

Apartheid's Prison

Raymond Suttner

Perhaps I should clarify what this input is and is not. I was asked to talk about my prison experiences. This is therefore not a detached, criminological or penological analysis of the character of political imprisonment in South Africa. It is what I have experienced myself. But I try to combine the personal with some reflection on what it has meant over and above how I experienced it. This paper is constructed mainly from extracts out of my forthcoming book, *In Apartheid's Prison*.

This was very hard to write. Not only because the experiences were difficult but also because there is a culture amongst South African political prisoners which discourages acknowledging and talking about their experiences as pain. It may seem strange that I say this when so many books have been written about experiences in South African prisons – books by former president Mandela and many others, which I cite at the end of this paper. There have been a lot of books, but there remain a lot of silences. The silences relate to what has and has not been written about and who has been able to tell their own story.

One thing that struck me about my own writing experience is that it took me some time to convince myself that my story was worth telling, that it would interest others that it was worth recording. In our liberation movement someone like Nelson Mandela has

towered over all of us and has set an example of modesty. He has not made much of his 27 years in prison so some of us thought, why should we, who served what one of my prison comrades termed 'parking tickets' of much shorter periods, be complaining or even telling our story?

There is a reasoning here that is not found with other traumas. If you are assaulted you do not say 'thank heavens I was only assaulted and not murdered.' You expect people to understand the assault as a crime and that you have experienced a trauma. That much is acknowledged. For some reason there is a state of mind with regard to political imprisonment, which is different. It is a variant of the phrase 'cowboys never cry' – political prisoners do not complain or even think it is right to talk about their experiences. Yet we are a damaged country, many people are wounded by their experiences. We need to speak about these and try to understand what has happened.

Another reason why I felt some hesitation about writing is that – what may surprise many observers – there is not always a receptive climate to books on imprisonment. Many reviewers of prison books start with a weary sigh as if to say – if they do not say it literally: 'not another prison book'. In a sense we have a denial of the significance of our experience and a denial of the social

importance of what was done to people over many years, sometimes in isolation, sometimes with ill-treatment including assault, sometimes without access to reading materials or news. It is also a denial of some of the sacrifices and resilience that made April 1994 possible. I will give just one example. There was a recent review of the re-issue of Indres Naidoo's book on Robben Island, where the reviewer remarked that the book lacked intellectual depth. Now, besides the arrogance displayed, what this betrays is an unwillingness to acknowledge the character of the experience that Indres Naidoo underwent, to understand it in its own terms. Indres was not describing an intellectual odyssey in his book, but harsh conditions that he and other prisoners survived.

We all have different stories. We all have different backgrounds that led us to take the steps that led us into prison. We all have similar and distinct ways of coping with torture, solitary confinement and other privations.

The factors that go to develop the moral consciousness of an individual enabling that person to cope, to withstand torture or alternatively, leading such a person to collapse and betray comrades or simply to give up attempting to survive – these are a species of adaptation or human choice in adversity. Unfortunately not all of us have been able to write our stories. In some cases, there is a reluctance to speak. In others, there is a problem with writing, relating to the inferior education that black people have received. We need to find ways of telling the stories of those who are still silent.

My account: part of the story of the difficult years

In my own case, I came to the liberation movement as a white South African youth

who had grown up in a liberal family. At home we were taught that all people should be treated with dignity and respect. We rejected apartheid. Perhaps we did not fully acknowledge what the liberation movement understood as emancipation of black people, but I saw no incompatibility between the liberalism that I grew up with and the ideals for which Nelson Mandela went to jail, as I read about this in my early years at University in the 1960s.

I did not see anything incompatible with being a liberal and supporting the ANC, although I did not have the opportunity to contact the ANC because it had been banned in 1960 and the SACP, which had been banned 10 years earlier.

Nevertheless, through my own experience, I came to feel that there was a certain futility in pursuing liberal politics since it amounted to protest politics and the South African government made it clear that it paid no attention to such protests. What was the practical value in this form of politics? It was morally right but I came to believe that liberalism did not have a strategy for change.

In the late 1960s I won a scholarship to study overseas and I then used the opportunity to link up with the liberation movement. I wanted to engage in political activities that would make a difference and I concluded that this entailed illegal, underground work. I was nevertheless worried about my preparation for the eventuality of arrest. I had witnessed in the early 1960s how one of my university lecturers had been arrested and surrendered in police detention and became a traveling state witness, giving evidence against his former colleagues. I did not want this to happen to me. I went through a period of training and read a great deal to prepare myself for working underground and the possibility of

arrest and torture.

For over ten years now, people in South Africa have been free to walk around wearing T-shirts signifying their loyalty to the ANC or the SACP. They may not know of or remember the time when to have contact with the liberation movement – just contact – could have led to a charge in court. Consequently, when I met up with comrades from the ANC and SACP in the late 1960s, I did not simply go over and greet them. We would follow from a distance, trying not to appear to be following one another. In chapter 2 ('Preparing') I describe this:

'[Joe Slovo and I] had a series of meetings. Joe certainly looked the part of the underground operator. And sometimes I had to "tail" him to our meeting places. We took no chances, suspecting (correctly, as we now know) that there were spies and other agents of the regime operating in London. Consequently, I could never be seen with someone like Joe. We might have to get to the same destination, but we would never go together. I would follow him, but that meant not appearing to have any connection with him.

'For example, if we were in a shopping area, I would watch Joe's reflection in the shop window – so I would seem to be window-shopping, while actually watching Joe. And he might be on the other side of the street. Sometimes I would follow him, and sometimes walk ahead and watch his reflection behind me.'

I was trained in surveillance and counter-surveillance, methods for sending off concealed messages, elementary ways of setting off explosions (mainly intended for distributing pamphlets, not sabotage).

This was in 1970/71 and in June 1971 I returned to South Africa, by ship, to take up a lecturing post at the University of Natal, Durban. What were the conditions of the time?

