



Prison Notebook

V2957/88

By Gertrude Fester

Publisher: Department of Military Veterans/Human Sciences

Research Council

Book review by Moira Levy

Many of us who are of a certain age will appreciate this book. It's a reminder of past times. Familiar names come up; you want to ask, "whatever became of so and so?" *Prison Notebooks V2957/88* by Gertrude Fester will also fill you in on a lot you didn't know at the time, or couldn't, or perhaps shouldn't have known, because those were dangerous times and when comrades "disappeared" – into detention, exile or hiding – you didn't ask.

V2957/88 was the prison number given to Fester when she was detained under the notorious Section 29 of the Internal Security Act and charged with treason, later changed to terrorism. This number identified her as a "vrou" (woman, hence the V) and as the 2,957th detainee to be held at Pollsmoor prison in 1988, at least by the time she was detained around August or September.

With 13 other accused, Fester, accused no 12, was tried in the 1989 "Rainbow Trial", thus named because in the dock all of South Africa's people were represented – in terms of age, race, religion, sexual orientation – at a time when non-racialism and non-sexism were what a lot of people were striving for.

All of which makes this an important record of a critical moment in South Africa's recent history, and it will be welcomed by many who believe that the past must be recorded, for posterity and the lessons it still provides. The people

who really ought to read this book are those who weren't yet around at that time, but today are responsible for taking this country forward.

In his foreword, Michael Donen SC makes this point in a tribute to Fester and her co-trialists: "Those who were not yet born during those times should read *Prison Notebook* to appreciate what our heroes had to go through so that we could attain the freedoms that we enjoy today. Those who lived through those times will be reminded of how lucky we are. All of us – government in particular – should read this book as a reminder of the debt of gratitude we owe them."

This book is part of a series published with the support of the Department of Military Veterans and the Human Sciences Research Council. It is an unusual book. More than an autobiography, it contains sketches, paintings and remarkable poems produced by the author during her lengthy incarceration during the trial, which lasted from March 1989 to March 1991 when all accused were granted amnesty and released.

Fester added the autobiographical detail on the advice of her publisher to provide context for her years of activism, especially during the turbulent 1980s. It covers her life in the United Women's Organisation (UWO), the United Democratic Front (UDF) and later in the ANC as an underground cadre.

The book goes back to the

beginning, and a childhood brimming with confusion and dismay – at divisions in her own family when lighter skinned relatives chose to live as whites; at the poverty of her African neighbours; of their forced removal under the Group Areas Act as apartheid took hold.

Later, as a first-year student at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) she was active in the black consciousness-aligned South African Student Organisation (SASO) and the Azanian People's Organisation (Azapo). She describes in some detail her struggle to adapt when she transferred to the University of Cape Town (UCT) to study drama. It was an alienating encounter with privilege and white suburbia. She found herself one of only two black students in some of her classes.

Her induction into the politics of resistance and feminism soon followed, and with it years of protests, boycotts, resistance, insurrection, living in hiding and on the run, and later detention without trial until the pressure of solitary confinement became intolerable and she signed a confession and became one of the accused in the long-running treason trial.

Her public profile grew – as an academic, woman leader, international speaker – alongside her underground role in the ANC and her activism drew the attention not only of South Africa's notorious apartheid security forces, but also of the ANC leadership underground ►►

and in exile and the growing, world-wide anti-apartheid movement. It's all there in the book.

She records her first encounter with Chris Hani – in Lusaka in the late 1980s on one of her first illicit trips to receive instructions from the ANC in exile. “I was overwhelmed ... i had read, heard, discussed, learnt so much about this man whom i admired immensely. And he was standing in front of me.” Her response? She burst into tears. “... the nervousness and tensions of the previous weeks in preparation for this journey, the anguish as i walked through the South African customs, the two-hour plane journey full of anxiety ... i was suddenly emotionally depleted, tired, but elated... And i was snivelling in the presence of comrade Chris.”

