Chapter Seventeen

Inside and Out

Prison

The routine for sentenced prisoners was subtly different from the regimen under 90-day detention. First the clothes: all khaki and ill-fitting, then the shoes, either a size too large or a half-size too small. Mealie pips (corn kernels) soaked in water and inserted into the shoe to enable the leather to stretch as the kernels expanded was the standard prison recipe for shoes that did not fit. My cell was on the ground floor this time, but the toilet buckets and bowls for washing and drinking water were the same as before. The exercise yard was as depressingly gray as I remembered it under 90-day detention, but the "no-talking" regime that was in place then had been relaxed just before our arrival. Familiarity with the Pretoria Local Prison was of no special help to those of us who had spent time there in solitary confinement. Among the warders, Du Preez was the main source of continuity between the former detainees and the new guards who now serviced the section. He did more than act under orders; he was the special branch's accomplice in policing a political prisoner. It was under his supervision at Pretoria Local that we exchanged our smart courtroom identities for prison ones.

The "political family" was a relatively broad one, from the centre-left in their thinking to liberal and communist. The long roll-call of political prisoners was an indication of the extent to which the structures of the liberation movement had been decimated. The toll of black activists in jail ran into thousands. Proportionately the number of white politicals was smaller but not insubstantial. Ben Turok and Harold (Jock) Strachan were the first of the MK recruits to arrive at Pretoria Local. They were tried at different times and each sentenced under the Explosives Act to three years imprisonment. They narrowly missed being charged under the "Sabotage Act" (introduced in 1962) under which they would have received 10-year sentences. Jack Tarshish, sentenced in 1964 was not as "fortunate" as the previous two. He was sentenced to 12 years for an act of sabotage he was trapped into committing by an enemy agent. Similarly Marius Schoon and Raymond Thoms, both in their late twenties and members of COD, were led into a police trap by an *agent provocateur*. They were apprehended just before placing explosives at the Hospital Hill police station and each sentenced to 12 years imprisonment.[1] Denis Goldberg was found guilty at the Rivonia Trial in June 1964 and

sentenced for life; Dave Kitson and John Mathews were convicted for sabotage in the "Little Rivonia Trial" for membership of the Transvaal Regional Command of MK. Dave was sentenced for life and John Matthews for 15 years. Their co-accused Wilton Mkwayi, Laloo Chiba and Mac Maharaj received similarly lengthy sentences and were sent to Robben Island. Their trial ran concurrently with ours, but was half as long. I had no knowledge prior to their arrests that they were involved in MK activities.

The convicted members of the African Resistance Movement (ARM) were already at "Local" when we arrived in April 1965. They were a spirited group, most of whom I had never met before. Their trials had taken place at the same time as ours, but they were tried in the Supreme Court under the "Sabotage Act" while we were charged under the Suppression of Communism Act and the case heard in the magistrate's court. The members of ARM would probably have been at home in MK if they knew how to find it. They were admirably militant and would have found COD too placid; they might also have been uncomfortable with its communist image. In any case COD had been banned since 1962 and some of those sentenced for their membership of the African Resistance Movement had joined the organization since then. In 1966 Fred Carneson, Bram Fischer and Issy Heymann, all of them SACP members, joined us. Rowley Arenstein and Dave Ernst from Durban (unaffiliated to any formal group of communists) arrived a little later. All of them, except Bram, were sentenced to between one and six years in prison. Bram was tried under the "Sabotage Act" and sentenced to imprisonment for the remainder of his life. Had he not left the trial to re-establish the underground network, he would have been sentenced to five years in jail. But it was highly likely that further charges would have been preferred against him and his sentence made much longer.

Ben Turok, writing about his experiences in prison almost 40 years later, described the members of ARM variously as nice, delightful, fair-minded, entertaining, courageous and laid-back. They were Hugh Lewin, Raymond Eisenstein, Alan Brookes, Dave Evans, "Spike" de Keller, John Laredo, Tony Trew and Baruch Hirson, probably all of them (except Baruch Hirson and John Laredo) in their late twenties. Their sentences ranged from one year to nine. I knew Raymond (he preferred to be called Roman) and Baruch, but had had no idea of their involvement in ARM or its forerunner, the National Committee of Liberation. They were all liberal in their politics, except for Baruch, who was a Trotskyite. Turok knew the communists better and described them without gloss. He saw Ivan Schermbrucher as severe in his political judgments, vehemently opposed to the armed struggle and a wonderful comrade in prison; Eli Weinberg as resolved to sit out his five year sentence with the least possible discontent; Norman Levy as disconsolate and furiously critical of the leadership outside; and Lewis Baker as a sombre figure but a kind comrade – when he broke out of his depression.[2] Ben's sentence expired before the arrival of Fred, Rowley, Dave and Bram and he was therefore unable to comment on them. Ben

Turok himself was solicitous of others' welfare, conforming to the rules, but not afraid of contesting an order that was unfair. He was always affable and as far as I could judge, inexplicably happy.

Class, status, opportunities and good fortune outside the jail did not matter. Attitude, however, counted a great deal. Also important were how one adjusted to the inanity of the prison regime and its rigid discipline; whether one was able to come to terms with the reality of being a sentenced prisoner; and how much one was able to identify with others in order to live comfortably with them. As far as I could see, to live together amicably one had to have the capacity to mask one's irritation at times, to share and to trust. I managed, but it took time. I did not always share the work ethic of others and often liked to read fiction for pleasure. But work and study kept us sane in a lunatic environment and sanity was the paramount thing. Sensitivity was also an essential quality, but that could not be learnt. Significantly, personal and family problems were discussed between confidantes rather than with the group as a whole. There was much that I discovered after my release from prison that I did not know about then. Differences in politics, religion and prior educational attainment were less important than the shared experiences that made us a family – something the prisoners, at Pretoria Central Prison noticed. We may not all have agreed on how to change the world, but we were all opposed to apartheid and many of us had experienced the harshness of 90-day detention. Most of us had suffered the strain of solitary confinement, standing-torture or in some instances brutal physical assault from overzealous security officials. All of us had been through emotionally draining trials and in many cases been hurt by the betrayal of comrades who had turned and become state witnesses. Now we were in prison together and this and everything else we shared was sufficient to make us a family.

At first we were placed in separate cells on routine observation for the prison psychologists (more likely criminologists) to ascertain whether we were capable of rehabilitation. Apparently we were incurable. Routine prison protocol was therefore abandoned and we were held three to a cell, like everyone else. The entire section, a dormitory of about twelve adjoining cells, held about 22 political prisoners facing sentences from one year to life. We read, studied and bared our personal histories to one another: eating, reading, sharing anecdotes and occasionally contraband. Sometimes the most private and least forthcoming of cellmates were the most self-revealing, using inner resources they never knew they had to overcome the social constraints of prison. Over three years, at different times, I shared a cell with at least a dozen prisoners..

