

Breaking of Men



"I'LL BLOODY SHOOT YOU unless you talk." The bloated little captain was hysterical. "There's 23 people dead on that station and this little game of yours isn't a joke anymore," he screamed.

For a day and a night I had been made to stand under interrogation at the Grays, Security Police headquarters in Johannesburg.

I hadn't asked for the warrant when I was arrested under the 90-Days clause: legal niceties don't count for anything under that law. I only tried to keep my face from breaking up in quivering; I struggled for composure as I denied any knowledge of the African Resistance Movement.

This was on the sixth floor of the Grays. I had walked in freely, minutes before, to collect a Power of Attorney for a friend who had been arrested two weeks before.

They searched me and then tried questions again. I said I knew nothing and refused to answer. Three SB men took me to search my flat. They had trouble among my files and books and newspaper cuttings so I made some suggestions for selection which they accepted, if a little warily.

The Lieutenant advised me to eat something as "it might be a long night for you." His sergeant only spat disgust at a Picasso nude. "All what you Liberals can think about is filthy pictures of *kaal* women."

They handed me to the team of interrogators back at the Grays and then these three went home. They were to be the "good" guys in a pattern of "sweet-sour"; they would know something of what the "bad" guys did to me in interrogation.

I WAS MADE TO STAND on one spot while they questioned me. Sometimes four of them would question me in a barrage; sometimes one would probe me; at other times they would ignore me as they chattered sex and sport among themselves. They would sometimes joke with me or sympathise with my predicament — "You're a nice boy, man. Why don't you get out of this mess." — and other times they cursed and threatened me.

I could see the unknowing cinema crowds in Main Street. I had been due at a party that evening: Would my hostess guess? I had asked the Lieutenant to tell my mother of my arrest — he never did —

but did the rest of the world seven stories below know or care that the police were forcing people to speak?

Why did I stand, many people have asked? If I had sat, it is true, I would have been hit or kicked, but that would have been better than the slow self-torture of standing.

I stood because I wanted to beat these people, I was determined not to show weakness and, perhaps most strongly, to prove I was right. I think now that this response is foolish, romantic and inadequate but most people have done the same.

My back ached and my legs felt a fine pull of pain as I tried to stand it out. But worse than this, was the dragging, tedious time. I welcomed questions because they occupied some moments. "We just want a few little questions answered and then you can go home to bed," they offered me tantalizingly.

I started to break after the bomb had been exploded on the station; it destroyed my sense of being right and better than my interrogators. This, coming on the top of the disillusion caused by the confessions of colleagues arrested before me, lost me the will to resist much. So, by interrogation, solitary confinement and the use of every psychological stop, they broke me to make a statement, and others, and finally to give evidence for the State.

WHEN I WAS TAKEN to the police cell I hardly slept though I had been kept awake and on my feet for most of two nights. I vomited on the cold porridge they brought me in the morning. Later I jogged about to keep warm. I determined to keep fit in case I was made to stand again but I could hardly manage more than a few arm swings before I felt ill.

In the afternoon I was moved to another cell — darker, colder and smaller. I slept uncomfortably through this day remembering only to ask for the Bible 90-Day detainees are allowed — which I got and the news that the French had beaten South Africa in a Rugby test match.

On the Monday the S.B. came for me again: more questions, more threats, more promises. I reached a stage where I was apologetic that I could tell them no more.

I began to doubt that I did not know more, though oddly I kept some facts from them, many of which were quite inconsequential.

After two weeks I did not see much of my interrogators and I longed to see them, to talk to them, to have some intercourse with human life.

I started with a strict routine of exercise and reading. I did exercises I remembered from my rugby-playing day: ; I ran on one spot; I ran imaginary cross-country courses, lifting my knees for the hills, striding down them and jumping ditches; I rolled my socks into a ball and practised catching off the wall. I set out to read the Bible (the only permitted reading in 90-Days); to read small parts of it critically; to learn sections off by heart.

But slowly the cell closed in on me and I began to pace it restlessly — three paces up, two across. For hours I would lie on the bed and stare at the cell walls — 12 feet high, black to six feet, green above — and dream hopelessly. I dreamt of escaping — but how? At nine feet there was a slit six inches deep and two feet wide which led through a two foot wall to the street outside. Behind me as I lay on the bed there were two grimy windows, barred and with a wire grill on both sides. The door was heavy steel with two bars and a padlock outside.

There was a light in a grill on the wall behind my bed. I could choose to have it on all the time or off all the time. I chose to have it on because when it was off the cell was dark, even at midday.

SLOWLY I WOUND DOWN; I paced more, I dreamt more. I did not always get my stipulated exercise time in the prison yard and then the days were unbearably long. Soon I stopped running during the exercise periods and talked to the policemen instead. When they brought my food I tried to keep them talking.

Occasionally I would have a visit from the local Security Branch lieutenant. He was the "good" guy. He promised me everything, and he arranged the first visit from my mother. She came with a message from Colonel Klindt asking me to turn State witness. The S.B. man would see my mother when she brought food for me. He would then tell me that she was worrying about me, that I should be a good son and

An anonymous South African is inspired by reading Ruth First's *117 Days* to describe his own experience of solitary confinement and interrogation, which led to his turning state evidence in a sabotage trail.

save her any further worry. In all the four months my mother suffered much more than I did. She was close enough to real life to feel the horror of "90-Days." I drifted to a state of little feeling.

The trials were times of intense chaos for me. I felt I would refuse to give evidence right until the last moment and then, when I was in the witness box, I wanted to give evidence as best I knew how. My strongest feeling was to avoid letting the "good guys" down. It is a feeling I still have sometimes now (what will they think of me writing this article?).

I had been moved to Pretoria and when my 90 days were up I was released and re-arrested but it did not cause me any jolt. I don't remember any hopes when they told me I would be released because I was then so indifferent to any hope.

Towards the end of November I was told I would be released without charge. I was taken to see Brigadier van den Bergh, the head of the South African Special Branch, for a bizarre interview. He seemed

intent on impressing me with his fanatical gaze; he kept me waiting in front of his desk as he glanced through papers; he asked me to work for the police then dismissed my refusal with the advice to be a "good boy."

I was released after several false starts that could either have been bungling or an attempt to tantalise me.

WHEN I READ RUTH FIRST'S *117 Days** I relived with a shudder my detention. There were the interrogators, Swanepoel, Van der Merwe, Van Zyl, Dirker.

Her detention was a year before mine and in that time these men have learnt a little. Ruth First describes how she resisted breaking. She was not made to stand but she had the lonely hell alright.

She has been fair to her jailers, telling

of humour as well as horror and the careful account of her feelings and reactions is valuable. Always she fought and complained with her interrogators and her prison warders: I avoided making any fuss but accepted, mostly, my lot. She kept faith in her rightness: after the station explosion, and my colleagues' confessions, I lost mine.

Extraneous accounts in her narrative — such as the inquest on Looksmart Ngudle who died under 90-Days detention — are disturbing, but they generally help to give a fuller picture of 90-Days beyond her personal account. Police have no qualms about beating African detainees for, as they told me, they do not consider them worth more subtle forms of torture.

Ruth First stops her story at her release. I would have been interested in how she adjusted afterwards. She had been driven close to nervous breakdown and tried to kill herself. I was close to this too and I am still troubled now. I fumble for some sense in it all.

* *117 Days* by Ruth First (Penguin Special).



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