

An African Trading Empire
The Story of Susman Brothers
& Wulfsohn, 1901-2005
Hugh Macmillan



I.B. TAURIS

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WMM 1885–1974
MCMM 1908–2003

IN PIAM MEMORIAM

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1901–2005

HUGH MACMILLAN

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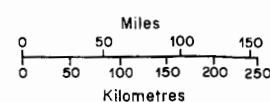
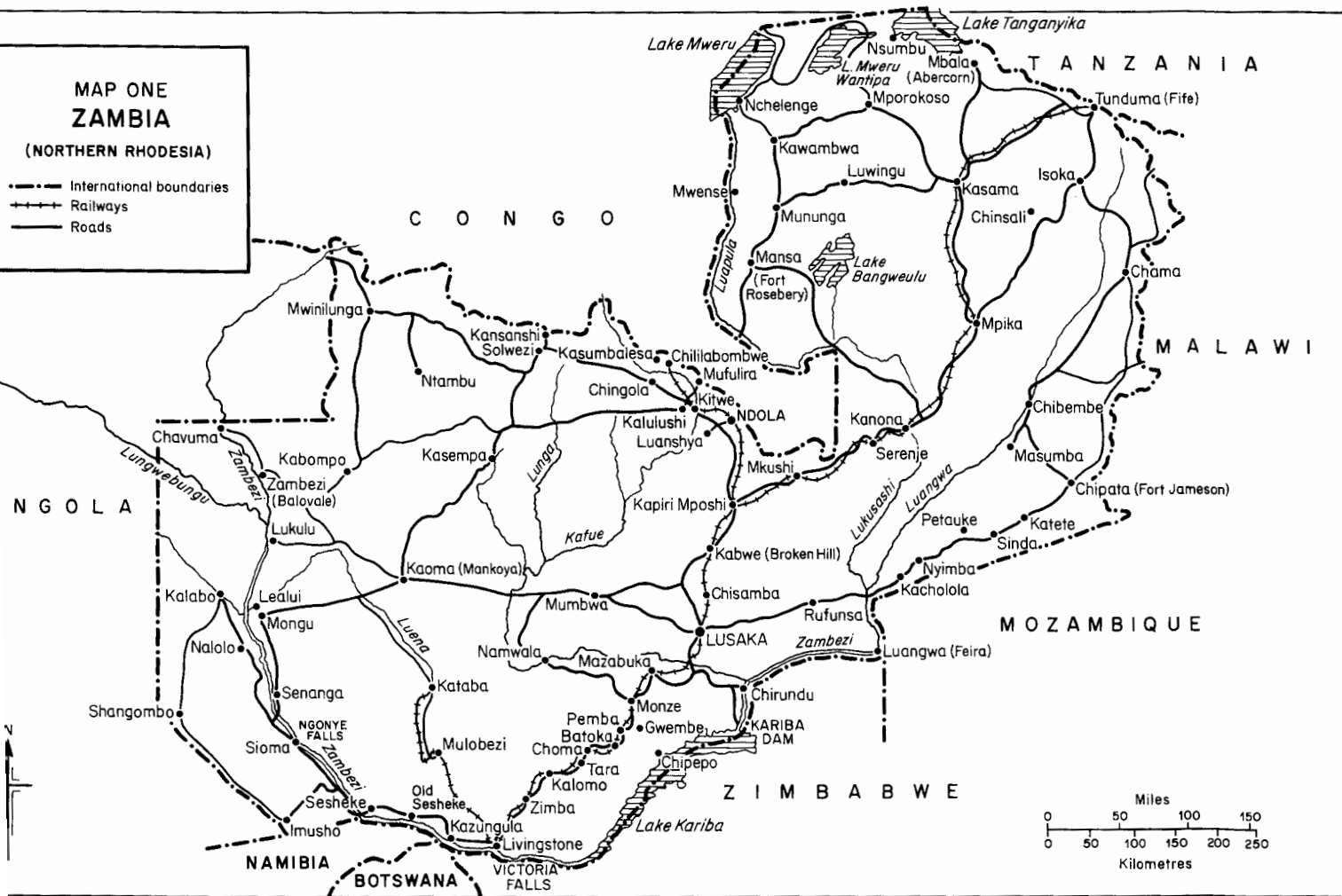
AE	Agricultural Enterprises
Afcom	African Commercial Motors
AGM	Annual General Meeting
BNA	Botswana National Archives
BP	Bechuanaland Protectorate
BSA	British South Africa
CAMS	Central African Motors
CBC	Campbell Booker Carter
CDC	Colonial/Commonwealth Development Corporation
CMCB	Cattle Marketing and Control Board
CS	Chief Secretary
CVO	Chief Veterinary Officer
DC	District Commissioner
GG	Governor-General
GS	Government Secretary
HC	High Commissioner
Indeco	Industrial Development Corporation
LM	Livingstone Museum
MMD	Movement for Multi-party Democracy
NAZ	National Archives of Zambia
NIEC	National Import and Export Company
Nortex	Northern Rhodesia Textiles
NR	Northern Rhodesia
NRG	Northern Rhodesian Government
NTC	Ngamiland Trading Company
PP	pleuro-pneumonia
RC	Resident Commissioner
RHL	Rhodes House Library, Oxford
RM	Resident Magistrate
RMH	Rhodesian Mercantile Holdings

