

Name: Matthews Marwale Mabelane

Date of birth: 1954

Date of death: 15 February 1977

In summary: Matthews Mabelane was politically active as a freedom fighter. However, his ability to fight apartheid came to an end when he was arrested as a 23-year-old student in Soweto under the Terrorism Act and shortly thereafter died while detained in John Vorster Square prison. His family now hopes that the reopening of a case for Mabelane can establish truth for apartheid-era atrocities that will serve South African history well.



**Matthews Mabelane**  
<http://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/m>

Matthews Marwale Mabelane\* was born in 1954 in the township of Soweto in the city of Johannesburg, South Africa. His parents had a total of seven boys; he was the third child.<sup>1</sup> Mabelane lived in [Sophiatown](#), a legendary black cultural hub, for only a short time while he was a newborn, yet the community had a lasting impact on his family.<sup>2</sup> Sophiatown is remembered for its vibrant sense of community, even though it was also an extremely harsh environment with a great deal of poverty, suffering, and violence.

The [National Party](#) (NP) passed the [Native Resettlement Act](#) in 1954, which allowed the apartheid government to remove black residents from Sophiatown. In 1955, Mabelane's family was forcefully removed from Sophiatown and relocated to Meadowlands, a suburb of Johannesburg and a so-called model township created for those forcefully removed, where

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Mabelane. Human rights violation submission to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Soweto. 1996.

<http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans/soweto/Mabelane.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> South Africa Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Final Report, vol. 3, Ch.6.

\*Mabelane's first name has been published as both Matthews and Matthew, but the former is most used in contemporary press. The Mabelane family surname has been published with different spellings such as Mabalane and Mabilane with Mabelane being that used in contemporary press.

Mabelane grew up. Residents who moved from Sophiatown to Meadowlands had no idea about how terrible the housing conditions provided by the National Party would be. The residents of Sophiatown protested against government officials, but in the end the government wiped out Sophiatown and consequently forced thousands of people out of their homes.<sup>3</sup>

As a teenager, Mabelane got the nickname ‘Mojo’, and attended school at Madibane High School in Diepkloof. Madibane High was a school that, at the time, produced good academic results, excelled in sports like netball and football, and also had brilliant music choirs. Mabelane’s brother, Lasch Mabelane, says that Mabelane loved girls and was a socialite at his school.<sup>4</sup> While Mabelane was a student, he became politically active with the other students in Soweto against apartheid policies.<sup>5</sup>

During the [1976 Soweto uprisings](#), Madibane High School was in the limelight. When the language of Afrikaans alongside English was made compulsory as a medium of instruction in schools in 1974 because of the [Bantu Education Act](#), black students began mobilizing themselves. Students who were politically active such as: Matthews Mabelane, Abiel Lebelo, Joy Rabotapi, and Trofomo Son, took the lead at Madibane High. On 13 June 1976, about 500 Soweto students met at the Orlando Donaldson Community Hall to discuss ways and means of confronting and challenging the Department of Bantu Education. The students decided to stage a peaceful protest march on 16 June 1976 against the introduction of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction. An action committee was set up to prepare for the campaign, which was later

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<sup>3</sup> “Sophiatown.” South African History Online. 2011.

<http://www.sahistory.org.za/place/Sophiatown>

<sup>4</sup> South Africa Truth and Reconciliation Commission. *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Final Report, vol. 3, Ch.6.*

<sup>5</sup> Odunayo Ajani. "Anti-Apartheid Agitation: 40 Years Later, Family Uncovers Cause Of Their Son's Death." *Daily Family NG*. 2017. <https://dailyfamily.ng/anti-apartheid-agitation-40-years-later-family-uncovers-cause-of-their-sons-death/>.

renamed the [Soweto Students Representative Council](#) (SSRC). Mabelane was a member of the SSRC, which at the time was led by [Tsietsi Mashinini](#).<sup>6</sup> It is clear that Mabelane played a prominent role in the year's unrest.<sup>7</sup>

A turning point occurred in Mabelane's life as a freedom fighter when, at age 22, he joined [uMkhonto weSizwe](#) (MK). MK was otherwise known as the 'Spear of the Nation', which was the armed wing of the [African National Congress](#) (ANC).<sup>8</sup> Initially, South African liberation movements were committed to a policy of non-violence with the government. However, the increasing use of security forces to brutally suppress resistance convinced the ANC that a military stance should augment their tactics. Thus, in 1961, uMkhonto weSizwe was formed, when Mabelane was just 7 years old. MK carried out numerous bombings of military, industrial, civilian and infrastructural sites.<sup>9</sup>

Mabelane left his home for Botswana, at age 22, during the pupils' exodus at the time of uprising in Soweto, in October of 1976.<sup>10</sup> The uprising began in Soweto with a series of demonstrations and protests led by black school children, which spread countrywide shortly after. The uprising profoundly changed the socio-political landscape in South Africa. While some left the country and proceeded to join liberation movements such as the African National Congress and the [Pan Africanist Congress](#) (PAC) in Tanzania or Zambia, others stayed behind. While in Botswana, Mabelane received military training that would help him alongside the

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<sup>6</sup> James Mahlokwane. "Who Killed My Son?" *Pretoria News*. 2017.

