

The Rest of the Story - Local Photographer's View from a Third World Prison Cell

In Zimbabwe, few good deeds go unpunished.

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In an earlier issue of Tualatin Life, there was an article about a project I've sponsored to photograph and interview inspirational women who could serve as role models for young girls in Zimbabwe. It's a project that has led me to go to Zimbabwe 3 times in the last 4 years, via a grant this year. The first two trips were exciting and motivational; this recent one became harrowing and involved some interesting life lessons learned via 3 days of lengthy interrogations and 4 nights in a Third World prison.

On Day 2 of this year's trip, it became apparent that booking meetings with my interviewees was unlikely because of a four-day holiday weekend. I asked my driver if we could go to a ceremony somewhat akin to a Veterans Day event at Arlington Ceremony. The ceremony was to take place on hilltop overlooking the capital of Harare, and Robert Mugabe, the Zimbabwean President, was to speak amidst the Russian-like statues created in celebration of their independence from England. Myself, my driver and two of his friends joined a crowd of about 15,000 where the only other whites present were four people from embassies. A journalist who was with us held my camera, as he was concerned I might be perceived as an unaccredited journalist if I did. Within minutes, a local sat next to me who clearly was a plain clothes intelligence officer. The ordeal began when the President finished speaking and we were all escorted out of the stadium by three intelligence officers that grew to a larger group of the same. My thoughts at that point were something along the lines of "eh, what a stupid pain," as my mind had not yet fully settled in the Zimbabwean time zone where the rule of law is sorely lacking. My self-confidence was soon to be less arrogant in nature.

We were handed over to the section in charge of "political crimes" at Harare Central Police Station, notorious for high profile cases and alleged crimes of a hyped up national security nature. Our three days of interrogation included sitting with Officer Dowda, the officer in charge, who clearly appeared unhinged - after all, his desk featured a plastic severed arm and a paperweight made of plastic severed fingers. I knew quickly through his persona that this was a man who lived to foster fear. Later I learned from my lawyer that Officer Dowda had a long reputation for torture in Zimbabwe that led to him to be removed from duty as a UN officer in Kosovo during the post-conflict period there.

All four of us were interrogated individually over the next three days by up to 20 officers, using traditional techniques of bad and good cop, and lies about what each of the four of us said. There was the waiting for hours to be interviewed in a cold room with broken windows, a very hard bench and accompanying officers who searched my lodgings. There were the sounds of the journalist being beaten. My mind was full of thoughts about how not to lose the one day's worth of interview video and still imagery I'd managed to capture this trip. It was soon to be a valid concern, as all the equipment I had with me and the portion that they could find in my lodgings were confiscated, reportedly to be returned this week, some 3 months later.

The interrogation approach I experienced was clearly an effort to make various charges stick through something I might say, like the proverbial spaghetti on the wall. Questions were often of little relevance, but reflective of cultural attitude toward women, marriage, and religion. I was asked what church I belonged to, criticized for not being married, and told that my "level of intelligence" revealed that I "must be a spy". At one point, Officer Dowda threatened to beat me. We were allowed to go back to our 2-star hotel the first and second days of interrogation.

I didn't believe the assurances some of the officers gave the other guys in my group about this all being over soon. It was the morning of Day 3 that I contacted the US Embassy and they joined me for that day's visit to the police station. It resulted in multiple layers of higher placed officers being involved in the interrogations, and the embassy consul being denied access to the room where I spent the next four hours being interrogated, without a break. Never during those 3 days of interrogations was I offered food or water.

Late the night of Day 3 of interrogations, I was charged with having a tourist visa when they believed I was conducting some type of business. Leading up to this time, I suffered 2 hours of chest pains. Officers refused my request to be taken to my lodgings for heart medicine relating to a heart attack I had in 1998, sending my driver instead. As I told them would happen, he couldn't find everything needed and it was hours before I received meds. I spent that night sleeping on a concrete floor with 3 youths in a cell at the police station which featured a raised concrete block with a hole in it to serve as a foul toilet. My clothes soon absorbed the stench of that toilet.

