



Vera Inber, Leningrad, 1943

Leningrad Diary

Vera Inber

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With an Introduction by
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Malroba
4/10/74.



HUTCHINSON OF LONDON

LENINGRAD DIARY

Here is how this book (Leningrad Diary) found its way back to it's first owner who read it while in the underground 35 years earlier...

During the late 1970's and early 80's, most of those involved in anti-apartheid and anti-colonial struggle of South Africa were either in exile, prison or underground.

This account is of an underground comrade. For those of you who do not know the meaning of the word underground, you deserve your ignorance.

Footprints

The one feature of underground is that you have lost your home. Home in South Africa may mean plush accommodation in lush areas, or it can mean ordinary homes built by government to house the police, prison warders and the railway workers etc, or it could mean squatter camps or government created townships for Coloureds, Africans and Indians.

It is usually home for one night and then you move on. Underground could mean sharing accommodation with a security guard, sharing a home – one that comes to mind is Nalini Naidoo and Dennis Dickson and two children in Pietermaritzburg who shared their home with Mseleku – the fellow in the Health Ministry. He is a very tall fellow whose legs did not fit in the bed. In fact from his legs to his feet, the bed could not cater for him. In winter it must have been horrible. I think he was safe here for more than one night like a B&B.

African comrades underground were constrained in the main to extremely marginalised places – no running water, toilets – like the present floods in Cape Town where children are playing and living in water that is dangerously infected while we watch on TV the 91st birthday bash for Mandela!

On my way to exile, I waited in Clermont in a wood and iron structure no bigger than a toilet with a huge hole in one wall. I was told not to walk across the hole, the neighbours would notice. I was left with a bucket to pee and crap in which was covered with old newspaper. Yes, she left a tin of milo. I was petrified to light the paraffin stove.

But then Ebi, my son, was held at Point Prison in a space that only allowed him to sit and stand. He could not stretch his legs for 23 days.

But Goolam Aboobaker, whose book this was as at 4 October 1974 had probably taken it to read before he went to sleep in the underground home he sheltered in.

How did we find it?

It was on Monday the 15 June 2009, when Goolam on a visit to Durban, from the USA where he is presently deployed, took Rajes Pillay and I to breakfast at Wilson's Wharf on the harbour but arrived late. Both Rajes and I are smokers and Goolam had to find a restaurant that catered for our addiction.

Footprints

The coffee was excellent and the muffins much too large for 10.30 am tea. Both company and coffee were stimulating. We decided to walk around to enjoy the sun. Rajes saw a dark passage saying bookshop and suggested we look at the books.

We ignored her and strolled around and even got some cash from the Standard Bank's ATM, when we found ourselves in a dark passage in the book shop we avoided earlier. It was Rajes who found Leningrad Diary. We all looked at the first page with a signature on it. Goolam claimed the signature was his and that this was his book, many years ago. He said he was reading it while he was in the underground.

Can you believe this?

I bought the book for Rajes as a souvenir of an amazing coincidence.

Phyllis Naidoo
20 July 2009.
Durban.