

To those who saw him, he was that rare creature in pre-war South West Wales, a black man. To those who got to know him, he was a good friend, a hard worker and a kind neighbour. But Gebuza Nungu was something else. He was a living link with Rorke's Drift, the legendary battle fought by a small band of British soldiers, which was immortalised for most of us in the film *Zulu*. The remarkable story of Gebuza, otherwise known as George Black, has recently come to light.

Who was the tall, imposing black man who lived in a bungalow called 'The Kraal' in Pennard? Several readers responded and between us all, together with the help of '*Dafen Recollections*' by Byron Davies (1) we have uncovered the colourful history of a Zulu warrior who laid down his assegai and conquered two local communities by personality alone. Gebuza, in his one known interview with the press in 1938, said he was born in Ulundi in 1870. According to him, his witch-doctor father was commander of the Zulus who broke the British square at Rorke's Drift on January 22<sup>nd</sup> 1879. Later he was one of the chiefs who were brought to Britain as prisoners with King Cetewayo. Far from being treated harshly, however, they were fêted and even had tea with Queen Victoria. When the chiefs were allowed home, their tales of Britain must have been eagerly absorbed by the young Gebuza. In 1898, when he was 28, he seized the chance to come to Britain with *The Savage South Africa Show*.

The show played at Earls Court for six months and Gebuza was one of the Zulus picked to appear in a royal command performance before the Prince of Wales, later Edward VII, when they gave an exhibition of tribal dancing and spear-throwing. When the show broke up, Gebuza became a lion tamer with the famous *Bostock and Wombell Touring Menagerie*. One of his trademarks was a lion's tooth suspended around his neck. By all accounts, Gebuza was well over 6ft tall and very handsome. He and the owner's daughter, who was said to be a suffragette, fell in love. Her family disowned them both. The menagerie was well known in South Wales – it was the same menagerie whose elephant Lizzie ended up in Swansea Museum – and possibly this was why Gebuza and his bride decided to go to Llanelli.

In his interview he merely recounted how he got off the train, walked along Station Road and went into the Cambrian Hotel to ask about lodgings. He soon found work in the Gorse Galvanizing Works in Dafen. And when his wife joined him they settled in Toft Place, Llanerch. Gebuza had already noticed how ready Llanelli people were to help him. He told his interviewer:

Though we were total strangers, people treated us as one of themselves. They used to bring us home-made tarts and, if they had been out shooting, woodcock and partridge.

As the first black man most of his fellow-workers had seen, Gebuza was an object of curiosity. "My job was as a furnace man and I remember how disappointed the workmen were when they saw me sweating," he said.

They thought that because I came from Africa the heat would have no effect on me. Visitors to the works always wanted to see me working. They liked to see my great black body shining in the light of the fire, and watch the play of my muscles.

Racist remarks were rare. "One day I was passing two little boys in the street, and one shouted after me, 'Black man'. The other said, 'That's not a black man. That's Georgie Black', the name I have always been known by in Llanelli." After 24 years in the Gorse works, the longest time he had ever spent in one place, Gebuza retired. As a token of their respect his workmates made him a special presentation, an occasion which affected him deeply.

For the last two years of his working life, Gebuza had commuted in a little two-seater car from Pennard in Gower, where he had built a bungalow with a thatched roof – 'The Kraal', ready for retirement. Gebuza's wife, a small, pale lady, was a recluse. Gebuza, now usually known as George or Mr. Nungu, was the opposite. "He was sociable and kindly, known to everyone as a real gentleman," said Byron.(1) "It seems he was also known as 'George the Black' and when asked if he found it offensive, replied, "No – if I was selling fish I'd be known as George the Fish". Mrs Mabel Whitehead, aged 84, remembers Gebuza Nungu with affection as a gentle giant who lived nearby in Pennard. "Everybody loved him," she said. "Although he was very tall and well built, he was kind and thoughtful, the sort of man who would do anything for anyone." His kindness sometimes had unexpected results, as when he offered to take her little boy Tony and another child to the local kindergarten. "We found out that the boys hadn't been anywhere near the kindergarten," Mrs Whitehead said.

Mr. Nungu had been taking them for walks on the cliffs, sitting one on each knee and telling them stories about his homeland and his witch-doctor father. "He told me he thought he could teach them more

with his stories than they could learn in kindergarten. But he was so apologetic when we said it had to stop. Nobody had the heart to be cross.” Mr Nungu was always very smart and well-dressed. “And if he hadn’t been coloured you’d have known him by the Union Jack which he always wore on his breast pocket,” said Mrs Whitehead. “He was immensely proud of being British. He wanted people to know he was British.”

During the Second World War Mr Nungu was a diligent member of the Home Guard. “He was proud of wearing the uniform,” said Mrs Whitehead. “Every Sunday morning, he and my late husband George, together with the other men, would go off to Home Guard duties and call in at the Southgate Country Club on the way home. He became an unofficial doorman there in his later life.”

Gebuza enjoyed the company of the poet Vernon Watkins, both were keen mushroom gatherers and the pair often met on the Pennard cliffs. Gebuza would swallow with relish all that Vernon rejected – elderly horse mushrooms and the maggot infested. “All good food, boy” he would say.

While patrolling the cliffs on Home Guard duties, Gebuza would sing some of the famous war-chants of his tribe. Vernon never liked to say these war-like songs sounded rather gentle and melancholy to an unaccustomed ear. During the war Gebuza was an indefatigable collector of scrap iron and among the many badges he proudly sported was a large WVS badge.

Of his pale and reclusive wife, Gebuza often told Vernon, “She is the black sheep of the family”. After Mrs Nungu died, people helped to look after Gebuza, taking him meals and doing his shopping. He died in the 1950s. The few who remember him believe he and his wife are buried at St Mary’s Church, Pennard.

## **Reference.**

(1) *Dafen Recollections* by Byron Davies, published Llanelli Borough Council, £10.

## **Acknowledgement.**

By kind permission of the *South Wales Evening Post*.