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A life-long passion for human rights

Koh Lay Chin

DATUK Dr Alijah Gordon's fascinating life almost reads like fiction, but every part of her controversial and riveting past is as real as the passion for human rights which pervaded her life.

An American writer who made Malaysia her home, New Jersey-born Alijah was known throughout her life as a scholar, historian, Islamic loyalist, activist and outspoken proponent of the Palestinian cause.

Often described with the words "fiery", "passionate" and "blunt", she was born in 1929 as Shirley Gordon, whose concern for the Palestinians began during her school days in New York.

Her passion for human rights blossomed at that time when she learned about the injustices in countries like Palestine, Iraq, Kurdistan and Guatemala.

It was in 1953 that 24-year-old Alijah, a college student, participated in a debate on television against the permanent representative of Israel to the United Nations, Abba Eban.

The subject was on the issue of Palestine and Zionism, and she held her own against Eban, who was to become Israeli Foreign Minister.

So skilled was she in the debate that she annoyed Zionist groups and attracted the attention of the Egyptian Government. She was later offered a scholarship by the latter to do research in Egypt.

Before that however she took it on herself to plead the Arab cause at the 1956 Asian Socialist Conference in Mumbai after leaving the United States in 1954.

Attracting controversy wherever she went, she was fired up by the cause for the Palestinians and Kurds in Egypt and was later expelled from the country.

She later travelled to Lebanon and then Myanmar in 1957 as the guest of then Prime Minister U B Swe, who had been impressed by her earnestness at the Mumbai conference.

Refusing to write a story a magazine wanted her to, she later moved to Thailand and then travelled to Malaysia from there in the very same year.

It was here she set up the Malaysian Sociological Research Institute in 1959, and became its trustee, the role which she was to embrace all her life.

She received a lot of support from former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, his wife Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali and very much later from former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim in the setting up of the institute.

The MSRI's first chairman was the late literary legend Za'aba, Tan Sri Dr Zainal Abidin Ahmad, who along with another famous writer, the late Pak Sako (Datuk Dr Ishak Muhammad), became her close friends.

Controversy still followed her when she was later living in Singapore promoting several campaigns, as she was forcibly expelled after writing an editorial that the Government did not like.

A friend said that she was "literally hauled" from her office in Singapore and "placed" at the Johor border, resisting all the way as "she felt she did not do anything wrong".

Expelled from Egypt and Singapore, she was also then banned from Malaysia from 1973 to 1982, "without being given any reason for the expulsion".

During these times she went to Beirut to "share the pain" of Palestinian

refugees there as well as repeatedly travelling between Thailand and Indonesia, until she got tired of life on the move.

She wrote to Dr Mahathir, asking for permission to return, which was granted.

Her staff at the MSRI said she had shared a close bond with Dr Mahathir, and that she called him on various occasions whenever she was fired up about an issue.

Extremely tenacious and strong-willed, Alijah then poured her soul into the MSRI and campaigns to render humanitarian support for the Palestinians, "one of the most depressed people within the ummah".

With her as the institute's driving force, volunteers were roped in to visit refugee camps in countries such as Lebanon and millions were collected in funds for Palestinian orphans and refugees.

A chain smoker, she was often captured in photographs with a cigarette in her hand and a smile with her blonde hair perennially tied up in a pony tail.

"She had this presence and was very tall.

"When she was sick she looked frail and very much smaller, but she could still intimidate people," an MSRI staffer said.

Alijah had been unable to walk for some time, but came down with emphysema and pneumonia almost two months ago and was later taken to the Gleneagles Intan Medical Centre, where she was to stay at its Intensive Care Unit for six weeks.

Her friend and MSRI co-ordinator, Noor Khairiyati Mohd Ali, said before she was ill she had been bed-ridden at her home in the institute but was still clocking 16 hours of work daily.

"The MSRI was always her baby, and she was very passionate about it and the cause of the Palestinians," she said.

There are many things unknown about Alijah, and although she wrote the first part of her memoirs *On Becoming Alijah*, it concentrates on her life long before coming to Malaysia.

Khairiyati said "everyone" had been waiting for the second part which was to narrate her experience in what was her home for most of her life.

"She tried, and we tried to help her, but her work with the Palestinians always came first.

"Now we will have to depend on her diary and notes, but as to the way the atmosphere or situation was, only she could really describe it," she said, adding that Alijah had been unable to speak much since she was taken ill.

Alijah was a storehouse of knowledge, Khairiyati said, as she had been in Malaysia since it first gained independence, and knew many distinguished personalities like the first Prime Minister Tengku Abdul Rahman.

"There were things she knew that nobody else did," Khairiyati said.

Alijah was married twice and divorced both times, with no children, although she had unofficially "adopted" several Palestinian orphans.

She once said her life was a series of responses to "moral hooks" and was never really in command of her life.

Despite this, those who knew her said she was resolute in her work, never failed to speak her mind and always persevered to raise support and funds for the Palestinian cause.

In a 1987 address to Universiti Malaya students at a memorial service for the massacre victims of Sabra and Shatilla, she urged the young to "make a real commitment in the name of the humanity we must all actively share".

"I don't wear black tonight. I wear red. For the Palestinians do not mourn.

"They bury their dead and go on with the daily struggle to survive as people.

"And if you, young Malaysians, would honour the Palestinian dead, then support the living."