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More than just a number – The story of the “Mamelodi 10”

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A research report in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Journalism and Media Studies, University of the Witwatersrand.

Johannesburg, July 2025.

ABSTRACT

This research-based longform project examines and maps the ongoing struggle for healing and justice among black South African families who bore the brunt of apartheid-era violence, focusing on the families of the "Mamelodi 10" – a group of ten teenage boys who were abducted and murdered by apartheid security police in 1986. While South Africa's transition to democracy and the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) have been internationally praised for promoting national unity, this study contends that such recognition often obscures the personal costs of reconciliation for families still seeking closure. Drawing on qualitative, narrative-based methods, the report explores how these families navigate individual and collective grief in the absence of genuine justice. It examines how they conceptualise justice and reconciliation, and how these ideas are shaped by their lived experiences in township communities. The report further seeks to humanise the "Mamelodi 10" by moving beyond their collective numerical identification and highlighting their personal stories. Ultimately, this research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the long-term emotional, psychological, and social dimensions of post-conflict recovery in South Africa.

Declaration

I declare that this research report is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts by Coursework and Research Report in Journalism, at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination at any other university.



Lillian Selapisa

03 July 2025

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I would like to extend my heartfelt appreciation to all the families who welcomed me into their homes and shared their story with me. Even though I was not able to interview all the families involved, the memory of all ten young men will forever be etched in my heart. I wish to also thank my supervisor, Prof Lesley Cowling, for her patience and guidance during this process. Thank you for believing in me when I did not believe in myself. To the Missing Persons Task Team Director, Madelaine Fullard, thank you for your time and expertise.

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SECTION I: THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

More than just a number – The story of the “Mamelodi 10”

INTRODUCTION

In the two decades leading up to South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), approximately 20 truth commissions were convened globally. The first was Uganda's 1976 commission under Idi Amin, paradoxically mandated to investigate human rights abuses committed during his own regime (Ancic, 2017). Most of these commissions emerged between 1974 and 1994, reflecting a broader trend of post-conflict societies seeking mechanisms for accountability and reconciliation (Avruch & Vejarano, 2002).

However, none of them garnered as much international attention as the TRC did (Hamber, 2001; Hayner, 2000). The process gained acclaim as a unique move towards advancing reconciliation and transitional justice (Hamber, 2001), and especially for its emphasis on exposing the truth and the granting of amnesty in exchange for perpetrators fully disclosing the crimes committed under the apartheid era (Hamber, Nageng & O'Malley, 2000; Hamber, 2001). Undoubtedly, the TRC set in motion some sort of healing process for many (Hamber, 1998; Hamber, 2001), particularly those who would have suffered greater harm had there not been such a process. These include the families of the "Mamelodi 10", a group of teenage boys who were lured to their horrific deaths in June 1986 by a security police agent.

The TRC was established in 1995 as South Africa was in transition from an apartheid state to a democratic country. The Commission was aimed at addressing human rights violations that had taken place under apartheid and forging a new, reconciled multiracial and multicultural nation (Du Pisani & Kim, 2004; TRC Vol. 1, Chapter 2, 1998; TRC Vol. 1, Chapter 4, 1998). The commission was premised on the ideal of achieving national unity and harmony and preventing future abuse. The TRC comprised seventeen commissioners and was chaired by the late Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, with Dr Alex Boraine as the deputy chair (TRC Vol.1, Chapter 3, 1998). It functioned through three committee: the Human Rights Violation, Amnesty and Reparations and Rehabilitation Committees (Maepa, 2005).

The first committee dealt with collecting detailed reports of politically motivated human rights violations, the second concerned itself with processing applications to be pardoned for one's role in the said violations while the last focused on recommending redress for the victims of the violations, including long-term financial support as well as programmes targeted at addressing their pain and suffering. The latter committee also recommended once-off financial benefits for the victims (Maepa, 2005). Through the TRC, a total of 7112 people applied for amnesty for their role in gross human rights violations. Only 849 received full amnesty while 145 others received partial amnesty. The commission collected more than 21 298 victim statements. The TRC handed over the first five volumes of its final report to

President Nelson Mandela in 1998 (SAPA, 1998) with an additional volume later handed over to President Thabo Mbeki on March 21st, 2003 (The New Humanitarian, 2003; SAPA, 2003; Mail & Guardian, 2003).

According to Hamber (2001), the TRC may have paved the way for more reconciliation work to be done and for making more acceptable the need for psychological support. However, the process has received criticism for creating the notion that healing is a "simple linear and straightforward process" (Hamber, 2001). It is this impression that this essay interrogates, to establish what other ways and methods individuals had to employ, post the TRC process, towards their healing and general mental wellbeing. It is important to recognise that while the TRC process was necessary to allow victims of human rights the platform to speak out on their traumas, it should only be understood as a starting point towards healing. The progress afterwards can be chaotic and slow, with no clear starting or ending points (Hamber, 2001). According to Hamber, the political process of reconciliation is fundamentally different from the personal healing process (2001) and often, a country and its leaders may encourage collective healing before individual victims have accepted the depth of their personal suffering. This research-based longform project unpacks how this demand may have the potential impact to cause a clash between individual healing and collective reconciliation.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

In June 1986, a group of 10 teenage boys from Mamelodi – a township located in the northeast of Pretoria – were rounded up in a minivan by a police officer pretending to recruit them for military training in Botswana under uMkhonto weSizwe (MK), the military wing of the African National Congress (ANC) (Nelson Mandela Foundation, 2019). The teenagers were Abram Makolane, Elliot Sathege, Jerimiah Magagula, Jeremiah Ntuli, Morris Nkabinde, Rooibard Geldenhuys, Samuel Masilela, Sipho Sibanyoni, Stephen Makena and Thomas Phiri. Joe Mamasela, an undercover officer in the apartheid era security police, collected the teenagers aged between 14 and 19 and led them to an ambush at Nietverdiend, near the Botswana border. He had gotten them drunk along the way (SAPA, 1996a). The boys were then injected with an unknown substance that rendered them unconscious before they were carried back into the minivan to stage an accident. An explosive was placed in the vehicle before it was doused with petrol and set ablaze. The vehicle was then pushed down an embarkment, burning all its occupants. The explosive went off due to the fire. Mamasela was known, even by his own superiors, as an abominable and lethal man who could not be trusted with anyone's life

(Dlamini, 2014). It is unclear why Mamasela became an askari, a term used to refer to former ANC, Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) and Azanian People's Organisation (AZAPO) soldiers who were tortured to conversion and constricted into the apartheid police force (Pauw, 2017a; Binckes, 2018). Some reports suggest that he did so to escape criminal charges he had against him (Dlamini, 2014). Other reports, especially those that covered the TRC hearings and Mamasela's testimonies, indicate that he deserted the ANC after the party killed his brother at a camp in a neighbouring country (SAPA, 1996b).

Meanwhile, Pauw (2017b), reports that while Mamasela claims to have been a victim of both the ANC and the apartheid state, his defection was likely a pragmatic choice to avoid prosecution for an armed robbery charge he was facing in 1979 – the same year he become police informant number R465. As a police informant, Mamasela was tasked to infiltrate the ANC in Botswana. However, his covert assignment was discovered in 1981, and he was captured along with another comrade, who he claimed was his half-brother. While Mamasela managed to escape, the brother was so not so lucky. Mamasela claimed it was his brother's killing that pushed him to sever his ties with the ANC. In an interview with *The Mail & Guardian*, Mamasela claims he defected from the ANC after he was betrayed by his comrades who set him up to be arrested by the security police because they were jealous of him (Maughan, 2016). According to him, he joined the party in 1977 and renounced it two years later due to the incident.

The abduction and subsequent killing of the Mamelodi 10 happened during a period when the so called "askari project" was in full swing. This project was established in 1979 by the Security Branch as part of their plan to bolster the country's counterinsurgency capacity (Dlamini, 2014; Binckes, 2018; Report of Harms Commission of Inquiry, 1990). The project started with some defectors and insurgents from the ANC and the PAC who were placed at Vlakplaas, a 44-hectare farm located in the Skurweberg mountains seven minutes away from Erasmia, west of Pretoria (Dlamini, 2014, Pauw, 2017a; Binckes, 2018; Report of the Harms Commission of Inquiry, 1990). Vlakplaas housed Section C10, initially C1 (Paw, 2013), a counterinsurgency unit that recruited askaris. These operatives were used to infiltrate, betray, and eliminate resistance networks. Under commanders like Dirk Coetzee and later Eugene de Kock, Vlakplaas became central to the state's clandestine war (Pauw, 2013; Binckes, 2018; Report of the Harms Commission of Inquiry, 1990).

Coetzee was appointed as the first commander of Vlakplaas in August 1980. Upon assuming command, he found the askaris demoralised – underpaid, addicted to alcohol and dagga, and generally unmanageable. He responded by enhancing the unit's efficiency (Binckes,

2018). He increased their salaries, ensured access to police medical benefits, issued firearm permits, and introduced clothing allowances. His objective was to stabilise the workforce and maximise the unit's operational effectiveness (Binckes 2018). Initially, the askaris were meant to function as the eyes and ears of the police, immersing themselves within communities in public spaces to help in identifying their former comrades for arrest (Pauw, 2017a). It was only in 1981 when Vlakplaas became a fully-fledged counterinsurgency unit, with four squads established, each manned by black police officers, askaris and led by a white officer (Pauw, 2013; Pauw, 2017a; Pauw, 2017b).

It was one of the Vlaakplaas members who would eventually be the reason for the disappearance of the ten teenagers from Mamelod. Their families , who assumed they had gone to exile, found out about their deaths some 10 years later, when members of the Security Branch, Jack Cronje, Jacque Hetchter, Paul van Vuuren, Wouter Mentz and Roelf Venter, testified during their amnesty applications for killings, including the "Mamelodi 10" (TRC Vol. 6, Sec. 2, Chapter 4, 1998; Ancer, 2005; Mail & Guardian, 1997). Investigations by the Missing Persons Task Team (MPTT) in the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA) traced their bodies to Winterveld cemetery (NPA, 2019). Between 2005 and 2006, nine bodies were successfully recovered and reburied at a special ceremony in Mamelodi in 2009 (Smillie, 2020). After failing to locate the tenth body, even with extensive excavation, searching through some 200 graves, the MPTT decided on a new approach which relied on high-tech technology (NPA, 2019; Smillie, 2020; Tshikalange, 2023). In November 2019, the remains of the last body were found and exhumed (DoJ & CD, 2023). The body was reburied along with the others at the Section B3 cemetery in Mamelodi in September 2023.

This case took place against the backdrop of political turmoil in townships in the 1980s. By the mid-1980s many of the country's townships were actively revolting against the government of the day (Laurence, 1985; Stemmet, 2006). The pinnacle of violent resistance was seen first in the Vaal Triangle on September 3, 1984, but there had been simmering tension in several townships including Atteridgeville, west of Pretoria and Tumahole, near Parys (Laurence, 1985; Stemmet, 2006).

The disappearance of the Mamelodi 10 was one of several disappearances orchestrated by the apartheid police across the country. In October 1986, an activist from Mamelodi, Moss Morudu who had been in hiding since September of the same year and trying to leave the country, was taken from his hiding spot by three policemen who pretended to be members of MK (Dlamini, 2014). According to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report (TRC, Vol. 6, Ch. 1, 1998), shortly after Morudu's disappearance, his family received a call from an

unknown person who told them that he was "where he had wanted to go," leading them to assume he had gone into exile. In October 1999, during the amnesty hearing of three members of the Northern Transvaal Security Branch, further details of his disappearance were revealed (TRC, Vol. 6, Sec. 4, Ch. 1). Although Morudu had never been formally detained, he was interrogated for about a week before disappearing, and at the time of the report's release, his fate remained unknown. It was later established by the Missing Persons Task Team (MPTT) that Morudu had been killed and his body blown up between Pienaarsrivier and Kgomo Kgomo, then part of Bophuthatswana (now the North West province). A symbolic burial was held for him in October 2013 at Freedom Park (Kgosana, 2013; Morudu, 2013).

In June 1987, two youth activists from Mamelodi, Matthews Lerutla and Jeffrey Sibaya were abducted by members of the Northern Transvaal Security Branch and driven to an area called Mmukubyane, which fell under the Bophuthatswana homeland administration (Ledwaba, 2023). The pair, aged 17 and 18, were tortured before being strangled to death with a seatbelt, then explosives were placed on their bodies, and they were blown to smithereens (Ledwaba, 2023). In July 2023, a ceremony to collect their spirit was conducted. The ceremony was also in honour of two other teenage activists who died at the hands of the apartheid police, Samuel Ledwaba and Oupa Mohale (Ledwaba, 2023). According to the Report of the Human Rights Violations Committee: Abductions, Disappearances and Missing persons (TRC, Vol. 6, Chapter 1, 1998), the TRC received more than 1500 victim statements in relation to people who went missing or disappeared after being abducted. Most of the victims disappeared between 1985 and 1994, and mainly in the then Transvaal and Natal.

AIM

This longform nonfiction research chronicles the circuitous journey towards healing for the families of the young activists from Mamelodi, one of the biggest townships in Pretoria, especially the women in the lives of the activists. This research report is targeted at the mothers and sisters for the most part because many of the fathers in the families have passed on and because throughout the unfolding of the case, the women have been at the forefront of the young boys' story. It aims to tell the story of how victims of harm and abuse have had to individually navigate their way through the labyrinth of healing at a time that demanded of them to simply accept the past, move on, and forgive as though it was an automated process controlled by the flick of a switch – the switch being the TRC.

The healing process is different for everyone, even those who may have gone through the same trauma. This research sought to find out what the healing process of each of the

mothers or family members of the teenagers has looked like over the years and at which point each of them are now, and how they have used their collective grief to balm their individual wounds. This essay also attempts to locate and place the Mamelodi township within the South African political history and activism.

