



# BEHIND THE BARRIER OF SILENCE

Susan Rosenberg is serving 58 years in the US for possessing explosives. She was one of three women imprisoned in a high security unit (below) where conditions were

deliberately inhuman. Linda Grant reports. Photographs by Donna Ferrato





“ We arrived at five in the evening, travelling in jump suits and slippers in an eight-seater plane with the marshals. We drove right up to the entrance of the unit and there were hundreds of prisoners’ faces at the windows watching. Prisoners had actually been assigned to build the High Security Unit and it was common knowledge that I was going to be moved there. There were 1,600 prisoners and the guards took the occasion to lock down the entire prison. One woman screamed out, ‘Hello Susan, we know it’s you.’ I started jumping up and down and screamed, ‘Don’t let them bury us down there.’ Someone else screamed, ‘We won’t.’ We knew it was going to be underground. It’s one thing to know and read, it’s another thing to see and experience.

“We stood at the electronically controlled metal gate under the eye of one of 11 surveillance cameras. An unidentified man had ordered us placed in restraints while we walked from one end of the basement to the other. The lights were neon, fluorescent, burning and bright and everything was snow-white – walls, floors, ceilings. There was no sound except the humming of the lights and nothing stirred in the air. Alejandrina said, ‘It’s a white tomb, a white sepulchre.’ I nodded and whispered, ‘It’s Stammheim.’

“For nearly three months we were the only prisoners there. We were informed that we were permanently designated to the High Security Unit, expected to serve our entire sentences of 35 and 58 years there. We were on constant display. It got so bad that officers would bring their wives and children to tour the unit. A group of high school students came. We made a sign that read, ‘Free all political prisoners in US prisons – stop human rights abuses’ and we would display it whenever we heard a tour coming. One day a man toured the unit. He had an Irish accent. As he came on the cell block he said, ‘So this is the dead wing.’

**SUSAN ROSENBERG**

In America, it is easier for journalists to get into prisons than into factories. After an ID check, a stroll through the Friskem metal detector, a quick pat search, you are in. The DC County Jail, a kind of public housing project for the black population of Washington, resembles, from the outside, the corporate headquarters of a building society, set in landscaped greenery next to a hospital. It is a jail run by blacks for blacks – some guards have relatives on the other side of the bars. Susan Rosenberg, now 35, one of a handful of white prisoners, a few months out of handcuffs and leg irons, is brought up to the room normally used for attorney visits.



Left to right: Silvia Baraldini, Susan Rosenberg and Alejandrina Torres in the High Security Unit at Lexington Prison. Its isolation and sensory deprivation were patterned on Stammheim, where the Baader-Meinhof Gang was held

She turns up the collar of her pale blue prison uniform. ‘Susan always loved to have style,’ her mother had said.

Inside Susan counsels Aids patients. She looks as if she has Aids herself. Her mother says she cannot eat the prison food. A lawyer says she has anorexia; refusing food is her only means of control in a situation which has stripped her of all power. She discreetly raises a fist – the old salute.

For nearly two years, between 1986 and 1988, she and two other women, Alejandrina Torres and Silvia Baraldini, were held in the High Security Unit at Lexington Federal Prison, Kentucky. The HSU never housed more than seven women during the time it was open. Its philosophy was that of small group isolation, in the pattern of Stammheim, the West German prison in which the Baader-Meinhof Gang was incarcerated and where some of them committed suicide.

In the underground unit at Lexington the walls, ceiling and floor were painted gloss white to stimulate sensory deprivation. There was 24-hour video surveillance, including a camera trained on the showers, which had no curtains. No natural light or ventilation ever found its way in through the heavy screens over the windows which prevented prisoners from seeing outside. Whenever the inmates left the outdoor exercise yard they were strip-searched. For a three-month period they were woken every hour. All their activities, including their conversations and their moods were monitored and noted. Initially, no books other than approved ones, mainly lightweight novels, were allowed and no visits of any kind, including those from lawyers, were permitted.

