

Chapter 33 – School for the Deaf at ‘King’ at Melrose

Silence around me...

The education of the Deaf¹ by the King William’s Town Sisters dates back to within the first ten years of the congregation’s history. It began, like so many great things, in an incidental manner. In 1884 a deaf boy, Tom Moore, was brought to Mother Mauritia Tiefenboeck in the hope that the sisters would be able to help him. This task was assigned to Sister M Stephana Hanshuber, who had some training at the famous institute for the Deaf at Dillingen, Bavaria.

Within the next couple of years five more deaf pupils were admitted. The little seed had begun to germinate and in 1888 the King William’s Town Convent School for the Education of the Deaf was formally opened. This was the first school in South Africa to use the Oral Method of Instruction for the Deaf.²

After 13 years of devoted service to the Deaf, Sister Stephana died, hardly realising what great development lay ahead of the humble work she had begun. She was succeeded by Sister Gisella Greissel as Principal of the school. During the 30 years of her principalship the sphere of work in the school was considerably extended. She believed that deaf children can be educated in all branches open to normal children, with the exception of Music alone.

Until 1917 the King William’s Town School for the Deaf was carried on as a private venture. In that year the institution was placed under the Education Department of the Cape Province and it began to receive partial grants-in-aid. The oral method of instruction was maintained and the curriculum was based on the standard requirements set down by the Education Department and the school was visited like ordinary schools by Inspectors of the Department. At the beginning of 1925 there were 26 deaf pupils, 16 girls and ten boys. The girls lived at Loreto Hostel with the other boarders and the boys had their own quarters at “Avoca”. The classes, which ranged from the Grades to Standard Six, were in a block between Avoca and the “old house”, and later in the cottage known as “St Catharine’s”.³

In 1924 Sister Cyrilla Hoetzl (who became the school’s third Principal) and Sister Verena Huber attended a teachers’ training college at the Clarke School for the Deaf at Nottingham, U.S.A. There they studied the latest methods and newest appliances employed in the oral method of teaching the Deaf and acquired special Diplomas. The school they took over in January 1925 had indeed a high reputation as can be seen from reports of the inspector, Mr Bain:

“September 1923: The work done by both the regular teachers and by others who give instruction in drawing, painting, woodwork, cookery and typing is deserving the highest praise. An interesting addition to the work done hitherto is the study of Afrikaans, which the two most advanced girls find very interesting.”

And again

“September 1924: In all classes satisfactory progress has been made and, as usual, the work reflects the greatest credit on the members of the staff. The needlework and the drawing are exceptionally good.”

It is interesting to follow up the careers of some of Sister Gisella’s pupils: Nellie Atkinson and Eileen Piccione took up commercial work. They qualified in Typewriting and Bookkeeping and were employed in regular office work. Jessie Mitchell went to England for a course of special training and subsequently ran a successful flower farm in Natal. Tom Moore, the first deaf pupil of the school served among Lord Kitchener’s Scouts during the Anglo-Boer War. Willie Bevington, who received his first art lesson from Sister Gisella, became the first Professor Art at the University of Cape Town. Jack Landrey became a

¹ *The Cabra Dominican Sisters opened the first school for the Deaf in South Africa.*

² *The manual Method of Instruction was used in the Grikley School, Cape Town, and at the School for the Dutch Reformed Church, Worcester.*

³ *Was formerly a Presbyterian Parsonage.*

successful farmer. David Scott attended an Agricultural College. Vivian Whipp, Willie Braidwood and Collier Williams took up trades... Not without good reason did the Johannesburg "Star", in July 1924, call it "the school that is second to none".

When Sisters Cyrilla and Verena took over they made practical application of what they had learned in America. Subsequently these teachers kept regular correspondence with the best American Institute for the Deaf. The new methods soon attracted the attention of the Education Authorities and other interested in the work.

A Letter from the Guild of St John Beverley for work among the Deaf in England, whose secretary had visited the school, reads:

"... As the first English Deaf worker and a broadminded Christian and member of the Anglican Church, I have great pleasure in testifying to the work done by the Sisters of your Convent for the Deaf. The school may be small but those who guide it have indeed the gift of organisation... The methods of teaching are excellent and the children seem bright, intelligent and happy. I hope the work will prosper as it deserves to do..."