Furthermore, and as more of a secondary focus, this research tells the story of these teenage boys whose young lives were tragically cut short by apartheid-era police. It aims to, as far as possible, give them life on paper by reconstructing their lives, particularly on the day they disappeared. Their identity has been reduced to merely being the "Mamelodi 10", whose families had to find healing from burying their skeletal fragments. Beyond the bits and pieces of their mortal remains, the identification, exhumation, and reburial – which has been the subject of news reports since 2005, these 10 young activists had personalities, likes, and dislikes and hopes and dreams. These details are what this research essay attempts to flesh out.

RATIONALE

There is an abundance of scholarly work (Van Zyl, 1999; Leebaw, 2003; Henrard, 2003; Autry, 2010; De Grief, 2012; Pillay, 2005) on South Africa's transition, the TRC process as well as substantial journalistic reporting on the case of the "Mamelodi 10". Much of what is out there about the teenagers from Mamelodi focuses on the recovery of the fragmented remains, and not as human beings, as young men who perished for crimes they had not even committed. This research essay attempts to humanise these young men – as members of a community, as siblings, as pupils, and most importantly as their mothers' sons. Much of the literature on the TRC, justice and healing have an academic or scientific tone and framing (De la Rey & Owens, 1998; Hopkins & Roederer, 2004; Stanley, 2001**)** with genuine, daily lived experiences of victims, direct or secondary, not being thoroughly unpacked. This research essay attempts to not only offer an in-depth study of the "Mamelodi 10" families' state of mind and healing process over the years, considering that the last reburial was conducted less than a year ago, but also offer some understanding of what the people who were affected by the TRC understood about the process, including how they understand the concept of justice at a very basic level.

This research report sought to create a platform for participants to explore their healing journey and take stock of how far they have come to date. Furthermore, this report is premised on the fundamental belief that, "A living history, not a haunted one, allows for life to go on" (Prager, 2015: 146). This report is not concerned so much with the merits of or criticism against the TRC process, but rather on unpacking the individual stories of pain, justice, and triumph, with the understanding that trauma, in relation to memory, can affect people long after

experiencing distressing events (Prager, 2015). It is generally accepted that survivors of traumatic events, and especially governments in transition from past political conflict like South Africa, are often encouraged to simply let go of the past (Hamber, 1998). However, from a psychological perspective, past traumas cannot simply be dismissed or forgotten with time. In fact, past traumas often have a major emotional impact on individuals and the society (Hamber, 1998).

NARRATIVE AIM

Intent

This narrative nonfiction project is written in the third person point of view to reconstruct the past. This is based on theorist David Eason's idea of separating so-called new journalism into two subcategories, namely, Ethnographic Realism (ER) and Cultural Phenomenology (CP). This report is concerned with the former concept, which is based on reconstruction as a journalistic tool, incorporating a third person narrator who has an all-encompassing vantage point technique and with ways of showing things as they truly are, influenced by social realism (Aare, 2016). As theorised by Eason (1984), these two modes of understanding realities are concerned with different ideals. Ethnographic realism concerns itself with categorising experiences in terms of the established duplicity between reality and projected pictures (Eason, 1984). In following this mode, a reporter goes beyond what is seen as the public image to get to the actual reality (Eason, 1984). Meanwhile, cultural phenomenology relates to the idea that what is projected to be true, and reality are connected (Eason, 1984). This ideology is rooted in the idea that when telling a story, observation is considered a passive process devoid of existential influence (Eason, 1984).

This report uses the conceptualisation of French narratologist Gérard Genette, as outlined in (Aare, 2016), of a form of narration he describes as focalization. This concept relates to some restrictions of narrative knowledge relative to the narrator or character's experience and information available (Aare, 2016). Jahn (2007) describes focalization as the presenting of narrative details to a "perspectival filter". Taking into cognisance the fact that a bulk of information has been collected from interviews with people who are somewhat secondary victims, and who are mostly senior in age, this essay has been able to reconstruct certain scenes as far as the participants could recall but has not been able to gain access into the inner thoughts and perspectives of especially the deceased. Therefore, this research report is presented from a filtered experience – filtered by the age of the characters or participants, their memory and interpretation of events.

Style

Narrative journalism or creative nonfiction can be described as a style of reporting that uses narrative techniques associated with either the novel or the short story (Eason, 1982). A "narrative" refers to the way in which stories are told (Kim et al., 2018). A narrative can either unfold in linear or nonlinear method (Kim et al., 2018). This research report concerns itself with the former concept. The linear method follows a structure that is told in order, with a clear beginning, middle and ending, with minimal disruptions (Kim et al., 2018). This technique is often used to reflect the cause-and-effect relationship between events as well as thematic progression. the narrative (Kim et al., 2018). This research report used this technique not only for its literary value, but also to provide a coherence, emotional depth and thematic clarity.

While the information presented in this research report may not be entirely new or previously undiscovered, it has been carefully compiled and contextualised in a way that gives a completer and more connected version of the stories of some of the families. Building on a range of sources and perspectives, including historical records, media reports, personal testimonies, academic literature, TRC records and the work of the Missing Persons Task Team (MPTT) this report seeks to produce a more comprehensive account of this important historical event. This is done in order to give the full effects of the boys' killings and their aftermath for the readers by using the techniques of longform journalism, such as descriptive detail, storytelling and reconstruction of events. The aim is immersing the reader in the events of the killing, the experiences of the families of their losses, and the TRC process. In using the various sources, the goal was not merely to seek new facts but to piece together the various fragments of the story in a way that offers an all-encompassing, and humanising account of the "Mamelodi 10". This report draws on many different sources, not for the sake of merely revisiting known facts, but to deepen the understanding of their significance within a broader socio-political context. Telling the story in its entirety is important, not only for its historical value but also as an act of preserving the memory of the victims. Furthermore, it is also important in acknowledging the intergenerational impact of unresolved trauma in post-apartheid South Africa.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Much of the literature around South Africa's transition to democracy offers complex reasons and meanings of the process with not much in-depth exploration of what the transition meant for ordinary people who found themselves thrust into the democratisation process without much preparation. Research has been done before by Aronson (2011) about how families,

including the mothers of the "Mamelodi 10", felt about the TRC and how they were coping at the time, but the research offered a broad but truncated idea of their state of mind. In Aronson's research, the mothers, especially, expressed their relief at their children's remains finally being found but felt aggrieved by the fact that their children had not been given the public recognition the mothers felt they deserved for their political exploits (Aronson, 2011). This research aims to add to the literature that is already available on this matter and build on the knowledge that has been produced over the years since the dawn of democracy.

The Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC)

There is substantial literature (Pillay, 2005; Winslow, 1997; Colvin, 2000; Shea, 2000; Elshtain, De Vos, 2002; Gerloff, 2008) on South Africa's TRC process – from its psychological value to the participants to the benefits of emphasising the paradigm of restorative justice in its application. The TRC was a negotiated settlement, and the result of compromises made during discussions around South Africa's new constitution (Young, 2005). According to Hamber, Nageng & O'Malley (2000), the ANC, at the time of the negotiated transition, did not wield enough power to demand the prosecution of all apartheid-era transgressors. In any case, they argue, the criminal justice system itself lacked the capacity to handle multitudes of prosecutions. What was within the influence of the ANC was ensuring that the National Party did not grant itself blanket amnesty and instead a condition-based amnesty process was adopted (Hamber, Nageng & O'Malley, 2000).

The outgoing regime would only participate in the transition if they were offered amnesty (Allais, 2011), and this already meant that the new government was somewhat limited in the way they could navigate the country's transition. The offer of amnesty was aimed at ensuring that the whole truth, or as much as the perpetrators were willing to divulge, was uncovered for the benefit of victims of past atrocities (Young, 2005). At the time of its establishment, the TRC was theorised under the ideal of "restorative justice" (Allais, 2011). The process was premised on the desire to find out what happened, and the reasons, as opposed to an emphasis on the punishment of guilty individuals (Llewellyn & Howse, 1999).

Allais (2011) questions the extent of the TRC's restorative nature. The author argues that even under restorative justice, there are non-retributive justifications for penalties. In fact, the paper argues that the restorative justice model applied by the TRC was not in tension with the moral concerns underpinning retributivism. That is to say, a case could have been made during the TRC for some form of punishment for past transgressions.

In his foreword of Volume One of the TRC report (TRC Report, Vol. 1) the late Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu writes that if justice is only seen as retributive and involving punishment, then the granting of amnesty would not be considered as justice. However, he writes, the commission was concerned not so much with being punitive but rather more on "correcting imbalances, restoring broken relations –with healing, harmony and reconciliation," (Tutu, 1998: 9). There is plenty of literature (Maepa, 2005; Graybill, 1998; Alexander, Batchelor, Durand & Savage, 2005; Van der Walt, Franchi & Stevens, 2003; Rose, 2015) in relation to the application of justice, especially as it relates to South Africa's transitional period and leaning towards restorative justice as the framing of the TRC process. Hopkins & Roederer (2004) use the metaphor of a field to unpack the complexity of the pursuit of justice in transitional contexts. The duo likens transitioning from conflict to a peaceful and democratic state to clearing a field. The transitional state does not mean simply clearing the field to completely remove all the traces of the past to allow for the new seeds of a democratic society to grow and flourish (Hopkins & Roederer, 2004). According to Hopkins & Roederer's analogy, new growth will remain entangled with and stifled by weeds, and even drastic attempts to remove them may have harmful effects. If not managed carefully, clearing the field could contaminate the soil for future generations. Justice is often equated with punishment, rather than simply acknowledging wrongdoing, which contributed to the heavy criticism of the TRC's approach (Llewellyn & Howse, 1999). However, Llewellyn and Howse argue for a different understanding of justice – one focused on restoration rather than retribution.

Trauma and Memory

According to Prager (2015), trauma is a memory illness and can only be remedied in the present. Furthermore, trauma can exist below the surface of everyday interactions for some time only to resurface and trigger memories that are beyond an individual's emotional and psychological capacity (Prager, 2015). The ills of apartheid have, in some way of the other, affected all of South Africa in what Prager (2015) describes as a "national psychic trauma" (139). However, it is important to note that while everyone has been affected by the harms of the unjust past, the healing of an individual and that of a nation should not be treated as one as they are entirely different (Hamber, 2001) and require different treatment and this research essay is concerned with highlighting this. While the TRC may have had its benefits, especially as it relates to truth telling, it is not clear whether the process offered full comfort to individuals struggling with the weight of personal trauma (Hamber, 2001).

Forgiveness and Reconciliation

The term "reconciliation" is often used to describe processes through which societies recover from trauma, mete out justice, and engage in social reconstruction, but defining exactly what reconciliation means and how it is achieved remains a challenge. The concept of reconciliation is often rooted in the idea that societies can recover from trauma while reconstructing society and ensuring that justice is served. However, according to Barsalou (2005), the exact definition of what reconciliation means or how to attain it is unclear.

Among the things that truth commissions are meant to achieve is the promotion of psychological healing, but it has been argued that revealing is not necessarily healing (Barsalou, 2005). There are other things that are needed to promote healing beyond just knowing the truth. Moreover, it is necessary to acknowledge that a process of transitional justice that may be sufficient for one persona may be wholly inadequate to another (Barsalou, 2005). While it may have been enough for some people to testify at the TRC and share their stories of pain and trauma, for others healing may not have started until there was some sort of penalty for those who wronged them.

Mendeloff (2009) argues that while proponents of transitional justice have put much emphasis on the psychological benefits of truth telling and seeking, there is limited literature on this. The author submits that while there is no definitive proof that participating in processes such as the TRC may be inherently harmful to participants, there is equally scant evidence that there are some great emotional and psychological benefits of truth-seeking. Reconciliation is arguably beneficial for healing; however, it is questionable whether it is entirely necessary for healing (Winslow, 1997). According to Winslow (1997), it is not completely necessary for survivors of trauma to ever confront a perpetrator for them to start and manage their healing process. While somewhat beneficial, healing does not depend on one reconciling with their offender (Winslow, 1997).

Violence and the body

The 1980s saw an amplification of the armed struggle and resistance in South Africa, resulting in concerted efforts by the apartheid government to suppress and eliminate political activism (Binckes, 2018; Pillay, 2005). In their efforts to quell the revolt, particularly in townships – which had become the hotbed of rebellion and revolution – security forces resorted to clandestine and harrowingly brutal acts, such as executions, to thwart political dissenters (Pillay, 2005; Rousseau, 2014). The security force employed various methods of elimination – which were not supported by the law, including forced disappearances as well as entrapment,

especially of youth that was eager to join the armed struggle. They also used different ways, according to the regions where such operations were carried out, to discard the bodies (Pillay, 2005; Rousseau, 2014). Based on some of the testimonies from the TRC, the perception was created that proponents of apartheid were of the belief that they were engaged in a war which necessitated the use of atypical and illicit tactics (Pillay, 2005).

The way the bodies were treated with contempt and callousness was indicative of how even in death the victims' worth was as insignificant as when they were alive (Rousseau, 2014). victims were not just eliminated, but they suffered further abuse of dismemberment afterwards (Pillay, 2005).In instances where bodies of their victims were made to look like the cause of death was something it was not, this was done as a tactic used to divert attention and cause a rift among the armed struggle forces (Rousseau, 2014). Although it would seem as though the targeting and killing of those who were considered terrorists in apartheid South Africa may have been considered as an act of reducing them to just "animal matter" or "dead meat", the fact that their assassinations were staged to be something else, the security police inadvertently affirmed them as human beings with identities and political belonging.

Beck (2011) conceptualises violence as a more triangular process, rather than a binary one, which involves a performer, a target and an observer. This reconstruction calls for a shift away from the conception of violence as being simply "empirically evident" and more "socially constructed" (Beck, 2011: 354). This means violence can be understood as a social process designed to alter and reconstruct a relationship. Its manifestation is shaped by and based on the idea of creating or maintaining a difference in social or political position between all involved to highlight the differences between above and below or superiority and inferiority (Beck, 2011). Violence is a method of making the body "a site of social bargaining processes" a strong weapon in creating a desired social order or changing an already existing social environment (Beck, 2011: 349).

