Surviving Indonesia's Gulag (excerpts)

By Carmel Budiardjo

Carmel Budiardjo (1925— ) is a British woman who married an Indonesian leftist. They were living in Jakarta when Suharto came to power and unleashed the anti-PKI massacres of 1965–1966. They were both arrested and sent into Suharto’s growing system of prison camps. She spent three years in jail and her husband was detained for thirteen. She became a human rights activist upon her release. Here she details the brutal treatment suffered by those accused of PKI affiliation under the Suharto dictatorship, known as the New Order, 1966–1998.

There was a great deal of mutual suspicion among the prisoners, especially during these first days, which made it difficult, with few exceptions, to establish any companionship with others who were suffering the same fate. Much of the time, I felt lonely and defenceless against a system of evil that had me in its grip. Each of us with our own fears had few emotions left to sympathize with others.

The only woman in our room I drew close to was Nuriah. She had a very practical approach to life and was always ready with advice. She was a tower of strength in moments of crisis. When people came back to the room in pain or physically damaged in any way, she was the one best able to comfort them or treat their injuries. She had what I can only describe as a sixth sense and always seemed to know before anyone else what was going on. I valued this greatly because I am not very perceptive and often failed to pick up signals or notice remarks made by officers during the course of the day. A few days after we first met, arrangements were made for her baby to be taken home and be cared for by a relative; and this was the only time I can recollect when she broke down. She was occasionally asked to help with chores outside our room, particularly in the kitchen, and this gave her access to all kinds of stories and rumours about the camp.

She told me that there were regular showings of pornographic films for officers to encourage them to be unrestrained in their use of sexual abuse and gross indecency when interrogating women.

Shortly before I was transferred from Sargas-Pusat, a row of cages was constructed inside the shed, to the left of our room. These cages were not yet in use by the time I left, but I later heard that they were used to isolate and humiliate detainees. Alone and in the eye of the guards at every moment of the day, some of these men and women went insane, some attempted suicide even though their tormentors deprived them of the means of inflicting physical harm on themselves. The only way of telling whether a person had succumbed was to see whether they remained in the cages and whether they were restricted to a punitive diet of unpalatable rice.

The night after my brief visit home, I slept even more fitfully. To add to our discomfort, one of the guards on duty had a transistor radio on full blast all night and walked past our windows a number of times, with his radio under his arm.

When I awoke the next morning, I was horrified to see a man stripped to the waist, dangling by his wrists from a tree near the well. His wrists were pulled just high enough to keep him touching the ground with his toes. His body was covered with swollen, red welts and his head hung down on his chest. Occasionally, a guard would walk across the courtyard or along the corridor past our room, ignoring him. To me, other people moving around normally, unconcerned about the sufferings of this man, made the scene even more horrific. It was more than I could do to go to the well or cross the yard to the toilet while he was still hanging there and I avoided looking out of the window. Later, when we were escorted on our morning visit to the toilet, it was a relief to see that he had been taken away. I never discovered his name but I later heard that he was a low-ranking army officer who, until his arrest, had worked at the army's recruitment office and was accused of having helped young Communists to join the army. Many thousands of soldiers and officers were arrested after 1965 and accused of being PKI agents or Sukarnoists.

As the day wore on, I tried to get the tortured man out of my mind as I sat answering the inquisitor's questionnaire. But, that afternoon, there was another incident that shook me profoundly. I had just finished writing and was lying on my mat, trying to rest when we heard angry shouts in the courtyard. I looked out and saw a detective standing outside one of the toilets, being harangued by Bonar.

