

Don Mattera

POET

Well, I think it's a long story about being banned you know, and how this banning came about. One has to go back to where it all began in Sopiatown, where politics, and the politics of resistance and insurrection at the time had been pulling all sorts of people together. Guys like myself, guys from the streets had luckily been converted from gangsterism to politics, through the ANC youth-league. As a member of the Western Areas students association, it was at this place that a whole new world opened up for me, outside of the world of gangsterism and fighting, so I had already begun writing poetry at the time, some of it not very political poetry, but poetry that spoke of the problems of the day. And 1958 in Sopiatown I remember there was quite a big fight that we had with the police. I was a gangster fighting in the streets, and the cops were pushing the politicians around. And they didn't have the answer. So the gangsters stepped in and it was quite something, it was shooting.

And in 1960 Sharpeville came. I was also part of fighting the cops in a place called Western Native Township, which was opposite to Sopiatown. My brother was one of the PAC members who was detained and jailed. So, a whole lot of political activity circulated in the area. And my poems, .... I was the first person I think, two days after Sharpeville I wrote a poem called Day of Thunder, Day of Blood. "In the dusty streets of Sharpeville, the thunder roared from sarracen skies, the blood flowed from black men's eyes when they met the hail of dumk-dumk, the crying the calling, the falling, the running of men, women, and children, and the cold grey faces of them who spat the hail and held the thunder while my people sang. Return, Oh, Africa, return. Bitter was that day....."

So that poem resulted in my being detained in 1963 for about 12 days. The policeman at that time was called Spengler. That was a form of censorship. Well, I had been writing poetry up to 1968. In 1968 SASO was formed, Black Consciousness became the dominant ideology, black culture was asserted through poems, through plays, that was my world. And then again I had been detained several times between 1968 and 1970. In 1970 we had founded something called Black Thoughts, and Black Thoughts was a poetry and music group that we took around to all the teachers colleges, to the black schools, and we preached the black word of black beauty, of belonging, of rising up and out of your degradation, and also looking the oppressor right in these blue eyes. So I was detained in 1970 when Black Thoughts had just been formed. I was detained again in 1973 after we had attended several universities reading our poetry, staging our plays. At one such university, the university of Turfloop, there was a powerful riot and I was named as one of the inciters. And Justice quired into the incident, and I paraphrase him now, he said "Don Mattera's volatile poetry had helped to stir the passions of the people there." So, I was then detained again. Another form of censorship. Then in 1973, I was the founder of the Union of

Black Journalists, and also the organizer of the Union of Black Journalists. We were now unionizing journalists, and also trying to get them into the stream of activity. I was detained in 1973, on November the fifth, I was then banned and house arrested for five years, three years were spent in house arrest. That meant that as a journalist, I'd been working for the Star newspaper, as a journalist I could not be quoted, nothing I wrote could be published. I was also banned from publishing houses, I was banned from anyplace that information is being collected, disseminated, criticized, looked at, analysed. So it really took care of me as a journalist. But more than this, it really took care of me as an artist, a poet, because none of my poems could be published, none of my plays that I had written at the time could be staged. So I moved into nom de plume. I adopted a name, which is now my Islamic name - Omar Rudin. And many of my poems were published under that name. And strangely and paradoxically, one such poem was also banned under the same nom de plume, it was called "The Drums Shall Speak". The day they banned the Biko T-shirt was the day they banned that poem. And then I resorted to writing under another pseudonym, which was also my actual name, my African name. .... and strangely enough another poem by ..... was also banned. So that there was no way, it appeared, I could escape the scissors and the censure of the apartheid rulers of our country. During my first term of banning and house arrest, the first three years, I almost went into a cocoon. Because when you are banned, firstly the people say, Where there is smoke, there is fire. If he is banned under the Suppression of Communism Act, then obviously he is a communist. And of course this was the brush that we were all being painted by. I was not the only guy, there were about 73 banned people in 1973 only (Names several banned people and organizations)

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I became very, very ill during the very first three years of my banning. Then the Star newspaper graciously fought very hard for me, got me back, the house arrest was lifted. I could now work in the newspaper, but I could not write any stories, I could not put headlines to the stories that I had subbed. I could only answer telephones, make appointments, and make inquiries. But obviously I disobeyed that. Without the editor knowing, I wrote articles under another pseudonym - Joe Williams. One such powerful article on Black Consciousness, drew the attention of the security police. A man who <sup>was</sup> now resigned, General Johan Coetzee, who was my chief interrogator in 1976 and '77 when I was detained, he had a court inquiry, and spoke to say that Don Mattera is banned and yet he is writing subversive stuff in the newspaper without his editor knowing. That means that this man had actually studied my style of writing. He know the way I wrote. It just goes to show that censorship is not just the publications' man who sits up there and looks at your work, it is also the police informer, the agent provocateur, it is also the agent who obviously would come to me some times and say "Why don't you write us a piece, we'll pay you", and I would know he was an agent. It would be published some where, and he would provide proof to his bosses or his masters that I was in fact engaged in subversive activity.

