

This Month in Moravian History

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Moravians on Robben Island

The small island of Robben Island northeast of Cape Town in South Africa has been frequently mentioned in recent news reports in connection with the death of Nelson Mandela. From 1962 until 1982 Mandela was held prisoner on this island. Lesser known, however, is that for many years the Moravian Church was in charge of a leper colony on the same island.

Moravians began their work among patients of leprosy (or Hansen's disease) in 1818 when the colonial government of South Africa asked them to take over the pastoral care of patients at the newly built hospital in Hemel en Aarde. When the government decided to close the hospital in 1845 and move patients to a more isolated location on Robben Island, the patients petitioned the government for the Moravian missionaries to come with them. On January 6, 1846, Moravian missionaries Joseph and Friederike Lehmann arrived at the General Infirmary on Robben Island to continue their work among the patients. According to one Moravian source the Lehmanns were welcomed as "the whole company of lepers broke forth in songs of praise to the Lord, who had restored to them their beloved father and mother."

On the island, a church and a home for the missionaries were built at the government's expense. In addition to the lepers, the government also placed mentally ill patients on Robben Island. In 1848 there were 250 people on Robben Island, housed in five or six houses, each with several rooms. The number of lepers was 70 and they lived together in several apartments, each with 20 beds. The leprosy patients appeared displeased with the overall situation on Robben Island, especially those who had previously lived in Hemel en Aarde. One missionary's report from 1848 states: "Some of those



who had been at Hemel en Aarde complained of their present accommodations; but it is a feature of this formidable complaint to make people dissatisfied. There is more cleanliness here than there was at Hemel en Aarde, and therefore more comfort and healthiness, but the patients preferred living in a small house, three or four together, and sitting over the fire, having as much fuel as they wanted; and that is no wonder, but they were so inattentive to airing their apartments, that the atmosphere must have been very unwholesome. In the Robben Island Hospital this is no longer the case. Their meat and food are likewise very good; but they cannot have their little gardens here as at Hemel en Aarde, which they not unnaturally regret." A later history of the work on Robben Island repeats a similar discontent: "No leprosy patient voluntarily wants to be admitted to Robben Island."

In 1860 the colonial government paid for the appointment of a teacher. John Taylor,

teacher at the Moravian school in Fulneck, England, was called to Robben Island, where he taught until his death in 1866. By this time the government decided to end the service of the Moravians, calling an Anglican priest to minister to both patients and English officials on the island. When Moravian missionaries Adolf and Charlotte Küster retired in 1867 and returned to Germany, no new Moravian was called. This ended more than twenty years of Moravian service on Robben Island.

Sources

Image: Daniel Suhl, Unity Archives, Herrnhut; *Periodical Accounts* (1846-1868); J. Grunewald, *Unter den Elendesten der Elenden* (Herrnhut, ca. 1870); J. la Trobe, *Work Among Lepers in South Africa and Jerusalem* (3rd ed., 1894); Harriet Deacon, "History of the medical institutions on Robben Island, Cape Colony, 1846-1910," (PhD diss., Cambridge, 1994).