

Chapter 4

The Participants

Life Histories: Four Voices

In the process of remembering, at any level—private/individual or collective/public—the individual always must negotiate the difficult terrain of the relationship between real physical violence (the "painful 'hard facts'" of lived experiences⁶) and, what is related to it, the processes of making meaning of all of the lived experiences and the meanings that have already been invented and created with the passage of time. Almost twenty years had passed when these four stories of Soweto were told in 1993, 1994, and 1995, respectively. Each person narrated a "factual" account of their lived experiences of the events of June 16.⁷ Each told the story of their experience of the uprising within the larger context of their lives. While not necessarily representative of all the groups in African society at this time, each of these four people represented diverse positions, ages, gender, and, in the different ways they were part of the uprising, four different inside perspectives and insights. Each had different personal memories of these events.

Lilli Mokganyetsi, now a schoolteacher and language specialist, mother of two, was 16 years old and a student in 1976. Zakes Molotsi, a former fighter of Umkhonto We Sizwe (the armed wing of the ANC), a "graduate" of eight years on Robben Island, was 22 years old and a factory worker in 1976. Patience Tshetlo, a domestic worker, a nanny and long-time cook, was 44 in 1976. At the time of the uprising, she was at home looking after her several young children. Sam Mashaba was 17 in 1976, a senior at Tshivase High School in Venda and already an active student organizer. Now he is a minister of the Seventh-Day Black Adventist Church. All four are parents.

Voices remembering in the present are never static (although their transcription fixes them), and they are usually not the same voice that spoke twenty years ago. These voices—all of them speaking in English—were recorded in 1993-95. They were *remembering* June 16, 1976. They were shaped and influenced by each speaker's experience, age/generation, gender, status/occupation, proximity to the struggle—all influences that have changed with time.⁸

Beginnings

Schoolchildren from junior secondary schools and high schools all over Soweto stood at the center of the uprising that began with the march protesting Afrikaans on June 16, 1976. However unruly or varied, the voices of these rebellious young men and women—boys and girls—affirm unequivocally and abundantly that they were the conscious, self-aware, often courageous if inexperienced protagonists of their own history.

Of the four narrators, Lilli Mokganyetsi was the youngest in 1976, attending Form 2 (the equivalent of ninth grade in the United States) at a secondary school in Tladi, a part of Soweto. At 16, politics had not yet become relevant to her, and on the morning of June 16, 1976, she prepared herself as usual and then went to her school, bracing herself for the mathematics examination she was to take. All the instructions and questions would be put to her in Afrikaans, the language of the township administration and the apartheid government. **25**

For many like her, the events of this day were at once heady and frightening, and the beginning of the protests came as a surprise. Although not directly involved in its organization, young schoolchildren like Lilli were nevertheless drawn quickly into the march and its snarled aftermath. An old boyfriend grabbed Lilli's hand, and she quickly overcame her earlier hesitancy, getting swept up in the in the events of the day even though she was uncertain of the reason for the protests.

Slightly older than Lilli, Sam Mashaba was a senior student at Tshivase High School near Sibasa in Venda, one of the areas north of Johannesburg slated to become a "homeland" when the uprising began. Tshivase's distance from Soweto (several hundred kilometers) would have meant that Sam was physically removed from these events. But, as he explained, the "media, the newspapers, were very good about informing us about what was happening there. We had a newspaper that was banned eventually, which was called *The World*—it was a good paper which we used to read very much as students. So I would say that it offered us much information regarding what was taking place here."

Despite the physical distance, then, and what he called the "diverse different perspective" of students in the northern Transvaal, it was clear that agendas and preoccupations in the north were not dissimilar and that protest action was not much different from that in Soweto.⁹ An established network of communications had linked the cities to the countryside well before the uprising began. Every second week or so, as Sam Mashaba tells it, the students met with certain people at a mission station. Often members of the Black Consciousness Movement, these visitors would meet with students—sometimes under the protection of a prayer or a choir meeting—to help them understand political developments and planning elsewhere in the country, and so news of the beginning of the uprising did not come as a surprise to Sam at all.

