

## XXVII – *St Thomas' College, Village Main, Johannesburg*

The history of St Thomas' College at Village Main in Johannesburg began before the “King” Dominicans first came to the “Lourdes” Mission at 26 Heidelberg Road. There was, on the property, a mission church, a presbytery and a hall which housed a small Primary School of approximately a hundred children, conducted by the Holy Family Sisters of Bordeaux. It was in 1939 that Bishop D O’Leary O.M.I., in collaboration with the Circuit Inspector of Bantu Education first conceived the idea of a College in Johannesburg at which young African women might be trained as teachers.

Several Religious Orders of Sisters were approached and Mother General Augustine Geisel of King William’s Town was the first to respond to the appeal for this type of missionary work. “Lourdes Mission”, with the small primary school attached, was ideal for the purpose, as the training of African girls who would later teach children from the city and its immediate environs would be effected in Johannesburg itself as was strongly advocated by the Government Inspectors.

In 1940 De Eiselen, later Secretary for Native Affairs, then Chief Inspector of Bantu Education, spoke at the official opening of a section of the new buildings erected to meet the increasing enrolment at the College. “In the past”, said Dr Eiselen, “we have had the idea that we should bring up our teachers in some sheltered mission station, far from the place where they have to work; and then we send them to a place like Johannesburg. There they find it hard to solve, in a satisfactory manner, the difficulties that are awaiting them. I am very glad that the Roman Catholic Church, through the Dominican Sisters, has taken this great step of establishing this institute right at the centre here; they can thus teach their students all that they will have to do in their careers as teachers.” When the Sisters<sup>1</sup> began this major work of training teachers on 23<sup>rd</sup> January 1939 the Training College opened with nine students. By 1941 the student teachers had increased to sixty-one. There was still only half of the final Sisters’ Convent in existence and a very small college building.

The number of children seeking admission to the Primary School by this date had increased so rapidly that a new school had to be built to them almost immediately. From then on extension after extension was added as the need arose down through the years, at a total cost, of building alone, of fifty-thousand pounds; a fantastic sum at that time. Finally the college consisted of a cluster of buildings which provided excellent classroom and boarding accommodation by any standard, including a self-equipped domestic science department in order that this necessary subject for African girls could be included in the training course.

From the beginning practically all the girls of the secondary and training school were boarders at the hostel, which formed an integral part of this St Thomas’ College, affording accommodation for 250 girls. The boarding facilities provided, on a Christian basis above and beyond mere academic scholarship, the opportunity for inculcating sound moral training in the formation of good teachers. The few years spent in an environment such as St Thomas’ provided, have given numbers of African girls a Christ-orientated outlook and directed their lives in a way that could not otherwise have been achieved.

Furthermore, a tradition was built up within the framework of the closely knit school and hostel which made for good order and discipline, both of which were appreciated by the Africans. Letters from past pupils gave eloquent testimony. They told what the college meant to them and what it stood for in the larger world outside. “Every teacher trained at St Thomas’”, wrote a former student of the College “is readily accepted. We were not aware of that until we left the School.”

It was in 1939 that the Government authorities encouraged the Dominican Sisters to build St Thomas’ Training College in Johannesburg, when the Mother General would herself have chosen to build elsewhere. By 1958 this institution, built up with much devotion and sacrifice and which had achieved

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<sup>1</sup> *The Sisters forming the faculty that directed the College for most of its existence: Mother Paula Wahlspeock, Superiors, was succeeded by Mother Alcantara Pauli; consecutive Principals were Sisters Gonzaga Ziegler, Catherine Bartl and Fromunda Zimmermann. The rest of the Religious teaching staff were Sisters Emily Russ, Bonita Deschler, Regula Schelle, Terese Meirer, Stella Forster, Margit Obnmacht, Veritas Strasser. (Sister Terese Meirer was Principal of the Primary School, staffed mainly with African teachers.)*

academic success, was, by a stroke of the pen, to be disestablished to comply with the Group Areas' Act of the State.

The first warning came in 1957. On appeal an extension was granted till the end of 1958. It was hoped that the college might be continued in a private capacity from the beginning of 1959 but applications for re-registration of the Primary Lower, Primary Higher and Secondary Schools and of the Training College as a private educational institution had all been "not approved".

