

July 77

*File
Rosebaugh &
Capuano
Carter Brazil*

Statement by
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Mennonite Central Committee

- 1. ~~FE~~
- 2. ~~SW~~
- 3. TR - pls send copy to J/HA -
Michele Bova
~~HR - C. Beringer~~
- 4. SCS - Mr Rivera

On July 13 my presence was solicited by the federal police of Recife, Brazil with urgency. As I was traveling in Southern Brazil, my superior got in contact with me and I was instructed to take the first bus back to Recife.

Upon arrival at the federal police headquarters in Recife, I was informed that my application for a permanent visa had been denied. This decision had been made by the authorities in the federal Ministry of Justice. The reason given by the Ministry of Justice was that the concession of a permanent visa was not convenient to the interests of the country. No further information was given regarding the decision. The federal police authority that proffered this information speculated that my professional qualifications had been deemed inadequate by the Ministry of Justice, resulting in the denial of permanent status. I was given eight days to leave the country. I immediately made arrangements for departure, and left Brazil at 10:30 p.m. on Thursday, July 21, 1977.

At this stage, I can only speculate about the depth of the reason given for the denial of permanent status. It is, of course, a definite possibility that this refusal is a reflection of the Brazilian governments displeasure over Mrs. Carter's visit with father Lawrence Rosebaugh and I. As is well known, Mrs. Carter's visit drew great attention to the question of human rights in the prisons of Recife, where we were held incomunicado during four days in May. Nonetheless, it should be made clear that there may have emerged more normal, routine complications in the application process that necessitated the denial of permanent status. As I do hope to return to Brazil sometime in the future, I prefer to believe in this latter case.

However, being realistic, I must recall that my work with father Lawrence has not been appreciated by many segments of Brazilian society. We were working with the homeless, hungry people that live under the bridges and on the sidewalks in Recife, attempting to offer them comfort for the physical and emotional pain that they suffer as ignored, unwanted elements of society. We wanted to give them new reasons for hope, by living among them as they do, sharing humble meals with them, even sleeping on the streets with them, and by doing all we could to refer them to other social assistance agencies in the city. We didn't expect to solve the poverty problem; we just wanted to represent Jesus Christ, resurrected, among them.

However, our way of witnessing of Christ's love to the poor has been suspect by Brazilian government authorities as being of a subversive nature, or of a demagogic nature. Strangely, had we not been imprisoned, our work would have continued as inconspicuously as the lives of the very poor of Recife. I am sorry that some Brazilian officials have so misinterpreted our intentions.

The attention being given to my leaving Brazil, like the attention given to Mrs. Carter's visit in June, will hopefully focus on the violation of human rights in Brazil, but will also serve as yet another impetus toward the restoration of human dignity in all countries, including the United States. I believe that the Carter administration is generating optimism in the hearts of many

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Brazilians, and hopefully this optimism will extend to those who suffer within our own nation as well. If all the world leaders continue to place human rights at the top of their agendas, applying pressures as deemed appropriate, I feel the world will become a better place to live in for all.

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Mennonite Central Committee, A Christian resource for meeting human need, is the international service organization of the Mennonite Churches in the United States and Canada. MCC Has its headquarters in Akron, Pennsylvania, U.S.A., with a branch office in Recife, Pernambuco, Brazil. Presently, MCC has 550 volunteers in 43 countries, in North America, Latin America, Europe, Asia and Africa, working as nurses, nutritionists, agronomists, social workers, and teachers. In Pernambuco, where MCC works in Brazil, there are 33 volunteers working in agriculture, nutrition, health, social services and education. MCC, through its volunteers, seeks to help the communities to develop in these areas and to spread the good news of Jesus Christ through a word and deed witness.

