

Chapter 27 – Stutterheim

The Promised Land of Tomorrow

Major-General Richard von Stutterheim, who had joined the British army after the Schleswig-Holstein campaign, is recognised as the founder of the British-German Foreign Legion. The British Forces had been sadly depleted in the war against the Russians, and it is believed that it was Baron von Stutterheim who suggested the formation of a mercenary army, to be recruited in Germany, for the war in the Crimea. Ten thousand men were thus enlisted and taken to England to be trained, but before they were ready to go into action the Peace of Paris brought the war to a close and Britain was left with this large army on her hands. To repatriate all of them was impossible, since most of them had forfeited their German citizenship. The solution came with the desire of Sir George Grey to settle colonists in Kaffraria which had been proclaimed a Crown Colony. He needed colonists and realised that military colonists would be better able to control the belligerent Xhosas. King William's Town was already a strong military centre. Queenstown was a thriving community. Between the two were what we should now call Bantu Reserves. The Gaikas,¹ for instance, had been allotted the territory between Dohne² and Cathcart,³ and Sandile⁴ had been made responsible for the 'Great High Road' and the safety of travellers using it.

Sir George thought that by putting a strong military buffer in Kaffraria he would both impress the Africans and make life more secure for the colonists who had been subject to the constant raids of the Bantu tribes.

The first contingent of the Foreign Legion reached East London on 12th January 1857. There were about 580 men and officers aboard, with Major Crompton in command. They were landed by surfboat on the West Bank of the Buffalo River and lived in tents at Fort Glamorgan, later marching in easy stages to Fort Murray to await the rest of the Legion. These passengers of the "Calloden" were joined by those of six other ships, only one of which, the "Vulcan", was driven by steam; yet it did not prove the fastest vessel.

"... the outpost of today will be the promised land of tomorrow...", said the Captain to his troops as they marched wearily into what is now the municipal area of Stutterheim,⁵ then called Dohne Valley. Yet the beginnings were arduous indeed. Wattle-and-daub houses were set up as quickly as possible until more suitable buildings could be erected. Each military settler was granted a small piece of land for cultivation, but this was hampered by the scarcity of agricultural implements. Around them was also the warlike Xhosa tribe, only awaiting their opportunity to launch a raid on the settlers. It was therefore understandable that these colonists had little chance of developing their property in peace. IN the first three years two hundred legionaries lost their lives from dysentery, famine and other ailments. Their very existence must have been a long, grim battle against overwhelming odds.

Baron von Stutterheim first set about building a pretentious 'castle' for himself on the lower side of Spring Street. But he afterwards returned to Germany and died at Wiesbaden many years later.⁶ A good number of legionaries also left for India when there was a call for volunteers to crush the Indian Mutiny. Yet the scene of Stutterheim slowly changed with the arrival of the settlers in 1858. Thirty-four families settled in the present municipal area and by their unremitting industry and thrift wrung a living from the reluctant soil. The mill that was started by the Baron and his friend, Captain D Dankwerts, was busy – a town had been born! Stutterheim, now a pretty little town, nestles at the foot of the Amatola Mountains that were the lovely guardians of Kaffraria.

¹ Followers of Gaika, Chief of the Rarabe clans of the Xhosas.

² Village near Stutterheim, named after Rev JL Doehne of the Berlin Mission Society, and founded in 1857.

³ Named after Sir George Cathcart, now a wool centre.

⁴ A Xhosa Chief

⁵ About 600 men reached Stutterheim and its immediate neighbourhood.

⁶ The Baron's partially built mansion was wrecked by the cyclone of 1860.

Provision was also made to the care of the Catholics among these settlers. In 1867 Father Joseph de Sany became the first resident priest of Kaffraria, taking up residence in King William's Town. Speaking German, besides French, English and his native Flemish, he was soon at home with the settlers and Divine Service held in one or other private house was a regular feature of his in this area.

Previous to this Mass was said at Stutterheim by Fathers Engels and Nesser, S.J. of Grahamstown. They held their services in the Magistrate's court room where all public functions took place at this time.

Father J de Sany's plan to build a church at the new settlement met with great enthusiasm. The little church of St Joseph, that could seat 120 worshippers, was opened on 12th May 1869 by Bishop Moran while Father de Sany lay dying at King William's Town where he was also buried in August of that same year. During the Frontier Wars the little church was used as a laager and in it one night a Protestant mother gave birth to a son. St Joseph's served the parish for about a century until it had to make way for a larger Catholic church. When Queenstown was separated from the Vicariate of Port Elizabeth Stutterheim became part of the newly-created Prefecture.