<http://www.pressreader.com/south-africa/pretoria-news/20171016/textview>.

<sup>7</sup> Phefadu, M., Masilela, L., Khuvutlu, T., & Hlatshwayo, O. "History of Madibane High." 2010.

<http://www.madibanehss.co.za/Our-History/>

<sup>8</sup> South Africa Truth and Reconciliation Commission. *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Final Report, vol. 3, Ch.6*.

<sup>9</sup> Janet Cherry. *Spear of the Nation (Umkhonto weSizwe): South Africa's Freedom Fighters, 1960s-1990s*. Ohio Short Histories of Africa. 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Mabelane. Human rights violation submission to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Soweto. 1996.

armed wing to begin fighting the apartheid government in a more direct and militant way.<sup>11</sup> Mabelane's family did not have communication with him after he left for Botswana nor while he was there. Mabelane's parents sought help from the police to find Mabelane.<sup>12</sup> In 1977, Jimmy Kruger, Minister of Police, announced amnesty for children who returned home, which could be a reason that Mabelane decided to come back to South Africa. He was arrested at the border shortly after the announcement.<sup>13</sup>

Despite Mabelane's reasoning for returning home, his ability to fight apartheid came to an end when he was arrested under Section 6 of the Terrorism Act. Only a year after being gone, Mabelane was arrested while re-crossing the border from Botswana back to South Africa on 27 January 1977. Mabelane's political activism was the reason of his arrest because the expansive apartheid laws, specifically Section 6 of the [Terrorism Act](#), allowed police to define anything as terrorism or communism. According to this section, if any police officer of, or above, the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel believed that any person was a terrorist or was withholding information on terrorists, that person could be arrested 'without warrant and [be] detain[ed]'. Mabelane was intercepted by police in Zeerust in the Western Transvaal, detained by police under Section 6 of the Terrorism Act, and taken to John Vorster Square police station in Johannesburg.<sup>14</sup>

Prisoners arrested under the Terrorism Act were at the mercy of the Minister of Justice. The Minister retained the power to order the release of any detainee at any time and no court of

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<sup>11</sup> Mervyn Rees. "Death-Fall Student Was No Big Fish, Say Police." *Rand Daily Mail*. 1977.  
[https://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/beta/asset/death-fall-student-was-no-big-fish-say-police/1wFmzT7T8\\_WpAw](https://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/beta/asset/death-fall-student-was-no-big-fish-say-police/1wFmzT7T8_WpAw).

<sup>12</sup> South Africa Truth and Reconciliation Commission. *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Final Report, vol. 3, Ch.6*.

<sup>13</sup> James Mahlokwane. "Who Killed My Son?" *Pretoria News*. 2017.  
<http://www.pressreader.com/south-africa/pretoria-news/20171016/textview>.

<sup>14</sup> "1967 Terrorism Act, No. 83 of 1967." South African History Online. 2012.  
<http://www.sahistory.org.za/topic/1967-terrorism-act-no-83-1967>.

law could order the release of someone arrested under the Act. Detainees like Mabelane retained the right to write to the Minister at any time with regard to their detention or release.<sup>15</sup> The government did not notify Mabelane's family when he was taken into custody at John Vorster Square. Consequently, his family was shocked when they found out about his arrest through the newspaper.<sup>16</sup>

Mabelane was held in John Vorster for 25 days and the conditions were brutal. Detainees who were in John Vorster Square at the same time as Mabelane have described those conditions. In an interview with former detainee Penelope 'Baby' Twaya, in the film, *'Between Life and Death: Stories From John Vorster Square'*, Twaya shares what life was like when she was detained at John Vorster Square. Twaya says that the police were 'business-like' and that 'their view was simple.'<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, the police intimidated, tortured and interrogated the detainees. Twaya states that '[the detainees] were going to tell [the police] the truth... who was inciting us, who was giving us instructions... we were going to tell them who in the ANC was giving us guidance to do this.'<sup>18</sup> If any detainee refused to comply then they were either beaten up or threatened.

