

Don Mattera

Author, Poet, Journalist and Activist in 143 organisations

Mattera started out as a kid fighting in the streets of Sophiatown. 1952 there was the defiance of unjust laws campaign, a national campaign initiated by the Congress movement. He became the Chief Debater for a group called the Western Areas Students Association, WASA. WASA was a conduit of the African National Congress Youth League. He became an underground operative of the Azanian People's Liberation Army in 1964. Mattera has published several poems and stories, one such is "Memory is the Weapon" (*Minnet är mitt vapen - Sverige*).

Madi Gray: Tell me, Don, how did you become involved in the struggle for liberation in South Africa?

Don Mattera: Madi, I was born into the struggle. When the first Dutch came here in 1652 and engaged with the people, that was the start of the the struggle. The struggle to me has no phases. The struggle began when colonialism began in this country and the aborigines of this country were oppressed. My grandmother comes from the Xhosa and the Khoikhoi and in her time the struggle was there, in her mother's time, the Khoisan women, the struggle was there. It was in my genes. The fact is I was born in a certain family and classified by the apartheid overlords. It stands to reason that that is when the struggle began, from the time of my birth. However, I graduated, I am sure, at a specific point.

I became a street kid and a gangster fighting in the street and we saw this political parody being played out before our eyes. We heard the leaders speak out against the system of apartheid and its progenitors as well as its functionaries. For me, Don Mattera, it was just a matter of time before I would break the hold of the street, the poverty, the gangsterism, and the socialisation process that was taking place at the time.

In 1950, 1951, 1952 Sophiatown was a hub. Sophiatown is the legendary township outside Johannesburg city and a great cosmopolitan population of people including Italians, Scots, Jews, you name whatever European tribe, lived there. This is where I came from. In 1952 there was the defiance of unjust laws campaign.

Madi Gray: It was a national campaign initiated by the Congress movement?

Don Mattera: The police were riding around with horses and lances, these very long spears, and they would go for the people in the streets and the people were boycotting. What we gangsters did, I was 17 years old, becoming 18, was to take petrol and mix it with oil and throw this on the street, especially in Victoria Street. It was the main street in Sophiatown where all the action took place. We would take an old blanket, dip it in this concoction, light it and run with it in the street. Many of the commandos, we used to call them the skiet

(shooting) commando, would just slide off their horses. The horses would spreadeagle and some people especially from the Berlina's gang would take their 303 rifles away and beat them up. This is how the dissidence against one form of oppression first expressed itself in 1952.

I remember people were shot. I remember I must have knifed a few cops. A bullet grazed my calf on that day, I won't forget. It was just mayhem. I always knew that they were the enemy, meaning the police and not white people per se, because my grandfather, an Italian, was so-called white, and there were many other so-called whites living in Sophiatown, so it wasn't a black/white thing for me, it was the police versus the people. Always the armed vs the unarmed. So me and many others, we got guns and it was a shoot for a shoot and a fight for a fight.

Madi Gray: Could you say that there was an informal start to the armed struggle then?

Don Mattera: Yes, but we felt that the politicians were too diffident, and too shy and too cautious and later on if you read my book, it is published in Sweden, it is called *Minnet är mitt vapen / Memory Is the Weapon*, you can read all of this in that book. However in 1954 it was a time of dissidents and anger because they were threatening to move us by force out of Sophiatown where we lived and already we were speaking out politically against them. In 1954 I attended my first political rally in what was then called Freedom Square on the corner of Morris and Victoria Streets in Sophiatown. After lots of heated breath and shouting and slogans, the police came. People started running and I said "What the hell are they running for? Let's fight these bastards. Let's give them what they want."

On that day I must have made a name for myself among some of the people. I was brave, I was reckless, I was angry and I was young, and at that time to have shot and killed a person would not have meant much to me, because I was a street kid, I was a gangster, I was the leader of the gang.

The seeds were sown with the forced removals. One of my gang called Berge was a frontliner in the attack on the police. They shot him in the mouth and another one, Mandla, was shot in the shoulder. Actually his shoulder was shot off, I saw it lying there, but I just dodged the bullets and dodged the cops.

I went through a bad year, I was shot in my spine in that year in gang warfare. I was again shot in my pelvic girdle at nearly the same spot. I was also shot in the leg, by the police this time. It was a reckless time. Here were these politicians speaking about the new day, speaking about freedom for all in our lifetime. The seeds were sown then, very strong seeds because I was a good reader, a good speaker, I wrote poems from a very young age. The struggle actually began with my birth, but there were different phases of the struggle.

Madi Gray: Don, you mentioned that you were in the gangs, were you a member of other organisations over the years?

Don Mattera: Yes, earlier that year during 1952, '53 and '54 I became the Chief Debater for a group called the Western Areas Students Association, WASA. WASA was a conduit of the African National Congress Youth League, which was then headed by a man called Harrison Motlana, a medical doctor and a great leader. At the time he was Secretary General of the Southern Transvaal ANC Youth League. We were with other trade unionists, great communists in this organisation. Because of my prowess with speaking and being articulate, I became his chief debater and we would debate issues of marriage and lobola, and we would debate the socialisation process with a great American sociologist, Dr Ray Phillips, a teacher at the school of social work where Winnie Mandela graduated. He wanted to explain to us the ways and means of how kids become street kids and how kids become gangsters. Here I was, the epitome of all of that and of course I had to tell him where to get off and I spoke to him about the elements, the socialisation process.

