WRITERS MOSAIC

What We Leave We Carry

Emmanuel Gotora

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>
> — Emmanuel Gotora

[Music]

Presenter: Leaving Zimbabwe, Emmanuel Gotora's dream was to become an aeronautical engineer. His faith gave him strength to face the many challenges to that dream. This is *WritersMosaic, What We Leave We Carry*, the series that tells the true-life stories of migration to the UK.

[Music]

Emmanuel Gotora: I am Emmanuel Gotora. I was born in Zimbabwe. I was born in Harare, and I grew up in a—what they might call a high-density area, in a place called Glen Norah. Born and raised there until about age 15, when I came to the UK. I grew up with lots of friends, lots of family around me. I was raised by my community. I was raised in a single parent household, but I was not raised by a single parent. I was raised by many people in that community, including neighbours and friends and family. We were poor, but I didn't realise or recognise that we were in that, actually, a lot of people who needed stuff, whether to borrow money or a cup of sugar, would always find their way to our doorstep, and they would always leave with what they came for. So, in a way, even though we didn't have much at the time, it was actually quite clear that we were probably a little bit better off than, say, people around us.

[Music]

I didn't quite see it deteriorate, but I do—I have experience of family who—my other uncle, when he went to the village, would have come across some white soldiers, and he was badly beaten. And then when he returned home, he actually had to spend weeks in recovery. So that was the only thing I saw personally in terms of immediacy, but you could tell that the country was on a knife edge just before independence. Being born in 1973 is quite significant because in my country, you start school age seven, and that's 1980, when Zimbabwe gained its independence from Great Britain, so I'm part of the first generation to go to school at independence. And so for me, it was a place of safety, a place of aspiration, if you like, and a place of hope. The vivid picture I remember is the jacaranda. This is the trees with the

purple flowers. That jacaranda season is the city at its most beautiful, and it's a vibrant place. It's a place filled with hope. In terms of your neighbours locally, you knew each other, you almost lived in each other's homes. It was a place of real solidarity during my time.

The first thing I remember about Independence Day is the first words that were spoken as the clock turned midnight [Bob Marley, *Zimbabwe*, plays] and as the flag, the Union Jack, went down and the new Zimbabwe flag was raised, was the introduction of Bob Marley singing the song *Zimbabwe*. I wasn't present at the stadium but remember watching it on TV, the one TV, with lots of neighbours in our living room and hearing lots of people outside enjoying and celebrating that moment.

The time when everything felt good in Zimbabwe post-independence was the first 10 years. And that's very significant and very specific, right, because the Lancaster House Agreement, which was signed by the British in handing over Zimbabwe as an independent nation, was for 10 years. And that had provisions on especially the transfer of land. Actually, that was one of the provisions that was missing from that agreement. And so Mugabe was the first—who became the first president, he was prime minister first and then president, was only really bound by the Lancaster House Agreement for 10 years. So if you trace the trajectory of Zimbabwe's downward spiral, it would be 1990 onwards. And really, the connection between the black community and the white community, whenever I've been there, is that the white community is really well organised, actually, to just get along and do the things they need to. So when there's food shortages or fuel shortages, you'll actually know

that it's really only the majority of the people rather than the more organised because they know how to organize themselves that way.

[Music]

I left in 1988, actually. So I came to the UK aged 15 on a scholarship to study aerospace engineering, and that was paid for, at the time, by the Zimbabwean government. My mum used to work for the national airline, which is now defunct, Air Zimbabwe. So the decision to come to the UK was both a decision—a dream that I'd always had and a decision that my mum eventually made. Because my mum used to work for the national airline, I spent a lot of time at the airport, so I was really fascinated by aircraft and what made these big heavy metal things stay up in the air. And I had made up my mind, through a school project actually, that I wanted to become an engineer, and that's basically what I came here to do in the UK.

[Music]

My generation, who were born around that time, were told we could be anything we wanted to be, and that was because, this is probably something that's well documented, but Mugabe was a teacher by profession, and so education was very big in terms of the new Zimbabwe government vision for the country. And quite a lot of my generation are actually dotted all over the world. Most of us here in the UK, some in America, some in Canada, some in Australia. But yeah, we were really given the chance to be whatever we wanted to be. And I chose to be an engineer, and here I am.

[Music]

My first impressions of Britain, London, were not what I expected. I came on the 2nd of December, 1988, to stay. I mean, even in ‘86 when I came, the Stand is very full of, at that time, homeless people sleeping in doorways, even up to this day. That was the biggest shock, actually, because you get this picture painted of the streets almost paved with gold, and when you get here, that's what you're confronted with. And I think even that winter when I first came in ‘86, a few of the people sleeping roughing the doorways had died, and it was just a complete shock. I never expected to see that level of poverty. For me, it was just a grimy, dirty place full of homeless people, quite a hard place.

