

## **SHARPEVILLE AND MEMORY**

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Ikabot Makiti was seventeen when he joined the crowd outside the police station in Sharpeville on 21 March 1960. He had just joined the Pan-Africanists, still a schoolboy. Subsequently, he came of age while serving a prison sentence on Robben Island between 1963 and 1968 for his contribution to clandestine efforts to rebuild the PAC in Sharpeville. Fifty years later he was interviewed by journalists in the week preceding the massacre's anniversary, one of the few remaining loyal Pan-Africanists still living in Sharpeville. Though he had joined the march early in the morning and so initially he was at the forefront of the assembly in Seeiso Street he was not present when the shooting began. He remembers being "told that we would get our answer at 1.00 pm". He was hungry and so he went home to eat, returning just in time to hear the police begin firing. "We were not armed", he insists, "so I didn't know what was going on. When I got closer I saw images that today still bring me pain".

"There was blood everywhere. People were running, but they didn't know where to go because there were three helicopters circling above them. My legs could not move. People were falling, crying. Some tried to run but they were shot in the back and fell. They were helpless".<sup>2</sup>

Makiti mentioned helicopters in another of the interviews he gave. He recalled a red helicopter. "All I heard", he recalled, "was the rat-a-tat-a-tat of machine guns and the wailing of ambulance sirens, and a red helicopter which flew surprisingly low"<sup>3</sup>.

There are no contemporary reports of helicopters flying over Sharpeville that day. The police did not use helicopters until much later, in the 1970's. The only aircraft present were the military Impala trainers that so signally failed to impress the crowd earlier that morning. Makiti's recollections are sufficiently precise to be persuasive, though. He definitely heard and saw helicopters. And indeed helicopters do feature in Sharpeville's violent history. Helicopters accompanied policemen and protestors in the open spaces of Sharpeville but not on that day in 1960. Rather they were in attendance on another day, nearly twenty five years later, when the people of Sharpeville reassembled to take their protest to authority. That day there were helicopters and if Makiti's memories conflate the two occasions that is surely excusable, for in Sharpeville on Monday morning, 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1984 history appeared to be repeating itself.

Over the weekend, teenagers – children even – were on the streets, visiting houses from door to door. They belonged to the Congress of South African Students (COSAS), a body which through its very name was intended to evoke historical memories for an earlier political generation. People should stay away from work on Monday, their young visitors urged householders. There would be a meeting and they would march to the administrative offices in nearby Sebokeng, they said, to demand that the authorities abandon the rent increases they had imposed recently. All the townships around Vereeniging would be joining the strike: Sharpeville, Sebokeng, Bophelong, Boipatong, and Evaton. A meeting in Evaton had made the decision to call for the stay away the previous week, on August 26<sup>th</sup>. Subsequently public assemblies in each of the five townships had acclaimed the decision. The rent increases would be stopped. People should pay only an affordable rent, thirty Rands a month. Councillors should resign. If they failed to then residents should boycott their businesses.

Before dawn on Monday there were pickets at the bus stops and the railway stations in the townships around Vereeniging, just as there had been nearly twenty five years earlier, in 1960. Indeed on Sunday the door to door canvassers needed to address historically rooted apprehensions. During their house to house visits the day before:

“the older people advised the children that it is dangerous to confront people like this because we know what happened in 1960 when we were facing the police and they opened fire. They might open fire again. The children, “No, this is not 1960, this is 1984. You can’t talk about what happened in 1960. What we are doing now is different from that”.<sup>4</sup>

In Sharpeville that Sunday there were alternative sources of authority to supply guidance to young activists. If police evidence is to be believed Tom Manthatha, a leader of the Soweto Civic association, spoke to a group that had gathered in St Cyprian’s Anglican Church. It was now time, he told them, for the councillors to leave their posts. If they refused “they should be attacked with stones and set alight”. “You have the power”, he continued, “but you don’t know how to use it. We must make the councillors resign. We asked them to resign, we asked them not to increase the rents but they did not listen”. In the subsequent trial defence lawyers contested the veracity of this evidence though prosecutors countered such arguments by insisting that the evidence was based on a police report submitted immediately after the meeting before any subsequent events might have prompted the authorities to doctor the record.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the anxieties of older residents, large groups began to gather in the streets in each of the townships. People who attempted to board buses were stoned. Already at this stage detachments of riot police were present in each of the townships around Vereeniging. During the night police fired upon and killed three teenage boys in Bophelong. In nearby Sebokeng there was an early morning confrontation between police and COSAS members when the activists tried to halt a yellow police personnel carrier, a “Nyala” they mistook for a mobile ticket van. The police inside the vehicle opened fire but no one was hurt. In Sharpeville early in the morning a procession began to move through the streets, walking up the main thoroughfare, Seeiso Street, on its way to the municipal buildings where Sharpeville residents normally paid their rents. As one participant remembers, “this was a march about rent, not politics”, and the only symbols people carried were homemade placards bearing the single Zulu word, *asiminali*, we have no money.<sup>6</sup> Police attempted to disperse the procession with rubber bullets and tear gas but after scattering the marchers reassembled into smaller groups. One of these chose a route that took them past the dwelling of Councillor Khuzwayo Jacob Dhlamini. As they reached his house the Councillor appeared in his doorway. The marchers shouted at him. He must come out of his house, they called, he must join their protest. Dhlamini pulled out a gun and started firing his weapon. The police then arrived and the crowd dispersed but reformed after the police left. Dhlamini walked out of his house to confront his adversaries for a second time. A volley of stones brought him down to the ground. Soon Dhlamini’s house was on fire. He meanwhile was forced inside his car and the vehicle too was set alight. He would die later from his burns and other wounds.

As the COSAS canvassers had assured the householders, this time it would be different, for this as not 1960 and two decades later neither repressive nor insurgent violence could be expected to have the same effect in demobilising public protests as it had then. On September 15<sup>th</sup>, a COSAS guard of honour would escort 42 coffins in a massive funeral, the biggest public assembly locally since 1960 to bury the casualties of various confrontations with the police in the five Vaal townships. The death tally that week was in fact higher for there was no public mourning for the murdered councillors. In Sharpeville, Petrus Tom suggests, Councillor Dhlamini’s death engendered not shock but jubilation:

“We went to see what was happening. Dhlamini’s corpse was lying outside in the street next to his car which had been overturned. His house was burning, his car was burning, and he was also burning beside his car. Everybody was ululating and shouting, ‘Oh they’ve made a Kentucky Fried Chicken out of him’.”<sup>7</sup>

In Tom’s memoir the main agency in these events is supplied by children. It was children who set the houses alight and who killed Jacob Dhlamini. When the police fired tear gas and rubber bullets into the crowd “we ran away”. The children also ran, Tom tells us, but in different directions, “they went on to other places”. They burned bottle stores and official buildings, erecting barricades of burning tyres, “to stop the police from getting through to the places that were burning”. At the funeral, Father Patrick Noonan, Sharpeville’s Catholic pastor observed how “the service was ... supercharged with youth practically dominating the whole proceedings”. After the service:

“Once again, as in all similar occasions, the large youth presence leads and controls the funeral procession. Teenage girls and young women with high-pitched voices in new ehythmic chants encourage their menfolk forward not only towards the cemetery but also in the struggle for liberation of every last black brother and sister”.<sup>8</sup>

For the time being, though, older residents were willing to take their marching orders from the youngsters and were more occasionally ready participants in the carnage. A similar sequence of events affected each of the five black townships encircling Vereeniging. According to another eye witness report in Evaton the houses of both the mayor and his deputy were burned down. After the conflagration, the rioters rejoiced. Mayor Sam Rabotapi fled the township. His gown was worn by an elderly women. She now “danced in the streets and called herself the first mayor”.<sup>9</sup>

Until the South African Defence Force deployed 7,000 soldiers and policemen in an invasion and occupation of the Vaal Townships in “Operation Palmiet” on 24<sup>th</sup> October, Sharpeville and its sister settlements would represent the epicentre for an insurrectionary rebellion that through the remainder of the decade would engulf South Africa. The revolt would continue despite initial concessions by authorities on September 6th. On this date 5000 people assembled in front of a police cordon in Sebokeng. Behind the police there arrived a group of officials that included four cabinet members on a tour of riot areas. The assistant police commissioner accompanying this group persuaded local managers to meet a delegation chosen by residents and at a subsequent encounter Vereeniging’s Town Clerk promised that the rent increases would be deferred. By now such measures were beside the point, for in the words of Patrick Noonan, the Irish Franciscan who made his home in Sharpeville during this time, “it was in the streets, the homes and the churches of the Vaal triangle where arguably the final solution to the scourge of apartheid was hammered into place”.<sup>10</sup>

Once again we need to address questions about the local dynamics of rebellion. Why did South Africa’s final decisive “liberation revolution” begin “in earnest”<sup>11</sup> in and around Sharpeville specifically? What considerations can explain the extraordinary authority that teenage activists could command here? And why did collective civic action slip so quickly into such brutally retributive killing? Finally, were events influenced by communal memory of the earlier confrontation between policemen and the residents of the Vaal townships, more than two decades before? Or was the location of what activists were swift to label “The second Sharpeville” simply coincidental, in no way a re-enactment shaped by historical engendered action repertoires?

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Just as had been the case twenty five years before, at the beginning of 1984, the authorities believed the Vaal townships to be orderly and disciplined communities. In 1976 during the Soweto students’ uprising, the townships around Vereeniging experienced only occasional ruptures of routine. Altogether, the Cillie Commission of Inquiry noted 75 incidents in the Vereeniging magisterial district, most of them quite minor including 24 arson attacks on schools, public buildings and

councillor's homes. Of this total only eight occurred in Sharpeville including three school-burnings and a riot when disgruntled spectators were refused their money after a last minute cancellation of a football fixture. In his report, Judge Cillie noted that the unrest around Vereeniging was less severe than in most other affected centres. In Sharpeville "most of the adult inhabitants... were not prepared to take an active part in the riots", in fact they cooperated in guarding local schools against attacks "of their own accord".<sup>12</sup> Parents did indeed keep their children at home, one local resident recalled later, explaining to them, "No, They shot your father, they shot your uncle, don't tell me about the struggle, we saw it in 1960. No".<sup>13</sup>

Amongst white South African officials, black communities the Vaal region enjoyed a reputation for political docility and orderly conduct. In the aftermath of the Soweto rebellion, the Vaal Triangle Community Council was the first of these bodies to be established following the enactment of the Community Council Act in 1977. Community Councils replaced the advisory Urban Bantu Councils and could enjoy executive powers that would be transferred to them from Administrative Boards at the discretion of the Minister. In the case of the Vaal the elected Council administered a R27 million budget and allocated accommodation and trading sites.<sup>14</sup> Local administrators were proud of their achievement in operating the new municipality's accounts on a profit basis, a record attributable to an "economic rentals" policy requiring seven annual rent rises between 1978 and 1984 taking rents from around R12 a month in 1977 to R62 at the beginning of 1984. These increases helped to pay for electrification of the township's houses and for the construction of water-borne sewage facilities, undertaken after 1977 as well as the building of another six schools, bringing the total to 15. The Community Council was in turn replaced by the Lekoa Town Council in elections in January 1984, the first fully fledged black local authority created under the 1982 Act. It was elected on a 14.7 per cent poll, low certainly but in fact indicating considerably more vigorous local participation in the elections than was the case elsewhere, especially in Sharpeville.

