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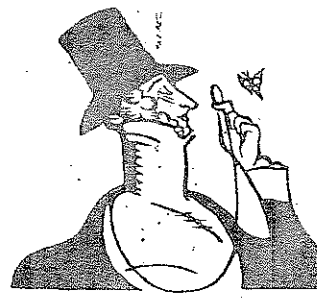
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THE NEW YORKER

NOVEMBER 18, 1996

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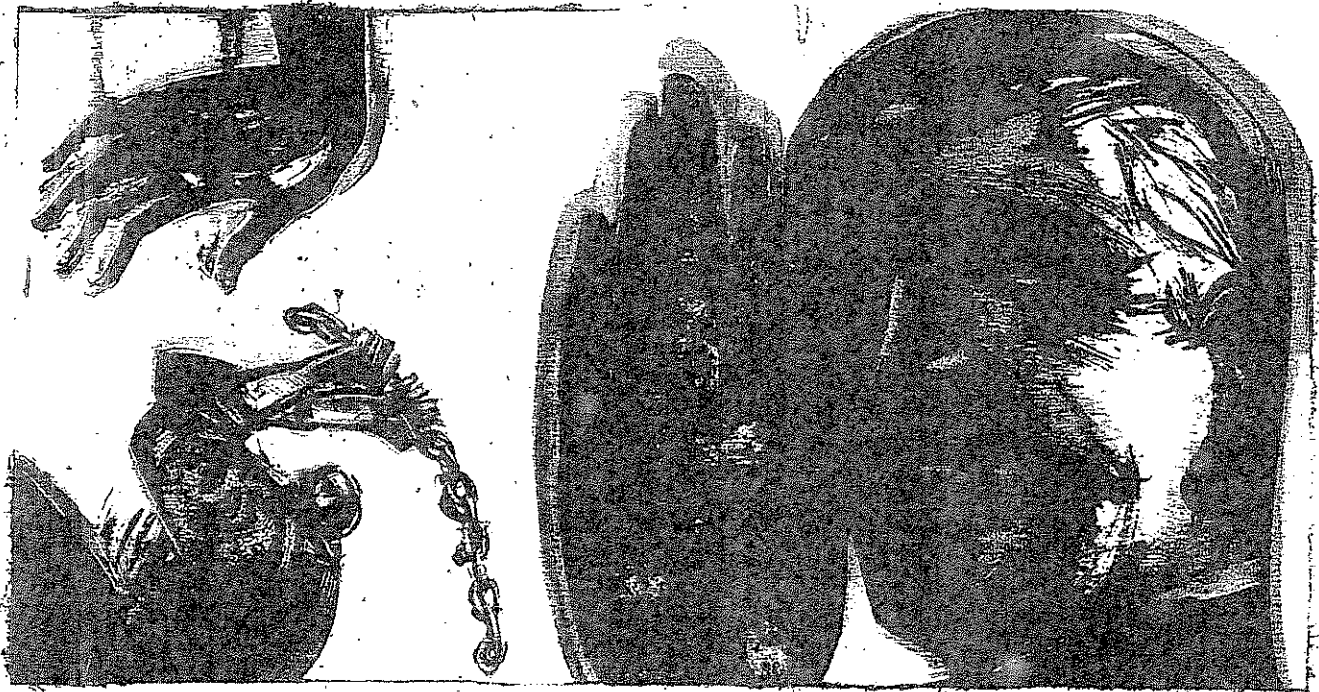
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RECOVERING FROM APARTHEID

The deadline for applying for amnesty from South Africa's Truth Commission is approaching. But will the confessions of former state officials who once terrorized the nation satisfy the need for justice?

BY TINA ROSENBERG



DIRK JOHANNES COETZEE and his wife, Karin, live in a small house on the outskirts of Pretoria. From their back yard you can see across a field to the red sandstone Union Buildings, where President Nelson Mandela and his colleagues in the post-apartheid government have their offices. The neighborhood is placid and leafy and solidly middle-class, and the house is protected only by the Coetzee family dogs. There is wall-to-wall carpeting in the living room, white sofas with matching armchairs, and a glass-topped coffee table on which are perched several ceramic birds. Coetzee, a handsome, youthful-looking man of fifty-one with a shock of gray hair falling over his forehead, likes to pad about in sweatpants, a sweatshirt, and leather slippers. Visitors find him friendly and a little nervous, and he talks in a manic stream. His subject

more often than not these days is his history as a ruthless killer.

Coetzee's soliloquy of guilt is part of a drama being played out in cities across South Africa and on television each night, as the truth commission inaugurated by Mandela's government holds public hearings and tries to force the country to come to terms with its past. Coetzee was the first white policeman to confess to crimes committed against blacks for political reasons. While the white government was still in power, he spoke from "in the heart of the whore," as he puts it, confirming stories that officials had denied for years.

Coetzee was born in 1945 to a small-town Afrikaner family in the northern Transvaal. His father was a postal clerk. He was a hot-tempered, athletic boy, good at rugby, swimming, and track, and uninterested in schoolwork. He

had a job as a postal inspector for several years, and in 1970 joined the South African Police. Coetzee loved police work. He was first in his training class and served with distinction. In 1974, he was sent to South Africa's secret guerrilla war in Rhodesia. When he came back, he went into the security police, where he prospered, and in August, 1980, he was made commander of a counterinsurgency unit known as Vlakplaas.