The enrolment of the practising school had risen steadily until its 620 scholars occupied every available space. In December 1958 some fifty student teachers wrote their final examinations. But of those whose training courses were still incomplete there remained 38 who had gone as far as the Junior Certificate, 46 as far as Form II, 30 as far as Form I and over 600 Primary School children who all had to find accommodation in other schools the following year.

Within seven years those stately buildings were razed to the ground and no landmark remains to call to mind the former mission and college. Nevertheless, St Thomas had certainly left its mark on thousands of young Africans whom it sent forth to spread the Faith among their own people and to teach them solid principles of Christian living.<sup>2</sup>

### XXVIII – *Berejena*<sup>3</sup> Mission, 70 Km from Fort Victoria

At Christmas time 1957 Mother General Aquilina Spiegel wrote on the first page of the Chronicle of Berejena Mission the reason for this foundation, namely, the need for an outlet for the missionary spirit in the Congregation; a spirit in danger of being stifled in South Africa, since regulations force our Sisters to withdraw more and more from mission work and other spheres of work among the African and coloured people.

Our first search for new mission fields led Mother General to Zambia, then to the North of Rhodesia. The Spanish Fathers in the Wankie area dealt with schools for European children only. On their return trip from the north, the Reverend Mothers from the Generalate visited Mother Patrick Cosgrave's resting place at Salisbury and then called on Father Wuerms, the Regional Superior of the Bethlehem Fathers in the Diocese of Gwelo. His Lordship, Bishop Aloysius Haene of Gwelo, invited Mother General to send a group of Sisters to the mission which was being built at Berejena near the Lundi River, about 70 Km south of Fort Victoria.

The three pioneers, sent in January 1958, were Sisters Theresia Nadler, Agnella Renn and Antonia Farry. The latter was to keep house for them until Sister Alexandra Menzel could come to Southern Africa. Their trip by train took them to Bulawayo and Gwelo where they were warmly greeted by the Rhodesian Dominicans. At Driefontein they witnessed the reception and the first profession of seven African Sisters who were directed by the Salisbury Sisters.

After ten days' travelling the trio arrived at Berejena Mission on 13<sup>th</sup> January 1958 at five o'clock in the afternoon. Father J Michlig had obtained permission from the Sub-Chief, whose name was Berejena, i.e. "White Hyena", to establish a school "on a hill rising out of the sandy grassland amid a wild profusion of trees and bushes". All around are mountains.

The first school was a thatched hut. There were 70 pupils and two African teachers. The number of pupils increased so much that Bishop Haene S.M.B. planned to establish a central mission at Berejena instead of keeping it as an outpost of Bondolfi Mission. For this purpose he received from the Government fifty morgen of land in the well-populated Chibi Reserve. When our Sisters arrived there were already four classrooms, a small chapel, a very simple house for Rev Father Tshirky and Brother Fridolin Meli and a

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<sup>2</sup> About eighteen years later one of our Sisters had occasion to visit Subiaco Mission again and found there a number of African Sisters, members of the African Congregation, Handmaids of Christ the King, who admitted that they had been pupils of St Thomas College, Village Main.

<sup>3</sup> Name of the local chief which means: 'the white hyena'.

house consisting of four rooms which led out to the yard where there was a small outhouse which was to serve as kitchen, larder and dispensary. One of the four rooms of the Sisters' house was used as a dining room, first by the Fathers and Brother and then by the Sisters. All the rooms had been thoroughly cleaned and prepared for the Sisters' arrival. "We had not expected that", wrote one of the pioneers, "taking into account that the place was run by men only. Spotlessly clean sheets were on the beds, the washbowls filled and there were even some flowers to welcome us". From the outset the Sisters loved Berejena and its atmosphere of friendliness.

From the beginning, also, they experienced the inconvenience of a lonely mission in times of illness. During their first week one of the young women helping with the work became seriously ill from an insect bite. The priest who returned at six o'clock in the evening from Gwelo, a distance of 237 Km, in pouring rain, had to drive off once more to Gokomere to fetch injections, medicines and nursing instructions. Sister Theresia had to learn to give the injections. The first Sunday at Berejena was spoiled by the worry as to whether Father X Inglin could be got to Shabani Hospital in time for an appendectomy operation. In pouring rain travel on the bad roads and through river-beds is slow and dangerous.