In 1977 the LTC's predecessor, the Vaal Triangle Community Council was also initially elected on an unusually high turnout, twenty per cent. Local officials and Councillors were accustomed to political acquiescence and at the end of June they decided to begin the new Council's term with the announcement of another rent rise, R5.50, maintaining that residents could easily afford this new imposition. Local workers, they believed, were comparatively well paid. In fact market research conducted in the following few months indicated that per capital incomes amongst black people living around Vereeniging were well below any national average and moreover the cost of living was rather higher and rising rapidly, by 13 per cent since the previous year.<sup>15</sup> A survey conducted in July 1983 by COSAS activists among 800 residents in the Lekoa townships suggested that "high rents" was the prevalent grievance.<sup>16</sup> About half of the 60,000 black households in Lekoa were in rent arrears by the beginning of 1984.<sup>17</sup> Whatever else its causes the apparent docility of Lekoa's new citizens had nothing to do with economic well-being.<sup>18</sup> But quite aside from the material hardship that the new rents imposed the succession of increases for older residents may well have represented a breach of faith and hence an injustice. Both in Sharpeville and in Sebokeng, residents recalled that twenty years earlier the authorities had promised that if they paid their rents for many years, after a time they would be expected to pay only for services. Then they would become owners of their houses and they would no longer "be owing rent".<sup>19</sup>

Below their surface calm the politics of Lekoa's communities may well have been complicated by turbulent subterranean channels for quite a long time. In 1971 and 1972, an evidently lively cluster of youth organisations constituted themselves in Sharpeville, including the Vaal Youth Club, the Sharpeville Cultural and Health Club, the Sharpeville Youth Club and the Sharpeville Students Association. Though the Students Association appears in the Black Community Programme's *Black Review* it was certainly not among the more rhetorically militant adherents of Black Consciousness. As well as seeking to promote "a spirit of togetherness and brotherhood amongst the students of Sharpeville", the Association's aims and objectives included "contact" with "local

bodies such as the Urban Bantu Council with a view towards establishing relations”.<sup>20</sup> Most Black Consciousness affiliates would have disdained any dealings with any of the “sell-outs” represented in what they called derisively the “Useless Boy’s Club”. It is of course possible that Sharpeville’s youth organisers hoped that through professing these aspirations they might deflect any hostility from the authorities. If this was the case they would soon encounter the limits of official tolerance. In 1973 the police detained five young SASO activists for a month and later one of them, Nkutseou Matsau was convicted under the Terrorism Act for publishing a poem and a newsletter, both considered by the court to be likely “to engender feelings of hostility between black and white”.<sup>21</sup> Joyce Mokhesi thinks the SASO branch had been in existence at least since 1971: she attended an occasion when SASO members took young people to the cemetery to tidy the graves and to listen to a speech from the poet Don Mattera.<sup>22</sup>

This police action may have effectively decapitated local activism in the period immediately preceding the Soweto uprising. It is likely though that the PAC succeeded in re-establishing a presence in the Vaal townships in its aftermath if not before. Ikabot Makiti and a surviving group of the Tsolos’ original recruits tried to reconvene the local branch as a clandestine organisation. In 1960 Ikabot had originally joined the PAC while attending Kilnerton High School where he was a boarder: he was at home visiting his parents on the weekend before the massacre. He knew the Tsolo brothers well, though, and joined one of the local Task Forces canvassing support for the anti-pass protest on Sunday night. He was not among the local PAC supporters who were arrested after the massacre and he returned to school where he continued to attend secret PAC gatherings. In early 1962 pupils at Kilnerton went on strike over food grievances: the school closed down and students were sent home after refusing to return to class: in Ikabot’s words “We were young; we thought we could do anything”. Ikabot obtained a job at African Cables and rejoined a small cluster of Pan-Africanists still active at the factory, people who had constituted a second echelon layer of leadership, mainly classmates of Nyakene Tsolo. They heard about Poqo activities in the Transkei – specifically the Bashee Bridge murders – and in early 1963 resolved to travel to Maseru to obtain instructions from Potlake Leballo. Ikabot and four companions did indeed visit Leballo’s headquarters and they received their marching orders but on their way back they were arrested, at the railway station in Bloemfontein. The police were checking the documents of passengers travelling from Maseru: “they had a list and they knew who to arrest”. Ikabot and his comrades were escorted back to Vereeniging where they were questioned by local Special Branch officers after being identified by Sergeant Wessels from the Sharpeville police station, still the local officer in charge, as he had been before the massacre. As secretary of the clandestine branch Ikabot had kept lists and records and these the police unearthed at his home, though luckily he had not identified individuals by their full names. Six young men, Makiti included, were convicted for continuing the activities of a banned organisation, for which offence they would serve a five year sentence on Robben Island. On the island, Makiti would finally encounter Robert Sobukwe. He and his fellow members of the labour span that worked outside the prison compound were escorted past Sobukwe’s cottage each evening on their journey back to their cells. Once in response to their passing, Sobukwe emerged from his cottage. They could see him, fifty yards away, standing outside his door. He stooped down, reached for a handful of soil and then stood up again, letting the soil trickle through his fingers: “Izwe Lethu”: Our Land.

On their release three of the Sharpeville Pan-Africanists were banished to Witzieshoek, later the Qwa Qwa homeland, on the border of Lesotho. Makiti and the other two were allowed to return home. One of Makiti’s comrades, Samuel Mokudubete, “the small one”, who returned to Sharpeville after serving his sentence, lived with his parents under strict police surveillance. He was stabbed to death at Park Station in Johannesburg in 1970.<sup>23</sup> Makiti himself found work at a factory and began once again to assemble support for the Pan-Africanists. In 1970 he began convening regular meetings every Sunday, using as a venue the old migrant workers’ hostel on the border of the township. Amongst those who attended was a later PAC Secretary-General, Thami ka

Plaatjie, then a schoolboy in Evaton. Makiti remembers that his group kept themselves well separated from any emerging Black Consciousness affiliates. Through the 1970s and 1980s, though, it became increasingly difficult to enlist new recruits, though, he recalls, especially when old rivalries between the ANC and the PAC resurfaced: "People were worried about being called spies".<sup>24</sup>

Resettlements in the 1960s may in any case have helped to disperse many of the remaining Pan-Africanists in Sharpeville for from 1967 a significant proportion of residents of the Site and Service scheme as well as young married couples and sub-tenants were re-housed several miles away in the new township of Sebokeng in its Zones 11 and 13. The Chief Director of the Sebokeng Development Board was John Knoetze, the same John Knoetze who in 1960 had so effectively helped Pan-Africanists in Bophelong contain the crowd on the day of the anti-pass protest. According to Father Noonan, Knoetze was the primary agent in the Vaal townships' pacification in 1960's. In particular, "the cumbersome relocation of communities to Sebokeng tended to have a palliative effect".<sup>25</sup>

In June 1978 the police claimed that they had unearthed a nation-wide conspiracy implicating members of an organisation called Young Christian Workers. In their round-up the police arrested thirty young men and women, several of them residents of Sharpeville, Evaton and Sebokeng. Police may have seen the YCW as an offshoot of the Young African Christian Movement, an interdenominational welfare organisation set up in December 1975 "to bring youth back to the church and keep them away from drink", though the original YCW was Roman Catholic youth movement, active in Soweto in the 1950s.<sup>26</sup> Court evidence suggests that this body supplied an organisational front for Zephania Mothopeng's efforts to begin a Pan-Africanist renaissance in Kagiso outside Krugersdorp. According to Patrick Noonan, one of YCW activists detained at Vereeniging, Cosmos Thokoa, later, after his release and on his return to home in Sebokeng, became "a secret member" of the PAC.<sup>27</sup> In 1978 two Krugersdorp women were convicted for undertaking arson attacks on the homes of state witnesses in Zeph Mothopeng's trial: they were active in a body called Christian Youth Workers.<sup>28</sup> The similarities in nomenclature indicates that each of these bodies may have accommodated Pan-Africanist revivals. However the arrests may well have shifted the balance of ideological affiliation among young activists, for it was a well attended meeting of the Young Christian Workers in Sharpeville in March 1980 that hosted invited COSAS speakers supplying a local launch for "Charterist" ANC-oriented activity.<sup>29</sup>

These developments seemed to have remained quite confined in their influence, though. As one resident observed in 1980 to Craig Charney, an unusually inquisitive visiting journalist from *The Star*, "people are passive here" though any eruption of submerged anger if it came to the surface could be "twice as bad as Soweto". But people kept such feelings well hidden. Local residents told the same visitor that what kept Sharpeville quiet is the memory of 1960, reinforced by a strong police presence. "People are afraid", a priest explained. To underline his point, one of the people Charney interviewed was questioned about the encounter by administration board officials the next day. During his day in Sharpeville the *Star*'s correspondent could find no one "who would admit to being present at the 1960 shootings, though the crowd ran to 1000's."<sup>30</sup> He also encountered grudging approval of some of the local councillors, perhaps a reflection of the local personal popularity of soccer manager George Thabe, leader of the Lekoa People's Party, a former personnel manager at African Cables, and first mayor of Lekoa. After his displacement as Mayor in 1981, Thabe started to oppose rent increases, a factor that may well have helped to sustain his reputation amongst older people.<sup>31</sup> Lingering local endorsement of "system" politics in Sharpeville was evident in the 1983 poll when ward number 27 attracted a 42 per cent turn-out, by far the highest throughout the Lekoa townships.<sup>32</sup>

By 1982, though, a fresh set of local associations appeared to signal a reawakening and re-alignment of political activity in the Vaal townships, in conformity with national trends, bringing activists in the region into the broad church of organisations that would soon affiliate into the United Democratic Front. In certain respects, though, Sharpeville's parochial politics represented resistance to the regional trend. In his memoir, Patrick Noonan recalls that 1982 was an "incubation period" of "new political thinking". In particular, he suggests, the ANC's Radio Freedom broadcasts were finding a receptive local audience. Using the relatively sheltered venues supplied by churches, his own premises in Sharpeville among them, new organisations began to assemble: indeed as he puts it, "the churches became sites of political dissent in the Vaal".<sup>33</sup> Amongst teenagers and younger men and women, it seems, any residual Pan-Africanist and Black Conscious networks of affiliation were eclipsed by the new sources of political inspiration supplied by the Congress of South African Students, established in the Vaal region in October 1980 and by 1983 drawing a following of 400 pupils at six schools. The Vaal Civic Association held its launch in October 1983, holding a public meeting at the Nyolohelo Catholic Church in Evaton, simultaneously announcing the local inception of Vaal region of the UDF constituted by the Civic, COSAS and a Vaal Organisation of Women. The Civic Association would be joining the UDF as a "first level organisation... because we have the same ideologies": the terminology used by the spokesmen of "first level" and "second level" suggests quite close familiarity with the strategic perceptions of top-echelon Front leadership in which struggles around local grievances would build support for more ambitious "national democratic" political assertions.<sup>34</sup> At its formation the Civic identified the principal grievances to which it would direct opposition: "continuous increases in rentals, students turned away for failing at school, and too few pension pay out days".

The Lekoa Council's announcement in June of another rent increase occurred in an increasingly excitable political climate. In January 1984 a decision by local education authorities to prohibit reenrolment at schools of pupils over-age as well as a succession of lock-outs of rent defaulters supplied fresh sources of grievance, as well as, in the case of the over-age pupils a new cohort of disaffected unemployed youths, recently politicised through COSAS's classroom crusade. In Sharpeville, the blame for the rent increases was especially easy to personify for Jacob Dhlamini announced the increases at a mass meeting summoned for the purpose. Dhlamini was already an unpopular personality, mainly because of the way he used his control over local housing allocation: "Dhlamini would get people out and get you a house if he liked you". At the meeting a women tried to remonstrate with Dhlamini, wagging her finger at him. "He became very angry and told her never to do that again, or else".<sup>35</sup>

In Sharpeville, though, the Vaal Civic's "area structures" competed for neighbourhood leadership with an organisationally autonomous Sharpeville Anti-Rent Committee (SARC) initiated by members of the Black Consciousness oriented Azanian People's Organisation. One of its leaders was the Anglican Priest Tebogo Moselane, a friend of Steve Biko when he attended university and also active in a local branch of the South African Students Organisation in the early 1970s. SARC held weekly meetings on Sundays through August at the Anglican Church. Later the Anti-Rent Committee would rename itself the Sharpeville Civic Association. By the end of August the Sharpeville Civic had emerged as the most influential organisation within the township and its leaders decided to join the Vaal Civic's protest by leading a march to Sebokeng so that Sharpeville residents could participate in the more generalised protest that was to be undertaken by the Vaal Civic association. Despite their willingness to work with the wider civic body, the Sharpeville leadership was politically different, connected with or engaged in black consciousness trade unions and political organisations.<sup>36</sup> Several of the Sharpeville trade unionists, Petrus Tom included, were veterans of the shop-floor organisation that the Tsolo brothers had helped to build at African Cables in 1959 that had supplied the Pan-Africanists with their original local organisational nucleus. In 1974 Tom became a shop steward at African Cables for the Engineering and Allied Workers Union, taking all the other members of the Liaison Committee with him into the Union. EAWU adhered to

a black leadership line that by 1980 put it in the black consciousness labour camp, though its origins in the Urban Training Project might have inclined it earlier to eschew political activity. In 1982, though the Metal and Allied Workers won over most of the EAWU branches around Vereeniging, including at African Cables. MAWU was affiliated to the non-racial Federation of South African Trade Unions, at that stage also still holding back from any political alliances. Councillor Dhlamini, incidentally, worked at African Cables as a personnel manager and in May 1984 he was widely blamed in the township when a hundred workers were dismissed, unfairly, people believed. Dhlamini as a member of the Council's housing committee subsequently sanctioned the eviction of some of these workers from their houses for rent arrears.<sup>37</sup>

