

“The British coloureds of Sophiatown”: The case of St. Joseph’s Home for coloured children, 1923-1998

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Abstract

During apartheid South Africa (1948-1994), black, coloured, and Indian children did not enjoy the same privileges as their peers of European descent – because of racial discrimination. However, some destitute coloured children’s lives changed positively following their admittance to St. Joseph’s Home for Coloured Children – administered by Sisters from the St. Margaret’s Order based in Sussex, England. This paper is not only the first academic study of St. Joseph’s Home for Coloured Children, but also the first to include the latter in the written history of Sophiatown. The article contributes doubly to the historiography of Sophiatown as well as the under-researched history of institutional care and orphanages in Johannesburg. The article explores how coloured children were perceived and treated at St. Joseph’s Home and how their lived experiences differed from those of the other children in Sophiatown – a racially-integrated area until the 1950s when the apartheid regime declared it an all-white area and forcibly removed black people. Furthermore, the article highlights St. Joseph’s Home’s challenges and successes during its existence as an institutional care centre, until 1998 when it was declared a monument and adopted a communal care structure. This paper is based on the Home’s administrators’ reports, interviews, and archival material. The findings of this research indicate that coloured children admitted to the Home adopted the English culture and “lived in comfort”, through the influence of the Sisters, making these children “better off” than the rest of their Sophiatown peers. The implication of the fact that these Home-based children were regarded as privileged is that they were resented by people from the older coloured generation, especially those employed at St. Joseph’s Home, for living privileged lives that were foreign to the rest of the coloured people of South Africa – during apartheid.

Keywords: St. Joseph’s Home; Coloured Children; Apartheid; Sophiatown; Orphanages; Racial Discrimination; Privileges; Nuns; South Africa.

Introduction

Orphanages and institutional care facilities for children constitute a worldwide phenomenon. By the early 20th century, orphanages became the

most common form of care facilities for orphaned, abandoned, and needy children in most parts of the world.¹ The primary reason for the establishment of orphanages was a philanthropic attempt to solve some of society's social problems concerning children's welfare.² Many children in desperate need of care benefited from the compassion-inspired good deeds of institutional care centres.³ Institutional care became one of the most significant developments in the history of childcare – with the establishment of the voluntary or charitable service for the protection of children from neglect and abuse.⁴ In other words, orphanages aimed to give a home to many orphaned, illegitimate, abandoned, and destitute children.

In Sophiatown, St. Joseph's Home for Coloured Children⁵ was established in 1923 to serve the needs of destitute coloured children from across South Africa. The aim of this article is to show that coloured children in this Home lived in a different/better world, despite being part of an oppressed race. The article also endeavours to complicate the history of childhood in Sophiatown – by correcting the view of renowned historians, scholars and memoirists according to whom Sophiatown children were juvenile delinquents and a menace to society.⁶ In this regard, the article aims to build upon the research already conducted on the youth of Sophiatown, to shed light on the group of children who have received little historical attention in the historiography of Sophiatown.

The Home contributed by relieving some of South Africa's coloured children from the deprivation and harmful circumstances that justified their committal. Indeed, all the children in the Home were admitted because of various reasons, some of which were more severe than others. Despite the seriousness of the problem faced by a child and his or her family, committal to the Home meant that the situation was beyond the family's control. Hence, the government deemed it necessary to remove the child from the perceived undesirable conditions. It can be argued that the children at the Home were better cared for and more privileged than the majority of children in Sophiatown. In fact, a considerable

1 S Mintz, *Huck's Raft: A history of American childhood* (Cambridge MA, 2004), pp. 155-160.

2 JB Ramey, "I dream of them almost every night: Working class fathers in Pittsburgh, 1878-1929", *Journal of Family History*, 37(1), 2012, p. 39.

3 G Brunet, "Children abandoned and taken back: Children, women and families in dire constraints in Lyon in the nineteenth century", *Journal of Family History*, 36(4), 2011, p. 429.

4 G Brunet, "Children abandoned and taken back..." *Journal of Family History*, 36(4), 2011, p. 426.

5 St. Joseph's Home for Coloured Children will also be referred to as the Home.

6 C Glaser, *Bo-Tsotsi: The youth gangs of Soweto, 1935-1976* (Cape Town, David Philip, 2000), pp. 29-31; D Goodhew, *Respectability and resistance: A history of Sophiatown* (London, Praeger, 2004), p. 28; T Huddleston, *Naught for your comfort* (Johannesburg, Hardingham and Donaldson, 1956), p. 128; D Mattera, *Memory is the weapon* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1987), p. 71-72.

number of Sophiatown children lived in abject poverty, because their parents were unemployed or worked menial jobs for long hours but were paid little. Often, they did not have enough money to supply the basic needs of their children, namely, decent clothes, food, and an appropriate living environment. Indeed, more than two families shared a room in most Sophiatown households.⁷ The inadequate number of schools in Sophiatown and the surrounding Western Areas, in the 1930s and late 1940s, accounted for the fact that a large number of children roamed the streets, instead of being in the classrooms.⁸ Huddleston stresses that children in Sophiatown lacked opportunities and recreational activities, as the government never invested in their wellbeing. Consequently, most Sophiatown young boys resorted to petty crime and became "tsotsis who lived by the knife and [were] hated and feared by the residents".⁹

