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Chapter 4: Helene Franz Hospital and the Bochum Leper Institution

by Mahunele Thotse

ABSTRACT

For almost eighty years, one family, the Franz family of the Berlin Mission Society collectively carried their work amongst the people of the far north of South Africa. The Helene Franz Hospital was established as a deliberate and organized initiative to address the prevalence of endemic diseases among the Black population in the Northern Transvaal region. The hospital's history is intricately intertwined with the lives of both Robert and Helene Franz. Their arrival in 1895 injected fresh energy into the battle against endemic diseases. Thotse is focused on the characteristics, beginning and initial endeavours of the Helene Franz hospital, the Bochum Leper Institute and their overall impact in the affected area. He interviewed with the grandson of Robert and Helene Franz.

Carl Heinrich Robert Franz was born on Nieder-Adelsdorf, Silesia, a district of Prussia on 7 July 1864. After his ordainment as a missionary, he was sent out to South Africa in 1892 where he worked at various stations of the Berlin Missionary Society including Adamshoop in the Orange Free State, Mphome and Lešoane in the Woodbush (Haenertsburg) area of the far Northern Transvaal.

In 1894 he was joined by his fiancé Helene Magdalena Schulz, who had been born in East Prussia on 24 March 1866. Helene was the daughter of Heinrich Christian Schulz and his wife Czereczina Wiszbowski (Christina Schmidt) of Russian-Polish extraction. Helene's father a descendant from an old emigrant family from Salzburg later moved to Eydtkuhnen and after his death, Helene was sent to a Luthern School in Kraschnitz, near Breslau at the age of fourteen. (Helene and Robert on the photo around 1900?)

Initially, Helene wanted to become a deaconess. However, with the view to a missionary career, she received formal training in general nursing, midwifery and medical diagnosis before she left for South Africa to be married to Robert at Middelfontein, near Nylstroom on 20 November 1894. During their sojourn in Lešoane, her first three children Johannes, Gottfried and Anna Rose were born. Ann Rose died in infancy. The other six children were born near the mountains of Hananwa in the Bochum-Blaauberg area.



In 1895 a war broke out between the Makgoba people and the Boer government of the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek in the lowveld area. The war was fought because the Makgoba people did not want to submit under the Boer government. During the war, Helene rendered invaluable service to the wounded, an event which served as the initial landmark of an illustrious nursing career amongst the indigenous peoples of the Northern Transvaal.

In 1897 Robert was transferred by the Berlin Mission from Lešoane to the Blaauberg (Hananwa), to replace Rev. Christoph Sonntag, when the latter's appointment was not extended by the Berlin Mission society. Several members of the Molepo clan followed the couple to the mission station at Leipzig (Blaauberg) to further their medical treatment. However, the mission station at Blaauberg was not equipped to accommodate patients in such large numbers. Initially Robert gave permission to the Molepo people to build houses at the mission station especially in view to the fact that many patients required prolonged treatment. This step could be considered to be the advent of the hospital work in Blaauberg.

While Helene cared for the physical welfare of the ba-Hananwa, Robert preached the gospel. However, there is pictorial evidence that he was regularly called upon to help with the nursing, especially the anointment of the mercuric balm, which was the recognized treatment for the highly prevalent spirochaetal infections (causing diseases

such as syphilis, yaws, lyme disease, and relapsing fever) before the development of Salvarsan. Salvarsan was the first chemotherapeutic agent, which was discovered by the Nobel Prize winner, Paul Ehrlich in 1907 and presented to the medical world in 1910.

The second Anglo-Boer resulted in a decline in the hospital work. Although the republican forces often approached Helene to treat wounded soldiers. After the occupation of Pietersburg by the British, Robert and Helene were placed under house arrest and therefore forbidden to leave the mission station at Leipzig. After the cessation of hostilities, the work escalated to such an extent that Robert was obliged to provide food and shelter as well as the required medicaments out of his personal funds. In view of the inability of the Berlin Missionary Society to render the necessary financial aid, Robert was forced to approach the ZAR government to either render financial aid or to suggest an alternative as they were in no position to carry the financial burden any longer.



Thanks to the good will and kind intervention of Mr Wheelright, the chief magistrate of Pietersburg, the farm Bochum (belonging to the government) which is situated about 100 km northwest of Pietersburg was placed at the disposal of the missionaries to pursue the medical work. By virtue of a grant-in aid-mechanism, financial resources from King Edward VII fund were utilized to build a hospital with a central consulting room, two hospital wards, a sisters' complex, dispensary, maternity ward, dining room and satellite bungalows for long-term- and recuperating patients as well as the housing of relatives from out-lying areas. Helene was called upon to manage the hospital, which was

initially named the Bochum Syphilitic Lazaretto. Subsequently, the facility became known as the Helene Franz Hospital.

In 1908 the Franz family moved to Bochum where they bought the adjacent farm Borkum from the government.

With the establishment of the Bochum hospital, Robert built a church and continued with his missionary work. Subsequently the Berlin missionary society granted him permission to conduct his evangelical services from Bochum. It soon became evident that a facility for the treatment of leper patients was urgently required, and in 1914 the Bochum Leper Institution was established with Robert Franz as the superintendent.

