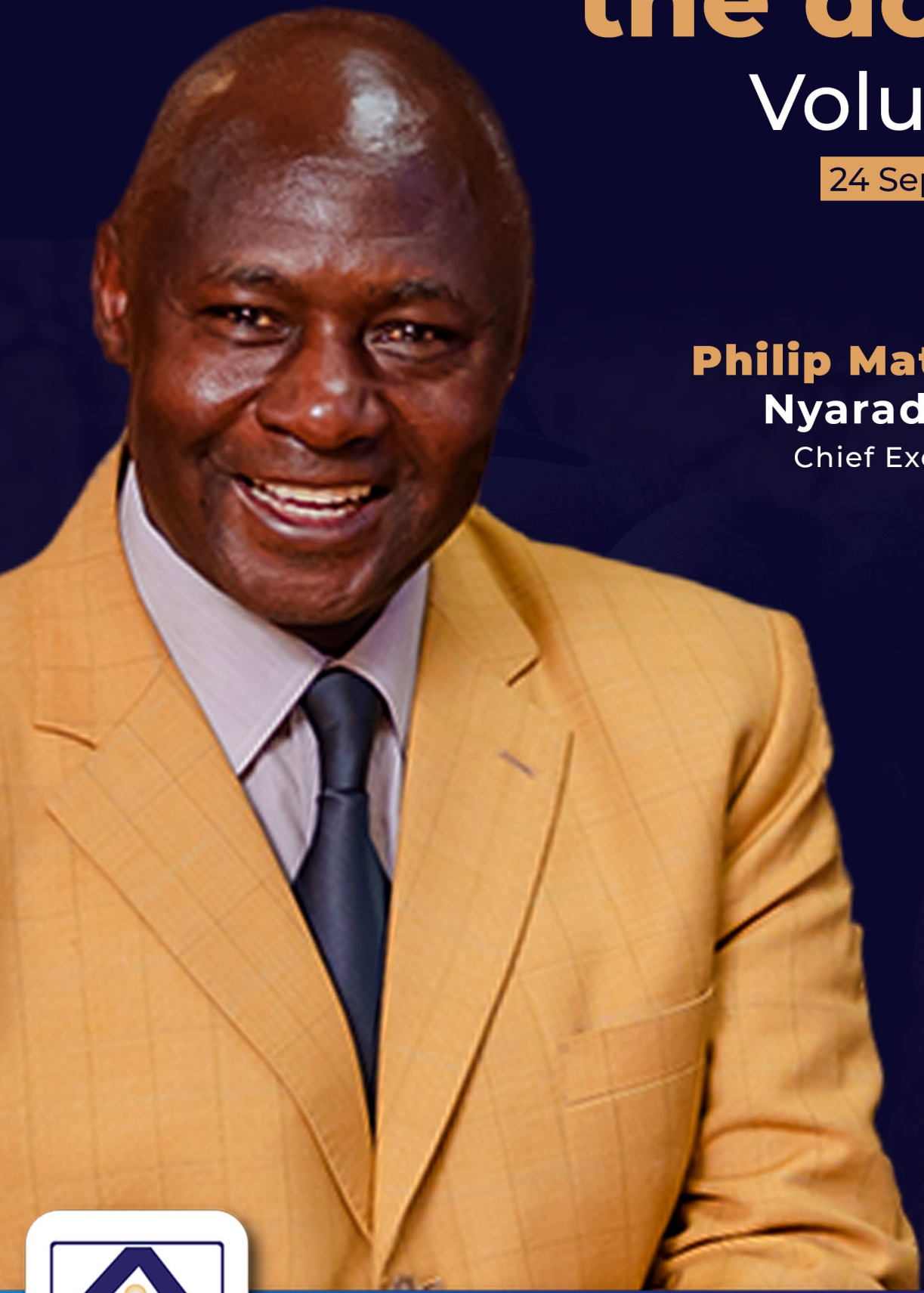
Connecting the dots...

Volume 13

24 September 2021



Philip Mataranyika
Nyaradzo Group,
Chief Executive Officer

Follow us on:

NYARADZO GROUP

www.nyaradzo.co.zw

Service • Strength • Solutions

My mother, my heroine...

Growing up before our parents went their separate ways, our mother – Mabel Mataranyika (nee Musasa) – was a no-nonsense woman, thanks to her parents who had raised their children on the straight and narrow.

At Saint David's Gunda in Rusape where she did her elementary education, Mabel had a reputation for being tough, beating the lights out of all that came her way, including bully boys who would scurry for cover upon meeting their match.

