

BLACK SASH TRANSVAAL REGION

Removals Sub-Committee Annual Report

The year that has elapsed since the last National Conference has been one of high drama, tension, occasional periods of elation and optimism but mainly sorrow. The year began with the tragic death of Saul Mkhize on April 2nd and ended with the removal of Mogopa. The intervening period was one of intensive work over a wide field.

Saul Mkhize was a patient, persistent and peace loving man who led the stubborn resistance of the Driefontein community against a threatened removal. We had worked closely with Saul in an advisory capacity and had been out to Driefontein with him on several occasions. On the day of the shooting, he had called a meeting of his committee and the residents of Driefontein in order to discuss the proposed removal and other community matters. He was shot dead while addressing this meeting. According to eyewitnesses, he was at that moment standing with his arms raised, pleading for peace. Constable Nienaber had left the school grounds and fired the fatal shot through the fence. Most of the crowd had at that stage already dispersed, as the police had fired tear gas. Despite this, however, the police division of Public Relations in Pretoria issued a statement saying that an angry crowd of about 500 people threatened the lives of the two constables present, and had failed to disperse after being asked to do so, and even after tear gas had been sprayed and a warning shot fired. In self defence, Constable Nienaber therefore fired at the leader of the mob, striking him.

Sheena, Jill Wentzel and I went out to Driefontein the next day and tape recorded eye witness accounts of the event. Josie Adler at the same time prepared a press statement and a full dossier on Saul and the Driefontein situation. We were thus in a position to release the information immediately to the South African and International Press, and this tragic event deservedly attracted worldwide attention and outrage. The funeral was attended by several members of this committee, and a very large contingent of overseas journalists and TV cameramen. On the 21st April, we held a four hour prayer vigil at St. Mary's Cathedral in Johannesburg. John Kane Berman, Pickson Mkhize (Saul's brother) and I addressed the congregation and members of the Mkhize family joined the Sash members in a silent stand in memory of Saul.

Our association with the Driefontein community of course remains unbroken and we have, for example, continued to monitor the pension payouts which we had begun at Saul's request during his lifetime. It was at one of these pension payouts in May that we heard of the death of Mr. Sibonyane, another Driefontein resident, at the nearby Dirkiesdorp police station. It was while investigating the circumstances surrounding this event that Gill de Vlieg got into conversation with one of the older residents of Driefontein and heard how they had lived on tea and bread in order to save the money to buy the land. She was so moved by this story, that she conceived the idea of the week long vigil, to focus attention on forced removals. This co-incided with the 70th anniversary of the passing of the 1913 Land Act. From the 20th to the 24th June, a full programme of events took place at Khotso House, which included talks by leading authorities on the historical background, the legal implications and the political and economic consequences of the Land Act and the present day policies of population removals which resulted. There were also panel discussions by leaders of communities under threat of removal. Throughout this period, Gill de Vlieg lived in the Chapel at Khotso House and had one meal a day of a slice of bread and a cup of tea.

The two communities adjoining Driefontein, namely Daggakraal and KwaNgema are also threatened with removal, and our committee has been in close contact with their leaders and their committees throughout this period. We have visited both areas on several occasions and also had several meetings with them in our offices in Johannesburg. The most immediate threat is to KwaNgema where the dam has been built, and is already flooding a large section of the land. The people in this area have calmly proceeded to rebuild their houses on higher ground, and are determined to remain where they are.

In these communities, and in all the others with which we have been concerned, we have come across the familiar divide and rule tactics of the government. They will recognise only their own approved or appointed community leaders (i.e. those who are prepared to co-operate with the proposed removal) and refuse to negotiate with the democratically elected leaders of the community who are opposed to the move. This has been strikingly evident in Driefontein and KwaNgema, as well as in the Western Transvaal where we have been equally active in Mathopiestad, and more recently in Mogopā.

Urban Removals

This committee has also been drawn into intervention on behalf of people facing removal from urban townships. Sue Sher, Gill de Vlieg and Audrey went out to Bethal, after a complaint had been received that people were being unlawfully evicted from the Black township there and re-settled in KwaNdebele. Reference books were examined to determine how many of these people already had Section 10 rights or could qualify for them. A successful Court action was fought in the case of one woman who had been unlawfully dumped in KwaNdebele. They also investigated allegations that the Labour Officer in the area had been selling Section 10 rights at R200,00 a piece.

We have also had close contact with the residents of Badplaas. This has been a royal Swazi Kraal for 130 years, but has never been proclaimed an urban township. The people are therefore said to be "squatters" and are to be removed to the usual dreary resettlement areas in Kangwane.

In the Leandra township, where 18 000 people are facing removal, only 712 new houses are being built, and those only for fully qualified 10(1)(a) or (b) people. We are trying to help them establish their rights. We have also had a great deal of contact with the leaders of the Huhudi Action Committee from Vryburg in the Northern Cape. A very thorough and useful research project has just been done by Marj Brown on that particular community and on the whole question of urban removals in general, and this forms the subject of a separate paper.

Special mention must be made of Grasmere, just outside Johannesburg where a large squatter community has developed and is being constantly harassed by police and Administration Board officials. One of our members, Merle Beetge, had been working there for some years and has recently been joined by Josie Adler and Sue Sher. Together they have done very intensive work in the area. This also forms the subject of a separate paper, so will not be dealt with in any further detail in this report.

