

INTERVIEWEE: Dr Elizabeth Floyd
DATE OF INTERVIEW: 24th May 2007
PLACE OF INTERVIEW: Johannesburg Central Police Station



Q: How important and what significant do you think detention had in the arsenal of the South African state?

A: I think in the 70s and up till about 82 people were terrified of detention and when they came out they were often isolated and unsupported. You talk to people now who were detained in those period and they've never actually been through a process of talking about it with people you understood and knew how to respond.

82 changed that. Also I think what was beginning to change was that a lot of people who were detained in that period, knew they were going to be detained and only some people left. A lot of people were saying, "I will get detained and go back and do what I was doing before," it wasn't the end of the road which I think it had been for people. People would previously get detained, come out and leave the country. So people were staying. People were also being sentenced and coming out and continuing work whereas previously I think quite often people had left after a detention or were quite shattered.

We were able to put on the map that detention had psychological effects. Even quite senior people were coping with that. Some avoided it, that's where a lot of the alcohol problems come in is that people were self-medicating their problems. So there are people who were tortured in the 60s, 70s, even the 80s who were destroyed by it and never recovered. So people got more and more confident or better equipped to handle detentions or knew people who had been in detention and were not as intimidated by it.

Now that indefinite detention with thousands of people all over the prisons, that was brought to an end by the hunger strike by prisoners themselves. So the detainees actually crashed the system through the hunger strike and they had to stop using the system.

What they then did is, obviously lots of people were released but some of the more high profile were put under house arrest with an assassination threat. Now, all detainees are scared of assassination after they come out and the Security Police use it but these people were incredibly vulnerable. There were people outside Polokwane who were just sitting ducks and some people did get assassinated and it was a real threat. That in some ways was more scary because what had happened was that deaths in detention were too high a risk for the government after Neil's death.

The other thing they started doing was disappearing people. Someone we knew in the Eastern Cape died in interrogation and then they covered up and dumped him to make it look like he'd been assaulted in a criminal case. Stanza Bopape was killed in interrogation and they made it look like he had escaped. I remember seeing the person he was arrested with and his experience was just like mine, suddenly the interrogation just stopped. They've now admitted what happened to Stanza but they started disappearing people rather than having to cope with the international repercussions of a death in detention. So the risks went up for individuals but the system was pulled apart.

In the early 90s with the Third Force provoked violence there was almost nothing we could do about it. That I think is really what was terrifying. If you look at the footage in the Apartheid Museum, I mean you can just see it's the most extreme violence.

If you compare us with South America, fairly similar experiences. I

<p>thought more people disappeared in South America but it's probably similar to here. Our experience was most similar to South America. Part of what happened in South America is that you did have health professionals who themselves were detained so they started using their profession to deal with the impact of detention.</p>
<p>Q: As you're aware a number of health professionals here were engaged in supporting the detention program through district surgeons and things like that. I wonder whether you could talk a little to that? The TRC had hearings into the health sector but there was very little cooperation from former district surgeons.</p>
<p>A: The Truth and Reconciliation Commission looked at the health profession in its assistance to the Security Police. They didn't look at the response. They focussed in on the Steve Biko case where the district surgeons were obviously key to the problem and extraordinarily negligent. You must remember it was the health profession that charged those people. When they got off on the inquest they were taken to the Health Professions Council. The Health Professions Council and the Medical Association had a very bad record of avoiding the issues and not confronting them. The Medical Association in the 80s had a very bad reputation because of that. The district surgeon here was a pathetic little guy, he was actually crying and he wanted us to make him feel better. Then there was Wendy Orr who came out publicly about what was happening in detention.</p>
<p>Q: What do you think this police station signified in those earlier years?</p>
<p>A: The Security Police operated regionally so every region would have its John Vorster Square but there's no question that for previous Transvaal period this was the headquarters, this is where the heavy action took place. But you must remember, you can torture somebody off a car battery anywhere and that was what they did; people were taken to places that we now know were Vlakplaas. But they could do it anywhere; you could experiment with your battery in the bush. In the Western Cape, the Eastern Cape and KZN there were headquarters that had similar reputations and functions.</p> <p>If you look at the Homelands there was another scenario. The Homelands didn't bother to cover up the physical injuries. You must remember that after Biko they didn't want to leave physical injuries and they scaled up their methods to do things like electrodes. Electrodes on skin you can see the burns but if you put it in somebody's anus or something like that, you can't. Things like sleep deprivation, squatting, cold water. Suffocation plus electric shock, anybody who's being through that describes it as a near death experience. That's also where people die. You're bagged with a wet bag so you can't breathe properly then shocked and you breathe in and the wet bag suffocates you. People like Eric Ntonga were suffocated with a bicycle tube.</p> <p>So you can torture people anywhere and I think they learnt to take torture to places that were less identifiable because so much had been identified with this area.</p> <p>The Homelands had different approaches. In Bop, they used to whip people with a sjambok. You'd get people with marks across their back where there were so many you couldn't count them on the other hand they didn't die. In Venda they just panel beat them and people like Moabe died just from internal bleeding and there were others who nearly died. They didn't bother to hide what they were doing.</p>
<p>Q: What are your thoughts around the unfinished business and culpability in relation to what happened here and at other places in terms of abuses around detention?</p>
<p>A: I think within John Vorster Square we know quite a lot of what</p>

