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Representing the Past in the Present with the Future in Mind:

A Close Reading of the Cell Stories Exhibition at the Robben Island Museum

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A Minor Dissertation submitted in [*partial*] *fulfilment* of the requirements for the award of the degree of Masters in Philosophy in African Studies with a Specialisation in Public Culture.

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION:

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from any work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature: Signed by candidate Date: 05.09.05

ABSTRACT

'Representing the Past in the Present with the Future in Mind: A Close Reading of the 'Cell Stories' Exhibition at the Robben Island Museum'

Pernille Nesje

> Myth is more powerful than factual evidence, and in its way surely far truer. (Vassanji 2003: 16)

Robben Island was declared a museum with the understanding that it should not embody the suffering and adversity of the maximum-security prison, rather it should celebrate 'the triumph of the human spirit against the forces of evil' (Kathrada 1996: 10-11; see also Deacon 1998: 163; Deacon 2000: 1; Coetzee *et al.* 1998: 10; Solani 2000b: 6; Coombes 2003: 58) . Thus, the triumph narrative has become prevalent at the Robben Island Museum.

This dissertation seeks to undertake a close reading of the 'Cell Stories' exhibition at Robben Island Museum, in order to explore if the exhibition has created a counter-narrative to the dominant triumph narrative. The exhibition was established in 1999 and it consists of 38 cells in section A in Robben Island's previous maximum security prison, and visitors interact with the exhibition through a self-guided tour. In each cell there is a photograph of one of the ex-political prisoners, a locker which holds an object, a label explaining the object to a certain extent, an extract of an interview with the former political prisoners, and occasionally an intercom through which you can listen to the prisoner himself talking about a certain aspect of his experience at the Robben Island maximum security prison. It was set up in order to showcase other histories of former political prisoners and life on Robben Island, attempting to counter the triumph narrative.

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The questions I am attempting to answer are: does the 'Cell Stories' exhibition break with the dominant narrative of Robben Island Museum? In what ways does the 'Cell Stories' exhibition represent the dominant national narrative of reconciliation in South Africa? What's more I have also documented the entire exhibition in the appendix.

In order to embark on this dissertation I have delved into the politics of nation building in South Africa, and more specifically in museums. What's more, I have looked at collective memory so as to provide an insight into the interviews conducted for the memories project of Robben Island Museum, and later used in the 'Cell Stories' exhibition. Last, but not least, I have also looked at Material Cultural studies exploring how objects create meaning(s). These fields have all been explored under my literature review.

Furthermore, the dissertation includes an extensive chapter on Robben Island, where I look at the materialisation of the 'triumph narrative' – more specifically at the first half of the 1990s. This chapter deals with the discussions concerning the future of Robben Island before it was created a museum, as well as the broader history of the island.

Following this particular chapter is my analysis of the 'Cell Stories' exhibition. This chapter has been divided into two sections. On the one hand, I take a closer look at the personal objects on display, analysing the possible reasons for their selections and attempting to find dominant strands of narrative. On the other hand, I delve into the interviews conducted as well as what has been included in extracts in the exhibition. This close reading has allowed me to come to the conclusion that the 'Cell Stories' exhibition follows closely in the footsteps of the dominant triumph narrative of the Robben Island Museum, as well as the national narrative of reconciliation of the 'new' South Africa.

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1. Introduction

One axiomatic characteristic of South Africa is that of particular discourses which have started to develop as the main means through which the 'nation' and its people and history are 'read' (Rassool 2000:1). South Africa is portrayed as a 'rainbow nation', a nation epitomized by 'diversity'. The people of South Africa have prevailed over many obstacles and hardships and, Rassool argues, the 'diverse' people of the country have been 'placed on a path of achieving 'reconciliation' as the basis for the new nation' (Ibid.). In simple terms, these discourses can be seen as the following:

> The 'miracle' of the new South Africa and the demise of apartheid have been made possible by the 'wisdom' of heroic leaders, and especially by the 'special magic' of Nelson Mandela (Ibid.).

In the words of Rassool, 'these discursive contours – of a society of 'many cultures' and a history of 'great lives of resistance and reconciliation' – have been emerging and taking shape in almost every sphere of heritage construction and public culture in South Africa' (Ibid.). The discourse can be read as heroic leaders saving the nation from the evil of apartheid; hence culture is framed largely in primordial, crude and very simplistic terms, as a result the complexity of South African history can be lost. Rassool admits that these dominant discursive forms have been challenged and criticised; yet there are still places that serve up the dominant narrative, although, as he writes, 'almost every sphere of heritage production has seen complexity, controversy and contestation' (Ibid.).

Robben Island was declared a museum with the understanding that it should not embody the suffering and adversity of the maximum-security prison, rather it should celebrate 'the triumph of the human spirit against the forces of evil' (Kathrada 1996: 10-11). This 'triumph narrative' was connected to the reconciliation project embarked on by Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress (ANC). Noel Solani (2000b; see also Deacon 2000) notes that the opening of Robben Island Museum was an effort 'of the new regime to construct a sense of national identity'. Robben Island Museum's main source of history is the former political prisoners' memories, and the museum staff has conducted numerous interviews. However, because Robben Island Museum was cast in the mould of reconciliation, the stories of struggles for a better life in prison are the stories usually represented at the museum – these

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are also the stories that the former political prisoners like to talk about the most (Solani 2000b). Thus, through the representation of prison memoirs through narratives and exhibitions some accounts are bound to be silenced. Hence, Robben Island Museum has been cast in the mould of the dominant national discourse pointed out by Rassool above. The Museum represents the resolve and resourcefulness of the former political prisoners, their 'wisdom' and so forth; what's more it centres its narrative on Nelson Mandela.

Mandela has been – still is – a significant figure in South Africa's nation building process, he is also a very well-known figure internationally. Subsequently, he has become a central figure in the narrative of Robben Island Museum. Solani (2000a: 51) writes that 'when [Robben Island Museum] opened it perpetuated the Mandela Myth. In the media and advertisements it was sold to the public as the place where Mandela spent 18 years of his imprisonment. Henceforth tourists that came to the island were more informed about Mandela than about other prisoners'. Hence, the prison has become synonymous with Mandela. Mandela's cell has become one of the main attractions on Robben Island; in addition there is a large photograph of Mandela talking to Sisulu in the courtyard of B section. The visitor is also informed where Mandela's 'Long walk to Freedom' was hidden, and so forth. Thus, in concentrating on Mandela the museum furthers the dominant national narrative of South Africa, as the story of Mandela is a story of a man that overcame adversity and forgave his perpetrators. Rassool writes that Mandela is the 'key trope for the nation's history narrated as the triumph of reconciliation' (2000: 13).

This dissertation will undertake a close reading of the 'Cell Stories' exhibition at Robben Island Museum, in order to explore if the exhibition has created a counter-narrative to the dominant triumph narrative. This introduction has been divided into three sections. First of all, I will attempt to describe the 'Cell Stories' exhibition at Robben Island Museum. Following that I will outline my research problematic, as well as my methodology.

1.2 A description of the 'Cell Stories' exhibition

> The ordering and reordering of objects and representations in national museums can serve to legitimate or 'naturalize' any given configuration of political authority (Steiner 1995: 4).

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Under this heading I will give a description of the exhibition itself, so as to give the reader more of a sense of what it looks.

The exhibition was established in 1999 and it consists of 38 cells in section A in Robben Island's previous maximum security prison, and visitors interact with the exhibition through a self-guided tour. In each cell there is a photograph of one of the ex-political prisoners, a locker which holds an object, a label explaining the object to a certain extent, an extract of an interview with the former political prisoners, and occasionally an intercom through which you can listen to the prisoner himself talking about a certain aspect of his experience at the Robben Island maximum security prison. The lockers, according to Noel Solani (2000b) are the same lockers that were used in the cells while the former political prisoners were still at Robben Island.

The photographs look like enlarged passport-photos in black-and-white, and have been taken by Ashwell Adriaan and Noel Solani during the interviews conducted for Robben Island Museum's memory project. Because of the surroundings through which the photographs are gazed at the images are bestowed with more of a characteristic mug shot. Although the significance of this will differ from person to person, I personally found it quite disconcerting as I was now faced with a picture of one of the political prisoners looking like a common criminal. Another interesting aspect of the photographs is the dates printed together with the name of the prisoner: these dates are not the dates of birth and death that we are used to see but dates of incarceration. If I would have had no pre-knowledge about the history of the Freedom struggle and the Robben Island Prison I might have more easily dismissed the pictures of these people, and as a result not critically engaged with the exhibition. However, because of the site on which the exhibition is set up I believe that visitors have some (pre)conceptions regarding the history of the Robben Island maximum security prison, but this does not mean that they will (*if* the exhibition is included in the guided tour) engage in this particular exhibition.

From personal experience the exhibition is not a part of the guided tour of the prison, and on the one occasion that a group was let into section A to view 'Cell Stories' they were there for fifteen minutes and there was no real introduction to the exhibition from the guide. However, the need to move the visitors through the prison efficiently because of time constraints – for instance, the boat back to the mainland – has meant that there is little time for reflection

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(Coombes 2003a: 79). These are things one does not have to worry about when going to a more conventional museum, where one has the ability to manage one's own time.

The objects on display consists of everything from a personal censored letter, a discussion document, a board game, a green jacket, a set of keys, to a wooden picture frame – these are personal articles, coupled with personal memories, and all donated by the prisoner himself. The label fixed upon the wall next to the cupboard containing the object elucidates the object's circumstance and history seemingly from the position of the owner himself. The language used allows me to draw this conclusion as the word 'I' is employed and grammatical errors have also been kept as they were – among other things. Personally I feel more connected with the ex-prisoner; I feel like he is speaking to me – a familiar technique often employed in advertisement.

In addition to the features of the 'Cell Stories' mentioned above there is the cell itself, which I consider an elemental part of the exhibition. The cell is no more than nine square meters, and the implication of the visitor being allowed *into* the cell – not just standing outside and gazing in – is a key characteristic of the exhibit. Visitors are encouraged to enter the cell in order to sense what it could have been like living and breathing in a cell with that dimension, something one is really confronted with when one reads the incarceration dates on the photographs. I personally started working out how many years each prisoner had been here, and applying that to my own life: how much had happened in my life during the time span of five or ten or fifteen years?

In the words of the official Robben Island Museum's website the 'Cell Stories' exhibition 'comprise artefacts donated or loaned by individual ex-prisoners; each exhibition was prepared in accordance with suggestions by these ex-prisoners, and brought in valuable historical material' (Robben Island Museum 2005a). While Solani (2000b) describes the exhibition as follows:

> The exhibition uses the traditional method of exhibiting material objects accompanied by an explanatory text as well as more modern visitor-controlled audio clips. Each cell has a former political prisoner's photograph, and a text. Some cells have an old prison intercom, which is used to provide a voice-over from an ex-prisoner interview. The multimedia presentation provides the visitor with many choices: read the texts, see the

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objects and/or listen to the audio clips. The use of oral narrative and material objects in the exhibition give it the illusion of authenticity, even though the cells never looked this way during the time Robben Island was a prison. The name Cell Stories seems to suggest that the stories told are the stories that took place in cells. However, the narrative told in the exhibition is that of the prison experience as a whole.

The interviews that were used in the 'Cell Stories' exhibition is part of a much larger Robben Island Apple Box Collection which can be found in the Mayibuye Archive at the University of the Western Cape. Ashwell Adriaan and Noel Solani conducted the interviews used in the exhibition for the Robben Island memories project in conjunction with the Mayibuye centre – the interviews were conducted over a period of two years (1998 – 1999). This is the most recent addition to the sound archive at the Mayibuye centre, and consists of approximately 200 in-depth interviews with former political prisoners at Robben Island (Robben Island Museum Web 2005a). Out of these 200 in-depth personal interviews Ashwell Adriaan and Roger Meintjes selected 38 in order to set up the 'Cell Stories' exhibition as a way to counter the dominant 'triumph narrative' of the Robben Island Museum. Selections of the interviews were selected and included on display in 'Cell Stories', these small posters allow the spectator to delve into a fragment of the past of one particular prisoner at one time. This exhibition, as according to Mavis Smallberg (2005), was set up to oppose the pervasive narrative (i.e. the 'Triumph Narrative') of the Robben Island Museum and the dominant (one-sided) political dimension of the story, it was set up to showcase the more marginalised stories of prison life on Robben Island.

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I have included photographs of the whole entire 'Cell Stories' exhibition in the appendix organised in an alphabetical order of the names of the former political prisoners – all the images are taken by myself.

1.3 Research Problematic

In South Africa in recent years there has been a proliferation of histories emerging in the public sphere in a visual form: monuments, museums, televisual histories and so forth (Rassool 2000: 5). At one such site – the Robben Island Museum – there are attempts to fashion the categories and images of the post-apartheid nation, and in this domain of historical production important contests are unfolding over the past of South Africa, and nation

building. This paper is an investigation into the practices within which the construction of a new image for society and a new scheme of collective identity in post-apartheid South Africa has been accompanied by the creation of a new representation of the national past(s).

When the National Party came into power in South Africa in 1948 it promised to deal with the overcrowding in certain areas in the urban sector – this overcrowding was a result of a massive migration from the rural areas (McEachern 1998: 501). Thus, apartheid can be seen as a reaction to 'previous failure to develop coherent urbanisation policy', although a *racist* response (Mabin 1992: 19). The foundation of apartheid policy became 'population control', while it attempted to develop a capitalist development in South Africa for the 'white' population. Hence, the 'colour segregation which was already a feature of pre-apartheid South Africa was systematised and legally enforced as race became *the* factor in the distribution of rights' (McEachern 1998: 501, see also Christopher 1994: 1). Apartheid was a spatial system, and one of the main features of the system of enforcement of racially based rights was the Population Registration Act 'with its classifications of racial identity'. Furthermore, the Group Areas Act looked to 'enforce racial difference by controlling non-white populations in terms of residence' (McEachern 1998: 501). The system of apartheid worked very much on a local level, which is one of the main reasons why creating a new national identity has become so vital for the 'new' South Africa.

My study will not overly concern itself with the broader history of Robben island, nor with aspects of its pasts – it will rather deal with the public image and symbolism resulting from the public representation and commemoration through a very specific case study of the 'Cell Stories' exhibition at the Robben Island Museum. Through this case study I will examine the role that museums have in the creation and portrayal of national identity in societies experiencing conflict or emerging from it, I seek to examine the cultural workings of public history and identity formation under conditions of political transformation in South Africa. 'Cell Stories' was initially set up to offer alternate perspectives of history and experiences of a previously divided nation, in other words it was set up to provide a counter-narrative to the pervasive 'triumph' narrative enveloping the Robben Island Museum – this thesis will set out to explore how the exhibition succeeds or fails to do this. Does the 'Cell Stories' exhibition break with the dominant narrative of Robben Island Museum? In what ways does the 'Cell Stories' exhibition represent the dominant national narrative of reconciliation in South Africa?

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Hence, in this dissertation I have attempted to answer these research questions, as well as documenting the 'Cell Stories' exhibition at the Robben Island Museum.

1.4 Methodology

The main source of primary research material for this thesis has been the interviews of former political prisoners incarcerated on Robben Island, I have looked at the interviews used in the exhibition, and gained access to these through the Sound Archive at the Mayibuye centre. As they are in the middle of the process of archiving these interviews, they are still just filed under the names of the interviewees. There are no transcripts available of these interviews hence I listened to them all and transcribed the sections that were relevant towards my dissertation; these extracts are included in the analysis section. However, some of the former political-prisoners have requested for parts or the whole interview to be restricted from the public as they felt that some things were too personal. I have spent many days in the Mayibuye Archive at the University of Western Cape, and during one of those days I came across some newspaper clippings regarding the future of Robben Island. These clippings dated from 1990 to the early part of 1992, and proved useful in the investigations into the discussions concerning the future of Robben Island in the early nineties.

Furthermore, I have used the 'Cell Stories' exhibition itself as a primary source, and I have spent numerous hours at the exhibition – reading, observing and taking photographs, over a period of six months. I have taken all the images included in this dissertation; hence I have not gone to the trouble of referencing each one of them. The photographs were all taken on the 4th of April 2005. I have also made use of a large range of secondary material – everything from autobiographies to theoretical analyses. Attempts were made to get in touch with the two curators – Ashwell Adriaan and Roger Meintjes – however Richard Whiting at the Robben Island Museum told me that Meintjes was in Portugal and that they had no contact possibilities. I had no more luck with Adriaan. The exhibition is still in the A section at Robben Island Museum and to this date there are no plans of dismantling it.

The outline of the study will be as follows: firstly, I have included in the literature review two separate sections. The first section deals with nation building in South Africa, as well as more specifically museums and the creation of a national identity. Furthermore, I have included an investigation into the District Six Museum in Cape Town. Secondly, I look more closely at

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(collective) memory and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Subsequently I will embark on a discussion of the Robben Island Museum as a whole, exploring its dominant narrative of 'triumph'. Moving on from that I embark on the close reading of the 'Cell Stories', where I will be critically un-packing the messages it conveys. The analysis has been split into two main parts, the first part focuses on the use of the personal objects, the second embarks on the analysis of the oral testimonies used as the main foundation for the 'Cell Stories' – a thorough analysis of all the interviews conducted, and the extracts of these interviews employed in the exhibition. Then last, but not least, a conclusion will follow where I will be looking into whether or not the 'Cell Stories' exhibition follows in the footsteps of the dominant narrative of Robben Island Museum.

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2. Literature Review: the politics of representation

The literature review will be divided into two main sections, the first one will undertake the politics of nation building and national identity, under which I have included a look at nation-building in South Africa, as well as museum studies as according to how museums can be used as sites for construction of national identity. Furthermore, I have also looked into the District Six museum in Cape Town as a smaller case study so as to explore the workings of nation building and the use of memory in a museum in South Africa. Following that I have included a section dealing with the particular elements of the 'Cell stories' exhibition: (collective) memory and the field of studies of material cultural studies, looking into how objects create meanings. In addition, I have included a section on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in order to delve into the workings of memory in South Africa.

The chapter 'The changing image of Robben Island' extensively deals with the different writings about Robben Island, and I have therefore decided against including a section on Robben Island in the literature review.

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2.1. Nation-Building and National Identity

Under this heading I will explore the politics of the representations of the past. Firstly, I will briefly look at nation-building and national identity in South Africa, and following that at museums in general. The body of works in these areas of study are of an extensive character; hence I will concentrate on highlighting the specific elements that constitute my study, and through the following debates I hope to highlight the existence of collective representations of the past, as well as demonstrating that they are social constructs. I have also included a section on the District Six Museum as I see this as significant for a thorough exploration of the creation of a national identity in museums. What's more, this particular section provides a bridge to the sub-heading following, where I explore collective memory.

2.1.1. *Nation-building in Post-Apartheid South Africa*

First of all I will define nation and national identity as according to Anderson who writes that 'nation-ness, as well as nationalism, [are] cultural artefacts', and also states that nations are 'imagined communities' (1991: 4 – 6). Thus, this paper views nations not as the product of primordial group identities seeking sovereignty but rather as the expression of a collective act of will to nationhood. Identification with a human community is in part an image of the mind, beyond the minimum contact in everyday life (Ibid: 6). However, the nation should not be understood as any less real but rather as an actual and creative process (Ibid).

Anderson highlighted the role of the narrative in the original imagining of the nation, both literally and allegorically. Although he did not elaborate on the features of particular national identity narratives he did look more closely at how the imagining of a nation is made up of a *story* of unity and homogeneity (Ibid). Bhabha highlights the need for a national narrative that represents a common image of the past in order to emphasise stability and unity (Bhabha 1994: 140 - 149). Thus, by giving the nation an image of a common past there is the underlying current of a common future, this will be looked at more closely when delving into the workings of the collective memory. What's more, by representing the past in concrete symbols, rituals and monuments allows for the materialisation of the collective representation of the past as well as stressing a long-term continuity.

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At the fall of the apartheid regime South Africa faced the task of un-packing a society created by decades of oppression and the segregation of peoples and cultures. McEachern (2002: xi) writes that the challenge faced by the 'new' South Africa was 'to replace entrenched visions of society and conceptions of self based on legislated difference and policed separation, with the construction of a new social order grounded in inclusion, democratic representation and unity, while still nurturing and valuing difference and diversity'. One of the writers tackling this issue was Boyce (1997: 5) who states that the representation of the past should be a common representation of the past and that it should 'centre on the idea of shared values and ideals', in other words, it should not linger on the divisive elements of the past. Chipkin also states that most authors see the 'national question' in South Africa through how a divided people can be reconciled, and in this context nation building becomes a question of national identity (2003: 27) – this paper will also consider the act of nation building as the creation of a national identity – a sense of belonging – through a symbolic and material process. Thus, South Africa's transition to democracy and recognition as a member of the community of nations has been accompanied by the task of developing a new national identity.

One of the basic elements of national identity consists in the sharing of common symbolic repertoire (Jenkins 1996: 110 – 111), naturally these symbols are not used to deny the stratifications and divisions of the nation but rather emphasising its coherence and overarching values (Mach 1993: 110) – these symbols embody simplified narratives of the nation (i.e. historical mission, freedom struggle, independence), as well as providing material form (i.e. flags, monuments, national anthem). Robben Island Museum can be seen as one of these elements in the creation of a national identity, as the museum embodies a historical mission, as well as representing the freedom struggle that succeeded the 'new' South Africa. The museum follows closely in the reconciliation strategy of South Africa's nation building – which will be looked at more closely in the chapter 'The Changing Image of Robben Island' – thus give meaning to an intangible notion such as 'nation'.

Towards creating a South African national identity, the government has put into effect numerous projects and institutions in an effort to define a common identity among its diverse people. For instance, the phrase 'the rainbow nation' was coined by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and was equally encouraged by the ANC as well as Nelson Mandela. And the celebration of 'the rainbow nation' – the celebration of diversity – has been visible in numerous events, for instance, the Rugby World Cup in 1995 (Nauright 1998; Steenveld & Strelitz 1998), the

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annual South African Music Awards, the 'Proudly South African' label, and in addition one can witness the celebration of diversity in South Africa in advertisements (see Baines 1998). The celebration has become a part of the everyday. By envisioning itself as the 'rainbow nation' the new South African government has made a strong commitment to building an inclusive national identity (Nanda 2004: 379).

However, Baines (1998) states that the 'discourse of multiculturalism' that seem to hang heavy over the South African nation – a discourse that attempts to encourage 'national reconciliation through mutual respect of differences' – in reality stresses the diversities rather than forwarding the unity. Baines (1998) writes that rather than 'unite the disempowered, multiculturalism emphasises social divisions and exaggerates cultural differences amongst them'. Degenaar agrees with Baines on some points, noting that the nation building is a state construct rather than just a natural development, he writes that it can have devastating consequences as the state is employing its power to 'impose a common culture (...) in a multiracial society' (1994: 24). Baines writes that 'it has been asserted that identification with the nation is the dominant form of cultural identity in modern nation-states' (1998), however, as he correctly points out, this is too simple a statement. National identity should rather be seen as a more fluid concept.

Is there a coherent 'South African national identity'? Williams believes so, and writes that it is in fact possible to recognise a series of common matters that make up the fundamental framework of an emerging South African national identity – themes drawn from both South Africa's history and its present policy positions. He lists the key elements of a South African identity as following: 'respect for democracy and the promotion of human rights; recognition of a common African-ness and the affirming of African potential (the essence of the African Renaissance); recognition and protection of cultural, ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity within the framework of a national constitution; a strong normative commitment to the values of justice, reason and tolerance in dealings with one another and other non-South Africans; and a commitment to the constructive management of conflicts within South Africa and elsewhere' (Williams 2000). And I will from here follow with a closer look at the use of museums in the context of the creation of a national identity.

2.1.2. *National Identity and Museums*

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Museums, like memory, mediate the past, present, and future (Davison 1998: 145).

As museums are essential sites of national cultural production, collective memory making, and the construction of national narratives, it is useful to look more closely at the workings of museums after the above look at nation building in South Africa. And following this particular sub-section is a closer look at the elements of the exhibition, with the first sub-section being about memory – which is also a significant element in museums and national identity.

In Pretoria on the 8th of November 1994 one of the fist conferences after the election of Mandela's government was held concerning the development of policy proposals for bringing museums into line with the government's Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) – museums as national institutions (Coombes 2003b: 161). Under the RDP heading of nation-building the document proposes that groups wishing to hold on to their 'cultural identity' should be supported, although museums should rather direct their attention on the 'common ground and shared aspirations' (ibid: 162)[1].

Naturally this can be seen as furthering the silences imposed by apartheid, as well as raising questions about 'how far such a strategy might encourage a convenient amnesia about the struggle for democracy and the sacrifices made during the liberation struggle' (Ibid). In the words of Davison, 'museums, like memory, mediate the past, present, and the future. But unlike personal memory, which is animated by an individual's experience, museums give material form to authorised versions of the past, which in time become institutionalised as public memory' (1998: 145). Hence, it is of course in the best interest of a 'new' nation such as South Africa to make sure that the most representative but inclusive image of the past is represented in their museums (Jenkinson 1989: 144). In other words, museums are 'used by nation states to represent themselves to themselves, as well as to others' (Ibid: 146). However, as the concept of nation hood, as well as national identity, is considered a construct of the mind – an 'imagined community' (see Anderson 1991) – the roles of museums are much more complex than just representing a one-sided view of the past. There will of course always be contestations and opposition, but at the time being there seems to be a dominant discourse

[1] 'History museums should concentrate more on the history of common challenges and solutions, and less on the history of conflicts. Let us forget about the battlefields, and concentrate on the ploughed fields!' (Küsel *et al.* cited in Coombes 2003b: 162).

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concerning the past in South Africa (see Rassool 2001; see also introduction to this dissertation). In other words, when certain past events are considered of importance by society as a whole or just a particular group – 'influential memory-makers' (Rioufol 1999a: 3) – collective representations of the past are then recovered and represented, and following that, slotted into narratives which then results in it becoming more meaningful and coherent (Connerton 1982: 26; Rassool 2001: 1; Rioufol 1999a: 5). Davison argues that, 'the reshaping of public memory is an explicit project' (1998: 147, see also Rioufol 1999b: 71 – 88).

In a post-conflict situation, such as South Africa, the function of museums generally become extremely significant in representing identity, subsequently they can aid in the promotion of 'national unity, stability and reconciliation within a society' (Naidu 2003). Thus museums can be used to represent the nation for others, as well as assist in its establishment within the international community; in other words, museums can assist in encouraging 'economic investment, foreign aid and tourism' (Ibid). Zedde (1998) also argues that 'nation' and 'national identity' can be slanted and biased meanings that are communicated by museums time and again. She states that 'the use of material culture to present subjective messages is at the heart of what museums are, and what they do' (Ibid). The belief that museums are apolitical and objective has, with any luck, been discarded, because every exhibition conveys meanings – intended or not – they have been put together by individuals with their own personal views and beliefs. A museum takes a stance even in what it does not reveal (Ibid). Thus museums are engaged in selective choices and the constructing of messages with particular points of view.

Davison does not fully agree with Zedde that the belief that museums are objective institutions has been discarded; she writes that 'even though museum presentations are always subjectively shaped, they are widely associated with authenticity and objectivity. Consequently, museums have become privileged institutions that validate certain forms of cultural expression and affirm particular interpretations of the past' (Davison 1998: 146). Even though there has been a lot of writing challenging and criticising the museum space there is still a pervading sense that museums are the bearers of knowledge. Kavanagh agrees and notes that the belief that all museums by definition are 'Good Things' has been a very complex notion to challenge (1991: 4). Davison also ties this to the her argument that in numerous countries state-funded national museums seem to be inclined to focus on projects that complement the national interest, although not openly recognized (1998: 146).

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To conclude, if museums are going to offer more than a dominant mythology that fits well into the nation state's belief of what is significant of the past and so forth, new methods of inducing, as well as representing, multiple narratives will have to be found. As according to Rioufol (1999b: 73) 'promoting a common representation of the past encompassing the stories and traditions of all South Africans in a respectful and inclusive manner is intended to foster reconciliation and national unity'. Yet, because of the diverse and segregated pasts of South Africans it is not possible to share a common past, but rather a common *representation* of the past. However, this new public representation of the past is seen as a 'reliable and trusted representation' because of the way it represents itself to a South African audience (Ibid: 77), and through such a representation it conceals the selectivity that goes into the constructing of a new common representation of the past. Thus, what is considered the so-called *real* past is not the collection of all that was silenced under the apartheid regime, but rather just parts of what was silenced, and – taking a cynical stance – only the parts which are now considered significant in the creation of a national identity (Leggasick *et al.* 1997: 13).

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2.1.3. *The District Six Museum*

> Museums are powerful vehicles for raising historical awareness but they can also foster nostalgia and romanticize the past (Davison, no date: 11).

This section will lay the bridge between the pervious sections and the section on memory which follows immediately after. The District Six Museum is an important gateway into both the creation of a national identity, as well as the use of memory in museums.

There has been a proliferation of South African museums and monuments in the recent past, such as the Mandela museum in Soweto, the Hector Pietersen memorial site, and the District Six Museum in Cape Town. These sites of memory have provided a space within which stories that were previously silenced could now be institutionalised and included into public memory (Solani 2000b). What is similar about these places is that they all employ personal stories/memories as a form of commemoration. However, remembering is a very personal thing and a selection is made on all levels – consciously and unconsciously – shaping these stories in particular ways. What's more, external factors such as public memory also aid in the formation of *how* and *what* people remember, and choose to tell.

Memory has become a central feature in the social theorising and critique in the 'new' South Africa, and I feel that the District Six Museum is a good example as to how memory is used to create a national identity, and will therefore provide a nice gateway into the further explorations of Robben Island Museum and the 'Cell Stories' exhibition. The District Six Museum is – as the Robben Island Museum – a site which has to deal with the engagement between the past, present and future in South Africa, thus it gives a brief look into the workings of nation building within the sphere of museums. The museum itself was established in 1994, and is located in Cape Town in the Buitenkant Methodist Church on the edge of the old district six.

District Six was the sixth district of Cape Town, and was a mixed community of freed slaves, merchants, artisans, labourers and immigrants. By the beginning of the 20th century the process of racially-based removals and marginalisation had begun. The first to be 'resettled' were 'Africans', forcibly displaced from the district in 1901. With time, as the more prosperous people moved away to the suburbs, the area became a neglected ward of Cape Town. In 1966 it was declared a 'white area' under the Group Areas Act of 1950 and by 1982, 60 000 people were forcibly removed to areas on the Cape Flats and their homes were bulldozed – over a century of history, of community life, of unity amongst the poor and of achievements against great odds, was jeopardized (Potluri 2004: 10 – 15). In a way District Six 'exemplified the articulation of ideological principle and spatial organisation which underpinned the apartheid vision of the city lodged at the very heart of its regime and its way of seeing South Africa as a whole' (McEachern 1998: 502). In other words, the forced removal of the inhabitants of District Six has come to symbolise the 'dislocation and harm caused by the Group Areas Act' (Ibid). The district was never again populated, and stood as a 'blot on the conscience of the entire nation' (Hart 1990: 134).

As according to James Young, places such as the District Six cannot remember on their own, but it is the people's own will to remember which bestows upon them meanings and significance (1993: 120). Hence I will now look closer at the District Six museum's use of people's memory. The idea of a District Six Museum was first introduced by the 'Hands off District Six' campaign in the late 1980s, where the idea was discussed in such a way as creating a museum in order to keep the memories alive. However, McEachern states that because the museum was not set up before *after* the fall of apartheid and under a democratic

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'new' nation, the museum illustrates the 'state rhetorics [sic.] of empowerment, representation and reconciliation' (McEachern 1998: 505). Naidu (2004) refers to an interview conducted with Ciraj Rassool and states that 'since its inception, as an independent community based organisation in 1994, District Six Museum was not faced with the pressure of conforming to the nationalist agenda. However, it still saw itself as nationally significant and contributing to the re–calling of South African history in its narrative around forced removals'.

The way in which the museum works with memory is through the performances of the visitors themselves: the visitors that have a connection with district six come and engage with the representations others have made of them. McEachern's focus in her article about the District Six museum is the map covering the floor of the church; it is a map of the old district. Terence Fredricks (2003) – the chairman of the District Six Museum Foundation – notes that 'the museum began with this map and grew through photographs and fragments of memory that people brought with them. It is worth remembering that most of our exhibits here have been created from what people have brought – it's their museum, their photographs, their stories. While the government removed the people and all signs of the people, now we have a place to reconstruct our memory. That is why the map covers the main floor. That is why we have the original road signs prominently displayed. People cannot bring their grandchildren to show them the building where they once lived, but they can visit us here, demonstrate on the map, view the road signs and, through the photographs, stories, music and displays, they can re-engage with memory and share it with others'.

McEachern notes that the particular feature of the map in the museum has been taken over by the people themselves. Visitors note down their names and street names, shops, markets, bus stops, and so forth In the words of McEachern 'they [the District Six'ers] wrote themselves into the map; they rendered social the map's physical representation' (1998: 506). In this way the District Six museum provides the people with a way to repossess history, thus resisting apartheid's history (Ibid). The map and the whole exhibition in itself have created a meeting-point where people can swap memories and meet other people who used to live in district six.

According to Hamber and Wilson (1999) the process of uncovering the past, more specifically here through memorialisation, allows a country to develop a common and shared memory thereby creating a sense of unity and reconciliation. The District Six Museum has become a repository in which the displaced community organised their memories and sought to

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repossess the land from which they were forcibly removed, what's more the museum acts as a 'memorial to all South Africans dispossessed by apartheid' (Swanson and Harris 2001: 63). The District Six Museum seeks to tell stories of forced removals as well as using the recovery of memory as a resource of solidarity, reclamation and unity – and in this way it can be seen to be a part of the state's rhetoric of national identity. Furthermore, Geoffrey White (1991) argues that when telling stories of the past is part of identity formation, in other words, the stories are discourses of identity. More specifically, McEachern notes that 'the retrieval of a more desirable past provides a way into new identity for them [the District Six'ers] in post-apartheid South Africa, as they take back urban citizenship, their identity as Cape Tonians' (1998: 518). The District Six museum contributes to nation building through empowering; it creates an atmosphere of unity and solidarity. Terence Fredricks (2003) says about the museum that, 'we don't believe that it's possible to recreate the past, but working with memory is what we're all about (…) Working with memory involves ensuring that people's stories are kept alive, but it is more than this. We take great care in how people's stories are told, recorded and displayed so that the process *assists in healing*' (my emphasis). Thus, the District Six Museum follows in the path of reconciliation of the 'new' South Africa.

When looking at the District Six Museum it becomes clear how it plays a great role in the formation of a new national identity, and this section will provide a better understanding of the following chapters on Robben Island Museum, and the analysis of the 'Cell Stories' exhibition, where memory also plays a key role.

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2.2. The Complexities of the Exhibition

Here I will look closer at some of the components that goes into an exhibition such as 'Cell Stories', and by that I mean the use of the ex-political prisoners' memories, as well as the personal objects. I will first include a section on the politics of memory; secondly I found it useful to look at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in order to explore the workings of personal and collective memory. The third section delves into the field of material cultural studies.

2.2.1. Memory: the politics of remembering and forgetting

> The collective representation of the past is the phenomenon whereby those past happenings that are deemed significant by society as a whole or by certain groups are collectively retrieved, recorded and re-presented (Rioufol 1999a: 1).

There are two main camps of thought concerning memory (Lavenne *et al.* 2005:1). Firstly, there is the school of thought that Ricoeur has labelled 'the tradition of inwardness' (Ricoeur 2004: 96 – 120). This particular camp argues that memory is an *individual* phenomenon, stating that memory is a subjective experience and memories belong to the individual. In other words, when one remembers one always remembers 'oneself' as the memories are not those of others, this results in the 'notion of reflexivity' (Lavenne *et al.* 2005: 1). Thus, memory was for a long time considered a very individual element of the psyche, and was believed to be no more than a 'storage place' in which the past could be stored and retrieved in its entirety (Hutton 1993: xx – xxi). Nevertheless, in the twentieth century this belief started to crack, firstly, one could argue, with Freud launching a discussion and argument concerning the interplay between memory and the unconscious, although the view that memory was an *individual* 'storage place' still prevailed (Ibid: 59 – 72).

The second school of thought regarding memory emerged, and was labelled by Ricoeur 'the external gaze'. This school of thought argued for the existence of a collective consciousness and as a result asserted the primacy of the *collective* feature of memory. The French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs is considered the first and major figure in introducing the idea

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that memory can be attributed to a collective entity (Lavenne *et al.* 2005:1). Halbwachs argued that memory depended on the group within which one was a part, as well as to ones status in that particular group. In the words of Lavenne *et al.* (Ibid), 'we are therefore not the authentic subjects of attribution of our memories'. Rioufol (1999b: 17) writes that Halbwachs 'redefined the notion of memory as a collective and reconstructive phenomenon'.

McEachern also mentions Halbwachs, and states that narrating the self and country in South Africa has been drawn into the creation and consumption of what Halbwachs calls 'collective memory' (2002: xvii). This is significant in that 'both narrative and memory are social, acquired and shaped through our social and cultural experience and relations' (Ibid). Through collective memory individuals produce versions of the past that fit into this collective memory, so that something as 'abstract as national identity is authenticated and legitimated' (Ibid). To put it simply, 'collective memory' is a set of ideas which states that our own memories are not entirely personal, this set of ideas has been developed across disciplines: psychology, history, cultural studies, just to mention a few.

On that note, collective memory can be seen as essential in the creation of national identity and unity: *our* past, *our* aspirations, *our* future and so forth – sets of shared notions about the past, present and future. However, collective memory is also exclusionary. Events, ideas, certain memories might not fit into the 'national narrative' and will therefore be discarded in the story of the nation. Irwin-Zarecka writes that 'collective memory is best located (…) not in the minds of individuals, but in the resources they share' (1994: 4), which naturally results in a lot being left out of the story. In other words, one can argue that in the public sphere there are certain ways of remembering and forgetting which are seen as 'the right way' (Ibid: 15). Hence, the details of certain events in the past do not become as important as the *meaning* of the event (see Irwin-Zarecka 1994: 49). However as previously mentioned I will argue – as Ricouer and Halbwachs do – that memory *always* bears the mark of 'others' because memories are presented to and received by someone else (Lavenne *et al.* 2005: 2; Ricouer 2004: 130). Lavenne *et al.* sums it up as follows: 'collective memory thus functions as a framework within which individual memory is built and structured' (2005: 2).

Brink, on the other hand, brings the discussion a step further concerning the individual existing within the collective, he writes that 'the individual constitutes and invents her/himself through the constant editing and re-editing of memory', hence oral testimonies cannot be

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considered 'facts' or 'the truth' but should rather be considered as a foundation for further exploration of the past – the oral testimonies are just, crudely put, *versions* of actual events and experiences (1998: 30). Oral testimonies can therefore be seen as an intersection of history, memory and language, whereby they overlap so precisely as to be more or less impossible to differentiate:

> The 'origins' of history, as recovered through memory, are encoded in language, and each of these moments becomes a condition for the others (Ibid: 32).

Oral testimonies and memories become stories that are shaped around notions of a beginning, middle, and an end: 'narrative lies at the heart of every process we call history' (Ibid; see also Minkley *et al.* 1996: 9; Schudson 1995: 358). Memories are – as all primary sources – 'inadequate and imperfect' as they are subject to the shortcomings of the human memory (Marwick 2001: 135 – 136). Nevertheless, what people *choose* to tell, forget or embellish on when it comes to stories of the past becomes just as significant, and well worth an exploration (Ibid: 136; see also Wright 2000: 126; Joutard, no date: 2). Thus the study of the past, through oral testimonies, is not a study into what actually happened but rather an investigation into how different people remember it and so forth. This is not to say that the past did not happen, however we cannot know the past except through language, either written or spoken (Wright 2000: 126). In other words, 'the past' becomes hearsay and will as a result be incapable of being totally un-biased.

In certain contexts – some more than others – individual stories are legitimised and publicised in order to be recognized as the 'real and authentic record of the past', and following that the stories become objectified and 'collectivised and their accrual is constituted as the new public history' (Rioufol 1999b: 82; see also Minkley *et al.* 1996: 3 - 5). Odendaal agrees, and writes about the matter that 'the stories that people are telling are turning out to be far stronger than just individual tales; they are contributing to the new social memory' (1996: 3). In order to delve further into this vast topic I have decided to look at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).

2.2.2. *The Truth and Reconciliation Commission*

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> The task of the TRC is to delve into South Africa's grim past; the records of the hearings of the TRC are the repository of South African memory (Coetzee *et al.* 1998: 1).

The 'Truth and Reconciliation Commission' (TRC)[2] becomes an interesting gateway into which one can enter the exploration of collective memory and personal testimonies because, to put it simply, it *seems* to produce individual lived experiences as opposed to a 'national', overarching narrative[3]. Thus in this section I will explore the activation of public memory in the workings of the TRC.

Brink states quite eloquently that the TRC is part of a larger 'patchwork', thus simply highlighting the fragmentary nature of memory (Coetzee *et al.* 1998: 3), and he also argues that unless the TRC is extended into the realm of literature, 'society cannot come to terms with its past to face the future' (Brink 1998: 30). Yet there is of course a big leap from the TRC and its aims, to the imaginings of literature, as Brink states: the TRC is 'intent on effecting reconciliation through establishing, as fully as possible, the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, about human rights infringements during the apartheid years – 'truth', in this context, being equated with 'facts'' (Ibid). However, he goes on to argue that fiction goes well beyond facts and rather grasps the 'real' (whatever that might be) – and through this one paragraph he manages to draw attention to the unreliable workings of memory in the way that oral testimonies cannot be considered the 'whole truth', because, in his eyes, to become 'truer' it needs to be engaged with through literature (both fiction and academic) (Ibid).

The TRC was founded on the necessity of oral testimonies encompassing considerable 'truth value', and one of the critics – Deborah Posel – has pointed out the TRC's tendency to elide memory and truth to equate forensic with personal evidence (Coombes 2003c: 8, see also McEachern 2002: xiv). Hence, memory in the TRC has to be seen as accurate and 'true' in order to work, yet 'research on the witnessing and testimony collected in the aftermath of genocide, war, or systematic political repression (such as in the case of South Africa) has

[2] In 1996 the TRC – lead by Archbishop Desmond Tutu – commenced their first hearings. The TRC was set up to investigate gross human rights violations between 1960 and 1994, and it was 'given the power to grant amnesty to those who made full disclosure of their crimes against humanity in cases where political motivation was proven' (Coombes 2003c: 7 – 8). The aim of the commission is to explore the 'truth' of events under the apartheid regime in order to heal the wounds of an embattled country, on a macro-level, it was created so as to 'facilitate a national reconciliation between victim and perpetrator' (Ibid: 8).

[3] The 'triumph over adversity' and universal narrative of the Robben Island Museum will be explored more closely in the following chapter 'The Changing Image of Robben Island'.

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pointed to the impact of trauma on memory and the distinction between narrative and traumatic memory' (Ibid).

Having provided an insight into the unpredictability and selectivity of memory, and hence oral testimonies, and I will move onto arguing that individual testimonies at the TRC also become incorporated into a new collective public memory – a national narrative, if you will – through the media TRC. In the words of Rioufol: 'individual stories are legitimised and publicised in order to be established as the real and authentic record of the past', and following that the stories become objectified and 'collectivised and their accrual is constituted as the new public history' (Rioufol 1999b: 82; see also Minkley *et al.* 1996: 3 - 5). Odendaal agrees, and writes about the matter that 'the stories that people are telling are turning out to be far stronger than just individual tales; they are contributing to the new social memory' (1996: 3). In the words of McEachern, the media TRC can be seen as one of the primary forms of 'narrating the nation' (McEachern 2002: xiv). Minkley *et al.* (1996: 3 – 5) argues that the media TRC simplifies stories/narratives into a 'resistance versus domination' dichotomy[4]. Thus, Brink's call for the past to be re-worked and re-presented in the realm of fiction in South Africa becomes very significant, and it seems the only way to truly engage with the representations of the past (1998: 42).

Stories can be unconsciously moulded on an individual level so as to become more relevant and significant, however, the stories can also be said to be shaped by the media TRC itself in order to fit the bigger framework of 'historical truth, reconciliation and national unity' (Rioufol 1999b: 84). Thus, as a consequence of 'the reshaping of individual memories by both witnesses themselves and the TRC, a collective story emerges, endowed with the features of narrativity: morality, fullness and closure' (Ibid; see also Minkley *et al.* 1996: 9). The production of memory as narrative truth is contingent on who it is being remembered for and what is being remembered. The TRC proposition that truth was embodied in the stories of the victims of apartheid suggests an individual autonomy in the production of meaning that is misleading. Testimony before the TRC involved a singular 'performative act but what it produced as meaning was not reducible to its truthfulness. Testimony is an act of public remembering which only becomes socially constitutive through witnessing' (Humphery 2000:

[4] The former is naturally the political activists, while the latter, the security apparatus.

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11). In other words, 'speaking necessitates hearing if private memory is to be affirmed as social 'reality'' (Ibid.).

Grunebaum-Ralph (2001: 198) writes about the TRC that 'as a cornerstone of the new South African democracy's project of nation-building, the TRC has, of course, mediated and framed individual trauma rooted in individual bodies in ways that subsume the individual into a homogenous and disembodied narrative of collectivity'. Ricoeur argues that in so far as personal testimony has a juridical function, it is not the witness' sentiment that is seen as significant, but rather the account itself – the *narration* of events (1980: 123). In other words, 'individuals' testimonies and the experiences that are given voice are thus pre-inscribed into an archive that is grounded within the institutional and discursive framework of the TRC and its political context' (Grunebaum-Ralph 2001: 201). Thus, the testimonies at the TRC are underpinned by a political project of nation building and reconciliation – they have been made to 'fit' a particular narrative of a 'new' South African history:

> In the complex and contested memorial landscape of the 'new' South Africa, the negotiated foundations of its constitutional democracy—and the history of these foundations— intersect with modes of silencing and displacement effected by discourses of reconciliation and healing; nation building and reconstruction. The stories that make official memory are rewritten in relation to the 'new', to beginnings, and to the bounded, imaginary body of the nation. The grounding of official memory narratives on Robben Island and through the TRC process is premised on stories and the places of stories being split off from the bodies, the lives, and the everyday comings and goings of the very nation in whose name and whose identity they are called upon to establish and represent. Testimonies to the TRC are atomized, detached from the continuously unfolding chapters of choices made, lives lived, and losses mourned. In displacing the real bodies of the nation in order for the imaginary one of the unified nation to take their places, the official custodians of memory reduce life stories and testimonies to a pre-inscribed archive (Grunebaum-Ralph 2001: 208).

To conclude, the TRC is a significant site for displaying and reshaping the representation of the past, it sustains the drive towards democratisation and nation-building. The above debate has illustrated how individual memories can be moulded so as to fit a national narrative, as

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well as the unreliability of memory. Thus I have shown that representations of the past – collective or otherwise – are socially constructed, this is something that will prove significant when researching the 'Cell Stories' and the interviews employed in the exhibition.

I have barely scratched the surface of this vast field of study, but hope that the above debate has illustrated how individual memories can be, and usually are, moulded so as to fit a national narrative, as well as just the basic unreliability of memory. Hence, my thesis will work from the understanding that all memory is, to use the words of Coombes, 'unavoidably both borne out of individual subjective experience and shaped by collective consciousness and shared social processes' (Coombes 2003c: 8). In other words, personal testimonies used in the 'Cell Stories' exhibition – or in the whole of the Robben Island Museum for that matter – are coloured by the collective memory of the present South Africa.

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2.2.3. *Material Cultural Studies: the manner in which meaning is created around objects.*

There is an extensive body of work on material cultural studies, however material culture studies, as well as museum studies, have 'languished in the doldrums for most of the middle decades of [the eighteenth century], until around 1975 when ideas about the meanings of objects and how they can be studied underwent a radical shift as the broadly structuralists and post-structuralists ideas developed earlier in the century in Central Europe, Paris, Moscow, and North America were applied to them' (Pearce 1992: 8). Material culture studies were expanded through works such as Ian Hodder (1982a; 1982b; 1989), Miller (1985; 1987), Shanks and Tilley (1987a; 1987b), as well as writers such as Appadurai (1986) and Douglas and Isherwood (1979). Traditionally, before the shift in the 1970s, objects were seen merely as commodities. There was also a shift in museology in the 1980s where the study of material culture now came to be considered as more important. Pearce argues that the reason for this is that 'museum exhibitions are the principal medium through which [the] past is publicly presented; museums move steadily into the forefront of the picture of the past, and its tangible memorials, become increasingly a political issue in the broadest sense' (1989b: 1). Hooper-Greenhill also writes about the shift in the latter part of the nineteenth century stating that:

> Objects were seen as sources of knowledge, as part of the real world that had fixed and finite meanings that could be both discovered, once and for all, and then taught through being put on show (Hooper-Greenhill 2002: 5).

Most of Pearce's studies are an attempt to delve into the 'philosophies and cultural traditions which underlie museums, their collections, and the objects which make them up, and to see how meaning is created amongst them' (Pearce 1992: 11).

Dana (1927) argues that 'objects are silent. They must tell about themselves, their origin, purpose, their relative positions in the development of their kind and countless other details through labels, guides and catalogues' (Dana 1927: 16 – 22) However, Cameron (1968) disagrees with Dana stating that 'the museum as a communicative system (…) depends on the non-verbal language of objects and observable phenomena. It is primarily a visual language, and, at times, an aural or tactile language' (Cameron 1968: 34). Nonetheless, looking closer at Cameron's argument, he does admit that the interpretations of objects could come out of layers of different realities, and the representation as well as the selection is very subjective. In other words, if objects 'speak for themselves' there are still numerous possible readings of an object (Hooper-Greenhill 2002: 3).

Subsequently, objects in a museum's collection need to be interpreted in order for the public to *fully* understand their significance – meanings are not intrinsic within objects. Their (intended) meanings are a result of the method of display and interpretation, in other words, an exhibition and the supplementary information structure a message to the public about the objects on display (Coxall 1991: 92 – 93). Coxall also argues that there is a prevailing belief that 'the object, like the camera, cannot lie' (Ibid: 93), yet, as already mentioned, the viewing of a display is very personal and as Cameron states there are numerous of interpretations of one display (Cameron 1968: 34; Hooper-Greenhill 2002: 3, 50). However, 'the wide ranging semiotic possibilities of things are reduced and controlled by power', as each society has its 'regime of truth'; what is considered 'common sense' and so forth (Hooper-Greenhill 2002: 50). Then again, other people argue that an object has a unified and stable meaning – an *unchanging* meaning (Wilson 1992: 81).

Davison writes that the museum is 'a field of interaction in which objects are not wilfully stripped of their former contextual meanings but are recontextualised, researched and annotated within new conceptual frameworks that add further dimensions to the objects concerned' (Davison, no date: 2). In other words, objects have properties conferred upon them by virtue of their museum life and existence, and these are not qualities and characteristics

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that are naturally inherent in the object itself (Gathercole 1989: 74). Hooper-Greenhill notes that 'it is an odd and persistent museum fallacy that objects speaks for themselves, and that the task of the curator is limited to presenting the object in an aesthetic, tasteful and ideologically neutral a fashion as possible for visitors to interpret the objects for themselves' (Hooper-Greenhill 2002: 49). Personally, I also believe that the curator can become so engrossed in the history of the display that he/she has been asked to set up, so that everything becomes 'natural' – in other words, one gets to know so much about the project that it is easy to forget that for other people the meanings one intended might not be so blatant.

Once an object is acquired by a museum it is physically repositioned to a new spatial setting, as well as being further re-contextualised by methods of cataloguing and explanation. The object is also viewed by visitors of the museum with different frames of reference (Davison, no date: 2; Cameron 1968: 34). And even if museum representation may be convincing in their 'visual rhetoric' and their 'explicit or implicit meanings', in reality visitors construct their own meanings as according to their own personal experiences, bias and knowledge (Davison, no date: 2). The objects on display have now become an item for public consumption. If the items were stored away somewhere in an archive they could be considered 'scientific, historiographic and research-based', yet at once they are put on display in a museum they are open for all kinds of interpretations and readings (Gathercole 1989: 76). In other words, even if objects are represented in such a manner as to evoke a certain meaning or meanings, an exhibition can create multiple meanings on different levels for different people. The framing devices in an exhibition offer contextual clues that prompt a certain interpretation of an object in a specific setting (see Miller 1985, 1987).

Depending on 'the arrangement or place of the object, the viewer in certain circumstances can be called to experience empathy or sympathy, pride or revulsion with the material at hand' (Hooper-Greenhill 2002: 131). However, Hooper-Greenhill argues that 'it seems likely that objects are made meaningful according to how they are placed within relations of significance, and that those relationships depend on who is determining what counts as significant' (Ibid: 50). I think both arguments are viable in different contexts, and one just needs to take them both into consideration – the discussion is an interesting one as it aids in the understanding that an object is a lot more complex than one would think at first glance.

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Miller (1987) regards material culture as encompassing the relationships between people and things, situated in time and space, and Davison agrees (no date: 6). This definition highlights the subject/object relationships, instead of focusing mostly on the formal qualities of objects (Ibid.): 'these relationships can change through time, and vary with subjective perceptions. In theory, therefore, meanings are inherently unstable and potentially ambiguous because they are continually recreated in relation to a shifting context. Even stylistic attributes cannot be regarded as being fixed through time because there is always human selectivity involved in choosing and interpreting the relevant attributes' (Ibid.). 'The processes of recontextualisation that characterises museum discourse involve an interplay of multiple levels of interpretation. Reading any display, at the simplest level, is an interpretation of an interpretation' (ibid: 8).

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2.3. Nation-Building and Collective Memory: a common representation of the past

Through looking at the act of nation building in South Africa, and more specifically on museums, I have established how the mechanics of nation building permeates next to all spheres of South African society. And although I have but barely scratched at the surface of this immense topic I hope to have made clear that in regards to this dissertation representations of the past are socially constructed and shaped in order to become more meaningful as well as relevant to a society as a whole. This was further explored in the section about collective memory. And when looking at memory coupled with the creation of a national identity – the two can be seen as inter-linked – one could sum it up as follows:

> The narrative of survival and healing constitutes a thorough attempt to promote national cohesion and reconciliation by favouring the common identification of all South Africans as victims and survivors of apartheid, as holders of *common knowledge (or 'memory') of the past* and as beneficiaries of the new democratic, peaceful and inclusive South Africa (Rioufol 1999b: 104, my emphasis).

Hence, this section has demonstrated how the narrative of the past has been – unconsciously or not – reshaped and that a dominant national narrative has emerged. As McEachern writes; 'one of the most striking things to an anthropologist making her first visit to South Africa [in 1996] (…) was the prevalence of narrative; the pervasiveness of story-telling, telling one's own story, and that of the country, the people' (2002: xii). She also notes that 'narrating people and their encompassing collective identity became both a process of imagining the nation and a political issue of representation' (Ibid).

What's more, looking at the debate concerning objects and memory it becomes obvious that an exhibition, or a display of any kind, embodies numerous layers of meaning and is of a very complex nature. Thus, my interpretation will only be one interpretation of many, as well as an interpretation of someone else's interpretation. Last but not least, it is important to remember that there are limitations to my methodology, as in any methodology. Buntman uses David William Cohen to note this, stating that 'understandings of the world are produced by acts of

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commission and omission, by forgetting and remembering, and by repressing and highlighting events and emotions, interpretations and interests' (Buntman 2003: 9).

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3. The Changing Image of Robben Island

After the Rivonia trial in June 1963/1964[5] Robben Island 'has been firmly fixed in international [and national] consciousness as the place of exile for black male political opponents of the apartheid regime – including the majority of the leadership of South Africa's first democratic government' (Coombes 2003a: 55). And when Nelson Mandela and other political leaders were released, the island turned into a symbol of human victory over oppression – 'an icon of hope' (Davison 1998: 154). The phrase of 'the triumph narrative' will run consistently through this paper, and in order to illustrate this particular phrase I have included a quote from Kathrada's opening speech to the 'Esiqithini' exhibition in 1993 where he said about Robben Island that:

> While we will not forget the brutality of apartheid we will not want Robben Island to be a monument of our hardship and suffering. *We would want it to be a monument reflecting the triumph of the human spirit against the forces of evil*; a triumph of freedom and human dignity over repression and humiliation; a triumph of wisdom and largeness of spirit against small minds and pettiness, a triumph of courage and determination over human frailty and weakness; a triumph of non-racialism over bigotry and intolerance; a triumph of the new South Africa over the old (Kathrada 1996: 10 – 11, my emphasis).

In this chapter I will outline how the contemporary public image of Robben Island materialised, predominantly concentrating on the early 1990s. However, before commencing on the shifting symbolism of the island, as well as the debates concerning its future, I will give a brief history of the island. The first section will explore the materialisation of the now pervading 'triumph narrative' at the Robben Island Museum. Under this section I will also examine how the island can be seen, and has been argued to be a microcosm of South Africa. Furthermore I will have a look at how Robben Island becoming a UNESCO world heritage site has affected its image and symbolism. Through this chapter I hope to demonstrate that the Robben Island's contemporary image is rooted in the new conciliatory narrative of the past and in the construction of a new national identity in South Africa.

[5] It began in late 1963 and ended on the twelfth of June 1964 (Buntman 2003: 19).

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3.1. The Shifting Image of the Island

Not often does a piece of land become so deeply instilled with a symbolism that has been and continues to be challenged and criticised, Davison writes: 'Robben Island (...) has been described [as] the most symbolically charged site in South Africa' (Davison 1998: 154). In this section I will therefore examine the diverse history of the island, as well as looking into the debates about its future – concentrating mainly on the early part of the 1990s.

3.1.1. *A Brief History of the Island*

The recorded history of the island dates as far back as the fifteenth century (Rioufol 1999b: 136). The island was then used as a stopover for the European sailors on their way to Asia; for food[6] and as a refuge, it was also used as a place for fattening up the Dutch East Indies Company's stock (Ibid; Deacon 1998: 162). Then moving swiftly on to the seventeenth century – after the Dutch settlement at the Cape – Robben Island provided the community with limestone, stone, food and it also signalled when new ships arrived in the bay. Thus, for both the Dutch East India Company and the settlement community at the Cape the island meant 'safety and security' (Deacon 1998: 162). However, they also started to use the island to imprison anyone who disgruntled the authorities of the 'Vereenidge Oost-Indische Compangnie' (VOC): some Khoisan were the earliest prisoners of the island (Rioufol 1999b: 136). In 1591 the Khoisan tired of the unjust trade between themselves and the Dutch, and attacked their settlement on Robben Island. However, they were no match for the gun power of the Dutch, and lost and were left on the island without any food or water – these tribe members became the first of many prisoners of Robben Island. The island's very first political prisoner was a local Khoisan leader Autshumato who was banished by the Dutch governor Jan van Riebeeck for allegedly stealing cattle in the 1650s (Garuba 2001: 67).

A Kramat is a holy shrine of Islam that marks the graves of Holy Men of the Muslim faith who have died at the Cape. And there is a Kramat on the island which can be explained by the fact that the island was also used as a prison for East Indies political prisoners, many whom where Muslim leaders and holy men. The Kramat was erected in the 1960s as an honour and

[6] The island was full of seals and penguins.

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commemoration for one of these holy men: Sheik Madura, one of the founders of Islam in South Africa (Art and Culture 2005). These political prisoners were brought to the Cape as slaves from the 1680s onwards. To sum up, the island provided a place of exile for political prisoners, slaves, and convicts throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth century – they were incarcerated on the island under very extreme conditions. Then in the latter half of the nineteenth century the British started using Robben Island as a whaling station, but also took over the island's function as a place of exile. The most famous prisoner that was sent to the island in 1819 is worth a mention here, his name was Nxele or Makan, he was a Xhosa-warrior prophet and led his people against the British. He was captured and punished for leading an attack against Grahamstown in 1819 (Garuba 2001: 68). However, he drowned when trying to escape the island (Rioufol 1999b: 137):

> His name came to be associated with resistance and this is why the island is sometimes referred to as the Island of Makana (Garuba 2001: 68).

Furthermore, they started to send people to the island that were diagnosed insane, as well as people with infectious diseases (or what they thought at the time were infectious) (Ibid; Deacon 1998: 163). Thus, the image of the island was now being torn between 'the image of the island as a healthy place, suitable for curing the sick and the mad' and the image of the island 'as a place to which the incurable and dangerous both patients and prisoners could be banished' (Deacon 1998: 163).

The prison on the island closed in the year of 1846, and the island now became exclusively used for the insane, chronically ill, and later lepers. Yet before the island became a place only for lepers, it was temporarily used as a place of exile once more: Xhosa, Hlubi and Koranna chiefs were detained by the British in during Frontier Wars resulting from the colonial expansion were sent to the island in the 1850s and onwards (Coombes 2003a: 54; see also Garuba 2001: 68).

The chronically ill and 'the insane' were removed from the island in the late 1800s and early 1900s, but at the same time the number of lepers proliferated. The hospital finally closed down in 1931, and by now the village consisting of both patients and hospital staff had increased to over 2000 people. The Defence Department took over, and used the island to

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train artillery recruits, as well as positioning guns in order to protect the country from invasion during the Second World War (Deacon 1998: 163).

But the island's history as a place of exile was not over: in 1961 it once again opened as a prison, this time for both common-law and political prisoners. Both types of prisoners were incarcerated together until the year of 1971 when the common-law prisoners were removed to another prison (but still on the island) – the reason for this being that the political prisoners had managed to politicise some of the common-law prisoners. Thus, Robben Island now became known as the prison for anti-apartheid activists, and incarcerated the activists that were considered the most dangerous for the apartheid regime (Ibid: 137). These activists came from all South African anti-apartheid groups: the African National Congress, the Black Consciousness Movement, New Unity Movement, the Liberal Party, the Pan-African Congress, the United Democratic Front, the South African Student Organisation and so forth. The maximum-security prison also included activists from the main liberation movement in Namibia: the South West Africa People's Organisation (Ibid).

In 1976, after the Soweto uprising, many activists were arrested and sent to the island – this considerably increased the numbers in the maximum-security prison. Then in 1982 some of the political prisoners were moved to Pollsmoor prison on the mainland, and in 1991 the last political prisoners were released. However, the island continued to house common-law prisoners until December 1996 – only a few months before Robben Island was declared a National Monument and museum in January 1997 (Davison 1998: 157; Deacon 1998: 164; Coombes 2003a: 65), consequently the island came under the jurisdiction of the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology (Deacon 1998: 172).

The implication of the island at present does not lie so much in what in fact took place there as compared to how the story has been *depicted* and *represented*. The island exists in the national memory somewhat through its more remote past as a prison and hospital (in particular for lepers), although it figures chiefly in the public memory as a prison for political-prisoners during the apartheid years – especially Nelson Mandela – who has played such a vital national part following their liberation (Ibid: 164). 'Robben Island became famous as a prison for political opponents of the apartheid regime in 1963. A substantial number of those sent to Robben Island had participated in the new military formations of the liberation

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movements, and it is this participation which they link in their narratives not only to their arrest but also to their harsh treatment within prison' (Solani 2000b).

3.1.2. *Debating Robben Island's Future*

During the apartheid years the symbol of the island was twofold. First there was the apartheid's narrative that deemed the island a place of exile and banishment – an image shaped over decades, beginning in the eighteenth century (as discussed in the previous section). Second, there was the opposed narrative of the liberation movement in South Africa within which the island's symbol can also be split into two: an image of the cruelty of apartheid, as well as a symbol of the resistance of the anti-apartheid groups – both a negative and a more positive image all at once (Deacon 1996: 5; Rioufol 1999b).

