

## Chapter 10 – Klerksdorp, Transvaal

### *On the Banks of the Schoonspruit*

Klerksdorp, the oldest town in the Transvaal, was founded in 1837 by the early Voortrekkers.<sup>1</sup> It lies on the Skoorspruit (Fair River) and was named after a certain Mr de Clerq who acted as secretary to the Voortrekker leader, Andries Hendrik Potgieter. It is situated some thirty miles from Potchefstroom.

The country was still teeming with game. Large herds of Springbok,<sup>2</sup> Blesbok,<sup>3</sup> and Wildebeest<sup>4</sup> roamed the veld, while Hippopotami cavorted in the river which now meanders so peacefully through the Convent grounds. About 150 years ago elands<sup>5</sup> were shot on the hill overlooking the Convent. This hill is still known as “Elandsheuwel”. Snakes, too, were plentiful then; the early chronicle frequently relates incidents of dogs wrestling with cobras and puff adders until they succumbed to the reptiles’ venom; and how inguanas<sup>6</sup> came up from the river, “milked the cows, took toll of the eggs in the poultry roosts, killing hens and chickens.” Lions and leopards also lurked for their prey in the high grass, till at last they were driven away or shot.

The first township consisted of only 25 plots and was known as “de Oude Dorp” (the old village). In 1886 gold was discovered nearby and a new township was started which soon overshadowed the other on the opposite bank of the stream, attaining such prosperity that it supported a Stock Exchange. Erratic deposits and difficulties in extracting the precious metal put an end to most of these activities. Its mining fortunes were, however, revived on the discovery that the Rand Gold Reef extended beyond Randfontein. Since 1953 further developments have taken place. Klerksdorp is now a manufacturing town as well, and it is growing steadily.

When this town first became a busy mining camp, hotels, bottle stores and shops sprang up. But there was no hospital at all and conditions became so bad that the sick had to be housed in the vestibule of the local gaol. It was towards the end of 1890 when the citizens of Klerksdorp requested Prioress Mauritia at King William’s Town for nurses. In 1893 the first nuns arrived and were warmly welcomed by Father Stephan Hammer, OMI. There were among the pioneers two teachers, a housekeeper and four other Sister to take over the nursing duties. The first convent here had its origin in an abandoned bar near the market square on the site later occupied by the Tivoli Hotel. Sister Evangelista Herley described this shelter as “old, dirty and dilapidated” when they reached it; yet it had also to serve as a little school. The initial difficulties can hardly be imagined, yet generously supported by the doctors and chief citizens of the town, the undertaking seemed to prosper for a time. But partly owing to the heavy rains which rendered the old building damp and unsafe, and partly also in default of experienced nurses – for the Sisterhood at that time was chiefly an educational institution – the hospital closed down in 1895 to the intense disappointment of the Klerksdorpians. The school carried on for a few months longer, but as the Prefect Apostolic found it necessary to withdraw Father Dupays owing to the shortage of Priests, the Sisters were also recalled and the school closed down...

The Dominicans’ second foundation in this place was more propitious. Mr John Baumann of Potchefstroom urged the local Superior, Mother Lucy Kaltenstadler, to advise her authorities at King William’s Town to procure the property that was being offered for sale at Klerksdorp, without delay. This purchase was a bolt from the blue. Mr Thomas Leask, while on a visit in Scotland, had instructed his agent to sell certain properties. The man, however, made the mistake of selling Mr Leask’s home at a low price pin-pointed for a smaller piece of ground. Thus the Sisters acquired a large house with outhouses, tennis court and a well laid-out garden on a large plot, for a paltry sum. Mr Leask, with his characteristic

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<sup>1</sup> *Pioneers;*

<sup>2</sup> *South African Gazelle;*

<sup>3</sup> *South African antelope;*

<sup>4</sup> *Gnu;*

<sup>5</sup> *South African antelope of heavy build;*

<sup>6</sup> *Large lizards;*

generosity told the nuns that it was a consolation to know that the new owners of his home would do much good therein.

