

Mortimer Hays-Brandeis Traveling Fellowship
Final Report, Hrvoje Slovene

**House Secrets: Industrial Tales in one of the World's Most Contaminated Cities:
Kabwe, Zambia**

For the past five years, my primary focus in photography has been to document abandoned, nineteenth-century factories and industrial spaces, as well as to show the irreparable damage modern industrialism has had on the global environment and its population. By photographing the devastating effects on local neighborhoods wrought by factories and industry, my intention has been to show how seemingly isolated problems have contributed to the global environmental crisis we are witnessing today. To date this project has taken me to Manchester, England-the birthplace of the industrial revolution; to Cleveland, Ohio; and Zagreb, Croatia. With the generous help of the Mortimer Hays-Brandeis Traveling Fellowship, I expanded this project to include Kabwe, Zambia. The mining of lead there by a Chinese-based company continues to put the population of hundreds of thousands at serious risk. Through my photographs, I showed the impact of modern industrialism on the real, day-to-day experiences of people and their industrialized habitats.

Although my original intention was to visit and document the effects of lead pollution in Kabwe, Zambia; Linfen, China; and Dzerzhinsk, Russia, I found a plethora of material in Zambia, and spent the majority of my time there. I first visited Kabwe in June 2007 and stayed there for three months. During that time I got in touch with local NGOs and familiarized myself with their work on the field. During that time I also became aware of the scale of the lead pollution problem on the location. In March 2008, I returned to Kabwe to stay for another four months. This time I asked my friend and an

English professor Donald Mengay to accompany me on the trip and document in words our experience in Zambia. After I came back to New York, I started organizing a nonprofit humanitarian organization MyMasuku that would help collect funds here in the USA to distribute to the people in Kabwe. In collaboration with local NGOs, the funds collected through the generosity of our contributors would be used to detect and prioritize the needs of the impoverished people who live in target areas and provide them with benefits and services in order to meet those needs: seeds, malaria nets, AIDS and malaria medication, helping to pay for doctors, agricultural aid, water pumps, water purification equipment, lead and other harmful chemical abatement, support and expansion of existing schools, provision of supplies for education (books, pens, notebooks, chairs, tables, TVs, DVD players), and teachers. MyMasuku would especially focus on job training and microlending to promote sustainable development.

The connections between lead pollution and a host of diseases have been recognized in the West for many decades. Regulations enacted since that time have largely minimized its impact there, a result of which has been the sense that lead-based problems are a thing of the past. The situation in developing countries, however, tells a tragically different story. Lead is still virtually ubiquitous in everyday lives, but it is most pernicious in the form of pollution from lead-extraction industries, a dirty little secret of the global market.

It was in the 1920s when the British realized the potential mineral bonanza in their African colony then called Northern Rhodesia. They quickly began to exploit the copperbelt, that bloated, elephantine swath hundreds of kilometers in area, under the foot of which Kabwe sits. It's a familiar colonial tale of opportunism. They imported whites

from the metropolis to run and manage the mines while culling the hard-labor force from nearby villages.ⁱ They never bothered to educate or train the locals beyond the most rudimentary-grunt-work, nor did they promote them to any leadership positions. For years things went swimmingly for the acquisitive British. Then in 1964 the local population wrested back control of their homeland, establishing it as an independent country. The new state assumed oversight of the mines within a decade after independence,ⁱⁱ taking on the role of the largest national employer, with the mining district serving as the mainspring of the country's wealth. In 1982 the government reorganized the industry as a state entity, the Zambia Consolidated Copper Mines, or ZCCM, which included all of Zambia's mineral extraction interests as well, including lead, zinc and manganese, the ores primarily found in Kabwe.

