

## THE UNFORGIVEN, SAHO

At Pretoria Local Prison, Robert befriended one of the former death row inmates, Mtutuzeli Nqandu, together with whom he was later reprieved. Nqandu was a Port Elizabeth activist who had ended on death row after he and his comrades had killed a policeman. He was about two years younger than Robert.

Their cells were next to each other.

"It's funny the way they put us there in the cells; there's like bars outside, the screen. You cannot see from outside who's inside," Robert explains. "We were facing towards the courtyard. There was a gap over the wall; I could pass things to him and he could pass things to me. He was next door to me. We used to smoke a lot. I used to smoke Craven-A. We used to stand there and smoke till our throats were sore, then I'd pass him sweets. We would talk the whole night till late. Everybody else would be sleeping, and we would be talking. I remember at Local the feeling of wanting to be outside was the strongest I've ever had. It was like when I was in detention. I wanted just to be free outside."

Now that he was no longer on death row, Robert could visit his father at Pretoria Maximum Security Prison.

"They took me from there to visit my father in [the Maximum] Security section. I visited him once or twice; and he was [then] released. There's no keys in Security Prison; everything is hydraulics, they press buttons."

Derrick McBride and Antonio du Preez were released at about the same time.

"I brought [Derrick] back home (in Johannesburg) and then me and Bonnie drove him down to Durban," says Paula. "We got a puncture on the way down there. He was just chattering away in the car. But like, the minute he was in the car he was like, 'What are we going to do now to get Robert out?' It's always been his obsession."

When Derrick got home, he was struck by the terrible condition his family was in.

Before he went to jail, he had a thriving welding business and his wife was running a busy take-away restaurant, "Day 'N Nite Diner". Now his wife and youngest daughter were battling to make ends meet.

Doris had suffered from three strokes and was now paralysed in her right side.

He is still bitter because there was virtually no support from his comrades to

his wife when she needed it.

"My machinery alone was worth about R870 000-00 at that time," he says about his welding factory before he went to jail. "The replacement value is about R3-million now. I am not - and this is important - I'm not disappointed and disturbed at what I lost. I am disappointed that the ANC had an attitude of 'fuck you, I'm okay!'. All leadership in the ANC. I went to Tokyo [former Gauteng Provincial Premier Tokyo Sexwale] - he took two years to reply to the letter. When I confronted him at the Robben Island re-union and I came and said, 'Tokyo, one freedom fighter who's got no compassion for another freedom fighter must be a terrorist!'. He said, 'Yes'. I said - in front of everybody - 'You are a terrorist!'. I said, 'I wrote to you pleading' - I hate writing letters, but the tone was desperation. We were starving."

[Derrick] threw himself into a campaign to get his son released as well. Antonio du Preez, his co-Accused in his trial and his son's former fellow combatant in MK also joined in.

Antonio had an added motivation to involve himself in the campaign. He had an eye on Robert's youngest sister.

The two met at a night-club a few weeks after Antonio's release. Neither had expected to see the other there.

"At that stage I was nursing, and it was like, 'We're going to party; we're going to a braai [barbecue]', and we'd end up at a club," she recounts. "I met him in a club. Then I said to him, 'What are you doing here? You [are] supposed to be sitting at home'. He said, 'You should be studying'. I said, 'I'm not studying yet; the exams are only the end of June'. He said to me, 'Carry on'. That was our first kiss on that day. Our first kiss was like, mmm, nice!"

To get her husband released from prison, Paula had to work almost as hard as she had battled to get him off death row.

She was now employed full-time by LHR.

Brian Currin gave her latitude to campaign for the release of Robert and many other political prisoners who were still in jail. He witnessed her frustrations as it seemed the ANC was forgetting about those of its members who were still in prison.

"Paula got more depressed then than when he was on death row," says Brian. "In a way, because it was so close, yet so far. Of course what happened was, once they [the sentences] were commuted, there was a lot of lethargy. The ANC was saying, 'Don't worry about it; he won't be executed'; and the momentum, the energy just disappeared. Paula maintained it. And I really sort of tried to maintain it as well. I think for Paula that was the most difficult time. They were used as political football[s]."

As she had done when Robert on death row, Paula wrote countless letters to

ministers in the Nationalist party government, foreign embassies, ANC leaders, international jurists and other influential individuals and organisations. I should be remembered that she also exploited her special relationship with Kobie Coetzee, the Minister of Justice.

Ronnie Mabo and Stephen Vilakazi, the MK guerrillas whose car bomb in Witbank had killed three civilians, were released soon after de Klerk's historic speech.

In a hand-delivered letter to the minister dated September 9, 1991, she pointed out the similarities between the case of the two and that of Robert. "In the case of Mabo and Vilakazi, their actions and the consequences thereof are identical to those in Robert's case - the differences relate to the length of sentence and colour of victims. Mabo and Vilakazi were fortunate enough to receive an eighteen year sentence - of which they had served little over a year - as the trial judge took into account the prevailing political conditions. The civilians killed in their case were black, and consequently, their case received little media attention, unlike Robert's where the civilians killed were white. I presume that neither of these two factors are contributing to Robert's continued incarceration..."

She was concerned after a number of sources had indicated to her that the remaining political prisoners - including Robert - would have to wait for an interim government before they were released.

In Robert's case, it seemed one of the factors keeping him in jail was his organisation's sensitivity to white feelings.

On 17 October 1991, she raised this in a letter to Cyril Ramaphosa. "I understand from my recent discussions with Jacob Zuma that it is Robert's case on which the government is proving most recalcitrant, because 'the white community is very emotional about McBride's matter'. Quite frankly, I do not really care too much about that, and I do not believe that we should accommodate such rubbish...We have no reason whatsoever to apologise for Robert's actions - he acted under very direct instructions from his commanders in Special Ops - nothing more, nothing less."

Eventually, Robert grew tired of waiting for his organisation's negotiating team to convince the Nationalist Party to release him.

He decided to find his own way out of Pretoria Local Prison. An escape from Pretoria Local Prison seemed more feasible than from the highly fortified death row.

Robert's escape plan was foiled when one of the inmates who was part of the group planning to break out let the cat out of the bag. The prisoner was one of the sixteen whose death sentences were commuted at the same time as his. Then he decided to ask to be transferred to Westville so that he could be close to his ailing mother.

Paula was not too pleased with Robert's decision to ask to be transferred to Durban.

"I didn't have [a] very clear view of it because obviously I didn't want him to go down there because it would be more difficult for me; it was more difficult for me to see him because I'd have to get down to Durban," she says. "He was on restricted visits there; because he wasn't on death row anymore. You only got five visits there. What I would do when visiting, I'd leave Jo'burg at 3 o'clock in the morning and drive straight through to Westville at 8 (a.m.). When he was in Pretoria I'd see [him] any time, but he was happier in Durban."

Freedom seemed as distant from Robert when he was at Westville prison as it was when he was in Pretoria. Each day, many political prisoners were being released as part of the agreement between his organisation and the Nationalist party government.

"There was a possibility that one had been left out and sacrificed, so it increased the urgency of doing things and making sure you were not sacrificed. I asked why I can't be released. I even wrote a letter to (ANC magazine) 'Mayibuye', and I think the same letter I sent to 'New Nation' (newspaper), talking about the Witbank case, saying if they released them, why can't they release me? They released Vilakazi and Maboia without any fight. There was a strong feeling that you are being wronged because you killed white people. If I had killed black people I would have been out, so there was quite a strong sense of being wronged."

Later, he was granted permission to study.

"I studied law - B.Proc. - and I did very well that year. The most disciplined part of my life was in 1992. Then I could 'gym' - I was allowed to go to the gym; I was allowed to study. I could move around a lot in that prison because, although it was an Inkatha area, the warders used to like me. They would take me around all over the jail; wherever I wanted to go. I'd go to any cell and visit people I knew, grew up with and went to school with. Sometimes I stayed the whole afternoon in that section."

At Westville, Robert got re-acquainted to a white prisoner who was also awaiting his trial when he was detained at Durban's Bellair prison. The inmate, Barry-Sean Combrink, would later on save the ANC activist's life. During his first meeting with Combrink at Bellair, Robert's mind was on escaping from custody.

He actually almost succeeded in eluding his captors, but was eventually re-arrested and shot in the leg when he tried to run away.

"When I was in Bellair, Barry-Sean was in the cell next to me," Robert remembers. "He got caught for robbery and dodging military camp. We had a fight. He was saying something from the other cell, and I swore him from the other side. Then he started talking, 'Let's escape together'. Then he says, 'I

will take you across the border'. I never saw his face until I came to Westville prison and he came to me and said, 'Do you remember the time you were down there in Bellair?'"

The African National Congress [ANC] and its allies in "the Congress movement"; the Pan Africanist Congress [PAC] and the Black Consciousness-oriented Azanian People's Organisation [AZAPO] had waged the struggle against the Nationalist Party Government as separate entities. In the early nineties, as FW de Klerk stated his commitment to a negotiated settlement in the early nineties, the different streams of the broad liberation movement attempted to close ranks and fashion a common response to the Nationalist party. They tried to set up a "Patriotic Front".

When a Patriotic Front conference was held in Durban, Derrick attended. He wished to publicise his son's plight at Pretoria Local Prison by distributing pamphlets among the delegates at the conference. He had a run-in with ANC leader Mac Maharaj, who was later to become the Minister of Transport in the ANC-led government after South Africa's first democratic elections of 1994.

"When they had this Patriotic Front, I came and said, 'Look, Robert sent me to distribute this,' he recounts. "I had about five hundred; it was a letter pleading with them for them to be released as political prisoners. He said, 'This is not an ANC meeting. There is PAC, there is AZAPO, they won't allow us'. I had a healthy relationship with people of other organisations. So I went to PAC and AZAPO people and said, 'What's the story with you people that you don't want me to distribute this?' They said, 'No, distribute it'. When I went back to Mac Maharaj, I couldn't find him. They disappeared with my documents."

Soon thereafter, a disgruntled Derrick resigned from the ANC.

Paula was of the view that they should not antagonise the ANC in their struggle to win Robert's freedom. She acknowledges that she too was exasperated by the delay in her husband's release.

"First, it increased tension, and different people react in different ways. I think I realised very early that the trump card to getting Robert released was to have the ANC as an ally, not an enemy. So my strategy was to keep them as an ally. I suppose it's just that Derrick has a different approach. There was conflict over it and there were disagreements, but it's really just a matter of approach."

Inside prison, Robert adopted almost the same attitude as Paula.