Thomas Leask was the owner of a large estate, a shop and trading station. As the 'Father of the town' he received visits from prominent persons. Thus Mr F C Selous,<sup>7</sup> the famous big game hunter and explorer, brought ivory, horns and other hunting trophies to the Leasks' residence. President Paul Kruger stayed twice in this house, smoking his customary pipe and being entertained on the capacious stoep.<sup>8</sup>

March 1896 marked the opening of the new school. The staff consisted of Mother Reginalda Fischer with Sister Winifred Simpkins as headmistress, and ten other nuns.<sup>9</sup> The Sisters arrived in three sections: one party came with the first train from Potchefstroom to Klerksdorp. They travelled in a cattle truck which stopped at the rail head from which the ladies were helped to alight by officials who brought a small ladder to avoid the big jump from the train to "terra firma". A second division came from the Mother House by train as far as Kroonstad and then by post cart to Klerksdorp. The third group travelled via Johannesburg by mule wagon.

ON the first day seven boarders and about fifty day scholars were present. The numbers soon increased and, already in the following year, the outhouses were turned into accommodation for the newcomers. Mrs Leask's beautifully painted bedroom was a gem of a chapel and remained so until 1908, when it was changed into the Sisters' refectory and a more spacious, if less graceful, chapel was built.

Just as the Mother House at King William's Town was at the beginning temporarily hampered by the war with Chief Kreli, so this convent at Klerksdorp sustained a great drawback, soon after its foundation, from the political unrest which culminated in the South African War. For many years the Convent was the only English medium school in the district. Parents were delighted to find they could procure education locally for both their sons and daughters up to Matriculation standard. The first Matric candidate passed in 1902. Indeed the public realised the full value of these private schools for they furnished a standard of educational training that was at the time not surpassed by any school in South Africa. Public schools were as yet very scarce, and hundreds of boys and girls, who at that time were receiving no instruction, would have remained practically uncared for, were it not for these private institutions. The needy and poverty-stricken, too, irrespective of race, class or creed, have been able to find education, clothing and a home in such centres. Members of the staff of these schools, when morning tea was served them, often took their portions to poor children who had had no breakfast that day. Small wonder then that, in November 1899, Fr John de Lacy OMI, speaking officially at Pretoria, could say: "Though war has been declared, the Sisters at Klerksdorp and Potchefstroom will not be interfered with."

During these war years the educational activities of Klerksdorp were entirely in the hands of the Dominican Sisters who kept their day-school open right through the time of strife. During this period these two Dominican houses in the Transvaal were entirely cut off from their Mother House in the Cape Colony; So Potchefstroom Convent was obliged to remit the rest of the money still owing on the Klerksdorp property. When the latter town was placed under martial law regulations, the market square was laagered<sup>10</sup> against potential attack and at the hoot of the siren all citizens were to hasten to it. The Sisters only, formed an exception because the new superior, Mother Euphemia Koffler, had offered their services as nurses in case of necessity. So the convent prepared to be turned into a hospital and a marquee was erected in the grounds. The "rat-tat-tat" of rifle fire was often heard at night, riddling Elandsheувel Street at the back of the convent, and no lights were allowed after dark. Not even the sanctuary lamp in

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<sup>7</sup> *He was born in England and came to Port Elizabeth in 1871. From there he made his way to Kimberley and thence he started his first expedition to the Zambesi country and beyond. He became known and respected by the Matabele tribe. Later he met Cecil Rhodes and undertook to act as guide for the proposed expedition to Mashonaland in 1890.*

<sup>8</sup> *A terraced verandah in front of the house;*

<sup>9</sup> *Sisters Veronica Gray, Columba Koller, Gregoria Nachbauer, Placida Mueller, Pulcheria Witt, Nicolina Jauch, Immaculata Westermeyer, Leopoldina Weiss, Hyacintha Denz and Genevieve Guggenmos.*

<sup>10</sup> *An encampment of wagons in a circle*

the chapel could burn in its usual place before the altar but was placed in a retired screened-off corner of the church.

Food was scarce and prices prohibitive. Fortunately the Sisters had a few cows so they had milk which they shared with their pupils and the sick. Sugar, tea and coffee became entirely unobtainable. Dried fruit put through a mincer and mixed with water formed a beverage called 'coffee', Both the English and the Burghers used to send provisions to the school when they could, and these were, of course, most welcome.

The convent annals record that "... a long crocodile of wagons would enter the town, the convoy carrying wounded soldiers to the hospital. On arrival at the laager or the Marquee at the convent, the wounded were laid in two rows outside the casualty ward to await their turn for treatment and admission. A Sister would go through these pathetic rows and render first aid to the most serious cases. Many a young man owed his life to these ministrations of the nuns."

During the siege of Klerksdorp, which lasted three months, the water from the river was completely cut off. Fortunately the convent was one of the few places that had a well. This was kept locked and water was given free of charge to whoever asked, for domestic purposes only. During the typhoid and diphtheria epidemics which broke out, the convent was hit hard and, although there were no deaths, the nuns had some very bad cases.

