

INTERVIEWEE: Catherine Hunter

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PLACE OF INTERVIEW: Johannesburg Central Police Station

I'm Catherine Hunter and I was detained in 1983, end of 1983, for three months in connection with the trial of Carl Niehaus and Jansie Niehaus. So it was three months leading up to their trial, which started in December that year.

Q: Can you tell us what your political involvement was prior your detention?

A: My main involvement was in Catholic left wing politics; I was working as a church worker in a Catholic youth organization called Young Christian Students. In fact I had been working for them for four years, I had taken time off from university and gone back but that was my main base and I was also increasingly involved in broader white politics but through my church involvement I'd traveled quite a bit. So I'd had a fair amount of exposure to people who were living in Zimbabwe in particular and elsewhere, so I had certainly come into contact with the ANC underground but in terms of open, everyday things it was in the Catholic left wing circles.

Q: How did you come to be detained or brought to John Vorster square?

A: It was a bit of a step out of my normal work. I knew Carl Niehaus but in fact I hadn't worked very closely with him but he was also involved in the church but not the Catholic church as I was and we had done some work together that, I'd at the time thought, wasn't that significant but in fact turned out to be hugely significant in his trial and it was for that I was detained. They took full advantage of me being there to find out as much as they could about other above ground or underground Church activity. That was what actually brought me here.

Q: And the actual process where they came and got you?

A: I was working in Mayfair at the Young Christian Student's offices and I received a phone call. Again it was a totally insignificant and throwaway phone call, I thought at the time, until in interrogation I realized it was far from that. I received a call and the person at the other end said they'd like to speak to Patrick and I said, "There's no Patrick here," and they said, "Who's that?" and gullible me said who I was and they knew I was. I used to ride a motorbike at the time and I went out of the offices to go to lectures at Wits and I had a friend with me and as I got onto my motorbike, I put my helmet on and I heard someone calling my name and I turned around and there was Nicholas Deetleefs who was to become my main interrogator with a few of his cronies and they said they were arresting me. At the time I didn't know for what because in fact what I'd been involved with Carl with had been a long time before. So they brought me here and so started the three months. That was my main memory and then during interrogation he made it clear that it was him who had made this phone call and I had sort of stepped straight into it by giving my name so he knew I was there.

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

A: I'd had a fair amount of understanding of the processes because a very close church worker who I'd worked closely with had been detained not very long before, Cecil Soles. We'd been very involved with support work and in food parcels and in getting legal aid for him and so on. And of course it was just a very politicized time. We all knew very well that if you were detained this is what was likely to happen, this is what you'd go through, this is what the implications would be if you were to be a state witness for example which was a very strong no-no. It was understood that anyone who was involved in anything that was politically risky could never go ahead and be a state witness because then they could never be trusted. So that was a sort of ground rule that I knew before I arrived but there were many others as well. So I certainly knew the significance of the 10<sup>th</sup> floor for example and of Section 6 and that sort of thing. So I knew a fair amount not ever thinking that I would be there because I knew so many other people who were more likely to be caught.

Q: Can you describe the process of your actual arrival here on that day?

A: I'm not sure if I remember much of it, I must say, I think I was just shaking like a leaf, I don't remember much. I know it was very bureaucratic. I was brought in all sorts of forms, dead silence, nobody said or explained anything to me; I just was having to accompany these cops. I know we drove to the back of the building and I would have to be signed through at each door. There was sort of top security at each door. I think I was taken for interrogation straight away. It was midmorning when I was arrested so I was certainly interrogated that day and assumed that I would be out by night. I think it really took me a while to realize that I was going to be in overnight and then the next night and the next night and the next.

Q: What was the tone of that initial interrogation?

