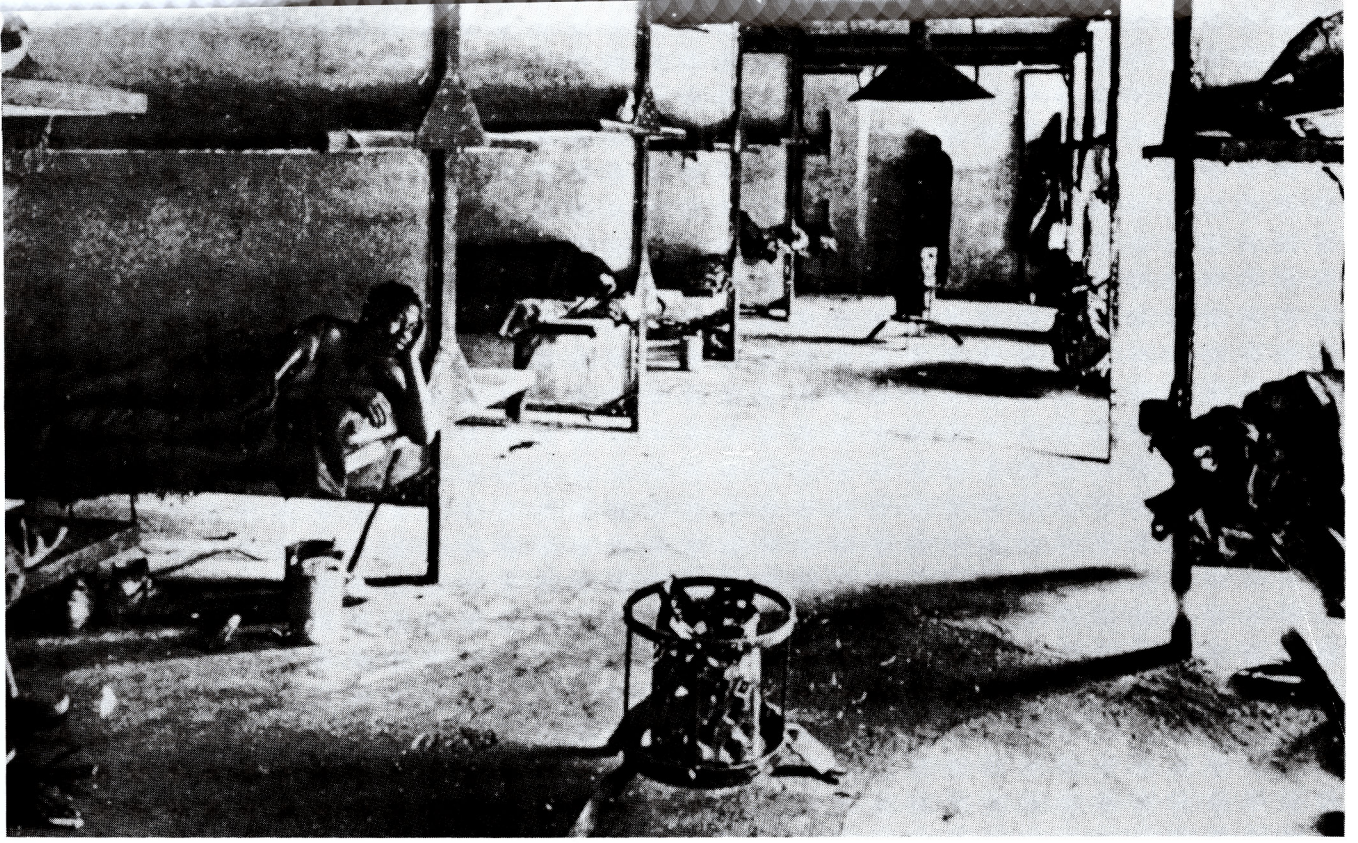




Chapter Eleven

The Compound System

At the end of the long road to the mines the strange and harsh life of the compound-dweller awaited the black worker.

Dispossessed of his land, needing money to pay taxes, brought to the mines by WNLA and made to stay there by the pass and the contract, the worker found himself a virtual prisoner in the compound; for the compound system imposed almost total control on him while he was at the mine.

In this chapter we try to give an idea of what life in the compounds must have been like. Then we analyse the system itself.

THE FIRST COMPOUNDS

Compounds were not new to South Africa. Mine-owners had developed the compound system in the diamond mines of Kimberley. There, all the workers were housed in large buildings next to the mines, where workers ate and slept together. They were carefully watched and controlled to prevent diamond stealing.

Mine-owners on the Rand were quick to realise the benefits to the employers of compounds. We shall discuss these benefits later in the chapter.