Governments changed hands frequently: on some days it would be the Union Jack which flew over the town; the next day the Vierkleur<sup>11</sup> would be hoisted again. But the Generals on either side were very considerate and helpful while hunted men of both parties were given shelter by the nuns until the danger had passed. General Louis Cronje as well as Lord Methuen and Major Coleridge saw to the regular rations of the nuns. The convent could only repay these benefits by permitting the officers the use of the baths in the hostel department, which the men so missed during the heat and long marches. For months the fighting went on, on either side of the Schoonspruit; in the convent grounds the trenches behind which the soldiers fought were visible for more than half a century.

On 9<sup>th</sup> April 1902 a conference was held, in a tent pitched in the convent grounds near the river, as a preliminary to the Treaty of Vereeniging.<sup>12</sup> The convent also lent chairs to the officials in attendance. The Transvaal was represented by:

Vice President S Burger  
State Secretary F W Reitz  
Commandant General Louis Botha  
General J H de la Rey  
General L J Meyer  
J C Krogh and  
L Jacobs

The Delegates of the Orange Free State were:

President M T Steyn  
General C R de Wet  
Vice Commander J B M Hertzog  
General C H Olivier  
General J C Smuts and  
Secretary W T Brebner

When the chairs were returned they were still ticketed with these names. Mother Euphemia had the presence of mind to have the names painted in white enamel on these now historic chairs, which were later given to the Paul Kruger Society.

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<sup>11</sup> *The Flag of the old South African Republic comprising red, white, green and blue stripes;*

<sup>12</sup> *The actual Treaty of Vereeniging was finally signed at Pretoria*

The South African War was just about over. The Boer leaders had been locked in agonising debate for 3 days before they finally signed the agreement with England.

President Steyn and General de Wet were the rock against which foundered earlier attempts to persuade the delegates to accept terms of peace. At the end a powerful address by General Smuts, then only 32 years of age, undoubtedly helped clinch the success for the party that wanted peace. The young General reminded the Boer delegates that they represented all the Afrikaner people and not only those in the battle-field against Britain. He said: "... Our people are calling to us from the prisoner-of-war camps scattered over the globe, from the concentration camps,<sup>13</sup> from the grave, yes and from the womb of the future, to decide wisely so that the future generation of Afrikaners will bless and not curse us... We were prepared to sacrifice everything for the noble cause of our independence, but we may not sacrifice the entire nation for that cause. The result of the struggle we must leave in God's Hands. Perhaps it is His Will to lead the people of this land through defeat and humiliation, yea, through the valley of death..." Strong, battle-scarred Boers broke down and wept...

The terms of the treaty were essentially the same as those put forward at Middelburg, Transvaal, about a year previously. The Burghers agreed to lay down arms and acknowledge King Edward VII as their lawful sovereign; and the British promised the period of military administration would give way to self-government as soon as circumstances permit. In addition the English agreed to pay a certain sum of money to help repair the damage done to Boer farms during the second guerrilla phase of the war.

After the cessation of hostilities and the rehabilitation of the country, borders were taken in again and the school began to grow. New classrooms were laid out and completed in 1909, 1913 and again in 1918. On account of the influenza epidemic it was difficult to obtain workmen and building operations were often interrupted in the latter year. A laundry, work-rooms, stables and other outhouses were erected later. A fine hall was added to the school in 1939 which was the envy of the town for many a year.

It must have been a strong spirit of faith and a desire to help souls that animated the early Sisters of the congregation, when the greatest part of the farm work on the extensive grounds had to be done by the nuns because labourers were not easily obtained. As early as 1912 the annals record frequent droughts, sometimes lasting from February to December, and frosts that killed fruit trees and vines. Then again "the air was so hot that the candles in the chapel were bent during Midnight Mass." At other times there would be such terrible thunderstorms that the Sisters feared lightning was sure to strike their house. Or "hail fell, the stones as big as hens' eggs, breaking hundreds of window panes in the school and destroying all the fruit of the year in half an hour." Several times the river in flood overflowed its banks; in 1913 the water came up as far as the windmill, ruining all the crops. In 1976 they experienced the worst flood ever... More than once the Sisters and their pupils walked through the grounds in procession asking God's protection and blessing, and they were always amply rewarded for their trust in prayer.

