



It started on the 15th of June 1976 in the afternoon.

We habitually had a
press conference in the
afternoon to plan the next day.

Percy Qoboza, editor of The World
newspaper assigned me to cover
the march of the students. Circulars

announcing that Afrikaans was to become the
medium of instruction had been circulated in
the DET (Department of Education and Training) schools
and most teachers were not very good at Afrikaans.

On the 16th I arrived at Naledi High School at 6am, which was the
beginning place of the march. The students were busy preparing
placards stating: "Afrikaans must be abolished", "We are being fed the crumbs
of education" and "We are certificated not educated". ➡

*Story by Sam Nzima
Photo by Heidi Lee Smith*

Then the march started, and as they went, they collected more students from other high schools along the route. Although only the high schools had been targeted, the children from the primary schools joined in.

The purpose was to head for Orlando Stadium, where a memorandum was to be prepared that the students were to submit to the Department of Education.

Tsietsi Mashinini led the march past Morris Isaacson to Orlando West.

At Matsiki High School the head master had locked the gate because the students there were writing a test in Afrikaans. The marchers broke the gate, tore up the exam papers and forced them out of the school grounds.

Then a young man running from the direction of Orlando East shouted (in tsotsi taal): “Amagata se azwakele!” – “The police are here!” Everyone was aware that trouble was coming – there was going to be chaos. Then seven open vans and one big truck (a “gumbagumba” that carries prisoners) arrived.

I took out my press armband and put it on fast, I could see that all hell was going to be let loose. The policeman in charge got out asking, “Wat maak die kleintjies hierso?”

The students compacted together and looked at him. He gave them three minutes to disperse or “otherwise we’ll shoot”. There were other police behind him.

The students began to sing *Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrika* (which was banned), he pulled out a gun and shot directly into crowd, while ordering “Skiet! skiet!”. The police shot randomly, a little boy fell down and another picked him up, I ran to take the picture under a shower of bullets.

Sam Nzima

“Sam, don’t sleep at home, they are coming to fetch you at 3am.” He also told me the order had been given “shoot at Sam if you see him taking pictures anywhere”.

By now the students were looting council-owned bottle stores, and rampaging. A bread van was stopped and a milk truck. They ate bread and drank milk. White people were injured. The whole day and the whole night, nobody slept, administration offices were burned, they killed a very good doctor.

I stayed on the streets all day. The driver returned to fetch my film.

At 3pm the picture was in the extra-late newspaper, on the front page. The debate about the choice to use the shot of Hector Pieterse dying was very strong – “it will cause war in SA”, the chief sub-editor Brian Malt said, but Percy said “this happened, why hide the truth?”

On the 17th of June the picture was in the UK newspapers, byline courtesy *The World*.

I went home very late, I never slept. The police went into the hostels that night encouraging hostel dwellers to go and kill boys who were “telling them not to work”. There was shooting all night and shouting “Black power”. I packed my things into the car boot, ready to go.

The rioting was no longer in one place, but all over Soweto. Police came the next day to shoot students looting shops along Potchefstroom Road. A stray bullet hit a Kaizer Chiefs player and he died there. Police shot at a press car and the bullet went

me to work for them. But I left Johannesburg, drove to Bushbuckridge, to my home at Lilydale. My wife was a sister at Baragwanath. The picture destroyed my home and my future in journalism.

I opened a business, a bottle store there. Two months later I got a visit from policemen posing as salesmen. They took me into the storeroom and produced a file of cuttings. “Did you take this picture?” “Yes.” “Why? If you do here what you did there, we will beat you up and lock you up.”

They imposed house arrest on me. Every Friday they would come and check on me. They would send a policeman with a book to make me sign. This went on for a year and eventually, they stopped coming. I thought I would be safe in Bushbuckridge but they followed me.

The picture that destroyed my future in journalism, I must make a living out of it. There are other pictures that survived that day: the sequence of Hector Pieterse, six more pictures showing what happened. The policy of the paper was that you were not allowed to take film home and so the negatives were locked up in the editor’s office.

For Christmas 1976 the South African Council of Churches printed 800 copies of the picture with a biblical message and the words “No Christmas in Soweto”. They sent 400 out of the country and the



Mbuyisa Makubo and Antoinette Pieterse were trying to find a car to take the boy to the clinic. Makubo saw our press car and took Hector there.

[Reporter] Sophie Tema opened the door and put Hector into the beetle. With Sophie helping, the driver took Sophie and Hector to Orlando West clinic, but Hector was certified dead on arrival.

They came back. The students were still running away to the hill near the house of Kaizer Motaung, called Devil Hill. They came down with stones, and dustbins to protect themselves from bullets.

I removed the film from my camera because I knew the police would pounce on me and order me to hand over my camera. I put it into my sock. The police confronted me: “Bring us your cameras!” they ordered. They pulled out all the films. All were destroyed.

Now it was just chaos.

I gave the film which I had hidden in my sock to the driver who took it back to the office. I remained and loaded another film.

The police called for backup. A hippo arrived and began mowing the students down. Students ran away, a helicopter came with teargas, I also had to run.

in under the seat of the driver. [Press photographer] Alf Kumalo was taking pictures, the students thought he was police and they assaulted him and smashed his camera.

But because of that picture the police were looking for me now. When Soweto started to cool down, the violence moved outside Joburg.

The station commander at John Vorster Square phoned me at work at *The World* and said: “Is that Sam Nzima? Come here to have coffee with me, or a cup of tea, now, today.” Percy Qoboza intervened and asked him “What do you want him for?” The commander said: “We are trying to reform, but the cover page of a magazine from Russia has this picture of Hector with the words ‘police are killing students in Soweto’. Communists will attack us because of this picture.”

You see the picture had got as far as Russia because *The World* was a member of UPI (United Press International).

I had a friend who was a security policeman, he told me, “Sam, don’t sleep at home, they are coming to fetch you at 3am”. He also told me the order had been given “shoot at Sam if you see him taking pictures anywhere”.

I had to choose between my job and my life. I went to Percy and said: “I’m in danger”.

The Star and the *Rand Daily Mail* both wanted

police confiscated the other 400 at Diakonia House. Then they banned the picture. The Argus group [owners of *The World*] took this to court. There was no Act applicable and they won the case.

The negatives were sent to the bank [for safe-keeping]. Police raided the offices, and then *The World* closed down. Police took all the documents they thought were a threat.

The negative I have is a copy of a copy. I don’t know what happened to the original negative. I asked the chief subeditor and he doesn’t know.

The original picture is in my control. In 1988 Brian Malt, the same chief subeditor, came to work for the *Lowvelder* and he wrote a letter on my behalf to the Argus company asking them to give me copy-right. It is now registered in my name.

The picture has become the icon of the whole world. Bill Clinton asked to meet me and he said to me: “Do you know your picture is all over the world?” It’s even in the UN High Commission in New York and in St James Church.

But this is a tug of war for me with the government, with various departments, the June 16 Foundation who want to use it as a watermark on stationery. I am still battling this thing.

When they used the picture for the Hector Pieterse memorial there was no negotiation with me. And it was made into a bronze statue presented to Mandela – also without reference to me. ■