

CONFERENCE 1966

By ELAINE KATZ

C. Louis Leipoldt's "Dit is die maand Oktober
Die mooiste, mooiste maand"

applies most fittingly to Cape Town where the 1966 National Conference was held. Despite glorious weather during the entire three-day period of Conference and despite the scenic and natural beauties to be enjoyed in the Spring, the delegates remained attentive throughout. Perhaps occasionally delegates thought wistfully of what they might be doing outside Gordon's Institute. But for the most part, the Conference was so constructive, stimulating and entertaining (some delegates are unconscious humourists) that extraneous distractions held little allure.

I must confess I did not feel that the first day of Conference was a "good" day. The level of debate was often poor and much time was wasted in unnecessary and uninteresting discussion. Perhaps it would be possible to arrange the first day's agenda, which deals mainly with administrative matters, on a different basis.

The discussions on the first day made me feel that there is a need for much more communication between all regions, a feeling which was strengthened by the subsequent discussions. One of the items for discussion was "The possibility of Country Branches keeping Headquarters informed of happenings in their area." It was unanimously agreed that this was possible. But I feel that we should carry this much further. We need to pool our ideas and this should be done frequently, not once a year at Conference. It is not enough for each region, or headquarters alone, to have a skeletal outline of the work being done in each region and in each country branch. Every region should have precise details of all aspects of the work undertaken in every other region.

The discussion on "Methods of Counteracting the S.A.B.C. Propaganda" made me keenly aware of the need for much greater co-operation and communication. The Transvaal delegation introduced this subject by means of a rehearsed playlet — a technique which had been used successfully before in Johannesburg. This technique is used to stimulate discussion which is conducted under the guidance of a skilled group leader. In this playlet different and opposing points of view were put forward by the Transvaal delegates, view points to which they did not necessarily subscribe. It is a tribute to their histrionic abilities and their slave driving producer that most of those present were unaware that the Transvaal delegation had been rehearsing their part for days before. Many delegates were completely taken in and, at first, thought that the Transvaal delegation had momentarily gone mad. Delegates, who consistently and unanimously had backed each other before were now shouting at each other without restraint and

putting forward totally opposed view points. This is not really the point here. I am not sure whether the playlet stimulated the discussion which ensued. What I found significant was that when discussion was opened to the floor, many interesting suggestions were put forward. Not all of them were feasible. Not all could be implemented. But for purposes of discussion here, I could see clearly how the idea suggested by one delegate would stimulate the imagination of another delegate and would lead yet another delegate to think spontaneously, of a new idea.

It is this constant interchange of ideas that we want. We want to discard old, stale habits and thoughts. Dynamic and positive suggestions help to revitalise old, worn out attitudes.

Furthermore, as Mrs. Sinclair pointed out, practical conditions and the very climate of ideas and opinions differ so much from region to region that it is vital that we communicate with each other lest we lose our common standpoint and lest we become estranged from each other purely because we have failed to appreciate the fact that different conditions operate in different parts of the country.

The interest which delegates showed in the reports from the Advice Offices, the fact papers presented on "Sada" and "mass arrests" indicates that more factual presentations of problems should be presented each year. As it becomes increasingly difficult to try to change people's opinions in view of the change of the climate of opinion in South Africa, these fact papers are vital and necessary. We must try to keep the small body of interested people aware of what is going on and it is through facts and figures that a balanced, critical and objective viewpoint is maintained.

I cannot write about the 1966 Conference without mentioning the public meeting held at the Claremont Civic Centre. Here Mrs. Sinclair gave a masterly Presidential address. Dr. Birley, as guest speaker, gave a talk on the movement which led to the Abolition of Slavery in the British Empire. Dr. Birley, with his rhetorical ambience, held us enthralled. I have no doubt that he sti-

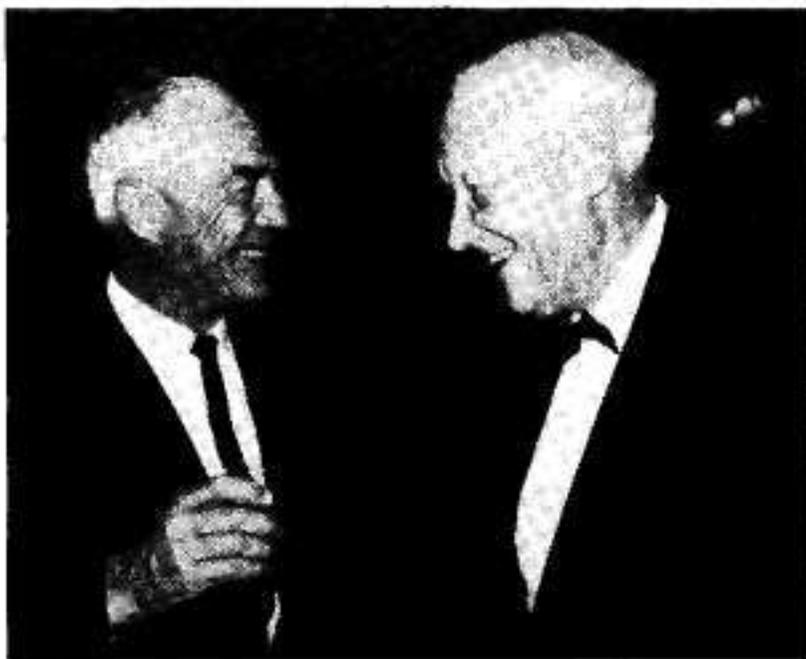
mulated the historical imagination of each and every member of the audience but this was only a subsidiary objective. The allegory, based on verified historical facts and not on fantasy (as a Spenserian "Faerie Queen") has universal significance and inspiration. We, in our awareness of South Africa's increasing isolation, should bear this in mind. The memory of this talk will always be a source of encouragement for Black Sash members when they feel their sense of frustration too keenly or when they feel the odds against which they are battling have become too overwhelming.

Mrs. Wilks, Chairman of Cape Western gave a cocktail party for the delegates and distinguished visitors at her home in Constantia which overlooks the valley of Hohenhort and Constantia. In this serene setting, removed from the frenzied and frenetic rush of the large city, to which we from Johannesburg are particularly subjected,

the "Barbarians from the North" hankered for much more than the taste of gracious living which we were temporarily able to enjoy.

As a new delegate I came with few preconceived notions. I frankly did not know what to expect and I came prepared to be critical. At the end of Conference I came away with a sense of purpose. I felt that we could go on doing the sort of work we have been doing and, though success is limited, nevertheless our organisation has a definite contribution to make. I feel that the resolutions agreed to at Conference, limited though they may be in scope, will give direction and a feeling of fulfilment to Black Sash members.

Viscount Grey's memorable statement "The lamps are going out all over Europe" could well apply to South Africa. We hope our lamp will continue to burn. It is a Conference like this which feeds the flame.



Professor Birley, Dr. Wolheim, members and guests at the cocktail party given by Mrs. Wilks, Chairman of the Cape Western Region, at her home in Constantia.