

## **A journey to reclaim an uncle, comrade and martyr**

In this extract from the introduction to his book about the life of his uncle, Ahmed Timol, Imtiaz Kajee describes the roots of his journey of remembering and reclaiming.

Ahmed Timol is one of the most celebrated official murder victims of apartheid South Africa - in the grim company of Looksmart Solwandle Ngudle, Joseph Mdluli, Dr Hoosen Haffejee, Steve Biko, Neil Aggett, The Imam Haron and so many others. The technique of "defenestration" - being teasingly dangled and sometimes dropped, by accident or on purpose, from a high police window - was immortalised in his own death. So was the chilling term that the security police would use to mock his fate : "Indians can't fly", as George Bizos has grimly noted. This was, evidently, the timbre of their humour. My uncle plunged 10 storeys to the ground at Johannesburg's notorious John Vorster Square, named after apartheid's worst securocrat, the man who introduced the torture laws as justice minister in 1963 and then went on to become apartheid's prime minister, as he was when my uncle died.

The death was itself not enough for them. They turned even our collective grief into a new tool of torture. Years after, after my uncle's death had inscribed itself in the collective memory of the anti-apartheid movement, detainees at John Vorster Square were taunted with my uncle's death.

Gerald Sizani from Orlando East, Soweto, was nearly 14 years old when Ahmed Timol died. Gerald was a product of the June 1976 uprising and was detained by the Security Police in late 1976. The police were not really looking for him, but for his brother Zweli. Gerald narrates: "They took me to the 10th floor of John Vorster Square at approximately 2am. An English-speaking policeman by the name of Captain Cronwright and his bullies were interrogating me. I refused to cooperate with them. They asked me if I heard of Ahmed Timol. They told me that I was stubborn like Ahmed Timol and that they had thrown Timol out of the window."

"They then took me to the window and I was told that this was called 'Timol Heights'. I was held by my feet and dangled outside the window. I closed my eyes, sure that I was dead. They would pull me up again. This happened in broad daylight. They managed to find Zweli and I was released at approximately 1pm the next afternoon. Then Zweli was severely beaten and assaulted, which damaged him permanently. To this day he has relapses of mental disturbances."

I have called this book A Quest for justice. I wanted, if not specific retribution, at least to put right some lingering sense of a wrong committed against my uncle, my family, my country, myself. Immediately after my uncle's death the ANC correctly promised, in its official statement, to "avenge" Ahmed's murder and I am, even now, not willing to let go of that word, despite all the colourful talk of "reconciliation" that surrounds such subjects as these.

But any question of vengeance was overtaken, during the writing process, by a more pressing need. It dawned upon me that I wanted to know my uncle. I was five years old when he died and this book is my own act of reclaiming him whom I only almost had. I still have his Beethoven LPs which brought him calm and rest. The ninth symphony has the most tattered jacket; it must have been my uncle's favourite. But however much I played and re-played his music to myself in old boyish hope, Ahmed never appeared. I had no Aladdin's lamp, but I kept rubbing away.

The process of reclaiming him in fact long pre-dated the idea of a book. I began on my own many years ago, with the hoard of faint memories that I cherish... of sitting with Uncle Ahmed in Amina Desai's yellow Anglia, the very car in which he was to be arrested shortly before his murder. Uncle Ahmed often took me to Amina's house and I remember the white cat - but all its playfulness is overwhelmed, for me, by the grim recollection, after his death, of coming from Standerton to Roodepoort with my mother in the middle of the night. We were sitting huddled in the small kitchen and the family were whispering to one another. There was a

ritual knock on the door. White policemen entered. Later, Uncle Ahmed's body was placed outside the flat in Roodepoort and people filed past. My granny, the dead hero's mother, was standing at the flat balcony. These glimpses are indelibly vivid in my mind.

During the years that followed I would go to the cemetery and visit Uncle Ahmed's grave with my grandfather. I would return to the flat and report back to my granny. She would inquire if I had prayed for my uncle.

These in full are the combined, precious and only personal memories with which began the journey recorded in this book, to know and reclaim my Uncle Ahmed in the fullness and roundness of his personality, going beyond the grim fixture in my mind of his martyrdom (a word I use literally: he was a martyr) and the immensity of my grief. In 1996 I began to collect documents about Ahmed's life and death as an act of remembrance and also to ensure that I could be of assistance, if necessary, as our democratic country began the process of re-visiting its past. There was, as yet, no idea of a book.

My uncle, Ahmed Timol, was a Muslim of the most profoundly humane kind. His particular brand of fundamentalism, however, was never theological and always humanist. He was no kind of zealot except in the causes of anti-racism and anti-apartheid and such values were hardly zealotry, merely common sense and elementary decency. Underneath his political ideology and religious belief Ahmed merely sought a South Africa made safe for school teachers such as himself was; a South Africa that could live up to every child's basic idea of fairness - racial fairness and economic fairness. His ambitions were as simple and as humane as that. In 1999, in Azaadville, Nelson Mandela fittingly dedicated a school to his memory and renamed it after him.

He was fundamentalist in the cause of common sense; he mingled the pious and the practical. He never left the house in the morning without reading Yaseen (a verse from the Quran), yet he never wore a "topee"(hat) for fear of upsetting his hairstyle; he wore a handkerchief instead. Ahmed always told Aysha (my mother) to keep her heart clean. He used precisely those simple, commonplace words for virtue. "Allah does not like it when the heart is dirty," he would say.

Ahmed was exceptionally well dressed on a Friday, the holy day in the Muslim calendar. In summer, he would bathe twice a day, Aysha recalls. "He was always very neat and tidy. He insisted that new shirts had to be washed before being worn, since there must not be creases on the shirt. The label on the back of the shirt had to be removed as it left a "mark" on his body. Ahmed always brought his friends home for lunch on Fridays after returning for prayers. Whenever Ahmed entered the flat he first went to the bathroom to comb his hair - never a strand out of place, that was his harmless ambition. But after the torturers had done with him, one of his eyes had rolled loose from its socket and his bush of black hair was pulled out and lay strewn on the cell floor.

Ahmed argued frequently and fervently that apartheid was a heresy against Islam. He refused to choose between Communism and Islam, thus showing that the idea of the "Godless Communist" was a figment of apartheid's own demonology. As the life of an anti-apartheid militant and Muslim, Ahmed Timol's story is of central importance now, in ways he could not have foreseen. His life underlines the profound humanism of political Islam in a divisive time when violent Christian Fundamentalism is trespassing upon Iraq (George W Bush has explicitly called his war against terrorism a "Crusade") and when vicious so-called Islamic fundamentalists are dragging the name of a great religion through the mud. Ahmed Timol's jihad was against racism and social and economic inequality.