



Reminiscences of Cynthia Salvadori: Her Life and Work
1936-2011

By Judy Aldrick

It is a great privilege to be standing here today in Fort Jesus to talk about Cynthia, her life and work. Cynthia always loved coming to talk to the Friends, she enjoyed the ambience and the appreciative audience. I met her for the first time at a Fort Jesus talk in 1985 and our friendship and working relationship blossomed from there.

Cynthia was never one to speak much about her personal background, so I am indebted to her brother and sister in law for the following information about her parents and the early years of her life.

As Cynthia always liked to say, her travels started even before birth, as she was conceived in Kenya, though born in England on 7th November 1936. Her mother Joyce Woodforde Pawle was an artist of English ancestry, while her father Count

Massimo (Max) Salvadori, was an Italian aristocrat and a political activist who held strongly anti-fascist views. Imprisoned by Mussolini in 1932, he was released after one year and placed under house arrest, but soon after managed to escape using false documents to England where he married Joyce. He then went to Kenya as a political exile. The young couple rented a property in Njoro, called Equator farm, which had originally belonged to Lord Delamere and they lived there from 1934-36 before returning to England for the birth of their first child, Cynthia. In 1939 they moved on to America and Cynthia's younger brother Clem was born there in 1940. However the connection with Kenya left an indelible mark on Cynthia. Perhaps it was because her parents spoke fondly of their time in Kenya, that Cynthia came to identify herself with the country, where she was conceived

At the outbreak of war in Max Salvadori immediately offered his services in the fight against Nazi Germany and Hitler. He served in various capacities. In 1941 he was sent to Mexico, with his young family, as an undercover agent, his cover being a representative of the J Arthur Rank film company. In 1942 he joined the British army and was in the SOE, Special Operations Executive and in the Italian Resistance. After the war Max Salvadori returned to America, took a job teaching history and became a respected university professor at Smith College, Massachusetts and author of several books on modern political history. Cynthia was very proud of her father especially his democratic political views and his war record.

Africa and travel was in Cynthia's blood. John Hanning Speke one of the famous 19th century British African explorers was a relative on her mother's side, while the Haggards, both Ryder the writer and Jack first British consul in Lamu, were great uncles, also related on her mothers side. Cynthia wanted to follow in their footsteps. Immediately after leaving university where she studied anthropology, she married and with husband Phil went travelling through the Far East from Japan to Burma.

They got a teaching job in Ghana. As Cynthia subsequently told me, it was the opportunity of getting out of America and back to Africa, which really attracted her, not the man. Predictably the marriage was doomed, Cynthia was not cut out to be (as she puts it) a suburban schoolteachers wife. All she wanted to do was travel and then she met Andy Fedders. He was the man of her dreams, a free spirit and nomadic wanderer like herself. She walked out on her husband, much to her mother's disapproval and never went back.

The book we are launching here today – *On the Right Track* - starts at this point – when Cynthia meets up with Andy in Zambia at a prearranged rendez-vous and they start a new life together.

The three-volume travelogue was written as Cynthia's memorial to Andy, and their time together. It is autobiographical, but also a fascinating description of Africa its land, people and civilisation.

Better remembered nowadays for her later work documenting Asian religions, cultures and history, this book covers an earlier part of her life dating between 1967-81. Sharing a taste for adventure and life on the open road Cynthia and Andy went on a series of lengthy safaris through the regions of West, North and East Africa. They travelled as free spirits without fixed plans or a set time frame for their own enjoyment. As Cynthia explained they were not tourists but “good solid dilettantes poking their noses into odd corners” - as far from the beaten track as possible. They preferred to travel alone, on a shoestring, often dependent on the hospitality and kindness of strangers, interacting with the people of the areas they arrived at. They endured discomfort travelling by lorry, hitchhiking and sleeping rough. They had near escapes, brushes with officialdom and setbacks caused by closed borders and visa restrictions. They were even arrested and deported on a few occasions. To quote Cynthia again “there are only three things that seriously impede travelling in Africa – red tape, war and rains”. But usually their luck held and they got to the right place at the right time and were rewarded, by rare insights into African cultures undisturbed by westernisation. They saw peoples still wearing tribal costume and using

implements of a pre-industrial age, following long held traditional beliefs and customs. They went as privileged guests to religious rituals and festivals and gradually became experts on these matters. As Cynthia had an artistic eye for photography and Andy a talent for writing, on return to base, they put together accounts of their travels in articles and booklets in order to fund their next trip.

