

https://dspace.org/

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

Brink, Elsabe

2015-01-12
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/16447

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

THE AFRIKANER WOMEN OF THE GARMENT WORKERS UNION, 1918-1939

Elsabé Brink

A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Arts, University of the Witwatersrand, for the Degree of Master of Arts.

December 1986.

ABSTRACT

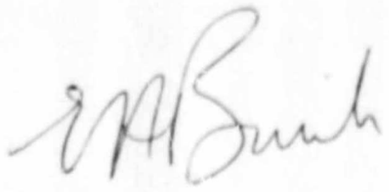
This dissertation examines the working and family lives of the Afrikaner women who were members of the Garment Workers' Union of the Transvaal between 1918 and 1939. It assesses the extent to which the garment workers, as working women, contributed to the shaping of South African society during this period. Through an examination of archival sources and an extensive number of interviews, the circumstances in which they engaged in industrial labour when other strategies for survival of the family as an wage-earning unit failed, were determined. Within rapidly changing community and family relationships these Afrikaner women became major breadwinners in the family. As a result they were often denigrated by society, but emerged as women who asserted their own respectability, dignity and sense of worth within the factory, union, community and family.

DECLARATION

I declare that this dissertation is my own unaided work. It is being submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted for any degree or examination in any other university.

Elsabé Antoinette Brink

22nd day of December 1986.



For Basil

(I)t is most misleading to focus attention upon the supposed 'leaders' of the working class. Above all it is simply impossible to stereotype the complexity and volatility of working class thought and action.

D. Geary, 'Identifying Militancy', in R.J. Evans, *The German Working Class, 1888-1933*, London: Croom Helm, 1982.

The deeply grained habit of cooperation, the habit of valueing people rather than concepts, the directness of emotional response are probably the main qualities that civilised society should try to take over from working class life.

B. Jackson, *Working Class Community: Some General Notions Raised by a Series of Studies in Northern England,* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968, p.159.



1.



A garment worker at work at her machine.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	page
PREFACE	ix
LIST OF TABLES	xiv
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS	xv
ILLUSTRATIONS	xvii
INTRODUCTION VOLKSMOEDERS OR FACTORY WORKERS	1
CHAPTER 1 WOMEN AND COMMUNITY 'Our Town is full of Need'	
Introduction - The Seductive Swindle of the City	20
Witwatersrand Working Class Communities - An Overview	24
Male Relatives of the Garment Workers	39
Conclusion	53
CHAPTER 2 THE CLOTHING INDUSTRY, 1915-1939 Development and Exploitation	
Introduction	55
Development of the Witwatersrand Clothing Industry 1915-39	57
Exploitation in the Factories	66
Conclusion	74
CHAPTER 3 THE URBAN AFRIKANER FAMILY Girls with Families and Girls without Families	
Introduction - One Less Mouth to Feed	75
Garment Workers as Mothers	79
Garment Workers as Daughters	90
From 'Frenchfontein' to the 'Game Reserve' - Prostitution in Johannesburg	99
Conclusion	108
CHAPTER 4 NEITHER PROSTITUTE NOR DESTITUTE - YET IN NEED OF ASSISTANCE The Economic Marginality of the Garment Workers	
Introduction	109
Strikes in the Clothing Industry, 1918-1932	116
Development of the Garment Workers Union, 1918-1939	123
The Socio-Economic Function of the Union	127
Health	130
Personal Welfare	134
Leisure Activities of the Garment Workers	139
Conclusion	143

CHAPTER 5
"N PERSOON VAN DIE WERKENDEKLAS' -
FACTORY GIRLS OR FACTORY 'MEIDE'?
The Social Marginality of the Garment Workers
Introduction 145
Family Relations 147
Virtue is a Grace 152
Abuse and Sexual Harassment in the Factories 157
Factory Girls or Factory 'Meide' 162
Respectability, Decency and Virtue 167
A Code of Conduct 174
Conclusion 179

EPILOGUE 181

APPENDIX 186

TABLES 189

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY 196

PREFACE

> If one could for one moment leave aside the material conditions then the white women and the churches would be left as the most important influences on the making of the kind of society that we have today.[1]

In 1981 I attended the lecture of Prof. Herman Giliomee at the University of the Witwatersrand Senate Lectures on South African History. To me as an Afrikaans-speaking South African, aware of the complex and troubled society in which I find myself, Prof. Giliomee's statement suggested an exciting topic for a M.A. dissertation. What was the role and contribution of white Afrikaner women in the shaping of South African society? With a topic as vast, it was difficult to find an adequate starting-point. A brief look at the activities, nature and composition of Afrikaans women's organisations such as the Afrikaanse Christelike Vroue Vereniging (hereafter ACVV) and the Suid-Afrikaaanse Vroue Federasie (hereafter SAVF) indicated that they strove for, "die behoud van die Suid Afrikaanse volk op geestelike, sedelike, verstandelike en stoflike gebied tot eer van God" (....the spiritual, moral, intellectual and material preservation of the Afrikaner 'volk' to the honour of God).[2] A review of this literature seemed to suggest that any overt political involvement in the shaping of South African society was remarkably lacking, as if

---

1 H. Giliomee, 'The Frontier in South African History', *Southern African History: New Perspectives*, Senate Lectures, University of the Witwatersrand, 1981, p.8. See also H. Giliomee and D. Elphick, *The Shaping of South African Society*, Cape Town: Longman, Penguin S.A., 1979.