Similarly, Glaser demonstrates that children in the Witwatersrand townships, in the 1930s and 1940s, were out of school and wandered the dusty streets. Since the children in the native townships of Johannesburg lacked opportunities, they usually engaged in such activities as crime and prostitution.¹⁰ Both Huddleston and Glaser identify the lack of educational opportunity¹¹ and the absence of parental control¹² as the primary sources of township children's dishonest and immoral behaviour. Glaser elaborates that children became unruly because their parents were always absent during the day, since they had to work to reduce poverty in their families. However, it resulted in their children's lack of discipline.¹³ Seemingly, juvenile delinquency could be curbed or eradicated by improving Africans' standard of living. In fact, delinquency was low in families with good wages, a stable family life, decent housing, and regular school attendance.¹⁴ Unfortunately, not many Africans in townships had such privileges. The majority of African families were poor. Huddleston observes that "the average number of children in a family is anything between four and seven. Quite often it is more. So, clearly if they are to be fed and clothed, it is necessary for both parents to go out to work".¹⁵ The fact that most parents were away during the day promoted delinquency and unruly behaviour among most of the township children.

7 WB Modisane, *Blame me on history* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1986), p. 57.

8 D Goodhew, *Respectability and resistance...*, pp. 44-48.

9 T Huddleston, *Naught for your comfort...*, p. 86.

10 C Glaser, *Bo-Tsotsi: The youth gangs of Soweto...*, p. 22.

11 T Huddleston, *Naught for your comfort...*, p. 84.

12 C Glaser, *Bo-Tsotsi: The youth gangs of Soweto...*, p.25.

13 C Glaser, *Bo-Tsotsi: The youth gangs of Soweto...*, p. 26.

14 C Glaser, *Bo-Tsotsi: The youth gangs of Soweto...*, p. 25.

15 T Huddleston, *Naught for your comfort...*, p. 89.

The establishment of St. Joseph's Home

The majority of children in Sophiatown lived in appalling conditions characterised by poverty and lack of opportunities. Most of those children were out of school and roamed the streets. A handful of them became petty criminals who preyed upon unsuspecting residents.¹⁶ In the very same Sophiatown existed a world that differed from the one that local children were used to. This unsuspected world gave hope and opportunities to children placed in its care. Marie, Eva, Caroline, and Ruth¹⁷ are part of the 808 children who lived a privileged life in Sophiatown between 1923 and 1998, after a former life of destitution. Indeed, though most of these children were orphans, they received a degree of care and love that was foreign to most Sophiatown children who lived with both parents. They attended school, had shelter, food, and decent clothes. The story of St. Joseph's Home's children shows that while the majority of children lived in poverty, a number of coloured children were privileged and hardly experienced poverty in their childhood.

Coloured men who lost their lives in the First World War inspired the establishment of the Home.¹⁸ According to the quartermaster of the Coloured Corps, Captain I.D. Difford, South African "men of exceptionally good character", between the age of twenty and thirty, were called to join Britain in the fight against the German Nazi.¹⁹ Cape Town took the lead and thus expressed coloured men's desire to serve in the war. Indeed, at the outbreak of the war, the response of the coloured community to military service was positive.²⁰ This gave coloured men the majority in the Corps also known as the "British Boys". Members of this Corps were regarded as the bravest non-European soldiers who were very loyal to their country.²¹ To honour the Cape Corps for the support provided to South Africa and the British Empire,

16 DM Hart & GH Pirie, "Sight and soul of Sophiatown", *Geographical Review*, 74(1), 1984, pp. 39-40; U Harnnez, "Sophiatown: The view from afar", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 20(2), 1984, p. 189; D Goodhew, "The People's-Police-Force: Communal Policing Forum in the western areas of Johannesburg c. 1930-1962", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 19(3), 1993, pp. 449-451.

17 These are the five ex-residents of the Home who provided their oral histories in this research. It is important to note that the Home's main characters were girls because boys were only admitted into the Home until they were nine years old. Therefore, the girls are the main actors in this history. Also, first names are used to protect the identities of the women and their decedents.

18 Throughout this paper, the St Joseph's Home for Coloured children is sometimes referred to as the Home.

19 Captain ID Difford, "The story of the Battalion Cape Corps, 1915 -1919" (University of Toronto Library, 1980, available at <http://www.archive.org/stream/storyof1stbattal000diffuoft/storyof1stbatta1000diffuoft-djvu.txt>, as accessed on 13 July 2013).

20 I Gleeson, *The unknown force: Black indian and coloured soldiers through two world wars* (Cape Town, Ashanti Publishing, 1994), p. 51.

21 I Gleeson, *The unknown force...*, p. 54.

in 1921, the Johannesburg Diocesan Council decided to build something useful, rather than erecting a mere monument.²² The Diocese of Johannesburg decided that the Corps be greatly honoured and appreciated for its members' sacrifice and excellent effort in military service – regardless of their little pay of two thirds of what their white counterparts received.²³ Clearly, the nation was indebted to these men for the role they played in the war.

Plans to establish the Home were made as early as 1919, when a committee consisting of Canon GH Ridout, the Priest in-charge of St. Alban's Coloured Church in Ferreirastown, Mr Leo McBride, Mr Richard Feetham, Mr Sydney Jones, and Mr CW Kearns convened to establish an orphanage primarily serving the children of fallen members of the Cape Corps. The piece of land donated by an anonymous philanthropist was ideal for the establishment of the Home because, at the time, Sophiatown was a freehold township that accommodated people of all races.²⁴ It was thus the perfect setting for a harmonious coexistence between coloured children, their white caregivers, as well as the coloured and black staff of the Home.