The relatively strong presence of experienced trade union leaders in Sharpeville both black-conscious predisposed and otherwise may help to account for the relative independence of the Sharpeville civic leadership. For increasingly it was to find itself at odds with the UDF affiliates. From its inception the Sharpeville leadership disagreed among themselves about whether they undertake court action against the rents, a route that might have been suggested by the local history of successful litigation by trade unionists, or oppose them through "peaceful protest", that is through boycotts and demonstrations. In November 1984 the police detained the more militantly predisposed SCA leaders including Tebogo Moselane, leaving the way clear for the advocates of litigation. These in March 1985 were reportedly still collecting funds to pay the legal costs of fighting the rental increases in court. They were also engaged in meetings with the Town Clerk, in defiance of a VCA proscription of any negotiations until the police released the eighty or so activists arrested during Operation Palmiet. The Sharpeville Civic leaders were unabashed. Those who were detained, they said, were being held because of their politics: "we are not political, we are not affiliated to any political organization". For good measure they expressed disapproval of the COSAS "agitators" who were preventing their children from going to school.<sup>38</sup>

Let us try and make sense of these political cross currents in Sharpeville. After 1960 surviving networks of political activity were disrupted by dispersal of part of the township's population to their new homes in Sebokeng. Ten years later, a fresh cohort of politically conscious youngsters constructed a dense cluster of Black Consciousness organisations but these were speedily suppressed by the police. Though the Vaal townships remained relatively calm during the 1976 Soweto rebellion Sharpeville became a key location in the PAC's efforts to revive its presence in South Africa between 1975 and 1978: these were again curtailed by the police. By this stage within the Community a group of trade unionists, mostly men in their thirties and forties probably embodied the most respected and experienced source of community leadership. Some of these had a history of earlier engagement with the Pan-Africanists but by the late 1970s the trade unionists were divided in their organisational and political affiliations. Memories of the 1960 massacre as well as more recent police activity had an especially inhibiting effect on older generations of residents in Sharpeville and consequently when civic leadership emerged among themselves they disagreed over tactics. A dominant faction within the civic association was disinclined to embrace wider political solidarities and preferred litigation to "mass action". These considerations would certainly have made it very difficult for passively predisposed older leaders to exercise any kind of disciplining influence over the aggressive behaviour of COSAS's teenage fraternity. A significant proportion of COSAS's following in the Vaal townships were constituted by the "push outs", people who had been forced to leave school. Inevitably membership of the "comrade community" would have overlapped with a locally particularly entrenched criminal gang sub-culture.<sup>39</sup>

Sharpeville's politics then was organisationally incoherent. There was more obvious unity of purpose between the older generation of civic leaders and politicised youth in other Vaal townships – or at least whatever latent differences that may have existed never found their way into newspapers and as we shall see, Sharpeville remained unusually divided as a community compared to its neighbours, divisions attributable to the absence of decisive leadership. But even in the other



Vaal townships, civic leadership was comparatively new and inexperienced, and by September it was shallowly rooted in the communities it purported to represent. In March 1985 the VCA only had around 100 or so activist members – six months earlier it was no more than a network of committees, one in each of the five townships. The Vaal's vanguard position in South African insurrectionary politics in the mid 1980s was not a consequence of especial organisational preparedness. Rent protests were widespread across the country in earlier months through 1984 and Tom Manthatha's speech suggests that excitable language was unexceptional but only here did such protests culminate in such a violent confrontation.<sup>40</sup> As in 1960, it was a combination of especially aggravating local conditions, politically animated youngsters and the *relative absence* or weakness of older more cautious communal leaders that was to prove to be so combustible on 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1984.

What were these local conditions? There were the issues identified in the protest: a succession of unusually steep rent charges in a setting in which household incomes were below average and in which other living costs were comparatively high. These concerns are important but probably insufficient to explain the scale and ferocity of protest. After all, as Noonan points out, despite their poverty at this time, members of his congregation in Sharpeville willingly paid increases in their parish dues. If the increases had been imposed by an impersonal Administration Board they might have engendered a more resigned reaction. After 1977, though, the rentals were imposed by locally elected councillors rather than white civil servants. These councillors moreover were very evidently beneficiaries of their office. In 1983 for example nine out of the twelve liquor licences awarded by the Orange-Vaal Administration Board were given to community councillors. The rewards for incumbency multiplied after the election of the Lekoa Town Council in January 1984. The new mayor of Lekoa, Esau Mahlatsi, secured another twelve licences for himself and members of his extended family.<sup>41</sup> Corruption seems to have peaked in the months before the Vaal uprising for in early 1984 discontented councillors not aligned with the dominant faction attempted to pass two motions of non confidence in the Lekoa Council based on complaints about corruption.<sup>42</sup> Petty venality was not new feature of South African township administration but it does seem that the new powers accorded by the 1993 legislation allowed councillors to breach the boundaries of local public tolerance of official rent-seeking. Meanwhile rapid expansion of secondary schooling in the previous few years was followed by the exclusion of over-age pupils and their subsequent expulsion into a sharply contracting local labour market, for a nationwide manufacturing recession imposed an especially heavy toll on the heavy industry-based Vereeniging economy. In this situation, unemployed youngsters were very ready to perceive rental increases as personal infringements. As one teenager in nearby Tumahole told a researcher:

“I was washing clothes in the yard when I saw many people marching in the next street. I went see what was going on... I joined the march because I saw the placards against high rents. I thought it was better if my parents spent that money on me. We had very little money to buy clothes and things. That is what encouraged me to join the rent issue”.<sup>43</sup>

As has been the case in 1960 a sense of relative deprivation helped to ratchet up an appetite for confrontation among teenagers politicised by class-room based nationalist organisation. This kind of sociology was not unique to the Vaal townships. What was unusual though is the degree to which “children” were in command of events during the opening days of the rebellion, a reflection of a particular local propensity amongst elders to abdicate political leadership, itself a consequence of an especially politically repressive local history. To an exceptional extent, though, and for very understandable reasons, older people in Sharpeville were “afraid”.

These considerations may help to explain why civic indignation escalated into collective passion when Councillor Dhlamini pulled out his gun.. In the aftermath of the uprising the authorities charged six Sharpeville residents who participated in the protest with “common purpose” complicity in the killing of Dhlamini. The charge was based on a legal doctrine which finds its

argumentative parallel in theories of collective violence that suggest that crowds behave unreflectively, that when people join crowds they lose their individuality and become intellectually degraded while at the same time through the emotional “contagion” engendered by physical proximity they are empowered to undertake actions they would normally shrink from.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, “aroused groups need certainty, not doubt” so the decisions taken by a groups are often more extreme than many might have taken as individuals<sup>45</sup>. Activist accounts of Dhlamini’s killing seem to share these assumptions about the way in which when people are gathered in a crowd “the effect of numbers is to impart to all a sense of their sudden, extraordinary and uncontrollable power.... (an) awareness that leads them to commit acts that would individually condemn”.<sup>46</sup> As the correspondent for *SASPU National* reported: “What happened then was a result of people’s anger, they were closed out, they couldn’t get any solution to their problem, let alone communication”.<sup>47</sup> Anger of this kind could still be discerning, however. As Joyce Mokhesi, brother of one of the “Sharpeville Six, observes: “If the people of the Vaal were merely a mindless mob, not only would the violence have been random, and scores of people murdered amid rumours of individuals informing for the system, but residents would never have organised themselves to clean up the debris and rubbish created during the uprising”.<sup>48</sup>

There is testimony, though, to suggest that not every members of the assembly gathered in front of Dhlamini was uniformly predisposed to violence and that not everybody underwent the kind of emotional transformation that arguably encourages people in a collectivity to abandon normal moral restraints. One of the “Sharpeville Six” defendants, Duma Khumalo, later told his story. He said he “followed” rather than joined the procession to Councillor Dhlamini’s house. This statement is different from his trial testimony in which he maintained he was coerced into participating in the demonstration. He believed that the intention was to frogmarch the councillor to the administrative offices. On approaching the Councillor’s house, Duma Khumalo saw Dhlamini firing his gun. People ran for cover and he tried to help someone who had been wounded in the foot by a rubber bullet. Later in his trial one witness testified that he had seen Duma pouring petrol through a window of the Councillor’s house. Another claimed that he had witnessed Duma pushing Dhlamini’s car out of the yard before the fires started. But Duma throughout would insist on his innocence. He told the court that he tried to save Dhlamini’s car when the house was already burning, an action that probably helped to incriminate him.<sup>49</sup> Dlamini was a kinsman of Duma and “he had no quarrel with him” he told the court in his evidence.<sup>50</sup> Dhlamini was killed through being repeatedly “hacked and stabbed”.<sup>51</sup> None of the Sharpeville six accused of complicity in his death were seen carrying weapons before the violence and there was no creditable evidence implicating them directly in Dhlamini’s murder. Obviously, though, Dlamini’s assailants were armed at least with knives. Jeremy Seekings has suggested that in South African townships during 1984 increasing levels of conflict “provided opportunities for, and attracted, chronically violent, people” and that increasingly “youth politics began to engage “undisciplined” non-student groups including street criminals who often armed themselves with knives. For especially marginalised young men violence was compensatory, a means through which they could assert power and acquire status.<sup>52</sup> Subsequent events would indeed demonstrate that in Sharpeville networks of youth activism embraced criminal syndicates and it is likely that the “push-out” on to the streets of over-age school students helped to accelerate this process.

In which ways did Sharpeville’s history shape events that day? Is there any sense in which the confrontation of between crowds and authority can be represented as a re-enactment? Did collective memories of the massacre and accompanying events shape these developments more than two decades later? It is possible. Position-holders in activist echelons in the Vaal in 1984 and afterwards may have been inspired or influenced in their commitments by their own family history. At least a few had parents who had belonged to the PAC’s local leadership or following in 1960. For example, Thami Zondo worked for the Detainees Parents’ Support Committee when he was himself detained in Sharpeville in 1985. In prison he was visited by Captain Steyn, “the one”,

Zondo recalls, "who had kept his father Michael under surveillance ever since the 1960 massacre". Then his father, Michael Zondo had belonged to the Pan-Africanists.<sup>53</sup> One of the Vaal Civic leaders, Lazarus More, was a kinsman of Thomas More, the Sharpeville PAC's secretary in 1960. The exiled Pan-Africanists worked hard to construct an association between their organisation and participants in the 1984 rebellion, for a while recruiting Joyce Mokhesi, sister of Francis Mokhesi one of the Sharpeville Six to issue a condemnation in their name of International Defence and Aid for failing to support legal representation. In fact IDAF did pay for the lawyers as well as helping the families of the accused though Joyce Mokhesi may not have known this.<sup>54</sup>

It is more likely, though, that if the PAC enjoyed any local influence it was through more subliminal kinds of recollection. In the ways in which activists tried to build their movement and elicit public support for it in 1984 there are so many similarities between their tactical repertoire and the methods used by their fathers nearly twenty five years earlier. As in 1959 and 1960, organisers in Sharpeville initially adopted a discreet style of operation: "Our strength, our base, is built more by house meetings than mass meetings".<sup>55</sup> In 1984 the Sharpeville Civic held its first public meeting in the Anglican Church, the same venue used for the launch of the PAC's branch in Sharpeville. On the morning of September 3<sup>rd</sup>, a first concern of the activists was to stop the buses just as it had been among Sharpeville Pan-Africanists on an earlier Monday morning. Of course these tactical echoes could be coincidental, the common sense dictated by activists' local knowledge of the particular configurations of their lived in setting, but they may also have been the effect of local folk memories or less consciously transmitted ritualised patterns of behaviour.<sup>56</sup> What we do know is that the outbreak of rebellion itself created a setting in which previously hidden memories could be given public expression. Outside Patrick Noonan's sacristy in Sharpeville in the days that followed the rioting one of his parishioners "had graciously installed" a patio: this was now Noonan noted in his diary, "the first ever illegal memorial to the Sharpeville dead of 1960 and the Vaal dead of 1984".<sup>57</sup> Four years earlier, as we have seen, no one in Sharpeville was willing to speak to a visiting journalist about the massacre, he could encounter no one who had witnessed the event. Now there was a new climate in which people could once again communicate with the dead. On Christmas Day 1984, thousands of residents from Sharpeville and the other Vaal townships heeded an appeal from COSAS and the Youth Steering Committee to visit the ceremony and help clean the graves of victims of the massacre.<sup>58</sup> Thereafter, the observation of March 21<sup>st</sup> as an anniversary date became a communal reflex. On 20<sup>th</sup> March 1988, for instance, police disrupted an "illegal gathering" at Sebokeng Methodist Church, held to remember the Sharpeville massacre and to launch the Vaal Student Congress.<sup>59</sup>