I was a very precocious young man, reading good books and all of the American revolutionary works, Paul Robeson, Richard Wright and W.E.B. du Bois, oh yes the genesis of black folk. I was already exposed to debates and the Moral Rearmament Movement, MRA, tried to get me to join them. So did the great Dr Nkomo of the Institute of Race Relations at the time and the great journalist Selepe Thema. He stayed in Western Native Township in Kambula Street and he would call me and say to me "Hey my boy, you have to change your life" and also a man called P Q Vundla. He was a politician and at one point his children were very close to me, his eldest son Xolile, he was a very close friend of mine. We debated the pros and cons. So those were the organisations, WASA and the MRA tried to get me, I went to several of their meetings and I think they just loved this precocious kid, this young kid who strings words together and call them poems and recitations.

Madi Gray: I suspect that precocious kid had the same charisma as the gentleman that I am interviewing today.

Don Mattera: Well, Madi, there are good things and bad things that have happened in my life. It was tough in 1955 to leave the gang. I was arrested for public violence and murder, fighting in the street in which one of the guys died. I had been stabbed around 9 times and shot three times and already I had a girl that I loved very much who would give birth in 1957. From then on, from the birth of my son, I began taking the score and people were already looking up to me.

I was speaking out against authority, challenging the police during the war of the government against the people in Sophiatown. It was a war in which we could not meet more than five at a time; they allowed only five of us in a group to speak and then they changed it to three who could meet.

One coloured man was driving his car and it got stuck on the main road. His children tried pushing it away, Mr Michaels was his name. So I went and I pushed and these cops came, they whipped everyone. I smashed the cops. But I did not see the police van coming around the corner and they hit me with the butt of a 303 rifle on my left eye and I conked out and they

took me to Newlands police station, which is now Sophiatown police station, and they banded me, handcuffed me like I was being crucified. They beat me. They cracked two ribs on my left side and they kicked my shin to pieces. It was 1956, they dumped me on March 30 in the hospital and told the doctors that I was a victim of mob violence, I was attacked and they rescued me. My father came and he rescued me from them. I went home and the arrest was under what was called the Riotous Assemblies Act, I'll never forget it.

The police brutality, my opposition to them, they sparked a natural hatred and a natural resistance. I hated the badge, I hated them, black or white and there were black cops that paid a protection fee to me for us not to attack them or hurt them. I'll never forget them, we called them the search barriers meaning fools, the fools who search people. When they would see me, they would wave and walk away, I was never searched and neither was my gang. In 1956 there was a change for me. The ANC became a reality in Sophiatown in all of our lives.

Madi Gray: Was that at the time of the Freedom Charter?

Don Mattera: Well, 1955 and 1956 was the Freedom Charter, but for me Don Mattera, I saw the ANC, we marched with them, I protected their women later as they marched and then the Mxathos, that family, Patricia, I was after her. She was a beautiful girl and I couldn't get her and she was so political. Later she would be murdered, on the eve of her unbanning, but that is another story.

However, coming back to the organisation, there was the influence of the African National Congress and definitely of the Communist Party. On several occasions I went to Communist Youth League meetings where I met Ronnie Kasrils as a young boy and I met Harold Wolpe and Mr Goldreich, whom I would later on see at Marshall Square when they were arrested before the treason trial and their escape. Later on all of these things would resonate in my consciousness.

Then in 1957 came the birth of my son and the change in my life, consciousness to change, but the streets wouldn't let me go. In 1958 one of my gang shot me in the back, the bullet rested in the bottom of my spine. People thought I was dead. It was a dark time in my life and I regret it very much, regret the animal that I'd become. Vengeance is an important thing to those who suffer; they want vengeance.

In 1958 there were stirrings of a new movement to break away from the ANC. My eldest brother Sonny Boy, Edward, said to me, "We are going to launch the PAC and you with your strong views of Africa, your strong reading of the African literature, you are a must for us". I said, "I'll think about it," because we felt that the ANC was weak and it was. It was a time when we didn't have guns.

My allegiance but not my membership fell with the Pan African Congress, later to become the Pan Africanist Congress of Azania. In 1959 it was launched on 6 of April. I was in the midst of all of that and my eldest brother was also a member, and I'll never forget December of 1959, the launch of the PAC. He said to you me, "You know, we are about to embark on a massive programme. You are living in Western Native Township, which is opposite Sophiatown.

Things will happen one day, you will see." Nobody told us what it was that would happen and in no time Sharpeville came. However, it just didn't come, it stayed with me in my consciousness, it stayed in my psyche. I wrote a poem:

*Day of thunder, day of blood
in the dusty streets of Sharpeville.
The thunder roared from Saracen skies,
the blood flowed from black folks eyes
when they met the hail of dum-dum.
The crying, the calling, the running, the falling,
the dying of men, women and children
and the cold stern faces of them
who held the thunder and spat the hail
while my people sang "Return Africa, oh Africa return.
Bitter was that day in the dusty streets of Sharpeville."*

The Pan Africanist Congress was formed. We all had great hopes. Later it was banned and its members house-arrested. In hardly three months it managed to raise a membership of over 60 000 members. Young people wanted to join this movement of anger and blood and death. I didn't join, but after 1964 I was an underground operative of the Azanian People's Liberation Army.

Lots of things were happening in our country. In 1968 the government announced that the coloured people would have their own political parties. The government announced that in parliament there would be the Coloured Peoples Representative Council (CRC). I felt it was rubbish and said so. People came and even politicians whose names I don't want to mention, they are dead, and can't speak for themselves. They said to me, "Are you going to allow the coloured people to be classified as those who supported apartheid? Why not join this Labour Party and we'll support you." And I did. But remember, 1968 was also the rise of the Black Consciousness Movement.

Madi Gray: I remember.

