

## Tribute to Petra Kahle.

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Delivered at the funeral on 20 June 2015.

**Petra Kahle was a friend, confidant of Ds Beyers Naudé and psychiatrist to a large number of political detainees at Baragwanath hospital. At times the Security Police (SB's) had their victims treated and moved them from Diepkloof prison to the hospital and into Petra's care.**

**Petra's funeral took place on Saturday 20<sup>th</sup> June 2015 at the Holy Trinity Catholic Church, Braamfontein, Johannesburg. The tribute below tribute was one of four. The others were by Amina Frense, Irene Menell and Bibi Kahn.**

Dear friends of Petra<sup>i</sup>, dear Paul and dear Georg, dear Christiane, and relations,

Today we say farewell to a courageous, honest, modest to a fault, but heroic individual whose human understanding and compassion played a unique part in the struggle to overcome apartheid.

You all know how Petra took charge of her life, in a wheelchair, over the past 21 years. She fought the disability imposed on her with untold will and inner strength. She amazed us all with her keenness to keep being involved in what went on around her, with her tenacity to meet people, always with a smile, never with a complaint and as an avid reader who kept track of South African and global events.

Petra, beside her considerably intellect, also had what I call, profound social intelligence. She could comfort people, help them talk matters through and cared deeply for her wide circle of friends – and of course for her family. The debility that befell her did not cause her to turn inward and become bitter, whatever the very considerable obstacles her failing body imposed on her. Her means to cope was to engage her bright mind and her shining inner beauty, to look beyond the physical limitations toward the world of thought and intellectual stimulation. She shunned talking about herself – had no self-pity and wanted no one to pity her. Until the burdens became too many, she kept a lively interest in all that is positive about the new South Africa, but would not spare the people and government that is turning the gains of 1994 into a new deep darkness.

You can all identify with these words.

I want to speak of other parts of Petra's life that many of you may not know much about.

Petra arrived with her husband Ernst in South Africa in 1972 during the height of apartheid. Ernst's employer had posted him to take over the company operations here.

But South Africa was not the place where Petra and Ernst longed to live. Both Petra's and Ernst's families belong to the tradition of Germans, few in number, who stood up against Nazi rule and the persecution of German Jews. Petra was not keen to come to another country governed by race laws, racism and authoritarian rule.

Petra's sons, Paul and Georg are the grandchildren of people they may justly be proud of. Their paternal grandparents, through solidarity with German Jews suffered at the hands of the Nazi's. Their grandfather<sup>ii</sup> was removed as Professor for Eastern Studies at Bonn University, and the Nazi's detained their grandmother, when she assisted a Jewish shopkeeper whose business was smashed by Nazi storm troopers during Kristallnacht. They left for England before the war started. The family are of the Catholic faith who knew that to be truly Christian they could not turn and look the other way and ignore what was being done to the Jews. Such solidarity is a rare quality and deserves celebration.

Petra and her husband, once in South Africa, showed remarkable solidarity with those fighting apartheid.

In post war Germany, as a young student, Petra worked part-time at gatherings now known as the Königswinter talks. These talks facilitated German-English dialogue between former war opponents. The objective was to bring Germany back into democratic discourse. A prominent supporter of this German initiative was an Englishman by the name of Sir Robert Birley, ex Eaton Head Master and then Educational Advisor to the British Government in Germany. Petra knew him from there.

When Petra found herself in Johannesburg in 1972, she re-established contact with Robert Birley, who then taught at Wits. He introduced Petra and Ernst into politically dissenting circles.

They then got to meet Beyers Naudé of the Christian Institute (CI). Silently at first, and when the CI was banned in 1977, secretly, Petra and Ernst donated privately to the work of the CI. A strong and lasting bond developed, between Petra and Beyers Naudé. It was through this connection that I first met Petra and became a friend in the Kahle home. My friendship with Petra was sustained during my 15 years of exile and I became a guest in her house again after my return in the early 90's.

I know that I speak for very many of you when I say I shall miss Petra deeply. With fondness, I shall remember entering the dining room of her Westcliffe home where Petra loved to sit, wrapped up, enjoying the sun and a view that stretches all the way to the Magaliesberg. She would put aside whatever book she was reading, beckon you to come and sit next to her and enquire and listen eagerly but also patiently.

Petra's friendship with Beyers took on added significance when Beyers was banned. In solidarity with our struggle, she offered her home as a place where Beyers could meet people, notably activists for whom it was too dangerous to go to Beyers and Ilse's home.

Beyers valued access to this 'safe' house, not least also to safely keep moneys and letters the SB's might look for at Beyers and Ilse's home. Petra provided a nook in her kitchen that Beyers could retreat to, apparently enjoying a meal, or writing a letter, while those Beyers was ostensibly meeting, remained in the dining room, should there be the dreaded knock on the door. Petra, ever discreet, asked no questions and did not want to know the names of those who entered her house.

