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AXEL C. HÜNTELMANN, CHRISTIAN JASER,  
MIEKE ROSCHER, NADIR WEBER (EDS.)

# Animals and Epidemics

INTERSPECIES ENTANGLEMENTS  
IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE





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# Animals and Epidemics

Interspecies Entanglements in Historical Perspective

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## Rats, Removals, and Redevelopment

### Plague in Port Elizabeth, 1938

On 23 March 1938, bubonic plague re-emerged in Korsten, a freehold multi-racial township on the outskirts of Port Elizabeth (now Gqeberha). Jane Thys, an African woman who lived on Curtis Street took violently ill and was transferred to the Formidable Epidemic Diseases Hospital – an old and dilapidated structure on the outskirts of the city.<sup>1</sup> Later that day, her son George Gama was found “ill with a bubo in the groin”.<sup>2</sup> That evening, another African woman called Nonina Toobi was also found to be infected. Over the next few months, this cluster of cases slowly grew and by August, there had been 22 confirmed cases and 16 deaths.<sup>3</sup> Despite this small caseload, the outbreak of bubonic plague – a much dreaded disease – provoked a dramatic state response. Officials feared that plague was endemic in Korsten and that should they need to quarantine Port Elizabeth, commerce would grind to a halt.<sup>4</sup> Terrified white citizens thronged medical doctors with requests for anti-plague vaccines,<sup>5</sup> and demanded that buses be segregated to escape what they described as the “ordeal” of sitting next to “some diseased person”.<sup>6</sup>

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1 D.L. Ferguson, The 1938 Outbreak of Plague in Port Elizabeth, in: *South African Journal of Laboratory and Clinical Medicine*, 18 (1963), 118–121, 119. – I would like to thank the editors for their extremely helpful feedback on this chapter. I thank also the participants in the “Animals and Epidemics” conference in 2022 for stimulating discussions and conversations. Finally, I am grateful to Christos Lynteris, Oliver French and Matheus Alves Duarte da Silva for their comments on an early version of this draft.

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2 Louis Fourie to Secretary of Public Health, Plague Port Elizabeth, 28 August 1938, Western Cape Archives and Records Service (WCARS), 3/PEZ, 4/1/1/1326.

3 Ibid.

4 On endemicity of plague in Port Elizabeth: Minutes of Proceedings of Council-in-Committee, Special Meeting Held 11 April 1938, 3/PEZ 4/1/1/1326; Duncan Ferguson to Port Elizabeth Town Clerk, 30 May 1938, 3/PEZ, 4/1/1/1326; Notes of Proceedings of Special Committee re[garding] Outbreak of Plague, Meeting held on 18 July 1938, 3/PEZ, 4/1/1/1326; Extract from Minutes of proceedings of Council; 3 August 1938, 3/PEZ, 4/1/1/1326.

5 Minutes of Proceedings of the Special Committee re[garding] Outbreak of Plague in the City, 12 April 1938, 3/PEZ, 4/1/1/1326; Notes of Proceedings of Special Committee re[garding] Outbreak of Plague in the City, 12 April 1938, 3/PEZ, 4/1/1/1326.

6 Mixed Omnibuses and Public Health, in: *Eastern Province Herald*, 29 March 1938, 8.



Meanwhile, opponents of segregation condemned the plague scare as little more than a convenient excuse to rid Korsten of its Black residents.<sup>7</sup>

Although Black, Coloured,<sup>8</sup> and some white people challenged the condemnation of their homes and neighbourhood as pathological, the outbreak led to the eviction of 3,145 people and the resettlement of 508 in McNamee Village, an allegedly plague-proof, segregationist “utopia”.<sup>9</sup> The removals, however, failed to solve sanitary problems and became a point of great bitterness amongst former residents of Korsten, many of whom were unconvinced that plague had ever existed in the neighbourhood.

The story of plague in Port Elizabeth is an example of how the materiality of plague epidemiology shaped the physical landscape of the city, as well as medical assumptions about rats, fleas, and *Yersinia pestis* (the causative microorganism of plague). Many medical historians of South Africa have been influenced by Maynard Swanson’s classic 1977 argument, “The Sanitation Syndrome”. Here, Swanson argued in the context of the early twentieth-century Cape Town and Port Elizabeth plague outbreaks that the presence of plague provided a convenient scapegoat for the forced removal of African people from the city centre. In Cape Town, Africans were blamed for the outbreak, their homes destroyed, and contents incinerated under the aegis of the “sanitation syndrome” – the equation of “black urban settlement, labour and living conditions with threats to public health and security”.<sup>10</sup> With few exceptions, they were evicted to Uitvlucht, a plague quarantine camp, which was later converted into a “native location”. Historians of South Africa have subsequently found the “sanitation syndrome” a useful concept to explore the relationship between sanitation and segregation in other parts of the country.<sup>11</sup> It is undoubtable that the sanitation syndrome played a significant role in shaping plague control in Port Elizabeth also, and I do not in any way dispute these

7 See interviews with Korsten residents quoted in Janet Mary Cherry, *A Blot on the Landscape and Centre of Resistance. A Social and Economic History of Korsten*, BA Hons Thesis, Cape Town, University of Cape Town, 1988, 47–56.

8 A distinct racial identity in South Africa which, although rejected by some, remains in common use. It refers to mixed-race people with a combination of European, Asian, Khoisan, and/or Nguni ancestry. See Mohammad Adhikari, *Burdened by Race. Coloured Identities in Southern Africa*, Cape Town 2009.

9 Statistical Report on Housing and Slum Elimination in City of Port Elizabeth, 1 July 1934–30 September 1938, City Health Department, Port Elizabeth, 20 October 1938, 3/PEZ, 1/3/2/6/12.

10 Maynard W. Swanson, *The Sanitation Syndrome. Bubonic Plague and Urban Native Policy in the Cape Colony, 1900–1909*, in: *The Journal of African History* 18/3 (1977), 410.