"How dare you answer me back? You're a prisoner here, don't forget." He screamed the words over and over again, *kamu tahanan*, using *kamu* for you. Officers were always addressing us as *kamu*. This is an acceptable form of address among friends but is very offensive when used between adults who have no grounds for familiarity with each other. Bonar lost no opportunity to remind us that we were prisoners, unworthy of respect and utterly at his mercy.
The man refused to be silenced by Bonar, insisting that he wanted to go to the toilet. Then Bonar started pummelling him with his fists but the man refused to budge. By now Bonar was livid. He barked an order to the guard on duty to summon others to help him deal with this infraction. Five or six soldiers turned up, all carrying rifles. They seized the man by the arms, dragged him along the ground to the centre of the courtyard and started laying into him with their fists, rifle butts and boots, as Bonar stood a short distance away, shouting at them to ‘give him a good thrashing.’ I sank to the floor unable to watch the scene, but there was no way I could avoid hearing the sound of beating, the words of abuse and the groans of the victim. After several minutes of this, the noise and the voices receded towards the shed as they dragged the defenceless man back to his room.

Then things went quiet again... A few days after my arrest, two more women joined us in our room. The first to arrive had been a member of the MP/RS, the upper House of parliament. Like all left-wing members of both Houses, she was expelled from parliament immediately after the Suharto takeover; her husband, a member of the lower House, had also been arrested. During Bud’s first and second arrests, I had often met her outside Salemba Prison in Jakarta when I used to take food to him three times a week.

Although these were called hari besok or ‘visiting days,’ they were not visiting days at all. We were permitted to bring food parcels but were not allowed to meet the detainees. Visits were permitted only once a year on special days like Christmas or Lebaran, the end of the Muslim fasting month. Sometimes even annual visits were cancelled for selected prisoners.

The hardships and sufferings of the wives and children of detainees are a story in themselves. The vast majority of these women had no means of support or regular income and were cold-shouldered even by close relatives, who were afraid of being tainted by contact with prisoners and their families. Some women managed to survive by setting up food stalls and selling home-made cakes. Others turned to dressmaking, but few were able to earn enough to keep hunger from the door. Some, in desperation, handed their children over to relatives or neighbours. In many cases, the children were hounded from their schools—as Tari had been—and were unable to get places in other schools.

Prison ‘visiting days’ were occasions for chatting to other wives or relatives, exchanging gossip, and gleaning what we could about the prospects for release.

‘Is your husband still in Salemba?’ I asked our new room-mate after she had had time to settle in.

‘Yes, and what about Mas Bud? He was released, wasn’t he?’

‘Yes, but they picked him up again, together with me. He’s here now, somewhere upstairs.’ Little had changed, I thought, except that we were meeting now as fellow detainees rather than detainees’ wives.
A day or so after she arrived, something very unusual happened. After we had returned from our early morning toilet, we were suddenly ordered to lie down flat on the floor and keep still for a few minutes. We had to do this again several times during the next few days. At first, we could not understand what was going on, then realized that each time we had to lie down, someone was taken across the courtyard who, for some reason, was not allowed to see us in the room.

After three days of this, another woman joined us. Her left eye was black with bruises and, as soon as the guard had gone, she sank to the floor, obviously relieved.

They told me there weren't any other women here. They said all the women here had been killed and their bodies had been buried under a heap of sand in the yard.

For three days, she told us, she had been held in strict isolation in a tiny room upstairs. She slept at night on a table with a guard sleeping on the floor underneath. Enormous pressure was used to force her into submission. She was stripped naked by torturers who deliberately started punching her breasts, knowing that she had recently given birth and had been unable to suckle her baby for days so that her breasts were full of milk and particularly painful and sensitive. She got a black eye when one of the thugs punched her hard in the face with his fist, striking her eye with a huge ring on one of his fingers. This had broken a blood vessel in her left eyeball. She was in a state of shock when she joined us, though she gradually calmed down, greatly relieved to be with other women.

But her problems were not at an end. They arrested a cousin of hers whose address they had forced out of her. She was summoned for a confrontation with him in the room next to ours. They stripped her naked in front of him while he, also stripped naked, was beaten by another woman detainee, the former member of the upper House of parliament, who was ordered to beat him by one of the torturers. As the frightful atrocity proceeded, I sat cowed in my corner trying to drive the sounds out of my head. But there was no closing my ears to the orders being yelled, the sound of the rattan stick being lashed against bare flesh, and the screams of pain. When things like this happened within earshot, a deathly silence fell in our room.

