

Saima: "I remember Christmas and the smell of soup."

Saima was born in Angola. Around the age of five, she arrived in Czechoslovakia, where she spent several years growing up with foster families and in various institutions. Her homes included Bartošovice and Prachatice. However, in 1991, the Czechoslovak government decided to send Namibian orphans "back" to a country they had never lived in and where they knew no one: Namibia.

L: How did you come to Czechoslovakia?

S: I was born in Angola. My parents had fled from Namibia to Angola and lived in a refugee camp. My father was on the front lines, and my mother was in the camp. I was born there. My mother died when I was eight months old, so we were raised by my grandmother—not my biological one, but in those times, adults would take in children when their parents went abroad to study, were in the military, or didn't return. Children ended up in the camp with others. Then, the SWAPO movement, which fought for Namibia's independence, arranged with communist countries to take in some children and students. Fifty-six orphans, including me, were brought to Czechoslovakia. We arrived in Bartošovice; I was about five years old.

L: What memories do you have of your childhood in Czechoslovakia? What stands out to you?

S: Life was childlike and, of course, different from what we knew before. We realized we were no longer in a refugee camp; suddenly, we heard Czech, and we had caregivers, teachers, cleaners, and other people who cared for us. That's one of the things I remember.

Another memory is Christmas with snow and the smell of soup with parsley when we came inside after sledding. We'd enter the dining hall, and it smelled wonderful.

These are my fondest memories. That soup smell really stuck with me.

Christmas was great because there was snow. We arrived in 1985 during winter, and there was snow everywhere. We thought it was sugar, jumped off the bus, and each of us grabbed some "sugar." It turned out to be snow.

I think it was around 1988 or 1989; some of us were teenagers when we were sent to Prachatice in the Šumava region, where we all lived together in a dormitory. We stayed in rooms of two or three and learned various things in groups. I'd say Bartošovice was home for me, and Prachatice was a place of adolescence, where we learned, met new people, saw new things, and began to lead more independent lives. We had our own clubs; everyone had friends or a Czech family they visited on weekends. It was nice.

L: I'd like to ask about your return to Namibia. I believe it was in 1991. You were still relatively young. What was the hardest part for you? And what helped you? How did you cope with starting anew in a country you had no connection to?

S: Returning to Namibia was a big shock—a major culture shock. When I returned to the Czech Republic in 2019, it wasn't as hard as moving from Prachatice to Namibia.

It was also difficult because we weren't told that some of us no longer had parents. We were all together in a dormitory, waiting to be picked up. When the receptionist called someone's name, we all ran with them, helped with their luggage, and hoped our names would be called too—that our mom or dad would come for us. But for some, parents didn't come. Relatives we didn't know arrived, and they didn't know us.

That was... I don't even know how to describe it. We didn't even fully understand their language. We spoke Oshiwambo, but it has various dialects we didn't know, and we mixed in Czech. The hardest part was dealing with other children who laughed at us. We didn't know the culture or traditions.

My uncle picked me up, but I kept running away from him. I didn't want to be with him and his family because they didn't understand me, and I didn't know them. Life in the village was completely different. We had no water or electricity. Water was carried on the head, and if you couldn't do it, they scolded you.

I just thought about escaping and returning to the others, even though I didn't know where to find them. It was very hard for me, and I'm still coming to terms with it. I probably survived it all because I'm the kind of person who keeps moving forward and believes things will get better—if not this week, then next week, next month, or next

year. I never lost hope that everything would turn out well and that I'd be able to return to the Czech Republic someday.

L: You lived in Namibia for 28 years. Why did you decide to return after such a long time?

S: Throughout those 28 years in Namibia, I wanted to come back. When the internet and YouTube became available, I started searching for songs and fairy tales I remembered from my childhood in the Czech Republic, or names of people I knew. I tried everything.

At the same time, I believed I would find the others and that we'd reconnect.

L: Did you succeed? Did others return from Namibia to the Czech Republic?

S: Yes, I did. Some stayed in Namibia; some returned here in the late '90s as university students; some went back to Namibia after studying. But the opportunity to return to the Czech Republic was only available to those who learned about it in time. I found out in 1998 when I was already a mother with a son.

L: What helped you settle back in the Czech Republic?

S: The beginnings were very tough. I live in Benešov, and I'd say that even five years ago, there were no Africans living there, and if there were, they studied in Prague.

