

Talk delivered on Tuesday, 13th Sept.2011 in Singapore. - Poh Soo Kai

“MY ARREST AND DETENTION IN 1976”

I was detained in Operation Cold Store i.e. 2nd Feb 1963, and released at the end of 1973. On the day of my release, I was advised by a very senior ISD officer that on release I should not publicize nor seek the release of my comrades in detention. It was not only dangerous for me but made their release more difficult. It was a friendly advice, and I believe made with good intentions.

However, I could not accept this bully-logic reflected in the thuggish policy pursued by the ISD. So on release, I met with four other comrades, P. Govindasamy, Lau Ah Lek, Fu Yang Yeow, and Tan Kim Sim, who were released on the same day, at my house. We issued a joint press statement, describing our individual detention - from three years to near 11 years - and called for the unconditional release of all detainees. We ended by calling Lee Kuan Yew a “political pimp.”

On the 11th anniversary of Operation Cold Store in 1974, I made a recorded speech of the mass arrests and a plea for support from FUEMSO. The recorded speech was played at a meeting organized in London by FUEMSO. I pointed out that on the very day of Operation Cold Store in 1963, Lee Kuan Yew had denied responsibility for the mass arrests in his press interview at the Singapore airport on his return from the Internal Security Council (ISC) meeting in K.L. This had infuriated Lord Selkirk who called him up, threatening to publish the relevant documents. Of course the press was blamed. In a later interview, he amended his earlier denial. However, it was clear to all, the denial was a publicity stunt to hit the headlines the day after the arrest. The subsequent correction would not have the same impact or it could even be ignored by the public.

The U.K., as chairman of the ISC, shared the responsibility for the arrests. The order for the arrests in February 1963, the carrying out of Operation Cold Store came directly from London. Selkirk and the others just enforced it. By handing the detainees over to the PAP government without first releasing them before the merger in September 1963, the U.K. shared

responsibility for their continued detention. This moral responsibility cannot be shrugged off by any legalistic talk. Thus, in my speech to the FUEMSSO students in 1974, I said students in the U.K. should demand the U.K. government make a statement calling for their release, make their stand transparent and condemn the PAP for the continued detention of those they (the British) had earlier detained.

Later in 1974, I attended the Tokyo conference on imperialism organized by the World Council of Churches. There I described the police state that is Singapore. Friends at the Conference assured me of support should I be rearrested. During my re-arrest, these friends including some Japanese Parliamentarians, petitioned the PAP for my release.

In the same year, I met Ms Small of the International section of the British Labour Party, and a delegation of trade unionists from Sweden who were here to attend a NTUC function at Raffles Hotel. I met them separately at my home. They wanted to know more of the Internal Security Act, the conditions of detention, the people detained, the length of detention, and the conditions of release with restrictions, making of a security statement (a statement that implicates others), TV appearances, etc. I did not know then that they were planning to bring a motion asking the PAP to explain the detention, prolonged imprisonment, and ill treatment of its opponents in the forthcoming Socialist International Conference to be held in Brussels in mid 1976.

Coincidentally, in early 1976 a few of us discussed the formation of a civil rights society, akin to the NGOs of today. G. Raman, Ong Bock Chuan, M. Fernandez, Gopinath Pillai (the PAP ambassador at large), Jing Quee, Gopal Baratham, and I had touched briefly upon the subject at a house warming party thrown by M. Fernandez.

This discussion developed into a pro-tem committee consisting of G. Raman, Michael Fernandez, Ong Bock Chuan, and I. We agreed to invite Father Joseph Ho, Dr. Gwee Ah Leng, and Dr. Un Hon Hin to join the committee. Tan Jing Quee did not join. He came to my house later with Kay Yew to express their deep concern that the PAP could use this civil rights society as a pretext for arrests. He was to be proven right.

Shortly after its formation, there was news that the Socialist International conference in Brussels would be tabling a motion asking its fraternal

member, the PAP to explain the arrests without trial, and prolonged detention of political opponents.

