

INTERVIEWEE: Barbara Hogan

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PLACE OF INTERVIEW: JOHANNESBURG CENTRAL POLICE STATION

Q: Could you introduce yourself and tell us when you were held at John Vorster Square?

A: My name is Barbara Hogan. I was picked up on the 22nd September 1981 and I was brought here on and off until January 1982.

Q: Could you please briefly outline what your political involvement was and the events that led to you being brought to John Vorster Square?

A: I was working underground for the ANC. I was working in the political wing, not the military wing. Besides that I was involved in organization, mobilization and all kinds of other issues. The Security Polices had cracked my network through a double agent and so I was picked up very early that morning.

Q: How old were you at the time?

A: I must have been 29.

Q: Before you were brought to John Vorster Square, what did the name mean to you?

A: It wasn't a pleasant place. It was a place of evil, a place where dreadful things happened to people. I had friends who'd been brought here, who had been carried out. It was well-known, it was a place where torture was carried out and it was the centre for the security Police. It was a place where there was no mercy and it was a place where, basically, psychopaths hung out.

Q: How did you feel when you were brought here and did you know that you were coming here?

A: I presumed when they picked me up that I would come to John Vorster Square. John Vorster was the primary place where they brought people for interrogation and I knew I'd be interrogated, so that's how I knew that I was coming here. When you make decisions to join an illegal organization, its after a fairly long process so you are aware that being arrested is a likelihood. So I think you do quite a lot of mental preparation and also a fair number of people I knew had been detained so it wasn't as though it was a complete surprise to me, coming to John Vorster. It didn't come as a shock.

Q: Do you remember your arrival at John Vorster Square?

A: I was brought by Captain Cronwright, I don't know if you've heard about him, bragging that I was going to go to jail for so long and it was pretty hectic, because they were trying to pick up a friend of mine who wasn't home and I could hear from the radio, and that was stupid of them, because I was getting important information. When I arrived here I never came through a door, we always came through the vehicle entrance at the back and I remember very clearly coming through that vehicle entrance and into the underground parking and then been taken upstairs in the lift. Cronwright kept on

saying, “Sy’s verskriklik kalm,” “She’s terribly calm”. I think I was just sort of sussing out what was going on, just watching what was happening.

Q: Were you taken to the cell or for interrogation?

A: I was taken immediately for interrogation.

Q: What was the character of the initial interrogation?

A: I was under interrogation for a long time, from September through to more or less December and then I was taken down to the Eastern Cape so I can't remember that first day of interrogation, but I do remember that I was trying to protect a particular person who they'd been trying to pick up and so I wasn't revealing anything about his whereabouts, because he was in the same ANC network as I was. So I was trying to not reveal anything and I remember it was very intensive. They kept me up at night. It was a very aggressive, fierce and very threatening kind of interrogation in the first three days.

Q: Do you remember anything in sensory terms about the building at all?

A: I have different memories. The interrogation rooms on the 10th floor had frosted glass halfway up and in rows, so quite often you could hear what was happening to the person next door. Although those were the more kind of “normal” rooms, they were upstairs, sun came in and they had carpets and a desk, but in a sense it was more menacing. I think that every prisoner will tell you that being in a cell is almost like your protection. Once the cell door is open there is no protection. When you're in those interrogation rooms there's no protection. My sensory impression then was the sounds of the interrogation room, because they picked up quite a few friends of mine, hearing friends of mine being interrogated, hearing people shuffling with chains, because people were chained on their legs and hearing those chains going about, hearing people being hit. So that was one sensory impression. In my cell it was just the sense of calmness. Your sensory impressions are mostly audio, because you don't have access to much. You can't see color much, you can't see anything else. I remember hearing the call to prayer from the local mosque in the early morning and in the evenings and that was incredibly calming, just hearing that, hearing the sounds outside also was very normal. I remember also hearing the prostitutes teasing men downstairs in the road and all the kind of rich language that went on with that. The endless clanging of doors late at night was also another thing I remember. Later on the interrogation was very fierce for many of us, you might not be able to sleep at night, and you hear doors opening. That was the linkage doors between the interrogation room and the cells and you would be awake to hear who was being kept at night and then clambering up and looking out the windows to see who was being taken for interrogation and if they'd been tortured and what state they were in. Nighttime was often the time when nasty things would happen, so it was just waiting for the clanging of that door to see them. Other times you would hear pigeons on the windowsills and their cooing would be incredibly acoustic. You would cling to anything that was outside, because you were in solitary confinement and I was in solitary confinement for six months during my detention period, so any form of life becomes important to you.

