

# For France

*A psychiatrist grapples with torture.*

Family is the most important thing in my life. Is it not so in every life? In the end, we are left with family. No one else really cares. Is this not why, regardless of every effort, neglect and even abuse are routinely uncovered in aged care homes and institutions?

Every morning before I leave for the office, I pause at the kitchen table, watch my two children, Pierre just twelve years old, and Mateo ten, munching on their cereal. I lean over and kiss each of them good-bye and call Marie who responds from the bathroom, a muffled “bye.” She used to come out and we would hug, but for some time now, we have both felt somehow uncomfortable, distant. Strangely, our bedtime trysts have been incredibly physical, I suppose I mean, aggressive. You might even say violent. On my part that is. There is something there, I am sure. The boys don’t sense it though, or at least I hope not. And Marie, I know she wants to talk, but I have avoided it. I suspect that she knows, and soon I will have to come clean.

When I say that I leave for the office, I don’t really mean that. It’s not an office, at least not any more. Not since I gave up my private practice and offered my services to the *Commandement de la Gendarmerie Nationale* in Algiers. I used to be a psychiatrist, a very good one, but patients were hard to come by in private practice. In the 1960s psychiatry was a specialty in its infancy and for people to admit that they went to a psychiatrist was to admit that they were stark raving mad.

Nor did I actually offer my services. They came knocking at my door. “I am here at the direction of General Massu,” began the impeccably dressed man in civilian clothes, obviously a career bureaucrat of all bureaucrats. “The General respectfully requests that you attend an audience with him, with a view to taking charge of the D.O.P.”

“Which is?” I asked. I had never heard of the D.O.P.

“The *Détachement Opérationnel de Protection.*”

“Which is?” I repeated, receiving no reply.

General Massu would later describe this operation as a division of “specialists in the interrogation of suspects who want to say nothing.”

Mindful that the main mission of any psychiatrist is to get one’s patient to talk, “the talking cure” as they say, I agreed to meet with the general, himself a famous military man, well known for solving the problems of terrorism facing French colonies around the world. And my wife and I were very much concerned about the political turmoil in Algiers, the bombings and riots. Right now, Algiers was not a safe place to live or to raise a family. So it was easy for me to agree. Although I diagnosed the general as a hard man, obviously an egotist of the first order, he was a patriot, and seemed honest and direct. General Massu was also a well-read man, who had survived torture by the Nazis during World War II. He asked me to take on the job of director of intelligence. He thought that a professional, such as myself, would be able to conduct interrogations that did not require the use of torture, which he had experienced himself and of course abhorred, as would anybody. And, as he said to me, he wanted to make sure that torture was not used unless absolutely necessary, to which I of course agreed. It was an easy choice to take on the job. In fact, I felt flattered. The money was good too, a great opportunity to earn some money for my young family. We had been struggling for some time. The hospital had no psychiatrist and did not see the need for one. I had tried doing general practice, but there was not much need for that either. People did not have the money to pay for doctors. They were grim economic times then, and still are, made worse by the economic turmoil. It’s why, of course, so many Algerians are packing up their bags and migrating to France. We should do the same. But my wife does not want to leave her many relatives and friends.

My staff included a number of assistant interrogators who had police training, a couple of male nurses, a psychologist, and several male secretaries, perhaps the most important of all staff, to record the respondents’ answers, describe their demeanor and so on. It took me many weeks to find secretaries of such caliber. It demanded much more than simply taking shorthand or typing. It required a level of sensitivity and perceptiveness on the part of the observer/recorder to set down in good prose everything that

happened, being careful to avoid any slightly inflammatory wording, finding words that, one might say, neutralized such actions as hit, whip, drown, etc. “Pressure was applied,” was a popular expression, as were “subject was persistently asked...” or “subject’s answers were double checked by other interviewers” (we never used the word interrogate or its derivatives).

I should have taken one thing that the General said more seriously. That my work was part of military intelligence. Therefore secrecy was absolutely necessary. Nothing we did or learned from our suspects was to be conveyed to the outside world. No talking to friends or relatives no matter how distant. Of course, never ever talk to the press, those cunning sneaks who wormed their ways into bureaucracies and organizations. “Information is power,” pronounced General Massu. “If even the slightest inkling of our activities is leaked to the press, we lose. It’s as simple as that.”

