

## Chapter 6

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

#### The Wounded: "... But the Pain You Feel Alone"

Oral history can reveal how memory and imagination generate historical knowledge in an effort to make sense of the personal experience of historical events.<sup>52</sup> Many things shape memory, including the circumstances of the remembering, the time between the event and the telling, and the age of the narrator both then and now. Another, less well-understood influence on memory is the sociopolitical context of an experience—in particular, how revisions of a nation's historical memory compel individuals to repress or alter their private memories. Oral narratives are a process of the conscious and unconscious (re)construction of a story in the remembering of a historical event. They are shaped by the interaction of social and political conditions, the relationship between historian and narrator, and the individual experience of remembering. Narrators always actively shape and measure their recollections. Life histories of experiences in repressive contexts are influenced by the contemporary political context, the received collective memory as it is altered over time (historiography), and people's changing circumstances at the time and in the present.

Among the forces that most shaped the remembering at the time of the interview was the prolonged period of violence that marred the extended negotiation after the release of Nelson Mandela and leading up to the elections of 1994. For several narrators, first interviewed in 1993, emerging hope and faith in the possibilities of a changed future was tempered by this violence—it had most recently climaxed in the assassination of Chris Hani—and by growing anxiety over the prospects for elections planned for 1994. They needed to make sense of what seemed like such a contradiction. How could they take the compelling power and knowledge of substantial change at hand and reconcile that with the daily experience of the violence that accompanied it and seemed irretrievably both a part of it and rooted in the past? For Patience Tshetlo, this violence reverberated in her memories even a year after the elections.

70

HP-M: How do people talk about June 16 now?

Patience: They don't even talk now, they can't... They don't even remember now. They can't talk anymore.

[...]

No, no. It's not like those years when Mr. Mandela was still in Robben Island.

HP-M: Then people talked about it?

Patience: Yes, they were talking there. They said the children tried to take over to Mandela. Others they were talking, they said children is better, but others they didn't want [them], they didn't want [this].<sup>53</sup>

For her, the violence in the townships had made it impossible to continue to think of June 16 as the "beginning of freedom." It had altered the content and shape of the memory:

HP-M: Why do you think that is?

Patience: I don't know. They are talking this freedom now. And the killings. You know, the people from Soweto, they have suffered too much. I think that is why they have forgotten the 16th. Before election last year, in the trains there were a lot of people dead, they have been killed. I think that's why they can't even remember the June 16th.

HP-M: Because of the violence ...

Patience: *Jaa*, violence. Yes. Oooh, we are near the station. We used to see the train when is coming. Seven o'clock train at the night. We'll hear the cries there, when we go the train is getting to platform. People they are thrown there in the railway line, stabbed, shot, I think that's why they forgot the June 16th now. Because there is other things which is following ... violence.<sup>54</sup> (See: "Patience Tshetlo Interview.")

In Zakes Molotsi's office at ANC headquarters in downtown Johannesburg, pictures commemorating the life and death of Chris Hani hung on every wall. The metal siding that was to keep the sun out of his window was bent and buckled, still showing the damage from where a bomb, exploded to disrupt the process of transition to elections in 1994, had torn into the building. The shattered glass of the window had been repaired, but it was almost as if shards of it still crunched underfoot, jangling the nerves of memory. In this way, political agendas and, even in 1995, the daily reality of apartheid and the struggle against it were still close to narrators' thoughts as they told their stories.

How different individuals felt this violence, how they bore it over time, and, above all, how it may have affected or changed their memories of these days was highly individual, sometimes quite elusive. Lilli Mokganyetsi's story was told mainly in the language of public collective experience.<sup>55</sup> However, contradictions and inconsistencies in the interview, and her way of shaping the narrative, alerted me to the particular relevance of its private meaning. Rather than discount the

fractures in this otherwise coherent tale, I have tried to think of them as "landmarks of memory," as indicators of how suffering was remembered and how it influenced all other memory. At the time I interviewed her, Lilli Mokganyetsi<sup>56</sup> was a 35-year-old teacher, born and raised in Soweto. Her story was one of political coming of age in the midst of the crisis in Soweto. Like so many young men and women, she was drawn into the vortex of politics and learned, within the space of a few days in Soweto in 1976, what might otherwise have remained outside her experience.



