



*Inauguration of
Kgoshikgolo Mokopa Makgoba*

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Batlhalerwa

THE DEATH OF MAKGOBA

The military problem that General Joubert faced when, early in June 1895, he set out to catch Makgoba was the usual problem of guerilla warfare. The enemy could not be starved out as Malaboch and his people had been in an earlier campaign. There was no strongpoint to be bombarded, no area where accurate rifle fire could be brought to bear, and no means of surrounding the tribesmen. The mountain forests were dense enough to swallow up 500 000 troops. Once the white men got into the undergrowth they became sitting ducks for the enemy's marksmen, armed with a weird assortment of weapons that range ancient elephant guns to the bows and arrows they used for shooting birds and monkeys.

It was a different story when the Swazi and Shangaan warriors made their way through the bush. Since they were advancing more or less as a body it was virtually certain that anyone they met was one of Makgoba's men so on sighting a black skin, they hurled their assegais and asked no questions. However, in the early stages of the fight General Joubert blundered. He ordered that all the Bantu distinguishing mark. Makgoba's spies spotted this at once and soon strips of white cloth were handed out to the warriors with orders that they bind these round their heads. Within a matter of hours most of the armed Bantu dodging about in the forest were wearing this decoration and firing at one another indiscriminately. No one knew friend from

foe.

The men of the commandos, nearly all of whom came from the Highveld and were unaccustomed to forests, were in a nervy state as they began their patrols through the Woodbush.

'We had the eerie feeling that wherever we went we were being watched by an unseen enemy and that behind every bush a black man was sitting with a muzzle-loader pointed at our heads', said one of them. 'The only sounds were the cries of the birds, the panting and the muttered curses of our comrades as they fought their way through the bush...The Commandant-General and his staff apparently had the idea that we should cut and level wide roads through the bush so that our wagons could come in. It would have taken five years.'

The plan of attack had been that the Bantu auxiliaries should advance like beaters at a pheasant shoot, driving all before them, while the commandos would patrol the forest paths, waiting to intercept Makgoba and his men as they fled before the advancing line of Joubert's auxiliaries.

That was the plan but it was thrown completely out of gear by Makgoba's cunning in equipping his men with the same headband as the auxiliaries. Let Bernhard Dicke, 1 who was there, in command of some 1500 Shangaans, describe what happened.

'A party of Makgoba's men had put on white bands which were the distinguishing badges of the native auxiliaries,' he wrote. 'During lunch time on June 3rd, 1895 (the day when the campaign opened in earnest) they had danced through the native auxiliary contingents and had occupied the drift through which the Government forces had come in the morning. When they first made their appearance, and while they were still passing through two of the auxiliary contingents, the officers present were warned by a farmer present that the troop was the enemy. The man who gave this warning [*probably Dick himself though he does not say so*] recognised their signals and their dancing step.

'As so often happens in South African history he was not believed. But, while the officers were still trying to pull his leg and make a fool of him the debacle began. The first bullet went through Commandant Swart Barend Vorster's hat; another grazed the tree where Captain Schiel was standing. The native contingents drafted from different parts, not knowing one another and shot at from their rear, did not know who was a friend and who a foe. They started firing at one another and at anybody and everybody while Makgoba himself attacked from in front.

It was their own native allies who then became the greatest danger to the Whites, who tumbled off the heights as quickly as they could with the frenzied native fugitives jamming in between them. Berry Ledebour, with half a dozen men from Fort Eendracht and a couple of others, saved the situation by disentangling themselves from the

panicky mob. They, anyhow, kept Makgoba's men from rushing into the disorderly rout. This debacle was never recorded in the Press...'

Dicke certainly gives us a story is not in any of the history books. He writes of '...the avalanche of fleeing humanity that constituted part of the Government forces - 400 Whites and 3 500 black s who had lost their heads'. It was first blood to Makgoba.

Joubert had one of the most important qualities of a successful general - more than his fair share of good luck. Certainly in this campaign against a wily and courageous enemy his good fairy was always at his side. He had spent quite a sum of money for those days in getting his forts established. He had also brought the State Artillery from Pretoria and had spent the best part of three months in assembling a rather 'thin' commando force. He knew that he had little hope of keeping these men in the field for long. They were already disgruntled by the muddle that had been made of the first engagement. They were not looking forward to the campaign in the forests that seemed to lie ahead of them.