The committee further decided that when the late soldiers' orphans had grown up, the Home would be open to all needy coloured children from all over South Africa.²⁵ The Home would be under the control of the Church of the Province of South Africa or Church of England.²⁶ The Home was named after Saint Joseph whom the Gospels portray as a man of principle who had accepted his God-given responsibility with humility.²⁷ Furthermore, the Home was to be recognised by the state and be registered under the Welfare Act No. W.O 2584.²⁸ In line with the Home's Constitution which clearly stated that funds were to be collected throughout South Africa²⁹, the building of dormitories and the upkeep of the Home were done with funds collected nationally.

During the period of the building of the Home, very few recognised orphanages and institutional care centres for destitute children existed in Johannesburg. Orphanages available in apartheid South Africa followed

22 University of the Witwatersrand Historical Papers, Johannesburg (WHP), AB2896, St. Joseph's Home A1.6, St. Joseph's Home: A report by the Ecumenical Research Unit, 23 June 1974, p. 1.

23 WHP, A1.6, Miscellaneous reports, 1937-1993, St. Joseph's Home: A report by the Ecumenical Research Unit, p. 2.

24 WHP, AB2896, St. Joseph's Home, A1.1, Inspection report, 1937, p. 1.

25 WHP, AB2896, St. Joseph's Home, A1.4, St. Joseph's Jubilee 1923-1973, p. 4.

26 WHP, AB2896, St. Joseph's Home, A1.1, Constitution, 22 October 1985, p. 1.

27 WHP, AB2896, St. Joseph's Home, A1.2, St. Joseph's Home: Past-Present-Future, 31 March 1964, p.1.

28 WHP, AB2896, St. Joseph's Home, A1.1, Inspection report, p. 3.

29 WHP, AB2896, St. Joseph's Home, A1.1, Inspection report, p. 3.

different regulations determined by the religious background of the founders and a child's race. The Arcadia-South African Jewish Orphanage established in 1906 is a good example of the influence of race and religion on admission. The ARC, as it was commonly known, only admitted white Jewish children. This orphanage went to the extent of committing children from Russia and Ukraine, as long as they were Jewish, but excluded needy non-Jewish white South African children.³⁰ Similarly, the Abraham Kriel *Kinderhuis* (Children's Home) in Langlaagte, which was founded after the South African War in 1902 by the *Nedehuits Hervormde Kerk* (NHK, the Dutch Reformed Church in the Transvaal), cared for this war's orphans. The Abraham Kriel Children's Home restricted its admission to white orphans and destitute Afrikaner children.³¹ Meanwhile, Johannesburg-based institutional care centres for destitute black children were very limited in the early 20th century. The Orlando Children's Home – which was the only black children's home in Soweto in the 1940s – provided welfare for black orphaned, needy, and destitute children. It was founded by a philanthropist named Maggie Nkwe. Although it was not aligned to a particular church, this children's home depended on local churches and well-wishers for donations.³²

St Joseph's Home had three main aims – with their related objectives. The first was to undertake the maintenance, supervision, and education of the Cape coloured children of all Christian denominations – any Muslim children had to convert to Christianity³³. The second aim was to provide the Home-based children with specialised training, to enable them to earn their own livelihood, become useful citizens and, generally, promote their physical wellbeing. The third aim was to render services in the towns and districts of Johannesburg and Pretoria – although the Home also received children committed through various welfare organisations and courts from any part of South Africa.³⁴ The vision of the Home was "To cater for the physical, spiritual, emotional, social and educational needs of children in an attempt to encourage their development and to assist them to become responsible members of society".³⁵ The Home managed, as far as possible, to cater for the children according to its vision statement, providing the admitted coloured

30 DS Sandler, *ARC 100 years of memories: Arcadia-South African Jewish Orphanage, 1906-2006* (Cape Town, 2006), p. 3.

31 AP Smith, *Die Abraham Kriel-Kinderhuis vier Jubelfees, 1902-1952* (Langlaagte, 1952), pp. 17-18.

32 C Maunder, *The little sparrows of Soweto* (Johannesburg, 1986), p. 27.

33 All children committed into the Home, regardless of their Christian sect had to adopt the Church of England religious practices.

34 WHP, AB2896, St. Joseph's Home, A1.3, Certificate of Registration, 23 August 1963.

35 WHP, AB2896, St. Joseph's Home, A1.1, Constitution, 22 October 1985.

children with a decent and healthy lifestyle that was impossible to achieve in their family homes.

The Sisters of the Society of St. Margaret's Order

It is important to acknowledge the people who work hard to maintain the Home's high standards. The people, who played a significant role in the making of St. Joseph's Home are the Sisters of the Society of St. Margaret's Order, from East Grinstead in Sussex, England. This society was founded in 1884 by JM Neale, in East Grinstead, as an order to nurse the local poor. The Order began its overseas activities in 1873.³⁶ In this regard, Mother Madeleine, Superior General of St. Margaret's, sent the abovementioned Sisters to Sophiatown, to administer the newly established Home.³⁷ The St. Margaret's Sisters' mission at St. Joseph's Home was to run its daily activities. The priest-in-charge, GH Ridout, expressed his gratitude to Mother Madeleine for sending the Sisters and praised them for their dedication and professionalism, as he believed that the Home was in good hands.³⁸

The Sisters were originally in charge of St. Mary's Orphanage in Rosettenville, since its establishment in 1902. It was believed that St. Joseph's Home would benefit from their experience.³⁹ The Sisters had started their work among coloureds at the St. Alban's Parish in Ferrierastown, briefly before joining St. Mary's Orphanage.⁴⁰ The Sisters' experience gained through their work in Ferreiratown and in a coloured township was going to make their mission at St. Joseph's Home easier.