The epidemic of the "Spanish Influenza" after World War I eventually reached such proportions that whole families died out. The overworked doctors asked the nuns to come to their aid and generously they responded. The chronicle mentions specially Sisters Borromea Allgaeuer and St James Bildstein who "did most of the nursing, and were isolated from the rest of the community until the danger had passed" ... "Despite the relatively poor accommodation of our Sisters and their pupils, they were spared. God's providence watched particularly over those who had to be in constant contact with the victims of the

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<sup>13</sup> *These settlements, 34 in all, established by the British Military Authorities during the South African War remove the women and children from the fighting zones. Though the motive of this was doubtless humanitarian, the system was so badly administered that thousands of women and children died in these camps mainly due to outbreaks of diseases and lack of proper sanitation. This caused intense bitterness among the Boers. Miss Emily Hobhouse, a social reformer and an Anglican minister's daughter, came to South Africa, had the system re-examined and secured the adoption of suitable reforms, which improved the conditions substantially. In 1901 she went back to England to collect relief funds. In 1903 she returned to South Africa and began implementing home industries. Spinning and weaving schools were founded at Philippolis and Langlaagte, and a lace school at Koppies. Miss Hobhouse died in England in 1926 and her ashes were buried at the Women and Children's Memorial at Bloemfontein, the greatest honour the Afrikaner people could bestow on the "Angel of Mercy!"*

dread disease. The hospital was hopelessly overcrowded, so the Railway Institute and the Milner School, the two largest buildings then available, were turned into temporary hospitals.”

A very sore trial to the nuns was the fact that owing to the fewness of priests in the Transvaal there was only the travelling priest available for Klerksdorp from 1890 to 1913. There was often no Mass for the community on Sundays because their pastor could not reach Klerksdorp being prevented by impassable roads in the rainy season or by some other obstacle. After 12 years of strenuous and incessant labours there, Father F de Corme OMI, died and lies buried in the convent cemetery. He was succeeded by his Oblate Confreres and for some time by Dominican Priests<sup>14</sup> until the Oblate Fathers again took charge of the area.

All the schools of the Congregation have grown from very humble beginnings. Many of the Klerksdorp pupils now come by luxury bus from the new mining centres in the vicinity such as Orkney and Stilfontein. In 1910 the Sisters had to procure horses and a “bus” to convey some of the children to the old section of the town, when there were as yet very few houses near the convent.

The school was always well patronised by the public and examination results were at all times gratifying. Among the chief Inspectors who visited this school in its early days were Mr van der Linde and Mr C.P. Hoogenhout. Many people who have become famous in and outside South Africa were educated at this convent. There was Cecilia Horwitz who obtained the first place in Bookkeeping, Shorthand and Typewriting among all the candidates of the British Empire in 1912. She also passed the Associate of Music while still a Matriculant.

In 1913 Peter Lemmer obtained a bursary from the Trinity College of Music, London, and several other prizes. He was one of the first “stars” in the convent’s history for he became a professor of Music and an Examiner attached to the University of Cape Town. Another celebrity is Leontine Sagan who, after obtaining her early training at Klerksdorp, went to Europe and studied under a “king of theatre”, Max Reinhardt. She acquired an international reputation with her production on stage and screen of “Children in Uniform” and she also became the first woman producer to work at Drury Lane. Later she returned to South Africa where “she turned up the wick of the South African theatrical lamp when its glimmerings were the feeblest...” Mother Joseph Sweetnam was also a past pupil of Klerksdorp Convent and Bishop D. O’Leary OMI was proud to admit that he received his early schooling from the Dominican nuns at Klerksdorp. Many other past pupils became teachers, doctors or reached prominence in other spheres. These past pupils have amusing stories to tell about their days under the Sisters’ tuition when they were still young and full of mischief.

The Principal of the Teachers’ College at Johannesburg, when on a visit to Klerksdorp, congratulated the local headmistress on the excellent grounding which the scholars had received at her school previous to their entering the College.

One day a small boarder caused great anxiety to the whole school. Little Louis Cronje – possibly descendant of the Boer General by that name – could not be found anywhere in the school premises. His father was informed, who came in all haste. People from town helped in the search and even the police came to drag the river but there was no trace of the child. Eventually a little girl told her teacher that she had seen Louis walking in the direction of his father’s farm. It was his mother’s birthday and homesickness got the better of him. *Enfant terrible!* But what a relief...

