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A Tribute to Dr Zuleika Sarojini Christopher

A NOTE TO THE READER

On 25 April 1992, comrades, friends, patients and relatives gathered at the Teachers' Centre in Durban to listen to a tribute to the late Dr Zuleika Sarojini Christopher. The tribute was paid by Kader Hassim, an Executive Member of APDUSA (Natal) and a grateful pupil of Enver Hassim and the late Dr Christopher.

INTRODUCTION

On Tuesday 17 March 1992, we received the sad and painful news that Comrade Zuleika Sarojini Christopher, known as ZULEI to her relatives and friends, died peacefully in her sleep. She was 68 years old. Since her family, on her mother's side is blessed with longevity, Comrade Zulei can be considered as having died young.

She leaves a grief-stricken husband, Comrade Enver Hassim, and two sons, Azad and Shaheen. She also leaves a mother, Mrs Ghadija Christopher, sisters Leila and Haidee and a brother, Gool. In addition to those very close relatives, she leaves many other relatives, comrades, friends, colleagues and patients. Though we all knew that Comrade Zulei had been ailing for a number of years, her death has come as a sudden and heart-wrenching shock.

Sudden death catches us unprepared. And when that happens we are overcome with guilt. We engage in self-recrimination. We are tormented by what we consider to be inadequate attention paid by us towards the dead. Taking a thought of Karl Marx, we behaved as if we would live forever and that there would be time enough to fulfill our obligations towards the person now deceased. Thus obligations remain unfulfilled. But there is no rescinding death and the living have to go about their business. In doing this we must, nonetheless, find the time to pause and to spare a moment for those who were once very dear to us but who are no longer with us.

A tribute of this nature is to record, albeit very inadequately, the life of a very special individual. It is also to extol the virtues of that individual and how he or she had influenced and enriched our own lives.

BACKGROUND AND EARLY YEARS

Comrade Zulei was the eldest child of the late Advocate Christopher and Ghadija Gool. She was born and brought up in Greenwood Park, a suburb of Durban. She became a fully integrated member of that community. She matriculated at the Durban Indian Girls' High School.

After matriculation she went to the University of Fort Hare - a remarkable and a courageous act for those days. It was also a major contributory factor in shaping her belief in the principle of non-racialism.

From Fort Hare, Comrade Zulei went to the University of Witwatersrand where she qualified as a medical doctor at the age of 23.

In 1951, whilst doing a locum for her uncle in Cape Town, she got to know her mother's relatives, some of whom were prominent members of the Non-European Unity Movement - Dr Goolam Gool, LB. Tabata, Jane Gool, Minnie Gool and others. No doubt, she was influenced in her political thinking by these forceful personalities.

It was also during this time that she met her future husband, Comrade Enver Hassim. He had come to Cape Town as a delegate from the Transvaal to the 7th Conference of the Non-European Unity Movement.

The attraction for each other was immediate. They married in 1952 and their marriage endured for 40 years and was dissolved only by death.

From all accounts they were deeply devoted to each other until the very end. Comrade Enver's account of his last days with his beloved Zulei makes very touching reading.

AS A PERSON

Comrade Zulei was' an unusually sensitive person who could love and hate with great intensity. She reserved her hatred for suffering, oppression, injustice, hypocrisy and discrimination whether based on race, sex, religion or class.

Comrade Zulei was a charismatic person. She impressed people and was able to draw workers, students and children towards her. They, in turn, loved and adored her. She would have made a marvellous psychologist.

She had the magic gift of making people feel at ease. She drew towards her shy and awkward persons. Through prolonged and patient contact with them, she helped them shed the skin of awkwardness. They emerged as changed personalities who began to feel comfortable with people and who looked forward to socialising. I recall an occasion when our baby son became ill and the general practitioners could not make a rational diagnosis. Comrade Zulei referred us to a very eminent paediatrician who worked only in hospitals. When we introduced ourselves, his reaction was: "Anything for Dr Christopher. She cured me of my shyness when in the presence of women."

