

## Chapter 14 – King William’s Town, Mater Infirmorum

### *A Power-house*

When Mother Euphemia Koffler was elected head of the congregation in 1893, one of her first acts was to purchase the ‘Horseshoe’ Farm from Mr Fluegel. (The story goes that this man had never met nuns before and regarded the white-clad figures he saw at the Izeli as witches.) Mother Euphemia’s object in the purchase was to establish there a mission school even as her predecessor had opened the orphanage for Europeans at Izeli. However, her intention did not materialise because Mother Mauritia’s large heart found room at Izeli for an African school as well. So for a couple of years the Horseshoe Farm remained vacant.

In 1899 Mother Jacoba of Rhodesian fame became Prioress General of the Congregation. With her unerring nurse’s instinct she decided that the farm should be turned into a haven of rest for ailing and aged Sisters. Thus it became known as “The Mater Infirmorum” Sanatorium, dedicated to Our Lady under her title as “Mother of the Sick”. This House is situated about four miles of King William’s Town,<sup>1</sup> just off the national road to Stutterheim. The Amatola Mountains in the distance and the beauty of the surrounding farms made it an ideal spot for a sanatorium for the retired Sisters. It was also a popular picnic and holiday resort for the Sisters in the early days. The small farm dwelling was turned into a chapel and presbytery. At the back of the house a quadrangle was designed and rooms built to accommodate the invalids. Later the priest’s house and most of these rooms forming the square were recast and the garden laid out with its fountain in the centre.

With the help of Mr Karl Boehrer and his son, Anton, both experienced horticulturists, Mother Jacoba laid out gardens, a plantation, an orchard and vineyard and erected stables as well as a holiday cottage near the river, called “Gennazzano”. She also fitted up the existing buildings for the use of the community. As time passed further improvements were made. The cellar at “Gennazzano” was equipped to make wine for the convent’s own use. Quite a good kind of liqueur<sup>2</sup> was made there by the nuns in former years, and a bottle of it could be found in the medicine cupboards of the Congregation.

The choice of the spot for the Sisters’ cemetery also fell to Mother Jacoba and when Sister Alberta Rummer died in 1899 she was the first to be interred there. Hitherto the nuns had been buried either at King William’s Town graveyard or at Izeli in, a seemingly, haphazard way. This was not due to carelessness but to an underground layer of rock on the farm that was very difficult to penetrate without the use of blasting explosives, and these were not always obtainable.

In 1904 the mortuary chapel was built to commemorate Mother Jacoba’s Silver Jubilee of Profession and, in the following year, the chapel and the graveyard were consecrated by Bishop MacSherry. Both Mr Boehrer and his son died after leaving South Africa, but their benefactions are commemorated by an empty grave in the cemetery, marked with a cross bearing the inscription: “Pray for Karl and Anton Boehrer”.

When, in 1927, the Mother House was celebrating its Golden Jubilee of Foundation, the Sisters at the Mater asked for a new church as their second chapel, too, had become quite inadequate. Mother Lucy Kaltenstadler was then Prioress General but she had hardly enough money to pay current expenses so she could not even think of building. Nevertheless a rough sketch of a plan was made and given to her. Tentatively Mother showed this to the Architects Messrs Cordeaux, Farrow and Stocks of East London. When, in 1927, the Mother House was celebrating its Golden Jubilee of Foundation, the Sisters at the Mater asked for a new church as their second chapel, too, had become quite inadequate.

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<sup>1</sup> *On the old road is a spot marked by a cross where the twenty-six-year-old Father John O’Rafferty was thrown from his horse and killed in 1922.*

<sup>2</sup> *Known as “Kuemmel”*

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The Sisters immediately got busy writing to friends and past pupils for assistance. Their appeals were not in vain. On 23<sup>rd</sup> April 1927, Bishop MacSherry could lay the foundation stone of the church and then the walls went up swiftly. Stained glass windows also had to be paid for. Generous benefactors again came to the fore to supply this need and their names now figure on the windows each donated. So many were the contributions that came from loyal devotion to the teachers of their school days, that Mother Lucy said: "Truly, under Providence, the church is being built by our pupils."

Father Bernard Schmidt, skilled in the art of wood carving, made the altars in teak. The beautiful statue of the Blessed Virgin was given by Sister Ernestine Oberauer's relatives in Germany; the one of the Sacred Heart came from Sisters Albertine and Winifred Koenig's uncle; while that of St Joseph was sent by Sister Ludmilla Hoess' family.

On 16<sup>th</sup> September 1927 the church was dedicated by Bishop MacSherry. The document embedded beneath the foundation stone says the Church is to be in honour of the Blessed Virgin, as a memorial of the Golden Jubilee of the Mother House, and a lasting remembrance of the first seven Sisters, Foundresses of the Congregation. On the following day Father Schmidt said the first Mass in the new church and Father John MacTernan erected the Stations of the Cross.

