# A House in Zambia

## RECOLLECTIONS OF THE ANC AND OXFAM AT 250 ZAMBEZI ROAD, LUSAKA, 1967-97

*edited by Robin Palmer*

*Susie Smith (1951-2006) who began this book and was the inspiration behind its completion.*

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# 9. PUSHPANATH (1988 – 92)

What a splendid recall and what an interesting way Susie brings to life two great heroes of the South African struggle and other not so minor characters associated with them.

I, Push, solemnly declare what I am saying[1] is the truth and nothing but the truth as I remember it and I cannot live up to the herstory of Susie or for that matter that phenomenon called Dr Edwards whose past was so formidable that I used to read the fantastic field reports by Susie in hiding to take on Dr Edwards - I am moving ahead of myself here and that is another story for another time…

***First impressions***

My first impression of the Zambezi Road compound was of a massive area with many houses in it, many trees, almost a subtropical forest, and massive houses spread across the compound following the logic of the owners which always baffled me. I remember the first week I was brought to Zambezi Road straight from the airport and given one of the rooms. The first thing I noticed was the house was very poorly maintained and it had lots of funny English cutleries, pots and pans, looking like they were very Victorian and I wondered what will I do with them. Of course Uma, my wife, would not touch them because she suspected that most of them were used to cook meat and she even started to cook outside with three stones and firewood until she felt that every last bit of grease (she was convinced it was all animal fat) was removed from the stoves.

In one of those generous moments of a newly arrived, I was given the responsibility of Bobby, the human dog. I accepted it most gracefully - I think, wanting to demonstrate what an open minded Indian I am and not wanting to hurt the English sensibilities towards animals and also because I knew that people visiting from the UK always enquired after Bobby first and so I was aware that my reputation was at stake a bit, and I needed to be careful and all that. I was simply stumped when suddenly Ray Simons arrived from the smarter of the houses and said I had to provide 'bones' for the dog. I was so stunned by this rather esoteric demand that I developed a

1 This was written in October 2004 with a postscript added after Susie's death in June 2006.

deep suspicion of the place and what it held for quite some time. But somehow we got into agreement that I would bring the bones but Ray would help to cook or do whatever one does to feed a dog. Anyway, as soon as the family arrived after a few months we felt that the house was too big for us, having lived in India for most of my life in a house 20ft x 20ft, besides we used to get lost frequently there. As if it was not enough, Ahir, our second son who was barely 18 months old, kept peeing on the wooden floor no matter what we did to get him to use the toilet. Vexed and weary, we soon took a smaller apartment and moved house. We took Bobby with us though because Uma had become very attached to him and we did not think that we had much option to renegotiate the ownership with Ray, having realised what a formidable person she was by that time.

I did not have such good fortune to spend such wonderful time with Jack and Ray, as much as Susie did, but I managed to get to them when we shared the food I cooked with Ray, especially when she got people around for a meal. Jack used to nod off after engaging me in a very rich dialogue on the Indian peasant struggle, but Ray would join in and we would start to talk about Zambia and she would take me on a tour of the compound and show me all the trees – I remember once counting eighty one different trees and plants. There were many evenings I spent time with them, but things changed when my family arrived. For the first time in our lives we ate avocados in plenty and ShyAm and Ahir would run around everywhere and play in that massive place – we were warned many times not to leave them outside unattended like that because the compound had many snakes and so on.

***Oxfam moves into 250 Zambezi Road***

But there was some invisible connection to me, Oxfam and to that house, as I soon realized. As soon as the situation was changing in South Africa, the Simons were offering the house for sale and our dear old Robin Palmer convinced all and sundry in HQ and we bought the house.

We were so relieved. For the first time all the staff were in one building and we had lots of space to park the two vehicles and we could have many partners and Oxfam advisory teams meeting in that building. We felt so free...

The house I stayed in became the meeting place, sleeping place and party

place in the evening when the live band music by the then Front Line Musicians and later the Burning Youth would play for all of us.

The big tree (all hugged in a snaky embrace by flaming bougainvillea during the season) was a special place which was in the back of the building which we used as the front for the office. It is under this tree that I remember most of the meetings took place. The first Black Consciousness training was held for staff and partners; Fr Peter Henriot discussing with us advocacy capacity in Zambia; the first programme impact measurement meeting with all the Southern African representatives in Oxfam; the first boisterous strategic plan was conceived; the best parties and send-offs and many small significant and not so significant meetings and visitors, including the letter-writing campaign and all the major meetings regarding the drought in Zambia were held there along with all the mess and the muddle that we hatched. Under the same tree when I went to do the Big Noise campaign[2] training, *The Post* newspaper interviewed me this time after ten years, and the sense of déjà vu was unbearable for me.

