

# Hero's welcome in Poland awaits hitman who killed Mandela's ally Janusz Waluś, who shot dead South African communist leader Chris Hani, could soon return home

Christian Davies  
11 Nov 2018

The Guardian logo, featuring the word "theguardian" in a white, lowercase, sans-serif font on a dark blue rectangular background.

Ewa Waluś was a small child when her father, Janusz, emigrated to join his father and brother in South Africa in 1981, just two months before General Jaruzelski's imposition of martial law. Ewa and her mother were left behind in the town of Radom, central Poland. She hasn't set eyes on him since he made a brief visit to Poland in 1992. A year later a South African court would sentence him to death for murder.

Radom is best known in Poland for a violent outbreak of worker unrest in June 1976 during the communist era, when thousands of people took to the streets to protest at sudden price increases. Employees of the Łucznik metalworks stormed the local party committee, stripping Radom's first secretary down to his underpants and throwing television sets, furniture and portraits of Lenin out of the windows before setting the building on fire. Three people died in clashes with the paramilitary police.

Janusz Waluś was living in southern Poland at the time, but moved to Radom in the late 1970s when the city was still suffering from reprisals imposed by the communist authorities. It was a period when dissidents started to coordinate their activities with Polish workers, laying the foundations for the establishment of Solidarity in 1980 and the eventual overthrow of the regime.

Waluś didn't concern himself with politics when he lived in Poland – he preferred racing cars. But after moving to South Africa he became involved in pro-apartheid and far-right movements, including the white supremacist Afrikaner Resistance Movement of Eugene Terre'Blanche. On the morning of 10 April 1993, in Boksburg, east of Johannesburg, he approached the home of Chris Hani, leader of the South African Communist party and a commander of uMkhonto we Sizwe, the armed wing of the African National Congress, and shot him at point-blank range in the chin, behind the ear and in the chest.

"We found out about it from TV," Ewa Waluś told the Observer, sitting in a little cafe just off the main pedestrian thoroughfare in central Radom. "First we heard it was a Polish immigrant, and then that it was Janusz Waluś. I was really scared when I saw my mother – she aged 10 years in one minute."

The assassination of the charismatic Hani, considered by many as a potential successor to Nelson Mandela as leader of the ANC, brought South Africa to the brink of a race war, just as the process of negotiating a transition from apartheid to a multiracial democracy was at its most fragile.

Waluś and his co-conspirator, Clive Derby-Lewis, a rightwing member of parliament who opposed the peace process, were sentenced to death for the murder, but their sentences were commuted to life imprisonment after the death penalty was abolished in 1995. They were refused amnesty by South Africa's truth and reconciliation commission in 1999, on the grounds that they had "failed to make a full disclosure" about the circumstances surrounding the ordering of the murder.

"Chris Hani was assassinated a year before our first democratic elections. The country at that time was awash in violence and fear, and his killing brought the peace process to a knife edge," said Zelda Venter, a senior court reporter in Pretoria, who has reported extensively on the Waluś case. "For many millions of South Africans, the scars left by those traumatic times are still raw."

Those wounds were reopened when Waluś was granted parole by a court in Pretoria in 2016, a decision denounced by Hani's widow, Limpho, as racist. The ruling was overturned, and Waluś's parole denied in 2017 by the South African minister of justice, Michael Masutha.

However, in September, South Africa's high court set aside the minister's decision because of irregularities in the process, giving Masutha 120 days to reconsider the parole application.

That raises the prospect that Waluś, who is now 65 and wishes to return to Poland to be with his family, could be released as early as next year, a possibility regarded with horror by many in South Africa.

"He must die in prison," said Dipuo Mvelase, a senior ANC official in the northern province of Gauteng, who served under Hani during the Angolan civil war in the 1980s. "He doesn't deserve to walk the streets of our country, and if he goes back to Poland he will pollute it with his racism. He has brought so much pain upon our people."