By a special Act of Parliament all special schools, including that of King William's Town School for the Deaf, came directly under the Union Education Department in 1926.

Meanwhile the school had far outgrown the pioneer stage. But much more important than the secular training, which is to equip the deaf handicapped successfully to take their place in social and economic life, is their religious education. The teaching of religion to deaf children is indeed a spiritual work of mercy; and it was this aspect, without doubt, which induced our revered Foundress, Mother Mauritia Tiefenboeck, to initiate this work when her Congregation had only just been formed. Needless to say, the imparting of religious knowledge to her charges must be considered the chief duty as well as the highest privilege of every Religious teacher. Deaf children, in particular, respond easily and readily to the concept of God's goodness and His love and care for them, provided these truths are presented to them in a simple and practical way. Their tendency to accept all religious teaching at its face value, of interpreting everything in its most literal sense and of applying it to the most unexpected situations, can be as embarrassing as it is amusing for the teacher.

There was a small school for the Deaf in Johannesburg, run by one teacher, Miss Jessie Davis, under the aegis of the "Deaf and Dumb Association".⁴ The school was sorely in need of financial aid. The Government, when approached by this Association for the Deaf, realised that the Cape Province had three such schools, while nothing had been done in the Transvaal to support the Deaf. Investigation showed that the oral method of teaching the Deaf in South Africa was used only at the school of the nuns at King William's Town. In 1933 Mr J H Hofmeyr, then Minister of Education, and Mother General Augustine Geisel agreed to the amalgamation of her Convent School for the Deaf with that of Johannesburg and to Miss J A Davis joining the staff of the new school. Mother General then bought the ten-acre property of Mr M Simpson, "The Haven", in the suburb of Melrose, and the entire staff with their deaf pupils were transferred from the Mother House to their new Home, ST VINCENT'S SCHOOL FOR THE DEAF, Johannesburg.

On the 23rd January 1934, Right Rev Bishop D O'Leary, O.M.I. blessed the house and Col M C Rowland, C.M.G., Chairman of the Deaf and Dumb Association, formally handed over the school to the Dominican Sisters in the presence of Bishop C. Cox, O.M.I, Rev Father Lawrence Shapcote, O.P., some 18 other priests, Mother General and many friends and well-wishers. All were delighted with the beautiful surroundings of the institution. The following day school opened with 38 pupils, including ten day scholars.

⁴ It is no longer proper to speak of the "Deaf and Dumb", for these children are neither dumb nor less intelligent than those who hear.

⁵ *Dedicated to St Vincent Ferrer, the celebrated Dominican preacher.*

Dr L. van Schalkwyk, Organising Inspector of Special Schools and two other officials of the Union Education Department, paid their first visit to the new school on 21st February. The previous day Rev Father K Flood, O.M.I., parish priest of Rosebank, had brought the Blessed Sacrament to the newly-prepared chapel at “The Haven”, and on 26th of the month he offered the first Holy Mass at St Vincent’s. Soon thereafter Father Shapcote was appointed chaplain to the institution.

The official opening of the school was set for St Dominic’s Day in August 1934. This function was also performed by the Hon. J H Hofmeyr, accompanied by his mother, Mrs A B Hofmeyr, and some two hundred guests. On this occasion the Minister paid tribute to the work done for the Deaf by the Sisters⁶ for the past fifty years. On 22nd October of the same year Mr Hofmeyr also attended the annual meeting of the Deaf and Dumb Association in Johannesburg of which there survives the following report.

“A Little drama, ‘The Pied Piper’, in which none of the players could hear what the others said, or even what he said himself, was played in the Johannesburg City Hall yesterday before the mayoress, Mrs P Roberts and the Minister of Education, the Hon. Mr J H Hofmeyr. The Minister expressed warm admiration for the School for the Deaf which had been taken over by the experienced Dominican Sisters. The Minister said: ‘In caring for the handicapped children, church bodies have anticipated the Government everywhere in this country. There is room in respect of these children for that individual love and affectionate care which a church body is so able to provide and which is always in danger of being overlaid by the routine of an education system’ ...”

The number on the roll kept on increasing and the necessary additions had to be made to the buildings, staff and sports facilities. At present there are about 220 boys and girls at this school.