Comrade Zulei had a sparkling personality. She was the "life of the party", so to speak. She was also cheerful with a well-developed sense of humour. She was tall, elegant and attractive. When she entered a room, she made heads turn. She was feminine and conscious of her femininity. Yet she yielded to no person of the opposite sex on a basis of inferiority. She was a revolutionary feminist. She maintained her own surname throughout her life. Male chauvinists learnt from early

times to give Comrade Zulei a wide berth. The unwary chauvinist who tangled with her got a merciless flaying - much to the delight of those of us who were present.

Comrade Zulei was very conscious of the oppression and exploitation of women. She was a tireless defender of their rights. She often went beyond the call of duty to assist women in distress. She had her own set of ethics which reflected her caring attitude for people. She had no qualms about

flinging in the trash can bourgeois medical ethics where such were hypocritical or in conflict with her own.

She was an extremely generous person who shared almost instinctively. She was generous to a point of fault. Generosity consists not only in the ability to GIVE. It also lies in the ability to TAKE. Generosity means to take with graciousness and without resentment towards the giver. Comrade Zulei did not know of this and therefore used to be shattered when confronted with hostility from the recipient of her generosity. I make bold to say that no person who came into contact with her left without sampling her hospitality and kindness. I was one of those who received so much from her and Comrade Enver Hassim.

And you can be sure that I was just one of the many who received substantial generosity from those two comrades.

In spite of age or her serious commitment to the struggle or to medicine, Comrade Zulei remained childlike in many things. She could mimic skillfully and thereby evoke peals of laughter from her audience. She was, if you pardon the expression, a "with-it" person. When the dance called the "twist" became the rage, you saw Comrade Zulei unabashedly "twisting" with her son or nieces. She would justify this medically-like "good exercise". And so it was when the hula-hoop hit the market.

The lively child in her never did die when she attained adulthood.

She was a pace-setter and role model for her sisters and other women with whom she came into contact.

AS A MEDICAL DOCTOR

When you care for people and when you are sensitive to their suffering and distress, you can only bring honour to your profession. Comrade Zulei was a dedicated healer of people. Most of us who came into contact with her were beneficiaries of her skill and care for one or other ailment. Her money-grubbing colleagues, no doubt, regarded her as a dismal failure and a disgrace to the profession. Why would they have done this? Comrade Zulei failed to synthesize the treatment of sick people with making lots of money. She had opened two practices. The one was in Warwick Avenue, Durban in 1948. The other was in Malvern, Durban in the mid-1950's.

Both had to be closed. I clearly remember the day she closed her Malvern practice. I saw large jars of medicines being off-loaded and I asked: "What's going on?" Comrade Enver Hassim replied dryly he had had enough of paying the bills for the medicines used in the Malvern surgery! In other words, Comrade Zulei was treating patients without receiving money from them. Yet she had no qualms about asking people for donations for the Unity Movement.

Comrade Zulei as a dutiful daughter took excellent care of her father who suffered from an ailing heart and other related illnesses. She nursed and treated him daily. This ensured that her father lived for a much longer period than he would have otherwise,

During the late 1950's, Comrade Zulei received employment in one of the Provincial Hospitals. She ended up working in the children's wards. There she came face to face with the horror of children dying from lack of food and timeous medical treatment. All this in a land of riches and abundance.

Comrade Zulei taught us the politics of medicine and medical care; the meaning of social diseases like tuberculosis, kwashiorkor, etc. From her we learnt the futility of seeking to treat the symptoms of a disease without eradicating the environment which bred that disease.

I recall clearly those hot, sweaty summer afternoons when Comrade Zulei used to return from the Hospital, drained physically and emotionally. Her day was spent tending dying babies. We constantly heard her talk about her babies. Each time one died, she was dealt a heavy blow. She was never quite able to detach herself from her patients.

THE COMPLETE NON-RACIALIST

Both Comrades Zulei and Enver Hassim were the complete non-racialists. They accepted non-racialism not only in theory but more importantly, in their everyday life. This enlightenment they passed on to us from the very beginning. In a race-ridden society, this was nothing less than a revolutionary position. The community in which they lived were accustomed to seeing African people as domestic servants or labourers.

