

MISERY IN HAPPY VALLEY



Dejection, anger and indifference

WENDY LEEB hoped that simply by being there to witness the forced removal of 40 families and the demolition of their

shacks she and the others monitoring the event would prevent more violence. Here is her account of what she saw.

June 9, 1992

MY DAY began like any other day, no premonitions, no feeling that something different could happen. While I was in the bath the phone rang; dripping, shivering and cursing, I went to answer. The voice on the other end asked me to come quickly, the Happy Valley squatters were being forcibly removed. I went.

All of us know about forced removals, all of us know about “squatters”, but what most of us don’t know is how it really is when it happens.

I have seen people forced to flee their homes; I have dealt with refugees; I have seen people, in the heat of the moment, force other people out of their areas, but never before have I seen seemingly cold-blooded officials carry out their orders by destroying peoples’ houses.

I had been out to this community on Saturday. There had been an intimation that the destruction of this settlement would take place. There were barricades on the road — erected NOT by the “squatters” but by the “legitimate” residents around them in order to stop the “squatters” removal.

One needs to know the circumstances. Forty families; refugees from the violence in another area; small children and dogs and puppies; settled in plastic, cardboard, and if they were very lucky, corrugated iron shacks; there for three years, no expansion, no problem; council land — a slope dotted with wattle and blue-gums that couldn’t be used for anything else; allegedly no complaints

from established residents; no theft; no trouble; in fact, the established residents supplied them with water.

So what was the problem? Nothing other than that the authorities decided they should move; that they were a public nuisance. How the city councillors of Pietermaritzburg came to the decision is a mystery. None of them lived near there, none of them came to see the carrying out of their decision, none of them seems to have cared. They also seem to have forgotten the real responsibility of government; if you sign the execution order you should be prepared to watch the execution.

HOWEVER, I digress. What is a forced removal like (and do remember that the group areas act has gone)? Before I try to tell you I must remind you that this is not an objective account. I can only write from the position of what I saw, what I felt and what others who shared the experience said they felt. It is strangely impossible to be objective about watching peoples homes and possibly, their lives, destroyed. One must remember that these are materially poor people, people who were forced to flee from established homes because of violence, people who just want to survive. They are people who work hard to get through a lifetime of setbacks and problems. They are people who want to have more but who cannot afford it and therefore try to make the best of what they’ve got. Unfortunately, today what they’ve got became what they had.

AT THIS point, it becomes difficult to describe what I saw, because I want to do it for you as accurately as I can, and I am, against my inclination, going to use racist terms. I drove to the place, accompanied by another monitor, both of us realising that there was nothing we could do other than to present a presence which would, hopefully, prevent violence from either side. We were basically witnesses. As I scrambled down the bank I heard the protestations. Of course, I was forewarned. There had been the riot-police and their vans on the side of the road, there was a Pietermaritzburg Corporation truck and various other corporation vehicles were parked nearby.

I saw black municipal policemen stripping the plastic off the wattle pole structures. Standing by were five riot-policepeople dressed in camouflage, and three white plain clothes people, one with a radio (walkie-talkie). Around them stood a group which consisted of women, very young children, a few youth and a few old men. In addition, on the road had been a pick-up truck (mello-yellow), and numerous other riot police-people.

There was an air of unreality. Both sides knew this shouldn’t really be happening, and both sides knew who stood to lose — them and South Africa. But the script had been written and it had to be acted out. The “squatters”, justifiably, were extremely angry. Every last shred of their privacy was being



violated. The white officials could simply reiterate their excuses: "We are simply following orders — don't talk to us — talk to Pat Cornell and the city council." The riot-police were under orders not to talk at all — someone knows that if they talk they may begin to feel . . . and we need to think very carefully about that.

The beginning of the nightmare happened next. Black municipal police began systematically to demolish the shacks, most made of gum-pole uprights and plastic or cardboard walls. As they crashed down, one young boy aged about thirteen, very dirty, and obviously mentally retarded, fell onto a piece of IBR plastic, and crouching down, began to wail — "waiouu waiouu". For him, this was the end of existence. While this child was howling his desolation, and while the other "squatters" were expressing their frustration, the white officials and the riot-policemen laughed. Only the black municipal policemen showed any sign of empathy.