I thought later that I should have asked, “and how will we know that we have won?” It was only later still, after I had become accustomed to my secret life as chief interrogator, that I answered my own question: “when all the terrorists are dead.” I know now that this answer is also just as silly. For once the terrorists are dead, the journalists and politicians will mine the records of history to find out what really happened behind the secret walls of the imperial buildings of the *Commandement de la Gendarmerie Nationale* and its connected neighbor *Barberousse* prison. Though in some ways, there were no secrets. Or at least there was plenty of submerged knowledge of the happenings behind the walls of *Barberousse* prison. Convicted terrorists were guillotined behind its walls. Everyone knew that. What they didn’t quite know, and I and my staff pretended not to know, was that many were probably convicted on the basis of the testimony offered up by our subjects.

My driver showed up as usual and we drove off, a ten minute ride. The car can be any color or make, seems to be a different car each day. Security says they do that so terrorists can’t learn what cars contain *Gendarmerie* personnel, so make it less likely to be bombed. I’m appreciative of that. But the car does show up the same time every morning, so I wonder if a terrorist out there—and believe me I know who many of them are, having

interviewed them—knows where I live and could easily lie in wait. But praise Allah, it has so far not happened. Of course I say nothing to Marie about all this. She would go nuts if she knew what I do.

Well, what I do is psychiatry at the highest—and lowest—level. I know the theory of mind control. After all, isn't that what psychiatrists are supposed to aim at? To exercise enough control over his patient's mind to put him back in control of himself, to be able to live with himself. How many normal people have trouble living with themselves from day to day? Most, if you ask me. I spend just as much time helping my staff as I do helping our mostly unwilling subjects answer our questions, tell us what they know, get it off their chest. It's a burden to them, to keep information in and to be unable to share it. This is a basic principle of psychiatry, in my view. It is the aim of any good psychiatrist to help his patient to talk about his worries and cares, insufferable thoughts and impulses. Not only that. We clinicians also know that there are many thoughts and past traumatic events that lie beneath the patient's consciousness. We can help by getting them to vomit (excuse the unseemly word) up what lies deep inside their consciousness (or unconsciousness, if you are Freudian or one of his followers).

I have been doing this for almost a year. My staff have come and gone. There are only a couple upon whom I can rely and be sure are trustworthy. Those who have suddenly left, saying that the job was too stressful, I let go of course, but am required to notify my bureaucratic superiors of their whereabouts. I try not to worry about them. I trust that General Massu does not have them watched, that they will not talk to the press or anyone else about our work. After all, they have been willing participants. To speak out is also to admit that they too are complicit in our secret mission.

Since you are reading this, it is reasonable for me to assume that you know why you are reading this "story"—let's call it that. You are curious. You want to be let in on the Big Secret of interrogation. Especially by one who is trained in psychiatry, the science of mind control.

Interrogation of unwilling suspects has a very long history, from the slaves of Roman times, to the Spanish Inquisitors who

catalogued and mastered the art, merging on science, though they did not know it. I should add that we do everything to avoid the use of any violent means to extract confessions. We French are a civilized people after all, with an impressive history of caring for those in countries who need and will prosper on our enlightenment. Government by the people, for the people. An idea that we French invented.

The first step, then, with those who will say nothing, is to scare our subject by demonstrating our omniscience of his past actions and collaborators. Embedded in this trick is something that may be obvious to you: if we know everything, why is it necessary to extract a confession out of this unwilling subject? I could answer that, but will not right now. There are many apparent illogicalities in the torture trade. We confront him with a *boukkaraor cagoulard*, a Muslim terrorist with his head covered in a bag with eye slits, who is one of our successes, and is now an informer. Some of these informers are very good at what they do or are made to do. Many will drop to their knees, their hands tied behind their backs, sobbing, wobbling back and forth, singing the names of accomplices, and whatever else we ask. Depending on our psychological assessment of our unwilling subject, we may use a female informer, instead of male. If we have concluded that our subject has a special relationship with a woman, this may be a very effective technique, especially if we strip her down a little, just enough to give him a taste of what we are capable of. I say “we” here, but I assure you, as a psychiatrist, I would never touch any subject or intentionally hurt them in any way. I leave that to my assistants provided from the military arm of D.O.P. Some appear to enjoy what they do a little too much. If I see that, I quietly take them by the arm and usher them out of the interrogation room for a cooling off period.

The majority of our suspects break down easily when confronted with these informers. I sit at the back of the room, often with a secretary and record the names of collaborators, their addresses, and so on. And if pending attacks are indicated, I quickly convey this information to the D.O.P emergency personnel. May I remind you, we are doing this for France and her dominion Algeria. We have brought Algeria out of the dark ages. They will become civilized whether they like it or not. Their supposed

independence for which they say they fight is nothing but a cry to go back to the barbarous ways of little tyrants in their little fiefdoms, dishing out a primitive justice to their enslaved people.