"Surviving and working under those conditions honed my sense of security and my ability to defend myself and my family," he says. "In a sense, that is good. I've gone through the worst; it can only get better. I've not only survived the worst, I've triumphed during the worst times. For me, it really tested me - my loyalty to the organisation, my patriotism to the country. I think a lesser person would have succumbed long ago to turn against the ANC because of the ANC's equivocal support for me."

In September 1992, Nelson Mandela insisted on Robert's immediate release. The ANC President wanted Robert released before his organisation could carry on its negotiations with the de Klerk's government.

"What happened was that Mandela and de Klerk were also speaking," Robert recalls. "Mandela says to de Klerk, 'There is no way we can get forward because my NEC [National Executive Committee] is demanding McBride and the other guys' release'."

FW de Klerk publicly responded to Mandela's demand that Robert McBride be released at his party's congress, which was held in Durban on 25 September, 1992.

Even those political prisoners who fell out of the guidelines agreed upon by the negotiators would be released, "irrespective of political affiliation". The qualification meant Robert McBride's "twinning" [with] Barend Strydom would continue - the Wit Wolf was released on the same as McBride.

Robert almost did not make it to freedom.

Just before his release, he was attacked by a number of white inmates. "They had surgical scissors; the long sharp ones. It seemed they had planned for some time because they had sent a youngster to make friends with our guys in our section - one of the white guys. The morning we were in the courtyard, I am sitting down, and this guy comes with a newspaper, asking me questions - 'explain this in the paper'. I had the paper in my hand, and I looked up and saw the guys sort of form a semi-circle around me. It was a distance, maybe five or ten metres, different angles. The one guy is walking, and he leant against the staircase for no reason, not talking to anybody." He knew all the inmates in the attacking group.

"Guys I used to walk past everyday, and there would be no problem. And then (as the group formed a semi-circle, I thought, 'Am I getting paranoid or what?'. As I bent down to look at the newspaper, I got caught up with the article the boy was pointing at. I just saw a shadow moving - blocking the sun for a split second. All I did was I just dropped the paper and moved my hand out. That's what saved me because the guy came down on me hard, but his hand hit against my arm. I knew what is happening now. I kicked towards him, but he stepped back, and all these other guys took out their chains, so I didn't run. I got very scared there. It was so sudden and I was not prepared. And there's six of them. I stood and started walking backwards."

Barry-Sean Combrink and a black inmate called Norman decided to enter the fray, taking McBride's side.

"Norman was reading the Sowetan newspaper. He grabbed the newspaper and folded it up. I don't know how - he just grabbed it and folded it as if it's a weapon and ran towards them. This other white guy at the same time also jumped up and rushed towards this other guy - there's three of us facing these guys. When these two guys stood next to me, the 'cunts' ran away. If these

two guys [had] never stood there, they would have finished me off very easily.

"After they stabbed [at me], they were shouting, 'White Power! White Power!' and there were AWB pamphlets in the prison, thrown all over."

Joyce Swartz - "Auntie Girly" - was overjoyed when she heard that her nephew was about to come out of jail.

"It was as if there'd been a storm and now the sun has come out and there's a rainbow - and the rainbow is a promise of good things to come," she smiles.

"There was a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. That is how it was for all of us. The day he was going to be released, I knew that I'm not going to be able to get anywhere near him. But I wanted only good things for him."

The day before Robert's release, she bought R50's worth of sweets.

"As he came near the gate, I started throwing sweets all over. So that he must walk on sweets - there must only be good things in his life. That was my only way to show him. He must have wondered what is all this for. I was throwing sweets so that people must see that there must be sweetness in his life - the bad things are behind."

The large crowd of supporters who were waiting outside to welcome the former ANC guerrilla was led by the organisation's then Deputy President, Walter Sisulu.

Jeff Radebe, the then Chairman of the ANC's southern Natal region; Sbu Ndebele and Mewa Ramogobin were also part of the ANC leaders welcoming Robert back to freedom.

At the press conference afterwards, he committed to reconciliation and regretted the deaths he had caused in his fight against apartheid.

Jeff Radebe offered him a position in the Natal Provincial Executive of the ANC. He declined it in deference to his wife's wish that they not settle in the province.

"I felt security was a factor in Durban," Paula explains. "I didn't want not to be able to walk in the streets easily. I didn't want us to be confined in how we behaved. So it was security. But it also was normal living. I felt that there's an obsession in Durban - in white Durban. I just didn't want that. That's my reasons."

Robert was initially tempted to take Radebe's offer since "it's also a kind of acknowledgement".

But his wife was adamant that they should not settle in the province.

"We had a disagreement with her; quite serious. She felt that I must stay here

in Johannesburg. And anyway, at that time it overlapped with me starting to work for the ANC (in Johannesburg) in November (1992). I just thought it's too early to have a major disagreement domestically. It was too early. I gave in."

Later, the ANC gave him the choice of doing field work in the violence-ridden East Rand townships or research in the office at the organisation's headquarters. At the time, the battle for turf between the ANC and the Inkatha Freedom Party [IFP] had reached fever peak in townships like Katlehong, Thokoza and Duduza.

Robert opted for field work, assuming the responsibility of heading the organisation's "peace desk".

"It was actually a 'war desk'," he says. "There was a lot of putting out fires and teaching people how to shoot. I was working mainly in the East Rand, but later on I worked right across - even Soweto I worked in. I told Paula about the situation and I told her I want to do field work; I can't sit in the office when people are dying."

He recalls the incident which helped him make up his mind very quickly that he wanted to be in the field. At the time, he was doing violence monitoring. "The first thing that sensitised me, I came into this area, Katlehong. I think it's the Mavimbela and Zuma sections in Katlehong. I was driving and monitoring. I just saw about a few thousand women and children running like the devil was behind them. I saw one lady with a child in her hands. I remember she wore a blue dress with no shoes on the feet, running. She was in the front, running, and there's these others in similar conditions - running away from gun shots from behind."

Robert was with another activist in the car.

The women and children were running away from Zulu men who were aligned with the IFP.

"So I stopped the car. There's a church there. I stopped the car and asked what's going on. Of course I was also naive trying to see what's going on, but seeing the women running with the children and these cowards with their guns also running - some faster than the women - I thought to myself, 'My God, this is not right!'. And I could hear the gun-shots on the other side, lots of single shots, automatic fire. It's like from a movie - you see these things in the movies. It was forced removal - these guys are basically taking over the area and these people are running away."

The police were in the vicinity.

"(But) they are doing nothing. We couldn't even carry weapons - the police would stop you and search you. Yet they are moving, chasing the whole community; these Inkatha guys. I think that is when I said, 'Fuck, this is not how it must be!' Because I know they are just flesh and bones. And that's when I committed myself - not wanting to do violence monitoring, but to teach

people to defend themselves."

Paula had succeeded in persuading her husband from taking the offer to be on the ANC's provincial executive in Natal. But she felt powerless to change his mind about working in the East Rand.

During his early days of working in the ANC Peace Desk, Robert travelled around town in taxis. He says this helped him adapt quickly to life outside. At the time, Paula was still working for LHR. She conceived within a few weeks of Robert coming out of prison. Robert learnt that he was about to become a father while on a visit to his parents in Durban.

He was then with one of his cousins, Collin Dookie.

"She said she did a test. I think she did the urine test, and then she went to the doctor the same day and did a blood test," he remembers. "She would know [the results] on Monday or something."

The father-to-be spent the better part of his wife's pregnancy period ducking bullets in the East Rand.

"I obviously felt it was unsafe," Paula acknowledges. "It isn't a time in my life that I look back on with any happiness because I was alone. I was pregnant. So it's not a time that I think, 'What a wonderful time!'. I was about three months pregnant then."

A few weeks after Robert learnt he was going to become a father, he became an uncle again.

"When I was giving birth, Robert came with a friend of his John, who was a paramedic," Gwyneth reports. "And Ashford - he was one of Robert's bodyguards. The three of them were there for me at the hospital. Before I saw Tiernan, nurses rushed him off to go and see his 'fathers' - there's the black guy, Coloured guy and an Indian guy outside. 'Wait now, who's this?'; then Robert came in and said, 'Congratulations'. Then, 'Come on the rest of you, let me see now who's there'. Robert saw Tiernan first. I think that's why he's so attached to him."

As head of the ANC's Peace Desk, Robert's main message to the communities he was working in was that the violence is meant to prevent democracy. Also, that they should not get stuck in the violence.

He was as close to death as he was on death row, if not closer.

"There was one occasion, we were standing outside a church on the Thokoza/Katlehong border, and there was shooting. About four shots. People had learnt by experience; they went to the floor. One of the youngsters lifted his head up to see where the shooting was coming from, and the guy hit him between his eyes. Next to me. There was a little bit of blood, then he was gone just like that. Right next to me. He was gone!"

When Paula broke her waters in June 1993; she was at her brother's house. "I knew (the twins) were going to be born pretty soon," Paula relates. "I was home with John and Claire. By some coincidence, Robert came home, and my waters broke. Then we went into the hospital and they sat with me. I had a spinal anaesthetic and a caesarean section, so it's a slightly different experience for the woman. I was being stitched up and whatever, and then I kind of passed out. When I came round, that's when I had time to appreciate them. They were very tiny, but they were very strong."

The twins, Amy and Christie, were five weeks premature.

"I remember Amy came out first," says their father. "Very tense; she's always been tense. Even now she is. Then the other one (Christie) came out very relaxed. Made a little cry and did nothing. She is relaxed now. She was born with a respiratory problem. She is actually asthmatic. That was the concern, but it was not serious."

Robert had a "funny feeling" when he saw his daughters.

"Also to hold them in the arms. You know the baby is in the tummy, and then you have one in your hands and it is out. It's not in this world a few minutes before, and yet here it is making a noise. There's blood running through its veins. It's warm and squeaking. You look at it, you're not sure whether you are dreaming or something. I remember being a bit like - like literally walking on air; feeling not too steady on my feet, and having a child in my hands. Looking at the child. Looking, but more of a feeling. Probably if someone looked at me they would think I was lost. It's that kind of thing."

When Robert was released from prison, his aunt Girly wished that "there must be sweetness in his life".

But that was not to be. Hardly two months later, his past caught up with him. During his time on death row, the ANC activist had been so demonised that even some of his comrades came to believe that he and Barend Strydom were two sides of the same coin.

In November 1992, he and Paula were invited to the birthday party of the ailing former ANC President, Oliver Tambo, in Benoni.

When the young Master of Ceremonies at the function saw the couple among the many guests, he apologised for Robert's presence, regretting that "we also have our Barend Strydom."

Robert was deeply hurt by the gibe. He says the pain of being compared to the white right-winger who shot black people dead at point blank range by his comrade in the ANC was worse than being on death row.

