

THOSE LESS-FORTUNATE BURGHERS

Deloraine Brohier -President, Dutch Burgher Union (Abridged)

At its inception in 1908, The Dutch Burgher Union set up a sub-committee for Social Services. Its terms of reference were:

(1) The sub-committee for purposes of Social Service shall devote their attention chiefly to the amelioration of the condition of the poorer classes of the community, - their moral even more than their material condition - by the employment of such agencies and the instrumentality of such men as will tend to foster habits of industry, thrift, and self-reliance, and thus enable them and their children especially, to help themselves, and ultimately to help others.

(2) To enable the sub-committee to be in touch with these classes, and to establish for their assistance and relief a properly organized scheme of social service, a register shall be kept of the names of such families as may be recommended to the sub-committee by any of the members as being deserving of special relief, and it shall be the duty of the sub-committee to appoint visitors from among the members to enquire into the circumstances of each case.

A perusal of the DBU Journals shows how this sub-committee developed over the years. Assistance to needy cases, payments for school fees, books, outfits to orphan children, monthly allowances to poor widows, university fees, even medical college fees of a student, are recorded. The Social Service Benevolent Fund thrived and had many volunteers

On the sub-committee, were Dr Andreas Nell, the first ophthalmologist, Mr Edgar Vander Straaten of the Ceylon Customs and the legal luminary, Mr Allan Driberg. Of the ladies, on the committee are; Dr Miss Alice de Boer, the very first lady doctor in Ceylon, a Dutch lady, who later married Mr R. G. Anthonisz, the Founder of the DBU. Mrs G. S. Schneider whom with her husband later set up the Schneider Trust which gave scholarships to boys attending St Thomas' College. Later Ruth Meier-Kelaart headed this sub-committee for a long period.

The volume of work of the DBU and its varied sub-committees has grown considerably and taken on much wider dimensions than the earlier pioneers could have envisaged.

The Fund for Social Service or Social Welfare is today augmented by the steady and supportive monetary assistance from the Burgher community who settled in Australia. Amongst the older generation over there, the links with the land-of-their birth remain. We have the Eighty Club of Melbourne, * the Burgher Association of Australia, the Burgher Welfare League of Western Australia, all of whom administer an active programme of assistance to the DBD. Recipients have also grown in numbers - 168 adults and 227 children registered for assistance.

In 2002 a proposal to set up a local Sponsorship Programme for children of the "Disadvantaged Burghers" was mooted. This programme funded in Sri Lanka Rupees by the present members of the Union, Associates as well as friends and well wishers will complement and augment the existing projects funded from abroad.

To whom is all this assistance, monetary and in kind, channelled? Come visit with me the Dutch Burgher Union, on a morning scheduled by its Social Welfare Programme. It is a day of payments for elders. As you approach the DBU's rear verandah, you would see men and women sitting patiently and quietly on the rows of straight-backed chairs waiting for their names to be called. They have been there from very early in the morning, showing little animation in their expressions. We have chosen to identify these people as "Disadvantaged Burghers" or the "less Fortunate".

The Social Welfare Committee preside at these sessions, as their names are called they shuffle up, talk to the Committee then take a slip of paper to the DBU's Secretariat and receive rupees one Thousand or five hundred.

With a farewell "God bless You", they leave to appear the next month without fail.

In Sri Lanka, with the cost-of-living spiralling, the money they get is so little but all these "disadvantaged" folk assure us, that it helps them to buy their medication, it goes towards food and nourishment or towards the meager income of the family they live with.

Take time to talk to them. We do. For us volunteers, it is a sad and tiring day. There was a woman of about 42 years, very thin, a blouse and skirt hanging on her. She wanted to get registered in the Eighty Club of Melbourne's Assistance Programme. As President of the DBU, with Neville Overlunde, Chairman of the Welfare Programme, in order to fill in a form I asked "What is your address?" No response. "Where do you live? Still no response. "Where do you sleep? She looked down avoiding the questions. "OK, where is your bed?" asked Neville kindly and I saw two large teardrops running down her cheeks. Slowly she then lifted her face and said "I have no bed; I sleep on the floor, my dirty clothes spread out; I go from place to place, to houses of some people I know"

Some of these "Burghers" today sleep on church steps or under the awnings at the entrance to shops. Those who have no roof over their heads live in cardboard and plank "lean-to's". There may be a bed that fills the one-room shanties, where ragged clothes hang on a string from one end to the other. An emaciated, oldish pensioner once came up to the table - helped by a strapping young man, his son. "Why do you want this money" we ask, "you have a strong young man who can work and earn for you both?" "He is schizophrenic", the old father explains, "I cannot take my eyes off him, day and night. I give him the tablets he has to take regularly and even have to watch that the pill is swallowed.

There is another old man who occupies a wooden plank "lean-to", along a well known thoroughfare in Colombo 7, along the boundary wall of a rich man's mansion. He has a good Dutch Burgher name. Passers by drop a coin or two, some stop their cars and may leave a parcel of food. He speaks the local language, reluctant as he says to talk in English so as to blend with his status!! He wears a sarong and banian. His ablutions he makes in the drains nearby. At dawn and dusk you see him carrying battered pails of water for his bath, at night when you pass by, a dim kerosene lamp bums inside his abode. He is happy, he says, so long as the arm of the law does not order him to move or the good Lord calls him home! He is 91 years old, he says.

Human experiences pour out. We look at their faces, lines and full of worry, voices filled with emotion - some without hope. E.F.C. Ludowyck, Professor of English, in his book "Those Long Afternoons - Childhood in Colonial Ceylon," has given a definition of the Burgher community. He says "The Burghers, differentiated from other groups by being in the main composed of salaried public servants or professional men ... (they) were neither bourgeois nor wretched enough to sink to the lowest levels of the scale. "On the basis of Professor Ludowyck's statement we might say, these people, such as I have described, are the Burghers who have now "sunk to the lowest scale".

Till I took up office in the DBU and absorbed myself in the Committee for Social Service, I used to describe the Burgher community similarly. Today I question myself from amongst the Burgher community you see so few in the professions or in the public services, just one or two lawyers or doctors. So few too in the Administrative Service, Foreign Service, in the Agency Houses, in the Police and Excise where once they predominated and held the uppermost office in the higher echelons of these services. But on the streets, in the buses and markets, shuffling along are men and women undoubtedly Burgher in appearance, but distinctly of the "lowest scale."

The Burgher community in Sri Lanka numbers today 34,000 in a total population nearing 20 million. I ask myself, where in the scale or level of affluence do we place the Burghers and what will it be in the future?

**NB. In Sept. 2003 The Eighty Club of Melbourne funded; 160 beneficiaries at Rs 1000 each, per month, with a spouse allowance of Rs500p.m., and family allowance of Rs200pm, for those qualifying, 116 children were sponsored.*

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