11 Elizabeth van Heyningen, *Public Health and Society in Cape Town, 1880–1910*, PhD Thesis, Cape Town, University of Cape Town, 1989; Sharon Caldwell, *Segregation and Plague. King William’s Town and the Plague Outbreaks of 1900–1907*, in: *Contree* 29 (1991); Howard Phillips, *Epidemics. The Story of South Africa’s Five Most Lethal Human Diseases*, Athens 2012, 38–67; Gary Fred Baines, *New Brighton, Port Elizabeth c.1903–1953. A History of an Urban African Community*, PhD Thesis, Cape Town, University of Cape Town, 1994, 30; Cherry, *Blot* (note 7), 18.

claims.<sup>12</sup> However, additional “pathological” factors that have been understudied such as architecture, infrastructure, and animals also shaped Port Elizabeth’s plague control and forced removals.

This article examines how the more-than-human dimensions of Korsten – its architecture, materiality, human residents, animals, and insects – shaped the control of plague.<sup>13</sup> Here, I draw upon two historiographical influences. Firstly, I follow the lead of plague historians who have emphasised the epistemological, material, and environmental aspects of urban plague control.<sup>14</sup> Secondly, I draw upon Jonathan Saha, who has shown how British imperialists in Myanmar were both disgusted and fascinated by the allegedly “excessive intimacies of Burmese encounters with animals”.<sup>15</sup> My argument is that colonial sanitarians took both the materiality of Korsten and the alleged presence of disgust-provoking intimacies between rats, humans, and fleas within the neighbourhood as justification for draconian epidemiological interventions. These connections between diseased animals and humans, facilitated by allegedly pathological architecture, in addition to broader concerns about the mixing of races, enabled officials to demolish much of Korsten. This happened despite protests from residents and evidence of infected rats in greater numbers in other parts of the city.

## 1. Korsten: An Infected and Infective Neighbourhood

Korsten in the 1930s was “home ‘for the poor of all races’”, and a site of working-class solidarity that posed a challenge to prevailing segregationist sentiments.<sup>16</sup> According to a survey conducted in August 1937, of 1,522 premises in the area, 827 were occupied

12 For example, Medical Officer of Health (MOH) Duncan Ferguson, was pro segregation and explicitly advised that authorities create three new areas for “Europeans”, “Coloureds”, and “Natives” on the grounds of public health. “The Medical Officer of Health Reports on 2nd August, 1938”, 3/PEZ, 1/3/2/6/11.

13 For the term more-than-human see Sarah Whatmore, *Materialist Returns. Practising Cultural Geography in and for a More-than-Human World*, in: *Cultural Geographies* 13/4 (2006), 600–609; Donald’s gloss of more-than-human geography is helpful for my historical case study. She defines more-than-human geography as “concerned with the multiplicity of agentive actors in space and place”. Megan Donald, *When Care Is Defined by Science. Exploring Veterinary Medicine through a More-than-human Geography of Empathy*, in: *Area* 51/3 (2019), 470–478.

14 For example, Prashant Kidambi, “An Infection of Locality”. Plague, Pythogenesis and the Poor in Bombay, c. 1896–1905, in: *Urban History* 31/2 (2005), 249–267; Robert Peckham, *Hong Kong Junk. Plague and the Economy of Chinese Things*, in: *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 90/1 (2016), 32–60; Christos Lynteris, *A Suitable Soil. Plague’s Urban Breeding Grounds at the Dawn of the Third Pandemic*, in: *Medical History* 61/3 (2017), 343–57; Zachary Fleishman, *Waste, Reclamation and the Production of Racialised Space in Cape Town, 1882–1913*, in: *South African Historical Journal* 73/1 (2021), 162–186.

15 Jonathan Saha, *Among the Beasts of Burma. Animals and the Politics of Colonial Sensibilities, c. 1840–1940*, in: *Journal of Social History* 48/4 (2015), 919.

16 Cherry, Blot, (note 7), 34.

“solely by Natives”, 378 “solely by Coloured”, 179 “occupied by Coloured and Native”, and the remaining 138 were “occupied by others” such as whites, Indians, Chinese people, or were church buildings. Of some 19,571 residents, 13,763 were “Native”, 5168 “Coloured”, and the remaining 640, “Other”.<sup>17</sup> A large portion of its population were victims of a series of forced removals that took place in the context of a previous plague outbreak of 1901. Then, officials quickly correlated Black inner-city “locations” with outbreaks of the disease and evicted their residents without providing alternate accommodation. Many, dependent on work within Port Elizabeth, chose to move to Korsten, rather than the under-construction segregated neighbourhood New Brighton, where officials hoped they might settle. The status of Korsten as a freehold village enabled anyone with sufficient funds – whether white or Black – to purchase property and live in the area. By comparison, New Brighton property could not be purchased, it was under police surveillance (which probably meant constant harassment), and location authorities enforced various restrictions against African movement, economic activity, and alcohol brewing. Moreover, New Brighton was further out of town, had higher rents, and its rail fares into town were more expensive.<sup>18</sup>

Korsten’s status as a rapidly growing freehold village without much town-planning or council oversight also meant that slum landlordism was rife. Only a small percentage of Korsten properties were owned by Black and Coloured people: 15.32% and 13.52% respectively. The remainder of the land was owned by a small number of white and Asian residents, organisations, as well as white slumlords like Sidney Wells, who owned some 28% of the land in Korsten.<sup>19</sup> Wells was known for making a fortune out of the 1901 forced removals. In 1902, he purchased “large blocks of erven at Korsten”, which he subdivided into small plots, and sold many of these to Africans at a monthly rate with interest of 5%.<sup>20</sup> Many of the homes constructed in this area were built hastily from scrap materials, and without council oversight as the recently evicted Africans scrambled to find new accommodation.<sup>21</sup>

Owing to such conditions, an outbreak of plague had long been feared in Korsten. As early as 1934, Port Elizabeth Medical Officer Duncan Ferguson had already predicted that Korsten would pose a serious menace to the city in the event of a plague outbreak as its “mixture of races” and “very poor” housing conditions would make an “epidemic of

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17 Report of Medical Officer of Health to Housing and Slum Elimination Committee, 10 August 1937, 3/PEZ 4/1/1/1326.

18 Baines, New Brighton (note 11), 46–47; Joyce F. Kirk, A “Native” Free State at Korsten. Challenge to Segregation in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, 1901–1905, in: *Journal of Southern African Studies* 17/2 (1991), 316–324.