Later on as we grew up as a family of all boys, we would also get a taste of her medicine whenever we veered off line. Once in a while, she would challenge any of us to a fist fight if she thought we were being stubborn by not following her strict instructions. We never dared her.

So when she locked horns with our stepmother, Bertha Mlambo, in a fist fight at our house in Sakubva (Number 34, Zororo), we all knew that her younger competitor stood no chance. In the course of the melee that ensued, Bertha must have felt the sting from the flurry of blows she received from the battle-hardened and much more prepared Mabel, too much to bear.

In the heat of the moment, she would miraculously extricate herself from Mabel's vice-like grip and with lightning speed bolted into the house with our mother huffing and puffing in hot pursuit.

After Bertha slammed the door behind her, Mabel would triumphantly give up the chase thinking the fight had ended. At that point, our mother might have thought that the vanquished would do the honourable thing by packing her bags and head for Chipinge where she had met and fallen for her then driver boyfriend, now husband, Steven.

Unbeknown to Mabel, Bertha was not yet finished. Within a few minutes, she would come running out of the house with a secret, home-made weapon clutched firmly in her hand. Onlookers would be horrified to learn what it was that was steaming in her hand - a pot, filled with boiling water - intended to inflict maximum harm on her rival. As she rushed forward to take aim at her bemused opponent, Bertha stumbled, lost balance, resulting in much of that missile missing its target.

I cringed with fear, and shudder at the thought of what could have happened if Bertha had not lost her balance and if all the boiling water had landed on my mother's defenceless body. The clothes she was wearing would still let her down because the boiling water that did hit her body, was quickly absorbed, working as a good conductor and transmitting the heat through to Mabel's body.

Luckily for her, the once-cheering spectators who were now stone-faced as the situation rapidly degenerated, quickly came in between the two angry women. Their intervention averted what could have been a terrible crime of passion.

Mabel would suffer some burns which required medical attention. At that moment, my mother must have hoped that her husband would realise how determined she was to keep him by her side. Instead, Steven would side with his younger wife, putting the final nail into my mother's hopes of launching a dramatic comeback.

On hearing what had happened to their daughter, the Musasa family were shocked and stunned and thought they could salvage the situation by mediating in the protracted dispute. Mabel's brother, Samson, would try to arbitrate, asking his brother-in-law to come over to their place – not far from where we stayed – for a men's talk, which he did.

Because emotions were still running high, the two couldn't agree, resulting in another ugly fist fight. Uncle Sam must have taken it personally, seeing how badly hurt and burnt his sister was from the boiling water that Bertha had poured on her. When the family mediation efforts hit a brick wall, Mabel would decide to seek external remedies in her pursuit for justice.

She took up the matter with Mambo Makoni, resulting in our father being summoned to appear before the Chief's Court in Rusape. We would all make a beeline to the Chief's Court to follow the proceedings. After giving their sides of the story and having been cross-examined, it soon became clear that Steven was determined to end his union with Mabel. At that point he was asked to prove before all in attendance that he wanted out of the relationship, which he summarily did, giving Mabel a divorce token known in Shona as "gupuro".

It was heart-breaking for us, her children, to see the world crumbling around our mother. A thousand thoughts ran through my mind. I imagined how pained she must have been seeing how her husband of twelve years had turned his back on her before multitudes of court attendees who included people from the village, who had turned out in their numbers to see a prince (muchinda) being hauled before the traditional court.

From being an ever-loving soulmate when they first met at our aunt Calista's place, Mabel would have been justified to feel hard done by Steven's about turn. Out of an abundance of love, she had left her solid, enterprising family to start a family with a man who had been orphaned at the age of six, and was still trying to find his feet, with the help of his only brother, Tongai.

In the twelve years of their marriage, Mabel had given Steven six wonderful children, all boys, in the hope that only death was to separate them. She must have also regretted trusting Steven with her life and basking in the glory of the goodies and flowery words that were showered upon her when they were still dating.

After Mambo Makoni's verdict, Mabel didn't want to chance making a fool of herself by escalating her grievances to superior courts, after all, the double tragedy of losing the battle and what she knew and believed was hers – the husband – had not made her a loser all-round though, especially in the court of public opinion where the outpouring of sympathy from family and friends alike earned the reluctant bachelorette a moral high ground that atoned for her loss.

The rumour mill was quick to go into overdrive and a number of theories were bandied around about why our father had become distant towards his wife of many years.

One school of thought was that he was desperate to sire a girl child whom he wanted to name after his beloved aunt, Tete Masodzi, who had made a huge sacrifice taking him and his siblings into her care following the death of our grandfather, Kurauone Kurai Mazikana Mataranyika in 1940.

