

An African Adventure

The Winds of Change!

Taking on responsibility for being the local Secretary for VSO Supporters Group in Cambridge focused me on writing and trying to record my actual experience whilst a Volunteer from 1968 to 1970. This is partly because I listened to a report on Newsnight that implied that interpersonal real-time face-to-face contact was seen to have little or at any rate decreasing value ... something with which I totally disagree and which my first adult engagement taught me.

I applied for VSO because I wanted to do something useful and because my Grandfather had given me a silver fountain pen when I passed the 11+ and asked me to promise that when I finished my education I would “give back” the value that I had gained. I was also hugely supported by my genetics Prof - George Dawson, who said that I should apply to go to New Guinea where very little scientific research had been done on cannibalism and the impact on human genetics - or even on the vegetation. Thinking back I now wonder if he was pulling my leg - however, I did not get an appointment in New Guinea but I did get one to the University of Zambia on the Copperbelt.

I remember rushing into my mother's bedroom with the letter and she, probably preferring to sleep a little longer, replied “but where on earth is that? I've never heard of Zambia” as if by denying knowledge it could be forgotten. A few hours later I discovered that it was in Central Africa and near the famous place where Livingstone had been found by H. M. Stanley in 1871. I had been allocated a role in the University as Extra-Mural Organising Tutor for North West Province (the Copperbelt). After that clarification the whole family rushed into action for we knew that we had relations of my father's somewhere in Africa and we were sure that he was an academic. Looking back it was lunacy to imagine that he might be of any help for he could have been anywhere from the Cape to Cairo, or Morocco to Malawi - but all we knew was *Africa*. So we kept at it until we discovered that he was in South Africa, in Johannesburg – a professor of philosophy and theology at Witwatersrand University - and he had grown up in the Transkei. Yes indeed we had contacts!

I arrived in Lusaka at a most inauspicious moment as there was great disruption at the University and indeed in the whole country as a result of the political situation in Southern Rhodesia which had recently made a Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI). During the years following UDI refugees flooded into Zambia as did ANC refugees from South Africa. In retaliation against the British government's response to UDI Rhodesia closed the rail and road routes into Zambia thereby causing, amongst general chaos, very serious petrol and food shortages. To add to the chaos of my position, my professor, the famous Lalage Bown, was in West Africa and the “establishment” that had been planned for the Extra-Mural Department on the Copperbelt failed to materialise. It was suggested that I stay in Lusaka, familiarise myself with the country and get to know as many UNIP politicians and academic departments of the University as possible. Two weeks later I requested that my “holiday” should end and that I should go up to the Copperbelt. My abiding memory of that journey was my request to the deputy head of department for a brief, a plan or list of objectives. His reply was “look in the file on the back seat”. I lifted the brown folder and in it there were two sheets of paper: on the first was my name and academic qualifications and on the other the address of the Mindola Ecumenical Centre where I was to establish the Extramural Department of the University. I didn't know what to ask or how to enquire about what was expected so I looked out of

the car window and immediately saw the largest ant-hill that I had ever dreamed of. "You have to go up there and start something" he added. My pulse jumped. "Perhaps I can build an unpredictable structure with lots of ideas and no resources" I thought to myself. Little did I know that that would be very nearly the truth.

Once in Kitwe it was clear why there had been no effort to transport me earlier. There were no spare rooms, never mind houses, offices, secretaries, cars or petrol. I was asked if I minded sharing a bedroom, something I loathed as the only time I had had anybody in my bedroom in my entire life was when I was ill and the maid had wakened me regularly to take my temperature, give me drinks and medicine. However I *had* no real choice. I agreed and was led to the room of Martha, a refugee from Rhodesia. I was given a typewriter and a card that confirmed who and what I was. That was it.