This way they managed to sustain the nomadic lifestyle they so enjoyed for several years, but it was a precarious existence. Eventually when the money ran out Andy took jobs as a camp manager. He often left Cynthia behind in Kenya to chase reluctant publishers, and oversee printing. This was the point when she began her own successful writing career.

Cynthia first started writing up her travels with Andy in 1983 in the format of a series of letters to her parents. This allowed her to write in small sections, with headings of place names and dates. In the early days she had not kept a diary or taken many notes so she had to work largely from memory, helped only by her maps and the photographs she had taken en route. After Andy's tragic early death in 1987, she had access to his papers and journals and revised the first version to include more detailed descriptions. Over the years she gradually added in more information only completing the manuscript a few months before her own death in 2011. Her family have published it posthumously, more or less exactly as she left it.

Three volumes of travels in Africa with Cynthia and Andy is quite a mouthful but taken in bite size morsels it is a fascinating read. The short sections all clearly marked means you can dip into whichever part of Africa interests you. It is a wonderful conglomeration of erudite history and anthropology mixed in with Cynthia's delightfully forthright and eccentric views. Horses and cats of course get a mention - anyone who was cruel to animals was immediately black listed. She had a deep rooted dislike of red tape and thought many of the present borders between countries, artificial and unnecessary, created by colonial powers for their convenience, rather than reflecting reality on the ground.

These travels undertaken nearly fifty years ago remind us how much Africa has changed. Several countries they visited, notably, Libya and Somalia, are now war torn and closed to tourism of any sort. The colourful dress, or lack of it, traditional artefacts and initiation rites they saw are all rapidly being replaced by a drab monochrome over-coating of westernisation. As well as being a pleasure to read, this book is a valuable record of a vanishing civilisation.

As I read on, memories of my far less hard-core safaris with Cynthia surged back. I remembered how without much forward planning we would set off in her ancient canvas roofed, open sided Suzuki jeep to do Marsabit or see Lake Victoria, stopping off on various detours along the way. It was a bit like being on horseback or on a camel, another of Cynthia's favoured forms of transport, when not hitching a lift on a lorry. We seldom managed upward of 30 mph. It is incredible how much more you actually see and appreciate at this speed and when more or less open to the elements.

On the way there would be frequent stops to have an impromptu meal with a generous Asian household or an overnight stay when night fell. Cynthia's gift for friendship was astonishing and no one seemed to mind when she pitched up out of the blue. Her presence was its own compensation. She was always so appreciative and could listen sympathetically as well as keep the conversation flowing. We also stayed at Catholic Missions, clean and basic, much recommended by Cynthia

On other occasions we went in search of the Parsee of Faza, re-discovered Zanzibar before it became a hot tourist destination and went pony trekking in the Bale Mountains of Ethiopia.

One trip was when my parents from London came to stay in 1996 and I took them to Lamu to see the dhows. Cynthia, who happened to be in Lamu at the same time, suggested a walking expedition across Pate Island. At very short notice, we hired the museum boat and a guide equipped with donkey and coconuts to sustain us along the way and carry anyone whose stamina might falter. First stop Faza and a welcome soda at our guide's family residence. As we sat on a bench in the shade of the makuti roof, my father a retired doctor was alarmed to see our host remove from his well

worn jacket pocket several antibiotic pills covered in fluff, which he proceeded to dole out one by one to grateful patients. Not exactly NHS or received medical practice! We then walked to Siu through coconut plantations and past Swahili tombs and saw the fortress rising unexpectedly amongst the mangrove swamps. We carried on, with one or two coconut breaks, to Pate and its ruins. Yes, what a welcome sight, our boat was there, waiting to take us back to Lamu. With Cynthia as our knowledgeable tour leader, it was an unforgettable experience. We enjoyed fresh crabs that evening at the Lamu Palace Hotel cooked by the former head chef from the Castle in Mombasa. All sadly long gone now. But some of you here may remember the Lamu trips later organised for Friends of Fort Jesus and a very memorable trip to Zanzibar – inspired by these earlier visits with Cynthia.

Cynthia's writing career really took off with 'Through Open Doors, A View of Asian Cultures in Kenya,' which first came out in 1983. A second revised edition was published in 1989. This book was a revelation to most people, who had not realised just how many different religions and communities made up the Asian peoples resident in Kenya. It also proved a wake up call for Kenyan Asians who suddenly became more interested in their own family history and background.

