



*A
Month
and a
Day*

A Detention
Diary

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY WILLIAM BOYD

KEN SARO-WIWA

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PENGUIN BOOKS

INTRODUCTION

Ken Saro-Wiwa was a friend of mine. At eleven thirty in the morning on 10 November 1995, he was hanged in a prison in Port Harcourt, in eastern Nigeria, on the orders of General Sani Abacha, the military leader of Nigeria. Ken Saro-Wiwa was fifty-four years old, and an innocent man.

I first met Ken in the summer of 1986 at a British Council seminar at Cambridge University. He had come to England from Nigeria in his capacity as a publisher and had asked the British Council to arrange a meeting with me. He had read my first novel, *A Good Man in Africa*, and had recognized, despite fictional names and thin disguises, that it was set in Nigeria, the country that had been my home when I was in my teens and early twenties.

Ken had been a student at the University of Ibadan, in western Nigeria, in the mid sixties. My late father, Dr Alexander Boyd, had run the university health services there, and had treated Ken and come to know him. Ken recognized that the Dr Murray in my novel was a portrait of Dr Boyd and was curious to meet his son.

I remember that it was a sunny summer day, one of those days that are really too hot for England. In shirt-sleeves, we strolled about the immaculate quadrangle of a Cambridge college, talking about Nigeria. Ken was a small man, probably no more than five feet two or three. He was stocky and energetic – in fact, brim-full of energy – and had a big, wide smile. He smoked a pipe with a curved stem. I learnt later

that the pipe was virtually a logo: in Nigeria people recognized him by it. In newsreel pictures that the Nigerian military released of the final days of Ken's show trial, there's a shot of him walking towards the courthouse, leaning on a stick, thinner and aged as a result of eighteen months' incarceration, the familiar pipe still clenched between his teeth.

Ken was not only a publisher but a businessman (in the grocery trade); a celebrated political journalist, with a particularly trenchant and swingeing style; and, I discovered, a prolific writer of novels, plays, poems and children's books (mostly published by him). He was, in addition, the highly successful writer and producer of Nigeria's most popular TV soap opera, *Basi & Co.*, which ran for 150-odd episodes in the mid eighties and was reputedly Africa's most watched soap opera, with an audience of up to thirty million. Basi and his cronies were a bunch of feckless Lagos wide-boys who, indigent and lazy, did nothing but hatch inept schemes for becoming rich. Although funny and wincingly accurate, the show was also unashamedly pedagogic. What was wrong with Basi and his chums was wrong with Nigeria: none of them wanted to work, and they all acted as though the world owed them a living; if that couldn't be acquired by fair means foul ones would do just as well. This was soap opera as a form of civic education.

Whenever Ken passed through London, we'd meet for lunch, usually in the Chelsea Arts Club. His wife and four children lived in England – the children attended school there – so he was a regular visitor. And, though I wrote a profile of him for the *London Times* (Ken was trying to get his books distributed in Britain), our encounters were mainly those of two writers with a lot in common, hanging out for a highly agreeable, bibulous hour or three.

Ken's writing was remarkably various, covering almost all

genres. *Sozaboy*, in my opinion his greatest work, is subtitled *A Novel in Rotten English* and is written in a unique combination of pidgin English, the lingua franca of the former West African British colonies, and an English that is, in its phrases and sentences, altogether more classical and lyrical. The language is a form of literary demotic, a benign hijacking of English, and a perfect vehicle for the story it tells, of a simple village boy recruited into the Biafran army during the Nigerian civil war. The boy has dreamed of being a soldier (a *soza*), but the harsh realities of this brutal conflict send him into a dizzying spiral of cruel disillusion. *Sozaboy* is not simply a great African novel but also a great antiwar novel – among the very best of the twentieth century.

Sozaboy was born of Ken's personal experience of the conflict – the Biafran War, as it came to be known – and, indeed, so were many of his other writings. Biafra was the name given to a loose ethnic grouping in eastern Nigeria, dominated by the Ibo tribe. The Ibo leader, Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, decided to secede from the Nigerian Federation, taking most of the country's oil reserves with him. In the war that was then waged against the secessionist state, perhaps a million people died, mainly of starvation in the shrinking heartland.

Not all the ethnic groups caught up in Ojukwu's secessionist dream were willing participants. Ken's tribe, the Ogoni, for one. When the war broke out, in 1967, Ken was on vacation and found himself trapped within the new borders of Biafra. He saw at once the absurdity of being forced to fight in another man's war, and he escaped through the front lines to the Federal side. He was appointed civilian administrator of the crucial oil port of Bonny on the Niger River Delta, and he served there until the final collapse of the Biafran forces in 1970. Ken wrote about his experiences of the civil war in his fine memoir, *On a Darkling Plain*.

