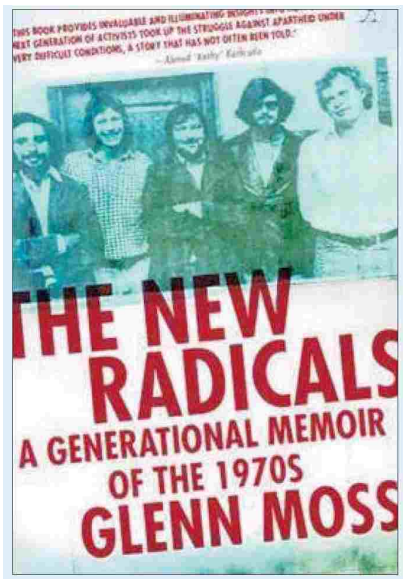
SATURDAY STAR, Canvas Life
31 May 2014, p.20

Cops would not even give me a Bible in solitary confinement

GLENN MOSS

*THIS is an extract from **The New Radicals: A Generational Memoir of the 1970s** by Glenn Moss published by Jacana at a recommended retail price of R225*

Glenn Moss was a student leader at Wits University in the 1970s. Detained and charged under security legislation in the mid-1970s, he was acquitted after a year-long trial. He went on to edit Work In Progress and the South African Review, head Ravan Press, and then work as a consultant to South Africa's first post-apartheid government.



FOR THE next few days and nights, I was held in a filthy cell at John Vorster Square, toilet overflowing and stinking, thin coir mattress on the floor, police station food pushed in at the door a few times a day. For the rest, I saw no one outside the closed system of control, and had no way of occupying myself except to pace the cell and try to sleep. The process of indefinite detention, in solitary confinement, had begun. On one occasion, a magistrate put his head into the cell and muttered something about *klagtes*. As he was scuttling out, I called after him that I did have complaints, but he hastened away before I managed to express them. At another time I was taken to a nearby district surgeon. He examined me in a cursory manner before handing a note to the attending security policeman, who was present throughout the examination. I wondered what the note confirmed: fit to undergo interrogation? Perhaps it noted a minor heart condition, and warned that I might succumb if subjected to electric shocks. District surgeons were as much part of the closed system of detention as interrogators, jailers and magistrates.

A week later, two security police arrived at my cell door in the late afternoon and told me to pack up. Pack up what? I had nothing with me apart from the clothes I was wearing. I was handcuffed and led up to the 10th floor, after being told that the restraints were for my own protection: "We don't want you jumping or slipping, and then people claiming we did that to you," one of them sniggered. Coetzee entered the office, and told me that I was being transferred to Pretoria. His colleagues there wanted to investigate my case, and in any event it would be better if I was out of Johannesburg where "my friends" were "causing trouble".

Only after my release did I realise that he must have been referring to demonstrations against detentions. A university assembly of staff and students, convened by the vice-chancellor and attended by over 6 000 people, had called for the release of those detained. Only the fourth time a general assembly had been called in the university's history, it was addressed by the chancellor, vice-chancellor and acting president of Nusas, as well as Professor Phillip Tobias, who told the gathering that the detention of Karel, Gerry and me "attacked and sought to erode our heritage of freedom of speech, freedom to protest, freedom to strive by all legal means for better conditions of life for the underprivileged and the disadvantaged".

The university general assembly also endorsed a statement issued by the Wits SRC, to the effect that while our detentions were legal in the strict sense of the term, "there can be no law unless it is based on the State's respect for individual liberties, basic human rights and the rule of law recognised by all civilised nations of the world. There can be no order while the individual in South Africa remains crushed ruthlessly under a burden of suppressive legislation". After the meeting, about a 1 000 students formed a picket line along Jan Smuts Avenue, and then took their protest to various suburbs of Johannesburg.

