

Pia & Srini – In Fond Memory, with great respect and much love

by Jayashri Ramchandran & Dr. N. Ramchandran (Bangalore, 29 April 2022)

It was way back in 1981 when we had landed in Hamburg to work for a small company. We did not know many people except our German colleagues. One day we received a call from the Indian Consul General who wanted to know if we could teach spoken Tamil to an Italian lady, a professor of music and lover of Indian classical music. We readily agreed. Soon thereafter came about our fortuitous, unforgettable meeting with the most wonderful, kind hearted couple we had ever known in our lives - Pia and Srini. Pia didn't waste any time in asking us specifically if we could teach her spoken Tamil of the "Madras Brahmins", because that is what Srini spoke with his folks and the version most of the Madras Carnatic music folks spoke, and Pia's beloved Veena and Music teacher Rajeshwari spoke.

Pia's reaction when we had said yes was typical of her – her eyes began sparkling and her beautifully sculpted and animated face brightened and we were rewarded with the laughter of pure joy that was so genuine and which only Pia was capable of. Srini was of course grinning shyly and was also apologising in advance as was his wont "for the trouble and time". The wonderful couple invited us over to Reinbek where they lived. There was no looking back for us. We were regular visitors at Hermann-Löns-Str. 6.

As we so fondly recall, there were not many spoken Tamil sessions at all. Instead, Jayashri was asked to carry her Violin to Reinbek on every occasion and we ended up spending high-quality time in Pia's Music room and library where Pia played the Veena and an out-of-practice Jayashri accompanied her on the Violin, with considerable trepidation. Srini was a constant presence and his music critique and erudite comments were proffered so gently as only he could. There was then the compulsory sit-down session in the living room. If it was tea time, there would be herbal tea and Pia's favourite cake which she was very proud of baking with whole-meal or, if it had been lunch time, it had to be penne or spaghetti with a simple topping of pureed tomatoes, fresh basil leaves and parmesan – cooked with genuine Neapolitan love and therefore, tastier than in any fancy restaurant.

The living room at Hermann-Löns-Str. was another unforgettable feature – it had shelves on every wall and even in the spaces above the windows crammed with books. Of course in every room, including the washrooms, available wall spaces were full of books. Srini was an acclaimed professor of Indology & linguistics and his erudition in Sanskrit, Tamil, English, German, Italian, Germanistics and so on knew no bounds. He collected Doctorates like trophies. Such was his erudition and

learning in subjects as varied as Darwin, Freud, Mahatma Gandhi, India's freedom-struggle, the environment and non-violence than he could discuss Jane Goodall, Carl Sagan, Karl Marx, Gandhi and Nehru with equal facility. "Ahimsa" for him meant not token veganism, but, as we experienced on every visit, following it with a passion – before he allowed our car to enter through the front gate, he would be standing there with a tray and ready to hand-pick tiny worms and other insects from the car's path. It was the same routine as we reversed to drive back home. Pia herself was a great and accomplished scholar, with publications to her name and a music historian par excellence in the Western classical and Indian classical traditions.

Both Pia and Srinii were humanists, extraordinarily kind-hearted and loving human beings. Their trust in the goodness of other human beings and the love and care with which they nurtured their friendships always touched a cord in us. Sometimes we even thought that perhaps Srinii was the more impractical dreamer and Pia had her feet on the ground, although in an innocent kind of way. Through them ensued our contacts to some of the most genuinely good human beings we had got to know – Ludwig Pesch is a shining example, and through him, Mieke. And Prof. Bahadur Singh, Christine, et al. Pia was instrumental in introducing Carnatic musicians to Hamburg's ethnic music scene. She invited many of them – the complete ensemble stayed at her house in Reinbek and we also had the great honour of housing some of them and organising small music sessions and gatherings.

How do we remember Pia and Srinii, this genuinely kind and beautiful couple? With a smile on our face, love in our hearts, and tears welling up in our eyes in gratitude that ordinary mortals like us have had the good fortune to have got to know such a great couple who were like our surrogate parents in Germany.

If we have to write an epitaph to Pia and Srinii, our contribution would be:
Value the great gift of life, rejoice in living it without guile or pretence, like you both exemplified so gloriously in your lives, dwelling less on the negatives and looking forward to preserving the future – to borrow partly from Dian Fossey.