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Does it Mattera? Matter About Don

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Does it Matter? Matter About Don

Abstract
In a country like South Africa where separation of the races is the official policy, it is not infrequent to witness individual efforts to breach the walls and establish a multi-racial solidarity. The presence in jail and among the banned of members of all the communities testifies to it, as do the homages paid from all quarters to the militants and/ or writers who have committed themselves to real, meaningful changes and have died, been imprisoned· or silenced in the process. Don Mattera is one of them.

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Does it Matter About Don Mattera?

In a country like South Africa where separation of the races is the official policy, it is not infrequent to witness individual efforts to breach the walls and establish a multi-racial solidarity. The presence in jail and among the banned of members of all the communities testifies to it, as do the homages paid from all quarters to the militants and/or writers who have committed themselves to real, meaningful changes and have died, been imprisoned or silenced in the process. Don Mattera is one of them.

The Mattera family cast roots in South Africa in 1904 when Francesco Mattera, then 26 years old and a sailor from Naples, jumped ship while in Cape Town and married a Griqua woman. He went to work in the Kimberley mines, made some money there and eventually founded one of the first bus companies for Africans in Johannesburg. He settled in near-by Sophiatown where the family, through inter-racial union or marriage, became as cosmopolitan as the city. Don Mattera, Francesco’s grandson, was born in 1935. Left at first in the care of his paternal grandparents, he was later sent to a Catholic school in Durban which accommodated orphans and children from broken homes. There, he was brought up the hard way, his rebellious spirit grew; there he learnt the English language and ‘English’ manners; there, too, he became a boxing champion.

When he went back to Sophiatown in 1950, the Mattera clan was no longer holding itself together, the Nationalist Party had come to power and Johannesburg was one of the worst places in the world for tsotsism (hooliganism) and crime. Don Mattera joined one of the youthful gangs whose leadership he assumed very quickly. He had several brushes with the police and even served a brief spell in jail. Yet he somehow managed to finish school, getting a second-class pass Matric in 1957.

By then, he was having second thoughts about making his way in life
through the power of the fist or the knife. A son had been born to him and tsotsim appeared at last for what it really was — and still is — a misdirected form of violence through which some of the oppressed get their own back on society to the detriment of their own brothers and sisters. Besides, there were more useful things to be done for a youth whose political awareness was growing. Boycotts and mass-demonstrations were being organized by the 'non-whites' to protest against the implementation of the first apartheid laws which defined the various racial groups and started setting them apart from each other where they co-existed. The convening of the Congress of the People and the subsequent adoption of the Freedom Charter (1955) testify to the growing militantism of both the oppressed and the white extra-parliamentary opposition. But the boycott of the Bantu Education Act was a failure, as were the attempts to oppose the destruction of Sophiatown destined to become a suburb for new White immigrants. It was in Sophiatown that Mattera came to know Father Huddleston and a few white radicals such as Joe Slovo and Dennis Goldberg, the latter later condemned to a life sentence for his part in the resistance.

Don Mattera belonged for a while to the Youth League of the African National Congress, then joined the more radical Pan-Africanist Congress, both organizations being banned after Sharpeville (1960). He later joined the Coloured Labour Party which was the only body where he could still be politically active, but he was yearning to struggle again side by side with his darker brothers, an opportunity which presented itself in 1971 with the foundation of the Black People's Convention. Don Mattera took his large share of the conscientization then taking place but his activities were brought to an abrupt end when he was banned in 1973. His banning order, renewed in 1978 for another five years, forbids him to address meetings, to be in groups of more than two persons, to leave his place of residence and to publish or prepare for (personal) publication. The crazy laws of the country still allow him to work for a living: Don Mattera serves as a sub-editor on the staff of The Star, one of the leading English-language newspapers. But he is cut off from normal life and from the vital communication with his fellow human beings. Many seasons have passed since Wally Serote wrote for him (in Tsetlo, Ad. Donker, 1974) the beautiful poem that follows; but how many more will have to pass before Don Mattera is free?
... it is a dry white season brother
only the trees know the pain as they still stand erect
dry like steel, their branches dry like wire,
indeed, it is a dry white season
but seasons come to pass.

