

## Chapter 6

### "I Saw a Nightmare ...:" Violence and the Construction of Memory

#### The Making of Memory: People, the State, the ANC, and Violence

"Human memory is a marvellous but fallacious instrument,"<sup>7</sup> Primo Levi wrote, and people are mindful that their own stories are not safe with them, that their memories dim with time, and that, ultimately, as they die, they will be lost to the historians and the children that come after them. The words "I can't quite remember" are present many times in each interview, as is the invocation "... if you remember." Sometimes memory was distorted, sometimes replaced by lies. Memory drifts, fades, and is altered, maliciously, with intent to deceive, or defensively, to protect against wounds that run too deep or against knowledge that is too contradictory. Individual historical experience counters official history and contributes more nuanced memories to social history. Lilli Mokganyetsi's story, for example, highlighted the difference between the time of the events she described and the time of the telling. Hers was a story from what Primo Levi has called "the grey zone," revealing some of the ambiguity, some of the contradictions and inconsistencies in an otherwise coherent heroic collective story. Rather than omit them or explain them away, this analysis has searched out such singularity, listened for private individual sorrow and meaning, to explore the distance and the bond between the narrator's telling of individual private memory and the historian's reconstruction of the broad, the public, social, and historical context. It was in the exchange of memories between the narrator and the listener, in the questions and in the telling, that these spoke to each other. (See Chapter 1: "Strengths and Weaknesses, or Memory and Violence.") 10

The violence implicit in the destruction or concealment of archives and records, the disappearance of bodies, the denial of responsibility—all disrupt or, worse, destroy the ability of individuals to think historically, to place their individual memories in the context of history. This has even more ominous implications if the individual experience of events of that history was disturbing or physically or emotionally wounding. In such cases it became impossible to discover the "shape and the 'why' of events,"<sup>8</sup> the meaning of events, and to satisfy the need of the individual to maintain continuity in the memory of their own life.<sup>9</sup> Such a need grew, I would argue, with the intensity of the experience and was related to attempts outside of the individual—by professional historians or by the dominant narratives of the state or official resistance movements, for good or bad—to alter meaning.

The people who were part of the Soweto uprising, either as witnesses, bystanders, or participants, belonged to this period, they were shaped by the

"psychological and social atmosphere"<sup>10</sup> of the time. Some were aware of the historical importance of what they had experienced, as evidenced by the need, despite the fear of discovery, of someone like Patience Tshetlo to collect the newspaper stories at the time:

HP-M: ... and you said it was dangerous to have these?

Patience: Yes, you know I chucked them in the wardrobe, underneath my wardrobe, so that they can't get them... here is Tsietsi.<sup>11</sup>

Tshetlo collected the newspapers then and told her story in the present so that those who came after her would see the story told again, through the photographs, through the articles, and possibly even through her own words, however inadequately prepared she might have felt to tell the story herself:

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HP-M: Why did you keep these?

Patience: I said maybe one of my grandchildren ... You know if I knew how to write I would write the history, the story of this thing.

HP-M: You should...

Patience: I said, maybe my grandchildren one day, they will look the history for this. Mmmh [yes].

HP-M: You should write some of this down.

Patience: ... *how* can I write, I don't know *where* to start. I could write ..., if I knew ..., I could write. I can't even know.

HP-M: If you were to write, what would you write about?

Patience: I will write about this ... riot of children. I will write the story and then put the picture of the riot, ... you know this is [the] hostel, the time they were fighting.<sup>12</sup> (See: "Patience Tshetlo Interview")

Individually, people are not unaware of their limitations, and Patience's words "*how* can I write, I don't know *where* to start" can be read as perception both of her own powerlessness and of the scope of the story: It is about not just finding the beginning but realizing that the "beginning" is so large, so broad, so encompassing that it is difficult for one person to tell or to speak of. These words also capture the distress of many whose need to think historically has not been met or, worse yet, has been destroyed in the violence of the past. The words and stories of individuals are eloquent testimony, less to some objective historical

truth than to the importance of considering history as a process, in which each individual *continuously* tries to negotiate the place and meaning of her memories in society and in time. (See discussion of "Narrators" in Chapter 1.)

