

Boomerang for Israel

Oswaldo Ortega

Taisir Kuban, 26 years old, and president of the Palestinian Students' Union, was arrested on December 20, 1967, five days after participating in the sabotage of an Israeli civilian airliner from Lidda, between Ramallah and Tel Aviv, along with an infiltrated commando group.

Frequently seized by stomach cramps contracted during his confinement, Kuban sometimes paces back and forth while reliving for us some of the things that happened to him during the three years and 16 days that he was held in different Israeli prisons.

BEFORE THE June 5 war I was asked by the Front to work in international student circles. I participated in many international student meetings to defend the rights of the Palestinian people. Shortly after the conflict it was decided that it would be a good idea if I started working in occupied territory to awaken the political consciousness of our peasants and refugees, and to organize the students in resistance against the occupation. In other words, it was necessary to organize strikes, meetings, protests, demonstrations. Though petit bourgeois but it was necessary to test ourselves and the ideology by putting them into action.

After receiving brief military training a group of us crossed over to the West Bank of the Jordan River at Kerameh, on August 3, 1967.

Our mission: to establish direct contact with our people in the occupied territory. We were initiating our clandestine work; during our penetration we had numerous encounters with the Israeli watch-dog patrols.

How were you taken prisoner? Did someone give you away?

I don't believe so. One of the lessons that I've learned through my arrest is that nobody should know the identity of someone who's carrying out an infiltration, not even those who want to help. I attribute my capture to some indiscretion, some excess of confidence on the part of some who felt secure because we were right next to them in Jerusalem, the very heart of the occupation, yet in spite of this we could still operate against the enemy.

When they knocked at the door I

was lying down. They spoke in Arabic. I thought perhaps some of my comrades were returning but they didn't give me a chance to get up. They broke into the room violently. They were Israeli soldiers and without saying anything they started beating me up while they searched the room.

"Where are the weapons and the men under your command?"

"You are mistaken. I don't know what you're talking about. I'm just a peasant. I'm just in Jerusalem for a few days of fun."

"It's useless, don't lie. You're an officer and we know it."

"Here's my identity card." I said handing them a false Israeli identity card.

After they hit and handcuffed me they pulled me out of the room and took me in a jeep to Maskobia prison, formerly a Russian Orthodox church whose cells of prayer have been turned into torture chambers, since the time of the June War.

They stripped me of my clothes and handcuffed and naked, I was whipped by eight Israeli agents in a circle around me. When I lost my balance and fell on one of them they would push me on another. They tried constantly to get me to confess. They beat me for more than six hours, until I fainted. Then they placed me on my back, with my raised legs thrust through the back of a chair and started hitting the soles of my feet with a stick. When this brought no results, they changed methods: an officer showed up but he was apparently opposed to applying electric shocks on different parts of my body to force me to confess. He argued with them and finally ordered them to leave the room and leave me alone with

him. He then approached me in a friendly way and offered me cigarettes; he said he was sure that I was a good boy; that he swore by the honor of the Israeli Army that if I helped him he would keep the secret, that he was only interested in knowing where the weapons were hidden and where the men under my command could be found. I repeated what I had said when I was captured: that I had never seen a pistol in my life except in the movies. He took down my statement and asked me to sign it. I told him I didn't know how to write. Then he said that I should place my thumbprint at the end of the statement.

"Do you want to work with me?" he insisted until the end.

"I'm afraid they will kill me," I answered playing along.

"The work you must do is not dangerous. We will release you and you will be in charge of denouncing the guerrillas. Look, here's a pack of cigarettes for you [the best brand] to help you in thinking it over."

I thought to myself that they place a cheap price on treason.

When he left he ordered that I be put in a cell until the following morning.

During the time I was in that cell a multitude of feverish thoughts assaulted my imagination. I imagined how, if I pretended to agree to his demands, he would free me; then I would manage to escape his guards and join my comrades; we would laugh and make fun of the captors. At the most intense moment of delirium I heard footsteps: it was the military police. They stopped in front of the cell bars, aiming their UZZI submachine guns at me. Some of them came in; they handcuffed me once again, blindfolded

me and pushed me out of the cell and through the prison corridors with sharp curt words of "left," "right," "forward." They put me in a jeep and moved me to another building within Jerusalem. When they took the bandage from my eyes I was in a luxurious room. I was alone for a while and then some 20 Israeli officers appeared, among them a colonel whose accent was obviously German and who led the interrogation.

"How are you, Taisir Kubaa?"

His calling me by my name disconcerted me. They had discovered my identity.

"You've been to Munich, haven't you?"

I remained silent.

"I'm from Munich," he said.

