

INTERVIEWEE	Jackie Seroke
DATE OF INTERVIEW	9 th March 2007
PLACE OF INTERVIEW	Johannesburg Central Police Station



Q: Maybe you can just start by telling us your name and what you are doing now?
A: My name is Jackie Seroke and I'm involved in business now, not so much politics, even though I'm also chairman of the ex-political-prisoners committee in Gauteng. We have provincial structures for fellowship of ex-political-prisoners to discuss their concerns and things like that.
Q: When were you detained at John Vorster Square?
A: I was first detained in John Vorster Square in 1987, I think it was. I was arrested on a roadblock in Koster. Koster is a small town in the then Western Transvaal. It's part of the North West now and also not far from Rustenburg. We were driving in a car that also had some arms cache of the Azanian People's Liberation Army and I was also driving with a member of the field commanders of APLA. I was a book publisher then and I moved around quite a lot and so when the arrest happened it was late at night around twelve o'clock or so. We did not expect the roadblock to be there but for some reason it was there. And then we were searched but this other fellow that I was driving with, my passenger, the APLA commander, had a copy of the PAC banned literature on him and they happened to come across it and they said "No, No, No, we must search you again," and that's how we got arrested.
Q: Can you describe your arrival here at John Vorster?
A: When we were arrested we were then taken to Protea Police Station because our destination was Soweto and we were roughed up there. You know, tortured, interrogated for about four days non-stop and some physical beatings and things like that. And then because they had to take me to a cell they brought me to John Vorster Square. I came here, I was obviously a little dizzy, I didn't know what was happening I just came here, I was sick. I was kept in a cell here and I think I stayed here for about a month.
Q: How old were you at that time when you were brought here?
A: I was 27.
Q: And were you interrogated again during your time here at John Vorster?
A: Yes, you know during detention what they would do, I mean each time something came up, they will take me here to an office for further interrogation and so on and brought back again. But what had happened with me, they also took me away from John Vorster Square because it was not known then by my family, friends and other comrades where I was and there was an enquiry by Amnesty International to find out my whereabouts and I think only after a month the Security Police confirmed that I was under section 29 of the Internal Security Act. But they removed me from here after

that, when I put the pieces together after detention this is how I could relate to it because when I was here I was not even next to a cell where there were other comrades. There was a State of Emergency at the time so the likelihood was that I would find people here who were also detained and talk to them because there was always, communication is important when you are arrested and just to talk to people, let them know you are here was important and at the same time because of my own circumstances no one knew I was detained, it was important to communicate. So I couldn't find anyone next to me I mean it was just total silence and I was hurting you know I had pain all over me and they couldn't even take me to a doctor. When they took me from here after a month they took me to the district surgeon in Zeerust. So we drove from here to Zeerust.

Q: So you were never visited by a district surgeon during your time here at John Vorster?

A: Ja, no, I was never being visited by a district surgeon. You see I think their strategy was to allow me to kind of heal from the open wounds that I had and the injuries on my body to heal a little and they took me to a district surgeon in that area. So even he was not willing to take care of me and I think I ended up being seen by some military man, medical personnel and then it went on. I don't quite remember what happened afterwards but that's how they handled my injuries.

Q: Now these interrogations do you remember what floor they took place on?

A: Ja, I'm not sure which floors exactly but I think it was on the 9th or the 10th floor where these interrogations took place.

Q: Do you remember the route that they would take you from the cells to the floor?

A: Look it was very difficult for me. I was blindfolded and handcuffed, my hands at the back and taken to an interrogation room. I only knew that I was at John Vorster Square because of the highway next to John Vorster Square, and when I started talking to people who were bringing me food and so on and I realized, Ja, I'm at John Vorster Square.

Q: Now your interrogators were they all White, Afrikaans policemen?

A: Ja they were White. Let's take it that way. I don't know whether they were, because one of the guys had difficulties talking in English so he always had a partner. The interrogation was always done by two guys: one could talk to me in English and my Afrikaans was not so good then so I couldn't really communicate with him directly.

Q: Do you remember how long the interrogations took?

