A FOREIGN CORRESPONDENT IN SOUTH AFRICA

NORMAN PHILLIPS

(Norman Phillips, Assistant Managing Editor of the 'Toronto Star', left Canada for South Africa on March 21, the day of the Sharpeville Massacre. On April 8, the South African Government suppressed his report on police brutality at Nyanga and, on April 9, arrested him under the Emergency Regulations. Protests from the Canadian Government secured his release from Durban Gaol on April 12.)

THE "questioning" took place on the third day of my incarceration in Durban Gaol. At the end, my interrogator, Capt. van der Westhuizen of the South African political police, the Special Branch, attempted an ingratiating smile and said:

"I guess you probably know more about us than we know about you."

It was an unusual compliment; the more so after the almost daily reminder from some citizen that no one could hope to understand the problems of South Africa without having been born, raised and confined within the borders of the Union.

The Captain was trying to extricate himself gracefully from a ludicrous situation. His chief, Maj. Gen. C. I. Rademeyer, then commander of the national police force, had ordered my arrest on the basis of a dispatch that had offended the sensibilities of a Durban postal clerk. External Affairs Minister Eric Louw had then got into the act by accusing me of poisoning Canadian-South African relations—a rôle for which I could not hope to rival his proven ability.

Mr. Louw was not in accord with his police chief (Rademeyer fell victim to a diplomatic illness and was replaced three weeks after my arrest). Despite my undoubted presence in Cell One, Block A of Durban Gaol, I was not—according to Mr. Louw—under arrest, but merely "held for questioning".

Here was an opportunity to demonstrate that Mr. Louw spoke the truth. If he said I was being held for questioning, questioned I would be; and van der Westhuizen, head of Security for Natal, had clearly been assigned to the task of grilling me. He was armed with carbon copies of everything I had written in South Africa, my notebooks and address lists. The setting was the cheerless Governor's office, and the Captain was accompanied by Head Constable Wessels who had taken me into custody.

They had some questions, the Captain began. In that case, I replied, I'd better have a lawyer. (Although I did not find it out until I returned to Canada, South African legal representation had been engaged for me by my employers.) Van der Westhuizen tried to assure me that the questions weren't involved and that I really didn't need a lawyer. Wouldn't I just try one or two for size?

I had one other reservation—my professional oath never to reveal sources of information. The Captain was almost eager to demonstrate his respect for this vow. The Head Constable was also impressed by this pledge and before the session was over was answering the Captain's questions for me: "You can't answer that because of your oath, can you?"

The interrogation took a scant fifteen minutes; and although it was obviously a device to save the face of the Minister of External Affairs, someone had briefed Capt. van der Westhuizen to include a homily on how to report conditions in South Africa. "You've been talking to all the wrong people," he complained.

I couldn't refrain from replying that his colleagues in the police force had been the worst offenders in leading me astray.

A foreign correspondent must go to the police for information; and the first person I interviewed after my arrival in South Africa was a senior officer, Col. G. D. Pienaar, who had been nominally in command of the police at Sharpeville on the day of the massacre.

When I first met him three days after the shooting, in the police headquarters at Vereeniging, Col. Pienaar was nervous, irritable and under great tension. It was only after I explained that I had flown 10,000 miles to find out what had happened at Sharpeville that he consented to speak to me at all. His version was my introduction to the stock responses that (a) no one from abroad could understand South African affairs; (b) all Africans were savages; and (c) the demonstration preceding the massacre had been the work of Communist agitators.

Col. Pienaar's delusion that Communism was at the root of his troubles verged on hysteria. After we left him, my colleague, Gerald Clark of the '*Montreal Star*', told me of his interview with the chief of police in Poznan, Poland after the riots there. Clark said the only difference between Pienaar and the Polish police-

man appeared to be that the latter was convinced all his troubles were the product of Capitalist saboteurs.

Policemen are very much the same wherever you meet them.

In Orlando Township outside Johannesburg I met two other police types—Capt. J. De Wet Steyn, a vigorous, efficient officer and a dead ringer for the best of New York's Irish cops; and, under him, a dispirited detective, a man near retirement who was watching his philosophy fail him.

The detective returned to Orlando on the night of March 28th, the windshield of his car shattered by a stone. He could not understand why it had happened to him, a man who had never used the sjambok unnecessarily. Nor could he understand his own son, who would not listen to him any more and was too big for his father to apply the corporal punishment on which his authority depended.

Steyn showed no weakness. He was a professional, trained to deal with mobs, and had he been in command at Sharpeville there would have been no gunplay. I watched him break up a stone-throwing crowd at Orlando, and his technique was a classically simple use of minimum force. He had full control of his men; and, as could be expected, the small disciplined force imposed its will on the larger undisciplined demonstration.

If I were a citizen of Johannesburg, I'd sleep better with Steyn in command than with the current chief, Col. Lemmer. I saw him lose his temper one March night and expel Stephen Barber of the '*News Chronicle*' from his press conferences. It was not an edifying sight. This was the first day of the Emergency Regulations, and the colonel was anxious to demonstrate that he was a law unto himself, above the courts and certainly above providing the simplest answer to a newspaper correspondent.

I did not have the pleasure of meeting Gen. Rademeyer, but I saw evidence of his having gone over the head of the Minister of Justice. If South Africa had become a full instead of semi-police state, he would have been a candidate for ruler; and it was not surprising that after a month of Emergency Regulations, the politicians sent him into involuntary retirement.

Having tried the police, a foreign correspondent automatically looks to the local press and wire services for information. For its day to day news about South Africa, the world depends mainly on the U.S. Associated Press and United Press International

and on Reuters, which draws on the South African Press Association (SAPA).

