A Lifetime Ago, He Helped Change South Africa, and It Changed Him
Lynne Duke. Washington Post. April 29, 2004

Eyes stare in through a peephole. Pale eyelashes flutter.

The prisoner, Murphy Morobe, knows who is watching.

The lieutenant, Adriaan van Niekerk, has come.

It is a macabre ritual, the moments before torture. Time seems to stop. Morobe focuses on those eyes, those nearly white lashes. It's almost as if he can hear them, the blinking of those eyes, "those eyelashes crashing at the door." And that smell, that cologne: There in the cell inside the John Vorster Square police lockup, van Niekerk's scent hits Morobe, and almost makes him sick. It is a harbinger of the things he will face when van Niekerk unlocks the cell and delivers the 20-year-old Morobe to police interrogators. They will beat him, even on his private parts, and force him to kneel naked through the night. To try to break him, to make him talk, night after night in that horrible South African summer of 1977.

Pen in hand, a charcoal suit draped nicely over his frame, his black square-toed shoes hinting at hipness, Morobe (pronounced mo- RO-bee) stands at an easel in his Midrand office, north of Johannesburg, and draws a strategic plan for a dozen of his staffers. The rather drab fluorescent-lit conference room seems to whisper: No fun shall be had here. And the work of the Financial and Fiscal Commission is indeed heavy lifting.

Morobe chairs this body, was appointed a decade ago by Nelson Mandela, then South Africa's president. No longer a firebrand activist in the anti-apartheid struggle, Morobe is a watchdog these days over the equitable flow of the national budget.

He is 47 now. His bald head is buffed, his graying goatee neatly trimmed. There is a bit of a paunch these days, but he is battling the bulge with daily workouts at the gym.

As he leads the staff of the commission, he appears a man fully at ease with himself, with freedom. He speaks with elegant reserve, with quiet force.

The pain of the past seems a lifetime ago, compared to his work now.

Whatever scars he bears are not visible, but for the faint nick on a knuckle. He shows it off as a battle scar, from a time when he was 19 and he had the gumption, during a protest, to punch a cop in the mouth.

Back then, the struggle against apartheid fired his very being. He was a leader of the Soweto uprising of 1976, when protests erupted throughout South Africa and landed him at John Vorster after six months on the run.

Through the 1980s, Morobe served in at least a half-dozen other jails or prisons, including Robben Island, at the knee of Nelson Mandela.

But prison didn't break him.

For here he is, a man of the new South Africa whose life is but one slice of the story of how old activists made it through the bitter years of their struggle and then settled, often uneasily, into the first decade of freedom. South Africa celebrated the 10th anniversary of its democracy Tuesday, when President Thabo Mbeki, leader of the African National Congress, was inaugurated for a second term.

Morobe is among the country's new black elite, those men and women of "the struggle" who have moved into government, into business.

The struggle still fires him, but the enemies these days are poverty, unemployment and the still-wide social and economic gaps left over from apartheid. His work on the financial commission, though tedious and behind the scenes, is the front on which he fights for the material equality that remains elusive here.

He is not bitter about the past, he says, for such an emotion is corrosive for those who bear it. And Morobe has worked hard, all his life, to keep adversity from getting the best of him. He has not forgotten the past -- that is impossible -- but he refuses to let it haunt him.

As a romantic young comrade, Morobe once dreamed of marching on Pretoria, the capital city, and ousting apartheid's leaders. Now, the city once synonymous with white minority rule is his home.

Beneath the canopy of jacaranda trees whose blossoms turn Pretoria lavender in spring, he is happily ensconced with his partner, Gail Andrews, a lecturer at a nearby university, in a kind of domesticity once unheard of, with jazz as his soundtrack.

He plays with his purple-tongued chow, named Bruma, and frets over the poor-performing rosebushes in his yard. This is Morobe's new normal.

His neighbors include Afrikaners, the descendants of Dutch settlers and the creators of apartheid, as well as foreign diplomats, from Africa and beyond, and a few former activists like himself.

It's not an ostentatious life. In fact, his home is quite modest.

Morobe, from outward appearances, hasn't joined that class of newly empowered black businessmen and women who have quickly and easily embraced the trappings of affluence.

