

McBride's daring rescue bid recalled

Robert McBride was destined to be an ace rugby player, but fate mapped out a more daring and volatile avenue for him to follow, as described in his soon to released biography . Shalo Mbatha reports

SHALO MBATHA

ROBERT McBride was destined to be an ace rugby player, to wear the Springbok jersey.

He would have been booed, boycotted and vilified in international rugby arenas had it not been for the fact that he was born coloured.

Neither would the rest -- his lofty pedestal in South African history -have been.

Very much like biblical Joseph the dreamer, McBride is the most recognisable personality in the South African psyche.

Author and poet Dr Gomolemo Mokae has written McBride's thrilling biography, Robert McBride -- a coloured life , which will be published soon. Mokae lets McBride speak for himself . The voices of loved ones, relatives, neighbours and schoolmates make no attempt to immortalise Robert. Instead the book creates an unbiased sense of his life and times . "Halfway through the research, I realised I had bumped into a minefield.

"I maintain that unless all South Africans make peace with Robert McBride's past, racial prejudice will be perpetuated well into the 21st century," Mokae says.

McBride's childhood was ordinary. He grew up in apartheid's coloured area of Wentworth in Durban.

His parents, both teachers, instilled a strong sense of pride in him.

McBride's father gave him a book by Al J Venter, A profile of 2 million South Africans , which was the beginning of his self-consciousness.

Even though he did not have a great relationship with his father, McBride was fully aware of the old man's stance on oppression .

While reading the book, I was dismayed to discover that darker-skinned coloureds are discriminated against, even by their own families.

According to the book, Derrick McBride was dark-skinned and, as a result, his mother made him clean the floors and toilets. That left a permanent scar on him and he hated whites.

"I remember when I was first arrested, the police mantra was 'as jy was 'n kaffer kan ons verstaan, maar jy is een van ons. Jy is 'n kleurling' (if you were a native, we could understand, but you are one of us, you are coloured), implying that I was one of theirs because of my heritage.

"They accused me of being a communist. But at that stage I had never read anything to do with communists," reads an excerpt from the biography.

McBride had his first violent experience while still a teenager, when a gang attacked him for not giving them a cigarette.

He was a non-smoker then. "He went into a cocoon and cried in his sleep. His biggest regret was how cheap life was, that he had added to the statistics of typical coloured violent behaviour.

"He was only teenager. "His father, Derrick, had always been radical and tried to show him that apartheid was responsible for all ills in the country," his mother Doris says in the book.

McBride came of age during the height of the struggle against apartheid in the burning '80s.

The ANC's military wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe, was active and people were joining the armed struggle in droves.

But there had not been many daring action except for the Silverton siege in Pretoria in 1981. Only guerrillas died, not civilians.

The spirit of the pending revolution was in the air. McBride's childhood friend, Gordon Webster (MK name Humphrey Mkhize), Welela Khumalo, Greta Apelgren and her sister, Jeanette Apelgren, Antonio du Preez and Mathew Lecordier belonged to a special operations unit under McBride's command.

Webster was the first to go into exile in Botswana.

McBride received instructions from his handler, Aboobaker Ismail (MK name Rashid), who reported directly to Chris Hani and Oliver Tambo.

Webster facilitated the training of many guerrillas but was captured after a fierce gun battle in 1986.

He was taken to Edendale hospital in Pietermaritzburg, under police guard, for treatment .

Rescuing Webster preoccupied McBride.

He woke his father up in the middle of the night and they discussed plans for the most spectacular rescue operation in South African history.

Seated on the family's green couch, sipping black tea, they went through plans for the father-and-son rescue mission.

McBride senior wore a priest's collar and carried a gun. He was disguised as a doctor .

"We decided to spring Gordon on a Sunday evening, after visiting hours because the police relaxed then.

"We sent Pam Cele, a nurse who was dating Gordon's brother, Trevor, to establish whether he could walk, and to tell him we were coming for him at 7.30pm.

"He said he could (walk). My father warned me that we might return carrying him, because he was diabetic and his sugar levels were unpredictable.

"I told him fine, it was worth the risk," McBride recalls in his biography.

Everything was set in motion. Lecordier and Du Preez waited in the first get-away car, Greta and Khumalo in the second.

McBride senior was the first to walk into the ward, but suddenly turned around and said: "Abort, civilians."

Robert walked in and found himself face to face with a cop who was now following his father. Then all hell broke loose.

"I remember thinking, 'is shandis' (is shit), the mission is fucked, there's no way we are gonna win this, but I know I have to go through with this thing. I pull the trigger. I miss, but bullets splatter all over the ceiling and roof.

"I shout Humphrey, no response. Bullets, noise, gunpowder, smoke. The patients and nursing staff are smiling, some bemused look on. Then I see him. Only then I found out he can't walk.

"He had tubes and drips down his nose, mouth, everywhere. I rip everything off and load him on a trolley and give him the gun and I push him out. My father was outside and we both push.

"Pandemonium outside -- people hanging through the nurse's home, windows and balconies, happy, singing freedom songs. I had to fire in the air.

"No one is scared. It is a wonderful thing happening. It took max three minutes, but I'm physically, mentally and psychologically drained," McBride recalls vividly.

They got away. Webster went back into exile and received treatment in Russia.

Black South Africa was hysterical with joy at the rescue. The apartheid machinery was involved in cross-border raids, killing locals, freedom fighters, guerrillas and civilians alike.

The ANC responded by including white civilians as legitimate targets in a conference in Kabwe, Zambia.

McBride was working under instructions from Lusaka. He loaded 60kg of explosives into the car and, together with Lecordier, drove to the Durban beachfront.

They blew up the Magoo's and Why Not bars, which were frequented by members of the defence force and the police.

There were three white female civilian fatalities and 100 casualties. McBride was caught while going into exile and sentenced to death three times plus 82 years.

He was on death row for four years and survived the 1987 death row "Christmas rush" through Paula Leyden's efforts. She later became his wife.

During the "Christman rush", 164 people were executed, the highest number in South African history. There were 20 reprieves.

Webster returned to rescue McBride, but was caught.