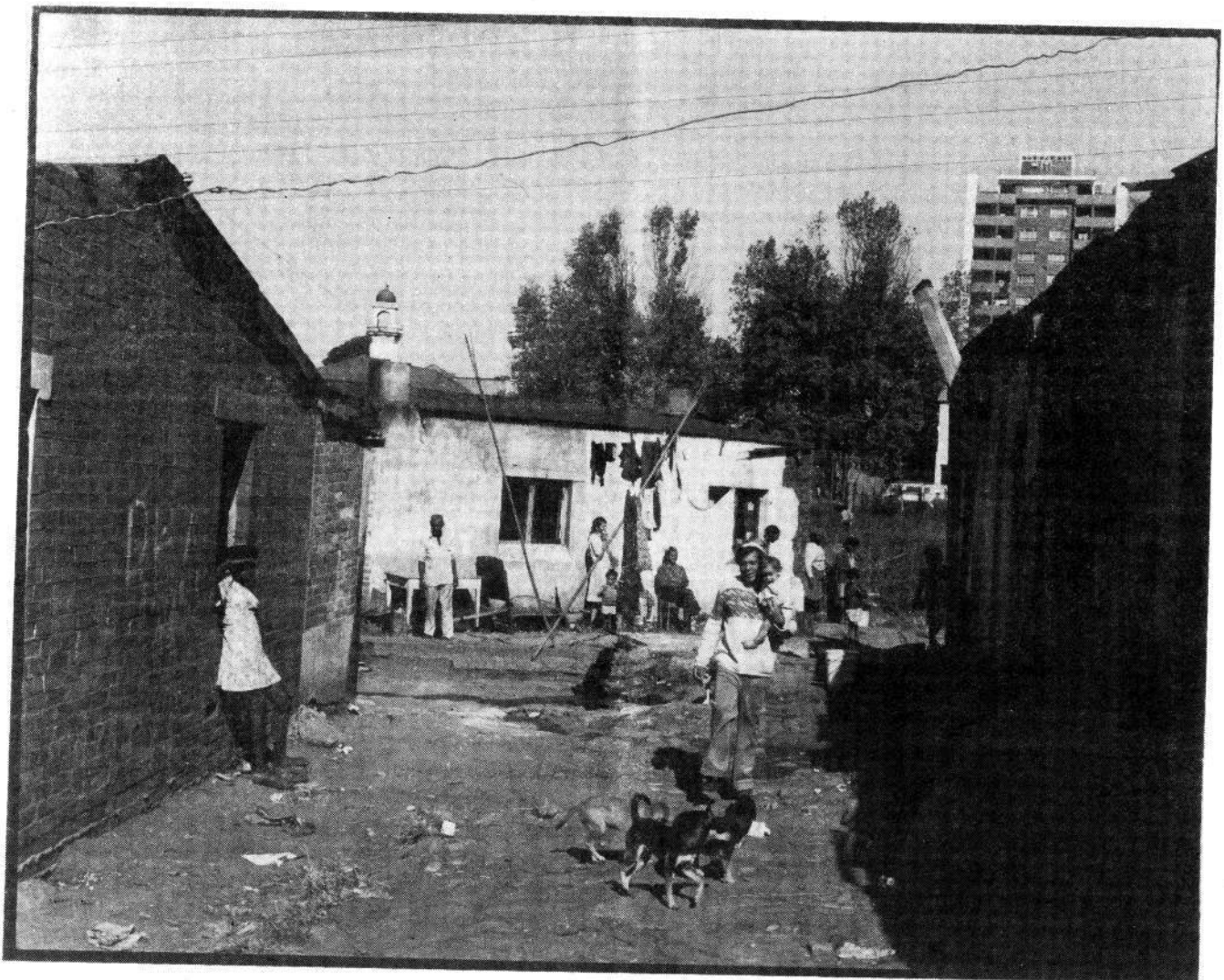


# BACKGROUND TO SQUATTING

1 Pietermaritzburg

## “THE BARRACKS” — AN URBAN SLUM

PHOTOGRAPHS AND COMMENTARY BY JOE ALFERS





Unemployment due to depressed economic conditions has its most dramatic effect at the lower end of the economic scale, and creates areas of urban squalor considered by the authorities as unfortunate but inevitable. REALITY investigated an area in Pietermaritzburg, where people, merely redundancy statistics in the eyes of the authorities and of industry, struggle to exist "with no visible means of support" in bureaucratic language. This area is no doubt typical of many urban slums in South Africa.