Ken's later fight against the Nigerian military, as it turned out, was oddly prefigured in those years of the Biafran War: the helplessness of an ethnic minority in the face of an overpowering military dictatorship; oil and oil wealth as a destructive and corrupting catalyst in society, the need to be true to one's conscience.

This moral rigour was especially apparent in Ken's satirical political journalism (he was, over the years, a columnist on the Lagos daily newspapers *Punch*, *Vanguard* and *Daily Times*), much of which was charged with a Swiftian *saeva indignatio* at what he saw as the persistent ills of Nigerian life: tribalism, ignorance of the rights of minorities, rampant materialism, inefficiency and general graft. Apart from *Basi & Co.*, his journalism was what brought him his greatest renown among the population at large.

In the late eighties, I remember, Ken's conversations turned more and more frequently to the topic of his tribal homeland. The Ogoni are a small tribe (there are 250 tribes in Nigeria) of about half a million people living in a small area of the fertile Niger River Delta. The Ogoni's great misfortune is that their homeland happens to lie above a significant portion of Nigeria's oil reserves. Since the mid 1950s, Ogoniland has been devastated by the industrial pollution caused by the extraction of oil. What was once a placid rural community of prosperous farmers and fishermen is now an ecological waste land reeking of sulphur, its creeks and water holes poisoned by indiscriminate oil spillage and ghoulishly lit at night by the orange flames of gas flares.

As Ken's concern for his homeland grew, he effectively abandoned his vocation and devoted himself to lobbying for the Ogoni cause at home and abroad. He was instrumental in setting up the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) and soon became its figurehead. That

struggle for survival was an ecological more than a political one: his people, he said, were being subjected to a 'slow genocide'. Ken protested the despoliation of his homeland and demanded compensation from the Nigerian government and from the international oil companies – Shell in particular. (He resented Shell profoundly and held the company responsible for the ecological calamity in Ogoniland.) But from the outset Ken made sure that the movement's protest was peaceful and non-violent. Nigeria today is a corrupt and dangerously violent nation: it was enormously to the credit of the Ogoni movement that it stayed true to its principles. Mass demonstrations were organized and passed off without incident. Abroad, Greenpeace and other environmental groups allied themselves with the Ogoni cause, but, ironically, the real measure of the success of Ken's agitation came when, in 1992, he was arrested by the Nigerian military and held in prison for some months without a trial. The next year, Shell Oil ceased its operations in the Ogoni region.

At that time, the Ogoni military was led by General Ibrahim Babangida. Ken was eventually released (after a campaign in the British media), and Babangida voluntarily yielded power to General Abacha, a crony, who was meant to supervise the transition of power to a civilian government after a general election, which was duly held in 1993. The nation went to the polls and democratically elected Chief Moshood Abiola as President. General Abacha then declared the election null and void and later imprisoned the victor. Nigeria entered a new era of near anarchy and despotism. Things looked bad for Nigeria, but they looked worse for the Ogoni and their leaders.

Over these years, Ken and I continued to meet for our Chelsea Arts Club lunches whenever he was in London. In 1992 he suffered a personal tragedy when his youngest son, aged fourteen, who was at Eton, died suddenly of heart

failure during a rugby game. Strangely, Ken's awful grief gave a new force to his fight for his people's rights.

We met just before he returned to Nigeria. From my own experience of Nigeria, I knew of the uncompromising ruthlessness of political life there. Ken was not young, nor was he in the best of health (he too had a heart condition). As we said goodbye, I shook his hand and said, 'Be careful, Ken, OK?' And he laughed – his dry, delighted laugh – and replied, 'Oh, I'll be very careful, don't worry.' But I knew he wouldn't.

A succession of Nigerian military governments have survived as a result of the huge revenues generated by oil, and the military leaders themselves have routinely benefited from the oil revenues, making millions and millions of dollars. Any movement that threatened this flow of money was bound to be silenced – extinguished. With the ascendance of Abacha and his brazenly greedy junta, Ken was now squarely in harm's way. Even so, he returned to Nigeria to continue his protests. These protests were now conducted in a more sinister country than the one I had known – a country where rapes, murders and the burning of villages were being carried out as a deliberate policy of state terrorism. There have been 2,000 Ogoni deaths thus far.