After the ANC underground structures were smashed in South Africa in the mid-1960s, the liberation movement had very little presence within the country. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the ANC reestablished a limited underground presence, but its activities were few. The liberation movement inside the country mainly consisted of small groups or cells producing ANC or SACP literature. Underground publications were erratic, appearing occasionally in Johannesburg, Natal, or the Cape.

Underground literature was illegal. It communicated ideas and news from organisations with zero access to the conventional, officially tolerated media. Without underground literature, there were few ways South Africans could learn about the ANC and SACP. People usually had only second-hand, distorted knowledge of these organisations, which was filtered through the apartheid regime and the country's fairly compliant liberal media.

At the time, *Umkhonto we Sizwe* [The Spear of the Nation, the ANC's military wing] had not yet fired a single shot within South Africa. People feared the power of the security police. There was a sense in the 1970s, of the overwhelming power of the Apartheid State and people feared to tell others of their sympathy for the ANC. It was hoped that underground literature would become a tool around which they could organise; that it would assist people to find one another, and to build, extend and strengthen the structures of the ANC.

My brief as an underground activist was rather vague – there were no working groups or structures into which I could be integrated. This was an entirely new phase of the struggle. There was no example to follow, no one to offer advice. I had to survive on my own or not at all.

There is a certain romanticism associated with work underground. Let me disabuse readers of that assumption. This was the start of four very lonely years. Struggle is about comradeship, about sharing and co-operation with others. But I was alone. All I had were coded messages received every six weeks or so. The liberation movement was nonracial and fought for an equal society, but I never had the chance to work with black people.

Our anthem was *Nkosi si-kelele i' Afrika* (God bless Africa), but I never sang it, until I was in jail with comrades who were on death row in the late 1970s, in Pretoria Maximum Security Prison.

The main aim of the struggle was the liberation of the black majority, in particular the African people, led by the working class, but I had no political contact with Africans, or much with working people. I was committed to the struggle but there was no nod of agreement from the oppressed majority around me in Durban.

There had been no network for me to contact on my return from England. I was 'my own boss' and if I made mistakes there was no one to say, 'Do something else'. Or, if I hit on some good ideas, there was no one to say, 'Yes, stick to that one.'

Underground work can take a variety of forms – all of which are very stressful and extract a toll on one's personal life. Everything essential – what one is, what one feels, and

what is most significant in one's life, must be concealed. You reveal only the inessential, in order to safeguard the most meaningful aspects of your being. Working undercover makes it difficult to form or maintain intimate relations.

Mine was a very isolated existence. I longed for communications from my contacts in exile. Their brief coded messages, written in 'invisible ink', were a lifeline, filling me with new resolve. Within the stringent limits of our situation, my contacts did what they could to support me. In the meantime, I did my best to maintain my morale and my cover.

My work consisted mainly in painstakingly producing pamphlets through a duplicating machine, getting rid of the defective copies, which was quite difficult but necessary because they were incriminating, and then posting the pamphlets.

Posting might seem a simple matter, but it was not. At first, I would bundle them into suitcases at night and dump them all into a couple of large postboxes. But as Ronnie Kasrils and Joe Slovo correctly pointed out when I saw them in 1974, if the postal authorities or police saw anything suspicious in one envelope, they could easily collect the lot. It was better to post the pamphlets in a number of separate boxes.

So I gradually came to know the whereabouts of just about every postbox in Durban and Pietermaritzburg. I used a variety of envelopes, varied the typing of the addresses and staggered the times that I posted the envelopes, to make it harder for the pamphlets to be discovered.

I was not a natural for working underground. There was nothing in my previous life that had prepared me. I had never broken the law

in any way. I was also unaccustomed to secrecy. I was used to sharing what I valued, speaking about matters that pleased or upset me.

I was also in no way prepared for *consistent* law breaking, a programme that must be carefully managed if it is to continue. Breaking the law means one sets oneself up against those who devote themselves to one's capture. Had I worked in a group, we would have regularly evaluated what we were doing, and assessed what the police might have been doing to combat us. I had no such reference group and consequently it was easy to make serious mistakes.

Throughout the years when I was involved in the struggle, we often heard the ubiquitous slogan or cliché: 'victory is certain'. Perhaps it was certain – but it didn't always look that way in the 1970s! In our underground units, we tried simply to maintain a flickering presence, and to continue the work of the liberation movement.

Arrest and torture

The main thing about my experience as a political prisoner is that it was a total experience. Imprisoning someone is an attempt, in varying degrees successful, to take full control of the life of a prisoner. As I say in chapter 1 ('In Police Hands') immediately after my first arrest in 1975:

'Now, I was in police hands. This intrusion into my privacy was to become characteristic of my life as a political prisoner for the long years to follow. From the moment I was arrested, there was nothing about me that the state did not want to know or have access to. There was nothing I could shut away from the police and say this is "not your business". The law now gave them access to every corner of my life.'

South Africa had laws against assault, but they provided no protection for someone in my situation. I knew I could be held for long periods without scrutiny, without access to lawyers or other people from 'outside'. Numerous court cases, at every level of the judiciary, had confirmed exclusive access of the police to detainees, even where assaults were alleged. And, as I expected, and soon found out for myself, they did abuse their powers.

The events of that night marked a crucial turning point. From that moment on, I passed from being an independent person and fell under direct control of the South African Apartheid State. In the years that followed, which saw me in and out of jail and detention, I would not be free of police intrusions. Even now – when this chapter in our history is over – I have habits that persist from this period of constant surveillance.

Trying to maintain a semblance of control

When I was arrested on June 17, 1975, I was caught red-handed and my own 'guilt', in terms of the South African law of the time, was easy to establish. The question really was how to alert two comrades with whom I had started to work a few months earlier, so they could escape.

The rule in these situations was that if a member of an underground unit was arrested, anyone else working with that person should immediately leave the country. One's job, on being arrested, was not to hold out indefinitely but to try and find a way of alerting the others and hold out sufficiently long for them to escape.

The police knew their time was limited. Consequently, they would torture me fairly early in my detention.

I did not think of it then, but I held a certain power over them. I alone had the information they wanted. Nothing they had could substitute in value for that. There was nothing they could give me that could persuade me to part with the information. I had no kinship with the torturers. There were no bonds whatsoever. There was nothing they could persuade me to do of my own free will.

