

Etched in our **COLLECTIVE MEMORY**

Recalling those lost in the Soweto uprising

BY WENDY KAHN

JUNE THE 16TH STANDS OUT IN OUR PSYCHE AND hearts as an historical milestone. It was a day that changed our country and each one of its citizens forever. Just as Americans remember where they were when JFK was assassinated, or when the planes hit the World Trade Centre, so do South Africans remember vividly the day that the horrific brutality of the Apartheid force came down on protesting schoolchildren. The image of the dying Hector Pieterson, one of the most iconic photographs of our generation, was etched in our minds forever.

Exactly 40 years later, two memorials were erected in Soweto to remember two of the tragic casualties of that time: protesting learner Hastings Ndlovu, after whom a street was named, and social welfare officer Dr Melville Edelstein. These memorials will ensure that their legacies will continue and that, to quote the Executive Mayor of Johannesburg, “they will live on in our hearts”.

Edelstein was dedicated to the Soweto community. For 18 years, he worked for the Western Areas Bantu Administration dealing with welfare issues, primarily helping young people and the disabled find adequate education and employment. Edelstein had warned in his 1971 MA dissertation on the attitudes of Soweto youth towards the Apartheid government that violence was likely to occur if

oppressive laws against black South Africans were not reviewed and revoked. He asserted that state schools might well be the tipping point between feelings of resentment and acts of outright defiance.

History shows that Edelstein’s earnest warnings were disregarded and that when the anger he had warned against erupted in violent protests on 16 June 1976, he was one of the first to lose his life. The bitter irony of it all was that his death came at the hands of young black protestors, who in their fury saw not someone who had genuinely dedicated himself to promoting their welfare, but simply as a white man and, therefore, the enemy.

Executive Mayor Parks Tau described Edelstein as a “peace-loving man who dedicated his life to the service of the poor on the then dusty township streets of South Africa”. He quoted the photographer Peter Magubane who, on finding Edelstein’s lifeless body, had said, “If they had known who he was this never would have happened. He was part of the community.” Mayor Tau further observed that “it was the Apartheid system that socialised people to falsely judge people according to the colour of their skins”.

Edelstein’s daughter, Janet Goldblatt, shared a moving message sent to her by Thandi Ndlovu, sister of the late Hastings: “Forty years ago your loved one left home to

do what he loved most – to serve the people of Soweto. What transpired that day has left a big hole in your individual and [our] collective hearts. As you make the painful journey to the spot where he met his painful death I can only say to you Melville Edelstein’s memory is starting to be engraved in my heart and in the heart of millions of my fellow Sowetans”. And on that day in Soweto we engraved the legacies of several of the precious lives we lost on June 16. Just as Melville Edelstein will be etched in the hearts of the people of Soweto, so will the memory of learner Hastings Ndlovu. As South Africans, our hearts are filled with engravings and memories of so much suffering and loss. But that is not how that day ended.

After the memorial plaque was unveiled by the Edelstein family, Minister Radebe, and Premier Makhura, young Levi Rosenthal prepared to read his bar mitzvah portion at the memorial site where forty years earlier his grandfather had lost his life. As his aunt Janet said in her speech, “We are here to celebrate the memory of my father, but also to celebrate life and the bar mitzvah of Levi”. Members of the Jewish community, including several rabbis and the prefects from King David and Yeshiva College, donned tefillin and talleisim to daven shacharit at the site of the dedication ceremony. The songs of prayer brought a sense of celebration to this Youth Day event, as Levi marked his religious coming of age before the memorial to his remarkable grandfather. **IL**



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