3 "I'll Teach You to Build the School": Patrick van Rensburg: from Apartheid to Socialism

On March 15, 2010, I drove the 161 miles from Johannesburg to Gaborone, the capital of Botswana. There, I spent five days with a life-long political and social activist named Patrick van Rensburg (b.1931).

Van Rensburg's biography has followed a fascinating trajectory, including service on behalf of, then in opposition to, South Africa's apartheid regime. After those phases of his life, in an attempt to alleviate poverty, half a century ago in the village of Serowe, Botswana, he developed a system combining education with employment. The system was inspired by figures ranging from Mao and Julius Nyerere to the Cold Warrior Walt Rostow. Van Rensburg called his groups of worker-students "Brigades," after Nkrumah's Ghanaian Brigades. The Brigades and related projects represent the culmination of his life's work. One main goal of my visit to Botswana was to learn what had become, over the years, of him and his projects.

My first meeting with van Rensburg was scheduled for the morning after I arrived in Gaborone. Once I was settled in my guesthouse, I realized I had no idea where his residence was located. I am unsure of the reason, but directions had been conspicuously absent from our introductory emails. All I knew was that he was currently associated with a newspaper called *Mmegi* (Setswana for "Reporter"). Although the city is small and laid out on a grid, not only do the inhabitants identify places by landmarks rather than street signs, but I had not yet been able to buy a city map.

The next day, packing my writer's gear, I drove the sixteen kilometers (ten miles) into town. Playing it by ear, I turned onto a wide side street and pulled into a small mall with a signboard listing offices, including what looked to be a church-based social service agency. This "office" proved to be a cubbyhole containing a desk, chair, telephone, and laptop, and a single employee, a

pleasant-looking middle-aged Batswana (i.e. Botswanan) man, wearing dark trousers and an open-necked, short-sleeved shirt. We introduced ourselves. As I told him what I needed, his facial expression tempered curiosity with politeness. Then, without hesitating, he Googled *Mmegi,* found the telephone number, and called to get directions (all in Setswana). Borrowing my pad and pen, he drew what proved to be an excellent map and sent me on my way with a big smile and a soft handshake.

"Come back if you get lost," he offered. "But you won't."

It turned out that I needed to find a small neighborhood in the far northeast corner of Gaborone. Ten minutes later, I was at the *Mmegi* compound. A few days afterward, while interviewing a government official, I mentioned how I had managed to find my way that first day. The good-samaritanism that got me to *Mmegi* turned out to have a Setswana name.

As the official explained with quiet pride, "One of the values we have here is *botho. Botho* means . . . when a person is presenting him- or herself to help other people." In other words, *botho* is unsolicited, forthright generosity.

Over the next three days, for a total of eight or nine hours, in a room which doubled as his office and parlor, van Rensburg and I talked and talked, while ten feet away his assistant worked at a desktop computer. Using as springboards his own autobiographical and other writings, I asked van Rensburg everything I could think of. He confided that he had suffered a serious recent illness, which I guessed must have been a stroke or brain tumor, since he spoke slowly and faintly, often repeating himself. But he straight-forwardly told me everything he could remember.

On the fourth day, we drove to Serowe, where we spent a long, very hot afternoon walking around the sites where his projects had been launched. Illness or not, van Rensburg walked me half to death. It may have been my imagination, but he seemed much more energetic and lucid here than back in the office in Gaborone. Even his voice was stronger. From the interviews and the visit to Serowe, and from my reading before and since, I have learned not only what became of van Rensburg's projects, but how he came to them.

The Formative Years (1931-1952)

"I was born in Durban, December 3, 1931. I am a bastard."

Patrick Van Rensburg's origins were complex and murky. In apartheid South Africa, legal pigeonholing by race created bizarre nightmares for people like the great writer Bessie Head, who was "coloured" (mixed black and white), and who (to anticipate) became a friend and employee of van Rensburg's

during the Botswana years. The parentage of van Rensburg, who grew up during the pre-apartheid era, had a complex absurdity all its own. Both van Rensburg's and Head's hybrid origins would define their lives, but the hybrids could hardly have turned out more differently.

It would not be overly fanciful to render his name "Patrick Lourens-Largesse-Maxwell-van Rensburg." "Lourens" was the name of his grandmother, Susannah Isabella (?1887-1945), a seamstress who raised him and whom the boy addressed as "Mummy." "Largesse" was his grandmother's married name, and Patrick's surname as a boy and young man. Susannah's husband was France Largesse ("Uncle Papa"), an émigré sugar planter from the francophone English colony of Mauritius. Given the course that van Rensburg's life was to take, "largesse," or generosity, was a very apt label. "Maxwell" was the name of his biological father ("Uncle Pat"), a good, solidly middle-class car dealer who was an officer during World War ll, and who had enough money to assure his namesake a comfortable early life and good education. Van Rensburg's mother, Cecile van Rensburg, was a telephone operator. In the course of her life, she had at least one lover (Maxwell) and two husbands. Finally, Patrick Largesse became Patrick van Rensburg when, at the age of seventeen, he was seeking employment as a government clerk.

> They said, "Where's your birth certificate?" The next day, we came back with it. I had registered as Patrick Largesse, but the birth certificate said I was Patrick van Rensburg. My mother had divorced [Herbert Francis] van Rensburg [a prison warden], the marriage didn't last long, but she was Cecile van Rensburg.

All of this left van Rensburg a South African, but an Afrikaner (i.e. Boer), French-Mauritian, and English South African. Then, add British, through subsequent residence and marriage, and, finally, "Botswanan," if not "Batswana" (the ethnic appellation).

With the names came a second defining complexity: social class. I asked why he had never become "Patrick Maxwell, Jr."

PvR: They never married, his mother wouldn't allow it.

RS: Oh, not good enough for them. An early dose of social class.

PvR: Yes.