19 Report of Medical Officer of Health (note 17).

20 “Housing and Slum Elimination Committee Meeting, 6th May 1938”, 3/PEZ, 1/3/2/6/10.

21 Kirk, “Native” Free State’ (note 18), 317–318.

plague or typhus fever” “difficult to control...”<sup>22</sup> Such an outbreak would cause enormous problems because Korsten was connected to the sinews of capital that stretched between the Port Elizabeth docks and the Indian Ocean World. Port Elizabeth was, in this period, a rapidly developing industrial manufacturing centre, and the third largest port of the country, which exported goods across the sub-continent, and internationally via its docks.<sup>23</sup> Many of its dock and factory workers lived in Korsten,<sup>24</sup> and their commutes to and from work provided a route for *Yersinia pestis* to travel across local and international trade networks.

Hence, as early as 1934 Port Elizabeth embarked on a vast slum clearance project, which aimed to redevelop Korsten through categorising properties as unfit for human habitation and flagging them for demolition or serving notices to property owners to repair defective premises.<sup>25</sup> The council aimed to eliminate the supposed health and ideological nuisance posed by Korsten by relocating its Black residents to a new model location, McNamee Village within the suburb of New Brighton, for which the construction of 3,000 houses commenced in November 1937.<sup>26</sup> Ferguson was closely involved in this project and was tasked with inspecting and reporting on the sanitary condition of each property in the area. Although such slum clearance had started before the outbreak of plague, it intensified once the disease was detected. Between 1934 and 1937, some 1,217 rooms were flagged for demolition, and 121 for repair. 525 occupants were “rehomed”. By comparison, in January to September 1938 alone, 781 rooms were flagged for demolition and 49 for repair.<sup>27</sup> Ferguson’s reports on these properties paint a picture of white middle-class disgust at the conditions in which Korsten tenants supposedly lived. Unfit “for human habitation”, these buildings were routinely described as “in a state of collapse”, being smeared with “filth and grime”, having ceilings of “filthy sacking”, walls of “newspaper” and “‘Dagga’ [cannabis] joints”,<sup>28</sup> floors of “earth”, and a lack of running water, toilets, or separate kitchens. The only beings that these houses provided an adequate home to, in Ferguson’s opinion, were rodents and insects.

Given these allegedly unsanitary conditions, when plague broke out, Korsten was immediately assumed to be widely infected, and the state response was draconian. Firstly, those residents infected with plague and all their recent contacts were lined up,

22 Ferguson, 1934, quoted in Louis Fourie to Secretary for Public Health (note 2).

23 Notes of sub-committee appointed to interview representatives of location authorities re[garding] anti-plague measures, 11 June 1937, 3/PEZ, 4/1/1/1326.

24 Sarah Hudleston/George Mnyalaza Milwa Pemba, George Pemba, *Against All Odds*, Johannesburg 1996, 18.

25 Baines, *New Brighton* (note 11), 59–60.

26 *Ibid.*

27 *Statistical Report on Housing and Slum Elimination* (note 9).

28 Case No. 95. No. 17, Dobson Street and Nos. 17, 19 and 21, Brassel Street, MOH Report 30 May 1938, 3/PEZ, 1/3/2/6/11.

vaccinated, and transferred to the Formidable Epidemic Diseases Hospital.<sup>29</sup> As humans who had been contaminated by the presence of rats, their bodies were treated with the same chemicals used to kill fleas on rats captured for laboratory analysis. Oral histories conducted by Vista University Students in 1987 with elderly former residents of Korsten,<sup>30</sup> attest that suspected or confirmed plague sufferers were vigorously disinfected. Those thought to have been in contact with rats were “dipped in a substance like oil claimed to be an antiseptic”.<sup>31</sup> At other times, they were subjected to “great degradation”: stripped naked and “greased” with paraffin emulsion<sup>32</sup> in front of their children.<sup>33</sup> At times, authorities also shaved their heads and “hairy parts”.<sup>34</sup> At the hospital, a camp was erected to house the victims divided by those diagnosed with or recovering from plague, and those who were contacts of plague sufferers.<sup>35</sup> Patients were held here for a minimum of twelve days,<sup>36</sup> but were at times kept for up to five months.<sup>37</sup>

Secondly, Ferguson’s department in collaboration with officials from the national Department of Public Health, sought to modernise Korsten through rat-proofing all houses in the neighbourhood and condemning those that could not be rat-proofed for destruction. Rat-proofing involved retrofitting homes to prevent rodents from entering them through architectural interventions which aimed to block any potential ingress or egress of rats. Virtually all houses in the neighbourhood were also subjected to vigorous fumigation. Those homes that were thought to be too dilapidated to make these alterations or worth less than the cost of rat proofing, were incinerated.<sup>38</sup>

Thirdly, any furnishings or household wares that could not be carried by plague sufferers and their contacts to the hospital were condemned as potential rodent and flea harbourages. Residents of Korsten were advised to “boil all blankets and personal clothing in order to rid them of fleas”.<sup>39</sup> Other materials, such as some 1,600 tonnes of

29 50,000 people were given two doses of plague vaccine. Ferguson, 1938 Outbreak of Plague (note 1), 120; Louis Fourie to Secretary of Public Health (note 2).

30 Baines notes that these interviews were conducted by Vista University Students. Unfortunately, they have since been lost or destroyed. My thanks to Gary Baines for his assistance in establishing this. Baines, New Brighton (note 11), 116.

31 Cherry, Blot (note 7), 51.

32 Ferguson, 1938 Outbreak of Plague (note 1), 119.

33 Secretary of Korsten Vigilance Committee, 36, Durban Road Writes on 19 July 1938, 3/PEZ, 1/3/2/6/11. See also “one black man”, quoted in: Cherry, Blot (note 7), 55.

34 Ferguson, 1938 Outbreak of Plague (note 1), 119.

35 Notes of Proceedings of the Special Committee Appointed in Connection with the Outbreak of Plague, 3 June 1938, 3/PEZ 4/1/1/1326.

36 Ferguson, 1938 Outbreak of Plague (note 1), 120.

37 Charlie Amshaw was detained between 12 April and 12 September. City Engineer to Town Clerk, 22 September 1938, 3/PEZ 4/1/1/1326.