The subsequent history of the townships around Vereeniging was to be punctuated by explosive cycles of confrontation between heavily armed policemen and protestors. Funerals often supplied flashpoints for further confrontation as on 24<sup>th</sup> October 1984 when mourners returning home from Sharpeville's cemetery after burying Lenny Isolene, a sixteen year old shot dead by police the previous week, were themselves ambushed by a detachment of *sjambok*-bearing policemen. The police pursued the mourners back to their homes beating them. Detentions and the authorities intermittent deployment of soldiers to support the police in house to house searches helped to prevent major instances of coordinated protest for the remainder of the decade: the last ambitious civic undertaking was an "Operation Clean-Up" in which residents collected refuse and loaded it onto the specially hired lorries, a measure to compensate for the authorities refusal to maintain the normal schedule of rubbish collections, a penalty imposed for the rent boycott. The boycott itself continued: no rents would be paid in Sharpeville and its sister townships for another decade. As well as the six bystanders under prosecution for common purpose, the authorities charged another seven local residents with treason, alongside members of the national UDF leadership ensuring the removal and isolation of the strongest civic leadership from local developments. In 1987, the authorities felt sufficiently confident about the degree of local order they had re-established to arrange a special visit to Sharpeville by the State President, P W Botha. Local residents remained

indoors, though, and children from farm-schools in outlying vicinities were bussed in to constitute a welcoming reception. This was despite efforts by Military Intelligence to establish pro-government loyalist Eagle Youth Clubs through the Vaal townships: in Sharpeville apparently the various inducements offered to local organisers only succeeded in a modest enlistment of around twenty people.<sup>60</sup> More adult groupings proved to be equally ephemeral: for a while a body calling itself “Concerned Residents of Sharpeville” circulated pamphlets attacking priests and trade unionists for deceiving the people.<sup>61</sup> Independent survey research in fact indicated impressive levels of support for civic activism and trade unionism. A random sample of 1155 adults in Lekoa’s townships, 314 of them Sharpeville residents indicated that two thirds of the respondents belonged to a trade union or a community organisation, that 27 per cent had attended a meeting of the Vaal Civic Association and that more than half of them supported it. One quarter of the sample confirmed that they lived in a neighbourhood in which the Civic had organised Street Committees.<sup>62</sup> Meanwhile the PAC’s insurgents were returning to their historic bases. Indeed in 1986 PAC publications claimed that in 1986 APLA units killed ten policemen in Sharpeville alone, in five operations<sup>63</sup>.

Richard Wilson, a British social anthropologist who conducted fieldwork in Sharpeville supplies a bleak portrait of the township’s development during the years that followed Nelson Mandela’s release in 1990 and the unbanning of the ANC and the PAC. Both movements re-established organised followings around Vereeniging but the Pan-Africanists were soon to be eclipsed by their old rivals. In particular, ANC sponsored “Special Defence Units” (SDU’s) seized command of Sharpeville’s streets, with local units sometimes naming themselves after liberation heroes – Slovo, Samora, and Castro – but also taking their titles from local gangs: the Germans, the Italians and the Untouchables, whose networks and membership they absorbed into their own ranks. Originally intended to function as an anti-crime militia the SDU’s were swiftly drawn into armed political hostilities, first with the local Pan-Africanists and then more significantly with hostel based branches of the Inkatha Freedom Party, which at that stage, was setting up its own armed units among Zulu-speaking migrant workers in the Vaal with the help of the police and the army. IFP members at the KwaMadala hostel killed forty residents in a single massacre in neighbouring Boipatong in 17<sup>th</sup> June 1992, probably assisted by local police.

SDU’s would also find themselves at odds with *Umkhonto we Sizwe* cadres, two hundred of whom returned to their homes around Vereeniging in late 1990. Understandably they were disinclined to defer to the political authority of delinquent teenagers. Wilson describes a conflict that accelerated during 1993 into an “all-out war” between the homecoming soldiers and the feral “Young Lions” in the SDU’s, the latter blamed for 36 murders, 84 robberies and 21 rapes in Sharpeville alone, between May and October 1992. In the course of 1993 MK members eventually forcibly disarmed the errant SDU group, by this stage organised into a sixty strong gang, the Germans.

Richard Wilson undertook his fieldwork in Sharpeville in 1996 in an environment still polluted by the lingering hatreds generated by these hostilities. Despite the Germans’s enforced demobilisation, “Sharpeville was still a ‘no-go area’ where no one organization, and certainly not the ANC, had complete control”.<sup>64</sup> In this vein, Wilson narrates the harsh story of the murder of Dennis Moerane, a former Sharpeville street criminal who to avoid family sanctions took refuge in the KwaMadala hostel helping IFP groups to carry out attacks on his former associates in the SDU’s. Later he gave evidence against the IFP at the Goldstone Commission and joined the ANC while living at the YMCA in Johannesburg. In 1996 he started visiting his family with the permission of the Germans who controlled the section of Sharpeville where he lived. The protection they offered was insufficient, though. On Christmas Day he was found tied to a lamppost in front of Sharpeville’s public library, his body stabbed and riddled with bullets. Two years later Dennis Moerane’s killer was convicted, a soldier in the new Defence Force and an ex Umkhonto combatant. In Sharpeville, national liberation had brought little comfort, and as Wilson was reminded by one his informants, here “there are no politics any more: all that is left is political grudges”.<sup>65</sup>

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Today the 1960 Sharpeville massacre is commemorated as a public holiday. In South Africa March 21<sup>st</sup> is Human Rights Day. This year, the fiftieth anniversary of the massacre, older residents attended church services. Additional events were organised by the Sedibeng Municipality: a night vigil in Sharpeville on the 19<sup>th</sup> and on the 20<sup>th</sup> a gala dinner, “to launch the Sedibeng Reconstruction and Development Agency and strengthen the relationship between business and the municipality”. The occasion was also to be marked with an important visitation in which the State President would receive the freedom of the city. Moreover the first lady, MaKhumalo-Zuma would be appointed as the new Agency’s patron, “as she is a symbol of strength, hope and commitment”, Mayor Mahole Mofokeng explained.<sup>66</sup> As things turned out, the president, Jacob Zuma, had a more pressing commitment, for he needed to fly off to Windhoek in Namibia that day. In his place Deputy President, Kgalema Motlanthe spoke to a modest crowd of several hundred gathered at the cricket ground, next to the long promised and still incomplete and now derelict George Thabe football stadium. Before travelling to the stadium, Motlanthe met survivors and laid flowers at the Garden of Remembrance in the Sharpeville Human Rights Precinct. Motlanthe’s address was more of a civic homily than a memorial eulogy, though. In the weeks preceding the protest the township had once again been beset by riots, this time orchestrated by a group calling itself the Concerned Residents of Sharpeville, a rather unlikely resurrection of the title of what had been a state sponsored vigilante association. The Residents were protesting about backlogs in the provision of electricity and running water to shack dwellers. Some of the Concerned Residents erected barricades of burning tyres and set the township library alight. Motlanthe used part of his address to express his disapproval of this destructive eruption. “The people of Langa and Sharpeville in 1960 did not voice protest by burning libraries and looting public facilities”, he reminded his listeners. “On the contrary, they left their passes at home and marched peacefully to the police stations to hand themselves over for arrest”. In today’s democratic era people should use democratic institutions to hold their government accountable, Motlanthe urged. All South Africans should ensure that the lives lost that day were “not in vain”; they should “pledge to show the world our abhorrence to the heinous acts of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance”, the Deputy-President added.

When it was announced, Pan Africanist leaders perceived the naming of the anniversary as a political slight, the absence of an explicit reference to the massacre a maliciously tendentious omission, calculated to deny their own party’s historical agency. Hence, they said, “for many of us, the day will remain Sharpeville Day, the day on which we commemorate the death of 69 people at the hands of the South African police”. Before this year’s celebrations, Letlapa Mphahlele, now the PAC president, noted that he had been omitted from the Sedibeng Municipality’s invitation list. “There is a calculated move by the ruling party to de-link the day from the PAC”, he said. “The silence is about erasing memories of Sobukwe. It is unfortunate that they treat the day – the event – as something that happened spontaneously, like an earthquake”, Mphahlele continued.<sup>67</sup>

The PAC’s understanding of the motivations that influenced the naming of the day is probably unfair though it is quite likely that the choice of words reflected official concerns to emphasise unifying themes in a conciliatory revisionism that predominated in official historical narratives in the mid 1990s. Indeed, the day itself was initially left off the list of anniversaries that would be accorded the status of public holidays. In effect, whatever its intentions, the anniversary’s anodyne change of name “detached Sharpeville from the specificity of the anti-apartheid struggle and framed it as part of the quest for human rights”.<sup>68</sup> For certain commentators this was an encouraging development. For instance, Robert Sobukwe’s friend and biographer, Benjamin Pogrand elected to

interpret the decision positively: “Sharpeville’s place in our history was firmly acknowledged, ... when it was chosen as the site for signing the new constitution into law”, he wrote in 1997. However the commemoration of the anniversary as an occasion to celebrate the advent of a new human rights dispensation may have helped to encourage its cavalier treatment as a date for festive events, concerts and “cultural performances” rather than commemorations and ceremonies. For many local people, Sharpeville Day is now “just another boring holiday”. According to Kgosi Manyathela, a member of the local PAC: “The ANC hosts big parties this day at the George Thabe Stadium and there is never a mention of Robert Sobukwe”. The day has become a political celebration in which “there is a continuous failure to reflect the truth”.<sup>69</sup> “Are we missing the point somewhere? Do we remember what we fought for?”, this year’s newspaper reportage of the anniversary quoted Tsoana Mhlapo as saying. Mhlapo is the spokeswoman for Sharpeville First, a body constituted by “descendants of those who witnessed the Sharpeville massacre”. Her organisation is calling for material improvements, better houses and jobs “for the very people who fought for liberation”. But symbolic reparations are needed as well, Mhlapo believes, “an apology from the state for what happened here”.<sup>70</sup> For older residents as well, the public anniversary has been robbed of meaning. As Vincent Leutsoa told his interviewer in 2000: “We should commemorate and hold silent prayers instead of music concerts and parties. The way the 21<sup>st</sup> is corrupted pains me. Nobody has ever asked the victims what they want, how they think the shootings should be remembered. It. Pains. Me.”

