

FRAGMENTS OF AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

By Vimla Dang

Rashmi's school days

Rashmi had just matriculated and joined Kinnaird College. She was hardly fifteen. She had come from Sir Ganga Ram School which under the brilliant guidance and leadership of Mrinalini Chattopadhyay. Sarojini Naidu's younger sister, had become the leading girls' institution of Lahore, known not only for its high educational standard but also for the spirit of patriotism it instilled in the minds of its young students. Rashmi wondered what she would be able to do in a Christian college, with its missionary teachings and Western outlook. She remembered with pride her glorious school days.

Rashmi loved sports as a child. When Mrs. Kapur, newly arrived from the Baroda Institute of Physical Education, introduced yogic exercises, *lathi*, *leziium*, *mugdars* etc in the school, Rashmi was simply fascinated. She soon became the sports captain. They had a special uniform for sports, blue shorts, a white shirt and an orange necktie. The girls looked very smart in this uniform. Rashmi was very fond of Mrs. Kapur. Once, Mrs. Kapur took her to a physical activities show. Rashmi saw young girls with bandaged eyes taking aim with their bows and arrows. She was very astonished and thought these girls were very brave. She also wanted to be like them. She tried very hard, and soon excelled everyone else in yogic exercises. She could even perform the most difficult of them – *shirshasana*. During the preparations for the annual prize distribution, Rashmi wanted very much to participate in the dance performances. But she did not have the white frilled frock required for the performance. Her parents could not afford to give her a new frock. Rashmi felt most annoyed with everyone and thought with great bitterness that she could have got a new frilled frock made had her parents been a little better off. She felt sad and dejected to the point of tears. However, at the prize distribution she won a silver cup for her best record in sports.

Rashmi loved music too. Her father had a taste for classical music, and would take Rashmi along with him to musical recitals. But it was tragic that she developed tonsillitis, and consequently had a hoarse voice. Still, she used to stand first in music examinations in school.

How patriotism grows

When Miss Chattopadhyay became principal of the Ganga Ram School, she introduced many new ideas. Rashmi was greatly excited with the idea of a wall- newspaper, and she became a member of the editorial committee of the school wall- newspaper, 'Forward'. The school started celebrating national days like Gandhiji's birthday on 2nd October and Independence Day on 26th January. Rashmi also composed songs. She composed her first song dedicated to Mahatma Gandhi, which she sang on 2nd October, 1940.

But the same evening, poor Rashmi got a shock when her principal asked her to sing the song before a gathering in her house. One of the women jokingly remarked, "You better tell your Gandhi Baba to change his ideology." Although said in a joke, this remark led Rashmi to think deeply. The woman who said this was Suhasini, Sarojini Naidu's youngest sister, who had a most striking personality. Suddenly, Rashmi heard her deep voice singing, "The people's flag is deepest red" and "*Utho jago, bhukhe bandi!*" Rashmi was stirred by these powerful and inspiring songs, which lit in her the burning fire of patriotism. She noticed that the singer's face turned red and her eyes almost spat fire as she sang these songs and raised her clenched fist to show her determination to fight for freedom.

→ Revolutionary ideas are created

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Sahasini was invited to address the matriculation class before the preparatory leave for the final examinations. Rashmi was very happy to see her. Sahasini read out to them the story of Khoziat from the famous book 'Dawn Over Samarkand'. Rashmi heard the story of this brave Muslim girl with rapt attention, the girl who had borne brutal tortures but who had put up a brave fight for her social liberation. Later, the Soviet Revolution freed Khoziat from the social bondage into which her young life had been imprisoned. Thus Rashmi heard for the first time about the Russian Revolution and what it had done for women.

Sahasini lived in Bombay, but she paid frequent visits to her sister Mrilanini in Lahore. In Ganga Ram School she met Rashmi's mother and father, and one evening came to their house. Here, Rashmi's elder brothers Sukesh and Rakesh were introduced to her. Sukesh was about 20 years old and was very talented. He was a poet, but he hardly ever showed his verses to anyone. Sahasini soon made friends with both the boys and invited Sukesh to come to Bombay for further study, after his graduation.

A very shy, quiet and serious person, Sukesh got the real opportunity for self-expression and development of his talent in Bombay. He was a brilliant student of literature, and at a very young age wrote lyrics, sonnets and ballads in English. But at this time his poems were romantic, quite different from what his later poems became. In Bombay, he started writing patriotic and revolutionary poems on every aspect of our national life and struggle. He came in contact with the student's movement of Bombay and by 1943 he had helped in building up the Friends of the Soviet Union (FSU) movement in Bombay.

In 1942, when the Communist Party became legal, Rashmi's other brother Rakesh also went to Bombay for a month during his vacation. Both the brothers talked politics at home. The Second World War was on and there were discussions about international events and the progress on the war fronts in every house. Rashmi heard these talks about the war, the capitulation of Czechoslovakia, Hitler's invasion of the USSR, and so on.

Rashmi's younger sister Anju was an expert cook. Sometimes when Sahasini came for dinner, Anju cooked the most delicious dishes. Sahasini praised her cooking. She used to call Anju 'the Lighthouse' and Rashmi's mother 'Honoured Mother', as a compliment for bringing up her children so well. Rashmi was not good at cooking. She did all the cleaning up of rooms, the dusting of books and furniture. In fact, she suffered from an inferiority complex, because she could not cook, and because her own work at home was never noticed. From the very beginning the division of work at home had been such that Rashmi had looked after the cleaning and tidying up of the house, and Anju, the kitchen. Apart from this, Rashmi soon became preoccupied with political work. And thus she remained behind in learning to cook.

In 1942, with the help of Rakesh and Sukesh, the Birdwood Road FSU Group was started in Rashmi's house. The children set apart a separate room for this, which they called 'the studio.' The shabby walls, the broken floor and the dirty-looking doors and windows were all soon covered with beautiful khadi curtains, sheets and multi-coloured cushions. Rakesh repainted the furniture. Rashmi's youngest brother Rati painted some beautiful pictures. Sahasini used to come regularly to see how the building of the studio was progressing. She gave an impressive portrait of Lenin to the group. It was placed in the centre of the mantle-piece, nicely framed. Thus, the first active FSU centre was started in Lahore. Rashmi, like the other children, felt that something very great was happening to them all. Sahasini talked to all the children individually and gave them real solid lectures, creating in them a great urge for self-cultivation and self-improvement. She told them what the USSR stood for, what sacrifices the Soviet people had made, what they had achieved. Rashmi thought with pride that some day their country would also become like the USSR and be rid of squalor and poverty, backwardness and illiteracy. The USSR symbolised for them not only a socialist country, but a land with the most honest, sincere, hard-working and courageous people, who had borne tremendous difficulties and overcome obstacles boldly and who had made their once backward country into one of the most advanced states of the world.

The FSU group started a wall-newspaper at home in which appeared articles not merely of a political nature, but also covering domestic problems. Rashmi's mother also wrote for it, making suggestions to the children about various aspects of home life. Rashmi's two cousin sisters and an uncle joined the group and 7-B Birdwood Road became a lively centre of young people, who were aspiring to achieve something very significant.

The children sang songs composed by Sukesh and by Rashmi's mother and by numerous other people, and gradually they set up their own singing squad.

By 1942, Rashmi noticed a number of people coming to their studio, people dressed in brown khadi and carrying books in sling bags. They were all Sukesh's and Rakesh's friends, belonging to the 'Renaissance Club,' the 'Students Federation,' the 'Civil Liberties Union' and the 'Literary League.' Rashmi thought they were all revolutionaries. Their looks, the expression on their faces, their attire—everything impressed her. But, as yet she did not know what kind of work they did. It was all a mystery to her.

On 7th November 1942, the anniversary of the Great Soviet Revolution, the FSU group was invited to take part in a public function. Rashmi was one of the active members of the cultural group. They sang songs dedicated to the great Lenin. Other friends performed a play on the story of the Red Flag. Rashmi now began to understand something about the activities of the revolutionaries.

In December 1942 Rashmi was introduced to a group of women comrades and asked to attend study circles. She attended some. Soon she was asked to do some active work. She started work among the women of an area situated in the heart of the walled city in Bhati Gate. By now Rakesh and Rashmi had both started going to meetings. Together with work among women, Rashmi started work in the students' movement in her college and started visiting the office of the Students' Union. She became an active member of the cultural squad.

And so, from a life full of social restrictions, entirely confined to the walls of the house, Rashmi began to experience a sense of social liberation. She thought that her family was amongst the luckiest in the world. The girls mixed freely with the boys, attended meetings and other programmes. They went to pictures, exhibitions and cultural shows. For Rashmi this was entirely a different life, a new life, a life of constant struggle, of constantly aspiring to achieve something. Outside the home there were various types of political activities, students' debates, study circles, rallies and demonstrations for students' demands, campaigns for strengthening Hindu-Muslim unity, cultural programmes and so on.

A tragic happening

Suddenly, something very tragic happened in Rashmi's family. A cable came from London (where Rashmi's father had gone in 1940 to work in the BBC Hindustani Section), that her father was ill and his condition was grave. The next day another cable arrived, announcing his death. It was a great shock to the family, because they were expecting him to return that very year. He had bought a gramophone, a radio, books and furniture, and was awaiting permission to return home. Rashmi was stunned, for she loved her father deeply. Her heart broke to see her mother taking off her bangles, her earrings and other ornaments. A deep gloom was cast upon the whole family. For days people kept coming to the house to express their condolences. Rashmi's women comrades also came and they brought the greatest sympathy to everyone.

By now the ideas of the family had changed radically—they did not want to observe the old customs and rituals. Rashmi's maternal uncle came from Bareilly and took her mother away for a few days. The children were now left by themselves. Some relations and acquaintances of the family indulged in a lot of gossip and scandal-mongering, making baseless accusations against Rashmi's mother for her leaving suddenly, without completing all the customary rituals. But the children paid no heed. Rashmi missed her father terribly in her lonely moments. She wondered all the time how he would have felt had he returned home to see his family so completely transformed.

The Civil Disobedience Movement in the early twenties had affected Rashmi's father. He was to appear for his M.A. examination when martial law was declared in Punjab. In the police action that preceded the episode of Jallianwalla Bagh, spots of blood had fallen on his *achkan*. Rashmi's grandmother hurriedly burnt the clothes for fear that her son might be arrested. But the naked repression let loose by the White police created a burning hatred in Rashmi's father's heart against the British regime. And for twenty long years after these events he refused to take up government service. He had five children, but he earned his living by giving tuitions. It was at a very late stage of his life that he accepted work as a 'casual artiste' in the All India Radio. He was an idealist. He was a scholar of English and was very fond of dramatic and cultural activities. Rashmi's mother had been to Europe in 1931-1932 for studies and had come back with a diploma in Montessori training. Rashmi's father also wanted to go abroad and see Europe. He had so many dreams. He loved Rashmi's mother. And Rashmi felt that even after so many years of their married life, her parents appeared to be young and very much in love with each other. Of course, there were sometimes minor quarrels, mostly the result of financial troubles. But these were quarrels that occurred in every Indian family. Rashmi's mother had never liked the idea of her husband going abroad during wartime. She had an instinctive feeling that he would never come back.

A month later, the family again reassembled and normal life was resumed. Just then Rashmi's grandparents on her father's side, aunts and other relatives arrived and settled down in their house. But the children did not like the idea of their permanently settling down in their house. At last Rakesh mustered up courage, and one day spoke to them frankly. A scene followed, but they soon separated and went to live in another house. Rashmi's two cousin sisters stayed back in the Birdwood Road house, despite their mother's protest. For, how could they go back to their old life now? A whole series of baseless slanders started spreading, and one of Rashmi's aunts even spread the rumour that something very dangerous, like making bombs and explosives, was going on at Birdwood Road. But no one paid any heed. It was impossible for old ideas to get reconciled with new ideas. It was difficult for those who had seen light to go back to live in darkness. So there was a final break with the old life.

Rashmi now started working with renewed vigour. In the college she would have heated discussions with her Congress friends, Kaushal and others, about the policies of the Congress, their vacillating stand on the Hindu-Muslim question. She contested the election for class representative and won against another girl with Anglo-Indian ideas. Together with some other students, Rashmi initiated an agitation against compulsory Bible classes. Outside her college, she was put in charge of the Bhati Gate area, where she helped in forming a branch of the Women's Self-Defence League.

In May 1943 the First Congress of the Communist Party of India took place at Bombay. Rashmi was asked to go to Bombay with the Punjab cultural squad. She wanted to go, but was afraid of Rakesh. She thought he would oppose her going to the congress. But Rakesh showed a sympathetic understanding and Rashmi was able to go.

Rashmi at the First CPI Congress

Members of the Punjab delegation were travelling in the same compartment. Rashmi was the youngest of them all. She was excited about her trip but she was too young to understand the political implications of such an important congress, that was taking place after so many years of illegality of the Communist Party. Travelling with them was Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna, the 70-year old revolutionary, whose back was bent due to long years of imprisonment, suffering and sacrifice. Rashmi looked at his long white beard and his wrinkled face with great admiration and thought of all the work he had done in the Ghadar Party. She wanted to know more about the Ghadar Party and study its history. Discussions went on in the train on many other issues.

Rashmi noticed that amongst the younger people in the compartment there was Sukanta, a provincial student leader, who went on reading newspapers and documents all the time

12.00

Page 4 Para 3

13.00

After "she would have heated

14.00

discussions with her Congress friends
write Kushal instead of Kanshal

15.00

Page 5

Under heading Rashmi gets/page
acquainted with Sukanta - ~~line~~ 5

16.00

write letter from Rakesh to Sulasa
informing her that she was going to
be taken into the party instead
of he

17.00

and did not speak much with anyone. Someone told Rashmi that he was a very studious and hard-working comrade. There were other older comrades like Sohan Singh Josh, Teja Singh Swantantar, and a group of women. Rashmi herself remained with the women most of the time.