Without a car, an office or a phone it seemed impossible that I could begin to set up meetings or undertake the research I planned, so it was agreed with the principal of the Centre that I should supplement the staff if at all possible until some resources became available to me. Consequently, on the following Monday morning I attended the staff meeting and was introduced. It was clear to me that sadly I could be of little help as most of the courses were youth training or health or home economics related so when we reached the end of the session and there was a request for anyone who could *read* music, I instantly volunteered. I felt general relief that at least I could contribute something, probably by playing hymns in assembly or choir practise. It was not until the following afternoon that I realised that I had volunteered to train the adult choir to sing at the forthcoming visit of the President, Kenneth Kaunda. That would not have been quite the shock it was had I been given any music. But there was no music and the choir harmonised in fifths and sang in Chibemba. There were no translations. Happily I remembered my music teacher saying that timing was the main thing that differentiated a good musician from those who should never perform in public and as I had won several prizes at local fleadhs in my youth in Ireland off I went, trembling at the prospect and thinking all the time that I had to **change** my expectations.

An ideal introduction

The President's visit was a great success and after he left I was introduced to a great many local people including Pierre Attala, a local businessman and owner of a car dealership. Very soon I had the offer of the use of a car ... all I needed now was a telephone and an office. Shortly after the excitement of the choir's success I was introduced to a fellow Natural Scientist from London whose father had started the Times of Zambia. Robin Hall knew the International Labour Organisation's representative on the Copperbelt and he was sure he would be able to help me with an office. The following weekend we visited Sven Matteson who couldn't wait to introduce me to Jonas Ponde, the Assistant General Secretary of the Zambian Congress of Trade Unions. After that I had both office and telephone access in return for developing a course for trade unionists on The History of Western Economic and Political Thought. I gave the first course in the Michaelmas term and it was followed by many and animated group discussions and an invitation to go to Livingstone for a repeat performance with the Miner's Union. My reward was to visit the Victoria Falls - magic and priceless – and in full spate. I often think that it was Jonas who saved my bacon when there were riots later in Kitwe following the British Government's apparent refusal to train Zambia airmen as a result of their poor mathematical skills. He cancelled our scheduled meeting at his office on the Saturday morning when a baby was pulled from its pram and thrown through a shop window. Buildings were destroyed and people were injured on a massive scale as the riot passed the ZCTU building.

Eventually I was promised that I could move into the house next door to the Centre's librarian, Sonja. The library had been set up in remembrance of Dag Hammarskjöld, the Secretary General of the United Nations who had died following a contentious air crash at nearby Ndola in September 1961. Getting to know Sonja and having access to the library created a new awareness for me of politics and policies that would often raise their heads over the coming months and years. However, with Jonas supporting me within the Trades Union movement I could concentrate on new ideas that were germinating as I heard of the need for better qualified people in the mines, police, army and, not least, the Boma, (this is a Swahili word for enclosure corrupted to mean government offices). So I began to use Pierre's car and arranged meetings all over the Copperbelt so that by Christmas I had only one visit left to make and that was to the prison. As I entered the sequentially locked gates I kept on wondering why the returned questionnaires that I had sent showed such high levels of education compared with the rest of the population, but it was not until later as I walked down the three rows of prisoners that I asked the Governor what the commonest offences were. "They are all in for capital offences, murder or rape" he replied calmly. My blood ran cold. I can remember exactly where I was in the lines and what I was wearing even now. But - I had just asked a young man why he wanted to read Economics and English and "a lady never shows her feelings" - my mother's demand for good behaviour, bounced in my brain. I swallowed, made my notes and carried on down the lines continuing to ask questions and take notes for future planning. Some years later I read an article about Bwana Mwakubwa (Big Boss) Prison and realised that the inmates were probably all political prisoners, accused and convicted of crimes that may have had more to do with politics and change ... wish I 'd known that at the time!

