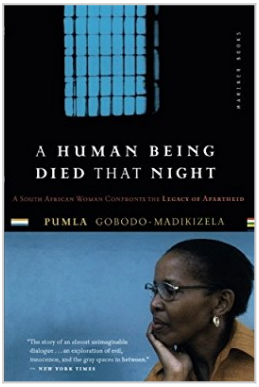

A Human Being Died That Night: A South African Woman Confronts the Legacy of Apartheid

By Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela

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Editorial Review

Review
"A startlingly personal account...written with clarity, energy, and enormous empathy."

About the Author

PUMLA GOBODO-MADIKIZELA served on the Human Rights Violations Committee of South Africa's great national experiment in healing, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. She lectures internationally on issues of reconciliation.

1 / Scenes from Apartheid As I drove the last half-mile of the road that leads to South Africa's notorious Pretoria Central Prison, I felt a dread unlike any I had felt in my earlier visits. Before I could make myself ready, a huge sign high above me at the entrance announced the noble agenda: "Correctional Services: Pretoria." The reassuringly professional sign was one of many changes, I half noted, that must have been introduced by the new black director of prisons. I slowed down my car, drove up to within a few yards of the prison entrance, and turned the engine off. I sat there, seeing but not seeing the people milling around gloomily after a visit with loved ones, waiting for the taxi vans that would drive them back to the impoverished townships on the outskirts of Pretoria. My anxiety built until I felt as if it could have exploded through the windows of my car.

The white guard stationed by the prison entrance was by now looking at me suspiciously. I impulsively turned on the ignition, not sure whether to move the car or, as I then decided, to get out, approach the security checkpoint, and announce myself to the guard. Anticipating that he would ask me to spell my name, I handed him my business card. He went to the telephone in his small observation room and returned to tell me that Doreen Krause, the head of the maximum security section of the prison, was expecting me. This hardly came as a relief; by now I needed something — any obstacle — that would give me an excuse to abandon my mission. Farther down the road I could see the massive gray concrete walls of the medium and maximum security sections of the prison.

The last time I'd come here was in 1989 to interview a man on death row for killing a white farmer in the Eastern Cape. There was to be a retrial, and the prisoner's lawyers had asked me to prepare a psychological report on him. That time I had driven straight to the prison without going through Pretoria. Pretoria was a city filled with too many of apartheid's symbols — the Union building, the seat of apartheid's parliament, the statues of Afrikaner heroes, prison cells, and buildings of torture where many opponents of apartheid, black and white, had died or disappeared or mysteriously committed suicide. Pretoria was the heart and soul of apartheid, and I had no desire to set foot there. But now, as I returned to the prison eight years later, Pretoria symbolized something new. It was the city where Nelson Mandela had been inaugurated as the first president of a democratic South Africa. A workforce that reflected this new South Africa had replaced many of the white men and women who had been the civil servants of one of the most brutally repressive systems in modern history. This day, on my way to the Central Prison, I'd driven into Pretoria to experience the atmosphere that came along with this new phase in my country's existence.

I had intended to stop only long enough to pick up some extra batteries for my small tape recorder and to buy coffee before heading for the prison in time for my appointment at noon. Instead, within a few minutes of entering the city, I lost my sense of direction and was driving around in circles through Pretoria's busy streets. It was a surreal scene in which the forbidding architecture of the apartheid era assumed a menacing

air and the one-way streets seemed to entangle me in a maze from which I couldn't free myself. Even the jacaranda blooms — trademark of Pretoria's beauty — lining some of the streets into which I strayed couldn't calm me. I stopped three times in the sweltering heat to ask for directions to the prison, on each occasion getting either inadequate or misleading directions. At last help came. At a set of traffic lights on Schubert Street I rolled down my window to take a chance on a middle-aged white Afrikaner motorist in a van. He offered to lead me to the road that would take me to the prison, and I followed him and his ordinary human goodness on my way.

