



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. Sylvia came to René Cassin at the asylum seekers' drop-in centre of the West London Synagogue so we could help share her story about detention. We met Sylvia in September to hear her story about detention.

NAME: Sylvia

DATES IN DETENTION: January 2010 for five weeks.

WHERE YOU UNDER 18 AT ANY POINT DURING THE TIME YOU WERE DETAINED:
NO

NAME OF DETENTION FACILITY: Yarl's Wood (Bedfordshire).

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

3. I am from Kenya and I arrived in the UK in January 2010 and claimed for asylum. After the screen interview, I was put in Fast Track and detained on the same day for 5 weeks. Before being taken to Yarl's Wood, I spent the whole day without food or drink.

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

4. When in detention they first put you in a special unit for a week to integrate. Then, they take you to another unit to share with the room with people. In detention, everything is regulated. They confiscate electronic



devices such as cameras and laptops. Even if I think they don't have the right to do so, they monitor people's phone as well. They also control internet, which website you can access or not and sometimes it makes the process of finding information and help to assess your case difficult.

5. Five times a day they check the rooms (before and after breakfast, before and after lunch, before sleep).

6. When in detention, you are given 70p a day. They have a shop in the centre but there is not a vast choice, again everything is controlled and everything is the cheapest quality.

7. They have a book with solicitors in the library. I contacted every solicitor but no one took my case because they said they couldn't as I was in the Fast Track System. You call the solicitors and they just don't go back to you, they only say that they can't take your case.

8. After immigration officers set out my main interview, I met the solicitor about three times before the interview but just 2-3 hours in total so it's not enough to prepare the case properly. Nevertheless, I applied for temporary admission, which I was granted one week after the interview.

9. I witnessed several hunger strikes when I was at Yarl's wood because for instance, when you send faxes to your solicitor, you pay but they are never received so no one can help you.

10. Hunger strikes are also to protest against indefinite detention. When I was there, I met a lady who has been there almost 3 years. I was put on Fast Track and allegedly it fastens the process, but in fact, once on Fast Track you're still there for a long time. I spent five weeks in detention with the Fast Track System but in Yarl's Wood I met a woman who has been detained for two years even if she was in the Fast Track System.

11. Another time, there was a hunger strike to protest against the process of deportation because officers came in the middle of the night without previous warning to tell someone to dress up to take her to the airport for deportation. It's the common way to deport people from Yarl's Wood: officers just come suddenly in the middle of the night so you can't fight



against your deportation as you have no previous warning and date/time of the deportation. They don't give time to people to assess their cases, immigration officers deport them before.

12. At Yarl's Wood, officers use a lot of force also against detainees. Some officers harass the inmates, intimidate and pressure you.

13. You can't make friendship in detention, for instance at the Church I was meeting people but officers were separating us after the services and everyone had to go back to different units.

14. The food is really bad there, it's usually just chips and rice, every day the same.

15. They only give you paracetamol, when it's time for your medication they make sure you swallowed it right away. Even if you complain of something serious, they don't care, they say you are pretending. Even pregnant women, don't receive a better treatment, I witnessed it, it's really nasty. Officers in the detention centre are just not bothered, they don't treat people well.

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

16. The impact of detention is above all economical for me. When in detention you can work as a cleaner to earn 5 pounds a week, so why once outside, you are not allowed to work and contribute to the economy? Now the UKBA only gives me 35 pounds a week but I still can't work and I have to go in specific shops with the vouchers I have.