On 4 September 1923, the Sisters moved into St. Joseph's Home, to commence their work of running it and taking care of the children's needs. In this regard, a diary entry reads, "We moved into St. Joseph's Home. Sister Madeleine and Sister Olivia arrived about 10.a.m. The first wagon of furniture arrived soon after 11.a.m".⁴¹ This diary entry shows that the Sisters were ready to start their work that span from 1923 to 1978 – when they returned to England in protest against apartheid. Indeed, the apartheid government disapproved of these white Sisters' mission of taking care of coloured children

36 *UCL Bloomsbury Project* (available on http://www.ucl.ac.uk/bloomsbury-project/institutions/east_grinstead_nuns.htm, as accessed on 3 February 2013).

37 WHP, AB2896, St. Joseph's Home, A1.5, Annual report, St. Joseph's Home, 31 December 1939, p. 2.

38 WHP, AB2896, St. Joseph's Home, A1.4, Minute Minutes, 30 September 1923.

39 WHP, AB2896, St. Joseph's Home, A1.4, St. Joseph's Jubilee 1923-1973, 5.

40 WHP, AB2896, St. Joseph's Home, A2.5, A report by Ecumenical Research Unit, 1979, p.2.

41 WHP, AB2896, St. Joseph's Home, A1.2, Diary 1922-1928, 4 September 1923.

in the new all-white suburb of Triomf.⁴² Consequently, lay staff administered the Home between 1979 and 1998.

Children admitted to St Joseph's Home

In South Africa, orphanages and institutional care centres are mainly established in urban areas. This is because of the prevalence of cases where urban families are unable to provide for their children, deaths or serious illnesses affecting mothers or both parents, illegitimacy, violence, drug use, and negligence.⁴³ Nevertheless, poverty is the primary cause of the institutionalisation of children.⁴⁴ In other words, children who are from impoverished backgrounds are essentially perceived as in great need of care, because their family situations are uncondusive to their growth and development. Traditionally, orphanages and institutional care centres targeted children whose parents were deceased or poor.⁴⁵ For example, the South African Jewish Orphanage – one of the oldest orphanages in Johannesburg, established in 1906 – committed children on the abovementioned grounds – which also applied to St Joseph's Home and many other orphanages.⁴⁶

It is important to note that St Joseph's Home for Coloured Children was not classified as an orphanage, even though establishing the Home for the orphans of the Cape Corps was the primary aim⁴⁷. Thus, this Home became a haven of safety, love, and care for needy coloured children, namely, orphans, abandoned, illegitimate, rejected, and neglected children, as well as those who came from broken homes.⁴⁸ Although most of the first children admitted were orphans, later in the years, the majority were children from broken and undesirable homes, as well as those whose parents were unable to care for them.⁴⁹

On 16 September 1923, St. Joseph's Home opened its doors to its first two children, siblings Rachel and Francis Mary Christina Lawrence. The reason

42 WHP, AB2896, St. Joseph's Home, A2.5, A report by Ecumenical Research Unit, 1 June 1979, p. 7. In the mid 1950s Sophiatown was abolished and was declared a white suburb. The land on which St. Joseph's Home was built survived the forced removals because it was on the area the apartheid government targeted.

43 S Murray, J Murray, E Branigan & J Malone, *After the orphanage: Life beyond the children's home* (Sydney, University of South Wales Press, 2011), p. 7.

44 K McCartney & D Philips, *Blackwell handbook of early childhood development* (Malden, Blackwell Publishers, 2006), p. 424.

45 C Neff, "The role of Toronto Girls' Home, 1863-1910", *Journal of Family History*, 36(286), 2011, p. 286.

46 DS Sandler, *Arc 100 years of memories...*, p. 3.

47 WHP, AB2896, St. Joseph's Home, A1.4, St. Joseph's Jubilee 1923-1973, p. 4.

48 See the children's different profiles; WHP, AB2896, St. Joseph's Home, A3.1, Details of Children Admitted 1923-1968.

49 WHP, AB2896, St. Joseph's Home, A3.1, Details of Children Admitted 1923-1968.

for these girls' admission was their mother's inability to take care of them, since their father – Mr GJ Lawrence – deserted the family.⁵⁰ The admission of the Lawrence siblings was followed by that of a further 806 children who stayed at St. Joseph's Home for the next 75 years of its existence – until it was declared a National Monument in 1998.⁵¹ However, the precise total number of children who stayed at the Home is unknown, because of a lack of accurate information. Indeed, the Home's Admissions Books of 1969 up until 1972 are unavailable, although other documents that contain children's admission information from 1973 to the late 1980s were accessed. A total of 479 children were admitted from 1973 to 1989, based on the Home's register.⁵² Yet, no information on the committal of children in the 1990s was available, although the Home released Annual reports until 1993.⁵³

Image 1: Photograph of the children – taken in October 1923



Source: University of the Witwatersrand Historical Papers, Johannesburg, AB2896 St. Joseph's Home A10.

