

South Africa: After the Heidelberg Tavern Massacre

The Heidelberg Tavern massacre was described by the Amnesty Committee of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) as "brutal." On New Year's Eve 1993, the Azanian People's Liberation Army (APLA), the armed wing of the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), carried out this attack on a Cape Town restaurant on the orders of APLA's director of operations, Letlapa Mphahlele, now PAC president. Many were particularly shocked as it happened at a time when the date for democratic elections had already been set for April 1994.

One of the four people killed was twenty-three-year-old white student, Lyndi Fourie, who was just finishing her civil engineering degree. Her mother, Ginn, a university lecturer, says of Mphahlele, "If I had met him then, I could have killed him with my bare hands."

Yet today Ginn Fourie and Letlapa Mphahlele share platforms in South Africa and around the world, speaking of reconciliation after tragedy through the Lyndi Fourie Foundation.

In 1978 Mphahlele, incensed by apartheid and oppressed by poverty, crossed the border to Botswana to enlist as a soldier to fight white people. He was seventeen. "Since God seemed unwilling to solve the issues for which I had prayed, I would take the liberation into my own hands." Several times in Botswana and Lesotho, he was thrown into jail. His brightness and commitment meant that he quickly rose in the leadership of the PAC's armed wing. In 1993 he slipped back into South Africa and was dubbed its most wanted terrorist. "I ordered the killing of white civilians," he says. "I thought that I would bomb them out of their cocoons of indifference to the country's reality. I believed that terror had to be answered with terror."

In July that year, armed APLA cadres under his command stormed into Saint James' Church in Cape Town during a service and killed eleven people. He had issued an order suspending attacks on civilian targets but waived the order after some black civilians had been killed in Umtata. He wanted to show that APLA had the capacity to retaliate and that no more were blacks going to be killed and massacred with impunity. At year's end, he targeted the Heidelberg Tavern.

Within a week, the three APLA soldiers involved in the attack were caught and sent for trial. Ginn Fourie attended the trial. "At the trial, I was confronted by my own feelings of anger and sadness but somehow I could engender no hate. I felt an unexplained empathy and sadness for them." She sent a message to them that she forgave them. Still, she was relieved when all three were convicted of murder and sent to prison for an average of twenty-five years each. "I was comfortable forgiving them at that point because, as a Christian, I had the role model before me of Christ forgiving his murderers, yet at the same time I depended on the law to avenge my loss."

Meanwhile, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was set up. This commission, which was getting at the truth of what was done on all sides during the anti-apartheid struggle, had the authority to grant immunity to those who had committed crimes if they disclosed what they had done. Fourie heard that the three killers might be granted amnesty and was not against it.

At the end of the hearings, the three men asked to speak to her. They thanked her and said, whether they received amnesty or not, they would take her message of forgiveness and hope to their communities and to their grave.

Mphahlele was urged to appear before the commission to make a full disclosure of his crimes. He accepted at first but then withdrew as he did not like the way the hearings were

conducted and insisted that he had waged a just war that shouldn't be treated as a crime. He was charged in the Supreme Court but acquitted on a technicality.

In 1998 Mphahlele, with the help of journalists, met Charl van Wyk, a survivor of the tavern attack and an ex-soldier who had been carrying a gun and had returned fire. They shook hands before TV cameras and shared their respective experiences. "It was the beginning of an exciting journey I was to travel," Mphahlele says. "I had to face the fact that people were killed and harmed because of my orders and that I had to sit down with those who were prepared to do so and pour out our hearts to each other."

Van Wyk, a devout Christian, invited Mphahlele to his church. Mphahlele was an avowed atheist, but for van Wyk's sake he said he would come. Van Wyk joked about it being a "spiritual ambush." Afterward, they went to the prison to visit Gcinikhaya Makoma, who had taken part in the attack on Saint James' Church. At the entrance, warders asked Letlapa if they were carrying guns. Letlapa said no, as he didn't expect people to emerge from a church service with a gun. But van Wyk was indeed carrying the gun he had used to defend against the attack in the Saint James' Church.

Mphahlele teased, "I guess you will be armed at heaven's gate."

"Yes," said van Wyk, "of course, you never know. There may be APLA hanging around the gates, and one would have to defend heaven."

"I don't think God would give a poor shot like you the task of defending heaven's gate. APLA would overrun them!" responded Mphahlele.

They laughed.

In Letlapa's autobiography, *Child of This Soil*, he described his life's journey and included this interaction with van Wyk. Ginn Fourie heard him interviewed about the book on the radio. With a "sense of anger and righteous indignation," she attended a book signing and publicly asked him, "Did you not trivialize the TRC by not participating?" She was surprised and impressed by the integrity of his response: "You could see it that way, but I felt that if the truth was sought, why were lawyers there to tell people what to say? Furthermore, my cadres were treated as common criminals, [whereas members of] the South African Defence Force remained in the army when they had clearly committed more and worse atrocities." He came from the podium to where she was sitting and said, "I'll do anything if you will meet me this week." She saw remorse in his eyes and body language. "It would have been so much easier if he'd been a monster with horns and a tail—if there was something to hate."