2 SAVF, *Vyftig Jaar van Soën, 1904-1954*, Pretoria: Wallachs, 1954. Also ACVV, *Ons Saamreis*, Cape Town: Nasionale Pers, 1930 and H.C. Lampbrechts and E. Theron, *Vrouevolksdiens: Die Werk van die ACVV*, Cape Town: HAUM, 1959. The ACVV's motto is "Vir Kerk, Volk, en Taal", (For Church, Volk, and Language). (Unless otherwise stipulated, all translations are done by the author.) The term 'volk' is roughly translated by 'nation', but since the concept 'volk' is a well-known in South African historiography, henceforth it will be used in its original form. cf. D. O'Meara, *Volkskapitalisme: Class, Capital and Ideology in the Development of Afrikaner Nationalism, 1934-1948*, Johannesburg: Ravan, 1983, p. vx.

to reinforce A.P. van Rensburg's view, as expressed in his book on Afrikaner women, that,

> In wese is en was die Afrikanervrou nog nooit 'n politieke mens nie. Waar sy tot haar reg kom is op liefdadigheidsterrein, met welsynwerk, in die opvoeding.
> (In essence the Afrikaner women has never been a political being. Where she comes into her own is in the fields of charity, welfare work and education).[3]

However, in the light of the introductory quotation, I therefore found it hardly credible that Afrikaner women did little more than work in a-political charitable organisations.[4]

In discussion with a number of people at the University of the Witwatersrand, among them Prof. Charles van Onselen and Prof. Ampie Coetzee, I became aware of the existence of the Garment Workers' Union (hereafter GWU), with its largely female Afrikaner membership. My interest was further stimulated by the mention of the existence of Afrikaans plays written by the garment workers.

Investigations proved that the records of the GWU, housed in the Church of the Province of South Africa Archives (hereafter CPSA) at the University of the Witwatersrand, would yield immensely rich and rewarding data on the lives of working women on the Rand. However, I immediately realised that a great deal had already been written about the GWU. Authors like Lewis, Touyzs and Witz have already covered virtually all

---

[3] A.P. van Rensburg, *Moeders van ons Volk*, Johannesburg: Afrikaanse Pers, 1966, p.99.

[4] However, subsequent research seems to indicate that in contrast to the activities of male-dominated state departments, the concrete results of these welfare organisations should not be underestimated. If analysed in this context, it could prove to be a very interesting analysis of the manifestation of the power of women's networks in the shaping of society. For similar developments in the United States of America during the mid-nineteenth century, see M. Ryan, *The Cradle of the Middle Class: Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, and M. Ryan, 'The Power of Women's Networks', in J.L. Newtown, M Ryan and J. Walkowitz eds., *Sex and Class in Women's History*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983.

political and organisational aspects of the GWU. This dissertation was, therefore, not intended to be yet another organisational history, or another 'Capital, State and .....' analysis. It looks at history from below; an investigation into the working and home lives of white female workers on the Rand.

Usually it is very difficult to gain access into the lives of women, for mostly they are "hidden from history".[5] However, the availability of the records of a union which had a predominantly female membership provided the means to gain insight into their lives. By a careful perusal of the records of the union I therefore have attempted to gauge the problems which faced the garment workers in the process of urbanisation and industrialisation. I felt that the experiences of these Afrikaner women, who formed part of the largest female population group on the Witwatersrand, could significantly illuminate the experiences of both coloured and black women, who during the early forties, entered the city in greater numbers and gradually numerically outstripped the white female population. I chose to concentrate on the inter-war years, 1918-1939, because it was during this period that white women entered and established themselves in the industrial female labour market in general and the clothing industry in particular and commenced to participate in trade union organisations.

For the purposes of this dissertation I interviewed some 35 women, a most enlightening and rewarding experience for which I am very grateful.[6] They shed much light not only on aspects of the activities of the GWU and its influence on their lives, but told me much about their family lives during this period. In addition to the records of the GWU

---

[5] cf. S. Rowbotham, *Hidden from History*, London: Pluto, 1976.