It is worth examining Don Mattera's place among his contemporaries, not only in the political field but, this time, in the closely-connected literary one. For he is little known to the outside world, having published but little and now being prevented from doing so, and although, like many other black writers of the seventies, he is no professional, yet he is far from being insignificant.

His autobiography, *Gone with the Twilight*, will, when it is published, rank among the most fitting, valuable tributes paid to the Sophiatown that was. Like his two predecessors, Bloke Modisane (*Blame Me On History*, 1963) and Can Themba (*The Will to Die*, 1972), Don Mattera, some ten years younger than they were, evokes magnificently the multi-racial community which lived in Sophiatown before this very togetherness was forbidden by law. Don Mattera relates his childhood and youth, the moments of happiness and those of sorrow, the partings and the reunions (the former more frequent than the latter). He describes his family and friends and the motley crowd of the teeming, bustling city, the exploited and the exploiters, the priests of various denominations, finally the gangs and the police. They all come alive in a wealth of picturesque details, chunks and slices of a rich, pithy life with its mixture of little joys and tragedies, its humour and tenderness and the overall humanity that transcended the barriers of language and colour (see documents I and II). The descriptions themselves seem to come straight from his youth, passionate, idealistic, vibrant with indignation or pathos. More lyrical passages occur when he relates the actual destruction of the houses where they had all lived and tells of the feelings of dispossession and uprootedness that were theirs. Here is a moving, though precise, testimony on the disappearance of a community and the passing of an era.

His poems are no less interesting for they straddle the period from Sharpeville and its aftermath of defeat and despair to the pre-Soweto days with their spirit of defiance and challenge; they also reflect the evolution of the late sixties and early seventies, associated as they are with the Black Consciousness Movement.
Mattera starts with poems descriptive of everyday life, concentrating mainly on the depersonalisation of the black man under the influence of oppression: a beggar murmuring 'thank you, baas', to one of his own brothers, black men queueing up for their pay or for their passes, or being arrested by other black men (document III).

Two themes soon emerge which are closely connected with each other. The first one — the plight of the country — is expressed in warm terms reminiscent of Dennis Brutus: Mattera also addresses South Africa as he would address a loved one, and the several variations all demonstrate the poet's deep concern for his country and his wish to see destruction and havoc avoided (document IV).

The second theme is couched in far more bitter terms. Mattera, here, takes the white man to task for his lack of true religion and general inhumanity. These are no Christians, he says, who edict such cruel laws and limit their religiousness to church-going and an occasional breast-beating. The word 'pharisee', either explicit or in filigree, can be found in many of these poems, the interrogation of the early days eventually becoming outright rejection (document V).

This protest poetry of the first kind — because it simply enumerates the evils — gradually becomes a more defiant one. The white man who, at first, was referred to indirectly in the third person ('they') is, at a later stage, addressed with a vindictive 'you' and finally pushed in the background as Mattera turns primarily to his black brothers. Like his colleagues of the Black Consciousness Movement, he has realized that the black man is truly on his own, that his passivity and lack of combative-ness play a part in the perpetuation of apartheid. The time for reasoning and praying is over: the black man must now stand up and claim his rights. The 'We've had enough' theme comes up over and over again under different forms, at first a cry of anguish and then a declaration of war. The rhetoric has clearly a mobilizing purpose but it is also meant as a therapy, for the black man has internalized the white man's depreciation of himself (documents VI and VII).