METHODOLOGY

This research essay has reconstructed history, particularly the last day some of the ten Mamelodi young men were seen alive, based on oral accounts and archival material. In depth interviews were conducted with six people from five families, particularly the female members – the mothers and sisters, and the twin brother of one of the victims. While five families were interviewed, only four families ended up in the final report. The information gathered from the Morris Nkabinde's younger sister was insufficient to be used in the final report as she struggled to remember much of what had happened because she was still young when her brother

disappeared. She had little knowledge of the day he disappeared and what happened afterwards. Her mother, who had all the information on this matter has since passed on.

One of the mothers of the "Mamelodi 10" refused to participate in the research without being offered compensation. She expressed being tired of people benefiting from her pain, in whatever endeavours they need the information for, leaving her triggered and without anything tangible to show for it. It is uncertain whether the surviving member of Stephen Makena's family is still well and alive, and if he is, where he lives. The last time the group had any interaction with Stephen's brother, he had moved from Mamelodi. It has been years since they lost contact with him. The other families could not be located for interviews. While the accounts from the participants were clear and detailed, some of the details have become unclear and uncertain due to either a lapse in or a distortion of memory.

From a traditional anthropological perspective, research has always involved a separation of oneself as the "other" from their research participants (Bilgen & Fábos, 2023). This means proper field work was understood as one going into unfamiliar territory and returning home after having gained new knowledge of the other (Bilgen & Fábos, 2023). However, from the 1960s, there started to be a shift with more anthropological researcher studying their own communities from an insider's perspective. According to Ntanyoma (2021), a researcher is considered an insider when conducting fieldwork within a space or with people he/she belongs to, while an outsider is seen as one who conducts research within an unfamiliar territory. The idea of the insider and the outsider in research is not so clear-cut and that the concepts of "home" and the "field" are complicated by various factors (Bilgen & Fábos 2023).

In fact, as a researcher, one may find oneself as an outsider in one's own land or vice versa. This is because being an insider or outsider is based on how participants view or relate with researchers, and not necessarily the other way around. Therefore, Bilgen & Fábos (2023) argue that it is necessary to question the notion that there must be a definite separation of a "home" and a "field" and that one must belong to a specific grouping or place. To this end, the authors submit that the idea of reflexivity is important because it can help researchers to be aware of how their positionality can have an influence on the process of the research being conducted. Reflexivity refers to process of reflection by a researcher on their position and its link to the research output (Ntanyoma, 2021). This can be done on two levels; looking at the relationship between research and researcher and how they influence each other. This is known as prospective and retrospective reflexivity (Ntanyoma, 2021). The former refers to the influence the researcher has on the research while the latter refers to the inverse.

When a researcher has a better understanding of his/her own privileges, biases and preconceptions, it becomes easier to not treat their participants as merely sources of data devoid of any history, characteristics and agency (Bilgen & Fábos, 2023). It is therefore necessary, as proposed by Bilgen & Fábos (2023) to move beyond the dichotomy of field and home and more towards a synergised concept of a "field-home".

Yip (2024) posits that the two positions of insider/outsider are fluid and exist in a continuum. This means a researcher is often never wholly an insider or an outsider but can instead change according to the context. Access to participants can sometimes be dependent on the researcher's positionality – sometimes participants may be more amenable to sharing information with individuals they consider to be more understanding to their situation (Yip, 2024). This apparent feeling of similarity or familiarity can create a community between a researcher and participants, thus increasing trust and congeniality in the research process (Yip, 2024). However, according to Bilgen & Fábos (2023), having roots within a community does not always mean gaining easy entry or affinity to the participants without changing the state in which things were found prior to embarking on the fieldwork.

As it relates to my positionality in this research report, I consider myself as both an insider and outsider to varying degrees. I am the former by virtue of having grown up in the township wherein the research topic is situated, but also the latter in that I have no real connection to the period under discussion. The Mamelodi that I grew up in and the one that the participants reflect on are virtually entirely different. In fact, despite some of the families living not too far from where I grew up, I had never heard about the case of the "Mamelodi 10" in my childhood. I grew up completely oblivious to the fact that such an incident had occurred around my neighbourhood. Furthermore, having not lived in Mamelodi for almost ten years, and visiting the township infrequently, my "insiderness" could possibly not be as cemented as it might have once been. Due to my age and generational differences between myself as the researcher and the participants, I do not have a shared lived experience of the people under study, thus making me an outsider in this regard. Understanding this, I have not relied too much on the level of my possible "insiderness" in conducting this research.

My interview approach was from a perspective of being practically a stranger. The participants were interviewed in an informal but controlled manner, allowing them to also ask any questions they may have had. This was necessitated by my positionality in the research. As an interviewer, I came under scrutiny and investigation by the participants as they attempted to figure out my family history to try to make sense of the extent of, and further position, my "insiderness". The interviews were conducted face-to-face in the local language spoken in

Mamelodi, colloquially referred to a "S'pitori" – a combination of multiple South African languages, and translated into English. This research also relied on archives, especially as it relates to the TRC process and the confessions of the police members who were responsible for the killing of the teenage boys. Moreover, because the TRC process and how South Africa steered the transitional period attracted a great deal of scholarly work, I used journal articles as well as published books for my research.

The case of the "Mamelodi 10" was covered widely by journalists, as was the TRC process. I therefore used newspaper articles, particularly those published between 1980 and 1990, and television reports to gather information about the case to help me retrace some details about the young boys' demise in my narrative account. I also interviewed the Head of the NPA's MPTT, Madeleine Fullard, who led the search and discovery of the ten Mamelodi teenagers for her expert input on the topic. While much has already been written about this topic, I approached this research with the intention of bringing together a wide range of sources to tell a more rounded and human story. In doing so, I was able to piece together differences pieces of the story, some already known, and others never heard of, to create a more layered and empathetic account. Unlike much of the existing literature, which often focuses either on isolated facts or political analysis, this report seeks add depth and nuance that often missing in other accounts. This report brings the different perspectives into conversation with one another. Rather than only focusing on only on the political or historical dimensions, I wanted to highlight the emotional impact of the events on the families left behind, and to allow for their voices and experiences to find expression. Bringing these different strands together enriched the research in a way that allowed it to be more human-centred, which is important for both historical understanding and collective memory.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Age

Almost all the potential participants of this research are senior in age and hours of interviews on end may not be desirable for them. The interviews were envisioned to be conducted over a couple of days, partly to allow the participants to rest in between the sessions and to go over some facts again to ensure that their recollection of events is accurate. This case is old, but the wounds inflicted on the families of the 10 teenage boys still relatively fresh – considering that the last of the 10 bodies was only reburied in September 2023, one needed to handle the interviews with utmost sensitivity to lessen the impact of the expected trigger retelling their stories may cause. However, there was no need for interviews beyond one day as all the

interviewed participants were able to recount the details without feeling emotionally overburdened. Furthermore, they were not interested in talking about the events for more than the agreed interview session.

Language

Participants were not proficient in English as it is not the language of conversation daily, and given that I am from the same township, the interviews were conducted in the local language – either Sepedi or Setswana. While my proficiency in both languages is above average, there were certain instances where the translation is not direct, but the essence of our conversations was captured as accurately as possible. The translations are as precise as possible but the risk of text being lost in translation, although minimal, is still there.

Re-traumatisation

Given the nature of the research topic, it was anticipated that the participants may go through some emotional distress as they relive the trauma of their past losses. Interviews with participants were planned to span a few days with each individual to allow them time and space to process their emotions so that they are not overwhelmed and end up being emotionally harmed in the process of participating in this research. Arrangements were be made with the necessary professional to provide counselling and emotional support where necessary.

Proximity

As a Mamelodian, telling the stories of people from Mamelodi, some of whom although I have no close relations with, are from my immediate neighbourhood, there is likely some unspoken expectation of this research report fulfilling a much greater purpose than it is likely to do. There might be an expectation for this research report to bring about some tangible changes in the lives of the participants, which it is unlikely to do. Throughout the research process, and before the participants agree to take part, I highlighted and ensured that they fully understood and agree to what the research is about and that it is, for the most part, an academic exercise.

Recognising the importance of storytelling in the process of healing, this research report unpacks the journey of some of the families of the "Mamelodi 10", especially in relation to the themes and ideas highlighted in the literature review. While the collective has moved on politically and every year it is triumphantly declared that the country is commemorating one more year of freedom, for 30 years now, many families are still recovering from the aftermath of the country's past – with some of them still unsure of what became of their loved ones. This

longform research report unpacks the dual process of individual healing and collective political acceptance of the past and how those who suffered direct loss from the injustices of the past have had to find a middle ground in the interest of national reconciliation.

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SECTION II

Longform article: More than just a number – The story of the “Mamelodi 10”

Mamelodi carries many stories – some shouted from rooftops, others carried in whispers – but all shaping the tightknit community I have known my entire life. Growing up, I heard about the struggle, about its heroes and the scars that remain. Somehow, though, some stories, like the one of the so called "Mamelodi 10", who were casualties of the political turmoil, remained a blank space in my knowledge. Discovering their story was like learning about a chapter in my family history that I never knew existed.

There are families who have carried the burden of their pain in silence over the years – only sharing the severity of its strain among those who share their grief. Hearing of their collective struggles made me wonder what other stories are still waiting to be uncovered in Mamelodi, what emotional baggage from the past continues to be carried in silence by those whose hearts are still bleeding. It is this curiosity that led me to the names that make up the "Mamelodi 10" – a story that goes beyond mere statistics. This pondering brought me to Rooibaard Geldenhuys, Jeremiah Ntuli, Thomas Phiri, Abram Makolane, Stephen Makena, Jeremiah Magagula, Morris Nkabinde, Samuel Masilela, Elliot Sathege and Sipho Sibanyoni, who became a piece of a larger history that I am only now beginning to understand. To honour them, one must try to piece together their lives that were cut short.

ROOIBAARD GELDENHUYS – THE BOY, THE BREAD, AND KARATE

Imagine, if you will, an ordinary Thursday morning in 1986. A day that had not yet been stained by what was to come. A young boy from Mamelodi, Rooikie Geldenhuys, started his day like any other. He woke up and exercised, as he had done the day before and the one before that and many others before. With one foot rooted firmly on the ground, he kicked the tree he had turned into a makeshift punching bag. He moved silently, steadily and with precision – every move calculated.

After his daily dose of exercise, "Rooikie", as he was affectionally referred to by his family, went out. This was nothing untoward; he was an active person who spent much of his time out and about the streets of Mamelodi. Clad in short black pants and a striped t-shirt, he looked as one would if they were preparing to work in the garden or around the yard. It was almost as though he was preparing to do some housework for the day. On his return from the streets, he asked his mother for some money for bread, which he was given. His family knew him as a responsible young man. When hours passed without him returning home, they were certain that he would eventually return with the bread as it had to feed everyone in the house and not just him.

That Thursday evening, his family went to bed without either Rooikie or the loaf of bread. His mother, who was single-handedly raising four children – the firstborn daughter, a son, and the youngest twin sons, Rooikie and Thabo – hoped he would return the next day. He did not. Two days passed and he was still nowhere to be found. In his absence, his sister would later recall, time seemed to move simultaneously too fast and not at all. The mother started to search for her son frantically around the neighbourhood, following each lead given to her. She searched in Duduza, in the East Rand, because someone had mentioned that he might have gone there. She searched in KwaNdebele, northeast of Pretoria, because someone else suggested that he could have gone there. She tried Soshanguve and Mabopane, in the north of Pretoria, because another person mentioned that he could be there. The mother crisscrossed the then Pretoria-Witwatersrand-Vaal (PWV) area, now Gauteng, in search of her son with no luck.

THOMAS PHIRI – THE PAIR OF JEANS HE NEVER WORE AGAIN

That same Thursday afternoon a group of boys played soccer on the grounds of a local primary school, Mononong, in Mamelodi East, while a mysterious man sat in a minivan parked at the corner nearby quietly observing them. Among the soccer players was Thomas Phiri, whose home was a couple of metres from the school. The 22-year-old spent much of his free time playing soccer, especially since he had moved to a different province to complete his schooling. Whenever he was home during the school holidays, he spent his time at the grounds with his friends.

He was home for the June holidays, when he informed his sister about the man who had started joining them during practice to help them improve their game. As the boys cheerfully sprinted across the field, evading their opponents to pass the ball to their teammates, Thomas's sister, Ntswaki Phiri, later told me that she called out for her brother to ask him to run an errand for her. As she was approaching the boys, the man alighted from the minibus and greeted her. His manner seemed affable and his approach good-natured, she remembers.

Thomas said there was no time for him to run to the shop to get bread for her because there was no time.. They had to go to town to buy soccer kits for an upcoming soccer game in Mabopane, north of Pretoria. The kind man she saw standing by the corner had offered to buy them what they needed. Asked if this was true, the man confirmed Thomas's story and promised the sister that the boys were in good hands.

Seeing how courteous the man seemed, and trusting her brother, the sister asked no further questions. Even though the departure seemed hurried and was announced at the eleventh hour, the sister had no misgivings about it, she would later say. Thomas and his friends got into

the man's minivan and off they went. Just before they left, Thomas took off the pair of jeans he was wearing and gave them to his sister to keep. The jeans were still brand new – bought by Ntswaki just two days earlier. She had bought him two pairs of jeans and a t-shirt for him to return with to school after the holidays. He left wearing his old clothes. This, he said, was because it would be better to play the match they were going to wearing his old clothes.

When Thomas's father returned home after work, Ntswaki casually repeated Thomas's story about his whereabouts to him, she recounts, adding that they should in fact have been back by then. When it started getting darker outside and Thomas had not returned, the family assumed he had gone to the home of one of his friends who lived nearby. While the country was under a State of Emergency, there was a curfew. Although there had been clashes and protests involving Mamelodi's youth movements, people continued with life as best as they could while trying to stay away from being on the wrong side of the law, even though it did not take much to stoke the police's ire. They minded the time they left and came back home as well as the time they were found on the street to avoid being caught out after the set curfew.

Thomas still was not back by the time they were getting ready to sleep. Worried, but still hopeful, the family went to bed without him that night, and the next night, and the following night after that. Eventually, the father decided to go in search of him. He looked everywhere he imagined his son could have gone with no luck. Four days after Thomas's disappearance, he reported him missing – an action that would unwittingly make him the subject of harassment from the police, who accused him of concealing his son's whereabouts. After this, the police would routinely raid the Phiri home at night, climbing over the roof and kicking doors open, demanding Thomas's hiding spot.