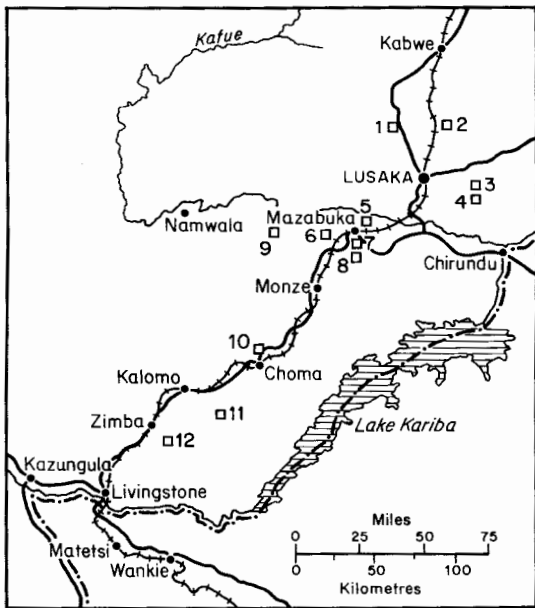
RP	Rabb Papers
RST	Rhodesian Selection Trust
SA	South Africa
SB	Susman Brothers
SBA	Standard Bank Archives
SB & W	Susman Brothers & Wulfsohn
SP	Susman Papers
SR	Southern Rhodesia
TZI	Trans Zambezi Industries
UDI	Unilateral Declaration of Independence
UFP	United Federal Party
UNIP	United National Independence Party
WP	Wulfsohn Papers
ZA	Zimbabwe Archives
ZANU	Zimbabwe African National Union
ZAPU	Zimbabwe African People's Union
ZCBC	Zambia Consumer Buying Corporation
ZRC	Zambesi Ranching Corporation/Zambesi Ranching and Cropping
ZSM	Zambesi Saw Mills
ZCCM	Zambia Consolidated Copper Mines

MAP ONE ZAMBIA

(NORTHERN RHODESIA)

- - - International boundaries
- + - Railways
- Roads





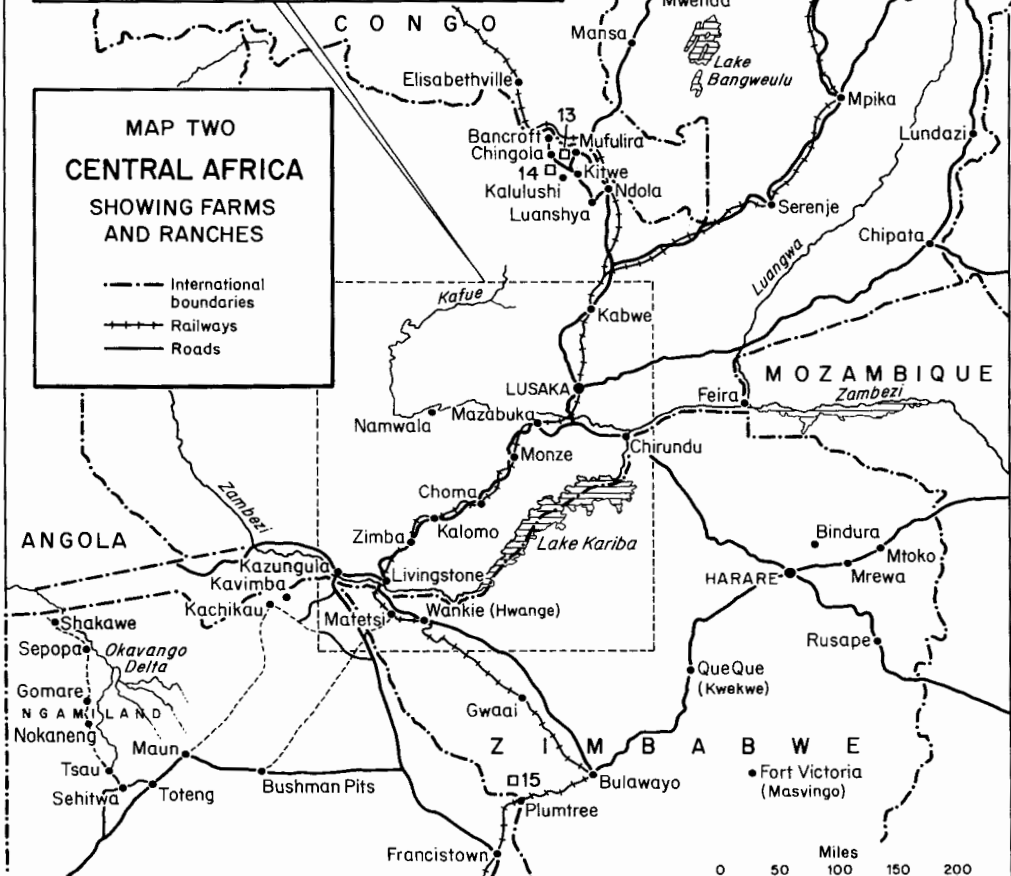
□ Key to farms and ranches:

- 1 Chisamba Ranch
- 2 Kalangwa Estates
- 3 Rietfontein Ranch
- 4 Leopard's Hill Ranch
- 5 Nanga Ranch
- 6 Heales Estates
- 7 Wolverton
- 8 Kaleya Estates
- 9 Lachinvar
- 10 Choma Farms
- 11 Kala Ranch Ltd
- 12 Forsyths Estates Ltd
- 13 Chambishi
- 14 Kansuswa
- 15 Brunopeg Ranch