In May of last year Ken was on his way to address a rally in an Ogoni town but was turned back at a military roadblock and headed, reluctantly, for home. The rally took place, a riot ensued, and in the general mayhem four Ogoni elders – believed to be sympathetic to the military – were killed.

Ken was arrested and, with fifteen others, was accused of incitement to murder. The fact that he was in a car some miles away and going in the opposite direction made no difference. He was imprisoned for more than a year and then was tried before a specially convened tribunal. There was no

right of appeal. This 'judicial process' has been internationally condemned as a sham. It was a show trial in a kangaroo court designed to procure the verdict required by the government.

On Thursday, 2 November, Ken and eight co-defendants were found guilty and sentenced to death. Suddenly the world acknowledged the nature of Nigeria's degeneracy.

Things did not augur well. But, instinctively wanting to make the best of a bad situation, I hoped that the publicity surrounding Ken's case, along with the timely coincidence of the Commonwealth conference in New Zealand (the biennial gathering of the former members of the British Empire), would prevent the very worst from happening. Surely, I reasoned, the heads of state congregating in Auckland would not allow one of their members to flout their own human rights principles so callously and blatantly? General Abacha, however, did not dare leave his benighted country, which was represented by his Foreign Minister instead.

The presence of Nelson Mandela at the conference was especially encouraging, not only for me but also for all the people who had spent the last months fighting to free Ken. (We were a loosely knit organization, including International PEN, the Ogoni Foundation, Amnesty International, Greenpeace and others.) We felt that if anything could persuade the Nigerians to think again it would be Mandela's moral authority. We were baffled and confused, though, when Mandela did little more than persistently advocate that we should all be patient, that the problem would be resolved through an easy, low-key diplomacy.

Despite Mandela's advice, there was a clamorous condemnation in the media of the Nigerian military. In response, Abacha's junta released newsreel pictures of Ken's trial to establish the legality of the 'judicial process'. One saw a row of prisoners, still, faces drawn, heads bowed, confronting

three stout officers, swagged with gold braid, ostentatiously passing pieces of paper to each other. In the background, a soldier strolled back and forth. Then Ken addressed the court. His voice was strong: he was redoubtably defiant; he seemed without fear, utterly convinced.

These images both defied belief and profoundly disturbed. If Abacha thought that this would make his tribunals look acceptable, then the level of naïvety, or blind ignorance, implied was astonishing. But a keening note of worry was also sounded: someone who could do something this damaging, I thought, was beyond the reach of reason. World opinion, international outrage, appeals for clemency seemed to me now to be nugatory. Abacha had painted himself into a corner. For him it had become a question of saving face, of loud bluster, of maintaining some sort of martial pride. I slept very badly that night.

The next day, 10 November, just after lunch, I received a call from the Writers in Prison Committee of International PEN. I was told that a source in Port Harcourt had seen the prisoners arrive at the gaol at dawn that day, in leg irons. Then the executioners had presented themselves, only to be turned away, because – it was a moment of grimmest, darkest farce – their papers were not in order. This source, however, was ‘110 per cent certain’ that the executions had eventually occurred. Some hours later, this certainty was confirmed by the Nigerian military.

So now Ken was dead, along with eight co-defendants: hanged in a mass execution just as the Commonwealth Conference got under way.

I am bitter and I am dreadfully sad. Ken Saro-Wiwa, the bravest man I have known, is no more. From time to time, Ken managed to smuggle a letter out of prison. One of the last letters I received ended this way: ‘I’m in good spirits . . . There’s no doubt that my idea will succeed in time, but I’ll

have to bear the pain of the moment . . . the most important thing for me is that I’ve used my talents as a writer to enable the Ogoni people to confront their tormentors. I was not able to do it as a politician or a businessman. My writing did it. And it sure makes me feel good! I’m mentally prepared for the worst, but hopeful for the best. I think I have the moral victory.’ You have, Ken. Rest in peace.

William Boyd
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The night of 13 June, as the presidential election results were being announced, I had gone with Alfred Ilenre to see Lateef Jakande, sometime Governor of Lagos State. My passport had just been seized by the security agencies. And he had said, to my startled ears, 'As the prison doors open to let you in, so they will open to let you out.'

As I stepped into Port Harcourt Prison, a.k.a. Alabama City, I recalled Jakande's words gladly.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Port Harcourt Prison lies but a stone's throw from my 24 Aggrey Road office and was there before I began to know Port Harcourt in 1954. It is equally a stone's throw from Stella Maris College where I had taught after graduating from university in 1965. I ought to agree that it is a shame that I had never visited it. It was there, at the back of Port Harcourt, close to the marshy swamps, solid, grey, forbidding from the outside. It was always a place to be avoided.

