

# Steve Biko

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## Introduction

September '77

In Port Elizabeth weather fine

It was business as usual

In Police Room 619

– 'Biko', by Peter Gabriel

On 12 September 1977 'business as usual' for the South African Security Police claimed the life of Bantu Stephen Biko, the twenty-first person to die in a South African prison within a period of twelve months. Biko was 30 years old.

Ten days earlier Biko was reported to be physically sound when visited by a magistrate at the Walmer police cells in Port Elizabeth. He did, however, request 'water and soap to wash himself and a washcloth and a comb', and added: 'I want to be allowed to buy food. I live on bread only here. Is it compulsory that I have to be naked? I have been naked since I came here.'

On the morning of 6 September, Biko faced a

team of Security Police in Room 619 of the Sanlam Building under the leadership of Maj. Harold Snyman, appointed to interrogate 'the Black Power detainees'. According to evidence given to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission by Det.-Sgt. Gideon Nieuwoudt at his amnesty hearing in 1998, Biko sat down on a chair facing his interrogator, Capt. Daantjie Siebert, who immediately ordered him to stand. Later, when Biko sat down again, Siebert grabbed him by the chest and yanked him to his feet. Nieuwoudt asserts that 'Biko pushed the chair forward and lunged with his fist'. Five men then assaulted him simultaneously, 'Blows were aimed backwards and forwards', which also flung him against the walls of the narrow room. Nieuwoudt thrashed him with a reinforced hosepipe. 'In the momentum', he said, 'Mr Biko hit his head, fell, seemed confused and dazed ... Siebert then told me to chain him to the [horizontal] bars of the security gate with arms outstretched [at shoulder height] ... two sets of hand-cuffs and leg irons also attached – standing.' He was left in this crucifying position for six hours, only able to move his head. Three to four hours later, when Biko asked for water his words were incoherent as if 'under the influence of liquor', Nieuwoudt went on to testify.

That night Biko was left lying on a urine-wet mat, still shackled by leg-irons on his feet which were locked

onto the walls. Although Lt.-Co1. P.J. Goosen, Officer Commanding, Eastern Cape Security Police, spoke at the inquest into Biko's death about his suspicion at the time that Biko had 'suffered a stroke' and said he had called in a doctor, Nieuwoudt reported at the TRC hearing that the first doctor only appeared 24 hours after the injury and to no effect, leaving Biko shackled in leg-irons and handcuffs for another night. On 11 September, though specialist evidence indicated brain damage, medical approval was given for him to be driven (naked) in the back of a Landrover hundreds of kilometres to Pretoria, where he died from the head injuries he had earlier sustained.

The details of Biko's death horrified the world.

In spite of the inquest that followed, in which the doctors and police displayed a measure of callousness so shocking that their evidence would be transcribed, virtually word for word, into a theatrical performance for audiences world-wide to witness, the details of what actually happened still remain shrouded. None of the Security Police who applied for amnesty from the TRC in 1998 was granted it. The requirement was to tell the *whole* truth. This 'we may never know', commented chairperson George Bizos.

It is, however, Biko's life-giving force that concerns us here. His vitality drew people to him, not only for his sharp intelligence and generous counsel but for his

exuberant energy and contagious laugh; not only for his clear thinking and his refreshing political insight but for his capacity to listen, his ability to place himself within a circle of people and not position himself up-front. Biko's gift of leadership was not that people should follow him in a slavish kind of way but that, suddenly, and to their great surprise, they discovered *themselves* and empowered themselves with their own resources.

Basically, Biko was appalled at what he saw all around him in South Africa at the time: 'the black man has become a shell, a shadow of man ... bearing the yoke of oppression with sheepish timidity,' he said. He challenged blacks not to be a part of their own oppression, believing that 'the most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed'. He defined Black Consciousness as 'an inward-looking process' to 'infuse people with pride and dignity'. 'We have set out on a quest for a true humanity,' he said clearly.

Young as he was, he realised that a new psychological climate had to be created if the liberation of his country was to come about. He expressed what he saw as the bitter truth. Of prime importance was 'to awaken the people as to who they are by getting them to state their identity. He thought that if you could do that, then there was no stopping them from revolution,'

explained his colleague Malusi Mpumlwana.

This consciousness towards a realised identity, a refusal to mirror white apartheid's definition of black inferiority, gradually took root amongst the black youth and revived political energy in the 1970s. A new dignity and a refusal to be afraid helped fuel those in emerging trade unions; it gave determination to the many working in grassroots organisations; it empowered lawyers, doctors, priests, poets, mothers and fathers. Its youthful followers, scattered by the apartheid regime especially after 1976, later joined and vitalised new thinking in the ranks of the banned, imprisoned and exiled liberation movements of the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC).

