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Tribute to Lyov Hassim

APDUSA VIEWS

Email malentro@telkomsa.net

Website: www.apdusaviews.co.za

Tribute to Lyov as delivered on 23 July 2011

People like us who are rationalists, believe that reason and logic should be the basis of what one believes in and what one does, that death is final and that there is no life after death, therefore no opportunity to make amends. One of the consequences of this belief is that a persons life and that persons deeds, unless recorded will be lost forever. Hence it is the duty of those who survive a person who led an interesting, inspiring and socially useful life to record that life so that it should not be forgotten.

Not every person who devotes a large portion of his or her life doing socially useful work gets credit for it. Unless you belong to a large organisation with ample resources or a well run organisation which is highly motivated your life and deeds will not be remembered.

There are many groups of people who were actively involved in the struggle and who belonged to organisations which are now long forgotten. Their stories and contribution could only have been kept alive by the survivors.

When Lyova died I felt bereft that a beloved son, a friend, a shoulder to lean on in hard times, a traveling companion and later a comrade had to be taken away at such a relatively young age. Those of you who knew him would have known some part of his life and his activities, but very few people would know the whole of his life. Because I was his mother, companion, friend, and comrade I knew him perhaps more than most people.

It is my sad but proud duty to be able to present as much as possible of the whole of Lyova to you. We named him Lyov after Lyov Sedov the son of Trotsky who was murdered by Stalin's agents and who was a revolutionary in his own right. Lyov did not really like the name but he bore it with forbearance. He did justice to the person after whom he was named.

Throughout his grown life he remained a rationalist and atheist. A rationalist is a person who insists on a reasoned and scientific explanation for things that have taken place. He said in an e-mail to Kader that "I am second generation atheist so I got no god to spring back to". He did not follow one religion or another and we would, in accordance with his thinking, have preferred his funeral to have been a non-religious and non-sectarian one.

This occasion allows us all here today to pay tribute to Lyova for the life he led and the contribution he made both to the freedom struggle and to peoples' lives.

I have always said that during Kader's detention and imprisonment the children and I were the recipients of the great kindness of people in Pietermaritzburg. I always felt that they enveloped us with care and compassion for which I was truly grateful. The kindness was both emotional and physical support and the way I was assisted so that I could work and earn our bread. However nothing had prepared us for the overwhelming outpouring of support on the occasion of Lyov's passing. The support ranged from sympathy and condolences, which were verbal and face to face, in writing, telephone phone calls, as well as e-mails. We were surrounded by caring people during our most difficult days. I take this occasion to express our most sincere gratitude to all those people who stood by us.

Lyov had an irreverent take on life. When he died both Liana and Enver showed us the song they said was his favorite. We played it before I started to speak. This song makes fun of what life throws at you and how you should re-act. There are no certainties. Sunscreen is the only one – because it is based on scientific fact. The song makes some profound comments on life as well as some things we never think of as important. I have put some of the words on the wall so it can be read easily. What Lyov believed was that one had to engage with whatever life threw at you – he taught me the idea of the curved ball. What you had to do was deal with it and do your best to fight and overcome those obstacles. Lyov had a lion's share of obstacles and afflictions which he faced head on. And when they became unbearable he sought refuge in liquor.

He was born with a terrible genetic inheritance. I will speak of this later, but any one of his afflictions would have made most people lose interest in life or become very disgruntled with their lot in life or even become nasty and anti-social. Not so with Lyov. He tried as best he could to grapple with these things, and make something of his life in spite of his ailments. The most that he did that showed he grappled with these things was when he made fun of the fact that all the bad genes ended up in him.

There are many strands to his life and I will try to give some of them. There are others that we never knew as Lyov was not in the habit of broadcasting his achievements. Some things he only let on long after they

had occurred, either because it fell under need to know, the underground political rule, or because he did not want to distress us.

