

Instructions from above

THE veins of Semane Molotlegi contain some of the bluest blood in Africa. Her cousin was Sir Seretse Khama. Her husband is Chief Edward Lebone Molotlegi, chief of the 300 000-strong Bafokeng, on whose territory lies most of South Africa's platinum. Chief Molotlegi's palace at Phokeng is distinguished by a magnified statue of a crocodile rising from a garden pool. A shaky relationship has existed for some time between the Bafokeng authorities and the Bophuthatswana government, as a result of which Chief Molotlegi is indefinitely abroad. In his absence, Mrs Molotlegi is responsible for aspects of the tribe's affairs. Here she sets out her side of a vexing story.

THE Bafokeng Women's Club was formed for the betterment of our community. In basis, the membership is drawn from the women of Phokeng but, since one learns from other people, it was decided to provide associate membership to women who could help us and support our ideals, without being a Mofokeng.

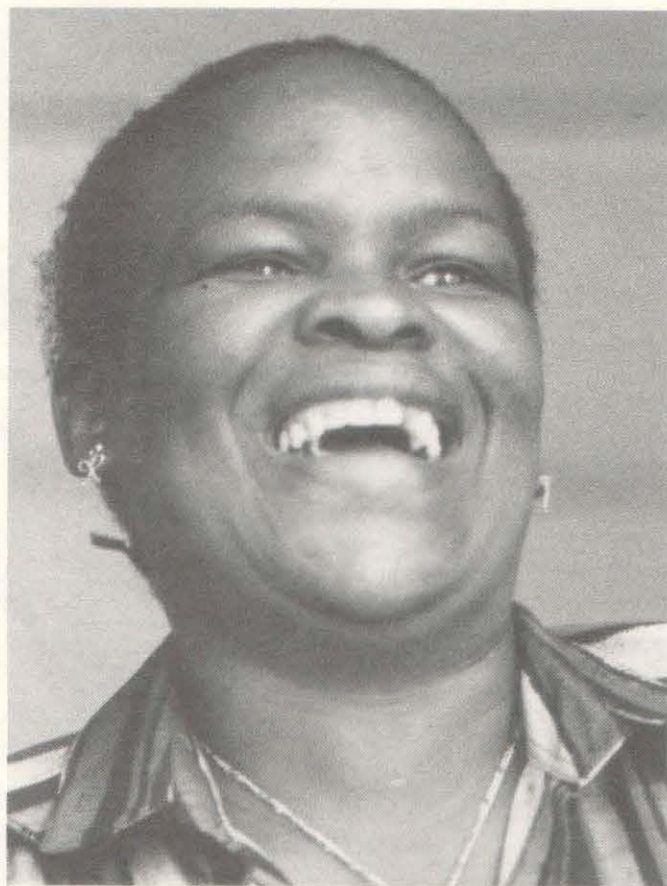
Whilst the Club was started in 1970, it was only registered in 1983. There were very good reasons for this. We wished to avoid trying to run before we could walk; as this has been the downfall of so many organisations of similar nature.

By 1980, with membership of 95 stalwarts, we had battled to show that our ideals could succeed; that we had purpose and we had joy in our work. The first crèche helped to prove this. Within all this DEDICATION, we also had time for laughter — even if sometimes it was laughing at our mistakes — and the sharing of sisterhood.

We were now geared for success and, following official registration, the membership took a tremendous leap. Our husbands and menfolk were also very supportive, because we seemed to be doing something good, and well. Today, we boast a membership of 3000.

Despite our efforts to show by deeds that we are solely a Welfare Organisation, we have had constant unfounded allegations directed at us by the State President of Boputhatswana. We have been accused of being members of the opposition Peoples Progressive Party (ie. our organisation as whole) but no proof was ever brought forward.

Even in the meetings to which we were summoned by His Excellency the President we were not given a chance to state our side of the story. In any case when given a chance as it once happened to me,



Mrs Molotlegi

all what was expected from me was to answer questions only, and nothing else.

These meetings left us feeling very much intimidated especially the closure of same. At one meeting the State President ended by saying "go and continue with your club but I will be in the mean time studying your constitution". Surely that must have been done before the registration. Or is this some kind of message that he is giving us? But what?

At another meeting after he accused us of misbehaviour and having heckled like politicians at a rally of his Party, he ended by saying "go but I tell you that your club will be investigated".

How can one work normally, when you know that somewhere in the dark there are two big feet dangling above your head, waiting to crush you to the ground? This is how we felt.

All these groundless accusations came

to a head after the attempted coup d'état of 10th February 1988. The abortive coup gave the State President a golden opportunity to get us where he wanted.

I personally am not a politician neither have I any interests in politics. My concern and love is for the development of our community especially the womenfolk. This seems to be a crime in Bophuthatswana for I was arrested and detained in February 1988. For the ten days that I spent at Rooigrond Prison I was never charged, neither did the police officers who came to detain us (ie. my husband and I) read to us our rights, nor indicate what we were being arrested for. All they could say was "we have had instructions from above to take you to Mmabatho immediately".

Previously our passports had also been removed on instructions from above. These instructions from above landed us in prison. It is noteworthy that these police officers were Colonels. The question is how protected are the citizens of Boputhatswana if such high ranking officers can act on instructions from above, irrespective of their intense training and grounding in law?

While we were in prison, myself and the fifty one ladies with whom I shared a cell, we were full of anger, trying to figure out how such an injustice could just be left. We were all of one opinion to sue the police for the humiliation and the inconveniences they had put us through. But after I was discharged and I got home, I felt that all I needed was peace, to get on with my life and work, and put that whole episode of my life behind me.

