Connecting the dots...

Volume 14

01 October 2021



Philip Mataranyika
Nyaradzo Group,
Chief Executive Officer

Follow us on:

NYARADZO GROUP

www.nyaradzo.co.zw

Service • Strength • Solutions

“What does not kill you, makes you stronger.”

In his book, Twilight of the Idols, written in 1888, German philosopher, poet and writer, Friedrich Nietzsche, penned the quote “What does not kill me makes me stronger.” He repeated the axiom in his autobiography, Ecce Homo, which was sadly his last literary work before his death in August 1900, at the age of 55.

Reflecting on my mother’s life of triumph over adversity, I came to the conclusion that several life-changing situtions she faced in her childhood and throughout her adult life, played an important role in building her character and making her armour-plated to be able to handle adversity, especially following her rejection by her husband, my father, Steven.

Had Nietzsche still been alive to hear Mabel Mataranyika (née Musasa)’s story, her audacity of hope, he would probably have written a blockbuster on her life with his aphorism befitting the title of the book.

Without lifelong lessons learnt from some of the events recounted in this volume, Mabel could well have died a very bitter woman, having been ditched by her husband through no fault of her own. Society refers to the syndrome as that of “victim mentality” when coping mechanisms fail, to the point of blaming other people, events or situations for one’s misfortunes.

Having been raised in a family that survived from the sweat of its brow, my mother couldn’t allow the situation she found herself in to dictate her future. She must have learnt this at a very young age, while growing up in Bvumbe village, in a family of six siblings – with two brothers, Samson and Jivas and three sisters, Cinderella, Elizabeth and Ruth.

When other girls of her age were going from one homestead to another as purveyors of cheap gossip, Mabel’s father, Samuel, together with his wife, Jessica (nee Mhowa), would hone their skills and values, grounded on hard work, honesty, respect and perseverance. Mabel also knew that there was no such thing as a ‘free ride’ and that, in the words of the late great American basketball player, Kobe Bryant, “great things come from hard work and perseverance. No excuses.”

Growing up in Bvumbe, the family were in for a rude awakening when circumstances forced them to vacate their village in order to pave way for the construction of Tsanzaguru Township, which takes its name from the nearby bald-headed mountain – leaving behind their houses and a small dam they had laboured to build so they could harvest water from the nearby stream to irrigate their crops.

The relocation itself was a sore point for my grandfather, Samuel and the whole family. As he was basking in the glory of having made history by becoming one of the earliest black villagers to build a weir in the village, little did he know that the government of Ian Smith had other ideas, which would change the course of their lives. In due course, all the villagers of Bvumbe and those in nearby villages would be asked to make way for the establishment of Tsanzaguru Township following the completion of the 68,000 mega-litre Rusape Dam, on the Rusape River.

The construction of the dam, which was part of government plans to increase the irrigation potential in the Save Catchment area as part of the country's economic development and growth agenda, anchored on sugarcane production in the Lowveld started in 1969 and by 1972 the contractors had completed their work. Commissioned the same year, the dam would also serve the sprawling urban Rusape Town, the surrounding white commercial farmers, as well as the downstream embankments. Once construction was completed, villagers in Bvumbe would be asked to find alternative places on which to settle or risk being forcibly removed, with no option for compensation. To incentivise them to move out of the area quickly, the government offered relocation funds and free transportation for the affected families.

While the move from Bvumbe would create new opportunities for the urban dwellers, with the creation of a new Township, Tsanzaguru, it wreaked havoc for those who had called it home for years, living in the village. Not in his wildest dreams had my grandfather, seen it coming, it all happened with lightning speed. To most who had not invested much on their properties, the offer was irresistible. For my grandfather, however, no amount of money could compensate him for the hard work he had put into building his dam and the revenue he expected to get out of his market gardening enterprise, a product of the now abundant water resource.

Once the government made its intentions known, not even Samuel's network of friends in government and other high places could stop the relocations. Facing the stark reality, Samuel put out word to his extended family to investigate alternative places on which they could settle.