Through the 1990s, PAC leaders maintained that “Sharpeville’s heroes” were not “properly acknowledged”. Since then the authorities have compensated for any earlier neglect: the people whom the police killed in the massacre are now indeed memorialised and their names appear on a monument which we will visit late in this chapter. But it remains true that they are remembered chiefly as victims, passive casualties rather than as active participants in a politically decisive drama, not as “heroes”, to borrow the Pan Africanists’ preferred terminology, and that their projection in this fashion reflects ways of interpreting historical events that risks diminishing them. This kind of representation is partly a reflection of the projection of the event at the time it happened. Hakan Thorn’s analysis of the main ways in which foreign newspapers reported the massacre suggests that even liberal newspapers depicted Africans in a manner that “reproduced two dominant and contradictory stereotypes of ‘African’s, deeply anchored in European colonial discourse and well established in the media at that time”.<sup>71</sup> Accordingly, newspapers often echoed uncritically the language of police statements that characterised a crowd outside the police station as animated by irrational collective passions – both the British *Guardian* and the *Svenska Dagbladet* reported that the police station was “under siege” and the *Guardian* reproduced Colonel Pienaar’s characterisation of the assembly around the station as constituted by “hordes of natives.” Shortly after the shootings, the South African High Commissioner in London echoed the police’s version of events in his press statement:

“According to factual information now available, the disturbances at Sharpeville on Monday resulted from a planned demonstration by 20,000 natives in which the demonstrators attacked the police with weapons including firearms. The demonstrators shot first and the Police were forced to fire in self defence and avoid even more tragic results”.<sup>72</sup>

A similar exposition was delivered by the High Commissioner’s colleague at the United Nations. “Extremists” managed to gather together crowds at Sharpeville and Langa. At Sharpeville when the police “attempted to arrest some of the violators” the crowd became “belligerent” and assaulted the police “with a variety of weapons: pangas, axes, iron-bars, knives, sticks and firearms”.<sup>73</sup>

The alternate representation of the confrontation tends to project Africans as passive victims, denying them agency as historical subjects. In the case of Sharpeville, Thorn suggests, this representation is reflected in the photographic images used on newspaper front pages of dead people

lying on the ground. Over time it was this landscape of the dead and dying that would become dominant in at least external depictions of the event. Inside South Africa, newspapers first carried photographs of the aftermath of the massacre, bodies photographed from a respectful distance rather than the remarkable series taken by *Drum*'s Ian Berry that supplied a sequential and personified narrative of the events that preceded the massacre as well as close-up photographs of the killing and the dying. Berry's pictures were published inside South Africa sparingly in the mainstream newspapers, after the end of the State of the Emergency. The second more impersonal group of photographs was taken by Peter Magubane and the pictures elicited an unfavourable reaction from his editor at *Drum*, Tom Hopkinson. He admonished Magubane:

"You have pictures but you don't have pictures that will sell the paper. I would have loved to see a picture going through one's bone. I would have loved to see a picture cracking someone's skull. I would have loved to see a picture of spectacles lying there, and in the background you have some of the dead people".<sup>74</sup>

Hopkinson's reservations notwithstanding, these were the pictures that appeared most frequently. One week later, Magubane returned to Sharpeville for the funeral. His pictures of this event appeared in *Life* magazine and they succeeded in capturing the complexity of emotions at this event but they were never republished.

The same dichotomy between representing local residents at the Sharpeville massacre as either the subjects of irrational passions or as innocent and almost accidental victims of the state's brutality was also evident in the conflicting interpretations that are evident in comparing official explanations of the massacre to the agitation that condemned it.

The official analysis was supplied by the Wessels Commission. Judge Wessels' findings were not wholly predisposed in favour of the police testimony that he listened to and he expressed mild criticism of Lieutenant Colonel Pienaar's deployment of the men he commanded. He noted that while "the effect of Police evidence was that open hostility was displayed" by the crowd outside the police station and "that violence was threatened and that a breaking point had been reached at 1.40 pm that obliged the police to fire", he acknowledged that he heard opposing evidence that was "irreconcilable". And to be sure, during the hearing lawyers acting for the bereaved cross examined Pienaar incisively. Could he not have tried harder to disperse the crowd with an order, Counsel asked. He would have liked to, Pienaar replied, but there was no time. "In the whole of that half an hour, you could not have spared a minute and a half in order to make this humane effort". He could not, Pienaar affirmed:

Counsel: "I am suggesting, Colonel, that you could have climbed onto a Saracen in your striking uniform and held up your hand for silence – and perhaps they would have been silence. And then you could have said, 'Now, go home or you are going to be shot'. You could have done that, couldn't you?"

Pienaar: "The only explanation I can offer is that time did not permit that."

Counsel: "And your only excuse is that you were too busy doing the other things that you have told us about?"

Pienaar: "Yes."

Counsel: "Colonel Pienaar, you could have detailed some other officer to make that effort, couldn't you?"

Pienaar: "I could have, I did not think of that."<sup>75</sup>

Despite the police's concessions during cross examination, in his conclusion Judge Wessels refused to find anyone culpable nor could he decide whether the shooting was justified or not. On the whole, though, Wessels tended to agree with the police that they had been confronting a hostile assembly. "There could not be the slightest doubt", he maintained, that the PAC's protest was preceded by a night of "violence and threats of violence" directed at the townships' inhabitants and that such acts of intimidation continued into the morning. His report recapitulated the police evidence in detail while referring only occasionally and perfunctorily to evidence from residents. Much of the residents' evidence in any case corroborated the police's version, hardly surprising given the fearful local climate in which witnesses had to live, particularly in the cases of those who

were under detention when they appeared before the Commission, often as witnesses coached and prepared by the police's lawyers. Most of the residents who appeared before the Commission therefore professed that they had no knowledge of the Pan-Africanists' activities or intentions, and that they attended the gathering either because they were curious or because they had had been intimidated. Police submissions included the assertion that the crowd was "armed, noisy and excited", that "a blood bath was inevitable" and that the atmosphere was extremely "inflammable". As Lieutenant Colonel Pienaar insisted at the Inquiry, "The native mentality does not allow them to gather for a peaceful demonstration. For them to gather means violence".<sup>76</sup> So, the crowd was constituted as "a mob", a term that Wessels himself appeared to endorse by using it in his own commentary, and the members of this "throng" were "prancing about", "massed together", in "a frenzied state". As far as the Commissioner was concerned the opposed evidence that the crowd showed "no real hostility... could not be accepted". This was despite testimony from Colonel Spengler that he did not think the crowd was likely to attack the police station. Though the crowd "could not be regarded as an armed one" the situation was indeed "inflammable" because of the "size and the mood of the gathering". The police's shooting was at least partly prompted by the shots they heard from the crowd "and a sudden flooding of the Bantu" across the boundary of the station compound and it might have prevented even greater bloodshed.

If not quite measuring up to a justification of the police action, Judge Wessel's assessment on the whole treated the police indulgently in his review of their evidence, disregarding photographs and reports that contradicted their testimony. For example the police denied carrying *sjamboks* though photographs taken after the massacre included pictures of policemen carrying these weapons. The police denied that any shots were fired by the constables from their vantage points on the armoured cars. If accepted, this denial would strengthen the argument that the shooting was by ground based personnel who were taking their cues about the crowd's mood from the people immediately in front of them. Ian Berry's photographs proved this denial to be untrue. Judge Wessels disregarded rumours about soft nosed bullets and did not attempt to explore why the police reloaded their weapons and continued to fire them after members of the crowd had turned and fled.<sup>77</sup> In his report Wessels preferred the upper estimates of the crowd size though the photographic record makes them seem rather questionable. Philip Frankel conducted his archival research in 1999 at a time of unprecedented absence of any restrictions, before records had been moved from the Department of Justice into the State Archive. He found "piles of unanalysed forensic evidence (bullets extracted from the dead and wounded) – neatly packaged in dusty brown paper envelopes and closed with red sealing wax – which were either unknown or unavailable to the Commission".<sup>78</sup> Some of the strongest evidence about the mood of the crowd was from Superintendent Labuschagne who had walked through the assembly without encountering any significant hostility: this evidence Wessels disregarded. More to his credit he also paid no attention to the piles of sticks and stones that the police constructed as evidence to incriminate the gathering after the shooting. Police brought a somewhat unimpressive selection of these to the Inquiry: twelve sticks, one knobkerrie, two hatchets, ten pieces of iron, two umbrellas and a bicycle pump.

Wessel's final judgement was hedged about with qualifications and prevarications. It was the police version, though, that would prevail in the kinds of popular understandings of the event that became common currency among white South Africans. For example, a compendious *History of Communism in South African* appeared in 1988, published by a professedly "conservative Christian" agency and drawing heavily upon police informants. In its treatment of events at Sharpeville, mass hysteria among the residents was initially fostered by "professional agitators". Their efforts were swiftly rewarded:

"Vast mobs of blacks assembled at Sharpeville – an estimated 10,000 shouting, screaming wild eyed Africans marched on the local police station. They were armed with sticks, clubs, bottles, knives, iron pipes, assegais, pangas, needle swords and other weapons. There was at that time, a standing order that police were permitted to open fire when the safety of police stations were threatened. The handful of officers in charge panicked and



opened fire. Pandemonium broke loose! When the shooting stopped, about 69 Africans lay dead and approximately 178 were wounded”.<sup>79</sup>

Much the same version of events appears in the senior Department of Justice official JPJ Coetzer’s memoir. The police station was surrounded 10,000 screaming black people (“skreevende swart mense”). The police were an isolated detachment, incapable of summoning reinforcements. Because of the violent climate of the times it was reasonable for them to assume they were under attack, though their continuation of fire after people began to flee was inexcusable, Coetzer concedes. However their fears were later vindicated, he suggests, when the police collected and built a stack of the weapons they found among the dead: “stoke, kieres, messe, ysterpype, assegaie, pangas, swarrde, gebreeke botels ander voorwerpe”. The shooting was in conformity with standing orders that police should fire if they had good reasons to believe they were about to be attacked.<sup>80</sup>

The converse of this kind of understanding of what happened at Sharpeville is discernable in Bishop Ambrose Reeves’ book. As the Anglican Bishop of Johannesburg, Reeves made the first call for an investigation and he raised the money needed to employ the lawyers who would cross examine the police. Without his courageous enterprise there would be no archival record for historians to consult. His own reading of the evidence is understandably selective, though, concerned as he was to refute a mendacious official version of events. Bishop Reeves was sympathetically predisposed to the ANC leadership and his book makes only the most cursory references to the PAC and its plans. He suggests that the organisation was able to operate in Sharpeville only as a consequence of recent restrictions imposed by the authorities upon the ANC’s leadership; this meant that the committed advocates on non-violence were restricted while a less experienced and less responsible group was allowed to operate “unchecked”. In Sharpeville a few days before the shootings local Pan-Africanists “took over whatever political organisation existed there”, established presumably by an earlier generation of ANC activism. The Pan-Africanists did not advocate violence, though, but their efforts through the night of the 20<sup>th</sup> to mobilise support for their protest by peaceful meetings were roughly broken up by the police. There was no really concerted plan of action and after daybreak because the Pan-Africanists succeeded in stopping the buses “groups of Africans drifted through the morning to various points” for “few people were sure of whether they were supposed to gather and where”. Eventually a crowd constituted itself in front of the police station in anticipation of an important announcement. As they waited “an idle holiday atmosphere prevailed”. The gathering was composed mainly of women and children and its members “were engaged in various peaceful occupations”. Nobody was waiting very purposively for “these were not dangerous agitators but for the most part ordinary citizens who had come to see what was going on”. The police’s lethal action was attributable not to any aggressive behaviour but was a consequence of the beliefs and prejudices that informed their commanders, their equipment and their deployment.<sup>81</sup>

Reeves’ analysis is a lot closer to the truth than the rationalisations of police behaviour offered by official sources including the Commission but it represents a simplification of what occurred all the same. In his book the Sharpeville massacre was the consequence of authoritarian reflexes; the inevitable outcome of any collective challenge that might have happened anywhere in South Africa to a political order animated by racial prejudice. And indeed he prefaces his discussion of the developments at Sharpeville with a narrative of comparable confrontations between the police and African communities, in Zeerust, in Sekhukuneland and in Windhoek in what was then South West Africa. As is argued earlier in this book, it was a particular combination of local circumstances in Sharpeville that helped to explain the Pan-Africanists’ success in constituting a following and their organisational preparations in the townships were extensive and systematic and informed by intelligent calculation. By no means were the local leaders allowed to operate “unchecked”. Reeves was quite correct to argue that crowd was not aggressive – the photographic evidence he used is especially compelling – but his narrative suggests that the assembly’s constitution and membership was largely apolitical, prompted chiefly by sociability and curiosity. This seems at

odds with eye witness accounts – supplied by journalists for example – and it is a characterisation that makes the gathering’s resolution and commitment very difficult to understand and it does its constituents less than justice. Moreover while it is certainly true that police behaviour was shaped by beliefs and prejudices this is not the whole story. It was also influenced by a succession of hostile interactions between constables and activists through the night before the protest – as Wessels had argued certainly, but which are also recalled by residents themselves. There were also specifically local political dynamics which influenced the perceptions of police commanders at Sharpeville. Elsewhere, even in close-by Bophelong as well as in far off Cape Town, the police managed comparable challenges to their authority more effectively, negotiating with local PAC officials and succeeding in persuading them to disperse their followers.

