

Removal from *Die Vlakte*

After the National Party government came to power in 1948, apartheid laws were passed in quick succession. The cornerstone of apartheid was the Population Registration Act of 1950 in terms of which every citizen was classified as a member of a statutory group. In the terminology of the time, the main groups were classified as follows: White, Coloured, Bantu and Indian. Each “population group” was forced to live separately in its “own” area and was restricted to using facilities such as schools that were reserved for that particular group.

From this division followed the Group Areas Act of 1950, whereby different parts of residential and business areas in towns and cities were allocated to different races for their exclusive use. This act was strictly enforced and resulted in the forced removal of vast numbers of people of colour to their “own” areas. Among well-known examples that have been given considerable prominence are the removals in District Six in Cape Town in particular, but also those that took place in Sophiatown in Johannesburg, Marabastad in Pretoria and Cato Manor in Durban.

Not so widely known, but equally significant as far as the effects on the residents were concerned, are the forced removals from a part of Stellenbosch that was known as *Die Vlakte*, an area close to the town centre. This removal left deep scars on the local residents. Furthermore, Stellenbosch University would also later be indirectly implicated in the matter.

Disruption of a community

The precise definition of *Die Vlakte* that would be affected by the removal was the area demarcated by Muller Street, Ryneveld Street, Banhoek Road, Smuts Street, Merriman Avenue and Bird Street. On 25 September 1964 *Die Vlakte* was proclaimed as a white group area. This would impact 3 700 coloured people in the midst of a much smaller number of white people. Besides the considerable number of coloured people, six schools, four churches, a mosque, a cinema and ten business enterprises would also be affected in various ways. In 1991, one out of every three coloured inhabitants of Stellenbosch had previously lived in an area that had been declared a white group area. Stellenbosch was, of course, not unique in this regard. The removals were part of a countrywide pattern that interfered dramatically in the lives of people of colour in South Africa, and in those of people classified as “Coloured” in the Western Cape in particular. By 1976, 306 000 coloured people (equal to one out of every six coloured persons) in South Africa had been moved.

Most houses in *Die Vlakte* in Stellenbosch were rental properties and in a good, habitable condition. It was not a slum quarter – the usual argument advanced by members of the National Party in parliament to justify such removals.

The removal of people from the town centre to Idas Valley and the present-day Cloetesville took place bit by bit until about 1970. There were regular complaints that the necessary community facilities were lacking in these areas. Moreover, pleas that families or neighbours should be resettled in the same street in Cloetesville fell on deaf ears. It amounted to the community literally being broken up. Some white town councillors blamed the insensitive way in which people were moved on the national department that had taken over the responsibility for the removals.

There was a clearly defined upper class of approximately 20% of the coloured people in Stellenbosch that consisted of skilled workers and professional people. It was these people, although it was of course not exclusively limited to them, who felt particularly hurt by discriminatory measures. In its removal frenzy, the state made no distinction between the aspiring middle class and less well-off members of the coloured community. Everybody would be affected by this in some or other way.

Education in *Die Vlakte* was a potent socialising factor that played an important cohesive role. The closure of schools that had served the community for years meant that cultural capital was fragmented and squandered. New schools in the resettled areas had to find their social compass from scratch. Especially the closure of Lückhoff Secondary School in Banghoek Road, which had been in existence since 1937 and had an excellent reputation as well as committed teachers, was experienced as a particularly heavy blow.

Besides the traumatic effect of the removals on individuals, it also meant that they were now much further away from the town's central business area and the schools, churches and mosque that had been close to their hearts for many years. On top of that, there were difficult adjustments in Cloeteville where people had to attempt to literally build a community from the ground up.

Reasons for the removals

How was it possible that such an inhumane system was carried through so callously? There is more than one answer.

The vast majority of white people in the town voted for the National Party and accepted group areas as an important pillar of government policy. At best, some white people argued that the policy had to be implemented more humanely, but few if any opposed it in principle as being completely reprehensible.

A further dimension of obsessive classification of individuals underpinned the policy. Group classification would pertinently affect the coloured community in particular. Families were broken up and harmed because the Population Registration Act classified some family members as white and others as coloured. When the bill was initially introduced in 1950, it was estimated that there would at most be 10 000 cases where classification would cause problems; six years later the government had to admit that more than 90 000 so-called "borderline cases" had come to their attention.

As a native of the Boland, a famous statesman such as General Jan Smuts who had been defeated in the 1948 election could plead movingly and with conviction from the opposition benches that the National Party should ditch plans to classify white and coloured. He pointed out that the Wilcocks Commission (headed by RW Wilcocks, former rector of the University of Stellenbosch, after whom the Wilcocks Building was named) had found in 1937 that such strict classification was impossible and could cause great harm. Smuts continued: "Don't mess with this thing, because it touches on matters that go very deep in this country." The failure to heed his warning would cast long shadows.

The policy could not have been about dramatic cultural differences as such. Indeed, between white and coloured there were in general only the ordinary differences that obtained between more and less well-off Western-oriented people: class differences, but cohesive linguistic and religious practices as well as certain shared social practices. The National Party chose to downplay these similarities, however, and to elevate colour as an overriding factor. Accordingly, the point was that all white people, and more specifically Afrikaners, had to be demarcated as a special race-conscious group from coloured people by means of a clear colour line.