I cast my mind back now, and think that in Ogoni society prisons did not exist. Wrongdoers were killed, fined, sent into exile or made to swear an oath. Thus, when the colonialists introduced the idea of a prison, a place of correction where wrongdoers spent time, it was novel, and has not sat well with our psyche. A prison was always a place to be avoided. Murderers and thieves were there together. No one had reason to be there. If you were there, you had to be an outcast.

Since our denigration as a people was unprotected, no one had ever been held on his conscience. So that the fact that an innocent man could be sent to prison was unthinkable.

It is true that we had read of the detention of people in Nigeria, but it was mostly a phenomenon of Lagos, where there were several human rights activists. That was until I told the Ogoni people that they were being cheated, denied of their rights to a healthy environment, and the resources of their land. Then almost the entire 51,000 Ogoni men,

women and children became activists. Still, prison seemed far away. We could understand death at the hands of a murderous army or police, but I do not think that we could understand imprisonment. And yet I do remember that I kept warning the Ogoni people to prepare for harassment, imprisonment and death.

Altogether, it was fitting that I should be one of the first to be detained. It would show subsequent detainees that they were in good company.

There were all sorts of preliminaries to be endured before one became an inmate of the prison, such as handing over all cash and other belongings to the prison authorities and being inducted into the life of the prison community.

I suppose that I was treated as a Very Important Prisoner and therefore my story will not be as lurid as it should be. All the same, I did find the prison a very depressing place. If its exterior is solid, grey and forbidding, as I have said, its interior is grimy, squalid and dilapidated.

I must say that I find it very distasteful writing about Port Harcourt Prison. Given the way public buildings are kept throughout Nigeria, no one would be surprised to hear that the prison was in total disrepair and unfit for human habitation.

You can tell the state of a nation by the way it keeps its prisons, prisoners being mostly out of sight. Going by this criterion, Nigeria was in a parlous state indeed.

The prison had been built in colonial times; it was, at that time, the largest prison in West Africa, and was well laid out, with plenty of open space for fresh air, and all educational facilities, such as workshops and library. It also had an infirmary. It had, and still has, a women's wing. But everything was in disrepair, everything was collapsing, everything was gone.

The administrative block itself had not been painted for ages; the room where the senior prison officers worked was stuffy and dirty, furnished with old chairs and tables, without fans or air-conditioners. There was no telephone, only one watercloset which was kept strictly for the boss of the prison, and no one there had a car. Oh, the wretchedness of it all is scandalous. And there are Nigerians who have been Ministers of Internal Affairs and supervised all this, and not said a word? More, there are prominent Nigerians who have been held under these conditions and have come out and done nothing about it.

I hadn't been in the prison for more than a day when I knew that the condition of Nigerian prisons and prisoners would be added to the long list of campaigns I had already accumulated.

After we had gone through the motion of being properly registered, our property logged, our weight and height recorded, and so on and so forth, we were invited upstairs to meet the boss of the establishment, a Mr Ikpatti. This was a special treatment, because as I have said, I was special. Mr Ikpatti, a short man with a developing paunch, well spoken and rather kindly looking, introduced me to the ways of 'Alabama City', the nickname of the place. How it got the name, I don't know. But from what I heard officially, I knew that I was in a different world indeed.

Theoretically, everything was being done to ensure that prisoners or those in prison custody had as proper a life as the deprivation of their liberty would allow. The constraints of space do not allow me to go into detail here. In practice, what we had in Port Harcourt Prison was a travesty. And that probably wasn't because the government had failed to put money into it. The negligence, callousness and incompetence of some thieving officials who had run the place over the years had a lot to do with it. To cut a long story short,

Mr Ikpatti welcomed me to 'Alabama City' and hoped that I would have a good time there.

I thanked him and, based on what he had told me, applied for and got permission to feed myself. I knew that Nigerian prison food was not edible; in any case, I need a special diet for survival, and only my family can provide that in Nigeria. And I obtained special permission to stay in the infirmary, since I needed medical care.

I got to the infirmary late that afternoon, the admission formalities having lasted four or five hours. A look at the infirmary and my heart fell. It was leaking like a sieve; there was no ceiling; the entire place was damp; there was only a bucket latrine; the narrow beds had rotten mattresses; and heavens, what else was there not, in that place?

It didn't come as a surprise, anyway. I asked that my office send three mattresses to us, along with bedding and a lot of cleansing material—detergents, disinfectants, insecticide, anything to help us clean the wretched place.