[Music]

When I came age 15, first of all, I came as an unaccompanied minor, as they say. So my mum put me on the plane on Air Zimbabwe. Most of my cousins were air stewardesses, so they looked after me on the flight. I got to Gatwick. Before they handed me over to my uncle, the first conversation I had with an immigration officer was that he was telling me, ‘Oh, you seem like a nice young man.’ He said, ‘Can I give you a piece of advice?’ I said, ‘Yeah, yeah.’ He said, ‘There's a place called Brixton. Don't go there.’ [Laughs] So, ‘Brixton. Don't go there’, was stuck in my head.

[Music]

Before I came to the UK, my great uncle was actually the person responsible for the keys to the new Zimbabwe embassy on the Strand in London, and so he had opened the embassy. And I was here first for Christmas trip around 1986, and then I eventually came and stayed. In fact, my cousin, who was three years older than me, had left Zimbabwe to come. And so, in a sense, I followed him to come here and live with his dad. So we lived at the Zimbabwe Embassy for a while.

[Music]

My cousin and I were not allowed to go to the same school because my uncle thought we would never do any work [laughs]. So he went to a school—back then, I think the name has changed—it was called North Westminster, and I went to a school called Holland Park. It was a bog standard, if I may say so, comprehensive when I went there, and it was one of the rough—in its rough days. But one thing I do remember was one of the teachers, when she saw me hanging out with a couple of the boys in my first week or so in the school, she pulled me aside, and she said to me, 'Those guys are not going to be your friends.' Obviously, coming from Zimbabwe, you listen to what the teachers say. And I didn't question it. I just accepted. I said, 'So who are going to be my friends?' And she pointed to another group of people. She said, 'Those are going to be your friends.' A guy from Nigeria, a guy from The Gambia, another guy from Ireland, and a guy from Lebanon. That was our group: Omar, Latif, Emmet, Amadou, and myself; that was our group. The reason the teacher told me to hang out with this specific group of friends is because, actually, that other group of friends were also mixed, but they were mostly white, but what she had seen was, and it made sense to me later, that these guys were not

serious about their education, but those guys, the other group, these are more serious about their education, so I think you fit better in this group rather than that group. It didn't make sense immediately. I just didn't question it because that's the kind of background I came from. Eventually, I saw, actually, in a way, she was doing me a favour in a sense because, actually, some of those young kids got thrown out of school, and she didn't want me going down that road

[Music]

So when I arrived from a former—obviously Zimbabwe is a former colony—I was always surprised by people telling me how good my English was in that sense, but that's what I got told. There was no issues or problems in terms of adjusting to the curriculum in the UK, education wise. When I first came here, the hostility to me, especially for that part of West London, in Holland Park, seemed to me to be, actually, between different groups of migrant communities. So the people from Caribbean background were the cool ones [laughs]. And the group that I was hanging out with, mostly from Africa and different places, were the not so cool ones. So there seemed to be tensions there, especially in that school anyway. There seemed to be tensions there between the Africans and the Caribbeans. In terms of hostility from the wider community, I didn't experience that myself. Partly, I think, and I would say this quite openly, is that I think it's because I had lived quite a sheltered life and in the embassy also quite a sheltered life, so I didn't really see that. I do think though that, actually, the one person in the group who was Irish also faced hostility and got beaten up quite regularly, and so that group, our group, seemed to be quite a haven or safe haven for all of us for different reasons.

[Background noises]

I actually did go to Brixton, and it was more specifically because the guy. I was just like, *why would you tell me not to go to Brixton? Let me go and find out what this Brixton thing is all about.* And I got to Brixton, walked through the market, and I was just like, *wow, these are my people.* I couldn't figure out why that person had told me not to go to Brixton. I'm sure they had good intentions, but I was safe in Brixton [laughs].