[6] The interviews were conducted along the lines suggested by P. Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978. See Table 1A and 1B for a tabulation of the main results of these interviews.

and the interviews, I investigated scores of files of the Department of Labour and Social Welfare, as well as isolated files of other departments at the Central Archives Depot (hereafter CAD) in the State Archives in Pretoria. Although no long runs of information on women are available, my search was at times rewarded by finds of information in the most unlikely places. For example, I found a significant report on prostitution in Johannesburg during the thirties buried in a box of correspondence of the Department of Social Welfare in the State Archives. Likewise, many of the garment worker plays referred to, were found in the records of the union. Limited use was made of the History Project Archives (hereafter HPA) of the Rand Afrikaans University, as well as of material at the Johannesburg Public Library (hereafter JPL) and the Germiston Public Library.

Since I chose a topic which touched on so many diverse aspects of the lives of women, I consulted with a great number of people in a variety of disciplines. I would like to thank them all here for their willingness to give their time and expertise in responding to my requests for information, for they are to numerous to mention individually. Special thanks to my supervisor, Prof. Phil Bonner, for a score of useful suggestions during three years part-time and two years full-time research. He valiantly shouldered the burden which was to become heavier over time. I am most grateful for the collaboration of Prof. Edith Raidt and her 1985 third year linguistics students for the transcription of the interviews and the insights which their investigation provided into the language used by the informants. In addition, I was fortunate to have received very constructive comment and criticism from Prof. Charles van Onselen, Dr Belinda Bozzoli and Prof. Ampie Coetzee. I would like to thank Leslie Witz, Jon Lewis and Margie Kinsman, who read and vetted a number of ideas and drafts and fellow M.A. students, Tim Clynick, Hilary Sapire and Andrea van Niekerk, for their support and friendliness. My thanks to Linde Dietrich who edited this dissertation, Diana Voster who helped with the final corrections and Patrick Pearson who made life after

the computer very pleasant. I would like to thank Mrs Cunningham of the CPSA for the patience and friendliness with which she always assisted me. In addition, I wish to express my appreciation to my parents and friends for their support, and Louisah Maseko who cared for Christiaan and Elsa when I worked. Finally, I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my husband, Basil, who supported me, listened when no one else would and was my severest critic.

This dissertation would not have been possible without the financial support of the Human Sciences Research Council and the University of the Witwatersrand, which I would gratefully like to acknowledge.

LIST OF TABLES

		page
1A.	Information on Women Interviewed for this Study	189
1B.		190
2.	The Population of Johannesburg and Suburbs and the Witwatersrand, 1921, 1926, 1931, 1936.	191
3.	Total and Working Economically Active Population of Germiston, 1918-1934	191
4.	Occupations of Men Related to Garment Workers in Certain Provincial Electoral Divisions, Johannesburg and Germiston, 1931.	192
5.	An Analysis of the Husbands and Fathers of the Women who were Interviewed for this Study	192
6.	Johannesburg: Analysis of Immigrant Cases for 1939	193
7.	Average Annual Wages in the Manufacturing Industry on the Witwatersrand, 1919/20-1937/38	193
8.	The Economic Development of the Clothing Industry on the Witwatersrand, 1915/16-1938/39	194-95
9.	Maximum and Minimum Wages in the Clothing Industry Industry, 1932-1943	xx

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

		page
1.	Photographs of Garment Workers circa 1928 and 1939.	vi
2.	Map of the Suburbs of Johannesburg, circa 1924. Insert: Location and Racial Composition of the Slums of Johannesburg, 1934	xvii
3.	Germiston, circa 1925. Townships established in the Municipal Area	xviii
4.	Germiston, circa 1925. Housing Density of George Town, West and South Germiston	xix
5.	\ GWU Executive Committee Meeting in Progress	xxi
6.	Anna Scheepers Addressing Workers in a Factory	xxi
7.	Garment Workers in a Restroom	xxi
8.	Hester Cornelius Leading the 1941 GWU Guard Procession accompanying Mrs Lategan, May Day Queen	xxii
9.	Garment Workers with a Trade Union Poster	xxii
10.	Garment Workers Modelling evening Gowns. Mrs Lategan, centre	xxii
11.	Mother of a Garment Worker holding a grandchild in her care, early thirties	xxiii
12.	Mrs Lategan and friend in GWU physical training club outfits	xxiii
13.	Mrs Lategan in Voortrekker dress with Molly Proudfoot in GWU Guard uniform	xxiii
14.	Johanna Cornelius, photographed during thirties	xxiii
15.	Garment Workers and Policeman, 1928 strike, Germiston	xxiv
16.	Garment Workers Conversing with a Clothing Manufacturer, 1928 strike	xxiv
17.	Garment Workers Assembled outside a Factory, 1928	xxiv
18.	Garment Workers Fleeing during the 1928 Strike	xxv
19.	Strikers surrounded by Male Onlookers outside S. Malk's, 1932	xxv

Sources

1. *Rand Daily Mail*, 1928 and GWU, Dac 2.2. *Ambag*, Aug. 1946.

