

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

BSQ-42

Russell Place
116 Baines Ave.
Salisbury, Zimbabwe
January 29, 1982

Lost Horizons

Mr. Peter Bird Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
Wheelock House
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755

Dear Peter,

Pity the favored residents of this verdant city. They have lived so long in a tropical Shangri-la, the real world looks like Hell to them.

Salisbury could be all an outsider ever wanted in a city. Now, in the height of summer, daytime temperatures are in the 70s; the nights are just cool enough to sleep beneath a blanket. Passing showers keep green the well-manicured parks and gardens of the city center, the flowering trees along the sidewalks, the park-like suburbs of rolling lawns and scattered trees.

The city center—a square mile of elegant shops, restaurants, office buildings and banks—has little of the metropolis about it. A few tall buildings are crowned with garish advertising: a flashing neon sign promotes flights to Frankfurt on Air Zimbabwe; a revolving globe reminds me of The Daily Planet building in the Superman series; long, concrete pincers grasp a small white ball, the significance of which eluded me until I learned that it marked the Pearl Building.

The effect is rather corny, a vain attempt to stick Manhattan sophistication into a small city. Salisbury proper has only about 600,000 people; the surrounding communities of poor blacks brings the population of greater Salisbury to about a million, but one would never guess that from the city center. The traffic is light, one rarely hears a car horn; the sidewalks only get crowded on Saturdays when shoppers are out in force.

Urban-life addicts would find the city a bit tame. Outside of the hotels, bars are hard to find. Nightclubs range from discos with a pimply clientele to snob dens with midnight floor shows and Manhattan-level admission prices, but the roué would grow bored with the selection in a week. Many of the smaller restaurants close at eight on weeknights, nine on weekends. The streets are almost deserted after dark, except perhaps for clusters of young people outside club entrances, waiting for God-knows-what signal that will change an empty bar into a packed nightspot in minutes. The city also offers more than a dozen movie theaters and drive-ins, with such films, at the moment, as Arthur, Cannonball Run (ending after a record 23-week run), Chariots of Fire, Loving Couples and Raiders of the Lost Ark.

The real attractions of this city operate during the day.

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On my map of Salisbury I counted 16 country clubs, golf clubs, sports clubs or athletic clubs; 11 fields and stadiums, including a polo grounds; nine golf courses; five municipal swimming pools (many homes and apartment buildings have their own pools); and three tracks, including Borrowdale Park, which has thoroughbred horseracing on Saturdays. Most people are probably too exhausted to go out at night.

And yet, the whites who grew up here are not happy, for they have lost control over their city and their country. Many of them are convinced, despite evidence to the contrary, that both are on the road to ruin. After almost two years of independence and black rule, the changes wrought by the avowedly socialist government have been cautious and moderate. Indicative of the slow pace is the continuation of the name Salisbury for the city. Lord Salisbury, a member of the British government at the end of the nineteenth century, was one of its most fervent imperialists. The white pioneers who arrived here in 1890 named the settlement they established in Salisbury's honor, eager for the protection of the British crown against the warlike Matabeles. The hill where the settlers first raised the Union Jack was called Harare by the local Africans. The Zimbabwe government has repeatedly announced that the place name would revert to its African original, but so far few people or businesses have made the alteration. A letter in the newspaper this week from a businessman pleaded with the government to give impetus to the change.

Such is not the case with the former name of this country, which was in tribute to Cecil Rhodes, tycoon and empire-builder, who sponsored the settlement of the area and headed the company that controlled the land for years. Any use of the name Rhodesia or any abbreviation of it is illegal. Now one sees Zimbank and Zimco, Zimglass and Zimpaper, Zimthis and Zimthat. Occasionally, the change hasn't been completed, as at the careers college where a vacant square sits atop two large Cs. Sometimes the transition is imperfect. In the hotel where I stayed, the informational brochure in my room had the white letters of Rhodesia appearing like ghosts beneath the Zimbabwe label pasted on the cover.

Government fiat, however, cannot efface the concept of Rhodesia from the minds of its white citizens. Reportedly, the reactionary elements among the white population continue to use the name. The white residents I have met talk about Zimbabwe, but, like the letters on the hotel brochure, Rhodesia looms through their words.

I have encountered a great deal of defensiveness and some bitterness toward me as an American, a representative of the Western powers that the whites feel betrayed them. At the same time, I have been treated with the utmost kindness and hospitality. I experienced this combination of generosity and anger in my first 10 minutes in Salisbury. My plane from London arrived at dawn, and since the airport bank was closed, I had no local currency when I got off the airport bus in Salisbury. A taxi driver refused to accept pounds or dollars, and told me I could walk the three blocks to my hotel. I had just picked up my bags when a young, beautiful woman stopped me and offered me a ride in her car. She was a native white Zimbabwean. I briefly explained what had brought me to her country.

