

This Bunch of Jolly Students

FORMAL EDUCATION FOR MEN SERVING LONG-TERM PRISON SENTENCES
SUZANNE STEPHEN

Suzanne Stephen is a founder member of the Black Sash in the Transvaal. She has served on the Committee for years and now, at 71 she is involved in so many different activities that no one but herself actually knows the enormous extent of her labours. This article is an account of what is perhaps her most important work.

SOME TIME IN SEPTEMBER 1960, the Secretary of the Isaacson Foundation Bursary Fund, which is administered from the South African Institute of Race Relations, received letters from two Africans serving the indeterminate sentence in the Komati Dam Prison, asking for help from the fund to enable them to further their studies.

As the Isaacson Memorial Fund exists for a specific purpose, the Secretary was obliged to write to the two men to that effect, but added that she would do her best to get help for them.

She put an appeal in the Rand Daily Mail to which I responded. After representations had been made, permission was granted by the Commissioner for Prisons for correspondence courses in various school subjects for prisoners. I began coaching with only two, Alfred D. and James D., through the post. Some months later they were transferred to Witbank Prison, which is a rehabilitation centre.

They told their fellow-convicts of the help they were getting and I then had a series of letters from men, at various stages of education, asking to be "enrolled as students" (their favourite phrase).

As the number of pupils increased the work of correcting the papers became too much for one person, so I wrote to the Commissioner for Prisons asking if I could get help in correcting the numerous exercises submitted. Permission was readily granted with the proviso that all the work should be routed through my hands; that is, that it should come to me from pupils and be returned through me to them. I thankfully accepted offers of help from interested people.

The expense involved was beyond my means. I had to provide the men with all their stationery needs — books, pens, paper, rulers, rubbers. The Prison Authorities provide only the envelopes in which the men's work is sent to me. Postage was, and is, an important item on the list of expenses.

I became the world's best scrounger, haunting second-hand book shops and book sales, but many expensive books have to be bought new, particularly arithmetic books and dictionaries and atlases.

Even the generous help I was getting was not enough. Fortunately I had a talk with one of the reporters on the staff of the "Rand Daily Mail", and soon an appeal appeared in that paper. Besides telling about the work, the expenses and the difficulties, the article quoted extracts from some of the letters received from the men. One such was —

"You bring light into my life. The light you bring it drives away the dark that is on me for so long."

A man of 24 who has served 4 years of a life sentence and who had left school in Std. III, wrote —

"I am serving a long sentence in prison. I see that if you can help me out with your education, I can be able to do something for myself when I come outside in future: so, Madam, I am humbly crying to you for you to assist me."

From another letter —

"Madam, I do hope I may not be pestering you. I can see that you have more than a hundred students. I also wish to be included among this bunch of jolly students. I say jolly students because every day, when they have time to spare, I can see them studying in groups, helping each other. During the long week-end, from Saturday to Sunday (the worst time in prison I have been told) they are also busy. I am serving a long sentence. I would like to start in Std. VI."

From another —

"I still got a long time to do and the studies is keeping me well, so that I must not get bad minds about my long sentence. So the studies will give me good minds."

Rewarding response

The response of the men is rewarding. Their enthusiasm is inspiring. If they did not have an honest desire for rehabilitation they would not bother with their studies. Many of them are only just literate and they battle to master arithmetic taught through the medium of a foreign language. A few who began have dropped off but the majority, including the first two, have persevered. Some, having been discharged, have written that they intend continuing with their studies.

The appeal in the "Rand Daily Mail" had a wonderful response — books, paper, envelopes, pens, pencils, cash, came pouring in.

In June last year an appeal for help appeared in "The Star." Among the letters in answer was one from Mr. V. in Zeerust, who wrote —

"I am an ex-policeman, I know only too well how depressed people are liable to become during long spells in prison, and how mental exercise draws one away from that closed-up feeling and the depression. Further I am a student myself and have done all my studying by means of correspondence classes and am aware of its advantages and disadvantages. I would like to help with the correction of English or Afrikaans."

I have purposely quoted this letter in full. Since then Mr. V. has corrected all the Afrikaans, explaining the mistakes and encouraging his pupils.