Through Comrades Zulei and Enver Hassim, members of that community saw and met for the first time African revolutionaries and leaders. From them we also learnt that the complete non-racialist is never found patronising a person because he or she happened to be an African in the narrow sense of the word. Patronising a person on grounds of race is an inverted form of racialism. Scoundrels and opportunists are quick to turn to profit their being "African". It was patronising which led to the fiasco caused by Knowledge Mdlalose whose proud and over-optimistic parents believed that the attributes contained in a well-chosen name would rub-off on the child and thus assist in developing and moulding their child's talents. Alas! ¹

AS A REVOLUTIONARY

Comrade Zulei was born in a family of politically active persons. Her father, the late Advocate Christopher, was a leading politico among the Indian

¹Knowledge Mdlalose -a former student of the university of Natal was allowed to bring the University to a virtual standstill. He was refused re-admission on the grounds that his academic performance in 1991 was below the acceptable level. He was treated with kid gloves by the University when he protested. It was this protest which brought the University to a standstill.

people. Though a moderate, he was not a quisling. As one of the first lawyers in his community, he was expected by his people to articulate their demands. This he did as he saw their demands. It was not the same way we saw their demands. Advocate Christopher did not amass a fortune which in one sense testifies to his honesty and integrity.

Her mother, Mrs Ghadija Christopher, famous for her involvement in the plight of the poor, was a "passive resister" in 1946 and went to prison. Her radical political outlook was gained from members of her mother's family whose names I have already mentioned. It goes without saying that in the end it was her own outlook in life which led her to the road of radical politics.

While studying medicine in Johannesburg, Comrade Zulei joined the Progressive Forum, a group of brilliant intellectuals who, against the general ethos of their immediate environment, belonged to the non-Stalinist Left and who had joined the Unity Movement. This was the ideological forge where Comrades Zulei and Enver Hassim shaped their world outlook and political ideology. When they came to Natal in the early fifties, they were committed revolutionaries and cadres of the Unity Movement. From this point onwards the activities and contribution to the struggle of these two comrades become inseparable. They worked as a team. In 1954, Comrades Zulei, Enver and Karrim set up a study group to train cadres. In 1955, these same comrades formed the Durban Branch of the Society of Young Africa (SOYA). SOYA was to make its impact politically in Natal as elsewhere. It was in SOYA that the young cadres got their political training. SOYA was also the structure where cadres were trained in field work.

In 1960, Comrades Zulei, Enver Hassim and Dorrie Pillay formed the Anti-Centenary Celebration Committee. This was in response to elements in the liberatory movement who regarded South Africans of Indian descent as a distinct group and who felt the need to celebrate one hundred years of their arrival in this country. Our position was that there was nothing for the Indians to celebrate 100 years of their oppression and humiliation. In any event, engaging in an Indians Only celebration flew in the face of the concept of building a single nation. The community of Greenwood Park where the Anti-Centenary Celebrations Committee was launched were exposed to radical ideas through debate and discussion because the issue of the Celebrations encompassed far more than the arrival of the Indians in South Africa. Public meetings were held and people had a detailed exposure to Unity Movement ideas.

In 1961, the Durban Branch of APDUSA was formed. Comrade Zulei was unanimously elected the Chairperson. The branch became a very active one and was well on its way to becoming mass-based when fascism struck. In 1958, Comrade Zulei was given the honour of reading out the paper on the National Situation which had been prepared by LB. Tabata. Being banned, he was unable to present his own paper.

Comrades Zulei and Enver Hassim were committed cadres who were "on call" for the struggle seven days a week. They, at no time, asked cadres to do what they themselves would not do. No task for the struggle was too menial or demeaning. They helped with duplicating, collating, stapling and distributing - on a house-to-house basis where this was called for. Comrade Zulei was par excellence a recruiter for the Unity Movement. In this she was matched only by Comrade Karrim Essack. She was charismatic and people were drawn towards her. Many of the members of the Durban APDUSA Branch were recruited by her.

She was tireless in this and never let slip an opportunity to politicise and recruit. Comrade Enver Hassim was known to have little tolerance for people whom he regarded as fools. It was Comrade Zulei who had to heal the wounds inflicted by Comrade Enver Hassim.

Comrade Zulei was a formidable platform speaker. She was eloquent, fearless and had the gift of arousing an audience. Because of these qualities she was much in demand as a public speaker. It would be a foolish person who would seek to cross swords with her. At work was a sharp mind supported by a sharp tongue.