There is nothing comparable to getting to know a person in prison. Costa Gazides read, wrote copiously and enlivened the dullest of prison moments with amusing reminiscences of his youth. He took sheer delight in testing the limits of authority, believing that the prison regulations were only there to be broken. As a medical doctor his

remedies for our ailments were mostly homeopathic and political. If I had a headache, its cause was imperialism and the cure a wet handkerchief spread firmly across the forehead (the large red prison handkerchiefs fitted the prescription perfectly). Rowley Arenstein and Dave Kitson were similarly two early cellmates as were Paul Trewhela and Lewis Baker. Rowley talked and listened attentively to others and was fond of recounting his experiences as a lawyer during the rural uprisings in Pondoland. He was proud of being referred to by his clients as an honorary Zulu. Dave Kitson was a talented engineer, then about forty-five years old, resigned to a life sentence that left him numb. He had a fund of stories, incidents from his youth in the CPSA in the 1940s in Durban and his activities in the trade union movement in London – all of which he often repeated. But most of the time he buried his head in old books from the prison library, anything that he could get. It didn't seem to matter that their publication pre-dated the South African War or that chunks of their spotted pages had been torn out for use as wrapping paper for home-rolled cigarettes by half a century of prisoners. He seldom spoke of the movement or said much about the state witness, Lionel Gay, who had betrayed him. For all his taciturnity Kitson was a good ally to have in prison; private but accessible.

Marius Schoon and Jack Tarshish were quite different "chinas". Marius was then in his mid-twenties. I had met him before in Swaziland during the 1960 state of emergency, when he was thin, pale and angry.[3] When I met him again in prison he had not changed. A delightful cellmate, he lived in his head, feasted on anecdotes, embellishing the plot and altering the scenery according to the mood and the occasion. He found happiness after 12 years in prison, re-married and had two children with his new wife, but tragically she and his younger daughter were killed in Angola, where they were victims of a parcel-bomb sent by the special branch and intended for him. Sadly, he died while I was writing this memoir.[4] Jack Tarshish, the last of my cellmates, could either be the life and soul of the cell's threesome or deeply depressed. He had narcolepsy and frequently fell face-first into his porridge or into his soup-plate at mealtimes. But I warmed towards him and was touched by his affection for his sister (Ethel de Keyser) whose photograph he valued highly and kept where he could always see it, on the top of his locker in the prison cell. Soon after his release he took his own life.

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Prison was very bleak in the beginning. We were closely watched by the warders who were all patently aware that the special branch was monitoring our treatment. This was despite the fact that the officer commanding the prison was nominally responsible for our keep. On our arrival, exercise time was a miserable half-hour in the morning and half hour in the afternoon, preparatory to a long lock-up. Conditions improved later, but it was a contest all the way. As D-category prisoners (in itself a punishment usually experienced

by the most intractable of common law prisoners) we were entitled to a single letter and one visit every six months. My first visit was in October 1965. I had not seen Philippa since April and was probably as apprehensive about the visit as she was. She looked thinner than I had remembered her and she had specially dressed for the half-hour visit. She kept a brave face as we awkwardly greeted each other through a brass grille, I on the inner part of the visiting cubicle and she on the outer; a warder next to her, his ear cocked to hear every word that passed between us. She made no comment on my ugly prison garb, close-cropped hair and unfamiliar appearance and spoke about the children, her work, my mother's poor health, her own family – anything but local or international news of the world outside – we knew that that was strictly forbidden, as was information about the prison, the prisoners, or what we did "inside".

I returned to the cell disappointed that I had not used the time more sensibly and that the visit had been about everything except feelings. Later, I learnt from the others to make a list of the topics to talk about and also figured out a way of masking questions that would normally be disallowed. But it made future visits less spontaneous and the quest for news seemingly more important than the visit itself. News, however, was our life-blood; we fed on it and were desperate for any snippet from which we could weave a credible narrative. In the absence of newspapers or a radio, news-gathering became an object of a visit to the dentist, the doctor, a conversation with a new warder (who was as desperate to talk to others on his watch as we were ravenous for news) but there was nothing we prized more than news from a family visit.

One morning in 1965, Lewis Baker received an unusual visit from the then Minister of Justice, B.J. Vorster. As the names of visitors were never announced and Lewis Baker was not due for a visit at that time, it was a curious, if not ominous summons when Warder du Preez called him to the visitors' room. It was not entirely untoward that a government minister should visit the prison, but it *was* unusual to be selected for direct contact. When Lew returned to the cell about an hour later, we heard it all, some of us several times over as we walked round the exercise yard in groups of three, sometimes joining a new group to hear the details a second or a third time.

It seemed that Vorster had remembered Lew from his days as a lawyer in Benoni. The two men had previously practised at the side-bar on the East Rand in the late 1940s and early 1950s. They were not friends. Lew was a member of the Communist Party and was now a prisoner and Vorster was in one of the fascist "shirt movements" before becoming an internee in an internment camp during the Second World War. Vorster had welcomed the Nazis as allies at the start of the war and found a political home in the neo-Nazi Ossewa Brandwag in which he rose to the rank of general in the Port Elizabeth district. In September 1942 he was interned for two years at Koffiefontein and his

activities were severely curbed after his release in January 1944.[5] Later, he became a member of parliament and in 1966, in the wake of Verwoerd's murder, prime minister.

Vorster's sudden appearance at Pretoria Local was an enigma. Had the man come to gloat over Lew's incarceration? Or was it nostalgia at the memory of old times in a prison camp? The visit no doubt gave Vorster an opportunity to reflect upon his own powerlessness in the war years. He spoke about his restrictions in detention and commiserated with Lew on his prison conditions, saying that "this was the way it had to be". At which point Lew interrupted him to ask for an upgrading of status, an increase in the number of visits, more frequent letters, a variation in the prison diet, and above all, permission to receive newspapers and enjoy contact visits from our families. Vorster appeared sympathetic and nodded his head in recognition of conditions familiar and unforgettable. He had experienced it all at Koffiefontein, he told Lew. He had had only a modicum of privileges there, half-hour monthly visits under guard, separated from his visitors by barbed wire, kept at arms length from society and banned from receiving newspapers or journals, except for a number of prescribed magazines which nobody would ordinarily buy to read. It was the way things were for political prisoners and Lew and his fellow travellers should understand that they were in that category now, as he and his comrades in the Ossewa Brandwag had been before. Sadly, he knew it all but could do little to change things![6]

Vorster's visit made little difference to our lives and prison conditions were slow to improve.

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The grimmest of my years in prison was in 1965, the year I arrived, but it had been worse before then. For a long time there had been no work. Then mailbags were found. They were unusable, whether or not we mended them; wear and tear and old age had contributed to their attrition. At first they were placed in each cell and the inmate's worked on them for about four hours in the morning and a few hours in the afternoon. Fortunately that work arrangement changed after our arrival and we were all allowed to work outdoors, in the yard. This was fine in the warm sun but uncomfortable in the cold. We sat on wooden stools brought from the cells, our backs resting against the yard wall. It was an infant school activity, threading adhesive string through the eye of an outsize needle and stitching countless holes, as if we were darning socks long past repair. Unfortunately I was never any good at darning socks (concealing a book under the bag's folds was out of the question as surveillance was strong). Dave Kitson sat next to me and worked characteristically quickly, completing bag after bag before I had even begun to enter the production process. Denis Goldberg worked with equally rapid results. More often than not, my contribution lagged behind everyone else's.