The congress was a unique experience for Rashmi. She was in Bombay for the first time. A big city, with wide roads and tall buildings touching the sky, it presented an impressive spectacle. The busy traffic, the numerous buses and trams and, above all, the electric trains, showed Bombay's inexpensive yet efficient transport system. Rashmi was impressed to see the very neat and clean restaurants at every corner. She was fascinated by the sea. She attended the delegates' session of the congress as a visitor, for she was just a member of the Punjab cultural squad. She made serious efforts to follow the proceedings of the congress and could understand something. She was interested to see delegates from so many provinces, to hear their languages and their songs. Here was a part of her country, representing the diversity of Indian languages and culture. To Rashmi the delegates appeared to represent the cream of patriots, for many of them had suffered years of imprisonment and lived an underground life. Comrades related to the Kayyur martyrs, who were mercilessly hanged by the British rulers, were also there. Rashmi listened carefully to the thesis presented by B.T. Ranadive (BTR) and the subsequent speeches of Dr. Gangadhar Adhikari ('Doc') and P.C. Joshi. She was introduced to Amir Haider Khan and Sajjad Zaheer, as the sister of the young poet Sukesh.

Rashmi spent quite some time in the congress exhibition and tried to learn about the history of India's struggle for freedom. She saw the story of the series of movements of her people in pictures and paintings. She felt very proud when among the young poets she saw the photograph of her brother Sukesh. Rashmi developed a great respect for Sukesh from that moment. Later, during the Festival of Culture held in the evenings, she noticed that Sukesh had composed a large number of Hindi songs. Rashmi participated in the Punjabi programme. But she was most impressed by the performance of the Bengali squad, led by Benoy Roy, and especially by their guerrilla song '*Hoi, hoi, hoi!*' and the song '*Phiraya de de de moder kayyur bandhu de re!*' dedicated to the Kayyur martyrs. The Maharashtrian squad performed the inspiring Urdu song '*Yeh jang hai jang-e-azadi, azadi ke parcham ke taley,*' composed by poet Makhdoom Mohiyuddin of Hyderabad.

Rashmi gets acquainted with Sukanta

Rashmi was having tea one day when Sukanta came to her and asked her for some facts about the work of the girl students of Lahore. She gave him the information, and that was the first time she talked to him. Sukanta quietly left.

In Bombay Rashmi spent a whole day with Sukesh and Suhasini. She had carried with her a letter from Rakesh to Suhasini, informing her that he was now going to be taken into the Party. Suhasini explained many things to Rashmi, and came to see her off at the station when she was leaving.

On her return to Lahore Rashmi was asked to sign the form and join the Party officially. Rakesh was not very happy at the idea of her joining so soon, and even opposed it, saying that she was too young and did not understand the full implications of joining the Party. But the local comrades just insisted, and thus Rashmi became a full-fledged Party member.

Rashmi passed her Intermediate examination and joined the third year. She was elected a member of the Current Events Society from her college. The society invited Arun Bose to speak at a gathering of students on the initiative of Rashmi. Arun Bose came with Sukanta. When they entered the hall, they were very surprised to see the whole gathering singing national songs. Arun said, "This is quite inconceivable in a missionary college!" Rashmi quietly remarked that the atmosphere had changed a lot even in missionary colleges.

Later, Arun Bose spoke at the Students' Party School. Rashmi was the only regular girl student to attend the school. Here she heard Sukanta speaking on various students' problems, and she developed a liking for him. Sukanta was rather too simple in his appearance and most careless

Page 6 - Line 10 from
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Instead of "will always"

write "would always."

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Page 6 - 10th line from
bottom

Perhaps "instead of
"victims", it should be
"victims"

- delete old "white" clothes for
stamps and rickets - line ^{6th}
under the great Bengal famine

Page 6th

Line 21 under the great
Bengal famine
Kathalbai, Nilphamari
Bodongunj

Page 8 Under departure
for Bombay, Kenji's
favourite quotation - Line

10
Page 8 Under departure
for Bombay - Line 11
Last para after
write Sonima
Miss Lalkaka, Miss
Clark. (and not Sonima)

about his dress and looks. But he was undoubtedly the most outstanding person for Rashmi. She admired the way he argued out his points and convinced others and she developed a great respect for his work. She noticed that Sukanta took a sympathetic interest in her work and he seemed to be very helpful. Once, it got very late when the lecture at the school ended. Someone had to escort Rashmi to her house. To her great pleasure Sukanta offered to go with her. Rashmi asked him many questions. "Why do comrades quarrel when they differ with one another? Why did Sunder stage a walkout? Should communists behave in this way?" Sukanta answered all her questions. Then, all of a sudden, she asked, "Who is there to point out my mistakes and criticise me so that I may also learn to improve myself?" Sukanta put his hand softly on Rashmi's shoulder and said, "I am there. I will help you." Then Rashmi knew that Sukanta will always help her.

At home, Rakesh started helping Rashmi a lot. Together they studied several chapters of the 'History of the CPSU (B)'. Rashmi would read and Rakesh would explain to her everything. A school was organised for all women workers. Rashmi attended that too.

The Great Bengal Famine

A terrible famine broke out in Bengal in 1943. The All India Students Federation (AISF) decided to send students' squads to Bengal from all over the country. Sukanta came to Rashmi's house and told her that she too had been selected to go.

The delegation from Punjab consisted of four students, and Rashmi was one of them. Sukanta was the senior most among them. Before their departure they had collected a large bundle of old clothes for the famine-stricken. Rashmi kept the bundle with her in the women's compartment. Sukanta came to see Rashmi at several stations when the train stopped, to enquire if she needed anything. At one station the train stopped for over half an hour. Rashmi took the opportunity to discuss a few of the problems with Sukanta relating to difficulties girl student comrades and women comrades faced. Sukanta gave his own opinion, and she was very happy to find that they both agreed on the issue.

The train reached Calcutta after two days. Here, squads composed of students from different provinces were formed. Rashmi was a little disappointed to learn that she was not put in the same squad with Sukanta. Before their departure from Calcutta, Sukanta came to see Rashmi and he gave her two cakes of Lifebuoy soap which were to be used in the famine-stricken areas where epidemics had broken out. Rashmi took them and greatly appreciated Sukanta's feeling of consideration for her.

Rashmi's squad went to Rangpur District, the home town of Benoy Roy, leader of the Bengal cultural troupe. His sister Reba Roy accompanied the squad to different villages. Rashmi thus got acquainted with a Bengal student leader, who was leading the squad. They went to Rangpur, Kathalbari, Neelpameri and Bordergunj. They received the warmest hospitality from the people, but the famine conditions were most distressing. Rashmi maintained a complete diary of their daily programme. They had to walk miles and miles, often carrying their own luggage, and move from village to village. They saw the thin-looking people with their semi-starved faces, the desolate huts of the peasants who had migrated to the city in search of employment and food, the pale and sickly women and children who had fallen victim to disease, and patients of diseases caused by starvation. They also observed the stark poverty of the peasant families, their bare mud huts, with nothing except a few earthen vessels. They were aghast to find women hiding in their homes because they had no clothes to cover their bodies. And the worst thing was the skeletons of people who had died of starvation, that they came across. At some places they found earthen pitchers lying on the ground. They were told, "Under this ground are buried the near and dear ones of those who could not afford to give their dead a proper cremation or burial. They just did not have the money." They visited refugee camps and centres of people suffering from infectious diseases. In one such centre Rashmi became very upset as she could not bear to see the little babies with bodies covered with sores. But she pulled herself together immediately, as someone

told her, "This is no time for frustration and demoralisation. You have come here as young ambassadors on an important mission. Go back to your provinces and tell your people and our brethren the sad plight into which Bengal has been plunged today." At many places Rashmi sang the song of the Bengal famine, "*Suno Hind ke rehnewalon, suno, suno...*"

They found the relief committees doing a lot of work, collecting clothes and funds, running cheap rice centres and milk centres for children. All this was making its impression on Rashmi. Here, on one side, was humanity suffering and groaning under the heels of a man-made famine, and on the other side were the hoarders and black-marketeers, making money to fill their coffers at the cost of the lives of the people. Then, there was the conscious organised force of the people, mobilising all help to fight the monstrous famine. What had happened to Bengal, *Sonar Bangla* of Rabindranath Tagore, where women were being forced to sell their honour for a few morsels of rice?

The squad returned to Calcutta after a fortnight's tour, and Rashmi once again met her own colleagues from Punjab who had been assigned to different squads. Sukanta, who had gone to Chittagong district, also returned. The Bengal student leader who led Rashmi's squad had become very friendly with her and Rashmi, on her return to Calcutta, felt that he was taking a keen interest in her. She also knew that Sukanta had noticed this development. But Rashmi thought that it was a mere passing fancy.

During the journey back to Lahore, Rashmi showed her famine diary to Sukanta. She felt that she wanted to show him everything, and to talk to him for hours and hours together.

The Punjab Students' Federation soon launched an "Aid Bengal" drive and Rashmi worked quite hard for it. With the help of Anita and Savitri, two other girl students, she organised the relief drive in the girls' colleges. Afterwards, Rashmi helped to organise a series of discussions on the Hindu-Muslim question in her college. Sukanta helped her in preparing for these discussions.

Rashmi had to suspend her work for a few days when she had to undergo a tonsillitis operation. Sukanta came to her house to see her when she returned home from the hospital.

Soon, Rashmi became a member of the Students' Committee, together with Sukanta and two other provincial leaders.

Experience of students' and women's work in Lahore

Rashmi's experience so far was very little. But she was the only girl who was working with the approval of her own people and could thus move around freely. However, she felt like an unwelcome guest when she went to see Anita at her house. Anita had to face a very tough home front. Rashmi had seen another girl being beaten by her father in public for continuing to do work in the students' movement. She had come across girls whose studies were discontinued by their parents or who were married off because their parents feared they might join the communist movement. She considered herself very lucky for belonging to a progressive family.

Rashmi came across a very good Muslim family in the Bhati Gate area where she went daily to work in the Women's Self-Defence League. A young Muslim girl here made friends with Rashmi. Her name was Akhtar. The first day Akhtar took Rashmi to her house, she talked to her about her life. Akhtar was married off to a fifty-year old man when she herself was hardly seventeen. She hated her husband and came away to live with her parents. Her father was a very strict person. Akhtar actually wanted to marry a young Khaksar boy, but he belonged to a different caste and her father would not agree to their marriage. When Akhtar insisted, her father beat her so badly that blue marks appeared all over her body. Then one day suddenly Akhtar was given in marriage to a man almost as old as her father. But Akhtar could not live with her husband and she came away to her *maika* and did not want to return to her husband.

Akhtar looked happy and cheerful despite her sad past and her miserable life then. All these experiences made Rashmi think that a girl in an Indian home was entirely confined to the

four walls of the house. She had no freedom as a girl, no rights as a wife, and no happiness as a mother. Rashmi realised that her own life and environment was quite different.

A year after her father's death, Rashmi's whole family planned to shift to Bombay. Sukesh and Suhasini wrote to them that they should come away to Bombay. Rashmi broke this news to Sukanta. Sukanta told her that he too was going to Bombay to work in the secretariat of the All India Students' Federation. Rashmi was very happy. But she was to leave for Bombay long before Sukanta.

Rashmi was invited to a farewell party by her class. Her professors also attended the farewell party. Rashmi wanted to leave a parting gift. She made out a leather file and wrote several very useful and informative articles for the album she wanted to present to her college. Sukanta suggested to her that she put in the album Lenin's famous words, "Man's dearest possession is life, and since it is given to him to live but once, he must so live as not to be seared with the shame of a cowardly and trivial past, so live as not to be tortured for years without purpose, so live that dying he can say: 'All my life and my strength were given to the first cause of the world—the liberation of mankind'."¹ When the album was ready, Rashmi took it to show to Sukanta. She felt very proud, showing it to him, because she had painted it and written all the articles in her own hand. Sukanta said that he liked it.

Before her departure for Bombay, Rashmi came to see Sukanta. As she was about to leave, Sukanta touched her hand with which she held her bicycle handle and pressed it. He then asked, "Rashmi, will you write to me from Bombay?" Without realising what she was saying, Rashmi said, "Why?" Sukanta at once continued, "Oh, occasionally, about your work." Rashmi said that she would. She did not know why she had said "Why?" For she did want to write to Sukanta about her work, and more too... But Rashmi was shy and afraid. She thought Sukanta would be able to understand her position. But she did not know how Sukanta had interpreted her "Why?"

Rashmi and Anju were both present at the usual Thursday assembly when Miss McNair, the principal, announced the news about their departure. They were very sad to leave their old college, a college that been the first training school for Rashmi's political work. The sisters felt grateful that Miss McNair remembered to mention their leaving for Bombay at the Thursday assembly.

Departure for Bombay

Rashmi and Rakesh were the first two to leave for Bombay in the summer of 1944.

In Bombay, Rashmi got admission in Wilson College. The college was situated near the Chaupati beach, very close to the sea. She was admitted to the Third Year² and she took the Honours Course in Economics. In Bombay all colleges were coeducational. And this too was a new experience for Rashmi. The college had a ladies' room, where the girl students could sit during their free periods. Rashmi found that the Maharashtrian and Gujarati girls were shy and rarely talked in the class. The Parsi girls who wore skirts, were bolder and more 'forward'. Generally, all the girls sat in the front rows in the classroom. Some of the boys were mischievous and often tried to provoke the girls who were timid. Rashmi found that the girls were by no means less intelligent than the boys. In fact, in some classes the best students were the girls. Rashmi noticed amongst such girls Miss Lalkaka, Miss Clark, Sonims and Shirin. But very few girls took part in extracurricular activities. There were societies and unions for every subject and occasionally debates and declamation contests were held.

¹ These words really belong not to Lenin, but to the young Soviet writer Nikolai Ostrovsky. They occur in his largely autobiographical novel 'How the Steel was Tempered'—Ed.

² Of the 4-year B.A. course—Ed.

Page 9. After 6th line on para four
she heard sharp criticism of other-
fronts from Subasini. Unjust criticism
was made of the AISF comrades too
Rashmi agreed with some of it but
not with all. Rashmi was puzzled
and confused. She was convinced
that neither Subasini nor the people
in her circle would ever be able
to understand and appreciate
her friendship and attachment
to Sukant. Moreover Sukant being
a Non-Kashmiri would never
be welcome in her family. Rashmi
also felt that she was too young to
decide the vital question of marriage
yet - up to the sad mishunderstanding
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1st para graph

Page 9.

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begins with the words

"the Communist students."

I think ~~above~~ the word

"the" should be deleted"

SPD

7th line—

Instead of stand on the"

it may be better to write

"stand regarding"

P I O

page 9

Rewrite the passage
regarding subasons. I
am writing on a
separate page.

Soon Rashmi got accustomed to the new conditions. After the first terminal examination, she found her name in the 'Scholars' List'. She did not understand what this meant. Later, she was happy to learn that she would be getting a scholarship and would have to pay no fees.

