

Chapter 21 – Belgravia

More Precious than Gold

The Dominican Sisters in Potchefstroom and Klerksdorp, travelling to and from King William's Town, often passed through Johannesburg,¹ and on every occasion had to ask for hospitality from Nazareth House. This was always freely and willingly given. However, when Bishop W Miller, O.M.I. requested Mother Lucy Kaltenstadler to open a day school at Belgravia in the interests of the children living in that suburb and in Malvern, her Councillors readily consented. The locality chosen was in Park Street, a few minutes' walk from St Anne's Church.

The ceremony of laying the foundation stone in 1906 was essentially and almost exclusively religious. It was performed by Bishop Miller himself, assisted by Fathers J O'Brien, John de Lacy, W Soye and Tom Ryan. Mother Lucy and a few Dominican Sisters represented the Congregation. The architects, Messrs Aburrow and Treeby, and the contractor, Mr R Thornton, were present. In the course of a speech, His Lordship expressed the hope that the school would be attended not only by Catholics but also by the children of all who wished their offspring trained and formed into true and worthy Christians and good citizens of their country.

Early in 1906 Mother Eleonora Petitpierre made this entry in the chronicle of the Mother House: "... A small community is leaving us to establish a new foundation in Johannesburg... Many people are rushing to the Transvaal to find gold but our Sisters are going to the Witwatersrand in search of the gold of Souls..."

The pass their train traversed twisted through the sheer, black mountains after sundown, moving steadily towards the vast inland plateau of the Orange Free State and Transvaal. Looking out of their train window next morning, the nuns² noticed that the mountains had dropped away and the Highveld stretched out before them, flat and empty, green grass dwindling to a distant meeting with the pale sky. But the loneliness of the scene could not blunt the missionaries' enthusiasm. Each mile they covered sharpened it until at last they saw the name for the first time – gaunt and forlorn as a spectre – the sign post pointed due north to JOHANNESBURG...

For miles around the veld was criss-crossed with rough tracks and roads, all converging on the goldfields. This burgeoning metropolis, which but a few years ago was a mere pattern of surveyors' pegs and scattered mining encampments had, by now, been arranged into ordered streets with tram lines laid down to north and south. At first there were horse-drawn trams but by 1906 the system was electrified.

On 11th January 1908 the Dominican Community arrived at Park Station accompanied by Germaine Letellier who had joined the staff as an assistant teacher. This lady wrote: "... We were all strangers in the Golden City and the crowd and confusion bewildered us not a little. The numberless packages which always accompany immigrants were at last safe in the porter's keeping and the Sisters made their way to Nazareth House where they waited for two weeks till their new home should be ready to receive them. I was taken to a home of a friend, Miss Louise Tuebes."³

The new school was opened on 3rd February by Bishop Miller in the presence of a large assembly. Among the priests present was also Rev Dr F Kolbe, an old Cape Town friend who spoke very warmly on this

¹ *The largest city in Southern Africa. It was founded as a mining camp in 1886, but only a year later no one was certain after whom the town was named, since four men by that name were associated with its origin. The Oblate Fathers journeyed thither to investigate the number of Catholics on the Goldfields. Few at first, the numbers soon increased, as families, women and children joined the diggers in the, then, Ferreira's Camp, from which the city grew. It has now a population of near two million.*

² *Sisters Peter O'Connor, Humberta Kaiser, Cornelia Huebner, Ludovica Marx and Luitgard Albrecht. Mother Reginalda Fischer was the first Superior.*

³ *Sister of Mother M Ambrose and an assistant music teacher at Belgravia for many years.*

occasion. School began in earnest next day. And what a day it was, with more than fifty pupils to question, examine and classify”⁴

“The curriculum at this Convent of the Sacred Heart embraced nearly every form of work – from the Kindergarten through the Standards to Matriculation and the Transvaal Pupil Teacher’s Class,⁵ as well as Commercial subjects, needlework and painting, while the music teacher found the day all too short for her work.

“And what was the convent like? Picture to yourself two buildings: a cottage and a hall with stage. The cottage was for the time-being the Sisters’ dwelling while the hall was partitioned into four temporary classrooms. The grounds were all that could be desired and, in parts, already transformed into pretty garden plots. Such was the convent at the beginning. But if you should chance to see it 12 or 15 years hence, forget my description if you are wise. Where the cottage and the hall now stand, you may find a group of stately buildings. A teacher’s dream, perhaps; but one that is likely to come true if the Sisters’ work in this new quarter meets with the success which has attended their efforts elsewhere...” Miss Letellier’s forecast came to pass although it took longer than fifteen years for the transformation to be completed.