I hadn't eaten all day, and when dinner finally came from my house at about six thirty I found I had no appetite for it. It had to be tasted first by whoever brought it, in this case, my steward, and I had to eat it in the presence of the warders, in a dingy front cubicle. No, I needed to get into the rhythm of the prison. In my state of mind I could take anything for the cause I believed in, but I did need a certain acclimatization at every new turn of events.

Already a crowd of Ogoni people had begun to gather before the prison gates. One of the earliest callers was Mrs Z, a lawyer and first daughter of Mr Nunieh, the first Ogoni lawyer, who, I was later to learn, had gone to Owerri to represent me alongside Olu Onagoruwa, Ledum Mitce and Samuel Igbara (a childhood friend, and younger son of one of the landlords of Bori). About 800 Ogoni people had, indeed, gone to Owerri, only to learn that I had been sent to

Port Harcourt. A number of them now attempted to see me in the latter place. In the end, I reluctantly had to place a limit on the number of people I would see. I didn't do this in order to keep away from visitors. But each time a visitor came, I would have to be sent for from my cell some distance away. And I couldn't really cope with the continual coming and going.

I finally got my mattress and the other items I had ordered from my office at about nine o'clock, and went to bed thereafter. Next to me in the infirmary was a young Ogoni boy who had spent three years and more in the prison, waiting for someone to sign a bail bond of 5,000 naira on his behalf.

Apart from Dube and Nwice who naturally stayed with me, there were three or four young men in the ward who introduced themselves to us. They gave us an idea of how the ward was run. We had to pay a levy of a hundred naira each, which was used for the upkeep of the ward: to replace electric bulbs, etc., etc. I knew it was illegal, but I didn't bother myself with that.

I slept well that night. The only problem I had was when the warder locked us in for the night. That was a novel experience, and I hated it thoroughly. What if I needed medical attention at night? There was no telephone, and no doctor either. Mercifully, the University of Port Harcourt Teaching Hospital was, literally, around the corner. But I would need to get there! I had to call on my store of humour to internalize the experience quickly and accept it as 'one of those things'.

I woke up after my usual four-hour sleep to analyse my new situation. What came to my mind was how often a prison had featured in my fiction. There were *Prisoners of Jeb's* and its sequel, *Pita Dumbrok's Prison*. And in 1992 I had completed *Lemona*, my fifth novel, in longhand only to have it stolen along with my briefcase at Lagos Airport on

my return from my trip to Geneva to present the Ogoni case before the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations. I thought how much better the novels might have been if I had written them after my current experience. The loss of my last novel, whose heroine had spent twenty-five years in prison, had affected me badly, killing my desire to write fiction. I hoped that I would be able to find the will to rewrite the novel and that it would be much enriched by my experience of prison.

I thought too of the other harrowing discovery, that one third of the 1,200 inmates of that prison were Ogoni people. Most of them had just been dumped there on minor charges, forgotten by the police and the judicial system which sent them there, with no one to take up their cases and give them justice. My attention had been drawn to the fact by the fairly large number of the prison staff who happened to be Ogoni. Again, it was not surprising that that number of staff should be Ogoni. The conditions of service of prison staff were dismal, and the salary a mere pittance. Who wanted to work in the prison except the condemned of the earth?

My enemies were soon to capitalize on the fact of the number of Ogoni people on the staff. When day broke and the staff had their usual morning briefing, the Ogoni staff were told that they were not to get too close to me, as information had reached the authorities that there was a plan to storm the prison and effect my release. I had to work quickly to dispel that piece of blackmail. I had a press release issued to the effect that there was no need to seek my release from detention, as every day I spent there helped to advance my cause.

All that day I had a steady stream of visitors, some of whom I couldn't refuse to see, as they had travelled a long distance from Ogoni in order to meet me. My aged parents came calling also, and it was quite cheering to see them look

so brave. I had initially asked my brother Owens not to allow them to come to Owerri. I had forewarned my father two years earlier that I might well end up in prison or in the grave for my endeavours, and he certainly seemed to take it well; but Owens had informed me how badly my father really felt, and I had then thought that he should not be made to suffer any more. At eighty-nine, he did not have to take the trouble to come to faraway Owerri. But when I read a brave interview which my mother gave to a national newspaper and heard her insist that I must carry on the struggle, I had no more worries about them coming to see me in detention.