And then, to cap everything else, it began to rain. The clouds descended, so it seemed, to within a couple of metres of the ground and mist shrouded both the mountains and the trees. It was cold, damp weather.

Councils of war continued but there were no brilliant ideas

as to how Makgoba should be taken. It looked as though the war might soon have to be adjourned to allow some of the men to return to their farms. However, on comparatively large bands of Bantu auxiliaries went out looking for the enemy.

One of them was a party of Swazi. These Swazi ran into two young women whom their guides said were Makgoba's 'wives'. The Swazi, in their direct way, applied a few of the tortures in the use of which they were adepts. One of the women broke down under this treatment and told them exactly where Makgoba was hiding in a densely wooded kloof that was half-way up the steep slopes of the Wolkberg.

The Swazi went there as fast as they could for the women had but recently left the spot where Makgoba and some of his wives and children were hiding. They had not far to climb for they found Makgoba waiting for them. As they approached the thicket in which he was hiding his double-barrelled rifle spoke and one of their party received the full blast at short range. He fell dead at the feet of his comrades.

Makgoba sighted again and pulled the trigger. But at that fateful moment in his life his gun let him down. The second barrel misfired and it was while he was struggling to reprime it that the Swazi shot him.

They treated him rather as they would have treated a

wounded lion after he fell, waiting to see whether he was shamming, possibly still sufficiently alive to fire the other barrel. But the body never moved again. Makgoba was dead and the 'war' was over. It had lasted six days when it might well have gone on for six months. Once again the Commandant-General's luck had saved the day. He had put nearly 7000 men in the field, if one counted all the Bantu auxiliaries, and yet a humble Swazi, whose name no one knew, had shot the man they wanted.

Makgoba was undoubtedly dead but how are the Swazi going to prove it to the white men? They argued among themselves and then decided to cut off his head and carry it up the mountainside to Joubertskroon. So Makgoba's head was brought to Joubert in a woven basket and then inspected and identified by men who had known him.

A legend has been established that, once the Swazi had cornered Makgoba, their leader challenged him to combat and that he was beaten to his knees and battered to death, after which his head was cut off. But there is evidence that seems to disprove this story. At the Commandant-General's headquarters at Joubertskroon, believe it or not, there was a professional photographer named Exton whose headquarters were in Pietersburg and who, over the next fifty years, took pictures of every conceivable subject. He photographed Makgoba's head and sold a great many prints of the original plate. These showed the chief apparently sleeping peacefully. There were no signs whatever of the battering he would undoubtedly have suffered in a hand-to-

hand battle with knobkieries.

Reproduced in this book is a painting of the head, for which the photograph served as a model, by the late Astley Maberley. It shows no evidence of wounds or bruises.

When President Kruger heard that the rebel chief's head had been cut off - and on a Sunday of all days - he was deeply distressed that the Republican forces should have been involved in a campaign that ended in such fashion. We have it on the authority of Landdrost Munnik that the President regarded this act as 'inhuman, un-Christian and uncivilized and he gave the Commandant a terrible telling-off'.

The total casualties on the Government side on this campaign were thirteen killed and eighteen wounded - all Bantu auxiliaries. There were no casualties among white men.

The burghers who had taken part in the campaign were rewarded with a bonus of R26 each. President Kruger told the Volkraad that he thought that all the Republic's Bantu allies who had taken part should receive a cash payment. He therefore proposed that the Raad should vote R20 000 to be distributed among those who could be shown to have turned out. Some of the older members of the Raad were quite genuinely horrified by this proposal.

'What, give R20 000 to Kaffirs? You must be mad!' they said, though not in so many words. The Volksraad

considerably reduced the proposed sum and in the end it was agreed that 'captains' of the Bantu forces should receive R4 each while the common or garden 'Kaffirs', who were their followers, should receive R2 each.

The widows of the Bantu who had been killed in the 'war' were paid R 2 and men who had been wounded received the same amount. It certainly was not profitable to turn out to fight for the Republic in those days.

Some 4 000 followers of Makgoba, Mamathola, Moshouti and Tslobolo, who had been captured in the cause of the operations against the rebellious chiefs, were marched to the Pretoria district where they were put to work on farms. Most of Makgoba's people were left in the valley that bears his name and hear their descendants live and work to this day. They are still called the 'Makgoba's people' and many of the male children bears that name.