It is found at the lower end of the main street of Pietermaritzburg where a number of families have been existing in what can best be called "rooms at the bottom". Some of the families were paying rent others were squatters. About twenty families were involved – 120 people, half of them children. This scene of squalor is called "The Barracks" and is mainly hidden from the main road by a row of flats and shops, (among them a butcher's shop and a restaurant),

The people at "The Barracks" were in dire need of houses but sub-economic accommodation is at a premium in Pietermaritzburg and there are special problems here – the community is racially mixed, which is against the law in South Africa: many are unemployed and even those re-

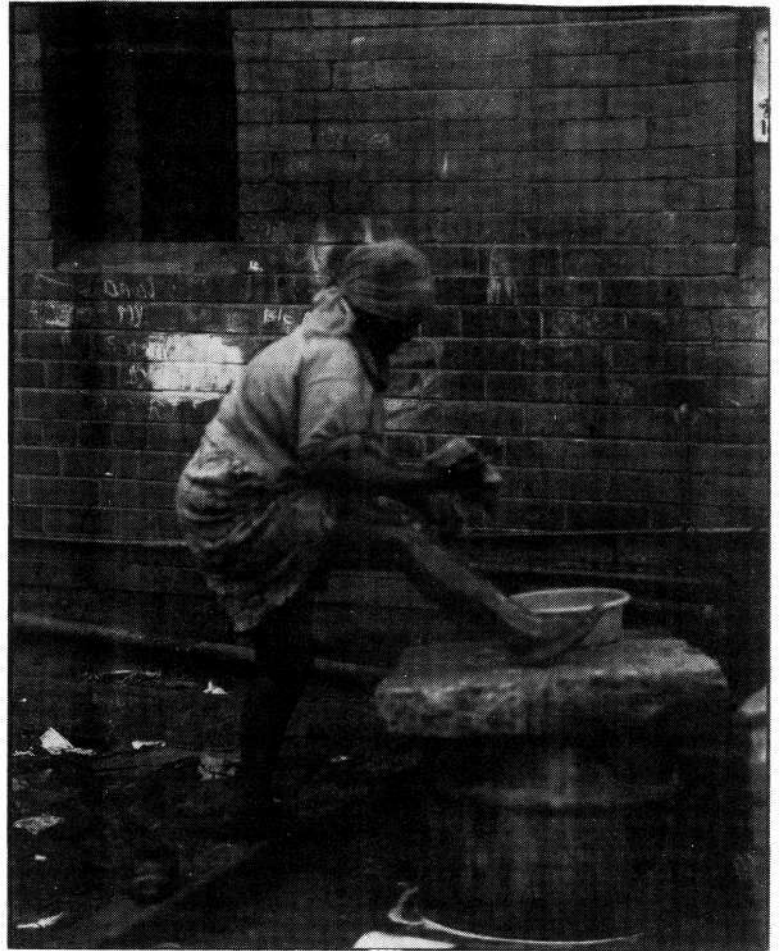
ceiving welfare grants or in employment are unable to pay more than depressingly low rentals. These slum buildings are privately owned but the health authorities have known about them for ten years and seem to have made little attempt to force the landlord to clean them up, though they contravene the local health laws. Recently the landlord died and his heirs tried to get rid of both tenants and squatters who, having no where to go, clung to these sordid rooms, with no electricity, no internal toilet facilities, no running water no heating. Two flush lavatories serve the whole complex and neither of them flushes. There are two taps, one broken.