In the rare (though admittedly increasing) occasions when our subject does not “break” (he is hardly broken, this is violent language that we try to avoid), we move on to the necessary next step. No, wait. There is an intermediate step. After showing him our sobbing informer, we send our subject back to his cell, where we leave him for a day or so. We may even send a guard into his cell as though he is to be taken out and tortured, but then make up some excuse for not doing so. The guard may feign good will on his part, pretend that he is taking pity on him. We make the best of psychological manipulation. It is our aim to make our suspect completely dependent on us. We can do this by manipulating his environment: we provide drinks of nice or horrible taste, a little food, though this is not recommended because should he vomit in response to our interrogations, it makes a terrible mess, not to mention the smell. And of course, there is the danger of choking.

A few more sessions like this will usually get our suspect talking. And if this should fail—I repeat—we only do this as a last resort, our methods up to this point work with ninety percent of our patients, I mean, suspects, in the unlikely event that our subject does not open up, we move on to the next technique. Once again, we depend on psychological methods. We abhor violence, the essence of torture. I owe a debt of gratitude to my military associates who provided us with the necessary equipment. This was an army signals magneto that, when wound up, would produce enough alternating current to cause quite a jolt of electric shock. We called it the *gégène*, which proved to be very effective. It is very important to note that we did not adopt this without any research on its effectiveness. In fact General Massu told us that he had tried it out on himself and found it most effective and safe. This was applied to various parts of the body, from ears, fingers, mouth and teeth, and later, inevitably I suppose, the penis and testicles. We pioneered this technique which was later to be adopted by interrogation departments throughout the civilized world.

But the most valuable feature of this form of interrogation

was that it left no marks on the body (if applied properly). And once this was fully realized, we then experimented with other types of torture that did not leave visible marks on the body. The most obvious was the one that has been used for centuries: water torture of various kinds, but mostly forcing water in the mouth, bringing the subject close to drowning, then saving him. From a psychological point of view, I preferred this method because it made it look like we were successively saving the subject's life. We were doing him a great service.

I could go on, but it is not my aim to scare or outrage you, the reader. I do want to remind you that our intentions were always noble and controlled. Anyone under my supervision who took too much pleasure in these proceedings was immediately moved to a different task. On the other hand, though, if anyone refused to carry out these tasks, for whatever reason, we insisted that he show clearly why this was so, to explain what other course of action was open to us? We did these things not because we wanted to, but for, quite frankly, the good of France, for the bright future of Algeria. We were saving a country that was under attack. We doubtless had the blessing of Allah!

This seemed all very well and good. But you have to understand that doing this day in and day out, takes its toll. They say that if you do not enjoy your work, you should quit. But how does this apply when one's job is torture? This is what it came down to. And besides, it was the very nature of torture that one must not enjoy doing it, otherwise if you do, you are some kind of sadistic creep, is that not so? I routinely managed to fire most of my interrogators who appeared to enjoy inflicting pain. I first tried moving them out of the interrogation room, but they resisted, even reported me to my superiors for not being fair, complaining that I was punishing them for doing their job with enthusiasm. This was an unsustainable logic.

I am a psychiatrist, I told myself. And psychiatry is a new science. I should keep my emotions out of it. But how does one do this without falling into other traps of logic? Is not the psychiatrist supposed to have empathy for his subject? But this was asking too much. I can't have empathy with my subject if at the same time I am inflicting horrible pain and suffering can I? Or is this the same as saying to a patient, "this will hurt" when

giving him an injection?

My solution in the end was the good old psychological tricks of self-deception and denial. I justified my actions by arguing that this was the same as working in a slaughterhouse, killing and preparing animals so that eventually people would be able to enjoy eating them. It was all to the good.

And so on this day, a day like every other day, my driver dropped me off at the office, I did my duty, then at the end of the day my driver picked me up. And on the journey home, I pondered, even worried, that this was a car that had probably picked up suspects late at night and brought them to my interrogation center. I also knew, but tried to dismiss it from my mind, that some such suspects never made it to my office.

“Hello my darlings,” I called, “I’m home!” The children ran to me. I kissed them both. We ate a delicious supper of Moroccan lamb that Marie had cooked. She said nothing. Just a faint smile, I think. But the lamb reminded me of the slaughterhouse. I excused myself and went to the bathroom and had a long shower. I scrubbed every inch of my body. It was like I had fallen in a cesspool. My body smelled like armpits all over. I went straight to bed. Marie came to me. Or did she? I was in some kind of delirium.

Then she was shaking me. “Wake up! Wake up!”

It was morning. My driver was waiting downstairs. Would he take me to my office? What did he know? He never spoke. Just looked at me in the rear vision mirror. Or was it my turn to disappear?.

*Moral: To punish another is to punish one’s self*

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