Yet, even at this stage, the liberation of minds is difficult to achieve. Or rather the poet, like many other Blacks, is seen as incapable of/unwilling to resort to the same violence as that of the rulers. Mattera's basic humanism appears in numerous poems (document VIII) and his 'I can't hate' echoes other black voices, notably Serote's. While the word 'love' is certainly the one that recurs most frequently throughout the collection, Mattera cannot but foresee the violent confrontation that the
Nationalists' obdurate refusal to grant the Blacks their lawful rights will inevitably cause (document IX).

The political import of some of the poems, especially those written in the early seventies, points to a growing didacticism on the part of Mattera. Some poems are obviously meant to 'teach a lesson'; yet, Don Mattera is no politician suddenly turned to literature or prose-writer converted to verse. There is in him a genuine urge to write poetry, and to write other things than those pressed on him by the 'situation'. The number of lyrics is important: some end up with the poet's main preoccupations. But others develop fully and reveal sensitivity, sense of structure and unquestionable talent of expression (see documents X and XI).

While Don Mattera's more recent poetry is, perforce, unavailable, the body of work that exists is by no means negligible. It must be seen alongside that of Mtshali, Matthews, Serote, Sepamla and Pascal Gwala as highly representative of the period from Sharpeville to Soweto: the new Black is reflected here at the same time as he is being addressed. Some of Mattera's poems antedate those of his colleagues while others echo them; but he has his 'own' voice, and he will have to be reckoned with as soon as his works are published. This could only happen if he were unbanned, a decision that Mattera is not seeking. If the reasons for this attitude can be understood — there are other people banned with whom Mattera feels complete solidarity, and what really matters is the total eradication of apartheid — yet one may wonder how much longer the free world will tolerate the continuation of such damaging practices which have nothing to do with the administration of justice. The banned have never been taken to court, they have not even committed any 'crime'. Clearly, they as a whole, as well as Mattera in particular, are being destroyed, as they would no doubt be if they had to go into 'voluntary' exile. They need all the support that can be mustered to remain in their own country as free individuals (see document XII for his open letter to white South Africans).

In Winter 1966, moved by yet another banning of black writers, Lionel Abrahams had asked (in The Purple Renoster), in the light of the predominating silence from a majority of the White community, if it mattered about Dennis Brutus — who was but one of the banned. If today we ask in turn if it matters about Don Mattera, we are underlining the lack of progress of the last fourteen years and exposing for what they really are the assertions of change and liberalization currently being made in South Africa.
If Prime Minister P. W. Botha wants to be believed, let him first open the prisons where the political prisoners rot, let him ungag the silenced, some of whom, like Mary Moodley who died recently, have been under a ban for 15 years. Let him call a National Convention of all leaders, at home and in exile, where the Whites will have to talk with, and not down to, the Blacks. Let him not waste one minute longer the extraordinary human potential which is still available in South Africa. Let the country see, in a few years and within its own borders, arise a situation similar to the one that prevailed in Zimbabwe. Can't Southern Africa save itself the expense of another Lancaster House Conference, with the thousands of casualties that would precede it?

DOCUMENT I

I am a second-generation Coloured. A product of miscegenation. The fruit of in-between existence. The appendage of Black and White. My father, Bosquala Graaf Mattera, was born of an Italian sailor and a Griqua washer-woman. My mother, Agnes Dinkie Lebakeng (still alive at the time of writing this account) was born of simple Tswana parents. They were not married. I was born in Johannesburg's Western Native Township in December of 1935. My maternal grandfather named me Monnapula (Tswana for Man of the Rain) because I came with a heavy rainfall after weeks of dryness. My mother was only sixteen years old when I was born and so it would be fine to say that we grew up together.

Things were tough on my African grandparents because they were poor and had other children to support; they placed me in the care of my paternal grandparents, who registered me as one of their own, the last of nine children.

