

The Rose Farmer

To be a white farmer in Zimbabwe these days is to hope for a new president. Of the 4000 who controlled 70% of the country's most fertile land eight years ago, Robert Mugabe has relieved all but three hundred or so of their land – and they have been warned not to get too comfortable. One gets the impression they must be a nervous bunch.

So it came as some surprise to discover that the boisterous, free-talking man in the seat next to me on my flight to Harare was a member of that dying breed. A jovial man in his late forties, Ralph Wilkinson was a third-generation Zimbabwean and clearly living well; he spoke proudly of his family (a wife and four children), his farm (11.5 hectares of greenhouses) and the way he'd managed to hold onto it.

“Anyone who hires a lawyer to keep their land is a bloody idiot,” he told me cheerfully. “Land reform isn't a matter of law, it's a matter of politics. I happen to know the right people, and I've been careful to keep good relations with them.” He thought about it for a moment, then added, “still, it could all go at any time.”

As our plane swooped in to the capital, Wilkinson pointed out the window. “See all that land lying fallow? Those used to be tobacco fields.” The earth surrounding Harare's well-ordered streets was indeed brown and mottled, with just a few patches of freshly ploughed earth prepared for the spring plant.

The fact that so much of the land owned by white farmers was used to grow cash crops like tobacco rather than staples such as wheat or maize, is often cited by those in favor of land reform; in this respect, Wilkinson is the perfect target. The product he grows in his greenhouses? Roses.

He invited me to come see for myself, but first I had to get through immigration. I had my first glimpse of the lingering effects of Rhodesian-era apartheid when a customs officer stopped me to ask if I had anything to declare. Wilkinson, who had already gone through the gate and was waiting a few feet away, came forward and grabbed me by the elbow; on no more authority than the color of his skin, he told the young (black) officer, “no, he doesn't have anything,” and led me outside without another word.

We stopped at a supermarket on the way through town, where Wilkinson showed me the technique store-owners use to create the illusion of stocked shelves. The trick was to line whatever items you had in stock – say, dish detergent or bars of soap – and spread them singly across the front of each shelf. If you pulled out a box of cereal, there was never another one behind it. “At first glance it looks like the shelves are full,” chuckled Wilkinson, “but look closer and you'll see there's actually just two or three items per aisle. I order all my groceries in bulk from South Africa.”

Back in his truck, we drove past the immense cement smoke stacks of Harare's power plant. Not even a puff emerged – despite sitting on Africa's largest coal reserves, the plant was shut down for lack of supplies. Harare relies on two hydroelectric dams for its power instead, but these are also constantly breaking down to the vexation of domestic and industrial users alike.

“Power outages are one of my biggest problems,” Wilkinson said. “Most days there's no electricity to run the irrigation pumps, so we have to wait until nighttime to water the flowers.”

He admits, however, that he's lucky to have a good water supply. His farm, situated a half hour outside Harare in the lush Enterprise Valley, sits atop a deep aquifer. Three boreholes provide him with all the water his roses can drink, a rare luxury in drought-ridden Zimbabwe.

Finally we pulled off the highway and through the gates of his farm, where the neat rows of his greenhouses sprang up before us. They ranged in size from one to three quarters of a hectare, their plastic tarps flapping like sails in the stiff breeze. “I hate the wind,” Wilkinson said. “Tears them wide open.”

Wilkinson employs 85 laborers, most of whom live on the farm in neat brick homes. They went about their chores, some pushing wheelbarrows full of soil, others hauling sacks full of freshly cut stems, yet more monitoring the irrigation lines. We visited one shed where half a dozen young women sat around a stone table, trimming and sorting the day's harvest amid laughter and jokes. They quieted as we entered, but stayed relaxed and exchanged greetings with their boss.

Wilkinson's relationship to his workers was pleasant but aloof. “I try to be nice to them,” he told me later, “but the trouble is they often take kindness as a sign of weakness. So you have to be a little tough.” Hard to say if this was racist, or true, or both. In this and many other ways, Wilkinson is part benefactor, part stereotypical capitalist. On the one hand, his workers have a place to live, a steady income, and plenty of food to eat – more than can be said for many of their countrymen. On the other, he's not teaching anyone how to run a farm for themselves.

We moved on to the largest greenhouse, where Wilkinson gave me a tour of the eight strains he currently grows. He showed me pink Ti Santo (“not a baby pink, but not too strong, either”), butterfly Sensai (“small stems, great for packaging”), orange Tropical Amazone (“does well in South Africa”), and his personal favorite, the velvety red Enigma. He brushed his fingers over the petals lovingly, and explained that “growers don't see a rose, they feel it.”

In 2000, just as the land reforms were beginning, Wilkinson borrowed the equivalent of \$150,000USD in Zimbabwe currency from a local bank and bought the farm with it. Because interest, at 35%, was a fraction of the rate of inflation, his debt rapidly shrank

to nothing. He paid the entire loan off a year and a half later for the equivalent of \$18,000USD – “a single shipment of roses,” he said with a glint in his eye.

It is an understatement to say he’s doing well. “The market’s cheeky these days,” he told me happily, which meant that he’s averaging 65 cents (USD) per stem on a farm that, at full capacity, can produce eight million stems a year.

Small wonder why a government bent on revoking the privileges of colonialism want people like Wilkinson to leave – and small wonder, too, why they’re fighting to stay.