A: Look the first interrogation during the periods when they

also applied torture they made an interrogation on a continuous basis. For 3 to 4 days, non-stop. You know a shift would come in to talk to you, find out the answers and if they are not happy they would beat you up and another group would come in just like that continuously, no sleep and so on. So it was I think a method meant to really try and get things out of you. See, I think I used my creative writing abilities to spin a yarn, you know to just talk about anything that they tell me about. So I was really talkative, just telling them what they wanted to know and explaining in detail even things that he doesn't want to hear of and I'll just go on telling the story and he would say, "Repeat it," and I would repeat the story later on and then the next group would come, I'll start the story from scratch. But the difficulty for me was that the guy I was arrested with was telling a different story and I was telling a different story and they wanted to find out which one was real and in the end, I mean mine was not real. His was obviously, after greater beatings and torture; his was real because in the trial he became a state witness.

Q: Being an activist had you ever prepared yourself in any kind of way for the possibility that you might be detained?

A: No you see that time when I was detained in 1987, I think it must be the fourth or the fifth time that I was detained again. So I at least had the advantage of knowing what was going to happen to me and I also used the technique, well it's not the technique really, it's more like a way to relax and get this thing out of my system because being an activist you are always very busy, you work hard at reaching your goals and so on. So when I was detained, when I came here, I slept the whole day. You must remember I spent some time not sleeping so I would sleep the whole day and amazingly sleep would come as a form of relaxation but I take out almost everything because once you are in the hands of your captors forget about the outside world. That was the trick. Forget about anything else don't even worry about your dog, whether it's been fed or anything like that or any circumstances around you. You even switch off from comrades that you work with. They have to exercise their own creativity and continue with what is happening because you are captured.

And also the problem will always be that you are tortured to take out more information about what's happening outside.

I was responsible for part of the Transvaal in APLA commanding structures and we had infiltrated a group of guerillas into the country and most of them went via Johannesburg for logistics and ready as a central point to go wherever they were going. And I'd come into contact with most of these fellows and some of them, when they were later arrested, not during this period but when they were later arrested, would point out that they had come to

me and yet I had long been detained and the police would try to put the two together during that period. So the interrogation just went on and on about people who were in the country, the danger, the arms, where the arms were and so on.

So the interrogation was really deep in that sense but the technique for me was "Just get the system out and forget about it." And I would tell the police, "Look I don't know what you are talking about, I have been here for almost three weeks. How do I know what's happening outside?"

Q: Do you remember anything about your cell specifically? Could you see anything from the windows, were there any writings on the wall or anything like that?

A: Ja there were writings on the wall. You know this was also another thing that the detainees did. If you were in a cell you write, "Jackie was here," you know. So I saw that most of the people had written there. I remember this quite clearly. I remember there is a fellow, Kgabisi Mosunkutu, he is with the ANC, he had written there that, "Kgabisi was here," and several other names that I saw are common names like, "Themba was here," and that sort of thing.

Q: How did that make you feel?

A: I knew that there were other detainees. John Vorster Square had several cells in it and the difficulty with the cell where I was is it was too dark. I couldn't see the outside. I know that first the cell was small. You know, it was not a big cell, it was a small cell and it had a window and a door but facing the passage. Looking from the outside I mean I just stared at the wall looking out of the window. So it was not very helpful.

Q: Were you ever taken out of your cells to shower or exercise or anything like that?

A: No, the exercise they didn't take me. Look I knew my right, I had one hour of exercise which I really tried to demand but really I didn't get that because during the period when we could exercise we were taken out for interrogation and they would take me out to talk to me. There was a deep interrogation at first soon after the arrest and then there was continuous interrogation almost on a daily basis especially at weekdays. The weekends some of the guys would go off to have a dop or something but the weekdays were interrogations almost everyday.

Q: You said you spent a lot of time sleeping as a form of relaxation; did you have any other way that you kept yourself sane?