Did I have any weapons in the car? the guard asked. I opened the glove compartment and then the trunk of my car for the security check. Within a few minutes I was driving down the road that led to the maximum security section of the prison, where some of South Africa's most hardened murderers were warehoused. I parked my car and walked toward the massive black metal gates. Inside stood a uniformed black guard who spoke to me through a square opening screened by iron bars. He opened this gate, and as it swung out I took a few steps back. Within seconds I had been escorted inside, and I found myself standing in the middle of a small, dark, stuffy passage with no windows — a checkpoint before visitors were allowed into the main building of the section. Awed, my heart beating hard, I stared at the blank concrete walls and wondered, as I had during my visit eight years before, where the prison's execution chamber was. South Africa had by now scrapped the death penalty. But I couldn't help wondering which corner of the prison apartheid's hangman had presided over. I could see in an adjacent room a guard in uniform, a semiautomatic assault rifle braced smartly against his hefty shoulder. He stepped out and asked me pleasantly what the purpose of my visit was. "Oh, you are the one to see Dikoko." I was indeed very close to seeing "Dikoko," Eugene de Kock, the man whom many in the country considered the most brutal of apartheid's covert police operatives. "Prime Evil" — his far less familial-sounding nickname — would be more than an abstraction to me within minutes. I was thankful for the presence of the black guard, and amused by his and all the other black guards' mispronunciation of "de Kock" as "Dikoko." As behind-the-scenes engineer of apartheid's murderous operations, he had been faceless and nameless. Now that he was exposed, his name was as unpronounceable — as unspeakable — as his deeds.

Another guard was called, and I was escorted out of the reception room and into a paved area with a small patch of green grass — a rich green that seemed to have been thrown into the midst of the prison gray to shock. My escort and I approached the main maximum security building, the immaculately polished brass trim of its entrance sparkling in the sun. The journey through the prison gates, a total of nine, was not undramatic. Walking through the maze of passages with brightly polished floors — thanks to cheap prison labor — I heard excited shouts and whistling from some black prisoners on a balcony above. They seemed to be enjoying the sight of a female visitor navigating the prison's corridors. Trying not to spoil their fun, I looked up and acknowledged their cheers with a smile. At that moment I felt as if I needed to be cheered more than they did. Finally, leaving behind me the shouting prisoners and noisy keys, each sounding its own note of power at each prison gate, I passed through a metal detector and the last entrance to "C-Max," the section where de Kock was imprisoned. My jitteriness caused me to seize on a second irony. The covert operations unit from which de Kock had commanded fear and power and crafted apartheid's most brutal schemes was the "C" section of the security department. Now he had come to lose that power in the "C" section of the prison, where, as a prisoner categorized as among the most dangerous, he had no privileges, no power.

In C-Max I was walking into a world of even more intense grays — gray walls, gray ceiling, gray floor. In search of some escape from this dull, depressing grayness, my mind wandered to the patch of green I had seen outside. It was an image I would return to many times in my subsequent trips to the prison; the grass stood out in my mind as an invitation to escape from the world of the living dead to that of the living.

The first thing I noticed when I stepped into the room was de Kock's bright orange prison overalls. The color was shocking, so much a part of the scenery I associated with the many prison movies I had seen. Silence of the Lambs immediately came to mind, and there was something about that memory that brought a shiver,