The small house was converted into a guesthouse to the chagrin of many of our visiting staff and I lived there for six months during my extension when Lucy as the Regional Representative occupied the main house and Lucy managed me at that time. And we shared so much about Zambia, our work, and our lives with a bottle or two of Mozi (the local bottled beer).

Even though we had a proper walled compound built by then, we used to keep the gates open so our partners from the villages could come into the Oxfam office openly and freely. We did our best to reciprocate the warmth and hospitality that we were offered by our partners when we went to visit them.

This property by virtue of all these endearing and enduring memories had become a part of the myth and legend of Oxfam and I did not realise then an important part of me too.

In 2003, when Mahesh (the Oxfam Country Representative in the late 1990s) told me that Oxfam was selling the property and moving into a

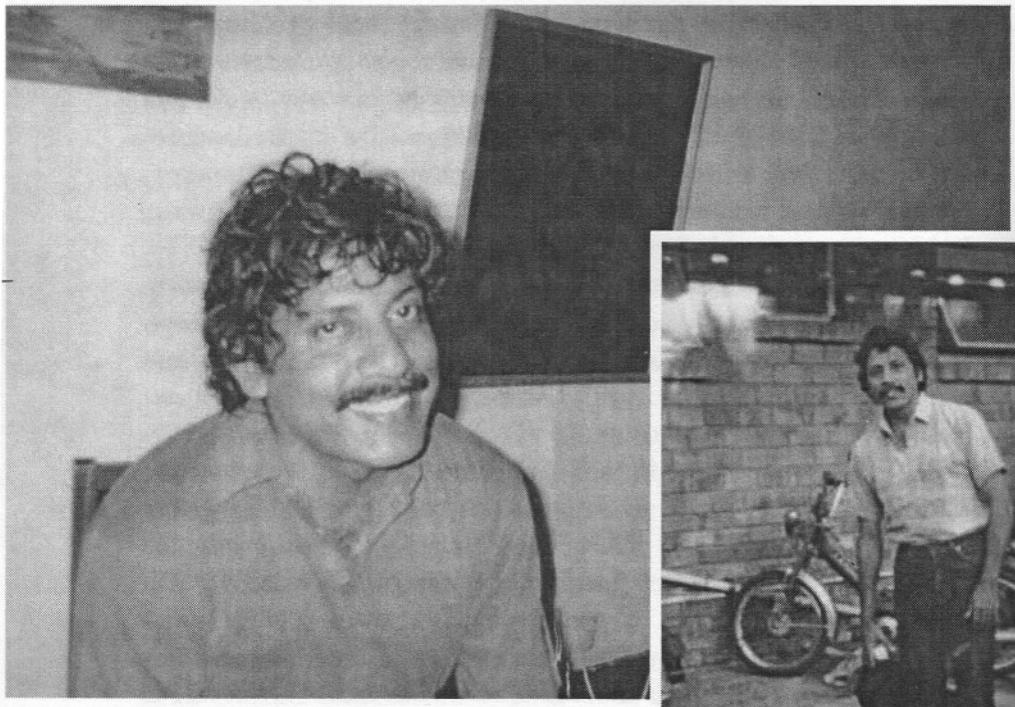
2 The Big Noise campaign involved a global petition calling for an end to the unfair rules of world trade; 17,800,000 people signed the petition presented to the WTO ministerial meeting in Hong Kong in December, 2005.

rented place I could not bear it; there were tears in my eyes. I just thought what a sentimental old fool I have become.

