

# “NGENHLIZIYO EMBI”

(which in English means “with a hard and callous heart”)

## THE DESTRUCTION OF CHARLESTOWN

by Peter Brown

During the late 1950's and early 1960's the Liberal Party published two small books. They told a story which every white South African should know about, and have on his conscience. Most don't know about it, so I make no apology for telling it again, and bringing it up to date.

Charlestown consists of three parts – Clavis, which was bought by the S.A. Mutual Life Assurance Society in 1895 and laid out as a township; Charlestown itself, which was laid out as a township under Natal Law in 1906; Clavis Extension, which consists of 350 plots and a commonage of 900 acres. Clavis was incorporated into Charlestown in 1930 and Clavis Extension in 1932.

Charlestown is on the Transvaal border with Natal. Before Union it was a flourishing rail centre and customs post. After Union, in 1910, the customs post closed and the railway yards and workshops were moved three miles away to Volksrust in the Transvaal. Most of Charlestown's white residents left. Houses were abandoned, rate revenue slumped and the Town Board could no longer meet the payments on money it had borrowed to provide water and other essential amenities. It was desperate for new rate-payers and a Mr Higgins, a member of the Town Board, set out on a deliberate campaign to persuade Africans to buy houses and plots in Charlestown and settle there. He succeeded, and, in 1911, the first African owner, Mr Abraham Ngwenya, took transfer of his Charlestown plot. The first recorded transfer of land in Clavis to African ownership was in 1912. In 1931 the Town Board bought the 296 plots remaining unsold in Clavis and from then on rented them out as building sites, mainly to Africans. The first African purchase of land in Clavis Extension took place in 1934.

Africans who came to live in Charlestown were welcomed by the Town Board as ratepayers, but never as voters. Although the black ratepayers outnumbered the white ratepayers, it was the white ratepayers who elected the Town Board which disposed of the funds of the Township. These funds, African ratepayers maintained, were spent mainly to the advantage of white ratepayers and hardly at all to the advantage of black ratepayers. In 1948 a petition

was submitted to the Natal Provincial Administration by black residents of Charlestown calling for an inquiry into the white Town Board's conduct. A Commission of Inquiry was appointed which found that, by that year, the Town Board had provided the whole of Clavis with a single water-tap and the whole of Clavis Extension with none at all. The Commission found it “obvious that the improvements in old Charlestown (largely white) have, to a large extent, been carried out at the expense of the ratepayers of Clavis and Clavis Extension”, most, if not all, of whom were black. Amongst other things the Commission recorded that “recently the Town Board suddenly withdrew the right for Africans to lease land for agricultural purposes . . . and then proceeded to lease the land to Europeans at the same rate and for the same purpose”. The Commission made certain recommendations regarding the future administration of Charlestown to which the Town Board paid no attention at all. Twelve years later, in despair, the Provincial Administration appointed a further Commission of Inquiry and, in 1963, dissolved the Town Board and appointed the Local Health Commission, one of its own subsidiaries, to administer Charlestown.

Unfortunately, while this second Commission's recommendations held out prospects for more reasonably human treatment for the black people of Charlestown, other things were happening which pointed in quite another direction. In 1948 the Nationalist Government came to power and the Africans of Charlestown now faced a far more formidable adversary than the Charlestown Town Board had ever been. For, in Nationalist eyes, for black men to own land, however honourably acquired, paid for at whatever sacrifice, developed with whatever loving care, in what it chose to designate as “White South Africa”, was offensive, and something to which an end must be put. The fact that Charlestown's black ratepayers and tenants had been the people who had kept its creditors at bay for forty years was, in Nationalist eyes, a matter of no account. They must go!

And so, in 1953, the Chief Bantu Commissioner for Natal

visited Charlestown and announced that all African people who worked elsewhere would have to go and live where they worked, and that all others would be moved to a place called Buffalo Flats, forty miles away, and eighteen miles from the nearest town of Newcastle. For twenty-four years the people of Charlestown have resisted this removal with every legal means at their disposal, but they have seen their numbers slowly reduced by a succession of Government actions against them, and their community broken and scattered by the overwhelming power of an uncaring authority. Sometimes that authority hasn't even bothered about whether the powers it was trying to use against them were legal. For instance, in 1958, the Charlestown Town Board issued notices to Charlestown residents working in nearby Volksrust telling them to move there within 30 days. It issued them in terms of a proclamation under the Urban Areas Act which investigations by lawyers acting for the people concerned revealed did not exist. Confronted with this fact the Board withdrew the notices and issued others on the same form, slightly amended – and also invalid.