When the Sisters wanted to erect a “Our Lady” Grotto in their grounds they were confronted with the problem of transporting the heavy stones to the site; for those were the days when St Vincent’s did not possess a vehicle of its own. As Sister Dosithea Graspointner stood pondering the dilemma she spied an unknown donkey peacefully grazing at the far side of the premises. Being of a practical frame of mind, Sister “Workshop”⁷ immediately decided to use the beast of burden while it had made itself at home in the convent yard. All went well and each morning the donkey returned to its work.

When the Madonna Statue arrived and was placed in the picturesque little cave the priest, Sisters and children gathered for the ceremony of the statue’s dedication. Behold, the little donkey was there again, quietly cropping the lush green grass near the grotto. Strange to say, from that day onward the donkey was never again seen at St Vincent’s.

People often ask what are the causes of deafness. In fact they are legion and even so, some of them may not yet be known to us. There is, of course, the hereditary factor; which, however, is responsible for but a small percentage of deaf children. Various diseases of the ear, trauma, meningitis, encephalitis and severe jaundice in infancy are known to play their part. Virus infections which can attack the mother during the period of gestation, e.g. German Measles or Rubella, may impair the auditory apparatus of the unborn child. Fortunately an effective vaccine against Rubella has been discovered and it should be used to immunise girls who have not had German Measles before they reach school-leaving age. Rubella is considered a mild disease, yet it can have very deleterious effects on the unborn child if the mother contracts it during pregnancy. It may also be interesting to know how deaf children are educated. Sister Liguori Tons, headmistress, said: “When these little ones come to us they don’t even know they have a name. We teach them their names; give them language and do everything in our power to prepare them for life.”

⁶ *The pioneer community consisted of Mother M Winefride Simpkins, Sister Cyrilla Hoetzl (the Principal, Sisters Verena Huber, Emmerich Pauli, Gilbert Litzel, Expedita Schuhbauer, Aniceta Wandinger, Eulalia Motz and Leonida Gfroereis. Afterwards the kitchen was, for many years, under the direction of Sister Hiltrude Halder. This remarkable woman was never ruffled, never too tired or too busy to say at least a kind word or two to whoever came into her domain. Her calm, genial spirit reigned in that very busy kitchen. Happily her successors endeavour to follow her example which is a constant exercise in patience and charity.*

⁷ *The name the deaf children have for Sister Dosithea*

At St Vincent's pupils are accepted at all ages, but the best time to begin is at the age of three years. This is the time when the child with normal hearing begins to build up a vocabulary. There are varying degrees of deafness but it is rare that a child has not a small percentage of hearing which must be stimulated as it can help ease the strain of lip-reading.

Starting in the infants' class, the children are first shown how to use their mouths to form words and to develop correct breathing. Tiny tots climb on to the lap of a Sister to feel the vibrations in her chest when she speaks.

The day a deaf-born child, with deep concentration and earnest effort, utters his first words "Mummy" and "Daddy", is for the parents an unforgettable experience. Slightly older children, in another room, sit with head-phones connected to a microphone. With his back to the instructing Sister and facing diagrams of such objects as a drum, a bell and a rattle, the child learns to identify the sound of various instruments.

An ear, nose and throat clinic has been established at the school which has a para-medical staff of two full-time psychologists, a full-time speech therapist, an occupational therapist and a physiotherapist. Although the breakthrough to speech and oral communication is a long, hard struggle, every step along the way is a triumph for these Sisters who have been called "the conquerors of silence".

"A primary difficulty in training the Deaf to speak is the small and fleeting movements of speech sounds", says Sister Carissima, the speech teacher. A profoundly deaf child's speech will always sound unnatural as the deaf person is unable to modulate his voice normally. Many deaf children show great aptitude for drawing, flower arrangement, pottery and other handicrafts, for the development of which there is full scope at this school. At the age of twelve boys begin to learn woodwork and girls are introduced to domestic science, though education continues on the academic side to Junior Certificate and even Matriculation for those who are able to do it.

Apart from the ordinary school subjects to matriculation level, tuition is given in applied mechanics and machine drawing. Vocational training is provided in various branches of Domestic Science, Commercial Subjects and Woodwork.⁸ This vocational training is an essential preparation for young deaf people who have to compete with hearing boys and girls for employment.