Biko's life expressed in words only, diminishes him. His arrival in the doorway, his large physical frame relaxed into a chair, were essential elements of who he was. The welcome he gave, the sound of his laughter and his immediate questioning curiosity are glaringly missing here. He is not easily packaged. Biko was by no means a paragon of virtue. Though he could hold his drink, he often drank too much; he earned a reputation of being a 'womaniser'; and he could not always judge for himself his own emotional and psychological capacity. He was essentially human but also exceptional. Biko strongly criticised the

institutional Church yet he believed in God and had insight into Christ's teachings. He was not a Marxist – indeed he was much criticised for this – identifying more with what his close friend Barney Pityana refers to as the 'Hegelian thesis–antithesis'. He believed in bargaining from a position of strength, as witnessed in the Saso-BPC Trial, where Biko stated in public: 'We certainly don't envisage failure ... We have analysed history ... the logical direction is that eventually any white society in this country is going to have to accommodate black thinking. We are mere agents in that history.'

Pityana would argue that Biko's historical analysis lacked the force of Marxist historical materialism. Biko regarded the common oppression of all blacks as being a stronger political motive for change, and more unifying, than that of class; he recognised that to forge a powerful identity among the majority would potentially shift political power. He was more at home in African socialism than in socio-political examples from Europe.

Although he set out to study medicine he never became a doctor. Although he never had time to complete his law studies, he donned the mantle of a lawyer of considerable skill when summoned to give evidence in defence of those in the organisations he helped establish. And although he never set out to



become a martyr, this is what he became. Perhaps the thing he least set out to do was to convert white South Africans, yet the Black Consciousness Movement jolted white youth into a profound self-examination that changed the political direction of a whole generation; and he converted one of the leading liberal newspaper editors without apparent effort. Above all, although he advocated a philosophy called 'Black Consciousness', Steve Biko was not a racist.

This brief narrative of his life traces some of the origins of Biko's political thinking and the role he played in connecting Black Consciousness and self-identity. It reveals his innate curiosity and fascination with the human condition, with humanity, with what being human truly is, particularly in Africa.

## Early years, 1946–1965

Bantu Stephen Biko was born on 18 December 1946 in Tarkastad, in the Eastern Cape, the third child of Mzingaye and Alice Nokuzola ‘Mamcethe’ Biko. His birth, in his grandmother’s home, included the traditional smearing and burying of the umbilical cord into the floor of the room where he was born. Mzingaye chose to name him Bantu Stephen Biko. ‘Bantu’ literally means ‘people’. Later Biko called himself ‘son of man’. Although this was done often with tongue in cheek, Malusi Mpumlwana interprets Biko as understanding his name to mean that he was a person for other people or, more precisely, *umntu ngumtu ngabanye abantu*, ‘a person is a person by means of other people’.

The name Stephen was prophetic of the manner of his death. It connects with that of his biblical namesake, Stephen, who was stoned to death. Stephen accused the Jews of being false to their vocation, of being stubborn, like their forebears, in refusing to acknowledge that

truth. Mpumlwana adds: 'Jesus was actually the path of the Truth, which is very much in line with what the whole vocation of Israel was about. Even as he died he challenged them in the face of their anger.' Stephen Biko challenged people to recognise their humanity and acknowledge it. This included the authorities and those who persecuted him. But they could not see him as a human being nor recognise who he was. They, too, were bound to kill him.

Biko grew up in a Christian family. His parents met and married in Whittlesea when Mzingaye was sent to work with Mamcethe's father, both of them policemen. The Bikos were later transferred to Queenstown, then to Port Elizabeth, to Fort Cox and finally King William's Town, where they lived in a house in the black location of Ginsberg. In 1950, when Mzingaye was studying for a law degree by correspondence through the University of South Africa (Unisa), he fell ill. After being admitted to St Matthew's Hospital in Keiskammahoek, he died. Biko (who was called Bantu by his family) was 4 years old. The first-born, his sister Bukelwa, had been delegated by her father to look after him, while Khaya, an elder brother, was to look after his younger sister, Nobandile. Though the children kept asking where their father was, Mamcethe could not at first bring herself to tell them he had died. Because he was often away, she said he had gone to Cape Town for work and

an aeroplane would bring him back. While playing with a group of other children they saw an aeroplane and shouted: 'Aeroplane, come back with our father!' But the other children said: 'No, your father died!'

As a widow with four young children, Mamcethe earned a meagre income for the next 23 years as a domestic worker. She remembers her first employer, the superintendent of Ginsberg, as a helpful and 'good man', who welcomed her children to play with his, included them at Christmas time and was generally generous. After he left, she had to take a job as a cook in the much tougher environment of Grey Hospital in King William's Town, the 'whites-only' town across the railway line from Ginsberg location.