though its real significance in my meeting with de Kock would emerge two weeks later. As I entered the tiny room, with gray walls and a disproportionately long table and an old leather chair with wheels, de Kock got up, balancing himself against the wall. His feet were chained to a metal stool bolted to the floor. He smiled politely, making eye contact from behind his black-rimmed thick lenses. I could hear the clattering of his leg chains as he awkwardly steadied himself, extending his hand to greet me. He spoke in a heavy Afrikaans accent: “It’s a pleasure to meet you.” I knew the face; I had seen it in the newspapers, and at public hearings during his first appearance before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, but this was the closest I had ever been to Eugene de Kock. As he smiled shyly, perhaps politely, rising to greet me, I saw a flicker of boyishness, of uncertainty. At the same time, my mind registered “Prime Evil,” the name that marked him as the surest evidence of all that had happened under apartheid. De Kock had not just given apartheid’s murderous evil a name. He had become that evil. The embodiment of evil stood there politely smiling at me.
I, like every black South African, have lived a life shaped by the violence and the memories of apartheid. I have three linked stories to share.
In 1994 I was completing my doctoral fellowship at Harvard University. On the morning of April 27 I joined the many South Africans assembled at the State House in Boston, where a voting center for South Africans had been created. I was the first person to vote, and my emotions were so intense that I seemed to feel them concretely as something that flooded through me. As I walked to the voting booths, I had an overwhelming sense that I was being transported from one historical moment, where I’d been a second-class citizen in my country of birth — where my parents and their parents had been sent from this place to that, wherever the mass removals and demolitions of black areas destined them to go, finally settling in the nominally independent “homeland” of Transkei — to another historical moment of power, pride, and affirmation. I remember later that day feeling a deep satisfaction, as if I had just completed a difficult race.
When I returned to South Africa in June of that year, on a beautiful clear winter day, I became aware for the first time that in my past travels I could not have described myself as a South African. I could only say that I was from South Africa. I remember thinking as my plane landed that day in Cape Town, This is my country, my home. Driving from the airport, past Langa Township, where I grew up, with its “informal settlement” sprawl visible from the freeway, I couldn’t help recalling that when I was a child living in the township, Cape Town had been out of my reach. As township dwellers, we were Cape Towners in name only. I never truly saw Table Mountain, the epitome of the beauty of this magnificent city, although it is within visual reach of the township; it was part of the world that had tried to strip my people of their dignity and respect, part of the world that had reduced them to second-class citizens in their own country. Langa, like all other South African townships, which were established by the apartheid government as a labor pool for white business, was a world of poverty, where all houses looked alike, each connected to the next like carriages in a long, endless train; where people left their homes to catch early morning trains that took them to the city at dawn; where a history of discrimination, repression, and exclusion from the privileges that citizenship and wealth confer had left its debilitating mark of poverty.
The first time I witnessed a scene of violence, I was five.
On March 21, 1960, a remarkable event occurred that transformed the nature of the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa. That day several thousand black people gathered in the township of Sharpeville to protest the notorious pass laws requiring blacks to carry internal passports, thus totally regulating their lives. The police opened fire on the crowd, killing 69 and wounding 186, including women and children. Most of the victims were shot in the back while fleeing. The Sharpeville incident was followed by countrywide demonstrations in black townships, leading to more bloodshed. In the township of Langa, the carnage was worse than in Sharpeville. At least this is how I would remember the events that I witnessed as a little girl of five from behind the hedge of my mother’s small garden of our tiny house at 69 Brinton Street.
My memory of the 1960 Langa violence is something I still find difficult to shake out of my mind. Yet its accuracy was tested in 1996 when, as a committee member on South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, I was forced to revisit the events in Langa Township. What I remembered was the commotion in the row of houses on my street — all replicas of the matchbox structure that was my home. Men I knew as

fathers of the girls and boys I played with were running past looking frightened, jumping fences to be anywhere but in their own homes. These were men I referred to as “father,” or “so-and-so’s father.” We never called them by their first names. These were the same fathers you would not want to catch you doing anything wrong in the streets, like playing outside in the dark. Countless times I had shared candy with their children, candy already in my mouth, or in theirs, split and broken into bits inside the mouth so that one, two, or three others could have whatever tiny piece could be shared. These were the men who brought us the candy, but now they were scared and running.

Men I had never seen in my home came out of the coal shed at the back of our house with blackened faces. Some came into the house, moving beds to hide under them, or in closets. Others wore what I later remembered as a look of defiance or impotent rage. My own father was nowhere in sight, and my mother, heavily pregnant with my youngest sister, Sesi, was frantically calling out to the neighbors to try to establish his whereabouts. To escape this chaos of men — scared and defiant men — running in and out of my home, I went outside. There I saw what they were all running away from. Army trucks that looked like huge monsters roamed the streets menacingly, some charging furiously over walkways and into the large field in front of our house to fire into scattered groups of people. Vaguely aware of my elder brother standing behind me, I was witnessing something I had until then never seen before: live shooting, blood, and human death. The image that I was to recall many years later was that of a street covered in blood and bodies lined up like cattle in a slaughterhouse.

The indelible mark left by this incident returned in a flash on June 16, 1976, when I learned that police had on that day massacred over five hundred black students involved in a peaceful march against the imposition of Afrikaans as a language of instruction. When the youthful uprising broke out into violent protest in the Cape Town townships in August of that year, the memory of those bodies, bloodied and dismembered, on Brinton Street sixteen years earlier cried out inside me. At Fort Hare University (which was later closed for the rest of the year), I packed my bags and with other students abandoned my studies to be part of the protests.

Twenty years later, when I was invited to join the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), I was shocked to learn that what in my memory was a “massacre” had been otherwise. According to archival records, one death had resulted from the police shootings in Langa.