And so they did come to Owerri. My father appeared quite calm, but my mother looked shaken. I had to assure her that I was perfectly all right, and that there was nothing to worry about. Like all mothers, she was quite solicitous of my well-being and had brought along a delicacy which I enjoyed in my youth: nutless palm fruit. I had quite forgotten it, not having had any for forty years or so. I was really thrilled to eat them. And after she had left, I was moved to song:

Mama Came Calling

She came visiting today
The lovely little lady
In her hand a dainty meal
Of nutless palm fruits
A long-forgotten delicacy
From my childhood days
Into which I dug my teeth
As my baby gums her breasts
And found therein once again
The milky sweet of a mother's blessings

On their visit to Port Harcourt Prison, the laugh was at the expense of my father. When he came to Owerri, he had not told me of the birth of his youngest son, my youngest half-brother, on the day of my arrest, 21 June. Indeed, everyone had forgotten to mention it to me; it came to me via a publication in a national newspaper. When my father came visiting, I teased him no end. The grand old man only smiled.

In the first two days in the prison, I worked very hard at adapting myself to the routine of the place. Because we were in prison custody, and also in the infirmary, we were not really subject to the full routine of a prison, although we had the rights to which prisoners were entitled. One major problem was again the toilet facility. My friend Mina, who was around most of the time, realizing my predicament, encouraged me to use what was available. The thought of it alone would kill the call. Eventually, on the morning of the third day, I was forced to use the bucket latrine, after ensuring that it was thoroughly disinfected and cleaned out. To urinate was to empty the bladder into a dirty little container whose contents were then poured through a hole in the wall out to the back of the building. Ugh! But having used it once, I learnt to endure it.

Company was not lacking in the prison. Perhaps the most celebrated man there was Major-General Lekwot, who had governed Rivers State between 1975 and 1979. He was the victim of one of the worst cases of political injustice – the well-known Zangon Kataf affair, in which a minority ethnic group, the Katafs, had risen against their Hausa-Fulani oppressors. The latter had taken heavy reprisals: a phoney tribunal had been set up, before which a group of hapless Katafs, most of whom had had nothing to do with the actual uprising, were arraigned and condemned to death. Babangida had granted them a reprieve, changing their sentences to various prison terms. The affair had aroused

national and international furore, but injustice prevailed, and Lekwot and his kinsmen remained in jail.

I found them all, and Lekwot in particular, in a calm frame of mind. He did his exercises regularly, and I had to pass by his cell, a sort of VIP abode, each morning as I went to have my bath in a stone enclosure in the open air. We got talking, and analysed the national, Kataf and Ogoni situations.

Also in prison was Mr O. C. Nsirim, who was having to clear his name over the murder of my dear friend, the late Dr Obi Wali. I had a lot of difficulty talking with him, which is understandable. I had known him for a long time, and when he slumped on the Thursday or Friday morning in his cell, there was cause for concern. I called on him once to extend my sympathy. He recovered and left the prison before I did.

The prison day was quite long, starting at about six o'clock, when the nightsoil man came to clear the latrine bucket. Some of the longer-serving inmates engaged him in a humorous banter in Igbo. Then would follow the general cleaning and after that breakfast. I took a look once at the food that was being served and almost puked. It was fit neither for man nor beast. Thereafter, for me, it was a matter of receiving visitors, having read the newspapers which arrived with my breakfast. There was a bit of time to read, and I followed the news on my radio very keenly. The day ended at about seven o'clock when the warders locked us in. Quite dreary, I would think. And not meant to keep one in good health.

By the Friday my health had deteriorated. I still hadn't had the opportunity to see my doctor, even though I requested it the very day I got to the prison. Instead of my doctor, the Coffin turned up, bearing in its depths Mr Ogbeifun and his man Friday. We went through the process of my making another written statement and answering a few more silly

questions from Mr Inah. I specifically asked Mr OgbEIFUN if he meant to transfer me again to another prison. He lied to me and swore upon it that that was not the case.

That evening, it became imperative for me to consult a doctor. I sent for my brother Owens, who happened to be around, and asked him to get in touch by all means with Dr Ibiama, who had been looking after me. Bobo Ibiama, a consultant physician, had been my contemporary at Ibadan University and had spent all his working life in Rivers State, where he rose to become Director of Medical Services before retiring into private practice and consulting for the University of Port Harcourt Teaching Hospital. He had lately made an unexpected foray into party politics, contesting the position of Governor of Rivers State. He was too fine a man to win a Nigerian election and duly crashed out. Very well born to a Bonny family, he was a model of a gentleman, and came into the prison as soon as he heard of my condition.

Along with him came Professor Claude Ake, all anxious for me. Bobo took a look at me, applied his stethoscope and sphygmomanometer and decided that I had to be moved to the teaching hospital. He gave orders to that effect.

