Living in Chilumba forty years ago - “down on the plain” - by Lorna Hobson

Robin Gray’s articles about road building in Northern Malawi unleashed a flood of memories for me of a wonderful year I spent in the Northern Region back in 1969.

In the late 1960s, I was delighted that VSO chose to send me to Central Africa. Initially I was appointed to Soche Hill Secondary School but the highlight for me was an extra year when I was stationed in Chilumba.

I was the first British volunteer posted to the school, which had only recently received secondary status. My household consisted of myself, my dog and the ‘domestic staff’ who lived nearby. They were Nya Nkwacha, a woman of small build but amazing energy, who cooked for me on the wood-burning stove, taught me some Chitumbuka and with whom I shared many a laugh; and Wilson, a man from the village who worked as a part-time ‘hewer of wood and drawer of water’. The water was carried from a nearby well and pumped up to the tank above the stove which Wilson kept going with wood gathered from the bush behind the school.

In my first week at Chilumba, I had an unexpected visit from Chinese workers from the Hara Agricultural Scheme, offering me a wonderful selection of fruit and vegetables. Thereafter they called weekly, so I was never short of fresh food. Nya Nkwacha also bought chambo and other fish for me at the lakeshore and eggs formed a staple in my diet. I seldom bothered with meat.

The teacher I most clearly recall was the headmaster, Mr Mvula, a friendly easy-going character. Another colleague was the history teacher, a man who, I was shocked to find, had to support his large family on the same monthly salary as I, supposedly a volunteer, received as ‘pocket money’. I used to visit his wife of an evening. She told me that her youngest child became poorly whenever the moon was full. Like every mother, she loved to speak to me of her little children and their development, and I loved to hear her.

Our nearest doctor was at Livingstonia, but more valued locally as a health centre was the Vinthukutu Mission, just north of Chilumba. On the beach one night a VSO was stung on the tip of his finger by what we supposed must have been a scorpion. He was taken to Vinthukutu. The story, as he told it later, was that they had bound a special stone tightly against his finger and by morning he watched the swelling in his arm subside and the pain ebb away. The stone was then boiled in milk, after which it would be ready for re-use. At the time I heard this, I was incredulous but quite recently I heard a similar tale startlingly similar in every detail.

Something I greatly valued was being invited to students’ homes. Visiting at Kaporo we watched the malepenga and other tribal dances, learnt to play the bangwe (a seven-stringed harp), to knot rope to make fishing nets, and - greatest thrill - went out in a dugout canoe. The trip that stands out most in my mind, though, was a visit to the Misuku Hills in the far north. We had many happy days high up in this beautiful landscape, with its varied flora and stunning views, and we visited different villages, wherever our student had relatives for us to meet and greet in the local dialects he taught us. Each village conveyed the feel of a caring community, proud and self-reliant. The houses were well looked after and neat, the slopes terraced for cultivation; we saw bricks being made with straw and mud, and a primary school painted with obvious care and pride.

As for the other northern highlands, my first reaction to the Nyika was elation at the sight of those fine rolling hills and coniferous forests, the rocky outcrops and the rich-looking dark soil supporting a profusion of flowers. We saw numerous herds: zebra, antelope of various kinds, eland, reedbuck... and birds of prey soaring overhead. I returned on another occasion, but it rained almost continuously, reminding me of the Scottish Highlands.

On several occasions I travelled the forty-five miles of ‘dirt’ road north to Karonga - a journey that on one occasion took the bus four hours! That would have been only months before the re-surfacing of that road, mentioned elsewhere in this Newsletter. Also at that time the road south along the lakeshore, through the South Rukuru valley, was still two years in the future. So apart from the dear old ‘Ilala’, our main route south was via Livingstonia. Many a time I enjoyed - sometimes endured! - the rough ride Robin Gray mentioned as unforgettable, between Livingstonia and Rumphi. I also of course experienced the thrill of the incredible escarpment road between the Livingstonia Mission and the lakeshore, that drops more than 3000 feet in 7 miles via 22 hairpin bends. Of course, it is close to this road that the breathtaking Manchewe Falls make their dramatic descent in a series of drops down the thickly vegetated precipice. One can go into caves under the Falls, where some of the Ngoni people are said to have once lived in hiding during a
On the Chilumba School compound, although the staff houses and the science teaching block were fairly new, the classroom where I taught was part of an old long low building with unglazed windows (though glass was later added allowing us to build up a class library). The corrugated iron roof made it feel like an oven in the afternoons and when it rained the clatter was so deafening that speech was impossible! In the hottest season just before the rains, the highlight of my day was when school was over (for the Day Students at least; I had Night Classes later) and I could take my bike and, with my dog running beside me, cycle through villages, through avenues of tall elephant grass, to plunge into the Lake. Later there would be piles of workbooks to be marked by the light of tilley lamps or candles. Then sleep, to the background night chorus from the nearby bush.

I count myself lucky to have lived in such a beautiful place, to have had the friendship of such welcoming people and to have been able to share with them the precious resources of this very special part of Africa.

Many thanks to Lorna for providing such an evocative account of her time at Chiluma. For readers who would like to learn more, the full length version of Lorna's article is on our website on the News/Latest News page.