

YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE A CRIPPLE IF YOU'RE DISABLED *

The upside-down world of racist South Africa

Vic Finkelstein - 19 September, 1989

'*Bam, bam, bam*'. It was late in the evening and in the silence of night the door shook with the loud knocking. I instantly guessed that this could only be the security police. My friends who had been sharing a pleasant evening suddenly seemed pale and wide-eyed, as I suppose I must have been. There was nothing for it but to open the door before they broke it down. Being in a wheelchair I had long ago reckoned that if the police did decide to arrest me there was going to be no escape. So at last, like other comrades that I had read about or met, my time had come... I was about to join what many South Africans regard as the greatest of apartheid's universities, the state prison, and I was going to be taught a lesson by the real professors of racism, the police torturers.

I started to open the door only to be forced back as it was pushed into my face. Three, or was it four, large men strode into the room. Swanepoel was instantly recognisable. A large bull-like man, his photograph had appeared often enough in the press during political trials when accused after accused described their experiences under his hands. '*Well Victor...*', he said looking me up and down. The other men wandered off to see who, and what, else was in the flat. '*Who are you, where are your papers?*' I asked, trying to exercise some control over the situation. Swanepoel laughed, '*Man, you know who we are*'. He made no attempt to identify himself or any of the others. I gave up even trying to play civilised – this was South Africa in the 1960s.

'*Ho, ho, who have we here?*' Swanepoel had walked into the lounge where my friends sat waiting. He grinned familiarly at Lorna. She had been '*banned*' some time ago and was not allowed to be in conversation with more than one person at a time! Now here she was together with several people. She could be in serious trouble. Swanepoel strutted round the room nodding knowingly at the other visitor and my cousin, who shared the flat with me. The lesser policemen began writing down their names... Suddenly there was a commotion from the bedroom where the others had been poking about in cupboards, under the beds and wherever. They had discovered the '*banned*' literature.

Swanepoel and the other police went off to see what had been found and for a moment we friends were left alone to contemplate our fate. We spoke quietly, I guess trying to encourage each other, not knowing how long, if ever, it would be before we could meet again. The police came back and the visitors were allowed to leave. We said a last good-bye.

I was wheeled into the bedroom. How I hate being pushed by able-bodied people without being asked! But there was no protesting. The cupboard was open and the crates of books and literature were being examined. Swanepoel turned to me and said '*You get ready. You're coming with us*'. So this is how you were told that you had been arrested, I thought as I gathered a few belongings. I supposed I was being detained under a 180 days detention order. This allowed the police to keep you in total isolation for six months. During this time they could do pretty well as they liked without interference from anyone,

* This is a true account of my arrest leading up to my first week in detention in South Africa under the '180 day detention laws'. Following a week of non-stop interrogation I was placed in solitary confinement for about 5 months, then 1 month incarceration awaiting trial and during the trial, followed by 15 months imprisonment (12 months suspended) for 'Furthering the aims of Communism'. On release I was served with a 5 year 'banning order'. I entered the UK as a 'stateless refugee' in 1968. This paper was first published in CBR News 1989.

including relatives and lawyers. It was what I had expected, but it didn't lessen the anxiety about what was now going to happen to me.

In the bedroom the police settled down to make a detailed inventory of all the literature they were seizing. As the crates were unpacked piles of books, papers and leaflets sprung up all over the floor. Was there really so much? Spread out around the bedroom the amount of paper looked enormous. But would they discover some of the coded letters that I had taken more care in hiding? So here it was, in this room, the reason why I was hated, why I was seen as a revolutionary threat to the apartheid state. I provided access to knowledge, to critical thinking. That could not be allowed. In all my time as a disabled person I had been treated as though I was somehow different. I was seen as a cripple, incapable of caring for myself, of being independent, let alone dangerously influencing able-bodied people. Now, overnight, being in a wheelchair was not important. At last the state regarded me as equal to my peers! Like the vast majority of the South African population I was an enemy. There was ironic comfort in this.

'Come', Swanepoel walked off and one of his underlings pushed me out of the flat to the waiting car; no special transport here you see! We sped through Johannesburg, three burly policemen guarding the dangerous cripple! After a while we came to a stop in front of a nondescript building – this is where police interrogations took place, where people 'fell' out of third floor windows. I shut my mind. For me the real personal struggle was about to begin. They dragged me out of the car into my chair. Away from my friends there was now no attempt to hide their brutality. They rushed me up the flight of stairs into the building (such helpful policemen) and we turned into a long corridor, or so it seemed. Now they began to enjoy themselves and ran along pushing me from side to side, laughing. Another flight of stairs, this time down, into the basement. Along another passage, past steel columns and then through steel doors with little peep holes... Deeper and deeper, it seemed to me into the bowels of an inferno. Funny, but even as my mouth got drier and drier, I was aware of the little oval name plates on the steel doors, locks and columns proudly proclaiming that this place of incarceration was '*Made in England*'.

We stopped in front of a row of lockers and the three captors began taking off their clothes! They changed into shorts and open neck shirts, putting away their hand guns. Here in their own private world, far from the scrutiny of public opinion, they could be comfortable while they wrung confessions out of opponents of racism. I felt completely alone, totally under their control.

Suddenly we were off again, down another yellow lit passage and then into a bare windowless room; or it seemed this way until I noticed the steel shutter closing off what might have once been a small window. The hefty door was slammed shut and in the heavy silence that followed the three tormentors crowded over me. After a while of glaring at me in silent intimidation Swanepoel spoke, '*Well Victor, are you going to talk?*' I looked at him and managed to get out, '*What do you want me to say*'. He didn't like that, no not at all. The police liked to maintain their own peculiar fiction that confessions were freely given. Swanepoel went red, his face seemed round and puffed with anger. He grabbed my shirt front and half pulled me upright from my wheelchair. He began talking loud and fast, '*You better start talking and fast. You think you're smart. Everyone talks when they come here. People much stronger than you all talked and you will too. ...*', and so on for five minutes. '*Make it easy for yourself*' he continued, '*We don't want to hurt you. You will talk and if you don't do it now you'll talk later. By then you'll be sorry that you were ever born. When we're finished with you, you will be crawl...*', he was pointing to the floor when he suddenly hesitated. Somehow what he was about to say, and no doubt had said a hundred times to his able-bodied victims, didn't seem the right thing to say to me, '*you'll, you'll be walking out of here*' he finished triumphantly, having found the appropriate words at the last moment for his ultimate threat.

Well, what else could he say? This was South Africa. Here all values are upside down.