Raising the money

The next stop was to visit Lusaka to meet my Prof and arrange for finance and approval for my plans ... almost 40 classes in around 5 subjects. Sadly, I was told that there was only money for about 8 in total. "We only have 8 in Lusaka and it is the capital" I was told. So there I was three months in and with contacts in all the important roles in the province that might need me but no way of delivering ... or was there? Well I had a small inheritance from my great aunt but that would only pay for few seminars; not enough for courses. I would have to concentrate on seminars and workshops and find sponsorship. I worked up a course for the mining companies and took it to the Head Office of Anglo American. The CEO was very accommodating and after approving the content, he asked for details of the finance. I told him that I was about \$50 short. He then asked how many people I was intending to have on each course and my reply was at least 20. "I'll write you a cheque for 50 x 20 ie \$1000 if you cross the street and persuade my rival at RST to give you equal sponsorship" he said. A thousand dollars but ... I had failed to explain the finances accurately ... I had meant that I was \$50 short in total ... but what could I do with that level of assistance? What *could* I do? "Well are you up for it" he asked pressing on and, almost without breathing, I agreed. Two weeks later I had an impress account with \$2500 ready to pay tutors and venues. No one would be disappointed and the possibilities had certainly expanded.

It was all very well now that I had the funds but how to get the publicity for the classes, how to get the programme off the ground? Someone at the Centre knew a reporter on the local newspaper and the local TV reporter so I went to meet Nebuchadnezzar Jere. Neb had trained in Scotland with the BBC and if you kept your eyes closed when he spoke you could imagine yourself in the Highlands. Neb agreed a programme of interviews both with me and some of the would-be students. After that requests from other programmes and newspapers kept up frequent and constant coverage. The best

deal was with the local mayors or indeed even the local Provincial Minister who needed help with speeches. In return for helping to draft speeches I was able to include references to the need for furthering learning within the University's Extra-Mural Department as a constant political objective of improving educational standards. The classes were in many cases so well attended that they were almost self-financing. The University budget would be enough for nearly 50 classes in the year after I left and that changed the position of the Department. The success of the programme was guaranteed by the appearance on TVZ and a visit to the towns of the Copperbelt by the Minister of Education just before I left. He used it to promote Adult Education in general and its benefits to women and minorities in particular. After that there was no problem with either recruitment of students or tutors or indeed budgets - things had certainly changed all over the Copperbelt and I had even attempted to help start a similar project in Solwezi province and was supporting the newly appointed Tutor at Mkushi.

Things aren't always what they seem!

Working as I did, rather more than 8 hours a day and more than 5 days a week, I was filled with enthusiasm to develop new programmes and courses but it had never been my joy to start anything in my real area of learning, Natural Sciences. My last attempt was to create a Natural History Society so that I could encourage the protection of birds and a recording of the wealth of animal and plant life. My recreation had for long been to borrow my neighbour's dog and his panga and head for the local dambos ... damp areas in the bush. Nearly every trip would end with me coming home with a new variety of plant to nail onto one of my trees or dig into my border. Each week a group of women would gather on Sunday evening knowing what was about to happen and every week they would go away talking loudly. Eventually I asked why they came and what they were waiting for ... "we want to know when you are going to bring something that we could eat" they replied - "aren't plants that you work on for eating? After that I knew that I had learned so little despite the months of shocks and surprises. There were still some things that I needed to become aware of. The idea of a local society interested in local history had however caught on - not *natural* history but *local* political history and the first meeting of the Copperbelt Local History Society took place just before I left. How they had changed the idea and purpose AND best of all had taken the initiative ... they had changed and I had learned enough to take up the next challenge.

South of the border.

As my time at the University was coming to a close there were reports on the local TV that announced Civil War in Ireland. I called home to find out what the situation was and to discover if all was well with the family. "Nothing like war, just a little local difficulty" my father reported "so you better get in touch with my cousin Basil in South Africa. We have told him of your work in Zambia and he is hoping that you might like to go South and help him out with a new project." That was how I discovered that plans had been put in hand to give me a job with the Johannesburg City Council. In those days the African township of SOWETO (South West Township) was still administered, managed and policed by the all-white City Council and there was a plan afoot, supported by the university, churches, and some political parties to give independence to the Township to administer itself. Basil thought that I could work within the Council and help train up some of the groups who were going to take on the various responsibilities.

