

THE WINTERVELD SQUATTER AREA

by Baldwin Moseki

The squatter problem is with us; in fact has been with us for a very long time. It is sad that it took so long to become an issue after all. Crossroads, Winterveld, Malukazi, Kromsdraai are all familiar names rammed into our "ken" by relentless watchdogs in the media. But what is a squatter? A squatter is not a phenomenon but a person who by no fault of his or hers exists on the fringes of our society. His identity is vaguely discernible, his needs hardly recognised by officialdom and his will is hardly credited.

When I visited the Winterveld recently, I was consumed by a red-hot guilt-feeling. Here you have a black churchman hastily going through an area of acute suffering, hoping to go home sufficiently informed to be able to indulge in some academic exercise such as producing a report.

Sprawled some 35 km outside Pretoria the Winterveld is an eyesore, an irritation and vexation to the Spirit. Geographically it lies within the so called Bophuthatswana Homeland. There is an obvious lack of social amenities and facilities to meet bare essentials. Streets are teeming with myriads of malnourished urchins who have no future at all. Listless men lean idly against tin shacks and stare forlornly at yet another day without employment. Men, women and kids, wallow in the sterile environment at the doorsteps of affluent white Pretoria. I spoke to some men and put together some tattered strands of History. Men and women had come to settle here from Pretoria's black Townships when accommodation was hard to find. Some were advised by authorities to seek temporary housing here, while being on Township waiting lists. Some had come from neighbouring white farms and had sought tenancy from black landlords in the area. These landlords are an interesting feature indeed. They are part of as ruthless a system of exploitation and dehumanisation ever to emerge within a black society in our country. I choose not to go into the historical intricacies of how they came to be land-owners in this area. Suffice it to state that they fall into two categories, namely: Five-morgen landlords and ten-morgen landlords. Each landlord, with his piece of ground, has attracted a high concentration of tenants and is reaping a great harvest in hard cash. Some are said to be netting as much as R600,00 a month in rentals. Those who have sunk boreholes in their plots swell their coffers by selling water to tenants. There is an acute shortage of this essential commodity in this area, to such an extent that one can see by the degree of concentration of tenant dwelling that the plot has some water.

The five — and ten — morgen sector is not all that unsightly with clusters of shacks only. Landlords have built big, beautiful houses, some double-storeyed. They increase in wealth and comfort when their fellowmen sink into poverty and misery. The crying anthem from their crowded backyards reached not their hearts nor ears. Surely no one can blame them for making a living, in given circumstances. Some are absentee-landlords, who stay in places like SOWETO and Pretoria and make occasional visits to collect their money. Enough for this category. It is at home in our capitalistic, exploitative, economic system. A system which favours the rich and powerful, and dooms the poor to perpetual servitude and misery.

SECTOR KNOWN AS "STAKANENG"

Adjacent to the five — ten — morgen sector is another filthy conglomerate of mudshacks which obviously took a long

time to build up. These are built so close to one another that there is no room for manoeuvre. A significant number of them are gaping ruins, vacated by harassed tenants. Perhaps I should explain here why there are harassed tenants in the Winterveld.

The area falls within the jurisdiction of the Bophuthatswana authorities. The people are a mixture of Tswanas and non-Tswanas. Being in Bophuthatswana they have been urged to take out citizenship certificates. Many are not persuaded that this is the right thing to do; as it would most probably prejudice their employment opportunities in white South Africa. Indeed those who have taken out these certificates already encounter problems when seeking employment in the neighbouring city of Pretoria. Those who refuse to take out these certificates are raided, arrested and prosecuted. A fine of R30,00 has been paid by many, while hundreds have had to flee to other parts of the Republic. Most hard-hit are the non-Tswanas. It is not easy for them to gain the citizenship certificate. They have to provide documentary proof that they have lived in the area continuously for a period of 5 years. It is interesting to note that some of the prosperous landlords are non-Tswanas. These also are under considerable stress. Politically, the Winterveld squatter area is a confusing situation. We have been made to understand that an agreement of some sort had been entered into by the Bophuthatswana authorities and the Government of the Republic, in respect of non-Tswanas in the area. The neighbouring township of Soshanguve is said to be providing for non-Tswanas ejected from the neighbouring Homeland. Some administrative assistance is said to be given by local offices to those turned away from the Bophuthatswana Offices.

