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# The Afrikaner Women Of The Garment Workers Union, 1918-1939

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savings and to which they were sentimentally attached.[41] In July 1937 a large number of Vrededorpers attended the city council meeting at which the declaration of Vrededorp as a slum was discussed. Long before the meeting the public and strangers' gallery and passages of the council chambers were filled by Vrededorpers. For three hours they waited patiently for the council to reach the Vrededorp issue on the agenda. Then for two hours they "followed the speakers with deep attention". During the ensuing discussion they strongly objected to having their suburb stigmatised as a slum and when Mr C.F. Beckett called Vrededorp a "disgrace to civilization", the "dissenting remarks" from the audience caused such an uproar that it was threatened to clear the gallery. Subsequently, Mr Lionel Leveson, a City Councillor, maintained that, in view of the fact that the Vrededorpers were virtually all tenants and not home owners,

> It was a pity the tenants did not have an organisation. They were inarticulate.[42]

The behaviour of the Vrededorpers during and after the meeting clearly demonstrated that they were not inarticulate at all. A committee of Vrededorpers took the community's complaints and objections against the slum declaration to the Minister of Health. On the insistence of the inhabitants the declaration was cancelled in October 1938 and Vrededorp was left in peace. It was clear that Vrededorpers wished to retain their community, and did not, as Stals maintains, resist resettlement because they feared moving,

> Die rede vir hierdie teenstand moet in hoofsaak gesoek word in hulle vrees dat dit onmoontlik sou wees om ander of beter verblyf te bekostig.
> (The reason for this resistance must mainly be sought in their fear that it would prove impossible to afford other or better accommodation.)[43]

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[41] Ibid., vol. II, p.24.

[42] *The Star*, 'Vrededorp to be declared a Slum', 28.7.1937. See *The Star* for a photograph of a plan for the proposed layout of Vrededorp as a 'model township', 29.7.1937.

[43] E.J.P. Stals, *Afrikaners*, vol.II, p.25. Towards the end of the decade, as a response to the housing shortage, sub-economic flats, the Octavia Hills Flats were erected in Pioneer Road, Fordsburg,

A concentration of garment workers was also found in Germiston, a town on the East Rand adjacent to Johannesburg which during the twenties developed into a major industrial area of the Witwatersrand. (See Map 2.) Most of the garment workers who worked in the local Germiston factories lived in George Town, the oldest and poorest white suburb of the town, close to its industrial areas. (See Map 3.)

Germiston was laid out in 1886 by the mining company Messrs Simmer and Jack,[44] and was proclaimed a township in 1904.[45] In the wake of the First World War the population of Germiston grew steadily and after 1922, Germiston exhibited the biggest growth rate of all the East Rand towns.[46] Germiston was favourably situated for industrial development, for it had a good water supply and cheap power, and rapidly became a major railway junction in South Africa.[47] Initially a gold-mining town, it was surrounded by 12 ore-carrying gold mines of which 5 closed down in 1921 and two more in 1922. Gradually the accent of industrial development shifted to the manufacturing industry and transport. Hence, industries developed rapidly in the two adjacent industrial sites, South Germiston Extension and Extension 2, which were proclaimed in 1916.[48] By 1918 Germiston housed industries such as engineering works and the Victoria Falls and Transvaal Power Co. Ltd. During the early 1920's numerous small tailoring concerns were located in Germiston, but thereafter it

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under a sub-economic housing scheme of the Johannesburg City Council. SBA, INSP 1/1/371, 1/1/379, 1/1/386. Inspection Reports, Standard Bank, 30.4.1938, 9.5.1939, 7.9.1940. CAD, VWN 2778. Johannesburg Utility Housing Co., Application for registration as welfare organisation, 1940.

44 SBA, INSP 1/1/292. Inspection Report, 29.4.1929.

45 Germiston Public Library, Germistonia, Johannesburg Municipality, Germiston and George Town, Ordinance No. 5 (Private), 1904.

46 S. Pauw, *Beroepsarbeid*, p.159.

47 SBA INSP 1/1/292. Inspection Report, 29.4.1929.

48 Germiston Public Library. D. Page, 'The Evolution of the Urban Morphology of Germiston', dissertation, no place, no date.

housed some of the largest clothing factories on the Reef such as the New York, Germiston and East Rand Clothing Factories.

By 1930 the manufacturing sector in Germiston employed 627 men and 429 women, the latter almost exclusively at the major clothing factories mentioned above. By 1933 the growing economic contribution of white women to the economy of the town was clearly revealed in the dramatic increase of the white female labour force. This doubled from 429 in 1930 to 843 in 1933, in contrast to the much slower growth of white or black male employment in the town. (See Table 3.) During the twenties and early thirties an increasing number of men found employment in the Germiston railway yards. In line with the 'civilised labour' policy of the government, these men were given preference over black men. Accordingly, the number of black railway workers declined considerably during this period, from 500 in 1930 to 259 in 1933.[49]

While during the late 1920's the garment workers formed the majority of white female workers in Germiston, white miners and railway workers dominated the local white male labour market which consisted mostly of,

> the artisan class employed in the gold industry and railway workshops, a large number of whom are of the Nationalist-Labour type.[50]

By 1934 secondary industry and in particular the clothing industry, had overtaken gold mining to such a degree that it was claimed,

> The future prosperity of Germiston depends upon its industries, the principal of which is ready-made clothing. Now eight factories all work to capacity employing 1 000 Europeans (mainly women) and 150 natives.[51]

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[49] See Table 3.

[50] SBA, INSP 1/1/292. Inspection Report, 29.4.1929. cf. J. Lewis, 'The Germiston By-election of 1932. The State and the White Working Class during the Depression', in P. Bonner, *Working Papers in Southern African Studies: Papers Presented at the African Studies Institute Seminar*, Johannesburg: African Studies Institute, University of the Witwatersrand, 1977.