38 See 3/PEZ, 1/3/2/6/10; 1/3/2/6/11; 1/3/2/6/12; WCARS, 4/PEZ 4/1/61; 3/PEZ 4/1/1/1326. In particular: Louis Fourie to Secretary of Public Health (note 2).

39 100 Men Fighting Plague at Port Elizabeth, in: Rand Daily Mail, 19 April 1938, 11.



Fig. 1 “Thousands of bags being deverminized at the FED” (Formidable Epidemic Diseases Hospital), Port Elizabeth, 1938. The dog (on the left) was likely trained to detect and kill any rats in the bags.

so-called “scrap” or “junk” material was condemned for destruction, probably because it was thought to offer a cosy, protective habitat for rats.<sup>40</sup> Teams of rodent inspectors appropriated and removed such material from Korsten, or took it out onto the streets and burned it to ash. Requests for compensation for items from money hidden in burned mattresses to pocketknives and crockery were dismissed as fraudulent or frivolous by officials in Ferguson’s office.<sup>41</sup> Any possessions that those under quarantine were allowed to take with them to the hospital were subject to close inspection and disinfection. Under suspicion that rats and fleas might have been nesting in such possessions, all were “deverminised” likely through fumigation or washing.<sup>42</sup>

Ultimately, in taking these measures, officials were hopeful that evicted Black residents would settle in McNamee Village, where they could be kept under stringent control, and the agency of rodents could be more easily kept in check. However, these segregationist designs did not entirely come to pass. Of the 3,145 people evicted, 1,974 of whom were

40 Louis Fourie to Secretary of Public Health (note 2).

41 Medical Officer of Health to Town Clerk, 22 July 1938, 3/PEZ, 4/1/1/1326.

42 Port Elizabeth in 1938 – Bubonic Plague collection. A. Schauder Collection, Cory Library, Rhodes University. Available: [http://vital.seals.ac.za:8080/vital/access/manager/Collection/vital:26020?site\\_name=GlobalView](http://vital.seals.ac.za:8080/vital/access/manager/Collection/vital:26020?site_name=GlobalView). My thanks to Vathiswa Nhanha and Gary Baines for helping me identify the provenance of this album.

labelled “Native”, a total of 508 took up homes in New Brighton, many in McNamee.<sup>43</sup> The remainder either moved to other parts of the city, rebuilt in Korsten, or left for other parts of the Union.

This was, then, somewhat of a success story for segregationists: a racially mixed neighbourhood was partially depopulated. Yet here Korsten was deemed insanitary and in need of draconian action not *only* because it posed a problem to segregationist ideologues, or even because of evidence of zoonotic transfers of plague between rats, fleas, and humans. Its status as an infected, and infective neighbourhood, was *also* blamed on its architecture and building materials, which allegedly facilitated multi-species intimacies between rats, fleas, and Black and Coloured people. Attention to these non-human factors through a close examination of Ferguson’s home reports not only provides a window onto the epidemiology of plague in 1938, but also reveals how perceived relationships between architecture, objects, and pests could be mobilised in support of segregation and forced removals.

## 2. From a Pathology of Wood-and-Iron to a Pathological Neighbourhood

From a close study of Duncan Ferguson’s hundreds of reports on houses in Korsten over the months of the plague outbreak, one feature is abundantly clear: almost all houses condemned for destruction were “wood-and-iron” buildings. No definition of such a building survives in these files, but it seems that this term referred to the numerous huts in the area, as well as its shacks. Ferguson’s descriptions of the interiors of these houses reveal his fixation with the harbourage they allegedly provided to “vermin”. One plague-infected “wood and iron” house, inspected on 31 March 1938, he described as “dilapidated and unsightly, unfit for human habitation”, “coated with dirt”, and “likely to attract and harbour bugs”. It was, in his opinion, “so dirty and verminous as to be injurious...to health and liable to favour the spread of infectious disease”.<sup>44</sup> This description is so common in Ferguson’s reports that it appears to have been cut and pasted over and over.

Maurits Bastiaan Meerwijk has observed that in 1911–1942 Java, when investigating plague-infected houses, medical officers dissected them as if examining the body of a

43 Evicted Coloured people had a choice of “economic” or “sub-economic” housing in seven different suburbs, while whites had a choice of four economic or one sub-economic housing schemes. “Native” people were only offered New Brighton. Statistical Report on Housing and Slum Elimination, 20 October 1938 (note 9).

44 Case No. 83. Lot 58 of ERF 48, Durban Road, Korsten, Port Elizabeth, MOH Report 31 March 1938, 3/PEZ, 1/3/2/6/10.

patient.<sup>45</sup> Ferguson's strategy, both in inspecting properties, and writing his reports, appears to have been similar. His reports broke down "wood and iron" buildings into their pathological elements, emphasising how every architectural aspect of the buildings, and the materials used in their construction, could provide spaces for rats, fleas, or other blood-sucking insects.

The state of flooring in Korsten was particularly repulsive to Ferguson, and his fixation on floorboards and sub-floor space is evident in nearly every report. For example, one slumlord-owned plague-infected building of seven rooms, inhabited by seventeen people, had rooms with floors with "no proper sub-floor ventilation", and its "sub-floor space" allegedly afforded "harbourage to rodents and fleas".<sup>46</sup> Other Korsten properties, however, were in even worse shape, having floors of "earth".<sup>47</sup> There are several reasons why Ferguson may have been so concerned with flooring. Information from the United States which had embarked on numerous concerted rat-proofing campaigns in cities such as San Francisco revealed that rats could burrow into properties from underground.<sup>48</sup> Earth floors were thus framed as a great danger as they did nothing to prevent burrowing rats from commingling with humans inside homes. South African rat-proofing regulations, which were legally enforced on commercial premises that stored or sold food or hides and were strongly encouraged for homes, likewise stipulated that any foundations of less than 18 inches deep in hard soil or 24 inches deep in soft soil were "unsatisfactory" on account of the possibility "for rats to burrow underneath and so enter the building". Meanwhile, buildings with floors "of earth, of defective boards or of bricks laid in clay", were pathologized as "entirely unsuitable for permanent use as stores or shops in which foodstuffs, produce, or other goods are kept" and thus should be "condemned and demolished at once". Homes with earth floors, likewise, were dismissed as spaces that "can never be rodent-proof" and thus should not be permitted.<sup>49</sup> Updated regulations of 1930 pushed the case of concrete as a solution to these problems, insisting that all ground floors must be of concrete or "similar solid rat-proof material".<sup>50</sup>

Ferguson's concern with sub-floor ventilation may appear to hearken back to an earlier period in which plague was thought to be propagated by the soil.<sup>51</sup> However, by 1938, these concerns had been reframed in accordance with the perceived agency

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45 Maurits Bastiaan Meerwijk, *Bamboo Dwellers. Plague, Photography, and the House in Colonial Java*, in: *Plague Image and Imagination from Medieval to Modern Times*, Cham 2021, 205–34.

