INTERVIEWEE: BABY TWAYA

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PLACE OF INTERVIEW: JOHN VORSTER SQUARE

My name is Baby Twaya; I was arrested on the 14th June 1977 just before the first anniversary of June 16th. I was here till December 1977 when I was moved to the Fort. It was just after the Soweto uprisings, which started in protest against Afrikaans, but then spread throughout the country, the whole apartheid system of the country. That time I was 16 turning 17, having been a student at Morrison Isaacson, which played an important role in organizing and coordinating the Soweto uprisings. When we were here at John Vorster we were held under Section 6 of the Terrorism Act implying that we were working for organizations that were banned like the ANC and the PAC.

Q: Can you describe what happened on the day of your arrest?

A: Schools were on and off and some of us were part of the leadership who were organizing to go back to school and trying to establish student organizations. I wasn't a leader in the SSRC, but I worked in the SSRC as one of the members. We were finishing a meeting at a house in Diepkloof where we were hiding, but obviously there were too many of us so we delayed a bit to leave. At that point there was quite a lot of repression so a lot of people were getting arrested and of course that was the period they had been chasing after Tsietsi Mashinini and the leadership of the uprisings in 1976. It was also a time where they had been preparing to make sure that we didn't organize the first anniversary of 1976. It was quite pre-emptive action from the police to hunt us down and I suppose, when one reflects, it was quite negligent on our part as well, because there were about twenty of us and they just took everybody. They started selecting people who were not attached to the student leadership and releasing them. We got here at John Vorster at about ten at night. They lined us up at the entrance to the charge office and we were all put in different cells, individually. There were between eight and ten young girls and I was one of those. We were put in the cells and then taken up to the ninth floor where the whole interrogation started and it went on and on and on.

Q: What did the name John Vorster Square mean to you before you were brought here?

A I at least had been exposed to the fact that people had died here. Some it was alleged threw themselves out of the windows. It was clear in my head that this was the highest power of oppression and you should expect torture. It was quite frightening. Even when were travelling into town in a taxi from Soweto as youngsters did So, in that sense it was quite scary, and even as youngsters when coming into town from Soweto in a taxi, we would be scared of just passing by there. It had a threatening authority of oppression at that point in time. Once we were inside I remember wondering if we would survive. It was really, really scary. The worst would be when were inside and each time we get fetched to go to the 9th floor as you walked and go into the lift and up the stairs half the time you didn't even have any sense of direction. I would be worried about whether I would survive and make it back to my cell. Before I got here it was always and authority of power and repression and I had always been worried that if you went in you might not come back alive.

Q: Had you prepared yourself mentally or physically for the possibility of detention?

A: I was 16. The mood of the country was that we knew that things can't be where they are and I knew that racism was not right. I had some politics in my family. My grandfather was a teacher. I remember my first encounter with a book called, Fanagalo, which simplified isiZulu to make it a workable language for the mine foremen. I remember my grandfather saying that he disliked the book, because of the way it undermined the languages of the African people, making a mockery of isiZulu. He always read newspapers, we read the Reader's Digest. So I always understood that the politics of our country could not be defined by race and that the majority of South Africans could not be oppressed on the basis of race. Whether I had prepared myself psychologically is another story. As an activist normally you don't prepare yourself, because you don't know, you just continue doing what you are doing. I was convinced that I was doing was the right thing by being part of the struggle. We tried to avoid being arrested. We knew that when you get detained you had to make sure that you would not reveal anything that would put other people at risk. I was aware that when one was arrested it didn't mean that the police knew everything. So it wasn't so much psychological preparation as interacting with other activists who would tell you how little to reveal. Obviously when you reveal at john Vorster they hit you and torture you and so some people did crack.

Q: Did you have a means of communicating with other activists in the same section as you?

A: The first two days, no. We were all scared. We had been intimidated the whole night. We were told that we had been charged under Section 6of the Terrorism Act, that we could be sentenced. I took us a while to find out that there was someone next door. When they were giving food, you'd hear there was someone in the next cell and you would start knocking on each other's walls and you would hear sounds coming back. Then gradually we realized that there were windows, so we went to the windows and screamed out…Then we were all aware of each other. On the third day they started questioning us and we would even signal to one another as we walked out of your cell, you would make a noise or signal so that they would know that you were walking out of your cell. When you came back, you did the same. We couldn't really talk but we screamed and we sang. I know that a lot of the other girls would sing. Those were the only signals that we gave one another

Q: Do you remember anything about the cell in which you were kept?