But while widely reviled in South Africa, Waluś is regarded by many on the Polish right as a modern-day resistance hero – a victim of the Polish communist regime he left behind in 1981. His killing of Hani is seen as motivated by a determination to prevent the imposition of "communism" in South Africa under the guise of black majority rule.

"[The ANC] are communist and they will destroy this wonderful country," Waluś had declared during his trial. "They will squander all that was built here by whites with such difficulty. It pains me that everything here will be destroyed in the name of a multiracial utopia that will never work here."

Waluś has become a cult figure among rightwing Polish football fans, in particular, who frequently display banners at matches with his portrait and slogans such as "Free Janusz Waluś" and "Stay Strong Brother". When football fans gathered at the Jasna Góra monastery in south-western Poland, the country's holiest shrine, for a "patriotic pilgrimage" in January last year, a priest led the congregation in prayer for Waluś's release. The National Radical Camp, the successor to a pre-second world war Polish fascist movement, recently held an indoor football tournament in his honour.

"The cult of Janusz Waluś started in the 1990s, but it has really spread in the last couple of years because of his recent parole applications, and of course it coincides with the rise of the far right in Poland," said Rafał Pankowski, a professor at Collegium Civitas in Warsaw and director of the Never Again association, an antiracism campaign group. "It represents not only the growing acceptance of racism, but also a growing acceptance of politically motivated violence."

Waluś's release is supported by a number of politicians in Poland. Several MPs have argued that he is a political prisoner, while Jan Żaryn, a historian and senator of the ruling Law and Justice party, described his continuing detention as "the result of personal vengeance from part of the South African elite". Waluś is sometimes described as the "last Cursed Soldier", a reference to Polish resistance fighters who were tortured and executed by the communist authorities in the Stalinist era – an implication that Hani's murder constituted a continuation of the same struggle.

Waluś's sympathisers provide more than just moral support, collecting money that goes towards paying his legal fees. Ewa Waluś confirmed that her father would not have been able to pursue his repeated appeals for parole if it was not for the financial assistance provided by his Polish well-wishers, although she insists that she does not accept donations from fascist or neo-Nazi organisations.

"I wish to express my deep and warm gratitude for your spiritual and material support," Waluś wrote in a recent letter from Pretoria central prison to the fans of the football teams Legia Warsaw and Raków Częstochowa. "For all your campaigns. For the postcards. For the demonstrations in the stadiums. For the funds that make my/our legal battle possible. I don't know what I would do without your help."

But many in Poland and South Africa strongly reject the notion that Waluś should be regarded as some kind of resistance hero, noting that he never engaged in the anti-communist struggle in Poland itself, and that communism in Poland had already fallen several years before Hani's murder. Whereas in Poland communism was used as a tool to oppress the majority, they argue, in South Africa it was a tool of liberation. Poles may have suffered under the communists in their own country, but as whites in South Africa they benefited from the suffering of others.

"The Poles who moved to South Africa in the 1980s left Poland because it was a horrible dictatorship that did not respect human rights," said Pankowski. "And where did they go? South Africa, which was a horrible dictatorship that did not respect human rights."

“It’s a very strong and convenient narrative of the rightwing in South Africa, that their racism is founded on anti-communism,” said Mvelase. “The apartheid narrative was that anyone who didn’t accept it was a communist and a terrorist.

“This is a man who, together with his group, was sent out to change the direction of our country – they were hoping for a war.”

[https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/11/heros-welcome-janusz-walus-apartheid-hitman-chris-hani-poland?CMP=share\\_btn\\_tw&fbclid=IwAR16H\\_gHHkilTRCiJnJmPr9CAZa0\\_HfSxR0Vc8wQ4n29LfRkgJPLI-YzODc](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/11/heros-welcome-janusz-walus-apartheid-hitman-chris-hani-poland?CMP=share_btn_tw&fbclid=IwAR16H_gHHkilTRCiJnJmPr9CAZa0_HfSxR0Vc8wQ4n29LfRkgJPLI-YzODc)