Within a couple of years the Sisters were cramped out of their accommodation. Three additional stands facing Park Street were bought and the first permanent convent was erected on this site.

These buildings were all single-storeyed.

On the Sisters’ arrival in Johannesburg they found there was an embargo on taking boarders as Bishop Miller promised Mother Ambrose of the Holy Family Convent, Parktown to allow no other convent but hers to take them. It was feared the numbers at Parktown would be depleted unless this inhibition was enforced. However, the Sisters at Belgravia were allowed a maximum of ten boarders and later this prohibition fell away. As new classrooms sprang up they were soon filled to capacity and the staff had to be increased to cope with the rising number of pupils.

As early as 1912 the Boksburg Mining Company offered the Sisters land for a school. For two whole years every Sunday two nuns from Belgravia travelled by train to arrive at Boksburg in time for Mass. The resident Priest, Father J O’Brien, O.M.I. was grateful that the Sisters, besides acting as sacristans, became catechists after the service. Sometimes they did not return to Belgravia until two or three o’clock in the afternoon. Since Bishop MacSherry did not allow our Sisters to open a convent at Boksburg the proffered ground was given to the Newcastle Dominicans.

The Belgravia Sisters later also taught catechism to the children on Sundays at Toronga about ten Kilometres from their own convent. They went to and fro by train. In 1940 Father Thomas Pierce, C.S.P., asked the Congregation to open a school at Malvern, where he had built a hall and a church. Owing to shortage of staff Mother Augustine had very regretfully to refuse, so the Assumption Sisters opened at Malvern.

As a rapidly growing mining town and economic centre Johannesburg was the stage set for some dramatic events to be witnessed by the Sisters in those early days. In 1913 the Miners’ Strike culminated in the burning of Park Station and of several buildings in town. British troops, brought in for the last time in South Africa to restore order, had to open fire and some twenty persons were killed.

The feast of St Dominic⁶ 1914 brought consternation to every community, for the clouds of war which had been gathering thickly over Europe and the world broke the following day. A Triduum of intercession for peace was held at the Mother House. Night and day without ceasing the Sisters sent up prayers that the nations might, even at the eleventh hour, be spared the horrors of war. In His inscrutable judgments the Almighty did not answer those prayers in the manner hoped for, but they found their fulfilment in

⁴ *The name of Margaret MacLeod, the future Sister Magdalen, O.P. was one of the first to be entered on the school register.*

⁵ *Several ladies were trained here for the T-3 Certificate in the early days.*

⁶ At that time the Feast was kept on 4th August.

other ways. The Sisters were allowed to continue their educational work in South Africa without any interruption and they accepted with resignation to God's Will sad news or no news of their dear ones in Europe, trying to perform their duties faithfully, with their eyes on God and their work for His Church in the land of their adoption.

In May 1915, the newspapers carried the information of the sinking of the liner "Lusitania" of the Cunard Company. The ship was torpedoed and sunk without warning off the coast of Ireland on the 7th of the month. It was announced that there were nearly 200 persons on board, many of them women and children. Only a few first-class passengers were saved. Public feeling in regard to this outrage became so intensified that it found visible expression in anti-German riots and burning of buildings in town. The Catholic men of St Vincent de Paul Society took turns to guard the Convent in Belgravia night and day during the times they were off work. Fortunately the Sisters' property was not threatened.

But even in this country excitement ran at high pitch as a result of a threatening rebellion, a by-product of the war. The unrest prior to the start of hostilities was insignificant compared with the strike of 1922 which resembled a revolution. When fighting in Europe came to an end, mining costs soared and the Trade Unions demanded increased wages. On the Chamber of Mines' refusal to grant this concession a strike ensued which soon turned into plundering and armed clashes. The Defence Force and the Citizen Force were called in and severe fighting broke out. The Prime Minister, General JC Smuts himself, had to assume command of the Government Troops to quell the revolt which had resulted in 400 deaths, several thousand wounded and millions worth of damage.

