**The silent solidarity that fortified those in the trenches of the struggle.**

Horst Kleinschmidt

The International Defence and Aid Fund (IDAF) was one of the earliest anti-apartheid solidarity organisations and it proved, over 35 years, to be perhaps the most effective in terms of its reach of support, cost effectiveness and the numbers of volunteers who provided that solidarity.  It was also one of the few organisations that the apartheid security apparatus failed to infiltrate.

The organisation was launched in 1956 in the basement of the home of Canon John Collins of St Paul’s Cathedral in London in response to an appeal by then ANC president, Chief Albert Luthuli for legal aid assistance in the notorious treason trial of 156 anti-apartheid activists. The following Sunday’s collection at St Paul’s was sent to defray the initial legal costs.

But that trial lasted for four years and, as resistance to apartheid grew, more activists were arrested and more trials ensued.  The demand for legal aid increased, as did the call to help the families of arrested and jailed activists.  Collins soon found himself raising funds from supporters in Sweden and elsewhere.  Such solidarity was anathema to the apartheid regime, since it made the legalistic persecution of activists far more difficult while also lessening the pressure the state could exert on their families.  As a result, in 1965, IDAF was banned in South Africa and it became a criminal offence to receive funds or assistance from the organisation.

The Canon was not deterred.  To finance legal defence he found secret ways to continue the work. With the help of South African exiles in London, money was channelled to a go-between law-firm in London as a means to create anonymity. This firm, in turn, instructed other law firms in Britain, who then instructed South African lawyers to act on their behalf. The legal costs in South Africa, it was said, were covered by prominent British citizens keen to see that due legal process was assured.  The instructing law-firm in Britain felt satisfied that the ‘legend’ they spun to the benefactors was ethically justified in the circumstances.

IDAF provided defence costs without regard to the political affiliation of those charged, nor did not question if the accused were charged with the violent overthrow of apartheid. Anyone who stood up against apartheid was deserving of a defence the Canon maintained, despite himself being a pacifist.

And, there were still the families of those detained, on trial or imprisoned. ‘The Canon’, as he was fondly called by those who knew him, set about establishing a global network of correspondents who sent letters of support and financial aid to these victims of apartheid. The selected correspondents were not told who funded the regular postal orders they sent, yet knowing that the letters of acknowledgement they received from South Africa served as a receipt and had to be sent on ‘to an address in London’.

Such family to family aid was often maintained for two decades and longer, on average exchanging six letters each to-and-fro each year between the solidarity supporter and the South African family. Lasting friendships developed.

IDAF kept records of this correspondence and when apartheid ended, IDAF sent, in two shipping containers, the letters and all other records, to be archived at the University of the Western Cape. In this collection, some of the most powerful are the letters from struggling, mostly indigent and generally women, who comment on everyday life in this racially oppressed and politically persecuted period.

The Canon set himself a further task:  “keep the conscience of the world alive”.   To this end he had published, in all the world’s major languages, books, pamphlets and posters that detailed evidence IDAF had secured from within the apartheid state and from the supporting entities across South Africa’s borders. This served as the bedrock of factual information for the global Anti-Apartheid Movement.

The Canon explained to the United Nations Special Committee on Apartheid, that IDAF “builds and sustains the morale of the people in the face of a policy that aims to break their spirit”. After his death in 1981, aged 77, the work he had set in train continued. A new Board was chaired by retired Archbishop Trevor Huddleston. During this last decade of apartheid, IDAF had to adjust and grow rapidly to respond to the increasing conflagration that finally broke the yoke of apartheid. In 1990 IDAF was formally ‘unbanned’ and in 1992 the organisation was shut down – it was no longer needed. The first democratic elections were held in 1994.

That the apartheid state realised the importance of IDAF can be seen in the attempts to compromise and infiltrate the organisation. Bureau of State Security spy, Gordon Winter admitted to rummaging through Canon Collins’ dustbins. Nearly a decade later, another spy, Craig Williamson, who later became notorious as a letter bomb killer, tried to gain evidence that would compromise IDAFs operations. He admitted to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that the one anti-apartheid organisation the Special Branch had failed infiltrate was IDAF. The IDAF hallmark of anonymity and secrecy was never breached.

With hindsight, the sheer scale of that work is extraordinary.  During its existence the IDAF managed to transfer more than £200 million in legal aid and in solidarity assistance to the families of jailed, detained, banned and executed anti-apartheid activists.  This money came from no less than 56 Governments around the world, with the bulk of it coming from Scandinavian countries. Their act of consistent solidarity was not least built on IDAF throughout producing clean accounts.

IDAF was outlawed for 25 of its 34 year history. Despite this it grew and by the 1980s some 180 attorneys and 70 senior counsel in South Africa were receiving IDAF funds to fight for the rights of countless thousands put on trial by the apartheid state.  And, at any one time during this period, some 2000 families of activists were supported financially and emotionally by “supporter families”.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_