When Mabel gave him six boys on the trot, Steven must have decided to look outside in search of the elusive girl child who could carry on with her aunt's name. Assuming that to be true, it may well explain why my father, according to Bertha, started showing signs of restlessness, even after she had given him two more children, both of them boys (Fungai and Innocent). His restlessness would be fertile ground for reconnection with his past, enter Victoria Mutizamhepo, an old flame he had dated during his days in Nyatwe.

In future instalments, I will touch on his relationship with Victoria Mutizamhepo, of the Dziva totem – who when they went their separate ways, after Steven had gone back to his village in Gwangwara, would get married to someone else. Perhaps, it was all in search of the elusive girl child or was just simply a case of unfinished business.

Another school of thought was that Steven could have mulled over the idea of having two wives, but found both women hell bent against polygamy, even though it was nothing unusual in my father's bloodline, as well as that of my mother's. Mabel's father, Samuel had experimented with polygamy, siring two girl children Lucia and Beredina with another woman before letting her go. The cat-fights that regularly broke out between her parents at their homestead had led my mother to swear by her blood in her youth that she would never be part of such acrimonious unions.

Those with fertile imaginations were even more dramatic about my father's decision to ditch our mother. They suspected that Steven had fallen victim to husband-taming herbs or love potions (mupfuhwira) which could have clouded his judgment and turned his feelings towards Mabel, topsy-turvy.

To back up their conjecture, they would point to the fact that our stepmother was from Chipinge, a district south-east of the country, with a reputation for producing herbalists whose craft would attract people from as far afield as Europe and Asia.

Of course, these stories could just have been figments of imagination by idle minds who wanted to spice up the story whiling their time away.

While Bertha may have celebrated her triumph at upstaging her more senior competitor, it would emerge over time that hers was a pyrrhic victory. After losing the battle that day at Number 34, Zororo in Sakubva, Mabel had the choice of three places for sympathy, moral support and to nurse the physical and emotional wounds she had suffered. She would have been welcomed to number 149 New Dangare, where Eubbah, wife of Benjamin Mataranyika would have been too happy to help. In Devonshire, the Marwenzes would have open arms. In this case she chose to go to her brother Samson, at Number 326 Zororo.

Apart from the moral high ground and sympathy she gained from the rest of the Mataranyika family as well as friends and onlookers, Mabel became an independent woman whose full potential may never have been realised had she remained in the shadow of her husband who used to pamper her like his life depended on it until love flew out of the window after the wolf came in at the door.

Out in the cold without the shoulder she used to lean on, Mabel's spirit might have been shaken but was not destroyed. She knew that behind every dark cloud is a silver lining. After all, like every man borne out of a woman, we are all born with unique gifts and talents that we must discover somewhere along the way and eke a living out of them.

After nursing her heartbreak and humiliation, Mabel would out-compete her rival where it mattered most – the quality of life – thanks to her hard work and to the fruits of her womb, her children, whom she had raised well. When she retired from her craft, they would take it upon themselves, to look after her well till her dying day.

Mabel's upbringing largely contributed to her overcoming the odds that were heavily stacked against her. It may therefore be important at this juncture to put in perspective the kind of person she was and the family she came from.

Mabel's grandfather, Chati, son of Mabika, had migrated from Mutambara on account of his reticence to participate in the battle of succession for the Mutambara chieftainship. Travelling by night, Chati had left Mutambara and settled in Chakuma, located about six kilometres north of our village in Gwangwara.

Chati Mabika would have a number of wives with whom he had several children. With his first wife, he had a number of daughters and a son, Ziyengwa. With his second wife, he would father Mhuriyengwe, while his youngest wife would give him five girls, Mwadini, Mwaringisa, Mwazvionei, Rena and Nenga and two boys, Samuel and Bhasera.

With his first wife Matilda, (Matiridha), Mututye of the Shumba totem, Ziyengwa would father a son, Killion and four girls. Erika, married to Gandiya, Eda, married to Nyagumbo, Jeni, married to Gunda and Jedi married to Gandiya's younger brother. With his second wife Chisaki they had Judith, married to Mtanda.

Ziyengwa had three sisters, one got married to Chapeyama a.k.a, Nyarota or Mudzimukunze, another to Nyanjowa, while the youngest got married to Makaure.

To save face from the unending fights with neighbours by his son Killion, Ziyengwa would move to Gandiya village where two of his daughters were married. The other reason for him moving was that there were better pastures for his large herd of cattle in Gandiya village. Because of the size of his herd of cattle, Ziyengwa is said to have been a proud man, resulting in him being called Chiganze, the boastful one. Mutizhe a Chihwa totem kinsman also accompanied Ziyengwa when he moved from Chakuma to Gandiya.

