

Shanthie Naidoo: A Tribute

Shanthievathie (“Shanthie”) Naidoo was a truly astonishing woman. It was a great privilege to know her. She came from a distinguished anti-apartheid family in South Africa, and took up the struggle for the liberation of her country with great courage, resolution and effectiveness. She was born in 1935 in Pretoria, the eldest of the five children of Ama and Roy Naidoo. She had three brothers, Indres, Murthi and Prema and a sister, Ramnie.

Her grandfather was Thema “Naran” Naidoo who worked closely with Mahatma Gandhi during his civil disobedience campaigns in South Africa, before the Mahatma returned to India.

As a young woman, Shanthie was active in both the Transvaal Indian Youth Congress and the Federation of South African Women (FedSAW), which was established in 1954, a year after the death of her father. Shanthie attracted the attention of the apartheid police at an early age. Shanthie went to work for the Congress of Democrats, a white organisation allied to the African National Congress and the Transvaal Indian Congress. Apartheid legislation did not allow for the existence of non-racial organisations. It was here that she would have been in contact with people like Hilda Bernstein, Ruth First, Nelson Mandela, Joe Slovo, Oliver Tambo and so many others.

Following the Sharpeville Massacre in 1960, the Congress of Democrats was banned, and in 1962 Shanthie went to work for the South African Congress of Trade Unions. In 1962, Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) launched its armed struggle against the apartheid state. Shanthie’s brother, Indres, was an MK soldier, was arrested and imprisoned on Robben Island. He wrote the well-known book “Island in Chains” about his experiences.

In December 1963, Shanthie was subjected to a five year banning order, with many restrictions on her activities. She was constantly harassed by the Security Police, and the banning order was renewed in 1968. Because of her banning order, Shanthie was not allowed to visit Indres on Robben Island.

In 1969, Shanthie was arrested under Section 6 of the Terrorism Act, and was held in solitary confinement and tortured in order to make her give evidence against Winnie Mandela, Joyce Sikakhane and other women in what became an infamous trial. Shanthini Naidoo (no relation) tells this story in her book “Women Surviving Apartheid’s Prisons”. Shanthie’s refusal in the witness box to give evidence against her friends confirmed her status as a hero in the struggle against apartheid. Shanthie told the court that she had two friends amongst the accused and said that she did not wish to give

evidence because “I will not be able to live with my conscience if I do.” She paid for this by being imprisoned yet again.

Shanthie wanted to leave South Africa and wanted to join her sister Ramnie in London, so that she could lead a normal life. She was refused an exit permit, in an act of petty spite by the apartheid state. In September 1972, Shanthie was given permission to leave South Africa and also permission to visit her brother Indres on Robben Island. After that visit she left South Africa, and was to remain in exile for 19 years.

When Shanthie arrived in London, she remained at the heart of the struggle, working at the International Defence and Aid Fund for Southern Africa (IDAF). She was also active in the ANC Women’s League and South Africa: the Imprisoned Society (SATIS) which exposed the conditions faced by political prisoners in South Africa.

In 1980, Shanthie and her partner, Dominic Tweedie, an anti-apartheid activist, went to work at the Solomon Mahlangu Freedom College in Tanzania, and during that year they got married.

In 1991, Shanthie and Dominic went to South Africa, following the unbanning of the ANC the previous year, and remained there until now.

Shanthie is survived by her husband and other members of her family.