



**AHMED
ERRACHIDI**

The
General

**THE ORDINARY MAN
WHO BECAME ONE OF THE
BRAVEST PRISONERS IN**

GUANTANAMO



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About the Book

On September 11th 2001, in a café in London, Ahmed Errachidi watched as the twin towers collapsed. He was appalled by the loss of innocent life. But he couldn't possibly have predicted how much of his own life he too would lose because of that day.

In a series of terrible events, Ahmed was sold by the Pakistanis to the Americans in the diplomatic lounge at Islamabad airport and spent five and a half years in Guantánamo. There, he was beaten, tortured, humiliated, very nearly destroyed.

But Ahmed did not give in. This very ordinary, Moroccan-born London chef became a leader of men. Known by the authorities as 'The General', he devised protests and resistance by any means possible. As a result, he spent most of his time in solitary confinement. But then, after all those years, Ahmed was freed, his innocence admitted.

This is Ahmed's story. It will make you rethink what it means to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. It will also make you look anew at courage, survival, justice and the consequences of the War on Terror.

About the Book

Ahmed Errachidi was born in Tangiers but lived and worked as a chef in London for 18 years before being detained in Guantánamo. He now lives back in Morocco with his wife and children and is opening his own restaurant. **Gillian Slovo** is a highly acclaimed South African-born novelist, playwright, memoirist and activist. Her work includes *Ice Road*, which was shortlisted for the Orange Prize; *Red Dust*, which was made into a film starring Hilary Swank; and the play *Guantánamo: Honor Bound to Defend Freedom*, which was put on in theatres all over the world.

This book is dedicated to my dear mother, who has suffered so greatly from what was done to her son; my lovely wife, who lost her other half for so many years; my sons Mohammed and Imran, my daughter Hanan, my niece Imane and all the members of our family who experienced the pain of our separation.

This book is also dedicated to the free people of this world whose words of support and solidarity gave me strength, helping me to understand that I was not alone.

And finally, I dedicate this book to all prisoners of injustice and torture around the world, but especially to my brothers who are still being unjustly held in Guantánamo, and the families of the prisoners who lost their lives there.

The General

The ordinary man who became one of the
bravest prisoners in Guantánamo

Ahmed Errachidi with Gillian Slovo

Chatto & Windus
LONDON

Introduction

As a daughter of two of South Africa's prominent anti-apartheid activists, I learned from an early age what sudden police raids and detention without trial looked like in close-up. In 1963 my mother, Ruth First, was held in solitary confinement under South Africa's notorious ninety-day detention without trial laws, an experience that took her to the brink of suicide. After her release, and after we'd settled in Britain, she wrote about her time in jail. Echoes of this returned when, in 2004, I was commissioned to write a verbatim play, *Guantánamo*, for the Tricycle Theatre in Kilburn.

We knew little then about America's offshore prison. There were those few iconic images of kneeling men, handcuffed in orange overalls, their faces hidden by masks and earmuffs, but the identities of the prisoners the Bush administration called the worst of the worst, and the circumstances in which they'd been picked up as well as the conditions under which they were being held, were shrouded in mystery. I set out with the journalist Victoria Brittain to interview the families of the incarcerated as well as lawyers like Clive Stafford Smith (about whom Ahmed writes here) who were among the few civilians to have eventually been given access to the detainees. We heard accounts that seemed at first unlikely, then preposterous and finally, astonishingly, true. We heard, for example, of the journey of British resident Bisher al Rawi who, having been seized by the Americans from the Gambia where he'd gone on business, ended up on that little bit of America at the edge of Cuba. Or the Kafkaesque journey of British

citizen Jamal Al-Harith who, having been imprisoned by the Taliban under suspicion of being a British spy and then released after the Taliban fled, was subsequently taken to Guantánamo and kept there for over two years.

As I was writing the play, the first group of British detainees, who included Jamal Al-Harith, were let out of Guantánamo. When their release was announced, there was an emergency meeting of our team to discuss whether we should stop the project because we assumed that the whole sorry episode would soon be over. The irony of it: even now, a full eight years later, and despite Barack Obama's pre-election promise to close the prison camp, 171 prisoners still remain in Guantánamo.