46 Case No. 83. Lot 58 of ERF 48, Durban Road, Report 31 March 1938 (note 44).

47 Case No. 100. Lot 17 of ERF 11, Stemela Street, Korsten, MOH Report 11 June 1938, WCARS, 3/PEZ, 1/3/2/6/11.

48 Rupert Blue, *Bubonic Plague Control in California in 1903. Origin of Ratproofing as a Control Measure*, in: *California and Western Medicine* 40/5 (1934), 363–65.

49 All quotes since note 48 from: J.A. Mitchell, Circular No. 19 of 1928, Dept of Public Health, 28 September 1928, 4/PEZ 4/1/61. (Underlining according to the original document.)

50 J.A. Mitchell, Government Notice No. 1380 of 1930, 3/PEZ, 4/1/1/1326.

51 Lynteris, *A Suitable Soil* (note 14).



of rats. In a memorandum, Louis Fourie, a noted plague expert, stated that providing “light and air” in sub-floor spaces would “do much to minimise rodent infestation in this area”, but failed to explain why.<sup>52</sup> This probably relates to perceptions of the rat as an animal frequenting dark and musty spaces, and avoiding the light.<sup>53</sup>

A second routine complaint of Ferguson’s was the state of kitchens and other food preparation areas. Disgusted that most residents cooked in their bedrooms, he constantly flagged this as a “structural defect”. Even at times where separate kitchens existed, these were typically in “scrap wood-and-iron” yard structures which were supposedly “coated with filth” and often had “earth” floors.<sup>54</sup> Bedroom cooking was pathologized because it risked attracting rats into the most intimate space of the home, where their fleas might hop onto sleeping humans.

These structural concerns framed Korsten houses as places that rats had inhabited, and from which they could never be evicted. The pathological architecture of Korsten had transformed human homes into rodent homes that had become “infected”<sup>55</sup> by rats. According to Ferguson, the construction of these wood-and-iron buildings was so defective, that it completely prevented any attempts to control rats or fleas within them.<sup>56</sup> The supposed inability to remove rodents from these homes placed residents in a double bind. Their homes were allegedly overrun with rats and insects, but they also could not be made rat-proof.

This was not only because the structures were supposedly filthy and dilapidated but referred to two practical problems. Firstly, according to Ferguson, the buildings were so haphazardly constructed as to render rat-proofing impossible. By 1938, South African rat-proofing regulations specified a suite of material interventions that property owners or occupiers could use to exclude rodents from their premises. Two of the most important of these were screens and barriers. Screens made of “rat-proof netting” – any sturdy netted material such as chicken-wire – were placed over ventilation shafts, gutters, and any open areas exposed to the elements. Barriers such as a layer of concrete flooring, or sturdy materials fitted to the bottoms of doors were installed to prevent

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52 Plague Precautions, 10 September 1938, 3/PEZ, 4/1/1/1326.

53 Ventilation was another pertinent complaint of Ferguson’s. Many of the structures he investigated had few or no windows which resulted in a “dark and gloomy appearance” allegedly favoured by rats. Case No. 79. Lots 6 and 7, ERF 82, Makuten Street, Korsten, MOH Report 19 March 1938, 3/PEZ, 1/3/2/6/10. The lack of windows in many of these houses was not only an issue from a lighting perspective, but they also caused ventilation problems. Case No. 97. Lots 8a and 9a of ERF 15, Daisy Street, Korsten, 10 June 1938, 3/PEZ, 1/3/2/6/11.

54 Case No. 100. Lot 17 of ERF 11, Stemela Street, Korsten, MOH Report 11 June 1938, 3/PEZ, 1/3/2/6/11.

55 Fourie refers to the buildings as well as the neighbourhood as “infected”. Louis Fourie to Secretary of Public Health (note 2).

56 The MOH Reports on 22 July, 1938, 3/PEZ, 1/3/2/6/11.

rodents from burrowing or gnawing in or out of buildings.<sup>57</sup> However, these measures only worked when other entry points to a building – such as floors, ceilings, roofs, and walls – were securely constructed. According to medical officials, none of these measures could viably be installed in many Korsten homes.

Secondly, temporary measures such as fumigation were described as highly ineffective in Korsten's structures. In a letter to Ferguson, W.A. Larmuth, the manager of the South African Fumigation Company, claimed that eliminating rodents in Korsten homes was "extremely difficult" because rats could escape into "rat holes and harbourages under the floors and in foundations" and that HCN (hydrogen cyanide) gas would be "rapidly absorbed if the ground was at all damp".<sup>58</sup> Edward North Thornton, the Chief Health Officer of South Africa, concurred with Larmuth's assessment. Because these buildings were "jammed down on the ground as they were constructed of galvanised iron flat against the wood it naturally followed that" even after fumigation, "a number of" rat "car-cases" would be left in "crevices on such premises".<sup>59</sup> Simultaneously, Korsten dwellings had "leaks and gaps in the walls", and although intensive fumigation might kill fleas, it would not eliminate "the eggs which were ready to hatch out".<sup>60</sup> This made it impossible to "say with certainty that the plague could be eradicated from these buildings."<sup>61</sup> In the eyes of sanitary officials, the wood-and-iron human homes of Korsten were thus fundamentally interlinked with rodent homes in the same neighbourhood. One could not be eliminated without destroying the other: to rid Korsten of rat harbourage, so too did human wood-and-iron homes need to go. This was because "contact between rats and humans in this area is intimate and encourages the spread of plague".<sup>62</sup>