The image of the island by the apartheid regime was predominantly negative, in Deacon's words: 'banishment to the island invokes the idea of symbolic cleansing of the Southern Africa subcontinent for the dominant classes' (1996: 6). Subsequently, the island becomes a symbol for everything that is 'bad' – its earlier image of 'safety and security' passed briefly by (Deacon 1998: 161 – 163; Rioufol 1999b: 138). Moving on to the liberation movements' image of the island, it was also more negative than positive in the beginning – during apartheid it became a symbol of the destructiveness and injustice of the regime (and colonialism in the past). This image was widely spread by the anti-apartheid activists in the public realm – through literature, meetings, posters, songs, the activists in exile, as well as by the international anti-apartheid movement (Rioufol 1999b: 139; see also Jacobs 1991: 195). However, a counter-narrative was beginning to emerge alongside the predominantly negative image of the island: the island as a symbol of the indestructibility of the spirit of resistance against injustice and oppression.

Rioufol (1999b: 139 – 140) argues that this more positive image of the island came about as a direct consequence of what was happening on the island – the political prisoners managed to adapt to extreme conditions, as well as fighting for their rights in prison, subsequently, the conditions improved progressively from the 1960s[7] – with some setbacks of course. And with

[7] For a more detailed account of how the political prisoners bettered their conditions, including setbacks and victories, see Buntman (2003: 14 – 60). I will include one quote here as an example: 'the early years, from 1962 or 1963 until approximately 1966, were harsh for the political prisoners. The crucial turning point in the gradual

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the conditions improving on the island the more positive image of the island developed on the mainland. The basis for their victories over the prison authorities was that they realised that they had a common enemy (i.e. the prison authorities) and in order to fight their battles to improve their conditions they had to represent themselves as a united front (Deacon 1998: 163; see also Buntman 2003). Following the spread of this particular image the island came to be known as 'the university', as the political prisoners had started classes in all spheres of academia – though predominantly concerning themselves with political theory and so forth (Rioufol 1999b: 139 – 140). Nonetheless, the symbolism of oppression and injustice still prevailed during the apartheid years (Deacon 1996: 63; Rioufol 1999b: 140). However, one can argue that 'for the [apartheid] state and for its opponents the island's (...) value as [a political symbol] has *at times* outstripped its practical value as a place where the leaders of oppositional forces have been separated from their followers' (Deacon 1996: 5, my emphasis).

Hence, simply put, the symbolism of the island during the apartheid era was predominantly negative for both the apartheid state and the liberation movement, although there was a counter narrative within the sphere of the freedom struggle.

Rioufol states that the more positive image of the island that we can now witness was prevalent already in 1990/1991, and she argues that it was something that happened more or less unconsciously. Nonetheless, the 'second dimension of the reshaping was achieved more slowly', which was a product of conscious actions by influential memory-makers – the universal imagery of Robben Island was well-established only in the wakening of the 'new' South Africa, 'crowned by the creation of the museum' (Rioufol 1999a: 3). In order to explore how Robben Island came to represent the past in such a universal manner I will now outline the debates surrounding the island's future with the prospect of the prison closing down.

The Prisons Department wanted to transform the image of Robben Island and in the early 1980s they embarked on this project by stocking the island (rather tastelessly) with eland, ostriches, and springbok, and they also brought back the penguin colony (Deacon 1998: 169).

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improvement of conditions was a mass hunger strike in about 1966 by almost the entire prison population of over a thousand men. Slowly brutality decreased, food improved, and cultural, academic, and political activities were organised by the prisoners. There was a regression in conditions in the early 1970s, with the arrival of the new commanding officer, Colonel Badenhorst, when a reign of terror was re-established. After Badenhorst left the island in 1972, conditions once again slowly began to improve' (Ibid: 36).

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It quickly became 'apparent that the island was too politically sensitive a site for an easy and wholesale reconstruction of its symbolism in the public memory, an erasure of its past' (Ibid: 170). Subsequently, it became a dispute as to which versions of the past and which pasts in itself should be deemed significant, more so than the others, and how these elements of the past should be commemorated (Ibid: 170; Rioufol 1999b: 142). The debates flourished at the launch of the political transition in the country as a result of the island becoming more accessible to the public. Robben Island was opened to tourists already in the latter part of the 1980s, although the focus then was centred on the island's role in the Second World War, the Victorian village, and the environmental resources (Deacon 1998: 169; Rioufol 1999b: 143). This, as well as stocking the island with animals, was a ploy of the apartheid regime to shift the symbolism of the island as an image of the cruelty of apartheid – as well as the more positive image – to a site less symbolically charged. However, when the island was opened up to the media in 1991 (Rioufol 1999b: 143) it quickly became a site of commemoration for returning former political prisoners, and other people who wanted to remember the struggle.

This first part of the commemoration of the island was predominantly coloured by people wanting to remember the atrocities of apartheid, although the symbolism of the island was in transition alongside South Africa and the negotiations process. As an example of the 'early vision' I would like to mention the newspaper article in the *Argus* 15th of June 1991. This article was based around the former political prisoner Mikki Xhayiya's first visit to the island after he was released, where he states to the journalist that he felt like a Jew returning to a concentration camp, and that he feels that Robben Island should be a 'memory of the cruelty of apartheid and the misery it caused', that it should serve as a 'reminder for posterity of the sacrifices that some of us had to undergo to bring about the democracy in this country' (McGibbon 1991).

During the years of 1990 and 1991 Robben Island featured quite prominently in the media. There were suggestions made to turn the island into a holiday resort, casino, wildlife resort and so forth – an attempt to reduce the political significance of the island for anti-apartheid activists (Crews 1990a; Deacon 1998: 168 – 169; No author 1991a; see also Deacon 1996; Hutton 1994). These ideas were openly discussed *and* contested in the press. Kathrada stated to the *City Press*: 'we are against a plan where we spent most of our youth suffering being made a place of pleasure for morbid visitors to see how we were incarcerated' (Blow 1991). Another proposal concerning the holiday resort on the island would involve turning 'every

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second cell into two toilets', however the article also states that 'Mandela's cell would not be desecrated but would be restored into a museum' (Simon 1990) – a *whole* museum in the former cell of Mandela? There was even a proposal for a quarantine station for South Africa horses, in order to prevent the spread of South African horse sickness to Europe when entering horse competitions. However, there was a hold on this application as Britain objected to South Africa's registration (No author 1992a).

Nick Malherbe – who then sat on the Future of Robben Island Committee – stated that 'the environment is the *most important thing*' (my emphasis), and that the 'maximum security prison would be ideal as a museum dedicated to the history of the struggle against apartheid, while the remainder could be used for a youth hostel' (Blow 1991). This statement illustrates just how some people wanted to undermine the significance of the island housing one of the main apartheid prisons. In addition he was also quoted in another article to have said that the attitude of the ANC (their opposition to Robben Island being turned into a public resort) was a 'selfish attitude', and that 'as far as the long history of the Robben Island was concerned the ANC are just a lot of Johnny-come-lately's [sic]' (Crews 1990b). Andre Odendaal contests the propositions and statements made by Nick Malherbe and states in one of the articles: 'hands off Robben Island (..) white business people and the Minister of Justice should keep their hands off Robben Island until a representative and democratic decision about its future can be made'. He also highlights the insensitivity of this discussion since some of the remaining political prisoners were entering their third week of hunger strike when this article was published (No author 1991b). The above quotes echo the debates in the press during the years of 1990 and 1991.

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The future of the island was discussed under headings such as 'Bid to open up Robben Island as a Public Resort' (Crews 1990a), 'Angry ANC in row over Future of Robben Island' (Crews 1990b), 'We won't Desecrate Nelson's Cell' (Simon 1990), 'Robben Island Plan may mean Thousands of Jobs' (No author 1990), 'Hell is no Pleasure Resort' (Blow 1991), 'Robben Island could draw Tourists' (No author 1991a), 'More to the Island than Hated Prison' (Crews 1991). These headings clearly show the contestation, as well as some of the attempts to shift the symbolism of the island away from the maximum-security prison.

One can argue that 'the interest of the public was captured by the symbolism and controversial status of the island in the narratives of apartheid and of the liberation

movement' (Rioufol 1999b: 143), thus it became a story featured in the press: it was newsworthy.

Thus, the debate concerning the future of Robben Island was, crudely put, split in two. On the one hand there was the proposals to turn the island into a holiday resort and so forth, in order to shift the symbolism of the island away from apartheid prison; away from an image of 'apartheid's evil and of the strength and righteousness of the resistance movement' (Rioufol 1999b: 145 – 146). Opposing the right-wing proposals was the plan to establish a museum, educational centre and/or a peace centre, suggestions coming from the anti-apartheid groups. These groups wanted the island to become a site for public remembrance, they wished for the highly symbolically charged site to be a place where the cruelty of apartheid was remembered, as well as celebrating the resistance (Deacon 1998: 165 – 166).

In 1993 the Mayibuye Centre in collaboration with the South African Museum opened up an exhibition epitomising this renewed interest in the island. However, it also concerned itself with the diverse history of the island discussed in the previous section. The exhibition was called 'Esiqithini' and its main focus was to be on the maximum-security prison and the experiences of the former political prisoners incarcerated there. The exhibition quickly came under scrutiny from different angles. Rioufol writes of the 'Esiqithini' exhibition that by 'displaying both apartheid's recent past and diverse histories of older times provided a compromise whereby the narrative of the liberation movement was re-used but modified and smoothed' (1999b: 144). The exhibition's focus on the maximum-security prison was displaced because of the uses of the comprehensive and long-term representation of the island. Through the representation of the diverse history of the island it neutralised the island's role in the recent apartheid past, and in this way the exhibition 'sketched a recasting of the liberation movement narrative into a new conciliatory narrative of the past' (Ibid: 145). 'Esiqithini' was set up in order to add to the discussions surrounding the future of Robben Island, which had been pretty intense since the beginning of the 1990s (as illustrated above).

And, as previously mentioned, the debates concerning the island's future can be seen to have followed the larger negotiation process underway in South Africa; and as compromises were made in this process of the change-over, compromises were made concerning Robben Island. I will now move on to looking at how the Robben Island Museum came to embody the image it conveys today.

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3.2. The Materialisation of the 'Triumph Narrative'

Before commencing on this specific section I will include what Rioufol (1999a: 2) considers the main features of the new public representations of South Africa, in order to provide a nice introduction, or, if you will, a foundation, for this particular section – as the Robben Island Museum closely follows the act of nation building in South Africa. Firstly, she argues that there is a 'unifying and positive' element, which is the emphasis and highlighting of 'past commonalities' and 'positive memories' – inclusive aspects. Then she moves on to the next feature being 'inclusive': an integration of formerly marginalized stories, yet the formerly dominant ones are not forgotten and are still the main players. Thirdly, she brings out the term 'conciliatory', an element that downplays memory and 'reality of past divisions and conflicts as well as their legacy in the present' – a reconciliation aspect. Moreover, there is the 'consensual' factor, which is all about 'seeking broad acceptance' – trying to avoid the representation of past that could revive old animosities and frustrations. And, last but not least, the 'forward-looking' aspect, which involves more of a focus on the present portraying it as a moment of unity, democracy, reconciliation and so forth, in other words, reading the past in terms of the present, which allows for the sidelining of the divisive times of the past (Ibid: 2). Throughout the following sections all these features will be apparent in the representation of the island's past.

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3.2.1. *The Compromise*

The 'compromise' can be said to have occurred in the late 1993 and early 1994 emerging from the context of negotiation and reconciliation. In the words of Rioufol (1999b: 146), 'the NP government acknowledged the political significance of the island for the resistance movement and the majority of the population as well as the legitimacy and popularity of a plan aiming at preserving the memory of Robben Island as apartheid's main political prison'. The decision was made that a museum should be established, and all other plans for a holiday resort, casino and so forth were discarded. The resistance movement, on the other hand, 'came to accept that the highly partisan symbolism of Robben Island [would have to] be curtailed by developing environmental aspects of the island and by including in its public representation many diverse histories and communities'. However, the liberation movement insisted on the

island's main focus lie on apartheid's prison. The compromise can be seen as the intersection where the shift of the island's symbolism occurred: the shift from the narrative of the freedom struggle (which was mainly negative although had a more positive counter-narrative) to that of a more conciliatory narrative of the past. Thus, when the new government came into power they could go ahead with the planning of the Robben Island Museum founded on the compromise between the 'two sides'.

As a result of this compromise coupled with one of the liberation movements narratives – the more positive one – the Robben Island Museum became a site where the 'victory of the human spirit over adversity' was celebrated, as well as the resourcefulness of the political prisoners, and of course, the narrative highlighting the prison as a 'university'. The image of the island was moulded in an 'inclusive and positive' fashion, providing a more universal message – this has been coined the 'triumph narrative' by various academics. In an article in *PACE* (No author 1992c) Eddie Daniels – a former political prisoner – was interviewed, and he talked about the atrocities committed in the prison, the constant beatings and degradation they had to suffer, yet he harbours 'no bitterness towards his captors'. Robben Island, he says, 'is to me a symbol of greatness – of the greatness of the human spirit – that people could rise above all that hatred and cruelty. It must be kept as a place for people to enjoy in tranquillity. The ghosts of all those noble spirits must not be disturbed' (Ibid: 44). Hence, already in 1992 the more universal image of the island was being shaped in the press.

Rioufol (1999b: 148) argues that this shift in the symbolism of Robben Island is of a twofold character, and that the shift emerged out of the compromise discussed above, and subsequently from representations thereafter promoted by a some of the famous former political prisoners – representations which ran alongside the reconciliation strategy embarked on before and after the first democratic elections. Firstly there is a change in the way the prison is portrayed in former political prisoners' narratives, the focus turning from the harsh conditions of the prison, and the cruelty of apartheid, to one of resourcefulness, rather highlighting individual and collective achievements while incarcerated. Furthermore, the experiences of the prisoners are reshaped in such a manner as to be included in a larger universal fashion, as touched upon in the paragraph above.

Buntman notes – while conducting her interviews for her research about the island in the years between 1994 and 1995 – that the former political prisoners' narratives 'are often

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insistent about the positive things they were able to achieve in prison, for themselves, their organisations and their struggles' (Buntman 1996b: 143). Rioufol argues that the reason for this is that the harshest period of the imprisonment (1960s to the early 1970s) seems now a long time past: 'a certain soothing of painful memories has become easier, such memories being possibly de-emphasised relatively to more positive experiences which have occurred later' (Rioufol 1999b: 149; see also Buntman 1996b: 181). Deacon (1996: 6) suggests that the political transformation has been overly personalised in the Robben Island story, and in the emphasis on Mandela. And through the following quote one can possibly argue that the reason for former political prisoners' narratives – after the first democratic elections – being more concerned (consciously or unconsciously) with the resourcefulness of the individual and the collective while incarcerated can be a consequence of the 'compromise' and the reconciliation strategy embarked on during the political transition. Because 'if you say you are bitter about the past, you are judged (against Mandela, who was not bitter) to have personally failed. If your life was destroyed by the horrors you have experienced under apartheid, you have personally failed. The nation is cured, healed, whole: you just don't fit in' (Ibid). Thus, the former political prisoners could be said to recall their past experiences within the broader context of the nation, as previously discussed under the sub-sections of both nation building and memory in the Literature Review.

Consequently, through the combination of 'an emphasis on positive experiences with one on the symbolic and universal dimension of these experiences makes it possible to downplay the divisive character of the representation of the past, hence fostering reconciliation' (Rioufol 1999b: 149).

Now I will move on to what can be seen to be two of the most noteworthy factors in the shaping of the contemporary representation of the Robben Island history: the Mayibuye Centre and, of course, the former political prisoners of the island.

3.2.2. *The Mayibuye Centre*

The Mayibuye Centre for history and culture in South Africa was set up in 1991 at the University of the Western Cape, and its main concerns are that of all aspects of apartheid, the freedom struggle, as well as the culture and social life in South Africa (Rioufol 1999b: 150). The centre encompasses projects such as an oral history project, a resource centre,

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exhibitions, conferences, workshops, lectures, symposiums and so forth (Odendaal 1994). The future of Robben Island has figured chiefly in the centre's research projects. Mayibuye centre has, for instance, published quite a few books concerning the island – books written by academics, as well as former political prisoners that were incarcerated on the island (Babenia 1995; Daniels 1998; Kathrada 1996, 2000; Naidoo 1991), but also works focused on the wider history of the island (Deacon 1996; Deacon 1997; Hutton 1994). And as previously mentioned the centre worked in collaboration with the South African Museum to set up the exhibition 'Esiqithini' dealing with Robben Island.

The 'Esiqithini' exhibition was redisplayed in 1996, changed its name to 'The Robben Island Gateway Project' and was set up at the Waterfront in Cape Town. However, Rioufol argues that the exhibition this time around was reworked in 'a more modest fashion' (1999b: 150), and although the Mayibuye centre aided in raising the public's interest for the island it has also helped in the shaping of the image of Robben Island in a particular manner. She states that in the exhibition at the Waterfront (more so than in the one set up at the South African Museum) the spotlight was on the prisoners' resistance and resourcefulness. In other words the exhibition concerned itself with 'how [the] prisoners (...) struggled for freedom, attempted to escape, how they kept themselves going by organising sports activities, how they received messages of sympathy and admiration from abroad and maintained the nation' (Minkley *et al.* 1996: 27). This modified display can be said to have been a forerunner for the way the Robben Island Museum's narrative is one of universal, positive, and inclusive manner– a representation of 'the victory of the human spirit over adversity'. However, Davison disagrees and states that the exhibition, both in 1993 and 1996, was a well-balanced display of all the pasts of the island. She writes that 'the hardship of prison life was juxtaposed with the commitment of comrades to continuing the struggle behind bars', and 'no attempt was made to present a seamless version of the Robben Island story' (1998: 155).

Rioufol states that the Mayibuye Centre has played a key role in the shaping of 'the public representation of Robben Island along specific lines by establishing a strong connection between Robben Island and the democratisation process' (1999b: 150). Firstly, she argues that the island itself and the former political prisoners are depicted as symbols of the 'new' South Africa: the forgiving and unified South Africa. Secondly, democracy is seen as the only way within which the island's many pasts can be revived (Ibid). And still today the Centre plays a

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significant role in the shaping of the public representation of the island: the Mayibuye Centre and the Robben Island Museum work closely together (see Mayibuye 2001).

3.2.3. *The Former Political Prisoners' Narratives*

The former political prisoners of the maximum-security prison on Robben Island have played a greater role than the Mayibuye Centre at the shaping of the contemporary image of the island (see Deacon 1998: 163) – but have as a result influenced the Mayibuye Centre in turn. Many have expressed 'strong views on the meanings they attach to their prison experience and the symbolism that should dominate its commemoration' (Rioufol 1999b: 151). In addition, some of the main figures that were part of the negotiation process in South Africa were former political prisoners from the maximum-security prison on the island, thus the significance of the island could not easily be brushed under the carpet. Mandela was in particular a key element in Robben Island becoming such a prominent site – the shaping of the Mandela story and myth played a key role in the future of the island (see Solani 2000a). Mandela became a symbol of the 'changeover and renewal of the country' (Rioufol 1999b: 143 – 144), and the history of the struggle took on a biographic story in the press (both national and international alike) – it also helped that he won the Nobel Peace Prize. One can argue that the debates surrounding the island took on a largely political character 'and became a stake in public discourse at the national level' (Rioufol 1999b: 145). In fact, in an article in *Argus* in 1992 a journalist wrote about the island that because 'Mr Nelson Mandela, president of the ANC, was for years imprisoned on the island (…) lends a political dimension to any change in the status of the island and there are fears that *the island can become a political hot potato*' (No author 1992b, my emphasis). Thus, the debate 'was part of a contest over the public memory of the island which because of its symbolic importance had important consequences for national identity' (Deacon 1998: 165).

Kathrada is another 'Robben Islander' whose proposals for the use of the island have been given a lot of consideration. He was the personal advisor to Mandela when Mandela became president. Kathrada also became the chairperson of the 'Future of Robben Island Committee', as well as on a committee representing the ex-political prisoners[8]. In addition, he came to head the 'Robben Island Museum Council'. Thus, he was a significant figure in the shaping of

[8] This committee was set up in order to investigate what the ex-Robben Islanders were struggling with and to represent their interests (Rioufol 1999b: 153).

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the 'finished product' of the Robben Island Museum. The quote that I included in the introduction to this chapter, about the 'triumph of human spirit over adversity', is one of Kathrada's most cited words. Kathrada has also published a book called 'Letters from Robben Island: a selection of Ahmed Kathrada's prison correspondence 1964-1989' (2000), the book can be said to echo his hopes for the Robben Island Museum. It is a book filled with stories about humour and humanity, and although there are stories about suffering the triumph narrative features prominently. Both Kathrada and Mandela have easy access to public channels of discourse (Rioufol 1999b: 151).

The former political prisoners' narratives flourished across a spectrum of media in the beginning of the 1990s; narratives that were dominated by the representation of the cruelty of apartheid, as well as the atrocities committed on the island by the prison authorities. The former political prisoners finally had a chance to publish writings on their own personal experiences on the island (see for instance Alexander 1994; Mbeki 1991; Naidoo 1991). Thami Mkhwanazi published a series of articles in the 'Weekly Mail' in February 1990. All this was published on the reliance of memory. However, there was a shift here as well, a shift towards describing their experiences on the island in a more universal and positive manner – in other words, the former political prisoners' narratives can be said to have been influenced by significant cultural brokers such as Kathrada and Mandela (see Deacon 1998: 163). It becomes easier to recall their experiences in a more positive light when the hardships seem such a long time ago, as well as noting that the former political prisoners might have also found it easier to reorganise ones recollections as part of a life story aligned with the conditions of the present:

> Individual and collective memories of ex-Robben Islanders are reshaped under the influence of the new positive representation promoted from above (Rioufol 1999b: 153).

As a result the former political prisoners' narratives are neatly packaged into a more consistent and meaningful narrative structure, and becomes more comprehensible and significant. The stories of the former political prisoners thus develop into stories about the resourcefulness of the individual or the collective; stories about unity; stories about moral strength. In other words, the recollections of the prison experience have been remoulded to fit the 'triumph narrative' prevailing to this day at the Robben Island Museum. And, as already

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discussed in the literature review under the heading 'The Politics of Memory', individual memories can be moulded so as to fit an overarching national narrative. In the words of Rioufol, in the case of the former political prisoners, 'the rhetorical use of universal and positive phrases, themes and symbols, as well as the underlying subtexts of reconciliation, non-racialism and democratisation, recast individual memories in a positive and inclusive fashion' (1999b: 153; see also Low 1995).

3.2.4. Robben Island a World Heritage Site

> Robben Island's official message is closely aligned not only with the nation-building project, but with global heritage tourism's moral aesthetic. As a World Heritage Site which represents a universal message of the victory of good over evil, it is a place where visitors can seek personal growth (Deacon 2000).

Deacon writes that tourism today is generally linked with personal development. And this notion of 'pilgrimage' fits well into Robben Island being a world heritage site, *and* a symbol for the triumph of the human spirit over evil – the universalist message (Deacon 2000: 2). Robben Island was created a world heritage site – natural and cultural – in December 1999. The basis for Robben Island becoming a world heritage site was that 'Robben Island and its prison buildings symbolise the triumph of the human spirit, of freedom and of democracy over oppression' (Ibid: 3). And, as according to Deacon, the committee brought up Mandela[9] over and over again (Ibid: 3). Hence one could argue that one of the main reasons for Robben Island being given the heritage site status was Mandela, and because of the importance the prison had for the freedom struggle – 'in order [therefore] to retain its World Heritage Site status, Robben Island is obliged to maintain the symbolic interpretation under which it was inscribed' (Ibid: 3). Hence, in the words of Kavanagh (1991: 4), a 'museum is not a neutral space'.

Coombes (2003a: 77) argues that the guided tour on Robben Island has blatantly marginalizing other stories in the favour of the Mandela and the ANC story, she mentions

[9] Mandela is a central figure in the whole of the Robben Island project, he is the activist, the leader and icon, and a superior representation for the government policy of reconciliation – the Mandela myth hangs heavy over the island. The way people have constructed Mandela as this saviour and so forth 'personifies the journey to a new democracy' (Deacon 2000: 1). This becomes pretty obvious on the guided tour on Robben Island: Mandela's cell has become the main attraction.

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Robert Sobukwe's house that was included on the tour not so long ago as a result of criticism. She also includes in her argument her observation that the cells in Block B have been painted, and that corridors have suddenly acquired decorative murals, and beds with mattresses have been set up in some of the cells (see also Davison 1998: 157) – just to mention a few examples of how the Robben Island Prison has been packaged for tourist consumption. And, as according to Coombes and my own personal observations, in the guide's narrative there is very little of the dehumanising aspects of the prison experience. Mandela is brought up time and time again. Such exclusion of many other significant people of the freedom struggle will irritate, at least, a local audience – and, one can also argue, stimulate the ignorance of many international visitors (Ibid: 74).

In the report of UNESCO's justifications for Robben Island being crowned a World Heritage Site it states that:

> Robben Island has come to *represent an outstanding example of a symbol representing the physical embodiment of the triumph of the human spirit over enormous adversity* and hardship. The role of Robben Island in the transformation of an oppressed society has *come to symbolize the rebirth of democracy in South Africa*, a country which has come to be viewed as a unique example of transformation in a world troubled by political uncertainty (UNESCO 1998: 101).

Hence, on of the reasons for Robben Island being endowed the status of a World Heritage Site is of a moral and universalist manner. Furthermore, the paper states that 'this property be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of *criteria iii and vi*:

Criterion iii The buildings of Robben Island bear eloquent testimony to its sombre history.

Criterion vi Robben Island and its prison buildings symbolize the triumph of the human spirit, of freedom, and of democracy over oppression' (Ibid.).

Thus, Robben Island's message is coupled with the nation-building project, as well as the global heritage tourism's moral aesthetic (Deacon 2000: 2), and in order to keep with the World Heritage Site criteria it needs to represent a universal and moral message.

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3.2.5. *The Robben Island Museum: a microcosm of South Africa?*

As can be seen from all of the sections above, Robben Island became a key symbolic site for the transitory society of South Africa. Over the period of transition to democracy there has been an elemental shift in the representation of the island, it was no longer merely a depot of all that was believed negative in society: 'communism and terrorism' on the one hand, or 'apartheid oppression' on the other (Deacon 1998: 178). It began to accommodate what is at the heart of the 'new' South Africa – Robben Island became 're-presented as a focus for remembering apartheid and a spear-head for national renewal' (Ibid). It is now defined as a 'cultural and conservation showcase for South Africa's democracy' (Rioufol 1999a: 4; 1999b: 155).

The Robben Island Museum can be argued to have become a microcosm of South Africa, and this new image is supposed to embody the 'new' South Africa. Rioufol breaks it into two strands. First of all, the museum should demonstrate that *all* South Africans have some sort of link to the island because of its diverse history – as its history is comprised of a broader Southern African past, which includes numerous communities. Thus the Robben Island Museum can be argued to follow in the footsteps of the concept of the 'rainbow nation', attempting to include all its pasts and all its communities – an attempt to celebrate the whole of South Africa, with its entire people and all its pasts. Furthermore, the island also stands for the victory of the liberation movement, and as a result of the compromise previously discussed, the more universal symbol of the 'victory of the human spirit over adversity'. Rioufol therefore sees the island as a 'microcosm of the dramatic shift from apartheid to the post-apartheid era', and that the island becomes an important symbol of South Africa in miniature (1999b: 155; see also Deacon 1998: 164). It is therefore not an easy task to commemorate the pasts of Robben Island, as it is 'highly significant since the island's symbolism decisively shapes the representation of the broader South African past and the narrative of national identity' (Rioufol 1999b: 155).

'The collective representation of the past is the phenomenon whereby those past happenings that are deemed significant by society as a whole or by certain groups are collectively retrieved, recorded and re-presented' (Rioufol 1999a: 1). In the 'new' South Africa, the version of the past has advanced considerably and been redesigned in correspondence with the

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new project of a democratic and reconciled nation, thus the government's reconciliation policy plays a great role in the representation of significant sites such as Robben Island. According to Rioufol, numerous features are a part of this conspicuous redesigning. Firstly, 'any representation of the past partly evolves under the influence of the present: since the past that is remembered and commemorated is the past that has been socially constructed and represented, the representation of the past in turn evolves to preserve the meaningfulness and significance of the past in the present context and to match the contemporary values of the community'. Furthermore, 'there is a close interplay between the representation of the past and that of the national community: since the national representation of the past consists of the portrayal of the nation as a community with a distinctive identity and 'fate' moving through history, it evolves over time in congruence with the evolution of the vision of the nation and in order to preserve the cohesion of the group' (Ibid).

The Robben Island Museum 'has become a symbol of the future of the new South Africa rather than its past' (Deacon 1998: 164). Robben Island can be said to have made a shift from the remembrance and commemoration of the past towards the celebration of the present. As a result voices are silenced: stories are left untold. Rioufol argues that this particular representation of the past 'is not a wilful silencing of specific aspects of the past as much as the result of both self-conscious and unself-conscious [sic.] processes' (Rioufol 1999a: 4). During a guided tour at the Robben Island Museum the focus seems to be on solidarity and discipline, there is a lot of praising of moral strength – moments of weakness is being sidelined. There is a clear concentration on informal political action and leadership, which results in the silencing of rejection and for instance the challenge by the Black Consciousness movement or New Unity Movement prisoners (Ibid: 6; Buntman 1996a: 129). There is also a strong focus on the Robben Island Prison as a university, but there is no mention of the use of education as enrolment and propaganda for political motives (see Buntman 1996b).

The museum tells the story of the past in such a way so as not to provoke any former upholders of the apartheid regime – in the prison the guides take the edge off apartheid. The apartheid context of the prison is largely absent from commemoration (a brief account on the video screened on the ferry seems to be the only historical background). This results in a representation of how all South Africans were victims of the apartheid – even the wardens. Rioufol writes that 'in order to fit the new political situation and to foster cohesion, the new representation of the past seeks to smooth memories of the apartheid past while rejecting the

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apartheid period and celebrating the present of the 'new' South Africa' (Rioufol 1999a: 4). Furthermore, she states that this can be seen in two main practices at Robben Island, arguing that 'painful and divisive aspects are 'tamed'', and that 'the representation of the past is displaced from the actual remembrance of the past to the celebration of the presence' (Ibid.). During the tour of the island apartheid becomes just a faceless mass (Ibid: 6). In addition to this, the Robben Island Museum has also been forced to represent other aspects of the history of the island such as World War Two, the leper colony, flora and fauna – something that once again assists in the de-emphasising of the apartheid past (Ibid.)

The issue of unearthing satisfactory structures of commemoration for the historical atrocities of apartheid presents diverse problems that has to be taken into account, one has to be aware of what kind of 'burden is represented by using the site [the Robben Island Museum] as a means of locating and constructing 'national memory' (Coombes 2003a: 93). Any meeting point between public history and private experience and its intersection with the construction of nationhood is a complicated topography to negotiate (Ibid: 95). In the words of Deacon, 'through the memories of high-profile island prisoners the history of Robben Island has become a marker of the broader transformation of South Africa. (…) The Robben Island story has thus become an important element in the construction of a new national identity around the observance of 'human rights'' (1998: 178).

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3.3. The Dominant Narrative of the Robben Island Museum

As one can see from the discussions embarked on in the previous sections, there are many elements at play in creating a museum such as the Robben Island Museum: and because of all these diverse and shifting aspects the result can easily be seen as 'the collapse of more nuanced and dialectical accounts of historical experience' (Coombes 2003a: 115). The Robben Island Museum has positioned itself as a museum that represents, and celebrates, the nation, this despite the fact that Andre Odendaal warned against the offering of 'superficial and romantic new master narratives about the struggle and the creation of a rainbow nation' (*cited in* Butler 2002: 159).

The Robben Island Museum has come to stand for the 'triumph of the human spirit over adversity' – a universalist message enveloped the museum. In the words of Myra Shankley (2001: 362), 'Robben Island has become a world-wide icon of the universality of human rights, of hope, peace and reconciliation.' What's more, the island has become a symbol of the struggle for democracy, and the subsequent victory:

Re-casting Robben Island in order to narrate triumph instead of tragedy, can be seen as crucial to the larger rhetorical project of democratizing South Africa. However, Neville Alexander – a former political prisoner at Robben Island – writes that the best way to deal with aspects of the past and present on a site such as Robben Island is to learn how to remember without 'constantly rekindling the divisive passions of the past' (Alexander 2002: 117). He concludes by stating that 'such an approach is the only one which would allow us to look down into the darkness of the well of atrocities of the past and to speculate on their causes at the same time as we haul up the waters of hope for a future of dignity and equality' (Ibid: 117 – 118).

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4. An Investigation of the 'Cell Stories' Exhibition

> In terms of recording and collecting, memories enter the museum as a *product*, as a source of information, something which cannot be stored, interpreted, returned to and employed (Kavanagh 2000: 3).

4.1. Introduction

> 'The past holds many truths' (Lubar 1997: 24).

In the process of constructing a sense of self, people tell stories about what they have done in their lives. Robben Island Museum has recorded many such ex-political prisoners' stories in biographical form, and as previously mentioned these interviews are stored in the Mayibuye Archive at the University of Western Cape. These life histories have then been used to construct an exhibition known as 'Cell Stories' (Solani 2000b). The use of personal narratives as a form of remembrance is extremely important in the Robben Island museum; one could almost argue that it is the foundation of what the museum is built.

As this paper has illustrated in the previous chapter there are numerous books, articles and papers regarding the Robben Island Museum and the pervasive 'triumph narrative'; there exists endless discussions referring to the silencing of other stories, other pasts of the island, and how the island ties into the nation building of the 'new' South Africa. However this dissertation will undertake a more specific study of the 'Cell Stories' exhibition: an attempt not to undermine, but to critically engage in the set up of the exhibition, the selection and so forth. I find that the chapter prior to this one allows for a deeper understanding of the contested site at which the 'Cell Stories' exhibition is located. And one has to be aware that there are always voices being silenced within the museum narrative, however, we have to look at it in a critical manner. This chapter will study the role of the 'Cell Stories' exhibition in representing ex-prisoner narratives: un-packing the exhibition so as to see whether the 'triumph narrative' is persistent.

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The exhibition is supposed to stand in opposition to the grand narrative of the Robben Island Museum, as Mavis Smallberg from the museum states: 'the 'Cell Stories' exhibition was [set up in order] to showcase the stories of the foot soldiers of the struggle – a kind of history-from-below concept that would put their contribution towards democracy on par with those of the 'big names' who were incarcerated in the B-section of the prison. The 'Cell Stories' are [recollections and donations of] those (...) prisoners who were kept in the General Sections i.e. A, C, D, E, F and G.' (Smallberg 2005). As mentioned in the introduction the interviews used in the exhibition was collected by Ashwell Adriaan and Noel Solani.

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4.2. Reading the Objects of the 'Cell Stories' exhibition

> Visuality is about a direct route to one of the senses; its impact can be visceral, especially when it creates a sense of identification (Ibid: 7).

I will include here the analysis of the objects, however I decided against including a thorough analysis of the photographs as I did not really see it as significant in this particular dissertation. Bank and Hayes (2001: 6) raise the point about the implication of the visual, as opposed to the written word: they argue that the visual mediates to the viewers in a different way than the written and spoken word because of the 'direct sensory impact'. As already debated in the literature review under the sub-section concerning material studies I explored the way in which objects carry meanings, and came to take the position that embody numerous meanings and can in some instances 'speak' for themselves. I will here therefore look into what kind of objects are displayed and analyse the possible reasons for their selection.

If an object can be as complex in relation to meaning as demonstrated under the sub-section concerning material studies in the literature review, exhibitions are even more complex. In the context of a collection of objects 'meaning lies in the relationships between the objects and other elements: it is combinational and relational' (Hooper-Greenhill 2002: 3). Collections embody ideas and values, but these are not always as easy to find, and other times too obvious (Ibid.). And it is through displays that museums produce and communicate knowledge. Hooper-Greenhill writes that 'running alongside dominant meanings alternative meanings are always found' (Ibid: 50), this is something that fits well into the 'Cell Stories' exhibition as it was supposed to demonstrate the alternative histories to the dominant ones at the Robben island Museum. However, 'as far as ideas are concerned, once an idea becomes dominant it is sometimes extremely difficult to recover old ones or to propose alternative ideas' (Ibid.). However, earlier meanings do not completely disappear as long as the object is still there – some earlier meanings might even be marked on the object – marks and scratches. Hooper-Greenhill therefore argues that earlier meanings can for the most part be dug up and made visible again:

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> Small remaining traces of earlier value may be nurtured until more fully-fledged meaning is researched and re-established, and new (or old) set of ideas and discourses becomes possible (again). Older meanings reinvigorated cannot take exactly the same form as they did previously as new circumstances are in play and it is never possible to reconstruct the past entirely. Historical imagination is always necessary in constructing an image of the past. (Hooper-Greenhill 2002: 50).

I have divided this section into four smaller sub-sections so as to be able to methodically look into each of the meanings that the objects seem to signify, although they are all very much linked I found that this was the best way in order to provide a more comprehensible analysis. Following that I tie them all together in a smaller discussion headed 'Prison life on Display'.

4.2.1. *The University of Robben Island*

The former political prisoners have been central actors in constructing an educative function for the island – it has for a long time been hailed as the 'university of the struggle' seeing that many of the ex-political prisoners studied and educated themselves and others in politics and other academic themes while imprisoned (Deacon 1998: 171). The prison itself is represented as an institution where 'prison cells were turned into classes of learning', thus making the prison a University (Solani 2000b). Coombes argues that one of the most *constant* features of the guided narratives of Robben Island over the years has been the stress on the prison as a 'university' (2003a: 81). This forms the foundation of any justification of how the prisoners upheld morale and would be fit to lead a country at their release: '*for different reasons, it was crucial that certain prisoners on Robben Island receive political status, and here too differentiating themselves from the common criminal was partly achieved by the emphasis, often repeated in narratives of island life, on the 'university' and the drive for self-improvement through education*' (Ibid: 82, my emphasis). And as many of the former political prisoners played a great part in the changeover in South Africa, stressing the university-narrative also emphasises their great qualities as leaders. However, according to Buntman (1996b) what has been silenced in the narrative of the Robben Island Museum is how education was used as a means of enrolment into different political parties as well as propaganda. I will now look into how the objects displayed in the 'Cell Stories' exhibition aids in furthering this specific narrative.

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The emphasis on Robben Island as a university stresses the moral strength and discipline of the prisoners, as well as leadership. To use one of Rioufol's features of the new South African nation, this narrative can be filed under the 'unifying and positive' aspect (Rioufol 1999: 2, see also the introduction to 'The Materialisation of the 'Triumph Narrative'' in this dissertation). 'Unifying' in the way that it downplays memories of past divisions, 'positive' as it highlights past commonalties. It can also be seen as 'conciliatory' because it de-emphasises other more negative aspects of prison life.

Robben Island maximum-security prison as a university is illustrated by Neville Mothlabakwe who in his locker has displayed correspondence mail from UNISA (the University of South Africa). It is a simple display; all that one can see is an envelope with the name of UNISA (see fig. 1). However, it demonstrates the importance of education, and how former political prisoners could become educated while incarcerated – there is nothing harsh or uncomfortable about this. Furthermore, Mngqibisa's locker contains a writing book made out of cement-bag paper – an object that demonstrates both the inventiveness that existed in the prison, as well as the hunger for learning. Mngqibisa states that 'we started education on the island with cement bag paper' (see fig 2).

What's more, Antonio du Preez has donated a discussion document headed 'the interim government and the constituent assembly' (see fig. 3). This particular document illustrates the political dimension of the 'University of Robben Island', however it is not a very 'radical' document. It follows closely in the footsteps of the nation building process of the 'new' South Africa: it talks about the negotiation process, and the connotation is of 'reconciliation'.

There is also the example as to how Robben Island not only acted as a university in the sense of thought, but also as a school of skilled labours. There is the photograph of the monument constructed by Philimon Tefu, and in the extract of the interview Tefu talks about how the 'building and extracting stones from nature was done by [them] and [that they] became very good at it because [they] were always under a qualified warder' (see fig. 4). Then he goes on to say that:

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Fig. 1: This is the UNISA correspondence displayed in Neville Mothlabakwe's locker. It is a simple display, however it falls nicely under the 'triumph narrative' that dominates Robben Island Museum. The correspondence illustrates two key aspects. First it symbolises Robben Island as a university, thus endowing the 'graduates of Robben Island' with both leadership skills and an intellectual capacity: 'fit to rule the country'. Furthermore, it emphasises the way in which the former political prisoners would not let anything break them; continuing their education on the island despite the harsh conditions of prison life. In other words, this sends the universalist message of 'the triumph of the human spirit over adversity'.



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Fig. 2: Sindile Mngqibisa's locker holds a notebook made out of cement bag paper. Once again this illustrates the university-narrative of the representation of Robben Island maximum-security prison (see caption of Fig. 1). What's more, it also represents the resourcefulness and inventiveness of the former political prisoners. The extract of Mngqibisa's interviews states that 'So if you were teaching me in the cells, I would write down the sentences on cement bag paper and carry it with me. The next day we would sit together, crushing quarry stones. I would put my brown paper bag in front of you and you would teach me. If the warders came near you would hide the paper under the stones (…) So the foundation of education of [sic.] Robben Island was brown paper cement bags (…). That became the university of Robben Island.'

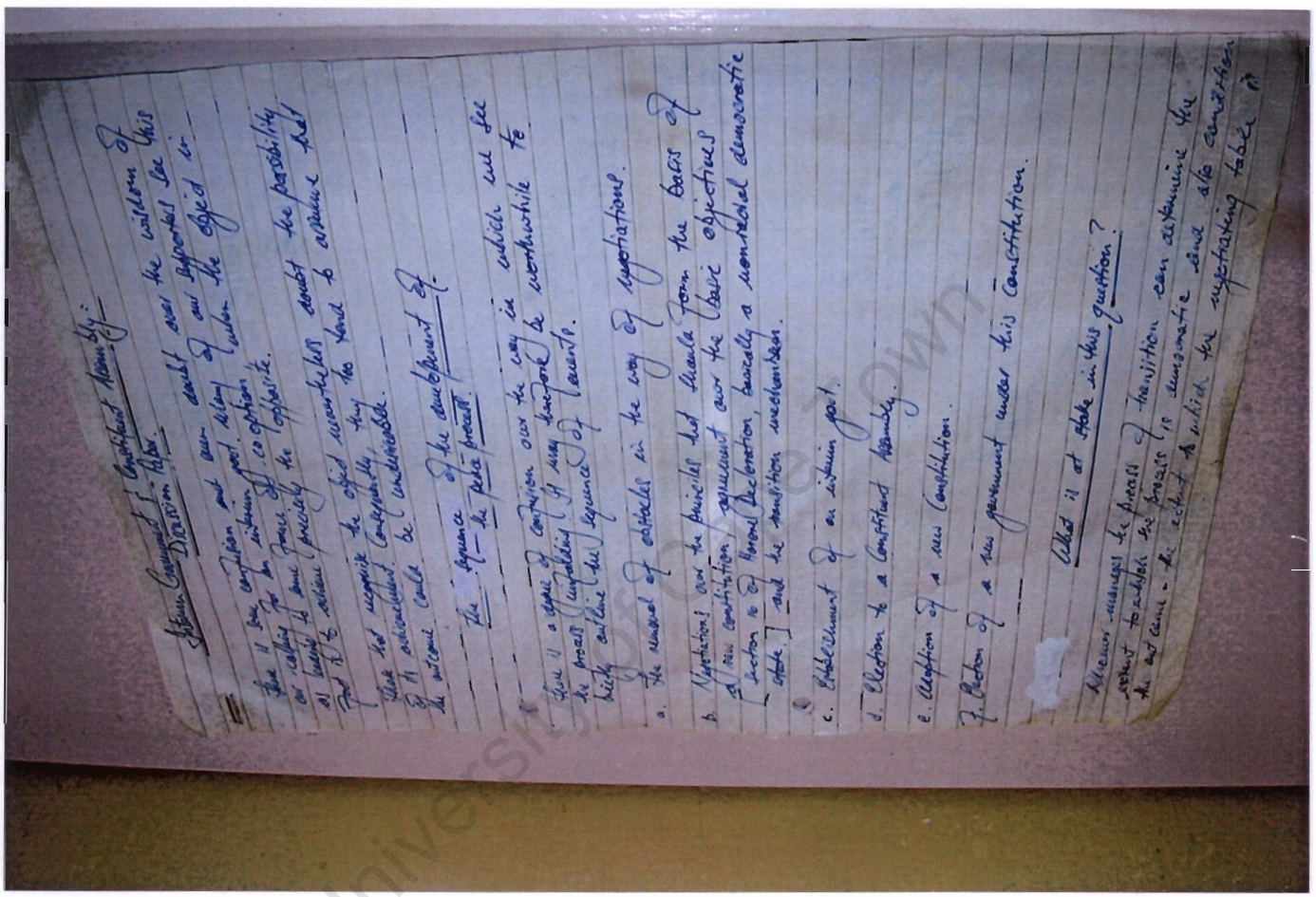


Fig. 3: Antonio du Preez's discussion document illustrates the narrative of Robben Island as a university; more specifically it demonstrates the political aspect of education. However, this particular document is of a very conciliatory manner in the way that it would not upset any visitors to the 'Cell Stories' exhibition. The discussion document is called 'Interim government and constituent assembly: discussion paper', and it does not deal with any radical ideas. It fits well into the reconciliation element of South Africa's nation building, the paper states that 'the Sequence of the Development of the Peace Process: there is a degree of confusion over the way in which we see the process unfolding. It may therefore be worthwhile to briefly outline the sequence of events:

a. The removal of obstacles in the way of negotiations.
b. *Negotiations* over the principles that should form the basics of a new constitution, agreement over the basic objectives (section 16 of Harare declaration, *basically a non-radical democratic state*) and the transition mechanism.
c. Establishment of an interim govt.
d. Election to a constituted assembly.
e. Adoption of a new constitution.
f. Election of a new government under this constitution' (my emphasis).

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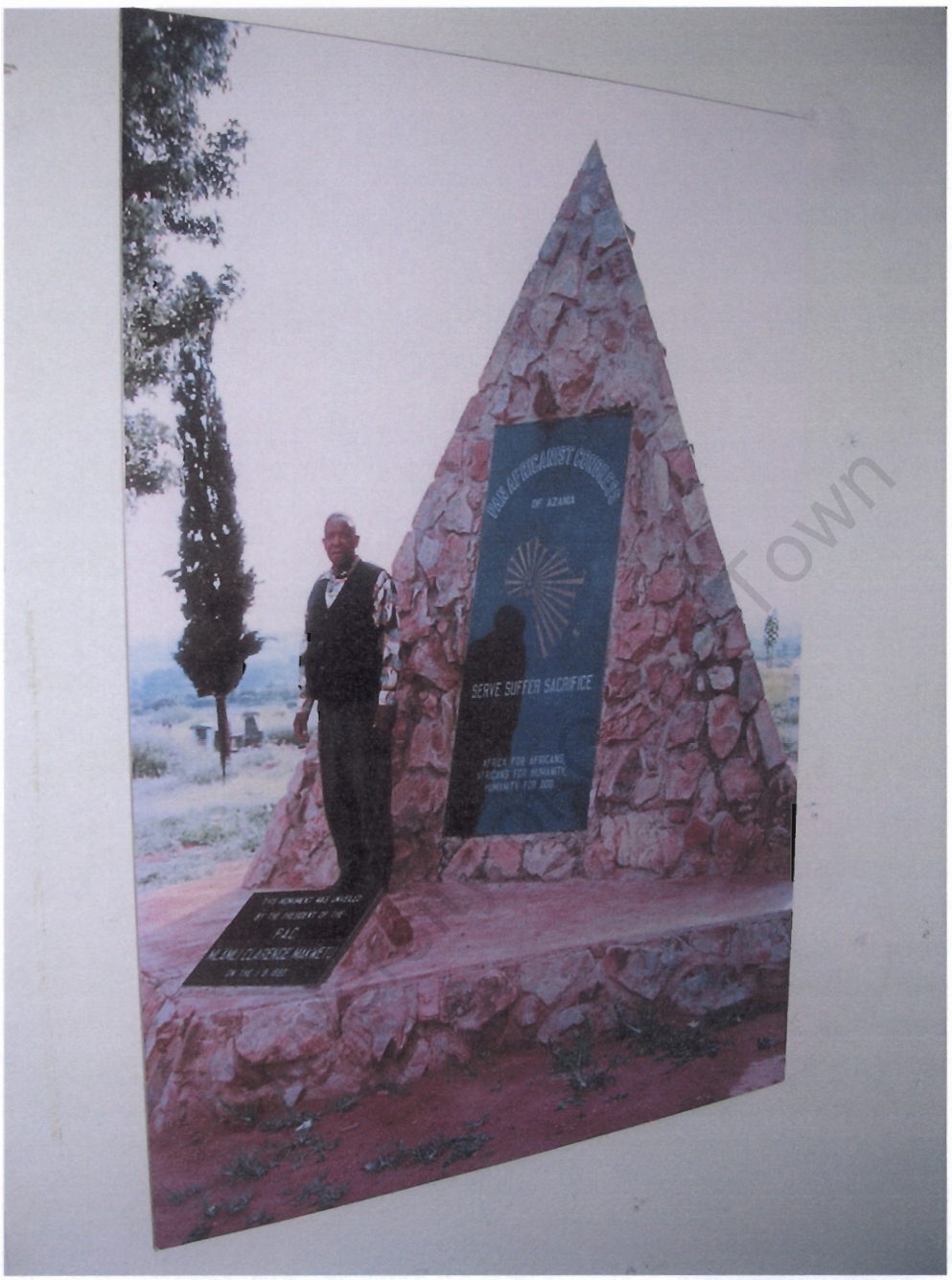


Fig. 4: This photograph is included in order to demonstrate the way in which Robben Island is not only represented as a university, but also as a place where skilled labour was taught. Philimon Tefu says about this monument that, 'after my release from prison, I used the very skills I learned on the island to build a PAC monument in Mamalodi in memory of the fallen'.

> In 1991, six years after my release from prison, I used the very skills I learned [sic] on the island to build the PAC monument in Mamalodi in memory of the fallen, for those who were hanged; and for the APLA cadres who died in combat[10].

In this context the prison becomes a university in more ways than one; you could come out of there with practical skills as well as theoretical. From the point of view of nation building in South Africa this can be argued to be of a 'conciliatory' tone, what's more it emphasises the constructive features of life in prison. I would also like to argue that when Tefu writes that he used his skills to build a monument of commemoration after he was released he repossessed the history of his incarceration, and used what he had been taught in order to build the something positive.

The carpenter diploma displayed in Henry Fazzie's cell is another example of Robben Island maximum-security prison as a place of learning (see fig. 5). Fazzie states in his interview that 'when the authorities abolished quarry work, they started teaching us different trades. We had always complained that chopping stones was not a trade (…) I qualified as a carpenter there on Robben Island, I got my diploma there'[11]. Then he goes on to talk about how the 'young Afrikaaner fellow' that was teaching them came to realise that the prisoners were just like everyone else, and the last paragraph of the interview extract states that 'all those youngsters co-operated once they started to understand. They were shocked when we started playing rugby because they were told that we were backward (…) Rugby brought us closer and they even put a strand of trust in us. When they got to work, they just took off their coats and slept. Then when the high officer came, we just woke them up, you see'[12]. This particular paragraph is of a very conciliatory manner, and does not bring about any harsh memories.

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4.2.2. *Resourcefulness*

The resourcefulness of the former political prisoners is displayed again and again: the belt made out of old nets and strings that were washed up on shore (see fig. 6); the pin made by Japhta Masemola (see fig. 7); the chess pieces made out of paper (see fig. 8); a picture frame

[10] See appendix: Tefu.
[11] See appendix: Fazzie.
[12] See appendix: Fazzie.



Fig. 5: This is another example of the representation of Robben Island maximum-security prison as a place of learning – Henry Fazzie's carpenter diploma. It emphasises the more positive aspects of prison life, consequently de-emphasising the negative. This is illustrated more clearly in the text on the wall next to Fazzie's locker: 'I qualified as a carpenter there on Robben Island, I got my diploma there. As Afrikaner fellow taught us carpentry and he started talking to us because he wanted to find out why we were in jail. He expected to meet cruel people on the island (…) All those youngsters [the people who were teaching them different trades] co-operated once they started to understand. They were shocked when we started playing Rugby because they were told that we were backward'. The text has a very conciliatory tone about it.



Fig. 6: This belt is displayed in Ntoyakeh Charliman's locker and the he says about the belt that '[it] was made by Mr. Mbada. It is made from fishing nets that washed up on the island. Prisoners used to collect those old nets and take the strings and make belts out of them. The leather part is made from old shoes and the copper part was made at the blacksmith'. The belt symbolises the resourcefulness of the prisoners, and once again how they would not let prison-life break them. This is a positive memory, and de-emphasises other more negative aspects of prison-life.



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Fig. 7: The late Japhta Masemola seems to have become the symbol of resourcefulness in the 'Cell Stories' exhibition. The pin on display here was donated by a warden – Christo Brand – and he said about the pin that 'I got hold of this pin in Pollsmoor prison. Mr. Jafta Masemola was sent there because he was on hunger strike (…) So, whilst he was in Pollsmoor prison, Mr. Mandela used to sit with a big blanket around him when he was studying outside in the courtyard. He told me he would like some of Jafta's pins, so I asked Jafta. Jafta gave me two pins that Mr. Mandela used to pin through the blankets to keep them together around his shoulders'. Thus, the pin embodies the signification of resourcefulness, however it also connotes a conciliatory manner because of the inclusion of the ex-warden.



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Fig. 8: Marcus Solomon's chess pieces symbolises the inventiveness of the former political prisoners. It shows that the prisoners found ways to occupy themselves, instead of letting the monotone prison-life of the sixties and early seventies get them down. They were active. Solomon says in his interview that 'in '64 we were not allowed anything. Nothing; only your facecloth, your toothbrush, your spoon and your clothes, of course. And soap. We drew the board on the floor with a little bit of soap. We drew the different chess pieces on cement bag paper and played chess with those flat pieces of paper'.

(see fig. 9). Japhta Masemola, in particular, seems to have become the symbol of resourcefulness and creativity:

> Jeff tried to make pegs and when they worked, he was celebrating there like a child. You could go to brother Jeff and ask him for four pegs and he would get busy and in no time you would get the pegs (…) Jeff had the energy and the enthusiasm to do anything (…) You take a thing like pegs for granted. But in an environment where you need it and it's not there and you are prohibited from having it, and suddenly someone was producing it and manufacturing it, it was something really fascinating. Most important, it was for free. You did not have to exchange or pay for it in any way. Jeff was doing it for satisfaction, as a challenge (see appendix)[13].

The label next to the pin displayed in the locker is written by an ex-warden – Christo Brand – this illustrates that the wardens were not just a faceless mass, they were also human (see fig. 10). However, this can be drawn into the argument that the wardens themselves were victims of apartheid – it could be seen as another reconciliation strategy. Indeed, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Mandela have stated that all South Africans are victims and survivors of apartheid, in the words of Rioufol (1999b: 102), 'even whites were victims under apartheid because they were living in a country of war (…) divided by conflict, racial hatred and fear, (…) in addition, they were victims of prejudice, ignorance, racism and lack of human and cultural exchanges'[14].

Another example of resourcefulness is Marcus Solomon's tiny pieces of cardboard with chess pieces drawn onto them:

> In '64 we were not allowed anything. Nothing; only your facecloth, your toothbrush, your spoon and your clothes, of course. And soap. We drew the [chess board] on the

[13] Mark Shinners was interviewed on behalf of the late Japhta Masemola, as Noel Solani and Ashwell Adriaan had been referred to him as the person who would be able to best relate the person that Japhta was (Interview with Mark and Mary Shinners conducted by Ashwell Adriaan (1999), University of Western Cape: Mayibuye Centre (3hrs 0min 38sec): Cd nr. 1).

[14] Desmond Tutu's opening address at the TRC echoes this: 'we are meant to be part of the process of the healing of our nation, of our people, all of us, since every South African has to some extent or other been traumatised. We are a wounded people because of the conflict of the past, no matter on which side we stood. We all stand in need of healing' (*quoted in* Rioufol 1999b: 101). And Mandela writes in his autobiography, 'a man who takes away another man's freedom is a prisoner of hatred, he is a prisoner behind bare of prejudice and narrow-mindedness (…) The oppressor and the oppressed alike are robbed of their humanity' (1994: 617).

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Fig. 9: 'This frame was made by an old man, Ngqondela, from Port Elisabeth. He was on Robben Island twice. The first time he was doing five years, the second time he was doing 15 years. The little girl in the photograph is my daughter, Senzeni'. This is what Phumlani Ngqungwana said about the wooden frame in the locker. The frame is one of many other examples of the inventiveness and creativity of the prisoners.

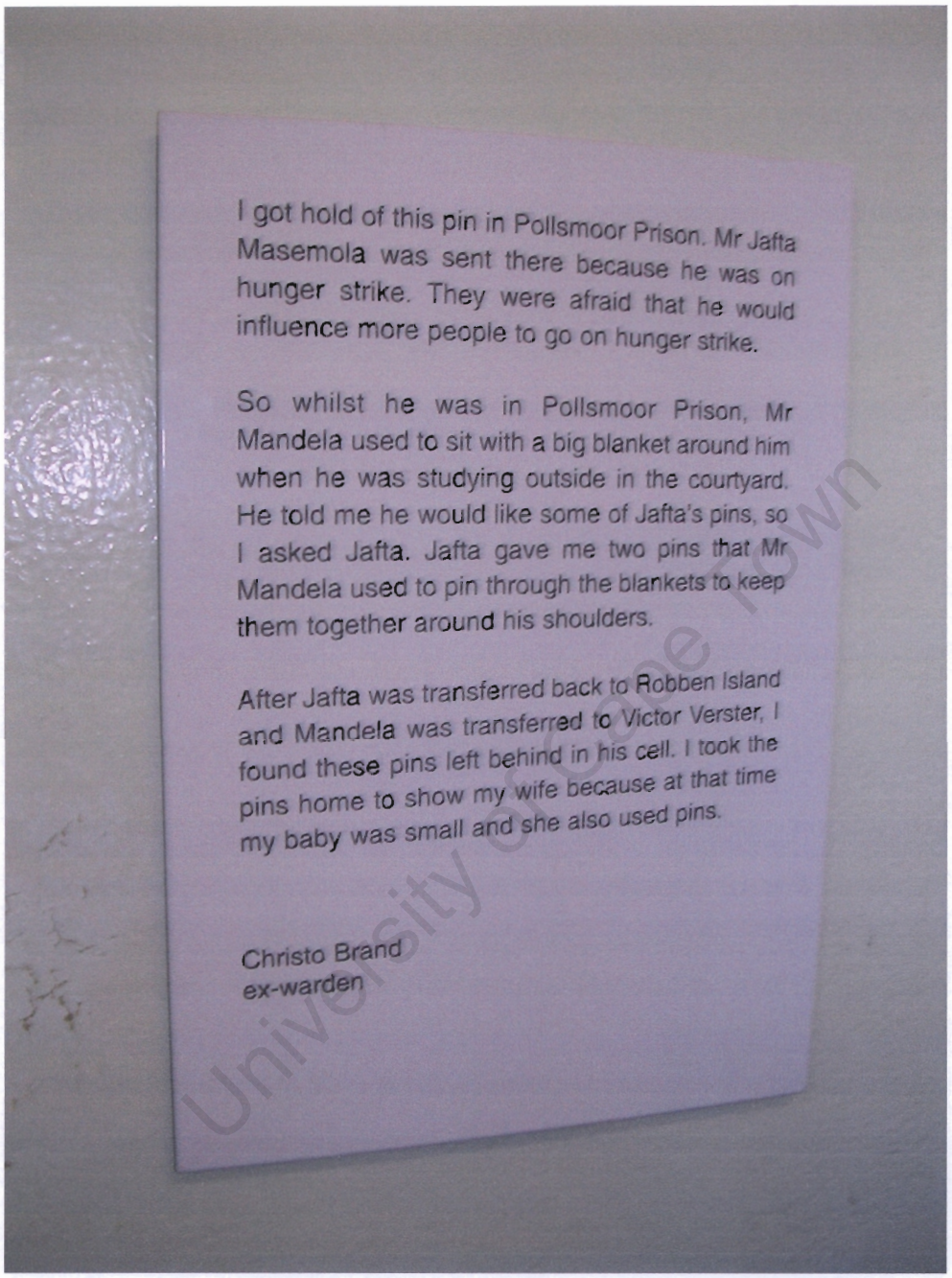


Fig. 10: Christo Brand was a former warden at Robben Island maximum-security prison, and he has been included in this exhibition in order to say something about the late Japhta Masemola. This extract of the interview is of a very 'appeasing' manner, in the way that it shows the 'face' of a warden, rendering the prison authorities more humane.

> floor with a little bit of soap. We drew the different chess pieces on cement bag paper and played chess with those flat pieces of paper[15].

However, let me return to the resourcefulness of the prisoners, the 'making and [the] objects themselves can become an insurance against forgetting and thus against the loss of personhood through reinstating (…) the capacity for fantasy. By invoking the personal, the naïve, and the fantastic despite the grim context of political suppression and resistance, these objects signal the complexity and contradictions of sustaining the self while also seeking membership in an ideal of political community' (Coombes 2003c: 9). In other words, the objects can be seen as a way of working towards a productive, and more positive, future rather than just dwelling on the destructions of the past.

One of the weird and fantastic objects on display is the 'watch holder' (see fig. 11) in John Nkosi's locker; the label next to it reads:

> The guy who made this for me saw that I had this calculator which had a watch. I used to put it next to my books to check the time while I was studying. He took the watch and looked at it, I thought the guy was just interested. The next time he brought this thing and took the watch and pushed it into the holder and said, 'Now you have something beautiful. You can stop putting your watch amongst your books'[16].

The 'watch-holder' demonstrates how the prisoners kept themselves busy by creating different things, not always just the useful things of the everyday, but in this case something that was made just for the sake of making it. This can be seen as an example of what Coombes notes in the previous paragraph, however it also illustrates the unity among the prisoners: the prisoners made things for others.

Furthermore, there is the more extensive display in Sedick Isaac's cell that truly emphasises the resourcefulness of some prisoners (see fig.12). The extract of the interview on the wall tells the story about how he tried to copy the master key to all the cells, and clearly illustrates inventiveness. However, it is important not to get lost in the story about the key because this

[15] See appendix: Solomon.
[16] See appendix: John Nkosi.

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Fig. 11: 'The guy who made this for me saw that I had this calculator which had a watch. I used to put it next to my books to check the time while I was studying. He took the watch and looked at it, I thought the guy was just interested. The next time he brought this thing and took the watch and pushed it into the holder and said, 'Now you have something beautiful. You can stop putting the watch amongst your books'. This is what it says about John Nkosi's display.



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Fig. 12: Another great example as to how the 'Cell Stories' exhibition represents the resourcefulness of the former political prisoners is Sedick Isaac's attempt to copy the master key to all the cells. However, this particular display also illustrates the hardship faced by the prisoners, and the ill treatment by the prison authorities: 'I was dragged down to the punishment section, roughly thrown into a damp cell. I was bodily lifted by two warders, punched in the face and head by others, dropped onto the floor and kicked about (…) The blood spots were carefully washed away from the cell walls'.

specific display has a more serious connotation. While telling the story about the key Isaacs starts off by saying:

> The day I found myself in prison I made the resolution to resist imprisonment, to continually endeavour to escape and to resist with all my strength the possible adverse effect of imprisonment[17].

Hence, in the story of the key Isaacs gives us clues as to how unpleasant prison life was. Furthermore he says that when they found the key 'I was dragged down to the punishment section, roughly thrown into a damp cell. I was bodily lifted by two warders, punched in the face and head by the others, dropped onto the floor and kicked about. Half dazed, I felt my clothes pulled off and chains put onto my legs and wrists (....) The doctor who came two weeks later said that he ''can find no evidence of assault'. The blood spots were carefully washed away from the cell walls'[18]. This story is an interesting one as it also undertakes the shame carried by some prisoners:

> I have always suppressed these experiences, never spoke of it before since to my great shame I was never able to take up the assault case as was my duty.

