

Name: Ephraim Mthethwa

Date of Birth: 1960

Date of Death: August 1984

In summary: Ephraim Mthethwa was a [United Democratic Front](#) (UDF) activist who helped South African youths flee the country to support the [African National Congress](#) (ANC) in exile. This made him a threat to the [National Party](#), which led to his arrest by the police. While in detention, the police ultimately murdered him.

During [apartheid](#), members of political organizations that posed a threat to segregation and the National Party's power were targets for detention. This time spent in detention sometimes even led to death. The cutting short of Ephraim Mthethwa's life is one example of this death in detention. Mthethwa's arrest and subsequent death was because of his participation in the United Democratic Front (UDF) and because of how he helped the ANC in exile by helping South African youths flee the country. Also, like many other deaths while in prison during apartheid, Mthethwa's death was not ruled a murder, but rather fabricated as a suicide. This was done in order for the apartheid government to eradicate political opponents, like Mthethwa, and to cover up the government's human rights violations.

Ephraim Mthethwa was born in 1960.¹ He was originally from Nambithi, however he and his family eventually moved to the [Lamontville](#) township, located south west of Durban. There he lived with his father, mother, his two brothers, and his three sisters.² While in Lamontville, Ephraim Mthethwa, according to his brother, was a parishioner of a Diakonia church and he also was "a member of the church choir, he was a chorister, and his choir used to

¹ Ernest Mthethwa. Victim Testimony to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Durban, August 30, 1996.

² Mthethwa. Victim Testimony to the TRC.

tour many places.”³ In addition, he, along with his two brothers, was a member of the UDF.⁴ Unlike his brothers, Ephraim Mthethwa also helped youth escape the country so that they could support the ANC in exile.⁵ He did not have a family of his own, however as shown above, he was very involved within his community.⁶

Within this short biography of Mthethwa’s life, one learns a lot about who he was as a man, and why he would have been a target for the National Party. First of all, he was from the Lamontville township. This township was one of the many other South African townships like it that was created to provide cities, in this case Durban, with “a pool of cheap labor.”⁷ In addition, Lamontville was also a township that was facing a lot of turmoil in the early 1980s.⁸ This first began when the township faced increased rent in 1982 that caused many residents of Lamontville to act, and as a result they formed the Joint Rent Action Committee.⁹ This political group was persecuted by vigilantes, and eventually one of their leaders was killed on 25 April 1983 for his involvement with the group.¹⁰ This unrest in Lamontville continued for most of the 1980s, and is significant as it illustrates how, although Mthethwa was not involved with the Joint Rent Action Committee, where he resided was a very volatile place that featured murders of political activists. This then makes it seem much more likely that Ephraim Mthethwa could have been killed due to his politics since it had happened in his community before. Another key take away

³ Mthethwa. Victim Testimony to the TRC.

⁴ Mthethwa. Victim Testimony to the TRC.

⁵ Mthethwa. Victim Testimony to the TRC.

⁶ Mthethwa. Victim Testimony to the TRC.

⁷ "Lamontville and What is Really Going on in the Township." South African History Online.

⁸ South Africa Truth and Reconciliation Commission. *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report*, vol. 3. Natal: Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 1998.

⁹ South Africa Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

¹⁰ South Africa Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

from this short biography above is that Mthethwa was a member of the United Democratic Front and in addition helped members of the ANC in exile.

Mthethwa's affiliation to the UDF made him a target of the apartheid government. The United Democratic Front was an "extra-parliamentary organization established in 1983," primarily in opposition to the government's constitutional proposals of that year, and "served as an umbrella organization of antiapartheid groups."¹¹ One of the sub-organizations that was a part of the UDF was the Diakonia Council of Churches, which was an organization that included all the churches in Natal that were opposed to apartheid. Mthethwa's parish was one of the churches included in the Diakonia Council of Churches. Membership in the UDF was looked very poorly upon by the apartheid government and sometimes could lead to dangerous situations for its members. For example, "a large number of people were arrested" because of their participation in the UDF and "several key members of the organization were murdered."¹² Therefore, many members of the UDF faced detention and sometimes even death. Mthethwa also was involved in supporting the ANC in exile by helping South African youths escape South Africa and join the ANC in exile. As a result, Mthethwa would have been under even more scrutiny as South Africans who assisted the ANC while in exile often were arrested for helping the ANC in exile and were monitored by the government very closely.¹³ This can be proven true in Mthethwa's case, considering he was monitored by agents from the [Bureau of State Security](#) (BOSS) before his arrest.¹⁴ Mthethwa's political alignment with the UDF and his work in helping the ANC in exile is what led to his arrest, which will be further examined.