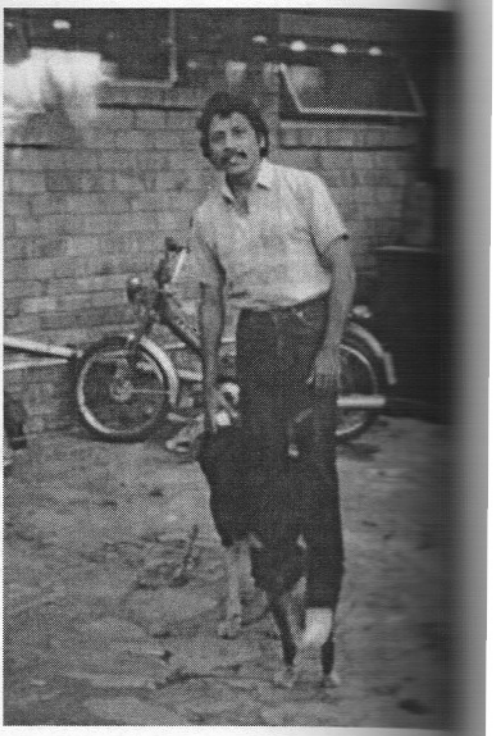
***A kind of postscript***

A few lines to remember Susie: she has left us, but her memories and the things she stood for remain in many splendored ways.

For starters, we are back in 250 Zambezi Road – the office is in full flow. I am sure she is keeping a close and friendly watch on the happenings there and having a few chuckles to herself.



*Pushpanath, 1990*



*Pushpanath & Bobby the famous dog, 1990*

management allowed everyone to feel valued and able to make a contribution – as I regularly saw for myself when attending team meetings. So no one felt excluded. This in turn resulted in great continuity and the retention of institutional memory, a critical factor. So there emerged a genuine sense of belonging to a real team and the incredible motivation that came with that.

One outstanding team member was the vastly experienced Wilson Kaonza, a driver who seemed to know every metre of a huge country and, because he travelled to the programme so much, also knew a very great deal about what was really going on behind the facade of 'official business' with the partners. He could recognise a bullshitter when he met one, often long before a Project Officer did! I found Wilson to be a person of great resourcefulness and much wisdom and kindness, a wonderful travelling companion. In later years, Oxfam sought to do away with drivers, which was a mistake at many levels, including a lack of recognition of just how much knowledge they had in their heads.

For a time, Oxfam Zambia operated an excellent induction process whereby potential programme staff were taken on tour with established staff to see how they interacted with communities. In such a way, we recruited the late Francis Banda, who lacked the education qualifications which Oxfam normally sought in a programme officer, but who more than made up for it in all manner of other ways.

Oxfam Zambia were also pioneers in Oxfam's campaigning work on debt and structural adjustment. Zambia was in some senses a laboratory guinea pig for the IMF, as Kevin Watkins notes in chapter 22, and Oxfam sought to publicise and expose the impact that its policies were having on the poor.[4]

### *Responding to the 1992/3 drought*

Arguably, Oxfam Zambia's finest hour was the magnificent team response to the 1992/3 drought, the worst the country (and the region) had suffered to that point. It was just amazing what they all achieved then, way,

4 This began with: John Clark with Caroline Allison, *Zambia – Debt and Poverty* (Oxford, Oxfam, 1989). I was somewhat disillusioned to discover subsequently that Florence Tembo, a Lusaka widow about whom John Clark, head of Oxfam's modest Campaigns team, had written so movingly, was not in fact a real person but a composite created for purposes of constructing an argument.

and way beyond the call of duty. [5] A special mention of Francis Banda, who died in 2005, seems appropriate here – 'Bouncing Banda', as Push dubbed him, really came into his own at that time. Push's experience in India was also critically important; not just for Oxfam's response, but for that of the country as a whole. His contribution was immense, both in terms of leadership and by insisting that Oxfam's approach be based on what some considered two heroic assumptions:

1. it is possible to approach relief within the framework of development;
2. it is feasible to facilitate, motivate, mobilise, and train local people to take charge of the relief effort.

In 1992/3 Push and the Zambia team proved that this was indeed possible. As he later wrote:

> *The approach adopted by Oxfam in Zambia aimed not only to empower the immediate constituency — the people affected by the drought — but also those who worked alongside them, and ultimately the donors themselves, who became involved in the struggles of ordinary people in an active and dynamic way.*[6]

***A regional centre?***

In 1995, just before my post was restructured and Oxfam began its curious process of regionalisation, I discussed with Lucy whether Lusaka might become Oxfam's regional management centre for Southern Africa, as it had by far the most experienced support staff in the region. Characteristically, Lucy had the honesty to decline, saying that the Lusaka

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5 In my Zambia tour report for November 1992 I wrote: 'Extraordinary things have happened in the Eastern Province this year. Parts of the province (especially in the Luangwa Valley) have been hard hit by the drought, the worst since 1949. It has to be said that the amazing example set by Oxfam staff, working all hours of the day and night and never accepting 'no' or 'it's impossible' for answers must have made a deep impression. It would be hard to exaggerate either the quality or the quantity of work that has been done. People seem to think we have vast numbers of staff who fly around in helicopters! Oxfam has penetrated communities in the Eastern Province far more deeply than ever before. For Pushpanath, the Regional Representative, this has been one of the miracles of his career. The Lusaka staff from the very start has been determined to integrate relief work with recovery work. They hope that the inroads they have made will serve Oxfam well in the years ahead.'