Instead of a Mercedes (owned by that tribe some here jokingly call the "waBenzi"), he drives a small truck, known locally as a bakkie. It suits him fine. He's an outdoor kind of guy who finds nothing more pleasurable than slinging on his backpack and taking five-day hikes, which he does twice a year.

But the transition from political activist to prospering executive has not been without new pain, new conflicts. Morobe has moved into the new South Africa while so many people he knows remain in the old one.

Each time he drives through Soweto to visit his mom and other relatives, his emotions are stirred. In Soweto, as in many other black townships, he is reminded of South Africa's abiding poverty and the huge challenge it represents.

He feels self-conscious, he says, somehow on the spot when he visits these townships. He has found success while many others have not.

"You can see it in their eyes when they look at you," he says of people in his old community. "There's a different way in which they look at you coming from Johannesburg. It makes you feel uncomfortable. . . . You have admiration from people who are your peers. You can sense an admiration, and a powerlessness at [their] own condition." South Africa's straits are a troubling reality. In a nation of 44.8 million, where the white minority of 9.6 percent still largely controls the economy, there is also a widening gap between the new black haves and have-nots.

"That, to me, raises the significant question of the dilemma in our society today," he says of the socioeconomic gaps.

He laments the slow pace of change for the nation's poor, as well as the lack of job-creating investment. South Africa's economic policies are internationally lauded for their wisdom, and yet the high unemployment rate, estimated at between 30 and 40 percent, is a blot on the new democracy.

It is a far more daunting challenge than the mere few hundred rand Morobe may give to an old Soweto friend or relative. It is a challenge that President Mbeki says he will tackle with new government spending to create jobs.

The pain of freedom hit Morobe in another way, too.

Like many other marriages among activists, Morobe's did not survive, did not transfer well into the era. He and his wife of 13 years divorced in 1998 after drifting apart. Morobe continues to support his two sons, ages 19 and 22, who live in Soweto with their mother.

The advent of South Africa's freedom was life-changing, in ways that only crept up slowly, Morobe says of the divorce.

"Once you move from the struggle life of being constantly on the move, many of us are having to deal with normalcy, what is called settling down," he says, careful not to divulge too much of the personal trauma.

"As you can well imagine, and depending on where the partner comes from, it's a very clear source of tension and friction," he says.

"Suddenly the world looks very different," he continues. "The adrenaline is no longer a factor in why you do things."

His sons have lived relatively free of the struggle and pain their father once endured. They are not quite "born frees," as younger kids are called, but close.

The younger, Lebogang, still is in school, and the elder, Maqhawe, is looking for work.

Morobe chuckles when he recalls how a television interviewer once asked Lebogang what he thought about June 16. It's a historic day -- the day his father led the students of Soweto in their famous but deadly protest against inferior apartheid education.

Lebogang responded glibly that June 16 is just a public holiday, though of course he knew the importance of the day that changed his father's life.

A few years ago, Morobe went to a courthouse to pay a traffic fine. A white man crossed his path. He seemed vaguely familiar. Morobe noticed the nearly white eyebrows and eyelashes. And then it hit him. He felt the rush.

"This strong smell came to me," says Morobe. "And I stopped. And I looked. And I just thought I was dreaming. And it was him! There he was." It was van Niekerk, the lieutenant with the pale eyes.

The two men faced each other, on a street of the new South Africa, as equals, but with heavy baggage. He spoke to van Niekerk in Afrikaans.

"I said, 'Hi, how are you?' And he was startled -- a white man, to be stopped by a black man in the street. And so he stopped. I said, " 'Do you remember me? You must be Lieutenant van Niekerk. I was one of the guys that was at John Vorster Square.' . . . He knew who I was. He was at a loss for words."

Van Niekerk, 52, remembers the encounter too. He didn't immediately recognize Morobe. But quickly it dawned on him. There on the street in Kempton Park, a Johannesburg suburb, they exchanged pleasantries, as distant acquaintances might.

Van Niekerk is a lawyer now, in a practice that, judging by the Afrikaans banter heard from the waiting room, serves primarily Afrikaners like him.

