

ANC Today - Letter from the President

Volume 4, No. 37 17—23 September 2004

Ray and Oom Bey – unlikely comrades, but comrades

Our movement, our people, our country are in mourning. This is because we have just lost, one after the other, two patriots and revolutionaries, who were among the most beautiful people we will ever be privileged to know. Christiaan Frederik Beyers Naude and Ray Alexander Simons have departed from the world of the living, never to return. But of them we can say, with no doubt in our minds, that their names, their memory, and the example they set, will be handed down from generation to generation as enduring monuments to the nobility of the human soul.

Those who were oppressed will carry the pain of their departure for many a day. Even as they celebrate their freedom everyday, they will feel a great sense of loss that the natural order of things has deprived Oom Bey and Ray the possibility to enjoy the fruits of the sacrifices they made for many more years. The fact that, in the end, they came to stand side by side in one mighty movement dedicated to the creation of a humane world for our people and the peoples of the world speaks of the invincible power of everything that is good. That millions revere them equally as their hero and heroine constitutes a powerful statement about the fact that the quality of justice and freedom is not strained.

To arrive at their common destination, Ray Simons and Beyers Naude travelled along their different roads. When they started and proceeded along their life journeys, not even the wisest in the world could have foreseen that one day they would walk through the same freedom's door they would have helped to prise open, working side by side.

A Jewish woman, Ray Simons was born in far away Latvia in Europe. She was a first generation immigrant, having arrived in our country in 1929, a 16-year-old. Beyers Naude was born in Roodepoort, in the old Transvaal. Native born, his ancestors, also originating from Europe, had been in South Africa for many generations.

By the time Ray Simons arrived in our country, she had been active in the communist movement of her native land. When she arrived, immediately and as a matter of course, she joined the Communist Party of South Africa. She remained a Communist throughout her life.

Beyers Naude was born the son of a Minister of the NG Kerk (Dutch Reformed Church). At the age of 24, he graduated in theology at the premier intellectual home of the Afrikaners, the University of Stellenbosch. The following year, 1940, he became an Assistant Minister in the NGK. When he passed away, he was still a Minister of the NGK.

As Ray Simons sailed away from Latvia, her hero and source of inspiration would have been V.I. Lenin, the leader of the 1917 Russian Revolution. That revolution and its most outstanding outcome, the establishment of the Soviet Union, served as a source of great inspiration to her for many decades. It was therefore natural for her that she would pursue in her new homeland, South Africa, the same objectives she had sought to achieve in her motherland, Latvia.

Beyers Naude was given the names Christiaan Frederik Beyers, after the old Boer General Beyers, who had been his father's close friend. Not only was his father a dominee of the NGK, he was also a founding member of the secret society of those who considered themselves true Afrikaners, the Broederbond. Necessarily, Beyers Naude could not but become an adherent of the philosophy

of the National Party of General Hertzog, which led to the institution of the apartheid system from 1948 onwards, under the leadership of the National Party.

A revolutionary from her very young years, Ray Simons was a worker and a working class leader. She helped to form the Food and Canning Workers Union, and served as its General Secretary. The working place and the workers' and people's struggles were the only universities she attended. The struggle led her to the books she read and wrote. In turn, what she wrote sought to accelerate that struggle and promote its victory.

Destined to join the Afrikaner ruling elite, Beyers Naude obtained two degrees at the University of Stellenbosch. A member of the Afrikaner clergy, he had the task to exploit the deep Christian convictions of the Afrikaner people to infuse them with ideas of white racial superiority. Groomed to become part of what would become the ruling Afrikaner elite, he joined the Broederbond at the age of 25, the youngest person to do so. The books he read served to strengthen his will and capacity to contribute to the strengthening of the system of white minority rule.

20 years after Ray Simons had left her European motherland, the most terrible crime was committed against the European Jewish population from which she came, when Hitler Germany murdered 6 million people during the Holocaust. In her new homeland, to which she had fled to seek refuge, some of those who were shortly to take power, Beyers Naude's colleagues, entered into secret conspiracies to establish themselves in our country as the local representatives of the villainous Nazis of Europe.

The cause for which Beyers Naude stood and had been prepared, the victory of the National Party and the introduction of the system of apartheid, succeeded in 1948. Thus began the process of the systematic and brutal repression of the democratic movement, which the Broederbond of Beyers Naude had planned for a long time, intent to ensure that the apartheid system would live forever.

Ray Simons' Communist Party was the first victim of this campaign of repression. It was banned in 1950. Three years later, in 1953, Ray Simons was served with her first banning order, with the regime using provisions it had put in the same law that gave it the legal authority to ban the Communist Party.

The following year, 1954, she was served with other banning orders, forcing her to resign her positions in the Food and Canning Workers Union and the Federation of South African Women, which she had helped to establish together with such outstanding women patriots as Lilian Ngoyi and Helen Joseph. Elected to parliament by the restricted number of African voters in 1954, who freely accepted her as their true representative and leader, the apartheid regime stopped her from taking her parliamentary seat.

In the meantime, Beyers Naude rose in the ranks of the ruling Afrikaner elite. Only 38 years old when Ray Simons was served with her first banning order, 41 years before the democratic victory of 1994, he had before him a full and successful life sitting at the high table of the oppressors, a true son of his father and General Beyers – a super-Afrikaner!