In 1997 'We Came in Dhows, Stories of the Indian Pioneers in Kenya' came out as a boxed limited edition. It was a mammoth work, which had taken years of research and effort to collate. Cynthia was always concerned that although British Pioneering Settlers had written endlessly about their early experiences in Kenya, Indian settlers had not, despite their early arrival and important contribution to the country. She thought it was time to correct the balance.

The book was a great success, and a notable contribution to Kenyan history. It inspired other Kenyan Asian authors to write about their ancestors and collect memories of their community members.

I worked with Cynthia on We Came in Dhows helping her with her researches and interviews at the Coast. Often Cynthia would stay at my house, and I would accompany her going out and about in Mombasa and beyond, searching out interesting stories and old photographs. Later on we worked together for our joint

effort *Two Indian Travellers, East Africa 1902-5*, which also came out in 1997. It was published by Friends of Fort Jesus and paid for by contributions from various Asian charitable trusts, impressed with the work Cynthia was doing.

Cynthia was a good friend of the Parsee human rights lawyer Pheroze Navrojee, who lived in Nairobi. It was when he showed her his grandfather's account of a journey taken from Zanzibar to Uganda in 1905, that the idea of a book about early Indian travellers in East Africa began to germinate. The problem was finding enough material, but providentially another personal account turned up in Mombasa. This belonged to A E N Adamjee, an old Bohra merchant who sat in an office in Old Town Mombasa. He was originally more my friend than Cynthia's. I would pop in for a chat whenever I visited the Old Town as he was a fount of local knowledge. His family had settled in Mombasa before the arrival of the British and had been ivory traders. In conversation I discovered that his late father Ebrahimjee Noorbhai Adamjee, as a young man, had written a journal describing journeys taken up country in the early 1900's, one of the very few East African Asians to leave a documented record of the early years. Cynthia was excited by the news of such an important find. It was hard work prizing it out of him, but Cynthia's persuasive tactics eventually won the day. This journal, hand written in a ledger, forms the first part of *Two Indian Travellers*. Nairobi friend, Shariffa Keshavji, helped Cynthia with the translation from Gujarati into English. I then tracked down all those mentioned in the account for the explanatory notes. As only 700 copies were ever printed *Two Indian Travellers* is a rare book these days.

The sparsely populated areas of the NFD had always attracted Cynthia and she would disappear for long periods into the borderlands of Ethiopia and Somalia living amongst the nomadic peoples and studying their customs. She would visit the settlements, riding on a mule with an interpreter by her side with her camera and notebook and became a familiar and trusted figure. The children would run after her calling *Ako Gange, Ako Gange* – Grandmother on a Mule. Father Tablino, a Catholic Priest at the Marsabit Mission was a good friend with a common interest in anthropology.

She translated his book from the Italian : *The Gabra, Camel Nomads of Northern Kenya*, was reprinted in English in 1999. Wache Guyo a schoolmaster in Marsabit from the small Burji tribe worked with her helping in her researches and she produced articles about the Rendille, Gabra and Borana – the ‘forgotten people’. The Borana culture particularly fascinated her and she then collaborated with a Dutch missionary based in Ethiopia called Ton Leus, to produce a Dictionary of Borana Culture, which was published in Addis Ababa in 2006. The plight of marginalised peoples aroused her sympathy and in 2000 she wrote a report for the Kenya Human Rights Commission about the areas of Moyale and Marsabit describing the difficult conditions of those who lived on the fringes, often in poverty and ignored by central government.

One of her last projects, was to edit a series of forgotten letters, which she discovered in the British Embassy in Addis Ababa. The book that came from this was entitled *Slaves and Ivory Continued: letters from R C R Whalley, HBM Consul in Maji. 1930-35*. I gave some assistance with this book as well. It particularly interested me as it followed on from the Adamjee account in the Two Indian Travellers. It was set in the lawless area of the borderlands between Ethiopia, Kenya and South Sudan where Baluchi ivory hunters roamed beyond the arm of the law and slavery continued unchecked. Poor Consul Whalley though diligently sending in his reports was given little encouragement as he laboured on in what was considered a backwater of no consequence. His consulship ended abruptly when the Italians invaded. This too must be a rare book.