He grew up in a home where both his parents were politically involved. While the social revolutionaries of the previous era did not believe that they should have children some, like Lenin, never did. Trotsky had four children and he and his wife suffered greatly during the Stalinist repression, all four of their children were directly or indirectly killed. Perhaps those who are going to engage in political work should think of the consequences upon their families a little more carefully, although I must say that I was the recipient of Lyov's kind and big hearted nature, and don't regret having given him life for he enriched mine. Bearing this in mind one has to wonder how he was affected when both his parents were in detention when he was only 7 years old and he had to be uprooted from his home and school and taken to be looked after by members of his family in Durban. Even previous to this he grew up in a home where his father was house- arrested and so he did not really have a normal home life as Kader could not accompany us everywhere and at any time.

He must have been profoundly affected by the arrest and sentencing of Kader , especially as he was very attached to Kader as a baby, and later when I went to study in Durban they were companions.

Personal Qualities

Lyov had a forgiving nature and did not bear grievance for long. He did not take sides if he was not directly involved. He had an aversion to gossip and never encouraged it. He also had a wicked sense of humour which lasted his entire life. As he grew older the humor became black at times. He thought of death and made fun of it, much to the dismay of those who listened to his views on the subject, as it invariably meant he was talking of his own death.

He also spent a lot of time thinking about philosophical issues and post-modern concepts that I had no understanding of. I wish I had listened more carefully. He challenged conventional wisdom and often made one uncomfortable when he took one out of one's comfort zone. He really was a man who lived in his head and ideas were very important to him. There were three women who figured very strongly in his life. First was Ishana whom he married and from this marriage Liana was born. Ishana was the head of the South African Council for Higher Education (SACHED) in Pietermaritzburg, and I will describe this period later. While Lyov was the theoretical head of this group in Pietermaritzburg, Ishana was the solid rock on which this group existed. She had control of

the resources of SACHED which she made available for their political work.

His world fell apart after the Sached group was disbanded by elements who took their cue from the ANC, and it was Shanta, whom he had met after the divorce, who gave him stability and companionship.

When Shanta died and his life was once again thrown into turmoil he met Maya who married him and gave him a stable home.

There were other people too who had faith in him and helped him, I must mention Kuben Chetty and Alwyn Volsum, who, when he needed articles, took him in as an article clerk though they knew he had an alcohol problem, even though at the time he was not drinking and was stable. Kuben Chetty stood up for him later on when he had gone back to drinking and there was strong pressure that he close his office to prevent him doing something dishonourable, and it was Kuben Chetty who said that such drastic action was not necessary.

Health

When he was a child he probably came into contact with TB twice and though the Drs. were doubtful he was treated on both occasions, although on the first occasion I am sure that he did have a reaction as the person who looked after him as a baby was diagnosed later with having TB. He overcame this and was a sturdy boy. At a crucial stage in his life, as he reached puberty, and was going to leave school for university he was diagnosed with a neuro-muscular disease, which involves the wasting of nerves and muscles. It started in the feet and that is how we noticed it – his arch was getting more pronounced. He would knock over things or stumble over others. Until I knew the cause, the clumsiness was irritating. I am sorry we did not deal with this very distressing news differently. His personality did change and he went through a terrible time when he started drinking and not studying. This led to his failing all his subjects at University. He had several massive operations designed to minimize the effects of the disease. Later on it became clear that his hands were also affected even though we were not told this originally.

He grappled with all his health problems and dealt with them with humor and perseverance. A neurologist who once examined him asked me some years later if he could still walk and drive and I replied yes he could and that he drove a manual car. The neurologist was surprised. (It is with sadness that I add here that the neurologist was Professor Brian Kies. A caring doctor, activist and lecturer. He died a few days ago of cancer. He was a man one of his kind and even as he lay dying he worried about his

father who is 90 years old and asked people to support him in this sad time). When Lyov's hands were affected he adapted to that as well.

He also went through periods of depression.

When the bakkie we had bought for him was stolen he went to University by bicycle. In Ohrtman Road he was run over by a 10 ton truck. It was a miracle that he survived. But survive he did. His pelvis was crushed like post toasties according to the orthopaedic surgeon. His body was terribly punished and he lived with a fair amount of discomfort for the rest of his life, both from the accident as well as his feet. His gait also became worse after the accident.