The stage was set for our detention. By talking of civil rights, demanding the release of detainees, highlighting freedom of speech and assembly, as well as transparency and accountability to the people, we could become an embarrassment that needed to be nipped in the bud.

But how to present this as a serious threat to national security to the Singapore public and international opinion? Despite the visit of Harold Wilson, ex-Labour Party Prime Minister of Great Britain to Temasek, international opinion was unfavourable to Singapore against the backdrop of the Socialist International rapping the PAP for its long term detention without trial of its opponents. Hence, the communist bogey was invoked.

MY ARREST

There was no more the knock upon the door in the wee hours of the morning. The ISD officers were waiting for me at the car park of my flat. As I came down the flight of steps to enter my car at about 7.30 a.m., I was approached by a couple of men who identified themselves as police officers. They said I was under arrest, but I would have to lead them back to the flat. When we entered my flat, they immediately closed all the windows. They were afraid neighbors would notice. They searched my study and took a few things away. Then as we were leaving, I asked if I could write a note to my wife, Grace, who had gone to work some half hour earlier. I wrote that the ISD had come. She should be brave and that I loved her. Inspector Lim read the note. He commented that we had been expecting the arrest. I nodded.

That I would be arrested was no secret. The PAP had to resign from the Socialist International as it could not honestly explain its totally undemocratic actions. Moreover, the PAP did not take well to moral pressure from any quarter. A week or so before my arrest in 1976, C.V. Devan Nair was dispatched to the Socialist International conference in Brussels to boast of his anti-colonial past, blithely ignoring the fact that experienced politicians attending the conference regarded him as a turncoat. He declared that he and I were acquainted and that I was a communist. That we were acquainted is without doubt. I had helped his

family financially while he was under detention. But he should have checked with the ISD, being a turncoat and leading the PAP delegation, whether I was a communist before declaring that he knew that I was one. The ISD would have told him that it had sent me a letter through the prison authorities, in reply to my request for an issue of the Barisan Newspaper, that I am NOT a communist, and thus the request was allowed. Perhaps he was too lazy to check his accusations, or perhaps he did. That probably is a trait of a turncoat.

Devan's allegation of me being a communist was in the headline of the Straits Times. It was all orchestrated. So I was expecting the arrest. Perhaps the PAP wanted me to flee, for during my interrogation, an officer made the comment that I was a Kamikaze. But he did not elaborate.

Continuing with the first day of my re-arrest, I was driven to my clinic on Balestier Road. They searched my consultation room. I do not know what they were looking for. But I was worried that they may plant ammunition there and "find" it. The thought that they were capable of fabrication was foremost in my mind, as I suddenly remembered what they said and did in Marshall's Anson by-election of 1961. Then the Straits Times headlined a plot to kill the PAP ministers. The Director of the Special Branch, Mr. G Bogaars, personally led a raid on a house in Telok Kurau – not far from my place. Some men were arrested, and ammunition reportedly found. Photos abound in the newspaper. All was quiet for a week or so. Then when Marshall spoke up at Anson to say he doubted the authenticity of the story, the ST printed, in small print and in the inside pages, a report to say that the ISD had received the information from "overzealous" police agents. Who were these overzealous police agents who had given false reports, and what happened to the ammunition found in the house – and who were their owners? Nothing more was ever disclosed.

I was led to the police car, made to put on a pair of spectacles that had a layer of foam on the inside. I was totally blinded. Even though my clinic was only a stone's throw from the Whitley Holding Centre, it took quite a while to reach there. It was a poor attempt to disorientate me and a total waste of petrol.

After changing into a T-shirt and short cotton pants, the spectacles were now off, I was led to my cell. It was on one limb of a U-shaped single-story structure with a flat concrete roof. There were more cells on the other limb.

The prison guard's station and the lavatory occupied the junction of the two limbs. In the centre of the building was the exercise yard, fenced off on all sides from the cells. The walls were high, and you could only see angled skies and the top of distant trees. The cell measured some 5 feet by 10 feet with a fixed bunk in the center. The fluorescent light was on all the time when I was in the cell. Once it blew, and all was in darkness. The guard could see nothing through the peep hole in his regular rounds. Immediately I was moved to an adjacent cell while the electrician on call promptly replaced the bulb.

