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Who's the real Alijah Gordon?

By Sharon Nelson

SHARON NELSON turns the pages of the memoirs of a remarkable woman, a champion of downtrodden minorities and, to many who met her, a living history unto herself.

LOOKING at the picture on the book cover, one wonders: has the fag been Photoshop-ed out?

Here is a young Alijah, her face as yet unlined, her eyes intent as ever and her fingers poised perfectly to hold a cigarette.

In the picture the cigarette is a phantom but in living colour, her chain-smoking would become one of her most recognisable trademarks, along with her fierce passion for the Palestinian cause.

I first met Datuk Dr Alijah Gordon as a rookie reporter nearly nine years ago. The substance of the assignment is a blur; Alijah's furious temperament is not.

She was kind to me - "You're new? Listen carefully." - and about one of my colleagues who had recently interviewed her: "A very literate young woman indeed." She was less so to one of her own colleagues who was conducting the Press conference with her.

"Tan (not his real name)," she tried to cut him off mid-stream. "Tan." He blathered on. "Tan ...With all due respect, SHUT UP."

I soon learnt that Alijah was one of the cub reporter's initiation rites. She had little time to spare and made the fact known at once. Many months after my first encounter, another reporter made his way to one of her assignments. She looked up at this tall young man, then all of 17 years old, and greeted him curtly: "Don't waste my life."

It was six or seven years before I met her again. By this time I was involved with the books section of the paper and Alijah was launching The Propagation of Islam in the Indonesian-Malay Archipelago, which she edited. The invitation had been issued to my editor but a close relative had died, so I was sent in her stead with an instruction to kirim her apologies. "Where is she?" Alijah demanded.

"Oh," she responded huffily, when I explained, as though miffed that someone had thought to die on such an important day.

Then she peered at me more closely. "What's your name again, girl?" I told her. "I know you, I know you ..." She patted my cheek so hard it stung. I often wonder whether this was affection or revenge for failing to meet her exacting journalistic standards.

Almost everyone who met her returned with a scolding story. When Part 1 of her memoir, *On Becoming Alijah*, was launched last week by Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, a few of her friends took the stand to share the memories of the formidable woman of action who died last November at the age of 72.

"The first time she called me," said Tengku Elisa Bustaman, "was to scold me for being late with my payments."

Like hundreds of other Malaysians, Tengku Elisa sponsors a child in Palestine under a programme run by the Malaysian Sociological Research Institute (MSRI).

"I admired her tenacity, her perseverance," said Raja Ahmad Aminullah, a guest at the launch. How was this manifested, I asked. "Put it this way: I never gave her my home phone number."

On Becoming Alijah is a book of modern history, painfully unfolding into the grim shapes we know today. Against this backdrop was a spunky young

woman with a precocious intellect and a social conscience too big and reactive for the smallness of beings around her.

She was born Shirley Doris Gordon in New Jersey on March 29, 1929, into relative wealth. But the Great Depression took its toll; the family went through very hard times, which may have steeled to her to face some of the dire circumstances she threw herself into later in life.

Shirley (she later became "Shirle", and how this happened is worth buying the book for) discovered activism early in life. When her mother separated from her father, she took young Shirley and her brother Clarence with her. For a time they lived in a block of apartments. The economy was in tatters and an exploitative landlord suddenly raised rents.

Livid, Shirley and two friends used lipstick - of all things - and wrote condemnations of the man on the walls of the block's public areas.

Her weapons touched both ends of the spectrum. When a black family moved into a white neighbourhood, "I also took my father's shotgun and joined them in the house to confront the whites who threatened to burn a cross on their lawn."

She wanted to read law at Columbia but was refused because of low marks in algebra, which apparently indicated an inability to "think logically". She took Middle Eastern/Islamic studies instead and after her graduate work, travelled through Egypt, India, Lebanon, Burma and Malaya. Always she took the part of the minorities, those easy to ignore. Always she became noticeable, probably reasoning that if she got noticed, the issues would too.

"She had an infinite capacity for getting into trouble," said Dr Mahathir at the launch. "She would call me if she could. Sometimes, it was possible to help her and sometimes it was difficult.

"Fortunately, I got made Prime Minister of Malaysia," he said with comic understatement. "I was able to disregard official reports - going by them, she would never have been in this country."

Those who think she orchestrated a useful alliance with the premier are gravely misled. He published in MSRI journal Intisari as early as 1964; his approach, intellectual and noisy, was astonishingly like hers.

She was banished from Malaysia in 1974 (again, buy the book). In 1982, Dr Mahathir lifted the ban and she came, in her own words, home.

During her years away, the work of MSRI, which she set up in 1957, continued. When her close friend Fatimah Haron went to visit her in Jakarta, her luggage consisted of 12 box files of MSRI's accounts. Scrupulous to the last, Alijah wanted to make sure that the institute was neither owed nor owing.

Her Palestinian sponsorship programme attracted a response from Malaysians of all faiths. Their aid helps about 200 Palestinian refugee children in Lebanon get access to health care, education and recreation, just to name a few facilities. Judging by the accounts of a few sponsors on the day of the launch, they gain as much from the programme.

She's been accused of being a Zionist, an Arabist and a CIA agent. As Dr Mahathir said: "She could not seem to get her identity right with anyone."

Early on in my career, one of my editors told me that if I could find out who Alijah Gordon really was, he'd give me a year's subscription to my favourite magazine.

I never did, of course. On Becoming Alijah: Part 1 doesn't answer any of the tabloid questions, either. In it, she remains a curiously unanswered question, pushing forward issues and forsaking the common ego which dictates all too many memoirs.

* `On Becoming Alijah: Part 1' is self-published and retails at RM140.

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