

Chapter I

Reverend Alexander Merensky- 1837-1918

Alexander Merensky, the great pioneer of the Berlin missionary, the geographer, the ethnologist and the author, was born some forty miles west of Breslau (now Wroclaw, in south west Poland) on the 8th June 1837. He died on the 22nd May 1918. Merensky was the son of Albert Merensky, a senior forestry official, and Pauline von Kessel. His mother, Pauline died at his birth and his father, Albert, died when he was seven years old.

Following his father's death, Alexander Merensky was accepted by the Schindler orphanage because his stepmother was unable to support the large family. At the Schindler orphanage he was troubled by the spiritual uncertainties of youth. Although his intention was to become a military officer, he experienced a spiritual awakening, particularly at the time of his brother's death who drowned in his presence. The influence he received from Rev. Knak changed him completely. At seventeen Merensky decided to become a missionary. The love for Jesus started burning in him and he was quoted as saying: " I felt deep in my heart the call to become a missionary" (Mminele 1983: 31.)

In 1845 Merensky went to the Berliner Missionshaus and for three years he was trained at the Institute of the Berlin Mission Society where he also studied medicine and nursing at the local hospital. He must have had an extra love for his work, because he dedicated himself to God and the South African people for today his name is amongst the great names of South African heroes.

In December of 1855 Merensky left Amsterdam for Cape Town. Heinrich Grutner, who also made a name for himself among the 19th century missionaries in South Africa, accompanied him. On his arrival Merensky wasted no time getting started with his work. He visited mission stations and studied the work he had to undertake. Eventually he was ordered to move from Natal to Swaziland and to establish a mission there.

It must be remembered that the Berlin Missionary Society was not the first missionary group to arrive in South Africa. The Dutch, being the first settlers of European descent in South Africa, are generally regarded as the first missionaries, who established the first church in 1652. The first Berlin Missionary Society arrived in South Africa from Germany on 17 April 1834. The missionary, August Geibel, was the leader. The following missionaries, August Ferdinand Lange, Gustav Adolph Kraut, Rheinhold Theidor Gregorowsky and Johannes Schmidt, accompanied him.

They were instructed by the Berlin Missionary Society to proceed to the land of the Batswana tribes, in the region of the 20th parallel latitude south of the Equator, somewhere in the area of Kuruman. It was pointed out to them that there was vast lands and large numbers of Batswanas who had been neglected by the missionaries in the region, who were crying out for the knowledge of God and of His love. However the Berlin Missionary Society established their first Berlin Mission station in Africa on the 24th of September 1834 among the Korannas under Piet Witvoet at Bethany in the Orange Free State.

By the time of Merensky's arrival in 1858, the Berlin Missionary Society had already founded the following eight mission stations in South Africa. These included Bethany, two in the Cape (Amalienstein, Ladysmith), three in Xhosaland (Bethany,

.....Pniel) and two in Natal (Emmaus, Christiansburg). At each of these mission stations, mission schools were established. However the main aim of the Berlin Missionary Society was the same as that of all missionary societies working in South Africa, namely "Evangelization".

The Berlin Mission was inspired by the words found in Matthew 28:19. "Go ye therefore and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and of the Holy Spirit". These were the words written at the main entrance door of all mission houses.

Merensky and Grutzner, who had just arrived in South Africa, were stationed at Emmaus. Then they were ordered to move from Natal to Swaziland and to establish a mission station there. They set off from Emmaus to Lydenburg where they were given permission to work amongst the AmaSwazi. Their attempt to evangelise the Amaswazi failed because of conditions laid down by King- Sobhuza I. The king wanted them to bring him gun powder and lead.

After being given permission by the South African Republic, they approached Sekwati, the paramount chief of the Bapedi. Sekwati, who had been longing for the missionaries for sometimes, was overjoyed. He wasted no time in giving them permission to work among his people. The chief made it clear to Merensky that he had no intention of becoming a Christian at his age, but he had opened his heart and hands for the missionaries to work among his subjects.