REPORT OF IMPRISONMENT OF
MENNONITE CENTRAL COMMITTEE VOLUNTEER,
THOMAS CAPUANO, MAY 15, 1977 -- MAY 18, 1977

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At around noon on May 15, 1977, in the city of Recife, Pernambuco, Brazil, I was with Father Lawrence Rosebaugh, a Roman Catholic priest, pushing a cart up Avenida Sul to the marketplace in the part of town called Afogados, where we intended to pick up sacks of fruits and vegetables from the market stands which were then to be distributed among the poor in the city. It was at this time, around 12 noon, that a white Volkswagen stopped and two men accosted us as police agents, demanding to see our documents. Although our documents were in perfect order, they continued to question us with regard to the cart, expressing doubt that it was really ours; with regard to our nationality, expressing suspicion that we were concealing our identities (although by our documents, it was obvious we were North Americans); with regard to our keys, expressing suspicion that they were not ours; and with regard to various lesser subjects as well. Often the two of them would ask several questions simultaneously, and when I would attempt to answer one of them, they would interrupt me with other questions. We informed them that we were members of foreign mission organizations: I identified myself as a member of the Mennonite Central Committee, a Protestant mission organization, and Lawrence identified himself as a Roman Catholic priest. For no apparent reason then, we were told we would be taken in and our documents subjected to a routine verification. We were then handcuffed and told to enter the car, while the men parked our cart and belongings near the side of the road.

We were taken to the "Delegacia de Roubos e Furtos" (the police station for robberies and thefts) in the suburb of Curado, which is a department of the "Secretaria de Seguranca Pùblica" (State Public Security Department), where our captors explained very briefly to a man seated at a desk that they had picked us up pushing a cart and that Lawrence had said he was a priest. The man sitting at the desk took our names, addresses and telephone numbers, our wallets and our glasses, and told us that our case would be resolved the following day. As we stood before his desk, various cars arrived, and shouts and several shots were heard, and five or six men came in. One of the men, who appeared to be the leader because he was the largest and the center of attention of all the others, drew close to me in a menacing manner, hit me lightly on the head with the gun that he carried (which appeared to be a rifle about one-half meter long), and thus frightening me, asked, "Are you a Communist?" He pushed me violently into the desk, poking the gun into my stomach. Next he shoved Father Lawrence in the same way though even more violently into the opposite wall and said, "You're subversives, huh? This is a case for the DOPS." (Department of Political and Social Order) He then disappeared into an adjacent room. I then requested to telephone the U.S. Consulate, but the seated man replied, "Don't worry about that... I'll do it later."

We were then conducted to the jail, where we were ordered to strip naked. What money we had in our pants was to be kept safely for us and returned, we were told. We were placed in a cell that measured 3.4 meters by 5.0 meters (which was easy enough to calculate, as the walls were tiled). There were 15-17 men in the small, stuffy cell, all of them nude as we also were nude, sitting or lying on the cement floor. There was nothing in the cell outside of the prisoners. Even so, there was almost no room for us to sit, as the room was filled far beyond capacity with the bare bodies of the other prisoners. The stench of sweat, excrement and mold was pungent and nauseating. We learned from the prisoners that many of them had been in jail for 20-30 days and did not know when they would be released. They didn't even know if their cases would be resolved by lawyers or by the courts. Many did not know the charges against them. All were held incomunicado. We were also held incomunicado, as our every request to telephone the U.S. Consulate was consistently ignored, deferred or outwardly denied by the guards or police officials. By the prisoners themselves we were threatened with sexual abuse, and then we were beat, kicked and shoved for about twenty minutes by a prisoner who said he was "mentally ill". Though there was a guard in the hallway at all times, no assistance came from him.

Before nightfall, we were led into the hallway with all the prisoners from our cell to bathe one by one in the water which spouted out of a pipe in the wall. The sound of the guards slapping and punching the wet, bare bodies of the prisoners was constant. At this time we were moved to a different cell, which measured 3.4 meters wide by 8.0 meters long; that is, a larger cell, though even more crowded, for there were 34 prisoners there. Many of the smaller prisoners were beaten for completely unjustifiable and arbitrary reasons by the guards in the hallway and the larger prisoners. There was no food that first evening.

