

FR OSKAR WERMTER 26 January 1942 – 12 October 2023



He was in his 81st year of age, 62nd year in the Society and 52nd of Priesthood.

Ort. 26/Jan/1942
Loc. Nat. Eastern Prussia
Ingr. 11/Ap/1961
Loc. Ingr. West Berlin
Ordem. 1/Jul/1971
Loc. Ordem. West Berlin
Grau P4

Defunc. 12/Oct/2023
Loc. Defunc...Richartz House (Zimbabwe)
Date of Funeral 16/Oct/2023
Place of Funeral..... Our Lady of the
Wayside Parish, Harare (Zimbabwe)
Place of Burial.....Chishawasha Cemetery
Prov:SAP

Born in East Prussia, now the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad, Fr Oskar Wermter was the youngest of five children (3 boys, 2 girls). He hardly knew his father, a civil servant who became a soldier in the Wehrmacht and died in a Russian prisoner of war camp in August 1945, four months after the war ended. His mother, a librarian, had to work alone for the children and in August 1944, she had to flee with them before the approaching Russian army.

They reached Silesia, but had to flee again in January 1945 and make their way to Thuringia, in what later became East Germany arriving in March 1945. As the Communists strengthened their hold, the family moved yet again in April 1949, crossing the border illegally into what became West Germany and they finally settled in Cologne. So, before the aged of seven, Oskar was a migrant three times.

But Oskar was a joyful and lively boy, his sister Maria tells us, and ‘the family began a ‘Catholic career’ with Oskar making his First Holy Communion and becoming an altar boy. He became a leader in a Catholic boys’ group and began his later activity by producing a self-made newspaper for the young people.’

In 1961, Oskar entered the Jesuit novitiate in West Berlin and after first vows he began philosophy near Munich in Bavaria, southern Germany. He departed by boat for Rhodesia in 1966 and went to St George’s to improve his English moving soon after to Marymount Mission to learn Shona. The following year he was at the University still improving his Shona but adding Social Anthropology and Economics to his studies.

In 1968 he was back in Germany studying theology and was ordained in 1971 in Berlin. He did a course in Communications in Dublin before returning to Rhodesia in 1972 and began pastoral work in Chinhoyi and was appointed to Mhangura in 1973. This was the year his first book was published, *Between Black and White*.

When the new province of Zimbabwe was formed, he became socius to the first provincial, Fr Henry Wardale. Oskar, of course, was not satisfied with an office job and was soon doing pastoral work in Braeside and Masasa as well as teaching in the LCBL novitiate, writing and doing radio work.

His next task was as superior of St Albert's from 1983 which involved responsibility for the Jesuits scattered in Chitsungo, Guruve, Mount Darwin and Marymount as well as St Albert's itself. He was happier in pastoral work in its different forms than in administration and by 1987 it was time for another move.

He became Social Communications secretary to the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference and combined it with teaching Communications at the Seminary, being chairman of the ZCBC Religious Advisory Board and spiritual director of the Zimbabwe Catholic Media Workers' Association. Maria wrote, 'He saw himself confronted with questions of war and violence, peace and freedom and he expressed his opinions, sometimes forcefully, in his writings.' He was also secretary of the Theological Commission (1982-1998). Meanwhile he was spending his week-ends doing pastoral work at St Teresa's and St Monica's in Chitungwiza and St Patrick's and St Matthew's in Glen Nora and Glen View.

We can briefly list some of his other activities. In 1994 he was in the press office in Rome working for the African Bishops in the Synod. He edited SAMBESI, a German mission newsletter, from 1968 to 1996 and was chairman of *Shungu dze Vana* (AIDS orphans) Trust from 1998.

In 2002, he became assistant priest at St Peter's Mbare and parish priest in 2010. In 2003 he became founding director of Jesuit Communications (JESCOM) which involved him in editing MUKAI/VUKANI and IN TOUCH and wrote articles too numerous to mention here and gave radio interviews. He also wrote three 'small' books which were published by Mambo Press. Perhaps his *Mbare Report* was one of his most striking productions as it covered the effects of *Murambatsvina* on the lives of the people. Between 2004 and 2006 he was a part-time teacher in Communications at Arrupe College (as it was then).

In 2013 he moved to Mabelreign and worked for IMBISA, the Southern Africa Catholic Bishops' Conference which involved him in travelling in the region and producing much documentation.

In 2016 his health declined. He had a prostate operation in January and developed chronic headaches during the year. A brain scan revealed an inoperable tumour resulting in excessive pressure in the brain which severely diminished his mental activity and mobility. A shunt operation was done by Dr Maraire and he very quickly recovered and was able to resume some pastoral work and writing. In 2017 he was hospitalised twice in the Avenues but, until he died, he never gave up his hope of returning to pastoral work. Oskar suffered a good deal in his last months. He was restless and unable to settle in a chair or in bed. He cried out a lot perhaps as an expression of his frustration and discomfort. He died in the early hours of last Thursday.

Twice this year, his sister Maria came to see him and it is wonderful that she was able to be with us as we celebrated his life and bid him farewell. She ended her message; 'I believe that Oskar now experiences the love which he pronounced for the people of Zimbabwe in word and deed'.