

# The struggle for democracy in the 1980s: oral accounts of political activists involved in the insurrection in Grahamstown

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## 1. Introduction

As an unprecedented wave of resistance to the socio-political status quo, the 1980s mass insurrection represented a watershed in South African politics, and proved that minority rule was untenable. Much of the existing work on the subject has tended to focus on the realm of broad political economy or on the chronological train of events. In a sense, the missing guest has been the experiences of individual political activists. The aim of this article has been to explore the events surrounding the resistance in a small town in the Eastern Cape, through the accounts of five such activists. This study forms part of a broader oral history research project. In all, the stories of eleven activists were collected, and all were used as source material in the section below **General Patterns in the Grahamstown Resistance**. The five individual stories discussed best encapsulate the general themes that emerged.

## 2. Methodology

This article, based on the life histories method, seeks to explore the "restless motion" of the lives of ordinary people in an extraordinary time. This study does not hope to provide a definitive history of the region in the 1980s, but rather seeks to record and explore the accounts and perceptions of the activists themselves towards these crowded years.

In the tradition of the works of Michel Foucault, it is not sought to attempt to speak for, or name the discontents, but rather to draw attention to the nature of their struggles, and the issues around which they were mobilized<sup>1</sup>. Unless the responses of those individual activists are accounted for, any analysis of the resistance will be overly state centred, with the failed system playing the dominant role<sup>2</sup>. In contrast, this study represents an attempt to clear a space in which the activists can speak for themselves.

The underpinning epistemological assumption of this article is that of the micro foundation of social reality. The most direct empirical reality in the constitution of the social world is the individual. This empirical reality reveals itself as an experience within a specific time span, at a specific place. Individual experiences must, however, be seen against the background of a totality of experiences and are closely bound to it. As such they contribute collectively to that coherent whole of human experiences which appears to be a unity in itself. We can understand the collective, all-encompassing reality by viewing it through the contributing parts.

The five life histories used in this article therefore contribute to our understanding of the way in which a significant part of the population experienced the period of political turmoil in the Eastern Cape (and in other parts of the country) during the 1980s. This micro approach coincides with the view expressed by sociologist Georg Simmel and historian Walter Benjamin, namely that history is only possible under conditions of selection, emphasis and synthesis. It is not possible to develop a full understanding of the totality of history. Social analysis and historical reconstruction are therefore of necessity selective and largely represent designs to suit a particular programme<sup>3</sup>.

What is truly social, according to Simmel<sup>4</sup>, is the individual's passage through life and her/his interactions with others. This position underlies Simmel's "fragmentary methodology" which assumes that localised social determinations are interwoven, and that all other determining forces in society spring from this source<sup>5</sup>. This concept of "fragmentary methodology" regarding sociological analyses was echoed by Walter Benjamin, who argued that the portions of social reality could only be pieced together through a process of reconstruction. Only through detailed micro research was a proper understanding of social processes possible<sup>6</sup>. Benjamin's method seeks to "... weave a fabric out of fragments of material that have

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The authors are grateful to Canon Ezra Tisani, Makhosandile Tisani, Mzwakhe Ndlela and the eleven activists who told us their stories, for their contribution in making this project possible. The financial assistance of the Joint Research Committee (Rhodes University) is hereby acknowledged. Opinions expressed and conclusions arrived at, are those of the authors.

been transformed by the process of emphasis and omission"<sup>7</sup>.

The method employed in this article is based on the assumptions mentioned above. This method relies on the recording of the detail of individual experience and thereafter constructing a montage, an overall framework for social analysis. In this article the individual accounts are also interpreted in the light of broader issues. Documentary analysis is used to provide linkages between differing social happenings, in order to obtain as comprehensive a vision as possible. Through recording the unique experiences of a number of political activists it is possible to capture aspects of the nature of the political struggle of a large proportion of the population, as well as the issues around which they were mobilized.

### 3. Historical background

#### 3.1 Origins of the Resistance

Between 1983 and 1987, South Africa was racked by internal turmoil of a type unprecedented in the country's history. Essentially, the introduction of the Black Local Authorities system and of the Tri-Cameral Constitution unleashed a wave of resistance that was only broken by two successive States of Emergency, thousands of detentions and the militarization of white South African society. These basic facts mask the full complexity of the nature of the resistance, regional dynamics and of the myriad of organizations that arose to represent the interests of black South Africans. The revolt was initially confined to the Vaal Triangle townships. However, it spread countrywide through a combination of activism, the increasing influence of bodies such as civic associations that had sprung up in most South African centres, and the alienating nature of the state's initial attempts to curb the resistance.

It should be noted that whilst the mass insurrection of the 1980s only began in the Vaal Triangle in 1983, in the Cape the battle lines had already been drawn by the 1980 schools boycotts, the attendant violent resistance sharing many of the characteristics of the later revolt. During 1979, the Grahamstown police had assisted in the establishment of a vigilante grouping, the Peacemakers, to assist them in their tasks<sup>8</sup>. This grouping became intimately involved in the 1980 schools boycott in Grahamstown. In July 1980, over thirty school pupils were arrested, following a wave of arson and stonings directed against school property, and the businesses and homes of members of the Peacemakers<sup>9</sup>. This violence continued into October, when pupils attacked members of the vigilante grouping en route to a meeting with parents and teachers to discuss mechanisms for ending the boycott<sup>10</sup>. At the time there seems to have been considerable tension between parents and students as to the utility of the boycott<sup>11</sup>.

The 1980 schools boycott shares a number of characteristics with the mass insurrection of the mid-1980s. Firstly, originally peaceful protests soon escalated into violence<sup>12</sup>.

Secondly, the protests represented not only conflict between the community and outside authority, but also revealed deep-seated divisions within the community, between older conservative elements and the youth. Thirdly, the protests were partially crushed by means of mass detentions, a similar mechanism to what was employed in the mid-1980s. Finally, the boycott energised the student leadership and it represented the logical extension of the activism of 1976. In the 1982-1983 period, the government made a number of proposals to change the influx control system and set in motion the process towards implementing the tri-cameral system<sup>13</sup>. The "Koornhof Bills" proposed to increase the controls placed on black migrants, whilst the Black Local Authorities Act greatly increased the powers of the generally unpopular and corrupt black Community Councils into town or village councils, ostensibly similar to those operating in white areas<sup>14</sup>. The black Community Councils had been established in 1977, with intention of "co-opting a section of the urban population as agents of the state at local level"<sup>15</sup>. The Councils were forced to increase services charges owing to the collapse of the monopoly on beer sales, an incapacity of the Bantu Administration Boards to "match income with expenditure in the 1980s" and losses incurred in the provision of housing and services<sup>16</sup>. These developments provided the impetus for the launch of the UDF in August 1983, an umbrella organization of civics groupings, trade unions and student organizations.