After all, I argued and convinced myself, a coup is abnormal and abnormal things take place in the wake thereof. So I accepted my detention as part of that abnormality.

I was however proved wrong for the coup is long over, and the persons involved have been charged. There has been a Commission of Enquiry, and none of our accusers came forward to give evidence. Why? I keep asking myself: Why me? An innocent person who is not a politician, who condemns the coup, is still being victimized. Instructions from above never gave me a chance to taste the peace I dream about.

Ever since I was released from jail on the 23rd February, my family and I and the Bafokeng Women's Club have been victimized and harrassed. Police have come to our home several times at awkward hours like 1h30, 3h00, 2h30, etc., to search, as they would say, for Mr Metsing or missing persons. They said they had information that those people had been seen at our home. These searches were always conducted without search warrants. Once I asked for the search warrant and was told that it was at the police station; again this was a colonel who said that.

We don't have a basement in our house but during one of their searches they asked where the basement was and also demanded to know where the arms cache was, this we do not have as well. What amused me was to later overhear some of the police asking amongst themselves what a basement was. Much as I was amused, it frightened me at the same time. How could they come to search while not knowing what they were supposed to look for? The question comes again: How safe is one in the hands of such people?

At one time I was away and my daughters of 17 and 12 were home, so was my son of 15. Police arrived at 03h00; a band of men moving around with a seventeen-year-old girl in the house. When my brother's mother-in-law intervened as she was home to look after the kids, one of the officers told her not to worry; that he will look after my daughter. Who can really guarantee her safety after all the incidents I have outlined?

I had all along been very unhappy about leaving the children at home. This incident confirmed my fears. I was mostly concerned about the psychological effects. Note that in all of these searches, ten men would march into the house, and about fifty or more, armed, would be surrounding our yard. The searches always lasted for about five hours. What could that do to a child? My biggest question is: if it is not safe for our children to be at home where do I send them?

The harrassment took many forms, but the effect was the same: one felt helpless.

A group of Anglican ladies came to our home to offer prayers for my husband who had not been well. They were ordered by a certain Lieutenant Tlhakane to go to the police station, because he alleged that they

were pretending to offer prayers while in fact holding a meeting about other things. This of course was not true.

Messages, such as one saying I should realise I am only the Chief's wife and not the Chief himself, were delivered to me by the Magistrate accompanied by the Administrator and the Station Commander, from His Excellency the State President himself.

Then His Excellency the President adopted the attitude of calling meetings of Tribal Councillors and Headmen from Phokeng. At these meetings allegations were directed at my husband and myself. At one meeting he accused me of disrupting the 1987 General Elections. At another he accused us of conspiring with Mr Metsing to bomb some places.

I then decided to write him a letter requesting an appointment and asking for a chance to present my side of the story. To my horror I heard the bearer was made to read the letter publicly, and then told to return it to me.

“We have had constant unfounded allegations directed at us by President Mangope”

I could not believe that a State President would act that way, this was very much below him; so I faxed the same letter to his office the following day with a covering letter to Mr Mokgoko, the President's Secretary. Behold the same letter, minus the covering letter, was delivered back to me by our local Magistrate. Somebody had driven all the way from Mmabatho to Phokeng; 124 miles just to return a fax copy.

I felt really frustrated and disillusioned not only by the return of my letter, but by the fact that we are supposed to be living in a Democratic Society. Where were the Christian Democratic principles which the the State President always advocated?

While I was cracking my head of what next I could do in search of justice and truth, Colonel Mmukubiyane, the officer who leads our harrassment episodes, served us a very hard blow; he came to close down the Women's Club sewing project.

This project, called Mahube Fashions, was started in January this year. As with all our projects the modus operandi is self help. In trying to generate funds for the community centre which the Club intends

to build, we also try to achieve spin-off benefits, particularly in regard to employment for our people. We wanted also to show that it was possible to produce high fashion clothing in rural areas, and to promote Bophuthatswana generally.

We had given employment to thirty women. The closure of Mahube Fashions left them jobless again. When we first interviewed, 150 women turned up. This is a clear indication that there are no jobs. It paints a picture of a mother taking the last piece of bread from her child's mouth and throwing it away for no reason whatsoever.

When I asked Colonel Mmukubiyane why he was closing us down, he confessed that he did not know; he was only acting on instructions from the Minister of Law and Order who happens to be the State President.

I thought to try and see Mrs Lekgetha, the Deputy Minister of Health and Social Welfare, the reason being that I had some kind of dealings with her in development projects before she even was a minister.

She gave me the appointment, only she could not bear to talk to me alone, for when I got to Mmabatho to meet her I found that she was with three other Ministers and a Deputy. No reason was given to me why all these ministers attended the meeting.

I articulated the difficulties that the Club was experiencing, and asked for the reason why Mahube Fashions was closed. I must say that the attitudes were very very negative. The Deputy Minister of Law and Order expressed his surprise, saying that I had long been told that all the activities of the Women's Club should cease until further notice. I asked why, and what is it that we had done to be metered with such kind of treatment, surely it is proper that we should be shown our mistakes so that they could be rectified. To my shock and surprise I was replied by none other than the Minister of Population Development who said they did not come there to answer questions because they were not in court.

How are we expected to develop our population, if the head of the department feels comfortable and proud by the fact that a job has been snatched from thirty needy people?

I however must thank the Minister very much, for was it not through him, I might have ended with a bruised feeling from hitting against the wall. Much as his answer hurt me at the time, I later interpreted it as saying that the only place I would be heard is in a court of law.

I have now taken recourse to the Supreme Court of Bophuthatswana, in confidence that justice will be done. I have decided also to set out the facts as I see them so that people of South Africa can gain an inkling of the state of affairs in Bophuthatswana.