Word spread fast and upon hearing of my grandfather's untenable situation, Samuel's nephew, Killion Chiganze - son of Samuel's half-brother, Ziyengwa Mabika, felt duty bound to assist. He also saw this as an opportunity for his uncle to move closer to him in Rukweza. To make the move possible, Killion would lobby the kraal head, Rukweza, with whom he had good relations, to get a place for his uncle to establish himself in the village. His efforts paid off, resulting in Samuel and his family being allocated a piece of land by the mountainside of Mupfiganehwe in Rukweza, about two kilometres from the local shopping centre.

Samuel's two sons, Samson and Jivas, decided to use part of the relocation pay-out to start a family business. They first sought advice from Wilson Madanhi, who was running a flourishing eatery at Mubaira Growth Point in Mhondoro. Wilson was married to one of my grandfather's daughters, Elizabeth, and so it was to her and their brother-in-law that Samson and Jivas turned to for guidance. Wilson was a maternal half-brother to Elia Majoni, a businessman well-known for owning and running Majoni Hotel at Mubaira Growth Point, so consultations were kept within family circles.

At the time, Mhondoro was part of the Hartley (Chegutu) District in Mashonaland, which was one of the five provinces in Rhodesia, with the other four being Manicaland, Matabeleland, Midlands and Fort Victoria (now Masvingo). After independence, Mashonaland was divided into three provinces namely Mashonaland East, West and Central. Bulawayo and Harare became standalone metropolitan provinces, while Matabeleland was split into two provinces, North and South, creating a total of 10 political provinces.

Opportunities arose in the retail space in Nyatsanga and Bhonda, respectively, in Mhondoro, where Samson and Jivas decided to invest most of the family relocation funds, starting retail businesses. In Nyatsanga, they opened a general dealer store, renting the premises of a prominent businessman of the time, a Mr Chigogo and at Bhonda they opened a retail shop, in a building which belonged to a Mr Mumanikidzwa.

Excited about these developments, Elizabeth and her husband persuaded Samson and Jivas to seriously consider establishing themselves in Mhondoro, where they would be together with the rest of the family, instead of shuttling between Mhondoro under Chief Mashayamombe and Rukweza, under Chief Makoni (Manicaland Province), for two reasons.

First, they put forward the argument, that the family had a good chance of being allocated more farming land in Mhondoro than they had been allocated in Rukweza. Secondly, they reasoned that it made more sense for them to relocate completely now that they had invested much of their payout in Mhondoro.

Samuel was initially not in favour of the move to Mhondoro, preferring that he stay near his nephew, at their new home in Mupfiganehwe, rather than moving to a new place altogether. On numerous occasions, the family would provide shelter and food to groups of comrades who found their location convenient, when coming from Mozambique before splitting into smaller groups and Samuel was happy to play his part in the fight for our independence. However, when several groups of comrades who came to their house kept telling him to move in with others for fear of reprisals from the Rhodesian forces given their isolated settlement, and their relationship with the comrades, Samuel would finally give in. Unfortunately for the family, Samuel died in August 1977 before the intended relocation for the second time within a few years. He did, however, give his blessings for the move and new set up in Mhondoro, which opened a new chapter for the family.

By 1975 the war effort was escalating with the comrades gaining more control and the situation in the country was explosive. At the time, Samson was working for BP Shell in Mutare, driving Shell and BP fuel tankers, delivering fuel to areas within the Eastern Highlands.

An incident on one of his delivery trips caused him to resign; he encountered the “boys”, who to make a point, burnt his delivery truck together with its contents, instructing him to go back, and to never return. When he got back to the depot and was assigned a delivery trip to another part of the country, he refused, choosing instead to resign.

Once he was out of a job, Samson joined the family business he and his brother Jivas had set up, shuttling between Mhondoro and Rukweza. Jivas, had also resigned from his job as a driver salesman for Ngandure Breweries (Pty) Limited, a National Breweries subsidiary, based in Hartley, now Chegutu. In running their operations and to be different and introduce bespoke customer service, the brothers bought a car, a Hillman, which they used for deliveries. They branded the vehicle, "Musasa Brothers."

It was during this time that Mabel's marriage had hit the rocks, and her sisters, Cinderella, Elizabeth and Ruth, were wishing for lady luck to smile on her, after all attempts by the family to mediate had fallen flat. That life-changing move to Mhondoro by Samson and Jivas would open doors for Mabel after it was decided that she join the family retail business as a storekeeper, at Nyatsanga, which she did, for the most part of 1974.