happened. I think disappearances where we don't know what happened were probably outside of institutions like this. There are disappearances where we don't know what happened.

A lot of those interrogation teams, even in 82, they weren't young. The core interrogators were over 50. So those people are dying. Some of them were very abnormal people. If you look at Niewoudt in the Eastern Cape who just died, you can see physically what happened to him. He just shrunk. He almost sort of disappeared. That movie, *Forgiveness*, about a security policeman who can't live with his conscience, which was based on Niewoudt, is very close I think to what happened to those guys. I think you see the physical effects of the psychological stress they went through. You must remember in the 80s they were heroes, they were competing to be recognised. I think for them, their families finding out that they were torturers. They were doing what the country asked them to do. You've got a lot of people who were traumatised on the border. So there's a lot of damage in those people that isn't recognised. And then they certainly feel that they were sold out by their seniors because they were fingered and their seniors have refused to admit that it happened or they're claiming that it was rogue policemen who were doing it outside of instructions.

I think for me, one of the things that was useful at the TRC, was them admitting that they had an elimination campaign against political leaders in the 80s in the country. We certainly experienced it that way but the recognition that they were out to simply eliminate. Someone like my husband was just told straight out by the Security Police: "Option No 1: you leave the country. Option No. 2: you stop what you doing. Option No.3: we sentence you," and he very nearly landed up on the island, "Option 4: we destroy you so can't function." So I think there was a systematic program of eliminating leadership. Then in so called 'unrest situations' they would pick off leaders. So I think that's one of the most important recognitions; that there was that systematic campaign to eliminate people.

Q: Do we still need to continue interrogating that past?

A: We've got a severe problem of denial by White South Africans; that these things didn't happen. Almost a wiping out of the past because it suits them. I think that underneath that there's also a fair amount of guilt. Guilt's a very, very damaging process.

There're too many people who were affected by repression who didn't come through the TRC system. The TRC focused on victims. You must remember that a lot of detainees were playing a leadership role in the movement and those people haven't been taken through the process.

For me it feels like it belongs in the history books. I find going to the Apartheid Museum very interesting. Some people didn't make it and we've left them behind and we've moved on. So I think the Apartheid Museum, certainly for me, it documents a lot of the things that I went through; friends being assassinated, what was happening in the townships, I worked in Soweto for most of the 80s and in Alex for a year. Some of it's quite startling. My kids are now old enough to be exposed to it so I think that there are institutions like that, which are important so that people can refer to them. But certainly for myself, it's history and we've moved on and some people aren't with us.

Q: How do you think this police station should be commemorated?