I went to what was called Hammersmith and West London College to do my A levels, and then from there, I went to the University of Hertfordshire to do my engineering degree. [Music] About a month after I graduated from the University of Hertfordshire, that would have been 1996, I got a letter from the Home Office, saying, 'Your student visa has run out. You need to return to Zimbabwe within 28 days.' Anyway, I went to a lawyer, put in the appeal, because by then, I'd actually secured an interview with what is now BAE Systems, British Aerospace. I'd secured an interview. This letter thing was still hanging over my head. Still, I went for the interview. The job was confirmed, but because they needed to get some extra security clearance because of the MOD connections, the Ministry of Defence connections, they needed a security check going back 10 years. So I hadn't been here for 10 years, and so they sent all the paperwork to Zimbabwe. That paperwork never came back from Zimbabwe, and they held that job for six months. So I never actually started a job as Aerospace Systems. When I didn't get to start the job with British Aerospace, I applied for a master's. Didn't quite get in for the master's programme because it

needed money. By that time, the scholarship had actually come to an end, finished. I didn't have the money to pay for another, for a master's degree, so I worked in McDonald's. At the same time, I worked at the embassy as a cleaner. So I would clean the embassy, the place I used to live. They gave me a job. It was cleaning the interior of the embassy every day.

So by this stage, I put in a claim for indefinite leave to remain. Another story about that is when I put in the claim to the solicitors to do that on my behalf, the secretary in the solicitor's office pulled me aside and said, 'I'm going to give you your paperwork.' Big wad of papers. Everything I had given—'I'm gonna give you your paperwork because these guys are not going to help you. You seem like a nice young man, and you are not going to—these people are just here to take your money.' Luckily, it was within those 28 days that that happened. So she gave me my file. I had to scramble to find another lawyer to do—to actually put in the appeal within the 28 days. Luckily, I found somebody through my uncle at the embassy, and they lodged the application on my behalf within the time.

So the reason why I didn't want to go back to Zimbabwe after I graduated is twofold. The situation had got worse. It was—that was '96, '97. And remember, 1980 to 1990 was the Lancaster House Agreement, so things were spiraling already out of control in Zimbabwe. And actually, my mum said, 'Don't come back. Do what you can. If you have to come back, then come back.' In between graduating from University of Hertfordshire, working for a couple of years, I'd also started another, a second degree, in theology. That is part of the pathway, really, that helped me to eventually get my indefinite leave to remain. So I arrived here aged 15, and it took 20 years, so

I was 35 by the time I got settled status here. How I coped with the uncertainty of all of that for over 20 years, I mean, there were moments, to be honest with you, where I felt like I should just go home. But I had unfinished business here. I think because I hadn't achieved what I thought I came here to achieve, I think that's what really gave me the resilience to stay on and see what else is there. And also by then, I had joined a church, and people there were very supportive and also gave me a job as well. So I worked for the church even before I went to do the degree in theology. I worked for the church for a couple of years. And this is—the church actually introduced me to an organisation called Citizens UK, through which I'm now actually working for.

I personally didn't grow up religious. We went to church when I was young, and then when my dad passed away, we stopped going to church. I came to faith, I think, aged about 21. This was the Wood Green New Testament Church of God. I got baptized in '97. It really links back to the unfinished business. So because I hadn't got this job, I was asking myself a big, big question: is there more to life than this thing that I came for? And that's where I think I found faith. For me, the church was a place of not just friendship, where I met young people like myself who were going through similar things, but also it was around the time of the inquest of Stephen Lawrence, and many—like many young black men of his age, we were scared. We were afraid of what would happen to us. And the church seemed to be a place of safety where we could talk openly about these things and actually be openly afraid of what was happening in the public. Yeah, that was a real moment for me, knowing that that was even possible. And then when you start to read and hear about the police surveillance and all of that stuff, then you start to really distrust the police.

Yeah, and it just felt like our anger could be placed in something positive. Otherwise it could have been completely the other way, right? Our anger could have been in another direction. In terms of experiencing some tension or racism from police, I did face that when I was in university. I think, for me, the record of being stopped in one evening was about four times [laughs]. In Hatfield, in a very small place. My housemate then was in the territorial army. He needed to train, so he put on his army gear, his big bag, and he was training, running. I was on a bicycle, accompanying him that evening. As soon as we came out of the house, we got stopped. Okay, fine, gave them our names. We were coming from that house over there. We got near the train station; we got stopped again. On the way back, we got stopped twice, almost in the same places. So the last stop, the fourth stop, was just before we got back to the house. By the time the police car stopped, my friend said, 'I'm living in that house if you want to talk to me', and he just walked off. And the police officer said, 'What's wrong with your mate?' I said, "To be fair, Officer, this is the fourth time we've been stopped this evening. He's fed up. But don't you guys talk to each other? Don't you talk? 'We stopped these guys.' He's clearly wearing something that is noticeable, the army gear. Didn't somebody say, 'Somebody in army gear and a guy following on the bike'?" Anyway, they let us go with not much of an apology, but that was the experience.

