

C H E S T E R V I L L E

INTRODUCTION

In 150 acres of hilly, wooded terrain, just 6 kms. north west of Durban lies CHESTERVILLE, the city's second oldest black township with a population of around 15,000.

Situated immediately adjacent to the plush white and, by definition, stable suburb of Westville and divided, by two national highways, from the historically racial battleground known as Cato Manor, Chesterville has survived not only apartheid's Group Area's axe but similarly motivated attempts at either its reduction or elimination.

Between the years 1940 and 1945 Durban, as elsewhere in the Union, was affected by rapid urbanization and wartime building restrictions, giving rise to housing problems of overcrowding in existing locations and the emergence of squatter camps. Chesterville's humble and squalid beginnings were from just such an illegal camp: the overflow from the 900 houses - built in an area then known as Blackburn Estate which fell far short of the demand.

According to one informant, a resident since hounded out of township existence, Chesterville was formally established in 1946 at the bequest of a certain Mr. Chester from whom obviously it derived its name. If this is so, then certainly these four decades of the township's history have been a travesty of what its founder and namesake intended. For it was at the latter's request that 275 acres were to be set aside for the specific use of widows and orphans. Rent - then only 12s 6d - was to be exacted for a period of 15 years and thereafter home ownership was to be given to the tenants.

That such a humane scheme never eventuated is hardly surprising given the function and the fate of South Africa's black townships. As pools of cheap labour, they provided the source from which post-World War II, rapidly industrializing, South Africa was to draw its vast profits. The long term implications that this has had for South Africa's social relations is evident today in widespread township rebellion. The basis of this shetto revolt is the implicit understanding of a system designed, in the interests of whites, to deny to the deprived both a say in the control of their lives and their right to enjoy the fruits of their labour.

The Chesterville story is little different. For all its laudable beginnings - at least in the mind of its benefactor - it too has traversed the same path from impoverishment to protest. A protest that goes beyond the mere rejection of the structural poverty that continues to blight the lives of millions, and is now an irreversible demand for freedom on, for the most part, 'Charterist' terms.

-POVERTY

It, to the casual observer, Chesterville's poverty is somewhat less apparent, it is merely that the lushness of sub-tropical vegetation acts as a camouflage, masking to some extent the superficial harshness of the physical reality.

And the realities are of:

- * a high occupancy of dilapidated, sub-economic houses;
- * of dirt roads in need of repair;
- * of inadequate educational facilities - a single Secondary and only two Primary schools;
- * of few and, for the most part, unusable recreational amenities;
- * of non-existent services for which an indigent community are expected to pay;
- * of rents in excess of what the majority can afford and with the threat of eviction for those in arrears;
- * of a high rate of unemployment.

In sum, except for a veneer of painting for those homes visible to the white public, little or nothing has ever been done to upgrade the township. Chesterville remains, as townships everywhere have, fit only for the fourth rate, the unenfranchised, the expendable.

PROTEST

1983 saw the last election for a Community Council. For the people, the practice of this discredited system held no more legitimacy than had the concept, which they saw as yet another government device to hold on to the substance of power whilst dispensing only its semblance. Which semblance the Councillors themselves have affirmed through their inability and seeming unwillingness to help in the upliftment of their own people.

Towards this latter end, organization was clearly necessary and the only solution if communities were to confront the government directly with their legitimate demands. Even before the crunch fell in Natal - with Victoria Mxenge's murder on 1 August, 1985 - Chesterville had done just that. In 1983, for example, it had joined a consortium of peripheral townships from the prescribed areas: Lamontville, Hambanathi, Klaarwater and Shakaville to form the Joint Rent Action Committee (JORAC). In that year too, and thereafter, other organizations were spawned to meet the growing needs of Chesterville's womenfolk, its youth and the crisis itself.

These community structures, as elsewhere, posed for the State a potential threat undermining its control. But whereas in certain areas of Natal, it had become clear that the State could rely on an Inkatha presence for the vicarious exercise of that control, with Chesterville this was not so.

Instead, the State moved in to put the township under the control of first one and then a second of its law enforcement agencies. By the end of that first crisis year, 1985, the South African Police (SAP) were operating from a premiss once used as a Beer Hall (and, symbolically, arsoned in 1983). Their number was increased when troops from the South African Defence Force (SADF) were sent in as reinforcement.

The very presence and permanency of these security forces have brought the besieged township of Chesterville into the forefront of attack, while at the same time affording its community organizations no protection whatsoever from a right wing vigilante group that emerged from within the township itself.

This group - the self-styled "A" Team - originated with the ex-Headmaster of the High School, Agrippa Cebekhulu, from whose name, it is thought, the "A" was taken. The education crisis had certainly not left Chesterville unscathed and trouble between the High School's Headmaster and pupils led eventually to the former's resignation and his subsequent recruitment of the notorious "A" Team from amongst ex-convicts and teachers and that included one Councillor. Although only relatively few in number, drawn from a handful of families all known to the residents, this gang with the alleged (and well documented) backing and collusion of the security forces has done untold damage to the community of Chesterville.