**Alexandra children.**

"Come Lilli, come, let's go. Come, come here, let's go." You know, I just joined in [laughs] ... we ran the streets of Soweto, getting into schools, collecting people... we were ... raising our fists, Black Power, Black Power, Black Power... We traveled the whole of Soweto, until ... we reach Phefeni. Yes... Until we reached Phefeni...<sup>57</sup>



**Soweto boys.**

Her voice grew softer as she told the following distressing part of her story:

And then, from there, a certain man ... [she hesitates] ... I wonder who was that man ... who we threw with stones, he was driving a car, of course, he was a white man. We threw him with stones, because he was forcing to move within the mob, because even other motorists, when they came, when they came our direction and find out there is a mob, they would rather turn, or try to take another direction. So this man forced his way through us. And then, we tried to chase him, go back, go back, go back. He insisted, and he suddenly took out the shotgun, and then when he was just about to fire one, or whether he fired one, I can't say... We started throwing stones, we started hitting him with stones [she emphasizes], until he died [she emphasizes], and we took a dust bin, of course, they put him inside that dust bin, and then ... in the meantime ... you could see flames blowing from somewhere ... [unclear] I tell you that it wasn't from our own mob only, because Soweto is a very big township... Smoke started billowing, and then the police of course, they now came in full force, shout at us, shout, shout, shout, shout, all those, all those ... we tried to resist, you know, we were throwing them with stones of course, but at the ultimate end we were fighting a losing battle. [Italic indicates where I added emphasis.]<sup>58</sup> (See: "Lilli Mokganyetsi Interview.")

We were both silent. It seemed as if we had, suddenly, stepped back in time, closer to the actual event. Lilli, in this crowd, had picked up stones from the ground and thrown them at a man until he was dead. Despite our emerging friendship and the many hours of meandering, sometimes searching, mostly everyday conversation that we had had over the course of a year and that had brought us closer and closer, this story had remained untold. In fact, Lilli Mokganyetsi had told no one of this encounter before.

Here was the vivid personal experience of one of the most violent episodes of the uprising. (See Chapter 2, "Tremor.") There are many other accounts of the stoning—most of them by witnesses sympathetic to the state. It was an episode which the state, in its official retelling, tapped mercilessly to prove the "savagery" of the black youth in revolt. **80**

Shortly after the shooting, Mr J. H. B. Esterhuizen, a WRAB [West Rand Bantu Administration] official, drove along Pela Street in a motor vehicle belonging to the Board. It is not known where he was going, nor is it clear whether the name of the Board was painted on the vehicle. Almost directly opposite the Phomolong clinic, the rioting scholars threw stones at the vehicle and one large stone shattered the windscreen. Some of these scholars were identified as pupils of the MIHS [Morris Isaacson High School]. Ten or so youths dragged Mr Esterhuizen from his car and assaulted him for about three minutes. He was struck with stones and sticks, and left for dead on the ground. Three students fetched a rubbish bin from a house and emptied out hot ash onto him. This is why it was found at the inquest that an attempt had been made to burn his body. A report in a Johannesburg morning newspaper on the 17th read that they had thrown the body into the bin and that some of them had said: 'That is were he belongs.'<sup>59</sup>



**Alexandra Placard - "Black Power, Free Mandela."**

Looked at side by side, the two accounts of the killing of J. H. B. Esterhuizen had an episodic quality, similar in the violence they portrayed, different in the meaning they attributed to that violence—on the face of it, two sides of the same coin. One was the lone voice of an individual remembering, the other spoke with the authority of the state. Each "episode" carried within it traces of the collective narrative of which it was a part, of the collective narrative that shaped its particular telling. These were accounts that followed different paths, each shaped by the history that preceded it and also by the layers of personal memory, collective memories, and "official" histories through which they had passed. On a personal level, it hardly mattered that the collective history of resistance later legitimized violence against the state and its collaborators, even such terrifying violence as the necklacing of other Africans. These were collective meanings that might be expected to shape the story at the time of the telling. At the time of the

event, however, no such group or collective meaning existed, and the violence (or violent responses to police violence) had not yet become commonplace. The explosion of violence on June 16, on the part both of the police and of the schoolchildren, would have had a psychological impact at the time, and that, over time, would influence its telling. Nor would someone like Lilli, relatively protected from the excesses of police power and growing up in an era of dampened protest and muted resistance, have had any experience of such violence, either at the hands of others or on her own. The question remains, then, why this story, which had remained untold until our interview, emerged when it did.

