



AT THE AGE of 75, Jonathan Aitken's life is upside down and inside out. The disgraced former MP says he was liberated while serving a prison sentence for perjury 18 years ago; bankrupted yet found something beyond earthly treasure; was reduced to the depths but raised to the heights. It doesn't seem to make sense.

On a baking hot afternoon in central London, Aitken has just returned to his home – where we agreed to meet for this interview – after spending another three hours behind bars. He laughs and says, “I’m getting close to a life sentence!”

But it's no joke. Ordained into the Church of England as a deacon just over a month ago, Jonathan Aitken has become an unpaid prison chaplain – dedicating himself to supporting charities working with inmates and ex-offenders. He spends his time listening to tales of criminality and then liaises with internal and external agencies to work for the rehabilitation of an offender. Not a week passes when he isn't behind the security gates of some prison or other. And his desire to make a difference in the lives of others all began with his own fall from grace.

“I lost everything,” he says, in the lounge of his ground-floor rented apartment near Earl's Court station in west London. “It was a big fall – our homes, my job, my reputation, my status, my marriage – all lost and in a very public way. Yet I can say that I am happier visiting prison – as I was today, building relationships with prisoners – than I ever was entering the Ritz.”

The Ritz... a luxury hotel in Paris that sealed his fate. He stayed there in 1993 while a fast-

‘When I was sent to prison there was a deep sense of relief’

rising government minister in charge of defence procurement, and therefore barred from taking any form of hospitality that might place him under an obligation. When the time came to settle the bill, he said it was paid for in cash, by his wife. It wasn't.

In April 1995, the *Guardian* newspaper broke the story that the bill had been paid for by an individual with connections to the Saudi royal family. Aitken's wife wasn't even in Paris. But rather than accepting the truth, Aitken sued for libel; the case collapsed when his lies were revealed in the summer of 1997.

Why did he launch an aggressive legal action on the basis of what he knew to be an outright lie? “Pride, arrogance and fear. I genuinely believed I could get away with it. I knew there were opportunities ahead, in government, and feared that if there was any smoke or scandal

then it might obstruct my progress. So I moved forward with a form of deluded self-confidence and pride, believing I could win the case.”

He eventually pleaded guilty to charges of perjury in 1999 and received an 18-month prison sentence. Everything in his life broke into bits. “I was trapped in a self-inflicted spiral of defeat, disgrace, divorce, bankruptcy and jail.”

If you like to dine out on legendary disgraces, then this one is irresistible: Old Etonian, graduate of Christ Church College, Oxford, merchant banker, government minister – slung into jail for lying. He had it all. And then it was gone.

But if his circumstances on the outside were in free fall, he was changing on the inside.

“Before the trial, some old Christian friends offered their support and began to pray with me. It was remarkable. They chose to associate themselves with an individual about to become a convicted criminal. I had always rested upon an undercurrent of faith – but had treated God much like a bank manager... He existed and was someone I tried to stay on good terms with just in case of some future need. But I rarely visited him and didn't really know him.”

HE BEGAN TO read scripture, and to pray. But as he got to know God, he got to know even more about himself. He says there was no crisis experience, like that of the Apostle Paul on the road to Damascus; much more a process of gradually understanding how much he needed to find peace with God.

“When I was sent to prison there was a deep sense of relief. I no longer had the burden of pretence. I could confront the reality of my own pride, arrogance and selfishness. And I could seek to be forgiven. But the act of perjury, which was responsible for my confinement, was only one of the things for which I needed to seek forgiveness. In prison, with long periods for reflection, I began to confront all kinds of wrongdoing in my life.”

So how did Aitken prepare for jail?

“I was obviously anxious about how I would cope inside. I was not fearing for my life but worried about what I would confront when banged up. Funnily enough, the only other occasion I'd been to prison was when I was leading the Eton College Debating Society and we went into Wormwood Scrubs for a debate. I remember George Blake [the former British spy who worked for the KGB as a double agent] led the prisoners team, and was a formidable opponent.

“So as I prepared to do time I asked as many people as I could find for advice. I spoke to prison governors, some former inmates, anyone who could guide me.”

What did they say? “Keep a low profile, be quietly helpful to one or two people. But once inside, I discovered that prison is actually colour-blind and class-deaf. It's full of men >

Jonathan Aitken was the gilded Tory minister who lied and lost everything. Now, as the BBC looks at the work of prison chaplain, he reveals how he found faith – and new life behind bars.

PHOTOGRAPHED EXCLUSIVELY
FOR RADO TIMES BY
RICHARD ANSETT



'I NEEDED TO REPENT'

THE RT INTERVIEW BY
BBC RELIGION EDITOR
MARTIN BASHIR

A CHANGED MAN
Jonathan Aitken
photographed in his
home in west London

< in all shapes and sizes.”

Plain sailing, then? “Not quite. On my second day in Belmarsh Prison, a huge man by the name of ‘Razor’ Smith greeted me.”