AS A REVOLUTIONARY TEACHER

There was a whole generation of youth who learnt at the feet of Comrades Zulei and Enver Hassim. I was part of that generation. They taught us the absolute need to spend our short time on earth in a manner most useful to society. They showed us the importance of tackling problems at the root and not to be distracted by superficial manifestations. They proved to us the inhumanity of oppressive systems which function according to certain laws and which are impervious to appeals and moral arguments. We learnt from them the politics of principled struggle; the honour of the noble cause and above all, a respect for the poor and lowly who are the producers of wealth.

They taught us the physical and oneness of humanity and that there were no races except the human race. Racialism is to society what deadly cancer is to the human body.

We learnt from them to hate intensely those who betray the interests of the people - the quislings, collaborators and sellouts. Between the latter and ourselves there is something akin to an eternal blood feud.

There is no let-up, no concession and no compromise where these creatures are involved.

They taught us by their own example that there was no place for us in the tracks of the rat race for money. Money was to be made because, inter alia, the cause and the movement would never need to go cap-in-hand for dole and hand-outs to the U.S., Britain and other imperialist countries. It was from them that we learnt to identify with the "lowliest of the low" - the workers in the sweatshops, in the bowels of the earth, in the concentration camps of the White farms and the starving peasantry. They initiated us to

the very potent weapons of non-collaboration, the position of no compromise on fundamentals and no negotiations with the enemy. In a word, they fashioned us into RADICALS.

And today we are proud to carry the banner of RADICALISM.

Both these comrades were true internationalists. Right at the outset, we were introduced to the struggles of Spartacus, the Maccabees, the American Indians. They stirred our youthful idealism with narratives of the Russian Revolution, the decades-long revolution of the Chinese.

They told us of the barbarous injustice meted out to Sacco and Vanzetti, innocent anarchists who were executed in 1927 by the heartless system of U.S. capitalism and then rehabilitated 30 years later.

They educated us about Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Lenin, Trotsky and a host of other revolutionaries, sung and unsung, who laid down their lives for the cause. Through them, we got to know the writings of Isaac Deutscher, Edgar Snow, Jack Belden, Edmund Wilson.

They willingly lent us valuable books from their well-stocked library without hesitating.

Like all serious Marxists, they ensured that we, first and foremost, studied the history of our country and with that background the nature of South African society was meticulously analysed. With their guidance we studied the history and development of all the major political forces in the country - imperialism, capitalism, feudalism, tribalism and the consequences of the inter-action of these forces on one another. We learnt that South African society, though having in common many features with other countries, was also unique in a number of vital respects. We studied the role of the missionaries in conquest, their political descendants, the liberals, the All-African Convention, the Non European Unity Movement, the ANC, the NIC-TIC and the Communist Party of South Africa. But their education to us was not limited to politics in the narrow sense of that concept. They strove to make all rounders of us. From them we came to appreciate the classical music of the West. This form of music was alien to those of us who are South Africans of Indian origin. Western classical music came across to us as a cacophony of sounds. We were entreated to be patient and were advised that nothing precious came easily. And so we listened with patience and in time we reaped the harvest when we were able to discern the various melodies and facets of the musical work. It was in this manner we obtained joy and intense experience from listening to the works of Beethoven, Mozart and other composers.

We were introduced to the masters of literature whose existence was carefully concealed from us by our formal teachers. I refer to Leo Tolstoy, Balzac, Turgenev, Chekov, Flaubert, Maupassant and others.

Of the twentieth century writers, we were exposed to Jack London, Ernest Hemingway, Steinbeck, Upton Sinclair, Theodore Dreiser, Saroyan, etc. We learnt to enjoy the plays of Bertolt Brecht, Tennessee Williams. Of the

women writers, we read Simone de Beauvoir, Han Suyin, Doris Lessing, Nadine Gordimer, Dora Taylor.

Exposure to serious works of fiction did wonders for our understanding of human beings, their motives and what made them do what they did. Through these talented artists, we became witnesses to the way people lived and behaved in ages gone by and never to return.