[51] Ibid., INSP 1/1/347. Inspection report, 27.10.1934. At the same

Nevertheless, the transition from a gold-mining town to secondary industry did not prove to be easy for its impoverished inhabitants. Poverty was a pervasive feature of Germiston. In October 1920 concerned citizens of Germiston resolved at a public meeting,

> that it is the imperative duty of the Government to deal with unemployment .... and to see to necessary legislation to open fresh avenues for employment.[52]

Not much prosperity came to Germiston during the twenties, and in terms of the physical planning the town remained very scattered and poorly laid out. In 1930 the business area properties "still resemble a mining camp", where a large number of store keepers could be found who catered for the "lower class Europeans and native trade and most of them do little more than make a living".[53] In 1932, at the height of the Depression, the *Germiston Advocate and East Rand Recorder* briefly alluded to the poverty rampant in the town. It maintained that "our town is full of need."[54] In 1933 Germiston also featured prominently amongst those towns in the country where benevolent societies, on behalf of the Department of Labour, were handing out rations to the needy.[55] With the outbreak of the Second World War the situation had not changed considerably,

> While there is a large population locally it must be admitted that a big percentage comprise the factory and railway worker type whose emoluments are not high and whose purchasing power does not extend to the high class prerequisites.[56]

Housing facilities for people working in Germiston were bad. In 1921 it was known that housing was very hard to come by in Germiston, a po-

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time some 2 000 whites and 400 blacks were employed on the railways and 26 838 blacks on the gold mines.

[52] CAD, MNW 550. Letter, Provincial Secretary Transvaal to Secretary Mines and Industries, Pretoria, 25.11.1920.

[53] SBA, INSP 1/1/302 and 1/1/292. Inspection Reports, 6.9.1930 and 13.5.1929.

[54] *Germiston Advocate*, 'Discourses on the Unemployed', 29.1.1932.

[55] UG 37-'33. Department of Labour, HP1.Annual Report 1933, p.12.

[56] SBA, INSP 1/1/379. Inspection Report, 9.3.1939.

sition which had hardly improved by the mid-thirties when housing conditions were considered to be 'pretty bad'.[57] In 1937 it was still maintained that many people residing in the centre of Germiston, presumably the George Town area, were living under slum conditions.[58] In 1939 the Medical Officer of Health of Germiston vividly described these slum conditions, consisting of scores of wood and iron houses and dilapidated brick structures.[59] Mrs Spangenberg, in a recent interview, graphically completed this picture when she described George Town as "sommer 'n gemors, man" (just a mess).[60] The extent of the housing shortage is evident from the fact that it was estimated that some 2 000 people, three quarters of the working population of Germiston, could not find accommodation in the town and had to commute into the town from the outlying districts and neighbouring towns.[61] Mrs V. commuted from Boksburg every day, while Mrs Viljoen came from Benoni to work in Germiston.[62]

Of the factory workers who lived in Germiston a large number of people were concentrated in George Town, the slum area of the town. (See Map 3.) Garment workers were generally located near to each other. According to the voters' rolls, four garment workers lived in Garden, Victoria and Meyer Streets respectively; five clothing workers lived in High Street at numbers 33, 111, 127, 159 and 343, whilst in President Street two garment workers were neighbours at 136 and 138.[63]

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57 Ibid., INSP /1/1/217. Inspection Report 17.6.1921. According to the Medical Officer of Health of Germiston, J.H. Rauch. *Germiston Advocate*, 6.3.1936.

58 *Rand Daily Mail*, 'Slum Clearance on the Rand', 30.7.1937.

59 Germiston Public Library. Germiston Medical Officer of Health, *Annual Report*, 1938-39.

60 Interview 26.

61 *Rand Daily Mail*, 28.2.1936 and 14.8.1936.

62 Interviews 31 and 32.

63 JPL, Voters' Rolls, Germiston 1931.

Housing conditions of single garment workers not taken in by kin or friends were appalling.[64] Sometimes up to four garment workers shared a single room and bed, costing about a pound a month, and used candle boxes as chairs. According to Hester Cornelius, they usually had one bed, a cushion and two blankets to share and made their sheets and curtains of washed flour bags.[65] A 1926 Wage Board report confirmed this tale,

> the only way many of the girls who had no parents or friends to assist them could exist was by boarding at places where by sleeping 3 in a bed and living on dry bread and black coffee, they could be accommodated at 6/6 to 7/6 a week.[66]

The Boucher women, a mother and seven daughters, who inhabited one room, serve as a good example. Their conditions were so severe that welfare officials remarked that the health of one of the daughters who was a cleaner in a clothing factory, could hardly improve whilst she had to sleep on the floor.[67]

A decade later an investigation carried out by Department of Labour officials, Misses S.M. van den Berg and H.J.L. Verwoerd into the housing and living conditions of young girls working in the clothing factories in Germiston, revealed a similar situation.[68] Many lived in 'iron and brick cottages, with no bathroom, crowded and lit by candle light'. The 320 women who were investigated - the majority of whom originated

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64 SBA, INSP 1/1/320. Inspection Report, 30.9.1932. In 1932 the European population of Vrededorp was 7 674, that of Fordsburg 4 727 and Mayfair 5 707.

65 *KW/GW*, H. Cornelius, 'Die Lewe van 'n Klerewerkster', November 1936.

66 CPSA, AH 1092. Records of the Garment Workers Union (hereafter GWU), Bch 1. Wage Board Report into the Clothing Industry 1926, as quoted in 'Garment Workers demand a living wage', no date.

67 CAD, VWN 679. Report of Germiston Childrens' Aid and Benevolent Society to Germiston Magistrate, 24.1.1936.

68 CAD, VWN 468. The report was compiled by Misses S.M. van den Berg and H.J.L. Verwoerd. Hansi Pollak, whose dissertation on white women in Witwatersrand industries had been completed some years previously, assisted in the investigation. See also E. Brink, 'Virtue is a Grace: Organisational Involvement in the Lives of the Garment Workers', paper presented to the Association for Sociology in Southern Africa Congress, July 1985.

from the countryside - were found living in three distinct areas in and around Germiston. They congregated mostly in George Town, the slum area of Germiston, the better labourers' quarters of the town and in the surrounding more rural areas. The girls living in lodgings in these areas paid 7/6 to 12/6 per week for their accommodation, while those living in the semi-residential area of the town west of President Street in the so-called 'better labourers' quarters', paid from 12/6 to 20/- per week.