As they seemed to have been destined, Ray Simons and Beyers Naude proceeded along their separate but interconnected ways, condemned, as in a Greek tragedy to confront each other in mortal embrace at a later date, each to perish in a conflict that could not but end in the immolation of the antagonists. At Sharpeville in 1960, the racist order that Beyers Naude upheld, and which Ray Simons opposed and fought, murdered the people to whose liberation Ray Simons had dedicated her life. That served as a signal to Ray Simons that the intensified campaign of repression launched 10 years earlier, in 1950, with the shooting of demonstrators at Alexandra Township and the banning of the Communist Party of South Africa, was bound to get worse.

The Sharpeville massacre told her that there would be more massacres, and that

she too might not survive the bloodletting. Everything she had learnt as a Communist told her that, inevitably, extreme reaction would, as in Nazi Germany and elsewhere, get ever more bloodthirsty with each life of a revolutionary it claimed.

She knew that sooner or later, she too might be obliged to react in defence of the dream of freedom, and, through a revolutionary armed struggle, deliberately take the lives of one or more of those who sought to deny the majority that freedom, including Beyers Naude.

The massacre at Sharpeville could have told Beyers Naude that his task would now be to bestow blessings on those given the task to shoot the innocent in cold blood, to defend a regime that was cruel, arrogant and frightened. He could have resigned himself to the inevitable, convinced that his ancestry and his upbringing left him with no choice but to remain loyal to his vows to act in defence of the volk at all costs, as Ray Simons would feel obliged to act in defence of the oppressed at all costs.

But the murder at Sharpeville communicated a different message to Beyers Naude. It told him that his loyalty to the volk could not take precedence over what his theology had taught him – that all people were created in God's image, that all human beings had a duty to love their neighbour as themselves, that God had given all humanity an injunction not to kill. Everything he had learnt told him that the time had come for him to choose between obeying his fellow Afrikaners, or obeying his conscience and his God. He chose the latter.

In 1963 he resigned his ministry in the NGK and left the Broederbond. He joined with others to form the ecumenical Christian Institute, which published the journal "Pro Veritate".

In its 15 December 1963 edition, the journal published an article entitled "Address to the Nation", which paraphrased what Moses said to the Israelites. Among other things the article said:

"One day in the not so distant future an explorer from a far land may arrive in this country and find a barren waste, dried-up fields without a blade of grass, burnt-out rubble heaps that once were cities, and no oasis in a vast desolation. 'What caused it?', he will cry in bitter horror. There will be one answer, and one only. This was the consequence of man's deliberate wilfulness: this is what happened when men who had seen God's plan ignored it: this is the result, the inevitable result, of knowing what is right, and choosing what is wrong. For today we are still given our choice: today we do know the Right; today we can still choose Right or Wrong. The future is God's secret: today is ours, and what you decide will shape your future, and your children's children's future for ever."

Though written by the Rev R. Orr, these thoughts reflected Beyers Naude's own views. Knowing what is right, he chose to do what is right, electing not to ignore God's plan that he had seen. He took the decision to ensure that his country did not turn into a barren waste, with dried-up fields without a blade of grass, and burnt-out rubble heaps that once were cities.

Unlike almost all his people at the time, he turned his back on those who wanted to transform his motherland into a barren wasteland, condemning his children's children to perish, consumed by a vast desolation. For choosing what was right, knowing what was wrong, he was chased out of his church and community as a traitor.

Thus began his persecution by his own people as an outcast, and the convergence of the different roads along which he and Ray Simons had travelled. In 1977 the Christian Institute was banned. He too was banned and

denied his freedom through house arrest. Having been subjected to similar persecution, Ray Simons had been driven into exile twelve years earlier, in 1965.

As the African people had elected Ray Simons to parliament in 1954, accepting her as their selfless champion and defender, in 1985 the Africans elected Beyers Naude Secretary General of the South African Council of Churches, accepting him as their selfless champion and defender.

In 1990, Ray Simons and her patriot husband, Jack Simons, returned from exile, having been away from Ray's second motherland for 25 years. In the same year, Beyers Naude served as a member of the ANC delegation that began the negotiations with the National Party government whose actions 30 years earlier, in 1960, had obliged Beyers Naude to choose to do what was right. Ray Simons accepted him as her own champion and defender, a trusted leader of the millions for whom she had fought for 60 years.

Our movement, our struggle, and our people are blessed that they had as their representatives such gentle giants as Ray Simons and Beyers Naude. We were blessed that we had these patriots who were by nature as meek as lambs, but as fighters for the liberation of our people, had the courage of lions. Unassuming, without even so much as a touch of vanity and self-importance, with no idea what it would mean to seek personal gain or acclaim, or to turn away from the cause of freedom because of danger or fear, they represented and represent what it means to be a servant of the people.

Proceeding the one from deeply held Communist convictions, and the other from a deeply held Christian faith, in the end they walked together through freedom's door, side by side. In the end, what brought them together to that door was their shared and unqualified love of the ordinary people of our country, their humanism, their unwavering devotion to the cause of liberty, their honesty, integrity and selflessness.

Their presence among the ranks of the freedom fighters at the time when that presence signified readiness to give up one's life, bestowed an especial nobility and dignity on our struggle and those who fought for its victory. It enabled us to say – these are the best among us, who represent the best of what we stand for. Over the next few days we will say our last farewells to them. But unless we turn our backs on those who laid down their lives so that we should gain our liberty, we will never say farewell to the example they set. We will never say farewell to the challenge they handed down to us and to future generations of democrats, to act as they did, truly in the interests of the innocent, the poor and the downtrodden.

President Thabo Mbeki