But Rashmi's studies were affected by the political work she soon plunged into. She joined the Bombay Students' Union (BSU) and started doing SF work in the college. At this time the communist students were completely isolated in the colleges due to their stand on the 1942 'Quit India' struggle. Rashmi observed that the students in Bombay were much more conscious than the students in Punjab and hence the division among them was quite marked. There were two organisations working among the students, the Students' Congress and the Students' Federation. Unfortunately, the SF workers, most of whom were communists, did open Party work, like selling 'People's War'¹, distributing Party literature etc. Rashmi, however, had a good academic record and therefore could manage to command greater respect among students. The SF set up 'Save Bengal corners' and in this campaign got wide support from the students. They organised a relief committee and collections for the sufferers of the Bengal famine.

By now Sukanta had arrived in Bombay and had started work in the AISF. Rashmi used to go to the Bombay Students' Union office daily, and in the evening Sukanta would go with her to the FSU office, where she was to join Rakesh. They discussed their work, had political talks, but they were both aware now that their friendship had already assumed a new form and all the time Rashmi carried the secret in her heart.

In Bombay, Rashmi came to understand Suhasini better. She was supposed to be the chief guide and mentor of Rashmi's family. Both Sukesh and Rakesh, together with all the other FSU comrades, acknowledged her as their senior. She was the sole leader for them and her dominating and all-pervasive personality was too clear to all those who worked with her.

Rashmi's whole family had come to Bombay. They lived in Wadala in a beautiful building situated at a mile's distance from the electric railway station near a TB sanatorium. Rashmi felt that she could never raise any point contrary to the opinion of Suhasini. Suhasini loved the family, but at the same time she wanted them to do whatever she liked. Rashmi was made to believe that Suhasini always did everything for their good. If she scolded the youngsters, it was to teach them to be better communists, better patriots and more dedicated revolutionaries. But Rashmi could not agree that Suhasini was always in the right. She observed that the FSU group gave themselves airs, they were made to believe that they had the best cadres, the best organised work, and the best leadership. Rashmi heard sharp criticism of other fronts from Suhasini. She agreed with some of it, but not with all. Once she heard some unjust criticism of the AISF comrades too. The criticism might have been correct, but the spirit in which it was made was not healthy and constructive. Rashmi was puzzled and confused. She was convinced that neither Suhasini nor the people in her circle would ever be able to understand her friendship with and her attachment to Sukanta. Moreover, Sukanta being a non-Kashmiri, Rashmi feared, would never be welcome in her family. She was not worried about this point, but she was deeply worried about the ideas that were being instilled in the minds of the family members.

Rashmi recognised that the FSU had very good organisation, that Suhasini helped to bring out the talents in everyone, that the FSU comrades had an exceptionally good team and a team spirit, and that they had an excellent leadership. But that was no reason why the FSU organisers should look down upon everyone else. Rashmi felt that Suhasini had had great opportunities, that she had been in foreign lands and had therefore learnt many things. Other comrades could have been as competent as her, were they given the same opportunities. But Rashmi clearly saw a great conflict between her own ideas and those of the people who were supposed to guide and lead her.²

¹ The weekly organ of the Communist Party of India in those days.—Ed.

² For more on Suhasini, see AFTERWORD—Ed.

Rashmi also felt that she was too young to decide the vital question of marriage yet. In fact, she did not have the boldness to speak out her heart to anyone. She quietly stopped meeting Sukanta and discussing things with him. A mental conflict raged within her heart, but she pulled herself up and decided to face this immediate question.

The sad misunderstanding

One day Sukanta asked her, "Why have you stopped seeing me, Rashmi?" She answered, "No, there is nothing like that." "Is there any change?" Sukanta asked. Rashmi just said, "No". Later, when Rashmi and Sukanta went into a restaurant, Sukanta insisted that Rashmi tell her the reason for the sudden change in her behaviour. "I have always looked upon you as my brother. I have the same respect for you as for Sukesh and Rakesh," said Rashmi. In her simplicity and innocence she completely failed to understand that her reply would hurt Sukanta's feelings badly. She could not imagine, could never conceive that what she had just said would hurt Sukanta so much that he would simply break off, stop talking to her. To the simple girl that she was, the logic of her answer was clear, "If I cannot tell him that I love him, if I want to take some time to decide the question, I can at least put him on the same level as my own brothers, whom I love so deeply." But she did not know that this itself would be sufficient reason for Sukanta to cut her off completely.

Sukanta stopped talking to Rashmi from that moment. They both saw each other in the SF office, but not a word passed between them. Sometimes Rashmi would meet Sukanta on the road but he would pretend he had not noticed her. Many activities were organised – campaigns, conferences, study circles and meetings, in which both Sukanta and Rashmi were present, but they did not talk to each other.

Once Rashmi took a written report of events in her college to Sukanta for publication in 'The Student'. It was past nine in the evening and she waited in the office all that time to go to him after everyone else had left. Sukanta just took the report and said he did not have the time to read it. Rashmi felt very hurt and walked out of the office with tears in her eyes.

Gradually, Rashmi started moving with other comrades. Sukanta did not like this and misunderstood her relations with one or two of them. He too developed friendship with another girl, so much so that this became a subject of talk amongst other comrades. Rashmi was deeply hurt.

The days that followed were difficult days for Rashmi, for she felt completely lost. She felt very jealous of the girl she saw moving about with Sukanta. But she thought to herself that she had no right to be jealous, for had she not rebuffed Sukanta herself? "But I could never imagine that he would at once change and become so indifferent to me," thought Rashmi sadly.

In the Bombay Students' Union no one knew about the earlier friendship between Sukanta and Rashmi. Sukanta was elected general secretary of the AISF at the following conference. He was one of the rising comrades in the organisation. People noticed the growing friendship between him and the new girl. Friends sometimes teased her about Sukanta in Rashmi's presence. So Rashmi was absolutely convinced about Sukanta's new affair.

Rashmi began to concentrate hard on her studies and tried to forget everything else. It was her final year, so she began working very hard. She had to take her examination in all the subjects, with Honours in Economics. She also started taking part in extracurricular activities. A declamation contest was held based on Rousseau's famous words, "Man is born free, but is in chains everywhere." Rashmi took part in the contest and she got help from Subrata Sen Gupta, then editor of 'The Student'. She did well and won the second prize. The first prize went to Mr. Gaitonde, the best debater among the Wilsonians. That evening, after several months, when Sukanta saw her in the BSU office, he asked Rashmi, "Did you get the second prize, Rashmi?" "Yes," Rashmi responded shyly, and that was all.

Communal riots broke out in Bombay, and the student leadership, instead of helping the people, closed down the BSU office. A special meeting was convened by the Politburo member B.T. Ranadive. He severely criticised the functioning of the student leadership.

Rashmi's examinations were drawing close and she more and more became engrossed in her studies. The AISF conference was to take place at Guntur in Andhra that year and preparations were on to enrol delegates. Rashmi did not want to go just before her examinations, so she decided to stay back. The delegation left for Guntur by the middle of December 1945.

Post-war upsurge in Bombay

In January 1946, on Subhas Bose's birthday, there were huge demonstrations in the city. There was a complete *hartal*, and many shops that refused to close down were set on fire. Rashmi was coming out of the Grant Road station when she heard a lot of noise. She found a great stir on the roads. She started walking in the direction of the Wilson College. Tear gas fumes rose to the sky and near Prarthana Samaj she heard the sound of shots being fired. The British police had opened fire on the demonstrators who had come out in their hundreds in huge anti-imperialist processions shouting, "British imperialism *murdabad!*" Rashmi hurried towards her college. In her mind the line was clear—there ought to be a strike in her college. As she entered the college, she found that all the students had gathered outside on the lawns. The Congress girls greeted her. She said, "We should have a joint procession today." Her Congress friends looked at their Student Congress leaders and replied, "Yes, there ought to be a united procession." The students soon formed into rows of four each and thus the first joint procession of students belonging to the Students' Federation and the Students' Congress started marching. Along with Rashmi, there were Shakuntala and little Kumud. They were shouting, "Students' unity *zindabad*, British imperialism *murdabad!*" Rashmi was very excited. She knew that they were marching to the place where firing was going on. Nothing could stop them now. Suddenly, the procession entered an enclosure where they found hundreds of people sitting. On the dais there were many Socialist leaders. Among them was Soli Batliwala, who had been expelled from the CPI some years ago. He pointed towards two men with bleeding faces and shouted, "The blood of those wounded at Prarthana Samaj must be avenged. Let us all march to Prarthana Samaj and face British bullets. They are shooting down our people. We must not sit here like cowards." The entire gathering stood up amidst thunderous slogans and began converging towards Prarthana Samaj.

"Get some water and wet your *dupattas* and saris, they will throw tear gas at you," someone shouted. Rashmi, Shakuntala and Kumud, who were marching hand in hand, followed this advice. Little Kumud was wearing a frock. She took out her handkerchief, dipped it in water and held it in her little hands. The demonstrators were shouting enthusiastically, "Down with police repression!" "Long live Subhas Bose!" "*Inquilab zindabad!*"

On the way Rashmi wondered that they had no guidance, they had decided to join the demonstration themselves and march to the place where police firing was going on. The entire AISF leadership was at Guntur, attending the conference. They could not get help or guidance from any of their leaders. And yet, Rashmi knew that it was right that they should have joined the demonstration because all the active students, irrespective of their political affiliation, had come out. Rashmi knew instinctively that it was correct to join the people when their sentiments were roused to fight for freedom. It was most important to be with the people and join the peaceful demonstration when the British police was shooting at them. So the three girls marched forward. The demonstration was stopped by the police. Rashmi remembered how the Calcutta students had squatted on the road when faced by British guns. So she asked her entire group to sit down. Many Student Congress leaders and workers fled when they saw the police pointing their rifles at them. But Rashmi's group remained firm. Soon the police started dispersing. Throughout, the people were raising slogans, "British imperialism *murdabad!*" "Stop police repression!" Rashmi noticed that the crowd was thinning down, but all around them loud slogans were being raised.

Suddenly, all the three girls noticed that they were being surrounded by a group of *goondas*. The slogans changed from "British imperialism *murdabad!*" to "Communist Party *murdabad!*" Rashmi felt worried, but she kept on marching. Shakuntala was quite afraid because she understood the indecent and vulgar remarks being made by these men. She told Rashmi that they should get away from that place. But where could they go? They were walking, but the crowd was following them. Rashmi decided that they should go to the coffee house in front of the AISF office. The crowd pursued them. The three girls entered the coffee house. The crowd kept on shouting slogans. They tried to follow them into the coffee house, but were prevented from doing so. There was a heated exchange of words, after which the crowd began to disperse.

In the meantime, the AISF comrades who came to know about the whole matter, came rushing to the spot. Sukanta was also among them. They had all returned from Guntur just then. By that time peace had returned outside the coffee house. Rashmi just glanced at Sukanta. She wanted to say something, but remained silent.

That night the central office of the CPI (PHQ) was attacked by the *goondas*. Rakesh as well as his mother were inside the building at that time. The ruffians attempted to set the building on fire. Comrades who were working in the PHQ defended it most heroically. The entire staff of the 'People's Age' and the People's Publishing House (PPH) turned into a battalion. They took out tiles from the roof and resisted the ruffians. Among those who received injuries was Balraj Sahni, who was then a member of the Party. Red Guards stood firm at their posts. The next day the story of 'the defence of the PHQ' was on the wall-newspaper.

For two days Bombay saw huge people's demonstrations in the face of brutal police firing. The AISF comrades helped to rescue those who were wounded. They, along with other communists, went boldly to places where the police was firing, carried those who were injured on stretchers and took them to hospitals. Among these comrades was Sukanta. Many a time bullets flew past him.

From January to March 1946 was a period of a tremendous mass upsurge, when the people demanded the release of the INA men. Thousands of students participated in the countrywide demonstrations that followed. Together with other SF workers, Rashmi too helped to organise solidarity meetings in her college. By February she took leave to prepare for her examinations. As she had taken Honours in Economics, she had to work really hard. Now she got completely engrossed in her studies. But the post-war upsurge continued unabated, arousing the people's wrath.

The RIN strike

In the last week of February 1946 unprecedented events took place in the country, culminating in the revolt of the Royal Indian Navy (RIN) men. The armed forces of the Army, Navy and Air Force turned their guns against their British masters. During long years of British rule these very men had been used to shoot down Indian patriots and guard the British possessions in India. Roused by the nationwide anti-imperialist upsurge and indignant at the inhuman conditions in which they had to live and serve, they raised their voice for the fulfilment of their demands. In Karachi, Bombay, Madras and Calcutta ratings of the Royal Indian Navy struck work and turned their weapons against their foreign masters. In Bombay mighty solidarity demonstrations in support of the RIN ratings were held by all sections of the people. The AISF and BSU were in the centre of this struggle. Together with other examinees in her college, Rashmi too left her books and came out to join her comrades. The British government imposed a blockade of ships in the ports, stopped the supply of food, coal and water in an effort to frustrate the armed forces in revolt. Students in their hostels observed mass hunger strikes and gave all their food, to be secretly carried to the ships. Rashmi's college too joined in this move.

The British imperialists let loose the severest repression to suppress the popular demonstrations. Curfew was repeatedly imposed on the city for days together. In the working class areas of Parel British soldiers mercilessly fired on innocent people. On 26th February the British soldiers used dum-dum bullets to shoot down innocent civilians indiscriminately. Two

hundred people were murdered in cold blood. Kamal Dhonde, the wife of a prominent trade union worker of the CPI was amongst those who lost their lives in this wholesale massacre.

On 25th February the local train in which Rashmi was travelling stopped at Dadar station and all the passengers had to get down. The train could not move as people had set railway stations on fire and removed the railway lines. Rashmi rushed to the Bombay CPI's Party office at Parel. She saw on the way camps set up by the White helmeted police. Even the military had been called out to suppress the demonstrations. Rashmi hurried to the Party office upstairs, but the women comrades were all instructed to go home. Rashmi was sent to the house of Com. Malu and stayed there until the next morning.

At the K.E.M. Hospital medical students worked day and night dressing and nursing those who had been wounded. The morning after the cruel massacre thousands gathered at the hospital to find their kith and kin amongst the 200 dead bodies. This was the worst massacre after Jallianwala Bagh. The champions of British democracy had left no stone unturned to brutally suppress the people. But the following week, leaders of the Congress and the Muslim League made a shameful compromise with their foreign protectors, betraying the country and the human corpses which lay in the morgue of the hospital. They asked the RIN men to withdraw their glorious struggle.