The first signs of the 1980s insurrection reached Grahamstown in September 1984. This first major incident of "unrest" concerned neither the Tri-Cameral Constitution nor the Black Local Authorities, although these issues contributed to the reality of the everyday life of the subjects of this research. Scholars boycotted school in memory of the death in detention of black consciousness leader, Steve Biko, seven years previously. Five hundred scholars marched from Joza to Fingo Village<sup>17</sup>. At the corner of Victoria and Albert Roads, they were dispersed by police using shotguns and sjamboks. When the pupils regrouped, teargas was used<sup>18</sup>. This march was to represent a formative political experience for many of the activists who told their stories.

#### 3.2 General Patterns in the Grahamstown Resistance

A number of general patterns are apparent with regard to the insurrection in Grahamstown in the 1980s which may be of value in historically locating the life stories. Firstly, it is evident that much of the popular anger was directed against representatives of the authorities within the townships, most notably black town councillors<sup>19</sup>. The highly-focused attacks succeeded in bringing the local authorities system to its knees, although it never totally collapsed.

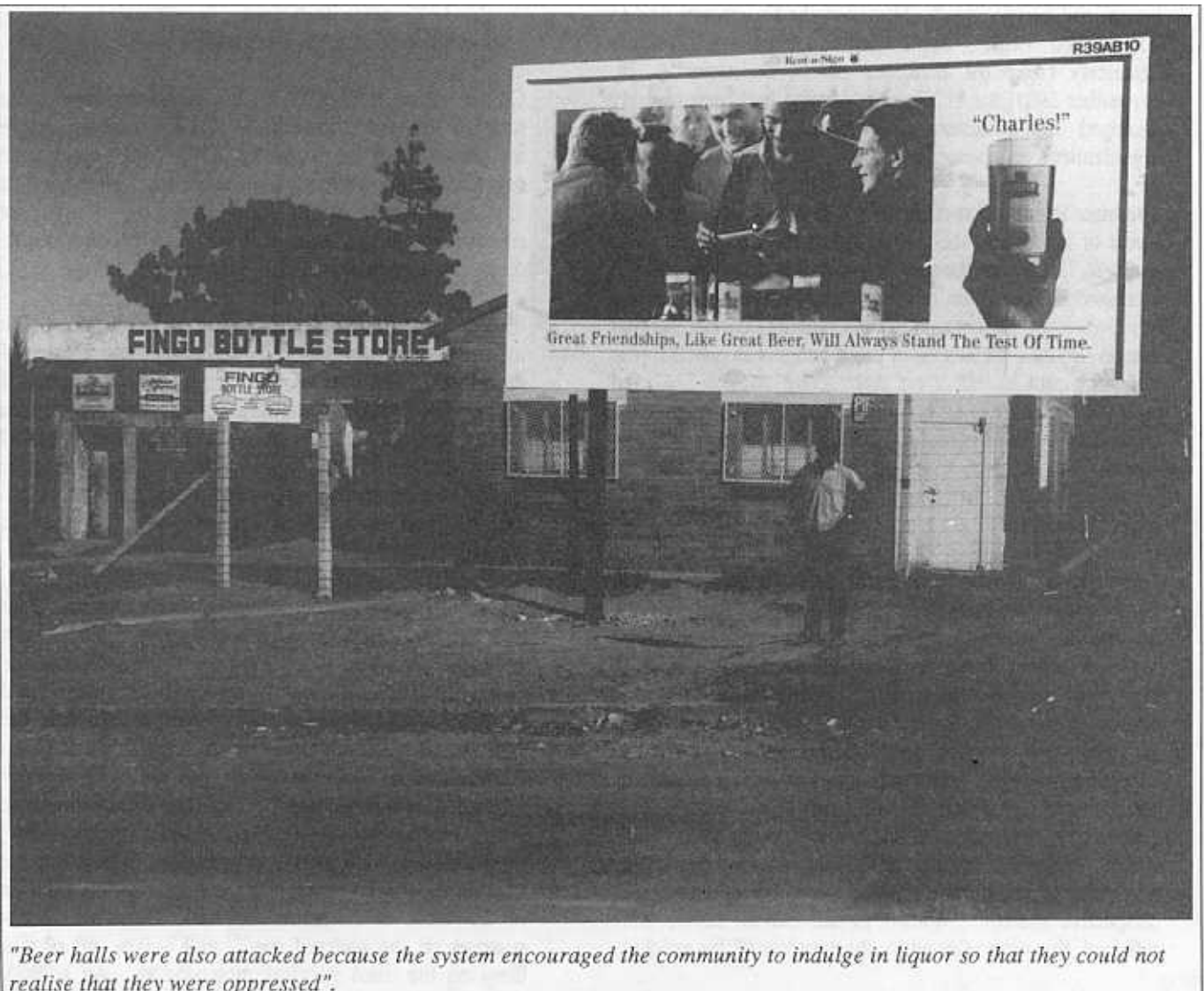
Secondly, the resistance followed coherent patterns, with the absence of authority being replaced by alternative structures, the street committees. These street committees, themselves reporting to area committees, based themselves on the principal of retaining the anonymity of street level leaders,

with detained activists being rapidly replaced, and records being kept of detainees and of those who had vanished<sup>20</sup>. More formal organization was provided by the umbrella Grahamstown Civic Association (Graca) which had originally been formed to encourage people not to vote in town council elections, but had now become involved in political education<sup>21</sup>. The life stories revealed some tensions between this organization and the street committee activists. Thirdly, the role of the security forces deserves some consideration. The police had a strongly militaristic organizational culture, a phenomenon not unique to South Africa<sup>22</sup>. The army's role seems to have been limited, and of a lower profile than the police<sup>23</sup>. Nonetheless, its presence in the townships greatly politicised its role and challenged the conventional mould of civil-military relations. By 1985, up to 35 000 South African Defence Force (SADF) troops were deployed internally to counter the disturbances<sup>24</sup>. Meanwhile, up to three-quarters of policemen were also committed to these tasks<sup>25</sup>.

