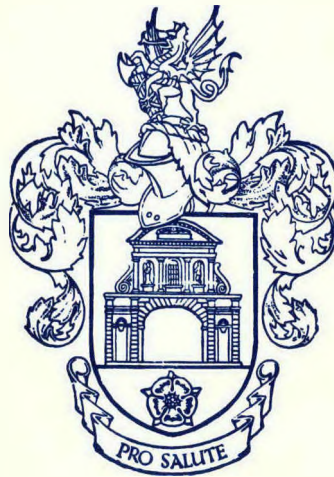


Sketch of Life
in Soweto.

~~4/4~~



L & G

Staff Association Magazine

LEGAL AND GENERAL ASSURANCE SOCIETY LIMITED

STAFF ASSOCIATION COMMITTEE 1964/5

PRESIDENT

MR. H.K. FISH

CHAIRMAN

MR. J.A. CUTLER

Secretary:

MRS. E. BEARDWOOD

Treasurer:

MISS H. WARD

Organising Secretary:

MR. W.J. VAN DER MERWE

MEMBERS

Mrs. J.H. van Niekerk (Staff); Miss G.A. Dancer (Accounts);
Mr. L.R.E. Hughes (Johannesburg Branch); Mr. A. Gien (Harcourt House);
Mr. D. Loubser (New Business); Mr. T.B. Johnson (Fire and Accident);
Mr. K. Rudman (Accounts).

Feature ,

"A SKETCH OF LIFE IN SOWETO"

BY

COUNCILLOR PATRICK R.B. LEWIS.

I would like to thank you for asking me to speak to you on a subject on which I have pondered for some time - what is it like to live in Soweto? The canvas is so large, and there is so little scientific information available, that one can only etch some facets and then only give a glimpse of the way of life of the hundreds of thousands of people who have moved to the cities from the rural areas.

It is a story of a social upheaval on a vast scale, where traditional patterns of behaviour developed over a long period of time, have been suddenly undermined before a new social code has been evolved to substitute suitable norms of conduct in place of those which have been destroyed.

First let me tell you how Soweto got its name. Early in 1930 the Johannesburg City Council purchased 1,300 morgen to the South-West of Johannesburg, adjacent to the Potchefstroom Road, and in 1932 started building houses in a township which was called Orlando, named after one of the then Councillors, Mr. Orlando Leake. One of the primary purposes was to rehouse Africans living in appalling slums at a place called Prospect Township, which was situated on part of the ground now occupied by the new Kazerne Goods yard. By the outbreak of World War 2 in 1939 5,800 houses had been built by the City Council in Orlando. During the war no additional houses were built even though rapid industrialization called for many more workers, and it was at this time that a veritable flood of people moved into the areas adjacent to Orlando, and the notorious squatter camps of Shantytown and Moroka were established. Those were days of degradation, crime and appalling misery. Then, after a hesitant start, the seemingly impossible was achieved. Today we have some 65,000 houses accommodating 306,000 men, women and children, and three hostels accommodating 14,000 men. So, to Orlando was added townships such as Dube, Naledi, Moroka, Chiawelo, Jabavu, Jabulani, Emdeni, Mapetla, Mofolo, Zolo, Zondi, Phiri, Senaoane, Maletsane. For years this large area of 7,900 morgen or 25 square miles was referred to as the South-Western Bantu Townships. It was a city without a name, with no corporate entity. A competition was then held to choose a name. Many of the suggestions had to be turned down because the Zulu would not accept a Sotho name and vice versa. Eventually, a compromise was reached, and Soweto is derived from the first letters of South-Western Townships. So Soweto is the name of this unique town.

Why unique? Because within a period of less than 35 years what had been veld has now become the home of nearly $\frac{1}{2}$ million African people. It is a city without industries, and the working population has to commute to work in the white areas of Johannesburg, some 12 to 20 miles away depending on the station at which the train is boarded. It is unique in that there is only one landlord - the City Council. Unique too, in that the landlord has been prepared, year in and year out, to subsidise many of his tenants by providing houses at sub-economic rentals, by providing medical care, recreational facilities, social welfare services, swimming baths, recreation halls, vocational training - incurring losses which for the last 12 years amounted to R6,500,000. The employers of the tenants have contributed R21,000,000 by means of such funds as the Bantu Transport Levy to subsidise transport, and the Bantu Services Levy towards the capital costs of providing services, thus enabling the rentals to be lowered.

