

## **My story**

Here is the story... The story of my life, the story that traumatised my childhood and my adult life. It is the story of all Portuguese who were born in the 1950s.

Our country lived in terror! Terror of Salazar and the PIDE, the State Police at the service of Salazar (the Portuguese Gestapo).

Everyone who opposed the regime would be arrested and tortured.

In December 1964, my father worked in the mine of Aljustrel, in Alentejo.

The miners worked in shifts: morning, afternoon or night.

My father was a handsome, cheerful, kind man and for him, friends were sacred, and there are still living witnesses who can confirm this.

And he was a very playful man, my father...

On a December morning, he knocked on our door (that's what my mother and I thought, convinced that he had forgotten his key...). But no, it wasn't him.

I soon opened the door of the "palace" where we lived (2 rooms), but no, it wasn't him.

In front of that damned door which, at my tender age, I rushed to open, I saw two men, one I knew, a certain "son of a bitch", and the other looked like he was even worse; fear took over me, I was only eight years old!

One asked me where my father was and I soon replied that he was at the mine.

The monster was, like his colleague, armed with a Kalashnikov, a weapon that I was able to recognise easily.

He asked again: where is your father? Tell us the truth!

And all these "friendly" phrases were screamed at me. You can imagine the effect on the eight-year-old child I was...

I answered again: Yes sir, my father works at the mine. He started screaming that I would pay dearly for that lie and pushed me with the gun that made him feel strong in the face of a child of that age, and I ended up on the floor.

Angry, I stood up and accompanied them through the "long halls of the mansion" (remember, two rooms!) and then I saw that one of them grabbed my mother, who was, 33 years old, at the time.

And then they started to unrip the mattress looking for documents that could incriminate him! But they found nothing because my father wouldn't hide anything in the house, in fear it would endanger us.

And it was chaos in those streets: women, children, I still remember, they all came to the streets at 5 a.m.!

And they screamed: Let's get them out of the mine, those "motherfuckers!" And then, despite my mother's cries of affliction, I ran out into the street, in my nightgown, in the direction of the mine. I remember it was very, very cold.

When I got there, I saw Ramona, the name that was given to the armoured car that came to get these courageous heads of families, who worked day and night to feed their own and who were thirsty for freedom.

For us, Ramona was the terror! For the child I was, it was huge! But I didn't care about that, and so I searched the little windows of the monster, looking for those eyes that I adored; and then, painfully, my loving daughter's eyes met his, breaking my heart... This time they had taken him, stolen him from me!

I knew he knew someday this would happen because I used to eavesdrop from behind the doors. It wasn't hard, there were only two! I could hear them talking about their fears. But he was a man of freedom, and he was not afraid, and he would say: "Whatever has to happen, will happen!"

And then my mother moved to the capital, to a friend's house, with my little brother António, who was 18 months at the time. There, she could visit my father once a week, when visitations weren't suspended due to interrogations, those terrible interrogations that would leave them in a state that would take a week or more for them to recover from the effect of the inhumane processes used to extract confessions...

What about me, what about me? A princess who had lost her prince! But I have to say: I wasn't being cuddled by my father, but I had the cuddles of my grandparents, aunts and uncles who did everything in their power to soothe my young anxieties and who gave me all the affection that had been stolen from me. I will never get tired of thanking them!

And then I had to continue to go to school which, at the time, was run by the power of the wooden ruler! But it wasn't just me, we were all entitled to the same treatment. The teachers were almost all fascists, brutes and insensitive! I was always thinking about my father, my sun now in the shade, and so I was almost always distracted, absent, my thoughts were always with him! Of course, the inevitable would happen, I would get beaten with the ruler! But the apple hadn't fallen far from the tree, and I was a tough nut to crack, so I didn't budge.

On a beautiful day, my grandparents, despite their difficulties, decided to take me to visit my father, although they weren't sure if they had permission to do so. Luckily, the visit was allowed!

And so, on one day in March 1964, I found myself, almost like in a nightmare, in front of the prison of Aljube with my mother, my grandmother and an aunt.

Right at the entrance, we came across two railings separated by a corridor where a fascist walked up and down with a Kalash in his hand, of course! The visit lasted 30m, and after 10m, I asked the guy if I could kiss my father. Since he didn't answer, I asked again, and he said: "Shut up, go on and hurry up." I crossed the first grid, and then I saw that the second, on my father's side, was closed, and the fascist was laughing, making fun of me, the jerk! Then he opened the grid that allowed me to embrace my father, the man of my life, Adelino Francisco da Silva! I felt like his arms were enormous, in such a way that I felt snug.

And my young tears began to run down my face, and my father said to me: "Do not cry or they will harm me!" And I never cried again, even today, I don't cry easily. Later on, when he was released, I heard my father tell my mother that those kisses had cost him very dearly: 5 days of isolation, water and torture, like: "What did your daughter say to you?" And then they lashed him with a chain, on his back, his legs, with his feet underwater, whip him, made him drink urine, and stuff like that! Disgusting horrors.

My father wouldn't tell me any of these things, but I, as I have said, would eavesdrop on the conversations they had in a low voice to spare me.

A beautiful day of June, they freed him! He didn't even want to believe it, because sometimes they would free them just to shoot them in the back, those Nazis! And on this beautiful day of June, he returned to the Alentejo, Aljustrel. And my father, who had always had black hair, for our great amazement, had his hair completely grey! At the time I didn't understand...

And then we celebrated like we did every time one of them was released!

In December serious stuff started to happen. With the help of a friend who, just like him, had gone through all of these atrocities, António Palma Brito, a great man, my father got a passport, false of course, left us in Portugal and, by various means of transport, train, bus, on foot, went to Belgium, oh yes, Belgium, our Belgium! He already had a job waiting for him there, in a factory, where he would work 18 hours a day to save money to bring us there and install us with every possible comfort. With a television and everything!" The friend, Palma Brito, had already organised everything. They were very close friends already because they had lived through the same horrible experience. He was my little brother António's godfather.

Decidedly, this month of June is quite favourable for us, although it was also on a certain day of June that my father, my great friend, passed away of cancer at the age of 72. So soon...Too soon! But he always said: "no matter what happens, I love the month of June!"

On June 6th we landed in Belgium. Such inexplicable happiness!

Then, the regularisation of our situation in the Ministry.

My father was interrogated in an office, my mother in another and me in another with a very nice lady and interpreter. And, like my parents, I was asked a lot of questions, which they thought I knew the answer to; although I didn't understand anything they were saying between them.

15 days later, we obtained the status of political refugees. Thank you Belgium, thank you for everything!

For a long time I hated Portugal, but as I grew older, I understood. My roots are there, my family.

I forgave, that's right, but I won't forget anything!

There are thousands of stories like mine.

It was at the request of the former Prison of Aljube, which is now a museum (too modernised in my opinion) that I shared this story, my story. They need testimonies, so here is mine! This testimony is dedicated to you, my father! Adelino Francisco da Silva, my father, my friend, my son!

Arletta da Silva

(Testimony sent by email. The text only suffered small changes in punctuation)