As for my own 'case,' nothing more happened after I handed in my answers to the questions I had been asked. There were no further interrogations, except for a rather unexpected brief encounter with Atjep. He appeared one day in the courtyard and I was summoned to go and talk to him.

'Did you have anything to do with the Gilchrist Letter? It wasn't you who wrote it, was it?' he asked.

'What on earth makes you think that? I did no such thing,' I replied.

This was a confidential cable dispatched in March 1965 by the British ambassador in Jakarta, Sir Andrew Gilchrist, to the Foreign Office about 'our local army friends', hinting that the British were informed about an army plot to eliminate Sukarno. The document fell into the hands of the BPI, the state intelligence agency headed by Dr. Subang, that forwarded it to us.
Subandrio, concurrently Foreign Minister. It was drawn to Sukarno's attention in May that year and was widely commented on. The Gilchrist Letter helped to stir up speculations in Jakarta, reinforcing the rumours of a council of generals that was plotting to depose Sukarno. Britain had reasons of its own to despise Sukarno, who had initiated a campaign of konfrontasi with Malaysia in 1964, after the British colonies in northern Borneo were united with Peninsular Malaysia against strong opposition from Jakarta. The crucial sentence read: 'It would be as well to emphasise once more to our local friends in the army that the strictest caution, discipline and co-ordination are essential to the success of the enterprise.'

Army intelligence insisted that the document was a forgery produced by the BPI, part of a series of pre-October 1965 events that, according to them, had been designed to create an atmosphere of tension. Many years later, Sir Andrew Gilchrist wrote to an Indian academic, confirming that the letter was not a forgery and confirming that it was 'one found by the Indonesians in the wreckage of the British Embassy.' But here was Ariej, trying to pin this one on me because I had worked closely with Dr Subandrio for many months before October 1965. This was the first and last I heard of the Gilchrist Letter during my detention.

One evening, when things at the camp had not yet heated up, we were sitting bracing ourselves for whatever horror would occur next when Bonar suddenly appeared at one of the windows. He stood leaning on the ledge and looked at each of us in turn, leering. What kind of mood was he in now? Had he come to bully, to intimidate or threaten, or to ridicule and gloat?

'Well, well. How are you all feeling this evening? Quite well and happy, I hope?'

'Happy! His taunts were sometimes more cutting than his tempers.

'We'll only be happy when you release us and let us go home to our children,' one of the women said.

The leer did not leave his face but he nodded slowly—a habit of his when he wanted to impress us.

'There's no going home for any of you lot, you dirty communists. This isn't like any other place. Once here, you'll never get out alive.'

'Had I thought about it calmly, I would have realized that he was playing on our vulnerability. But any sense of calm and rationality had by now been destroyed. None of us said anything.

After a pause to let his words sink in, he said 'Hey, you,' pointing at me, 'how old is Tari?'

'Seventeen.'

'That's a nice age for a girl to be left alone at home, isn't it? What's going to become of her?'

'I don't know,' I replied, 'but I'm sure she'll be able to look after herself.'
'Ugh, rubbish! She'll be out on the streets soon enough, selling herself to make a living. And what about your daughters,' he said, turning to the other women. 'Tin years old? Four years old? In fifteen years, they'll be grown up, all of them, and out on the streets. Prostitutes. And you lot won't be there to look after them, will you?'

I felt so vulnerable that his words hit me like a knife. Would we really be here forever? And what would happen to the children?

'Ever heard of Eichmann?' he asked, looking at me.

'Yes, he was the man who planned the annihilation of the Jews in the German concentration camps,' I replied. 'Of course, I've heard of him.'

'Eichmann, that's me, commander of this camp. I've read all about him. A great fellow. He's my model.'

I stared at him, hardly believing my ears. After a few moments, he swaggered off, chuckling something to himself about Eichmann and concentration camps.

