

PORT ELIZABETH DIARY

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A RECENT editorial in the Port Elizabeth press expressed horror at finding Port Elizabeth bracketed with Johannesburg as one of South Africa's two main "trouble-spots." This because we also ran a bus boycott and then a go-slow campaign among African dock workers. The paper asked "whether Port Elizabeth deserves to be so regarded and, if so, whether there is anything we can do to remove a largely undeserved stigma."

The curiously tautological phrasing of the question, the editorial's later analysis of "inter-racial friction sparked by agitators," the equally confident (and correct) appreciation that "there is hardly any natural communication between the population (race) groups", all reveal the writer as a member of the honourable fraternity of egg-dancers, a legendary association with large membership in the Eastern Cape. A membership, moreover, that embraces both sides of the colour bar.

This diary is chiefly concerned to discuss some aspects of this interesting sociological phenomenon and the curious juxtaposition of the country's politically most advanced African community with its most retarded white one.

Port Elizabeth is an industrial seaport. Its intellectual component is sited 80 miles away in the cloistered seclusion of Grahamstown, where it maintains the one English-speaking "white only" university. In Port Elizabeth the profit-motive rules unchallenged even by such flickers of enlightened self-interest that intercourse with Rhodes University and the colleges might bring. And without intercourse, as nature provides, the intellectual fertility of Grahamstown itself is rendered pretty barren.

Thus the Eastern Cape, which should be the southern redoubt of the great coastal bastion of the British tradition in South Africa, stretching northwards through Border to Natal, is a cultural desert and a slum of white political apathy, truly representative of that most contemptible of all sections of the Union's population, the British-descended whites. Prosperously established in their industrial and commercial pursuits, too comfortable in their (often anti-Semitic) clubs and their golf links, they fail to throw up ministers for their churches, teachers for their

children, politicians to fight their causes, or even that radical minority which has been the creative element throughout British political history. All you can sometimes rouse them over are the "jingo" issues of Crown, Commonwealth, flag and anthem—and then not for long. Lest I be misinterpreted, I speak of my own people.

Balancing on the periphery of this amorphous mass are Afrikaans and Jewish minorities, and between them an English-language press that is unique in South Africa for (one paper) *sometimes* calling "Natives" Africans and (the other newspaper) *for always* doing so. A credit to Port Elizabeth and district that it paradoxically supports a press which is less inhibited on general colour issues than any other in the Union.

However, our real claim to fame is one not usually much advertised. It lies in our having the best organized, most articulate and proportionately strongest provincial branch of the African National Congress. Why this should be so is due to many causes, few of them connected with the "agitators" and "outside extremists" whom Port Elizabeth white inhabitants like to blame. Partly it is the result of the Amakhosa being a homogeneous linguistic and cultural group; partly of their having had nearly a century of political education through limited representation on the Cape's original common electoral roll. Then there is the topsy-turvy fact that the "liberal and progressive" cities of Port Elizabeth and Uitenhage have more complete residential segregation for Africans than any other large South African towns.

One senior Port Elizabeth city councillor recently told a public conference of Nationalists: "Nothing worthwhile could have been achieved if we had not held fast to one principle in all our housing plans, and that was separation of the races. . . . God gave us the vision to separate the people"—and this was alleged to have cleared slums, eradicated "the evils of race mixture," liquor, dagga, robbery, murder and juvenile delinquency. Seeing that the segregated Coloured and African townships notoriously have much the highest criminal and alcoholic rates—the result of poverty, neglect and frustration, not inherent racial qualities—this is sanctimonious self-delusion. Nor did the Almighty really influence policy. Funds for rehousing Africans and Coloureds were only available—whether the Government was United Party or Nationalist—for segregated schemes. The city council really had no choice. But the virtually complete segregation of the African community has

given a tremendous impetus to black politics, whose character the average white in his ignorance and fear magnifies and distorts out of all reality. This achievement was emphatically not intended by the council and would hardly be regarded as "worthwhile."

One consequence was that, when the African and Indian Congresses launched their Defiance Campaign (of passive resistance) against unjust, discriminatory laws in 1952, three-quarters of the 8,000 people imprisoned were Africans from the Eastern Cape, mainly Port Elizabeth and Uitenhage. When the tensions of that campaign led in October, 1952, to police and administrative heavy-handedness provoking a race riot, which the more easily got out of hand because most of the responsible African leadership was banned or proscribed, white Port Elizabethans, counting all the "benevolence" which they had "given" to their Africans, were furious at such base "ingratitude" as well as very frightened. And they, therefore, acquiesced without much protest in the imposition of a curfew, influx control regulations, labour bureaux and service contracts, and all the other paraphernalia of urban "control" for the subordination of Africans, from which the Eastern Cape had hitherto been free. This final withdrawal of their previous limited freedoms sealed for Africans their breach of trust and contract with the white population, and made them here, who had once known something a little better, even more resentful of their fetters than others elsewhere who had always had to bear them.