Makgoba was never more than a chieftain yet his name will for ever because it was given to kloof in which once lived and where he died. Thus, it is now of the name of the most spectacular scenic drives in South Africa, if not the world.

Of this valley John Buchan, then building up a Lands Department for the Milner Administration, was later to write: 'I have never been in such an earthly paradise in my life The whole place looks like a colossal nobleman's park laid out by some famous landscape gardener. The woods are virgin forest-full of superb orchids and fern, and

monkeys, and wild pig and tiger cats [his phrase for leopards probably from the Afrikaans 'tiger'] and bushbuck. I went there in the hottest season of the year and the air was like a Highland June. ... I only wish my old father could have seen the place. He would have realised where the Garden of Eden really was situated'. Such was the kloof where Makgoba lived eighty years ago. It is just as beautiful today.

II

The death of Makgoba, and the severe punishment meted out to the rebellious tribes-in most cases a fine of R10 on every adult male-brought peace to the settlers on the eastern slopes of the Drakensburg. More farms were taken up and the village of Duiwelskloof, the centre of the little community, was moved to the farm Skraalhans (Thin Hans) which may have been the nickname of one of the founders of the De Beers family. Next to Skraalhans is the farm Korthannie (Short Johanna) and this said to have been thus named in honour of Mrs De Beers.

The plan to move the village to this side where there was a better water supply is believed to have originated with one of the pioneers of the district, F J W J Labuschagne, a bachelor, of whom Bernhard Dicke used to say that he could fire a magazine rifle. The kloof was given its name by the surveyors because their wagons stuck in the thick, treacly mud there and they found the bush so dense as to be almost impenetrable.

In all the thousands of kilometres of travelling the surveyors did in carrying out their surveys between Pietersburg and the Limpopo they had never struck a worse place than this. But the name would have been no less appropriate had it been given to the village because of the terrible toll that blackwater fever and malariatook of its early inhabitants. That was the price they had to pay for their ample water supply. There were rivulets everywhere and they had built pools where the mosquitoes bred. Years were to pass before the baleful role the anopheles played in spreading the disease became known.

The kloof had once been the scene of a tremendous battle the Modjadi's forces and Albasini's Shangaans in which the latter suffered one of their very rare defeats. But the surveyors who had plunge into the thickets here when they were laying out the beacons of the farms pooh-pooed this story. How, they asked, could any battle have taken place in the thickets so dense that it took days to cut a short path through them?

There was no real road to the village until 1889 and even then it more like atoboggan run than a road. Wagons bound for Leydsdorp and the so-called Selati Gold Field used to skirt the side of the village and go right round the Modjadji's territory in order to avoid this terrifying mountain drive. Eventually the coaches came down the track on the way to call at the Birthday and Ellertonmines, then reasonably properous gold-mining

propositions. The Zeederbergs ran these coach services only because there was a good deal of traffic between Pietersburg and the Birthday Mine, situated far out on the great plain that was the Lowveld. But they still skirted the village, avoiding its almost perpendicular section of the road because it a mud slide when the rain came.

Meanwhile 'Doel' Zeederberg's gangs were cutting the more direct route to the Lowvwld and Leydsdorp that came up from Pietersburg via Smits' Drift, climbed over the summit of the range and allowed passengers to spend the night at Haenersburg. It then ran for a short distance across a comparatively level plateau before beginning a breakneck descent of some 600 metres in 19 kilometres to Agatha, the Letsitele valley and Thabina far below. It says a great deal for the courage and enterprise of C H Zeederberg and his brothers that they could even contemplate the building of a coach-road down such precipitous slopes.

The road you take today from Pietersburg to Tzaneen follows roughly the course of the old Zeederberg road from Pipersburg as far as the top of the Berg and across the comparatively level plateau at the top. But this road then makes a gradual descent in graet loops that take you gently down Magoeba's Kloof. The old coach-road had no time for such niceties. It swung to the east, off to the right of the present road, just abive where the Magoeba's Kloof Hotel is today. At that point, with the Iron Crown frowning down on it, the narrow track began the almost

precipitous descent that took it across the Broederstroom and through the natural forest where, in the nineties, great yellow-wood and iron-wood trees towered above the track. It plunged down the mountainside to the Letaba Valley where it crossed the Letaba river-if that mighty stream was not a torrent after a heavy rain. Once this crossing was accomplished it climbed again to the small settlement of New Agatha-then a rest-camp for some of the Lowveld diggers who had contracted malaria on the great plain 600 metres below.

