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Passion for Freedom: An Interview with Jean Weir

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So, how is it that you found yourself arrested on September 19, 1994, with four other anarchists (Antonio Budini, Christos Stratigopoulos, Eva Tziutzia and Carlo Tesseri) and accused of an armed robbery at the rural bank of Rovereto (Serravalle), Italy? How did your life evolve to lead to this situation?

How did I find myself arrested that day of September 19, 1994? Well, it obviously wasn't 'the perfect crime' ... a couple of local people saw some guys jump over a fence into the forest in the Chizzola mountains; a massive 'manhunt' ensued, and within a few hours everybody was rounded up. But I don't think that's what you mean. You ask me how my life had evolved leading up to that moment. I'll try to answer that question, which seems to imply that this was some kind of climax that my life had been heading towards. Actually it's not like that. If things had gone differently and we hadn't been caught, no one would ever have known about the event. It would simply have been 'a day in the life' of a few anarchist comrades.

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I don't think that there's anything exceptional about anarchists deciding to take back some of what has been stolen from us all – we have to face the problem of survival like all the other dispossessed and moreover we are not prepared to simply 'survive' but want to go beyond the limitations of poverty and act on reality. Some comrades believe that expropriation will be a mass event where all the exploited will act together one great day, others are not prepared to wait to infinity for that to happen, or to spend the whole of their lives being exploited or participating in the exploitation of others.

Looking back in time, what was exceptional was the fact of having comrades with whom it was possible to discuss anything and possibly act together as a result. I say exceptional, although at that time it was normal. This deepened knowledge of one another (and oneself) is the fruit of being in a common struggle – demos, meetings, discussions, actions, etc. – in the dimension of an informal anarchist movement. Relations between comrades deepen, one gains real knowledge of one another, not just our goals but the way we are as individuals, the way we react, our strengths and weaknesses. From there I think it is natural for comrades who know and trust each other to go into certain questions more deeply and decide to experiment in order to push their struggle forward and open up new possibilities in whatever field. For anarchists the absence of hierarchy also concerns action. When carried out in a projectual dimension with a real tension towards freedom, the validity of any one kind of action depends on the existence of all the others.

The media and the Italian State whipped themselves into a frenzy over the trial, but how was your experience of the solidarity from other anarchists and rebels during the legal process and during your prison sentence?

Actually, the thing developed into two trials...no three. First there was the trial for the robbery in question, then we were accused of two other robberies in the area, so that led to a second one (which went on for many months), during which the *pen-tita* ('repentant terrorist') matured, leading to the infamous Marini

I think that this concept is strange to anarchists in general. Anarchists are judged by other comrades according to what they say and do, and the coherence between these two factors – not through diatribes about their personal, real or invented, attributes as practised by organisations that rely on charismatic leaders and such like as came about in Russia following the Bolshevik takeover. If anything, it's the other way around. Personal attacks exist at times that take the place of actual critique of the methods exposed by certain comrades when some sectors of the movement find their status quo threatened by these methods. That is easier than attacking the ideas themselves and opposing them with others that might be more effective, who knows. But, as I said, this is not a true characteristic of anarchists who by their very existence deny the concept of leader and at the same time exalt the individual, each and every individual, in the dimension of equality.

Trial.1 The local media did go into a frenzy immediately following the Serravalle (near Rovereto) robbery: all of the elements of the media cocktail 'terrorist scare' were there; foreigners, anarchists, guns, robbery, etc... But that was nothing compared to what was to happen subsequently, at the national level.

The reaction of the anarchists of Rovereto and the surrounding area was immediate and unconditional. Their solidarity was passionate and also ludic at times. They claimed the identity of the arrested comrades, defending our identity as anarchists within an articulate denunciation of the role of the banks and the validity of robbing them, through posters, leaflets, demos, public meetings etc.

