

Time Travel at The Old Fort Johannesburg Prison (Constitution Hill)

Student uprising 16th June, 1976

Goal/topic

Reflect on the recognition of Human rights, Right to education and Freedom of speech with expression, the South African Constitution then and now

Facts

Constitution Hill/The Fort, prisoners

Constitution Hill Precinct in Braamfontein Johannesburg has a very complex history going back to 1892 when the Old Fort was built under the Zuid Afrikaanse Republiek. Functioning as a prison, except for the brief period of the South African War (1899-1902) when it was a military defence post, new buildings were added to the site in the late 1900s and early 20th Century: the so-called Natives' section and isolation cells known as Sections Four and Five where black male prisoners were held, a Women's Prison (1907), and an Awaiting Trial building (1920s). All these buildings together were known as the Fort, a place that was notorious for its harsh treatment of prisoners: who ranged from common criminals to hundreds of thousands of ordinary men and women who contravened colonial and apartheid legislation such as hut tax laws, beer brewing laws, pass laws and the Group Areas act. Many political prisoners were also incarcerated at the Fort. Boer military leaders were imprisoned during the South African war 1899-1902. In 1906 and 1913 Indian passive resisters (including Mahatma Gandhi) were incarcerated.

In the miners' strikes of 1907, 1913, and the so-called Rand Revolt of 1922, white miners, whose particular racist brand of socialism was symbolized by their rallying cry: 'Workers of the World Unite for a White South Africa', were held in the Fort. Waves of resisters to the repressive regime of the new apartheid state passed through the entrance of the Old Fort: many involved in the 1952 Defiance campaign, the Treason Trialists of 1956 (including Nelson Mandela), and those imprisoned after various waves of resistance: Sharpeville in 1961, the 1976 uprising and the harsh clampdowns of the mid 1980s States of Emergency. The prison complex of the Fort has impacted deeply on hundreds of thousands of ordinary South Africans lives as it was essentially a transitory prison where prisoners were held until they were sentenced before being transferred to serve their prison terms elsewhere. The late 19th Century Old Fort was declared a National Monument in 1964 although it continued as a functioning prison until 1987 after which the buildings and the site as a whole, suffered from neglect and vandalism. The entire site was injected with a new meaning and energy when it was chosen in the mid-1990s as the site for the new Constitutional Court. Today Constitution Hill is a city precinct managed by Blue IQ and JDA and anchored by the South African Constitutional Court which is the highest court in the country on constitutional matters.

Constitution Hill provides a unique perspective of Johannesburg and its rich history. The site is home to the Women's Gaol museum, Number Four museum, and Old Fort museum. These areas host exhibitions that showcase South Africa's rich heritage and advocate human rights

1976 in Old Fort Prison

Tens of students were detained during the Soweto Uprising as well as leaders of organizations including Fatima Meer, Winne Madikizela-Mandela, Nomakhaya 'Kayo' Ethel Mafuna, Oshadi Mangena-Phakathi, Nikiwe Deborah Matchbox, Mapitso Lolo Tabane, Cecilie Palmer, Vesta Smith, Joyce Piliso Seroke, Jeannie Noel, Sally Motlana, and Sibongile Kubeka.

Scenario, The Old Fort Prison, 16th June 1976

Many students, boys and girls, as well as some teachers and adults, are taken into the Old Fort Johannesburg prison, arrested for the protest marches and uprising in Soweto today. The police raided the demonstrators, picked up quite many and brought them into the police vans.

Several have been beaten and have injuries; many are upset, crying and screaming. They did not know where the police were taking them. After a horrendous journey, the students finally arrived at the Old Fort Johannesburg prison.

Many have heard about the prison before, as a place of fear and horror, for political prisoners, for common criminals. There are many terrifying stories of Section Number Four, Number Five and the Women's Jail. But they never thought they would end up there themselves. The Internal Security Amendment Act and the Terrorism Act give the Minister of Justice enhanced powers to prohibit publications, prohibit attendance at gatherings, to restrict persons to certain areas and to detain persons and witnesses in custody without trial, for more than a year. But what wrong have I done, many ask themselves? Am I a security risk, a terrorist?

Now all of them, boys and girls together with a few teachers and adults, are standing outside the big gate waiting to be taken behind the walls. The guards have calmed them down, forced them to silence. What will happen? For how long will I be detained? Will I ever see my parents, friends and relatives again?

