

## Chapter 26 – Ermelo

### *Strong in Faith*

The Very Rev Daniel Kauzcor, F.S.C. begged Mother Lucy Kaltenstadler to open another Convent of her Congregation in his Prefecture, namely Ermelo,<sup>1</sup> “... for there were at least a dozen white Catholic children in the town growing up without religious instruction”. Accordingly then, on 19<sup>th</sup> August 1925, two adjacent plots were bought at Ermelo from Mesdames Adendorff and Nicholson. In 1926 the Apostolic Delegate gave permission for the foundation and on 20<sup>th</sup> December 1927 Mother Paula Wahlspoek<sup>2</sup> and two companions arrived to take possession of the place. There were two good, though small cottages on the combined property, which was about ten minutes’ walk from the centre of the town. It was shortly before the arrival of the nuns that the priest, Rev. Hugh Ille, F.S.C., acquired a presbytery. Formerly Mass was said in the home of a private individual with whom the priest stayed during his visits to this capital of the Eastern Transvaal.

Mrs W Cooke, mother of Sister M. Convivia, O.P. acted as the Sisters’ benefactress. She helped in every possible way, not only by supplying their most urgent needs, but also by introducing them to desirable shops and other business centres. In these new surroundings the Sisters prepared for Christmas. One room in the priest’s house was the parish chapel and there the Crib was arranged. Rivalling its original in Bethlehem, everything was primitive in the extreme; an electric bicycle lamp gave light, but love in the hearts of the Sisters burned even more brightly...

Great difficulties had to be overcome in order to establish the Convent School at Ermelo, where almost the entire population was Non-Catholic and strongly prejudiced against Catholics and nuns.

The Convent consisted of a small cottage and a two-roomed outhouse which had been used as a fowl run. The front room of the nuns’ cottage served as a parlour and music-room by day and as a bedroom for two Sisters by night. Because the first few boarders had also to be accommodated in the nuns’ dwelling, the outhouse was cleared of its lumber and the fowls were housed in an enclosure. The hens resented this change and whenever the dormitory window was left open, in they flew and laid their eggs on the Sisters’ beds.

Next to the parlour the Sisters fitted up a tiny chapel for themselves. Here, in this temporary Convent of the Sacred Heart, Father Ille celebrated the first Mass on 8<sup>th</sup> January 1928. A spacious cottage, half an hour’s walk down a shaded avenue, was hired to serve as the school for the time being. In May Mr Maartens started building the double-storeyed convent designed by Mr JA Moffat. The Sisters were fortunate in having a large fruit and vegetable garden which was in good condition; so fresh fruit and vegetables had not to be bought in those lean pioneering months. Several branch convents sent useful gifts, but few thought of adding groceries, yet wholesome food was often at a minimum because the Sisters were very short of money while their pupils were few. One day Mother Paula told the Sisters that the baker might not deliver bread to the Convent as she had been unable to pay the bill for some time. But Mrs Rayner, the baker’s wife, was one of the few Catholics in town, and the good baker continued to

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<sup>1</sup> Founded in 1880 and named after the home town of Rev F Lion Cachet, the first clergyman of the new settlement.

<sup>2</sup> She was surely one of the loveliest souls God gave to the “King” Congregation. In appearance she was of medium height, somewhat inclined to plumpness, of fair complexion with blue eyes. Not being photogenic, the pictures available of her are not good. Although always modest, Mother Paula possessed rare gifts. She graduated at Rhodes University. A born educator, she was loved by many, yet she lived a life “hidden with Christ in God”. Excelling in English Literature, Latin, History and Mathematics, she taught senior classes, chiefly in the capacity of headmistress of the Teachers’ College at King William’s Town and afterwards of several of our other schools. She worked for the advancement of European pupils from 1888 to 1939. The next twenty years were to be devoted to the education of Non-Europeans at St Thomas’ College, Village Main; St Louis Bertrand Mission, Potchefstroom; and St Joseph’s School, King William’s Town. Even in her semi-invalid retirement at the “Mater” she gave private lessons to a few Non-European youths; among them was Mr Joseph Sonaba who became a Priest some time after her demise. She could not fail to influence even children by her hidden, saintly ways... Whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are just – these Mother Paula loved and love of them she endeavoured to instil into all her pupils.

supply the Convent nonetheless. At another time when the convent purse was again empty the community<sup>3</sup> prayed that St Joseph should supply their need. The following day the Sister Sacristan was overjoyed to give Mother Paula the gold coins she found next to the Saint's statue – enough to pay the baker and the butcher. Doubtless the money was left there by some kind lady who knew or guessed the Sisters' plight.

Monsignor A Mohn, F.S.C. laid the foundation stone of the imposing, well-planned building with its frontage of over forty metres and capable of receiving extensive additions.

Already, on opening day of the new school, there were sixteen scholars, four of whom were in Standard VIII and 21 music pupils of all grades up to the Associate. On 30<sup>th</sup> July 1928, death stalked into the convent and carried off Sr Vincentia with a sudden heart attack. She was buried at the Ermelo cemetery whither Sister Stanislaus Bertele would follow her in a few years. When Sister Antonina Schellhammer came to take Sister Vincent's place in the Kindergarten, she found thirty little boys and girls to welcome her. At Easter practically all the Catholics had received the Sacraments to the joy of the Parish Priest. From now on Sunday Mass was said in the boarders' dining room in order to accommodate the laity and the Catholic pupils. Though this making of the chapel of ease was very inconvenient, yet it lasted until 7<sup>th</sup> June 1929, when the Sisters' new chapel in the school was opened to the parish.