¹¹ South Africa Truth and Reconciliation Commission

¹² South Africa Truth and Reconciliation Commission

¹³ Stephen, Ellis. "The ANC in Exile." *African Affairs* 90, no. 360 (1991): 445.

¹⁴ Mthethwa. Victim Testimony to the TRC.

Ephraim Mthethwa's brother, Ernest Mthethwa, recounts in detail the day that he, Ephraim Mthethwa, and their brother were arrested. The day began with some peculiar activity. Ernest Mthethwa recalls that the home telephone "line was off," but that no one really thought much of it. Later that night, however, things took a vast change from odd to terrifying. Torches surrounded the house, which were immediately followed by "loud knocks at the door" sometime in the middle of the night. A man then came into their home and asked about Ephraim Mthethwa's whereabouts. When told that Ephraim Mthethwa was asleep, the man then went into Mthethwa's room and proceeded to tell Mthethwa to get dressed. This was followed by this man and other men taking Ephraim Mthethwa with them along with his cassettes, radio, and record player, in order to find out more information about Mthethwa. These men, members of BOSS, then interrogated Mthethwa and his two other brothers in the Durban Central Prison, asking them about a photo of Ephraim Mthethwa that youths "used to skip the country." Youths could show Mthethwa's photo at border crossings and be allowed into neighbouring countries where the ANC in exile was operating. Ephraim Mthethwa's brothers were released shortly after, however Ephraim Mthethwa was kept in prison. Although reports state that Ephraim Mthethwa was in this prison for months, his brother notes that this was actually false, and that Mthethwa was in prison for what he describes as a only few days.¹⁵

Ephraim Mthethwa's arrest is key in understanding that he most likely was murdered and did not kill himself. The family believe government turned off the Mthethwa's telephone line to ensure that they could not communicate anything that was about to happen to them and to ensure no one could call them warning them of this raid. Among the first questions that the state asked Mthethwa was about his involvement in helping youths leave South Africa to support the ANC

¹⁵ Mthethwa. Victim Testimony to the TRC.

in exile. Additionally, the state seemed like they already had damning evidence proving Mthethwa's participation in helping the ANC in exile. This conveys how the state came in knowing that Mthethwa was guilty of these allegations, and considering how the state has dealt with other ANC supporters during the ANC's time in exile, Mthethwa's death as a murder seems very plausible. Furthermore, Ephraim Mthethwa was kept in the Durban Central Prison while his brothers were only kept in prison for one day. This depicts how Mthethwa was detained and kept in prison because of how he helped the ANC in exile, considering that he and his brothers were all a part of the UDF, but Ephraim Mthethwa was the only one that the police knew supported the ANC in exile. Finally, reports from the state say that Mthethwa was in prison for months. However, according to Mthethwa's brother, he was only in prison for a few days. This discrepancy suggests a need to question police reports.

Mthethwa spent his time in detention in the [Durban](#) Central Prison.¹⁶ To paint a picture of what his time in prison would have been like, another fellow anti-apartheid man described the prison as "all grey and steel," with "nothing comforting or homely" about the prison at all.¹⁷ Furthermore, Mthethwa would have been allowed at a maximum thirty minutes a day outside.¹⁸ Another prisoner of the Durban Central Prison recounts that he was "tortured with electric shocks because he refused to supply information to the police"¹⁹ about the ANC in exile. Not only does this demonstrate the bleakness of Mthethwa's time spent there and how he probably was given none to little time outside and tortured, but it also justifies Mthethwa's brother's belief that Ephraim Mthethwa was killed because he refused to disclose any information and did not

¹⁶ Mthethwa. Victim Testimony to the TRC.

¹⁷ "Inside Apartheid's Prison -- An Experience that Haunts for a Lifetime." *The Huffington Post*. October 25, 2016.

¹⁸ "Inside Apartheid's Prison."