My first family visit was a disaster. My younger brother, a clinical professor came to visit me. He worked as a chest physician at Tan Tock Seng Hospital. His first question was, "Have you newspapers to read?" "No reading material," was my reply. Click. The intercom was cut off. I was not to talk of matters in the centre. And so ended prematurely the visit for the family for the week.

I was summoned to go to an interrogation cell on the first day of my re-arrest. The guards had to be careful. If there was a red light at the end of the corridor, he had to stop, make me face the wall of the corridor, lest we run into some other escorted detainees approaching the right angle junction. New traffic rules had to be learned!!

Strange as it may seem, the officers asked no questions. We sat and looked at each other, and engaged in small talk. One told me he had recently returned from a posting in Cambodia. He was on the last plane out of Phnom Penh before the city fell. Another asked me to talk on socialism and try to convince him. I told him it is not possible unless we change places. They were friendly, but kept on telling me that if I do not write a confession I will definitely rot in prison. So I asked them to ask me questions if they want to know anything. They would not! The reply I got was that if they did, then I would know what they knew of me! So we sat there from about 6.00 a.m. to midnight staring at each other. They placed a small clock on the table and told me I could go back to my cell only at midnight. That kind of interrogation went on daily for the six months I was in Whitley Road Detention Centre.

The interrogation rooms were cold. For the evening session, the officers came in warm clothing while I shivered. Going back to the cell, however, was not comfortable either. It was terribly hot- like entering a furnace, more

so after the cold of the interrogation room. I was most happy when it rained, for then the cell was much more comfortable. The heat did not dissipate from the poorly ventilated room until well past 2.00 a.m.

Then one day, Deputy Director Si-Toh walked in accompanied by some 6-8 rough-looking men. They stood behind me and by my two sides. But Si Toh was polite. He asked if I had made night calls in my medical practice lately. On reflection I told him yes, one. He showed interest. Who did I attend to? It was a tenant on the ground floor who had abdominal pain. Any more night calls? No. Disappointment showed in his face. Did I send out letters lately? I did. I knew then that my letter to Lin Chew after the PAP's walk-out from the Socialist International had been intercepted. In the letter, I had told her that I agreed with the Socialist International's move to ask the PAP to explain its detention of political opponents, but I told her that she was not to worry over me. The PAP would have to find a scapegoat for that humiliation and I was prepared for it. Maybe because they had intercepted my letter, they did not ask me questions regarding Lin Chew or the Socialist International.

And then suddenly the door of the interrogation room was flung open and H.H was pushed in, onto the floor. I know him. He was an ex-detainee. An honest man but I had suspected that he had links with the Singapore Revolutionary Party, an organization I would not touch. He was my patient. They had beaten him up and he was in bad shape. He looked at me and said sorry to me. Though he did not finish his sentence, I surmised that he must have told the ISD that I had given him medicine for the injured bomber. (A year back, two bombers attempted to attack the Nanyang Shoe Factory but the home-made bomb went off in the attackers' car while they were driving to the factory, killing the driver and injuring the other bomber.) I told HH not to worry, just tell them the truth. After that they dragged HH out of the room. They never interrogated me about the prescription but I was not concerned as the drugs were prescribed for HH's flu symptoms. In fact, the ISD officers had gone to my clinic and taken HH's medical case notes and a few days later, they showed me my own prescription for HH. Thus the poker game they played with me ended on an anti-climax note for the ISD.