RS: Sometimes, people with . . . mixed backgrounds wind up being anti-racist, anti-classist.

PvR: Well, I wouldn't contradict that theory.

In terms of social class, before his working life was over, this man of complex parts would serve as a clerk in a government records office ("I was the tax man"), cadet diplomat, sales manager for a dry goods firm, provincial organizer for a political party, short-order cook, primary school teacher, and head of a secondary school (which he built) and of three important organizations that grew out of it.

Van Rensburg's linguistic history was also complex, though less so. At home, his grandmother's people spoke English and some French. English, his school language, became his main language, for which he came to have the flair of a talented native speaker. As an adult, he also picked up on the Afrikaans he had studied at school. The few words of Setswana I heard him speak sounded, to my untutored ear, like the Setswana I overheard from Batswana. Like his other poly-attributes, I would hypothesize, language became part of van Rensburg's staunch one-humanity creed.

His religious history was also complicated and, possibly, important. His grandmother was raised in a Dutch Reformed household in the Afrikaner Orange Free State. Through marriage, she became a Catholic, and, ultimately, a devout one. Patrick was thus raised as a Catholic, and he took the religion seriously, until he did not. Of his years directly after secondary school, he wrote, "My faith was also a source of comfort and reassurance at that time but yet a burden too with its message of abstinence, even from self-gratification. I ached for the love of a young woman." By 1963, he could also write, "Let's just say that at the moment I have pretty massive doubts about the divinity of Christ, with a fast-developing antipathy to organised religion" [1] But not many Catholics can lapse completely.

PVR: She [my grandmother] used to beat me. Oh, boy! With a hanger.

RS: So your work with the Brigades was intimately connected with the beatings you suffered with the hanger?

PvR: Oh, I wouldn't say that.

RS: Just joking. But is there any way you *would* say your upbringing affected the way your career went?

PvR: Well . . . I was a good Catholic.

"Good Catholic" can be construed as a source of his unswerving moral compass, but there may also have been other consequences. Together with a traumatic, prototypically sexual-sadistic English boarding school experience,

Catholicism may have done its bit toward loading this great leader and prodigious worker with a self-confessed, lifelong burden of diffidence. In the course of time, either overcoming, or in spite of, this diffidence, van Rensburg became a major-league womanizer, speculating about every woman he met as potential bed partner, and often acting on his speculations. When, as a school principal in 1965, he was forced to confront the problem of student pregnancy, his humane and responsible attitude toward sexuality tacitly acknowledged his own earlier tribulations:

> . . . above all, we needed to eschew moral outrage, pious sanctimony, hypocrisy and homilies, and recognise the natural stirrings of passion in our young people. To load them with a sense of guilt was no answer. They needed guidance in dealing with their sexuality, as apparently the young had had traditionally in some of the pre-colonial societies.[2]

Van Rensburg's other personal habits as an adult ranged from moderation to moderate immoderation. Over the years, for instance, he became a proficient toper.

If van Rensburg's origins were complicated, his education and the other elements of his upbringing often seem, as he describes them, starkly simple. In his writings and our interviews, van Rensburg recalled his early life in Manichean terms, speaking about extreme kindness and cruelty, happiness and suffering, in ways that evoke Dickens's coming-of-age novels. First in Pietermaritzburg (called "Maritzburg"), and then in Durban, his grandmother and other maternal relatives, including Uncle Jumbo (Louis Antoine James Largesse), a train driver, loved and nurtured young Pat. So did the Maxwells, snobs though some of them were. "Uncle Pat" acted like a real father, frequently picking the boy up at school to take him for drives in his fancy car. Later, van Rensburg remembered the Durban years fondly, summoning up the budding pleasures of art and nature that he would never cease to enjoy or to try to foster in others.

> Durban was the playground of my late childhood and early teens. It was always warm, the summers hot and humid. There were the beaches to walk and run on, the sea for swimming and surfing, and sometimes just for watching in all its moods; woods to roam, parks to play in, and hills to climb. When it rained, there were, also, the museum and the art gallery, and my favourite bioscopes (at seven pence).

If all this seems bucolic, there were also, of course, the dangers and tragedies. Twice, he almost died, once from diphtheria, the other time nearly being run over by a bus. (He was saved by the family dog.) When a relative and his most constant playmate disappeared while swimming, it was presumed that he had

either drowned or been eaten by a shark. "Now I had discovered something of the meaning of death, at least for the living. The lonely terror and agony of a young boy in dying, I could barely imagine, wholly appalled." One glimpses here the empathy that became a hallmark of van Rensburg's adult nature.

During the war, there were also fears of Japanese attacks on Durban. Like many other children, he was transported to rural KwaZulu-Natal, in his case to a place way up north, called Ixopo. There, for several months, he attended a boys' boarding school. In some ways it was a good school, and he was happy enough, making friends, for instance, and enjoying amateur theatricals. But he also missed his family. When he was subjected to sexual hazing, he told his grandmother, who immediately withdrew him from the school. They returned to Durban together to take their chances with the Japanese.

A good student, van Rensburg continued to move smoothly through the grades. Accepted to the excellent Glenwood High School, he became equally interested in history, literature, and the sciences. At seventeen, he won the school's essay competition. He also showed a pronounced appetite for practical knowledge. An English teacher with whose family van Rensburg boarded taught him carpentry skills. The handy teenager raised silkworms and produced and sold a magazine on behalf of the war effort, in the process becoming "captivated by the marvel of printing"[3] Two decades and several lifetimes later, many of these talents and interests would be brought to bear on the secondary school curriculum van Rensburg was to design in Botswana. There he would also grapple with many other practical skills. He became a very competent mason and an incompetent soap-maker. (The product made his skin itchy and red.) But that is getting ahead of the story.

