

The life and humanity behind the name

Hawks spokesman McIntosh Polela's book explains why he no longer has the name he was given at birth, writes Sue Grant-Marshall

THE life of McIntosh Polela can be summed up in two words: the ones that make up his name. Behind them lie the cruelty and abuse of a childhood he was determined to survive. He was not born with his name. He created it, and therein lies his story as told in *My Father, My Monster* (Jacana).

Today he can walk into a crowded room and discuss his harrowing early life with a self-confidence and ease that give the lie to a life that might have defeated others. Yet he's not arrogant or supercilious, mechanisms used by many to cover a deep-seated hurt that will never entirely be salved.

He's intrinsically a serious man, yet he smiles readily and communicates easily. They're the perfect qualities for the spokesman for the Hawks, the elite crime-fighting unit of the South African Police Service. Yet he didn't walk into the job, in spite of years as a TV journalist and having a master's degree from the acclaimed London School of Economics.

Why would life suddenly turn easy for him when everything else had conspired to make it a treacherous morass to navigate?

He was in his mid-teens when he realised that education was the key to escaping the village where he and his sister, Zinhle, were raised and tortured.

Polela was only five years old, and his sibling two years younger, when their parents disappeared from their lives. They were dumped on a bus that took them from their hometown of Durban to Pevensey, near Underberg, in KwaZulu-Natal. The children were literally thrown to the wolves in their extended Shezi maternal family.

Their grandmother grabbed their suitcase of clothes, leaving them in rags. Soon their much older cousins began to abuse them. Zinhle (three) would be forced to the ground and set on fire, or pushed on to the hot iron stove. When out in the fields herding cattle, Polela (five) was repeatedly thrown into a river and held down until his lungs were bursting. His shrieks of terror were ignored. Waterboarding for babies.

He tried to impart his pain to the Catholic priest from the nearby mission, sobbing out his anguish in the confessional as he begged for help. But none materialised.

"I knew then that not even this man would save my sister



FORGIVING: McIntosh Polela learnt lessons in forgiveness from his English teacher. Picture: ARNOLD PRONTO

and me. It was my responsibility to do that," Polela says. His gaze is level and steady as he recalls this. So he made plans with Zinhle to run away. But her little legs gave in, they were caught and he was beaten until his body flowed with blood. "Wiping it off, as I regularly did, became a kind of ritual. I also developed mechanisms to cope with the beatings — imagining myself in another place."

When school started and pupils were told to remove their shirts, "so teachers could see how clean we were", Polela hoped they'd see the sjambok scars. But, to his surprise, they were ignored. "Instead, they beat me because my uniform and feet were dirty."

As he grew older and his uncles returned from the mines,

they taunted the siblings, calling them orphans, saying his father had killed his mother.

One day the little boy gained enough courage to confront his always sad-faced aunt (his mother's sister). On a rare visit to the village, she confirmed his mother was dead.

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"I determined to take my revenge on my father." The boy made a gun "that I kept polished at all times to blow out his

brains". To that end, he sold marijuana at school to raise the Durban bus fare.

As Polela approached his teens, people he describes as "angels" in the book began to appear in his life. An English couple, the McNamaras, who had opened a store nearby, wanted to adopt both siblings.

His sister agreed and moved in with them. However, Polela's burning anger, compounded with mistrust of all adults at the time, made him refuse.

He concentrated on his education: "I knew it was the one thing nobody could take from me. I set out to become the dux student."

At the same time, his high school English teacher, Cheryl Wood, began painstakingly to teach him about forgiveness.



be sorry, and to hug me, were not going to materialise."

Frustrated at times, furious at others, Polela told his father he could no longer retain his family name of Nzimande. He had called himself McIntosh at school after reggae star Peter Tosh, whose full name was Winston Hubert McIntosh. Polela is the name of the river near his village. One day, in his despair at not being able to protect his beloved Zinhle, he had stood on the bridge over it, ready to fling himself on to the rocks below.

"That's when I looked at the trees, felt the wind and realised I was listening to life."

That is why today his name, Polela, "means life to me".

In time, he learnt from his paternal extended family — he is one of 11 siblings that he knows of — that they had also suffered.

"They said, 'you had it better than us'. And, when they described their dreadful life with this monster, I understood."

Polela has three children of his own now and has brought up his daughter, Shadow, as a single parent, attending parenting classes "so I would do it right — I didn't trust myself to bring up my sons".

There's doubtless another book in there somewhere, but Polela is writing one on a completely different topic while being the Hawks' spokesman.

He had struggled to get a job in communications on his return from London. "I didn't want to work for the government," but in the end he rang Bheki Cele.

Polela loves his job because he loathes crime. When people wonder why he doesn't ensure his father does time for murder, he points out that he's giving him "what he failed to give us and our mother — humanity. He probably doesn't even realise that."