

On a Tough Missionary Post in Zululand

PART II

*The Life Experiences of the Missionary
Friedrich Volker according to the notes of
his wife*

HERMANNSTADT 1928

Edited by Charles Ballard
Translated by Helen Feist

SYNOPSIS

The life of the German missionary, the Reverend Friedrich Volker, in nineteenth century Zululand has been portrayed by his wife as one of great trial and tragedy. Part I which appeared in the 1979 edition of *Natalia* was concerned with Volker's arrival in Natal in 1858 and his subsequent establishment of Emlalazi Mission-station in southern Zululand in 1860.

Volker's writings expressed much the same sentiment on Zulu society and political life as the majority of German, Norwegian and English missionaries. Like many of his colonial Victorian contemporaries, Volker felt strongly that the Zulu king, Cetshwayo, and members of the ruling class placed social and economic restrictions in the paths of those Zulu who desired to become Christians. More importantly, the king and the ruling class of chiefs and royal princes wanted to prevent mission-stations from becoming centres of sanctuary for Zulu who had committed crimes, who had been rebellious and who rejected established Zulu customs in preference for those practised by Europeans.

With the approach of the Anglo-Zulu War, 1879, Volker and many Zululand missionaries despaired at having to leave their homes and the work which they had been doing for almost twenty years. But Volker was not opposed to the war on principle as was Bishop Colenso; instead he saw in a military solution the means of toppling King Cetshwayo and the traditional ruling class that hampered missionary endeavour.

Ironically, the defeat of the Zulu by Britain did not "open up" Zululand to unrestricted missionary activity. Sir Garnet Wolseley's Ulundi Settlement of 1879 reflected little sympathy for the expansion and protection of mis-

sionary interests. Wolseley had, in keeping with Colonial Office policy, devolved political and economic power to thirteen puppet chiefs — some of whom were extreme in their anti-missionary bias. Volker was forbidden to re-occupy Emlalazi by the District Chief, John Dunn. The *Natal Colonist* commented on this strange twist in missionary fortunes:

Instead of the 'missionary borne back on the wave of conquest' which they invoked, they find themselves stranded, shut out from the very spots they voluntarily relinquished in hopes of speedily re-occupying freed from such checks and trammels as have hitherto hampered them.¹

In August 1881 Volker and his family moved to northern Zululand and established themselves at Ekuhlengeni. Part II focuses on Volker's last years of mission work in post-war Zululand. However, Volker did not find the peace and political stability that he now so desperately wanted in order to carry on his evangelical work. He had the misfortune of running a mission-station that was located squarely in the war zone during the destructive Zulu Civil War of 1883–84. The anxiety, fear and grief which Volker and his family experienced is given full expression in this concluding section.

CHARLES BALLARD

PART II

In Northern Zululand

As dear Brother Volker realised the impossibility of returning from Sinkwazi to Emlalazi, the Superintendent gave the order in August of the year 1880 to rebuild Ekuhlengeni (i.e. the salvation) in Northern Zululand, which had been destroyed during the war. The mission was then suffering from a great shortage of funds, the salary of the missionaries had been reduced and Volker had to see to it that he could manage without special help, but together with his family he was looking forward to going to such a nice station and he was thankful to God in his heart that he could once again embark on a full programme of missionary work.

After having made the necessary purchases in Durban for the construction of the station, he departed from Sinkwazi on the 11th September, 1880, accompanied by his eldest son, Johannes. The road led via Eshowe and Kwagwaza (where the English missionary Robertson had resumed his activity) throughout Zululand. On the 28th of the month they arrived at Brother Stallbom's at Bethel. Here they were met by the missionary Schröder, who had recently arrived from Germany, in order to accompany them to Ekuhlengeni, where they arrived on the following day.

As expected they found the whole station, which had been built by Brother Wagner and afterwards tended by him, completely destroyed by the war. The buildings were burnt down, the fire also having spread through the banana plantation. Many trees were felled and the water supply wrecked. Some of the walls, especially of the living quarters, were reasonably intact. After all that Volker had gone through, his heart was filled with much gladness that he could take up his vocation once again. He therefore looked to

¹ *Natal Colonist*, 28 Oct. 1879.

the future with confidence and spared neither trouble nor expense to put the station to rights once more. To start with, the permission of the local ruler, Zulu Chief Ugcinwayo, had to be obtained and the British resident Osborn had to be notified. This was done during the next few days, and after some difficulties had been overcome, friendly advice and permission were obtained. Volker returned to Sinkwazi to fetch his family and the rest of his belongings, after having covered the ruin of the old waggon house with corrugated iron held in place by large stones, thus establishing a temporary lodging.