However, he was destined for an even worse pain on December 16, 1993; the anniversary of Umkhonto We Sizwe - "MK" - the armed wing of the ANC. "MK" was formed by Nelson Mandela and other ANC leaders after the

organisation was banned by the Nationalist Party Government. At the time, Mandela and his comrades felt they had explored all peaceful avenues to end apartheid.

As the negotiations between the ANC and the de Klerk government appeared to be leading to the country's first democratic elections, the ANC resolved to disband its military wing. A decision had already been taken to suspend the armed struggle.

MK was officially disbanded on 16 December, 1993. During a ceremony held on that at Soweto's Orlando Stadium, many of the military wing's combatants received medals.

Robert was also expected to be honoured for his activities in MK.

"To be honest, I didn't think people would turn their backs on me like that," he reminisces bitterly. "When I came there in the beginning, there was a lot of speculation that I'm going to get a medal. It was in the paper - one of the black journalists wrote that. There were people who did absolutely nothing, but they got medals."

He feels his operation of 14 June 1986 - the "Magoo"/"Why Not" car bomb - had a lot to do with the snub by his organisation.

However, because he had carried out other missions on behalf of MK, he expected to be honoured for them.

"I could understand maybe [that] they wouldn't give me a medal for this 'Why Not bar' thing - it's too controversial and stuff. But I knew the Edendale rescue mission was spectacular. It might have been madness at that time, but it certainly was an indication of bravery. And it elevated the ANC and brought them recruits. It was a propaganda victory for the ANC."

Joe Modise, the overall commander of MK, was the main speaker at the armed wing's passing out parade and disbanding. Modise referred to the daring operation carried out by Robert and his father to free Gordon Webster from Edendale hospital.

"He mentions the operation in the speech," says Robert. "He congratulates me when he first sees me, then he mentions the operation in the speech. Other death row guys who killed civilians with land mines, they get medals - they get medals only for putting land mines; there's nothing else they did. They get called up. In Silverton (in Pretoria), they put a limpet mine at the bus stop and killed white people there. I am not saying they should not have got medals, but I am saying in the view of that I should also have got something, and I didn't get any medal.

"Even a death sentence was not the same like that. It was nothing. The devastation I felt was the worst thing I ever experienced in my whole life. Ever! It was in order to give me a medal. It was not controversial. It would not

have been a problem. Also, the fact that Modise mentions the operation in his speech that day. Obviously, to me there's a spanner in the works. I asked Ronnie Kasrils. I asked Rashid; they say it's a Sphiwe Nyanda and Modise's thing. I don't believe it's Modise - as much as I might have problems with him. Because he congratulated me and mentioned the operation in his speech. So the only other person is Sphiwe Nyanda. Or maybe Rashid himself, although Rashid says it's Sphiwe."

Robert later received a medal from the "government of national unity" which replaced the de Klerk government after the elections. However, the medal could not heal the pain in his heart.

"I wanted an ANC medal - from my organisation - not these new reconciliation medals, and I think I deserved it. If they didn't want to give it to me they could have given it to my father - if there was a problem with me. They didn't even do that. In spite of that, I still remained loyal to organisation."

He proved his continuing loyalty to the ANC a few months after he was cold-shouldered by his commanders in MK.

He literally came between ANC leaders Joe Slovo and Cyril Ramaphosa and bullets when the two were touring the township of Thokoza in the East Rand. McBride's altruism was captured "live" by SABC-TV and foreign networks like CNN and Sky-TV.

"What happened was that we had this presidential project that was started by Mandela," he recounts. "How it started was, we went to Mandela with Duma Nkosi [now an ANC MP]. Mandela called us to address the NEC (National Executive Committee) on what is the situation (in the East Rand). It was really getting bad in Thokoza. A number of actions were taken from the various levels, and one of them was to approach [FW] de Klerk and [declare] it a special area. It was a 'Kathorus Presidential Project' - it was launched by de Klerk."

On 10 January 1994, Robert and other activists in the ANC's Peace Desk took the organisation's leadership on a tour of the East Rand. They were to show them the effects of the violence, including the displacement of residents from their homes.

"We had put up defence - SDUs [Self-Defence Units] there, and these guys [Slovo and Ramaphosa] had their own official guards. The SABC went in the morning to this area and said to IFP people like Gertrude Msizi (now the organisation's MP), 'The ANC is coming to the hostels. What are you going to do about it?' These guys then decided to arm themselves and stationed themselves at areas we were going to, areas which had been fought over already - there would be informal truce over the areas. So, thanks to the SABC, Inkatha re-deployed in the area without us knowing."

The shooting from IFP supporters took the ANC delegation by surprise.

"The irony is, I am taking Slovo in the area. I am showing him what is happening - how these houses were hit. The houses were full of bullet holes, burnt down and stuff. I am saying, 'This area is now relatively safe. We are going to the worse area, but this one is relatively safe'. As I say, 'Safe', these guys start shooting at us. Cyril's bodyguards run away. By instinct, I automatically grab Cyril. I want to put him down, but I am not his bodyguard, and am feeling embarrassed to throw him on the floor. So I say, 'Chief, go down!'; he says, 'Are you suggesting I must lie down on the floor?' - the shooting is going on all over outside. Anyway, he goes down. Then someone - a lady soldier - dives and puts him on the floor. But the bullets are flying. Our people are returning fire. The people are standing around and looking excitedly, and I have to go and tell them to lie down."

Robert's high profile made the journalists get interested in him as the bullets flew about.

"The fucking journalists have the cameras on me," he shakes his head; "waiting for me to shot! They are following me up and down. There's bullets going all over. The bullets are splattering all over. And I just keep walking, telling the people to lie down - 'Stay inside. Go down!'; I am just walking, I don't care. Till everybody is lying down and they are safe. Then I go to the front to see what is happening."

A photo-journalist working for an international news agency, Abdul Sharrif, was shot and died on the same day at Natalspruit hospital.

"[Abdul Sharrif] was shot there, but the cameras are on me. Only on me! On my face. The best thing was the people realised I was cool. 'Live'; I am not modelling or anything. I remained cool."

In the history of South Africa, feelings about an individual have seldom been so polarised along racial lines as they have been about Robert John McBride. After his release from prison, a poll conducted M-Net television found out that its predominantly white viewers felt the ANC activist should have been released.

Yet, just before the country's all-inclusive elections of 1994, Robert proved to be very popular among the members of his predominantly black organisation. He was the second most popular candidate on the provisional list of nominations for the legislature of ANC's PWV [Pretoria, Witwatersrand and Vaal] region.

He and Paula spent little time together when he was a member of the provincial legislature.

"Robert and I get on very well - I love Robert very much, and he is important to me," Paula says. "Our relationship has been up and down. It's been difficult because since he's been out there's been very little time when we lived together as a family. We have always had people living in the house. The time he was in the PWV [legislature], we had a bodyguard living in the house."

Permanently, and that's very, very difficult."

After spending some time at the PWV Legislature (now the Gauteng Legislature), Robert asked to be transferred because "there was no area of growth".

He was sworn in as a member of the national parliament in Cape Town on 5 June, 1995. His reception was "mixed".

"Some were very warm; some were slightly warm; some of my comrades were indifferent. A lot of apprehension on the side of the white party people. I was just a (national) MP for five months. Then I resigned and applied for a job in foreign affairs."

It should be recalled that during his trial, David Gordon had planted the myth that he was a descendant of Major John MacBride - the Irish soldier who came to South Africa and fought on the side of the Boers during the Anglo-Boer war. As a result, when the ANC guerrilla was on death row, the Irish, believing that one of their kin was about to be executed, aligned themselves with the campaign to save his life. Tiernan MacBride, the grandson of the Major, was one of the many Irish people who wrote to the South African state president asking him to spare Robert's life.

Robert's supposed link with the Irish subsequently determined the course of his political career. A number of trips undertaken to Ireland prior to his move to the Department of Foreign Affairs heightened his passion for international relations.

During one of these trips, he met his "cousin" Tiernan MacBride.

"What I found out about him, there was no pretensions," Robert says of Tiernan. "He was quite loud - very loud. Full of laughter and jokes and wit. He's quite a big guy in size - he was surprised to see that I am bigger than him."

Through Tiernan, he got acquainted to IRA leader Gerry Adams.

"I spoke to Gerry Adams in June 1994 and said, 'Why don't you suspend the armed struggle so as to give negotiations a chance?'. Also, they would have the moral high ground and the initiative with them. He then asked me to arrange a meeting for him to come here and assist with support groups - information groups and stuff like that. He also invited me to a number of functions they were having there. By 1995 it was clear that this thing (the cease-fire) is going to break down because the British refused to move on any issue."

Interestingly, his travels to Ireland also opened his eyes to another international conflict which he would later get his South African comrades to help solve: the East Timorese's fight for autonomy against the Indonesians. "I just started taking an interest in (the East Timorese) and reading because I

had never really - until about 1992 - I had never heard of East Timor. I didn't know what the hell it was. Then I started looking at history and reading books about it - how this happened and the circumstances of these people."

It was just over a year since I had put my medical practice on the back burner to focus on the life story of the ANC activist who was seldom out of the country's newspapers. Robert and I had secured an appointment with an official at South African Broadcasting Corporation [SABC] to discuss a proposal for the television series on himself and his family.

Our appointment was for the morning of 11 March, 1998 - on a Wednesday. The Tuesday before the meeting, I came back home late.

"Papa, have you heard? Mr McBride has been arrested," Gaositwe, my ten year old son informed him as I walked in. "He has been arrested in Mozambique. It was on the news on TV."

I was on time to catch the news headlines on SABC's TV3 at ten o'clock. Indeed, there was an item on the arrest of South Africa's senior foreign official Robert McBride in Mozambique.

The following morning, the stories of McBride's arrest were on the front pages of many of South Africa's newspapers. There were as many theories about what he was doing in Mozambique as there were stories. At the time, with monotonous regularity, heavily armed criminal gangs were staging bank heists and ambushing cash-in-transit trucks in Pretoria, Johannesburg, Durban, Witbank and many other cities.

The police were finding it difficult to bring the gang members to book. One of the theories about Robert's arrest was that he was in cahoots with the cash-in-transit robbers. That he had gone to Mozambique to procure arms for them. Another alluded to the McBrides' support for the East Timorese struggle. It was suggested that Robert was actually on a mission to obtain weapons for Fretilin, East Timor liberation movement.

Then there was a theory linking him to the Irish Republic Army, postulating that he was in fact trying to get weapons for the IRA. A few days after her husband's arrest, Paula McBride appeared on SABC-TV to refute the allegations that he might be involved with the criminals who were conducting bank-heists.

