

State Plays “Musical Dungeons” With SLA

Open Road

1977

This article first appeared in *Open Road* newspaper, Box 6135, Station G, Vancouver, Canada.

The long and complicated saga of the now defunct Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA) is still unfolding in the courtrooms and prisons of California. Russ Little, Joe Remiro, Bill and Emily Harris, the group's four surviving members, are all now serving one or more life sentences each and the Harrises face even more trials growing out of their urban guerrilla activities in 1974.

While Patty Hearst (now the prosecution's main witness against the Harrises) is freed on \$1.5 million bail and given a half hour national television time to slander the SLA, the Harrises have been forced to endure a game of what Emily calls “musical dungeons.” They have been shunted from jail to jail and systematically prevented from preparing their legal defense.

The latest incident occurred in Oakland, California, when Judge A. Lindsay attempted to arraign the Harrises on the Hearst kidnapping charges. Before proceeding, the judge appointed two lawyers of his own choice for them over their objections.

He then refused even the appointed lawyers' request that they step down and let Susan Jordan and Leonard Weinglass defend the Harrises. In the face of this outrage, Emily attempted to leave the courtroom rather than be arraigned without counsel.

She was manhandled by the bailiffs and a scuffle broke out which resulted in overturned chairs and both Harris's, seven deputies and a matron sprawled on the floor. Undaunted Judge Lindsay proceeded with the arraignment.

Locked Down In Maximum Security

On another front, the Harris's close comrades, Joe Remiro and Russ Little, have completed their round of trials and have been locked down in separate Maximum security prisons where they continue revolutionary activity.

In a letter written while the two were lodged in the infamous San Quentin Adjustment Center, Russ Little describes their relief at finally being out of the courtroom arena. He spoke of the resistance they have put up since their capture in 1973 on charges of murdering Oakland, California Superintendent of Schools Marcus Foster:

“The pressures of being subjected to these different forms of physical and mental torture were offset mainly by our efforts to continue growing and evolving as conscious revolutionaries; by reading and analyzing our own practice and theory, especially as members of the SLA; and by corresponding with above ground revolutionaries on the streets and locked down POWs about the struggles going on in this country and internationally.

“The pressures,” Little writes, “were also offset by our attempts to resist by all possible means—from the limited, corrupt framework of the judicial process to the direct action that led to our third trial for attempted escape—to resist the State's power to hold us in captivity.”

At this third trial Remiro and Little did not deny the fact that they had tried to escape, but based their defense on proving that the attempted jailbreak was triggered by their belief that they would be murdered in the custody of the prison system. They focused their case on the racial warfare, guard brutality, stabbings, murder and suicide in the prisons. Escaping from jail, they argued, is not a “crime” but an instinct for survival.

To support their case, Remiro and Little subpoenaed a number of revolutionary convicts from California prisons as witnesses. In a typical over-reaction the State of California called out the largest security force ever assembled for a trial.

The San Jose Civic Centre took on the character of a mini-Vietnam, with at least two hundred sheriff's deputies sporting machine guns and battle fatigues surrounding the area.

In this atmosphere, James “Doc” Holliday, a widely respected revolutionary in California's prisons, testified that the authorities at San Quentin felt threatened by the fact that Remiro and Little had relationships with black, brown and white prisoners. He explained that race wars have been going on for years in the prisons, and that guards use the racial antagonism to pit prisoners against each other.

“The kind of multi-racial unity that was sparked off when Russ and Joe got to the prison was in direct contradiction to the way the officials try to maintain control,” Holliday testified.

“At first the guards tried to instigate the blacks to attack Russ and Joe, by reminding us over and over that they had been convicted of killing a black man. When that didn't arouse our anger: the guards spread the word to the whites that Russ and Joe were “nigger-lovers”, hoping the whites would kill them.”

Several other prisoners testified that guards offered to give them weapons if they would “hit” Little and Remiro at San Quentin. One convict said a guard promised to get him hacksaw blades in exchange for the dead.

Speaking on his own behalf Joe Remiro described incidents like the time he and Russ were taken on a “tour” of the gas chamber. Also, the times guards threw scalding hot water on him, set his blankets on fire while he was asleep, and encouraged another prisoner to urinate on his food. He said the guards always smiled when they told him he wouldn't live five years in prison.

At the close of the trial the judge instructed the jury to ignore the defense case and stressed that “prison conditions have absolutely nothing to do with the facts.” Subsequently, Little and Remiro were convicted and given their second life sentences.

Meanwhile, Bill and Emily Harris are facing a barrage of upcoming political trials where their vision of a “future humanistic society composed of free individuals” will grapple with the dead hand of the State.

More information on the Harris's case can be obtained from their defense committee: 204 Avenue B, Redondo Beach, California 90277. The latest addresses of the four are: Russ Little (B-66002), Tamal, California 94964. Joe Remiro (B66003), Folsom State Prison, Represa, California 95671. Bill and Emily Harris, Alameda County Jail, 1225 Fallon St., Oakland, California 94612.

fifth Estate

Open Road
State Plays "Musical Dungeons" With SLA
1977

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/282-april-may-1977/state-plays-musical-dungeons-with-sla>
Fifth Estate #282, April-May, 1977

fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net