He was advised to avoid the difficult route through Zululand and to return via Hermannsburg and Greytown and through the thorn country in Natal via Helpmekaar. His son Johannes stayed behind with the missionary Schröder on the station Ekuhlengeni. From Sinkwazi Volker, with his wife and a few children, first had to go to Durban again to buy provisions for house and family including seed potatoes, seeds and whatever else was missing. They were given a friendly reception by the family of the missionary Flygare, whose wife was a relative of Volker's wife. Flygare had resigned from the Hermannsburg Mission and had found employment with the Swedish Mission. After all the essentials had been obtained, they returned to Sinkwazi in order to set out as soon as possible for Northern Zululand.

With the start of the rainy season, the unfavourable weather made the journey very difficult and time-consuming. The Volkerts travelled in a covered waggon with a span of fourteen oxen, followed by two goods waggons. At the beginning of December they arrived at the Swedish Mission Station Oskarsberg, where they were received very warmly. Before they departed on the next day, they still visited the local cemetery where the Britons who had fallen during the Zulu War had found their last rest. The graves were temporarily provided with small black wooden crosses, on each of which hung a wreath of white everlasting flowers, with a red satin bow, with which the Empress Eugénie of France had had the graves decorated on her recent visit to the resting-place of her son.

On the following morning they crossed the Buffalo River and the next day reached our station Bethel, where the brother and sister Stallbom were pleased about the visit. At two o'clock in the afternoon Brother Volker had the oxen inspanned again. It was hoped to reach Ekuhlengeni before sunset. However at the next river the goods waggons stuck fast, and it was only after some hours that the poor oxen with lashes of the whip and great commotion, could be brought to drag the waggons out of the mud. Finally, it became so dark that someone had to walk ahead with a lantern to find the waggon trails which sometimes showed the way past precipices. Thus at eleven o'clock at night they finally arrived at their future home, where missionary Schröder and Johannes Volker were sleeping deeply and only awoke after loud whip cracking; they had bedded down in an old calf stable.

The whole family settled down to sleep, the grown-up daughters in a part of the waggon-house which was already equipped with a door and windows, the parents and the little ones in the former stable, where the holes in the walls were covered with sacks and the entrance with ox-hide. Thus all slept soundly after the long journey and rose early to view their new world, which they found enchanting, especially the rivulet (here called *Schlote*).

As all kinds of seeds had been sent ahead, they found there was already a

pretty little garden full of vegetables, which had been started by the young missionary Schröder and which he had planted with circumspection and good taste, surrounding it with a hedge of sunflowers.

The small congregation of Christians who had fled from Emlalazi with Brother Volker had settled with other missionaries in Natal, since Burpham was not a good place to live. Only a very few, who were still in the christening instruction classes, accompanied him to Ekuhlengeni. However, soon the faithful Petrus Quabe arrived with his family from Emlalazi, followed later by his brother-in-law Matthaas Mtembu. The heathen living in the vicinity of Ekuhlengeni showed themselves friendly towards the missionary family, even if they only came hesitantly to work and very gradually to instruction.

A lot of building now had to be done. By Easter 1881 the living quarters were habitable. To the delight of Volker some youngsters and an old granny and her daughter also reported for Christian instruction. Schröder in the meantime studied the language and held morning prayers for our people until after some time he asked Ham [in the nineteenth century Europeans spelled Hamu in several variations — Uhamu, Uhama and Ham *C.B.*] the brother of Cetshwayo, for a plot where he could set up a new station, and this was granted him.¹⁰ So he took leave of Volker and moved into the vicinity of Hlobane, between Zululand and the territory of the Transvaal. He revisited Ekuhlengeni only once, after that the Volkens did not see him again, for during the Second Zulu War, which soon broke out, he was cruelly murdered by a Black named Mapele. He was faithful unto death and he therefore also gained the unfading crown of honour as a martyr and witness to Christ.

The Ravages of the Second Zulu War

New unrest had broken out when the 13 chiefs or small kings appointed by Sir Garnet Wolseley skirmished and warred among themselves. While Cetshwayo as a prisoner paid a visit to England, messengers continually proceeded to Maritzburg to ask for his reinstatement as king. The requests of the Zulus were supported by the party of Bishop Colenso. As a result England relented, Cetshwayo returned and on 29th January 1883 he was installed as king by Sir Theophilus Shepstone in the presence of 3 000 Zulus.