The early compounds on the Rand were usually wood and iron shacks — ‘nothing more than camps’, a Native Commissioner reported in 1903.

Living conditions were mostly overcrowded, dirty and unhealthy, although some mines

provided better housing than others.

Inspectors reported that the compound huts contained 20 to 50 workers, who slept on concrete bunks built one above the other like shelves. Many of the huts had earth floors which turned muddy in wet weather. When the huts were crowded, workers had to sleep on these damp floors.

In the earlier years, many compounds did not provide washing facilities, but by 1903 most compounds had concrete baths in the centre of the compound in which workers could wash themselves and their clothes.

The compounds were badly built, often with no windows or lights. Cracks in the walls were stuffed with rags to keep out the wind and the cold. The only

heating came from an ‘imbandla’, a big tin of hot coal giving off highly dangerous smoke fumes.

There was no place for workers’ possessions. Clothes, bicycles other belongings hung from the ceiling and people could only hope that these would not get stolen.

The appalling conditions in the compounds were described in dozens of reports. Here are typical comments from inspectors.

‘... 20 huts in the compound, being about 14 years old and practically worn out, as the smoke of the years has corroded the iron of which they are built. There are no floors to the huts, no bedsteads, no stoves, no proper ventilation and no light at night.’

— The Stubbs Gold Mine.¹



Compound workers made to strip for a medical examination.

*'... Of the 50 rooms, 49 floors which are either defective or absolutely rotten... many of the labourers are obliged to sleep on the rotten uneven floors which it is not possible to clean. The boys complain of being unable to sleep owing to the unevenness of the floors and the insects.'*²

— New Randfontein Gold Mines.

Compound conditions were generally so bad that in 1903, when Chinese workers were brought in (see Chapter 14), the British government insisted that the mines build new or improved compounds for them. After the Chinese left, nearly all black

workers were housed in compounds.

Eventually, some of the richer mines 'modernised' their compounds. They built new compounds with bathing facilities, electric lights in the rooms and higher ceilings for better ventilation. Compounds were built according to a plan like the one shown below in the photograph on this page.

LIFE IN THE COMPOUNDS

Life in the compounds was very different from village life at home. In the compound, men slept on cement beds in rows, in huge crowded rooms — terribly

different to the small, comfortable private huts at home!

There was no privacy anywhere in the compound. The toilets were nothing but a long bench with holes where 20 men could relieve themselves at the same time. Washing was also a public business and in the rooms, the men dressed and undressed in full view of others. The lights were left on all night.

'In the hostel there is no privacy in the rooms nor in the open lavatories nor in the shower rooms. It is against the tradition that a son sees his father naked or on the toilet. But hostel life has forcefully changed that.'

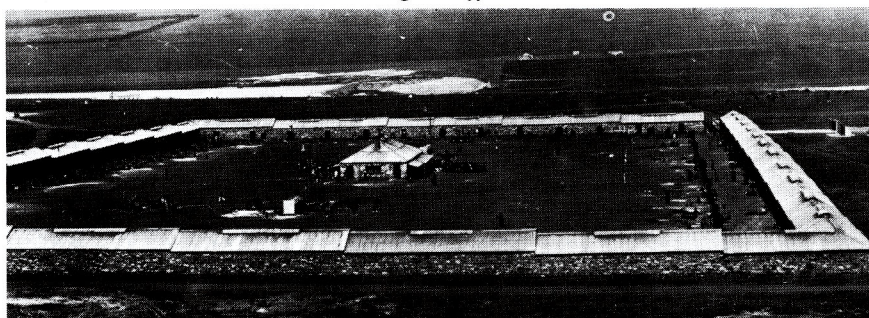
— from *Another Blanket*

FOOD

The compound was supposed to provide most of the food the workers needed to stay alive. The Chamber of Mines made an agreement with the mining companies that the rations should be the same in all the compounds — not more than 5 lbs of mealie-meal plus 2 lbs of meat a week, to save costs.

This was not enough food for doing hard manual labour for ten

A 'modern' compound. According to the Deputy Commissioner of Police in 1913, an efficient compound 'should be surrounded by a high iron fence' and have 'barbed wire on the top which prevents anybody getting in or out'. It should 'contain' the workers, have a reliable guard and a sufficient supply of arms in the manager's office.³



hours or more every shift. To keep up their strength, they had to buy their own food out of their low wages. A report in 1909 showed that many of the workers spent half their wages on food.

Often, compound food was not fit to eat. In 1903, a government report found rotten food served in a number of compounds. For example:

'Coarsely ground meal. Many of the particles of flour were black and purple. Slightly mouldy and musty smell. Not fit for human consumption.'

