

# MANDELA & MORAVIANS

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Dealing with Church Buildings in Holland I contacted the Technical University of Delft. There I was shown a letter of Nelson Mandela they had published in a book<sup>i</sup>. I had heard about Mandela renaming the Presidential Palace after the first Moravian Mission station in South-Africa: Genadendal. Genadendal means 'Valley of Grace'. It had been seen as a disgrace by the Dutch to see white Moravian missionaries, who were German, move inland in South Africa to reach the blacks with the Gospel of Christ. In an interview by the BBC just after Mandela's passing they interviewed the former chairman of the Moravian Church of South Africa in Genadendal. He shared what Mandela had meant to him, especially when he was in prison. What did the Moravians mean to Mandela?

This mission station 'Genadendal' was started by George Schmidt. He had gone to the Khoi (also called 'Hottentots' by the colonists which means 'stutterer' as the Khoi have clicks in their language, today Hottentot is a politically incorrect word for the Khoi<sup>ii</sup>) 'but the general opinion was that it was impossible to christianise them.'<sup>iii</sup> This Schmidt experienced too as he sat in one of the inns in Cape town in 1737: 'Listening to the talk of the customers in the canteen, he heard them scoff at the fool, who had come to convert the Hottentots without a salary from the Company, until he told them that he himself was that man.'<sup>iv</sup> A modern day account of Genadendal writes of the Khoi when Schmidt came: 'Schmidt became acquainted with an impoverished and dispersed Khoi tribe who were on the threshold of complete extinction.'<sup>v</sup>

The work of the Moravians throughout their history produced some strong women. The Moravians had an integral view of humanity as being one with a differentiation between men and women but both needing to work together to honor God. As God who is One, created them as two, to unite and continue creating one. 'The structure of the moravian spirituality is build upon the double helix of the masculine and feminine aspect of God being represented and 'incarnated' through men and women of faith.'<sup>vi</sup> Zinzendorf the leader of the Moravian church in the 18<sup>th</sup> century ordained women, amongst them the ex-slave girl from St. Thomas, Rebecca Protten, who according to historian Jon Sensbach is the first black ordained woman in Europe (ordained in the 18<sup>th</sup> century).<sup>vii</sup> An important woman in South-African Moravian history is Wilhelmina Stompjes. Two moments out of her life.

During the Xhosa war in 1818 the mission station at White River got robbed of 235 cows by 200 Xhosas. In the aftermath colonists coming to the mission station say to Wilhelmina Stompjes, who is a Xhosa, that they would kill the Xhosas. '...but she retorted that they, too, were God's creatures and that the Lord commanded them to pray for their enemies.'<sup>viii</sup> The mission station was being watched by the Xhosas and after the war one of them told her: 'we were supposed to attack you, kill you and rob everything. Only we did not know how come but we could not agree so at last we gave up. We saw that it was not to be. Your God was too strong, He prevented us from killing you all.'<sup>ix</sup>

A second incident in her life. This was during the fighting between the Amhala and the Amagcina who hated each other to death. Blood was already flowing at the mission station Silo. Just as missionary Bonas was about to be killed the hand of a Xhosa held back the hand of the slayer. As Bonas discovered it was Wilhelmina. Bonas in his description in Wilhelmina's *moravian memoir* writes his version: 'Then Wilhelmina grabbed the hand of the Amagcina Chief and said: "Listen to us and pull

back your men.” But he answered: “I will not do it, I have never pulled back because of any man and I am not afraid of any man.” Then Wilhelmina asked: “Good, you are afraid of no one, but don’t you fear the Almighty God, whose word is being preached here?” “Oh yes,” was his reply, “I fear only God.” And with that he ordered his men to pull back, and because they did not want to listen to him, he drove them back with force.<sup>x</sup>

One of the main events in Mandela’s life was being imprisoned on Robben Island (1962-1982). One thing that Robben Island had been was a leprosy run by the Moravians. The first lepers came to Robben Island in 1845 on the condition that their (Moravian) pastor Rev. Lehman was to follow.<sup>xi</sup> The Moravians had started their work in leprosy in 1811 at the request of the government and when the government moved the work to Robben Island in 1845 the lepers petitioned the government to have the Moravians come with them.<sup>xii</sup> The Moravians served until 1867 when the government decided to change to the Anglicans to minister to both the patients and English officials. The German missionaries went back to Germany. So Mandela had lived for years on an Island that had been a leprosy run by white foreign missionaries. They served there about the same amount of years Mandela was imprisoned.