For the next four decades Reeves’s book remained the most authoritative analysis of the Sharpeville massacre and its arguments provided the template for the perceptions of the event that prevailed within the Anti-Apartheid Movement. Sharpeville – adopted by the United Nations as the “International day for the Elimination of Racism” – became the most significant symbolic anniversary in the movement’s annual calendar, though it was a commemoration in which Pan-Africanists appeared on public platforms very infrequently. In the historical narrative that prevailed on these occasions police fired into an “amiable” crowd constituted largely by “curious residents” rather than politically assertive citizens.<sup>82</sup> A standardised narrative became the received history among members of the exile ANC community and their sympathisers. In as much as the Pan-Africanists played any significant role as an agency precipitating events, their success in orchestrating protest was mainly a consequence of the efforts invested by the ANC in preparing for their own protest against the pass laws. The PAC opportunistically capitalised on these efforts by deciding to “jump the gun” and announce their own plans with an earlier starting date, an “ill-conceived and hurriedly organised protest.”<sup>83</sup> The repression of the protest was an expression of “deliberate violence” by a police force deployed by a state itself crossing “the frontier of terror” into fascism.<sup>84</sup>

Meanwhile, the exiled Pan-Africanist leadership developed its own characteristic way of telling the story of Sharpeville, “a living monument in the annals of the struggle of the African people” in which martyred citizens become heroic embodiments of the “growing spirit of resistance within the country”. The massacre was preceded by extensive preparations. The PAC’s organisers, “headed by the President himself proceeded “from door to door, hut to hut, township to township, village to village” and “spoke to the masses in the busses, in the trains” and at in a range of public places, “spreading the gospel of liberation and exciting the masses”. All this was done in secret. Even so, despite this precaution, at Sharpeville the police appeared as “the forces of darkness their might unleashed”:

Machine guns rattled, crackled and whistled. Saracens roared with rancorous gusto. Tanks boomed and pummelled with ghastly staccato. Felons felled the scurrying scattered crowds; Darkness: deep darkness upon the children of Azania! There they lay motionless... littered like debris on the soil they loved.<sup>85</sup>

This is not the kind of language that could conceivably been used by anyone who had lived through these events or indeed by anyone who had learned about them from first hand testimony. After the Commission of Inquiry, though, it would be a long time before any of Sharpeville’s inhabitants would be able to offer their own testimony on how they thought about the experiences of that day. For at least two decades after the killing in Sharpeville there would be no public conversations about the massacre or about the events leading up to it. Indeed “we were forced to forget about the shootings, because if you spoke about them you were arrested”.<sup>86</sup> In Joyce Mokhesi’s account of growing up in Sharpeville during the 1960s, parents remained silent: “Their silent grief smothered our knowledge” for “They wished us free of the anger they would not feel.... They hoped that the path of forgetting would give us, their children, a peace they could not feel”. For three years after

the massacre, a Catholic priest, Father Rudolph O'Flynn, held a memorial service on March 21<sup>st</sup> but he was then deported and after that there were to be no more special church services.

A vengeful local constabulary treated wounded survivors who were recovering in hospitals as criminal suspects, imprisoning them and investigating possible charges that could be directed against them. Later on, it is true, the state offered compensatory payments to people who had been disabled but the amounts were derisory, one-off payments of less than one hundred Rands. The Vereeniging Municipality paid for the funerals and for the costs of erecting headstones, but these offered only cryptic reminders of what happened. "The inscriptions make no mention of the struggle or the sacrifice (and) the graves are like any others... It is (was) as if none of the dead had been massacred, as if there had been no protest; and in this emptiness there was nothing, not even honour, for a family to cherish".<sup>87</sup> Police successes in inhibiting resident testimony at the Commission of Inquiry and in bullying people into giving evidence on behalf of the authorities helped to consolidate a culture of mutual distrust which continued to inhibit social and political life in the township twenty years later, as journalists discovered when they tried during the 1980s to persuade people to speak to them about the massacre.

Even without the police's subsequent efforts it is quite likely that the sheer scale of the violence inflicted on the 21<sup>st</sup> March would have had morally and emotionally damaging effects for a very long time. As Ambrose Reeves pointed out, 216 families were affected by the deaths or serious wounding of breadwinners and parents – at least five hundred children would have experienced a disintegration of their family life. But the consequences would have been much wider. Social psychologists believe that people who witness or experience and survive extreme violations of normal civic conduct as in mass killings undertaken by officials have to cope with stigma and trauma. They live in a setting in which they encounter generalized attitudes of suspicion and distrust which help to reinforce their own feelings of psychological isolation: this was certainly the case in Sharpeville to judge from the survivors' experiences. Traumatic violent experience estranges people and for its victims their experience makes them feel vulnerable, helpless and even ashamed.<sup>88</sup> When the Tsolo brothers were released they found that their family was socially ostracised, blamed by its neighbours for the calamity that had been visited upon the community and punished by officials through the withdrawal of their father's business licence. Still suffering from his leg wound, Lebetsa Ramohoasa's testimony was cited by the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission as an emblematic case of post traumatic stress:

My life changed. I led a miserable life. You know my feelings changed altogether. But I don't know what kind of help I could give myself and I was satisfied. I said I have to be satisfied because it is something that happened to me. I am helpless; I can't do anything for myself.<sup>89</sup>

Following Freud, theorists of the psychological effects of political violence suggest that survivors of such experiences "inhabit a liminal space, both part of society and removed from society", existing on a bewildering threshold between the living and the dead<sup>90</sup>, arguably an effect likely to be all the more pronounced in a cultural setting in which, as Father Patrick Noonan discovered in Sharpeville, people "see little division between the supernatural and the everyday details of life".<sup>91</sup> Vincent Leutsoa lost two members of his family on March 21<sup>st</sup>. As he recalled when he was interviewed more than forty years later, "I was alive, but it didn't feel that way. I was alone". Over and over again, survivors refer to the "pain" they live with, not just physical pain but the kind of protracted emotional anguish which can become unbearable, a torment that survivors liken to "a pain in my heart". "Almighty God, this story pains me", Isaac Moeung told a visitor in 2000. Shot and subsequently detained he was "still angry", he said.<sup>92</sup> In 1984, Sharpeville residents interviewed for a documentary film insisted to researchers that people who had lived through the massacre "were still crying within" (*ne 'ntse ba lla*).<sup>93</sup>

Whether individually experienced psychological disorders are experienced collectively in social groups is more contentious. Catherine Merridale's research on death and memory in Russia reminds us that the process of grieving can depend and be influenced by social convention so that in certain "high mortality regimes" grief may have to be highly individualised, repressed and hidden, not shared or ritualised.<sup>94</sup> The assumption that nations or groups possess collective psyches that can be healed by the same sorts of therapeutic processes that may restore individuals was a key premise in guiding the activities of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission but even quite cohesive social groups are unlikely to be uniformly affected by events that may have traumatic effects upon individuals. It does seem reasonable, though, to suggest that in small tightly knit communities in which significant numbers of people witness and experience horrific happenings that their own stressed state will have broader social effects. The ways in which violence might cause a shared communal trauma might work in the following way. Violence that appears to break normal rules ruptures ordinary suppositions about everyday life, weakening the moral fabric surrounding institutions and eroding also peoples own perceptions of moral and social responsibility, their personal autonomy and self confidence.<sup>95</sup> In a setting in which public violence is sanctioned through policy decisions – as in the authorities' justification of the police's behaviour at Sharpeville, a setting is created in which people have to accustom themselves to what ordinarily would be intolerable; they achieve a measure of personal security through developing a protective layer of social indifference. Hence collective fears colour social relationships discouraging imaginative empathy and social solidarity – as seems to have been the case with the collective rejoicings Petrus Tom describes in his memoir after "the children" had burned Jacob Dhlamini, after they had "made a Kentucky Chicken" from him. Obviously the severity of this sort of "collective trauma" will be all the greater if the violations are unchecked and un-punished and unopposed by groups that might represent alternative sources of moral authority to the officials inflicting violence. In the unusually repressive environment Sharpeville represented – unusual even in a South African context of comparison - no such local sources of alternative authority could emerge for a very long time. Here in the mid 1980s, in the near absence of an adult generation prepared to exercise leadership – a consequence of the fearful situation in which young men and women grew up in the 1960s and 1970s, alternative political authority would be exercised through militarised echelons of youth. Richard Wilson encountered these in his fieldwork in Sharpeville in 1996, cohorts of youngsters socialised in criminal sub-cultures and nurtured also in an inherited "culture of violence"<sup>96</sup>, caught up in cyclical vendettas, mimicking again and again the sacrifices of earlier generations, or, to borrow Joyce Mokhesi's hauntingly vivid metaphor, "breaking open the wounds of their fathers' bodies, staining the white future".<sup>97</sup>

In such settings what is needed to restore community life so that people no longer inhabit such "liminal" spaces? Are there procedures that can help the emotional and moral recovery of individuals as well as supporting the reconstruction of communities affected by both the direct experience of officially instigated killing and by locally transmitted memories of such violations. The public telling of their stories – "truth testimony" – may go some way towards achieving the kind of moral reintegration that is needed by people who inhabit a liminal world of the half dead if it can elicit expressions of empathy that lessen the stigma felt by the casualties of collective violence. Best of all would be if individual accounts of pain and loss can cohere into a collective memory, "subscribed to and shared by a group".<sup>98</sup> Very optimistically, South African Truth Commissioners believed that the public compilation of diverse memories about particular events – not one story, but many stories – could lead to "a rich and inclusive memory, sometimes called a 'thick memory', that can capture gradations of responsibility for the past" and in so doing build new kinds of social solidarity between former adversaries.<sup>99</sup> Especially important, though, in any reconstruction of social cohesion there must be clear acknowledgement of wrong doing either by the original perpetrators or by convincing proxies for them, as Tsoane Mhlapo maintains, "an apology from the state for what happened here". Ethnographic studies of the local politics of reconciliation in South Africa suggest that what may be needed is rather more than apologies, that

before people can overcome the kind of trauma that destroys their own self belief and their sense of social security they need a form of justice with retributive moral foundations. For the Israeli social psychologist, Dabiel Bar-tal there are strong grounds for believing that revenge addresses basic human needs, it “loosens the taut feeling caused by the slaying or despoiling of one’s self” and “an expression of responsibility to the killed”.<sup>100</sup> At the very least, judicial or truth telling procedures need to name perpetrators of violence before reconstruction of a reintegrated moral community can begin among victims and their sympathisers. The process of “social healing” is possible only once the source of violence has been identified and even “sacrificed” through punishment to atone for the original harm.<sup>101</sup> It is possible that alternate more conciliatory forms of “transitional” justice may also help to address such needs, though this is contested by critics of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Reparations might also rebuild civic authority, as several survivors from the massacre interviewed in 2000 suggested. But in Sharpeville, forty years after the event, as Isaac Moeung observed, “the victims were never compensated”. “We are left here alone with our memories”.<sup>102</sup>

Story telling, acknowledgement and reparation were each aims of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The Commission visited the Vereeniging region in August 1996. For those people who offered their testimony to the Commission there may have been relief and comfort but to judge from the interviews and we have cited in this book, lingering local perceptions of injustice remained very widespread. With respect to many of the residents of Sharpeville, the Commission’s visit failed to achieve the kind of ritual “symbolic closure” that its proceedings may have obtained elsewhere. We do know that the television broadcast of the Sebokeng hearings affected one white community profoundly. Piet Meiring, the DRC’s representative on the Commission was invited to a parish meeting in Randfontein (on the West Rand) to address members of the white congregation who were shocked and mortified by what they had seen: “We really did not know! Can we be guilty of the misdeeds of a small group of criminals?”<sup>103</sup> In Sharpeville, though, the effect of the hearings may have blunted by the continuation of conflict, for, as we have seen, violent rivalries between different militarised factions were still in progress at the time the Commission began its investigation in Sharpeville. The Commission itself heard about the killing of Molefe Phele, a Sebokeng Pan-Africanist who after his return from Tanzania to Sebokeng in 1992 had been the victim of a drive-by shooting, possibly an incident implicating the police because Phele’s father later saw his son’s assassin’s car parked at the police station.<sup>104</sup> Only one year before the Commission opened its proceedings ANC supporters fired shots at a PAC commemorative meeting at the George Thabe stadium. The confrontation followed the cancellation of an ANC rally planned at a different venue for the anniversary after the non-arrival of leaders who were scheduled to address the gathering.<sup>105</sup> Violence affected the hearings directly for on the night of August 7<sup>th</sup> shots were fired on one witness’s home. On the following day, a group of *Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging* supporters gathered outside the College chanting slogans: the only evidence of any local white interest in the hearings.<sup>106</sup>

The Commission held public hearings on Human Rights Violations over four days in the hall of the Sebokeng College of Education, from August 5<sup>th</sup> to August 8<sup>th</sup>, 1996, one of fifty or so public hearings held all over the country. The proceedings addressed a sequence of violent events, beginning with testimonies about the 1960 massacre on the first day before considering the 1984 rebellion as well as the conflicts between ANC and IFP supporters in the 1990s. The Commission allowed only a day, then, for survivors to address the events of 1960. These hearings were organised around testimony from witnesses who were already selected. During the preceding months the Commission had employed statement-takers who had visited people who had indicated their willingness to tell their stories. The Commission had elicited 46 such statements from a range of witnesses present at the massacre including people who had survived wounding, detention, prison sentences and exile. The original deponents therefore included Pan-Africanist activists, one of whom, Sidwell Kasa, is identified in the report as a participant in the pass protest. He was later

imprisoned for three years and subsequently banished from the Vaal. From the deponents the Commissioners then chose the witnesses who would testify at the public hearing.