When young Master van Rensburg finished secondary school, because he did only fairly well on his Matric exams, he realized he would be unable to get a university bursary (scholarship). Since he did not want to burden his family any longer, he got his first job, as a government clerk. In the years that followed his grandmother's death, in the course of performing his duties as a clerk during the late forties and early fifties, he felt the need for further education. His motives were to improve his job skills, to advance his general knowledge, and, later, to move into the diplomatic service. This move he regarded as a path to wider horizons, to a life where he could travel and enjoy an expatriate standard of living. So he doubled his workload, in 1952 obtaining an external B.A. degree from the University of South Africa, with concentrations in literature and law. A lifelong learner and teacher, van Rensburg can be seen as an excellent advertisement, not to mention proselytizer, for liberal education.

Turning Against Apartheid (1952-1962)

"What happened was, I was having second thoughts about being a racist South African Vice-Consul. Bad things were happening in South Africa, and I found myself lying." --Patrick van Rensburg, on his reasons for resigning from the South African Diplomatic Corps in 1957.

As a young man on his way to becoming a representative of a regime that was fast becoming a global pariah, van Rensburg himself held beliefs that he would later regard as appalling. Logical and empirical, he was initially a principled supporter of the central tenet of apartheid, separation of the races. This position he saw as harmonious with empathy for all humans. How he came first to believe in racial separation, then to reject that belief, is another complicated story.

Van Rensburg's origins could easily have made him a lifelong racist, or in British parlance, "racialist." When he was three, the family car was in an accident. "The first vehicle to come by stopped. Its driver was an Indian man. We refused his proffered help. My upbringing had already made me aware of race . . . It wasn't long, anyway, before racially acceptable help came by!" The family shared the prejudices of their race and social class toward not only Indians, but black Africans, and even other whites:

> My family's fear of richer Indians was stronger even than their fear of "educated" Natives, though most of English and Afrikaans Natal nevertheless hated these Black "agitators", as they called them . . . Many, my family included, were however less hostile towards less educated, traditional Natives, mainly Zulus--the "old type"--which included loyal servants. White Natal had very little real contact between people of different races. Indeed the English and the Afrikaners had only limited associations between each other--or even among themselves. The English dominated Natal political life and the less well off of *us* cherished illusions of superiority not only over all "non-Europeans" but over Afrikaners too. We built stereotyped images of other groups, creating a whole racist mythology with its own pejorative terminology and phraseology.

The "us" in that passage (my italics) is illuminating, suggesting van Rensburg's self-identification as a "less well off" Englishman. On the other hand, later in life, he would look back and imagine that there must have been countervailing, anti-racist influences:

> There is a time beyond recall, as I write and there is no one left to ask, when there must have been a loving black woman's face over my cradle, caring for me with comforting words of endearment, because I was always at ease with the Zulus who worked for us and because years later, I understood recaptured Zulu words. [4]

From those starting points, as he grew up, van Rensburg developed an ideal of universal kinship, including affection for Boers and sympathy for black Africans. In our interviews, he repeatedly expressed admiration for both groups, for the way, as he saw it, they had both been good losers, accepting their defeats in war and acceding to subsequent changes in the polity. With logic of sorts, he came to see racial separation as the only way to protect the rights, indeed the lives, of both races. As a cadet diplomat in the Belgian Congo during the mid-1950s, he admired the way the Belgians had kept the white workers home, as a tactic for avoiding racial conflict. At the time, he saw separate-but-equal in South Africa as the only alternative to the racial Armageddon that he anticipated would be the likely climax of almost two centuries of conflict and oppression.

Exposed, however, to the global perspectives of colleagues from more liberal nations and sensitive to developments at home, van Rensburg began to realize that "separate-but-equal" may have been a chimera. "My early flirtations with Nationalist Afrikanerdom could not last all that long, given the lengths to which, in time, they showed themselves prepared to go to oppress others, to their advantage, as soon enough became clear to me . . ." For a time, as vice consul, he was satisfied with mentally chiding the South African government for not expeditiously carrying out the racial separation he felt was necessary. Then, his nagging doubts became undeniable certainties. "In my contacts with other diplomats, I would say something, like 'I'm sorry.' In my head, I would know, 'I have to lie.' " He resigned as of May 31, 1957, shortly after the Bantu Education Act and many other noisome laws had been enacted and had met with serious protests.[5]

After his resignation, but before his flight to England where, in his first book, *Guilty Land,* he would reprise the history of South African racism and his own racial evolution, and where he would help organize the European Boycott movement, van Rensburg returned to South Africa for three years. There, he worked as a provincial organizer for the opposition Liberal Party. In 1960, he represented the party at the Second All-African People's Conference, in Tunis, where his anti-racism took another step forward.

> For my part, as the first White African to speak at a plenary and open session, as a fully accredited delegate, I noted this as a recognition of the non-racialism of the new Africa, in which Africans could be White and Whites African. It was in no way incongruous here in Tunis, where so many among the North Africans were surprisingly light-skinned, fair-haired and even blue-eyed.

Soon, however, as the age of African nationalism dawned, and even while he was working for the Boycott and being reviled by conservative white South Africans, van Rensburg was subjected to vilification by the militant left wing

of the ANC. He thus got a double dose of what it was like to be targeted in the name of ideology. *Guilty Land* charts van Rensburg's movement away from racism, his embrace of humanity, group by group, until his departure from England in 1962. In this, in several other books, and again in our conversations, he described the epiphany that, two years later, marked the last stage of his evolution, when his work among Batswana children removed any vestiges of anti-African racism.

