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BRAAIVLEIS BENEATH THE BRAKPAN WALL

by ALLISTER SPARKS



IT WAS the most extraordinary event so far in the unfolding story of the country's transformation. One hundred white residents of the deeply conservative town of Brakpan, who have built a "Berlin Wall" to keep blacks out of their suburb, reached out across it the other day in a gesture of racial reconciliation.

They spent the morning together with 800 residents from a sprawling squatter community on the far side of the wall, clearing litter from the 50-metre stretch of land between them.

They planted a tree to symbolise their new relationship, taking turns to dig in the hard-baked earth while the crowd formed a circle, held hands and sang, "Come together, people of Africa".

The atmosphere was heavy with emotion as children formed a line and threw handfuls of earth around the sapling to symbolise "the unity of tomorrow".

Finally, everyone sat down together beside the wall for a braaivleis.

Such lovefests across the colour line may be common enough for liberals, but this is hardline country. The National Party represents the left wing in the old mining towns of the East Rand, and the Conservative Party controls the Brakpan Council with a 9-3 majority. The three opposition Nationalists scraped in only because they ran as independents.

Building the wall therefore seemed entirely in keeping with local attitudes. It went up last July, a two-metre high structure of prefabricated concrete slats that runs for more than a mile along the outer edge of a suburb called Dalpark Six, cutting it off from the black township of Wattville and an adjacent squatter settlement called Tamboville, where 48,000 black people live.

The wall was Frank Lammont's idea. As the squatter settlement encroached closer and closer to his home on Dalpark

Six's outer crescent, Frank took a petition of protest around the suburb and sent it to President F.W. de Klerk.

When nothing happened he went to Steve Erasmus, the "independent" councillor of Dalpark Six. With Steve's help, the council agreed to build the wall at a cost of R150,000.

Yet Lammont and Erasmus were the driving forces behind this reconciliation exercise. "What an amazing experience," Lamont enthused as he surveyed the scene. "Look at them. There's no hate, just a feeling of let's fix up the mess we've made in this country."

He talks of building a park where the children can play together, and of forming a committee to help Wattville and Tamboville's unemployed find jobs.

What changed him? Lammont looked puzzled. "When I raised the petition it was with a feeling of anger," he said. "One associates squatters with squalor and I was angry that they were being allowed to encroach on our suburb.

"Then I began to realise they were here to stay. I guess it was a matter of acceptance. And I decided that if they were going to live next to me I had better get to know more about them."

With Erasmus's help again, Lammont made contact with Abe Nyalunga, chairman of the Wattville Concerned Residents Association. Abe, a savvy 34-year-old, invited the whites to meet his community.

Five of them drove, with some trepidation, into Wattville — at night. They were led to a small Anglican church where a singing, cheering crowd of 400 awaited them.

What followed was a strange mixture of awkward paternalism and warm response that seemingly changed the lives of the whites who were there and led to the party at the Wall.

The whites made patronising remarks about "the wonderful way you people sing", and the blacks responded with uninhibited delight. There was some disarmingly straight talk. "I nursed many of you when you were children," elderly Mrs Catharina Hlatshwayo told them. "I loved you then and I still love you now, even though you have built this wall which is a pain in my heart."

Ah, the wall. As they sat there singing and grilling their steaks and sausages in the noonday sun, symbolising the new South Africa with their togetherness, the wall loomed behind them, symbolising the old.

The whites, faces glowing with their conversion like born-again liberals, were saying things like, "Together we can show the world that the residents of Dalpark Six, Tamboville and Wattville can live side by side." But they are still not prepared to demolish the wall.

"The majority of people in Dalpark Six still want it," said Erasmus, "and as their councillor I must respect their democratic wish."

"I don't regret it," said Lammont. "The wall serves a purpose. You could say it provides a comfort zone. It makes people feel less threatened and that is why we have been able to come together like this."

The blacks disagree. To them the wall is a crude symbol of racism, but on Abe Nyalunga's advice they have decided not to make it an issue. "We're just going to build relations and the wall will come down on its own," Abe murmured.

So the party of reconciliation went on beside the wall of apartheid, jointly symbolising the ambiguity of this society in transition where hopes and fears and attitudes and symbols themselves are all in a state of flux and nobody is quite sure what is what anymore. ●