Shortly after our arrest, the anarchist fortnightly *Canenero*² was born. I think it is fair to say that, although it might have come out at some later date, for various reasons our arrest was a catalyst in its appearance then. Its eagerly awaited pages and knowledge that comrades very close to me were working day and night to bring it out was a brilliant light that illuminated that initial period in jail. So many other things happened, it's hard to put everything down on paper. Right from the start anarchists came from all over Italy for the trials, the courtroom was always full and sometimes there were too many comrades for everybody to get inside.

I remember the huge *Baci* (kisses) and encircled 'A' that appeared written in lipstick on a window overlooking the court after those who hadn't been allowed in occupied a building opposite and sent their greetings down from above... the news that over 150 cash points in the area had been glued, resulting in one of the banks withdrawing their claim for damages... the banner conveying birthday greetings unfurled in court when one of the hearings coincided with my birthday...

Flares and fireworks were set off against Trento prison during one of the hearings in the town court, resulting in a number of comrades getting expulsion orders from the area. While I was being held in the maximum security prison of Vicenza, a terrible dump,

particularly the women's section, comrades hired a coach and did an impromptu demo with flares, banners and paint-bombs at New Year, an action that wasn't without risk because Vicenza was in close proximity to the American NATO base. I learned when I got out that everyone had a good time and went on to party throughout the night somewhere in the mountains. Next day a police helicopter appeared in the women's exercise yard, and remained there until the day I was transferred to Opera prison in Milan. That demonstration of love and solidarity was a contribution to getting me thrown out of a disgusting place without any ingratiating 'letters to prison governor' or such like.

These are some of the moments that stand out in my mind concerning the initial period. Later, following the invention of a 'repentant' 'ex-militant' of an invented armed gang that we were all supposed to belong to, many comrades were arrested or went into hiding to carry on the struggle. I know that many of the remaining comrades debated intensely to agree and decide what to do, but I don't know as much about that period as I do about the preceding one.

Reading your questions has taken me back to these not so far off times, and remembering the solidarity fills me with an immense glow. It was amazing. Only someone who has lived through similar moments can understand what I am talking about, and as you can see, I can't squeeze the answer to this question into just a few lines, even although anything I mention is only a tiny part of what comrades were doing day after day, for years.

An anarchist defence committee that had been formed earlier became extremely active in finding lawyers, coordinating contributions from benefit gigs, etc., and sending out regular news of the whole situation, which was to develop into a complex repressive attack against a large part of the anarchist movement...

The comrade who sent the money-orders was accused of being 'treasurer' of the phantom clandestine organization invented by public prosecutor Marini along with the *Carabinieri* special forces,

of attack. At the same time, there is a critique of the clandestine organization and 'attack at the heart of the State' that was quite prevalent in the 70s, particularly in Italy. Most of these organisations were of a Marxist-Leninist matrix, but some anarchists tried to do the impossible by forming an 'anarchist' version that ended up falling into the contradictions of any fixed clandestine set-up. And I do believe that many anarchists at that time felt considerable pressure upon them to form some such organisation in order to be 'in the reality of the struggle'. The theories we are talking about valorise the formation of small groups not weighed down by ideological preconceptions, acting directly on reality without any sense of sacrifice but for their own immediate pleasure and freedom, in the context of the freedom of all.

Another essential component in the writings we are discussing is that of analysis of the profound changes that have taken place in the past three or four decades and have affected the way exploitation functions throughout the whole world and the struggle against it. The 'new technologies' that many young comrades experience as normality today actually changed the way the world is run.

The whole productive set-up, including that of food, the extraction of fuel etc. moved from Europe to Asia and the East, following a massive project of restructuring that was met with rebellion that almost reached the point of generalised insurrection in some countries. This was followed by a complete change in educational requirements by the system, and an extensive cultural flattening in favour of infinite chains of data that take us nowhere.

It should also be said that, once certain texts existed in English, alas the language of the new world order, they have been translated into their own language by anarchists in other parts of the world who have seen something interesting in them, and that is one of the things that has given me most pleasure in the whole endeavour.