The rationale of the control unit, according to the Federal Bureau of Prisons, was that it was designed for inmates who represented a high security risk. Baraldini, Rosenberg and Torres were there for politically motivated

crimes and were judged to be the potential subjects of rescue attempts.

The effects of small-group isolation within a control unit are well-documented: Rosenberg, Torres and Baraldini suffered the expected pathological disorders, which included loss of concentration, headaches, hallucinations, emotional disturbance, dizziness and digestive problems. Alejandrina Torres had a heart attack and Susan Rosenberg lost a dramatic amount of weight.

‘She was so emaciated when she came out of Lexington she looked as if she’d come out of Dachau,’ her mother says.

The effect on Silvia Baraldini, now held in the New York Correctional Institute, was even more serious. For five months she asked for a medical examination; when granted, it revealed cancer of the uterus. ‘I had my operation inside the prison because, according to them, I was too dangerous to be taken to a hospital outside,’ she says. ‘There was no pathology lab. They removed my uterus but because they couldn’t take any slides they had to come back six days later, after the diseased uterus had been sent to the Mayo Clinic for analysis, and remove everything else – my ovaries, tubes and lymph nodes. It’s a hard experience for all women, but it’s a very hard experience to go through alone. There was no one apart from a nurse who came in one night and asked me if I wanted to talk about it. The surgeon’s attitude was that I was a certain age and I was going to be in prison for the rest of my life and he couldn’t understand why I was so upset. Something that is inextricably tied to your identity as a woman is taken away from you, and in my circumstance I could never assess how much the stress of the situation contributed to it, so that made prison doubly assaultive as far as I was concerned.’

Aged beyond her 42 years, grey-haired, but with nails jaunty and defiant with red polish, she often gropes

for simple words, her concentration slides, ideas trail into a foggy silence. ‘The worst thing for me about Lexington was the implied sexual threat – men walking in on us in our cells, whether we were undressed or not, on the toilet or not, the continuous strip searches. When you’re in that situation there’s a very thin line between what is assault and what is not and that was played on very consciously by them. They knew that with our association with the women’s movement we found it particularly offensive. They played it for what it was worth.’

Susan Rosenberg, Alejandrina Torres and Silvia Baraldini would have remained in Lexington to serve their entire sentences had it not been for Susan’s parents, Bella and Manny Rosenberg, and their friends – Hollywood producers once on the blacklist, art dealers, theatre critics, journalists. ‘You have to show that these people were not in jail because they were out for money or because they were drug addicts; in fact that’s the thing they fought,’ says Manny Rosenberg, a retired dentist who practised in El Barrio, the Puerto Rican neighbourhood of Harlem. The Rosenbergs maintain that the women held in Lexington (and many others) are political prisoners. The Lexington control unit was closed down because of the intervention of Amnesty International and the embarrassment to the American government of the prison being cited by Mikhail Gorbachov, at the 1988 Geneva Summit, as an example of human rights abuses in the United States.

In the Forties, Bella Rosenberg was blacklisted from her job as a story editor for Embassy Pictures (the first independent studio). The Rosenbergs’ friends are the old Left, men and women who survived some form of McCarthyism. Silvia came from a wealthy, politically liberal Italian family with a history of resistance to Fascism. She moved when she was 15 to New York, where her father, who was a specialist in aviation and foreign trade, worked for the Italian Embassy. During the Sixties, she and Susan were active in the anti-war movement. The Seventies was the time of COINTELPRO, the FBI’s notorious counter-intelligence programme designed to infiltrate and destroy the Black Panthers and other militant organisations. ‘I was conscious that the American government would stop at nothing to defeat its opposition, however small, and that this pattern was built in,’ Silvia Baraldini says. ‘At some point I realised I wasn’t interested in changing a tiny bit here and a tiny bit there, but the whole thing.’