In 2011, when the Moroccan-born chef Ahmed Errachidi, who'd been held in Guantánamo for over five years, was looking for someone to help him complete his book, my play made me an obvious person to approach. I read his manuscript, which had been written in Arabic and then translated, and, at least in the beginning, I read it as a courtesy to someone who had suffered so greatly. By then pressure from the British government had led to the release of most of the British residents who had been held in Guantánamo (none of whom were subsequently charged) and so conditions in the prison camp were better documented. Because of this, I didn't expect to learn much that was new from Ahmed's account. I was wrong. I found myself reading with growing interest. By the time I reached the end of his draft I was surprised by how moved I was and surprised by the portrait of resistance that had unfolded. Intrigued, I agreed to fly out to Tangier to meet him.

A solid mountain of a man, Ahmed Errachidi likes to cook and he also likes to eat. On our first day together, we drove for hours in his 4x4 in search of a restaurant that he particularly wanted to take me to. All the time he drove he talked, and the more he talked the slower he drove, so it was late afternoon before we were finally sitting at a table.

His subjects were twofold: his religion and his time in Guantánamo, and these, I began to realise, were intimately connected. Although he was a practising Muslim when he was picked up, Guantánamo made him more observant. Ask him about his growing faith and he will wryly admit that his past behaviour contains many errors. Yet now, he says, his faith is strong, and his determination to lead a morally upright life informs almost everything he does. This is a result of Guantánamo: during his incarceration a conviction that Allah was testing him and that, if he survived this test, everything would turn out all right, is what sustained him.

For a man who was held without charge for over five years, and who spent much of that time in solitary, Ahmed seems to be in remarkably good shape. A family man, he talks passionately about his three children. His weekends are spent ferrying the wider family to the beach (picnics his responsibility, food elaborately described), and his weeks preparing the start-up of his own restaurant. The most visible signs of the privation he endured are his edginess in confined spaces (he always wanted to talk outside) and the strange timbre of his voice. As I listened to him I noticed that although he can pitch his voice low and he can also pitch it high – he appears to have no middle range. ‘It never used to be like this,’ he tells me. ‘It happened in Guantánamo: too much shouting maybe, or too much gas spray.’ Asked whether he has consulted a doctor, he says, ‘I did. But he wanted to put something down my throat to see what is happening. After what I’d witnessed in Guantánamo of the aftermath of force-feeding, I couldn’t face it. I didn’t tell the doctor where I’d been, I just said no. I told him, give me antibiotics and I took them. But they didn’t help.’

All this is related without a trace of self-pity. As I got to know him better, I began to realise that Ahmed had written his memoir and felt strongly about getting it published not so that the world would feel sorry for him, but so that people would understand what their governments had done in the

name of democracy. He seems to feel little rancour for the ordinary soldiers who shackled and sprayed and beat him – he talks about them as ignorant, and he says that were he to meet them again he would try and help them see the errors of their ways. He feels very differently about the men – the Bushes, the Cheneys and the Rumsfelds – who were in charge. Their actions, he insists, were a fundamental attack on democracy for which they should be held accountable: he is passionate about getting the world to understand this.

Our scratchiest moments came when I asked him about al-Qaeda or about a man like Abu Qatada. Not because Ahmed backs either – he made it clear that he abhors the killing of innocents and he'd neither met nor heard of Qatada while in England – but because he didn't want to have to prove his innocence by continual condemnation of al-Qaeda atrocities. As far as he is concerned great wrong was done on 11 September 2001, but this wrong does not cancel out another: the detention without trial and torture of hundreds of men in a lawless Guantánamo. 'Why,' he asked me, 'should I always have to prove that I do not like bin Laden? He's nothing to do with me.'

There were other moments, also, of contestation. At one point I questioned a section of his manuscript where, in describing how he used to talk to his guards about their religious beliefs, he seemed to be equating a belief in Father Christmas with a belief in Jesus as the son of God. I suggested that this might be offensive to Christians and that perhaps he should leave it out. He was happy to take my advice but before we cut the passage he wanted me to know that it had also occurred to him that his arguments might cause offence, but he'd kept them in because, in the strange mindset of Guantánamo, this was how he had talked to the soldiers: and the one thing he'd been determined to do in his account was tell the truth. I listened to what he had to say. And then we kept the passage in.