A: I think at the time they knew that my arrest would not go unnoticed and that they wanted to get out of me what they were going to get out of me and get rid of me fast to minimize the publicity. I think they got straight to the point and said to me, "This is what we believe you have done. Will you write a statement," and I denied it, completely denied it. I said they didn't know what they were talking about and I kept that up for quite a while, I don't know how long. Then I think at some point when they realized I was going to be "uncooperative" they started asking more about who I was, where I was, what I was doing, where was my head, my heart, they were trying to find the gaps, the loopholes and so on. I think they were quite heavy with me in the beginning, threatening in the sense that if I wasn't cooperative I could be on trial myself. I think that that was an option, that I could be one of the three accused. In the end it turned out that the other two would be accused and they wanted me to be a state witness. But it wasn't quite clear and I think the reason why they had to make that change was that they didn't have any other evidence except me on this particular thing that Carl and I had done together. So in the early stages the assumption was that I was going to be one of the accused. At the time I believed that in fact they were just looking around for evidence and they could never really prove that I'd been involved with this. I couldn't imagine what evidence they'd stumbled upon that could lead to me. I was

baffled. So I just continued to deny it and they put me away. That was where the power of solitary confinement comes in. You're stuck in your cell and you don't know whether you're going to be called up for interrogation or not. You're constantly fighting in your head about "What should I say?" The idea being, and this I had been well schooled in before, that you must give a totally watertight, comprehensive, legitimate story at all times. It's gotta hang together, whatever you say. So having to work out within that framework what can you could say that would dampen their suspicions. I fast thought that it would be better for me to be out but it wasn't to be for a long time. Then they just skirt further and further around. They start off trying to get you to say what they want you to say for the very short-term purpose of wanting to nail Carl Niehaus but they then started getting further and further around as to who did I hang out with and what was important to me and how did I come to be there and what did I do on such and such a date and trying to imply that all sorts of people that I trusted were on their side but they didn't catch me too much on that. I think that we had a very strong community, a supportive group and so we had thrashed out a lot of these issues and I knew that those questions would come and those tactics on their part and so I was quite equipped to recognize things. Not everything, that's for sure, but in that particular case I could see where their questioning was going and keep a lid on it for my own purposes.

Q: Can you describe the cell you were in?

A: As I came to realize later, it was quite large because for other reasons I was shifted into two different cells. One which was very small and which I know was the one that Jansie Niehaus had been in and then a long, thin one that I think was meant for groups. The one that I was in for most of the time was fairly large and I'd love to see that cell one day to know whether my perception of the size of it is actually real, fits my memory. It was big enough for me to do a lot of exercise, that's what I used to do. I used to run round it clockwise, anti-clockwise as detainees do just to kill the time.

There were so few features in it that I know them backwards. The windows how they were covered up. It was very high up so it was very difficult for me to see anything out the windows but what I could see out the window I knew very well. It was a triangular slab of concrete where all the pigeons gathered and I watched that endlessly. There were a whole range of things that happened between me and that spot. People came to know where I was and would find a spot and communicate with me.

I remember the loo. The loo was the only curved anything in the whole place. Then there were the bars around the door, I remember that very well. Otherwise it was completely bland.

That's all I really remember about my cell, very stark. There were stories of how people used to write messages to each other and poems on the walls and there was evidence that there once had been and they'd painted over them. I used to spend quite a bit of time trying to decipher writing underneath the

layer of paint. I remember that. Somewhere I recorded some of the things that people had written because people used to write very fiery political poetry but I can't find my records of what I wrote and I don't remember it. I think I even tried to scribble something of my own once but I don't know.

Q: Were you able to communicate with the other prisoners?

A: No. For some reason I got to know that there was a woman in the cell next door to me from Alex and I never was able to reconnect with her afterwards. When they brought food around, you'd sign for it so you could see who else had signed for it so I knew Jansie was down the corridor and this woman next door's name appeared often enough and I think I may even have tried to shout at her through the toilet seats or through the windows but somehow we managed to communicate and we established we were in each other's adjacent cells but not more than that. We certainly were never doing sport together, they used to let us out for half an hour or forty-five minutes a day in the little sunlit quad. I think I was once there with Jansie but we were kept very apart. She had her watchmen and I had my watchmen but we were running around the same circle. I think that was the closest contact I had to her. We shared the same bathrooms of course so every so often there was evidence; somebody would leave a bar of soap behind or something like that but again we were never actually there at the same time.

