

Carlos Roche: Life in Attica

(Originally edited by Andrew Lutsky and edited for the classroom by Cari Ladd. The longer interview is available at: http://www.pbs.org/pov/disturbingtheuniverse/interview_roche.php)

Attica was ... it was the craziest place you could possibly think of being in, you know. You talk about New York state, everybody thought it was liberal. But Attica was racist, and racism was sponsored and pushed by the administration, you know. They created it, they allowed it, and, uh, it was unbelievable.

When I first went to Attica, they gave out ice once a year. Frozen water. They would bring it on the fourth of July and say, "White ice!" Bring it in fifty-five-gallon drums, open the door to the yard, throw it out on the ground and say, "White ice!" and only white guys could get the ice. And they would take the drums back to the mess hall, fill them up again and bring it back and say, "Black ice!" and anybody could take the ice, you know. And that was the first thing that hit me, and I mean it blew my mind. I was ... I couldn't believe it, you know. And that went on from '66 to '70. And then they stopped it in '70.

Uh, haircuts was segregated, a white guy couldn't cut a black guy's hair or vice versa. Uh, the mail was insane. If I had a letter from a lawyer and I gave it to you to read, and the letter was found in your cell, we both went to the box. You got a year and I got two years. And every two days you did in seg, you lost a day of good time, you know. That was Attica, you know.

And it happened on the regular, you know. They would beat you down, thought nothing of it, you know. Uh, so you just couldn't, or I couldn't, get accustomed to it, you know. And I was there six years, you know. I begged my family to, uh, help me get out of there, get transferred to another joint. And I would tell them stories about what happened in Attica and they said, "No, it couldn't be like that. You're in New York. That's not the South." And they couldn't believe it, you know. And it wasn't until after the riot and the stories started coming out that they said, "Wow," you know, I was telling the truth all those years. That was Attica, you know.

What was the reason for the rebellion?

Uh, they say it was a fight between two guys on the football field the night before in A Block. That's what they said. But it was the years and years of humiliation, you know, mental and physical abuse, you know. It reached a head and just exploded, you know. They claim that it was planned, the administration claims that it was planned and this and that and the other. That's a lie, it was spontaneous, you know. And that's how it happened.

It-it was madness, you know. I remember that first night, September 9th, we were in the yard and me and a couple guys were sittin', and a friend of mine, in fact a guy locked next to me, kept walking around the yard, and he's looking up, you know. Uh, he just kept walking around the yard. And it was strange to me, you know. And I asked him, I called him The Owl-- his name was Raymond White-- and I says, "Raymond, you alright?" He said, "Yeah." I said, "You sure?" He said, "Yeah." He said, "Man, this is the first time in twenty-two years I've been out after dark." And I was like, "Whoa," you know. And he was walking around looking at the stars. You know, he kept walking around the yard, you know. A lot of strange things came out of that, you know.

Why was Bill Kunstler called to Attica?

Bill Kunstler was called to Attica along with the other people to negotiate with the state, Department of Corrections, you know, for us, you know, because it was never really allowed to be known to the public what actually was happening in Attica. Uh, and we needed people from the outside to take the message out there, to tell them what happened everyday in a snake pit, you know. We had no access to the outside world. Our correspondence was censored, you know.

Um, you weren't allowed to ask, or-or-or what they called "beg" for money from people that you would write. You could only write your immediate family, you know, legal wife, mother, father, sister, brother, children, period. You weren't allowed to write anybody else, you know. So they controlled information coming into the institution and going out of the institution. And, uh, if we were gonna get anything from these people, you know, we had to be able to break their control. And Bill Kunstler along with the other observers was brought in, you know, so that they could see and take the message outside what they were doing to us in Attica, you know.

He was respected just for the fact that he came to Attica, you know, and sat and listened to our grievances. We had a legitimate beef, and, I mean, all the negotiators were respected for that, you know. Um, that was the first time in like six years that somebody actually listened to what we had to say, and even guys that were angry, you know, had to give him that. Uh, you could talk and talk and talk and the people that you're trying to talk to are not listening. That's what we got from the administration. When Oswald came to Attica, I think it was in August, he was supposed to come and talk to people, listen to our problems, listen to our beefs, you know. Never saw anybody.

Nobody listened until September 9th, you know. It was like we were non-entities. And that what was one of the things that I admire about Bill. I mean the people that came into that yard didn't have to come in there, you know. And they came in there not knowing what might happen to them, and they not only came in, they stayed. And that's one of the things that made them outstanding to me, you know.