Most of the children were committed into St. Joseph's Home by the Magistrate Court – with the provision of a government grant of £1 per month, per child. This amount increased annually.⁵⁴ The Home received some form of additional contribution from the parents or relatives of the

50 WHP, AB2896, St. Joseph's Home, A3, Details of Children Admitted 1923-1968, pp. 1-2.

51 The total number of children's names that were recorded in the admissions book from 1923 until 1968 was counted from WHP AB2896 St. Joseph's Home A3.1 Details of Children Admitted 1923-1968, 1972-1979, 1980-1989.

52 WHP, AB2896, St. Joseph's Home, A3.4, Lists of committed children. This list is not dated. It contains a list of the committed children in the Home together with the years they were admitted.

53 WHP, AB2896, St. Joseph's Home, A1.5, Annual reports and Statements of Accounts, 31 December 1993.

54 WHP, AB2896, St. Joseph's Home, A3.1, Details of Children Admitted 1923-1968.

committed children. Some employed mothers promised the Home an extra contribution, to help support their children financially. For example, Elize du Plessis' mother contributed £1 every month towards the upkeep of her daughter, from 1929-1936.⁵⁵

In 1939, the number of children admitted into the Home increased, following the completion of a new building block. According to the Annual report of 1939, this year "will always remain the outstanding year in the history of St. Joseph's Home, for it saw the completion of the Girls' block".⁵⁶ The Committee realised the need to expand the Home, as there were many requests for the admission of more children from various magistrate courts.⁵⁷ As a result, the Committee raised money in the immediate community and around the Transvaal – through street collections, concerts organised by the Entertainment Committee. The "friends" of St. Joseph's Home also contributed money on a monthly basis.⁵⁸

Over the years, the Home experienced major changes. Initially, St. Joseph's Home was established for coloured children of Cape Malay descent only. Nevertheless, children with African surnames started to appear in the records in the late 1940s. While the race of the father was sometimes unstated in illegitimate children's profiles, it can be assumed that the father was white or coloured, whereas the mother was black. Joyce Malambo, for instance, was illegitimate. Similarly, Daniel, Betty and Freda Mokoena who were admitted on 26 April 1949 were illegitimate children. Their mother Emma Mokoena was not married to their father Andrew Clarkson; hence, the children took the mother's surname.⁵⁹ The most obvious reason that prevented these mothers from marrying their children's fathers was the Prohibition of Mixed Marriage Act.⁶⁰ This had a major effect on the children who were neither black nor white – as it was illegal for a parent to have a child of a different race. Thus, St. Joseph's Home was the only hope for some of these mixed-race children, regardless of whether they were of Cape Malay ancestry.

The majority of children committed into the Home were girls. It accepted children over 2 years old. Girls were allowed to stay in the Home until they

55 WHP, AB2896, St. Joseph's Home, A3.1, Details of Children Admitted 1923-1968, p. 254.

56 WHP, AB2896, St. Joseph's Home, A1.5, Annual reports and Statements of Accounts, 31 December 1939, p.1.

57 WHP, AB2896, St. Joseph's Home, A1.4, Meeting Minutes 27 July 1927.

58 WHP, AB2896, St. Joseph's Home, A1.5, Annual reports and Statements of Accounts, 31 December, 1939, p. 2.

59 WHP, AB2896, St. Joseph's Home, A3.2, List of Committed children 1949, pp. 273-275.

60 The Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act, Act No 55 of 1949, was an apartheid law that banned marriages between people of different races.

were 18 years old, whereas boys were transferred to other institutions when they reached nine years old.⁶¹ It suffices to stress that in the 1920s and late 1930s, no institutions providing for boys existed in either the Transvaal or the Orange Free State, although a few existed in Cape Town.⁶² In most cases, boys who could not find alternative children's homes were returned to their families.⁶³ It was only in 1965 that St. Nicolas Home for Boys was opened in Sophiatown – in reaction to the then Chaplain of St. Joseph's Home's, Rev GA French-Beytagh, plea that a home be provided for boys who could no longer stay at St. Joseph's Home.⁶⁴ Clearly, St. Nicolas Home was a relief to most young boys who had an alternative place of safety as soon as they left St. Joseph's Home, upon turning nine years old.

The British nuns as the "mothers" of the coloured children⁶⁵

Image 2: Photograph of the Sisters of St. Margaret Order who were caregivers at the Home



Source: University of the Witwatersrand Historical Papers, Johannesburg, AB2896 St. Joseph's Home A10.

Before 1978, Sisters Olive, Madeleine, Jessica, Ruth, Naomi and Rita were the permanent matrons of the Home, although a number of other Sisters regularly visited from England. These were the women the children considered

61 WHP, AB2896, St. Joseph's Home, A1.1, Constitution, 22 October 1985, p. 7.

62 WHP, AB2896, St. Joseph's Home, A1.4, St. Joseph's Jubilee, 1923-1973, p. 5.

63 In the admissions books, when the child was taken out of the Home due to age limit or other reasons, the Sisters always updated the information by providing a date when the child left and where the child went to. Most of the children discharged were returned to their families.