At first, I was employed through a work agency and didn't really understand what it entailed. I had no time for anything, not even learning Czech. I lived in a dormitory mostly with people from Moldova or Ukraine. Gradually, I became increasingly frustrated.

I came with a friend who had grown up with me in Czechoslovakia.

I also got sick, dealt with my health and disappointment with everything, and then depression set in. But even when I complain, feel sad, or don't sleep well, I wake up thinking I'll keep going and try to improve my situation.

L: How did you get in touch with Simi?

S: It was in 2021 when I left the work agency and started working directly where I had previously worked through the agency. I also moved and had to report my new address to the Ministry of the Interior. At the ministry, they asked where I worked and in what position. A month later, I received a letter stating that I was here illegally because the job I was doing wasn't the one I had applied for an employee card for, and because I hadn't notified them of changing employers. I was given an exit order. Official letters from the ministry aren't easy to understand. I asked people around me, and everyone sent me elsewhere until someone suggested I write an explanation of why I didn't want to leave.

So I truthfully wrote what had happened—that I didn't know I had to report changing employers. But even that didn't help. I went to the integration center in Benešov and to OPU in Prague, but everyone advised me to leave. Someone suggested I contact Professor Mildnerová, who had written a book about us called "Black Falcons." She advised me to reach out to Simi and the ombudsman. The ombudsman also advised me to leave, so Simi was my last hope.

When I called Simi, they immediately offered a consultation and asked me to bring all the documents I had received. The lawyer instantly understood the situation, knew our history with Czechoslovakia. She told me she couldn't promise anything but would consult and try.

Most importantly, they asked me if I wanted to stay and try, and I said yes.

Since then, whenever I receive documents from the Ministry of the Interior, I send them to Simi, where they review them and let me know. But it was probably too much for me; I started having severe depression. The lawyer at Simi offered me therapy. That's how I met therapist František. He helped me a lot; I felt relieved and had the strength to keep fighting.

I think I've tried everything Simi offers. Once I resolved my residency, I started going with Maruška to schools to share my story and talk about migration. I really enjoy that.

L: So Simi was the first place that told you they'd try?

S: Yes, exactly. They were willing not to give up. Often, they weren't sure because some procedures in the process hadn't been tried before. What was very important to me was that they kept asking me how I saw it—what I wanted, whether I wanted to try.

They equipped me with arguments. When I had to handle something with the ministry myself, I already knew what to say and what my rights were. And it always worked out.

L: Is everything resolved now?

S: Yes, first I had a two-year visa for the purpose of leave to remain; last year, I passed the Czech language exam and received permanent residency.

L: That's great, congratulations!

S: The exam itself is actually quite simple — the harder part is overcoming your own fear, especially if you're not used to writing much.

L: If you could send one message to people in the Czech Republic about Africa, what would it be? What do you think could help break down stereotypes, fight racism and discrimination, and help others avoid going through what you did when you returned?

S: I remember one situation that really stayed with me. We were visiting a friend at his cottage, and some of his other friends were there too. One of them kept his distance from me the whole time. Later, my friend told me not to take it personally — that that's just how he is. But then he explained my story to him, told him where I was from and why I was here. The next time we met, he greeted me normally, shook my hand, and we talked.

The problem is that a lot of Czechs think that anyone who looks or sounds different — whether they're from Africa or somewhere else — is here living off benefits. But we work here just like anyone else. Everything I do, I do honestly. It's not about skin color. And sometimes I even think that, in my heart, I'm more Czech than some people I see in the streets — people who just party, and then look at me and say “n****r” or “black face” and laugh.

Yes, maybe I and many other foreigners are more Czech at heart than those who only look the part.

L: I don't even know how to properly respond to that.

S: You know, I never saw it this way until Kateřina started writing about our story in the newspapers, and the film came out. I always thought that all of this — everything I went through — was normal. Because I didn't know anything else. My mom died when I was eight months old. I was raised by my grandmother. Then I was in Czechoslovakia, where I had a Czech family who loved me and wanted to adopt me. Then I was taken to Namibia. They wanted me to stay, but they didn't understand me — and didn't want to. I was always dealing with something, and I didn't even realize that this wasn't normal. But after the years I've now spent back in the Czech Republic, I can feel it. And I know — this isn't how any child should grow up. No one should have to live like this.