Now journalists can be journalists

ZUBEIDA JAFFER has put the painful past behind her. But acknowledging where we've come from as journalists is key to building the honour of the profession, she said in her 1997 World Press Freedom Day lecture at Rhodes University.

ON THE morning of 7 August 1996 — a year ago — I walked alongside a group of women into the main hall at the University of the Western Cape to face the Truth Commission. Arrangements had been made for a special hearing of women to coincide with National Women's Day on August 9.

I was to be the second woman to testify. The first that morning was Agnes Gounden, a woman I had met 16 years ago. Agnes Gounden's sister, Avril du Bruin, was shot and killed in June 1980 when the Cape Flats was gripped in protest. In the months preceding her death — my first months as a reporter at the *Cape Times* — Cape Town was engulfed in schools boycotts, bus boycotts, a huge meat strike and other forms of civil unrest.

Towards the middle of that year, as protest intensified, scores of people were killed and injured. After news of the shootings filtered through into our newsroom, police refused to supply the *Cape Times* with a casualty list.

The crime reporter at the *Cape Times* could not confirm numbers of the victims nor their names. The police said they had shot gangsters who had looted shops. The chief of the counter-insurgency unit, Major-General V. Verster said: "If you want the names of the dead, you must get them from the families of the dead. We are not going to release them."

About a week after the shootings, the editor, Tony Heard, called me into his office. He needed somebody who could do an investigation into who the victims were and how they had died. "We will give you whatever time you need and whatever resources, but we want you to find these people," he said.

I agreed to do it. I was too young to realise the full import of what I was agreeing to. I was an enthusiastic 22-year-old who came from a loving and protective Cape Muslim family. Little did I know that I was to experience first hand the complete lack of press freedom which I had only learnt about in theory as a student at Rhodes University. Little did I know that I was about to do an investigation that was to change my life. In July, 1980, I drove to Elsies River and Lavender Hill, but most of the work continued on foot. Elsies River was like a maze. I found some of the families in the transit camp where there were no roads, no formal addresses — only an endless sea of shacks. "Over there," somebody would point out. And through the mud and slush of the untarred pathways, I made my way to the distant dwelling where sometimes I found the family or was sent off in a different direction.

On to the sprawling flats of Clarkes Estate, where families were still nursing their grief. A local student, Lynette Maart, served as my guide to the area.

After two weeks, with her help, I had tracked down 26 families. According to hospital reports at least 42 people had died but Tony Heard called a halt to the search. He wanted the story. "Write everything you've got so far," he said.

So I sat on the edge of my bed, next to my desk on which perched my small brown portable typewriter and the horror of the two weeks flowed onto the pages. It was during that time that I had met Agnes Gounden and her mother Mrs du Bruyn in a small house in Sydneyvale, Bishop Lavis. Agnes had told me how she had seen her 25-year-old sister, Avril du Bruyn, a bank clerk, slump to the ground after being hit by a police sniper bullet.

Agnes and her mother, both distraught, led into their living room a three-year-old boy, Ronald. He was the son of Avril. In just three years, he had lost a father who had died naturally and then a mother ripped away from him unnaturally. When I met Agnes last year, a few days before testifying, I enquired about her mother and then I remembered the child who had been orphaned.

"What happened to Avril's little boy," I asked Agnes. "My mother could not cope, so I adopted him," she said. And then she lowered her voice as her eyes brightened with pride: "He is now a second-year medical student at UCT," she said. "Goodness," I replied, "I have a nephew who is also a second-year medical student. Perhaps Ronald knows him."

"What is his name?"

"Riaad," I said.

"Riaad is one of Ronald's best friends," said Agnes and we both laughed.

Riaad was in the hall when I testified on August 7, but his friend Ronald had not come to hear Agnes tell how his mother had been killed. "We don't talk about it at home," said Agnes. "I did ask him if he wanted to come, but he preferred not to hear what had happened."