Q: Do you remember anything specific about your cell?

A: I remember the cement chairs in it. I remember they had a pipe system that was covered with steel of a kind. They allowed me a Bible and I was playing this cat and mouse game with the Security Police, so I had to keep track of the stories that I was telling them. When you're sitting twelve hours under interrogation, you've have to be sure that you remember what you're telling them. I remember being able to get a pen and tearing pages out of my Bible and writing down what I had done and then tying it with pieces of cotton that I had taken from my clothes and putting it under the pipes so that I could retrieve it when I needed to re-gather my thoughts. I remember the walls around the toilet, sitting on the top sometimes to try and look out. Sleeping on the floor is another memory. Those are the memories of the cell.

Q: Could you see anything outside?

A: I looked out to the east part of Johannesburg. I have a memory of being able to see a tree in the distance and of course just the cityscape.

Q: How else did you spend your time in isolation?

A: Initially when you're under interrogation you're taken up on weekends, so it was unremitting interrogation and being in isolation was actually a relief, because you were out of the domain of you're interrogators. Those first couple of weeks I was able to sleep very deeply and had very vivid dreams. So being on my own was an ordeal in a way because you didn't have anyone to help you along, to deal with the terror, to deal with all those sorts of things, but it wasn't bad, because I wasn't living in a space that you saw all day and no one else. I think I was more fortunate. Later on I just lived in a cell all the time. So during the interrogation period it's easier. After interrogation when they just put you to rot alone in a cell while they try to finalize everybody else's case that's when you have to start dealing with how you got through the day. I was allowed food from outside and sometimes when I'd get oranges, I'd construct a putt-putt course, do things like that. That was the typical things which prisoners did. I made, with the stolen pen again, I made a pack of cards out of a biscuit box and hit them in my mattress. I also did a lot of singing and poetry which I recited a lot. I used to exercise and walk round and round. Then miracles of miracles, my family managed to get me a tennis ball. I must have driven other people mad with that tennis ball but I was able to throw the ball against the wall. My bad time was not at John Vorster. It was after I left John Vorster and I was taken to Heidelberg. It was after Neil Aggett had died in detention, it was the accumulation of a lot of things and then just getting through the very day became an immense ordeal. Not being able to sleep, having your muscles just freeze, just the panic of waking up each morning. At one of the places I was, in Vereeniging, just the birds waking you up in the morning was upsetting, because you knew you were going for interrogation and now you had to face three hours of before they came to fetch you. Isolation always means that everything becomes more intense, you become more scared and you start to live in your own world. It's an ordeal. Finally all you have left is your body so you spent time exercising that body. I was fortunate that my family managed to smuggle in a pen and I was able to send out in my laundry, notes from John Vorster Square. So I was able to have some sort of communication with the outside, particularly after I was assaulted, that's how I was able to send those messages out.

Q: Did you have any kind of access with other people?

A: No

Q: You weren't able to communicate with anyone?

A: Women were always in a difficult position, because they were kept in separate sections from men and usually there were fewer women. I did have access, not to women who were in my trial, but to Lilian Keagile who was detained at the same time as me. We were able to talk over the passageway for a short period of time. Then a friend of mine, Hanchen Koornhof, was also arrested and I was able to shout down the passageway, but they were obviously monitoring what I was saying and they'd take it out on you the next morning for communicating. I was not able to communicate with a lot of people.

Q: Did you ever get a visit from a magistrate or district surgeon?

