

Tender missals:

During the Rhodesian guerrilla war (the 'Chimurenga' to most Zimbabweans) in the 1970s, missionaries had to very delicately balance their relationship between the Rhodesian security forces and the 'terrs' (the 'comrades' to most Zimbabweans) who operated clandestinely throughout the countryside.

During my sojourn at Gokomere Mission ('83-'84) which had been established by the Bethlehem Brothers from Switzerland, I heard many hair-raising accounts of the strife and horror of the war years.

I recorded the following anecdote in my notebook after a visit with Brother Hugo, the Mission's motor mechanic shop instructor:

"So what do you think of this?"

While regaling fellow Canadian, Ferg, and I in his room with harrowing stories of the Liberation War days, the soft-spoken Brother Hugo, took down a leather-bound notebook from his Spartan shelf. From the pages he withdrew a piece of foolscap and carefully unfolded it.

"A boy from this village brought this right to my door. He looked scared."

I found this under a stone right on my door step." He set the paper on the arm of the chair between us. "It was from one of the terrorists who was already operating in this area."

Along with Ferg, I read the neatly printed letter:

Dear brother,

I am very happy to send you the short missive. Brother we need your kind help. Please, please brother, we are needing trousers and jerseys. Also, six units petrol for transportation. Give these to the boy carrying this missive. He will come again to your door on Saturday.

Down with puppets! Down with racism!

*Yours in the struggle,
Killer Mskira*

When I handed it back, Brother Hugo, touched the bald pate at the center of his frizzy aureole, smiled softly and stuffed the folded paper back into the notebook, which he placed on his bedside table.

"I really had to hide such letters," he said in his soft German accent. "You know the security forces could come along anytime."

"And did the guerrillas ever actually visit here?" I asked.

"O yes, they would come at night to the Brothers' sitting room and we would ask them what we could possibly do for them."

"Were they armed?"

"O yes, you know the bullets strapped were around their waists," He made the circular motion of a bandolier, "and they would point their AK-47s. They would tell us to follow them. It was a command, of course, and one never knew what was coming next. But they always tried to reassure us, saying: '*Don't be afraid.*'" He chuckled.

Brother Hugo went on to describe the forced marches to the propaganda sessions called '*pungwes*' in the nearby bush, where girls from the school would often willingly pair off with some of the 'comrades'.

Yet frightening as these nocturnal visits were for the Bethlehem Brothers— even more terrifying were the daytime visits of the Rhodesian security forces.

"They were suspicious that we were helping the terrorists," said Hugo. "It got worse after there were terrorist attacks at white farms in the area. They often came to our Mission looking for '*mujebas*' [spies, lookouts] and even hidden weapons. Once I chased 2 Rhodesian soldiers out my garage."

He then described how the situation at Gokomere became even tenser after a missionary was killed at the nearby Berejena Mission. Of course the authorities blamed the terrorists for the atrocity. Yet the Rhodesians apparently suspected the victim himself of being a terrorist sympathizer. Thus, the local rumour was that the perpetrators of the murder were the notorious Selous Scouts— disguised as 'comrades.'

"We didn't know what to expect next. I had to be prepared."

Hugo then motioned us up behind his desk. Under a small carpet there was a trap door. Beneath it was a crawl space.

"I found out afterwards," he said dropping back the door, "that brother Emil, without telling anyone, had dug one in his floor, too."

He then picked up the notebook again and drew out another letter— his *piece de resistance*.

"This I received after independence," he said chuckling.

As he spread it open, he told us it was from one of Mugabe's bodyguards. The former comrade had accompanied the Prime Minister, when a few months after independence, Mugabe and his entourage made an official visit to the Mission to thank the Bethlehem Brothers for their contribution to African education.

"I think I recognized the guy," said Hugo, still with his elusive smile, "from one of those *pungwes*."

The letter was addressed from Avondale, one of posh Harare suburbs that before independence were exclusively for whites. The typed text read as follows:

Dear brother Hugo,

Do you remember me? Brother, I was a comrade, near Gokomere during the war. I'm writing this missive today to know about a white girl who was then a secretary at the secondary school. She is of medium body structure and quite young-looking. I would be very grateful if you could help me with her address. Hope you are pushing on well.

Yours sincerely,

Lovemore Makiba

"This could have been the same guy who sent the first letter," said Hugo. "I think so."

I looked over at Comrade Ferg, as both of us laughed. So was that what liberation was all about for young Lovemore (AKA 'Killer Msikira')? Freedom to bonk a *mrungu* girl?

Watching us, Brother Hugo beamed. He was clearly pleased with his dramatic rendition.

-1983 April, Gokomere, Zimbabwe (Transcribed, 2017)