

## Chapter 1

# DON DE CRUZ DE LA SINGAPURA

Gerald de Cruz wrote to his daughter, Judith, on 17 November 1975, saying that he envied her watching again the film, “Man of La Mancha”. Don Quixote’s face is “as pasty as used canvas shoes; his walk almost as faltering as a drunk’s; his spear always getting in the way of gates or bags of flour; and his sword, if it can be called that, looking like the first cousin to prehistoric man’s first attempt at a corkscrew”. Unlike Superman, who represents escape from the times and from reality, the “feeble, often ridiculous and frequently derided” figure of Don Quixote enchants people because they can recognize something of themselves in him. Born into what his creator, Miguel de Cervantes, calls a discourteous world, Don Quixote embodies the need for humans to meet the taunts of discourtesy. Prisoner of illusions himself, as every man is, the “sad and silly Knight” tilts at windmills. But why? Cervantes, wounded and captured in war and sold off into slavery before his family ransomed him at the cost of its financial ruin, experiences evil first-hand. However, he is interested in knowing, not why men die at the hands of evil, but why they have lived at all. They live, de Cruz avers, to confront the “distortions of reality which make

it difficult to become human". By proclaiming what it was like to be human in the charged sixteenth century, Don Quixote the Castilian not only became the hero of a great literary creation, but also immortal. "It does not matter a tinker's damn that we are weak", de Cruz says of Don Quixote's sentimentality and delusions. "What matters is the direction in which our lives are pointed." That is the lasting legacy of Cervantes' canonical creation, *El ingenioso hidalgo don Quijote de la Mancha* — *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha*.

The introspective intensity of de Cruz's engagement with Don Quixote suggests a degree of fellow feeling that could have come only from a shared experience of life preserved over four intervening centuries. Both were adventurous, astonishingly and sometimes dangerously so. De Cruz's amazing decision to take his wife-to-be, Coral, on a trip to the Kremlin to convince its amiable inhabitants to call off the armed uprising in Malaya does prove that truth can be stranger than fiction, especially since he hardly had money for the journey. His fortunes on that remarkable expedition, which naturally soon got derailed yet opened up new vistas for him and his steady but equally adventurous companion, would have made a worthy chapter in a modern rendition of *Don Quixote*. He probably was the only Eurasian communist from Singapore to have experienced a proper Catholic marriage in Karachi while the secret police were watching him, and he was almost run over by a capitalist's car as he crossed the road to buy the wedding ring. But in de Cruz's remarkable life, as in his knightly predecessor's, the improbable was a standing invitation to the possible. Reality was an inconvenience that both treated with genial nonchalance.

That nonchalance, however, was but a softer aspect of a life lived seriously, vividly and to the full. De Cruz contributed to society across a wide variety of fronts — community life, teaching,

politics, the labour movement, voluntary service and journalism. *A Varied Life.*

De Cruz was fifty-five when he wrote to his daughter. Confronting reality had become second nature to him by then. Born into a Eurasian family in Singapore in 1920, he contested his ethnicity because of the privileges it derived from its affiliation with British colonial rule. Rejecting his father's ethnic faith in the British Empire, de Cruz sought a place in multiracial Singapore. He denied the agency of race because it obscured the fundamentally formative influence of society on an individual's self-awareness. As chairman of the Eurasian Progressive Movement in 1945, he placed his intellect and keen sense of history in the service of his community, which he sought to bring firmly within the mainstream of post-colonial history.

De Cruz practised what he believed in. When, during World War II, imperial Japan invaded and occupied Malaya and Singapore, he took the extraordinary step of joining the Japanese-supported Indian National Army (INA) to eject British colonialism from India. The Japanese, who had treated the Chinese with particular brutality because of their association with China, had targeted Eurasians because of their identification with the British. Yet, de Cruz made common cause with the INA because to him the political imperative of fighting colonialism took precedence over even the horrendous Japanese assault on his Eurasian identity. Those years were the beginning of a lifelong friendship with the INA military officer Inayatullah Hassan, who later settled in Pakistan and hosted the de Cruzes in Karachi. De Cruz's fascination for the people and the ways of the subcontinent led him to name his son Simon Tensing, after the Nepalese climber of Mount Everest.

De Cruz gravitated towards the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) and its allied organizations in their struggle against the

returning British after the war. He was a founder member of the Malayan Democratic Union (MDU) in 1945, he became a cadre member of the MCP in February 1947, and played an influential role in politics as Executive Secretary of the Pan-Malayan Council of Joint Action in 1947–48. The product of a conservative Catholic upbringing, de Cruz had contemplated taking Holy Orders as a teenager. But he broke intellectually with the Church when a local priest rebuffed his religious doubts and questioning of ecclesiastical authority. His political doubts, particularly over the MCP's adoption of a strategy of armed revolt in Malaya in 1948, in turn led him to reject the party, which appeared to him to be a kind of secular church jealous of its monopoly of ideological truth and protective of its hierarchic authority. Repudiating church and party was of a piece with de Cruz's rejection of the authoritarian paternalism which his father had represented within the family, particularly over his mother, whom he adored. It was only towards the end of de Cruz Senior's life that son sought to reconcile with father.