The role of the South African Police (SAP) was even more contentious than that of the SADF in the 1980s. SAP riot control techniques have tended to be very heavy-handed

and seem to have learnt little from the tactics employed by European police forces<sup>26</sup>. SAP riot control techniques remained framed by perceptions of unfavourable terrain, climatic conditions and the size and aggression of opposing mobs<sup>27</sup>. Poor strategy and inappropriate equipment (shotguns, sjamboks and teargas versus specialised riot protection gear and other equipment) ensured a higher degree of casualties on both sides. In addition, young and inexperienced policemen were often placed in situations where demands were placed on them beyond their emotional capabilities and training. This led to increasingly severe responses by the police when faced with hostile mobs<sup>28</sup>. In the case of Grahamstown, this resulted in the increased use of firearms by the police and, consequently, higher casualties. In addition, these responses deepened the cleavages between established authority and its opponents.

Fourthly, the impact of the resistance on white Grahamstown needs mentioning. One of the most visible manifestations of the discontent was in the endemic stonings of vehicles on Raglan Road, which then formed part of the N2 highway<sup>29</sup>. These incidents reflected the more intense, hidden struggles in the township between



those co-opted into existing structures of authority and those seeking their demise. However, these incidents also reflected the faceless side of the rebellion and the bitter harvest of entrenched racial segregation. In return, they often triggered disproportionate responses by white civilians<sup>30</sup>.

On 21 July 1985, the First State of Emergency was declared, confined only to certain regions, including Albany (the region within which Grahamstown falls). In the first five days after the declaration, at least thirteen Grahamstown residents were detained<sup>31</sup>, with over 441 being detained countrywide<sup>32</sup>. By December 1985, 1000 people had already died in the past 18 months' "unrest" countrywide, as a result of both police action and conflict within communities<sup>33</sup>. SADF members were given wide-ranging powers of arrest, with every soldier effectively gaining the powers of a policeman<sup>34</sup>.

During March 1986, the first State of Emergency was completely lifted<sup>35</sup>. Resistance nevertheless continued in Grahamstown throughout that year, notwithstanding the declaration of a nationwide second State of Emergency on 12 June 1986. The most conspicuous evidence to the outside world was the stoning of vehicles, petrol-bombing of houses and necklacings<sup>36</sup>. However, the Emergency was to be applied with "unprecedented harshness", which ultimately broke the backbone of the resistance<sup>37</sup>. By November 1987, the UDF's organization had been severely damaged in the Eastern Cape region, with many youth organizations collapsing<sup>38</sup>.

The mass insurrection of the 1980s thus saw unprecedented levels of resistance, the partial destruction of government authority in parts of the townships, and in consequence, the increased militarization of society and unprecedented levels of repression. These broad developments conceal the real human drama - the stories of those actually involved in the resistance and its effect on their social relationships and personal outlooks. It is hoped that these stories from Grahamstown, will reveal something of the real face of the rebellion.

#### 4. The stories

There are a number of different manners in which oral history research may be presented, apart from simply reproducing interview transcripts. For a usable research report or article, however, there are two alternatives - to weave the stories into a single narrative, or present a number of distinct individual stories in turn. The latter has the advantage in that the richness of the individual experience may be preserved, yet does not preclude the possibility of identifying general trends or tendencies. This approach was selected as the most appropriate for this article. It provides a range of differing perspectives on the experience of a community, yet allows one to gain an overall perspective thereof. Whilst, in all, eleven stories were collected, five were selected for the purposes of this article.

#### 4.1 Shared Experiences and Common Themes

Although each of the five activists have their own unique story, certain common trends and themes are identifiable. Firstly, there is the process of political socialization. Against a backdrop of the reemergence of political organizations, each of the individuals became involved in localised struggles. Generally, this conscientizing process took place in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a period when a number of major schools boycotts took place in the region.

After a period of inactivity, a plethora of community organizations had emerged in the Eastern Cape.

Although organizations such as the South African Allied Workers Union (SAAWU) and the United Democratic Front (UDF) had originated outside the district, a legacy of political and workplace activism had preceded their arrival in Grahamstown. In this sense, it seems apparent that a dualistic relationship existed between individual and localised activism, and political structures. On one hand, it appears that:

"... some of the civic organizations only came after the UDF. They had been there, but were not structured or coherent in any way. So when the UDF came into being, it assisted in the formation of other civic organizations."

On the other, it is evident, that grassroots organizations such as the street committees in Grahamstown emerged independently of the rise of the UDF. Whilst national level organizations were to give a certain coherence and ideological direction to local struggles, it was mass participation in the latter, that would enable the former to mount an unprecedented challenge to the status quo.

In contrast to Subject A and Subject B, Subject C's political involvement came through NGOs and the trade union movement. However, a similar process of juxtaposition between the spontaneous emergence of grass roots structures and the rise of national level organizations, such as the UDF or individual trade unions, is apparent. Thus, whilst both trends were related, the relationship between local activism and national organization was two-way, whereby both changed and were changed by the other.

An additional dimension is the spatial one. Apartheid space had both local and regional manifestations. On the regional level, the homeland policy, and the 1981 independence of Ciskei, unleashed a range of new pressures. On the one hand, the mobilization against Ciskeian independence had a ripple effect in neighbouring South African centres such as Grahamstown. On the other, the wave of repression unleashed in that territory<sup>39</sup>, created a bleak precedent for future repressive action. On the local level, whilst the resistance centred around Grahamstown's densely-populated townships, it spilled over into the neighbouring white area in the form of consumer boycotts, stayaways, periodic stonings on the national road<sup>40</sup> and strikes, all of which drew on the mass political mobilization. An additional

spatial dimension concerns the activists themselves, their movement across the region, and the extended networks of support that sustained them, in times of both conflict and peace.

Furthermore, there is the temporal aspect. In many respects the resistance represented a cumulative affair, the later outbreaks of protest being framed by earlier experiences and the subjective interpretations thereof. Even if earlier struggles were, in objective terms, unsuccessful, they may have, in some cases, been interpreted as advances, and the basis for future collective action. In this manner, a rich culture of resistance arose.

A key component of the struggle of the 1980s was the hidden world which the activists built for themselves, a world of disguised faces and structures, and of codes. Of all the facets of the 1980s resistance, this is probably the least researched. Only through oral accounts is it possible to

piece together all its complexities.

Related to this is the issue of state repression. Of particular importance here is the state's choice and deployment of "normalising technologies" for dealing with the new dissidents. Strategies ranged from the simple disappearance of individuals, to the selective use of torture as an instrument of policy. The ultimate objective of the latter seems to have been to force detainees into becoming obedient citizens, to become collaborators, in addition to controlling and disciplining them<sup>41</sup>.