In its haste to rid itself of its black townspeople the Charlestown Town Board in 1958 tried to use powers it did not possess. Thereafter there was a lull and the threat of removal receded for a while. In the 1960's, however, the lull ended, and the full might of the State was brought to bear on Charlestown. Every black homeowner in Charlestown proper was expropriated and evicted and, with one exception, as far as I can establish, their homes were destroyed. The exception was taken over by a member of the white community. In other parts of the town the Government threatened landlords (including the Local Health Commission, which had recently taken over the administration of the area) with prosecution if they did not give their black tenants notice to quit. Notice was duly given, the demolition squads moved in, homes which had sometimes been occupied for 30 years were flattened. Their owners, and their possessions, and what building materials they had salvaged, were loaded on to Government trucks and transported thirty miles to Duck Ponds (now Madadeni) six miles from the town of Newcastle. At that time the accommodation offered at Duck Ponds was a single-roomed, prefabricated, wooden shack without a floor. The rent for this shack was nearly three times what most tenants had been accustomed to pay at Charlestown. There was at that time no school at Duck Ponds, there was no proper store, and there was no work. Since those days there has been a further lull in the removals and, for those who remained behind, the hope must have started to grow that perhaps they would be spared this terrible fate that so many of their friends had suffered. Alas, it was not to be. This year the final expropriations have taken place, the compensation has been paid, and the demolition squads are busy again.

What has happened to the members of this community of poor and generally upright families who, over the years, had woven for themselves many of the threads of social organisation which go to make for stability; a community which, in spite of all it had suffered at the hands of various white authorities, was still so strongly committed to a non-racial future for our country that it provided the Liberal Party in Natal with one of its largest branches at a time when that was a dangerous thing to do? The stories of some members of this community appeared many

years ago in those Liberal Party booklets. Perhaps they should, where possible, now be brought up to date.

In the first case, the story cannot be brought up to date. It concerns Mr Abraham Ngwenya. It was written at that time that "Mr Abraham Ngwenya was the first African to buy land in Charlestown. He bought a plot and a house from a white owner in 1911 and he went into business as a blacksmith, doing most of his work for surrounding farmers. Shortly after the Chief Bantu Commissioner's 1953 visit Mr Ngwenya told a Liberal Party investigator, "I am 80 years old. I am too old to do more than repairs. This move to Buffalo Flats has knocked me down, and I feel almost too old to get up again. I would rather die, soon and escape this bitter ending to a hard but happy life. Nor can I understand why the farmers and the Government wish to do this to me. I never cheated them and they never cheated me." Mr Ngwenya's wish was granted. He died in 1959."

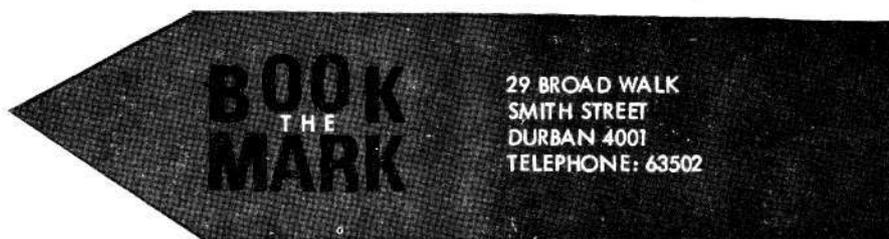
In 1963 Jeremiah Mdakane was already over 70 years old. He bought his plot in Charlestown in 1925 from the same Mr Higgins who had first persuaded Africans to move there. He said "When I received my title deed I settled down with full confidence and established my home." Having settled his family where they could, he thought, live undisturbed, he went off to Johannesburg where he worked as a waiter. He continued to work there until 1947, coming home whenever he had a weekend free or leave due. But in 1947 he was taken ill and he returned to Charlestown to retire and to live on what he could grow in his garden and on the cattle he was entitled to run on the commonage. Until the Bantu Commissioner's visit he looked forward to a quiet and happy ending to a hard life, spent with the family from whom he had been separated so often during his working days. He became a preacher in his church and a leader in the community. Forty years after he had paid Mr Higgins for his title-deeds the Government removed him from Charlestown, demolished his beloved home, and left the weeds to take over his garden. He took refuge in Clavis where he lives to this day in a wattle-and-daub shack, his memory gone, unconscious of the fact that each day brings the government demolishers nearer to this home too. And what will happen to him when they do arrive? Elias Tabethe lived a few doors away from the Mdakanes. He, too, had built himself a strong stone house, set in the large garden which provided him with much of his food. As a ratepayer he was entitled to run stock on the commonage. For years he made his living making bricks on the commonage for local builders and farmers – until one day the Town Board took his brickmaking licence away. He was Chairman of the Liberal Party's Charlestown Branch for many years and represented it at Provincial and National Congresses. His home was destroyed at the same time as Mr Mdakane's. From being master in his own house and the strong and independent head of his family, he became a lodger in a relative's rented house in the municipal location in Volksrust – a dependent. Piet Tshabalala, too, built himself a solid home and a successful business many years ago in Charlestown. He was a coal merchant, a building contractor and a cartage contractor, and an exceptionally able person by any standards. He tells the story of how, when the word got around that he was going to be removed from Charlestown, he was approached by a contemptuous white man, who offered him R40,00 for the house it had cost him

