

HOLIDAY FROM APARTHEID

By NELL GREEN



Mrs. Green

FOR NEARY FOUR YEARS, from September 1961 to June 1965, my husband and I lived in Swaziland where he went as consulting engineer to the Swaziland Railway. After many years of planning, talk and survey the railway was at last being built to take the iron ore from the new mine at Ngwenya, near the Transvaal border, right across Swaziland to Portuguese East Africa to link up with the existing railway to L.M. Here the iron ore, sold on a 10 year contract, is shipped to Japan in huge ore boats. Other railway traffic is now developing, but only the ore made the building of the line an economic possibility.

We already had a small house in Mbabane so it was simple to settle down there and a week after our arrival, I was invited to a meeting called by Father Arden, now Bishop of Malawi, but then head of the Usutu Anglican Mission which runs St. Christopher's Boys High School.

A group of about 30 men and women of all professions, religions and race groups who were worried about the many unfilled needs in the educational and social life of Swaziland had been invited to attend and an organisation was formed called the Swaziland Sebenta (work) Society which would try to tackle at least some of the country's problems. One of the most urgent appeared to be the very high rate of adult illiteracy.

By talking too much at the meeting, a not unusual failing of mine, I came away as secretary of the new group and so found myself a most absorbing and stimulating voluntary job which gradually took up more and more of my time. My long-suffering husband was relieved that my energy was now taken up with non-political activity because in this territory, as opposed to some we know, teaching people is not considered a reprehensible and subversive pastime. In fact the Government authorities approved to the extent of giving the Society support which has grown steadily during the years from R200 and tacit approval in 1962 to R1200 plus the use of

some office accommodation and much active help from government officers in 1965.

The whole literacy project had to be started from scratch. Special primers had to be prepared in siSiwati, the language which people speak but which is only gradually becoming a written language. It is closely related to Zulu and in the schools Zulu is taught because school books are available in that tongue and it would be uneconomic to produce these for a small language group like the Swazis. As, however, there existed no adequate adult teaching primers in Zulu anyway, we decided to produce our own in siSiwati to make it as easy and quick as possible for men and women to learn to read and write their everyday speech.

The Bureau of Literacy and Literature under the directorship of Mrs. Maida Whyte guided all our efforts in those first years. A founder member of the Society, Mr. Simon Nxumalo, spent weeks working with the Bureau on the correct text and one of our Black Sash members, Mrs. Barbara Findlay from Pretoria came to Swaziland to do sketches for the illustrations for our 3 primers which she did under her professional name of Barbara Clark.

Money had to be raised for all this, partly by individual membership of the Society at 50 cents per annum and partly by straight begging for

donations which came in gradually varying from 20 cents to R20,000. Of those last, only one has so far come in, spread over three years!

For the first two years virtually everybody worked on a voluntary basis for the simple reason that we could not afford to pay any salaries. The Bureau sent full-time instructors from Johannesburg to train literacy teachers in the use of the books. The primers were specially designed so that the teacher, for whom we have in fact coined a new name in siSwati, 'umsiti', meaning helper, need not be highly qualified. Anyone who has passed Std. V or VI and can read and write his or her own language well, can be trained to be an 'umsiti' in a matter of days if not hours, and, provided their classes are regularly inspected and they are given a refresher course after a year; they manage very well.

In 1964 after our big grant came from the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in London, we were in a position to appoint full-time instructors, hire an office, get a paid secretary and a vehicle and driver and expand the work.

We then also tried putting our part-time 'basiti' onto our payroll instead of expecting them to do all the teaching on a voluntary basis, working entirely for love of their fellowmen. The pay was small — 20 cents per hour per class and we kept this up for a year, but as the number of classes grew, the office administration needed to check and pay these small amounts of money became impossible. Miss Marion Halvorsen told us that in Tanzania where she had done literacy work in the Mission field for years, the learners all pay their teacher direct a small monthly sum and this idea we have now adopted and it appears to work reasonably well. In the rural areas it is often very difficult for the women to find ready cash for their own education; what there is, goes to the children's schooling and the umsiti is very often working for love again.

The big industrial concerns, sugar mills, estates and mines etc. are co-operating by appointing full-time literacy officers to their staffs and one company, Ubombo Ranches, now has 3 full-time teachers on its payroll. The Prisons are holding classes for long-term prisoners and from these captive audiences have come some of our quickest 'graduates' and many go on to English when they are literate.

For English classes we are using a set of books produced in Nigeria especially for adults and these seem to be answering well.

Since I left in June last year Mr. S. Nxumalo

has undertaken the job — at least temporarily — of Director and the work is going from strength to strength. There are now about 200 new literates, 800 in classes, about 70 part-time and 11 full-time 'basiti' plus our administrative and training staff of 8.

This growing organisation is going to need a great deal of money and our big donors, the Gulbenkian Foundation and the Anglo-American Corporation have reached the end of their promised 3 year support. However the King of Swaziland, Sobhuza II is convinced of the value of our work and has recently channelled a R2,000 gift from abroad to Sebenta. If the ordinary person could become equally enthusiastic and give widespread support, many a mickle makes a muckle and we could forge ahead with this absolutely gigantic task. A rough estimate of the number of adult illiterates is 90,000, so there is plenty still to do. We are realising that literacy must go hand in hand with other community development projects and we are in close touch with agricultural officers and other workers in this field.

I was heartbroken at having to leave Swaziland with so much still to be done under such pleasant circumstances but the Railway is completed and my husband's work has brought him back to Johannesburg and of course I follow. I am grateful for the comfort of the familiar Black Sash faces and the many demands on time and energy and compassion. These will ensure that I do not pine too much for the stimulating and challenging work in that freely developing little country, a country unhampered by the thousand and one rules and regulations by which South Africa attempts — without hope of success — to force a living, growing community into the cast iron mould of an ideology which, to the rest of Africa and the world, is not only unacceptable, but is a curious and rather horrible anachronism.

Yet, while I may be over-optimistic, I am convinced that common sense will prevail in South Africa and that Christian re-thinking of our so-called traditions as well as economic pressures will still bring about a peaceful toppling of our Apartheid idol. What fun that will be and what energy it will release for constructive co-operation, ignoring all the artificial and outdated barriers of colour gradation and working together as South Africans for South Africa's advancement.