One man wrote that he expected to be discharged and would come to see me. Some days later there was a knock at my door. On opening it I saw a tall, very thin African in clean but threadbare clothes. The word "respectable" leapt to mind. He might have been an Elder from some struggling African Church collecting donations. Then he spoke —

"Madam, I'm Jackson. When your other students hear that I am going to be discharged they say I must come to see you, to tell you you don't know what you are doing for us. You don't know what you are doing."

The lack of emphasis made the words all the more emphatic. Without waiting, he went on — "I was sentenced to death for murder. I was in the condemned Cell." Then the sentence was commuted. As he put it — "The Judge say I must be in prison for 15 years.

Where he was and how he had been treated I have no idea. I asked no questions. Four years ago he was transferred to Witbank for good behaviour. There he learnt a trade —

he is now a first class cook, and he has began studying. He has a good job as a cook. He has been several times to see me and once he brought his wife.

The co-operation of the Prison Authorities is a further encouraging sign that the coaching has introduced something of value into the different Prisons.

Transfer to new prisons

Sometimes prisoners are transferred from one prison to another. In the new prison they are given a new number. At first this meant that the chance of studying ended for these pupils, but before long this was changed, and they were given leave to write to me for the coaching to continue. In addition without exception I have had letters from other men in that prison asking to be enrolled, or the old pupil had written: "My friend (name and number follow) would like to learn too. He has never been to school but I will help him." This from a man who is little more than literate himself but they help each other and most of them make gratifying progress.

As the work grew and the donations in money, books, paper, and pencils etc., continued in unfailing supply, I asked a friend to help me keep the accounts — income and expenditure. All cash is banked under the name "Prisoners Education Fund — Trust Account."

A strict account is kept and a Chartered Accountant has very kindly drawn up a financial statement at the end of each year.

Those of us who are doing the correcting and explaining feel the same way about it — it is fascinating and absorbing. My gratitude to all those who make the work possible by their generosity is unbounded. This is no exaggeration.

Other values

The coaching has values apart from the actual education:

The assurance that there are those outside who care.

In prison every decision is made for the prisoners. The coaching means that each one makes his own decisions — even if it is only how many sums he will do that evening.

It gives the men the opportunity to help each other.

It gives the prison authorities the opportunity, within the framework of their duties, to help and encourage the men to learn.

Each man is an individual instead of being a number and a name — in that order. It

is wonderful the way the personality of the men comes through to us. We, the teachers, are all aware of it. I suppose because to us they are individuals.

It is and always has been a matter of great regret to me that, when the men write so gratefully, I cannot tell them that I am helped by splendid people; but this I may not do. I must keep strictly to the condition laid down by the Commissioner for Prisons — to confine my notes to school work only.

I wish to make an appeal to those who have had the patience to read this halting account of a wonderful experience. The work must be extended. My pupils are African, Indian and Coloured and the opportunity to improve through study should be available to all prisoners, men and women, — “So the studies will give me good minds”.

EXTRACTS FROM LETTERS WRITTEN FROM PRISON. (UNALTERED.)

IF you were barely literate, imagine the thrill of achievement, being able to write a letter unaided . . .

Good morning. S. Stephen. This is J. K. — says early in the year. I see.

I writing my books every day.

and I read my books every day.

I can writing to my mother to day.

In the book I see two leittle boys in the book.

I sit every day and read on my desk.

I am ready to school every day.

We playing on my book.

The book says. What game we playing I says —

I am read in the room. it is my game.

Good buy Mrs. S. Stephen thank you —

Early in the year.

J.K. says. How are you. In the year.

OR you could write a letter for someone else:—

Dear Madem please be kind for me, I'm askeng a help, about stardy. I see you help many boys, can you please sent me books also, sube I see your boys they go very good. I wish to be like them. I see they busy every day wan they come from the walk. and I see they proveng good. please help me. I bone in Zululand my cantre is very poor about education I cannot even read my letters from home I worenng people to read for me . . .

I've seen many convicts corresponding here

in prison, and I asked them, that how do they get it right, and they all told me about you. So, I too, I have made up my mind, I apply for my standard one books.

I've decided to be one of your students, because I have seen that to study is to prevent many misdemeanours. That is why I interview you for that case. I have seen that a pertinent person is the one who is educated, so I've a certain impulse to study. So that's all my emphasize.

SOMETIMES letters go astray . . .

I asked to be taken on as a pupil as early as June. But I have not had a reply to my request. I concluded that my letter did not reach you, because those who applied with me already a step ahead in studies. I wish to ask kindly to take on, as a beginner — English St. I and Zulu also Std. I. Please be kind and accept my request this time.

