

Reflections on a South African Township Tour

(Written following a trip with the Project Change delegation to the 2001 NGO Forum of the World Conference Against Racism)

By Dalya Massachi

I remember being shocked and horrified to read about South African apartheid in high school in the mid-1980s. This is the country that for hundreds of years suffered under the rule of a tiny white minority—and managed to remain that way until very recently. It somehow escaped the African independence struggles of the mid-twentieth century.

It's unconscionable that whites thought it was acceptable to essentially enslave the people whose land they were sharing. They were prepared to spend whatever resources necessary to control the black majority—and they followed through. They also imported Indian indentured servants and made sure "coloreds" (mixed race people) completed the oppressive system.

Soon after I arrived in South Africa, the overwhelming sense surrounding me was that everything there is about race. It's inescapable. This situation is similar in many other countries around the world, but it's simply more blatant there. Our Project Change team was a mixed group of Americans, and that said something to all who came in contact with us: we were foreigners.

As delegates to the NGO Forum of the World Conference Against Racism, we might as well have been staying anywhere in the Western world: with plentiful hot water, light switches everywhere we turned, every amenity at our fingertips. But this was white South Africa. Or at least what was reserved for Whites Only until 1994.

After several days of the plush accommodations accompanying the conference, we decided it was time to see a glimpse of the other side of South Africa. We learned that although some things have radically changed in the past 7 years, enormous challenges remain. One of the most striking examples is in housing.

Our group first learned a bit of history at one of the local museums documenting the apartheid era. We heard and read about the ways African men were forced to live in barracks (what seemed to me like prison cells) and present identity cards everywhere they went. We saw photos of black men finding fleeting solace in beer halls and sporting arenas (often used as secret meeting places for underground freedom fighters).

Another photo depicted a musical band consisting of black men and their instruments. I couldn't help but think of the bands of Jews that the Nazis forced to play for them. It was the only way the captives could survive. (The parallels between the two regimes do not end there. In fact, I met a Jewish woman who works with an organization teaching South African school children about the similarities.)

We then went on to the nearby black township of Crispin Manor—a few miles away from the city of Durban. Our guide was a 19-year old township resident named

Mousaffa, who had started his own local car wash business. He told us he wanted to become a bigger businessman after he completes his schooling.

The township was a large piece of land – acres upon acres. It was well guarded by police stations that used to spy on its internal happenings. The police were to report to the white authorities whenever trouble was brewing inside. Again, the idea of prison came to mind.

Most of the houses there were little more than squatter dwellings-turned-permanent housing: the same kind that proliferate all over the developing world. People had assembled pieces of wood, sheet metal, mud and sticks in the best way they could to provide shelter for their families. Dotted amongst them were shops to try to serve some of the needs of the community.

The other houses—the ones that had been built in the last few years—were the beginnings of the government-sponsored improvements. These box-like, cookie-cutter homes all had one room, running water, indoor plumbing, electricity and sturdy rooftops. Additional rooms could be built later, Mousaffa told us.

The lucky owners of the new homes are the ones chosen at community meetings. These elections are largely based on popularity and status. Many black South Africans are losing patience in this waiting game...

The contrast between the township and the splendid houses a stone's throw away was not lost on anyone. We passed white- and Indian-owned mansions, reminiscent of the plantation homes and the slave quarters of the pre-Civil War American South. Gates or barbed wire surrounded the estates.

But such a quick, superficial tour of the township felt woefully inadequate. We passed through like spectators or zoo-goers. Our van drove through only long enough to stop for a few photographs. Mousaffa said the residents encourage tourism of their neighborhood to help publicize their situation. We weren't entirely convinced.

I wonder how different our experience would have been if we had stayed overnight in the township, and spoken to several people who lived there. For example, I wonder what we would have learned about black women's experiences of being separated from their husbands when men became disposable workers in the mines. What about women's lives as domestic workers for white households?

What could the young people of the township tell us about how their generation is the first to prepare for a multi-racial nation (a difficult task in their largely single-race schools)?

My questions abound. Perhaps I will have to visit South Africa again to get some answers.