As the whole of the land was, however, not restored to him, he was dissatisfied, especially because the son of Mapita, Usibepu, his former subject and one of the 13 chiefs, retained a small area in the North East and he regarded him with particular suspicion. Cetshwayo therefore sent messengers to Usibepu and let him know that he was to return the cattle which he had appropriated during the absence of the king. Usibepu's answer was: "Come and get them with an *impi*" (armed group). Thus war broke out and the stay in Northern Zululand was almost more dangerous than during the First Zulu War.

Volker lived among the Usutu, the king's party, when they fought the first battle with Ham's men, who had combined with Usibepu and his people. The Usutu were beaten and returned in disorderly flight.

Many wounded came to the station and had to be bandaged, the others looked for a hiding place in the vicinity; old women who could not keep up any more were left at the station. Other women came daily from their hiding

places and asked for provisions with milk if possible for their small children. No one could or would refuse all these poor people. As a result, however, Volker was seen by Ham's people as an adversary, although he maintained the strictest neutrality and only aided those in need.

One evening when Volker held a service and an instruction class in the church, three messengers from Brother Stallbom came riding up to the house and brought the shocking news of the murder of Brother Schröder. One can imagine the pain and sorrow with which all were affected. How many of the following nights were spent in fear and horror! There was continual speculation as to how it might have happened and what the poor Brother must have suffered. "Yes, eternity will disclose it", Volker used to say, but all must be prepared, day and night, against the possibility of sudden attack.

The news that Cetshwayo had been beaten and that the enemy army was approaching was given to Volker in the middle of the night by fleeing Usutus. It was too late to fly, as even Petrus Quabe admitted. So everyone commended their affairs to the Lord and expected in God's name the arrival of Ham and Usibepu's people. Great clouds of smoke already heralded their approach as they burned down everything before them, grass, huts and kraals. The small band of Christian ones, especially women and children, old grannies and old men, fled into the living quarters; some, having rested awhile, tried to make their way across the border. The black masses could be seen approaching like a tide, ever nearer through the valley of the Black Umfolosi. Midday had approached and Brother Volker, accompanied by Petrus, Phillipus, Moses and Kleophas, went to meet them in a composed manner in order to receive them at the entrance to the station and to say a few polite words to the *indunas* (leaders). His people in the house were seized with fear and took refuge beneath the verandah, the mother with the four youngest children (the other children were safe at school in Hermannsburg). Only the eldest son Johannes kept guard behind the house. All knew that the first reception would decide their fate and fervent prayers and sighs went up to Heaven from their hearts that almighty and merciful God would help and save them in their great need. In a few minutes the whole family was surrounded. More than 1 000 of Ham's and Usibepu's men encircled the house while Volker himself was still negotiating with the *indunas*. Out of fear Mrs Volker and her children greeted the crowds surrounding them as amicably and obligingly as possible. The reply was: "We have killed the Usutu, give us matches so that we can also burn their houses and kraals." Then they became insistent and started making demands. With bloodthirsty eyes, their hands full of glistening assegais, they called for blankets, sugar, soap and so on.

Brother Volker gave the *indunas* nearly all his coats and other possessions to gain their goodwill because without their orders and against their wishes nobody was allowed to plunder and murder. Most of them were already laden with all kinds of things which they had robbed from Cetshwayo's people. Furthermore, they had many women and small children and girls with them whom they had captured and gagged and bound because according to their instructions, they were only allowed to kill men, youths and boys. All the prisoners stood trembling and shaking like a herd of sheep under the trees.

Finally, shortly before sunset, after terrible pressure and afflictions and after they had finally taken hold of everything they could lay their hands on, even the washing from the bathtub, the whole army moved across the river.

But as the life and health of all had been so graciously spared, Volker and his people could only praise and thank the Lord for saving them in their dire need.

