

Johannesburg

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At the ~~Fort~~, the African detainees were protected by the fact that their numbers were large, and that they had among them political leaders of authority and experience. In smaller towns, the conditions were worse.

A large number of African detainees were held during the first month at a prison in Boksburg, about 14 miles from Johannesburg. There was one Indian detainee in this gaol, and he was kept in a cell by himself. He protested to the prison authorities, and after asking repeatedly to be put with the Africans, the authorities eventually told him that he would be permitted to go in with the Africans if he signed a statement saying that he was going in a cell with African detainees at his own wish. This he did.

The food at Boksburg was unfit for human consumption - soiled, low-grade beans, mealies boiled in water and fat, and porridge; meat three times a week; black coffee without sugar; and sometimes a watery soup. Blankets were filthy. They smelled foul, and were full of bugs and fleas. Food was served in rusty dishes and mugs, always dirty, and sometimes in addition smelling very strongly of some disinfectant, which did nothing to improve the flavour of the food.

Here the detainees were allowed out for only an hour during the day, to wash in the morning, empty their latrine buckets, and fill their water buckets. When they had been in Boksburg for some time, they found out that a large number of the prisoners were from Sharpeville and Vereeniging. They were kept away from the detainees and let out in the yard to exercise at different times of the day. However, one day one of the warders released them all together, by error, and they were able to talk to them in the yard.

There was only one old man among them; the others were young boys in their teens and early twenties. They showed the detainees their bullet wounds; some limped, with bullets not yet removed; some shirts were still stained with blood.

One Sunday the Chief Warder burst into their cells in a furious rage. It appeared that some of the detainees had been talking quite loudly after lights out at 8 p.m. The warder on duty had reported this to his Chief. The Chief Warder threatened the detainees that he would beat them all until the blood flowed, and he would shoot others whom he could not handle. During the morning the men complained of these threats to the Captain, but he dismissed them, saying they should not pay attention to such threats.

One afternoon the Chief Warder arrived, accompanied by two white and six African warders. He then demanded that the detainees perform the Tausa in the prison yard. (The Tausa is the notorious 'prison dance' that African prisoners usually have to perform. Some years ago a photographer from the magazine Drum managed to take photographs, through a telephoto lens from the top of a big block of flats, of Africans at the Fort performing the Tausa. There was unfavourable public comment, and this practice was said to have been stopped. Subsequently a law was passed making it an offence to publish

photos or drawings of prisons, and the Tausa is still common to many gaols. To perform the Tausa, prisoners must strip naked, then turn around and do a sort of dance, bent over, so that the warders can see nothing is concealed in any part of their bodies.)

Not only were the detainees stripped and searched, but their cells were gone through, the clothes and blankets left strewn in disorder as though a hurrican had hit them. When they protested about this, the Chief Warders informed them that according to regulations, they should have been subject to such a search every day, and he had only just found out that his subordinates were not carrying out orders. Everyone was angry, but the detainees preserved their discipline to prevent further trouble. After a few days, the Captain came on inspection, and asked if there were any complaints. They protested vigorously against the daily, degrading naked searches. The Captain smiled and said "These are gaol regulations, and if we suspect you we have the right to search you ten times a day if necessary. Even the Angel Gabriel, if he came here, would be subject to the same regulations."

A detainee who had been arrested a little later than the others, had seen a Court judgement ordering the police to allow relatives and lawyers to see the detainees. When the Boksburg detainees approached the Chief Warder on this matter, he simply replied: "That judge is not here now."

One day, three new prisoners were brought in. The Captain had informed the detainees that morning that although they had not yet been charged, they were going to be joined by one who was charged. They were surprised at this, as the authorities had instructed the warders not to let the detainees mix or even talk to other prisoners.

The first of the new arrivals was a young man who introduced himself to the detainees, and told the story of his arrest. The others found his story unconvincing, and felt he was not telling the truth. The next, an older man, was pushed into the cells, and was recognised by detainees as a man they had known; the third followed - there were murmers. This was a member of the police force, a C.I.D. man. He looked at one of the detainees, and knew that he had been recognised. He was asked to appear before the detainee's committee, to meet them and explain how he came to be locked up with them. He admitted he was a member of the C.I.D., but said that while on duty, in the presence of a white policeman, he had given the Congress salute (the 'thumbs' up sign') for which he was taken before his superiors. He was suspended, then later arrested and charged. And that was how he came to be there.

There was a great deal of speculation and discussion, but in the end the detainees could not convince themselves that this man was in fact genuinely arrested. It did not seem likely that a man who had been in the police force for 10 years should be gaoled for an offence that appeared to be trivial, even under the state of emergency, and especially since at that time the African National Congress had not been banned, and to

give the salute was not an offence.