A: You see, its complicated, because when I was in John Vorster for I think two to three months and then I was taken to the Eastern Cape and then I was taken all over the place. I was six months in police cells and then a further seven months awaiting trial before I was sentenced. A magistrate never came to me at John Vorster, but he came to me in Heidelberg, where I was able to report being assaulted, but never at John Vorster. I was taken about once every two weeks to see a district surgeon.

Q: How did those visits work?

A: The district surgeon had offices in Harrison Street so they'd take you by police van or private Security Police car. There was one period where they had assaulted me very badly and I had started bleeding internally and they had forgotten that I had to see the district surgeon the next day and I was bruised and pretty badly beaten up. They had to take me to the district surgeon, but before I left, as I was getting into car, they said to me, "if you tell him that you were assaulted, we'll kill you." They came with me to the district surgeon and insisted on sitting in on the consultation. What the hell has happened to you?" and I was just too terrified, I just started crying and I just said, "Nothing". The Security Police wanted to stay and he chased them out and he said to me, "What happened?" and I said, "I was assaulted". He then took my pulse and everything and he was afraid I was going to have a heart attack and I was then put on sedatives. He then demanded to see me everyday for ten days. I was one of the fortunate people. I think it was because he saw me immediately after the assault that he felt if he didn't take any action, he himself could be compromised. He sent a report to the security Police headquarters in Pretoria and then demanded to see me everyday, because he thought I was at risk. The Security police then lay off me for those ten days, but then on the last day, after I'd seen him, they then packed me up and took me off to Vereeniging so that I wouldn't be under his jurisdiction anymore, to start again with the assaults and the district surgeon would be unable to protect me.

Q: Were you taken to the showers and for exercises?

A: I was never taken sometimes for the morning showers when I was under the interrogation, but there were times particularly around December, during Christmas time, when they just forgot about us. They were off having their own fun, their own braais and so there was a whole long period where we were

never taken for showers or anything. The cells were pretty filthy and my family made a huge fuss about the filth in the cell and my clothes. So they brought in people to clean it. But I was never taken out for exercise or anything like that; it wasn't part of the routine.

Q: Beside your family did you have access to anyone on the outside?

A: I wasn't allowed access to my family. The Detainees' Parents support Committee started at that time so they were linked into a network of people who were fighting to give me access to food and clothes. So it was indirect contact. They could send me food in, stuff like yogurt, biscuits and fruit. They managed to get the inside of a ballpoint pen into a hem of a towel and they managed to put in a sewing needle. I used to examine everything that I got from them and then found that and on the basis of that I could construct short notes on pieces of toilet paper to them and they could write back to me and I used my hair as a thread. My sister just looked at everything on my clothes that had a seam that was sewn with hair. I was allowed a visit for the first time in December with my father and my stepmother who was Afrikaans and a strong Nationalist supporter, which was why politics was always been difficult in my family. I didn't know I was getting a visit, I was brought up to the interrogation room and suddenly I heard my parents' voices and I was quite freaked, wondering what was going to happen, but my stepmother was actually amazing. She walked in and she said, "Barbara, do you what your rights are? You can write to the minister, the magistrate's supposed to have seen you", she was totally in control. That was actually achieved through the work of the Detainees' Parents Support Committee. It was bringing parents on board and saying, "Your children aren't these evil people, they need protection." She was amazing; she gave evidence in mitigation in court for me, she faced enormous community disapproval, but she stood by me all the time. The other time, later on, that I was allowed a visit was when I was in Heidelberg. It was the morning that they had found Neil Aggett's body and I was the allowed a visit with my family. I knew someone had died in detention, because a newspaper van had driven past with the headlines on it saying that a detainee had died in detention. From the conversation amongst the security Police I was able to deduct that it had been a trade unionist and I immediately suspected Neil and as I walked into the interview room, my sister, she was very smart, said, "Have you heard about Neil?", so I knew it was Neil. They allowed me another visit on my birthday, but at that time I was just gone. I'd been having nightmares, I wasn't able to sleep, and they had to take me away for heavy sedation, so when I arrived I was completely out of it and I only have a vague memory of that visit.

Q: Did you ever see Aggett during his time of detention?