2. E.J.P. Stals, *Afrikaners in die Goudstad*, Cape Town: HAUM, 1986, vol. 1, pp.47-48.

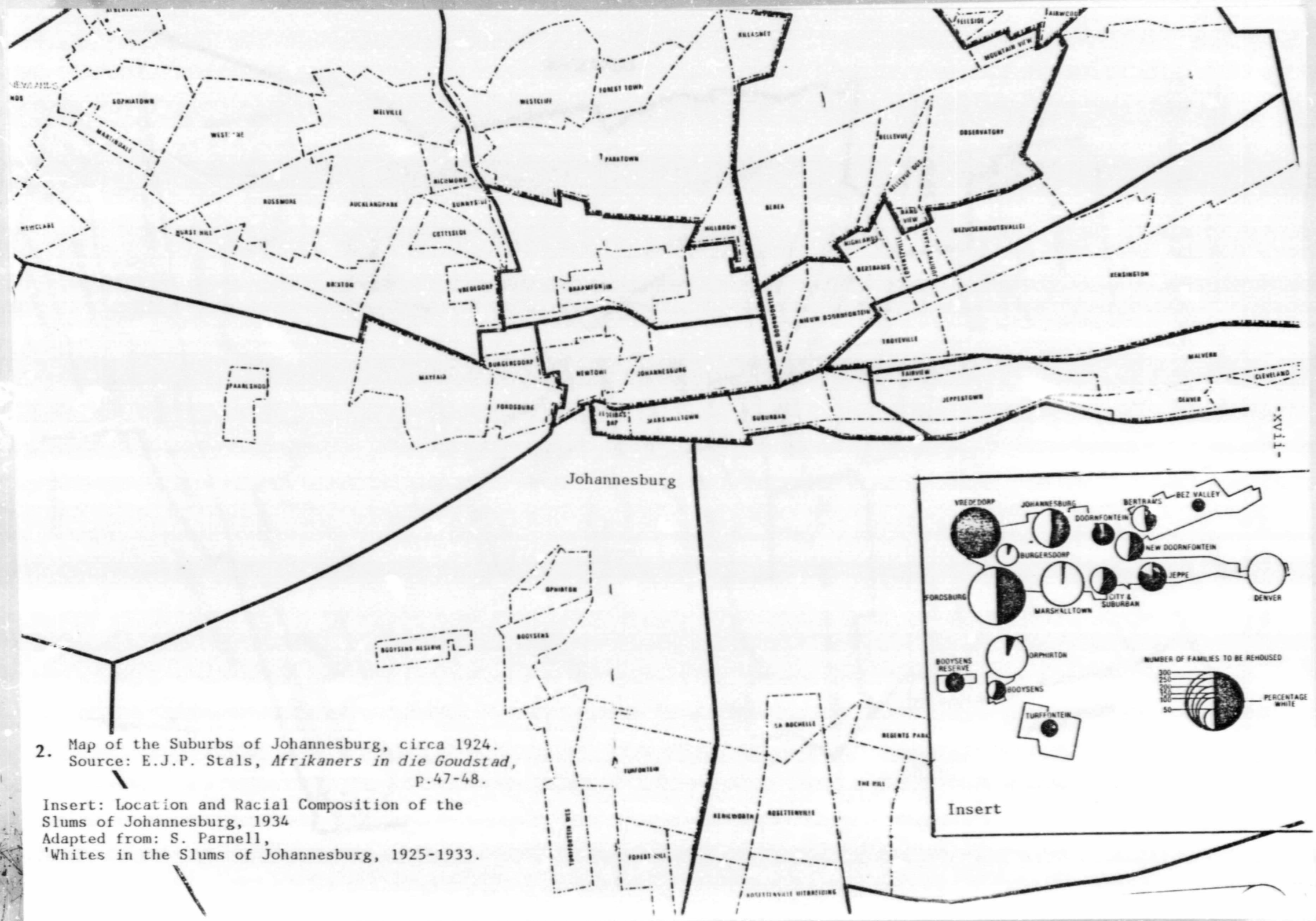
3-4. D. Page, 'The Evolution of Urban Morphology', dissertation, no place, no date. Germiston Library.

5-7. GWU, Dac 2.2. *Ambag*, Aug. 1946.

8-14. Collection, Mrs Lategan, Interview 17.