Early in February the pupils and teachers were visited by a School Inspector. He was well satisfied with the work of the newly-arrived Sisters.

The great excitement of the month of March was the blessing and opening of the new Convent building. Despite the rainy season, Mother General and Mother Hilda Moloney came to Berejena for the occasion and brought Sister Alexandra with them. Bad luck accompanied them from the time they turned off from the main road to the mission. It was the wrong turning and the car stuck in the mud. In the great heat the two Reverend Mothers set off to try and find the mission and obtain help to move the car out of its rut.

Within the next few months the difficulties and joys of a new beginning in the mission field followed one another in quick succession. Easter saw the baptism and First Holy Communion of ten young Catechumens. Later on fifty boys and girls were confirmed by Bishop Haene S.M.B. During the ceremony the long dry grass outside the Mission was found to be on fire...

Sister Agnella's sudden and serious illness pointed again to the great need for a clinic. Between September 1958 and April 1959 Dr Hueffer came to Berejena occasionally to attend to patients. In February of that year the first permanent member of the clinic staff arrived. The building was small and primitive but kept scrupulously clean and neat by Sister Brigid Hickey. Soon plans were made to build a larger and better clinic and Sister Maya Gloor had the joy of moving into these new premises.

The school year of 1960 started with 570 pupils on the roll. During this year, too, the community of four on this lonely mission station had the joy of a visit from their newly-elected Prioress General, Mother Fromunda Zimmermann. The mission grew and became well established, supplying medical and educational facilities to the Black Rhodesians of that area.

About 14 Km from Gwelo the Bethlehem Fathers had built a seminary<sup>4</sup> for African youths. Mother General agreed to Bishop A Haene's request to send three of our Sisters to help the Fathers and Brothers at this institution. Sisters St Louis Wilhelm and Radegunda Mueller duly arrived to supervise the housekeeping and the kitchen, while Sister Adelina Mack, a nurse, was to care for the students' health.

This clinic gradually also served outsiders and the people developed such faith in Sister Adelina's nursing skill that they often speak of her a "Doctor Roma". Without publicity these 'backroom girls' are helping with the maintenance of the seminary and at the same time disseminate the Gospel message to all with whom they come in contact.

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<sup>4</sup> *Chikwingwizha Mission, named after the hill behind the seminary.*

## XXIX – *Matibi*<sup>5</sup> Mission, 100 miles from Fort Victoria

“Matibi” is beautifully situated in the Rhodesian Lowveld at the foot of huge granite boulders. The Swiss Bethlehem Fathers bought the mission station<sup>6</sup> from the Swedish Full Gospel Church on 7<sup>th</sup> December 1962 and named it for St Ambrose, the great Bishop of Milan. When Father Xavier Inglin and Brother Franz S.M.B., the only white people on the mission, took up their residence there the place consisted of a couple of new and some very old, dilapidated buildings. A State-aided Mission School was run by African teachers but the proposed clinic or hospital was destined to be in the care of the King William’s Town Congregation. On 18<sup>th</sup> December 1962 Brother Joseph S.M.B. had brought Sisters Nives Kastner and Maya Gloor to see the mission. Before embarking on their duties here the two nurses first went to Driefontein Mission Hospital for some months to learn the Shona language and to gain some experience in clinic work from the Salisbury Sisters and Dr Carey. On 1<sup>st</sup> August 1963 Father Inglin brought the two Sisters to Matibi. A room containing two beds and their trunks was their abode. They started their clinic in a hut. By the 28<sup>th</sup> of the month there were already four patients under the Sisters’ care and the out-patients that had been seen, numbered approximately five hundred.

On her first visit to Matibi the newly-elected Prioress General, Mother Fromunda Zimmermann, brought Sister Amora Nibler as Superior to the mission. Sister had hardly time to settle in: A number of typhoid cases came in during September. By the 18<sup>th</sup> of that month Sister Amora and Father Inglin had to be taken to Driefontein Hospital. The cause of their grave illness was not far to seek – the water supply was not only poor but highly dangerous, infected as it was with typhoid and bilharzia.

