



Line of fire

At just 17, Niromi de Soyza became a *fighter* for the *TAMIL TIGERS*. Years later, she shares her *extraordinary* experience with Jane Albert. Styled by Philippa Brophy. Photographed by Hugh Stewart.

HAIR: DIANE GORGEVSKI, MAKE-UP: CHARLIE KELLY, SHOT ON LOCATION AT THE ROYAL BOTANIC GARDEN, SYDNEY

Niromi de Soyza wears a Bottega Veneta dress and belt, Tiffany & Co. ring and bracelet, Alexander McQueen shoes, from Cosmopolitan Shoes. Fashion details last pages.

At first glance, Niromi de Soyza* is just like any other mum you might meet, one who juggles the school run with running a household in an affluent area of north Sydney. But behind this peaceful suburban life lies an extraordinary story of AK-47s, cyanide capsules and death, fighting alongside rebel soldiers in the jungles of Sri Lanka. In her previous life, de Soyza was a Tamil Tiger.

It was 1987 when de Soyza's life changed forever. Until then she had enjoyed a relatively privileged upbringing as a teenager in Sri Lanka. Born into a middle-class family in the picturesque, forested city of Kandy, de Soyza and her sister attended the local private school. During the week she dutifully studied and on weekends she would hang out with her best friend Ajanthi, sharing secrets and dreaming about life beyond the school gate.

And then one day, with no warning, the then-17-year-old de Soyza ran away from home and took up arms, becoming a teenage soldier with the militant Tamil Tigers separatists, and taking her best friend with her. For the next 12 months she ignored the desperate pleas of her family, choosing instead to live and fight alongside the feared guerrilla insurgents. During that year she would renounce everything she was and pledge allegiance to the Tigers, becoming adept at carrying and firing an AK-47, sacrificing the luxuries and comforts of home for the deprivations of the Sri Lankan jungle in a desperate bid to achieve independence for herself and her people. She would also witness unspeakable tragedies, which would ultimately cause her to lose faith in everything she knew and held dear.

"The life of a guerrilla sounds idealistic but in reality it's brutal, it's soul-destroying," de Soyza says over a pot of tea at home.

Many Australians would have no concept of what could make a healthy, well-to-do teenager so desperate as to take up arms and fight an unwinnable war. Indeed, it is hard to reconcile the petite, elegantly dressed and highly educated mother of two who sits before me today with the image of an armed, hard-nosed rebel fighter. De Soyza's is a compelling, humbling and sad story.

Her peaceful life as a 45-year-old wife and mother in Sydney today is a world away from the death and destruction that punctuated the first half of her life. De Soyza was born in the late 1960s to Tamil parents. Her engineer father hailed from Jaffna, a northern Tamil town, while her mother's family were Indian Tamils brought to Sri Lanka by the British to run tea plantations. De Soyza had a happy childhood but one marked by the increasingly violent tension between the Sinhalese government and the minority Tamils, who were being pushed out and who were demanding an independent homeland.

In 1977, the first of a series of bloody uprisings led de Soyza's parents to send the then-eight-year-old to go and live with her grandmother in Jaffna. There she would be able to continue school

in preparation for university. Children were deliberately kept ignorant about the political situation, but de Soyza's childhood memories are peppered with stories of gunshots, shellings and death, and for de Soyza – an insatiable reader – it all became very real the day government forces burnt down her beloved Jaffna library.

In 1983 another, bigger, more fearsome round of riots known as Black July saw countless innocent Tamils killed in many parts of the island and survivors turning up in Jaffna with nothing more than the clothes on their backs. Death was now a reality. "People would greet each other by saying: 'Oh, you're still alive,'" says de Soyza. "The mother of one of the girls in my class was killed when a shell fell on her. [The girl] missed school for a week then came back, and we wouldn't make a big deal out of it. The following week somebody else would be dead."

As the fighting and death toll escalated, de Soyza became increasingly agitated by the injustice of the situation and her inability to do anything. Women were expected to quietly study, gain a profession, and marry. Not de Soyza. "From a young age injustice was something I couldn't stand," she says. "I'm quite an idealist and I remember [Mexican revolutionary Emiliano Zapata] saying: 'It's better to die standing than live on your knees' and I thought sooner or later I would be dead because the war was so bad. So I figured if you're going to be dead you may as well have done something, instead of dying a victim. And that was my option."

A number of Tamil independence groups were gaining traction, and in 1987 when de Soyza caught wind of news the Tamil Tigers were recruiting female soldiers, she didn't think twice. She grabbed Ajanthi and a bag of books and composed a hastily written note to her family explaining she was leaving to fight for freedom and asking them not to pursue her.

"For me it had been a slow build-up of all those things, the thought that you couldn't let these people die for nothing, that I had to do something," she says. "But sure enough I didn't think of the effect it would have on my family. I thought: 'I was doing it for them, why didn't they understand?' It took a long time to sink in."

