

IN MEMORY OF MARHUM DEMAL HODZIC

By Gul Zaman

On Monday, 11th October, 2004, Demal Hodzic left for Te Aroha to fix one of the flats he owned, telling his brother, Abas that he would be back by early afternoon. Sadly, no one knew that this was his last conversation with a family member. By 4.00pm the same afternoon the police called Abas at his home in Papatotetoe to relate the sad and devastating news that Demal had died of a heart attack whilst working alone in his flat. 'Demal' is pronounced as 'Jamal.'

'Inna Lillahe Wa-Inna Elahe Rajeon' – from ALLAH (Subhanahu Wa Ta'ala) we come and to HIM is our final return. His body was taken to the Hamilton Hospital for a post mortem and released the next day for burial at the Manukau Memorial Gardens, Auckland, where his two other brothers are also resting.

"I consider myself extremely fortunate and privileged to have known late Brother Demal since 1987 when I first settled in Auckland. During the seventeen years that I knew him, I had the pleasant opportunity of working very closely with him and knowing him as a brother and a true friend. I will fail in my duty if I do not mention some of the noble contributions he made to the Muslim community. His life was one of difficulties and he carried much responsibility on his shoulders."

Demal Hodzic who was known as Jim to all of us, was born in 1932 in a small town called Trnopolje in Bosnia. He was the eldest of six brothers and one sister. At the age of fifteen he commenced work on the small family farm to help his father (who was also the local Imam) to support his parents and seven siblings. At the age of seventeen he left home to work at the nearest town, Prijedor to support his large family. Two years later, at the young age of nineteen, he was drafted for two years into the Yugoslavian National Army and employed as a tunneler. Whatever money he earned he sent to his parents to support the family. On his discharge from the army after two years compulsory military service, he returned home and continued to work as a tunneler. During this time his younger, sixteen year old brother Rafik, joined him to also work as a tunneler.

As the pay was meager and the future in Bosnia looked bleak, both brothers decided to cross the border to adjoining Italy. This was a highly dangerous journey as the Communists, who ruled the country, vigilantly patrolled the border, and severely punished anyone caught crossing illegally. Alhamdoelillah, they eluded the Yugoslavs but were caught by the Italians and kept at a secure camp for a couple of months. The authorities cleared them and allowed them to cross over to Germany where they started to work again, as tunnelers. They always sent money back home to support the family.

After the war they spent a couple more years in Germany, but set their sights on Australia, the land of greater opportunities. Two years later, both Demal and Rafik decided to pack their bags and move down-under.

They landed in Queensland and in desperation, took the first available job as cane-cutters. This was a unique experience as it entailed not just cutting cane but also

dodging the numerous frogs and poisonous snakes. With a few pence in their pocket and after securing basic lodgings, they quit this unsafe occupation and started to work in factories, which was a much safer environment. Most of their earnings were sent home to the family. When they had accumulated enough money, often working additional hours, they quit their jobs after two years and bought a house and a business.

When the business didn't succeed, Demal ultimately decided to move to New Zealand, leaving Rafik behind in Aussie. In 1962, at the age of 40 years, Demal again packed his bags and moved to South Island and once again found himself working as a tunneler at the Manapouri Power Station Project.

He worked there for the next seven years and so met Jenny Ford, whom he married in 1969. When he moved back to Bosnia with his newly wedded wife, his parents welcomed him and his wife, with open arms and requested that they live in their home in Prijedor. Demal and Jenny lived there for the next two years and it was here where their eldest son was born. They named him Ibrahim, after his grandfather.

They found difficulty in settling in Bosnia after the death of Demal's father in 1972. Ultimately, Demal and Jenny returned to New Zealand with their young son in 1978 and settled in Te Aroha, close to Kaikai Tunnel where Demal worked as a carpenter. He built a house in Te Aroha during his spare time. The couple was blessed with two daughters – Dula and Demka. In 1980 Demal and Jenny separated and eventually divorced.

In 1980 his youngest brother, Abas joined Demal and both stayed together and worked as carpenters for the local farmers. In 1984 their mother passed away in Bosnia. In 1985 both moved to Auckland and initially worked at the West Haven Marine Centre. Soon thereafter, they started their own construction business, building houses in the South Auckland region. In 1991 another brother Shafik also migrated to NZ together with his family and lived in Mt. Roskill.

The 1992, the Bosnian war affected the Hodzics family immensely. The daily killings and rapes of innocent Muslims women by the Serbs, not mentioning the untold destructions of homes, farms, animals and crops, worried and stressed Demal, Shafik and Abas greatly. They all sacrificed much and paid large sums of money to get the remaining siblings (Hassan, Hussain and Safia) and their families to New Zealand as refugees in 1993.

The deaths of the two younger brothers, Shafik (2002) and Hassan (2004) due to cancer, greatly affected Demal, both mentally and physically. The lack of community support at their funerals added to his disappointment as he considered the local Muslims whom he worked with, as part of his larger family. Incidentally, brother Demal was very regular in attending and helping at other Muslim funerals, particularly those in South Auckland.

The Friday preceding his death, he rang me and sounded very distressed. On his regular Juma visit to the Manukau Memorial Gardens to offer prayers to the deceased, including his brothers, he noticed that the plot next to Marhum Shafik, which he had reserved for himself, was used for the burial of a child. His immediate reaction was

that someone had deliberately intended to hurt him out of malice. I tried to calm and reassure him, and promised to visit him that evening but when I called, found no one there. I was subsequently told by Abas that he was at the mosque. The next day he went to Coromendal to visit his son, daughter and grandchildren, returning home late on Sunday. I never got to see him alive again.

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During the seventeen years of my acquaintance, I had opportunities of working very closely with him, particularly in the building of the new Otahuhu Mosque. I know that he contributed both financially and devoted his valuable expertise in its construction. He was deeply involved in the development of the Otahuhu Mosque over the last 20 years.

He was the key person who, together with Dr Preena, negotiated and convinced the two sisters who owned the two adjacent properties, to sell their land to SAMA for future extensions to the mosque. As a member of the Mosque Committee, he played a major role in the design and planning of the new Otahuhu Mosque.

He served South Auckland Muslim Association (SAMA) in various capacities and was the longest serving Patron, Executive member and Mosque Committee member until his death. He and his family were the first to offer their help whenever called upon. Amongst his notable efforts were the renovations of the old centre, shifting it for temporary area to make way for the construction of the new mosque and fencing the boundary.

He was a unique individual who was very passionate, committed, persistent, humble, generous, industrious, helpful, dedicated, charitable and pious. Even though he was 72 years of age and not in the best of health, his concern was always for the welfare of the Muslims, particularly those of South Auckland.

A few weeks before his death he spoke to me of his desire to sell his Te Aroha property and with the proceeds, go for hajj. May ALLAH (Subhanahu Wa Ta'ala) accept his intentions, good deeds and reward him and his family.

I salute you, Brother Marhum Demal, and pray ALLAH (Subhanahu Wa Ta'ala) grant you Jannatul-Firdous.

He is survived by a son, Ibrahim, two daughters, Dula & Demka and brother, Abas all living in New Zealand. Brothers Rafik and Hussain are living in Melbourne, a widowed sister, Safia back in Bosnia, nephews, nieces, sister-in-laws and grandchildren.

(Writer of this article, Brother Gul Zaman, is a former President of SAMA)