— of a sample of mealie-meal from the Treasury Gold Mining Co.

'Small mealies, most discoloured, purple and brown in parts. The majority of the corns contained weevils. Very disagreeable and musty smell. Not fit for human consumption.'

— of a sample of mealies from the Glencairn Gold Mining Co.⁴

Food was also used as a means of controlling labour. Only men who could show their stamped ticket were given meat and bread. A stamped ticket was supposed to show that the worker had done his assigned load of work.

SPARE TIME

In those early mining years, compound workers had very little spare time. Often, they were so tired after a shift underground that they spent their spare time sleeping. According to one compound manager, workers should either be 'working, resting or in hospital.'

The managers were chiefly concerned with one thing: to run the compound without trouble. They tended to treat the workers not as men, but as numbers. Workers were identified by the numbered bracelets they wore on their arms.

In later years, managers began to organise the spare time of the



Compound workers pose with the manager for a visiting photographer in 1899. Meals in the compound were usually inadequate, and the workers had to buy their own food to supplement their rations.



Youngsters cutting hair (above) and making ornaments (below) in their spare time. Removed from normal society, close friendships were very important. Often, a chief would send an entire 'age regiment' off to the mines, so that at least they could be together in the hostile world of the compound.



compound workers — ‘to keep them out of trouble.’ Tribal dances and competitions were arranged, one group against the other. The dancing gave many workers great pleasure and a chance to express themselves, but it also kept alive the tribal divisions in the compounds.

Compound workers were migrant workers, their families far away. In the compound, they saw only other workers. They lived in a world of men.

The compound was a place where people had little money, and pleasures were hard to find. Many workers spent their money on heavy drink or *dagga*, to forget where they were.

‘If one is not drunk one is homesick.’

— A compound worker.⁵



Compound workers in a dance contest. The teams were divided along ethnic lines.

If they got a pass to leave the compound, they would spend more of their money on women.

It was hard to save money in

these conditions, and hard to remember the needs of the family in the harsh world of the compound.

Liquor as a Form of Control

The supply of liquor to black workers has an interesting history.

When the gold mines first started, liquor was given to recruits to tempt them to work in the mines. Mine-owners began to invest in the liquor industry, and in the early years, many mine managers had a policy of rewarding hard workers with a ‘tot’ at the end of a shift. One newspaper commented that ‘better work is got out of (the worker) when he sees the prospect of a cheering glass at the end of a day’s labour.’⁶

The Boers also benefited from this practice, as alcohol was distilled from the crops that they sold.

The situation began to change, however, when many workers drank so much that they could not work productively. By the time managers stopped supplying liquor, workers were buying their own liquor, getting drunk at their own expense.

Mine-owners suddenly became concerned with the morals, health and safety of their workers. They began to support the campaign for the banning of liquor to black workers. But the Transvaal government resisted, because of the farmers’ interests in the industry.

It was only after the Boers were defeated in the Anglo-Boer War that ‘European-style’ alcohol became illegal for black workers.



Policemen supervise the disposal of liquor confiscated from compounds and shebeens.

People of the Compounds

The compounds represented a carefully worked out system of control. There were people in charge at every level to watch over the workers and to make sure that the system worked smoothly.



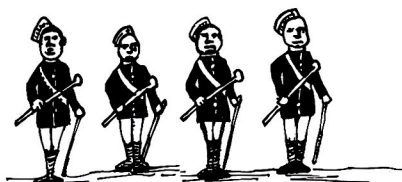
The compound manager was in charge of the compound as well as the underground section. He was usually chosen because he could 'understand the native' — in other words, he could 'control the workers'. The compound manager wielded great power over the men, meting out punishment.

His job was so important to the mine-owners that he was put in a class above the ordinary white worker and paid much higher wages.



The induna was appointed by the compound manager. He was usually a 'boss boy' who had satisfied the manager with his good work. The induna lived in his own rooms. He received higher wages than the other black workers, and extra beer and meat. The job of the induna was to keep order amongst the workers and settle their quarrels. Some indunas saw themselves as chiefs, but often workers did not accept the induna because he was chosen by the manager. 'We don't elect him,' said one worker, 'he is appointed in the night.' 'He does not care about worker problems,' said another. 'He sides with management.' *From *Another Blanket*

However, this was not always the case. Indunas sometimes acted for the workers. Early reports show many cases of indunas writing to chiefs and magistrates in their home districts to complain of bad treatment in the mine. The induna had privileges and owed his job to the compound manager but at the same time he was still a worker. His job was a difficult one, because he had to play a double game.