A: I think the Apartheid Museum works because it documents the people who fell by the wayside and what people have being through. So it's a recognition that these things did happen. But I think the biggest

commemoration is that you move on.

I've come to this police station at some period when they were making an extraordinary effort to be receptive to the public. I'll give you an example. I used to get a physical reaction when I heard a helicopter because I can remember working in Soweto surrounded by the army with helicopters chasing school kids. That changed when somebody was attacked in our street and a police helicopter arrived to protect us. Or when you see the Tracker helicopter over your neighbourhood looking for stolen cars. So I think experiences change things. Perhaps we just need to recognise more that the experiences are there. Or for example, most detainees, after you've been in detention, when you hear your front gate, you wake up automatically and every car that stops outside your house, you wake up. I can remember in 1994/95, hearing a police van stop outside and a policeman walking up the stairs and I thought, "What the hell do they want with us now?" and it was the period of the Yeoville rapist and they noticed our security gate was open and they had come to check up on us. So for me that's the most important way to move forward, is that people's experiences of a place change.

A: The other issue is that the perpetrators were all Security Policemen it was not the blue uniform SAPS. Certainly my experience of the blue uniformed SAPS some of them were extraordinarily kind to me. There were times when I wanted to say, particularly to the black policemen, "Sorry I'm not an ANC hero." There was a kindness and a concern.

I can remember one of the cops in Hillbrow, as the Security Police fetched me, he picked up that I could understand a bit of African languages. He sat on the other side of the yard and he was talking to me in Sotho as I crossed the yard but in a way that the Security Police couldn't hear. When I came back – your biggest worry in being taken for interrogation is that something happens to you and nobody knows – and when I came back they said, "We saw you were gone, we're glad that you're back." Now they weren't suppose to be doing that but the black police particularly, were very, very torn and some of the White police very embarrassed to be associated with what was going on. So maybe that's also one of the other lessons, is that was the Security establishment. The same when there were mass detentions and they put people in the prisons, the prisons were quite careful not to associate themselves with the Security Police and what they were doing to individuals.

A: If you take someone like [Paul] Erasmus. Those people who were involved in those things at that stage who've now been dumped with the guilt and the responsibility and the public profile – they start turning to their ex-detainees for support because the ex-detainees are the only people who really understand what it's about. It's very interesting stuff; where the perpetrator looks to their victim for recognition of what it was about. I think the detainees were clearer than the people outside about what was going on. It was a battle and that was the sharp edge of it.

Q: It's also interesting, the power dynamic between people who have information about the past and the victims.

A: But it's also important that you need to regard people as survivors. Maybe dented, maybe partial damage. And one needs to get out of that victim mentality. Victim mentality doesn't do anything for anyone feeling a victim immobilises you so you need to get that transition on both sides.

Q: Can you go a bit more into the Paul Erasmus story?

A: The majority of the interrogators have gotten away with it. Except for their consciences. Very few of them have retained normal family relationships. Erasmus perhaps is a very good example of it. Erasmus went from being kind of a wannabe in the security team, trying to please

his seniors to get promotion and then he had doubts. He says it's because he had an English mother. Once he had the doubts and he pulled away from it he was then subjected to the treatment that he had subjected others to. So I think the guilt is really what destroys people. He was a perpetrator who then experienced what it was like to be the victim and broke down completely. He got lost in the middle and is actually quite desperate for attention from his previous victims. One of the people he harassed was Winnie Mandela and somehow she's given him support. He harassed me for ten years. Maybe he functions better these days. I find him irritating because he wants to do it to me and I just feel, "Take your baggage elsewhere, thank you very much." He wants a huge amount of attention. If you look at Posttraumatic Stress Syndrome, which is what he has, part of the therapy is to make sense of the experience. When you have very, very senseless crime it's almost impossible to make sense of it but in a political context there's more of a process to do that. His particular role is obviously embarrassing and carries loads of guilt so he can get some meaning from helping to tell the story and help with bringing out what actually happened.

END OF INTERVIEW