Effecting the order was to take all of the time and patience of Professor Ake, my brother Owens, my friend, Alfred Ilenre, who had come down from Lagos to see me, and one of the prison officers, Mr Okpoko, who had gone out of his way to ensure that I was properly taken care of.

It transpired that because I was in prison custody, I remained the responsibility of the Nigerian police force and not of the Nigerian prison service, and that the permission of the Rivers State Commissioner of Police would have to be obtained before I could be released into hospital. When the Commissioner was contacted very late that night, he said we would require a court order from a high court judge. No judge could be contacted that night.

The following morning, Saturday, my brother was able to obtain the high court order, but when it was presented to the Commissioner of Police, a bovine-looking man called Bayo Balogun, he merely threw the court order to the floor. This took place before a journalist from the respected newspaper *The Times* of London. And there the matter might have ended.

All that Saturday I was in agony. Then came the Sunday. I met with the *Times* reporter, Mr Kyle, and came to learn that there had been quite some concern in Britain over my safety. Indeed, Claude Ake had given me that morning a copy of *The Times Literary Supplement* in which Tony Daniels had done a piece about my arrest.

I had met Tony, an exciting medical doctor whose wanderlust has carried him through most of Africa, in March at my Port Harcourt office, and swapped stories with him. He had such a fund of jokes on Africa, it was really most unbelievable. He had also written several travel books on Africa and I thought it really nice of him to have exposed my travails to the British public.

That Sunday night when my condition deteriorated further, I had to cry for help through the window of our ward. A helpless warder came round, and sent for the Superintendent; he turned up equally helpless, looked through my window and mumbled something really inane. I might just as well have died. But I was determined not to give my tormentors that comfort. The will to survive saw me through the crisis.

When morning came, I sent urgently to the boss of the prison and challenged him. I virtually called him an assassin before most of his senior staff whom he had invited along. I could not understand, I said, why he had refused to send me to hospital in spite of a consultant's order. I refused to accept that the police should determine what

happens to me. The prison authorities and Mr Ikpatti himself, personally, would have a lot of accounting to do to my family and to the Ogoni people if anything should happen to me because they were dithering over who was to sign what paper or because they did not know what to do about simple matters of life and death. Somehow, it worked. After a six-hour wait, during which Mr Ikpatti must have consulted the gods and oracles of his native Ibibioland, he finally informed me that he had found a way round the regulations. He would send me to the hospital and inform the Divisional Police Officer, a minor official in the pecking order, about what he had done. It would be up to the DPO to send the information to his superiors.

Then another real problem cropped up. The prison had no writing-paper and all the shops had closed. Mr James Nwibana, a printer from Ogoni, had visited me the previous day and left me a ream of paper, just in case I wanted to write. I sent for the paper and offered to type the letter myself just in case the prison typist had gone home.

Mercifully, the typist was an Ogoni man who had refused to close for the day. He finally typed the letter without an error, and I was on my way to the University of Port Harcourt Teaching Hospital. The prison had no ambulance and no car, of course. I had to travel in a car provided by my office, in between two prison officers.

We drove past my office on Aggrey Road, and were, within a few minutes, at the blessed hospital. Mrs Beredugo, an experienced Matron and the wife of an old friend, was on duty, and took steps to ensure that I was safely installed in a private room in the hospital within a very short time indeed. Dr Ibiama had left orders to that effect, and I was under sedation before very long.

Believe it or not, fifteen minutes after I left 'Alabama City'

for the hospital, an order signed by the Chief Judge of Rivers State arrived, asking that the MOSOP Three be transferred to different prisons. I was to be sent to Enugu, and Dube and Nwice to Owerri Prison. Mr Inah was on hand to execute the order, and only waited until MIDNIGHT to commence operations.

He arrived at the prison with armed guards, ordered the hapless Dube and Nwice to get ready, hurled them into the Coffin, and came to the teaching hospital to fetch me. I was rudely awakened out of deep sleep to see the unwelcome face of Mr Inah at the door.

'I have orders to take you away,' Mr Inah intoned coldly.

'Where to?'

'To Enugu.'

I looked at the time. It was thirty minutes past midnight.

'Sorry, I'm not well,' I said weakly.

'I have my orders.'

The Matron on duty came in to ask what was happening. Mr Inah reported his mission.

'Sorry, you can't take away the patient without the specific instructions of the Chief Medical Director.'

'I have my orders, madam,' Mr Inah emphasized.

'And I have my orders too!' The Matron was firm.

Mr Inah withdrew. I could hear the rain pouring down.