> It had been quite by irony--that one morning after five months in the classroom, the great change that had happened so quickly in my life suddenly struck me, along with the recognition that the youngsters before me were Black--that I realised that since I'd begun teaching I hadn't noticed the race of my pupils.[6]

Botswana (1964 to the 1970s)

There exist five books that together provide a clear and full picture of the four major projects that have dominated Patrick van Rensburg's life for the past half century: Swaneng Hill School, the Brigades, *boiteko,* and the Foundation for Education with Production. (*Boiteko* is a Setswana word that roughly translates as "Many hands mean light work.") He himself wrote three of these books, two of them about the early years of the first three projects: *Report from Swaneng Hill: Education and Employment in an African Country* (1974); and *The Serowe Brigades: Alternative Education in Botswana* (1978). He subsequently brought these accounts up to date in his unpublished autobiography, *The Making of a Rebel,* which also chronicles his fourth and latest project, the Foundation for Education with Production, bringing the story of his labors into the 1990s. Van Rensburg's fellow exile to Serowe, the great South African writer Bessie Head (1937-1986), also wrote two books that describe the first three projects: *A Question of Power* (1973), and *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* (1981). Like van Rensburg, Head was an impressive witness. If his books provide the facts, hers flesh out the living details. My own interviews with van Rensburg and others, and our tour of the Serowe projects, complete the story.

After his sojourn in Great Britain, van Rensburg, by now in his early thirties, returned to Africa with his British wife, Liz. Traveling via multiple modes of transportation across North Africa, then south through East Africa, they ultimately fetched up in a VW camper van in Serowe, Botswana. There, he persuaded local rulers to grant him a parcel of land in return for a pledge to build a secondary school. Van Rensburg's immediate motive for founding Swaneng Hill School was that, when he arrived, there were only six secondary schools in all of Botswana to accommodate thousands of primary school graduates. It was thus unsurprising that, when he told a contingent of these young people that they would be offered places in a secondary school if they

helped build the school, he found willing enough workers. His larger point was that poor countries could not afford sustained development without massive amounts of unpaid, or poorly paid, manual labor.

The beginnings were auspicious. After the first buildings had gone up, the students asked van Rensburg for a sports field. He replied that there was no money left, but that they could make one for themselves. The field materialized. As demand for admission to the school increased, more buildings went up. In the course of all this construction, the students received training that became the germ of the Builders' Brigade. Other Brigades soon followed. The Brigades, then, began as vocational training programs associated with Swaneng Hill School.

At first, the school seemed to embody van Rensburg's egalitarian self-help principles. Students had their own cooperative association and government. Wherever possible, academic and practical work were integrated. Van Rensburg and an important associate, Robert Oakeshott, created a curriculum called "Development Studies," which was designed to instill progressive attitudes in the students and to provide theoretical underpinnings for the practical instruction. The Carpenters' Brigade built the desks and chairs. No department was supposed to be purely academic or theoretical. The Science department found limestone on campus, which was used for new buildings. The English and Setswana departments started several publications, leading to a newspaper, *Mmegi*. Van Rensburg's comments about the origins of this paper capture the heady optimism of those early days:

> In August [1967] the first issue of the new village newspaper we had planned to launch as part of our policy of making the school a centre of development in the community, appeared. We called it *Mmegi wa Dikgang*--Setswana for *The Reporter*. It proclaimed itself--in the vernacular--a forum for promoting the development of Setswana, and of literacy and rural development, as well as for reporting news and discussing social, political and economic affairs . . . It was in time to acquire a significance that could not then be foreseen.[7]

With physical work built into their weekly schedules, the students went on to erect classrooms for a local primary school and to start a cattle-marketing co-op. In 1969, under Oakeshott's guidance, they joined a second set of Brigades in the building of another secondary school, in a place called Shashe River. Later, they built a third.

The interviews in Bessie Head's nonfiction book, *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind,* chronicle some of the early successes of van Rensburg's projects. In one interview, Mututsi Seretse, the manager of what were called the Swaneng Consumers' Cooperative Society Stores, proudly described their profits and large membership during the first years of operation, 1965 to 1967.

> . . . membership at present stands at about 5,000 . . . His [van Rensburg's] idea was to give village people cheaper goods at wholesale prices . . . We called our first annual meeting and paid out a bonus of 5 per cent . . . Then, with permission and agreement of the members, we started an extension to the self-service co-op store, a co-op bottle store and butchery, and a co-op hotel.

In *A Question of Power,* Head brings many of the people involved in van Rensburg's projects to vivid life. The novel offers detailed, thinly veiled portraits of the leader, his family, and colleagues, paid and unpaid. Van Rensburg, who is called "Eugene," is consistently portrayed as the benefactor of Head's thinly disguised persona, Elizabeth. Elizabeth (like Head) has a breakdown, assaulting a harmless old Englishwoman who works for the Brigades. Returning from three months in a mental hospital to the fictionalized Serowe, "Motobeng" (there is no such place), she encounters Eugene:

> Along the pathway, she met the Eugene man. He stopped and stared at Elizabeth . . . She started to say something about having made a terrible mess and hurt people. He cut her short, raised his head proudly, and said, 'You'll make up for it.' He was that kind of man. People were always going up and up and up, never down and down and down.

Figure 8: Bessie Head in front of her house in Serowe, Botswana, probably during the late 1960's. —I am building a stairway to the stars. That is why I write‖ –Bessie Head [http://www.bessiehead.org/], photo used by permission of Khama III Memorial museum.

A second character, Grahame, "the English farm manager," is based on Vernon Gibberd, who worked with the Agricultural Brigade for over a decade. Like Grahame, Gibberd was a Quaker and a well-known innovator in dry-land agricultural practices. Then there are the Batswana. A main character, Kenosi, is based on Bosele Sianera, Bessie Head's best friend, a member of the Weavers' Brigade, and co-creator of the *boiteko* garden. "She was the sort of woman who simply ate up all the work in front of her, with a deep silence and concentration. There was a wonderful majesty and purposefulness about her, like the way cats go about their affairs." [8] *Boiteko* was van Rensburg's response to the need for jobs for Brigades graduates. Inspired by the ideas of Robert Owen, it began as a barter system intended to create a self-contained subsistence economy parallel to the formal sector. *Boiteko* generally attracted older participants than did the Brigades, many of them long-term unemployed people from the village.

