



## **PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF DETENTION**

1. René Cassin is a London-based human rights non-governmental organisation that works to promote and protect universal human rights, drawing on Jewish experience and values. Jewish people have been forced to seek refuge from persecution throughout their history, and as such we feel uniquely compelled and qualified to speak out on the issue of Asylum and Detention. Below is a testimony of an individual who has been through detention.

2. Julia knew about René Cassin's work on the parliamentary inquiry about detention through a flyer of the organisation she found in a charity and she called René Cassin to share her story about detention. Julia is willing to give oral evidence to the panel if possible. We met Julia in September to hear about her experience about detention and the story of her son, Salomon who was also detained several times.

**NAME:** Julia

**ARE YOU OVER 18:** YES.

### **DATES IN DETENTION:**

1. I have been detained three times between 2008 and 2011 and my son has been detained five times between 2008 and 2012.

I was detained for the first time in 2008 with my son. We spent two weeks in detention centre at Tinsley House near Gatwick before being deported back to our country.

We were both detained a second time in 2009 for one week in Brook House near Gatwick before being deported again to Trinidad.

In 2010, my son was detained in Harmondsworth for one month before being sent back to Trinidad.

In October 2011, I was detained again with my son and we were both sent to Yarl's Wood for 1 month and a half.

In May 2012, my son was detained in Dover for about 1 month, in isolation.

**WHERE YOU UNDER 18 AT ANY POINT DURING THE TIME YOU WERE DETAINED:**

2. I was over 18 the three times I have been detained, but the first time I was detained in 2008, my son was just under 18. He was major the three other times he has been detained.

**NAME OF DETENTION FACILITY:**

3. Tinsley House (Gatwick), Brook House (Gatwick), Harmondsworth (Middlesex) and Yarl's Wood (Bedfordshire), Dover (Kent).

**What were your experiences of living in immigration detention, including the context and duration of your stay?**

4. I am from Trinidad. I came the first time in the UK in 1990, with my husband and our two children, my son, Solomon and his sister, both babies. We were granted visas valid for 7 years. I had two more children born in the UK.

5. I could have stayed legally in the UK until 1997. However, in 1994, I decided to come back to Trinidad because of marital problems. I took my four children with me. I tried to set up a business in Trinidad but life was too dangerous there because of gangs' violence and kidnappings.

6. Life was too dangerous for us in Trinidad, so in 2003, I decided to come back to London with my children. I entered with a 6 months visa and when it expired, I remained. I was told to apply for a long term visa on humanitarian grounds. I was corresponding with the Home Office, but every time I asked information on my application, I was just told that my application was under examination. This situation lasted for years.

7. During this time I became very ill. The left side of my body was paralysed. Despite several medical examinations, doctors I consulted couldn't find the problem. My GP wrote numerous letters to the Home Office to inform them of my health problems. Nevertheless, it didn't change anything, the Home Office was still considering my application.

8. My solicitor advised me that all the documents for my application for a long term visa on humanitarian grounds have already been sent and recommended me to go back to Trinidad and see if a treatment for my illness was available there. At the time, there were a lot of Cuban doctors in Trinidad, reputed to be among the best doctors in the world. Also, I had done some research and found that some people with the same symptoms have



been cured in Trinidad. This is why I came back to Trinidad, only with my son, Solomon. There, I was treated for 6 months and cured.

9. In 2008, I came back to London with my son who was just under 18. We were both detained in Tinsley House for two weeks and sent back to Trinidad. This was a very traumatic experience for my son. While in detention, a solicitor tried to help us but we were deported just after two weeks and he didn't have enough time to help us.

10. I was confident about going back to Trinidad because I thought it was to come back more easily to the UK. Indeed, an immigration officer had offered me help. He told me that if I accepted to go back to Trinidad, he will speak to the British Embassy in Trinidad so I can come back in the UK with a visa based on humanitarian grounds. When I was in Trinidad, I went to the British Embassy about my visa. They told me the immigration officer had lied to me and they just laughed at me.

11. After spending 6 months in Trinidad, I wanted to go back to the UK again. However, my son was too afraid to try to come because he had been detained with me last time. This is why I went back to London alone. I don't know if it was because I was issued a new passport, but I was given a 6 months visa to come. When I arrived, I immediately looked for legal advice.