At age 70 her research work and writing showed no sign of slowing down. She collaborated with Shaila Mauladad Fisher and produced a lavishly illustrated book about the Punjabi community in East Africa. This came out in 2009. Sadly Cynthia by this stage was too incapacitated to attend the launch party in Nairobi.

A bad fall in Ethiopia in 2006 had damaged her hip and she was becoming increasingly lame and worst of all she could no longer ride. Refusing to seek medical intervention her condition steadily worsened and lead eventually to her death at the comparatively young age of 74.

Cynthia had a wonderful gift for making friends, and the conversations and correspondence with her friends meant a great deal to her. But she was also ruthless in ending friendships, a tendency which became more marked as she grew older and less tolerant. The diverse group who made up her friends demonstrate the breadth of her interests and her multi-faceted personality. Here I mention just a very few, in no particular order, who I was fortunate enough to meet. It is after all, by the companionship one keeps that the person is truly known.

There was Anna Merz: She was a rich and eccentric Swiss lady who founded the Lewa Rhino Sanctuary. Cynthia stayed in the small guest cottage next to her main house. It was one of her early bases, where she holed up while Andy was away and it was here she started her writing career. Situated in a private game park with magnificent scenery, yet with a small cluster of houses and amenities close at hand, it suited Cynthia. There was a continuous stream of tourists visiting, providing the social contact she so enjoyed.

Helen van Houten was another close friend: She provided Cynthia with a handy Nairobi base for many years. Helen lived in a sprawling house in Karen, with a room permanently reserved for Cynthia and her beloved black cat, Ursa. Wonderfully easy going and laid back, she worked as an editor for various UN agencies and was an expert on book lay out and presentation. When I knew her she had left a husband somewhere in America and now shared her life with a Kikuyu boyfriend called Paul. She was devastated when he died of a sudden heart attack. The long friendship between Cynthia and Helen ended in a petty bust up over an editorial matter. Cynthia was notoriously prickly and protective of her manuscripts and hated to have her wording changed in any way.

John and Kay Blackwell: John was a manager for Del Monte farms. When I knew them they lived in a lovely old settler style farmhouse in Makuyu. Cynthia would house sit when they were both away or when Kay spent time in America. Cynthia kept a horse here for many years. She had known Kay before marriage to John,

when like Cynthia she had been a free spirited, hippy American back packer travelling in Africa. The friendship endured but on retirement John and Kay moved to Gilgil and they saw each other less often.

Jony Waite: was Cynthia's oldest friend living in Kenya – a talented artist and another American free spirit, who on her travels to Kenya had fallen in love with the country, married a White Kenyan and remained. When Cynthia decided to leave her husband she went to stay with Jony who was then married to David Hopkirk and lived at Athi River. Later both Andy and Cynthia often stayed at the Hopkirk ranch basing themselves in a spacious ramshackle hut originally intended to garage farm vehicles. Then when Jony divorced and bought herself an old Arab mansion in Lamu town– Cynthia continued to come and stay. This was Cynthia's final resting place. She died in Lamu in Jony's house.

Andrew Hall was another friend an artist, antique dealer and occasional camp manager. He had houses in Old Town Mombasa and in Zanzibar and lived with his American girlfriend Nancy in relaxed commune style. Cynthia was a frequent and welcome guest. Andrew Hall sadly died at a young age leaving a posthumous daughter and an inheritance tangle.

Roland Minor and Errol Trzbinski: were fellow residents in Lamu. They provided congenial company in her latter years, swapping books and gossip.

Zarina Patel: outspoken and feisty a political activist and writer. She and Cynthia were good friends for many years and Cynthia encouraged her to write the book about her grandfather: *A M Jeevanjee 'Challenge to Colonialism*. Eventually however their strong views clashed and the friendship cooled.

Then there were her myriad of Asian encounters, such generous people who welcomed her into their homes. She interviewed them at length, ate with them and became friends. Her Asian network of friends stretched the length and

breadth of Kenya. I tended to meet the ones at the Coast, not upcountry, so this is just a small sample - a glimpse into her life.