WHILE WE, and the officials, watched, the destruction continued. At one point, I asked a woman whether I might hold her baby, and she gave her to me. Here was this little thing, maybe five months old, dressed in a beautifully crocheted little white dress, and wearing a clean white nappy. One must remember that there is no running water in the area and then realise that this baby is as loved and cared for as any of yours or mine. This led me to really look at what was happening. This was not about politics, this was not about power, this was about people being totally insensitive, uncaring, oblivious about other peoples' feelings, needs and humanity. This was the Third Reich all over again. Just as ordinary people, acting under Hitler's orders, killed the Jews, so, too were these officials acting against their fellow people on- other peoples' orders.

Who is to blame?

AS THE shacks began to be dismantled, the life of the people in the shacks began to be apparent. Every shack was somebody's home. The walls went down and I saw a piece of green Christmas tinsel hanging from the roof struts, brave and wonderful — but no, the strut was demolished. Another wall went down, and there was somebody's bed — made of thin wattle strips with a half inch mattress; someone had made their bed so they could lie in it — and

now, they never would again. Next wall down (another house), revealed a coffee table, covered in a beautifully crocheted white cloth, with three carefully cultivated pot plants, each surrounded by tinsel.

With the destruction of each wall more and more was revealed. The perfectly packed nappy-bag with four napkins, two baby-grows, and two jerseys, all clean to start with, but all too soon to end up as rags in the rubble.

Women wept and cursed, much to the disgust of a police lieutenant who believed that the swear words being used should not either be uttered by or before women. What he simply couldn't know is that these women had gone beyond convention into the realm of desperation. Their homes and their lives were being destroyed; their children were at school for the first time; their men were at work; and the women were witnessing the destruction of the framework they had and have worked so hard to achieve.

One could go on and on forever. There are no limits to what we witnessed. But, one of the things that sticks in my mind is the fact that every one of those shacks was a *home*. Every single place belonged to someone, every wall that came down had something stuck to it. Each part was personal. There were paper roses, Johnny Walker magnum whisky bottles from a decade gone by, the interior spinner of a washing machine, rags and tatters. And each thing had a use and a meaning, everything was cherished and used, and all of that was dissipated and destroyed. Why?

IHAVE a theory, and as I told you before, I am not objective. It is because of power and ownership and standards and a whole lot of language

that precludes us, whoever we are, from understanding, from caring and from identifying. And I end with an anecdote from today:

The person in charge was an "elderly" white man, complete with radio (walkie-talkie). He was under orders, and he took, I think, more strain than he would have had the Council appeared. Nonetheless he stood by his orders. And he "did his job". For hours he was harassed, importuned, insulted — and he simply stood by his orders. On the other hand there was another old man (a kehla, an old man of the people who simply watched). And then he said to the official: "You obviously don't know Jesus — you don't know what he wants people to do. You wouldn't do this if you knew". Very shortly after this interchange that particular official left.

I am not a Christian, but I believe that not a "sparrow falls" that is not recorded somewhere. What happened today is in my memory, in yours if you read this, in every person who was there, no matter on what side.

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June 10, 1992

WE WERE called out again today. When we got there we found not only the riot police, the municipality security forces and their police, but a professional and militant private security force called COIN. Immediately we went on to the site it seemed that the 30 to 40 black members of this force were not South African, and couldn't speak a South African language. The white members were totally uncommunicative. The uprights of the peoples' shacks,



In the final stages the uprights of all the shacks are broken down

Fourth Reich blues

LOUIS TRICHARDT is set in the 'real Africa'. It is a bushveld town of mopani and baobab, with the occasional kiepersol, in a landscape of elephant grass and rock and red soil. It nestles against purple mountains of pine and shadows. It happens to be a true 'Voortrekker' bulwark, or perhaps 'Dwarstrekker' bulwark would be a more appropriate description. It was established many years ago, when lion, elephant, buffalo, rhinoceros, and various kind of antelope roamed the plains, and the Boer and Matebele killed each other in great numbers, not to mention nearly annihilating the beasts in unison, and harmony?