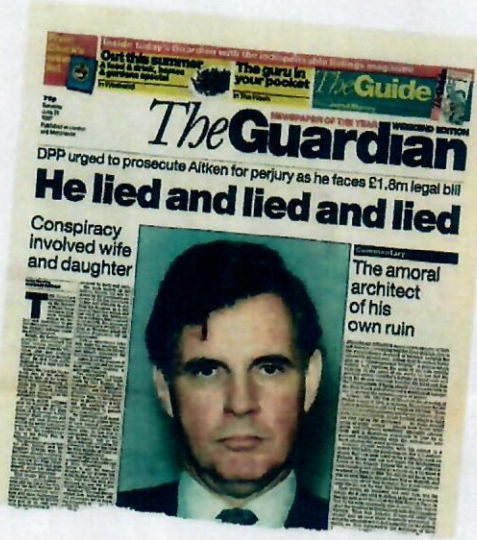
Smith, around 20 stone in weight, was serving a 26-year sentence for more than 200 bank robberies, including possession of firearms. “He said, ‘You’re Aitken... you’re new’. And then he asked, ‘Are you a friend of that f***ing Mickey Howard?’ ‘Cos you can tell him, I’ll f***ing kill him.’ He was referring to Michael Howard, one of my oldest friends at Westminster, who had introduced a two strikes rule [a mandatory life sentence for a second serious offence].

“After a long pause, and really not knowing how best to respond, I said, ‘Look, I’m very sorry you feel this way. I’ve known him all my life and I do believe Michael is a straight guy.’

“Razor breathed heavily, looked down at the steel gangway, then said, ‘Well, at least you’re f***ing loyal! We’ve been friends ever since.’

AITKEN SERVED SEVEN months of his sentence. But as he focused all his energies on surviving inside, family members also confronted their own travails on the outside. Some time after being released, one of his daughters told him what happened when their regular visits were over and they departed for home.

“There was a large window through which we could wave to each other one final time,” explains Aitken, “and all of us inside cherished that last moment until the next visit. My daughter said that they would always put on their brightest smiles and wave joyously. But the minute they were out of view, they would burst into tears and have to console each other.



DISGRACED
The Guardian's report on Aitken's deception in 1997 after the collapse of his libel action against the paper

That is just one of the many sufferings that I inflicted upon my family.”

While his relationship with his four children did survive the prison sentence, his marriage to the

Swiss economist Lolicia Azucki did not. They married in 1979 and Aitken says that he had not realised how unhappy she had become, even before his trial, but he now acknowledges that he played a large part in her misery.

“The truth is that while I did not have major romances, I did have regular adulterous flings while married to Lolicia and my conduct throughout the marriage is something that I deeply regret. I have sought to be repentant and have asked for forgiveness.”

Without prompting, he throws in the fact that he had a child with society beauty Soraya Khashoggi. “She asked me to call round to discuss how she might get back with a former lover. One thing led to another and, though I didn’t know it for some time, we had conceived a quite wonderful child.” That child was Petrina, now 38, pictured below.

While we’re on the subject of his cutting a swathe through a range of eligible young women, I ask him about his three-year relationship, starting in 1976, with Carol Thatcher, daughter of former prime minister Margaret Thatcher. His voice softens.

“Margaret was hot and cold with me... but I think things were permanently set after I ended

the relationship with Carol. I suspect that, like any mother, she was fiercely determined for her daughter. As you can see, my conduct over time has been atrocious. I, of all people, have needed to repent and seek forgiveness.”

HE HAS SINCE remarried, but how does he react to those who suggest that his faith is more convenience than conviction, that he has “found God” simply to rebuild his reputation?

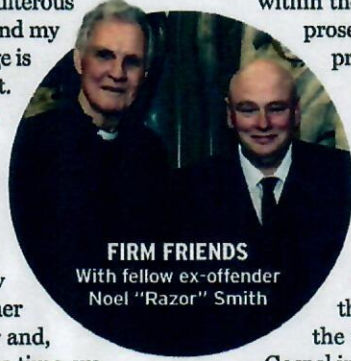
“I have a lot of sympathy for cynics who might say that – indeed, I might have said the same about somebody else. But there are two things that I would ask you to consider. First, I do believe in an all-seeing and all-knowing God and so if this is just a PR stunt, then it would be a very foolish thing for myself to believe that I can deceive the Almighty.

“Second, it is 18 years since I completed my sentence. I have committed myself to a range of charities that work with prisoners and ex-offenders and I was recently ordained deacon within the Church of England. I do not proselytise in jails but solely seek to provide support.

“I hope that you will give me the courtesy of seeing and testing my commitment to these causes. If I am found wanting, then feel free to dismiss everything I say. But if you find that my life and faith does bear the test of time, then perhaps you might consider the implications of Christ and his Gospel in your own life?”

Aitken’s ordination service took place at St Paul’s Cathedral in June and he held a party to mark the occasion at a hall in the Old Bailey. Among a range of parliamentarians who were invited, pride of place was granted to six former fellow inmates from Belmarsh Prison. At the head of the table was Noel “Razor” Smith.

“The last shall be first,” says Aitken – before leaving to deliver the scripture readings at a church in Wimbledon.



FIRM FRIENDS
With fellow ex-offender Noel “Razor” Smith



MODERN FAMILY
Aitken with first wife Lolicia Azucki, and, right, his four children, Victoria, Petrina, William and Alexandra, pictured in 2003