

Julian von Klemperer: A great loss to the legal profession (1946–2018)

THE SUDDEN death of lawyer Julian von Klemperer (71) has been described as a great loss to the legal profession of Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal and South Africa. ‘His death has been a terrible shock,’ said his wife Margaret, former arts editor of *The Witness* who is being comforted by her daughter Judy and son Christopher, who flew from the Western Cape to be with his mother. ‘We are all devastated and are going to miss him terribly.’

Born in Durban in 1946, Von Klemperer attended Cowan House Preparatory School and then Michaelhouse, from which he matriculated at the age of 16. He did his BA in 1965 and his LLB in 1968 at the University of Natal (now University of KwaZulu-Natal).

Articled in Pietermaritzburg, he was admitted as an attorney in 1969. After a stint in the army, he went to the United Kingdom where he spent two years working for Theodore Goddard and Company. After meeting and marrying Margaret, the couple set up home in Pietermaritzburg, where Von Klemperer started his practice – Von Klemperer, Davis and Harrison Incorporated – in 1980. The firm was involved in numerous human rights cases, acting for the ANC in terrorism trials and representing COSATU in

various cases, including interdict applications against the police in the eighties. He was also a regular visitor to United Democratic Front detainees during the States of Emergency.



In 2012 his firm amalgamated with Shepstone & Wylie and he continued to practice as an executive consultant appearing regularly in the high court in Pietermaritzburg. In a statement issued after his death, Shepstone & Wylie said: ‘He was a well-known attorney throughout KZN, trusted and loved by his many clients ... he was also deeply respected by his peers and colleagues in the

profession and in the judiciary ... his common sense and practical approach to law, coupled with his dry sense of humour and old-world manners, endeared him to all who dealt with him ... he will be sorely missed. Our thoughts and prayers are with the Von Klemperer family.’

Von Klemperer was President of the Natal Law Society from 1997 to 1999, co-chairperson of the Law Society of South Africa from 1999 to 2000 with the late Judge Jake Moloi, and a member of the Judicial Service Commission from 2003 to 2009. While president of the Natal Law Society, he attended the Truth and Reconciliation hearings on the administration of

justice in South Africa between 1960 and 1994. In an article in *The Witness* in October 1997 he said the society had a duty to participate and to accept that the profession didn't do enough for the people of the country. Current president of the KwaZulu-Natal Law Society Asif Essa said Von Klemperer had made an immense contribution to the profession. 'He was a seasoned litigator and a senior member of the profession, who participated in the affairs of the profession right up to his untimely demise.' Lawyer Petrus Coetzee, director of Mason Incorporated, who has known Von Klemperer since 1983, described him as a 'true gentleman'. He said: 'I saw Julian last Thursday at the High Court. We greeted each other and had a chat and I asked him when he was going to retire. He said he probably wouldn't as the law was his life. His death is a great loss to the entire legal profession.'

Another friend, Ant Jenkins, from AG Jenkins Attorneys, said it was thanks to lawyers like Von Klemperer, to whom he was articled in the 1980s, that he gained a thorough grounding in the practice of law. 'Julian was a highly intelligent and extremely thorough lawyer who excelled, in particular, in high court litigation,' he said. 'I have often commented that had attorneys been able to be appointed to the bench when he was at the height of his career, he would have made a fine and highly respected judge of the high court.'¹

Von Klemperer was *The Witness*' legal adviser for many years. Friend and former editor of the paper John Conyngham said: 'Not only was he a respected member of the legal fraternity, but also an intelligent and humane member of the Pietermaritzburg community whose presence will be missed.' Away from the courtroom, Von Klemperer was an avid horse rider who in his teens and early twenties represented Natal at show jumping. 'He and I always rode together,' said daughter Judy. 'He tried to ride twice a week and more if he could get a day off from work.'

Von Klemperer leaves Margaret, his daughter Judy who lives in Durban with her partner Hilary, and son Christopher, who is based in Cape Town with his wife Emma, and their children James and Sam. Close friend of the family, Durban actress and writer Caroline Smart, said she was 'shattered' by the news. 'Julian and Margaret have been long-time friends,' she added. 'My heart goes out to Margaret and the family for their loss.'

ESTELLE SINKINS

This is a shortened version of the obituary in the *Witness*, 11 January 2018.

NOTE

- 1 Attorneys have to undergo additional training in order to be appointed advocate and be able to be admitted to the bench.