Within just a few years, however, Swaneng Hill School, the Brigades, and *boiteko* all ran into serious difficulties. Even while the work-study mix was at its apogee, the school's institutional arteries began to harden, and its blood pressure to rise alarmingly. In 1966, van Rensburg appointed a new vice principal with a mandate to improve results on external academic examinations. In part because of this push, many, if not most, of the students began to resist manual labor. Especially the older students preferred to regard themselves as book scholars and incipient members of the elite. Over time, a town-and-gown divide developed. The students at Swaneng Hill School began to mock their cohorts, the purely manual laborers of the *boiteko*. As these elitist attitudes hardened, a disgusted van Rensburg completely separated the Brigades--and himself--from the school. Without the founder's leadership, Swaneng Hill endured a serious student riot, and the erstwhile vice principal, now acting principal, moved on herself. Since then, Swaneng Hill has come to resemble other, more ordinary secondary schools in Botswana.

The now-independent Brigades and their offshoot, the *boiteko*, encountered their own difficulties. On several fronts, van Rensburg struggled with the problem of motivation. Money was a never-ending worry. The Brigades were expected to pay for themselves by selling their goods and services: construction, agricultural products, woven textiles, and so on. Some Brigades, such as the Builders', did pay for themselves, even turning a profit. That particular enterprise wound up building a hotel, a cooperative store, and many workshop buildings, all over Serowe. (Swaneng Hill School is on the outskirts.)

Figure 9: How have these buildings held up over forty-five years?(Very well.) March 20th, 2010 (photo by the author).

But many of the Brigades bled red ink. When the barter system of the *boiteko* proved untenable, the project evolved into small businesses that sold their own wares and services. But *boiteko* membership never provided a full livelihood. There are numerous vignettes and anecdotes in *A Question of Power* that speak to the financial problems endemic to alternative economies. For instance, Head describes a meeting of the food co-op at Swaneng Hill School. After Eugene has patiently explained the finances of the co-op, the chronic complaint about too much work for too little money bubbles up, threatening to disrupt the proceedings.

> They were still muttering like that when an old man stood up slowly and importantly. People thought he had a momentous speech to make on production and turned to him, expectantly. He said: 'Last week I fell off a lorry… .' He got no further than that. A loud roar of laughter drowned the remainder of his words. He stood there smiling good-humoredly. He had broken the serious, tense atmosphere of the schoolroom.

Another major problem was finding jobs for graduates, which transformed the school-leaver problem into Brigades- and *boiteko*-leaver problems. Several interviews in *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* speak to the problem of post-Brigade and post-*boiteko* employment. Ndoro Sekwati, a graduate of the

Weavers Brigade, put the problem in perspective:

> . . . most trainees cannot set themselves up as weavers and silk-screen printers because the equipment is too costly . . . In spite of this, many girls did not regret the period spent in the Brigade. They would have joined anyway, out of curiosity, just to see if it would help them or not. Young people in Serowe are very attracted to something new.

Remarkably, van Rensburg managed for years to keep these problems of wages and post-training employment at bay. One pillar of his projects was the labor of paid and unpaid staff from abroad, people like Oakeshott. He also attracted significant ongoing support from international foundations, notably Swedish and Dutch, and even made use of some Peace Corps volunteers.

Parts of S*erowe: Village of the Rain Wind* describe the antecedents of van Rensburg's projects. Among the proto-Brigades was the building of primary schools and a water supply system by Tshekedi Khama (1909-1959). Tshekedi was the son of Khama the Great, who, as chief of the Bamangwato and a leading figure in the precolonial era, had himself used labor brigades. Tshekedi was also the uncle of, and regent for, Seretse Khama, who was to become the first president of independent Botswana, and who was initially, at least, a friend and reliable ally of van Rensburg's. As chief of the Bamangwato, Tshekedi Khama marshaled the unemployed into "voluntary" work regiments. Head interviewed many people who were involved in one way or another. One such person was Lenyeletse Seretse, later a civil servant, who painfully recalled those days:

> In Tshekedi's time, work regiments were a part of village life and he had a terrific amount of projects going on at the same time . . . And unlike today there was no aid money to build schools . . . The suffering we went through! It was 1948. It was hot, as only drought years can be and we worked all day outdoors. Those of us who had more means were forced to share with those who had less. Soon, we were starving . . . He had a contractor for the college; we provided the free labor.

This was the legacy van Rensburg inherited when he came on the scene fourteen years later, a white foreigner to boot. The positive aspect was that people knew what cooperative labor was all about; the negative, that it was associated with coercion and privation. For the most part, van Rensburg successfully neutralized the negative parts of the legacy, as well as the large threat of anticolonial racial animosity. He hired and promoted numerous capable Batswana, and far from being white overseers, he and his wife worked alongside everyone else. In fact, few or no others worked as hard as he did. When, in 1967, he pointed out the need for a great hall at the school, student and staff grumbling became an uproar. Even the energetic and

visionary Oakeshott found van Rensburg's plans for this new building excessive. But, from 1967 to 1970, van Rensburg built it anyway, doing a disproportionate share of the work himself and coming down with pneumonia in the process.

> I'm very proud of this building . . . Of course, the hall was a big, big challenge. And they took it, they took the challenge . . . We minimized the cutting down of trees. IVS [International Voluntary Service] sent us somebody who had architectural skills . . . At least 6,000 bags of cement had gone into building it along with many hundreds of tons of river sand, pit sand, and crushed stone for concrete, mortar and wall plaster . . . Over three years of Saturdays, I had personally moved at least 50 tons.[9]

Figure 10: Van Rensburg inside the Great Hall of Swaneng Hill School. At the time of its completion in 1970, it was the largest hall in Botswana. March 20, 2010 (photo by the author).