With the erection of the Wannenburg sub-economic housing scheme in 1938, efforts were made to alleviate the housing shortage in Germiston.[69] Allocation of these houses took place strictly according to income and as soon as the earning capacity of tenants improved, they had to make place for more unfortunate slum dwellers.[70] Mrs Spangenberg neatly summed up the occupational composition of the inhabitants of Wannenburg,

> Die vrouens het in die fabrieke gewerk en die mans het op die spoorweg gewerk. (The women worked in the factories and the men worked on the railways.)[71]

A breakdown made by the Medical Officer of Health of Germiston in 1943 revealed the social composition of Wannenburg. The 79 families residing there had an average of 3.6 children, bringing the total to 289 children in the scheme. The average family income was £13.18.7 per month and of the 79 families eighteen breadwinners were municipal employees, thirteen were wage earners working for the railways and thirteen were in the Army. Ten families survived on a widow's pension, five on an ordinary pension and four wage-earners were employed in the munitions

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[69] CAD, Germiston Municipal Archives (hereafter GMA) box 201, 72/1/4a, vol. I. The suburb was named after a major of the town, Mr H.J. Wannenburg. The municipality called the Wannenburg scheme "one of the finest in the country", 27.6.1938. Also CAD, VWN 2849. Letter, Germiston Municipality to Minister of Labour, 8.5.1941.

[70] CAD, GMA Box 200, 72/1/4, vol. 4. Minutes Germiston Municipality, Public Health and Non-European Affairs Committee, 11.1.1943.

[71] Interview 26.

factory. Of the children of these families, of whom 10% supported their families in 1944, the Medical Officer of Health maintained that,

> the children earning money, either can scarcely support themselves on their earnings or they make a monthly nominal contribution towards the family income.[72]

The case of Mr C.J.H. du Plessis of First Street, Wannenburg, provides some insight into the lives of tenants of the suburb. He was an elderly man living on an old age pension on which he had to support two grandchildren. He was already indebted to the municipality for £27.16.8 of arrears in rent, which he had promised to pay off at 5/- per month. It was felt that he could not be evicted, for then he would only move into a slum again.[73]

The circumstances of the Dicks, Van Tonder and Street families add substance to this remark. The Dicks family, who took a house in Primrose, a slightly more affluent suburb of Germiston, at £3.15.0 per month, seem to have survived on the earnings of their two children, the son Higgens earning £1.1.8 per week and the daughter Bella bringing in £1.1.1. The Van Tonder and Street families had children who were too young to find employment. Both families had at first lived in one room each, but later managed to afford two rooms each to live in.[74] Although these cases would seem to represent the bottom rungs of the survival ladder, they give some indication of the importance of the financial contribution of the children of these families.

During the twenties and thirties impoverished Afrikaner migrants settled mainly in the poorest areas of the Witwatersrand. In spite of bad housing

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[72] CAD, GMA box 200, 72/1/4, vols. 4 and 5. Report of the Medical Officer of Health, Germiston, 8.5.1943 and 4.9.1944.

[73] CAD, VWN 2849. Letter, Germiston Municipality to Minister of Labour and Social Welfare, 8.5.1941.

[74] CAD, VWN 679. Report, Germiston Children's Aid and Benevolent Society to Germiston Magistrate, 24.1.1936.

conditions in working-class suburbs, Vrededorpers especially, vigorously resisted efforts to have their suburb declared a slum. In George Town equally bad slum conditions prevailed. It was found that garment workers who lived there, either with kin or in rented accommodation, were housed under very bad conditions. However, during the late thirties the erection of the Wannenburg housing scheme brought some relief to the housing shortage in Germiston. Although these working-class communities in which Afrikaners in Johannesburg sought refuge still need to be investigated in depth, this preliminary overview seems to indicate that Afrikaner poor were readily incorporated into class conscious communities such as Vrededorp in Johannesburg and George Town in Germiston.

## Male Relatives of the Garment Workers

Within these working-class communities, the Afrikaner family as economic wage-earning unit, had to explore all possible avenues of employment to ensure its economic survival. The employment opportunities of men, traditionally the main providers of the family, had a significant influence on the degree to which their wives and children were pressed to go to work. Davin, in her study of British family life before the First World War, found that,

> As a general rule in the towns and cities the better and more certain wage a man could earn, the less likely his wife was to go out regularly to work, provided he remained in health and employment.[75]

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[75] A. Davin, 'Imperialism and Motherhood', *History Workshop Journal*, no. 5, Spring 1978, p.32. In an analysis of relationships in the London tailoring trade in the 1830's, Taylor similarly found that only a master tailor could afford to support a non-working wife. B. Taylor, '"The Men are as Bad as their Masters": Socialism, Feminism and Sexual Antagonism in the London Tailoring Trade in the 1830's', in J.L. Newton, M. Ryan and R. Walkowitz eds., *Sex, Class* , p.206. In his study of classes in Victorian England, Stedman-Jones also found that the wives of skilled men usually did not work. When they did work, they were forced to do so and consequently were in no position to bargain for the best-paid employment. G. Stedman-Jones, *Outcast London: A Study in Relationships between Classes in Victorian England,* Hardmondsworth: Penguin, 1971, pp.83-84.

Employment opportunities for working-class Afrikaner men, subject to similar constraints, underwent major changes during the first decades of the twentieth century. At first, some men could provide for their families by finding employment in independent small enterprises which drew on skills they had acquired in the rural areas.[76] However, industrialisation and capitalist development after the Boer War put an end to these small independent ventures. In the period up to the First World War, scores of men became unemployed and had to survive on charity, or on wages earned as unskilled labourers on temporary relief schemes, such as the construction of the Main Reef Road project, the sewerage system of Johannesburg and the Transvaal railway network.[77] In addition, after the 1907 strikes on the Reef gold mines, Afrikaner men gradually entered the mining industry.[78]

The First World War and the corresponding reduction of imports provided a major boost to the mining industry, capitalist agriculture and the initial development of the manufacturing sector.[79] However, after the war, boom conditions soon gave way to an economic crisis, precipitated by Britain's return to the Gold Standard, which triggered a depression lasting from 1920 to 1922.[80] On the Witwatersrand in particular, the depression was accompanied by an extended period of industrial unrest among both black and white workers.[81] Yudelman identifies several com-

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[76] C. van Onselen, *Studies*, vol. II, pp.114-120.

[77] Ibid., pp.160, 126 and cf. E.J.P. Stals, *Afrikaners*, vol. I, ch. 7.

[78] D. Yudelman, *Emergence* , pp.70-76.

[79] Ibid., p.240.

[80] Ibid. See ch. 4 for a comprehensive discussion.

