

AFRICA CALLING: A CULTURAL-HISTORY OF THE HERMANNSBURG MISSION AND ITS DESCENDANTS IN SOUTH AFRICA

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THE HERMANNSBURG Mission Society (HMS) was founded in 1849 at Hermannsburg, a village in the sprawling area of the Lüneburg Heath, then in the Kingdom of Hanover. In these moorlands with grazing heifers and sheep, a spiritual revival had taken place largely due to the preaching of one 'Louis' Harms. The seminary founded by Harms drew young men from this agrarian catchment, and he established what is referred to as a *Bauernmission* ('farmers' mission' i.e., perhaps less academic, but nevertheless of deep religious conviction), which prepared them in Lutheran theology to be sent out among the pagans of the world.

Strategically, the missionaries were to be accompanied in the field by missionary colonists, tradesmen or male volunteers skilled with a vocation to support the endeavour; and this was significant enough to warrant the construction of a dedicated brig, otherwise used for charter. The brig, named *Kandaze* after a biblical queen of Ethiopia (Acts 8, 27), was to ferry the original six missionaries, two catechists and eight colonists destined for service among the Galla of Ethiopia. The *Kandaze* left German shores in October 1853 and rounded the Cape, as the Suez Canal had yet to be built, but on reaching Zanzibar learnt that despite all their efforts access to Ethiopia was denied. The brig did a U-turn and landed in Port Natal (Durban), by default as it were, in August 1854, as did subsequent direct voyages.

Helped by German settlers in New Germany (who had arrived in 1848), the farm 'Perseverance' was eventually acquired and 'New' Hermannsburg was established near Greytown, where missionaries and missionary colonists originally lived in a communal lifestyle. Having learnt Zulu, missionaries established mission stations in both the British colony of Natal and the South African Republic, among Zulus and Tswanas respectively (for whom the translation of the Bible is accredited to the HMS).

For missionaries this was a lifelong calling and marriage was only possible once they were established in the field, when brides would follow in another voyage of 5–7 months duration. This was a tough life; the death of a wife in childbirth was not uncommon, nor was losing a wife or child to malaria.

On the other hand, once freed from their contracts, missionary colonists became settlers, mainly as agriculturalists in climatic zones not too dissimilar from their *Heimat* or place of origin, well-watered, misty and cold in winter. Their social life centred on the churches and concomitant schools they built. With this infrastructure they could meet the admonition of Harms to proclaim the Lutheran faith, never forsake their German roots, retain the language, and uphold the culture, traditions and customs. Thus, some two dozen settlements were established within the regions of missionary activity, each being identifiable by its characteristic

townscape of church, school, parsonage and cemetery.

Some of these communities experienced deprivation and the destruction of property in the Anglo-Zulu War, and scorched earth policies and incarceration in concentration camps in the Anglo-Boer war. In turn, during World War I and World War II these communities became the mainstay of missionary activity.

However, the HMS could not avoid political meddling in the fatherland. One must remember that until 1871 there was no Germany, just numerous German states, the unification of which was the main goal of Prussian premier Otto von Bismarck. The interference was such that the HMS opted for independence, but then joined the state or provincial protestant church, which by riposte precipitated a split, and the founding in 1878 of the Free Lutheran Church with an independent seminary in the nearby village of Bleckmar. The associated synod in South Africa was established a few years later in 1892, resulting in much anguish in congregations, some of which split or even ceased to exist. This is the reason why for example, Wartburg has two places of Lutheran worship, only a stone's throw apart.

This tome on the HMS descendants is a 'team effort' recording the 'Hermannsburg Germans' and their pioneering lives in South Africa. Udo Küsel, a descendant himself and former director of the National Cultural History Museum in Pretoria and president of the South Africa Museums Association, has previously published work on the HMS. Appropriately, this compilation is entitled *Africa Calling*. Following the introduction and setting, the main focus is on three regions of missionary activity, namely Zululand, Upper Pongola River

Valley in northern KwaZulu-Natal, and the Bechuana Mission, situated in what was originally the South African Republic, later Western Transvaal and now North-West Province. Each region is covered by about ten articles or contributions, and all endnotes are consolidated. It is bookended by a general conclusion but unfortunately, there is no index.

As revealed in the introduction, Küsel began this personal mission by collecting textual sources about the descendants, and from these selected what he deemed were the most interesting. For reasons of accessibility the language of publication is English, requiring translation from German for some extracts. Some originated from family histories, many from talks or papers by the late Eckhard von Fintel, with some specialist contributions and a few extracts from academic work or higher degree theses. What I found particularly interesting was the compilation by Walter Volker of the 'Arrival of the Hermannsburg families in SA', which lists voyages and passengers from 1853 until 1967; and especially parts of the General section like festivals, Christmas and Easter, brass bands and traditional cuisine, which today includes delicacies absorbed from neighbouring communities.

However, this is more than a compilation; it is a valuable compendium and is timeless as after five or six generations in South Africa the migration to the larger urban centres is unstoppable with inevitable acculturation. My only regret for *Natalia* readers is that in relative terms this tome gives short shrift to Hermannsburg, New Hanover, Wartburg and Harburg in central KwaZulu-Natal, and particularly Bethanien (Izotsha) on the South Coast.

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