Approached unexpectedly with questions about Morobe, van Niekerk reluctantly agreed to a brief interview. He spoke with circumspection, careful not to say too much. He was nervous discussing his duties at John Vorster, for the past is not quite over. Recriminations still could surface. Proposed new amnesties for past crimes are still a subject of debate here.

In his office that day, Van Niekerk says he knows nothing of Morobe and torture. He was not an investigator on the Morobe case, he says.

"I cannot say yes or no, because I wasn't there," he says.

But he acknowledges that, as a duty officer at John Vorster in the 1970s, he did often look into the cells and he probably did escort Morobe to the interrogators.

Van Niekerk is on record for his involvement in a different case, this one involving torture that was fatal.

In 1998, van Niekerk told the country's Truth and Reconciliation Commission that he participated in the 1988 electric-shock torture that killed anti-apartheid activist Stanza Bopape at John Vorster, according to commission records. In exchange for their confessions, van Niekerk and nine others involved in Bopape's death received amnesty in 2000 from criminal or civil prosecution. Van Niekerk is today a free man, like thousands of other former security officers involved in activists' deaths. He grapples with his own pain from the past. After fighting from his side against the liberation struggle, he sought counseling to help him heal, he says. He transitioned from apartheid to democracy with difficulty, but found guidance in Mandela's example.

"If he can make some good out of this, why can't I?" van Niekerk says of the former president known for his push toward reconciliation.

"I accept life, the new life, the new political dispensation," says van Niekerk. "I mean, for 13 years I was an opponent of the ANC. But it's turned around. I've got no problems with those guys." But when he ran into Morobe, he wondered if Morobe had a problem with him. "One will expect, if you see such a guy, that there would be hatred," van Niekerk says. "But we greeted each other by hand, like gentlemen."

Says Morobe: "There is something called bitterness. It's an emotion I have not been able to find room in myself to have."

Between former victimizer and victim, there was but one message Morobe wanted to deliver. Though unstated in his exchange with van Niekerk, Morobe hoped the encounter said this:

"Despite all of your best intentions, here I am."

Three frantic men stormed into the old U.S. Consulate in downtown Johannesburg one day in 1988. It was the height of the apartheid- era battles during a nationwide state of emergency, and Morobe, Mohammed Valli Moosa and Vusi Khanyile had decided enough was enough.

They'd been jailed, without charge, at Johannesburg Prison. Prisoners had dubbed the crowded place "Sun City," after the country's famous gambling resort.

Things were so bad, in fact, that Morobe and the others decided they had nothing to lose. If they escaped and were caught, they'd simply end up back in jail. If they succeeded, then a new opening would be made in the struggle.

They hatched a plan. They would feign illness, get taken to a nearby hospital, then slip their guards, hop into a waiting getaway car, and dash into the consular offices for sanctuary.

The long shot worked.

"We've just escaped from prison," Morobe remembers saying to a U.S. official. "We're here to seek help and sanctuary." They stayed at the consulate for 37 days, with friends and relatives bringing them food and clothing. They made headlines. They caused quite a diplomatic stir between Washington and Pretoria, then in the thick of a controversial alignment called "constructive engagement." For Morobe, it was his final bold stroke against apartheid. He was never arrested again.

But other conflicts emerged. This time, within the liberation movement itself. Winnie Mandela, his Soweto neighbor, had had trouble of her own with the security forces through the decades of her husband's imprisonment. By 1989 the squad of bodyguards she surrounded herself with had become a law unto themselves, abducting Soweto teenagers to force them into Winnie Mandela's orbit. There were beatings and torture and, in the most infamous case, murder.

The "mother of the nation," as she was called then, had stepped beyond the bounds of the movement, which in those days was called the United Democratic Front. It was an internal surrogate for the exiled ANC, and Morobe was its publicity secretary.

That meant it fell to Morobe to speak out. It was Morobe who, with the blessing of the exiled ANC leadership, stood before the local and international media and denounced the bodyguard squad and distanced the UDF from Winnie Mandela. It was a sensational move that stirred controversy in the movement and brought a heap of resentment down on Morobe from Winnie Mandela's loyalists.