In The Hague there is a publisher who still prints books by a South-African. Mr. Maasbach prints the books of the missionary statesman Andrew Murray of South-Africa. In 1902 Andrew Murray wrote a book in which he devoted a chapter to the Moravians. Though he admitted that christian denominations can grow and go the core needs to be addressed. This is the formula he deducted from the early Moravians: ‘Life and Love, passing from the living, loving Christ, through a living, loving disciple, will communicate life and love to those who otherwise are cold and helpless.’ He held this as a formula well worth thinking about in tending to South-Africa’s spiritual needs.

There is a connection between Martin Luther King and the Moravians. In Holland we celebrated 150 years abolishment of slavery this year, next to the Martin Luther King’s speech 50 years ago, but also in The Hague, the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Peace Palace. Professor Jon Sensbach, an american professor of History wrote the book *Rebecca’s Revival, Creating Black Christianity in the Atlantic World* on Rebecca Protten in which he asserts that what she started on St. Thomas in the 1730s ‘spread through the Caribbean and North America, changing African-American culture forever. Much that we associate with the black church in subsequent centuries—anchor of community life, advocate of social justice, midwife to the spirituals and gospel music—in some measure derives, however distantly, from those early origins.<sup>xiii</sup> As I spoke with professor Sensbach in the streets of The Hague as he visited the Moravian Church in The Hague to speak on Rebecca in 2007<sup>xiv</sup> I asked him why the study on Rebecca? He answered that as a historian he was looking into Martin Luther King’s life and where he got his idea of non-violence from. He traced it back to Rebecca who had witnessed from close by the St. Johns Revolt and who choose instead for a St. Thomas Revival. She, an ex-slave, became a moravian evangelist, was imprisoned for marrying a white missionary and barely survived. ‘Her’ Revival came through fire. Distrust and critique from fellow slaves and downright brutal persecution from the whites. Sensbach writes: ‘They carried on their teaching even after angry whites stormed their meetings and thrashed them with swords and whips. They persisted when planters set fire to their Bibles and beat out the flames on their slave’s faces; or chained them to the ground to keep them away from meetings; or flogged their skin to pulp; or dumped them in jail; or sold their families apart.’<sup>xv</sup>

While serving in The Hague as the Moravian pastor we were visited by a few South-African Moravians. A brass band, Karel August who wrote 'The Quest for Being Public Church' and a pastor who had been in prison during apartheid. In prison he grew angrier and angrier as he was held in a small solitary cell. In the midst of this ordeal he asked the Lord 'why?' and all he got as answer was 'my Grace is enough for you'. As he got that answer his cell transformed into a place filled with the presence of the Lord. This transformed his demeanor, his time in prison, and as could evidently be seen as he stood in the pulpit, his looking back on that time in his life.

Let me end with a story about the Methodists as Mandela's mother (Gadla's third wife) was Methodist and Nelson, following in her footsteps, attended a Methodist missionary school. The founder of the Methodist found his deep conversion to Christ in a meeting by Moravians in London. What had impressed him and bound him to the Moravians was what he had experienced on a terrible boat trip to America. The Moravians were the ones who cleaned the toilets which no one wanted to clean. But most impressed was he by their disciplined fearlessness. In a raging storm when everyone was holding on and fearing for dear life it was time for their daily service time. In the midst of the storm they gathered and sang as was their custom.

Nelson Mandela's name given to him by his father, Gadla Henry Mphakanyiswa, was 'Roliyahla', which has the significance of 'troublemaker'. Its literal translation is 'pulling the branch of the tree'.<sup>xvi</sup> Madiba (name for the kings in Mandela's clan) was transformed from Roliyahla to Nobel Peace Prize winner. From being military leader of the ANC to peaceful and forgiving transitioner of the Old Apartheid South Africa to the New All-Inclusive South-Africa. The series of books on the Moravian mission and church work in South Africa carries the theme of the Pear Tree. This points back to the Pear Tree planted by Georg Schmidt in Genadendal. Roliyahla took a branch of that Pear Tree and planted a new one.

"What counts in life is not the mere fact that we have lived.  
It is what difference we have made to the lives of others  
that will determine the significance of the life we lead."

— Nelson Mandela<sup>xvii</sup>

**Letter by Mandela.** The project in Genadendal was a project funded by the Dutch Government to help revitalize and restore Genadendal. The project which was a cooperation between the Dutch and South-Africans involving a large constituency and including the local community did more than just achieve technical results. 'The social results, in terms of improvement of living conditions and upgrading of community pride and self-esteem, have probably been more important...'<sup>xviii</sup>

## Foreword



# NELSON MANDELA

April 2008

During our term in office as President of the Republic of South Africa, we decided to rename the presidential official residence in Cape Town from 'Westbrooke' to 'Genadendal' which means 'Valley of Grace'. We also visited this historic little town on 10 October 1995.