it's  
unfair  
or  
hahaha

It's  
under  
pseudonym

In 1976 I was detained briefly, on a Thursday the 28th of August. I was then again in 1977, the same date, I was questioned about a meeting I had with the Kennedy aides that had come here to gather information. In 1978 I was detained and kept for about 19 days and charged for 20 counts of breaking my banning order. The witnesses all refused to testify against me. I was acquitted. And in the same year, on the 31st of October, my banning order expired, and it was reimposed for another five years - to be lifted in 1983. Then Nadine Gordimer, a very close friend of mine, a woman I respect, and also who has proved by her commitment and activity that she is a revolutionary, took my work to Index on Censorship, which is based in London. They published my poems, and also an excerpt from my book, "Gone With the Twilight" - which has now been published as "Memory is the Weapon". This raised the curiosity of the system. I was then detained and questioned for about two days and I was made to sign a statement that I had in fact given this interview to Index on Censorship. The same year, 1978, was also the year that some of my poems were published in Eastern bloc countries without my knowledge. I was again quizzed about that. The law of censorship is interwoven with the Police Act, is interwoven with the Defense Act, because as a journalist you may not write about a policeman arresting a person, you may not take a photograph of a policeman arresting a person, you may not take a photograph of a police station or a police vehicle, during the execution of his duties. And similar laws apply to the defense act, where you may not do any of these things that I have mentioned. Censorship is cruel. Whereas Adolf Hitler and other despots... and other murderers actually burned the books, in South Africa not only the books were burned, but the writer was burned, he was banned, house arrested, he was detained, and if they could help it they would try and spread rumours they you're an agent or a quisling of sorts, to try and make you lose credibility with the people. So that when one looks at censorship in South Africa, one does not look at it in isolation to the other laws that the government has passed and implements to win over the minds and control the thinking of its own people, because it keeps the revolutionary material away from them, it creates opiates through television and through their newspapers, where people, white people, ... it becomes a question of "I didn't hear, I didn't see, I can't say" and it's the same thing one can remember about the Nazi holocaust against the Jewish people. Today, there's a holocaust in this country, and sadly the people of Israel, the people who have gone through all this suffering, who know the pain and burden of censorship is, and murder and detention and torture, also collaborate with this government. The Americans and the British the same.

So, a poem in this country, a poet in this country, if they are revolutionary, if they are for the resistance movements, are also in danger. Poets particularly, because of the oral power. You can give a guy a book, he can read it over two weeks, but he needs a poet to articulate the aspirations of the people at that given time, at that given moment. Therefore, we cannot

Banning & detentions - Mandela & supporters on his behalf

Things a socialist may not do

Aim of censorship

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undermine. I cannot underscore the importance of the written and oral word, particularly when it comes to poetry. Now the censorship... South Africa has been known to say that it is doing reform. it's busy with creating reform in which the world should see that apartheid is dead. But none of us are told when this funeral took place, where apartheid has actually been buried. Censorship is alive in this country. My play, "One Time, Brother". When I was unbanned in 1983, my poem, very volatile poetry, "Azanian Love Song" which has been sold out and out of print in this country, was not banned. And we were all surprised, my god, are these censors blind? They are not banning this potent, volatile work. The same year, I write a play called "One Time, Brother" in which the colored people are being warned that should they join with the government in the tri-cameral election, there will be problems. And it was a powerful potent play which we took to the townships. It was banned. We had already played to 29,000 people in Colored and Indian townships. They couldn't ban it because they didn't have the script. When we put it onto script, when they got the script, finally, the play was banned. I also believe that censorship has to be fought in the highest courts of the law. We must never say that the courts are the creation of the apartheid system, why take them there? I believe that you have to take them there, I believe that you have to challenge these people at their own doorstep.

I think there's another form of censorship I'd like to discuss - self censorship. Which we see today, the newspapers are censoring themselves, in order to appease this Stoffel Botha. I believe, and if you study the Japanese art of pruning trees, you stunt the growth of anything when you prune so much. The newspapers are pruning so much that they appear to have lost their teeth, have lost the fruit of objective journalism. The censorship that has been placed on Zwelakhe Sisulu is not new. It has been placed on other journalists before. But why is it more pertinent? Because Zwelakhe Sisulu is also the epitome of the new leadership of this country. He has the quality of being a future Prime Minister. He has the quality of being a powerful leader in a new South Africa. So, they know this, so they want to destroy him now, castrate him as it were. What they have done to our political prisoners in jail, Nelson Mandela and company, is a grave form of censorship. I should tell you this, when all these political guys like Nelson Mandela come out, they're all ill after 25 years. We know about common criminals who come out after 25 years and are still strong. So what the hell are they doing to these guys. What kind of slow poisoning is being put into their food. Nobody wants to discuss it and I'm not afraid. There is a form of censorship into the human ethos. They know that people like Zwelakhe Sisulu, and other powerful young journalists, who represent the new African, who represent the new leader in this country. When it comes to a post-apartheid era, they should be dead, they should be broken, their spirits should be destroyed. So there are many forms of censorship. Self censorship is one of the worst kinds. It is a time when the human spirit is deadened. All we do is become pliable in law. We hide behind policies of government and laws of government. So, I'm

just saving, self-censorship, censorship by the state, censorship through penal codes, censorship through laws relating to state intelligence, these are all part of the apartheid policy to reproduce itself in this country.