The public testimony was from non-activists, “apolitical” people, in the language used in the Commission’s Report, or in the words used by Archbishop Desmond Tutu at the hearings, “ordinary people trying to abide by the law”.<sup>107</sup> When Elizabeth Mabona woke up that Monday morning she “found out that it was bad outside”. People were “all over the streets”. No one was to go to work, and anyone who disobeyed this instruction would “be killed”. She joined a group on their way to the police station. At the station, “we sat down, we were singing hymns, you know it was a jolly atmosphere”. At a certain juncture “people from the PAC approached” and told them they could “disperse”, return to their homes for dinner and after eating come back to the police station “so that there can be another meeting”. Mrs Mabona returned home but when she arrived there she found the house empty, her husband was still at the station. She became worried and went out into the street where she encountered one of her husband’s friends. She asked him where her husband was because she had earlier seen them together. “He said, no, he is around, please go. Why do you involve yourself in issues involving men?” She started walking back to the station but she then heard gun shots and ran back to her home. Later she learned that her husband was dead. She subsequently visited the hospital but could not find his body so she then decided to visit the police station. At the station she saw that all “the people that had been taken to the station were all dead”. The police confirmed that her husband’s body was among the dead. On the next day and the following days they questioned her, again and again, five times altogether, because they thought her husband was a Pan-Africanist. He was not and nor was she: she was “taking part just as an onlooking.” She did not believe in the protest” but she and her friends were “singing these hymns as Christians because we were just rejoicing”. They were expecting to receive a message that afternoon and they “were just joyous”.<sup>108</sup>

David Ramohoase was on his way to work at the dry cleaning factory that morning when he was stopped by a PAC picket line. Its members asked him to accompany them to the police station. “We asked them what are you going to do there, they said no we are going to enquire about the pass”. He walked with them willingly enough, for he too “wanted to go and listen to this issue about passes”. He joined the crowd on its fringes, sitting at the edge of the main body, awaiting developments for “a long time”. It was a very sunny day, he recalled, and many people were sheltering themselves with umbrellas. Not one person was armed as far as he could see. “Those who might have had guns, maybe they were hidden somewhere” but he could see no weapons, not even a stick. “Not even a knobkerrie”, he insisted, he “could see only umbrellas”. Between one and two o’clock a small white car arrived and out of this car “a man jumped... a white person, and he had a very short stick in his hand and he had a band on his head”. The man dropped his stick and then he said “shoot”. Mr Ramohoase fell to the ground. Later he realised he had been shot in the leg. The person next to him told him to keep his head down for the police were now walking around inspecting the bodies. His neighbour said if he looked up “they will come and finish us off”. He did see the constables turning bodies over, but “we didn’t actually know what they were doing”. “According to our minds”, though, “they were doing something to the people”. Mr Ramahoasa remained in hospital for three months. Even today his leg still hurt him, especially when the weather was cold. But emotionally too, he was not well.”<sup>109</sup>

From these “narrative truths” the Commission assembled its findings. The police deliberately opened fire on an unarmed crowd that had gathered peacefully. The police continued to fire after the crowd began to flee. The police did not open fire spontaneously, for the deponents to the TRC gave evidence that suggested “a degree of deliberation”. The report cited David Ramahoasa’s original deposition in which he said that a white man “gave a sign” before the shooting started. In his statement, David’s brother, Lebitsa, “remembered a white man climbing into a Saracen and pulling the door shut above him, just before gun shots rang out”. As a consequence hundreds of

people were shot in the back and sixty nine were killed. Many of the people who were wounded or killed “were apolitical, women and unarmed”, the Report concluded.<sup>110</sup>

To those residents who read the Report, these findings may have supplied the solace of an official moral vindication. They appear, though, in a few fleeting paragraphs, four pages in a six volume report of several thousand pages, overlaid by similar reports and findings about scores of more recent and nearly as bloody encounters between armed officials and protesting assemblies. From this perspective the shootings at Sharpeville are reduced to just “an ordinary atrocity”, rather than a defining event. And indeed it is notably missing from the list of happenings that the Commission chose to address with special hearings. To a degree in other settings, the Commission could offer a semblance of justice through eliciting testimony and even, sometimes, expressions of remorse from killers or from those who gave them orders, especially when it addressed applications for amnesty. But none of the policemen who were present at Sharpeville that day were visited or summoned by the Commissioners and none of them applied for amnesty. In the words of Mary Mantsho, Secretary of Sharpeville’s Khulumani group, “At the TRC the Police did not come for us. We are always talking about this”.<sup>111</sup> The Report names no individual policemen, not even Lieutenant Colonel Pienaar. Instead the Commissions’ condemnation is impersonal. “The former state and the Minister of Police” were “directly responsible for the commission of gross human rights violations.” Perhaps if the TRC had attempted to solicit police testimony it might have succeeded. Philip Frankel’s interviews with policemen, conducted in 1999 and 2000 do indicate that many of the Vereeniging-based white police officers who participated were traumatised, still experiencing repetitive nightmares and flashbacks. Forty white policemen left the service in the Vereeniging district in the weeks following the massacre. In the same period others expressed sorrow and even contrition to the congregations of the churches they normally attended.<sup>112</sup>

Thabo Mbeki’s successor state would indeed pay reparations several years later but it would be left to the young leader of the “New” National Party, Marthinus van Schalkwyk, born just a few months before the massacre to express an apology. During the 1999 election campaign, van Schalkwyk visited Sharpeville and laid a wreath. This was one of two symbolic visits van Schalkwyk made to the area – the other was to the site where the Treaty of Vereeniging was signed at the end of the Anglo-Boer War. Both visits were hardly likely to win votes and, instead, seemed to be conceived as an effort to reposition the National Party morally and philosophically through emphasising continuities between two different national liberation movements. “It is only when white South Africans understand the struggle of black South Africans to be free that they will themselves really be free”, Van Schalkwyk told a small gathering of a hundred people assembled at the site of the massacre in Sharpeville.<sup>113</sup>

Nyakane Tsolo was not mentioned in the Commission’s Report and he did not offer testimony. He had returned to Sharpeville at the end of 1991 after a thirty year absence. When he jumped bail in 1961 he travelled to Lesotho. Later he underwent military instruction in Egypt as a commando, training with their special forces. Among his companions he became known as “Transistor Man” because he was so small. Between 1963 and 1973 he lived in East Germany, he told journalists later. If this report is accurate it would have been unusual because on the whole the German Democratic Republic was inhospitable terrain for Pan-Africanists. In 1973, though, “circumstances” forced Nyakane and his young family to take leave Germany “secretly” and take refuge in the Netherlands. He remained in Rotterdam for the rest of his exile, for a period designated as a PAC representative and working with local anti-apartheid bodies. He remained a Leballo loyalist through the 1980s maintaining that his mentor had fallen victim to an internal struggle within the PAC between genuine revolutionaries and reactionary reformists, losing his formal standing as the organisation’s Netherlands representative as a consequence.<sup>114</sup> When he re-appeared in Sharpeville in 1991 he was just visiting. Despite his inclusion on the PAC’s electoral

list in 1994 he maintained his home in Rotterdam through the rest of the decade. He only made his homecoming permanent at the end of 2001. One year later he was dead, from a stroke.<sup>115</sup>

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Nyakane Tsolo lived long enough to be invited to the opening of Sharpeville's memorial, an architectural tribute constructed on behalf of the Gauteng regional government and the South African Heritage Resource Agency. Since its opening in 2002 the monument has been expanded to include a museum and will shortly incorporate the now abandoned old police station. The police have moved to new premises, a bright light building one mile away, surrounded by flower beds. Policing today in Sharpeville is very different from historical patterns, according to Inspector Manala, the station's commanding officer. Local officers deal mainly with "social crime" and domestic strife. The gangster syndicates still make their homes in Sharpeville but they operate outside the township, further afield, he says. There is very little serious organised crime within the borders of the township, the Inspector insists.

Visitors can walk through the empty rooms of the old station. The building's bleakly functional exterior is now softened with a pink wash painted over the band of plaster above the orange face-brick. Lawns, paths and two rows of shrubs and trees supply a shady formal garden in the area where once the front ranks of the PAC's supporters pressed against the wire fence. Inside, though, the decor and furnishings have hardly altered over fifty years: a long hardwood counter in the charge office, shiny red-polished concrete floors, iron windows, rusty filing cabinets and battered venetian blinds. The holding cells in which the police detained the Pan-Africanist leadership remain: creaky armoured doors, a meshed-in courtyard, concrete furnishings and high-up grated windows.

The building will soon be renovated, converted into an archive, administrative offices for the museum and meeting rooms to accommodate community groups. One local association that hopes to make the old station an assembly point for its activities is the local Sharpeville branch of Khulumani – "Speak out". Prompted by the impending establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Khulumani established itself as a national association of survivors of human rights abuses between 1960 and 1992.<sup>116</sup> Its immediate aim was to supply advice and support for people who chose to offer testimony to the TRC. Since its formation it has enrolled a membership of 55,000. In Sharpeville an energetic local branch of Khulumani has existed since 1995 meeting every fortnight in the Catholic Church Hall. Khulumani has three hundred Sharpeville residents on its "data base", a membership that includes many of the survivors of the 1960 bloodletting but also people who were affected by more recent abuses, up to and including the 1992 massacre in nearby Boipatong. Its officers, elected every three years by a show of hands, include as Deputy Chairperson, Johannes Sefatse, one of the people gathered in front of the police line on 21 March 1960. Nationally, Khulumani has agitated for a special pension fund for survivors and it has also opposed various amnesty applications. In its local setting in Sharpeville the organisation views its role as the continuation of the business left unfinished by the Truth Commission: the provision of a sympathetic setting in which people can tell and retell their stories, a supportive milieu within which "if they come they will be healed", its officers believe.<sup>117</sup> The group includes a cadre of trained counsellors and indeed from time to time "facilitates" such training from visiting specialist. Usually its meetings are attended by between fifty or a hundred people. They can participate in a range of activities including a handicrafts programme and fieldtrips to historical sites. They help people who come to mourn their loved ones: "Always after 21<sup>st</sup> March we bury some of the families". On such occasions, people assemble in front of the monument and they weep for their dead.



By the side of the old station, across the road where there was once open veldt, the Sharpeville memorial takes up the ground where most of the massacre's victims died. The site is inhabited by a memorial garden in which the names of the dead each appear on a separate obelisk. The garden is planted with the acacia trees and the grasses and the flowers that once grew wild in the surrounding landscape, now mostly built over. The obelisks are arranged on each side of a channel of water that drains from a fountain, a symbolic representation of the cleansing function first performed by the rainfall that arrived after the massacre, washing away the blood of the dead. In front of the garden is a monumentally proportioned gateway, brown rendered plaster, vaguely Etruscan, the default genre when South African architects attempt to represent African building traditions, though in this region indigenous construction was stone-based. By the side of the gateway there is a plaque, commemorating Nelson Mandela's visit to Sharpeville, the location he chose for the ceremonial signing into law of the 1996 Constitution. It reads: "In memory of those who gave their lives for a free and just South Africa". The names of the dead appear again on four plaques fixed to the front wall of the gatehouse. Certain residents believe that there are names that are missing and indeed this is quite likely, for the monument makes no direct reference to people who died from their injuries sustained at the massacre or who may have been buried secretly, unacknowledged by any inquest. The victims of later political conflicts lie in a newer cemetery, Vuka, located next to the old site and service scheme. Here too, the Heritage Agency has been at work, restoring the graves and building pathways.