I was transferred to Pretoria on the day of those university protests. After being taken from the 10th floor of Vorster Square and down to the garage area, I was pushed into the back of the car and handcuffed to one of the arm rests. Driving down Jan Smuts Avenue en route to the Pretoria highway, we passed Wits University and saw a demonstration of students calling for the release of Karel, Gerry and me. The police were furious. I should have been jubilant that students were showing such strong support for those detained. But I was already experiencing some of the numbness that sets in after even short periods of solitary confinement, and I felt strangely disconnected from the demonstration and wanted the journey to Pretoria to be over as quickly as possible.

The drive to Pretoria was full of drama. There were armed personnel at various stages along the highway, monitoring our progress and, I believed, that of others being moved from Johannesburg. What were the police anticipating? Escape attempts led by armed groups? Attacks on the vehicles? The security police must have believed that we were part of a well-organised conspiracy, whose members still at large were capable of mounting armed initiatives to free those in custody.

Driving into Pretoria along Potgieter Street, I assumed I was being taken to the old red-brick Pretoria local prison with its massive iron-studded wooden doors. But we passed that, turned into the city centre and pulled up in a side street running between Pretorius and Schoeman streets. One of the policemen jumped out of the car and drew his weapon. The other unlocked the back door, removed my handcuffs, and pushed me through a side door. Looking around, I realised I was in Compol, headquarters of the Pretoria security police, and a place where detainees had been tortured since the early 1960s.

It was growing dark outside. I was handed over to two other security policemen, hustled out of the side door of Compol and into a waiting car, although this time not at gunpoint, nor was I handcuffed again. A brief drive along Pretorius Street, and the vehicle turned suddenly into the entrance to a partly built underground parking garage. We drove in semi-darkness through the building works, with piles of bricks, bags of cement and mounds of sand scattered about. Images of being shot and my body dumped, interrogation in the darkness of a building site, or simply being "softened up" prior to interrogation, terrorised me.

That was when the vehicle stopped, and the driver turned to me. "Perhaps you have heard of me? My name is Spyker van Wyk."

■■■

"Spyker" is Afrikaans for "nail". He had once used a piece of wood with a protruding nail to interrogate a well-known political activist, striking his penis. The name "Spyker" stuck. Detainee after detainee had alleged that Van Wyk had been involved in brutal interrogations, and he was widely believed, with his brother Andries, to have been involved in torturing Imam Abdullah Haron to death in Cape Town during 1969.

"Didn't you and your brother kill the Imam?" I asked. Van Wyk was a wiry man, with slicked-back hair, a precise middle path, and a trim military moustache. He looked back and, instead of punching me, which I had expected, responded in a most revealing way. "Andries had nothing to do with that," he asserted angrily.

Then he and his colleague – a Sergeant Van Aggenbach, who invariably accompanied Van Wyk – led me through a door, up some half-finished concrete stairs, and into the charge office of the Pretoria Central police station. There I was "processed" and handed over to the uniformed police, one of whom took me to the second floor and locked me into a cell. There must have been some prior planning around the transfer to Pretoria, because somehow my parents had managed to deliver clean clothes, a toothbrush, toothpaste and a few pieces of fruit, and these were tossed into the cell after me.

For the next three weeks I only left the cell to shower and for a half-hour period of exercise in an enclosed courtyard. I saw no one apart from the uniformed police. Lying on a mat on the floor of a police cell, with no access to reading material or any other forms of distraction, I became increasingly disoriented and restless. I asked without success for a Bible, as I thought this might elicit a sympathetic response.

I fantasised more and more about escape, often dreaming of high-speed chases with me speeding along a road on my motorcycle. I could almost feel the wind in my hair, the air on my checks. I found a toilet brush with a wire handle in the cell, and began a slow and painstaking exercise to scrape away the mortar between two bricks. I would flush the dust down the toilet regularly, to avoid detection. I managed to remove the cement around a whole brick to a depth of about two inches before the wire handle finally wore away. I don't think this involved any serious plan to escape.

It was an activity designed to deal with boredom, with inactivity, and with the slow and debilitating effects of solitary confinement.

This material has been copied under a DALRO licence and is not for resale or retransmission.