

CHAPTER XXV

Stutterheim – St Dominic's Convent

Stutterheim, formerly known as Fort Dohne or Dohne Valley, had not Catholic school. Founded by baron von Stutterheim and his life-long friend, Captain Ohlsen and laid out by the British German Foreign Legion, which the baron himself had inaugurated, the pretty little town nestles at the foot of the Amatola Mountains, lovely guardians of Kaffraria. The Baron had come to South Africa as Commanding-General of seven ships conveying 10,000 legionaries who had fought in the Crimean War. An essentially German section of these travelled with their "loved father and friend" as Sergeant Steinhart calls the Baron, to Stutterheim.

Several of these settlers were Catholics visited by Missionary Priests stationed at King William's Town. Among these missionaries was Father J J Sany who had previously worked at Cradock and at Uitenhage. At the latter place he had built a Church and was loved and respected by all during the 18 years of his mission work with them. At Stutterheim he built St Joseph's Church in Long Street. Previous to this the only building in Stutterheim was the Court House and there the Jesuits, especially Fathers Engels and Nesser said Mass. It was also the scene of all public functions. There too the people of Stutterheim said farewell to Father Nesser when they heard they were no longer to be served by the Jesuits of Grahamstown. At the farewell Father Nesser humorously said he objected to being brought to court by a policeman and later when he was presented with a purse he reminded the donors that Jesuits did not work for gold but for the honour and glory of God.

St Joseph's Church now, 1956, after 90 years still serves the 100-odd parishioners of Stutterheim, but its days are numbered for it is to give way for a new and larger Church in the very near future.

Its opening ceremony was performed by Bishop Moran assisted by Father J P'Connell of Fort Beaufort. Father de Sany lay dying in King William's Town where he was buried in August 1869. Amongst those present at the dedication were Colonel Schermbrucker, Mr R Egan, and Miss Mary Fitzgerald all from King William's Town.

During the Kaffir Wars the Church was used as a lager and in it one night a Protestant mother gave birth to a son. In 1953 he was still alive; but, though born in a Catholic Church, he is not a Catholic.

- 1929** On the 5th April, 1929 the Propaganda Fidei, permitted Mother Augustine Geisel to open a Convent of our Congregation at Stutterheim. Foundation Day was fixed for 17th August. Milner House, a private hotel, was bought from Mr F E G Aspeling and the little band of five pioneer Sisters arrived. They re-named the place St Dominic's convent. The pioneers were: Sister Placida Miller, Sister Columba Koller (Sacristan), Sister Osanna Haslinger (House Sister), Sister Thomasita Nübling (Commercial Teacher), Sister Thelma Lobinger (Cook). The teaching staff came later in the same year: Sister Theodora Linder (Kindergarten), Sister Alexis McLoughlin (Primary teacher), and Sister Elvira Redler (Music). School started in January, 1930.
- 1940** In 1940 the Convent was raised to the status of a Priory. The existing Superior, Sister Gregoria Nachbauer, became the first Prioress. In 1932 a double-storeyed building was erected. It was blessed by Father A Wergen and was intended for boy boarders; but when the girls outnumbered the boys it was used for them and the boys were transferred first to the Annexe and later to Roseneath when in 1950 it was purchased from Mr Dennis Wylde. In 1944 Mother Augustine bought "The Retreat", an adjoining property. She hoped that at some future date the grounds might be used for building a hospital. The spot would have been ideal for that purpose for it faces the lovely Amatola Mountains with

their forest-clad slopes and thrilling waterfalls. Patients would enjoy the scenery and yet be far enough removed from the forests to avoid their dank mists. The hospital was not feasible and so in 1956 "The Retreat" was again sold.

1936 As Stutterheim possessed no facilities for nursing and tending the African and Coloured and sick, at the beginning of 1938, St Mary's Clinic was opened as an offshoot of St Dominic's two Sisters from the Convent took up residence in the double-storey section of the present (1956) School for Coloureds. On the 4th March, the first patient, Gabat Guskoni, was admitted as a pneumonia case by Dr W B Johnston. From that time there was a steadily increasing flow of patients so that the limited accommodation of 7 beds and 2 cots was quite inadequate. Medical, surgical and obstetric cases were taken. Doctors and Sisters were kept busy day and night.

The Stutterheim Dispensary Committee supplied medicines; the Convent gave 2 Sisters as staff and also food for patients and staff. Most of the furniture belonged to the Mission which is run by the Pallottini Fathers. Every year there was a steady increase of patients until 1949 when the Clinic closed. The closing was due to opposition of the Dutch Reformed Minister, who agreed to run a better clinic. This, however, did not materialise, and he soon left for Cradock.

Among those who worked indefatigably in the interests of St Mary's Clinic were Father A Wergen, Mrs Jessie Alcock and Sister Cortona Haas. Father Wergen was mainly instrumental in doing the thankless preliminaries of starting the Clinic. Mrs Alcock of the Dispensary Committee brought joy to every patient by her visits and especially by playing a Lady Bountiful at Christmas time. Dull indeed would the festal season have been without her. Sister Cortona worked without a break for 10 of the 12 years of the Clinic's existence. With only one assistant, she was on call day and night and always had a kind sympathetic smile. A European who came to take away his discharged servant said: "I like to come here, for to meet a woman like the Sister-in-charge makes me a braver man." Her life was devoted to suffering humanity. When the Clinic was closed at the end of 1949 Sister Cortona left with a heavy heart. Her departing words were: "I hope the Native Clinic will be reopened and that I shall again be permitted to work here." Sister Cortona died as a patient at our Mater Dei Hospital, East London, 10th March, 1953.

In 1947 Mother Joseph Sweetnam arrived as Prioress of St Dominic's Convent. During the previous World War years repairs had been sadly halted, and inferior building material had perforce been used. It was now found essential to substitute earthenware underground pipes for the old iron sewerage, also to build new septic tanks and French drains. Underground burrowing became the order of the day till at last six ducts, with tanks and French drains were completed.

Repairs above ground were equally needed and soon both plasterers and painters were renovating the Convent. Foundations were laid for a new laundry and servants' quarters. The unsightly spot where the old building had stood was transformed into the nucleus of a playground with merry-go-rounds, sea-saws and hop-scotch plots. New sports grounds were laid out later with tennis courts and netball field.

Hitherto the Sisters had been accommodated with sleeping rooms among the children and it was felt they should have a private and self-contained section to themselves. So the former Annexe of Milner House was fitted with hot and cold water, the three rooms were divided into cubicles and accommodation was given there to nine Sisters.

The 24th September, 1951 Stutterheim held its first civic reception of a cleric when Bishop J B Rosenthal was received by the leading town celebrities in the Town Hall. The Sisters and their pupils contributed largely to the success of the reception.

1953 In 1953 Mother Joseph was made a General Councillor and this office released her from Stutterheim. Her place was taken by Mother Hedwig Oelberger. She has given the Convent a copious supply of water for the gardens and lands; but the possible amount of water per hour obtained from the borehole precludes the making of a swimming bath. Now, in 1957, she is enormously busy helping all the events that will lead to the opening of the new Church. At this the Sisters will have their own private Oratory. Hitherto they knelt with the public and because of shortage of floor space went to Mass in relays on Sunday.