

Mdukutshani — a homeland

Sheena Duncan

In this article Mrs Duncan, director of the Johannesburg Advice Office, describes her visit to Mdukutshani

MDUKUTSHANI is a farm run by the Church Agricultural Project on so-called white land opposite and next to rural Kwa-Zulu. CAP used to operate in the Maria Ratchitz area but the notorious removals of 1968 to Limehill meant that new land had to be found if the Project was to fulfil its purpose.

The driving force which established the Project and which keeps it going and growing is Neil Alcock, whose burning enthusiasm is sometimes uncomfortable and always challenging and inspiring.

Mdukutshani lies along the Tugela river somewhere between Tugela Ferry and Weenen on the edge of the Msinga Reserve. Thembi Khumalo and I rode through the beautiful uplands of the Free State and Natal, passing farms and factories where machines work instead of men, then slid downhill into the heat to cross the broad brown river. To and from this river trudge women with plastic pails to draw the day's water. To fetch this one precious bucketful some will have spent almost as many hours as it has taken us to travel from Johannesburg, and this must be done and endured every day. What is left of time and energy for anything else?

In contrast to the emptiness of 'white' South Africa where a man is divided from his neighbours across his far-stretching acres, here there are people everywhere — people and goats.

At Mdukutshani the people who work on the farm, both black and white, live in scattered houses just like those of their neighbours in Kwa-Zulu. All of them, both black and white, earn no more than R30 per month. The river is bath and laundry and source of all household water. A water wheel made out of old motor car parts which normally pumps the water up the cliffside was temporarily out of order while we were there, so the farm people were once more carrying it up in buckets.

We city people for whom water gushes clean and cold from taps should give thanks constantly. There water is the subject of daily conversation. Muddy and lukewarm it means everything, and without it nothing can be accomplished.

Neil believes that there is always enough water, whether people live near a river, in the hills or on the flat dry plains, but that they must learn how to collect and store it. He and the people have cut furrows along the contours of the hills

to collect and channel the rain as it runs wastefully down the slopes. One woman showed us her husband's new small dam built in front of his house which this year will fill with rain water from the road. He plans to breed fish so his family will have food and he will be able to sell to those of his neighbours who can afford to buy. This same man, in his small garden, has flourishing rows of vegetables and a cow which provides milk and cottage cheese and precious manure for the crops.

Mdukutshani is the archetype of all those hundreds of other places in South Africa's so-called homelands where there is absolute poverty, hunger, disorder and, human misery on a massive scale. Across the river there are the huddles of huts, closely packed, belonging to those who were 'black spots' and were resettled into the homeland off the land they had used for generations. Each family is allowed to occupy one half acre. They were forced to sell their cattle (when other men made fortunes from buying and selling them again on the 'white' open market) and were dumped with no plans made for the future of their communities. There they are, with nothing to do but stare across the water at the farmland they used to use, richly grassed and treed, and now unused, owned by some white absentee landlord who no doubt sits in the Durban Club speaking of 'my farm' — his dream for his retirement.

Here there is anarchy. The new resentments between those who were recently dumped and those who have always lived here compound all the old resentments rooted in almost forgotten tribal disputes. The traditional authority structures have been destroyed and have not been replaced by any other effective authority. Men receive death threats and are killed, but their murderers are seldom brought to trial. The 'Haves' here are the criminals. Crime is big business. There is said to be a gun factory in a cave in the hills and gun-running is profitable. Stock theft, dagga farming, processing and marketing makes fortunes for the few. Corruption is part of everyday living. Christmas each year is when the war happens.

The many endure and may or may not survive. Good and evil mean nothing. To be good is to be strong and wicked and to live.

Justice and authority lie out of reach, a long, long journey away, at Tugela Ferry or Weenen.

We met old women who make this journey perhaps each year, perhaps more often, to apply for pensions. They showed us carefully preserved pieces of paper with meaningless date stamps 1973, 1974, 1975, 1976. They are never told anything besides 'Come back another day' but they treasure these pieces of paper. One day a miracle might happen and the pension might come. We were told of those who do have pensions who at the two-monthly payout are made to put their thumb print on the receipt for the money before the cash is handed to them and who, when they complain that the money is short, are told 'You have signed for it'.

We heard of the woman whose child was born without arms and legs. He is now two years old and becoming too heavy for her to carry all the time on her back, and of the woman whose 17-year-old son was taken on a lorry to work at a sawmill where his fingers were chopped off in a machine. He was not paid anything, as he has been told that there is no Workmen's Compensation. We saw the lorries laden with children collected at the roadside to work on the farms.

We saw the stark contrast between white South Africa's richly treed and grassed, sparsely populated land and the over-grazed, unwooded, eroded and crowded land of Kwa Zulu. Trees and shrubs have been cut down and burned, otherwise how is a person to boil a pot of water? The problem of fuel is a major headache. To buy it requires cash which few have, so they use whatever is combustible and lies to hand. The thorn trees, so valuable for fixing nitrogen in the soil and an essential factor in the ecology of the area, are destroyed as is all the other bush. When that is finished the grass is used and in the end nothing is left to hold the soil and prevent its headlong rush to sea with the river. Neil spoke of women feeding blade after blade of dry grass onto a tiny flickering fire under a pot which will never boil and never cook the meal put into it.

To this are now being shovelled the urban unemployed. Perhaps endurance was possible when my husband, my son, my father, my cousin, my brother was working in Johannesburg and the money he sent each month was there to share. Now he has lost his job and they have ordered him to come home. They say he will be arrested if goes to find a new job and that he must wait at home until the Bantu Commissioner sends him a job. The Commissioner now sends no one away to work and the men are here, shamed and despairing. They are not allowed to go away to find work, and there is no work here.

In this situation lives Neil and his wife Criena, his young sons, his sister-in-law, Kathy, Norman and Clare and others whom we did not meet. His vision restores to men their pride and their ability to feed and support their families. Neil's *view of man and the land, South Africa and the world*, is an holistic one. He knows and has shown and is teaching that a man can live a full, pro-

ductive life and feed himself and his family on half an acre of land and be beholden to no one. In doing so, he can rehabilitate the land and break out of the environmentally destructive spiral of fertiliser, pests, insecticides, more pests, poorer soil and more fertiliser.

On the other side of the valley we can see, among the closely built houses of the resettled people, the green of their gardens. They are allowed to keep one cow or goat if it does not graze on the communal lands. This one beast for those who can manage to buy it, together with water from the new furrows on the hillside above and the mixed vegetables grown in the garden with, perhaps, a couple of hens completes the cycle which restores the land to productivity and provides good and proper food for a family with enough over to sell.

CAP finds that it costs R260 for a man to become a true crofter like this, the first essential requirement being wire for a fence to keep out wandering goats. As well as money, of course, it demands time, understanding, patience and an ability to use the inevitable failures as part of the learning process.

There is a school on the farm with a refreshingly different approach to education for living. It has had to work through the bureaucratic hassles which hamper all constructive thought and action in South Africa. There is also a handcrafts centre where women learn to make saleable articles from local materials which are sold on the open market and where they relearn forgotten crafts. All the time people are learning the means of survival and of self-sufficiency.

During the last week of every month Neil runs his 'barefoot university' courses at Mdukutshani where he welcomes students from anywhere, provided they can understand Zulu which is the medium of instruction. The course is run on a monthly basis rather than in a more concentrated time span so that the students are led through the seasonal cycle.

There are a multitude of problems experienced by people in the area. Apart from the inability of the old and disabled to obtain the pensions which are their statutory right, there are all sorts of troubles connected with Unemployment Insurance, Workmen's Compensation, the exploitation of labour, particularly that of children, the need for legal assistance in both civil and criminal matters and a desperate need for free medical attention. We were told that Church-run clinics insist on payment as does the hospital at Tugela Ferry. Most people have literally no money to pay for a visit to a clinic or a doctor and so have to do without any medical help.

One cannot imagine what conditions must be like in all those hundreds of other similar areas where there is no presence like that of CAP. *Thembi has noticed a marked difference in the attitudes of people in this area from those in another part of Kwa-Zulu which she visited ear-*

lier. There people were so oppressed and depressed that there was seemingly no spark on which to build. Here there is spirit and hope and determination, however new and untested, because people can see the way up and out.

