

HONORARY GRADUATE

Arthur Suzman

The University seeks to honour Arthur Suzman QC, doyen of practising advocates in the country, illustrious member of its Convocation, eminent South African.

Arthur Suzman was born in Johannesburg on 31 October 1905. He received his schooling at St John's College in this city. From there he proceeded to this university in 1923, where he read for the degree of Bachelor of Arts. In 1925 he graduated, with distinction in eleven courses, including his two major courses, Roman Law and Psychology. Two years later the degree of Bachelor of Laws was conferred on him.

Arthur Suzman was very active in student affairs and in sport. He served as a member of the Students' Representative Council, was President of the then Students' Union, Chairman of the Philosophical Society, and Honorary Secretary of the Law Students' Council, the Debating Society and the Athletic Club. In July 1927 he was appointed 'Leader of the Opposition' in the first Student Parliament at Durban under the auspices of the National Union of South African Students. Like so many institutions of those dear dead days, long ago, the Student Parliament has since gone the way of all flesh.

As a middle- and long-distance runner Arthur Suzman excelled in his youth. In 1922 while still at St John's College he broke his school record for the mile – as he has facetiously remarked, a mere minute slower than Paavo Nurmi's then world record! He represented the University in 1925, 1926 and 1927 in the Inter-varsity Athletics and in the Inter-varsity Cross-country, being awarded a full blue for athletics.

Early in 1928 Arthur Suzman was admitted as an advocate to the Supreme Court and commenced practice at the Johannesburg Bar. Some months later he was awarded one of the two Union Government Postgraduate Scholarships, granted to the two most distinguished graduates at the University. He went up to Oxford University, where he read for the degree of Bachelor of Civil Law, that most demanding of postgraduate degrees. Among his teachers were great legal academics such as Holdsworth, Cheshire, Lee, de Zulueta, Allen, Jolowicz and Fifoot. As was to be expected of a person with his intellectual gifts, Suzman took his degree in the first class.

On a visit thereafter to the United States, Arthur Suzman was granted a scholarship by the famous Harvard Law School. He decided not to take a further degree: he was satiated with working for examinations. Instead, he pursued postgraduate legal studies under such eminent academics as Dean Roscoe Pound, Joseph Beale and Felix Frankfurter, subsequently the distinguished member of the United States Supreme Court. The fruit of his research was an article on administrative law published in a leading American law review.

Like Odysseus of old, the young Suzman continued to wander far from his native land. In 1931 he returned to England, was called to the English Bar by the Middle Temple, and then read for eighteen months in the chambers of Gerald Slade, who was later elevated to the English Bench.

1933 saw Arthur Suzman at last back in Johannesburg. He had been asked to act as a locum for teaching Roman law while Professor Robin McKerron was on long leave. Simultaneously he resumed practice at the Johannesburg Bar.

For ten years he continued as a part-time lecturer in law; many years later, in 1980 and 1981, he resumed this role.

Arthur Suzman enlisted in the armed forces in 1943, being appointed as an Information Officer. On behalf of the Director-General of Demobilization, in 1944 he presented a comprehensive memorandum on war pensions to a special committee of inquiry, which contributed to extensive improvement in the pension system.

On his demobilization he organized a highly successful law refresher course for ex-servicemen under the auspices of our Faculty of Law. In July 1946 he participated in the proceedings that led to the formation of the General Council of the Bar of South Africa, of which he was appointed its first Honorary General Secretary. The creation of the South African Law Revision Committee (now the South African Law Commission) was to a considerable extent a result of his inspiration. He served as a member of the Committee in 1956 and 1957.

It was not long before Arthur Suzman's qualities as an advocate led to his taking silk, that is, becoming a King's Counsel. This took place in 1948. His sharpness of intellect, conscientiousness, determination and thoroughness were already bywords. He peels off facts and legal rules like leaves from an artichoke, arriving at the heart of the matter. To change the figure, and use a metaphor he loves, he finds and then goes for the jugular. Since 1976 Suzman has been the senior silk in this country. He is as active and enthusiastic in his practice as ever he was.