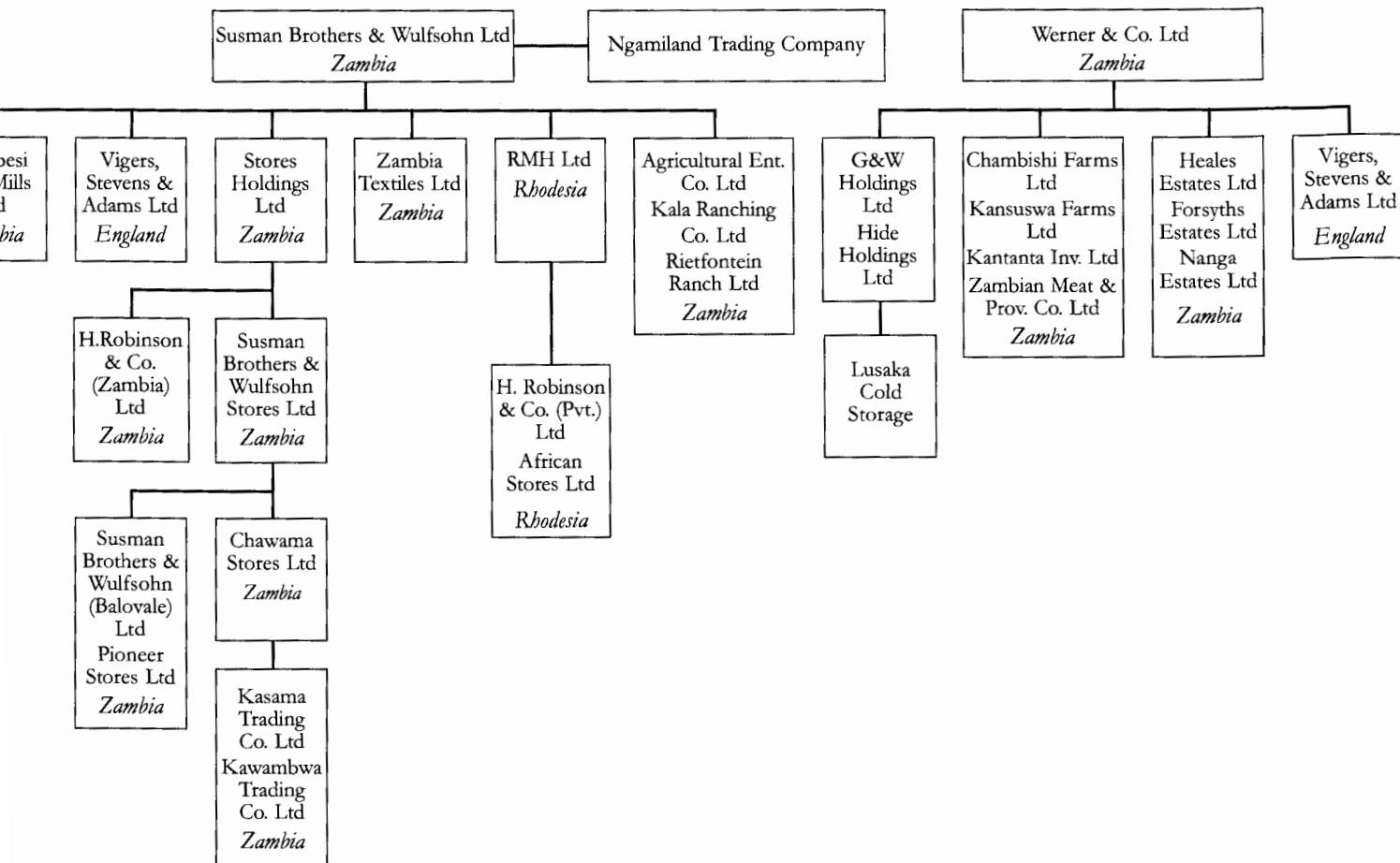


**MAP TWO
CENTRAL AFRICA
SHOWING FARMS
AND RANCHES**

- International boundaries
- Railways
- Roads



ORGANIZATION OF MAIN COMPANIES IN THE SUSMAN BROTHERS AND WULFSOHN GROUP, 1966



CHAPTER 1

From Lithuania to Barotseland: The African and Baltic Backgrounds

This is the story of a family business. It has operated in many countries, and under many different names, but it is best known as Susman Brothers & Wulfsohn. The main focus of its activities has always been in south-central Africa. The story begins in the heyday of imperialism and touches several European empires: the Russian, the British, the German and the Portuguese, as well as a Eurasian one, the Turkish and, more importantly, an African one – the Lozi. It could start at any one of several different places and times: in Russia in 1876, in Cape Town in 1896, or in Francistown, Bechuanaland, in 1900. But the really decisive moment occurred just over a century ago, in April 1901. It was then that two brothers, Elie and Harry Susman, crossed the Zambezi in dugout canoes and landed on its north bank at Kazungula in what is today Zambia. What is special about Kazungula? Who were the Susman brothers? Where did they come from? How did they get to Kazungula? Why were they there?

Kazungula is not a conventional beauty spot, but it has its own charms. Colin Harding, first commandant of the British South Africa Company's Barotseland Police, spent three weeks at Kazungula late in 1899 waiting for boats to take him up the Zambezi to Lealui. He provided this most evocative pen-portrait of the place:

Kazungula is by no means a sanatorium, but though unhealthy, the beauty of the 460 yards of water that divided us from the opposite bank was very great. The sunsets were glorious, lighting up the river as evening drew on with a glow of colour of exquisite variety and beauty. Occasionally we would sail out to pass an hour or two down the reaches in a welting flood of crimson and gold in the west. The far-off cry of some wild bird alone breaking the glowing silence of the evening, while, in spite of the scene of romance and dreams around, we would practically replenish our larder with the large tiger-fish

which abound at this point, and make an excellent dish for the hungry traveller eaten under the dim light of the stars and the brighter one of our own cheery camp fire.¹

Someone standing on the river bank at Kazungula in Zambia today, and looking south across the Zambezi, can see, in midstream on the right, a reed-fringed island with low bush which is the eastern tip of Namibia's Caprivi Strip. On the other side of the island, the Chobe River, a major tributary, enters the Zambezi and separates Namibia from Botswana. Straight ahead on the south bank of the river is the boundary between Zimbabwe and Botswana. This is the only place where Botswana touches the Zambezi River. It is the only place in the world where four countries meet at one place – an imaginary point in the middle of the Zambezi. The boundary of a fifth country, Angola, with Zambia and Namibia, lies not much more than 100 miles to the west.