[81] cf. P. Bonner, 'The Transvaal Native Congress, 1917-1920: The Radicalisation of the Black Petty Bourgeoisie on the Rand', in S. Marks and R. Rathbone, *Industrialisation and Social Change in South Africa: African Class Formation, Culture and Consciousness*, New York: Longman, 1982; P. Bonner, 'The 1920 Black Mineworkers' Strike: A Preliminary Account', in B. Bozzoli ed., *Labour, Townships and Protests*, Johannesburg: Ravan, 1979. Also F.J. Grobler, 'Die Invloed van Geskoolde Blanke Arbeid', pp.373-397.

ponents of this economic crisis which included among others, " the Afrikanerization (sic) of the white labour force; the large-scale white unemployment accompanying massive urbanization..."[82]

During the twenties and thirties Afrikaner males constituted an ever-increasing percentage of the white urban labour force. This is clearly evident from the percentage increase of Afrikaner employees in the mining industry which, apart from the state, was the largest employer in South Africa.[83] A brief look at the total number of white miners in the Transvaal during the inter-war years, reveals that in 1920 50,8% of all white miners had been born in the Transvaal. In 1930 this figure rose 64,6% and in 1940 reached 81,2%.[84] Pauw's investigation into the occupational distribution of Afrikaners in the cities during the same period, confirms these figures. He found that in 1926 some 40% of all miners were Afrikaners.[85]

However, during the inter-war years, for a variety of reasons, this sector of the labour market did not expand significantly. The 1922 strike, in particular, had a marked impact on the number of miners employed on the Witwatersrand. Whereas in 1920, 28 055 men were engaged in the mining industry, this figure dropped markedly to 22 099 in 1922, a level at which it hovered for the rest of the twenties. Only in 1935, when 38 774 white males were employed, did it exceed the pre-1920 levels.[86] It is evident from this picture of relatively stagnant white employment that, despite efforts of the Pact government to improve white employment opportunities on the mines, it was not easy to procure such employment. This is again

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[82] D. Yudelman, *Emergence*, p.158.

[83] Ibid., p.169.

[84] Ibid., see table 2, p.132.

[85] S. Pauw, *Beroepsarbeid*, pp.297-298.

[86] The exact figures are: 1923 - 22 457, 1925 - 25 312, 1930 - 27 880, 1935 - 38 774 and 1940 - 51 994. D. Yudelman, *Emergence*, p.132.

reflected in the decrease of the percentage of miners in relation to the total white male population in the Transvaal which dropped from 8,7% in 1918 to 7,4% in 1921 and increased slowly to 8,3% in 1936.[87]

The economic decline and labour unrest of the late 1910's and early 1920's also resulted in a sharp fall in average annual wages in the mining industry, from an average of £485 per annum, to £375 per annum in 1924/25. (See Table 7.)[88]

In view of conditions prevalent in the mining industry, it is revealing to compare the number of fathers of garment workers who were interviewed for this study, who were miners, with the number of their husbands who were likewise employed. About double the number of fathers (8:4), compared to husbands of the women were miners. It would seem that during the late 1910's, many fathers of garment workers who had migrated to the Rand, found employment as miners and were relatively prosperous while thus employed.[89] However, a minority of garment workers were married to miners, suggesting a shortage of employment opportunities in this area, and those who were, did not remain in the clothing industry for very long, but became housewives.[90] Miners' wives seemed to have occupied a more fortunate position. Mrs Nel recalled that these women could afford better homes and prettier furniture and went on to outline the view commonly held of miners' wives,

> Hulle het lekker 'gespend'.....ek moet eerlik sê daar was (hulle) 'snobbish'. (They spent a lot.....I must honestly say that there (they) were snobbish.)[91]

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[87] Ibid., p.229.

[88] This is clearly a more drastic reduction than the decline manifested in average annual wages of the manufacturing sector as a whole.

[89] See, e.g., [illegible] 2, 12, 30 and 25.

[90] Interview

[91] Interview 19. [illegible]s view seems to corroborate the findings of the Carnegie Commission that often miners tended to be 'spendthrift' and not to save much. Carnegie Commission, *Poor White*, vol. I, p.194.

However, even men who could find well-paid employment as miners were not necessarily permanently secure, because miners' phthisis, an occupational disease, incapacitated many men.[92] For example, Mrs H. continued to work in the clothing industry after her husband contracted phthisis, a disease which he suffered from for seventeen years.[93] Men who contracted phthisis seemed to be a breed apart, as is illustrated by the case of Mr C.E. Ralph of Germiston. He had been discharged with first-stage phthisis in 1916 and had to support a family of fourteen, consisting of eleven girls and three boys. In 1920 he informed the mayor of Germiston that not only had his wife had triplets, but that he had,

> Quite a family for a phthisis man to rear up having been off with first stage since 1916.[94]

Mrs Britten, whose husband died of phthisis after a long illness, commented that the phthisis men worked until the very end, and recalled their treatment by the mining authorities,

> Hulle sal nooit sê dit is tisis nie. Nee, hulle is baie oulik; as hulle tisis sê moet hulle baie uitbetaal..... en dan sê hulle maar tuberkulose jy weet, of borskwale ja..... (They will never say that it is phthisis No, they are very clever; if they say phthisis they have to pay out a lot....and then they say tuberculosis instead you know, or chest ailments, yes.....)[95]

Once primary and ante-primary phthisis had been diagnosed, the possibility that miners would find alternative employment declined sharply, for employers were reluctant to employ them even if they were still fit for work.[96] Mr A.J. Bauer, an unemployed miners' phthisis patient of Vrededorp, serves as a good example. His appeal to the Witwatersrand

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92 The disease, caused by prolonged exposure to dust in underground conditions, especially in the early days of the industry struck down a large percentage of miners. D. Yudelman, *Emergence*, pp.127, 93.

93 Interview 14.

94 CAD, GMA box 98, vol. II, 1920-26. Letter, C.E. Ralph to Mayor, Germiston, 24.5.1920.

95 Interview 3.

96 *Official Labour Gazette*, 'Town Unemployment', vol. 1, no. 1, April 1925.

Tailors' Association (hereafter WTA) to reissue his daughter Martha's membership card, in order to facilitate her finding employment, reveals his inability to be the provider of the family, as well as his dependence on the earning capacity of his daughter,

> we are hard up .... but Sir I hope you all considered this she got her membership card. (sic)[97]

These men, who could no longer support their families adequately, joined a large and growing corps of unemployed men.

