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RETHINKING AND RE-REMEMBERING PRISON: REIFICATION, AGENCY AND LIMINALITY[1]

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Abstract.
This article is both a narrative of my experiences as a political prisoner and a reflection on how this understanding has changed over time. The experiences span a period of forty years, insofar as their impact continues to be part of my psychological being. I relate these encounters within the framework of three main categories. Reification, that is, the attempt by prison authorities to turn prisoners into things, which is apparently, applied in general to common law prisoners. Agency, meaning that the political prisoner or potential prisoner has elements of subjective capacity in varying degrees even in the most adverse conditions, such as undergoing torture. The authorities cannot completely control the political prisoners, or may even cede a great deal to them. Liminality is used to connote the notion of my life being in continuous transition from one state of being, free but potentially in prison, in prison but potentially or definitely to be released, though release is subject to the possibility of re-arrest or other dangers. While the article relates my specific experiences it is intended to signify the capacity of people to choose elements of their existence in other difficult situations.

"Prison. The word terrifies. No other image affects the daily life of each and every citizen the way the idea of prison does. The architectural brutality of the prison establishes it as a presence in every person's mind-no matter what one's gender, ethnicity, social position or economic class. .... Prisons carry a no-nonsense public relations message." (Sanders, 2005: 24).

This work is written 35 years after my first period of imprisonment and 22 years after the second period was completed, in 1988. My book **Inside Apartheid's Prison** (2001), was unlike many others in the prison memoirs genre, written after some time had elapsed after release. I was more concerned to relate my own consciousness of the experience, rather than many of its details. But writing again now, 9 years after that book, I have had time not only to relate much of what happened differently, illustrating yet again that the same set of events may be given different meanings over time. This

[1] An earlier version of this article was originally presented at a seminar on 11 March 2010, UNISA, Pretoria. The respondent to Raymond Suttner on that occasion was Garth Stevens from the University of the Witwatersrand, and his response to Suttner follows.

article attempts to frame the experiences within analytical categories that may contribute towards understanding and coping with traumas inside and possibly beyond prison. In the case of some concepts, like liminality, I was not aware of the term that I now use nor did I use reification and agency very frequently, if at all.

My belief is that the common understanding of being a political prisoner as “heroic suffering” fails to differentiate between varying modes of dealing with these experiences. While I describe what I see as the supposedly dominant way of coping, my own understanding may not have been shared by many others. I was in fact always with a minority of prisoners, white people and often on my own. I try to make sense of a range of experiences but without pretending that this analysis corresponds to that of others or their subjective states at any given time. The reality is that many have not attempted to make sense of their experiences. They tend to talk about these in anecdotal terms, but possibly unconsciously avoiding confronting the trauma.

Insofar as this covers the same experiences as **Inside Apartheid’s Prison**, it does not attempt to provide the same level of detail, and some questions that readers have asked me to elaborate on are already in the book and would not, in my view add to the explanatory value that this article seeks to achieve.

Having been in prison, is not something in the past tense, it is still with me and is continually in my daily experience. Every time someone rings the doorbell loudly for a long period, it evokes a flashback. I associate banging and knocking and ringing with unwanted sounds and that period of my life, when it was not my own. There could suddenly as a civilian or a prisoner be a series of events that preceded a search or an arrest or a move or some such unwanted, anxiety provoking emotion. The notion of being a prisoner connotes a range of things, one of which is a sense of insecurity of location, that you can be taken away at any moment, moved or even released. Whenever they called me in prison they would not say why or to where I was going. I would ask whether I should take my toilet paper because the answer would give an indication of a big move –to another prison, release or another part of the prison. They do not answer questions about what is going to happen when they take you as a thing from one place to another.

This reification of the prisoner is essentially what characterises imprisonment. For a non-political prisoner, their mode of survival is to conform to this and they make some gains through that situation, compromising young warders and then getting some concessions from them. Without spending too much time on this because it is not my experience, a typical young warder has to ensure that the passage is clean and polished well for inspection by the head of the prison. If the big gangsters do not cooperate that will not happen. They ply the low-earning warder with tea and biscuits or other things and he enters a relationship of mutual dependence. They and he are aware that they now have the power to land the warder in trouble and soon he is smuggling dagga (cannabis). One day a person may be a warder, the next he may appear as a prisoner.

Being a political prisoner, possibly not for all, but for me meant being a representative of a long line of freedom fighters. The phrase I had in my head is “head held high”. I drew on this tradition in order to strengthen myself under torture or other ill-treatment or

on trial. Or, in my training I had been told, that if put on trial I “would know what to do”, that is, stand proudly and defend the struggle.