Roles

The students are students from 16th June 1976 protests taken into the prison (20 male and 15 female)

Some adults are adults from 16th June 1976 protests taken into the prison (15 male and 10 female)

Leaders play the roles of warders and wardresses

Male chief warder, female chief warder/matron

Other prisoners (10 characters?)

Everybody keep their age and sex

Key Questions

- Is there a freedom of speech? Can we speak our mind? Are we equal?
- How do we improve freedom, equality and human rights?

Activities

Reception activities

Prison activities, females:

- Cleaning, shining of floor, maintaining the cleanness of the cells
- Fold blankets: making of beds and décor as form of protest art
- Washing clothes: prison uniform, warders and wardresses uniforms, even Johannesburg residence that used to pay a fee to the prison for the service.
- Garden work: moving rock materials around the prison, using surgical scissors to cut the lawn around the court yards.

Also, demonstrate diet preparation: Address by a long term serving prisoner on the three congresses of Diet as per race

Prison activities, males:

- Cleaning: shining of floor maintaining the cleanness of the cells
- Fold blankets: making of beds and décor as form of protest art
- Garden work: moving rock materials around the prison
- Board games (ludo): play of board games and gambling introduced by common crime prisoners

Also, demonstrate diet preparation: Address by a long term serving prisoner on the three congresses of Diet as per race

Time Plan

07.30 Prepare the site

08.30 The participants assembly in the film room

09.00 Welcome

Background, scenario, characters, rules

09.40 Initiation

Line up at the main entrance at the tunnel (4 lineups),

Reception and address of prisoners by the Chief Warder, Rule and Regulations (detention without trial)

Separation by gender, count of prisoners (done by one long term serving prisoner)

Prisoner cards, dress up in prison uniform, submission of personal belongings

10.10 Females go to women's prison/ a communal cell

Males go to number five/ a communal cell

10.20 Females: Find a place to sleep, go to the courtyard

Washing, cleaning, garden work, diet introduction, prison art, protest songs and dialogues in form of poetry

Males: Find a place to sleep, go to the courtyard

Cleaning, fold blankets/prison art, board games (ludo), diet introduction, conduct the Tauza dance, protest songs and poetry (solitary confinement)

11.10 Males leave number five, led by the warders; females leave women's prison, led by warders, to attend their first court hearings,

Accusation according to the charges stated by the 1961 Republic of South Africa

Constitution (then Constitution) under the Internal Security Amendment Act, (which replaced the Suppression of Communism Act), which gives the minister of "justice" enhanced powers to declare organisations unlawful, to prohibit attendance at gatherings, to restrict persons to certain areas and to detain persons and witnesses in custody (act of terrorism, public violence)

11.20 Time Travel ends

Reflection on freedom, equality, human rights, then and now. How do we improve it today?

11.45 Lunch

12.30-16.00 Workshop on the Time Travel method

20 October 2014

Ebbe Westergren Kalmar läns museum and the Time Travel team Constitution Hill

Facts, About the student uprising

The June 16 1976 Uprising that began in Soweto and spread countrywide profoundly changed the socio-political landscape in South Africa. Events that triggered the uprising can be traced back to policies of the Apartheid government that resulted in the introduction of the Bantu Education Act in 1953. The rise of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) and the formation of South African Students Organisation (SASO) raised the political consciousness of many students while others joined the wave of anti-Apartheid sentiment within the student community. When the language of Afrikaans alongside English was made compulsory as a medium of instruction in schools in 1974, black students began mobilizing themselves. On 16 June 1976 between 3000 and 10 000 students mobilized by the South African Students Movement's Action Committee supported by the BCM marched peacefully to demonstrate and protest against the government's directive. The march was meant to culminate at a rally in Orlando Stadium.

On their pathway they were met by heavily armed police who fired teargas and later live ammunition on demonstrating students. This resulted in a widespread revolt that turned into an uprising against the government. While the uprising began in Soweto, it spread across the country and carried on until the following year.

The aftermath of the events of June 16 1976 had dire consequences for the Apartheid government. Images of the police firing on peacefully demonstrating students led an international revulsion against South Africa as its brutality was exposed. Meanwhile, the weakened and exiled liberation movements received new recruits fleeing political persecution at home giving impetus to the struggle against Apartheid.