Back to waiting for the clock to strike midnight. But there was one incident I must tell you. One day I was brought to the upper floor of the interrogation block. The Nepalese guard, the ghurka, stood outside the closed door. I

was alone in the room. Suddenly I heard an extremely loud stamping of the boot in salute. The door was opened and expecting some big shot to come in – thus the unusually extra loud salute—I turned my head to look at the entrance. In walked a man, spotlessly dressed, in his late thirties, perhaps early forties. He was alone and that was unusual, because very senior officers nearly always come in pairs. He walked round to the other side of the table, pulled out the chair and sat down. He smiled, and said “Dr. Poh, may I call you Dr. Poh”. We were given numbers, and were never addressed by name. He was trying to be polite and nice. My reply was, “Of course you can.” Then the next question made my day. He asked, “Dr. Poh, now what is your story?” My reply was direct, “what story do you want?” He knew he had lost. He got up and stiffly walked out of the room.

After some months, I was transferred to Moon Crescent Centre. A few weeks in a three-cell block with friends, then solitary in a big 8-cell block.

In early February 1977, the ISD officers informed me of my wife’s, Grace, detention. They said I could visit her at Whitley Road Detention Centre. She had just been arrested. I knew that her detention was aimed at me. I would not let them enjoy and exploit my discomfort. I turned down the offer to see my wife. She was detained for a month, with days and nights in the cold interrogation room.

Also, some time in early February, I heard of the arrest of my friends, G. Raman (who was my lawyer), A. Mahadeva, Jing Quee, Kay Yew, Joethy, etc.

Then through the prison grapevine, came the news that in an arranged BBC interview, Lee Kuan Yew had said that G.Raman had sworn an affidavit that he, Grace and I had gone one night to treat an injured man in Masai, Johor. That G. Raman, a senior lawyer held under detention, had been brought under guard – though Lee Kuan Yew took pains to stress that there were no uniformed officers around – to the magistrate court to swear an affidavit, testified to the contemptuous attitude Lee had of Singapore’s judiciary.

And so Lee declared that based upon Raman’s affidavit, he would let the Singapore Medical Council (SMC) judge me. I would be judged by my peers. Presumably, Lee thought that this would satisfy some of the critics of my arrest.

But this was all a public relations exercise. Fabricate a story, hog the headlines, then quietly forget it. The SMC was never instructed by the government to summon me for an enquiry. I received no request to appear before the SMC.

In fact, my copy of the newspaper of the BBC interview was censored. Why keep me in the dark when I would be appearing before the Medical Council and be judged by my peers? The sad thing is, up to quite recently, I was surprised to hear a young friend telling me that it is the ethical duty of every doctor to treat any injured person anywhere. If there was an injured person in Masai, going to Masai was perfectly right and ethical. The young friend could not believe his ears when I told him that up till today, I had not been to Masai. He must be wondering, what other nonsense and myths he had believed in since his school days. He thanked me for waking him up.

I was kept in solitary confinement for almost a year in this 8-cell block, the largest in Moon Crescent Centre. Then I was transferred to a smaller 5-cell block situated at the extreme west end of the MCC, separated from other blocks by the administrative block. This was unofficially known as the "tough" block. I found myself in pleasant company. Fook Wah, Ho Piow and Chia Thye Poh, having got advance news of my arrival, were waiting behind the door to welcome me. It was nice to be with friends again after so many months in solitary.

I made it a rule not to see detainees when they were sick as I could not treat them. I always insisted that they see the prison doctor. One day, Fook Wah complained of a stomach ache, and Dr. N. Singh came, examined him at the corridor just inside the compound. It was a cursory examination. He prescribed some antacids which were delivered that afternoon. By 10 p.m. when we were all locked in our individual cells, Fook Wah called for me. He said the stomach pain had not improved with the medication, it had worsened. Fook Wah was a very stoic person. Terribly beaten in the lock-up, he had lifted his chair and decided to fight with the ISD brutes to the bitter end. What do you do with a man who is not afraid of death? The ISD boss was called in, and he wisely told the Neanderthals to stop the torture. Fook Wah was a leader in the Chinese High School students' movement, and had to run when the police were going after its leaders. Though coming from a rich family, he endured the privations while on the run without any grumbles. When he called me from his cell, I knew the pain must have

been severe, but what could I do. So I told him I would see him the first thing in the morning when the guard came to unlock us. In the dawn's dim light, made worse in a prison cell, I could see no jaundice, but felt a huge lump in the abdomen. He must have noticed that I hesitated, for his next words were, "Soo Kai, do not be afraid to tell me the truth. I can take whatever it is." I told him he had cancer and it was at a late stage. I wrote a letter to the Superintendent. I am not supposed to communicate with the prison doctor. Fook Wah was transferred to General Hospital, found to be inoperable, and sent back to our cell.