12. In the meantime, being alone and separated from his family affected a lot my son who stayed in Trinidad. Also, he was more vulnerable alone there. He was harassed and threatened by gang's members in Trinidad.

13. For these reasons, he travelled to London on his own in 2010. When he arrived, he was detained and sent to Harmondsworth. A solicitor took the case but didn't help. My son tried to claim asylum because of the harassment and threats he was subjected to in Trinidad. He was detained for a month and during this time, his mental health worsened. He hated detention so much. The solicitor told him that Trinidad was a peaceful place and that he couldn't claim for asylum on these grounds and told him to withdraw his claim for asylum. He went back to Trinidad.

14. While in Trinidad, the situation became worse and worse. A gang was harassing and intimidating him. The gang tried to make him steal for them. He was also threatened because they knew he had relatives in the UK so they wanted money from him. I had to pay some times.

15. Because of these threats, his mental health worsened again. He was so ill that I decided to go back to Trinidad to take him with me in London. When

we were in Trinidad, a Church helped us and they said that because we were both detained more than once in the UK we couldn't go back there. The Church arranged something for us to go to Ireland. My son spent one month in a psychiatric asylum in Trinidad. Then he was better and declared fit to travel. He was also given medication for his mental illness he had to take a several times a day.

16. A Priest was waiting for us in Ireland, he had an accommodation for us. Also, it was better because as citizens from Trinidad, we didn't need visa to go to Ireland. Everything was ready for us there and we had the flight tickets. Unfortunately, we had a connexion flight in the UK. When at the airport, we were detained, the immigration officers said we were lying, that we were not going to Ireland but planning to stay in the UK even if we had the flight tickets proving that we were just in transit. They called the immigration in Ireland to report our past detentions in the UK. Also, they confiscated the medications my son had for his mental health saying that they were not authorised in the UK.

17. We had arrived about 8:30 am and my son remained without medication until 11pm, symptoms of his mental illness started to appear and he was very unwell during the interrogation. They wanted to send us in different centres but I fought and we were finally both taken to Yarl's Wood. We arrived there about 1 or 2 am after spending the whole day without eating.

18. Once in Yarl's Wood my son wasn't given medication for about 36 hours. He was really sick, screaming and he started hallucinating. He was eventually taken to a hospital and given some medication. Then he was taken back to the centre.

19. We spent 6 horrifying weeks in Yarl's Wood. While in detention, the mental health of my son became worse and worse. Doctors there said he was too ill to be interviewed. A psychiatrist also said he should not be interviewed because he was too ill. The immigration officers said because of the risk of absconding, my son and I had to remain in detention. Also they were keeping trying to interview him.

20. One day, an immigration officer came to interview us and when she was interviewing me she noticed the bad state of my son and she said it wasn't possible to interview him. She didn't even try, she could see he was crazy. In front of me, she called her superior and told him "*this is totally beyond me. I don't know why this young man is still inside here because he's very ill. I cannot interview him and I will not*". She was the nicest person we met during this whole awful experience.

21. Five days after this, we were released and sent to housing in Clare House. It was the first step to find us temporary accommodation. We didn't stay long and while there we had access to a doctor who gave medication to my son. Then we were granted temporary accommodation in Sheffield.

22. In Sheffield we were reporting every week. In March 2012, a letter from the Home Office arrived. It said our case was unfounded, asked us to vacate the accommodation and said we will be sent back to Trinidad. The Home Office stopped the economic support we had. When my son saw the letter, he became crazy again. He left Sheffield and went to visit his sisters and brothers in London. He didn't come back to Sheffield, neither to take his medication or to report. My son was so afraid to go to the GP because he thought he will be detained again. So he just became more and more ill.

23. In May 2012, my son was detained again as he was controlled by police officers after peeing in the street. He was taken to Dover.

**What were the conditions in immigration detention like, including your ability to access services such as legal advice, healthcare, pastoral support?**

**Degrading and inhuman treatments suffered by my son at Dover.**

24. While taken to Dover in May 2012, my son suffered the most traumatic experience of his life. As after leaving Sheffield he was not taking his medication, his mental health was so bad that he was put in isolation in the detention centre.