In 2005 the next brush with death occurred. He had a heart attack and had to have a triple by-pass. This was so severe, and his condition so critical that he could not be transported by car to the hospital in Westville but had to be medicated and taken by ambulance.

This made him even more aware of his own mortality. His humor became decidedly blacker and the jokes a little too close to the bone for comfort. Yet he was the ultimate survivor and would count the years post by-pass as he knew that by-passes had a limited lifespan.

Lyov was afflicted with alcohol abuse and he fought many battles against his addiction to alcohol. When he drank, it was mainly binge drinking which meant that for long periods of time he did not touch liquor but when he did start again it was excessive. He tried over and over again to stop, and in the last few years of his life he was sober, except for a few hiccups. When he fell off the wagon he would dust himself off and get up and try again. He joined the AA and made lasting friends with people who had a similar affliction and who understood the circumstances of the abuse of alcohol. He also joked that he went to the AA and managed to survive and stay sober without the religious part. He was one of the people who helped friends who were also alcoholics and I heard lately that he was responsible for starting a group in town, which sadly is no longer functioning. Lately he told me that he no longer liked the taste of liquor and I had hoped that that was the end of that struggle for him.

Lyov was quite philosophical about what all these illnesses meant and he would talk of death and try to make a joke. Just the other day he was going on about how it could happen and I said to him that for a man who makes out such resignation to life's inevitable he really fights to stave it off when it stares him in the face. Maya related how when she was driving him to the hospital in January this year he had the presence of mind in the midst of the heart attack to phone his Dr to tell him what was

happening to him and to come to attend to him at hospital. So like him. When I felt overwhelmed by the sadness of his death I knew that if he had a chance he would have fought for life. But this was his 4th serious brush with death and he could not make it this time. Not many people fight 3 times for life and so I take heart from his love and zest for whatever life offered and his ability to rise above his own tribulations. (Just as an aside his second brush with death involved being hijacked. He had taken Shanta for treatment for cancer and then taken her children for the weekend to be with her, when he was hijacked and a gun put to his head and robbed of her new car. He was quite traumatized by this incident although he rarely spoke about it. The nightmare of that day was compounded by the fact that Liana was supposed to be with him and had not gone after all. His trauma was not only the violence but also the fact that he did not know what would have happened if she had been with him.)

The other thing is that in a lesser person all these afflictions and ailments could have alienated them from other people, made them morose, or taken out their frustration on those around them. Lyov on the other hand related well to other people and always found something to make life less burdensome for others as well as himself.

The day he had the heart attack he went to swim and then for a walk. It was while he was walking he had the attack. He tried to live as healthy and normal life as possible. Many people did not realize the obstacles in his way or how he contorted his feet to be able to operate the clutch, brake and accelerator pedals of the car.

Political Activity

During the students' strike in 1980, Lyov was one of the leaders. When the strike degenerated into a political game and truancy, a certain amount of thuggery took place and he took a stand. He paid heavily for this and was alienated from some of the students. He was also the butt of dirty tricks from this section of the students. The strike petered out and he was vindicated.

When he failed first year Kader suggested to Ishana Samuels (who later became his wife) who ran the Sached office, that she take him under her wing and give him some meaningful socially important work. Sached, the SA Council for Higher Education, an NGO which was an alternative to the apartheid government educational system. She employed him and it was one of the most productive times of his life. He was exposed to the students who came to SACHED for help as well as the trade unionists. He

worked under trade unionist John Makhatini first and then on his own as well. The boy who struggled to wake up in the morning and grumbled to do chores early would heed Makhatini's call to go out at dawn to do organizational work. The Unions he worked with included MAWU (later NUMSA), Municipal Workers, Paper Wood and Allied workers union and the National union of Textile workers. On his own he organized workers from a factory in Bishopstowe into NUMSA.