I was parted from my mother. She had taken up employment at what is known among Black people as the 'kitchens'. Meaning that she worked for some white family in the rich northern suburbs of Johannesburg. I only saw her at some weekends and I remember the lovely things she brought with her — clothes, cakes, sweets and all that. My father's people loved her and she was beautiful, with lovely sleek legs and a body to match. Snookie, a man I knew well, used to call her 'English lady'. I can't recall though, that she and my father ever met. He had many women, mostly Africans, and they were all very beautiful. But, with all the apartness, I still loved both of them, I guess.
I loved all my grandparents. To me, having a European grandpa was no different to having a Tswana one. I mean, which child then, would have noticed what children, especially the white ones, are alert to, now. There were real differences of course; one household had more food than the other and it must have been natural for me to favour the house where food was abundant. Game, fruit, salads and delicious Italian dishes smiled appetizingly from my paternal grandparents' dinner-table. There was enough wood and coal. And there was money.

My grandfather, Francesco Paulo Mattera, came to South Africa from Naples, Italy, in 1904. He was 26 and a sailor in the merchant navy. His parents were farmers and his taste for adventure, which began with street-singing led him to the shores of Cape Town. He jumped ship, and after roaming friendless through the City, met my grandmother, Minnie Booyens-Rawana. A narrow-eyed beauty with a copper-coloured skin of Xhosa-Dutch and Griqua extraction. They married at a Dutch mission at Graaf Reinet, the birth place of my grandmother.

There was no law against marriage between black and white in South Africa, then. They loved each other and that was all that mattered. He often told us, 'Dat time, no beezneeza lika now. You marreed, who you marreed. Nobaady he say who dis man or dat womman. No law to breakka a man an his womman...'

It never occurred to me then, what he meant or what the broken English was trying to convey. It was not until later, much later when I was infatuated by what was 'love' for Poppy, an Afrikaner girl who lived in neighbouring Westdene, that I understood. She was a girl I often chased around innocently when she came to visit the Theunissens, her coloured family who lived in my street. Her mother called me a 'Kaffir' and set the dogs on me when Poppy and I talked. They threatened me with arrest because she was a white girl.

Later, too, I saw and read what the broken English had tried so hard to tell me... It was different in those days. People were more worried about fighting the trials of existence. Too preoccupied with their own lives and problems to really care about who married who. Or what an Italian sailor was doing with his Griqua wife in bed.

In the years that were to follow, the racial sensitivity on the subject of love between white and black accentuated itself in various forms, in many walks of life. The bodies of white men and women were made holy and there was to be no love, let alone sexual intercourse with black people. I understood what the old man said and hated myself for having laughed...
The Mattera family was as cosmopolitan as Sophiatown. My two aunts had been proposed to by the sons of rich Italian immigrant families, some of whom also had businesses and bus companies. Carlo, whose empire was built on building buses, was a close friend of my Papa, as I used to call my grandpa. My aunt Rosina, who had a beautiful voice, married a man called Francisco Perreira, whose father was Portuguese and his mother Coloured. They had a dark featured son, Frank, who committed suicide. His death occurred a month after our Sophiatown homes were demolished...

My aunt Baby, whose name was Helena, married a Scotsman who had quite a temper and had formerly been a professional racing-driver. Their only son Chossie had no trace of Coloured features. His nose was straight, his eyes green and his hair ginger-brown. My uncle Willy had a white woman called Tilly who had sleek, long hair that fell over her left eye. Tilly was always beautifully dressed and she and my grandma got on quite well. Then Willy joined the South African army to fight against the Germans. It was also the last we saw of our lovely Tilly...

My three uncles, Danny, Frankie and Goon, had many different women. There were African, Coloured and Indian varieties, whom I had to call aunt. But I understood. My own father had an African staff nurse, who was beautiful as she was kind. My family was a symbol of the multi-racial complexion of Sophiatown. There were other white men, like the Rosenbergs, Theunissens, Rademeyers, Janofskis, Jannssens, Haupfts and a host of others, who shared the cosmopolitan Sophiatown with more than 200,000 Africans, Indians, Coloured and Chinese, many of whom were brought into the world by the hands of my granny. She worked until the early hours of the morning, delivering babies...