The area referred to earlier as "Stakaneng" presents a serious health hazard. With a high percentage of non-schooling children sitting and playing everywhere in filthy surroundings, the threat of epidemics is there. Pit lavatories are situated in close proximity with wells from which water is drawn.

I spoke to a young woman at one of these wells. She spelt out the wearisome process of using a bucket tied to a rope to scrape the bottom of the well. Perhaps I should state here, that this method did not only arouse the revolting experience of being a black South African within me; it also put me way back when I bounded with youthful vigour and innocence in the company of my peers at our village wells. We met and made friends at these wells; thank God, many a courtship started there. The surroundings were different; consonant with the tone of black communal life and experience. Gone are the times, and the Spirit quickens with each nostalgic moment. The Winterveld situation is different, it marks and scars not only the exterior but also the inner being of a people caught up in the whirlwind of politics. A figure at the well is dull, forlorn and uncommunicative; for prolonged suffering has chilled the Spirit.

Men in this area fall into two categories:

- a) those who rise early to board buses heading for Pretoria and
- b) those who yawn the whole day long as a result of unemployment.

Those in the first category leave their humble dwellings as early as 3.00 a.m. and wind their way back at about 9.00 p.m. They pay about 70 cents for a return trip. They are in fact a weary band of workers; for much of their energy is used

up in commuting. It is difficult to give their best at work and equally hard to play a meaningful role at home. They work for a pittance; some bring home about R9,60 per week.

The unemployed are a bedraggled lot; haggard and disconsolate, there are no piece-jobs around. Some are not working because they do not have the necessary documents. They cannot stray too far away for fear of arrest. To be out of work is a demoralizing experience. For a black person it's devastating in its effect. It means you are a sitting duck for the over-zealous policeman. By all definitions an unemployed black is a "vagrant". You need to be black to know this; you need to have had a chance of clutching your "dompas" to your bosom as a treasured possession. Many blacks are clinging to their jobs at all costs because they dare not upset the equilibrium between their home environment and their work environment which hangs so precariously on a "dompas" peg. This is not peculiar to the Winterveld area; it is an ubiquitous manifestation of a pernicious policy of systematic stifling and repression of the voiceless black people of this country. We are told that all this is done in good faith by those who intend well with us.

Another sector, relatively uncongested, is what is known as Mabopane B. This area has tap-water and a number of good houses with some home-ownership sort of scheme. There are some Church buildings, e.g. the Methodist Church and the Anglican Church. Ministers in this area contend with enormous social and spiritual problems. Some could be pitied; for their furrowed brows were testimony to inner tensions and restlessness over their embattled flock. At one of the Churches records showed that attendance at the last Good Friday stood at 520 and collection at the previous Palm Sunday amounted to R13,98. It was quite obvious that the political restlessness of the area had crept into the Church. Pastors, priests and ministers had to be cautious in their ministrations and utterances. Some alleged to having been openly intimidated by officialdom.