Now the church was half finished and dedicated; but it had only half a tower and no bell. That should not be. However, Mother Lucy was adamant that she had no money; but she suggested that the Sisters continue to trust in prayer. When she returned to the Mother House what was her surprise when she opened the mail to find a cheque for fifty pounds from the Sheehan family. "The bell!" she thought, "and from past pupils again." So the bell was ordered and it arrived towards the end of 1928. Its inscription reads: "Donated by the Sheehan Family, King William's Town... Hail Mary, pray for us." And in German... I was cast by Rudolph Oberauscher, Munich". In addition to the usual dedication of a bell this one is also enriched with the blessing against devastating storms.

The Past Pupils' Association (K.C.B.U.) donated the silver Sanctuary Lamp, and Sister M Georgina Schoenhofer,<sup>3</sup> when superior at the Sanatorium, provided it with an adequate water supply and erected the handsome pews. Later a closed circuit of loudspeakers was installed so that each ward is equipped with a unit which can be controlled to suit the wishes of the individual patients. In this way the bedridden patients can follow the prayers and Holy Mass with the Community in the church.

A memorable figure at the Mater Infirmorum, for a long time, was its first chaplain, Rev John MacTernan. He was ready at any time of day or night to answer a summons to the bedside of a dying Sister. With the community gathered around him at the cemetery, he used regularly once a month to offer Mass for the repose of all those whose mortal remains were sown in that truly peaceful God's acre. On 11<sup>th</sup> September 1930, the good priest was found sleeping his last steep in his arm-chair.

Formerly each grave was surmounted with a wooden cross. But these became very weathered and the epitaphs almost indecipherable. Therefore, in 1953, Mother General Aquilina Spiegel undertook to have

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<sup>3</sup> Aunt of Sisters Euphrosine and Robert Asbeck.

cement crosses made which would be more durable. As the cemetery is a private, only those, apart from the Sisters, are buried there who have made a special request to that effect.

When all was ready the “Mater” began to shelter the sick and aged members of the Congregation. In 1962 the old chapel and the Sisters’ former dormitory were demolished to make room for a plain “hospital wing”. This was connected with the church and the remaining wards, to facilitate the bringing of Holy Communion to the sick in their rooms. Those Sisters who can be moved are taken to the church in wheel-chairs for Mass and Adoration.

On visiting the Sanatorium one might be tempted to wonder whether Robert Browning was just whistling in the dark when he wrote the long poem “Rabbi Ben Ezra”, which begins:

“Grow old along with me!  
The best is yet to be,  
The last of life, for which  
the first was made.”

These Sister will testify that time has taught them there is more to life than one’s youthful senses can grasp and that awareness of values comes into focus only with age.

If such a group of elderly nuns represented a grim and even repellent picture to the imagination, dismiss it at once; they are the least depressed members of the Congregation. By cheerful fidelity for many years to their allotted tasks these Sisters have given ample evidence of their true and enduring love for God and mankind. Now, relieved from active responsibilities, these venerable ladies are to enter specifically on the contemplative life for which every true Dominican ardently yearns. Their prayers carry a message to the world beyond their walls. Many intentions are prayed for as each senior Sister takes her turn at the priedieu for her hour of adoration before the altar. The Sisters pray for the Congregation, for all our friends and benefactors, for our country and for the whole world.

Mary, the Lord’s Mother, has a special place in the nuns’ affections. One cannot “separate her from the Lord who chose her as His mother and His bride... She is the selfless space where God became man; ... her self-effacing service” is to guide man to God.

Only in eternity will we know how much grace, love and strength, courage and heroism radiated from that hallowed chapel. Without these sufferers and their oblation cheerfully made for love of Him Who bore the Cross for mankind, the far-flung activities of the congregation would surely long since have perished.

Souls are purchased in the coinage which Christ Himself first paid, the currency He so inevitably asks in one form or another from those who are His won – the price of suffering. This is the work of these Sisters for God and mankind now.

On entering the chapel they read above the altar Christ’s welcome: “Nolite timere – Ego sum”.<sup>4</sup> The love of their Lord is the essence of all they love here on earth, and He will be coming soon... Like Jean de la Fontaine the Sisters believe that the wise man is not surprised by death for he is always ready to leave. And there is really nothing morbid about honestly facing the fact that one is about to leave the world. For God’s friends it is a tidings of joy. The Psalmist also speaks reassuringly of the loving Shepherd escorting His sheep safely through an unknown valley; He is at their side and “His touch is as gentle as silence”, so the need fear no evil.

There is, too, the beautiful practice of singing the “Salve Regina” when a Dominican is dying,<sup>5</sup> recommending the departing soul to the tenderness of Mary with the familiar plain-song melody sung daily after Compline.

And so the “Mater” has become one of the Institute’s holy places, for from there most of its members have answered the Master’s summons, and within those precincts they are laid to their everlasting rest.

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<sup>4</sup> *Fear not, it is I. (Latin)*

<sup>5</sup> *This custom originated in 1260, when Father Sadoc and his forty-eight companions were massacred by the Tartars at Sandomir in Poland while singing this salutation to the Queen of Heaven at the conclusion of the Divine Office.*

The Sisters spend much of their time in the chapel. Thus this convent is, as it were, the spiritual power house of the Congregation whence the flames of loving intercession rise up daily to God's throne, drawing down in turn untold graces and blessings on the world and on all the Sisters, even in the remotest branch house or loneliest mission station where Mother Mauritia's daughters labour in the Lord's vineyard.