

KINGS OF ALEXANDRA

ARNOLD BENJAMIN

Staff of 'The Star', Johannesburg

SIXTY-SIX men sit in 'N' of the Johannesburg Magistrates' Courts facing charges of murder, attempted murder, assault, robbery, arson and extortion. The vast court building was designed in days when mass trials were less commonplace than today, and the accused jam the dock and the entire well of the court, sitting close together on rows of wooden benches. There are no spectators—only 10 armed policemen who allow no-one to enter but officials and the press and a succession of witnesses who say: "Yes, these are the men who terrorised us. These are the Msomis".

"... Two men came into my shop and demanded that I hand over a revolver. If I did not they would burn the shop and kill me. I told them I did not have a revolver. They said I would then have to pay them £15 protection fee. I paid the money . . . I bought my own life with it . . . I was afraid to go to the police because I knew they would tell the Msomi gang I had reported to them."

Witnesses' names are not published, by order of the court. All doors are locked but one, where the police scrutinize everyone who comes in. These precautions became necessary early in the trial. Witnesses complained they were threatened both in and out of court. Two of the accused escaped one day and were only recaptured after a week. The police guard was doubled after threats on the lives of the magistrate and prosecutor.

They are a tough-looking bunch of men, the accused. Most of them are scarred and battered. There are broken noses, gashed faces, complex patterns of dents and welts on shaven skulls. They have formed themselves into a prison choir which is said to sing most beautifully. Three or four are Coloured, the rest African. They are dressed in overalls or in flashy suits or in tatters. Most of them are in their twenties and thirties. Five are juveniles under 19; the age of one accused is estimated at 15.

A young man with raw pink scars on his face and hands and throat says: "... He came back with a bottle of benzine. I was still lying on the ground. He poured benzine over my face and body. I asked him what he was doing and he said 'You are a dog.' Bokkie, another one of the accused, then struck a match and threw it at me. I rolled in agony on the ground but could not put the flames out . . ."

"... They took £14 out of my hip pocket and £4 out of the till.

One said: 'We want more money. This is not money.' My wife and I were made to sit on the end of a bed. They took my son and put the barrel of a gun next to his temple and said: 'We will count to four. If you do not give us more he will be shot'."

Alleged leader of the Msomi gang is accused No. 1, Shadrack Richard Matthews. He is a sallow, clerkish-looking little man of 35 with a short stubbly beard. Witness after witness has pointed him out as the "brains" of the gang. It was he, they say, who ran the "Msomi office" in Twelfth Avenue—under the thin façade of a rent collection agency; here people came to pay their protection fees, and gang members held their regular meetings—received instructions and weapons and brought back the spoils.

Next to Matthews sits Ginger Mashiane, a large and plumpish young man with a smile of lazy good humour perpetually on his face. He is said to be Matthews' personal henchman. But the real strong-arm man, say the witnesses, is No. 16, Alex Dube, powerfully built and a natty dresser. Witnesses have paled and trembled as they approach to identify him to the court.

"... The following morning the body of a dead man was found in the street... I realised the great danger I was in and went to see Shadrack Matthews at his office and asked him for peace. I was told I must wait until Alex Dube came. When Dube arrived, he and Matthews spoke. I then asked Dube for peace, and he said there was no such thing as peace and that my house would burn... I paid them £50 and was told that nothing would happen, that it was all over. I went back home."

"I paid Alex Dube £1 for a note that would keep tsotsis out of my shop. He gave it to me saying I should not be worried any more. It read: 'From Alex Dube. See that you keep out that shop, you hear what I said. Get out and mind you boys. Signed, Alex, 99 11th Avenue.'"

Also among the accused are two African police constables, Zachariah Mati and Ephraim Dhlamini, alleged to have worked with the Msomis on several occasions. There was even a minister of religion among the original accused. But he was discharged early on because of insufficient evidence.

