

# Message of thanks from Ronnie Kasrils

**ACTSA**

**2.12.09**

Dear Friends,

I am writing to thank you on behalf of Andrew, Christopher, Brigid and myself for your moving words of comfort regarding the sudden and tragic passing of our beloved Eleanor. Thanks you for offering a little of your personal reflections. Each special message such as yours, part of the tapestry of tributes paid to Eleanor, helps strengthen us in coping with the agonising blow we have sustained. We are fortified by the love and concern you have shown and reinforced in the knowledge that so many fine human beings have been touched by the delicacy and strength of her reach; her personal warmth, kindness, elegance and infectious humour; her firm sense of justice and moral integrity; her quiet courage and resolve; her extraordinary life.

A friend who attended the memorial service – “*A Celebration of Eleanor’s Life*” -- at the Vineyard in Cape Town, and like Eleanor had studied and loved art, offers the following observation: “Whilst sitting in the service, listening to the speakers – all of whom seemed to reflect different dimensions of Eleanor’s life – and looking at the wonderful photographs of Eleanor and your family and friends, I thought, Eleanor’s life *itself* is her masterpiece – a true work of art. And it will live on in every person she has touched along the way.”

President Jacob Zuma wrote: “Comrade Eleanor’s passing is a profound loss not only for your family and for her friends and comrades, but for all those who shared her desire for a free, democratic and just South Africa. From her early days in the movement and the struggle, and through her involvement in Umkhonto we Sizwe, she demonstrated great bravery, resourcefulness and initiative. We recall her role in the success of our early campaigns in Durban and her daring escape from detention. Throughout the difficult years of exile, in the underground, during times of great danger and adversity, she was the glue that held her family together...A person of great principle, Eleanor was resolute in her commitment to the people of this country and to the cause of freedom everywhere...”

Former President, Thabo Mbeki, wrote: “Zanele and I were deeply saddened when we heard the news...we too will miss Eleanor, who was to us not only a comrade but also a friend...she established her place among our panoply of heroines and heroes, and confirmed her courage and loyalty to principle when she participated as a combatant in the earliest activities of Umkhonto we Sizwe. And yet as she moved among us with an easy grace, she carried no megaphone to broadcast a message of self-praise, nor any banner to proclaim that she had courageously dedicated her life to serve the people...”

Our domestic worker in government residence, Magdalene Louw, spoke at the memorial service of how special Eleanor was to her over the past 15 years: “Thank you Eleanor for everything you have done for me, since the first day I worked for you

from 1994, I appreciated your fairness, sometimes without saying a word, but seeing you with a beautiful smile made me feel comfortable. You were my doctor when I was sick. You were my psychologist when I felt depressed. You were my financial adviser when I struggled. You were my life saver when my problems became too much. I never regret sharing my confidential life with you. I always knew you were there to help me. Oh, my special days with you!”

Bob Hughes, former chairperson of Britain’s Anti-Apartheid Movement, wrote: “I was very sad to hear of Eleanor’s death and will always remember her as a warm friend and comrade. During her long years of exile in London she was a stalwart supporter of the AAM, as well as working behind the scenes for the ANC. Eleanor was one of those people who quietly inspired others by her example of commitment and personal courage.”

Brian Filling, Chairperson of ACTSA Scotland (successor to the Anti-Apartheid Movement) wrote: “Eleanor, as she used to remind us, was originally an ‘Ayrshire lass’ and so she holds a special place in our hearts. Although Eleanor was a ‘baby’ migrant to South Africa she was one of our finest exports.”

George Risquet, Cuba’s former foreign minister, wrote: “News of the passing away of Eleanor has shocked and saddened us. We remember the way she obtained copies of Che Guevara’s banned book [for Umkhonto we Sizwe] when she worked in the Durban bookshop [1961-63] and the way in which the strong bond of friendship between us was born. Her untimely death is a heavy blow for us.”

Our very special friend, Father Michael Lapsley wrote: “For me, Eleanor, not least as a white woman, has always been a role model in her willingness to be daring, and consequently to suffer and make sacrifices because of her commitment to bring freedom and justice for all South Africans. Some of my richest memories of Eleanor were from the 1980s: sitting around the table in Golders Green together with Andrew and Christopher, talking about the struggle, solving the problems of the world, and celebrating being alive...South Africa and the world is a better place because of her life. My comrades in the Cuban solidarity movement, Focus, join me in passing our condolences and honouring the memory of Eleanor. With prayers and love...”

Slava Tetekin wrote from Moscow: “Eleanor was an outstanding personality both as a courageous freedom fighter and as a warm human being – the centre of your family. I fondly recall my meetings with her back in Moscow and especially in South Africa where she invariably gave me full hospitality in your home. Her memory will stay not only with me but with thousands of Russian readers of your book that gives a broad picture of her life and struggle.”