Vlakplaas was a farm outside Pretoria that housed government informers who had turned against the African National Congress and its armed wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe. They were called *askaris*, Swahili for "soldiers." The idea was that the *askaris* would go out and mix with the locals to finger their former comrades. But in fact they acted as a covert hit squad.

The white officers at Vlakplaas con-

DIRK
COETZEE
COMMANDER
OF Vlakplaas
covert
black
hit
squad
JOE MORSE

sidered themselves the vanguard of the African outpost of Christian civilization. Events of the mid-seventies—the victory of rebel Communist forces over Portuguese colonials in Angola and Mozambique, and the student uprising in Soweto in 1976—increased their conviction that they alone stood in the way of Armageddon. "It was so pure, so select, so elite," Coetzee says. "It was an honor to serve."

Early in November, 1981, one of Coetzee's superiors called him into his office and told him to "make a plan" with Griffiths Mxenge, a prominent A.N.C. lawyer. The officer told Coetzee that Mxenge was supporting terrorists, and Coetzee asked several of his soldiers to stake out Mxenge's home, office, and car.

On November 19th, Griffiths Mxenge left his office in the coastal resort city of Durban early in the evening. He got into a white Audi and headed toward his home in Umlazi, Durban's vast black township. As he neared his house, he saw a gray van parked in the road with its hood open. A man waved him down, and, when Mxenge stopped, the man asked him for a jump start. Mxenge got out of his car, and two more men appeared, carrying pistols. They forced him into the back of the Audi and drove to the Umlazi cycling stadium, where they stabbed him forty-five times and slit his throat. They took his jacket, his watch, and his wallet and drove off in the Audi. The car's stereo system was later installed in a Mercedes that belonged to one of Coetzee's superiors. Coetzee and his soldiers poured gasoline on the Audi and set it on fire. "He was a negative black, not a 'ja baas' black. That made him a Communist, a terrorist, the Anti-christ," Coetzee says. "It's hard to explain now."

The official investigation, such as it was, ended with the blame going to an "unknown person or persons." The chief of the Security Branch announced that the police were looking into the theory that members of the A.N.C. killed Mxenge in a dispute over his handling of funds. The same finding and similar theories were announced in the murders of perhaps a hundred other activists, including the 1985 shooting death of Mxenge's wife, Vic-

toria, who had taken over his defense work.

The assassination of Griffiths Mxenge would have remained a successful police operation against the A.N.C., followed by an effective coverup, had not something unexpected happened: in 1989, Dirk Coetzee went into exile and confessed to the murder and to other crimes he had committed along with his Vlakplaas comrades.

COETZEE returned to South Africa in 1993, during the transition to black rule, but it is as unlikely that he will go to jail for Mxenge's murder now as it was during the height of apartheid. Early this year, he went to the Cape Town headquarters of the new Truth and Reconciliation Commission and handed in an application for amnesty for a long list of crimes, including six murders. Under the law that created the commission, anyone who makes a full disclosure of a politically motivated crime committed between March 1, 1960 (the month of the Sharpeville police massacre and the year that the A.N.C. was banned), and December 5, 1993, the day before South Africa's accords for transition to majority rule were approved—will probably receive indemnity from civil and criminal prosecution. Coetzee was indicted in July for the Mxenge murder, and a trial date was set for early December. But even if he is convicted he may not have to serve a prison sentence. The Truth Commission began hearing his testimony last week, and he is likely to be granted amnesty.

The Truth Commission hopes to encourage political criminals on all sides to confess in detail to their acts. It offers Dirk Coetzee and other perpetrators of human-rights abuses a kind of giant national plea bargain. If they confess and name names, they may be granted amnesty and can avoid a trial. Not all these confessions will result in amnesty. People whose crimes are deemed "disproportionately" heinous or not politically motivated can be turned down and will remain liable to prosecution or to civil suits. Coetzee's crimes might well put him in that category, but the commission is likely to be lenient, taking into account the fact that he told his story at a time when it undermined the

apartheid government and helped lead to its downfall, and that it led to other confessions.

Coetzee's break with apartheid was not, however, due to a sudden attack of conscience. Like many Vlakplaas officers, he stole and smuggled for personal gain. He was caught protecting smuggler friends from police investigations. Even by Vlakplaas standards he was a loose cannon, and was frequently insubordinate. His behavior drew reprimands, and with each demotion he became more isolated and resentful. He began to tell Vlakplaas stories at parties. In 1982, he was relegated to the narcotics bureau and two years later, was brought before an official police board on seven charges of misconduct. Finally, in 1986, he decided that it was time to quit. He exaggerated his diabetes and got a medical retirement.

Coetzee had been meeting occasionally for off-the-record talks with Jacques Pauw, a young reporter from a new independent Afrikaans weekly, the *Vrye Weekblad*. At dinner in September, 1989, Pauw asked him under what circumstances he would talk for the record. "Find me a safe place where my family and I can live in peace," Coetzee replied. Pauw realized that this could be done only through the A.N.C., and, without asking Coetzee, began to explore the idea.

A month later, one of Coetzee's black hit men, Almond Nofemela, talked. He was on death row for killing a white man in a nonpolitical crime. Just before he was scheduled to be hanged, a visiting member of Vlakplaas told him that the organization was renegeing on its promise to save him. "Take the pain," he said. Instead, Nofemela told a lawyer from a human-rights group that he had been a member of the team that stabbed Griffiths Mxenge. The confession bought him a stay of execution. (Now that the death penalty has been abolished, he is serving a life sentence.)