Q: Besides the exercise and looking out of the windows did you have any other significant ways in which you dealt with being kept in isolation?

A: We used to get our drink in the morning. Sometimes it would be cold tea and then it would be hot tea with no sugar, coffee with sugar or whatever. It always came in the same standard polystyrene cup and I used to mark on to the cups what I had done. I used to try and remember all the exercises I had ever done and build up a routine for myself mark it off on the cup. When one cup was full, I'd chuck it out and the next one and so on and so on so I could monitor my progress. To my great amusement, months later, I went up for interrogation and there was my pile of cups, they'd all been collected and they were sitting in my interrogator's office with all my little signs on them and he took them out and said what did this mean, what did that mean and I said, "Oh that's sit-ups" or, "That's press-ups" or whatever it was, they were completely insignificant. But Sure enough they'd been collecting all this stuff that I thought was chucked and trying to work out whether it had some meaning. I thought it was very funny.

Afterwards I had to try and work out what was happening in my subconscious because I became very aware of this issue of the fact that you can use your dreams to your advantage. Not that I knew about it at the time but if you can try and wake up in the morning and be conscious of what the processes are and imagery and people and see what the themes are. You can put yourself to bed by telling yourself, "Ok this is the issue I have to deal with by morning," and use your brain to shed some light on it. I know I had experiences of that where I knew that a certain line of interrogation was being hinted at one day and I knew it was going to lead me down some dangerous path and didn't know how to answer it in a way in which would be in keeping with the story that I'd told till then. So I would sleep on it and talk to myself the night before as to this is the issue you might have to address and in the morning, sure enough, I would have an explanation for something or other that I had said that they thought was a sign

of something that they needed to delve deeper into. So I was quite aware of the way I played with my own mind when I came out.

I suppose also the issue of fear. I really was quite scared at times not only for myself but the fact that my presence there could have drawn attention to other people who I may or may not have known about in terms of whether they could deal with that attention. Regrets; I think you just have to put a lid on things and forgive yourself sometimes for saying stupid things that you need not have.

I come from a religious background so it was the first and maybe even the last that I read the bible because that was the one thing that was there. It was intriguing to me because I came from a liberation theology context and having to look at the bible with such intensity and try and make it make sense to me and work out what is God in this context and is there a God for me? I had revelations in some ways. I came to understand God to be a collection of the positive force and power that all my friends provided for me. I knew I was safe, I knew that my comrades out there were with me, that I could trust them and that became God for me. I was having to work out what is the point of being religious in this day and age and in the circumstances in which I now find myself and what is going to change in the way in which I express religion or don't express religion when I come out as a result of having spent three months on my own, having to be aware of the presence of God in whatever way I understood that.

I suppose you see everything so starkly. You look at friendships in terms of, "Is that person worth the effort, or is that person not?" All the grey edges are rubbed off in terms of how you think of certain people. Very strong feelings about everything. These are all very in my head issues but that's all you've got basically.

Q: What kind of access did you have to people outside, was there any communication with them?

A: After a certain amount of time I'm not sure how long, my parents came in. Obviously one's parents are just about the people you worry most about when you're in detention. At the time there were big differences in terms of religion and politics between me and my parents and it was very worrying that my parents would wonder what on earth am I doing, having been arrested. From the word go they were behind me. They were supportive and they said so and whatever decision I took, because everyone knew it was a looming decision as to whether I was going to give evidence or not, they knew that I couldn't possibly give evidence and they made it quite clear that they would stand by me whatever my decision was. So that visit was very important because they made it quite clear that they were with me. Obviously trying to work out with them how to get certain messages to people on the outside that needed to know what I was there for was very tricky because unless you work out a whole system of codes before you arrive there how can you use them? My parents were not the people that I had

worked out codes with but we managed and looking back I think we did pretty well. People did get the message that I was trying to get across.

