

# SEARCH FOR OLGA'S MOTHER

—Donald Cole

*Donald and Naomi Cole served the Lord in Angola for eighteen years until 1966 when it became necessary to leave. In recent years Don has made a number of trips back to Africa.*



YOU MAY NOT know Olga. She is a member of the Cole family though she was born in Angola to Angolan parents. How she became part of our family is a long story that will have to wait for a more opportune time. Here, it is enough to say that her name is Olga Etosi Mundombe and that she earns her living as assistant to the Angolan ambassador in Washington D.C. We love her.

Early in February, Olga called to tell us that she had reliable information that her birth mother was in a refugee camp in Zambia. Not since 1982 had she seen her mother, and then for only ten or fifteen minutes of conversation monitored by guards. That is another long story that will have to wait. Olga told us she wanted to leave immediately to find her mother. It is neither easy nor wise for a woman to travel alone in central Africa, and my wife Naomi and I believed strongly that I should go with her. That explains my absence after the 19th of February. I was traveling with Olga.

We met in Atlanta and flew to Johannesburg and from there north to Lusaka, the capital of Zambia. In Lusaka, we stayed at the CMML Flight House—a missionary guesthouse that is managed by a hospitable Zambian couple. One of CMML's pilots, John Loudon and his wife and four small children (one is a baby) were in Lusaka on business, and he—in keeping with plans made by e-mail—flew us north to Solwezi, not far from the point where Angola, Zambia, and the Congo meet. From there, we would make our way by road to the camp where we hoped to find Olga's mother and other members of the family.

Solwezi is two or three streets of frontier-style shops and not much else. There were no cabs, but I had been in touch by e-mail with a mission about twenty miles west of town. A German missionary (who called himself a mere adviser) wrote that he could provide a Land Rover and African driver. He was true to his word, waiting at the tarmac runway was the vehicle and driver. The driver would take us to the camp and, of course, bring us back to Solwezi for the return flight to Lusaka. We were all set.

Not quite. We stopped at the local police station to show the officer in charge the permits we had been given in Lusaka by high-ranking authorities. He was impressed but said he had to contact his superior officer and after solemn deliberation and mutterings about security, they said that we could

proceed. However, a policeman would have to travel with us. "Get a gun," the officer told him. "We have to protect our guests." Meanwhile, the sun had gone down. And so we drove to the camp in the dark, accompanied by an armed policeman. Except for a few walkers trudging along under a starless sky, we saw nothing—only potholes in an unpaved road.

The camp is a vast stretch of land in the Northwest Province. It has over eighty streets (footpaths, really) and between the streets are strips of land two kilometers wide, set aside for cultivating food. Zambia is hospitable and takes in refugees from Angola to the west and the Congo to the north. We met the Red Cross representative who said our camp held about sixty-five thousand souls. I thought the figure was exaggerated. Since we had no "address," he said gloomily that it might take six months to find Olga's mother, and to start he would need a tankful of gasoline for his motorbike. He was mistaken. Shortly after sunrise the next day we knew exactly where she was and as soon as the Land Rover returned from the mission—to which the driver had returned for the night—we would make our way to her hut.

Meanwhile, we spent the night in the home of the headmaster of a sprawling school. He and his wife, Zambians, are gracious people. A devout Christian, the headmaster has a bookcase filled with theological tomes. We were unexpected but warmly welcomed. In order to make room for Olga and me they sent their kids to neighbors' houses. Olga's room had a bed with a fancy orange satin spread. The headmaster's wife apologized because the room assigned to me had no bed, only a mattress on the floor with clean sheets and a blanket. Except for spots where I stepped on incautious cockroaches, the room was immaculate, and I slept until dawn.

Because we had eaten nothing but two slices of toast the previous day, we were ready for the coffee and bread that the headmaster's wife brought to the table. Our driver ate with us and then we climbed into the Land Rover. A thin woman guided us. She was a distant relative who, hearing early in the morning that an ancient white man and a young African woman were looking for somebody named Mundombe, had come to the house to say that she knew where Luisa Mundombe was staying. She would show us the way. The headmaster's wife was eager to ride with us. A loving woman, she wanted to witness the joy of a family reunion after long

hard years of separation. So there we were—two men and three women and a pair of unidentified passengers crammed into the Land Rover as it crept along the “street” called Thirteen. About two miles after the turn, we saw the grass huts we were looking for and turned in.