He, together with members of the SACHED group were deeply involved in the great SARMCOL strike and it was his terrible comradely duty to have to go to the mortuary to identify the charred bodies of the MAWU comrades namely Gloria Mnikathi, Phineas Sibiya, and Simon Ngubane, who had been murdered in Mphophomeni. He showed a side I only heard of lately – a strength of character that his joking affable nature hid. On another occasion he and a fellow comrade tried to protect a fellow unionist at a meeting where the latter had taken notes and was accused by undisciplined youth with criminal inclination of being a spy. This man was marked for death. Lyov and the other comrade tried to slip the man out of the meeting but the old unionist was nonetheless attacked but they ensured his survival by taking him to hospital. Another time he saved a woman from NUTW from being necklaced near Prilla Mills. He told me once that I had no idea of the things he did and the places he knew during the Sached days, and that he was in and out of the townships during that period. He was organizing and giving political lessons throughout this time. His work in the Trade unions involved organizing, signing up members, as well as training recruits and the leadership of the particular union in political theory and absorbing new members into NUMSA structures. His work in going to schools to sell Upbeat magazine, which was a progressive magazine with content which was not found in the syllabus, brought him into contact with progressive teachers and students. So he did political work on that level too and became involved in raising political consciousness. They were particularly successful in some of the rural areas. This led to a headlong clash between the old and young in these areas.

There was a time that the Sached office was a hive of activity and throngs of young people went there to learn and discuss. This was a safe place to meet and assemble. They could engage in intense discussion about oppression and exploitation, and capitalism in a central area where these young people could come and congregate from all corners of the city. At some point during this time several persons including Lyov, started LAYCOM to bring together the Labour, community and education sectors. Here advanced workers were given formal training in running the

unions, as well as training in wage disputes and policy. They learnt to lead evidence and defend their members in disputes. Laycom also absorbed the senior leadership of the unions and there they started advanced political studies in things like the Russian Revolution, Stalinism etc. This became a sore point at a later stage because they were effectively neutralizing the influence of the pro-ANC elements while the ANC was still banned.

During the period 1987-1988 he joined WILSA, the Workers Internationalist League of South Africa, a supposedly radical left group. He was apparently the leading thinker in the Natal Section of the group and was greatly admired by members to whom he lectured on the complex subject of Marxism. He was known to the members as Comrade Lionel. Here again they studied advanced political ideas. A section of the leadership of WILSA demanded that, for the sake of the revolution, Ishana should terminate her pregnancy. By that time Lyov and Ishana had had enough of the leadership of arm-chair intellectuals playing revolution and took a stand against them. He walked out.

After they left Wilsa, Ishana and Lyov joined The Marxist Workers Tendency or Inqaba. This was a group of intellectuals who infiltrated the ANC in the mistaken belief that since the millions were already organised in the ANC they did not have to do any organizational work. In this organisation he once again worked hard and wrote for their newspaper under the name Lionel.

In recognition of his hard work in the Trade Union movement Lyov was elected as a delegate to the first Cosatu conference held in 1985, he was just 21 years old. When he saw the direction that the conference was taking - being hijacked by the ANC/SACP elements he must have been devastated. His training and political views were formed in the left wing Fosatu, the Federation of SA Trade Unions which was the predecessor of Cosatu. This federation had tried to keep an independent line and refused to be sucked into the ANC camp. This independent line also enabled workers from different political groups to find common ground in the trade unions and so work together. This, it must be remembered, was at a time when Inkatha and the congress groups were at war. With Cosatu, and the subsequent wholesale sell-out by the Fosatu leadership that independent line vanished forever. He was terribly disillusioned and never reached those heights of political activity again. He tried at least twice, to the best of my knowledge, to get some grouping together, but what came of these tentative efforts I don't know. It seems nothing materialized. In the end he must have realized that even when numbers

were small it was important to keep the faith in political change that one had when one was young and idealistic. Lately he was writing to the press as well and I know he was looking for a political home. The unions would not have satisfied him as I am sure that he realized that the political training and the ideological battles of the Fosatu era were no more.

During the time in Sached he was one of the people who started a student group called Forward Youth. This arose out of the work done whilst distributing Upbeat magazine. In Forward Youth they came into conflict with both Inkatha and the pro-ANC elements. It was at this time when the political temperature was heated that Lyov and Ishana and their group were threatened. At that stage Lyov and Ishana were living in this very house and the heavy metal frame on the windows of the 2 bedrooms and high pre-cast concrete wall in front of the lounge were measures taken against petrol bombs.