The death of Esterhuizen was a landmark of memory marked by violence. It featured as prominently in the memory of individual participants as in the "official" apartheid versions of the uprising. What needs to be addressed is the emotional intensity with which this episode was charged. Collective and individual memory is powerfully linked to affect and emotion. Lilli was trying to make sense of the events that scarred her consciousness and her memory. She needed to find a place for the violence and the questions about herself it raised—questions about guilt being among them—to establish continuity in her own biography and memory.

My own disquiet at the sudden fragility of the line that separated heroes from villains in Lilli's story caused me to ask no further questions at that time, and the story hastened on. In fact it was the motion of the story that conveyed its emotion—and with that the importance of its meaning for her. Lilli's story began with the quiet of the evening before, the ignorance, even forgetfulness, but quickly surged forward, even as the students moved from their school, along the roads, past other schools, other children running to join the group, fast, to the deathly encounter. There was a rhythm to her narration, amplified by the repetition of the words *stones*, *go back*, and *shout*. It evoked the pounding feet, the clenched fists thrust into the air, and the thudding stones as well as the gathering emotion, the single-mindedness as the swelling crowd moved toward its rendezvous with other children coming at Orlando High School from various directions.

But there was more. On her way to another demonstration in downtown **85** Johannesburg three months later, she was confronted with the full ugliness of police power:

We were supposed to march to town... When we started to [hitch]hike, we saw a bus coming, it was a Putco bus. And then this Putco bus, it was going to stop... Immediately when the bus stopped, a police car was here, ... they shot at us randomly, we ran right under the ... train bridge, when suddenly I heard a very heavy thing, ... my right hand it was so heavy ... I was wearing a white skirt, a red t-shirt, ja, a long-sleeved red t-shirt, ... my hand it was so heavy... I started screaming ... help ... I ran, you know ... I ran. When I was running

under the bridge, ... there was mud there, mud with [pauses, then with more certainty:] yes mud, then I fell there, I stood up again, I fell, I started crawling now, I started crawling. When I reached ... the end of the end of the bridge, when I tried to stand up, I tried to lift my leg, it ... didn't allow me to do so. I tried. When I looked down I found my skirt, it was open here, it was ... there was no blood there, it was just open... No man. Then I fell down again. Then I started screaming: people, help me, help me, help me, I've been shot at. Then blood started coming out. So now, I realized that I have been ... I was being shot from the back...<sup>60</sup> (See: "Lilli Mokganyetsi interview.")

For all its detail, this was also a symbolic story, a metanarrative. Lilli's story incorporated all the elements of the collective story as well as some pieces of the official history. Her words described the children of the Soweto uprising as historical agents in their own right. But they also suggested—through her use of such words as *mob* and the description of her initial fears—the possibility that the children were, as the government had it, "passive pawns" whipped into a destructive frenzy by "communist agitators." Simultaneously, it was a story about the loss of innocence, about the violation of the body and the spirit, about knowing the sound of gunshots, and about learning how state structures were designed to subject a people.

Two acts of violence framed the story in a way that showed they were linked. The police bullet violated Lilli's body, just as the killing of the man on the street violated her innocence and that of a generation of children. This was the story of a brutal coming of age, of recognizing fear, and of the gathering force of knowledge. It was a story in which the clear boundaries between official and private memory, between hero and victim, were blurred. It was an epic and imaginative story, swelling with anger and with pride almost twenty years later, as if it just happened. In addition, Lilli's story was also what Alessandro Portelli has called a "youth narrative," marked by a sense of openness and change, of multiple possible identities.<sup>61</sup> It thus revealed the space between the personal experience and the "history" as one marked not simply by the passage of time but by changing meanings, changing identities, and additional layers of history, events, and experiences. It was a story that moved between the *I* and the *we*, eloquent and compelling in the way it revealed the struggle between and negotiation of collective and individual identity.<sup>62</sup> Because only a relatively short amount of time had passed and memories of the Soweto uprising had taken on new meaning in postapartheid South Africa, they seemed more readily accessible to the historian. However, the Soweto uprising was a youth uprising. Any analysis therefore also needed to take into account that these historical actors were children and young people—children, or youth, who are now adults, and who represented and reconfigured their own actions over time and space.