I will explore further how the former political prisoners contextualise their problems in prison; how hardship and suffering is displayed so as to be able to use the exhibit to show how they dealt with the negative aspects of prison, under the sub-heading 'Hardship and Suffering Contextualised'. Isaac's story of the key can be seen as an example of this: he was imprisoned but refused to give up.

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4.2.3. *Unity*

The use of these very personal objects in 'Cell Stories' is an interesting phenomenon, as they are placed in a locker where they *could* also have been stored when their owners were imprisoned. There is also only one object in each cell which results in the item being embodied with a connotation that can go far beyond the meaning of the object itself (see Belcher 1991: 147). For instance, a set of keys displayed in the locker of Mafi Mgobhozi can

[17] See appendix: Isaacs.
[18] See appendix: Isaacs.

come to symbolise more than just a set of keys that were used to open the *kolgos* box where the collective food was stored: it can become the emblem of unity (see fig. 13). The *kolgos* was a communal thing, the prisoners donated money and rations so that they could share it as a group. And through exploring the objects in relation to one another (see Hooper-Greenhill 2002: 3), there is another mention of the *kolgos* in another cell, yet this time around one gets a detailed description of what the *kolgos* collective entailed:

> There was a big box and when you came back from fetching your grocery orders from the hall, you would put all your things near this box...Toothpaste, soap, tobacco, everything. My responsibility was to put these things in the box, keeping the *kolgos* for the individual cells separate from that of the general section. (...) The kolgos had to provide for new prisoners who had nothing[19].

Nonetheless, in this context one is also confronted with how there were people who were not part of the unity, although it is just briefly mentioned:

> However, sometimes someone would refuse to take part in the *kolgos*. This person would drink his tea alone although we stayed together in the same cell. Such people were just stingy and selfish and I do not want to mention the names of the people who behaved like that[20].

And in this case the locker holds a suitcase-like box, which is the *kolgos* box (see fig. 14). Thus, the visitor is not only confronted with the way the prisoners were able to cope with the conditions of imprisonment, but is also allowed to witness the resourcefulness of the prisoners – it is a beautifully crafted box. Food was an important issue in the prison because 'food (...) was provided on racially differentiated basis, and racial slurs were the hallmark of daily life in the early years' (Buntman 2003: 44). As a result of apartheid 'reasoning' different 'races' should have different food, justifying it by stating that it was of a 'traditional and cultural' concern, however, the 'racially discriminatory diet' failed in separating prisoners and (Ibid.) – as one can see from above, the prisoners created a *kolgos* collective. These objects – the keys and the *kolgos* box – become symbols of unity.

[19] See appendix: Sikundla.
[20] See appendix: Sikundla.

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Fig. 13: Mafi Mgobhozi has donated the keys to the *kolgos* collective. The *kolgos* embodies the connotation of unity, resourcefulness and the resolve of the former political prisoners. Mgobhozi says about the *kolgos* that this 'collective where we donated money to buy food for all of us. I was in charge of the *kolgos* that was left at that time [the time just before the release of the last political prisoners on Robben Island]. So when we embarked on the hunger strike, I took the keys and locked all the *kolgos* food in a trunk. We decided that it would be a do-or-die hunger strike. Either they released us, or we would die in prison'.



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Fig. 14: The *kolgos* box displayed in the locker of Jacob Sikundla clearly signifies the unity that existed in the maximum-security prison at Robben Island, and fits well into the dominant narrative of Robben Island Museum. The *kolgos* was a collective into which all the prisoners donated money and food. Sikundla says that 'it was a big box and when you came back from fetching your grocery orders from the hall, you would put all your things near this box (…) the kolgos had to provide for new prisoners who had nothing'.

Although there are numerous of examples of the unity and solidarity that existed among the prisoners throughout this exhibition, I will only mention a few more as examples here. Sazi Veldtman, for instance, has displayed a pair of shoes in his locker (see fig. 15):

> I got arthritis in prison. At times I would use bandages for my wrists, elbows and hands just to keep warm. Comrade Djudju said, 'OK you are having this problem, I think what you can do is use these shoes.' They were made by an old man from Natal, Baba Mdlalose. They had the fur of rabbit inside, so they were very warm'[21].

What shines through in this display and label is the solidarity and humanity on Robben Island, someone else was willing to go through the trouble of getting Veldtman some shoes because he really needed them. Yet, it is important not to get completely lost in the connotation of unity in this display; Veldtman got arthritis in prison because of the harsh living conditions.

4.2.4. *Hardship and Suffering Contextualised*

Lungelo Dwaba's locker holds a folder of personal letters, this helps to personify the struggle and life in prison (see fig. 16). What's more, it aids the visitor in the understanding that these people were actually locked up and had no freedom – they could not choose to see their family whenever they wanted. Sometimes letters were all they got. Furthering this line of display is Strini Moodley's locker with a letter that has been 'cut up'; the letter is a representation of the censorship of prison life (see fig. 17). Moodley's interview extract says about the censorship that 'the guy who comes to hit me with a donkey *piel* or unleashes a dog on me, I can deal with. But when a guy comes to you and exercises his power over you by giving you a letter with a big window cut into it, it was the cruellest form of punishment'[22].

Moreover, Moses Masemola's locker is empty (see fig. 18), and his label reads:

> I have nothing. During the time of our release, things were still tough. There was an officer there, Piet Fourie, a very cold boy, he confiscated all those things which I wanted to bring home as mementoes[23].

[21] See appendix: Veldtman.
[22] See appendix: Moodley.
[23] See appendix: Moses Masemola.

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Fig. 15: This is a display of the unity and compassion that existed among the prisoners. Sazi Veldtman says that 'I got arthritis in prison (…) Comrade Djuju said, 'OK you are having this problem, I think what you can do is use these shoes'.



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Fig. 16: Lungelo Dwala's locker holds a folder of personal letters, and in his interview he says: 'I kept all of them. All the letters I had received, whilst on the island. From my young daughter, my girlfriend, my brothers and sisters, parents, all of them'. In a way this demonstrates the misery of incarceration; one is separated from everyone, there is no freedom to move. The folder of personal letters coupled with Dwala's audio-recording gives the letters a whole other meaning. Dwala speaks about the monotone life in prison: 'crushing the stones day in and day out'. He mentions how people were punished when they did not meet the acquirements of the day; meals after meals were taken away. When listening to the recording of the interview with Dwala and looking at the letters one realises just how much of a light they were in the everyday life of prison.

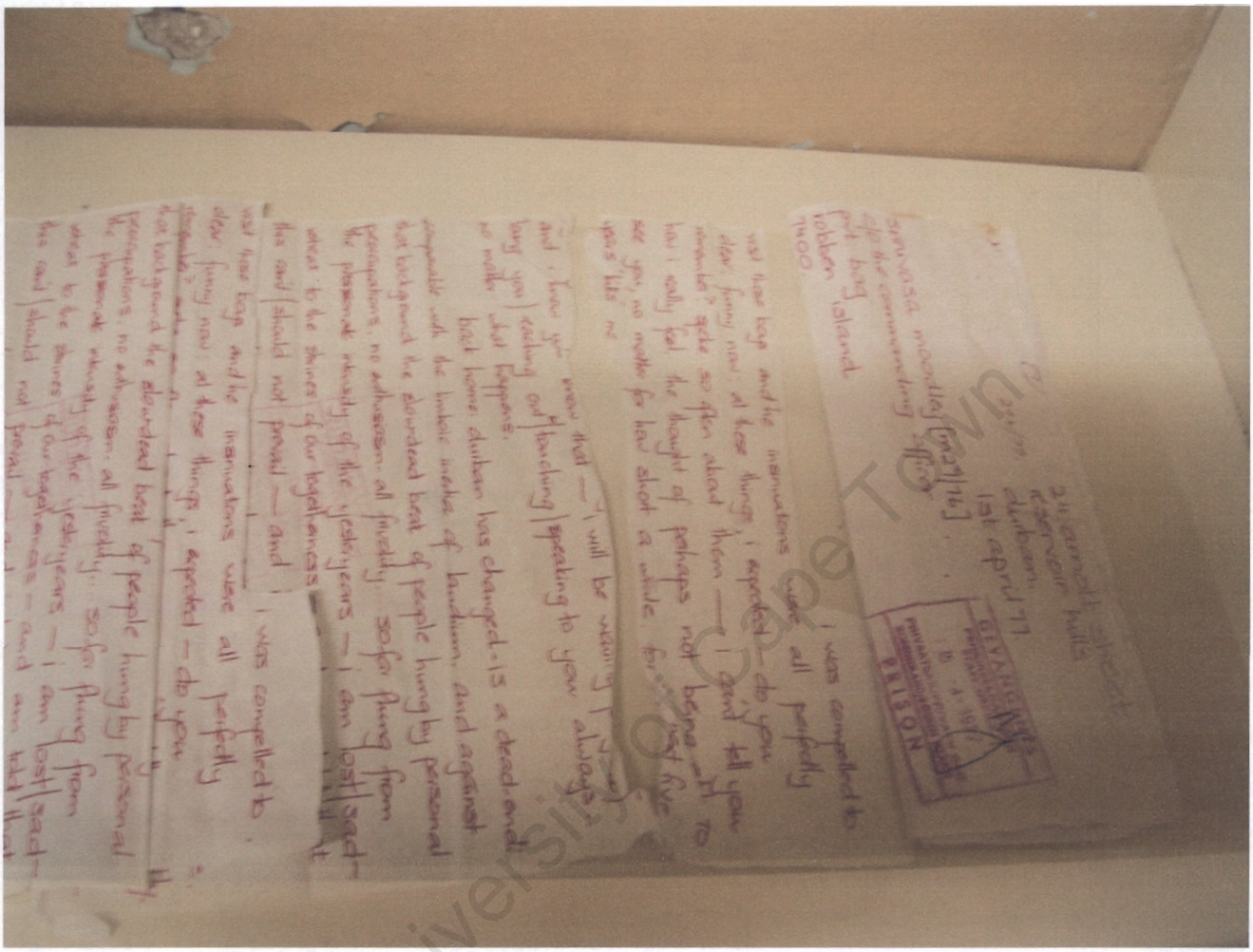


Fig. 17: Strini Moodley's letter is cut up so that it is almost impossible to read, this is an illustration of censorship in prison. And as according to Benson Fihla in his interview, this was one way of torturing the prisoners, as the prison authorities just cut random holes in the letters.

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Fig. 18: This is a powerful display of the adversity of prison life, Moses Masemola's locker is empty and the label next to it reads: 'I have nothing.' Furthermore, in the extract selected from his interview he talks about how he was 'among the fellows that could not push the wheelbarrows. I was young, just from school, straight into prison. So I was the first to go down. They dug a grave there in the sand, I was put in there; they put soil over me. They only leave your head out. Then they told hardened criminals to piss in your mouth. This guy from Port Elisabeth pee'd all over my face when I was helpless.'

A very powerful display as the visitor expects to see an item in the locker. Moses Masemola's cell does not contextualise the hardships and atrocities they had to suffer. Masemola's empty locker aids in putting prison life in perspective: all the things one might have taken for granted was something you could have ended up fighting for at the island. And in the exhibition there are examples of how they were deprived of every-day items and how small the battles to obtain these things could seem for an outsider, but how significant they were for the former political prisoners: Saths Cooper's hair brush (see fig. 19); the radio (see fig. 20); the ludo game (see fig. 21). Other examples of how certain things that many people take for granted are being taken away from the prisoners is also brought up in this exhibition, such as Kadar Hassim's display of his shorts (see fig. 22). His locker exemplifies that a simple decision like that of dressing oneself was taken away from them, a very belittling factor of life on the island:

> The shorts were part of the standard issue of clothing that was given to prisoners after the mid-1970s. Up to that stage we were given what was called 'moleskin' shorts for summer. Now they had a very strict idea of what summer was. Their summer began on the 1st of September. So whether it was freezing or not, it was summer and they took away you long pants and gave you a short pants[24].

The mention of the objects on display that illustrate how the prisoners were deprived of everyday items, also illustrate their triumph over the prison authorities – they got some of the items in the end. Especially so with the radio (see fig. 20); the radio tells the story of how prisoners were deprived of news from the outside world in the early years but how, after fighting the prison authorities, they were allowed radios and newspapers.

4.2.5. *Prison Life on display*

> Objects in museums are assembled to make visual statements which combine to produce visual narratives (Hooper-Greenhill 2002: 3)

[24] See appendix: Hassim.

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Fig. 19: Saths Cooper's display of a hair brush emphasises the way in which the former political prisoners sometimes had to struggle in order to get hold of simple, everyday-life things – things that most people take for granted. Cooper states in the label next to the locker that, 'it was a problem getting this brush because the prison authorities only allowed combs to be brought. I had to make an application until eventually, I think in my second year of imprisonment on Robben Island, they took an order for a hairbrush'.



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Fig. 20: The radio displayed in Matthews Meyiwa's locker also represents the hardship of prison, as it took years before radios were allowed at Robben Island. And as one can see from the incarceration-dates he was there in the sixties and early seventies – the worst years in the maximum-security prison. Matthews says about the radio, 'some time between 1988 and 1989, we were allowed to buy personal radios so that one could listen to music and news. Particularly when everybody was asleep I would open it softly, so that I would not disturb the other inmates. And it helped me a great deal.' The extract taken from Sedick Isaacs' interview illustrates how hard it was to get news from the outside world in the sixties and early seventies: 'the key came back with a radio, which was acquired somewhere with instructions that I must try and make it work (…[the] radio was missed and a massive search was on. (…) the radio was found (…) the radio, which was now working, was switched on and for the first time ever, news was broadcast into a news starved cell. To the head of the prison it was like swearing and blaspheming in church'. Isaacs was severely punished (for both the master key and the radio).



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Fig. 21: According to Tokyo Sexwale the ludo game is a result of a ten-year struggle for sports and recreational activities, and this really puts things into perspective: 'we fought for more than ten years before they allowed us to have an intersectional sporting programme with one governing committee'. Furthermore, by reading the extract of the interview on the wall the board game also signifies how organised the prisoners were: 'previously each section had a sport and recreation committee and you could only play in sports organised by that committee (…) I became the leader of the [intersectional] Sport and Recreation Committee that represented all Robben Island. Decision-making was centred around this one body that was recognised by the authorities for the first time (…) We became a government of the prisoners right under the nose of the authorities'. Hence, the board game on display comes to embody both the suffering of the early years of the prison, as well as how the prisoners fought hard for all things, and got organised right under the noses of the prison authorities.



Fig. 22: These pair of shorts displayed in Kadar Hassim's locker embody prison life in the sense that everyday decision-making could be taken away from you. The shorts represents that you were not even allowed to make a simple decision about whether to wear shorts of trousers. In the extract taken from Hassim's interview he says, 'the shorts were part of the standard issue of clothing that was given to prisoners after the mid-1970s. up to that stage we were given what was called 'moleskin' shorts for summer. Now they had a very strict idea of what summer was. Their summer began on the 1st of September. So whether it was freezing or not, it was summer and they took away your long pants and gave you a [sic.] short pants'.

As I have illustrated throughout the analysis of the objects on display in the 'Cell Stories' exhibition they all carry numerous meanings, hence also numerous interpretations. However, I found that one of the dominant themes in the exhibition concerning the personal objects was that of unity, resourcefulness and triumph. And these topics are of a very conciliatory manner, and most of the objects would not really distress or offend any of the visitors to 'Cell Stories'. And when a few objects border on some upsetting memories, the problems can be said to be quickly contextualised. As in the instance of Benson Fihla's locker where there is a tennis table diploma on display (see fig. 23), and the label reads:

> We were refusing to grind stones within an exposed area of the quarry. Fifteen of us were taken away and isolated from the other prisoners for a year. All our privileges were taken away, with the exception of the table tennis table. That at least helped us develop skill in table tennis[25].

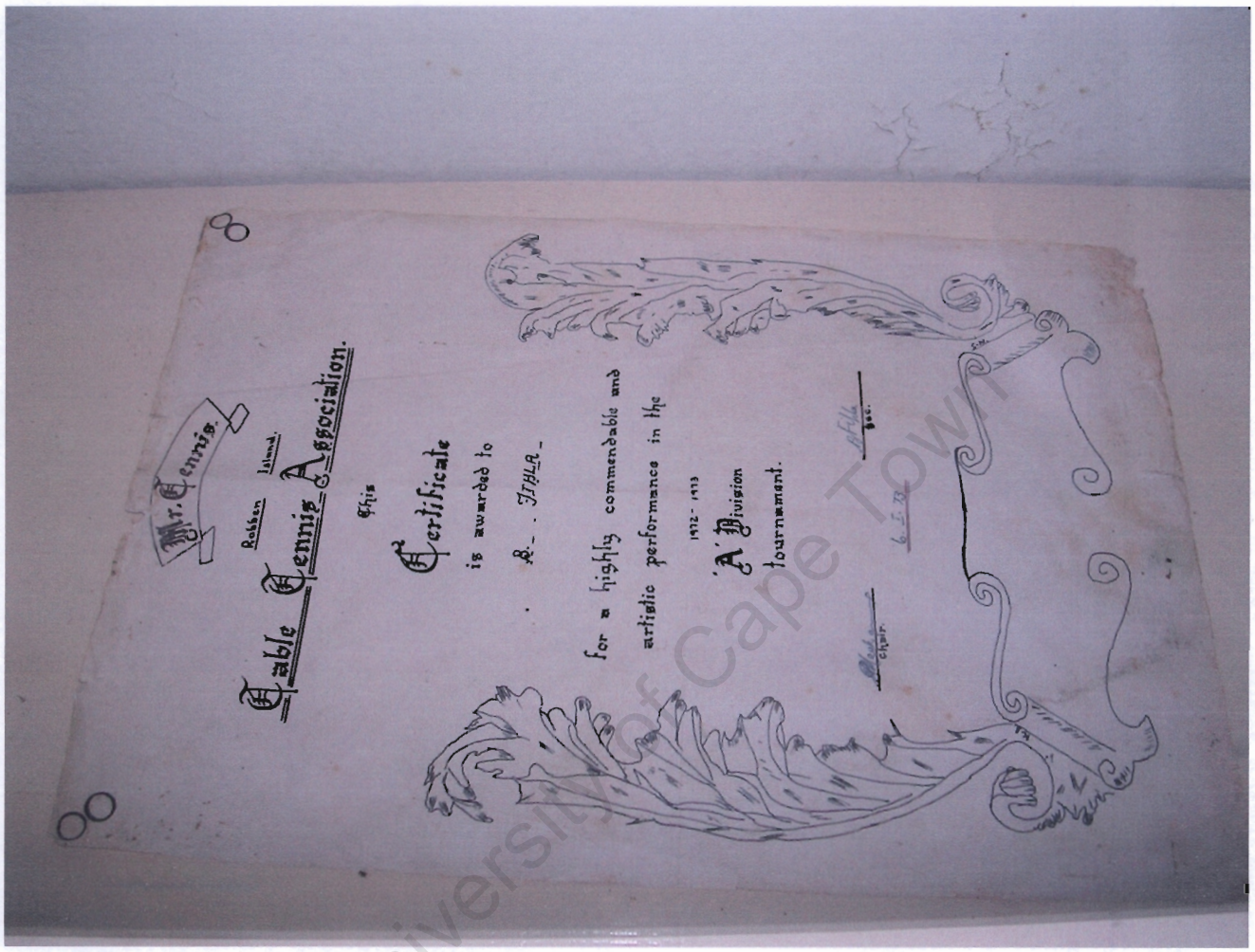
This is a perfect example of the contextualisation of the problems faced by the former political prisoners, Fihla and his companions were punished but they did not let that break them – the table tennis diploma demonstrates 'triumph'.

All these personal objects aid in a fuller understanding of the histories of individuals that were a part of the freedom struggle and incarcerated on Robben Island, and it gives people more of a feel for the sacrifices that went into the struggle – sacrifices of individuals fighting for the freedom of many. As Hooper-Greenhill states, 'objects may bring together and bring material form to elusive intangible abstract ideas such as 'home', 'nation', 'sacrifice'' (2002: 108). And one could argue, as Hooper-Greenhill does, 'that it is only through objects that these abstract ideas can be thought of at all; without the concrete material thing, the idea would remain at an abstract individual level and it would be much more difficult to share it' (Ibid.). For instance, the abstract idea of 'nation' seems to run through the exhibition like a red thread:

> Objects are used to materialise, concretise, represent, or symbolise ideas and memories, and through these processes objects enable abstract ideas to be grasped,

[25] See appendix: Fihla.

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Fig. 23: Beson Fihla's table tennis diploma is on display in one of the cells, and he says about it that 'we were refusing to grind stones within an exposed area of the quarry. Fifteen of us were taken away and isolated from the other prisoners for a year. All our privileges were taken away, with the exception of the table tennis table. That at least helped us develop skills in table tennis'. This illustrates the resolve and strength of the prisoners when met with adversity.

> facilitate the verbalisation of thought, and mobilise reflection on experience and knowledge (Hooper-Greenhill 2002: 111).

In other words, the sacrifices and battles of the former political prisoners on Robben Island were all in preparation for the 'new' South Africa nation that exists now (see Mach 1993: 110[26]) – the 'Cell Stories' exhibition's objects embody the struggle for a nation.

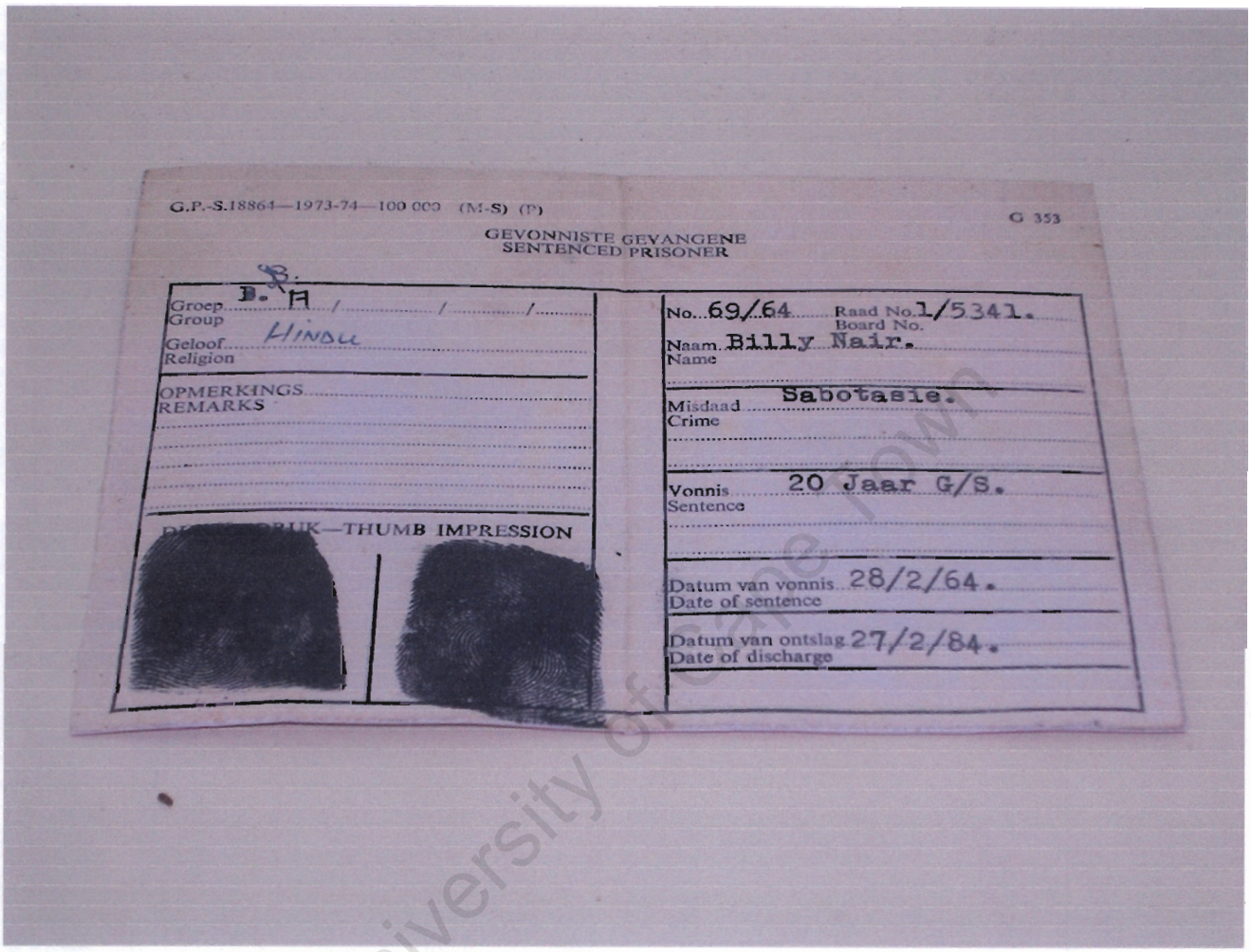
As this analysis of the objects employed in the 'Cell Stories' has demonstrated objects can be used in order to bring forward specific histories (see Hooper-Greenhill 2002: 108), and these 'new positions can deepen [the] understanding of the present, as well as the past' (Hooper-Greenhill 2002: 51). Through its use of the personal objects donated by the former political prisoners 'Cell Stories' aid in a fuller understanding of what went into the freedom struggle, and if one is critically engaging with the objects one can un-pack other marginalized stories of the past (see fig. 24). Although the objects do not fully open up the other worlds that were a part of the freedom struggle – the divisions between the different political parties and so forth – it can still be seen as a gateway into the fragmented histories of the struggle. It could perhaps tease the interest of some interested visitors, who would then go and find out more about these marginalized stories.

As we have seen 'personal experience can be encoded in artefacts, so that the objects represent the memory, the significance of the emotional power of these experiences' (Hooper-Greenhill 2002: 109). And through this the objects can be argued to 'make abstract notions tangible'. The objects act as symbols, linking unconscious reactions to existing subjects or relations in society (Hooper-Greenhill 2002: 111). However, the 'recycling' of objects is bound to involve a recontextualisation, as objects can never be completely reinserted into their 'original' histories – however much illustrative framework or nuance is supplied. There will always be an 'interruption' between the object's past and *present* representations of the past. In other words, the object will be coded and re-coded, and this process can be repeated time and time again.

The objects displayed in the 'Cell Stories' exhibition have come to symbolise the unity, the resourcefulness and triumph of the ex-political prisoners at Robben Island, some are presented

[26] See also the section on nation building and South Africa in my literature review.

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Fig. 24: Billy Nair's identity card in prison. This card held all the information that the prison authorities considered significant about the prisoners: prison number, name, crime, sentence, date of sentencing and date of release, fingerprint, and last but not least, into which group the prisoner would have been categorized. How you were categorized determined your diet among other things. For instance, in the case of Billy Nair's prison card he was first classified group B, which were the 'blacks', however as one can see from the card he was re-classified to group A. Group A was generally the Indians, this group had a better diet. Nair says about his card that, 'this card is your passport in prison. You had to carry it at all times. If they want to charge you for an offence, they don't ask for your name or number, they ask for your card. *This is your identity*. I made sure it was one of the things I smuggled out when I left prison' (my emphasis).

as intellectuals, while others 'handymen'. The objects are there to assist in the building of the foundation of the narrative of the exhibition, which I personally found to be walking in the same footsteps as the dominant narrative of the Robben Island Museum as a whole. Although there are objects on display that illustrate the suffering and hardships of the prison I would argue that the objects – seen in conjunction with the written and spoken words – are used as a gateway into the dominant narrative of the representation of the past.

Putting these personal objects on display allows for a more layered and nuanced reading of the prison and its former political-prisoners, however the dominant strand of the exhibition seems to be of the 'triumph narrative' so prevalent at the Robben Island Museum.

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4.3. The Interviews: the 'Memories'

> Memory is organised around personal experiences and episodes rather than around abstract semantic categories; memory is personalised and related to biographical experiences. Ways of knowing become increasingly more abstract as more knowledge is gained, but those concepts and beliefs that are not reviewed for ongoing relevance may remain at a very concrete and basic level (Hooper-Greenhill 2002: 118).

Kavanagh states that history – as in the 'study of the past' – has mostly dealt with the depiction and analysis of 'change and rupture', and because of the various and diverse documentary evidence available historians have not had to look any further than archival resources. As a result, the knowledge produced has been quite one-sided as most of the written documents about the past have been written by the literate and intellectually privileged, as well as interpreted by the times literate and intellectually privileged – this is now well-recognised (Kavanagh 1989: 126). Consequently, 'the legitimisation [...] of oral testimony as a source, yielding as it does evidence that moves beyond the scope of documentary sources revealing the ignored and forgotten, has cracked open the established mould of practice' (ibid: 126). The 'study of the past' has therefore had to accept that what people remember and what they choose to tell is just as significant as any written document about the past (Joutard, no date: 2) However, Jenkinson states that although oral history work has become an accepted practice it is still usually seen to be of 'subsidiary importance to the main task of collection care and interpretation, rather than as a critical element in the production of histories in museums' (Jenkinson 1989: 141). He wrote this in the end of the 1980s and I do believe that there have been a lot of changes within the museum practice since then.

In many decades written documents have held some kind of authority and authenticity over an 'oral testimony' in the realm of the historian, however, 'the scholar of the past, no matter how dedicated to empirical methods, is confronted by documentary records, collective memories and individual memories shaped by (...) the dance of remembering, forgetting and imagining. And that dance whirls in the scholars head as he or she constructs a representation of the past' (Harris 2000: 114). Harris touches on the subject of transcribing oral testimonies, stating that he realises the need for this, but that no matter how cautiously and delicately someone treats

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an oral testimony of any sorts there is the unavoidable consequence of relocating (or even dislocating) authority as the voices are separated from their words (Ibid: 122).

To assert that the study of the past, and in employing oral testimonies, is not a study into what actually happened but rather an investigation into how different people remember it and so forth, is not to say that the past did not happen: 'it is to argue that we cannot know the past except through the medium of words, of language, written or spoken' (Wright 2000: 126). In other words, the 'past' becomes hearsay and will as a result be incapable of being totally un-biased or otherwise. In this part of the dissertation I have looked into some of the interviews included in the 'Cell Stories' exhibition, and have found elements that are important in order to provide a close reading of the exhibition.

4.3.1. 'Universal and positive' phrases: in the reconciliation framework

In quite a few of the interviews there exists undercurrents of reconciliation, non-racialism and democratisation, the individual memories are sometimes recast in a more positive and inclusive fashion. For instance, Mkhwanazi[27] states that there 'was this magic of people with opposing ideologies living together in harmony (…) a common survival against the brutal prison authorities.' He also talks about respect, 'each organisation respected each other's beliefs.' Matthews Meyiwa is one of the interviewees that seem to concentrate on the hardships of prison life, but then again he was one of the first people there – and the sixties are known as a very harsh period. Nevertheless he states that 'we were very resourceful (…) the people on the island came from all walks of life. We were a very happy group of people. Happy in our misery. We would quarrel but it did not lead to violence.(…) *we had one common enemy; it was the prison authority*' (my emphasis)[28].

Marcus Solomon's extracts reads:

> The strong bonds that developed was almost like having a family. For example, Saturday afternoons became a social event when we were locked up after the visitors

[27] Interview with Thami Mkhwanazi conducted by Ashwell Adriaan (07.01.99), Mayibuye Sound Archive: University of Western Cape (2hrs 54min 42sec): Cd nr. 2.
[28] Interview with Matthews Meyiwa conducted by Ashwell Adriaan and Noel Solani (1998), Mayibuye Sound Archive: University of Western Cape (2hrs 16min 19sec): Cd nr. 1, side A.

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left. People learned the names of your children, your family. 'Hey, Solomon, what did Pat say?'[29]

Ashwell Adriaan asks a question about the suffering in prison, and Nkosinathi Benson Fihla tells the story of how, during the summer, they were made to work inside, but during the winter months they were forced to work in the quarry. And there was 'this one warden. A sadist. The worst sadist I've ever met. If it was a cold day he made us sit down and work in an exposed area (...) and if you didn't reach your acquired amounts of stones you were punished'. However, he quickly goes on to say how they managed to fight this, 'one day we had had enough and refused to work (...) we were punished for a year'[30]. This goes to show that although 'they' were met with obstacles 'they' fought it, and because of the unity that existed it worked:

We resisted. We struggled against the things we felt were wrong[31].

And as in this particular case, most of the interviewees claim the authority of the narrator by subsuming himself into 'we' – it becomes a story about a collective unit rather than one individual. But who is 'we'? For some it means *all* the ex-political prisoners, for others it's their particular political party. It is as if the story of the maximum-security prison on Robben Island belongs to everyone, and people seem reluctant in the interviews to talk about their personal experiences. In the case of Fihla it is always about 'we' – the unity shines through. In the words of Elizabeth Tonkin (1992: 101), 'it is the account as resource which matters, and the significance of the tellers is that they lend their authority to the account, just as the moral of the account authorises the policy that the teller supports.'

Another example of the unity that existed in the maximum-security prison is illustrated by Antonio du Preez in his extract in the exhibition[32]:

I couldn't come to terms with the fact that I was going to spend fifteen and a half years on Robben Island. That was the one thing that was driving me a bit nuts. A week after

[29] See appendix: Marcus Solomon.
[30] Interview with Benson Fihla conducted by Ashwell Adriaan (no date), Mayibuye Sound Archive: University of Western Cape (3hrs 27min 17sec): Cd nr. 2.
[31] Ibid: Cd nr. 1.
[32] See appendix: Antonio du Preez.

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> our arrival there, this old man came past and shook everybody's hand on the bench. We were about six people sitting on the bench and he introduced himself to everybody with a smile on his face. I was right on the end and he said to me, 'How are you comrade?' 'I am very well.' He said, 'you don't look so well. Don't be so angry man, relax. How long are you going to be with us?' 'Fifteen and a half years.' He said, 'oh, that's enough time for me to get to know you, so we will talk later.'

This extract goes to show how they took care of each other, and it is cast in very unifying and positive phrases. What's more, Paul Langa – among almost all of the prisoners interviewed for the exhibition – remembers clearly the sports and recreational activities. He is quoted in the exhibition:

> One of the major roles I played was to get comrades organised into a Summer Games Committee. The prisoners were divided into houses and each house chose its own name and convenor. Everyone had to belong to a house. Those who were not participating wore white clothes and were judges[33].

Tokyo Sexwale's extract also deals with the sports and recreational activities:

> We fought for more than ten years before they allowed us to have an intersectional sporting program with one governing committee. Previously, each section had a sport and recreation committee and you could only play in sport organised by that committee. We all wanted interaction with our sporting, social and cultural activities because sport was the centre of survival, apart from debates[34].

4.3.2. The divisive elements of the past

Strini Moodley was of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) and he calls himself a 'revolutionary', in the interview he explains how they were considered extremely radical and revolutionary. He helped found the BCM, arguing that the 'black people had to redefine

[33] See appendix: Paul Langa.
[34] See appendix: Tokyo Sexwale.

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themselves' because 'white people had defined who we were'[35]. Moodley's interview consists mostly of how they – BCM – fought the authorities, how they were not afraid, and how they knew their rights. However, from his interview the only extract that was taken from it was the label explaining the censored letter that is displayed in his cell; perhaps what he was speaking about was/is still a bit too radical and critical. And when he talks about the Rivonia trialists he says he was disappointed:

> We were surprised, because we had thought that our revolutionary congressmen that we were going to meet would've captured far more territory that we found. Because when we arrived we were wondering 'what's happening here', there's no underwear, people are sleeping on the floor, on mats, 'what's happening'. This is a political prison, it is not an ordinary (…) you fight for the best that you can get for yourself. So, these guys [pause] took the nine of us and put us into what they called the observation, which after two days we actually discovered was a punishment section. So, we began to make demands immediately. Because the punishment section, that was called the C-section, had no hat water. There was only two kinds of water in the bathroom there, it was solid hot water and what we called *brakwater*. The food was disgusting; we wouldn't even feed animals that kind of food. So, everyday we begun to make our demands[36].

His interview is predominantly about how the BCM fought for their rights:

> We [BCM] fought and earned the right for every prisoner the right, not a privilege, to study[37].

He mentions numerous examples of how the BCM fought and how other political parties did not. What's more, he tells of how the different political parties held their own meetings, and how the other parties sometimes opposed the BCM's battles because they 'found it disruptive'. This goes to show that there was not always a consistent unity between the prisoners, or across party-political lines.

[35] Interview with Strini Moodley conducted by Noel Solani (no date), Mayibuye Sound Archive: University of Western Cape (2hrs 3min): Cd nr. 1.
[36] Ibid: Cd nr. 1.
[37] Ibid.

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> By 1978, and I'm proud to say this, and I challenge any prisoner to disagree with me, we of the BCM revolutionised Robben Island. Every wall that divides section from section was put up because of us, because when we saw other prisoners we made it our duty, in the presence of warders, or anybody, to raise our fists and, without fear, great each other as comrades[38].

Both Faku and Moodley are very harsh when it comes to the 'white man', and it is understandable that the curators found it difficult to include it in the exhibition. When Faku is asked about what his most painful memory of Robben Island he says that is of how 'the white man had no regard of the black person's cause, I just couldn't reconcile [it] in my mind, these warders do not really, really, understand our actions (…) the white warders were a reflection of the white community. It's pain that has stayed with me[39].' Furthermore, Faku was the major of Port Elisabeth during the time of the interview and he states that 'all the experiences that I've had with whites has helped me to do my job as mayor (…) it has taught me how to interact with them'[40]:

> There is a thing inherent in the white people, very unfortunate. They always want you to conform. Their practices to them are the standards, you see. It is inherent in the white man to this very, very day (…) to this day I still don't conform[41].

Moodley, on the other hand, says that the freedom struggle was against 'the entire edifus [sic.] of white society'. And when Moodley came to Robben Island with the other comrades from BCM, they wrote down their philosophy and aims for everyone to read. The reply from the ANC, as according to Moodley, was that they considered the white liberal party allies of them, and especially Helen Suzman. Moodley was disappointed at this, because 'white people have defined who we are. We do not need them as allies'[42].

Paul Langa also mentions the communication level across political affiliation, and he says they were not really 'homogenous, we fought in prison'. He talks about the rejection of the

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[38] Ibid.
[39] Interview with Nceba Faku conducted by Ashwell Adriaan (no date), Mayibuye Sound Archive: University of Western Cape (2hrs 43min 11sec): Cd nr. 1.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid: Cd nr. 2.
[42] Interview with Moodley conducted by Noel Solani (no date), Mayibuye Sound Archive: University of Western Cape (2hrs 3min): Cd nr. 1.

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ANC by the PAC in the earlier years. As well as briefly mentioning that someone was stabbed with a fork because he changed his affiliation from the BCM to the ANC, however Langa says that this incident made them realise that they had to get along.

In the interview extract where Tokyo Sexwale talks about the sports and recreational activities he also mentions that 'we achieved a lot for prisoners but this came after many struggles, many disappointments, many beatings, many insults and ugly, evil things that were done to others before us'[43]. However, he does not really go into this in detail.

4.3.3. Memories of hardship and suffering contextualised?

While going through the interviews of the former political prisoners at the Mayibuye Centre I noticed that many of the interviewees talked about the hardship they had to suffer, but they seemed to be more willing to talk about the dedication it took to survive, and one can easily argue that the triumph narrative clearly dominates the memories. In the words of Mac Maharaj quoted by Buntman (2003: 78 – 79):

> I remember prison as a good experience. I think I have unconsciously learnt to [distil] from that experience all the good aspects, distil them and hang on to them, which is good for me and is good for [other's perception of me]. But at the same time that very process means that in a certain way I don't want to confront [reality]. I don't even want to speak [of it].

This pain of remembering certain things comes out quite clearly in the interview of Nceba Faku when he suddenly becomes very quite as he is recalling 'the lighter moments' in the prison:

> I normally don't like to talk about Robben Island [a long pause] it has made me what I am….I don't talk about Robben Island, I don't [the interview recording was then paused for an un-known period of time] [44].

[43] See appendix: Tokyo Sexwale.
[44] Interview with Moodley conducted by Noel Solani (no date), Mayibuye Sound Archive: University of Western Cape (2hrs 3min): Cd nr. 1.

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This is included in the audio recording on the intercom in his cell, which hints at how much more lies underneath the surface of the 'triumph narrative', but does not critically get into it. It leaves a lot to the imagination of the visitor, and one could argue that this is a good thing in the way that it makes it harder for the visitor just to walk away – his voice sounds heart-broken and one can hear the pain. The interview is stopped for some time and when it is resumed he is talking about 'the elders' at the island. We cannot know what was talked about during that pause, but the interviewer did not or was not able to probe any further into what Faku did not want to talk about – what it was that he had just remembered. Rather the rest of the interview is of a much lighter manner, Faku talks about the sports and recreational activities that were introduced to the maximum-security prison, the prison as a university, the older prisoners, the communal *kolgos* and so forth. He states that 'we found our way and survived'. He acknowledges the difficulties of prison life but concentrates on the 'lighter moments' – the unity is clear in his story of Robben Island:

> I was the most popular cheer-leader [at sports events].
>
> Robben Island was a living example of how the ANC [pause] the kind of society the leadership wanted.
>
> The most wonderful thing about Robben Island was that you were taught to live communally, you were taught to share. People who didn't have family; if your mother came to visit she also went to see another who had none. And people got their families to write to other prisoners[45].

Faku seems to realise that his memories are veiled – that some of the worse memories do not surface – hence he declares that 'I do not want to go back to Robben Island, I'm scared that if I go back to Robben Island I'll be disappointed at what I'll find. How I left Robben Island was so good, I don't want it tampered with'[46].

During the years of the 1960s (as well as some repetition in the 1970s under a new chief warden) viciousness, humiliation and dehumanisation of the prisoners was part of the daily life (see Buntman 2003: 46 - 47). In the words of Buntman (Ibid: 48):

[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid: Cd nr. 2.

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> Being forced to strip for a shower, to change uniforms, or for a body search symbolised the world being lost and the world being entered into, the dispossession of property and the ability to manage one's body and appearance – 'being stripped of one's identity kit' – and the loss of privacy endemic to most total institutions, and certainly Robben Island.

Another aspect of mortification that the prisoners had to live with was what Buntman calls 'interpersonal contamination', which includes rape, sexual molestation and public rectal examinations. However, searches of people's cells, lockers and personal items are also a part of contamination (Ibid: 48). Buntman brings up two individual examples, however one of them, Johnson Mlambo, is a part of the 'Cell Stories' exhibition. She writes that Mlambo was buried in sand to his head and then urinated on by the warders (Ibid: 48). She also mentions more examples of degradation and humiliation, yet I will not include any more here. However, these are not aspects of prison life that is easy for anyone to talk about, or wanting to include in an exhibition:

> Memories are personal and specific; exhibits are general. Memories are incorporeal, exhibits show things. Memories stand on their own; a good history exhibit provides context (Lubar 1997: 18).

According to Noel Solani (2000b), 'most prisoners remember the unity that existed among them against those who represented the Apartheid system. In later years the nature of the enemy changed as the prisoners began to create a good working relationship with the prison authorities. Under both circumstances, communication between prisoners was essential for unity'. Communication was next to impossible as prisoners were separated in different cells, as well as sections and cellblocks; as a result communication was established along political connections. These structures, developed as early as 1963, were employed as means of contact between political organisations (Ibid.). 'The re-establishment of political organisations and the formation of communication structures was a rejection of one of the codes of imprisonment, that of breaking the 'bonds of community' and making sure that people act as individuals. It is through the creation of a common enemy that prisoners today remember the common struggles they fought together. Whenever differences are raised they are quickly contextualised' (Ibid.). Memories of adversity, commitment, endurance and *triumph* dominate

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the recollections of many ex-prisoners (Ibid.). However, recovery work (such as the conduction of all the interviews) also has a tendency itself to homogenise its subjects as primarily 'representative' of a larger political ideology (see Coombes 2003c: 10).

Moses Masemola's extract in the exhibition starts of talking about how the prison authorities used 'hardened criminals to crush us, to victimise the youngsters in the political groups', however the last paragraph states that 'fortunately, we managed to politicise these criminals. Some of them were charged with political activities and taken for prosecution outside and returned to serve sentences on Robben Island'[47]. However, Billy Nair talks of the suffering without contextualising it in his extract:

> In 1964, we froze. Ask anybody, we froze as we were in an icebox from morning to evening (…) Even at night when we were sleeping. In summer they gave you four blankets. In winter, five blankets. One of these blankets we used as a pillow. We had a sisal mat and another soft mat. Now here are those two mats. You cannot even prevent the ice cold that is coming up from the floor.[48]

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4.3.4. The prison as a University

The interviews, as well as the objects, also illustrate the prison as a university. Mokgoro audio recording in the 'Cell Stories' exhibition tells us about the prison as a university – both formal and informal:

> I was one of the unfortunate ones on Robben Island, who could not get financial support from a family outside, to enable you to register and study. For my whole period in Robben Island, I was just not formally studying. Although I did a lot of reading. At one stage I also decided to slip into C section because that was the section used by those who were studying (…) I was informally studying, you know. I did bookkeeping, I did commerce, biology, I did English. And although I never sat for formal examinations but I did read. Besides, my political reading I read quite a number of political theories. And I think that helped me a great deal to improve my

[47] See appendix: Moses Masemola.
[48] See appendix: Billy Nair.

> understanding; to improve my political awareness and sustain me, you know, during my time on the island[49].

The political dimension of the education at Robben Island is illustrated by Kadar Hassim:

> The truth of the matter is that prison is no place for cross-organisational debates and argument because nobody gives way one inch (…) We tried at one stage, Neville and myself, Mac Maharaj, James April and Billy Nair. Quite foolishly and naively, we thought that we could start a discussion on Marxism but very soon we just bogged down in a Sino-Soviet dispute[50].

Other examples of are included in the analysis of the objects, such as the carpenter diploma and Philomon Tefu's monument.

4.3.5. Discrepancies

> What we are dealing with here is a host of unreliable narrators, myself among them. None of us intentionally so, but we all have a story to tell, and the invisible line between fact and fiction shifts constantly (Nicol 1998: 22).

I have identified a discrepancy in the interviews and the 'Cell Stories' that I would like to look into further, it concerns the quotes of the interviews.

As mentioned in previous chapters the interviews used in the 'Cell Stories' exhibition came from a larger Memories Project, and one of the curators was also the main interviewer in most cases – Ashwell Adriaan. The website for the Robben Island Museum states that the 'Cell Stories' exhibition 'was prepared in accordance with suggestions by these ex-prisoners' (2005a), however, in the words of Jenkinson: 'it is the professional that sets the agenda, who selects just whose experience will be useful, structures the encounter, who asks the questions, decides on the usefulness of the answer, and who finally edits out (of history) the material not

[49] See appendix: Mokgoro. Extract from interview with Mokgoro conducted by Noel Solani (no date), Mayibuye Sound Archive: University of Western Cape (1hr 1min 19sec): Cd nr. 2 side A.
[50] See appendix: Kadar Hassim.

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required (1989: 146). As an example I can mention the interview of Tokyo Sexwale[51], where, when I got to the extract used in the exhibition itself, discovered that the words on the wall are not his exact words, but they are written in such a way so that one would believe they are. Details were left out that would not have changed the meaning of the statement, but they did leave what Sexwale was saying about how they suffered in order to be able to create such an organised sports and recreational committee:

> This came as a result of many struggles, beatings, (…) and ugly and evil things done to others before us[52].

The curators could have included certain ways of showing that things have been left out, just so that the spectators knew that there was a selection made. It is important when using the words of another person to be exact: there should be direct quotes, or it should say somewhere quite clearly that the extracts are paraphrased. As I continued my research into the interviews I noticed that it was the rule, rather than the exception, to phrase the extracts of the interviews differently, and hold back chunks of it.

Joutard also brings up some useful points in transcribing the interviews, and he argues that getting an accurate verbatim account of the interview is extremely important: 'the transcription of the interview must be accurate and true to the original conversation. Correcting a person's use of language is not good practice (….) editing and changing what has been said compromises the quality of the interview' (Joutard 2000: 9). What's more he writes that 'to better understand his narrators, the oral historian must give them [the interviewees] total respect' (Ibid: 2)

The bit that is included on the intercom at the exhibition seems to be talking about *all* the political prisoners in Moodley's section:

> The other problem was that they insisted that the lights stay on inside the cell (…) so, every night we used to do that, flick the light off, and sleep. So, the warden on night duty comes around and sees the lights are off and puts them on. So, it became a war[53].

[51] Interview with Tokyo Sexwale conducted by Ashwell Adriaan (no date), Mayibuye Sound Archive: University of Western Cape (1hr 2min 53sec): Cd nr. 1.
[52] Ibid.

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The above quotation is a part of the intercom audio recording; however the following quote is the rest of the statement that was not included:

> We tried to encourage all the other prisoners to also put their lights off, but there were only three of us who were putting the light off in B-section[54].

What Moodley is talking about is how the BCM was disappointed in the political prisoners that were there when they got there, he is speaking of how the BCM came in and started fighting the prison authorities for different things such as education and diet and so forth. However, the audio recording gives the impression that he is speaking of *all* the prisoners, thus no divisive aspect is shown.

Another example is Paul Langa's extract, where he talks of the Summer Games Committee. The words in the extract are not the exact words of the interview, for instance, all throughout talking about the Summer Games he kept on repeating the words: 'sports for me had a unifying effect'[55] – this has been left out, along with the word 'Boer' in the sentence:

> Unlike Christmas when we only got additional sugar and coffee.

In the interview he says, 'Christmas time the *Boers* only gave us additional coffee and sugar'[56].

When someone is recording the experiences of another person, it is a 'shared authority' that is created (see Frisch 1990), and this is important to remember particular in the making of the 'Cell Stories' exhibition as the interviewers were asking the questions: 'an interview is an interaction between the interviewee and the interviewer. It is not a monologue but a dialogue' (Joutard, no date: 8). Sometimes the interviewee can say things they think the interviewer wants to hear, and leave out bits that could have been important for them, this is another aspect of how discrepancies in interviews can come about. One example of this could be

[53] Interview with Strini Moodley conducted by Noel Solani (no date), Mayibuye Sound Archive: University of Western Cape (2hrs 03min): Cd nr. 2.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Interview with Paul Langa conducted by Ashwell Adriaan (1999), Mayibuye Sound Archive: University of Western Cape (1hrs 56min 31sec): Cd nr. 1.
[56] Ibid.

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Mothlabakwe's interview[57] where he in answering the question on censorship, and you can hear him getting angry and frustrated just by talking about it and he catches himself in the middle of a sentence, and says:

> The censorship was terrible, I won't lie to you[58].

This statement, after the ramblings on and on about how terrible the censorship was, can be seen as a way for Mothlabakwe to give the interviewers an opening to ask another question – it feels like he does not think that these are the things they want to hear; the bad memories. The interviewer can also sometimes ask leading questions to get the answers they would prefer, for instance, questions like: 'what were the lighter moments', without asking about the hardships they suffered, or 'what was it like meeting Nelson Mandela'.

4.3.6. The interview

> There is no remembering without forgetting. There is no remembering which cannot become forgetting. Forgetting can become a deferred remembering. Forgetting can be a way of remembering (Harris 2000: 118).

The recollection of the unity that existed between them dominates the interviews that were used as reference in the setting up of the 'Cell Stories' exhibition. From the 1960s the 'enemy' was the prison authorities, but in later years it shifted as conditions were improved and better working relationship with the prison authorities emerged. Nonetheless, communication between prisoners was a necessity for survival and for the existence of unity, this was not easy as the prisoners were separated in different cells and communication was therefore often difficult. Communication channels were as a result developed along political affiliations, and through these channels communication came into being between different political organisations.

Nceba Faku says that he wants Robben Island's former maximum-security prison to look the way it did when they left, not how it looked in 1976 when he was sent there, he says that 'if it

[57] Interview with Neville Mothlabakwe conducted by Noel Solani (no date), Mayibuye Sound Archive: University of Western Cape (3hrs 18min 44sec): Cd nr. 2.
[58] Ibid.

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was possible for me I would like to reinstate Robben Island just as it was'[59]. He reasons that this is because they fought so hard for every little thing, and actually says almost in a whisper 'please bring it back…'[60]. He also states that he does not like to actually talk about the island, and he does not like to go there – it is not the same Robben Island that he remembers.

Mkhwanazi was asked by Adriaan at the end of the interview if there was something he would like to include something on Robben Island, and Mkhwanazi replied:

> There is something lacking about what is happening around Robben Island as a museum (…) it would appear that people have not had the opportunity to get in touch, there is a feeling, an eagerness among the ex-Robben Islanders, wherever I look (…), that they've been excluded from this whole scenario of making Robben Island this historic venue. They've never had the opportunity. I would like, one day, some trips to be organised, there must be programmes published, these people ferried [to the island] (…) let them go to the Robben Island, see Robben Island, what it is today. Because they have made a tremendous contribution. That is why today I'm sitting here, I'm not frustrated like other people, who are bitter because they have been sidelined, I feel like I must make a contribution. I can afford to get there, but other people can't afford to get there, so I feel that, let us work together, there is so much about Robben Island. Let their voices be heard, (…) a lot of people have anecdotes, endless anecdotes that needs to be heard[61].

He continues to state how important it is for these small anecdotes to be heard, how significant the 'little things that happened' are, although 'Cell Stories' is about prison life would it not have been interesting to have included this quote in order to put things into perspective?

Joutard writes about the strength and weaknesses of 'oral testimonies' and argues that one of its strengths is that 'it gives the power of speech to those who do not have it, the forgotten ones, the outsiders' (2000: 1) – it is egalitarian. It also lets out emotions that could not have

[59] Interview with Nceba Faku conducted by Ashwell Adriaan (no date), Mayibuye Sound Archive: University of Western Cape (2hrs 43min 11sec): Cd nr. 2.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Interview with Thami Mkhwanazi conducted by Ashwell Adriaan (1999), Mayibuye Sound Archive: University of Western Cape (2hrs 54min 42sec): Cd nr. 2.

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been aptly portrayed in a written document. However, one needs to recognise the axiomatic weakness of the human memory as already mentioned: 'its selectivity, its immense capacity to forget (…), its deformations and its errors, its tendency to interweave memories with legends and with myths' (Ibid: 2). Nevertheless, Joutard sees this also as one of its strengths because there is significance in what has been left out and so forth, it aids in a further understanding to all the nuances of the representation of the past – and demonstrates that the *representation* of the past is more important (and its through this that we live) than the 'actual' events of the past (Ibid. see also Marwick 2001: 136; Wright 2000: 126). One of the strengths of 'oral testimonies' is obvious when the intercom is used for the extract of an interview in 'Cell Stories', because one can now hear the voice with all the 'uuuhms', silences and emotions it creates a thicker description of the person, the place and the time.

The 'triumph narrative' is quite inherent in most of the interviews, as the former political prisoners either contextualise the problems and hardships they had to live through, or the interviews are laced with unity. However, a selection has been made, and the extracts of the interviews on the walls on the cells of the exhibition, as well as the audio recordings, are dominated by the 'triumph narrative'. Obstacles met while in prison becomes examples of the resolve of the prisoners, as well as the solidarity that existed among them.

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5. 'Cell Stories' exhibition: a counter-narrative to the dominant triumph-narrative?

In this conclusion I will attempt to answer my research questions: Does the 'Cell Stories' exhibition break with the dominant 'Triumph narrative' so prevalent at the Robben Island Museum? And, in what ways has the exhibition been cast in the national narrative of South Africa?

Deacon wrote in 1998 that, 'the Robben Island Museum Project will clearly play a vital part in the construction of a national identity after apartheid, we should keep in mind, as the museum staff do, that any history or commemoration that it provides will necessarily be selective in the remembering and forgetting – precisely because of the island's vital role in national reconstruction.

As previously looked at, Robben Island has a rich and diverse history, however its past(s) has been progressively reshaped in a positive and universal fashion, as a site of resistance, where human spirit conquers all – thus the triumph narrative dominates the island in numerous ways. Through recasting the adversities that the former political prisoners had to tolerate and the cruelty of apartheid in decontextualised and abstract terms the universal message of Robben Island is born. As an alternative to the mentioning of 'real' events, individuals and beliefs, the version of the past referred to consists of archetypes and values: 'forces of evil', 'bigotry and intolerance', 'solidarity', 'justice' (Rioufol 1999a: 8). And, Rioufol argues that through such an account of the past the former upholders of the apartheid system are allowed to detach themselves from it, as well as being able to (morally) condemn it as 'evil' instead of (politically) denounce it as the invention of certain individuals and beliefs (Ibid). In the same way, this version represents the morals and accomplishments of the former political prisoners, which are universal values that one and all are able to admire and hold fast to, thus 'supporting the transformation towards a democratic, peaceful and unified South Africa' (Ibid).

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McEachern (1998: 500) states that when 'apartheid is (…) being engaged through memory, [it is] always partial and certainly from the perspective of the present', hence, the title of this dissertation 'Representing the Past in the Present with the Future in Mind'. The 'Cell Stories' exhibition plays into the greater narrative of reconciliation in the 'new' South Africa by providing the visitors with a representation of the sense of unity, moral strength and resolve of the former political prisoners on Robben Island. Through re-casting the stories of the former political prisoners' narratives and personal objects in a unifying and positive fashion, the 'Cell Stories' exhibition fits well into South Africa's reconciliation strategy. As becomes clear from the analysis of the personal objects on display the overriding connotation is of 'triumph', in the way that the objects illustrate how the prisoners fought for their different rights and won over the prison authorities. Stories of hardship and suffering become a way to tell the story of how the former political prisoners never gave up, and how in the end they triumphed – in other words, hardship is quickly contextualised. I would therefore argue that the 'Cell Stories' has not succeeded in its initial intention that was to juxtapose the dominant narrative of the Robben Island. However, Robben Island Museum's tour seems to centre on Nelson Mandela and this particular aspect has been challenged in the 'Cell Stories' exhibition through the representation of not so well-known prisoners. Subsequently, a more nuanced understanding of the maximum-security prison and the former political prisoners shines through.

Rassool wrote two years after the launch of the 'Cell Stories' exhibition that it was going to break 'new ground in the highly contested arena of heritage production in South Africa' (Rassool 2000: 17 – 18), and that it engaged 'critically with the tendency for history in the public domain to be narrated mainly through 'great lives of resistance and reconciliation'' (Ibid: 18). Furthermore he writes that 'two years of research and collection has culminated in a 'unique record of the prison history', one which serves to challenge any idea of 'a homogenous prisoner community'' (Ibid: 18, the quotation is from the interviews of the curators conducted by Rassool). However, I disagree with Rassool; the 'Cell Stories' exhibition echoes the dominant representation of the past at the Robben Island Museum, and does not critically engage with the recollections of unity and comradeship, nor does it really break with the strand of reconciliation in South Africa. There is a strong sense of the triumph narrative in the 'Cell Stories' exhibition, however, one cannot put it all down to the imposition of a narrative of triumph from *above*: ex-prisoners themselves frequently speak of their pain in positive ways, as shown in the analysis of the interviews and extracts: 'representing success is relatively easy' (Solani 2000b).

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Through both the former political prisoners' narratives, as well as the selection made by the curators Ashwell Adriaan and Roger Meintjes, the analysis of the personal objects on display, as well as the extracts of the interviews clearly show how a conciliatory message is represented – there is a central representation of the maximum-security prison as a university; of the former political prisoners as either intellectuals or 'handymen'. The interviews demonstrate how the former political prisoners clearly remember their struggle to gain the right to study and read newspapers. What's more, memories of how they struggled for a better diet also play a chief role in the interviews. Another central aspect to the interviews is how the prisoners recall when sports and recreational activities were introduced on the island. The dominant narrative looks to highlight how Robben Island emerged as a place of learning, a 'University' where people learnt a range of skills, as well as emphasising the unity that existed among the prisoners. Furthermore, when the interview extracts actually tell off hardship and suffering, the objects aid in de-emphasising this[62] - the objects show the resourcefulness; the unity and so forth. The 'Cell Stories' exhibition displays people's accomplishments while they were incarcerated with no real exploration of the challenges and the complications in which people attained these, to use Solani's words: 'in the one man-one cell format, it can celebrate individuals who succeeded while silencing the memory of hundreds of others who did not have this opportunity' (Ibid.).

The prevailing feature of their memories is of unity and comradeship, and when mentioning hardship and suffering these stories are used in order to show how they managed to turn the situation around. Thus, although the display of personal objects and extracts of interviews show a variety across political spectrum, the dominant message of the 'Cell Stories' exhibition emphasises rather than challenges the 'triumph narrative' of the Robben Island Museum.

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[62] See appendix: Matthews Meyiwa; Mafi Mgobhozi; Johnson Mlambo, Billy Nair; John Nkosi.