Compound policemen were also appointed by the compound manager. They were allowed to carry knobkerries or sticks and they guarded the compound gate and controlled the queues to the kitchen and the washing rooms. They had to wake the workers in time for the next shift.

They helped the Induna to settle quarrels, acting as his advisers or councillors. They were given the power to search rooms for stolen goods, alcohol, dagga or dangerous weapons. In many compounds they also had the power to detain workers.

Compound policemen were paid extra money for their jobs, but lived with the workers.



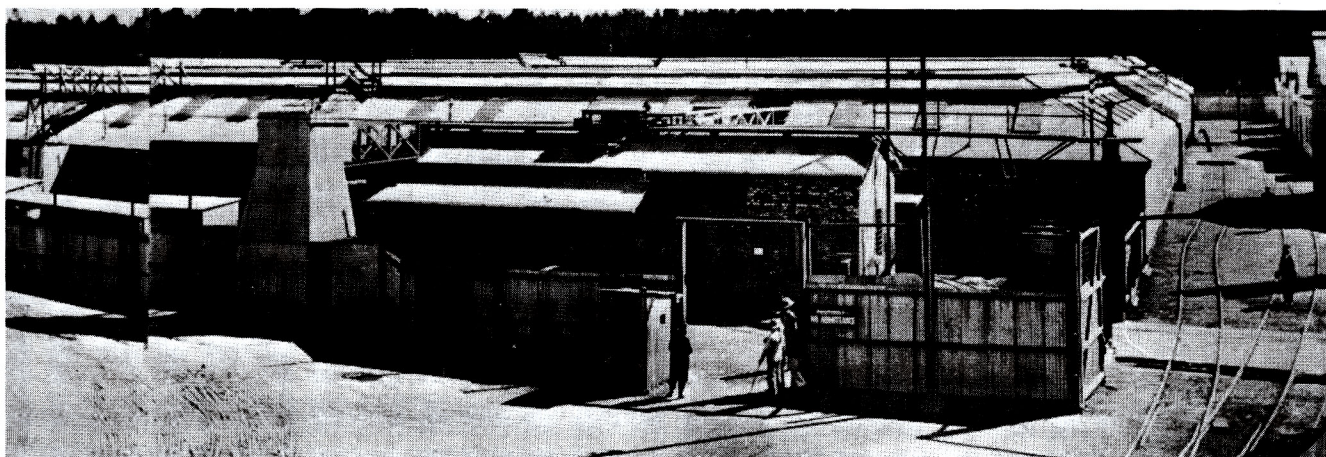
The Sibonda — In each room a sibonda was chosen by his room mates to keep order in the room. He would give tasks to each person in the room so that it was kept clean and tidy. The Sibonda would settle small quarrels in the room.

The sibonda was responsible to his room mates and did not get the higher wages or other privileges for his job. He spoke for his room mates if there was any complaint.

Nevertheless, the compound manager found the sibonda system useful because he could find out what was happening in the rooms if he needed to.



The workers — There were about 3 000 men in each compound. The workers were divided into three main language groups — Sotho, Xhosa and Shangaan. Workers of one language group had very little to do with other workers in the compound. They ate and slept separately.



'In many respects the compound resembles the barracks, and it becomes a simple impossibility to maintain order and discipline unless the compound manager is recognised as having considerable power.' — Editor of *'SA Mining Journal'*, 1894.



THE MINE POLICEMEN

An early photo of compound policemen.

Both the indunas and the policemen had some power because they were the manager's men. They had to satisfy the manager rather than the workers.

But they would sometimes play a double role — they would promise to help a worker in trouble by speaking to the manager. Usually, the worker would have to pay for this service.

It was a common practice to appoint Zulu policemen. The compound workers were divided into different language groups, but nearly all the men hated the compound police. This hatred of Zulus (and suspicion of other groups) served the managers very well. As one government official said: 'The inter-tribal jealousies have always rendered it possible, in the last resort, to protect Europeans by utilising one tribe against another.'⁷

VIOLENCE

Every compound had its detention room where workers could be handcuffed and locked up. In 1903, a government official agreed with managers that the compound jail was 'an absolute essential as being the only means of controlling riotous and quarrelsome natives... as it not infrequently happens that a native "runs amok" it is necessary that he should be promptly dealt with in order to prevent further developments.'⁸

In the mines, workers were often punished to get them to work harder. Although it was against the law, supervisors would often hit, and kick their workers. Threatening and shouting were part of the day's work. The 1913 Native Grievances Inquiry described conditions in their report:

'Natives are frequently assaulted by Europeans, generally underground. A certain number of such cases seems inevitable when the conditions of work are considered.'