A systematic analysis of the problem of white male unemployment during the inter-war years has yet to be carried out, but some conclusions can tentatively be drawn. The only figures for white male unemployment which exist are those of unemployed men registered at Post Offices before 1924 and thereafter at the employment bureaux of the Department of Labour. These bureaux, which were established in the major urban areas of South Africa, collected statistics of the number of unemployed applicants, as well as the number of men who could be placed in employment, be it subsidised or unsubsidised.

The problem with these figures is that it is unclear how many men who were unemployed actually were registered with these bureaux. Nevertheless, even though the available figures do not present an accurate picture of the white male unemployment situation during the inter-war years, they do serve as "an indicator of the magnitude of the problem".[98]

In 1920, nationwide, there were 20 708 men registered as unemployed. By 1922, the year of the Rand Revolt, this figure had doubled to 53 396, reflecting post-war recessionary trends and the industrial unrest of those years. During the twenties, despite slightly improved economic

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[97] GWU, Aab 1.166. Letter, A.J. Bauer Vrededorp to General Secretary WTA, 5 May 1928.

[98] R.H. Davies, 'The White Working Class', p.47.

conditions, unemployment figures rose steadily to 81 042 in 1930, the start of the Great Depression which lasted from 1929-1933, and contributed to a record 187 924 unemployed white males in 1933. During the thirties the unemployment rate in the country fell to 119 218 in 1935 and eventually to 82 200 in 1939, a figure still well above that of 1922.[99]

The figures for registered unemployed white men in Johannesburg follow a similar pattern. In 1920 there were 9 827 men who had registered as unemployed. By 1922 this number had virtually doubled to 17 837 and then gradually increased to a total of 23 526 registered unemployed in 1930. This figure rose sharply to 72 400 in 1933, when the Depression was at its worst. By 1935 this number had virtually halved, but by 1939, despite state initiatives to curb unemployment, 28 450 white males were still registered as unemployed in Johannesburg. This figure, like the one for national unemployment, remained much higher than the 1922 figures.

A more refined indicator of the state of white male unemployment in Johannesburg during the Depression, emerges from the figures calculated per thousand of the total European population by the Department of Labour. During the period January 1932 to December 1936, the period for which figures are available, registered male unemployment rose from 7,9 per thousand to a peak of 18,5 per thousand in January 1933. Thereafter it

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[99] *Number of White Male Applicants for Employment at Labour Bureaux, 1920-1939.*

| Year | Johannesburg | Total |
|---|---|---|
| 1920 | 9 827 | 20 708 |
| 1922 | 17 837 | 53 396 |
| 1926 | 16 530 | 53 586 |
| 1930 | 23 526 | 81 042 |
| 1931 | 27 380 | 120 021 |
| 1932 | 43 653 | 174 442 |
| 1933 | 72 400 | 187 924 |
| 1935 | 43 281 | 119 218 |
| 1939 | 28 450 | 82 200 |

Union of South Africa, *Official Yearbooks*, nos.4-21.

slowly declined and from December 1935 to December 1936 rapidly halved from 5,2 per thousand to 2,3 per thousand.[100]

The effects of unemployment, regardless of its causes, were experienced by the families of garment workers. An analysis of the Voters' Rolls of Germiston and Johannesburg reveals that a number of males relatives of the garment workers, presumably their fathers, had no occupation or were retired. From Table 4 it is also evident that the majority of male relatives of garment workers who fell into this category, resided in the older, more settled but more impoverished working-class communities, such as George Town in Germiston and Vrededorp in Johannesburg. This gives some indication of the extent of deprivation which faced these garment workers and their relatives, and the way in which the burden of keeping the family from destitution was moved from the *pater familias* to the female members of the family. This trend is borne out by evidence in the GWU records. Johanna Nel, who applied for a confinement allowance in the 1930's, indicated that her father, a waiter, was unemployed and could not support the family.[101] The husband of Heila Campher of Braamfontein could only earn a few shillings "now and then, whilst doing odd jobs",

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[100] The figures per thousand of the total European population of Johannesburg (199 494) are:
January & July 1932 : 7,9 and 7,8 respectively
January & July 1933 : 18,5 and 13,2 respectively
January & July 1934 : 13,9 and 11,3 respectively
January & December 1935 : 8,5 and 7,8 respectively
January & December 1936 : 4,6 and 2,3 respectively
UG 37-'33, 43-'34, 11-'36, 44-'37. Union of South Africa, Department of Labour, *Annual Reports*, 1932-1936. State labour bureaux divided registered unemployed men into three formal categories: Class A - men who were capable of heavy labour; Class B - men who were less competent; Class C - men who were 'unemployable', mostly due to old age and infirmity. UG 43-1934. Department of Labour, *Annual Report* 1933, p.10. See relevant articles in the *Social and Industrial Review*, August 1926. In contrast to this picture of continued unemployment amongst white men, the Department remarked in 1933 that the proportion of female factory workers had increased, which was to some extent due to the inability of men to find work.

[101] GWU, Bcd 4.1.1. Affidavits, Confinement Allowances, Mrs Nel, 22.11.1937.

while Susan Smook's husband, who suffered from ill health, was a hawker who earned very little.[102]

During the inter-war years, urban unemployment was further aggravated by massive urbanisation. The Carnegie Commission found that the white urban population of South Africa increased considerably from 55,78% of the total population in 1921 to 61,27% in 1931. Correspondingly, during the same period, the rural population declined proportionally from 44,22% to 38,73%.[103] The Witwatersrand as the major industrial area of South Africa, absorbed large numbers of these rural migrants. In 1931 the total population of the Witwatersrand was about one million, with the black population increasing from 293 657 in 1911 to 301 577 in 1921, and doubling to 614 967 in 1936. (See Table 2.) In addition, this body of work seekers was further enlarged by a growing generation of young white work-seekers who flooded the labour market during the twenties. Between 1920 and 1924 juvenile unemployment rose to yet unheard of proportions. It was calculated that in May 1921 57 372 young men had turned 18 during the preceding five years, but that 85 762, that is 28 000 more, would turn 18 in the following five years. This was a direct result of the unprecedented increase in the number of births after the Boer War. In the Transvaal the number of births for 1903/04 was 48,9 in 100 and in 1904/05 37,85 in 100.[104]

The church, especially, was well aware that the younger generation in particular would not be able to find employment when they were eligible to do so. In 1922 *Die Kerkblad* maintained,

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[102] GWU, Bcd 4.1.1. Affidavits, Confinement Allowances, Mrs Campher and Mrs Smook. Interview 30 and 22.