The father was sometimes detained for several days, being questioned about his son's whereabouts. A few days after he was released from detention, a new set of police would raid his house, insisting on knowing where Thomas was. They raided the family home on numerous occasions, including when they accused the family of hiding hand grenades in the yard. The police were apparently tipped off that Thomas was in possession of hand grenades. They dug around the yard, looking for the weapons. They found nothing. This was happening even though it had been weeks since Thomas disappeared.

JEREMIAH NTULI – THE PARTY THAT NEVER WAS

When Mrs Maria Ntuli came back home from work one evening she found her youngest son, Jeremiah Ntuli, bathing in the boys' bedroom. The 17-year-old was preparing to meet up with his friends on the East side of Mamelodi for a party, he told his mother. Exhausted from work,

the mother did not probe further about the party or the friends hosting it – neither their names nor where exactly in Mamelodi East they lived. In any case, she did not know any of her son's friends because he hardly ever made mention of them. She agreed to let him attend the party on the condition that he would be back by 10pm, the mother recalls. This would have been just before the curfew of 10pm to 5am that had been announced two weeks earlier. MaNtuli asked Jeremiah if she should wait up for him until then. He said she should. He promised to return home long before then. The mother whiled away time by watching TV. She started getting concerned when her son was not back home at the agreed time. He was not one to fail to keep his word. Just after 10pm, and before going to bed, the mother decided to check outside the gate to see if he had not been delayed and was on his way back. She looked up and down the road hoping to see any figure appearing. Jeremiah was nowhere to be seen.

She went back to the house, switched off the lights and went to sleep. Although distressed by her son's unbecoming behaviour, she would later say, she did not want to rush to anger before she understood why he did not honour his promise. The next morning, she went to check on him in the boys' bedroom – perhaps he had returned much later than the consented time, when she had already gone to sleep. When she asked his brothers if Jeremiah had returned, they said he had not. His bed was still as it was the night before.

MaNtuli, as she is generally referred to by those who know her, went to work that morning worried about her son's whereabouts. A few hours after arriving at work, she called home to check if Jeremiah had come back and was told that there had been no sign of him. The mother told Jeremiah's siblings to call her as soon as he set foot home. She waited for the call. The day went by until it was time to knock off. No call ever came to tell her that the youngest of her eight children had come back home.

Upon her return from work, she found that Jeremiah had still not returned. She sat in the living room, she remembers, waiting for him. She felt helpless and frustrated because she had no idea where to start looking for him or whom to ask about the party he had supposedly gone to because she knew nothing about any of the people her son hung around or partied with. She had never seen him with any of his friends, not even those from the neighbourhood. Life had come to a confusing halt, with no indication of which direction to follow or door to knock on. The family spent another night without Jeremiah but decided not to report him missing yet. They were hopeful that he would find his way home, still.

It was only after returning from work on the third day of Jeremiah's disappearance that the mother realised that something was seriously wrong. She decided to go report her son missing – that she last saw him on June 26, 1986. The police told her they would not be taking

down her statement and that she should rather leave her home address. They would come to her house. The mother left her address as directed and went home to go wait for the police. She waited for their arrival. Days went by. Weeks followed. Months passed. But a missing person's case was never recorded with the police.

ABRAM MAKOLANE – THE BOY WHO WOULD NOT BE TAMED

Abram was a quiet and reserved child, according to his mother. When he started his political journey, he would go to political meetings with his peers and then return home. The police had started raiding his home looking for him quite early in his activism. One day, he told his mother that he would be leaving to escape police harassment. He did not say where he would be going, though, or how long he would be gone. His mother, Martha Makolane, was always worried about his safety. What if they ambush him somewhere in the street and kill him, she often wondered. She asked her son the same question when he announced his imminent departure, and he assured her that he would be fine because they would be in a group.

The mother was apprehensive about him going because she had always believed that the police would eventually find him, and the ending would not be pleasant. She wished he could be a little less active in politics, she reveals, years later. Little did she know that he was in more danger than he realised. Two days after mentioning this obscure trip to unknown lands, Abram disappeared. He did not officially let his mother know that he would be going. He was just there one day and gone the next. After his disappearance, the mother asked around about his whereabouts and some of the boys he used to hang around told her that Abram had skipped the country to go "learn the gun".

When Abram's activism entailed more than just attending political meetings, he became a person of interest to the police. He would often spend nights away from home, sleeping at a scrapyard not too far from his home, to avoid being caught by the police during their frequent night raids to his home. On numerous nights their home in Mamelodi West would have several police officers surrounding the house – footsteps could be heard from on top of the roof, while others were moving towards the back of the house, and others knocking aggressively while announcing their arrival. With each visit, the house would be left looking topsy turvy, from the beds to cupboards and every other moveable thing in the house. He returned home in the wee hours of the morning to bath and get ready for school. His mother had come to accept that she would only see him briefly at the crack of dawn every day. The mother had lived in Daveyton with her family until her husband passed on. This necessitated her move to Mamelodi at the request of her in-laws, who said it would be better for her and her children to live where they

could be assisted and supported. Abram was about 12 years old when they made the move. But the move to Mamelodi did not turn out to be as safe and comfortable as the family had hoped it would be.

THE AFTERMATH

After three months of searching for Rooikie, the family heard through the grapevine that he had gone to Botswana. Him being only 16 years old, they wondered how he would have managed to cross the border. Around this time, the family started being harassed by the police, who would storm their house at the crack of dawn, blasting them with the brightest of torches in their sleep, in search of Rooibaard.

While contending with the fact that she had no idea where her son was, the mother had to further deal with the hostile police officers who demanded that she reveal his whereabouts. On days when they did not storm the house looking for Rooibaard, the police would demand to know where he was hiding his weaponry. In all their home raids, no weapon had ever been found, but that did not stop them from returning and wreaking havoc. Although the frenzied assaults became routine, the trauma of having police surrounding their house at ungodly hours felt fresh every time. One night, the police swarmed the house while the mother was sitting with her children and demanded answers from her.

"Waar is die vuurwapens [Where are the weapons]?" one officer charged at the mother.

"I only have two," she responded timidly.

Although the mother had married into a coloured family and understood Afrikaans fairly well, she was too dazed and overwhelmed to make sense of what they were saying.

Her children popped their eyes out in shock and looked at each other, wondering if the others knew anything about the weapons their mother was referring to. The police demanded that she show them what she was talking about. She escorted them to the kitchen, where she pointed to her two stoves – a coal stove used to warm up the house and an electric stove used for cooking. This heightened the police's anger, Rooikie's sister reveals. They thought she was playing tricks on them. One of the officers pointed at a gun and repeated that they were looking for weapons, like the one they were showing her. Stunned, the mother explained that she would never be in possession of such and that she thought they were referring to a stove. She also had no idea about the weapons they claimed her son had been hiding in their home. In fact, the only weapons she had ever seen in her life were the ones the police have exposed her and her children to.

The police took their harassment of the Geldenhuys family further than just depriving them of sleep every so often. They took the second born, who was four years older than the twins, and tortured him for hours, demanding that he reveal where his younger brother was hiding – an ordeal that left the young man scarred. They held him at the Magaliesburg Mountain, which towers over the Mamelodi township. Whenever he had flashbacks of his captivity, the twins' brother would wake up at odd hours of the night and leave the house, just to avoid being captured again.

IN THE SHADOWS OF GRIEF

In the days, weeks and months after Thomas vanished, life became emotionally and mentally draining for the Phiri family. For a while, the father was convinced that Thomas had left out of frustration and grief. Just a year earlier, Thomas's mother had disappeared and was found dead on the side of the road after three days in a suspected criminal incident. Thomas, being the youngest of five siblings, was the hardest hit by the mother's sudden passing. He had been the one who had to identify his mother's body when she was found. The father surmised that Thomas's actions were a delayed response to the mother's death. Perhaps he was overcome by grief and decided to leave home to deal with it somewhere far on his own. Maybe being in the house without the mother's presence had become too unbearable for him.

The family had had hope that he would return, but they started worrying it was getting closer to schools reopening and his return to Limpopo and there was still no sign of Thomas. One of the things that the family was confident about was that he loved school and would not unnecessarily jeopardise his education. Him not returning in time to start the new term signalled that something was wrong.

Three weeks after Thomas had left, his family had to go collect his belongings at school. As weeks and months passed, the family watched news with the hopeful anticipation that they would somehow, someday, see or hear something about him. Learning to live without him, unsure if he would ever return, but hoping that he would was a struggle, says his sister, Ntswaki, who had been the closest to him. Overcome by grief, even after time had passed since Thomas's disappearance, the thought of linking it to the mysterious man never crossed her mind, she told me.

A HARD PILL TO SWALLOW

Some days after Jeremiah's disappearance, MaNtuli was informed by her children that they had heard that a group of boys had been collected by a kombi. However, she refused to accept

the fact that her son might have misled her. She was adamant that Jeremiah had gone to a party and when he returned, he would explain himself. Although difficult, life went on. The mother continued going to work as though things were normal. The upkeep of her family depended on her strength to carry on, she told me.

One day, after returning from work, MaNtuli's children told her that a man by the name of Rudy Mphela had come to see her and said he would return later. And he did. He asked the mother to explain the circumstances around Jeremiah's disappearance, and afterwards he said he would assist in the search of her son. He mentioned that in the neighbourhood, there were other families whose children had gone missing – the Nkabinde, the Sibanyoni families, who, along with the Ntuli family, all lived in the same neighbourhood in Mamelodi West, as well as two other boys on the East side of Mamelodi from the Sathege and Phiri families. The Nkabindes and the Sibanyonis live – to this day – on the same street, just a couple of houses away from each other. Likewise, the Phiris and the Satheges live less than 1km from each other. The three families also live just a few minutes' walk from my childhood home. The Satheges live just one street away, while the Phiris live a few metres further. In fact, the school where Thomas and his friends had been playing soccer before they left on the day of their disappearance is the same primary school I attended. I have also known the Sathege home all my life, although I had no idea that something so tragic had befallen the family.

True to his word, Mphela started helping the families with the search for their children. It took some time after Jeremiah's disappearance for the mother to finally accept that it had not been a party her son had gone to. She now convinced herself that he had gone to exile and was afraid to inform her. Then, a few weeks later, MaNtuli had a visitor. It was a woman she had not known before their meeting – Abram's mother. She too was searching for her son. She told MaNtuli that she had heard that her son was with MaNtuli's son when they went missing. MaNtuli could neither confirm nor deny this because she did not know whom else had joined the party her son had gone to. Abram's mother was hoping to get answers, but MaNtuli had none for her. The parents were joined together in sheer misery of not knowing where their children were.

Jeremiah's mother had no idea that her son was involved in politics. She was not even aware that he was close friends with someone known to be one of the chief rabble rousers in the community, Rooibaard, who lived less than 500 metres away. He never shared any such thoughts and ideas out loud. He never made the mistake of making any political utterances around his mother. Even though Rooibaard's family had seen Jeremiah visiting their home

before, Jeremiah's mother had never seen any of her son's friends visiting. At home, Jeremiah was an obedient and dutiful young man whose focus was solely on school, the mother recalls.

In retrospect, she told me, she realised that some signs had been there, but she had not paid much attention to them. For instance, there was a day when Jeremiah went to the back of the house to sit next to a big rock. There, he started drawing the map of Africa, highlighting all the countries where ANC was known to have gone for underground military training. When she asked him why he had drawn it, he said it was just aimless drawing with no real significance.

THABO GELDENHUYS – A BROTHER'S PAIN

Thabo Geldenhuys struggled to come to terms with his twin's disappearance. While he had always been the more reticent one of the pair, he became practically mute – due to both the fact that his twin was no longer around and out of fear that the police would harm him the same way they did their older brother. Thabo remembers the exact day his twin disappeared. When they woke up that day, Rooibaard told him that they would meet each other someday in future. Thabo dismissed this as one of the political slogans that he often used. Rooikie often told his brother that he would miss him the day he left. This became especially frequent in 1986, so it was nothing shocking to Thabo. He thought Rooikie was being his usual self.

Thabo had also wanted to join politics like his twin, but he told me that they both agreed that Rooikie, who was the sturdier and more combative of the pair, was the better twin to participate in political activities. Rooikie encouraged his twin, who was a soccer whizz, to focus on his talent and not become as heavily involved in politics as he was. This, he said, was so that their mother would not lose them both at the same time if the security police ever targeted him. In fact, Rooikie promised to give Thabo a hiding if he ever spotted him at any of the political activities around Mamelodi. Thabo had no qualms with abiding with their agreement, he recalls.

Rooibaard never hid the fact that he wanted to join Umkhonto weSizwe (MK), the armed wing of the African National Congress (ANC). He was expressive about becoming a guerilla – even though some of his family members did not fully understand what the term meant. When Rooibaard was not doing anything at home, he would be found singing struggle songs to pass time. He would break out in song at any random moment, and his family had become accustomed to this. His politicisation was fuelled by their mother having been cheated out of her marital home during hers and their father's divorce through a clandestine relationship their father had with and a man who was part of the local authority (known as a "Blockmaan")

with connections in council. Life was tough for the children and their mother when they had to move from the comfort of their own home to go and share a house with their maternal aunt and her family. The three boys were moved around twice in two years in search of a place to live. Rooikie would often tell his mother that he would get her out of the treacherous life upon his return from exile.

Thabo did not like speaking much. He kept to himself and only showed any sort of enthusiasm when he was on the pitch playing soccer. In any case, Thabo considered his twin the braver one between them. So, it made sense that Rooikie was the karate-training comrade and he, the energetic soccer player. They agreed that Thabo would do all the chores in the house and keep the yard clean while Rooikie attended the political activities.