'The mines consist of an enormous mileage of tunnels, in which a number of Europeans, many of them of no high standard of education or ethics are in practically unchecked con-

trol of several members of a subservient race. As a rule, neither the master nor the servant understands the other's language, yet the master has to give directions and the servant to obey them.'

*'Both parties are working under unhealthy and unnatural conditions. In these circumstances the temptation and the opportunity for assaults on the servant by the master are constantly present; and these circumstances may perhaps be modified, but cannot be altogether removed.'*⁹

Everyday violence was also used on workers by the compound policemen. They carried sjamboks in the compound. They were not supposed to use them, but they did. Underground 'boss boys' also carried them.

Great anger and bitterness built up in the unnatural crowded conditions of the compounds. Where workers were divided into ethnic groups and there was a shortage of food, liquor, women and money, people were suspicious of others. Sometimes, a small quarrel would build up and spread like wild fire through the whole compound. One group would turn against another, and there would be open battles, leaving

people seriously wounded or even dead.

Working in constant danger also led to tensions underground. These tensions sometimes led to unplanned violence.

'An older man accidentally loosened a rock with his spade. It fell on the foot of a young worker below him. In great terror, the young man sprang up and struck him with the spade. The older man was taken to hospital in a serious condition.'

— From Another Blanket.

TWO VIEWS OF THE COMPOUND

'To the old hands this is like a club. They get away from the squabbles of the women and the domestic worries and then, just as sailors do, they go home and are received as heroes. They love it.'

— Compound Manager¹⁰

'Surely the miners are ill-treated all through. Not only by whites but more especially by their fellow men. That is why they have to be rough because they live in a rough situation. Any kind of soft person can hardly survive here.'

— Compound worker¹¹

HEALTH

*Ulelezindundumeni –
Lying in the graves,
Lying on the mine dumps,
The lover of my child.
(Zulu song.)*¹²

The harsh life in the compounds, poor food and medical care and the dangerous work underground caused the deaths of many miners every year. Reports on the compounds show just how bad conditions were for the health of the workers.

'Crowding increases the spread of any infectious disease. This applies particularly to pneumonia, tuberculosis and cerebro-spinal meningitis.'

—Medical officer to Chamber of Mines, 1914.¹³

'We were not well treated, we even had to work on Sundays, we had to load the ore trucks. We got coarse food to eat. After about two months we began to get ill. We had stomach-ache first then our feet got swollen and we could not walk. The doctor used to see us and gave medicine. Some died...'

— Worker on Jubilee Mine 1902.

'I found natives who should have been carefully covered up lying on the ground out of doors and the majority of them with only a very scanty covering. In the afternoon the floors were being washed and it was not reasonable to expect them to be dry before evening... not many of the serious cases will have a chance of recovery.'

— Dr Sansom, District Health Officer, Report on Langlaagte Compound Hospital, 1903.

'A case has come to my notice where a native was injured by a fall of rock about 9 a.m., his leg being badly broken and great loss of blood occurring. He reached the mine hospital about 11 a.m. No attempt was made to get a doctor until 1.45 p.m., after the hospital superintendent had dressed the injury. A note was then sent to the mine medical

We do not like our men to go to Johannesburg because they go there to die.
(Sotho Chief)



A compound hospital. Thousands of mineworkers died each year from disease, malnutrition and accidents underground.

officer to which he replied that he could not come until 5 p.m. as he could not get an anaesthetist. The patient died, of shock and haemorrhage, at 4.50 p.m., no doctor having seen him.'

— Director of Native Labour, 1913.

In 1903, 5 022 black workers died on the mines. The causes of their deaths were:

- Pneumonia and meningitis, from crowded, damp conditions, sudden changes in temperature, and general weakness — more than half (59%);
- Intestinal infections, from bad food — 11.86%;
- Scurvy, from lack of vegetables — 5.8%;
- Accidents — 4.08%;
- Bacillosis — 5.39%;
- Tuberculosis, from sudden changes in temperature and damp conditions — 5.39%.¹⁴

'At the mines he must work hard, about ten hours every day, mostly underground and gets very inefficient food; as a matter of fact he has to live on mealie-meal porridge, although he is supplied with one pound of meat

twice a week and recently some mines have commenced supplying them occasionally with fresh vegetables. This does not help much. As a consequence of this bad feeding, the natives are generally weak and unhealthy, and sickness, and especially scurvy is of frequent occurrence.'