In 1860 they established the first station among the Bapedi and named it "Gerlachshoop" in honour of General von Gerlach, one of the Society directors who had just died.

It must be remembered that it was not only Sekwati who was chief in this area. There were other chiefs, who were heading smaller tribes, like Boleu of the Bakopa near the

present Groblersdal and Mabhoko of the Ndebele. Sekwati was their Paramount Chief. The second station was established in 1861 and was named "Kgalatlou". The Paramount Chief died in 1861. His son, Sekhukhune, succeeded him.

Under the new Paramount Chief Sekhukhune, the following stations were established. The "Phatametsane" also called "Garbelstadt" were established in 1863 near the present Phokwane village among the Matlala people of Chief Maserumule. The last one was the "Ga-Ratau" in 1864, near the present H-C Boshoff Hospital in Maandagshoek.

Merensky, as a doctor, fought the malaria that had engulfed the land of Sekhukhune with considerable success. Nevertheless the Paramount Chief ignored his contribution. The mission station, "Gerlachshoop" was destroyed during the Swazi uprising in 1864. The Christians were so badly persecuted that, at the end of 1864, they fled seeking missionary protection at "Botshabelo" (a place of refuge), a farm near Middelburg. "Botshabelo" under Merensky became the center of all the Berlin Missionary Society missions in the Transvaal.

"Botshabelo" became the institution for training ministers, and teachers for black students. Merensky also built the church at "Botshabelo", the oldest church in the Transvaal. He also erected the stone fortress, Fort Wilhelm, which was restored in 1962 and declared a national monument.

Shortly after Merensky had become superintendent of the mission, he acted as mediator in the peace negotiations between the Boers and Sekhukhune following the abortive Transvaal Campaign against the Bapedi chief in 1876. These negotiations gave birth to the peace treaty signed in 1877. The terms of this peace treaty being that Sekhukhune would become a subject of the Transvaal Republic. The Boers regarded Merensky's mediation and his new relations with Sekhukhune and Theophilus Shepstone

unfavourably. The Boers never trusted Sekhukhune and the British Shepstone government. Merensky's mediation was an embarrassment to them. The Shepstone annexed the Transvaal Republic on the 12 April 1877.

Although Merensky welcomed the British annexation as he was convinced that it will bring peace and order, he was also blamed by the Shepstone government because he had denied them the opportunity to utilize Sekhukhune's hostile relations with the Boer government as an urgent justification for the British annexation. On the other hand he was also blamed by the Boer Government for using Sekhukhune as a lever against President T.F Burgers. Indeed, the Boer government regarded him as a traitor. Nevertheless when the first Anglo-Boer war broke out, Merensky was asked to support the Boers as a doctor on the Natal border. Merensky was also present at Laingsnek and Skuinshoogte (Ingogo). From his field hospital he watched the Majuba fighting through his binoculars in February 1881. Therefore he was able to leave behind a striking account of the battle in his memoirs. After the war it was clear to Merensky that through his pro-British attitude since 1877, he had lost the support from his colleagues as well as the Boers.

The other problem Merensky encountered was the treatment of the Christian converts in Botshabelo. The government of the Transvaal was too weak to bring peace in the country. Although the government kept on promising Merensky and the Botshabelo residents protection, this protection was never enjoyed. This caused friction between him and the converts, as he tried to convince the Transvaal Republic to return the children of Chief Rammupudu's subjects who were kept as slaves by the neighbouring Boers. The Boers, did

not want any compensation. Merensky and the Boers in particular, started to lose all hope and trust in the white government and with Merensky himself.

The paying of taxes by blacks, particularly those who were staying in Botshabelo, were challenged by the Christians. But "Merensky tried to appease the government and admonished his flock not to disobey the law of the Boer government, his subjects started to view him as a friend of the Boers" (Mminele 1982:50).