Without the Mattera family, there would have been no real Sophiatown, many used to tell me. If there was death, go to Matticks (what people called the old man). If someone needed to be got out of jail, go to the Matteras — the people with the buses and the cars — they would give the money. If there was no food, go and ask, because there was always bread and food at the Italian's place. He would surely give. Cripples, healthy beggars, some in tattered disguise, came, like the not-so-rich white people, especially government officials and members of the police who never left empty-handed. This was the character of my family and it was part of the nature of Sophiatown. This was the family that had taken me in from my Tswana relatives and opened a different way of life to me...
I had many brushes with the police. Like the time I alighted from a train on a visit to my mother in one of the African townships. A tall, African policeman stopped me. His huge hands gripped my belt, pulling my trousers against my private parts.

‘Pass’, he shouted, so that others heard.

‘I’m a Coloured’, I answered, knowing this to be the password of privilege and temporary safety and immunity. It would work now, as it had several times before.

‘Half-caste Boesman, is what you mean’, he said in Afrikaans, tightening his lethal grip, so that my testicles moved into my bladder, and consciously aware of his power, he pressed harder. Urine ran down my thigh, wetting his hand. A blow stunned my senses. Half-blinded, I sagged and his grip loosened. As I was coming to another shot crushed into my ribs. Darkness. When I looked up there was a Boer policeman poking his baton at my exposed testicles.

‘Wats verkeerd bruin balas (What’s wrong brown balls?)’ I tried to tell but instead he ordered me to leave. I turned to the African and promised I would get him someday.

‘Get your kaffir-mother, you sonofabitch’, he shouted again, to attract the attention of bystanders. Some people laughed. A woman tried to help but I pulled away.

All my mother said when I told her of the incident was, that I was beginning to understand humiliation, which was a way of life for Africans.

‘Now you know a bit. With Coloureds it is different. You have many rights and privileges. Your colour ensures you status and a future. No pass, no permits and influx control. It’s bad when your skin is black. Now, I’m happier that I gave you to your father’s people, otherwise you would have suffered’, she told me without pity.

I argued that the policeman was an African and yet he beat me without regard for my age. She replied that he stopped being an African when he wore a police badge. He became something totally different. A tool. A robot. Something else but not an African. Being an African was something great, transcending and valuable, with an open heart, she said. I loved her for giving me something better than pity. She helped me to understand and believe that being an African was beautiful and I wanted more than anything to become one...
DOCUMENT III

RUBBER STAMP

Black men stare fixedly
at the baked-brick building
in Albert Street

They stand like statues
carved in grease and sweat
polished with the slime of frustration
against Chinese-owned 'native-eating-houses'

Where were you born
What's your tribe
Who's your chief
Where's your permit...

Black men stare fixedly
at the powerful rubberstamp
in its path of destruction and heartbreak
lord and master of hungry men and women
degraded in their own land
abused by the rubberstamp
in a whiteman's hand...

DOCUMENT IV

GOD BLESS AFRICA

Sea and sand
my love my land,
God bless Africa
but more the South of Africa
with its angry mountains
and smiling hills
where the water spills
to cool the earth's heated brow
God bless the children
of South Africa,
the Black and the White children
but more the Black children
who lost the sea and the sand
that they may not lose love
for the White children who took the land
Sea and sand
my love my land
God bless Africa
but more the
South of Africa

DOCUMENT V

OFFERING

To say that you love
and offer it
to a dream

To say you love that dream
and offer it
to man

To say that you love man
and yet offer him
to God as Cain did his brother

To say rather no such love
nor dream nor offering
and what of no God?
NO TIME, BLACK MAN

Stand Black man
and put that cap
back on your beaten head

Look him in the eye
cold and blue
like devil's fire
and tell him enough
three centuries is more
than you can take, Enough!

