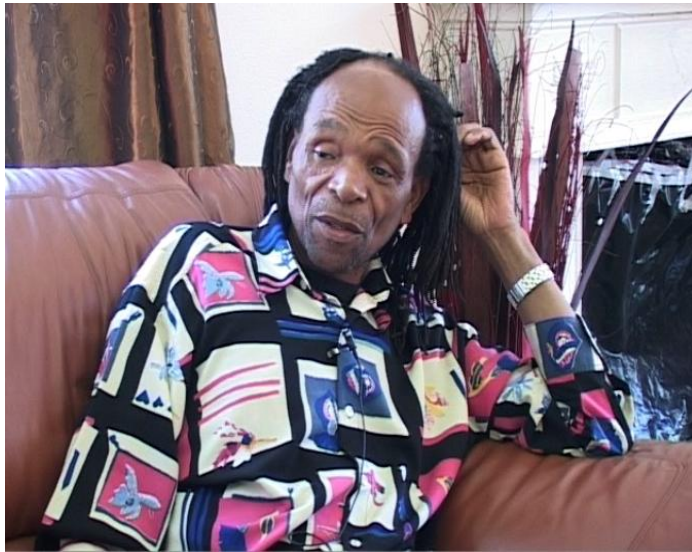


# Freedom fighter James Mange tells of torture, surviving death penalty

*By Luvuyo Mjekula*

HE was ready to die. In fact, UMKhonto we Sizwe revolutionary James Mange felt privileged that he knew when he would die.



*Liberation struggle hero James Mange during an interview with the Department of Correctional Services at his home in Fourways, Johannesburg in November 2011*

He was to be hanged at the gallows in Pretoria's Maximum Security prison in November 1979 after being arrested, charged and convicted of treason.

Although he escaped execution, Mange remembers vividly the amount of torture he endured while awaiting trial, as evident in an interview with the Department of Correctional Services in the second week of November 2011.

Different methods of torture were used at different prisons and police stations including Modderbee, Pietermaritzburg and John Vorster Square, to break the detainees, Mange stated in the interview.

He recalled how he and his 11 co-accused were beaten up and thrown into coffins, alive, while held at John Vorster Square.

"John Vorster Square was different because (the interrogators) utilised physical as well as psychological torture to break you. They bring you into this cell which has got so much blood on the walls, very dark, and they beat the daylight out of you."

They would be beaten up until they lost consciousness and put into empty coffins.

"When you wake up you are inside this coffin. You are never the same when you wake up inside the coffin, you are dead," he said.

Mange said they watched action movies to help them cope with the torture.

Things could have turned for the worst when the group's lawyer warned Mange, during their trial, that he was staring at the death penalty. However, he took the warning in his stride.

Of the 12 cadres who had become known as the Maritzburg Twelve Treason Trialists, Mange was the only one facing the death penalty while the others could get off with lighter sentences, he remembered his lawyer informing him.

"But James Mange, you are in trouble. You are a commander and in terms of treason you are responsible for each and every operation that has taken place (against the apartheid government). So, you are definitely in serious danger; you are a candidate for the death sentence," the lawyer had warned Mange.

Asked by the lawyer if he would be able to handle the death penalty, Mange said: "Of course. When we joined Umkhonto we Sizwe we already donated our lives to the cause. It is a sacrifice and up to this point nothing has deterred us."

Mange continued to deny that he was a guerrilla and an operative. This was despite the fact that interrogators claimed they had reliable information that he was due to travel to Whittlesea where he would bomb a police station.

He rejected claims he was on his way to collect the arms he would utilise for the bombing. He even denied that he was trained in Angola and the Soviet Union.

Torture had broken some psychologically but he remained resolute.

Mange had earlier mourned the hanging of fellow revolutionary Solomon Mahlangu in April 1979, an event he described as "the worst" but one that spurred on the revolutionaries and gave them strength.

Mange was convicted in November 1979 and sentenced to death by hanging. He was 24 years old. He was kept on Death Row for 12 months.

Despite his willingness to die for the freedom of his people, Mange survived execution after his lawyers successfully lodged an appeal, without his knowledge.

Following heavy international pressure, the appellate division in Bloemfontein found that Judge Jooste Hefer had meted out an incorrect sentence, which was then commuted to 20 years' imprisonment on Robben Island.

During his 20 years on Robben Island, Mange said he met stalwarts such as former president Nelson Mandela, Govan Mbeki, Billy Nel and Walter Sisulu among others. Mange said Robben Island was "something else".

On Robben Island he got to finally communicate with his family, whom he had refused to see while he was on death row.

To make things even better, negotiations with the apartheid government started and gave him and his comrades hope that they would be released.

Looking back, Mange, now 55 and a district elder of the Twelve Apostles Church in Christ in Soweto, has no regrets. "Giving your life is one of the dearest possessions for the betterment of others, donating it to the nation can be the highest and greatest opportunity to serve," said Mange.

Today the father of four lives with his wife Danisile and three sons in Bryanston, Johannesburg. His fourth son passed away in 1995.

Mange was a music fanatic and taught himself how to write music while on Robben Island. He has subsequently written a number of songs about the freedom struggle as well as a poem titled, Through Freedom.