Teaching and supervision of deaf children requires a tremendous amount of energy on the part of their tutors, together with an inexhaustible amount of patience. This latter should perhaps not be sought for by way of a direct answer to fervent prayer for forbearance, but rather as the blessed reward for a sympathetic study of the manifold and profound consequences of deafness as applying to deaf-born children. Equally important is a scientific knowledge of this highly specialised branch of teaching, tried and extended through years of practical experience. Therefore, Sisters selected for this school undergo an additional course of training which qualifies candidates for the Diploma of Teachers of the Deaf.

Three aspects claim priority of importance for teaching a deaf child, namely:

The acquisition of language;

Development of speech, and

The capacity to lip-read.

Only thus can the Deaf be wrested from the world of silence, loneliness and isolation which would be theirs as the inevitable consequence of their handicap. The orally educated boy or girl is equipped to meet the demands of life successfully and is no longer debarred from the avenues which lead to friendship, knowledge and a secure livelihood. Of course, all pupils are not equally successful as all are not equally gifted, nor do they enjoy the same advantages. By the time the pupils leave St Vincent's they are able to talk intelligibly, lip-read and write public examinations under the same conditions as hearing candidates. Some pupils, when they have left school, continue their education by correspondence courses, even through UNISA.⁹

⁸ Sister Dosithea Graspointner has taught these boys woodwork and all the other technical subjects listed above, practically from the school's inception

⁹ University of South Africa.

Space will permit to site only a couple of past pupils to show that the Deaf are able to hold their own in our competitive world if they have been given the correct education: Robert Simmons has been awarded his Ph. D (Doctorate in Philosophy) and is a full-time lecturer at the Witwatersrand University. With the aid of slides and diagrams he has no difficulty in lecturing in neuro- and micro-anatomy to second and third year medical students.

Father Cyril Axelrod was born in Johannesburg, the deaf son of Jewish parents who immigrated to South Africa from Latvia before the Second World War. After matriculating at St Vincent's he entered commerce as an accounts' clerk and at the same time studied for the Chartered Institute of Secretaries' qualification. He obtained first place in the National Intermediate Examination but decided to abandon the business world. Cyril had been brought up in the Jewish Orthodox religion. At one stage he wanted to be a Rabbi and had actually enrolled in a Jewish Seminary. He was later converted to Catholicism and went to America for a few years' study before he entered the St John Vianney Seminary in Pretoria to complete his studies for the priesthood.¹⁰ In 1970 he was ordained before a large congregation in the Catholic Cathedral, Johannesburg. Having completed his Novitiate at the Redemptorist Monastery in Cape Town, the whole of South Africa is now his parish, for he has set himself the task of helping the Deaf of all races and creeds in this country.

A number of past pupils work as Engineering Draughtsmen; some as Architectural Draughtsmen, one is a Carpenter Foreman; a number are fitters and turners, while there are those who are interested in electronics. The girls, too, have made good both at work and as housewives. Gertie Koch, at the age of sixteen, was the first handicapped South African Girl Guide to receive the Founder's Badge – the Guide's highest honour – from the Chief Commissioner of Girl Guides, Mrs M Grant. The South African headquarters' Advisor for handicapped Guides, Mrs M Mostert, said that for a normal girl to win the award is a tremendous achievement; for a handicapped Guide to obtain it is "quite extraordinary".

The quickness of eye, which most deaf children develop, makes them good at games. Teams of St Vincent School have often won tennis, football, cricket and swimming matches against other schools. Max Ordman, who became an Olympic Wrestler, practised his first soccer games under the direction of Sister Fabiola Ritt. Of her the right-winger, Barry Nieuwenhuys, said, "She can put it over; and Sister can talk football with the experts."

Keith Hollamby ran for Wanderers in the Southern Transvaal Athletic League. The Boy Scouts also compete well with groups of normal children. Here too sister Fabiola stepped in when they lacked a Scout Master to train her boys. Mr C Wilson, Scout Master of King William's Town, speaking of the Deaf, said: "These boys were excellent and deserve great credit. They have not only displayed great patience and skill in their tests, but have always been our best patrol. Leader Hirst is a first class scout and my hearty congratulations go to him and his patrol for their well-earned results."

Deafness was also no obstacle to Robert Swift and Elwyn Canning who passed their Matric Mathematics with first-class results. Both are now working as quantity surveyors.

Another feature of this school is the acoustic department which, in fact, has lost its departmental character, since acoustic training is now carried on throughout the school. Classrooms have been equipped with acoustic devices and each child is supplied with a hearing-aid. These children love to hear. Who does not? But for them hearing is a great luxury which will not be theirs without special effort.