In her own way Rashmi had been both a witness to and participant in this struggle. The BSU organised a demonstration to the Castle Barracks, but when stopped by the police, they turned back. The demonstration was not very big, and later the students were told that they had made a mistake in not defying Section 144 imposed in the Castle Barracks area. Rashmi saw Sukanta marching in all these demonstrations along with her and other student comrades. But, except for an exchange of glances, nothing more passed between them. During those momentous days Rashmi often thought that they might all be killed and then Sukanta will never know what went on in her heart. But what was the idea of telling him anything now, for he had already chosen his partner in life? So thought Rashmi.

The month of March came and brought relative peace to the country. There was hardly a month left for Rashmi's examinations, but she boldly sat for her examinations. She had twice almost decided to drop the idea of sitting for her Honours examinations, but her mother pulled her up and insisted that she must appear. In April the results were declared, and Rashmi was relieved that she had got through her Honours. When she went to the AISF office, Sukanta asked her, "How did you fare? What marks did you get?" Rashmi answered his questions and was grateful to him that he enquired about her results.

The next week Rashmi went even to the AISF office to have a discussion with Sukanta about some post-war formulations of Stalin. He offered her a seat and answered her questions.

The reorganisation of BSU

Then, all of a sudden, there was a big upheaval in the BSU. There were reviews, criticisms and self-criticisms. The AISF comrades discussed their own functioning and their relations with the BSU. There was an effort to correct wrong methods of functioning. The AISF comrades called up many youngsters of the BSU and asked their opinions. Rashmi too was called by Nargis, whom she respected greatly. During the discussion Rashmi expressed sharp criticism of the BSU secretary. She had once talked to Nargis earlier too and had told her casually, but pointedly, that Sukanta had completely cut her off after their last talk together. Nargis had probably talked to Sukanta about this. Rashmi respected Nargis and felt that she could discuss her innermost thoughts with her. So she spoke frankly, without any consciousness of the fact that her criticism would be conveyed by Nargis to the higher Party committee.

After a fortnight the students' fraction top was reorganised and Rashmi was taken on it. Sukanta's new girl friend was also taken on it along with Rashmi. Sukanta was appointed 'in charge' of attending fraction top meetings, along with Ravi Sinha of AISF. Rashmi thought now was the time for her to talk to Sukanta and to normalise their very abnormal relations. She only

wanted that they should start talking with each other, just like other comrades, and change their very embarrassing and unusual relationship. So one evening she approached Sukanta in the PHQ and asked for an appointment. The following day was fixed for their meeting.

That night Rashmi could not sleep. Her mind was constantly occupied with the thought of making their meeting fruitful, so that her relations with Sukanta were normalised. In the morning Rashmi bought a packet of Capstan cigarettes and started for the AISF office. Sukanta was waiting for her. They decided to go into the nearby Lamington Restaurant where they ordered some tea. The waiter brought them tea. Rashmi then began, "I have been wanting to talk to you since long."

"Then why didn't you come earlier?"

"Well, you know, it is not easy. You just cut me off," she said.

"Well, under the circumstances it was the best thing to cut off our relations," replied Sukanta.

"Well, now we are both in the same fraction committee. Moreover, we are communists. We have to work together. Your own attitude is hardly communistic. You must normalise our relations. Had I known that you would just break off with me, I would never have talked with you. Do you think we can go on like this when we are both working in the same office? Do you think it helps our work? If I had not asked for this appointment, things would have just gone on as before," Rashmi continued.

"No, then I would have talked to you myself," said Sukanta.

Rashmi felt relieved to hear these words. She said, "We should talk to each other, discuss things normally, and behave like any other comrades."

The tea had finished. The waiter took away the cups and wanted the room to be vacated. "Let us have some more tea," suggested Sukanta, and he ordered another round. Rashmi was very pleased. She noticed that Sukanta too wanted to spend some more time with her. She took out the packet of cigarettes and gave it to Sukanta affectionately. Sukanta took the packet.

Thus, after nineteen months the ice was broken, nineteen months that had seemed like eternity to Rashmi.

"Meet me again," said Sukanta, as they came out of the restaurant. Rashmi said, "Yes, I will. And remember, I respect you just as much as I do my own brothers."

Thus came reconciliation between Rashmi and Sukanta. For Rashmi, the normalisation of relations signified the beginning of a period of greater understanding, better cooperation in the common work they were both devoted to doing. Little did she know then that the breaking of the ice would once again open the outlets of their hearts from which warm affectionate love would start flowing afresh. Sukanta also thought that what Rashmi desired was the normalisation of their relations as between two comrades who had dedicated their lives to a noble cause. He too could not think, nor could he imagine that his old feelings would resurface once more with added force.

Time passed. Rashmi and Sukanta often met in the office to talk over and discuss things—organisational functioning in the SF and in the Party, the political situation in the country and so on. Rashmi was able to talk to Sukanta normally and without any feeling of embarrassment. She came closer to the entire AISF team. She became especially very intimate with Nargis Batliwalla. She got some beautiful bookmarks from the FSU 'One Piece Exhibition' as a present for Nargis.

The tragic death of Sukesh

Sukesh had written a powerful poem on the RIN revolt, 'On the Naval Ratings' Strike', addressed to the British people. Rashmi read the poem with a feeling of admiration and pride for her eldest brother.

She remembered yet another poem written some years ago by Sukesh entitled 'The Five Voices', dedicated to the prisoners of the Deoli Camp:

Come with the power of the people
Surround your sons in the prisons
For this is the hour of the people
The people have arisen!

Sukesh had written poems on practically every important national event. But no one could imagine that the one on the RIN revolt would be perhaps his last one. For Sukesh died suddenly on September 13, 1946. He was hardly 25 at that time. He was living with the Jambhekars at 7th Road, Khar. Terrible communal disturbances had broken out that year and a large number of people had been wounded. Scores of young people thronged to the hospitals in Bombay to donate their blood to help save the lives of those seriously injured. Rashmi's entire family joined the volunteers and all donated blood. But the needle that was used to draw blood from Sukesh's arm was not properly sterilised.¹ Sukesh fell ill immediately. The poison was eating up his whole body, but no doctor was able to diagnose his illness. His fever rose high and he became weaker and weaker every day. Rashmi and her mother were in their own house in Santa Cruz. They came to see Sukesh but did not realise the gravity of his condition. They went back home. The news of his sudden death came as a terrible blow to the whole family. Along with the entire family many friends and comrades rushed to 7th Road, Khar. Members of the Central Committee and the Politburo also arrived. Covered with the Red Flag, his body was taken to the cremation grounds. Thus ended the young life of Rashmi's eldest brother, of one who had brought about the radical transformation of the whole family by taking to politics first.

For Rashmi's mother this was a terrible shock. She had lost her husband three years back. Suhasini almost lost her mind, for she had developed a very great attachment for Sukesh.

Sukesh was just 25 at the time of his death. He had written some 500 poems during his young life. He was 14 when he wrote his first patriotic poem²:

I will carry the flag,
But promise me
That if I fall
You will take it from my weakening grasp
And keep it flying even as I fall,
Promise, Comrade,
And if you fall,
You will pass it on to someone else.

I will carry the flag,
But promise me
That if I fail
To keep it flying for fear of death
You will shoot me dead.
Promise, Comrade
And if you fail,
You will shoot yourself
And pass it on to some one else.

¹ After Shashi Bakaya's (Sukesh's) death there were many different conjectures about its cause. One of his FSU friends who went to donate blood along with Shashi told others that the doctor had told Shashi that his physical condition at that time was not satisfactory and he should not donate blood until his condition improved. But Shashi insisted. This seems a more plausible cause of his death, which seems to have been caused by cardiac arrest after a brief illness. B.T. Ranadive spoke on behalf of the Party at the crematorium in Bandra.—Ed.

² Shashi wrote this poem in 1941 when he was 20 and had already met Suhasini.—Ed.

He wrote "The Ruin"¹ when the great building opposite Churchgate station collapsed, crushing to death nearly 200 men. I clearly remember how in our studio in Lahore Suhāsini had read out "The Ruin" and remarked at the end, "It is a great poem." I can never forget these powerful lines from another poem of Sukesh:

Woman,

From your womb a child
Wild as the ocean is wild
Will soon be born.

.....
Feed him as you can.

O! Woman,

For he is the future's free
Woman and man.

These lines for the first time made us love, respect and honour our own dear mother.

Sukesh used to write love lyrics, sonnets and Urdu verses at first, but his contact with Suhāsini brought about a tremendous change in his poetry. After that he wrote with a burning passion about the freedom struggle. He wrote songs in Hindi that were sung throughout the country. In 1942, during the 'guerrilla camp' in the Forman Christian College in Lahore, the Bombay students' squad sang his famous song:

Shuru hua jana jang (20 lines in Hindi)

Hundreds of young people sang this song as they marched through the streets of Delhi. Mama Phansalkar led the squad. Rashmi and Rakesh took particular interest in learning their brother's song. Rashmi never suspected earlier that Sukesh could write so well in Hindi. She had heard this song for the first time in the 'guerrilla camp' organised by the Students' Federation in Lahore in 1942. And in 1943 Perin Bharucha taught her still another song composed by Shashi:

Hindi hum chalees karor (about 18 lines in Hindi)

This song was taught to all women workers who were demanding the release of the national leaders and sung throughout the schools and colleges of Lahore. Women workers had learnt it in Bombay and taught it to others. It was several months later that Rashmi learnt that this song had also been composed by Sukesh.

In 1943, on the occasion of the First CPI Congress in Bombay, where she had gone with the Punjab singing squad, Rashmi heard the following song sung by Bombay workers on Lenin and learnt that this too was composed by Shashi:

Lenin ka gungan karo bhai... (17 lines)

The Maharashtrian girls and boys sang this song with their deep full-throated voices, moving the audience to love and admiration of the greatest sage of human liberation, the great and indomitable Lenin. Sitting in the hall where the Party Congress was being held, Rashmi wrote down and learnt this song from a Maharashtrian textile worker.

The Hitlerite armies had been pushed back from Stalingrad. The Red Army was marching forward. The Soviet people, men and women, old and young, defended every inch of their motherland. It was then that Sukesh wrote the saga of the Red Army's march:

Itihatey samik lal chaley.

Hitler ke kal karal chaley..... (Long Hindi song)

¹ Vimla is mixing up two of Shashi's poems here: "The House Collapse" which had the sub-title "And x,y,z was dead" and "The Ruin", to which perhaps Suhāsini referred. —Ed.

Rashmi loved this song, set to the tune of an Urdu *ghazal*. How many more poems and songs Shashi had written! Rakesh brought all of Shashi's old notebooks and started collecting his poetry. On Shashi's first death anniversary the FSU brought out a cyclostyled book containing some of the best poems he had written in English.

A public meeting in Sakesh's memory was held at the Poddar College hall (Matunga) by the Bombay Branch of the FSU. Sukanta was among the speakers and spoke on behalf of the Students' Federation. Rashmi heard him and wept silently. Rashmi's family had been badly shaken by this death. Rakesh, who looked to his elder brother as his guide and friend particularly missed him. Rashmi often noticed him weeping, and for days he appeared to be quite a lost person.

Sukesh was a quiet, modest and reserved person. Rashmi was sorry that she had not had the opportunity of getting to know her eldest brother better. For about five years, ever since he came to Bombay, he had lived with Suhasini and Jambhekar at 7th Road, Khar, separately from the rest of the family. The sisters and brothers did not talk freely with each other; there was a shyness between them which went off only with the passage of time. Rashmi recalled how Sukesh, Rakesh and their cousin sister Roopan had played about, sung and danced in the good old days in Lahore. But they were all in the same age group. The brothers, and particularly Sukesh, were not very free with their young sisters Rashmi and Anju. Rashmi's mother told her that Sukesh had always been very sensitive as a child. No one could ever know the pain that he carried in his heart, and yet he had done so much for the family, contributed so much to draw them into the national and revolutionary movement. Rashmi's mother always believed that his tragic untimely death was due to continuous neglect of health and overstrain. Yet, it should never be forgotten that the one person who was responsible for bringing out the latent talent in Sukesh, for rearing him as a passionate patriot and a dedicated and conscientious worker was Suhasini. In his death she suffered both as a comrade and a mother. For all his friends, comrades and near and dear ones this was a loss that could never be repaired.

Rashmi joins the School of Economics

Rashmi had graduated by now. She got her B.A. Honours in Economics and joined M.A. in the School of Economics. She started working on her thesis on the textile industry. Sukanta and Ravi Sinha also joined the same institute. They had to attend regular classes as they were appearing by papers.

Rashmi came to the School library daily to read for her research. She was greatly impressed by the serious and scholarly atmosphere in the School. Here Rashmi saw Sukanta practically every day. In the evenings the SF group had tea together and together they left to go to the AISF office. Rashmi, Sukanta and Ravi, all contested elections for membership of the college union. Election cards bearing the names of all of them were printed. Sukanta canvassed for Rashmi and Rashmi canvassed for Sukanta. There was not much chance for any one of them being elected as they were all new to the School. Moreover, anti-communism was rampant in those days and it had become known to every one that they were communists. However, Rashmi felt happy that she was part of this contest as it helped her to come closer to Sukanta.

An International Youth Commission consisting of Soviet, Yugoslav, French and Danish representatives was invited to visit India by the AISF. The group in which Rashmi worked went to the rich Malabar Hills area to collect funds. This was the biggest fund-raising drive organised by the SF after the Bengal famine of 1943. Sukanta took personal interest in the entire campaign and came to the BSU office. Rashmi left the office quite late in the evenings.

One evening, Rashmi was working in the office, getting ready the collection boxes, when Sukanta suddenly entered. "Are you working all alone, Rashmi?" he asked. "Isn't it getting late? Don't you want to go home?"

"Yes," replied Rashmi.

"Come, then," said Sukanta, and they went out of the office together. Sukanta left Rashmi at the Grant Road station. On the way they talked about their work. When the train was leaving, Rashmi thanked Sukanta for seeing her off. Sukanta simply smiled back and left the platform. This was the first time after their reconciliation that Sukanta had suggested to Rashmi that he would like to see her off. She remembered wistfully how he used to see her off daily at the FSU office before the sad misunderstanding arose between them.

