People don't forgive or forget
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By: Janet Smith

Greta Apelgren cannot get a job in Durban. She'll apply, but prospective employers always ask if she's "the same" Greta Apelgren. That goes for government jobs, too.

"They ask me: 'Why didn't you declare your crimes on your application? Are you ashamed of it?' And I say: 'But I got amnesty. That was the whole point.'"

Of course, she is "the same" Greta Apelgren, even if she changed her name and her faith for a while when she was married. She is the woman convicted for her part in the escape of fellow Umkhonto we Sizwe operative Gordon Webster from the Edendale Hospital in Pietermaritzburg in May 1986. And, together with Aboobaker Ismail – her immediate commander in their Special Operations Unit – and her comrades Robert McBride and Matthew Lecordier, Apelgren got amnesty from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission for that.

She also got amnesty for her part in the explosion at the Why Not Restaurant and Magoo's Bar on June 17, 1986 – although Apelgren was never convicted for the deadly blast. She applied to the TRC as a matter of conscience, together with Ismail, McBride, Lecordier, Earnest Pule, Lester Dumakude and Johannes Molefe.

Apelgren, like McBride, had apologised, but the geography of anger did not change.

"To a lot of people in Durban, I'm still Greta the terrorist. It does haunt me but I've had to just accept that, really, we are thought of and probably will always be thought of, as the most rotten of all. Besides Magoo's, there was the audacity of springing Gordon from Edendale Hospital. I don't know. I suppose Robert and I will always be thought of as something of a Bonnie and Clyde."

For Apelgren, who was born and grew up in the poor community of Wentworth, it has been painful to spend so many years away from it. She's been living and working in the Northern and Eastern Cape since the late 1990s. Apelgren was in her late twenties when she and McBride, then 21, were arrested.

It's been 25 years since she drove her sister Jeanette's Mazda 323 towards West Street, following McBride and Lecordier in a Cortina packed with

explosives. Two and a half decades of being "Greta the Terrorist" to so many people.

On June 14, without being briefed on the detail of what was going to happen, MK operative Apelgren sat in the Mazda to keep a parking bay for McBride. Those were her instructions under the the discretion of McBride's autonomy as a commander of the Special Operations Unit that reported through Ismail to MK headquarters and Joe Slovo, who answered to ANC president Oliver Tambo.

Once McBride had set a timing device for 15 minutes, with Lecordier on the lookout in the light drizzle, he and Lecordier walked to meet Apelgren. They drove to a mobile police station in the middle of Durban to see if the police would rush towards the blast, which is exactly what happened.

Charged on 18 counts, mostly of terrorism, Apelgren was sentenced to 21 months for the Webster escape. There was a national state of emergency in place and when she was first captured, Apelgren was one of 28 women held under Section 29 of the Internal Security Act. It provided for indefinite detention, with interrogation and solitary confinement. In other words, it allowed relentless, unknowable torture. That's what happened to Apelgren.

"I described it once as if maggots had eaten part of my soul and it will always be that way," Apelgren said this week from Bhisho, where she lives, working as a senior manager in the Eastern Cape government's strategic management support unit.

She was taken to the CR Swart police station in Durban after being arrested with McBride in Nigel on the East Rand.

Apelgren was tortured day in and day out for a week. Her two main interrogators told her they had been in a car outside the Parade Hotel having "a good couple of drinks because the drinks were too expensive at Magoo's" when the bomb went off.

"They were swearing at me: 'We would have died if we'd been in the hotel! We would have died!'"

A favourite torture method for the security policemen was to put a plastic bag over her head and seal it so that she could not breathe. That would go on until the plastic was clinging to her nostrils, mouth and eyelids and her body was starting to spasm. They would also threaten her with the murder of her four-year-old nephew.

"I suppose being a township girl, I had a high threshold for physical pain. I was never going to confess. I said to them: 'I want to hang by my neck.' I knew I was going to die, but I was not going to confess privately to some judge. All the time they were torturing me, I was praying. While they were

screaming and I was being strangled, I was praying. That made it possible for me to not feel the pain. You're not physically there when you are praying so hard."