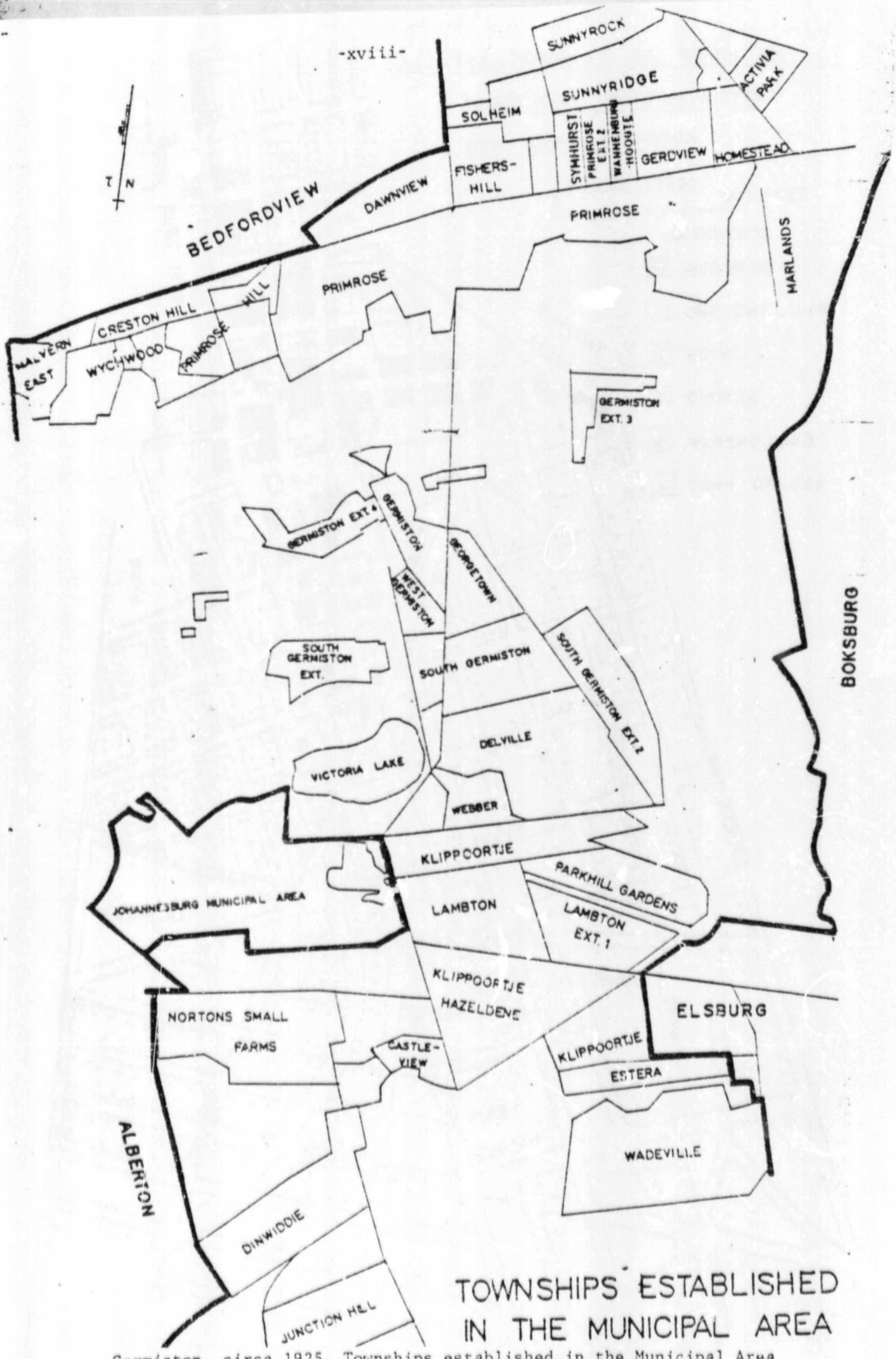
15.-18. *Rand Daily Mail*, May 1928.

19. *The Star*, 18.8.1932.



