

**GEORGE MAKONESE**

**MATUVI**

**THE WAR**

**AS I**

**SAW IT**

**IN RHODESIA, NOW ZIMBABWE,  
THROUGH THE EYES OF A BLACK BOY**

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**WOLSAK  
& WYNN**

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*I dedicate this book to my father who passed away in 2002.*

*My brothers and sisters and I are so grateful for the life lessons that my father and mother gave to us.*

*My mother is one of the most resilient people I have ever known. It's because of her strong nurturing and love for each of my siblings, her nine children, that we survived.*



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This book describes a true story of the war that I saw as a young boy and how it affected my family. All my father ever wanted was to provide his kids, us, with a good education, food and shelter.



# INTRODUCTION

This book is about my life growing up during the War of Liberation in the southern African country of Zimbabwe, formerly known as Rhodesia.

My father was a small businessman in a rural area in the Midlands province of Zimbabwe, a small place called Chamini, near the town called Zvishavane. It is surrounded by mountains and a river called the Runde wiggles through the steep topography into our valley. The river and the mountains serve many purposes in this remote area: people fish in the river, bathe in it, grow gardens next to it and get their fresh drinking water from it. The mountains serve as a space for feeding the cattle and as a source of various fruits – from guavas to an assortment of wild berries. As a child, a day trip to the mountains to bring back the cattle was an adventure not to miss. Now living near one of the major cities in Canada, I begin to realize why all the young boys always wanted to go up to the mountains. Whenever I have gone back

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to Chamini, I have not been able to go back to the mountains, but as I looked at them, I could visualize the winding paths running through the valleys and over the mountainside. Even now, I can remember a beautiful spring oozing from the ground where people and animals could not pass without a sip of fresh water. The water seeping from that aquifer is probably the best I have ever tasted.

In my memories going up the mountains and spending the day out there was special. We always had a plan. We would go early to find the cattle then slowly make our way home. We would stop to climb the wild fruit trees, pull fruit straight from the branches and eat the juicy sour fruit called matamba, Natal oranges as they are called in English, or we'd stop by a boy-high bush with fresh fruit called nhengengi, sour plums. I always tell people if you go to Africa do not go and stay in some fancy hotel all the time – go to the rural areas. This is where you see life from a different angle; you feel it, literally taste it. This is where time is measured by the amount of sunlight or moonlight. Time slows down for you, as if the entire world is yours to enjoy. At least that's how it felt when I was growing up there, in my early childhood years.

This is also a place where you realize that this universe is huge. Looking out into the sky at night with no artificial lights around, you can see every little star, shooting stars, strange formations of stars and the dark corners, which your eyes cannot see the furthest edges of in the sky. Tiny flickering green and red lights from planes flying thousands of feet above the earth appear now and then. You begin to understand that even darkness

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is important sometimes, the land below your feet starts to cool off as the night progresses towards the inevitable approach of morning. Your thoughts start to wander in a calm way; you begin to think about nothing. You ask yourself what it all means and you cannot wait to see the sun again in the morning and enjoy the day and the sunset again.

Sunsets in Chamini are absolutely breathtaking as the sun looks like it's sitting on top of the mountains and a shadow from the mountains is cast on the valley below, almost as if warning you that it's time to go home for dinner. In this area most people do not care to have watches; the position of the sun tells you the time. As I was growing up, the sun setting meant it was time to gather the cattle; a signal to start herding your cattle home to the kraal.

With the arrival of the war my family lost everything, including our feeling of tranquility and our sense of purpose. Our lives were changed forever. Many in Zimbabwe still suffer even now as a result of the war. Liberation is always tricky. Who does the liberating and what are the effects of the war on the children and families? These effects can spread across generations, as I witnessed growing up. While I now live in Canada, every time I go to Zimbabwe, I see families whose lives still bear the scars of the war, having lost their son, father, sister or other relative during it. War does not only affect those who are directly exposed to it, it impacts them and their families for years to come.



# CHAPTER 1

## WAR ARRIVES

Hidden in this quiet mountainous area my father, Cleophas Kira Makonese, built a little store for the community. In the store he sold everything from bread, sugar and clothes to manual farm implements such as hoes and plows. He also sold corn seeds for the locals to farm their staple food. The store was situated next to the school, which was also a gathering point for the community. My father had two wives, Jesslin and Esnati Makonese, and several rural farming fields to sustain our huge family. He had gone to school up to the equivalent of a second year in high school today. During his time he could have been a teacher, but he chose to be a small businessman. My mom, Esnati, his first wife, was a very hard-working woman who helped him to set up his business in a place that is now named after him – KwaMakonese.

On the day the war arrived, I was playing keep-ups with my



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brother Paul using our homemade soccer ball in the yard. Soccer was the most popular game that young boys played in Zimbabwe when I was a child. The ball was normally made of a collection of plastic bags rolled together into the shape of a ball. Plastic grocery bags formed the inside of the ball and the outer plastic bag was normally from a mealie-meal bag, which was slightly thicker and could withstand the kicking much better than the grocery bags. Mealie-meal is ground corn, used to make the staple food called sadza. In the olden days people used to grind the corn on a piece of stone, crushing the corn between two rocks, causing the dry corn shells to break apart and form a kind of coarse flour. The flour was poured slowly into a pot of boiling water and gently stirred into a thin porridge. Nowadays people go to a grinding mill where pulverizing the corn takes a matter of minutes. But you can also just buy the already made cornmeal from a shop in plastic bags ranging from ten to fifty kilograms. We used to make our soccer balls from a twenty-kilogram empty mealie-meal bag. It was just the right size to fit enough plastic bags inside it to make a ball.

This homemade ball did not bounce very well and it took some getting used to to control it. It was heavy and did not go extremely far when you kicked it, but I tell you it brought a lot of joy for most kids in the rural areas. You only got to kick a genuine leather ball when you started school. Normally the school had one or two leather balls that were used by the school team and the best way to get to kick a real ball was when the school team was practising. The younger kids would hang around the goalpost area waiting for the ball to be kicked off the football

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pitch out of play. Since there were no nets, the ball normally flew through and as young kids we would run to pick it up for the older students playing on the team. Once the ball was in hand, we kicked it as hard as possible back to the players in the field. That was our only way to feel a real soccer ball. Soccer is my favourite game, I could go on and on talking about my love for soccer, but on this day it was different. This day the course of my life was changed forever.

My mother was preparing dinner. Normally we ate sadza as the main course with sour milk and some boiled fresh corn and vegetables. This was not sour cream, this was fresh milk from the cow, which had been left out for about a week, that way it started to separate, and the water went to the bottom, while the thick cream stayed up in the jar. The locals call it “mukaka wakakora.” Boiled corn, roasted corn and cornmeal porridge – it was always corn something, since corn was our staple food. Though in Zambia the sort-of-sadza thick porridge is made from cassava.

The sun was almost leaning on the mountain’s side and outside it was still ridiculously hot when I saw the line of heavily armed men approach our home. I froze on my feet. This was my first time to cast my eyes on the so-called freedom fighters. The Comrades were known by the villagers as “Vana” or “Vana-vevhu,” meaning Children of the Earth. Their guns were hanging from their shoulders and some had guns on their backs. Some were even carrying two guns on their backs and at the back of the line one of them was carrying this long cylindrical weapon, which I later learned was called a bazooka or RPG, meaning rocket-propelled grenade. The weapons were of assorted colours,

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shapes and sizes, and ranged from AK-47 to FN rifles, but many of the guns had these curly bullet holders.

The freedom fighters used anything they could lay their hands on. They even used FN rifles that they took from the fallen Rhodesian forces. They would take away the weapons from their enemies after they killed them in a battle and they would store the weapons in mountain caves, carrying whatever guns they could on them. Sometimes the freedom fighters would get the locals to wrap the weapons up in plastic bags and bury them in cornfields for storage.

Our home was a principal place in our village. It was where the school was and where my father's store was, which was the only store in a twenty-kilometre radius.

My father hastily stood up in surprise and horror. I saw the fear on his face and I knew then and there that this was not good. Time froze for me; the gap between my father and my brother and I playing with the soccer ball was too big for me to run to him. The freedom fighters were very fast; they surrounded the home quickly and I soon found myself face to face with a heavily armed man who was greeting me, smiling at me. I could not smile back. He gestured for me to kick the ball to him, but I was confused and just held the ball in my hand. I remember him saying, "Give it your best shot, kick it hard." I kicked the ball towards him and he kicked it back and stopped, staring at me with a big grin on his face. He asked me to kick again, gesturing with his swinging motion as he threw the ball back to me. I kicked the ball again, this time harder, and he said, "That's more like it." Then he started talking about the national soccer team.

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I could not seem to get myself to listen. I was in shock and fear and so he eventually moved on to the end of the yard of our home, facing the forest to look for intruders. His movements were quick and I could see him watching from side to side, sort of scanning the area. It was weird to see him moving around with all the guns and equipment he was carrying.

Not knowing what was going on outside, my mother yelled for me to come in to the kitchen, a hut in the centre of the yard. After waiting for a few minutes and wondering what was going on outside, since it was common that if she called that dinner was ready we would be there in seconds, she shouted again and this time as she shouted, she came out of the kitchen.

She was met at the door by a gun barrel to her face. The soldier was not actually pointing his gun at her, he had just swung his gun in her direction as he turned to look at her. I was scared and confused, not knowing what was going to happen. I thought the freedom fighter was going to shoot her. Time seemed to stop again. My mum yelled, “Mai hwe, Mai hwe!”

The freedom fighter then spoke rapidly. “Mai mushatya henyu,” he said. It means “Mother, do not be scared,” and he continued to say everything is okay. He sat down by the door of the hut and started talking to her, trying to calm her down.

My mother was visibly shaking as she looked over and saw her husband surrounded by gunmen. The freedom fighter repeated himself several times, telling my mum not to be scared, but with no success. My mum sat down, breathing heavily and sobbing in horror, with her hands to her head. I feared for her and for all of us. I could not do anything for my mum or dad or for me. The

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freedom fighter asked what she was cooking, trying to calm her down and said that they were all hungry. Then he told her that they wanted to talk to my father first.

The men introduced themselves as the Vanavevhu, the Children of the Earth. They asked my father to sit back down and one of the freedom fighters put his gun down. He explained to my father that they were there to liberate all the povo, the people. They told him the war had now arrived in the area and that increasing numbers of the Vanavevhu would arrive from that day on. My father was told that he would be required to support the struggle for liberation. They demanded goods from the store that they did not pay for, but there was no choice. This was the minute that changed my life forever, the turning point of my childhood. I believe the person I am today has a lot to do with that moment.

The freedom fighter talked to my father for about half an hour, though it seemed like an awfully long time to me. One of the men came over to where we were standing and asked for our names, grade in school and how school was. I do not know what I said to him; it did not matter that much at that time. I was very scared. I know he was trying to make us feel relaxed, but there is one thing I learnt during the war: you can never relax if someone carrying a gun is standing close to you, whether it's pointed at you or not. However, it is a completely different feeling when the gun is pointed at you, as I learnt a few months later.

I had heard a lot of stories about the Vanavevhu, how they beat up people and, in some cases, killed people if they suspected that they were a "sellout." It was a weird feeling, standing there

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as my brain whirled, wondering what was going to happen to my parents, our family. My mother had been ordered back into the kitchen and a soldier stood by the door. I continued standing there as the soldier talked to my father. After some time he gave a hand signal to the other freedom fighters and the gunmen disappeared into the bushes as quickly as they had arrived. They moved so smoothly it looked as if the forest swallowed them, as if the forest and soldiers were one.

By now it was getting dark. I could hear cowbells ring and echo between the mountains as older boys brought back the cattle from the grazing areas. My father was talking to my mother in the kitchen and from the way they were talking I could sense there was more trouble to come. My father was whispering and using very subtle and minimized hand gestures. I could see him leaning into my mother's face, making sure that we children could not hear what he was saying. However, even if you were a baby you could have picked up that he was scared too.

Growing up I had never actually seen my father scared. The fear you feel as a child when the person that protects you is scared is intense. It felt like something in the air had snuffed out the happiness in our home. I followed my father to the shop. As we walked, I asked who those people were, if they were going to come back and kill us. At that moment my father turned around and looked at us, the children who crowded around him: my sister Evelyn, also known as Tadzidza (which means "We have learnt" in Shona); my brothers Paul, Sydney, Wilmore and Tomson; and myself. We stayed at home with my mother all the time, while the older siblings were away in boarding school

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at Dadaya High School. He realized that we were all standing there waiting for an answer and that we were more scared than he was. Then my father smiled and said no, we just must be more careful now, the war was getting closer to our area. He said the freedom fighters were going to stay in the mountains and that they would not bother us. He told us they said they were here to free everyone. It did not make sense to me. Free us from who or what? Our lives as I knew it were very nice. I did not understand. He told us not to worry.

As night fell my father disappeared into the store carrying empty boxes. From the clothing section he took all the men's jeans, shirts and pants and put them into one box. All the cigarettes, toothpaste and candy bags went in another.

The Vanavevhu wanted food, clothing, cigarettes and painkillers such as Cafenol, a common headache medication and painkiller at the time. They had ordered my father to put all these items in boxes and bring them to the Runde River. Since this was my father's very first time to be in contact with the freedom fighters, he took his battered Datsun and drove to the location that was close to the Runde River. When he got there, there was no one in sight. He turned off the engine and switched off the truck lights. Suddenly the whole area was pitch-black under the canopy of thick vegetation along the river. My father could hear the loud sounds of the frogs and other nightly creatures. There was no one in sight. Then suddenly my father heard footsteps coming from all around him as the freedom fighters surrounded my father from all directions.

The leader was terribly upset with my father. He told him that

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he could get all of them killed. I remember my father telling us the story many a time, repeating the man's words, "You bring your truck here, making all this noise to our base! Never do that again or we will shoot you and burn your truck."

My father quickly learnt these guys meant business. One time they would be nice and then suddenly you did something they did not like and they could kill you. The base was a meeting place that the freedom fighters chose in the woods. They would come during the day and check out the place to make sure they could escape if a battle broke out. In most cases, all the Vanav-evhu would escape and the locals would be the ones who would get caught or killed at the base.

The freedom fighters quickly took the stuff from the truck and my father was told to drive back with no headlights in the night, to only use moonlight. The moon was not up yet but my father drove all the way from the river on a winding dirt path not big enough to be a road. He was also told that when he got home, he was to come back to the base for further instructions. When he got to the house, he said goodbye to us as if he was not coming back again. He was not crying but you could hear from his voice that this was serious. When my parents had serious things going on my father always addressed my mother with "Mai Wiribeti," which means Wilbert's mum. It is a custom in that part of the world that a wife is addressed as the mother of the first son or daughter. My father said to my mother that the war that they had been hearing about was finally here.

Stories of the freedom fighters having been seen in the woods had been talked about frequently. One story was that a strange



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looking group of people were seen very close to our home at dusk days before this unexpected visit. Apparently, this was true and now they had arrived. The freedom fighters were known to check out a place first from afar, using binoculars to see who lived there and sometimes count how many people lived there.

My father walked back to the base that night, where he was made to sit on the ground behind a tree with the leader of the freedom fighters. He was eating, but he immediately told my father that there were many more groups coming and the war would be in our area soon. He said the freedom fighters were going to liberate everyone from the hands of the Rhodesian government. As you can imagine, if you tell a poor person that things are going to change for the better, the message was good news and it gave people hope that their lives would change for the better. The Comrades had a tendency of embellishing the benefits of fighting the war for the people. In some cases, they told people that they were going to take over all the soldiers' trucks after they won the war and give the trucks to the people for carrying cow manure for fertilizing their fields.

It was like music to the ears of the poor people. These promises were like bringing rural people to heaven and offering whatever heaven looks like. Most of the people believed the promises. My father had been singled out as the smart one, and of course in that part of the rural area a person with a little grocery store, educated to standard six and owning a truck was important. He brought the people the necessities they needed from town, such as salt, sugar, cooking oil, bread, farming implements and clothing. But my father also realized that some people would not have

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the money to pay and so he also bartered with the locals, taking dry buckets of corn in exchange for salt, which he then bagged in jute bags and sold to Grain Marketing Board for real cash. He used that money to order the necessities that people needed in the store.

A lot of the information the freedom fighters told the locals was explained during pungwe sessions, which were all-night rallies. The pungwe sessions were geared towards maximizing support from the people. Supporters were promised that after the war, they would take over everything. The people were promised that they would go to the towns and have whatever they wished from the shops, people were promised that they would take over farms. My father was promised that all his business losses caused by supplying the freedom fighters with food and clothing taken from the store would be repaid. My father was promised money, lots of money, from the new people's government and assistance from the government to get his business back.

The people were promised that after the war they would have good roads and electricity would be brought to the rural areas and that rich people would be forced to share their wealth. All these promises made the locals more supportive of the freedom fighters. They cooked them food whenever they showed up, which most of the time was in the middle of the night. People took turns to kill their only form of wealth, their livestock – their goats and cattle – for fresh meat to feed the freedom fighters.

The Vanavevhu took clothes from the people, such as jeans and shoes. If they saw someone wearing a nice jacket, they would sweet-talk you into exchanging clothes, as most of their clothes

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would be in bad condition. It felt good for some of the locals for it felt like exchanging clothes was a direct connection with the freedom fighters. In some cases, the Vanavevhu would exchange their tattered and torn clothes and take better clothes, especially dark-coloured clothes, from the young men.

In the cold season they asked for blankets from the locals, which they rolled up and carried on their backs. Sometimes they would leave the blankets behind and the locals would go back the next day and pick up the blankets. People were also asked to take care of the wounded freedom fighters. If a group had someone extremely sick or they had wounded fighters, they would come into an area at night, wake up people, ask for the chief of the area to appoint someone to take care of the wounded and then leave the wounded Comrades there. If a freedom fighter was killed, they would ask the locals to bury the fallen freedom fighter. A select group of elders would be asked to give the freedom fighter a respectful burial. Everything happened at night.

Dark jeans were the freedom fighters' favourite type of clothing because the pants were more durable. I remember the day that my father was asked to give away all the jeans he had in the store. The Vanavevhu showed up just after the sun went down. They arrived with the nightfall and they seemed to appear from all directions. It took them less than five minutes to surround our home, then two guys went into the store with my dad and came out with boxes of merchandise – from the popular Super Pro sneakers and canned beef to clothes and blankets. I grew up at the back of the shop and my father had taught us to be vigilant when working the store and not to give away stuff. We

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always had to make sure that people paid for something before we handed them the item. At this point I felt that the freedom fighters were stealing from my family.

The soldiers tried to make jokes with us kids. I was not sure if my father was going to resist and shout at the freedom fighters this time, for I knew with all the stuff they were taking that my father would not be able to order more goods. Besides the food we grew in the fields, the store was our family's only means of getting extra money. Without that there was no way to replenish the goods taken from the store. Before they left, the Comrades sat with my father, swearing that people like him would be recognized after the war as heroes. But that never happened. The promises they spread to the people assured them of food and information about the whereabouts of the Rhodesian forces. My father was promised time and time again that he would be given money to replace his goods after the war was over.

Some of the promises were used to recruit young men who would be sent for training on how to use a gun and possibly be deployed to a different area to fight the guerrilla battles. The promise for the young recruits was better lives, jobs and money.

The name for the battles, "guerrilla warfare," was used by the Rhodesian forces because the freedom fighters did not have a defined location where they operated from; they moved around in the forest and attacked the soldiers suddenly. The Rhodesian forces could not figure out where they lived. In most cases the Rhodesian forces were ambushed as they moved around in the rural areas. The locals had little information of the whereabouts of the freedom fighters. Vanavevhu groups rarely revealed where

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they were headed and they regularly tricked people by telling them incorrect information about their next destination. When crossing rivers, they would choose rocky areas with no sand to avoid leaving footprints. There is a story about a guy who used to repair their shoes . . . The story was that around ten of them came to his home and asked him to glue soles on their shoes facing backwards so that their footprints would show them going the opposite direction.

I remember one time when my father was asked to take care of a group that had been food poisoned. Many of the fighters from that group died, but a few remained. The group leader, who was extremely popular in the area and who regularly visited my father at night, was one of the survivors. When his group got poisoned, he came to our home in the middle of the night, banging on the door frantically. He asked to speak to my father privately outside at the back of the house. He told my father that members of his group were dying, that he had already lost a few and he himself was extremely sick. He asked my father to go to the nearest town, Zvishavane, which was known during that time as Shabani, and get him some medications. On a piece of paper, he wrote what he wanted. Rumour has it that he had been a doctor before joining the group. My father did not know how he could get the medications, but he had to find a way. If he did not, he risked the whole family's chance for survival.

My father had one distant relative who was a doctor at a hospital in Zvishavane. He went and begged for medication from him. He told the doctor if he did not get the medication that the family would be in danger. The doctor gave him some of the

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medications. The poisoned freedom fighters stayed in hiding by the riverside where they could get fresh water.

When my father came back the leader was now seriously ill, but he refused to stay in anyone's home. He took the medications and told my father the secret location in the thick bush where he would be hiding and told the chief to ask someone to bring him food daily. The poisoned fighter stayed in the bush near the river for a couple of weeks until he recovered. This man came back years after the war to thank my father for saving his life. The last I heard, he contacted one of the family years after my father passed away, still expressing his gratitude for my father saving him from a near-death experience.

During the time he was hiding in the bush, the recovering fighter read books. My older brother was tasked with finding him books. My father always travelled with my big brother, who was old enough to drive. He drove the car most of the time and my father would sit as a passenger. My brother told me one of his tasks was to find books and alcohol for the freedom fighters.

Among the Vanavevhu there were some educated fighters who read and spoke very good English. I was told there were also some fighters who were doctors who knew how to take care of the wounded. These educated fighters helped in strategizing attacks and they had the real information about how the war was going. Some information was passed along via letters. If a group visited the area, they could leave a letter or send a letter to another group. Young men called "mujiba" would be sent with the message to another village to leave it for another group of freedom fighters who would be coming through. This whole

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process was very secret – only a trusted few knew about the path the information followed.

Vanavevhu did not have cars but there were stories of them asking for people's cars and hitching a lift during the night to travel long distances to be dropped off somewhere far away. The Rhodesian forces would put up roadblocks during the day so the story of them asking someone to drive them at night is plausible. I just could not see them walking from Maputo in Mozambique, where most of them trained, to reach the middle of the country. However, the freedom fighters pushed the story that they walked all the way on foot. I would agree that they walked in their areas of operation by foot, but it's hard to imagine they had walked all the way around the whole country by foot.

When the war was at its peak, it was clear that they were recruiting young men directly from the local areas and those who were recruited locally did not go to Mozambique. The new recruits were trained somewhere in the mountains. It was more like on-the-job training according to some who returned after the war – mostly how to use a gun. The bulk of the local recruits were used by Vanavevhu for carrying their gear and for navigating the local forest. For that they would be accepted into the group and be given a gun. Once recruited, they would not go back home. The freedom fighters stayed on mountaintops where they could watch the valley below. Most of the settlements in rural areas are in the valleys or along the dirt roads that cut across the area, winding through the villages.

My village was surrounded by hills and a couple of mountains and there was a dirt road that cut across the valley, running in

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the narrow opening of the mountains. If you were up a hill or mountain and a car was driving on this dirt road, you could see the plume of dust behind the vehicle. Sometimes you could see the plume of dust before you even heard the sound. This used to amaze me when I was young – until I did physics and learnt about the speed of sound and the Doppler effect. Using binoculars, Vanavevhu would identify the vehicle from the top of the hill.

One day just before dusk the Rhodesian forces were driving along the road, deploying soldiers into parts of the villages. Unaware that they were being watched, they were fired upon by an RPG-7 launcher. It was the Comrades' common method to hit the leading vehicle, crippling the convoy. Then they would shoot into the chain of army trucks using rapid-fire rifles, the most common of which was the AK-47. The thud and boom from the RPG were felt in the ground and the sound of the RPG echoed off the mountains. For me it was as if the explosion was a few feet away.

I ran into the kitchen hut where my mother was already pouring water to extinguish the fire where she was cooking. It was common that if the Rhodesian forces got to a home and found a fire burning in the kitchen, they would take the log of fire and use it to burn the huts. The Rhodesian forces knew that villagers were feeding the freedom fighters. The villagers had no choice, whether they liked it or not. The freedom fighters had guns.

We lay down on the floor while the gunfight went on. The sound of the gunfire reverberated through the valley and the ground. I could hear and feel the thud of the rocket as it was



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fired again. After fifteen minutes or so there was silence. By this time it was already dark and my mother whispered for us to get up as she peeped outside to see if anyone was coming. My mom, four of my siblings and I hurried out quietly. I was scared. My father was not at home on this day. In the moment of fear sometimes the bushes looked like a person and I gripped my mother's hand tightly as we moved in the dark. We did not follow the path – we walked across the field into the stubby bushes at the edge of the yard. We walked in the opposite direction from where the gunfire had erupted. It was quiet, but we could see the smouldering fire of the burning army truck from a distance. Then there were several explosions as the truck burnt. I assume it was ammunition and possibly fuel from the burning truck.

There was no time to lock up or check anything; as we got out of the yard we started walking rapidly, almost running. If it was during the day, we could have been running but during the night we needed to keep close to our mom to not lose her. She kept looking around to make sure we were all there. I could only go as fast as my mother's brisk half-running walk. We headed for the mountains. The gunfire erupted again and, as I turned to look in the direction of the sound, I could see the specks of red bullets coming off of one side of the mountains and the other side of the adjacent hill.

We briskly walked-ran for about an hour. There was no time to feel tired. In fact, we did not even think about it. We had to go as far as we could. Suddenly a roaring sound came out of the opening between the two mountains. We could see a bright searchlight in the sky from the helicopter in the area where the

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fighting was coming from. As the helicopter circled the area there was another boom from an RPG-7. I took it that the freedom fighters were now shooting at the helicopter. We continued to run towards the mountain as more gunfire sporadically erupted.

By the time we reached the first house beside the mountains, the gunfire had stopped. We frantically entered the yard of a chief called Vaswondo at the beginning of the next village, whose house was one of the last houses before you entered the mountains. We noticed it was deserted and we carried on to the next house, Baba Morgan's house. After a few minutes of briskly walking, we entered Baba Morgan's yard and knocked on the door. It was quiet for a moment and then suddenly the front door cracked open. A stocky, grey-haired man opened the door and he waved for us to come in. We went in quickly and he shut the door behind us. Inside, his whole family was sitting quietly. We huddled in the corner with the other kids as my mother whispered to Baba Morgan's wife. Baba Morgan braced the door with anything he could find. There were no lights; the room was dark. By this time, it was late in the night and we sat there tired from the running and rapid walking, but I kept my eyes open and listened for any sounds from outside. I do not know how I fell asleep or at what time; the room was so quiet that it was hard to even hear the sound of breath.

I woke up at dawn to the normal sounds of cowbells as the cattle were just starting to move around. I realized all the adults were already outside. I looked over to where my mum had been sitting through the night, but she and Mai Morgan were already outside making a fire in the mud hut kitchen. I got up and woke

up my brother and we went to find our mother.

My mother told us we could not go back to our house or shop yet. She told us no one knew if the Rhodesian forces had left the area. If we went back, we would be a target and could get killed or captured. We spent the day there and Baba Morgan went over to check the situation later on. He passed by the shop and the school to check if anything had happened.

He came back and reported that all was normal and that he had heard the fighting was going in the other direction from our area, but he suggested we should stay for a day for things to settle.

The next day we cautiously went back to our house. Some people believed that the war had chased the Rhodesian forces out of the area and that they were now scared to come back. We knew it was just a matter of time. They would come back and possibly another battle would happen because the Vanavevhu loved the mountains around our village. It made it difficult for someone to ambush them except by air. There were rumours the freedom fighters were now occupying all the surrounding mountains. There was also a rumour that they considered this area to be safe for them, therefore if they fought battles somewhere they would come to these mountains afterwards and spend some days in safety.

However, as fighting went on day after day, our family, and my father specifically, became a target. We heard a rumour that he was now being looked for by the Rhodesian soldiers. One afternoon after church a loud rumble of noise came from the dirt road. I could see a plume of dust in the distance. People who

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were coming out of church ran in different directions. In a matter of minutes the whole congregation had disappeared, running away to their homes or into the bush. This was our home, so my father told us to go to the back of the house and stay there. My mother took us all into the back of the store, which was attached to our house, while my father and big brother remained in the front entrance to the store.

As the sound of the army trucks grew louder and louder, I sat there thinking this was the time when we would be packed into the trucks and taken for torture. I could hear the trucks come to a halt with the loud puffing of the brakes. I then heard a lot of footsteps as the soldiers surrounded the house. The door flew open from a kick from one of the soldiers. Two of them came in in full military gear, their guns pointing in all directions as they ordered us to get out of the house. As we left, three soldiers went into the house with their guns cocked and ready to fire.

As they were searching the house, one of them shouted to my mother, "Is there anybody else in the house?"

My mother replied, "No!" I could hear the fear in my mother's voice. We were all scared.

My father was called out of the store and into the yard, where he was asked several questions about the freedom fighters: When last did you see them? How many were they? Which direction did they go? The most frightening moment was when the interrogator said to my father, "We found some remains of canned beef, empty cigarette packets and empty soft drink bottles and we know that there is no other store in these parts. We know that these items came from your store and one person has already told

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us that you are supplying the terrorists with all sorts of help.”

I will always remember my father looking at the soldier as he replied, “Now listen, young man, what do you want me to do? I settled here so I could farm and have a small store to feed my family, but you guys come in here brandishing your guns and ask me questions; the terrorist freedom fighters come here with their guns too and they want stuff from my store . . . Can I say no? Can you say no if someone has a gun in his hand?”

The soldier looked at my father for a second and he said, “I can kill you right now, old man, and not one question will be asked. Do not give them anything.”

My father looked at the soldier and said, “You can kill me right now. I am ready. What do you guys want me to do? I told you they have guns, just like you. It does not matter who kills me. You can kill me, or they can kill me.”

I remember my father shouting at the soldiers, “Please shoot me! Kill me now, in front of my family, you cowards, or get out of my home and look for the terrorists in the bush.”

At that point the soldier stood up and said, “We are watching you, old man. Today I will let you go but when I return, I will burn your house and kill your family and your little terrorist friends.” Then the soldier turned around to us and said, “Your father is stubborn.” He said to my mother, “Mother, tell him to stop giving stuff to the terrorists.” The soldier was now pacing around my father. “Can you not see the terrorists are going to lose? They have no transport. They have to walk to every place. Sooner or later, you are going to run out of food so you will not be able to supply them and they will kill you and they won’t have

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any food so they will give up. You and your family are going to die for nothing!” After that the soldiers hurried into their trucks and left.

Then things started to get even more tricky for my father. Someone reported to the Vanavevhu that he was seen talking to the Rhodesian forces and giving them information. As my father explained this situation, he said he was like a cigarette, one side was burning while the other side was bitten and locked between the lips. It was what we would call a Catch-22. He knew that someone in the area had reported that he was seen giving the Rhodesian forces directions of where to find the freedom fighters.

Soon after, my father was taken by the Vanavevhu and warned that he should not be talking to the Rhodesian forces. It so happened that the freedom fighters had encountered an awfully bad battle where one of them was killed. They had come under heavy gunfire from an ambush in a different area as they crossed the Runde River.

It was apparent that my father’s life was in danger. Both sides, the Rhodesian soldiers and the freedom fighters, wanted him for questioning. Selling out the freedom fighters would lead to him being beaten up and possibly to death or permanent injury. The Rhodesian forces were also notorious for snatching people at night and torturing them. Some would be released afterwards but many never made it back home.

Around this time, one of my cousins who recently died was caught after a nasty battle that lasted several hours during the night. It was in a remote area and I remember that to visit our



George Makonese Matuvi grew up in Chamini, a rural area in the district of Zvishavane, in Zimbabwe, where he was surrounded by mountains and developed a love of both soccer and books. He is currently an electrical engineer and runs a small consulting company. *The War as I Saw It: In Rhodesia, Now Zimbabwe, Through the Eyes of a Black Boy* is his first book. He lives in Hamilton, Ontario, with his family.

# “GROWING UP I HAD NEVER ACTUALLY SEEN MY FATHER SCARED.”

“The fear you feel as a child when the person that protects you is scared is intense. It felt like something in the air had snuffed out the happiness in our home. I followed my father to the shop. As we walked, I asked who those people were, if they were going to come back and kill us. At that moment my father turned around and looked at us, the children who crowded around him . . . My father smiled and said no, we just must be more careful now, the war was getting closer to our area. He said the freedom fighters were going to stay in the mountains and that they would not bother us. He told us they said they were here to free everyone. It did not make sense to me. Free us from who or what? Our lives as I knew it were very nice. He told us not to worry.”

## **IN THE WAR AS I SAW IT, GEORGE MAKONESE MATUVI INVITES US**

into the world of a young boy living through a war he doesn't understand. As violence drives his family from their home in the mountains to the streets of Zimbabwe's towns and then cities, the author shares his family's story with honesty, composure and a touch of humour. Interspersed within this tale of flight, hardship and the eventual return to rebuild, Matuvi shares stories of his life as a child, from making soccer balls out of discarded plastic bags to the tales his father told around the fire at night, adding depth and joy to his portrait of a family struggling with displacement. *The War as I Saw It* is not a tragedy, though there were many tragedies during the war, it is a story of love, of strength in difficulty and of the ingenuity of one family as they cope with forces beyond their control.



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