I tried to use what powers I had to avoid telling them anything. I also tried to determine the timing of my torture

They did not offer me my freedom, or any concessions if I were to provide the information – which I would not have accepted in any case. They sometimes said, but without much conviction, that I would feel much better if I told the full truth. And they stressed how my career as a university lecturer was ruined, as if that might induce me to talk.

The police questioned me in teams, two or three at a time, with some police hanging around in the background, and sometimes butting in with obscenities.

It was clear to me that I could not give them what they wanted. I continually said I did not wish to be rude but I would not answer any more questions. Captain van Zyl, one of the heads of the investigation, replied that I was being *very* rude. I suspected that at some point they would ‘burst’, either losing patience or becoming, or pretending to be, enraged. The assaults would then begin.

I wanted, as far as possible, to remain master of the situation. I said I was not going to talk and they might just as well take me to be tortured. I hoped that I could provoke it *then* rather than be taken by surprise. Captain Wessels replied laughing: ‘You believe what you read in the newspapers?’

It must have been in the early hours of the morning that Warrant Officer A Taylor, a very tall man, entered without his glasses, wearing a white butcher’s apron, carrying handcuffs. He took off my glasses and put handcuffs on my hands, saying quietly that I would now be taught a lesson. He then blindfolded me and led me to a lift, which went up a floor or two.

The torture through the application of electric shocks to my genitals then started. They seemed aware of the danger of electric shocks. They wanted me to know that damage or death could result from such torture. A person whom I thought was Captain Dreyer said: ‘This is bad for your heart, you know.’ They said that my mother and sister had been arrested in Johannesburg – while they continued to torture me, presumably so I would associate torture not only with myself but with my family, who were supposedly also being held. I knew these were tricks used to break a detainee’s resolve and did not fall for them. At one point they said: ‘We must put our kaffirs onto him. Tell him to speak!’

Then an African voice shouted: ‘Tell the truth man! Tell the truth!’

When they stopped, Captain Dreyer said: ‘Let’s see if you can put on your socks.’ I could not. I felt very disoriented. He said: ‘I’ll put them on for you’. And he did this.

When they stopped the shocks, it was the morning of the next day and interrogation continued.

In the evening I was taken to a police station and booked in and urged to rest and think about things and prepare to ‘feel better by telling them everything’. I knew I would not be left to rest and after a short while I was collected by a very aggressive group of younger Security Police, led by Taylor, for

further questioning and torture.

What was it like to be in the hands of the SA security police? (In chapter 5, 'We'll give that Jew a hiding!') I try to answer this:

'...You know they have already tortured and killed many people. You know this precludes any sense of human kinship between you and them. You are surrounded by these people, and have no access to family, friends or lawyers. The security police are a law unto themselves. They decide when and what you eat, whether you are allowed books to read, and how much exercise you get.'

'These people guard you. They stand in front of you, at your side, and behind you. You never know what they are going to do next, if a blow is about to fall and from what direction it may come.'

'There is nothing you can do, nothing unobserved by them, nothing you can do without their permission. What limited washing is allowed is a luxury, and they will not permit you to wash until they have finished their intensive interrogation and torture. Sleep is out of the question – until they have completed their business.'

'There is much crudity, and violence is always in the air. Yet the police also try to maintain a contradictory self-image. They would like to appear to be civil servants who would serve under any government. They are just doing their job. That is why there is an elaborate pretence that torture and other violence is practiced without the knowledge of the senior officers, or while they are off-duty, since they would never approve of it.'

Police 'kinship' with me

Anti-Semitism was an obsession with the police. For them, being Jewish was a crime in

itself, predisposing a person to political 'criminality' and particularly to Communism.

What then did their threat of putting the 'kaffirs' on to me really mean?

Despite my perception that there was no kinship between the torturers and myself, the white torturers, in their reference to the 'kaffirs', may have assumed a kinship with me.

I may have been in jail for taking up the struggle of the black people, but they still claimed me as a fellow white who would fear, as they did, the thought of 'the kaffirs', the barbarians at the gate, the hordes waiting to be let loose on 'us'. With my white captors, reason allegedly had a place. What they wished to convey to me was that there was a threat that went beyond reason: and this was the 'kaffirs', a type of primeval force.

'The kaffirs' did not refer to sophisticated police, who turned the electricity on and off, usually stopping just short of mortal danger. Such behaviour was supposedly rational. The violence of 'the kaffirs' was, in contrast, a basic, unthinking violence.

In a sense, the police were responding to my polite refusal to talk, by saying that I should tell them what they wanted to know quickly – before the chance of rational communication became impossible.

So what we have, on the one hand, is a sense of *dissociation* from me as 'a Jewish Communist' – representing to the police, the worst of the worst type of white treachery and betrayal. But on the other hand, we also have *association*. The police calculated that their racist associations between Africans and primeval violence would strike a chord with a fellow white.

Uncertainty

I had prepared for detention. Yet, in detention, uncertainty is of the essence. There is a large unknown. One does not know what is going to happen. One knows it will be terrible, but there is great anxiety because of unawareness of what that entails. People say that every detention is different. It may be long. It may result in a trial. It may not. It may entail torture. It may not. But it is always traumatic. Even when one has been tortured, one does not know whether it is over, when the torturers will come back and what they will do next time.

Awaiting trial

After the interrogation was completed I was charged and tried. In a sense, I was gradually coming to understand how my life was changing. After returning from my first court appearance, I was taken to prison.

I had never seen a door as massive and heavy as the steel one that shut behind me in Durban Central Prison. It shocked me in a way that the loudly crashing doors in detention had failed to do. There was something very final about the way it closed.

This door was at once a physical barrier to movement and symbolic of a change in my life. My previous life was now excluded, part of the 'outside'. In the years that lay ahead, my life now belonged to the 'inside'.

Normally, we close doors to provide personal security, comfort and safety. Behind the door of one's home there is usually warmth, harmony and contentment. A prison door, in contrast, locks you into a world that strips you of your dignity. Here, comfort is absent and there is no personal privacy. There is also a constant barrage of unwelcome sounds.