To the extent of:

- * lives disrupted
- * of a continuing cycle of victimization, arrests, detention, torture;
- * of killings, maiming, arson;
- * of schooling disorganized and "comrades" routed;
- * of children, youth and leaders in hiding;
- * of desperate mothers, wives and sisters standing vigil.

In the relatively small, beleaguered township of Chesterville upwards of 45 have met with violent, premature death at the hands of the security forces, unknown suspects or the infamous "A" Team.

CHESTERVILLE, it would seem, is a classic example of where, in a well organized community, the State's modus operandi is to terrise, to divide and, in sum, to crush all opposition - real and potential.

So that today Chesterville is experiencing the depth of black fury: trapped into a situation of violence not of their making; their demands rejected; their organizations smashed; hounded to the ground when they dare to escape; despairing of help from any quarter;for them the only answer left to the brute force pitted against them is to return with firepower.

No longer, the youth are saying, are they going to defencelessly wait to be the next target for some callow, trigger-happy, robot-like recruit - who, if he had any understanding wouldn't be there.

BLACK YOUTH TOO ARE ARMING.

Affidavit

I, STANLEY MFANAFUTHI DLAMINI do hereby make oath and say:

1

I am an 18 year male resident at H731, Road 15, Chesterville and am a scholar at Chesterville High School.

2

I reside with my parents.

3

On the 19th June 1986 at approximately 6.50 pm I went to my neighbours house also in Road 15. My neighbour is Good Manzini.

4

It was my habit to go to this house to sleep from time to time as it is dangerous to stay in one's own home. It is known that the police and the A-team (a gang which has terrorised Chesterville for some time) often attack houses where young men of my age stay.

5

On this particular night I was at the neighbour's house with his brother-in-law Russel Mngomezulu, and another friend Tibelo Mbatha.

6

At about 1.15 am that morning Sandile Mkize and Russel Mthembu came to this house. They were known to me.

7

These two asked for Russel Mngomezulu whom they knew would be there.

8

They then said that we should accompany them to the house of one Cwepheshe, who is also known to me and who also lives in Road 15. Russel Mngomezulu, Tibelo, Mbatha and I then accompanied Sandile Mkhize and Russel Mthembu to that house.

9

On the way I enquired why we were going there and Russel Mthembu said that I should not worry as they had met certain men from the border who had come to help us.

10

When we arrived at Cwepheshe's house we knocked and entered.

11

Sandile Mkhize and Russel Mthembu then went out again and shortly thereafter returned with two men and one woman, all Black, but who were not known to me.

12

One of these men said to us that they had been looking all over for us and they had dangerous weapons for us. He asked what would happen if the police caught us. The man talking had a firearm in his jacket.

13

At that point Russel Mthembu asked the strangers who the White man in the car outside was. I gathered that these men had come in a white Hi Ace van and that they had left one White and one Black man in the car. I however did not see them myself.

14

The stranger replied that the struggle was multi-racial and Umkhonto has Black and White members.

15

Umkhonto is to the best of my knowledge and belief the military wing of the African National Congress.

16

The woman that had come with the stranger then left having said that she was going to collect what she called the material.

17

After a few minutes the man who had done the talking stated that his woman companion was taking too long and that he was going to see what was happening. He then went out.

18

Sandile Mkhize tried to follow but the remaining man said he should not go out as there was a man from Chesterville outside whom we should not see.

19

Then this remaining man also went outside.

20

At this stage there were six of us in the room, namely Russel Mngomezulu, Tibelo Mbatha, Sandile Mkhize, Russel Mthembu, Cwebeshe and myself.

21

Suddenly I heard gunfire coming in from the window and thin walls. I saw the stranger who had gone out to look for the woman described in paragraph 17 standing at the window and am certain that he was one of the people firing at us.

22

I saw Russel Mngomezulu fall on the bed he was sitting on. I was grazed by a bullet on my forehead and fell to the floor. Sandile Mkhize fell on top of me. I heard Tibelo who was at the door fall also.

23

The sound of the shooting was like that of a machine gun.

24

The shooting lasted about 2 to 3 minutes.

25

After the shooting stopped I asked whether anyone was still alive. Tibelo replied and I told him that I was going to get help.

26

Russel Mthembu, Russel Mngomezulu, Sandile Mkhize and Cwebeshe were dead.

27

I then went to Manzini's house and reported what had happened. We then borrowed a car from a Mr. Sithole who took Tibelo to hospital.

The above affidavit was taken by Peter Rutsch of the Legal Resource Centre, 20 St. Andrew's Street, Durban.

It was done in my presence and in my house on the Friday evening, 21 June 1986.

In view of Black Sash's involvement with Chesterville, a number of us had gone, in response to an urgent call, to the township on the morning of the 20 June. Not only did we visit the homes of the families concerned and heard their tragic story verbatim, but we were also a witness to the slaughter shack itself and saw it in the bloody, bullet ridden and chaotic state in which it had been left only hours beforehand.

Ann Colvin
Chairperson

BLACK SASH - NATAL COASTAL REGION

NATIONAL CONFERENCE 1987