But who are the people who live at Soweto and where did they come from? Why did they come? What manner of persons are they?

Who are the people? Where did they come from? The Xhosa came from the Transkei, the Basuto from Basutoland, the Shangaan from Portuguese East Africa, the Zulu from Zululand, the Bapedi from Pietersburg in the Northern Transvaal, the Tswana from the Western Transvaal, the Nyasa from Malawi, the Bechuana from Bechuana-land, the Mashona and Mandabele from Rhodesia. There are also Swazi, Fingo, Pondo, Makwena, Barolong, Bakgatla, Venda and Griqua. Johannesburg is the magnet for people from all over Southern Africa.

They came to the cities to work, for in their homes in the rural areas the land available was limited, and the agricultural methods primitive. They had no means to support their families when crops failed. They needed cash to pay taxes. Their wants increased and the bright lights of the cities lured them to come to E-Goli - the City of Gold - to seek the cash they needed. With the industrial expansion in the cities their labour was required to enable the factories and industries to function. The services provided in the towns, the educational and medical facilities available, and the general better living conditions drew the people to the cities from the rural areas.

At one time, it was just the men who came. In 1900, of the 60,000 Africans the ratio of males to females was 12 - 1; by 1927, with a population of 136,000 the ratio was 6 - 1; at the outbreak of war the ratio was 3 - 1 and now it is equal.

At first the men worked for short spells, returning home to join their families and returning to the cities again when their funds gave out. What a different pattern it is today! Now that the women folk have moved to town the vast majority are permanent urban dwellers.

How different they found the city from their rural areas! How strange they felt in their new surroundings! How ill equipped their tribal beliefs and training had made them for their new life. Instead of the sun being their time-piece, they now had to work to the inelastic and unsympathetic clock of the white man. Instead of working in the circle of their clan, where everyone was known to them and to each other, they were now among strangers, strangers to them and strangers to one another. They heard unfamiliar tongues they could not understand. Because they could not understand they were thought to be stupid - some called them momparas and worse. Whereas at home they had a sense of kinship, and could consult their kinsmen, they were now on their own and had to make decisions for themselves. Their food was different, as were their mealtimes, and the white man's medicine was different. Instead of a barter economy, ready cash was necessary. Instead of leisurely walks along country paths, 170,000 persons each day rise early to throng the crowded trains carrying them to work, only to repeat the same tortured travel in the late afternoon. No longer were cattle the symbol of wealth. In the City the material goods of the West and a flashy car were one's aim. Whereas in the clan initiative was not encouraged and could lead to jealousy, now they were judged on their own merits and were encouraged to develop individuality. At home there was respect for one's elders. The daily battle to secure a place on the crowded trains destroyed any attitude other than looking after oneself. In the City one was on one's own, and free from restraints of the tribe, but at the same time one had lost the security of the assured help of kinsmen. The ancestral spirits seemed far away; some people in the towns even cast doubt on their very existence. It is difficult enough for a rural dweller of any race to adjust himself to the hustle and bustle of the City. For the African it also meant adjustment to a totally different way of life.

What an upheaval - what an adaptation to make. The migratory worker away from his kith and kin, away from his women folk, could not be expected to observe the tribal sanctions and restraints - for a man is a man and needed his desires fulfilled and so began the process which has caused a most heart-rending upheaval in the structure of African society, particularly in family life. Sadly enough both marriage and family life are very unstable and one fears that it will be a long process to rebuild secure and stable families again. But

other societies, notably England during the Industrial Revolution, have experienced the same maladjustments inevitable in such a drastic transition, and have readjusted themselves. While large numbers are living normal family lives there are still 85,000 men and 55,000 women living under single conditions in hostels, compounds, flats or on their employer's private property. There is no means of estimating how many of these men and women are in fact single and how many are involuntarily parted from their spouses.