In prison, if you have prepared or learnt to deal with the situation, you can adapt. Where they take something away or deny you something important there is always a mode of surviving after retreating to another, smaller territory or conditions with less of the comforts of life. They can stop certain food or many other items. Then you make as much pleasure as you can from others, from what is left or what is improvised in place of what has been taken.

One day they raided our books and took huge numbers, accumulated between the 1960s and the early 1980s. At one point prisoners who were “A group” were allowed to buy three books a month. When I became "A group" after about five years (under what criteria I did not and still do not know) I placed my first order for books which I never received and then the scheme was cancelled. But unwittingly over the years they had allowed in quite a few progressive books either through that scheme or via the University of South Africa (UNISA), for example, the **Socialist Register**, which had an article by Joe Slovo on armed struggle or the **Grundrisse** of Marx and various works of Cabral, Althusser, Gramsci and others, from UNISA, which we copied out word for word. At first we were only allowed to study undergraduate degrees and I had done a BA so that I had to register for Library science which had some BA subjects in the degree. I then had to justify, sometimes successfully, why I ordered 20th century books when the history course stopped somewhere around 16th century.

To have large numbers of these books taken away was a great trauma. It did not affect all that we prized because they tended to work by title, so that **Selected Works** sounded harmless or **Register** sounded like keys’ register even if it was **Socialist Register** it was fine with them. They did not look to see if the author was Thatcher or Lenin. They worked by title. Gramsci was unknown, though it was better to get his works in a collection rather than in **Prison notebooks**, something that may have been seen as containing criticism of their prison. But life went on and we adapted and we continued with a lot of other permissible or contraband books. There was also the prison library but its cataloguing was indecipherable, with no list of authors and any title beginning with “The” listed under T and **The Tempest** described as “science fiction”.

There are a lot of aspects of my existence today that derive from this period. Even the positive things, like consistent work on research, are of an extreme kind related to modes of survival. The consistency of exercise, every day without the need for someone to push me is a hangover from the second period “inside” where physical exercise was more important than intellectual work as a means of survival.

To clarify, I was inside twice. In the first period, I was a detainee, then awaiting trial and then sentenced prisoner- totalling eight years. The second time was a state of emergency detainee, held for 27 months June 1986 to September 1988, 18 of these in solitary because all other whites had been released. My release was conditional, under house arrest, reporting twice a day to the police and forced to stay in my home from 6 pm to 6 am with a range of other limitations. This required a form of self-policing in order to remember to report on time. In this sense, the psychological effects of imprisonment were not removed, although their form was altered. There was also a potential danger of assassination. The day I moved into a house, David Webster, a

scholar and activist, was assassinated. Consequently, while free I had to take different routes to report, because regular habits facilitate any planned attack. I also had to conceal engagement in any political activity since this was disallowed.

But in August 1989 I defied restrictions and went to Zimbabwe for the Harare declaration on negotiations and since I was already in trouble, I thought I might as well make it big trouble for myself and the regime as well through public interventions and went on a "world tour". I returned in late January 1990, with the potentiality of prosecution but said that I regarded myself as free. A few days later this was in fact legally the case with [former President F W] de Klerk's announcement of February 2 1990, *inter alia*, lifting restrictions.

PRISON AS A CONTINUOUS PHENOMENON.

But the prison experience is a continuous phenomenon in another way, in that I prepared for it before it happened and I anticipated it – correctly – after I was first released and it remains part of my psychological make up now that I am "free". That is something I have only thought of recently. From the time I committed myself to work underground I also prepared for arrest and handling torture. I feared what I had seen of others betraying their comrades and especially those who became state witnesses.

In a sense, when I was detained I entered a familiar environment. I had long read and imagined it, and the coarse way of speaking to me and the threat and actual violence always present. This was a world without any sense of common humanity between the torturers and me. On their side there was an unbending determination to extract information that I largely succeeded in withholding.

But every detention is different, as we experts say. All who have been detained or imprisoned talk about it endlessly and are in a sense experts, because everyone's experience is unique. I had resisted writing about my experience because it was so short, a "parking ticket", compared with Mandela. A trauma counsellor said to me, that if you are robbed you do not deny a sense of injury because you were not murdered. The liberation movement inculcated a sense of modesty – writing anonymously or under pseudonyms – and an unwillingness to "show off" or dwell on your own achievements or suffering. In general, however, the comrades with whom I worked paid little attention to "the personal". In retrospect my sense is that most, including myself were not sufficiently aware of ourselves as damaged individuals, nor were many interested in hearing about it, insofar as anyone did voice such feelings.