But this story raised more questions. How and why did it emerge from memory where it had remained hidden until its insertion into this narrative? In what

relationship did it stand to the judgment of others? Moreover, how did this private memory intersect, overlap, or contradict collective memory? I would argue that the stoning was a "landmark of memory," created by the convergence of public and private experience.<sup>63</sup> It was not just the exceptionally vivid story that emerged but also one that showed all the signs of the wounded individual, who, in the remembering and the telling, surrendered the injury and anguish of the self that were part of the individual experience of the historical. Lilli Mokganyetsi's story undercut the heroic. I would suggest that the primary reason this story was hidden came from the psychological need to maintain some sense of continuity in a life history. Creating personal continuity in the absence of political continuity contorted memory.

The oppressive political context of apartheid produced repressed, conflicted, and dissonant memories. In fact, the memories of experiences in repressive political contexts are often fraught with guilt and complicity. People needed to integrate memories in order to create personal identity, a "me that stays the same,"<sup>64</sup> which provides a sense of stability over time. Put differently, pieces of knowledge of a personal past are woven together in a complex mixture of life stories and personal myths, creating "biographies of self that provide narrative continuity between past and future."<sup>65</sup> However, establishing continuity in a person's life often demands repressing or hiding certain ambiguous experiences even if they were pivotal to the individual's life. Lilli Mokganyetsi actively shaped the telling of her part in the Soweto uprising, not because it lacked significance for her life but because its details and her disquiet at its violence did not fit the public historical narrative in the tradition of heroic struggle against apartheid. **90**

Despite forgetfulness, despite all the inconsistencies and discrepancies that affect how individuals construct the past and therefore make history,<sup>66</sup> there was a "fundamental integrity" to this autobiographical memory.<sup>67</sup> "In the prevailing view of memory, you judge authenticity by the vividness of an image and its wealth of detail."<sup>68</sup> But recent work on memory has shown that qualities of exactness and vividness, including consistency, emotionality, and confidence in remembering do not prove a memory to be true in the conventional sense. Memories can be essentially true even when significant facts are wrong.<sup>69</sup> If we allow that the vividness of a memory does not necessarily guarantee its authenticity, then the reverse, that a "flawed" memory may be false yet contain an essential truth, may also hold. Not all important memories are those highlighted in a narrative: Some of the deepest truths may be hidden in a soft aside, a detail (seemingly) quickly passed over as it was here.

Collective public memory has little space for individual wounds to innocence and body, or for the guilt that only briefly became visible in the gentleness of Lilli's

words: "I wonder who was that man." Lilli's story was told mostly in the mode of collective political memory. The stoning broke that pattern. In the way she set it up in the telling, against her own falling victim to police bullets, it became striking as the articulation of a private memory of the loss of both physical and political innocence. It was a "landmark of memory" that revealed the need to establish continuity between the present and the past and to establish the possibility for a responsible future. Lilli Mokganyetsi's story conveyed profound meanings that went beyond the immediate, beyond the apparent, beyond the chronological, beyond the coherent or the utterable. It revealed the interstices, the hidden places that memory seeks out in order to heal the wounds that history has inflicted on the individual. Lilli's story demonstrated an essential and vigorous sense of responsibility about the past, "the existence of an ethical relationship with memory, and ... a will and a need to elaborate the process of mourning."<sup>70</sup> In the end, this story stunned me into near silence, and it was its very power to unsettle that proved its significance. It steered me toward a more complicated understanding of the powerful meanings of the stories of Soweto, toward recognizing the untenable damage done by the silence to which these stories were relegated and by the silences thrown up between those who were part of Soweto and those, like me, who stood by, or let it happen, or who countenanced those in their midst who committed these acts of violence.

