

Chapter 7

Crossing the Steelpoort River

The main river Steelpoort is called Tubatse in Sepedi. It flows from the West of Lydenburg and pour its water into the Olifants river. It was the south boundary of Sekhukhune land and the Lydenburg government.

After realising that Sekhukhune has made his intention clear that Christians must leave his country or suffer the consequences. Martinus Sebushane one of the converts paid a cow to the king pleading that the king may have mercy on them: That the king relax his intention and allow Christians to stay in the country, and that Christians will remain loyal and obedient to the great king. Sebushane also felt that they are children of the soil and they have nowhere to go. The king remained their only master. The king received the gift and remained stubborn to his decision, nothing could change him.

Merensky and Nachtigal also went and plead with the king. The king made it clear that he did not want to quarrel or fight the missionaries, but only those of his subjects who proclaimed Christianity in his country. The king also proposed to the missionaries to put sense in the minds of his subjects who are now called converts to change their minds and join the masses by renouncing their new religion and follow the religions of the fore-fathers: worshipping the ancestors by doing the customary laws, particularly when burying their dead one. The king concluded to the missionaries by saying that he needs peace in his land and missionaries as people who know God can help in this regard but the ball is in their court: let them decide. The king wanted everybody to join him in building his kingdom. The king as a new king to the people of Bapedi knew that a divided nation couldn't be successful. There were many people who were now turning to be the enemies of the Bapedi kingdom. That includes his half brother Mampuru and the neighbouring chiefs who were once under his father's leadership.

The king prefers rather to deal with the outside pressures and challenges than the inside squabbles. If the missionaries can understand his position and see things the way he saw them the better the problems can be solved. The king believed that the gods of the forefathers' has turned their shining face against him and the nations. This is caused by their negligence of the fathers teaching and allowing the new religion that imposes the Lord Jesus as a king to the whole nations. So the punishment will be that, the white man will take the land of the forefathers and destroy their graves, and in place of graves build the church and the altar to worship Jesus who is a foreign king in their country. That will be an insult to the ancestors.

Rev Merensky became more frustrated. He found it difficult to work with an independent king of the Bapedi who felt it was his land, his people and the Lydenburg Republic has little or no say to this self governing state of Sekhukhune.

Merensky had planned earlier to leave Sekhukhune land and settle in Natal. Unfortunately he felt that he is not solving the problem. He already had a congregation. He cannot leave them now. It was at the time when his converts needed him more. He cannot run away alone and leave them behind. He also felt that the obligation and the oath he took when he left Germany as a missionary would be violated. Merensky strongly believed that he couldn't separate himself from the people he worked hard to convert. The converts are now like his own family. He will live and die with them for the sake of his God.

The ideal of converting Sekhukhune turned to be a risk. Sekhukhune's hostility on Christians reached a climax when the king made it clear that all Christians must be driven away from his land. Soldiers were given a simple message, "hunt them and kill them".

It was raining and Christians were trapped within three rivers. The Moutse river, Steelpoort and Olifants river. These rivers were flooded. The king was sure that they won't go any further. Their plan of escaping is doomed to a failure.

Mminele has this to say: -

*“Early on Wednesday morning of the 23 November 1864, despite a heavy downpour the previous night, a group of Christians among them Johannes Dinkwanyane and Merensky converged at Tubatse (Steelpoort) river drift. Finding the swollen river having ebbed, they crossed. They were in all sixty-nine Bapedi souls. They crossed at the spot where Merensky crossed when he entered Bapedi for the first time four years earlier. Soon after the Christians had crossed, the river came down in full spate again just in time to bar Sekhukhune’s soldiers who were pursuing them”. (Mminele 82: 27)*

The crossing itself is significant in the minds and memories of the Botshabelo peoples or Christians. To them, it is like the miraculous event in the Exodus book, when Israel crossed the Red Sea followed behind by Pharaoh’s soldiers only to die in the Red Sea when water closed them up.

