THE MAFEKENG AFFAIR

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Two policemen and Mr. Johannes le Roux, the Paarl Native Commissioner, made a call on Mrs. Elizabeth Mafekeng in the middle of the morning of October 27th. They presented her with a piece of paper banishing her from her home in Paarl where she had lived for 32 years, from her husband and eleven children, to a distant and desolate spot of dust called Southey, about 700 miles away. The document, signed by Mr. De Wet Nel, Minister for Bantu Administration, was issued under the Native Administration Act and said that it was "injurious for the peace, order and good administration of Natives in the district of Paarl" if Mrs. Mafekeng remained there. She was given five days (later extended to twelve) to say good-bye to her family, make arrangements for their care, wind up her work as president of the African Food and Canning Workers' Union and vice-president of the Women's League of the African National Congress. There was, of course, no trial, no public hearing and no possibility of appeal.

This story, which has still not ended, made heavy headlines in newspapers throughout the world and led to the first large-scale riots in the history of the Western Cape. As the 'Mafekeng Affair' gained momentum, and the Paarl demonstrators attacked all representatives of white authority they could find, the Cape—that is, the Cape of white officials and white citizens reposing rosily in the sun, sea and mountain air—was like a ravished virgin, blaming every able-bodied possibility in sight. The Cape, with its conscience cushioned so comfortably for generations by its condescending liberalism, trembled with shock and pained bewilderment. The oddest assortment of reasons for the violence was offered—all but the real ones. The causes suggested by officials fall into two, mutually contradictory classes: first the police blamed "Coloured hooligans" and included, among those arrested, alleged members of two gangs with the dashing names of 'Elephant Kids' and 'Apaches'; against this, Mr. De Wet Nel said on November 14 that the riots proved he was right in removing Mrs. Mafekeng, thus suggesting that the disturbances were politically inspired. One has to study the case from the beginning, in all its human poignancy

and flashy drama, to make any sense of what is being said now.

Mrs. Mafekeng was known as 'Rocky' among the women workers in Paarl. She is a striking, vivid woman by any standards. Plump, but compact, her face is expressive, strong, humorous, beautiful. She speaks calmly, with great assurance and lively good nature. On the platform, like most African speakers, she always begins her speeches with a song or two, singing in a clear, rich and well-organised voice. Her speeches are fiery, militant and witty.

As an ordinary worker in a Paarl canning factory, she was always popular; she attracted special attention, however, when she handed in her apron and walked out of the factory as a protest against the management's demand that all women workers carry 'passes'. Her husband, 'Henry' Moffat Mdityana, also a canning factory worker, was one of the first Paarl men to join the Food and Canning Workers' Union; and with this background of trade union sympathy, Mrs. Mafekeng also joined the union, to rise swiftly from one executive post to another.

In 1955, Mrs. Mafekeng was the South African delegate at an international food workers' conference in Sofia, Bulgaria. She is said to have greatly impressed the gathering, and was elected to the praesidium of the conference. She also travelled to Britain, Sweden and China. A story is told of her visit to a canning factory near Peking. She was struck by the fact that the women workers did not wear protective aprons, the sort she and her union had fought for and won in Paarl. "You must organise a complaint," she is reported to have urged the women. When they explained their routine of working through the workers' council which ran the factory, she persisted, "Then make representations to the council!" Encouraged by her, they did. And, I'm told, got their aprons. In London, Mrs. Mafekeng met Barbara Castle and other socialist leaders, and she returned to South Africa with her vigour refreshed.

She has a large family which she loves and which kept her busy, however; and at the time of her banishment there were other women leaders who appeared more active than she did. Why was she chosen as the first woman to suffer under the barbarous banishment Act, which had already sent over eighty African male leaders to rot in far-flung, secret places? She took part in the Defiance Campaign. But so did thousands of others. She marched to Pretoria to protest against passes for women. So did thousands of others.