In the early days of contact between White and Black many well-meaning people, looking through the eyes of one civilization and, not knowing the customs and traditions of the other, condemned polygamy and other marriage customs, and the lobolo system, interpreting that system as the purchase of the wife by the bridegroom - how wrong they were.

In days gone by, while customs varied from tribe to tribe pre-marital pregnancies would have had serious consequences for both parties. In the towns no such sanctions existed and illegitimate children became accepted without any eyebrows being so much as raised. The transfer of cattle by the kinsmen of the bridegroom to the kinsmen of the bride was a symbol of the alliance of the clans, and many consequences flowed from these transactions. For one, if the husband died his clan would care for his wife and children. There were no uncared for widows or orphans.

How different in the towns. One was away from the close-knit community where everyone knew one's actions. One was among strangers who did not care thus causing a breakdown in tribal sanctions.

In the cities the lobolo system lost its old meaning for there were no cattle. Yet it persists today in the form of money in circumstances which destroy its original purpose. It is often the earning capacity of the bride which determines the lobolo demanded. In days gone by it was the parents and the clan who assisted with the payment of lobolo now it is the groom who has to find it. If the amount demanded is too high the man and maid often live together until lobolo can be found.

In Bantu society in rural areas polygamy was the accepted norm. The women tilled the fields and were responsible for providing the meals. In the cities there were no fields to till and the only means of providing the food was to go out and work for cash. Then who looked after the children while one was at work in the city? No wonder many of the youngsters have grown up without discipline or the desire to have regular employment, seeking rather to live by their wits. The role of the women in the tribe was well defined and very

different from that of women in the Western societies. What profound change has resulted from coming to the city. Today in Soweto the women play an increasingly important role in their own society and are potent agents of stability. Read books such as "A Black Women in Search of God" to appreciate the stabilising force of the Manyano women. It is often the women who provide the stimulus in educating the children. In many households the women scrimp and scrape to find the funds to enable the children to acquire the knowledge they themselves never had. And what problems this often creates where the children may scorn the parents because of their illiteracy.

One of the ever-present problems is that of making ends meet. Poverty in the rural areas was one thing because in the rural areas one shared what there was to share. In the city where cash is required to meet the month's rental - for with only one landlord one can find oneself on the street with nowhere else to go if the rent is in arrears - where food and clothing has to be bought at ever-increasing prices - poverty is a nightmare, especially for the aged, the out-of-works, the ill, the deserted wives with a crop of children to care for. These days of full employment and more adequate wages have helped enormously in relieving the hardships of a large portion of the Soweto population, but it is a constant struggle, especially if the men spend their wages on clothes, or gambling, or at the Municipal beerhalls or on their girl friends without measuring up to their responsibilities for the family they helped to create.

I have endeavoured to put to you this melting pot into which people of varying tribal backgrounds, various levels of education, varying stages of civilization, have been thrown. What has been the outcome of this melting pot process?

If one visits Soweto one is impressed with the manner in which the houses are kept, by the gardens that have been made and how neat the homes are inside.

I can only marvel at the resilience, at the good humour, the philosophical attitude, and the good sense of the people in adapting themselves to what has happened.

Who could have visualized some 30 years ago - 20 years ago - even 10 years ago the skills that would be acquired by these country folk, who could have envisaged that there would be African matrons at Baragwanath Hospital, and a hospital staffed with African nurses, who could have believed that Municipal treasury officials would be Africans, that the builders of houses, the bricklayers, the carpenters, the electrical wiremen, the plumbers and drainlayers would be Black,

and that there would be building contractors, that they would be driving bulldozers, that they would acquire the skills for industry, that there would be elegant owner-built homes in a middle-class suburb, that there would be choirs who could sing the Messiah to us in the City Hall, that there would be artists trained in the city's art centre in Polly Street capable of exhibiting works of art in London, Paris and New York. Who would have believed, not 10 years ago, but 3 years ago that making European liquor available to the Africans would not result in an orgy of drunkenness and terror. The release of European liquor to the Africans has improved the relationship with the Police, who no longer have at all times to carry out the hated liquor raids. Unacceptable and unenforceable laws breed disrespect for the law. The complicated pass laws and influx control regulations impinge on the desired freedom of movement of most families in one way or another. In the minds of the Africans the Police are identified with the laws and the niceties of the difference between the makers of the law and those who have to carry them out are not recognised.