This political and geographical peculiarity is one of the many strange consequences of the late nineteenth-century Scramble for Africa in which the major Western European powers, Great Britain, France and Germany, and some smaller ones, carved up the continent between themselves. In a deal done with Britain in 1890, without reference to local rulers or people, Germany acquired a pan-handle of territory, much of it periodically flooded, which gave its colony of South West Africa at least nominal access to the Zambezi. This became known in German as the Caprivi Zipfel and in English as the Caprivi Strip. It was named after the little-known chancellor who succeeded Bismarck. Its anomalous existence – it was described by the eminent geographer Frank Debenham as 'the ridiculous Caprivi Strip, that enormity of political geography' – is the reason for Kazungula's uniqueness.²

Kazungula, which is thirty-five miles upstream from the Victoria Falls, just above the Katombora Rapids, and just below the gentler rapids at Kambove, has been for more than a century, and is still today, an important Zambezi crossing-point. It is the main point of entry for trucks carrying goods from South Africa to Zambia, the Congo and Malawi. Some return empty, but others carry copper and cobalt from the Copperbelt of Zambia and the Congo, or tea and tobacco from Malawi. As there is no bridge, trucks and their trailers are carried across the river on a motorised pontoon. Although bridges have been built across the Zambezi further downstream at the Victoria Falls, at Chirundu and within Mozambique at Tete, Kazungula has retained its significance. It is the most important point of direct contact between the countries of the South African Customs Union and those to the

north. The existence of this river-crossing allows trucks to travel between the north and the south without entering Zimbabwe.

One hundred years ago, the Scramble for Africa was virtually complete on paper, but not nearly complete on the ground. An up-to-date atlas of the world would have indicated that Kazungula was, at least in theory, the meeting place of four countries: German South West Africa, the British protectorates of Bechuanaland, 'Barotseland–North-Western Rhodesia', and Southern Rhodesia. The last two territories were under the control of the British South Africa Company, better known as the Chartered Company. The Germans had not yet occupied the Caprivi Strip and were in the end to do so for only five years – between 1909 and 1914. It remained under the effective control of King Lewanika, the ruler of Bulozhi, an African kingdom, almost an empire, which the British called Barotseland. The British had not yet taken control of the northern part of the Bechuanaland Protectorate, nor had their surrogate – the Chartered Company – taken effective control of Barotseland.

For many years the Kazungula crossing was the only way into the Lozi kingdom from the south. From about 1874 until his death in 1888, the keeper of this gate to Barotseland was George Westbeech, an English ivory trader who had befriended King Mzilikazi and his son and heir, Lobengula, at Bulawayo in the 1860s. He went on in the 1870s to befriend Sipopa, king of the Lozi, and his eventual successor, Lubosi Lewanika, who seized power in Bulozhi in 1877. Sipopa had latterly ruled from Sesheke in the Zambezi valley, but Lewanika returned the capital to the central flood plain, 250 miles to the north. He made his headquarters at Lealui. Lewanika valued Westbeech for his links with Lobengula, and for his ability both to prevent Ndebele attacks and to keep out undesirable white traders. Westbeech made his base at Pandamatenga, about fifty miles south of Kazungula, but he also had stores at various times at Lishoma, ten miles to the south of the Zambezi, at Sesheke and, for a while, at Kazungula itself. In return for services rendered, including the supply of guns and powder, Lewanika granted Westbeech the exclusive right to hunt elephants in the Linyanti-Chobe marshes – the future Caprivi Strip.

Kazungula became the terminus of Westbeech's Road, also known as the Old Hunters' Road. Westbeech developed it as a wagon route in the 1870s and 1880s. It was a continuation of the Missionaries' Road, which led northwards from Shoshong in Khama's Ngwato kingdom. The road bypassed Lobengula's Ndebele kingdom, leaving its boundaries to the east, but also avoided the tsetse-fly belts of the Kalahari, and the Makgadikgadi saltpan,

which lay to the west. A succession of traders, travellers and explorers, including Serpa Pinto, Emil Holub and Frederick Courtney Selous, as well as aspiring missionaries, all passed this way in the 1870s and 1880s.

Westbeeck eased the way into Barotseland for François Coillard, representative of the Paris Mission, and obstructed the way for the Jesuits, who had reached Kazungula in 1880. The Paris Mission was French, Protestant and evangelical, but drew many of its missionaries from Switzerland and Italy. Coillard had worked for many years in Basutoland. His wife was Scots, and he was sympathetic to the extension of British influence in south-central Africa. In the years after 1885, his mission established stations at Sesheke and Lealui, the upper and lower capitals of the kingdom, as well as at Senanga, Sefula and Kazungula itself. Lewanika wanted missionaries because he realised the benefits that might flow from Western education and technology. He also sought a British protectorate, like the one established for the benefit, more or less, of Khama, and other Tswana rulers, in Bechuanaland in 1885.³

Lewanika was never very securely established in the kingdom where he had seized power. He had to deal with two major rebellions within the first decade of his reign. In one of them, in 1884, he was forced to flee his capital and it took him more than a year to regain his throne. Westbeeck thought that the Lozi kingdom was like a republic and that Lewanika lived in 'mortal dread' of being overthrown by the chiefs. Alfred St Hill Gibbons, hunter and explorer, who passed through the kingdom in 1895–6 and again in 1898–9, described it as '... a heterogeneous regime embracing a score of "quondam" independent tribes, speaking many different languages, each retaining and influenced by its own tribal customs and characteristics, some governed directly by the king, others through satraps or governors selected by him from among the members of his family, and others again by subject chiefs'.⁴ The kingdom had many of the characteristics of a nineteenth-century European empire. It was large, extending over 250,000 square miles, the same size as the then German Empire, though with a very much smaller population. It was also polyglot and multi-ethnic. The ruling Lozi, or Luyi, people made up a minority of the population, even within the historical heartland of the central plain. Many of the outlying peoples, such as the Luvale, the Kaonde, the Ila and the Tonga, paid tribute to the king, but were not directly ruled by him. The effective language of government was Silozi, a variant of a South African language, Sesotho, which had been imported into Buluzi in the 1840s and had become the lingua franca in this multi-lingual area. This was the language of the Kololo invaders from the south who took power in the

Zambezi valley from the Luyi ruling group between the 1840s and the 1860s.

