

1st October, 1960.

Dearest Hilda,

CAPE TOWN

I went out to Worcester on Thursday and spent a couple of hours talking to Asha. I must say I think she must have suffered more than any other woman during the emergency. But you will be able to judge because you may have heard worse from Durban (which I doubt) or Kimberley (which may be possible). And what is even more amazing is that she has come out of it much more self-confident than I have ever known her. During the treason trial she was so quiet and unimpressive. But now she is a person exuding self-confidence and determination, although still in an unassuming way. I suppose the sort of thing she went through either makes or breaks you. It certainly made her. And she felt so sorry for the European women!! She said when she first saw Amy and Nancy at Simondium, she thought they wouldn't survive. Apparently they hadn't been sleeping and looked terrible. Anyway, that is by the by. Here is her story:

The Africans of Worcester, as in so many other parts of the country, stayed away in answer to Chief's call on March 28th 100%. The Coloured community was not as responsive, but some of them did respond. The police reply was to turn off the water in the Worcester location and to surround the location with the army.

The events of the night of the 28th in the Worcester location are perhaps known to you. It was night of violence and arson and the ANC people were powerless to prevent any of it. When one of the ANC types tried to calm the people down, they threatened to beat him up.

Anyway, it was against this background that Asha was picked up on the morning of March 30th at about 11a.m. while she was standing on the pavement outside her home. She was called to the car and asked to climb in after which she was driven to the charge office where she was told she was being kept under the emergency regulations. There was a young policeman in the charge office and he addressed all his questions to one of the two special branch men who were with her, name de Villiers (if you're using names). "Wat is donderse naam?"

"Wat is die donder se adres?"

These questions were answered for her by the SB de Villiers.

She was then locked up in a cell at the back of the charge office where a Saracen was standing. Civilians were coming in all the time to fetch guns (presumably to help at the location where Africans were still not working and where the army was still surrounding it).

While she was kept in the cell, all the policemen on duty at the time came to have a peep at their latest acquisition and they spoke loudly so that she could hear, making rude remarks and referring to her as a "vark" (pig) and "donder" etc.

That night she didn't sleep at all. Loudspeakers were continually blaring out that people should return to work and there were comings and goings all through the night. That day, the Wednesday of her arrest, she was fed by the family, but that didn't last. On the Thursday morning when her food was brought to her by the same young policeman who took her name and address on her admission, he threw the pieces of bread at her head - his aim was good and they all hit her there. She reported this to the officer in charge and he said he would see to it. She heard no more.

That day, the Thursday she was moved from the charge office to the Worcester local jail. She was taken to the men's section as all the men had very recently been moved to the newly-completed Worcester prison where the men detainees were later to be housed (they were at Roeland Street in the meantime).

5/10/60

The cell was about 6' x 10' - no complaints about the size. But the point is that not only was she in isolation as far as her being in the cell on her own was concerned - but there was no other human being in the whole section. The men had recently been moved and she was the only woman in the whole section, so that there was nobody else to see or hear. She had one mat and four blankets. Nothing to read, no paper or pencil, nothing to sit on. She could either sit or lie on the floor or stand up. And for the first 11 days here she was only allowed out for ten minutes each morning while her cell was cleaned out. The walls were absolutely filthy.

When she arrived her hairpins had been removed from her hair, her ear rings, her scarf, all the things in her pockets. On the tenth day of her arrest she was told that there was a charge of incitement against her and she asked to see her lawyer. They told her she could not see a lawyer, but that she could write to her lawyer. This she did and in a few days she had a reply saying that he would appear for her.

She appeared in court on April 11th and then again on April 25th. The first postponement was for lack of evidence and the second time there was still not enough evidence and so the case was postponed again to May 9th. The magistrate said on this occasion, when a remand was again wanted, that if the police must have their evidence available by May 23rd - and at this juncture the case against her was withdrawn!