Five families were evicted by court messenger on the 2nd May and appealed for help to the Rev. Sol Jacob, director of Community Care who housed the families in St. Anthony's Church Hall and then investigated the situation at the Barracks. The remaining families were to be evicted on 31st May 1977.

As soon as a family was evicted the landlord removed the floor, roof, windows and door of their rooms and at once squatters moved into these shells.

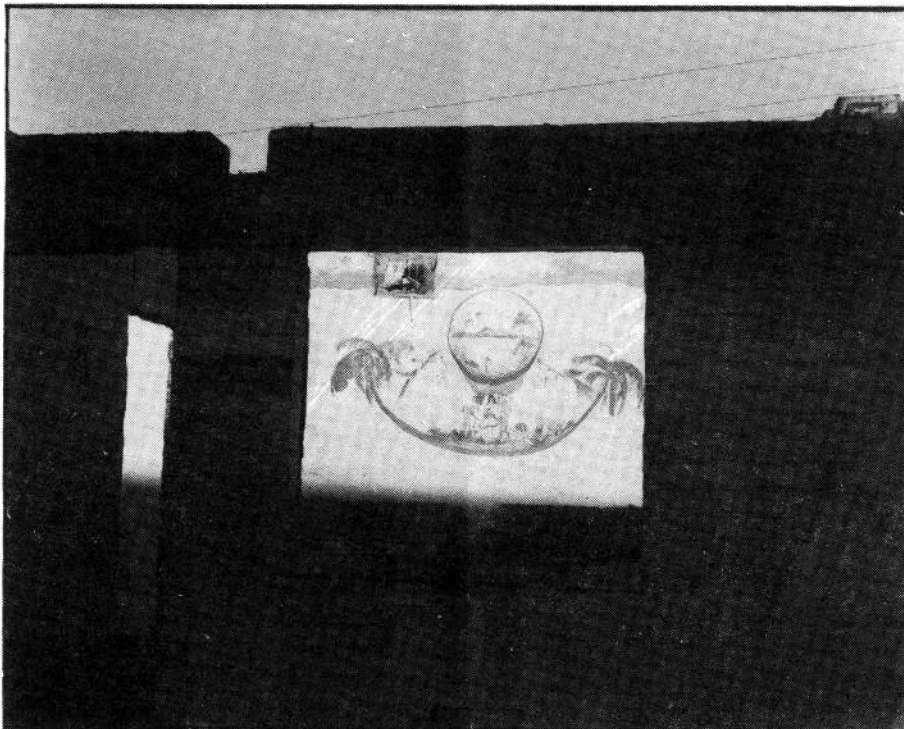
*Right:*

Washing facilities are minimal. Two lavatories which do not flush. Two taps — one broken. The drain is usually blocked and filthy water overflows and seeps into the ground.



*Below:*

A squatters home — no roof, no floor, no door, no window. It offers little protection from the elements but the picture on the wall makes it home for someone.



*Right:*

The Barracks is the only home these children have ever known.

*Below:*

The Rev. Sol Jacob and representatives of the South African Institute of Race Relations and the Black Sash asked for an interview with the Mayor of Pietermaritzburg, and discussed the Barracks and other squatter haunts. The Mayor was sympathetic but explained that the City Council was doing all it possibly could to provide houses. Later the matter was discussed with Councillor Pamela Reid who at once realised that the matter could only be dealt with as an emergency and that emergency measures must be taken. She brought the matter up at a City Council Meeting and was fully backed by the Mayor and Councillors. The people from the Barracks were to be moved into tents. An attempt would be made to set up prefab housing until permanent housing could be provided. All municipal departments would seek to find work for some of the growing numbers of unemployed. And a fund would be opened to collect money to help the homeless and the unemployed. The City Council itself opened the fund with a donation of R60 000.

The time lapse from the deputation to the Mayor until these measures were passed and execution commenced was three days. Why is Pietermaritzburg called Sleepy Hollow? This picture is taken from inside one of the tents in which the families from the Barracks are now living. □