There is a tendency to be very repressed and not express fears and anxieties and not to use the word "I" but merely describe how the fuse did not light for sabotage or as Madiba [Nelson Mandela] would say, "I was strengthened by my comrades" and similar phrases in a depersonalised way. This is not to say that I have shaken off all elements of this repression.

I was always with white prisoners, though I had some illegal contact with black political prisoners on occasions, especially during emergency detention. In my experience the white political prisoners, who were small in number, were wracked by internal tension. We would never have chosen to be with one another, in certain cases. The state brought us together. There were generational, experiential and ideological differences.

Elaine Unterhalter (2000: cf 157-8) makes an insightful comment on how black and white (mainly male) autobiographies relate the history of the struggle in a stereotypical manner, and it cannot simply be dismissed as boring. The reason for such rehearsing of the history was to locate the person as part of this wider tradition of liberation, and I too saw myself as part of this tradition. They consequently relate a lot of the history preceding their detention. When I envisaged torture and was being tortured with electric shocks, I remembered who had gone before me and that I was at once a human being who ought not to die, but I was a small part of a wider struggle, involving millions who had died or would die or were being tortured at the same time as I was. This may have been romantic, in that I had illusions of the qualities of some of the comrades in the struggle on whom I thought I was modelling myself, but there were nevertheless some who confirmed this exemplary character and were worthy of such admiration or emulation.

LIMINALITY.

Liminality refers to thresholds between one state of being and another, rites of passage from boyhood to manhood, getting married and so on. (Turner, 1969: cf chapters 3 & 4; Rapport & Overing, 2004: 229-232). I see myself as always having been in a liminal state in relation to prison - on the way there, there but not quite there in detention or awaiting trial, partly on the road to release, inside but not with ''the others'', with the others and fairly settled, but in the last few years, on the threshold of release from prison, but nevertheless entering freedom with the sense that I could easily lose it. In the last period of a fixed term of imprisonment, the liminality affects what you say or do in relation to other prisoners, who were staying behind and I did not want to upset them by dwelling on what good things might have been ahead of me. Underground is especially liminal because you are acting politically while they are consciously trying to hunt you down. There is a liminal state, which the other side consciously seeks to bring to an end or to transform into another form of liminality.

Liminality is a state of being neither here nor there, in this case free and unfree or potentially one or the other. The state of indefinite detention is especially a variant of that phenomenon in that you think release will happen - but while seeing others cross that threshold, even specially released in front of you, you do not know when you will pass from where you are to where you “must” or ought to be some day. It has greater uncertainty than other liminal states in that liminality is generally associated with rituals that are regularised (as in a marriage or release from serving a sentence) whereas indefinite detention has no distinct rites of passage, year after year of renewal of the emergency can pass.

The court case is another liminal phase, which may be handled in various ways. Some adopted the approach of the common law prisoners and said they were misled or pleaded for mercy. I understood political prisoners to be defiant, following the example of Mandela and Bram Fischer, the Afrikaner aristocrat turned revolutionary. In so doing one robs the police of their day of triumph.

This is a liminal moment where one has agency. In my case I was young and I may have increased the sentence I received by making no apologies and going to the prison with my fist in the air. I was single- minded.

A young Raymond Suttner leaving the Durban Supreme Court after sentencing in November 1975. Source: Gisèle Wulfson.

TORTURE.

I had spent a lot of time preparing for detention and potential torture and expected it. I did not want to be tortured when I was too weary so that I would not know what was happening. In that situation weariness may lead to loss of control. Prema Naidoo (a member of a distinguished struggle family, whose forebears were close to Gandhi) was tortured for 10 days and eventually could not have full control of his consciousness and then told them about things they had not asked. He emerged with scars all over his body.

There is nothing inevitable about what happens in torture situations. You may die, because they do not know enough about electricity or cannot tell that you are about to die for other reasons or they intend to kill you and then sometimes construct a situation

and throw you out of the window or you do jump in order to end the pain and avoid betraying others.

The question of agency is always at the centre of my rethinking of prison. Even under torture I had what they wanted and it was up to me to release or not release it. Only I had what they wanted. It was not inevitable to tell anything or everything. And they depended on my response to their acts of violence. Their mode of agency was first talking, then mainly electric shocks but also other physical pain. I did not believe in the theory that you just say nothing. I believe that you can stall or if too arrogant can get so badly beaten that you lose control of what you say. I first told them about people outside the country and other matters that did not interest them greatly.

My main job was to protect two people who had recently been recruited, on I think inadequate advice. They were inexperienced but the rule was that if anyone was arrested the rest should disappear, meaning then, get out of the country. I had then to ensure that they knew I was arrested because my absence would not be immediately discovered. One was not expected to hold out indefinitely and thus impair one's capacity through continual beatings. So I told the security police of hiding some of my material in the University of Natal, as it was then known, where I was a senior lecturer in law. If they raided the university, everyone would know I was inside. In other words, torture did not rob me of all rationality, though I imagine that over time it did impair elements of my judgment.