Until the end of the nineteenth century, ivory was the most valuable export from the Lozi kingdom. Lewanika's control over ivory was vital to his economic survival. Many of the guns, and much of the powder, which were essential for elephant hunting, came from the south, but Portuguese and Ovimbundu, or Mambari, traders also imported these commodities from the west. There were also contacts with Arab, Swahili and Nyamwezi traders from the north. Lewanika did not himself engage in the slave trade. He refused, for example, to sell slaves to a Portuguese trader who visited Lealui in 1895, but slave caravans were encountered on the northwestern frontiers of his dominions until the eve of the First World War. These slaves were usually bought by Ovimbundu traders and were destined for use on plantations within Angola. They were no longer exported from the continent of Africa. Although Lewanika did not engage in the slave trade, forms of slavery or serfdom were essential features of production in Buluzi. Lewanika's armies continued to raid neighbouring and subject peoples, such as the Ila and Tonga, for captives and cattle until well into the 1890s. Slave, captive and tribute labour was essential for agricultural production at royal headquarters such as Lealui, Sesheke, Nalolo and Libonda, as well as for the construction of mounds and canals in the plain. Although slavery was formally abolished in 1906, some people continued to work as slaves into the 1920s. The memory of slave status lasted much longer.⁵

Even though Lewanika controlled a state that had depended on raiding to increase or replenish supplies of labour and cattle, he continued to live in fear of attack by his more militaristic neighbour, Lobengula, and his Ndebele state. Westbeech's death in 1888 left a power vacuum on the southern boundaries of the Lozi kingdom. Fear of the Ndebele led Lewanika in 1890 to sign an agreement with Frank Lochner, a representative of the British South Africa Company, encouraged to do so by François Coillard. The Lochner Concession became the basis of the company's claims to control Lewanika's territory. The British South Africa Company was financed by Cecil Rhodes and Alfred Beit from the profits that they derived from the exploitation of Kimberley diamonds and Witwatersrand gold. It had been granted a royal charter by Queen Victoria in 1889, which authorised it to occupy and control, on behalf of Great Britain, the region between the Limpopo and Zambezi rivers. The charter was extended to the north of the Zambezi in 1893, but the company had to fight two wars against the Ndebele and Shona peoples to establish its control in the south, and it was slow

to move into the north. Lewanika always distrusted the company and hoped for a protectorate that would be administered directly by the Colonial Office in London. He knew that Khama, whom he saw as a role model, enjoyed a considerable degree of autonomy under Colonial Office rule in the Bechuanaland Protectorate.⁶

Robert Coryndon, one of Cecil Rhodes's protégés, a man of only twenty-seven, arrived at King Lewanika's capital, Lealui, in October 1897 as the company's first resident representative. Lewanika gave Coryndon a frosty reception, refusing to believe that he could represent both the British government and the Chartered Company. He only softened his stand after intervention by Adolphe Jalla, an Italian member of the Paris Mission. An order-in-council, signed by Queen Victoria, was promulgated in November 1899 and provided for the establishment of company rule in 'Barotziland-North-Western Rhodesia' under the supervision of the British high commissioner in South Africa. Coryndon was appointed administrator in September 1900. The Lewanika Concession, negotiated in October 1900, drew an internal boundary between the two parts of the British protectorate at the Machili River, about thirty miles west of Kazungula. Effective control of Barotseland remained with King Lewanika and was only gradually taken from him in the ensuing decade, but the company gave itself a free hand in the area that it designated as North-Western Rhodesia.⁷

The government of the Bechuanaland Protectorate was also slow to establish control over its northern boundary area. Real power there remained for some years – at least until he was deposed by the British in 1906 – with Chief Sekgoma Letsholathebe, ruler of the Batawana people. British officials were sent from Bechuanaland and North-Western Rhodesia in 1902 to settle a boundary dispute between King Lewanika and Chief Sekgoma, ignoring the existence of the German sphere, which was supposed to separate the two. This question of Barotseland's western boundary with the Portuguese colony of Angola was referred by Great Britain and Portugal to the king of Italy for arbitration. Until his decision was announced in 1905, the international boundaries on the west bank of the Zambezi remained unclear. In reality King Lewanika continued to control an area that extended from the upper Zambezi for some distance westwards into what is today Angola. The arbitration award removed from Bulozhi the dominions claimed by King Lewanika west of the Kwando River. The settlement of the boundary line about sixty miles west of the Zambezi did not please Lewanika, but it allowed company officials to operate freely for the

first time on the west bank of the river. They had earlier feared that the Zambezi might be declared to be the western boundary of Barotseland.⁸

Kazungula lies at the centre of some very complex political geography, but of some even more complex physical geography. David Livingstone, one of the area's first explorers, compared the upper Zambezi basin to a saucer tilted from northwest to southeast. The Zambezi itself rises in northwestern Zambia and flows through Angola, re-entering Zambia above the Chavuma Falls. As it flows through Zambia two major rivers then join it, the Kabompo from the east and the Lungwebungu from the west. The latter river is navigable for several hundred miles into Angola.⁹

The Zambezi then flows for 120 miles through a vast flood plain which is up to thirty miles wide, and has been for three or four hundred years the heart of the Lozi kingdom. Impermeable clay lying beneath the Kalahari sands that cover much of western Zambia, as well as Botswana and eastern Angola, creates the flood plain. The floods begin to rise soon after the beginning of the rains in December, but the delayed arrival of water flowing from the north ensures that they reach their highest point in May, two months after the end of the rains. When the floods subside in July they leave pools of water, some of which remain until the next rainy season. They also leave areas of moist mud, providing fertile gardens.