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This is the background. Against it the slither down the Gadarene slope has steadily gained momentum. In October, 1955, the self-styled "liberal" city council of Port Elizabeth became the first municipality in South Africa to apply "control" (i.e., ban) over all African meetings of more than nine persons throughout its entire magisterial district. No single measure has so offended Africans or, with delicious irony, better prepared them to carry on underground political activities when the expected outlawing of the ANC is announced. It is a fair comment on the nature of the city council and the people who elect it (all-white, plus a purely token Coloured vote) that the resolution asking Dr. Verwoerd to apply his "new model" banning regulations was passed without one word of opposition or even protest—without, indeed, any reason being offered till five months later, and then it made no sense.

Of a similar vintage (1955-56) were the mayor's attempts to solve the "problem" of "agitators" by asking Dr. Verwoerd to banish four ANC leaders from the municipal area. The request was instigated by the Political Police and the Government's Native Affairs Department's officials, who desired to suppress an incipient boycott of Bantu Education schools. It was facilitated by three "Bantu" egg-dancers who, wearying of the arduous exercise of keeping their shells intact and off the ground, allowed themselves to plop (yolks and all) on the side of the authorities. They produced "Native" evidence in the form of seriously tendentious and imaginatively conceived affidavits about "a wave of lawlessness, arrogance and contempt for law" in the African location. Dr. Verwoerd, however, treated the mayor's original request and several agitated reminders with masterly inactivity until it suited him, twelve months later, to lead Mr. Louis Dubb's "evidence" in support of his "Banishment Bill" imposing on municipalities the duty of doing the Government's dirty work for it.

The mayor's and council's yells of consternation at being thus displayed in the underclothes of their devious intrigues—they called it "a breach of confidence"—were all the more strident for realizing how foolish the predictions of imminent disaster, if the four men were not banished "as a matter of urgency" in June, 1955, looked in June, 1956, when the Minister had done precisely nothing and no calamity had befallen the city.

However, councillors manfully closed their ranks, endorsed the mayor's "every action" and gave him a unanimous vote of confidence. But the tone of their speeches showed that they were a little ruffled by public and press criticism, which was sharp and to the point. It has lost none of its barb by the discomforting ease with which Africans later organized their 14-day sympathy bus boycott and a go-slow campaign in the Port Elizabeth docks, despite the absence in Johannesburg of all four would-be deportees among the 18 Port Elizabeth Africans arraigned at the treason trial.

The dock "strike" has been temporarily broken by the employment first of convicts and "scabs" from East London and Cape Town, then by imported labour from the famine-stricken Transkei reserve, brought in army trucks and at first insulated from local contacts under armed guard. One minor irony is the inability of the Government to use troops as strike-breakers, as is routine elsewhere. For all South African troops are white, and steve-

doring, etc., is manual labour—"kaffir's work."

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A "welcome home" for the treason accused during the Christmas recess produced reassuring evidence that the might of the South African police force is massed to uphold even such trivial laws as Municipal traffic regulations. For, failing to find any other indictable offence, 50 policemen, many armed, led and directed by the Political Branch, arrested seven of several hundred Africans returning from the reception hall in one stream towards their segregated suburb (how else could they go home?) on a charge of "organizing a procession". An appeal against the magistrate's conviction and fine is still pending at the time of writing.

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A different category of intimidation was seen in the affair of Rabbi Ungar. Rabbi Dr. André Ungar came to the Port Elizabeth Reform Synagogue, Temple Israel, in 1954 from Britain. He had left Hungary after the war and graduated at London University. Last October he announced publicly that he was returning to an appointment in London at the end of January. On 8th December the secretary of the Port Elizabeth Jewish Reform congregation received a letter from the Secretary of the Interior announcing the cancellation of Dr. Ungar's temporary immigration permit and ordering him to leave the country before 15th January. No reasons were given.

Nor were any needed. Rabbi Ungar had on several occasions criticized the South African Government's racial policies as immoral and contrary to the Jewish religion, as it is to others. Perhaps his most obvious cause of offence was to address a series of what the local Afrikaans papers described as "piebald" (racially mixed) meetings held to denounce the Group Areas Act, which imposes residential and occupational segregation for the race groups by expropriating the property of non-whites. Dr. Ungar had there referred to "the shadow of the Swastika" (which after all he knew from personal experience) "marching across the Free State" and had called *apartheid* "an abomination"—a strong, if strictly Biblical, term.

Now it is, of course, permissible to differ from these opinions, either by way of agreeing with what the Government seeks to do or in holding that the language was intemperate. Our egg-dancing leader-writer subscribed to the latter view, believing that Dr. Ungar "did not always temper his intellectual integrity

with discretion, did not recognize politics as the art of the possible, or understand that changing public opinion is a long-term process." Nevertheless, lest the whole egg drop into the Government's lap, he proceeded to defend Dr. Ungar's right to say what he felt and to criticize the extraordinary apathy of the white public in failing to take up on his behalf the obvious quotation from Voltaire. For the sad truth was that, except for a number who vehemently said "good riddance," few voices were raised to defend the right to freedom of expression.