In our conversations, my experience of Ahmed was of a man trying his utmost to be truthful. Just as he was willing to talk openly about a mental breakdown he'd had in London, he also answered every one of my awkward questions with forbearance and, as far as I could make out, honesty. Only twice did he ask me to leave out something that he'd told me. The first time it was because he was worried that should his sons read it, a personal detail might adversely affect the way they were growing up. The second time was when, because of what they had been through, he was reluctant to criticise the way some of his fellow prisoners had negotiated with the prison administration.

Ahmed is a generous man. He insisted on paying for every meal we shared and on sending me back with presents for my daughter. And when a mutual acquaintance had her computer hacked and everybody in her address book got a bogus request to send her money, Ahmed sent the whole amount. Told that it had all been a hoax, he didn't rant about the cruelty of strangers but instead expressed his relief that his friend hadn't needed the money because that meant she was not in trouble.

This open-heartedness doesn't make Ahmed a pushover. I was to meet the steel in him when, on our second meeting, I tried to turn on my tape recorder. 'Please don't,' he said. 'I see a tape recorder and I dry up.' I tried to persuade him - it was much easier for me to catch his voice and way of speaking if I could play it back - but gently he persisted and eventually, knowing of the scrutiny he'd endured in Guantánamo, I gave in. Our bargain was that he would talk slowly and stop as soon as I asked him to, so I could write down his exact words: it was a bargain he kept to. I say I gave in but, looking back, so persistent was he, I'm not sure I had much of a choice. That one exchange gave me first-hand experience of how determined Ahmed can be, and how hard to budge.

This same determination runs through his book. For *The General* is less a story of the injustice done to one man - although that is certainly here - and more an account of how a man in the most powerless of situations fights to change the balance of power.

That he was an English speaker instantly put Ahmed in the Guantánamo firing line. Yet he could have chosen to step back and, if he had, he would have had an easier time of it. But his fierce pride and his resolve to stand up to injustice meant that he didn't choose the easy way. That's why he ended up spending so much time in solitary and perhaps also why he seems to have survived so well. The result is a book which is not just a catalogue of injustices but a testimony to the way an ordinary man can find in himself an extraordinary will to resist.

Gillian Slovo
May 2012

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THEY'D STRAPPED GOGGLES over my eyes so all I could see, through the gap on the bridge of my nose, was a small section of my feet. They'd also made me wear earmuffs, and a thick paper mask, and mittens made from material so stiff I couldn't move my fingers and which cut off the circulation to my hands. And, on top of this, they'd shoved in a suppository that stopped me needing the toilet, and sprayed my head with a chemical that I could still feel burning through my skin. And then they had put me on first one plane and then another.

There I sat on the second plane on a low bench between two other prisoners. We were in intimate proximity - I could feel their arms and legs touching mine - but since communication was forbidden and I couldn't see them, I had no idea who they were. We were chained together, our legs shackled to rings on the floor and to each other, while another horizontal chain joined us by our waists along the line. And so we sat, motionless, through a journey that felt like it was never going to end. Later I was able to figure out that the whole transfer took roughly twenty-six hours, during which time we were kept blindfolded, muffled, chained and motionless.

It was the worst experience of my life. Forbidden to move, and cramped for such an extended period, I began to experience the most terrible pains. They shot, jagged, through my joints making me want to cry out, although I'd learned that if I did I'd only earn myself a beating.

I'd been a prisoner of the Americans for long enough to know that they were moving me to a prison in Cuba where

the rules of law didn't apply.

I didn't care where I was headed or what awful fate might befall me there. All I wanted was to be allowed to shift my weight so as to relieve the pain or, if that wasn't possible, to die. I prayed for the end, either of this journey or of my life. I was in such pain that the only way I could make myself feel better was imagining that this was the Day of Judgement. And then at last I heard the muffled roar of the engines changing and I felt the plane beginning its descent.