He offered to meet her in private—and so began their remarkable journey of reconciliation. "I did not ask for forgiveness," he says, "but she forgave me. It was the most important gift that one can receive from another human being." Ginn Fourie says, "It's not that I don't feel a great sadness of losing my daughter, but forgiving her killer has made it bearable and given me a creative way forward. Letlapa has told me that in forgiving him I have restored his humanity."

In an interview on South African radio, a commentator asked, "One wonders why she could forgive what many others found impossible. Is it because she is a Christian or that she has grappled with her own role in the country's history? Perhaps it is because she has been writing her doctoral thesis on forgiveness. Or is it all of this and the mission statement she wrote two years before her daughter died (in which she wrote she had to extend God's grace to everyone she had ever met)?"

Many, including some of her own family, could not accept her forgiveness of Lyndi's killers, but she says, "As a Christian, I cherished the role model of Christ for forgiving murderers. I have come to understand forgiveness as a process that involves the principled decision to give up one's justifiable right to revenge."

Not everyone affected by the attacks has accepted the hand extended by Mphahlele. "Some people have decided not to forgive me for what I have done," he says. "I know it's not easy to forgive and I understand them. But to those who do forgive me, it is the start of rebuilding our communities."

Letlapa had been in exile for many years. In 2003 his homecoming was formally celebrated in his village of Seleteng. Guests of honor—two of the few white people present at the occasion—were Ginn Fourie and Charl van Wyk. Fourie was invited to speak to the crowd. "Your comrade's bullets killed my daughter," she said. "That terrible pain will always be with me. But I have forgiven this man who gave the command." She spoke of her sorrow about the 350 years of oppression by her people. "It has been a long and healing journey," she said, "but now I know there is work for us to do."

"I asked," she says, "that they teach us to dance the rhythm of Africa by sharing what we are feeling, particularly fear of each other, anger, or sadness. Vulnerable feelings when expressed to each other have the potential to establish lasting bonds and may overcome the violence and corruption that oppresses us all at the moment."

Mphahlele responded, "In the past, apartheid divided us racially and ethnically. Generations that lie ahead won't forgive us if we continue to stay apart out of our own choice." Turning to Fourie and van Wyk, "people who had every reason to hate but who chose to understand and forgive," he said. "Thank you for your gift of forgiveness." He read a poem he had written the year before for Lyndi:

Forgive our idiocy
Our Souls retuned
To heed prophecy
By the graveside of the Prophet
Whose blood we spilt
Whose teachings we ridicule
While he walked among us.

Fourie's was "the most moving speech of the day" according to Mphahlele. "She also got the loudest applause, longer than I got after nearly two decades in exile."

In July that year, Fourie and Mphahlele were invited to the Grahamstown Festival to participate in a conciliation march from Rhodes University to the cathedral. Extending what she had said to the Africans about the need for her people to face up to the past, she asked Afrikaners present to forgive her British ancestors for the shame and humiliation brought upon them by the Anglo-Boer War. "No Truth and Reconciliation Commission or conciliation, the ghosts of the past still haunt us, in the pain and violence enacted by many."

In the succeeding years, Fourie and Mphahlele have spoken together at many forums in different countries. Mphahlele, who in 2005 toured British schools to talk about his experiences, says, "The fuel that keeps me running now is community involvement. Out of the gift of forgiveness, which so many black and white people have given me, I am regenerating community development."

He visited thirty-six British schools and interacted with their senior students, as well as

speaking in homes or doing interviews. He had to respond to many probing questions, ranging from whether in similar circumstances he would make the same decisions to what it was that turned the struggle for a new society in South Africa. “I have changed since then and I no longer believe that you should meet violence with violence,” he says. “The key to change in South Africa was when the ordinary people lost their fear.”

He made it clear that injustice needs to be confronted and that there is a price to pay for that. But there was also a price to pay in self-worth if you did nothing.

Young people pursued many angles on the question of forgiveness. Mphahlele told one group that the dropping of charges did nothing for his spirit after the years of hassle that he had experienced with legal proceedings. But when Fourie forgave him, *that* reached something deep within and restored his humanity.

A woman of Jamaican heritage asked, “How can you as a black man forgive what whites have done to your people?” He replied, “Forgiveness does not rule out the need for justice. But unless we forgive, we destroy ourselves.” One girl asked, “What is your biggest fear in coming to speak to us?” He replied, “If you all sit there and say nothing.”

In 2006 the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA), whose task is post-TRC prosecutions of those who were denied or refused to apply for amnesty, was investigating Mphahlele, and Fourie was asked to help. She inquired what would happen if she did not cooperate and was told she would be subpoenaed. She then agreed to write an affidavit making it clear that Mphahlele was passionate about bridge building and reconciliation. She told the NPA that she would trust Mphahlele with her life, “which is not something I could say about you.” Because of her response, she was derided by them as being “infinitely naive.”

Today Fourie says, “We are good friends, not enemies,” and Mphahlele, who once said, “My proudest moment was when I saw whites being killed on the battlefield,” has been called by the *Cape Argus* “a peacemaker of international renown.” “You can’t legislate for or against forgiveness,” Mphahlele is quoted in the *Mail and Guardian*: “It is an individual choice. My involvement with the people who were hurt because of my orders has no cutoff date—it is an unfolding process. It thinks it is the right thing to do because after hurting each other, we must become agents of healing, spiritually and practically.”