What conclusions can be drawn from what is to me a still haunting discrepancy? How can what I remember so vividly turn out to be unconfirmed by reports of what happened on that day? Since the countrywide protest in 1960 had been organized by the Pan-African Congress (PAC), when the TRC was preparing for its first public hearing in April 1996, I interviewed leaders of the PAC, including its president, Clarence Makwethu, more to straighten out what was irresolvable in my mind than to establish the truth for the records of the TRC. None of them could confirm what was so very clear in my memory, suggesting that my memory was wrong. Or was it? Can what was still so vividly alive in my memory be described simply as a misrepresentation of the facts, a reconstruction and exaggeration of events as they had happened? I asked myself, What does this tell us about remembering traumatic events?

I can only suggest that when the safe world of a child is shattered by the violent invasion of police, the intensity of the moment is something that the experience of a five-year-old cannot absorb. She lacks the psychological capacity to contain the brutality before her eyes, and certainly has no language with which to re-present the traumatic events. Blood, bodies, and death are the only meaningful words that capture the image of what she cannot truly articulate through language.

Here is my third story.

In 1990 I was lecturing in psychology at the University of Transkei. This was an interesting time in the nominally independent homeland of Transkei. Bantu Holomisa, fondly known as “The General,” had recently become leader of Transkei after a bloodless coup. Following the release of Nelson Mandela from prison, Holomisa announced that he was lifting the ban on all political organizations in Transkei. This edict, along with other events in Transkei, angered the South African government, and there was an attempted coup

to remove Holomisa from office. Most people at the time, myself included, had no doubt that the apartheid South African government was implicated in the coup attempt. On the day of the incident, all businesses, schools, and other institutions were officially closed. You could see groups of people throughout the city of Umtata, capital of Transkei, their eyes cast upward toward Holomisa's office on the eleventh floor of Botha Sigcau, the tallest building in that small city.

I joined one of the groups that had converged in the streets, watching as the violent drama was unfolding, hoping that whoever was South Africa's agent would not succeed in what he was trying to do. Gunfire echoed in the streets and over our heads, and the smoke and dust pouring from the windows of Botha Sigcau were visible signs of the battle being fought inside. Despite the fact that the action on the eleventh floor was intensifying, despite the fact that it was clear that people could be seriously injured, despite all that, I was waiting for the moment when I would celebrate victory with those multitudes watching in the streets. The moment of victory did arrive. The officer who was leading the coup attempt, Captain Craig Duli, was "captured." There was jubilation throughout the streets of Umtata. My car was filled to the brim; soldiers perched wherever there was space, hoisting their R1 rifles in the air through the windows as I honked and drove in circles in a spirit of celebration. The soldiers in my car immediately composed a song about how Captain Duli, "puppet of the Boers," couldn't stop Holomisa.

As the true nature of the events emerged, and we heard how the mutilated body of Captain Duli had been thrown into the trunk of an army vehicle, and how he later either died of his wounds or was shot along with others who had sided with him, I realized that I had been party to the killing of another human being. I had knowingly participated in an incident that would certainly result in the taking of a life. In my mind the point was not whether I could have done anything to stop it or not, but simply that I had been there, celebrating.

This was not the end of my shame. In 1996, while serving on the TRC, I was asked by the head of the Eastern Cape branch of the commission, the Reverend Bongani Finca, to be part of the panel that was going to hold a public hearing in Umtata. Before the hearing, each person on the panel was assigned to "facilitate" the testimony of two or more witnesses who would be appearing before the TRC. On similar occasions in the past, when I was not involved in organizing a public hearing, I usually made a point of reading the summaries of the stories of witnesses, and tried whenever possible to meet before the hearing started with those whose testimonies I was assigned to lead. Now I was shocked to see the name of Mrs. Nontobeko Duli, widow of Captain Duli, on the list of people scheduled to testify in Umtata. I did not know how I could sit on a panel and hear her story when only a few years earlier I had celebrated the death of her husband. Here she was, a victim like many others whose stories of trauma I had listened to. How could I with honesty convey words of comfort without first addressing my shame and guilt for having celebrated her husband's death? At the hearing in Umtata, Mrs. Duli was called to the witness stand, and she spoke about her loss, her children, and how she was struggling without the support of her husband. Her pain was as real to me as the rapid beating of my heart.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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