

TOWNSHIP BLUES

After 30 years, apartheid caught up with an Africa reporter in Soweto's Hector Pieterse museum

By Michael Holman

I do not like Soweto. I know it is almost *de rigueur* to sing its praises. But I don't like the place. I have never written a salute to what may be called its "indomitable spirit" or hailed its "indefatigable diversity" or praised its "boundless courage". It may well be a symbol of gutsy resistance, a grim symptom of apartheid, or deserve its portrayal as one of the worst legacies of white rule.

For me there are more persuasive monuments to dark days, such as the soulless dormitory of Onverwacht, Orange Free State, where black families lost hope, out of the spotlight that focused on Soweto. And, on the scale of human misery, Soweto lags behind the festering favelas of Luanda and the horrors of the slums of Lagos. Now there's a city to reckon with: rough, tough, raw and powerful. The banks that once lined Broad Street have long since fled to the safety of Ikoyi or Victoria Island, and the nearby butchers' stands at Jankari market are awash with blood. "Like the Somme on a bad day," said an irreverent colleague. Soweto does not inspire me, nor intimidate me, as Lagos does.

Duty took me to Soweto when it was in the frontline of the struggle against apartheid, but I've accumulated no special anecdotes from it and, unlike nearly every journalist I know, I have not been mugged, shot at, or car-jacked there. I do not care to visit its shebeens, however fashionable they might have become. I don't find its contrasts in lifestyles engaging, or its enthusiasms entertaining. I regard the ghettos of wealthy residents, with their expensive houses, not as a triumph of entrepreneurial spirit, but as conspicuous displays of dreadful architectural taste.

So I have had no reason to commemorate or celebrate Soweto – until recently,

nearly 10 years after the elections that marked the end of apartheid, when, during a visit to the museum that commemorates Hector Pieterse, I cracked. Pieterse was 13 when he became the first casualty of student protests against a government edict that all classes were to be taught in Afrikaans. In 1976, at the time of his death, I was a journalist based in Harare, soon to move to Lusaka. The image of that boy, carried dead or

language, in a reasonable tone, quite matter-of-fact, as if spelling out the obvious, she justified an evil system. Over, and over, and over again. I watched, mesmerised.

Then it hit me. I was overwhelmed by a great wash of sadness, for generations lost during the scourge of apartheid. Not just for the millions who died, directly or indirectly, victims of war or preventable disease; but for the might-have-beens, the

should-have-beens, the could-have-beens: the unread writers, the unheard musicians, the uncelebrated athletes, the talented and the ordinary – lost to Africa, lost to the world, sacrificed to prejudice.

Suddenly, I was weeping; no, sobbing. These were not discreet tears, not dignified drops. My shoulders shook and my nose ran. Later, I wondered why I had been so uncontrollably moved. I like to think that I am as hard-bitten as the next hack. My notebook has recorded racism and its consequences, drawing on my childhood in Rhodesia, the events that followed Ian Smith's unilateral declaration of independence, and the export of South Africa's battle to Angola, south-west Africa and Mozambique.

But at the museum, my guard was down, my notebook left behind. For more than 30 years it has served as a great anaesthetic, a filter for

tragedy that ensured compassion took second place to more pressing concerns: how much space for the story, how to write it, when to file it. This time there was no deadline to distract me, no byline to seduce me, no dateline to add to my collection.

So this is how I now remember Soweto. The Hector Pieterse museum. The place where I blubbed. I write this dry-eyed. My memory has served as my notebook. The protective artifice of my trade still works.

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The famous image of the death of Hector Pieterse in Soweto

dying in his friend's arms, must be one of the most powerful from those grim days. But it was not this that penetrated my professional carapace of detachment. It was something mundane and banal.

Lingering alone by a filmed interview running on a loop, fascinated as well as repelled, I was transported to my youth in Rhodesia. A white woman in her mid-30s, with those clipped southern African vowels, was setting out her concerns about majority rule. I cannot remember any more detail. But in the familiar code-word