

Without the truth, there is no justice

Why is the government Ahmed Timol helped put in power ignoring the circumstances of his death, asks **Imtiaz Cajee**

IT IS 38 years since my uncle Ahmed Timol was thrown to his death by security police from the 10th floor of John Vorster Square in Joburg.

Ever since I was a youngster I have pondered on the life and death of my beloved uncle. I used every opportunity I found to talk to my grandparents (Ahmed's mother and father). I wanted to know about his life.

How did he die? What happened? How did they as parents react? I remember paging through newspaper articles of the time, trying to make sense of what happened.

In my teenage years I wanted to avenge the death of my uncle through joining Umkhonto weSizwe, I wanted to play my part in liberating the country from its oppressive rulers. I wanted to join the ranks of my uncle and thousands of other comrades who had sacrificed their lives for their people. But it did not work out that way.

When my grandmother was approached to testify at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearings in 1996, she initially refused.

I pleaded with her, begged her to tell the story – to keep it alive. I convinced her that it was important, and her quiet testimony – in her language, Gujarati – shocked the nation.

Months after testifying, my grandmother died. She did not witness the renaming of the school in Azadville, Ahmed Timol Secondary School, by Nelson Mandela.

My grandmother's testimony at the TRC was emotional for me. I had over the years heard her vividly describe the pain of losing her son. But the testimony at the TRC was something else – I had a lump in my throat and was breathless for a while. I had a vision: I needed to do something more constructive in memory of my late uncle. The idea of writing a book in his memory was born.

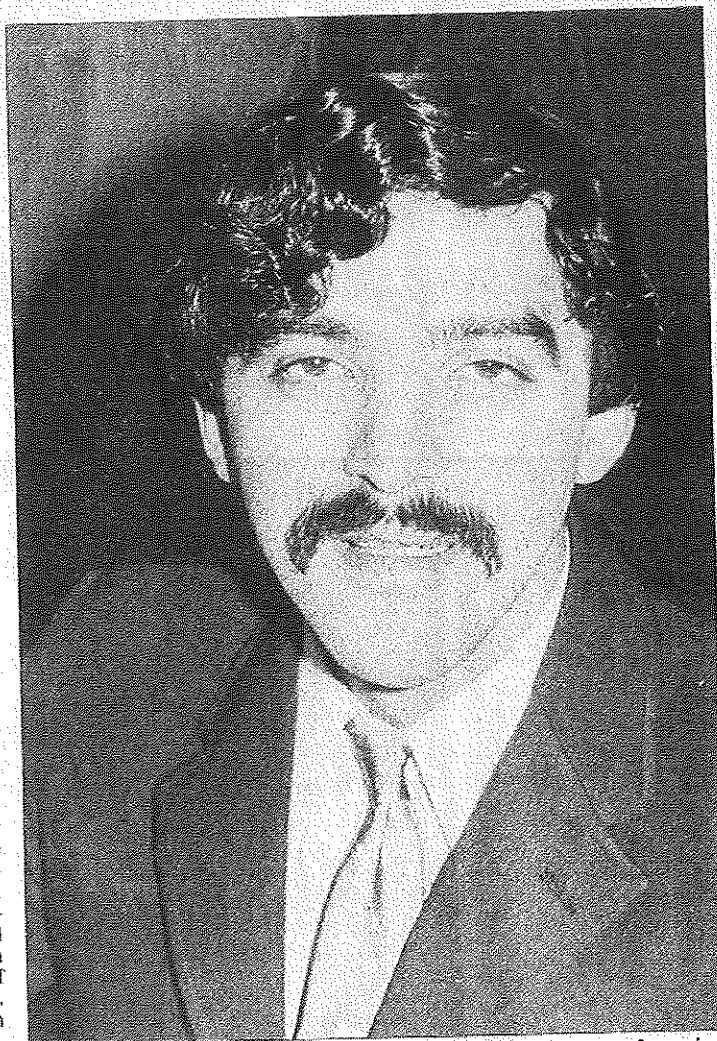
I started the process of once again reading the newspaper articles.