In all, Apelgren survived more than 100 days of isolation in a solitary cell.

"The problem with a traumatic experience is that it takes but a small sound, a picture of something, to remind you, and this usually happens at the worst times when you just cannot afford to remember. You cry and get so depressed. It'll never really go away. You can't totally heal. You just accept the damage.

"Going to the TRC (in 1997) definitely did help me. Up until then, I was afraid even to tell my own family about it. But in that TRC environment,you're forced tell them everything. You want to rationalise and say only XYZ not ABC, but there, ABC makes its way out. And for me, previously not being able to bear to cry in front of other people, it was quite something.

"Even my sister Jeanette couldn't talk to me about it. When I came out of prison, she used to cry for hours. Then in 2003, I went to visit her in Australia, where she is living now, and she took out a roll of toilet paper on which she had recorded all the terrible things that had happened to her when she was in detention herself and I realised what she went through."

When Apelgren first got out of prison, she got a job within two weeks with an NGO and spent seven years in Durban.

"I did mix with a lot of other comrades and there was an ex-political prisoners' committee because there were so many guys, so many who had been sent to Robben Island. But it was difficult. People want you to carry your crimes with you. So I took a job in Kimberley."

It wasn't just any job. Apelgren, a qualified social worker, was appointed to the post of director of welfare. But when she visits Durban, her emotional housekeeping goes awry. "When I go home and go past the beachfront and that hotel, yes, I'm reminded." But she is constantly reminded

. "I never stop thinking about it."

Apelgren has been a political activist for 44 years, since she was 11, and attended her first political meeting with her parents in Wentworth in the 1960s. Her parents were factory workers and had themselves been conscientised before they were in their 20s. Still, they took it hard when Apelgren was held under suspicion of being involved in the Magoo's bomb.

"Even though the community was quite politicised generally, to be arrested with anything to do with terrorism and the security police, that was something else. Immediately people stopped greeting them and walked on

the other side of the pavement. They hadn't expected that immense rejection. But fortunately after we appeared in court and started to testify, different issues came out and the community started to understand it.

"Violence had always been far from my mind, even though I knew the four pillars of MK. It never occurred to me. I was a professional social worker. I went to discos. I went to church. I dressed glamourously. I was involved in politics. But to kill other people. I had planned to get married and have five children and have a beautiful life. But nothing in that era was normal."

A turning point came when the SADF kill

ed children in a raid on an ANC safe house in Lesotho.

"I couldn't understand that. If they really wanted to get those few activists, why didn't they just go and kill them? Why kill children? That affected me terribly.

"There was also the case of some young activists who had left country, not yet trained, at about 19, 18. They were extremely young. Not yet very involved and I remember Oliver Tambo was at their funeral in Mozambique and there were all these coffins with these young men inside there who really hadn't done anything yet.

"Then, as a social worker, I saw the separation of black women who had had relationships with white men from their blond, blue-eyed children in Addington Hospital. And that hurt me very much."

There is much that unnerves and troubles Apelgren, "and will, for the rest of my life". The deaths at Magoo's are "a spiritual burden which will never go away. I'll have to carry that till I die. I didn't know the extent to which those injured had been permanently disabled until we were shown their medical records in court. Some were quite horrific. I really felt bad about it, but I had to remind myself that I didn't do it as an individual for fun or for any person. Sometimes, yes, a lot of the time, I do feel really bad. I feel bad. How could you not feel bad about it?

"But I have to remind myself I wasn't playing a game. It was a war situation and that was an act of war. I have to counsel myself spiritually. All guerrilla fighters feel this way. You do feel a detachment. It's very difficult to say that under the same circumstances, you would never do it again.

"I had always been a person who was too sure of myself. I always knew what I wanted in life. I was always successful. But that experience really humbled me. I learnt humility more than anything else.

"When I talk to my nieces and nephews about it, the main question they want answered is: why did you have to go to prison? I try to simplify it because

they’re distracted by romance and fashion and music. So I only have one word – racism. That’s what took us to the brink of destruction. And what we have to do is keep fighting racism, that’s the only message.

“That was our only conflict.”