Typical Scottish Jewish girl makes home in Zambia after dumping legal career in UK

Lynne Mendelsohn runs an animal sanctuary in Livingstone: 'My Jewish identity is important and I'd like to be buried in the Jewish cemetery. I tell people it's my tribe'

By **SUE SURKES**

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LIVINGSTONE, Zambia — A 57-year-old former lawyer who describes herself as a "typical Scottish Jewish girl" dumped her round-the-clock professional lifestyle in the United Kingdom for a small town in Zambia, where she works (round the clock) running one of the country's few animal rescues.

Lynne Mendelsohn attended schools in Glasgow and Buckinghamshire and studied at Newcastle University. She took a law conversion course and worked mainly in London for construction and engineering firms.

In her later years, she focused on offshore wind projects, which involved much traveling and an average working day of 12 to 13 hours, six and a half days a week.

"Then a litigation case was settled before a trial, and for the first time, I had three weeks to take a break," Mendelsohn recalled.

“I got a friend to come with me to climb [Tanzania’s Mount] Kilimanjaro, go on safari, and visit Zanzibar. Those three weeks made me realize how burnt out I was and how much I didn’t want to spend the rest of my life doing this.”

“I was coming up to my 40th birthday, which is when you’re prodded to evaluate things,” she said.

Lynne Mendelsohn with a canine rescue. (Courtesy: Zambezi Animal Welfare Services)

A few months after her 40th, she closed the door on her law career and bought a lodge in Livingstone, the Zambian town closest to the iconic Victoria Falls.

While growing up, she had always had pets but lacked the skills to be a vet. “At 14, I was thrown out of the

physics class, and my friend did my math homework," she remembered.

At the same age, she began volunteering with disadvantaged and disabled children and orphans. She volunteered during her travels.
"I became very aware of my relative privilege," she said. "At Kilimanjaro, we were all standing in expensive climbing gear while local children ran around with distended bellies."

A classroom of children from rural homes in Zambia. (Royal Mayhem, CC BY-SA 4.0, Wikimedia Commons)

While running the lodge and its restaurant, Mendelsohn and a friend from the Kilimanjaro trip raised funds to help some 200 Zambian children attend school. (School tuition fees were subsequently abolished.)

She also started rescuing dogs and building kennels in a closed-off area of the lodge. “But a hotel and restaurant with barking dogs wasn’t great.”

Together with a Zambian with some veterinary knowledge, she launched an outreach program in 2015 that offered free rabies vaccinations for dogs and deworming and treatment against fleas. “There was a huge turnout,” she said. “We treated 250 dogs in one day.”

That led to the creation of the Zambezi Animal Welfare Services.

Feeding the cats at the Zambezi Animal Welfare Service (ZAWS) sanctuary in Livingstone, Zambia. (Courtesy: ZAWS)

The sanctuary she now runs is still the only one south of Lusaka and one of the only ones in the country.

After the COVID-19 pandemic halted tourism, Mendelsohn left the lodge and sold it.

She borrowed and recently bought a farm where she and animal-lover friends established the permanent sanctuary. It employs 12 Zambians.

Over the years, Mendelsohn has experienced a divorce and an armed robbery at the lodge which left two dead, one injured, and Mendelsohn with a period suffering PTSD.

Lynne Mendelsohn of the Zambezi Animal Welfare Services' sanctuary in Livingstone, Zambia, rescues a sick dog. (Courtesy: ZAWS)

She and her team are currently dealing with a string of traumatic dog deaths caused by donated dog food that was contaminated with ataflatoxin — a mold in maize, which is an ingredient in dog food.

Raising funds is hard, even though it costs just $2,500 per month to pay salaries (she takes no money), food for staff and the animals, electricity and water.

Bath time at the shelter run by the Zambezi Animal Welfare Service (ZAWS) in Livingstone, Zambia. (Courtesy: ZAWS)

But she has no plans to leave. She mentioned a one-legged man on crutches who walked three kilometers (just under two miles) with four dogs on string leads to get them vaccinated, spayed, and neutered. “How can I quit when there are people like him?” she said.

She continued, “It drives me crazy, but I love it here and have never felt so at home even though I’m very much a foreigner and, in many ways, very different. Many

Zambians are lovely, friendly people, and Livingstone is a small town where everyone knows me, whether I like it or not."

Community outreach by the Zambezi Animal Welfare Services, Livingstone, Zambia. (Courtesy: ZAWS)

Zambia and Livingstone have a rich Jewish history. Mendelsohn knows of one other Jew who resides there part-time today.

"As part of my identity, being Jewish is important," she said, "but the religious side is not for me. I tell people

here it’s like my tribe.”

The Jewish cemetery in Livingstone, Zambia, July 10, 2024. (Sue Surkes/Times of Israel)

She added, “I’m going to stay in Livingstone and would like to be buried in the Jewish cemetery.”

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