Pietermaritzburg Sached had tried to keep an independent and non-sectarian line, which meant that they treated all sections of the liberatory movement equally, which in effect kept the ANC from getting a stronghold in or control of, Pietermaritzburg Sached. Hostility against Lyov, Ishana and other members of their group, from the ANC, was so high that an unstable member of their own group was incited against him and managed to get hold of a gun and threatened to shoot him. He was warned to stay away from the office and a fatality was averted. This person, later when he recovered, received a cheque from the Security Police which he did not want, but there was a suspicion that this money was given to him for services rendered.

During this time too, members of the ANC went to John Samuels who was the head of Sached at the time (and subsequently head of the notorious Oprah Winfrey School) and complained about the work of Pietermaritzburg Sached and how the ANC was kept out of controlling Pietermaritzburg Sached. The response to this complaint was that John Samuels came with an armed guard and forcibly closed the Sached Office and that was the end of Sached in PMB. They tried for a while to keep an office open but as funding and logistics were a problem they were forced to stop. This was another crisis he had to endure because up until then that was the focal point of their political work.

The closure of the office also meant that their group broke up and that camaraderie was lost as well because John Samuel caused dissension within their ranks when he closed the office down. The trade union activity also ceased because entry of trade unionists who were not pro-

SACP/ANC was blocked by the ANC elements who had taken control and their group was effectively removed from this sphere of political work.

On the 13th June 1986 Lyov was detained together with a large number of activists. It was the beginning of a period of emergency rule and the state once again feeling under threat picked up those in opposition to it. Lyov, ever the joker, in the article by Christopher Merret in the Witness 12th June 2008 relates how when he heard the voice of Peter Kerchoff he thought “hey if they’ve got the liberal Christians here, it can’t be too bad.” When he discovered a large number of other detainees he says he “felt a sense of purpose and belonging to something historic that was bigger than all of us.” He mentions that detention was a positive experience that he was proud of. He also refers to the chicken project that had been started to give employment to the unemployed workers of SARMCOL and how the security police thought that this was a code for some underground work which at the time always amused him.

University

After he became immersed in Sached work his focus shifted from his disability and he blossomed when he went back to university. He excelled academically and passed Hons with distinction. He also tutored and later lectured in Political Science. Before the confrontation with the ANC/SACP and the closure of the Sached office he had been offered scholarships to study abroad, but when the crunch came these offers were either withdrawn or he had become disillusioned. He never spoke about this again.

His work on a Master’s thesis was sporadic at times and he lost interest in the topic he was supposed to explore for the thesis. The topic was the background to the rise of a liberatory movement based on sound Marxist-Leninist theoretical principles and an anti-collaborationist stand. It also encompassed the role of the immigrant intellectuals who had set up the groups that studied the political terrain in SA and had produced a thesis detailing the nature of the society and the form of struggle.

When the negotiated settlement came it also had ramifications on what the primary discourse in both left wing and academic circles was. The fact is that this topic was not the “flavour of the month” and was relegated to the fringes. The primary focus was on the ANC and its history and the re-writing of our own SA history.

On this matter he once told me a little regretfully that had he pursued studies in history he would have completed the thesis. That was not to be.

I often wondered if as parents we had not pushed him in directions he really did not want. Regrets are of no consequence now that we grapple with his death and we can only give him the due that he deserves. In grief one harks back to what could have been. That is soul destroying and so it is better to appraise his life and what he did achieve.

He told me that he tried to make his students think and try to upset their pre-conceived bias. The women were encouraged to speak out against patriarchy and he said the male students would be put out and uncomfortable by this approach. He enjoyed the discomfort and would try to engage them ideologically.

He was a great observer of people and was interested in the tensions of students from different backgrounds living in a modern world and enjoying everything modernity provided and the way their cultural practices collided with the modern world. He felt duty bound to bring these things to the fore. He was also very human and where it was in his power to help his students or any other person he was not to be found wanting.