A: I had been taken to the Eastern Cape for interrogation and I was brought back here briefly over the December period and as I came in, Neil crossed my path. We were at a sort of reception area for the cells and Neil walked past me. I noticed that he had a scratch on his arm and that it was bleeding, but he saw and he was all delighted and he gave me this huge smile and lifted his arms and said, "Amandla, Amandla Barbara", and he was really supportive. I was able to work out that it was that day that they really started beating him up. It coincided with the day I saw him, in retrospect it was always quite important for to have had that moment with Neil, because I never saw him again and of course I didn't go to his funeral, I was in detention by then.

Q: Were you ever read or told what your rights were whilst in detention?

A: Nothing. No, you were away everybody and everything. There were no regulations. You were basically in their hands; there were no rules of the games with them. They sneered at anything legal. Later on when I was able, I laid charges of assault against them and the case came to court while I was awaiting trial for my major case. They then submitted a document, which had been drawn up about detainees' rights, that they said they had found in my possession and then on the basis of that, I couldn't exercise my rights and therefore I could not have demanded to see a magistrate. It was all nonsense, because the document that was shown in court was published after I'd been detained. However I had made sure that I did understand the rules of interrogation in terms of not incriminating yourself. I had spent a lot of time preparing myself for that and that was what infuriated my interrogators. I gave advice to Hanchen, when they wanted her to sign things and I said, "Don't sign anything." There was a whole patriarchal thing going on there and I think that they really hated me and detested me in certain ways. They kept on saying that I took control of the interrogation situation. But there was no thing of "These are the rules, this is what you're entitled to", it was just, "You behave or else we'll kill you." At John Vorster you were always taken by the same process from the cell to interrogation. In the initial interrogation I was taken by two Railway policewomen and they would take me for a shower and then to the interrogation. They were present in the room during one of the assault periods and then they were taken out of the room. When I started bleeding, they were brought in to take me to the toilet and they were completely shocked. I think they believed that they wouldn't assault a White woman so for both of them it was terrible and they had divided loyalties. The next day, the one woman came into my cell and said, "I want to tell you I've resigned, I'm pregnant and if my child is a daughter, I'm going to name her after you." I think this gives you an idea of how people related to a white person in detention. Suddenly it became real, it wasn't just a black person who there was a certain amount of distance from. They were also from the Railway Police not the Security Police and they were quite contemptuous of the Security Police as were most other divisions of the Police. The other woman came to me and she said, "I want to ask you one favour. Please never mention me if you lay a charge, because my husband's family are all the police and I have to give evidence it would ruin my marriage". After that I was handed over to a bunch of far nastier women, pretty vicious and very cruel. That was for the rest of the time.

Q: Were there specific people who were involved always involved with your interrogation?

A: For the most part yes. People were brought in from the Eastern Cape, because they were trying to link me to the Eastern Cape. But most of the time it was basically Prince, Deetleefs and Cronwright organizing them.

Q: What were they like?

A: Prince was mad, he was bosbevok, and he had been on the border and was just mad. You could see it in his eyes and he's eyes used to range all over the place. I think you reach a stage where you know that some people have crossed a terrible line. Everyone did terrible things here, but there's some that just cross a terrible line. Prince was once of them. You knew he would stop at nothing. He was mad for finding commies under every bed and seeing you as the devil incarnate and he had no way of managing