A: Yes quite clearly. There was a solid gate barricading the entrance. There was a distance between the solid door and the gate. It was bare. Just a mattress and some grey blankets. There was a toilet. I remember the first night I actually washed in the toilet; because that was the only place you could get water. So there was a toilet, a mat and a blanket and a Bible. That was all and nothing else. It was cold, because it was June. The first thing you do is you sit on the mat and you wonder what's going happen to you. Where's the next sound going to come from. I looked around. I peeped through the window. The following day I could see that the windows were facing the Home Affairs offices. It took a long time for me to venture out and start screaming outside to let people know that I was in detention to allay fears that my parents should know I was here. It must have taken three or four days. But four days in a cell was like four years. You were all by yourself. That was solitary confinement. That was it. You were in

that cell and you were alone and nobody else to talk to, just the Bible, the mat, and the blanket and of course you had a toilet. Because we were arrested elsewhere I didn't have a toothbrush or panties, I had nothing. You had the clothes you were wearing. So the first thing in the morning I would wash my panties in that little basin in the toilet, get it dry and make sure that you do that in the night before you were taken to interrogation. So those were the first few days. In the second and third weeks the police who were looking after us, some of them became friendly and they began to just talk to us and we would listen then ask who was next door and they would tell us. On of the policemen would even let one of us go and check out the other friends in the other cells. But that was only a month or two months later. There was a male section so they would help us communicate with our male counterparts in the other section. So there was some form of exchange of information. I think what also helped was that because it was the peak of the anti-apartheid movement at the time, our lawyer Priscilla Jana insisted that she had to know where we were. So she at least was able to access information about where we were and that we were ok and communicate that to our parents. So with that feeling that Priscilla was aware of our existence, aware of where we were and able to communicate with our parents we began within ourselves to relax and decided to wait for the worst to come. Once we knew that there were people in the cells next to us we felt comfortable, we knew who they were and we at least got to know, through smuggling letters, that Patricia was on our case (obviously we were not allowed to see her, because Section 6 had no privileges).

Q: Were you ever allowed food parcels?

A: No. Under Section 6 you were not allowed visits. You were later on allowed a parcel of clothes. No food, drinks, newspapers, nothing! Only the Bible but no magazines. You were not allowed to talk to your next-door neighbor. If you were found, I don't know what would have happened, but I'm sure you'd be punished. That was it. That was the Terrorism Act, no access to any type of ordinary things. You were given three meals, water and tea, anything beyond that never.

Q: How did you personally cope with the isolation of solitary confinement?

A: It was strange at John Vorster, but I can compare it to when we were moved to the Fort later. It was scary, because you were closer to the people who had arrested you. All you could do was pray. Pray that you survive the interrogation. Pray that whatever you finally said to the police wouldn't implicate any of your colleagues, your comrades. Because the cells here were more spacious then those at the Fort, we could at least do some exercises. We spent time singing, reading the Bible; I must have read the Bible three or four times, finished it from Genesis to the last chapter. We read all of it, all the time. That was the book that I read, it was the only book I had access to. In the morning I would do some exercises, because we were not even let out of the cells. There was no courtyard or anything like that. There were just the cells and a passage, a door, and you walk out and you would go to the offices and then to the ninth floor. So in the morning, I would wake up, exercise, plait my hair(I had to learn, because I had no one around to plait my hair for me), wait for breakfast, if there's a friendly policeman on duty, have a quick chat, then you wait for your lunch and then your supper. In between you read the Bible and then we'd spent time staring through the window. All the time we would just stare through the windows. We used to have some entertainment from the homeless people who lived across the street. They'd been

drinking and they'd start fighting and we got to know their names and we would call out to them and they would dance for us. So we would do literally almost nothing. Waking up in the same place, doing exercises in the same space, reading the Bible all the time and thinking and worrying that certain things shouldn't come out. The weekends were the best for me, because you knew on weekends at least they would not call you up to interrogate you. So weekends were a relief. On Monday mornings I would get extremely nervous waiting for the knock on the door, to be called. I was always worried that there shouldn't be any new information coming or new people getting picked up that could then be linked to me. Because once that happens, you get called again. So on Monday mornings I would be nervous and pray that they wouldn't come this time. I think as days went on and on, I just decided that I was not in control of this environment, I was in solitary confinement, I would jus hang in there until somebody else somewhere decided what to do with us. I was moved at the same time as Joyce Dipale, from here to the Fort. We were moved but we weren't told that the case of the SSRC Eleven was coming up. The only reason we were moved was because they came and said that we weren't coming to be charged, but would we testify and we refused. I remember one policeman who was travelling with us in the van to the Fort just said, "Fine. If you don't want to testify, you are protecting your friends. I must tell you that people die in jail. You're going to die, you're going to age and you're going to die in jail. So it's your choice." We just refused to testify. So they said they were moving us to another place and they took us to the Fort. I think that was around December 1977.