My steady silence irritated one of the officers, who struck me in the face and ordered me to answer.

"How can I answer when I don't speak Hebrew?" I said.

They exchanged glances. Actually the colonel had spoken to me in English from the beginning, but I insisted on playing the game though I knew I was lost.

The Colonel repeated very slowly three times the same greeting: "How are you, Taisir Kubaa. President of the Palestinian Student Union?" Through a subtle psychological game he was trying to convince me that it was useless for me to continue to lie and that I should put all my cards on the table. While he awaited my reaction he opened up the file he was carrying and started to read it next to me so that I would see the newspaper clipping; with my pictures and statements during the period of international meetings and congresses.

"OK I'm Taisir Kubaa. What do you want from me?"

"We don't want anything," replied

the Colonel. "at any rate, what do you want from us?"

"Me? I want to resist the invader."

"You are really a man, my friend. But what use is it for you to continue to deny the weapons and the men under your command? Confess, once and for all; where are they?"

"I don't know what you are talking about. I've just arrived in Jerusalem. I haven't even been able to establish contact with the students."

"Taisir, how is it possible that being an educated young man, you've resigned your post abroad and have come here to risk your life?"

"I don't belong to the traditional Palestinian leadership. I have an ideology that forces me to return here and fight against the invader."

"I'm not here to discuss politics," he grumbled, the muscles of his face stiffening, and then demanded once again, to no avail, that I reveal the information.

"If you don't confess I'll send you to a place you won't return from alive."

The situation was very tense. The officers remained silent and attentive during the interrogation.

"Before crossing the Jordan I knew I was risking my life and I crossed it."

"You are obsessed."

"That's right — with defending my rights."

They transferred me to the Sarafand concentration camp, in Ramallah. They locked me up in a cell of 1.80 square meters, where I couldn't even stretch my legs. I had to remain with my legs bent whenever

I lay down to rest. The floor was my bed, and I had a dirty blanket for cover. There was a ghastly stink from the sewer coming from the other cells. My cell also served as my bathroom. Since no light entered, I lost track of time. They tortured me sporadically. They would stand me on a stool and hang me, handcuffed, from a ceiling hook; they would then pull the stool away and I would hang like a piece of meat in a butchershop. Then they would whip me to force me to confess. Many Palestinian prisoners have remained partially or totally paralyzed as a result of these savage tortures that lacerate the joints and muscles. They applied electric shock to various parts of my body, including my genitals. They used my hands as ashtrays for their cigarettes. They even resorted to police dogs. The guards would egg them on, and their eyes blazed with fury. They would whip them and their drooling mouths and enormous teeth almost touched me. Since they were not allowed to bite in my case, they would paw the air tearing my clothes and scratching my skin. With what remained of my notion of time, I think it was night when they used to shoot their dying victims or those "obsessed" prisoners whose unwillingness to collaborate made them lose their patience. Screams of pain and desperation, sobs of impotence would make those hours seem interminable. One of those nights I listened, horrified, to them torturing a child. His voice was unmistakable; he begged for mercy in the name of Mohammed, of Allah and even of Issa (Christ); that night I couldn't contain myself any longer and cried as I had never cried during those endless hours of torture. After 17

long days of this useless effort to break me physically and morally, they changed methods once again.

"We've been ordered to leave you alone but you must sign this document acknowledging that you have not been tortured."

"Have I been tortured or not?"

"Yes, somewhat."

I would have expected the torturing of prisoners from anybody, but never from Jews who once suffered the same identical tribulations from the fascists. How is it possible for victims to turn into torturers, not of those who were responsible for the suffering but of others who are completely innocent of the cruelties they suffered?

Of course, I refused to sign. From Sarafand, they took me back to the former church of Maskobeia, in Jerusalem, and placed me in a cell — scarcely large enough for three people — together with four other prisoners, who had been captured three or four days before. When I told them who I was they told me there was an intense campaign of solidarity in the Arab nations and throughout the world by progressive student and youth organizations demanding my freedom. Then I understood why they had ceased to torture me, and why they were so anxious for me to sign the document absolving them from any responsibility for the tortures they had inflicted on me. From Maskobeia they transferred me to Ramallah. On April 20, 1968, four months after my capture, they tried me before a military court. They asked me to choose an Israeli lawyer to defend me. I refused. The Union of Democratic Lawyers and the International Union of Students had offered the names of various lawyers to assume my defense.

"If you don't allow those lawyers

to defend me, I will defend myself."