Susan and Silvia met and became friends, working on campaigns like that of the Panther 21, a case which went on for a year before being thrown out of court. Both were associated with the politics of the May 19 Communist Organisation, a loose coalition of those activists still around after the ▷



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**ALEJANDRINA TORRES,  
35 YEARS FOR  
SEDITIONARY CONSPIRACY**

dissipation of the anti-war movement when the boys came home from Vietnam. Liz Fink, Silvia's lawyer, who was brought up on the Left and began her career defending the Attica prison rioters, knew Silvia and Susan during their activist period. 'I hated them. They were very arrogant. I told them, "You aren't going to like prison."' "

Silvia was eventually indicted, in 1982, under RICO, the anti-racketeering laws designed to put the finger on high-ranking members of the Mafia who were insulated from criminal liability because they didn't themselves commit criminal acts. Under RICO, if a crime exists and you are a member of a group that has committed similar acts, you can be indicted for that act. Silvia was convicted of driving the back-up car used to spring from jail Assata Shakur, a Black Panther leader found guilty (after nine dismissed trials and acquittals) of being an accomplice to the murder of a state trooper during a shoot-out on the New Jersey turnpike in 1973. Also taken into account was her possible participation in the Brinks robbery of 1982, which was claimed by the Weather Underground, and lesser offences such as a drive to Connecticut to rob an armoured car which never turned up. She was given 43 years.

At around the same time, after 'watching people die in my arms' at a drug clinic in the Bronx where she worked as an acupuncturist, Susan Rosenberg joined a clandestine organisation, living underground for two years before surfacing in 1986 at a New Jersey roadside in possession of explosives and false identification. Having advised her to read *The God That Failed*, the judge sentenced her to 58 years with a recommendation of no parole. Her subsequent appeal for sentence reduction was refused by Federal Judge Mary Trump Barry, property magnate Donald Trump's sister.

Both Silvia and Susan insisted on conducting trials they deemed political, refusing to recognise the court or the legal system. According to Susan's lawyer, Mary O'Melveny, the judge responded by banning from the proceedings words and phrases like 'black liberation struggle' or 'US policy against Nicaragua'.

Alejandrina Torres, now held in prison in San Francisco, was born into a poor family in San Lorenzo, Puerto Rico. At 25 she married Reverend José Torres, an activist and the only Puerto Rican to take part in the Selma civil rights march. 'I have always worked through the church. My husband and I participated together in witnessing to the community not just within the four walls they call a church. When we realised that there was very little the municipal structure did for our people, we founded a Puerto Rican high school and cultural centre. The government tried to destroy it but it still stands because the community supports it.'

Her political involvement began with



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**SILVIA BARALDINI, 43 YEARS FOR DRIVING A BACK-UP CAR**

a campaign to release prisoners in US jails who supported the Puerto Rican independence movement. According to the government she was a member of the Fuerza Armada de Liberación Nacional (FALN), an underground group that has claimed responsibility for a number of bombings in the United States. In 1983 she was arrested on charges of possessing weapons and explosives and seditious conspiracy – 'to use force to oppose the lawful authority of the US over Puerto Rico'. She was convicted in 1985 and sentenced to 35 years. She is now 50.

Amnesty International's report said that conditions at Lexington were 'deliberately and gratuitously offensive' and the treatment of the three women was 'cruel, inhumane and degrading'. Amnesty argues, and the Federal Bureau of Prisons accepts, that the women were transferred to Lexington because of their political beliefs. The women assert that they were told they would never leave the unit unless they renounced their politics and their 'past associations' – in other words, they would have to collaborate with the FBI. The sentences themselves seem to characterise these women as political prisoners, their supporters argue. Mary O'Melveny cites the comparable case of Denis Melvassey, who stockpiled explosives bought from the proceeds of bank robberies in a New York apartment. The explosives were used for bombing three abortion clinics. He was given seven years. Don Black, the Ku Klux Klan Grand Wizard, who set sail with an arsenal and gang of mercenaries to invade Dominica, was sentenced to 10 years in prison and served two.

