

Oey Hay Djoen (1929-2008)

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I had no idea the short telephone conversation on the morning of 17 May would be the last time I ever spoke with him. Just a few hours later, Oom Oey, as I called him, collapsed at home and was rushed – in so far as Jakarta’s traffic allowed – to hospital, where he drew his last breath just twelve hours later. ‘If you are ready to go, then go, but not on a Saturday,’ his wife Jane Luyke whispered in his ear. (There is an old belief that someone who dies on a Saturday is likely to take a companion from those close to them.) I do not know if people can control the time of their departure from this world, but it was a few minutes after midnight, on a Sunday, when Oom Oey breathed his last.

Oey Hay Djoen was born in Malang on 18 April 1929. His father died when he was nine years old, and he was raised under the firm but liberal hand of his mother, in a family that sent him to a Catholic school but still burned incense for their ancestors at the family altar. Early on he developed a love of reading, and through reading he was introduced to the world of politics. When Japan surrendered, and independence was proclaimed, politics became part of his life. At the young age of 17, he was accepted as a student at Marx House in Yogyakarta, an event which he said changed his life. There he listened to talks and engaged in discussion with Republican leaders like Sjahrir, Alimin, Amir Sjarifuddin, Setiadjit and Maruto Darusman. He joined the Socialist Party, the largest block in the leftwing movement at the time, and began translating some of the classical socialist literature from English, being already fluent in Dutch and English as a result of his Catholic schooling in Malang.

“He was known for the strength of his convictions, his straightforwardness and honesty”

Soon he was in the thick of the revolutionary struggle, through involvement in the trade union movement and urban guerilla activity in south Malang. He built underground networks, bought weapons from disaffected Dutch conscript soldiers, and got to know prominent Chinese Indonesian nationalists, like Siauw Giok Tjhan and Go Gien Tjwan. He was arrested and imprisoned by the Dutch, but escaped with the help of some of his comrades, before running up against the effects of the so-called Madiun Affair of September 1948. In the wake of the execution of some of the leftist leaders who had nurtured him, the arrest of others and the disappearance underground of those who were left, Oey confessed to having ‘lost direction’ and ‘gone out of control’. He was not yet 20 years old.

Oey got his life back on track through the chance to work as manager of the publishing firm Sin Tit Po in Surabaya, editing the magazine *Republik* with Siauw Giok Tjhan and Ismoyo. In August 1951, Njoto, one of the five leaders of the newly re-formed Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), fled to Surabaya to escape pursuit by the military. He stayed in Oey’s house, and engaged the young man in discussion about everything from economics to classical music, soccer to Marxist theory. In Oom Oey’s recollections, it was this encounter with Njoto that helped him find himself and give some direction to his life. Njoto put him in touch with local kampung performance troupes (ludruk) as well as Jakarta-based writers and artists. He became good friends with AS Dharta, who later became Secretary General of the leftwing cultural organisation Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat (LEKRA).

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Soon Oey was once more active in cultural politics, mixing on a regular basis with leftwing artists and intellectuals. By 1953, he was based in Central Java, but publishing in the PKI national newspaper *Harian Rakjat*, and interacting with prominent names in leftwing cultural circles, people like the literary critic Bujung Saleh, the writers Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Rivai Apin, and Dodong Djiwapradja and the painter Hendra Gunawan. He also became a successful businessman, one of the leaders of the federation of Indonesian cigarette manufacturers (Gaperon), and developed a reputation as a businessman with a strong sense of social commitment, who used his wealth for the benefit of others. He became a member of the Constitutional Assembly and later the national parliament for the Communist Party, an indication of the PKI's accommodation of Indonesians from all class backgrounds.

After his marriage to Jane Luyke in April 1954, and the birth of their second child in 1956, Oey and his family moved permanently to Jakarta. His house in central Jakarta became LEKRA's central office, and figures like the head of the PKI, DN Aidit, became regular visitors. The LEKRA leadership gathered there once a week for meetings, and with a wide variety of ethnicities all represented, cultural clashes were not uncommon. Oey recalled how he was once jokingly reprimanded by Aidit for his signs of deference towards speakers who were older than himself, something that came from his Chinese heritage. 'What's all this bowing and scraping?' Aidit quipped. 'Is that feudalism, or what?'