By now it was already more than a week since I had last seen Tari and Ani and the separation was getting me down. It was unbearable to be cut off from any news of home, and I could well imagine how hard it was for them, knowing nothing about the two of us. I spent much of the time worrying about how they were coping.

His words were senseless, yet I find it difficult to describe the mood of despair that overcame me. And I was not alone. Nobody in the room spoke after he left and the atmosphere was laden with gloom. I spent the night dozing off occasionally, unable to dispel the fear that I would never leave this place alive, never see the children again.

I woke next morning in a fit of sobbing. I managed to calm myself but broke down every time anyone said anything to me. I could not lift myself out of this depression for the whole day.

Late that afternoon, I saw Bud crossing the courtyard. He glanced in my direction as he always did and noticed that I was utterly miserable. On his way back across the yard, I saw him speak to one of the guards. Then, quite unexpectedly, the guard came over and entered the room.

'He wants to tell you something. I'll let you out but please be quick.'

I went out and stood just near enough to hear Bud's words.

'Please don't cry. Don't worry about the children. They'll learn a lot through all these experiences. They'll grow up much more quickly and grow wiser in the process.'

I could say nothing in reply. I only nodded and tried to smile through my tears. The guard escorted me back to the room, whispering as we went: 'Cheer up, Ibo. Things aren't all that bad. Why don't you try singing, to keep your mind off things?'

It had been foolish of me to let Bonar get the better of me like this. I took this advice to heart. Never again during all the years of my detention did I suffer the fear and heartaches of that dreadful night and day.
The Kalong Torture Chamber

Most of the people transferred to Likdam came from an interrogation centre in Gunung Sahari, Jakarta, the headquarters of a special unit established by the Jakarta military command in 1966 to smash the underground movement. The exploits of this unit—though not the methods it used—were widely reported in the press. Its most spectacular achievements were the arrest of Sudisman, the only member of the PKI politbureau not to be caught and murdered in 1965, and Brigadier-General Supardjo, the most senior army officer in the Untung Group that planned and carried out the kidnappings of the generals. Both men were later tried by Suharto’s extraordinary military tribunal, Mahmilub, sentenced to death and executed.

This was the place where Tari had spent a few dreadful hours. From my own brief visit there when I was summoned by Atjep, I remembered it as a derelict house with nothing outside to distinguish it from the other houses in the quiet side street. It still bore the name-board of the social services union for becak-drivers which had occupied the building until it was requisitioned by the army. But the oppressive feel of an intel unit hit you the moment you entered the front door, the detached, sullen attitude of the soldiers on guard and the swagger of the officers in charge of operations.

The operation conducted from Gunung Sahari was called Operasi Kalong or ‘Operation of the Bats.’ As the name suggested, it functioned mainly at night. I knew from Tari’s experience that this was a torture centre, but it was not until I met the detainees who came to Likdam that I got a true sense of what went on there. Every time new tapols arrived, we would hear more accounts of horrific torture sessions. Sometimes, a prisoner at Likdam would be summoned back to Kalong for further interrogation. A burly lieutenant whom we knew only as Bob would turn up and ‘borrow’ the person for a few days. The word in Indonesian is dibon, which means being exchanged for a voucher, a word I heard many times in detention. Whenever Bob appeared, a shudder would go through the camp.

When a new detainee arrived at Kalong, he or she would be kept in the interrogation room for days, sleeping on one of the tables and not allowed to mix with the other people. The unit was geared for rapid action and reaction, and the turnover of prisoners would sometimes be very high. Newcomers had to be isolated, shocked and demoralized and were forced to watch others being interrogated and tortured, a form of torment in itself.

During its first years of operation, Kalong was run by Atjep and Major Suroso, an officer who won rapid promotion in recognition for his successes in rounding up communist activists. The two of them had recruited and trained a team of tough, dedicated and ruthless torturers and had also been able to recruit a number of communist activists to assist in the interrogation of their comrades. By late 1968, when I began to hear first-hand accounts about the centre, two senior communists were playing a
crucial role on the Kalong operations; they were widely despised because of their active participation in the torture of detainees.

