

## MARIA GORETE'S STORY



# “I do not belong to myself any more.”

*Michele Turner writes...“Maria Gorete Joaquim was a seventeen-year-old student in Dili when Indonesia invaded. Because they suspected her of passing information to the resistance, Indonesian Intelligence played a cat-and-mouse game of arrest, torture, release and rearrest with her before finally killing her in 1979 (‘though she is officially still only ‘disappeared’). Her fate is similar to many thousands....., but she is remembered by many Timorese because she defied the army of occupation so openly, and because she shone as a young person of spirit even before the invasion, and was known to many of those who escaped the capital.....”*

*Maria Gorete*

Michele Turner interviewed people who had known Maria Gorete. Olinda told her:

“Before the war I was at school with Gorete. She was a member of the Fretilin student organisation and I went to some of their meetings. Maria was active and bright, good at school too, very clever. The Indonesians imprisoned her and afterwards she told me what they did to her: gave her electric shocks, insulted and humiliated her and other girls, took off all their clothes, used cigarettes to burn them. One girl couldn't speak for days from shock. Some they beat and put into the water tank. One girl had a baby in prison. Gorete told me about the torture because she wasn't afraid to talk.”

Lourenco knew Gorete in Dili:

“Maria Gorete became a close friend. She was an easy-going, happy, open, friendly person. She was passing information to the bush about what the Indonesians were going to do so they imprisoned her for nearly a year. When they released her she talked about the time in prison. She told me how they used cigarette butts on her face and electric shock on her body and hit her. She said when she was first in prison she fought, she wouldn't let them use her, but she couldn't stand the treatment any more and after three months the officer in charge raped her. After that she didn't resist him because it protected her from the others and from more torture. She said sometimes they gave her injections after beating. She thinks they were to make her tell things. They made her dizzy and afterwards she slept for hours and couldn't remember what happened. ....”



*Bullet holes in Church at Ainaro*

“When she was free after being in prison she went to all the Indonesian parties. They wanted her to go because she was a pretty girl. She wanted to get information to pass to the bush. When the soldiers were drunk you could learn a lot. Many Indonesians came to visit her at home because they thought after the treatment in prison she had become an easy woman. Often she'd get up early and come to visit me to avoid them.

“After a while she didn't want to pretend or go to the parties, and the Indonesians were not happy with her. They warned me to stay away from her, that she was a Communist. ....

Gorete was the kind of person who could not easily be intimidated. She was outspoken, defiant, spontaneous. She couldn't keep things inside herself, she would criticise the Indonesians openly to their faces.....

“When she'd been free nearly a year she tried to get away to the bush and was arrested again. This second time she was taken around by the Indonesians. I kept hearing of her through many people, knowing she was alive, being seen. They forced her to go with them and she was seen in Manatutu, Baucau and Lospalos and other villages.

“She wrote to her mother then and someone got the letter out. In it she said: “I have to humiliate myself many times before the Indonesians, but there is nothing I can do, I am in their power, I do not belong to myself any more.” She said this to held her mother not to feel shamed at what she heard. But after three months I heard nothing definite, from no one who saw her. There were plenty of rumours, stories maybe to confuse us, that she was taken to another island; that she was dropped from a helicopter; that she was shot at Watolari near Kelikai.

“...Other people told me what she did, how she put up with indignity working for the Indonesians to get information to pass it on to the resistance. She did this very well for a long time, she bore a lot.

“When I met her she didn't talk much but what she said I remember. She was very quiet, subdued, broken. I don't know how to explain it, it was as if she was naked of her dignity as a human being. She said she had been working for the Indonesians interpreting and they treated her like a simple object for their fun. Maria Gorete was everything for them - their interpreter, their prostitute. It seemed to her she was raped every hour, whenever or whoever wanted her. She said she couldn't stand it any more. The Indonesians couldn't manage her. She made it clear she wouldn't work for them and said, ‘Well, you'd better kill me.’” (from Michele Turner *Telling: East Timor-Personal Testimonies 1942-1992*)

The **Report of the Commission for Reception Truth and Reconciliation** (2005) known by its Portuguese acronym **CAVR** concluded that between 1974 and 1999, 183,000 Timorese lost their lives through violent means. The Indonesian military and militias were responsible for 90% of these deaths, and internal Timorese strife accounts for 10%. No Indonesian person has yet been held accountable for the crimes. <http://www.cavr-timorleste.org/>

The CAVR Report makes for difficult reading. The crimes against humanity committed against the Timorese people were abominable, both in content and number. That it all happened on the Australian doorstep is cause for reflection about our values, the use of our media and the priorities of our politicians.

**For Reflection:**

- Do you know any family which has lost a member through violence?**
- Do you know any family which has lost someone and never recovered the body?**
- Do you know of anyone who has lost a family member to murder where the perpetrator has not been found?**
- What level of trauma might reside in the Timorese population?**
- What do you consider to be torture?**
- What do you know about the UN Convention Against Torture?**
- Is torture is ever permissible?**



*Maria Gorete dressed for an Indonesian officers' party*  
(from Michele Turner *Telling: East Timor-Personal Testimonies 1942-1992*)