At the first national congress of LEKRA in Solo in 1959, Oey was elected a member of the organisation's central secretariat. With his background in journalism and publishing, he soon became head of LEKRA's publishing division. He translated classic texts like Che Guevara's *Guerilla Warfare* into Indonesian, and kept up a steady stream of original publications in the cultural pages of *Harian Rakjat*. Friends remembered him as a dedicated and effective organiser.

Then came the catastrophe of October 1965. Like thousands of others, Oey Hay Djoen was arrested and imprisoned because of his leftwing connections. Initially detained in Jakarta and the prison island of Nusakambangan, he was one of the first group of political prisoners to be transported to Buru, wearing the number 001 and leaving Jakarta on 17 August 1969.

In Buru, Oey was grouped alongside Pramoedya Ananta Toer and Rivai Apin in Unit III, the 'diehards' unit, whose members the military authorities kept separated from the other prisoners. Throughout his imprisonment, he kept up the non-cooperative stance of the prisoners the Dutch had incarcerated in Boven Digul, 40 years before. He continued to read and engage in intellectual work, translating among other things Plato's *Republic* and a guide to acupuncture by Felix Mann, founder of the Medical Acupuncture Society. But at the same time, as his fellow prisoner Hersri Setiawan recalled, the urban businessman Oey was also the winner of a competition for planting out new ricefields. He was one of the last group of prisoners to be released from Buru, 14 years after he was first arrested.

Once back in Jakarta, Oey threw himself back into writing and publishing, in defiance of the military's attempts to keep former political prisoners isolated from the rest of society. He was a regular participant in activist meetings, seminars and discussions, always unafraid to offer criticism when he felt it necessary and praise where he thought it was deserved. He was known for the strength of his convictions, his straightforwardness and honesty. Among other things he was a fierce critic of NGOs and their dependence on donor organisations, when they should be setting their own agendas.

"Mixing with younger activists...made him aware of the importance of translation"

It wasn't all just talk, either. When the riots hit Jakarta in May 1998, Oom Oey and his family were

active members of the Volunteer Team for Humanity (Tim Relawan untuk Kemanusiaan), continuing the work they had begun in 1997 in support of the those suffering in the wake of the financial crisis. In 1998, he made use of all his networks, both inside Indonesia and abroad, in support of the victims of sectarian violence. 'This is today's reality,' he explained, 'We have to be able to respond to it.'

Mixing with younger activists at this time made him aware of the importance of continuing the work of translation. Highly critical of the taste for quoting without ever having read the sources of the quotations, he translated tens of thousands of pages of texts of philosophy, history, political economy and social movements. Almost all of it was the classic works of Marx and Engels, along with a few key texts of Rosa Luxemburg and Plekhanov. I asked him once why he hadn't translated Lenin. 'Lenin is too prescriptive. He's always telling us what to do, whereas what we need is the strength of critique. That's what you find in Marx and Engels.' Yet with all of this, his own thinking never stood still. 'Change is the only thing that's eternal,' he once said to me.

"He was always there for friends who were losing their energy and enthusiasm"

What shone through everything was the sincerity of his friendship. He was always there for friends who were losing their energy and enthusiasm in the face of the mountains of problems they had to overcome. 'We can't do everything. There are limits to our capacity. The important thing is how to organise the limited capacity we have.' He liked to repeat the words of Njoto, his friend and mentor: 'It's like throwing pebbles into a pond. If you toss a handful in at once you just get confusion. But if you throw just one pebble into the middle of the pond, its ripples will span out right to the edge.'

For me, Oom Oey is that pebble. His ripples will be with us for generations to come.

P.S.

* From <http://insideindonesia.org/content/view/1085/47/>

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* Oey Hay Djeon, who died on the 17th May, 2008 in Indonesia, translated Agnes Khoo's "Life as the River Flows - Women's Oral History on the Malayan Anti-Colonial Struggle" into Indonesian language. This was published in March 2008. It was Mr. Oey's last translated work.