Don Mattera: These young people were telling us that we were black and proud and that coloureds were black and Indians were black and that as black people we had to stand together. So me, coming from the womb of a black woman, a Tswana woman, coming from the paternal loins of a Xhosa and a Khoikhoi woman, wow that was just up my alley. The Black Consciousness Movement attracted me but I remember I was interviewed "You are a poet, are you a black poet or are you..." I said, "I am just a poet, I am a human poet" because I was a non-racialist. They said to me, "You have to make up your mind, it is them and us. Are you with them or are you with us?" could see the choices were stark and the choices were definitive. I chose to be black, meaning not of the skin but of the state of mind. I became an espouser of the great Black Consciousness Movement, so much so that the Labour Party won that election and also won the support of many black people because of

me. I was then the most taped politician by the government. BOSS, the Bureau of State Security and also another group, in Pretoria, I think it's called SCHPOL and these were the think tanks of the police, the name will come to me. The police headquarters were called the Vagthuis. John Vorster, the Prime Minister, had mentioned that I was stirring up the coloured people towards black consciousness and it was dangerous.

On March 30th 1970 after the Labour Party won the election, the National Party government nominated 20 sell-outs of the coloured party that supported them, their functionaries, and they controlled the Coloured Representative Council.

Madi Gray: So that's how it was done.

Don Mattera: Yes. I'll never forget I got a visit on 30 of March 1970 from Mr Roy Havenga. He was in a Ford Cortina car with the head of BOSS (Bureau for State Security) himself, Hendrik van der Bergh.

Madi Gray: You were that important?

Don Mattera: Yes, they called me to the window of the car and he leaned out and he said to me "Mattera, deur jou bek gaan jou gat swaar kry. Ons sal vir jou klaarmaak." "We will finish you off, because of your mouth, your arse is going to burn." That is the equivalent. If you go back now and get all the newspaper clippings from the *Rand Daily Mail* and from all the other places about Don Mattera you will see why.

I then preached Black Consciousness to coloureds and Indians. The students were preaching it at an intellectual level; I had it at the empirical level, on the streets, in the schools, the high schools, in the churches. Psalm 8 was a very strong psalm. I used to show that, when the writer King David says, "What is man?" He doesn't say what is white man or black man? So how come we've changed God's mission? It is not God's mission to divide us. We must show that God was referring to us, the black man, that he is mindful of us though we are being oppressed. They saw that as a distortion of the bible and mentioned it later on.

So there we were and I became a functionary of the Black Consciousness Movement. I articulated black consciousness to the coloured people but from a political platform of the Labour Party which was working within the precincts of the system so they couldn't ban me, they couldn't fight me, they could only harass me, throw coal in my yard, horse manure, cow manure in the yard where I lived. So that was that. So you came up to 1970 and of course things are changing now.

Madi Gray: In what way?

Don Mattera: I am now dubbed a poet of the liberation movement and my collection of poems speaks out against the political system.

Madi Gray: When were they published?

Don Mattera: They were published in 1983. The poem that I read from political platforms is *The Protea Is Not a Flower*. Because the protea was the national flower and is paradoxically, ironically still the national flower of this country.

Madi Gray: But it's changed. The national protea used to be the suikerbossie, it's now the king protea.

Don Mattera: Yes but that was by insemination. It was never born a king protea; it became a king protea and a queen protea by cultivation.

Madi Gray: Okay, if you say so.

Don Mattera: No you read it up and you can see. So I wrote *The Protea Is Not a Flower*. And today's justice minister Brigitte Mabandla and her husband were my friends.

My poems spoke out vitriolically against the system and on every platform my poems spoke out:

Black man put your cap

back on your head,

look him in his eye,

cold and blue as the devil's fire.

And it continued, so poetry became a very strong vehicle of the struggle.

Madi Gray: Could you make a living by your writing?

Don Mattera: In 1973 I became a journalist at the Star newspaper. I joined the Star with that reputation of being a dissident and a political poet. The Star inherited me with my warts. Their journalism was still in the hands of the white male elite. There were many white women, but no white women spoke out against that.

Madi Gray: Were there white women in decision-making positions?

Don Mattera: No not making decisions, but in general. At the Rand Daily Mail where I visited the office continuously, I don't mention names but there they were, these white liberal journalists sitting in separate desks while their black counterparts were in a separate position and in little dark corners and eating out of iron mugs and from a different canteen while their white counterparts ate out of porcelain plates. I spoke about this at the TRC. Didn't the Star keep apartheid alive in its newsroom? Did they not abide by the so-called laws of the land, and why were we underpaid and white journalists were paid more? The white woman was paid more than the black man.

For me these are the paradoxes. I don't want to mention names because these are good people, great journalists among them, but the story is they saw the unfreeness, they saw the deplorable conditions under which their black counterparts worked and they did nothing to change that. I can go on but the indictment is not against them. The indictment is against the system. We helped to keep the system alive whether we liked it or not as journalists and therefore I said it was time that we started a new journalist organisation for blacks.

So I spoke to Bokwe Mafuna and many others. In 1973 we launched the Union of Black Journalists. I was a national organiser and I dubbed then what is called liberation journalism. Just like you have liberation art, liberation culture, now liberation journalism. I preached a journalism that spoke out against division, against ethnicity, against the deplorable conditions of work. I spoke out for a journalism that must fight the State at all costs. I was definitely not objective in my writing and in my assessment, because objectivity is a luxury in the pen of the one who is writing. For me it just went on, as the national organiser.

Arthur Ashe came to play tennis here, we opposed his presence and then he said to me, "Let me meet those journalists that you say are against me." So I set up a meeting for them. On 5 November I set up the meeting for 22 November, and I am banned on 21 November. I am banned and house arrested. I am defiant, I go to the meeting and the American consul man says to me, "Please, don't come in, we don't want a scene here but we will put you in another part of the building." I said, "No, you can stuff your building" and I stood outside. Arthur Ashe came. "So they banned you, what is banning? Explain it to me." I said, "They will do that inside."

