

REMEMBERING HEDI

January 6th 1997 is the eighty first birth anniversary of Hedi Stadlen - known better in Sri Lanka as Hedi Keuneman (first wife of Pieter Keuneman). She lived in the island from 1940 to 1945, and was a founder member and one of the activists of the Communist movement of that period. Many remember her well and to others, she is now a legendary figure, whose dynamism, militancy and dedication are still talked about. Like a comet she blazed across the skies and disappeared, but has re-emerged again into our view.

Born Hedi Simon, in Vienna in 1916 to an assimilated Jewish family, her father was Dr. Hans Simon, an economist and lawyer and her mother was Else Reis, a well-educated Viennese. The family was part of the sophisticated, intellectual and cultural milieu of Vienna, Simon's great uncle being Johann Strauss, the famous composer of light music. Hedi, an only child, went to a famous avant garde girls' school (gymnasium) in Vienna, whose principal, Dr. Eugenia Schwarzwald, was known for her advanced views. Some of the teachers who influenced her were socialists. On leaving school, she studied philosophy for two years (1934-1935) at the University of Vienna under Professor Schlick. But because of the anti-semitism of the period and the fascist threat, the family moved to Switzerland and Hedi's father, who had contacts in Britain, sent her to Newnham College, Cambridge. She lived there from 1936-1939, and she did a Moral Sciences tripos, Part I, obtaining the only first that year; for Part II she took the Psychology tripos.

Cambridge in the 1920s and 1930s was intellectually and politically an exciting place. The university had produced dissidents and famous gurus, Bertrand Russell, Wittgenstein and G.M. Moore in Philosophy; E.M. Foster and F.R. Leavis in English; J.D. Bernal, and J.B.S. Haldane in Science, and Maurice Dobb and Keynes in Economics. The years of the economic depression of the early 1930s, the rise of fascism in Germany, the Spanish Civil War and Mussolini's aggression in Abyssinia politicised the students. The Marxists in particular were active and captured the labour and socialist societies in Cambridge University as well as the Majlis - which grouped the Indian students and became a strong anti-imperialist organisation. For Hedi there was an added reason for her political commitment - namely the virulent anti-semitism of that period. As she writes "the racial discrimination suffered by the Jews in Austria made me feel specially sympathetic to the victims of colonial rule and strengthened my determination to identify with the fight for the freedom and independence of colonial peoples".

Communist Party

Many students in Cambridge became members and supporters of the British Communist party. There were numerous issues in local British politics which mobilised the students; including the rising numbers of unemployed, the hunger marches

and the agitation against the class differences of Britain. Students in Cambridge were also inspired by young communists like John Conford and others of the International Brigade who died in Spain, fighting against Franco's regime. Communism to them was the answer to Fascism.

The other issue that mobilised the Left students was that of anti-imperialism, and during the 1930s there was a coming together of Asian nationalists and the British communists - many of the students from India and Sri Lanka also becoming active in the British Communist Party.

Hedi's communist friends in Cambridge included a fellow refugee from Vienna, Eric Hobsbawm the historian, and several Indians including Mohan Kumaramangalam (later a Minister in Indira Gandhi's Cabinet), and a group of Sri Lankan students - P. Kandiah, Vaidyalingam and Pieter Keuneman. Many of those students including Hedi, used to travel at weekends to London to work with Krishna Menon's India League. Here she met many Indian nationalists including Indira Gandhi.

Hedi married Pieter Keuneman in Ascona, Switzerland in September 1939, after he had completed his law examinations in London. On arrival in Sri Lanka in 1940 she plunged into political activity. She wore the sari, lived very simply, often walking bare foot, and identified closely with the lives of the working people.

Hedi was active in many aspects of party work - in supporting the strikes in Colombo of that period, in campaigning for the Communist party and actively helping to run the Friends of the Soviet Union. She recalls that

Many of those interested in our work were middle-class and English educated, students, teachers, clerks and I was therefore able to address meetings in English. I worked in the reading room and library of the friends of the Soviet Union helping with the publication of journals and leaflets and traveling outside Colombo to other centres in order to widen membership. I loved doing this since it gave me an opportunity to stay at the homes of supporters and make many friends.

During her first two years in Sri Lanka, Hedi lectured in Logic at the University in Colombo and also taught at the Modern School started by Doreen Wickremesinghe.

In 1942 the Communist Party's policy was to support the war effort and to cooperate with the government in civil defence and food control measures. The Communist Party also supported the creation of Co-operative Societies and Communists were encouraged to stand for election in each of the localities. Hedi was elected as President of the Rendapola Co-operative Society. She writes

"I remember this as perhaps the most satisfying work I did because it made a genuine contribution to help the local population to get a fair supply of foodstuffs with their coupons. Our chief enemy were the black marketeers and I remember arriving at our Co-op very early, long before opening time every morning in order to prevent illegitimate black market dealings through the sale of food destined for the local people. Later I also did a supervisory job, touring a number of Colombo stores. This work offered me the chance of practical, day to day contact with the women who shopped there, and to gain their confidence in spite of the colour of my skin. When rice became very scarce I also tried to persuade women to adapt to other foods by carrying such food around on a trolley and offering it to the women to taste".

Hedi was so active in promoting the alternative cereal bajiri, that she was popularly known in Colombo as 'bajiri nona'.

At the end of the Second World War, Hedi - aged 30, returned to Europe to see her mother and then decided to stay on. She divorced Keuneman and married the Austrian concert pianist and musicologist Peter Stadlen, and still lives in London.

Although she had played such an active role in Left politics, she was lost to Sri Lanka history. We hope she can be persuaded to write about the years she spent in Sri Lanka - for her story is not merely that of an individual but forms a part of the political history of Sri Lanka. ■

Kumari Jayawardena

New Arrival at the *Suriya Bookshop*

Embodied Violence **Communalising Women's Sexuality in South Asia**

Edited by: **Kumari Jayawardena and Malathi de Alwis**

Contents

Abducted Women, the State and Questions of Honour :
Three Perspectives on the Recovery Operation in Post-Partition
India

Ritu Menon & Kamla Bhasin

Rape and the Construction of Communal Identity

Kalpana Kannabiran

Gender, Nationalism(s) and Cultural Identity:
Discursive Strategies and Exclusivities

Shahnaz Rouse

Childhood and Role Models in the Andar Mahal:
Muslim Women in the Private Sphere in Colonial Bengal

Sonia Nishat Amin

Sexuality in the Field of Vision:
The Discursive Clothing of the Sigiriya Frescoes

Malathi de Alwis

Ethnicity and the Empowerment of Women:
The Colonial Legacy

Jasodhara Bagchi

Hindu Nationalist Women as Ideologues:
The Sangh, the Samiti and Differential Concepts of the
Hindu Nation

Paola Bacchetta

Static Signifiers
Metaphors of Women in Sri Lankan War Poetry

Neloufer de Mel

The Myth of 'Patriots' and 'Traitors':
Pandita Ramabai, Brahmanical Patriarchy and Militant Hindu
Nationalism

Uma Chakravarti

Institutions, Beliefs and Ideologies:
Widow Immolation in Contemporary Rajasthan

Kumkum Sangari & Sudesh Valid

Now Available at the

Suriya Bookshop

~~~ *the creative alternative* ~~~

425/15 Thimbirigasyaya Rd, Col. 5. Ph: 501339 / Fax: 595563