The police called in everyone Nofemela had named except Coetzee, who realized that he was being set up to take the blame. On November 5, 1989, he and Pauw left for the island of Mauritius, where Pauw interviewed him, and on November 9th Coetzee flew to Lon-

ASSASSINATION
OF
GRIFITHS
MXENGE
BY
DIRK
COETZEE

don. *Vrye Weekblad* published Coetzee's story a week later, just as the new President, F. W. DeKlerk, was pledging reform. An investigating commission was appointed. The police denied that Vlakplaas was a hub of illegal activity, making the rather unusual argument that the two confessed murderers were in fact innocent. The commission concluded that Coetzee had lied, and that Vlakplaas had no death squads.

In London, a wary Dirk Coetzee met with an even wrier Jacob Zuma, the intelligence chief of Umkhonto we Sizwe. At the end of the debriefing, Zuma and his men offered Coetzee the A.N.C.'s protection. After spending a decade slaughtering the blacks he believed were threatening his home, family, women, children, *volk*, and nation, and Western Christianity itself, Dirk Coetzee applied for and received membership in the African National Congress. "Instead of the brutal savages about whom we were taught by the South African regime," he wrote in an unpublished memoir, "I found highly

intelligent, extremely well-informed, and civilized gentlemen for whom I soon felt nothing but admiration and respect."

The feeling was not quite mutual. The A.N.C. never fully trusted Coetzee, but it understood how crucial his revelations were to the anti-apartheid cause. He was a white policeman from a counterinsurgency unit, and he was corroborating the A.N.C.'s claims that the government had sponsored systematic abuses of human rights, including murder and torture. Comrade Dirk was taken care of in exile for years in London and then in Lusaka, Zambia. This rapidly advanced him to the top of the South African security forces' enemies list.

In Lusaka, Coetzee was sent a package containing a booby-trapped personal stereo. The wrapping had the name and return address of the A.N.C. lawyer Bheki Mlangeni, who had become a friend of his. When Coetzee refused to pay what he considered outrageous import duties, the package was "returned" to Mlangeni, who put on the

headphones and popped in a tape labelled "Evidence of Hit Squads." Then his head blew off.

THE head of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is Desmond Tutu, the Nobel Prize winning defender of the downtrodden, who was the secretary-general of the South African Council of Churches when Griffiths Mxenge was murdered in 1981, and who, as it happens, gave the principal eulogy at his funeral, in a tiny village outside King William's Town, in the Eastern Cape. "When the government of the people takes over, justice will be done," he promised a crowd of fifteen thousand mourners in an emotional sermon. The government of the people took over in 1994, but whether or not justice is being done is a point of contention.

"He has turned his back to us," Churchill Mxenge says of Tutu. Churchill Mxenge is a compact, balding, middle-aged man with glasses and a serious demeanor. He is Griffiths Mxenge's younger brother, and he now works as the chief of the title-registry office in the

Eastern Cape provincial capital of Bisho, a dusty town whose center consists of one street with a half-dozen government buildings, a parking lot, a fish-and-chips takeout, and a few shops surrounded by miles of dirt fields. "I try to put myself in Tutu's position," Churchill Mxenge says. "Tutu is a man of the cloth, a man who believes in miracles. But I cannot see him being able overnight to cause people who are hurt and bleeding simply to forget about their wounds and forget about justice. It is President Mandela's wish, too. But that is not normal. That doesn't happen. Unless justice is done it's difficult for any person to think of forgiving."

In April, the Mxenge family, along with the



"These are some of my new friends from birthing class."

brother
Mxenge
Angry at
the idea

families of Steve Biko and of the murdered activists Fabian and Florence Ribeiro, joined with the radical Azanian People's Organization to file a lawsuit contending that the Truth Commission had violated the right of families to seek judicial redress for the murders of their loved ones. In August, the court ruled in favor of the Truth Commission.

The idea of peaceful reconciliation is one that has informed Tutu's career, and it is no surprise that he is defending it so vigorously now. In 1976, the year after he was appointed Anglican Dean of Johannesburg, he wrote an open letter to then Prime Minister John Vorster in which he spoke of the need for "real reconciliation with justice for all." When he met Coetzee in London, he told him that the South African people forgave him because he had expressed his sorrow. He put himself on the line as a peacemaker at Griffiths Mxenge's funeral. As at almost every A.N.C. funeral, several undercover policemen were secretly recording the event, among them a constable named Albert Tofile. When funeral-goers discovered that Tofile's partner had a tape recorder, Tofile pulled a gun. The crowd turned into a mob and attacked him. He fell. The mob kicked and stoned him. Desmond Tutu leaped from the platform and threw himself over the policeman's body. He calmed the crowd and returned to the podium, his clerical robes drenched with blood.

Churchill Mxenge is right about Tutu's belief in miracles: when Tutu calls the current situation "the miracle that is South Africa," he means it literally, as the fruit of divine intervention. He insists that he is not a politician, and points out that he never joined the A.N.C. But the drive for emotional connection that suits him so well as a pastor has made him immensely effective in the public arena. "He is deeply spiritual and a total media freak," Alex Boraine, the vice chairman of the commission, says. Tutu is probably the second most beloved South African—after the President, who has a very different style. Mandela is referred to as the Old Man, not just for his age, seventy-eight, but for his sombre, cautious nature. Tutu, who is sixty-five and just became Archbishop Emeritus, likes to make rabbit ears behind people's heads in



"You wave at clowns, Peg. You don't marry them and let them run your life."

photographs. He is known as the Arch, and has a trademark habit of throwing his head back and his arms in the air—"doing the Arch"—when he is delighted, which is frequently. Like Bill Clinton, he thrives on having seven people tugging at him at once, and then persuading each one that he has his complete attention and interest.