Events leading up to June 1976

When government decreed in 1975 that Afrikaans would be the language of instruction in half of all subjects taught in Standards five and six, there was widespread opposition from teachers, parents and students. In the first months of 1976, demonstrations took place at various schools. Probably the first example of student opposition took place when pupils clashed with the principal of Thomas Mofolo Secondary School, the first school to impose the new language of instruction, on 24 February 1976. By March the principal at Thomas Mofolo called in the police. Motapanyane, a student at Naledi, went with fellow SASM students to talk to students at Thomas Mofolo and schools in Meadowlands, and students began boycotting classes. The Naledi SASM students went to Orlando West Junior Secondary School, and students there began destroying their textbooks and boycotting classes in protest. According to Motapanyane, whose SASM branch visited many other schools throughout Soweto, protests were widespread by May 1976. By 17 May 1600 students were boycotting at Orlando West and 500 at Phefeni Junior Secondary School. On 27 May an Afrikaans teacher was stabbed, and when police were called in, they were stoned. On 8 June police descended on a school to arrest a SASM local secretary, and they were stoned and their car was burnt. On 13 June the Naledi branch of SASM called a meeting, which was attended by about 400 students who voted to hold a mass demonstration. SASM established an Action Committee, which had two representatives from each school, and was later renamed the Soweto Students Representative Committee (SSRC). The council was recognised as the leadership of the student movement. Tsietsi Mashinini was elected president of the SSRC, and his fellow pupil from Morris Isaacson, Murphy Morobe, was also on the committee. Branches of SASM in other parts of the country engaged in protests in their own regions, and many students nation-wide were primed to take action without being goaded. Baruch Hirson acknowledges that SASM played a major role in the student uprising of June 1976. In his book *Year of Fire, Year of Ash*, he writes:

'When finally the school students rose in protest against the imposition of Afrikaans as the language of instruction in three school subjects, it was SASM which provided much of the leadership, SASM that called the crucial demonstration for 16 June 1976, and SASM which created the Soweto Students' Representative Council (SSRC) from which the leaders of the Revolt were drawn.'

June 16, the SSRC and the turning point

The students marched on June 16, 1976, and were met by a brutal police reaction. It is estimated that 20,000 students took part in the march. More than 500 students were killed on that day, Hector Pieterse being the first casualty. The members of the SSRC were desperately sought by the police, and Mashinini eventually fled the country in August 1976, with Khotso Seatlholo taking his place as president of the SSRC. The SSRC became a major force in the aftermath of the uprising, calling for stay-aways, boycotts and various forms of political action. The revolt was no longer a student revolt, and workers joined in political resistance, bringing business and industry to a halt during several general strikes. Thousands of students fled the country to swell the ranks of uMkhonto we Sizwe (MK), the armed wing of the ANC. International reaction to the massacre was swift, with former allies of the apartheid regime condemning the shootings and the policy of apartheid. Many of the students continued to take part in organisations that emerged to oppose apartheid, such as AZAPO, COSAS, and the UDF, among others.

According to the government-appointed Cillie Commission of Enquiry 575 people died. Police action resulted in 451 deaths. 3 907 people were injured. The police were responsible for 2 389 injuries. Both the death and injury figures were disputed by various sources as being too low. 5 980 were arrested for offences related to the resistance in the townships. Within four months of the Soweto revolt 160 African communities all over the country were involved in resistance. It was estimated that at least 250 000 people in Soweto were actively involved in the resistance. Resistance in the various communities were located in all four provinces and the homelands. A police witness said to the Cillie Commission that at least 46 incidents of arson, strikes and disturbances occurred in Venda, Lebowa and Gazankulu. 30 November, 700 people were in detained. 31 December, Then Prime Minister BJ Vorster says: "The storm has not struck yet. We are only experiencing the whirlwinds that go before it." Winnie Mandela is elected to the Black Parents Committee. Mass detentions follows and she is one of six executive members of the Federation of Black Women to be detained. She is released and banned again. 110 bombings by insurgents occurred. Only about 3 000 pupils out of a possible 27 000 pupils applied for re-admission to Soweto schools. 230 000 people were arrested for pass law offences.