GOLDEN AGE OF PRISON.

Something that relates more specifically to memory and post traumatic stress is that despite having been fairly severely tortured in my pre-trial detention in 1975, I remembered my first eight years in prison or initially remembered these as a type of golden age. The second period was hard and I could see the evidence in my state of mind. But I never signed anything renouncing any organisation or form of struggle. I do not thereby impugn the motives or reasons that made others "sign" for a range of reasons, facing different conditions. I agree with Jean-Paul Sartre that we have to choose ourselves, and I cannot choose for another person, what they should do in particular situations. (Sartre, 1974.)

Somehow there was a reservoir of strength preventing certain routes to be taken, I nevertheless felt the effects much more the second time and acknowledged them more readily. I did not like being "called to the front" (to see the Head of the Prison or some unknown person for some unknown reason), or have Security Police arrive at the end of each year of the State of Emergency, to re-detain me. But I would give them a run for their money. They would ask: "are you satisfied?" And I would say, of course not. And they would say why and I would say because this is completely illegal. They would ask why and I would say that will require consultations with my lawyer. Then they would leave, saying, "that one will be here to switch off the lights at the end of the emergency".

I think that while I believe I remember the details of both these experiences, I repressed the loss suffered in the first experience. I was not married nor in a relationship, what are obvious and present costs, of which one is continually reminded by letters and visits and spaces in between these and longings for such emotional contacts. This is unlike the general loss of freedom which is a condition to which one adapts, which is the daily

environment within which one exists. I did not evaluate what torture had meant, moving directly from sentencing to prison, without any counselling for a long time after release. I also may still not have a clear conception of the meaning of a seven and a half year sentence, mostly without newspapers and in a small group which created huge tensions unlike what could be more easily defused in a big group as on Robben Island. There the differences were mainly political as I understand it, but ours were partly political but mainly personal.

I have never really admitted that ten years is a long time to lose in a professional career. I started teaching at the age of 22 in 1968 and have held positions at four universities in law, African studies and other areas. Every time I was arrested or took decisions about involvement, I forfeited early doctorates (on two occasions) or potential early promotion to relatively high positions. I always stayed just too short a time to get a sabbatical or a promotion that may have been due. I have only said or written that now. I have never spoken of experiencing losses that set me back in various ways. So I have not got loss of memory, but I still may not have a clear understanding of or consciously expressed the trauma and losses I experienced. In some respects, because my self-understanding is still that of a revolutionary (a word that I see connoting moral obligations) I remain ill at ease about voicing my own sacrifices.

My understanding changes. But there is not erasure as far as I can see but defects in my processing the experience. I do not need hypnosis or some other method to remember that I was tortured, as some do. My understanding and the level of importance I attach to some experiences, like my initial torture which I more or less shrugged off, has changed. I have a clearer appreciation of the after effects and I had “the habits of prison or underground” in the three years interregnum before my second arrest and it remained a way of being, a furtiveness that actually continued to be appropriate in the situation. Even today when it is no longer as appropriate, I still react if there is a car outside my house or someone drives behind my car for some time. These are ingrained approaches to potential danger that have not disappeared.

Before my second arrest I was underground for a while and had to practise various modes of disguise and other techniques to avoid arrest in the first relatively short emergency. So there was a degree of continuity between pre-arrest in 1975 and after release where I was in a liminal state before the second arrest.

ARRESTED AGAIN.

One thing that was very different about my second spell was that it had no definite end and this meant that because I landed up being the only white in the country who remained after about a year, that I correctly concluded that I must prepare for the worst, (and hope for the best). Now I had been in a relationship and my partner could not have that perspective and continued hoping for a release in time for Christmas or whatever rumour was circulating. I could not encourage that because my coping depended on not setting myself up for disappointments and relating to an indefinite stay. Ultimately I had to encourage her to find another relationship, hoping it would not happen, but it did. Often when one makes such decisions, morally correct though they may be, one hopes that they will not be acted out. Unfortunately for me it did happen and that was painful.

Regrettably, this was not something that many or any of my comrades could relate to, after release. It is, gender scholars will say, part of a wider question of masculinities (most of my comrades were men) and attribution of reason and not emotion to males. In general, one was simply expected to take one's place back in the ranks and that is one of the reasons why I think there are a lot of people who are apparently lazy, but in fact, suffer from post-traumatic stress syndrome. It is only now that I am looking back and thinking that someone who worked with me and was described in one variant of South African English as "lazy to work" may in fact have suffered from this syndrome. Few of us had any awareness of this psychological state though it must have inhabited many of the psyches of people in ANC headquarters and structures.