A quick word on the concept of 'cult of personality', as you brought it up.

tain level of clarity. Tensions that we already feel burning inside us become clearer, making it easier to gather and assimilate them in order to act. So, the text takes on its own life, makes its journey within the context of the struggle, contributes to giving the comrades that so desire it an instrument for recognising and valorising their own ideas and dreams, turning them into a point of strength in life and in the struggle. The text then becomes both a subjective encounter and a physical 'thing', which in the vicissitudes of its journey throughout social and ideal space, becomes an element in creating informal relations between individual comrades. As well as that, we all need analysis – for example of the economy, the new technologies, the changing faces of power and the struggle, new enemies and false friends. And, let's face it, many of us are lazy or lack method when it comes to gaining knowledge. Without ideas, analyses and projectuality we are nothing, mere abstractions, building castles in the air, the hot air of formal structures and their organisational obsessions. The structure of the Italian language, and these texts in particular, is quite different to the English language of 'pirates and shopkeepers'; it always takes me a long time to get them readable to a certain degree, and to follow the argument through. It's quite a journey, particularly as these comrades, Alfredo and the others I have translated, are my comrades in struggle, we lived through the experience of these ideas in practice, they come from the development of the movement over the past few decades. I believe that these particular ideas, or theories, are an important contribution to the struggle today because they come from the part of the movement that doesn't refer to any fixed organisation or formal structure and wants to attack oppression in all its forms directly.

In fact, attack and the theory of attack – which is the same thing for anarchists – are the essential element of the informal movement, without which it would exist in name alone. So, there is also a strong element of critique in these writings, a critique of the fixed anarchist organisation such as syndicalism or the federation that relies on numbers, as being limiting and anachronistic in terms

and a warrant was issued for his arrest. The comrade who bore the brunt of the committee's activity was accused of counterfeiting an internal police note that was sent to Radio Blackout in Turin. Both were subsequently acquitted or had charges dropped.

Throughout the various repressive phases thousands of posters were printed and flyposted in all the major towns and cities, and also in many small villages – wherever there were anarchists who wanted to show their solidarity.

From being a straightforward question of a few comrades 'caught in the act' about which there is little to be said, the thing had evolved into about 60 anarchists being accused of belonging to a clandestine organisation, insurrection against the State, etc., with charges that carried multiple life sentences.

Everything stood on the 'confessions' of the twenty-year-old girlfriend of Carlo, one of my co-arrestees, who had been singled out by the R.O.S. (*Reparto Operazioni Speciali* / Special Operations Group) as potentially being someone young and impressionable that could be scared into collaborating with the police and judiciary.

She announced that she was an 'ex-member' of the 'gang', and had participated in one of the robberies in the Trento area. The way the story emerged was so absurd it was almost laughable, but things began to get quite serious – there were hundreds of raids all over Italy and many comrades ended up in prison, some went on hunger strike and were released. There was a wide denunciation of this frame-up against anarchists which had now become a main news item: endless meetings, attacks on the press, the entrances to underground stations glued on the first day of the Marini trial, demos, itinerant exhibitions, etc. etc.

Over and above the arrests, there was a total distortion of anarchist methods, and tens of thousands of pamphlets were printed and distributed all over the country denouncing this. Many actions took place, and leaflets and posters were now being drawn up at national level, following countless meetings with groups and in-

dividuals from all over the country. There were regular interventions on free radios. Actions of solidarity also took place in Germany, Greece and Spain. A German comrade brought out a bilingual paper, translated many Italian texts – theoretical texts I mean, not related to the repression and organised benefits and meetings. She was also very close to me throughout the years I was inside in many ways. I also received many letters, telegrams, cards, conveying good wishes, passion, colour, solidarity from comrades in many countries, including the UK.

Can you tell us about your experience of prison and the conditions, opportunities for rebellion, etc? How was your relationship with the other prisoners?