One was S. who, until October 1965, had been the personal bodyguard of D. N. Aidit; the other was B. from South Sumatra, who had been made a member of the party’s international department only a short while before his arrest.

The commonest form of torture was the electric shock, first applied on the thumbs, then on other parts of the body, including the genitals. Another favourite was bending the victim with the long, spiked tail of the mammoth pari (stingray) fish. Several of the men arriving at Likdam bore the scars of newly healed wounds on their arms and backs. The physical state of one young man particularly horrified me. He was very handsome and had a lithe body and thick black hair; his skin was darker than usual for an Indonesian. When I first set eyes on him, he reminded me of a proud young Indian sitting astride an elephant. But one day, when he was stripped to the waist, I saw fresh scars all over his body, hideous thin, white streaks across his dark skin where the tail had torn through his flesh. He was the younger brother of a PKI leader and had been beaten mercilessly to make him divulge information about his brother’s whereabouts.

Some tapols who joined us from Kalong bore psychological rather than physical scars. One man who slept just outside our room always had an empty stare on his face. He could have been taken for a simpleton. He spent the whole time cooking and doing chores for his food group. He only ever spoke when spoken to and responded like an automaton to whatever people asked him to do. The torturers had used electric shock on his genitals to devastating effect. He was a victim of mistaken identity, they mistook him for a communist member of the upper House of parliament, the MPR. Although the confusion was cleared up, he remained in detention because he happened to be a member of the banned peasants’ union, the BTI.

I heard exactly the same stories from everyone who arrived from Kalong. Even after the initial interrogation sessions were over and the newcomers could now join the others being held in the compound, conditions were intolerable. The detainees were segregated into groups and were forbidden to talk to anyone in another group. There were plenty of informers spying on the detainees, most of them former comrades, who were constantly on the lookout for breaches of camp discipline. Torture went on all day and night. There was a term for the shrieks of the torture victims—tapol whist or ‘obligatory song.’ In the evenings, the inmates were required to watch television, except for the news bulletins when the set was turned off. Perhaps this kind of regime was maintained to prevent the tapols from spending the evenings in discussions with each other. It is really frustrating watching people on television living normal lives when you yourself are held behind barbed wire in a detention camp. When I later had the chance to watch, I sometimes felt like screaming at the people inside the box and wanted to tell them things they would never read in the Indonesian press.
What was particularly disturbing about Kalong was the number of communist cadres who were now working for the army. But there were plenty more whose courage defies belief. One who stands out for me is Sri Ambar, a member of SOBSI and one of its leading women activists. She had succeeded in escaping arrest for about nine months after October 1965 but her husband was caught and their home was mobbed and destroyed by a gang of young men. I first heard about Sri when I moved to Likdam. She had come there from Kalong about a year earlier. Stories about Sri were legendary. Even the guards spoke about her with awe. One soldier told me she was so distraught when she came to Likdam that the mere sight of a uniformed soldier would cause her to scream ‘Get away from me, you brute!’

Later, when we met in Bukit Duri Prison, she told me about everything that had happened to her.

After her home was destroyed, she and her two daughters moved in with her mother. One day she met a former comrade in the street. In the course of a chat, the man asked her where she was living. She took the precaution of not giving him her address, mentioning only the district where she was staying. As it turns out, that was more than enough. Little did she know that he was working for army intelligence. He went to the local government office and scanned the photos of local residents handed in when applying for identity cards. He found hers and was able to direct the army to her mother’s home. Other activists had just been arrested during an operation against the underground and, under torture, one told the army that she was helping to distribute illegal pamphlets. While she was certainly a victim of betrayal, she agreed that her own lack of vigilance was partly to blame.