64 WHP, AB2896, St. Joseph's Home, 1.5, Annual report, 31 March 1964, p. 3.

65 The Sisters of St Margaret's Order were often referred to as Nuns in some literature. In this paper, Nuns or Sisters is used when referring to them.

as their mothers, since most of those children were committed at two years and left the Home when they turned 18 years. Although these nuns were servants of God and their lives were dedicated to prayer and bible devotion, they spent time with the children and took them out for spontaneous walks in the township. In this regard, Sister Rita wrote, "we took the children out for a long walk this afternoon and the weather was good. Mrs Walker was visiting and she joined us".⁶⁶ Taking walks with the Sisters was a norm at St. Joseph's Home. The later generation, Eva, Marie, sisters Ruth, Caroline and Edna indicated that one of the things they missed about St. Joseph's Home was walks to the township with Sister Rita. As they put it, "We would join Sister Rita and sometimes Sister Naomi in taking long walks in the township. When the people saw us passing they would say here are the English-coloureds!"⁶⁷ The children were ironically known as the English-coloureds because they were coloured people who spoke English.

Apart from running the Home, the Sisters' primary calling was to serve God; they took turns to go to Mass every day and sacrificed their lives for the love of the children they took care of.⁶⁸ The 1976 Annual report notes that the Sisters lacked privacy and quiet time, because the Chapel was below the children's dormitories. As a result, every noise made by the children was heard when the Sisters were in devotion.⁶⁹ Furthermore, the report states that the "Sisters have to be accorded adequate time and physical conditions in which their interior life of prayer, Bible study, contemplation and a loving waiting upon God can be carried out".⁷⁰ Though the Sisters reportedly lived under inadequate conditions, they still carried their duties diligently. The Sisters were clearly an asset to the Johannesburg Diocese, because of their contribution and positive role in the life and philosophy of the Diocese.

Technically, St. Joseph's Home's children had decent relationships with the Sisters and a good upbringing. Most of the ex-residents interviewed for this study seemed happy with the life they experienced under the care of the Sisters. As Eva put it, "life was a fairy tale at St. Joseph's Home, everything was too good to be true. We were loved, cared for protected in a very amazing way. We were very important. Little did we know that we were in for a surprise the moment we went to the outside world after spending so many years in

66 WHP, AB2896, St. Joseph's Home, A1.2, Diary, 20 November 1923.

67 Marie (Personal Collection), interview, C Hlongwane (Researcher), 12 July 2013.

68 WHP, AB2896, St. Joseph's Home, A2.5, A report by Ecumenical Research Unit, 1976, p. 4.

69 WHP, AB2896, St. Joseph's Home, A2.5..., p. 5.

70 WHP, AB2896, St. Joseph's Home, A2.5..., p. 7.

the Home". After turning 18 years old, Eva was returned to her family in Kimberly, where she experienced a cultures-shock. She was not used to her relatives' lifestyle. She notes that "They drank and swore all day and it was a lot of us living in a small house". In addition, Eva was accused of snobbism when she spoke English and handled herself as she was taught in the Home.⁷¹

Marie not only agrees with Eva regarding the love and care received in the Home, but she adds that the Sisters had prepared the children well for the outside world by teaching them moral values, housekeeping, and love for one another.⁷² Likewise, Edna, Caroline and Ruth acknowledge that the Sisters played a significant role in their upbringing and credited the Sisters for the kind of people they became later in life.⁷³ Caroline claims that they are now responsible members of society because they were influenced positively by the Sisters.⁷⁴

Although positive reports about the Sisters outweigh the negative ones, the relationship between the Sisters and some of the children was not perfect. Marie and Eva recall unfair treatment from Sister Naomi who favoured some children and detested others. For example, according to Eva, Sister Naomi preferred children with "lighter skin and silky hair" than those with "darker skin and kinkier hair. She always picked up lighter skinned girls to go with her to certain functions where the girls were needed to help for instance weddings and other gatherings".⁷⁵ Consequently, darker children were segregated against. Thus, it could be argued that Sister Naomi had racist tendencies influenced by ignorant Eurocentric views of Africans as primitive.

The English influence on the coloured children

St. Joseph's Home's children's life differed from that of their coloured peers in Sophiatown and the neighbouring townships. It can be argued that St. Joseph's Home's children were more privileged than any ordinary coloured child in his/her parents' household – during apartheid. Indeed, the Home's children received education, proper shelter, and meals, compared to other coloured or black children who lived in neighbouring townships. In this regard, Wendell Moore's article "Class D coloureds": The establishment of Noordgesig, 1931-

71 Eva (Personal Collection), interview, C Hlongwane, 12 July 2013.

72 Marie, interview, C Hlongwane, 12 July 2013.

73 Edna (Personal Collection), interview, K Tselapedi (Researcher), 27 November 2011.

74 Caroline (Personal Collection), interview, K Tselapedi, 27 November 2011.

75 Eva, interview, C Hlongwane, 12 July 2013.

1948" highlights the challenges that coloured families experienced, namely, living conditions characterised by poverty and overcrowding, as well as the lack of such services as electricity and sanitation.⁷⁶ Clearly, St. Joseph's Home's children lived in a stable dwelling where they were well taken care of, regardless of their racial classification. This shielded the Home's children from other coloured people's challenges.