Unlike the Egyptians, to them the enemy was not dead, but prevented from advancing to kill. The enemy was only separated for a while, the enemy will go back and strategise, the enemy will come back to strike.

The river became flooded in time to save them from Sekhukhune’s soldiers. The soldiers couldn’t cross the flooding river to catch up with the enemy. Christians are called enemies because they have not renounced their new and dangerous religion. Their religion was dangerous because it was believed to have brought harm, sickness and death to the people.

The river has come in between to separate the two religions. Sekhukhune and all those who listen to him are heathens. Heathens are now enemies of Christianity. They are enemies because of their evil and cruel deeds they have done unto Christians. Many lost their lives because of their cruel deeds and many are still suffering.

The heathens on the other side of the river have failed to fulfil the obligation. They should have killed the converts before crossing the river. It was believed that the Christians are bringing in all the miseries in the country. They are allowing the White man in the form of

a missionary to use them to disobey their culture and their own king. The fear was that they will come back with the whites to take their land and even to kill their king.

So the river has let the enemy escape.

It was a sad day for Merensky who had just been blessed with a baby girl. The girl was named “Mamotshaba”, an African name meaning “mother of the flight”. Her mother called her that because she came at the time when her father Merensky and his converts were planning the run and the crossing of the Steelpoort river. Sekhukhune’s soldiers arrived at the house of Merensky looking for the converts, only to find her mother sleeping on a bed in great pains. It was the time of her arrival. Soldiers had no business with whether a woman was sleeping on a bed screaming in pains. What they wanted were Christians of their own colour. They have been tipped that they have entered Merensky’s house. The Rev agreed that they were there and they have been given food although they had already gone to hide. Their blind eye of ignoring the woman on top of a bed made them to forget to search for their victims under the bed. What they could have found was Marothi’s family quiet as a mouse under Merensky’s bed. Stephanus Marothi was one of the 69 converts who crossed the Steelpoort River the following day, 23 December 1864 into the free land, the land of refuge.

It was times of many memories for Rev Merensky. The place, which he crossed running, was the very same spot he crossed when he came for the first time in this land of Sekhukhune. He remembered the day when he was to meet the great king Sekwati the father of Sekhukhune who now made him to run without looking back. The great king welcomed him with no conditions. He was to work and do his mission with no interference. His mission was to proclaim the word of God to the nations, which has no idea about the God he was bringing. The people or the nation had a choice, to accept him or reject him. He never thought that after four years he will be running for his dear life for the sake of the scripture.

He also remembered that the mission society sent him to the Swazis not the Bapedis who now threatened his life. He recalled how the great king of Swaziland turned him down. The king welcomed him with conditions. To bring in the gun powders from whites in

Lydenburg and that the king will pay him back in exchange of young girls as slaves.

Merensky rejected the conditions or the proposal, blacks were not allowed to carry guns and trading with human was also forbidden. So the Reverend and his company were told to leave the country of Swaziland with immediate effect.

How can Merensky forget that on the day he came to Sekhukhune Heinrich Grutzner and their wagon accompanied him. Today he finds himself accompanied by black converts who had nothing to offer or to help because they were all on the run. As on the first day when he came to Sekhukhune land with his wagon and a missionary friend. Today they have no food, cattle and nothing together with his fellow Christians. Their muddy house in which the Reverend slept fell down because of heavy rainfall immediately after he vacated it for the run. It was a sign that there is no turning back and there is not much time. You have to be quick or you will not make it to the river. Soldiers are coming behind you.