6 K. Pushpanath, 'Disaster without Memory: Oxfam's drought programme in Zambia 1992-3', *Development in Practice*, 4, 2, 1994, 81-91.
*http://www.developmentinpractice.org/readers/Advocacy/Advocacy%20Pushpanath.pdf*

visiting us from the Oxfam office, don't you want to come out and send Dorothy some fruit or something?' When Ray came out, we both pretended that Dorothy was at the office!

Like everybody who worked for Oxfam at the time, we all met the Doctors, Nurses etc at 250 Zambezi, but apart from Alex and Khosi, whom I later visited in their home in Ammersfoot, Holland, back in 1988, I didn't get close to the others.

***Dr Edwards***

Mike Edwards came to replace Susie in 1984. The men (Daka and Wilson) liked to refer to him as Dr Edwards when he wasn't listening (he preferred to be called simply Mike by everybody), because it made them feel important to be daily associating with someone with such a title. Before he left, Mike also extended our office family, with the recruitment of Lucy Muyoyeta, Christine Chinzewe, Felix Chiputa and later on Francis Banda. We were now a big family with attendant challenges of growth. Mike will remember Dux Halubobya, the CUSA Chief Executive and landlord of CUSA building, where we rented offices. He is now both a businessman and commercial farmer in Lusaka. One thing Dux detested about Mike was his simple snack for his daily lunch, which he bought a few metres from the office, came back and ate in the office. Dux appreciated directors who went out to some 'respectable' place to have their meal; we were next to Big 5 travel agents and several FAO offices upstairs. As a result of this resentment, he never really took the trouble to learn Mike's name. He would refer to him as Dr Lloyd-Williams (mixing him up with Anne who had stood in for a couple of months, after Susie left and before Mike came), or Dr Edward Smith-William, or simply the young doctor! He also frequently asked me to do something about my boss's lunch arrangements. We said nothing to Mike; this was a secret among the staff!

***Push and Uma***

After Mike, came Push with his lovely family in 1988. Push stood out as the most generous Rep we ever had. We used to look forward to his home leave or out of country visits, because he would always bring lots of presents indiscriminately (regardless of the level of friendship) for each one of us; clothes, makeup, chocolates and other goodies. Remember, this was still during

Zambia's long phase of shortages of essential and even non-essential commodities. One had to have forex to taste an apple or such categorized luxuries! I must admit, though, that I instantly became more of Uma's friend than Push's. I often took my little daughter, who was the same age as their youngest son, to play with their boys at 250 Zambezi and even when they moved to Kabulonga. While the kids amused themselves, Uma taught me how to prepare different types of vegetarian dishes and gave me several recipes too. Up to now people say I am a very good cook! She also introduced me to different types of herbs and how to use them effectively in cooking. I was very sad to see her leave together with the children, but thank God that I had had the privilege to meet such a truly lovely, warm and friendly person.

***Susie, her friends, pregnancy and sterilization***

Susie had a wide circle of friends and she endeavoured to introduce all to us, her office family. I will just pick a few of those who made lasting impressions on my life. Gabriel Banda is still a friend of the family; he has always endeavoured to keep me abreast with the happenings around Oxfam circles, happy moments and even sad ones. Then there were Dr Tony Klouda, Peter Wiles and Peter Lee. I had been struggling with birth control methods due to my endless allergies, but I could not find any really suitable pills etc. So I said to Frank, my husband, that I had done more than my quota of birth control, it was high time he came in and did his part. Susie said 'tell Tony (Klouda) about it' and I wrote to him. Tony gave a detailed contribution from a medical viewpoint, giving various options and advice. Convincing Frank took too long and I got pregnant again for the second time, while faithfully swallowing the pills and a copper loop inserted!