Historical memory is contested and manipulated by those in power in repressive societies who seek to internalize oppression through ideology. But even those writers who celebrated the cause of "the people" have tended to represent protesting crowds as a disembodied, sometimes idealized, abstraction. (See Chapter 1, "Literature Review" and Chapter 5, "Analysis of the Literature In this book I have tried to present and document the multiple stories of the Soweto uprising. In doing so I have considered how the ideologies and political agendas of those who were able to create authoritative accounts have imposed on the events of Soweto meanings that reflected those agendas. The destruction of historical archives (such as the records of the magistrates courts in which the daily indignities of apartheid laws were adjudicated) and all the materials deliberately excluded from them,<sup>13</sup> the one-sided teaching of history in classrooms, official reports and government commissions designed to "explain" the state and its policies, the suppression of any information about political dissidents—all were violent attempts to change what is known and remembered of South Africa's past. The state could not change what had happened in Soweto in 1976. But it compounded the violence that was directed at people physically by what I have argued were violent attempts to hide the evidence thereof. In other words, the state tried to change the meaning of events and, as a consequence, it tried by violent means to alter the processes of historical memory. (See essay: "The State and Legitimacy" and Chapter 3, Section 1: "Official Stories.")

The ANC too tampered with these processes, by selectively using aspects of the uprising to support its own cause, by appropriating voices and images as its own, and by gradually downplaying and therefore diminishing the independent actions and thoughts of the young participants (see Chapter 3, Section 3 "Official Discourse (or Narrative of Resistance?): The African National Congress".) Until 1976, this constituency of rebels had been outside of its grasp, and it had fallen to the various *Black Consciousness* movements to conscientize black South Africans. The students themselves precipitated mobilization and then accepted the responsibility, which the events thrust upon them, to continue and expand the battles for change. They did so with varied success and at a great cost measured in death, imprisonment, banning, and exile. In the years since 1976, the struggle against apartheid has been politically successful. In this, the historical actors of the Soweto uprising have played a major part:

I think, if you take the whole result of 76, though there is no one really who can appreciate that it was maybe a correct ... but in certain ways it has a very special influence in the whole process today. Because, this was a generation which was so eager after, you know, the period ..., you know, *they take up things with vigor and so much endurance that*

*is, for things to change, and if you look even at the present moment, most of them are playing a very leading role, that is within the society today.* [Emphasis in last sentence added].<sup>14</sup> (See: "Zakes Molotsi Interview.")

The ANC, all but silenced and in exile during the uprising, has emerged the victor. **20** Its own narratives of the uprising, brief and written from afar in the years following 1976, have gradually been incorporated into a history of successful, if painful, heroic struggle. To create a cohesive narrative that celebrates unity and its own ascendancy, it has had to exclude the ambiguities inherent in the youth movement and the challenges to its own authority posed by a powerful and different ideology of resistance (*Black Consciousness*.)

More than anything else, I argue in this chapter, the memories of Soweto, collective or personal, have been shaped by apartheid's legacy of violence. Violence became part of people's personal memories and in turn shaped history as these were transformed into individual historical narratives. In the following pages I illustrate by way of several examples how violence permeated the history of South Africa in this time and how the experience of violence continues to shape the remembering and the telling.

Undoubtedly, physical violence has left the most-visible marks on the landscapes of history. The state circumscribed the lives of African people in the townships, confining them to restricted and inherently oppressive living conditions, ruled them with a vicious and racist administration and police, denied them political participation, and deprived them not only of economic opportunity but also of everyday stability and security. The stories of the uprising itself illustrated both the violence with which the police responded to the mounting protests of students and the violent reaction its repression unleashed. Unable adequately to counter the crushing force of police arms and manpower, the students and others retaliated by destroying the physical structures of apartheid—administrative buildings, schools, and institutions.

The state's further violent assault on the language and culture of black people, on their future, and on their power and ability to effect changes in policies of immediate concern was inherent in the proposed education-policy change that would have made Afrikaans the medium of instruction in African schools.