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APPENDIX: THE 'CELL STORIES' EXHIBITION



All images by *Pernille Nesje* (2005)

Appendix

A

B

C
Charliman, Ntoyakhe (1965-1970/1978-1986)
Cooper, Saths (1976-1982)

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Dwaba, Lungelo (1964-1979)

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Fihla, Benson (1964-1978)

G

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Hassim, Kadar (1972-1980)

I
Isaacs, Sedick (1964-1978)

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K

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Mgobhozi, Mafi (1989-1991)
Mkhwanazi, Thami (Thamsanga Gerald) (1980-1983)
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Mngqibisa, Sindile (1963-1978)
Mothlabakwe, Neville (1982-1990)
Mokgoro, Gauta (1965-1971)
Moodley, Strini (Strinvasa Rajoo) (1976-1981)

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N
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Ngqondela, James (1964-1973/1983-1990)
Ngqungwana, Lizo (1987-1991)
Ngqungwana, Phumlani (1988-1991)
Nkosi, John (1963-1989)
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T
Tefu, Philimon (1963-1985)
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U

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W

X

Y

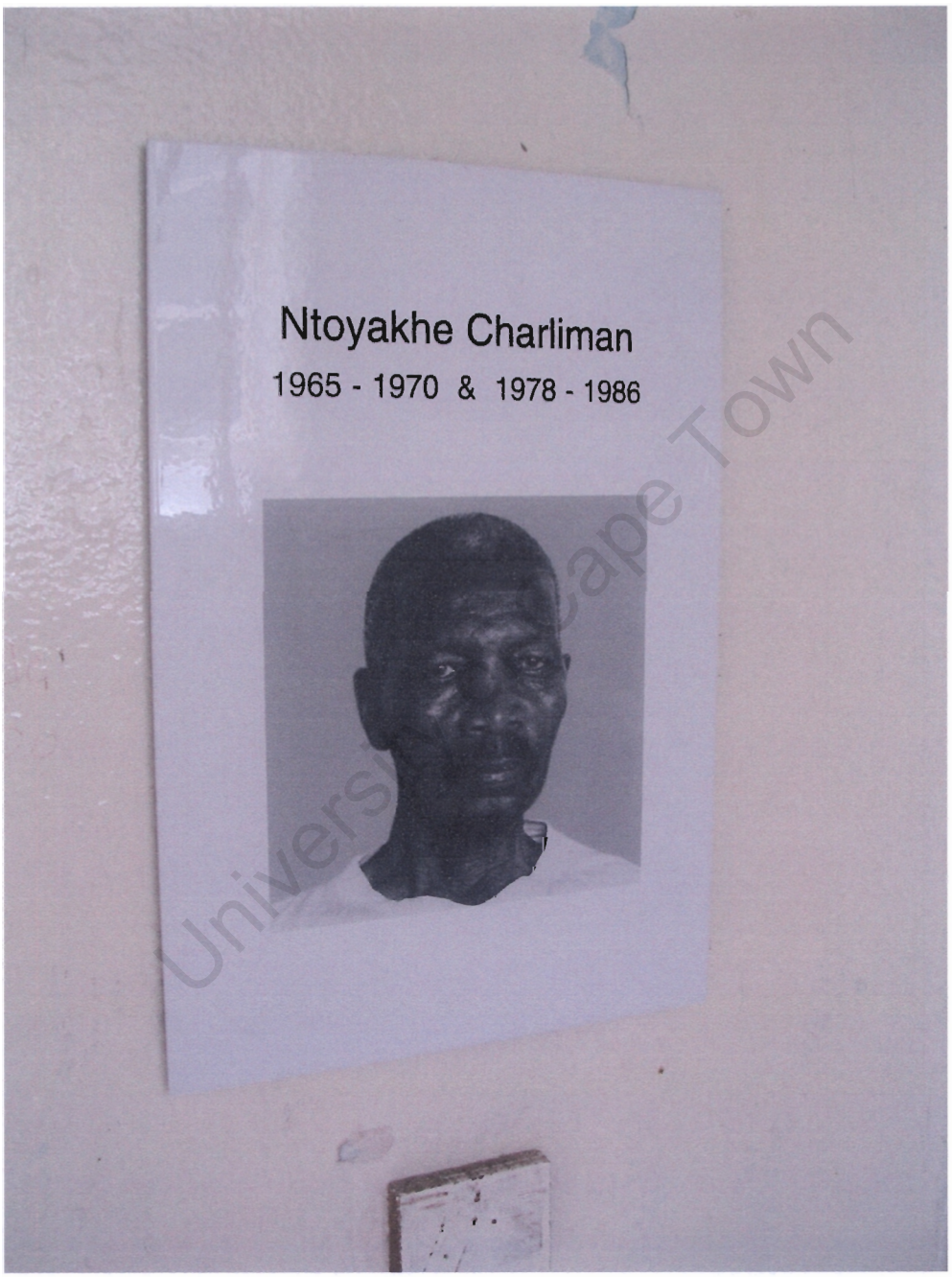
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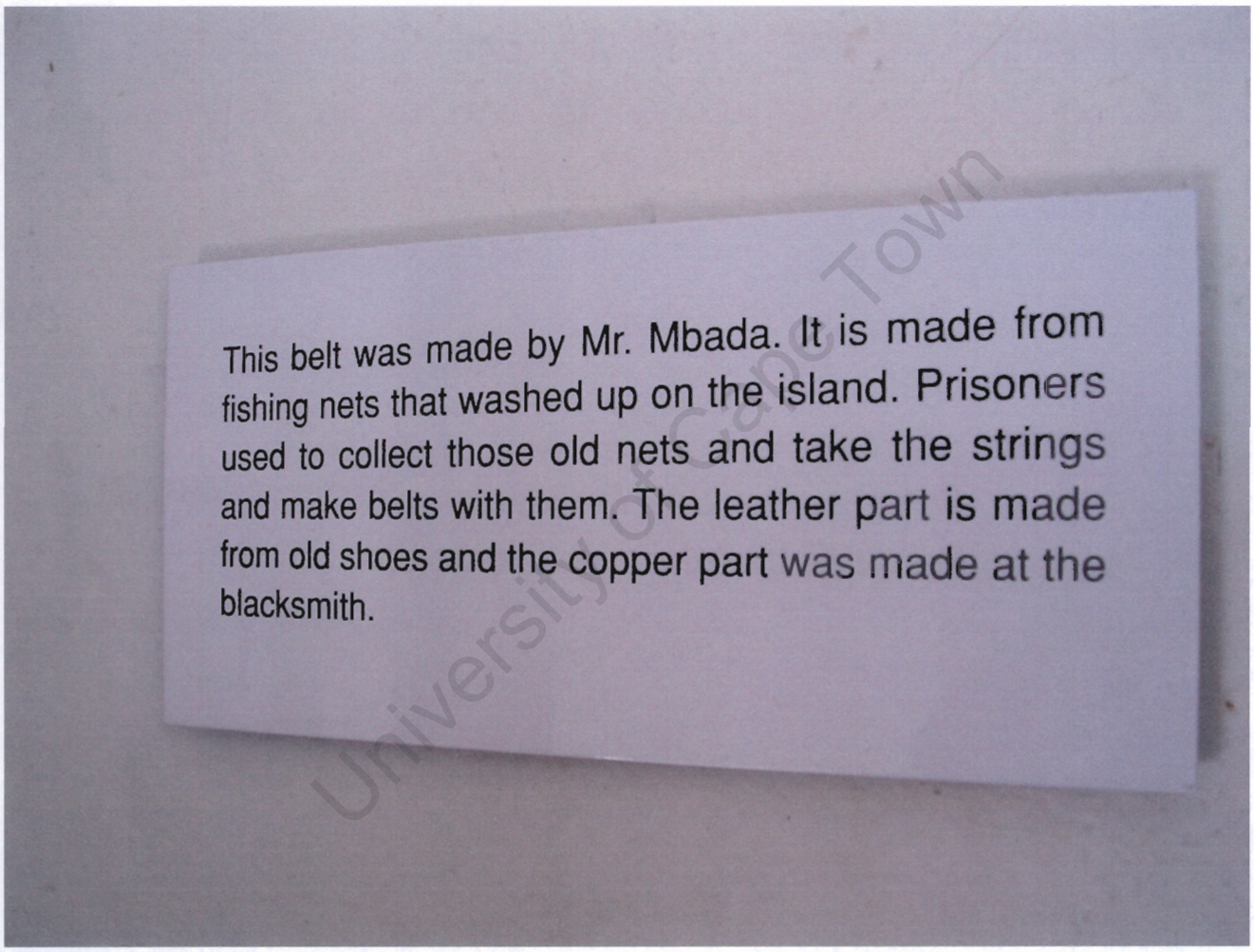
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Charliman, Ntoyakhe (1965-1970/1978-1986)



University of Cape Town



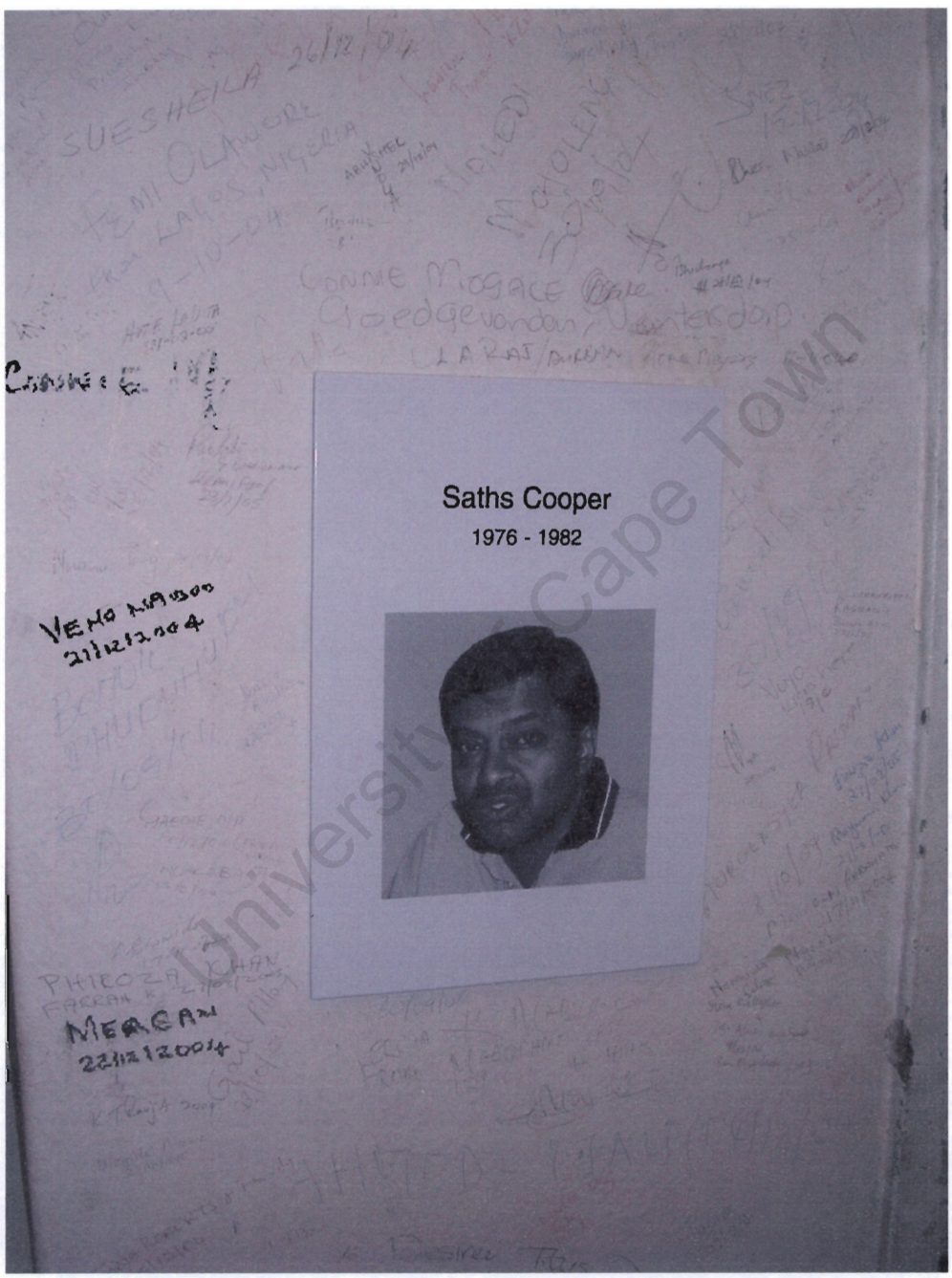
University of Cape Town

Label explaining the belt on display, in the words of Ntoyakeh Charliman.

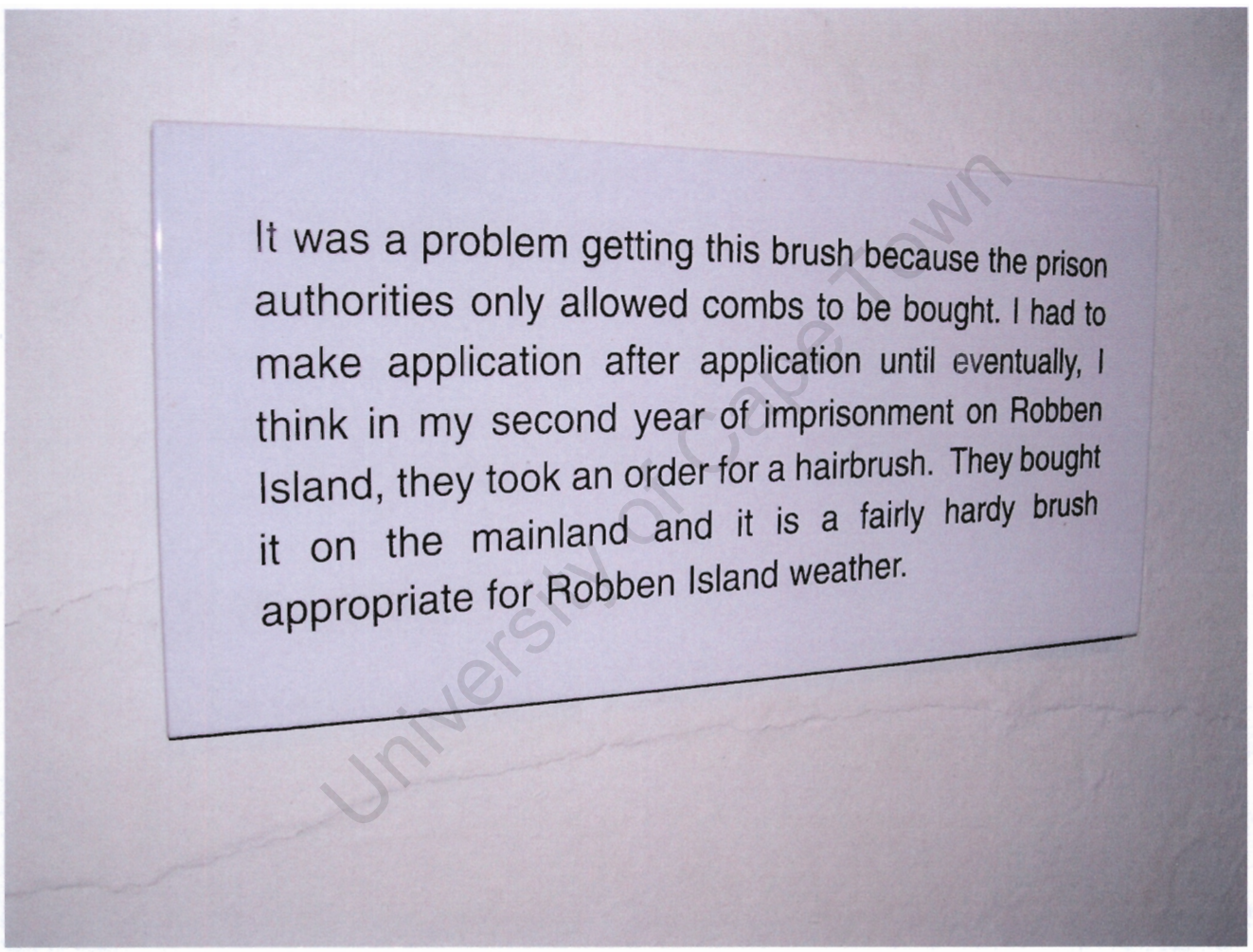

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Personal object: a belt made by former political prisoner at Robben Island, displayed by Charliman.

Cooper, Saths (1976-1982)



University of Cape Town



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Label explaining the hair brush in the locker of Saths Cooper, in the words of Cooper.



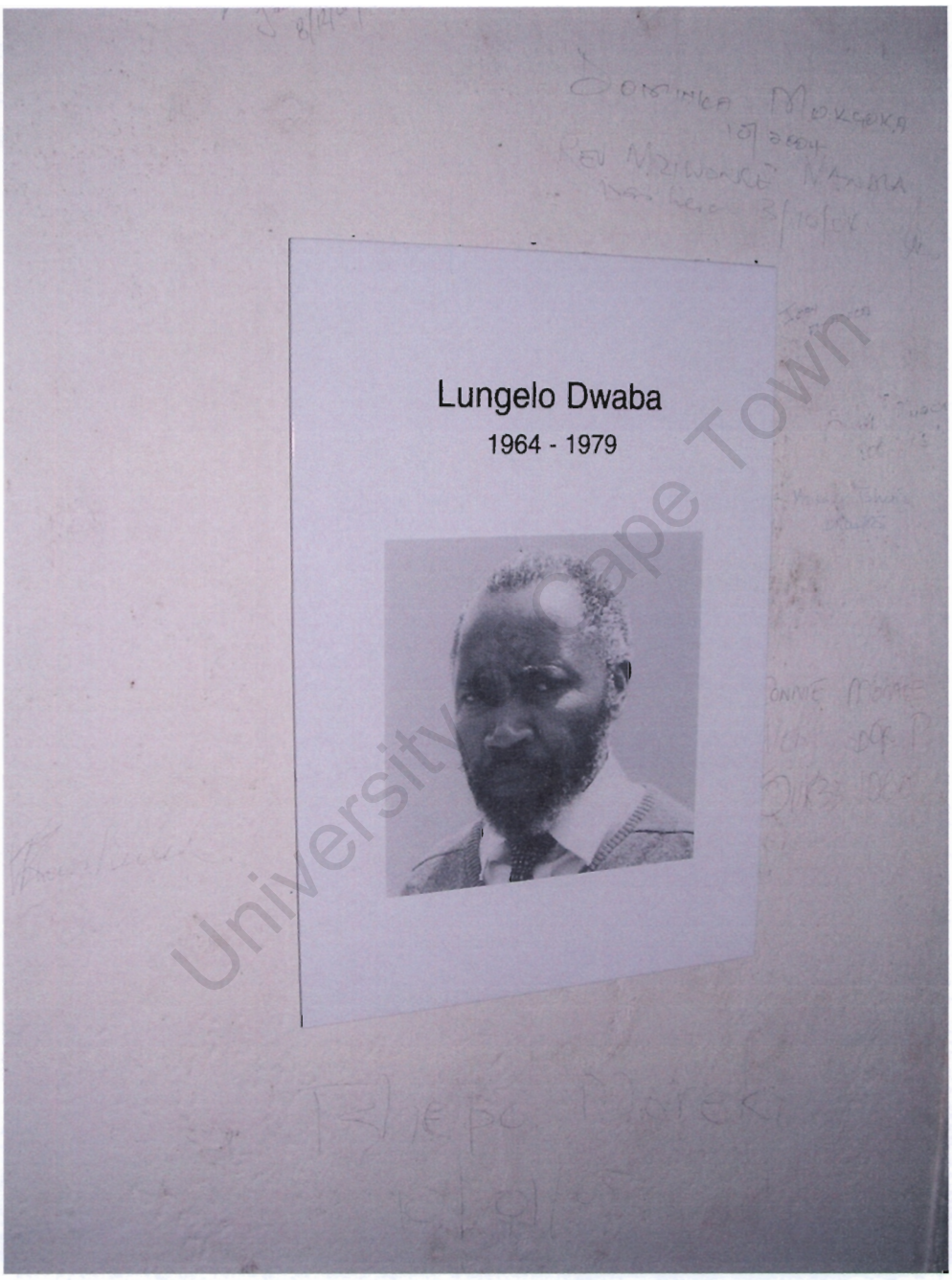
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Personal object: Saths Cooper's hairbrush.

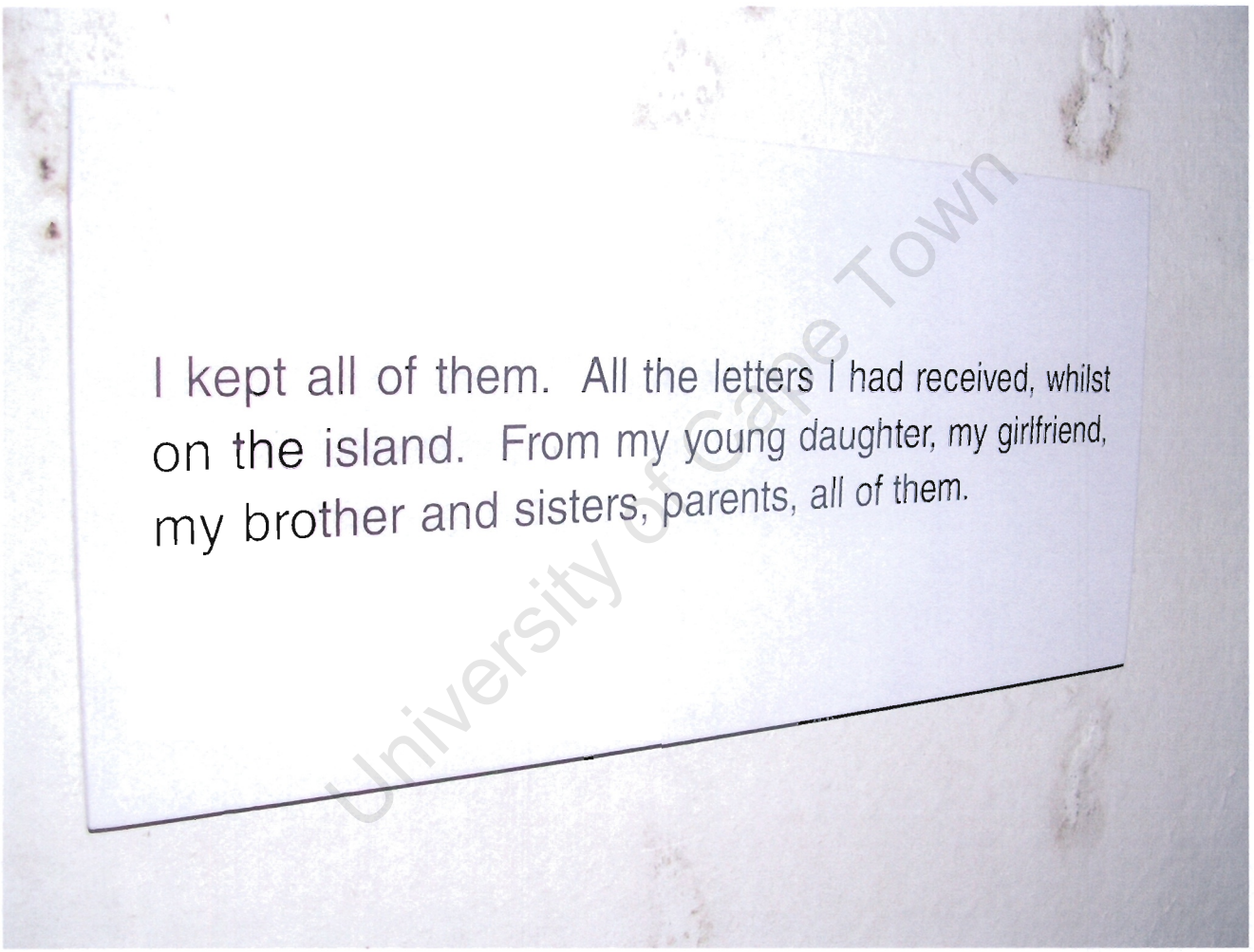
D

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Dwaba, Lungelo (1964-1979)



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Label explaining the Lungelo Dwaba's homemade folders of the personal letters he received while incarcerated on Robben Island, in his own words.



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Personal object: homemade folder with letters that Dwaba received while at Robben Island.

Dwaba's audio recording:

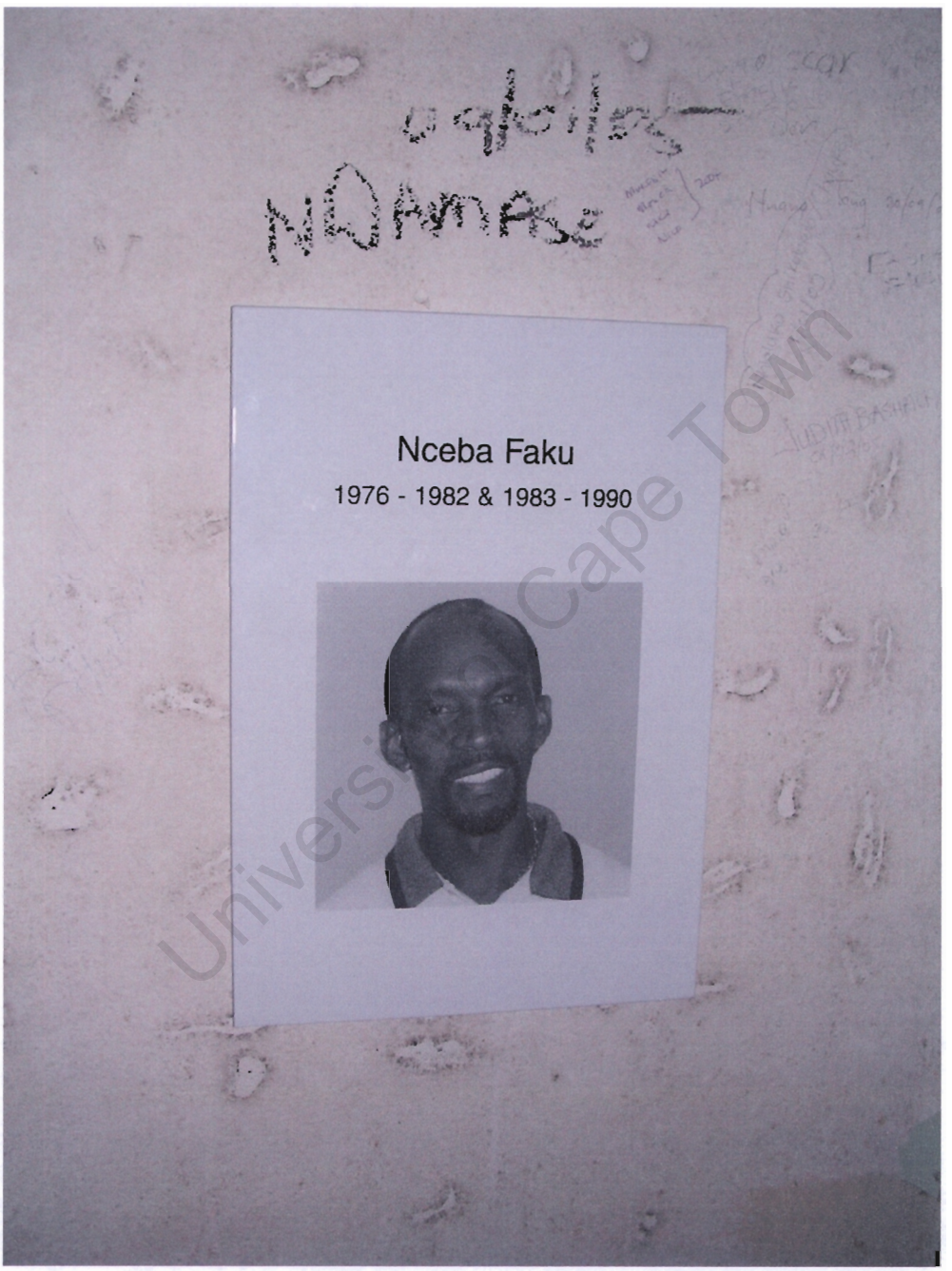
'We were crushing stones day in and day out. We had to meet this special requirements everyday, but most people could not. They were punished; no supper, no breakfast. Three meals, six meals. We're happy because we won.'

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F

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Faku, Nceba (1976-1982/1983-1990)



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Nceba Faku's wooden sculpture:

In his interview he says that 'it's a sculpture of a municipal man carrying a night-soil basket. I was given it by someone when he left; I can't remember the name of who made it.'[1]

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[1] Interview with Nceba Faku conducted by Ashwell Adriaan (no date), Mayibuye Sound Archive: UWC.



Personal object: a wooden sculpture that was given to Nceba Faku by another political prisoner, however he cannot remember the name of the artist.

Nceba Faku's audio recording:

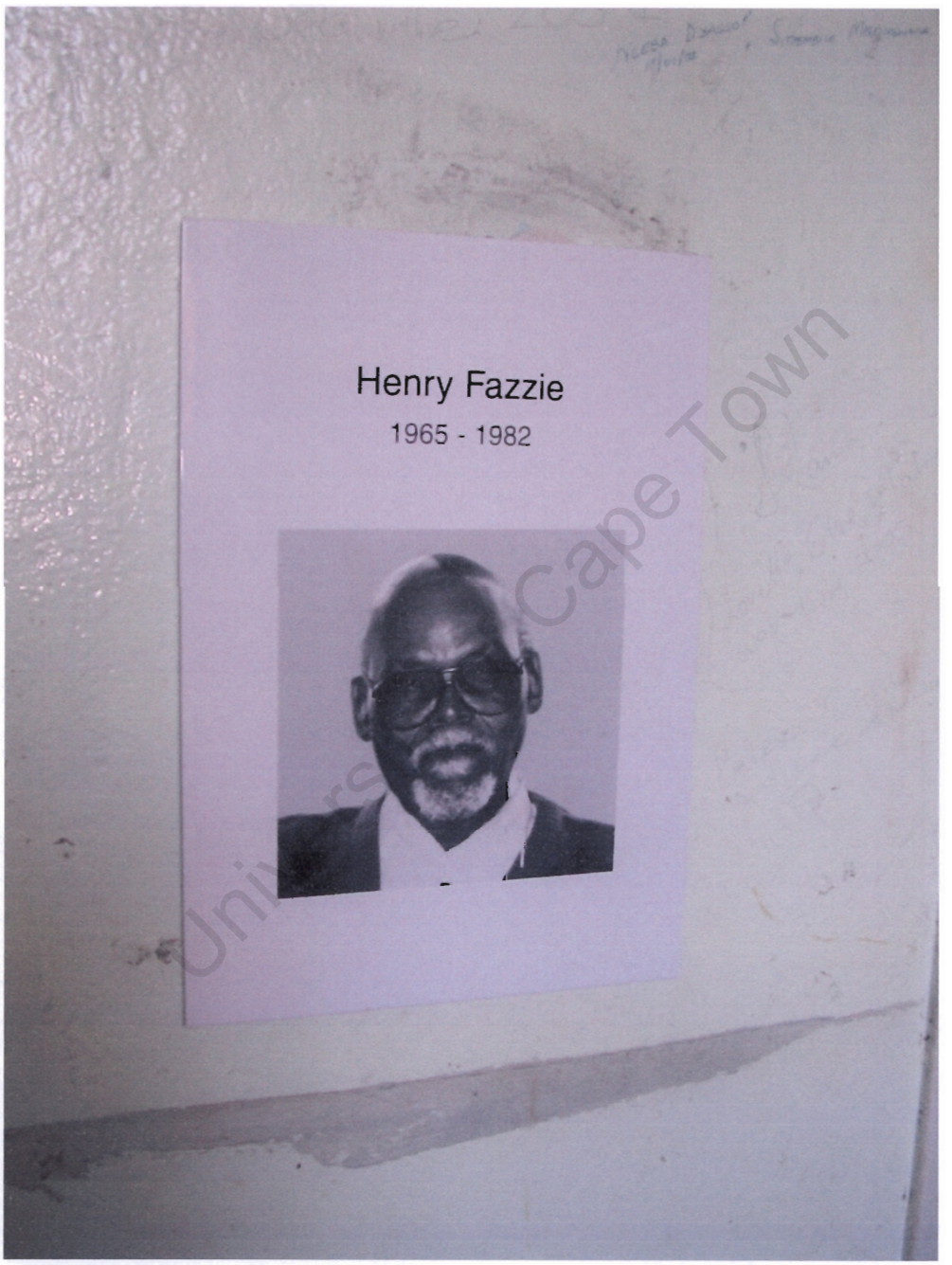
'I was one of the fortunate ones because I got good guidance'

I could not hear the rest of the statement, but it ends in the following manner:

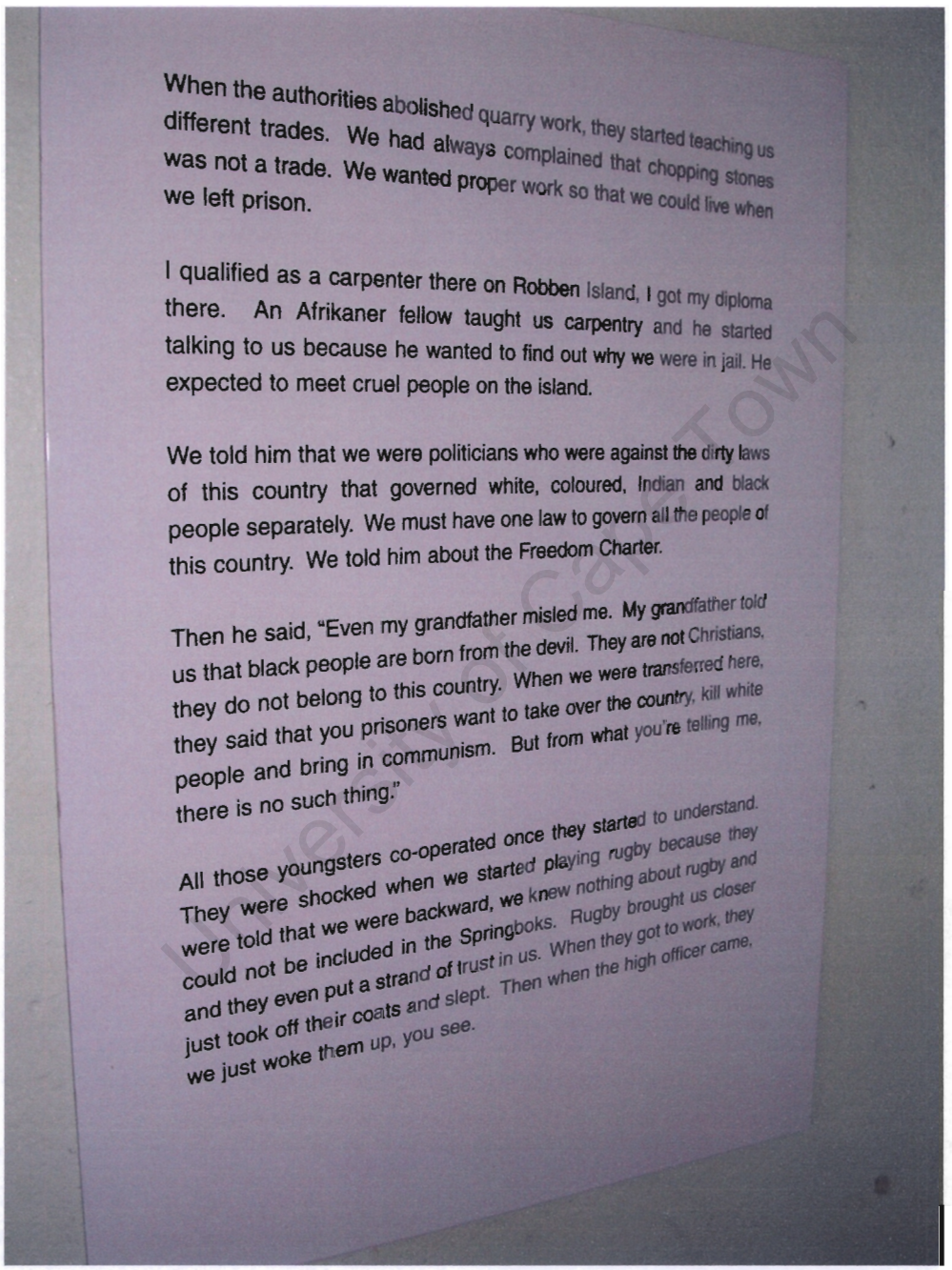
'I don't like to talk about Robben Island, I don't talk about Robben Island, it has been more than a prison.'

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Fazzie, Henry (1965-1982)



University of Cape Town



When the authorities abolished quarry work, they started teaching us different trades. We had always complained that chopping stones was not a trade. We wanted proper work so that we could live when we left prison.

I qualified as a carpenter there on Robben Island, I got my diploma there. An Afrikaner fellow taught us carpentry and he started talking to us because he wanted to find out why we were in jail. He expected to meet cruel people on the island.

We told him that we were politicians who were against the dirty laws of this country that governed white, coloured, Indian and black people separately. We must have one law to govern all the people of this country. We told him about the Freedom Charter.

Then he said, "Even my grandfather misled me. My grandfather told us that black people are born from the devil. They are not Christians, they do not belong to this country. When we were transferred here, they said that you prisoners want to take over the country, kill white people and bring in communism. But from what you're telling me, there is no such thing."

All those youngsters co-operated once they started to understand. They were shocked when we started playing rugby because they were told that we were backward, we knew nothing about rugby and could not be included in the Springboks. Rugby brought us closer and they even put a strand of trust in us. When they got to work, they just took off their coats and slept. Then when the high officer came, we just woke them up, you see.

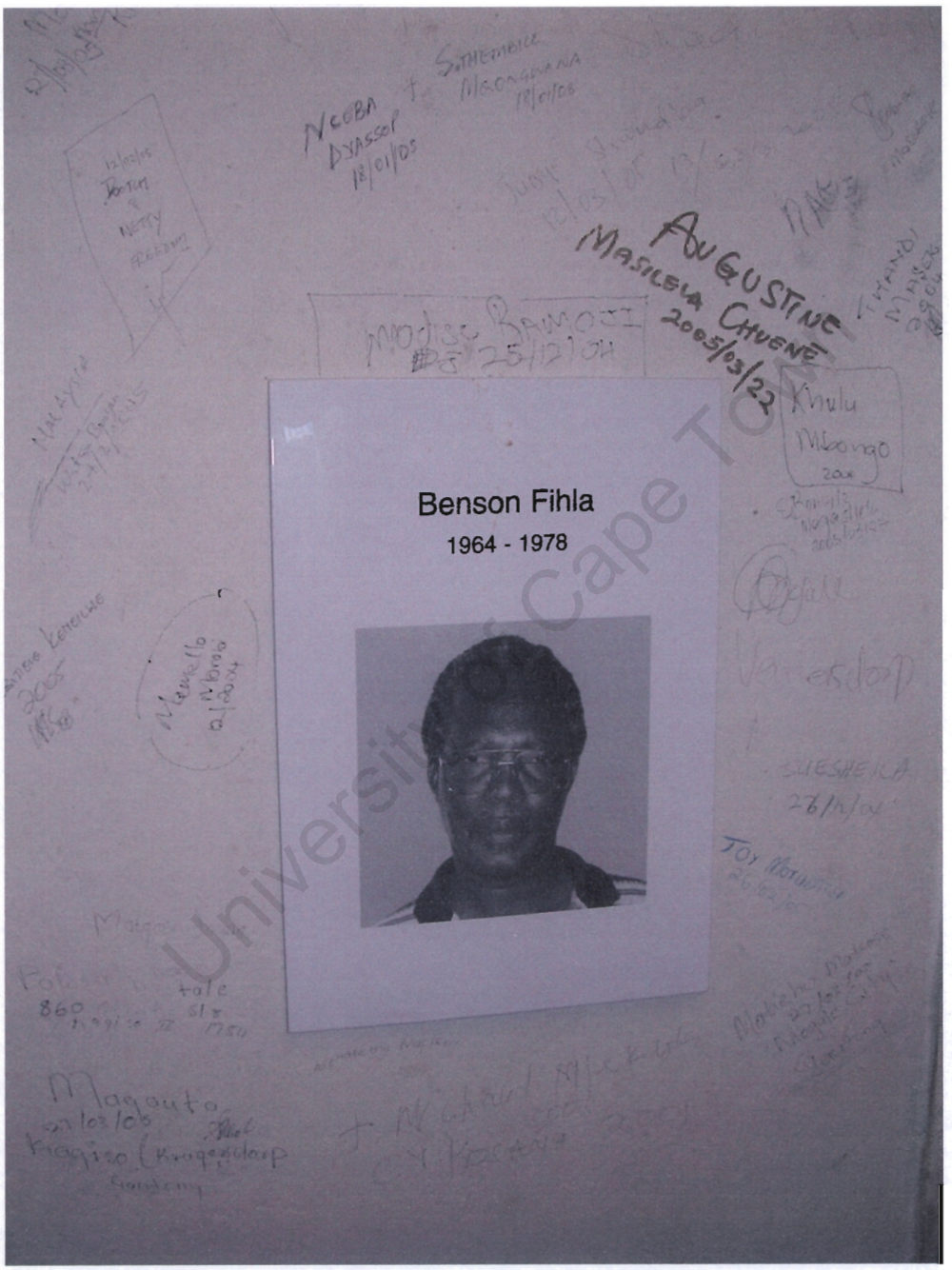
University of Cape Town

Extract from the interview of Henry Fazzie conducted by Ashwell Adriaan (no date), University of Western Cape: Mayibuye Sound Archive (2hrs 43min 11sec): Cd nr. 2.

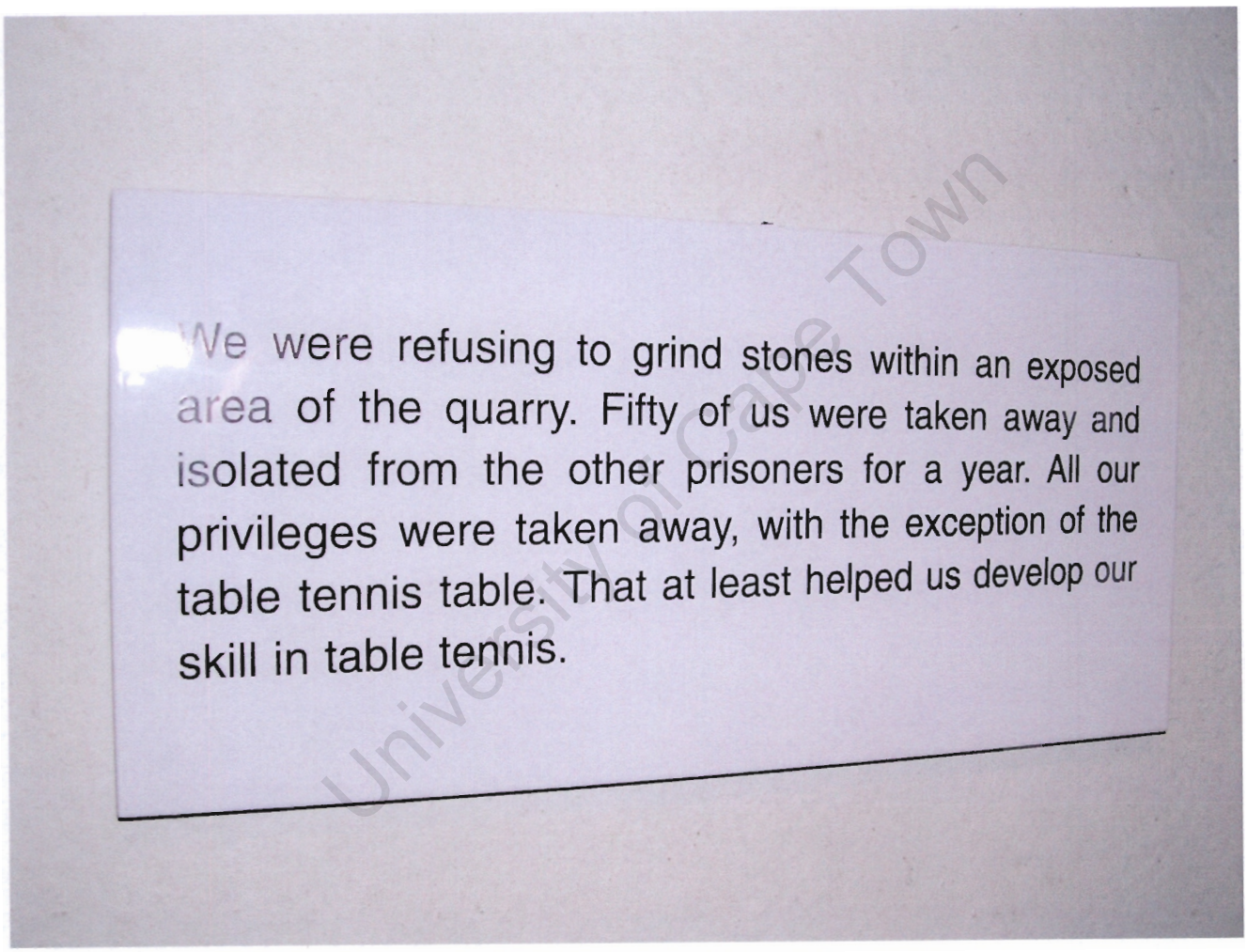


Personal object: a trade diploma in carpentry issued to Henry Fazzie.

Fihla, Benson (164-1978)



University of Cape Town



University of Cape Town

Label explaining the events surrounding Benson Fihla's table tennis diploma.

University of Cape Town

Personal object: Benson Fihla's table tennis diploma.

Benson Fihla's audio recording:

'The situation at Robben Island in the early 60s was that people were dehumanised, literally dehumanised. So there was nothing productive. There was nothing that you could offer yourself, you see, I've got this skill, I can do that. You must also understand, you know, when we were coming in, arriving at prison Delport would ask (pause) what's the term in Afrikaans? (pause) 'what were you doing outside?' Then he heard me say 'I was a teacher' (Fihla is making some 'spitting sounds') you said you were a lawyer, you said you were a teacher, smack, smack. It was much better to hide your qualification, because you're going to be treated badly. Because it was sort of a way of dehumanising because you had this skill.'[2]

University of Cape Town

[2] Interview with Benson Fihla conducted by Ashwell Adriaan (no date), Mayibuye Sound Archive: UWC.

H

University of Cape Town

Hassim, Kadar (1972-1980)



University of Cape Town

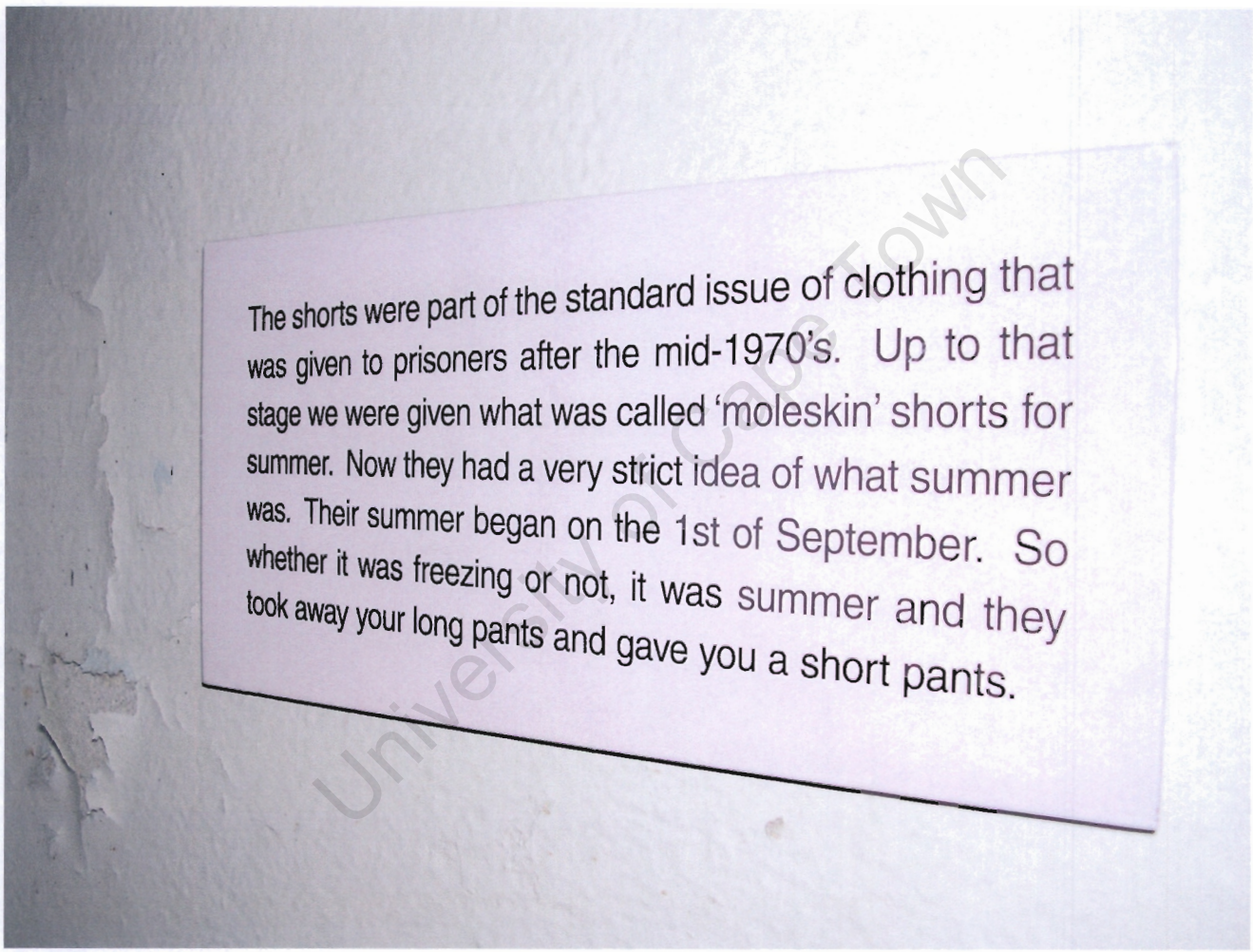
The truth of the matter is that prison is no place for cross-organisational debates and argument because nobody gives way one inch. It is a futile, very frustrating exercise because if you make a certain point about something and somebody challenges you as to factual accuracy, there is no way you can prove the point. You can't go to the library and take out a book or a newspaper and say here, this is where it comes from.

We tried that at one stage, Neville and myself, Mac Maharaj, James April and Billy Nair. Quite foolishly and naively, we thought that we could start a discussion on Marxism but very soon we just got bogged down in a Sino-Soviet dispute. Mac Maharaj and company would also not accept the fact that there was a bureaucracy in the Soviet Union or that certain bureaucratic practices were performed. So those debates were quite useless.

I like Govan Mbeki's attitude in this matter. He didn't encourage political discussions and debates I think that he realised that nobody was going to change and that in prison you become ever more rigid than you were outside. No, those kinds of debate did'nt really function – did'nt matter.

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Extract of the interview with Kadar Hassim (could not get access to the interview at the Mayibuye Sound Archive).



University of Cape Town

Label explaining the shorts displayed in Kadar Hassim's locker, in his own words.



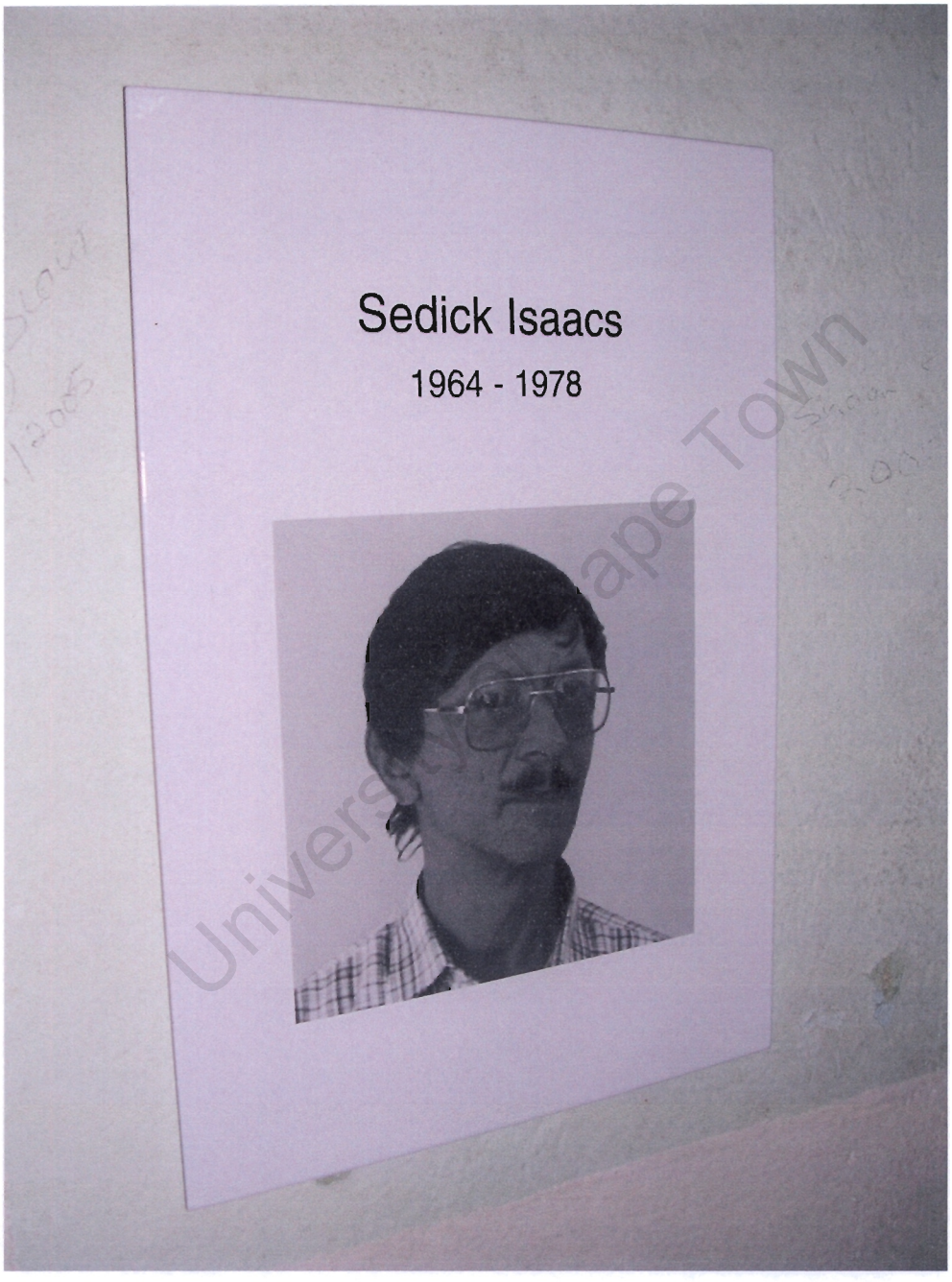
University of Cape Town

Personal object: Kadar Hassim's shorts.

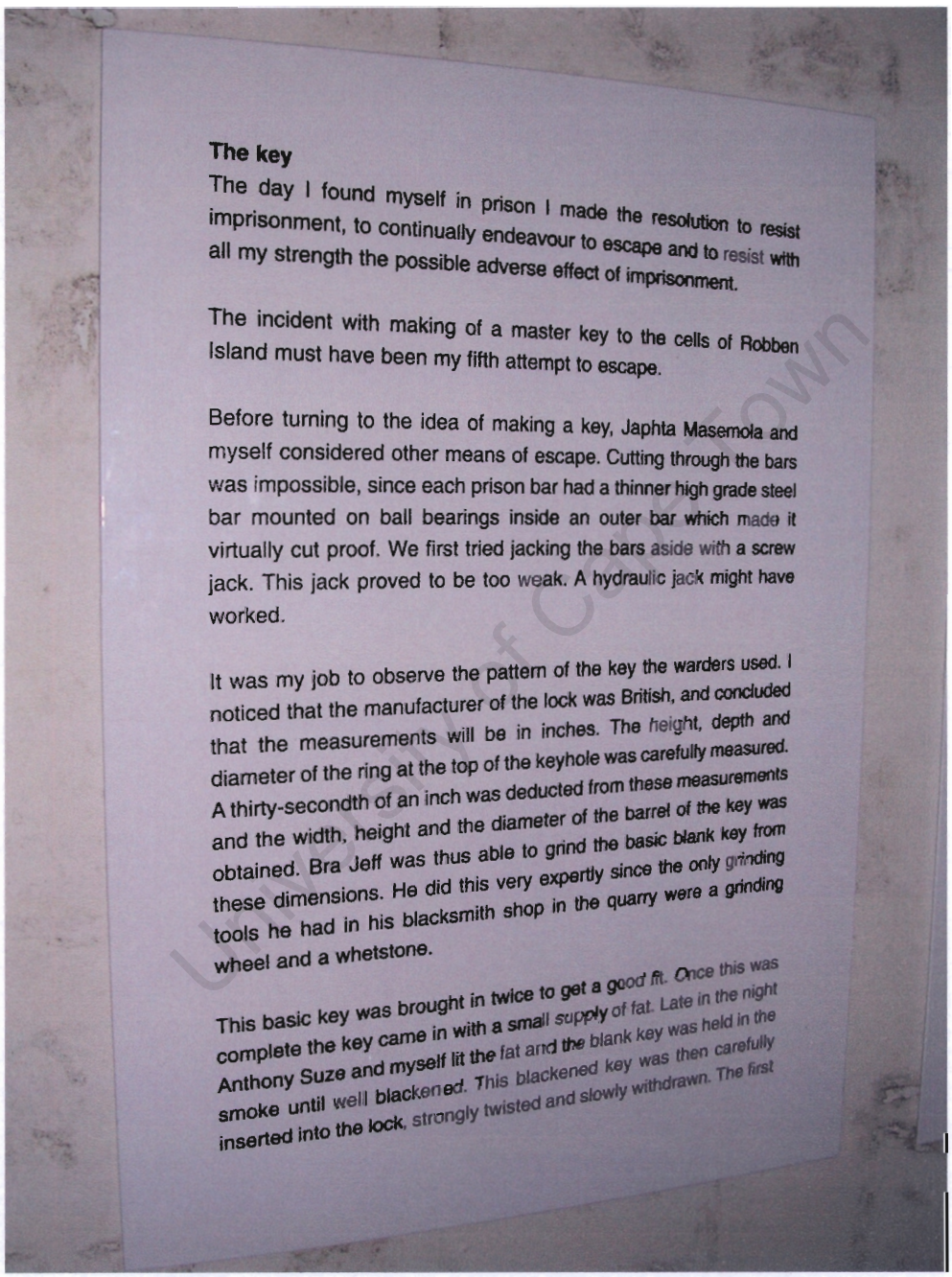
I

University of Cape Town

Isaacs, Sedick (1964-1978)



University of Cape Town



The key

The day I found myself in prison I made the resolution to resist imprisonment, to continually endeavour to escape and to resist with all my strength the possible adverse effect of imprisonment.

The incident with making of a master key to the cells of Robben Island must have been my fifth attempt to escape.

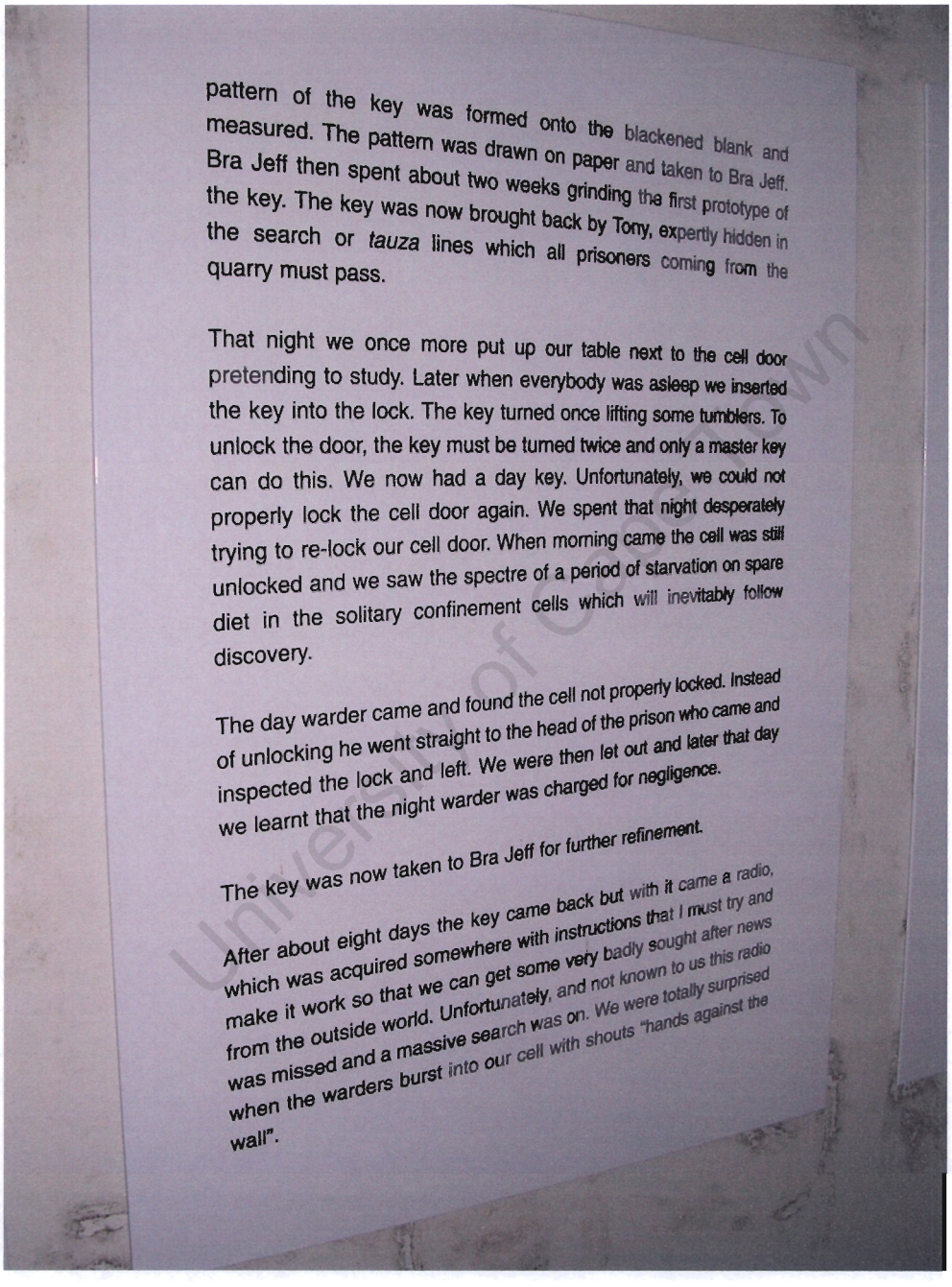
Before turning to the idea of making a key, Japhta Masemola and myself considered other means of escape. Cutting through the bars was impossible, since each prison bar had a thinner high grade steel bar mounted on ball bearings inside an outer bar which made it virtually cut proof. We first tried jacking the bars aside with a screw jack. This jack proved to be too weak. A hydraulic jack might have worked.

It was my job to observe the pattern of the key the warders used. I noticed that the manufacturer of the lock was British, and concluded that the measurements will be in inches. The height, depth and diameter of the ring at the top of the keyhole was carefully measured. A thirty-secondth of an inch was deducted from these measurements and the width, height and the diameter of the barrel of the key was obtained. Bra Jeff was thus able to grind the basic blank key from these dimensions. He did this very expertly since the only grinding tools he had in his blacksmith shop in the quarry were a grinding wheel and a whetstone.

This basic key was brought in twice to get a good fit. Once this was complete the key came in with a small supply of fat. Late in the night Anthony Suze and myself lit the fat and the blank key was held in the smoke until well blackened. This blackened key was then carefully inserted into the lock, strongly twisted and slowly withdrawn. The first

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Extract of the interview conducted with Sedick Isaacs, the first of three.



pattern of the key was formed onto the blackened blank and measured. The pattern was drawn on paper and taken to Bra Jeff. Bra Jeff then spent about two weeks grinding the first prototype of the key. The key was now brought back by Tony, expertly hidden in the search or *tauza* lines which all prisoners coming from the quarry must pass.

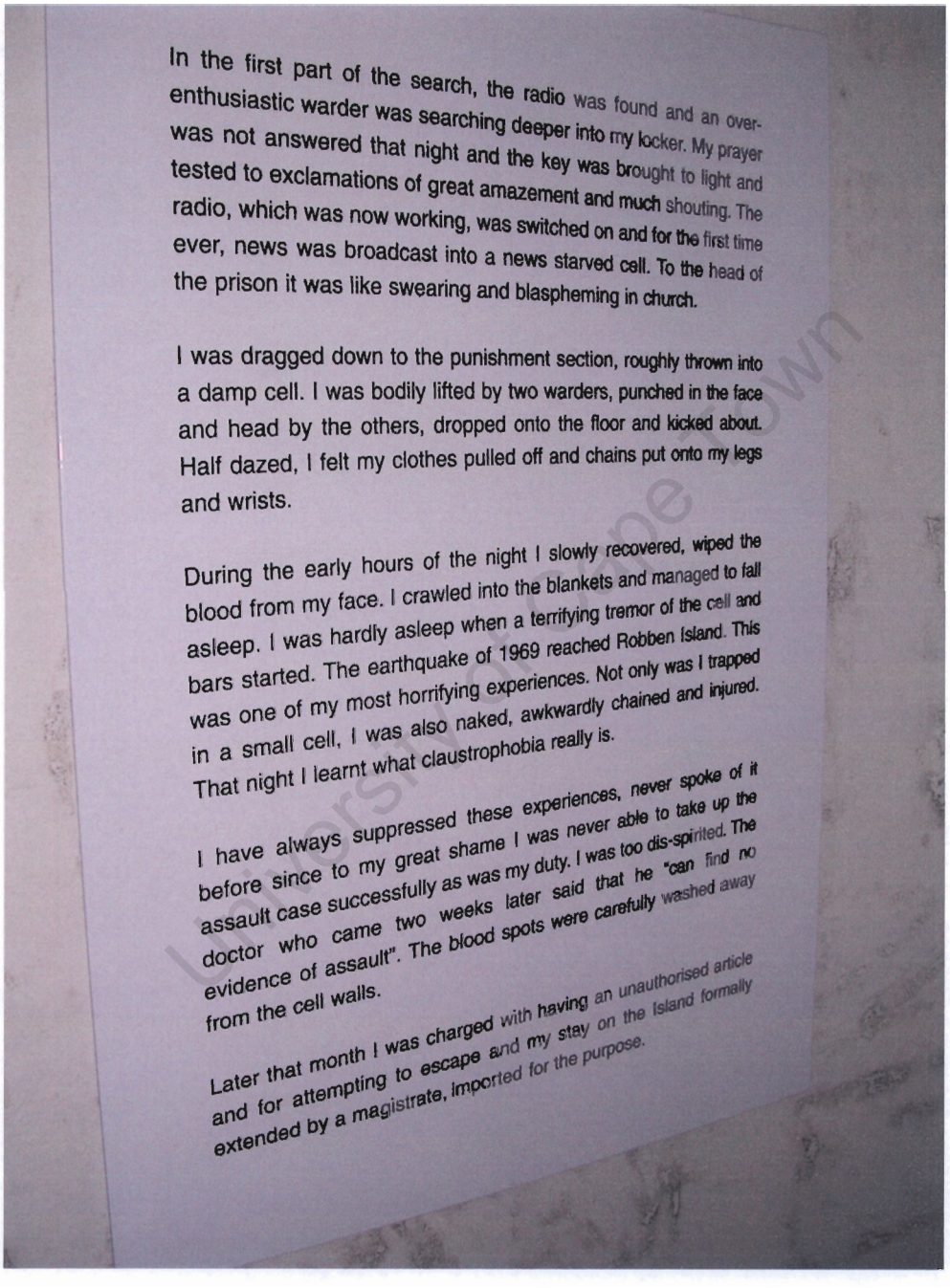
That night we once more put up our table next to the cell door pretending to study. Later when everybody was asleep we inserted the key into the lock. The key turned once lifting some tumblers. To unlock the door, the key must be turned twice and only a master key can do this. We now had a day key. Unfortunately, we could not properly lock the cell door again. We spent that night desperately trying to re-lock our cell door. When morning came the cell was still unlocked and we saw the spectre of a period of starvation on spare diet in the solitary confinement cells which will inevitably follow discovery.