"I know my husband; I know what moves him," she said with conviction. She added that she understood that, to the press, the name "Robert McBride" was "a red rag to the bull". The numerous theories about the reasons for his trip to Mozambique were not surprising, but she was confident that they very much off the mark.

Interestingly, at the time Paula was actually in the dark about Robert's mission to Mozambique. She did not know about his trip to the neighbouring country, either.

When he left on the Friday before his arrest, she thought he was going to visit a sick cousin in Durban.

Reports said the foreign affairs official was arrested in Mozambique with a youth who had accompanied him on the trip, "Vusi Mbatha" aka "Vusi Madida".

Interviewed after he had once again done a Houdini, Robert relates that "Mbatha"/"Madida" is actually a Mozambican, "Emmanuel Nhanhombe". He had first met the Mozambican in 1993, when he was head of the ANC's Peace Desk and putting out fires in the violence-ridden East Rand.

Aubrey Lekwane was with him when he met Vusi. At the time, the youth was between 17 and 18 years old. The activists suspected that Vusi was a spy. Vusi had a number of explanations of how he had come to end up in South Africa.

"It's hard to say what was his first story because he told many stories," says Robert. "The one was that he's a child of an exile - the exiled 'Madida; he knew everything. 'Madida' was a guy who was at an ANC hostel or something in Solomon Mahlangu Freedom College in Tanzania [SOMAFSCO]. The guy says that his father was a Madida. He gave his whole exile story - the whole legend - from A-Z. Everything fitted in. We found that there was a Madida, there was a college, and Madida had a son and everything - who is who, where they met them. Vusi was even in Angola, and when the ANC security guys came in, one of them, Bob Lawrence started talking Portuguese to him. Bob Lawrence immediately said, 'I remember this guy, he was in a camp with me. He was naughty. What are you involved in now?'"

"Bob Lawrence" was the MK name for Ralph Peterson, a Coloured activist from Newcastle.

At the time, a commission was instituted by then President FW de Klerk to investigate the many killings which were taking place in the country, especially on trains. The commission - "the Goldstone commission" - was headed by Judge Richard Goldstone.

There was a belief in the liberation movement that the killings were being carried out by members of the conservative Inkatha Freedom Party [IFP], working in cahoots with agents of the apartheid government, to block the country's move towards a negotiated settlement.

Vusi told Robert and his comrades that he knew of a Mozambican gun-runner who was supplying arms to IFP members in a hostel in Diepkloof, Soweto. "We then said take this guy - the Goldstone commission was going on; take him and make a statement to an advocate and give him to the Goldstone commission. It's out of our hands. This thing is too complicated."

Towards the end of 1997, Robert felt he needed Vusi Madida/Vusi Mbatha/Emmanuel Nhanhombe to help a comrade who was in a spot of

bother.

At some stage, Vusi had stayed at the house of the comrade, Winnie Madikizela-Mandela. Now the ANC Women's League president and former wife to Nelson Mandela was being grilled by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission over her alleged involvement in the deaths and mysterious disappearance of activists in eighties. A number of those activists were former members of "Mandela Football Club" - a structure set up by Winnie which gained notoriety in the township for its members' unruly behaviour.

During the TRC hearing, Jerry Richardson, former "coach" of Mandela FC, was making damaging allegations against Winnie Madikizela-Mandela. Some of the allegations rung a bell with Robert. Emmanuel Nhanhombe - alias Vusi Mbatha, alias Vusi Madida - was on hand to give another side to the story.

"I can't remember how the issue came in - which happened first - but it linked up with Vusi. At the time of Winnie Mandela's thing, I needed Vusi then. He came in just in time. But like, it was a weird coincidence. To give evidence to the Truth Commission that he had been part of the plot to smear Winnie's name because all these people were just hammering her - saying whatever they want to say about her. But the thing that was conspicuous by its absence was that there were attempts to smear her [name]. So I went to the Truth Commission. (TRC chief investigator) Dumisa Ntebeza gave me a Danish investigator."

At the time, Robert was a representative of the Department of Foreign Affairs in the National Intelligence Estimates Board [NIEB] - a substructure of the National Intelligence Agency [NIA].

Besides enlisting Vusi's help in proving that there was a conspiracy to besmirch Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, he also thought the Mozambican could assist him in an investigation pertaining to NIEB.

Robert was recruited into NIEB because he was working with the intelligence people "at an operational level".

"So they then went to Thuthukile Mazibuko (then acting Director General of the Department of Foreign Affairs) and told her that 'this guy is helping us a lot'. They started sending the (intelligence) guys regularly. I helped them recruit people."

His contact in the NIA was an activist he used to work closely with when he was the head of the ANC's peace desk, Frank Radebe. The NIA was trying to help the police bring the criminals involved in bank-heists to book. Robert had his own theory about the armed robberies.

He approached Frank Radebe with it. From a report on the rounds found scenes of cash-in-transit heists, he deduced that the firearm used was a "CZ25".

"We used to call it 'Che Peterson' because Basil February - the (Coloured) guy who was killed in Zimbabwe - was named 'Paul Peterson' - his MK name. He died with that gun in his hand. Others used to mix it up with a Scorpion. A Scorpion is something different, but I had seen the thing on the East Rand, with a couple of people I had worked with, and they were very few and far between."

The foreign affairs official then reckoned there was a link between the comrades he used to work with in the East Rand with the gangsters who were staging the cash-heists.

"The comrades in Pretoria and East Rand. It might have been a wrong assumption, but I had only seen guns like that ever on the East Rand." When Robert and Aubrey met Vusi Mbatha at the time of Winnie Madikizela-Mandela's TRC hearing, the Mozambican suggested a possible source of the weapons the gangsters were using in their operations.

"What happened was, whilst the investigator was with Vusi - giving a statement about how he was used to smear Winnie and stuff like that - then we start[ed] speaking about 1993," Robert remembers. "Aubrey is with me, and the investigator - the international investigator - is there. We're just talking in general. Just like nostalgia. Then [Vusi] says, 'No, I was in Maputo over the weekend'. This is in November 1997. He says, 'I've just been to Maputo. I saw (Alexander) Uamba. He's still doing the guns, and he's giving them to these people who are involved with these people who were in the cash heists'. So, I said, 'Why don't you go and tell the cops about it? Go and report it. Didn't the Goldstone Commission people close Uamba down?'. He says, 'Ja', he took the Goldstone Commission (investigators) to Maputo and showed them Uamba's house, but Uamba was then arrested in Swaziland for gun running at some stage, so they could never follow up with him what he was busy doing. He leaves it like that."

Robert and Aubrey gave Vusi a number at which he could contact them if he should encounter any problems.

"We leave him with the investigator and we go," McBride continues. "Not even about two weeks later, he phones and says he has the information. He's given it to the people he used to work with in the (police) firearms unit, (and) they say he must come and give the information to me. Information about the gun running. I ask him, 'Why are you giving it to me?' He says, 'They say you are connected with the intelligence people'. This is like maybe two weeks - I am on leave."

Robert contacted Frank Radebe and shared the information from Vusi Mbatha with the NIA agent.

"I go and talk to Frank; I pass it on to Frank. Frank actually came to see me about something else - all these investigations about SDU's [Self-Defence Units] which we had started; which NIA was now on. So I started talking to Frank. Frank said he's interested in the story. Then I start giving him all the

background."

Had Robert not confided his investigation into bank-heists with the NIA to someone outside the government structures, he would now probably be serving a long prison sentence in a Mozambique.

After his arrest with Vusi in the former Portuguese colony, neither the South African government, nor the NIA, nor his department, nor the ANC would acknowledge that he was in the country on official business. Fortunately for him, there was a South African journalist who knew better. The journalist, Wally Mbhele, was working for the Johannesburg weekly, Mail and Guardian (formerly, the Weekly Mail).

The Free State-born activist was McBride's predecessor in the ANC's Peace Desk.

After dropping out of the University of Zululand "for political reasons" in 1989, Wally won a place in "the Weekly Mail training project". Then, when his contract with the weekly ended after six months, he joined the ANC Peace Desk.

Wally's stint in the Peace Desk lasted between 1991 and 1992. When Robert was released from prison and took over from him, the former MK guerrilla gave the portfolio a different slant.

"What I know is, he is a soldier," Mbhele explains. "Obviously, he could not operate on the same level I was operating. I was much more of a journalist - analysing data, trying to give that information. He's the practical person who would actually go the scene himself."

Wally, now associate editor at City Press newspaper, was aware of McBride's concern over the bank-heists before his arrest in Mozambique.

"We met at the Mafikeng conference of the ANC in (December 1997). Already, I was the political correspondent for the Mail and Guardian. So we were just talking about the bank-heists. I remember that conference took place against the background of these renewed heists. It was a new thing that was happening in the country. And I think we were in discussion with some of my colleagues, and Robert happened to be around us." Robert started sharing his theory of the bank-heists with Wally and his colleagues.

"The modus operandi by those guys (the robbers) - he seemed to be well acquainted with how they were trained. He actually said he trained some of these people. The modus operandi they used. He said it could some of the defence units members. He said he was almost convinced that it's them who are behind these kind of attacks.

"And then I developed an interest there. I said if that's true, then it means this

is a story. If ANC dissidents - people who used to be in self-defence units [SDUs] are now involved in this kind of job - highway heists - then it's a big story. Then I made an appointment to see him because I wanted him to tell me more - off the record."

Frank Radebe, Robert's contact in the NIA, was part of the task group which was investigating the cash-in-transit heists. He was working with the then so-called super-cop of South Africa, Bushy Engelbrecht.

When Radebe heard what Vusi Mbatha had to say about the source of the weapons used by the criminals staging the heists, his interest was aroused. Of added interest was the suspicion that a former comrade of McBride's in MK's Special Ops was involved in the heists.

A plan was devised to get to the bottom of the matter. This included arresting Alexander Uamba, the Mozambican who was allegedly supplying the robbers with weapons.

"The idea is (Uamba) must come over [and] get arrested here in South Africa," Robert explains. "Then when I speak to Frank - I think we met at the 'Wimpy' (restaurant) in Hatfield (in Pretoria)."

He was to entice Uamba into South Africa, pretending to be someone interested in buying arms from him.

Vusi Mbatha set up the first meeting between Robert and Alexander Uamba. The two men met the alleged gun-runner at his house in a suburb of Maputo, the capital city of Mozambique. Uamba was about 45.

"He's short, he's about 5 feet 3 or 4; not taller than that," says Robert. "If he was slim he'd be very small, but because he's quite fat, he's quite broad. He likes to talk in whispers."