Dr. Ungar had, of course, complicated matters by opining that, since the Government already knew he planned to depart, its deliberate attack on a man who had no motive to contest the order could reasonably be construed as a warning to all ministers of religion and to the Jewish community. The latter likelihood was increased by the letter having been addressed to the secretary of his congregation and not to Dr. Ungar personally. The first reaction to this was a letter in the press from a member of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies rather gratuitously denying that "the withdrawal of Dr. Ungar's immigration permit is regarded by the Jewish community as an attack by the Government to intimidate such Jewish citizens who may be critical of Government policy."

Rabbi Ungar replied, setting out the deductions from his own case in greater detail, mentioning the press and parliamentary campaign (described by Senator Rubin in the last issue of *Africa South*) designed to intimidate or at least neutralize South African Jewry and seeing Mr. A. M. Spira's letter as a successful product of that policy. The fat began to sizzle. "Port Elizabeth Jewish Citizen" desired to record his "indignation at the abuse of the freedom of the press by this non-desirable visitor to South Africa." Furious that the Jewish community's "friendly relations with its non-Jewish fellow-citizens" were being jeopardized by this "irresponsible and undignified" Rabbi and owing allegiance only "to the Government and people of this country", this correspondent pronounced the traditional Hebrew blessing of "Boruch Sheptorau" ("thank God we are getting rid of this Rabbi").

There were some more in this vein and a few belated, though resolute, replies. But more significant than the outspoken virulence of a few was the silence of the many. For Mr. Spira's letter was the only comment of a Jewish representative character. The Rabbi of the large Orthodox congregation in Port Elizabeth,

who is not slow to seek press publicity on issues he supports, was conspicuously silent throughout. It was impossible not to feel that, behind this vociferous silence of the bulk of the Jewish community, there was more than personal antipathies or the old schism between Orthodox and Reform. The Jewish community in South Africa is smaller and more vulnerable than the British. Yet it has far more reason in its recent history to know how little is gained by ducking before the storm, how every vindictive discriminatory action hits at us all, black and white, Gentile and Jew. The Jewish churches, understandably outspoken in defiance of injustice to Israel, are less justifiably quiet on the moral implication of our present colour policies. Dr. Ungar was an exception. It was left to an Anglican priest to emphasize the ethical obligations of a religious ministry and to protest at Dr. Ungar's expulsion for having expressed his conscience.

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Apartheid from the cradle to the grave is bad enough. It has been spotlighted by Archbishop Clayton's testamentary wish to have his ashes interred in soil that is not reserved "for Europeans only". But in Port Elizabeth there is a danger that apartheid will drop living people into their graves more speedily than is really necessary.

Not long ago a little girl was seriously injured in a street accident. A spectator, who was evidently colour blind, phoned for the non-white ambulance. When it arrived, its attendants were refused permission to lift the girl in by an officious white eye-witness who knew that the child was white. A delay of 20 minutes occurred while the "white" ambulance was summoned. The girl later died in hospital.

No one can say that the delay was cause of the effect. But one day it will be in a similar case. Shortly after, the white ambulance drove past an African who had been squashed by a bus. Probably he was dead then. He certainly was when the non-white ambulance got him to hospital. But still . . . And, although more sensible and practical orders have now been given to the ambulance crews, no one can guarantee they will be carried out. For if the non-white ambulance is called to one of those innumerable borderline cases, where people insist on differentiating where the eye cannot, are the non-white attendants going to be able to act in the face of white intransigence such as delayed that little girl?

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In February the Cape ANC, whose headquarters are in Port Elizabeth, announced a consumer boycott of products and firms which are Nationalist controlled or financed. This is obviously a long-term policy whose effects will only gradually be felt. But, even before it has really got under way, some chickens have come home to roost. For one thing, the list of products and firms originated with a Nationalist-front organization in Natal, which was exhorting all true Afrikaners to "buy Afrikaans." For another, the State Information Office has long been casting careless statistics on the waters about "the Bantu's" immense spending power, in order to prove how affluent and well-cared for our Africans are. There is some truth in this, though a deal less than the S.I.O. affirms. But the developing purchasing potentiality of the non-white market is something on which most local industrialists have had a keen and avaricious eye. After all, 12 million consumers are a much healthier foundation for an industrial economy than 3 million, even if the latter are the third highest (to the U.S.A. and Canada) income group in the world.

Industrial and commercial firms, as well as advertising agencies, have all been researching into the extra 9 million potential. Many employ African P.R.O.'s and research assistants. So that it came as a surprise only to the uninformed that, within a fortnight of the economic boycott being announced and long before any results would be visible, representatives of four listed firms were seeking interviews with ANC leaders to prove, if they could, their freedom from Nationalist control or finance. One firm artlessly announced that it was just at that moment launching a scheme to employ Africans. . . . "Would any of your chaps care for a job?" Another concern revealed that it had just occurred to it to consider recognizing African trade unions for the purposes of negotiation, even though the Government will not allow them to be registered. Thus the shape of things to come.

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Whites soliciting interviews with "kaffirs"! There is a new South Africa for you. And if the Port Elizabeth I have written about is unrecognizable to its average white inhabitant (as I have no doubt it is), I am confident that it will long outlive the mirage city which he thinks he sees. For the seeds of the future are deep in *my* Port Elizabeth.