The diggers' claims at Agatha were in the fever area where there was also horse-sickness and bilharzia. This was old Agatha, the area that had first been given the name 'Agatha' after one of the first names of the wife of Cristiaan Joubert, Minister of Mines in the old Republic. The hills behind this very profitable gold-mining area were just high enough to provide cool evenings when the summer sun grilled the Lowveld. This was new Agatha, the only healthy climate anywhere near the diggings short of making the long journey up the road that led to the top of the berg. It was possible for prospector or a digger to work on the so-called gold-fields at the foot of the Agatha hills and then retreat to hillsides in the evenings and sleep in the comparatively cool air there. Many of them did this. They acquired land and built houses in the hills. Gradually the gold-mining boom petered out and the hills of Agatha, between Letaba valley and Letsitele valley became a residential area.

Today the flourishing town of Tzaneen lies in the valley below these hills and many of its citizens live up on the heights of Agatha. Indeed Agatha, once a tiny settlement in the wilderness, may claim to have preceded Tzaneen as one of the first outposts of civilization in the district.

The coach journey from Haenersburg to Agatha was a full day's run in the old days-and no wonder! It was described by some of the old prospectors bound for Leydsdorp as a 'hell run'. Having been driven over sections of this track as it is today I find it difficult to imagine how the 'outside' passengers on the coaches managed to stay in their seats on this hair-raising ride. John Buchan, after making the journey, wrote of 'the Leydsdorp coach which once a week imperils the traveler's life ...' and added: 'twenty miles further on the same coach, if it has thus far escaped destruction, precipitously descends a mountain-side into the fever flats that line the Groot Letaba and the Letsitele rivers ...'. You will agree with him if you ever follow the course of this old road, long since abandoned but still visible.

The passengers, having been shaken until their back teeth rattled, were allowed to disembark at Agatha and spending the night at a wayside inn owned by two young German settlers, Konrad Plange and Heinrich Altenroxel. They rose at dawn the following day for the final 'plunge' down the mountain-side, and the last stage of the journey to Leydsdorp.

The two enterprising young men who owned the hotel, the store and some hectares of arable land at Agatha were pioneers who had established themselves there long before the coach service to Leysdorp came into being. They had come to the Transvaal in 1880 and worked together for a man named Tamsen who owned the hotel and a store in Nylstroom. Mrs Tamsen was a German, the daughter of a missionary named Richter whose parish was the Woodbush. She knew and loved this beautiful district and often talked about it.

This inspired Heinrich Altenroxel, when his leave came round, to make an expedition there on horseback. He, too, was enchanted by the countryside, with the result that he and his comrade, Plange, decided to leave the comparatively civilized surroundings of Nylstroom and strike out on their own in the wilds. The first of their ventures were the hotel and store at Agatha. Later Altenroxel was to establish the Krabbefontein estate just outside the town limits of present-day Tzaneen. Still later he and Plange, in partnership, carved out of the wilderness one of the most renowned agricultural properties in the Transvaal the Westfalia Estate. They named it after the district from which they came Westfalen.

These two young men were the pioneers of organized agriculture in the district. Altenroxel grew tobacco at Krabbefontein and established a factory there that produced pipe tobacco and cigars - both of them products

that won acclaim in Pretoria. Konrad Plange, very much the business man in the partnership, harnessed the water-power on the farms that today form Westfalia, set up a turbine on Krabbefonten and was probably the first farmer in the Transvaal to use electric power and to install electric lights.

They had courage as well as enterprise these two. They decided that coffee could be produced in the district and, they had moved down from the healthy area on the heights of Agatha, to acquire their land on the banks of the Letaba River, they planted between them 180 000 coffee trees which they had imported - 80 000 at Westfalia and 100 000 on Krabbefontein. But they had the worst of luck. Their coffee trees, after a flourishing start, developed a leaf sickness. There were no agricultural advisers in those days and no scientific methods of treating plant diseases. Altenroxel and Plange lost all their trees without getting one crop from them. Today coffee is one of the important crops of the district and Walter Plange, only son of Konrad Plange, the pioneer, is one of the leading growers in the district on his beautiful farm high up in Makgoba's Kloof.