¹⁹ Raymond, Suttner. *Inside Apartheid's Prisons*. (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2001), 125.

answer in the manner that his captors wanted him to. This is very believable and even likely considering that there is written recordings of prisoners at the Durban Central Prison who were tortured for not answering questions the way the state wanted them to.²⁰ Furthermore, this depicts how Mthethwa may have been killed due to his support of the ANC in exile, considering the case of the man who was tortured because he would not give out information regarding the ANC in exile. Additionally, Ernest Mthethwa also stated that when he was questioned at the Durban Central Prison, if the state did not like your answer they “would hit and assault you.”²¹ This just further illustrates how violent the prison that Ephraim Mthethwa stayed at was, and that the chance for a murder would not be too out of the question considering that there was recorded instances of violence towards prisoners who were linked to the ANC in exile.

Moreover, there is an eye-witness who told Ernest Mthethwa that his brother Ephraim Mthethwa was murdered while in prison. According to Ernest Mthethwa, a friend of Ephraim Mthethwa’s was released from detention on the day that Ephraim Mthethwa died and told Ernest Mthethwa that his brother was going to be killed that day.²² If this is true, then there is no doubt that Ephraim Mthethwa was killed in detention. On the other hand, when asked about the man who said this, all Ernest Mthethwa can say is that he was an Umkhonto weSizwe ([MK](#)) soldier so he has no idea where he might be and he does not remember the man’s name. This makes Ernest Mthethwa’s claim that this man made almost impossible to find out since there is no information about the man and no hint as to where he could be today. With that said, even if this is not true the likelihood that Mthethwa was murdered in prison and did not commit suicide is very likely considering all the details: Ephraim Mthethwa was an African man living in a township at war

²⁰ Mthethwa. Victim Testimony to the TRC.

²¹ Mthethwa. Victim Testimony to the TRC.

²² Mthethwa. Victim Testimony to the TRC.

with apartheid and who was helping the ANC in exile. This made him a high target for death in prison, and thus makes it highly probable that he was murdered, whether or not the MK soldier part of Ernest Mthethwa's story is true. It is also very important to look at Mthethwa's death as well when trying to prove that it was not in fact a suicide, but rather a murder.

Another part of Mthethwa's life that makes his death seem like a murder and not a suicide is the record of his death itself. Mthethwa died in 1984. However, the specific date of his death is largely up in the air. One source states that he died in detention on 25 August 1984²³ at the age of twenty-two, another states he died on 24 August 1984,²⁴ and yet another states that he died on 26 August²⁵ 1984 at the age of twenty-three. Although there is not a huge difference between the dates, this once again illustrates how inconsistent the apartheid government was, and how anything they say must be deeply scrutinized. As a result, since these dates are inconsistent and most likely falsified it is not unreasonable to think that the cause of Mthethwa's death could also have been falsified. In regards to Ephraim Mthethwa's actual death, the evidence speaks for itself. Ernest Mthethwa recalls that when he saw Ephraim Mthethwa's dead body, there was "a scratch or a laceration on the neck,"²⁶ which the state used to show that he had hung himself. This was a common claim of police; on a [list of deaths in detention](#), 37.5% of the causes of those deaths are reported to be suicide by hanging.²⁷ When one combines how Mthethwa died also with how he was arrested, his political affiliations, and his time spent in prison, it seems very possible that he did not commit suicide, but more likely was killed by the prison guards.

²³ Mthethwa. Victim Testimony to the TRC.

²⁴ Okwesili, Meche. *Good Over Evil*. (Victoria, B.C.: Trafford, 2003), 297.

²⁵ "List of Deaths in Detention." South African History Online. March 16, 2017.

²⁶ Mthethwa. Victim Testimony to the TRC.

²⁷ "List of Deaths in Detention." South African History Online.

Ephraim Mthethwa died while in detention. However, he is much more than just that. He also was a man who was very involved in his church and community. According to his brother, he “was always very happy and he loved music,”²⁸ and “always wanted to socialize”²⁹ with others. Additionally, he was a member of the UDF and helped the ANC in exile by helping South African youths escape South Africa to go to the ANC in exile. Ultimately, this is what led to his arrest and subsequent death; a death that was fabricated to cover the apartheid state, and one in which his family “never got the death certificate.”³⁰ The injustice lies not only in the reasons why Ephraim Mthethwa died, as he died only trying to help bring equality to a subjugated people, but also to his family as they have had to live their entire lives without knowing truly how their son or brother died and never even received a death certificate for him.

²⁸ Mthethwa. Victim Testimony to the TRC.

²⁹ Mthethwa. Victim Testimony to the TRC.

³⁰ Mthethwa. Victim Testimony to the TRC.

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