It is also a town of extremes. Winter is lovely. While most in South Africa are reaching for electric blankets, warm water bottles, for their wives, this town rejoices in springlike days and cool nights. But then, summer arrives, and the heat is a constant reminder of the concept Abaddon. Thunderstorms luckily intervene on a regular basis, providing some heaven-sent relief, while at the same time destroying crops.

Blame for this latter phenomenon must be allocated, and to whom else but the Government. What with its integration, a flagrant disregard of God's word.

LOUIS TRICHARDT hosts around 9000 pale skinned inhabitants, a big town by South African standards. Most of these souls are pure Afrikaner stock, with pedigrees to match. They come in all shapes and sizes, although an awful lot of men look like honorary members of the Charles Glass society.

Louis Trichardt counts many times more black people. They are only considered part of the town's population for as far as they render services to the cash flow. The same applies to the 'kypies', or coloureds.

The 'kerriegatte', or Indians, pose a problem. They are also not regarded part of the town, yet they own half the real estate. The town council, in it's infinite wisdom, once passed a motion that Indians were not allowed to operate businesses in the white area. The ironical, if not comical, result was a fair

number of pure boere flocking across to the shops in the Indian area. Forgotten were the pleas for support to the 'brotherly' white businessmen. These emanated, inter alia, from the ultra conservative dominee. He turned his back on the Dutch Reformed Church, and started his own fire and brimstone version of a holy sect, where a white skin is paramount for membership. He is considered by his many followers to be a true prophet, nearly in the same league as former dominee Andries Treurnicht, and former nobody Eugene Terréblanche.

IN THE entertainment field, a good time is 'boeremusiek' by Oom Japie and his merrimen. The folk dances the 'sakkie-sakkie', a shuffling of feet, which resembles a South African Bureau of Standards test to ascertain the durability of certain brands of footwear. Lots of pugilistic activities in between lighten up proceedings, ek se, to the delightful squeeling of women and girls, and chanting of men and boys. As the evening progresses, and the alcohol flows, hysterical laughter, or gratifying screams, can intermittently be heard, as rear ends and other body parts are squeezed by over zealous young men and 'oomies' alike.

A good time is also Otto Karl's German Oempha band, playing march music. The purists motivate themselves clamorously for the future armed struggle, which will return to the white man the power to absolute rule.

The non-purists, and believers in human equality, more than often stare at themselves in the mirror the next day, asking why they did not speak up, why they even agreed, why they showed no guts.

A MUSICAL performance by Bles used to be the highlight of the year when even ultra conservative tannies behaved like groupies. But then Bles caused terrible pain. He left his lovely wife for a harlot. And was it not he who preached of love, commitment, God and love, in his, oh so very romantic, songs?

From Page Thirteen

which had been left intact the day before, had been demolished, and the place was in chaos.

People were even more angry, if that was possible, than the day before. They had survived a night, without shelter, in sub-zero temperatures; and now all hope of rebuilding was being removed. They concluded that the members of the security firm were not South Africans, and resented this fiercely. They resented the guns being pointed at them, but most of all they resented their perception that their vision of hope in a new South Africa had been betrayed, and that they were helpless and powerless.

Again, through sheer power of will, they forced the authorities out of the area.

Yes, there were weapons. The police and the municipal police were armed to the hilt. The people armed themselves with sticks and bottles and pieces of aluminium and bricks. Both sides were restrained, and it became obvious that neither side really wanted blood shed. The security forces withdrew, including the security firm which then regrouped on the road and gave a military show which would have done justice to any state occasion. It seemed, for the time being, the people had won.

In a gesture that could only be interpreted as spite, bravado or pure foolishness the municipality then proceeded to demonstrate their supposed power by cutting down trees in the area. Presumably this was to remove all possible reconstruction material. Needless to say

after two or three hot, futile and fruitless hours the plan was abandoned. The "squatters" hung their washing out, and began rebuilding their shacks. Life went on.

WHAT WE need to think about is why and for what purpose are these things happening, and why are we allowing them to happen?

If we are people who care; if we are people who want a new South Africa that is equitable; if we want to change the ravages of the apartheid system which we all, including the government, acknowledge as wrong; can we afford to let our fellow people suffer both by being forced to be perpetrators and being perpetrated against again and again? ●