Another contributing point was the refusal of the Transvaal Government to raise the status of the Chiefs at Botshabelo. On the 1st May 1874 Grutzner requested the Landdrost of Middelburg to pay the chiefs at Botshabelo at least ten percent of the taxes collected. This request was made in light of the fact that the Botshabelo residents were regular with their payment of taxes. The chiefs ought to be viewed as salaried officials of the state and occupying a sort of "Veldkornet" post. "This request was turned down" (Mminele 1982:51)

The black residents of Botshabelo were also dissatisfied at being forced to serve as police and prison workers in Middelburg. Their complaint was based on the fact that most of the prisoners were their own people, the Bapedi. Eventually the government had to replace them by hiring the Zulus from Natal.

The other concern of the Botshabelo people was that they were used to serve on the side of the state in the wars against Sekhukhune or their fellow Blacks without individual compensation. Their compensation went directly to the Berlin Mission. As a result of this set-up, through which Merensky occupied the position of "Paramount chief at Botshabelo, he did not find favour with the Christians at the mission station. They viewed the set-up structure as an "Onnatuurlike samestelling".

Chiefs at Botshabelo felt that the missionaries were exploiting them. They decided to

pull out from Botshabelo to a free land where they would be independent. By the year 1866 a large number of Rammupudu's subjects were no longer prepared to stay at the mission station. They all felt that it was humiliation for their chief to be subordinate to Merensky. On the 4th of October of 1873 another group under Dinkwanyane, the half brother of Sekhukhune, left Botshabelo for a place called Mafolofolo with about 400 people.

In giving his view as to the main cause of the exodus, Merensky wrote as follows to the Home Board in Berlin.

"The missionaries can protect the blacks against arbitrary demands by the Boers, but against arbitrary demands by the government they cannot do anything As such we cannot blame them too much for having left."

It must be remembered that Merensky owed his loyalty more to the British government, arising out of his agreement between himself and President Burgers. We can conclude by saying, Merensky in South Africa experienced not only the work of missionaries among the heathen, but he had also learned to bind the wounds of soldiers by stopping the blood that flowed, as a doctor. He also learned to be in between the two fighting groups negotiating peace and love amongst them. On the 6 January 1883 Merensky preached his last sermon at Botshabelo, and on that day, he baptized eighty-five people adults and children. He then left for Germany to rest. But in Germany he held administrative posts in his Society until the Berlin mission sent him again to Malawi in 1891. In Malawi he established the first mission stations, called Wangemannshohe and the second station called Manow. Merensky worked very hard in Malawi. He then moved forward to the Zambezi River where he met the expedition led by Hermann von Wissmann, which was dispatched to East Africa to establish German authority in the area which was

called Tanganyika later.

Merensky was able to give them more information about Africa and its people. While he was stationed in Malawi, Merensky had the opportunity to visit his old mission station at Botshabelo after paying a visit to the Transvaal President, Paul Kruger, to discuss matters of common interest. Alexander Merensky returned to Germany in 1892 and remained there for the rest of his life. Merensky died in 1918 in Germany.

After his return to Germany Merensky did excellent missionary as well as scientific work. He was highly honoured during his life. The University of Heidelberg honoured him with a doctoral degree in Philosophy.

The university of Berlin (Friedrich Wilhelm) also honoured Merensky with doctoral degree in Theology. He was also made honorary member of a number of famous academies and international scientific societies.

Merensky's contribution can therefore be classified as follows.

1. As a missionary

- He was an outstanding figure in the history of the Berlin missions. He was a pioneer missionary par-excellence in whose disposition there was not a single weak trait.
- He was a hard worker, healthy and undaunted, a man of perception and will-power, he could handle with ease a team of oxen in the wilderness.
- He was an unshakeable religious zeal. His eloquence and extraordinary power of persuasion made him a particular preacher in South Africa and Germany, his home country.
- Practical work was an essential aspect of his training of black Christians.
- Developing leadership was part of his method as he allowed members of his congregation to select their own leaders to develop their sense of responsibility.