Arthur Suzman has all the while taken a deep interest in legal education. For forty-three years he has been a member of the Board of our Faculty of Law, and can take pride in being the member with the longest service. He was one of the founders of the *Annual Survey of South African Law* in 1947, being appointed a member of its Editorial board, a position he still holds. In 1958 he generously donated to the Faculty of Law a collection of books on legal literature, which bears his name, and which he continues to fund.

Several other aspects of the catholic interests of this polymath call for mention. There is his contribution to legal writing. He assisted in the preparation of two legal classics: the third edition of Lee's *An Introduction to Roman-Dutch Law*, published in 1931, and the first edition of Cheshire's *Private International Law*, published in 1935. He himself has published two books on company law and is co-author of a book on compulsory motor-vehicle insurance. A number of articles from his pen can be found in books and leading journals on law published in South Africa and abroad.

Then there are his writings on literature. Relatively late in life he became an ardent student of Shakespeare. With typical determination and enthusiasm he amassed what is surely the largest library of Shakespeariana in the country, amounting to over 700 volumes. In 1953 he wrote an article titled *'Imagery and Symbolism in Richard II'*. Modestly he let it moulder in his desk. Then, encouraged by Nevill Coghill, an English don, he submitted it to the *Shakespeare Quarterly*. To his surprise and delight it was accepted in 1956.

Arthur Suzman is a bibliophile, though he disclaims being a bibliomaniac, and in particular being a collector of books owned by other people: understandably, he actively discourages would-be collectors of the books he owns. In 1981 he delivered a fascinating and amusing address to the Fourth South African Conference of Bibliophiles in Cape Town, in which he dwelt on the history of his extensive private collection of legal books (one of the finest in the country) and other works; and gave an entertaining account of how it came about that Felix Topolski designed his bookplate. The address was subsequently published.

From 1970 to 1978 Suzman was chairman of the ill-fated South African PEN, the literary society. Abiding interests of his have been history and political affairs. In 1961 he attended some of the sessions at the trial of Eichmann in Jerusalem, which heightened his interest in the Holocaust. Fifteen years later he and Denis Diamond produced a work called *Six Million Did Die: The Truth Shall Prevail*. It is the most authoritative refutation of those evil men who seek to deny the Holocaust and, in particular, of a scurrilous booklet giving voice to this vicious lie. A second edition of this work of exhaustive scholarly investigation appeared in 1978. In that year the South African Institute of International Affairs published what is probably the finest of Suzman's shorter works on political affairs, *South Africa at the Crossroads: Responding to the Winds of Change*. In it he gives expression to his deep commitment to what may be called realistic liberalism.

In 1963 Suzman was appointed a member of the South African Commission of Enquiry into the Companies Act. His dissenting report evoked praise from several commentators. He was also a member of the private committee of inquiry appointed by the Progressive Party in 1960, which produced the two highly regarded reports on the ideal constitutional structure, known as the Molteno Reports after the name of the chairman.

Jewish communal affairs have been dear to the heart of Arthur Suzman for much of his life. Since 1952 he has been a member of the Executive Committee of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies. For twenty years he served as Chairman of its Public Relations Committee. From 1980 to 1983 he held the high office of President of the Board. In addition he served for a long period on the executive of the South African Friends of the Hebrew University.

Behind Arthur Suzman's normal seriousness of outlook and speech lurks a keen wit that will out when the occasion allows. In legal circles he has the reputation of being a brilliant after-dinner speaker.

Happy is this university to have been the Alma Mater of such an outstanding South African, who has contributed so much to it, to his profession and to the country as a whole; a fiercely independent, an outspoken and courageous man. In the history of Wits and South Africa there have been a number of prominent Suzmans; one is tempted to say Suzmen, until one realises that there is a famous lady married to one of the brothers Suzman; and then one is inclined to speak of the Suzpersons. This university has already awarded an honorary doctorate to the lady, and also to the eminent elder brother of Arthur Suzman, Dr M M Suzman. Now it wishes to pay a tribute to a third member of this remarkable family for his long distinguished service in so many fields of endeavour by conferring on him the degree of Doctor of Laws *honoris causa*.