Let him hear it
if he turns his face and sneers
spit and tell him shit
it's all or nothing
he's got all
and you have nothing

Don't bargain with oppression
there isn't time man,
just no more time
for the Black man
to fool around

OF REASON AND DISCOVERY

I have dispensed with reasoning
It blinded me to many wrongs
nearly robbed me of sanity
I once reasoned with the whiteman's evil
saw his crimes against my people
his weakness and human folly
God would right the wrong, they said
But they did not say when
So, I have dispensed with reasoning
for it clouds a Blackman's vision
blunts his wrath and makes him tolerant
of his oppression

I have discovered, yes
the reason for all this hurt
this long deep searching
of scanning the Godless sky
for the suspended reply

I have discovered, yes
the fault not in the God
nor the pain, but the sufferer
who makes virtue of his anguish
and waits meekly on the God
for deliverance
though white scavengers rip flesh
from his battered black bones

I have discovered, yes
the yoke is comfortable
when the belly is full
and there is time to pray for peace
though police guns rattle on mine-dunes*
in the name of protection and order

I have discovered, yes
that an ounce of gold
exceeds the value of a Blackman's life
and there is no more time to reason and pray

Yes, I have discovered, yes...

* a reference to the Carletonville Mine shootings, 1973

DOCUMENT VIII

AND YET

I have known silences
long and deep as death
when the mind
questioned the logic
of my frailty
in the imminence
of my destruction
by men ruled and ravaged
by powerlust

I have known deep silences
when thoughts like angry waves
beat against the shores
of my mind
revealing the scars
of brutal memories
of trampled dignity
and the murder
of my manhood

and yet
I cannot hate
try as I want to
I cannot hate, WHY?

DOCUMENT IX

OF LIFE, OF DEATH

Even as we live
let us remember the dying
as we clench our fists
against the robbery of life
cursing our subjugation,
let us assess the quantity
of life lost
and how much of the dying
we can expect to know

As for me
I have reached the cross
If there is love, then it will be shared
with them that are moved by it
If hatred is to be, then
it will be learned
for what it teaches and not
what it would make of me

And, if there is to be life
let it be new, abundant, meaningful
throbbling in me, in my children
in my deluded brothers
a life, born out of the lives of men
striving for justice and freedom

Yet, if there is to be a dying
if corpuscles must commune
with gutter grime,
THEN LET THEM,
I will fall lovingly
assured I would rise again
to testify for the aftermath
that all my brothers may come together
to rebuild what their fathers destroyed

DOCUMENT X

DEPARTURE

I grow tired
and want to leave this city
seething in unrest and injustice
I am leaving
no, I have left
look at me
on the banks of the Nile
under some spreading palm
I shall be sleeping
the sleep of freedom
do not wake me
leave me to dream
my dream of departure
from this city
seething in unrest
void of pity
for I have grown weary
of eating the brine
and long for jungle fruit

DOCUMENT XI

AT LEAST

This day at least
let me see the hours through
without a wince
of discontent
as I drop
the heavy cloak
of bitter resolve
to welcome the infiltration
of warmth and love and beauty

This day at least
let me be moved away
from the ghosts
of pained exhortation
that lacerate the heart
embittered emotion

For these brief
somewhat fleeting hours
while the crisp laughter
of the wind fills me deeply
O my land,
at least for this untroubled day
let me unclench my being
to stroke the yellow flowers
OPEN LETTER TO SOUTH AFRICAN WHITES

To you, I may be just another name. Just another number in a sea of black faces. To your government and to your Secret Police, I am a PERSONA NON GRATA... An enemy of the State who must be silenced or destroyed.

To those true Black people, who share with me a destiny as Children of Africa, I firmly believe that I am a spokesman for Justice and Freedom and Equality... A man moved by the plight and pain of my oppressed brothers and sisters.