Being in prison does not come naturally to

anyone. The concrete floors and walls and steel surroundings are alienating, and a cell is quite unlike the home of any person, rich or poor. Although one is 'inside' one always feels like an 'outsider'.

That is why, at first, I experienced prison life as if I were an outsider looking in. On one level, I accepted that I was a political prisoner. In fact, I was proud of it. But part of me could never accept the 'prisoner' tag, or having been thrown in jail because of what I stood for.

The prison was all grey and steel. These two words define the textures, the materials and colours I would have to deal with for a long time. In prison, there is little you want to touch or look at.

Although not yet a sentenced prisoner, I started to get a glimpse of what lay ahead of me. I saw the various ways in which prison rules try to rob prisoners of their individuality. There were constant invasions of privacy and attacks on the dignity of prisoners. One little thing that immediately struck me was the 'Judas hole' on the door. Any passer-by could look into my cell whenever it took his fancy and sometimes other [common law] prisoners would do so, and shout obscenities at me. I felt, then, a peculiar sense of powerlessness. I could not see much of the outside from inside the cell, but anyone looking in could see as much as they liked and deprive me of any semblance of privacy. It was sometimes quite intimidating to have a person I could not see shouting threats at me from outside the cell.

From early on I noticed the prison noises, the occasional silences, broken by terrible noises, the banging of steel doors, jingling of keys, shouting and swearing of warders. No prison official speaks softly. Officers would shout at warders and warders always shouted at

prisoners.

Sleep was difficult, since the young warders on patrol did not bother to be quiet. When they looked into my cell at night, they would switch on the light long enough to wake me and then go away. Sometimes a young warder would just stand around, apparently aimlessly, but lightly jingling his keys, enough to cause considerable irritation and make me realize how frayed my nerves were.

On trial

In the liberation movement we had very clear ideas about how freedom fighters should conduct themselves in court. This is not to say that everyone abided by this. But our view was that you should not beg for mercy but proudly defend your beliefs. My statement to the court included: 'I am not the first person, nor the last, to break the law for moral reasons.' I realise that the Court may feel that I should have shown more respect for legality. Normally, I would show this respect. I would consider it wrong to break laws that serve the community. But I have acted against laws that do not serve the majority of South Africans, laws that inculcate hostility between our people and preclude the tolerance and co-operation that is necessary to a contented and peaceful community.

'For this, I will go to prison. But I cannot accept that it is wrong to act, as I have done, for freedom and equality, for an end to racial discrimination and poverty. I have acted in the interests of the overwhelming majority of our people. I am confident that I have their support.'

A politically motivated defence tended to be prejudicial to the personal interests of the accused. It made it harder to get out of jail and may have increased the length of our sentences. It tended to make certain types of

legal defence impossible. In some cases, in order to safeguard our organisations or security, we had to conceal some of what might have freed us from jail.¹

There were some things I just could not say, even if they reduced my sentence, because they may have reflected negatively on the liberation movement. I first experienced this while an accused person; and then again in the 1980s, when applying for release from detention during the state of emergency. To some extent, we sometimes aided the process of legal conviction because we were unable to advance arguments to free us.

Naturally, my statement did not impress the judge, who in passing sentence said:

'There is no question of his succumbing to sudden temptation or pressure....I consider that his reasons for breaking the law, even if sincerely held, affords little basis for mitigation of sentence. I have no doubt that many terrorists all over the world who have killed innocent people by the indiscriminate use of explosives claim that they were morally justified in so doing, but such conduct cannot be tolerated in a civilized community. And the motives of the terrorists are of minor importance when deciding upon an appropriate sentence, because the requirements of law and order are paramount.

Similarly, a man like the accused, who promotes revolutionary change in South Africa and urges others, by means of widely distributed subversive pamphlets, to support that change by using every available means, including violence and guerilla warfare, cannot lay claim to special consideration from the Court because he asserts that he acted from the highest moral principles. Although the accused has not himself detonated a bomb, he had endeavoured to light a trail of

gunpowder, which he believes will cause a bomb to explode...

While it is true that he never disclosed to his colleagues, students and friends, or to his family, that he had embarked on an illegal course and, as far as we know, only recruited two assistants that does not rebound entirely to his credit. For it seems to indicate that he possessed the fanatical dedication of a resolute man who had embarked on a secret subversive course and had disciplined his life to prevent any sort of suspicion falling upon him. ...'

Serving my sentence

Immediately after my conviction on November 13, 1975 I was returned to my cell and issued with prison clothing. The next morning I was transferred to Pretoria, and started to serve my seven and a half-year sentence.

The entire framework of prison existence is aimed at turning the prisoner into a passive object – an object whose every movement, whether inside or outside his or her cell, is either determined by others or severely limited.

The prisoner's number was said by officials to be the most important part of his or her identity and there was a pre-numbering period when prisoners were deemed to have no identity at all. To be allocated a prison number was to be saved from this nothingness.

The language of prisons expressed the view of prisoners being regarded as things – as objects whose management was in the hands of warders. Thus it was common to refer to prisoners in Afrikaans – the language of the prisons and police force – as '*eenhede*', or units. You would often hear announcements

directing a particular warder to come and collect his 'units'. The words used for 'collect' and 'to bring' are '*afhaal*' and '*aflaai*', and both are associated with the delivery or loading of things.

Many of the ordinary criminal prisoners conformed to these expectations. They waited for their cells to be opened for exercise – and said nothing if this was later than regulations demanded. They waited to be asked before speaking, went back to their cells when told to do so, showered at the times allowed, accepted food when it was given and ate it hot or cold, all without complaint.

As political prisoners we challenged this dehumanised concept of prisoners and the prison world and generally prevented it being applied to us.