As Sister Nives had left Matibi on transfer, Sister St Louis Wilhelm came from Gwelo to help Sister Maya until Sister Amora was sufficiently recovered to return. Drilling for water on the mission was of no avail and drinking water had to be transported over 15 Km of bad road so Sister St Louis organised a campaign of prayer. Their faith was rewarded when Bishop A Haene S.M.B. sent Brother Henry to build a dam and, on the very day it was completed, a storm almost filled the dam with the much-needed rain.

A Sister who was sent as reinforcement to Matibi gave the following account of her journey: “... I boarded the Railway Bus at Johannesburg Station at 8 o’clock in the evening for a journey that was to continue through the night with only brief stops here and there on the way. Beit Bridge, at the border, was reached very early next morning. Here the macadamised road ceased and the wheels of the Rhodesian Bus took the tarred strips that lead to Fort Victoria. Rhodesia is different from South Africa; in some respects, and with adequate rain, it is a paradise.

“The majority of my fellow travellers were now Africans, laughing and chatting raucously. The slanting rays of morning sun turned the trees and bushes into pure gold. Along the way there were placards “Beware of Elephants”. When we had travelled for about an hour the white driver of the bus warned us to be very quiet for he had spied a group of elephants in the bush. The bus now slowed to a halt, the engine purring softly and ready to speed away in case of danger. Sure enough, we were rewarded with a clear view of a group of elephants: a couple of cows with their calves and a bull. Slowly the huge beasts trundled over the road. Finally a younger female scurried over, turning to look at the bus with her head held high. (The chauffeur took care not to come between the cows and their calves as this would be inviting trouble.) Large ears now flapped and a row of tusks with massive heads waved about as they sampled the human smell and, with an occasional ‘wooshe’, they expelled their breath. The calves peeped at us from behind their mothers... the atmosphere in the bus was tense until the little herd lost interest in us and went on its way deeper into the bush... There are rumours that lions are occasionally sighted here as well; but we did not see one.

“After travelling about 120 Km the bus driver announced that a Sister was at the roadside to meet me. What a joy it was to meet Sister Amora. The message of my arrival reached the mission after the Priest had already left for his out-station, so Sister hastily commandeered the ten-ton lorry and the African chauffeur to meet me at the halt, still several miles away from Matibi...”

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<sup>5</sup> *The name of the African Chief was given to that area.*

<sup>6</sup> *Is situated about 100 miles from Fort Victoria.*

The clinic at the mission was built through the generosity of an American widow, Mrs Slattery who had donated the funds in memory of her husband. When she journeyed to the World Eucharistic Congress in Bombay she called at Matibi to see the completed building.

In January 1965 the new kitchen unit of the mission was completed. A few months later the small new convent was equipped with spacious cupboards and electric light replaced the kerosene lamps.

As from March 1967 the Ministry of Health in Salisbury allowed Matibi Clinic a Grant-in-aid for its twenty-two patients. Twins were no strangers here; by the end of that year ten pairs had been born at the clinic and, in the following year, a mother gave birth to triplets. The electric generator was small so it could only supply light to the mission and consequently modern incubators, etc. could not be used here.

However, many premature infants were reared in a simple soapbox for a cot and the necessary heat maintained by three hot-water bottles that are refilled hourly in rotation. To the sophisticated nurse in the city this seems impossible but it can and must be done in remote rural areas although it demands constant vigilance and very careful nursing.

For years the nearest medical practitioner for Matibi and Berejena Clinics was at Fort Victoria's<sup>7</sup> State Hospital. In time an airstrip was built where the Doctor of Driefontein Mission Hospital<sup>8</sup> could land his small aeroplane when summoned to these isolated missions by radio telephone for emergency cases.

One of the Sisters helps with parish work and prepares children and adults for the reception of the Sacraments. The former little school hostel has been changed into a Home-craft Centre where girls who have completed the sixth standard are taught sewing, cookery and mother-craft. An African Sister also teaches "the three Rs" to the many illiterate adults of the surrounding area. In this way the Africans are being taught to help themselves and the Christian Faith gradually takes root in the hearts of the people.

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<sup>7</sup> *The first hospital here was begun by Mother Clare Huber and her companions.*

<sup>8</sup> *Administered by the Salisbury Dominicans.*