Her union, however, is probably the most militant in the country. It has relentlessly fought starvation wages and "separate trade union development". She is its tenth official to be immobilised by the Government. In addition, as the official campaign to force African women to carry passes intensified in the Cape, Mrs. Mafekeng naturally led the opposition. On October 2nd she was arrested after leading an anti-pass demonstration in Paarl; the charge came to nothing in court, but on October 12 Mr. De Wet Nel signed her banishment order.

Southey is about forty miles south-west of Vryburg in the Northern Cape. The most notable thing about it when it first flared into the news was that no one seemed to know anything about it. Some called it a concentration camp; others, a detention camp; officials, a Native Trust Farm. It is in the dust-rich, largely uninhabited wilderness where a woman of Mrs. Mafekeng's gifts could look forward, as she herself put it, to "a future of nothingness". The Government would pay her £2 a month there for her needs; she would not be allowed to move without Ministerial permission.

Mr. C. Bourquin, the Native Commissioner in Vryburg, who would have been in charge of her "welfare", told me on the telephone: "This is a cattle farm with the . . . ah . . . vegetation of the district. She will have two rooms furnished, of course, very simply. The nearest families are about a hundred yards away, European engineers on the farm. She could work as . . . ah . . . a domestic servant in one of their houses."

But what would happen to Mrs. Mafekeng's children, whose ages ranged from two-months-old Theresa Uhuru (Freedom) to her twenty-one-years-old eldest daughter, once the central figure of their home was torn from them? How casually this Government with its chatter about preserving Western European Christianity tramples over what should be untouchable ground—the sanctity of family life.

Africans and Coloured people were united in their rage against the banishment, and so too were many whites who had not protested before about other banishments; nevertheless, although Mrs. Mafekeng was a regular church-goer herself, no Cape clergymen could bring themselves to accept an invitation to speak on the same platform as African National Congress spokesmen in public protests called at Paarl and Cape Town. One white clergyman came to the well-attended meeting on the

Parade in Cape Town to "bear silent witness".

Mrs. Mafekeng herself was obviously under terrible strain. I met her in her union's Cape Town offices which, not long ago, were subject to unofficial terror when the local Ku Klux Klan broke in, causing nearly £2,000 worth of damage by smashing the place to bits and scribbling illiterate obscenities on the walls. The traces of K.K.K. writing were still on the wall next to tidy union posters declaring 'Trade Unions Make You Strong' and 'Demand the Return of Your Leaders' as Mrs. Mafekeng spoke gently about the problems of her children. "It is a hard knock," she said. "But my spirit is not broken. For every leader they suppress there will be ten others."

On Friday, November 6th, three days before Mrs. Mafekeng was due to leave for Southey, crowds of Africans and Coloured workers began to collect outside her white, terraced cottage in Barbarossa Street. It was a wide, dusty, unlit road, and over a thousand people were said to have gathered there over the week-end. There was only one incident: a traffic cop tried to drive through the crowd; they lifted him on his bicycle and placed him quietly but firmly on the ground in the next road. He drove away without a backward glance.

On Monday morning, when the press arrived, there were about three thousand people waiting: Africans and Coloureds, deeply angry, watchful and suspicious. There were posters at the corners—'Save Mafekeng'; and groups of people sang anti-pass and freedom songs and hymns. At No. 64, the Mafekengs' two-roomed house, the family sat together round a hard table, haggard, weeping a little as they answered press questions. On the walls there were pictures of Mrs. Mafekeng next to a colourful painting of Christ tending lambs, and a photograph of Seretse Khama and his wife, Ruth.

Mrs. Mafekeng wasn't at home. "They'll get her over our dead bodies!" one woman shouted. Trade union delegates came from all over the Cape and joined the crowd, waiting, singing. The police were supposed to come at four in the afternoon. It was hot. The shuffling of the crowds kept the dust moving. There were heaps of ashes on the far side of the road where, someone told me, groups of people had lit bonfires throughout the night.

"Where is Mrs. Mafekeng?" the press kept asking.

