


Behind Bars:



10 YEARS AS A POLITICAL PRISONER

by Moira MacDonald

Martha Kusma's face does not give away the formidable spirit lying behind it. Seeing her on the street you meet a slight, smooth-skinned young Black woman with an understated presence. She introduces herself in a gentle, soft-spoken voice.

Even when you ask her about her ten years in an Ethiopian prison, the infrequent visits from family and friends, the fears for the welfare of her children, the school she set up with other political prisoners to teach illiterate inmates to read, her face saddens yet the softness remains. But ask Kusma why she was there and the expression tightens, her eyes flash and her voice, filling with anger, becomes a keenly directed weapon.

Kusma is 39 years old and now lives with her three children in Toronto. In 1980 she was arrested in the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa while working as a journalist at a state-monitored newspaper. She was still breast-feeding her youngest child.

Although she was never formally charged, Kusma's arrest was largely due to her many years of writing and speaking out in favour of cultural and linguistic rights for her tribal people, the Oromos of western and south-eastern Ethiopia. The first year of her ten-year incarceration was spent in a detention centre where she was also tortured and the next nine in the Addis Ababa Central Prison. Kusma was finally granted amnesty in 1989 but the still-oppressive political situation forced her to flee with her children to neighbouring Kenya. Once there she was constantly under the threat of deportation. With the help of several groups — including the Canadian centre of PEN, an international writers organization which had been monitoring her case for several years — Kusma was granted asylum in Canada.

"I belong to a big nation subjugated by a small nation and that (big) nation has lost its identity," says Kusma of her Oromo roots. Oromos constitute between 40 to 55 percent of Ethiopia's population. But the pattern of Ethiopian government policies over the last century has meant continued subjugation of Oromo culture and language to the policies of powerful minorities.

"My imprisonment didn't begin that very day," says Kusma of her arrest. "It's like I inherited the problem from my parents. Being born Oromo means being conscious that your (language) is a great crime."

As a child Kusma learned to keep her national identity as inconspicuous as possible. At the state-run school she was publicly humiliated for speaking in her native tongue and even had to change her Oromo name, Kuwea, to an Amharic one in order to attend.

"I didn't want to be identified with my people. I was ashamed of being Oromo... but secretly I always wanted to speak my language," she recalls.

Both Kusma's father and grandfather had actively promoted the Oromo Protestant religion, her father spending many years in prison himself for it. But Kusma only became politicized at university where she met stu-



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dents who "were proud of being Oromo."

"That's when I began to look at myself from a different perspective," she says, "as a full, complete human being."

Kusma was still in university when a military coup overthrew the emperor, Haile Selassie, in September 1974. A revolutionary leftist regime took power, closed down the university and sent all students to the countryside to reclaim the land from its owners and divide it amongst the peasants. An ill-conceived plan, since many of the students were killed when they met up with the angry and armed landowners. Kusma refused to go and quickly married and became pregnant in order to be granted exemption.

Kusma soon began working for the Radio Voice of Gospel station, sponsored by the Lutheran World Federation. As a producer of family programs she decided she would try to promote Oromo culture in her work since the majority of Ethiopian Christians were Oromo.

"I used to go out to the countryside. My targets were rural people, the Oromo. I did interviews, I wanted those people to have confidence in themselves. I wanted them to know they had a culture of their own, (that) they were human beings equally (and) not to be ashamed of themselves."

The programs took off. Says Kusma, "The Oromo people began writing letters asking for more air time. (But) the government was alert. They didn't want this to happen."

In 1977, threatened by the station's work, the government shut it down. "That's when

my imprisonment began for me," Kusma says.

Kusma was placed by the government as a women's column editor in an Oromo newspaper, *Barissa*. *Barissa* had previously enjoyed high circulation amongst the Oromos, but the by-then Marxist-Leninist government assumed control and circulation dropped from 20,000 to 200, consisting only of government officials assigned to monitor it. Claiming that the paper was being circulated, the government moved the copies out one door of the printing press, only to immediately return them through another door as unsold, minus 200.

"At the newspaper I was paralysed," remembers Kusma, "the journalist in me really died because I couldn't reach people." Cut off from the Oromo, Kusma decided to direct her columns to their actual audience, the government. She called on it to uphold and enforce its own policy to protect the rights of all nationalities. It was risky business for Kusma, given the political climate, but as she says, "You don't think of the consequences when you're writing, you just want to get it out... and then later worry about what people (will) say."

Kusma was arrested in February 1980 during a government sweep of Oromos suspected of wanting to join the militant Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), which had recently attacked government targets. Kusma's husband was a member of the OLF but had managed to escape the country, leaving Kusma to take care of their three children.

Originally she supported his actions, "because he was fighting my share too (and I felt) I would carry his burden from this end." She has not seen him since and now feels bitter about what he did, saying that Ethiopian men "consider children as the burden of the woman" and that her husband, "completely ignored us when we needed him most."

Kusma was taken to the Central Investigation Department, supposedly for ten minutes of questioning. She endured periodic torture during her year there but says her jailers "knew somehow that what hurt me more was when they beat those people I respected," forcing her to watch.

After she was moved to the Central Prison Kusma was finally able to receive visitors, but they came rarely, terrified of the consequences of being associated with a political prisoner. "Being a political prisoner was like being a monster," she says. "Visitors could also be implicated."

"I felt like I was cut off, that I was really abandoned by everybody. But I had no guilty conscience, I felt I was right."

"We kept very active in the prison, working day and night," Kusma recalls of the inmate community. "The guards wanted us to weep... to break... (but) as an act of defiance we smiled in the midst of the hardest times."

Besides helping to set up a prison school, Kusma kept her memoirs, smuggling them out with visitors or bribed guards to give to missionary friends going out of the country.

But after a few years of little contact with the outside world, Kusma's belief in herself began to falter. Then letters began to arrive from groups like Amnesty International and PEN, telling her she was right and restoring her confidence.

Authorizations for prison releases were often on the same list as death sentences. Such a list, she recalls, "for some was the shadow of death, for others it was the bell of freedom ringing from afar." The "lists" could come at any time which is why Kusma says she never slept more than two hours a night, for fear of being executed in her sleep.

Kusma's own release came arbitrarily as part of a general amnesty annually announced by the government on the anniversary of the 1974 revolution. She says it wasn't until the main prison gates were opened and the released prisoners saw the waiting television cameras on the other side that they really knew they were free. "It's only when something good happens that the cameras arrive," she remarks wryly.

After almost one year in Canada Kusma still feels uncertain about her future. Depression keeps her from writing more about her experiences. "The only thing that is keeping me going is the happiness of my kids. I don't see my future here. Back home it's a very important time, the conflict (of the Oromo) there is heading for a climax... I want to be dying their deaths, suffering their pain."

But what frustrates Kusma as much as her own feeling of ineffectiveness is the unwillingness of foreign governments to speak out against the oppression of the Oromos. Sadly, says Kusma, "(the Oromos) don't have any economic interests, any political interests for them — it's not Kuwait."