My next home was Harare Remand Prison, where through the small gate I saw two groups of black men. One group was being forced to strip; the other was being shackled to each other. It was one of the truly fearsome moments of this experience, as I envisioned a totally hostile environment inside that fetid prison. I turned to the immigration officer who had taken me there and asked to return to the police cell. He denied that request, telling me that "while there is no good prison in Zimbabwe, this one isn't too bad." I wasn't reassured. I shortly had to pass through the small gate cut into 20 feet high walls topped by barbed wire. After the elongated admittance procedure that involved writing my body weight on my prison clothing, I was put into the "holding cell" where new arrivals and prisoners just back from court are housed. The cell held forty men. Three grey wool blankets per person were issued to serve as "beds" on the concrete floor in Zimbabwe's high plateau winter season. The men took advantage of being allowed to smoke in a cell full of these wool blankets and closed, barred windows. Each cell I encountered at Remand was marked with words penned by former prisoners. I couldn't help but think what amazing photographs I could have made of that writing as the sun fell low in the sky to cast golden light on yellow walls. Other wall markings were from beds that had been supplied by a foreign organization, only to be stolen by prison staff. As night fell, each man in that cell stood and began to speak in their native Shona language. Oddly to me, it seemed an AA meeting. I soon figured out that each prisoner was telling their name, the charge against them, and possible sentence. I figured they'd bypass me, the only white guy. Wrong. I stood up to just say in English my name, the charge and that I was sorry I didn't speak Shona. Several voices of welcome rang out urging me not to worry about Shona. Soon the guy next to me on the floor told me of prisoners he'd met there from New Zealand and Israel, and he said I would be out within a week. I couldn't allow myself to believe anything, for hope was a cruel companion.

The quick way that bonds form among prisoners and the value of those relationships in a controlled, closed environment was one of my invaluable lessons learned. Every week I still think of the people I left behind in that prison, many of them incarcerated for minor issues like lost or stolen passports, expired visas, and lack of money to fly out of the country as required by the courts in cases such as these. I met men who were both kind and inspirational. One man from Ghana taught me prison life - how to best fit in, avoid trouble, keep healthy, and fold one's blankets. One man was a pastor. Another guy I met in the cell I was moved to for nights 2 and 3 was age 25 and knew 7 languages. Even though paper and pen were very hard to come by at the prison, this man kept a diary for 5 months - only to find the diary missing when he returned one day. He claimed he would still write about his experience, as "each day is right here in my head, forever." He and his fellow Ugandan friend were slated to fly out earlier that week, but the immigration officials were late, forcing them to miss the plane, return to prison, without word on their future. Hope; so easily lost. Others I met held such hope of court proceedings and release, which I saw held little chance of coming to fruition. Most of the prisoners had been there from 5-27 months. While I wondered if their kindness would translate to only a request for money or help once I was released, that proved to be true only of a guard in the end, not a prisoner. You know a society is not as it should be when the moral and value systems of prisoners are far more laudatory than those of the police.

The daily routine included about 8 hours out of the cells in the courtyard and the rest of our time in the cells. If we were not in a certain formation when the door was opened in the morning, we lost some of that outdoor time. I spent most of my time sitting with my back to the wall, watching and talking. The great majority of the prisoners wanted to know my story, since as the #2 in command officer told my "newbie" group - "you don't see many white people in here." In fact, there was only one other, a South African. I remember at one point, there was a group of Muslims kneeling in fervent, silent prayer just 20 feet from a group of Christian prisoners singing jubilantly; both groups trying to raise their spirits through their chosen paths. It stuck with me as an occurrence the outside world could benefit from experiencing. The inside prison world was teaching me things about my outside world life.

Survival in a prison like this required having someone on the outside that could bring you certain allowed foods. My driver brought me beef jerky, bread, and Coke. My Ghanaian friend lent me some Tupperware to put it in. I was very cautious in eating the corn meal, beans and vegetables served for meals inside the prison. Maybe it was some kind of penance, maybe it was an effort to lose some weight. The prison bread was good, but the toilet conditions made it pretty easy to avoid food in general.

Prisoners were only given the chance to discuss "chronic" health conditions as they entered the prison in front of a nurse, guards, and fellow new inmates. Prison privacy is an oxymoron. Showers consisted of hoses and cold water trickling from above one's head. When my group entered the shower to disrobe, I still remember the Nigerian who was petrified at the idea of removing his clothes in front of strangers. In his culture, you just did not do that. Lice were rampant due to the shared blankets, and I contracted both lice and ringworm during my stay.