— State Mining Engineer's report, 1901.¹⁵

Pneumonia took the lives of many workers from hot countries like Zambia, the Congo and Tanzania. In 1911, for example, more than 67 out of every 1 000 mine-workers died of pneumonia. These figures were so shocking that in 1913 the government stopped workers from these countries being recruited to the mines. They were not used to the cold Transvaal nights. When they came up from the hot underground tunnels after a long shift, the change of air was too great for them.

'If the mines continued to employ these people it would be little less than murder.' — Minister of Native Affairs, 1913.¹⁶



Why Compounds?

Why were compounds set up in the gold mines? In Kimberley the compound system prevented stealing. But gold could not be stolen out of the rock in the same way as diamonds. The Rand mine-owners therefore did not need compounds to prevent stealing. Nevertheless, the compound system had so many other advantages for the diamond mine-owners that the gold mine-owners decided to use the system as well. Why was this?

CHEAP LABOUR

To understand why the compound system was used on the gold mines one must remember the aims of the mine-owners. Their aims were very different from those of the workers.

* Most workers went to the mines to earn money to support themselves and their families on the land. They needed their wages to survive.

* The mine-owners, on the other hand, wanted the mines to produce as much gold as possible — they wanted to make big profits. But gold mining in the Witwatersrand was expensive and the price of gold was fixed. To make big profits, mine-owners had to cut down on their costs — to save money somewhere.

How did they save money?
The only way mine-owners could save money on their costs was to use cheap labour — and they got cheap labour by employing migrant workers.

CHEAPER LABOUR

Mine-owners paid compound workers lower wages. They were able to pay such low wages because they could argue that they housed and fed the workers in large numbers. The workers did not actually pay for living in the compounds — they received lower wages instead. So the compound system saved the mine-owners a lot of money.

It was quite cheap for the mines to provide space for large numbers of workers to sleep in. It was cheap to give them a diet of *pap* and sometimes meat (usually offal). It would cost a worker more to rent a room for himself, buy his own food and pay for transport as well.

Life in the compounds was hard. Nevertheless, the system claimed to save the workers money. It saved the mine-owners a lot more money.

MORE PRODUCTION

There was another reason why mine-owners liked the compound system. The men in compounds worked more regularly because they could be watched more carefully.

Before the compound system, more than a quarter of the workers would stay away from work on any one day but the compound system resulted in over 90 percent of the workers going to work every day.

In the compounds, fewer workers ran away. They were not allowed to leave until they had finished their contracts — contracts on the mines were usually for six to 12 months. The compounds were carefully guarded. Workers who stayed and worked for the mines for six to 12 months also became more experienced. They learnt to work more quickly — and more gold was produced.

CONTROL OF WORKERS

For the mine-owners, the most useful thing about the compound system was that it kept tight control of workers. If workers 'gave trouble' or tried to resist their low wages or conditions of work, it was easy for the army and the police to surround the compounds and imprison the workers with their guns.

As a government commission of enquiry advised in 1913:

'...steps ought certainly to be taken to render the compounds more easily convertible into places of detention. Where the compound has strong, steel-cased gates which can be locked from the outside, only one entrance, and high walls with no outer windows, a comparatively few armed men can prevent exit from it and thus isolate a disturbance which might otherwise spread with alarming conse-

*quences.'*¹⁷

The government itself, therefore, recommended that the compounds be used as places of control and punishment, like prisons.

The compound system prevented resistance from workers in a number of ways:

* It was easier to find out who the organisers were in a compound.

* It was easier to stop workers in all the compounds from knowing that there was trouble outside the compounds.

In short, compounds:

- separated the mineworkers from other workers;
- controlled the workers; and
- turned workers into labour machines.

Compounds, therefore, made workers more profitable to the mine-owners.

FAMILY PLANNING

Row upon row
Like winter-shaken stalks of maize,
The barracks stretch from one
Miserable end to the other.

Within the enfenced hostel
No gay children bounce and romp about,
No busy housewives colour
The washing line once a week.
Here there is no homely smell of food
That wanders in the air during the day.

Sunset gathers the half-castrated inmates
Like stale crumbs from the city.
They plod through the large gates
Weary, bent: and shut
Their fatigued minds, eyes and ears.
For them the day is over.
They are banished to a twilight life.

The silence that they left behind
At the breaking of the dawn is
Rippled as if it was a calm lake
By laughter as they buzz about
Like newly-wedded women.

They strip off to their vests
Embalmed in a day's sweat.
Yesterday's tripe and porridge are
Hastily warmed up for supper again.

One by one, they enjoy their naked
showers
Splashing their rigid bodies in the water,
And return to their stuffy rooms.

An inmate belches like a sea-rover.
It echoes in the far-flung room.
He raps his full stomach
That is large as a mole-hill:
'Exchoose me you bastards!' he thunders.