The *Cape Times* ran the investigation into the riot deaths across a full page on July 24, 1980. The day after the story was published, an anonymous donor gave the *Cape Times* R5 000 for the families of the victims. A fund was started and about 10 days later, with the help of Shawco, Elsies River, I helped to bring together the families to decide how to distribute the funds. Three days later, shortly after I returned home from working night shift at the paper, security policeman Spyker van Wyk and his team arrived to detain me. So continued a journey which had started the day I was called into Tony Heard's office.

Little did I know that I would be beaten into the walls of the Sanlam Centre in Port Elizabeth. "Lies, lies, all lies," said the captain as his heavy hands hit my body. I cannot remember his name but I remember that he discussed the story with a Captain Oosthuizen who said the lies had also been carried in the *Eastern Province Herald*. He took me to the window of the sixth storey and said they would throw me down if I did not confess.

They wanted me to admit that I was a member of the ANC or that I knew one name of somebody in the ANC. I did not know anybody and I most certainly was not a member. What I had done as a student at Rhodes was to attend lunchtime meetings at the offices of the man who is now head of the Rhodes Journalism department. Guy Berger was my tutor and invited me and a number of other students to read *Time Longer Than Rope* by Eddie Roux to help us understand South African history. We did not

INDEPENDENT INSIGHT
Finance
WEEK

do this in secret in the dead of the night. We met during lunchtime and I certainly did not consider this to be a clandestine activity. This was eventually to be interpreted as constituting an ANC cell of which I was accused of being part.

I was not a member of the ANC in 1980 but the security police could only believe that I had written what I had because I had been instructed to do so by the ANC.

I was definitely on the way to becoming sympathetic to the organisation and the detention experience pretty much convinced me to become an activist. Listening to those stories of families had disturbed me to the core, and then came the detention. They not only beat me, but drugged me and interrogated me until I was unconscious. For many hours, I lay in a stupor on the floor of an interrogation room. And then, when they did not have a case against me, they detained my father so that he could hand over my student books. After being held as a terrorist for two months, I was charged with possession of three banned books. Many months later, I was to be acquitted.

But my life was never the same again. I could not write the way I wrote before. I could not cry. I could not feel. To cope with the trauma, I had to suppress my feelings and this hampered my work. I realised that I had to step back from the mainstream media so that I would not be limited in the truth that needed be pursued so that apartheid could be destroyed. In an increasingly polarised country, my writing found expression through community organisations, through the United Democratic Front, through trade union publications, through the famous community newspaper, *Grassroots*.

I was to return to mainstream journalism in 1990 after the unbanning of the organisations and the beginnings of greater freedom of the press. Testifying at the Truth Commission represented for me a symbolic break with the trauma of the past — it was part of the process of becoming a whole person again.

After I testified, I bumped into a former colleague at the *Cape Times*, who said to me he had had no idea that I had had such a rough time in detention. "Why did you not tell me," he said. "You did not ask," I replied.

Nobody really asked me what had happened. But, I must use this opportunity to acknowledge that I was very well supported by my editor and the management of the *Cape Times*. Tony Heard campaigned actively for my release. The journalist organisations, Mwasa and SAUJ, called for my release and international support came from across the world. I did not suffer what some of my colleagues at other newspapers suffered — they were not only attacked by the state but isolated by their editors and managements.

I was harrassed further. In the mornings when I got off the train in Cape Town and walked to work, I was followed by security police. In May 1981 when I reported on the anti-Republic Day protests at UWC, my passport was withdrawn without explanation. I can go on and on. I dreamed of a time when I would be free to pursue the career that I had trained for. And now that time has come. We are living at a time when journalists can be journalists.

As South African journalists, we have to put our minds together and restore our profession to a central position of honour. The effort of each one of us together, our varied talents, will move us towards a greater professionalism which all our people are entitled to.

Zubeida Jaffer is Group Parliamentary Editor for Independent Newspapers.