The widespread presence of wood-and-iron buildings in Korsten transformed a problem of individual homes into one affecting an entire neighbourhood. Until "better dwellings were erected", argued Ferguson, "there could be no certainty in deratting" in Korsten.<sup>63</sup> Thornton, recounting a home inspection where he had witnessed a "case of plague lying on the floor in a hovel in Korsten literally alive with fleas", claimed that housing conditions were "unique" in Korsten. Such buildings, he wrote, could "not be treated in any other way but by being burnt".<sup>64</sup>

57 J.A. Mitchell, Circular No. 19 of 1928, Department of Public Health, 28 September 1928, 4/PEZ 4/1/61; J.A. Mitchell, Government Notice No. 1380 of 1930, 3/PEZ 4/1/1/1326.

58 Larmuth to Medical Officer of Health, 25 May 1938, 3/PEZ, 4/1/1/1326.

59 Notes of Meeting of Special Plague Committee, held on 16 April 1938, 3/PEZ 4/1/1/1326.

60 Notes of Proceedings, 12 April 1938 (note 5).

61 Ibid.

62 The MOH Reports on 22 July, 1938, 3/PEZ, 1/3/2/6/11.

63 Notes of Proceedings, 18 July 1938 (note 4). Fourie likewise emphasised that it was urgent to focus plague control efforts places where "housing conditions are bad and rodents are living in close contact with the occupants of dwellings". Louis Fourie to Secretary of Public Health (note 2).

64 Notes of Proceedings, 12 April 1938 (note 5).

For Thornton, it was strictly this architectural problem that had rendered Korsten a pathological space. Thornton, unlike Ferguson, was careful to pathologize *only* the material aspects of Korsten – building materials, objects, architecture – rather than its human population. Korsten’s structures were its primary issue, rather than its mixing of races, or the state of hygiene of its inhabitants. In a discussion on whether railway staff who dealt with “all classes of people” should be vaccinated, Thornton was insistent that this was unnecessary. Rather than suggesting vaccinating those exposed to “native” bodies, Thornton argued instead that vaccines be offered to people “brought into contact with the type of house in which the people of Korsten were living”.<sup>65</sup> However, despite his insistence that the materiality of Korsten rather than its human inhabitants were the problem, Thornton’s arguments nevertheless reinforced segregationist sentiments, and reveal how architecture and materiality could justify segregation on the grounds of public health. In a nod to the New Brighton scheme, Thornton claimed that it would be much easier to manage plague there, as “natives” were under greater surveillance.<sup>66</sup>

Ultimately, whatever their views on segregation, all scientists involved in plague-control in Korsten agreed that its wood-and-iron buildings could not be “deverminised”. Human homes were thus framed as rodent harbourage in Korsten: almost every aspect of these wood and iron buildings were condemned as providing spaces in which rodents could nest, proliferate, and infect humans with plague. Perceived human, flea, and rodent intimacies within “plague infected houses”, thus justified forcibly removing people from their homes and preventing them from reoccupying them.<sup>67</sup>

Yet despite the colonial framing of human homes in Korsten as little more than a series of rodent harbourages, the actual presence of rats in Korsten homes was rare.<sup>68</sup> Colonial archives themselves reveal that the wood-and-iron buildings actually had fewer infected rats than other parts of the city. One of the only properties in which Ferguson found “two plague infected rodents” in Korsten, was a brick building.<sup>69</sup> According to Fourie, by July, only a “dozen mummified carcasses had been found” in the demolished buildings.<sup>70</sup> Rats were, however, readily found in other parts of the city. A white-occupied wood-and-iron house in North End, a district closer to the city centre, was found to be “infested with rodents” and subsequently flagged for demolition.<sup>71</sup> Cases of “plague-infested” rodents

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65 Ibid.

66 Ibid.

67 The MOH Reports on 22 July 1938, 3/PEZ, 1/3/2/6/11.

68 Louis Fourie to Secretary of Public Health (note 2).

69 Case No. 95. No. 17, Dobson Street and Nos. 17, 19 and 21, Brassel Street, MOH Report 30 May 1938, 3/PEZ, 1/3/2/6/11.

70 Notes of Proceedings, 18 July 1938 (note 4).

71 Case No. 132. No. 19, Doyle Street, MOH Report 25 July, 1938, 3/PEZ 1/3/2/6/12.



Fig. 2 “The Green House”, an example of a wood-and-iron building in Korsten, Porth Elizabeth, 1938.

were also discovered in Strand Street,<sup>72</sup> and the Feather Market Hall, both in the centre of the city.<sup>73</sup> By August, only two infected rats had actually been found in Korsten itself, while six were found in other parts of the city, three of which were in North End.<sup>74</sup> In spite of this lack of evidence of Korsten rodent infection, Fourie insisted that he had

no hesitation in stating that, in Korsten, the epizootic had started among the rats in the south-western corner of the township at least a year or probably more ago and it has since been smouldering and spreading slowly outwards from the primary focus of infection.<sup>75</sup>

72 Notes of Proceedings of Special Committee re[garding] Outbreak of Plague, meeting held on 29 April 1938, 3/PEZ 4/1/1/1326

73 Ibid.

74 The majority of rats inspected for plague were found in an area “from the South End of the City and New Brighton Location”. Louis Fourie to Secretary of Public Health, Port Elizabeth, 28 August 1938, 3/PEZ 4/1/1/1326.

