

POLITICAL DETENTION REMEMBERED

Margery Moberly



Natal Witness

Hans Meidner's Morris Minor 3 months later, with his wife anxiously awaiting his release



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On 30 March 1960, NU students stood in groups of ten or less in central Pietermaritzburg, protesting the arbitrary arrest of their lecturers and others

'They didn't know what to do with us. We were the first white political prisoners in Pietermaritzburg, and no one knew how to treat us. The warders considered us a cut above the common criminals, and were half inclined to call us "Sir".'

On a recent visit to Pietermaritzburg, Dereck Marsh, former University lecturer and political detainee, recalled his experiences in the local gaol during the State of Emergency of 1960. When I interviewed him his mood was upbeat and his tone lighthearted and he recounted his time in detention with a good deal of amusement. It was the ineptness of the police and the Special Branch at that time that gave rise to this humour, but he was quick to acknowledge that later detainees suffered unspeakably as their captors refined their grisly trade and honed their interrogation skills.

The temperature of protest and opposition to the Pass Laws had been rising during 1959. In 1960 as the Nationalist Party government prepared to establish a republic the pot boiled over. There were marches in many cities and hundreds of blacks ('natives' as the newspapers called them then) burned their passes in defiance. On 21 March police fired on an anti-pass demonstration at Sharpeville, and 56 people were shot.

In the midst of these events the government decided to impose a State of Emergency and to round up 'troublemakers', 'agitators' and the leaders of various organizations such as the ANC, the PAC and the Congress of Democrats. It was clear to the stripling Liberal Party, centred here in Pietermaritzburg, that something would happen. They had been active in opposing the Treason Trials and had addressed meetings up and down the country in company with the ANC and the Indian Congress. 'Once,' said Marsh, 'I even shared a platform with Nelson Mandela.' Liberal activists were well known to the Security Branch who regularly attended Party meetings and took notes. In turn they were well known to the Party members who used to tease them mercilessly. 'Can you keep up?' a speaker would ask the scribbling SB man, so obvious in his safari suit and long socks. 'Would you like me to speak more slowly?'

The ANC declared March 28 a National Day of Mourning for the victims of Sharpeville and Marsh postponed his planned birthday celebration until the following night. The guests left at midnight. At 2.00 a.m. the police arrived. 'What is the charge?' asked Marsh when they announced that he was under arrest, 'There is no charge,' came the chilling response. 'I want to phone my lawyer,' said Marsh. 'You will not phone anybody,' replied the SAP.

Then they searched the house. 'But they really had no idea

what they were about. When I told them that our two small children were asleep in one of the bedrooms they readily agreed not to search that room! They asked me to show them where "the papers" were so I showed them my desk; but most of my papers were about my University teaching. Eventually they took some Liberal Party pamphlets and a few other things, which they solemnly listed, and then they made me sign the list. I have it still ...'

They bundled Marsh into a car and drove off into the night. When they did not stop at the Police Station in Loop Street he wondered if they were going to drive him straight to Robben Island, but it was to the Pietermaritzburg gaol that they took him. This was the old prison dating from colonial times that stands at the top of Burger Street, and now houses the Gateway Project. The prisoner was marched into a cell after his belt and shoelaces had been removed. There was a straw mattress on the floor, a blanket and a pillow, and a bucket in the corner.

I was feeling pretty miserable,' he recalled, 'and then I heard them bringing in Peter Brown and I felt much better'. Brown (the National Chairman of the Liberal Party) was shown to the next cell. 'In .there' barked the SB. 'After you,' responded Brown. Marsh smiled at this memory of his friend. 'He is always such a gentleman.'

Soon afterwards the third prisoner was brought in. This was Hans Meidner, Natal Chairman of the Liberal Party, and a lecturer in botany at the University. Though the SB must have known that none of the Liberal Party leaders was a terrorist they would have been mystified by Meidner: with his Jewish features, shock of graying hair and staring eyes he must have fitted exactly their picture of an anarchist agitator.

All round the country similar swoops had taken place and political activists of all colours were bundled into gaols, while families and lawmen frantically searched for ways to get them released. Local lawyers, Simon Roberts and Leslie Weinberg, applied for a court order on the grounds that the new Emergency Regulations had not yet been gazetted - another example of official ineptitude in those early days. The application was successful and the three were duly released, well aware that they would be re-arrested as soon as the legal machinery was in place.

The *Natal Witness* of April 1 carried the headline 'SAAF, Artillery and Carbineers mobilized in tense South Africa'. Also on the front page was a small paragraph headed 'Re-arresting of detainees begins'. It includes the bald statement: 'In Pietermaritzburg 3 people were removed to gaol at 11.30 a.m.' No names. No details. Now it was illegal to mention the names of detainees.