



By Justice Dikgang Moseneke

In full flight

A rare and genuine hero, she never faltered in her attack on apartheid repression

I too rise to remember, pay tribute to and celebrate the life of Helen Suzman.

The collective life of a people yields only a few genuine heroes. During spells of political confrontation and social strife, real heroes are even more uncommon. The reason is not far to find. Ordinarily, a human being does indeed succumb to a real threat to her life or limb or freedom or property, as well as to a hazard to her social status. She fears even more the rejection, disapproval or sometime ostracism of her very own or of the powerful in a society.

I heard of the name Helen Suzman in my township of birth, Atteridgeville, in Tshwane. The adults often in hushed tones said she was different from them. They never said who "them" were. Then all liberation movements had been banned. Their leaders were in jail or in exile. I was only 15 years of age

and yet I had just become a child soldier against apartheid and colonialism. As a teenager I had already resolved, like many other youth of my time, that apartheid is a monster with which we must brawl and destroy in our lifetime. The remarkable thing to us as fiery child activists was that she was not only a woman, and the only member of her party in Parliament, but she often and openly, inside and outside of Parliament, said apartheid was a monster that must be destroyed.

We shared the passion to destroy apartheid and yet our worlds, I thought, were indeed miles apart. She did not seem to think so. Soon members of our underground cells were arrested, charged and convicted in a mass political trial before the Supreme Court at the Synagogue in Pretoria. Sentences imposed ranged from life imprisonment to five years. I earned myself ten years on Robben Island, at the age of 15. Within days of the conviction Helen Suzman rose in Parliament to express her disapproval and disgust for dispatching so many student activists against apartheid straight to jail in circumstances where no acts of violence were proven. Frankly, she was the only one that cared to demur publicly.

Her impatience with the increasing apartheid repression soon became legendary. In the same year, 1963, Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe, the President of the Pan Africanist Congress, had just finished his jail term after his conviction arising from the pass protest of 1960. John Vorster, the Minister of Justice of the time, brazenly moved Parliament to authorise his indeterminate detention on Robben Island. In a monumental speech of protest, Helen Suzman reminded Parliament, our country and the world that no one should be detained without trial; that Parliament is not a court of law and may not itself impose criminal sanction; that no one should be condemned without being heard; that only courts of law bear that power and even so, only after due process and a fair trial; that on no one may an indeterminate sentence of imprisonment be imposed; and that, in any event, the protest for which Sobukwe was convicted was legitimate because pass laws invaded the dignity, right to equality, worth and free movement,

and the right to work, of all disenfranchised African people. The Nats booed her and ignored her. Parliament passed the Sobukwe detention clause every year for eight years and every year for eight years Helen Suzman renewed her objection to its passage.

For every year she paid a visit to Robert Sobukwe at his solitary residence of detention. She visited Nelson Mandela and the Rivonia trialists in solitary confinement on Robben Island regularly. Besides my mother, who came for those notorious 30-minute visits every six months, Helen Suzman was the only woman I set eyes on on Robben Island. She insisted that she wanted to see the actual cells where political prisoners were kept. She had an abiding concern for the lot of political captives. She raised constant questions in Parliament about their condition and, supremely for me personally, she supported our right to study while in prison.

Once I was out of prison a virtual love affair developed between Helen and me. We served together on a committee that raised funds to finance the further study of political prisoners still on Robben Island. We served together on the first IEC [Independent Electoral Commission] that ran our elections in 1994. My wife, Kabo, and I have had a good few dinners at her residence. She insisted that I must have whisky: one day gives you long life. When I became Chancellor she sat in the front row next to my mother in this very Great Hall.

We must wonder and admire this Helen Suzman in full flight. She interceded for a fellow citizen in distress for no immediate gain, but certainly moved by the highest principles of human decency which today form the bedrock of our amazing Constitution.

Helen Suzman may rightly claim what Karl Max famously said about worthy living: Man's (and I hastily add a woman's) greatest possession is life, since it is given to her to live but once. In dying, she must be able to say: "All my life and all my strength have been dedicated to the finest cause in the world, and that is the liberation of mankind."

That is the Helen Suzman of my world.

Thank you for listening, and God bless.