With the help of a grand piano and an organ – through the vibration of amplified sound – a sense of rhythm is developed which is applied to bodily movements and speech and reaches its most spectacular achievement in the percussion band which has carried off the highest awards at several performances even in the Johannesburg City Hall.

The production of plays¹¹ like "Robin Hood" and "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" by the pupils of the school for the Deaf in their own hall created quite a stir. "How can deaf children give a concert?" people asked when the entertainment was announced. But when the audience left the hall after the

¹⁰ John Turner has also begun to study for the priesthood and is, at present, at Mariannhill, Natal.

¹¹ The plays performed by this school were adapted by Sister Flavia Lang to suit deaf pupils.

performance one heard on every side. “Wasn’t it marvellous! Who would have believed it! I would not have missed it for anything!”

They cannot hear the cues;¹² they cannot hear the music; they cannot even hear the applause; but these deaf children presented these performances as an essay in true enchantment. Not one of them had more than 20 per cent of normal hearing while many are totally deaf. Without St Vincent School to teach them, these children would have spent their lives in a silent world. Instead they have learned to speak intelligibly, to play in a percussion band and to dance without hearing a sound to guide them. The Percussion Band “experience the rhythm” of the music and play nine different instruments under the patient guidance of the Sisters. The teachers use a huge score¹³ for all the children to see. The little dancers perform pretty ballet steps with their eyes on their dancing teacher who “conducts” their movements. In such a performance there was so much drama, tragedy, heartbreak, heroism and comedy that it warranted a notice in “The Star” as well as in the Afrikaans paper, “Die Vaderland”.

Whenever possible the children are encouraged to return to their homes during vacation or even over weekends, so as to avoid estrangement between parents and children. This is particularly necessary for small children, who so much need the care and love of Father and Mother. It is also a regular practice of the school to keep parents informed of the child’s progress, with a view to close co-operation between school and home. As the school caters for deaf children from nearly all over the Southern Continent, many come from great distances. Such pupils are always escorted to and fro by a member of the school personnel. Going home by plane is for many of them no longer a novelty. This mode of travelling, however, requires no escort for these children, not even for the smallest of them.

Guests are a regular part of the school programme, for it is annually visited by various groups of teachers, doctors and nurses in training, by officials of the Education Department, by prominent citizens or visitors to the town from our own country and from abroad. The first thing the caller notices is that this is a “noisy” school: a gentle purposeful noise is going on all the time – the sound of children talking. At this school talking is encouraged...

In 1951 the privilege was theirs of entertaining the world-famous American Deaf-Blind, Dr Helen Keller and her companion, Miss P Thompson. Miss Keller, then in her seventies, was a slight, white-haired woman with blue eyes and a shy smile. Being deaf her diction was not quite normal, like the speech of a person who had had a stroke and her consonants were slow and laboured, but one could understand her well.

When the distinguished guest rose to speak at St Vincent’s, a clatter of little hands greeted her. “I hear your welcome through my feet on the floor”, she said; and the pupils followed breathlessly every movement of her lips as she addressed them. The children gave Miss Keller a sheaf of beautiful flowers, a jewel box and a blotter made at the school and she, in turn, presented the Scouts with a trophy.

This school now publishes its own quarterly magazine edited by Sister Elvira Deinzer.

Of course, one cannot hope to list the very many generous friends and benefactors who have helped St Vincent School grow from strength to strength. There are the Board of Management, the strong Parent-Teachers’ Association and the Social Fund Committee who are untiring in organising functions and collecting donations to benefit the institution and its pupils; and without devoted lay staff the Sisters¹⁴ could not possibly maintain the high standard of the school. May God reward them all abundantly with temporal and eternal blessings!

¹² The children pick up their cues by lip-reading or from one of their teacher nuns sitting immediately in front of the footlights.

¹³ The scores were invented and made by Sisters Hermina Kyrein and Carissima Guggenberger. These charts display symbols to represent each instrument.

¹⁴ Retired Sisters from St Vincent School have offered their talents and valuable experience to help train teachers for the deaf at our Mission of St Thomas at Woodlands, Cape. From the beginning of 1976 Sister M. Loyola Schaerdinger has begun a class for deaf Indian children at Lenasia Township.