On the first night of Rooikie's disappearance, his twin thought he was with his friends, and they were somewhere with girls. He expected him to knock in the wee hours of the morning as he had done before when he was attended night vigils or gone on some activities at night in the community. Thabo became increasingly anxious on Sunday because that day, the twins, along with a female cousin, were supposed to attend their confirmation ceremony at church. That morning, Thabo woke and prepared to go to church. Rooikie's suit hung in the cupboard. He kept staring at the suit on the hanger, wishing his brother was with him. The church service that Sunday was the saddest one Thabo had ever experienced. After the service, they got home, took off their clothes and had something to eat. The mood was sombre. All the joy of that day had been taken away by Rooikie's vanishing. He would never have deliberately missed a day such as this one so Thabo knew that his twin had finally done what he had always told them he would do – skip the country to go get military training. His nights became lonely and their bed empty without Rooikie.

Although heartbroken, he held on to the fact that it was what his twin had always wanted, hoping that he would one day return. It was like losing a part of himself, but he soldiered on – stoically, because that is what his twin would have wanted him to do. He is a man, he told himself, and he had to be strong. Except, in the eyes of his family, he did not display strength. He seemed as though he was slipping away from them. They could see his heartbreak, but they had no way of making it better for him. They were all in agony.

MAMELODI IN THE 1980s: WAR AND ITS TURMOIL

The desire to see change in many young political activists in Mamelodi was rooted in the wider resistance movement that was happening in the township and across the country at the time.

The year 1985 saw a rise in youth activism, with many young people taking active steps to directly confront the apartheid government.

In Mamelodi, life before the township insurrections had been one of quiet endurance, the *Washington Post* reported at the time. Written records belonging to then Member of Parliament (MP) Peter Soal, also highlighted this. In fact, until towards the end of 1985, the township had been considered one of the least politically problematic townships. Although life had been arduous for them, families in the township tried to live their lives as best as they knew how, Rebecca de Saintonge notes in her biography about Nico Smith, who lived in Mamelodi from 1985 to 1989. Children gleefully chased makeshift soccer balls across potholed streets while mothers stoked fires to prepare what little food was available every afternoon – each day bringing its own worries of what could be prepared to feed their families. Despite the township having electricity, nights often descended into darkness, with only the flicker of candles and paraffin lamps signalling activity in every home. Days were marked by the familiar sounds of chickens clucking every morning and afternoon – chickens which were kept mostly for the sustenance of families as the price of poultry and eggs was unaffordable for most.

While this period also marked a time when the government spent some money on townships, the facilities provided, and services were insufficient de Saintonge writes. Moreover, the government saw no value in planting trees in the township and during windy seasons, dust settled wherever it landed – including on anyone walking the streets, from head to toe and everywhere else it found space. Because there was hardly ever electricity, in addition to the dust, residents also had to contend with the smoke of the fires used for cooking permeating through open windows and doors. Life in Mamelodi was particularly onerous to the mothers, who had to make ends meet when it was impossible for the ends to stretch out in any meaningful way, according to de Saintonge. Many of the families, including those of the "Mamelodi 10" victims, were headed by women, either due to the death of the fathers or separation.

Yet, beneath the stoic resilience, unrest simmered, especially among the youth in the township. Many joined the Mamelodi Youth Organisation (Mayo), which was established in 1983. Through Mayo, the youth held widespread meetings, organised campaigns and urged the community to revolt against the government, as was reported in the *Work in Progress* newsletter in 1986. Their efforts were met with scepticism and harsh criticism by the parents, who felt that the system could not be defeated.

Young men like Abram, whose mother warned him about his political activities, refused to heed any such warnings. He insisted that change was necessary and that he wanted to be part

of bringing this reform. Likewise, his comrade Thomas continued to be aggressive, ignoring suggestions to show more restraint. The youth's anger had reached a boiling point. They took no prisoners when it came to getting everyone involved in the liberation, and anyone who showed dissent or apathy was not met with kindness.

The year before the ten boys disappeared, many youngsters in their age range, between 13 and 23, took control of the township, de Saintonge writes. At night, they moved in packs, chanting through the streets. They hurled bricks at people's houses, smashing windows as they passed. They caused a ruckus along the way – often trapping people in their homes, afraid to challenge the movement. The system, they believed, could only be successfully challenged if the community, both old and young, presented a united front. In their approach, the youth ate the proverbial elephant one piece at a time. They cornered different parts of the community into submission one section at a time, de Saintonge revealed.

On July 1985, government declared a partial State of Emergency, which covered some 36 magisterial districts in the Eastern Cape and the PWV area. This resulted in the detention of thousands of people. After a couple of months, the State of Emergency was extended to the Western Cape and eventually became enforced across the whole country in June 1986, just after being lifted briefly three months earlier. While Mamelodi was not part of the Magisterial Districts where the State of Emergency was initially enforced, a report by the Black Sash noted that the residents found themselves in a situation that was no different to areas that were under the State of Emergency. Between August and September of 1985, South African Defence Force (SADF) armoured vehicles were a regular sight on the streets, as were police vehicles. The community also found itself subjected to a 6pm curfew. No one was to be seen out and about after the curfew or face detention. Because the area was not under the declared State of Emergency, the people detained were held under the Internal Security Act of 1982 – which contained several provisions that allowed for people to be arrested and detained in connection with offenses against state security.

Before November 21, 1985, there was a significant disconnect between parents and the youth in Mamelodi regarding their views on the political situation, an article in *Work in Progress* noted at the time. However, a shift in the parents' perspective likely encouraged young activists, including the "Mamelodi 10," to expand their resistance beyond the township. This change in attitude coincided with an increase in targeted police operations in the following year. At the same time, there was rising dissatisfaction among residents, particularly over rent costs, which placed a severe financial strain on already struggling residents, according to TRC records. Even those willing to pay simply could not afford to. Residents began receiving

monthly bills reflecting unexplained and varying increases. The municipality blamed a system fault, claiming that due to ongoing unrest, officials were unable to enter the township to take meter readings and instead had to charge based on past averages. Adding to the frustration, Mamelodi residents were already paying higher electricity and water tariffs than other townships because their services were procured through the Pretoria City Council rather than directly from Escom (then the Electricity Supply Commission, renamed Eskom in 1987) and the Rand Water Board.

On the 19th of November 1985, the community decided that in two days they would march to the office of the mayor to submit their demands, including rent reduction, lifting restrictions on funerals, removing police from the township, and dismissing all local councillors except one, who had been elected by the residents. The events of the day were recorded by MP Soal and newspapers at the time. On the day of the march, things went awry as they were being addressed by the mayor. Gunfire erupted, leading to the police killing 13 people and injuring many others. Following this tragic event, the resolve of Mamelodi residents hardened, leading them to embark on a widespread rent strike.

THE MINIBUS OF DEATH

Rookie was friends with Thomas, Steven Makena and Eliot Sathege. The trio lived in the East end of Mamelodi, while Rooibaard lived on the West side. Through his friendship with Jeremiah, he became acquainted with Abram. They, too, lived in Mamelodi West. The boys were members of the Congress of South African Students (Cosas) and through their activism met a man they would call “Comrade Mike”, who told them he was an MK operative and promise to take them for military training in Botswana. He was the man in the minibus that Ntswaki had met at the soccer field the day her brother disappeared.

According to Mxolisi Malinga, a fellow activist who was 16 in 1986, they had met Comrade Mike one night in May when he joined them at the entrance of Mamelodi West Hostel, where they regularly held their meetings. From that day, Comrade Mike had regular meetings with their leader, Jeremiah Magagula, who would later be among the ten boys who were killed. The leader briefed his comrades about their planned departure. The comrade, who told them that he had been sent by the ANC to help them with training, had detailed information about the boys, according to Malinga. The day before the trip, Comrade Mike had briefed a group of boys about their planned departure. According to Malinga, who would later tell his story to *City Press*, he was supposed to have joined the ten boys on that fateful day, Comrade

Mike told them he would collect them at a spot near the Denneboom Station in Mamelodi West, which is not too far from the hostels.

It is unclear where the ten boys met up with Comrade Mike that day, but going by the memories of Ntswaki and Thabo, the minibus started by collecting Thomas and his friends, Steven and Eliot, who were playing soccer together in the early afternoon. It then proceeded to collect the others at a spot near the Mamelodi hostels on the west side of Mamelodi. It is also unclear whether Jeremiah had indeed gone to meet his friends in Mamelodi East, like he said he was, or if he too was one of the boys who hopped onto the minibus near the hostels.

Malinga and two others had not arrived at the time the minibus came to pick them up at the agreed time because his mother had sent him to go buy vegetables for her.

On their way back from buying the vegetables, they met Comrade Mike and their fellow comrades, who asked them to jump in. They could not, for fear of leaving for exile with his mother's items. Comrade Mike promised to fetch them two weeks later, but that never happened.

As the minibus rumbled out of Mamelodi, it carried the hopes and dreams of 11 young people who thought they would come back trained and ready for war. Comrade Mike – it would later emerge at the TRC – gave the aspirant soldiers, some of whom were only 15 years old, alcohol in the vehicle, perhaps to get them to relax or maybe to make sure that they could not fight back even if they tried. Blinded by their assumed allegiance to a black man who assured them that he would take them to the promised land, the young men probably gleefully imbibed the drinks provided to them along the way.

There was an eleventh potential MK combatant in the vehicle, Nomsa Mashaba, who was 18 years old at the time, and the only female passenger in the vehicle. She managed to escape while the minibus had stopped at a petrol station. According to her, in an interview with *Business Day* published on 28 November 2024, she grew suspicious of the trip after noticing a familiar vehicle following the minibus. She decided to hide in the bathroom after Comrade Mike made a stop in Zeerust.

VLAKPLAAS: THE HEADQUARTERS OF HEINOUSNESS

The apartheid-era South African Police acquired a 100-hectare farm situated on the Hennops River, some 20 kilometres West of Pretoria in 1979. The farm was known as Vlakplaas and was used as a base for covert counterinsurgency operations. Between 1969 and 1994, the then government had death squads operating inside and outside the country and Vlakplaas was one of the headquarters of these clandestine squads operating within the country. It was the hideout

for several white police officers and those who were known as askaris, according to an investigation into apartheid death squads conducted by investigative journalist Jacques Pauw and TRC records. The word “askari” means “soldier” or “police” in Kiswahili, Arabic, Turkish and several other languages. In the South African context, however, the term was used to refer to mostly black officers who had defected from liberation movements, including the ANC, the Azanian People’s Organization (AZAPO), the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) and others, according to Jacques Pauw, an investigative journalist and author known for exposing apartheid-era death squads.

The comrades would be arrested by the Vlakplaas operators and taken to the base to be tortured into conversion to becoming askaris. They would afterwards be sent to townships to kill and commit other merciless crimes against black people. Askaris were an important ammunition against the armed struggle as they could carry missions out with little to no suspicion from their targets, Pauw revealed. It was easier and cheaper to use askaris to infiltrate townships to get rid of anyone who was a threat to the state instead of arresting them and going through the judicial authorities. Joe Mamasela was one of the askaris stationed at Vlakplaas and Mamelodi was one of the townships where he was sent to destabilise identified and potential political activists to prevent them from fighting against the state. And Joe Mamasela was Comrade Mike.

TRC: ONLY THE TRUTH AND NOTHING ELSE

In 1996, almost a decade after the disappearance of their loved ones, the families of the “Mamelodi 10” discovered that the boys had not gone to exile for training as they had thought and hoped. In fact, the group had not lived beyond the very day they last saw them. The discovery of the boys’ deaths resulted from an investigation by a special unit set up by the then Attorney-General with the help of Mamasela who revealed some details about the operations he had been part of, according to a report by the TRC. However, details about their killing were fleshed out further by some former members of the security police during their amnesty applications in 2006, in relation to this case and many other operations they had overseen in the 1980s

The TRC was established in 1995 as South Africa was in transition from an apartheid state to a democratic country. The Commission was aimed at addressing the human rights violation that had taken place under apartheid and forging a new, reconciled multiracial and multicultural nation. The commission was premised on the ideal of achieving national unity and harmony and preventing future abuse. The TRC comprised seventeen commissioners and

was chaired by the late Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, with Dr Alex Boraine as the deputy chair. It functioned through three committee: the Human Rights Violation, Amnesty and Reparations and Rehabilitation Committees.

The first committee dealt with collecting detailed reports of politically motivated human rights violations, the second concerned itself with processing applications to be pardoned for one's role in the said violations while the last focused on recommending redress for the victims of the violations, including long-term financial support as well as programmes targeted at addressing their pain and suffering. The latter committee also recommended once-off financial benefits for the victims. Through the TRC, a total of 7112 people applied for amnesty for their role in gross human rights violations. Only 849 received full amnesty while 145 others received partial amnesty. The commission collected more than 21 298 victim statements.

Among those who applied for amnesty for crimes they committed under the apartheid government were Brigadier Jack Cronje and Captain Jacques Hechter. Cronje was the commander of Vlakplaas between 1983 and 1985. He testified that while the boys did not fit the profile of activists who would ordinarily be assassinated based on their activities in Mamelodi, the fact that they had an interest in and intentions to skip the country to go for training was sufficient reason for them to have been eliminated. Cronje, stone-faced, said the young men's elimination was necessary to foil any plans of "terrorists" getting trained and returning to attack the government. Furthermore, the ten were killed based solely on the suggestion from Mamasela that they had displayed eagerness to be MK combatants.

The idea that Mamasela could have enticed the boys into wanting to go for training was never entertained because they trusted the man enough to believe that he had not tricked them in any way, as he was supposedly instructed not to. They had all willingly approached and asked him to help them skip the country, according to Mamasela's version. He had always presented himself as an MK member in the townships where he operated so it was easy for potential combatants to approach him unprompted, Cronje later testified at the TRC. He said that while he knew that the ten were part of school boycotts, consumer boycotts and arson, he could not have them tried in court as he would not have sufficient evidence to prove their guilt.