I was complicit in a situation where we had no idea of needing treatment. When various people were released from prison, we would sit down with them and advise them to work in one or other sector. We and they expected this to happen immediately. In fact, many received a mandate as to what they should do from their prison comrades, especially on Robben Island, which had to be reconciled with possibly different perceptions outside. None of us reflected on anyone's psychological state.

As indicated, 18 months of my State of Emergency detention were spent in solitary. I had not expected it to be very difficult because my pre-trial detention was five months on my own. That had not seemed so bad. When I was again arrested in 1986 I first went to John Vorster Square which was a terrible place, though when one young warder was on his own, I could persuade him to allow me out into a court yard to get some air. Or once when my lawyer gave me fruit, I asked to be able to take some to various other prisoners and he said *he* would, I said no *I* wanted to do so myself. So he said you are section X and they are section X, ok. Insofar as individuals held under the same provisions were legally required to have no contact, it made no sense but he let me do so.

I was suddenly moved to Diepkloof, where I was at first on my own, though from the beginning I could easily have contact with the mainly short term common law prisoners. For some reason there had been a change since my first period inside. One was now allowed to have money and buy things from a tuck shop in the prison, various unhealthy items which nevertheless compensated for being in a cell. I used to open my window and if I inhaled I could get high on all the dagga they were smoking.

From the beginning I used my money to smuggle newspapers, which were at first not allowed. Secretly a warder who had right wing inclinations would smuggle indirectly to me, asking nothing in return. I did not know this from him, but from one of the gang leaders who were there. I have been asked "why?" I think that some of the warders could not understand how someone like *me*, who apparently had good opportunities in life, was in prison and at a human level they tried to help me. This was seldom the case with specially trained warders, who observed the rules strictly in prisons intended specifically for political prisoners**.**

I had a routine smuggling system throughout my period in Diepkloof. It was mainly in exchange for cash which the bandiete (common law prisoners) would use for buying dagga. When I was allowed newspapers legally I still offered money to those who had helped me and they could not understand that I wanted nothing in return. The ethos of their trade as criminals was very different from ours. "Ours" meaning that I was with

others, including two priests for up to 9 months. I also smuggled personal or political letters in and out hidden inside cardboard file covers, for carrying study material. The message was written on very thin paper.

As in my period as a sentenced prisoner being in a small group had its tensions. I remember that we received a message that we should go on a hunger strike for 1-10 days. This was very common on the Island but not so common for white political prisoners.

I thought because I was in leadership, I should volunteer for 10 days. Another comrade, for some existential reason felt the same. Others got quite angry and accused us of blackmailing them. In prison one can get some of the good things of life and one is reluctant to part with them. I was very loath to fast even considering the notorious character of Diepkloof food, but I had to. We got various messages in the meantime which reduced the number of days required until it was a symbolic single day. The warders did not know this and when we did not take our food the “drama factor” created panic. In prison there is a routine and continuity is sacred for both prisoners and the prison command. The very fact that this was disrupted rather than the character of the action threw the authorities into panic. This anxiety lasted until we took our food the next day and they were visibly relaxed.

I have mentioned that I had reconciled myself to being inside indefinitely. Some did not and cherished hopes that were repeatedly dashed, although all went out long before me, often released in front of my cell. I remember how this lack of preoccupation with release improved my standing as a table tennis player. Initially, someone could defeat me with his left hand; in the end I could beat him, both using right hands because my spirit was still strong. I did not like prison but my calculations or expectations were correct.

When everyone else had gone there was no one to talk to except the warders and prisoners which was not allowed but happened. I became more and more lethargic though I did so much running that I had to have an operation on my knee and can no longer run without risking injury. Then I did a range of other exercises.

I got by with the warders and officers who could not understand why I was not released. Some believed the Security Police wanted to “break me”.

After a while I sought permission to have a pet bird. I had seen how the sentenced prisoners had such pets. They allowed me a love bird, a parakeet, not out of kindness, but because they feared I was being psychologically affected and they would be blamed. I called the bird “jail bird” or JB and trained it by letting it bite my hand and soon it became very attached and would sit under my track suit and if I sought to get it out, it would bite. If it heard that I was eating a granola bar, it would emerge to eat out of my mouth. I think what one misses in solitary is not merely affection towards oneself but expressing affection. JB was the recipient of my affection.

