

MIGRATORY LABOUR...

The Human Costs

So much has been written and said about the hostels that it was difficult seeing them, with their spotless white walls, rooms furnished with new lockers, delicately painted in pastel shades, laundries and lavatories as yet unused, to realise that the awful reality of compulsory herding was still to follow.

So might one feel if taken on a conducted tour of a newly built, unoccupied prison before the occupants were compelled to move in. Indeed, in some respects, they compare rather unfavourably with prisons.

Prisoners, most of them, have a determinate sentence whereas our hostel-dwellers are committed for the whole of their working lives; their colour is their crime and their sentences are determined by old age or disability when they are no longer of use to their White employers.

In prisons the accommodation is free and with luck one may have a private cell. There are certain services in prisons, for a prisoner does not have to jostle with four others around one gas ring to cook her own food.

One enters the hostel through great iron gates and, to the left near the entrance, is a beer garden and beer hall where the women are permitted to "entertain" their guests, providing of course that they like beer.

Prisons, too, have a special place for visitors but the considerate hostel authorities have not overlooked the possibilities here of a steady source of income to purchase perhaps such small luxuries as towel rails, picture hooks or even a heater for the sick bay.

Near the entrance is a shop, about the size of a small cafe, which is to serve 2 700 women. Here they may buy fish and chips, tea coffee and sugar. This shop is leased to one private individual.

Next to the shop is the clinic to be used at first for birth control. A prison clinic could not have been chillier than this one but we were assured that heaters will be fitted... in time.

Going through the security gates to the sleeping, eating and ablution section, one sees two colossal, angled bedroom wings enclosing

an area of ground eventually to be grassed and planted with indigenous shrubs and trees. A prison too has a quadrangle for limited exercise and fresh air when the prisoners are not at work, and very colourful some of their annuals and shrubs are too.

Going along one narrow concreted corridor one tried to picture the 4 a.m. scene; ("but 'they' like to get up early"), the frantic scramble to wash for there are 14 people to a bath or shower, 12 to a washbasin and 14 to a loo.

The cells are carpetless, curtainless, concrete and cold. Privacy? — " 'They' do not want privacy, 'they' like to be together." The occupants can only get to sleep when the last one puts out the light and must waken when the first one up puts it on again.

There are four steel, wired beds, each with a thin rubber mattress and a steel locker. The mattress, locker and the wall above each bed are numbered. The daylight comes in through a row of narrow windows at ceiling level and a small barred one lower down which opens. No well-built prisons provides an easy exit either.

Further down the passage is the dining room-cum-kitchen, furnished with several all-in-one steel tables and benches. Small, square, numbered lockers for storage of food and utensils line the walls. The cooking is done at gas rings, ten on one long steel table for 50 people, so five share one ring.

Will noise of ordinary conversation, the raised voices of irritation, or the laughter of this jolly togetherness combined with the clatter of plates, mugs and pots on steel tables not be deafening? "Oh, but 'they' like noise" we were reminded.

There are also laundries with overhead washlines; one washtub to every 24 women. Once they have washed and hung up their smalls the wise ones will sit and watch them drip and dry for who else will stop petty thieving? There is one ironing point for 70 people.

Our hostels proudly boast a library, sewing and reading rooms. When they will be used is an interesting point to ponder for our hostel-dwellers are out at work all day and when "at

home" their time will be cut out queueing for the gas ring or scampering for the loo.

The authorities do not claim ignorance of the fact that people forcibly herded together will, in moments of stress, exhaustion and frustration, act and react as less than humans. At each end of each passageway is a steel drop-gate, electronically operated by a central switch "in case of disturbances". The reason given for such hateful epitomes of White

power and oppression? — "because 'they' are different".

Different they thankfully are, for in any situation there is very little equality and comparisons are always odious. Who displays the characteristics of man and who of savage? — the tyrant or the slave, the glutton or the starved, the oppressor or the oppressed, the crucified or the slayers?

Barbara Waite.

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Redundant Families

It seems that the Black Sash was rather naive in February when they welcomed Dr. Koornhof's announcement that a man qualifying to live permanently in an urban area might bring his wife to live with him in terms of Section 10(1)(c) of the Urban Areas Act, provided that he had suitable accommodation. At the time we expressed our reservations that the lack of suitable accommodation was going to prevent many married couples from taking advantage of the concession and we regretted that the concession would only apply to people who were married by civil rites after 10th December, 1971.

Since February we have assisted a number of men and women to make application for permits to live together in Johannesburg. At first it was encouraging to feel that some of these people could hope that they would be allowed to live normal married lives, but as the months went by with no decisions being made by the authorities and no women coming back to report that their applications had been successful, hope dwindled and we again shared the sorrow and despair of people separated by law and prevented from fulfilling their marriage vows.

Now as Family Day draws near, all has become clear. Dr. Koornhof made his statement at the beginning of this year. On June 24 Mr. Moss, chairman of the Johannesburg management committee, said that the municipality's Non-European Affairs Department had made 50 applications to the Department of Bantu Administration and Development for men to be allowed to have their wives living with them in Johannesburg but no replies have been received.

Mr. Moss said that the Non-European Affairs Department had received no directives

dealing with this issue which means that they are unable to make decisions in individual cases without referring them to the Government Department of Bantu Administration.

A spokesman for that department said that the Chief Bantu Affairs Commissioner was in Europe until August and he would have to deal with these applications. Meanwhile people wait on the pleasure of the department for vital decisions which will affect their whole future happiness.

On June 9, Dr. Koornhof said in an address to the Synod of the Nederduits Gereformeerde Church at Ga Rankuwa that his department was determined to eliminate the unhealthy state of affairs under which many African families could not live together.

The public could feel more confident that he means what he says if they could see some concrete results of his very limited concession made in February. When a cabinet minister makes a statement like this in Parliament one is entitled to expect that immediate action will be taken by his department to put it into effect.