THE SOUTH AFRICAN POLICE: TWO PERSONAL ACCOUNTS

The funeral of Steven Biko, who was murdered by the South African Police while in custody of the SAP security branch, was held in King William's Town on Sunday, 25 September 1977. Over 20,000 people from all over South Africa journeyed to the small Cape Province town to honor the martyr. Hundreds of others from South Africa and adjacent countries were prevented from reaching their goal by SAP roadblocks, permit checks and other means. The two accounts presented here detail other means.

The first is written by a lady who intended to take one of the chartered busses from the Dube section of the City of Soweto. For understandable reasons her name is withheld:

'When I left home for Steve Biko's funeral on Friday the 23rd, little did I know that I would spend that weekend in jail. To get space in the busses booked, I decided to get to the Y.W.C.A., Dube, at 6:30 pm. There were a few people outside the hall. Some young men told us to sit inside the hall, so as to avoid confrontation with the police, who were nowhere to be seen then.

'By 8 pm, the hall was full to capacity with mourners. No speeches were delivered, no songs were sung as we sat talking and waiting for the busses. Shortly after 8 pm, the busses arrived, and the names of those who had reserved seats early were called. These left the hall in single file via a side door. We were all quiet in order to hear all names.

'Never will I forget the next nightmarish two hours after that. All hell broke lose when out of the blue there was a shattering of all the window panes, and a billowing of choking tear gas enveloped us. Waves of people surged through the small doors amid heart-rending female screams and forced groans of fallen men. I found myself crawling on the grass outside the hall, overcome by the tear gas and kept down by the stampeding mourners.

'Gunfire brought me to my senses. Half blind, hampered by my travelling bag and provisions, I scaled a high fence and fell into the neighboring yard. I staggered to the door and found it locked. Continued bursts of gunfire and screams lent me wings. I flew into the next big house where I was welcomed with water. Yes, water. That was the best thing to happen to my half-blind eyes and parched throat. The sting of tear gas was immediately eased. I sat huddled in a corner with some other twenty or so women. Lights were switched off and we all prayed that the police would never guess we were there.

'That was not our lucky day, for within ten minutes the back door was kicked open by a gun-wielding cop in the fearful camouflage uniform. He shone a torch on us and whistled. Soon the house was full of them. We were kicked and driven out of that house with sjamboks and batons, amid sounds of breaking glass and furniture.

(continued, over)
'The run to the police lorry was short but still the longest in my life. As we ran, blows showered over my whole body like rain in summer. Worse was to come when I clambered into the lorry. For what seemed a year, we were beaten up, really beaten up by the savage cops. About 100 of us were packed into the lorry. Worse was to come.

'Walking on top of us with their heavy boots, they started individual assaults. My hair was pulled out by the roots and there was a tug of war for our pants. These cops were so wild they wanted to rape us in the full lorry. Blessed be the man who promoted jeans for women. That saved us. The men who dared look at the indecency were mercilessly clobbered and ordered to close their eyes. From Dube to Meadowlands a policeman was sitting squarely on my back as there was no room for him to sit. That was the longest drive I've ever experienced.

'What I saw when we finally got to the charge office, I shall never forget. The way people had been beaten up! One girl was lying on the floor in a faint and the cops saw a big joke in her. Faces were bleeding, blood-covered heads and torn clothing were the order of the day. We were made to sit on the floor, and abused in all possible ways.

'We were finally charged with "public violence and stone throwing" and locked up for the week-end, the longest ever. Monday was spent in the court cells. We were finally released on bail, sick, with unstitched wounds open, sjambok wounds and semi-paralysed arms. Was that the end? God, no!

'When we met our relatives and friends outside the court, we were bound to be excited and jubilant. That was soon ended by gunfire and threats by the riot police. We all ran helter-skelter in all directions with the police in hot pursuit. They, however, made sure not to rearrest us, but we all thought we were lucky to escape the second police onslaught.

'Shall I ever forget the brutality of the South African police? Never with this scar across my face! But still, Steve Biko, rest in peace!'

"I suddenly heard shots being fired and noticed police wearing camouflage uniforms in the vicinity. A black policeman pointed a lit torch towards a window of the bus. I heard him whistling and shortly thereafter his colleagues came to our bus. A white policeman stood at the door while five black policemen entered and started hitting us with sjamboks.

'I was also hit with a sjambok several times on the shoulders and all over my body. I sprained my left foot. I fell out of the door of the bus and noticed a black policeman pointing a gun at me. He used abusive words, including calling me a bitch. I was powerless.

'Apart from being assaulted by policemen, I suffered the loss of a traveling bag containing 15 Rand and clothes."