Such networks were often staffed by older students or by those, like Zakes Molotsi, who were no longer at school and were more experienced or otherwise involved in political activity. Zakes had a good sense of what was going to happen and was aware of the plan for demonstrations on June 16. Though he was perhaps not caught quite so badly off guard, he hardly anticipated what "the spark of Wednesday, June 16" would unleash.

For those like Patience Tshetlo who were removed more by age than by physical distance from the march and the exploding conflict, the shock was almost palpable and the distance quickly evaporated with the realization that it was *their* children who stood at the center of the shots and the flames.



Burning truck, Alexandra.



WRAB smoke and tree, White City.

Everyone, however, was taken aback by the violence of the confrontation, 30 and no one was prepared for what had been torn loose in the township. By the late afternoon, the township was in flames. At the Orlando police station they were handing out batons and guns. Police riot vans moved toward Orlando East township. It looked as if they were manned by soldiers, as they were wearing camouflage uniforms and carried rifles. A helicopter landed on the Orlando East rugby grounds.¹⁰ It was a long train trip home that day, for those who had left schoolchildren behind in Soweto and who could see the smoke hanging over the horizon just outside of Johannesburg. It seemed like the end of the world.



Police, Alexandra.



Burning truck, Alexandra.

Education

What each narrator thought of as the defining element in his or her own identity is suggested by how the context for the individual's experience of the uprising was established and in the particular way in which each began to explain the story of his or her participation or part played in the uprising of June 16, 1976.¹¹ On the one hand, a disciplined family background in which education was considered paramount set the stage for the personal relevance of a struggle that started in the schools and that revolved, at least initially, around issues of education and advancement.

Lilli, Sam, and Patience all came from family backgrounds in which education

played an important role. Everyone in Lilli's family, except for her oldest sister, was educated. The children's lives revolved around school, and only around school, and the family was highly regarded in the community because of their perseverance. Schoolwork came easily to Lilli, and the decision to become a teacher seemed only natural.

Sam was born "in a peasant home, a very poor home indeed." His father was illiterate, his mother went only as far as Standard 2 (the equivalent of fourth grade in the United States). He was the "fourth and last, born in the home." Only his oldest sibling, a sister, was not educated, less surprising perhaps for the "remote areas of the Northern Transvaal" where girls took on domestic duties very early. But all the boys in the family went to school and supported each other in this endeavor.

Like Sam, Patience Tshetlo had also grown up in a rural town, and her parents invested heavily in the education of their last-born daughter. Her own experience of having to take hygiene classes in Afrikaans as early as 1948, and her experience of the potential of education, even in a field so humble as domestic science, which had secured her a position as a cook for a large company canteen for many years, made her sympathetic to the students of Soweto and to their call to be heard.

Zakes Molotsi was one of no doubt many children of Soweto who was, by force of economic and family circumstances, driven out of school early. For most, this meant the end of school altogether. Children would return to school only when parents or other family members had overcome financial difficulties. Patience Tshetlo said her "father used to ... [keep] ... goats ... [with] wool, like sheep, but they are goats with this big long hair. He used to send me to school with that. He'll cut the wool on April for the session up to June, and then in September again." Then he would sell the wool and send his daughter back to school.¹² 35

Experience

On the other hand, for someone like Zakes, a broader background of political awareness and a history of knowing—a background of political experience rather than education—provided the guiding context for political responsibility and action. Zakes Molotsi almost immediately placed his childhood and the beginning of his story in the broad context of a divided country, trying to fix, in terms of age, when the private became political, when the individual memory merged with or contradicted the received collective memory, challenging or questioning received history. This account indicated that there might have been a brief period, coinciding with childhood, in which the boundaries did not matter, but that life was circumscribed, that in fact beyond this time there was no place that was simply private, simply individual, that was not affected or shaped by the political realities of the country.

Zakes Molotsi had long been part of what had remained of the African National Congress, which was banned and organizing underground. He understood the things that foreshadowed the events of the uprising, the mounting tension and the small successes of union activists in organizing resistance in the workplace. He knew that 1976 "was a year that was a very dark year, you could see that ... a sense that there was something wrong."