The other strange thing that happened was that people that I knew who were very close to me and concerned about me must have got to learn where the cell windows were. I think that late one night they walked around the outside of the building singing a song that they knew would alert me to the fact that this could only be them outside. So I looked out and I couldn't actually see them because when you looked out the window you couldn't see below but I knew who I was dealing with down there. They would have to look out for their own security, which didn't always work. I did get to the point to where I was actually able to talk and indicate where I could see so that they could stand at a distance and hold up placards with big messages on to me about what I needed to know was happening on the outside because that was the big thing, you just don't know the context into which you're playing. So they tried to fill me in and reassured me that they were all with me and I let them know that I was fine and that I was standing by what I'd always said I would stand by.

Unfortunately, to the rage of my parents, my boyfriend at the time got caught late one night. He was alone and we were talking and somebody alerted somebody to the fact that he was there and Warrant Officer Nicholas Deetleefs who was my main interrogator came from home and he [boyfriend] was arrested at eleven o'clock at night and interrogated. That was a big blow because then obviously they knew that this communication had been set up and so we couldn't use that anymore. I think it was quite late, towards the end [of her detention] but it meant that he [boyfriend] was now watched. It was a big blow but we had taken full advantage of it up until then.

Q: Were you allowed to food parcels?

A: Food parcels came in once a week; a certain amount, certain ingredients and my parents used to arrange that. Of course it was a huge event in the week, especially after week after week on your own.

Q: Do you remember the process whereby you were taken from your cell to interrogation?

A: No it was just the big clanging doors and being signed out and walking along long corridors and down and up lifts. I could never work out where I was going. Maybe it was deliberate but you certainly go along different routes each time.

Q: Do you remember where the interrogation room was?

A: It was where all the main interrogations took place. It was always in the office of the Warrant Officer in charge of me. I got to know some of the other Security Police because they would come in and act good cop, bad cop but it was always in his office.

Q: What would they like the interrogators in terms of their personalities?



A: They were big, beefy, aggressive threatening people. They certainly were very skilled in terms of trying to play each other off against each other. But normally they were just a silent presence except Nicholas Deetleefs himself. I could definitely tell that if I was saying what they did not believe I should be saying, people would come into the room and just hang around and stand close to me and it was threatening. There was never an actual hit but there was always the sense that it could happen.

Q: So your interrogation had a mental rather than physical nature?

A: Definitely. There was no physical assault, and I was forever grateful for that. There was always the threat of it and certainly they would make me feel physically uncomfortable. I was a typical White lefty woman and I didn't fit the mould of what they regarded a woman should look like and they would let me know that, that there was something inferior about the way I handled myself as a woman. So there was that sort of stuff but I think it was much more intellectual and emotional intimidation.

Q: Did they make you write statements?

A: There was a statement that I had signed that my parents later saw and said it couldn't possibly be mine because an English mother tongue speaker didn't write it. But I did sign it and that was the only thing that I signed as far as I know, except for medical documents. So it wasn't as if I repeatedly wrote statements. I wrote a statement in connection with the particular thing that they wanted from me to do with Carl and Jansie's trial and that was it; nothing else. I never actually wrote anything myself for them. It was more they writing and saying, "Do you agree with this, does that reflect the truth?" and so on.

Q: Were you ever taken to see a district surgeon or visited by a magistrate?

A: Yes I did and again it was pretty standard check ups. Nothing much I remember about that except anxiety about the fact that there was always a security policemen right there. I was in the middle of some ongoing treatment and they took me back because as part of the ongoing treatment I had to go back on a certain date to the general hospital and they saw that through. I know I was very anxious about it because I felt this was a breach. I had to have a security policemen right there and my own doctor who I'd been dealing with was revolting basically. Anyway they did get me there.

There were some medical problems that I had and I couldn't get seen fast enough, certainly for my purposes, and I it's possible that that was part of trying to break me down. Everything just took too long; trying to see the doctor I needed to see and that sort of thing.

Q: Are there any sensory impressions that you can remember about the building?