De Soyza recalls her pride at receiving her first weapon and precious, deadly cyanide capsule, the symbol of the Tigers, that was worn around the neck and was to be ingested at the first sign of capture. But the reality was a far cry from her idealistic dreams. The year 1987 proved to be one of the bloodiest. Indian peacekeeping forces had arrived, but, rather than work on a peaceful solution, the Tigers determined to fight both the Sinhalese and the Indians. They were subsequently driven from Jaffna into the dank jungle, where food was scarce, shelter nonexistent and malaria a daily reality. De Soyza had no change of clothes – not even a spare pair of underwear – no footwear and barely enough food to keep her alive. The romance soon dissipated.

As time went on doubt began to gnaw at her. What began as simple hypocrisy – her beloved Tigers' commitment to the mantra against smoking, drinking and relationships was blatantly ignored by some – became deceit when their leader publicly surrendered arms in

a gesture of peace, only to privately stockpile more. There was also death within the ranks. She and hundreds of others watched as her friend Thileepan was chosen to go on a hunger strike, resulting in his death. "I was shocked. I kept thinking something would happen and he'd be saved. Sitting there crying in front of him and letting him slowly die was so wrong. And yet all of us did it."

Then came the day she will never forget. At dawn on December 23, 1987, de Soyza and her small unit were ambushed by the military. In a blur of machine-gun fire, hand grenades, jeeps, tanks and a helicopter gunship, 13 of the 22 freedom fighters were killed. Her father figure, Muralie, shot dead. Her friend Gandhi, blown sky high when a grenade landed on his head, leaving her drenched in his blood and tissue. And her beloved Ajanthi, killed by a single bullet to the head, right in front of her. Her best friend, her allies, her reason for fighting, were wiped out in an instant.

"Everything was gone. You spend 24/7 with these people, sharing what little food you have, caring for each other; you become family. And then suddenly half of them are gone," she says, tears rolling down her cheeks. "You realise it's not like in the movies, when you have a chance to say those final words. They're just dead and you're never going to get a chance to say goodbye to them ... For a while every night I'd recite their names over and over again saying: 'I'm thinking of you, you're not gone, you're not forgotten.'"

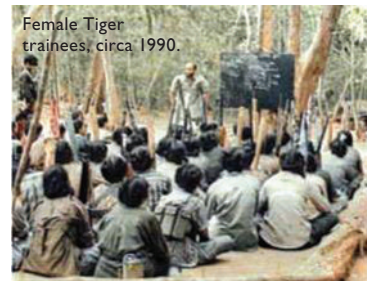
De Soyza was emotionally, physically and mentally wrecked. A friend and fellow Tiger recognised the state she was in and helped her escape the jungle. She was overwhelmed to discover her family had forgiven her and was waiting for her with open arms. She was 18 years old but had already lived a lifetime.

Two decades later the jungle, the fighting, the malnutrition are a lifetime away. Now de Soyza is happily ensconced in Sydney, where she arrived as a refugee and later settled with her Australian husband, young daughters and her own extended family, it's as though it all happened to someone else. This bright, positive, engaging woman seems at odds with that troubled teen. But the memory is never far from the surface.

"Ajanthi's family came to see me straight after I left [the jungle]. I [imagined] they thought I was a failure because here am I thinking I'm doing the right thing, but having to accept the fact I've failed. I thought wrong. I've upset so many people, I've hurt so many people and especially Ajanthi's family," de Soyza says, weeping continually. "Because they're not going to have her back and how am I going to put it all together, and I can't do that."

Rather than dwell on that nightmarish chapter, she poured her story into a book, *Tamil Tigress*, which carries an overwhelmingly clear anti-war message. What began as diary entries scribbled night after night at boarding school in India where she was sent once she'd regained her strength, is now being adapted into an Australian film, *Tigress*, with a script written by Jane Hampson.

In a sign of how far things have come, the book has since been released internationally, including in Sri Lanka earlier this year, translated into both Tamil and Sinhalese and launched by the commander of the army. De Soyza was not aware of the launch



Female Tiger trainees, circa 1990.



Tamil Tigresses at a leader's funeral in October 1986.

"I FIGURED IF YOU'RE GOING TO BE DEAD, YOU MAY AS WELL HAVE DONE SOMETHING"

HUGH STEWART



Burberry Prorsum dress, scarf and belt. On right arm: Tiffany & Co. bracelet and ring.

and in fact has returned only once to Sri Lanka, under her married name, and not to the cities of her childhood. Instead she's trying to put her past to a positive end. The science and law graduate is studying a masters in education, and regularly gives author talks at schools, universities and book clubs. Her message? The futility of war and humans' ability for transformation.

De Soyza also visits Sri Lankan refugees at the Villawood Immigration Detention Centre near Sydney to raise awareness about their situation and the right to freedom of all Sri Lankan refugees in detention; meanwhile, her mother works as an interpreter in detention centres around Australia.

For de Soyza, her war is not over. Was it all worth it? "By the time the book was published the Tigers were wiped out," she says. "It made me realise the cause was still there. And it wasn't worth the price we paid. Parents lost their children, wives lost their husbands, a whole generation was wiped out from the Tamil community. That's what war does." But redemption is a word she believes in strongly. "Everyone has something they've done in their past that's shaped them to be who they are now. You make the choice to be the adult you are, from that experience." She muses: "If I could do it – have a life full of violence – and turn myself around, then ..."

*Niromi de Soyza is a *nom de plume*.