For Sam Mashaba, none of this was new either. He remembered growing up in the presence of a politically active brother and with the constant threat of the police. In the years of his growing up, he had merely been an observer, seldom affected directly by the activism of his older sibling or by harassment by the police. But by 1976, he was well aware of the troubles burdening South African society.

As the youngest of the four narrators, Lilli Mokganyetsi told a story marked by her initial lack of experience. She was frightened, not only by the obvious violence of the day but also because of the newness of much of what confronted her. For those who were young, their inexperience really stood out in their memories, and Lilli several times commented on her lack of knowledge and the newness of what she was experiencing. Despite the distance in years from these events, Lilli's story reverberated with some of her ambivalence at the time. Though she had heard about clashes with the police at other schools, she was uncertain of their significance, and her story is full of references to her inexperience and her naiveté. There are many similar accounts.¹³

Change came quickly, though, as did experience, and students rapidly became **40** seasoned in dealing with the ever-present threat of the police as new demonstrations and marches followed and violence flared time and again. Despite the many attempts by the police to control the unrest, to forbid marches, and to increase their visibility and numbers, students successfully organized a new demonstration that took them right into the center of white Johannesburg in September 1976. Lilli also remembered this day and the awareness among students that the police would hardly allow a march to move from Soweto to Johannesburg proper without interference. Ever resourceful, students, making their way into the heart of the city, instead used the very means by which the government transported its otherwise segregated black workers to their white jobs in town.

Two things immediately stood out as marking participants' life stories differently and as explaining the different levels of experience among participants. The first, besides the influence of class and gender, was *age*—or where they were in their life course when these events took place. Second, and undoubtedly related to the first, was the intellectual proximity of each of these four protagonists to the struggle—i.e., the level of experience with and exposure to political issues.

Together they marked not only the way in which these events were experienced but also the way in which they were remembered and the meaning attributed them. As a school student, Lilli Mokganyetsi's story came from right inside the uprising. It was, as a result, perhaps the most searing, as I will argue in Chapter 6 "The Wounded."

In contrast, as an adult, Patience Tshetlo clearly experienced the uprising more acutely as a bystander, drawn into the conflict not as an active protagonist but as a mother. She was simultaneously sympathetic to and fearful for her children.

Family

In remembering the Soweto uprising, each of the narrators was also telling the memories of a life observed through that lense. The younger narrators most often chose to begin their story with the family, with a description of the roots that provided the personal context for the story to be told.

As we have seen, siblings could forge a path or be an example, and Sam spoke warmly of the brother who was his mentor and role model. For some, like Lilli, the influence of siblings was less direct or effective. On the evening before the planned demonstration in sympathy with the students who had been protesting the imposition of Afrikaans as a language of instruction in African schools, a curious conversation took place between her and her older brother. He clearly tried to prepare her for the coming day but, when the uprising began on the morning of June 16, she had "even forgotten" that she and her brother had talked about the plans the night before, and she was caught completely off guard.

Sam's story illustrated, however, that, far from being a source of strength, 45 families could also be the site of political division, and political ambivalence could produce that most dreadful of divisive schisms: one family member turning on the others. Sam Mashaba's story about his brother began simply enough, with an introduction of his "other elder brother, the one that I come immediately thereafter," who was a teacher. As he spoke of his suspicion that his own persecution by the police may have been the consequence of his brother's betrayal, his pain became evident. Different personalities were to be expected in every home, Sam Mashaba acknowledged, but his brother's cooptation revolved around his profession as a teacher—a profession that, in the 1970s, would have required at least a nominal adherence to the policies of *Bantu Education*—and around his need for security, both personal and professional.

In contrast, Sam Mashaba described the relationship to his mother as one of support, remembering how she embraced her children's struggle. Without a doubt parents were deeply concerned with the safety of their children, and many tried to prevent their children from going out during those dangerous days or from joining demonstrations. In the end, parents had little control, as their jobs took them far

out of the townships, and children simply waited until they were gone, seeing them as more a hindrance than a help.

