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Millie Pimstone: Concept, Research and Text
Linda Bester: Exhibition, Design and Digital Artwork

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HELEN SUZMAN: FIGHTER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Helen Suzman was one of South Africa’s most vociferous and energetic opponents of apartheid. She takes pride of place among those liberals who devoted their lives to the fight for human rights and the rule of law in South Africa. From the start of a political career that spanned almost four decades, she worked tirelessly, never flinching from challenging the pernicious system created by apartheid.

Helen Suzman’s struggle against the ruling National Party, both within and outside of Parliament, was relentless and often lonely. For thirteen years (1961–1974), she was the only Member of Parliament from the Progressive Party. Against great odds in Parliament, she resisted the pro-apartheid government. Although she represented an affluent White constituency, she saw herself as an “honorary ombudsman for all those people who have no vote and no Member of Parliament.” Her contribution to the pursuit of justice in South Africa received overwhelming recognition at home and abroad. Twice nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, her valiant stand against the injustices of the apartheid regime was acknowledged by numerous institutions.

Realising that laws could be changed only through political action, Helen became active in the United Party, then the Official Opposition. She rose rapidly in the Party’s organisational structures and, at the end of 1952, she was one of three candidates nominated for the Houghton constituency—a safe United Party seat—in the forthcoming general election.

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APARTHEID

The policy of apartheid was formalized by the National Party after it came to power in 1948. Building on earlier policies of segregation designed by English administrators, race discrimination was vigorously applied to all areas of life. The policy was built on a set of fundamental race-based laws and structured around an elaborate system of “Bantustans,” pseudo “ethnic homelands” reserved for Black citizens of South Africa. Such land reserves inevitably excluded all economically viable land.

Sharpeville massacre, 21 March 1960

A TENSE AND BITTER TIME

Within two months of the Progressive Party members’ taking their seats in Parliament, mounting discontent over the Pass Laws and other discriminatory enactments spilled over into a passive resistance campaign. This led to the indiscriminate shootings at Sharpeville on 21 March 1960. State reaction to the widespread unrest that followed was to stifle all protest by declaring a state of emergency, banning the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) and arresting their leaders.

From 1961 to 1974, Helen Suzman was the Progressive Party’s sole representative in Parliament. In the face of unremitting hostility, she never lost her courage or compromised her principles in her fight against apartheid’s racist agenda and the erosion of civil liberties and the rule of law.

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“Every so often, a Parliament produces a personality to whom friend and foe alike can raise the hand in salute... Such a personality in our South African Parliament is that remarkable woman, Mrs Helen Suzman...” –Daily Dispatch, 28 July 1964

ELECTION STRATEGY
Helen fought three elections during her thirteen “solo years” in Parliament. Max Borkum, her campaign manager, was a brilliant organiser, and election campaigns were run with military precision. Harnessing the assistance of an army of volunteers, he organised his team into specialist groups to cover all aspects of an election campaign: canvassing, locating absentee voters, publicity, transport to the polls on election day—nothing was overlooked.

SEEING FOR HERSELF
Helen’s remarks in Parliament were frequently greeted with a storm of abuse, usually sexist or racist, often anti-Semitic. She was closely identified with Israel and when Israel did not support South Africa at the UN, the abuse became more vociferous.

Helen saw for herself the dreadful consequences of government policies. She went to sites of forced removals and resettlement, and saw the heartless destruction. She visited deprived schools, prisons and places of banishment to which Black activists had been confined. Armed with evidence from these on-the-spot investigations, she forcefully challenged the government. She managed to secure some improvements in prisoner conditions.

“We are so unbelievably lucky to have a guy like this. He has such presence. He is a great guy, really is! Humour and humanity! A special man.” –HS

Under the United Democratic Front, the biggest mass protest in South African history was mobilised. Violence escalated and widespread defiance grew. A state of emergency was declared in 1985 and was renewed annually until 1990. The death toll mounted and thousands were banned and imprisoned.

Helen Suzman’s tenacious fight for human rights led her to a great friendship with Nelson Mandela. “She is a person appreciated by all South Africans,” wrote Mandela on the occasion of Helen’s 90th birthday in November 2007. “Her courage, integrity and principled commitment to justice have marked her as one of the outstanding figures of our history.”

NELSON MANDELA
Helen’s initial meeting with Nelson Mandela took place when she visited Robben Island in 1967. It was the first time she was allowed on the Island and she was immediately impressed with his dignity and unmistakable air of authority.

Seven years were to pass before Helen was allowed to return to the Island. When Mandela was moved to Pollsmoor Prison and then, to Victor Verster Prison, Helen continued to visit him as often as she was allowed.

“...this was the one man who would have the will and authority to persuade the ANC and the government to suspend violence, and who could create the climate for negotiations.” –HS

“Most White people have never been in a township. They know nothing about the wretched, overcrowded houses, the inferior schools, the unlighted streets. Most of all they know nothing of the seething anger that has built up over the years.” –HS
ONE LAST PARLIAMENTARY ACT
In a most fitting conclusion to her career, Helen’s final Parliamentary act was the introduction of a motion of censure against Judge JJ Strydom, who had given what she termed an “outrageously insufficient” sentence to two White farmers who had beaten a Black employee to death. She knew the motion would be unsuccessful. But, as always, she remained true to her steadfast conviction:

“You have to take a stand against something you know to be wrong.” –HS

For thirty-six years Helen represented the Johannesburg constituency of Houghton with great distinction and dedication. On 26 June 1989, she gave her thirty-sixth and final annual Parliamentary Report-back. The Houghton Primary School Hall was packed to overflowing and there was an outpouring of tributes and thanks.

Helen Suzman died peacefully in her sleep on 1 January 2009, at the age of 91.