

A People's Heroine - Rajes Pillay

Rajes was born in Pietermaritzburg and grew up in Kimberly. There she attended an Anglican school that catered for students of Indian, Coloured and Chinese extraction. Her teachers and parents agreed that she was a bright student who should study further.

When she was thirteen her father passed away and her mother felt that the children would have a better education outside South Africa as the apartheid policy denied her the opportunity to study at the Universities of the Witwatersrand and Cape Town.

In 1963 the family moved to London where Rajes completed her 'A' levels. During her stay in London she came into contact with Oliver Tambo, the President of the ANC, Yusuf Dadoo, the Chairperson of the SA Communist Party, and various other leaders who were in exile.

She returned to South Africa in 1966 and continued her studies as an external student at the University of Natal supported by a bursary from the South African Council on Higher Education (SACHED). In this period she interacted with student leaders like Paul David, Steven Biko, Ben Ngubane and Rogers Ragavan who was the chairperson of the Students Union. She left without completing her studies and started working at the New Republic Bank in 1967. She commenced organising the bank workers and was told that she either had to stop or be fired. She chose to resign and joined Game Stores in their Smith Street branch.

In this period Rajes joined the newly-revived Natal Indian Congress and played an important role in maintaining correspondence with many political prisoners imprisoned on Robben Island. For this purpose she was given the name 'Maadu'. Upon their release from prison, Rajes helped integrate them into civilian and political life. Among the people she worked closely with were Phyllis Naidoo, MD Naidoo, Poomaney Moodley and AKM Docrat.

While involved overtly in the NIC and the Lakehaven Children's Home, where she played the piano for the children in its care, Rajes was also active in the ANC underground. She worked with people like Judson Khuzwayo and Shadrack Maphumulo and recruited activists into the ANC and ferried them abroad to Swaziland or Botswana.

Her cover was exposed in 1978 when she came into contact with an ANC recruit who was in fact an agent for the apartheid regime. She had to leave the country or face arrest and interrogation. Rajes had the unenviable choice of either leaving the country or facing arrest and interrogation. She remained in the country for a short period, living in a motor car that was parked in a secluded spot.

With the security forces hot on her trail, she escaped to Swaziland in a furniture truck, skipped the border and linked up with the ANC structures there. During 1977 - 78, she worked for Swaziland Council of Churches and advocated for a greater awareness about apartheid crimes and support for the victims of apartheid atrocities.

Rajes subsequently underwent further training and became the communications and logistics officer for the ANC underground. In this capacity she prepared cadres for infiltration into the country and received the reports from the various units that were inside SA. Rajes undertook this work at great personal risk as the apartheid regime mounted successive terror attacks on neighbouring states suspected of harbouring ANC guerillas. She was in Swaziland when Absolom Duma lost an arm in a booby trapped post office box when he went to retrieve mail. She was in the region at the time of the kidnapping of Joe Pillay, a registered refugee and brother of her then partner Ivan Pillay, the murder of Zweli Nyanda the brother of the former Chief of Staff of the SANDF, Siphwe Nyanda; the murder of Pat Msomi, Jabu Mthlane, Ruth First, Krishna Rabibal and others. She lived under the constant threat of her own kidnapping or assassination.



Comrade Rajes and her brother, Rajakrishna at her 70th birthday party

In the early 1980s, while undergoing training in Angola she, along with another cadre, was injured in a hand grenade explosion. She had to have extensive surgery. Unfortunately, the operation to realign her arm had to be redone in Swaziland in clandestine conditions.

A growing number of people around her and with whom she worked either "disappeared" or were kidnapped. Among those that she had the misfortune to work with were apartheid agents, who professed loyalty to the liberation struggle but were conveying information to the apartheid regime's security forces on the whereabouts and deployment of ANC cadres.

It became much too dangerous for Rajes to continue her work in the frontline states, and she was asked by the leadership to leave Swaziland and relocate to Lusaka. In all of her assignments she displayed the qualities of a committed and disciplined cadre who demanded compliance with the highest standards of revolutionary discipline and behaviour.

In her service of the ANC and SACP, and indeed of the country, Rajes endured immense personal sacrifice, living in an environment of perpetual danger; risking being kidnapped, assassinated or being "disappeared", a fate that came to befall many of her comrades - but she never once wavered in her commitment to liberate the people of South Africa.

Rajes returned to SA in 1990, resumed her studies and completed a Diploma in Library Science at the Technikon. She volunteered at various NGOs, community organisations and joined the local Reservoir Hills ANC branch, seeking neither political office nor special favours. She remained a valuable repository of political and community organisational knowledge for newer social activists.

Because of the largely underground nature of her work and contribution, Rajes was not well known to the public but she will forever be treasured by those who knew her and worked closely with her. She will always be remembered for her wisdom, humanity, and for the many moments of mirth and nostalgia when recalling the dangerous and troubled life of being an activist. She may not be a household celebrity but is a heroine of the movement to liberate South Africa.

Long Live Comrade Rajes!



Rajes with the late Paul David and Kisten (Zed) Moonsamy



Rajaluxmi (Rajes) Pillay
4 August 1944 - 29 December 2020