The day warder came and found the cell not properly locked. Instead of unlocking he went straight to the head of the prison who came and inspected the lock and left. We were then let out and later that day we learnt that the night warder was charged for negligence.

The key was now taken to Bra Jeff for further refinement.

After about eight days the key came back but with it came a radio, which was acquired somewhere with instructions that I must try and make it work so that we can get some very badly sought after news from the outside world. Unfortunately, and not known to us this radio was missed and a massive search was on. We were totally surprised when the warders burst into our cell with shouts "hands against the wall".

Extract of the interview conducted with Sedick Isaacs, the second of three.



In the first part of the search, the radio was found and an over-enthusiastic warder was searching deeper into my locker. My prayer was not answered that night and the key was brought to light and tested to exclamations of great amazement and much shouting. The radio, which was now working, was switched on and for the first time ever, news was broadcast into a news starved cell. To the head of the prison it was like swearing and blaspheming in church.

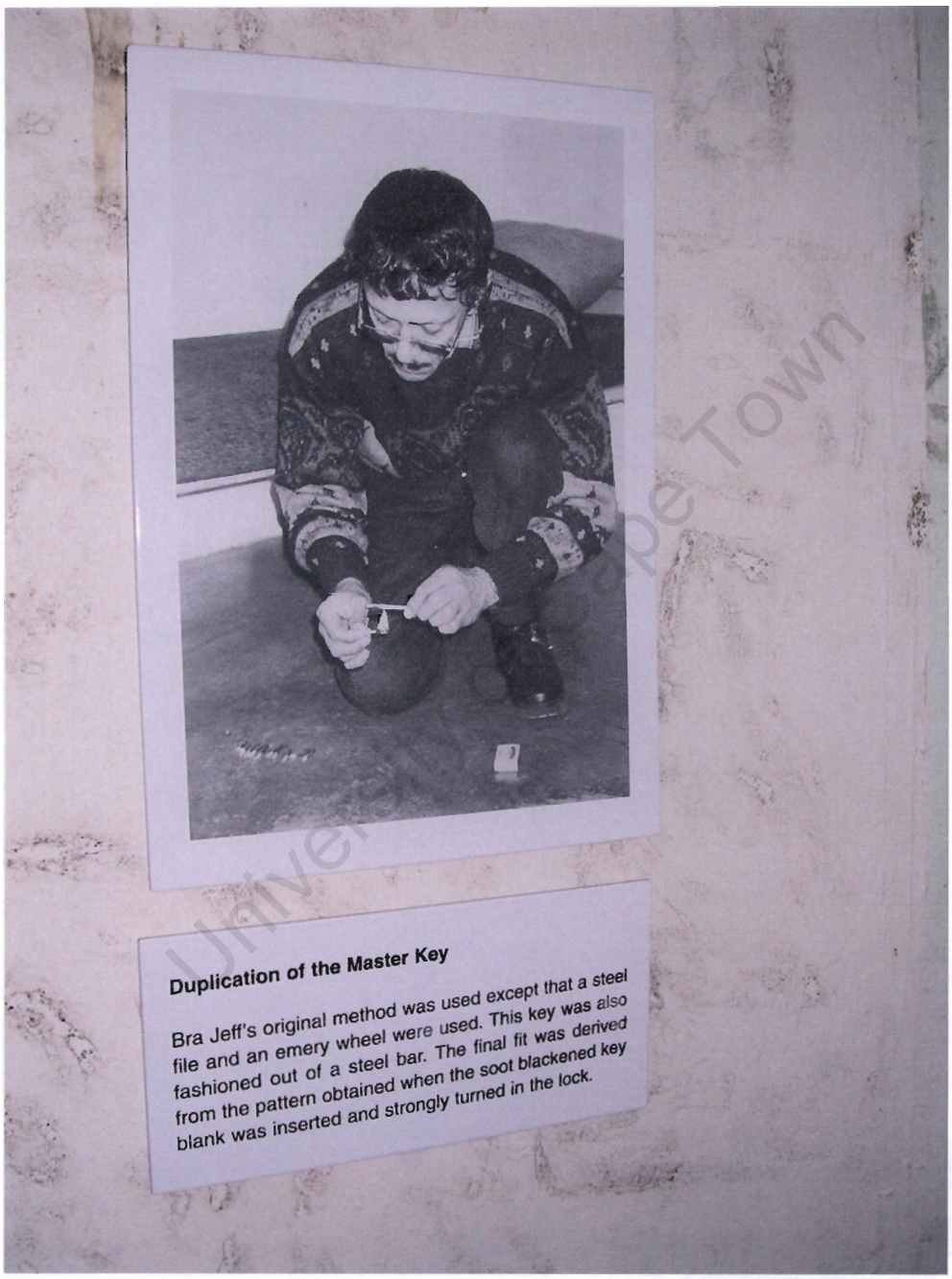
I was dragged down to the punishment section, roughly thrown into a damp cell. I was bodily lifted by two warders, punched in the face and head by the others, dropped onto the floor and kicked about. Half dazed, I felt my clothes pulled off and chains put onto my legs and wrists.

During the early hours of the night I slowly recovered, wiped the blood from my face. I crawled into the blankets and managed to fall asleep. I was hardly asleep when a terrifying tremor of the cell and bars started. The earthquake of 1969 reached Robben Island. This was one of my most horrifying experiences. Not only was I trapped in a small cell, I was also naked, awkwardly chained and injured. That night I learnt what claustrophobia really is.

I have always suppressed these experiences, never spoke of it before since to my great shame I was never able to take up the assault case successfully as was my duty. I was too dis-spirited. The doctor who came two weeks later said that he "can find no evidence of assault". The blood spots were carefully washed away from the cell walls.

Later that month I was charged with having an unauthorised article and for attempting to escape and my stay on the Island formally extended by a magistrate, imported for the purpose.

Extract of the interview conducted with Sedick Isaacs, the last of three.

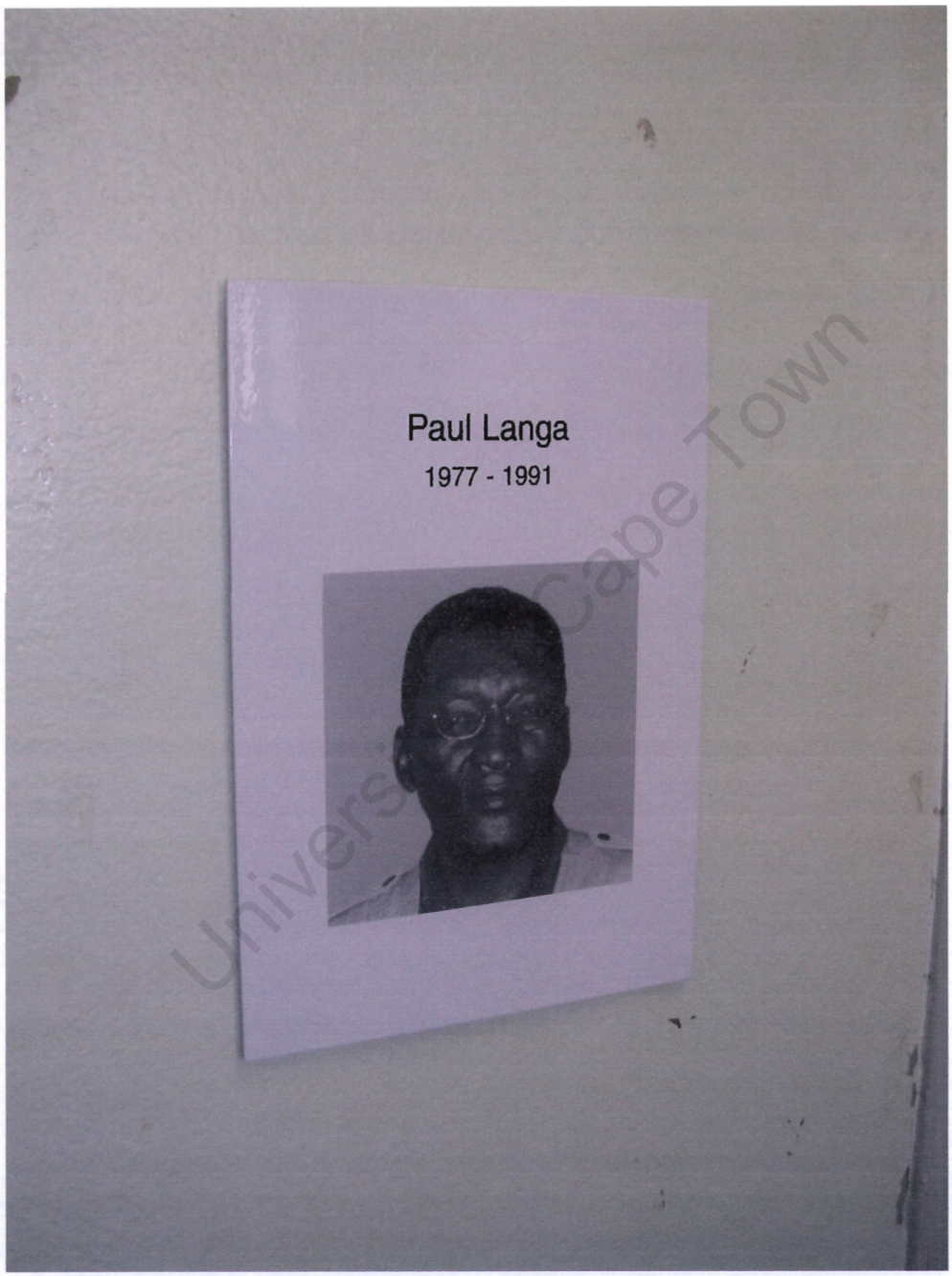


Personal object: a picture of Isaacs showing how they attempted to duplicate the master key.

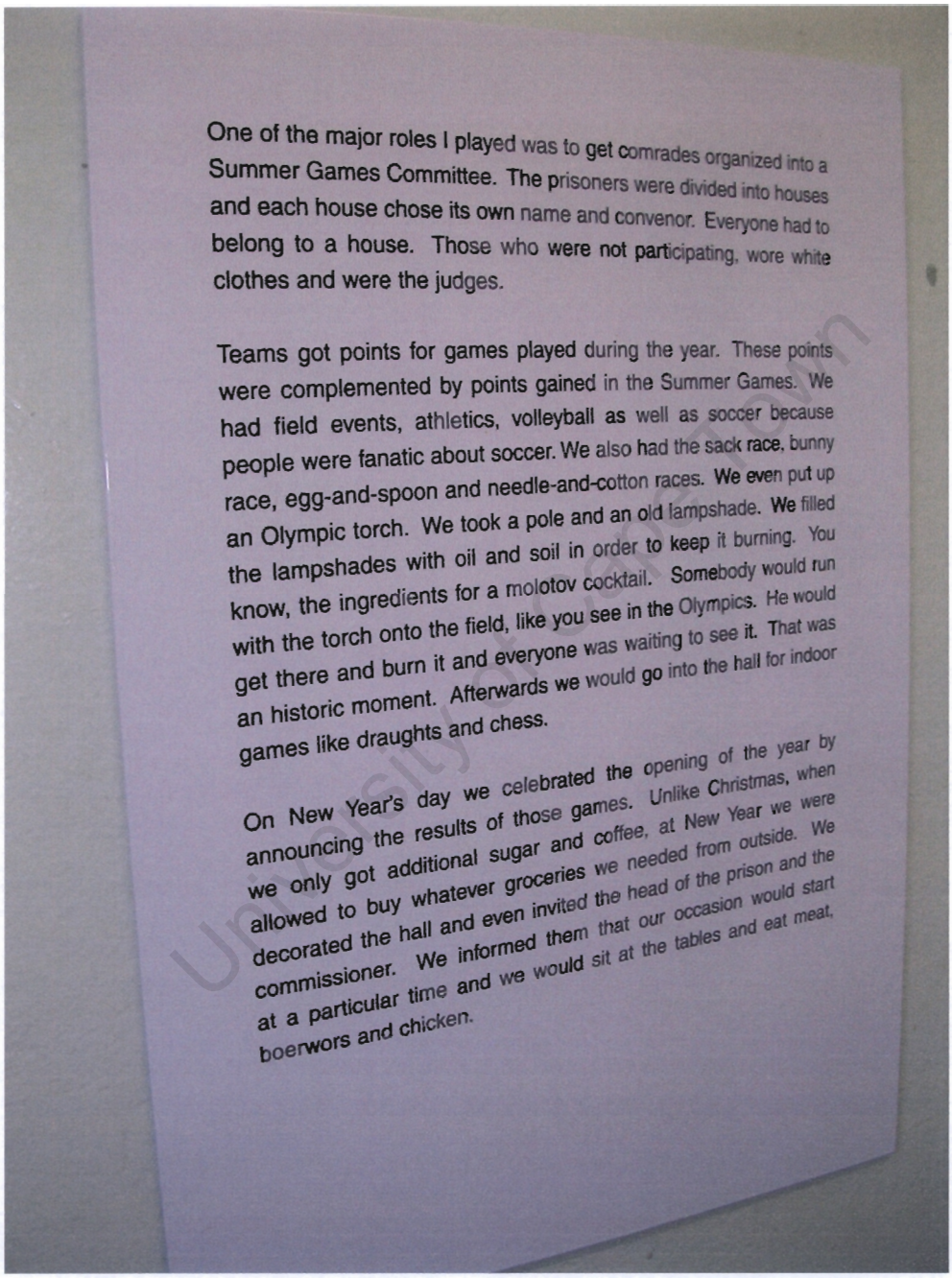
L

University of Cape Town

Langa, Paul (1977-1991)



University of Cape Town



One of the major roles I played was to get comrades organized into a Summer Games Committee. The prisoners were divided into houses and each house chose its own name and convenor. Everyone had to belong to a house. Those who were not participating, wore white clothes and were the judges.

Teams got points for games played during the year. These points were complemented by points gained in the Summer Games. We had field events, athletics, volleyball as well as soccer because people were fanatic about soccer. We also had the sack race, bunny race, egg-and-spoon and needle-and-cotton races. We even put up an Olympic torch. We took a pole and an old lampshade. We filled the lampshades with oil and soil in order to keep it burning. You know, the ingredients for a molotov cocktail. Somebody would run with the torch onto the field, like you see in the Olympics. He would get there and burn it and everyone was waiting to see it. That was an historic moment. Afterwards we would go into the hall for indoor games like draughts and chess.

On New Year's day we celebrated the opening of the year by announcing the results of those games. Unlike Christmas, when we only got additional sugar and coffee, at New Year we were allowed to buy whatever groceries we needed from outside. We decorated the hall and even invited the head of the prison and the commissioner. We informed them that our occasion would start at a particular time and we would sit at the tables and eat meat, boerwors and chicken.

Extract from the interview with Paul Langa conducted by Ashwell Adriaan (1999), University of Western Cape: Mayibuye Centre (1hr 56min 31sec): Cd nr. 2.

M

University of Cape Town

Masemola, Japhta (1963-1989)

Mark Shinners (1963-1975/1979-1991) – Shinners was interview on behalf of the late Japhta Masemola.



University of Cape Town

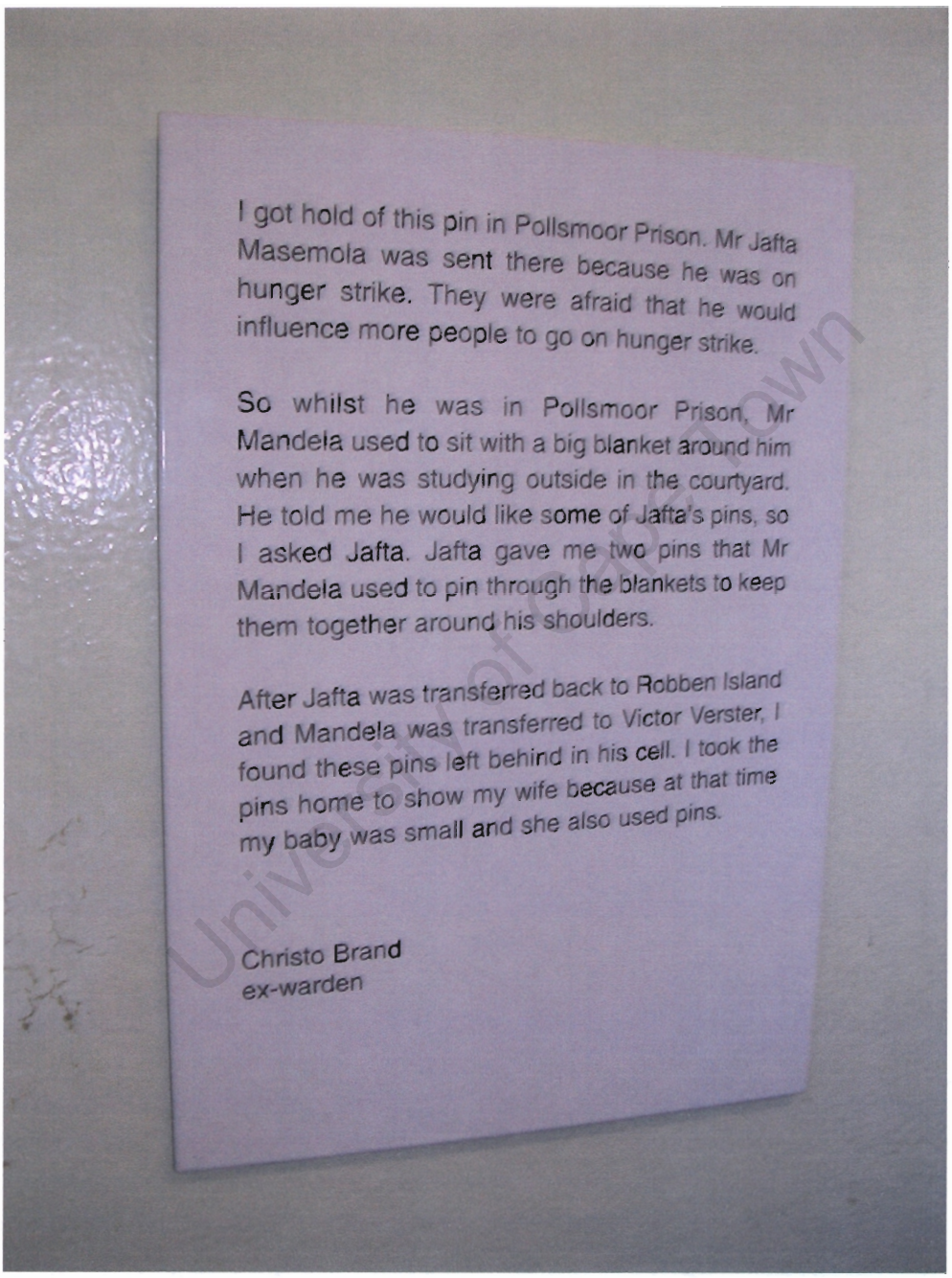
Jeff tried to make pegs and when they worked, he was celebrating there like a child. You could go to brother Jeff and ask him for four pegs and he would get busy and in no time you would get the pegs. So now you did not have to hang your clothes from the window. The warders would sometimes stop you from using the windows and accuse you of trying to escape. With Jeff's contraption you could pull a wire in the cell and hang up your clothes.

Jeff had the energy and enthusiasm to do anything. So you had this informal grouping of people around him. These were the people who made things happen. You take a thing like pegs for granted. But in an environment where you need it and it's not there and you are prohibited from having it, and suddenly somebody was producing it and manufacturing it, it was something really fascinating. Most important, it was for free. You did not have to exchange or pay for it in any way. Jeff was doing it for satisfaction, as a challenge.

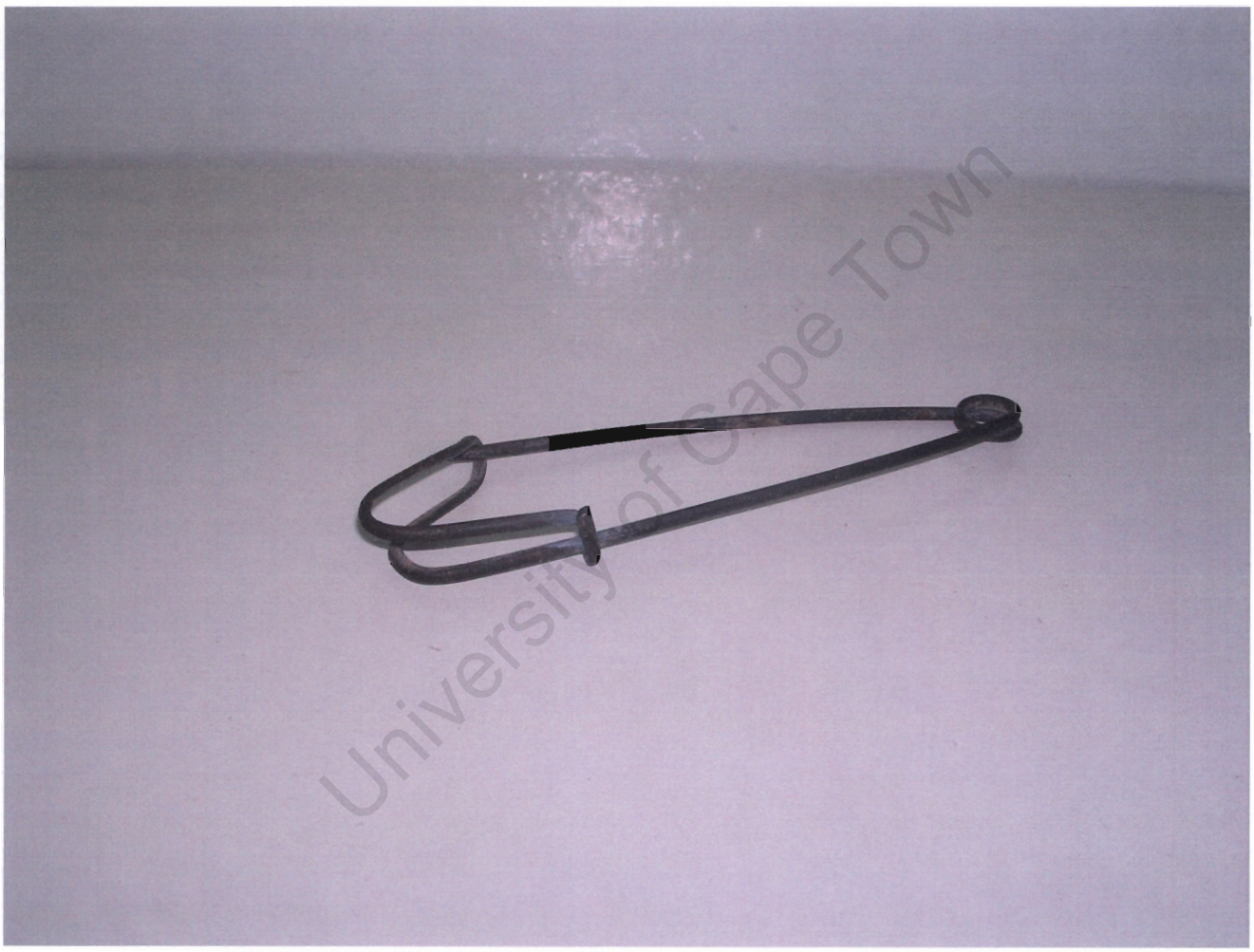
Of course he was not an easy man to relate to at all times. Some people found him very difficult but you had to understand the method and the mind of Jeff Masemola. At times he would be very emotional and angry about certain things, but he was a very forgiving man. He could look at his own behaviour and admit that he was wrong. Sometimes he would demand to be left alone. At other times when we asked him why he wanted to be alone, he would say, "Look, I feel I am being unreasonable. People are in prison here and I insist that things must be done in certain ways."

But the next time he would change his mind and come back. At all times he was thinking about other people and how he was impacting upon them. He felt that he was the one who had to make things easier for people. That's how he was, really.

Extract from interview with Mark and Mary Shinners conducted by Ashwell Adriaan (1999), Unicersity of Western Cape: Mayibuye Centre (3hrs min 38sec): Cd nr. 3.

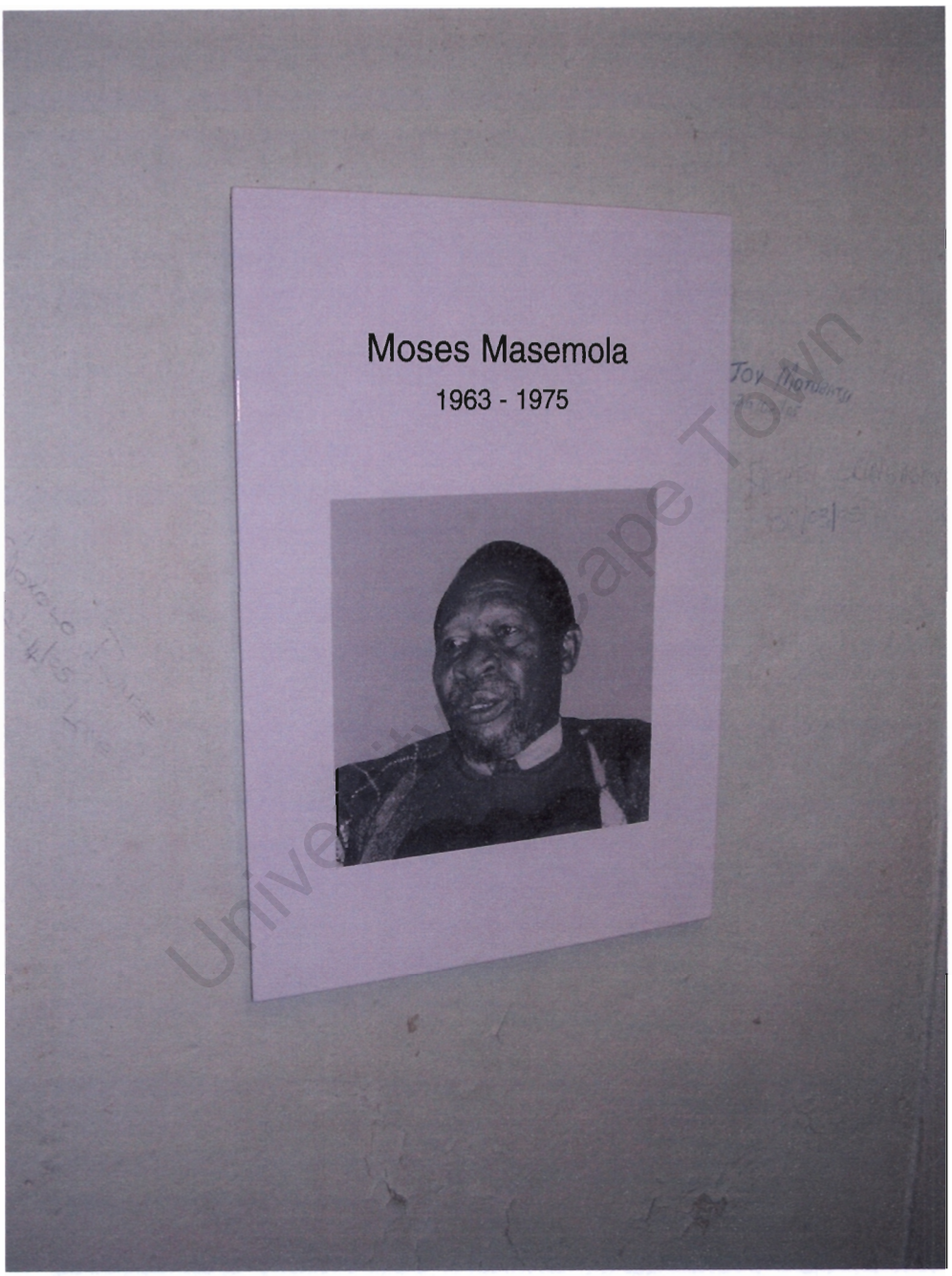


Label explaining the pin displayed in Japhta Masemola's locker, in the words of a former warden at Robben Island – Christo Brand.

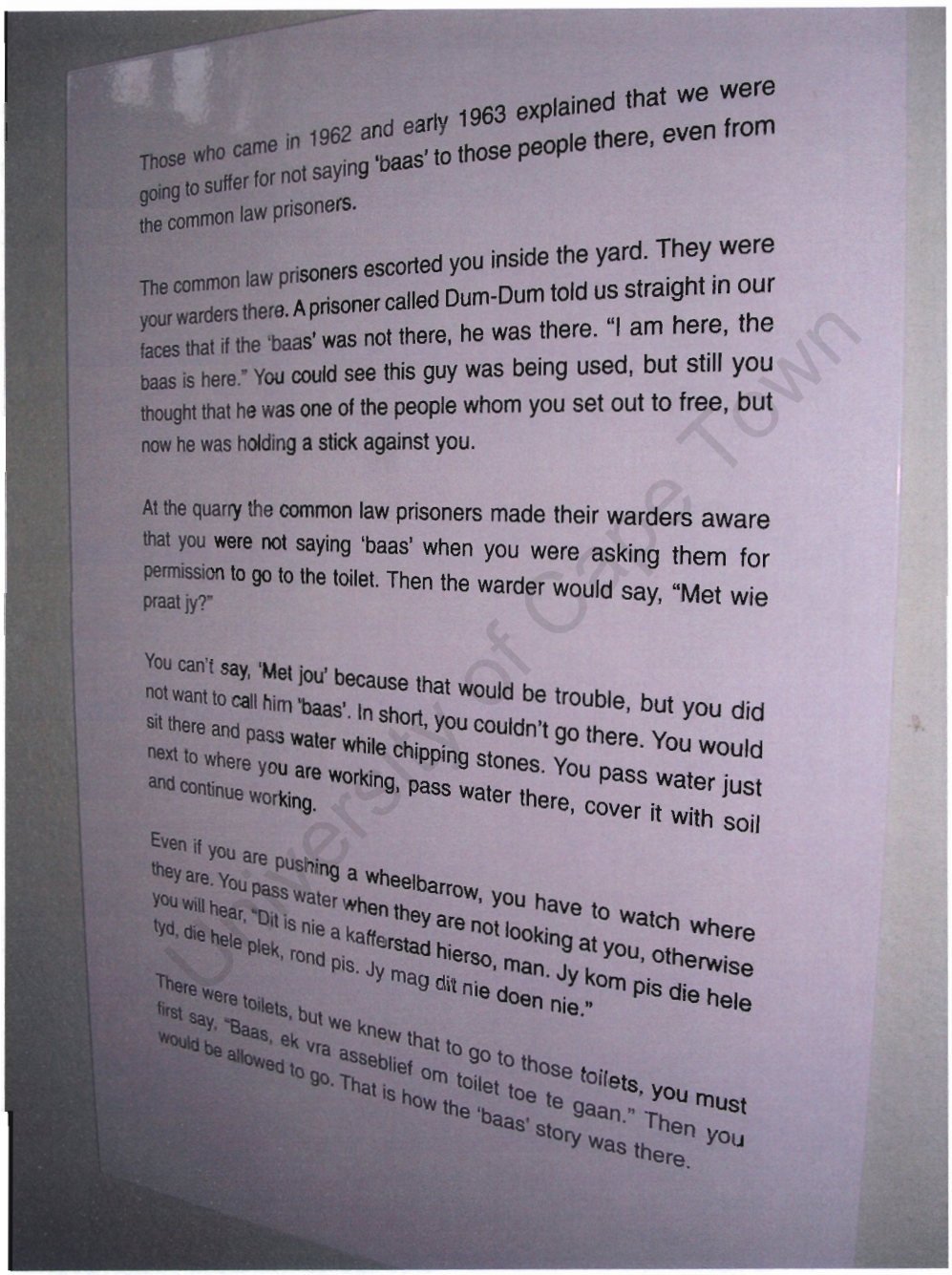

University of Cape Town

Personal object: a pin, made by Japtha Masmola.

Masemola, Moses (1963-1975)



University of Cape Town



Those who came in 1962 and early 1963 explained that we were going to suffer for not saying 'baas' to those people there, even from the common law prisoners.

The common law prisoners escorted you inside the yard. They were your warders there. A prisoner called Dum-Dum told us straight in our faces that if the 'baas' was not there, he was there. "I am here, the baas is here." You could see this guy was being used, but still you thought that he was one of the people whom you set out to free, but now he was holding a stick against you.

At the quarry the common law prisoners made their warders aware that you were not saying 'baas' when you were asking them for permission to go to the toilet. Then the warder would say, "Met wie praat jy?"

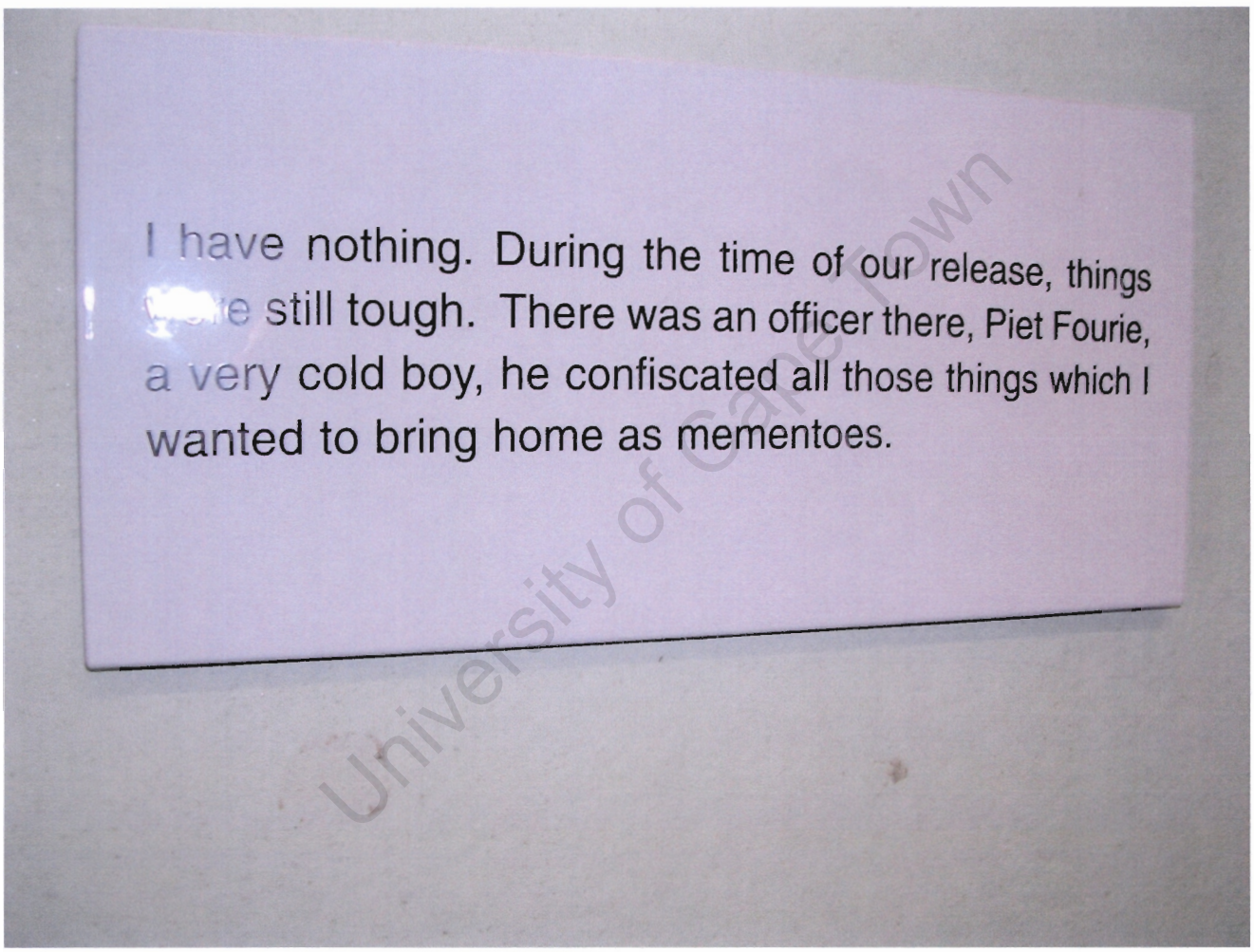
You can't say, 'Met jou' because that would be trouble, but you did not want to call him 'baas'. In short, you couldn't go there. You would sit there and pass water while chipping stones. You pass water just next to where you are working, pass water there, cover it with soil and continue working.

Even if you are pushing a wheelbarrow, you have to watch where they are. You pass water when they are not looking at you, otherwise you will hear, "Dit is nie a kafferstad hierso, man. Jy kom pis die hele tyd, die hele plek, rond pis. Jy mag dit nie doen nie."

There were toilets, but we knew that to go to those toilets, you must first say, "Baas, ek vra asseblief om toilet toe te gaan." Then you would be allowed to go. That is how the 'baas' story was there.

University of Cape Town

Extract from the interview with Moses Masemola.



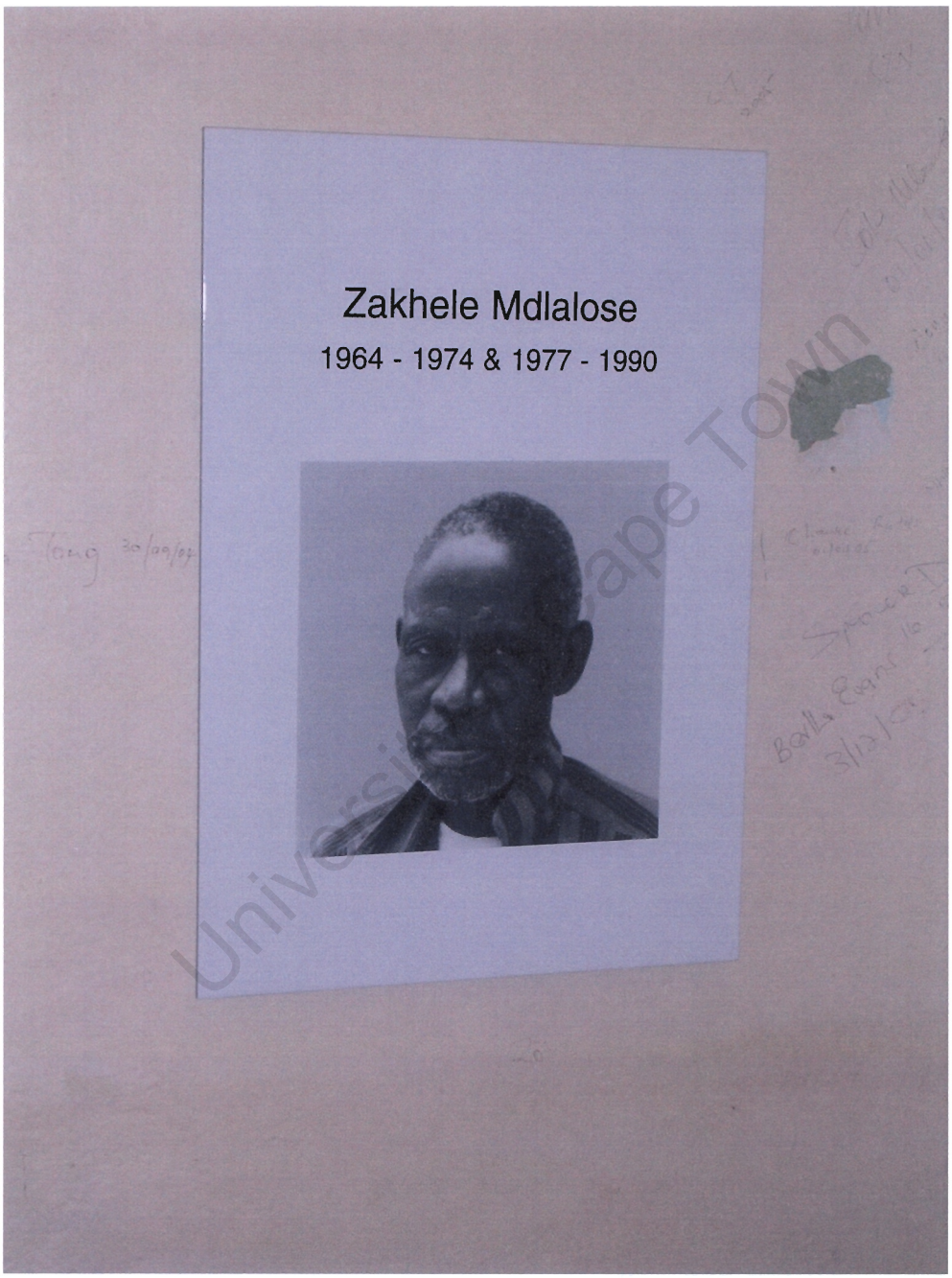
University of Cape Town

Label explaining the empty locker of Moses Masmola.


University of Cape Town

Moses Masemola's empty locker.

Mdlalose, Zakhele (1964-1974/1977-1990)



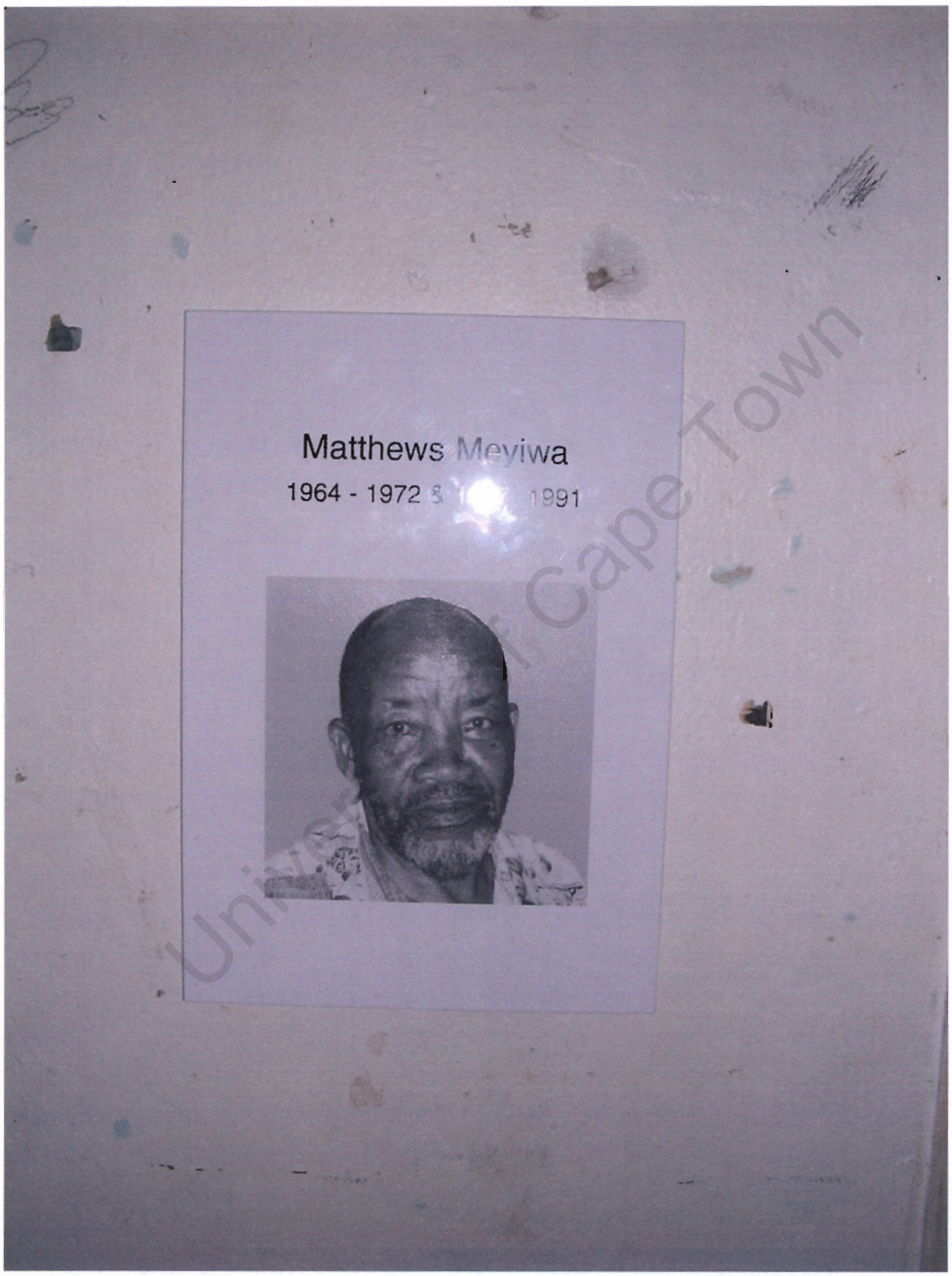
University of Cape Town

Zakhele Mdlalose's display:

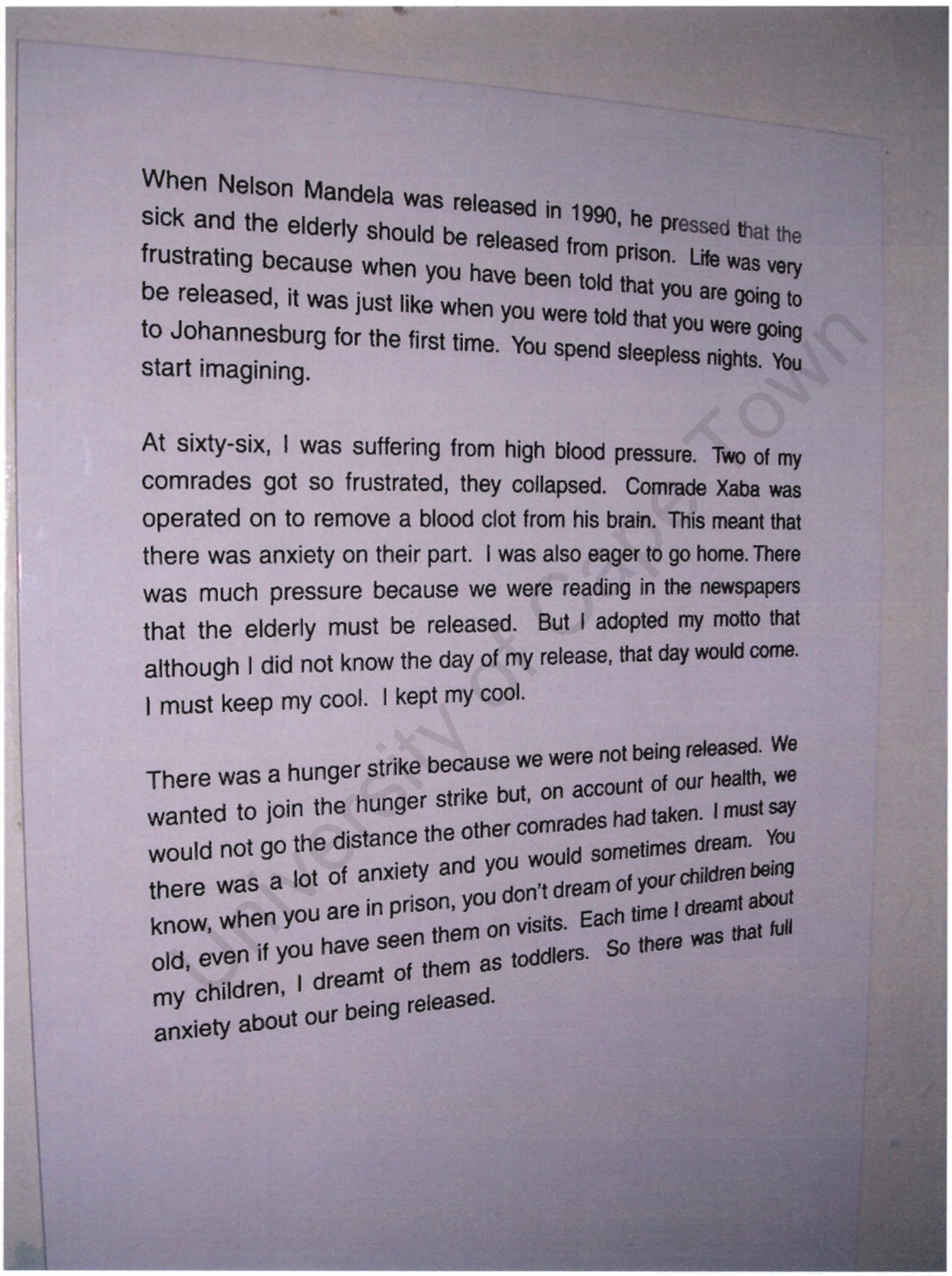
There was nothing on display in the cell of Mdlalose. This could mean that the object has been taken back (as it is just on loan from some), or that the display is down for maintenance.

University of Cape Town

Meyiwa, Matthews (1964-1972/1977-1991)



University of Cape Town



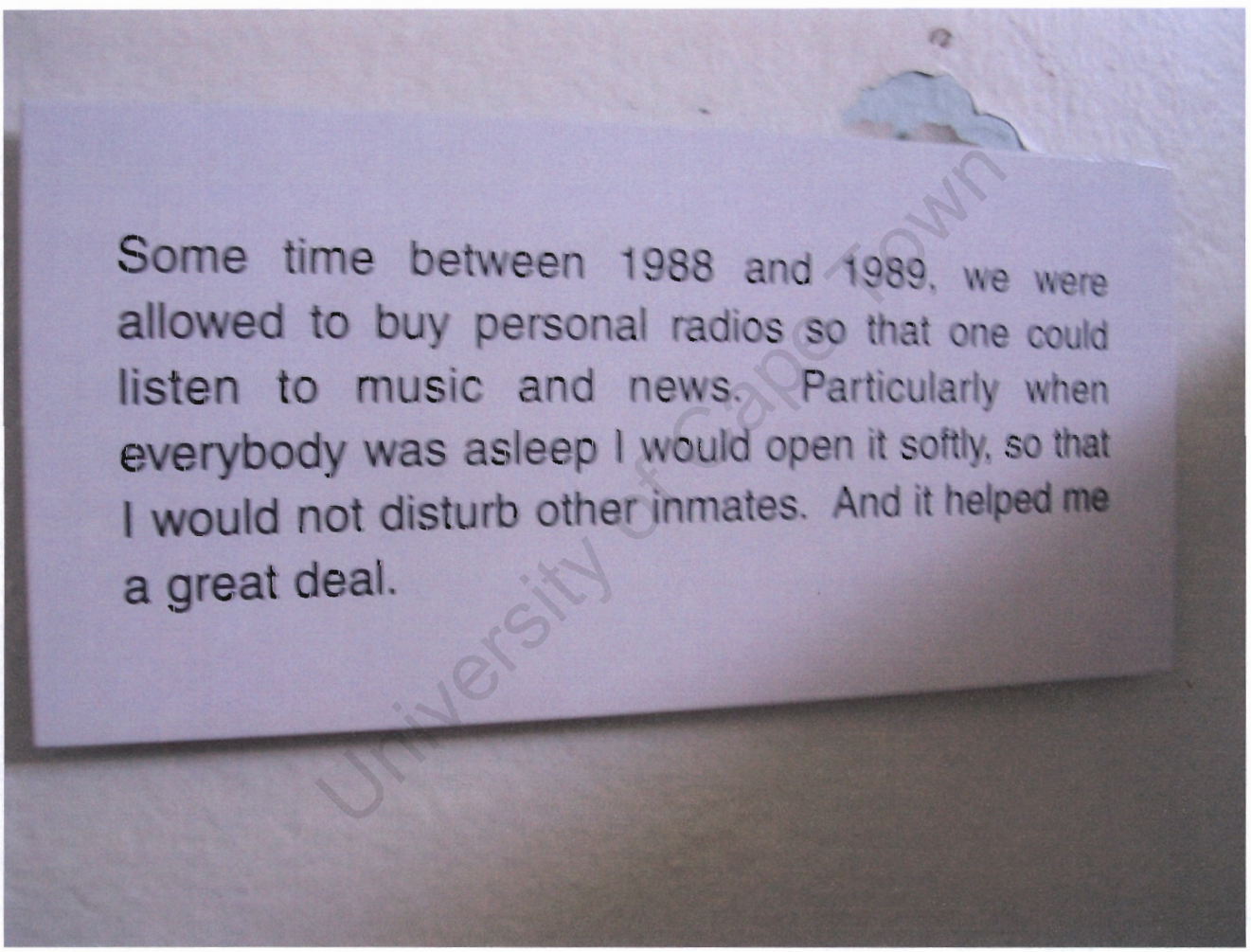
When Nelson Mandela was released in 1990, he pressed that the sick and the elderly should be released from prison. Life was very frustrating because when you have been told that you are going to be released, it was just like when you were told that you were going to Johannesburg for the first time. You spend sleepless nights. You start imagining.

At sixty-six, I was suffering from high blood pressure. Two of my comrades got so frustrated, they collapsed. Comrade Xaba was operated on to remove a blood clot from his brain. This meant that there was anxiety on their part. I was also eager to go home. There was much pressure because we were reading in the newspapers that the elderly must be released. But I adopted my motto that although I did not know the day of my release, that day would come. I must keep my cool. I kept my cool.

There was a hunger strike because we were not being released. We wanted to join the hunger strike but, on account of our health, we would not go the distance the other comrades had taken. I must say there was a lot of anxiety and you would sometimes dream. You know, when you are in prison, you don't dream of your children being old, even if you have seen them on visits. Each time I dreamt about my children, I dreamt of them as toddlers. So there was that full anxiety about our being released.

University of Cape Town

Extract from the interview with Matthews Meyiwa conducted by Noel Solani and Ashwell Adriaan (1998), University of Western Cape: Mayibuye centre (2hrs 16min 19sec): Cd nr. 2.



University of Cape Town

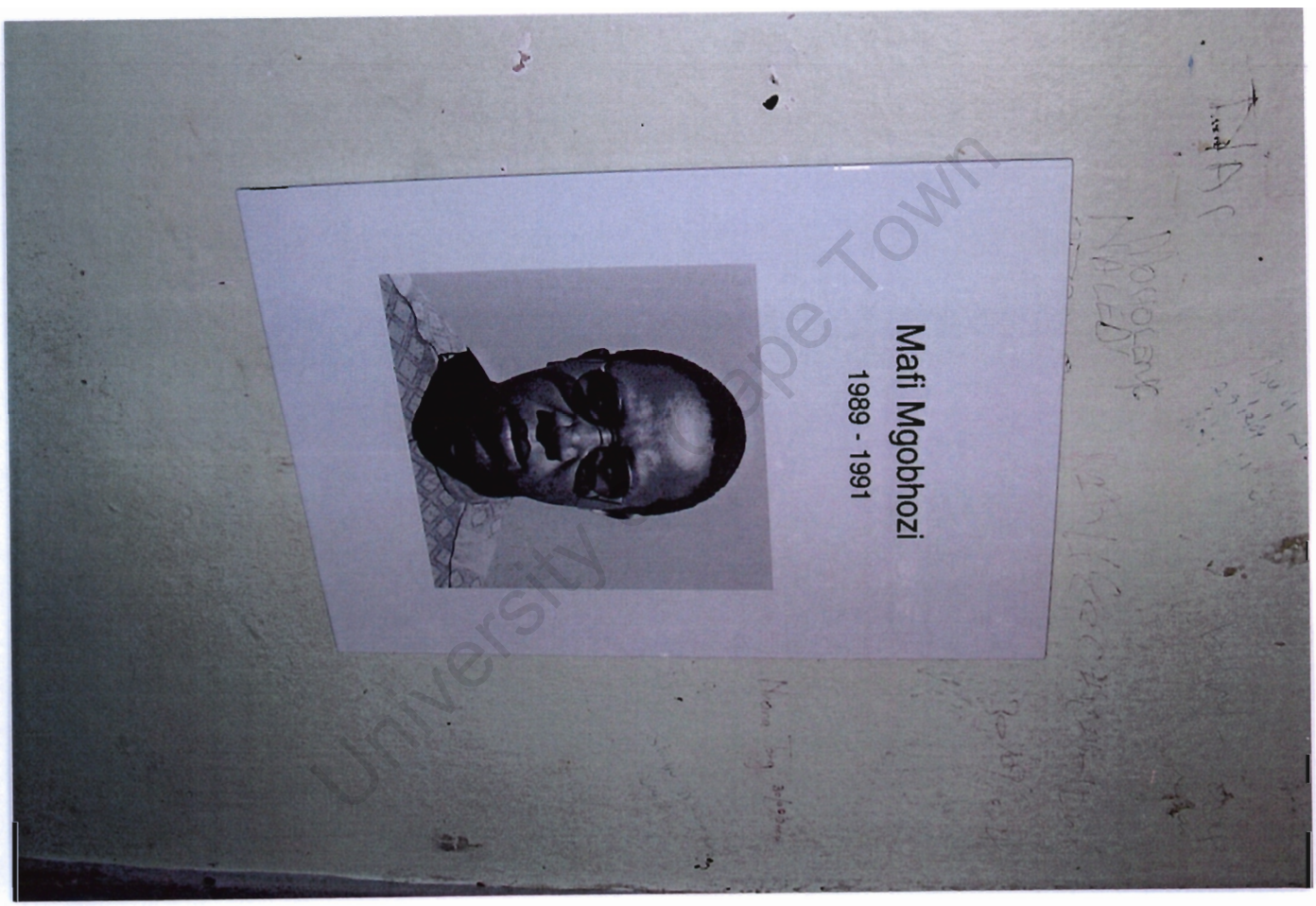
Label explaining the radio in the locker of Matthews Meyiwa, in his own words.



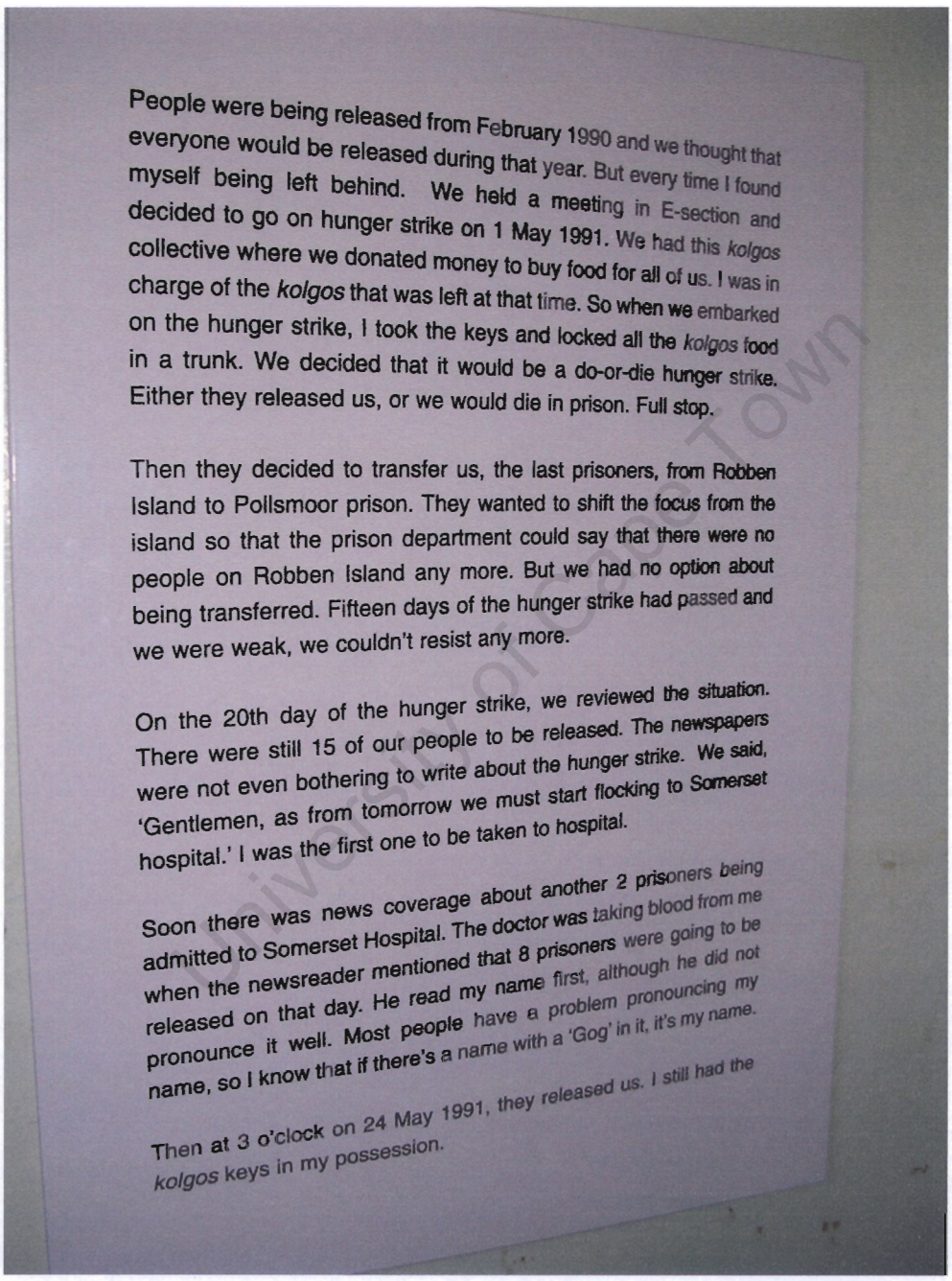
University of Cape Town

Personal object: a radio.

Mgobhozi, Mafi (1989-1991)



University of Cape Town



People were being released from February 1990 and we thought that everyone would be released during that year. But every time I found myself being left behind. We held a meeting in E-section and decided to go on hunger strike on 1 May 1991. We had this *kolgos* collective where we donated money to buy food for all of us. I was in charge of the *kolgos* that was left at that time. So when we embarked on the hunger strike, I took the keys and locked all the *kolgos* food in a trunk. We decided that it would be a do-or-die hunger strike. Either they released us, or we would die in prison. Full stop.

Then they decided to transfer us, the last prisoners, from Robben Island to Pollsmoor prison. They wanted to shift the focus from the island so that the prison department could say that there were no people on Robben Island any more. But we had no option about being transferred. Fifteen days of the hunger strike had passed and we were weak, we couldn't resist any more.

On the 20th day of the hunger strike, we reviewed the situation. There were still 15 of our people to be released. The newspapers were not even bothering to write about the hunger strike. We said, 'Gentlemen, as from tomorrow we must start flocking to Somerset hospital.' I was the first one to be taken to hospital.