Also of importance remained the relationships between individual representatives of the status quo and the activists. A common thread through the 1980s resistance in Grahamstown were ongoing attacks on persons perceived to be collaborators<sup>42</sup>. However, such collaborators represented the product of the same communities and often were old acquaintances of the activists. It was inevitable that the



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1980s resistance represented not only an attack on the apartheid state, but also a struggle between competing interests within the community. A final issue is the effects the resistance had on the activists' lives into this decade and their retrospective assessments of the value of their contributions.

#### **Subject A: Student activist to employee in organized student affairs**

Whilst at school in Grahamstown in the late 1970s, Subject A had joined the Congress of South African Students (COSAS). He remains ambivalent about that organization, recalling both COSAS's ability to weather repeated waves of detentions, and the tendency for those in leadership positions to fail to consult with membership and be "too independent". However, it was only in 1980, in the aftermath of the schools boycotts, and following the death of a friend at the hands of the police that Subject A was actively drawn into resistance politics.

At the friend's funeral, a number of mourners, including Subject A, were detained. Whilst the circumstances surrounding his detention were somewhat arbitrary, his experiences in police custody reflected a certain consistency:

"In the evenings, the police would fetch you from the cell where you were staying with others and take you away for interrogation. Police would sometimes not take you back to your original cell after interrogation. They would sometimes tell the others that they had released you because you had co-operated. Of course they were lying."

As is apparent from the other activists' stories, it seems evident that the detention process had a number of distinct hallmarks. These included isolation from society, attempts to divide activists, and the scientific use of torture. Detention was not only intended as a deterrent to others, but to gain assert power over, and, it was hoped, to force him or her to recant of earlier beliefs. In this process, the objective of gaining information from detainees seems only to have been accorded secondary status.

After his period in detention, Subject A's school refused to readmit him as a pupil. This, and his financial independence on his brother in King William's Town, forced him to continue his schooling in that centre. Subject A went to live in Zwelitsha, one of King William's Town's black townships, which were incorporated into the Ciskei. However, he maintained contact with events in Grahamstown, revealing something of the nature of extended networks of support and contact. Resolving to become better informed, Subject A and his friends regularly met to discuss political issues. At this stage, Subject A's primary sources of information on national level debates included not only daily newspapers, but also Radio Freedom, and periodic supplies of banned literature. Following the 1985 murder of Cradock community leader Matthew Goniwe, a particularly large school boycott took

place. As a result of his involvement in the boycott, Subject A was forced to flee the Ciskeian authorities, and return to Grahamstown.

Subject A played an active role in most of the schools boycotts of the 1980s, and still believes today that they yielded impressive gains in terms of recognition for SRC's and better school facilities. He was never able to realise his objectives of becoming a teacher, but places the blame on the Bantu Education system and the discouraging attitudes of his teachers. Although it seems evident that schools boycotts yielded very mixed results<sup>43</sup>, any cost-benefit analysis of their effects is necessarily subjective.

During the 1980 school boycott, a right wing group of vigilantes, the "Peacemakers", founded by the police in 1979 "to assist them in their tasks", had intervened on the side of the authorities<sup>44</sup>. The Peacemakers actively supported the community council system, violently attacking suspected opponents thereof. Nonetheless, the community councillors, widely despised following the increases in basic service charges<sup>45</sup>, were forced to seek refuge in a fortified enclave. However, the conservative groupings still sometimes took the offensive. Following Subject A's return to Grahamstown in 1985, he was hunted by the former Peacemaker vigilantes, and his home looted.

In contrast to COSAS, Subject A believed that the UDF emerged spontaneously in Grahamstown, representing a broad coalition of well-established youth and civic organizations. Indeed, the UDF's national policy and relationship with the charterist movement initially was unclear to many in Grahamstown. Unlike COSAS, Subject A believed that decision-making within the UDF was fully democratic. His involvement in the UDF stemmed from his membership of a youth organization. It was belied that the UDF "... ensured all organizations had a role to play in what was happening".

Despite the democratic nature of the UDF and its apparent independence of the ANC, activists painstakingly began to erect a hidden world in which to pursue their political aims. Meetings were purposefully kept short, with individuals only being notified about them at the last possible moment. Certain individuals were entrusted with the task of clandestinely informing selected activists about secret get-togethers.

As part of the wave of detentions following the declaration of a second State of Emergency on 12 June 1986, Subject A was detained under section 50 of the Emergency regulations. He was to be incarcerated for almost three years. His experiences in detention were somewhat less severe than in 1980.

"The comrades who had been in detention in 1985 had fought for an improvement of conditions in detention."

It seems that this was mostly achieved by means of hunger strikes. However, Subject A's detention started with a spell in solitary confinement, where the food was especially bad and washing facilities very limited. Although he regularly faced hour-long interrogations, he was not tortured - a more subtle level of "normalising technologies" was applied, involving less use of physical violence, and a greater use of more indirect methods to humiliate or break down the individual, such as the regular denial of normal washing facilities and the frequent use of solitary confinement. Following his release, Subject A felt that he "... was in another world, a different world", and experienced considerable difficulties with normal social interaction.

Subject A believed he personally benefitted from his involvement in the struggle, through realising that:

"... nothing is static. I also realised that if people fought or struggled their situation would change. If they are honest in their struggle, they will triumph."

In the end, when pressed about the most effective form of resistance, Subject A argues that "... MK played a very important role." Whilst there is little doubt that Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) activity had considerable symbolic importance, "... it remains difficult to separate rhetoric from reality, in efforts to appreciate the size and nature thereof"<sup>46</sup>. Probably, activists such as Subject A had a greater impact, but there is little doubt that the possibility of assistance from a powerful force from outside considerably boosted their morale.

During his 1980 bout in detention, Subject A's mother died, "... the one who worried most about me." He was never able to complete his education, and at the time of the interview worked as a messenger in the offices of a university's SRC. However, he feels that his period as an activist resulted in:

"The people in my community see my role and have a certain way of looking at me. They respect me. They approach me when there are things they do not understand".

#### **Subject B: Street Committee Organizer and Activist.**

In the early 1980s, Subject B was a scholar at Nombulelo High School. He did not see himself as politically active until his brief detention by police at a commemoration service for Steve Biko, in 1984. Indeed, for the duration of the 1976 Soweto uprising, Subject B's parents had sent him to school at the more peaceful farming hamlet of Paterson, where members of his extended family lived. As was the case with Subject A, it was an arbitrary arrest that was to prove a formative experience politically. Subject B had been following a crowd of toyi-toying youths at a distance when he was arrested. At that period:

"... one could easily be taken up and beaten up and not even taken to a police station".

Subject B was taken to a house in white Grahamstown, where he was repeatedly assaulted and then released:

"As long as there was trouble in the location ... getting picked up was a high possibility. And the person picked up would pay the price for what they term trouble in the location."