They slip into their stony beds,
Clasp their baggy and sweat-reeking
Pillows as if they were their
Beloved ones left in the homelands.

They look at their shirts,
Overalls, trousers, jackets — all ragged,
Hanging aslant on the damp walls
Like faded, dusty family portraits.

Portable radios are switched off,
Candle flames flicker and die,
Darkness and silence covers
Them all like a large blanket.
Alone,
They quietly succumb to sleep.

In the night,
An inmate's untroubled sleep is
interrupted.
He sits on the edge of his bed
Half dozing,
Gazing from darkness to darkness,
And then he spills the seeds of nature
All over his slovenly sheet with
half-satisfaction:
'Family planning,' he whispers to himself.
Then the musical snores
Of the sleep-drowned inmates
Slowly lull him back to sleep.

James Twala¹⁸



Working in the Mines

INGOLOVANE

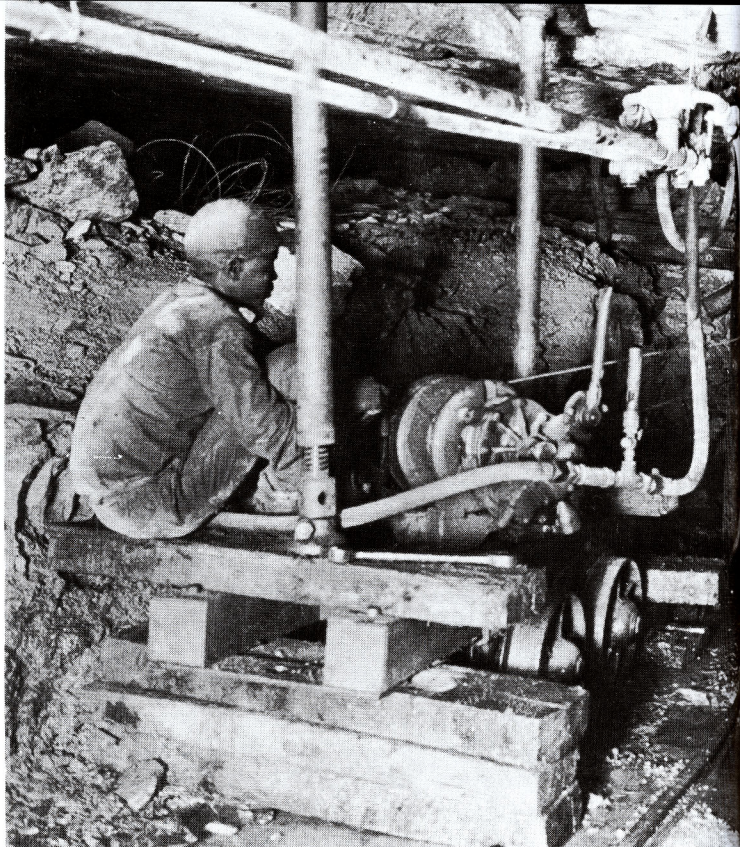
*There are trucks in the mine!
They are everywhere.
They are in Kimberley and Vereeniging,
Yet their real home is in Johannesburg.*

*They are pushed in the mines by the strong men of
Africa.*

*There are trucks.
We did not sleep last night, we were working.
There are trucks,
There are trucks.*

(Xhosa song)¹⁹

(For the mine worker the line of trucks is endless, carrying the refuse of the mills high onto the vast dumps.)



For migrant workers, life in the compounds and mines came as a great shock. Most of the migrant workers were subsistence farmers who had worked all their lives on the land, out in the open. Many had never been to a large town before.

Most workers had never seen machines before they went to the mines. They had never worked underground, in the dark, in the dust, in the terrible heat. The new workers had to learn new ways of working.

Work lost its old meaning. They were no longer working only for themselves and their families.

As migrant workers they worked for others — they worked for a wage.

In the mines, they could not work only at times when they saw work was needed, as they had done on the land. The mine owners wanted the mines to produce as much gold as possible. So the workers had to work in shifts. They worked day and night, nine, ten or more hours at a time.

A WORKING DAY UNDERGROUND

Working conditions were not exactly the same at every mine —

some were much better than others. But the working day at every mine followed more or less the same pattern:

The 'native day shift' would go down the mine any time from four to six o'clock in the morning. Some were given hot coffee, others got no food at all.

When the workers reached the level where they had to work, they were supposed to wait for the white miners to come. But the white supervisors did not come until 6.30 a.m., so the 'boss boy' would get the workers to start work without the white miner.

They would start by getting tools ready and filling up holes where yesterday's dynamite had not exploded. (This was a dangerous thing to do without checking — unexploded dynamite could explode later or cause fires, leading to terrible accidents.)

