

KBP-6

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

ANGLING IN SOWETO  
The June 16th Memorial

American Express Travel Services  
Merbrook, Box 9395  
123 Commissioner Street  
2000 Johannesburg, South Africa  
June 1982

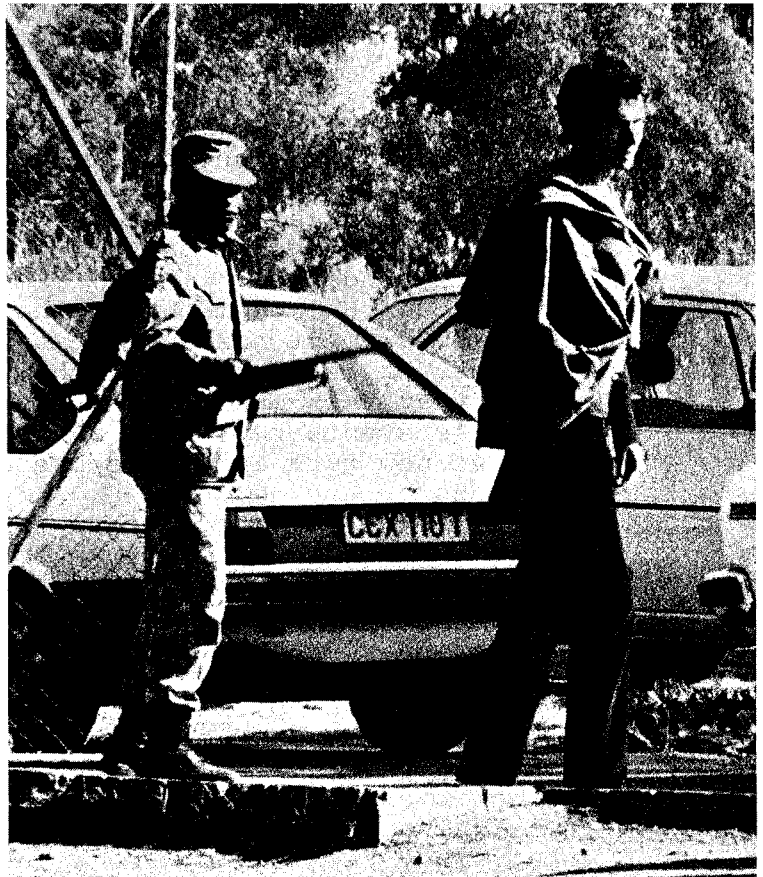
Mr. Peter Bird Martin  
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Dear Peter,

"They're really quite clever, these chaps," says the BBC correspondent. He leans tiredly on the hood of his car and nods towards the large, grey, authoritarian building in front of him. The monolithic structure, with its neo-Grecian portico and brilliant white columns, is the largest and most solid looking thing I have seen since entering Soweto. It is also the South African Police Barracks.

Forty seven journalists are milling about in the parking lot of the aforesaid mausoleum. This sight is not unusual. Those spirited, wide-eyed street thumpers are always somewhere together. After all, a story is like fishfood; journalists are expected to surface when there are ripples.

However, there is a problem, and all of the newspeople are going around in circles nibbling at each other. Why? It's June 16th, anniversary of the '76 Soweto riots, and the only story is no story because it's about the press itself.



Shotgun wielding riot policeman forces South African journalist to remain in police compound

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Kendal Price is a fellow of the Institute studying the cultures of South Africa, her black homelands, and the bordering African states.

All of the local press and foreign correspondents applied for and were issued visas allowing them into Soweto for "the purpose of news coverage." As each of them arrive at the Regina Mundi Church in Soweto they are escorted by plainclothes policemen to the police barracks a few kilometers away. "The station commander would like to talk to all journalists," the beefy, crewcut white chaps in the yellow Mazda tell them. As I drive into the police compound, the heads turn to see who the newest catch is. "The station commander will talk to you just now," I am told by one of the fellows in the compact.

After parking my car I ask the first group of reporters I come across, "have you all been in to speak with the station commander?" They smile and shake their heads. "Has anybody?" I ask. They smile and shake their heads.

"They're really quite clever, these chaps," says the BBC correspondent.

