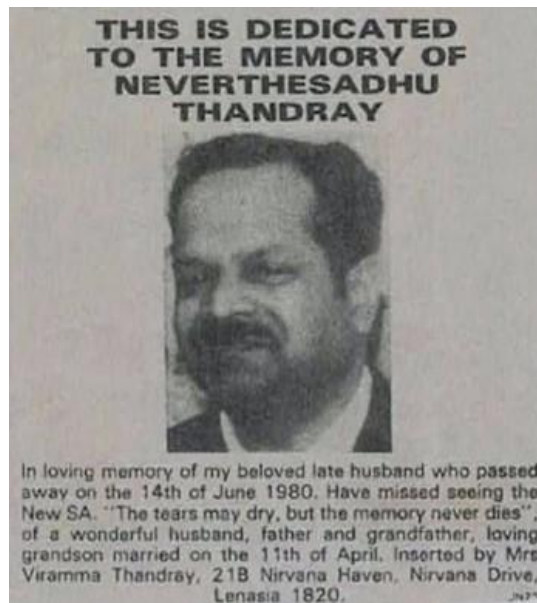


## Neverthesadhu “Murvy” and Viramma Thandray: Struggle was their Life

Farida Limbada (Sarojini Thandray)

My father, Neverthesadhu “Murvy” Thandray, was born on 1 December 1915 at their home in Anderson Street in Johannesburg. He went to a multiracial school in Krause Street, Vrededorp. After matriculating, he went to the EuAfrican Training College, where he earned a “Coloured Teachers’ Third-Class Certificate” on 28 September 1936. He also studied Politics, History, Languages and English part-time at University. Murvy played the violin and sitar.



Murvy worked for the Transvaal Education Department. He was a teacher and later became principal at the Denver Primary School. He participated fully in the 1946 Passive Resistance Campaign and went to jail. He was forced to resign from his post, and he dedicated himself to a life of politics and the struggle for freedom. He was elected Secretary of the TIC, which joined in 1939. After he lost his teaching post, he worked full-time at the TIC office in central Johannesburg. In the early 1960s, he worked briefly as a teacher at the Central Indian High School or “Congress School that was established when Indians refused to move to Lenasia.

On 24 March 1943, Murvy married my mom, Viramma Chetty, who was born on 16 March 1925 in Zululand. She had seven sisters and five brothers. She grew up on a sugarcane farm because her father worked for Mr Hulett, the sugar baron of Natal at the time. She lost her mother at the age of fifteen and moved to 133 Keal Road, Sydenham, Durban with her family and had to look after her siblings. She was only able to attend school till Standard 2, and only ever wore shoes for the first time at the age of 17. It was only when she married “Murvy” at the age of 18 in 1943, that he moulded her studies and educated her so much so that her favourite books were Shakespeare.

Viramma too was an active member of the Indian community. She was well known for her cooking ability and people in the community relied on her to perform Hindu ceremonies and cook at weddings. To earn a living, she went to work in Greys clothing factory in Jeppestown. She had to leave work to partake in a life of politics with Murvy. During the years when Murvy was banned, she would make *masala* (Indian spices) and walk door to door to sell her products. She also sewed blouses for saris to earn extra income.

In 1948, non-White students were refused entry into the University of the Witwatersrand. Viramma marched with a group of women and students from the University to Red Square in Fordsburg. The Afrikaner students attacked them and pelted them with rotten tomatoes and eggs that they took from the surrounding shops. Viramma joined in the TIC's 1946 Passive Resistance Campaign. She and some other Transvaal women resisted on an open field on the corner of Umbilo Road and Gale Street in Durban. They were told to disperse, but refused and were subsequently arrested. They appeared in court, and each was ordered to pay a £3 fine or a serve 30-day sentence. They refused to pay the fine and served the sentence. At Durban Central jail, punishment included washing all the prisoners' clothes. When they refused to do so, they were transferred by goods train to the Pietermaritzburg prison. In the Durban prison a White male doctor would visit them in the early hours of the morning and force them to strip waist up. He would verbally abuse them and tell them there was a ship at port waiting to ship them off to India. They were released after 23 days because they were first-time offenders. In November 1947, they were re-arrested in Durban and were once again transferred to Pietermaritzburg for a sentence of 30 days.

In 1956, Viramma was part of a group that organised the famous women's march to the Union Buildings to revoke the pass laws. Preparing for this march involved going personally to towns like Klerksdorp, Wolmaransstad, Ventersdorp, Pietersburg, Lenasia camps and various townships. A total of 20 000 women marched on 9 August 1956. The police attempted to disperse them by setting their dogs on them. Viramma also protested against the pass laws in Sharpeville alongside, Mrs Amina Pahad, Mrs Jada, Mrs Miriam Cachalia and Dr Zainab Asvat. They were again arrested and had to serve 30 days in the Vereeniging jail. This was their third arrest.