This could be serious as there was always the residual fear of losing the “right” to work at all. Mailbags were bad, but no work and being shut in a cell was worse. Kitson came to my rescue, adding sufficient sacks to my share of the day’s production tally to enable me to exceed the informal quota. Work was to be taken seriously. “No talking”, was the rule, but of course we did talk when the guards weren’t looking. I had my finest conversations with Bram during some of these work sessions. This was much later, after we’d come back from a brief interlude at Central Prison in November 1966, and he had already been sentenced to life imprisonment. He talked about his family’s involvement in the 1913 rebellion and his revulsion at the school cadets, which he associated with the British army, imperialism and the enemy. On one occasion we talked about the 1936 Soviet trials (which I knew he had attended) and asked him whether he suspected they were unfair. Before he replied, he adjusted the mailbag perched on his lap, looked around and paused characteristically. His answer was a surprise. “Of course I did! But that’s between you and me!” He did not want to join the anti-communist bandwagon.

Throughout 1965 conditions were bleak. Harold Strachan was released soon after our arrival in April 1965 and promptly did his best to expose the conditions he had experienced in jails in Durban, Port Elizabeth and Pretoria. This did him little good personally and he was returned to prison on further charges and treated abysmally. But every prisoner benefited from his disclosures. The articles were published in the Johannesburg *Rand Daily Mail*, despite their contravening the Prison’s Act of 1950. Lawrence Gandar, the newspaper’s editor, forfeited his job for publishing Strachan’s story, but the disclosures were subsequently discussed in parliament and clearly reached cabinet and prime minister.

In the aftermath of these articles, Helen Suzman, the lone Progressive Party Member of parliament, made a sudden appearance at Pretoria Local. She had come to follow up Strachan’s revelations of prisoner abuse. She walked from cell to cell until she reached the end of the section, bombarded all the way by an earful of complaints. Later she visited the prisoners in Mandela’s section on Robben Island. There the inmates were more astute in providing her with a coherent list of complaints. They had got wind along the prison grapevine that a visitor was coming and stood to attention at the entrance to their cells, saying very little as she walked through the section. When she reached Mandela’s cell he was waiting for her with a long list of complaints. Characteristically, she listened carefully and said she would take them up with the prison authorities – and typically did as she said.

She came to Local again in 1967 and on that occasion asked to see Hugh Lewin. Like old friends, they greeted each other from either side of the brass grille in the visitor’s room where Hugh spoke for us all. Nothing much had improved since her last visit; upgrading was still very slow, and work was a meaningless activity, amounting to little

more than a form of punishment. Much time, he told her, was still spent in the cell and registration for advanced university courses was increasingly difficult, due to the authorities' incomprehensible opposition to post-graduate study. (I was fortunate enough to register for an honour's degree in history in 1967, but after that there were few who were allowed to register for post-graduate courses; the regulations for common law prisoners simply did not apply to "politicals".) Unlike the other prisoners, we were not allowed to receive local or international news; treatment was more punitive, searches were more severe and surveillance fierce. Helen Suzman's visits led to a few permanent changes, but apart from the welcome recreational improvements, things remained the same as before.

It was study, however, that kept us going. It enabled us to survive the long lock-ups and lack of amenities. We registered with the University of South Africa (because it was equipped for distance learning and was the only tertiary institution sufficiently trusted by the regime to be free of subversive ideas). It was a safe "school" where the tutor would not be seen as a conduit for subversion. For us it was access to the university library that was important; the ability to requisition books on history, literature, anthropology, philosophy and Native Administration (but not Political Science or Government). The university's printed notes could be discarded without serious intellectual loss. In the weeks prior to the exams there was hardly any movement in the cells. We sat perched on our wooden stools until "lights-out" – heads down, silent as the dead, transforming the section into a dormitory of a most unusual university. As a captive student-body, it was rare if we did not do well at exam time.

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Central Prison

"*Kom, Kom, Kom!*" the warders' battle-cry rung through the corridor as it always did when something untoward was about to happen. Without a word being said on where we were headed, we were led out of the prison through a side door and conscientiously herded into a truck like so many sheep. The vehicle stopped almost as soon as it had started, at Central Prison – a stone's throw from Local. We were led into the main hall, a huge concourse with high walls and a black, stone floor. The whole place reeked of polish and the atmosphere commanded order and silence. The only activity was the opening and closing of grilles by turnkeys and the motion of a few inmates skating on "taxis" from one set of gates to another.[7] There were about 15 of us, Dave, Denis and Marius had been summarily removed from the section at Local the day before, and were now reunited with us. They had been brought to "Central" first, but we were at a loss to know why. There was equal confusion as to why we were moved at all.

The one-on-one surveillance by a handful of alert warders at “Local” (on the look-out for signs of mutiny against the prison regulations) was out of the question at Central. There were many more opportunities for our interacting with other prisoners in this jail and less likelihood of our being micro-managed than before. We stood in the stark hall, ignored by the turnkeys and of no special interest to anyone except the floor-dancers. Time seemed to be of little consequence to anyone. Finally, there was movement. Warders entered the hall carrying suitcases, which we recognised as ours – some of us still had “personal property” kept at “reception”. Among the bags was my capacious green case, which Terry Bell had found so incongruous; he had only a toothbrush, which he kept in his shirt pocket. I forget why we were handed the suitcases, but as soon as I was reunited with mine, I opened it and looked for contraband. There was no tobacco to be found, no matches, no radio, money or chocolates. All I found was a peppermint, which I quickly threw into my mouth and just as quickly spat out again. I might have been starved for sweets, but this was a mothball.

Central was another world. It had its own political economy. Jam, sugar, tobacco and matches were all “household” commodities that could be bought and sold on the section floor. Books, sex, secrets and skills (which were all part of the legal and professional service sector) were eminently exchangeable for other commodities. The Prisons Department more or less owned their prisoners – at least for the duration of their sentences and for each further sentence they received. Many prisoners were often “in” and “out” of prison in what amounted to a lifetime cycle of release and return. They were subject to regulations rather than rights. “Basic rights” included meals, exercise, visits, letters, study materials and work. These could easily be forfeited if the regulations were contravened. Rights depended on one’s category of “citizenship” (a forbidden word as prisoners forfeited their citizenship for the duration of their sentences). One’s status as a citizen (meaning the number of letters, visits, purchases, etc.) depended on whether you were grade A, B, C or D. Most of the political prisoners were in grade D and remained in that category far longer than the other prisoners. They barely qualified for anything more than the basic prison rights. The commanding officer was the most authoritative individual in the system but real power rested with the warders and their vassals: the section cleaners, the librarian, the heads of stores, the workshop-heads and the narks. Together with the corrupt community in the kitchen (the “hidden hands” behind the prison economy) they ruled the roost in the jail and no inmate in his right mind would attempt to ruffle anyone’s feathers.

Our section at Local Prison was tiny by comparison with Central. It took time to get used to the size of this huge establishment, the large number of inmates, the prison’s heterogeneous culture and its babble and buzz. It was not called the “The Big House” for nothing. It came as a surprise to us that we were not kept together as a group of political

prisoners, but accommodated in different parts of the section. Possibly the authorities thought that we would not have the same opportunity to assert our solidarity as a special category of prisoners if we were mixed with common law prisoners. The irony was that we regularly asked to be treated equally with the other prisoners, but the special branch preferred to keep us apart and dispense separate and unequal treatment.