The doctors had done all in their power to prevent pregnancy, so the pregnancy test was not even at the bottom of their list. The clinic called me to receive their latest results. Frank was out of town. Susie offered to accompany me to the clinic and I thanked God that she did, because I discovered that I was pregnant! Susie held me comfortingly and reassuringly encouraged me not to panic. I have never forgotten that experience.

The baby was born prematurely in the seventh month. The two Peters who were in Lusaka actually came home to see the baby. We (but the men really) had a very interesting discussion as the Peters coaxed and encouraged Frank to get sterilized! They seemed to have satisfactorily

# 17. VICTOR PELEKAMOYO (1992-97)

***First impressions of Oxfam***

I arrived at 250 Zambezi Road in a taxi for what was supposed to be a job interview for a consultant accountant to work on the drought programme in the Eastern Province of Zambia. Oxfam had just embarked in 1992 on an unprecedented drought response programme during Southern Africa's worst drought in fifty years and they were looking for someone to strengthen the capacity of their partners and communities in reporting, record keeping and accounting for donor and Oxfam funds. I had never done this sort of thing before as most of it was as we later came to coin 'social accounting' – accountable, simple and responsive.

Frankly, I had never heard of Oxfam (UK & Ireland, as it then was) and did not even know of its existence in Zambia until August 1992 when a colleague in Lusaka referred me to the then Regional Representative for Zambia and Malawi, Pushpanath, for a consultancy assignment. I was at this time working for a Lusaka-based quasi non-governmental organisation and would you believe it, one of its donors was actually Oxfam America.

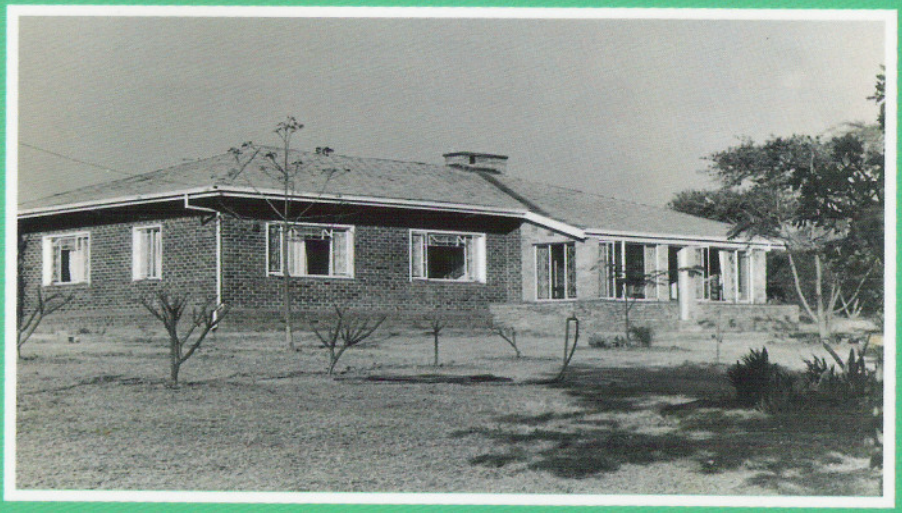
I entered the house through the back to the reception where Jane Mwamba the receptionist/secretary was expecting me. The office was unusually clean, quiet, informal, friendly and most of all modestly furnished. Push came to fetch me from the reception and led me to the Regional Representative's office. It was very small (just enough space for three people) and had old and seemingly cheap furniture - well, for a Regional Representative of an international organisation you expected better. And by the way, typical of accountants and probably most job seekers, I was in my best tie and suit and my host was in jeans, t-shirt and sandals! I felt overdressed for the occasion and I was quite uncomfortable especially when Push made complimentary comments and remarks about it.

***On the bus to the Eastern Province***

We had an informal chat about the role and my credentials. I was never outrightly offered the assignment but given a challenge to join Push, the late Francis Banda, Wilson Kaonza and two trainee journalists from the UK on a field trip to the Eastern Province. They travelled by car and I had to join them two days later but had to make the journey by public transport -

This is a story about a house with a history and about the people who lived or worked there. It captures something of the spirit of the times in the worlds of politics and development, and it discusses the links which were established between Oxfam GB in Zambia and the African National Congress of South Africa. They were remarkable times and remarkable people.

*"There can be few houses in Lusaka that have welcomed so many interesting people or witnessed so much history in the making."*
(Hugh Macmillan)



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