When the white miner arrived, the day's work would begin. The workers spent a few hours lashing — shovelling broken rock into trucks to be taken up to the surface. When the lashing was finished, it was time to drill new holes.

The workers hammered deep holes into the rock so that the dynamite fuse could fit in. Then the skilled miner would put

in the dynamite. By this time it would be about 3 o'clock in the afternoon.

The skilled miners and the lashers, trammers and hammer men would leave. The workers who helped with the blasting of the holes would stay until they finished their work. This could take until 7 o'clock at night.

During this long working day of nine to 15 hours, labourers were not given any food. If they wanted to eat underground they had to bring their own food.

The night shift worked for equally long hours. They would go down at two o'clock in the afternoon and usually only finish work at six o'clock the next morning.

White miners, on the other hand, did not work for more than ten hours a day and in the middle of the shift they would go up to the surface for a two-hour food break. Often, a 'learner blaster' would be left behind to supervise the blasting, despite the fact that he was still learning to blast and did not yet have a certificate.

At the end of the shift, the workers would go up to the surface in the lift. After their hard work in the hot, airless tunnels, they would be sweating heavily. Even when the weather was cold or raining, they would still have



'If I go to the mines, where shall I find the courage to get into the cage?'
(From a Chopi song).²⁰

to wait in queues to collect their tickets, to show that they had finished another shift.

Only when they had their tickets could they at last get their food. If they had bought some food of their own to add to the small supply, they first had to cook it.

After eating, the workers would talk a little. As there was very little lighting in their rooms, there was not much else they could do. There was no chance of washing their clothes — these might get stolen during the night when they were hanging up to dry.

Usually, the tired worker would go to sleep soon after his meal, before another long, hard shift underground the next day.

ACCIDENTS

Working underground was not only hard and uncomfortable. It was also dangerous. Rock bursts and rock falls killed people regularly. In those early mining years there were even more deaths in the gold mines than there are today. In July 1903, for example, the death rate was 112 for every thousand mine-workers — some died from accidents, some from disease and others from general weakness.

Mine Boy

An Excerpt

from the Novel

by Peter Abrahams

'For Xuma the day was strange. Stranger than any day he had ever known. There was the rumbling noise and the shouting and the explosions and the tremblings of the earth. And always the shouting indunas driving the men on to work. And over all those, the bitter eyes and hardness of the white man who had told him to push the truck when he did not know how.

It was the strangeness of it all that terrified him. And the look in the eyes of the other men who worked with him. He had seen that look before when he was at home on the farms . . . The eyes of these men were like the eyes of the sheep that did not know where to run when the dog barked. It was this that frightened him.

And when a lorry came the men jumped out of the road and ran like the sheep. Over all this the induna was like a shepherd with a spear. And the white man sat with folded arms.

With another he had pushed the loaded truck up the incline. The path was narrow on which they had to walk and it was difficult to balance well. And the white man had shouted. 'Hurry up!' And the induna had taken up the shout. And one little truck after another, loaded with fine wet

Workers did not have proper working clothes and protective helmets. Danger was always with them underground.

'Working in the mines is an agonising and painful experience. Your work is in an extremely dangerous place. Whenever you go down into the shaft, you are not sure that you will come out alive. You don't want to think about it. But it keeps coming. Whenever an accident occurs and someone is either killed or badly injured, you think of yourself in that position, you think of your family and you become very unstable and lonely. You feel you want to see them for the last



Peter Abrahams

white sand, was pushed up the incline to where a new mine-dump was being built.

But as fast as they moved the sand so fast did the pile grow. A truck load would go and another would come from the bowels of the earth. And another would go and another would come. So it went on all day long. On and on and on and on.

But the sand remained the same. A truck would come from the heart of the earth. A truck would go up to build the mine-dump. Another would come. Another would go . . . All day long . . .

And for all their sweating and hard breathing and for the redness of their eyes and the emptiness of their stare there would be nothing to show. In the morning the pile had been so big. Now it was the same. And the mine-dump did not seem to grow either.

It was this that frightened Xuma. This seeing of nothing for a man's work.'

Acknowledgement: Heinemann African Writers Series.

time . . . Death is so real you keep on praying and thanking God each time you come out alive.'

— from *Another Blanket*.

M'GODINI

*I went to the country of Joana.
I find men working underground.
Working with tools in their hands
The hammer and drills of the bones
To break the rocks that are so hard
Working by candlelight.*

*Fire! zzi, fire, zzi!
Bad luck! The holes are blasted
It kills men underground.*

(Shangaan song).²¹