Violence too was done to the fabric of society, not only by apartheid and its migration and urbanization policies but also as a consequence of the divisions it created within families. Sam Mashaba spoke of the painful consequences of his brother's assimilation into apartheid structures and policies. The uprising itself cast a most chilling shadow over relations between the generations. Although many parents supported their children, many thought they had failed them in the past and had therefore propelled them into a violent present in which they were

called upon to take up the tasks that were left undone by the generation that went before.<sup>15</sup> (See: "Du Randt comments" in Chapter 2)

The inability of individual parents to protect children from police retribution, and the violence done to their dignity and authority by countless encounters with government administrators and the police, left parents powerless and speechless. At times it must have seemed as if their children spoke a different language. This was especially true with respect to the issue of education, where the older generation's investment and belief in education led to deep concern about and disagreement over the targets their children attacked. The ever present threat of the police and fear of parental interference made secrecy indispensable for the students, further disrupting the links between parents and their children and disrupting family ties that were already under severe strain. The most irrevocable disruption was, of course, executed by death. But secrecy also wrought its damage. Elliot Ndlovu lost his youngest son, Hastings, in the first encounter between police and the demonstrating students. But it was not to be the end. He had three other children: 25

They decided to flee the country. I remember coming back late one night, and I found the house was full of students. If I come at home there, I find my children's friends here. I just greet and get into my bedroom there, and I sleep. That evening it was full of kids here, they were singing, happy, playing records here, and ... in the morning everybody was gone. [long pause] ... So, that's how they decided to leave the country. My wife was running a shop at Tladi, but after this incident, her health deteriorated to the extent that she had to linger. She never recovered. She died in '82, 1982 she died.<sup>16</sup> (See TRC testimony: Elliot Ndlovu, testimony before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Human Rights Violations, Submissions - Questions and Answers, Date: 23 July 1996, Case: Soweto, Day 2: Human Rights Violations Hearings & Submissions, Hearing Transcripts, Johannesburg, Victim Hearings, 4. Soweto 22 - 26 July 1996, Elliot Ndlovu.)

Physical violence was inscribed not only on bodies but in the memories and on the dignity of people. The voices of individuals such as Elliot Ndlovu spoke softly of the past, sometimes gravely with time and age, at other times raw with emotion. The bodies of those who did not die or disappear have survived or recuperated from the physical violence of the uprising. Pain, grief, and anger became part of their memories and their individual histories. It is to the individual memory of violence in the lived experience of those who have survived the uprising that the last part of this chapter turns in the story of Lilli Mokganyetsi.

#### Notes:

**Note 7:** Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (New York: Vintage International, 1989), 23.

**Note 8:** Stendhal, *Vie d'Henri Brulard*, quoted in Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, tr. Francis J. Ditter Jr. and Vida Yazdi Ditter (New York: Harper

and Row, 1980), 55.

**Note 9:** See Daniel L. Schacter, *Searching for Memory: The Brain, the Mind, and the Past* (New York: Basic Books, 1996); John Kotre, *White Gloves: How We Create Ourselves Through Memory* (New York: Free Press, 1995), and Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, 52.

**Note 10:** Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, 56.

**Note 11:** Patience Tshetlo, interview by Helena Pohlandt-McCormick, tape recording, Johannesburg, June 1995.

**Note 12:** Ibid.

**Note 13:** It is striking that, among all the acquisitions of personal papers in the State Archive system, there are none of African people. The state archives in South Africa used their archival privileges to exclude some materials and documents from their collection, and to destroy others that were unwanted. The archival system of South Africa is now, as so much else, changing fast, and undergoing a process of analysis and reinvention. In a remarkable and quite unselfconscious exhibition of change of heart and priorities, the State Archive in Pretoria displayed in the early months of 1995 the original posters and pamphlets as well as police photographs from the Soweto uprising, artifacts that had until then been secreted in the inaccessible stacks of the archive under the protection of the South African Archives Act. For a more detailed discussion of the changing history of the archives during the 1990s, see my essay, "In Good Hands: Researching the 1976 Soweto Uprising in the State Archives of South Africa," in Antoinette Burton (ed.), *Archive Stories: Facts, Fiction, and the Writing of History* (Durham: Duke University Press, forthcoming 2005).

**Note 14:** Zakes Molotsi, interview by Helena Pohlandt-McCormick, tape recording, Johannesburg, May, 1995.

**Note 15:** Elliot Ndlovu, in *Two Decades ... Still, June 16*, film produced by Loli Repanis, directed by Khalo Carlo Matabane, for SABCTV, 16 June 1996.

**Note 16:** Ibid.