

CHAPTER XXI

Johannesburg, Belgravia – Convent of the Sacred Heart

(Also Evaton, Vleeschfontein, Rustenburg, Zeerust)

As Johannesburg is the hub of the commercial life of the Transvaal with, in 1956, over a million inhabitants, it forms a rallying point for all surrounding towns and districts. The Dominican Sisters in Potchefstroom and Klerksdorp travelling to and from the Mother House at King William's Town often passed through it and, on every occasion, had to ask hospitality from the Nazareth Sisters. This was always freely and willingly given. However, when Bishop Miller requested Mother Lucy Kaltenstadler to open a school at Belgravia in the interest of children in that suburb and in Malvern, her councillors readily agreed.

Johannesburg, Belgravia – Convent of the Sacred Heart

1906 The locality chosen was in Park Street, a few minutes' walk from St Anne's Church. The ceremony of laying the foundation stone in 1906 was essentially and almost exclusively religious. It was performed by Bishop Miller assisted by Fathers O'Brien, Delacy, Soye and T Ryan. Mother Lucy and a few Dominican Sisters represented the Congregation. The architects Messrs. Aburrow and Treeby and the contractor R Thornton were also present. In the course of a speech the Bishop expressed the hope that the school would be attended not only by Catholics, but also by the children of all those who wished to have their children trained and formed in accordance with what God wished them to be – true and worthy Christians and good citizens of their country.

On the 11th January, 1908 the pioneers arrived at Park Station accompanied by Germaine Letellier who would join the staff as an assistant teacher. They were Mother Lucy Kaltenstadler, Sisters Peter O'Connor, Sister Ludovica Marx, Sister Humberta Kaiser, Sister Cornelia Hübner, and Sister Ludovica Marx, three teachers and a housekeeper. The party was like majesty bereft of its externals, for there was no Superior and no cook. In the absence of the last-named the four Sisters decided to work during the day at the school, but to sleep at Nazareth House. Miss Letellier went to stay with Miss Louis Teubes who teaching in Johannesburg. The days were busy and the builders' rubble was scattered everywhere. Desks and other school furniture arrived by rail. These were unpacked and arranged by the four Sisters who certainly did work that had not entered into their school curriculum. Mother Lucy telegraphed for Sister Luitgard Albrecht to come as cook and then all went merry as a marriage bell. The Sisters could now remain at their Convent of the Sacred Heart after their fortnight of nightly residence at the Nazareth Home.

On the 3rd February, 1908, in the presence of a large assembly Bishop Miller declared the school open. Nearly all the Priests of Johannesburg were present and also Doctor F Kolbe from Cape Town. Next day was spent taking names and addresses of the 40 pupils and assigning them to their classes. Incidentally the only classrooms were those formed by partitioning the large hall into 4 divisions, the stage section was reserved for the senior classes. As two new teachers had arrived, Sister Liguori Connellan and Sister Pulcheria Witt, the curriculum embraced a variety of subjects. Shorthand and typewriting, needlework and painting seemed the favourite branches of study and soon the music teachers found the day too short for their work. Mother Reginald Fischer arrived as Superior and Art Mistress and before the end of the year 200 pupils were on the roll.

Soon with well over 200 children the Sisters were cramped out of their accommodation. They slept at night just wherever they could find a corner large enough to allow a recumbent position. Sometimes 2 beds were pushed together to accommodate 3 Sisters or one would lie at the feet of another. This was especially the case when there were visitors

to be catered for. The tiny room set apart as Chapel could hold only the Priest and six Sisters; meals were snatched in the music room. The staff grew to cope with the rising numbers of children; but all the Sisters were cramped into the original tiny cottage. By 1910 the numbers had increased to between 400 and 500 so Mother Lucy at last gave permission to extend the Convent. At the same time new classrooms sprang up like mushrooms and in six months' time both these and the Convent were filled to capacity.

In August, 1931 the Sisters were saddened by the death of the Kensington Sanatorium of Mrs Pietro Ferrero, their old benefactor of early Potchefstroom days. Some of them accompanied the motor hearse that took the remains to Potchefstroom to be buried in the family lot next to her husband. In 1905/6 she and her husband had been mayoress and mayor of Potchefstroom. After his death she had decided to live in Johannesburg so as to be near her children: Carl, Stephen, Tilly and Lucy. Their grandson Peter was ordained priest in 1956 and visited the old home at Potchefstroom.