As polygamy was their way of life back then, Killion, the only son of Ziyengwa would father several children with his two wives, one of whom was Forcina. My uncle, Timothy Chiganze's father, Douglas, was the first son of Killion and Forcina. Uncle Tim is one of the people that looked after me when I came to Harare and has been my mentor and closest uncle for years.

Chati's sons with his youngest wife had their families too. Samuel got married to Jessica Mhowa and the couple had six children, two boys (Samson and Jivas), and four girls (Cindrella, Elizabeth, Mabel and Ruth). Samuel was therefore my maternal grandfather.

Samuel was a hardworking man who worked as a foreman for a white farmer, who was popularly known as Chichena, and whose farm was on the outskirts of Rusape. While toiling for his baas, it dawned on him that he would one day want to have somewhere he could call home.

By that time, his aunt had married into the Bvumbe family. Samuel would negotiate with his nephews to allow him to settle in Bvumbe to which they agreed, resulting in him being allocated a sizeable piece of land.

Once settled on the land, Samuel would use his vast experience gained from working for Chichena to bring development into the Bvumbe area. As a knowledgeable farmer, he knew that droughts were an inescapable reality due to climate change whose effects had long started to kick in.

Samuel thus thought it wise to draw water from a small river flowing near his land to beat any dry spell that might arise by harvesting fresh water to irrigate his crops all year round. Even though his idea was brilliant, there was red tape to be followed in order to secure a water permit from the Rhodesian government which would allow him to construct a small dam or weir to harvest the water.

Samuel would inform his nephew, Headman Bvumbe, of his ambitious plan. At first, the headman doubted his capacity to undertake such an expensive and somewhat complex project. As far as Headman Bvumbe was concerned, this was child's play and a pipe dream that could never be realised.

While Samuel was also aware that the laws of the land did not allow an ordinary black person, a retired labourer for that matter, to have easy access to water and perhaps challenge the colonialists' dominion in the field of farming, he had created a strong network of influential white farmers in the area who valued his farming skills and admired him for being a go-getter who would stop at nothing to achieve his goals.

With Headman Bvumbe being one of the sceptics, BOOM, the permit came through, leaving him to wonder if Samuel had really worked for it, or if it was through some miraculous divine intervention. Little did he know that his uncle had leaned on his contacts within the colonial regime's bureaucracy using his power of networking with the right people at the right time.

To please his uncle whom he so loved, Headman Bvumbe hesitantly took the news to Chief Makoni, unsure how the breakthrough would be received. To his surprise, it was greeted with raptures of joy, for Chief Makoni had long seen the light.

Thereafter, the real work would start. As the project promoter, Samuel would receive special treatment from the authorities when procuring material for the dam project and other essential services. He would also receive expert advice from government engineers who would visit the site regularly to inspect and approve all the critical stages of construction, up to its completion.

What started as a small idea ultimately grew into a national asset of high commercial value, which in modern day parlance could have been given National Project Status. Once construction of the dam was completed, Samuel would install water pumps and irrigation pipes to pump and transport the precious resource to his fields, which was quite unheard of back then as blacks were confined to being hewers of wood and drawers of water.

But not Samuel! He even had a tractor powered by power-paraffin to till his fields. The dam project would solidify his balance sheet, making Samuel one of the most successful farmers of his time. To Headman Bvumbe's disbelief, the water permit and dam became a ticket out of poverty. Not only did it elevate Samuel's social standing in the community, it also became his bargaining chip to wiggle his way out of petty village politics and get favours.

At all the critical stages, Mabel and her siblings would give their father moral support, and lend a helping hand where they could. All of Samuel's children would be hardworking, each one of them in their own way. As a young boy in the 1970s, it was a pleasure to go visiting at our maternal grandfather's as they always had fresh produce. Green mealies, groundnuts, brown rice and wheat were some of the crops he specialised in.

Because of his long association with white farmers in the area, my grandfather became one of the earliest black people who valued the importance of education and did right by all his children, sending them to school without discriminating between boys and girls, which was quite unheard of at the time.

His first son, Samson, he sent to Saint Faith's Mission Madetere in Rusape. His other son, Jivas, quit school after he became spoilt because of the relative wealth his father had amassed.

Unlike their brother, Mabel and her three sisters were sent to Saint David Gunda Primary School, which was a distance from their homestead. To make it to school on time, our grandfather bought them bicycles to ride, which was also unheard of back then for girls to ride bicycles to and from school.