2. Map of the Suburbs of Johannesburg, circa 1924.
Source: E.J.P. Stals, *Afrikaners in die Goudstad*, p.47-48.

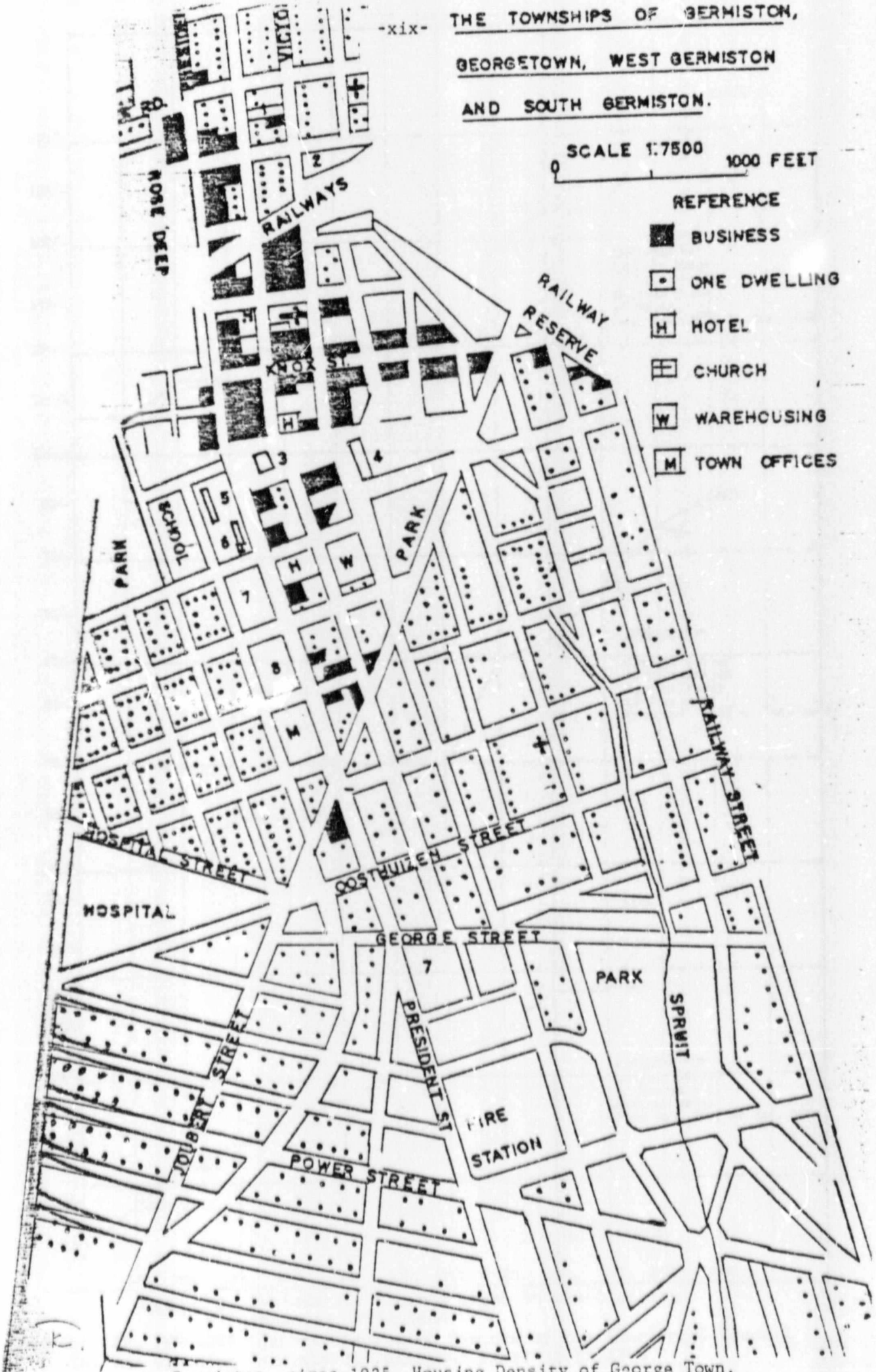
Insert: Location and Racial Composition of the Slums of Johannesburg, 1934
Adapted from: S. Parnell,
'Whites in the Slums of Johannesburg, 1925-1933.



3. Germiston, circa 1925. Townships established in the Municipal Area
Source: D. Page, 'The Evolution of Urban Morphology'.



4. Germiston, circa 1925. Housing Density of George Town, West and South Germiston
Source: D. Page, 'The Evolution of Urban Morphology'.



4. Germiston, circa 1925. Housing Density of George Town, West and South Germiston
Source: D. Page, 'The Evolution of Urban Morphology'.