Through the act of remembering, one person's individual experience continues to be linked with changing collective memory. It is generally accepted that when public and private memory overlap, such a "fusion of the individual and collective memory" generates great power.<sup>71</sup> Ronald Fraser's<sup>72</sup> work on the Spanish civil war presented intense testimonies, a consequence of the connectedness of public and private experience. On the opposite end of the scale, Luisa Passerini and Anne Marie Troeger have argued that silences scar memories of Nazism precisely because of the separation of politics and private life. What Passerini has called "wounds in the tissue of memory"<sup>73</sup> and Selma Leydesdorff has characterized as "shattered memory"<sup>74</sup> are the dark side of memories of the experiences of totalitarianism. They range from speechless despair to forgetting, denial, suppression, and resignation. Each of these in turn is compounded by a desire to absolve the self.

But the coincidence or separation of public and private experiences, and their parallels in remembering—eloquence and silence—are never definitive or unequivocal. Cohesive stories reveal ruptures. Similarly, when there seem to be clear divisions between public and private there are things that bring them together. It could be, then, that a story such as the stoning, unanticipated and emotionally intense, signaled the wounding of a person, an event that had no place in the otherwise cohesive, heroic—and collective—story. It was also evidence of the presence of realities and choices for which otherwise there were



no words or spaces or that have too long remained hidden.

Two kinds of information go into a memory: the original perception of the event and the information supplied after the event. How much time has passed, therefore, is important, as is what has happened both to private and collective memory in that time (historiographical debates, guilt, liberation and the possibility of a future, age). With time, the two seem to become blended into a single memory that replaces what was originally present.<sup>75</sup> Memories are not always stable, though, or unbroken. Even if Lilli Mokganyetsi's story provided only a glimpse into the experience and feeling of that day, it was a glimpse that was sufficient to make impossible any subsequent naive oversimplification of her and others' life-history memories of resistance or submission in the face of coercive and violent authority.<sup>76</sup> This was a story that pushed beyond existing frameworks, interpretations, and norms. It carried within it hidden meanings and buried wounds, reminders of the conflicting social forces and institutions that affected consciousness and remembering. It was a narrative that forced a reevaluation of the categories and concepts within a changing cultural and historical context, especially when it has historically homogenized, simplified, demeaned, and controlled (women's, children's, African's) actions and voices. It also provided some insight into the relationship between the concept of the self and cultural or political norms, between private/individual and public/collective memory.

More than anything else, this interview with Lilli Mokganyetsi testified to the power of the dynamic interaction between two people—a dynamic that in many productive interviews escapes the historian's control. This moment of the stoning allowed a passing glimpse of what the experience might have been like before retrospective reinterpretation altered it. With changing political opinions and climates and individual experience, actions considered legitimate in the past may become unacceptable or too painful and therefore fade from memory, or they may be forcefully excised or altered. Lilli Mokganyetsi's story, a personal narrative set in an oppressive historical context, indicated that memories of apartheid South Africa were fraught with questions of guilt, pain, and personal responsibility. This was a historical era around which political and theoretical debates have arisen that not only permitted but in some cases encouraged people who lived through them to reinterpret their experiences. The stoning permitted an invaluable insight into the original psychological reality of the moment, momentarily unfettered by subsequent layers of interpretation and justification. But the process, subconscious or conscious, to change or understand the meaning of events continued, and the moment of the telling revealed the narrator's subjectivity, the time that had passed, and the many layers of meaning that the story had passed through. This story granted a glimpse of what may be psychologically true for the narrator, of the psychological cost of an event, and of the narrator's relationship to her own history. Memory has to heal wounds, wounds that may be as individual

as the memory or the experience. The violence done to people's consciousness, to minds, to memory may be elusive. The violence done to bodies was not. Lilli bears the physical "scars" of the violence she experienced:

[T]he hole in the right, in the right arm, it's this side [shows], and then this other side, on the left leg, I also was shot from behind here, and then, so now the bullet went through this way [shows] ... so now, that is why the, the, the, the skirt was opened ... at the back it wasn't so much, just a tiny hole, and then in the front it was ... just like that [indicates large space with her hands ... long pause].<sup>77</sup> (See: "Lilli Mokganyetsi interview.")