So the government came down on me. But the important thing is I was at one time the most watched, the most spied upon, and the most checked. They also started a rumour with Steve Biko and others that I was an informer, an agent for the CIA, a vilification. It was confirmed when they exposed him [the real spy], he turned out to be a major in the security police force.

Madi Gray: Here, in South Africa?

Don Mattera: Yes, and he was a journalist for the *Star*, he was a journalist for the *Rand Daily Mail*. He was a journalist all over. The same man carries ANC membership today. So, that should tell you a fat lot about who was an agent and who was not.

Madi Gray: Yes.

Don Mattera: So I was banned, but before that day with Arthur Ashe in Shakespeare House, police were beating kids in the library gardens park. I came upon them, three, two boertjies and one black guy. I said "Listen, why are you beating these kids?" "There aren't supposed to eat here in the bloody street, on the grass." I said "But these are students, why are you kicking these bloody kids around?" So this boer grabbed me, and I hit him, I flattened him. The other one took out a gun and the black one hit me on the head. I lay there bleeding, they picked me up and they took me to John Vorster Square, I was not banned yet.

The Star sent round its lawyers. I was charged with assault, interfering with police during the execution of their duties, resisting arrest and threatening to kill. So a big case, some Afrikaner guy was got to defend me, I won the case; the kids came to say how they were brutalised and how this hero came. That was another sharpening of their sword.

They found a book on me called *Poems from Ghana*. They said it was a communist book and I was a communist. I said, "No, I am a socialist, I am not a communist". They said it doesn't matter, so I was taken and charged. I was released on bail of almost R2000, R5000, and the *Star* warned me, "You are forever being in problems with the police, and you know we can't continue..." So I said "Then let me go, fire me, sack me." They said, "No, it would be a sin." I said, "Fire me." Then of course the banning came and the police yanked me out of the newsroom.

Madi Gray: Did your banning orders include that you could not be in a place where things were published?

Don Mattera: Yes, out of bounds were all the places where things were published and newspapers, they defined it in the order, libraries, books, dissemination, quite a lot. It was a severe version of the banning order, including house arrest. Between six in the evening and six in the morning, I had to be in my house; I could not leave the magisterial district of Johannesburg from Westbury to Eldorado Park.

They kicked me out. They forced me out of Westbury into Eldorado Park. In this twilight zone lots of poems were written, but underground work continued for the Azanian People's Liberation Army. I was a member of the BPC, the Black People's Convention, by then. I was banned from those activities. I was banned from the writers association of which I was a founder, but we would revive it in 1983.

Madi Gray: The Writers Association, is that part of the Pen Club?

Don Mattera: No, it was black. The Black Writers Association, which became the African Writers Association. I spent these terrible years of banning and house arrest. The *Star* fought for me relentlessly to try and get me back so that I could earn a salary, they were giving me R250, just to keep me alive. For three years they fought for me. In 1976 they allowed me to come back as a copy boy, not to write anything. The *Star* made me a sub-editor and I trained as sub-editor and John Horak joined that same newsroom and was watching me all the time. One day in 1974 a young boy was detained at the Johannesburg station and he sent a message through some police to me to say that they were torturing him. I told the police to tell him "Bala! Write!" So he got a toilet roll and he wrote every day what was happening to him onto a piece of toilet roll. Then he gave the policeman this toilet roll, obviously rolled away from the main roll, to give to me. As the policeman is coming in, he is a short policeman but he is dressed in civvies, the informer [the journalist who turned out to be a spy] sees him giving me something and the other informer, the black guy George who was working for him,

which I only found out later, said to me "Bra Mattera, what is that?" I said, "A toilet roll." "I see it has been written on." I said "Yes it has been written on, why?" "No I just wanted to know what it is" I said "It is not your business."

So I go to the toilet and I sit and read it and he tells me all the horrors, the rape that the guys did against him in the cells in a place called Morningside, Morningside Prison there and then they took him to the Hillbrow police station and the same cruelties were perpetrated against him there in the torture by the police. And he says to me, "Do you know how they want you?" Your name, they write your name here with blood on the wall, our blood, Don, Don Mattera, and these people want you. They want me to give evidence against you. He's got it all there because I helped him, he is a PAC boy, I helped him and I wanted him to get out. He wanted to go for military training. His name is Kerwin. I won't give you his surname. There he was for solitary confinement for two and a half years.

But that day at eleven o'clock the toilet roll came, I read it. Guess who is standing outside of the toilet as I come out? The journalist/informer. He said, "Don, wat was daai papier?" What was that paper? I said, "No, it was just some guy who had written a poem but I flushed it down the drain." I phoned Beyers Naudé, he was head of the Christian Institute at the time. He came and I gave him the paper and told him take it to the United Nations. If you were to go now and ask his wife, Ilse, she would remember.

So I was detained at three o'clock. The cops waited for me outside. We fought, they bashed my head, here, this mark, and I was bleeding, a dramatic picture. That same day they raided my house in Eldorado Park. They raided all the places of people that knew me and there it was. It was quite a time for me. The journalist/informer really made my life hell by spying against me. So I was again arrested for breaking the terms of my banning order and charged under the Suppression of Communism Act. The witnesses refused to give evidence against me in 1977 and 1978. I was acquitted. I was arrested again about five times afterwards for breaking the terms of my banning order. There was no proof against me, nobody wanted to witness against me. Some of the witnesses left the country, went into exile, and so I stayed, being a member of the Black Consciousness Movement overtly at the top and assisting the Azanian People's Organisation, AZAPO, as a member of the Azanian People's Liberation Army underground. They were the military wings, headed by Muntu Myeza. I helped to get the guns and the ammunition, buy in Pretoria and arm our people to fight. I was also in charge of recruitment and procurement for the Western Transvaal with the Pan Africanist Congress of Azania.