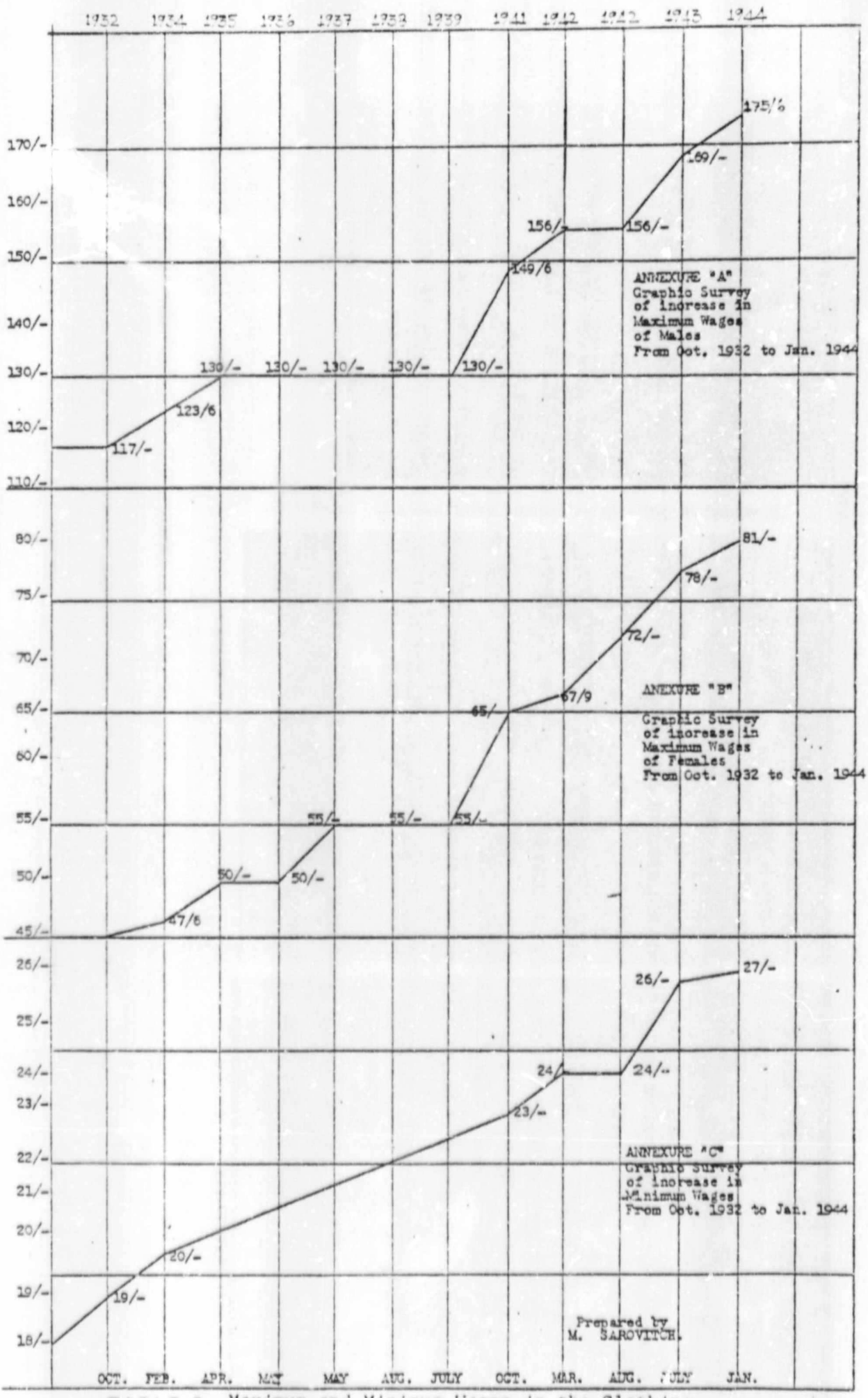


TABLE 9. Maximum and Minimum Wages in the Clothing Industry, 1932-1944

Source: CAD, VWN 1025. Report, Secretary for the of the Industrial Council for the Clothing Industry for the year ended 31.12.1943.



6. An executive committee meeting in progress.



7.



8.

9.



10.



11.





12.



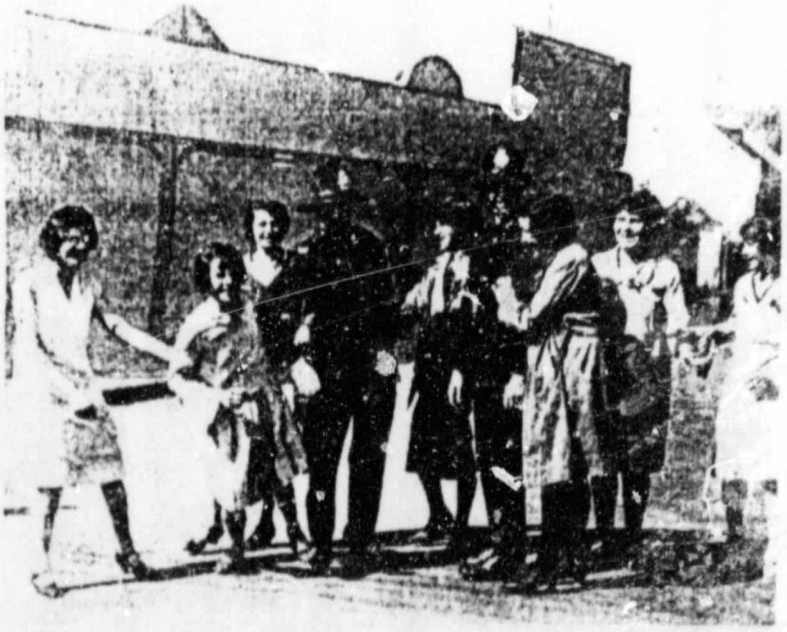
13.