Raymond with his pet bird – JB. Source: Gisèle Wulfsohn, 1988

In some ways having this bird and training it was something that the warders could understand about me, as opposed to why I was in jail and had gained nothing. They did not understand what I was doing with all the books, initially disallowed, and my politics. But a bird was within their world. It was something the other prisoners and the warders could identify with and talk about. One officer also had birds and I asked him whether they could talk at all and he said, *"Hulle praat fokkol"*, [They say fuckall], as if that was a merit. Mine did not talk but it smelt like a baby, something in deep contrast to the prison environment.

SURVIVING.

I am classified as an intellectual and one of the points of interest for me has been the intellectual side of struggle. But I have also or primarily been involved because of a sense of personal, existential commitment that I wish to make my life in a particular way.

I placed weight on being a white and saw my involvement as connecting me to something from which I had been excluded – normalising my life insofar as it could be, in the sense that it was abnormal under apartheid for whites, to put their life at the disposal of the liberation struggle. Bram Fischer was my role model. It may sound naïve but I did not count on being alive and hoped to be sufficiently effective to do so much

that if captured I could land up on the gallows. I remember acting this out when I cashed in life insurance for a pittance in the 1980s insurrectionary period.

Now this personal commitment has practical consequences. When you are alone in the cell or with your interrogators your knowledge of ANC strategies and tactics, Marxism or religious texts is insufficient to survive. I have seen people who were very bold on public platforms collapse when facing the prospect of indefinite prison and separation from their lover. [Mahatma] Gandhi, Mandela and [Chief Albert] Luthuli all said one must prepare oneself for whatever one advocates that others do. (cf Benson, 1985: 144-5; Mandela, 1994: 360; Chatterjee, 2007: chapter 4; Suttner, 2010). By this I mean as Mandela said if you are ready to die, you must mean that, you must be psychologically prepared when it happens. I prepared myself to be ready.

The second time I went in I had been out of jail for three years, though underground for about six months of that time. I had become a little afraid of being re-detained and tortured again (as one comrade assured me would happen). When I was arrested in the second detention, starting June 1986 I did feel afraid – until they were rude to me when I asked a question. Then I thought “fuck you” and felt a surge of strength returning to me, some of what had got me through the previous time, returned.

WHO CONTROLS THE SITUATION?

The key issue for me is who controls the prison? To the outsider this may seem absurd and it may appear obvious that the prison officials control it. For the bandiet, the ordinary criminal, it is clear, as the warders say in the beginning “you are nothing, you do not even have a number” and when you have a number you become something. Now we handled the situation differently, obviously the question of self-agency is very constrained when you are blindfolded and tortured, though even here you can have some control over the flow of information and disinformation.

In Pretoria Prison, as sentenced prisoners, we never ran if they called us nor did we polish the floors. The image I have of other prisons is that of prisoners “taxi-ing” as it is called, sliding from one side of the passage to the other, on wrapped up blankets, making them shine like a mirror before inspection. We said the floors were Marley tiles and you do not polish them and that was accepted. Often we had much more “institutional memory” than the authorities. In general, we did various things, at one stage gardening and woodwork, but then it was stopped. Then we did our own thing in one part of the prison and the warders left us alone most of the time. Sometimes we had to wake them up because of the imminent arrival of an officer and they would invariably say they were not asleep, just resting their eyes.

In general we dictated the pace of events, and all the warders had to do was lock us up or let us out and count us which despite our small numbers they often got wrong.

On the other hand, the head of our prison most of the time was an old man, Captain Schnepel and in our eyes he was more powerful than any Tsar. We constantly listened to rumours or discussed speculation of his impending departure. When he was away there was a tacit agreement between the warders and ourselves that we would practise peaceful coexistence. We would lie down and sunbathe while the warders also relaxed.

The problem with the Captain is that we needed his permission for certain things and although I was not our chief spokesperson, I often entered into negotiations with him. Every Wednesday was the official day to make your requests and complaints, but in practice we also did so ad hoc. His common response was “you people never take no for an answer”, and I would respond “but what is the reason?” and he would say “because *I* have decided”, then I would ask but what is the reason and he would repeat that he had decided. Finally, in exasperation he would say, if you do not understand me in English I will say it in Afrikaans. “*Ek* het besluit!” Sometimes we won, sometimes we lost.

Sometimes he felt we betrayed him by calling in our lawyer, when he had done something unreasonable, for example there were dogs in our yard and sometimes a neurotic dog would bark the whole night and usually they would remove that one and replace it with another, but one time he would not budge and he presumably got reprimanded by Headquarters. They did not want lawyers around. He tried to inculcate a sense that we owed him something and would descend into a maudlin mode when we challenged his decisions, beyond the prison walls, to the Commissioner of Prisons or sought our lawyers.