Although the Home's children lived "in comfort", they were envied and indirectly hated by the older generation of coloureds who worked in the Home. These staff members regarded the children as enjoying aspects of white society and culture that they were denied.⁷⁷ Indeed, the children lived in a typically European environment evocative of British society than the coloured one.⁷⁸ As mentioned by Edna, these children were raised under the influence of the English culture, because their "mothers" were English. Edna continues, "we did not behave the way society expected us to behave, we were far from being typical coloured children in that we spoke differently and our general behaviour was not that of coloured children in a sense that we spoke British English and hardly any Afrikaans apart from the older children who were committed into the Home when they had already mastered the Afrikaans language".⁷⁹ Marie agrees and stresses that the Sisters taught them to be ladies and, as a result, their behaviour "stood out at school and [in] the community".⁸⁰

Furthermore, Eva explains that everything done in the Home was influenced by the "English culture",⁸¹ from the music they listened to, the books read in the library (the children read Shakespeare and a lot of literature) and the food they ate. She emphasises that "We had English breakfast every morning and our suppers consisted of steamed vegetables".⁸² Consequently, when the children left the Home, they were – culturally speaking – more English than coloureds. Yet, circumstances obliged them to be "typical" coloureds and adjust to these requirements was difficult.⁸³ Additionally, Eva states that society expected St. Joseph's Home's children to behave according to coloured people stereotypes

76 W Moore, "Class D coloureds": The establishment of Noordgesig, 1939-1948", *New Contree*, 77(1), 2016, p. 15.

77 WHP, AB2896, St. Joseph's Home, A2.5, A report by the Ecumenical Research Unit, 1976, p. 9.

78 WHP, AB2896, St. Joseph's Home, A2.5, A report by the Ecumenical Research Unit, 1976, p. 10.

79 Eva, interview, K Tselapedi, 27 November 2011.

80 Marie, interview, C Hlongwane, 12 July 2013.

81 Eva was referring to the cultural norms of England and the English people. The Home's children adopted those norms from the Sisters.

82 Eva, interview, C Hlongwane, 12 July 2013.

83 WHP, AB2896, St. Joseph's Home, A2.5, A report by the Ecumenical Research Unit, 1976, p. 11.

of being "heavy alcoholics, smokers and people who swear a lot." However, because they were different, they were despised by other coloureds.⁸⁴

Since St. Joseph's Home's children were heavily influenced by the English culture, most of the girls attended at Bosmont School, an English school located in the western part of Johannesburg had a reputation. They were variously known as "snobs, English ladies, English roses, British coloureds, spoilt orphans, brats, and spoilt hommies." Most of the other learners found it hard to mingle with them, because of cultural differences. According to Marie, "we were called names because we were different from many other children. We spoke proper English and conducted ourselves differently from what the community expected coloureds to behave".⁸⁵ The above accounts prove the significant influence the Sisters had on the children's lives and how this enabled them to challenge any categorisation as typical Afrikaans speaking coloureds.

Eva stresses that the Sisters ensured that every girl had confidence and high self-esteem, especially at school, because many people "were jealous of our upbringing".⁸⁶ Whenever the girls complained that they were being labelled abnormal at school, the Sisters reminded them that they were "unique, beautiful and special in the eyes of God and they should never have an inferior state of mind". In other words, the Sisters taught the children to be strong-willed and clear on what they wanted to achieve in life.

Though the relationship between the Sisters and the children seemed good, the latter had to adhere to a code of conduct that enabled them to administer the Home effectively. It was essential that the Sisters listened and understood the children; and that they ensured that standards were set, and that the children knew what was expected of them. The manner in which the children were addressed also mattered.⁸⁷ On the one hand, swearing and shouting at the children was discouraged, because it harmed them. On the other hand, shouting was occasionally accepted – to get the attention of a difficult child.⁸⁸

Evidently, the Sisters had to deal with various types of children with different personalities. Indeed, these children were from different family backgrounds. Most of them came from unsuitable families; hence, they had to be removed

84 Eva, interview, C Hlongwane, 12 July 2013.

85 Marie, interview, C Hlongwane, 12 July 2013.

86 Eva, interview, C Hlongwane, 12 July 2013.

87 WHP, AB2896, St. Joseph's Home A10, Matrons' course: The role of the matron, 1970, p. 12

88 WHP, AB2896, St. Joseph's Home A10..., p. 14.

and placed into the Home.⁸⁹ According to the Sisters' observation, some children were very good and happy while others were troublesome, cheeky and disrespectful to other children and the Home's staff. For example, Jeanette James – an abandoned child – was "very disrespectful and ran away twice".⁹⁰ Likewise, Maureen Ethel Lyons was a "very rude child and often disrespected the staff and had a negative influence on other children".⁹¹ Similarly, Daphne Joseph was "a very difficult child and very rude to the staff and gruesome to other children. Not satisfactory at all".⁹² All these bad behaviours had been adopted their family homes. Conversely, other children were so well-behaved that the Sisters liked them. For instance, Cyril van Wyk – who arrived at the Home when he was two years old – was "a very shy little boy but very nice and sweet. We are all fond of Cyril. It's a pity he has to be transferred to St. Theresa's Home".⁹³ Similarly, Martha Sternberg was "a popular child in the Home and in the school. She is friendly and loved by everyone".⁹⁴