Declan Kearney, personal friend, wrote from Ireland: “As we exchanged hugs and goodbyes with Eleanor and Ronnie outside historic Kilmainham gaol, Dublin in February 2007, Ronnie said: “We are family now, aren’t we?” We all agreed – our little child had acquired African grandparents!! So, when we learned of your passing Eleanor, it meant we lost part of our extended family...We will always recall that evening in Dublin when we dined, drank, laughed and danced...and you Eleanor led

the way. So, we will enjoy memories of a happy, talkative, fun-loving, interesting Eleanor.”

Gerry Adams, President of Sinn Fein, Ireland wrote: “I am honoured to have known Eleanor, as a sister in struggle and as a friend. Every struggle has its heroes and heroines. Every struggle has its icons. But behind the headlines in every struggle there are the unsung heroes and heroines, and in many cases there are more unsung heroines...Eleanor Kasrils was one of those whose song must be sung and recalled by the generations that will reap the benefits of her commitment and determination. Eleanor was a white woman who spurned the opportunity for a comfortable life and dedicated herself to the service of the people of South Africa and throughout the world.”

Ali Halimeh, Palestinian Ambassador to South Africa, wrote: “It is with deep sorrow that we received news of the passing of Comrade Eleanor. She will be remembered for her courage and dedication to the revolutionary struggle in South Africa and many countries.”

Algeria’s Ambassador, Mourad Bencheikh, wrote: “I read in your book all that you wrote about Eleanor. She has been a source of inspiration for you since the very moment when you saw her “striking grey eyes.” I had the honour to be seated at her table when you gave your lecture a fortnight ago. I also was struck by the limpidity, cleverness and kindness of her eyes. She told me having kept a vivid memory of her stay in Algeria with you, and she appreciated my invitation to go back there with you [to]... the deep Algerian South, where the purity of the air and the quality of the silence prompt to meditation and tolerance. She was delighted at the thought of going there. Destiny decided otherwise. Her beautiful eyes are closed forever, but she will be with you to the end...”

His Royal Highness, Prince William of Orange, chairperson of the UN Secretary General’s Advisory Board on Water and Sanitation, of which Ronnie Kasrils had been a member, wrote: “I received the very sad news your wife has passed away. Please accept the sincerest condolences of all members [of the committee]. We hope you can find the strength together with family and close friends to come to terms with this tragic loss and to find a way to help each other towards a brighter future in which your wife, although no longer with you, will always have a special place among you.”

Archbishop Desmond Tutu wrote after the Memorial Service in Cape Town: “Dear Ronnie, Saturday was such a beautiful event. Your Eleanor must as always have been smiling in deep appreciation. People are all the better for having been touched by her and people genuinely wanted to be there. May this serve to assuage the pain of physical separation. Your kids were fabulous as was their dad. Love and blessings.”

Dear Friends, thank you once again for your expressions of solidarity in our grieving. We are fortunate to be surrounded by good friends and family. We are proud that the courage and devotion Eleanor displayed in the struggle to liberate our country has been so suitably recognised by the both the current President and former President of our country, by those who stood shoulder-to-shoulder with her in the struggle, by

the tributes of ordinary South Africans, and by such obituary headlines as “A staggeringly courageous woman,” “Struggle heroine will not be forgotten”, “Remembered for Strength and bravery”, “Celebrating a significant, well-lived life”, and “A life spent fighting for freedom.”

A letter to a Sunday newspaper expressed the following tribute: “Her quiet fight for equality sounded the bells of freedom for millions. She demonstrated with humility, dignity, commitment and resolve the power of an ordinary person, working with others, to do extraordinary things.” The writer concludes: “Thank you, Eleanor Kasrils, for being one of the architects of our freedom. You did so much, for so many, for so little.”

Dear Friends, Eleanor was a wonderful wife and mother; she was profoundly modest and kind to everyone who accepted her love. How apposite the simplicity of the epithet;

*“She never lacked appreciation of earth’s beauty or failed to express it; She looked for the best in others and gave the best she had.”*

Dear Friends, thank you for being there for her and for us.

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Eleanor was cremated in a private ceremony attended only by Ronnie and her three children. Her ashes were buried beneath an Assegai tree planted at Kirstenbosch Gardens by the family and a few close friends.

The Assegai Tree, *Curtisia dentata*, is a species found only in the southern parts of Africa; it is a medium sized tree pleasing to the eye; it presents a positive profile with its spreading crown and evergreen glossy leaves – in much the same way as Eleanor is remembered for “projecting our country in an exemplary way.” The specific epithet ‘dentata’ refers to the leaf margins which are dentate or sharply toothed. Eleanor clearly too had “teeth,” operating as an effective Umkhonto we Sizwe (Spear of the Nation) cadre. Amongst the first recruits for MK, she was prepared to shed her blood, a notion reflected in the bright red colours of the wood. It is perhaps fitting that the tree is known as the assegai tree, for the handles of spears were reputed to have been made from *Curtisia*.

Dr. Guy Preston, who spoke at the tree planting ceremony, pointed out that the assegai tree produces fleshy white berries gradually turning red – “a fitting tree for the wife of Red Ronnie.”

Eleanor’s tree can be visited at Kirstenbosch Gardens, Cape Town, and is located in a small glade by Pearson House.

Ronnie Kasrils. St. James, Cape Town. 26 November, 2009.