Transvaal Rural Advancement Committee

The province of the Transvaal is not only very large in area but is also unique in that there are no fewer than six homelands within this one province. Our experience in working on the removals map showed that the Transvaal had been relatively under-researched, a fact which was later borne out by the S.P.P. Publication. It had become increasingly clear that a small sub-committee of the Black Sash, most of whose members have full time jobs, were unable to cover this vast area. For this reason, a decision was taken to form a new organisation based roughly on the AFRA model. It was started as a separate organisation with independant funding, but was later restructured as a Black Sash sub-committee in order to facilitate both the fund raising and the general organisation.

Our first full time field worker, Aninka Claassens took up her post on the 1st August, 1983 and was immediately bombarded with problems, crises and appeals for help from all over the Transvaal and the Northern Cape. She has done extensive travelling in the course of her duties, establishing contact with communities over a very wide area.

In accordance with established Black Sash principles, we do not act on our own initiative but only in response to an approach from a particular community. In such a case our role is a purely advisory and supportive one, respecting the right of the people concerned to make their own decisions and formulate strategies best suited to their particular circumstances. Most of these contacts have already been established in the course of the last four years, but have been intensified in Aninka's work. She has held in depth meetings with the people, arranged legal representation, Parliamentary involvement and liaison with other organisations. In all cases, there has been meticulous fact finding and documentation, so that comprehensive and accurate files now exist on all the communities with which we have been involved. This has meant that when a crisis does occur, for example in the case of Mogopa, we were in a position to call a press conference and provide full dossiers on the historical background and all other relevant facts to the press and diplomatic corps without any delay. Information is constantly being disseminated on a variety of subjects through releases to the press and other interested bodies.

At the end of October, Aninka organised a two-day conference at St. Angar's in Roodepoort to provide a means of communication between all communities under threat of removal. More than 80 people representing 20 different communities attended this unique event. They were addressed by two lawyers on all the relevant laws relating to removal. The conference served as a precursor to similar conferences on a national basis.

Earlier this year, Aninka participated very effectively in the recent UCT summer school on "Population Removals". Publication is also due to begin shortly of regular newsletters. We firmly believe that despite all that has been written, forced removal is still a largely untold story and that it is vitally important to focus as much publicity on it as possible, both locally and overseas. If we are not successful in stopping removals, we are at least determined that they will not take place by stealth.

The scope and volume of the work of this project has been far greater than originally envisaged. It has proved to be too much for one person, even someone with Aninka's immense energy, dedication and intellectual grasp of the total situation. We have therefore found it necessary to appoint two additional field workers. Aninka will be joined early in March by Marj Brown and in April by Joanne Yawitch. We were extremely fortunate to have found Aninka Claassens, but trebly so to have three such highly competent and committed young women.

The original committee has inevitably undergone changes in function and in membership. They have continued to meet regularly, and some of the members have volunteered to form themselves into small sub-groups, each specialising in a different area. They will act as support groups for Aninka, people whom she can call upon in an emergency in any particular case. The Co-Chairman of this committee last year was Josie Adler and she has unfortunately had to resign this year due to her other commitments. She is a person of exceptional organising ability, imagination and dynamism. Her wise counsel will be sorely missed. Her place has been taken by Gill de Vlieg, a most courageous and dedicated person who is a real pleasure to work with on any committee. Another of our excellent members, Barrie Collins has had to resign as he has taken up a post in the Transkei. He not only compiled the excellent slide tape show, "The Destruction of Kwapitela" but also undertook numerous field trips which were carefully documented.

The committee is too large to be able to mention each one individually, but I should like to record my thanks to them for their hard work and support over the past year, and their constant willingness to drop everything and travel long distances when called upon, or simply to do valuable backroom work.

Removals in the Age of Reform

No sooner had the Government been given their overwhelming "Yes" vote in the Referendum than they set about showing what the hidden agenda was really all about. On November 18th, the President's Order was served on the Mogopa people, giving them 10 days in which to go.

The story of the battle of Mogopa must be written in full, because it exemplifies every aspect of Government strategy, from persuasion, to community division, coercion, and finally force. It also demonstrates to an extraordinary degree, the optimism, and the simple faith in the law which we find repeatedly in these rural communities. And the story also needs to be told of the courage and sacrifice of the many who volunteered to help.

Possibly no other removal has ever attracted so much publicity or aroused such vehement worldwide condemnation. That the Government should have gone ahead so ruthlessly despite this, is a clear indication of their total disregard for public opinion. It is also a grim warning to all the remaining Black Spots. Already, we have reason to believe that new tactics are being tried in Driefontein, KwaNgema and Motlatla (Western Transvaal) in order to push through more "voluntary" removals. How else are they to justify the exclusion of Blacks from the new constitutional dispensation, than by making them ex-South Africans with all possible speed?

The battle of Mogopa was our battle too. We fought a long and very tough fight for what we believed to be a just cause, and we were defeated. We shall certainly go on, simply because we have no alternative. But our work in future will require much thought, careful planning, and an imaginative approach to new problems. In the words of Lewis Carroll, we must "Consider anything, only don't cry".

ETHEL WALT