Whether or not Tutu's gospel of reconciliation will triumph over the "normal" human impulses to seek vengeance and punishment is an open question. The story of Constable Albert Tofile at Griffiths Mxenge's funeral did not end with Tutu's heroics; a few minutes later, the crowd dragged Tofile from his car and killed him.

THE Truth Commission runs parallel to the court system. Although the two institutions are separate, each can benefit from information gathered by the other, and their missions intertwine. A person who has committed a serious political crime has a choice: he can apply for amnesty by testifying to his own and his colleagues' transgressions at a public hearing in front of television cameras, or he can sweat it out and hope that others applying for amnesty do not provide evidence implicating him, and thus make him liable for in-

dictment. If he does not apply for amnesty by the cutoff date of December 14th (the Truth Commission has asked parliament to extend it for three months), he has lost the opportunity to avoid punishment for crimes that may come to light during testimony from those who have applied.

A few weeks ago, one of Coetzee's successors at Vlakplaas, Colonel Eugene de Kock, known as Prime Evil, was sentenced by a court to two life terms and more than two hundred years in prison for various crimes, including sending the stereo bomb that killed Bheki Mlangeni. Dozens of de Kock's men testified against him, excusing their own actions on the ground that they were following orders, and in the process implicating many of their former superiors. Several of the soldiers are applying for amnesty. De Kock has said that he will apply, too, although many of his crimes had little or nothing to do with politics, and others were heinous in the extreme.

In March of this year, Desmond Tutu appeared on a television program with several members of the families of apartheid-era victims. Churchill Mxenge repeated what Tutu had said at his brother's funeral, and accused him of betraying his promise of justice. The perpetrators "are still in the security



"I sold my soul for about a tenth of what the damn things are going for now."

"My first year in office, I spent three-quarters of my time grappling with this," Omar says.

Most countries replacing right-wing dictatorships with democracies have instituted amnesties, either formally or informally. Upon leaving power, Latin-American dictators tended to issue themselves amnesties—a corruption of the historic concept of amnesty, which is granted by a government to people who took up arms against it. If there was no official amnesty, the generals simply sabotaged the judicial process

forces and part of the civil service," Tutu replied. "Those people have the capacity of destroying this land. . . . If there were not the possibility of amnesty, then the option of a military upheaval is a very real one."

Tutu's answer reflects the practical justification for the Truth Commission: protecting the new democracy by appeasing powerful and well-armed whites. But there is also a philosophical answer. I had dinner recently at a restaurant in the industrial city of Port Elizabeth with Tutu, his bodyguard, and Alex Braine, and I asked Tutu about what he had said in his eulogy for Griffiths (killed in 1981). Did he think that he was honoring his promise of justice?

"There are different kinds of justice," he said. "Retributive justice is largely Western. The African understanding is far more restorative—not so much to punish as to redress or restore a balance that has been knocked askew. The justice we hope for is restorative of the dignity of the people." This is an expression of the African notion of *ubuntu*—interconnectedness, the idea that no one can be healthy when the community is sick. "It's a deeply Christian concept," Tutu said. "You are not saved as an individual, but through incorporation into a body. *Ubuntu* is a good deal more Biblical and

Christian than Western individualism is."

Tutu's notion of a restored community encompasses even Eugene de Kock. "We can say he is a monster," Tutu told reporters recently. "But he is a human being with a possibility of changing."

THE Truth and Reconciliation Commission was set up on July 19, 1995, as part of the National Unity and Reconciliation Act, a bitterly debated law that ran to forty-eight single-spaced pages and was nicknamed "the mother of all bills." The commission is made up of three committees, the most controversial of which is the Amnesty Committee. So far, it has received more than three thousand applications, mostly from people already in jail.

Establishing the principle of amnesty for apartheid-era crimes was a key issue in the negotiations on South Africa's transition to black rule in the early nineteen-nineties. The old government first insisted on a blanket amnesty. "That nearly derailed the whole process," says Dullah Omar, who became Mandela's Minister of Justice. But the A.N.C. took seriously threats of a violent halt to the transition. What was called a "postamble" to the 1993 interim constitution stipulated that there would be some kind of amnesty—details to follow.

or warned their civilian successors that trials would bring a military revolt.

As a consolation prize in countries where the new government did not have the power to hold widespread trials, the Latin-Americans came up with the idea of truth commissions. In Argentina and Chile, testimony about human-rights abuses helped get at what the Chilean human-rights lawyer José Zalaquett calls "all the truth, and as much justice as possible." The commissions released lengthy final reports that exploded the security forces' propaganda, provoked great public debate, and gave official government acknowledgment of state crimes. "Truth doesn't bring the dead back to life," Zalaquett likes to say. "But it brings them out from silence." Since the Latin-American commissions had no subpoena power, however, and offered perpetrators no incentive to talk, they relied for information primarily on the testimony of victims, which was taken not in public but behind closed doors. Without the perpetrators' testimony, most families never found out "all the truth." In Chile, where not a single soldier has come forward voluntarily to talk about the disappearances, families are still waiting, after twenty-three years, to find out what happened to their loved ones.