Most of the Lozi people now live permanently on the margins of the flood plain, though they continue to cultivate and to graze cattle in the plain. Only a minority today live as their ancestors did, spending one half of the year on mounds in the plain, and the other half on the slightly higher bush margins. Cattle are still moved twice a year, from the lush grasslands of the plain to the poorer grass of the bush margins and back again. Livingstone, who first saw Bulozzi in 1851, was greatly impressed by the rich food resources of the plain, whose people could draw on apparently abundant sources of fish, meat, cereals, vegetables, pulses and tubers. He compared the beneficial impact of the annual flood with that of the Nile in Egypt.¹⁰

The central plain narrows and comes to an end south of Senanga. The Zambezi, which is navigable from Chavuma southwards, is then broken by falls at Sioma and by a series of rapids and cataracts near Katima Mulilo. It flows for most of 200 miles from Sioma through semi-arid bush country and teak forests, until it reaches the Chobe flood plain, or Sesheke flats, which terminate at Kazungula.

The most peculiar consequences of Livingstone's tilted saucer are to be found to the south and west of Kazungula. Two very unusual rivers, the Kwando (which becomes the Chobe or Linyanti) and the Okavango, rise to

the west of the Zambezi in Angola and flow southwards parallel to it for several hundred miles. The Kwando flows to the west and south of the Zambezi, but then takes a sharp turn to the east and north and enters the Zambezi from the south at Kazungula. It does not, however, always flow into the Zambezi. If the floodwaters of the Zambezi rise first, the Chobe can flow backwards into its own swampy flood plain. The course of the Okavango is even stranger. It flows into Ngamiland, a region of northern Botswana named after the now dry lake that was the object of Livingstone's early explorations. The southeasterly flow of the river is stopped by a wall of Kalahari sand and it feeds the extraordinary inland delta of swamps that take their name from the river. While floodwater from the Okavango can reach the Zambezi by way of the Makwegana spillway and the Chobe, water from the Chobe does occasionally flow back by the same route into the Okavango. Water from the Okavango also flows, by way of the seasonal Botletle and Thamalakane rivers, through Ngamiland into the true desert of the Makgadikgadi saltpan.

The area centred on Kazungula was, in 1901, a frontier zone in several senses. It was a place where remaining pre-colonial African states met; where the spheres of influence of several European powers met; and where several embryonic protectorates and colonies met – at least on paper. It was a place where pre-colonial African states and European protectorates uneasily co-existed. It was also a frontier zone in a wider sense. It was a place of contact and interaction between black and white people; of white penetration, occupation and settlement; and of black accommodation, collaboration and resistance. Above all, it was a place where aspects of the environment – navigable stretches of river broken by falls and rapids; malarial swamps and seasonal flood plains; Kalahari sands, with bush and forest; mosquitoes, tsetse flies and snakes; crocodiles, lions and hippopotami; extremes of summer heat and winter cold, all provided real obstacles to travel, trade and communications.

The Kazungula axis, including Sesheke-Mwandi, forty miles to the west, and Victoria Falls-Livingstone, a similar distance to the east, was for many years to be central to the business whose history is the subject of this book. The business was based at first on Sesheke and latterly on Livingstone. In the early decades of the twentieth century its activities extended over 300 miles to the north through the upper Zambezi valley and over 300 miles to the south through the Kalahari to Ngamiland. It operated as a trading and transport business in two of the most remote, inaccessible and logistically difficult regions in southern Africa.

The Baltic Background

Who were the Susman Brothers? The founders of this business, Elie and Harry Susman, started their lives as Elias Jacob and Hirsch Leib Zusmanovitz in the small market town, or *shtetl*, of Riteve on the western frontier of the Russian Empire. Riteve was about thirty miles east of Memel, a Baltic sea port that lay at the northern tip of the kingdom of Prussia and, from 1871, of the German Empire. Kovno *Gubernia*, the province in which Riteve lay, was once part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and was attached to the kingdom of Poland. As a result of the French Revolutionary Wars, and the Third Partition of Poland, the area became in 1795 a part of the Russian Empire. It was also a part of the Pale of Settlement, the western border area of the Russian Empire in which the vast majority of its Jewish population was confined. The Susman brothers were, like the majority of the people of Riteve, Jews. Elie, the younger brother, but the senior partner in what he called the 'BarotseLand trading expedition', had just passed his twenty-first birthday when he crossed the Zambezi at Kazungula in April 1901. Harry, the elder brother, but junior partner, was twenty-five. Riteve's existence depended to a large degree on cross-border trade and so, in moving from a Baltic province of the Russian Empire to central Africa, the Susmans had exchanged one frontier zone for another.¹¹

According to the Russian census of 1897, Riteve had a population of 1,750. Of these almost 1,400 were Jews. Perhaps one-third of Riteve's economically active population was engaged in trade, another third were craftsmen. The remaining third included people who made a living from transport with horses, wagons and boats, as well as a handful of professional people, and an even smaller number of people who were engaged in agriculture. Riteve was just one of a large number of predominantly Jewish market towns that were scattered throughout the Pale of Settlement. Nearby towns of this kind included a rather larger centre, Telz, as well as Plungyan, Vorne, Salant and Gorzhd. Riteve was not in itself an important centre, and its inhabitants tended to think of it as poor and isolated. But it was close to Memel, a significant Baltic port, and it was on main roads from Memel to Plungyan and Shavl, and not far from the main road between Memel and the provincial capitals of Kaunas (Kovno) and Vilna. It was also on a river, the Yureh, which was a navigable tributary of the Niemen. River transport was important for timber, which was cut in neighbouring forests and transported to Baltic ports.¹²

Riteve was a centre for the timber industry and for the production and export of flax. It was also unusual for a *shtetl* in that it was one of the principal seats of the Oginski family, who were the most powerful of the Polish nobles in the former grand duchy of Lithuania, and who were comparable in influence in Poland itself with the Radziwills, the Potockis and the Poniatowskis. The Oginskis were also major landowners in the neighbouring centres of Plungyan and Salant. A branch of the Oginski family, probably the main branch, was resident at Riteve for most of the nineteenth century. Accounts of Riteve, written in the twentieth century by former Jewish residents, reveal an ambivalent attitude towards the Oginskis.