Apparently they recorded conversations in the cells and the captain was frustrated in not being able to give vent to his feelings about what we were saying about him. One day, however, when we requested something he responded “now you want something but it is the fucking old captain this and the fucking old captain that”.

When I was on my own in emergency detention, my previous experience was a source of respect. There is nothing that counts more in the eyes of a prison official than someone who has already been there and they soon find that out if they try tricks like giving dirty blankets. Someone who knows the ropes does not stand for that and when I got to Diepkloof around six weeks after detention and I said that I would not use them, until they were medically inspected. They brought new blankets in abundance.

In the states of emergency others came in and left, but even when I was on my own again, I still had a list of things that the warder who guarded me had to do every day and the head of the prison would know this and instruct new warders to get my list and do those things. I would not wait for them to bring medicine but insist on us walking to the hospital, so that I could get a bit of fresh prison air and greet people (something quite out of order but tolerated in a situation where they feared my capacity for drama, something that would break the prison tranquillity).

One of the politically conservative warders explained that with the others he just said *fokkof*, get into your cells, but with me it is the United Nations, the Supreme Court and who knows what else.

The physical power may lie with the authorities but the political prisoners can create breaches of the peace, bring in lawyers, hold hunger strikes, and make credible complaints, demand that the rules be observed, and refuse to sign for receipt of some communications. I would never sign *even that I had received something*, that is, to “take note”, if I did not like the contents of the communication. I would ignore the explanation that all I was doing was acknowledging receipt. I would say that it is so unreasonable that I cannot put my signature to such an acknowledgement. The

bureaucrat abhors a vacuum like a missing signature. One wise young right wing man who guarded me found a solution and simply forged my signature.

When I was in solitary the second time, I was not in a good state in the long run. A psychiatrist confirmed or diagnosed before I acknowledged that I was depressed and prescribed various medication for sleep interruptions and other symptoms. I had much more literature than had been the case when I served a sentence, and in fact an extra cell to accommodate some of the literature. But I found as the months in solitary passed that depression made survival dependent on exercise and I came out physically more muscular than before, but emotionally damaged. I had a resistance to acknowledging that I was depressed. Somehow I had not understood it except as a "weakness" and was woefully ignorant until it descended on and enveloped me. While the exercise proved more effective in combating this, I could not do much intellectual work.

POLICE AND CHANGE.

Over the decade between my first and second arrest, the character of resistance and also that of repression changed. What was striking "inside" was the degree of sophistication of certain security police in the 1980s. In general the reason given for my continued detention was that I had advocated popular power through writings, speeches and other methods, which they tried to connect to necklacing (the killing of alleged informers through burning them alive with a rubber tyre around their necks).

I enjoyed the flattering suggestion that holding me would enable them to bring the state of emergency more speedily to an end.

I was questioned for days by Major Oosthuizen and Lt Brookbanks (who had been uncovered as a spy at Rhodes University). They had read everything I had written and remembered better than I had. They openly taped the sessions and it was quite interesting.

While I would rather have been out, it was stimulating to argue over meanings which I think they wanted to lead towards treasonable interpretations. They were right in a sense in that I had worked for insurrection, but I was sufficiently experienced to know how to deal with argument. Argument is argument and you cannot argue with electric shocks on your genitals and *klaps* (blows).

In police custody, there was the capacity to do with you what they wanted in some respects. They could take you unexpectedly to some unknown and undisclosed place. This was a major destabilising factor and denial of agency. For that I can find no counterweight. I have no idea why I found myself verbally abused in a Hillbrow police cell after my knee operation or in Sandton police station sitting with a man having a model of an AK on his wall. Many things in detention may be calculated to shake your equilibrium through simply being unexpected, even if having no concrete meaning. Cumulatively such experiences may contribute to a person unravelling. Certainly although I managed to maintain clarity about what I was and was not to do, I was shaken by these sudden moves.

CYNICISM ABOUT THE STRUGGLE.

I am writing of a very different period of the struggle in the sense that when we joined we could only anticipate difficulty, we anticipated one day being assaulted and jailed and/or killed. Initially, one had access to toothpaste and bread and jam (the ingredients of prison pudding as it happens) and terrible coffee or *rooibos* tea (including the branches) in a large pot. There was no thought in my mind and I thought in the minds of others, of parastatals or shares. We had tensions and different personalities clashed, and some may have been more anti-social than others. But in general there was little to gain in a material sense from taking this route, being in the struggle and a political prisoner or a detainee. Father Albert Nolan (1988: cf 158, 160-1) celebrated the struggle as a phenomenon which provided solidarity and unity and strengthened participants. I have subsequently learnt that the degree of sacrifice/benefits and anticipation of later benefits may have been uneven in the pre-1990 period. Some appear to have readied themselves for a much better life than before.