My banning order was lifted in 1982, eight or ten months before the expiry. I was twice banned, two five-year terms. The second term was not severe; the house arrest was taken away. But from 1978 to 1982 I had to report to the police every weekend. They would take my fingerprints and would take a photo of me. If I didn't come, I was arrested.

I've also worked for the African National Congress through different sources. I helped to get money from London sent to me as royalties to give to people in Durban that were prosecuted in the sabotage campaigns there. Those were the organisations I was working with. I think it should cover everything.

Madi Gray: What were your Swedish connections?

Don Mattera: In 1986 I won the Kurt Tucholsky Award from the Swedish PEN Club. I arrived in Sweden on June 19th or 20th. I was terribly culture shocked when I got there. I was always wondering about these people that seem to have no inhibitions of any sort, some of their women were lying flat on the grass without bras, drinking up the early sun of June. My sponsors were the Swedish PEN, Thomas von Wegesak and he was a head of a publishing house, but also the great playwright Agneta Pleijel, and they took me in and took me around and I received a flat in a place called Hökarängen, meaning the Valley of the Hawks. So there I stayed in a street called Korintvägen, the currant, the fruit.

Madi Gray: What did you do there?

Don Mattera: I stayed in that flat, and had visits from my father in my dreams. He actually walked through the door and I said to him "Graf, what are you doing here?" He said "I've come to visit you. And why are you so far from home?" I said "Well these people have invited me here." He says "These are good people and you must learn everything you can, because back home it is going to be bad." I'll never forget that dream. He actually sat on the bed, and the bed was bumpy because it was one of these folding beds that's a settee and doubles up for a bed. My father told me that he didn't come for me, but was coming for my aunt and my uncle. So in August the one died, the other in September, I'll never forget, and it was a powerful visitation.

Then I travelled extensively through Sweden. Go now and do the library inventory on me and you will see. På svenska, säger jag, "Jag har rest inom Sverige från Kristianstad och Ystad och från Värmland till Götaland. Jag har talat med svenska ungdomar och elever om Sydafrika och om livsproblem. Jag har träffat en stark innerlig känsla för mig, Don Mattera, och för mitt hemland, Sydafrika. Jag har också träffat en engagemang från många svenska människor om Sydafrika. Svenska folket har kämpat för oss i Sydafrika. De slåss för oss mot apartheid. Jag var en mycket tacksam stipendievinnare i Sverige." (In Swedish I'd say that I've travelled the length and breadth of Sweden, from the south to the west. I've spoken to Swedish youths and pupils about South Africa and about existential problems. I've met strong inner warmth for me, and my country, South Africa. I've met a commitment from many Swedes to South Africa; they have fought for us against apartheid. I'm a very grateful winner of a Swedish grant.")

I wrote six of my short stories when I was in the flat. One is called The Story Teller. My poems are translated into Swedish. One of them says:

*Det finns ingen smärta som den att inte vara älskad,
inte vara önskad i sitt eget land
havets sand, min kärlek, mitt land
Gud! Välsigna Afrika,*

*men mest södra Afrika där vi bor.
Välsigna det area, bergen, och de lindkullarna
där det kalla vattnet springer från
för att läka jordens banna.
Välsigna dalen i Sydafrika
de vita barn och de svarta barn,
men mer de svarta barn, som fyller havet ur sanden,
att de ska inte förlora sitt kärlek till de vita barn
vilka färder vårt tåg, vårt land,
havets sand min kärlek mitt land
Gud! Välsigna Afrika,
men mest södra Afrika där vi bor.*

So God has answered my prayer, he has blessed the white children and the black children of this country. Today we are free, not one white man or white woman was driven to the sea. Not one house was taken away. They are still stinking rich. They still have a good life most of them. None of that was taken away.

So God answered my prayer but he answered it through men and women like Winnie Mandela and Nelson Mandela and Helen Joseph and other great women and other great men and great communists, great people, the Weinbergs, the Alexanders, men and women that have helped to liberate this country and have helped to give us a meaning in our life. For me God has intervened, and there is a God. I see this God every day.

Madi Gray: Do I detect contradictions?

Don Mattera: Yes. Madi, as a tourist guide, you must show on your trips how the paradoxes are still there, the paradox and the irony of poverty. The Baragwanath hospital is ramshackle and yet we spend so much money helping to bring peace in Africa. Maybe that is how it should be, but we must also learn to bring peace in our own country, and help people create for our people, jobs for people.

So Sweden was a very important place. What I am saying to you now, Madi, I say it with authority. There is no South African who has been projected by the press in Sweden, not even Allan Boesak and not even Oliver Tambo, as much as I have because I travelled, I have spoken to more than a million Swedes since 1986 up to 1996, 1997 when I visited again. I went to high schools, I went to Göteborg to fight against the skinheads, spoke out against them in Kungsträdgården. I have been travelling in Borås with the anti-nationalist movement against those that said "Bevara Sverige svensk!" (Keep Sweden Swedish!) I am with a movement that says "Bevara Sverige blandad!" (Keep Sweden mixed!) and I have spoken with children, youth. I have been in Falkenberg, in Skåne, in Hörby. I have been in Sjöbo where the racists are. I have travelled round Malmö. I was the most listened-to South African in Sweden by the ordinary people and I picked up my Swedish through a little book *Svenska på tre månader* (Swedish in three months). I don't have practice here. Det finns ingen att tala

svenska med i Sydafrika (There's no one to talk Swedish with in South Africa). Just 12 months ago I was in Oskarshamn, I was in Småland, at a conference with ANC people that you know.

Madi Gray: Tormod Nasset was an organiser?