After living a multi-racial, multi-cultural life in Zambia, living in Johannesburg was something of a shock. Black people were almost always in servile positions and aside from the Drs and teachers that I met in the township I couldn't mix with non-white people for they were mostly out of the centre of town after dark. I couldn't stay with my Indian friends from Dublin either. Indeed, if I wanted to go out with them - both of whom had read medicine in Dublin, we had to have an Indian or African girl in the car to avoid being picked up by the police for breaking the rules. As a consequence I took to playing bridge and spent most of my evenings in groups of white people - often supplemented by visitors from Europe. It was on one of these evenings following the discussion of possible Israeli involvement in SW Africa that the penny dropped - I looked at my new bridge partner and suddenly did the sums ... he was a physicist, an Israeli and a soldier to boot!

I wasn't really interested in politics at that time, I was inspired by the progress that was made possible by getting well organised help into the African community. Again, the Trade Union system helped, this time the Building Workers union. Again we set up classes and seminars but much more down to earth and practical than in Zambia. Book-keeping and record keeping, minute taking and report writing, objective setting and planning. The experience gained in Zambia couldn't have been more relevant. We had great fun working out programmes for seminars and discussion groups that always took about 4 times as long as I expected, but the hand over was planned for the end of the year and we worked hard to meet timetables and keep to the Agendas.

It's not what you say it's the way that you say it.

It was at this time that I was asked to contribute an article to a new magazine designed to bring the main racial groups together and considering the future for the country as a whole....hopefully post-apartheid. So I set down my ideas that better educated, more skilled Africans would add to the overall value of the GNP and so to the wealth and security of the entire country. It clearly struck a chord for I was invited to present my ideas at the University Humanities Department. We had a lively discussion and I was able to use at least some of my research notes from Zambia where, when I went there, the general school level was form 2 while after classes and a serious attempt at Adult Education we had endeavoured to aim for form 4. Again, we discussed the cost to the economy of the lack of skilled workers and the threat of overpopulation, especially if it included too many unwanted children as a result of failure to educate women. I thought that I was being entirely apolitical but at the end after I had been politely thanked I was described as *distinctly pink* ... apparently I had used the expression "financially enfranchised" which to me meant that the black, Asian and coloured population would have money to use and spend within the economy. It was the wrong thing to say as I discovered the next week.

My joy at receiving a cheque (19 rand) for my article could not have been greater. Everyone with whom I worked thought it represented what we were all aiming for and we all enjoyed the first black run Council meeting. It marked, we hoped, a real changing point in the history of apartheid and created a prototype for the future.

However, on returning home I discovered the opposite view expressed in violence. My house had been broken into. All my photographs were taken as were all my research notes and files, my essays on programmes that I had run and had measured and case studies - everything that I had hoped to put into a PhD on Adult Education with the encouragement of Prof Bown. My photographs and taped interviews on ZTV were also gone so I would never be able to show my parents what I had been doing, and so was my diary and address book - so I had literally been cut off from my project in

one fell swoop. All my material possessions remained. The next day I was warned that going home was the only thing that I could do if my friends were to be safe. Apparently taking offending work / publications was the first move, then came violence and attacks on friends – non-white ones first and then ... they'd return their attention to me!

I spoke to my cousin and he took the positive view that I had made my contribution and seen my project reach a satisfactory conclusion the week before." There is more than one way to skin a cat" he responded. "Go home and find the next job."

There were so many stories that I had wanted to tell that would encourage others to take on the cause of Adult Education and racial integration. There were warnings and ideas and so much that I had never had real time to consider in depth or write up properly as the volume of work had been so great - but I had to accept the reality - and so I returned somewhat reluctantly to Ireland. There too things were not as expected. "Ireland is descending into greater chaos – worse than we ever expected. Go to London and find a job" was my father's advice and so after Christmas I packed my bags and left never to return permanently. I moved to London, linked up with my former TCD friends and then joined the Investment Department of Hill Samuel, Merchant Bank - the only link I maintained with Africa was to join the selection panel for V.S.O.

I am still engaged in the support of VSO. I joined the Cambridge Supporters Group Board formerly as Secretary and now as Treasurer, but I still cannot forget those heady days when so much was happening and so much was changing that 7 hours of sleep was an absolute luxury. The experience helped me grow up and understand what the real world was about, how to change things and how to get jobs done – a training that stood me in good stead throughout my entire career. VSO was not only a good opportunity for me – it was a **Very Special Opportunity**.