

Chapter Four

The guard shouted from the window: “*Jasim Hammud, Khuz Aghrnzak!*” – Jasim Hammud, pick up your belongings, “*Wa Hidhaak...*” – and your shoes.... “*Wa Raqamak...*” – and your number “*Watl'a*” – and come out. This typical announcement meant the release, at least from the dreary cell. No one could predict whether the fellow was going home or to the gallows or before a firing squad. The victim himself felt so uncertain that he would not be able to decide whether to celebrate or to mourn the departure. And what is the number?

Every unfortunate one who enters the Mukhaberat is given a small wooden or plastic tablet bearing a number. "You are no more a human being; you are a number", he is told. The psychological impact of this must be experienced to be fully understood. One, for the first time perhaps, realises that he has ceased to be a human person–nor is he a commodity. No–he is merely a number–as abstract as a number. And then he is frightened at the prospects. So, he has ceased to exist in reality. He is nobody.

During my stay of four months and two days in detention, we were at times called by our names, and at times by the numbers. This meant that we had to remember our numbers at all times if we wished to avoid the calamity. A feeling of reassurance surged forth when I was called by name. At least, I existed. But this was depressed when I was cited as a number. We had a Korean who did not know Arabic at all. He was taught to memorize the number, which he did after great effort. He failed, however, to show up when his number was called, and the Haras shouted: “*Ayn Huwa–Ma Aku?*” – Where is he, is he not there? Unfortunately, nobody else recalled that it was the Korean's number, so the head shouted repeating it. After a pause, the Korean responded.

“*Shi Bek?*” – What is the matter with you? The Haras demanded. Someone had to explain him that the poor man did not know Arabic, but the guard was not interested. He was roughly manhandled to the Muhaqqiq.

Blindfolded and handcuffed, every detainee was pushed down the corridors, sometimes by the winding

staircases, and alternatively by the lifts. The Haras caught him by the arm and pulled him till he was brought to the door of the room where his Muhaqqiq waited. On some occasions there would be a panel of investigators, four or five or six of them, all lined up on a sofa. The blind-fold never allowed you to see their faces; you could only count the pairs of shoes visible from beneath the fold—or hear the footsteps. The Haras would stand by you, or, when directed, leave the room. And then the volley of questions would begin, questions being shot from here, there and everywhere.

There were several Muhaqqiqs, each assigned to a room, and each room had a number. So apart from remembering our own numbers, we were required to remember the number of our Muhaqqiq's room. It was common to say, for example, that "I belong to No.9, or 14, or 21". Each Muhaqqiq was known for his notoriety and cruelty, and if one was in the hands of a Muhaqqiq known to be the least humane and merciful, one earned our special sympathies. "So you belong to No. 14 eh? That Muhaqqiq is the most notorious one. He never lets his victims out"—one would be told.

The questioners were specially trained to cause maximum damage, physically and mentally. The most commonly adopted tactic was to ask several question consecutively, and then pause. This pause, which at times extended to several minutes, left the detainee uneasy, unsure and staggered. What next? The pause seemed eternal. Are they looking at you, or are they no more interested in you? You never could tell. It shattered the nerves, and cold sweat would begin to settle on the forehead. And then it began all over.

"Tell the truth", meant admit your guilt. Contrary to all measures and standards of justice, you were guilty from the minute you were accused. My Somali cellmate, Abdul Qadir, tried to defend himself. A burning matchstick introduced to his beard burnt the hair and the chin. He came back to the cell with a peculiar smell of the scorched hair emanating from him. This was the beginning, he was told. "Go and think over it—and tell the truth when we call you again".

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