Ha! Ha! Ha! Someone in the police department has just read Catch-22. It is ventured off the record that this must be the case. The day's events represent a creative new turn in police/press relations.

All eyes turn as another car drives in behind the dusty yellow leader. Out pops a tall, French photographer--he has the only trimmed mustache present, and a Renault. With him is one of the black reporters for The Sowetan. She's laughing nervously and shaking her head. The French photographer says, "I told them I was going to take her to her home. They tell me no, you cannot do that and we will take her there ourselves. I tell them you will not take her anywhere without me; I will take her and you can follow. They say are you saying she will not go with us?" The small, thin, black woman speaks up, "I'm not going anywhere with them." She's got her arms folded across her chest. The French photographer nods and says "you see."

A middle aged white policeman wearing a blue sweater approaches and offers the young black woman a ride to her home in Soweto. He makes the offer in a very public fashion. It is exactly the same one the French photographer just described as having been offered. There's no surprise among the spectators when she refuses again and the policeman storms off in a huff.

The French photographer makes a reasonable offer to the departing officer, but this is not a stellar day for reasonableness.

A fellow with a beard and intense eyes walks up to the car-leaning group. The foreigners have expanded to Julie Fredericks of National Public Radio, Joseph Lelyveld of the New York Times, two other Americans and two Britons. The bearded one is a South African reporter. With great conviction, "we're being kept here against our will, and in abuse of our rights as journalists. We think that if all of us together tried to leave at once, that is, if we acted as a group we'll be able to exercise our rights." Getting more of a lack of response than a negative one, the South African says, "well, I guess you'll have to decide for yourselves."

When "outraged sensibility"

has walked out of earshot the group breaks out in somewhat embarrassed laughter. Lelyveld says, "sure, you'll be going, all the way until you reach that locked gate and that fellow with the shotgun." The others laugh again, but look toward the gate just to check and see if the reason for their being able to poke fun at the self-righteous South African is still there. It is.

Lelyveld adds, "I don't need to test them on whether or not this is a police state. I'm perfectly willing to accept the fact that this is a police state."

Another car enters the privileged sanctuary and stops at our group. A black man steps out and immediately a volley of questions is fired at him. "No, everything is quiet at the church. There are a couple of hundred people inside and very few outside. There's not too much going on." He parks his car and moves to another group.

A short blond haired girl bounces up to the group. She's one of those people who walk on the balls of the feet as if perpetually trying to see over a fence. She's also wearing skin tight pants, similarly fitting top, a ridiculous looking six inch wide belt, and one brand new Olympus around her neck. The girl is very attractive, which is probably why the group is overly critical when she asks, "do you know anything about a rumour the people at Regina Mundi were tear-gassed?"

They jump all over her with "where did you hear that?" and "we just spoke to some who was just there and HE didn't say anything about teargas." (The riot police tear-gassed many people at many different locations during the day. The worshipers at Regina Mundi would get theirs later in the day.)

"It's just a rumour," she says defensively, backing away from the barrage of skeptical replies. She doesn't need to add the "whew!" as she walks away, obviously stung. That was no friendly nibble, that was a full-fledged bite.

However, the main event of the day is beginning. Four of the South Africans are in their car approaching the gate. At this point they still only manage to arouse a few turned heads from the parking lot. But the young people doing their futile best for the sake of South Africa's

right to know are not taking the locked gate lying down. They are out of their car and arguing with a new, faceless middle-aged white policeman. He's also not taking this insolence without putting in his own feelings about the matter (we say you stay here, you damn well stay here!). Of course, this is verbal "bang-bang" so out come the cameras, tape recorders, and steno pads. The whole clicking, whirring, scribbling mob descends on the sub-compact and even smaller encounter between the bearded one and the man in light blue.

So, out come the reinforcements, much to the collective glee of all the old hands who know posturing when they see it. However, one woman in her late thirties alternately scribbles frantically into her notebook and looks up nervously as the dozen or so additional riot police walk by the crowd and take up positions.

The black policemen are far more interesting than the young South African reporters shouting platitudes about press freedom. Most of the photographers and the two TV crews focus on the riot squad that is actually sauntering more than marching out to the gate. Either they've been told by the white commanders not to let the reporters incite them to violence ("The press were excluded to insure a peaceful memorial service," said the police commissioner), or their own black machismo is showing through. (We gon' just stroll on out here, an' show all you white folks--that includes you too, Boss--just what the word "cool" means.)

