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WOMEN IN THE FRONT LINE

by Hilda Bernstein

Not long ago we read of the death of Florence Matomela; and marked one more murder to the white supremacists, who killed her as surely as they killed Ngudle and Saloojee, Mini and Mayikise, Lenkoe and Kgoathe; as surely as they killed Mary moodley. They can write their lie, 'natural causes' on the death certificates. Their 'natural causes' apart from beatings and torture, include illnesses that can be controlled or cured in any civilised country today; and a lifetime of poverty, of insufficient food and of hardship also adds up to a 'natural cause.'

Florence and Mary died in the front line. Not every fighter can handle a gun. Some people think the front line is up there near the Zambesi, or along the Caprivi Strip. Those are also front lines, but most of our women fight right in the centre, in the heart - inside South Africa. Long years of imprisonment and restrictions, unrelenting struggle and unrelenting sacrifice. Women with heart disease and asthma and diabetes crouching on the cement floor of cells where they are not even permitted to spread a hard blanket, except at night; the only furniture a foul latrine bucket. Women confined for weeks and months and years, consumed by the thought of children left alone. Is this not the front line?

Florence and Mary were members of Congress, women who gave out warmth and life like the African sun, full of lively energy and songs and the cheerfulness of infinitely generous and splendid personalities. Florence, who had been to jail over and over from the Defiance Campaign of 1952, through the Treason Trial and 90 days, lost her husband while she was serving her last, five-year sentence. Five children. Who cares for them now? Solitary confinement without access to the regular insulin she needed. Did she not, then, die fighting? Would you count her cell as the front line? Did she not sacrifice everything - her home, her husband, her children, and finally life itself - for freedom?

Our women are scattered now like leaves across the world, blown by the force of police and oppression, forced to leave homes and children and escape to safety. And leaving was the worst kind of defeat, a forced retreat. Sometimes the children journeyed out later to join parents who had been forced to leave; torn up from everything familiar, friends, schools, streets to which they belonged, bewildered or resentful. At least, with one parent or with both, they could build a new kind of life. Sometimes it was not possible for the children to follow. They grow up, remembering less and less about the mother who left in the night, the mother in Morogoro or London or Berlin. The mother remembers; she remembers the little ones she left. They have grown and changed; they are far, too far.

Like wives and mothers everywhere, the women of South Africa create a place that is home, with whatever difficulties and sacrifice. The home offers the only stability, the only comfort. The men cannot do it. Even those who are fortunate enough not to be indentured, migrant labourers live most of their lives outside the home. The women's lives centre around the home, no matter how much they must stay away to work, no matter how much time and energy goes in other activities, still they make the continuous effort to maintain, to hold together, the basis of a home. When the woman goes - to jail, to banishment, into exile - the home has gone.

Children who have been able to join their parents in exile are uprooted and brought into a strange new land, to learn new languages, different cultures. The older ones remember home, and however much they learn new things and adapt to new ways, they are proud to remain South Africans, and for them, home is still over there --

but the little ones forget. In a few years the past has gone, their understanding is only of here and now. They do not even speak their own tongue. 'Say Afrika!' I heard a South African mother say to her three-year-old son who had been born in Europe. 'Afrika?' he replied, and laughed - 'Afrika? What's that?' Afrika - Myibuye - but how can babies remember?

One November night, one northern night in Europe, I went searching for a South African friend among great boxes of new apartment houses standing on the outskirts of a city; row upon row, a petrified stone forest, silent among the early snow and contracting cold. Hundreds and hundreds of doors, all closed against night and winter, all the same. Strangers behind strange doors in a strange town. But we found the door we wanted - and inside, like a door opening into another world, was a South African home; familiar music playing; photographs of imprisoned leaders on the walls; a bead necklace, a woven mat, carried thousands of miles, the memorabilia of that other home, the one that had to be abandoned; that home in the southern hemisphere, where November is summer and the Southern Cross sparkles in the warm nights. There, among the iron frost in this strange land, a South African woman had created something of her home.

You will see such rooms, flats, apartments, scattered all over the world, the same photos of Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu and Bram Fischer, the same record playing 'Nkosi Sikelele', the same books and beads, in Sweden, Moscow, Lobatsi, Cairo, Helsinki, Berlin, Algiers, London, * Toronto, Prague. The occupants are students, trade unionists, nurses and teachers, writers and other professional people, workers of all trades, fulltime political activists. To each one, a piece of South Africa adheres, and scattered across the globe the exiles re-create the feel of 'home.'

But there are many within South Africa itself who become exiles. Women and children, families of political prisoners, or of workers who have died or who are too ill to serve the apartheid state any more, these 'superfluous appendages' are also forced to uproot themselves, to leave homes painfully created amidst poverty, with so much effort and work; and with what bits and pieces they can take with them, they are forced to make some sort of life in a Resettlement Camp in conditions of extreme isolation and loneliness, in desolate places. Apartheid has uprooted thousands upon thousands of women and their families, kicked them out of places where they have lived all their lives; Indians 're-classified' in new group

areas; Coloured people removed from District Six; Africans from township and from tribe, removed to suit the needs of master apartheid plans. These people are also exiles. Paradise Valley is not home. Nor is Limehill.

Sometimes it is easier to be a man, to abandon it all and take up arms, to forget wife and family, to join the military struggle with its positive dangers and positive hope, than it is to fight this other unending kind of battle, to endure a life made infinitely cruel by the harsh laws of apartheid. Are there medals for these women, who bury the babies that die and care for the ones that survive? Will we line them all up one day and make speeches ~~praising~~ praising their courage and devotion, and decorate them for holding the front line?

Wherever there are South African women, for us that is the front line. Soweto, Lusaka, Morogoro, London, Moscow - the line stretches around the world. Wherever we have been forced to make our homes, we have only one real home - a free South Africa. Florence Matomela and ~~Mary Mordley~~ ^{life} did not survive to see that better ~~work~~ for which ~~she~~ fought with such supreme courage and loyalty. We women will find our own way of remembering ~~them~~, not with rewards or decorations, but in the new world we will make, where women will play a full and free part.

A German who spent many years in exile told me: 'We had one slogan: our faces turned towards the Fatherland!x This meant that everything we did was directed to one purpose - to help us to return to our country.'

We do not use the word 'Fatherland', but we can adapt the slogan for ourselves: 'Our faces turned towards home.'

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