[103] Carnegie Commission, *Poor White*, vol. I, p.57. The percentage of white males engaged in agriculture also declined from 37,28% in 1921 to 35,17% in 1926.

[104] S.Pauw, *Beroepsarbeid*, pp.107-109, also quoted in F.A. van Jaarsveld, *Die Afrikaner se Groot Trek*, p.169.

> Werkeloosheid dreigt van alle kanten. Is het niet om ons met weemoed te vervullen om jonge krachtigen mensen te zien rondlopen van arbeidsgelegenheid ontroofd?
> (Unemployment threatens from all sides. Does it not fill us with grief to see strong young folk walking about bereft of job opportunities?)[105]

These young men entered the labour market totally unprepared, as they often left school too young which left them with very few options other than unskilled labour.[106] An investigation done by the Carnegie Commission of the educational levels of children of poor Afrikaners, found that in a sample of 462 families, 44,8% of the sons and daughters had passed standard six, i.e. 171 of 414 sons and 159 of 323 daughters who were investigated. A total of only 29,2% had left school before passing standard six.[107] By contrast, the Commission found that of the 462 families, 44,8% or 366 of the parents had attended primary or farm schools, 39,0% (319) could barely read or write and 11,9% were totally illiterate.[108] The educational level of a Bushveld farmer arriving on the Rand and calling on the Department of Labour for employment, clearly demonstrates this state of affairs. He had arrived with a wife and six children on a donkey wagon loaded with an eight-day supply of food to last him until he had found employment. However, when asked about his level of education, he said that he had read the Bible four times and that his son had attained standard six.[109]

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[105] *Die Kerkblad,* 'Nogeens de Drankkwestie', 1.9.1922, p.5.

[106] *South African Journal of Industries,* 'Careers for the Rising Generation', vol. 4, no. 11, December 1921, p.890.

[107] Carnegie Commission, *Poor White*, vol. II, p.125 (A).

[108] Ibid., vol. V, p.169 (A). In a similar investigation of 562 female factory employees the Commission found that 57% of the sample had attained standard six or a higher qualification. Ibid., vol. I, p.221 (A). Pollak's research, also undertaken in 1932 indicated that 49,9% (269 of 540) of the women she investigated, had passed standard six and that only 19,6% had left school prior to standard six. H. Pollak, *Women*, Addendum, p.46.

[109] *Germiston Advocate,* 'Back to the Land', 4.10.1935.

A lack of skills further handicapped these migrants in procuring employment. Pauw's analysis of urban occupations in which Afrikaners predominated, reveals that in 1926 some 60% of all unskilled white labourers were Afrikaners. A total of 38% of men were employed in the transport sector, but only 18,7% of all white men employed in the skilled trades were Afrikaners.[110]

During the early twenties, before the Pact electoral victory, the lack of skilled labour in the ranks of Afrikaner men was blamed partly on the failure of the trades to train young apprentices. It was maintained that employers tended to rely on the ready supply of trained immigrants[111] and preferably paid low wages to the local juvenile labour force, to the extent that in 1928 the Johannesburg Juvenile Affairs Board declared,

> Some individuals are so keen in placing the youngsters in work that they would push the father out of his job to make room for his child, because he would be so much cheaper.[112]

Nevertheless, in secondary industry this preference for cheaper juvenile labour rapidly tapered off once these youths could qualify for adult wages.[113] Moreover, during the period 1920-1925, affected by adverse

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[110] S. Pauw, *Beroepsarbeid,* pp.297-306. Pauw also found that during the thirties, this picture remained remarkably unchanged.

[111] *South African Journal of Industries,* 'Making Provision for Our Children', vol. 6, no. 9, September 1923, p.382. During the late twenties efforts were made to send young rural migrants back to the farms. However, this scheme of the Department of Labour failed when it was found that some 50% of these young men eventually migrated back to the urban areas. *Germiston Advocate,* 'Back to the Land', 4.10.1935.

[112] CAD, ARB 490. Secretary of the Juvenile Affairs Board (hereafter JAB), 'Work of the Juvenile Affairs Board', 3.9.1928. The aim of the Witwatersrand JAB was to find employment for boys and girls whilst still at school, look after them from the age 14-18/19 and follow the careers of all those registered. CAD, MNW 3547. Statement re. work of the JAB submitted to the Minister, 26.11.1920.

[113] The trend was, however, partly controlled by the Apprenticeship Act of 1922 which was "intended to turn numerous 'poor white' children into 'civilised' adults" by means of thorough craft training. B. Freund, 'The Social Character of Secondary Industry in South Africa', paper presented to the African Studies Institute Seminar, University of the Witwatersrand, 22 April 1985. Due to educational provisions in the act, black youths were generally excluded from its orbit.

economic conditions, these average annual wages underwent a decline, evident in sectors of the manufacturing industries such as metal engineering, vehicles and parts, furniture and building and contracting. (See Table 7.) Between 1924/25 and 1929/30 average annual wages recovered to some extent, only to be greatly reduced as a consequence of the Great Depression. Despite the post-1933 economic recovery, average annual wages did not increase spectacularly during the latter half of the 1930's and in some sectors such as the heat, light and power, and chemical and drug industry, even declined. (See Table 7.)

The decline of average real wages as calculated by the Economics and Wages Commission in 1925, presents a more detailed analysis of the difficulties experienced by men employed in the manufacturing and other industries. Average real wages in the engineering, building, printing and general manufacturing industries had all peaked in 1921/22 and then begun to decline. Building and clerical workers experienced a decrease in real wages from 110.9d. to 86.8d. and 102s.7d. to 94s.6d. respectively. Wages in ... manufacturing industry similarly decreased from 84s.9d. to 80s.7d. over the same period.[115] In these categories the decrease in real wages compared to 1910 varied from 16% for engineering workers to 6% for the manufacturing industry and 2,5% for builders.[116] In all classes of occupation the average weekly real wages of European male workers on the Witwatersrand also declined from 108s.7d. in 1921 to 95s.11d. in 1924.[117]

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See also R.H. Davies, *Capital, State*, p.162. During the period 1933-1939, the number of men trained as artisans increased considerably, from 6 103 in 1933 to 11 583 in 1939. Ibid., p.257.