Her most favoured Asian friends in Mombasa were the Sondhis. Her particular friend was Shirin Sondhi. They were an unusual couple, as she was a Muslim Ismaili, while her husband Jagdish was a Hindu with luxurious moustaches – perhaps he reminded Cynthia of Andy as he also sported splendid moustachios. Shirin suffered badly from arthritis and was a fan of alternative medicine and was always trying out new dietary remedies. They lived in a large family compound in Tudor. Younger brother Kuldip Sondhi lived next door, with his Norwegian wife Aase. Jagdish ran a warehousing company while Kuldip was a successful hotelier and one time Chairman of the Tourist Association in Mombasa. I enjoyed many elegant meals with them and Cynthia, seated at their enormous dining table. It was like attending a grand dinner party from a previous age, with proper conversation and everyone on their best behaviour. Eventually they went to live in Vancouver, Canada. They were rich, cultured and well connected and very supportive of Cynthia's projects.

Then at the other end of the scale there was Kulsum who was vastly overweight and lived in a shared dwelling in the back streets of Old town Mombasa. She had multiple health and financial problems. Her younger son had been sent to live with a rich and childless relative. This was traditional practice for Indian families who could not afford to look after their own children. Kulsum was always cheerful and so happy to see us and was a tremendous cook. A kind and lovely lady she peddled Indian fabrics out of suitcases to help make ends meet. Illness caught up with her however.

The Pujara sisters were another of Cynthia's favourites. There were at least seven of them, all unmarried, but well educated, daughters of a Mombasa ivory trader who fell on hard times. When I knew them they ran a school in their dilapidated house, but eventually had to leave before it fell down. This was Leven House, one of the most historic in Mombasa Old Town. It was great fun visiting them there, but less so when they moved.

There were many others who entertained Cynthia in their houses, plying her with refreshments as they told her the stories of their ancestors. She would take the information down in her notebook to be written up later, carefully taking names and contacts, so she could follow up. It was all done with great attention to detail and meticulous organisation but without seeming so. In her work she was extremely disciplined and professional. I went with Cynthia on many occasions to Kilifi and Takaungu, to Rabai and Malindi into the backstreets and down narrow unmade roads and watched Cynthia at work. It was always an adventure.

Cynthia had a passion for lame ducks. She liked to spend hours discussing their problems and trying to find a solution. But Cynthia's interventions were not always successful, though her intentions were good. One of her disappointments was Bubbles (not her real name), a young American art student who Cynthia met when she was working at Jony's Gallery Watatu in Nairobi. She lived with a handsome Luhya pilot, who was killed in a plane crash. Cynthia consoled her after the tragedy and encouraged her ambition to continue her studies of African art. Cynthia pulled out all the stops. She organised a scholarship for her to study and arranged free lodgings for her with Cynthia's recently widowed mother. Bubbles stayed for about a year but did not complete her course. She returned to Kenya became a Muslim and went to live with a former beach boy in Lamu. Cynthia was not impressed, especially when they ended up both living in Lamu – but not on speaking terms.

Cynthia was an expert traveller travelling light with a few essential clothes, her laptop and trusty notebook. Through long practice as a houseguest, she knew the rules, how not to overstay a welcome and when to move on. She was an early riser but liked a siesta, was a cryptic crossword addict, a grand master at scrabble and a glutton for a good detective story.

Cynthia's suicide in Lamu, on June 7, 2011 was a devastating blow to all who knew her well. Completely bedridden, lonely and in pain, the loss of her pet cat proved the

final straw. The death of Andy in 1987 had hit her hard and she never truly got over his loss. She claimed he taught her how to write and how to live and in her final messages sent on postcards to her friends she wrote that she was going to join Andy.

Cynthia was the descendent of a line of famous explorers and travellers in Africa. She wanted to follow in their footsteps, break new ground in Africa and leave her mark. But in the twentieth century it was hard to find unexplored corners of Africa or topics that had not already been extensively researched. Money meant little to Cynthia, but she wanted to be remembered for her writing and research work. She wanted to add to human knowledge. For her success meant becoming a source for reference, being quoted in footnotes and acknowledgements. She set herself high standards and wrote because she wanted to, choosing only those subjects that interested her. Some recognition did come late in her lifetime, but perhaps the greater part is yet to come

The title of her posthumous book being launched today, *On the Right Track*, is most appropriate as Cynthia believed in following her instincts and her love of travel was one of her most distinctive attributes

In the words of Cynthia: "The gods know best, we should follow whichever track they seem to be indicating". Certainly in her case, they lead her to the right track, as she explored the fast vanishing cultures of Africa and went on to become an expert in the Indian Communities of East Africa and a prolific writer and notable anthropologist and historian.