It is difficult for outsiders to bring necessary relief into the situation, for lack of an internal communication network even on Church levels. Thank God, attempts are now being made to infiltrate the situation. Self-help projects need to be introduced; but initial spadework in motivation is needed, in a Community that is on the brink of hopelessness and apathy. It is disconcerting to note that there are inhibiting factors for those contemplating entry with the view of offering some help or making some representations. Ideological obstruction is factor number one. The Winterveld is within the Bophuthatswana Homeland or State or whatever name-tag it wears. This is a reality that cannot be brushed aside. Some feel that making representation to the Tswana authorities on behalf of the Winterveld people is tantamount to a recognition of their "so called State". Well, "recognition" or no "recognition", "State" or "Bantustan", the poor and the crushed within are crying for help. What do we do in the face of ideological obstruction and political insensitivity? I sometimes wonder how men can be completely immobilized by these considerations, taking into account that some claim Christian motivation in their actions. I know of short-term goals and long-term goals. Some people in pursuance of the long-term goals neglect the short-term ones, whose immediacy and urgency impinge painfully upon our lives. The poor and simple sometimes find it difficult to be led by men whose heads are always in the clouds and therefore cannot address themselves to basic issues of life and death, hunger and cold. The poor and simple folk of the Winterveld need an assurance of a stable home, an opportunity to earn a living and to contribute to the common good. Admittedly, they are caught up in what is euphemistically termed "population movement", which is in fact an ill-conceived, forced displacement of a whole category of people who have been for far too long at the receiving end of harassment in their country. We cry halt! to this callous act of turning people overnight into political footballs.

At the beginning of this article I lamented the fact that it

took too long for the Winterveld area to receive media attention. Perhaps there was nothing newsworthy about it. Perhaps our people are already saturated with horror stories. Perhaps we have become "dull and insensate". Thank God, the Church has begun to do something in the Winterveld area. After a depressing visit to the area, I attended a meeting called by the Pretoria Council of Churches. Pastors, priests and ministers operating in this area were invited to the meeting for initial exploratory discussions over the situation. This was good; for the Church of Jesus Christ must involve herself in matters affecting the poor, the suffering and the sick. Victims of a sick society are the concern of the Church. Subsequently, as an attempt at bringing about some "internal network" of communication, a workshop seminar for ministers was organised. A good turn-out from the African Independence Churches was noted.

I am reminded, at this stage, of my visit to the Crossroads Squatter Camp earlier in the year. Here I saw the Church at work. Men and women had come together and directed all their energy toward the upliftment of their suffering fellow-human beings. They were not bogged down in petty ideological or political bickerings. They responded on the human level to human needs. Perched on a bleak strip of sandy wasteland, Crossroads seemed to all intents and purposes doomed. The people of Cape Town had to work hard to save Crossroads. They mounted campaigns to publicise the plight of the people and thereby pushed up the "political cost" of demolition. Thank God, Crossroads was a homogeneous community moulded by fate and imbued with the Spirit of oneness. Outsiders found the necessary "infrastructure" to build on. The drabness, dullness and the apathy of the Winterveld situation emerged nowhere here. It was a vibrant community. Men took responsibility for law and order; with the result that the crime rate was kept very low. Women took prominent roles in communal social activities. Some took to drama and depicted, in a poignant way, their life situation. They chose not to languish in silence but to make the most vehement protest against structural evil. The echo of this protest penetrated the farthest corners of the Earth. The devil himself was stopped in his tracks.

People need proper housing; whether it be at the Winterveld, Crossroads or Malukazi; whether or not they find themselves in a wrong "preferential area" or in a "national" state of some dubious origin. An uneasy calm prevails over the Winterveld area at the moment. Nobody seems to know why. According to tenants I spoke to it started at the height of harassment and prosecution when families were leaving in great numbers. Some were surprisingly stopped by men in uniform and told not to leave. It takes a super devil not to relent sometimes, somehow. It is a funny story indeed; but everything is funny in a society so widely divided against itself.

Reports indicate that a number of families left for the Groblersdaal area which incidentally is being prepared for the Ndebele people. It will probably become one of the "States" soon. Many have since trickled back into the Winterveld as a result of difficulties encountered at Groblersdaal. Some are said to have found new "Squatter" places outside Pretoria.

The squatter problem is a legacy of the white man's policy in our country; a policy that discriminates in a brutal way, against black people and dooms them to a life of perpetual restlessness and misery. There is much talk about consolidation and fair distribution of land. Those who are familiar with the modern usage of innocent phrases will note that it all amounts to up-rooting of whole communities of black people. The Winterveld people are casualties of policy as well as those at Crossroads, Malukazi, Glenmore, Kromsdraai and many other places. Rural and urban development is geared to and understood in terms of this policy; and the population needs are not, basically, prime determinants. □