My father was banned on 24 May 1954 under the Suppression of Communism Act. He was forced to resign from the TIC, the South African Indian Congress, the Transvaal Peace Congress, the South African Congress of Democrats and the Freedom of the Press Committee. On 4 July 1956, his banning order was extended to five years. In 1959, his banning order continued for a further five years. This time he was banned from being a member of, or partaking in any activities of the following organisations and groups: Transvaal Indian Youth Congress, African

National Congress, African Congress National Youth League, Natal Indian Congress, Cape Indian Assembly, World Federation of Democratic Youth, Colonial Youth Day Committee, Transvaal Youth Day Committee, Committee for Peace and Friendship with the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic(USSR), Students' Liberal Association, Cape Peace Council, Natal Peace Council, Johannesburg Discussion Club, South African Peace Council, Civil Rights League and Springbok Legion. Being a banned person for such a period meant that it was very difficult for him to find employment. For several years he managed to support his family as a bookkeeper for IE Laher Wholesalers in Fordsburg. He also worked at the 7UP factory as a dispatch controller in Doornfontein.

As a young child, I barely saw my father at home due to his political work and underground activities. Whilst living in Denver, I clearly remember how the security police would bang on the doors and windows, raid the house, ransack it and take all my father's books, paraphernalia and typewriter. Murvy conducted underground work for the ANC and the TIC and sometimes was not even at home when these raids occurred. He took special care not to share the details of any of his activities or relationships with anyone for fear of reprisals. The only thing I ever saw were people who came to our home whom I later recognised as veterans in the fight for justice.

My relationship with him became more meaningful as I matured. I would spend time with him talking about the current political situation in the country. In 1961, when I completed matric, he was banned again and subsequently fired from the school where he was principal, namely, Central Indian High. I started a nursing course in 1963, and he would visit me at the hospital. When I qualified as a nurse, he decided that it was important for me to further my studies in England. I left in 1967 and returned to South Africa in June 1969. The security police asked me to appear at John Vorster Square and wanted to know if I had any contribution to the nurses' strike, which had occurred earlier in the year at Coronation hospital. They brought out my father's file which was a stack of many files and went through it to find things about me.

I met my husband Abdul Hamid Limbada in August 1969. Due to the political affiliations of Murvy and our different religious backgrounds, neither family approved of the union. However, Murvy approved of my marriage to Abdul Hamid and advised us not to be concerned about ostracism in the community. We have three children together.

Murvy had served multiple jail sentences prior to his banning in 1954. I cannot begin to explain the terror and pain inflicted on our family being constantly raided in the early hours of the morning where papa was usually always arrested. On one particular arrest for treason, he was taken from prison to prison without the family

being informed as to his whereabouts. When my mother tried to locate him by going to the police, she was told by the Special Branch to “mind her own business and stop listening to their conversations – or she would be thrown out of the window of Grays Building in Main Street, Johannesburg”.

My dad passed away in my arms due to a massive heart attack on 14 June 1980. The security police arrived yet again at our home a month later to ascertain his whereabouts when they discovered he had actually passed away. It has been a very long journey of healing to have lost such great parents who fought for the basic rights I have today. I could not be prouder of them, and even after so many years without them, I miss them dearly.

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The influence my grandparents had on me is indescribable. They taught me what unconditional love is, a love for music, art and literature. They instilled in me the value of social and economic justice. Even though my grandad passed when I was eight years old, those years were the foundation of who I am as an adult today. Over weekends we spent time playing his sitar and violin and he encouraged me to sing along. Some Sundays we loved how he made kites with us to fly in the park. He loved us unconditionally and even at a young age, shared concepts and philosophies with his grandchildren. He taught me to read and write by the time I was four. I recall times as a little girl how we were traumatised by the security police when they would raid my grandparents’ home. I was forever terrified that they would take my grandad away yet one more time. Still, each time they did this, my grandpa would never get angry or speak disrespectfully. My grandparents had values one could only hope to aspire to.

My grandmother loved me as no other, till the day she died almost 20 years after my grandpapa. She struggled with the loss of my grandad and had two strokes post his death. She told me many times, specifically in 1994, that it was indeed a great sadness that my grandad had never lived to cast his vote and see the results of their struggle for justice. I have always been so proud of a woman who was only afforded the education of Standard 2, forced to raise so many siblings on her own, yet went on to learn to read and write and appreciate the great classics. Her greatest accomplishments did not come from her lack of education in school, but rather her contribution to society and her family at large.

The most painful moment I recall in my life was sleeping underneath my grandfather’s coffin in the hope that they would not take his body away, and subsequently my grandmother’s passing when the staff at the hospital political songs in her honour. It has taken me years to deal with their passing. My

grandparents embarked on a journey together that required great sacrifice for the greater good. I am forever proud to be a South African and know that every part of that is because of them.