- He produced a number of interesting publications indicating the thoroughness of his knowledge
- Amongst them we can name the following:
 - His memories published in 1888, became an important source for the study of mission work in South Africa.
 - In 1875 he published in Germany a considerably improved Map of the Transvaal Republic.
 - On his return to Germany he published a map of the whole of South Africa.
 - Later he published a small map of the shire region in East Africa and of Malawi, and finally he published an atlas covering the whole mission areas.
 - He composed and translated into Sepedi a number of hymns, including hymns No. 198 and 339, which appear in the Lutheran hymnal.
 - He had four individual publications, which are partly autobiographical, seven brochures, two narratives, four cartographical works, five articles which appeared in the “Berichte Berliner Missions Gesellschaft” – Twelve articles sounded in the “Deutsche Kolonial-zeitung” and Ten articles in the “Nova Acta Leopolding”.
 - He was very much interested in geography, which led to his contribution to the discovery of Zimbabwe ruins. Rumours about legendary ruins in the North caused him to study native folklore and manuscripts.
 - Merensky often studied this folklore and was convinced that the ruins existed in Zimbabwe. He also indicated where a search could be made.
 - He was prevented by a small pox epidemic from finding the ruins himself.
 - At Botshabelo he gave his friend, Karl Mauch, the information about Zimbabwe and its ruins.
 - Mauch convinced him that Zimbabwe had been a gold producing center in the country Ophir during a period of trade between Solomon and the Phoenicians.

3. Merensky as a medical doctor

- He was very good as a medical practitioner and this attracted many Whites and Blacks to his mission.
- He began his work by knowing only the basic principles of first Aid, but his knowledge increased through his hard work and dedication. He furthered his studies in Pretoria where he became a qualified doctor.
- At that time he was the only trained and qualified doctor in the area of Middelburg.
- After his return from Germany he addressed medical meetings speaking with authority on tropical disease.

4. His other contributions

- He took an active interest in the German Colonies in Africa. In 1884 he became a member of the board of Management of the Gesellschaft für Deutsche Kolonialzeitung.
- He also emphasized the importance of the economic relationship between whites and blacks in South Africa.
- He advocated the allocation of gardens and land to blacks working on farms and plantations.
- He discouraged forced labour and slavery.
- He encouraged segregation and the establishment of reserves and locations for blacks.
- He wanted the paying of taxes to encourage diligence, good treatment and judicial protection.
- He opposed Europeanization and emphasized the protection and maintenance of distinct national character for blacks, including the preservation of the authority of families and tribal chiefs.

- He was interested in the success of his mission at Botshabelo and would do anything possible to realize this. He went overseas regularly to raise funds.
- He remained friendly with the government of the day as long as it promised peace so that missionary work could go on peacefully.
- He never stopped to criticize the shortcomings of the government in the Transvaal.
- When it came to work Merensky wanted to keep everybody busy like a bee, with himself setting the pace. Thus earned him the nickname "Phakisa" meaning "be quick".
- He believed that the only solutions to this country's problem were when whites and blacks regard this country as their home.
- He also believed that it is the duty of whites in the south to encourage civilization throughout the entire continent.

Merensky's contributions in education

Merensky started educating the Botshabelo residents as early as 1865. By 1875 more than ten types of schools were established. The kinds of schools were as follows: the Congregation School; the Catechumenal School; the Confirmation School; the Evening School for Adults; the Youth School; the Sunday school; the Trade School; the Evangelist School and the Evangelist Seminary, though some of them were closed down.

The main aim of education was a religious one, i.e. to convert and evangelize the Black residents at Botshabelo, so that they could also do missionary work among the black masses. Merensky was concerned with the spiritual upliftment of the black people and teaching them to read and write so that they could be in a better position to understand the Bible and other related literature. The other key position he held at Botshabelo is that of a personnel recruiter. The main objective was to organize the seminary within and even from abroad. Teachers were called from Germany viz. Reuds Hermann During, Johannes Winter and Carl Richter. Among the converts Maritinus Sebushane and Ezekiel Mampe, who became assistant teachers.

This is one side of the story about Revered Merensky. We need to know the other side from the day he met the Bapedi people in Sekhukhune land, how he dealt with Pagan people and their culture.