Uamba informed McBride that he had contacts high up in the hierarchy of the Mozambican army.

"The guy he is getting the stuff from [is] his brother-in-law. The guy who's actually in charge of internal affairs in Maputo. His name is Nhathave. He then tells us that these guys say they want to meet with you but you must show you are interested - you must go and show them the big amount of money.

And they want to work in dollars. So if you can come back the next time, you can meet with them. So we leave it like that."

Back in South Africa, Robert met Frank to brief him on his meeting with Alexander Uamba.

"I speak to Frank and he says okay, he says, 'Go, we will requisition money for you so you can go and talk to this guy'."

In March 1998, he returned to Mozambique.

"I'm with Vusi again because of the interpretation. I don't know whether Uamba is stupid or is pretending to be stupid - sometimes we don't understand each other very well, so I need somebody to interpret.

"The first thing when I arrived there in the evening - I think it was a Saturday - the first thing we did was to show Uamba the money is there. So he would then arrange with the generals for a meeting. What had happened is that we came on a weekend, and Uamba then reported back that they can only see us on Monday."

On Monday, he and Vusi were on their way to see Uamba.

"Vusi says he wants to make a phone call. From the way we used to work in MK, when something like that happens, alarm bells start ringing. So when Vusi said he wants to make a phone call, I stop. He goes to the public phone - he makes the phone call. I don't make an issue of that. I just say, 'Vusi, go ahead; take the taxi and go. You can meet me afterwards and we will arrange a place (to meet)'. He takes the taxi and goes."

Rather than turn back, Robert decided to follow the taxi.

"(To) see what is going on. He's going to Uamba's house in Maputo. I see as the taxi stops in front of Uamba's house - the taxi is parked; I don't see Vusi. But in about 20/30 seconds after I arrive, about four guys come out of the house. They grab the taxi driver. They start beating the taxi driver up. I'm not sure what is going on in this place. I wait and I see, (but) Vusi doesn't come. I see lots of police and people standing on rooftops and stuff. So I'm parking; I'm just watching. I don't know what the hell is going on."

He sensed that things were going wrong. He decided to go and enlist the help of an official he knew at the South African embassy.

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"So I go back to the embassy; I'm looking for Thandu Kwazi Nyawose; he's the guy I must liaise with. Unfortunately he's not there. He's a diplomat; he's one of our guys. I want to go and tell him what is going on. I had seen him on the first trip and told him that I'm busy with an investigation. So, I wanted to go back. I didn't see him on the second trip. So now because things are going funny, I wanted to tell him something is wrong here. He was not there, so I waited for an hour. The embassy had started closing. I then decide I must leave because I don't know where this guy is."

Earlier, Robert McBride had got involved in a car accident with a fellow South African in Mozambique.

"What had happened also the Friday night, the South African guys smashed into my car but I don't think it's connected - but it becomes relevant afterwards. So the car was dented on the side. Just out of the blue, the guy came."

Three hours after leaving the South African embassy in Maputo, the foreign

affairs official-cum-undercover agent was at Mozambique's Ressano Garcia border.

"It's actually in Komatipoort. The Komatipoort border (on South Africa's side). When I reach the border, I'm passing through the gates when I see two policemen running. They have a paper in their hands. I'm already through – I'm going to the South African side now. They come and give it to this guy who was searching the car."

Accounts in the South African press at the time said that when the Mozambican border policemen called him, Robert tried to run away. He disputes that.

"The guy stops and says, 'We've got a message here that you must report to the police station'. So I'm thinking maybe it's for the accident, so I go down. No, I don't run away; I go down. I was through the gates. I reversed and came back and came through. I was still in Mozambique, but I reversed and came. Then I came there and asked what was the problem. They searched the car - they just searched the car, the knife was in my bag. They looked through the bag, they looked at the knife they didn't take it, they left it there - they took the knife afterwards. So I asked, 'What is going on?' So they are now telling me that they are following orders. I said to them that it's late, the border is going to close. It's getting late. They told me they are following orders."

He spent the night in a guest house at Ressano Garcia.

In the morning, he went to the police station.

"They tell me the senior officer is coming from Maputo. They come; they pick me up. They take me to one of the main police stations. They start asking me a lot of questions - 'What is going on?'; 'What am I doing here?'; 'Was I with somebody else?'. I say I was with another guy, and the guy has gone missing. They look at my diplomatic passport. They then say they are going to check, I must just wait a little while."

While Robert was still waiting, the police brought in Vusi.

"Vusi is full of blood; he's been beaten up. They don't allow me to talk to him; they keep him there. About half an hour later, they bring a white guy from the embassy, a cop. So the Mozambicans ask him, 'Do you know this guy?'. He says, 'No'. So I say if you don't know me you are not a fucking policeman. I say it just like that. I'm saying this to him in English; there was a translator. I said to him you are not a fucking policeman. He says, 'Ja, I know this guy.' They say, 'No, you don't know this guy. Can you check this passport if it's the right one?' He says, 'No it's a right one. I know this guy. He used to plant bombs in South Africa and then they gave him a position in Foreign Affairs. So that passport is a genuine passport.'"

After Denysschen's remarks, the police got rough with McBride.

"That was the end," he sighs. "Now they start - they then go and search my car again. They find my knife - it was a knife that a professor from India gave me; the knife I used to cut coconuts when drinking. So they start saying this one is assassin ado. I'm an assassin; I'm a bad man; I kill people."  
He was taken to Machava maximum security prison in Maputo.

"They take me and put me straight into a place; they call it cella disciplinaria; it's a punishment cell. They've been pushing me; there's been scuffles all along the way. Then they take me and throw me into a cell.

"There is a door; a solid steel door with a hole above on the wall, and the one hole on the steel door right at the bottom. It's very hot and humid, and I'm not acclimatised to the humidity. Very overwhelming in the place, because it's dark. There are no lights; it's too hot. Fortunately no mosquitoes come in there; it's too hot. The water runs off your body as you are sitting there. So basically, fortunately for me, it wasn't completely new territory. I just realised that this is going to take a long time to get sorted out; just relax. So I took my glasses off and put it down and I just lied down on my back and slept."

Wally Mbhele heard of McBride's arrest over the radio.

"I was just waking up in the morning - listening to the news bulletin on (radio) 702, and I could hear (talk show host and former Irish international rugby player) John Robbie going to town about McBride's arrest in Mozambique. 'Gee whiz!' Then I started thinking what could he have gone to do in Mozambique. And the way the story was presented on radio - and also in newspapers - I somehow believed that he was there for gun-running or gun smuggling. I remember I was driving to work and 702 had already dispatched a reporter to Mozambique."

However, his feeling that McBride might indeed be involved in gun-running did not last long. By the time he got to work, his investigative reporter's questioning mind was already in action.

After Robert was arrested, a South African team of detectives left for Maputo to investigate claims that the Foreign Affairs official was involved in an arms deal.

Two former members of the Security Branch [SB], Assistant Police Commissioner "Suiker" Britz and Superintendent Frans "Lappies" Labuschagne were part of the investigating team. Wally was intrigued by the make-up of the South African investigating team

"You know, all we were getting was the story based on police sources and 'the (apartheid government's) old guard', of course. All these people made some dramatic come-back into the political scenario. All of a sudden they were authorities on this issue. And to me, it somehow surprised me because I was now used to the new generation of democrats in the police force - they would give you a story that is not influenced by some hidden agenda. But this time, specifically on this case of Robert, we were getting stories from people 'Suiker' Brits, stories from people like Lappies Labuschagne."

He discussed his suspicion that all was not what it seemed with his editor, Phillip van Niekerk.

It was a Wednesday.

The Mail and Guardian comes out on Fridays.

"We were going closer to deadline. I went to Phillip and said, 'Phillip, we need to get the other side to the story. So far what we've heard is one side of the story - what the police are telling us. Let's try to go to the people who are very close to Robert McBride. Let's try and tease them to come out with something. Maybe we can get an angle for the coming Friday'. That's when I started. I worked the whole night. I'm talking here about - until 2 o'clock in the morning. Going around people who were very close to him at foreign affairs; going to people who were very close to him. Just trying to unpack this whole mystery."

The journalist also intended "to unpack the mystery" was by investigating the investigators.

When I started work on the life story of Robert McBride, I got most of the insight into his life from the interviews I conducted with numerous people who came in and out of his life. This also related to the spirited battle by his girlfriend (and later, his wife) Paula to save his life.

When Robert was incarcerated without trial in a Mozambican jail, I had the privilege of observing Paula at close quarters as she fought to get her husband released.

After learning of Robert's arrest, Paula was unfazed.

"It could be worse, he could be dead," she said philosophically. "He is still alive. At least there is something I can do to get him out." She learnt about her husband's arrest while in the Cape with her parents. She was not aware that Robert would be in Mozambique.

"She didn't even know," says Robert. "She knew I'm going to Durban - because I was going to go in, show them the money, meet with them and go out. Because my cousin was sick - Collin. She thought I'm going straight to Collin."

For about seven days, Robert was left all alone in the punishment cell at Machava prison. The police were not even interrogating him.

"I think was like a hot potato for them; they didn't know what to do," he says.

"They had made a balls up."

South Africa's envoy in Mozambique, Mangisi Zitha, saw him in prison a few weeks after his arrest.

The sixty year old former minister in the Ka-Ngwane homeland later visited Robert to inform him that he had been suspended on full pay by the

Department of Foreign Affairs.

At the time, the press in South Africa was awash with allegations carried out in a report instituted by the head of the South African National Defence Force linking McBride and other leading politicians in a plot to overthrow the South African government.

The head of SANDF, General George Meiring, had reportedly handed the report to President Nelson Mandela. The so-called Meiring report alleged that McBride was a co-conspirator in the plot with Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, former MK chief of staff and then understudy to Meiring Sphiwe Nyanda and other activists from liberation movements which were rivals to the ANC.

Amazingly, American pop star Michael Jackson was also mentioned as being part of the plot.

Paula employed a lawyer friend who was conversant with the Mozambican legal system to help in the fight to get her husband released. The lawyer, Jose Nascimento, also shared the McBrides' support for the East Timorese's struggle against occupation of their land by the Indonesians. In fact, this link was one of the reasons why some sections of the media speculated that Robert was in Mozambique to obtain arms for Fretilin - the East Timorese guerrilla movement.

Jose Nascimento was born in Johannesburg on 29 October 1958.

"My father is a normal tradesman and my mother was a housewife - with very little education," he says. "My father was a carpenter. Very basic education. They are still alive - three years of education."

Between 1977 and 1982, he obtained two law degrees from the University of the Witwatersrand ["Wits"]: B.Proc. and an LLB. In 1995, he registered for a Master's degree in international law with Randse Afrikaanse Universiteit ["RAU"].