We have seen in the last decade or more how some who have emerged with great reputations from the struggle have compromised their integrity, left jobs under a shadow, been convicted of crimes or been accused of crimes and not faced courts, as in the case of President Jacob Zuma. In the main, the ANC must bear most of the blame (and I do not absolve myself since I was in leadership some of this period, though not directly involved in such decisions) in that only a few went to the promised land of parliament and well paid jobs. Some of those who had skills that were prized in the struggle, which could lead to blowing up SASOL, the oil from coal refinery, and later deeds were not put into specific skills training programmes and they may have used their military skills for armed robberies and other acts of lawlessness. Certainly there are definite cases of this happening.

But those who suffered imprisonment are generally respected by black communities and other progressives. I have learnt that if you have earned respect it is not something that just remains. How you conduct yourself every day must reinforce the initial reasons for respect. That is why I am very careful not to fall into temptation in what I do and do not do in my life, that I do not enter shady deals and I pay VAT and do not bribe traffic cops.

That some have lapsed, some who were very brave in their time and left jobs under a cloud has bred a certain cynicism amongst others, as if this justifies, retrospectively, their not having involved themselves in the resistance. I am not judging those who did not risk their lives. However, I do believe that what many of us tried to do was important. I am proud to have played a small part in creating an opening for democratic and transformational development, even if these have gone off course or may have done so. I am proud that I have had the opportunity to associate myself with the freedom struggle, because it was something that linked me to the fate of the oppressed majority. In later years I met rogues but I also met exemplary individuals like Chris Hani, Walter Sisulu and Oliver Tambo. I had a close but tempestuous relationship with Nelson Mandela. I think I irritated him greatly by disagreements but unlike some others, he never lost his personal warmth and remained close, though I have not seen him for some years.

PRISON AND REPRESSION.

Prisons are fearsome places, in the first place because one is going into some unknown danger. There is nothing akin to what one knows outside. This is plain threatening and often that is not a metaphor, but prison officials or police act out violence on a person who is held. So the imagery of the prison is in some ways as powerful as the experience.

But there is a tension between the intentions to reify, to treat a prisoner as a thing and the *powers* of the prisoner. I have indicated this with regard to many or most political prisoners, but in the case of common law prisoners, gangsters comprise a competing power centre and their notions may well be hegemonic in many/most prisons. But the gangsters wielded open power, in a minor prison like Diepkloof, not meant for "hardened criminals".

I imagine that there is always latent violence in any repressive institution. I myself feared this after torture and had considerable anxiety about it resuming. But as a political prisoner, once I found myself in a prison, I did not fear violence, except in very exceptional cases. For the bandiete it was of course different, with gangster rule.

This account is intended to speak to notions that people have of coping requiring exceptional qualities. That may be true, but we need to unpack this and in so doing we see that prison is a place where individuals may exercise some agency, limited by the overall environment, but there is always an element of choice. One cannot determine release, unless one offers something to the other side, but given that one is inside, one need not be powerless. That speaks to a range of situations in ordinary life, where we grapple with ways of being and acting. Inside or outside, there is agency or surrender of agency.

POLITICS AND PSYCHOLOGY OF STRUGGLE.

The struggle has had multiple impacts at different levels in the lives of participants. Liberation struggles are historically the domain of the "brave", defined in macho, masculinist terms. Resistance to psychotherapy may have been informed by a number of considerations although some operated at subterranean levels.

Of central relevance is the culture of trust and secrecy which was important not only for the survival of one person but could jeopardise the security of many people, compromise sensitive operations and undermine the objectives of a particular campaign or intervention. Speaking openly about anxieties to a therapist was simply not possible without compromising the basis on which underground units had to operate.

But even without these constraints, masculinist notions of bravery and strength do suppress willingness to be vulnerable. It may not have been possible for many of us to be involved as deeply in struggle while also being debriefed on complex psychological traumas and fully interrogating their implications. It is possible that refusing "to go there" even if made as a conscious decision was in fact what enabled people to continue in extreme conditions. For some, lifting the lid could have had dire consequences on their capacity to focus on the dangers they confronted.

The question, then is what we do about this now? How do we “normalise” ourselves and lift the burden we carry? Even this cannot be answered in simple terms. At some levels our traumas are similar to those of the larger society.

Politics and psychological interventions are also informed by location and interaction within other aspects of our identities, in particular “race”, class, gender and cultures. Generally those experiencing trauma from the struggle are part of the wider South African patriarchal society which suppresses the attention we should give to our emotional and psychological being. Addressing the wider condition may be necessary for adequately treating those from the struggle experience.

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