

VIVA MOLLY

by a colleague in the Black Sash Advice Office,
Port Elizabeth



Molly Blackburn

(picture by the Natal Witness)

Molly died in the service of others when, at the height of the festive season, she went to Oudtshoorn with her sister, Mrs Judy Chalmers, local chairperson of Black Sash, and Brian and Di Bishop, to experience for herself the tribulation of people of Bhongolethu; where lack of amenities under an unequal system had become a harder yoke to bear after a full tenth of the populace was arrested in two military-style operations in November.

"Now that you haven't got Molly to protest," said a youthful member of the security forces to a black priest, "Now that Molly's gone, we're going to get you!"

Molly's death seemed to illustrate the divide in the white community. It became a catalyst for commitment — an event from which people took their bearings. While a few crowed and cracked crude jokes, others, many formerly apolitical, came forward to join organisations and offer services, bearing out the biblical truth enunciated in the funeral service:

"Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone, but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit." (John 12,24)

Thousands of letters of condolence poured in. Messages came from all over the world and from what the Roman Catholic Bishop of Port Elizabeth, Rt. Rev. J.P. Murphy termed "that great multitude of friends she acquired throughout the whole country as she sought untiringly to be of assistance." Within days of the funeral a meeting of prominent citizens met to form what they hoped would become a dynamic force for justice. Indeed it seemed that what Molly's pastor, Rev. George Irvine, head of the Methodist Church in the Eastern Cape, called the "seed of courageous caring" was even now bringing forth new life.

Why did Molly evoke so much admiration, such love and persecution and — even in death — constitute a challenge? Because her feelings were translated into action that was dynamic and daring, that captured the

affection of many and the imagination of millions. Because she fought repression with every weapon in her armoury, but mainly with her own indomitable spirit. Hers were not statements from behind the shuttered smugness of a suburban home but were the fruit of her experiences in the townships. Her home was open to all who sought it at any time and privacy was no factor.

People knew Molly loved them and was prepared to put herself at risk, endure exhaustion and discomfort, court imprisonment and look danger in the face. She was without fear, completely resolute. She never prevaricated. The only concern I ever heard her express was that after prolonged exposure she might lose sensitivity to people's sufferings. But she never did. "Molly was sensitive to the cries of those who are crushed daily under the wheels of the apartheid wagon," testified Rev. Dandala. "She allowed herself to suffer with the suffering. How many times have we called on Molly to intervene in the face of extreme brutality of Apartheid, sometimes even at the most awkward hours – to be met by her sigh of disbelief that South Africa could be so cruel to her people as it so often happens. Each moment of brutality was enough to shock Molly Blackburn."

The question was sometimes asked, he said, why people should have turned to Molly instead of to those with power. What was this power of which they spoke asked Dandala, but the power of the gun, the power to instil fear, detain without trial, split families under infamous influx laws by whatever name. "What is the power that Molly Blackburn did not have? It is the power to destroy – that she did not have. But in her was the power of moral courage. Her power was there precisely because she was weak in terms of state power and it is that power that made people to cry on her shoulder. She had the moral courage to visit the displaced squatters.

'Mrs Molly' had the moral courage to walk with a poor black mother to prison to search for her detained son or husband".

Molly became well-known in the townships, once standing waist-deep in water to rescue children in the low-lying shanty town of Port Elizabeth's Soweto when flood waters swirled. Where others needed police escorts, Molly walked freely, and entered the townships at any time of day or night until her entry was stopped by the withdrawal of

her permit. At a funeral at Zwide stadium, the vast crowd rose. "Viva Comrade Blackburn!" it roared. Sometimes mistakenly regarded as a sensationalist, Molly used the media as an ally to publicise the human catastrophes of Apartheid. She was a committed Christian, deriving support from membership of St John's Methodist Church where she was encouraged to "dare for justice." From her position of relative strength as a public representative, she was ready to take up the cudgels on behalf of the unenfranchised. Because of her, said Rev. Dandala, many black people refused to give up hope for change among white people. "She defied every attempt to limit her and refused to be silenced."

It was mourning the loss of a champion and celebrating her compassionate caring that made Molly's funeral an occasion of goodwill, an opportunity for assertion that black people were walking tall and an appeal to whites to cast off the shackles binding both black and white.

Huge throngs held aloft a wreath and danced the toyi-toyi war dance in sedate tree-lined streets in the city's central residential area. As they danced down the street, a lone traffic officer extended his arms. "Stop!" he said. The crowd stopped, turned and danced back up the road.

While police dogs, casspirs and strategically stationed soldiers watched, UDF marshalls kept tight crowd control.

Rev Alan Boesak said: "Even in death Molly is doing what she tried to do in life – bring people together. She is a true daughter of Africa and the children of Africa are here today to show how much we have loved her . . . She lived and showed us how to love and care and how to give. She gave so much of herself for so many. There are precious few white people who have gained so much credibility, who have earned so much love and respect from us. We have so little time. We have today, by God's grace, a little bit more to walk on a path that we have been shown, to try and seek what she has sought, and to build what she has tried to build. Let us not waste these moments. Let us begin now."

As the plain coffin left the church and became engulfed in a sea of mourners, words rang out that Molly would have wanted:

"Let us live to make men free . . ." □