From Serowe, the Brigades spread across Botswana. During the years following the huge expansion of diamond mining (beginning in 1965) and Independence (1966), the Brigades participated in a protracted construction boom. The building in Gaborone where van Rensburg now lives, and where *Mmegi* was housed until early 2012, was part of that boom:

RS: How many trainees built this building?

PvR: About twelve. But we also had other buildings that they were building. Some houses, too. We trained them, then said, "You have to go out and make your own job."

RS: Were they able to get jobs?

PvR: Yes, a lot of the housing that's been built here is by trainees. This was early Gaborone.

During that typically very hot and dry late-summer day that I spent driving and walking around Swaneng Hill School and the village of Serowe with van Rensburg, I saw the current reality of what he had built, most of it sleepy and faded. But what I saw was juxtaposed in my mind's eye with the place of stirring hope described in his and Bessie Head's books.

The Foundation for Education with Production: Back to South Africa, and Beyond: The 1970s to the Present

As if those first three ambitious projects were not enough, in the final section of *The Making of a Rebel,* van Rensburg describes his most recent undertaking, the Foundation for Education with Production (FEP), an offshoot of the earlier projects. Since the 1970s, FEP projects have been undertaken in Botswana and several other southern African countries. After the rapprochement between de Klerk and Mandela in 1990, FEP moved into South Africa, marking a homecoming of sorts for van Rensburg.

In developing FEP, he demonstrated his usual pragmatic flexibility, adapting projects to local conditions. For instance, although unions were not a problem in Botswana, where they have never been strong, private building companies sometimes were, so he built where he could. In South Africa, union and company opposition depended on local conditions, so, again, he picked his spots. He also sought out strategic allies. In the early 1990s, when he was allowed to return to South Africa on one-month visas, he traveled to the Eastern Transvaal (renamed Mpumalanga in 1995). There he met Chris Seoposengwe, a member of the ruling African National Congress (ANC) who was directing the education and training programs of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). Seoposengwe was very interested in incorporating FEP methods into government-sponsored vocational training programs, and van Rensburg helped him do it.

Subsequently, van Rensburg lectured at conferences and other venues across South Africa and Europe, spreading the FEP gospel and finding further philanthropic support. School- and home-building projects were undertaken

in several South African homelands and provinces, including Lesotho, KwaZulu-Natal, Bophuthatswana (later Northwest Province), and Gauteng (home to Johannesburg, where residential flats were built). As had been the case with the earlier projects, van Rensburg kept to a policy of letting go as soon as a project was up and running:

RS: Once you started an FEP project, did you remain in charge?

PvR: I'd go to greet them, but not to observe. There are twelve places throughout South Africa. I started several, and some of them have gone out and started others. When they start off, it's education with production. Then, after a while, they've got their skills, they don't need any further assistance.

In KwaZulu-Natal, van Rensburg introduced FEP to Jacob Zuma, whom he had first met thirty years before when he had been a Liberal party organizer and Zuma a local chief and entrepreneur. Van Rensburg offered an interesting perspective on South Africa's controversial president.

RS: So who was Jacob Zuma, back then?

PvR: He was living on the Natal coast. What I got him interested in was housing, because I could see that the housing of the poorer people was appalling.

RS: It still is.

PvR: I got him into Empangeni [a town in KwaZulu-Natal], into building. That's where he lived . . . He had a farm--farms--there. He also had some fishing enterprises.

RS: He came from some money?

PvR: No, he wasn't particularly wealthy. I interested him in the education, getting students involved, particularly in practical skills. He had some responsibilities as a Zulu chief. He was open. He tried out some of my suggestions. When I went back much later, I found that things were happening. Building, carpentry, and farming. It grew. Some of them took it up, and then they brought in new skills. Sugar, cotton farms, and the big sugar factories.

RS: What do you think about Zuma and housing these days? And education. Now that he's responsible for everything.

PvR: Well, I don't think he's got any great new ideas. But he sticks by what he undertakes.

Conclusion

While I was in Gaborone, hoping to get a further perspective on van Rensburg's work, I had a cordial two-hour discussion (followed by tea) with James Radipotsane, Director, Department of Technical Education and Training, Ministry of Education. Radipotsane presented the bureaucratic POV on the Brigades:

RS: You took over some of the Brigades, didn't you?

JR: Yes. Twenty-one of forty-one. [There used to be sixty-some.] We are also going to take over the others. We only started last year, in May.

RS: Is the work of the government vocational schools parallel to the Brigades? Different?

JR: The Brigades were offering National Craft Certificate Programs, NCC programs. The government was offering the same ones. Eventually, in . . . 2000, the government introduced a new program, called the Botswana Technical Education Program.

The director went on to describe the government's current, elaborately structured vocational and technical education system, which has four levels that span secondary school and the equivalent of our junior college. More subjects are offered than the Brigades ever did: Engineering, Beauty, Hospitality, etc. Students--even some who were formerly reluctant because of the stigma of vocational education--are now flocking to the program. Some of the graduates have become self-employed entrepreneurs. I found it impossible to gauge how much of what the director was describing had been derived from van Rensburg's projects, which pioneered vocational education in modern Botswana. Where I could, I tried to defend van Rensburg's ownership:

RS: But that [starting businesses] was van Rensburg's idea, that they would do that.

JR: This was when jobs for everyone were very hard to find, which is still the case. But our program was developed in collaboration with industry.

In the face of aggressive questioning, Mr. Radipotsane, a calm, pleasant, and rational man, tried hard to justify the "rationalization" of the Brigades.

JR: Because of the challenges they were facing, some of the Brigades could not sustain themselves. The production units were not generating income. Some of them had just died. They were relying a lot on government subsidy. So there was a consultation, and it was agreed government should take over.

