

My Botswana Days, 1960-1972

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When I arrived in Mochudi in June 1960 as a newly married twenty-three-year old I had just left a busy post in Port Elizabeth as a Regional Librarian in the Cape Provincial Library Service. I had been in charge of a staff responsible for delivering books by library van to small towns in the region up to four or five hundred miles away.

I had absolutely no idea what I was supposed to do in Mochudi, and my new husband George was far too busy in his new post as District Commissioner. Mochudi was then a large traditional African village with a Dutch Reformed Church and mission in its midst and the small settlement at Phaphane occupied by us, a doctor and family and an education officer and family a little way away from the village on the slope of a rocky hill or kopje. I had a cook and a cleaner and a person to do the laundry and I think our groceries were sent by railway from Thrupps in Johannesburg, though I don't remember who collected them. I think there was a baker in Mochudi.

I don't remember the doctor¹ who occupied one of the nearby residences, but Archie Mogwe, the Education Officer, and his family became very good friends. Twenty years later I was sitting in a well-known Indian restaurant in London studying the menu while waiting for George when I felt a gentle tap on my shoulder and there was Archie. George used to recount how he left the room for a minute and came back to find his wife in a clinch with an unknown black man! Of course, when Archie turned around and he saw who it was he was just as delighted as I was.

Two years later or perhaps a little less, we were transferred to the Bechuanaland Protectorate headquarters in Mafeking and there I found a post in the Education Department. This was a relief because I never quite fitted in with other administration wives. And two years later my much longed-for baby, Kate, arrived and took over my life.

I suppose it must have been 1965 when the great move from Mafeking Gaborone, as the projected capital of Botswana, took place. I think it was Peter Heady who was in charge of the meticulous planning to move several hundred people from the so-called 'Imperial Reserve' in Mafeking to the newly built town. There was of course already a railway station and village in Gaborone, as it was then called, but the move called for a whole new town planning exercise, complete with roads and housing, churches, shopping malls, and a presidential residence. The houses were of three or perhaps four, types, known as Type 1, Type 2, etc. with Type 1 being the largest and most luxurious, built around a central courtyard. Ours was a Type 2, very comfortable with, I think, three bedrooms and something known as a 'breezeway' – a multi-windowed space dividing the living quarters from the bedroom/bathroom block.

I do not remember anything going wrong in the course of this massive move. Everything worked – water, power – and everything happened on time. The most exciting thing for me was making a garden, and this, with my baby, kept me thoroughly busy for a time. Then our son Jonathan was born in March 1966. The hospital in Gaborone was a few months short of being opened so he was born in the mission hospital in Molepolole, delivered by Dr Alfred Merriweather, the prospective Speaker of the new Legislative Assembly. I was treated to a discussion on Standing Orders between my husband and Dr Merriweather, standing on either side of my bed in the labour ward, until the actual appearance of the baby sent George into hasty retreat!²

I remember the excitement when the cinema appeared, and then, wow! A dress shop opened by a Mr Khan! Until this time I had made virtually every scrap of outer clothing for myself and children,

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aided by beautiful Vogue patterns bought on rare visits to Johannesburg or the two-yearly 'home leave' to England. I don't remember any other shops but there must have been a butcher because a book used to be brought around, probably weekly, into which we would write our orders. I remember noticing a frequent order from someone before me on the list for '1lb boys' meat'. What this was I do not want to know.

As the children grew, I began to make very good friends with other mothers of young families. These warm friendships have lasted through the years, only interrupted sadly – very, very sadly – by death in the case of Janet Hermans.

One other friendship which was very important was that with Jane Selolwane, who worked for us as a cook, and her little granddaughter Vala, who was much the same age as my daughter, and much loved by her. I lost touch with Jane and I fear she is no longer with us. But I wonder if anyone knows where Vala is? She was sent by Jane at the age of six or seven to live with a relative because she thought she was becoming spoilt by her intimacy with our household. This was a huge loss to us.

We left in 1972 to live in Johannesburg for a few years before moving to England. But my children, and particularly my daughter, regard themselves as Batswana.

Endnotes

1. The doctor worked at the government owned clinic, not at the DR Hospital. The clinic is now known Clinic 1.
2. George Winstanley had been the Clerk of the Legislative Council and was, therefore, well briefed on Parliamentary style proceedings.