and he hated you. If he could kill you, he would be happy; it was that kind of thing. There was Struwig as well who was equally a person who'd cross the line, a huge man with a vicious streak. There were cases with him that George Bizos can talk about where he had sat on detainees and pulled out their teeth with pliers. He was that kind of man, with just no nuance. Deetleefs was not so heavy physically, but he was a smart interrogator. I think most people would say that he was a smarter interrogator. The problem was with my case is they had intercepted a document which I had fielded to the ANC which had spelt out all my ANC underground work. I had written a document spelling out everything; I'd even attached a list of names, at the request of the ANC, of the people that I worked with. So there actually was nothing; they could have literally taken that document and taken me to court and incriminated me but they were so used to dealing with military cases where they had to try and find out the networks, the cells, the munitions dumps, all of those kind of things that they were used to beating people to a pulp. They were under the impression that they'd hit a major ANC underground network, which they hadn't. So the terror was firstly that you knew you were dealing with some deeply psychotic people but secondly, that they could beat you to a pulp for information that you simply did not have. You got into bizarre situations where you could see that they simply did not believe you. You'd give a piece of information and you could see Deetleefs panicking, could he trust this or couldn't trust this? I think what made it worse in my situation was in those first couple of days when I was protecting people so that they could get out of the country while the going was good, I led them a merry path. I pretended to be this little girl who had just fallen apart at the seams and crying. They'd given me Kentucky Fried Chicken and ice cream and wrung out of me the name of a person. I gave them the name of this person who I knew to be abroad, who I had no contact with or anything. So they thought I'd given them the name of the kingpin. They were delighted, they thought they'd cracked me in three days and they were absolutely over the moon. Then when they came to arrest the people, the truth suddenly came out and they realized how much they'd been manipulated. The other security policemen down the passage were mocking them and saying, "In three days she's got you in a mess," and they hated me for that, they really hated me for that. So there was an unmitigated, relentless thing towards me. So you knew finally that you were dealing with madmen and you also knew that people had died because madmen didn't know what they were doing. To give you an example of the extent of the terror that you finally find yourself, I tried to commit suicide at one stage. In fact it was the day before they took me to Vereeniging when I knew that they were going to take me out of the jurisdiction of this district surgeon. I knew that I would be beaten up elsewhere and I knew that I had nothing more to say and it was this terrifying notion that they could kill you for nothing further that they had to say. By that stage, when you'd been interrogation for six or seven weeks, everyday and all day and the real nasty interrogation had started I just lost all sense of proportion. I know now why people commit suicide. For me it was absolutely clear, this was my way out. I stole tablets without them knowing it. I first tried to cut my wrists by sharpening the end of my toothpaste tube, you know it's made out of aluminum, and that wasn't strong enough to get to my vein. I'd tied a thing around my neck, very tight, and at that stage, it was after the assaults, they'd been forced to give me a bed because of the district surgeon. So I had a bed with iron bars at the back and I tied whatever I'd tied around my neck to the iron bars so that I wouldn't be able to release myself. So I was virtually choking and I hoped then that I would suffocate myself while being under sedation. The next morning I woke up and I was alive so I must have managed to rip the thing off my neck. That was the lowest moment in my life. I knew what I was going in for and I knew how vulnerable I

was and I knew they hated me and I was suffering the consequences of isolation. So they took me off to Vereeniging and I was sitting in the car and Prema Naidoo, a friend of mine who went through worse assaults, had the same thought, thinking if I managed to get hold of the steering wheel would I be able to kill all of us? So I arrived at Vereeniging and I was walking in I saw two pieces of glass on the grill and before they could even see it, I just took them and I covered them with my hand and I kept it and that was going to be my safety valve. I was joyous to discover these two pieces of glass. They then left me on my own and they said they were going to pick me up for interrogation the next morning. They left me with some Omo (detergent) and there were these filthy blankets covered in vomit so I washed these blankets as well as wash my hair. As I washed my hair something slid out of the shampoo container and it was one of these spare cartridges for ballpoint pens and in it was a note from David Webster who had started the Detainees' Parents Support Committee and he had been my supervisor. It was the first real contact that I had where I knew that anybody outside knew what was happening to me. He said, "Stay strong, we're demonstrating, we're creating a huge hullabaloo, there's major exposes coming up in the Sunday papers. We're thinking of you," and I just sat and cried. It was like God intervened. After that there were moments where the thought of suicide came and I thought, if I put myself in a bucket of water and I bring down the lead could I electrocute myself but I think that was the turning point. It was one of those moments that were just totally amazing. In Vereeniging I was kept awake, I was assaulted but I was never systematically tortured. Deprivation of sleep is a form of torture but I was never kept manacled with my wrist to my ankle as friends of mine were. I think that I can really understand how people break in detention and I will never ever judge a single person who broke in detention or offered to give state evidence or whose life fell apart because I know how terrible the circumstances are. I think that people can be very harsh on people outside. Ruth First talks about her attempt to commit suicide when she was in jail for ninety days and I think that it's important that people speak about it. Often with men, the notion is that you have to be strong, you have to be trained so that you managed it all and you could see it through and I think it places an enormous burden on people.