Soon there was news coverage about another 2 prisoners being admitted to Somerset Hospital. The doctor was taking blood from me when the newsreader mentioned that 8 prisoners were going to be released on that day. He read my name first, although he did not pronounce it well. Most people have a problem pronouncing my name, so I know that if there's a name with a 'Gog' in it, it's my name.

Then at 3 o'clock on 24 May 1991, they released us. I still had the *kolgos* keys in my possession.

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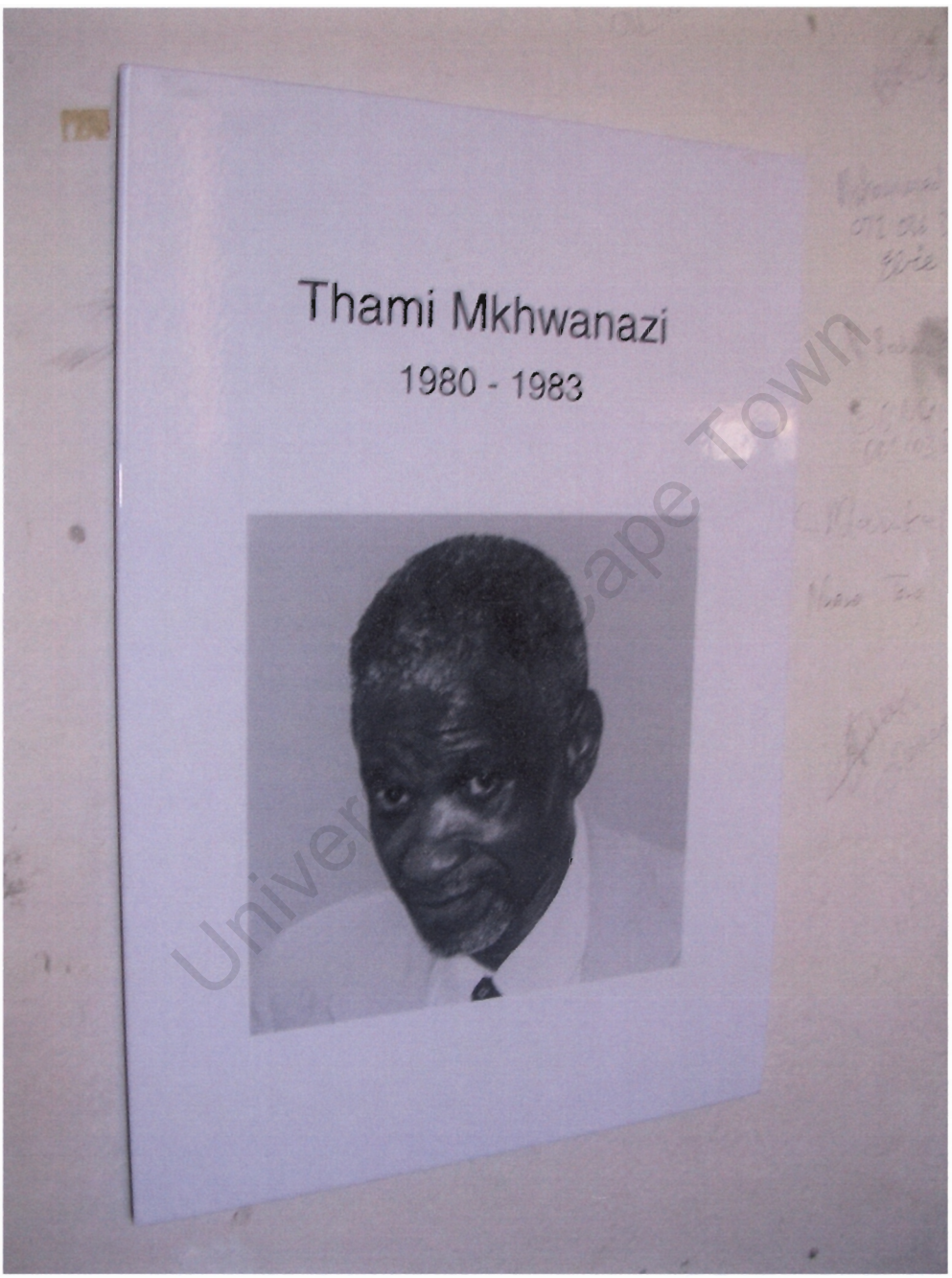
Extract from the interview with Mafi Mgobhozi.



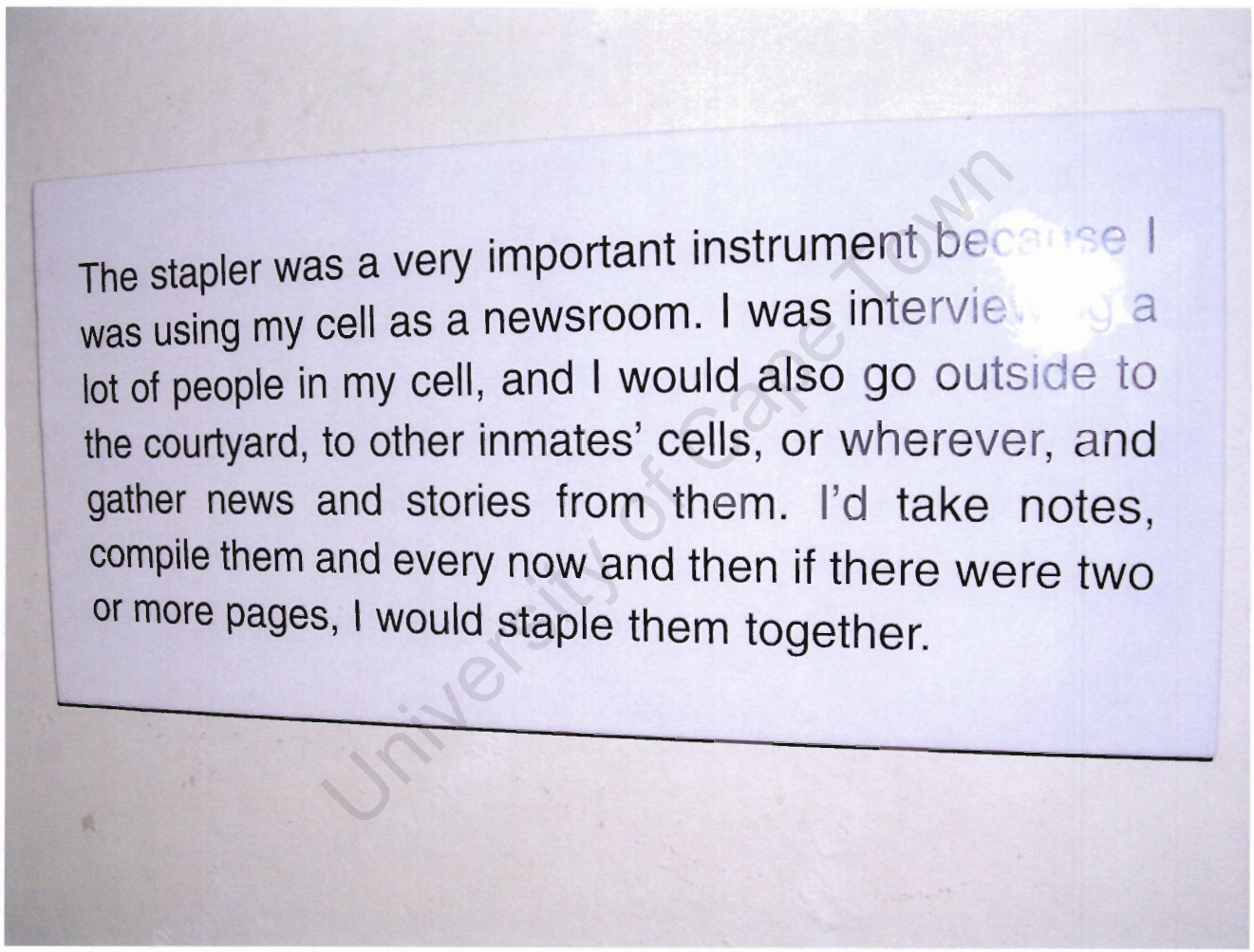
University of Cape Town

Personal object: the keys to the *kolgos* box.

Mkhwanazi, Thami (1980-1983)



University of Cape Town



University of Cape Town

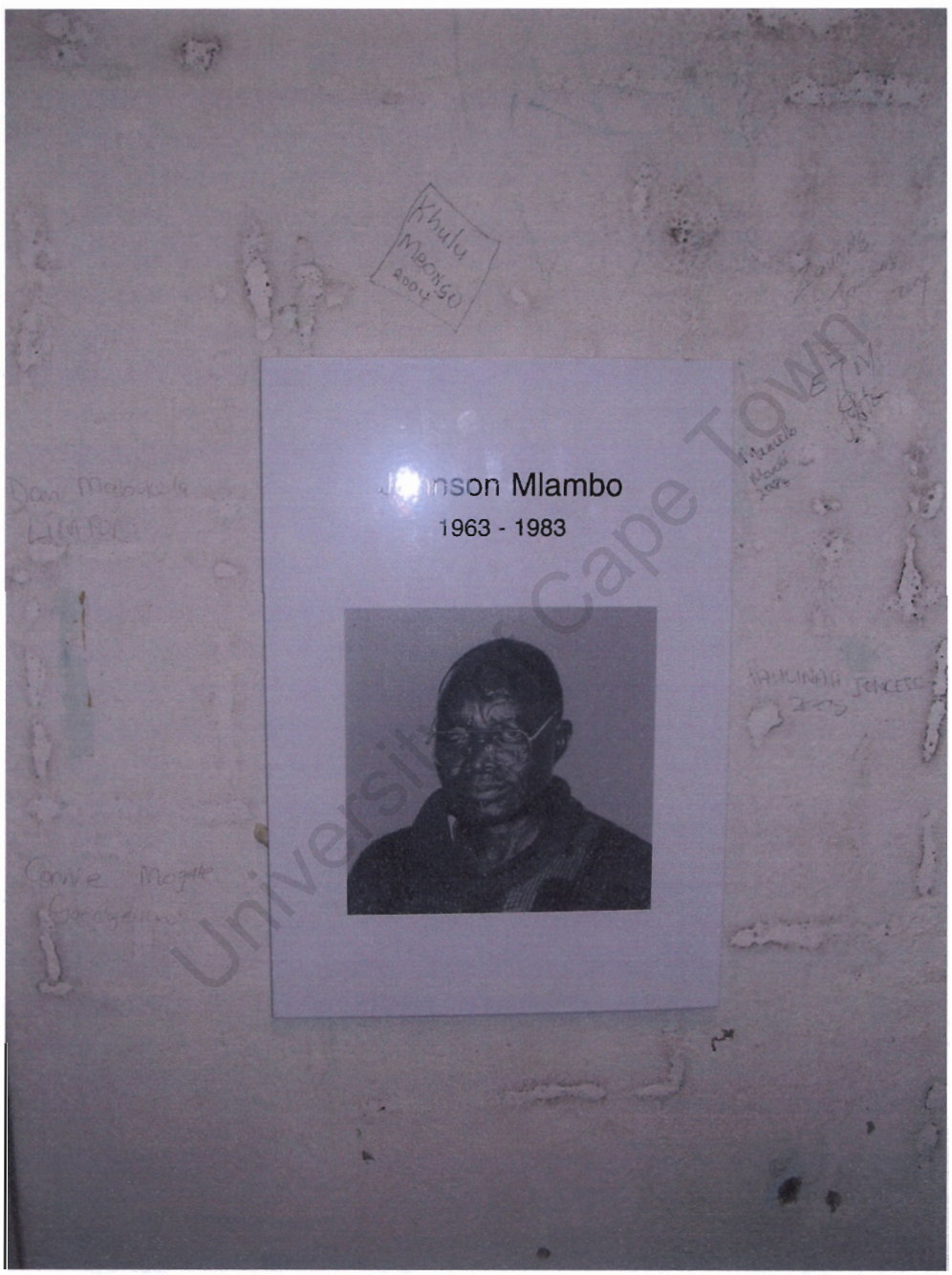
The label explaining the object, in the words of Mkhwanazi.



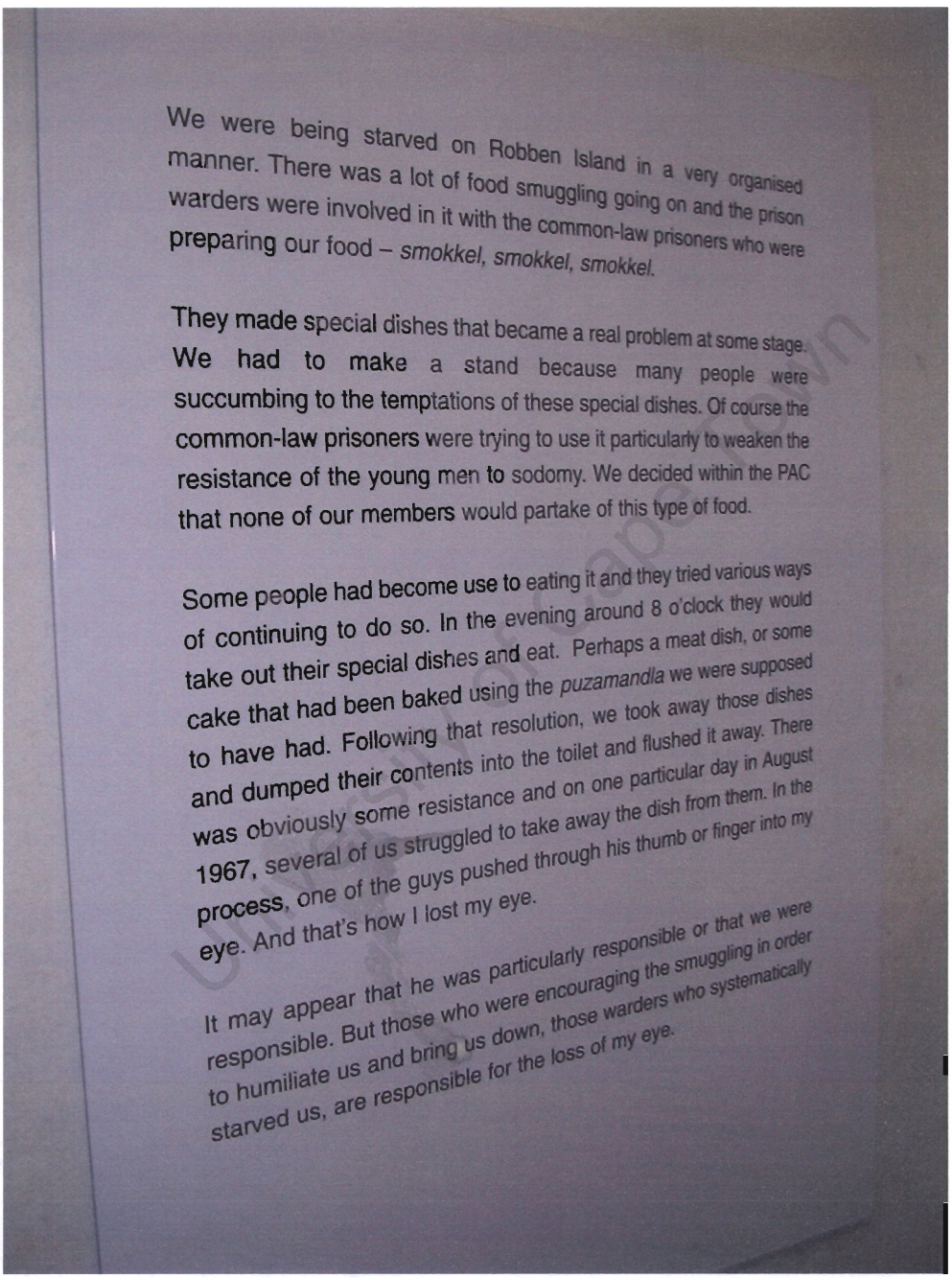
University of Cape Town

Personal object: a stapler.

Mlambo, Johnson (1963-1983)



University of Cape Town



We were being starved on Robben Island in a very organised manner. There was a lot of food smuggling going on and the prison warders were involved in it with the common-law prisoners who were preparing our food – *smokkel, smokkel, smokkel.*

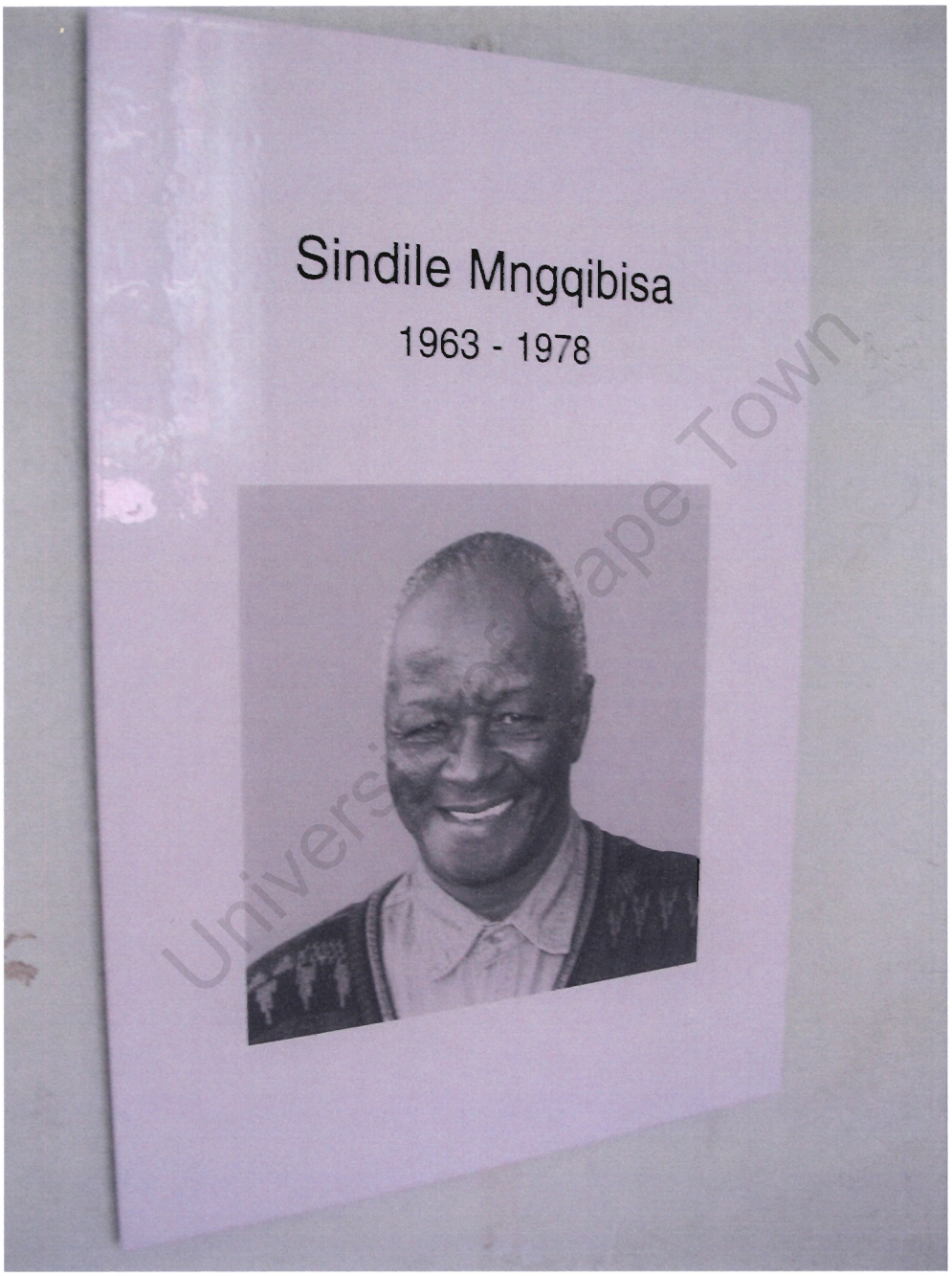
They made special dishes that became a real problem at some stage. We had to make a stand because many people were succumbing to the temptations of these special dishes. Of course the common-law prisoners were trying to use it particularly to weaken the resistance of the young men to sodomy. We decided within the PAC that none of our members would partake of this type of food.

Some people had become use to eating it and they tried various ways of continuing to do so. In the evening around 8 o'clock they would take out their special dishes and eat. Perhaps a meat dish, or some cake that had been baked using the *puzamandla* we were supposed to have had. Following that resolution, we took away those dishes and dumped their contents into the toilet and flushed it away. There was obviously some resistance and on one particular day in August 1967, several of us struggled to take away the dish from them. In the process, one of the guys pushed through his thumb or finger into my eye. And that's how I lost my eye.

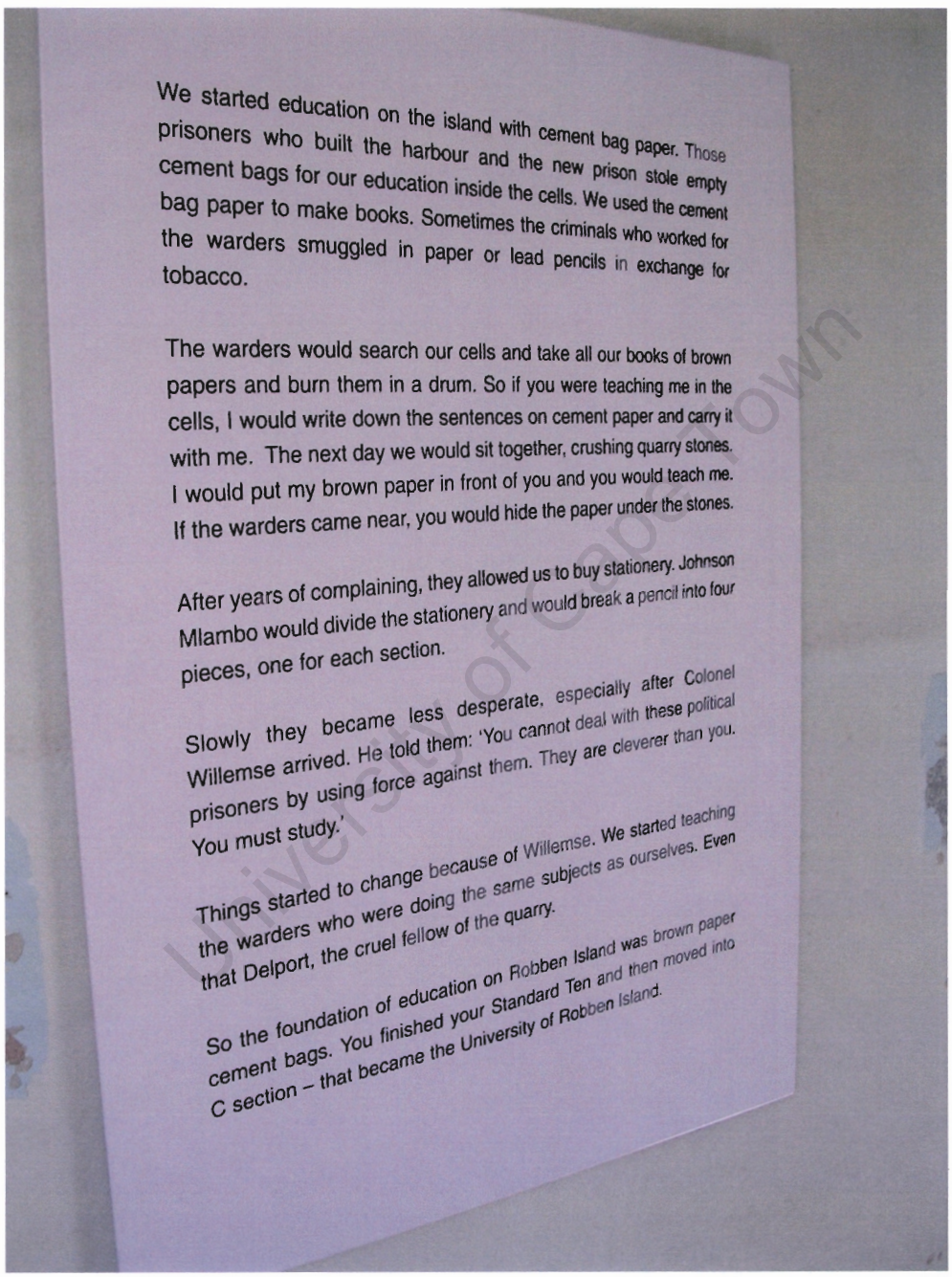
It may appear that he was particularly responsible or that we were responsible. But those who were encouraging the smuggling in order to humiliate us and bring us down, those warders who systematically starved us, are responsible for the loss of my eye.

Extract from the interview with Johnson Mlambo.

Mngqibisa, Sindile (1963-1978)



University of Cape Town



We started education on the island with cement bag paper. Those prisoners who built the harbour and the new prison stole empty cement bags for our education inside the cells. We used the cement bag paper to make books. Sometimes the criminals who worked for the warders smuggled in paper or lead pencils in exchange for tobacco.

The warders would search our cells and take all our books of brown papers and burn them in a drum. So if you were teaching me in the cells, I would write down the sentences on cement paper and carry it with me. The next day we would sit together, crushing quarry stones. I would put my brown paper in front of you and you would teach me. If the warders came near, you would hide the paper under the stones.

After years of complaining, they allowed us to buy stationery. Johnson Mlambo would divide the stationery and would break a pencil into four pieces, one for each section.

Slowly they became less desperate, especially after Colonel Willemse arrived. He told them: 'You cannot deal with these political prisoners by using force against them. They are cleverer than you. You must study.'

Things started to change because of Willemse. We started teaching the warders who were doing the same subjects as ourselves. Even that Delport, the cruel fellow of the quarry.

So the foundation of education on Robben Island was brown paper cement bags. You finished your Standard Ten and then moved into C section – that became the University of Robben Island.

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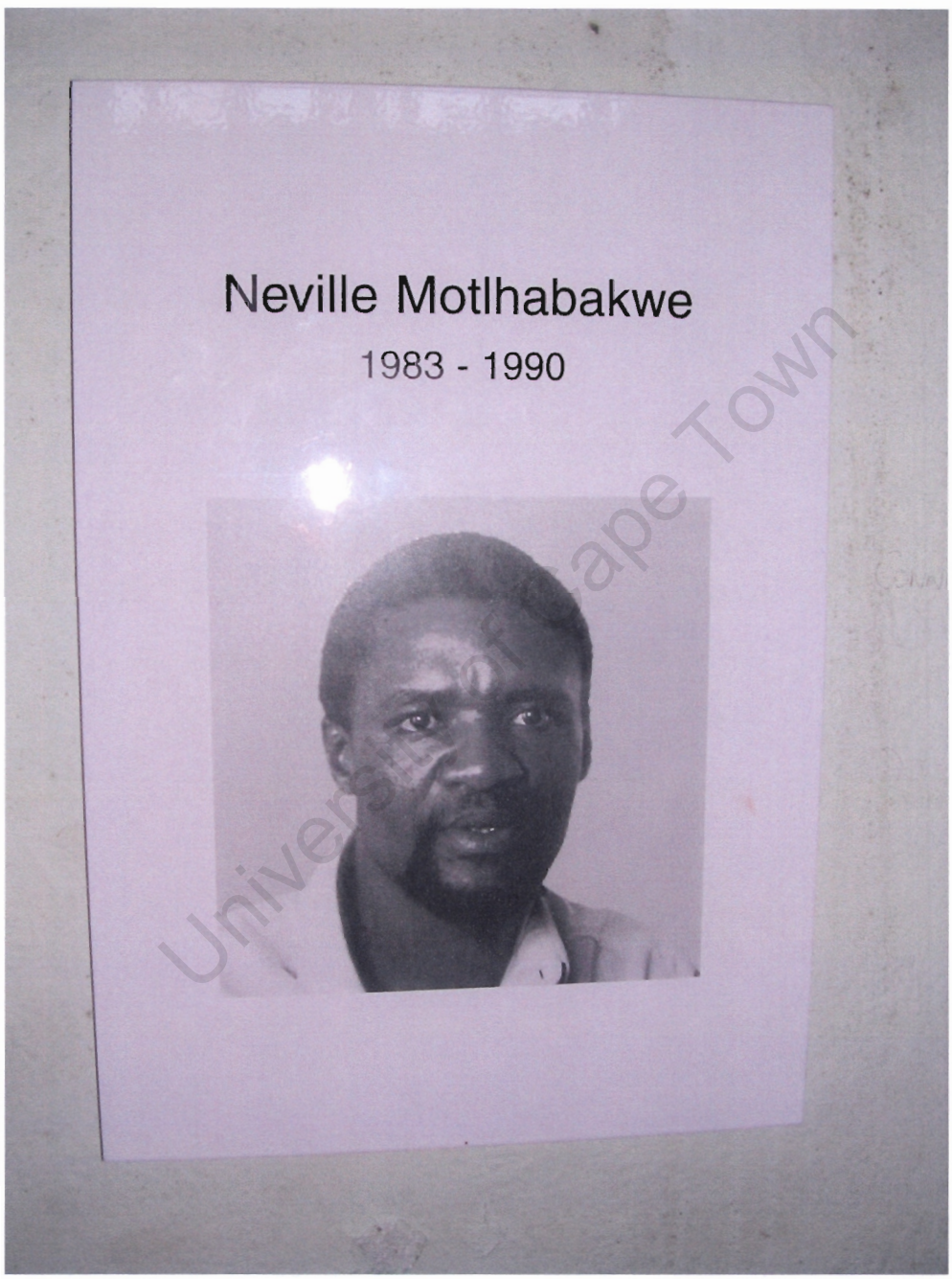
Extract from interview with Sindile Mngqibisa.



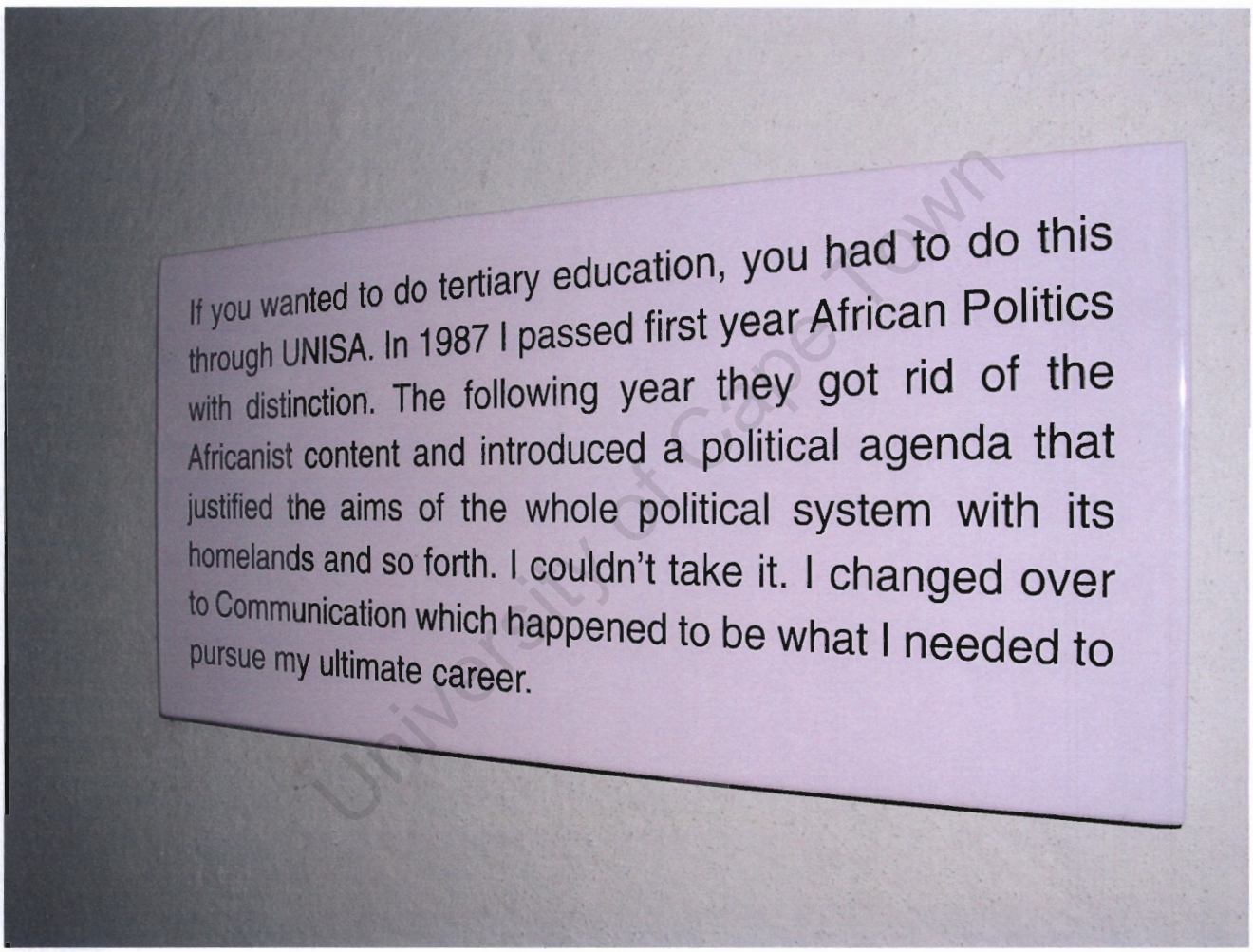
University of Cape Town

Personal object: a notebook made out of cement-bag paper (read the word 'rebuild' on the bag – a conscious decision?)

Motlhabakwe, Neville (1983-1990)



University of Cape Town



University of Cape Town

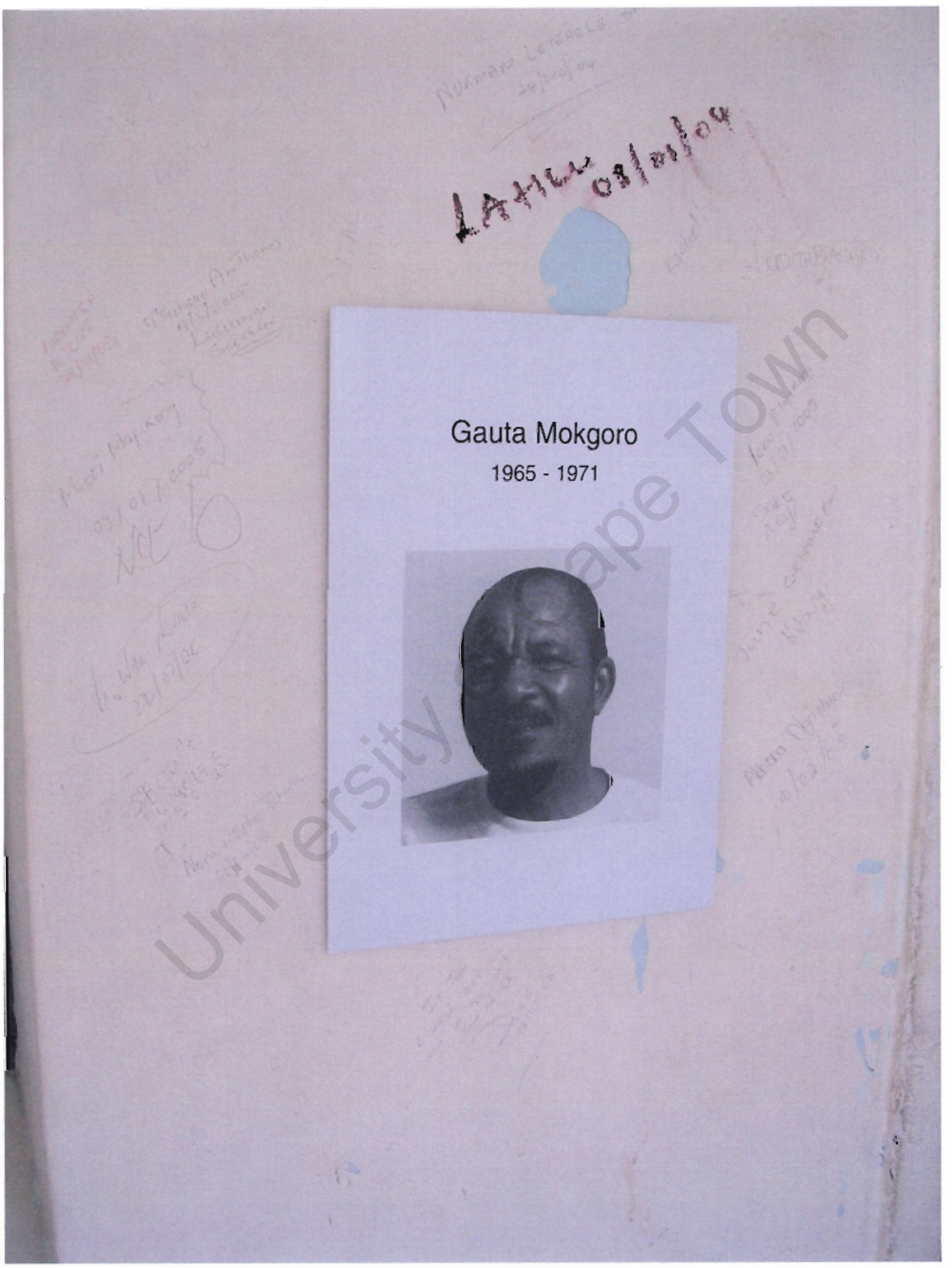
The label explaining the correspondence from UNISA displayed in Neville Motlhbakwe's locker. (Extract from interview with Motlhabakwe conducted by Noel Solani (no date), University of Western Cape: Mayibuye Centre (3hrs 18min 44sec): Cd nr. 4).



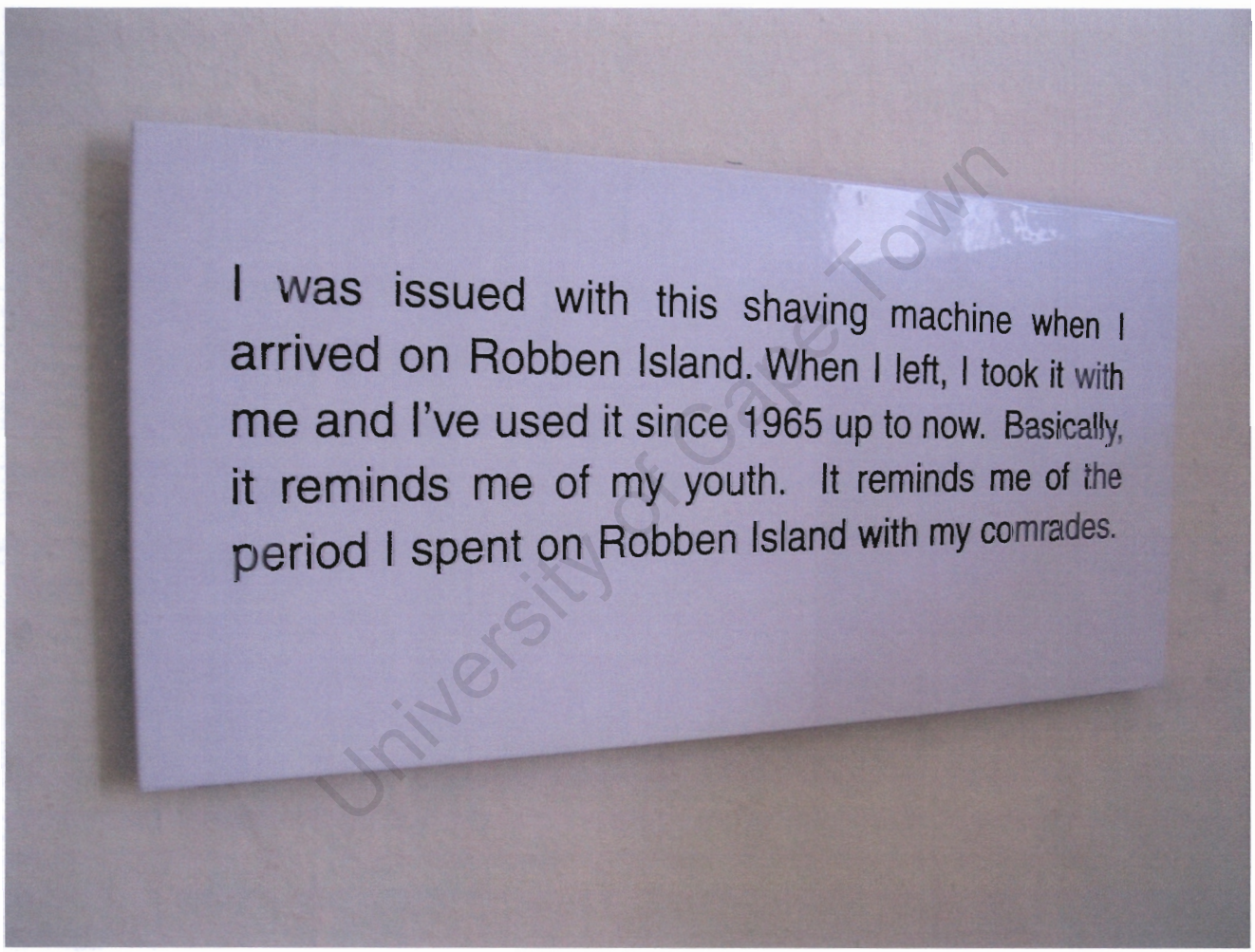
University of Cape Town

Personal object: UNISA correspondence.

Mokgoro, Gauta (1965-1971)



University of Cape Town



University of Cape Town

Label explaining the Mokgoro's razor, in his own words.


University of Cape Town

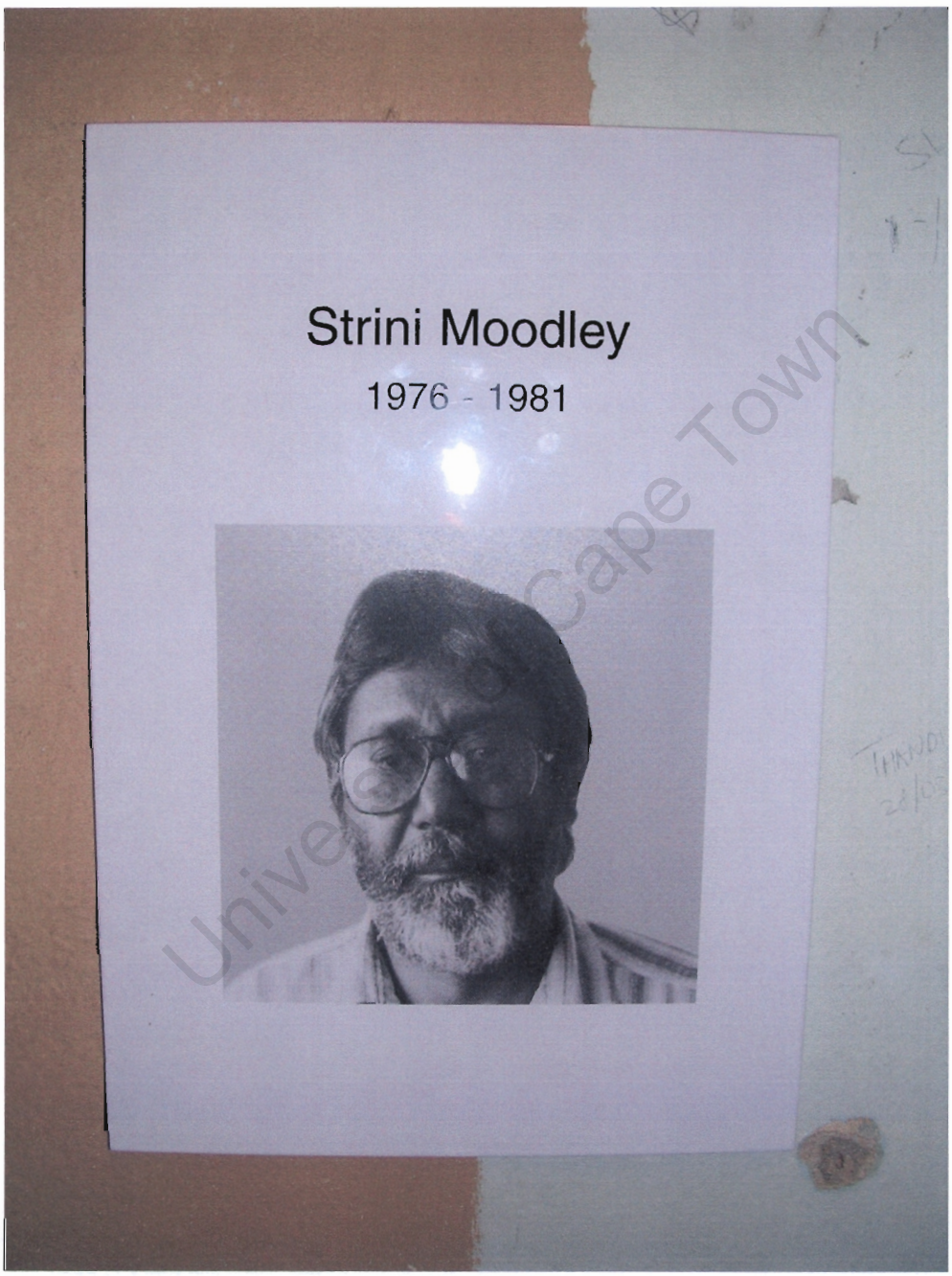
Personal object: a razor.

Mokgoro's audio recording:

'I was one of those unfortunate ones on Robben Island who could not get financial support from a family outside to enable you to register and study. For my whole period in Robben Island I was just not formally studying, although I did a lot of reading. At one stage I also decided to slip into C-section, because that was the section used by those who were studying. I slipped into that section to stay there, to be able to read. And I was reading educational books, I was informally studying, you know. I did bookkeeping, I did commerce, biology, I did English. And although I never sat for formal examinations but I did read. Besides, in my political reading I read quite a number of political theories. And I think that helped me a great deal to improve my understanding; to improve my political awareness and sustain me in, you know, during my time on the island.'

University of Cape Town

Moodley, Strini (1976-1981)



University of Cape Town



University of Cape Town

Label explaining the censored letter in Moodley's locker – in his own words.

Personal object: a censored letter.

Strini Moodley's audio recording:

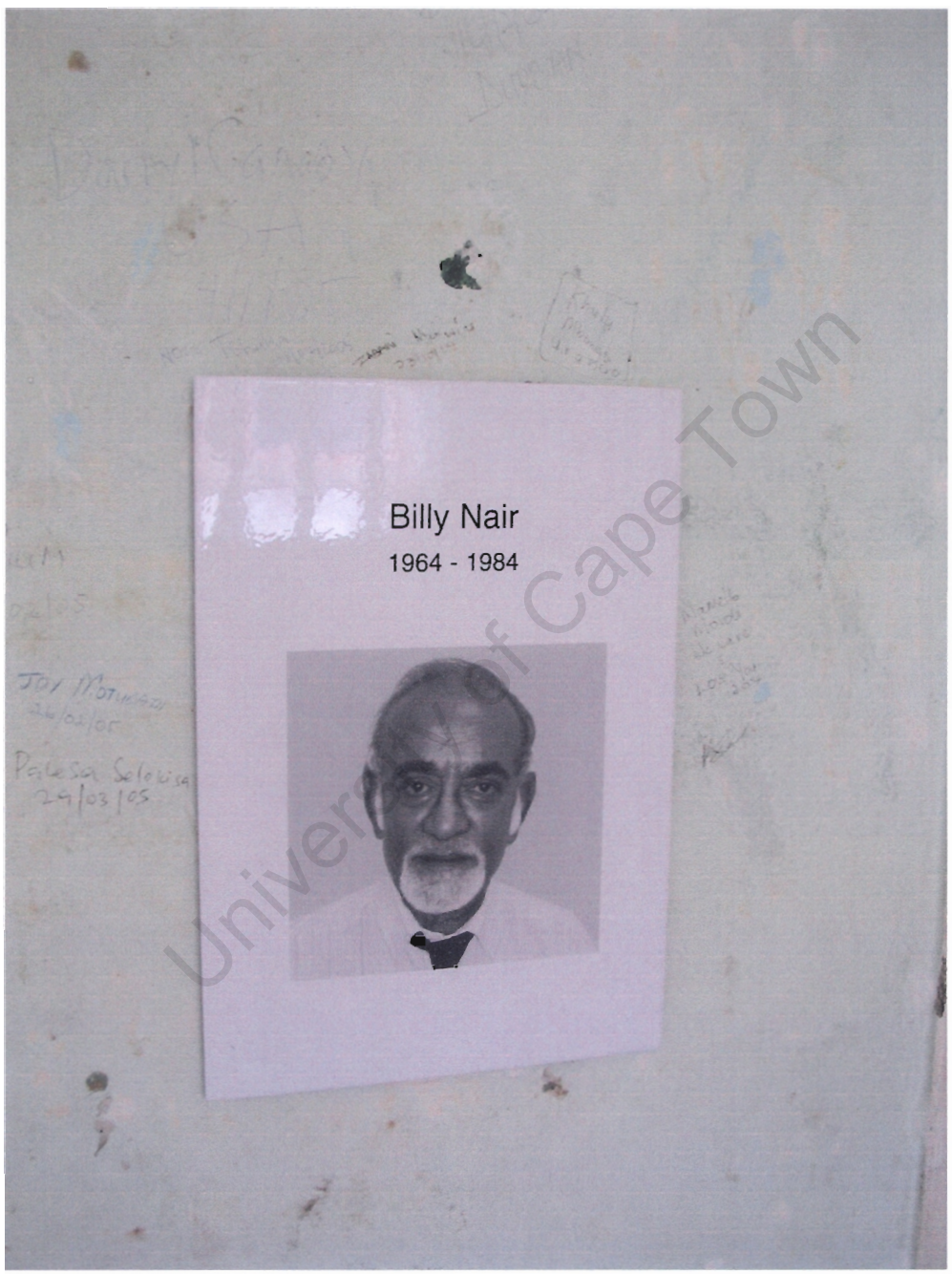
'The other problem is that they insisted that lights stay on inside the cell, of course we wanted to know, 'but why?' I mean, at night every normal human being puts the lights off to go to sleep, why must it stay on for us? 'No, because it is a maximum-security prison.' 'But what is it? What is going to happen to us if the light is off? So, you know your reason is illogical. But if you are not going to put the lights off, then we will put the lights off.' And, of course, you know, the prison window that looks into the passage, the top panes out, so you just have to put yours hands through and flick the light off. So every night we used to do that, flick the light off and sleep. So, the warden on duty comes around and sees the lights are off and puts them on. And so it became a war: we put it off, he out it on. All night. Sometimes we didn't sleep just to prove a point.'

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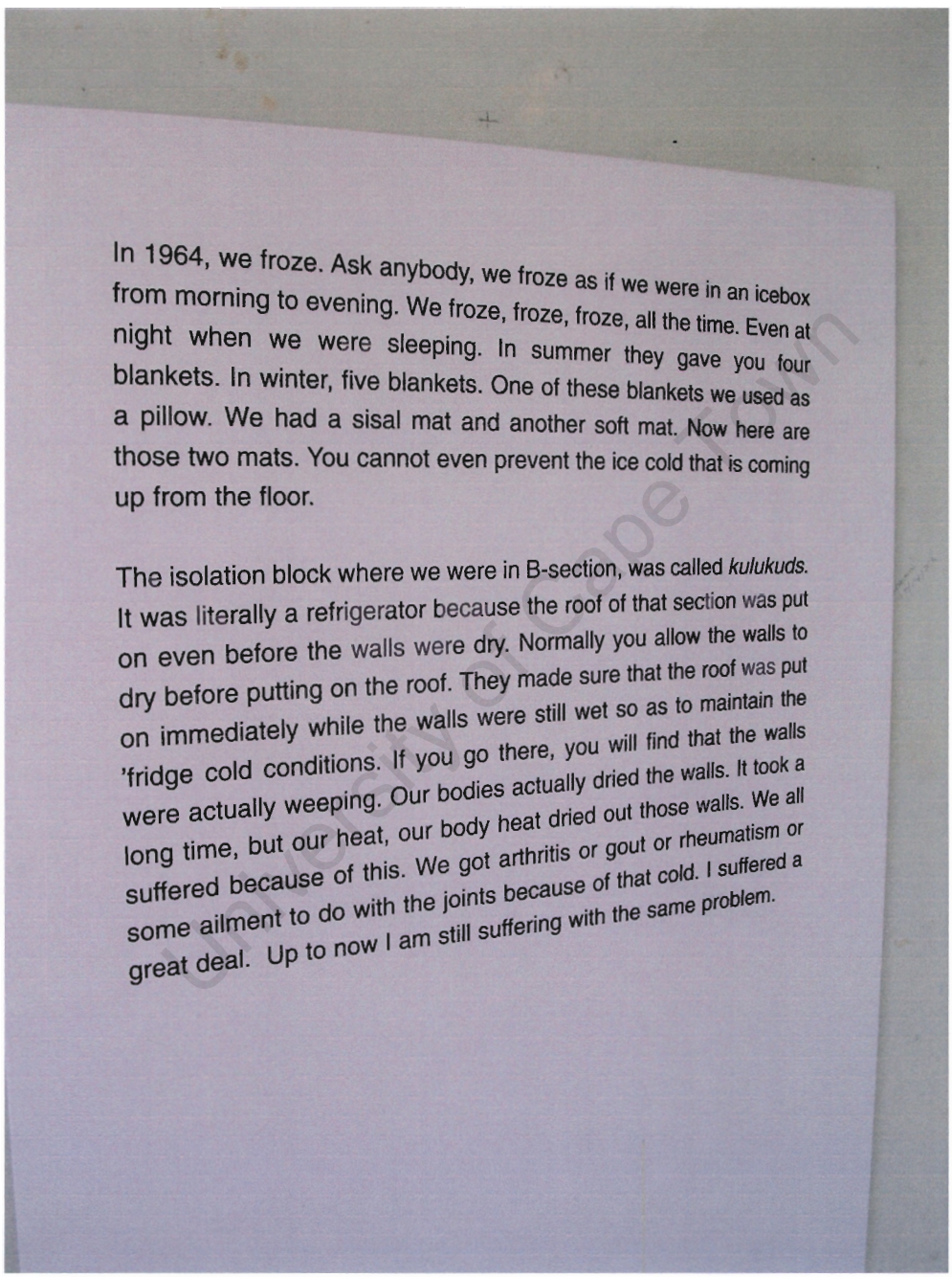
N

University of Cape Town

Nair, Billy (1964-1984)



University of Cape Town



In 1964, we froze. Ask anybody, we froze as if we were in an icebox from morning to evening. We froze, froze, froze, all the time. Even at night when we were sleeping. In summer they gave you four blankets. In winter, five blankets. One of these blankets we used as a pillow. We had a sisal mat and another soft mat. Now here are those two mats. You cannot even prevent the ice cold that is coming up from the floor.

The isolation block where we were in B-section, was called *kulukuds*. It was literally a refrigerator because the roof of that section was put on even before the walls were dry. Normally you allow the walls to dry before putting on the roof. They made sure that the roof was put on immediately while the walls were still wet so as to maintain the 'fridge cold conditions. If you go there, you will find that the walls were actually weeping. Our bodies actually dried the walls. It took a long time, but our heat, our body heat dried out those walls. We all suffered because of this. We got arthritis or gout or rheumatism or some ailment to do with the joints because of that cold. I suffered a great deal. Up to now I am still suffering with the same problem.

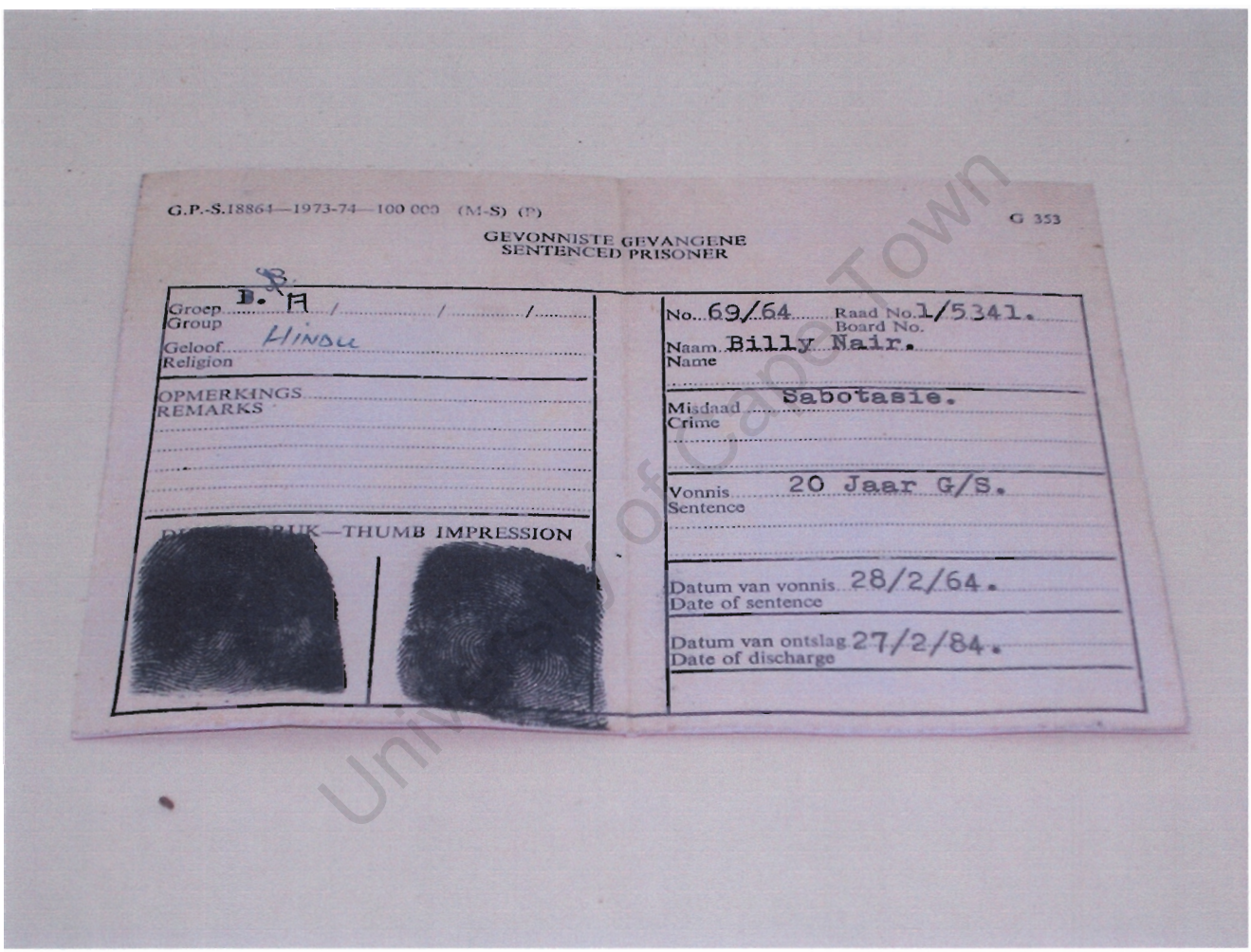
University of Cape Town

Extract from the interview with Billy Nair.



University of Cape Town

Label explaining the identity-book displayed in Billy Nair's locker – in his own words.


G.P.-S.18864—1973-74—100 000 (M-S) (P)

G 353

GEVONNISTE GEVANGENE
SENTENCED PRISONER

Groep / Group: B. A

Geloof / Religion: HINDU

OPMERKINGS / REMARKS

DUIMAFDRUK—THUMB IMPRESSION

No. 69/64 Raad No. / Board No. 1/5341.

Naam / Name: Billy Nair.

Misdaad / Crime: Sabotasie.

Vonnis / Sentence: 20 Jaar G/S.

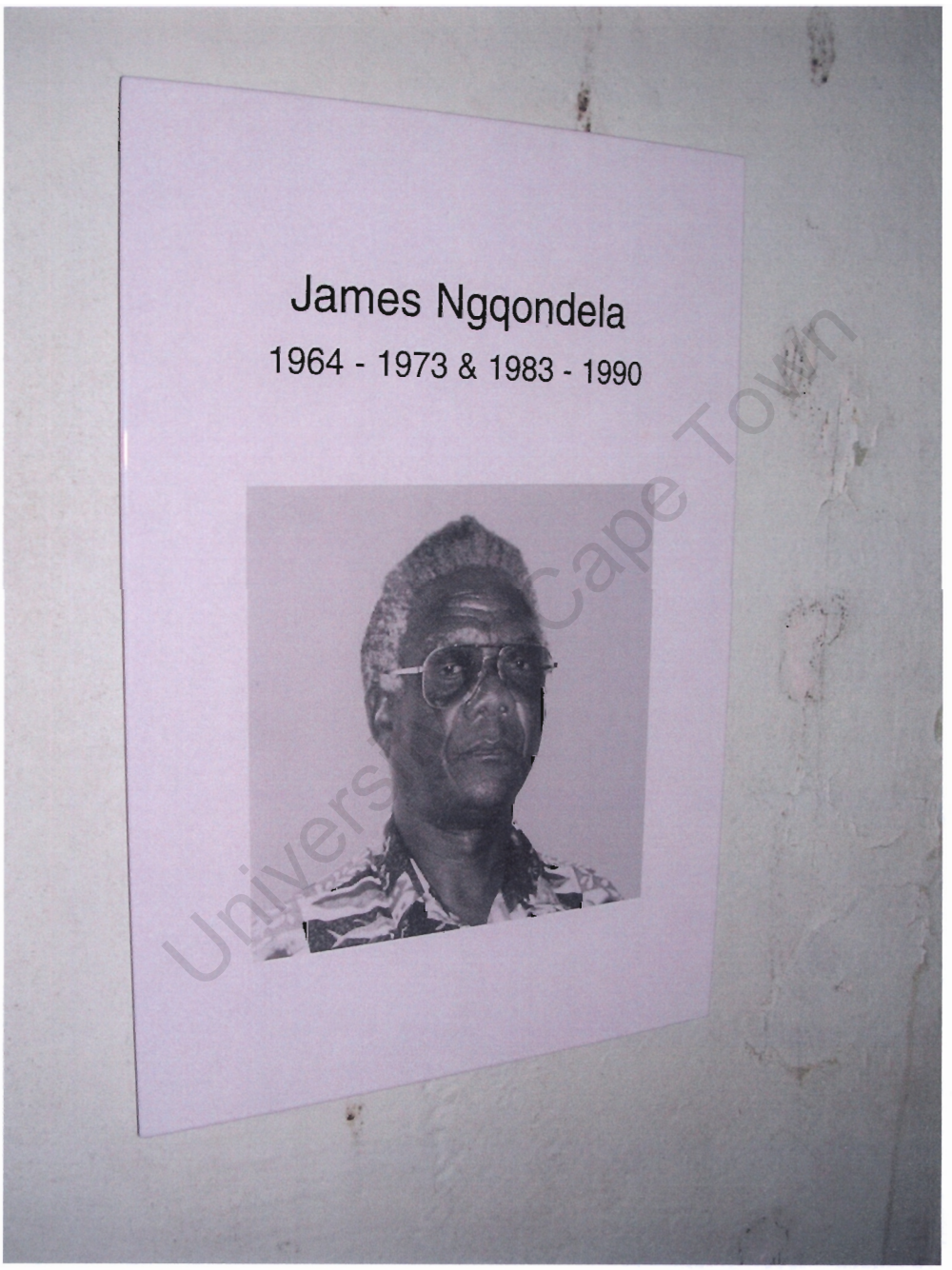
Datum van vonnis / Date of sentence: 28/2/64.

Datum van ontslag / Date of discharge: 27/2/84.

University of Cape Town

Personal object: the prison book that all the prisoners on Robben Island had to carry.