They walk slowly by the the crowd of reporters and casually form a line in front of the car. They look at us like it's all they can do to stay awake.

The television cameramen love it and point and call to each other urgently, "hey, get a close-up on that gat, yeah, the one he's holding right in front of you." Meanwhile the black police are looking more mellow than ever, (uh, excuse me Sah, but my machine gun is caught in yo' camera strap), and the rest of the photographers are

doing their monkey act climbing all everything and each other to get a good shot.

The ruckus subsides after only twenty minutes when either the reporters run out of argument, or the policemen run out of patience. It is hard to tell which, not having followed the actual conversation--I was with the monkeys.

The car is driven back to the parking lot, the crowd returns to the lawn in front of the building, and the riot police yawn in unison. Dangling their rifles, shotguns, and automatics like so many football helmets after a rout, the boys in brown/green/tan start back to the main building. They won't talk with us but they are friendly just the same.

For the next hour there's only more idle chatter, a little horsing around (the S.A. Police Public Relations Officer draws a chalk circle on the pavement and asks "anybody for hopscotch?"), and then of course, the police soup.

Some people have a nose for these sorts of things.

The police have their own canteen, and after the rigours of confrontation what could be nicer than a good, hot, cup of soup? Thus, as if from a very selective snowfall, white styrofoam cups start sprouting from the faces of numerous distinguished newspeople. The phenomenon is described as such because of the singular attention that is being paid by so many to keeping the cups to their mouths. It turns out the soup contains lots of tasty rice that the starved prisoners are doing their best to scarf up without aid of spoons. Note: that's first hand reporting on the latter item.

At 2:00 pm (some people have been here since 9:00 am) the district commandant of the Soweto police arrives. All of the



Black riot policemen block the gate of the Soweto police station

press are called together. Most of the journalists' names are read out and they are asked for their visas to Soweto. The district commander has one expression and very little to say. When he collects them all he says, waving the handful of permits in the air, "you now no longer have permission to be in Soweto. If you are caught in Soweto again, an admission of guilt fine will be allowed the first time and if you are caught a second time then I'm afraid you will be arrested, gentlemen." Someone quickly calls out, "we're in Soweto now, General. How are we supposed to get home?" With no change in his expression the general says, "you have permission to travel through Soweto on the way back to Johannesburg." He walks away briskly, ignoring the other questions of the press.

Everybody starts packing up and getting into their cars. There is no rush to file ("This isn't much of a story, and even if it were there's still too much going on in Lebanon and the Falklands. Though, what I wouldn't give to be in Beirut right now," the photographer for Newsweek confides

to me.) A few drinking arrangements are made.

I realize I have been overlooked and I still have my press pass. I ask Lelyveld if I should try and use it. "I've still got mine too, but I don't think it would be worth the risk," he tells me.

I walk up to the Police Public Relations Officers and wait for him to finish an interview. He's pleasant and seems to appreciate someone waiting for him to finish speaking. So he is smiling as I introduce myself and ask him if I was allowed to keep my permit on purpose. "Does this mean that I'm allowed to go into Soweto?" He's very apologetic now and explains, "no, you must have just been overlooked. You may not use that permit. Please give it to me."

I give him my permit and he says almost jovially, "now just give me a call tomorrow if you have any trouble getting another permit."

For a moment, out of context this sounds like an insane comment. But in the course of the day's proceedings it makes perfectly good sense. The police did not just want the press out of Soweto, they wanted them under their control for the day.

I take the Police PRO's phone number, promise to call him, and we shake hands. There are a few other journalists still in the parking lot, but by waiting for the official I've become one of the last to leave.

I turn left out of the gate just like all of the other cars, and at the intersection about a kilometer down the road I do the same. I've never been out here before, but backtracking looks like it should be easy. I see three black fellows with suitcases hitchhiking, and remembering this is a long straight stretch I decide to pull over and give them a ride. I've got the room today.

A blue sedan pulls over 20 yards in front of me and disgorges five or six middle aged white men. Oops, I think I've stopped for the wrong three brothers.