Finally the river has done it. Two different groups of people are now separated. They are different because of the social beliefs. Their story has an unpleasant ending. Their squabbles are not properly solved. As they go in different and opposite directions, the grudges in their hearts grow. They were aiming hard in teaching one another a lesson. The lesson of respecting one's king or Reverend. The converts or Christians though were not physically hurt but spiritually they were. Inside they were burning. Time was not on their side. They couldn't wait to explain their feeling any longer. Their own people had taken a last step to kill them all because they are all enemies of the king. As the gap widened between them, the flooding river continued flowing as if nothing had happened. But deep in it, the river carried squabbles and insulting words into the next river, which is the Olifants River. The Olifants will do likewise by taking this to the Indian Ocean. No one can tell their story. It remains in their hearts. Their children will hear and learn this story from them. Rev. Merensky has written and explained the story to his mission society in Berlin, but Rev. Merensky cannot bare witnesses to himself. The fact is that any Evangelical Lutheran Church in southern Africa (ELCSA) member wants to know what happened to their forefathers in late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

What happened when the king heard that his Christians had fled? What made them to run for their dear lives and leave their properties and families behind? The question is, why should a brother turn against a brother. Was there any third party? This became an open challenge for all members of the church to look for more information and facts about their own church and start writing their own church history so that the church's history may no longer remain oral or verbal history, that is something passed down by the word of mouth from generation to generation. We want the church to have its history written down for the sake of our future generations and the church itself.

The king keeps hoping that his subjects will come back one day. Instead the opposite happened. Many of his subjects that are Christians left behind, followed their leaders at the other side of the Steelpoort River. Rumours had reached them that Rev. Merensky had bought land near Middelburg for his Christians. The area was named "Botshabelo" meaning a place of refuge. Merensky had to welcome 98 Christians that included more than 30 children amongst them from Sekhukhune capital. As if this was not enough for the king to stomach, three of his wives including Tlakale fled the area via KgalaTlou and knocked at the door of Botshabelo. While the king was still asking himself questions, news reached him that another seven Christian women had left the capital. This became clear to the king that the remaining stations in his land influence his subjects.

Nachtigal reported that certain white people involved in arms trading with the king influenced Sekhukhune. They told him that, missionaries are using this mission stations to spread propaganda against the king and that the stations are also used for the benefit of the Boer Republic in Lydenburg. The king reacted by closing all missionary stations in the whole region of his domain.

In January 1866 news from the king reached Rev. Knothe who had taken over from Merensky at gaRatau and Rev. Nachtigal who was still at Marotheng capital to leave the area immediately. The mission stations were closed immediately. Rev. Endemann who was serving at the area of chief Maserumule was also informed to move out of the area.

The closing of all the Berlin mission stations in Sekhukhune's main domain area gave negative feelings for the mission society in Berlin. It struck harder on Merensky, who was quoted by Nachtigal,

*"When brother Endemann and I visited Merensky on the 20 November 1864, the latter said " we should all decide to leave our station with our converts. When we hesitated he asked to be allowed to leave. He wanted to be the scapegoat. In this way he would emerge as a martyr and further, his departure and his reluctance to negotiate with Sekhukhune over his and his converts' return would be well received in Berlin".*

The Berlin mission society's aim of sending missionaries to the heathen nations in Africa was never meant to divide the peaceful nations. It was not in the mind of the mission society that missionaries would form their own regime or kingdom. What was not clearly defined is the fact that Sekhukhune pointed a finger at Merensky as someone who wants to take his place as king and that the Reverend was working for the Boers.

According to the information from the king's followers Merensky has failed in his call. He was sent to do mission work not politics. He should work harder to influence the king and his subjects to see the objectives of being a Christian. Because of the missionaries' behaviour the invisible wall now divided the nation. The wall of hatred. The converts are now given or named names. They are called Majakane, meaning that they are Christians but deep in their hearts the name meant that people who have turned against their culture and traditions in favour of the white man's culture.

In short it meant that they are "sell outs". Where as the missionaries were called "Monere" which means meneer a better name to the word "Baas" which was mostly used when they were calling the Boers. On the other hand the people who remained calling Sekhukhune a king and do his will, for instead taking their children to mountain school and doing most of the customary laws are called the heathens. The word sounded good but deep in it means the Devil worshippers because of there being anti-Christians.

Quoting what Nachtigal wrote in his diary can support that,

*"Sekhukhune, was when one views him quite objectively as a heathen sovereign, in the right when he grew angry and drove us from the land".*