Another big story... where to begin? Well, for a start, I wasn't in just one, but seven prisons over these years, and spent much of the time being shunted up and down handcuffed in a prison van between Milan and Trentino, squinting through the pinholes in the metal windows to catch a glimpse of the mountains or the orchards in bloom, as the trial in Trento ran its perverted course. The conditions in each of these prisons were fairly specific and varied immensely. But there are some factors that are peculiar to all women's prisons – they are a lot smaller than men's, and often have far fewer facilities, sometimes to the point of zero, for educational or recreational needs.

The first thing that struck and annoyed me was that I was alone, I mean, I was held separate from my comrades, who for much of the time were sharing a cell, so had ample opportunity to talk, laugh and generally face the situation together. Eva and I were kept apart, and fortunately she was released a month or so after our arrest. I'd been in similar situations before, so I knew the score and mustered my strength. The solidarity from outside that I have mentioned at length certainly nourished that strength, but there were many things going on within and around you that you would have liked to discuss with your own comrades, and that was impossible. I mean, even concerning some of the trivia in prison – or

in Comiso for that purpose and referred to as the *Coordinamento* for the self-managed leagues against the Cruise missile base in Comiso. And these were the people who really had the power to destroy the base – with their workmates, neighbours, families, farm animals, tractors, diggers, etc. That was the dream.

But, apart from the repression pure and simple, there was a combination of obstacles, including the local mafia, two masked individuals who burst in on us with guns one night and fired a shot that went through Alfredo's trouser-leg. Then there was the Communist Party, always acting as fire extinguishers as is their role – and, last, but not least, the anarchist movement itself and our own limitations. It's not possible to go into all the details of this struggle now, but looking back in time, I think that some record should be made of this attempt as it was a very real experience that had a strong experimental and theoretical aspect, so belongs to everybody.

The publishing project you are involved in – Elephant Editions – is well known for being the main translator of Alfredo Maria Bonanno and other 'insurrectional' anarchists, whilst we don't want to add to or create a cult of personality, can you explain why the ideas of Alfredo, and the other writers you publish, are important for the struggle to overthrow the conditions which oppress us?

In the first place, we are talking about ideas, quite rare merchandise these days. Ideas with a subversive charge, which encounter and stimulate other ideas that take us out of the swamp of opinion and tolerance and help us to reach the lucidity necessary to act upon and transform the reality that oppresses us. I should say that I have never approached any of the texts that I've translated and subsequently published other than with the purely selfish intention of wanting to enter the discourse and clarify some ideas myself. When eventually (after a long struggle) the text becomes something tangible in English, I want others to read it too. For (some) people reading such texts becomes an encounter, a level of self-discovery derived from seeing ideas set out in the written word with a cer-

cided to distinguish themselves from this circus and act in a protracted struggle in the logic of mass rebellion. The essence of anarchist struggle is in the means, not the end.

We drew up leaflets analysing the reasons, not only military but also social and economic, as to why the only serious answer to this project of death was to occupy the base and destroy it, and printed thousands of them on an old hand-operated *Roneo* duplicator using stencils that some comrades from Class War had given us in England. Nobody had any money to speak of and everything was improvised as we went along. We managed to assemble a sound system, and travelled, doing – usually Alfredo – very strong, unequivocal outdoor talks in the *piazze* of the neighbouring villages, which were attended by most of the male population of each place. We also did leaflets specifically addressed to women and went around the living areas handing them out and having impromptu *capanneli* with some of them. We did leaflets addressed to the workers at the Anic petrol refinery (who refused to go into work until we were released when the *Digos* – political cops – pulled us in), and to school students, handing them out outside all the schools. Some of the pupils refused to go in for a day as a result, and held a spontaneous demo that filled one of the *piazze*. It was here that I began to see how power actually works at local level: the leader of the Communist Party came knocking at our door, proposing that we ‘work together’. Needless to say, he was given short shrift. By this time some people had lent us a little old house, as many of us lived over 60 miles away. The meetings and leafleting, posters, etc. had led to some people from different areas and walks of life – pupils, lorry drivers, farm workers, etc., agreeing on the need to destroy the base, and they formed minimal ‘base organisations’ that they called leagues for lack of a better word. These leagues, which often consisted of two or three people but had the potential to expand and multiply as the struggle intensified, began to need a place as a point of reference and coordination, i.e. to have meetings, draw up and print leaflets etc. A small place was rented

rather everything is trivia, but can be heavy at times. Reverberations from the proverbial ‘butterfly’s wing’ can do full circle at any instant, like an iron boomerang and even one’s thoughts seem to take on (or perhaps they have it anyway) a solid capacity to act on reality.