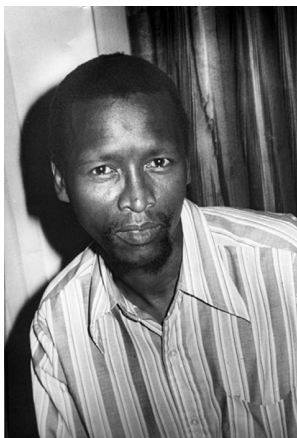
Ginsberg was a closely knit community of about eight hundred families, every four families sharing communal taps and toilets. In spite of her slender means, Mamcethe's house, though simple, was by no means destitute, and with her quiet and singular dignity she always welcomed her friends and neighbours. 'Everybody knew the next person,' Biko's younger sister Nobandile remembers. 'It was common, then, if you didn't have food, you'd go to your neighbours and they'd give you samp, beans, mealie meal, sugar in dishes, and when you had [eaten] you'd just return the dishes.' Biko and Nobandile grew up side by side in the small township, where the languages of English,



*Nobandile Biko.*



*Alice Nokuzola 'Mamcethe' Biko.*



*Khaya Biko.*



*Bukelwa Biko.*

Afrikaans and Xhosa intermingled. At the age of 6 or 7 he took Nobandile, aged 4, to the creche each day on his way to Charles Morgan Primary School and collected her on his way home.

From a young age Biko made people laugh, not only by tomfoolery and clowning but by the way he engaged in conversation. If he had been too busy playing soccer in the streets and had missed a meal, he would demand it with the next one. He avoided doing things that bored him: errands for aunts or feeding the chickens before school, when he would deliberately get up late. He loved experiments and, like most boys, used his younger sister as guinea pig, but Nobandile 'enjoyed every minute' of that shared childhood with him and, on reflection, remembers that 'We never regarded ourselves as poor though when I look back I realise that, in fact, we were poor'.

Soon, tall and slender, the youthful Biko went off to secondary school at Forbes Grant. His mother began to notice that when other children had parties he refused to have clothes bought for him and he would say: 'I know we don't have a father. We can't afford these new clothes.' Though she would tell him not to worry about such things, the truth is that he worried about his mother all his life. He was deeply committed to her well-being. It made a profound impression on him that she laboured for such long hours in such

unrewarding jobs, for very little pay.

Mamcethe wanted her children to be educated. Biko was doing so well at school that the Ginsberg community gave him a bursary to go to Lovedale Institution in nearby Alice, where his brother, Khaya, was already in boarding school. The bursary was, in fact, from money collected to build two senior classrooms, which had not materialised. Biko was 16. Within the first three months of his arrival, Khaya was arrested, suspected of sympathies with the banned PAC. Biko was arrested too. ‘They took us to the police camp, decided I was the younger of the two and sent me in first for a sort of heavy grilling, seven people around me. It didn’t take long for them to discover that I didn’t know a single thing about it. They were talking about “friends” of mine who had been arrested; I didn’t know these people. They were talking about things I was *doing* with “friends”; I didn’t know about this. This was how I got a glimpse into what was going to happen to my brother. I never saw him thereafter. He just disappeared. I saw him ten months later. It was a bitter experience. I was terribly young.’ Khaya was convicted but acquitted on appeal. When Biko returned to Lovedale school, he was immediately expelled although he was entirely innocent. ‘I began to develop an attitude which was much more directed at authority than at anything else. I hated authority like hell.’

In 1964, having missed a full year of studies, Biko went to boarding school at St Francis College in Mariannhill, outside Durban. He had just turned 18. It was run by Catholic nuns and monks, and he later described an atmosphere free of government intervention. 'I think it helped a lot in the formulation of ideas in a slow sense. We saw the principal and all the authorities [as] obviously not representative of the system but, all the same, they had an approach to us which was sort of provocative and challenging. That's where one began to see, in a sense, the totality of white power. These were liberals, presumably, who were enunciating a solution for us.' Biko was not loath to question anybody and did so: 'I personally had many wars with those guys, most of them non-political wars in a sense, but again this kind of authority problem.'

Biko began to question 'all sorts of [practices] within the Church, within the authority structure within the school'. He befriended a Catholic nun, who gave him a good deal of her time discussing such issues as the position of nuns within the Church, for example, and why it was necessary to have the institution anyway, which apart from other things imposed strictly disciplined relationships between nuns and monks. And, doubtless, he was curious about celibacy. He also sought answers to these questions by initiating a correspondence with Father Aelred Stubbs,



of the Anglican Community of the Resurrection, who was principal of St Peter's College at the Federal Theological Seminary in Alice. Father Stubbs had, in his normal round of duty, come across the Biko family at the time of the two boys' arrest. It was the start of an important and long-term relationship between spiritual 'father' and 'son'.