However, the departures from Catholicism and communism were not exercises in escapism. They were decisions that he took following his intense experience of both, and they led to other kinds of engagement and commitment. Although gifted with a buoyant nature that sought sunshine and the company of like-minded bohemians, he was never a bourgeois philistine. In the case of religion, he arrived at Islam, becoming Haji Karim Abdullah in 1968. He was drawn to Sufism and developed a close friendship with the Sufi scholar Idries Shah and his sister, Amina. Politically, he found sanctuary in the broad left. Recalled from Britain — where he had campaigned for the Labour Party, of which he had been a member from 1952 to 1956 — by Singapore's first Chief Minister, David Marshall, de Cruz became the Organizing Secretary of the Labour Front between 1956 and 1958. He found

his true home in democratic socialism. His work in the 1960s for the Political Study Centre, which the People's Action Party government had set up to socialize civil servants into the realities of self-governing Singapore, saw him lecture passionately on democratic politics and ideological trends in world affairs. He enjoyed talking to pre-university students, who responded with a barrage of questions so numerous that he wrote books based on his talks and his answers to their questions. It was fitting that de Cruz, who had received a teacher's diploma in London in 1952, risen to being Principal of Osborne House, a school for intellectually challenged children in England, from 1952 to 1956, and had lectured at the Workers' Educational Association there from 1952 to 1956, should return to teaching back home. He lectured at the National Youth Leadership Institute from 1964 to 1969, the Department of Extra-Mural Studies at the University of Singapore from 1968, the Police Academy from 1966 to 1970 and the National Police Cadet Corps from 1970, and was Supervisor of Studies at the Singapore Command and Staff College from 1969 to 1971.

In his personal life he took to blood donation with a regularity that brought him (unsolicited though they were) silver, gold and platinum medals. He was also a founder member and the first chairman of the Singapore Association for Retarded Children. In 1964, its school was the only one of its kind in Malaysia to give the children, aged from five to fourteen, free training in personal hygiene and social adjustment. He was also an adviser to the Juvenile Court Magistrate from 1961 to 1965, and a member of the Singapore Council of Social Service from 1965 to 1966. His Papers — which contain typewritten notes on the Singapore Children's Society, the Association for the Retarded, the Association for the Blind, the Singapore Association for the Deaf, the Singapore Handicaps' Friendship Club, and the scale of

the social welfare challenge — bear testimony to the painstaking research that accompanied his voluntary work.

Singapore's ejection from Malaysia hurt de Cruz deeply, but his mind soon focused on the challenges of building a multiracial meritocracy in the free nation. He felt empowered by the way in which Singapore was cementing its independence by trying to create a new society through legislative radicalism and egalitarian daring. He was less confident of the international situation, but he believed that non-alignment was the city-state's safest bet in the global jungle. De Cruz was eager to prove that the ideas of socialism could be achieved within a democratic framework in Singapore. Although his defence of democratic socialism was directed primarily at those who derided it as a bourgeois parliamentary sell-out to capitalism, his rancorous break with Marxism did spill over occasionally into his vituperative denunciation of Leninism and Maoism. There was nothing personal in this battle, however; its polemical argumentativeness was just Don de Cruz's way of leaving his mark on the contested realities of those burning times — just as the combative Man of La Mancha had once done.

De Cruz went on to translate some of his political ideas into practical ways of increasing the contribution of labour to Singapore's industrialization. His paper, presented to the seminal 1969 Modernization Seminar organized by the National Trades Union Congress, provides insights into how labour can improve its bargaining power with capital through education. What Singapore's workers did not need was a self-destructive spiral of industrial strikes and street violence that would merely drive away investment and deepen unemployment and underemployment. De Cruz was undoubtedly a revisionist in pushing this line, but he had no quarrel with the term, "revisionist", which he understood as a way for socialists to remain ideologically relevant by staying

responsive to specific national conditions and changing times. Hence his interest in labour issues, which spanned his years as Assistant Secretary of the Pan-Malayan Federation of Trade Unions in Kuala Lumpur from 1946 to 1948; his role as a founder member of the Singapore Industrial Labour Organization (SILO) in 1969; his chairmanship of the Information and Publicity Committee of the National Trades Union Congress from 1970; and his work as Education Officer in SILO and the Pioneer Industries Employees' Union (PIEU) from 1971. His editorial skills joined hands with his labour sympathies in his work for *Perjuangan*, the NTUC's monthly journal, and *Labour News*, the monthly journal of SILO and PIEU.

De Cruz was a consummate journalist. He worked for *The Straits Times*, *The Malayan Standard* and *The Democrat* in the 1940s, was Assistant Far East Correspondent for the London (Sunday) *Observer* in Singapore from 1958 to 1964, worked for *The New Nation* as Diplomatic Editor and columnist in the 1970s, and contributed to *The Sarawak Tribune* in the 1980s. He excelled as a columnist, using words with some of the existential edginess that had guided the spear of his illustrious Castilian predecessor. His left-liberal instincts and progressive views made him an ideal commentator on the times, particularly in the 1970s. A believer in a robust society who had little patience for the self-regarding antics of the sex-drugs-drenched counter-culture, he nevertheless contemplated life around him with a profound sense of empathy and compassion as he witnessed ordinary individuals trying to live in extraordinary times.

De Cruz's Singapore years — the subject of this book — ended effectively in 1975, when he left to become a training consultant for the Sarawak Foundation at the invitation of the state's Chief Minister (and later Governor), Haji Abdul Rahman bin Ya'kub. That work would take him a decade. He had remarried after the

death of Coral de Cruz. His second wife, Rokiah (Maimunah) bte Mohd, gave him a son, Adam, in 1971. De Cruz suffered two strokes, in 1982 and 1983, but his mental faculties were unimpaired, and he remained with the Foundation until he retired in 1985.

Gerald de Cruz passed away in Kuala Lumpur in 1991, and was buried in Johor's Kampong Singapura.

In a world of Supermen, he had remained a quixotic man, answerable to no one but himself.