Bearing the marks of a severe beating, Subject B was asked to address a political rally, and tell the audience what had happened. He was "... still a bit young", thought "... addressing a big crowd was scary", and "... was shivering before (he) got on the platform". Whilst Subject B believed

"... it was unsafe to be involved, it was not worth retreating."

It was in the area of street politics that Subject B was to become most involved. The civic movement in Grahamstown was divided, with two rival leaders both "... feeling they owned individual groups of people." When confronted with a divided civic movement seemingly imposed from above, a group of activists, including Subject B, decided to organize street and area committees. He entered a secret world, a world that involved constantly moving address, working to establish new street committees, and organizing the co-optation of individuals onto structures to replace those who had most recently been detained. Each street had a committee of ten, electing an executive for five streets. Communication between committees was by word of mouth, considerably hampered by the complexity of structures, and the fact that two entire street committees, of "Y" and "N" streets were arrested. At this stage, Subject B began to address political meetings in disguise.

Although both the Grahamstown Civic Association (GRACA) and Grahamstown Youth Congress (GRAYCO) made repeated attempts to bring the street committees under their control, Subject B and other street committee activists refused, preferring to retain some form of autonomy. Indeed, in defiance of the civics, the Grahamstown street committees organized a consumer boycott, revealing something of the discontinuity between individual actions and established organizational structures. However, contact was retained with activists from other centres involved in the organization of street committees, such as Malgas and Goniwe (prior to his assassination). Subject B believed that their contribution formed part of a larger political context.

Prior to the formation of the street committees, a major focus of violence had been between the Peacemaker vigilantes and political activists. Organized vigilante activity had declined in the early 1980s, following the death of their leader, Mr Blaai (see below). However, by the mid-1980s, tensions rapidly increased between black policemen and other residents of the townships. At this stage, there were a spate of attacks on individual policemen's houses<sup>47</sup>.

During the July 1985 to March 1986 State of Emergency, Subject B was detained again. His reputation had preceded him, and the policemen arresting him were surprised by his relative youth:

"The picture they had was of this huge guy, and they were not thinking in terms of this small boy."

Shortly after his detention, Subject B's father died. After initial promises to release him, the security police informed him that he would only be permitted to attend the funeral if he co-operated with them in future. This offer was repeated on several occasions. As was the case with Subject A, then, the process of detention involved sustained efforts to "turn" the activist.

As a result of Subject B's refusal to co-operate, he was transferred to police cells at Kenton-on-Sea (a nearby seaside resort). Here he was placed in solitary confinement and repetitively tortured, the objective seemingly being to break his morale and co-operate in future, rather than extract information per se. Detainees were regularly made to:

"... ride a helicopter, you have a broomstick, they handcuff you ...".

Again, the technologies of detention were intended as "normalising", with the objective of making the internee "willing to work" with the existing order. Seemingly as an experiment, he was briefly released in both 1986 and 1988. When the authorities discovered there "was no change" in his political beliefs and actions, he was redetained. Released in 1989, he was placed under heavy restrictions until the De Klerk reforms.

Subject B believes the political resistance contributed to P.W. Botha's loss of political power and the negotiation process:

"Those things made him (P.W. Botha) find that the country is getting out of hand and he was forced to declare a State of Emergency. After that the (struggle) continued, with people making a lot of sacrifices, to such an extent that he was to suffer a stroke and give up completely. The new person (De Klerk) realised he could not take the same trend..."

A deeply religious person, Subject B has retained his involvement in community affairs, and at the time of the interview worked as a fieldworker for the Albany Council of Churches. Like Subject A, Subject B regrets the opportunity to not have studied further, yet believes that:

"... through this type of experience, one has learnt and contributed, and sacrificed."

### Subject C: Working to Change the Field

Unlike Subject B and Subject A, Subject C was already working during 1983. His political involvement began in 1977, when he left school in standard eight. Subject C was employed as a reporter for a student group, collecting information on consumer boycotts, strikes and political campaigns. Thereafter, he worked as a fieldworker with the Surplus People's Project.

"I would say that was the one thing that gave me insight because it mean going to those areas threatened with removal. Trying to discover how people felt as they were threatened with removal, and whether they knew about the place they were moving to... I could see that people were really, really suffering in the true sense. When people were faced with the dilemma perhaps: when one had R5 and one had the choice between using the R5 to travel to town to seek work or using the R5 to buy something to eat for the family."

After leaving the Project, Subject C obtained work at St. Andrew's College, an exclusive and predominantly white private school. At about this stage, he had become involved in organizing a local workers movement, "Young Christian Workers". They would

"... start off with small situations to mobilise the workers before we went on to attack the larger ones".

After a period of mobilization at St. Andrew's, the workers asked permission to form a workers committee.

"It would only be formed up by the workers and address worker issues within St. Andrew's. But we as workers knew that I would be reporting back to my group in the location after work."

However, individual committee members proved extremely vulnerable to management pressure, and a decision was made to link up with the South African Allied Workers Union (SAAWU). Against the backdrop of rising political resistance in the townships, the small group of unionists at St. Andrew's began to mobilize workers in surrounding factories and at the University. Subject C believed that:

"... radical changes needed to be made within the structure that would accommodate the plight (of the poor)."

During the wave of repression during the mid 1980s, Subject C's house was ransacked by police while he was at work.

"They didn't actually find anything, but it gave me an indication that one day my time would come."



His time came in July 1986. On his way to work, he was detained by two policemen, one of them a black policeman known to him. Subject C was detained for over a year, although he was never informed as to under which legal provision he was being held. He was given no access to his family during his time in detention. Although he was never tortured, he was on one occasion assaulted by a young white policeman for smiling at an inopportune moment. On numerous occasions, he was forced to write a statement, which was then torn up when it failed to reveal any involvement in a conspiracy to stir up the youth.

Subject C's employers continued to pay his salary whilst he was in detention. His apparent wealth and a personality clash with a fellow-detainee, an older, ex-Robben Islander, led to accusations that he was an informer. He began to fear his release, because of a possible adverse reception in his community. Finally, Subject C could no longer cope. Convinced that he was mad, the authorities placed him under medical care for the last two months of his detention. Following his release, he confessed:

"I could not bear seeing people next to my home. Because every time I saw people standing next to my home, I had this feeling that these people had perhaps come to kill me, because they had heard this information from prison and they had now come to act upon it. This was a very difficult period for me."

Over the following year, Subject C managed to clear his name, whilst working for two different NGO's. He has no regrets about his decision to become involved in worker organization, despite the trauma of his detention.

