After an absence of four years from South Africa, and therefore from Black Sash work, I came to this Conference very curious to see what developments had taken place. The excellent magazine had kept me informed of Black Sash activities, but this is not the same as getting the ‘feel’ of a movement at a three-day Conference.

As a delegate, I had been called upon to enumerate the laws which deprive a South African citizen of his right to trial before the Courts before he is considered guilty of any offence, and I realized with horror how long the list is, and how drastically the position has changed for the worse in the ten years since the Black Sash started.

The National President, in her speech at the public meeting on Monday, 18th October, exposed the deterioration very forcefully. Her whole speech, and her quotations from de Tocqueville on justice and freedom, should be read and re-read, and deeply pondered.

At Conference there were representatives from all the Provinces except the poor Free State, where the Black Sash apparently has never been able to revive after its initial courageous and lively start, although a handful of stalwarts still keep the spirit alive. Many of the old familiar faces were to be seen, but fortunately many new and many younger people have joined and have become leaders in their Regions.

Mrs. Jean Hill

On the first day, we had to face the fact that one of our foundation members, Mrs. Jean Hill of Durban, had recently been served with banning orders by the Minister of Justice, restricting her for five years to the magisterial district of Durban, and banning her from all social gatherings, all teaching, all political activity, all publishing. As the terms were read out to the Conference, the wickedness of this arbitrary action was brought home to all of us. We know that Jean Hill’s ‘crimes’ consist of working for her fellow human beings in education, in the provision of legal aid, and in promoting charity and understanding — all stemming from her deeply-held Christian faith.

A press statement about Jean Hill’s banning challenging the Minister of Justice to substantiate his accusations in the banning order was prepared and published in the local press. It was also decided that South Africa will not have heard the last of Jean Hill.

Regional Reports

Reports from all Regions were spoken to briefly, as they had all been circulated. Since headquarters are having difficulty in covering expenses, it was agreed to raise the levy to 75 cents per member without raising the subscription, and Cape Western and Transvaal Regions very generously offered to make up last year’s deficit.

All Regions were exhorted to encourage new people to join, and it was encouraging to hear that Transvaal had enrolled ten new members recently.

Several hours were given to discussion on the work of the Advice Offices, as this is the most practical and perhaps the most valuable work the Black Sash is doing, by way of trying to dull the sharp edge of apartheid implementation. In Athlone, where the Black Sash shares the work with the S.A. Institute of Race Relations, 4,380 interviews were conducted during the year, and in Johannesburg 1,115. In Durban the Advice Office is being re-opened, and in some Regions members help other organizations who do this work.

All Regions reported excellent relations with the English press, and the Tenth Anniversary birthday was well covered all over the country. The English press in Port Elizabeth gave the Conference wonderful publicity, with photographs, daily reports and excellent sub-leaders, which appear elsewhere in this Magazine.

Hospitality

As usual, the high standard of organization and hospitality which we have come to expect from all regions acting as hostesses were more than maintained, and the arrangements were excellent. The last time we came to Port Elizabeth was for our very first full Conference ten years ago, and I overheard one exhausted hostess whispering that she hoped it would be at least ten years before we came again! This sentiment was not echoed by the guest delegates, who enjoyed and appreciated all the hospitality thoroughly.

Adherence to principle

I have had four years holiday from battling against unsympathetic government authorities, and have enjoyed a new experience, unusual in present-day South Africa, of actually gaining the approval of government for doing educational work with African adults. My feeling as I am
plunged back into Black Sash work is one of unbounded admiration for my Black Sash friends who help in spite of government disapproval. I also admire their determination to reach agreement with each other on principle, in spite of differences of approach and personality clashes. When an impetus and a dynamo meet, sparks may fly, but the result is action — not stagnation. Adherence to principle and devotion to the interests of all South Africa's people outweighed all other considerations in ensuring wise decisions on every occasion, especially with firm and fair chairmanship.

Two aspects of work
The clearest impression left with me is that all the efforts at brain-washing by the S.A.B.C. and all the intimidation used by the Nationalists to force or cajole all Whites into approval of apartheid, have not been entirely successful. Here is a group of women fearlessly prepared to go on working hard to provide at least some crumbs of justice for those South Africans suffering most under the cruel regulations and heartless legislation which are necessary if apartheid is to be enforced. These crumbs are not enough to satisfy millions of virile people, and therefore the Black Sash is also trying to enlighten and arouse all Whites, who, through the power of the vote, could bring about peaceful change at the polls, and do away with much injustice.

Both aspects of the work are important, and both were given recognition at Conference.

Reluctant though I had been to take back on my shoulders the burden of guilt that White South Africans carry, I was proud to be back with the women of the Black Sash.

Extracts from the writings of Alexis de Tocqueville
Quoted by Mrs. Sinclair in her Presidential Address

FREEDOM
THAT which at all times has so strongly attached the affection of certain men is the attraction of freedom herself, her native charms independent of her gifts — the pleasure of speaking, acting, and breathing without restraint, under no master but God and the law. He who seeks in freedom aught but herself is fit only to serve.

There are nations which have indefatigably pursued her through every sort of peril and hardship. They loved her not for her material gifts they regard herself as a gift so precious and so necessary that no other could console them for the loss of that which consoles them for everything else. Others grow weary of freedom in the midst of prosperities; they allow her to be snatched without resistance from their hands, lest they should sacrifice by an effort that well-being which she had bestowed upon them. For these to remain free, nothing was wanting but a taste for freedom. I attempt no analysis of that lofty sentiment to those who feel it not. It enters of its own accord into the large hearts God has prepared to receive it; it fills them, it enraptures them; but to the meaner minds which have never felt it, it is past finding out.

"Ancient Régime and the Revolution".

THE GERM OF TYRANNY
A GENERAL LAW has been sanctioned, not only by a majority of this or that people, but by a majority of mankind. This law bears the name of Justice. The rights of every people are consequently confined within the limits of what is just . . .

Unlimited power appears to me to be in itself an evil and a dangerous thing; and the mind of man unequal to the disinterested practice of omnipotence. I think that God alone can exercise supreme and uncontrollable power, because His wisdom and justice are eternally proportionate to His might. But no power on earth is so worthy of honour for itself, or of reverential obedience to the rights which it represents, that I would consent to admit its uncontrollable and all-predominant authority. When I see that the right and the means of absolute command are conferred on a people or upon a king, upon an aristocracy or a democracy, a monarchy or a republic, I recognize the germ of tyranny and I journey onwards to a land of more hopeful institutions.

"Democracy in America".