The same week representatives of the youth commission were taken for sight seeing in Bombay. Different SF comrades accompanied the delegation to different places. Rashmi and Sukanta went with them to D.R.D. Wadia's house. They sat together in the car in the front seats. Rashmi was sitting very close to Sukanta; their clothes touched and a current of love ran through Rashmi's heart. Later, Rashmi was very pleased to learn that Sukanta had himself suggested that they both go together with the delegation to Mr. Wadia's house.

Preparations to go abroad

After the youth commission had left, the question arose of sending an AISF representative to work in the International Union of Students (IUS) office. It was suggested that the Indian representative might leave in time to be able to attend the International Youth Festival. Rashmi's name was proposed. The matter was soon finalised and Rashmi began preparing to leave for her great European tour.

She was at once taken to the AISF to acquire the training necessary for work that awaited her in the IUS. She was put in charge of an international section where the work was to be done under Sukanta's guidance. The first month was spent in studying the old correspondence with Miss Vidya Kanuga, the then representative of the AISF in the World Federation of Democratic Youth (WFDY).

Sukanta soon afterwards left for Delhi with other AISF comrades for a working committee meeting. Before his departure he went to see Rashmi off at the Grant Road station. They both had tea together. Then Rashmi said to Sukanta that she would write to him at Delhi. Sukanta was happy to hear this. He told Rashmi that he would definitely reply to her.

Sukanta left, and Rashmi wrote to him her first letter, a letter which expressed her warm but suppressed sentiments. "I have been wanting to write to you since long, and write to you what I find difficult to talk directly when you are here. Sometimes I do not only want to discuss with you, but feel like fighting with you." To this Sukanta replied, "If you feel like fighting with me, what holds you back?" His letter to Rashmi was also full of warm, but hidden sentiments. However, both understood the unexpressed feelings that they had for each other. This first letter by Rashmi opened the possibility of further correspondence and freer discussion between her and Sukanta.

When Sukanta returned to Bombay, he met Rashmi in the office and suggested they go out for a cup of tea. They went to a restaurant. Sukanta enquired about Rashmi's work and health. Rashmi talked to him more frankly. It was then that she told him that she was suffering from piles, something that was giving her continuous trouble. Sukanta was glad that Rashmi had shared with him her very personal troubles. He thought she confided in him completely. Their letters to each other had brought them closer, creating a feeling of great sympathy and understanding.

From then onwards Rashmi and Sukanta worked in the same office, and Rashmi had to consult Sukanta daily about her work. She wrote letters to the IUS and WFDY which had to be checked by Sukanta, and this work brought them closer to each other. Sometimes, when it got a late for Rashmi to go home alone, Sukanta accompanied her up to the suburban railway station.

Once Rashmi's entire family was invited by Mohan Bhai (Dattatreya) for lunch. Sukanta was also invited. Mohan Bhai and his two Punjabi friends turned out to be old acquaintances of Sukanta. This was a strange coincidence, an unexpected get-together of common friends of Rashmi and Sukanta, which Rashmi heartily enjoyed. Immediately after lunch, both Rashmi and Sukanta had to leave for the office to attend a meeting. They went together from Dadar to Grant

Road station and it was then that Rashmi learnt that Mohanbhai's uncle, Prof. S.M. Dattatreya, had been Sukanta's professor in Lyallpur.

Once Rashmi invited Sukanta to her house at 6-B, Willingdon Colony in Santa Cruz to finalise arrangements for her voyage to Europe. She had long wanted to invite Sukanta to her house and waited for him eagerly. She had cooked some delicious potato chops for him. At last, Sukanta arrived. Rashmi's younger brother Rati made tea as there was no one else in the house, while Rashmi talked to Sukanta. She had kept a file of old letters, including some of Sukanta's, which she brought out, saying, "You had changed your attitude towards me. You even stopped calling me by my name. See, here you have addressed me as 'Com. Vimla'." This was in an old letter Sukanta had written to Rashmi from Andhra in reply to some points about AISF work. Sukanta was surprised to see that she had kept all the letters so carefully in a file. "Do you keep all your letters like this in a file?" he asked. "Yes. I keep some people's letters," said Rashmi with a smile.

They then had tea together. Sukanta praised the potato chops made by Rashmi. They recalled the old happy days of Lahore. Both left after an hour and a half. They travelled together up to Grant Road station. Sukanta said he was sorry to leave so soon, but he had a meeting. Rashmi also went to the office to finish some work.

Late in the evening, when she was climbing down the stairs, Sukanta called out to her, "Where are you going?" "Home," replied Rashmi. "Wait," said Sukanta, "I shall come with you." Sukanta joined Rashmi. Rashmi was very pleased. She understood that Sukanta wanted to be with her and she was glad. "I did not want to leave your house so early today. I wanted to stay longer," Sukanta said on the way. "But I had a meeting," Rashmi listened to him with a feeling of happiness and love but made no reply.

Rashmi's mother had started making preparations for her departure for Europe. Just at that time Anju, who had stood first in her nursing examinations at the J. Wadia Children's Hospital, was also selected to go to London on a scholarship for higher studies in nursing and hospital administration. Their mother took out all her old saris and divided them between the two daughters. New blouses were stitched for both of them and also warm clothes made. Their mother made very pretty clothes for her daughters. Suhasini helped her in these preparations. Both sisters applied for their passports.

Sukanta gave all the help Rashmi needed in getting her passport. Rashmi welcomed the decision of her students' organisation to send her abroad, not only because it promised great possibilities of learning new things, but also because it would spare her the mental suffering and agony she had undergone and give her a chance to begin life afresh. Sukanta supported her going abroad because he knew she wanted to go. He too wanted to spare them both the mental suffering that had been caused due to the problems that had arisen in their relationship. Their affection and love was rapidly being revived but none of them was clear about the future. Rashmi knew that Sukanta's affair with the other girl still existed and she never wanted to come in the way of their happiness. So she very much wanted to leave India for some time.

Sukanta went out of Bombay for a few days. By the time he returned very few days were left before Rashmi's departure. One morning they set off together to have a talk. They came to the Churchgate station and went to the coffee house nearby. The AISF had decided to send Sukanta also to attend the IUS Council and the Youth Festival. Rashmi was to travel by boat. She told Sukanta that she was keen that he join her. Sukanta had difficulties and regretted that he would not be able to go with her. He might come later, but nothing was certain as yet. While they had coffee, in the crowded and noisy atmosphere of the restaurant, they were able to finalise Rashmi's financial and other requirements.

They came out. Sukanta understood that Rashmi wanted to spend some more time with him. He too wanted to be with her. So he suggested they have a cup of tea. They went into a restaurant opposite the School of Economics and sat together in a quiet corner. Their conversation continued, but they were talking about things which were not so important. All this time Rashmi

was longing to talk to Sukanta frankly, to give vent to her feelings openly, but she was shy. She felt awkward and embarrassed. They returned to the Churchgate station and got into a train in a compartment which did not have many passengers. Rashmi sat near the window. The train started and she looked out. Many stations passed, but Rashmi could not start what she wanted to say. There was silence between them. Sukanta was sitting very close to Rashmi, but he too remained silent. Then, he asked suddenly, "What are you thinking?" "Nothing," replied Rashmi. But this was not true. Rashmi's mind was full of so many thoughts. She thought of their long separation, which was now fast approaching. They got down and went straight to the office where Sukanta resumed his work. Rashmi had the feeling that she had lost a golden opportunity to talk and open her mind to Sukanta. And she did not know whether and when such an opportunity would come again.

Rashmi felt a joyous sensation while working in the AISF office with Sukanta. She experienced an irrepressible tenderness sweeping over her when they walked together every evening to the station. She was conscious that Sukanta too felt affection for her, though he did not express it openly and frankly. But she felt that a barrier still existed between them. A persistent feeling of shyness and embarrassment stood in the way of normalising their relations. And yet, what sort of normalisation did she expect? She had never conceived of their union, for, ever since their break, someone else had come into Sukanta's life. She was happy that Sukanta's attitude was again considerate and warm towards her. She was satisfied with the help he gave her in her work. She did not know the depth of Sukanta's feeling for his new friend, nor the extent to which their friendship had gone. But now she was leaving India for some time, and she was anxious to normalise her relationship with Sukanta completely so that they could work together like two good friends and comrades.

So she decided to write to Sukanta what she could not say to him directly. She gave him a letter one day expressing her heartfelt desire that the barrier of embarrassment be broken between them and asking for still better and more normal treatment.

Sukanta was annoyed when he read the letter. His reaction to it was just the opposite of what Rashmi had expected. He wondered what Rashmi wanted from him. So he wanted a discussion on her letter. They went into a restaurant to talk. Sukanta complained that Rashmi seemed to belittle the positive change that had come about in their relations. After tea, they sat in the veranda for some time. Rashmi was terribly upset. She said to Sukanta, "I don't want anything to come in the way of our friendship." Sukanta could see that Rashmi was talking in all sincerity. He said, "I too don't want anything to come in the way of our friendship," and he patted Rashmi's hair kindly and affectionately. It was time for him to go to the PHQ for his dinner.

The next day he was leaving for Cuttack for the Council meeting of the AISF. "I hope you will get your passport without much difficulty, Rashmi. I'll try to get back to Bombay before you leave." There was warmth in these words, and Rashmi knew that once again peace had returned between them. She just touched him and said, "Good bye."

The entire AISF staff left for Cuttack the next day. The passport authorities were delaying the grant of a passport to Rashmi. The Cuttack Council meeting of the AISF launched a strong protest and demanded that Rashmi be given a passport immediately. At last she got it. Her passage had already been booked by 'S.S.Samaria,' which was scheduled to sail on June 14, 1947.

One morning, as Rashmi entered the AISF office, an 'Express Letter' was handed over to her. She recognised Sukanta's handwriting on it and opened it immediately. She had never expected a letter from him. "I know that you are not expecting a letter from me, but I know also that you will not mind if I write to you," Sukanta began his letter. He told Rashmi that he was trying his best to return to Bombay before her departure. Rashmi was overjoyed.

Her preparations were soon over and the day arrived for Rashmi to leave. All her friends and relatives came to the docks to see her off. Rashmi said 'good bye' to one and all. Tears gushed like from a fountain from her eyes as she shook hands with every one. At last she boarded

the ship and waved to them. An Indian girl, a cousin of Com. S.G. Sardesai, was travelling by the same boat. Rashmi arranged her bags and occupied her place in her cabin. At 5 p.m. Rashmi was surprised to learn that all the passengers were allowed to leave the boat for some hours and return by 12 o'clock midnight. Rashmi was excited. She tried to contact her people at Santa Cruz, but in vain. Then she telephoned the PHQ and got a message conveyed to Sukanta saying that she was coming to the AISF office.

The last night before departure

Rashmi got into a taxi and came to the AISF office. Sunil was working there. Sukanta came after his dinner and was surprised to see her. "I came to get 'The Student' file," said she. She went to his desk as he managed find a few copies of 'The Student' for her. "What else?" asked Sukanta, softly. Rashmi told him that she had to return to the boat soon. He came out with her to the bus stop and then told her that he would come up to the docks. Rashmi was quite thrilled. She had longed to have a few last moments with Sukanta, but that had not been possible earlier. A mere chance had brought them together now. They got into a bus.

"Will you come back soon. Rashmi?" asked Sukanta.

"Of course, I will."

"You won't stay longer than your term?"

"No, I will come back. I wanted to invite you for a meal and give you food cooked by my own hands."

"You may do that when you come back," said Sukanta with a smile.

They soon got down and walked up to the docks. It was nearly ten, there were still two hours. They both sat down near the sea. It was a beautiful moonlit night. The cool and fresh waters flowed calmly past them. These two hours were precious for Rashmi. They had been snatched by sheer luck, just when Rashmi was leaving her homeland, her near and dear ones, and going far, far away, across the oceans.

"What did Nargis tell you?" Rashmi asked.

"I will tell you when I come to Prague," said Sukanta.

"Will you come definitely?"

"I hope so. I wanted to go along with you, but that was not possible. Now I shall come by air."

They went on talking. And then Rashmi said, "Why do you become so stern sometimes?"

"No, Rashmi!" Sukanta said. Suddenly and for an instant their hands touched. Sukanta held Rashmi's hand in his own for a while. That was the first most thrilling and joyous moment for Rashmi. The pressure of his hand awakened in her heart the desire to belong to Sukanta for ever and ever. Casually and carelessly Sukanta lay down on the grass near her and once again caught her hand. It was then that he promised that he would do his best to come to the Festival and to the IUS Council meeting, as decided by the AISF. The clock struck 11 and Sukanta went in to see the time. There was still one more hour. But that too passed soon. Rashmi took out four bars of Nestle's chocolate and gave them to Sukanta.

"How will you go home?" she asked, and gave him five rupees to get a taxi. "I won't need Indian currency any more, so you may take this." Again they said good bye to each other. Sukanta pressed Rashmi's hand warmly and went away.

The S.S. Samaria did not leave until the next morning. Rashmi's friends and relatives were at the docks next morning too. All members of her family came. The Jambhekars too came. Among those who arrived to bid her good bye were Wadud, Sushila, Kamal, Sen and many others. But Rashmi did not see Sukanta among them. She could just wave her hands, as the boat had already left the shores. She had not expected so many people to come again without any prior notice. She was very happy that they could.

S. S. Samaria sails off

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At last the boat left Bombay. Rashmi felt sad to leave her country, and yet her mind was filled with new ideas. She looked to the future with great hope and expectation, with new plans of learning and self-education, of acquiring training and experience in the international students' movement.

The sea voyage was not very interesting for Rashmi because she was travelling all alone. She managed to get acquainted with some Indian girls. There were many British and Anglo-Indian families on the boat and Rashmi began to have a taste of Western life and culture. She liked the morning breakfasts and developed a taste for Western dishes. It was here that she was forced to eat beef, which was served with practically every meal. There was music and dancing, games and a lot of fun in the evenings. The rooms on the upper deck smelt of alcohol, and Rashmi detested going there. There was a lot of love-making on the boat which appeared to Rashmi as vulgar as she was not familiar with the Western way of life. Many women suffered from seasickness, and Rashmi also felt seasick in the beginning, but gradually she got over it.

The first stoppage of the boat was at Cairo. The passengers were greatly relieved to see land after so many days of 'life on water'. Roads and buildings and people appeared once again. As soon as the boat stopped, scores of Egyptian vendors came rushing in to sell beautiful leather bags, cushion covers, wooden figurines, baskets and toys. Rashmi bought two Egyptian bags, one for Sukanta and the other one for her brother Rakesh.

When the boat left Cairo, a case of infantile paralysis was discovered. The patient was kept in a segregated cabin and treated there, but his condition became worse and worse. After two days, a special landing was made late at night and the patient was sent out to the hospital. Rashmi was deeply affected by this incident. The patient was a young man. He too had left his near and dear ones behind just a week back. No one could say whether he would survive or not.

It was moving to see the reaction of many Indian passengers when the boat was passing through the Suez Canal. They all said, "Now we are moving away from Asia, from our own continent." The canal is so narrow that if one throws a stone from the boat it can reach the land across the waters.

Experience with the British Customs

Rashmi spent twenty-one days on the boat and at last arrived at Liverpool. Arvind Mehta's wife Kumud had come from London to receive her. It took the passengers seven long hours to disembark, and then Rashmi had the terrible experience of the British customs authorities. Each single article of her baggage was examined minutely. Rashmi was carrying a large box containing a poster exhibition and some very artistic gifts, to be presented to the Stalingrad Youth Memorial. The customs officers callously damaged the beautiful pieces of sculptures and paintings of *Shahid-e-Azam* Bhagat Singh. Rashmi and Kumud got very late. The special train meant for passengers of the boat had left, so they had to catch another train to London.

On the way Kumud handed over a letter to Rashmi from Sukanta. She felt so happy to read it. He had sent useful instructions, and at the end had written, "I was very happy that you came to the office that night to get 'The Student' files." Both Rashmi and Sukanta knew that her visit to the office that evening was so vital for them; it gave them four precious hours to be together on the last day before Rashmi left her homeland.

In London

Rashmi spent just two days in London. She met Kitty Boomla, Arvind Mehta, Dr. K. M. Ashraf, Sharaf Athar Ali and many other comrades. She was taken to the office of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) and was introduced to Com. Rajani Palme Dutt, a leader held in great esteem by all Indian comrades there. London is a big city, but there was hardly any time to see it. Kitty Boomla, who was planning to return to India that year, told her all about the IUS and

WFDY. Rashmi learnt that Kitty was attending Party schools to get her knowledge of Marxism-Leninism and Indian politics updated.

The next day Rashmi left for Prague.

Arrival in Prague

Rashmi arrived in Prague all alone and went straight to Stalinova, to the office of the Festival Committee. Here she met Kitty Hookam, secretary of the Festival Committee, as well as Vidya Kanuga, the then representative of the AISF in the WFDY. She was handed over all the latest letters from India giving news about the participation of Indian youth in the Festival and the IUS Council. The offices of the Festival Committee were buzzing with news of the youth expected from all over the world to attend the first great Festival of Friendship and Peace. Here Rashmi met Bert Williams of Australia, who was secretary of the WFDY at that time. Delegations of young people had already started arriving. Hundreds of Czechoslovak youth received them warmly every day at the Praha (Prague) railway station.

The anniversary of the Great French Revolution was celebrated on 14th July in a big hall. There was a ball, and here Rashmi saw for the first time European social dancing, so much written about in English novels. It was thrilling to see how European young boys and girls enjoyed themselves, how naturally they mixed with each other, how freely and confidently they moved about.

Within a couple of days groups of young people started arriving from all corners of the world. And then came the grand opening of the First International Festival of Youth, symbolising the warm and unbreakable unity of young people and their aspirations for a world of peace. Among the participants were youth who had themselves experienced the horrors of war, boys and girls who had suffered the cruel tortures of gas chambers and concentration camps, who had seen with their own eyes the terrible destruction of magnificent monuments and of cities and towns, and whose near and dear ones had perished in the ghastly war which ended not so long ago. These young people had come together to express their common desire to sacrifice their all for safeguarding the noblest cause in the world, the cause of peace among nations.

Row after row in colourful national costumes, holding their national flags marched in the Masaryk Stadium, which presented a sea of faces. Hundreds of white doves were released in the sky amidst enthusiastic slogans of peace and friendship, and thus the Festival was ceremoniously inaugurated. Rashmi marched with the Indian contingent in her *ghagra* and *odhni*, proudly displaying the pieces of mirror glistening amidst the multicoloured design of her skirt. She was sorry that Sukanta should have missed such a grand and picturesque demonstration of youth.

Sukanta arrives in Prague

Early next morning Rashmi went to the exchange office in Sokolovna to get her travellers' cheques cashed. As she was standing near the counter, someone put his hands on her shoulders. She glanced back and found Sukanta smiling at her. Rashmi was overjoyed to see him. He had arrived by air the previous night and had come to Sokolovna to contact Rashmi and other members of the Indian delegation. Rashmi was excited to see him in Prague at last, but was too shy to express her feelings. They went upstairs to the hall where the 'Needs of Youth' seminar was to be held that day. No one had arrived as yet. Rashmi was relieved. She had prepared a paper on the needs of Indian youth, but she felt hesitant to speak at the seminar in Sukanta's presence. Luckily for her, the seminar was postponed for some reason.

Here in Prague Rashmi was quite free to move about with Sukanta; no social restrictions prevented their being with each other. She took him first to Stalinova to meet Vidya Kanuga. On the way Sukanta said that he wanted to have some breakfast and tea. They went to a canteen and got something to eat. Then they walked up to Stalinova. Rashmi told Sukanta all about her journey, from Bombay up to Prague. She related to him her experiences in London and Prague, her reaction to the way of life in the West for the first time, she really felt absolutely free moving

about with Sukanta, chatting with him without any fear. Sukanta could see she was very happy to see him. And so too was he to see her.

After they had got all the details about the IUS Council meeting and the Festival from Vidya, Sukanta and Rashmi got into a tram to go to Tilova College, where the Council was to meet. On the way they had lunch together. The Council meeting lasted all afternoon. In the evening they came once again to Stalinova to meet Vidya, after which Rashmi took Sukanta to her hostel. She brought out some sweets and cigarettes for him and they sat down to chat together. Now in her own room, Rashmi told Sukanta that she was very happy that he had been able to come. They talked together for hours, and then Rashmi came to the tram station to see Sukanta off. It was decided that Rashmi too would seek accommodation in Tilova College and stay there until the end of the Council meeting.

Next day they went to see Yarmilla, the office secretary, to fix up the rooms where they would stay. They were given rooms next to each other. A thrill ran through Rashmi's heart at the thought that they would be residing in rooms side by side. They came out happily and moved to their rooms. Sukanta suggested that Rashmi could bring her bags the next morning.

The Council session started early next morning. Rashmi felt unwell that day, so she left the meeting and came upstairs to rest. In the evening Sukanta came to see her. He touched her and said, "You seem to have fever. You are very warm." Rashmi smiled back at him and replied, "It is just exhaustion." They went to see the exhibition after they had had some tea. On the way Sukanta said to Rashmi, "You must be angry with me because I did not come to Europe with you. I wanted to, but it was not possible. You must be annoyed also because I did not come to the docks again next morning before your ship sailed. But you must excuse me."

Rashmi said it did not matter and that she had not taken it ill. On the way back Sukanta and the Indonesian friend Sugiono sat together in the tram. Sukanta hinted to Rashmi to come and sit with them. But Rashmi did not catch his words and sat on the opposite seat. When they arrived at the Tilova College, Rashmi asked Sukanta to bring her the files of 'The Student'. Sukanta came straight to Rashmi's room and sat down on the bed.

"Are you happy I came, Rashmi?" asked Sukanta.

"I told you so yesterday. Why should you ask?" said Rashmi.

"Well, should I not ask?" Sukanta said.

"Of course, I am happy, very, very happy that you came. You will help me in all my work, won't you?"

"Of course I will."

For some time they talked about the report that was to be presented to the IUS Council. Then they retired to their rooms to go to bed.

The Council session continued the next day. Late in the evenings there were meetings of various commissions. After dinner Sukanta went to attend the meeting of the commission on colonial problems. Rashmi came back to her room and got ready to wash her hair. She then combed her hair and settled down to read a book. After two hours Sukanta came to her room.

"You are still awake?"

"Yes," replied Rashmi.

Sukanta sat down near her and gave her a detailed account of the commission's meeting. He also told her about the stand he had taken on specific issues. He seemed to be satisfied with his contribution. He then asked Rashmi, "Did I do well or not?"

Rashmi smiled and said, "Yes, yes". Thus they talked for some time. Both of them were aware of the increasing warmth and intimacy that was growing between them. The love that they felt for each other was awaiting frank and open expression. Yet another day passed.

Next morning Rashmi got ready to leave Tilova College and go to the city to attend a Festival event. Before leaving, she went to Sukanta's room. He was sitting on his bed, writing. As Rashmi entered, he asked her about her programme.

"I am going to the Festival grounds. Please come with me," said Rashmi.

"I have to complete my report, Rashmi. I am sorry I won't be able to come with you."

Rashmi was somewhat disappointed. Sukanta asked her to sit down for a while.

"Come with me," Rashmi repeated.

"I cannot go just now. Do sit down for a while."

Rashmi sat down on the bed near Sukanta and leaned against the wall. They were sitting very close to each other and suddenly Rashmi's shoulder touched his. A glow of warmth passed through her body.

"What are you thinking?" Sukanta asked.

"Nothing," she said.

"It is good to be here," he remarked.

"Yes, but you will go away soon," Rashmi said sadly.

"Should I stay on here?"

"How can you stay on here? You are such a big leader. They would want you back."

For a while they were both silent.

"Please shut the door. I wish to talk to you," Rashmi said. Sukanta got up and closed the door.

"Now tell me please, what did Nargis tell you?"

"She told me whatever you had told her," replied Sukanta.

"Still, what did she say?"

"What did you tell her?"

"I told her that you had become annoyed with me and that I was sorry about it," said Rashmi. And then in an agitated voice she continued, "I do not want you ever to be angry with me again. I want nothing to come in the way of our friendship."

"Is this friendship?" Sukanta asked.

"Of course, this is very good friendship," Rashmi asserted.

"Is this just friendship or something else too? Asked Sukanta.

Rashmi looked down and said sadly, "What is the use of telling you now?"

"Why? What has happened?"

"You have other friends," said she.

"Are you angry with me?"

"No, what right have I to be angry with you?" Suddenly her voice broke and she said, "I don't want you ever to be angry with me again."

"Rashmi, Rashmi, do you love me? Say 'yes' or 'no'."

Rashmi was taken aback. She looked up at Sukanta with her eyes full of love.

"Didn't you know it all this time?"

In a moment she found her head resting on Sukanta's shoulders. Sukanta held her with his hands and kissed her face, her eyes ... He raised her face to his and said, "My dearest, my dearest!" All their pent up feelings burst out in a torrent. Tears gushed from Rashmi's eyes, tears of love and of gratefulness. Sukanta fondled her hair affectionately and pronounced her pet name. Rashmi was overwhelmed. In a moment the whole world looked different to her; life was beautiful. She touched Sukanta's hair and said, "I used to long to touch and play with your hair. She closed the open buttons of his shirt and said, "Why did you not guess all these years that I love you, so deeply that I have held you in my heart all the time?" It was time for her to leave. "I don't want to leave you, but people will be waiting for me at my hostel."

There was a knock at the door. Sukanata got up and opened the door and found Suigomo standing there. Both of them came down and went with Rashmi up to the tram station to see her off. Rashmi left the keys to her room with Sukanta and said, "I shall be back tomorrow early morning, before breakfast." She mounted the tram and waved good bye to Sukanta and Suigomo and left.

Rashmi reached her hostel, met all her friends and settled with them the programme of the Indian delegation. Next morning she arrived at Tilova College at seven. She carried with her the Egyptian bag she had bought at Cairo for Sukanta. She knocked at Sukanta's door as she reached the college. He soon came out.

"Please give me my keys," Rashmi said. Sukanta brought out the keys and both went to Rashmi's room together. Rashmi put her bag on the table, took out Sukanta's present and said, "This is for you." Sukanta took the Egyptian bag. "Do you like it?" Rashmi asked. "Yes, it was so good of you to think of buying it for me." Sukanta sat close to Rashmi and held her hands. Suddenly, Rashmi burst into tears.

"Why, are you not happy?" asked Sukanta, wiping her tears with his own handkerchief. Rashmi went on crying. She had found Sukanta after so many months and had told him the secret of her heart, but the suffering and mental torture she had gone through only she knew. And much had happened during these long months. Sukanta had become friendly with another girl. But Rashmi knew that he loved her dearly and that he belonged to her.

"Be happy, Rashmi. I love you very much. You must not feel sad." In a few minutes Rashmi was all right.

The IUS Council meeting was held at the same time as the Festival. Misha and Tamara Ershova led the delegation of the Anti-Fascist Committee of Soviet Youth, Rajko Tamovich, the Yugoslav delegation; M. Trouval, the French delegation; Bill Rust and Tom Madden, the British delegation. Sukanta listened to the discussions attentively and himself played a decisive part in influencing the policies of the IUS on colonial countries. The North African and Vietnamese delegations applauded him for boldly answering the criticism of M. Trouval against the IUS policies of solidarity with colonial countries. Sukanta and Rashmi met representatives of the organised student movement of every country at the Council. The Egyptian student representatives, Sugiono and Suripio from Indonesia, the Tunisian and Syrian students, would consult Sukanta on every important point. The students' delegations from colonial and dependent countries put forth a common point of view and called upon the IUS to pledge full support for the struggle of the students of their countries for national independence, which alone could guarantee their right to free and democratic education. The Council meetings lasted for five or six days. Consequently, the delegates attending them had to miss a lot of Festival events.

The Great Festival—August 1947

The Festival delegation from India consisted in the main of students studying in Britain. Rashmi and Sukanta were the only ones who had come directly from India. There was a big contingent of Muslim students too.

15th August 1947 brought freedom to India. Indians in Prague celebrated the day by holding a big reception. Muslim participants congratulated the others. The terrible consequences of the partition of the country were not yet known and were not even expected.

Madan Bakaya and Gul Zaveri had also arrived by now from Bombay, representing the FSU. Rashmi spent a lot of time with them.

For fifteen days, the streets of Prague, the beautiful capital of Czechoslovakia, were filled with young people from all over the world. The Czechs showed them warm hospitality, treating them with great kindness and consideration. The Wenceslas Square was beautifully decorated with bunting and flags of different nations. The window decorations of the shops, for which the city is so famous, were extremely attractive. The tram conductors and the traffic police were extremely kind to the foreigners. Every day youth marches and demonstrations passed through the city. Rashmi was excited to see the torchlight procession of youth, singing partisan songs. The well-known Czech song '*Tansvi, tansvi, Vikrutse, vikrutse*' and the popular song of the Yugoslav youth '*Yedan dva, yedan dva, omladina Titova*' were soon on the lips of all young people. Hotels, restaurants and teashops were crowded with youth, and in the evenings '*lorcky porky*', the Czech sausage served with mustard, was the favourite dish of hundreds of youth.

An important aspect of the Festival was the youth exhibition organised in a huge grounds and especially put up for the great gathering. Rashmi and Vidya had helped to put up the Indian section, which was poor both in quality and material due to financial difficulties, and so were the sections representing other colonial countries. The technique of putting up an exhibition was entirely new to Rashmi, who had seen several exhibitions in her own country. Large photographs, oil paintings and wood carvings formed the major part of the exhibition. Unlike in her own country, here most of the work was done by professional artists and technicians who were specially brought to Prague to mount the exhibitions.

The Festival brought to Prague some of the best artistes, singers and dancers, but Rashmi was too young and immature to understand their talent. Western music and dance were absolutely new to her. Sukanta showed little or practically no interest in cultural and artistic events at that time. However, Rashmi took him to a few open air performances.

She went to open air film shows, most of which depicted the struggle against fascism. With Madan Bhai and Gul she enjoyed the cultural evenings and listened to the inspiring songs rendered by the Polish, Bulgarian and Greek choirs. She also saw the Soviet dances and the famous Russian ballet. The evening of national games was interesting and Rashmi was particularly struck by the Mongolian game of wrestling. The receptions held by different delegations brought delegates of various countries together and gave them an opportunity to exchange experiences and gain knowledge about the life and struggle of youth in different lands. But with the IUS Council and other work, the richness and abundance of culture that the Festival offered could not be fully absorbed by Rashmi and Sukanta.

The last day of the Festival saw the biggest get-together as youth marched in the richly decorated Wenceslas Square. President Gottwald stood on the dais that was specially erected for the event, together with youth leaders from all countries, and thousands of people, dressed in their national costumes, passed by. The people of Prague greeted these ambassadors of peace and friendship and shouted slogans from every nook and corner of the great square. And thus culminated the first festival organised by the World Federation of Democratic Youth and the International Union of Students.

It was obvious that such a successful event could not have been organised without the help of the government, and this assistance could possibly be given only by a government which was itself pledged to a policy of peace. The enormous facilities to accommodate thousands of foreigners, the transport arrangements, the complete handing over of the theatres, cinema halls, schools and open air stages to the organisers could alone make such a grand festival possible.

Many countries still groaning under the heels of imperialism and fascism could not be well represented at the Festival. The Chinese, Spanish and Greek delegates, however, found their way, bringing with them the call of their youth for solidarity to liberate their countries from the clutches of imperialists and fascists. Rashmi and Sukanta met the Chinese students and sent an interview with them for publication in 'The Student'.

Rashmi and Sukanta moved about together during all the youthful events of the Festival. They went to the banks of rivers, to the beautiful parks, to the gardens on hilltops and to the open air performances, hand in hand. Rashmi dressed herself in all the beautiful saris given by her mother. She felt younger in age and happier in spirit. They had breakfast, lunch, tea and dinner together, and enjoyed the big red 'yablokas' (apples) and the sweet, juicy pears. Sukanta would buy apples for Rashmi and Rashmi, pears for Sukanta.

In the late evenings they would talk endlessly for hours together about the ups and downs of their friendship, the sad break, the reconciliation and the situation that had brought them together again after almost 24 long months. Rashmi showed Sukanta passages from her diary, confirming her continuing and ever-increasing affection for him and her heart's desire to work and to live with him, devoting her life to the fulfilment of the cause which they both cherished so ardently. In between her reading the passages, Sukanta would sadly remark, "Oh, Rashmi! What

have you done? Why did you not show all this to me earlier? Why did you keep me in the dark all this time?"

The Festival ended. Youth teams were going to Yugoslavia to work in the brigades. Madan Bhai and Gul went earlier. Navin Patel also accompanied them. Sukanta was invited to visit and study the conditions and the working of the youth organisations in Yugoslavia by the youth organisations there, and especially by Rajko Tomovich, who was the guest of the Indian youth the previous year. Sukanta went away soon after the Festival.

Rashmi now settled down to her regular work in the IUS office. She went to the office at 7 in the morning daily and returned to her hostel at 6 in the evening. In the beginning she was put in charge of the Students' Relief Department, which dealt with rendering material aid to the students of needy countries. The IUS was a constituent member of the World Students' Relief (WSR), together with the ICS and Pax Romana. The WSR had its headquarters in Geneva. Rashmi spent the first two weeks in studying all the material related to the work of this department. The French student leader M. Bouchet also worked in the WSR on behalf of the IUS, and was sent to the WSR meetings along with Rashmi later.

The IUS office then had only two representatives from Asian countries—Rashmi and the Indonesian Sugiono. Later, Peter Chien, representing the NFCS joined them. The IUS established a new department, the Colonial Bureau, to strengthen its contacts with the students of colonial, semi-colonial and dependent countries. The IUS Press Release and WSN department was looked after by the representative of American NUS, who was working only in a fraternal capacity. Another American student, Ben Wienfield, who was a progressive, helped in the work of Press Information Department. The President of the IUS was Joseph Grohman, a Czechoslovak, and his fiancée Yarmilla, a tall and kind lady, looked after the office and managerial work. There was no Soviet representative in the IUS at that time. The administration and functioning of the organisation was extremely bureaucratic in the initial period, with the President reigning supreme. He hardly showed any understanding of colonial problems and therefore Rashmi, Sugiono and Peter Chien had to wage a hard and prolonged struggle to get the IUS to really support the students fighting against colonialism.

Rashmi's lack of knowledge of the Czech language was a great handicap for her. An English weekly 'Prague Newsletter' was published in the capital, which helped them to understand local and world developments. But this too stopped after some time.

In Rashmi's hostel there was a smart, robust looking Czech girl, who was engaged to a White Russian (Belorussian) boy. She was immensely kind to Rashmi, and grew very friendly with Madan Bhai and Gul. She told Rashmi a lot about her country, their customs and the way they lived. Another girl, Vera, a press correspondent, took Rashmi to the Party office and showed her the giant buildings of the 'Rude Pravo' (Red Truth), the Party journal.

Meeting with Gustava Fuchikova

One day Vera took Rashmi to meet Gustava, wife of the great revolutionary writer Julius Fuchik, author of 'Notes from the Gallows' and several other books. With great emotion and pride Vera related to Rashmi the inspiring story of Julius Fuchik, his unprecedented sacrifices and exemplary heroism. Rashmi looked at his wife with admiration and a thrill and noticed the signs of deep suffering on her kind but resolute face.

Later, Vera took Rashmi to see a play about Fuchik's life. Rashmi had not yet read the full story of Fuchik. Yet, she was very proud of having met Gustava, friend, beloved and wife, companion and comrade of the great writer. Gustava was in the same prison with Fuchik for many months, where Fuchik was brutally tortured, mercilessly beaten and finally murdered. It was a great honour to meet his wife, who had shown equal valour in the face of fascist cruelty and oppression.

→ Sukanta Returns to Prague

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Madan Bhai and Gul came back from Yugoslavia with very extraordinary stories about the work of Yugoslav youth. They left for India soon afterwards. Navin Patel also returned. But he had settled in Prague for some time. Sukanta came back last of all, after an extensive tour of some parts of the country, along with Malayan, Chinese, Indonesian and African youth leaders. He had also met Marshal Tito, who gave the youth leaders a special interview.

It was one day in the morning that Sukanta's train arrived at the Prague railway station. Rashmi was there, waiting for him. As the train steamed in, Sukanta saw her and shouted, "Rashmi!" and dismounted with all his luggage. An African youth was also with him. They went to the IUS office together, arranged for the African's stay, left him in the office and came back to Rashmi's hostel. Rashmi had been by now given a new apartment. Sukanta entered her room, put his jacket on a hanger and then caught Rashmi in a warm embrace. "My dearest, my darling!" he exclaimed. Rashmi was moved to tears of joy.

"Oh, I missed you so much, dearest Sukanta."

She then started making tea and breakfast. Sukanta watched her affectionately. Rashmi had bought fresh bread, butter and his favourite 'salami'. They had tea together. Sukanta had brought Rashmi as a gift a beautiful Yugoslav leather bag. Rashmi had to hurry back to her office. They came out together and went to the IUS office. In the evening Rashmi made arrangements for Sukanta to sleep in her own hostel, which had been utilised earlier for many other Festival participants.

Sukanta spent about a month in Prague after his return from Yugoslavia. He taught Rashmi many things and helped her start her work in the office. He spent his time reading, and writing articles on his experiences in Europe for 'The Student' and the 'People's Age'. Those days Yugoslavia was counted among the foremost People's Democracies. All the youth brigades which had returned from Belgrade came back greatly inspired. They talked about the sacrifices of the Yugoslav youth in the anti-fascist war and the high esteem in which the people held their 'beloved leader' Marshal Tito, who had successfully organised the partisan movement against the German fascists. The youth teams were given beautifully bound books, pictorial albums, boxes and pieces of Yugoslav embroidery as gifts by the Yugoslav national youth organisation. Sukanta wrote articles also based on his interviews with Chinese, Malayan and African youth leaders.

In the evenings Rashmi and Sukanta went visiting several beautiful sites. They saw the ancient and majestic monuments of old Prague, the President's castle, the National Theatre, the Charles' University. The Institute of Oriental Languages and the Masaryk College. They spent many evenings in the spacious parks of Prague and visited the homes of some Czechoslovak friends. Winter had set in and it got dark soon. By now they had got used to Czech food—'polovki' (soup), 'lorcky-porky' (hot sausages) with mustard, and so on. They had also learnt a few useful expressions like 'Yukui vam' (Thank you), 'Prosim' (Please), 'indiski' (Indian), 'mladi' (youth). Most of the Festival participants had left. But still, there were a few foreign youth here and there.

One morning Sukanta and Rashmi visited a friend's house near Masaryk College. The place was simply but tastefully done up with multicoloured *daris*, paintings and flowers. On their return, Rashmi said, "I wish I could live with you in such a house. I shall make our home beautiful even if we are made to lead camp life in a small tent." But Rashmi sadly said that such a thing may not ever prove possible.

During the days of his stay in Prague Sukanta naturally expected a definite commitment, a promise from Rashmi, about their future relationship. But Rashmi would always reply, "I can make no commitment. You should go home and get married to your friend. I can only tell you this much that I shall love you always and ever, whatever may happen." Once she even said, "You may try to forget me." Sukanta was hurt and asked, "Can you forget me, Rashmi?" Rashmi's eyes filled with tears. She had no reply.

Sitting in a restaurant, Sukanta said to Rashmi one day, "Your decision is not correct. You must think it over again, or else, if you don't change your mind, it is better that we shall not

even write to each other." Rashmi was once again puzzled and perturbed. She could not visualise a situation forcing upon her another break. At such times she would just answer back, "This is just not possible." And so time passed.

The few months in Prague had brought Sukanta and Rashmi very close to each other. Both were conscious of the fast-approaching day when they would have to part once again, but both also knew that it was impossible for them to break with each other again. In her great sense of consideration to Sukanta's friend, Rashmi was making the biggest sacrifice of their common happiness, a happiness that she had felt and enjoyed for barely two months, after a long period of suffering.

Partition had brought untold sufferings to the people of India and Pakistan. Sukanta received disturbing news about his family. He was upset for many days. One afternoon, sitting on a bench in a park, they both discussed the situation back home. Sukanta's family had been forced to migrate from Lyallpur to Delhi. Full news about his sisters had not been received. He wrote to Prem Sagar Gupta of Delhi to do his best to help his family. This friend kept Sukanta regularly informed about the condition and the whereabouts of his family. Still Sukanta kept worrying about his family and, in particular, about his sisters.

Sukanta leaves for India

After a few days, news was received from London that Sukanta's passage to India had been booked by boat. The time came for Sukanta to leave Prague. The night before his departure Rashmi went out shopping with him. They bought some attractive gifts for Sukanta's sisters and brothers. Rashmi took them with her and spent an hour arranging and packing his bags. They arranged to start for the station early next morning.

In the morning Sukanta could not get a tram in time and got a little late. However, they both rushed to the station. Navin Patel was also there to see Sukanta off. On the station they had very little time to be together. As the train started, Rashmi hurriedly slipped a letter in Sukanta's pocket. In the envelope there was a photograph of Rashmi which she had put in along with a brief message pledging her love for Sukanta. Tears welled up in Rashmi's eyes as the train carried him away and far off from her.

Czechoslovakia, Rashmi's temporary home

After Sukanta left, everything appeared sad and lonely to Rashmi. However, she made a serious effort to adapt herself to the living conditions in Prague, which was now her temporary home.

Czechoslovakia is a country inhabited by two nationalities—the Czechs and the Slovaks. It is the country where the Second World War started after the infamous Munich Pact with Hitler signed by the British Prime Minister Chamberlain. The Germans occupied Czechoslovakia in 1939 without meeting much resistance. In Bohemia, Moravia and Slovakia a puppet regime was set up. But the majority of the people were implacably opposed to the rule of the oppressors. For six long years, from 1939 to 1945, an underground resistance movement, led in the main by the communists, was conducted by the people. Russians, Ukrainians, Frenchmen and Yugoslavs fought in Czechoslovakia, and thousands of them perished during the war.

The country was liberated in 1945. The incredible cruelty of the Hitlerites is still remembered with fear and hatred by the people. The German concentration camps, with their heaps of emaciated corpses, are a byword among the common folk.

It was in this country that Rashmi experienced her first European winter. She felt terribly cold and uncomfortable, but she stuck to her Indian dress. A pair of black flannel shoes and socks helped to keep her warm. The days were very short, and Rashmi found it strange to work in electric lights at four in the afternoon. By 5 p.m. it would get dark. But Prague looked cheerful and bright with its coloured lights. Rashmi found it most interesting to see the first snowfall. Sometimes the snow was knee-deep, but it was not yet so cold. By November Rashmi began to

feel the extreme cold weather. The IUS offices were centrally heated, but the house where Rashmi lived was not. For days together the sky was overcast, and in the mornings and evenings there was a mist. The less crowded parts of the city looked dull and quiet and nature presented a dark and endlessly deep chilly pit with the moon, a red crescent, hanging motionless. Once Rashmi waited for a tram at the station for a full 30 minutes in such weather and felt terribly afraid to find herself quite alone, without a single other soul.

The IUS office did not have a strong leadership. There was no Soviet representative at the IUS headquarters for many months. Rashmi and her friends were surprised that there was hardly any one in the organisation's centre who could understand and appreciate colonial problems. The Press and Information Department was manned by British students. Once, the editor of the News Bulletin, an English student, so badly distorted the words of an article submitted by Rashmi and her Asian friends for publication that they were simply furious.

Rashmi headed the 'Bureau of Students Fighting Against Colonialism', together with Sugiono, the Indonesian representative. Peter Chien of the NSFC (China) also assisted them in their work. The bureau soon brought out its own cyclostyled bulletin. Rashmi worked hard to prepare regular material for the bulletin. The first occasion for which the Bulletin prepared was for popularisation of the cause of colonial youth during the International Students' Week. Rashmi went to give talks on the condition of education in her country in many schools and colleges. Tom Madden, the English student, accompanied her together with Joseph Grohman, the IUS President. Tom always insisted on the use of very restrained language in the portrayal of colonial conditions. Hot and passionate words while describing the freedom struggle by colonial representatives in the IUS often made him nervous, since he himself belonged to a metropolitan country. Rashmi's speeches were studded with statistical facts to prove how 200 years of British rule had made any genuine development of education impossible in India. In her speeches, she stressed that the British policy of suppression of national languages and imposition of English as the medium of instruction obstructed the growth of education in the country. The failure to lay greater stress on technical and vocational education, governed by the desire of the imperialists to keep India industrially backward, had resulted in very few technical and industrial institutions in the country. High tuition fees, expensive textbooks and other educational equipment made it impossible for children of the poor to acquire education. The existence of 85% illiteracy in the country proved the bankruptcy of British educational policy. The Indian students inspired by patriotism, took a leading part in the freedom struggle. Rashmi used to describe proudly the role of the Indian students during the RIN Revolt, in the movement demanding the release of the INA prisoners and in the great upsurge of freedom struggle leading up to the events of 1947, when India gained her national independence.

Once, after a public meeting, Rashmi, T. Grohman and T. Madden were invited to a restaurant by the organisers. After tea and refreshments, they were offered drinks. Rashmi sat quietly as the others started drinking and proposing toasts. She was amazed at their capacity to go on drinking. The English student felt dizzy and could not keep company with the Czechoslovak youth. After a while he had to be physically removed as he had become completely drunk. Being the only girl among so many boys, and with her conservative background, Rashmi felt an utter disgust and asked her hosts to let her retire to her apartment. It was difficult for her to appreciate the love of the Europeans, and particularly the continental people, for alcohol which she thought made intelligent people appear stupid, when they were in a drunken state.

It was during this period that Carmel Brickman, who had recently returned from the South East Asian Conference, became acquainted with Rashmi. She as well as Ben Wienfield, the progressive American, were closer to the Asian representatives than other members of the IUS Secretariat. Carmel was a Jewish girl with big eyes, and with her deep understanding of the colonial people, she soon won the confidence of the Asians. Once, during the ISW, in the bitter winter of Prague, Rashmi, Carmel, Ben, Sugiono, Peter Chien and some others spent a whole day together. Starting from the Wenceslas Square, they travelled to the wide roads of old Prague and

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had their dinner in a corner restaurant near the President's Castle. They could all speak English and this helped them to understand each other. Rashmi felt happy that day after a long time of her stay in a state of loneliness and homesickness. Her ignorance of Czech language, which acted as a barrier between the foreigners and the native youth, was a big handicap. So the IUS started lessons in Czech language.

Soon, Reddy, Ranga Rao and the Jambhekars arrived in Prague. Rashmi was happy, and the Indians started cooking their own food. Ranga Rao took a room in the same building in which Rashmi lived and constantly helped her. The Jambhekars settled down in a hotel at first, but they shifted to a proper flat with a kitchen and bathroom after a month. They had come for a short visit to Europe, but soon found that they could not return home with the conditions prevailing in the country at that time. Ranga Rao had come to study, and Reddy for treatment of polio, which had made him physically disabled. Rashmi treated these South Indian boys like her own brothers and discussed all her difficulties with them. The Jambhekars' flat became the centre of their evening activities. They went to the Czechoslovak theatre very often. For some time Navin Patel and P. Mukherjee, representatives of 'Forum', stayed in Prague. However, both left the country soon and joined the students' group in England. Navin Patel, once a Party member in Bombay, was caught in a case of smuggling foreign currency. The hotel 'Ambassador', where all the foreigners assembled, was the place from where such unhealthy activities were conducted. P. Mukherjee, a friend of Navin Patel, also came under suspicion of the Czech police, to the extent that he was once arrested and interrogated for quite a few hours. As a result the Indian group in Prague was forced to break off all friendly relations with them. Smuggling and black marketing, perhaps not considered serious offences elsewhere, were regarded as serious crimes in the People's Democracies.

Rashmi soon grew conscious of the strict atmosphere round her. Whenever they had to post a letter to India, they were required to show their passports and then present their letter to the postmaster. They had to move about extremely cautiously. Rashmi was convinced at that time that all the security measures and restrictions imposed on foreigners were absolutely necessary in the set up of the country with capitalist encirclement all around and spies and pro-imperialist elements active. There was strict rationing in Prague. Every one had food coupons and even those dining in hotels and restaurants were required to produce coupons. In winter Rashmi simply longed for green vegetables as potatoes and onions were the only vegetables available. Rashmi often went with the IUS staff to eat at the canteen. She liked the Czech soups and sausages, but sometimes, when the entire meal in the canteen consisted of sweet dumplings with just a sprinkling of powdered cheese, she went to distant restaurants outside for lunch.

By 1949 the IUS started its own canteen which supplied both tasty and nourishing food at cheaper rates. The Indians sometimes bought noodles, boiled and ate them to get the taste of rice, which they missed very much. Butter was rationed, and so was tea. A packet of butter was all one could get, and people mostly managed their cooking with margarine. Rashmi took both tea and coffee without milk.

November 7, Anniversary of Russian Revolution

The entire Executive Committee of the IUS was invited to a reception at the Soviet Embassy on the occasion of the anniversary of the Russian Revolution. After a grand dinner party, a programme of songs and dances was organised in the big embassy hall. Rashmi noticed that President Gottwald and several other leaders of the government were present in the hall. She sang the famous song on Lenin written by Sajjad Zaheer:

Muluk rus mein manai raha ik Leynin va ka nam bhayya, Leynin va ka nam

(There lived a man in the land of Rus, Brother, and he was called Lenin, and he was called Lenin...)

The song went off extremely well and everyone started dancing to its tune. Little did Rashmi dream that she would attend a reception and dance in the same hall with the leaders of the Czechoslovak Government. Here an interesting incident took place.

One by one the student and youth leaders from different countries bowed before Rashmi, inviting her for a dance. Tom Madden, Ben Wienfield, and many others came to her. As she did not know how to dance, she declined to dance with them all. Then, suddenly, appeared Mr. Trouval of the French NUS, a non-communist and a person the IUS was interested in keeping within the Executive Committee despite all the differences. Tactically, thought Rashmi, it would be wrong to refuse him. She expressed her inability to dance with him too as she did not know how to dance, but he said he would teach her. So Rashmi was obliged to accept his proposal. The next day she had to face several angry faces, as all those she had declined to dance with felt annoyed and insulted! Rashmi had to spend quite some time trying to explain her conduct to all these people. She realised that it was wrong of her to have accepted the invitation to dance from any one after declining to dance with the others. It was discourteous and unkind, but then it was due only to her complete lack of knowledge of European customs. Later, Rashmi tried to learn dancing. She understood that here in all social gatherings a person felt completely isolated if he or she did not know how to dance. But Rashmi enjoyed joining only in folk dances. She now took part in collective dancing together with many other young girls and boys.

Presentation of Material for Stalingrad Youth Memorial

Immediately on her arrival, Rashmi had contacted the Soviet Embassy and had requested them to receive the material she had brought from India for the Stalingrad Youth Memorial. A large black trunk was bought specially to carry the material. After several visits to the embassy, a representative of the embassy came to the IUS office. Rashmi took him to her hostel and gave him all the material. Beautiful photographs by Sunil Janah, sketches by Chittaprosad, paintings by Amrita Shergill, Hebbar and many other Indian artists, Indian saris done in gold and silver, beautiful pieces of coloured silk, specimens of handicrafts, and an *anat* (an ornament) made of pure gold—these were some of the gifts collected in India after much effort. In later years, Rashmi thought that it would have been better, had these gifts been presented to the Soviet youth delegation attending the Festival, by the Indian delegation. She felt very sad to part with such a treasure, but she also felt a sense of pride when she thought that these gifts would be placed in some museum hall in Moscow in a building dedicated to the youth who had given their lives defending the 'City of Steel'—Stalingrad, during the war. Unfortunately, receipt of the material was never acknowledged officially. Rashmi felt happy when she learnt from a friend who had visited Moscow, that the material was exhibited in the museum halls in the city.

First visit to Switzerland

Rashmi started work in the Students' Relief Department first, and later took charge of the Colonial Bureau. Soon she was told that she was required to go to Switzerland to attend a meeting of the World Students' Relief. Mr Bouchet (a Frenchman), Tom Madden and Rashmi started together. On reaching the Swiss border Rashmi discovered to her great dismay that as she had a British Indian passport, a separate Swiss visa was needed. She had not bothered to secure this visa as every one had told her in Prague that a British Indian passport was treated like a British passport in the West, and no Swiss visa was necessary for that. But this turned out to be wrong. It was 8 p.m. when Rashmi was told to get off her train. Rashmi was greatly worried as she was all alone in a foreign territory. Tom even started giving her instructions about how she should come the next day. However, the Railway authorities got in touch with the concerned office on telephone and managed to secure a permit for her before the departure of the train. Rashmi felt a great sense of relief. The next morning they were all in Geneva.

Rashmi had heard from Mrs. Bose (a teacher in the Ganga Ram School in Lahore, who was a grand daughter of Bipin Chandra Pal) that Switzerland is a country where one literally walks on a bed of flowers. So Rashmi was very happy and excited to see this country. It was really beautiful. The town itself, as well as the mountainous background, the wide roads as also the green trees on all sides lent it unrivalled charm.

The atmosphere in the WSR office was very different. They treated the IUS representatives with respect, but had definite mental reservations when they talked with them. Among the three of them, Mr. Bouchet commanded their confidence the most. Here, Rashmi met Mr. Malcolm Adivesiah, an Indian from the South, who had a leading position in the organisation. He had conducted several study courses and seminars in Asia and organised successful relief projects in Madras and other parts of India with the help of the WSR and ISS. The team of people in the WSR office gave an impression of hard-working persons. There was a well-established library and an appreciably large staff. Rashmi attended the Executive meeting of the WSR on behalf of the IUS, which was its constituent member. A lot of controversy raged over proposals to help students of displaced areas. They were called 'displaced persons,' having escaped from Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia and so on and found asylum in countries of Western Europe. Many of them lived in Switzerland too, a traditionally neutral country. It was clear that these people had run away from their own countries due to ideological differences with the governments of these countries. The West, obviously, wooed them and showed undue sympathy for them.

After the meeting Rashmi made some purchases with the Swiss currency that was left over. She bought a watch, a red cardigan and tea. Watches were very cheap in Switzerland. Rashmi liked Swiss food immensely. Thus ended her first visit to Switzerland.

After ISW, Christmas was the next important occasion for festivity. Together with it, came the New Year celebrations. All foreign students were invited by some Czech family or the other on Christmas day. Rashmi too was invited to a friend's home. She celebrated the day with a happy family. In a neat and tidy room she saw the Xmas tree, brightly illuminated with coloured electric bulbs. There was dinner with specially cooked fish. Afterwards, there was a little celebration and every one got Xmas gifts from the tree. Rashmi noticed that Xmas and New Year were complete national holidays for the people. After about 7 p.m. no trams ran on the roads. Cinema houses also closed down, as everyone wanted to celebrate these days at home with their families.

On January 1, 1948 Peter Chien came to offer Rashmi his New Year greetings and presented her a beautiful doll. It was only then that Rashmi learnt that Peter was a Christian. People spent their evenings eating and dancing merrily and drinking parties lasted until the middle of the night. The only means of transport available was the taxi. People came back home as late as 2 a.m. to 4 a.m.

Thus ended Rashmi's first Xmas in Europe.

The Oriental Institute in Prague

Rashmi visited the Oriental Institute of the Academy of Sciences in Prague along with her friend Dusan and others. The Institute was functioning under the able guidance of Prof. Lesny, an academician and a scholar specialising in Indian studies. It published a magazine called 'The New Orient'.

Rashmi learnt from Prof. Lesny that he personally knew poet Rabindra Nath Tagore and had also met Subhas Bose when he visited Czechoslovakia during the war. Prof. Lesny had visited India twice in the nineteen-twenties and had lectured at Shanti Niketan in Bengal. He had written a book on Buddhism after several years of study of the subject.

During the previous ten years important research work had been done at the Oriental Institute. Dusan Zbavitel (born in 1925), later became the head of the Indology Department of the Institute and wrote the first text-book of Bengali in Czechslovakia. Dusan specialised in the

field of Bengali literature. Similarly, Kamil Zvelebil (born in 1927), became a Corresponding Member of the Academy of Tamil Culture in Madras and was working in the field of Dravidian philology.

The most popular Indian writer in Czechoslovakia at that time was Tagore. Over 20 of his books had been published in Czech translation. Several translations from Bengali literature, mostly done by Dusan, had also appeared. Other books included Prem Chand's 'Godan', Krishan Chander's short stories and Iqbal's '*Paigham-e-mashriq*.'

Apart from these, ancient classics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, Kali Das' 'Abhijnyanashakuntalam' and 'Malavikagnimitram' had also been translated into Czech.

The Oriental Institute of Prague was also training in Indian languages numerous technicians and trade representatives who came to India every year. Rashmi and her friends were presented a file of 'The New Orient,' printed on beautiful art paper. Rashmi came to realise here that students of the Institute knew Tagore much better than she did, and she found it difficult to discuss his writings with them. A strong desire grew in her to read more about her country, Indian literature and Indian people. But it was difficult at that time to find books in English in Prague. Even newspapers in English were difficult to obtain.