By then, he had developed an interest in the struggle of the people of East Timor for autonomy from their Indonesian occupiers. Jose's attraction to the East Timorese struggle was because of some sort of *mea culpa*.

"I became quite passionate about the issue of East Timor because it was a tiny little nation - a spot somewhere on the map. Defenceless people that needed to be protected. At the same time, it was a guilty conscience that I had not done enough during the apartheid era. I thought I didn't do anything for my own people, I must do something for someone."

The worlds of Jose Nascimento and Robert McBride intersected in 1996, when East Timorese Nobel laureate Ramos Horta visited South Africa. Ramos had a message for Nelson Mandela from Xanana Gusmao, another East Timorese leader who was in prison. Jose went to pick him from the airport.

"Fretilin [the East Timorese liberation movement] contacted me from Mozambique; because they had leaders in exile in Mozambique. They wanted me to give Ramos Horta as much support as I could in South Africa. They also told me at the time that they wanted to see President Mandela - that was prize number one. And so I went to the airport to pick up Ramos Horta. The next day I got a call with a request that I should try and set up a meeting with Madiba [Nelson Mandela's clan name]. So I sent a fax to Madiba's office. But the response that we got was that Madiba was ill - he had gone for some operation. I sent two to three faxes - because we wanted to get this meeting. Ramos Horta had a message from Xanana Gusmao to be given to Mandela. We weren't able to get anywhere."

Robert McBride, whom Jose had never met before, saved the day. Ramos Horta and McBride already knew each other.

"Then Ramos Horta got hold of McBride," the South African lawyer of Portuguese descent continues. "He managed to get hold of Robert, and Robert secured the meeting. Ramos Horta went and met Madiba - Madiba was bed-ridden. And from that meeting, that's where the idea started that Madiba should go and visit Xanana Gusmao."

When Robert was arrested at Ressa Garcia, he called on the lawyer he had met through their mutual passion for the East Timorese struggle. Initially, the policemen at the border gate informed Jose that Robert was being held so that a car accident he was involved in could be investigated. But a few calls later, the lawyer knew better.

"That very evening, ministers were contacted," he relates. "And then a very close friend of mine, in a very top position - I don't want to mention names - he had phoned the minister of police and came back. That same evening came back with the story. He told me the charge was gun-running. And I couldn't believe it. I said, 'This is bullshit!'"

He thought the matter would be cleared at diplomatic level.

"I actually believed this thing was going to be over - I actually thought two days at most. I thought a phone call from Madiba to (Mozambican President) Chissano - or from our government to Chissano - and Robert's out." With hindsight, Jose is happy that this was not the course that was followed. "In a way, even though it was unfortunate for Robert to have to go through all of this, I feel vindicated that it was done through the courts - that it wasn't any special favour. For Robert's reputation, I think it was very important that he was cleared properly - fairly -, and it wasn't a diplomatic exchange or a diplomatic favour that was done."

He visited Robert at Mozambique's Machava prison a few days after his arrest. Then it became evident to him that there were big forces which wished to keep him locked up for a long time.

"Let me tell you another interesting thing. Never did any South African policeman speak to Robert in Mozambique, and this is why I wasn't co-

operative - one of the reasons I wasn't co-operative with General Engelbrecht at the end when Robert came back - Bushie Engelbrecht. Because they had six months in which to find out. They never cared a damn about interviewing and finding out anything from Robert. They were bent on nailing him, and that's what they did. I think in this whole process, what really shocked me was the role of people going all out to nail Robert.

"They weren't interested about anything else - they weren't interested in information that Robert had concerning the gun-running, which to me was of far more importance than some guy who supposedly overstepped the line in terms of bureaucratic purposes in a sense that being a foreign affairs man, that wasn't his duty. I think more important than that was the gun-running information that he had, and no-one ever cared a damn about [it]. At least to my understanding no-one took any interest. That to me was a far greater issue, and that really upset me because I realised then that they were not interested in the real issues. They were rather interested in nailing Robert." During Robert's detention, Paula, often accompanied by Jose, religiously took a plane to Mozambique on a weekly basis. Sometimes Derrick McBride, her father-in-law, joined them. Most of the times, she would be refused permission to see her husband.

Inside Machava prison, Robert reckoned his name had now been destroyed. He saw only one way out.

"I had made up my mind that I would run away," he smiles. "Not now; I must face it and take the thing through. Basically I realised that my name had been destroyed, so I don't need to fucking worry about that; that is out of the way. I must just worry that they were not going to keep me there forever. I was going to escape and run away, I'm going to kill all those people who set me up. It was clear in my mind. It was, sekunjalo! ['This is it!'] - it was time. In my mind it was time for war. That's what it was, and I didn't care a damn about reconciliation. So all the people who had set me up - who back-stabbed me - I was going to run away and kill all of them wherever I find them."

Outside, things were not any rosier for Mrs McBride. After Robert was arrested, many of their friends steered clear of her. They would not offer any emotional or material support. Only a few, like a couple who stay near them in Erasmia, Pretoria - Mark and Sharon Heywood - retained contact.

The Heywoods, together with Aubrey Lekwane, Derrick McBride and Paula's brother John Leyden, were the people behind [the] "Release Robert McBride Committee" - an organisation formed to pressurise the South African government to insist that its citizen either be charged quickly or be released.

As every newspaper got sold on the story that Robert McBride was a gun-runner, the Mail and Guardian stood by him.

Wally Mbhele was largely responsible for that. He tirelessly pursued "the other side to the story" of Robert's arrest in Mozambique, seeking people who were close to him in both the Department of Foreign Affairs and socially.

"Once I started talking to these people (in Foreign Affairs), they were so afraid

to talk about this issue," the journalist recounts. "I remember once I was in the house of one of the Foreign Affairs officials - once I was busy talking to this guy. Calls from abroad - Foreign Affairs offices in other countries would come - and I would get a sense that Robert was not acting alone when the guy was telling them: 'No, didn't you know? He was seconded to this intelligence probe within Foreign Affairs'. That's when I started picking up that he was not acting alone."

He would not be put off by advice from high ranking ANC officials - including some cabinet ministers - not to jeopardise his career because Robert was indeed a gun-runner. The advisers assured him that he was going to come a cropper in his attempt to prove that Robert was innocent. His investigation of the South African policemen on McBride's case was buoyed by a call he received from a former ANC exile, Felicia Dlodlo.

The female activist's husband, Viva Dlodlo, was assassinated by apartheid death squads in Swaziland in the eighties. Viva was a member of the ANC's armed wing, Umkhonto We Sizwe ["MK"].

Felicia recalled that, at a previous Truth and Reconciliation Commission [TRC] hearing in October 1996, convicted assassin Eugene de Kok had implicated "Lappies" Labuschagne in the murder of at least four MK members in Swaziland in 1987.

The MK guerrillas included Viva Dlodlo and Cassius Maake, the most senior ANC member, were killed in exile.

Jose Nascimento decided early on that it would be in his client's best interest if he roped in a native Mozambican attorney into the team. He opted for one Albano Silva.

"(Silva) is a very small man, a guy who feels uncomfortable in suits," says Robert. "He's a guy who's completely assimilated, he's a white Portuguese, assimilated to the black Mozambican culture. Speaks about five or six black languages. Very little English. But what he did was he brought one of his own partners to translate."

Having Silva in the team increased Robert's confidence.

Although, publicly, the story was that McBride was acting alone, behind the scenes, his defence team contacted a number of his associates in South Africa to show that he was indeed part of an official intelligence structure. People who prepared affidavits included Aubrey Lekwane, Frank Radebe (for the NIA) and Robert's friends Andre van der Byl and Ashley Bhoodoo. Lekwane's affidavit related how he and McBride had first come in contact with the Mozambican youth who was arrested with Robert, Emmanuel Nhanhombe - alias Vusi Mbatha, alias Vusi Madida.

Van der Byl and Bhoodoo prepared an affidavit on an investigation they had undertaken in conjunction with McBride into corruption in the police fire-arms unit.

"About policemen involved in corruption; giving licences for semi-automatic rifles to Inkatha aligned people," Robert elucidates. "And there was another white guy - from about 1995 we were working on it. On one occasion in particular, when we worked together, we got account numbers and dates of deposits made into policemen's accounts which corresponded with the days when Inkatha aligned people received the licences. It was like about twenty days, different days and for different licences."

Gerry Adams, the President of Sinn Fein, was shocked when he heard of Robert's arrest in Mozambique. The Irish activist was close to the McBrides.

The letter read:

22 April 1998

Paula McBride

South Africa

Paula a chara

I was deeply shocked to learn of Robert's arrest in Mozambique. My thoughts are with you, the children and Robert at this difficult time.

In trying to advance an Irish peace process, and as Sinn Fein developed our peace strategy, the example set by South Africa was very important. We decided to learn as much as we possibly could about the South African experience.

On our first visit to South Africa in the summer of 1995, and on subsequent trips by other party officials, Robert worked tirelessly to ensure that we met the broadest range of representatives from the ANC, National(ist) Party, the (Inkatha) Freedom Party and others. He was also enormously helpful in facilitating our first meeting with President Mandela and other South African government Ministers. They all willingly shared their experiences and negotiating skills with us, and that help and assistance was invaluable in the context of the search for peace in Ireland.

When Robert travelled to Ireland in 1995 he spoke eloquently to people here about the South African peace process and its lessons for Ireland. He made a great impact on everyone he met.

We owe Robert a tremendous debt of gratitude. If there is anything I can do to help please don't hesitate to contact me.

Is mise le meas

Gerry Adams MP

Sinn Fein President

cc President Nelson Mandela

cc Albano Silva

Adams's letter, together with one from East Timorese Nobel prize for peace winner, Ramos Horta, were submitted by Robert's defence team to the Mozambicans as testimonials of his character.

As, outside, Robert's name was being dragged through the mud by the

Meiring report and other allegations churned out by the media about his mission in Mozambique, he found succour in something which had previously strengthened him in similar circumstances: reggae. More particularly, the reggae music of his namesake, Robert Nesta Marley.

"It's probably the reason why when people are in trouble they go [to] religion," he says. "With me, I go to reggae. It's very funny, but it sort of helped me cope with the situation. It's like, I'm more and more convinced that it's something more to like in Bob Marley's music and creative lyrics - because I can look at any Marley song, and it has an application from my life. It's like a special place in me."

"Bad card", Marley's song from his "Uprisings" album, had special meaning for McBride at Machava maximum security prison.