#### **Subject D: Youth Congress Activist and Street Warrior**

Subject D completed his primary schooling in Grahamstown, completing one year of his secondary education at Peddie, in the neighbouring Ciskei homeland. He then, on the request of his sister, who was married to a Zulu in Durban, completed his secondary education in that centre. Subject D found the Durban environment somewhat different to the Eastern Cape one:

"They (the Zulus) are more attached to their custom and they regard themselves as the tribe ... you might find yourself in a difficult position. They offend the other tribes"

Subject D's political involvement began when he was still in junior school in Grahamstown when he participated in a 1977 schools boycott. This was during the post-Soweto wave of repression, necessitating underground meetings, not only within Grahamstown, but with individuals from other centres. These meetings:

"... gave us direction, and reading material and also to debate some of the political issues ... I became politically aware since then."

The school Subject D was at, Ntsika School had something of a reputation as a centre of activism, being "very notorious". The activists behind many of the initiatives at the time were Ntsika students. Thus, organization remained a covert business, with no backing from an established organization. Rather, it was on the basis of activism by a group of individuals at a single school that later, more formal organizations were built.

Subject D was personally involved in a number of clashes with the riot squad, which was perceived as "... most vicious and brutal" in contrast to the SADF and normal police. Subject D describes the confrontations as "... stones against a bullet". Again, the heavy handed responses of the authorities hardened attitudes and confirmed his militancy.

Subject D was briefly detained by police, but was soon released on account of his age. During this period a personal friend of his was shot whilst attending a funeral in Port Elizabeth.

In contrast, in Durban there "... were no strong organization", despite the emergence of a vigorous trade union movement in that centre. The only overt political activity Subject D came into contact with during his stay in that centre was a confrontation between police and youth from the Kwa-Mashu and Lamontville townships and a single strike at a school. However, according to Subject D, there were covert "armed structures" all over Natal, although he had little contact with these groupings. His movements shed some light on the nature of regional variations in political culture. In Grahamstown, a series of schools boycotts took place in the late 1970s and early 1980s, backed up by a vigorous informal organization. The situation in Natal was partially framed by deeply-entrenched notions of ethnicity. There was less overt political resistance, although even here there were signs of discontent, both in the emergence of the independent unions, and the shadowy "armed structures" that had emerged.

After matriculating in Durban and then working for one year in his brother-in-law's business, Subject D returned to Grahamstown in 1984. He automatically joined the Grahamstown Youth Congress, which had recently emerged. He differs from many of the other activists in that he slotted into already existing organizational structures, a move made possible by his earlier political activities. Subject D believes that the Grahamstown Youth Congress was established to mobilise those of the "youth" who had completed their formal education, and thus could no longer be members of COSAS. The Youth Congress was to become involved on a door-to-door campaign informing people about the formation and rise of the UDF. Subject D soon became a leading activist, which contributed to him being unable to find employment:

"It was terrible because it was not easy to get a job at that time. We were all on the run. For instance, at this time we were not sleeping at our

places. It would have been an unstrategic thing to do at that time because you had to find your own place to sleep."

Although unemployed, he also did voluntary work for the UDF-affiliated South African Allied Workers' Union (SAAWU). On 25th May 1985, his parents' house was firebombed, at a time when he was at their house. The bomb was a relatively sophisticated one and Subject D has little doubt it was the work of the police. He was injured during the bombing, whilst his female companion was burnt to death. Subject D and his parents were constantly harassed by the police following the attack. His involvement in SAAWU was abruptly ended when that union's offices were firebombed, severely disrupting union organization. He played a limited role in the rebuilding of SAAWU's activities in Grahamstown. Thus, with the exception of his involvement in 1977, Subject D's story is somewhat different to those of many of other activists who told their stories, in that he joined organizational structures that were already in existence, as adverse to being involved in their formation.

Furthermore, Subject D's story introduced an additional spatial dimension. This concerned the attempt to establish "no go" areas to the authorities in Grahamstown.

"The purpose of that thing was to cultivate or to create conducive conditions for the MK members. Because, if for instance, we manage to create 'no go' areas that area would be safe. There must definitely be no informers therefore MK cadres might use that place as a free zone."

This strategy was never totally successful owing to the lack of "real slum areas", Subject D argued. However, the area around "I" Street became famous for "troublesome activities". Indeed, several armed battles took place with the police in this area. Mostly, the activists used R4 and R5 assault rifles stolen from members of the security forces, and, in particular, from the notoriously poorly-trained "kitskonstabels" (police auxiliaries).

Again, there are indications of the resistance being a cumulative affair. Police brutalities fuelled militancy, whilst the increased organizational activity empowered individuals with greater confidence - confidence "... not to fear, to shout the name of the African National Congress". Street committee structures mushroomed. Although the UDF supported this initiative, it is evident from Subject D's story that they were in fact a semi-spontaneous grass-roots initiative. He argues that the UDF was only a front "to rally people" and work for the unbanning of the ANC. State legislative measures such as the hated "Koorhof Bills" assisted in the process of conscientising individuals to the process of injustice, and greatly facilitated the mobilization of people around subsequent issues and campaigns.

Subject D was intimately involved in the organization of the Grahamstown consumer boycott. This boycott had rather

mixed results, as many black shopkeepers took advantage of the situation to raise prices, despite pressures from the community. However, these shopkeepers never became identified with a conservative grouping. The earlier Peacemaker vigilantes had, in fact, disintegrated following the execution of their leader, Mr. Blaai, by students in late 1980. Ironically, Subject D's own father was a policeman. He felt that his father had no problems in the community.

"We were not against individuals".

Even then there was:

"... a shift in the balance of forces (in the police) taking place ... we cannot blame some of them...who were forced by the conditions to work for the police."

Although, by 1985, all members of the police, Subject D noted, had become widely disliked in the community.

After the firebombing of his parent's house, Subject D retreated into deep hiding. Nonetheless, the authorities were able to track his movements through a sophisticated network of informers, whose task it was to report on the movements of known activists between defined areas in the township. Subject D was able to discover something of this network from informers the activists themselves had within the security establishment. He refused to divulge additional information, as "even now" it was unwise. Despite this knowledge, during 1985 "... the people (including Subject D) were taken straight to gaol". Subject D was charged with arson and attempted murder. He managed to escape during his first court appearance, but was, however, recaptured some months later. Found not guilty, he was then detained and moved to police cells in Kenton-On-Sea and then prison in Port Elizabeth.

Subject D's four months in Kenton were in solitary confinement.

"I should say after that detention, when I was speaking, I was stammering a little bit. Secondly, during the course of the night I was sweating and I was experiencing some nightmares. I did undergo such things. Anxiety: becoming frightened over something you don't know."