Now when all thought that the last of the enemies had departed, an old woman emerged from the banana plantation where she had hidden. At that moment a wild Zulu warrior dashed from the other side towards her, swinging his spear and calling: "Ha! shall I stab her now? Shall I kill her?" But Johannes Volker stood with his mother in front of the kitchen door. Whether he remembered the fable of the Wolf and the Fox at this moment, or for whatever reason, the quickwitted and brave Johannes called out to the savage: "Au, if you stab her, you cannot boast to have killed a person; she is hardly a person any more." And behold, the wild warrior stopped as if thunderstruck, jumped once more into the air and was off. But unfortunately with the defeat of Cetshwayo the war did not come to an end: instead the insecurity increased continuously, the King a fugitive in his own country and the people split up into marauding bands. On 22nd September 1883 the station was again attacked by a detachment of Ham's people. Since their wild war cries: "*Watshetsha watshetsha izulu*" could already be heard from afar, a number of men, women and children fled before them into Volker's house. They fired at the fugitives but did not hit them. Roaring, they surrounded the house and demanded that those in hiding be handed over. To comply would have meant the certain death of these poor wretches. They had crept trembling into all the nooks under the tables and the beds. When Volker refused to hand them over, they threatened him, stabbed to death his dog, which had barked at them, and drove away his cattle and those of the heathen Christians. As it started to get dark, however, they released them again and camped for the night in the vicinity of the station. Before dawn the inhabitants of the house were awakened by their shouting. They hit with sticks against the window panes, crying: "*Kipa abantu: kipa abantu*" ("Bring out the people!") When they did not get their will, they drove away all the cattle, but returned some of them later when Johannes Volker, together with several heathen Christians, made representations to Ham.

Daily it was hoped that England would intervene to restore peace and order in this part of Zululand, but that was a vain hope, because everything was in a state of chaos. Even Mapela, the murderer of Brother Schröder, was allowed to rove up and down the country with his bands. One day he came to Ekuhlengeni on horseback with mounted and armed followers and addressed Johannes Volker with the words: "Do you know who I am?" He answered: "Yes, I see you are Mapela". Not having expected to be recognised, he asked somewhat disconcertedly for food. He came another time when Father Volker was also present and asked for bread. It was terrible to see this person and to have to hand food to him willy-nilly; but it was considered the lesser evil, as any use of force on the part of the Volklers would have been their undoing.

Missionary Weber at Emyati had approached the Governor of Natal in writing and asked that steps be taken for the punishment of the murderer of

Schröder and for the security of the rest of the missions; but the petition was refused on the grounds that this did not concern Natal.

All our missionaries had also sent a petition to the German Government in connection with Schröder. The reply was: "Detailed enquiries had been made in respect of Schröder's background and of all circumstances concerning him and they had been officially informed that Schröder and all missionaries who left Germany together with him had excluded themselves from the community of German subjects and that this matter could therefore not be taken in hand."

This proved again that human help is of no avail. Volker tried to the utmost to hold out on the station which had only just been newly built in order to preserve it from destruction, but it was all in vain, because the confusion and distress increased from day to day. On a Sunday after the service, Volker had already packed the most necessary effects and food into bundles and the heathen (i.e. converted) Christians had offered to carry these as far as Natal. As evening approached, they became increasingly reluctant to go on their way and the Lord influenced them in their hearts to unpack again and stay put. After a few days it was decided that the mother and children should travel to Hermannsburg to good friends in Natal on the waggon and with the oxen, which they had got back from Ham's people, while Volker himself, with the eldest sons, still wanted to stay on. And so it came to pass.

Yet on the return journey Mrs Volker heard that they all had to leave Ekuhlengeni.¹¹ She now hurried back and when one day they outspanned at the Buffalo River, the Swedish missionaries P. Witt and Friestadt,¹² knowing what went on in Zululand, came and offered her spacious quarters in Fort Melvill near to the new house at Oskarsberg. Mrs Volker preferred to move on first to Emfunyane where she met her dear ones and also brother and sister Stallbom. This was a sad and yet happy reunion, for God's hand had preserved them, body and soul, from harm. From Emfunyane, where they all had to camp out in the open, they moved back again to Fort Melvill, near the Buffalo River, which they had to cross. They were kindly welcomed by the English Bishop Douglas MacKenzie whose station was in the vicinity. He saw the waggon full of children, as well as black women and children carrying their bundles in front and behind the waggons. After some days he came with his wife to the place of refuge, Fort Melvill, enquired after all and sundry and helped the Volkens as best he could.

