

# A SOUTH AFRICAN POET ON HIS IMPRISONMENT

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IN 1975, at the height of his literary acclaim, South Africa's leading poet in the Afrikaans language, the 36-year-old Breyten Breytenbach, was imprisoned by the Government of his fellow Afrikaners for clandestine activities against their apartheid system of racial laws. Released last December and now back in his Paris home with his wife, Yolande, Mr. Breytenbach is still numbed by his seven years in prison and the shock of reentry into freedom. But he consented to talk about how he came to "invade" his own country to campaign against apartheid, how he was caught, and how his jailers treated him before sending him into exile.

Even now, Mr. Breytenbach remains a thorn in the side of South Africa's Afrikaners, whose resentment of his dissidence conflicts with their respect for his artistic eminence. As with most small nationalistic groups that feel their language and culture are under threat, Afrikaners have a heightened regard for their poets and writers, especially those who achieve international fame. In addition to winning both of South Africa's principal literary prizes, which are given by the country's news agencies, Mr. Breytenbach's ironic, often satiric poetry, dealing mostly with politics, sex and death, has been well received in translation in Great Britain and Holland. One volume each of his poetry and journalism has been published in the United States.

Mr. Breytenbach, now 43, looks thin and his hair is flecked with gray. Relishing his return to the food and wine of France, he toasts the culinary contrast with South African prison food: "Spare diet in the punishment cell is a handful of dry gruel, so dry you have to mix it with toothpaste to get it down," he says, and confirms that food in South African prisons is still graded according to the race of the prisoner. "Even the condemned man's last meal is subject to apartheid. Before being hanged, the white prisoner gets a whole roast chicken. The black prisoner gets half a chicken. Strangely enough, from the time they are condemned the blacks get the same food as the white - except for that last meal. It's like a kind of reaffirmation of apartheid in the final moment before the gallows."

There is pain in Mr. Breytenbach's eyes as he talks of the condemned prisoners. "On average about seven a week are hanged, and you hear it all, every week, hear them walking to the gallows, always singing, usually in Xhosa or Zulu, stamping their feet with every step. Sometimes there would be a young voice in the group, quavering with fear, and the older voices would sustain it, lift it up. Then you'd hear, muffled in the distance, the thud of the trapdoor, the instant of death. But the singing would go on to the end."

Often the song is the black resistance anthem, "Nkosi Sikelele iAfrika," (God Bless Africa) and sometimes the condemned prisoners sing hymns. But one prisoner who always sings alone in Pretoria's maximum security prison is Dimitri Tsafendas, the Greek immigrant who was declared insane and sentenced to life imprisonment for stabbing Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd to death in 1966. Every Friday night at precisely the same time Mr. Tsafendas sings "Sarie Marais," the ballad from the Boer War, followed by "Roll Out the Barrel." Then he is silent for another week.

Mr. Tsafendas and Mr. Breytenbach were the only long-term prisoners not condemned to death, and Mr. Breytenbach says that Mr. Tsafendas is subjected to a daily ritual of hate for killing "the architect of apartheid." His food is routinely spat in or scattered on the cell floor and his slop bucket overturned.

Mr. Breytenbach served the first two years of his sentence in solitary confinement in a cell 6 feet by 9 feet by 22 feet deep. "It's like being in the bottom of a well. The depth emphasizes the narrow confines. You can touch both sides with your outstretched arms and the only space is upward. At the top is an opening onto a catwalk so the warders can look down on you any time."

Though often subjected to verbal abuse, Mr. Breytenbach was never assaulted physically during the seven years he served in prison, but the relish with which prison officials attacked him psychologically was most painful for him. "If my mother's letters had more than the number of words allowed, the prison censor got a kick out of waving the letter in front of me and counting the number of excess words he had cut, just snipped off the end. And when my mother died, I was given no privacy to cry - the warders stared in at me constantly to watch my reaction."

Mr. Breytenbach writes in Afrikaans, which is one of the newest languages in the world, having evolved over the past 300 years from the Dutch spoken by the first white settlers in South Africa. Because it is the first language of three million white Afrikaners - the group that has ruled South Africa since 1948 in varying degrees of domination over two million English-speaking whites of British descent, two million "Coloreds" (of black and white ancestry), one million "Asiatics" (mostly descendants of Indian laborers) and more than 20 million blacks - Afrikaans is identified with the 317 apartheid laws and regarded by most blacks as the language of their oppression. Conversely, most Afrikaners regard it as the language of their survival, and the relatively few Afrikaners who reject apartheid and refuse to conform to Afrikaner Volkspolitiek are branded as outcasts and verraaiers - traitors.