On the one hand, these accounts recall anti-Semitic incidents in which the *poritz, graf*, or duke, Irenaeus Oginski, is alleged to have driven pigs into the *beit midrash*, or prayer house, and in which his sons dug up the Jewish cemetery. They recall Duke Irenaeus's suicide on the eve of the festival of Purim in 1859. He was a Polish nationalist and was about to be arrested by a troop of Cossacks for treason, a few years before the second great Polish nationalist uprising. The Jews are said to have celebrated in later years their double liberation from Haman, whose plot to kill the Jews is described in the book of Esther, and Duke Irenaeus.

On the other hand, the accounts also recall with a degree of pride Irenaeus's liberation of the Lithuanian serfs in 1835, nearly thirty years before their emancipation by Tsar Alexander II in Greater Russia. They recall the beauty of the Oginski Park, and their free access to its lake, gardens and greenhouses. They remember the beauty of the Oginski Palace, which, according to one distinguished Jewish native of Riteve, 'could take its place on the Champs Elysées, Piccadilly or 5th Avenue, New York'. They recall the beauty of the Catholic church, which was built by the Oginskis and completed in the 1870s. Its tall spire was a local landmark and could be seen for three miles by returning residents – both Christians and Jews. They also recall that Duke Irenaeus paved the road to Memel in the 1850s; that Riteve was in 1882 one of the first towns in Lithuania to be connected to the outside world by telephone; and that in 1892 it was the first town in the region to have electric street lights. They also remember the Oginskis' establishment of an agricultural school in the 1880s, and of a professional music school, which provided this small town with a sixty-piece orchestra.¹³

The main role of the Jews in this part of the Russian Empire was as middlemen between the Polish nobility and the Lithuanian peasants. The peasants of Riteve were freed from serfdom and the village commune, or *mir*, was typical of Russia but not the norm in Lithuania. While the nobility

owned large estates, the peasants farmed on individual plots. Wednesday was market day in Riteve and peasants came into the town to exchange their produce, such as grain and flax, for manufactures. Business on other days was slow, and many of the Jews were peddlers who spent the whole week walking from village to village, and from farm to farm, hawking haberdashery, cotton reels and cloth. They often exchanged goods for produce, anything from eggs to pig bristles. They slept at the farms of their customers and returned home for the sabbath and for high days and holidays.¹⁴

The nobility and the Jews were controversially linked through the noble monopoly of inns and taverns, preserved until the 1860s, and their control over the manufacture and sale of alcohol. The nobles usually leased their taverns to Jews, for whom inn-keeping was a staple activity, often combined with petty trading. The Jews themselves were thought to be abstemious, but were frequently accused of profiting from the drunkenness of the peasantry. In Riteve the main source of income for the Zusmanowitz family was a way-side inn on the road to Memel. This was one of the more important inns in the town, and must have brought the family into direct contact with their noble landlords, the Oginskis.¹⁵

The Jews of the Lithuanian provinces of the Russian Empire, Kovno and Vilna, were known for their devotion to Orthodox Judaism. The influence of Elijah ben-Solomon Salmon, the Vilna *gaon* – genius – of the eighteenth century, was strong. He was not opposed to secular learning, which he saw as necessary for the understanding of the Torah, but he was profoundly opposed to the mysticism of the Hassidic tendency. This mysticism made little progress in the region. The leaders of Orthodox Judaism were also opposed to the Jewish ‘Enlightenment’, or *Haskalah* movement, though this did make some progress in the Lithuanian provinces in the nineteenth century. Orthodox Judaism almost certainly gained strength during the century as Jews reacted against the official policy of Russification, and the evangelism of the Russian Orthodox Church. These policies of Church and State also targeted Christian minorities in the region: the Catholic Poles and Lithuanians, and Protestant Germans. The Jews of Riteve took great pride in the large number of rabbinical scholars who emerged from their small town in the course of the century. Daily life, for the men anyway, revolved around the *beit midrash*, with morning and evening prayers, and study of the Torah and Talmud. The Vilna *gaon* had hoped to be able to go to live and work in Jerusalem. Some of his followers did go to the Promised Land in the first decade of the nineteenth century and others followed in the 1860s. The leaders of Orthodox Jewry were, however, suspicious of the rise of the

Zionist movement, which began in the 1880s as Chibat Zion – a spiritual movement whose followers were known as the Chovevei Zion. It is unlikely that this movement, or the secular Zionism of Theodor Herzl, had much impact in Riteve before the end of the nineteenth century.¹⁶

Not a great deal is known about the life of the Susman brothers in the Russian Empire before their departure for Africa in 1896. We do know that their father Behr Zusmanowitz (also known as Zusmanovitz, Susmanowitz and Susmanovitch) was born at Riteve in April 1853. He was the son of Joel Zusmanovitz, described in one source as Rabbi Joel, probably an honorific rather than a professional title. Behr married Taube (Tova) Diamond in about 1874. They had five children, three sons and two daughters, all born at Riteve within the ensuing twenty years. Behr Zusmanowitz was a man of strong character who grew into a stern patriarch. His religion was strictly Orthodox, but he was not, in the words of his grandson, Maurice Gersh, ‘a *yeshivah bocher*’ – a seminarian. He had some of the characteristics of the ‘wandering Jew’ and was able to earn his living as a tailor. On several occasions, he left his wife and family to manage the inn while he went off to seek a fortune overseas. He travelled first to America in the early 1880s and seems to have spent time in New York. He was shocked by what he saw, regarding the country as ‘immoral and unethical’. Unable to come to terms with the modern world as he saw it in the United States, he preferred to return to Riteve.¹⁷