DROP a pebble in a pond . . .

I notice that my mates are making good progress through your coaching, and I also wish to apply to be enrolled as one of your pupils.

I am going to pull a long stretch and therefore will have a long time in which to learn. The Jailer has also encouraged me to do this since this will put me in good stead to find employment when I get out of here. I am a bantu male serving a very long time I am serving nine years. So dear madame I have decided to ask for help from you I am not educated. every time I see my fellow convicts writing ang arguing about their studies I envy them very much. So I wonder whether you wont be kind enough as to help me also with few book as to keep my self bussy while I've got the chance of doing so . . . I have never been to school but my friends always show me their good job that they earned through your help.

STUDYING by correspondence affects people in different ways . . .

I am a good friend with books and writing. Since I started to study I am no more lonely..

I am not shore of the sums and I am sure too glad of helping me out of the darkness into the lights. Must I do from Junior English or must only fight with arithmetic.

OUR work is helped along by "teachers" in the prisons:

please be kind for me. for dirty job because I have started this sums very wrong and after I had finished them in there came one who helps us and said let me see and I give him to see he is W..P.. he said I must do them like this . . .

is that right away to do this sums of addition I am so sorry to rub I'm shame for that I think it will the first and last thanks very much for your kindness and horspillity you can please write to W..P.. and tell him that he must not ge tired to show us he is very kind and patient to show and learn a person so you can give him power too.

LETTERS like these prove that the work must go on:

Ek is Daniel wat hierdie brief aan stier om aan mevrou te sê dat ek die brief ont vang het en dat ek ge ver staan dit en so wil ek ook aan mevrou weer terig ant woord dat gegee dit wat lans aan my slaap. Ek doen ek nou die boeke vir die best frint van my dit so laat mevrou kan weet wie het dit nou en so wil ek hom ook in kennis stel by mevrou. Liewe mevrou ek ge lik wêns ook vir mevrou vir die Nieuwe Jaar wat die Here aan ons ge skenk dit. Dat almal nog op die beene is en ook nog ge sond is en ek hoop ook die self de aan mevrou wat vir ons nieuwe vir stand gee so dat ons ook kan iets ken wat baie van ons nie ge weet het

nie. So moet ek dangkie sê aan mevrou vir die hulp wat aan my ge gec word so ek is baie Bly daar oor.

I am very glad to dorp you these few lines whith good opportunity I am pleased to get my results I was gething exsited all the time about the mistakes good luck there is not so much rong I am willing to write and read but I havent got something to write Im all ways broow to somebody a pencil please help me with ballpen let pencil rule ruber I whant to got my own proppety please sent me a English book that translation with sesotho.

Dear Mestress, with much jollification I am here with my few lines as to lay my request to you Mcestress.

Mestress, my request is this I want to lern, and I have no one to help me with any lectures so mestress, this is now my idea. As soon as I got your forms I thought of writing a polly letter to you mestress.

Your letter dated 13-8-67 has been received. Secondly I wish to say I bow my head in humbleness and in gratitude unto you for being concerned, the words are hard to say but only God who is my Master can sincerely clearly the tendernaess which I have developed during this short period of time.

Suzanne Stephen's address is — The Gerald Fitzpatrick House, 51, Gordon Road, Bertrams Johannesburg.

WHITE AND NON-WHITE PRISONERS ADMITTED TO PRISONS 1967-1968.

Mrs. H. Suzman asked the Minister of Prisons:

(1) How many prisoners in each race group were admitted to prison during the period 1st July, 1967, to 30th June, 1968.

Whites	Bantu	Coloureds	Asiatics
13,792	561,405	77,374	2,325

(2) How many in each race group were sentenced to imprisonment of:

(a) up to and including one month:

Whites	Bantu	Coloureds	Asiatics
4,352	235,342	36,489	779

(b) more than one month and up to six months:

2,332	155,034	18,750	389
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(c) more than six months and up to two years:

791	15,482	2,708	71
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(d) two years and longer:

Whites	Bantu	Coloureds	Asiatics
757	9,752	2,723	58

(3) What was the daily average number of prisoners in custody in respect of each race group during this period:

Whites	Bantu	Coloureds	Asiatics
3,171.1	63,334.0	13,587.6	441.2

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