Based on a personal interview with ML Thotse on 10 February 2016, prof R.C. Franz, who is a grandson of Robert and Helene Franz, explained that the establishment of the leprosy institution was a direct consequence of an incident that occurred in the Bochum hospital's early years:

Oupa (Afrikaans for grandpa) Franz encountered a group of people throwing stones at a leprosy patient when he was visiting one of the remote satellite missions. Subsequently, he interceded, transported the sufferer aboard his equine carriage, and proceeded back to his residence. Ouma Franz was greatly distressed by the situation because they lacked the necessary resources to provide treatment for these patients, and the condition was considered highly contagious. On the next morning, she strongly urged Oupa Franz to accompany her to Pretoria, as she had a pressing need to meet with the Minister. Oupa Franz raised an objection, stating that they should first send a written communication to the Minister. However, Ouma Franz firmly asserted that if Oupa Franz desired her to provide medical care to the leper patients, they must travel to Pretoria. Upon reaching Pretoria, she proceeded to the Union Buildings and inquired about the whereabouts of the Minister's office. She was directed to the office. She persisted on meeting the Minister, who was clearly occupied and unable to see her. Subsequently, she requested a chair and, ensuring that he would have to pass by that entrance, patiently awaited the arrival of the Minister. After he finally arrived, she attended her meeting, and one year later, the leper institution was established.

Since the farm Bochum was situated in a region populated by black African communities it was deemed to be the ideal location for the institution to be established a few kilometres from the hospital. Again, the social structure of the patients was considered a determining factor. Patients lived in small square houses and could continue with working on the lands and caring for their livestock within a familiar environment – they could even go on hunting trips.

Missionary Robert Franz continued to play a supportive role in the hospital while still catering for the spiritual welfare of his community. In this he was assisted by the evangelist Adolf Mamabolo.

Robert Franz was no longer in good health and missionary H. Jonas van Bischoffkreuz from in Moletši often assisted him at Blaauberg. By 1914 his health condition forced him to request the Berlin Mission society to terminate his appointment. In July 1914, Missionary Martin Jäckel replaced Robert at Blaauberg. Jäckel subsequently married the eldest Franz daughter in 1920. Robert was appointed as superintendent of the Leper Institution by the Government. Until his death in April 1919 Robert took care of the spiritual well-being of the leper patients. He was ably assisted by his sister-in-law Johanna Schulz.

Helene worked tirelessly to fulfil her mission as a sister of mercy for nearly forty years. Being a modest person, she only saw the best in other people and genuinely thought that happiness and salvation were the two main goals of humankind. In 1908, she was awarded the St Johns Order of the Nurses of Malta, despite her never having sought public recognition. She was awarded the King George V Jubilee Medal in 1935 in recognition of her exceptional service to the Northern Transvaal's indigenous population.

After her passing, the hospital was renamed the Helene Franz Hospital in her honour, and she was referred to as “The Angel of the North.” This flourishing establishment stands as a lasting tribute to the valiant efforts of a noble woman in the service of humanity.

The Franz couple's commitment to serving others did not end with them. Their children and Helene's sister carried on their legacy. Johannes Gottlieb Heinrich (Hans), the eldest son, took over his father's position as Helene Franz Hospital's superintendent until his passing on November 3, 1955. He was buried beside his parents at the family

churchyard in Bochum, close to the hospitals where they had given their life to alleviate the suffering of Hananwa's impoverished inhabitants and lepers. "*In as much as you have done it unto one of these My brethren, you have done it unto Me,*" is the fitting epitaph found on his tombstone, which is drawn from Matthew 25:40.

Johanna, Helene's sister, left Germany in 1908 after working as a fully qualified nurse at Hamburg's renowned Eppendorfer Krankenhaus. Johanna took up the care of these unhappy persons upon the founding of the Bochum Leper Institute and continued to do so until her retirement in the late 19th century. After providing over forty years of care for "her lepers," she quietly passed away in 1951. She was always referred to as Tanni Schulz or lovingly as "Fräulein" because she never got married.

After the lepers were moved to Westfort, the facility was used by the South African National Tuberculosis Association (SANTA) as a Tuberculosis Sanatorium. The Helene Franz Centre for Retarded Children was established as a result, and it is still in operation today. Johanna Maria Christina Roos (Hannerle), Helene's youngest daughter, carried on with the business when her mother passed away until retiring in 1974. She was affectionately referred to as Mohumagadi, the matriarch or senior woman of the tribe, by the ba-Hananwa.

Gottfried Heinrich, the writer who rose to the position of regional director of education, was the second oldest son of Robert and Helene. He founded the GH Franz School, which is still in operation today, not far from Bochum on the property Uitkyk No. 3. The fact that Dr. Mamphela Ramphele, who was born at the Helene Franz Hospital on December 28, 1947, was formerly the vice-chancellor and rector of the University of Cape Town as well as a member of the World Bank in Washington, is particularly noteworthy.

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