

AFRICA

Mugabe, Smith in eleventh-hour drama

An unassuming man named Joram Kucherera may have been responsible for averting a bloody coup in Zimbabwe

SAPA

Kwekwe, Zimbabwe

He is a small, unassuming man with no claim to fame. But, he says, he brought together two arch-enemies for a midnight meeting that probably averted a holocaust in Zimbabwe.

Wearing a plain sky-blue cotton T-shirt, grey shorts and slippers, Joram Kucherera, a 52-year-old small-scale farmer in the Midlands district of Kwekwe, recently recounted how on the night of March 3 1980, he accompanied former Rhodesian prime minister Ian Smith to a conclave with his avowed enemy, Robert Mugabe, the leader of Zanu-PF and commander-in-chief of the Zanla freedom fighters that had waged a seven-year guerrilla war against Rhodesian security forces.

In his beat-up car, Kucherera says he collected Smith from his Belgravia home in the capital, Salisbury, and drove him to a secret meeting with Mugabe in Mount Pleasant, a day before results of the first independence elections were announced.

Smith last week confirmed the secret meeting in a telephone interview from his Belgravia home.

"Yes, I went to see Mugabe. We met and he shook hands with me and was very courteous to me. We had a conversation and that conversation is in my memoirs," said Smith.

Then a member of the "abinet of conscience" of the evangelist movement, Moral Rearmament (MRA), Kucherera was asked to explore ways of bringing the two adversaries together.

A month before the watershed elections, said Kucherera, it was discovered that Rhodesian army general Peter Walls, Bishop Abel Muzorewa and others were contemplating a coup if Mugabe's party won the elections.

"People were told that Mugabe would butcher whites and close down churches. The whites had made contingency plans to move their families out of the country.

"The propaganda was that a coup would be to stop communism. A bloodbath was feared and whites were panicking," said Kucherera.

"The MRA decided that what was lacking was trust. So, it was decided that the main enemy of the whites, Mugabe, should meet the leader of the whites.

"Feelers were put to Smith through his son, Alec, to see if he was agreeable

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to such a meeting. I was given the task to approach the Zanu-PF group. I phoned the president's house and he instructed me to liaise with [Emmerson] Mnangagwa over the issue."

Kucherera said Mnangagwa was aware of the planned coup.

"Later, word came back from

Mnangagwa that Mugabe was agreeable to the meeting and that the meeting had to be at his house and at night."

In the run-up to the elections, Mugabe survived several assassination attempts and his residence resembled a fortress.

Kucherera said that on their arrival, he and Smith were received by Zanla commander General Solomon Mujuru. "We walked past 50 tense and heavily armed guards into the house. Things became so heated, I did not think I was going to come out alive. There was so much confusion."

"One young guerrilla shouted, 'Let's get rid of him now', raising his rifle but Mujuru turned and hit the young man with the butt of his gun.

"It was the longest day of my life. I have never been so scared like that in my life. We could see anger on the faces of the cadres. Smith just stood there in his fawn brown suit, waiting for me to tell him what to do."

Later, a smiling Mnangagwa came to receive Smith, and led them into the lounge where Mugabe stood up to

welcome his visitor.

"Smith was surprised with the warmth of the welcome, it was the contrast of what he expected to see. The man he regarded as a terrorist was very disarming," he said.

For the next few hours, Mugabe explained his party's policy.

"He ended by saying that if he won the elections, he was going to give two whites of Smith's choice cabinet posts in the government, one in finance and the other in agriculture.

"Smith tried to get himself to be included in one of those posts but Mugabe said that would not be diplomatically possible.

"Then they shook hands and an agreement was sealed. On the way back to his house, Smith said to me, 'This is a remarkable day for Rhodesia'."

Kucherera said Smith assured him that Walls and Muzorewa would know of the agreement by morning.

"Smith said we did not have to worry about them. He was the boss and the other guys were puppets," said Kucherera.