The experience quickly made me calm once I realized that it appeared that the prisoners meant me little harm. I can only remember one man of a couple thousand prisoners who I thought might be a threat to my physical security. I began to realize, to my benefit, that I had no control over the situation I was in, and that my lawyer, the Embassy, and an arbitrary regime held the keys to my every move. I became a more patient and calm person, and began to look upon this as an experience from which I could learn and benefit. I awoke each day wondering what I would hear from my fellow prisoners that day about their situation or what would happen with my case. It became an intellectual exercise for me, perhaps as a way of putting aside thoughts about family or when I would be free. Next to standing at the entrance to Remand Prison, the most frightening experience came in a conversation with an Immigration official who carefully implied through eye contact and body language that my case with them on the visa issue was going well for me. However he noted that the "boss" had yet to rule on it. His subsequent remarks forced me to once again slam on the brakes on an emotional roller coaster when he remarked that "the Harare Central Police officers are pursuing criminal charges against you." It was then that the duration of my stay went beyond any reasonable estimation.

It was the morning after my 3rd night of incarceration that my cellmates and I failed to get into formation in time for the opening door. The door slammed shut, and it began to matter little to me. Not 30 minutes later, a guard came to the door saying I was wanted at the front of the prison. I hurriedly tried to give my contact info to the inquiring cellmates, but only managed to get that info to my Ghanaian friend before the guards ordered me to move on. As I left, they sent me back for "my things". I looked back at my cellmates with an intensity of determination and sadness, saying pessimistically "I'll be back soon". In fact, Immigration was there to release me and take me to the airport. I changed out of my prison uniform, reversed the lengthy admission process and hurriedly gave my Tupperware and things back to the owner of my footwear, begging him to give back the highly valued Tupperware to my Ghanaian friend.

I was free from prison, but not from the bureaucrats. I discovered it would cost \$870 to reschedule my outbound ticket, and I heard that we were in a hurry to catch what the driver thought was a soon to depart plane. All this while I waited as the driver ran two personal errands. That allowed US Embassy officials to locate me mid-transit. We got to the airport only to find that my flight was boarding and no further boarding was allowed. I was told that my original driver would be allowed to fetch my luggage, but that "Immigration has nothing to do with your camera and computer equipment, that's the police's matter." Thus began my final night of incarceration, this time at the Airport jail. My companion here in a tiny cell was another Ugandan, and I was up most of the night as he rambled in torrents of fear about his fate. We were generally ignored that night; our only companion a concrete toilet. I laid with my head at the toilet and my feet at the drafty door.

While I'd been assured I'd be met at the cell by Immigration officials early the next morning to take me to my gate, they had yet to show some 2 hours after their scheduled arrival. Guards searched for them at the airport unsuccessfully. Guards spoke of my flight being late afternoon, when I knew it was a morning flight. One said to me "that there was some trouble with your case", failing to understand why I didn't find his "joke" very funny at that point. In languid fashion, my escort eventually arrived and took me through customs to my gate, where he left me. It felt anticlimactic and strange after days of a fear of optimism. He said that I was technically not being deported, since no charges against me stuck, and that I could return in the future. He noted that my visa had been cancelled, so I had to leave on that flight.

It was without further argument that I sat in Harare's nearly empty airport, wondering what my family



Classrooms in Zimbabwe are undersized, poorly maintained, unsafe in terms of construction and exposure to electrical wiring, and with windows often broken. Heat and air conditioning are completely absent in rural areas such as this overcrowded classroom.



This girl is fortunate to be able to attend school. When family budgets run short, the boys go to school and the girls stay home given high school fees. The pride this girl has, despite tattered clothing, will be important as she seeks to overcome patriarchal attitudes that are far stronger in rural areas such as where she lives than in urban centers.



The school system in Zimbabwe essentially collapsed starting around 1990. Books are extremely dated, in poor condition, and sparse. Classroom sizes run from 40-50 kids. Infrastructure has decayed, as is evident in this image. Many teachers have left Zimbabwe for better paying teaching jobs in South Africa.

knew and how much heartache they'd endured. As it turned out, all they'd been told was that I was coming home earlier than my original plans. The idea didn't sound so bad to me as I waited in solitude, thinking about the Orwellian world of fear and intimidation I was leaving behind. As the plane lifted off, I was overcome with sadness for those I left behind and the knowledge that it was the women whose stories remained untold that could lose out over the course of their lifetimes. There were many stories gathered, but so much yet to be done. Those untold stories still call to me, unsettled and not at rest.



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