When he realised that being employed as a temporary lecturer had no future he switched to studying for a Law degree and did well in those studies. His favourites were the difficult subjects Jurisprudence, which sets out the philosophy or legal reasoning of law, and Constitutional Law. For both of these subjects he got distinctions. He later lectured part-time teaching mainly human rights.

From what I gather he was a good lecturer and the students liked him. We received a card from one of his students and I will quote what he said about Lyov:

“I was taught ‘Human Rights’ by Mr. Hassim in 2009. That course was the most life-changing to me at University, due in no small part to Mr. Hassim. Not only was he a great teacher and mentor, he was also humble and aware of the hardships of ordinary citizens. One could easily see that he had a purpose in life, to help people.

He made me realize that one must make the most of one’s life to help others and at the very least to empathise with those less fortunate. This belief of his has guided my proposed career-path , and I am indebted to him. My condolences to the family upon the loss of a man of dignity, humility and courage.”

He joined the Legal Aid Board and defended the poorest of the poor. People who would not have been able to get help and by all accounts he did his best for these clients.

Lyov also was interested in labour law both because of his early work in the trade unions and also because he knew people depended on advice in this area. He often helped people with their problems in this field.

Protective part of his nature

From an early age Lyov was very protective of both Enver and I. I am told his kindness also extended to those he taught and mentored and I am grateful that these sterling qualities will be remembered by those he cared for in so many different ways.

He believed very strongly that children must not be chastised physically. Soon after Liana was born I was told that physical punishment was not to be inflicted on her. On one occasion when he had to drop her at nursery school which she did not like, she begged not to go in. He closed the car door and took her to Ishana's family for the day.

Lyov was a man who gave much and asked for little in return. He fought many demons and sallied forth into the world and was able to take on these demons and overcome the difficulties that confronted him. The one important thing about him is that he tried to deal with his many afflictions – he never let up or gave up in despair. He would try to overcome whatever life threw at him and if he failed he would rise up and try again. He had a remarkable capacity to rise from adversity.

Lyov loved Natal and felt at home here. He also loved the sea. In a way I am happy that on the day of the heart attack he went for a swim. He loved water and could swim many laps for long periods. In water the effect of the disability of his feet was reduced by the buoyancy of the water which counteracted gravity and it also calmed him.

Lyov was a person who could socialize with people of all walks of life and we heard that when he took a combi he would engage with other passengers including reciting Shakespeare and poetry. He also made enduring friendships and he and George remained friends since schooldays and traveled through many roads together including the AA. Dees Govender and he first met through the Union work and later in the AA. He and Frans Shangase remained friends and comrades through

thick and thin, and when he opened office Frans joined him. Later he met other Sached and Union friends and stayed in touch in various ways.

He was a man who did not care for worldly things. He did not chase material possessions. A car was a necessity and the only small luxury he afforded himself was the Blackberry cell phone. He used this phone with deadly effect. Apart from a steady stream of e-mails to friends and family, he used it to access articles by political scientists which he then distributed. He would even use it to read a book. The cell phone was his portable computer and a means of accessing the internet and the world of knowledge.

Lyov lived by a set of standards and rules that he adhered to. He was a deeply ethical person and very much aware of not bringing dishonor to himself, his family and friends. Behind that devil may care facade and hail fellow well met were the same codes of ethics and behavior that all decent human beings hold dear. He has left many diverse memories amongst a large number of people.

The purpose of this tribute is to record very briefly the short but eventful life of Lyov. Its principal purpose is to present a fuller picture of that life so that in retrospect one may find a rational explanation for some of the things he did and which at that time appeared to be odd. It is also to record his struggle to overcome the many burdens that life had imposed on him. That struggle is the struggle of all humanity and humanity's hallmark. In this sense Lyov identified fully with struggling humanity. It was this which drew him close to people from all walks of life.

Let us who interacted with him consider it a privilege to have had a relationship with him since it enriched him and us and therefore made him and us better human beings. Lyov's passing has driven home painfully the truth expounded by Lucretius, the Roman philosopher when he stated that to no person is life is given as freehold; to every person life is given as a lease. Lyov's lease had come to an end.

Thank you.