RS: And you phased out some of the things they were doing.

JR: No, for now we have not . . . But we are also going to be rationalizing the programs. Rationalizing means getting rid of duplication and maximumizing [sic] the use of resources. You'll find a college in the west, in the central, in the south, offering the same program. Say, hospitality. So we're scattering the small resources we have.

RS: But what about the people who want to study the subject and live in a place where you close a college?

JR: They can always access the others. We are a small country.

RS: But isn't it true that you have building going on everywhere? So if you consolidate to one area, where's the access in the former locations to services for customers and for jobs for the program graduates?

JR: There are forty-one of them [Brigades]. Rationalizing also means scattering the program so that no community is disadvantaged. So this might bring programs to communities that, in the past, had no access to these programs.

In my opinion that explanation, though nuanced, adds up to the old story: you can't cut costs without cutting services. If you are committed to "the formal sector," you can only run a simulacrum of programs like the Brigades. Also, although the present government program works with the formal sector, that sector, as van Rensburg explained, could not--and still cannot--absorb all the job seekers. As he also said, the diamond boom was based primarily on new technology rather than labor, and even today there are very few international corporations with branches in Botswana. Finally, Botswana's low unemployment rate depends heavily on government jobs. So, in a sense, the country is still grappling with the problems that sparked van Rensburg's projects half a century ago.

In our conversations, van Rensburg expressed a mixture of resignation and anger toward Botswana's current government. He reiterated the point that once you build something you just have to let it run its course, but he also

railed against someone he referred to as "that crazy Swedish woman," a free-marketeer, the wife of a minister and a nemesis of the Brigades. He even made an old man's threats about publicly denouncing government bean counters (like Mr. Radipotsane).

No doubt, van Rensburg can find much to regret. I am sure it saddens him (as it did me) to see that many of the Brigades compounds across the country are now clusters of crumbling old buildings, like the Tswelelopele Brigade Centre, which I drove past (both coming and going) near the South African border at Ramotswa. The compound is a sleepy place with peeling paint and a weedy dirt yard. The original Farmers' Brigade in Serowe still exists, but it, too, is a run-down, sleepy place. Van Rensburg showed me this vestige without much comment. From co-op to co-optation: over the years, many of his programs have passed into the mainstream and been subjected to the vicissitudes thereof. For instance, Botswana developed an extensive network of cattle cooperatives (147, with 100,000 members), but these could not compete with supermarkets and they have been ravaged by epidemics, including hoof-and-mouth disease. Half a century later, nothing seems like what it must then have been. Most *boiteko* enterprises have metamorphosed into private businesses. When we visited the hotel, the only people we saw were three middle-aged businessmen drinking to the music of a boom box in the open-air bar. The place did not have much of the feeling of a co-op.

PvR: I built all this. All the stone comes off the hill . . . Let's not go in, I don't want to be drawn into anything.

RS: You put in the boom box, the sound, right?

PvR: No, I can't be blamed for that.

Van Rensburg also told me parts of the post-Swaneng Hill story of *Mmegi*:

PvR: I reestablished it in '84. In Serowe . . . We bought out an old Dutch editor. He'd retired.

RS: Are any of the people downstairs holdovers from those days, products of Swaneng Hill training, the student paper?

PvR: I think it's too long ago. This paper! Half the staff leaves at the end of each . . . This paper is something else!

My own research revealed that *Mmegi* is currently owned by Dikgang Publishing Company, formed in 1992. The new company took over from Mmegi Publishing Trust, an NGO that remains a major shareholder.[10]

I do not believe, however, that change should be confused with failure. Forty-five years later, the designs of the hotel, school, and other Serowe buildings still seem beautiful, and the masonry remains stout and virtually flawless. As for the still-standing *boiteko* buildings, van Rensburg expressed his lingering pride:

> This is what I started, all this, the Serowe Development Trust. There were printers--they've moved now--carpenters, garages . . . where all the different businesses were located. The people who rent them are entitled to keep some of the profits. We had twenty-five when I was still running it. In all probability, if I hadn't come, it wouldn't have happened . . . The only thing I haven't got is a Batswana wife. And I feel I ought to have at least five or six.

In evaluating van Rensburg's efforts, one needs to see the forest. For almost fifty years now, large numbers of people have enjoyed livelihoods running, or working for, businesses that he created. When Swaneng Hill, the Brigades, and *boiteko* were at their apogee, did the good work carried on from day to day, month to month, year to year, by all those people--students, paid employees, and idealistic volunteers, both Batswana and outsiders--not matter to their own lives? Would those who gained affordable food, shelter and clothing say that the projects that produced them were failures? Since then, people's lives have continued to be touched by van Rensburg's work in many ways, some trivial, some not. Whatever he may think of present-day *Mmegi,* readers all over the country look forward to each day's edition. As we were leaving the school compound, the men at the gate smiled and waved to us:

RS: Are you still appreciated around here, Patrick?

PvR: Oh, I don't mind if . . .

RS: I think you are.

PvR: No, I think I am. I am.

True, almost everything built by van Rensburg has changed, but what ideals, or ideology, have the changes betrayed? Even then, in the 1960s, the informal, rural economy he worked so hard to create combined equality with wealth generation. Was that pure socialism, or (God forbid!) did it include a tincture of closet capitalism? If graduates of van Rensburg's programs have risen through the professional ranks or developed viable businesses, are those successes or failures? Does he mind the fact that the current rulers of South Africa, busy, self-aggrandizing, and frequently self–enriching, have not honored him for FEP (not to mention his important earlier work against the apartheid regime)?

RS: After '94 [majority rule], weren't you welcomed back?

PvR: I was allowed back, not welcomed.

RS: After what you did for them? The Boycott movement? I don't understand why they wouldn't have had a parade for you. Ride into Jo'burg on an elephant.