South Africa was in a very different

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

South African Commission of Truth and Reconciliation

situation. A year after Mandela became President, the old apartheid barons were much more discredited and isolated than anyone had expected. Mandela's government was so popular that it could probably have decided to reverse the constitutional provision of amnesty entirely. It did not, because its leaders genuinely believed in reconciliation.

The two other committees that make up the commission concentrate on the victims of political crimes. The Human Rights Violations Committee relies on a team of sixty investigators armed with the power to subpoena witnesses and seize documents. All South Africans who were victims of political violence are welcome to go to a commission office and talk to a staff member about their suffering. If a story seems accurate, the victim is invited to testify, if he or she wishes, at one of the televised public hearings that are being held in township halls and churches all over South Africa. Another committee, Reparation and Rehabilitation, screens victims to see if they need urgent assistance, such as medical or psychological treatment, money to educate children, or help getting pensions and other entitlements. The Reparation Committee can also recommend some sort of recognition of hardship, say a scholarship or a health clinic named for a victim.

THE Human Rights Violations Committee opened its hearings on April 15th, in East London, a small city in the Eastern Cape. About four hundred people were in the audience to hear a religious service and Tutu's prayer for healing and repentance for both victims and perpetrators. Then everyone sang the new national anthem. A candle burned onstage. The first witness was Nohle Mohapi, who testified about her activist husband's death in police custody in 1976, which was reported as a suicide, and her own six months in solitary confinement for her work as Steve Biko's secretary. The witnesses sat at a table with a friend or relative on their left and on their right a Truth Commission briefer, who comforted them and provided tissues and an arm when the crying started. Twice in the first two days, Tutu himself collapsed in tears.

A similar scene has been repeated practically every weekday since, with

nine or ten witnesses a day. Each week, the hearings move to a different township hall, church, or auditorium around the country; sometimes there are hearings in two different cities simultaneously. A troop of newspaper and TV reporters travels with the hearings, and most major newspapers, even Afrikaans papers, give them extensive coverage, often with a separate story about each witness's testimony.

The audiences are virtually all black, with old women in hand-sewn dresses and turbans, and young people in torn tennis shoes and knit caps. They also seem almost uniformly pro-A.N.C. Conservative whites and conservative black supporters of the Inkatha Freedom Party, a Zulu nationalist party formerly funded and supported by the apartheid government, told me that they think of the commission as an A.N.C. operation and are terrified that it will inspire A.N.C. supporters to violence. "It's just opening old wounds," a

local Inkatha politician in Umlazi said. "It makes you hate the person you had forgiven." Ironically, he echoed the words of Churchill Mxenge, who said, "I personally feel they are making themselves the joke of the country, crying in front of the cameras, and at the end of the day, nothing."

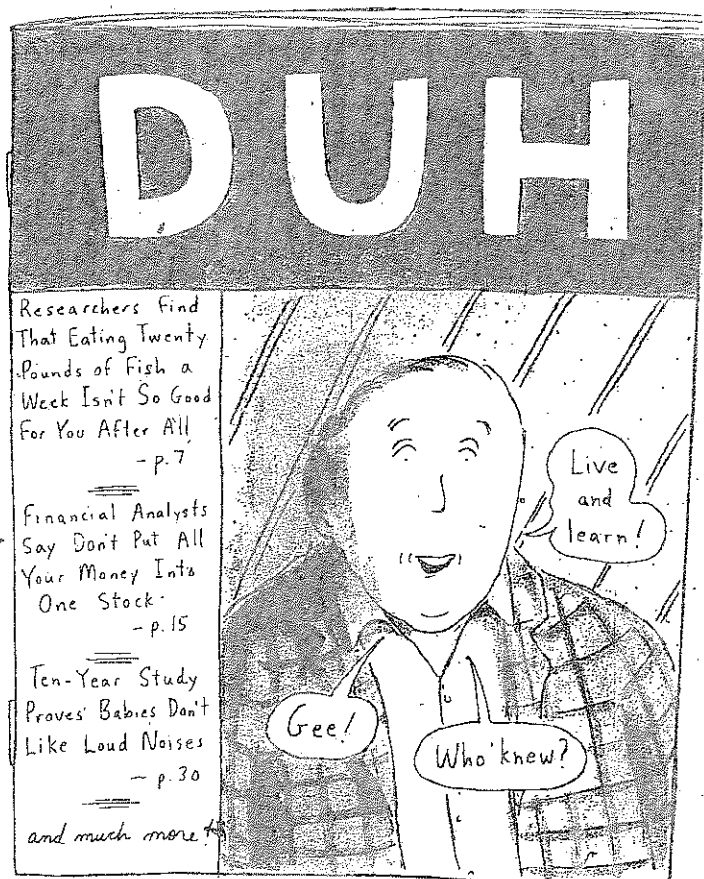
The membership of the commission contradicts the view that it is an organ of the A.N.C. The seventeen commissioners come from a broad spectrum of groups. They are mostly lawyers, clergy, psychologists, or human-rights activists, and range from a member of the Pan-Africanist Congress on the left to a member of the Freedom Front, a group calling for an Afrikaner homeland. There are seven blacks, two coloreds, two Indians, and six whites. Many witnesses have come to testify about killings or bombings committed by the A.N.C., and the commission has treated them with equal respect. When Mandela visited a Johannesburg hearing

HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

repar. committee

HEARINGS OF HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS COMMITTEE

THE HEARINGS



A. Chut

and sat in the gallery, Tutu put on a witness who testified about abuses he had suffered in an A.N.C. training camp.