The nature of the incarceration in Lexington seemed designed to destroy the women's ability to challenge the conditions of their imprisonment. Provided with a television diet of game

shows and sitcoms, they felt brain-dead. 'People laugh at us when we say it was like a concentration camp,' Silvia says, 'but the fact that we lost the ability to concentrate and therefore to read was a major blow. It became symbolic. You can only give so much attention to a certain thing before your mind starts wandering. Instead of thinking in paragraphs, you start thinking in sentences and you approach your life in sentences. It's very unnerving.'

There has been almost no coverage of the Lexington unit in the American press. Through Bella and Manny Rosenberg's contacts, sympathetic journalists in network television spent a year lobbying for permission to film inside the prison. The story, which was to have been aired on the top-rated Barbara Walters' *20/20* news programme, was dropped the night before transmission. Other filmed interviews were never shown. In 1988, the *New York Times* reported on a back page the decision of the federal district judge to close the unit: 'Consigning anyone to a high-security unit for past political associations they will never shed unless forced to renounce them is a dangerous mission for this country's prison system,' he said. It was the first official doubt cast on the US government's position that it holds no political prisoners. This ruling was challenged by the Bureau of Prisons and overturned.

Independent film-maker Nina Rosenblum, who had worked on the *20/20* story, acquired the footage shot inside Lexington and decided to make a feature-length documentary which was eventually funded by Channel Four. The liberal establishment has been supportive of *Through the Wire*, which will be shown on PBS in June. But while Burt Lancaster, Oliver Stone and Darryl Hannah are sponsoring an LA screening and there has been coverage

in the arts pages of some magazines, no American newspaper or television network has covered the story. Donna Ferrato, the stills photographer for *Through the Wire* (and photographer for this article) took her pictures to *Life* and *Time*. Both refused to assign a writer to the story.

None of the three women has any immediate hope of freedom, although the Italian government is lobbying for Silvia Baraldini to be transferred to an Italian prison and the magazine *Oggi* has taken up her case. 'Don't portray us as victims, please,' Alejandrina said. With the weight of a popular nationalist movement behind her, she can be the most optimistic. 'I have great expectations. Things are happening all over the world and the Puerto Rican people will not be left behind. As long as there is a glimmer of hope it can move mountains. I lost 30 pounds in that place but there was no way they were going to destroy me. I wouldn't give them the satisfaction.'

Perhaps it was the lack of any legitimate agenda for left-wing politics in America that had driven Susan and Silvia to armed struggle. I put it to Susan that while many people in Britain would passionately support her general views on racism and imperialism, few would go along with the strategy of small, clandestine groups operating in the name of the people but without mass support. At best, she and her comrades were romantic and naive. She nodded.

'Hindsight is a blessing, but it is also a curse,' she replied. 'When you spend years alone, you can re-evaluate almost excessively your life and your choices. The Left in this country as a whole – and myself included – has never been able to come up with a strategy that can win the hearts and minds of other Americans to play a role in the movement for social justice. So in that context, I think my strategy and tactics have been just as ineffectual, and that's a major problem for all of us because what we've got now is a country that is either completely de-politicised or almost brain-dead. We all have a problem, in prison or not. The counter-insurgency role the US government played in Nicaragua was completely successful and the movement I am a part of couldn't stop that. But neither did all the lobbying of Congress.'

On the Trump Shuttle from New York to Washington to interview Susan Rosenberg, I had what I thought was a piece of great good luck. Just before the plane left La Guardia, Jesse Jackson and an aide took their seats. I passed him a note outlining the story I was doing on Lexington and asking for a comment. Jackson stared out of the window at the New Jersey flatlands. As we approached Washington, circling over the White House, Congress, the Pentagon and the Vietnam War Memorial, there was still no comment. □ *'Through the Wire' will be shown on Channel 4 on Monday 21 May at 10.40pm*