In seeking his fortune in the United States, Behr Zusmanowitz became part of a large-scale emigration of Jews from the Russian Empire in the 1880s. This was triggered by the wave of anti-Semitic pogroms, which broke out after the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881. The pogroms were largely confined to the southern parts of the Pale of Settlement and did not occur in the northern provinces, though there were isolated incidents of arson aimed at Jewish businesses there. Emigration was also encouraged by the generally anti-Semitic tendency of government policy; its continued threat to remove Jews from border areas; and to reduce their involvement in rural trade and in the production and distribution of alcohol. Other factors encouraging emigration included: the worldwide depression in agriculture in the 1880s; the effects of railway-building on older modes of transport; and the adverse effect of the moves towards freer trade on cross-border smuggling. This latter development must have had an effect on the local economy of Riteve, which was just thirty miles from the German border at Memel – precisely the distance from the border to which, throughout the nineteenth century, the Russian government threatened to remove the Jews.¹⁸

The second most popular destination for Jewish emigrants from the Lithuanian provinces of the Russian Empire was South Africa. It is usually estimated that three-quarters of the 50,000 or so Jews from the Russian Empire who reached South Africa in the late nineteenth century came from these provinces. This has been attributed to reports reaching them in the mid 1880s, before the discovery of the Witwatersrand, of the spectacular success of a few Jews from the area – in particular the good fortune experienced at Kimberley and in the Transvaal Republic by Sammy Marks, who formed a close alliance with President Paul Kruger. Reports of his success were carried in the Hebrew paper that circulated in the Russian Empire – *Hamelitz*. Another factor may have been the efforts made to advertise South Africa by Sir Donald Currie and his Castle Line shipping company. It sought steerage passengers to fill its ships and advertised in *Hamelitz*. Currie helped to sponsor the Jews' Temporary Shelter in the East End of London. This provided accommodation between ships for emigrants from the Baltic, who usually landed at Hull but then left the country for the United States or South Africa from London. The predominant share of Jewish immigrants to South Africa coming from a small area within the Russian Empire could be further explained by the workings of the extended family in tight-knit communities. New immigrants worked hard to save money to pay for passages for their brothers, sisters, parents and grandparents – and, ultimately, aunts, uncles and cousins.¹⁹

It would be a mistake to exaggerate the similarities between the frontier zone in the Russian Empire from which the Susman brothers, and other Jewish emigrants, came, and the African frontier zone to which they moved. Emigration and immigration are painful and difficult at any time. Although experience of a multi-lingual society may have been an advantage to migrants moving from Russia to southern Africa, it must be easier as a general rule to move to a place, such as the United States, where the official language is also the lingua franca. Jewish immigrant traders in Africa faced a peculiar difficulty, which they shared with missionaries from countries in Europe where English was not spoken. They had to learn to function in new official languages at the same time as in several African ones.

As the immigrants worked their way through the Cape Colony, the Orange Free State and the Transvaal in the years before the Anglo-Boer War and the creation of the Union of South Africa, they had to deal with two official languages: English and Dutch. They also had to learn some words of Afrikaans, Zulu, Sotho or Tswana in order to deal with their customers. While this must have been very difficult, it was not an entirely unfamiliar

situation to people from the frontier of the Russian and German empires. They had already had to contend as peddlers and petty traders with two official languages, Russian and German, and with customers who spoke Lithuanian or Polish. They were also used to a situation in which the peasants spoke dialects that had not yet been reduced to writing or which deviated markedly from the written standard.

Although Jewish immigrants faced huge linguistic and cultural difficulties, including widespread and rampant anti-Semitism – especially in the English-speaking white population and the official classes – there were one or two points of linguistic and cultural contact. There were some quite strong similarities between Yiddish and colloquial Afrikaans, which was still not a recognised or written language. It was not very difficult for Yiddish-speakers to learn to communicate in Afrikaans. Jews on the frontier also found that they had something in common with Afrikaners and Scots, who were also over-represented there. They were both ‘peoples of the Book’ whose Bible-based and Calvinist form of Christianity had a good deal in common with Orthodox Judaism – including an emphasis on the Old Testament. It was, of course, suggested by the controversial German economist, Werner Sombart, that Max Weber’s ‘Protestant ethic’ was in reality a ‘Jewish ethic’.

While the climates of Lithuania and central Africa might seem to be very different, there are some surprising environmental similarities between the two regions. Accounts of Riteve frequently refer to plains, forests, rivers, lakes and seasonal swamps, to winter mud and summer dust – only the latter an inversion of the central African norm. Many Jews made their living as polers on river barges. Accounts speak of long journeys at night in tented wagons, drawn by horses instead of oxen. Riteve was not an important centre for the cattle trade, though nearby Telz was a centre for the dairy industry. The Jews of Lithuania and Poland had, however, been involved for centuries in the supply of cattle by way of long-distance trails to Germany, and to the Black Sea regions of the Ottoman Empire. Very little is known about the life of the Susman brothers before they left Europe. It is, however, known that Elie Susman, as a boy of fourteen or fifteen, peddled haberdashery to the farms and villages around Riteve. He would take orders for cotton thread from peasants’ or farmers’ wives and return with them in the following week. Peddling and petty-trading skills were certainly transferable from one environment to another, as were the skills of cattle and horse traders, transport riders and butchers.²⁰

There were also some similarities between the social structures of the Russian and Lozi empires. The official abolitions of slavery or serfdom in