It was during the amnesty hearings that some details pertaining to the boys' political involvement were revealed. Abram, who was 17 at the time of his disappearance was a student at J Kekana High School doing Std 8 (now grade 10). He was a known comrade, had been arrested a couple of times and was once charged with arson and public violence. Samuel Masilela was a 16-year-old Form 1 (now grade 8) pupil at Mamelodi High School who had never been detained or charged for his political activism. Philip Sibanyoni, one of the youngest

among the group, was 15 years old when he died. He was in Std 9 (now grade 11) at Jafta Mahlangu High School. His mother was not aware of his involvement in political activities. He had never been detained or arrested by the police. Thomas Phiri, 22, was in Std 9 (now grade 11) at the time of his death. He was a known activist but had never been detained or arrested. Jeremiah Magagula was 16-year-old comrade who attended Mthombo Primary School. He had never been detained or arrested. Then there was 19-year-old Morris Nkabinde, who was known to be politically active. He had never been taken into custody. Stephen Makena, 18, was also a known activist. He had a clean record. The only information the commission had about Elliot Sathege was that he was 20 years old at the time of his disappearance. The commission's initial list also had Matthews Lerutla and Mandla Sibiya listed as part of the "Mamelodi 10" activists. However, although he was also from Mamelodi, Lerutla disappeared in 1987. It is unclear what happened to Sibiya because he is still listed as one of the Mamelodi 10 on the TRC's victim's list. In later lists, including in the amnesty ruling of the officers who participated in the plan to eliminate the boys, Jeremiah Ntuli is added, however Lerutla remains part of the list, with the omission of Rooibaard Geldenhuys.

The TRC concluded its work in 2003, and its final report recommended the establishment of a task team that would continue to search for missing people who had disappeared between 1960 and 1994 because of the political conditions. The following year marked the birth of the Missing Persons Task Team (MPTT) in the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA). Its maiden case was the Mamelodi disappearances. Before the MPTT was formally enacted, other investigators within the NPA had already done the bulk of the work to locate all the relevant documentation that would help in tracing the where the ten boys had ended up

THE ELIMINATION PLAN: FROM INFILTRATION TO EXECUTION

After infiltrating the group of young boys, Mamasela informed Cronje of the youth's eagerness to go for military training. A plan was hatched with the Special Forces to eliminate them as a preventative move. The mid-1980s saw coordinated efforts among all the covert units of the state to kill anyone who was opposing the National Party State. Before officially executing the plan, met with Cronje in town to discuss the planned route for the aspirant MK soldiers. Mamasela was instructed to drive to Nietverdiend and then turn down a particular dirt road close to the Botswana border.

On the day of the execution Cronje, along with Hechter, tailed behind the minivan in another car until the agreed spot, the former would later reveal at the TRC. There, Mamasela

found another minivan carrying four special forces operatives clad in balaclavas waiting for him and his consignment. At this point, the young men were considerably under the influence of alcohol. Upon the minivan stopping, the young men were all taken out of the vehicle and immediately pressed to the ground by the masked members of the military. They were then injected with an unknown substance. Their limp bodies were placed back into the vehicle which was driven to an area in the then apartheid-era "homeland" of Bophuthatswana. With only the ten young men inside, the vehicle was driven down an embarkment, where it crashed into a tree. It was then doused with petrol and set ablaze. A limpet mine as well as two AK47s were also placed in the vehicle.

This staged incident was one of many assassinations documented in the TRC's investigation into state-sanctioned atrocities. In October 1986, for example, according to TRC records, a Mamelodi activist Moss Morudu, who had been in hiding, was lured out by three security branch officers posing as MK members. Shortly after his disappearance, an anonymous caller told the family he was "where he had wanted to go" – a cryptic message that led them to believe he had successfully gone into exile. In reality, Morudu had been interrogated for about a week before being killed. His body was blown up between Pienaarsrivier and Kgomo Kgomo in Bophuthatswana. In the absence of any remains, the local *Pretoria Rekord* reported that a symbolic burial was held for Morudu in 2013 at Freedom Park.

The violence did not end there. In June 1987, two youth activists from Mamelodi, Matthews Lerutla and Jeffrey Sibaya, aged just 17 and 18, were abducted by members of the Northern Transvaal Security Branch. They were taken to Mmukubyane, also in Bophuthatswana, tortured, strangled with a seatbelt, and blown up with explosives, as detailed in TRC records. In July 2023 the *Daily Maverick* reported that a spirit collection ceremony was held in their honour, alongside three other teenage activists – Samuel Ledwaba, Oupa Mohale, and Morudu – who were all murdered by apartheid forces.

Between the disappearance of the "Mamelodi 10" and the end of 1988, eight more Mamelodi residents vanished without a trace, according to TRC records. The disappearances form part of a dark pattern of systemic violence in which young Black lives were extinguished with clinical precision – their stories buried until the post-apartheid era began to recover the truth.

UNITED IN GRIEF: SEARCHING FOR THE MISSING DEAD

Upon finding out what had become of their loved ones, the wives, mothers and sisters of Mamelodi residents who had been killed in the 1980s joined a support group called Khulumani

(*speak out*). The group included families from Kwandebele whose loved ones were lured to their deaths by Mamasela some two weeks after the killing of the "Mamelodi 10". On the night of 15 July 1986, nine young men had been waiting for Mamasela, who had promised to provide them with arms and training. However, when they opened the door for him, they were ambushed by hit squad members instead, Hechter would later reveal during TRC hearings. The nine were lined up and executed. Hechter proceeded to pour petrol over their bodies and set them aflame, hearing. The people involved in the killing were granted amnesty for it.

The group of women figured it would be better for them to search for the remains as a unified team instead of each of them pursuing their own path, MaNtuli recalls. Through the support of Marjorie Jobson, the National Director of the Khulumani Support Group, the women started meeting weekly on Wednesdays at the Mamelodi West community hall. In their meetings they would be joined by Mphela, who was a field worker for Khulumani in Mamelodi – the same man who initially contacted the families when he heard about the boys' disappearance. The group paid R35 to book the hall for every meeting held there. They got the money from Jobson. During these weekly sessions, they counselled and consoled each other.

They also put in some work into finding their loved ones by following any lead they found. This collective approached the NPA in 2004 to ask them to investigate their case. This was after they had tried to search for their children themselves for years with no success. They were aware that they were buried in Winterveld and had even tried to conduct an exhumation themselves in 2001, after visiting the cemetery at least three times and talking to some workers there who remembered the burial of the ten. Unfortunately, they could not locate the exact spot where the boys were buried and decided to enlist the help of the NPA.

Although she did not mention this during our interview, Abram's mother testified at the TRC in 1997 that after her son's disappearance the police came to inform her that her son had died in KwaNdebele. She went there to search for his corpse but could not find it. In fact, when she read through the list of people who had died, her son's name was not there.

After some time, the women moved to having their gatherings at MaNtuli's house. They continued meeting at her house for years until their matter was brought to finality. It was during one these meetings they discovered that there had been an eleventh occupant in the minibus of death – the young woman who had managed to escape. Nomsa met up with the group to express her regret for never revealing how their loved one had disappeared, despite having some idea of their journey that day.

To this day, if there is any reason for them to convene as a group, they do it at MaNtuli's house. The nonagenarian was the chairperson of the entire group of the Mamelodi families that

had been searching for their loved ones. Despite being the oldest of them all, the women still rely on her to remember all the names, dates, activities related to the case which may have escaped their memories. And she remembers practically every fact in detail.

WINTERVELD CEMETERY: AND THEN THERE WERE NINE

On 26 June 1986, a minibus burst into flames in the bush outside Madikwe, a rural village in what was then Bophuthatswana. The sight of smoke in the still landscape drew curious locals to the scene. What they found was horrifying – a smoking kombi and, inside, charred human remains. The police were called, and ten bodies were collected from the scene. The severely burnt and unrecognisable remains were transported first to George Stegman Hospital near Rustenburg, and then to the mortuary in Garankuwa.

For five weeks, they remained there, unclaimed and unidentified. On 7 July 1986, District Surgeon Dr JMC Hoog performed post-mortems, concluding that all ten had died from injuries caused by an explosion and exposure to intense heat. They had all lost their limbs in the fire – some more completely than others. They were buried anonymously on 31 July 1986, alongside four others, in the paupers' section of Winterveld cemetery. No names. No identities. Just numbered graves: A36, A38, A39, A40, A156, A157, A158, A159 and A161. The only surviving record was a handwritten burial log kept by the Tribal Authorities that managed the cemetery.

All these details, and the complex, emotional process that followed, were shared with me in an in-depth interview with Madeleine Fullard, Director of the Missing Persons Task Team (MPTT) in the NPA, conducted in her office in Pretoria. Speaking with a mixture of clinical precision and deep empathy, Fullard recounted the search to find and recover the remains of the ten young activists – a mission that would stretch the resources, resolve, and emotional resilience of her team.

Nearly two decades after the disappearance of the young men from Mamelodi, Fullard and her team would walk through the Winterveld cemetery, carrying the written records in hand. The MPTT had been tasked with finding the remains of the ten missing young men, and many others who had been lost to state-sponsored killings. The MPTT had every reason to believe that locating the graves would be straightforward. They had the burial numbers. They had the date. Instead, what they found at the cemetery was an undecipherable maze with no clear start and end points.

The cemetery had fallen into disrepair. Graves were swallowed by overgrown grass. There were no headstones, no numbers, no order. What had been meticulously documented on

paper bore no resemblance to the chaotic sprawl before them. Fullard quickly realised, she would later say, that the search was going to be far more difficult than expected. Originally, families had been given small metal rods engraved with grave numbers to mark burial sites. But by the time Fullard and her team arrived, most of these markers had long been stolen and sold for scrap by those needing a quick buck. Without those numbers, the burial register was effectively useless.

But Fullard and her team did not give up. They began piecing together the past in the only way possible, by speaking to those who might remember. The MPTT interviewed cemetery workers, undertakers, and community members. Some remembered the ten burnt bodies and the shock they stirred. Others offered vague memories of where the graves might be. One person remembered the burials happening near a tree at the far edge of the cemetery. Another was sure they had been further up the slope. Then came a breakthrough. A cemetery worker recalled that some investigators had visited years earlier, before the grave markers were stolen, Fullard said. He pointed the team toward a stretch of land near a tree. As the MPTT searched the area, they stumbled upon a rusted metal marker buried in the ground. It read: A155 – one of the four others buried on the same day as the "Mamelodi 10". It was a crucial clue. It provided the team with an anchor. If that marker was there, then it meant those who were buried that same day would not be too far.

The team decided to exhume the surrounding graves, and they invited the families to be present. On the day of the digging, the mothers walked in sombrely, some carrying blankets, others food – prepared for whatever the day might bring. Fullard recalls how the mothers sat together under a tree chatting away while the MPTT worked. Suddenly, one of the team members, digging carefully through the soil, struck something solid. It was a metal rod: A160. It was a match to one of the ten boys.

At first, while the worker was digging, the grave appeared empty, Fullard recalled. The mood grew tense. But then she remembered a detail from the post-mortems: the victims had lost their lower limbs. There would be no bones at the bottom of the grave. Fullard requested her colleague, forensic anthropologist Claudia Bisso, to shift the excavation toward the centre of the site. Fifteen minutes later, a bone appeared. Fullard then signalled to the mothers to come closer. They gathered around the edge of the grave and peered inside. One of the mothers, Abram's mother, would, many years later, describe the sight as the most gut-wrenching moment of her life, one that even in her old age, has remained vivid in her memory.

In the weeks that followed, Fullard and her team carefully excavated the area, opening more than 40 graves. On Human Rights Day, 21 March 2005, the MPTT conducted a public

exhumation of five of the confirmed graves. Again, the families stood witness. For Fullard, the work was never just forensic. It was personal. It was about memory, truth, and justice. The boys would finally be returned to their families, not as anonymous remains, but as sons, comrades, and young men who had wanted to fight for freedom – and paid the ultimate price.

TOGETHER FOREVER

According to Fullard, there was little scientific doubt that the remains recovered were those of the ten young men from Mamelodi. The skeletal remains were consistent with young males, mostly teenagers, and bore identical burn patterns, particularly severe damage to the lower limbs, likely caused by the fire. The bodies had been buried in proximity within the cemetery, not necessarily in a single row, but clustered together. Several features reinforced their connection: each grave contained a clear plastic tag, believed to have been attached at the hospital mortuary, which did not appear in any other graves in the cemetery. In seven of the coffins, investigators found fragments of broken glass, likely from the minibus windows shattering during the explosion, and pieces of burnt fabric, possibly from the victims' clothing or the vehicle's upholstery. In one coffin, a cluster of foot bones was found, suggesting the mortuary staff may have bundled remains together during the original burial.

Fullard recounts that by 2006, only nine of the ten bodies had been recovered, leaving the families in prolonged anguish. Despite the exhumation of over 200 graves, the tenth set of remains remained elusive. Eventually, MaNtuli, speaking on behalf of the families, informed the Missing Persons Task Team (MPTT) that the group had agreed to proceed with burying the nine identified individuals and to leave an open grave for the missing tenth. A special reburial ceremony was held in Mamelodi West, Section B3, in October 2008.

After twelve years of an unsuccessful search, the MPTT adopted a new strategy, using drone photography to identify untouched areas in the cemetery. In November 2019, they finally had a breakthrough. They found remains matching the profile of the other nine that had been discovered more than a decade earlier. Still, the families longed for individual identifications and requested DNA testing. The MPTT sent samples to Bode Laboratories in the U.S., with support from the Foundation for Human Rights. Unfortunately, the results were inconclusive – none of the DNA matched the families, a devastating outcome that cast renewed doubt over the identification. A second attempt through the University of Cape Town's laboratory also failed to yield definitive matches. To provide reassurance, the MPTT brought in U.S. forensic anthropologist Steve Symes, a specialist in bone trauma. In a detailed presentation at the Mamelodi West municipal offices, Symes meticulously walked families through each forensic

detail, demonstrating how the burn patterns and skeletal injuries aligned with the postmortem records.

Fullard remembers the moment she had to share the news of the crushing blow with the families with graphic clarity. It is a moment that has remained cemented in her memory as one of the most difficult of her career. It was just after a trip from Mpumalanga when she and her team found themselves in a community hall in Mamelodi West, burdened with the weight of devastating news. This was a meeting she had been dreading, knowing what had to be said. They had to inform the families that, despite all efforts, there had been no DNA matches for the "Mamelodi 10". The pain of delivering that message was compounded by the fact that matches had been successfully made for another group from the same area – the "Mamelodi 4". Unlike the "Mamelodi 10", whose remains had been severely burnt, the "Mamelodi 4" had been killed in an explosion, leaving their bones more intact and making DNA extraction possible. The remains of the ten boys were in such a degraded state that recovery through DNA analysis was nearly impossible. The contrast in outcomes felt cruel, Fullard would later say.