Hundreds of inmates in the higher grades filled the cells in the B section and as it was a "hanging jail", about 120 prisoners (few of them white men) were held at any one time in death row. In the 10 months that we were there about 80 hangings took place. The choral ritual that preceded the executions, and the mournful lament of fellow inmates on death row, could be heard as far as the Local prison from before dawn to dusk. All the inmates lived with it, carried on their ablutions as usual, ate their breakfast before rushing down the stairs to "assembly" in the large main hall on the ground floor. After two or three rounds of counting (to confirm that the number of prisoners remained the same as the night before) we moved in double-line formations through the prison yard to the workshops. On hanging days we silently waited behind a door wedged into the wall of the complex that housed the gallows. This was to allow the prison hearse to remove the remains of the dead men from the yard after the executions. On these mornings we marched to the workshop more slowly and the mood was more sombre than usual. What remains with me is the memory of the nightlong lament. Lewis Baker and I were closer to the singing than the other political prisoners because three months after our arrival at Central we were unexpectedly transferred to cells in a section opposite death row. The reason for this doubtful privilege was our upgrading in status from grade D to grade C!

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By some strange coincidence the work I was given on my first day at Central was concerned with coffins. The allocation of work to prisoners was a mystery. Lew and I were sent to the sheet metal workshop and the other "politicals" randomly placed in the fitting and turning, blacksmith and carpentry workshops. Nothing prior to this had prepared us for any of these occupations, but as "Jock" Strachan sensibly said, "prison was comprehensible and manageable but never predictable".[8] The prisoner who acted as the foreman of the sheet metal workshop was a badly brutalized inmate who had set himself the impossible task of improving my working skills. In this instance it was hammering and folding the malleable metal sheeting into the shape of long, narrow coffins, referred to in Afrikaans as "*trommels*" (literally "drums"). We were told these were used to store armaments for the SADF. Subsequently I discovered that they were also used to store government documents that accompanied the minister of a national department from Pretoria to Cape Town twice a year, when parliament sat. My job after knocking out the bumps in the sheet-metal case was to bend the crooked wires straight for

the opening and closing mechanism in the lid. Lewis Baker made the lid and used the wires I tortured into shape to thread them through the coffin's hinges.

"Big Eye", the workshop chief, regarded the politicals as "peace freaks" and kept a watchful eye on us. Lew Baker, a sensible judge of the inmates (they were, after all, his clients in the prison law practice he found himself conducting[9]) said the foreman was to be ignored at our peril – and I believed him. More than once this aggressive recidivist had threatened to throw me into the trench of filthy pea-green water outside the sheet metal workshed if I didn't improve my work performance. It was numbing work, hammering out the humps in the coffins, my head in the tin box for hours at a time, ears ringing until I was totally deaf. Relief came for a short while with the visit of the new Minister of Justice, Petrus Cornelius Pelser. His appearance at the workshops occurred just after the assassination of Verwoerd in 1966 while the officials sorted out the turf war between the special branch and the Prisons Department as to whose prisoners we were. Pelser came virtually unannounced except for a brief warning along the prison grapevine that an important visitor was on his way to inspect the workshops. The message was passed in quick succession from one workshop to the other until it arrived at the sheet metal section, at the end of the line. Big Eye gave the orders for all of us to make a good impression on the visitor. This injunction was hardly necessary as Pelser's visit consisted of a peremptory walk in double quick-time past the workbenches, a slightly raised eyebrow as he looked in the direction of Lew and me, and he was gone! When the minister left, Big Eye (who had noticed my effort to appear productive) slapped me hard on the back and proclaimed in his thick, crackly voice, "Leafy, you were a credit to your race!"

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My friend Buks taught me more about prisoners' attitudes to the authorities, crime, the law and the values of the inmates than anyone else in the prison. Buks was a Jack-of-all-trades, good at everything he did and good company too. We sat outside the sheet metal workshop where the atmosphere was freer and we could smoke with less likelihood of detection. Buks had his own work ethic and advised me to take my time, but work well. So we talked and smoked, while all the time he was totally in charge. He did not enjoy my over-sized cigarettes, "bombs" I called them. Like many of the other prisoners I spoke to he was innocent of any of the charges laid against him and had been "railroaded" by the prosecutor, the court and the law and falsely betrayed by his accomplices – the law was an ass if ever there was one, he said. Crime was about *being caught;* acts of violence and disobeying authority were legitimate in a violent and "no good" world. If items were stolen from an individual who was careless of his security, the victim deserved to lose them. Sabotage was not in his line of trade, but probably in order. Communism didn't fit into his book of offences at all. He referred to it as "bible-punching". Despite his telling

me to take my time over the workload, he looked askance at any idling on the part of inmates and was appalled at the sight of Roman Eisenstein and Paul Trewhela noisily scooting past us in a cart piled high with window frames from the furniture shop they worked in. On another occasion, Buks literally stared in total disbelief at a political prisoner who carelessly emptied a bucket of dirty water over him. When we returned to Local in November 1966, I wrote a piece for *The Gleek* (our prison *samesda*, a tabloid newspaper, edited chiefly by Hugh Lewin) in which I paid tribute to Buks' philosophy, as well as his contribution to the new jurisprudence. Here is the story:

My Friend Buks

"Just call me Buks," he said and sat down opposite me on the edge of a narrow channel of water. His stocky legs just reached the surface of the yellow slime at the bottom of the *sluit*.

"How do you do?" I said, occupied with a buckled strip of wire, which I was preparing to flatten on a sooty steel stake. Buks stared at me and answered enigmatically "Five to eight." [He thought I meant how long was his sentence]. He watched the curved end of the wire twist and list as I brought the hammer heavily down. He saw me secure the loose end with my foot and hold the humped edge with my fingers while I dealt the slippery thread of wire a solid blow. He watched the wire slip from my fingers and slither off the stake as hammer and hump connected.

"You don't know your job," he said, and taking the wire twisted it between his short stubby fingers, a real bunch of fives. He filed out the dents with two light taps of the hammer while I fished in my pocket for a small yellow pouch of tobacco, cigarette paper and matches. Whilst Buks worked, I tore off a strip of paper and rolled a substantial cigarette – a bomb, I called it – and handed it to my friend: a reward.

"What you in for?" I asked.

"Railroaded," Buks replied, remaking the bomb and returning half a handful of snout.

"Oh!" I commiserated, looking closely at my new friend. "Did they catch you red-handed?"

"You're a tit!" Buks glared at me. He was a man of about forty, short, tubby but toughly made with round, very round brown eyes in a florid face. "RAILROADED!" Buks repeated.

He was very angry. "When a man says he's innocent there's no-one who can tell him different. That's if there's no witnesses. Only one man knows."

"God," I said perceptively, I thought.

"Hell, no! The only man who knows is hisself, of course!"

Buks flashed a glance at me, took a pull at the cigarette and handed me the soot-stained stub.

“What you in for?”

“Communism,” I said.

He nodded silently while I watched the trail of wire straighten under his hands.

“See how it’s done?” he said, handing me the hammer. “You knock out a little bit at a time. Just turn it a shifty each time you punch it.”