A lot of things were happening at the same time, and we realized that we're gonna need legal representation, especially when they said 'no amnesty.' We're gonna have to be represented by somebody because, uh, they would drag a guy in the courtroom, chain him up and gag him, and he couldn't say anything, you know. And when Bill Kunstler came into Attica on September the 10th, we knew that we might wind up being the guy that's chained and gagged in the courtroom, you know. And, uh, the only way that you're gonna get any justice is if people hear what you got to say. And they could never hear what you have to say if you're chained and gagged. So we knew that a lawyer was necessary, and, uh, we couldn't think of a better person to represent us than Bill Kunstler, because he would advocate for us the way we needed to be advocated, you know.

Uh, I can remember him telling us that Sunday night that [Corrections Officer] Quinn was dead, you know. We didn't know. I mean we actually didn't know. And when he realized that we didn't know, I mean, he was sort of taken aback, you know. Uh, Quinn died Thursday and we didn't find out until Sunday. Uh, I was with Big Black when Black told him, you know, there was 200 and some guys in that yard out of 1,387 that were doing life, and the announcement that Quinn had died, you know, placed all of those guys in the position for getting the death penalty. And I think at that moment the realization hit everybody, you know, of what we were actually facing. And that was why amnesty was a must, you know. I was doing thirty-five years, yeah,

but I couldn't ask the guy that was doing life, you know, to, uh, accept what the state wanted to give us, which was no amnesty, and in turn put him in a position for the death penalty, you know. So, uh, I voted along for the amnesty.

Uh, [Kunstler] said that, uh, they were gonna try to get the best deal possible for us, you know, that we needed to have a consensus, that we needed to be unified in whatever they, you know, present to the state. Uh, it was like a shock to everybody that they knew that Quinn had died and they didn't tell us until Sunday when they came with the ultimatum, you know. "You release the hostages, return to the cells, and then we'll talk," you know. Nah, it can't work like that, you know. We're giving and getting nothing in return, you know. A promise we'll talk. Well, we had had to promise before, that they'll talk, and we never got anything but a promise, you know.

And, I mean, he, Bill Kunstler actually begged us, you know, to really consider what we were doing. My opinion is that Bill was under the same opinion that we were, that we never ever thought that the state would come in the way they did, you know. Nobody believed that. I mean he told us if we don't give up the hostages, if we don't return to our cells, they comin' in, you know. We knew that. But nobody thought they would have come the way they came, you know, including him. I mean, he can't be blamed for that. Even I didn't believe it, you know. Nobody thought that, you know. I don't think any of the other negotiator observers thought that. Nobody in the yard, none of the prisoners thought that, you know.

On the morning of the 13th it was hazy, it was ... it wanted to rain, and, uh, when I woke up that morning, uh ... By the way, this is something else about me you may not have known: I used to make booze. I used to make wine. And, uh, I had made a five-gallon pail Friday night, and I was saving it. It was Monday morning and I told the guys, I said, "Come on, man, the bar's open," and we went and we started drinking. Um, we were standing there and I was talking to a couple of guys, and Frank Smith was one of them, uh, Sabo, a guy Raymond White that I was telling you about who was walking around looking at the stars, and we were standing there, and we was talking, and everybody had their cup, we were drinking.

And that's when the shootin' started. After they dropped the gas and they started shooting, uh, the reality set in, you know, that this was no game, this was no joke, you know. People are gonna die. And it happened just like that: People died, you know. When I seen a guy's head explode, you know, uh, that's when it hit me, you know. I'm glad that they took [the observers] out of the yard, they allowed them to get out of the yard because, uh, when they came in the way they came in, they would have killed them too, you know. They had no qualms on-on who they shot. They killed their own people, you know. And it's--I still think about it, you know, it still bothers me. I-I had never been in a situation where everybody had a gun but me, you know. And they were shootin', you know.

Uh, when I first saw it I jumped in a ditch, but I was on the top of a pile of a lot of other people that were in the ditch. And I looked down towards the door and I could see them shooting people in the ditch, and they were walking around towards me, you know. And I didn't think I was gonna come out of there without being seriously hurt, you know. Uh, guys that was on the ground on both sides of me—one got killed, one lost a leg, you know, they shot it off, you know. And it still amazes me how come I didn't get shot, you know.

And I still, I'm still trying to figure out how I came out of there without a scratch.