In the freemasonry of the world of journalism, it is customary for the foreign correspondent of a reputable newspaper to receive every courtesy from local newspapers or local wire service offices.

The South African Press Association not only expressly refused Gerald Clark and myself an opportunity to look at the reports they were sending abroad, but also thought it necessary to call the South African Government Information Service and inform it of our presence in South Africa.

In contrast, the South African English-language newspapers were most co-operative. The only exception, and that was understandable, occurred at Capetown. At 2 a.m. one morning after we had written our stories, I called the '*Cape Times*' to check whether there had been any recent developments that we had missed. The editor to whom I spoke refused to speak on the telephone, but suggested that if we called in person and identified ourselves he would assist us.

We went to the newspaper office in an expectant mood, believing the refusal to talk on the telephone indicated that some major development was taking place. But no, it turned out that this was a routine precaution—for fear that the conversation would be tapped by the police and the paper accused of supplying information to overseas correspondents.

Once our attention had been called to it, telephone tapping seemed to be an integral part of the South African way of life. Figures were quoted for the substantial sums which the telephone service had invested in tapping and recording devices; private citizens displayed a reluctance to use the telephone except for the most innocuous calls, and I was able to hear for myself the sound of recording machines on the lines of people who took an interest in politics. Frequently, I was asked not to call a person by telephone but rather meet him in person.

From a professional viewpoint and a rather jaded one at that, the most refreshing experience in South Africa is encountering the magazine called '*Drum*'. In an era when newspapers seldom crusade and when reporters depend on public relations officers for information, '*Drum*' and its Editor, Tom Hopkinson, practise an intrepid and purposeful brand of fundamental journalism. In North America it would be called muck-raking, an almost forgotten tradition established by Lincoln Steffens, a relentless exposer of corruption of all sorts.

'*Drum's*' factual reporting, its enterprising unveiling of the seamiest aspects of apartheid and its delightful pin-ups form a mixture that rouses torpid instincts in any newspaperman. "Why don't I give up my comfortable job," we say, "and work for peanuts with these people?" But, of course, we never do.

Most South African newspapermen I met knew the score and would dearly have liked to write as they saw. Amongst them are some of the most courageous journalists in the world, but too many have become inured to the daily indignities they see. Their shock mechanism no longer works. As one told me, "We are immunized against shame." Another looked at me wide-eyed and asked, "Do you get emotionally involved in your work?"

Perhaps one of my most embarrassing moments in the Union was when an editor summoned an African office-boy to expose his ignorance and indifference to politics. This performance was intended to disabuse me of any misguided notion that the average African wanted a vote. It only served to display the lack of communication between the white South African employer and his black employee.

White South Africans I met in ordinary daily contact on the street, in shops, or in buses and planes, seemed impelled to impress a visitor with their colossal ignorance of black South Africans. Seldom have I met more courteous people; they would walk blocks out of their way to guide me and, on the strength of a casual encounter, invite me into their homes.

The only abuse I received was at a Verwoerd rally, when an impassioned Nationalist mistook me for an American and accused me and the United States of plotting to invade the Union. We were after the gold, he declared, and he, a government purchasing official, had instituted a boycott of U.S. goods. I could not convince him that I was a Canadian, let alone persuade him that our southern neighbour had no designs on his country.

Despite Mr. Louw's conviction that foreign correspondents like locusts descend on the Union too frequently and with the sole intent of devastating the country, my experience is that most of my colleagues lean backwards to give the Nationalist Government an opportunity to present its case. One rival of mine from a Conservative journal was presented with Father Huddleston's '*Naught for Your Comfort*' on his departure from Canada. He religiously refused to read it for fear of becoming biased. His eyes were opened when the Johannesburg Stock

Exchange took him to its respectable bosom and one of its members introduced him to an underground radio broadcasting unit.

My own repeated requests for an interview with Prime Minister Verwoerd or any of his senior Cabinet Ministers was treated with disdain by the South African Government Information Service. The best they could offer me was a briefing from a junior public relations man. Despite this rebuff, my paper persevered until the moss-backed Minister of Bantu Administration, De Wet Nel, granted an interview to my successor, Robert Nielsen, who immediately replaced me when my stay in the Union was cut short.

A Canadian correspondent, 10,000 miles from home, works under the disadvantage of being out of touch with his editors. Cable service is poor and telephoning nearly impossible. Whether it is preoccupation with recording devices or not, service between South Africa and London is vastly inferior to that between London and Toronto.

Feeling very much cut off from Canada and wondering about the quality of my work, I was cheered one day at lunch in Cape Town when I overheard two diplomats discussing the same problem. One of them said that he felt the best reports he had made to his government had been written during his first month in South Africa. His impressions had then become blunted, and it was not until after he had completed two years in the Union that he felt he had regained the same standard of objectivity as he had reached immediately after his arrival.

In my own case, I flew from Canada with the Rev. Ross Flemington, President of New Brunswick's Mount Allison University and head of the Federation of Canadian Universities. I had not seen him since the war, when he had been a principal Protestant chaplain with the Canadian Army overseas. Mr. Flemington stopped over in Nairobi and reached Johannesburg a day or two after my arrival. Each of us spent about three weeks in South Africa going our separate ways. We compared notes after we returned home.

President Flemington had one advantage over me. He had been in Hitler Germany in 1934 and had been shocked by what he saw there. South Africa in 1960, he said, left the same sour smell in his nostrils.

I could not have asked for better corroboration of what I had been trying to say.