Ernst Kahle's contempt for the SB and apartheid police is legendary. To counter the social isolation and ostracism of political activists, he employed a former detainee, Eric Molobi<sup>iii</sup>. Eric remained politically active and soon was detained again whereupon Ernst walked into the Krugersdorp Police Station where Eric was interrogated and tortured, and successfully intimidated the police to the point where they let him into Eric's cell, to sit down and talk to him. The Molobi family became Petra's close friends<sup>iv</sup>.

Similarly, Ernst employed Indres Naidoo<sup>v</sup> after Indres completed ten years on Robben Island. Indres is now frail but his wife Gabi has remained a loyal friend to Petra throughout the years.

I was detained under the Terrorism Act in 1975. I was taken for interrogation from Pretoria Central Prison to Compol. In the cubicle where I was interrogated stood boxes of material the SB had taken from our house. Next to the boxes were huge foolscap folders with enlarged black and white photos. Several photos were of Petra and Ernst coming out the front door of their home, or sitting in their car at a traffic light, or shaking hands with people they met. I was asked: Why did they come to South Africa? What are they telling you? Why do you visit them so often? Who are their black friends? – I was left with the impression that Petra and Ernst would be deported. On the evening when I was released, after 73 days in solitary confinement, an impromptu reception party was organised at Ilona's<sup>vi</sup> and my home. My daughter Zindzi was not yet a year old. Petra and Ernst arrived; I remember it clearly, with twelve bottles of Zonnebloem, Cabernet Sauvignon, the first alcohol that passed my lips after nearly 3 months of enforced abstinence.

On 11<sup>th</sup> June 1988 - I was in exile by then - a massive musical concert at Wembley Football stadium took place. It was billed as the Nelson Mandela 70<sup>th</sup> Birthday Tribute. For 12 hours artists from around the globe paid tribute to the father of our nation. 600 million people in 67 countries watched and made their demand for the release of Nelson Mandela and all other political prisoners. It took seven videocassette's to record the event from start to finish. One week after the event, Ernst Kahle<sup>vii</sup> took the first seven cassettes through Jan Smuts airport, undetected as he predicted<sup>viii</sup>, and gave them to Petra who was working at Baragwanath Hospital. Many of her patients were political detainees, otherwise held at Diepkloof prison. They required specialist medical and psychiatric support after their interrogations. Petra would try to smuggle the cassettes, one by one to these prisoners so they could get them into Diepkloof. The idea was that when warders showed prisoner's videos (of their choice), so the warders could go drinking on Saturday afternoons, the prescribed cassette would be removed and the

Wembley Mandela concert be seen instead. Petra later said she could not be certain the video's got into the prison due to the hush-hush nature of her contact with her political patients.

When the ANC was unbanned, Ernst provided office space in his company for the ANC, so the ANC could establish itself. These were extraordinary gestures. It resulted in the ANC leadership coming to have meals at the Kahle home where Petra was the ever-perfect hostess despite her demanding work at Bara. Ernst may have grabbed the political headlines, but without any doubt, Petra provided coherence and shape to Ernst's actions.

She also was the one who was the pillar in the family and who steered the Kahle ship through turbulent seas, caused by Ernst in their relationship. Petra responded with grace and stoicism. Not infrequently, Petra was known to repair and forgive. All of us who know her, salute her for being an unshakable rock.

Had Petra not been injured in that car accident, she would probably still be professionally engaged. When she came to Baragwanath Hospital Petra started the first Psychiatric outpatient Clinic that in 1985, became the Psychiatric Unit where patients could be hospitalised. Her former colleague, Dr Cliff Allward<sup>ix</sup>, this week painted a glowing picture of what Petra did for South Africa through her work at Bara. He spoke to me of Petra's social and political awareness that made it possible for the unit to be rooted in the South African reality of the time, essential because of the clients it served. He added that it also served as a political awakening for many of the doctors around her. Allward described how Petra's reputation grew and the Psychiatric Unit attracted many people in need when "being in political trouble".

Allward described to me how the murder of Steve Biko in 1977, impacted the conduct of a "jumpy" Security Police for a while. They apparently feared that through their torture, more detainees might die. Their grotesque response was to send ever more people they tortured during detention, to Petra's Unit for treatment.

Allward movingly calls her a trailblazer and friend. She had come at a time when South Africa was most in need of someone with her kind of empathy, willing to work in the highly charged circumstances in which she worked. He said her real quality lay in the multiplicity of small things she did for her clients and the Unit, which added up to the sum of her achievement. Allward said she did this with "total, total integrity and caring", and added: Petra was able to do her job so well because in her social life she met people living on the political edge. He concluded: "She white-anted the apartheid system".