On 15 February 1977, Mabelane's life that was filled with passion and meaning came to an end. Security police stated that after being interrogated in John Vorster Square, room 1026, he jumped out of the window on the tenth floor and fell to his death. It was further alleged that Mabelane had run along the edge of the window and then stumbled and fell, according to an eyewitness. Other documents state that Mabelane fell onto the bonnet of a police officer's vehicle

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<sup>15</sup> "1967 Terrorism Act, No. 83 of 1967." South African History Online. 2012.

<sup>16</sup> Rees. "Death-Fall Student Was No Big Fish, Say Police." 1977.

<sup>17</sup> Penelope Dwaya. Interview With South African History Archive. Doxa Productions, 2007.  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UoW-Vlnl5UY&feature=player\\_embedded](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UoW-Vlnl5UY&feature=player_embedded).

<sup>18</sup> Dwaya. Interview With South African History Archive. 2007.

and that his skull had cracked. Conflicting reports from government officials make the exact cause of Mabelane death unclear.<sup>19</sup>

Mabelane was the 39<sup>th</sup> person to die in South Africa prisons, and his death was ruled as a suicide. Mabelane's father buried him at the Avalon Cemetery in Soweto. At the time, the apartheid government did not restrict the families from providing a funeral for the deceased, nor did they give restrictions as to where it was held or how many people could attend. Even after Mabelane's funeral, the police harassment did not stop. After his funeral, one of Mabelane's brothers would be detained by police for six months and then released. Their father, Phillip Mabelane, noted that the police 'got nothing' from his other son in terms of anti-apartheid insider information.<sup>20</sup>

Police reports state that Mabelane jumped from the tenth floor of John Vorster Square, committing suicide; however, his family has shown evidence that he was pushed. Although there was no post mortem examination, a disturbing message that was written in his trousers shows that Matthews foresaw his death. It took a full day for police to allow Mabelane's father, Phillip Mabelane, into the government mortuary to identify his corpse. Mabelane's corpse was never subject to a post-mortem report or his unnatural death the subject of an inquest.<sup>21</sup>

However, the most sickening details in Mabelane's death case arose when his family retrieved Mabelane's body. The family discovered his blood-soaked trousers, containing a disturbing message that Mabelane directed toward his family, particularly his brothers. On the inside of the white lining of his green, bloodied pants, it was written: 'Brother Lasch, tell

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<sup>19</sup> Mabelane. Human rights violation submission to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Soweto. 1996.

<sup>20</sup> Mabelane. 1996.

<sup>21</sup> Mabelane. Human rights violation submission to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Soweto. 1996.

mother and my other brothers that the police will push me from the tenth floor. I bid you farewell.’<sup>22</sup>

Mabelane’s father, Phillip Mabelane, remembers the day Mabelane died vividly. Phillip Mabelane said in an interview with *Pretoria News*, that he ‘will never forget listening to a broadcast on the old Sesotho radio station that a young student detainee had jumped to his death from the tenth floor of John Vorster Square.’ Phillip Mabelane continued, stating that he ‘remember[s] a black police officer knocking on [his] door, telling [him] that [his] son had died.’ Phillip was shocked and asked the police: ‘Are you telling me that the young man they were talking about on the radio was my son?’ When Phillip Mabelane examined the corpse, police told him that according to the Constitutional Law, he did not have the right to take any further steps regarding the matter of his son’s death.<sup>23</sup> The Mabelane family did not take ‘no’ for an answer and refused to believe the cover-up story.

The Mabelane family sought out any and every lead on an investigation into the causation of Mabelane’s death. Among their leads is a United Nations report from 1979 of which two-and-a-half pages deal with Mabelane’s death. The document quotes the police inquiry into the death that claimed that Mabelane forced the window open and climbed on to a ledge. ‘The police were unable to stop him but called to him to come back... he lost his balance and fell to his death,’<sup>24</sup> the police investigation said, but the United Nations found that ‘it would be absurd to suggest that he attempted to escape through a window of the tenth

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<sup>22</sup> Ajani. *Daily Family NG*. 2017

<sup>23</sup> Mabelane.1996.

<sup>24</sup> United Nations District General. United Nations Economic and Social Council. Item 16 ed. Vol. Thirty-fifth Session. 1979. 93-95.

floor.’<sup>25</sup> This document also shows that magistrate W.P. Mormehl found that Mabelane fell and died by multiple injuries, but the United Nations report also concluded that there was no one person to blame.