I lifted the hammer, fingered the wire and connected with its metal edge. The wire wriggled loose from my fingers and the serpentine tail struck Buks directly in the chest.

“Oh my God!” I shrieked.

“You’re a real nit,” Buks bawled, rubbing the wounded region with the black fingers of both his hands.

“Now do it just like I showed you,” he said, biting his lip with anger.

“Here,” I said, putting the hammer into his hand, “maybe I ought to watch you a little longer.”

I rolled another cigarette, a smaller one this time – Buks did not seem to appreciate my bombs – and handed it to my friend.

Buks’ attention was diverted at that moment by a handcart stacked high with jingling steel window-frames. A prisoner in dirty khaki work clothes lounged lazily over the top of the load. His mate galloped in front of the cart, drawing the load with long, inelegant ricksha leaps. The cart wheeled round in its tracks, the frames collapsed and the passenger rolled over into the dust. The ricksha riders rested somewhere under the cart. I moved to help them.

“You stay put!” Buks ordered. He shook his head disapprovingly.

“Bad one’s those. Bad,” he repeated

“Bad,” I said weakly.

The men at the cart extricated themselves from the wreckage and stood foolishly grinning at one another. “Hey Quilp,” the curly-headed ricksha rider called to me, “help us pull this up.”

“Don’t you move,” Buks ordered.

“Can’t get away,” I shouted sheepishly and turned guiltily to the stake.

“Know them?” Buks enquired.

“Mmmm ...”

“What’s their ticket?”

“Sabotage.”

"Your line?"

I nodded. It was too difficult to explain the difference between communism and sabotage. In any event, I noticed that the other inmates were filling their buckets to wash for lunch. A gaunt young man, with narrow slit eyes and a disproportionately long nose walked towards me, swinging a dilapidated black bucket.

"Hi Quilp," he called. "We must talk sometime." He swilled the contents of the bucket into the sluit with an extravagant movement of his wrists before marching off to the tap.

The muddy water rushed along the sluit. It dammed up against Buks' boots and covered his feet to the ankles with a pale, greasy scum.

"Cunt!" he screamed, leaping out of the water.

"Another one of yours?" he demanded viciously.

"Who him? Never seen him in my life before," I muttered as the bell claimed me for the lunch queue.[10]

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Back to Local

We returned to Local in November 1966, less innocent in the ways of prisoners and prisons, but at least reunited as a group. The austere no-man's land that was Local, which should have been familiar, was a shock. We had been at Central for ten months and the bustle and barter at the "Big House" contrasted starkly with the slow rhythm and set routine at Local. Yet it was a relief to be re-united with comrades whose crimes were communism, sabotage and fighting for human rights rather than the anti-social offences we attributed to prisoners at Central. My time there was a levelling experience and therefore in a significant way salutary, a glimpse of a culture I would never have known.

At Local we were, with few exceptions, middle class, professional and English-speaking and if there were hierarchies among us their genesis was ideological and professional. We shared similar tastes in music, sport and books, played chess and bridge and enjoyed volleyball and "boop-squash", a game derived from the public school version of "fives"; activities which made us objects of curiosity to the warders, who were alienated by our academic preoccupations and closer in social class, education and interests to the common law prisoners. In contrast to Central, the "white" section at Local was a political jail, more like a concentration camp than an ordinary prison, but technically subject to the same regulations as common law prisoners. But uniquely, we were subject to the close scrutiny of the special branch and were treated differently in matters of parole, contact visits, access to news and study.

Once back at Local, we found Issy Heymann, Harold Strachan and Bram Fischer already there; the three of them had been tried and convicted while we were at Central. Issy Heymann was a veteran in the communist movement. At first he was held in solitary confinement and later joined by Harold ("Jock") Strachan, when the latter returned to face a further sentence for his revelations on prison abuses. Jock and Issy were as incompatible in temperament as oil and water, but apparently made amiable prison companions. Together they helped to cheer Bram. Issy had been sentenced to five years imprisonment for furthering the objects of communism and was sentenced to a further year for aiding Bram when the latter was in hiding. He was a diffident man, eager to please, always preferring conciliation to conflict and easily cheered. "Jock", on the other hand, who arrived at Local more or less at the same time as Bram, was often despondent, but masked it well with his mordant wit and sarcastic references to prison convention. He had been sentenced to eighteen months on top of the three-year sentence he had just completed and was held in complete contempt by the prison establishment.

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Bram said very little about his 10 months in hiding and few questions were asked. As the prison cells were possibly bugged we never spoke of his chances of survival underground or of his likely activities before his capture in November 1965. Nor did we, in the relative privacy of the exercise yard, discuss the merits of his decision to go underground. At the time of his disappearance from the magistrate's court we unanimously approved of his action. We knew he would be convicted and beyond the symbolic value of his sentencing, saw little merit in his going to jail. For security reasons we were not privy to his discussions with the exiled leaders in London and in any case, party protocol required that we be told only on the basis of our "need to know". Accordingly, we did not ask. After his return from London, he apparently discussed his plans with the recently augmented Central Committee in South Africa and told them that he had already started preparations to go underground. Eli Weinberg and Ivan Schermbrucher, who were already in prison, were evidently informed of this development.[11]

Bram's intention, as we understood it, was to resurrect the structures of the Party and re-build the movement. Broadly stated this was a desirable aim. But the question was whether it was feasible for him to establish a racially inclusive network in the face of the segregated spacial arrangements of apartheid. Making the contacts, acquiring the cover, providing the logistics for this task were almost impossible without detection. The presence of a white man in a black area was immediately suspect and Africans were similarly vulnerable in the white suburbs. Nelson Mandela's brief image as the "Black Pimpernel" was a symbol of resistance, an inspiring signal to the African nationalists and

the masses that the ANC was alive and fighting, but it was difficult to see what significance beyond the symbolic the "Red Pimpernel" would have.

In 40 years very little has been written of Bram's achievements in hiding.[12] He was normally a gregarious person and his vision of a future socialist society unshakeable, but he could become anxious and distracted when things went wrong. What propelled him to rebel against the court in this instance, I think, were his subjective feelings as an Afrikaner, lawyer, communist and a person who passionately believed in the cause of justice and Socialism. I believe he seriously meant every word of his letter to the court in January 1965 when he wrote:

> Unless the whole intolerable system is changed radically and rapidly … [a]ppalling bloodshed and civil war will become inevitable … To try to avoid this becomes a supreme duty, particularly for an Afrikaner, because it is largely the representatives of my fellow Afrikaners who have been responsible for the worst of these discriminatory laws.[13]

He clearly felt that his decision to go underground was both a moral duty and an act of defiance that was expected of him. The structures of the SACP had been broken and he would "for as long as possible" do his best to mend them.

With the hindsight of half a century I do not think that a decision by the leadership – internally or in exile – instructing him to remain in London rather than recreate the underground in South Africa would have held him on that occasion, despite his stringent views on party discipline.[14] It is interesting to note that the exiled leadership, struck by the seriousness of his proposal to resurrect "the underground" *at home*, (unusually) attempted to persuade rather than instruct him not to return to South Africa – as they could have done under the party principle of "democratic centralism".[15].