No one could say.

"Did the police fetch her early?"

Shrugs. But still the crowd waited.

We got no help from the police either, who would not say if they had taken Mrs. Mafekeng away earlier than expected. A little before four, someone gave the cry that the police were coming up a lane at the back of Barbarossa Street. With a roar, the crowd surged towards the lane; if it was the police, though, they didn't come any nearer and we didn't see them again until much later.

"Where's Mrs. Mafekeng?" worried reporters kept asking.

No one could tell them.

People shuffled about in the dust, went away for supper, visited Van Zyl's shop on the corner for chocolate and cold drinks. The day darkened, people came home from work and the crowd swelled, packing the road and straggling into the next street.

"Where's Mrs. Mafekeng?"

It was too dark to say exactly what happened. But suddenly there were the police, screams, batons, bullets, stones hurtling into windows. "Kill Verwoerd! Kill De Wet Nel! Kill the police!" was heard above the tumult. For about three hours the police were in open battle with the enraged demonstrators; cars were overturned, Van Zyl's shop smashed, stones hurled at white passers-by.

Heavily armed police reinforcements rushed to the scene, cordoned off the area and finally, at 12.30 p.m., Col. I. P. S. Terblanche, Deputy Commissioner of Police for the Western Cape, said everything was under control. "All I can say," he said, "is that the police were fired at and they returned the fire, and several people were injured as a result." Paarl Hospital that night treated ten injured people: eight non-whites, two whites, several with bullet wounds. One man died later.

There was renewed violence the following night. But by this time Paarl police had Saracen armoured cars from Cape Town and larger reinforcements. The armoured cars, and police with sten guns, patrolled the usually placid, oak-lined streets of Paarl, the 'Pearl of the Cape'. When a crowd gathered, an armoured car drove up, and an officer ordered the people to go home. When they didn't, twelve policemen with batons and rubber hoses leapt out of the armoured car and tore into the crowd. Within seconds, twelve people had to be helped off the road, all nursing bleeding heads.

"Where is Mrs. Mafekeng?"

Incredibly enough, the police were still giving casual, non-committal answers. A warrant was out for her arrest, however, and after the second night's rioting, newspapers began to speculate that she had fled. The following day a report came from Basutoland that she had crossed the border with her two-months-old baby, Uhuru, seeking refuge in the British Protectorate. The police, touchy, taken by surprise, were still searching for her in Paarl.

Most people couldn't suppress their excitement at what had turned out to be one of the most dramatic escape stories in local history. How did Mrs. Mafekeng get away while thousands of people kept an all-night vigil outside her house and the police kept up a constant patrol in the area? She must have left through the back door before dawn on Monday, carrying her sleeping baby, not knowing when she would see her devoted husband and other children again, and driving non-stop across the hot dreary desert of the Karroo; she risked a heavy gaol sentence, of course, if South African police caught her before she reached safety.

Meanwhile in South Africa, people were suddenly discussing with awe and a great deal of compassion an African woman most whites had never heard of before.

The '*Cape Times*' leader of November 11 began by condemning violence, but continued: "Yet it must be said at once that simply blaming the events at Paarl on hooligans or agitators does not by any means explain the deeper reasons for what happened or relieve the Government of its culpability in the matter. Violence is only roused in conditions of violence, where feelings are running high because of real or fancied grievances.

"The basic point to remember is that Mrs. Mafekeng has been flung out of the home where she has lived for over 30 years because of some secret police reports and upon the nod of a Minister. At the stroke of an official pen she has been deprived of practically every right that makes life worth living to most human beings. Down the ages human beings have been reacting violently to just this kind of treatment, and fighting to have it removed from the conduct of governments . . ."

An important statement on the background was made by Mr. Oscar Mpetha, Cape President of the African National Congress:

"Contrary to the assertions of Government spokesmen, these riots are not caused by agitators. They are symptomatic

of a deep-lying sense of grievance and frustration among the masses of the people, caused by the intransigent and inhuman policies of the Nationalist Government.