Ngqondela, James (1964-1973/1983-1990)



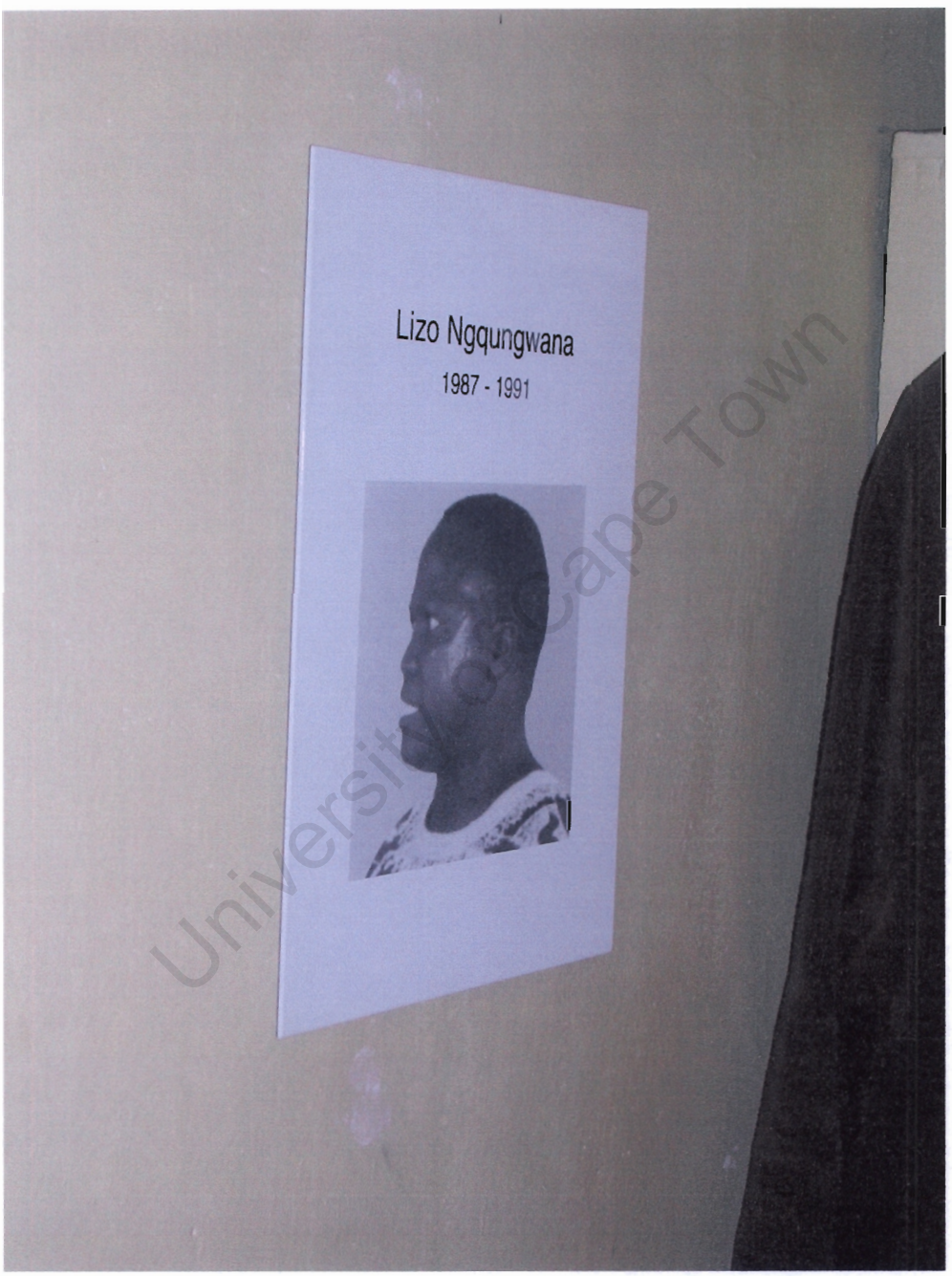
University of Cape Town

James Ngqondela audio recording:

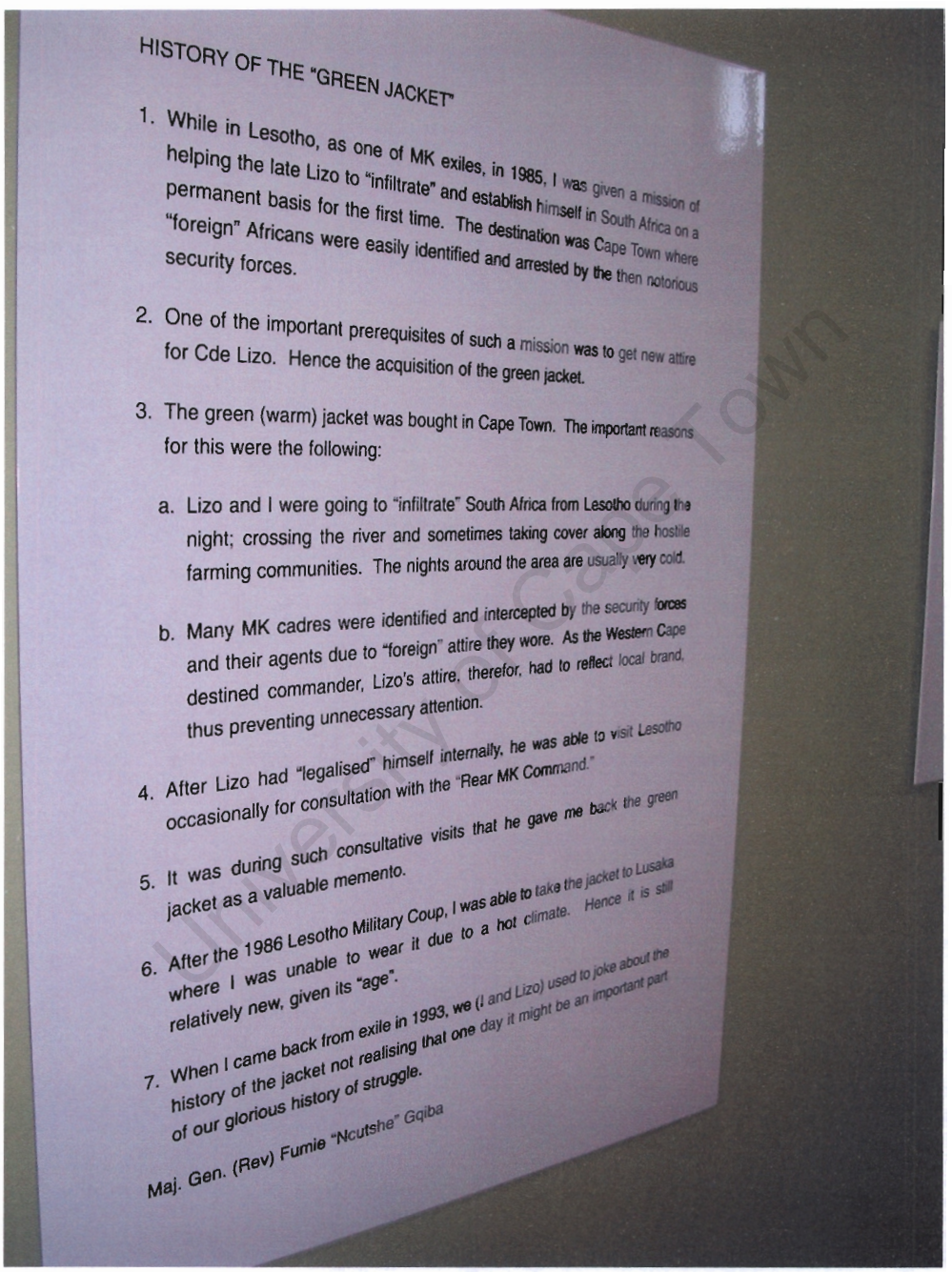
Ngqondela's recording is about the earthquake on the 29th of September 1969. He keeps on repeating the data, and tells us how frightened he was lying in his small cell.

University of Cape Town

Ngqungwana, Lizo (1987-1991)



University of Cape Town



HISTORY OF THE "GREEN JACKET"

1. While in Lesotho, as one of MK exiles, in 1985, I was given a mission of helping the late Lizo to "infiltrate" and establish himself in South Africa on a permanent basis for the first time. The destination was Cape Town where "foreign" Africans were easily identified and arrested by the then notorious security forces.

2. One of the important prerequisites of such a mission was to get new attire for Cde Lizo. Hence the acquisition of the green jacket.

3. The green (warm) jacket was bought in Cape Town. The important reasons for this were the following:

   a. Lizo and I were going to "infiltrate" South Africa from Lesotho during the night; crossing the river and sometimes taking cover along the hostile farming communities. The nights around the area are usually very cold.

   b. Many MK cadres were identified and intercepted by the security forces and their agents due to "foreign" attire they wore. As the Western Cape destined commander, Lizo's attire, therefor, had to reflect local brand, thus preventing unnecessary attention.

4. After Lizo had "legalised" himself internally, he was able to visit Lesotho occasionally for consultation with the "Rear MK Command."

5. It was during such consultative visits that he gave me back the green jacket as a valuable memento.

6. After the 1986 Lesotho Military Coup, I was able to take the jacket to Lusaka where I was unable to wear it due to a hot climate. Hence it is still relatively new, given its "age".

7. When I came back from exile in 1993, we (I and Lizo) used to joke about the history of the jacket not realising that one day it might be an important part of our glorious history of struggle.

Maj. Gen. (Rev) Fumie "Ncutshe" Gqiba

University of Cape Town

Extract from interview with Fumie Gqiba, an interview conducted on behalf of the late Lizo Ngqungwana.

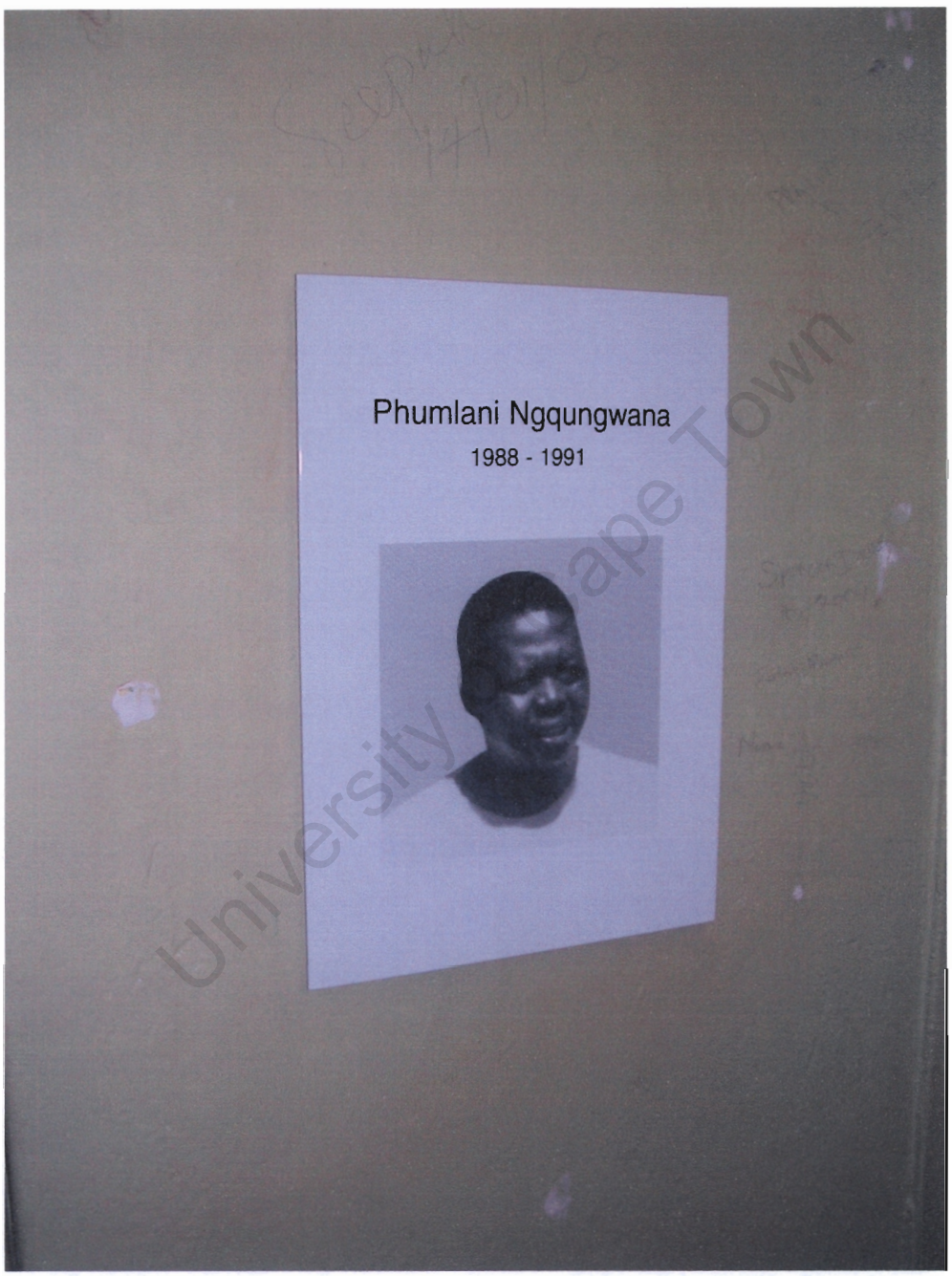


Personal object: a corduroy jacket.

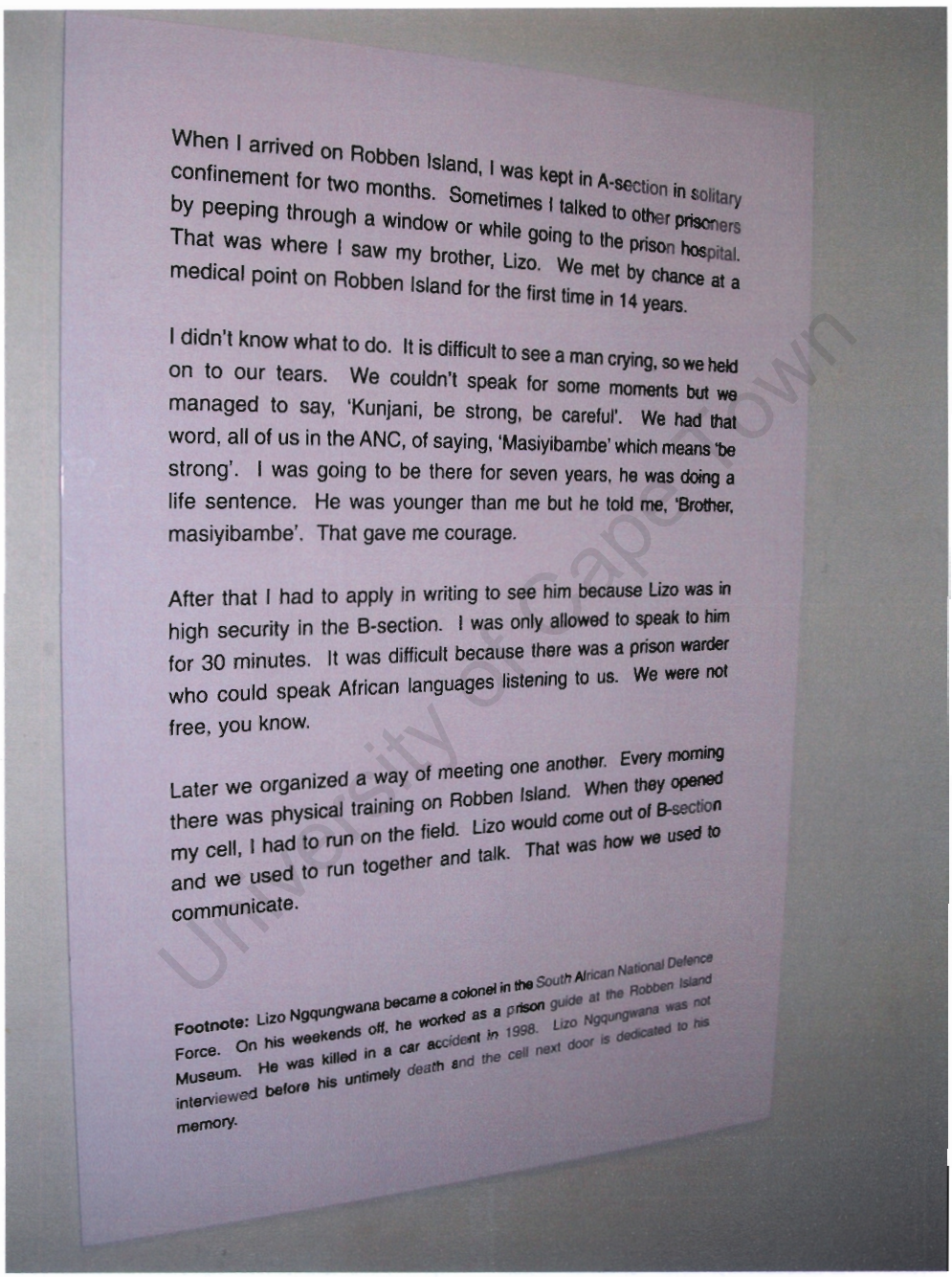


This display was behind closed doors, the visitor to the 'Cell Stories' exhibition is not allowed to enter this particular cell.

Ngqungwana, Phumlani (1988-1991)



University of Cape Town



When I arrived on Robben Island, I was kept in A-section in solitary confinement for two months. Sometimes I talked to other prisoners by peeping through a window or while going to the prison hospital. That was where I saw my brother, Lizo. We met by chance at a medical point on Robben Island for the first time in 14 years.

I didn't know what to do. It is difficult to see a man crying, so we held on to our tears. We couldn't speak for some moments but we managed to say, 'Kunjani, be strong, be careful'. We had that word, all of us in the ANC, of saying, 'Masiyibambe' which means 'be strong'. I was going to be there for seven years, he was doing a life sentence. He was younger than me but he told me, 'Brother, masiyibambe'. That gave me courage.

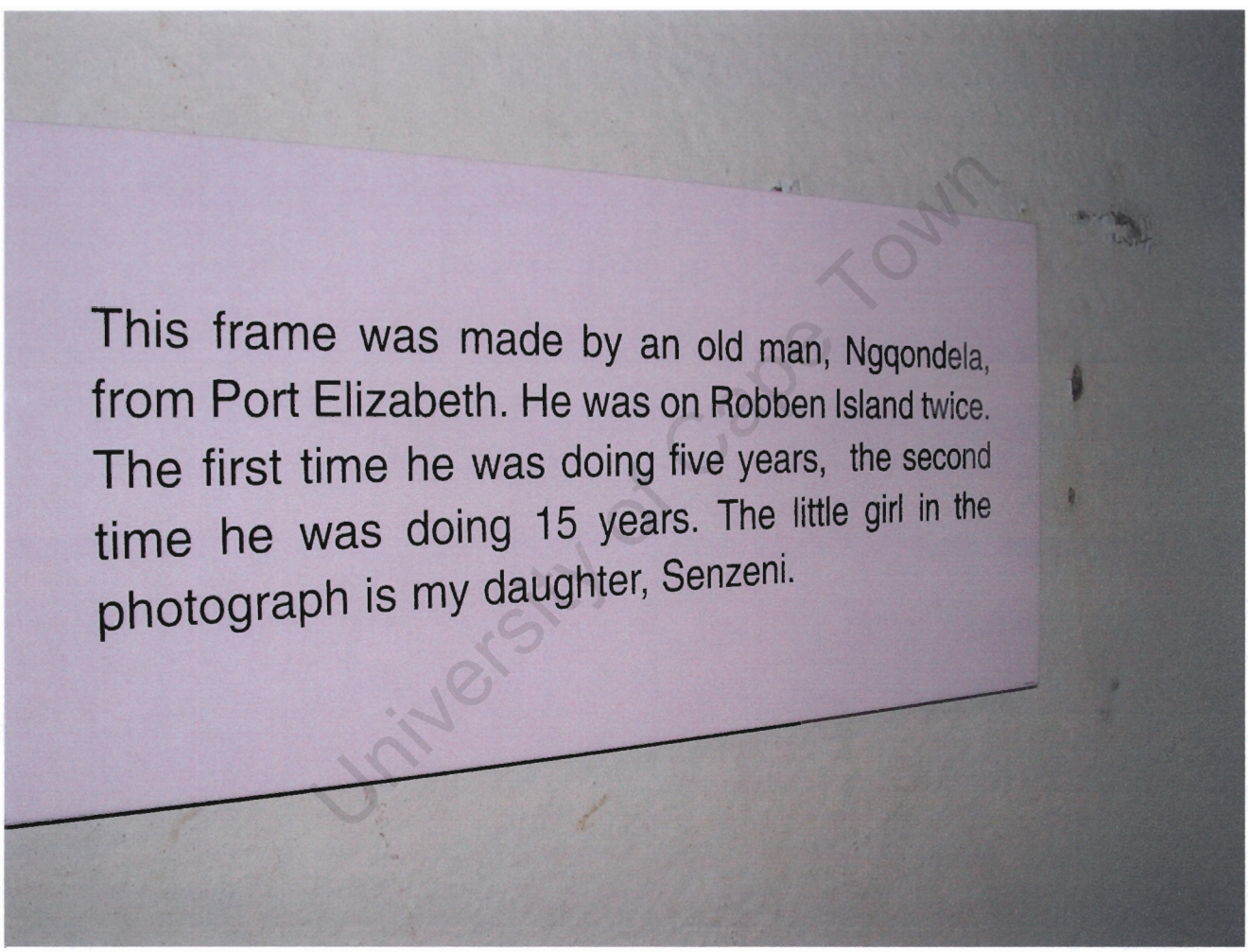
After that I had to apply in writing to see him because Lizo was in high security in the B-section. I was only allowed to speak to him for 30 minutes. It was difficult because there was a prison warder who could speak African languages listening to us. We were not free, you know.

Later we organized a way of meeting one another. Every morning there was physical training on Robben Island. When they opened my cell, I had to run on the field. Lizo would come out of B-section and we used to run together and talk. That was how we used to communicate.

Footnote: Lizo Ngqungwana became a colonel in the South African National Defence Force. On his weekends off, he worked as a prison guide at the Robben Island Museum. He was killed in a car accident in 1998. Lizo Ngqungwana was not interviewed before his untimely death and the cell next door is dedicated to his memory.

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Extract from interview with Phumlani Ngqungwana.



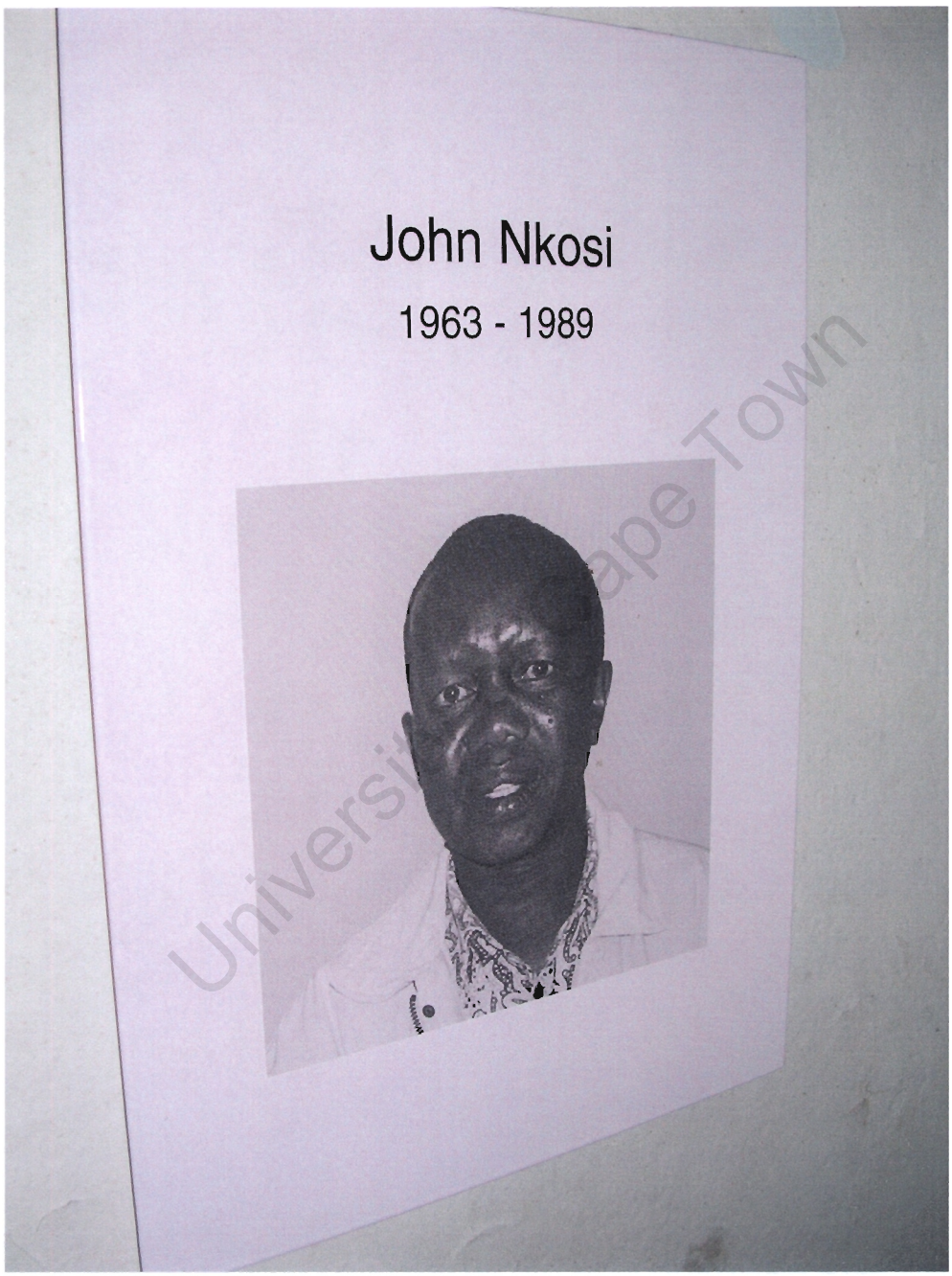
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Label explaining the Phumlani Ngqungwana's frame, in his own words.

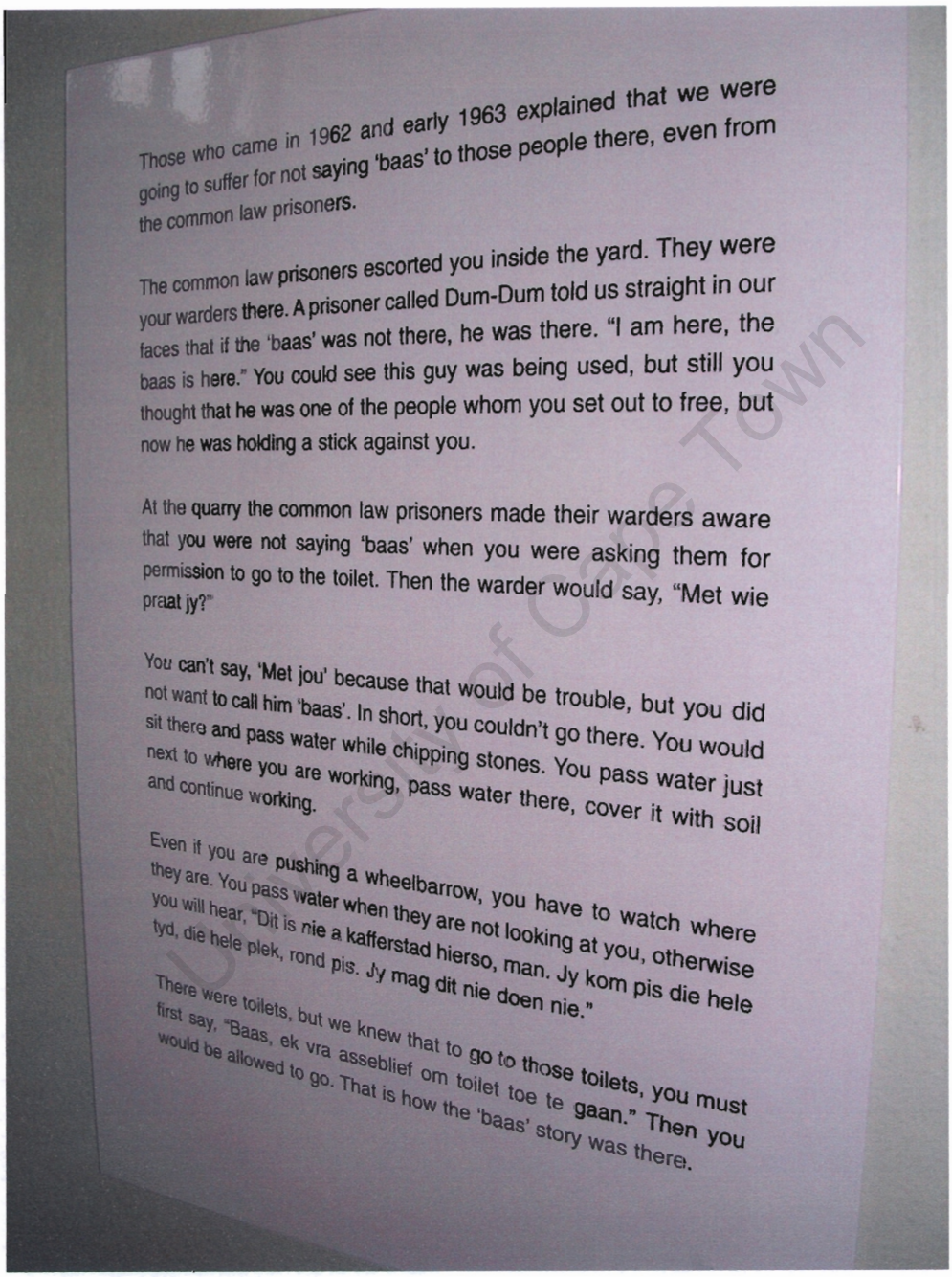


Personal object: a picture-frame.

Nkosi, John (1963-1989)



University of Cape Town



Those who came in 1962 and early 1963 explained that we were going to suffer for not saying 'baas' to those people there, even from the common law prisoners.

The common law prisoners escorted you inside the yard. They were your warders there. A prisoner called Dum-Dum told us straight in our faces that if the 'baas' was not there, he was there. "I am here, the baas is here." You could see this guy was being used, but still you thought that he was one of the people whom you set out to free, but now he was holding a stick against you.

At the quarry the common law prisoners made their warders aware that you were not saying 'baas' when you were asking them for permission to go to the toilet. Then the warder would say, "Met wie praat jy?"

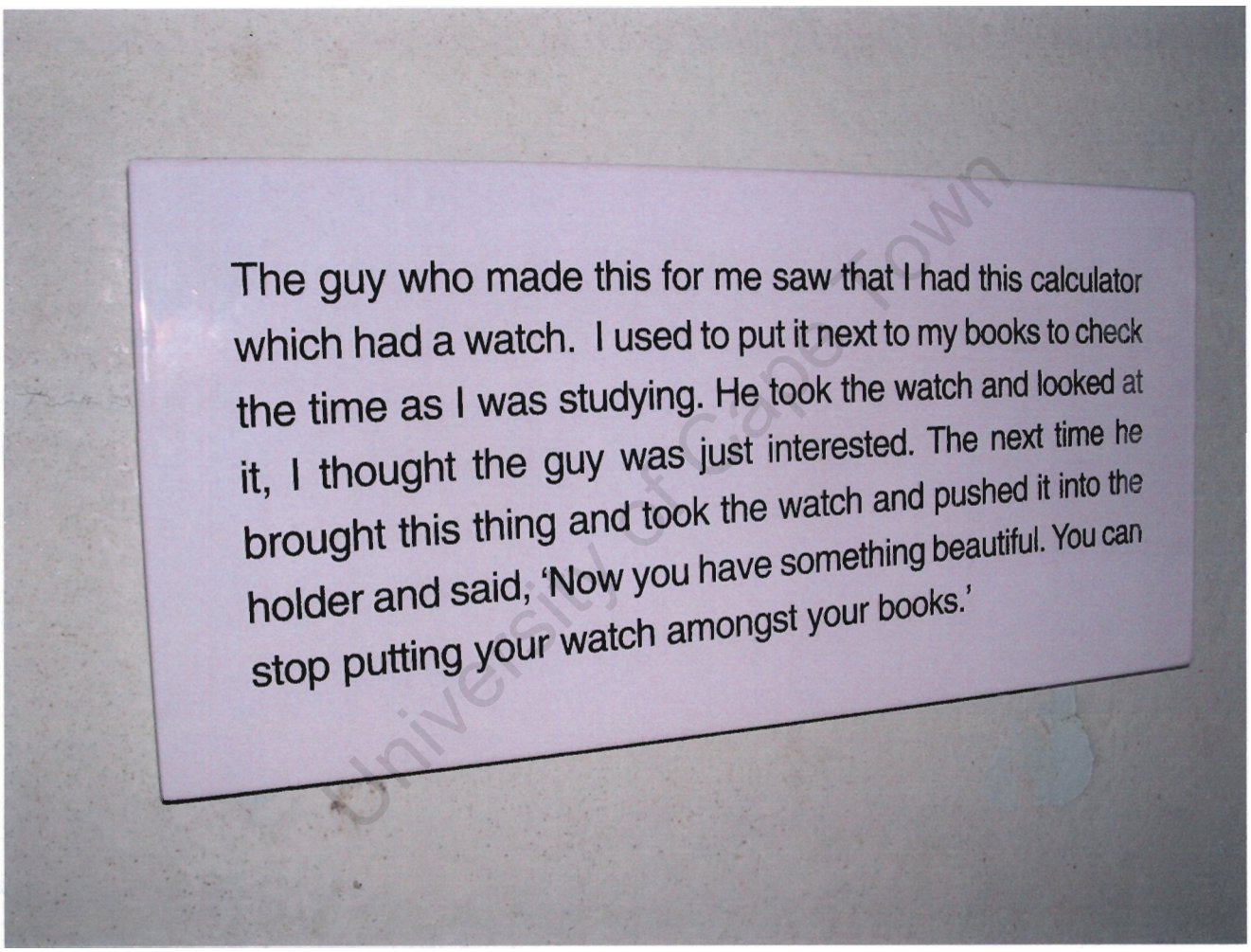
You can't say, 'Met jou' because that would be trouble, but you did not want to call him 'baas'. In short, you couldn't go there. You would sit there and pass water while chipping stones. You pass water just next to where you are working, pass water there, cover it with soil and continue working.

Even if you are pushing a wheelbarrow, you have to watch where they are. You pass water when they are not looking at you, otherwise you will hear, "Dit is nie a kafferstad hierso, man. Jy kom pis die hele tyd, die hele plek, rond pis. Jy mag dit nie doen nie."

There were toilets, but we knew that to go to those toilets, you must first say, "Baas, ek vra asseblief om toilet toe te gaan." Then you would be allowed to go. That is how the 'baas' story was there.

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Extract from the interview with John Nkosi.

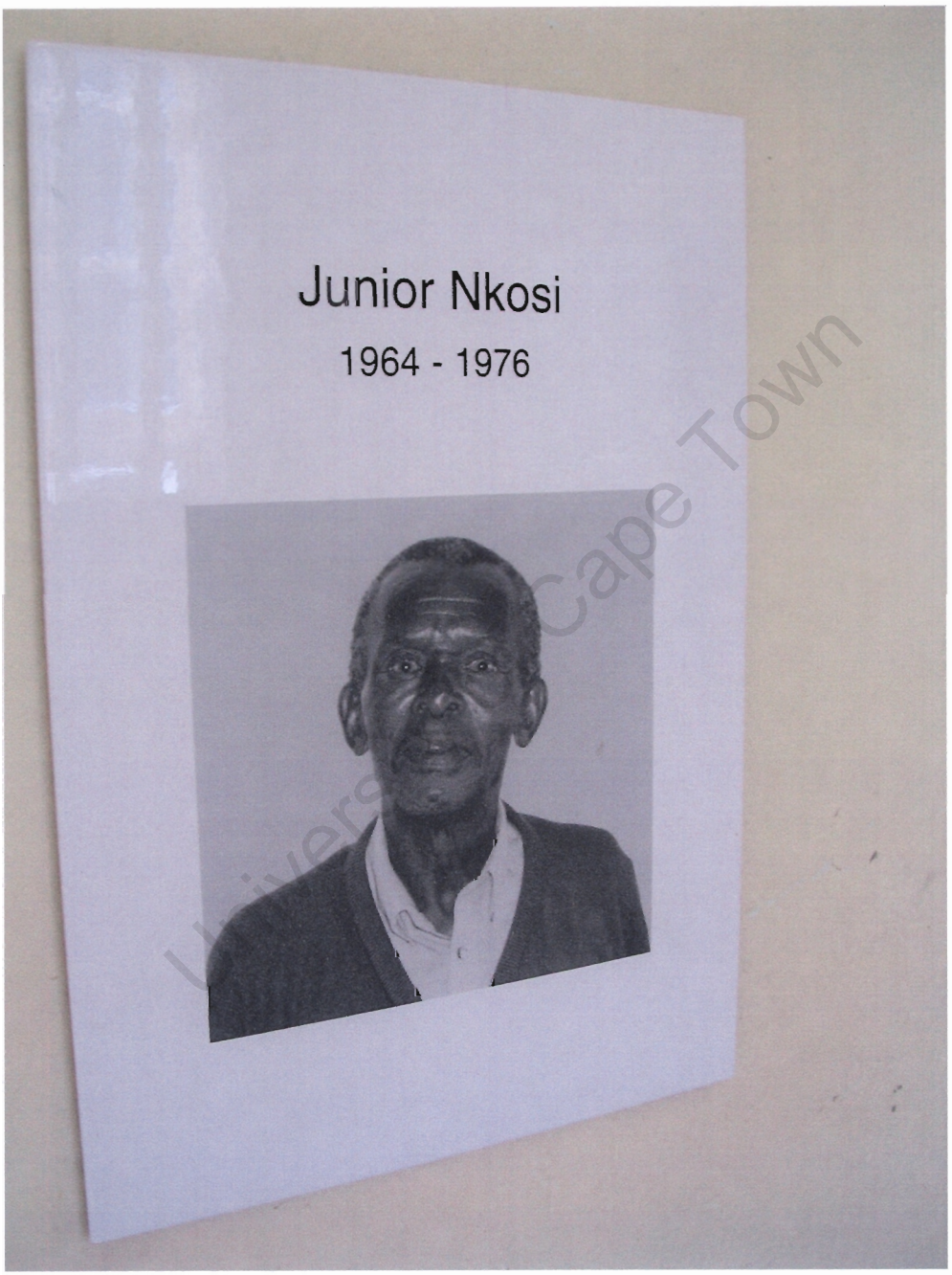


Label explaining the 'watch-holder' displayed in John Nkosi's locker.

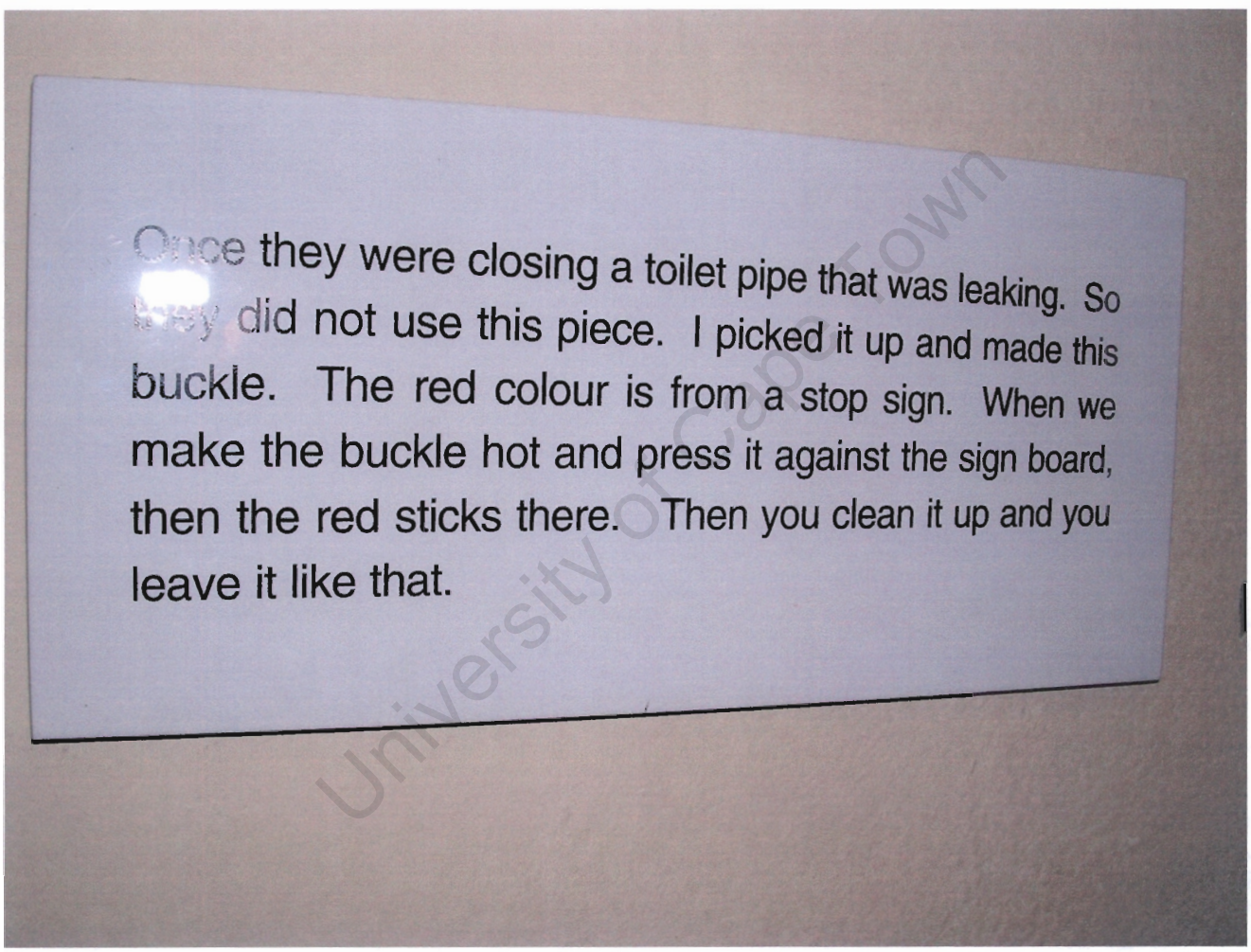


Personal object: a 'watch-holder'.

Nkosi, Junior (1964-976)



University of Cape Town



University of Cape Town

Label explaining the belt buckle in Junior Nkosi's locker.



University of Cape Town

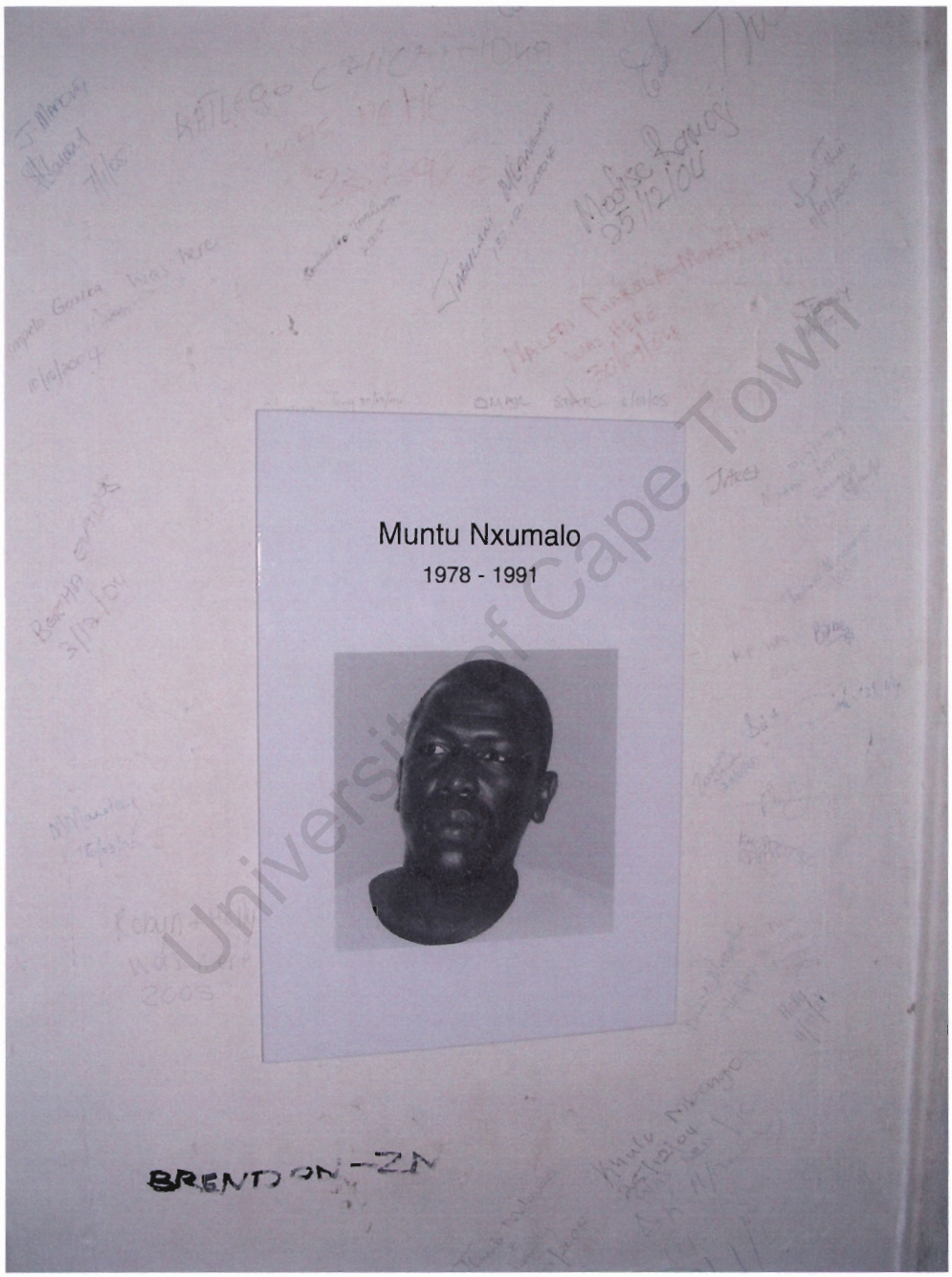
Personal object: a home-made belt buckle.

Junior Noksi's audio recording:

[the intercom was not working any of the times that I was at the 'Cell Stories' exhibition].

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Nxumalo, Muntu (1978-1991)



University of Cape Town

Muntu Nxumalo:

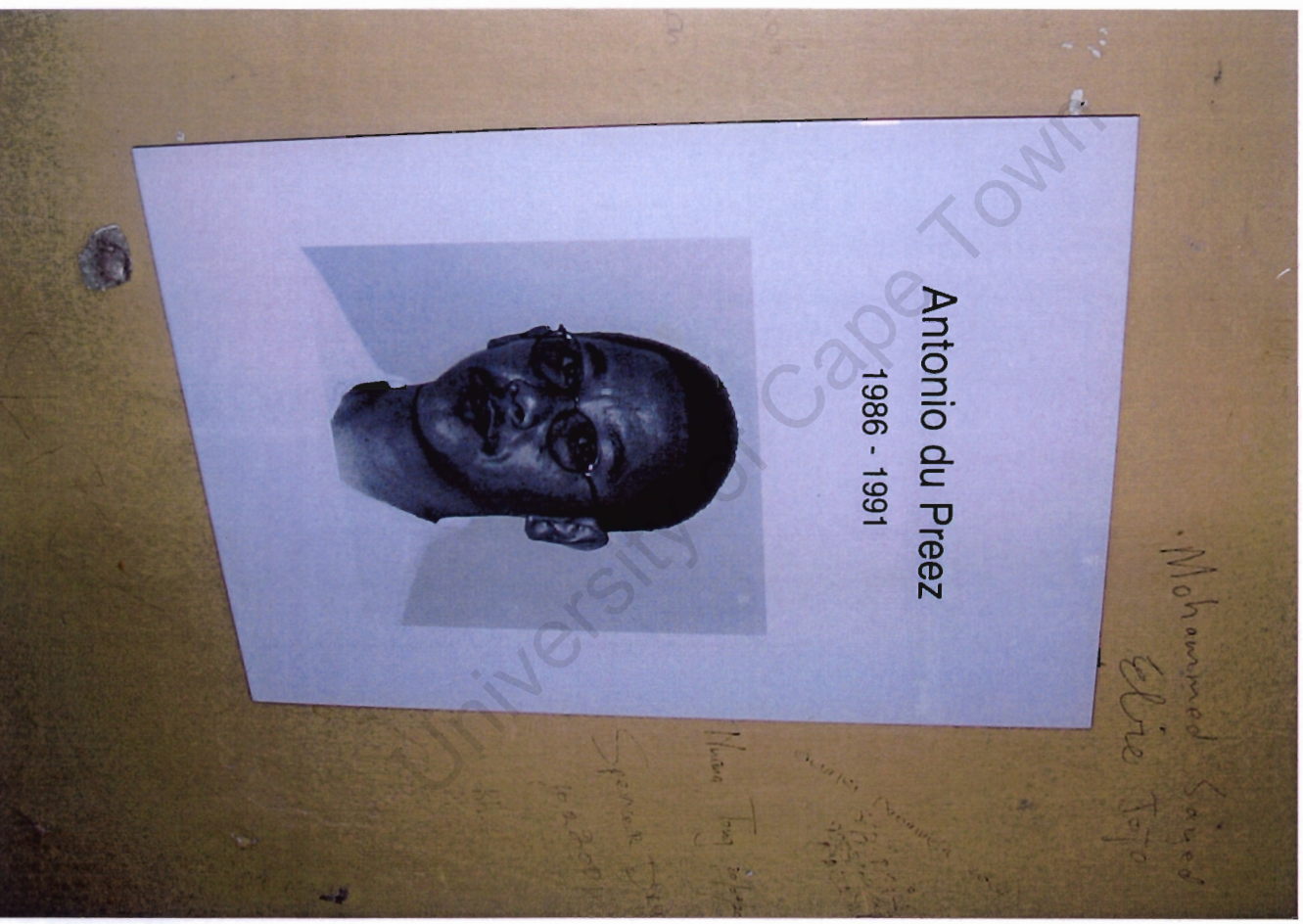
There was nothing in display in his cell. It could have been taken down for maintenance or – because some of the objects are just on loan – the object could have been taken back.

University of Cape Town

P

University of Cape Town

Preez, Antonio du (1986-1991)



University of Cape Town

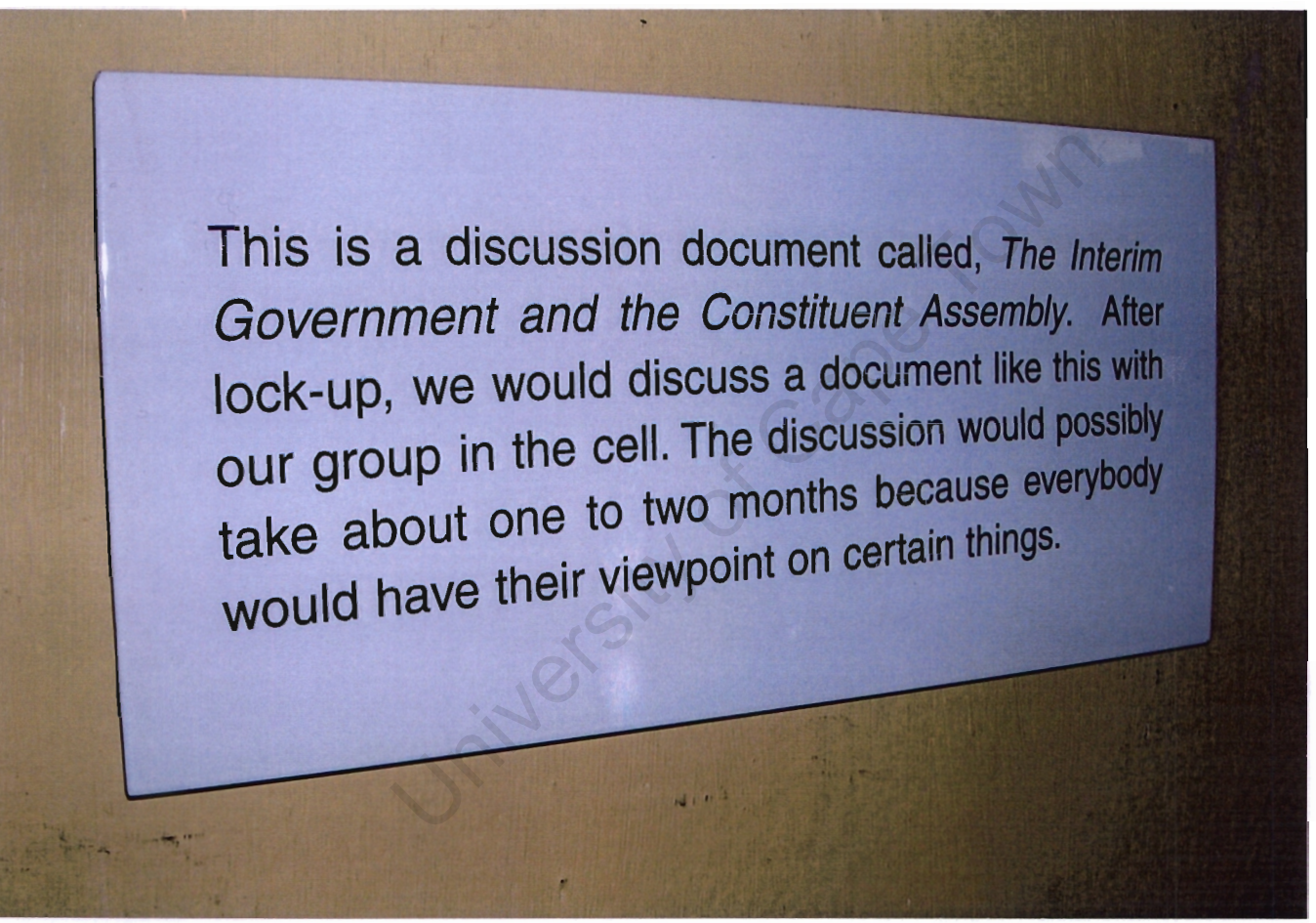
I couldn't come to terms with the fact that I was going to spend fifteen and a half years on Robben Island. That was the one thing that was driving me a bit nuts.

A week after our arrival there, this old man came past and shook everybody's hand on the bench. We were about six people sitting on the bench and he introduced himself to everybody with a smile on his face. I was right on the end and he said to me, 'How are you, comrade?'
'I'm very well.'
He said, 'You don't look so well. Don't be so angry man, relax. How long are you going to be with us?'
'Fifteen and a half years.'
He said, 'Oh, that's enough time for me to get to know you, so we will talk later.'
And with a big smile, off he went into the garden to potter with some plants and stuff.

The guys said, 'Hey, do you know who's that?'
I said, 'No, who's that?'
'That's one of the treason trialists, Elias Motsoaledi.'
That was the turning point for me. I was born in '64 and that old man had been in prison during my whole lifetime. I had no reason to be angry. If an old man could do it with such positive spirits, I was being unreasonable. My whole attitude towards my sentence and my stay there actually changed. I had not done anything wrong. I was proud of what I'd done.

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Extract from the interview with Antonio du Preez.



University of Cape Town

Label explaining the 'discussion document' displayed in du Preez's locker.

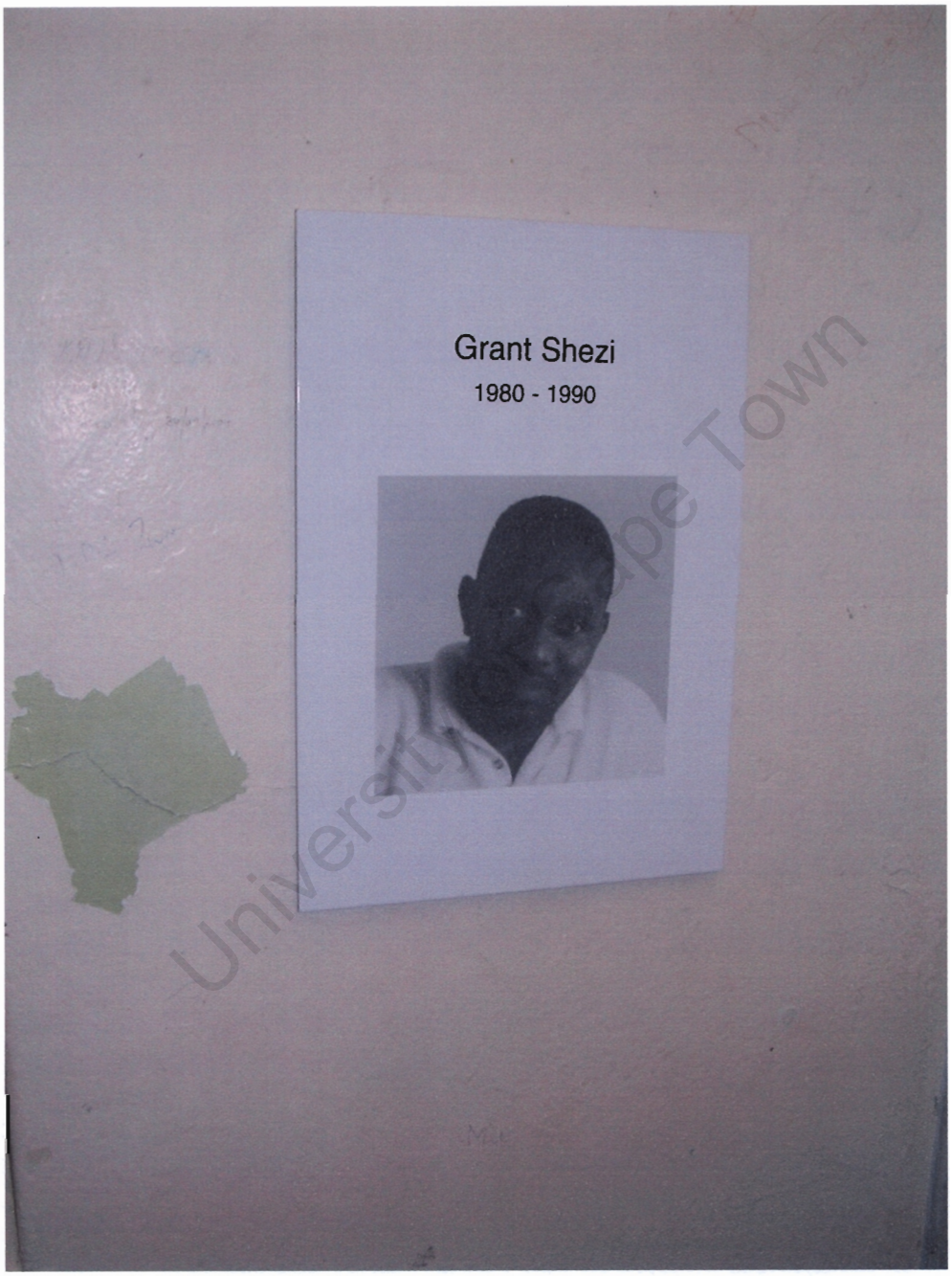
Personal object: a 'discussion document' from the time du Preez was at Robben Island.

University of Cape Town

S

University of Cape Town

Shezi, Grant (1980-1990)



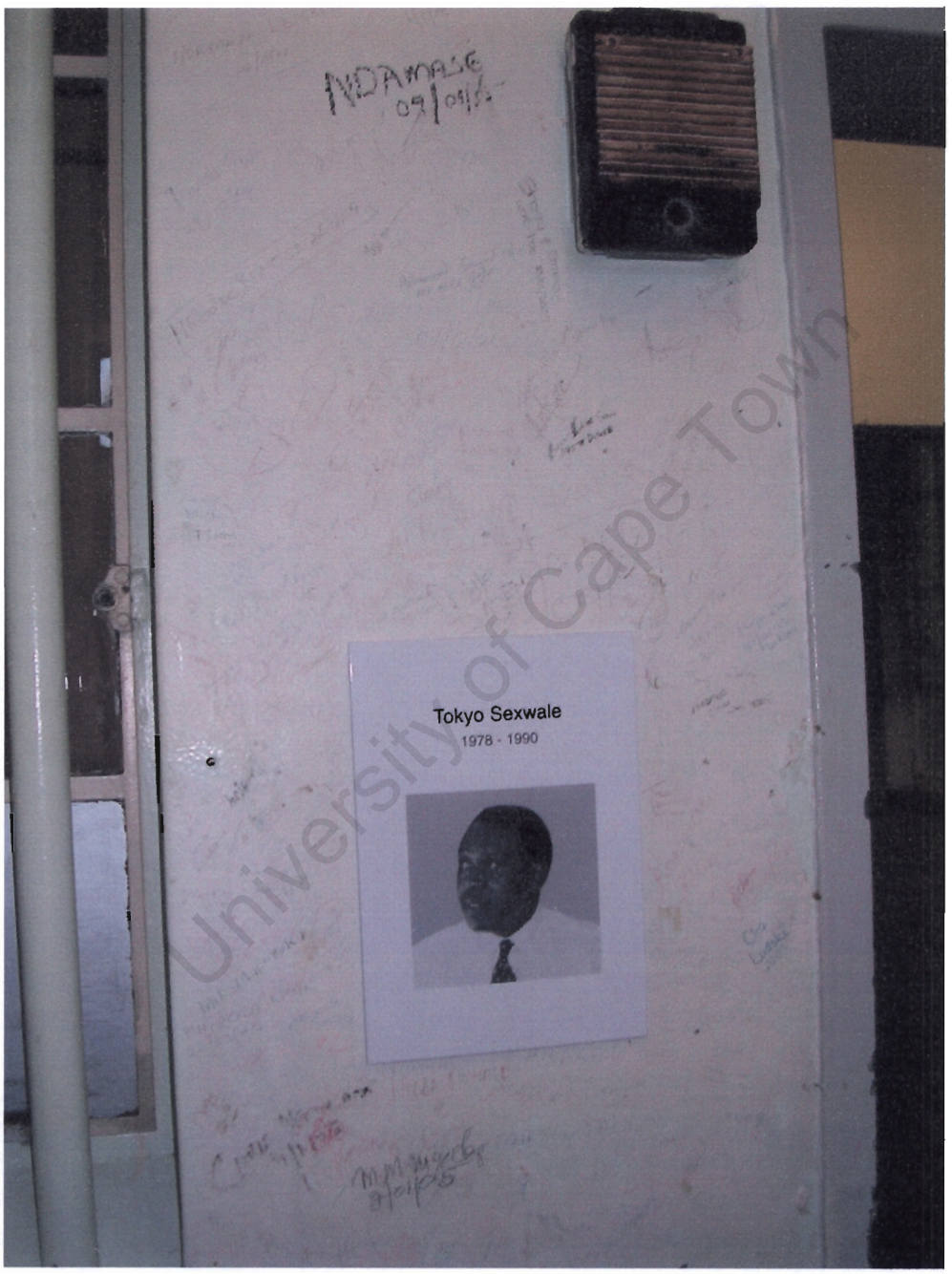
University of Cape Town

Grant Shezi's display:

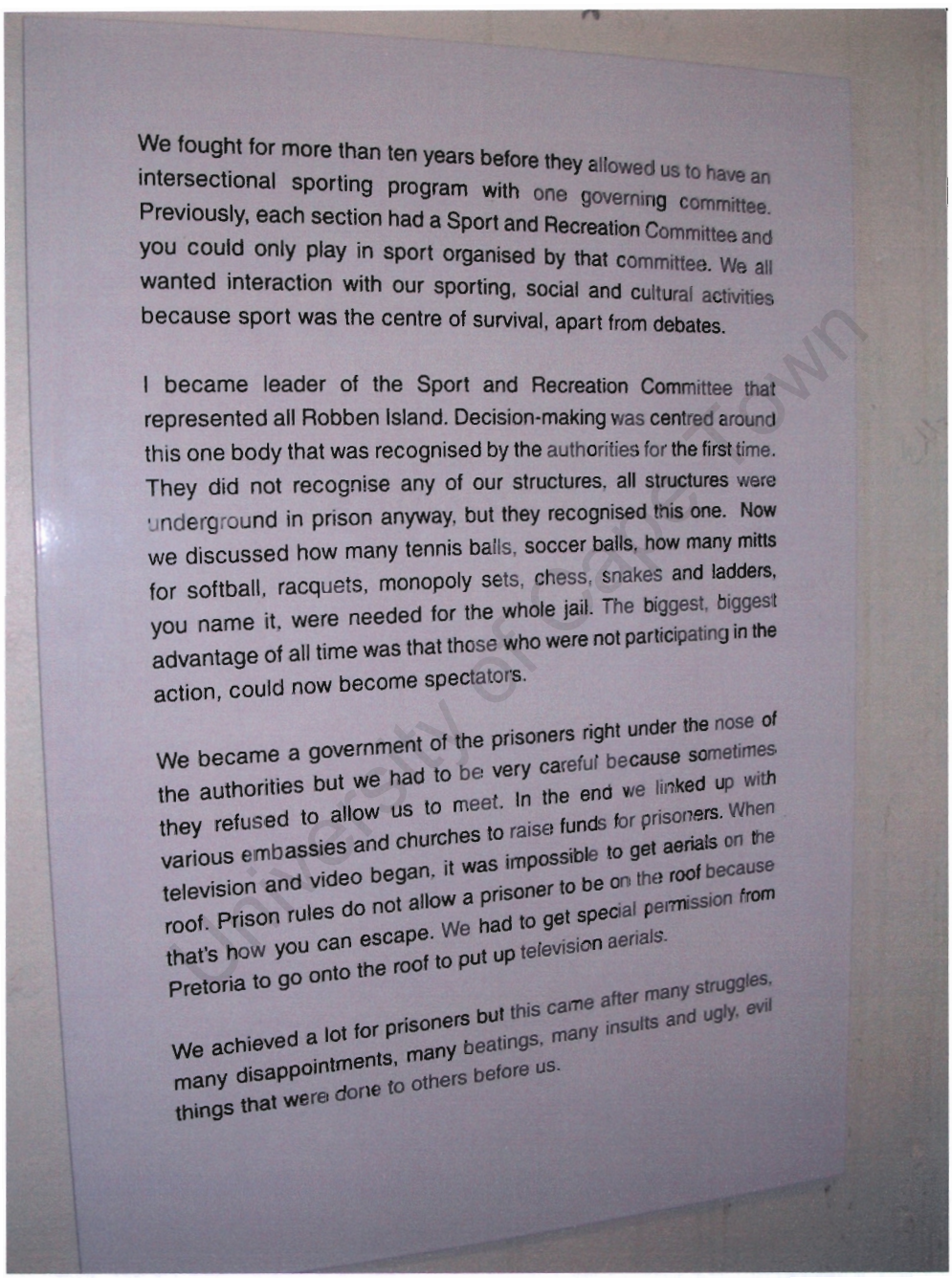
There is nothing on display in Shezi's cell. There could be two reasons for this; either the display has been taken down for maintenance, or Shezi has taken back his object – after all some of the objects in 'Cell Stories' are only on loan from the owner.