'Don't worry,' the Matron assured me, as she tucked me into my bed. 'Nobody will take you away from here.'

Later that night, Dr Longjohn, my contemporary at Ibadan University and a friend from those days, turned up. He woke me up and asked if I had been taken proper care of. I replied in the affirmative.

'That's fine. You can go back to sleep.'

I rolled over. Dr Longjohn had just saved me from the conspiracy which involved Governor Ada George, the

Commissioner of Police, Bayo Balogun, and other highly placed persons in the murderous Babangida regime.

Fate had played its own part. That night, Mr Ogbeifun and Bayo Balogun did their damndest to find the leader of the police mobile squadron to organize men to storm the hospital and take me away. That man was not to be found. And they gave up, reluctantly.

According to Dube, who was in the Coffin while Mr Inah drove around looking for the Chief Medical Director of the teaching hospital, the Police Mobile Force leader, the Commissioner of Police and Mr Ogbeifun, they finally drove off when all else failed, at about two o'clock, in the direction of Owerri. Arriving at the Port Harcourt International Airport, Mr Inah decided that he needed some sleep and the Coffin stopped at the airport so he could do so. They arrived at Owerri Prison at nine o'clock the following morning. The prison authorities were not very willing to take them in, as the regulations had been breached. In the end, they were admitted.

That morning Dr Longjohn came to inform me, humorously, that he had been told that Ogoni warriors would be coming to storm the hospital. Was I assuring him that that would not happen? I gave him the undertaking. He laughed and went off.

Unknown to me, a great number of people and organizations in Nigeria and abroad had taken steps to save me from the fangs of Babangida, the Monster of Minna. Amnesty International, which had adopted the three of us as Prisoners of Conscience, *The Times* of London, the *Observer*, the Committee for Writers in Prison of International PEN, the BBC, Ken Jr, my first son, William Boyd, the peerless British novelist, the United Nations Working Group for Indigenous People, UNPO, Greenpeace, the Association of Nigerian Authors had all played a role in my release. Nor must I fail

to mention the staff in my office at Port Harcourt and Lagos, Apollos Onwuasoaku, Innocent Iheme, Deebii Nwiado, Emeka Nwachukwu, Kweku Arthur, Sunday Dugbor and others. And, of course, the entire people of Ogoni, Olu Onagoruwa, Ledum Mitee and Barry Kumbe, Senator Cyrus Nunieh, Samuel Igbara and Mr Briggs, the lawyers who took up my cause free of charge. I must also thank the senior police officers at Owerri, including Mr Ilozuoke and Mr Ukah, the prison officers at Port Harcourt Prison, Dr I. I. Ibiama and the doctors and nurses at the University of Port Harcourt Teaching Hospital.

Release finally came on 22 July, when one of the police officers in mufti who had abducted me on the highway in June came to inform me that he had instruction to grant me bail. This instruction, it would appear, had come from someone called Aikhomu, who was said to be Vice-President of some place called Nigeria. Just where were the courts, you wonder? What of Mrs D, the magistrate who was busy writing in her book and sending us to prison custody? The court no longer mattered. A man called Aikhomu had decided. Shame on these men who subvert the law and morality! The bail bond, I was told, could only be signed by my 89-year-old father. I'm stumped if these guys haven't all gone crazy. I thanked the messenger for his troubles, anyway.

Meanwhile, in Owerri, by the crazed dance of the Nigerian masquerade, the good judge who sat over my suit, which we continued to press, had found that the state had held me illegally and ruled that I be paid some compensation and set free. The ruling did not matter to the Babangida government: it had already taken a decision unguided by the law which it was supposed to be obeying.

I had been detained for a month and a day, during which I had witnessed the efficiency of evil. In a country where virtually nothing worked, the security services, armed with all the

A MONTH AND A DAY

gadgets of modern invention, made sure that all orders were carried out with military precision. And the men were marvelously faithful to their instructions.

When Mr Ogbeifun and Mr Inah turned up at my bedside in the hospital to say something about bail and whatnot, I could only offer them the scorn of stony silence, my eyes shut, so I wouldn't see their extraordinarily handsome faces.

Had I known what the conspiracy had in store for the Ogoni people, I might not have been so thankful that I had got off lightly. Notice had been given that on 15 July, 132 Ogoni men, women and children, returning from their abode in the Cameroons, had been waylaid on the Andoni River by an armed gang and cruelly murdered, leaving but two women to make a report.

The genocide of the Ogoni had taken on a new dimension. The manner of it I will narrate in my next book, if I live to tell the tale.

Port Harcourt
17 May 1994