This was not the only gaol where some of the detainees were suspect. It was obvious that the police had their 'plants' in their attempts to find an answer to one of the questions that they subsequently asked so many detainees: Who is the master-mind?

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From all over the country, there were reports of detainees who had been kept by themselves when they were first arrested.

One of these, Boyce, was a boy of 19, afterwards the youngest detainee among the Transvaal men at Pretoria.

He had been arrested at Wynberg Police Station (near Johannesburg), and was locked in a cell by himself from the day he was arrested, a Thursday, until the following Monday. Prisoners were brought to his cell to empty his latrine bucket and bring him water, and three times a day, they brought him his food - porridge. The porridge was brought round in big oil tins, and the prisoners, including Boyce, had to dig it out with their fingers - no spoon or other implement was provided.

During this period he was called to the Station Commander, who asked him, "Why do you hate the Reference Book? I also carry a pass - why should you object to it?" Boyce explained that the Reference Book and identity card were not the same. "I carry a book with dozens of pages," he said, "and if I am found without it, I am arrested. Your identity card doesn't lead you to arrest, nor control your movements."

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J.B. was kept by himself for fourteen days. He was arrested with others, but the day after their arrest, the others were taken to the Fort, while he was kept at Newlands Police Station. He was never told why he was kept separately, nor did he ever see an official apart from the warder. He was not kept in his cell all the time, but when he was let out, he was not allowed to mix with any other prisoners. He was not allowed anything - no food from outside, no books, no writing materials. Food was rotten porridge three times a day. He spent most of the time pacing about his cell.

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All the Transvaal detainees from gaols in widely-scattered towns, were transferred to Pretoria the day after we were moved. They came from outlying areas and districts, as well as from the Fort at Johannesburg, from Boksburg, Klerksdorp and other places; from country reserves, such as Sekhukhuniland, Zeerust and Lichtenburg. So they became one big family of nearly 250.

They arrived at Pretoria gaol to find an atmosphere of hate and hostility. "This is Pretoria", they were told several times by the hearded warders. Warders were yelling

and banging doors. The cells were stinking, the dishes were filthy, the men could not eat out of them.

As they were checked in, a warder called each name in turn. The men answered "Ja", but when a name was called, and the man in question said "Yes", the warder shouted at him: "This is Pretoria! Here you don't speak English - you speak either Afrikaans or your own kaffir language!"

All the warders put on this harsh, tough manner. They arrived singing - and were told singing was not allowed - "This is Pretoria!" They were talking among themselves in the reception office - they were told to keep quiet.

They were taken to cells that had been occupied by ordinary prisoners who had had no facilities for washing or changing. As a result the cells were offensive to the extreme - the smell hit the detainees before they entered the cells. They were full of all kinds of vermin, fleas, lice and bugs on the blankets and on the walls.

Proper detainees' conditions, like everything else in South Africa, was for whites only at Pretoria.

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One evening we found a bug in our cell. Matron was quite shocked and upset, ~~xxxx~~ ("If there's one thing that Matron and I can't stand, it's a bug," said Mrs. Reeding); our rooms were turned out and fumigated, the mattresses thoroughly cleaned.

We were lucky. Our cells were clean, although the building is so old. Our blankets were clean, although they appeared to be made from some type of compressed black waste material, and shed their fluff constantly until we thought there would be nothing left of them. Our tin bowls and enamel mugs were new, after we had complained about the chipped, rusty ones we were first given. Our sheets were washed for us once a week, even though they were not dried properly on the same day. We were the privileged among the detainees.

Bugs, fleas, lice, every kind of vermin infested the blankets and the cells of other detainees. "If there's one thing that hits you as an African in prison," said Peter Ntite, one of the African men detainees, "it's the lice-infested blankets and cells - it's horrible."

The African men who were held at Newlands Police Station (in the West of Johannesburg) were there for three days before being transferred to the Fort. They marched in singing, and were immediately reprimanded by the Chief Warder. They were made to strip and were searched. Then they were taken to cells.

All the men complained of the filthy, stinking blankets with which they were issued, infested with fleas and vermin. They appointed a committee and spokesmen to complain about the dirt and the food, and repeatedly complained about these things, although their demands were not met. They were, however, issued with DDT powder, and cleaned their blankets as best they could.

Although we ~~xxx~~ complained about food and conditions incessantly from the first day of our detention, and prepared in the next few weeks innumerable memos, ~~statements~~ and petitions, we were always aware of the fact that our conditions were very much better than those of any of the other detainees.