I think that simply staying alive, holding to one’s individuality and keeping one’s spirits – and head – high is in itself a form of rebellion in the context of an institution that is deliberately built to put people down and humiliate them. Things were very different then compared to what they had been in the 70s and 80s in Italy when there were thousands of comrades in prison, often held in custom-built maximum security prisons. Rebellion was a constant, a necessity and a continuation of the struggle outside, almost taking the place of it before the reformist about-turn of many of the Marxist-Leninist leaders set in.

Today, especially if you are a woman, you might be very few in number, inside for any one of a whole variety of reasons (better – anarchists don’t declare themselves political prisoners, and if they end up on ‘political’ wings it’s because the State puts them there to prevent them from ‘infecting’ the other prisoners). In fact, in some of the small prisons I was held in starting from Rovereto, I was kept separate from the other prisoners as far as the limited conditions allowed. The screws weren’t used to seeing the leaflets that arrived in my post and their hands would literally shake upon coming in contact with some of them and I was transferred from there as fast as they could.

The only thing I remember about Trento prison is an earthquake one night following which I spent the next hour or so trying to decide what to do in anticipation of another tremor until I fell asleep. Not all such events have a happy outcome: 8 prisoners (and two female guards) were killed, trapped in a fire that broke out in Le Vallette prison in Turin in 1986. Accounts of prisoners in New Orleans make the blood curdle in horror, to mention but a few. We must never forget that – beyond the anecdotes and reminiscences

— prison consists of so many reinforced boxes that millions of people all over the world are locked up in day and night. The latter are hostages of the State and live at the mercy of a hierarchy of vile cowards 24 hours a day.

The female wing in Trento was closed down and I was dispatched to Vicenza, which I mentioned above. The women's section consisted of two rows of cells facing each other. In the morning the heavy iron doors were opened, leaving a second barred gate locked. And that was the 'prison condition' for the rest of the day. Pale thin girls spent their whole days in bed because, although there was an exercise yard, it was freezing cold outside (Vicenza is in the mountains.) The exercise period is established by parliamentary decree but nowhere is it written that there is a 'minimum stay'. An obligatory two hours in a huge freezing cold area of reinforced concrete with nothing to do was too much for most people, and the screws were quite happy to forego the task of locking and unlocking x number of gates of access.

So, the battle began, at first the 'good' way, pointing out the situation to medical staff, writing collective demands to the governor, etc., to no avail. It was very difficult to talk to the other prisoners as, apart from the outside yard, there was only a couple of hours 'sociality' each day that had to be signed up for in advance, naming one other prisoner who could be locked in with you, or whom you could 'visit'. Nonetheless, we all managed to agree that we would go out into the yard next day and, in protest, would refuse to enter when the two hours were up. This, in the context of prison, is tantamount to insurrection. The day came. The presence of the screws from the male section downstairs, was confirmation that everybody's plans had been thwarted. Shortly afterwards (this was in the period immediately following the New Year demo) my cell neighbour C. and I were 'ghosted': me to the 'political wing' in Opera, Milan, C. to some out-of-the-way provincial prison. This long description is to try to show how a simple attempt to obtain