Don Mattera: Yes. I was speaking about culture and art, how they can help to liberate people but how they can also bring people closer who are diverse, because there is strength in diversity. It is very important, we can't make everyone like we are, but we can make everybody think that we are all one family in this world and when finally the sun sets, it is not about white or black, it is about good and bad. That is all. I have other poems in Swedish. My books are published in Swedish; you can get them there.

Madi Gray: Do you know who translated you?

Don Mattera: The one was a young boy, you can get it from a publishing house starting with an A, Alba or something. You can go to the library in Sweden and look up Don Mattera, and you will find three books by me. You will find *Azanisk kärlekssång* (Azanian Love Song) 1989, and *Minnet är mitt vapen* (Memory Is the Weapon) 1990, *Sverige och rasismens cancer* (Sweden and the cancer of racism) 1992, but that's not in English, it's only in Swedish. When I was called in by ABF to tour and speak out against the growing racism at schools "Svartskallar, Ut med invandrare! Bevara Sverige svensk," I spoke out against all of those. I made friends. One of the skinheads was at Kungsträdgården in Stockholm next to the Swedish institute. He was playing with chains and big knives. So I went and spoke to the group. My sponsors in the Swedish PEN Club heard about it. They came, "You mustn't do that again, we are responsible for you! You could have been killed!" I said, "No, I come from the street and I spoke to these people and I told them what they were doing was wrong." One of them became my friend, Ulf Wettergran, tall, almost seven foot, a giant. The day I left to go back to South Africa on December 24th 1986, he was there holding me and crying, saying he had never met a man like me and he became a taxi driver. We became close friends and he would phone, he was my friend. And I met playwright Agneta Plejel's daughter, who had an immigrant boyfriend, and I think they killed him in one of the cemeteries in Stockholm on Södermalm, near Mariatorget.

Madi Gray: They killed him in a churchyard by the Maria Magdalena church, I think. Wasn't he carrying two batteries that were mistaken for weapons?

Don Mattera: Yes, something like that. I was there then. What is the big daily newspaper in the morning?

Madi Gray: *Dagens Nyheter* (Daily News).

Don Mattera: *Dagens Nyheter* wrote "Skinnhuvud dödar på kyrkogården". So I wrote them a letter, I said, "Why do you say 'skinhead'? He had a name, he was a child, he was a human being and why not use it?" I received so many phone calls from people because they are also human. They also need love and it is just that the system of Sweden did not protect them really at the time. It was too free for kids to wander round. He was a nyckelbarn, one of those children who carry keys around their neck. You know I made friends, I started a small football club in Hökarängen.

I also met the great Sten Andersson, the former Minister of Foreign Affairs, who was not staying far from me with his two children who were deaf. We became friends. He invited me to come and visit them after he saw my letter and then I also wrote to him to ask for support for the people of Zambia and to support the people of Zimbabwe, not only South Africa and Mozambique. He wrote back, I have his letter to me.

I have fond memories and I can tell you that Sweden was an important diversion in my life. It made me see people, I never saw them as white, I saw them as Swedes. It was a great experience. I went out on Allhelgonaafton, All Saints Day in the night, they burn candles in the cemeteries. I visited the cemetery where Sten Andersson was burning candles for his mother or his father. He was a regular visitor to that cemetery near Hökarängen.

At T-Centralen I saw people that were being chased by police. I stopped the police in Vasagatan, near Gamla Brogatan where the ANC Head Office was. You know it was also bombed.

Madi Gray: That happened in 1986.

Don Mattera: Yes I was there, I commiserated with my colleagues, I went in.

Then there's something I never talk about. For three months I travelled extensively through Sweden, collecting clothes for the Solomon Mahlangu Freedom College in Tanzania, there was a man called Joe Frans who became a secretary in the Stockholm municipality. He is a Ghanaian Swede, he is now a full citizen and a politician, he is with the Social Democrats and they were heading the Stockholm municipality.

The ANC roving ambassador at the time was a man called Jerry Matsile, and Lindiwe Mabuza was the Chief Representative, the ANC ambassador in Stockholm. So I travelled extensively for three months with the Africa Groups and ABF, collecting clothes and money for the ANC's Solomon Mahlangu Freedom College in Tanzania. I was not a card-carrying member of the ANC, but they were my children and it is my party. I could never renounce the ANC. I may not be a member, but you cannot renounce something that gave birth to you.

Madi Gray: No, you can't. I've got one or two more questions. I'm under the impression you also worked for the *Weekly Mail*?

Don Mattera: Oh yes. In 1990 they offered me a job. Firstly I was the editor of the business magazine, which was part of the *Finance Week*. I campaigned for a stronger intervention of blacks in business and the magazine was described thus by a man called David Allen "Now Don Mattera has launched the business magazine. It is another terrain of struggle for him. It is a feisty magazine, and a no nonsense one. Don Mattera doesn't hold back punches." That was David Allen, a former assistant editor and a news editor of the *Star* newspaper, a good man, a redhead, a very talented and very powerful speaker and writer.

As the two young boys who founded the *Weekly Mail*, Erwin Manoim and Anton Harber, said to me, "Listen, we need a man like you to give our arts and culture pages a kind of punch and so on." Which we did. People like this great guy that used to work for *The Mail*, Raeford Daniel, worked under me as my deputy and the one who is presently now doing the arts, Sean de Waal, are all people that worked under me and we made a great team because I don't believe in being an editor, I believe in editorial alliances to pool strength. It became one of the best arts and culture pages, six pages. And books and other reviews and I was also called a very special person, I did special book reviews like Maria Teresa, Trevor Huddleston. I did fantastic work there and they saw that I had other talents.