Despite the strife and unrest, Johannesburg continued to grow with leaps and bounds and its industrial progress drew many thousands of Non-Europeans who settled on the outskirts in unsightly shanty towns. The problem of supplying these multitudes with proper housing would become colossal. By 1970 more than a million houses had been built for them and still the slums were not eliminated as ever more people poured into the city in search of a living. Johannesburg has grown into one of the world's most cosmopolitan cities with skyscrapers, very many miles of shops and on its fringe the "sands of avarice" shone as white pyramids in the sun. These dumps were unavoidable, so the municipality tried to camouflage them in order to improve the appearance of the city.

Although the scholars of Belgravia Convent came from modest working-class homes, the institution could proudly take its place next to the exclusive schools of Johannesburg in the 1930s under the able direction of Sister M Pius Galvin, O.P.⁷ It attained this prestige not only by its splendid academic achievements but also by the girls' elegant appearance and fine deportment. Exactly on the hour the headmistress would appear at assembly; of medium height, she carried herself with a natural dignity. Respect was something she never worried about, but she always received it. She was to it that her pupils wore their uniform with military precision and neatness. Wherever those young ladies were seen their aspect never failed to command respect and admiration.

⁷ *Norah Galvin, born of Irish parents who immigrated to South Africa, was educated at St Mary's Dominican Convent, Cape Town. In those days there were no Standardised Tests for ascertaining I.Q.s. However, it was not long before that expert educationist, Sister M Joseph Leahy, discovered that her small pupil was gifted with intelligence beyond the ordinary. From 1887 Norah attended the Convent school at King William's Town, becoming one of the first matriculants of this High School. In so doing, she added a certain amount of prestige to the institution, for in those days a girl who had matriculated was regarded as something of a prodigy. Mother Mauritia Tiefenboeck admitted the young Sister Pius to profession in 1891. Then began for Sister Galvin that work of teaching, training others to teach, organising and developing the schools of her Congregation which was to keep her active for close on sixty years. It is not easy to gauge the wholesome influence she has exercised on literally thousands of South African women. The General Chapter of 1946 elected Mother Pius a member of the General Council so the remaining years of her life were spent at the Mother House. Patient in suffering, when her health failed, she found her greatest trial in what she called her idleness. Such an amount to be done, so few to do it, and she, who had always been a worker, now seemed only a drone in the hive. She passed away on 3rd March 1951. On 5th March her nephew, Very Rev Father J Galvin of Cape Town, celebrated a solemn Requiem Mass for her at the Mother House.*

By 1936 the Sisters moved from the old single-storeyed Convent to a new dwelling on the opposite side of park Street. Steadily increasing numbers on the roll led to the acquisition of more spacious buildings and grounds. In 1951 Bishop PW Whelan, O.M.I., D.D., opened the new school hostel in the same old Park Street. Gradually the school became too small and it had to make way for the “stately buildings” which had been envisaged by Miss Germaine Letellier at the school’s inception more than fifty years ago. It may be said that Belgravia Convent School rose again to the crest of the wave in the 1950s, under the principalship of another inspired teacher, Sister Rosemary Mittermaier.

The golden jubilee of the Convent’s foundation was celebrated and a fine pageant depicting the main events in its history was staged by the pupils under the direction of Miss Norah Taylor. This elocution teacher was also responsible for many other successes gained by Belgravia convent at school concerts, speech contests and eisteddfods in the city.

Though it is not possible to give an account of the many past pupils of Belgravia who have followed the call to the religious life or to the priesthood, or who have distinguished themselves in various walks of life, brief mention should be made of at least two who have made their mark: Molly McNicholas became State Librarian of Rhodesia and Marcelle Pincus, nee Rubin, does outstanding work for the South African Council for English Education in Johannesburg.

Sister Paul Lee Sun, one of only four Chinese nuns in South Africa, hails from East London. Since she came to Belgravia she has worked for the people of her own race. Her spare time is devoted to visiting sick and elderly Chinese all over the city. There are no Homes of Chinese Aged in this country and Sister aims at getting such an institution established where these citizens can receive proper care. She has co-ordinated a group of helpers in conjunction with the Chinese Consul General, Mr Lo, who all work towards this goal.

Many were sad at the end of 1975 when Belgravia Convent had to close its High School section because of the shortage of young nuns to teach all the classes. The school now carries on as a primary one. The Congregation has recently trained some Sisters in other fields of apostolate such as pastoral work and catechetics, by means of which the nuns still endeavour to harvest souls in the Golden City.