

## 7. The war of position in small things

By Jeremy Cronin

I arrived in the maximum security wing of Pretoria Local Prison in September 1976. I was joining a small band of fellow white male political prisoners back in those grim days of apartheid. At that stage there were just seven or eight of us. Frankly it was a relief to be a sentenced political prisoner, finally amongst comrades after months of interrogation and solitary confinement.

Of course, we would all have preferred to be with the much larger contingent of black political prisoners, most of them on Robben Island – but that was never going to happen under apartheid. Our political activism might have made us part, at least spiritually, of the South African black majority. But our white skins also marked us out as a tiny minority of a minority. The regime was determined to keep it that way.

After warm hugs of welcome from my new comrades in the exercise yard, the inevitable question arose. “So what did the judge sentence you to?” “Seven years”, I replied. “Hmm, that’s just a parking ticket,” Dave Kitson shrugged dismissively – he was ten years into a 20 year sentence. “He’ll hardly be here long enough to dirty the dishes”, he jested with Denis Goldberg, who was by then some 11 years into his four life-sentences.

A short while later, on that first day in Pretoria Local, I was summoned to the “venster” – the neck-craning, high window of the prison captain’s office that overlooked our exercise yard. As I jogged back to my new comrade acquaintances, Denis took me aside with an avuncular hand on my shoulder. “When they summon you to the

‘venster’”, he admonished me, “you walk politely but slowly, you NEVER jog.” That was my first lesson in the war of position that was being waged daily.

The great Italian communist Antonio Gramsci, in his “Prison Notebooks”, draws a distinction between what he called a “war of movement” (a class struggle of rapid and sweeping advances) and a “war of position” (a slow, grinding, incremental struggle of minute advances). I suppose most of us were in prison because we had once been inspired by that more romantic notion of an impending cataclysmic revolutionary upheaval – perhaps an October 1917 replay, another ten days that would shake the world. Gramsci had argued, however, that a war of position was the more likely predominant character of class struggles in relatively developed capitalist economies.

Gramsci’s evocation of a “war of position” is usually attributed to the experience of trench warfare in the First World War. I am sure this is right. But I sometimes wonder if Gramsci’s long experience in a fascist prison was also not part of his understanding of a “war of position”. Either way, the Denis Goldberg that I met for the first time in those September days of 1976 was our own local veteran and expert in the war of position. It was a war that was being waged by political prisoners, in the very belly of the beast, throughout apartheid South Africa’s extensive prison system. It was a struggle to push back the authority and control of the warders, to create small and often furtive spaces, liberated zones for political discussion and debate, for smuggling in news of the struggles outside, for learning from each other across different and disrupted generations of struggle. It was a struggle, even in prison, to win some space that we controlled and they didn’t.

By the time that I arrived in Pretoria Local, the political prisoners, with support from campaigns within South Africa and internationally, had already achieved important improvements in their conditions. Correspondence studies were allowed – but not newspapers or radios. Even the anodyne magazines we were permitted (like *Readers Digest* or *Farmers Weekly*) often arrived shredded by the prison censor’s

scissors. Nevertheless, by 1976 things were immeasurably improved compared to the tough mid-1960s.

In 1976 Denis was acknowledged by warders and prisoners alike as our unofficial leader. The first requirement for waging an effective and ongoing war of position inside the trenches of Pretoria Local, Denis educated me as a newcomer, was to maintain coherence, discipline and unity amongst ourselves. In theory this should have been readily achievable. We were united, after all, in our political beliefs and in our shared predicament. But it wasn't always plain-sailing.

The serious strategic defeat suffered by the South African liberation movement by the mid-1960s, meant that there was a generational gap between those of us (like Denis and Dave Kitson) who had been politically active in the 1940s and through the heady 1950s of mass campaigns and general strikes, and those of us (like me) who had become politicised as part of a distant, global 1968 student ferment. In contrast to my older comrades, my experience (at that stage) of South African politics was entirely limited to small underground cells in which even the real names of the other two comrades in the unit were unknown to me.

More challengingly, some prison comrades had suffered terribly in the apartheid torture chambers and were still emotionally fragile. Others had children who were now adolescents, but whom they had last seen as two or three year-olds. Others had not heard from wives or partners for many months. All of this resulted in strains that inevitably impacted upon morale and cohesion. It was often Denis, with the longest sentence of all, who played father- mother- brother and counsellor within our small circle.

But, notwithstanding the occasional emotional flare-up or generational disconnect, we maintained a high level of collective unity and discipline. And this often produced paradoxical results. Some of the junior warders would approach us prisoners (usually Denis) to look after their lunch-boxes, or a packet of biscuits. "If we leave it in our locker-room," they told us, "the other warders will steal it." Others would seek legal or financial advice, or help with their studies, or even marital counselling from us "terrorists".

Of course, this remained a war of position with an unfavourable power balance for us prisoners. Small prison advances accumulated over many years could be rolled-back suddenly in one fell swoop. But even these wrenching roll-backs were read as positive omens, retribution for spectacular popular victories that we imagined (accurately or not) had happened somewhere outside.

When I arrived in Pretoria Local in September 1976 I was able to confirm to the news-starved comrades that, indeed, the frenzied chopping down by the warders of a lovingly cultivated fig tree in the prison yard the year before had coincided with a major Southern African turning point. In 1979 I wrote a poem about this. Here it is:

GROUP PHOTO FROM PRETORIA LOCAL ON THE OCCASION  
OF A FOURTH ANNIVERSARY (NEVER TAKEN)

*An uprooted tree leaves  
behind it a hole in the ground  
But after a few months  
You would have to have known  
that something grew here once.*

*And a person's uprooted?  
Leaves a gap too, I suppose, but then  
after some years...  
There we are  
seated in a circle,  
Mostly in short pants, some of us barefoot,  
Around the spot where four years before  
When South African troops were repulsed before Luanda*

*Our fig tree got chopped  
down in reprisal. – That's Raymond  
Nudging me, he's pointing  
At Dave K who looks bemusedly  
Up at the camera. Denis sits on an upturned  
Paraffin tin. When this shot was taken*

*He must have completed  
14 years of his first  
Life sentence.*

*David R at the back is saying  
Something to John, who looks at Tony who  
Jerks his hand  
so it's partly blurred.  
There we are, seven of us  
(but why the grinning?)  
Seven of us, seated in a circle,  
The unoccupied place in the centre  
stands for what happened  
Way outside the frame of this photo.  
So SMILE now, hold still and  
click  
I name it: Luanda.  
For sure an uprooted tree  
leaves behind a hole in the ground.  
After a few years  
You would have to have known  
it was here once. And a person?*

*There we are  
seated in our circle, grinning,  
mostly in short pants,  
some of us barefoot.*

The writing and performance of poetry in prison was expressly outlawed. There was even a paragraph in the “Prisoner’s Handbook” which read: “Singing, poetry, and the making of any other unnecessary noise is strictly forbidden.” So, when I wrote my “Group Photo” poem and many others, I was uncertain whether any would survive, except in memory. But thanks to the ever resourceful Denis,

poems were transcribed with a 0,5mm pencil onto strips of flimsy paper and concealed in many ingenious ways inside the cardboard lids of washing powder or the covers of note-pads. I still have a speciality Goldberg prison-made cardboard box-file with a toothpaste cap for handle. Its permitted function was for reference cards for the correspondence studies I was allowed. But it was also the concealment place for dozens of poems that successfully emerged out of jail when I was released in 1983.

For this, and so much more - thank you Denis!

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In the office of the then Deputy Minister of Transport, 2009  
(now Deputy Minister of Public Works)  
Foto by Thomas Krehwinkel