A: Smell. I remember, the first day going up in that lift and the smell was just, absolutely repulsive and it came to represent the interrogation. I think it was a different smell from the cells. In the cells it was disinfectant. Up there in the interrogation rooms, I don't know what it was, the paint or whatever but it was awful and that revulsion and what it represented to me stuck with me for a long time. It's not a nice experience to have other people choose your clothes for you when you're locked up. It was the middle

of summer and somebody just went into my clothes and threw a whole lot of stuff into a little suitcase and it was just too hot. I just remember being hot.

Q: What were your 'warders' like in comparison to your interrogators?

A: I think they were under strict instructions to keep a distance and to have bare, minimal contact so they would just pass the food through the bars. I remember one time, some poor guy, he was doing his army service and I completely convinced him that I was innocent and that I was there because of some big mistake and he felt very sorry for me and brought me books to read. So now I had novels and I wasn't supposed to have and sure enough I got caught and he got the blame. And then I was hauled off to interrogation as to whether I'd known him beforehand and I certainly hadn't. I suppose it gave me a sense of power that I could actually hoodwink these people. In the main I suppose they were just cold and passive. No eye contact. Certainly in the early stages, no eye contact. Also it was a bit odd for them to have a White woman there because a lot of them were White, Afrikaans women and I didn't quite fit the stereotype of what a terrorist should look like so I suppose they were a bit intrigued by me. I don't remember having much contact with them except trying to get medical treatment when I needed it and not being able to. One particular night just banging and banging on the security gate trying to get attention and the next day giving them all hell because I was so angry that nobody had come and they were all looking down. You could never tell whether they'd been told to ignore me or to deliberately make me feel humiliated.

Q: How did your detention affect your ability to interact with the world outside after your release?

A: It's very hard to tell but I think certainly people who come out of solitary confinement should go into therapy and have counseling and that sort of support. I didn't have that because almost as soon as I came out my brother was arrested and he was eventually jailed on an extremely serious charge and there was a chance that I could have been drawn into that so I left the country. And I sat there not knowing whether I was going to come back so in my mind it was almost a continuation. I was in another country but I didn't know who I could speak to and who I could trust and so it was almost a strange continuation of solitary confinement even though I was far away. So I think that I probably didn't emerge particularly emotionally strong. I certainly think that I didn't do enough talking straight afterwards about what had happened because I wasn't able to. Also I came out and it was still heavy Apartheid days and you didn't know who you could talk to and you didn't know who you could trust and still watched what you said anyway, whether you'd been in detention or not. You never knew what was going to backfire or what was going to be used and abused about what you said in the wrong context. I had good friends and they were very supportive. A lot of my best friends today came through that patch with me. There were lots of people in my position as well. You hit the ground running, you keep on running and you don't really have time to take stock, think through what happened and settle your spirit.

Q: What does the building represent to you today?

A: When I drive past I know I once stayed there and I point it out to my kids who are fast coming up to the age that I was when I was detained. I've never actually come back in but there's certain things like



that triangle of concrete where the pigeons roost that I can't drive past without realizing that at one point that's all I could see. It's bizarre to me that the name's changed and it's hard for me to relate to it in its current form because at the time all the cops in any senior position at all were White and they were enormous, they were *dik* and the Black policeman where definitely following along, doing what they were told and some of the Black security police who were involved in my interrogation I would occasionally say to them, "What are you doing in this position?" The dynamics between cops in interrogations must be so different now. It was so steeped in the policies of the time that I can't really relate to what must be happening.

Q: How do you think the past of John Vorster should be commemorated, if at all?

A: It's hard to separate it out from the fact that people died here. The fact that people died here was a rallying point so it drew more people in to support the anti-Apartheid cause. In that context I presume that any holding cell, any holding place in the country, needs to be remembered for the fact that people were hurt, were killed, were maimed for life, were damaged for life as a result of their beliefs, as a result of what they had stood for and the risks they had taken to express what they believed in. So you'd have to put against the backdrop of the political context and not let it be seen as a stand-alone monument. It's a symbol of the oppressive regime, along with many others. I guess the post-1994 generation need to be aware of how they've come to be where they are today and need to understand their history and this is very much part of that.

END OF INTERVIEW