So community organising is really about giving people power to make decisions about—on the issues that impact them, whether it's immigration or housing or jobs. The real thing for me in terms of community organising, has been that it is probably the closest to the idea of the Britain that you get sold [laughs]. It's this whole place

where you can be who you want to be alongside other people who are different from you. And I think that's where the, for me, the real value lies.

I became a British citizen, I think it was 2020. I held on to this idea; I never wanted to become a British citizen because of some of those things I experienced. I held on. We called the Zimbabwe passport, we call it the Green Bomber. I held on to my Green Bomber for a long time. And my wife would say, 'Well, you should go and get your citizen—' I never wanted to do that. That sense of somebody in two places was me. So I'm here, I'm living here, but my sense of home is back home. It was out of choice that I'd left it that long because my indefinite leave to remain was about 20 years ago. But I held on to the idea of hope of something happening that I could go back home. Talking about Zimbabwe can be painful because of the hope that has not been realised. Especially, I think, for my generation. I think we were the first to be told you can be whatever you like, but that is not the truth. You can be whatever you like elsewhere, I think it seems.

Whenever we would go on holiday, my wife would be and my kids would be in one queue, and I'd have to be in this long, long queue. And so that was also part of the decision, like, *no, we can't continue like this*. So there was a bit of a deeper feeling about that British citizenship in terms of, *well, maybe now's the time*. Again, it was a moment of pain, to be honest.

The New Testament Church of God was founded by people from the Caribbean who were part of that Windrush generation. What the church did, as a Pentecostal church, was actually give people a sense of a shared identity but also a sense of

protection being amongst your own and give you enough kind of strength and sustenance to be out there as a person. The church has been like a shelter to help me to navigate, if you like, the challenges of being a migrant in the UK.

When I look at my kids, I think I've got the settled British citizen hat on, but I talk to my mum every day, and so there is still that sense of I'm here, but I'm also there. Yeah, I think I do think in terms of ‘home’ and ‘back home’, still. Even though I still have my Green Bomber and the British passport, I think that's probably how I live my life that way. This is ‘home’, but I also have ‘back home’.

[Music]

For me, the whole Brexit scenario divided the country. This whole thing about stereotyping people who voted for Brexit, voted leave, and then finding out they were my close, close friends, some of them, made me really question, yeah, there is a danger in just stereotyping those as people who didn't really know what they're doing, because they did, and they had good reason to, some of them. I know that, and I think that's a fair thing, but it does really then point to that sense of alienation that we're seeing now, even to an extent with some of those elements that are being attracted to the far right, currently. There is a sense of alienation. There is a sense of anger, a sense of disappointment that they're feeling that I think there is just that need to be a bit more attentive to what people are going through. Of course, it does make me feel uneasy. I don't want to feel like I'm hunted or people like me are being hunted. As a person of faith, I do have that sense of hope that we can see each other as human beings, sometimes even with similar challenges. I think there is a bit

of a myth that migrants, like myself, have everything on the plate. We don't. I mean, you've heard part of my story. It hasn't been easy by any sense of the imagination. But I think that is where getting to know your neighbour, as basic as that, actually really matters.

My wife was born here. Her parents are from the Caribbean, Jamaica and St Vincent. Raised in East London. My children were born here. And so that really grounds me here. There's always been this sense of, *would I go back one day?* And maybe that's still a possibility when my children have grown, in university, getting on with their own lives. I still, to this day, like most Zimbabweans I know, send money home and support people back home. And so there is ‘home’, and there is ‘back home’.

I miss being able to go to seven or eight houses and eat whatever is on the table at Christmas. That whole sense of community. But that was basically how we spent our Christmas day. You wake up, you've got five or six, seven houses that you're going to eat in, and you just hop from house to house until you come back to. Not such a thing as a, maybe they do that now, like a family Christmas dinner. It's like seven, eight families you're joining.

[Music]

I also do miss, am I allowed to say this, the sun and the warmth? There is sun out as we are speaking here today, but it doesn't feel warm [laughs]. Even in the winter in Zimbabwe, my friends and I would get up very early in the morning, sit outside, and

we would wait for the sun to come. If anyone who I grew up with or anyone of my family sees me now, they would not call me Emmanuel; they would call me Tatenda, because that's how I grew up being called. The Emmanuel is really the passport [laughs]. So that's the name of the passport. But they would call me that. So they don't—this Emmanuel thing, they call me because they have to. But that's—my name is Tatenda, which means ‘thank you’.

[Music]

Presenter: Emmanuel Gotora was talking to Tim Finch.

[Music]

A recording of this interview can be found at **writersmosaic.org.uk**

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