Q: Going back to John Vorster, where you ever taken out for showers?

A: We were. After the second or third day they took us out and escorted us to go and wash. I think later as the torture decreased we were also able to wash our clothes. Once they felt that they had gotten enough information from us they paid us very little attention, because they had gotten who they wanted to charge.

Q: Do you remember the route they took you from the cells to the ninth floor?

A: It's not clear in my head. I remember the movement, but not the directions. I think that it may be one of the things that I decided not to remember when I left detention. Those are unpleasant memories that as you grow, you negotiate and rationalize, because you just don't want to remember them and they bring with them a lot of pain and anxiety and they can pull you down. I just remember that we would leave my cell, go into a lift, two lifts, and then to the ninth floor. Then the same route back. I don't remember whether there were staircases and I don remember whether I turned left or right and I think its just part of a process of negotiating those feelings of negativity and deciding that I didn't want to recall.

Q: How long did these interrogations go on for?

A: The first three months. The first two months was tough. That was daily interrogation. Daily! The third month eased a bit. The first two months was regular torture. I can remember the policemen. I think it was Adjutant Jordan; he was the lead interrogator for us. I remember the first day I was questioned about a whole range of things: Am I working for the ANC, do I know about the ANC, who sent us to form the SSRC, who else do I know is involved ion the struggle who was not arrested with us? Then there

were specific questions about who of the group were insiders and instigators and leaders and where did they get their instructions from? So there was quite a range of questions. Obviously we would say, “No, We are in the struggle, because we know that we don’t want to be taught Afrikaans. We also know that there is a difference between our education and the education of Whites.” But they wanted to know who was inciting us. “Somebody must be telling you these things. It just can’t be you. You can’t know these things” then we would get beaten up. I remember. I was slapped and kicked. That was better then when they covered my head with a black hood and electrocuted me. That was quite scary. They did that about once every second day, quite frightening and that was the first week. The second week he would threaten, kick and slap. But even then when I went through that type of torture, I just thought that there was nothing more I could do what would it help? So I kept to the same story. “No we don’t have instructions. We are aware that we don’t want to be taught in Afrikaans” And there were practical reasons. We explained to them that we were doing English, Afrikaans and South Sotho all in English (our second language) or Afrikaans (our third language) and we struggled even though we were at good schools. Morris Isaacson was one of the best schools in Soweto. So it was a struggle to use another language to decode the content of a subject like Science. So we just told them that we thought that we were doing was correct, but it would be a daily question. “Who told you to do that?” It was as if they thought we couldn’t think for ourselves, somebody else had to tell us. So obviously the torture was directed towards getting you to implicate other people. At that time I personally felt that I was going to be solid on this issue and that anything could happen. After about three weeks, I remember asking to go see a district surgeon. I had quite a lot of pain in my ear as a result of the torture and the electrocution. It was quite scary; we went to the doctor, saw the doctor and came back into the cells again. The irony was that after international awareness and protests began top increase, we were then told by Jordan that if we felt we had been tortured and that we had a story to tell, we should charge them. I remember that me and Joyce were convinced that we had a case. We wrote statements charging the police with torture little knowing that it would take more then six months and the case would just fall away. In the third month once they had built their case against the leaders, they stopped with the interrogations. Once in a while I would be called upstairs for strange things. Once I was called to verify letters. I was asked who had chaired a meeting at a certain place, but I didn’t know anything. So it was really just to verify information that they thought I had. In the fourth month we spent the whole time just sitting in our cells not knowing what was happening. They hardly ever came into the cells. By the fifth month, nobody ever came. That’s when we started interacting with comrades who were in the male section. We even smuggled in pens and newspapers. We could write on pieces of tissue paper and the police would smuggle them in and out for us. Then they would send out some of the ordinary prisoners to bring us food. One of them was my neighbor’s son and it was nice to see someone you knew, because he helped me to smuggle letters to my home in Dube. By the sixth month I remember feeling that maybe I was going to be lucky and be home for Christmas, but that was not to be. They moved us to the Fort.