The group of white men move fast. They are angry and agitated and they surround my car very quickly. I look out of my left hand window (the cars are right-hand drive here; you drive on the left), and there's a blur of action as the white men grab the black fellows--teenagers actually--and start pulling apart their



The general revokes permits; white commander in civilian clothes

bags. But there's something more pressing on my side of the car. It's a man, maybe in his fifties, who's got his head stuck halfway into my window and his hands are reaching in like he's holding somebody by the neck. He says "I'll fucking kill you with my bare hands!" as another man walks by briskly and shouts "we gave you your chance, don't push your luck!"

That confuses me, and confusion not fear must be what comes through in my expression because the white guy with the claw-like hands repeats himself a bit more emphatically. "I'll fucking kill you with my bare hands!" he growls at me and pushes his hands in my face as if for me to inspect them. I'm staring at the bulging vein on the pink, tense face, and wondering if this guy's going to pass out from the strain. The only words that finally come from me are a plaintive appeal. "Please just take it easy. Relax. I was just going to give them a ride."

Wrong button. The man in my window shouts at me, "where are you from?" keeping his hands in position. "America" I say quietly, thinking a soothing voice might help. "Well, then go on back to Vietnam, we don't want you here." Vietnam? But the question mark must show up on my face again because he goes back to the refrain. "I'll fucking kill you, with these, with my bare hands," he hisses. Out of the corner of my eye I see the very frightened face of one of the black fellows. When I feel a pair of hands around my neck, shaking me I feel very frightened myself. "I'll kill you!" (I believe you, honestly I believe you I think and gratefully do not say.) As

a matter of fact I've got absolutely nothing to say at this moment. Not much to do either. My hands are still on the wheel. (Hit him? Not on your life. I haven't seen half a dozen white policemen in uniform today, and other than reporters, I haven't seen any whites who weren't cops.)

I can't really tell what he's doing now. His head is out of the car while he talks to someone else. He's got both hands on my collar now and he seems to be trying to pull me out through the window. But that can't be it exactly because I'm not going anywhere, I'm just sort of jammed up against the window frame. (That's it. It's just a continuation of this morning. No, you haven't really been arrested, but you can't leave either. No, I'm not actually going to strangle you, but I am going to hold you out of your seat by your neck for a while.)

He lets me go. (After how long? Who's counting?) The first confusing person marches past the window and says "now, get the hell out of here." pointing in the opposite direction. "But Johannesburg is that way," I say. Both he and the Soweto semi-strangler turn and shout at me at the top of their voices, "you go that way, turn left at the sign marked Johannesburg, and take the highway!" (Thank you for the directions, Officer.)

One last glance at the three black fellows. They're having pamphlets of some sort shoved in their faces by five, <sup>of the</sup> shouting, middle-aged white men. They look very beleaguered. (Sorry, boys.)

I start the car and only then notice the twenty or so black women looking at me impassively from the backyards of their cubicle houses. They're wearing colorful blankets wrapped around them and leaning with their elbows on the fence.

As I turn around a carload of journalists drives by. They look at me with great concern on their faces.

A week later the skin on the back of my neck is still tender, but I've stopped jumping at the sound of my own shadow. There was one short piece in The Star on the detention of the journalists. The incident wasn't mentioned in any of the other papers nor on the radio. I don't have a TV.

What was mentioned was that there was violence at the Regina Mundi church on June 16th at the conclusion of services. It was reported that one man was arrested there, while over forty buses were stoned in other parts of Soweto.

The official version is that the crowd left the church chanting and singing, and began stoning the police as soon as they saw them. The riot squad was at the church despite the government's public promises that there would be no police present as long as the worshipers stayed indoors.

Another version of the story behind the violence is this: The service went peacefully until the crowd discovered a man they thought to be a police spy. Shortly after this discovery the riot police arrived in force. The crowd began leaving the church and teargassing and stoning or stoning and teargassing ensued. Some blacks who were there believe the arrested man was the alleged undercover policeman.

The only thing that is for certain is the fact that very little was published about the events of the 16th, and what did show up in the South African press was highly suspect.

Sincerely,



Kendal Price

Received in Hanover 10/22/82