Upon returning to the block, the prison superintendent wanted to send him to the Changi prison hospital which was no more than a dormitory with cages for sick detainees. It was not a hospital. We could provide him with better care in the prison block. We all objected to Fook Wah going to the prison hospital and were prepared to fight against his being transferred there. The warder came with a wheel chair. Fook Wah refused to go. The warder was sent back to tell the superintendent. After a few days, the prison relented, and agreed to send Fook Wah back to the General Hospital's prison block. He was there for a week or so, only to be released to go home when death was imminent.

Then one day I was sent to Whitley Road Detention Centre for a few months. This time I was alone in a large open cell with a small exercise yard. You can shout to your neighbours, but you can't see them. Dr. Toh Siang Wah, the acting head of department when I was posted to Kangar Maternity Hospital (KMH) in 1961, came to see me. We had a chat and he decided to send me a bible, and said he will arrange for someone to read with me. That someone turned out to be a senior officer at Whitley. I had no objections. I only insisted on reading the bible from page one. And he did not know anything from the Genesis. They must have found my interpretation more reasonable, for soon the session was over.

Sometime later, I was taken to the changing room and told to change into the clothes I was arrested in. More presentable now, I was wondering where they would be taking me to. Soon I was in the prison's staff rest room. Tea and cakes were laid on the table. And to my surprise, I was warmly greeted by two doctors who had worked with me in hospital. They were Dr. Teo and Dr. Nagulendran. Both consultant psychiatrists at Woodbridge Hospital. They explained that they had been requested to

conduct a psychiatric survey of detainees. The apparent objective was to have a psychiatric profile – like cardiac profile, or arthritic profile which I am sure you all are more used to. With this, it would save time and money to sieve through the hundreds of student applicants, etc. to higher institutions of learning.

So detainees are on the way to becoming psychiatric patients, and maybe Whitley will be later known as a psychiatric hospital.

I was given forms to answer, questions ranged from IQ tests, to whether I was best loved at home. I was not going to fill the questionnaire. Then Dr. Nagulendran said the study would be absolutely secret and have nothing to do with the ISD. Further, I was free to participate or to reject participation.

I had my cakes, thanked them as I was happy to see some old friends. Told them I would decline participation. I was wondering what other detainees would do, most probably participate but give every untruthful answer they can. I was later to find my guess was right.

However, some 10 days later, I was called to the interrogation room. The sole interrogator, an inspector, put on an angry face and started by telling me that I will be punished for not participating in the survey. I smiled, and asked him how he came to know of my non-participation when I was assured by the doctors that the whole process was confidential and secret. He did not reply.

Then as suddenly I was transferred back to MCC. To my old block with Chia Thye Poh and Ho Piow.

BRUSH WITH DEATH

Finally, in 1980 I was again transferred back to Whitley. This time in Whitley, I was also kept alone in the large cell. I was taken to the interrogation room about once a week to have small talk, sometimes on health problems and read papers.

Early one morning in 1981, I had a very severe pain running from the top of my head to my neck. I must have fainted, for the next thing I knew was that

the guard had spotted me lying in the yard at about 4.30 a.m. and had called the inspector on duty. They came into my cell and enquired about my condition. I said I needed hospitalization for I think intra-cranial pressure had somehow increased. They rang up their superior and told me their order was to send me back to Changi Prison. The doctor there would attend to me. So early in the morning I was driven, with a severe headache and vomiting, to Changi prison.

The male nurse on duty was kind. He told me that Dr. N. Singh had been informed and would see me the first thing in the morning when he came on duty. It was around 6.30 a.m. I was admitted into the prison hospital. It was a dormitory with two cages at the entrance, one on each side. I was put into one. He gave me two panadol, and I felt better lying in the bed.