University of Cape Town

Sexwale, Tokyo (1978-1990)



University of Cape Town



We fought for more than ten years before they allowed us to have an intersectional sporting program with one governing committee. Previously, each section had a Sport and Recreation Committee and you could only play in sport organised by that committee. We all wanted interaction with our sporting, social and cultural activities because sport was the centre of survival, apart from debates.

I became leader of the Sport and Recreation Committee that represented all Robben Island. Decision-making was centred around this one body that was recognised by the authorities for the first time. They did not recognise any of our structures, all structures were underground in prison anyway, but they recognised this one. Now we discussed how many tennis balls, soccer balls, how many mitts for softball, racquets, monopoly sets, chess, snakes and ladders, you name it, were needed for the whole jail. The biggest, biggest advantage of all time was that those who were not participating in the action, could now become spectators.

We became a government of the prisoners right under the nose of the authorities but we had to be very careful because sometimes they refused to allow us to meet. In the end we linked up with various embassies and churches to raise funds for prisoners. When television and video began, it was impossible to get aerials on the roof. Prison rules do not allow a prisoner to be on the roof because that's how you can escape. We had to get special permission from Pretoria to go onto the roof to put up television aerials.

We achieved a lot for prisoners but this came after many struggles, many disappointments, many beatings, many insults and ugly, evil things that were done to others before us.

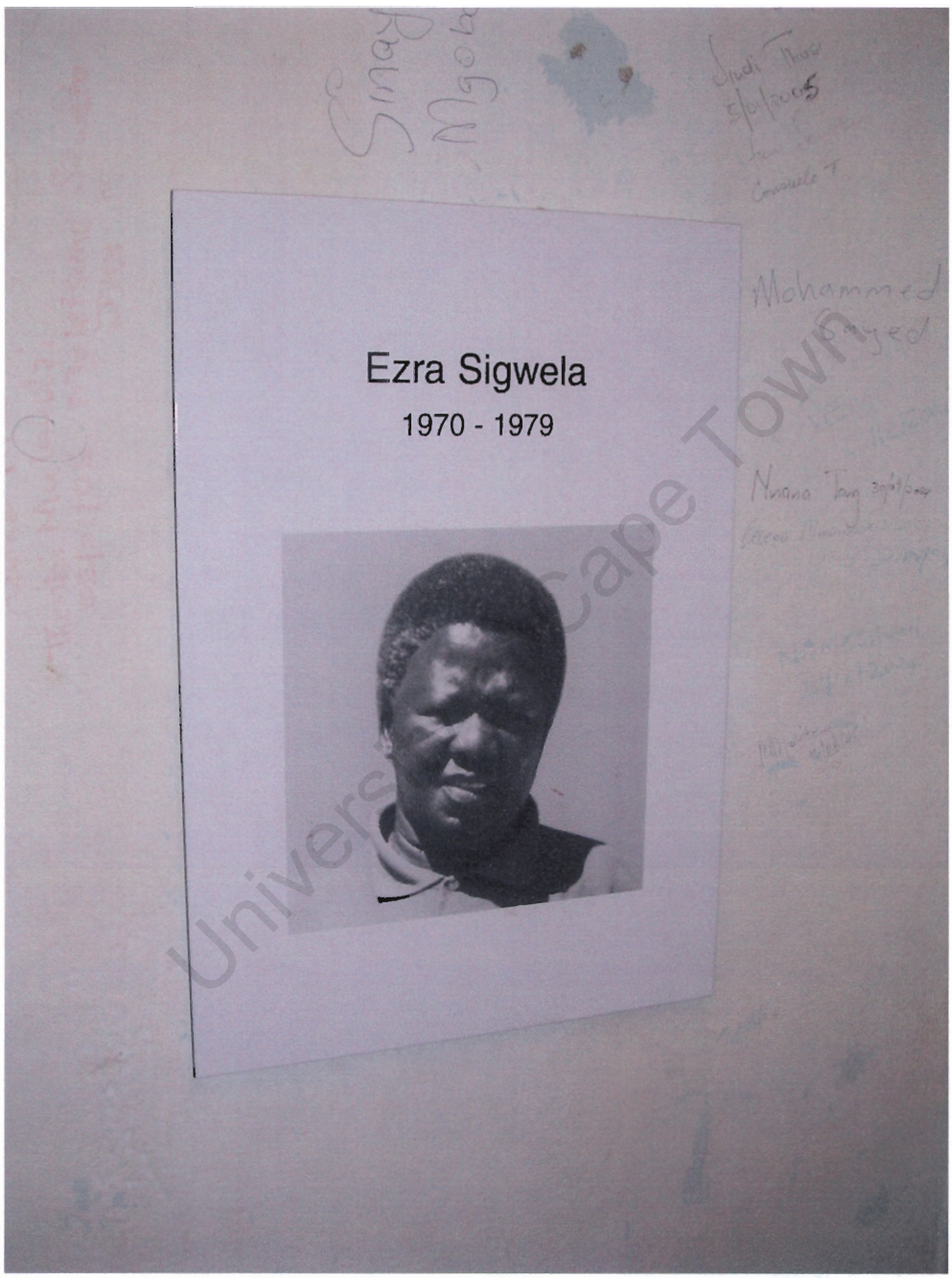
Extract from interview with Tokyo Sexwale conducted by Ashwell Adriaan (no date), University of Western Cape: Mayibuye Centre (1hr 2min 53sec): Cd nr. 1.



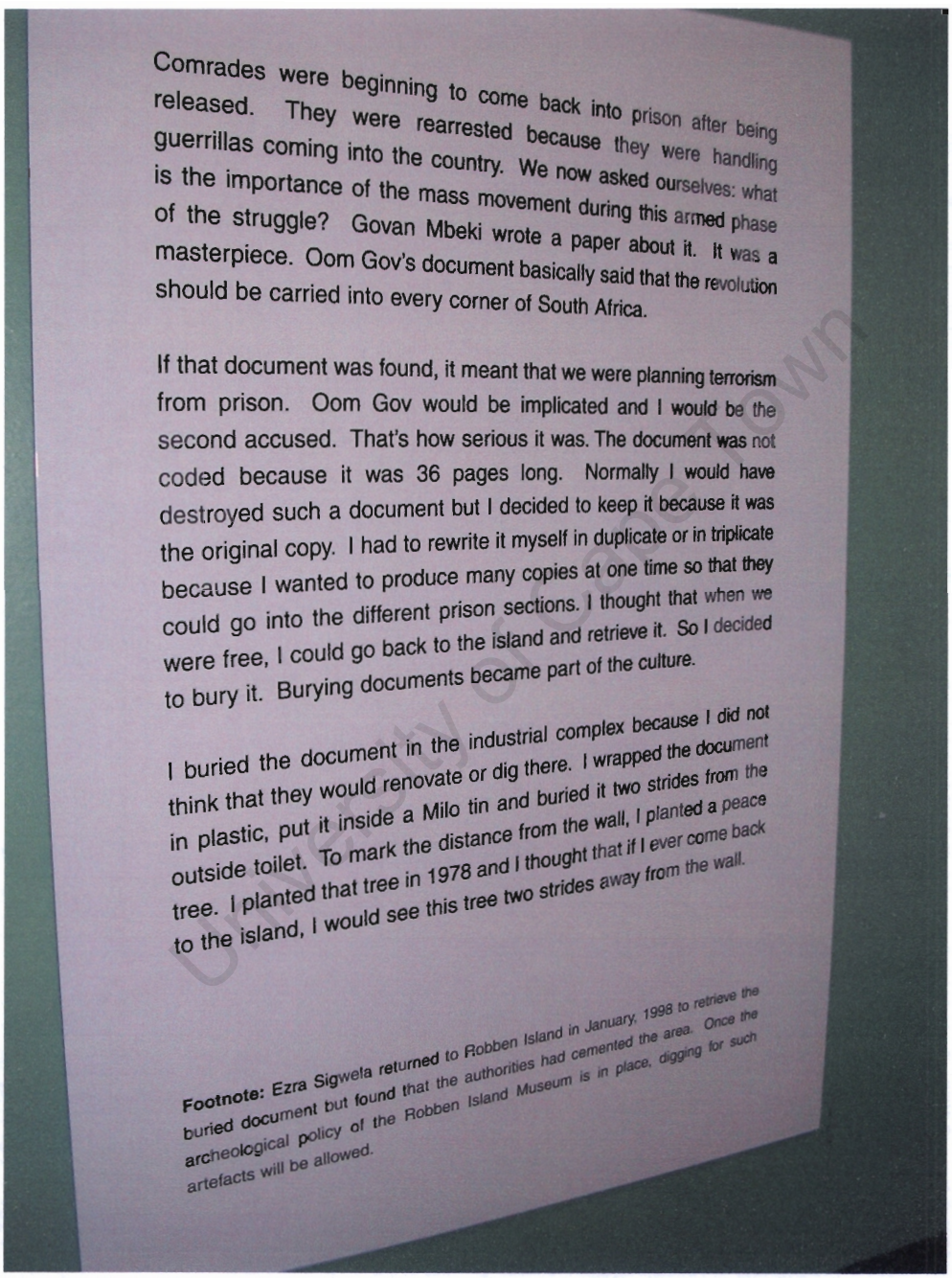
University of Cape Town

Personal object: a board-game – Ludo.

Sigwela, Ezra (197-1979)



University of Cape Town



Comrades were beginning to come back into prison after being released. They were rearrested because they were handling guerrillas coming into the country. We now asked ourselves: what is the importance of the mass movement during this armed phase of the struggle? Govan Mbeki wrote a paper about it. It was a masterpiece. Oom Gov's document basically said that the revolution should be carried into every corner of South Africa.

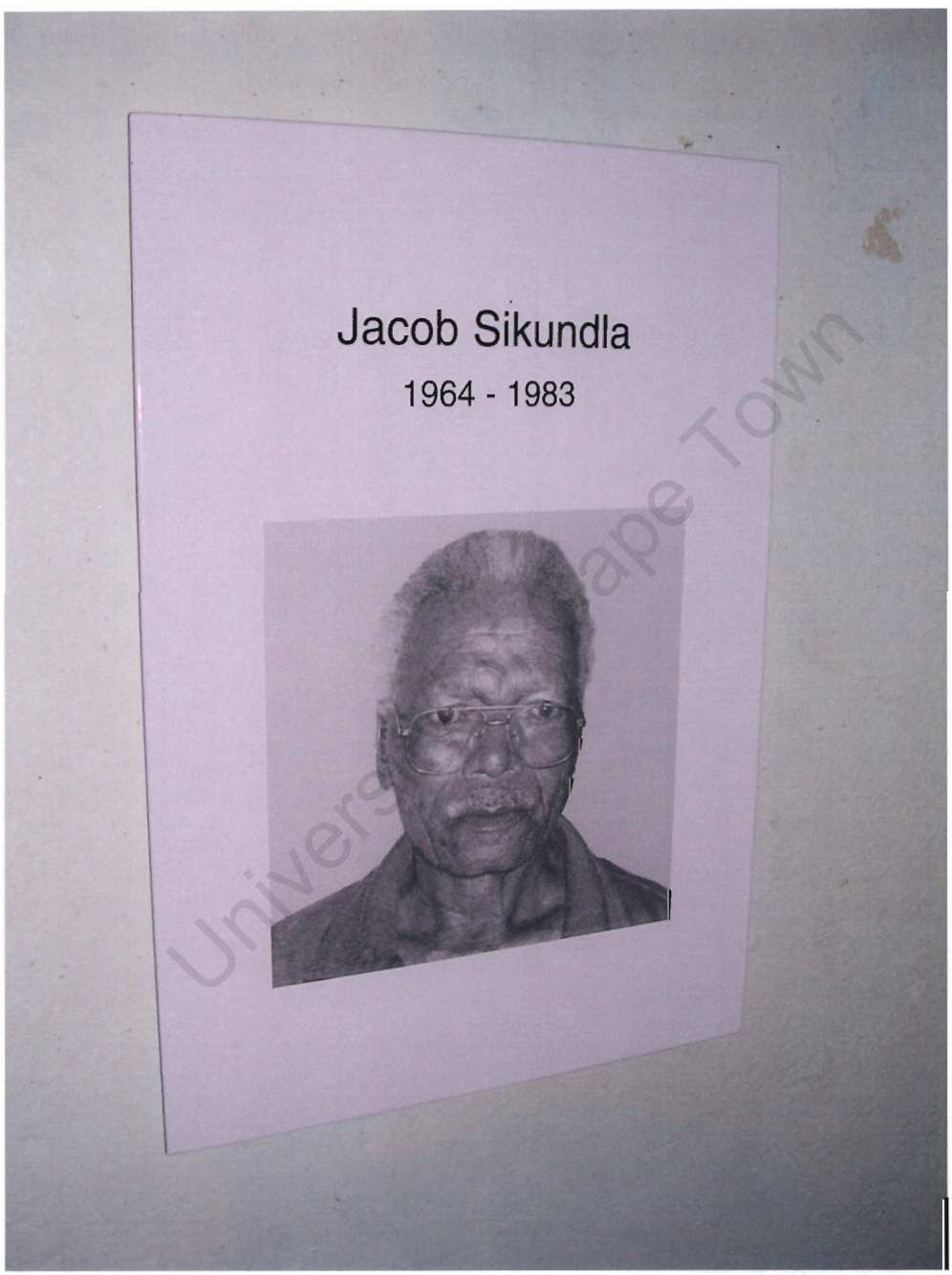
If that document was found, it meant that we were planning terrorism from prison. Oom Gov would be implicated and I would be the second accused. That's how serious it was. The document was not coded because it was 36 pages long. Normally I would have destroyed such a document but I decided to keep it because it was the original copy. I had to rewrite it myself in duplicate or in triplicate because I wanted to produce many copies at one time so that they could go into the different prison sections. I thought that when we were free, I could go back to the island and retrieve it. So I decided to bury it. Burying documents became part of the culture.

I buried the document in the industrial complex because I did not think that they would renovate or dig there. I wrapped the document in plastic, put it inside a Milo tin and buried it two strides from the outside toilet. To mark the distance from the wall, I planted a peace tree. I planted that tree in 1978 and I thought that if I ever come back to the island, I would see this tree two strides away from the wall.

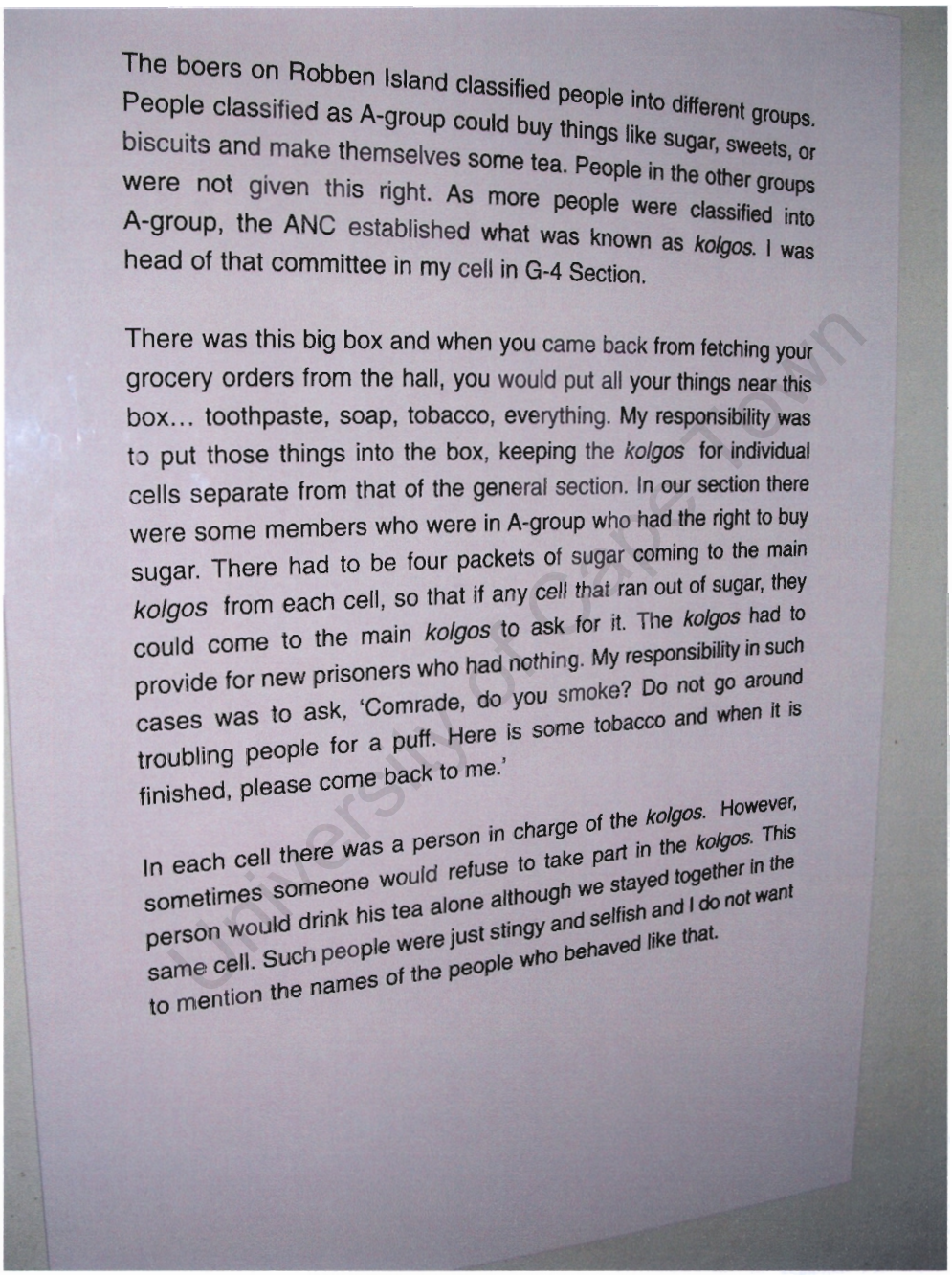
Footnote: Ezra Sigwela returned to Robben Island in January, 1998 to retrieve the buried document but found that the authorities had cemented the area. Once the archeological policy of the Robben Island Museum is in place, digging for such artefacts will be allowed.

Extract from the interview with Ezra Sigwela.

Sikundla, Jacob (1964-1983)



University of Cape Town



The boers on Robben Island classified people into different groups. People classified as A-group could buy things like sugar, sweets, or biscuits and make themselves some tea. People in the other groups were not given this right. As more people were classified into A-group, the ANC established what was known as *kolgos*. I was head of that committee in my cell in G-4 Section.

There was this big box and when you came back from fetching your grocery orders from the hall, you would put all your things near this box... toothpaste, soap, tobacco, everything. My responsibility was to put those things into the box, keeping the *kolgos* for individual cells separate from that of the general section. In our section there were some members who were in A-group who had the right to buy sugar. There had to be four packets of sugar coming to the main *kolgos* from each cell, so that if any cell that ran out of sugar, they could come to the main *kolgos* to ask for it. The *kolgos* had to provide for new prisoners who had nothing. My responsibility in such cases was to ask, 'Comrade, do you smoke? Do not go around troubling people for a puff. Here is some tobacco and when it is finished, please come back to me.'

In each cell there was a person in charge of the *kolgos*. However, sometimes someone would refuse to take part in the *kolgos*. This person would drink his tea alone although we stayed together in the same cell. Such people were just stingy and selfish and I do not want to mention the names of the people who behaved like that.

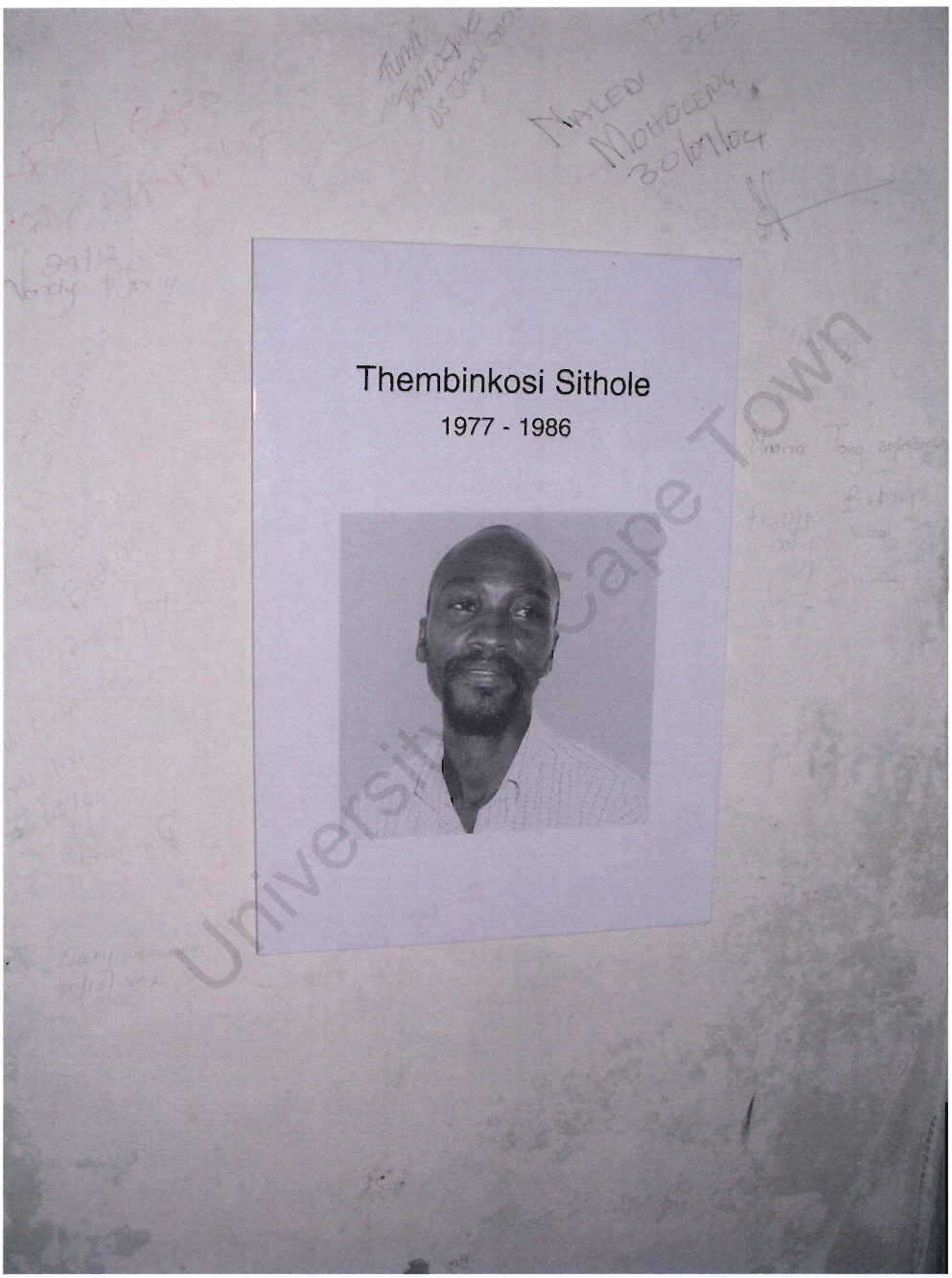
University of Cape Town

Extract from interview with Jacob Sikundla.



Personal object: a homemade suitcase/box (for the *kolgos* collective).

Sithole, Thembinkosi (1977-1986)



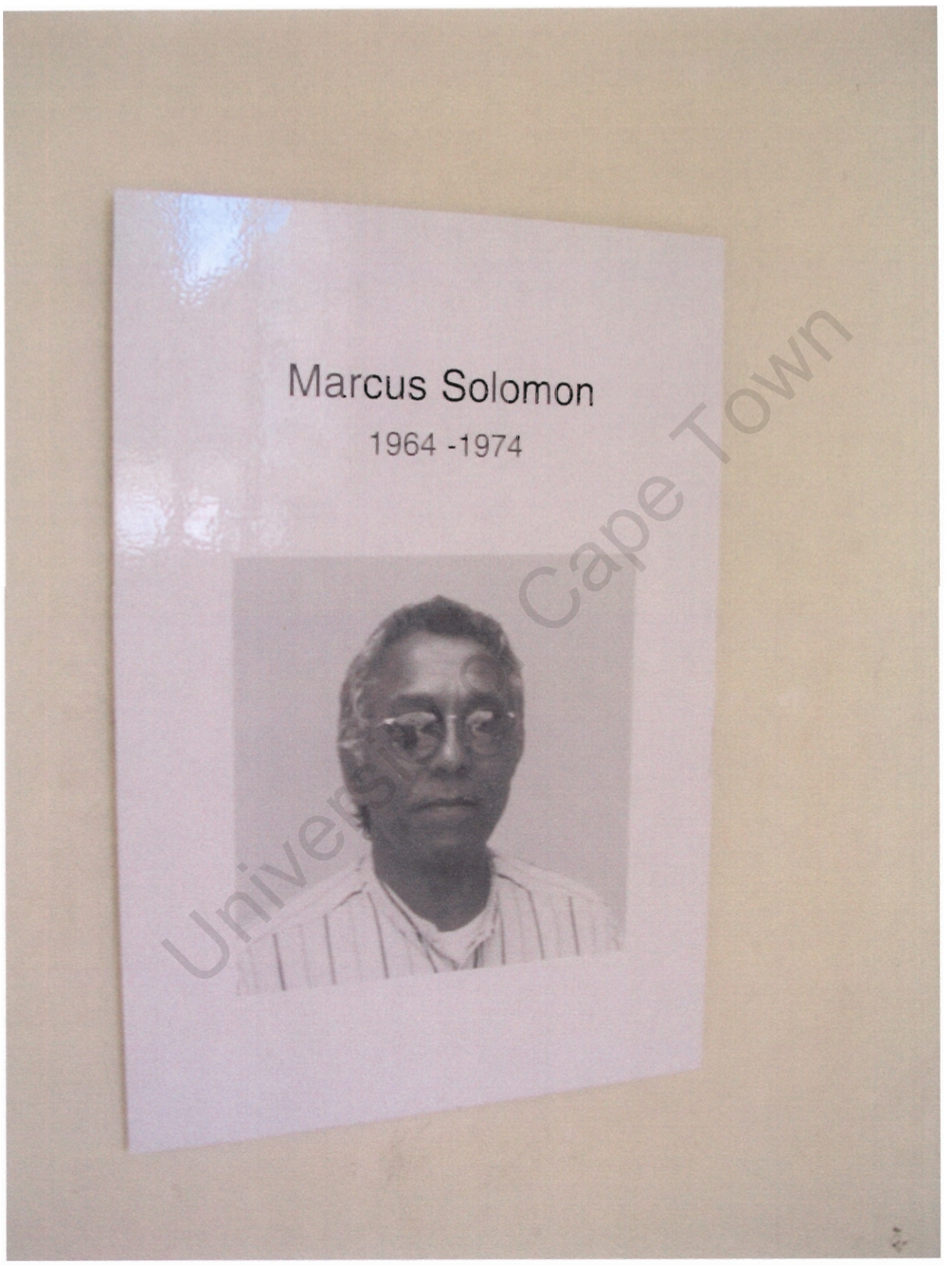
University of Cape Town

Thembinkosi Sithole's display:

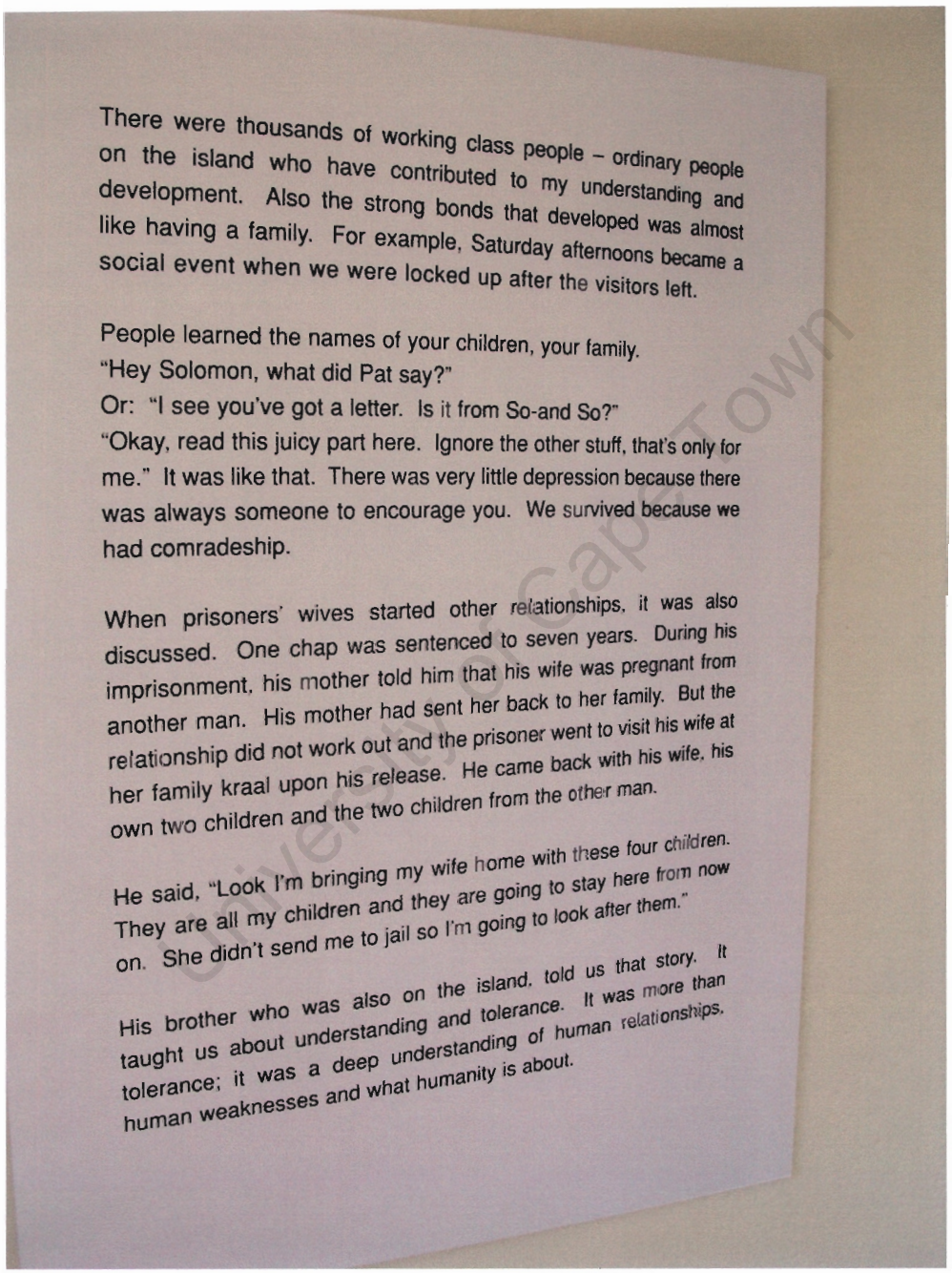
There is nothing on display in Sithole's cell. The object could have been taken away for maintenance, or Sithole could have claimed it back, as some of the objects are just on loan.

University of Cape Town

Solomon, Marcus (1964-1974)



University of Cape Town



There were thousands of working class people – ordinary people on the island who have contributed to my understanding and development. Also the strong bonds that developed was almost like having a family. For example, Saturday afternoons became a social event when we were locked up after the visitors left.

People learned the names of your children, your family.
"Hey Solomon, what did Pat say?"
Or: "I see you've got a letter. Is it from So-and So?"
"Okay, read this juicy part here. Ignore the other stuff, that's only for me." It was like that. There was very little depression because there was always someone to encourage you. We survived because we had comradeship.

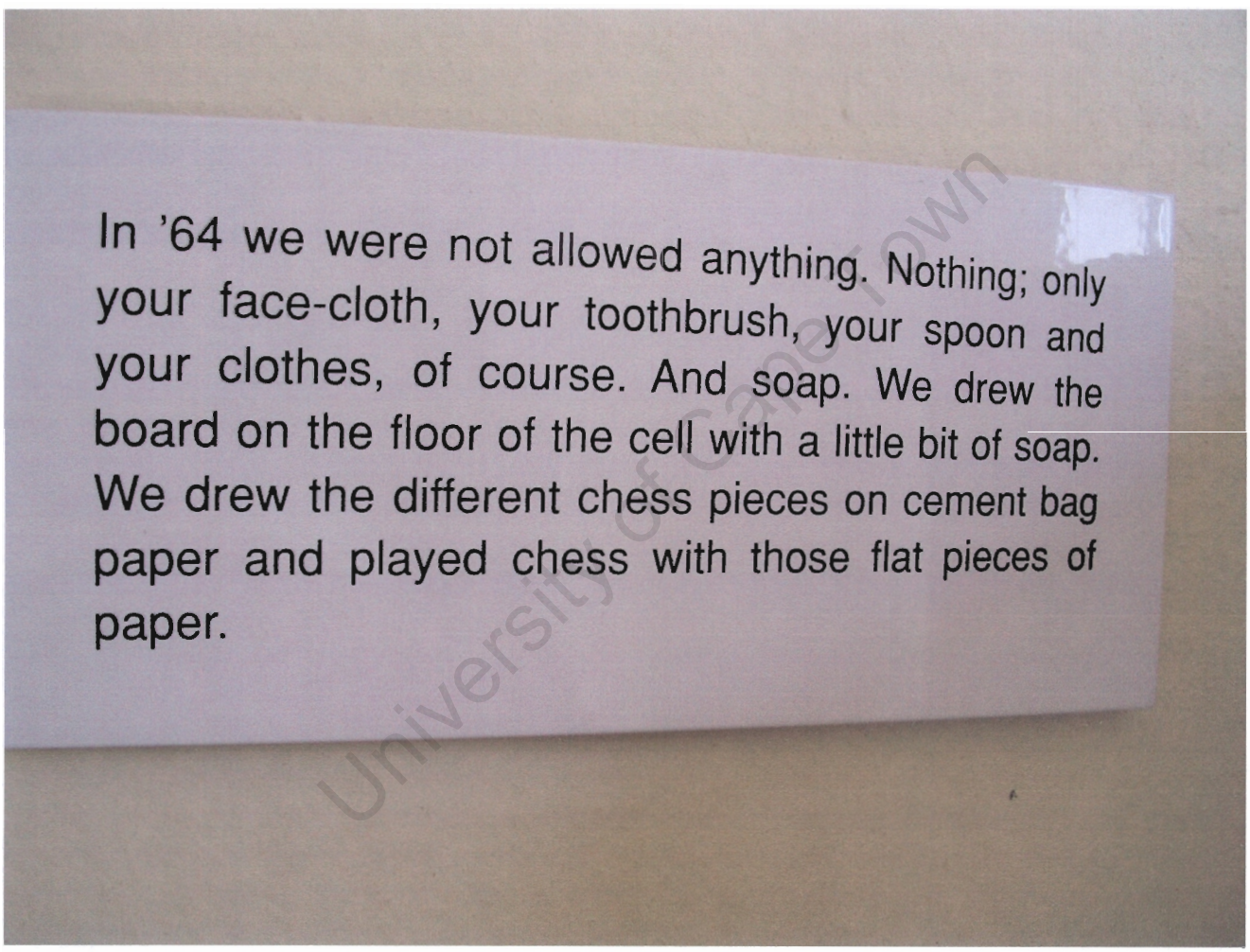
When prisoners' wives started other relationships, it was also discussed. One chap was sentenced to seven years. During his imprisonment, his mother told him that his wife was pregnant from another man. His mother had sent her back to her family. But the relationship did not work out and the prisoner went to visit his wife at her family kraal upon his release. He came back with his wife, his own two children and the two children from the other man.

He said, "Look I'm bringing my wife home with these four children. They are all my children and they are going to stay here from now on. She didn't send me to jail so I'm going to look after them."

His brother who was also on the island, told us that story. It taught us about understanding and tolerance. It was more than tolerance; it was a deep understanding of human relationships, human weaknesses and what humanity is about.

University of Cape Town

Extract from interview with Marcus Solomon.



University of Cape Town

Label explaining the small chess-pieces in Solomon's locker.



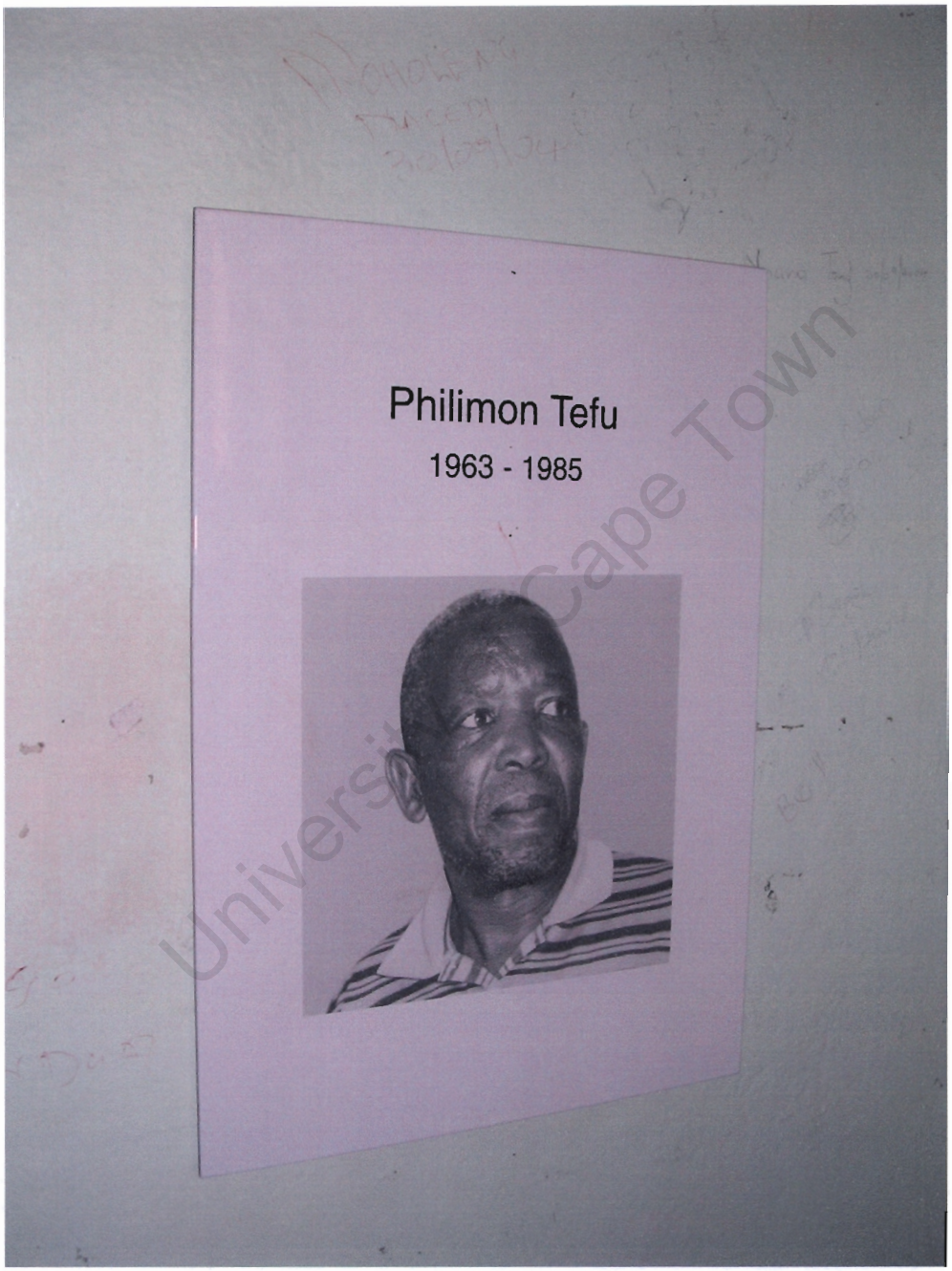
University of Cape Town

Personal object: chess-pieces made out of cardboard.

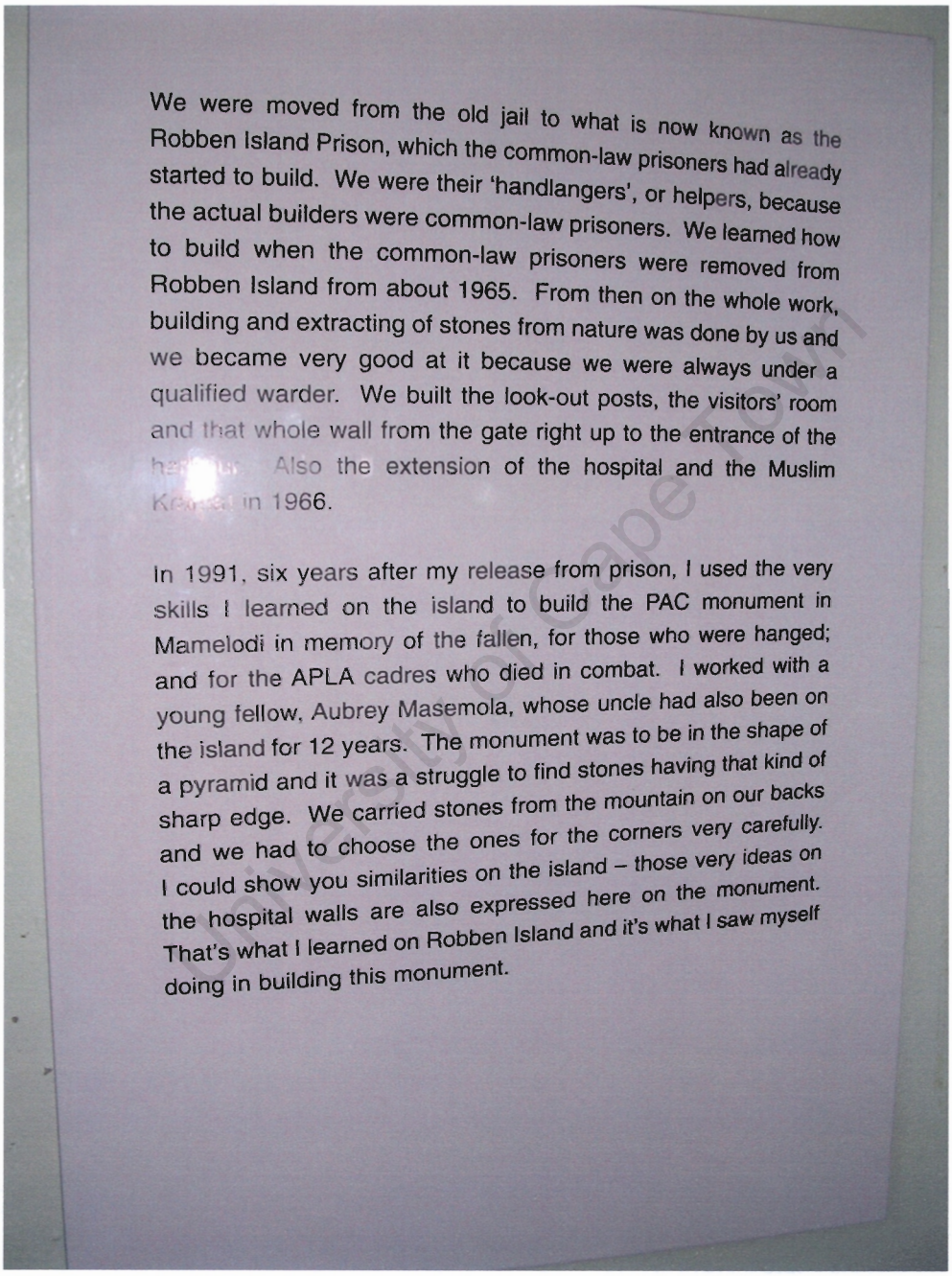
T

University of Cape Town

Tefu, Philimon (1963-1985)



University of Cape Town

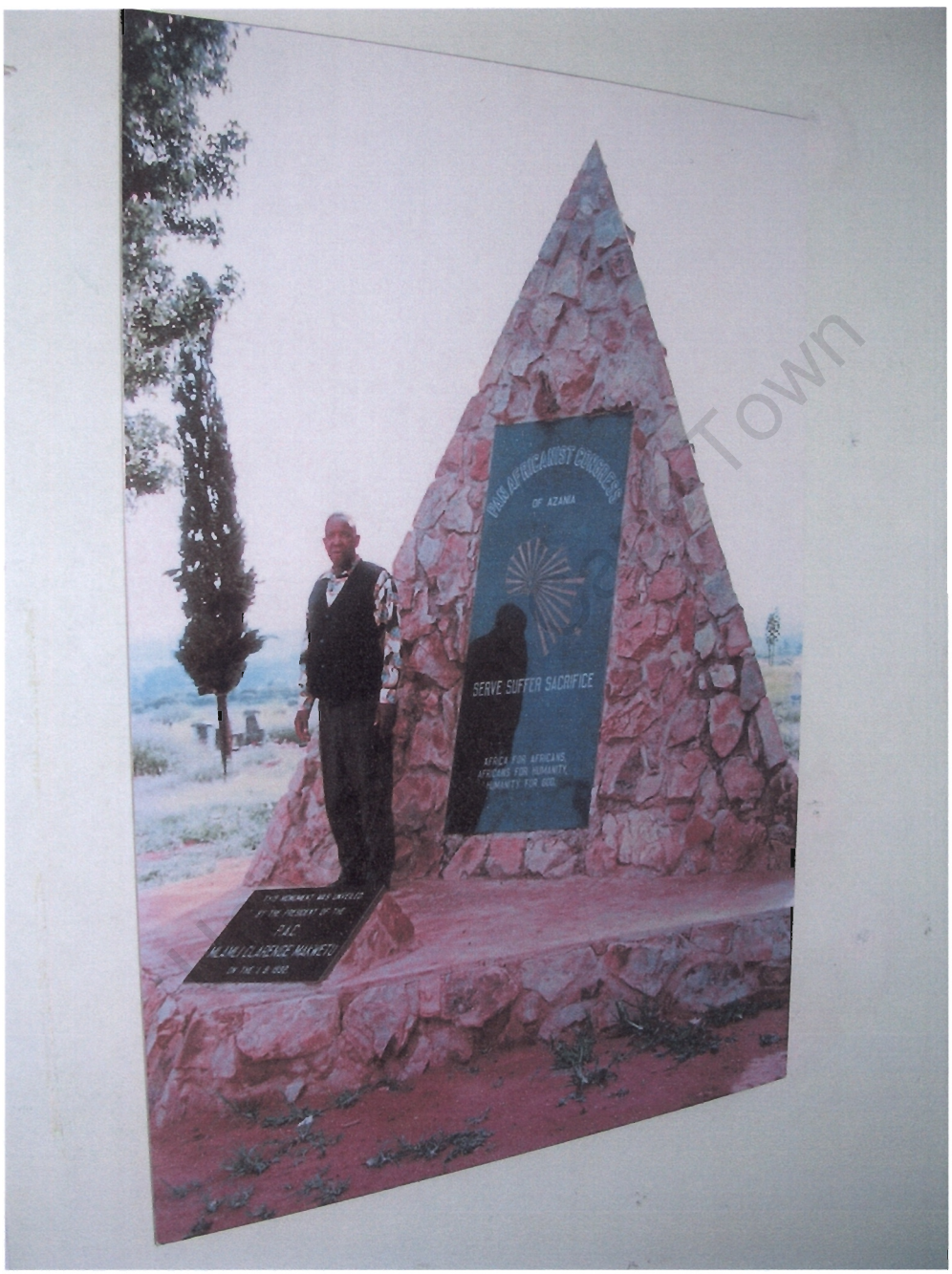


We were moved from the old jail to what is now known as the Robben Island Prison, which the common-law prisoners had already started to build. We were their 'handlangers', or helpers, because the actual builders were common-law prisoners. We learned how to build when the common-law prisoners were removed from Robben Island from about 1965. From then on the whole work, building and extracting of stones from nature was done by us and we became very good at it because we were always under a qualified warder. We built the look-out posts, the visitors' room and that whole wall from the gate right up to the entrance of the hospital. Also the extension of the hospital and the Muslim Kramat in 1966.

In 1991, six years after my release from prison, I used the very skills I learned on the island to build the PAC monument in Mamelodi in memory of the fallen, for those who were hanged; and for the APLA cadres who died in combat. I worked with a young fellow, Aubrey Masemola, whose uncle had also been on the island for 12 years. The monument was to be in the shape of a pyramid and it was a struggle to find stones having that kind of sharp edge. We carried stones from the mountain on our backs and we had to choose the ones for the corners very carefully. I could show you similarities on the island – those very ideas on the hospital walls are also expressed here on the monument. That's what I learned on Robben Island and it's what I saw myself doing in building this monument.

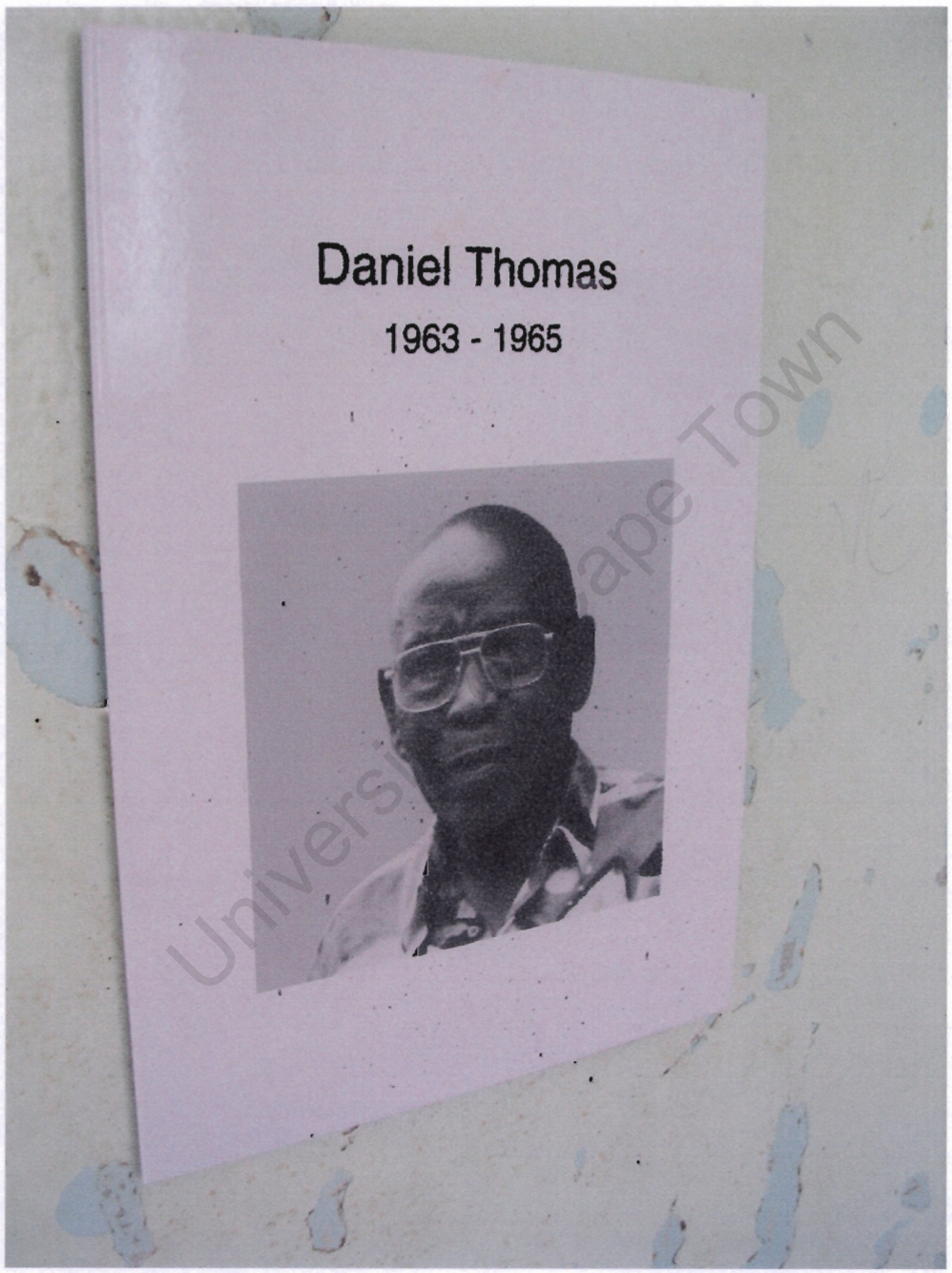
University of Cape Town

Extract from the interview with Philimon Tefu.



Personal object: a photograph of Philimon Tefu in front of the monument that he built in remembrance of the fallen during the freedom struggle.

Thomas, Daniel (1963-1965)



University of Cape Town



University of Cape Town

Label explaining the card displayed in Daniel Thomas' locker, in his own words.

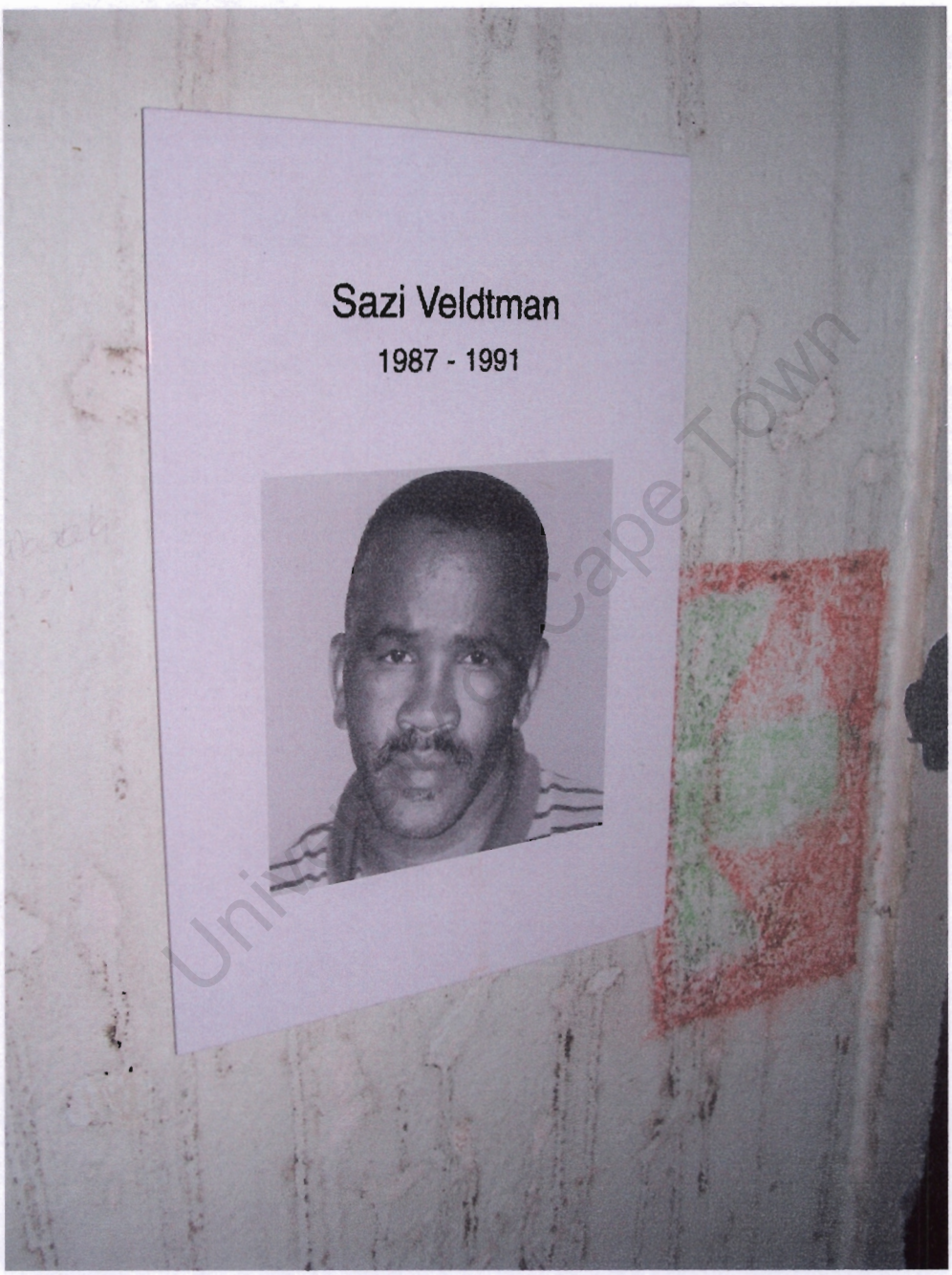


Personal object: a Christmas card from his wife.

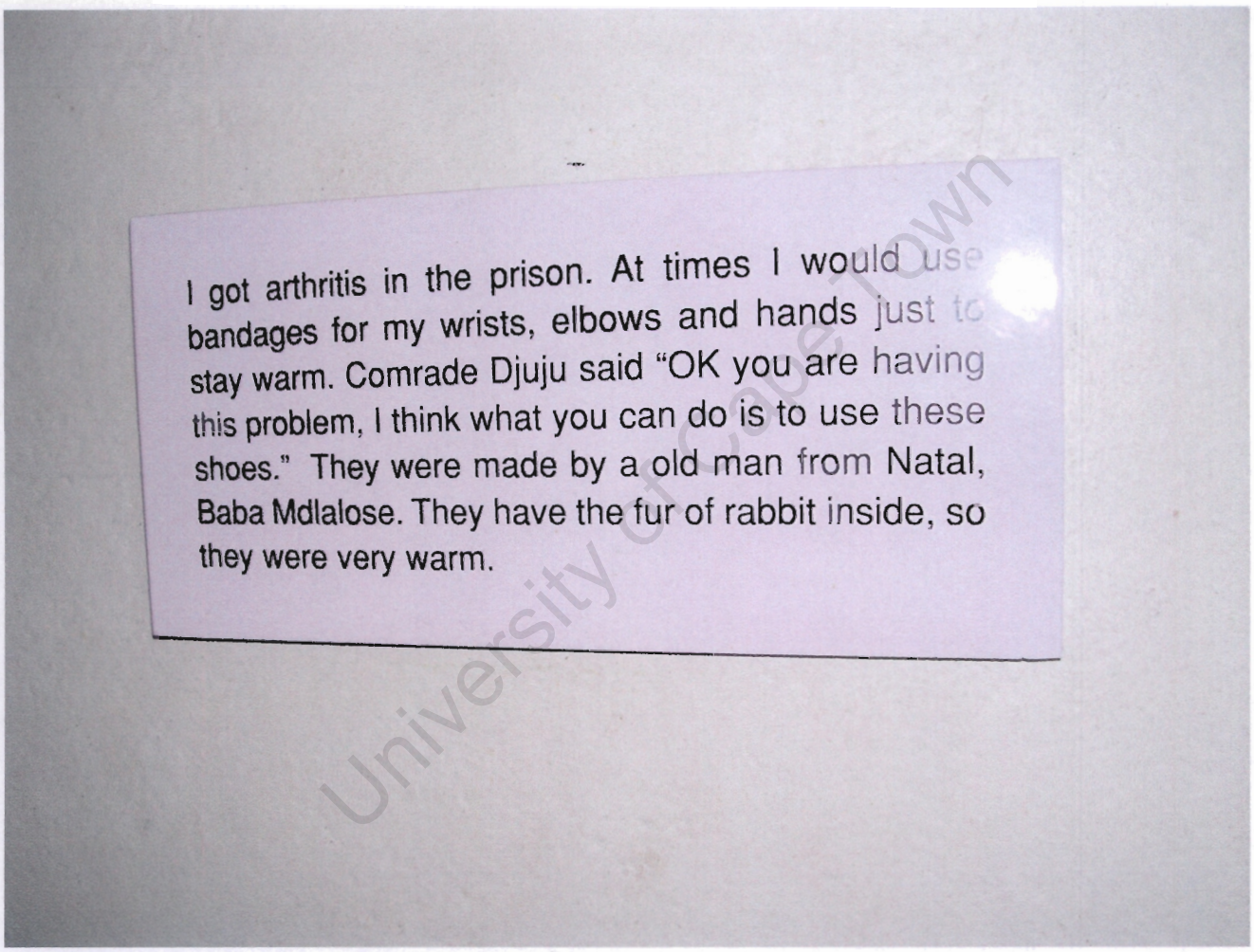
V

University of Cape Town

Veldtman, Sazi (1987-1991)



University of Cape Town



University of Cape Town

Label explaining the shoes in Sazi Veldtman's locker.



Personal object: shoes. .