Separating the Memorial Garden from the adjacent exhibition hall is a tree-lined paved pathway, "Constitution Walk" which one day will lead through to a reconstructed historical precinct in which the Sedibeng Council hopes to restore Maraneng, the official residence that used to accommodate the King of Lesotho during his visits to the Basotho migrant community, as well as the Community Hall, burned out during the 1980s and the long disused swimming pool. The exhibition hall at present relies heavily on Ian Berry's photographs as well as excerpts from survivors' testimony: these combine to make a powerful impression that is all the more effective because of the simplicity of the display and the emotionally understated aesthetics of the memorial. Indeed some local residents would prefer a less allegorical monumental style that made more direct visual references to the event.<sup>118</sup> The absence of these may have been intentional. Other commentators have drawn attention to the way that official commemorations of Apartheid's history strive to maintain a consensual and even "politically decontextualised" tone.<sup>119</sup> Hence March 21<sup>st</sup> is a day to celebrate the achievement of human rights rather than to recall the Sharpeville shootings. Local residents often seem nonplussed by this predisposition. Japhta Mokwena has lived on Seeiso Street for the past fifty two years. From his home he can easily see the police station in front of which he stood on 21<sup>st</sup> March 1960. He feels that today outside the station "there should be a statue of the army tank used at the massacre... as a reminder that innocent people were gunned down".<sup>120</sup> The Museum's curator, Sekwati Sekoane, has in fact asked the police authorities if they can supply a vintage Saracen. In the meantime residents must content themselves with an almost life size sculptured papier mache rendition of a Saracen, the work of, Moses Tsolo, grandson of Job Tsolo, brother of Nyakane, a Fine Arts graduate from the Vaal Technikon..

The Pan-Africanists have built their own monument. In Phelendaba Cemetery on the township's outskirts sixty four of the people killed by the police are buried in a single row one hundred meters long. Originally their graves were marked with plain concrete tablets, erected and paid for by the Vereeniging Council, marked only with names and dates. These have been replaced with polished scrolls. Below the biographical details of each of the dead, the inscription reads "Robala ka Khotso" (Rest in Peace). The new headstones were installed by the Heritage Agency and they are mostly identical though here and there, some families have chosen to put up their own tributes. On many of the graves there remain flowers and empty bottles and vessels from the libations that mourners continue to offer. Philemon Tefu rests in his plot in the preceding row of graves, for the final resting places of Sharpeville's citizens are located in the order of their demise and Nyakane's..

Job's and Gideon's father died shortly before the massacre. At the head of the row stands the PAC's memorial, three painted concrete tables, yellow, green and black, the traditional national colours. On the central tablet there is a map of Africa with the rays of a star illuminating the continent. Next to the continent a legend reads: "They died for freedom: lest we forget", a reminder of the contested interpretations that extend their claims even to the bodies of the dead.

Memorials aside, in appearance Sharpeville would still be quite recognisable to anyone returning after a fifty year absence. Rows of mainly ochre and grey four room dwellings still line most of the roads and lanes, the standard "matchbox" houses constructed in hundreds of thousands across South Africa in the 1950s, utilitarian brick cabins with asbestos roofs and outhouse toilets. Some have been subjected to improvements: concrete tiles on the roofs, painted and plastered walls, burglar bars and front *stoeps* and on a few stands residents have built over their plots, walling their gardens and replacing the matchboxes with suburban double storeys. There is a astonishing range of what are evidently still well-attended churches, several dating from the 1950s, red brick halls with short towers and shallow steeples. Television satellites, power lines, and cell-phone masts reflect key changes in the way that people live their lives since the 1960s but there are not many signs of post-democratic affluence. The heavy industries that were once the economic staple of this region are now in decline and local unemployment levels are somewhat higher than the already steep national average. What might have been Sharpeville's new middle class now lives in Vereeniging or even further afield in the leafy neighbourhoods by the Vaal River, in the resort settlement of Vanderbijlpark. Government subsidies have helped to build several thousand new houses, though, in a new section of the township, "Sephiso" (Promise) and Sharpeville's population is now around 100,000. Besides the Human Rights Precinct, the township's new infrastructure includes properly tarred roads and, more exceptionally, a well resourced library, replacing the old building that stood near the police station. The new building accommodates a computer equipped study room and a hospitable reading room with well stocked bookshelves. Sharpeville's civic endowments are completed with a community health centre. Complaints of the Concerned Residents notwithstanding, the township seems to have received a fair measure of public investment from the Sedibeng Municipality and the provincial authorities. Its neighbourhoods now constitute just four wards of a local government that embraces all the major settlements across the Vaal region. Each of these wards has elected an ANC candidate since the inception of local polls for here as elsewhere the Pan Africanists receive short shrift in the voting booths. In a quite different way, though, historical traditions shape electoral politics. One of the Councillors is the son of Samuel Kodisang who sixty years ago headed the township Advisory Board.

On the eastern borders of Sharpeville, on the way out along the road that leads to Vereeniging there is a lake formed by the reservoir that has accumulated behind the Leeukuil Dam. The dam is fringed with willow trees and bull-rushes and it is surrounded by gentle parkland. In a harsh landscape of decaying heavy industry the lake and its serene surroundings are startlingly beautiful. South Africans normally enjoy such amenities but here there are no concrete benches and barbecue sites for picnickers, there are no children's swings and no places for fishing. The lake is deserted, overlooked only by the ruined shell of the building that once served as the municipal brewery.

This neglect is attributable to a persistent local belief. Sekwati Sekoana, museum curator and one time Treason Trialist can supply an explanation for this strange abstention. As he shows school-children around the Memorial he tells them about the meaning of the water that is made to flow through the Garden. "After the shooting started it began to rain", he says. "The rain washed the blood away from the dead and wounded and the water drained away to flow into the reservoir at the township's edge. The dam was often empty before that day but since then it has always been full. The people used to like sitting by the lake. Always they used its water for washing and drinking. Not for fifty years. Nobody has used the water since. Nobody goes there. Never".<sup>121</sup>

For so many of Sharpeville's inhabitants, their homeplace remains a vicinity of restless spirits, tormented ghosts.

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- <sup>3</sup> Monako Dibetle, "Sharpeville is still bleeding", *Mail and Guardian*, 19 March 2010
- <sup>4</sup> Petrus Tom, *My Life Struggle: The Story of Petrus Tom*, Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1985, p. 66
- <sup>5</sup> Judgement, Delmas Treason Trial Records, University of the Witwatersrand, AK 217, L12.3, p. 322.
- <sup>6</sup> Peter Parker and Joyce Mokhesi-Parker, *In the Shadow of Sharpeville: Apartheid and Criminal Justice*, New York: New York University Press, 1998, p. 11.
- <sup>7</sup> Petrus Tom, *My Life Struggle*, p. 64.
- <sup>8</sup> Delmas Treason Trial Records. Papers prepared by the Defence. Patrick Noonan, 'The Vaal Triangle during the unrest in 1984-1985', University of the Witwatersrand Historical Papers, AK 217 S8 10. 20, p. 7.
- <sup>9</sup> Johannes Rantete, *The Third Day of September: An Eye Witness Account of the Sebokeng Rebellion of 1984*, Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1984, p. 8
- <sup>10</sup> Patrick Noonan, *They're Burning the Churches*, Bellevue: Jacana, 2003.
- <sup>11</sup> George Bizos, quoted on the cover of Noonan, *They're Burning the Churches*.
- <sup>12</sup> Republic of South Africa, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Riots at Soweto and Elsewhere from the 16<sup>th</sup> June 1976 to the 28<sup>th</sup> February 1977*, Volume 2, RP55/1980, Pretoria, 1980, pp. 167-168.
- <sup>13</sup> Parker and Mokhesi-Parker, *In the Shadow of Sharpeville*, p. 25.
- <sup>14</sup> Simon Bekker, 'The local government and community of Sebokeng', Occasional Paper no. 3, Department of Sociology, University of Stellenbosch, June 1978.
- <sup>15</sup> Prakash Diar, *The Sharpeville Six*, Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Inc, 1990, p. xix.
- <sup>16</sup> Delmas Treason Trial Records. Papers prepared by the Defence. Emergence of the VCA. University of the Witwatersrand Historical Papers, AK 217 S8.4.1.
- <sup>17</sup> Delmas Treason Trial Records. Papers prepared by the Defence. Lisa Seftel. Events in the Vaal Triangle. University of the Witwatersrand Historical Papers, AK 217 S8.10.4.
- <sup>18</sup> "Defiant Vaal Boycott Enters Third Year", *Work in Progress*, Braamfontein, September 1986, pp. 16-17. See also Noonan, p. 121.
- <sup>19</sup> Delmas Treason Trial Records. Papers prepared by the Defence. Notes on a discussion with Philip Masia, General secretary of the Orange Vaal General Workers' Union, 10 December 1985. University of the Witwatersrand Historical Papers, AK 217 S8.10.19.
- <sup>20</sup> B A Khoapa (ed), *Black Review 1972*, Durban: Black Community Programmes, 1973, p. 184.
- <sup>21</sup> Alan Brooks and Paul Brickhill, *Whirlwind before the Storm*, London: International Defence and Aid Fund, 1980, p. 81.
- <sup>22</sup> Parker and Mokhesi-Parker, *In the Shadow of Sharpeville*, p. 25.
- <sup>23</sup> Moses Dlamini, *Robben Island Hell-Hole*, Africa World Press, Trenton NJ, 1986, p. 199.
- <sup>24</sup> Ikaboth Makiti interviewed by the author, Sharpeville, 20 July 2010.
- <sup>25</sup> Noonan, *They're Burning the Churches*, p. 11.
- <sup>26</sup> "Movement aimed at abstinence", *The Star*, 20 October 1978; Moses Dhlamini, *Robben Island Hell-Hole*, Africa World Books, Trebnton, NJ, 1986, p. 70..
- <sup>27</sup> Noonan, *They're Burning the Churches*, pp. 179-183.
- <sup>28</sup> "Woman planned to set fire to house", *The Star*, 8 August 1978
- <sup>29</sup> Delmas Treason Trial Records. Papers prepared by the Defence. Emergence of the VCA. University of the Witwatersrand Historical Papers, AK 217 S8.4.1.
- <sup>30</sup> Craig Charney, "Sharpeville – 20 years later...", *The Star*, 21 March 1980.
- <sup>31</sup> *Sowetan*, 15 July 1981.
- <sup>32</sup> *Sowetan*, 1 December 1983.
- <sup>33</sup> Patrick Noonan, *They're Burning the Churches*, p. 51.
- <sup>34</sup> "Civics on the frontline", *SASPU National*, Vol 5, no. 7, December 1984, p. 13.
- <sup>35</sup> Prakash Diar, *The Sharpeville Six*, p. xxv.
- <sup>36</sup> "Defiant Vaal Boycott Enters Third Year", *Work in Progress*, September 1986, p. 17.
- <sup>37</sup> Prakash Diar, *The Sharpeville Six*, p. xxv.
- <sup>38</sup> *Speak*, 3,1, March 1985, letter to the Editor complaining about the Sharpeville Civic Association, p. 6.
- <sup>39</sup> Richard Wilson, *The Politics of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa*, Cambridge: Cambridge Univesrity Press, 2001, p. 177; Clive Glaser, *Bo-Tsotsi: The Youth Gangs of Soweto, 1935-1976*, James Currey, Ocford, 2000, p. 189.
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- <sup>48</sup> Parker and Mokhesi-Parker, *In the Shadow of Sharpeville*, pp. 23-24.
- <sup>49</sup> Mtutuzeli Matshoba, "Nothing but the truth: The Ordeal of Duma Khumalo" in Deborah Posel and Graeme Simpson (eds.), *Commissioning the Past: Understanding South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, Johannesburg, 2002.
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- <sup>64</sup> Richard Wilson, *The Politics of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 181
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- <sup>82</sup> Mary Benson, *Nelson Mandela*, Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1986, p.84.
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