

BERG STREET SWIMMING POOL

Christopher Merrett writes:

THE restoration and re-opening of Pietermaritzburg's Berg Street Swimming Bath in 2015 coincided with its fiftieth anniversary.¹ It revived memories of its opening as the Berg Street Indian Swimming Bath on 1 September 1965, which took place under typically bizarre apartheid circumstances. The ceremony was deemed multi-racial in terms of Proclamation R26, allowing the presence of officials and guests of the local authority at a segregated facility. Within a few years a significant proportion of the Indian community had been moved to the Northdale complex and had to catch a bus into town to swim. The Northdale Olympic pool was to be completed only in 1978.

The popular history of the half-Olympic-size pool invokes memories of drownings before it was opened: for instance, in 1961 three members of the Pillay family lost three sons in the Dorpspruit, and there was another death, this time in the Msunduzi River, in 1962.² Following these tragedies, a petition organised by Hanif Bhamjee called for a swimming pool for the city's black communities, which up to this point had made do with reservoirs, the river and spruits – frequently with dire health and safety consequences. At the opening in 1965 the mayor, Colonel H.C. Franklin, acknowledged, but failed to apologise for, “numerous deaths [that] could have been avoided”.³

However, the struggle for black recreational space and amenities in Pietermaritzburg was long and hard-fought and in many ways emblematic of the broader liberation struggle. In 1938, the Natal Indian Congress (NIC) described the lack of a swimming pool as a “long felt grievance” and it was supported by

the Colonial Born and Settlers Indian Association (CBSIA).⁴ Although the City Treasurer pointed out that two loan accounts for public building contained unallocated sums, the City Council showed no concern or interest.⁵ Correspondence drew attention to the poor state of upkeep and general neglect of the Indian section of the city. Swimming was to become a campaigning issue for the liberal Indo-European Joint Council (I-EJC), which suggested a pool using purified water from the Dorpspruit; while on the west side of the city the Pentrich and Camp Drift Residents Association (PCDRA) also took up the cause.

But the City Council remained obdurate, apparently indifferent to the health and recreational issues involved at a time when swimming was an enormously popular, well-provisioned sport amongst whites: “The Penguins and Seals clubs flourished and a high percentage of provincial champions came from Pietermaritzburg.”⁶ As the liberal R.F.A. Hoernlé put it, “‘Public’ swimming baths are for the only public that counts, viz., the White public.”⁷ The latter continued to derive long-term benefit from the considerable investment made in sports facilities just after World War I, a period of municipal socialism worldwide that was racially skewed in South Africa. It had produced the Alexandra Park open-air baths after a wide range of options, even a Market Square site, had been seriously considered.

The coloured community was simultaneously campaigning for a pool, highlighting the dangers of contracting bilharzia in the Dorpspruit and Msunduzi. The response was a similar flat and unmotivated refusal from the City Council

in spite of ongoing deaths, including those after World War II of children of ex-servicemen. During the late 1950s the proposed swimming baths became a liberal *cause célèbre* and a mobilising factor for the Indian and coloured communities, at this time both heavily concentrated adjacent to the centre of the city. The I-EJC argued, in somewhat contrary fashion, that there was reason for three baths (Hindu, Muslim and coloured), but no argument for none; and it noted the disappearance in the year 1959–1960 of R35 200 from the draft budget.⁸ The funds reappeared in 1963, still bedevilled by uncertainty about Group Areas implementation. Indeed, this was a major reason behind lack of development in Pietermaritzburg in the 1950s. Many city officials sympathised with apartheid's grand planning objective of largely autonomous Indian and coloured satellite townships governed by local affairs committees.

The solidarity of the oppressed could not, however, be assumed. When elements in the City Council mooted the idea of a shared pool, the secretary of the I-EJC demanded four days usage out of five for Indians on the grounds of demographic statistics and rates contributions. The Natal Coloured Welfare League rejected mixing. When the Berg Street Indian Swimming Bath was eventually opened, the Pietermaritzburg Coloured Welfare League protested that it had a right to its own facilities, although Woodlands pool was not to open until 1968.⁹ Ironically, the Group Areas Board raised no objection to joint usage.¹⁰ The City Engineer preferred Sanctuary Road as a possible location, regarding Berg Street as dangerously near the beerhall.

From 1965 the Berg Street pool served to provide a recreational facil-

ity and enhance safety, but it also had a political dimension in keeping with the protracted and contentious history of its origins: nine clubs were affiliated via the Pietermaritzburg Indian Amateur Swimming Federation (chairman M.S. Naidoo) to the South African Council on Sport (SACOS) and thus part of the anti-apartheid sports struggle.

Swimming pools were highly protected spaces and whites recoiled above all else from the idea of imagined contamination from the multi-ethnic sharing of water. The issue of municipal facilities for Africans was summarily dismissed on the grounds that “in Natal...adult bantu did not patronise swimming baths”.¹¹ The prevalence of bilharzia cases amongst Sobantu's children in the 1960s was shrugged off as inevitable.¹²

In early 1985, a straw poll amongst councillors produced an uncertain majority for desegregation of swimming pools (7–5 with 3 abstentions). However, in late 1986 the City Council voted (10–2) to open all pools to everyone, a decision endorsed by the provincial Executive Council in February 1987.

Unfortunately, the Berg Street swimming facility fell victim to municipal neglect and maladministration in the twenty-first century. The pool was allowed to deteriorate, the buildings and fittings were vandalised and the premises used by unauthorised persons. Its restoration should be celebrated not only as the revival of a much-valued recreational facility, but also as a symbol of the struggle of oppressed communities for civic rights and full and equal citizenship.

NOTES

- 1 Kailene Pillay, “Celebrating 50 years with clear water”, *The Witness*, 7 September 2015. Berg Street is now Hoosen Haffejee Street.
- 2 Shan Pillay, *The Witness*, 12 January 2009.

- 3 *Natal Witness*, 2 September 1965.
- 4 V.K. Pillay and C. Zachariah, secretaries NIC to Town Clerk, 26 November 1938; S. Rathanam, secretary CBSIA to Town Clerk, 28 November 1938, in Pietermaritzburg Archives Depository (PMA) 3/PMB 4/3/339, file 1464/1938 (Colonial Born and Settlers Indian Association swimming bath for Indians).
- 5 City Treasurer to Town Clerk, 19 December 1938; Finance, Etc. Committee, 9 February 1939 in PMA 3/PMB 4/3/339, file 1464/1938 (Colonial Born and Settlers Indian Association swimming bath for Indians).
- 6 Christopher Merrett, *Sport, Space and Recreation: Politics and Society in Pietermaritzburg* (Pietermaritzburg, University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2009) p. 191.
- 7 R.F.A. Hoernlé, *South African Native Policy and the Liberal Spirit* (Johannesburg, Wits University Press, 1945) p. 34.
- 8 This was approximately the official cost announced when the facility was opened (*Natal Witness* 2 September 1965).
- 9 J. Francis, secretary PCWL to Town Clerk, 3 October 1965, in PMA 3/PMB 4/4/2/166, file 299/17 (Suggested swimming bath for non-Europeans).
- 10 Letter to Town Clerk, 20 April 1960, in PMA 3/PMB 4/4/2/166, file 299/17 (Suggested swimming bath for non-Europeans).
- 11 Bantu Administration Committee, 18 April 1969, in PMA 3/PMB 4/5/808, file 299/204 (Suggested swimming bath at Sobantu Village and Slangspruit).
- 12 *Pietermaritzburg Corporation Yearbook* 1968, p. 119.