"For me the situation in Mozambique was like 'Bad card'," says McBride. "The song that just fits in it, like: 'You are go tired to see me face/Can't get out of the race/Oh man, you say that I'm in you face/And then you draw bad card/Propaganda spreading over my name/You wanna (want to) bring another life to shame...'"

The Meiring report, Robert avers, was a "bad card".

"It just didn't work out. For me it showed that amongst my own people, there's people who didn't have belief in me. It's like really I'd given people a second chance to nail their colours to the mast. Some responded positively, and others messed up again."

When President Nelson Mandela received the Meiring report, he instructed the late Chief Justice Ismail Mahomed to investigate the allegations contained in it. Mandela announced that Mahomed had found the "inherently fantastic". General George Meiring was subsequently dismissed from his position. But the rejection of the Meiring report by the South African government did not spell Robert McBride's immediate release.

Instead Antonio Namburete, the Mozambican attorney general, added a further charge against him: espionage.

Namburete explained that McBride, his lawyers and his wife had invited the charges by their explanation of his business in Mozambique. In August 1998 she lost her patience with Mozambican bureaucracy. She approached the land's supreme court for an order for her husband's release. When Robert McBride emerged from Machava prison on 9 September 1998, there was a possibility that he would have to return to Mozambique to stand trial. The Mozambican police were still continuing to investigate the espionage charges against him.

When he got back home, he repeated his claims that he went to Mozambique to investigate gun-running on behalf of the National Intelligence Agency. Joe Nhlanhla, then Deputy Minister of Intelligence (now retired after becoming

Minister of Intelligence), rejected those claims.

Robert retorted by explaining he was chosen to be his department's representative in a subsidiary of NIA, the National Intelligence Estimates Board [NIEB].

"I was nominated to this position by the then acting director-general, who had been informed by agents in the field of my experience in intelligence work. To my mind, this would appear to be obvious - I was not appointed to this position because I happen to be a good cook. I have stated previously that I have been involved in a number of times at an operational level with SASS and NIA. If they wish to deny this, so be it."  
(Pretoria News 17 September 1998)

He was finding it difficult to get hold of Frank Radebe, his previous contact in NIA.

"I haven't seen him," he says. "I phoned him and told him to come and see me. He stayed away. Even at the time when the house was under observation, I phoned him and said to him that I'm scared. He didn't come. That was at the time from coming back from Mozambique; it's like within a week. Then it wasn't six weeks later when I heard he's fired. It was like a forced retirement."

Mail and Guardian chose him as its newsmaker of the year.

Wally Mbhele's coverage of the "McBride affair" was rewarded by the Foreign Correspondents Association when he was named joint winner of the organisation's journalist of the year award.

In March 1999, exactly twelve months after Robert was arrested at Ressano Garcia border gate, the Mozambican supreme court cleared him of charges of gun-running, espionage and criminal conspiracy.  
Robert's suspension by his employers was then lifted.

He says the subsequent revelation that General George Meiring and MI agents in the SANDF were feeding Mandela with false information makes the many months in a Mozambican jail worthwhile.

"In my own mind it was good I was arrested in Mozambique; it was absolutely marvellous. Because, say I was not arrested, and they had taken photos of me seen in Mozambique - meeting with these gun runners - then they would ask me, 'You were in Mozambique?' 'Ja'; 'You met with the gun runners?'; 'Ja'; 'You discussed buying guns from them?', and I would say, 'Ja'. Then they would say, 'He's guilty'. Then there would be no chance. Now with me being arrested, they had to play their hand. They had to make a move. Unbeknown to them, Mandela put up this (then Chief Justice) Ismail Mohamed thing."  
Robert feels compelled to succeed so that he can get back at his detractors.

After his release, he no longer had the anger he had while at Machava prison

about the people who set him up.

Then he wanted to seek them out so that he could kill them. Success, he now feels, would be more than adequate punishment.

"I would probably not be able to see my family again if I act out on natural instincts. It would be a nice, fitting, very justifiable thing. To gain a lot of personal pleasure. But it's not viable. For me, the biggest victory is to survive and to succeed. And to really thrive. To get very successful materially also, and do very well. Succeed in everything else I do - my job; if I do business, I must do it also. That I think is more difficult for them to live with it. It's the worse punishment - letting them get sentenced to life imprisonment in this country with the likes of a successful Robert McBride. It's not an easy revenge because it doesn't appeal to my immediate instincts, but it's a better revenge. Let them live with me - a very successful, very happy; very confident person." The Truth and Reconciliation Commission [TRC], a conception of the African National Congress-led government, was set up as an avenue for South Africans to deal with their gory past.

Although Robert McBride had spent a number of years in jail - four of them on death row - for his part in "Magoo"/"Why Not" car bomb and he was subsequently reprieved, the TRC advised him that he would have to attend a hearing into the fateful act.

Hoping that there would finally be closure on the matter, Robert agreed to attend the public TRC hearing in Durban.

During the hearing, Robert re-established contact with a number of people from his past: Roshan Dehal, his lawyer during his trial; his former lover-cum-comrade Greta Apelgren and Matthew Lecordier. Conspicuous by their absence were Gordon Webster and Derrick Robert McBride.

A subpoena was out for Gordon, but TRC officials had failed to find him. The former MK cadre had changed his name to "Mark Mkhize", and was living an ordinary life in Bizana in the former Transkei homeland.

We sat in the small lounge-cum-dining room as his wife and Webster prepared us something to eat: pap and russians [sausages]. Remarkably, for a house of a former high-profiled ANC activist, there was not a single political poster or picture in the room

Those belonged to the old Gordon Webster.

His alter-ego, Mark Mkhize was turning over a completely new leaf. I asked him why he was no longer active in politics.

"You know, when you talk about some people who are active in the ANC - those people who are active now, or those who were active before the unbanning (of the ANC), I would say those who were in the struggle, or those on the Island, they are not active," Gordon Webster/Mark Mkhize replies.

"They are just out there to get money, to enrich themselves. In fact, ninety percent of them. I haven't met somebody who says, 'There's too much corruption; I will expose something'. Nothing has happened. So to say somebody is 'active' means 'active' to gain more money."

Gordon's view that "sometimes you struggle for somebody who doesn't care for you" was probably developed after his futile attempts to get the ANC to help him get a job.

"I went to the ANC offices in Pietemartitzburg. I also went to Jo'burg. (Then ANC chairman of ANC's PWV region) Tokyo Sexwale promised; there was more promises. It was before the elections, and so everybody were manoeuvring for themselves. I find it strange. As 'Gordon Webster', they sort of respect me. They feel awkward. And also I feel awkward. And I say, 'I'm looking for a job', and they would say, 'Phone tomorrow'. When I phone he's not there. It was a real headache."

Some of his siblings and associates maintain that he gave up too quickly when a number of his former comrades failed to help him get a job. However, Gordon states that he is actually happy with his current position away for the hurly-burly of politics.

"I want to be normal," he says. "So I don't have to organise and talk. Some people find it very strange that 'you are too normal to the liking'. So you have to live [according] to the people's standards, not your own standards? I don't want anybody to set standards for me. I can be sleeping in the streets; if I'm not worrying you, you should not bother about it. People say, 'You're not working', but what are you doing about it? There's no need talking about it if you can't come to me and say, 'Look, I can help'. Then that's fine. But if you sit and talk nonsense, then it's not worth it."

Although he attended Coloured schools, he grew up speaking isiZulu at home. He has always been close to his Zulu mother, Agnes Webster (nee Zuma).

One of his aliases in MK was "Steven Mkhize". When he decided to take on a new identity, he opted for the same second name.

"I would say, it was a synonym. I was 'Steven', but I liked 'Mkhize' to such an extent that I adopted it as my surname. I prefer 'Mkhize' than being 'Webster'. If I could have my way I would change it. (But) the family would really feel that I've let them down. To a certain extent they are angry that why did I get involved in politics - I could have been somebody who's rich. And then all of a sudden, now I have to change my surname again. They would think I'm disowning them when they were there for me. But they all call me 'Mkhize'. Even my mother calls me 'Mkhize'."

He was adamant that he would not attend any TRC hearing.

"In the first place, why come with it (the TRC)? What was the purpose? Money was wasted! I [have] never even bothered myself with the TRC. Why

must I give evidence? What did I do? I was following orders - fulfilling the aims and objectives of the ANC. Why should I apply for amnesty? It's absurd! Who must I apply to now? Isn't the ANC the government? Who must I apply to? You can't say, 'sorry' to your mother if your mother sent you to do something. Your mother sends you to milk the cow. You milk the cow and say, 'Sorry, I milked the cow'? Why did you milk the cow in the first place? So, to me it's just a joke."

Derrick McBride also stayed away from the Durban TRC hearings.

A week before the hearings were to start, he released a hard-hitting press statement which explained his decision. He argued that his actions could not be judged in the same way as those of former apartheid hit-squad leader Eugene de Kock. He also had misgivings with some of the TRC commissioners who evaluated the applications for amnesty.

"The TRC amnesty committee is staffed by judges, some of whom sentenced South African citizens to death prior to 1990," he wrote. "They have a mandate which is to decide whether or not the 'crime' or 'gross human rights violation' that I and others committed is worthy of amnesty. I will not allow them to stand in judgement over me. I will never be judged by the same standards as those who maintained and supported apartheid. I will not answer questions as to whether or not my actions fall within the Norgaard principles. I was part of a legitimate struggle against an oppressive regime."

At the time, there was controversy over lack of proper reparation for the victims who had come forward to tell their stories to the TRC. Many families of victims who were tortured and killed by the agents of the apartheid regime were still destitute. They had not received any money from the TRC as they had been led to expect.

In his letter to the TRC, Derrick referred to the matter.

"The TRC has brought to the commission people who told their stories and relived their pain. Where are these people today? They have satisfied the insatiable greed of journalists for 'snot and trane' ['snot and tears']; they have made for good Sunday night viewing; they have created an image of a society mending itself. That image is a false one, because daily reality for them has not changed. What did they victims receive? If they were lucky, a copy of the TRC report. A name in print. Their story in the book."

That the father was staying away from the hearings while his son was attending did not come as a surprise to me.

Over three years of researching the McBride biography, I had come to know that, although in his trial Robert had described himself and his father as "almost carbon copies", over time - especially during his sojourn at Pretoria Central prison's Death-Row, Robert had come out of his father's shadows.

In agreeing to attend the hearings, McBride junior was hopeful that, in the

spirit of reconciliation embodied in the TRC's founding mission statement, those of his compatriots who remained unforgiving towards him would be persuaded to change their minds once he had provided "full disclosure" of his MK operations.

