

MATTAN, MAHMOOD HUSSEIN (1923 - 1952), seaman and victim of injustice

Name: Mahmood Hussein Mattan
Date of birth: 1923
Date of death: 1952
Spouse: Laura Mattan (née Williams)
Child: David Mattan
Child: Omar Mattan
Child: Mervyn Mattan
Gender: Male
Occupation: seaman and victim of injustice
Area of activity: law
Author: Danielle Fahiya

Mahmood Hussein Mattan was born in what was then known as British Somaliland in 1923. Little is known about his early years there, until he left Hargeisa in search of work, joined the British Merchant Navy and docked in Cardiff in 1946.

Living amongst his fellow Somali and Muslim men in boarding houses in Tiger Bay, Mattan began to find his feet and lay down roots. Shortly after arriving, he met seventeen-year-old Laura Williams from the Rhondda Valley who was working in a paper factory in Cardiff, and they married in 1947. Laura described her husband as a good, kind man and a provider. Although their marriage was a happy one, due to it being an interracial union they faced racial hostilities in the local area and lived apart on the same street whilst raising their three children: David Mattan (b.1948), Omar Mattan (b.1949) and Mervyn Mattan (b.1951). Mattan left the Merchant Navy in 1949, and then worked in various jobs, including one in a steel foundry.

On the evening of 6 March 1952, a Ukrainian Jewish shopkeeper named Lily Volpert was brutally murdered in her shop, and rumours began to circulate that a Somali man had been seen there at the time of the killing. Cardiff City Police interviewed a number of local men including Mattan. Two hours after the murder had taken place, detectives visited his lodgings, questioned him but ultimately found no evidence that would place him at the scene of the crime.

Almost a week after the murder, with no arrests and the investigation stalling, the victim's family offered a reward of £200 (equivalent to over £7,000 as of 2023). This was to prove key to Mattan's undoing as several people came forward, including Harold Cover, a West Indian Tiger Bay resident who claimed to have seen Mattan coming from the direction of Miss Volpert's shop. Despite inconsistencies on time and changes in eye witness accounts by Cover and others, Mattan was charged with Miss Volpert's murder on 16 March 1952.

Mattan's trial started on 22 July 1952 and the main prosecution witness Harold Cover's testimony was upheld despite its inconsistencies. The jury and Mattan's defence team were not told that Cover's testimony had changed, and not all witness statements were disclosed, four of which failed to pick out Mattan from an identification parade. Several other eye witness testimonies failed to identify Mattan and this crucial information was not released by Cardiff City Police. In his summing up, Mattan's own defence barrister Mr Rhys-Roberts attempted to explain his client's behaviour but in doing so dehumanised him by describing him as a 'half child of nature, a semi-civilized savage'.

After just three days the jury returned a verdict of guilty. Mattan had insisted on his innocence throughout the case, and now put all his hopes into trying to get a last-minute reprieve by the Home Secretary David Maxwell Fyfe, but was denied despite his heart-felt letter pleading for mercy. Mahmood Hussein Mattan was executed by Albert Pierrepont on 3 September 1952, the last man to be hanged at Cardiff Prison.

For the next 46 years the Mattan family fought to clear his name, living in the shadow of an injustice which threatened to tear them all apart. In 1969, a respected local Somali named Mohamed Kalineh took up the cause to clear Mattan's name after the main prosecution witness Harold Cover was charged with the attempted murder of his own daughter Elaine Smith, a case which bore the hallmark of Lily Volpert's murder in 1952. This created media interest, and journalist David Wickham and Ted Rowlands MP urged Home Secretary James Callaghan to reopen the investigation, but despite their best efforts Callaghan refused to do so.

The 1980s were spent making futile efforts to get the case to the appeal courts, until a last ditch attempt in 1994 brought it to the attention of young journalist Phillipa Cherryson of the South Wales Echo. Cherryson came across a letter from Mahmood Mattan's stepson Phillip Mattan asking for help with the campaign, and from then on she was committed to the cause alongside family solicitor Bernard de Maid.

In 1996, Mattan's remains were removed from Cardiff Prison to the Muslim section of Western Cemetery in Ely, Cardiff. This came about after Cherryson raised awareness through her articles that Laura Mattan had never been allowed to visit her husband's unmarked grave in Cardiff Prison or to remove his body from there for a private burial. The efforts of Cherryson and De Maid led to the Criminal Cases Review Commission taking up the case, and it was one of their very first cases to go to the Court of Appeal, represented by renowned human rights barrister Michael Mansfield QC. The night before the appeal hearing, Anne Shamash, Michael Mansfield QC's junior, found a slip of note confirming that the man Harold Cover had identified to be Mattan was in fact Tahir Gass, a Somali with a gold tooth who in 1954 was convicted of murder and deported back to Somalia. (It was later revealed that Gass had jumped ship in Italy and his whereabouts remain unknown.) In the light of this new evidence, on 24 February 1998, Mahmood Hussein Mattan's conviction was deemed unsafe and quashed. The family were awarded £725,000 in compensation.

Despite this victory, the weight of all the pain and trauma that had marked the lives of Mattan's three sons began to take its devastating toll. Omar, who had once described knowing the truth of his father's death as a cancerous growth in his head, was found in 2003 washed up on a beach in Scotland, and the coroner ruled an open verdict. Eight years later Mattan's youngest son Mervyn, who had struggled with alcohol since having to identify Omar's body, was found dead at his home. Mattan's remaining son David passed away after a short illness in 2014. Laura Mattan died in 2008.

BBC Sounds marked the 70th anniversary of Mattan's execution in September 2022 with a nine-episode podcast featuring members of the Mattan and Volpert families and detailing the case and the trauma suffered by the Mattan family. This resulted in South Wales Police issuing an apology for their part in Mattan's conviction and execution which was delivered to the BBC.

Author

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Sources

Danielle Fahiya, author and presenter, 'Mattan: Injustice of a hanged man', BBC Sounds, 2022

Innocent.org, 'Mahmood Hussein Mattan'

Further reading

Wikipedia Article: Mahmood Hussein Mattan

Additional Links

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