It so happened that morning was my visit day. My family on arriving at Whitley was redirected to Changi Prison. Vomiting and in bad shape, I was led along narrow corridors until I reached the visiting room. There was no intercom now. I told my family my condition and why they had sent me to Changi Prison hospital. Has Dr. Singh seen me? No. My dad was very worried. On returning home he telephoned my brother, who contacted his friends in the Health Ministry. It was arranged that a consultant from Changi General Hospital would come to see me.

The consultant physician came at about 3.30 p.m. He recommended that I be transferred to Changi General Hospital. It was a pleasure to have nice bedsheet, and a comfortable bed after so many years in prison. But I was too exhausted to really enjoy the new environment. The neurologist thought I needed an X-ray of my skull and I was dispatched to TTSH. They did multiple x-rays and came to no diagnosis. There was a huge mass pressing on the nasal cavity and the forehead.

The decision was to ask the neurosurgeon to come in. The operation was fixed on a Monday. I had been in the air-conditioned ward for close to a week. It must have been the air-conditioning, for a day or so before the scheduled operation, I coughed up a whole lump of mucus. The diagnosis was now obvious. I had a mucus cyst stretching from forehead to the cheek, and it had burst just in time before the operation! My skull need not be cut open. Instead the ENT surgeon was called in to operate on the very chronic sinusitis.

All went well. By the third day, when the pack left in the nasal cavity to stop the bleeding was being removed by the ENT surgeon, the wall of the cavity, weakened by continuous pressure from the expanding cyst, gave way. So, the pack was removed together with an artery that the wall was attached to. As a result, no blood went to the brain and I fainted. The only way then was to ligature the carotid, which a surgeon did. But then my heart stopped. My poor friend, the ENT surgeon frantically pumped at my chest. I was told that revived me, but I felt as if I had a fractured rib on recovery. Lack of oxygen to the retina, and alteration in the geometry of the eye socket became my main defects. Thanks to my friends, I survived.

MY RELEASE

Some three months in hospital in 1981, I was served another 2 years detention order and sent back to Whitley to recuperate. In August 1982, I was told I would be released. But I was warned that I should not criticize anyone, that I would not be allowed to hold a press conference to discuss my case and the charges against me, and that the ISD would be issuing a statement on my behalf. They even called in my parents to warn them that if I were to call a press conference, I would be rearrested straight away. I would have to follow the usual restriction orders whether I signed acknowledging receipt or not.

My reply was that I was a civilized person, and if reporters knocked at my door, I would invite them in. They had better post their men outside my door and shoo the reporters away. I would definitely deny whatever statement attributed to me but not signed by me.

I was released on Aug 26 1982, having spent all 17 years in Lee's prison without a trial. No reporters came to see me for a few days. Then a person by the name of Mr. D'Silva from Associated Press came to my house. I told him of my restrictions and threat of imprisonment should I discuss my case. From this he could draw his own conclusion.

I was to run into him some time later. He told me that after the interview, he had gone to Albert Street to have a bite that evening. There was a tap on his shoulder and he was asked to follow the ISD officers to Whitley. He told them that whatever I said in my interview was all recorded in his tape, and they could have a look at his dispatch. They showed no interest. He was brought to the staff meeting room and sat there for the whole night. Early in

the morning, he was asked to sign a statement that he had been well treated and then allowed to go. I suppose this was to frighten other foreign reporters in case they showed more courage than their local counterparts.

Harassment tactics continued. For example, when I was employed by a clinic at the airport, I was not allowed a pass onto the tarmac. Civil servants unfortunately dared not think. I just told them to ring up my clinic owner, a British nurse, and tell her that I had been denied entry onto the tarmac. So should any emergency arise, I was in no way responsible. A few phone calls followed, and I was issued with the pass.

After that short stint at the airport clinic, I started a private practice in Upper Serangoon Road before migrating to Canada in 1989.