certainly exciting, it was in the air you breathed around you. There were many examples of mass squatting, occupation of universities, non-payment of tickets, bus rides, meals, etc. in towns like Bologna where hundreds of young people just refused to pay. Many small actions of attack were carried out by individuals or very small groups of people without all the rhetoric of the armed organisations, and this was to have a profound effect on that part of the anarchist movement that had been pushing in that direction. There was always a strong sense of projectuality and of being part of the struggle for freedom along with other comrades in this informal movement. That developed into what some anarchists refer to as the 'insurrectional method' of struggle. The latter interpretation attempts to draw in mass participation along with anarchists against a given objective, based on a certain organizational hypothesis. This requires a constant engagement in the struggle over a period of time. It's not a question of a small group of anarchists deciding to attack a particular expression of power, but an attempt to involve large numbers of people self-organised in a proliferation of base organisms – nuclei, leagues or whatever they decided to call themselves – and attack the objective all together. The point of this way of organising is that it can't become hierarchical, but can extend and multiply horizontally, and once the objective is in view and all the individuals involved are experiencing a qualitative change in their relationship to power (absence of delegating, deciding in first person, creativity, etc.), the struggle might even go beyond the objective. I am lucky to have lived one such experience, even if the end result wasn't that which everybody had desired and worked hard for. But that doesn't matter.

The time was the 1980s, the place, Comiso, in the island of Sicily, where I was living at the time. The Americans had decided to deposit some Cruise missiles in the military base there, and there was wide local dissent about this. Anti-nuclear protestors, the communist party, the socialist party, the Greens, etc. protested in massive demos or pacifist pickets outside the base. The local anarchists de-

and participation of certain other prisoners in their own incarceration. The times that I came within inches of this participatory oppression were the worst for me, and the kind of reality they are aiming for filled me with disgust. You'd like to spit in the screw's eye and tell her to wipe the smile off her face when she comes to unlock you in the morning, but you can even end up saying 'good morning'.

Recently an Italian comrade told me that when he was in prison last year there were some of the old Red Brigades militants who always called the screws *stronzo* or *pezzo di merda* – 'shit' in either case, and how the other cons really envied them for it. Had they tried it, they'd have ended up black and blue and with a few broken ribs.

Generally, you need to teach yourself to contain your loathing for the whole set-up. On coming out I was under house arrest for a while, then I came back to London as I had another short sentence pending in Italy concerning a stolen car connected to the robbery. I slipped unobtrusively into my ghetto existence here. Not with pride, I may say, because such an existence is full of compromise like any other. There's no real struggle here, no tension in terms of attacking what oppresses you and everyone around you. You can become a frenetic activist or you can spend some time trying to take stock, 'socialise' yourself within that reality to some extent and keep carrying on with your own projectuality as best you can, always in the dimension of seeking affinities and outlets for the struggle as you want to experience it. So, in this open prison you're also a misfit, an outsider playing a role and respecting the 'social rules'.

Italy has a long history of insurrection both in recent times and distant, can you talk about some of the social struggles there that you have been involved in?

In Italy, the 70s and 80s, although there was a proliferation of clandestine organisations which declared war against the State, there was also a diffuse insurrectional movement, and that was

a basic 'right' comes to be considered a dangerous threat to order and submission.

The fact is it's necessary to see the context we're talking about. You don't enter prison saying, wow, lots of people locked up, here's fertile ground for rebellion, let's have a go. In the first place, most people have many problems and are simply not interested in how you define yourself, and personally I didn't try doing so, other than through my way of relating to them and the surroundings, although in some prisons there were 'politicals' who knew about us. That's different. In the normal run of events, when you are in prison I think your job is to get on with being a prisoner and continue living your life under 'different' conditions and try to contribute to raising the tone of what can often be a pretty dismal reality. Most of the women inside are in a far worse situation than we are. Many have children, sometimes thousands of miles away, and worry about them all the time. We are privileged because we have comrades, solidarity, excellent lawyers who are often comrades themselves.

