My diary kept coming back.

The older generation will remember when we had Filofax Personal Organisers with ring binders to replace the diary part with the incoming year’s diary. Before the age of smartphones it was the ultimate in personal administration. Mine was of the small variety, leather bound to fit into any pocket, akin to a wallet.

By 1975 repressive acts by the state could be anticipated any time. Without fail, when going to bed I put this diary, together with any other potentially compromising literature on my bedside table. Should there be the feared knock on the door during the night – they always came at night – I’d take the diary et al to the window and toss it over the next-door fence before opening up for them.

Best plans have a way of coming apart. It was six am. I was playing with Zindzi, not yet a year old, on the bed. Ilona had gone to make tea when they came. She opened the door. They were in the bedroom before I could carry out my plan. There it was, the one item they would want more than others, in full view next to me. But they wanted to start in the lounge and then the dining room, insisting I was present. Capt. Olivier told me I was now a detainee under Section 6 under the Terrorism Act. I told Ilona, who told our neighbours who alerted friends and the press. Olivier and his men logged each item and handed Ilona a ‘receipt’ for all they took at the end. After three hours they eventually came to our bedroom. I improvised my plan. I insisted that I had to change Zindzi’s nappy. I dumped the soiled nappy on the bedside table so it covered the diary. But they were awake to my plan. They removed the nappy and the diary was logged and confiscated.

I worried about the diary, especially the back pages where I kept the names and addresses of overseas political contacts I sent information to. One was to Librairy d’Escalier in Paris. This was a decoy for Breyten Breytenbach. He wanted everything about the behaviour of foreign companies. Our aim was to aim at the heart of apartheid by getting public opinion abroad to demand a stop to investments into the apartheid economy and eventually to get companies to withdraw from South Africa.

Now I was in Kompol, the interrogation rooms of the SB’s. They had put the material collected during the raid on the table. Page by page they wanted an explanation, a description and a confession from me. My diary was in the middle of the table. They started at the beginning: why did you meet so-and-so and what was discussed? At 10am their secretaries, as was usual, brought in tea for them. They assembled outside the doorway, smoking, drinking tea and discussing aspects of their investigation into us, the detained. I had to wait in the cubicle with what seemd dried blood on the wall behind the tap and basin.

The one in the cage becomes the master of the psychology of his captors. I felt I could win small victories right in front of them. Their eyes were elsewhere, distracted from me and my diary. As they sipped tea I put my finger between the back cover and the pages where I kept the names and addresses. I tore page after page from the six rings, crunched each page up, put it in my mouth and swallowed it. The provision of an enamel tin with water facilitated getting it down. Page after page I swallowed, not knowing if I had reached the page with Librairie d’Escalier. Just before their lunch break I breathed relief, all the overseas addresses had been eaten.

Three months later I was released without charge. Six months after that I fled South Africa and received asylum in The Netherlands. One day a visitor from Johannesburg brought me a parcel from Ilona. The SB had eventually returned my documents to her. She thought I might want my diary. My diary and I were re-united but not for long.

During a trip to London I spent time at a second-hand bookshop in Charing Cross Road. My diary in the side-pocket of my jacket. A pick-pocket removed it without me noticing. I was not only sorry to be deprived of my diary, but because it contained the blue card the SB had put into it. It read: Horst Kleinschmidt, detained, Terrorism Act. My diary seemed gone forever.

Then, one day, back in Amsterdam, I received a small parcel from London. It contained my diary with a note which said: I went to a flea market looking at old clothes. I found this diary in an old jacket. I saw the blue card. I’m sure you want your diary back. Good luck. It was not signed, no name, no address.

Electronic devices have superseded the Filofax which I treasure as a memento in my archive.