Konrad Plange may have failed as a coffee grower eighty years ago but it stands to his credit that at least he tried and paved the way for others. He was also the first farmer in the district to plant the saligna eucalyptus, the timber that has since become the mainstay of the timber industry in the Transvaal.

Altenroxel succeeded in interesting a German syndicate in financing Krabbefontein as an agricultural estate of which he acted as manager. The tobacco enterprise was a success but the main revenue of the estate came from the growing of maize, for which there was a constant demand from the surrounding tribes. The chief difficulty these pioneer farmers faced was, as always, the terrible climb their wagons had to make to cross the mountains to get to Pietersburg before their produce could be sold, or the equally long journey to Leydsdorp and the diggings where, while the mining boom lasted, there was a market for everything they had to sell. The time was to come when the diggers were reduced to a diet of mealie meal and biltong.

Heinrich Altenroxel was sufficiently impressed by the prospects to invite his brothers Bernhard and Franz to come out to join him. They were followed by a brother-in-law, Hubert Gassel. At a considerably later date another relative, Ferdinand Klosterschulte, arrived. The Altenroxels had farmed in Germany for generations and they were an asset to the district.

The time came when with Plange, the Altenroxels, the Dicke brothers and the Reuters at Medingen, there was quite a colony of Germans living on the outskirts of the village of Duiwelskloof.

You are to hear more of the Altenroxels and Plange.

III

Although it is still the custom to talk of the 'war' with Magoeba and the other rebellious tribes the white pioneers got off fairly lightly considering how easily the Bantu might have overwhelmed and massacred them. They suffered stock losses, and they lived for some years in constant fear of an attack, but as a rule a few shots fired at night sufficed to frighten off marauders and there were few casualties. The Bantu seemed content to shake their assegais and stamp their feet in protest against the occupation of what they regarded as their land.

The exception seems to have been an attack on the little band of white settlers at Agatha in October 1894, which opened the final campaign to hunt down Makgoba. Agatha at that time had a small Government office where D. Roodhuizen and his wife lived. He was the only civil servant in the district. Heinrich Altenroxel and Konrad Plange were both bachelors then and for the rest there were a few diggers and the owners of occupation farms just outside the area of Government ground. All told the settlement could muster about fifteen rifles. The forty-odd men and women and children who gathered round the Government building to defend themselves in 1894 were completely cut off from the rest of the white community. Makgoba's warriors were in force between them and Duiwelskloof. Behind them were Mamathola's impis on the warpath. When the attacks began they knew they would have to fight for their lives.

Sixteen men in the Duiwelskloof area volunteered to ride to the aid of the garrison, if it could be called that, at Agatha, for they knew how desperate was the situation of these settlers. On their way there, and with orders from the field-cornets not to shoot unless they were attacked, they were cornered by an impi of the chief from which the mountain behind Tzaneen station takes its name - Mashouti. They were told that the chief wanted them to come to his kraal to talk matters over and they agreed to go there. Among them were farmers who spoke the Sotho dialect of the district and from what they overheard they knew that it was planned to massacre them once they got to the kraal.

Bernhard Dicke, who was one of them, wrote this description of what happened next:

'...The men arranged that, in case of need, they would first endeavour to shoot all the leaders. Twenty-one indunas around them were pointed out by men who knew them... And then, just before the signal for the slaughter was to be given, the surrounded patrol broke loose!

'The natives had been misled by the whites in their midst coming along so quietly and, on nearing the chief's kraal, the impi had begun to dance and sing...

'...After the fight it took the patrol four and a half hours to cover the half dozen miles still separating it from New Agatha. It had to make use of circuitous routes, had to feint, dodge and double back to break through and past successive impis, putting up a running fight all the time before reaching its destination. There were several marvellous escapes and narrow shaves but only a few men

were wounded.

'...That night New Agatha was attacked and the natives broke through the defence they first crept through undetected. What would have happened if the original fifteen guns had not been reinforced need not be told.'

Four days after this incident commandant Schalk Burger and a commando arrived and New Agatha was saved from further onslaughts. It seems to have been the only skirmish during the campaign in which the lives of white settlers were threatened. The rebels marched up to a number of farmhouses and made threatening gestures but seem to have been driven off with surprising ease.