A: Ja you know you complain all the time. That is one of the ways to see that you are still alive. If you have let's say new demands and you are able to notice the days. You know when I was arrested I had contact lenses on and I said, "I

want my contact lenses," I took them out, and the guy said, "Where are they?" and I'll just complain, "I want my contact lenses, they are at home" and this was trying to establish a connection with my home to say at least if they go and get my contact lenses I will be able to see. So I complained seriously that I just can't see very well and I don't wear spectacles I just want my contact lenses. This never worked until after a month or so after Amnesty International had been in touch. It never worked. I never got anything from them. I think I was kept, when I understand it, the isolation or the deep isolation was really to try and keep me out of communication with anyone so that they could go and make more findings of where the other guys were.

Q: So during this period you never had visitors or parcels from outside or anything like that?

A: No I never had anything. I never really had anything but I know that my lawyers came to John Vorster Square to find out whether I'm here or not and they were told I'm not here. But they made such a fuss that the police told me, "Your lawyers were here," and at least it gave me a sense of health, at least people know where I am now, at least that's communication for me. That small bit of information was communication.

Q: Did you get regular visits from the magistrate during that time?

A: No I didn't. I actually made a statement. I made a statement here. You had to make a statement to the magistrate. You know I was arrested with weapons and I was arrested with someone who was an underground worker, an APLA guerilla and a commander for that matter. So I went to the magistrate to make a short statement and in my mind the statement to the magistrate was meant to fob off further interrogation because I was going to stop having further interrogation after that, but it didn't work.

Q: Nothing happened as a result of that statement?

A: No it didn't work. That never worked. I think the isolation was...I was beginning to loose my mind I think. I mean how could that have worked? I mean I blamed myself after that but it just never worked. I thought it would take these guys away to think that, "This guy is co-operating." But because I suppose my statement was empty I mean there was nothing that I said that could implicate anyone or even myself so it wasn't really a very good statement. So when I went to the magistrate I just told him "Look I was tortured and beaten up. You know I was beaten up very bad and now they told me to come and talk to you, I don't want to, why should I come and talk to you? I want the magistrate in court." That's the statement that the magistrate took. So it didn't work for me because the intention was to take away the focus from anything concerning the case I was arrested

for into something else but like I say it never worked.

Q: Did your interrogators ever threaten your life?

A: Ja, Ja. The guys actually said they could kill me if they liked. The interrogation was terrible you know. I must tell you. I think, Ja, this guy was Badenhorst, I remember him, he was terrible, I think he was a Colonel or something. You know the type of torture that he used is something that is not pleasant to talk about. You know when I was interrogated I was naked but blindfolded with my arms behind my back also tied up but, there's you know police desks in their offices, they have a drawer with a shiny handle on that drawer. He put the testicles in there and just put his foot on it and say, "Praat nou." Now you must understand that is a very, very painful part of the body and quite frankly he would do that and laugh. I mean the guy was sick, terribly sick. And then they used other forms of torture like beating you up with their fists and whatever they were using. I don't understand what it is that they were using. And also you know they used all range of form of torture because they would use cold water, just pour cold water onto you and I know that it was winter then and then start from there up to the worst form of torture like squeezing your testicles and beating you up, using electric shock you know, and electric shock when you are wet it's very bad and they would use that. They used the broomstick between my legs. They would put a broomstick between your legs and they have your hands handcuffed in front of your legs like this and use an electric shock, very painful! I don't think torture of that nature works because when that happens you tell yourself, "Look I'm loosing my life and I'm not going to die and make these guys happy by confessing to anything, if they kill me let them kill me."

Q: Where there stages at which you thought you might die?

A: Oh yes! Ja, That's possible. I mean that was possible at that given time that you could easily die. In hindsight talking about this makes it seem as if it was rosy. It wasn't! I mean it really wasn't. I mean the kind of torture and the fear and everything and they also used torture methods that work on your mind to say that... for instance this guy, and this came back to me very strongly, he told me "When is your birthday?" I said no it's in February, and he said, "You are not going to see another year in your life, you are dying, now we are gong to kill you! We've been trying to get a way in which to deal with you and this is it, we found you now!" And of course they were referring to other areas where I was detained but with no evidence, nothing that could take me to court and that sort of thing so this time they had it and I thought it's possible. It was just one avenue that is possible. But I knew that once the world knows that I'm detained it would be easier.