As we shall see later when Biko befriended a challenging young Anglican priest, David Russell, he would continue to pursue with interest questions of faith and belief, his understanding of religion and his disappointment in the Church. Consciously, however, these questions were not central to his life. Already, at school in Mariannhill, he sought information of an increasingly political nature and he recalled how the pupils found intellectual debates valuable, particularly about Africa's independence from colonialism, which was then under way: 'We were great listeners to news services,' Biko recalled, 'and at that time [Hastings] Banda [of Malawi] and a whole host of other African leaders were coming up.' Several of them became 'heroes', particularly Algeria's Ahmed Ben Bella. Biko himself identified particularly with Oginga Odinga, one of Kenya's national leaders. Their ideas and stances were hotly debated while the whole question of military coups was carefully discussed. Biko remembered, however, that all of them agreed on the

idea of a common society. 'I don't know to what extent Christian principles played a part here,' he mused, 'but I was always sold on the idea of a common society.' He added that nobody could enunciate the method or approach or design on his behalf but that, talking of himself as an 'oppressed person,' he would do so for himself.

Biko was full of zest and youthful confidence whenever he came home. He would arrive at the door in high spirits, hardly pausing before describing his journey home and everyone he had met. 'He was like a father who comes home. We would hug and kiss and there would be laughter,' Nobandile recalls, and then the two of them might go off the next day and visit some of the older, more lonely people in the township, or they would sit on the verandah until late at night singing Gibson Kente songs. It was partly this zest for life, combined with incorrigible optimism and excitement at Africa's increasing independence, that drew him towards the future rather than the pessimism of the immediate present.

He had been only a boy of 13 when the protest against the carrying of passes took place with the subsequent massacre at Sharpeville in 1960 and both the major black political movements, the ANC and PAC, were banned and went underground. Spurred by the police action at Sharpeville, which killed 69 people

in that non-violent protest, there was strong opinion in both organisations that the door had finally closed on passive resistance and that some form of insurgency was necessary for fundamental change in South Africa. Biko was 14 when Nelson Mandela proposed, in June 1961, the formation of the military wing of the ANC, Umkhonto weSizwe (MK). He was 15 when Mandela was arrested on his return from an illegal visit overseas and sentenced to five years' imprisonment, and he was 16 when most of the MK national high command were arrested at Liliesleaf Farm in Johannesburg (he himself also being arrested at Lovedale) and were sentenced to life imprisonment after the Rivonia Trial in 1964.

Running alongside the ANC's 'controlled sabotage' programme was the PAC's militant group, known as Poqo. It was with this organisation that his brother Khaya had been suspected of having connections. Biko talks of the only 'politicos' in his family being PAC and how 'at a very young age I listened to a whole host of their debates'. The PAC was not sympathetic towards Communist ideology nor did it readily accept white membership at that stage. In spite of his admiration for their courage and their 'terribly good organisation', Biko was not convinced by what he saw as an exclusive Africanism.

When Steve Biko matriculated from school in 1965, aged 19, all this history had only very recently come

to pass. As far as the government was concerned, the black opposition was neatly rolled up into jails under lock and key or had fled into exile. To what extent all these events were known or in what way they affected the emergent ideas of the young Biko is difficult to judge. Whatever the case, Biko soon expressed his distaste at what he saw as 'this sort of appalling silence on the part of Africans and this tendency to play kids and hide behind the skirts of white liberals who were speaking for them'. Seemingly unscathed and certainly unafraid, Biko believed that blacks could be playing a far greater role. Possibly influenced by his Catholic school background, he believed, at that stage, in what was then known as the 'non-racial' approach – that already established institutions should be opened up to a far greater participation by blacks. Better recruitment and greater numbers of black students would mean that these institutions would shift from being predominantly white to becoming more representative.

Biko wanted to study law at university but there was a popular mentality in the Eastern Cape that equated law with political activism, and was therefore to be discouraged. Medicine was the safe alternative for a good profession, and Biko won a scholarship to study it. There was also a common pattern at the time that bright black students with good matric results should go to the medical school at the University of Natal

(Non-European Section, or UNNE), one of the few possibilities for good tertiary education. Thus many intelligent and remarkable young black students, for whom medicine was not necessarily their first choice, found themselves there in a core group with a measure of freedom which did not exist in any other long-established liberal university, where blacks were always a very small minority.