"... They took Gabriel Nkosi to a vacant lot... his arms were tied behind his back. Each time he tried to get up he was beaten down again with sjamboks. The screaming went on for three-quarters of an hour... He tried to run away but they tied him up and stabbed him with knives and screwdrivers... I reported the matter to the Wynberg

police twice, but they took no notice of me."

#

Alexandra, named after Edward VII's gracious queen, has always been rather a special township. It is an isolated "black spot" hard by some of Johannesburg's very fanciest white suburbs. And it is just outside the city's northern boundary. Like the old Sophiatown, it is a "free" township where Africans can acquire property. But this "freedom" also means that neither State nor municipality need feel responsible for it. Until very recently Alexandra was nobody's baby. Housing is squalid, sanitation of the sketchiest. Left, as it were, to stew in its own potent juices, it has acquired a certain colour and also a certain reputation as the worst slum in Southern Africa. Today it has 95,000 people—or 115,000, or 145,000, nobody is quite sure—living in roughly one square mile. So there are all the standard conditions for crime to flourish in—and one additional one. Because of its situation, most of Alexandra's young men and boys are barred by influx control from finding work in urban Johannesburg—even though they have grown up in the township, even though their fathers may be men of substance who have given them education and some taste for good living. Of Johannesburg, yet not legally in it, they remain in the township, become idlers, delinquents, eventually criminals. Small teenage gangs have always been legion—the Vultures and the Rock-breakers, the Mau Mau and the Young Americans. They were prepared to try their hands at most kinds of wrongdoing, and out of material like this grew the Spoilers, and then the Msomis.

The Spoilers were a gang that somehow became more powerful than the rest. They got their name, so it is said, because they went round breaking up ("spoiling") people's parties and making off with the money and liquor. Next they were demanding "protection" money from shopkeepers and taximen and even ordinary wage-earners, the price of being left unmolested. The racketeering spread, and so did the violence. Early in 1956 a businessman whose toes had been stepped on too hard organised a vigilance group. Soon its members were armed with guns too, and bloody skirmishes began to rage through the township. Soon they had taken the name of Elifasi Msomi, the Natal axe-killer hanged for 15 murders, and suddenly it was out-and-out warfare for the control of organised thuggery in Alexandra.

It was not only the gangsters and their families who suffered in this battle for supremacy. Often both sides would shoot and

kill wantonly just for "prestige". The Spoilers were dispersed, then made a comeback. They burned down a cinema where their rivals met; the Msomis imposed a "tax" on householders to pay for the damage. Both gang leaders had their big cars destroyed by fire. More taxis were "chained", or commandeered, for raids. "Protection" and the Friday evening pay robberies went on. Men would board the township buses and hold up the driver, while fellow gangsters went systematically through every passenger's pockets. Nobody was safe. Even the sewage-cart men had to do their work by day.

Where were the police? From the nearby Wynberg station, constant raids went on as always for liquor and passes. But complaints against the Msomis—complaints of robbery and brutal assault and murder—never seemed to produce any result. People said the police were afraid of them; then it became persistent talk in the township that they were in league with the Msomis and even supplying them with arms. The Spoilers?—quite a few of *them* were arrested. But people who lodged complaints against the Msomis found that their names got uncannily back to the gangsters. Eventually most people found it not worth the trouble—and certainly not worth the risk—to go on complaining.

Requests for action were ineffective. In January, 1957, a senior officer of the Wynberg police was quoted (*The Star*) as saying that there was not very much crime in Alexandra. The only real evil, he said, was the existence of the liquor dens.

An elderly man testifies that he was assaulted by eight Africans—revenge for having intervened in a robbery—and savaged by a dog they set on him. He dragged the dog into his house and killed it with an assegai. After he reported to the police, the owner of the dog arrived. They arrested the witness for killing the dog and for possessing a firearm.