The renaming of the official residence was in honour of the oldest mission settlement in South Africa. Over the centuries it became a place associated with the coming together of people from different racial groups: in addition to being the first permanent Khoi settlement at the Cape, it was also a place of sanctuary for more than a thousand slaves when slavery was abolished in 1838.

Genadendal is blessed with a rich tangible and intangible heritage. It boasts of vernacular architecture, musical traditions and language and a long tradition of humanitarian efforts and political struggle.

It is with pleasure that we learned about the completion of the restoration project due to the assistance of the Dutch Government. The improvements that were effected provided the inhabitants with infrastructure to improve the quality of their lives.

May the history of Genadendal continue to inspire especially during the 270<sup>th</sup> year of its existence.

*N.R. Mandela*

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(Source: The Challenge of Genadendal (2009) Amsterdam, page vii)

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<sup>i</sup> *The Challenge of Genadendal* 2009 by Hanneltjie du Preez e.a. (ed.), published in Amsterdam by IOS Press (an imprint of Delft University Press), page vii.

<sup>ii</sup> <http://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khoikhoi> (14dec2013)

<sup>iii</sup> *The Pear Tree Blossoms, The History of the Moravian Church in South Africa 1737-1869.* (1967) by Bernhard Krüger, published in Genadendal, page 12.

<sup>iv</sup> *The Pear Tree Blossoms*, page 18

<sup>v</sup> <http://www.viewoverberg.com/Genadendal.asp> (14dec2013)

<sup>vi</sup> L.F.M. Schalkwijk 2013 *Gado Hanu, the faith of Stonfutu's*, page 18 of the concept PH.D. manuscript.

<sup>vii</sup> John Sensbach 2005 *Rebecca's Revival, Creating Black Christianity in the Atlantic World.* Cambridge, Massachusetts (Harvard University Press)

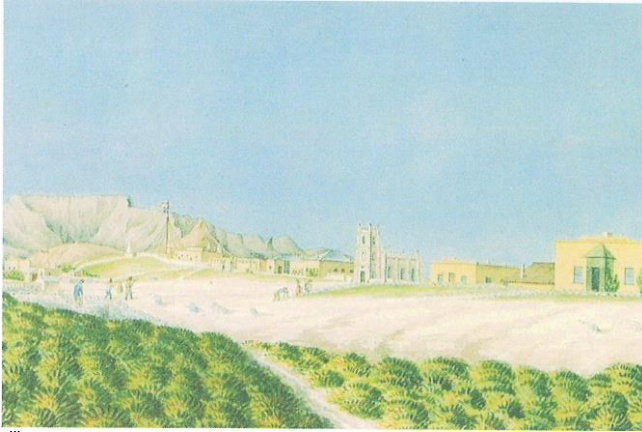
<sup>viii</sup> *The Pear Tree Blossoms*, 135

<sup>ix</sup> From Wilhelmina Stompjes' *Lebenslauf* (life story, translated from German) from the Archive in Herrnhut, Germany.

<sup>x</sup> From Wilhelmina Stompjes' *Lebenslauf* (life story, translated from German)

<sup>xi</sup> Deacon, Harriet (ed.) (1996) *The Island, A History of Robben Island, 1488-1990.* (Google books, page 58)

<sup>xii</sup> [http://www.moravianchurcharchives.org/thismonth/13\\_12%20Robben%20Island.pdf](http://www.moravianchurcharchives.org/thismonth/13_12%20Robben%20Island.pdf) ('Moravians on Robben Island' in Moravian History, Issue 84 — december 2013, issued by the Moravian Archives in Bethlehem; this pdf version) Illustration is in the pdf (a 1-page document).



<sup>xiii</sup> Sensbach, page 4

<sup>xiv</sup> The 550<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Moravian Church which began in 1457 in Kunwald, Moravia, now the Czech Republic.

<sup>xv</sup> Sensbach, page 4

<sup>xvi</sup> [http://africanhistory.about.com/od/mandelanelson/a/bio\\_mandela.htm](http://africanhistory.about.com/od/mandelanelson/a/bio_mandela.htm) (14dec2013)

<sup>xvii</sup> <http://www.nelsonmandela.org/content/page/names> (14dec2013)

<sup>xviii</sup> *The Challenge of Genadendal*, back cover