

NOTES FROM THE GALLOWES

by

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Chapter 4 — 'Number 400' (Cont.)

Imprisonment and solitude are two thoughts often confused in people's minds, but that is a great mistake. A prisoner is not alone. A prison is a community, and even the strictest confinement cannot tear one from the group - unless he excludes himself. The brotherhood of the enslaved is subjected to pressure which strengthens, concentrates it, and makes it more sensitive. It penetrates walls, which live, speak and tap out signals. Brotherhood embraces the cells of each corridor, which are related in common duties, common worries, have same guards and exercise periods together in the fresh air. When they meet outdoors, one word or gesture is sufficient to pass on news or sometimes to save a human life. Brotherhood unites the prisoners who go to hearings, in groups, sit together in the Cinema and return together. It is a brotherhood of very few words and immense services, for the grasp of a hand or the gift of a cigarette can crack the cage you have been placed in and liberate you from the solitude which was intended to break you. Cells have hands; you feel how they hold you from falling when you return tortured from a grilling. They feed you when others are driving you to death by hunger. Cells have eyes which watch you as you leave for the execution, and you know that you must walk erect because you are their brother and must not weaken them with a wavering step. This is a brotherhood bleeding at many wounds, but unconquerable. Without its support you could not bear one-tenth of your fated burden. Neither you nor man.

If I am able to continue this tale (for we know not the day nor the hour) Number 400 will appear frequently, as it does at the head of this chapter. I thought of it first as a room, and my first meditation there was far from happy. It is not a room, however, but a collective, a purposeful and fighting group, even a happy group.

It started in 1940, as the work of the Gestapo anti-Communist unit increased. It was a branch for Communists of the Domestic Imprisonment Department, a waiting room for Communists in order to avoid their having to be led up from the

first floor to the fourth every time the Gestapo officials wished to ask them another question. They thought this made their work easier; that was their idea in opening this branch Cinema.

If you put two prisoners together, however, especially if they are Communists, you have an organisation in five minutes, which sets out to upset all your plans. In 1942 the Cinema received the name Communist Central, and went through many changes. Thousands and thousands of comrades, men and women, took their seats in turn on its benches. But one thing never changed - the spirit of a collective, devoted to battle and convinced of final victory.

Number 400 was a very advanced trench on the battle-field, completely surrounded by the enemy, under an avalanche of fire from all sides, but never for a moment dreaming of surrender. The red flag flies high here. The absolute unity of the whole nation fighting for its liberty is expressed in this collective solidarity.

Down in the main Cinema paced guards of the SS in high boots; they shouted at you every time you winked your eyes. Up in Number 400 Czech inspectors and agents from the police department were on duty, men who entered Gestapo service as interpreters, either voluntarily or on orders from their superiors, and did their duty as Gestapo henchmen - or as Czechs. Sometimes a mixture of both. It was not necessary to sit at attention here with your hands on your knees and your eyes staring straight ahead. You could sit easily, look around, move your hands. You could do even more, depending on which of the three sorts of guards were on duty.

In Number 400 you made profound studies of the human animal. The nearness of death stripped each of us naked. Even those who wore the red arm-bands as Communists under investigation or suspected of cooperation with the Communists, and those who were set here to guard us and who helped in the investigations in a nearby room. In the other room words were your shield or your weapon during the grilling; here in Number 400 you could not hide behind words. Here they do not weigh your words, but what is in you, what you are made of. By this time there was left in you only what is most important in life. By this time all that tempered, weakened or beautified your fundamental personality had been blasted away by the storms which come before death. Only the subject and predicates remained; the loyal resist, the traitor betrays, the hero struggles, the weakling gives up. In each of us



there is strength and weakness, courage and fear, firmness and wavering, purity and dirt. Here only one or the other remains. Yes - or no. If anyone tried to dance adroitly between the two extremes, he was as conspicuous as if he had put a yellow feather in his hat or danced in a funeral procession with cymbals in his hands.

There were men like that, of course, among both the prisoners and the Czech inspectors and agents. During investigations they burned a candle to their god in the Reich, and in Number 400 burned another to the bolshevik devil. In the presence of the German commissar they could knock your teeth out trying to make you confess the name of your courier; in Number 400 they would give you a hunk of bread to ease the hunger. In a search unit they would steal everything of value in your home; in Number 400 they would give you half a cigarette from their booty to show how they sympathised with you. There were others - a slightly different variety from the first - who never hurt you on their own initiative, but still less offered you any help. They always had their own skins in mind, and proved extremely sensitive barometers of the political weather. When they were tense and very officious, you could tell that the Germans were making progress toward Stalingrad. When they were affable enough to start a conversation with a prisoner, you knew that the Germans had been beaten back in Stalingrad. If they begin to tell you about their ancient Czech forebears or that they had been forced into service with Gestapo - excellent: the Red Army is certainly marching on Rostov. Still a other sort of creature sticks his hands in his pockets while you are drowning, and lends you a hand after you have pulled yourself out on the bank.

That sort instinctively felt the strength of the collective in Number 400 and tried to draw close to it because of that strength. But they never belonged to it. There was another sort who never even guessed there was such a collective. I would call them the murderers, but murderers are of the human race. They were the Czech-speaking beasts, with sticks and irons in their hands, who tortured us so that many a German commissar fled from the sight. They hadn't even enough hypocrisy to control their passions, for the sake of either their own nation or the Reich. They tortured and murdered for pleasure, knocked out our teeth, burst our eardrums, gouged out our eyes, kicked us in the groin, or beat our brains out for no reason but to satisfy the cruelty within themselves. You saw them every day and had to bear their

presence, which filled the air with croaking and blood. The only defence you had against them was the firm faith that they would not escape justice in the end, even if they murdered every last witness to their crimes.

At the same table with these types sat men who sought in justice to be written with a capital M - Men. Those who used prison rules to protect the prisoners, who helped build the prison collective in Number 400 and belonged to it with all the more, since they were not Communists; on the contrary, they may have worked against the Communists as agents of the Czech police. But they realised the significance of the Communists for the whole nation when they saw us battle against the invader, and from that moment assisted each of us who held true and loyal even on those prison benches.

Many of our soliders outside would have wavered had they had any conception of what awaited them once they fell into the hands of the Gestapo. These loyal men inside had the horrors before their eyes every day, every hour. Every hour they lived with the expectation of being set among the prisoners and being tested worse than they. But they didn't waver. They helped save the lives of thousands and tempered the suffering of those whose lives they couldn't save. The name of hero belongs to them. Without them Number 400 could never have become what it was to thousands of Communists: a spot of light in a black building, a trench in the rear of the enemy, the centre of the battle for freedom right in the den of the invader.

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number of people were basing the future struggle and campaigns on this kind of actions.

It is true that at the time, the people had made their demands and said they would struggle for their realisation. A number of people even at that time were already talking of violent struggle against the enemy but then at the time it was not possible for the ANC to entertain this kind of thinking, but the fact of the matter is that the people's expectations were sparked off by the Congress of the People and the people expected more. It was now for the African National Congress to chart the way forward.