How did comrade Chris take it? Apparently in his stride. “We exchanged the usual pleasantries. He then asked for an update on the situation in general in the Western Cape,” Fester writes.

This book is a mix of memoir, reflection and brutally honest confession about the trauma she experienced during her 104 days of solitary confinement. She writes about that harrowing time and the run-up to the trial: “(m)y mental state is becoming more precarious. Hallucinations and blackouts are becoming frequent”. It's a diary of a personal struggle, not only against the iniquity of apartheid but also with unanswered questions, profound anxiety and personal emotional breakdown.

For a prison notebook it is (mercifully) free of polemic. Fester relies on her memory – no paper or writing implements of any kind were allowed for political detainees – and she is upfront about her state of mind not only during solitary confinement but also 30 years later, when she attempted to sort through her vague and confused recollections.

“I was seeing things, having panic attacks and occasionally lost the will to live. I was often confused, and this

led to my doubting my mental capacity. ... Was i not making sense? Was i not clear? ... It became so bad that i dreaded every feedback [from the publishers], and this would lead me further down the abyss of psychosis. Every time it unnerved me more and more. This ... led me to again question my mental health and sanity. In short, i was reliving a similar trauma as when i had been in solitary confinement.”

It must have been painfully difficult to write this book and readers, be warned, it is often also painful to read – but well worth it. The strength of this account lies in its unflinching honesty and the courageous sharing of a deeply traumatic personal experience.

But, and here's the thing: despite the emotional turmoil the author recounts, there is a steadfast political conviction and strength that underpins her entire account. This prison notebook may be a harrowing read, but ultimately it is inspiring. It's about commitment and courage and tells of a time when the Left in South Africa knew right from wrong and which way was forward.

A last word: don't skip the appendices. These contain among other things excerpts from the trial charge sheet including the plea of the accused – “As for the charge we now face, we say that it is the State that stands accused. In defence of its apartheid practices, this regime has brooked no opposition ... Thousands of the regime's political opponents languish in jail, having been detained without trial. Scores of others are forced to stand trial for so-called crimes against the State. This is called the maintenance of law and order. We call it terrorism.”

Appendix E, compiled in 2018, tells what became of the trialists and we are powerfully reminded of what has still not changed in South Africa. Those who are poor and black struggled the most to get back on their feet after the trial. It makes for poignant reading. Unemployment, living in shacks, without money for transport, even to

attend ANC branch meetings, employers refusing to accept them back, wives who left them, and disappointment, deep disappointment, with the way things in South Africa turned out.

Fester writes: “I saw Alpheus walking down the path towards my car. His face was lined; his former well-built body, as i had known him, had shrunk. He walked with lead legs, his features shrivelled through what i thought was hardship, ill health, hopelessness and pain. I could not reconcile this shadow of a man with the Alpheus i knew – i can picture him in his MK uniform in the court, with right arm raised into a fist, shouting ‘Amandla!’ – bold and handsome with courage and bravado ... and now this... i burst out crying! We hugged.”

Finally, an appendix from Fester's former jailer and interrogator, Captain Andre du Toit (later promoted to Brigadier and Major-General in the post-apartheid SAPS) is a three-page letter in which he asserts he has come to peace with the past and his role in enforcing apartheid.

He writes: “In my career, I have witnessed a lot of violence, heartache, unfairness, craziness, all committed by individuals who believed that it was okay to do whatever they were doing to other people. For a very long time when I was serving in the security branch, I witnessed people killing, maiming, planting bombs, exploding bombs, shooting ... and it was all justified by some ideological motivation ... I realized that anything to do with politics and ideologies as a motivation to hurt and kill was wrong and that I will never be able to believe anyone coming with political ideologies or justifications.”

Fester's reply is brief: “If you are healed and happy – good for you. Unfortunately there are many who as survivors of apartheid brutality and inhumanity cannot say the same.” **NA**