As the face of the retail business, Mabel's duties included placing orders with suppliers. In the course of her duties, she would acquaint herself with the business of Charles Stewart, who had settled in Rhodesia from Britain, and was operating a thriving poultry enterprise named after him.

As a family business established in 1958, Charles Stewart had expanded over the years. By 1971, the business was exporting day old chicks and breeding stock to Malawi, where it is now headquartered. It has since evolved into one of Zimbabwe's leading producers of day old chicks, with footprints in Mozambique and Zambia. At the time, most people in and around Hartley would buy their chicks from Charles Stewart Day Old Chicks. Besides broiler and layer chicks, Charles Stewart also produced eggs for sale at wholesale prices.

From interacting with Charles Stewart Day Old Chicks, Mabel learnt the ins and outs of buying products from them, putting on mark-ups and making money for the family enterprise for which she worked.

Towards the end of 1974, Mabel decided she had had enough of working in Mhondoro and that it was time to retrace her footsteps to the capital (then Salisbury) to try her luck in the big city. Working for the family business was no longer giving her the latitude to develop as a person, and her income as a shopkeeper, was inadequate to cater for herself and her children.

At the time, Mabel had two mouths to feed, being Donald and Garikayi whom she took with her following her divorce, while Johanes Mhanamana, Thomas Munyaradzi and myself stayed behind with our father and step-mother, Bertha (nee Mlambo).

Mabel's elder sister, Cinderella together with her husband Ernest Nyamayedenga Kamwara, who now lived in the rural areas at their village in Gunda, Makoni, after his retirement, had a house in Mufakose (Number 15, Nhuta Close). It was at this house that Mabel would find refuge.

Once in Mufakose, Mabel would hit the ground running, buying off-layers, broilers and eggs from Charles Stewart and selling them to local retail shops. While the returns were not that high, they were enough to keep her going. As the dollars trickled in, Mabel decided to complement her income by rekindling a passion for sewing that she had developed after it became clear to her that Steven wanted out of their relationship.

Mabel had bought a Singer sewing machine during their happier days which she used to patch our clothes. More than doing patchwork on our torn and worn clothes, she learnt to make shorts and shirts for boys as well as dresses for girls, with offcuts, that she would sell to the local community to supplement the family income and provisions.

When she found herself out in the wilderness, she would draw on all this to grow her income base in order to look after her children. While there was a large customer base for poultry products in Mufakose where she now lived, there was no ready outlet for the clothes she made; she had to find a market for them. As a woman, she must have understood the challenges a girl child has with regard to sanitary wear. To fill the gap, Mabel would make padded underwear to help her girl child customers with hygiene during their menstrual cycles that she sold together with other clothing materials she made.

Mabel bought her offcuts fabrics from the then textile giant, Cone Textiles, founded by Victor Cohen who died in August 2017, at the age of 78. Cohen had expanded the business into one of the largest textiles concerns in southern Africa, before it collapsed due to a combination of a huge overhang of debt and the influx of cheap imported fabrics from Asian countries, amongst other factors resulting in six thousand workers losing their jobs.

In 1994, Cone Textiles was liquidated, tolling the death knell on the optimism many people had for the revival of its factories in Harare and Chitungwiza.

For a different type of fabric, Mabel would look no further than Julie Whyte, another established brand in the clothing industry which has been in existence since colonial Rhodesia.

From talking to other women in similar businesses, Mabel learnt that there was a huge market for her apparel within farming communities, such as Lyons Den in Mashonaland Central and Arnoldine Mission Farm in Manicaland. As her earnings improved from selling to farm workers and their families, she bought a few more machines, hiring tailors to increase production. Once she had a significant amount of stock, she would be gone for weeks selling her apparel and collecting the monies on her return trips.

Her hustle of selling clothes within the farming communities kept her away from her young children, Donald and Garikayi, so when she met her cousin Freda Chiganze - daughter to Killion - whose hustle was to serve food at construction sites in Chitungwiza, she would be attracted to it. It is after this Freda, that Freda Chigumadzi wife of Doctor Peter Tazviona Chigumadzi is named.