[114] UG 14-'26. *Report of the Economics and Wages Commission*, p.269. The real wages were calculated in two categories - on a basis of food, fuel, light and rent, including or excluding sundries. The former is quoted here.

[115] Ibid.

[116] Ibid., p.268.

[117] Ibid., p.270.

These decreases in average real wages and average annual wages affected many of the male relatives of the garment workers. An analysis of the occupations of these men as they are registered in the 1931 Voters' Rolls of Vrededorp, Langlaagte, Jeppe, Fordsburg and Germiston, reveals that the majority were employed as skilled labourers such as blacksmiths, plumbers, carpenters and builders. (See Table 4.) The latter categories, even though moderately well-paid, were very sensitive to economic fluctuations, and the men involved in these occupations were thus subject to patterns of cyclical employment.[118] The second largest group consisted of low-paid unskilled men employed as gate-keepers, caretakers and artisans, followed by a considerable number of railway employees. A smaller number of garment workers were related to miners and clerks. In addition, two garment workers were related to men who were self-employed, in the one case as a transport rider and in the other as a trolley owner.[119]

In comparison, a brief look at the occupations of the husbands and fathers of the garment workers who were interviewed for this study, similarly reveals that a considerable number of garment workers were married to skilled labourers such as builders, carpenters, furniture-makers and butchers. (See Table 5.) Like the above group, a proportion of these women were also married to railway employees and a smaller number to miners. In addition, two garment workers were married to policemen, two to butchers and two to railway workers.

At this stage it is difficult to assess the importance of the wages of the brothers of the garment workers in the economic structure of the family. It would seem that they did not support the family to the same extent as did their sisters. Even the Carnegie Commission does not throw

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[118] See e.g. interviews 22 and 30.

[119] JPL, Voters' Rolls Johannesburg and Germiston, 1931. It was not possible to differentiate clearly between fathers and husbands of garment workers in these Rolls.

much light on what happened to the sons within the family context between leaving school and marrying in their twenties.[120] However, it does analyse the kinds of employment sought by sons in the cities in comparison to the kinds obtained by the fathers. During the thirties sons tended to express a greater preference for much more specialised trades requiring apprenticeships, such as furniture-makers, mechanics, plasterers, barbers, printers and tailors. 5,5% of the sons, as opposed to fathers, were employed as commercial and clerical workers and a few exceptions belonged to the 'learned professions'.[121]

From the preceding analysis it is evident that newly urbanised Afrikaner men, in their quest for stable employment, were confronted with considerable difficulties. During the 1920's and 1930's the white labour market was adversely affected by deteriorating economic conditions. Consequently, unemployment was rife and urbanisation as well as a vastly increased juvenile labour force added to an over-supply of labour, a development which depressed wages considerably.[122] These circumstances equally affected the male relatives of the garment workers. They were mostly labourers who, due to a lack of education and skills, as well as being handicapped by ill health and old age, could not provide adequately for their families. Consequently, unlike the wives of miners and other

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[120] From 1916-1920 until 1941-44 the average age of brides remained between 24.72 and 25.25 years. M.J.M. Prinsloo, *Vrouearbeid*, p.353. The bridegroom would presumably have been either the same age or slightly older.

[121] This study was done of the livelihood of 602 still living fathers, all of whom originally gained a livelihood on farms, but had moved to urban areas at the time of the Carnegie Commission investigation. Carnegie Commission, *Poor White*, vol. II, pp.130-137. Only one example of an offspring of a garment worker who went to university, was found in the records of the GWU. During 1931 a son of a garment worker, Mr S.G. Nienaber of Braamfontein, studied at the University of Pretoria, but owing to the lack of finance had to terminate his studies. GWU, Bbc 16.1. Correspondence, W.J. Baker to General Secretary, 31.8.1931 and letter S.J. Nienaber to Secretary Industrial Council, 6.5.1933. Likewise, very few of the offspring of the garment workers interviewed for this study, completed a university education.

[122] This does not even take into account the scope of the competition of cheap black labour, especially in the low-paid categories of unskilled employment.

better-paid men, their wives, daughters and sons had to work in order to keep the family from destitution. In 1931, at the height of the Depression when scores of women were entering the clothing industry, Solly Sachs, well aware of this situation, remarked,

> The vast majority of female workers are not only dependent for their livelihood on the earnings in the clothing industry, but are solely and partly supports of families and a large number of them are daughters of phthisis or invalid fathers.[123]

## Conclusion

The Afrikaner poor, as well as the garment workers, followed readily discernable routes when they left the countryside and devised specific blueprints for survival once they arrived in the urban areas. As a strategy for urban existence, they usually settled in the poorest suburbs of the city and built up a cohesive community. The majority of the garment workers, it would seem, settled in Vrededorp in Johannesburg and George Town in Germiston, two white suburbs where, during the inter-war years, slum conditions were predominant.

In these communities, Afrikaner families, functioning as wage-earning units, implemented numerous alternatives in order to survive and incorporated the efforts and abilities of all the family members, both male and female. After the turn of the century, capitalist expansion and industrialisation cut off existing avenues of independent enterprise previously open to unskilled Afrikaner men. However, in their search for waged labour, they had to enter a labour market which during the inter-war years underwent considerable changes. Unemployment became a major problem, an over-supply of labour developed during the twenties, partly due to a greatly increased white juvenile labour force. The situation was compounded by a marked decrease in wages and by the lack of skills

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[123] GWU, Dac 2.7.10 and Dac 2.8.1. Letter, S. Sachs to Witwatersrand Trade and Labour Council, 1.10.1931.

and education of many newly arrived migrants. Moreover, they had to compete for employment against a much cheaper black labour force.

Therefore, as a wage earning unit, the family had to find alternative means for survival. When fathers could no longer find adequate employment, their sons, but especially their daughters, had to find employment in a flourishing manufacturing industry in general, and the clothing industry in particular.