I was very didactic, I would go to the reporters who were working there, particularly the blacks, and I would say "Listen no, there must be a better word." So we worked at what we call elevated diction. To elevate language, to instead of saying this, look for another word that can encompass but also elevate the language. So the *Mail & Guardian* in its arts and culture pages, had a special kind of free language. We called it free English, free writing. You could start your sentence with one word. You could say "Drat." I didn't think it would come to all of this. John Matshikiza presently writes in that style, which is free language, free verse. I believe in free verse, free language and free style. So we learn.

They said that we see that you have a patient penchant for bringing the best out in kids. Don't you want to train them for us? said, "What is happening?" "We've got one of your colleagues from the *Star*, Jenny." I said "Wow I know this woman, she's a good teacher. Maybe we team up." So we teamed up and I became the Chief Training Officer of the *Weekly Mail* cadet school, but I was doubling up as an arts and culture editor. Then I signed a contract that we would work for five years without a salary increase. We were all earning R5 000.

Then I got a commission to go out and get money so I left for Holland and for Sweden. We got lots of money from Sweden. We trained in one year 24 young cadets including Alex Dodd, she is an art and book critic, including the present editor of the *Mail & Guardian*, Ferial Haffajee, and the present editor of the *Sunday Times*, Mondli Makhanya. So Swedish money helped me to train some of the best young journalists today, who are free thinkers, free minds, and they write in that free style that I was putting out. So once more we are grateful to the people of Sweden.

Madi Gray: I was active as a freelance journalist in the Union of Journalists in Sweden. At one point we had a Stockholm chapter, which was independent. It was the Stockholm chapter that gave the *Weekly Mail* the money initially. They went over the heads of the national union.

Don Mattera: I do remember.

Madi Gray: I was invited as a resource person to talk to them when they were in the process of thinking about setting up a fund and subsequently I became a member of the union's international group that met visiting journalists.

Don Mattera: Yes, I also know you that way, because when I was told about Madi Gray, I said, "I remember this name, I remember this woman." There was also a woman called Caroline with the national union in Sweden. We walked up that road from T-Centralen and there was a function waiting for us, for Anton Harber and I. I do remember it warmly.

Madi Gray: Do you remember Lotta Schyllerquist?

Don Mattera: Yes I remember Lotta. I remember there was also a tall young journalist with very black glasses, Joseph somebody. I've had great memories. We travelled to Gävle, where we got help, we got help in Göteborg, Gothenburg. Everywhere we went, the journalists would just agree to help.

We trained also from Holland, from NOVIB, an organisation that gave us lots of money to keep the *Mail & Guardian* alive and also to pay salaries to our young journalists. Remember, I'd signed a contract not to accept increases, but it was fine. I never earned more than R5 000 and these kids were already earning more than I was earning. It was a great time.

Madi Gray: At the Africa Groups office in Stockholm, Ingvar Flink was responsible for solidarity with the media. AGIS played a key role in giving information to SJF, the Swedish Union of Journalists.

Don Mattera: Yes, I remember Ingvar. They had an evening for me there. They took me to many functions. The Africa Groups also told me, "Don, there is going to be a problem one day. Apartheid is going to die and we will have to change our whole structure. South Africa may not fit into that structure. Most of our help goes only to ANC-related organisations and your organisations, which are PAC and BC, unfortunately will not receive any funding." That was bad news. You could tell them that Don Mattera is mycket tacksam (very grateful). I have had the best, Sweden is my second love after this country.

Madi Gray: That is wonderful to hear!

Don Mattera: Oh yes. I have stayed on Öland, they called me in Kalmar to come and teach and speak. I am the patron of many folkhögskolor. I've been to more folkhögskolor than any South African. My former wife lived there with me, and my little son Don, now my very laat lammetjie (late lamb), he is 13 years old. I have Swedish books and I am trying to teach him a

bit and let him know.

This is too strong to say I really know the Swedish people. I've seen them cry, I was there when they sang *Du gamla, du fria*, (the national anthem). You know it? And in summer, when the children sing about Sweden. Last year when I was with Tormod, I went to a school to speak and a little girl came after the session, and she said "You were speaking to me the whole time. Everything you said is about me. The good and the bad was about me. Did God send you to me?" I said "Do you believe in God?" "Yes, I believe in God." I thought that was a victory in Sweden that there are some people, some young people who believe in God.

Madi Gray: Yes.

Don Mattera: Because it is also a dangerous system. It is a dangerous system for us to see how children are moving for their own searching and for their own right. My lecture was, Do you see your faith in the tapestry of the global world? You see these children don't see themselves there. They are invisible and I spoke to her she said, but I was actually speaking to a class of about 50 or 60 and there was a standing ovation from those kids. I made friends, Tormod will tell you, he was there. And it was just too moving. Jag har en innerlig och djup kärlek för Sverige (I have a deep and abiding love for Sweden).

Madi Gray: Did problems crop up?

Don Mattera: No, I was never once the butt of racism. Maybe inadvertently, it was in Borås. These young skinhead boys were scratching these spurs on the street as black people came. They attacked a black boy who was passing "Svartskalle!". And I went among them and I got the one in a vice and Joe Frans, who comes from that area, assisted me and I held onto this boy and he spat in my face. I didn't wipe with my hands. I went to his face and I wiped it. I smeared it, his spit on my face. And then I said "It is so lovely, your spit is so sweet." He looked at me. "Hey" he said to his friends, "Han är tokig!" (He's mad). I'll never forget that. Tell them in Sweden that it has been a journey since 1986. I have been there so many times. It is exactly 20 years since my first visit and it feels like yesterday. But the Sweden of 1986 is gone.

Madi Gray: Yes. It is 20 years ago.

