

## The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs

I can barely remember the actual writing of my Jail Diary. It was just after my release from 168 days of solitary confinement, and I was elated to be out amongst people again, that I recall. I wrote it all by hand, rapidly, in secret, and relied on friends to have it typed. The police were everywhere, we had to be careful, not just I but the typists. This was the time when Nelson Mandela and others, including two very close friends of mine, were on trial for their lives. Our movement was being crushed. It was a bitter period, and writing was more than a release for me, it was the only joyous activity I could manage, an intimate form of clandestine resistance.

I arranged for the manuscript to be smuggled out of the country and sent to Ruth First in London. I called the book 168 Days. Ruth got a message to me saying that she liked the book very much, but suggested that my father rather than she be responsible for finding a publisher. Only later did I discover that Ruth had herself written a fine book on her own detention in solitary confinement, and given it the title 117 Days.

Some months later, and this is a part that I remember well, I received a visit from William Collins, the London publisher. Being called upon by the person responsible for publishing Collins dictionaries was a great honour, like being visited by Mr E Britannica. Yet, as soon as he began to give me the good news that his firm would be publishing the book, I jumped up, grabbed him by the arm and yanked him out of my office. He was startled. "I'm sorry, Mr Collins," I said, deeply embarrassed "but I am sure my office is bugged...."

Standing in the corridor, I explained that not only were all my writings banned in South Africa, but that I was prohibited from preparing anything for publication. I was eager for him to go ahead with bringing the book out as soon as possible, I explained, and willing to take the consequences, but did not wish to give advance warning to the police.

In fact, I was detained a second time by the security police, publication was delayed, I went into exile in England, and the only punishment I received was a lashing from a conservative reviewer in the Sacramento Bee who wrote that the book made him feel sorry for my gaolers.

I forgot about the book. Years in exile passed. I had a busy life, wrote other things, participated in campaigns



up and down Britain and in Europe for the release of all political prisoners in South Africa. Then, just as I was about to leave London to work in the newly independent state of Mozambique, I received a phone call from David Edgar asking if I would mind if he transformed the book into a play for the Royal Shakespeare Company. We met, chatted for a while, and I went off to Maputo and forgot about the book again.

Ten years later, the day after the bomb went off which nearly took my life, four Albie Sachs's got in touch with David Edgar to find out how I was getting on. The play had been put on at various theatres and broadcast in radio and television by the BBC, and when I eventually emerged from hospital, the four were waiting to put on a special benefit performance on my behalf. It turned out to be a memorable evening, one I hoped never to forget, and, also, never to repeat.

Over the years I had been amused to hear that not only had the book been prescribed as a set-work in British schools and as recommended reading in University literature courses, but that at a certain stage it had been required reading for members of the South African security forces. Now, at last, after twenty five years, it can be read openly by anyone in South Africa. The ANC has been unbanned, Nelson Mandela has been released, and we have new opportunities to struggle for the non-racial, democratic South Africa that has always been at the centre of our longings.

I am proud of our generation. We believed, we fought and we took many blows. We have thousands and thousands of stories to tell, and each will do it in his or her own way. The freedom struggle needs intimacy and softness as much as it requires firmness, of that I am convinced. This was my little contribution towards recording what it was like at the time.



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You wait for these moments, constantly, but when they come, you are amazed.