MATERIAL CONTRIBUTION

The willingness and generosity with which a person assists the cause he or she believes in, by way of material contribution, is an important indication of that person's commitment to that cause. Without ado, I can say that the material contribution made by Comrades Zulei and Enver Hassim went far beyond the call of duty. Our organisation in Durban in those days consisted mainly of indigent students and ill-paid workers. Only Comrade Enver Hassim was what we would call "well-off". For a start, the home of Comrades Zulei and Enver Hassim and the legal office of A. Christopher & Company (of which Comrade Enver Hassim was a partner), were available to us for seven days a week. Their home was open house for our Movement's activities, whether it be for meetings, duplicating our literature, collating, stapling, informal discussion or plain socialising. Their home was the centre of our activities.

That home was also where hungry students received wholesome food.

And for those who wanted it, there was always a bed to sleep for the night. Their motor car was always available for Movement work. Since Comrade Enver Hassim, for some inexplicable reason could not (or would not?) drive, the burden of driving long distances fell on Comrade Zulei. She was an accomplished driver. Trips to conferences were made in their car, with them footing the cost of fuel and food all the way. They would not allow a student to pay for any expense on the journey.

When the Unity Movement reached the stage in Durban when we began bringing out regular publications, Comrades Zulei and Enver Hassim bought an expensive duplicating machine which they placed at the disposal of our Branch. During Easter 1962, the first APDUSA Conference was called in Cape Town. The Natal delegation was a large one and transport became a problem especially for students and Articled Clerks.

Comrade Enver Hassim borrowed a VW Beetle from one of his clients and handed it to us for the trip to Cape Town. On the way to Cape Town the Beetle capsized. Miraculously, not one of us was hurt. Unfortunately, the same could not be said for the Beetle. It was, in the chilling words of the panel beaters, "beyond economic repairs". That heap of junk which was once a "people's car", had to be stored and then conveyed by train from Laingsburg to Durban. Towage, storage and transport charges and, in the end, the value of the vehicle itself had to be paid for. We did the proper thing and offered to pay for the damages "once we started earning". That improbable offer was politely turned down and without pomp and fanfare Comrades Zulei and Enver Hassim paid for everything.

These are but examples of the generosity and commitment of these comrades when it came to providing for the needs of the Movement and money matters in general.

If today you are able to discern traces of similar generosity in APDUSA members, then you must know that that characteristic was acquired from Comrades Zulei and Enver Hassim.

I can spend a lot more time giving examples of the commitment of these two comrades. What little I have stated so far would have deeply embarrassed Comrade Zulei and will certainly embarrass Comrade Enver Hassim. In such matters they were extremely modest. These examples are for the benefit of those of you who have had little or no association with Comrades Zulei and Enver Hassim. It is also for the record.

THE LONG DARK NIGHT

The early sixties, 1963 to be precise, saw the emergence of naked fascism in this country. A section of the leadership of the Unity Movement took the decision to embark on the armed struggle and went about preaching and organising along those lines.

Bannings, house arrests, persecution fell fast and furious on the top leadership of the Unity Movement. Both Comrades Zulei and Enver Hassim were hit with banning orders early in 1964. In terms of their banning orders, they were prohibited from communicating with each other.

During the latter part of 1964, both the comrades were detained under the notorious and much feared 90-day (in practice indefinite) detention law. Comrade Zulei emerged from this detention a totally transformed person. Her captors must have done something terrible to her. She herself would not speak of it except in snatches. From the little we were able to ascertain, we believe that she was subjected to hallucinatory drugs by her tormentors. She was never the same after the vile system laid its filthy hands on a noble, but vulnerable person. Comrade Zulei was right - the system cannot be defeated peacefully.

In 1966, Comrade Zulei and Enver Hassim were charged with breaching their banning orders which forbade them, inter alia, from attending political meetings. They were found guilty and given suspended sentences. This meant that they had hanging above their heads the Sword of Damocles. If they were found attending any other political meeting, then they would be sent to prison.

The United Party-controlled Natal Provincial Administration, the essence of British Colonial fascists, dismissed Comrade Zulei from her position as senior medical officer. The dismissal, blatantly illegal was successfully challenged in the Supreme Court.

Comrade Enver Hassim was again detained. This time it was under the 180-day (again, in truth, indefinite) detention law. He was allegedly involved in a move to forge passports to assist political refugees. Upon his release he was threatened with further detention.