There is also considerable anger and resentment. Neil believes that it is absolutely essen-

tial that white South Africans be made to understand the inevitable and terrible white fate if we continue to sleep. He believes that this is the only way to overcome white resistance to knowing the truth, that whites will continue to close their eyes and ears if the stress continues to be put only on the everyday tragedy of Black existence.

The Soweto eleven

THE Soweto 11 are on trial for sedition, a common law crime, but with terrorism as an alternative. They are presently being tried at Kempton Park, a fact which reflects the Government's habit of holding contentious political trials in out-of-the-way places.

Jill Wentzel, wife of Ernie, the senior defence advocate, had been so taken with the force of these youngsters' personalities, that she offered to introduce me to them. I agreed, a trifle apprehensively lest they should suspect patronage which I didn't feel. Such are the inner knots which one tends to make for oneself in this bizarre country.

Thus it was that I found myself in a courtroom at Kempton Park one Friday morning early in November. The room was clean and modern with desks and benches of clear, light wood. The spectators' benches were crowded with parents and relatives of the accused. There were several uniformed and plain-clothes policemen. I felt deep unease when I saw more than one of the former playing with the machine-guns slung over their shoulders — these in addition to the revolvers they carry routinely. It made the situation scarcely less threatening to be told that initially they had had dogs at the court as well.

Just before 10.00 the 11, whose ages range from 19 to 23, came into the dock. They looked fit, slim, shingly clean, almost unreally like the sort of advertisement in 'Post' which projects a sophisticated, affluent image of black youth. Some wore track suits with stripes of white, enhancing the basic maroon or navy. Bongie, the only girl, wore a mohair jersey over a pleated skirt, made even more elegant by an ivory pendant. Some of them had wanted to wear Afro clothes, but their parents had forbidden it. Such is the cohesion of their family life that they had simply obeyed.

They exuded, collectively and individually, a feeling of youth, but a curiously mature, highly disciplined youth. They all carried thick files, in which they made notes as witnesses gave evidence. They missed nothing: as each witness entered they exchanged whispered queries, comments, sometimes merely a raised eyebrow. The combination of high intelligence, drive, sensitivity and toughness impressed itself on me again and again as I watched their successive changes of expression during the proceedings: scepticism,

potential dislike, humour and impassivity.

At tea-break the policeman in charge, George, stood near the dock, but did nothing to prevent contact between the children and their parents and friends. The other police stood close enough to the dock to hear what was said but were not obtrusive.

The tremendous affection between parents and children was manifest. Little Montsitsi, slightly built, with gold-rimmed glasses, listened to his father respectfully and lovingly. The 'Chief' cuddled his eight month old niece with the exclamation 'You're so ugly!', and then handed her round for all to dandle. Another young man talked fluently to his plump little girlfriend, and although they never touched their physical longing was painfully visible.

We were not ignored. Some of the 11 came up to greet us, obviously delighted to see bubbly Jill. In conversation my initial impression of alertness and high intelligence was confirmed. The youngsters are hungry for books on philosophy, psychology and education. One is impatient for Plato's 'Republic'. They relish dispute on anything. Jill had to acknowledge herself out of her depth when they wanted to discuss the drifting of continents. They are understandably cagey about their personal philosophies, which probably vary enormously. For instance, the Special Branch have confiscated from Bongie Bibles, prayer-books and religious tracts.

They were curiously reticent about the torture many of them have suffered at police hands, accepting it as something to be expected. Little Montsisi was smilingly unsurprised when Ernie told him what the hospital records had revealed about the 'extensive bruising' (to use a newspaper euphemism) he had undergone. Another young man said that when he was held under Section 6 he learnt that 'that's when you really get courage; it's the only thing left to do. All you can do is meditate'.

Whatever the ultimate verdict — and the presiding judge gives the impression of having painstaking patience — it is a tragedy that our country does not use people like these to their full potential. To make them second-class citizens, to destine them for citizenship of a homeland or to drive them to militancy is our scandal and our sorrow.

Janet Sahli