The difficulties of pioneering did not continue indefinitely. When the hostel was ready for occupation the number of pupils increased and prejudice gave way to respect and finally to love of the Sisters.

On Easter Sunday 1930, two Sisters took a long walk to the new Township and were received by the Africans with exuberant pleasure as heralds of a church and school which they hoped would be opening there in the near future. The Sons of the Sacred Heart had started mission work in this locality the previous year, but during the difficult years of global warfare a number of their Society was interned as aliens, thus their mission work was seriously hampered. Father Weiler, 82 years of age, was not interned and so acted as parish priest. He had to say Sunday Mass regularly at this mission. Sister Procla drove him to the various outstations in the mission car, but often lost the way, thus arriving late. At Holbank mass was said in a dilapidated hut with the door so low that people nearly had to go on their knees to enter. The air within the hut was anything but conditioned, yet the zealous priest went through the Service despite the lack of ventilation.

By the time Mother Paula's sexennium as Prioress had passed, she had completed and furnished the first section of the convent, school and hostel. Her successors were to lay out the grounds and add to the buildings as the years progressed. By 1934 the laity had built their own church and the convent chapel ceased to serve the parish.

When World War II ended it was difficult to bring more German Priests of the Sacred Heart into South Africa so, in 1949, the Apostolic Delegate, Archbishop MH Lucas, S.V.D. welcomed the arrival of five Franciscans from England. The Prefecture of Volksrust was erected by a Papal Bull in 1959 and entrusted to the Order of Friars Minor. This ecclesiastical territory comprised the area which included the district of Ermelo.

In 1942 Sister Gonsalez Wiendl died after a short illness and was the third Sister to be laid to rest in the town cemetery. In sickness Dr Juriaanse was an outstanding benefactor of the Convent. In 1938 one of the convent boarders died and gossip accused the nuns of neglect. Here again the Doctor strongly advocated the cause of the convent and made it clear to the Ermelo world that the child had not suffered from inattention. The Sisters owe him and several other medical practitioners of the town a deep debt of gratitude. May God reward them and all the other benefactors of our Convents!

The Ermelo Standard Six won the Malan Floating Trophy for the best results in Afrikaans Taalbond Examination of 1948. This award was given by the Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Kuns en Wetenskap

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<sup>3</sup> *The pioneer staff consisted of Sisters Vincentia Dilger, Rita Kugler, Maria Devrooy, Alexis McCaughlin, August Daisenberger, Henrietta Kramer, Friedberta Seibel and Ancilla Mayer. The latter, a brilliant musician contracted pneumonia after the first school concert, from which she never really regained her health, and died a few years later at Cradoc.*

(South African Academy for Science and Art). On several occasions the University of South Africa also bestowed Ten-pound Bursaries on some of this school's pupils for excellent work in examinations.

In 1954 Mr Peter Weidner of Warmbad, South West Africa, made a very fine gesture. His three daughters had been pupils of Ermelo Convent. He now suggested that, as the Convent needed a hall, he would donate towards it a thousand pounds for each of the girls as a token of gratitude to the Sisters. Later he offered further assistance if the nuns would expedite the building. This act was reminiscent of the early days of Ermelo Convent when Mr Weidner was the right hand of the sacristan, Sister Procla Elbs, helping her with carpentry and any odd jobs on hand. When Mrs Minnie Melle, nee Weidner, died at the Mater Dei Hospital, East London, in 1971, her father gave another substantial donation to the Sisters there, in his daughter's memory.

Over the years the pupils of this convent had been prominent in both the educational and sports fields. They had distinguished themselves in tennis and hockey and, during the last eight years of the school's existence, have failed only once to capture the "Veritas" tennis cup for which all the Transvaal and St Agnes' Convent of Welkom competed annually. Bernardine Cooke won the Rotary competition in 1973 and enjoyed a five-week visit to England after keen competition with candidates from other Transvaal towns. In 1967 Helen Smith won the competition and spent the Christmas vacation in Austria. In the 1974 competition a pupil of the school was also a finalist. Ermelo Convent has also won prestige in other directions, notably when one of the pupils received the Standard Bank award for the second highest aggregate marks in the English section of the Transvaal University Entrance Examination. Among the past pupils of this convent were several converts to the Catholic Faith as well as a number of vocations to the religious life.

This school, which played a prominent role in education for 46 years, was forced to close down at the end of 1974. A couple of Sisters would remain at Ermelo to assist the priests with parish and mission work. The institution had catered for children from Lourenco Marques (now called Maputo), Swaziland, Zululand, White River, Barberton, Standerton, Carolina, Bethal, Piet Retief and Johannesburg, as well as large numbers of Ermelo children. The main trouble was the difficulty of obtaining adequate trained staff to maintain the academy. The playground will now stand empty as a sad reminder that a school has died. However, how does one calculate the good done to the souls that were privileged to attend the institution? One prays that in the hearts of the pupils was left behind a Christian influence, deep and lasting; an influence that would take even deeper root with the years.