In Johannesburg the Sisters found there was an embargo on taking boarders as Bishop Miller had promised Mother Ambrose of the Holy Family, Parktown Convent to allow no other Convent but hers to take them. It was feared the numbers at Parktown would be depleted unless this inhibition was enforced. However, the Sisters at Belgravia were allowed a maximum of 10 boarders and later the prohibition fell away. In 1933 Mother Augustine Geisel, the Prioress general, decided to purchase Damfield's property which, on the far side of Park Street, adjoined the boy's playground. This was used as sleeping accommodation for the Sisters. As it was unoccupied during the day, it was on two occasions burgled. The biggest sum of money the burglars found was two coppers; but unfortunately they also made off with many blankets, all this in broad daylight. They posed as workmen and took what they liked.

1912 As early as 1912 the Boksburg Mining Company offered the Sisters land for a Convent and School. For two whole years every Sunday two Sisters from the Belgravia Convent travelled by train to arrive at Boksburg in time to prepare for Mass there. The resident Priest, Father O'Brien, was grateful that the Sisters, besides acting as Sacristans, became catechists after Mass. Sometimes they did not return to Belgravia until two or three p.m. As Bishop MacSherry refused to allow our Sisters to open a Convent at Boksburg the proffered site was given to the Newcastle Dominicans.

Evaton – Francis Xavier Mission

1931 In November, 1931 at the request of Bishop David O'Leary Mother Augustine Geisel agreed to send Sisters to open a Mission School at Evaton on ground given to him by one of the first Convent pupils at King William's Town. Mrs Litgertwood, nee Gorman, had, in 1929, built a school and a small Church on a portion of her grounds. On the 18th August, 1933 three Sisters were motored from Belgravia to Evaton by Father L Muldoon, the Priest-in-Charge of that area. It was a silent drive for Father Muldoon carried the Blessed Sacrament intended for a dying man whose confession the Priest had heard on the previous day. On arrival the patient was found already dead so Father telephoned the Bishop and asked to be allowed to reserve the Blessed Sacrament in the Church near which the Sisters would be housed. Bishop O'Leary readily consented and the pioneers had the unique privilege of themselves bringing the Blessed Sacrament to be reserved at Evaton. Mother St James Bildstein the Superior at Belgravia who had accompanied the pioneers was delighted that the first filial of Belgravia should have so rare a privilege.

When she left them in the afternoon Sister Majella Kaiser, Sister Gisella Greissel and Sister Magdalene McLeod got ready for the night. The priest had a room at Mrs Litgertwood's. it was arranged that Sisters Majella and Gisella would teach at the little Native School and Sister Magdalene would act as cook.

The three-roomed house in which the Sisters lived was too small; so in 1934 a Chapel and a bedroom were added. As soon as the Chapel was complete the Blessed Sacrament was reserved there and the Sisters had the further privilege of a conventual Mass once a week. On the other days they had Mass at the Parish Church which was ten minutes' walk from the Convent. Towards the end of 1934 Father J Buckley O.M.I. arrived at Evaton as Parish Priest. He, like his predecessors, first resided at the home of Mrs Litgertwood. However, he soon built himself a small room at the Parish Church where he took up his abode.

At the Convent, known as St Francis Xavier's Mission, there were frequent changes on the staff. The Sisters lived in cramped surroundings until, in 1943, Sister Theresa Schusterbauer became Superior and built a more suitable Convent. Here, on the 21st December, 1948, Sister Maurice Buckel, who had come to spend the Christmas vacation at the Mission, died. She had been in delicate health and barely survived the train journey. She was buried in Johannesburg.

Doctor Verwoerd's *Bantu Education Act* hit the Saint Francis Mission School very hard. Their day school for African children at the end of 1957 ceased to be government-aided. According to regulations issued by the Diocese each child must bring 1/- per week for tuition. Those unable to pay must be sent away. The Sisters themselves had no means of support other than their small salaries and without these they would not be able to pay the salaries of secular African teachers.