A shopkeeper was threatened with death for refusing to pay the protection fee, he says. "I reported the matter to the Wynberg police. Three weeks later they took a statement. Two days after, I was coming home on a bus when Kaiphas and several natives boarded the bus, assaulted me and told me to leave . . . I was dragged from the bus . . . When we got to the house Kaiphas demanded money from me. I told him I had none. He then struck me again. He took my wireless, wrist watch and reference book. He told me he would take me to the office because I had reported to the police. I realised my life was in great peril. I hired a truck and had all my belongings removed to

Evaton, where I went into hiding."

And a women witness, describing a robbery, reports: "They said 'We are the Msomi. Where are you going to report this? We are the kings of Alexandra'."

Eventually, of course, the police began to do their job. Early last year there were sudden transfers of men from Wynberg station. Nothing was ever explained officially; but new police effected some quick arrests in Alexandra and began the investigations which led to the arrest of the 66 men now charged. Undercover men were set to build up the case against the Msomis.

One day Matthews offered him a job, one such African witness alleges. "He told me my duties would be to go about the township and rob people. During my probationary period of a month I would be armed with an axe and a knife, and after that with a gun. My wages would be £3 a week. If I murdered somebody I would get £5 commission . . ."

The knifings and beatings-up continued much as before. But at last in September, 1958, the police swooped—and hard on the arrests came a last savage reminder of what Alexandra had been experiencing for so long. When the suspects were taken to Johannesburg Fort, the convicted Spoilers were waiting there for them; their day of vengeance had come at last. Word passed through the vast prison that there were to be killings that night. For some reason the newcomers were locked up in the same section as the Spoilers. When night came, the other prisoners heard strange sounds of singing, banging and clapping of hands. In the morning four of the Msomi accused were found dead in a blood-spattered cell, beaten and trampled to death, and two others badly injured. The bloody war of the Alexandra gangs had ended within the very walls of "Number Four."

#

The suspects shuffle, doze and whisper to each other in their tightly-packed rows; the pretty white girl facing them yawns at her recording machines. The preparatory examination has been going on for three months and is nearly over. And still the tale of violence unfolds. Witness No. 200-odd, an African girl of about 20, flounces into the box wearing a sack dress and tells of murder. "In the yard of our house I saw a man's body lying. I struck a match and saw that it was someone I knew, Gabriel Nkosi. I went to tell his family." "Was this the only time you have seen a body in Alexandra?" asks the tall young

prosecutor, John Gildenhuys. "No, there were other times." "But you didn't report to anyone, the other times?" "I only reported this one because I knew him. The others I saw from a distance."

At first witnesses were terrified to make statements to the police. But as the hearing got under way they have been coming forward more willingly. The number of counts has risen to over 100—including five of murder—all over a period of only one year.

Sometimes one or other of the accused gets up to cross-examine. They had their lawyers there at the beginning, but now they are saving their money for the Supreme Court trial that may follow. When they differ on the line of questioning, there are sharp shushings and frantic signs to sit down. Occasionally, when the court rises, they exchange angry words in Afrikaans. Others swop banter with the police and try to cadge a cigarette before trooping down into the cells.

The fear these men command, even as captives, seems prodigious. A witness complains they have threatened him with death during his evidence. Two policemen go with him as he steps among the accused to point out individuals. Next day he says he was molested in the township by their women who are always outside the court. "I was so frightened I slept in the veld," he says.

Proceedings are interrupted again when 17 accused stage a mass break-out from the prison van taking them to court one morning. Half the police in Johannesburg are out looking for them, and the prosecutor asks for an adjournment because the witnesses are again in terror. And Shadrack Matthews complains to the magistrate that the *'Golden City Post'* has called the accused "scarfaces."

Alexandra has been a peaceful place since last September, people are saying both in N Court and elsewhere. They can spend an ordinary evening out now. Mothers can send their children to the shops during the day. Of course, "normal" crime for an African area continues. Young gangs rushed to exploit the vacuum—the Sputniks, the C.P.Z., the Junior Spoilers, the New Msomis. But on the whole, things are very different. As a bus driver told the court with a flourish: "We came home and found all the streets were deserted and all was quiet. I walk like a big lord in the streets of the township