In this way, the violence of the Soweto uprising and the violence of police action became inscribed on bodies, serving as a daily physical reminder of things that the mind would much rather suppress or forget.

#### Notes:

**Note 52:** "... But the pain you feel alone," the quote in the title of this section, is from Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the chairman of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. See Nombulelo Elizabeth Makhubu, testimony, 30 April 1996, Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Human Rights Violations, Submissions (Questions and Answers), Case GO/O133, Johannesburg, Day 3.

**Note 53:** Patience Tshetlo, interview by Helena Pohlandt-McCormick, tape recording, Johannesburg, June 1995.

**Note 54:** Ibid.

**Note 55:** This story has appeared, in a somewhat different version, in Helena Pohlandt-McCormick, "'I Saw a Nightmare...': Violence and the Construction of Memory (Soweto, June 16, 1976)," in "'Not Telling: Secrecy, Lies, and History,'" ed. Gary Minkley and Martin Legassick, special issue, *History and Theory* 39 (December 2000): 23-44. In a different analytical context, this story has appeared in Michelle Moulton and Helena McCormick, "Boundary Crossings or Conversations in Complicated Contexts: Oral History of Nazi Germany and Apartheid South Africa—A Comparative Perspective," *History Workshop Journal* 48 (Fall 1999): 41-63.

**Note 56:** Lilli Mokganyetsi, interview by Helena Pohlandt-McCormick, tape recording, Johannesburg, 8 December, 1993.

**Note 57:** Ibid.

**Note 58:** Ibid.

**Note 59:** South Africa, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Riots at Soweto and Elsewhere from the 16th of June 1976 to the 28th of February 1977* (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1980), 1:123-24.

**Note 60:** Lilli Mokganyetsi, interview by Helena Pohlandt-McCormick, tape recording, Johannesburg, 8 December, 1993.

**Note 61:** Portelli, *The Battle of Valle Giulia*, x-xi, 192-98.

**Note 62:** Don Foster and Joha Louw-Potgieter, eds., *Social Psychology in South Africa*, ed. (Johannesburg: Lexicon, 1991), 475-76.

**Note 63:** Luisa Passerini, ed., *Memory and Totalitarianism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 13.

**Note 64:** Kotre, *White Gloves*, 150.

**Note 65:** Schacter, *Searching for Memory*, 93.

**Note 66:** Psychologist Dan McAdams provides this link to history: "The unfolding drama of life is revealed more by the telling than by the actual events told. Stories are not merely 'chronicles,' ... written to report exactly what transpired and at what time. Stories are less about facts and more about meanings. In the subjective and embellished telling of the past, the past is constructed—history is made." Dan P. McAdams, *The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self* (New York: Morrow, 1993), 28.

**Note 67:** Craig Barclay, quoted in Schacter, *Searching for Memory*, 95.

**Note 68:** Research by psychologist Frederick Bartlett, described in Kotre, *White Gloves*, 32-39.

**Note 69:** See Portelli, *Trastulli*, 1-26.

**Note 70:** Renate Siebert, "Don't Forget: Fragments of a Negative Tradition," in Passerini, *Memory and Totalitarianism*, 166.

**Note 71:** Kotre, *White Gloves*, 230-31.

**Note 72:** Ronald Fraser, *Blood of Spain: An Oral History of the Spanish Civil War* (New York: Pantheon, 1979), and cited in Passerini, *Memory and Totalitarianism*, 13.

**Note 73:** Passerini, *Memory and Totalitarianism*, 13.

**Note 74:** Selma Leydesdorff, "A Shattered Silence: The Life Stories of Survivors of the Jewish Proletariat of Amsterdam," in Passerini, *Memory and Totalitarianism*, 147.

**Note 75:** Lutz Niethammer and Luisa Passerini have a slightly different version of this: "[T]he actual perception must have been far more complex before the observer settled on one particular perspective, and established it in the niche of his memory." Passerini, "Introduction," in *Memory and Totalitarianism*, 13; and Lutz Niethammer, "Where Were You on 17 June? A Niche in Memory," in *Memory and Totalitarianism*, 54.

**Note 76:** James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 8.

**Note 77:** Lilli Mokganyetsi, interview by Helena Pohlandt-McCormick, tape recording, Johannesburg, December 1993.