Decades later, his family is seeking answers and comfort. Mabelane’s family has suffered great trauma as a result of the falsified police reports and Mabelane’s death being pushed under the carpet for so long. Mabelane’s mother passed away in 2001. She suffered acute mental depression because of Mabelane’s death. Mabelane’s father, Phillip Mabelane, who is now 95 years old, says he can only sleep well once he knows how his son died.<sup>26</sup>

The cause of Mabelane’s death in John Vorster Square during apartheid is extremely significant today as South Africa attempts to set the record straight for crimes committed by apartheid police. Finally, the truth is being brought to the surface with similar cases to Mabelane’s, such as the case that was re-opened for anti-apartheid activist, [Ahmed Timol](#). For over 40 years, Mabelane’s father, Phillip Mabelane, has waited to discover the truth of how his son died at the hands of security police.<sup>27</sup> Recently, Ahmed Timol’s case has given the entire Mabelane family hope that they may finally learn what really happened in John Vorster. On 12 October 2017, Judge Billy Mothe ruled that Ahmed Timol, who security police originally said committed suicide at John Vorster Square, was tortured and killed by South African police. Members of the security branch, police tasked with investigating anti-apartheid groups such as the African National Congress and the South African Communist Party, tortured Ahmed Timol

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<sup>25</sup> United Nations District General. 1979. 93-95.

<sup>26</sup> Rees. “Death-Fall Student Was No Big Fish, Say Police.” 1977.

<sup>27</sup> Amanda Khoza. "Mabelane Family Hopes Timol Death Inquest Will Open Doors." *News24*. July 13, 2017. <http://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/mabelane-family-hopes-ahmed-timol-death-inquest-will-open-doors-20170713>.

and then pushed him out of room 1026, or from the building's roof.<sup>28</sup> John Vorster room 1026 was the same room that Mabelane was last seen in before he died, which is one of the many similarities in their cases.

During Ahmed Timol's hearing, witnesses described the extreme violence meted out against opponents of the apartheid regime in detail to a Pretoria Court. The torture at John Vorster police headquarters included electric shocks to the body, prisoner's testicles crushed 'like pepper,' and their jaws and skulls fractured by savage beatings.<sup>29</sup> Mabelane's brother, Lasch Mabelane listened attentively to the hearings from the public gallery, stunned by what he heard. Lasch commented, 'There was a modus operandi' among the police.<sup>30</sup>

Lasch Mabelane has been very dedicated to getting justice for his brother. Lasch believes that the tricks played by the perpetrators of these apartheid-era atrocities are infuriating, because the killers will only start talking if they are exposed – otherwise, the perpetrators will keep quiet. According to Lasch, 'time is running out now' for the case to be properly dealt with, and he insists that the perpetrators 'come out and tell the story.'<sup>31</sup> Not only do the families affected by these tragedies want to see the perpetrators and what they look like, whether they are real human beings and have families, children, relatives and friends, but the families also want the criminals to be held responsible for their actions. This landmark decision for Ahmed Timol

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<sup>28</sup> Peter Granitz. "South African Judge Rules Anti-Apartheid Activist Ahmed Timol Was Pushed To His Death By Police." *The Telegraph*. 2017.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/10/12/south-african-judge-rules-anti-apartheid-activist-ahmed-timol/>.

<sup>29</sup> Granitz. "South African Judge Rules Anti-Apartheid Activist Ahmed Timol Was Pushed To His Death By Police." 2017.

<sup>30</sup> Granitz. 2017.

<sup>31</sup> Granitz. "South African Judge Rules Anti-Apartheid Activist Ahmed Timol Was Pushed To His Death By Police." 2017.

opens the door to dozens of new criminal cases, such as Mabelane's, against the captors of anti-apartheid activists who died in detention.<sup>32</sup>

Although Matthews Marwale Mabelane fell short of breaking down the cruelty of the apartheid government during his young adulthood, his family hopes that the reopening of a case for Mabelane can establish truth from apartheid-era atrocities that will serve South African history well. The family's lawyer, Samuel Mabelane, is collecting information from The [National Prosecuting Authority](#) (NPA), the [South Africa Human Rights Commission](#) (SAHRC), and the police. Samuel has already found other families that do not believe the accuracy of the explanation for the death of their family member. The family's lawyer plans on taking the matter to court in due time to have Mabelane's inquest re-opened.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> The Conversation. "Ahmed Timol Inquest: Why Uncovering Apartheid Crimes Remains So Important." *The South African*. 2017. <https://www.thesouthafrican.com/ahmed-timol-inquest-why-uncovering-apartheid-crimes-remains-so-important/>.

<sup>33</sup> Mahlokwane. "Who Killed My Son?" 2017.

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