Financial challenges at St. Joseph's Home

While the Home was definitely a safe haven for the destitute children, it faced major financial constraints from the late 1970s to the early 1990s. Some of these financial problems were short-term and could be solved easily, others depended entirely on the financial standing of the benefactors. Accordingly, the more money and resources the Home received, the fewer financial difficulties were encountered.⁹⁵ The Sisters who administered the Home regarded their duties as their service to the Lord and assistance to humanity. Consequently, they did not receive any remuneration, compared to hired staff like cooks, drivers, and janitors whose payment came from the Home's funds secured through donors and collections.⁹⁶

The Home released Annual reports and Statement of Accounts almost from 1939 to 1998. In all reports, the Home pleaded with donors to continue giving and, if possible, to increase their donations annually, considering the increasing costs of living and inflation rates. For instance, Rev. Leslie E. Stradling who – was on the Home's Committee – wrote to donors on 21 May

89 WHP, AB2896, St. Joseph's Home A10..., p. 15.

90 WHP, AB2896, St. Joseph's Home A3.1, Admissions Book 1923-1968, p. 261.

91 WHP, AB2896, St. Joseph's Home A3.1, Admissions Book 1923-1968, p. 232.

92 WHP, AB2896, St. Joseph's Home A3.1..., p. 202.

93 WHP, AB2896, St. Joseph's Home A3.1..., p. 213.

94 WHP, AB2896, St. Joseph's Home A3.1..., p. 198.

95 WHP, AB2896, St. Joseph's Home, A1.5, Annual report, December 1979, p. 2.

96 WHP, AB2896, St. Joseph's Home, A1.5..., p. 4.

1973, informing them about the financial difficulties faced and asking for more support. He observed that some well-wishers had been donating the same amount for thirty years.⁹⁷ According to St. Joseph's Home's Constitution, the funds could only be sourced nationally, although the Essex-based St. Margaret's Order to which the Sisters belonged occasionally provided funds for their upkeep.⁹⁸

In the early 1980s, when the Sisters had already left for England, the Home continued to experience financial constraints. However, some individuals and companies continued to donate food parcels, the children's clothes, toys and books. Other people donated their time and assistance in the Home. For example, some students from the University of the Witwatersrand spent some afternoons teaching the children how to play musical instruments and helping them with their homework.⁹⁹ By 1984, the Home was in serious financial difficulties. Hence, the children wrote letters to people, begging for financial assistance. One letter reads:

Dear Friends, I need your help please give me some money we are very poor, we need some money to buy food for us we have some clothes but it wearing out. Any amount would do. I am very hungry. I'd appreciate your kindness. Thank you, Nancy.

Another reads:

Dear People, we have not enough money but some people give us clothes and shoes but we have not any money of our own. We are just asking for only some money we are not asking for all your money but only a one sent [cent] or a two sent [cents]. But help us please friends we asking you. Thank you, yours sincerely Kathleen.

Yet another reads:¹⁰⁰

Dear Friends, the reason why I am writing this letter is to inform you that St. Joseph's Home has a big problem would you please help us to collect some money? I am 15 years of age and am in the Home from 1969. We appreciate what you will do for us. We have everything here but at this time we are very poor. Thank you, Beatrice.

The children wrote these letters to various people to help relieve the financial burden which was hindering the Home. It is unclear whether the children

97 WHP, AB2896, St. Joseph's Home, A1.5, Annual report, June 1973.

98 WHP, AB2896, St. Joseph's Home, A1.5, Annual report, December 1974, p. 7.

99 WHP, AB2896, St. Joseph's Home, A1.5, Annual report, December 1981, p. 4.

100 WHP, AB2896, St. Joseph's Home, A9.2, Correspondence: Children, p. 9.

planned to write the letters themselves or were instructed to do so by the then Principal of the Home or management.

Conclusion

During apartheid South Africa, children of colour experienced unequal upbringings, as they were not given the same opportunities as their white counterparts. Non-white children lacked such opportunities that could change their future as education and decent upbringing. On the one hand, most children in Sophiatown purposelessly roamed the streets and lived in destitution. On the other hand, some coloured children lived an opulent life. These once-destitute coloured children became heavily influenced by the British culture and led better lives than their coloured peers. They enjoyed basic needs that other coloured and black children in South Africa were deprived of. The St. Joseph's Home coloured children had access to school, food, decent clothes, and a comfortable shelter.

St. Joseph's Home spared a number of coloured children the discrimination caused by apartheid, by giving them an opportunity to live decent lives while most of their peers struggled. However, their luxurious life was short lived. Upon turning 18, they were forced to adapt to new lifestyles in the coloured communities. Most of those who went back to coloured communities – after spending many years in the Home – did not receive a warm welcome. They experienced resentment and were labelled snobs, because they found it hard to fit in the outside world. These children's "colouredness" was affected because they grew up under the influence of "British culture" and the English language which they adopted while growing up in the Home. They later became strangers to the culture into which the apartheid society categorised them.

Altogether, the history of St. Joseph's Home challenges the perception that children who grew up in orphanages experienced hardships and abuses perpetrated by their caregivers. Although life in the Home was not a fairytale for these children, they were better cared for in the Home than in their original homes. However, prior to being declared a National Monument in 1998, the Home faced serious financial constraints, which forced some of the children to beg for money. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that St. Joseph's Home in Sophiatown contributed significantly to relieving some of the South Africa's coloured children from the deprivation and other circumstances that justified their committal.