It took an agonisingly long time before I finally felt the glorious jolt of wheels touching down. I heard a door opening and the sounds of boots, and the clang of chains as they unhooked us from the plane. Then we were ordered out, shuffling forward in our shackles and guided by commands. I was so relieved to be on my feet and so accustomed to having men I didn't know push me about: I went where I was told to go. I could smell the salty tang of the sea wafting in on a breeze that stirred the humid air. I followed the line of prisoners in front of me onto some kind of vehicle - I think it was a boat because I could feel it shifting sideways - and like them I knelt, something that I, a large man, have always found difficult. After what I reckoned must have been about an hour we were told to get up and move out, and then once again ordered onto our knees. I could hear a man, he must have been an American because he had an awkward accent, telling us in Arabic not to move. The pain returned as my weight pressed down on knees that felt ready to crack. To try and relieve the pressure, I shifted to one side. Someone belted me, twice, against the back of my head. 'Don't move,' a harsh voice shouted. 'Don't move.'

I couldn't take it. I fell forward. In that moment before I lost consciousness I thought back to my childhood and to what I might have done to deserve this terrible fate.

I am Moroccan and was born in Tangier in 1966, the middle of five children. In Guantánamo I did a lot of thinking back to my early life and one of the people I thought about most was my father whose behaviour and example had a great impact on me.

He was a farmer, a strong man, and very tall, very upstanding. He did everything for us children, and he was also incredibly kind. Only once, when I was seven, did he ever hit me. I'd insulted a farmer who was poorer than us and my father, who was bringing us up to respect all people no matter how poor they were, got so angry when he heard what I'd done that he slapped me. But because he was also a gentle man who never usually resorted to violence, he couldn't bear to see me upset. When I started to cry, he gave me money for an ice lolly. That was my father all over: a mixture of softness and absolute propriety.

He'd had a tough childhood: his mother had died when he was young and his father had remarried someone who didn't like him so he'd left home prematurely. As a result, although he had gone to traditional religious classes, he'd not got as far as learning to read or write. So he taught himself, buying books until we had a small library at home – mostly religious books, guides about how to pray and how to fast.

I loved my father very much and as a child I was always at his side. I loved to hear his stories that were filled with challenge, heroism and defiance. Remembering them in Guantánamo, I wonder whether they helped to build my own determination.

The story I best remember dates back to the 1940s and it goes like this: my father was one of a number of young men digging the foundations for a hotel in Tangier in the heat of the day. He was so strong he could work his shovel with one hand, even when he reached the hard earth two metres down. But my father didn't stay long in that particular job because soon after he'd started working there the man in

charge, who was Italian, became abusive, shouting 'Come on, you donkeys' to the men working the foundations. At this my father downed his shovel and climbed out. When the Italian demanded to know where he thought he was going, my father just said: 'I don't work with donkeys,' and left. He soon found another job - there were plenty of opportunities in those days - but after a while the Italian tracked my father and his legendary strength down and asked him to come and get rid of a massive rock in his garden which was getting in the way of his entertaining. My father didn't want to work for such an abusive man but the Italian dared him to prove that he was the man he pretended to be, and my father would never refuse such a challenge, especially when there was mockery involved. So he agreed to take a look at the rock.

When he got to the garden he saw how enormous the rock was. As the Italian sneered to further provoke him, my father stayed calm. He walked round the rock. He climbed it, ignoring the Italian's escalating scorn, and he examined it all over. Then at last he said: 'I'll take on this challenge.' What my father and nobody else had noticed was that this was not one but two rocks sealed together by time and that there was a small, almost invisible, fissure running between the two. All my father need do was to get his hammer and pick, place the pick on the line and hammer until the rock split, and then he could work on the fragments until they were small enough to be carted away. When the job was done, the Italian was so impressed by my father's strength and guile he wanted to keep him in his pay. But my father told him that he'd only come for the challenge, and that he'd never work for a man who insults his employees.

This story stuck in my memory, especially when my father kept repeating how much he had wanted to prove to the Italian that he was not a donkey but a man. I admired that in my father. From a very early age, I wanted to grow up fast to prove myself a man just like him. Little did I know that it

would take the privations of Guantánamo for me to understand that I was strong enough to endure and resist even the most terrible abuse.

