

Are there enough of us to fill the shoes of this fisherman?

PERSPECTIVES

A lot of people died horribly in South Africa in the past fortnight, as people have been dying here for a long time now.

Even the best-intentioned among us begin to lose track of the numbers, names, places, details. Who, beyond the bruised community itself, can tell you the names of the Sebokeng dead, what sort of people they were, whether they had families, what made them laugh? I cannot. I suppose it is inevitable that such specific mourning — an essential process if the lives of the dead are to be properly honoured — takes place among those who knew the victims. When someone like Chris Hani dies, someone known to so many, that event reaches into every corner of the country, as it should. But other deaths seem to pass us by.

One of those who died in the awful aftermath of the Hani assassination was not a major political figure, but I and others knew him and I would like to mark his passing. He was a big man, in body and heart, and in a country less used to senseless murder, this stupid, sickening killing would have touched more people than those who wept at his funeral in Grahamstown.

Ali Weakley and his brother Glen were shot to pieces with automatic rifles as they returned in their bakkie from a day's fishing near Mpandi, in the Transkei, on the eve of Chris Hani's funeral. There was no attempt to rob them. The gunmen who shot from the bushes disappeared into the soft-looking valley.

Nobody has any idea of who they were or why they did this terrible thing. What we do know is that Ali and his brother were random victims of the crime committed in Dawn Park, Boksburg, such a long way away to the north. The dreadful dominoes started falling soon after Chris Hani fell on his driveway. Ali was one of them.

What a victim for fate to



SHAUN JOHNSON pays tribute to a man whose senseless murder touched more people than those who wept at his funeral in Grahamstown this week.

have chosen. What monstrous irony, what obscenity. Ali was a "new South African" long before most whites began to think about the morality of the system under which they prospered and others groaned. At Rhodes University in the 1970s he was a rare specimen: rugby captain and instinctive, from-the-gut liberal.

Ali had an annual inter-varsity match against the University of Port Elizabeth called off because in those weird days UPE would not allow Chinese students to attend the post-match ball.

He persuaded his team to do this because it was right — even though, at that time, they had a good chance of winning. Later, Danie Craven threatened to ban him for life if he played in a non-racial match in Port Elizabeth. Ali told him where to get off, played the game and was rewarded with the attention of the security police.

There is more to the sad irony: Ali's family, like Chris Hani's, came from Cofimvaba. He learned to speak Xhosa from his childhood friends but he was no bwana or baas. The faces at the funeral showed that. Both he and Chris Hani took their degrees from Rhodes — Hani via Alice, Ali via Grahamstown.

Like Hani he loved the Transkei and felt he belonged there. Ali was not, I think, one of those white South Africans who feared the future so much that he felt powerless, inclined to flee.

He was not a politician but he got involved where he could.

His friend Ian Macdonald, Professor of Philosophy at Rhodes, who delivered a moving eulogy at the funeral, recalled that long ago Ali would roll up his sleeves and do electioneering donkey work for PFP or Democratic Party candidates. More recently, he involved himself in Grahamstown's local peace committee and its efforts to deal with the crisis of local government in Rini.

On the day of his funeral, he was supposed to be involved in a mediation meeting. Ali felt that if you expressed political views, you had to act on them: you had to "put your money where your mouth was".

Now he is dead, in his 43rd year, and everyone he touched is shattered and bewildered. The pointlessness and unfairness of his end is a terrible burden to bear for that large circle of intimates, confidants and admirers he has left behind in the eastern Cape.

It is made worse because they do not know what drove the men with the guns to fire on the fishermen. There is some opaque measure of comfort to be derived from the fact that it seems, from the outside at least, that Chris Hani's murder might be "solved" — solved in the sense that the bereaved will know who did it and why. Ali's people deserve to know, too.

There is nothing that can be done to the gunmen which would undo their act. But there is something that can be said to them: shame on you, you killed a new South African. Shame on you, shame on all of us. I hope Ali can go fishing in peace, wherever he is now.