"Most non-whites at Paarl are employed in, or in one way or another dependent on, the food and canning industry. Their trade union, which has a proud record of struggle on their behalf, has been subjected to continual and vicious attack by the Government. Their trade union leaders have, one after the other, been summarily banned. Strikes in the industry have been declared illegal, placing the employers in an almost unassailable position. The workers have been excluded from unemployment insurance benefits.

"The banishment of Elizabeth Mafekeng, mother of eleven children, president of the trade union and a highly respected leader in Paarl, must be seen against this background . . ."

I phoned Mr. George Whitehead, general manager of Langeberg Ko-operasie Beperk, the premier canning firm in Paarl, and asked him what the employers thought about Mrs. Mafekeng's banishment. "I will not be dragged into a political brawl", he said.

Officials of the Department of Bantu Administration, however, were finally persuaded to part with what they called some of the reasons for Mrs. Mafekeng's banishment.

Mr. C. W. Prinsloo, Chief Information Officer, said solemnly that she had visited Bulgaria, Poland and China four years ago. When she returned, he said, there was an article in the South African weekly newspaper, '*New Age*', with the headline, "Ambassador Returns!" On arrival at Jan Smuts airport, Johannesburg, she gave the 'Afrika!' thumbs-up salute of the African National Congress. In '*New Age*' of December 8, 1955, he continued, there was another article in which she had said, "I was so happy I forgot I was black".

The '*Cape Times*' answered this well: "The accepted practice of Western democracy has been not to arrest and punish folk in peace time unless by due process of law . . . In the case of Mrs. Mafekeng there was no due process, nothing beyond some Ministerial vagueness about visits to China and Poland and giving the 'Afrika!' salute at Jan Smuts aerodrome . . . To the man in the street there was nothing to demonstrate her wrong-doing, if any . . . Clashes between the unfortunate police, who have to meet the consequences of Government policy, and the non-white masses, who are infuriated by it, are becoming mono-

tonously regular. There have been 105 major clashes of this order since 1948, and the rate seems to be increasing, for 33 of them occurred in the past two years. We are going deeper and deeper into a blood-tinged bog of racial troubles—and the Government shows only a crass determination to go in deeper still".

And very little could equal the crass cynicism of Dr. Verwoerd's comments on the affair on December 14. According to an article in '*Die Transvaler*', he said the British Government could "have all the Mafekengs" if they decided to give Mrs. Mafekeng asylum. His Government would pay the fares. "The whole point," he said, "is that if a Native comes to live in a white area, like Paarl, he or she must behave in such a manner that it is not necessary to take any action to maintain peace and good order. If not, they must leave the white areas and find their homes somewhere in the Native areas."

Mrs. Mafekeng's husband made a statement which, in contrast, is deeply moving in its dignity and restrained tragedy. "I am not willing," he said, "to be dumped with my children in the bush of Basutoland. People are not to be moved around like cattle. I've worked here for 24 years for the same firm. What I want is my wife back. We were legally married in church, yet the Government removes her from me and the children without law. I came home from work and found her gone. She had run away to escape the Government, and she couldn't even say good-bye to me."

The only memorable comment from '*Die Burger*', the Cape Nationalist paper, was the dark hint, "Next time people have to be banished they must not be given time to organise protests . . ."

In Paarl, the Saracens had, it seemed, temporarily stunned the people's anger, and Mr. De Wet Nel made a statement praising the "Bantu" for not allowing themselves to be aroused by agitators. Six days later there were minor riots in Wellington, and in the second week of December police were stoned by angry Africans in Langabuya between Paarl and Wellington.

And in a musty, converted hall in Lady Grey Street in Paarl, 72 people, many of them juveniles, are assembled for another mass trial, charged with causing public violence. Africans outside, alive with memories of Mrs. Mafekeng and their multiple reasons for rebellion, sing the most popular anti-pass song, "When you strike the women, you have struck a rock . . ."