

Chapter 45 – Welkom, St Agnes Convent and School

Something attempted...

Permit me to introduce you to Welkom, only 240 Km from Johannesburg, the leading town of the Orange Free State Goldfields. In 1946 came the announcement of a fabulous gold strike on one of the farms in the area. Immediately there was feverish activity and this remarkable mushroom city grew out of the dry soil of the Western Free State.

Its surroundings, however, are not as dry as one might suppose. The many mine evaporation dams and natural pans in the vicinity resemble a veritable “lake district” which not only attracts anglers and yachters but also abounds in a great variety of bird life.

In 1949 the Welkom Township Company, a non-profit-making association, was formed by the Anglo-American Corporation of South Africa. It bought land and started planning the town and, by 1961, Welkom had an elected town council. In contrast with the experience of the Witwatersrand after the discovery of gold there some 90 years ago, no ugly mining camp with tents and crude shanties sprang up in the Free State. Instead, a model town with broad roads for traffic to flow smoothly, modern business houses, attractive residential suburbs, parks and recreational amenities, was planned from the outset. More holiday and pleasure resorts are at no great distance from Welkom.

However, the most important place for many of us in this town is the Convent of Saint Agnes,¹ that was founded in 1951. On the 11th November the first Holy Mass was said there to ask God’s blessing on the new undertaking. The institution has today a modest enrolment near the three-hundred mark. The school building itself, from a limited number of classrooms, has more than trebled its size – complete with well-equipped science laboratory, attractive Grade-rooms and a fine hall.

Any building in such a setting as St Agnes’ Convent² cannot be otherwise than beautiful. The twenty acres on which the school stands have been used to great advantage. Many trees have been planted and the front garden emphasises the warm colour of the face brick walls and grey-blue roof slates. There is a spacious play-ground with jungle gym and merry-go-round. The tennis team, of necessity, must win the league considering that there are four beautiful all-weather courts and practically no rainy days in the area. To complete the picture there are hockey pitches, two netball fields and a swimming bath.

Lest the impression be created that buildings are rated more important than people, I hasten to add that the school has quite a high reputation for the successes of its matriculants, of whom a few annually go to one or other University or College. The girls are not only good students but charming young ladies in every sense of the word. A capable and conscientious staff concentrates on the education of the pupils in all its broader aspects. That the school has been run efficiently under the leadership of the various Principals is borne out by the comments of School Inspectors. To quote Mr W L Roux: “... One is impressed by the excellent discipline and by the friendliness and general behaviour of the children. The pleasant relationship which exists between pupils and staff results in hearty co-operation. We received every assistance from the Headmistress and members of the staff and could find no fault with administration or organisation... Outstanding work is being done and there is no doubt about the progress that the scholars have made. The pupils are interested and keen to learn; the teachers, both nuns and seculars, are conscientious and approach their task with enthusiasm and devotion...”

Under the tuition of a Sister pupils also take Art as a school subject. At the local city show as well as at Bloemfontein there is always an impressive list of St Agnes’ pupils who are winners of Art Awards. The speech and Drama Mistress has been associated with the school since 1957. She has been responsible for

¹ *Born at Monte Pulciano in Tuscany, she became a Dominican at an early age, Famous for sanctity of life and for many supernatural graces bestowed upon her, she died in her 49th year (A.D. 1317). She was canonised four centuries later.*

² *The first community: Mother Consolata Kaiser, Sisters Cupertina Auer, Rose Dixon, Maxentia Kramer, Palmatia Dengl, Aniceta Wandinger, Harriet Pathan, Deodata Otto, Immaculata Wicher, Brendan Mittermaier, Calasanz Georg, Symphorosa Englmann, Martha Gaes, Rosaria Singhammer.*

many outstanding successes in the field of dramatic art, both at the school itself and at the local Eisteddfods, where Convent pupils have gained distinctions. Music in its various aspects is also taught here. Many people, while in Primary School, take lessons in piano-playing (this being the most commonly played instrument in the Western world) but give up this extra-activity on reaching High School. However, a few hardy types keep up the lessons and hours of practice until they are able to take Music as a subject for Matriculation.

The splendid Parents' Association has, over the past twenty-two, fostered the spiritual well-being of the pupils and provided additional facilities, materials, equipment and amenities as deemed necessary for the school.

The convent chronicle records that "on 8th December 1976, at 10.40 in the morning, an earthquake rocked Welkom. A six-storey flat building, very near St Agnes', collapsed about two hours after the tremor occurred. Several people were feared dead until all occupants of the flats were accounted for. There were also reports of individuals that were briefly trapped in buildings through doors that were jammed. A spokesman for the Geological Survey Office in Pretoria said the quake measured 4.8 on the Richter scale which qualified it as a moderate earthquake. Miraculously, in a city of six major gold mines, where thousands of men are underground every day, only one fatality was reported. Many citizens offered help and accommodation to the homeless victims of the quake. The Tulbagh-Ceres earthquake of some years ago had registered 6.3 and 6.5 on the Richter scale.³ All over the town cracked walls, rubble and shattered window panes bore witness to the grim toll of the tremor..." The Catholic Church was also badly damaged, but the Sisters reported gratefully that, as far as could be estimated, their Convent had not suffered serious harm.

As senior pupils look back on their school years each one, without doubt, realises how much she has loved being at St Agnes'. Now they will have to stretch their wings and lift off from that cosy hide-out where these teachers endeavour to pass on to another generation of young South Africans the precious heritage of a Christian education.

³ *The scale is a logarithmic one so that the intensity of an earthquake registering eight on the Richter scale is for more than twice the intensity of one that had measured four.*