As soon as she arrived in Kalong, she was interrogated but denied everything. They brought in the man who had betrayed her and ordered him to repeat his allegations in her presence. Still she refused to confess. They were both stripped naked and flogged in an attempt to find out who was lying. By now it was late in the evening. They were both taken to a yard in the middle of the camp, tied to a tree by their wrists and left dangling with their toes just touching the ground till morning. As she hung there in great agony, an elderly civilian employee at the camp crept up to her while the guards were out of sight. He held a cup of hot, sweet tea to her lips for her to sip. Then he took a jar of balm from his pocket.

‘Excuse me for touching you,’ he said, as he rubbed her body with the ointment.

After this, the torture sessions continued daily, till one night, things came to a head. Atjep who took personal charge of her interrogation was enraged by her stubborn refusal to talk. On this occasion, she had been stripped naked as usual and was being beaten in the presence of some of her male colleagues, when Atjep suddenly shouted ‘Let her have it.’
One of the torturers pulled out a knife and plunged it into her left thigh, causing a long, deep gash. One of the other prisoners in the room who saw this fell unconscious at the sight of so much blood, but she herself could hardly feel the pain.

"You sadists," she yelled, then bent down and, scarcely conscious of what she was doing, she pushed the two sides of the gash together, to try to stop the bleeding. But Atjep would not let things rest and nodded in her direction to the man who had knifed her. He made another plunge at her with his knife, this time in the right buttock. By now, she was so weak from loss of blood that she fainted.

When she came to, she was lying in a military hospital and was told that she had been brought in two days earlier. The first doctor to examine her said she had only herself to blame. But other medical staff were more sympathetic and told her that the doctors on duty had been shocked to see how badly injured she was. Apart from the deep knife wounds, there were many other injuries and bruises on her back and neck. Two days after the gashes on her legs had been stitched up, a doctor came to say he would have to remove the stitches. When she protested, he told her that the doctors on duty when she arrived had complained to army headquarters about her condition. An investigation had been ordered and the doctors had been instructed to remove the stitches so that they could measure the length and depth of the gashes.

"The removal of the stitches was more painful than anything I had suffered," she told me.

She heard later that Atjep was suspended from duty while the inquiry was underway and spent some time in detention.

Long before she had fully recovered, she was discharged from hospital and ordered to return to Kalong so that the interrogations could continue. When she next turned up for questioning, her two daughters were in the room and were being beaten. They had recently been taken into custody and had been asked to give information about people who used to visit their mother at home. When they refused, the decision was made to confront them with their mother. As she stood and watched, the girls shouted, "Mother, don't say anything. Never mind if we have to go through this."

Sri kept quiet as the girls were beaten. The two of them were taken away and she heard nothing more about them for several months. Later she was told that one of her daughters was being held at another camp run by Kalong. The younger daughter, who was under ten years of age, was taken away by an army officer who said he would look after her. Sri was never able to discover what happened to this child or where she was taken. Up to the time I last saw Sri, the quest to find her daughter had led nowhere.

The loss of her child was the worst tragedy of all for Sri. She told me that whenever she was brought before interrogators or army officers, the first thing she always did was to ask them where her daughter was.

There was to be yet another confrontation, this time with her mother. The elderly woman had been detained and was accused of helping her daughter. The army had no
respect for her parental bond with Sri. She was quite fearless and made no secret of her views when interrogated in Sri's presence:

'Did you help your daughter and give her shelter after the coup?'

'Yes, of course I did. Why shouldn't I?'

'Didn't you know the security forces were after her because she was scheming against the Government?'

'That's nothing to do with me. She's my only daughter and it's my duty to help her in every way I can when she's in trouble.'

'But didn't you realize you would get yourself into trouble by helping her?'

'I don't care about that. I'm her mother and that's all that matters to me.'

While all this was going on, the soldiers were slamming her face, punching and beating her. Undeterred she turned to Sri and shouted 'Don't take any notice of what they are doing. You must do what you have to do. All this doesn't matter.'

Sri's mother remained in detention for several months together with her granddaughter, the older of Sri's two daughters.