Hence segregation was a requirement, not because people were actually so different, but precisely because they were so similar. People had to be made different, then, or it had to be prevented that they would be treated completely the same, with equal opportunities. The historian Hermann Giliomee succinctly summarised the implications of the premise of formal classifications as statutory policy: "If whites were not classified and not obliged to keep themselves apart, the government could not treat them as the privileged; without privilege, not all white people would behave as the government wanted white people as the dominant group to behave." But the coloured people would bear the brunt of segregation, as was also the case in Stellenbosch.

Reactions and changes

The removals did not lead to large-scale political resistance. Besides, many people who were moved were dependent on officialdom for housing in the new areas and therefore could not afford to be too defiant. One person elaborated: "We were very upset about this, but the people were not politically conscious in those days. They didn't have the vote to make their grievances known, their hands were tied."

Political powerlessness coupled with a strong sense of displacement in fact resulted in greater repressed resentment. The whole process left many long-lasting scars among many people. As one former inhabitant of *Die Vlakte* recalled in 2004: "It was just a sad business. The guys were removed from their town, their bioscope, their school, their church, their sport and their family. It was like one long funeral. You were very worried,

because you didn't know who were going to be your neighbours in Cloetesville. Later when you went to visit the people on *Die Vlakte* who were still waiting to move, you were furious when you saw how the houses had been flattened." A former businessman in *Die Vlakte* did not beat about the bush: "I was very angry and filled with hate. I couldn't contain this hate and disappointment. Just imagine, for years you have built up your business together with your dad and other family members, and here they come to break it down."

For many women, their houses were their pride in which they had invested a great deal of emotional energy on behalf of their families. Now they were simply demolished indiscriminately. One woman remembered: "It was terrible to see how they broke down our houses afterwards. I wouldn't even walk past there. One day a white girl stopped me near the Methodist School. She had probably noticed that I was sad. She questioned me and I told her the whole story. It was very sad to think that people's houses could be demolished just like that."

The attachment to and subsequent loss of the uplifting symbolism of an exceptional community school likewise left a bitter taste. Lückhoff School in Banhoek Road was the heart of *Die Vlakte* and the first Afrikaans high school for coloured learners in the Boland. The school building was erected in 1938 after the school had initially been run in houses and buildings in the area. Learners came from as far as South West Africa (now Namibia), and by 1969 the school had more than 1 000 learners. But on 30 October 1969 the learners had to walk with their school benches from the old school to the new school building in Idas Valley. A former teacher testified: "Everyone was sad to leave the school where there were so many happy memories. The school was central to the community of *Die Vlakte* in particular and the Western Cape as a whole."

Testimonies of this kind were illustrative of the feeling that prevailed for a long time and that has not been completely erased to this day. Yet the community showed remarkable resilience in systematically attempting to re-establish social structures and cohesion under disruptive circumstances in the areas to which they had been moved.

As an institution, the University of Stellenbosch did not protest against the evictions and in general the university authorities went along with the government policy. Individuals such as Professor Erika Theron, who also served on the town council, did have serious misgivings about the implementation of the policy, but even in her case it did not lead to a severing of ties with the National Party.

What left a further bad taste, was that the Lückhoff Secondary School later ended up in the hands of the university. At the insistence of the then Provincial Administration, the school, as well as an adjacent site, was transferred to the university in exchange for a portion of sought-after development land of the university on the then extra-mural campus in Bellville. While the university did not ask for it, it also did not show the necessary sensitivity by distancing itself from a building that had been acquired in a controversial manner.

For the university, another sequel to the eviction of people from *Die Vlakte* was the erection of the current Arts and Social Sciences Building at the corner of Merriman Avenue and Ryneveld Street on land that had been expropriated in the 1960s. Up to the 1990s, moreover, the building carried the name of BJ Vorster – admittedly a former Matie and chancellor of the university, but someone who, as South Africa's prime minister from 1966 to 1978, was closely associated with apartheid. Protest on the part of some staff members who worked in the building contributed to the name being changed.

The post-apartheid period also saw changes with regard to the former Lückhoff School building. For over 40 years the history of the building had created a division between the university and the coloured community of Stellenbosch. In 2007 the university dedicated the school building symbolically to the community as a gesture of reconciliation and transformation. In 2008 and 2009 a permanent photo exhibition was installed in the building to give recognition to old boys and girls of the school who had become prominent role players in South African society.

The past in the present

If the past is not acknowledged in all its articulations, it is difficult for a community to deal effectively with the present. Hence an open, but also a nuanced understanding is required to lay new building blocks for a post-

apartheid generation.

The university's role during the apartheid years and the multifaceted branches of the university's activities have not yet been examined in depth. The almost tacit consent to the evictions of the 1960s is only one dimension. The university has a complex past, and a more comprehensive account would provide multiple perspectives and a range of tones. At present, however, there exists a more receptive understanding of what happened in the town and the immediate geographic space of the university, and aspects that were omitted in the past are now coming to the fore. This can contribute to a responsible transformative ethos in order to blaze new trails and thereby help create a new history for younger and future generations.

SOURCES

Biscombe, H (compiler). *In ons bloed*, Sun Press, Stellenbosch, 2006.

Du Toit, J. "The role of memory in urban land restitution: Case studies of five families in Stellenbosch", Unpublished MA, Stellenbosch University, 2011.

Giliomee, H. *Nog altyd hier gewees: Die storie van 'n Stellenbosse gemeenskap*. Tafelberg, Cape Town, 2007.

(Text: Prof Albert Grundlingh)