I made notes and began the task of identifying individuals who could assist me with the project. This was a difficult and painstaking process. I received assistance from some, while others simply humiliated me. Yet I continued on this journey.

I found the energy and courage to speak to a former policeman, Captain JH Gloy. I held my nerve and painstakingly inquired about my uncle. Gloy was reluctant to speak and threatened action against me if I continued phoning him.

In January 2005, my book was launched at the former John Vorster Square, the place of Uncle Ahmed's death, now named Johannesburg Police Station. The SA Police Choir sang the national anthem and members of the cabinet attended and paid tribute to Ahmed Timol.

Other launches were held in Azadville, Cape Town, Durban, Canada and the UK. I had the opportunity to speak at these launches, have my photograph taken and sign many copies of the book. I was "famous".



Ahmed Timol, who plunged to his death from the 10th floor of John Vorster Square in Johannesburg 38 years ago.

But launching the book has not brought about the sweet joy of paying tribute to my uncle and achieving closure.

The story is incomplete. There are pages missing. Yes, I had, for the first time, told the story of Ahmed Timol, the detainee, who, according to the apartheid regime, committed suicide by "jumping" from the 10th floor of the notorious John Vorster Square.

But the questions remain. What were the circumstances that led to Timol's death? Was a police informer in Timol's community responsible for betraying him?

Why did the policemen responsible for his arrest and detention not testify at the TRC? Why were they not subpoenaed? Why did Timol's former comrades (by then – in the mid-1990s – in government) not pursue this matter?

These are the questions that remain.

They beg answers. The inquest records state that my uncle committed suicide.

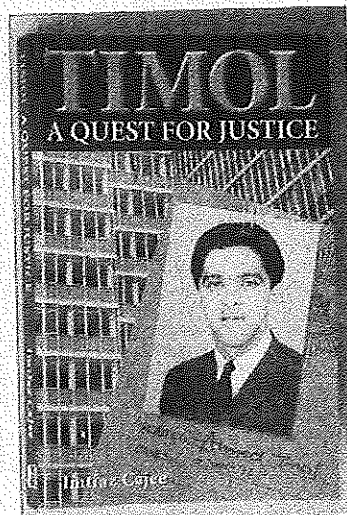
This is the state's official truth. This has to change. History will judge me, personally, and the former liberation movement, now in government, on this.

It is not my uncle's case alone. The inquest records of all the others who died in police detention must also be rectified. People ask me: Why do you want to pursue this matter? You have had your moment of fame and glory. Move on with your life, they say.

But I feel deep within me that I cannot rest until the full story is told.

People in the community who worked with the Security Branch must disclose their actions. Those who worked at John Vorster Square at the time and have information on Timol's death must speak.

The journey I have undertaken to



Cajee, Timol's nephew, has written a book calling for a reopening of an investigation into the circumstances surrounding the death of the anti-apartheid activist in police custody in 1971.

uncover the truth has been the experience of a lifetime. It has given me a better understanding of the underground structures of the liberation movement. And it has brought me into contact with some remarkable individuals whose sacrifices have not been acknowledged.

One is Abdul Hay Jassat (also known as Charlie). He was detained and severely tortured in the 1960s. Charlie had dedicated his life to the struggle.

Today, his humility, simplicity and his remarkable tolerance of his interrogators are deeply inspirational.

He is a constant reminder to me that the people always come first, despite the suffering he personally endured.

The other is the late Amina Desai.

She was sentenced to five years' imprisonment for allowing Timol to use her home for his underground activities. Her return from prison and her banishment within the community did not deter Amina. Her story is a tribute to the ideals of honesty, simplicity and truth.

The journey has also brought me in contact with former Security Branch officers.

Recently, after reading my book, a former security policewoman told me that, for the first time, she understood the pain and suffering of the "other side".

If I have managed to get a single individual to understand the suffering of Timol and others, my small contribution has been worthwhile.

I seek not retribution or vengeance, but the truth. Lessons must be learnt from our past. The sacrifices and commitment of Timol and thousands of others should remind us that our democracy came at a massive price.

● *Cajee is the author of Timol: Quest for Justice*