At night we were all forced to lie down on the cement floor. There was simply not enough room for everybody, however, unless we were to lie on our sides, like sardines in a can. Sleep was impossible, since the heat and the smell and the sweat were unbearable. It was so crowded that the legs and arms of the prisoners hit and poked their neighbors, and there were some people who had to spend the entire night seated or standing. One boy had to lie down on top of the toilet, because it was the only empty place.

Water was not given to the prisoners more than twice a day, at times determined by the guards. Several times I was unable to drink even at these times, because I was at the end of the line and the guards did not want to give out any more. The thirst and parched mouth were agonizing throughout our time in jail.

Since we were told that our case would be resolved the next day, we awaited release all day Monday, May 16, 1977. When evening came and we realized that our case was not going to be resolved that day, we determined to begin again our requests to telephone the U.S. Consulate. On the third day, May 17, innumerable requests were made to contact the U.S. Consul, both to the guard in the hallway and the guard at the front desk (called "the permanent"). All my requests were ignored or refused.

By the fourth day, May 18, it became clear to us that we as well as all the prisoners were being subjected to

a series of calculatedly demoralizing inhumanities: a) starvation diet: In the morning there was no food whatsoever. At noon, we received a handful of dampened manioc flour (placed in our hands) and a piece of dried meat the size of a quarter. In the evening, 25-50 grams of bread was given (though that first night there was not even bread). Those prisoners who had been in jail for more than 7-10 days were emaciated and weak, their rib cages and collar bones protruding. b) arbitrary violence: Throughout our time in jail, the screams of pain and the beatings received from the guards could be heard echoing down the hall. On the fourth day, we witnessed a torture scene: two adolescent boys were being beaten and shoved. Then, one of them was forced to hold out his hands while a hefty policeman smashed his hands with all his strength, using a length of board. From the sounds produced, it seemed that they were being broken into pieces. c) unsanitary conditions: No soap was provided for showers. One day showers were denied altogether. Lice were everywhere and by the second day I was infested. The toilet consisted of a hole in one corner of the room. The cleaning of this toilet was not done on a regular basis; at the most, once a day, but one day no cleaning was done at all.

Visits from relatives or friends were forbidden. Contact with the officials of the jail was extremely restricted. Consequently, the prisoners, many of them very poor persons with no contacts to help them and without a lawyer's assistance, were forced into an agonizing waiting game, never knowing how many more days of jail lay ahead of them.

On the fourth day, May 18, I had the opportunity to request a final time a telephone call to the U.S. Consulate. This time I made my request directly to a police investigator (delegado) who happened to be in the front room, close to the desk, when we went into the hallway to take our showers. I asked the man, "May I call the U.S. Consulate? We are Americans, and were brought in for just a routine check of our documents." The man replied, "Don't you know this is Brazil, not the United States? You got that? Brazil, not the United States!" I asked again, "Then I can't call the Consul?" He replied violently, "You're not going to talk to no damn body! You two are fucked up!" (Você não vai falar com pôrra ninguém! Vocês estão fudidos!), implying by his last phrase that we did not have a hope of being released, and much less of calling the consul.

Finally, just before noon on the fourth day, May 18, 1977, we were called to the front desk, where they took our names and the names of our mission organizations, and sent back to the cell. Twenty minutes later we were called again and released. The money from our pants had been stolen, but all other valuables were restored intact. We were told to leave the police station. No explanation whatsoever was given.

I did not wish for the fact of our imprisonment and the hardships and mistreatment suffered by us to be the object of attention in this case. Rather, the cruelty and human degradation under which those who remain imprisoned suffer are what deserve all the attention and concern, and above all, work, of the government and people. Truly, the deplorable conditions, the lack of the most basic human rights, and the brutality of the police in the Delegacia de Roubo e Furtos appear to me to be equal to those of the Colonial era. I appeal, therefore, in the name of Jesus Christ, liberator of the oppressed, in the name of those unfortunate prisoners, and in the name of the Brazilian civilization, which I so admire, for the rapid and complete restoration of the respect and dignity due to every human being, no matter how humble or scorned he may be.