75 Ibid.

For white medical officials, since rodents were critical in the framing of Korsten as plague infected, rodents had to have been present, despite slim evidence of this.<sup>76</sup> Accordingly, medical discourse depicted Korsten as a source of immense danger on account of its allegedly rat-friendly architecture, rather than its incidence of human cases or even the presence of infected rats. So disgusting was the state of these buildings when viewed by middle class white men, and so appealing were they when examined with what these men imagined to be a rats-eye-view, that officials assumed plague *must have* originated in Korsten, and thus all cases *must have* been related to this district.<sup>77</sup> Despite the discovery of an infected person in Walmer who “denied having visited Korsten”, Thornton emphasised that the “native evidently acquired in some way a contact with a Korsten flea”.<sup>78</sup>

### 3. Reception of the Removals: Contesting the Architectural Pathology

The shaky epistemological ground upon which Korsten had been constructed as a “focus of infection” rendered the plague removals a highly controversial measure that was supported by some, and sharply condemned by others. With comparatively few rats found in the area and a small human case load, Ferguson, Thornton, and Fourie’s arguments about Korsten’s pathological nature hinged tightly on arguing that architecture itself was a driver of zoonosis. This enabled residents and landlords to attack them for not allowing them to put their properties in order, to make arguments that “slum” is a culturally contingent category, or to dismiss the operation as a smokescreen for segregation.

Several articles in white-owned media supported the measures and continued to reify Ferguson’s framing of Korsten houses as rodent homes. A 1949 article in *The Rotarian*, is a case in point. This publication, the mouthpiece of the Rotary Club, a charitable organisation which had provided financial assistance for plague control and the construction of McNamee Village itself, described the operation as “the most important present-day social experiment in subequatorial Africa”.<sup>79</sup> The publication, describing Korsten in zoomorphic terms, argued that Port Elizabeth’s slums (including Korsten) were irredeemably infested with rodents, and infected by disease. These “festering congeries”<sup>80</sup>,

76 This constitutes an example of what Lynteris has called the “imperative ontology” of plague. See Christos Lynteris, *The Imperative Origins of COVID-19*, in: *L’Homme* 234–235/2–3 (2020), 21–32.

77 For more on this rats-eye-view approach to architecture see Jules Skotnes-Brown, *Scurrying Seafarers. Shipboard Rats, Plague, and the Land/Sea Border*, in: *Journal of Global History* 18/1 (2023), 108–130.

78 Notes of Meeting of Special Plague Committee, Meeting held 16 April 1938, 3/PEZ 4/1/1/1326.

79 From Slums to McNamee, in: *The Rotarian* (1949), 26.

80 *Ibid.*

it claimed, were utterly unfit for humans and constituted “filthy warrens”<sup>81</sup> in which “Vermin swarmed.”<sup>82</sup> By contrast, according to the article, McNamee consisted of houses “made gay with flower gardens, pocket-size lawns, and rustic adornments.”<sup>83</sup> In 1939, the *South African Medical Journal*, likewise framed McNamee as a success story. One author argued that unlike the disease-riddled “warrens” of Korsten in which rodents putatively nested, houses in New Brighton were “built rodent-proof.”<sup>84</sup> A reporter for *Umteteli wa Bantu*, a quadrilingual English, isiXhosa, isiZulu, and Sesotho newspaper under white oversight, but with a large nationwide Black readership, likewise praised the slum clearance project.<sup>85</sup> The reporter, likely a Port Elizabeth correspondent, writing under the pseudonym “Man-On-The-Spot” reiterated Ferguson, Thornton, and Fourie’s pathology of architecture, declaring that the “danger spots...are the dwellings, where the human cases come from.”<sup>86</sup>

Some individuals living in or owning property in Korsten likewise supported the removals and actively aided the government in destroying their infected properties. Property-owner S. Matheson, for example, offered his properties to the city council, “free of charge” in order to assist them in their slum clearance project.<sup>87</sup> Certain Coloured and Black landowners, such as Sadie Dampies, Willem van Staden, and Salomon Matebe, likewise, were happy to move out of homes in Korsten in exchange for compensation in the form of money or plots of ground in other areas.<sup>88</sup>

Other residents and landlords, however, sharply contested the condemnation of their properties, homes, and possessions as a series of plague-infested rodent harbourages, and a controversy over Ferguson’s pathology of wood-and-iron emerged. One of the first committed challenges was articulated by the Korsten Vigilance Committee, a community group of Korsten residents and property owners. Although some of their members agreed that their homes were in a pathological state, they resented the council for “not giving them an opportunity to put their houses in order”. Others contested the categorisation of Korsten houses as slums: the committee stated that their properties were “only slums from a European’s point of view”. Moreover, the Port Elizabeth City Council was partially responsible for turning Korsten into an infected neighbourhood. Despite

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81 Ibid., 27.

82 Ibid., 26.

83 Ibid., 27.

84 New Brighton Village, in: *South African Medical Journal* 13 (1939), 431.

85 Natasha Erlank, *Umteteli Wa Bantu and the Constitution of Social Publics in the 1920s and 1930s*, *Social Dynamics* 45/1 (2019), 75–102.

86 Man-On-The-Spot, *African Affairs at Port Elizabeth*, in: *Umteteli wa Bantu*, 30 April 1938.

87 S. Matheson to A. Schauder, 7 May 1938, 3/PEZ, 1/3/2/6/10.

88 W.T. Jarman, *Compensation of Slum Owners*, Undated (likely August 1938), 3/PEZ 1/3/2/6/11.

paying rates, residents had received no electric lights, drainage, kerbing, guttering or proper access to running water.<sup>89</sup>

Slumlord extraordinaire Sidney Wells, who stood to lose a considerable amount of money, came out in support of these residents and, enraged, penned a series of letters to the city council. In one, he complained that his properties were not the problem. It was, in fact, the “council or public property which consists of so-called roads flooded with water and muck” that was creating a sanitary menace. Wells argued that his tenants and loan recipients had been “persecuted and taken from their homes and treated worse than animals”.<sup>90</sup> In another, he described the condemnation of his buildings as “Hitler actions” where the “three Hitlers, the Docotr [sic] and two inspectors” were “persecuting me and others by the most vindictive actions possible”. Councillors had treated Korsten residents, he fumed, like “dirt” and accordingly Wells issued a veiled threat of violence against the council.<sup>91</sup>

In the arc of the twentieth century, as apartheid policies came to pass, some Black residents of Korsten came to interpret the event as another in a long history of forced removals. Some of those residents interviewed by Vista University students remembered and had internalised Ferguson’s pathology of wood-and-iron. One former resident, for example, stated that since he was living in a “brick building”, he was “safe” and thus he was “not involved in that removal”.<sup>92</sup> Others had correlated Korsten with rats, or forced removals with the presence of rats, despite the lack of actual evidence of rat infestations in the neighbourhood. Mrs Maleki, for example, was under the impression that only those whose houses were infested with rats were removed. According to her, the “whites would enter a house and check whether there were rats or not. If they found rats, the house would be condemned”. Contrastingly, those who “had no rats in their houses stood far away from the scene”.<sup>93</sup>