The public, however, has not been as respectful. At a hearing in Bloemfontein, in July, when a witness asked for compensation for the death of his son in an A.N.C. camp, members of the audience began to hiss and shout. Tutu had to ask them for tolerance toward people "with whom you don't identify." More recently, Tutu clashed openly with A.N.C. officials who don't think that their members need to seek amnesty, since whatever they did under apartheid was justified as part of the struggle for freedom. Last week, he threatened to resign from the commission unless the A.N.C. formally acknowledged that it, too, was responsible for human-rights abuses.

But perhaps the commission's most important contribution is that forgotten victims, in forgotten towns, will have their cases investigated and the chance to tell their stories. For example, the first time the country took notice of repression in Worcester, a city of sixty thousand in the Western Cape's wine country, was a winter day last June, when a few hundred people, mostly middle-aged women, filled the rows of plastic chairs in the auditorium of a teachers' college. In the course of two days, nineteen people—blacks testifying in Xhosa and coloreds in Afrikaans—told of killings and torture. Amos Dyantyi, a middle-aged civic leader from Worcester's black township, described being given electrical shocks through wires in his anus and attached to his neck. Then, he went on, "they took an instrument like a jackhammer, with sharp iron points, and used it there." He stopped and reached for a glass of water. "I am sorry, I apologize for my expression of emotion," he said. By that time, most of the audience was in tears.

"It has taken it off of my heart," Mzukisi Mdidimba told me after testifying about being tortured at the age of sixteen. "When I have told stories of my life before, afterward I am crying, crying, and felt it was not finished. This time, I know what they've done to me will be among these people and all over the country. I still have some sort of crying, but also joy inside." Outside

the Worcester hearing, Virginia Nuzuko told me that she, like most people there, knew every witness. "We come to hear the history of our people," she said. "White people in that time did not see us as persons. We know now we are persons."

WHAT Latin-American victims wanted—justice in a court of law, with real prison cells for murderers and torturers—was rejected by almost every A.N.C. official I spoke with as smacking of "Nuremberg," "vengeance," and "retribution." Virtually all the victims of abuse who have come before the Truth Commission have not asked for prosecution. Ncediwe Mfeti, testifying about the disappearance of her husband, Phindile, in East London, said on the second day of hearings, "All I want is the security policemen to give me back the photograph they took away twenty years ago. And if there is a part of his body, even a bone somewhere, to give it back to me so I can give him an honorable burial."

Forgoing retribution, however, seems to be easier for policymakers or for those who have gone through the intense experience of testifying before Tutu's commission than it is for most ordinary black South Africans. The politicians, intellectuals, and private-school or foreign-educated blacks now naming their salaries in the corporate world have ample reason to defend the miracle of their new state. The average citizen, on the other hand, for whom little has changed, is not necessarily willing to placate whites at any cost. Recently, I went with a Zulu-speaking interpreter to Durban's township of Umlazi, a hilly jumble of matchbox shacks with chickens pecking in the dirt yards and a few middle-class homes with the occasional B.M.W. parked in front. Umlazi is where Griffiths Mxenge lived. His house, shown to me by its new residents, was nicer than most—with a sloping roof instead of the usual flat one, several rooms, and a covered garage—but it was no mansion. It had a hot plate for a stove, and there was no refrigerator. The neighbors were enthusiastic about the Truth Commission (the area is an A.N.C. stronghold) and followed it on TV. But when I asked if they agreed with the idea of trading jus-

tice for truth they all said the same thing: "Let's have both." Nonhlanhla Dlamini, a young woman wearing thick glasses, who was helping her mother wash clothes in a bucket next door to the Mxenge house, said, "I'd tell the commission to investigate and hang the killer." The neighbors all wanted to restore the death penalty.

The politically savvy, however, know something that the people of Umlazi do not: that in the judicial system only a few victims would find true justice. "The reality is that the vast majority of the South African people don't have access to justice," Brandon Hamber, a researcher at the Center for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, says.

South Africa's justice system, a marvel of efficiency and fairness by African standards, has been stretched to the breaking point by a crime wave that, as in other countries, has accompanied the transition to democracy. Prosecutors staged a work slowdown recently to protest their low pay. Police protection for witnesses is inadequate. In numerous apartheid-era cases, "everybody knows" what happened, but conclusive evidence is lacking. Few crimes left a paper trail. "We always planned our op-

A DIFFERENT KEY

The inspirational-misfit movie of the year is "Shine," an Australian film based on the life of David Helfgott (right), whose career as a concert pianist was shattered by a mental breakdown. The film, which caused a sensation at this year's Sundance Festival, opens in New York and Los Angeles on November 22nd, and has already propelled the forty-nine-year-old virtuoso back to the brink of international prominence. An American recital tour is planned for 1997, which means that audiences will have to prepare themselves for a performer who gets up from the keyboard from time to time to give listeners a bug. Helfgott, who has developed his own eccentric way with language, had just one word to say about the film's only slightly fictionalized dramatization of his life: "Brilliantissimo!"