Unfortunately for my grandfather and his family, when a decision to convert their village and others within their surroundings to an urban settlement was made by the government, after the construction of the Rusape dam, they would be forced to move out of their Bvumbe village in 1974, leaving their dam and fields behind. Today, the fertile lands on which wheat, brown rice, ground nuts and winter maize used to grow, is a concrete jungle with houses and shops in what is now called Tsanzaguru Township.

Juxtaposing the way our mother was brought up vis-à-vis her husband's humble beginnings, Mabel would have been justified to feel hard done by the way Steven treated her. When our mother accepted father's proposal for marriage, Steven almost touched the sky with excitement because he was punching way above his weight marrying above his social class. Fast-forward to their fallout, engineered by the young and energetic Bertha, albeit with very little if any education, the tables had been turned with Mabel drowning in tears of regret, while counting her losses.

Of course, the entire Musasa family were horrified by the ugly turn of events, which had degenerated into fist fights that almost ended in disaster, when after realising that she was no match to her opponent, Bertha had poured scalding water on her rival, causing grievous bodily harm.

Unfortunately, when love dies there isn't much that well-wishers can do. For Mabel, her loss was Bertha's gain, albeit short-lived. After receiving treatment for her wounds and the finalisation of her divorce at Chief Makoni's Court, it was time to pick the pieces up and go back to the drawing board.

In the weeks and months that followed, she would head for the capital city which, like the American dream, shared the ideal by which equality of opportunity was available to any citizen, allowing one's highest aspirations and goals to be achieved.

But unlike in 1962 when my uncle Tongai accommodated Steven and his young, beautiful wife at his Egypt, Highfield home to enable the couple to start a new life together, this time around Mabel was facing up to a cruel world all alone in Mufakose, as a single mother, not on account of the death of her spouse but due to the craftiness or lack thereof of her rival.

Three of her children whose ages she considered old enough to weather the storms she left with their father in the hope of taking them back into her care once she had fully established herself. Yours truly, along with Johanes Mhanamana and Thomas Munyaradzi stayed behind with our father whilst she took Donald and Garikayi with her, since in her words, they were still young fragile souls.

It was, however, by the grace of God that Johanes Mhanamana, Thomas Munyaradzi and I did not suffer nervous breakdowns, because whenever our father was out of sight, Bertha would inflict emotional torture, as well as physical pain on us, which nearly battered our self-esteem. We had to be strong.

Even though we were no longer staying with her, our mother would devise clandestine ways to check on us in order to give the little support she could to keep us going. This was the case when we were staying with our step-mother in Sakubva, and when we moved back to Egypt.

A few days after Bertha walked out on our father, at the end of 1976, taking her children, Fungai and Innocent with her, our mother who had shifted her base to Chitungwiza, would successfully negotiate with her ex-husband to take us into her care, closing a nightmarish chapter in our lives that could have completely destroyed us had it not been for our relatives who were always there for us whenever the chips were down.

Having been deserted by Bertha, our father who had left his job in 1977 took the decision to relocate to his village in Gwangwara where he had hoped to move in with Victoria Mutizamhepo, his long-time sweetheart, only for relatives to deny him aboard in a place they termed Mai Johanes' home.

He would be welcomed in Chifuri Village in Chiduku Tribal Trust Lands where he eventually settled with Victoria. Of course, more drama would follow after Bertha decided to dump her children, Fungai and Innocent with their father. This was after Bertha had found new love, getting married to Karumazondo, ironically from Mataranyika village in Murewa, with whom she would have three children, two boys and a girl. A few months after leaving her two young children, Bertha would come back to collect them, deciding to look after them herself. She must have been spooked by the thought of her young children being ill-treated by Victoria the same way she had treated us.

While our mother didn't have much to share with us, her love and the peace that had eluded us for years were enough to make up for the lost privileges. As time went by, we would all join in her hustles to help put food on the table while attending school at Farai Primary School.

By the time she passed on in November 2011, our situation had been transformed from one where we scraped the bottom of the barrel to make ends meet to one where we could have three square meals a day without raising much sweat.

Even though it was not fashionable to be a single mother back then, my mother was able to demonstrate that she was made of sterner stuff by rising up to the challenge, without falling for the temptation to re-marry and have another set of children.

While our parents never reunited and found common ground in this life, our love for both of them, saw us bringing them back together in death, when we interred their remains at the family shrine in Rukweza. My mother – my heroine – is now resting in eternal peace, having fought a good fight and having run her race extremely well. My brothers and I are her legacy. If she couldn't have been together with her beloved Steven alive and as a couple, consulting daily on how to raise their children, all of them boys, because of Bertha and other forces, today they lie side by side, never to be separated again.