Others, however, were not convinced that plague was a genuine problem, and dismissed it as little more than an excuse to remove them from the neighbourhood. One unnamed resident of Korsten claimed that there were “always rumours that Korsten was going to be proclaimed a coloured township and that all blacks should be removed to New Brighton”.<sup>94</sup> Fezile Teka, who was removed in 1938, likewise dismissed plague as an “invented disease”, rather than a real problem.<sup>95</sup> Another former resident, identified as “old man”, recounted that the entire process of removal was fraudulent. Plague was allegedly “sparked off by a women who was admitted to the Provincial Hospital”, and

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89 All quotes since note 88 from: Secretary of Korsten Vigilance Committee, 19 July 1938, 3/PEZ, 1/3/2/6/11.

90 Sidney Wells, 5 August 1938, 3/PEZ, 1/3/2/6/11.

91 Sidney Wells to Slum Committee, 22 Sep 1938, 3/PEZ, 1/3/2/6/12.

92 Quoted in Cherry, Blot (note 7), 51.

93 All quotes since note 92 from: Mrs Maleki, quoted in Cherry, Blot (note 7), 54.

94 Unnamed interlocutor, quoted in Cherry, Blot (note 7), 51.

95 Fezile Teka, quoted in Cherry, Blot (note 7), 52.

“caused by the mice in the black dwelling area”. When “the people came from work”, he recounted “they found that some of their houses were destroyed during the big hunt for the rats”, however, it was “untrue to say that the woman admitted to hospital was suffering from rat plague”. The entire affair was little more than a “scapegoat” to segregate Black from Coloured people.<sup>96</sup> For these residents, if plague was a hoax, then, so too was the pathologisation of many Korsten homes. One anonymous domestic worker claimed that in the 1930s, Korsten was “better at that time than the shacks you find today [1987] in the townships – it was very clean.”<sup>97</sup> Finally, many residents who had accepted housing in New Brighton found the neighbourhood, despite the grandiose propagandistic claims of city officials, an extremely unsanitary place. These tenants complained “bitterly” about the unhygienic, and ramshackle state of their new homes, one claiming, in terms close to Ferguson’s home reports, that it was “really awkward and surprising to think of it for human beings to live in this manner.”<sup>98</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

This case has demonstrated that colonial suspicions about architecture, materiality, and multispecies intimacies, in addition to medicalised fears of racial mixing, were mobilised in justification of segregating Korsten residents. Although Ferguson and numerous racist others undoubtedly considered Korsten’s status as a multiracial neighbourhood to be a source of disease, its alleged architectural and material “defects” ultimately were thought to have transformed it into a plague spot. The wood-and-iron buildings of the region were condemned as little more than a series of rodent harbourages that would enable rats to infect the entire city, and eventually other Indian Ocean ports. The capacity to blame architecture for plague, even in the face of few human cases and no ratfalls, represented a moment in which rat-proofing had become a dominant strategy of urban plague control in South Africa, coupled as it was with nascent strategies of “separate development”. For medical officials, the perceived impossibility of excluding rodents from Korsten homes was enough to justify the destruction of much of the neighbourhood and forced removal of many its residents. Simultaneously, the mobilisation of alleged architectural “defects” and rodent “harbourages” in support of segregation also enabled to residents of Korsten to contest the condemnation of their homes, even if their appeals were ultimately ignored.

In controlling plague in Korsten, sanitary officials treated Black and Coloured homes as if they were rodent homes. To cleanse the bodies of their inhabitants for diagno-

96 All quotes from “Old man”, quoted in Cherry, Blot (note 7), 53.

97 Domestic worker, quoted in Cherry, Blot (note 7), 50.

98 Reference from Native Affairs Committee, meeting held on 13 September 1938, 3/PEZ, 1/3/2/6/12.



sis and examination, both rats and humans were dipped in chemicals to kill fleas. To destroy rodent harbourages, officials believed they also needed to destroy Black and Coloured homes, furniture, and other possessions. Although residents and landlords of Korsten complained about the indignities of dipping and contested such architectural pathologies, there was little they could do against the draconian legislation that enabled officials to take almost any action to contain plague. Ultimately the plague outbreak became a point of great bitterness in the collective memory of Korsten. Former residents, recognising the shaky epistemological foundations upon which Korsten had been deemed a plague spot came to view it as yet another episode in the terrible history of South African forced removals and redevelopment.

### Photo credits

Fig. 1 “Thousands of bags being deverminized at the FED” (Formidable Epidemic Diseases Hospital), Port Elizabeth, 1938. © Adolf Schauder Collection, Cory Library, Rhodes University, PIC/A 4279.

Fig. 2 “The Green House”, Porth Elizabeth, 1938. © Adolf Schauder Collection, Cory Library, Rhodes University, PIC/A 4279.

### Abstract:

This chapter argues that in the context of the 1938 plague outbreak in Port Elizabeth (now Gqeberha), sanitary measures imposed to control the movements of rats were extended to the attempted control of Black and Coloured people living in the suburb of Korsten. In the reports and recommendations of public health officials, numerous houses in Korsten were framed as rat habitats, which allegedly enabled the rodents to breed, nest, and disseminate disease to humans, objects, and other structures in Port Elizabeth. Humans living in this neighbourhood were forcibly removed from their homes, placed under quarantine, and encouraged to move to the model township of New Brighton, a ‘hygienic’, ‘rat-proof’, segregationists’ utopia. Thus, the process of removing undesirable animals – rats and other rodent residents from Korsten – was also a process of removing Black Africans from the same area. Despite numerous protests from residents and landlords who contested the colonial pathologisation of their homes and properties as rat habitats, 3145 people were evicted. Ultimately, anti-rat measures became segregationist measures, shaping official policy, and also African memories of the removals.

### Keywords:

rats | plague | segregation | South Africa | forced removals