Both these comrades had to bear the full weight of persecution. There was almost daily surveillance; there was telephone tapping and anonymous callers who made threats; there was unauthorised opening of mail and there were the police raids, euphemistically called "visits". I was told how, on one occasion, a member of the family playfully hurled a shoe which missed its human target and hit a tree in the yard. That member got the shock of her life when out jumped two members of the Security Police from the tree and fled into the night. They had been watching the house. Those were the times when menace hung heavily in all our lives. Even those with stout hearts quaked.

It was at this stage that Comrades Zulei and Enver Hassim took the decision to seek refuge in Canada. They did so to escape the wrath of fascism. How they must have agonised over that fateful decision! They did what they had to do. People can take so much suffering and no more.

A quarter of a century has elapsed since their departure. We, who remained, view their departure as fighters who, after being wounded, take themselves away from the battlefield. Though not actively involved in the struggle in later years, at no stage did they betray the cause, nor compromise principles. The enemy, to them, remained the enemy.

THE LAST YEARS

Comrade Zulei fled from fascism and went to Canada where she hoped and expected to enjoy sanctuary and peace to recover from her ordeals. Instead a cruel fate awaited her. She was stricken with crippling arthritis. There was the excruciating pain and the frustration from not being able to use her hands, even to write. But there was worse to come. She was then afflicted with a dreaded disease called LUPUS. Lupus attacks the skin and causes the victim to lose hair. These effects are devastating for any person, but more so for women for obvious reasons. The disfigurement is just the beginning. In the end it kills and it was this disease which finally took the life of Comrade Zulei.

Life in Canada for Comrade Zulei was one long hell. It was spending long periods in hospitals. To make matters worse, Comrade Enver Hassim suffered from an inflammation of his pancreas, another horrible disease. The late Pat Naidoo suffered from a similar disease. He could not bear it and in the end took his life.

From all accounts, Comrade Zulei bore her sufferings with great fortitude. Acquaintances and neighbours spoke glowingly of her courage and cheerfulness.

CONCLUSION

Our assembly tonight has been organised to pay tribute to a very dear comrade, teacher and friend. From my brief survey of her character and personality, you will agree that Comrade Zulei was a very special person. As individuals we will each remember her fondly for the things she did for us and the happiness emanating from her deeds.

As an organisation, we pay tribute to her as a leading and founding member of the Society of Young Africa and APDUSA.

Comrades Zulei, Enver Hassim and Karrim have had a dominant influence in moulding the present leadership of our organisation. It was they who inspired us with revolutionary fervour; it was they who armed us with an ideological armoury which enabled us to stand up to anybody politically. Comrade Vishnu Tewary, as a student, was thus able to worst a Rowley Arenstein, then a leading member of the Communist Party, in a public exchange. Our mentors were obviously pleased with the work they had done on us. Comrade Zulei used to proudly refer to us as "Young Lions". If we were indeed the Young Lions, then that was so because she was the lioness. The fervour Comrades Zulei, Enver Hassim and Karrim infused into us, the science of politics they taught us, has enabled us to continue the struggle for over 30 years. Yet our association with these comrades was not long in terms of years. The actual length of time is irrelevant because our association was so intense, so deep and so rich that 25 years after their departure from the shores of this country, we are able and do acknowledge and publicly proclaim that association.

That what they taught us is so valuable and relevant that even our children have adopted their main tenets. And what is more important, our children will most certainly imbue their own children with these ideas and values.

Long after we would have died and our names forgotten, our positive contribution to the cause of humanity will live on. What more can we realistically ask for?

Those of us who knew Comrade Zulei and associated with her, are grateful for that honour. She has made a telling impact on our lives. Therefore, we will always remember her dearly.

To those of the younger generation who missed that honour, I say:

You would have loved and adored Comrade Zulei as she would have loved and adored you.

You, together with her, would have made a splendid combination, for she excelled in relating with the youth. One of the purposes of this tribute was to get you acquainted with her.

To the close members of Comrade Zulei's family and especially to Comrade Enver Hassim, I say:

Consider yourself blessed and fortune-favoured to have had Comrade Zulei with you for as long as you did.

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