There were few places or people that the children could have turned to with their concerns, a situation that Zakes Molotsi too identified as contributing significantly to the mounting tensions in the townships. Patience Tshetlo "always asked, What's going on, now today, now today, *oohh*. It was terrible." But there were times when her children did not confide in her, for fear she would pass on the information to their father, who was a police officer. In general, she supported the children's actions, but she was self-conscious about the lack of action and courage among her own cohort.

As a mother of four, Patience Tshetlo presents the vantage point of the older generation. Her story was a different one, as was her understanding of family. She found herself at an entirely different stage of her life at the time of the uprising. It determined both her position toward it at the time and the way she started her story: with an image of family but, instead of the family that included the parents that shaped *her*, the family that included the children who have come from her and who, by their very involvement in the uprising, walked a path away from her. It was thus a beginning that established a context not of the past but of the present and the future.

Like many parents, Patience also tried to talk her children out of participating in demonstrations that would put them in danger, but she was largely unsuccessful. Her words reflected some of the respectful astonishment the students' courage inspired in many adults during these violent days, but they were also critical of the violent anger of the children.¹⁴



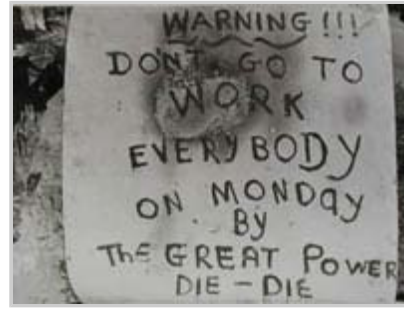
Children, Alexandra.



Small children posing in front of signs and house.



Workers, Alexandria.



Poster: "Warning!!! Don't go to work."



Poster: "Azigibelwa."

Status

Status and profession undoubtedly also influenced how people experienced and remembered Soweto. From Patience Tshetlo we get a sense of how a profession might have shaped the thinking of a person and contributed to her ambivalence about the students' actions. Her husband had retired from the South African Police by the time of the uprising, but his attitude toward the students was critical nonetheless, and it may have reflected not only his closer position to and sympathies with the state but also generational differences. 50

Sam Mashaba, who at the time of the interview was a senior minister in the Seventh-Day Adventist Church in South Africa, told a story that resonated with wisdom. His words show perhaps the clearest evidence of how occupational position in the present shaped the way the story of Soweto was remembered. More clearly than any others, his account distanced itself from the violence that was part of resistance and that had, by the time of the interview, so wracked South African daily life.

Patience Tshetlo's story was in many ways evocative of the everyday suffering under apartheid and the grind of poverty. The story about her son's shoes, left behind as students ransacked his place of work, a bottle store, was both a reflection of how little the family could afford to lose and a recognition of the mundane concerns that had to be set aside during these days. She seemed to have few moral qualms about the looting, for example, but was fearful of the police and of the violence, reflecting much of her generation's ambivalence and irresolution that was so criticized by young activists.



Bottle store, Mofolo.



Bottle store, Mofolo.

Rifts within a family or doubt in the individual were not simply a question of generation or even cohort. As change came to South Africa, it altered the meaning of Sam Mashaba's betrayal by his brother. The "terrorist" became the respected political activist, and the erstwhile teacher loyal to the government was unmasked as the informer and sellout he had been. Fear of betrayal gave way to vindication marred by sadness and the lingering effects of division within the family. The story of this family passed through different layers of time, each with a different and changing political context. The experiences of the past *then* were not easily discarded, though, as it was the memory of the betrayal in the past that was carried into the present and that, together with the new political realities of the present, formed the framework around which Sam had to construct his ideas of family, loyalty, and himself.