Photograph by Tim Bauer

erations to leave no tracks," Dirk Coetzee says. The Army deliberately destroyed documents that could connect officers with crimes. Without documents, proving the involvement of higher-ups must depend on the testimony of underlings whose careers as murderers make them easy to discredit in court. In addition, the police routinely drop investigations and lose evidence to protect their colleagues.

I asked Dullahi Omar why the police hadn't been purged. "When I was named Justice Minister I didn't know where the Ministry was—I had to look in the phone book," he said. "We knew nothing about what was going on. A large part of the first year was getting to know who's who. Then we had to keep things going. There has been an upswing in crime, and we didn't have the luxury of sweeping people out. Slowly, the police will be purged, in a way that involves the communities." At the moment, about a thousand policemen are under investigation for corruption.

The difficulty of prosecuting apartheid-era crimes was made painfully obvious early last month when Magnus Malan, who was South Africa's Defense Minister from 1980 to 1991, was acquitted—along with fifteen other defendants—of massacring thirteen people. Malan was alleged to have authorized a program that trained Inkatha fighters to form an anti-A.N.C. death squad—

a "third force" behind the "black-on-black" violence that has killed fifteen thousand since 1984 in KwaZulu-Natal and is still going on. The third force was a brilliant stroke on the part of apartheid officials, since it allowed them to get blacks to do the dirty work against the A.N.C., and at the same time to shrug their shoulders and tell the world that blacks were simply ungovernable. According to the indictment, the massacre was ordered because the newly trained killers were bored; the victims, seven of whom were children, were not the intended targets. It was strong stuff, but not strong enough to reach Malan. In the end, the judge said there was no doubt that the soldiers were trained at a government base, but he felt that the state had not succeeded in directly linking Malan and the other defendants to the crime.

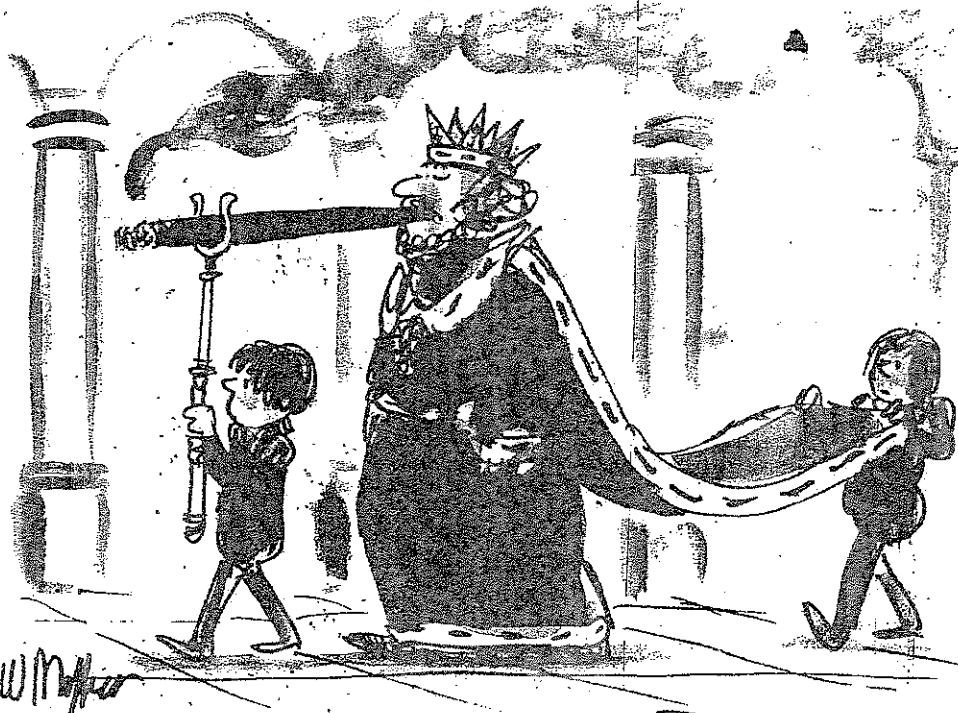
Although the acquittal of Malan was a blow to the Truth Commission, there have been convictions in other trials, like that of Eugene de Kock, and more trials are in the works. In late June, twenty-two policemen sent a letter to the commission admitting responsibility for twenty infamous unsolved cases. In late October, former Police Commissioner Johan van der Merwe laid the responsibility for the bombing of the headquarters of the South African Council of Churches in 1988 (for which A.N.C. soldiers had been blamed) on

former President P. W. Botha himself. More Vlakplaas officers have sought amnesty, and a few A.N.C. officials are also coming forward: the current Defense Minister, Joe Modise, has announced that he will apply for amnesty. After van der Merwe testified, Alex Boraine said, "This is the start of the river that will become a flood."

NO matter how many apartheid-era criminals turn to the commission for amnesty, its most ambitious mission is to change the way white South Africans think. And this may be more difficult than Desmond Tutu would like to believe. A day I spent talking to whites at Fourways, a suburban Johannesburg shopping mall, revealed the problem. Two people I polled had never heard of the Truth Commission. Two others expressed enthusiastic support, and said that the hearings were showing them shocking new aspects of the old regime. On the other hand, "General Malan wouldn't give orders to kill someone unless he had a good reason," said Mrs. Cecile Smith, of Sandton, a housewife shopping with her two daughters. "The Truth Commission puts whites in a bad light, and I feel I'm not to blame for what happened in the past." Ardy Van Huyssteen, from Johannesburg, a man in his thirties sitting with his baby daughter, said, "A lot of money is being wasted crying and screaming. It's

not bringing back lives. I was a victim, too—I had to go into the Army against my will. I'm not standing there crying. The black man feels we owe him something just because his skin is black." John Dawson, of Johannesburg, a man in his fifties sitting with his wife, noted, "Apartheid is still here, only now it's reversed." And he also charged that the testimony is unreliable: "Black intelligence is not that good that they can remember things that happened six or seven years ago."