PvR: No, it wasn't like that. I had made some kind of peace with, uh, Mafikeng [now called Mahikeng, capital of now Northwest Province].

Van Rensburg is alluding to his having brought FEP projects to the hated Bantustans, Limpopo and Bophuthatswana, which were desolate dumping grounds for black ethnic groups before they became (in 1994) part of the new South Africa. For that matter, he also brought FEP to Southern Rhodesia before it was liberated and renamed Zimbabwe. And the program still operates there, even now that Zimbabwe needs to be liberated from its liberator, Robert Mugabe.[11] If van Rensburg does mind the slights, he should blame his own resolute humanism and resistance to racism--from both directions--and his imperviousness to all forms of partisanship that impede the eradication of poverty. Van Rensburg's own values explain why this prophet is without more honor in his own country. Besides, no one has a monopoly on disrespect. I asked him about communism and socialism in present-day South Africa, and beyond:

RS: Do you understand the South African left, Patrick? I don't.

PvR: Well, I don't think there is one.

RS: Well, the government has absorbed the former left, communists included. High-ups in the government. But I don't think they're really communists anymore.

PvR: No, there's no communism. But I don't know what communism is now. I mean, we never really . . . the Soviet Union had a dictatorship.

RS: I think there is a socialist ideal in South Africa. But I don't imagine it could ever really amount to much. I can't see any African countries becoming socialist states.

PvR: No, they don't have sufficient production capacity. They're still importing a lot that they need.

The final paragraphs of *The Making of a Rebel* anticipate the triumph of capitalism in the new South Africa. Like Orlean Naidoo and the other

activists represented in chapter two, van Rensburg regards economic apartheid as today's villain. Although the post-1994 nation was born out of an almost miraculously peaceful political change and transfer of power, the ruling coalition of politicians, labor unions, and the Communist Party has thus far proven starkly unable to redress poverty--except among its own leadership and supporters. The truth, too, is that most Afrikaans big business, and the bigger business of English-speaking South Africa, plus even bigger international investors, all supported the inevitable transfer of political power at least partly in order to hold on to as much of their own wealth as possible.

Perhaps the best way to look at the sum total of all that Patrick van Rensburg has accomplished over the years is to take a Pisgah view. As in the rest of the world, people across southern Africa are living in houses, learning in schools, and working at jobs that are the fruits of all sorts of motives. Van Rensburg's were among the best and, as such, the predominantly weak record of African socialism notwithstanding, new generations will be inspired by what this man has thought and written, and by the projects he invented and developed. When van Rensburg came to Serowe in 1962, perhaps it was fortunate that he could not have anticipated the failures of African socialism. In his own pragmatic, un-ideological way, he just went ahead and practiced socialism. Here, at least, on this imperfect planet, I cannot imagine a life better spent.

Notes

Except where indicated, all quotations are from my interviews with Patrick van Rensburg in Gaborone and Serowe, Botswana, March 16-20, 2010. My other principal sources (titles abbreviated):

- van Rensburg, Patrick. *Guilty Land: The History of Apartheid* (London: Jonathan Cape, and New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1962) (*GL).*
- --*The Making of a Rebel* (unpublished & undated PDF sent to the author). *The Making of a Rebel* was written over the decades subsequent to the publication of *Guilty Land*, whenever van Rensburg could find time away from his other projects. The PDF is unpaginated, so page numbers refer to my own Word document of *The Making of a Rebel (MoaR).*
- *Report from Swaneng Hill: Education and Employment in an African Country* (Stockholm: Dag Hammerskjold Foundation, 1974).
- *The Serowe Brigades: Alternative Education in Botswana* (The Hague: Bernard van Leer Foundation, 1978).

By Bessie Head:

- Head, Bessie. *A Question of* Power (London: Davis-Poynter and New York: Pantheon, 1973) *(QoP).*
- *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* (Cape Town: David Philip; Oxford, England, and Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann, 1981) (*SVRW*).

1. *Moa*R, pp. 74, 381.

2. *MoaR*, pp.180, 416, 434.
3. *MoaR*, pp. 36-39.
4. *MoaR*, pp. 1, 7, 31-33.
5. *MoaR*, pp. 85, 173.
6. *MoaR*, pp. 238, 368.
7. *MoaR,* p. 540.
8. *SVRW,* pp.167-68; *QoP,* p. 204; http://quakerscsaym.ning.com/notes/Richard_Gush_Lecture%3A_Vernon_Gibberd,_2008; *QoP,* p. 88
9. *QoP,* p.157; *SVRW*, pp. 163, 80-81; *MoaR,* p.567; for a biography of Tshekedi, see Michael Crowder's unfinished typescript, *Black Prince: A Biography of Tshekedi Khama, 1905-1959*: http://www.thuto.org/schapera/etext/classic/blpr.htm
10. *International Labour Organisation, Cooperative Facility for Africa,* 28/10/2009: www.ilo.org/public/english/employment/.../botswana.htm; www.mondotimes.com World Botswana; www.un.org/africa/osaa/ngo-directory2/dest/countries/printNGO.asp?lang=ENG&country=3&ngo=BOT20.
11. For a critique of van Rensburg's work in Zimbabwe, see: Chung, Fay, *Reliving the Second Chimurenga: Memories from the Liberation Struggle in* Zimbabwe (The Nordic Africa Institute, 2006, published in cooperation with Weaver Press). From a photostat sent me by Henning Melber, Director, Dag Hammarskjold Foundation, no p. #'s.

My first acquaintance with Patrick van Rensburg came through fiction. Norman Rush told me that van Rensburg was a principal model for Nelson Denoon, one of the protagonists in Rush's novel, *Mating,* which won the 1991 National Book Award.

An earlier draft of the Botswana sections of chapter three has been published in *Front Porch Review,* April 2012.