Don Mattera: It's gone, the world is catching up. When I went there at different times, I would see the Sweden of Ingvar Carlsson has gone, of Sten Andersson is gone, of Anna Lindh has gone, the woman that was knifed to death. Yes I have seen it is a different Sweden. But what they must do is fight hard for their values and their customs and they might fight hard to try and retain some of the things that have made Sweden such a beautiful and interesting country. You must not lose it, they mustn't allow themselves and their country to be

swallowed up by the EU or by the global hegemony of America, they must hold on. It is going to be tough.

Madi Gray: How do you feel about South Africa and the ANC?

Don Mattera: You can't renounce your mother and father and yes I am angry and I am bitter that Mr Mandela never affirmed me, neither did Thabo Mbeki affirm me, but why not? There are other people who at least are affirmed, if I wasn't. So yes, it hurts. Today we are free and we are not free. Politically we are free, but the economy is in the hands of the same people and only those people who are members of the ruling elite get what they get. For me, that is not what we fought for. The proliferation of shacks, this is not what we fought for. The continuing poverty. This is not what we fought for. The fact that the new black elite is now joining hands with the old white elite and the new white elite, is not what we fought for, it's not. And my pain and my anger are adrift in my poems. I don't speak out against my country overseas, I speak out inside South Africa. Today I can say honestly that the intelligence family in society watches me. When I speak against the State of Israel, fighting against the Palestinians, they tape me and they monitor me. I can show you now, you can see for yourself. You can come with me to the car, I'll show you, you can see, I am not lying. In the back of my car over there I have bits and pieces of reports by the state police then and the new police now. Even this government has got me under surveillance and watches me. Where I speak and attend meetings, the intelligence is there for other reasons.

Madi Gray: I believe you.

Don Mattera: Why should I be monitored? There is one ANC guy who is crying now, Sakkie Matozola, "I am being watched, they are tailing me." What shit! We are also being tailed, we are also being watched. Suddenly others are more oppressed than others, others are freer than others, others are more meaningful than others, this is not what we fought for. I don't speak out against my government, I don't speak out against my state president. I do it in their midst where they are sitting and then I tell them how I feel about what is happening.

I have interacted for 143 community organisations since 1960. I'm co-founder of the first publishing house for blacks, Skotaville, and am co-founder of the first black writers organisation called the African Writers Association. I am co-founder of the Union of Black Journalists and co-founder of several organisations aimed to help to build a new social fibre and a moral fibre among young people. I go into prisons and help to stop prison fights and help to rehabilitate the prisoners. I have an organisation that fights against gangsterism in the townships because I was a gangster, I was a street kid.

You can visit the newspaper archives at Bloemfontein University, you can phone them up and ask for Mrs Lategan. She is handling the library. You can phone them and ask them, but you'll pay a lot of money because it is a rand a page and they have something like 30 000 pages, 40 000 pages on me. You would see for the next young person who wants to do his

doctorate, there is enough material. Tom Lodge has interviewed me. They come to me for their dissertations, their theses. They come to me for their summaries and I just give them the information like I am giving to you now.

What can we do? We are all servants of this humanity and somebody asked me one time, "Don, you like to speak about compassion and empathy. Explain compassion." I said "Well let me first explain empathy. Empathy is your pain in my heart. Compassion is your caring for the pain in my heart." That's all.

It is not just caring by word of mouth, I care for you my brother, come let me lift you up. I care for you my sister, come let me heal your wounds. It says of Jesus "And when Jesus saw the multitude, he was moved. And he went up to the mountain and he opened his mouth and he spake." That is from the old King James Version. So it says he was moved. When you are moved, you are taken from one disposition to another. It is a movement of your heart, your mind, psyche, you get moved. If you can't be moved, then you stay in the same place.

Madi Gray: Have you had contact with Swedish religious organisations?

Don Mattera: I've spoken to lots of them at their churches. I am a Muslim by faith. Some of them are still so narrow-minded, even among the Christians today. Some of them have become narrow-minded and they see it differently in that they don't see God in Muslims, just like many Muslims don't see God in them. So this is the fractured relationship that people have in religion, they do not see God in their religions or in themselves.

So I have transcended religion, I am on a different plane. For me compassion is my religion and God is the dispenser of the first compassion. As Christians you believe God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that is what the Christian says, that is compassion. And Jesus, peace be on his name, was the mark and hallmark of compassion. Mohammed, peace be on his name, he was the hallmark of compassion. God said to him "Read Mohammed. Read in the name of the Lord who created thee from a congealed clot of blood, read." And you read the Koran, God is explicit about compassion and, if you were to go on the Internet today, the South African version of the Internet and you looked up I think it is called B.I.G. you would see they say Don Mattera, Poet of Compassion. That is what they say.

I am also a doctor of literature through Natal University. In Uppsala I found somebody who said that they would accept my writings and assess them for a doctorate. I never followed this through. I do religious philosophy and the philosophy of religion and, like I said, I've transcended. So I think I've gone the full circle, I am 70 years old, I will be 71 this year, there you have it, so it should tell you.

Madi Gray: It has. Don, here are several articles about you that I downloaded from Internet sites. I was wondering whether you have them written out. If you'd like them you are more than welcome. I see there are a couple of your poems here.

Don Mattera: Yes, there is one that is a great poem here; it is called 'Man to Man'. Oh this is a classic one. They did ask me for permission to include these but I said no, because I dedicated this to Ruth First, and there to live and love and believe also meant where to know and sing and die. Very powerful that one.

Madi Gray: She was a very powerful woman.

Don Mattera: Oh yes, I call her the queen, the queen of sadness. She was a sad woman. You'll see, if you read my book, "Memory Is the Weapon" in English, the American version is called "Sophiatown".

Madi Gray: Don, I would really like to thank you very much for the wonderful interview and your inspiring thoughts and for the journey that you have taken me on and you will be taking other people on when they read the interview with you.

Don Mattera: No that is fine, but also tell them that there is no religion in this world higher than compassion.