For a minor language, Afrikaans has a remarkable literature, and successive waves of writers and poets, roughly identified by the decades of their emergence to prominence, have influenced the language's development beyond the measure possible for poets writing in more established languages. Thus, from the vertigers (so called because they emerged in the 30's), who include Van Wyk Louw, Dirk Opperman, Elisabet Eybers and Ernst van Heerden, there followed the viertigers, the vyftigers and Mr. Breytenbach's own group, the sestigers, still regarded as the most innovative and challenging of all these categorizations within the Afrikaner cultural spectrum.

Mr. Breytenbach reflects sadly on the number of leading Afrikaner poets who have been personally destroyed by the clash between the broad challenges of their art and the narrow demands of Volkspolitiek: Not only the self-imposed termination of careers but alcoholism and suicide have been the fates of many of them.

Badly spoken, Afrikaans is an ugly language which rasps like sandpaper to the ear. Well spoken, it is one of the gems of the linguistic store, rich in vivid imagery and musical sounds. Political orators such as J.D. Basson make it sound like a cello, full of fruity tones and cadences, and its innovative modernity gives its newer words a special import - an aircraft carrier is an abbaskip (piggyback ship) and a subway rail is a moltrein (mole train). Mr. Breytenbach's contribution has been to push Afrikaans beyond its own confines, expanding its boundaries of poetic vocabulary and making it sing with a new confidence. He and his contemporaries have shown they can raise orthodox Afrikaans lyricism to new heights. In prison he wrote: In die middel van die nag kom die stemme van die wat binne enkele dae gehang sal word en in die klanke 'n dun benoudheid reeds soos van stywe toue In the middle of the night come the voices of those who within mere days will be hanged and in the sounds is a thin anguish as of stretched ropes

The translation is crudely inadequate to the beauty of the line in Afrikaans, conveying only a hint of Mr. Breytenbach's poetic power.

HOW did this nationally acclaimed poet, his brother a general in the South African army and his background deeply rooted in the Afrikaner group-consciousness, come to declare a private war on that group's innermost political values?

Descended from a distinguished old Cape family - the Breytenbachs were among the early settlers of the 17th century - Breyten was graduated from high school in the Afrikaner heartland of the western Cape Province but then deviated from the Afrikaner norm by eschewing the academic shrine of Afrikanerdom, Stellenbosch University. Interested in art and poetry from the age of 15 and impressed by the reputation of the fine arts faculty of the University of Cape Town, he enrolled in this English-language university.

At the age of 20 he left school and set out for Europe, working as a porter at London's Euston station before drifting into a variety of jobs on the Continent. But Paris was his destination and he settled there in 1962, painting, writing, teaching English and becoming fluent in French. In Paris he met and married Yolande Ngo Thi Hoang Lien, who was born in Vietnam and raised in the French capital and whose father was Vietnam's Finance Minister under Prime Minister Ngo Dinh Diem. In 1964, he published his first book of poems, followed by others in 1967, 1969 and 1970.

When Mr. Breytenbach wanted to return to South Africa to collect the awards he had won in 1967 and 1969, his wife was refused an entry visa as a "nonwhite" and Mr. Breytenbach was told he could face arrest under the Immorality Act which makes interracial marriage a crime.

Then in 1973 the Breytenbachs were both issued three-month visas to visit South Africa. The poet found his homeland "a paradise poisoned and polluted," and after being approached by security police to be an informer, he returned with his wife to Paris where he was already involved with anti-apartheid groups. Ultimately he joined with two other white South Africans, Barend Schuitema and Don Morton, to plan an organization they proposed to call Okehela. They decided that Mr. Breytenbach should travel incognito to South Africa to contact anti-apartheid whites and some black spokesmen, such as Steve Biko, in order to channel money from European church groups to black trade unionists in South Africa, to "help develop a political infrastructure among anti-apartheid whites and to project to other whites inside South Africa the ideal of an alternative society free of racial barriers."

