



Br Peter Osterkiewicz, S.J.
(1891-1984. In Zambia 1924-1984)

19 March 1984

Peter Osterkiewicz was born in Podhajce near Lviv, Poland on 28 July 1891. He was drafted into the Austrian army at the beginning of the First World War. From what he told us, it looks as if he did not see too much of that war. Soon he was taken prisoner and spent the rest of the war in the Crimea, where with other prisoners he worked in the town tramways. He suffered greatly during this time from the cold and ended up with frostbite in both feet. At one stage he nearly died from starvation and afterwards he decided never in his life would he complain about any food given him. The Bolshevik revolution took place when he was still there. After the revolution, with thousands of other ex-prisoners of war, he slowly found his way back to his home near Lviv. It seems that he tried to join the Dominicans but the porter at the monastery told him that there were 'no free places'.

In June 1920 he joined the Jesuits in Stara Wies and took his vows in 1922. Soon afterwards he was sent as sacristan to Wilnius. Shortly afterwards in 1924 he headed for Northern Rhodesia with Fr Siemienski. He recalled his embarrassment in accompanying the well educated secretary to the General to visit some of his high class friends and relatives while on their journey to England to get the boat to Cape Town.

On arrival at Kasisi he was sent to Kapoche to work under Fr Seidel, making the journey on foot in eight days. The climate was very hot at Kapoche and the poor food and hard work soon wore out this rather frail brother. In 1926 Mgr Brown, S.J. of Salisbury, arrived at Kapoche as the first stop on his official ecclesiastical visit of the Mission, having come over the mountains and across the river. He took Br Peter with him to Kabwe, where he worked at Mpima under Fr Siemienski.

In 1927 when Fr Bruno Wolnik was appointed Prefect Apostolic of the newly erected prefecture of Broken Hill, he took him to his headquarters in Kabwe. He remained with Mgr Wolnik most of the time right up to 1947, even moving to Lusaka with him, except for a brief stay in Chikuni in 1934-1935. He wrote of himself as "the cook, the shoemaker, carpenter, driver, minister of the house ... literally *ad omnia*". Even to this day his benches are still in use in the Sacred Heart Church.

From 1946 to 1952 he was very sick in Katondwe. The boys at one stage carried him on a plank to the church for morning Mass. He was sent to a hospital in Salisbury but in 1947 it looked as if the end was near. However he recovered miraculously and in 1957 he was back again in Mpima. where he remained until 1962. He spent the rest of his years in Katondwe until he finally came to Lusaka at the end of his long life, in 1981.

In Katondwe he was a real *factotum ad omnia* i.e 'a do it all' and 'a do it yourself'. He oversaw the generators, pumps, locks, drove the truck to Lusaka, even when well over seventy; repairing watches fascinated him. He installed the present water pipes in the house when he was 85! Even in the heat of October he would wear long warm underpants because of the damage done to his circulation during the war as a prisoner in Russia. Often he had to request new shoes because of the legacy of the frostbite.

He never developed any hunting skills. He used to tell us how he went with assistants after a lion that had killed a cow. They followed the traces till they arrived at a cluster of palms. 'I went into the cluster, and there, there was the lion with the remains

of the cow. As the lion roared, the rifle fell out of my hands, and of my assistants there was no trace. I froze and I started to recite the act of contrition, and, slowly, I retreated, not taking my eye off the monster'. Another time he was going to Lusaka with another brother. At one point he commented to his companion, 'We must have missed the way because I do not remember those rocks'. The other answered, 'These are not rocks, they are elephants'. Br Peter made the sign of the Cross ready to be trampled on by them!

He spent the last years of his life praying in the church at St Francis, always kneeling down, rarely sitting, and doing little things around the house. He passed away peacefully in the novitiate on 19 March 1984.

Br Peter features clearly in the famous novel of Dominic Mulaisho '*The Tongue of the Dumb*'. Unlike the other two Jesuits in Katondwe Mission at the time of the author's youth, he does not try to disguise the person. He is described as a 'small elderly brother who was the dog's body of the mission' i.e. the jack of all trades, able to put his hand to anything. He was a 'small man with weather beaten scaly skin, hairy arms, and a back curved into a bow from lifting heavy bags and stones. His head was pointed, and only at the apex was there any sign of visible hair-growth. He was so light and small that sitting there before the enormous organ he looked like an ugly little sparrow treading on a heap of maize'. He is portrayed as a person who is at one with nature, with the local people and with God. This inner relationship with nature extends to everyone he meets because in some way he is a link and a bridge between the people and the mission. When he is killed by a lion (in the novel) the people mourn: "Beer passed round and people sang. But it was not the song of drunken people, or of people rejoicing. It was a song of people sorrowing and people who sipped at the calabash to lighten their hearts'.

In the history of our province there have been many examples of outstanding faith, seen most clearly in the lives of the early missionaries. We have also had quite a number of men of extraordinary dedication in their service of the church and of the people. We do not see too many of simple transparent holiness. It is in this category that Br Peter can be placed and, in the eyes of some, at the top of the list.