As Fullard and her team walked into the hall that day, she could feel the anticipation in the air. It felt almost as though there was a heavy feeling of hope, as if the families were on the brink of receiving long-awaited answers. Some had come believing this might finally bring closure. Whether the news of the "Mamelodi 4" came first or the two groups were addressed separately, Fullard can no longer recall. What she does remember is that the families had gathered as one, united by loss and the shared grief of having their loved ones disappearing under virtually similar circumstances. And then suddenly, they had to be separated by the truth. A truth that, for some, brought the beginning of closure, and for others, only more unanswered questions and the continuation of grief.

Over time, Fullard explains, the families began to find peace. While they never received the individual identifications they had hoped for, the overwhelming forensic evidence helped them accept the truth. At last, they could begin to grieve with certainty and without restraint.

TO BE BURIED TEN TIMES

In 2009, the coffins of nine of the ten boys stood side-by-side during a memorial service at the Solomon Mahlangu Freedom Square, not too far from where Mamasela's minivan would have collected them. They were buried in one mass grave in B3, Mamelodi West. The tenth grave remained empty, the last comrade yet to be found.

For the Geldenhuys family, the joint burial presented a unique problem, his sister said. According to their cultural traditions, the surviving twin must perform a ritual that involves

entering the grave, lying down, and then emerging before the deceased twin is buried. This ceremony is believed to sever the spiritual connection between the twins, preventing the spirit of the deceased from disturbing the one who is still alive. Since the bones were not individualised, Thabo could not enter any one grave to perform the ritual.

The Citizen reported that Thabo had to walk from one grave to the next, until he had gone through all of them and hope the ritual had been performed successfully. For all he knew, maybe none of the bones were the right ones and the exercise was futile. The last missing remains were eventually found in November 2019 and handed over for reburial in 2023, when Thabo was ceremoniously buried for the tenth time.

IT WAS NEVER ABOUT THE VICTIMS

When the truth about what had become of the boys finally surfaced, Rooikie's siblings were not interested in attending the TRC hearings, electing rather to watch the proceedings on television. His elder sister says she refused to have their pain paraded for the world to see. Their mother had spent years longing and searching for someone who had died within hours of leaving the house. Moreover, she had been subjected to abuse and harassment over someone the police already knew they had killed. The least the police could have done was to leave the family alone, Rooikie's sister says. Although the Geldenhuys family continued with life as best as they knew how, the mother had moments when she could not escape the grief. Sometimes she would go days without eating. How could she swallow anything, when she had no idea what her child was eating, if at all, wherever he was?

What is worse is that when the earliest batch of MK operatives returned from exile, some people extended the family's torment with falsities. One visited the family to assure them that Rooikie would soon return. He had been with him in training, the man said. He encouraged the family not to worry at all. Their hopes were raised. The mother was fuelled with renewed positivity. Her agony would soon be over, she was sure. Days passed; weeks followed. Before she knew it, another year had passed, and her son had still not returned. Another year followed. She eventually met her demise in 1992 – her heart still aching for her son.

Rooibaard's sister was frustrated by the TRC process while it was still happening. Now, years after its conclusion, her frustration is still palpable. Her exasperation now is not so much over the TRC, but over the government that allowed it to happen in the format that it did and then left the victims to their own devices to figure the next step out themselves.

She feels the perpetrators continued with life as though nothing happened while the victims were left to lick their wounds. The very freedom that her little brother was willing to give his

life for is now being enjoyed by people who do not care about anything or anyone else but themselves. They could not even offer psychological support.

"Our government must be very much ashamed, because these kids were eager to fight for freedom, they were willing to put their lives on the line, and now the current government does not even care. At the very least, they could have renamed some streets to the Mamelodi 10 as it has been done for others. These kids died so brutally. They deserve to be honoured," she says.

Asked whether she had forgiven or healed from the ordeal, the sister simply responds: "I just don't care."

Towards the man who orchestrated the death of the ten boys, Mamasela, she feels nothing. He spared no thought for the boys when he led them to their death. Likewise, she has no feelings to spare for him. Only God can forgive him. And even with that, he will forever live with his actions.

HOLDING ON TO MEMORIES

When I first read about the "Mamelodi 10" case, I imagined the families to have lived in parts of Mamelodi I had never set foot in. The fact that the case involved youths from Mamelodi made it feel like a close matter, but I had always imagined some distance between the families involved and I. This assumed detachment was fuelled by the fact that I had never heard about these stories before growing up. When I visited Ntswaki for our interview, I felt embarrassed that I almost got lost. It almost felt as though I should have known the house and their story.

When I arrived, she welcomed me graciously and mentioned that it was the first time that someone from Mamelodi had taken up the task of telling the story of the "Mamelodi 10". It had always been strangers coming to probe and investigate the story. It felt comforting to her to have someone from the township finally telling this story. She also mentioned having a vague idea of my family and my childhood home. She was watching TV with her two grandchildren when I arrived. She stands next to a chair and motions for me to sit, while telling the children to lower the volume. She is kind, soft-spoken and gentle. She sits on a couch across my chair and stares into the wall as she prepares to speak to me. Throughout the interview, she rarely glanced my direction.

Although it has been nearly 40 years since her brother handed her the pair of jeans and t-shirt she had bought for him just days earlier, with the promise of returning later that same day, Ntswaki remembers the events of the day she last saw her brother as though it had just happened the day before. She remembers the colour of the minibus that took her brother and his friends.

“I still have the clothes I had bought for him packed safely away in a suitcase. I have never wanted them to be touched or worn by anyone else,” she says.

She remembers him fondly as someone who would never say no to her. Even with his obstinate disposition, there was no request or instruction of hers that Thomas defied. Their other siblings would remark that Thomas was quite stubborn except with his sister. Thomas was a kind young man, although temperamental and rigid in his ways. He detested seeing people doing things he thought were out of line. He had little patience with what he considered wayward characters – and even less for people who failed to fulfil their promises. His lack of patience often manifested in physical altercations. His friends were aware that if he thought their conduct was out of line, he would not hesitate to discipline them using his fists.

It was this same frustration with things that were not right that fuelled his political interest. He loathed unfairness and was determined to tackle it head on each time he was confronted with it. To him, the political system in the country invited rejection and opposition and he was always ready to challenge it in any way possible. Before being moved to Limpopo, he had attended Stanza Bopape Secondary School in Mamelodi East, where he was active in rallying his fellow pupils to protest in rejection of the system.

Due to the political turmoil and increasing political activism by the youth in the 1980s, especially in 1985, Thomas’s family felt moving him away from Mamelodi would be in his best interest to ensure that he matriculated. Perhaps he would be less distracted by political activities and focus only on his schooling. However, even at the new school, he became known for mobilising other pupils to protest their poor treatment and the subpar food they were provided. His father was once summoned to the school over this.

A MOTHER’S GUILT

If Abram’s mother had not moved from Daveyton to Mamelodi, maybe her son would have never had any interest in politics, or maybe not enough to actively take part in the activities. This is how his mother feels sometimes when she thinks about the tragic way he died. Although there is no way of changing what happened, the mother often thinks about how differently things could have turned out if she had made different choices, if her son had made different choices. If only he had heeded her warnings about his political activities. If only she had been a little sterner. If only. She will never know.

Abram’s mother speaks about her late son in the fondest tone. She says she has learned to accept what happened, but sometimes she gets flashbacks from the images of the torched minivan, with the children’s remains incinerated onto the seats. She keeps photos of scene,

along with the two remaining photos of her son when he was about 14 years old. In one of the pictures, he is captured wearing his school uniform outside their old house in Mamelodi West. She also keeps her son's birth and death certificates. Date of birth: 1968-10-11. Date of death: 1986-06-28. She proudly displays the documents, as though they are the only proof that her son was once alive.

"I don't know, but maybe it would have been better if they had just shot them and buried them instead of what they did. They were killed brutally, and they were just kids," the mother says.

Asked what she missed most about him, the mother says: "My son was so calm and very sweet. He bothered no one. I loved him dearly."

"They were killed so brutally. They were killed so brutally. They were killed so brutally," she says, as though she is registering the shock for the first time.

Her healing journey has been tumultuous – sometimes feeling as though she had come to terms with it all and other times being engulfed by rage. She will never forgive, she says. She will especially never forgive Mamasela for his part in the boys' killings. In fact, if she ever came face-to-face with him, she would hurl the most profane insults at him.

"He is a despicable man who led our children to death," she says, visibly riled up.

"Why would he do this? I hope he is having a good life wherever he is. He chose money over our children's lives. Let him face his God."

She is also tired, she says. She is tired of carrying the frustration and hurt. She is tired of the resentment she harbours against everyone involved in her son's killing. She is tired of wishing justice had prevailed – justice that entailed retribution. She is tired of hoping the government would do better. Her son is no more. She is all cried out. He will never return, and his killers continue to enjoy life in the new South Africa without any real repercussions. It is all exhausting.

Although she has a good memory, it is almost as though her recollection of events is split between two significant moments: life when her son was still around and after she discovered that he had been killed. Anything else that happened in between seems fuzzy to her. Over the years, she has patched some bits of memory together to try and make sense of what might have happened and where she cannot fill the gap, she relies on MaNtuli. During the interview, there are moments when she gets lost in space and keeps repeating how brutally her son was killed. At one point, she said her son must have suffered more than the others. It is almost as if this is a memory she is fighting hard not to remember but is also not ready to forget.

“WHAT EXACTLY IS JUSTICE?”

It is not inconceivable that Jeremiah would not have revealed his political dealings to his mother. Even at her old and frail age, one can tell that MaNtuli is a stern disciplinarian. Although I had visited her two weeks earlier to inform her about my intention to interview her, on my arrival on the agreed day, she scolded me for arriving without warning. If it had not been that I had had witnesses on the day I had gone to inform her about the interview, I fear she may have told me to come back another day when she felt up to doing the interview. I had been to her house twice before, and for some odd reason, I got lost on my second visit – although I got there without hassle the first time.

I drove around different streets, unaware that I had passed her house at least twice, while asking about, “one of the mothers of the Mamelodi 10”. No one knew what I was talking about. What Mamelodi 10? What did they do? Are they famous? Each of the five people I asked looked at me like I had been speaking a foreign language, even though I had deliberately asked much older people who I had assumed would have some idea of what I was referring to. It was shocking to me that families would have experienced such tragedy and almost no one around the community was aware of their pain. It is no wonder they leaned onto each other as a group, because otherwise, they may not have had anyone else.

When MaNtuli finally set down for our chat, her opening line was: “Okay, let’s hear it.” Throughout our conversation, I notice that she pays attention to every detail she mentions in her story. If she is unsure or thinks she is getting the facts crossed, she stops to think about for some time before continuing. In some moments she calls her grandson to come jog her memory. She also waits for everything she says to be noted down. She only starts her next sentence once she has seen that the pen has caught up to her speech. Even when I tell her that she could proceed and I would verify some details myself later, she insists on telling me what she knows to be factual. Quite early into the interview I realise why all the other women trust her to validate some of the things they say or to fill in the gaps. She is thorough in her ways. She even has a book where she keeps record of the contact details of all families of the “Mamelodi 10, including anyone else they met during the search and reburial of the remains. My number has also been added to the book to keep record of our interaction. She is so meticulous that in one of the pictures of the families at the Winterveld Cemetery to witness the exhumations, she is seen with a book and pen in hand, writing something down. She tells me about the TRC process in detail.

When they heard about the TRC hearings that would be taking place, where they would finally get to hear what exactly had happened to their sons, the mothers all wanted to be part

of the process. Unfortunately, when they attended the first hearing in Johannesburg, they were not all allowed to enter the room. Ten was too big a number, they were told. MaNtuli says she was saddened to have been returned home to catch the proceedings on television but was comforted by the fact that a few of them were allowed to go in and submit their statements. Only Abram's mother was allowed to enter the venue and make her submission. It was at the next session when she could finally go in and be face-to-face with the men who had orchestrated the brutal killing of his son. Cronje, Paul van Vuuren, Hechter, Venter and another one. Wouter Mentz is "the other one". They were all granted amnesty for their role in the killing of the ten boys.

Even at 94, she still remembers their names clearly. She remembers their faces, too. She remembers their smug expression that lacked remorse as they were testifying.

"It was as though they were laughing in our faces – like we were fools, and they were the smart ones. That got to me so much," she says, visibly irritated.

The mother says she found it incredibly infuriating that their children were killed for actions they could have potentially taken, which they may not have even gotten the chance to do. Nelson Mandela was released just four years later and the transition to a new, democratic state followed.

In 2006, MaNtuli was approached by the late Adriaan Vlok to extend an olive branch to her and the other families for what his members had done to their children. Vlok was the Minister of Law and Order from 1986 to 1991 who testified before the TRC for his involvement in surreptitious activities aimed at thwarting political activism, especially in townships in the mid-1980s. He admitted having been aware of and involved in the bombing of the headquarters of a trade union federation and the South African Council of Churches.

He further revealed his involvement in the apartheid government's "dirty war", including orchestrating deceptive campaigns meant to cast aspersions against activists. One such example is when they unleashed a campaign to crush a consumer boycott in Mamelodi at the insistence of white business owners. The police distributed fake pamphlets claiming food parcels were available at activists' homes. Angry mobs torched the homes when there was no food provided. Like his fellow cabinet members who testified at the truth commission, Vlok's testimony included no apology, only him accepting responsibility for some of the underhanded shenanigans the police had gotten up to under his watch. He was granted amnesty in 1999. It was only years later when Vlok went on an apology crusade, starting by washing the feet of Reverend Frank Chikane, an anti-apartheid activist he had once plotted to assassinate in 2006. That same year he approached the Mamelodi mothers.