1952 Belgravia – In 1952 at the Convent of the Sacred Heart, Belgravia the present large building was erected to occupy the site of Bamfields backyard and the former boys' playground. Two adjoining dilapidated cottages were purchased for demolition so as to increase the frontage area of the new building. This had made the Belgravia Convent one of the most conventual of all our institutions. While the building was in progress, and in fact on account of it, the Sisters realised that the children needed room for playgrounds. Long before, Mother Claver Reisch had been offered 4 erven for the nominal sum of £15. Unfortunately the telegraphed request to King William's Town for permission to purchase did not make the matter sufficiently urgent and permission had been refused. Later the property was sold for over £800.

The Belgravia Sisters taught catechism to the children on Sundays at Toronga about 15 miles from their own Convent. They went to and fro by train.

In 1940 Father Pierce asked the Congregation to open a school at Malvern where he had built a hall and a Church. Owing to shortage of staff Mother Augustine Geisel had very regretfully to refuse, so the Assumption Sisters opened at Malvern.

When speaking of Belgravia one can hardly omit the name of Father Delport. For more than 40 years he was Parish Priest of St Anne's Parish and chaplain to the Convent. He loved the children, especially the smaller ones. On one Ash Wednesday he teasingly told a little girl who still had ashes on her forehead she had not washed that morning. With all the precocity of the typical Johannesburg child she shook a warning finger at him and said: "That is what you did to me." Eve-like she did not say she had replenished the vanished ashes by the sharpening of her pencil three or four times. This Father knew but kept the information himself. He was father and friend to all the Sisters in the difficult early days. When he was transferred to Yeoville he greatly missed his old haunts. He died at the Kensington Sanatorium on Christmas Eve, 1954.

Vleischfontein – St Peter Claver

1880 About 160 miles West of Johannesburg at Vleischfontein in the Marica District there was a Mission station dedicated to Saint Peter Claver. This had been founded by the Jesuits during the time when the Transvaal was known as the South African Republic as early as

1880. When the Sisters came to Johannesburg it was already 29 years old. It belonged to the Zambesi Mission and lay on the old main road from Kimberley to the interior. Thus it was used by the Jesuits as a halfway station for the Fathers of the Zambesi Mission when they travelled via Kimberley and Zeerust. The Mission lost much of its importance to the Fathers when the new main road went via Mafeking and also when the Beira railway afforded a shorter route to the Zambesi. So on the death of Father Bontempe S.J. in May 1894, it was settled that the Mission should be taken over by the Transvaal Prefecture and that the Superior, Father Leboeuf S.J., should go on transfer to the Zambesi after handing over his responsibilities to Father Noel O.M.I.

1928 **Immaculate Conception Mission, Vleischfontein** – Father Noel put the Mission under the patronage of the Immaculate Conception and was helped by the Holy Family Sisters. In 1928 these Sisters wished to retire so Mother Augustine was asked to substitute them for the King Dominicans. On the 2nd July with Sister St James Bildstein as Superior a party of four was sent to the already flourishing Mission. They were to teach 130 Bechuana children and to minister to the wants of the Oblate Fathers.

Situated not far from the junction of the Marico and Crocodile Rivers in the North West of the Transvaal, the place had been the haunt of many wild animals, a veritable hunter's paradise, a fountain of meat as the name implies. However, after 48 years of labour the wild animals gave place to cattle; but the Sisters found the Bechuana pupils were more interested in how to snare birds for the pot than in their lessons. The lure of the veld was also strong in their parents, so the children could hardly be blamed. At harvest time the schools were empty and pupils would be playing hide and seek round the hay racks or following honey birds to the wild bees' hives.

On the 16th February, 1929, just 7½ months after the arrival of our Sisters Father Xavier Goodfriend O.M.I. brought the Blessed Sacrament to the Sisters' small Chapel. Later in the year the School Inspector arrived; faces looked glum for at his last visit in 1928 he had declared Vleischfontein to be the worst of his 150 Native schools. However, he was so pleased with the progress that, in April, four teachers received Government grants teaching from Kindergarten to Standard IV. Nor was this all. Sister Barnaba Werkstätter was given a special grant of £4 quarterly to teach the children gardening. Bishop O'Leary, visiting the Mission about this time, administered the Sacrament of Confirmation to 33 Natives and ordained Brother Wm. Le Dreau Priest. After his ordination he continued for 31 years to fulfil priestly duties as an Oblate Father in the Transvaal till he died at Pretoria in January, 1957. At the time of his Ordination, on Christmas Day, 220 Natives received Holy Communion at Midnight Mass.