We were very conscious of our dignity and any attempt to undermine it. We expected, and demanded, respect. If they called us we would go, but we would not run or move with undue haste. It was common for warders to shout '*Kom, kom, kom!*' at prisoners; which in English literally means 'Come, come, come!'. But in Afrikaans it sounds much harsher and more degrading. If a warder shouted this at us – and new warders would sometimes try – we would normally object to being summoned as if we were dogs. The prison regulations made reference to treating prisoners in a civil manner – as we would never fail to remind officials who deviated from this rule.

Prisoners were expected to stand to attention when speaking to an officer. Our version of being at attention was by no means a military one. We would not fawn or beg; though we adopted various stratagems to win concessions that might improve our conditions.

I came into an environment in which, after

long years of struggle, some of the conventional ways of treating prisoners had been reversed and the prisoners ran many aspects of their lives.

By the time I arrived some of the worst excesses, which had characterised the early years, described in Hugh Lewin's book, *Bandiet*, were no more. How did we relate to the boere (Afrikaans word literally meaning farmers but applied by us to white prison officials and police, whether English or Afrikaans speaking,) as we called the warders?

A type of peaceful coexistence reigned most of the time, with neither the boers nor the prisoners seeking confrontation. For our own reasons, and in order to reduce their involvement in our lives, we kept the prison clean and did most of the things expected of us. It was rare that prison officials would go around scraping their fingers on the top of doors to look for dust, as one found in other prisons. We did not polish the floors because we convinced the warders that the tiles were made of a material that did not need polish.

Through this 'balance', we managed to achieve a sense of tranquility most of the time. I remember how, during breaks from the prison workshop, we would sit with our backs to the wall in the prison yard and there was a sense of peace that I prized.

It suited both sides to reduce conflict and avoid situations where we had no option but to fight. We could not be at their throats every day. We did not have the energy for that. Conflicts drained us more than in normal life. The dullness of prison life made it harder to deal with sudden changes and it suited us to let some things pass, even when they were unjust.

Being a white political prisoner was always different from being a prisoner on Robben Island. As was the case with women prisoners, who by all accounts had a very hard time, we were always very few in number. Managing small group dynamics was very difficult.

Before I joined the others in Pretoria Local, I had been held in solitary confinement prior to trial and again in Maximum Security. I longed to be with the other prisoners. In that situation of isolation, I conjured up in my imagination some sort of idealised version of what the other political prisoners would be like. I imagined that the liberation movement comprised figures such as one finds in revolutionary novels, people who had managed to eradicate all the normal human weaknesses.

It was a rude awakening to find that many of the men that I was to spend years with possessed various habits and traits that were not only contrary to what I had imagined but were downright irritating and difficult to live with.

We were together because of our common allegiance to the liberation movement. Outside of that commonality, a great deal divided us. And personality differences often made for serious incompatibility.

We were from different generations. Our life experiences and the character of our involvement in the struggle were very different. In theory, these differences might have enriched our community, but they often led to tensions. Every individual has his or her way of coping with extreme conditions. Sometimes one person's coping mechanisms disrupted another's. Some of us required solitude at times, when others wanted company in order to deal with a difficult

situation. Some wanted to play while others were more inclined to read and study.

And the pettiness of prison life heightened these differences. Prison life comprises a number of petty interactions that make up social life. Just as people may fall out over major issues outside prison, great anger could arise over minor issues within prison. For example, how someone dried a floor, or whether or not a mop was adequately rinsed, or dishes properly cleaned, could cause ill feeling. Most of us had gone through some sort of training, but nothing prepared us for being thrown together in the way that we were – for so long, and with people we would not have chosen to be with in the normal course of events.

There is not time to go into details of the special problems we had, for example, access to news, restrictions on visits and so on. Let me conclude this section by saying that a variety of factors made for a stressful and difficult existence.

Out, then on the run

When I was released, on May 11, 1983, my mother fetched me from Pretoria Local. I was given a couple of cardboard boxes. One contained personal belongings and the other books and papers that the prison censors had not allowed me to have while in jail. In the margins were written remarks, such as 'pure Marxist formulations', which the prison censor must have jotted before handing the papers back.

I wore clothes borrowed from one of my brothers, because I did not yet have clothes of my own. We drove from Pretoria, a place I had only known from prison vans and prison walls, on to the highway to Johannesburg.

When I was released, I had at first planned to

leave the country on an exit permit. Many political prisoners had left the country after serving sentences, because they immediately found themselves placed under close surveillance and heavy restrictions, and had great difficulty finding work or playing any political role.

But conditions had changed and it was no longer inevitable that I would be restricted on release. It seemed if I proceeded cautiously, that I could play some constructive role within the country.

This was a political choice. But it was also a very difficult personal one. I knew and feared the implications of the decision to remain in South Africa. I did not intend withdrawing from politics. I did not intend taking unnecessary risks, but I did foresee the possibility, indeed likelihood, of experiencing further state repression. I did not want to go back to jail. I did, in many ways, long for peace, quiet and a contented family life. I dreamed of a tranquil home life, uninterrupted by police attention or the threat of it. But, I asked myself this: If I were a black South African, without any opportunities to take up a professional career or emigrate, would I then consider withdrawing from politics?

Having been in jail once, having been tortured, I knew what might well lie in store for me. But I saw no other way. I had made my choice in the late 1960s to throw my lot in with those wanting to change South Africa. I considered it important that I, as a white person, should not demand less of myself than did my black comrades.

I was also influenced by the choices made by Joe Gqabi, the ANC militant who was, assassinated in Zimbabwe in the 1980s. He, too, had been in jail, but came out and continued to struggle, first inside the country,

until he was re-arrested; and later, after he was forced to leave. I saw very clearly that my end could be like his. I did not want that, but felt I had no alternative. The decisions were my own. The consequences flowed from what I had chosen.

For some time, I was very cautious about my political role, operating in semi-conspiratorial fashion, for fear of inviting police attention. I met with various activists and engaged in discussions, but this was with a fairly low profile.

I gradually emerged from seclusion, particularly in efforts to popularise the Freedom Charter, the unifying vision adopted at the Congress of the People in 1955. I became more and more deeply involved in the activities of the United Democratic Front, the broad organisation of anti-apartheid forces, formed in 1983.