Q: You said that Amnesty International had a campaign to try and find out where you were?
A: They talked to the police here in South Africa and they said where am I? And the police did explain and it became a public matter that I was in detention.
Q: And then were you charged as a result of this detention?
A: Yes I was charged. I was charged.
Q: And then were you sentenced?
A: I was sentenced yes, 12 Years.
Q: Where were you supposed to serve those 12 Years?
A: I went to Robben Island. I spent time in Robben Island.
Q: But you said following that detention in 1987 you came back to John Vorster Square at some stage?
A: Ja. When I came back I was also active in the leadership of the PAC. I was also responsible for negotiations at the Multi Party Forum. The then Codessa in Kempton Park. So one day when I was from those negotiations or from the talks, I was living in Berea then, there was a swoop on the PAC. I think it was in May 1993. Almost a country wide swoop on the PAC. Most of the people were detained so I was detained and taken to the head office of the PAC and I came back to my familiar place, John Vorster Square.
Q: But that must been a very different type of detention?
A: Ja at that time, I mean this was a short period. A very short period because I think after a week or so we were released. But that was different. But I seem to have forgotten where the cell was that I went into even the second time. But I think it must have been on the 6 th or 7 th floor or something like that.
Q: It wasn't on the same floor as before?
A: It was not the same cell I had gone to before.
Q: During your first detention the guys who were the jailers, were they very different to the guys who were the interrogators?
A: You know that first period in John Vorster Square was definitely different, in this sense; that I did not have contact with anyone. Even the food they brought me was brought in by the guys who were interrogating me. The police came in. The second period there were many of us and I met the police who were handling my case earlier. They were still working in the police force the second period and we laughed about this because I was making jokes at them saying that, "Oh now you are meeting me with experience and it's not going to be the same thing," and of course there were bombastic statements we were making then that, "You are wasting your time, very soon I will be the Minister of Police you know. Do you think I will give you a promotion?" So it was like a joke all round and obviously we did try and deal with the tension I mean that's the type of talk that we had but it wasn't as bad as that. Of course

detention is detention. No one likes to be kept in a cage. I don't even think birds and animals like that but that's what happened.

You were asking about the jailers? The Security Police were very particular about detainees in that it was members of the Security Police who were looking at us, giving us food and so on. Even though this time I mean they may have been Black or Indian or whatever but they were basically Security Police.

Q: Did you have any Black Security Policemen?

A: Ja there was this fellow I think he was from Eldorado Park. I forgot his name and we used to chat a lot and he would ask me about who do I know in Eldorado Park. Look if someone comes to bring you food you just want to hold this guy for about ten, fifteen minutes and hold a conversation with him, when you are in detention. It makes things easier you know. And just talk and try to tell the guy, "I mean you think I'm a terrorist, just look at me, I am a normal person like you; the freedom I fight for is the same freedom that you want. Now you are just working for your pay and you get things from your master," that type of discussion. I used to have long discussions with him here at JVS because he was almost regular in bringing me food and also at one stage he took me to Protea Police Station. I was going to be interrogated there on that particular day. He took me to there for someone and we went to Protea and he brought me back here.

Q: When you were originally arrested and when you found out that you were at John Vorster Square as opposed to being at a different police station, what did John Vorster the place mean to you?

A: Look I mean many people had died at John Vorster Square particularly in the 70's. They were thrown out of the windows. There was also the tenth floor what was called "die warekamer" you know. And also the Security Police at John Vorster Square were quite vicious. They were known to be very vicious in dealing with detainees. So I had those apprehensions, I mean I thought, "Well, there it goes." But I had seen the worst then because I had been tortured. When they brought me here I thought it was just for safe keeping than being tortured. I thought I can meet whatever it is that I have to meet but John Vorster Square stands out like a sore thumb. I think it's John Vorster Square and PE and some place in Pretoria, which were terrible, but John Vorster Square I think you would say was really the pinnacle of torture chambers.

Q: How was this place different to other places were you were held?