Q: Were you physically assaulted from the outset or only after they realized that you had been leading them around the garden path?

A: Now and again they'd give you a *klap* and things like that. There was a period in which they were threatening me with electric shock. It was after about six weeks when they just decided that I was a hard nut. They wanted me to give them some dramatic revelation and I didn't have a dramatic revelation to give and that's when they started climbing into me. The assaults weren't long. I think I was far more fortunate than most people who came to John Vorster Square. I think that what probably protected me was that visit to the district surgeon who sent a report.

Q: What was the food like?

A: It was better than prison food but it was endless beetroot, bits and pieces of meat. They made you sign a book for your food and that's how you could see who was in detention. That was very important, to know you had been in. I remember people complaining about how sweet the tea was; they'd put gallons of sugar in your tea. Huge mounds of bread. But you weren't really hungry.

Q: How was John Vorster compared to other prisons?

A: The bad thing about John Vorster was that the bad things were happening here, the torture. It was a place of interrogation and assaults. You lived with that as a presence because you could hear stuff happening in the interrogation rooms. That was your reality, you were in fear of your life, you were in fear of being hurt, and you were in fear of being raped, in fear of all those things. But you learn to live in a cell; a cell is a cell is a cell. In Heidelberg it was a nicer cell and at least there was a little bit of sun but it was far worse because then I had being in solitary already for about four months and then it was the period when Neil died. From that point of view it wasn't living in terror anymore but it was dealing with you and having to manage everyday with virtually nothing. So John Vorster I think was the place of terror and the place of the unknown and the place of evil. The others were more places of an ordeal more than the terror.

Q: What after-effects, physically or emotionally, do you think John Vorster made in your life?

A: I was sentenced to ten years after I stood trial and then I was on my own for another year because there weren't any other White women prisoners. On and off I was in solitary for nearly two years. So I had a lot of other things to deal with besides what was happening in John Vorster. So most of my recuperation probably took a number of years, when I was a prisoner. I haven't had lasting effects of prison or detention. I think I'm far more of a social hermit than I ever was before. I have unexplained emotional moments when something can just get to me. I think what it did teach me was how institutions, particularly state institutions, can make monsters out of ordinary people. If you look at the Security Police, particular the ones who I believed had stepped over the line, for me it was the institutionalization of evil. When you look at Iraq now and you look at Guantanamo Bay, it doesn't evoke any kind of emotional turmoil but it turns in my stomach and it's like "Oh God, the bastards are at it again." It's a firsthand knowledge and a firsthand experience of what those people must be going through. So you become less self righteous about good and evil because you understand that evil is a human construct. It's constructed by people; it's constructed by institutions. Institutions like the Security Police, like the CIA. So you become less puritanical because good and evil are no longer abstract concepts. I think that's helped me a lot in life to deal with big issues of what is right and what is wrong because it's made me less judgmental but absolutely much more familiar with what evil is. In a way all of us try and recover what we were as youth but I cannot be that person anymore. In a way I think I'm more measured and more insightful into these kinds of issues and I know that you can't just hate because it's evil, you've got to get rid of the system because it's evil. So I think that has matured me.

Q: What do you think this building represents in terms of history?

A: It's probably the iconic institution in South Africa of the Apartheid years, of the years of torture, of the reign of the Security Police, of the reign of the mad forces. I think it really does represent what was happening then. And, for me it will always be that. It can become just an ordinary police station but for me John Vorster will always be that place where terrible, terrible things happened to be people. It should never be normalized to the extent that we forget what a place of hell it was for so many people.

It should never be allowed. That's what John Vorster means to me. That place of terror that will never go away.