They did not yield. They charged me with infiltration and affiliation with an illegal organization. The international and Arab press campaign, and the mobilization of student and youth movements prevented them from carrying out their trial behind closed doors as they had wanted in the beginning. Foreign journalists and consular representatives from Jerusalem attended the trial as well as a good number of Palestinians, men and women from the West Bank who sympathize with our cause. Israel wanted to condemn the resistance through me, and I wanted to condemn the occupation through the judges. I rejected both charges when I had to defend myself.

"I did not infiltrate into any foreign territory. I returned to my country via Amman-Jerusalem, exactly as an Egyptian would go from Alexandria to Cairo, or a Chinese from Peking to Shanghai. There are various means of transportation: trains, airplanes, buses, but I like to walk. I'm poor and I can't afford such means of transportation so I decided to walk at night which allowed me to enjoy the scenery, the moon and the stars, aside from saving money. You, gentlemen of the jury, are the real infiltrators. You infiltrated my country and murdered my people. You are really the ones who should be sitting in the dock and I should be judging you."

They moved uneasily in their chairs and began shouting for me to shut up.

"I'm my own lawyer and I have every right to develop this thesis in my defense. I also reject the second charge.

"I'm not a member of an illegal

organization; I'm a member of a progressive group which is recognized by revolutionary forces all over the world as a national liberation movement and which struggles against imperialism and its servants. You, gentlemen of the jury, are the ones who belong to an illegal organization. Zionism is a fascist, racist organization at the service of US imperialism; for those reasons the charges made against me are actually against yourselves. Third, I don't accept the legal authority of this court. It has been named and appointed by a state that I don't recognize. I am here under duress in a military rather than a civil court."

"If you want your sentence to be less severe, it is advisable that you stop your political agitation."

"I don't care if you sentence me to life imprisonment. It would be a reward for my inflexible attitude toward the occupying forces. The day will come when you will be judged for your actions, and not only by the Palestinian people. I can assure you the judges won't be Christian or Moslem. They will be Jews like yourselves, but honest, progressive Jews, enemies of Zionism."

They threatened to order me from the courtroom and to continue the trial in absentia if I continued the same type of defense.

"This is Ramallah. This is my city, my country. You are the ones who must leave. Ask those present which one of us should leave."

The public broke into applause. Some of the women cried and others began to boo the prosecution. The court then threatened to empty the

room.

"Gentlemen, you must calm yourselves. First, you throw them out of their country and now you are going to throw them out of this room."

The authorities, having lost all control, called in the military police and ordered them to take me out. I refused to move. They had to carry me out. The trial continued in my absence. A group of officers and the major communicated my sentence to me in my cell: three years. When they gave me my sentence for me to sign, I refused.

"I don't accept this sentence or any other given by such a court. You can cut off my hand and sign with it if you like, but as long as I live I will never sign of my own will."

"Sign and within a few months you can appeal and we will release you."

"The only thing I will do is to ask my people to increase the struggle."

I was in solitary confinement in the Ramallah prison for more than six months. They then moved me to the Nablus Central Prison with more than 600 political prisoners. More than 90% of them were peasants and workers and the rest were students and professionals. There I started to work in the clandestine organization. I learned there that a revolutionary can be useful not only in freedom but in prison. Political, cultural and ideological educational groups were created among that vast mass of prisoners, who had magnificent human qualities: they organized movements to improve prison conditions, they began to participate in the celebration of patriotic Arab and international

dates, such as the hundredth anniversary of Lenin's birth; political study circles discussed subjects such as the Cuban and Vietnamese revolutions. An underground network to detect and bring to justice the "stool pigeons" was effectively established.

In August 1970 I was returned to the Ramallah prison together with 400 other prisoners, and I was marked as one of the main political agitators in the Nablus Central Prison. In Ramallah, I was totally isolated from the rest of the prisoners. They placed me in a cell with Bruno Broget, 19 years old, the Swiss patriot of the Popular Liberation Front who was arrested during a frustrated assault on Tel Aviv and sentenced to 15 years in prison. Once in a while they would approach me offering my release if I "voluntarily" abandoned the West Bank, but they always obtained the same negative response.

On January 6 of this year they unexpectedly took me from my cell, blindfolded me and put me in a jeep, and drove for quite a while on an unpaved bumpy road, which had us bouncing on our seats; the wheels of the jeep raised such heavy clouds of dust that it penetrated our throats and lungs and caused a continuous, dry cough. When the jeep stopped and they removed the bandage from my eyes, I saw that we were in an arid region. There were other prisoners in other jeeps, and by the comments we gathered that we were in the Negev desert! They took our belongings from us and pushed us in the direction we were to walk. We obeyed. After two hours of walking in the desert a Jordanian patrol saw us and took us prisoner. They kept us ten days in prison and afterwards released us.