14.



15.



16.



17.



18.


YS OUTFITTERS
YOUTHS
CLOTHING

19.


SMALK
(PTY) LTD.
CLOTHING
& SHIRT
SMALK
PIECE GOODS

20.

INTRODUCTION

'VOLKSMOEDERS' OR FACTORY WORKERS

Introduction

Heil Volksmoeder, Werkster!

> Die Afrikanervrou het altyd 'n heldhaftige rol gespeel in die geskiedenis van die Afrikaner volk. Gaan in daardie tradisie voort. (Salute, *Mother of the Nation*, Worker! The Afrikaner woman has always played an heroic role in the history of the Afrikaner volk. Continue in that tradition.)[1]

An investigation into the role and function of women in the process of urbanisation and industrialisation is a difficult exercise, for women, as opposed to the genderless category of 'workers', are usually not treated as a distinct subject suitable for official investigation or documentation. Furthermore, documentation on Afrikaner women in particular, when and where it is found, indicates that their role as workers is relegated to a position inferior to that of their supposed role as wives, mothers and *volksmoeders*. Nonetheless, an analysis of the lives of Afrikaner women who were garment workers on the Witwatersrand during the inter-war years, demonstrates that, contrary to their designated social role, their economic role as workers was vital for the survival of their families. When a garment worker was disapprovingly accused of working outside the home, she claimed,

> Wat help dit as ons vrouens tussen die potte en panne werk en dit is leeg? Moet ons handjies vou en wag tot daar self kos in die potte val?

---

[1] *Garment Worker/Klerewerker* (hereafter *KW/GW*), S. Sachs, 'Heil Volksmoeder, Werkster!', May/June 1952.

(Does it serve any purpose if we women work among the pots and the pans and these are empty? Must we fold hands and wait until food fall into the pots automatically?)[2]

Solly Sachs, General Secretary of the GWU from 1928 until 1952, went some way towards understanding the crucial economic role of Afrikaner garment workers when he equated the notions of *volksmoeder* and worker in an open letter (quoted above), which was addressed to the garment workers in 1952 shortly after his banning under the Suppression of Communism Act.

For several decades, Solly Sachs's book entitled *Rebels' Daughters* or *Garment Workers in Action,* published in 1957, remained the most authoritative work on the social conditions of Afrikaner women in the clothing industry.[3] Most authors on the GWU, when discussing the social circumstances of the labour force in the clothing factories, quote Sachs as their main source of information.[4] Sachs's book, though, is not footnoted and is without a bibliography or list of sources. Hence his assertions cannot easily be checked. It is a dramatic, autobiographical and journalistic account of the trials and tribulations of Solly Sachs in his role as general secretary of the GWU until 1952. The main thrust of Sachs's portrayal of the women workers is to suggest that they were

---

2 Ibid. Anna Jacobs, 'Vyande van die Werkende Klas', February 1940, p.4.

3 S. Sachs, *Rebels' Daughters*, London: Robert Cunningham, 1957; *Garment Workers in Action*, Johannesburg: Eagle Press, 1957.

4 See for example authors J. Lewis, *Industrialisation and Trade Union Organisation in South Africa, 1924-1955: The Rise and Fall of the South African Trades and Labour Council*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984; L. Witz, 'Servant of the Workers: Solly Sachs and the Garment Workers Union, 1928-1952', M.A. dissertation, University of the Witwatersrand, 1984 and B.M. Touyzs, 'White Labour and the "Social Democratic" Movement in the Transvaal: the South African Labour Party, the South African Trades and Labour Council and the Trade Union Affiliates, 1930-1954', PhD thesis, University of Cape Town, 1984. The first academic study on the GWU was done in 1955 by H.L. du Plessis, 'Die Vakbondwese in Suid Afrika met spesiale verwysing na die Klerewerkersunie', M.A. dissertation, Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education, 1955. It investigated the influence of trade unionism on the development of industry, with reference to the GWU.

Author Brink Elsab├⌐
Name of thesis The Afrikaner Women Of The Garment Workers Union, 1918-1939. 1986

PUBLISHER:
University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg
©2013

LEGAL NOTICES:

Copyright Notice: All materials on the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg Library website are protected by South African copyright law and may not be distributed, transmitted, displayed, or otherwise published in any format, without the prior written permission of the copyright owner.

Disclaimer and Terms of Use: Provided that you maintain all copyright and other notices contained therein, you may download material (one machine readable copy and one print copy per page) for your personal and/or educational non-commercial use only.

The University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, is not responsible for any errors or omissions and excludes any and all liability for any errors in or omissions from the information on the Library website.