Some years later, when I was being held in the same prison as Sri, she heard that her mother had died of a brain tumor. Together with her, we mourned the passing of a courageous woman. She may have known little about politics but would not allow anyone to shake her faith in her daughter.

Sri was kept in the interrogation room at Kalong for so long that she witnessed a great deal of torture. She told me she saw a soldier bite off the ear lobe of Tati's friend.

'How could he possibly do such a thing?' I asked her.

'One of Arief's most brutal thugs held the boy's head in his hands, dug his teeth into the fleshy part of the ear and bit it off. Then he spat it onto the floor. That's how he did it,' she said.

Another scene had shaken her profoundly. As she was sitting in the interrogation room one day, a young boy was brought in. He had been caught carrying messages which the interrogators had reason to believe were intended for Sudisman, the PKI politburo member who was still at large, in hiding somewhere in Jakarta. They beat him mercilessly, to force him to say where Sudisman was hiding, but he said nothing. Sri was struck by the dignity of the boy as they flogged him without respite.

'It was remarkable. He stood there, his head held high, defying these sadists.'

Then they tried to undermine his confidence by telling him they had obtained plenty of information from people in the party leadership so he might as well tell them all he knew. They mentioned a name, Sujono Pratikno, a PKI central committee member who had just been captured. He held a key position in the clandestine movement and had worked closely with Sudisman. The boy could not believe someone so high up would betray Sudisman and was convinced that they were bluffing. Sujono was brought in, but still the boy showed no sign of weakening.
'Now,' said one of the interrogators to Sujono, 'tell us about the underground organization you've set up in Jakarta.'

Sujono walked to a blackboard, picked up a piece of chalk and began to draw a diagram of the underground network, indicating the cells that had been created and writing down the names of people in the cells. He also described the ways each of the cells kept contact with Sudisman.

As Sujono was busy scribbling, Sri looked at the boy. She saw him quiver. All his poise had gone; he was limp with horror. Torture he could stand but not the sight of such treachery. Sudisman was captured the very next day and the underground network crumbled to pieces.

Later I found out more about this incident and the tragic consequences for the underground movement. Immediately after Sujono's betrayal, one of the young couriers escaped from the detention centre with the help of his close comrades and rushed to Sudisman's hideout to warn him to flee. Sudisman refused to believe that Sujono had betrayed him and thought this was a ploy to force him to leave his hideout. But within hours Sudisman was arrested.

For Sri, the worst of her memories was witnessing the treatment of another courageous young activist caught carrying messages from Central Java to Jakarta. She had seen him in the prisoners' compound and he had whispered words of admiration for all her courage.

She was in the room when they started flogging him. They aimed at his back and neck, the most vulnerable parts of the body. I was told by prisoners who had gone through such beating that the only way to protect yourself is to bend the head back as far as possible against the top of the spine. The flogging grew in intensity and Sri tried not to watch. She stared at a piece of paper in front of her, trying to concentrate on anything but the atrocity going on in her presence. But when she heard him fall, she turned round to see what had happened. He was lying prostrate on the floor, thick, white foam was oozing out of his mouth. When she rushed over to him, the torturers did nothing to hold her back. They seemed stunned by what they had done.

She bent down and just managed to hear him whisper a girl's name, probably the name of his sweetheart. A few moments later, the boy was dead.

Not long after all these experiences, Sri was summoned to appear as a witness at Sudisman's trial but she refused to testify. She held her hand cupped behind her ear to indicate to the judge that she could not hear properly and told the court that her hearing had been impaired by torture.

Many years later, in 1975, Sri was tried and sentenced to fifteen years. After being released in the early 1980s, she lived in Bogor, West Java, with her husband who had spent fourteen years in detention without trial. They managed to survive from the proceeds of a small stall which they set up with the help of Amnesty members in Austria, but after her husband died she stopped writing to the group.
she lives somewhere on the outskirts of Jakarta and has begun to lose her mind, hardly surprising for someone who has lived through such a terrible ordeal. But the legend of Sri Ambar’s unshakable courage is still spoken of with awe by all those who knew her in prison.