Testifying at the 1997 Truth Commission hearings on her bodyguards' brutal behavior, she spat bile at Morobe. She questioned his ethnic bona fides, suggesting he'd been a puppet for Indians within the old movement. "Murphy Patel," she called him, using a common Indian surname.

Many in the audience that day felt the sting of her words.

Morobe says he did not.

"I laughed," he recalls. "Short of finding it ridiculous, I found it funny." He regrets, he says, that the two haven't spoken in years.

"Speculation and postulation," as he calls it, have trailed Morobe for years. He's heard it, knows all about it. Some here believe that Morobe, once a leading light in the liberation movement, did not receive a higher position after 1994 in part because of his dust-up with Winnie Mandela.

Moosa, his fellow escapee, became a cabinet minister. (Khanyile went into business and today heads an investment holding company.) Why, some here long have asked, didn't Morobe reap a higher-profile reward?

Morobe says it was his decision. It was his choice, he says, to recede from politics and not stand for parliament during the 1994 elections, which disqualified him from high appointment by the ruling party. He decided to remain independent, he says, to chart his own path.

He'd already begun working in the private sector. In 1989, he took a job with a manufacturing firm, P.G. Bison, handling social investment and business development.

After Nelson Mandela's release from prison in 1990, Morobe spent a year on a fellowship to study economics and management at Princeton University.

Then he returned to South Africa to administer the grand negotiations that would decide his country's future. Those talks pitted Mandela's ANC, as well as other liberation movements, against President Frederik W. de Klerk and the ideology of apartheid.

With the march toward elections on track, Morobe also managed to also study for and receive a diploma from a local professional school.

Just after the historic 1994 election, he served as secretary of the legislature of Gauteng Province, based in Johannesburg. It was his job to preside over the province's ceremony to lower the old South African flag and hoist the new one.

"That is when your heart feels so bloody good, as I was bringing the flag down," he recalls with relish.

"And guess who was standing next to me?" It was Claus von Lieres und Wilkau, the Transvaal attorney general who had sentenced Morobe to Robben Island. That made the moment all the more precious.

When Mandela asked Morobe to lead the constitutionally mandated financial commission, he felt he could not refuse. And the commission is an independent body, not tied to politics, which suits Morobe just fine.

Morobe also chairs the South African National Parks board. In the private sector, he sits on the boards of two companies, including Old Mutual, once an Afrikaner business bastion, as well as two developmental groups.

He jokingly calls this "my eclectic collection of things I do."

He's crouched low, sweat drenching his loose Mandela-style shirt, dripping down his face, as he dances under spotlights bouncing through a cavernous downtown Jo'burg warehouse turned funky function hall.

Cabinet ministers, corporate leaders, politicians, bureaucrats are gathered there Saturday night in tribute to Moosa, who is leaving government service. And Morobe, the fellow prisoner and escapee, is the evening's emcee.

There are speeches, singers, dancers and film clips of Moosa's government tenure. But no evening like this can proceed without a tip of the hat to the struggle, to the old days.

Trevor Manuel, a leather-jacketed activist who now is the finance minister, reminds the crowd of Morobe and Moosa's daring escape.

"People who escape from prison are generally not nice people," Manuel jokes. "They must have done something wrong."

And Morobe deadpans that Moosa once was called "Bones" because he didn't eat much and was so thin. Morobe and his fellow prisoners salivated while Moosa picked over his food, setting much of it aside for his friends to gobble.

"We'd like to thank him for all those meals we shared with him in prison," Morobe says as laughter flitters through the hall.

They can laugh about it now. The pain happened for a reason, says Morobe. That is the logic he calls "contextualizing" the pain, to understand it better. Pain, he knows, was part of the bargain, part of what he signed on for.

He looks back in awe sometimes at all he went through, and at those times, the rush returns, that feeling of the struggle and its hopes, its antics.

It's there, he says, whenever he and his old comrades gather to recollect, "as we contemplate each other's paunches and think back on those days when we were still on spindly legs and youthful dispositions. We have great times sipping whiskey and laughing about it.

"When we sit and look back, we actually look back with a great deal of pride, and actually surprise, that we have come this far."