At the time of the hearings, Derrick and Doris McBride were separated. Their marriage officially ended during the first half of the year 2000. By then, father and son had grown apart. The warm comradeship and friendship which had driven them to join forces in the daring rescue of Gordon Webster from Pietermaritzburg's Edendale hospital had turned cold. Robert puts the blame on the strain in their relationship at his father's door. Although he understands that his parents might have fallen out of love, he expected Derrick to take care of his invalid wife.

"Firstly if they are separated for whatever reason - people get married and they get divorced - that's normal," McBride junior rationalises. "It has happened ever since the human being started walking upright, and it will continue happening. I've got no problem even with him or my mother being unfaithful to each other. That is normal - it's just as normal as it's ever been. It happens. Society has tried to regulate this thing; it never works. The problem I had with him is that he never looked after my mother." Robert's voice turns sadder.

"There is nobody on this earth that can say my mother did one wrong thing to him. Nobody! I think and think - I can't think of anyone. He cannot say that my mother did one wrong thing to him. But I can see a lot of things which he did wrong to me - as fathers do something wrong to their kids - they treat them too harshly or something like that. But my mother, no-one can point a finger at her."

Doris McBride died on August 9, 2000, National Women's day. At the time, the woman who epitomised the African adage that "a mother grasps a knife on its sharp end in defence of her child" was staying with her only son, Robert.

Like his father, Robert was now also separated from his wife. Their marriage was officially annulled in September, 2000. Both he and Paula describe their relationship now as "amiable", and they have joint custody of their three daughters.

Greta Apelgren's marriage was also on the rocks at the time of the TRC hearings in Durban. Greta's name now was Zahrah Narkedien. She had taken on the new name when she converted to the religion of her Muslim husband, Fahien. She met Fahien Narkedien in 1993, seven months before the country's first democratic elections.

"I met him in a night-club," she relates. "We became good friends. I think he has the right personality, because I am subdued and tense sometimes. He's very much an extrovert. He likes to be in control. We were good with each other."

During the historic elections, Greta/Zahrah was an ANC candidate, representing Wentworth. The potential vote for the liberation movement in the township was divided when a disillusioned Derrick McBride decided to run as an independent candidate.

As a result, the Nationalist party ended up winning the majority of seats in the area.

Greta and her husband-to-be relocated to Kimberly in the Northern Cape province, where she got a job as a director in the Department of Social Welfare.

She was brought up in a staunchly Catholic home. Her conversion to Islam was motivated more by love for her partner than faith. This was apparently necessary before she and Fahien could get married.

Speaking at the home she shared with her husband in Kimberly a year before the Durban TRC hearings, Zahrah related the spiritual anguish she underwent when she had to renounce her religion and the doctrine of the Holy Trinity - "the Father, then Son and the Holy Spirit".

This she had to do before a number of Muslim clerics who were overseeing her conversion to Islam.

"It was difficult, because I've been believing that from childhood. And the Bible makes sense."

At the time of the TRC hearings, she was separated from Fahien and was re-connecting with Catholicism. The Narkediens' finally got divorced in August 1998.

The Durban TRC hearings into the activities of Robert's Wentworth MK unit started on 28 September 1999. This was exactly seven years to the day since the former death-row inmate emerged as a free man out of Westville prison. Twelve years before, when he and Greta were standing trial for their MK activities in Pietermaritzburg Supreme Court in 1987, Matthew Lecordier was on the other side. He had turned state witness. Now Lecordier was a prisoner serving a long sentence and his two former comrades were free people. In a written submission to the TRC, Lecordier stated that he had agreed to turn state witness after he was "repeatedly assaulted, humiliated, intimidated and abused by the security police". He further reported that after Robert and Greta's trial, he was congratulated by the security police for his evidence and paid an amount of money.

When he was later approached by the police again and asked to spy on the trade unions in the Western Cape, he finally decided to run back to Durban. But he did not feel at home in Wentworth.

"I was at a loss to understand where to go and in the result, felt hopeless and lost. I had no-one to turn to. The security police had made a misery of my life.

They had caused me to be an outcast by my own people and indeed, caused me to forcibly turn against my own comrades...In the [end], I was left alone, without friends and family, without a job, utterly frustrated, deeply distressed and not knowing which way to turn."

It was then that he turned to crime, Matthew explained.

By the time of the hearing, Robert McBride and Matthew Lecordier had reconciled with each other. Matthew visited Robert at Westville prison shortly before his release.

"He was feeling very uncomfortable," Robert recalls. "We had this thing also as men - we usually don't express our feelings directly. He came in - was feeling uncomfortable - but he came in and looked me straight in the eye and apologised. He said, 'I'm sorry I did a wrong to you'. He looked me in the eye and said it, but he was like, close to tears. He was being honest. I said, 'Okay, don't worry, it's finished'. He did not have to explain much. I just said, 'I know what you went through'. I made it easy for him and also; I started asking him about other things, unconnected. He had said what he wanted to say; I didn't want to rub his nose in it."

The Durban TRC hearing marked the re-union of Robert, Greta and Roshan Dehal, the lawyer who represented them during their trial. Roshan was representing the two former lovers-cum-comrades.

He was also legal counsel for Matthew Lecordier.

Four of Robert's former comrades in MK's Special Ops were also scheduled to give evidence on the car bomb whose reverberations were still being felt in the country twelve years later. These were Johannes Mnisi, alias Victor, alias Johannes Molefe; Lester Dumakude, alias Chris; Ernest Lekota Pule, alias Oupa; and the former head of the elite unit, Aboobaker Ismail, alias Rashid. In a written submission at the Durban hearing, Abu-Baker Ismail stated that he was taking responsibility for all the operations carried out by members of Special Ops.

Some of the families of the victims of the "Magoo"/"Why Not" car bomb were opposing the applications for indemnity by Robert McBride and his commander.

Rashid asked them to embrace reconciliation.

"Let me turn to those who have suffered physical and emotional hurt as a result of these operations," he said, reading from his written submission. "Whatever detail, whatever clarification I and my comrades are able to provide you and the commission during this hearing in no way diminishes my awareness of the fact that the dreadful pain and suffering visited upon millions of South Africans generated further terrible pain and suffering. I know that there are men and women in the audience today who carry the physical or emotional scars which resulted from our activities. I do not believe that we

serve any useful purpose if we try to isolate one hurt from another today. For the hurt that I or those under my command caused you, I say again today that I am very sorry."

One civilian - Mlungisi Buthelezi - had died during the rescue of Gordon from Edendale hospital, and a number were injured.

Robert and Greta had applied for amnesty for the casualties caused by the operation.

Rashid submitted that, the rescue mission was highly regarded in the ANC. "Comrade Robert, his father Derrick McBride and the others who were involved in the rescue are heroes of the struggle and are held in high regard in the ranks of MK and the ANC."

The operation which most people were interested in hearing McBride's former commander speak on was the "Magoo"/"Why Not" car bomb.

McBride's notoriety in the eyes of most white South Africans stemmed from it.

As Rashid himself explained in his submission, as former head of Special Ops, he carried the can for all operations undertaken under his command. However, most of the anger and hatred of the surviving victims of the "Magoo"/"Why Not" car bomb and friends and relatives of those who had died when it detonated were directed at Robert. Robert owned up to, and applied for amnesty for over fifteen operations undertaken by his unit.

He accepted "political and general responsibility" for the operations, some of which the police had failed to pin on him when they captured him.

Like Rashid, Robert expressed remorse for the hurt he had caused.

But some of the family members of the victims of the "Magoo"/Why Not" car bomb were unimpressed by Robert's gesture of reconciliation. They still opposed his application.

David Gordon has his theories about the lack of forgiveness for his former client.

"For the purpose of extenuating evidence, I sent out every feeler that I could to get hold of one of the victims of the bomb blast to come and testify along the lines of saying, 'I was hurt. I forgive him because if I had a black or brown skin I would have perhaps done the same'," the advocate remembers. "There were actually about eighty people who were injured in that bomb."

The advocate did come across someone who was prepared to talk to him.

"I even remember taking him to lunch, and he had been pretty badly injured. And I asked him whether he would testify - I said it would help a great deal if someone who had suffered would have expressed forgiveness and

understanding."

The man said he would come back to him.

"He never did. That was the first time I was exposed to this lack of forgiveness. I think one of the problems that the man in the street has is that, unfortunately, the people who were killed were young or women. There was no man killed. Women victims excite passions."

The advocate says McBride expressed remorse over his actions while in the dock.

"I can remember clearly that he said he was sorry that people have lost their lives and that people were injured. I think that the problem is that Robert has been portrayed - and possibly because of his own personality, and possibly because of antagonism towards him -; he's been portrayed as arrogant. And to a certain extent I think that the position he holds (in the Department of Foreign Affairs) as well - he's been portrayed as having been rewarded for what he did."

He is pessimistic about the prospects of Robert ever being pardoned by the majority of white people in his home city.

"I would say Durban it's not the place where he's ever going to be forgiven. I don't think the ethos of reconciliation in respect of the Magoo's bombing - whatever he said and what he hasn't said, which people might have expected him to say - it has just not filtered down. I'm afraid he's going to have to live with it. I think it's a fact of life."

At time of writing, 19 March 2004 former deathrow inmate Robert John McBride had just been inaugurated as chief of police for Ekurhuleni Metropolitan.

This catapult from (former) poacher to game -keeper made it to the front of the *New York Times* ("A South African journey: Bomb maker to Police Chief") However, the "journey" had not been an easy one.

When word first came out that Robert was on the short-list for the job, a section of the South African community waged an intense campaign to block his appointment. *The Citizen*, a conservative newspaper which was started by the former nationalist party government to be its propaganda tool, was at the forefront of the campaign

Mr Thabo Mbeki, president of the republic of South Africa and of the ruling party the African National Congress, was moved to respond to the campaign in his on-line column in the ANC's magazine: "...The day after it (*The Citizen*) "broke the story" (on Robert's possible appointment), it published an editorial

"Here comes McBride". Among other things, it said "He is blatantly unsuited, unless his backer support the dubious philosophy: set a criminal to a catch a

criminal. Make no mistake, that's what he is..."

Mbheki went to argue that Robert, like all South Africans who had made "full disclosure" at the TRC and expressed remorse for their actions, was entitled to be forgiven and his potential to grow in a free South Africa not be limited by his past: "It would be fundamentally wrong that he is denied the possibility to be appointed to any position simply because of what he did during our struggle for liberation; for which he apologised and for which he was granted amnesty. We will not agree that Mr McBride should be condemned for having been a liberation fighter "(*ANC Today 7 October 2003*)

This was not the first time that a sitting president of the ANC was moved to come to Robert's defence when a section of the South African population wished to punish him for his past.