The years that have passed have shaped these memories. Age is undoubtedly one significant factor that alters memories. The passage of time and the resulting distance from the events being recalled caused distortions that were the consequence of faulty memory—for example, dates were mistaken and names of organizations were forgotten. But age is important in two other respects, as life histories such as those above make apparent. Age *at the time of the narration* of the life story determines how people shape their story and what meanings they embed in it. The age of the narrator *at the time of the event* described in the story seems also to have a profound effect on how those historical events were experienced and what they meant for the unfolding of that person's life. Individuals embed historical events in the unfolding story of their life. They experience events at a certain age or stage in their life—as children, mothers, adults, workers, students, adolescents—and may speak of them at a later stage. This may help explain the many differences from account to account as well as some of the inconsistencies and clashes between different accounts. Taking account of the nuances and differences revealed by each of these life stories makes it clear why any closer look at the student movement would present us with a complex picture of simultaneous unity and difference.

Notes:

Note 6: Elizabeth Jelin and Susana G. Kaufman, "Layers of Memories: Twenty Years After in Argentina" (paper presented at the conference Legacies of Authoritarianism: Cultural Production, Collective Trauma, and Global Justice, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 3-5 April 1998), 1.

Note 7: I have selected these stories, from the body of about 30 formal and informal oral interviews I have so far conducted, for their particular richness and thoughtfulness.

Note 8: It has been pointed out many times to me that individuals who may have had little to do with the ANC initially, its presence having become so tenuous in the townships in the 1970s, might very likely have formed a stronger identification with that liberation movement later on. That in turn then might have shaped their memory and presentation of events experienced in the past. Aubrey Mokoena, for example, once a member of the Black Consciousness Movement, later headed the Release Mandela campaign and has held office in the ANC government since 1994. When the Black Parents Association (BPA) was constituted as an umbrella organization on 21 June 1976, Aubrey Mokoena became the first secretary, to "handle the situation, No. 1; to look into the question of mass funeral; and No. 2, to look into the question of collecting money for the bereaved families for relief sake; and thirdly, to act as a mouthpiece for the students in this crisis." The BPA was made up of representatives of the Soweto Parents Association (SPA), the South African Students' Organization (SASO), the South African Students' Movement (SASM), Black Community Programmes (BCP), the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), the South African Black Social Workers Association, the Parents Vigilante Committee, the Institute of Black Studies, and the South African Black Women's Federation. Although most of these organizations were national, their office-bearers, represented in the BPA, generally lived in Soweto. Aubrey Dundeebele Mokoena, testimony, 7 February 1977, SAB K345, vol. 148, Commission Testimony vol. 100, pp. 4803.

Note 9: Sam Mashaba, interview by Helena Pohlandt-McCormick, tape recording, Johannesburg, September 1993.

Note 10: Zweli Sizane, statement, 12 August 1976, John Vorster Square, SAB K345, vol. 99, part 3, pp. 13-15.

Note 11: Accounts of individual family background are not always located in the same place of the interview. Some are at the beginning, revealing possibly a need to explain contributing contexts, factors, continuity with the past (as in the case of Sam), or, in contrast, a radical break with the past, a "nevertheless." Others wait, giving pride of place to the account of the events of the day, as part of a collective rather than a private story, or they respond only to my later prompting, almost as if personal history were an afterthought, unnecessary to what was experienced as, above all, collective. No account can be characterized unequivocally as private or collective remembering—they all move between the two extremes.

Note 12: Overall, this meant that the average age of black schoolchildren completing all twelve years of primary and secondary education was considerably higher than that of children of other races. Patience Tshetlo, interview by Helena Pohlandt-McCormick, tape recording, Johannesburg, June 1995.

Note 13: Paul Ndaba, in Sifiso Mxolisi Ndlovu, *The Soweto Uprisings: Counter-memories of June 1976* (Randburg, South Africa: Raven Press, 1998), 34-35.

Note 14: This ambivalence has also been commented on by Gail Gerhart. She added that "there were also critics [black adults] who questioned whether the hundreds of dead and wounded was not too high a price for the meager achievement of a government climb-down on the Afrikaans issue." In *Nadir and Resurgence, 1964-1979*, ed. Thomas G. Karis and Gail M. Gerhart, vol. 5 of *From*

Protest to Challenge: A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa, 1882-1990, ed. Thomas Karis and Gwendolyn M. Carter (Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Institution Press; vol. 5, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972), 170.