Yes, we shed tears today for you Petra but we also celebrate your life. Thank you for all that you gave us.

Besides deep integrity, Petra demonstrated through actions rather than words what solidarity means. She came from another country, not to be another white immigrant

whose presence bolstered apartheid. Her morality compelled her to get involved, and in so doing, we South Africans embraced her and continue to embrace her, as one of us.

I cannot let go, without speaking of Petra's sons Paul and Georg. Guys, your extraordinary support, love and care for your mother over the past 21 years is deserving of very special praise and recognition. All of Petra's friends have, over the years admired your wonderful attributes, shown by you at a time when teenage and professional life was pressing you to get on with other things. But, you never spared a moment for the special needs and care your mother required. You have come from a tradition and with credentials we cannot forget. When we see you in the future, we will always recognise in you what you did for your mother. We embrace you too as one of us!

Thank you.

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<sup>i</sup> Petra, born Ebermeier, (1940-2015) was a medical doctor, whose family lived in the Bonn area of Germany. She worked as a Psychiatrist at Baragwanath Hospital most of her life, then the largest hospital in the Southern Hemisphere.

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<sup>ii</sup> Paul Ernst Kahle was one of the most important orientalists of the twentieth century. Born in Hohestein (Eastern Prussia) in 1875, he studied theology and 'Oriental Studies' in Marburg and Halle.

In 1923, he moved to Bonn, where he was appointed director of the 'Oriental Department' of the University and secretary of the *Deutsche Morgenländischen Gesellschaft (DMG)*.

Nazism had serious consequences for Paul Kahle and his family. In November 1938, following the Kristallnacht, Paul Kahle's wife and eldest son aided a Jewish shopkeeper in Bonn. As a result of this, Paul Kahle faced constant persecution and intimidation, as a result of which he lost his post at the University. In 1939, he joined his wife and five sons (Wilhelm, Hans, Theodor, Paul and Ernst), he took refuge in England.

In England, Kahle worked on the catalogue of Islamic manuscripts at the Chester Beatty library. In 1941, he was asked to give a series of lectures at the British Academy. These lessons formed the basis of his major work, on the Cairo *Geniza*.

Only after World War II was it possible for Kahle once more to take possession of his library. He was then appointed *Professor emeritus* of the University of Bonn. He died in Düsseldorf in 1964. (Source: Wikipedia)

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<sup>iii</sup> Eric, after 1994, became the founder of Kagiso Trust Investments, a significant Black investment company. As one of the first black companies in South Africa it is respected for its influence, based not least on the fact that it was not indebted to benefactors for their shareholding.

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<sup>iv</sup> In June 2006 the following letter appeared in the Mail and Guardian:

Molobi: Kahle's role vital: I am surprised so little has been said in the media about the relationship between Eric Molobi and the family of Ernst Kahle, CEO of Munich Reinsurance. When Molobi was released from Robben Island in 1981, Beyers Naude approached Kahle to employ him. That laid the foundation for Molobi's business acumen.

When the African National Congress was unbanned in 1990, Kahle made available two floors of the Munich

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Re building, in Johannesburg's Sauer Street, to the party. It was here that Nelson Mandela had his first office after his release.

Kahle took a huge risk at a time when most other business executives were still coming to terms with the fact that the ANC had been unbanned.

When Kahle was killed in a car accident in 1993, Molobi gave a moving tribute at his funeral, acknowledging how much Kahle's support and mentoring had meant to him in his time of need.—Marilyn Aitken, Underberg.

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<sup>v</sup> Indres co-wrote a book about his life with retired judge Albie Sachs, titled *Island in Chains*, published by Penguin.

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<sup>vi</sup> Ilona and Petra remained trusted friends. I was married to Ilona from 1972 – 1979. Ilona served six months in prison for refusing to testify (contempt of court) against Mrs. Winnie Mandela who was charged for breaking her banning order.

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<sup>vii</sup> At the gathering after the funeral two old men who used to work for Munich Re came to me to express their thanks for my words. They wanted me to know that Ernst had made Munich Re staff observe 16 June as a day to commemorate before it became a national holiday, something they said, the Black staff deeply appreciated.

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<sup>viii</sup> The reason Ernst could be confident that he would not be searched like others when returning to South Africa, was that he had recently been invited to serve on President P.W. Botha's Economic Advisory Council, an honorary position only, but one that meant his entry and exit from South Africa was through the VIP Lounge where no searches for illegal items were undertaken. It seems that the size of Munich Re, the company Ernst represented, had reached prominence and size that afforded him this honor. In typical style, the one hand of the apartheid state did not know what the other was doing; at best they wanted to gain his favor despite the actions he was known for.

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<sup>ix</sup> Dr. Cliff Allward worked with Petra at Baragwanath Hospital in the 1970's and 1980's.