In South African prisons, white women get beds; white men get coir mattresses on the floor; Indians and Coloureds get a felt mat to sleep on; and Africans, men and women, a grass mat.

The African women detainees slept on thin grass mats on the cement floors - no beds, sheets and pillows, or mattresses for them. * Age or physical condition had nothing to do with it. Our pleas to the authorities that they should be given mattresses were always treated with annoyance - any question~~x~~ that we raised concerning the condition of the non-white women detainees was treated as 'politics.' And our attempts to have their food improved were rejected. We saw for ourselves the poor food they received, the usual rations for African prisoners: mealie-meal porridge (mealie-pap) for the morning and evening meal; no coffe, bread or milk

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A white woman detainee wrote from Cape Town: "Never before did I realise how warped is the mind of the Afrikaner who goes to Church twice a day on Sunday, and can see nothing un-Christian in the fact that pregnant women were sleeping on mats on a cement floor. I felt ashamed of my white skin, when I had a bed and clean sheets, and Mrs. Tamane who is over 60 and suffers from a weak heart, had to sleep on the cement floor."

We were astounded at our first lunch in Pretoria Central - a stew that was quite eatable and tasty, beans and bread, and potatoes that had been washed before being cooked. We thought it magnificent after Fort food. After several weeks of the same food, our appetitix for it diminished considerably. In the morning porridge was brought up together with individual rations of sugar, fat and jam. Later, when we were taken down to the yard, we heard the wardress call out "Maak oop die hek - hier kom die Noodregulasies!" (Open the gate - here come the Emergency Regulations); and that's what we were, Noodregulasies. The day I was released, I saw it chalked on a board at the main door, where the number admitted and released every day was recorded: releases, 1 Noodregulasie.

We continued with our daily lectures and classes, and were very busy making final plans for the hunger-strike. We discussed what possible action might be taken against us, punishment in the form of sentences, deprivations or solitary confinement, and what each of us would do under the circumstances. We kept the time for the duration of the strike flexible, not having any idea at all how we would react to the lack of food, and deciding that the length of the period would depend on what we ourselves found out after we had been without food for some days.

We had started making arrangements for the strike before leaving the Fort. We had ordered 4 pounds of glucose which we decided we might need for breaking our fast, and this we divided between us, five tablespoons each, which we put in empty jars and coffee tins, and each kept with our clothes in case we should be separated during the hunger strike. The glucose was to become a source of bitter contention between us and the prison authorities.

We had also taken steps to find out what drugs were safe to take when not eating, and our sources of information reported to us that both aspirins and a certain brand of sleeping tablets could be taken safely. Each day a Medical Orderly came to our yard to see who need pills or potions, and for a couple of weeks before the hunger strike all of us, including those who had never suffered from headaches or sleeplessness, complained bitterly of these two things, and lined up in the "pill parade" for aspirins and sleeping tablets. These were put into a common pool, and divided equally, so that we would each have a supply to ourselves should the need arise.

We had numerous meetings and discussions on the hunger strike, as there were many questions of tactics to resolve. We wanted other sections of detainees to join us if they were prepared to do so, both white and non-white at Pretoria and elsewhere in other gaols throughout the country. We could not, however, depend on this. In the first place, we had to arrange unconventional methods of getting news of what we were doing to the outside world, and then we did not know to what extent this could be conveyed to ~~other~~ other detainees, ~~even if they were~~ or if they get information, whether they would agree with our action, or agree among themselves.

We were due to start the hunger-strike, unless the Minister replied to our petition, on Friday 13th May. We became impatient for the day to arrive. We felt we had done everything we possibly could before-hand, and now we wanted to start.

The night before the hunger-strike, we had a celebration supper. The prison soup was quite edible, and in addition we supplemented with our own stores - tinned salmon, hardboiled eggs, tomatoes. Then we each brought out our own private stocks of cheese, biscuits and chocolate - we had each ordered these so that we would have something if we were separated and individuals felt they had to start eating again. We packed these, together with the remainder of our communal stocks, in cardboard cartons and put them away on the top shelves. They were not to be touched until the hunger-strike ended. The scene in our recreation room was something like the night before Christmas, with the packets of food, and sweets and chocolates being handed around by everyone.

We finished up a somewhat hilarious evening by all eating too much in an endeavour to get rid of open tins and perishables. We only learned later that this was the wrong way of starting a hunger strike. But at last we were ready, and we downed our last cups of coffee before midnight and went to bed ready to face the first day of our hunger strike.

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