Q: Were the same people always in charge of your interrogation and what were they like?

A: At John Vorster Square it was always the same people and they were businesslike. Their view was simple, they were going to intimidate us, torture us and interrogate us. We were going to tell them the truth. We were going to tell them who were inciting us, who were giving us instructions. We were going

to tell them who in the ANC were giving us guidance to do this. If we refused we were going to be beaten up and threatened. There was also an element of undermining, that if you were a young girl, you just couldn't be political. You should be a girlfriend of all these boys. These young men are activists and leaders and why are you in the struggle? They would always ask: "What does such a young girl know about the struggle?"

Q: Did you ever get the sense that your interrogators had any humanity?

A: Not the interrogators I didn't expect that and when they showed it, I was suspicious that they were trying to softening me up to try and get me to slip up. At John Vorster Square you had to be careful not to assume things. Primarily, because they were quite clear and there was a history. We knew that there were different levels of interrogators, lower ones like Jordan and then top ones like Cronwright. Even when you in the interrogation room, you would just hear Cronwright down the passage. He had these vulgar Sesotho words, he didn't know Sesotho, but he knew all the dirty words. He was amazing, the biggest intimidator. I don't think he beat people up, but he's role was that of a psychological torturer. He would come into a room and threaten you with your interrogator, shake you up a little. I didn't pick up any humanity from any of my interrogators. I was fearful and I was not looking for it. I knew that they had work to do make sure that you don't pursue your struggle that you don't become convinced as an activist there's some value to fighting for freedom of the country. They were not there to give you support. At the Level of the policemen who were taking care of us in the cells, yes there was. There was one called Visser, he was the type you could decide if you wanted to trust or not. There wasn't any feeling of trust when you were under Section 6. You can't necessarily say that you can trust these people, because they are on duty and their work is to make sure that your work doesn't succeed, bottom line. But there were those who were empathetic, but we learned to be careful ourselves. When you're in prison, you're in prison. You can't expect anyone to acknowledge that you're there and you can't expect a policeman who interrogates you to be supportive of what you have to protect them, because you don't want to jeopardize their work or their position. One couldn't assume that if they smiled at you they were supporting you.

Q: How did John Vorster Square compare to other places you were detained at?

A: Going to the Fort was a big relief, Firstly it was distance, no torture teams there. I remember getting out of the charge office here and feeling like I was going home, even though I knew I wasn't going home. I didn't care where we were being transferred to, I was just happy to leave Johan Vorster Square. This was where the big, strong men of the Security Branch were. Here and at Compol in Pretoria. I walked out of the charge office I just felt relieved. Joyce and I felt exactly the same, because we were transferred at the same time to the Fort. Then when we got there we realized that it was actually a prison and I then got confused. The distance from John Vorster made me feel relieved and the cells here were also a bit cold and there were warmer. That distance made a big difference. They weren't up on the ninth floor while you were sleeping downstairs; they had to drive to come get you for interrogation.

Q: What does this building represent for you today?

A: A feeling of extreme sadness. It's tragic when I think of other people who died. I always count my blessings and say well here am I to tell the story and I've survived the entire trauma. To me this place really symbolizes the height of repression. It's gory and eerie to think that I actually stayed here when I was 17 and survived it. It's quite shocking to me. I don't think that I drive past this place anymore. I don't conscientiously drive past this place, because it evokes feelings of negative energy and sadness and shock that an institution so big would have spent all its energy and time tracking young people and sustaining an unfair system. That is my memory of John Vorster Square.

Q: How do you think a place like this should be commemorated?

A: I think a place like this should be commemorated so that it can be used for better things and change our perceptions of it. It must serve the present government just as it served the state then, but with the angle of community policing. I think it should be used to play a role in community policing for the safety of the country and the safety of all of us. I think it's important that it support the transformative policies of the country. We can't wipe out the history, but this building should really be used to tell that history to our children so that they begin to understand how we got where we are today. Not necessarily to carry that trauma through, but to help us rebuild the country by acknowledging that these things happened. I think they should have seminars here where they tell the truth about what this building used to symbolize and look at what it should symbolize now. Largely it should be used to sustain and the support the policies of a new democratic country.

END OF INTERVIEW