R1 500,00 to build. The State paid him more than that, and then knocked it down. They also killed the coal and the contracting businesses. Piet Tshabalala, however, is a remarkably resilient person. When his life in old Charlestown was ended he started up a new life in Clavis and Clavis Extension. He owned a plot in each and on one he built a tea-room and on the other he lived, like Mr Mdakane, in a wattle-and-daub house. Now all that is over too. His tea-room has been expropriated and his house has been demolished. You can stand in the ruins of that house and look out on the ruins of many other homes, interspersed with some, still standing, that are about to be ruins. The people who live in them, or used to live in them, are finally being moved to Buffalo Flats, now renamed Osizweni or "the place where you will find help". But will you? Will Piet Tshabalala? It seems unlikely. To take an example the people being moved from Charlestown are being settled in a particular section of Osizweni in which a number of trading sites have been set aside. It would be reasonable to expect these sites to be allocated to people who had come from Charlestown. But no, they have already been given to people who have nothing to do with Charlestown. And Piet Tshabalala? He and other people who were in business in Charlestown made a special trip to Ulundi in December last year to plead their case with the Kwa-Zulu authorities asking to be allocated trading sites amongst their old customers at Osizweni. They were told to go home and a reply would follow. Seven months later they were still waiting for it. Let us hope the recent appointment of a new Kwa-Zulu Minister of Community Development will lead to better things. I know of another person whose original home in Charlestown was expropriated and destroyed and who had land in Clavis on which he re-established himself, hoping that some miracle might happen before the axe could fall again. No miracle happened. Instead the Government valuator came, but this time he was different from the one who had come

before. In old Charlestown the valuator went to some trouble to show that he took his job seriously. He came into the house and measured the rooms and looked at the walls, and so on. The one who came to Clavis stood outside in the street and did the job from there. When invited inside to be able to make a better assessment, he said it wasn't necessary. When offers of compensation, based on such valuations, were finally received, and people protested, the officials concerned shrugged, and said words to this effect, "Well, if you don't like our valuations, get your own, and take the matter to the Arbitration Court. But, of course, you won't be able to use valutors from Volksrust (a few kilometres away) because Volksrust is in the Transvaal and Transvaal valutors are not allowed to operate in Natal. And you won't be able to use the Newcastle valutors, (the next nearest town), because those work for us. But you could try Ladysmith . . ." — so far away as to be beyond the pockets of the people of Charlestown. Probably there are valutors in Newcastle who are not contracted to the Government, but the people of Charlestown didn't know that, and, with heavy hearts, decided they had no alternative but to accept what they had been offered.

The man who told me this story pointed to a neat row of wattle-and-daub rooms on the plot next to his and said, "They will be coming to knock those down tomorrow." I asked him, "How will they do it?" and he replied bitterly, "Ngenhliziyo embi" — "With a hard and callous heart". For, he said, the demolishers would come, and trample all over people's most treasured and private places, and knock the old familiar walls down, and tear the place to pieces, laughing and joking.

But the demolishers are on the very bottom rung of the hierarchy of people who do such things as destroy Charlestown "Ngenhliziyo embi." The big names in this field work from Pretoria and Parliament Street in Cape Town. □



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