# CHAPTER 2

# THE WITWATERSRAND CLOTHING INDUSTRY, 1918-1939

## Development and Exploitation

### Introduction

In attempts to explain the movement of women into and off the labour market, the view has been commonly held that "women act as the reserve army of labour, to be absorbed and rejected by capitalism in times of economic prosperity and depression respectively".[1] However, evidence from the early twentieth century in Britain indicates that this is not necessarily the case. In the words of a Miss Squire, a factory inspector in Great Britain in the early 1900's,

> The husband is out of work, and the wife at once goes round to the nearest place where she knows work is to be found. She wants it immediately for necessities, and she takes it at any price, and of any description, that is offered.[2]

Stedman-Jones's study of class relations in Victorian England echoed these findings,

> ...the weakness of the woman's industrial position stemmed partly from the fact that the supply of her labour was not primarily dependent upon the demand for it, but rather upon the state of the demand for her husband's labour.[3]

The South African data tends to support this view, at least in the case of Afrikaner women taken up in industrial labour on the Rand. An inverse relationship existed between the wife's pattern of employment and that

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1 B Bozzoli, 'Feminism and Marxism in South African Studies', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 9, no. 2, April 1983. C. Walker, *Women and Resistance*, London: Onyx Press, 1982, p.2.

2 D. Bythell, *The Sweated Trades: Outwork in Nineteenth Century Britain*, London: Batsford Academic, 1978, p.167.

3 G. Stedman-Jones, *Outcast London*, p.84.

of her husband. As the capacity of men to earn declined, so the stimulus for women to seek work increased. Women on the Witwatersrand, and particularly in the clothing industry during the twenties, seemed to have been absorbed by capitalism during times of depression and *not* in times of prosperity.[4] In 1932, in the depth of the Depression, the Department of Labour observed in a similar vein,

> the proportion of female factory workers has slightly increased. This is in some measure owing to the continued unemployment among men. There is a growing tendency among women to remain in or return to the factory after marriage and in a large percentage of industrial families the women are the principal wage earners.[5]

Thus, during the late twenties and thirties, the increased employment of women became a feature of newly established South African industries, especially of the clothing and textile, fruit canning and packing, sweets and biscuit industries, and of laundries.[6]

On the Witwatersrand the clothing industry in particular attracted the majority of white female workers, their increased employment being closely linked with the capacity of their menfolk to find work. The case of Mrs Minnie Burger, a garment worker, gives some indication of this trend. Although she had been a shorthand typist before her marriage in the mid-twenties, she could not find similar employment in Johannesburg and of necessity took up employment in a clothing factory when her husband lost his job during the Depression.[7] Mrs H. Mouton of Melville serves

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[4] Prinsloo maintains that the Depression *itself* could have been a main cause of the greatly increased number of women employed in industry during the late twenties and early thirties. M.J.M. Prinsloo, *Vrouearbeid*, p.136. Exact figures for white males and white females in the Union are:

| Year | White Males | White Females |
|---|---|---|
| 1921/22 | 53 937 | 6 0 8 |
| 1927/28 | 72 956 | 1 1[illegible]2 |
| 1932/33 | 69 983 | 1 7190 |

Ibid., p.360.

[5] UG 37-'33. Department of Labour, *Annual Report* 1932, p.26.

[6] UG 11-'36. Department of Labour, *Annual Report* 1934, p.46.

[7] GWU, Bca 3. Statement, Mrs Minnie Burger prepared for GWU Commission of Inquiry, 1948.

as another good example. In 1931 she was employed at Progress Clothing Manufacturers at 27/6 per week for 9 months. In mid-1931, at the advanced age of 47, she had taken a job and became the breadwinner of the family, most probably when her husband lost his job due to the Depression.[8]

This chapter examines the development of the clothing industry as a major employer of white women on the Witwatersrand during the inter-war years. Incorporation into the industry introduced Afrikaner women into the ranks of the employed, enabled these families to survive and helped to mould their character. The pattern and tempo of the development of the industry thus provide a crucial backdrop to a study of the working and home lives of the garment workers in particular and Afrikaner working women in general. Their home circumstances and state of employment of their husbands and fathers, served as the index for the urgency with which garment workers had to find work. As a result those industries, such as the manufacture of clothing, which employed women extensively, had a ready supply of labour which was extremely vulnerable to exploitation.

## The Development of the Clothing Industry 1915-1939

The development of the clothing industry is well documented and needs brief mention only.[9] Two forces combined in the post-First World War period to give rise to a female working force in the garment industry. First, the impoverishment of Afrikaners in the towns and countryside drove many women to the towns in search of work. Second, the growth and alteration of production in the garment industry itself served as a major attraction for these women in search of work.

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[8] GWU, Bcd 4.1.1. Unemployment Benefit Fund, 3.7.1931 and Application, Mrs Mouton for Relief Unemployment Benefit Fund, 6.7.1932.

[9] See e.g. H.A.F.Barker, 'The Economics of the Wholesale Clothing Industry of South Africa', PhD thesis, University of South Africa, 1961. L. Witz, 'Servant', ch.1.

The disruption of the trade routes during the First World War greatly stimulated the development of the South African manufacturing sector. Restricted imports, the comparative lack of foreign competition and the increased demands of the local market created conditions of 'artificial' protection in which the industry could flourish.[10] The local market itself was also expanding rapidly as the urban population of the Rand absorbed an ever-increasing stream of migrants from the rural areas. (See Table 2.)

From 1915/16 onwards, the clothing industry of the Witwatersrand expanded rapidly and greatly benefited from these circumstances. With foreign competition reduced, manufacturers began to cater for the local market, which among other things, demanded "modern working trousers made with extra strength" and the "sterkstrong" trousers produced by the East Rand Clothing Manufacturers.[11] At first consumers, mainly newly arrived impoverished and unsophisticated rural migrants, were very uncritical, but gradually they became more demanding and sophisticated in their choice of clothes. In the 1930's, Lidens Ltd, also of Germiston, described their shirts and pyjamas as being much superior to the "cult of the cheap and common"[12] (in clothing) made elsewhere on the Rand, while the African Clothing Manufacturers in Germiston portrayed their clientele as "the working man and working girl of today", no longer "demarcated in apparel by indifference to cut and quality of materials".[13]

In the expanding manufacturing industry on the Rand new jobs were being created, and in many cases these were taken up by white Afrikaner women. At first their entry into the industry took place when many of the male

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10 R.H. Davies, *Capital, State,* p.110; M.J.M. Prinsloo, *Vrouearbeid*, p.114.

11 A. MacMillan, *Environs of the Golden City and Pretoria,* Cape Town: Cape Times, 1934?, pp.62, 69.

12 Ibid., p.71.

13 Ibid., p.62.

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