In the meantime a number of Boers, who had also been joined by some Germans and Englishmen, had seized on the idea of occupying the land of the Usutu. They offered Prince Dinizulu, the son of Cetshwayo, their help against Ham and Usibepu, in exchange for which he was to give each one of them a free farm. Dinizulu agreed, and after the Boers had pronounced and anointed him King, the fight against Ham and Usibepu started. Soon one could read in the English newspaper: "The Boers opened such an infernal fire, that Usibepu's people could not stand it." For the Boers were all excellent shots and the Zulus scattered in all directions. The Boers occupied the whole district and founded a new republic. England calmly acquiesced in the certain expectation that "our time is still coming". Later Dinizulu was accused of high treason and banished to St. Helena in 1889; however, he was brought back and assumed the rank of a Zulu King under English supervision until his death.

It was however above all a gracious dispensation of God's Providence that the Boer Commando had once again re-established peace and order, even if it had to be deplored that during these troubled times our station Ekuhlangeni was totally destroyed for the second time. As fire was the main cause one could not be sure whether the fire had been caused by the carelessness of the Boers who had camped in the house, or deliberately by vengeful heathen.

The blessed Th. Harms at that time wrote in his mission paper 1884, p. 195 f.: "We have here no permanent abode, but we seek the future one. It was this word of Holy Scripture which our missionaries in Zululand had to experience to the full. Already once all our stations in Zululand had burned down and our missionaries had barely escaped with their lives. After the end of the (first) war, they returned again to Northern Zululand, rebuilt their stations with much effort and diligence, began again to collect the dispersed little band of Christians and to bring the Word of God to the heathen and now they have once again had to leave everything behind. Missionary Volker's station is totally destroyed, all buildings burnt down and all the utensils of the house, which could not be saved, have been smashed. The fields of the missionaries and of the Christians, planted in high hopes, are devastated. In the meantime the conditions in Zululand have somewhat changed, for a number of Boers have got together to restore peace in Zululand. They have done us the great favour of rescuing the missionaries Kück and Hermann, who were surrounded on all sides and they have also proved to be very friendly towards our missionaries. They have promised our brothers that they will protect German missionaries and take care of the mission . . ." It might be mentioned here that this promise has been faithfully kept.

In the Safe Haven of Peace

On 21st February 1858 Brother Volker, in the harbour of Durban, had written in his diary: "As the Lord has permitted us to reach this harbour, so may He also permit us to reach the heavenly harbour of peace, that none of us may stay behind." That should now, after thirty-five years, be granted him. On 3rd May 1893 the Lord fetched His loyal servant home and brought him into His blessed heaven, into the safe haven of peace, "where all suffering and the buffeting of storms make way for the countenance of the Lord." The missionary Friedrich Volker passed away at the age of 67 years and 5 days. When he had been dressed in his official robes he lay on his bed, a picture of peace. Soon the family, Germans from nearby whom he had looked after spiritually and the Black congregation assembled around the deathbed with loud lamentations. Then in the evening he was laid in his coffin and this was taken by moonlight into the church.

The funeral took place the next day. Old Brother Schütze delivered a sermon in German from Psalm 73, 25. This was Brother Volker's blessing on his being assigned to Africa and the last word of comfort which he had heard on earth from the mouth of his wife. As Andreas, Volker's cattle herdsman, had also died the same night, they were both buried together. Brother Stallbom preached, standing between the two graves, in Zulu from Phil. I, 21 and the Native teacher, Martin, preached from John II, 25, 26.

Soon afterwards one could read the following in the Hermannsburg Mission Journal: "It must have been moving to see the procession of mourners

at this service, who looked half-dead themselves, but still would not miss following their dear Father to the graveside. The disease had affected and laid low many and yet whoever could somehow manage, had come.”

Though the dear Brother’s pilgrimage was a life full of troubles and drudgery, his last journey was in supreme peace. Even if he attended to his missionary vocation in true faith, he still knew that he could only receive salvation through grace and he trusted in the mercy of his Saviour. We may count him among those who have prevailed through the Blood of the Lamb. “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord; for they rest from their labour and their works follow them.”

NOTES

¹⁰ Brookes and Webb, *History of Natal*, p. 99–100. Ekuhlangeni was located in the district given the royal prince Hamu as a reward for having defected to the British during the early stages of the Anglo-Zulu War.

¹¹ The Zulu Civil War of 1883 had adverse repercussions for missionaries in northern Zululand with most of them fleeing to Natal for safety.

¹² J. du Plessis, *Christian Missions in South Africa*, (Cape Town, 1965), p. 386. Zibhebhu (Usibepu), Royal Prince and arch-rival of Cetshwayo, shared John Dunn’s hatred for missionaries. He made life untenable for the Swedish missionary Friestadt, forcing him to abandon his station at Ekutuleni on two occasions.