In August 1929 "Milner House", a private hotel, was bought at Stutterheim and transformed into a school by the Dominican Sisters... Father A Wergen S.A.C. was very happy when he could fetch Mother General Augustine Geisel and the first few Sisters from the Mother House to start the proposed St Dominic's Convent, of which he gave the following account:

"... Two motor cars and a lorry, bearing the Sisters and some furniture, were well on their way to their destination when we met an ox wagon on the road, going in the same direction. At the moment when I was about to overtake the wagon there came suddenly, without warning, from a turn in the road, a car, travelling at terrific speed in our direction. The road was narrow and a fence on one side prevented me from moving further away to make room for the oncoming car which, unable to stop at that speed, advanced inexorably towards us with what seemed to us, in that agonising moment, to be certain death. But, as if by a miracle, the terrified motorist somehow managed to avoid a collision, as he raced through the narrowest possible space between the wagon and my car..."

"When, to our amazement, we realised that all persons and vehicles were unscathed, Mother General said: 'An inward cry for help and mercy was all I could send up to the Sacred Heart and Our Lady.' Doubtless the evil one wished to prevent the good work that was to be done through the new Convent. But God, in His mercy, did not allow it."

The arrival of the German speaking teaching community was especially welcomed by the descendants of the original German Settlers in whose homes German was still spoken. A humble beginning was made with a Kindergarten and the Primary Standards.⁷ Soon the need for an establishment for boarders arose and was met by the addition of new buildings and the acquisition of neighbouring properties. For ten years the new school struggled on and became self-supporting so that it was raised to the status of a Priory in 1940, with Sister Gregoria Nachbauer as its first Prioress. To a full Primary Course were now added the departments of Commerce and Music. The enrolment of pupils in all sections rose to a hundred and fifty. Without being much in the limelight, but generally respected and supported by the public, the community of Dominican Sisters have made their contribution to the development of the little town and district of Stutterheim.

In 1944 the Prioress General bought "The Retreat" where she hoped to erect a hospital at some future date. The spot was beautifully situated facing the lovely Amatola Mountains with their forest-clad slopes and thrilling waterfalls. However, the hospital proved not feasible and "The Retreat" was sold once more.

On 24th September 1951, Stutterheim held its first civic reception of a cleric when Bishop JB Rosentbhal was received by the leading citizens in the Town Hall. The Sisters and their pupils contributed largely to the success of the function. On March 23rd 1957 the sleepy little Border town awoke and, by nine in the

⁷ *The first community consisted of Mother Placida Mueller, Sisters Columba Koller, Osanna Haslinger (sister to Mother Ignatius Haslinger, second Prioress General of the Salisbury Dominican Sisters), Thomasita Nuebling, Thelma Lobinger, who were later joined by Sisters Theodora Linder and Alexia McLaughlin.*

morning, was humming with unprecedented activity for it was to commemorate its foundation one hundred years before.

In 1960 a small notice appeared in the paper that “Sister Herman McAuley, of the Dominican Convent, Stutterheim, was awarded a certificated vote of thanks by the Priory in Southern Africa of the Most Venerable Order of the Hospital of St John of Jerusalem for meritorious action which led to saving the lives of two swimmers at Hickman’s River, East London on New Year’s Day.”

Owing to unavoidable circumstances St Dominic’s Convent School was closed down at the end of 1967. The existing buildings have been altered to serve as a rest home for senior and infirm members of the Sisterhood as the “Mater” Sanatorium is over-crowded.⁸

Officially Stutterheim Convent is called a House of Retirement but it is certainly not a place of inactivity. So far every Sister can be up and about and knows how to spend her day usefully and happily. There is no age limit for knitting, crocheting, embroidering or reading. A number of magazines and religious pamphlets are read here with interest. A kind benefactor, through St Vincent’s Convent, has supplied the community with information and entertainment provided by a Television set. Some of the “younger generation” – those Sisters in the early seventies – take care of the garden and the hens that supply eggs and vegetables for the large family of over two dozen nuns. The “senior Sisters” who are over the age of eighty-three, spend most of their time in vigils before the altar where they intercede for the Congregation, South Africa and the whole world.⁹ The Convent still makes a small contribution to the local parish by providing a sacristan, an organist and a catechist.

⁸ *Sister Brigid Hickey serves the community as Infirmarian. (in 1977)*

⁹ *The Blessed Sacrament is exposed every morning until midday.*