The state decided to clamp down. When a partial state of emergency was declared in 1985 I went underground to avoid arrest.

I was in disguise. All I had learnt from Ronnie Kasrils in the 1970s, simple as it may have been, now proved of use. I had to watch out in earnest, to see whether I was being followed on foot or by car, and carefully applied what I had learned. I had to study my own habits and form an identity that appeared quite different to my normal one. I changed my walk. I combed my hair straight back and grew a very severe and ugly moustache of the type that one finds amongst prison warders. I smoked. Few people recognised me in this more extreme disguise and I escaped police detection throughout the first emergency.

There had been no safe houses prepared for me, or by me. Seldom do you know exactly when you will be forced underground. For the

first few nights of the emergency, it was nightmarish, as I moved from place to place, staying with people I did not know and in circumstances that were very inconvenient and unsafe. I had to borrow a car or exchange my own car, and try to find more permanent accommodation.

It is interesting to note how many people were prepared to take the risk of offering refuge. There were many unsung heroes and heroines who, despite the dangers, gave me – and others like me – a place to stay.

In general, during the 1985/6 state of emergency, we regrouped and carried on. We escalated our activities against the regime and advanced calls that raised the level of resistance.

However, this was a period when I felt considerable fear. At the beginning of the emergency, I really did not want to be caught. When I heard the way people were being tortured, I believed I was not ready to face that again. I remember one night driving with Khehla Shubane, who was then an activist in Soweto (and now head of the Nelson Mandela Foundation). We were discussing what would happen if I was arrested. And he quite practically assured me that I would, definitely, be tortured. I did not resent his frankness, but I wondered if I still had the same single-mindedness that had carried me through my earlier detention.

Nevertheless, through applying myself to political activities, I was not obsessed with the prospect of arrest. I just carried on, causing as much trouble for the regime as I could. To do so was the policy of the ANC.

Politically, the 1980s were a very exciting time. I saw living examples of what one may call 'mass creativity', a phenomenon I had

previously known only as a phrase from books. The 1980s were a very important period in many people's political involvement. The struggles of the 1980s forced the apartheid regime to negotiate.

Back inside

The partial state of emergency was lifted in February 1986 and activists cautiously re-surfaced. However, around June, we started to be more careful again, because that was the month when the Soweto risings were commemorated and arrests could follow. I was however in an ambiguous situation. I found a fresh hiding place, but I could not go fully underground. I wanted to hold onto my job at the university and felt that I should, at the end of the first emergency, reappear at work.

I was re-arrested on 12 June 1986. I had been invited by Professor Reg Austin, now a senior executive at International IDEA in Stockholm, who was then a professor at the University of Zimbabwe, to deliver some lectures at the University. In fact, my main purpose was to meet with the ANC. I had been chased by some cars the night before my intended departure and was not sure about going. But a meeting of activists believed I should go. Unfortunately, we did not have a proper alarm and I overslept. When I arrived at the airport we had not seen the morning's newspapers that said a state of emergency would be declared that day. The police were waiting for me in the departure lounge and I was back 'inside.'

I had dreaded this moment. I was back in police hands. I wondered how I would handle it, now that I knew all of what it entailed. I asked a question of the arresting officer, Major Oosthuizen, and he answered me rudely. I immediately felt angry at being treated this way. I think that anger was also a

surge of strength flowing back into me and this made me better prepared to deal with what lay ahead.

On the way back into the city, they spoke to someone on the police radio. I heard the person on the other side saying, 'Gaan jy hom 'n ding of twee wys?' (Are you going to show him a thing or two?). That is, were they going to beat me up? I said nothing. I just waited.

One of the places they took me in order to search, was my office at Wits University. Some of the police did not know how to behave in this environment. They wanted to appear different from the image we had of them – as being thugs. But on arriving at a security barrier, they simply got out, displaying their guns, and lifted the barrier. After they parked, just before going into the Law Faculty, one of the policemen came out brandishing a huge rifle. Oosthuizen, slightly embarrassed, told him this was not necessary.

They took me to my office. This is where their problems started. I am not very neat and tend to accumulate a lot of paper. There were lecturing and research notes going back to 1968. There were also political papers. The police had no idea where to start, what was relevant to their task and where this mass of papers should end up. In the meanwhile, people were knocking on the door of my office. Eventually they let in Professor June Sinclair, then Dean of the Law Faculty, and decided to bundle me out, abandoning their search.

In the passage, I told those around my office that I had heard the police say on the radio that they intended to beat me up. I said I had been tortured the last time I was in detention. I asked them to bring an interdict preventing similar assaults.

The police were furious. Oosthuizen turned to me in the car and said, 'Now we are seeing the real Raymond Suttner.' It was as if I had betrayed a sacred trust, by taking steps to avoid being tortured.

The university did bring an interdict and although the police denied they had intended to torture me they gave an undertaking not to do so. That gave me slightly more peace of mind than I would have had otherwise.

But I was not expecting to be in detention long. I thought the police were holding people like myself, just for precautionary purposes, until after June 16 and June 26 (the anniversary of the adoption of the Freedom Charter). I thought I would be out in time to resume lectures in July of that year.

In the meantime I tried to make myself at home in John Vorster Square police cells, which was not a very pleasant place. It had been specially designed to hold political detainees and had an audiovisual system whereby the police were able to monitor our every movement and sound. There were very many prisoners, but very little space to exercise and according to the regulations, which I managed to extract from the police after much argument, we were each entitled to exercise for one hour a day. It was impossible to fulfill given the lack of space and the number of detainees, each of whom was supposed to be held in solitary confinement.

But after many written complaints I was taken out to exercise. The policeman who took me out said, 'It is twenty-five to four now. You have an hour's exercise. You finish at twenty-five past four.' I thought that perhaps I had not heard correctly. I did not argue. The next day, however, he said, 'It is twenty to four now. You have until twenty past four.' So I asked myself, 'What would happen if he were

to take me out at five to four, would the exercise end at five past four?' I explained that an hour was the period from 20 minutes to one particular hour until 20 minutes to the next hour that followed it – not until 20 past the first hour. He looked at me suspiciously and called another policeman 'Jacobs, kom hierso!' (Jacobs come here!). Jacobs confirmed my version.