There was no doubt that he felt deeply about the shattered state of the movement and assumed personal responsibility for the reconstruction of the Party's broken structures. His mission underground would be to complete what he had already started when he was still free. Once underground and in disguise (leaner; hair dyed auburn, cut well back and receding from his forehead; a goatee like Smuts; rimless glasses; and a pipe in his mouth to change his speech) he worked under the aliases of Peter Thompson, Peter West and more often, Douglas Black. His work underground was lonely, limited in logistics and handicapped by having to assume the depressing identities of Mr Black and his alternative aliases. Although the task he set himself was worthy, it was probably too ambitious and the support he received from London too ambivalent to make a difference. In a country where the majority of the population was black, his mobility was limited and his disposition too needy to undertake the solitary job of resuscitating the structures of the SACP and generally, the liberation movement. In particular, his auxiliary network was too

small and known to the police. But he was probably the only senior person available and able to undertake the task.

He wrote articles to the newspapers to encourage whites to enter into a dialogue on race and politics, crafted a draft discussion statement about rebuilding the Party and the liberation movement more generally (the document was found on his premises by the security police on his arrest).[16] In it he urged the remnants of the Congress Alliance to work within the apartheid community structures such as urban Bantu councils and the Transkeian Regional Authority, a controversial topic that simultaneously occupied Mandela and his comrades on Robben Island.[17] He reached out to Rowley Arenstein in Durban, asking him to set aside his differences with the SACP on his opposition to the armed struggle. This, Bram argued, was no more a contentious matter, as MK's structures had been crippled and the organization was no longer functional. According to a conversation I had with him in the prison yard, the reason the negotiations came to nothing was because of Rowley's insistence that his cooperation be conditional on his being "leader" in Natal. I never pursued this with Rowley as I had no reason to doubt Bram's word. In the course of 1967 and part of 1968, I had many discussions with Rowley on practically every contentious topic, but he was dismissive of his contact with Bram. On reflection, I think it is highly likely that he would have insisted on leading the movement in Natal, but as I assumed that the structures in that province had been devastated as badly as everywhere else, the question of leadership did not seem to be important enough for either of them to end the connection.

Unsurprisingly, Bram said nothing to me in prison about his liaison with the SACP leadership in London or of his difficulties in acquiring resources from them. It is now known that he wrote numerous letters to the London Office (which was code-named Kim) but seldom received replies. When he did, they asked for more details and complained of a shortage of resources. There is no written record to suggest that this apathy was due to lack of support for his work or whether it reflected the Party's state of organization in London at the time, but interest in his project was clearly limited.[18] Initially, they sent him forged papers including a driving licence, identity document, and later, a passport. But he did not seem to be particularly mobile.

It is not clear whether Bram confined himself to Johannesburg for lack of funds or whether he remained there because his contacts were in that city. According to one of his biographers, it seemed that at this point his chief objective was to avoid capture.[19] It was only a matter of time before he and his small network of trusted comrades would be caught. Violet Weinberg was the conduit between him and Issy Heymann. She passed money and instructions she received from Bram to Heymann, which he in turn conveyed to his contacts in the African townships. It was during Heymann's detention and traumatic interrogation that he revealed Violet's name, leading in turn to her arrest on 8 November

1965 and subsequent breakdown after 70 hours of interrogation. Bram's arrest followed three days later.

He had been in hiding for 290 days and the evidence of his previous trial and the additional evidence found in his house were enough to convict him.[20] Among his papers were notebooks, letters in code, envelopes with cash, false identity papers and an array of equipment for his various disguises.[21] Applying the creams to his face in the morning and padding his cheeks with cotton wool swabs to change the shape of his face, was a nightmare, he told me. He was taken to Pretoria Local Prison and a week later appeared in the magistrate's court, a shadow of his former self. The preliminary hearing was relatively brief, during which he was kept at Local as an awaiting trial prisoner in what was virtually solitary confinement.

As before, Bram pleaded "not guilty" and on this occasion, explained his plea in an eloquent statement from the dock at the end of the trial. The address, as intense as Mandela's and as passionate, lasted four hours. He worked on it for the entire period he was awaiting trial, tracing his personal path to Socialism, demonstrating why he had come to challenge the apartheid state and all it stood for. Most notably, at a time when peaceful protest had run its course, and the movement had taken to armed struggle, he spoke of negotiation with the movement's leadership rather than the pursuit of civil war. His words were prescient:

> If one day it may help to establish a bridge across which white leaders and the real leaders of the non-whites can meet to settle the destinies of all of us by negotiation and not by force of arms, I shall be able to bear with fortitude any sentence which this court may impose on me.[22]

He was found guilty of sabotage and 14 other charges and sentenced to life imprisonment. (The judge, in what seemed to be an aside, ruled out any consideration of the death penalty.) Although he would have received a sentence of five years as a member of the Central Committee when first tried, the state would almost certainly have acquired sufficient evidence to prefer charges of sabotage against him later.

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When I met him in the prison yard he bore nothing of his former professional appearance. His hair had been closely cut. His prison jacket was too big, his trousers too long and his shoes chronically ill-fitting. Du Preez's mission was to make it known to him that he was a pariah and he did his best to make him feel like one. He harassed him at every conceivable opportunity and for months before we returned to Local, made him crawl on his knees to clean the lavatories and polish the floor. Bram did not complain, partly

through pride, but also confusion: first from the disorienting effects of the solitary existence in hiding and then, more particularly, after his sentence and solitary detention. His loss of identity had severe effects on his morale as did the unseemly haste of his peers at the Johannesburg Bar Council in moving to strike him off the roll of practising advocates. The reasons they gave for this action were ostensibly not political, but for his "dishonourable and deplorable" conduct in breaking his undertaking to stand trial.[23] This judgment was handed down on 2 November 1965, nine days before his arrest. The judge, coincidentally, was the same Quartus de Wet who had sentenced Mandela and his comrades and rejected our appeal against the magistrate's judgment. Only after Mandela became state president did the Bar apologize for its disparagement of Bram.

His morale only lifted when he was reunited with his political family at Pretoria Local. Encouraged by the vitality of the group, he had started to recover. He looked quite robust, wielded a formidable stroke at the prison variety of squash and played a strategic game at volleyball. He liked winning. In May 1967 we heard that he had won the Lenin Prize. He knew that at the time of his trial, but our acknowledgement of this honour must have boosted a badly battered self-image. When I left the prison, I took a note from him, explaining that the prize was not for him personally, but for everyone in the struggle for Socialism. (I thought that he should say more and affirm his part in that struggle, but I knew better than to suggest that he amend his message.) He subsequently became ill, his health rapidly deteriorated and his condition shamelessly neglected by the prison authorities. He died a prisoner on 8 May 1976. Rather than freeing him when it became apparent that he had not long to live, the authorities "released" him to his brother's home in Bloemfontein, and designated the private dwelling as a prison. Finally, they placed him under guard and withheld his ashes from his family when he died.