It seems clear that unless Truth Commission hearings are held at their kitchen tables during dinner, whites will find some way to shut the information out. Some South Africans I talked to felt that white racism is worse than ever. Whites feel threatened



READING MACHADO

The barren frangipani branches uncurl their sweet threat out of the blue. More echoes than blossoms, they stun the senses like the nocturnal magnolia, white as the pages I read, with the prose printed on the left bank of the page and, on the right, the shale-like speckle of stanzas and the seam, like a stream stitching its own language. The Spanish genius bristling like thistles. What provoked this? The pods of a dry season, heat rippling in cadenzas, black ruffles and the arc of a white throat? These are all echoes, all associations and inferences, the tone of Antonio Machado, even in translation, the verb in the earth, the nouns in the stones, the walls, all inference, all echo, all association, the blue distance of Spain from bougainvillea verandahs when white flowers sprout from the branches of a bull's horns, the white frangipani's flowers like the white souls of nuns that move like ponies under pine trees in the autumn mountains, onions, and rope, the silvery bulbs of garlic, the creak of saddles and fast water quarrelling over clear stones, rooted and stunted as olive trees, these heat-cracked stanzas, all inferences, all echoes, associations.

—DEREK WALCOTT

the new crime wave, by South Africa's limited attempts at affirmative action, by the idea that their jobs and salaries are no longer assured.

Dirk Coetzee, for one, is still bitter. Even before he was indicted, he had started to resent the A.N.C. When he returned to South Africa, he was given a job in the National Intelligence Agency, and he wanted to be a policeman again, and not some sort of spy. The government, he said, had ignored his suggestions for purging the police. He rented a house, his car was subsidized by the government, and he couldn't even afford to buy a new battery for the cell phone that he, like every other member of South Africa's elite, possesses. It was the next morning when I visited him, and Coetzee seemed in no hurry to go to work.

Coetzee said that he had spent the years since Vlakplaas trying to make friends. "I have feelings of guilt, embarrassment, and humiliation—for all of them, but especially the murders." He has been going around to policemen, and asking them to apply for amnesty. And he has apologized. "My greatest fear is meeting a relative of a victim we killed," he said. When that finally hap-

pened, it was on the set of a British TV program on which Coetzee was appearing with Fumbatha Mxenge, one of Griffiths' brothers. Coetzee extended his hand, and Mxenge shook it. "Which I'm grateful for," Coetzee said. (Churchill Mxenge told me, "We can't accept his apologies, and he knows it.")

Coetzee's motives have always been ambiguous. In his unpublished memoir, he says that he defected to avoid taking the rap for Mxenge's murder. But he told me that leaving South Africa was an act of conscience. And, despite his often repeated remark that he was ready to stand trial, the indictment infuriated him. "During the years of apartheid, I was used by the National Party, and now I am being used by the democratic A.N.C.-led government," he fumed to a reporter.

Jacques Pauw, the journalist who initiated Coetzee's defection to the A.N.C., doesn't trust Coetzee's repentance. "He knows he's supposed to say 'I'm sorry,' but there is a difference between that and realizing that what he did was wrong," Pauw says. But many others I talked to disagreed. For reasons base or admirable, Coetzee left his family, language,

home; and country to throw himself on the mercy of his enemy. That kind of wrenching break can shatter lifelong views.

The purpose of the Truth Commission's public hearings is to help all South Africans recognize their complicity in apartheid—group therapy for forty-one million people. The report the commission will publish at the end of its tenure will be a comprehensive look at the pattern of human-rights violations and the events that contributed to them. Since Americans have long known so much about apartheid's crimes, it's hard for us to believe that South Africans need a truth commission to reveal them. But even some middle-class blacks I met said that they hadn't known the full picture until now. And it had been easy for whites to deliberately look away.

"The apartheid propaganda machine was so strong that some whites could indeed claim they didn't know," Brandon Hamber says. "But it's more that the abuses were known but they had lost context." Violence against blacks was justified as necessary to maintain order. "People need to see the human cost," Hamber explains, "the woman who says, 'The police came in and broke my sewing machine.' It's the small stories that have gone missing."

The Truth Commission hearings could be more effective than trials in showing how apartheid worked. "The problem with trials like Nuremberg is that ordinary Germans could say 'It was all them,'" Charles Villa-Vicencio, the commission's research director, says. "We are trying to enable South Africans of all levels to acknowledge their guilt. There are different levels, but the bystander is still part of it."

Perhaps the crowd in the mall will be touched by months of televised confessions from policemen who sent mail bombs that killed six-year-olds, poisoned clergymen opposed to apartheid, and hacked the arms off their torture victims. Or perhaps not. Shame is a rare and precious thing. "You cannot legislate repentance," Desmond Tutu says. "That is where faith comes in." The Truth Commission is likely to inspire more genuine repentance than any other approach yet tried, but it will still reach only a small portion of apartheid's criminals and bystanders. More will take a second miracle. ♦