In the beginning, there was a general state of ignorance about our conditions, the prospects of our release and how long we were likely to spend in detention. Thousands of people had been pulled in and the officials had not sorted out who would go out and who would remain. I was not interrogated at all for the first 19 days. I had expected to be interrogated immediately. But once the expectation of interrogation was removed, I used the time to rest. I just lay on the mat in the cell and reminisced about what I had done in the three years I had been out of prison – all the interesting things, as well as the errors I had made. I did a little exercise. I did not think I would be in very long.

From inside the Perspex-sealed cells, cars outside on the highway made a 'whoosh, whoosh' sound. I tried to imagine it was the sea. I felt alone and abandoned in the cell. Sometimes, the only social interaction the whole day would be rudeness from a policeman. Most of the time, I felt powerless.

During this period, many people were being held for just two weeks, although they had no idea that was the case. In fact, many only knew they were in jail, but not the provisions under which they were being held. One day, I bumped into the unionist Bashir Valli in the showers and he said to me, 'Raymond, what is this about a state of emergency?' I said, 'Yes, there is a state of emergency.' He said, 'Does this mean we will be in for long?' I

said, 'I don't know.' Bashir was out a few days later.

'Pack all your things!'

There appeared to be some irregularities in the way I had been arrested and my lawyer, Peter Harris, brought an application for release – on grounds that had led to some other detainee's release. I did not count on anything, but I had a slight hope of success. On the day I expected to hear the result of the court application, a policeman came to the door of my cell and said, "Pack all your things." I asked: "For release, or for moving to another place?" He answered: "For moving to another place."

I was moved to Diepkloof prison, into a section reserved for white prisoners, but intended to be separate from the other (criminal) prisoners. Over the two years that I spent there I was joined by up to four other detainees. But after a while they were all released and I spent 18 months in solitary confinement.

Being alone was difficult. But being with other detainees could be both supportive and stressful. The dynamics of small groups within prison are always very intense and difficult. Some comrades were determined to get by, while supporting others as much as they could. But some detainees felt a sense of despair and gave up finding ways of surviving. Instead of remaining occupied and doing things to keep up their spirits, they threw in the towel and left it to the regime to show mercy or not. When someone was not coping, it made it harder for all of the rest of the detainees. It meant that – in addition to coping yourself – you also had to carry the other person on your shoulders.

To get by, you had to do things that made life still seem meaningful. These included

exercise, reading and writing, study and watching movies (which they allowed once a week). After years of prison, I was experienced with strategies for survival and applied these.

Gradually, all of the other white state-of-emergency detainees were released and I was on my own. The last to go was Tom Waspe. He was released on 10 June, 1987, the last day of the 1986/7 state of emergency. They released him in front of me, in the passage of the section of the prison where we were housed. I had known this was coming and was thus able to handle it 'without visible emotion.' In fact, I argued with the police, and that made me feel better.

They asked: 'Are you satisfied?' I said I was not. They asked why not and I said my continued detention was illegal. They asked why and I said I needed to consult my lawyer before I formulated my position to them. This continued without my conceding it was a valid re-detention.

As the months went on and on, solitary gradually wore me down. Very many letters people wrote to me never arrived. There was hardly anything getting through the prison walls. Near the end of my period in detention, the prison officials started to worry about my psychological condition. They were not concerned about my health, but worried that they might land in trouble if anything happened to me. I took advantage of the situation to apply to have a pet, confident it would succeed. I had seen how sentenced prisoners were allowed pet birds and I successfully applied to have a pet lovebird/parakeet.

One day, Sergeant Joubert, a warder who was always very kind to me, arrived with this beautiful little red-cheeked parakeet in a

shoebox. I clipped the wings so the bird could not fly away. It was then a question of training it. I held the bird and it bit me. I let it carry on biting, even though my hand was sore, just to get it used to me. After a few days, it relaxed, and spent most of its time under my tracksuit or on my shoulder. It was wonderful having this beautiful little live creature with me. Its head smelt like a baby and it had no one else in the world besides me. I called him Jail Bird or 'JB'

We bought a cage. When I put the bird inside, it would pace up and down, much like prisoners did in their cells. When it was time to sleep, I would put a towel over the cage and JB would sleep.

We were inseparable. The bird would eat out of my mouth. I used to buy granola bars and the moment the bird heard me open the packet it would stick its beak into my mouth. When I exercised, the bird would sit on my shoulder. If it were angry with me, it would retreat into my tracksuit, and sit there. If I tried to touch it, JB would bite me.

House arrest

On September 5, 1988, I was presented with a restriction order and released. Unknown to me, a police document marked 'confidential' explained why it was necessary to put me under house arrest and various other restrictions:

'He is a ... hardened activist who has made highly knowledgeable attempts through speeches, statements and publications, to encourage individuals in the Republic of South Africa to contribute to the overthrow of state power. ...SUTTNER was sentenced to seven and a half years in prison on 13 November 1975.... He maintained his political views and principles during his period of imprisonment...After his release

SUTTNER continued with his activities and concentrated on advancing and propagating the Freedom Charter. SUTTNER tries hard to create an environment in the academic world, which would advance the goals of the ANC.'²

In the light of these factors they felt it was necessary that I be placed under house arrest and prohibited from political activities.

I came out of detention with an immediate sense of insecurity, a feeling that the police still viewed me as their prisoner and possibly in transition between one detention and another. The restrictions resulted in a form of surveillance of my life, which had a similar effect to that of detention. Every time I wanted a variation on the restriction order, or to go somewhere outside the magisterial district to which I was confined, I needed permission, in writing, from the police. They usually answered at the last moment.

At an objective level, there were very substantial differences between detention and restrictions. An impersonal official did not lock me up behind a grille at night. I could switch off my own light whenever I chose. I had the food I wanted. I could drive a car. I was surrounded by colours I had not seen in prison. I saw women and children. There were substantial differences. But I was nevertheless dealing with a continuation of trauma and stress in a different form. House arrest was a lot better than prison, but, at that particular moment in my life, it was very difficult.