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I see this opportunity to write a few words about my grandparents as a reminder to me of their social and political influence and their lifelong contribution in the shaping of our beautiful country. I grew up oblivious to what the struggle was in all aspects, who were involved and why it was so significant for all South Africans. It took many a year, a lot of reading and chance meetings with people who were comrades or who just knew my grandparents and what they both stood for, to remove my blindfold to the injustices inflicted on all people of colour in South Africa. It was a slow journey that began in my childhood. I am unfortunate to have only vague and fleeting memories of my grandad, whom I dearly called "Tata".

He would put me atop his shoulders and play with me outside in the garden. I always felt safe and warm in his presence. Occasionally he would take me to work with him in 'town' and at lunch time we would feed the pigeons, ironically outside John Vorster Square. He was a giant of a man, though small in stature. I was a four-year-old toddler at the time of his passing and remember seeing what seemed like hundreds of people at the Brixton Cemetery that day and a procession of vehicles that stretched as far as my little eyes could see. I always wondered who these people were and why were they there. I would learn later in life that he was indeed an important and significant man.

Throughout the early 1990s, I experienced racial hostilities in Johannesburg CBD first hand while going to school, at the library gardens, the Shell House shooting, the marches, watching the release of Nelson Mandela and his colleagues. It was then that I took interest in what was happening in our country as a young adult. I always believe that, had my grandad lived longer I probably would have followed an entirely different career path. Throughout the years I have met people who knew him and spoke highly of him as a man, father figure, teacher and an activist. One of those people was Ahmed Kathrada. He had paid a chance visit to my granny's home in Lenasia in 1994, and I had stayed the weekend. I instantly knew who was sitting at the kitchen table when I woke that Sunday morning. In addition to telling me about my grandad, he kindly advised me and wished me well with my matric exams.

At 25, I accepted The Mahatma Gandhi Award, posthumously awarded to my grandad and Walter Sisulu. That night I met "Mosie" Moola, who was all too excited and happy to tell me about my grandparents. As grandsons of the two stalwarts, Shaka Sisulu and I delivered speeches, which roused the audience. It filled me with awe and pride for having grandparents who made a difference by

dedicating their lives and who were steadfast in their beliefs. I had finally started understanding why it mattered so much. Mrs Thandray was the epitome of the best gran in the whole world, she would reprimand, comfort, teach, care and love with a whole heartedness that influenced me as a human being, man and father. I loved her dearly and miss her to this day. Her treats, cooking and preserves were epic; she even taught me how to make roti.

She would take me to school and *madrassah*, collect me after, and make sure that all my schoolwork and Islamic homework was done, even though she could not read Arabic. A clear sign of the natural tolerance and open mindedness she possessed. Despite her struggles and challenges in life she always had a smile on her beautiful face. Her love for her husband, daughter, nephews and grandchildren was evident until the day she passed. Losing her was extremely painful and once again, I only gained in depth insight of her contribution and efforts after she passed.

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I was six or seven and I remember vividly how the special branch would raid my grandparents' home, No. 33 Vulture Ave, Lenasia. This happened frequently. There was no formal knock on the door, there was no friendly greeting, it was swearing, name calling, banging and screaming. They were always looking for something, I could never understand what it was that they kept looking for. But they kept hounding my grandparents. Little did I know then I was in the centre of "The Struggle".

The happier times I remember was of Sunday mornings with my loving grandad, sitting on his shoulders, doing things around the house together, as any normal grandad and grandson would do. Every memory etched into my mind as a young child and adult today is of love, contentment and security. In 1980 , my tata passed away , I remembered the Saturday like it was yesterday, my sister and brother and I sat and waited to hear any news of Tata who had been taken to hospital. We thought he would walk through the door, and we would see him again, but alas, it was not to be. It was this sad moment in my life that made me realise what a giant of a man he was! The people that came and paid respect to him, the special branch coming to the funeral and looking for him, crazy that they were looking for him when he was laying right there in state.

At the funeral people read out letters from Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki, Ahmed Kathrada, Tata Madiba, and many more who could not be there due to the political climate in the country. The South African Communist Party flag draped over his coffin and the motorcade that went on for kilometres. Little did I know what my grandparents had done for the struggle at the time. As a teenager I heard stories

of how the apartheid government bullied, punished and tortured these lovely souls.

I took part in the school boycotts and ran the gauntlet against the police but always making sure not to get caught. In 1992, I got married and by then my gran had a stroke and was not so active. In 1994, we had our first free elections. In 1999, my grandmother died and again we were reminded of who and what my grandparents had done. When passed away a little of me died too. Today, I am the national Head Coach for Cue Sports South Africa; I'm a Protea Snooker Player and I have represented South Africa numerous times on the continental and world stage. This would not be possible but through the sacrifices made by my grandparents in the struggle. They instilled in me a passion for what is right, to respect your fellow human beings.