"Are you planning to go to South Africa?" she asked. When I said no, she drawled in dripping sarcasm, "Oh, nooo, you can't visit that aawful, APARTHEID South Africa." Amicably, she tried to convince me that to understand what is happening in this part of the world, I must visit South Africa, an argument I have heard several times.

White Zimbabweans feel that Americans were misinformed about Rhodesia. ("The truth is complicated," one told me.) My misconceptions of what I would find here erred in the whites' favor. I was not prepared for the hardcore racism I have found among the whites who are natives or long-time residents. At the snack bar of Borrowdale Park, the race track, an elderly gentleman sat down at my table. I tried to get some tips on the horses, but the conversation drifted quickly into politics. Many of the whites who live here seem eager to express their views on Zimbabwe, especially to an American. Like most other former Rhodesians I have spoken with, he felt the country is going to the dogs.

"It's all right for me, I'm set," he said, repeating a sentiment I had heard before and would hear again. "But if I was 30 years old, I'd emigrate. There's no future here."

(An American Embassy official who has been here two years told me that talking with unrepentant Rhodesians is like listening to a cassette tape—the same opinions, often the same words, are heard over and over.)

"I'm not a racist," the horseplayer continued. "I have nothing against the African. I quite like the chaps. But," he raised his hand and pointed his forefinger at his head, "they just don't have it up here. They lack the capacity to run a country."

He spoke with such quiet certitude that he obviously expected no contradiction, and I did not argue. Only once have I tried to shake the prejudice I've encountered. I was at the home of a family whose name I had been given in the States. They had graciously invited me to a dinner party. I was speaking with two daughters, ages 22 and 19, and the younger one's fiancé. They had asked me about my experiences in West Africa, and I replied that I had enjoyed it mostly because of the kindness of the Africans I had met.

"Oh, I like the Africans, too," the 22-year-old said, "when they're living in the bush and are simple and unsophisticated. It's only when they get into the urban areas that they become a nuisance."

I disagreed. I told them about my stay in Lagos, living with a Nigerian, and about the time I was escorted home from the train station at night by a stranger who went miles out of his way just to make sure I arrived safely. The three young Rhodesians (for in their hearts, they remain so) listened with vacant faces. When I had finished, they smiled and changed the subject.

The Rhodesians (using that term to distinguish reactionary whites from the liberals, who do exist here, though I haven't met any, except for other foreigners), the Rhodesians show an appalling lack of understanding of what has happened in America and in the rest of the world for the past 30 years. With the impact of the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War on our conceptions of race relations, even racist Americans operate

from a different set of assumptions than the Rhodesians do. Until two years ago, the Rhodesians lived in a paradisaic world, oblivious of the passage of time. This ignorance extends beyond their perceptions of race and affects their views of what has happened in this country since independence. Whites complain to me about the high taxes they pay, as if no one in America had ever felt the government's pinch. The only difference is that in this country, where the average income is about \$600 a year, all whites are in the upper income bracket and pay a proportionally higher share in income taxes. The agent for my apartment house told me she's quitting her job because, with a quarter of her salary being taken out in taxes, it's no longer worth the effort. Her family will rely on her husband's income, while she will spend more time sunbathing and meditating. How many American women enjoy that kind of freedom?

Many businessmen, white and black, have never had it so good. After 12 years of economic sanctions against Rhodesia, Zimbabwe's liberated economy grew by 14 percent in its first year and 8 percent last year. Inflation has surged from 10 percent for higher income families in 1980 to 17 percent last year (inflation rates for lower income families average a few points lower). Still, prices are relatively low. A three-course dinner for one in a good restaurant can cost less than U.S. \$12, and fast-food restaurants offer T-bone steaks for between \$3 and \$4. Movie tickets are \$3.75 or less. A taxi ride across town costs less than \$4. Houses sell for between \$25,000 and \$70,000; apartments rent for between \$200 and \$500 a month.

The usual response from Rhodesians when one extols what they have here is: "You should have come here 10 years ago." The most bittersweet recollection of the past I've heard was at the dinner party, when the hosts and guests recalled their holidays in Mozambique, before that country gained independence in 1975. Gone now are the house on the lonely beach, the dinners of shellfish bought for pennies fresh from the sea, the splendid sightseeing tours. As I listened, I wondered whether the fantastic opportunities these privileged people had enjoyed were worth the pain they feel at being deprived of them for a reason that, to them, is totally illogical. Life now holds nothing but more regret as the world they knew vanishes like a mirage.

Regards,



Bowden Quinn