On the surface, I might have seemed in reasonable shape, but I paid a price to appear this way. I survived through means similar to my period in detention. I required medication for depression and insomnia. I still experienced the tension I had felt inside prison, and had to prepare myself to deal with

my responsibilities. If I had to meet someone, I would try to plan the day in such a way that I could also fit in relaxation exercises, just in case the meeting imposed stress. I still did extensive physical exercise and continued using many of the coping mechanisms that I had employed during my prison period.

I was a free citizen but, at the same time, fell under the administrative authority of the police. I was a lawyer but I could not deal with the police on a similar basis to other lawyers. I did not grovel, but I could not relate to the police purely as a professional lawyer.

I did not abide by all my restrictions, however, and engaged in political work. Engaging in such activities was important to me, not only politically, but to my mental well-being and recovery. It was re-empowering. House arrest had an isolating effect, similar to solitary confinement. It was very hard for black comrades to visit me without attracting attention, so I found it hard to be politically involved. This, in itself, was dehumanising and depressing – in that a crucial aspect of my identity was being denied. In solitary confinement and house arrest, one concentrates on personal survival and getting by. And, insofar as one becomes increasingly inward looking, it is a de-politicizing process.

In August 1989 I decided on a more serious act of defiance, leaving the country to attend a meeting of the Organisation of African Unity, as part of a delegation of the Mass Democratic Movement. I was not discovered and went out by aircraft, spending five months outside the country. I returned, not knowing whether or not I was to be prosecuted, early in 1990. A few days later the ANC was unbanned and all restrictions were lifted. A new phase had opened.

Conclusion

I have tried to describe my choices and journey as a white South African activist who joined the liberation struggle. At the time of my initial involvement, few could have foreseen that, in the 1990s, we would be enjoying liberty from apartheid, under a government led by the ANC. I did what I believed was right. I had no idea when our struggle would succeed.

This is my own way of making sense of what happened, looking back and interpreting the past and present. It is not clear that what I did was a major factor in bringing about any decisive victory. But I like to think that I was there when the going was hard and it was difficult to be in the liberation movement. And that I helped further our cause in the dark years between the Rivonia trial and the Soweto uprising.

While writing my own book, I have been mindful of the need to help other South Africans find ways of telling their stories and of validating their experiences. In a sense, the telling of a story of imprisonment – even in post-apartheid South Africa – cannot escape the history of privilege, availability of skills and material circumstances to write and find a publisher. I am conscious of the challenge to take steps to avoid reproducing patterns in which the lives and experiences of black people are invalidated.

Apartheid could only be preserved – or brought to an end – through our individual and collective action. In telling our individual stories as whites and blacks, the larger South African story can be appreciated and our history as a whole understood.

I do not want to leave people with the impression that what I experienced was solely never-ending privation. It is true that being

imprisoned for so long meant I missed some things. I do regret not having fulfilled my potential in various careers. But my choice also brought me gains as a human being. The liberation movement gave me an opening, gave me a way of escaping from acquiescence in apartheid South Africa. In a sense, I got a fresh start in life. I felt I could not celebrate my own humanity unless I threw my weight in with the people. I was given the opportunity to realise my humanity, to be truly 'humanised'. This is something very important and irreplaceable that I gained from the struggle.

It is now 30 years since I began a political process that led me to jail, torture, re-detention and house arrest. These past three decades have been eventful ones in our

country's history and the world at large. I do not think that everything I believed then remains valid today. But what was central to my involvement was not an attachment to any particular social model. My involvement was primarily in order to find a way of bettering the lives of the majority of South Africans. I like to believe that a sense of justice and commitment to this process of transformation still motivates very many people in our liberation movement.

I have undergone some changes in my perspective since those early days, as the transition has unfolded. But the basic commitment that drove me throughout this period remains. That is why I want to remain part of the building of a democratic South Africa.

Work on which this paper is based:

Raymond Suttner, *In Apartheid's Prison. Notes and Letters of Struggle*. Ocean Press, Melbourne. New York. Forthcoming.

A selection of other works on Political imprisonment in South Africa:

Natoo Babenia, *Memoirs of a Saboteur*. As told to Iain Edwards. Mayibuye Books. Bellville. 1995

Jeremy Cronin, *Inside and Out*. David Philip. Cape Town. 1999

Eddie Daniels, *There & Back. Robben Island 1964-1979*. Mayibuye Books. Bellville. 1998

Michael Dingake, *My Fight against Apartheid*. Kliptown Books. London. 1987

Ruth First, *117 Days*. Bloomsbury. London. 1965 (reprinted with foreword by Joe Slovo, 1988)

Tim Jenkin, *Escape from Pretoria*. Kliptown Books. London. 1987

Kathrada Ahmed, *Letters from Robben Island. A Selection of Ahmed Kathrada's Prison Correspondence, 1964-1989*. Mayibuye Books. Cape Town. 1999

Hugh Lewin, *Bandiet. Seven Years in a South African Prison*. Heinemann. London 1981

Caesarina Kona Makhoere, *No Child's play. In Prison Under Apartheid*. The Women's Press. London. 1988

Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk To Freedom. The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela*. Macdonald Purnell. Randburg. 1994

Jean Middleton, *Convictions. A Woman Political Prisoner Remembers*. Ravan Press. Randburg. 1998

Indres Naidoo, *Island in Chains. Ten Years on Robben Island*. 2nd ed. Penguin Books. London. 2000

NOTES

1. But cf. Jeremy Seekings, *The UDF. A History of the United Democratic Front in South Africa*. 1983-1991, David Philip, Cape Town, 2000. Pp. 26-7 discussing using court records as a resource where he remarks that 'the accused themselves were not above lying if necessary to avoid conviction or mitigate sentence. ...' Certainly that did happen, but this disregards
the many cases when accused lied and got higher sentences through protecting others or their organisation.
2. I am grateful to Dr Rupert Taylor for providing me with this document a few months ago. It is held in a special collection of police documents at the University of the Witwatersrand.