

Amina Desai

LENASIA INDICATOR

1-31 JULY 2009

'A woman must be educated, independent'

IMTIAZ CAJEE

"A woman must be educated and have her own independence." This had always been the mantra of Amina Desai.

Born Amina Nagdee in September 1919, one of nine children of a Malay mother and Indian father, she was obliged to leave school while in Standard 4, in order to look after her younger siblings at home, and thereafter educated herself.

Desai tried to find correspondence courses to complete her JC school certificate. She was intent on becoming a nurse, and enrolled herself in a school for midwifery, until barely five days later when she was unceremoniously fetched by her father, who deemed it an unsuitable profession.

She persisted, however, and was eventually allowed to study at Harvard College, which at the time was "Whites Only". Desai became the only "non-

white" student, where she was credited with being a fast learner, and managed to attain qualifications in typing, commerce and shorthand.

She and her sister Halima began publishing articles under pseudonyms in the Indian Views magazine, edited by Ismail Meer, about feminism.

In May 1943 she married Suleiman Desai. Desai was a member of the Transvaal Indian Congress, friends

with Indian struggle activists of the likes of Yusuf Dadoo and Ismail Cachalia, and owner of a shoe agency for Watson's shoes. When he died of a heart attack in 1969, Amina immediately assumed control of her husband's business — a business she continued to run for the next 35 years.

However, early one morning in October 1972, Amina Desai was arrested, accused by the Apartheid government

of conspiring with her lodger Ahmed Timol to further the aims of the then-illegal African National Congress.

Ahmed Timol, a schoolteacher and family friend, had been staying with her and was arrested just days before, but was notoriously tortured and killed in detention, becoming one of the many detainees to mysteriously "jump" from the tenth floor of the John Vorster Square prison.

In November 1972, aged 53, Desai was sentenced to five years' imprisonment. She served most of her sentence in Barberton and Kroonstad prisons alongside longtime ANC stalwart Dorothy Nyembe, and for a short while with Winnie Mandela, whose defiance and courage she greatly admired. She was released in 1978, by this time South Africa's longest-serving Indian woman political prisoner, and was placed



Amina Desai believed that a woman must be educated and have her own independence.

under a banning order and house arrest for a further five years until 1983.

She was devastated to have to leave South Africa in 2004 due to failing health, to live with her family in the UK and Ireland. Desai passed away peacefully in Dublin on 9 June, having attended the recent South African Freedom Day celebra-

tions, hosted by South Africa's Ambassador to Ireland, Priscilla Jana, who had also been part of her original legal defence team.

She is survived by her children Zinnie, Hilmi, Bahiya, and Adela.

— Imtiaz Cajee is the nephew of Ahmed Timol and the author of "Timol: Quest for Justice".

A tribute
to

Amina Desai

by

Imtiaz Cajee

✍

Lenasia Indicator

July 2009

✍