

## **Experiences of a WiPC minder** **by Naomi May**

During the past three years I have been a minder to five prisoners, three of whom have since been released. Although one of them had served his sentence, the other two were freed due to pressure from human rights organisations such as PEN. Indeed the most rewarding aspect of this work is that, once a PEN campaign has been mounted on behalf of a prisoner, his or her chances of reprieve will be high.

The downside, however, can be a sense of futility and frustration with letters and emails disappearing into the void. While the role of the minder is to befriend prisoners and their families and to work, as far as is possible, for their eventual release, the initial problem is how to make contact and where to start. Here I have found Lucy Popescu of English PEN's Writers in Prison Committee (WiPC) and Cathy McCann, Dixie Wills and others at International PEN to be most helpful.

Having acquired the necessary addresses, a great deal of luck is still required. So far I have had almost no response to repeated attempts to contact my two unfortunate prisoners still in detention in Sierra Leone and Saudi Arabia. Paul Kamara, former editor of the daily *For Di People*, was imprisoned for two years in 2003 for criticising his government's involvement in the rampant corruption in Sierra Leone. Irrepressibly defiant, he has survived two murder attempts, first being shot, then thrown from an upper window: his wife believes he may yet be killed while in jail. In the meantime, the well-known poet Ali Al-Domaini was given a brutal nine year sentence in May 2005 for objecting to the slow pace of reform in Saudi Arabia and for demanding a constitutional monarchy. Since the sentence accords with Islamic law, there is little that can be done other than to plead for mercy through a transference from prison to house arrest.

At the risk of theft by warders, parcels of food and books can sometimes be sent to those in jail. Then there are standard letters of appeal to various figures in authority and ambassadors, including our own ambassador in the prisoner's country. As there are seldom replies, this can seem pointless, but I was assured by Dr Sylvia Casale, President of the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture, that persistence is important and that every letter counts. In the past, the *New Statesman* kindly allowed the WiPC a monthly paragraph, which minders can use to put the case for their prisoners. If minders have political or journalistic contacts, these can be useful.

At times it is dangerous for prisoners if foreigners try to contact them. This was the case with the poet and dramatist Marwan Osman, a Syrian Kurd, sentenced to fifteen years hard labour in 2002 for attending a peaceful demonstration demanding better legal protection for the Kurdish minority. The closest I got to him was a correspondence with Dr Zaradachet Hajo, President of Kurdish PEN, by then based in Frankfurt. After international pressure, Marwan Osman was released on 22 February 2004 and immediately left Syria for Iraqi Kurdistan.

While the aim of the WiPC is to get people out of jail, they tend to face serious problems when they are released. My most fruitful relationships have been with two prisoners whom I was unable to contact before their release. Jorge Olivera Castillo, formerly editor of Havana Press, was among 75 Cuban dissidents rounded up in March 2003. Sentenced to 18 years, he was put in a cell with four others, a hole for a lavatory, no natural light and not enough space for them all to lie down at once. He later suffered a variety of bizarre torments and became ill, losing 30 lbs, from high blood pressure, high cholesterol and two parasites, *Jardia* and *E-Coli*. There was an international outcry and after 21 months he was conditionally released on health grounds. Since then we have had a regular email correspondence, mine in English, his in Spanish. His health remains very poor, he cannot get the drugs he needs and, having lost his job, he is penniless. He lives in terror of being returned to prison. The postal service is too erratic to use but I managed to send him a book with one of my friends who was travelling to Cuba.

When I became minder to Jiang Qisheng I was told that one rarely hears back from China. Nevertheless, after months of writing in vain to his prison in Beijing, I eventually received a letter from his wife in typewritten Chinese. The unexpected solution was an oral translation by a waiter in a local Chinese restaurant. From this I learned that Qisheng had almost served his sentence but his teeth had loosened due to poor prison food and that one of his eyes had clouded (a cataract, later dealt with). After his release I sent him a book of views of London and later one of Kew – but the choice of books can be quite tricky. Once a PhD student at Beijing People's University, Qisheng had been imprisoned several times before having been active as a dissident since the Tiananmen Square massacre in June 1989. Humanely assiduous in his support from families of the victims, he was arrested in May 1999 for attempting to draw the attention of the foreign press to the tenth

anniversary of the atrocity. On release he has had better luck than Castillo, being granted an honorary Spirit of Freedom award by Chinese students and scholars in the USA, then a more concrete NOVIB free expression award of €2,500. He has since written a book about his years in prison, where he was particularly appalled by the maltreatment both of minorities and of the very poor from China's huge underclass.

Castillo's memoir of life in the other Guantanamo, Castro's gulag, is now in the archives of the International Centre for Prison Studies at King's College, London, while Qisheng's *My Life in Prison* will soon be translated into English.

Being a WiPC minder can often seem quite discouraging and, given the large number of people unjustly imprisoned worldwide, any success appears a drop in the ocean. But when a writer has the courage to confront, and bear the punishments of, a savage regime and survives to tell the tale, this will have an impact on international opinion and his or her sufferings will not have been in vain. Where Communist Cuba, for instance, had once been seen as incompetent but benign, the recent round-up of dissidents and the testimony of writers like Castillo have helped to expose the barbarity of its penal system. Similarly, if Quisheng's book is published in English it will give a glimpse of the dark underside of a country that may otherwise seem just too vast, too alien and too far away.