I look back on my childhood with great nostalgia. My father had a plot of about two hectares that was five minutes from where we lived in Tangier. It was close to the shore in what was once the outskirts of the city. It had four wells and fig trees – and my father used to grow vegetables there, enough for him to sell. Now that land has been tarred over and turned into a big parking space for people who are waiting to take the ferry to Europe. I look at this, sometimes, and feel the irony of it. But in those days it was a small, working farm, where my father also kept some cows, employing several people to help him. Our neighbours would come and pick vegetables before showing their baskets so my father could tally up how much they owed. He was very generous and especially kind to those less well off than him. He would often look into a full basket and then say to the impoverished woman holding it, ‘Don’t worry about paying: go quick and make your vegetable pot.’ People treated him with great respect, they called him *sharif*, meaning someone who is honoured and who has dignity.

I was always trying to make him proud of me, and when I was young, I spent all the time I could working on the farm. My ambition was to grow up to be his right-hand man. It was actually quite hard to keep up with him. Farming was not his only income: he was skilled in a number of trades and he worked such long hours that I don’t remember him ever spending a whole day at home. Even during festivals like Eid he’d go out and work. When my mother told him to rest, he’d say he wanted to provide us with everything we needed. I’d sit up, way after my brothers and sisters had gone to sleep, and wait for him to come home. When he did, my mother would tell him that all the children had eaten and gone to bed – all except Ahmed. She’d serve him

supper and he'd invite me to join him. Concerned that my mother might have prepared a better meal than the one she'd given us, he'd insist that I share his.

Throughout my childhood I kept hold of this adoration for my father and whenever I was with him I felt the warmth of his love for me. When I was in Guantánamo, thoughts of him, the smell of his farm and of Tangier sustained me. I especially liked to remember the end of spring when the hot air of the coming summer would begin to dry out the succulent grass. That scent of fresh grass evaporating is one I love because it throws me right back to my childhood on the farm. And it tended to be spring that I most set my mind on in Guantánamo, remembering the brightness of bougainvillea, the sweetness of jasmine and the sticky yellow of mimosa to help me survive.

Before I started school I used to go to a playgroup where one of the boys, who was older than me, had such a bad stutter that he struggled to enunciate a single word. Aged five I envied this stutter because it made the boy different, special, which is what I wanted to be. I used to go and sit under an electricity pylon near the farm and practise stuttering. There I'd stay, unseen for an hour or two, stuttering away until eventually I learned how to do it without trying. I never told anyone what I was up to and when, after I'd started school, my teacher asked my mother where I'd picked up my stutter, my mother had no idea. I still stutter to this day, especially when I am nervous. Perhaps the electricity has forged its pattern inside me.

I went to school when I was seven, and we were taught in Arabic and in French. The school wasn't far from where we lived, and then there was only sand and a railway track between the school and the sea. During the breaks we used to cross the track so we could eat our olive sandwiches by the seashore. I did well at school and particularly at composition: I won prizes and my work was read out nearly

every week. I told myself then that one day I'd write a book. I could never have dreamed that this would be the one.

I was an adventurous and determined boy, always trying to do things for myself. One incident I remember will tell you something about the child I was: it took place before I'd started school, so I must have been about six. My mother had taken me and my brothers to a funfair which I so enjoyed I wanted to go again. I knew my mother probably wouldn't take me a second time and so, without asking permission, I decided to go on my own. I planned my trip carefully, putting on my best clothes before setting off. I didn't know exactly where the funfair was so I just headed for the lights. I must have walked more than two kilometres to get there. It was an unusual thing to do. In those days, we children, brought up as we were on stories about gangs and kidnappings, never went anywhere on our own.

I reached the fair but having no money I couldn't ride the carousel, or go on a car, or a plane, or eat candyfloss, as I would have done had I been with my mother. But I was happy enough roaming around, taking in all the wonderful sights. I was having so much fun, in fact, that I didn't register time passing until at last it dawned on me that everything had quietened down and that almost everyone else had left. The fair was closing: it was past time for me to go home. But by now I was scared of the dark and the empty streets.

It hadn't occurred to me to worry about the upset my compassionate mother would feel when she realised I was gone. Later I learned how her heart almost flew away in panic. She'd always tried to hide my naughtiness from my father and now she couldn't bring herself to tell him that she didn't know where I was. She knew he'd react badly about what had happened and blame her for it. So she served him dinner, extra hot to slow him down, and told him she needed urgently to visit my aunt who lived close by. Soon my aunt had my cousin and a neighbour out scouring