I have, in this account, preferred to remember him as I last saw him in 1968. It was good to see his spirit revive before I left. He participated in the Saturday morning lectures in the prison yard, sitting cross-legged on the slate floor of the "squash" court, listening intently to talks on social anthropology (John Laredo), physics (Baruch Hirson) and historiography (Norman Levy). My lecture on historiography was, I think, the third in the series, and the kiss of death for the Saturday morning seminars. I had taken particular trouble to present a rounded view of the different historical approaches from Herodotus to Hegel and beyond, deciding to be careful in the mentioning of Marx and the materialist school of history. I had hardly got to Hegel when Du Preez, who had been listening on the sidelines, leapt towards me and seized my lecture notes, ending that session and all others. At first I took it personally, thinking that I should have been more circumspect in the presentation of the topic, but later realized that Du Preez was probably acting under orders, and irrespective of what had been said would have ended the colloquium anyway. For some reason I cannot now recall, I cancelled my letter to the officer commanding

dated 14 July, asking for the return of the "history notes which Mr Du Preez took from me on 1 July 1967". I'm not sure of the reason for withdrawing the letter. Further charges on this score were improbable and I was hardly likely to be accused of furthering the objects of Communism by converting saboteurs while they were in prison.

The Last Lap

Despite some changes in the next 17 months of my sentence at Local, conditions were generally depressing. We were still on the portable bucket system, which meant that we carried our respective sanitary pails to the toilet at the end of the passage, together with basin and water-bowl perched on top of one another. The stench was disgusting and the challenge for me was to be able to hold my breath for as long as possible from the bathroom back to the cell at the other end of the passage. I was released before the completion of the new prison building in December 1968, where toilet facilities were better. In the new complex the inmates had beds in single quarters, which was a change from living in a communal cell of three with sleeping mats on the cement floor.

The dreariness of prison life was to some extent attenuated by the visits from the International Red Cross and Helen Suzman, and by the effects of their interventions. With Suzman's support we received a music-set and classical records. For the first time in the prison's bleak history, the sounds of Beethoven and Bach filled the prison's hollow spaces. In addition, the authorities conceded to the purchase of sports equipment: tennis and volleyball, which helped to turn the exercise yard into a sports ground at exercise time and on the weekends. Similar concessions were introduced at Robben Island. Through further pressures from outside and perhaps as a consequence of Jock's prison exposures, up-grading was accelerated. Most of the inmates at Local were still in the grade C category and allowed only a monthly half-hour visit and a letter of 500 words. Sometime early in 1967, Lew and I were up-graded from C to B grade, enabling us to receive a monthly visit of two persons and to write and receive three letters each month. We were by that time about the only two short-term prisoners at Local. We did not expect further promotion, probably never aspired towards it, but eight months before we were released, we unexpectedly received promotion to grade A.

If we were common law prisoners we would most likely have received parole or at least been promoted to A grade halfway through our sentences. We were now able to write five letters as well as receive two visits every month. In terms of the prison standards with which we were familiar, this was tantamount to affluence. We shared our new wealth by lending our names to any correspondent among us who needed to increase his letter quota. Liz Franklin (Hugh Lewin's former wife) reminded me many years later that she had received a letter from me from Local. It took me some time to remember how I'd come to write to her, until I recalled our system of proxy correspondence. I'm not sure

how many others received letters from me, but I was glad to share my grade A privileges with the other prisoners. Along with the upgrading we were allowed to make a small number of purchases of toiletries, tobacco and groceries. These we clandestinely shared with everybody as were the matzos and sweetmeats sent in at Passover, by courtesy of the Jewish Community. One of my letters to the officer commanding, dated 9 September 1967, requests purchases of a half pound of coffee, two pounds of sugar, a pound of peanut butter and a pound of cheese. We must have planned a binge that week-end.

The concessions in grading were welcome, but hardly compensated for the ban on news or the absence of meaningful work. The austerity of the institution and the pettiness of the prison hierarchy did not change in all the time I was at Local. The most elementary requests I made to the OC involved repeated letters, some of them urgent and many of them mundane, but important to a sentenced prisoner. The OC was the nanny to whom I wrote regarding everything. I appealed to him for permission to attend my mother's funeral (denied); asked for permission to write a letter to my brother to send five pounds to cover my stationery (September 1965 – denied); to purchase a pair of nail scissors (July 1966 – denied); to see the dentist (April 1967 – granted); to receive spectacles that were sent out for repair (June 1967 – granted); to see my lawyers to discuss the new restrictions imposed on me by the special branch (February 1968 – denied); to send my son, Simon, a postal order for his fifth birthday (February 1968 – denied); to allow my hair to grow in anticipation of my release (February 1968 – granted). The correspondence was endless. One letter I sent to the OC before leaving was a request to give my guitar to Hugh Lewin. As I never possessed a guitar and could never play one, I am not sure why I came to write that letter. Nor do I have any record of the OC's reply.

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My prison notes evoke strong memories. In January 1966 I wrote an emotional letter to my children, Deborah, Simon and Tim, which read, rather embarrassingly:

> *On New Year's Day we had a concert ... There was a play called "Murder in the Cathedral" … There were also songs sung by a group of daddys called the boop-a-doop skifflers. They sang rock songs, blues and special mood numbers. Djamila's daddy [Costa Gazidis] played the double bass. After the concert we all stood in a circle, crossed arms and sang Auld Lang Syne. It was a wonderful morning and I don't think I shall ever forget it.*

I'm not sure about the boop-a-doop skifflers (the instruments were made from cardboard) or whether I got the sequence of events right. I do remember that there were songs and carols on Christmas Day and that the play (two scenes from T.S. Eliot's *Murder*) was held

on the following week-end. Dave Evans was the artistic director and I his superfluous assistant and "prompt". Hugh Lewin, who subsequently wrote a graphic account of the Courtyard Players, made an elegant Beckett, and Marius Schoon, Paul Trewhela and Alan Brookes were tough knights. Costa Gazidis looked incongruous as the priest. The props, a few prison tables for the altar, a sheet (deviously acquired) for a tablecloth; a blanket with bright red trimmings for the archbishop and a majestic mitre for his head – each of these an inspired piece of prisoncraft – were variously made by Denis Goldberg, David Kitson, Johnny Matthews and Jock Strachan.

There were two other plays that were performed at Christmas time before I left, each as grand as the ones before. The performance during Christmas 1966 consisted of excerpts from Shakespeare's *Henry IV* (the Gadshill robbery and the raucous scene in the Boar's Head). Hugh played a superb Hal and Paul Trewhela an unlikely, but irrepressible Falstaff. The same team of theatre-hands, Jock, Dave, Denis and Johnny Matthews created the swords, belts, Falstaff's cloak and Hal's boots. These were designed to perfection from scraps of cloth, cardboard, sweet papers and cut-outs painted with blue, red and black inks. The third play, performed before I left Local, was Pinter's *Dumb Waiter*. Hugh and Dave Ernst made engaging gangsters and the props (waistcoats, shirt-fronts, cardboard guns and even a proscenium arch in the way of a curtain drawn across the yard) were probably the most ingenious of all the theatre accessories created while I was at Local. [24]

On the Way Out

I look back on my prison letters to Philippa and notice the drift from reality to fantasy. In one of them I reflect on how much I had been thinking of her. In another, I say "only two more Christmases before we're together again", but the letter is too long for the prison word limit and I amend it to read: "only two more Christmases and I'll be with you forever". Finally I tell her I will do everything to make her "lonely struggle worthwhile" and remind her that I love her and hope she will "continue to do the same for me". In that same letter I wish her "a *happy* wedding anniversary and many, many happy returns of 20 March". My conception of a happy wedding anniversary seems not to have stretched to a celebration in which there were two celebrants. Her replies to my letters and references to our relationship were kind, even affirmative, and in the parlance of prisoners who are sustained by the support of their spouses, she was staunch.