Unfortunately this restructuring dovetailed with the crash of commodities prices on the world markets.ⁱⁱⁱ More and more revenue needed to be poured into the then-flagging mines just to maintain them, with little or no cash going into improvements or even proper upkeep of the facilities.^{iv} The situation deteriorated to such a point that in 1995 the state ditched the mines entirely, selling them off to private investors. Almost a decade of disarray ensued in which outside corporations bought into and then relinquished their interests. After only a short time the Anglo American Company, for instance, pulled up stakes and abandoned the area entirely. It claimed there wasn't enough of a pay-off to justify their digging efforts so they up and went-leaving in their dust many mounds of discarded material. The mine closed down, but the lead is here to stay. It is still a source of income for many residents of Kabwe. This is where they collect lead stones, which, through a number of channels, they send all the way to South Africa.

Also, they are using the same stones to build their homes. They are free and sturdy enough to be used for that purpose.

Being so close to the city and surrounded by suburbs, this mesa of shunned dirt, which I climbed over for months, is constantly lofting on the wind, up toward the sun until it comes crashing down again, blanketing schools, churches, homes, businesses, hospitals and anything else in its path. Nobody seems to be able to escape these poisonous clouds.

There are so many amazing people I have met while living in Kabwe. They all helped me not only understand how rooted the lead pollution problem is in this town, but they also introduced me to locals, guided me through the suburbs where otherwise I would not have had access and explained that lead pollution is only one problem among many, which include malaria, AIDS, lack of education, careless government, and corruption. Having all that in mind, it was clear to me why change comes so slowly to this part of the world. It's simple: people just want to survive. That is all they care about.

During my first two weeks in Kabwe I met Anned and Michael, representatives of a local NGO, who were helping me as my guides and translators through the duration of my stay in Zambia. Each is a walking encyclopedia of local history and lore, not to mention the ins and outs of the broader political labyrinth, and they were sweet and caring enough to share their enormous knowledge and experience with me. I also became friends with the sisters at the Steven Luwisha Girls High School, which is situated on the bullseye, the fire-red zone, directly in the path of the dust, aerosolizing upwind at Broken Hill. I spent almost a week on a little family farm Kawasaki where AIDS infected the whole family, from the oldest to the youngest. They grew their crops

on a lead polluted soil and drank water from a well they dug out themselves. They knew they were poisoning themselves with every bite they took, but they had no choice. This is where I left most of my clothing when we parted. They gave me one of the warmest hugs of my life. In one of the most affected parts of the city, Makalulu, I met Pearl who heads an HIV support group called *Butanda*, the Bemba word for sorrow. Not only has she four children of her own, but she's also taken in an additional ten orphans. She was one of the rare people I met who has had her kids' blood tested, so she knows the statistics. They weigh in at a disturbing 52 to 65, several times the high figure of the acceptable range, which is fifteen. Even more troubling, though, is Pearl's own lead profile - 75.

After coming back to the United States, I used the photographs I made in Kabwe as my application portfolio to the MFA program at Yale School of Art. I was one of the nine students accepted and am currently attending my second semester at the program.

I would like to give my heartfelt thanks and gratitude to the Mortimer Hays family, as well as the Fellowship committee at Brandeis, for granting me this rare and wonderful opportunity, and allowing me to pursue my dreams through the benefit of their generosity and support.

ⁱ Obidegwu, Chukwuma F., and Mudziviri Nziramasanga. *Copper and Zambia: An Econometric Analysis*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, p. 4.

ⁱⁱ For a historical sketch of mining in Zambia see the report issued by the World Bank's Environment and Social Development Unit, Country Department 3, Africa Region. *Document of The World Bank, Report No: 25347-ZA, Project Appraisal Document On A Proposed Credit in the Amount of SDR 14.1 Million (US\$19 Million Equivalent) and Grant in the Amount of SDR 15.5 Million (US\$21 Million Equivalent) to the Republic Of Zambia/or the Copperbelt Environment Project*, Volume I. February 14, 2003, p 4.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*, p. 4.

^{iv} *Ibid*, p. 4 - for this point and the following historical information.