In August 1975, with the help of a French anti-apartheid organization that supplied a French passport in the name "Christian Galazka," Mr. Breytenbach shaved off his beard and flew to Johannesburg. But the French group must have been infiltrated, because from the time "Galazka" obtained his visa the South African security police had him under surveillance. The police shadowed the poet in Johannesburg and Cape Town, noting his contacts, before arresting him and charging him under the Terrorism Act. Initially Mr. Breytenbach wasn't unduly concerned because he believed he hadn't done anything more illegal than use a false passport. But he was sentenced to nine years in prison for the intent with which he had entered the country. The court took the view that trade union campaigns against apartheid constituted a threat to the safety of the state.

In November 1975 Mr. Breytenbach began his solitary confinement in Pretoria's maximum security section - a confinement interrupted only by three bizarre events. After repeated petitioning by Afrikaner writers such as Andre Brink, Mr. Breytenbach was allowed to see a new edition of his work. The prison authorities interpreted this literally, however - he was allowed to see the volume but not read it. On another day Mr. Breytenbach was removed from his cell by the senior security police officer, Colonel Broodryk, and taken to the latter's home. The colonel, who admired Mr. Breytenbach's writing, walked with him in the garden and introduced him to his two daughters, who asked for and received his autograph. Colonel Broodryk later allowed Mr. Breytenbach to write a book of poetry in prison and, without consulting the author, arranged for the printers to dedicate the volume to himself.

The most bizarre incident began when a warder broke all the rules of the prison to whisper into Mr. Breytenbach's cell that he was a secret ally named Groenewald, who wished to help the prisoner escape and was prepared to smuggle letters and messages to friends outside. It was such a crude attempt to win his trust that Mr. Breytenbach made his responses sound absurdly naive or indistinct, guessing, correctly, that he was being tape-recorded by Groenewald. Mr. Breytenbach played along, accepting writing materials and sending out several letters to Yolande and others, hoping some might get through as part of the official campaign to win his trust, and he verbally led Groenewald into ever wilder realms of speculation about sabotage targets.

The result was a second trial under the Terrorism Act in June 1977, when Mr. Breytenbach was formally accused of planning an escape, recruiting a warder for such a purpose, illegally sending letters from prison and plotting to blow up targets such as the Afrikaans Language Monument in Paarl. The state officials realized all too late that they had been sent up by their prisoner, and the patent absurdity of the charges quickly became embarrassing. Mr. Breytenbach was acquitted of all charges except smuggling letters out of prison, for which he was fined a nominal 50 rands.

He smiles at the memory. "On the first day of this trial the court was full of big shots from the Special Branch and the Bureau of State Security, and during the early recesses they were openly betting that I'd be hanged - but as the case went on they started vanishing from court one by one until eventually there were hardly any left. All that could be heard from Groenewald's tapes sounded like someone at the end of a tunnel mumbling. Then the Boere moved me to Cape Town." Mr. Breytenbach constantly refers to his warders as the "Boere" (plural for Boer), explaining that this is prison terminology; he is aware of the irony whereby he, an Afrikaner or Boer himself, so describes them.

The poet was taken in shackles a thousand miles, from Pretoria to Pollsmoor Prison, near Cape Town, where he spent the next five years of his captivity, though in a larger cell. And he was allowed to write. In this period the French Government was bringing diplomatic pressure to bear on Pretoria, pressure that was intensified when the Socialist Government of Francois Mitterrand came to power. In December 1982 the South African Government finally relented and Mr.

Breytenbach became one of 27 political prisoners, and the first white, to be released before full expiration of sentence in the first such commutation in 30 years.

MR. BREYTENBACH says the remission of his sentence from nine years to seven, to which the South African authorities attached no conditions beyond requiring that he leave the country, was sudden and unaccompanied by any prior indications by officials. Indeed, when he was taken to the superintendent's office, he thought he was to be punished for some infraction of rules.

His release was delayed for four hours because no box could be found in the prison for his original clothes and belongings. Then he was allowed a brief visit with his father before flying to Johannesburg and on to Paris. Although the older man, as the result of a stroke, hadn't spoken a word in years, he looked at his son and cried "Magtig!" (Wonderful!). It was the only word he could manage, and he repeated it several times as they shared a bottle of wine before Mr. Breytenbach's supervisor indicated it was time to leave.