I am addressing you as a nation and at the same time, I am also aware that many valiant white men and women have raised their voices, offered their lives and the lives of their families in the cause of freedom for all people. I am constantly mindful of their great sacrifice and I know and am convinced that they will forever be enshrined in the hearts of Black people.

I have chosen an Open Letter, because your government has arbitrarily denied me my right publicly to express my feelings. My writings have been outlawed and nothing that I say can be published. My very thoughts are branded a danger to the security of the State, which in the final analysis, is REALLY YOU.

Since the crimes you and your government have perpetrated against my people are innumerable and since I lack the courage to rise up against you in their name, and most of all because I hate violence; I will confine this letter to the irreparable damage you and your government have personally caused me and my family.

Until this day, I have ever been united with those who suffer, are poor; with the sick and the dying. It was an inheritance from my family.

Yet for nearly six years now, with four more to follow, perhaps until I die, your government has summarily cut me, and countless others, off from the very vital and precious life-giving force called HUMAN INTERACTION.

Perhaps your government has told YOU why it took the criminal decision to deny and rob me and my colleagues of all social, political and human intercourse with our fellow-beings; making it a crime even to speak to a group of children.

I was given no reason whatsoever.
And did any of you ask your government why I am prohibited from attending my daughter's birthday party? Or why I must wait outside a hall when my own son is being handed a trophy or a badge? Or why I have to ask your Chief Magistrate for permission to attend the funeral of a loved one or a friend or a great leader?

Have any of you ever been prohibited from weeping at a graveside?

Well, I have been.

Have any of you white people experienced the horror of raids by the Secret Police? Do you know how humiliating it is to hear that loud and vicious banging at the door, and watch helplessly as armed police search the house, pulling blankets off the sleeping children? Searching, scratching and stamping, until the whole damn house is filled with hatred and anger.

Have any Afrikaner mothers or wives ever sat up wide-eyed on their beds, afraid and bewildered with tears flowing uncontrollably as the husband is bundled into a police vehicle?

Well, my wife has.

And, has any white ten-year-old boy ever run barefoot into the night to the waiting police car and, with his fragile fists, banged against the door, crying and screaming as his father is taken away to some cold and dark cell, perhaps never to return again?

My little son has done just that. And it is the same child that rushes to switch off the television set when your South African flag and your anthem appear at the end of the programmes.

I am not telling you these things out of self-pity. Nor do I want to be unbanned. These things are being said that you, unlike the German nation, cannot tomorrow say: 'BUT WE DID NOT KNOW...'. For you there must be no excuse. History will be the judge.

I don't think that you can answer these questions unless you are a HELEN JOSEPH, a BRAAM FISCHER or a BEYERS NAUDE. Or any of those white men and women who have stood up to be counted, and are dead or suffering as a result of their consciences. Also, I don't think you have the capacity for such remorse as would move me to say: 'Forgive them for they know not what they do...'

You know what you do.

And what is being done in your name.

Yes, day by day, bitterness and anger overwhelm me, robbing me of clear thoughts; transforming me to a near vegetable. I have been so demeaned that I can no longer truly fulfil myself as a poet or a person.
And today, my children, affected by this terrible change in me, reflect the bitterness I carry within my heart. I don’t know why, though I have tried very hard, I cannot hate you. But my children watch me closely: laughing when I laugh, crying when I am sad. Asking me, forever asking me why it is that I endure so much pain and humiliation. Or why the setting sun no longer moves me. Or why I have rejected Christianity.

They will find the answers.

And no doubt this letter will hurt and offend you and your government, especially your Secret Police. If I know you, as I know your rulers, these words will spur you to vengeance and violence against me. Against my family. It has happened before, but I do not care.

I am prepared to die.

All documents courtesy of INDEX ON CENSORSHIP, 21, Russell Street, London, who have published excerpts from Don Mattera’s work in their 4/1974, 5/1978 and 1/1980 issues and to whom we express our thanks.

Don Mattera