

Remembering a father's love

ELORA SHEHABUDDIN
 April 15, 2016, marked the first death anniversary of Ambassador K.M. Shehabuddin. The first Bengali diplomat, along with his colleague Amjadul Huq, to declare allegiance to the new nation of Bangladesh, on April 6, 1971 in New Delhi, Shehabuddin was posthumously given the Independence Award in Dhaka last month.

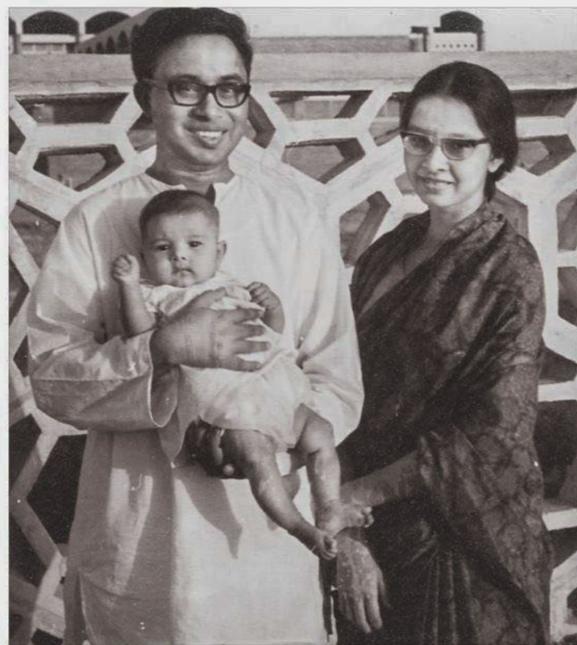


PHOTO COURTESY: ELORA SHEHABUDDIN

Elora with Mr and Mrs Shehabuddin

How does one distill into a few paragraphs the memories and emotions and love of a shared lifetime? Friends who have also suffered a deep loss have spoken to us about vignettes, "movie clips" if you will, that will carry us into the future. It is to those memories that my mother, my three sisters, and I return time and again. The clips are often quite different—my youngest sister was born 16 years after I was—but the love, warmth, and support we received from our father, Papa, Abbu, was constant.

My parents were in Islamabad at the Pakistan Foreign Service headquarters, waiting to be sent out on their first overseas posting, when I was born. More significantly, I was born on March 26, which in three years would mark the birth of our nation. I have very hazy memories of New Delhi, a hastily canceled birthday party, relatives who came across the border and stayed with us, and the new red, green, and gold flag in the garden.

From Delhi, our parents, my younger sister Farah, and I went to Paris. My father, who had studied history at Dhaka University, was imbued with an infectious love of life, travel, and good food. That meant we learned not only about the capital cities in which he was stationed but we were able to explore and appreciate surrounding sites, cities, and histories. In those early years in Paris, he drove us everywhere, from Salzburg

to London, in his white VW Beetle. He filled those trips by telling us which king, queen, or artist did what to whom and where, and by singing along with us our newly-learned French songs.

From Paris we moved to Beirut, which Farah and I absolutely loved, because it was beautiful and the food was delicious, and also—I have to confess—because, with the civil war underway, we could not and did not attend school regularly. We were too young to appreciate the dangers and concerns that preoccupied our parents. At night, when the fighting got loud and scary, we would sit in the dark and Abbu would regale us with more historical tales. When he finally closed down the embassy in Beirut and moved to Dhaka—for Farah and me, our first time actually living in Bangladesh—he brought that same enthusiasm to showing us

around Dhaka and, on most school vacations, our home district of Chittagong, and everything in between. He wanted us to love his village, where he had spent so much of his childhood, as much as he did, and to remember, always, that that was our *bari*, our place of origin. I have joyous memories of freely walking around the village and the fields surrounding it with cousins, of visiting and eating with relatives even though I didn't always know how exactly we were related. We saw several of these long-lost cousins again when we took Abbu back to the village for his janaza, as he had requested, and were grateful for those happy memories. During that sorrowful trip, we were also overwhelmed by our conversations with the many men and women who told us, as they lined up to pay their respects to our father, how our parents had quietly helped

them in so many ways over the years.

With his older brother his only sibling, my father had grown up in an unusually small family for his generation and he and my uncle were very close to their mother. Perhaps as a result, he was extremely sensitive to the needs of women around him, even more so of course when he was eventually outnumbered 5 to 1 at home! He would be the first to recognise that he couldn't have walked out of the Pakistan High Commission in April 1971 without the support and encouragement of our mother. Every time he was transferred to a new country, they would worry about what educational opportunities would be available for "the girls." When the time came, they listened politely to relatives and friends concerned about the impropriety and dangers in sending me, then a teenager, from Warsaw (which in the 1980s had no English-language schools beyond the 8th grade) to boarding school in England, and

later to college in the US, but they did what they were confident was right. As we grew up, he took immense pride in his four daughters' accomplishments and comforted us through our disappointments.

When I got married (to a historian from Lebanon/Palestine!) and had children, my father was delighted to have a son-in-law and another man in the house. And he adored his grandchildren. "What do they like to eat?" "What shall I get them from the market?" "How are they doing at school?" When they were still babies, he sang them his one lullaby. It was one with which he had comforted all four of us as well as many of our cousins, the Chatgaya song "Do, do, Lalar ma..." My son memorised the song as a toddler (so often had he heard it!) but would ignore all our pleas and insist on singing it only for his Nana.

From across the seas, my father continued to worry about me, his eldest, and how I was juggling home, family, teaching, and writ-

ing. He asked me about my current book project every time we spoke, to the point that I would be careful to call only after I'd had a productive writing spell. Last April, I'd been busy with the usual end-of-semester madness and had not spent as much time on the book, but I did call him for his birthday. He was in a really good mood, cheered by the attention and company organised by my younger sisters in Dhaka. Just a few days later, he left us all without warning.

I now look at the next generation—his grandchildren, my children—and am grateful that he got to spend time with them every summer. And I take comfort in the knowledge that they carry bits of him in them and will, I hope, grow up with his best qualities of love, compassion, integrity, generosity, and humility.

The writer is Associate Professor of Humanities and Political Science at Rice University.

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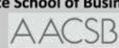
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 Sunday, 8 May 2016

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