The years rolled on and by 1925 the opening of a Catholic House of Studies as a prelude to a Catholic University in South Africa was frequently mooted. In that year the Apostolic Delegate, Archbishop Gijlswijk OP, felt that the time had come to make a modest beginning. As Klerksdorp Convent had extensive grounds for potential extension, it was decided to erect the first House of Studies there. This

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<sup>14</sup> *Father Lawrence Shapcote, the son of a missionary, was born in the Free State in 1864. He became a Catholic with his mother.. When they had left South Africa he entered the Dominican Order and was one of the first Dominican Priests to work in the Western Transvaal. Father Ceslaus Hylands, op came from an old South African family and was the first vocation for the Dominican Priests from South Africa. He also worked in the Western Transvaal and later on the east Rand.*

was inaugurated on 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1926 by Mother General Lucy Kaltenstadler of the “King” Dominicans. The newly erected hostel received some twelve young nuns from King William’s Town with Mother Paula Wahlspoeck in the dual capacity of principal and Mistress of Novices. Books were supplied by various branch convents; thus was formed the nucleus of what was hoped to be a big educational move. As a mark of the Archbishop’s special interest in the new enterprise, His Excellency presented a large statue of St Dominic to the House of Studies.

The Superiors of other religious Congregations had become enthusiastic about the venture so, in 1927, student Sisters from every corner of South Africa assembled at Klerksdorp. The Dominicans of Oakford were the first to arrive. In charge of this group was Sister M Benedicta who also joined the teaching Staff, specialising in Afrikaans. Sister M Maxima and Sister M Editha headed the party from Mariannhill. Soon there followed a lively set of nuns from the Precious Blood Institute, who had recently come out to South Africa. Benedictines from South West Africa came, as well as Dominicans from Rhodesia and Sisters of Charity from the Northern Transvaal; and there was now keen emulation among these students from the various Sisterhoods.

Meanwhile, Mother Paula’s<sup>15</sup> task of coping with the vastly increased work-load had become impossible even for one of her calibre. Help came when the Apostolic Delegate enlisted the talents of the gifted Miss Evelyn Mitchell<sup>16</sup> for the House of Studies. The Superior’s work was further lessened at this time when she resigned her post as Novice Mistress to Sister Aquinata Heinzle, op.

The ecclesiastical authorities, encouraged by the success of the Matriculation results, wished the Government to turn the House of Studies into a Training College for Teachers. At first, hopes ran high; but soon, from unofficial sources, the rumour came that there was no hope that the State would co-operate or give consent to these plans. What had been begun so optimistically was doomed to failure. The students dispersed to their several Sisterhoods; those belonging to the “King” Congregation went to the Mother House, and by arrangement of the new Prioress General, Mother Augustine, Geisel, were drafted to the Training college at King William’s Town. Thus Klerksdorp Convent once more reverted to the status of a boarding school.

A great change came for the town when the nuns’ chapel ceased to be the quasi-Parish Church. The parochial church was built in the new township and this necessitated having the presbytery there also. By this time the convent had reached its 60<sup>th</sup> year of life. Improvements to the institution continued throughout the years. In 1968, for various reasons, it was deemed expedient to close down the boarding department. The hostel block then accommodated part of the expanded Primary School from the Grades to Standard Five.

Another milestone in the school’s history was reached when the new differential syllabus of the Transvaal Education Department demanded that more study courses be offered to pupils in Standard Eight, in preparation for their future curriculum. The Sisters then decided to link hands with the Teaching Brothers of Charity who conduct a Boys’ College at Klerksdorp. Education is really the preparation of the young for life, in which men and women will have to complement each other. In stepping out from their traditional separatist schools, and introducing the Co-Education System into the senior sections of their schools, these teachers strove to widen their vision and hoped to offer boys and girls a fuller preparation for life.

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. page 166.

<sup>16</sup> *She had studied at Rhodes, Cape Town and London Universities. On her return to her native and she lectured in French at Natal University College and later held the post of University Librarian. In 1930 she entered the Convent at King William’s Town and was thereafter known as Sister Camillus. The young Sisters, who were privileged to receive their first English lessons from her, remember her kindness and her delightful sense of humour. She served the Congregation as Principal of several schools, as Hospital Secretary at “Mater Dei”, East London and as General Councillor. Here she showed her great love for the Church, the Dominican Order and her Congregation. The following lines from St Augustine, typical of her life of faith and hope, were found among her effects after her death: ‘There we shall rest, and we shall see, We shall see and we shall love: We shall love and we shall praise. Thus will it BE WITHOUT END .... AT THE END.’*