1940 By 1940 some 800 souls were attending the Mission Church. This included their chief and his family. One of his daughters even became a Holy Family nun and his niece joined our African Sisterhood of King William's Town. Unfortunately some of the Natives were recruited to the Rand Mines where they imbibed communistic principals and on their return imbued others with the same. In 1946 as many as 300 fell away from the Church in spite of the restraining influence of the Chief, Mokoko, a staunch Catholic. In 1947 the Communistic disturbances played further havoc among the Natives who were now split into two distinct parties.

1949 The Fathers then, after 70 years of successful work, decided to close the Mission and to transfer their endeavours to spread Christianity elsewhere. On the morning of the 7th July, 1950 our Sisters, after 21 years of service, left Vleischfontein for our Convent at Springs where they made their annual Retreat. Before leaving Vleischfontein the Fathers demolished the consecrated Church. The altar from the Sisters' Chapel was taken to Rustenburg. The windows and doors, and in fact all that could be removed from the Church, were transferred to the Fathers' new Mission beyond Communistic influence.

Rustenburg – St Margaret’s Convent

1950 At the request of Bishop J C Garner of the Pretoria Diocese Mother Demetria Hemmer then opened St Margaret’s Convent, Rustenburg with a party of three Sisters. The pioneers were: Sister Magdalene McLeod, Superior, Sister Ulric Stephen, Principal of Schools and Sister Auxiliatrix Lutz, Music Teacher. They arrived on the 7th July, 1950 and were welcomed by Father J Johnson C.S.S.R. and Brother Andrew of the same Congregation. Sr Bernadette Weisshaupt came the following year to teach the Grades and Std I. as Mother Demetria was overseas Mother Aquilina Spiegel and Sister Gilbert Litzel and Sister Eulalia Motz accompanied the pioneers to their new home and helped to set it in order. Unfortunately Mother Aquilina, while helping to arrange the Sisters’ Chapel fell and broke her arm. She went back to her Convent next day and had the arm in plaster for six weeks.

On the 23rd July, 1950 the Bishop himself sang Pontifical High Mass in the Church which had previously been built by the Oblates. In the sermon Father John O’Brien C.S.S.R. referred to the Dominican Sisters as spreading from King William’s Town to the Vaal and on beyond the Limpopo and now at last settling as a small beginning at Rustenburg to aid the Redemptorist Fathers.

School opened on 1st August with 15 pupils; the number soon rose to 60. At the earnest request of the rural section of the population boarding accommodation was, in January, 1952, made available and first 5 Catholic boarders were welcomed. In August of the same year our Congregation bought the property on which the Sisters now live, and later a vacant plot and a citrus orchard. Owing to the increase of pupils it was found necessary to build on the newly acquired ground a large modern school.

In 1952 Sister Rose Dixon succeeded Sister Magdalene as Superior and in the same year Sister Fortunata Hummel came to take over the schools. She found 47 children on the roll with classes ranging from the Grades to Std VI. These included 5 boarders. In 1953 Sister Rose was transferred to Welkom and Sister Fortunata became Superior. By August, 1954 the roll had increased to 71 and in August the new building was started by Brother Aloysius. It was ready for use in August, 1955 and the numbers rapidly increased to over 100. This included children to Std VIII.

Since the establishment of the Hierarchy in South Africa in 1952 Rustenburg comes under the Archdiocese of Pretoria with Archbishop Garner in charge.

Zeerust – St Francis Xavier

1951 Further to the West of Rustenburg but also in the Archdiocese of Pretoria is Zeerust with its Church of Saint Francis Xavier here in 1951 Mother Demetria, Prioress General, had bought for the Congregation property with a view to opening a Convent to supply the educational needs of Catholic children in that area. She had one this at the request of Archbishop Garner. However, owing to extreme shortage of staff she was obliged to inform the Archbishop that she was unable to send Sisters to Zeerust.

In 1954 when Mother Aquilina Spiegel was Prioress General the property passed to the Sisters of Charity of St Paul. They established there St Mary’s Convent School where they teach girls and junior boys from the Kindergarten to Matriculation.