That all is not well we know. You cannot have a social upheaval such as we have had without somebody being hurt, and it will take time and patience and understanding to heal the wounds caused by the destruction of one social order before another takes its place.

The beliefs of the African, the concepts of kinship, the belief in ancestral spirits, the belief in signs, in omens good and bad, the belief that one can be bewitched, that one can bewitch one's enemy, the belief in the witchdoctor's occult powers, in his medicines - these and many others are deeprooted and will be a part of African thinking for a long time to come.

What have we tried to put in their place? Often the Africans first contacts with White civilization were the missionaries. What dedicated men and women they were. To what extent have those sacrifices and dedication influenced African life and morality today? A large proportion of the educated Africans received their schooling at Missions and Church affiliated institutions such as Lovedale, Fort Hare, Kilnerton, Adams College and Roma. While the churches have many hundred of thousands of members and adherents, Christianity is by many regarded as the white man's religion and is therefore suspect. Was the behaviour of the white man towards them, and were the laws of the white man such as to create a desire to repose belief in the white man's God?

Countless separatist churches, some put the number at over 2,000, have sprung up throughout South Africa. These vary from those

having beliefs and a faith bearing a close resemblance to Christianity to those which are almost completely pagan. It is regrettable to have to say that the Christian church is finding it hard to penetrate to the core of the masses and amongst the more sophisticated church affiliation is often for purposes of social status rather than for inherent belief backed by a standard of conduct.

A hopeful sign in a society where the class structure is emerging is that not only in South Africa, but in Africa as a whole, status is allied with the extent to which western civilization has been attained. We recently suggested that we have an exhibition in Soweto at which tribal huts and impedimenta be displayed and tribal costumes worn. The Advisory Boards would have none of it - they did not want to be reminded of their past.

In Soweto today various strata of society are emerging. These strata are based on the extent of education, and the absorption of western civilization. Possession of material goods is a symbol of success and status. The better educated - professional persons, the teachers, shopkeepers, nurses, senior officials in Administration, entertainers - tend to form the uppercrust of society. One's income and skills are important factors. In addition there are the labourers and the newcomers to town. There are church associations, choral societies, football clubs, school associations, chambers of commerce, advisory boards and many other organizations cutting right across ethnic grouping and these activities determine one's associates and place in the new society. Unfortunately, there are also the city slickers and spivs, the people who want to make money the easy way not caring whom they rape or rob or how they maim. I often feel that today the greatest need in Soweto is to find some way of providing the law-abiding citizen with protection from the molestation of his fellows.

The urban dweller of today has travelled a long way on the path of material progress. His standard of living, his abilities, his outlook and that of his City-bred children are vastly different from those of yesteryear. What of tomorrow? I see a further advance in that progress, but care must be taken that these abilities are given adequate outlets so that a mood of frustration is not allowed to develop. If that can be done then I have confidence in the future.

Collection Number: A1132

Collection Name: Patrick LEWIS Papers, 1949-1987

PUBLISHER:

Publisher: Historical Papers Research Archive, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

Location: Johannesburg

©2016

LEGAL NOTICES:

Copyright Notice: All materials on the Historical Papers website are protected by South African copyright law and may not be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, displayed, or otherwise published in any format, without the prior written permission of the copyright owner.

Disclaimer and Terms of Use: Provided that you maintain all copyright and other notices contained therein, you may download material (one machine readable copy and one print copy per page) for your personal and/or educational non-commercial use only.

This collection forms part of a collection, held at the Historical Papers Research Archive, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa.