

# INTRODUCTION

## BACKGROUND

The liberation movements that led the armed struggle for Zimbabwean independence evolved from trade union and nationalist organisations which, in turn, developed into mass protest in the 1950s. As the people's movement grew stronger at the end of the decade, the settler politics moved ever further to the right, restricting the possibility of a negotiated road to majority rule and then independence. The Southern Rhodesian African National Congress was banned in 1959 by the government of Edgar Whitehead, its successor, the National Democratic Party, met the same fate in December 1961 after it rejected constitutional proposals which had been accepted by the white electorate, proposals that would have paved the way for independence in Rhodesia without the achievement of majority rule, thus leaving power in the hands of the white settlers.

The successor to the NDP was the Zimbabwean African People's Union (ZAPU), formed at a time when peaceful paths to independence under a black government were closing, and nationalist supporters, especially in the Youth Wing, were becoming increasingly militant, demanding they be provided with weapons to seize power themselves. By the time ZAPU was banned in September 1962, plans were already being made for the acquisition of those weapons, and the first cadres were undertaking sabotage. Soon after the banning, the party leadership took two important decisions: they would not form another legal party and they would begin to prepare for a war of liberation. Seventeen years later, independence was won and an African government took power.

In 1962, ZAPU established its offices in Lusaka, Zambia, a country already moving towards independence with majority rule. The party began to build an army to conduct guerrilla war. It recruited and trained many thousands of young people to fight for liberation. It also received tens of thousands of refugees towards the end of the war in the late 1970s, and was responsible for accommodating them and educating those who were too young to fight.

The record of that long struggle survives in many quarters – official documents, news reports, academic articles and books, photographs, and most importantly in the memories and private papers of the participants who are still alive more than 30 years later. However, the Zimbabwean government has, since 1980, been dominated by ZANU, a political party formed as a break-away from ZAPU in 1963. Within this context, the story of ZAPU's role in the liberation struggle has been eclipsed, deliberately underestimated by official Zimbabwean sources, and largely not understood by many sympathisers.

An important collection of photographs relating to ZAPU activities came into the possession of SAHA in 2007. The photographer was Zenzo Nkobi, a Zimbabwean, who was an unofficial ZAPU photographer from the mid-1970s until well after independence in 1980. Negatives of nearly 10,000 photographs survived, taken primarily in Zambia during the late 1970s. The photographs present an intriguing glimpse into the struggle waged by ZAPU's armed wing, ZPRA, and provide evidence of the significant role it played in combating the Rhodesian regime. This donation presented an exciting opportunity for SAHA to seek out some of the ZAPU survivors to talk about events and individuals depicted in the photographs and, at the same time, discuss their experiences and their understanding of the role of ZAPU in achieving independence in Zimbabwe.

This report, along with the related virtual exhibition, tell the story of ZAPU's liberation war, through the lens of Zenzo Nkobi's camera and in the voices of those interviewed to tell us about the photographs.

LEFT: ZPRA cadre with toddler, 1978

RIGHT: People waiting to cast votes in Bulawayo, 1980

## ABOUT ZENZO NKOBI

Zenzo was born at the village and mission of Dombodema, in south-western Zimbabwe, near Plumtree. His father, Thomas Nkobi, left Zimbabwe for South Africa soon after his birth, where he spent the rest of his life in politics, rising to the top echelons of the African National Congress. Zenzo remained in Zimbabwe, where he was raised by his mother and went to school, trained as a teacher, and then went to teach at a rural school not far from the Botswana Border. His cousin, Callistus Ndlovu explains:

That's when he got tied up in politics because he was accused of teaching small kids anti-Smith songs like ... he would compose some songs in Kalanga or Sindebele which were talking about the regime and so one policeman observed this and so they wanted to arrest him so he escaped and went to Botswana and ran away.



This took place in 1967. From Botswana he reached Lusaka, and made contact with ZAPU there. It was at that time that he first made the acquaintance of his father and developed a close relationship, as they were now both engaged in the liberation struggle within the region.

ZAPU eventually sent Nkobi to German Democratic Republic (East Germany) on a scholarship to be trained as a photographer. He studied there for several years, proceeding beyond the first degree to complete a Masters. He met and married a German woman by the name of Edelgard, and they raised two daughters together, eventually settling in Bulawayo after 1980.

While in Germany, he became something of an elder brother or mentor figure to many Zimbabweans who followed in his footsteps to study photography. Caroline Mhlanga, who was one of those ZAPU cadres who knew him in Germany and later worked with him in the ZAPU publicity department in Lusaka described how he taught them the artistic side of photography:

... he made me understand photography better. I came to like it, you know, so that each time you know I saw a project I was looking at it as a picture, through him, and each time he saw whatever, even passing animals or anything, he would remind you that that is a picture, that is an object.

He also returned to Lusaka on numerous occasions, and became something resembling an official or semi-official photographer for ZAPU. Towards the end of the 1970s he moved to Lusaka on a more permanent basis and worked within the publicity department in ZAPU offices, providing the photographs for many ZAPU publications. He accompanied the ZAPU President, Joshua Nkomo, on numerous occasions, both to the military and refugee camps in Zambia and to international meetings and recorded the activities on film.

Zenzo returned to Zimbabwe before independence and began recording the events of the 1980 election campaign. After independence he continued chronicling public and political events, particularly those relating to ZAPU, but was not employed, and established his own photographic studio in order to earn a living. The artistic side of his personality seemed to predominate, however, and the business did not succeed. Later he joined the staff at the Bulawayo Polytechnic where he taught Photography until he died suddenly in the mid 1990's.

After Zenzo's death, Edelgard found comfort within the South African ANC community through her close connections with Zenzo's parents, and eventually married former treason trialist and ex-detainee Dennis Goldberg. It was Goldberg who deposited the negatives of Zenzo's photographs with SAHA after Edelgard's death.