25. He spent one month in isolation. No one could see him for an entire month. During this whole time, he didn't see any doctor despite his mental health problems. I called a charity called medical justice<sup>1</sup> and they sent someone to see him in Dover. The gentleman who went to see him was told he couldn't see him because isolation status doesn't allow any visitor. The gentleman came back and eventually managed to see my son. He said Solomon was in a very bad state and didn't even know who he was. My son wasn't responding or reacting, he was so lost that he didn't even know who he was. The charity tried to get a doctor to visit my son.

26. The officers in Dover said it wasn't possible for my son to see an external doctor and they sent him to a hospital. The report from the hospital said,

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<sup>1</sup> A small charity which arranges for independent volunteer doctors to visit men, women and children in immigration detention. <http://www.medicaljustice.org.uk/>

among other things, that he had temporary blindness for two days because he had spent such a long time in the dark that his eyes took time to adapt to the light. The report also said he was pissing on the walls and he didn't know who he was.

27. Once treated at the hospital, my son became better and could tell what happened while in isolation in Dover. He said that for a month, he was treated like an animal in his isolation room. There was no light, he was left naked and had to beg for food. When some food was given to him, they just put it under the door like if they were feeding an animal. He was left for a month in his own excrements and filth. There was urine and stool all over the walls. He remembered that once an officer restrained him badly, he put his face on the floor and had his foot on his neck, he made his nose bleed.

28. A solicitor took the case of my son and the Home Office accepted to pay him £37,500 for damages. We are still trying to get greater reparation because his traumas from this experience are so deep and also because since we were told to leave Sheffield in May 2012 we have no support, no money to live on and no accommodation. We have just been surviving thanks to charities, the solicitors were also at our charge as we were supposed to leave the country since May 2012.

**Degrading treatments and torture suffered and witnessed by me at  
Yarl's Wood.**

29. The six weeks spent at Yarl's Wood were terrible, there is a lot of racism there. Officers use a lot of racist remarks and they treat you bad. I took a job in the kitchen, washing plates, to earn £5 a week. One day, when an officer saw me in the kitchen, he said looking at me with disgust: "*Do they allow this kind of people in the kitchen??*". I knew it was a racist remark. Another time, the same officer looked at me and spat on the floor just in front of me. I was very humiliated, I cried a lot but I had no one to report to.

30. In the night, when you are sleeping and not fully dressed, the officers come and open the door without knocking.

31. While I was working in the kitchen for three weeks, I witnessed a practice which amounts to torture. When it's time to eat, they serve you a very small amount of food, just enough to survive but not enough to fill you. You can't choose what you want to eat, they just serve you food and if you ask for more, you are told that you cannot have more. So you never have more food and you are just hungry. But what I witnessed when I was working in the kitchen is that for every meal, there is a great quantity of food which is

not served to detainees. Then the food goes back to the kitchen and they chuck it.

32. To see people left starving, prohibited to be served more food and then see all the food not served just wasted, is a torture. I witnessed this practice for the three weeks I worked in the kitchen at Yarl's Wood. They just serve enough food to detainees to them to survive and they chuck all the rest. Where I come from, we know the importance of food and see all this waste was such a torture for me.

33. Among all the detention centres I was in, Yarl's Wood was the worst. Food torture, humiliation, racism... There you felt you are not a human being but you are just there to be deported like an animal.

34. Even the doctors treat you like animals. My son was very ill when detained with me at Yarl's Wood but he wasn't given a better treatment. Even medications were not given to him correctly. They never gave him his pills, they used to drop them in the table, without speaking with him, looking at him or dealing with him at all.

**Were there any longer-term impacts of detention on you, your family and/or your wider community?**

35. Dover detention still traumatises my son. The time he spent alone and incommunicado in this dark room, naked and in his own excrements, still has effects on him, he still has nightmares about it and he is anxious just thinking about it. It was the most traumatic experience of his life. Also, even if he's better now, he still has mental health problems.

36. If that charity hadn't sent someone to see maybe, maybe he would have died. Maybe it's what immigration officers wanted....