The separation from the prisoners who had been my family for nearly four years was difficult to bear. Bram, Denis, Dave, Marius and Jack still had years of their sentences to serve and would remain in prison for three times as long as I had been there. Baruch, Hugh, Fred, Eli, Ivan and Rowley would be there for more or less twice as long. I had made a point of walking around the yard at exercise time, talking "one-to-one" to each of

them. I hoped to be able to visit their wives or loved ones or contact their families after my release, but six days before I was due to leave I was issued with an order renewing my banning from work, meetings, politics and social gatherings. If the government could not keep me in prison they would make sure that I was a prisoner at home. I was prohibited from leaving the house at night (between the hours of dusk and dawn) and I was to report to the local police station daily to prove that I had not absconded overnight. My movements during the day were similarly curtailed. I was barred from entering any township, factory, publishing-house, university, college or school. Writing of any sort, whether a book, pamphlet or critique of the government, distributing a poster or a drawing were all forbidden. Visiting friends and family, unless I saw them one at a time and during the daytime, was unlawful. A doctor could visit my house "if the name of such medical practitioner" was not on a banned list. Communicating with any person on such a list "except your wife Phillipa [sic]", was forbidden.[25]

I did not have a chance to say goodbye formally to anyone at Local as I was suddenly told to collect my books and papers and to report to "reception". My fellow prisoners (all of them now close friends) were in the exercise yard, fully aware that I was about to leave and that I would probably be taken to a prison closer to my home in Johannesburg. They had witnessed others leaving before: Ben, Spike, Tony (Trew), Costa, Paul and Jock. Lew had been taken to Benoni pending his release on the same day as me. I knew how I felt when others had left and now that I was leaving I wondered whether they felt the same gap of years between this moment and the day of their release. I was as apprehensive of seeing their faces, as I was uncertain of the future. After a search of my possessions and the handing over of my suitcase, I was taken to the Fort to be released in the morning. Sleep was impossible that night. I'd forgotten about the dirt, the noise and the chaos at the Fort; Local seemed so sanitary by comparison.

At about 9 a.m. on 11 March 1968 I was called to the reception room and given my suitcase and the little money remaining in my account. From there it was a short walk to the huge double doors that were the only notable architectural feature of the Fort besides its dramatic location. And then OUT.

Philippa was waiting, probably as apprehensive as I was. Emotions were not something we could show. Best to behave as if this was an ordinary moment. But that was not how I felt and I'm sure that she did not feel like that either. I blinked in the sunlight; kissed and briefly hugged her, both of us strained and embarrassed. We went straight to the house at Ivy Road, Norwood, in a car that she had borrowed. What did one say to one another in circumstances like this? It was a celebratory moment, but feelings were too wrought to be festive. The snowman I made before leaving nearly four years previously had gone from the front garden. I half expected it to be there. It's not uncommon for

prisoners to return from jail and expect everything to be the same as when they left – or as they remembered them in their dreams.

I knew the children were no longer as young as I had left them, but that is how I saw them in my mind's eye. Tim, my step-son, had already been sent to his father in London, but Deborah, just turned nine, was standing in the living room – waiting. She greeted me shyly and moved towards her mother. Simon, now nearly five, was outside in the garden. His back was turned towards me and he had in his hand a dead sparrow, which he had found on the grass and was stroking. He knew I was there, but said nothing. Perhaps I should have helped him bury the bird, but I simply stood there unable to do anything but watch him fondle the lifeless creature and wait. It would take us all time to thaw.

Chapter 17

1 For details of the police trap, see SADET, *The Road to Democracy, Volume 1*, p. 628,

2 Turok, *Nothing but the Truth*, pp. 168–169.

3 Harold Strachan recaptured the 1960 period in Swaziland deliciously in his autobiography, *Maak a Skyf, Man!*, published 40 years after he and Marius were together in the (then) dusty town of Mbabane.

4 He was survived by his son, "Fritz", and his wife Cherie whom he met while in exile in Ireland.

5 On his release from internment, he was virtually house arrested (in Robertson, in the Cape Province) and needed a permit to "receive" his wife from the Transvaal and had to obtain special permission to travel to Cape Town on any specified business.

6 On Vorster see Bunting, *The Rise of the South African Reich*, pp. 98–100. Lewis Baker's profile of Vorster during his detention was substantially accurate. What Lewis did not know was that after his release, Vorster himself had travelled to Cape Town from Robertson to speak to the then Minister of Justice, Colin Steyn, to request the release of his friends in Koffiefontein. The minister is reputed to have thrown him out of his office! Bunting, *The Rise of the South African Reich*, p. 100.

7 Taxi is the prison word for skating on rags across the prison floor, either to polish or shine it.

8 Strachan, *Maak a Skyf, Man!*, p. 154.

9 He informally advised prisoners of their legal options on further charges for cases that were pending.

10 Full acknowledgement is made to The Gleek, Pretoria Local, Christmas 1966, for the re-publication of the story in this history. It appeared under the title "My Friend Buks".

11 Clingman, *Bram Fischer*, p. 353.

12 For a brief review of Fischer's underground activity see SADET, *The Road to Democracy, Volume 1*, pp. 619–631. A valuable source of information derived from interviews and court records.

13 Cited in Bizos, *Odyssey to Freedom*, p. 300.

14 See the discussion in chapter 16 above on Bram's interaction with the exiled leadership.

15 Clingman, *Bram Fischer*, p. 345. Clingman notes that the principle of democratic centralism was not evoked. Slovo's statement that Bram convinced (persuaded) the exiled leadership in London is not matched by the leadership's subsequent lethargy in attending to his requests for money and logistical assistance.

16 SADET, *The Road to Democracy, Volume 1*, p. 630.

17 See Nelson Mandela, in Mac Maharaj ed., *Reflections in Prison* (Zebra Press and Robben Island Museum, 2001), p. 13.

18 Some light is shed on this by Martin Meredith, *Fischer's Choice*: *A Life of Bram Fischer* (Jonathan Ball, Johannesburg, 2002), p. 130; See also SADET, *The Road to Democracy, Volume 1*, p. 631.

19 Meredith, *Fischer's Choice*, p.136.

20 Bizos, *Odyssey to Freedom*, p. 309.

21 Meredith, *Fischer's Choice*, p. 136.

22 Cited from the transcript of the trial by Meredith, *Fischer's Choice*, pp. 143–144.

23 Bizos, *Odyssey to Freedom*, p. 302.

24 For a comprehensive account of the courtyard players, see Lewin, *Bandiet*, *Seven Years in a South African Prison*, chapter 9. My memories of these plays are impressionistic; Lewin has splendidly captured both the detail and spirit of this theatre.

25 Notice in terms of paragraph (e) of sub-section (1) of Section 5 of the Suppression of Communism Act, 1950 (Act No. 44 of 1950). All the above restrictions were set out in this document, 5 March 1968. The spelling of Philippa was incorrect, so technically I could not legally communicate with her either.