He found conditions in gaol in Port Elizabeth "appalling". Soon after his arrival there were a number of violent clashes between white and coloured (of mixed racial origin) warders, and black detainees. Over time, however, the detainees managed to overcome some of the warders' mistrust. In addition, there was little torture,

"... because it was very difficult for them to do it because there was lots of pressure".

It should be noted that there had been earlier public revelations of mistreatment of detainees in the relevant prison.

Subject D believes that his political involvement sharpened his thinking. Although some of his relatives opposed his involvement

"... they were able to adapt. (The resistance enabled) ... all to taste the democratic process."

#### **Subject E: Economic Migrant to Activist**

For economic reason, Subject E was sent to relatives in Cape Town for most of his school years. Although technically an "illegal" in terms of the influx control system, he managed to obtain admission to a school in Langa. His first exposure to political resistance came in Cape Town during 1976:

"... we had those running battles with the police in the street. There was something novel about that, being part of the people throwing stones, running, battles and so on. I would say that also had some influence on me, but, as I said, my thoughts were not organized in any way. It was just spontaneous."

Returning to Grahamstown, Subject E completed his matric in 1978. In 1980, he enrolled at the University of Fort Hare. Forced to leave as the result of a strike, he worked for a year prior to enrolling at the University of Zululand. He was expelled in 1984 for becoming involved in a strike at that University.

What happened was

"... a very difficult situation, a very traumatic situation, which, I think, also shaped by political thinking."

Subject E had become a member of AZASO, initially a black consciousness organization, which had gradually shifted to a charterist position. AZASO was technically not allowed on campus. However, a group of students had begun to establish a branch on campus, as well as pressing for a democratically-elected SRC. Subject E became involved in the establishment of a rugby club. Members not only played rugby with teams from other universities, but also made use of the opportunity to hold political discussions after matches.

During late 1984, Inkatha had begun organizing a rally. As previous Inkatha gatherings had been marked by violence directed against non-Inkatha members, attempts were made to stop the rally through a court order. However, these attempts proved unsuccessful. Indeed, the meeting was marked by violent attacks on those who did not support Inkatha. This resulted in further conflict and a boycott, forcing him to leave. Subject E then moved to a teaching

post in the Ciskei. However, after a year, he was forced to flee that homeland on account of his involvement in attempts to unionise Ciskei teachers.

In 1986, he briefly enrolled at Vista University in Port Elizabeth, but soon had to leave again as a result of yet another strike. His experiences of these different universities and his forced movements between them represented a formative political experience. By the time of his return to Grahamstown, Subject E was a seasoned political activist, ready to assume a central position in the struggle in that centre.

By 1986, Grahamstown had already become a major centre of resistance. Subject E was struck by the unwillingness of residents to accept the authority of the community councillors, as well as the street committee system. Although the street committees were designed to weather repression, Subject E was of the opinion that:

"People were not aware the regime was about to clamp down on them. It was only when the street committee was arrested and taken to gaol that people became scared."

Following the declaration of the second State of Emergency, most of the street committee leaders were arrested. However, by this stage the consumer boycott had been instituted, a boycott which Subject E played a central role in organizing. The authorities periodically issued false pamphlets, claiming the boycott had been called off. However, Subject E and a number of fellow activists were able to issue counter-pamphlets, most of which were illegally duplicated at schools. Unprecedented levels of repression forced him and his fellows deeper into the hidden world (there were about twenty key activists in Grahamstown who had managed to elude arrest).

"... it became quite risky even to attend those clandestine meetings. Hence we devised a way. If we were going to a meeting we would have a check point. We would not say we were meeting in so-and-so's house. We would simply say so-and-so's house would be a check point and people would go and check there. They would then be told where to go ... even in that meeting situation we would always be sure that there was somebody outside looking, watching for the police, security, informers".

Subject E not only feared arrest by the authorities. Some of the youth had begun to take unacceptably violent measures against those who were caught breaking the boycott. Subject E and his committee had to remonstrate with these youths:

"It was really getting out of hand. We had no option but to call all those youth into a meeting and address them. It was quite a risky situation because they were quite dangerous as well. They

would ignore us completely because they were also armed."

Although he had on one occasion been picked up in a police swoop, he was not identified and was thus released. At this stage, only a few leaders had managed to evade arrest. In addition to normal work of political mobilization, they were called on to mediate in disputes, as well as assist in the organization of the funerals of victims of police action:

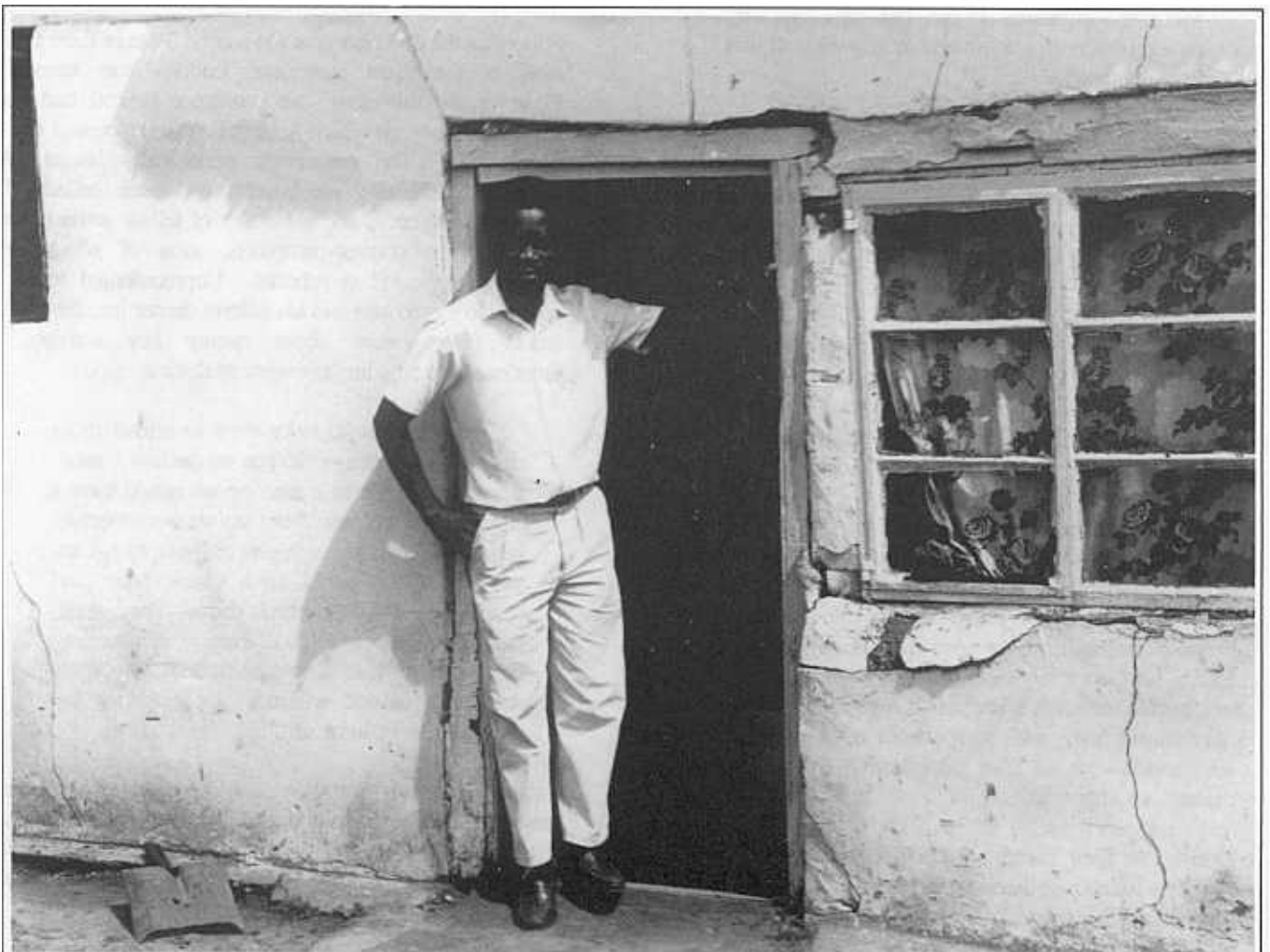
"There were no clearly defined areas of work that show a person is actually doing something. So one had to respond to everything that was coming up ... sometimes even things they regarded as personal things. If a neighbour fights another neighbour, people would come to us and ask us to resolve it, things that I really think could be resolved at that level ... at that stage people looked at us for guidance. If there was somebody who was shot and killed they knew we would come in and we would immediately mobilise funds to support them ... and actually run everything."

It was only in December 1986 that Subject E was detained by the authorities. On the day prior to his arrest, a number of comrades had been arrested. At 5 a.m. the following morning, he found the house he was staying in was surrounded by the police and the army. Subject E was then taken to the Kenton-on-Sea (a nearby seaside resort) police station. He would spend four months in solitary confinement in police cells.

During this period he was regularly interrogated:

"So you lived in constant fear - you did not know when they would come. They could come in the evening, they could come in the morning, they could come anytime. And you knew that some of the people who were detained before you were also assaulted in trying to extract information. So you lived in constant fear - of not knowing when they are going to come for you."

He was then transferred to St. Alban's prison in Port Elizabeth. He would remain there until April 1988. He



*"Yes, I remember very vividly my arrest on the 9th December 1986. When I woke up I just heard footsteps and somebody knocking on the door. Then when I looked outside, I saw that the whole house was surrounded by police, security, SADF and the peace was just invaded. Then I knew that they have come for me".*

vividly remembers the crowded nature of the cells, and the poor sleeping conditions. Prisoners were given mats to sleep on, on a concrete floor. They were not issued with sheets, but a number of filthy blankets.

Subject E resolved to complete his studies, and enrolled at a correspondence university, UNISA. He would complete his degree through that body. In addition, political discussions were held in prison. A number of detainees had earlier been prisoners on Robben Island, where they "... got theoretical orientation", being taught by prisoners such as Harry Gwala.

In addition, "... very sharp" debates were held between those who believed "... strongly in nationalism and were opposed to communism" and those who were committed communists. Several children, some as young as eight, were detained in neighbouring cells.

"They were not as matured as us and could not take detention."

Following his release, Subject E obtained employment as a tutor at SACHED, an NGO primarily focusing on the provision of bridging education. At the time of the research he was still working as a fieldworker for that body. Subject E believes that his spell in detention strengthened him as a person:

"I don't know of a single person that come out of prison disappointed or despondent. It is true it is not a place where you can say you were on holiday. On the other hand, there is another dimension: that of political growth and intellectual growth that people experience there. You feel that it exposes you to different people, how people interpret things. Actually, prisons and places of detention have been used to enrich people politically ... and I know it has happened that way to many other people ... the struggle has made me a much more disciplined person, much more responsible than I was before."

## 5. Conclusion

Involved in a number of different organizations, the stories of the five activists reveal many facets of the resistance in the 1980s. These include the relationship between grassroots initiatives, and regional and national organizations, the social effects of a decade of resistance and repression, and the practical implications of shifting state strategies. Whilst regional and national groupings served as important agents for mobilization and change, it is evident that much of the drive for change came from below, in the form of semi-autonomous initiatives such as Subject B's street committees and Subject C's Young Christian Workers. Although they may have at times clashed as well as co-operated with more formal structures, such initiatives provided the basis for much of the sustained resistance through the 1980s.

The resistance in the 1980s did not only involve conflict with the authorities, but also within communities, between the activists and more conservative elements. Initially, the most prominent representative of the latter were the Peacemaker vigilante grouping. However, popular anger soon focused on community councillors, policemen and suspected collaborators. The community councillors had become particularly disliked following the increase in service charges, growing administrative inefficiency, the collapse of the beer monopoly and losses incurred in the provision of housing and services<sup>48</sup>. Indeed, a major focus of violent resistance involved attacks on the houses of community councillors and policemen. Ultimately, many were forced to leave the communities they were drawn from. Equally under threat were informers and collaborators. Even an activist with impeccable credentials, such as Subject C, had to fear for his personal safety, following the merest suspicion of co-operation with the authorities.

By the mid-1980s, the state increasingly made use of long-term detentions as a means of re-imposing social control. All five activists were to suffer long periods of imprisonment. Whilst experiences varied, all faced constant pressure to recant their political beliefs and to fully co-operate with the authorities in future. It seems that torture was regularly used as an instrument of policy, intended not so much as to extract information, but as punishment and to ensure such co-operation.

The lives of all five activists were irrevocably changed by their decisions to actively engage in the process of mobilization and protest. None of the activists have any regrets about their involvement in the mass resistance of the 1980s, although in all cases a heavy price was paid, financially, educationally, and emotionally, in coping with long periods of imprisonment and persecution for their beliefs. Ultimately, as one of the activists remarked:

"The way people and organizations have dedicated themselves to the struggle ... gives me hope that we will be able to enjoy our freedoms."

## ENDNOTES

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