A: No you know for me John Vorster Square was like a

dungeon. I mean I didn't expect it to be like this. When I came in it was so dark and you know they had to keep the light on for 24 hours but the cell I was in was so dark, I mean even with the light on, it was just so dark for me, minus the fact that of course I had taken my contact lenses out, but it was very dark and it gave me that fear as if I'm in a cave of sorts. Quite frankly it was a relief to get out of John Vorster Square. I mean I was taken to a different place. I mean I was detained for longer periods at different other areas but they just moved me from one place to the other. But it was a relief to get out of John Vorster Square. At other areas you could talk to people and the security police were not as strong as they are here at John Vorster Square. In other areas it was just ordinary police and you could do anything. You could bribe them, you could get this, you could get sympathy from some of them but here it was not possible.

A: Do you remember anything in particular about sounds and smells or anything like that while you were in John Vorster?

Q: Some of the detainees were singing, especially late at night when loneliness really gets at you. There was a young boy, I don't know him, I mean I have never really met him, but he used to sing and he had such a good voice. He would sing alone and he would sing some of those UDF songs, you know the freedom songs. And I could just feel that you know this young boy, I took it that he's young from the voice and so on, I think he must have been maybe 18 or there about. I remember that part. I actually missed it when I left John Vorster and I just missed that boy singing and thought I would want to see him.

I think the first month; the cell I went in had a heater. At some stage John Vorster Square used heaters in their cells and it had a heater and that heater was so strong. I mean the smell of the heater just worked on me and I'm not quite good with that and it just worked on me. It used to irritate me even though it was making the place warm. It used to irritate me.

And, well we call them donkey blankets. Now because I complained a lot and I would take them out and say, "These blankets are not clean, I want clean blankets and I want sheets, I want this," I was really fussy. And in a way in which I'm not in real life but when you are detained you ask for anything under the sun that you don't even enjoy, so I asked for everything. I complained that the walls were not clean and somebody must come and clean the cell and that sort of thing, it could affect my health. But that's what really came to me.

Q: And when you see John Vorster today what do you think

about it? Does it trigger any memories of detention or is it just a building?

A: No it's not just a building. For me it's a fortress of repression. I cannot identify with it. It's one of those things. When I look at John Vorster Square when I drive around town, I look at it the same way that I look at the Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria. It really depresses me and I know they changed the name of John Vorster Square into Johannesburg Central Police Station or something like that but it still has the same meaning. It hasn't really changed and I sometimes think that as a symbol of repression some of the things that are happening could come back again. I don't now when that would be but I always think because it's still a jail and a prison, the ghosts of most of the people who were tortured and killed here could rise. Also the fact that we would have people who were creative in the application of torture living here, someone can get possessed and do the same thing to an ordinary citizen of the country and that bad omen of John Vorster could live with us. So I don't have mixed feelings, I hate it! It's as clear as that.

Q: What kind of effect did your detention have on you emotionally and physically afterwards?

A: At first I try not to talk about detention and I'm not sure whether I'm doing it consciously or it's a form of denial but I never really openly sit down and discuss this issue because today people think that those who were detained were heroes or they were good freedom fighters and things like that but there are so many stories about detention; that this is where your dignity and your humanity is trampled down and your sense of self worth is really destroyed. And you can never really come out of that situation as a person thinking that "Look this was good I mean at least I was detained." It's not like that I mean it's really that you were tortured. You were brought to your weakest point and I think that the guys who applied torture used this. You first start by standing your ground, then they take the challenge and say, "Jy sal buig! You'll definitely crumble down! We will get to you!" and because you are in their hands they have at least 6 months to deal with you and they could do that and they could torture you with almost simple things like telling you that, "We just heard that your child died" and sometimes it's not true you know. And because you are in jail it is true and you want to know what is further information and they will tell you all this. And they will tell you how your friends have turned against you and all that. Mental torture which is the worst form of torture. So I really think that some people who come from prison and have been tortured have really revealed a lot of information. They sang like canaries some of them and they don't want to confront that issue directly. And I don't think I'm special

or that I was a hero too. This was a time when I feared for my life and when you are in detention you don't know what tomorrow brings, that you could die or you could spend a long time in prison. That element of fear really gets to you. The only thing that makes you survive is because we were on high moral ground. We were fighting for freedom, democracy and it was a good cause and then you say to yourself, "Whatever happens to me at least it was a good cause," I think that was the saving grace, that above everything else. But at a personal level, ha, very tough.

