

Bulawayo

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

In the summer of 1966, I was studying in the great Yeshiva of Mir in Jerusalem. One day, I received a call from Rabbi Professor Dr. Louis Rabinowitz, former Chief Rabbi of South Africa and then Vice Mayor of Jerusalem. He was one of the most dynamic, charismatic rabbis in a generation of outstanding ones. He was also a close friend of my late father. I used to visit him regularly on Shabbat. He said that I had been studying too much theory and, I needed to get out into the world for some experience in the rabbinate. He had a mission for me.

The rabbi of the Bulawayo Hebrew Congregation on Bulawayo (which was in Southern Rhodesia – now Zimbabwe) had died tragically. The community was distressed and Rabbi Rabinowitz said they needed someone to go there for the High Holy Days and give them moral support. He wouldn't let me say no. I agreed but I stressed that it would only be for a short stay because I needed to finish my studies. I now suspect he never told them it was a temporary assignment.

I went to the head of my Yeshiva to ask for permission. Knowing the challenges I would face, I asked his opinion about racial discrimination. He replied that he had no idea what the problem was but that I should act in accordance with the command of the Torah – do that which is good and just.

I flew to Johannesburg where I was taken to meet Chief Rabbi Casper and the Head of Beth Din, Dayan Kurtstag. They briefed me on the situation in Bulawayo and told me I could contact them directly if there were any problems. I spent Shabbat with an old family friend, Rabbi Yaacov Newman, and off I flew to Bulawayo.

I fell in love with Bulawayo immediately. The atmosphere, the climate, the sounds, and smells. The magic of Africa. The relaxed Colonial lifestyle was so different from the impersonal formality of the more developed cities I was used to. Bulawayo was the second city of Rhodesia. The wide streets were apparently designed to handle large ox carts turning round in them. Its affluent suburbs stretched out toward farmland and the veldt. There were large houses with verdant gardens, tennis courts and swimming pools where the more comfortable citizens would gather for sundowner drinks at the end of a hot working day. I was welcomed with a level of hospitality and warmth I had not experienced back home in the UK.

The Jewish community was cohesive. There were differences. An Orthodox synagogue and a Reform one. Although it was staunchly pro-Israel, there were political divisions between right and left. As a result, there were three youth movements, Bnei Akiva, Betar, and Habonim. Yet remarkably they all seemed to get on with each other.

Beyond the Jewish community, one could not help noticing, however, that were

segregated suburbs and townships. What struck me almost immediately was the way many white Anglo Saxon emigres lived in their own bubbles. It was a colonial atmosphere that I had only read about in stories of Anglo India. Some might have been socially looked down upon in snobbish London but, in Bulawayo, were part of an upper class asserting its superiority over the local population. Everyone seemed to know their place. But there was tension beneath the surface.

In 1960, British Prime Minister MacMillan made his famous speech about the "Winds of Change" in which he heralded the process of relinquishing Britain's imperial possessions in Africa. The succeeding Labour Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, wanted to hand power over to the black majority right away. But opposition in the white population of Southern Rhodesia led the Prime Minister of Rhodesia, Ian Smith, to declare Unilateral Independence (UDI) in 1965. He professed loyalty to the Queen but not to parliament. No other country recognized his regime. Harold Wilson's portrait was printed on toilet paper!

I arrived the year after UDI as Smith began to roll back some of the social and political progress the African population had gained under that marginally more enlightened Sir Roy Wilensky (an opponent of UDI). The community soon had to face a major moral issue. The Jewish Carmel school in Bulawayo had admitted black and Indian pupils. But Smith took steps to end that policy. As a community, I felt the Jews should fight this. We officially protested. But it was in vain. His Land Apportionment Act meant that different races had to go to schools in different areas. As a postscript, Carmel still thrives today even though most Jews have left. It is an all-black school and still officially Jewish. The pupils sing Hatikvah in Hebrew and it is very pro-Israel.

There was no overt anti-Semitism but it lurked beneath the surface. The mainly Jewish suburb of Kumalo was known derisively as "Jewmalo". More significant were tensions in the Jewish community between those who wanted to keep the old colonial system and those who supported independence and an end to discrimination. Some thought the young leader, Robert Mugabe, was "a man you could deal with." Others argued that the African communities were too tribally split and not capable of responsible self-rule. Eventually, the Smith regime collapsed and Mugabe took over. Zimbabwe descended into tribal warfare, nepotism, and corruption. Today, it is a pale shadow of the thriving rich country it once was.

I was welcomed with open arms and was made to feel at home right away. As a young, enthusiastic, informal rabbi, I relished the challenge of making orthodox Judaism more attractive. I could speak in a language that appealed to the younger generation. I enthusiastically threw myself into my role. Having no other commitments, I could devote myself to the community night and day.

I took groups of youngsters away on weekend camping trips to give them a Shabbat experience. We went to the Wankie Game Reserve, the Victorian Falls, the Capital Salisbury, and the Matopos excavations. It was magical. And the High Holidays were better attended than usual. The whole experience was

exhilarating and completely sold me on going into the rabbinate. People began to ask me whether I would stay. I replied that I needed to finish my studies and my stay would be temporary. But it seems that the general opinion was that I left because I did not want to stay.

A year later, I wrote an article about my experience in Bulawayo. I described the political and racial tensions. I was critical of those who were insensitive to the aspirations of the African community. And, although I stressed how wonderful the community and the people were and how happy I was, it seems that the tenor of my article offended some people. Word went around that I had left in disgust. Nothing could have been further from the truth. For me, it was, and remains, a magical episode in my life. Over the years, I have kept in contact with some of the friends I made in Bulawayo. They are now scattered around the world.

So imagine that fifty-five years later, having moved on from country to country, I should discover that in the very building where I live in Manhattan there is living someone who had been living in Bulawayo way back in 1965. What are the odds? And that I should be sitting, in New York, drinking Scotch, as I once had in Kumalo, with four ex-residents of Bulawayo. They remembered me and told me how sad they were that I left. They thought it was because I did not like the country or the community.

They reminded me of what I had loved about the community – the warmth, the sensitivity and, indeed, the intellectual vibrancy of life in Jewish Bulawayo all those years ago. Unfortunately, all that talent has dispersed to the four corners of the earth and enriches other communities. The glory that was Bulawayo, as I knew it, is now long gone. Liberty does not always bring prosperity or freedom. But the happy memories, the friendships, and the photographs remain.