On the way to the airport, the nearly freed man was allowed to run into the sea for a quick swim. (Emerging from the water, he noticed a sign proclaiming that the beach was segregated.) His clothes were still wet when he arrived at the plane. He had forgotten about routine boarding procedures, and when an airline official reached for his parcel of manuscripts to put it through the security screen there was a tug of war until the poet was assured that this separation from his manuscripts was only temporary.

In Johannesburg his wife was waiting for him with the French Ambassador and a bottle of champagne. Then, after seven-and-a-half years of separation the Breytenbachs flew to Paris. There, even after some weeks of reunion, they were sitting close together as he spoke of his first impressions of freedom. "I couldn't get used to things on the walls, like pictures and ornaments," he said. "Walls looked cluttered after the bareness of the cells. I kept opening doors and leaving them open - the joy of an open door, to walk through whenever you like. Telephones were exotic things I had forgotten about. Colors overwhelmed me, the bright colors of clothing, flowers, books. And the voices of children - I hadn't heard the voice of a child for seven years. To see the stars at night! And the moon! To ride in a car, and see other cars going by, traveling so fast. And not knowing the value of money, not knowing what things cost after seven years."

For him, the worst moments of imprisonment came when he woke up every morning. "After the freedom of dreams, you open your eyes to the reality of the cell and the realization that this is your reality for years and years to come." He hallucinated. He would be sure that Yolande was speaking to him and he would answer out loud. He had an imaginary companion in the cell, Don Espejuelo (Sir Mirror), a sardonic old Spaniard he invented who criticized his poetry and scoffed at his views on books, painting, cinema and music.

"After a long time in solitary confinement I also started getting visits from Dostoyevsky, which was terrific," Mr. Breytenbach said. "I came to know him quite well, and to call him Fyodor. In fact, I owe Fyodor a poem, the poem referred to in 'The Brothers Karamazov,' about Christ returning to Spain where he meets the Grand Inquisitor. One of the brothers Karamazov describes the poem, but it's never written. That's the one I promised to write for Fyodor."

Mr. Breytenbach also speaks of a letter he wrote to Colonel Broodryk, offering to spy for him if released. "I thought I was being so clever, to secure release with such a promise, then to repudiate the promise after getting out. You think strange things and do strange things in that strange place, incredibly naive things which seem subtle at the time."

Have his political views changed at all? "Not in the slightest. In fact, I'm even more revolted at what's going on in South Africa than before, having experienced such things as the horror of all those hangings, and racial differentiation even in the condemned cells. My perceptions of the system have deepened, and I'm more inclined now to see the culprits also as human beings, prisoners of their own responses. My basic response to apartheid is the same as before, but my method of response will now be different. I'm going to stick to my own way, through writing."

HE plans to write mostly in French and English. Is this a rejection of Afrikaans? "Not as a language, no. I'd never reject Afrikaans as a language, but I reject it as part of the Afrikaner political identity. I no longer consider myself an Afrikaner. Actually, I prefer to consider myself a citizen of the world. I feel at home here in Paris. I'm a Parisian! But Afrikaans - I've long felt there was hope for it only if it were used in resistance to apartheid, but I think it is now too late. For blacks, it is a denial of reality and a humiliation. Afrikaans as the youngest prince of the Germanic languages? The prince has been poisoned. What remains is a language for use on tombstones."

He speaks of the years of separation from Yolande, the pain of isolation and the early part of his imprisonment when he wasn't allowed to write. But he also speaks of the strange sensation of missing some aspects of prison life, of an occasional pang of homesickness for his cell with its certitudes and reassuring routines. "The other night I dreamed I had to go back, and my biggest worry was that I'd given away my spoon and plate and bit of soap. Would I be able to get them back?"

But, as a writer and artist, he counts it an advantage to have been imprisoned and feels that his writing has been improved by the experience. His imprisonment helped him to square accounts with himself as part of what he regards as a necessary process for white South Africans opposed to apartheid - the need to pay an expiatory price for it. "We need this for ourselves, independently of any general wish to serve the black cause and see justice done," he said. "It is for our own inner selves as well. We need it for our own redemption."

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