On accompanying Freda to a construction site where she served meals, Mabel realised that there were opportunities in the space for more people. She proceeded to negotiate with the foremen of building contractors, John Sisk and Son, who were building new houses in Chitungwiza, to be allocated a site of her own to serve meals, which she got. Once given the greenlight, she grabbed the opportunity with both hands as it meant more time with her sons and a potential increase in her income.

Moving out of Mufakose would allow her sister Cinderella and her husband who had been so kind in giving her accommodation, to rent out their property for income as retirees.

The break to move to Chitungwiza came in mid-1976. Because she was a well-known Charles Stewart customer during her time in Nyatsanga, sourcing chickens to supply her new catering business came easily.

Sadly, tragedy would strike when her elder sister, Cindrella, at whose house in Mufakose she had stayed, passed on in June of the same year (1976), after battling asthma. Back then, very little could be done to manage asthmatic attacks, unlike now where people suffering from the condition have access to rescue inhalers and controller inhalers to treat symptoms and make the disease more manageable.

Futher misery would befall Mabel and all of us, when in August 1977, our grandfather – Samuel – died, also from asthma induced complications. The death in 1976 of her sister Cinderella and that of her father, Samuel in 1977, would be a huge blow to Mabel as it robbed her of two huge pillars of support, in her quest to be independent. Nonetheless, life had to go on.

Around that time, my father's marriage to Bertha had fallen apart after we had shifted base from Zororo in Sakubva, Mutare to Egypt, Highfield in Harare, resulting in her walking out on her husband without notice. Johanes, Thomas and I would join our mother in Chitungwiza, at the end of 1976, reuniting with our other two siblings, Donald and Garikayi.

Having been transferred from Harare to Chitungwiza, we had to adjust to our new life at Farai Primary School where Johanne and I got places for Grade Seven, while Thomas enrolled for Grade Four at Chinembiri Primary School. Donald started Grade One at Seke 2 Primary School. Garikayi was only five and hence not yet of school going age.

More mouths to feed at Mabel's home now meant more work. We also had a role to play before and after school. Mabel made it a point that when she went to Charles Stewart to get orders for the outside catering business, she also bought eggs which we sold, doing rounds within our area of residence early in the morning, calling out "Eggs! Eggs!" so customers could buy them for breakfast. We also sold eggs over the weekends.

Immediately after school during the week, we would go to the construction site to help serve food to customers and also to collect the plates. Once back home, we helped wash dishes in preparation for the following day. Friday was our busiest day of the week as besides serving food, we had to collect the week's takings from those customers who preferred to buy on credit.

Mabel hired two girls, Enia and Eurika to help her in her catering business – cooking and delivering food to her customers. Mabel's nephew, Innocent Chiganze (Air Commodore)– young brother to Timothy – would come to stay with us at the beginning of 1977 after he completed his 'O' Levels at St Augustine's Mission in Penhalonga. His arrival added another pair of hands to help in her business.

Joel Kamwara, son to Cindrella, also joined us in Chitungwiza, spending some months with us before leaving for South Africa where he would spend years toiling for a pittance, while contracted by the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association, popularly known as Wenela at the time. Joel's arrival was very welcome and the four of them, together with Mabel, would prepare the food and serve customers.

Most of the customers were dependable, settling their bills by the gate where we had a small administrative table, without having to chase them up. Of course, there always was the odd one or two who, for failure to control their spending habits, chose not to pay. On such occasions, Innocent and Joel would spring into action, helping with enforcement. In cases where some customers failed to pay their dues, we would make sure they wouldn't be fed on account the following week.

In all of this, we became distracted in our learning at school, as we failed to strike a balance between school work and helping our mother with her side hustles. The imbalance would soon catch up with us after Johanes and I didn't do well in our grade seven examinations. Even if we had done well, the funding for moving on to high school was thin.

As a result, we had very few options to proceed to Form One. Our father would soon request to take custody of us kids and at the end of 1977, Johanes, Thomas and I would go to Chiduku Tribal Trust Lands where he had settled with his new wife Victoria Mutizamhepo, after relatives blocked him from moving into our Rukweza home. While it was not all a bed of roses staying with Victoria our new step-mother, we would find out that she had far better parenting skills than those of her predecessor, Bertha.