

## MID-MARCH IN UITENHAGE 1985

"Come quickly Molly, they are killing our children!". Chilling words spoken by the Chairman of the Kwanobuhle Parents Association. A meeting place was hastily agreed upon, and 45 minutes later I, and 8 Black Sash colleagues drew up in front of the Uitenhage Post Office. A small group of parents – faces strained, voices hushed, met us. There was no time for embellishment of the facts – several youngsters between the ages of 15–18 had been virtually abducted from their homes early that Sunday morning, while others had been taken when they went to the police station to sign the bail register during the morning.

One of the fathers, grey with anxiety, described his own attempts to find his son that day – how knowledge of his son's whereabouts was denied by the person on duty, how – even while he stood discussing this, he had heard what he believed to be his son's cries for mercy – for the beatings to stop. We were appalled, and under guidance from the parents strode into the C.I.D. Office nearby. A pleasant sergeant temporarily calmed our fears by announcing that he could foresee no problems regarding the parents' desire to see their children. Following his directions, off we went to the police cells. A wrong turning brought us to double doors in an outer building – I knocked and entered.

Only time will reveal the significance of the scene . . . the young man writhing in pain on the floor . . . hands behind his back, manacled to the leg of a table . . . a man in civilian clothes bringing down yet another blow with a vicious orange whip on the bleeding victim. Three swollen-faced and bruised youngsters sitting in stunned silence on a bench nearby. Several men – presumably prison staff, lolling around in an unconcerned manner. They had doubtless witnessed just such a scene many times before – in fact one calmly munched his lunch during the whole sordid event!

The ensuing 10 minutes proved to be a salutary lesson to us in police tactics. We refused to leave the scene of the crime until the Station Commander arrived, and the C.I.D. declined to produce him to satisfy our demand. In the end they unshackled the prisoner and marched him off to the police cells. We felt our only option was to return to the main building to see the District Commander.

The remainder of the day reads like a John le Carré novel. A most amiable police Colonel listened to our tale with concern – picked up the 'phone, spoke to various departments, and then announced that no-one of that name had been anywhere in the police station that day. For once we were speechless!



### Establishing the Truth

Eventually, we persuaded our friendly Colonel to accompany two of us in an attempt to establish what we knew to be true. First to the police cells – through the huge doors where we had seen the prisoner enter 30 minutes earlier, and into the office. Yes, I would be allowed to examine the records – no need to hurry, I could take as long as I liked – but they could tell me that no-one of that name had been there. They could also tell me that no-one could get into the cells unless his name was in the register.

We left, puzzled, and went into the “assault” office. All very neat and trim – not a chair or note-book out of place. “What about this blood on the floor?” I asked. Shrugged shoulders from the Colonel.

On to the C.I.D. offices to meet two Captains – blank faces – strong assurances that no-one of the name was in the building. Maybe the police could have some-one in their patrol van . . . but it didn't have a radio and so could not be contacted. We were furious at the transparency of this tactic, and at what seemed to us to be open trickery. We left, saying we would give them an hour to establish the prisoner's whereabouts.

Predictably, on our return we were met with masked stares and blank denials. An affidavit made days later by the prisoner revealed that during the entire “search” that afternoon he had been held in a room no more than 20 m.

from where we were standing. Also significant was that he was released without ever being charged with any offence.

Another youngster, taken on the same day, was not permitted a visit from his parents for a whole month. During this time, following strong demands, his lawyers were permitted a visit. Their description of his physical appearance intensified the parents' fear for his safety, and could have justified the cat-and-mouse game of “hide-the-prisoner” which seemed to be the tactic adopted in his case.

It is tragically true that the majority of people in this country no longer regard the Law as their protector. Our witness of the torture has been well-documented, and legal procedures will be instituted in due course. In that what we saw mirrors the experiences of many, many blacks in our area, it is to be hoped that this case will at least expose a serious break-down in one aspect of police discipline. Many of us believe that until this particular section of the police force can be called to account by members of the public, and until they themselves are forced to operate within the law, not only will their contaminated image damage by association the reputation of our uniformed police, it will continue to foment the deepening racial tensions in this country. □

N.B. Events described here took place on March 17th – 4 days prior to the massacre on March 21st.

#### Guest Editor.

**Michael G. Whisson**, Professor of Anthropology at Rhodes University, member of the board of Reality.

#### Contributors

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**F.G. (Guy) Butler**, Professor of English at Rhodes University, native of Cradock, author of **Karoo Morning** and much else besides.

**W.J. (Bill) Davies**, Stella and Paul Loewenstein Professor of Development Studies at Rhodes University. Formerly the regional director for the Urban Foundation in the Eastern Cape.

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