After eleven days of solitary living other awaiting trial prisoners were brought to the same yard (it is now only a woman's jail) and she was allowed out from about 7a.m. - 12 noon and then again from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. Of course she was always locked up alone in her cell. The week after her charge was withdrawn, these prisoners were moved out of her yard and she was again quite alone.

She complained every day about being left alone. The superintendent told her that this was because she was an Indian. To this she replied "I am a South African". But she remained alone until Monday, May 30th when they came into her cell early in the morning, told her to pack because she was being moved to another jail.

The food at the Worcester prison was bad. Breakfast was porridge without milk, lunch was beans and mealies (she did not eat the meat provided) and bread for supper with either pumpkin or carrots or cabbage. Coffee was later added to breakfast and supper. After a few weeks she was able to buy her own provisions. The tins were opened for her and the contents emptied in to her enamel basin. There were no facilities for heating food - in fact the coffee and the porridge were also always cold.

After a month she was told she could buy her own books and magazines which she duly did. After she had read them, they were removed one day, the matron saying it had been a mistake to let them in. But after the matron had perused them they were returned later the same day.

Without being told where she was going, she too arrived at Simondium. She was taken to the cell which Cissie Gool (a Malay woman who one imagines falls into the same ~~character~~ category as Asha who is part Indian and part Malay and with whom she could have been at least after the charges against her were withdrawn) had vacated the day before! So again Asha was alone, although she did see the European women during the day. If they were caught talking to one another (a wardress guarded against this all the time), this would be reported to the Matron who would scold them all. At Simondium she was let out from 8 a.m. to 12 noon and again from 2 - 4 p.m. She had a bed where (which incidentally had been provided for a week before she left the Worcester jail). But she was not allowed to sit under the blankets during the day time, no matter how cold the weather!

Day after day she asked to be allowed to join the African women, but she was told that they were not allowed to mix the races.

However, after she was interrogated, she was allowed to join the African women who had also been questioned. She was warned that she would not be able to eat and sleep as she had been doing - she would have to sleep on the floor and eat out of tin and not plastic plates. She was only too pleased to be allowed to go and she was warmly welcomed by the African women. They were together for about six weeks.

But whenever anything happened the Matron always threatened her with isolation - even ~~xxx~~ if the Matron didn't like the songs that they sang. One day she (the Matron) told Asha that if Asha knew what the special branch had told her ^{about Asha} she would never sleep again and never smile again. Because of what she was told, she again isolated Asha from the other women in the African hospital section. This lasted for the final ten days of her detention. Although they were ^{all} in the same ^{section}, ~~they~~ ^{she was} were always isolated from the others. She was even taken by matron to the bathroom so that she couldn't communicate with the African women. Matron got tired of this after a while, as ASHA took so long to bath!

The remaining women, seven of them, were taken back to Roeland Street at the ~~beginning~~ end of July. Asha was released on August 20th, together with the three remaining African women.

Her recreation at Simondium included knitting and embroidery, reading books provided from the European library (not so the Africans) and of course singing. The food here was better.

At Roeland Street they were kept in two cells. An official brought her a form to sign, saying that she wanted to be with the Africans.

The sort of discussions the women had were on Congress policy - I can't get other details.

Incidentally, Special Branch were present at all visits and the African women, some of whom cannot speak English or Afrikaans very well at all, could only conduct their interviews in either of these two languages. Xosa was forbidden.

I'm terribly sorry about the delay with the White men.

Do you know that Forbes Robinson from P.E. had his own 8-day or 10-day hunger strike? Write c/o Govan to him if you want to. He was the last of the Whites to be released I understand. Joe Morolong wrote and said he was sending you details - do let us have them in time for next week's paper - otherwise I think it will be almost unusable.

Govan keeps promising to send us his diary, but so far nothing has come. If it pitches up, we'll send it to you.

Someone here has all the background stuff that you want, but won't send it away. Have you seen Africa South - the article dealing with the 17 or 19 days. That is all background stuff. And another is appearing in the next issue

*Lots & lots of love,
Sonia.*

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