MaNtuli took him to every family that had lost their child, from Mamelodi West to the other side of the township. Just as he had testified to not having known about some of the clandestine operations that had happened under his stewardship, Vlok denied having any knowledge of the operation to have the ten boys killed. He maintained that some of the operations the police undertook at the time were done without his knowledge as though to suggest that they may never have happened if he had been aware. Vlok asked MaNtuli to gather the mothers for a feet-washing ceremony as his earnest act of atonement. He washed their feet and asked them to forgive him.

MaNtuli still has the Bible she was given by Vlok as part of his redress efforts. On the front flyleaf, the Bible is inscribed:

> "*Dear Maria –*
> *I have sinned against THE LORD…*
> *AND against you!*
> *(Lovelessness*, pride, etc through apartheid!)*
> *Please forgive me!*
> *May God bless you!*
> *[signature]*
> *Ps 51*
> *John 13: 1-7 (Specifically verse 15)*
> *PRETORIA"*

The Bible chapter in reference speaks about love, humility and service. It is about Jesus washing his disciples' feet, an act that had been reserved for servants, as a symbol of servanthood and humbleness. Verse 15 says: "*I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you."*

After that, Vlok routinely provided the families with food parcels, and they even started to see him as a friend of sorts. He did this until 2022 when he fell ill. He died in January 2023. In the later years of his life, he customarily delivered food to impoverished black families, particularly in Olievenhoutbosch; a township nestled between the luxe suburbs of Centurion and Midrand.

MaNtuli keeps the bible with the rest of the items she has kept over the years as memorabilia. Amongst which are an ANC-branded T-shirt bearing the names of the ten boys, with glaring misspellings of some of the boys' names. She has refused to let anyone touch, and thus defile, the T-shirt since she received it in October 2012. Along with the names is the quote: "MY BLOOD WILL NOURISH THE TREE THAT WILL BEAR THE FRUIT OF FREEDOM". The quote seems ironic given the families feel that their children have not been

given the same recognition and support as other families, including the family of Solomon Mahlangu, to whom this quote is attributed.

One of MaNtuli's prized possessions is her son's letter of certification from the ANC's MK, which states that the boys joined the military wing in January 1986. The certificate stands proudly displayed on the cupboard in the living room for all to see. Just across the room, high above the wall, is a framed A1-sized black and white picture of Jerimiah Ntuli. It is difficult to miss. She also wants to show me the pictures of the burnt minibus but is unsure where they have been moved. They are not at their usual spot. I must return for them another day, she says, but I must not just rock up and I should not return too soon after our interviews because she needs time to look for them.

Like the members of the "Mamelodi 10" families, she too is exhausted by the case and anything that has to do with it, especially the government's failure to ensure that they are taken care of as promised. She does not care anymore, but she will never forgive her son's killers. She had no forgiveness to offer when she was asked to pardon the perpetrators at their last TRC appearance, and she has even less to give now. All she knows is that she never wishes to cross paths with Mamasela, not in this lifetime or the next. She says while the TRC process was professed to have been aimed at justice and restoration, she felt none of the justice that people keep talking about.

"I am done with this whole thing. I am no longer interested in anything. We have received no assistance. We were told that our children would be taken to school. We were told we would be given letters to present to doctors to receive free healthcare. None of that has happened. There is no point," she says.

"What exactly is justice? What are they referring to when they talk about justice because I have not seen anything of that sort for us. I am even close to the end of my life waiting to see this justice."

IF I KNEW THEN WHAT I KNOW NOW

When Thomas's sister was shown a picture of the man who had been responsible for luring her brother and his comrades to death, she was gobsmacked. She recognised him. He was the kind man who offered to take the boys shopping the last time she saw them. Shivers ran down her spine at the thought of having come face-to-face, and even exchanging pleasantries, with the man she now considered as the most despicable human being on earth. She wished she had felt or seen something that would have warned her about the man. She wished she had insisted on Thomas staying home. She wished she had probed him further, maybe she would have picked

up something that would have alerted her to his sinister intentions. There was nothing she could do. There was nothing she could have done even the next day. There was nothing she could have done the moment her brother left with the driver.

She spent many nights afterwards trying to understand how sick a man Mamasela had to be to look her in the eyes and promise that her brother was in good hands when he knew his intentions with him. What is worse is that the man continues to enjoy life in the new South Africa, while mothers and siblings had to find their own way of reconciling the past with the present. In their case, the families had to help each other with their pain while Mamasela washed the blood he had on his hands and moved on as though he had somehow been a victim of circumstances. She has so many questions for him, even though she cannot verbalise exactly what they are, but she knows there is plenty he must account for, here on earth and beyond. She may not know what she would want to ask him, but the rising tempo in her voice as she speaks about him is enough to indicate how she feels about him. The mere mention of his name got her chest visibly rising, her breathing getting faster as though it had suddenly required additional exertion for her to breathe.

Until the exhumation of the remains of the "Mamelodi 10", Ntswaki thought she had healed and was ready to deal with how things turned out. But when she was confronted by the sight of bones upon their exhumation, she was shattered anew. The image kept repeating itself in her mind for weeks afterwards.

"I kept imagining the cruelty of it all," she says, her voice cracking. "Their death was terrible. It was cruel, very cruel."

The government's failure to make good on its promises made the wound fester. While the families received compensation of R30 000 each as reparations from the government, they still feel short-changed. Some of the other promises made to them turned into nothing but falsities. The families had hoped that the new South Africa would bring justice and recompense, but instead it was built on their pain and trauma, leaving them with nothing but awful memories and empty promises.

"I wish our government had not made the promise they did. They raised our hopes only to dash them. They told us that the children of victims would have their education needs taken care of, but what about those who died without children? Our loved ones were young, why can't the children of their siblings who survived them enjoy such benefits?"

Ntswaki says the TRC process encouraged them to forgive, but that was not something she was willing to do, not then and not now, still. There are people who were granted amnesty by the TRC yet some of them did not fully reveal the truth about the atrocities they committed

during apartheid. They were given the license to continue with their lives yet there are families who are yet to recover the remains of their children. How does that equate to justice, she asks? They should have been arrested, like any other offender in this country.

Justice means judgement, she says. Without retribution, there is no justice. Since all the perpetrators in their matter were pardoned, justice was evaded. They were given reconciliation in place of justice, and they have never been certain what to do with it. Their loved ones' killers got to continue with life while they only had bone fragments of their loved ones as consolation. The sister says she was content with having only received fragments of his brother's remains because that is what she had been prepared for. Thomas appeared to her in her dreams, she says. She knew even before the official discovery that they would find only his head, she says, because Thomas had told her so in a dream. She dreams about him sometimes, looking like the boy she knew before he disappeared. Although she will never see him again in his physical form, it is comforting seeing him in dreams. It is hard for her to forgive because her father died longing for the arrest of his son's killers, even though they had been granted amnesty by the TRC. To him, every wrongdoing deserved judgement and punishment. Anything else outside of this was futile and contemptuous toward the victims. Her father was correct, she says.

It is interesting how the mind can play games with a person, sometimes, and how memories over time end up being a mash up of facts and what the mind convinces one to be true. Even though I knew that the MPTT had not told the families which remains belonged to whom, during my chat with Ntswaki, it appeared that there were details that were not factual that she wholly believes to be real and true. For instance, she believes that they found her brother's skull, but there was not complete skull among the bones collected. There was only one that was more put together than the others. She also believes that her brother put up a fight before he was killed and would have been stronger than the chemical they were injected with. There is no way of proving this, but from her memory of her brother's strong-willed character, she is convinced that he could not have gone down without a fight.

Ntswaki says the community they have built as families of the "Mamelodi 10" has been comforting. If it was not for this, she may not have been as strong as she is now. She may never be completely okay but knowing that there are other people who share the same grief makes it a much easier load to carry.

MAMASELA: THE POLITICAL ENIGMA

It is unclear why Mamasela became an askari. Some reports suggest that he did so to escape charges of car theft he had against him in 1979. Other reports, especially those that covered the

TRC hearings and his testimonies, indicate that he deserted the ANC after the party killed his brother at a camp in a neighbouring country. However, in an interview with *Mail & Guardian*, Mamasela claims that he defected from the ANC after he was betrayed by his comrades who set him up to be arrested by the security police because they were jealous of him. According to him, he joined the party in 1977 and renounced it two years later due to the incident.

Testifying at the TRC, Brigadier Cronje described the man as an ex-criminal who was reformed by the state and taken for training to serve them. He had been an informant before he was an askari and never truly a member of the ANC. Moreover, at the same hearing as Cronje, Hechter said there had never been any doubt of Mamasela's loyalty to the squad. In fact, he considered himself as a "black boer" who identified wholly with the side of the struggle that he was serving – this is something Mamasela denied in one of his testimonies, claiming that every act he had committed at Vlakplaas had been under duress. Hechter further described Mamasela as an intelligent and pleasant person.

The same sentiments were not shared by former Vlakplaas commander Eugene de Kock, who said the hitman was a mean-spirited man who often directed his maliciousness particularly towards other black officers who did the same job as him. De Kock was giving his amnesty testimony at the TRC relating to the killing of eight Cosas activists in the East Rand in 1985 using booby-trapped hand grenades. He displayed disdain towards Mamasela, describing his manner of working as against the required discipline at Vlakplaas. He disliked Mamasela, he said, because he was a poor team player who did things the way he wanted. De Kock accused Mamasela of shooting an eight-year-old girl in Vereeniging in an alleged act of self-defence in 1985. The shooting was apparently covered up and Mamasela swiftly moved from Vlakplaas to the security police headquarters in Pretoria to work under Brigadier Cronje, who could rein him in, somewhat. According to de Kock, Mamasela was not someone he had desired to be around. De Kock was the commander at Vlakplaas from 1985 until the end of apartheid.

Mamasela has revealed details about the operations he was part of, but there seems to have been no genuine sense of regret shown by him over the years. He has maintained his posture of being a victim of circumstances who had no choice but to execute all that was expected of him. He has never apologised for his part in everything he did because he believes he was merely a puppet at the mercy of his masters.

While it will never be known whether the boys approached Mamasela or the shrewd operative enticed them into wanting to skip the country, some of the families, although they have no way of proving it, believe Mamasela had moles within the community. They are

convinced that he made his way to the township with some idea of whom he was searching for and how to entrap them.

Present-day Mamasela has positioned himself as a beacon of light of sorts, who has found his niche in being a state witness in apartheid related matters. At the end of November in 2024, he attended a case of two former colleagues as the key state witness, as reported by *Business Live*. One of the people charged was an askari. Mamasela is reported to have the desire to build a memorial to all apartheid victims – black and white, because both black and white people were killed in the pre-democracy state. Not much information about the man is publicly available, but a 2016 article in the *Mail & Guardian* reported that he runs a company that offers training for those who want to go into the security space or to be bodyguards.

WISHING FOR A LIFE WORTH LIVING

Although Thabo claims to have learned to live with the pain, evading all questions relating to his emotions, because he is a man, his eyes welled with tears from the moment he uttered his first word until the very last. He routinely twiddled his fingers and stared into space as he spoke. It is difficult to decipher the emotions he is experiencing, but there is a flood of them. A particular one keeps creeping out – utter disbelief. Even after 38 years of his twin's disappearance, his incredulity of how his Rooikie's life was cut short is still palpable.

"These people were cruel," he blurts out, to no question.

After his disappearance, Rooikie's absence was glaring, his twin brother says. It could not be ignored because the gap he had left was too big. Life felt empty, school felt emptier without him. Thabo was used to looking across the room and seeing his brother in the same class, sometimes just next to him. The trajectory of Thabo's life was altered entirely by his brother's disappearance. He has never been married or had a child. In fact, he has never left his family home. His older brother gave up his life to take care of him. At 55 years old, he must be guarded and guided like a teenager. But life would have been different if Rooikie had lived, he believes. One of them would have a job at the very least, maybe even a car, or a house, a family. One of them would be living a life worth living. Thabo would certainly be much happier and fulfilled if his brother was still alive. They would have conversations about anything and everything as they had always done before he left. They would laugh together. He would not feel so alone.

After two months of Rooikie being gone, one of which was the month they had turned 17, Thabo accepted that his twin was really gone. All he could do was to grieve alone, silently. Sometimes he would cry until he started laughing out of disbelief. He had to continue seeing

his brother's clothes in the room. He would see the people Rooikie did karate with practising and remember his twin among them.

He continued with life as best as he could by pursuing his soccer career, but the longing for his brother never ended. The emptiness never became filled. Sometimes, without any trigger, memories of the year 1986 play out in his head. The clashes at the hostels. The burials of school pupils every other weekend. Rooikie practicing his karate at home. Him playing soccer with his friends. The first night without his twin brother, feeling the empty, cold side of the bed for the first time. The first church service without his brother. The suit he never wore. His clothes that filled the room with no one to wear them. Rooikie's favourite pair of shoes.

Sometimes, all he talks about is the struggle and the ANC, as though he is unaware of the years that have passed. He speaks about the past as though Rooikie is still in it. Guerillas, boycotts, resistance. That is all that occupies his mind on some days. Other days, he thinks about his soccer playing days and how he almost joined Mamelodi Sundowns before his dreams were thwarted. Soccer. Karate. We must fight! On other days, he numbs the pain by drinking alcohol. He wakes up early in the morning and drinks the ghosts away. He comes back home late in the afternoon, his sorrows drowning in alcohol. He drinks to forget. He drinks to survive.

The memories continue to terrorise him. In those moments when grief engulfs him, all Thabo can do is chant slogans and sing struggle songs. "Sizobonana kwelizayo!" He chants. Just as his twin had done before he disappeared. "Izwe lethu!"

In uncovering the story of the "Mamelodi 10," I have found more than just a historical account. I have found echoes of lives that deserved to be remembered beyond their tragic end. They should be remembered as sons, brothers, and friends whose dreams were stolen before they could fully take shape. Now as I walk through the familiar streets of Mamelodi, I realize that the past is not as distant as it sometimes seems. This project has reminded me how young South Africa's democracy is, how recent these stories of pain are and how tender some wounds still are. The weight of these untold stories lingers, carried in the silences of those who still grieve. Remembering these young boys of Mamelodi is not just about looking back; it is about ensuring that their names are spoken, and that history does not forget. Their story is now part of mine, and hopefully, part of yours, too.

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