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One of the elements of the Great South African Tangle that has got lost in the wash is the tale of the white kids whose lives were obsessed by the anti-apartheid struggle. Statistically these guys may not have been a significant portion of the population but in certain catchments, notably the liberal arts departments of four or five universities, they dominated their environments. Very few ended up dying for the cause. For most, the armed struggle of the ANC was as odious as the segregation rules of the government. Archbishop Tutu, who did not yet have the "Arch" at the time, memorably described the difference between white opposition and black opposition as like a bacon and egg sandwich – "the hen is involved, the pig is committed". This story, on one student who could not have been more committed, is a poignant reminder that the lives ruined by dud politics came in all complexions

In their name their son was killed

Noel and Helen Hamlyn are ordinary English-speaking South Africans. All that sets them apart is that their son Michael was killed by South African security forces in the raid on Gaberone. They spoke to ***Stovin Hayter*** *about their struggle to come to terms with the way their son died*

Michael Hamlyn was shot dead by South African soldiers, along with at least I I others, on the morning of June 14, 1985 in what has come to be called the 'Gaberone raid'. As Noel Hamlyn tells of his visit to 2914 Padulugo Close, Gaberone, and describes the methodical violence of his son's death the words come fast, each with its little burden of rage.

'As we approached the house I thought the front part was two little out-houses. In fact it was a whole house with the middle blown out.'

Six or seven bullets had been fired through the lock of every door at a slight downward angle, making a pattern of holes on the opposite wall. The doors had been kicked open and a second person, carrying a shotgun, had stepped

inside and killed anyone they could see.

'Michael's door had been kicked in half, making a stable door. Michael was on his haunches, or on hands and knees, at the foot of his bed when they shot him.

'Achmed Geer, who was renting Michael's house, was shot near the telephone. His blood is on the wall, above waist height. In Michael's room there is only one patch of blood, below the level of the bed. He must have been that low when he was shot.

'The guy actually fired two shots. One set fire to the bedclothes. There is a big black mark on the wall.

'They executed Michael. They went there to get him and they got him.'

Occasionally Noel Hamlyn shakes his head for several seconds, as if trying to jog from view the vision of his son's death that will never leave him. At other times he gets up, walks out to the balcony, performs some small domestic task. He is a man used to being in control, confronting chaos.

His wife Helen sits off to one side, but breaks in forcefully when she feels her views are not being represented fully, or with the right nuance. What adds to the horror, for her, is that most of the people she knows think her son deserved the way he died, that they will not question the official reasons given for his death.

Noel and Helen Hamlyn visited their son in Gaberone some time after his disappearance from University in Durban. They met a few of his friends, including Jeannette and Marius Schoon and their two children. It was only some months later that the Hamlyns learned that the couple were wanted for ANC activities in South Africa.

They pleaded with their son but could not persuade him to return 'home'.

His life, and that of the group of radical South Africans he moved with in Gaberone, was accompanied by a constant low-key paranoia about surveillance. There was always an awareness that their phones might be bugged, or that someone might be watching them.

Sometime after his return from visiting his son Noel Hamlyn was

approached by a man who said he was from the special branch, wanting a statement about Michael.

'He said he had reason to believe my son was a member of the ANC. But I had asked Michael to his face whether he was a member, or an activist, or fancied himself an activist in the future, and his answers were no.'

The policeman suggested that Michael might be used by the ANC, at first subtly influenced, helped financially, receiving favours a step at a time until it was too late to refuse to return a few favours.

At a press conference in Pretoria after the raid the South African security police described Michael Hamlyn as a computer expert involved in intelligence and in housing ANC members in Gaberone.

In spite of the official version, Maj Craig Williamson's 'evidence', the Hamlyns are convinced their son was not, could not have been, collecting intelligence for the ANC or housing and passing grenade throwers.

They offer reasons – he was too busy studying, he was too conspicuous, everyone would have known, he did not even occupy his own house...

'He would have loved to see a change in the regime in South Africa. He believed in Marxist-Leninism and associated with extremely left-wing people, but we don't for a moment believe he was planning or aiding insurrection in South Africa'.

Helen Hamlyn believes that someday, somehow, something will come to light which will show up holes in the official accusations. Something should be done to right the wrong she believes has been done to her son. People should be made to recognise it.

He husband is less optimistic, but still feels he must fight back, somehow.

'Something must be done to stop them or they'll do it again.'

At first thoughts of revenge crowded his mind. 'Then I realised that the man who wielded the shotgun was just like the shotgun itself, a tool in the hands of a war machine run out of control. Revenge doesn't make sense anymore. I've got over that.'

He tells of a letter he wrote to a newspaper, which was not printed.

'I wanted people to get a picture of Michael as a young man, thin, pale-skinned, probably in a T-shirt and a pair of underpants, quivering on the floor, and a man with a shotgun standing there, blasting him all over the wall.

'But it would frighten people so much their minds would reject it. They don't want to know they were party to that kind of crime.'

People lose their sons every day and in all sorts of ways – hit by drunken drivers, blasted by lone gunmen for no particular reason, stabbed in the street. But some die particularly South African deaths – stepping on a landmine, burned by a mob, or at the receiving end of 'rubber bullets and birdshot.'

The Hamlyns are average English-speaking South Africans in every way except that their son ended up on the 'wrong' side. For them the political implications of their son's death are inescapable, and full of irony.

'What is appalling is that Helen and I are conscious that this was done in our name. They killed our son in our name. The blacks who were shot at least realised that we were the enemy.'

Again and again the conversation comes back, implicitly, to the 'liberal dilemma' the failing attempts of some white South Africans, appalled at the system they live under and benefit from, to find some solution they can live with, to expunge the guilt of generations.

'I just cannot understand how whites in this country can pretend they are right. We're just a few people but we're hanging on by our teeth. What difference would it make if we were all to go?

'I realise what might happen to me. I'm South African. I'm white. I stand to lose my possessions, my life.

'But I still cannot join people who can only achieve freedom by throwing bombs, and I'm certain it could not have been for Michael. I would rather lie down and die than be a part of that. Innocent people are being killed, people who don't want to take sides but who are being forced to.

'We're standing in the middle. We don't want to be involved in this war and yet here it is.

At first the Hamlyns wanted nothing to do with the public funeral in Gaberone. For a week they tried to have the body brought back to South Africa, to arrange a private funeral. But the plans kept failing through and eventually they decided to go to the even on June 22, reluctantly. But the funeral ended up changing their own view of their son.

'Three and a half years ago Helen and I decided Michael would never be the kind of son who would make us happy in a way we could understand. We thought we had given up on him, that we were reconciled to the worst possible news. But when it happened ... it was a nightmare.

'Some of the other parents at the funeral wailed and cried. They showed their grief very publicaly, and I found myself doing the same. I broke down every few minutes. The friendliness and kindness of everybody just floored us.'

One of Michael's professors at the University of Botswana told the Hamlyns that when his marks had been announced in the University senate a few days before his death, the senate had clapped. He was one of the brightest students the university had ever had.

'So many people came forward – black students, white students, neighbours, friends, teachers – to say how much they thought of Michael. It threw us. I feel differently about Michael than I did before.

'He was buried with all honour among friends. The other things tend to fall away.

'At the graveside I realised that I had never felt more relaxed among black people, so at home, so accepted. Thousands of people turned out for the funeral. It made it right. Michael's gone home.'