Having said that, it was a great experience to encounter so many different crazy people that one wouldn't otherwise have met due to personal choices and all the ghettos we 'scum of the earth' are divided up into: gypsies, drug addicts, 'murderers', 'historic leaders' of once upon a time, prostitutes, 'drug ponies', etc. And I lived some intense and at times hilarious moments. Don't get me wrong, prison wasn't 'the best days of my life'. But, when a number of very particular human beings who are forced to cohabit against their will make it to come together on the basis of this common denominator and simply be themselves for a moment with their exquisite idiosyncrasies, a strange alchemy occurs that transcends all walls and becomes a true moment of freedom, and a threat to the status quo of the prison.

Of course it would have been better to have brought down the walls for real. Many of these women are still locked up. Many more have joined them. You asked about solidarity, and I can't conclude

this reverie without mentioning an unforgettable moment of solidarity that I experienced from the other prisoners. As I said, I received a lot of mail that wasn't officially censored, among which was the whole collection of *Canenero* and a considerable quantity of back issues of the Italian anarchist paper *Provocazione* that came out in the eighties. At Opera, the latter were removed from the cell I was in following a routine search, with a few feeble justifications such as 'fire risk', 'illicitly acquired', etc. What was obvious was that the contents were definitely not appreciated by those who had come across them. I was furious, and demanded my papers back.

Anyone who's been in prison will know that there's no such thing as 'demand and response', even the most insignificant request such as getting permission to buy a pair of socks has to go through a process that might take weeks. I wasn't prepared to wait, and to cut a long story short ended up staging a protest by simply refusing to go in from the yard and be locked up after the exercise period. The immediate result of this was that I managed to get an audience with the *Maresciallo* from the male prison; I eventually got my papers back, and the much hated uberscrew in charge of the female prison disappeared from circulation for a few weeks, which gave everyone a break. The second result was to be escorted to a kind of 'internal court' on Monday morning, presided over by the prison governor in the presence of screws, cops, psychologists, etc. The verdict: guilty of insubordination. The punishment: two weeks in the punishment cell. That shocked everybody on the wing, many of whom had been 'inside' for nearly twenty years. The rare punishments at Opera were 2-3 days. After being checked by the doctor who signed that I was fit to face the sentence (the doctor always has the last word, even on Death Row...), I was marched down to the isolation block, to be locked up 22 hours a day, and have only essential possessions: my anarchist papers (I made sure I got these), a couple of books, a dictionary and a small radio.

Screws were assigned to sit on the other side of the metal door peering at me through the spy hole and let me out for exercise in

a small, squalid yard for one hour in the morning and one in the afternoon. Anyone who talked to me would receive similar sanctions. After spending most of the night at war with the mosquitoes (it was the middle of August, 40 degrees) I woke up to the sound of a loud rap number just outside the window. Peering outside I could see the girls that worked in the garden below dancing in single file through the plants, rapping out the whole story.

What a buzz!

Then when I got out for 'air' all the women in the section were at their windows singing a whole repertoire of love and battle songs at the top of their voices. The confusion was such that the screws had to take me away from that dirty yard to the sports ground for exercise twice a day.

For the rest: suffice to say that for the whole duration all the prison food ended up down the toilet as I received a constant supply of fresh food, hot coffee, etc, thanks to the cunning and creativity that only those who are locked up against their will are capable of, unseen by the uniformed spies outside the cell or the armed guards patrolling the walls. When the two weeks were up, big party on the wing!

After you left prison, how did you feel coming 'out' into 'society'?

Society? What's that? I think I experienced society like an iron vice from the day I was born. They had to lock me in the classroom for the first two weeks I was at kindergarten. Perhaps the closest I've been to being 'in' society was when I was in jail. You can't escape it - unless as I said, you declare yourself 'prisoner of war' and spend the rest of your time alone, with special status. Prison is a microcosm of the world outside, a kind of caricature that you're stuck in, there's nowhere to hide, so you become socialised to some extent whether you like it or not, for the sake of the other prisoners and in order to try to do something with your time. But always within precise limits.

Like society outside, the prison structure is polarising: segregating and excluding the rebels and moving towards the integration