Tape 2

*Attack on foreign press for accepting censorship*

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When Vietnam and all the other flashpoints of the world had their problems, journalists of the world went there and they won Pulitzer Prizes. They were not afraid of governments, they went there because the duty of a journalist is a sacred one. He has to give the news as it is, undiluted, unpolluted, he has to give to the people. And the risks, the incumbent risks involved he has to face. He has to go out there and do his job. Why the duplicity when it comes to South Africa? Why come and hide behind the government skirts and say that the government of South Africa prevents us from doing our work, it prevents us from writing our stories, it prevents us from going on the spot. It was good to do it in Vietnam, in was good to do it Cambodia, .... but when it comes to South Africa, why does the foreign news media apply a double standard? Why doesn't the foreign news media see this as just as important as the other flashpoints in the world. So I'm saying that the censorship of expediency should also be looked at, and should also be discussed among journalists. They come to this country, they pay people that work and help them here almost nothing, and they produce massive stories, they get big bylines overseas. I'm saying the time has come when foreign journalists, both visual, .... media and otherwise, should look at this issue. Why censor themselves when it comes to South Africa? Why go and ask Stoffel Botha for permission to attend that meeting? Why ask...? there are other means to do these things. I think journalism in this country has to face up to the challenge of censorship. The Star newspaper, the City Press, the Sunday Times, any newspaper that espouses to hold dear the edifices of journalism has to go out there and do the job. I have never been a journalist who has been afraid to speak my mind, to write my mind. And whether that gets published or that gets broadcast, I know I have done my work.

The responsibility rests on each individual writer, poet, playwright, novelist, journalist in this country to not only speak out against censorship, but to act out against censorship. And I'm not saying that people should take AK's and limpet mines, people will find manners in which to express themselves, and to articulate the things that they feel hurt them.

such poem, "The Poet Must Die" is my objection against censorship that the state applied to James Matthews' poetry as well as Gladys Thomas. Their book, "Cry Rage", was banned, and still is banned. It was banned for distribution and possession.

In part the poem says, "the poet must die, his breath could start the revolution, his thoughts could set the country ablaze, the poet must die. Ban him, house arrest him, no, send him to the island, no, place him against the wall, and call the firing

squad. but remember to wipe the blood from the wall. and break down the wall and destroy the neighbors, destroy everything, because if truth must be killed, the poet must die".

When you are banned nobody wants to talk to you. Everybody's afraid. They are afraid that this plague of censorship that you are carrying with you will be transmitted to them. And you look at them in the streets and they look away. And then you write, "When you see me again, and I see you look away, as you look at me looking at you. try to remember the nights and the days that you called and knocked at my door and you told me of your pain and your suffering and your anguish. And you do recall how I used to lift up your children and how I kissed them and smothered their mouths with my breath. And do you remember the times that you called at my house and cried about your anguish and your pain. And I held your hand and I comforted you. And now, now you look away, and I look at you looking away. I know you're afraid of contamination but who knows what tomorrow holds for the leper who walks alone" Banning is one of the most severest manners to punish people. And for me, being a very gregarious person who likes to flock and be with people, it was a severe blow. Because it was difficult for me to tell you, let other people tell you, there is a whole cult around me, and I hope that this cult has been broken, a kind of godfather cult, in politics, in the streets, in the ghetto, in poetry. When I was banned more than 30 poets wrote poems to me. And many wrote in the past tense as if I was dead, as if I didn't exist anymore. And that has been to me one of the most severest forms of punishment, human punishment I could take from another person, and the system.

Finally, what am I about? I have no hatred in my heart. For nobody. I believe that through all the years of political activity, of being banned and house arrested, compassion has become the fruit with which I live. And I think that there is no humanity in anybody, in any politician, in any academic, in any poet, in any person, when there is no compassion. There is an emptiness. And for me, there is no hatred for the white man in this country, not even for his children. And my poem "Sea and Sand", speaks of this compassion. Many whites do not like the poem because they do not understand the poem, it is a prayer. When I was eight years old I was sent to a Catholic school in Durban. And when you are good at the school, they send you to the beach, and you swim and they give you lots of buns and sweets, but the water was very restless and very tepid. And so I crossed over the board to the other side and the water was soft and the sand was soft and the sun was warm. And I played with these kids and this man came with his stick and he whipped me out of the water, at the age of eight, and he told me that this sea and this sand belonged to the white people. I must go to the other sea and the other sand that belongs to the white people. When I was twenty I wrote Sea and Sand, which is a veritable anthem in the ghetto. It is also a powerful song which I have put music to and children sing at concerts and poetry readings. It says, "Sea and sand, my love, my land, god bless Africa, but more the South of Africa where we live. Bless the angry

