

Sonni Pillai
(Demised - 18th June 2007)



What has fallen on me is indeed a melancholic duty to say a few words in tribute to the memory of my friend, the late Mr Sonni Pillai, for whom the bell tolled on the 18th June 2007. His name had been for a few years, at the top of the seniority list of Advocates and Solicitors in Malaya, having been called to the English Bar from Gray's Inn on the 2nd February 1951.

He was probably best known as the internationally recognized Secretary of Penang City Hall which position he held for almost 2 decades from the late 50s. In those days the Mayor of Penang was elected. Mayors came and went but Sonni Pillai provided continuity in the efficient running of the City of Penang in effect as its *de facto* Mayor as it were.

Sonni Pillai was born a Muslim, of a Muslim Burmese mother. His father, Mr Pillai was an Advocate and Solicitor practising in Penang. Sonni was on a holiday in Ceylon, as it then was, when the Japanese invaded Malaya and he was marooned in Ceylon for the duration of the Japanese occupation of Malaya. He studied in University in Ceylon majoring in English Literature, working his way through college *inter alia* as a newspaper reporter. After the war, he went to England and read law from Gray's Inn. Among his contemporaries in London who became his close friends were people like the late Tun Abdul Razak, the late Tan Sri Taib Andak and he was particularly close to his co-Penangite, the late Justice Tan Sri Eusoffe Abdoolcader. On his return to Malaya in 1951, he joined his father's firm and sometime later with some of his contemporaries established a firm called Pillai, Lim, Lee and Huang which became a well-known legal firm in Penang with a branch in Kota Bharu. It was sometime later that he moved on to take up the position as Secretary of the Penang City Hall. In the early 70s; Sonni moved on to the United States to teach. Later he had a teaching stint in the Hague, Holland, before accepting a senior position in legal drafting in Hong Kong. He returned to Malaysia in the mid 70s and worked with me and the late Mr Ng Ek Teong and the late Tan Sri C Selvarajah in Messrs Ng Ek Teong & Partners. Later, in semi-retirement he opened the firm of Sonni Pillal and Associates, largely attending to uncontested banking and conveyancing

work. His wife Puan Zarina Din, after she qualified as a lawyer, joined his practice as an associate.

Sonni Pillai was taken ill on the 18th June 2007 and peacefully passed on in the early afternoon of that day. He is survived by his wife, Puan Zarina Din, his only sibling, his sister Ms Sybil Curtis who lives in the United States of America, and a whole host of friends who knew him to be a warm, very learned and highly respected member of the community.

With the background of English Literature, from his days in University in Ceylon, he kept in close touch and developed his knowledge and interest in English Literature to such an extent that he was recognized by most, if not all of his friends, as the most knowledgeable person, outside academia, in respect of English Literature. He also had a good command of Latin, good enough for him to point out errors in the poems that the late Tan Sri Eusoffe Abdoolcader used to publish in the newspapers in tribute to his Demised wife on each anniversary of her passing on. That he could do that, demonstrated both his knowledge of Latin and the close affectionate relationship he had with the late Judge.

Sonni Pillai had a dry sense of humour and had a huge reservoir of anecdotes based on his many active years going back to his student days, on which reservoir he tapped making conversations with him scintillating. What was said by one of the learned members of the Bar, some years ago, in moving a reference, a tribute to another one of my friends at the Bar, has equal application to Sonni Pillai: having a conversation with him was a feast and his ready humorous wit was the wine for the feast!

Sonni was a kind, affectionate and a very warm and likeable person, a good man.

Shakespeare In "As You Like It" talks of,

*"Finding tongues in trees
Books In rushing brooks
Sermons in stones
And good In everything"*

What more, the life of a good man. Sonni Pillai's life was indeed a sermon, a full useful life that we should be thankful for and that should inspire us, we who are left behind.

He has now gone, leaving that sermon that was his life, leaving behind good memories for all who knew him.

In respect of his passing on, on the 18th June 2007, we can say,

*"and so dies another wave on the shores of life whispering its brief story into
the sands of time
And a gentle spirit has crossed the bar to land on a silent shore
Where the billows break no more nor the tempest roar".*

But those of us who were close to him should not grieve in that,

*"The souls of the righteous
Are in the hands of God
There shall no evil come to them
There they are at peace".*

My Lord, on behalf of the Bar, I tender our deepest condolences to Puan Zarina Din and to Ms Sybil Curtis. My Lord, I respectfully move that a copy of these proceedings be deposited in the archives of this Court and copy of it be extended to each, Puan Zarina Din and Ms Sybil Curtis

Honorable Retired Judge Dato' V.C. George