There was mild consternation at the sight of the Land Rover until our guide called out that Olga had come. The young people present had never seen Olga, but they knew who she was. They knew that she was the girl who had gone to America and gotten fabulously rich. Poor Olga! The myth about fabulous riches is sometimes hard to bear.

You can imagine the joy when Olga and her mother caught sight of each other. Neither Olga nor her mother Luisa is a shouter. They spoke softly to each other, but what they said was drowned out by the shouts of the men and women who had trekked with Luisa all the way from the center of Angola. They were joined by a crowd of people from Angola who heard the whooping and rushed up to find out what was happening. Everybody was pleased, and none more so than the headmaster’s wife. She stood smiling happily. Olga and Luisa weeping as they embraced recalled the scene in the Bible where Joseph meets his old father Jacob in Goshen. For nearly twenty years, Jacob had thought that his beloved son Joseph was dead. When they saw each other, the Bible says, Joseph “embraced his father and wept on his shoulder for a long time” (Genesis 46:29, NLT).

The trek from Angola to Zambia through trackless wilderness had taken eleven months, chiefly because the group had to stop two or three times to plant fast-growing food for the journey. Not until they crossed a river at the border were they safe, and for three months they were given all the flour and beans people toughened by semi-starvation thought they needed. To top the list of blessings, a Land Rover arrived bringing Olga. Those impoverished people stood rejoicing and talking excitedly. Several asked me if I had any Umbunda Bibles for them.

Somebody went to find Ivete, Olga’s remaining older sister. (Dulce, the first-born, was shot to death last year.) Ivete was drawing water at the river, and she hurried back to the little compound where she and some of her children lived with Olga’s mother. Luisa had told me that Ivete was physically well but troubled in heart. “She cries,” her mother said. After greeting Olga, Ivete saw me sitting on a stool nearby and she came collapsing at my feet. She laid her head on my knee and began to weep. “If only you had been with us...” she said. Thirty-five years had passed since we said goodbye in Angola. Ivete was twelve or thirteen then; now she is

forty-eight years old—thin and worn but to me she is as lovely and dear as when she was a child.

The family ducked into Ivete’s hut for a palaver. When they emerged, it was to announce that—given Luisa’s precarious health—she would return with Olga to Lusaka. There, in Lusaka where there is an Angolan embassy staffed by old acquaintances of Olga, they would determine what to do next. Meanwhile, we would return to Solwezi to wait for the Cessna to take us to Lusaka. Because of pounding rain it would be a day later than scheduled.

In Solwezi, we found two mini-hotels. One boasted that it managed the Cave Man’s Salon. We chose the motel across the street called the Mwaaka Lodge. It was new and well equipped. The young woman in charge showed us all six rooms and we rented three: one for me, one for Luisa and Ivete (who wanted to postpone saying goodbye to her mother—in Africa, a goodbye is often final), and a third room with twin beds for Olga and one of Ivete’s young sons. They talked all night. In the morning, a young German missionary came to town to take us to the airstrip. The Cessna (piloted this time by Bruce Poidevin) landed, and soon we were airborne, on the way to Lusaka.

CMML missionaries in Zambia were extraordinarily helpful and kind to us. Bruce Poidevin, who started the flight service and set up the guest house, assured Olga that she and her mother were welcome to stay in the guest house as long as they needed it, and that he would fly her anywhere she needed to go. Here, I register heartfelt thanks. The Zambian couple

who prepared meals, etc. treated Olga and Luisa tenderly and respectfully, as if they were in the line of African royalty—which they are.

Olga introduced me to the staff at the Angolan embassy. “This is Uncle Don; he’s my Dad,” she said simply. Though we had never met, they knew who I was. They treated Olga with much respect, as befits her position in Washington; however, international and diplomatic affairs are never rushed. There were papers to be completed and signed, and faxes to be sent to Luanda. Also, Olga needed to find a suitable place to rent for her mother and, she hoped, Manuela, a sister who is currently in a different refugee camp with four children. Because the Zambezi River was in flood, getting them out of the camp would not be easy. The roads were under water and, we were told, so was the nearest airstrip.

Nevertheless, with God’s help, again, Olga was able to bring them to Lusaka. Olga’s mother, sister, and her sister’s three small children now live together in a rented house in Lusaka. Olga sends money to support them. 🌹

