



Namibian diplomat,  
Nora Schimming-Chase

PHOTO BY JOHAN JOOSTE

## Portrait of a

# Diplomat

**A** woman of indomitable spirit, Nora Schimming-Chase has been shaped by the strong forces of Namibia's political history. Her years of exile included a period of study in Germany as a young, refugee student. Soon after Namibian Independence in 1990, she was to return to that country as Namibia's first ambassador.

"Serving as a diplomat is the logical extension of my involvement in the struggle. A realisation that Independence was a beginning, and not an end – that we have to control our own destiny. At times, the process of reconstruction of the country can be more difficult than the struggle for liberation.

"Diplomacy is one of the most important pillars of

reconstruction. At Independence, Namibia became part of the international community, and the country had to be represented by diplomats. We became members of the United Nations (UN), the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), and the Commonwealth. The Minister of Foreign Affairs, Theo-Ben Gurirab, maintained from the very beginning that we would have an aggressive economic foreign policy.

"The diplomatic mission is the arm of our government which works towards economic independence. Development aid is simply that, and limited in time and amount. No country can develop only on development aid.

"Our country has the potential, the resources, and

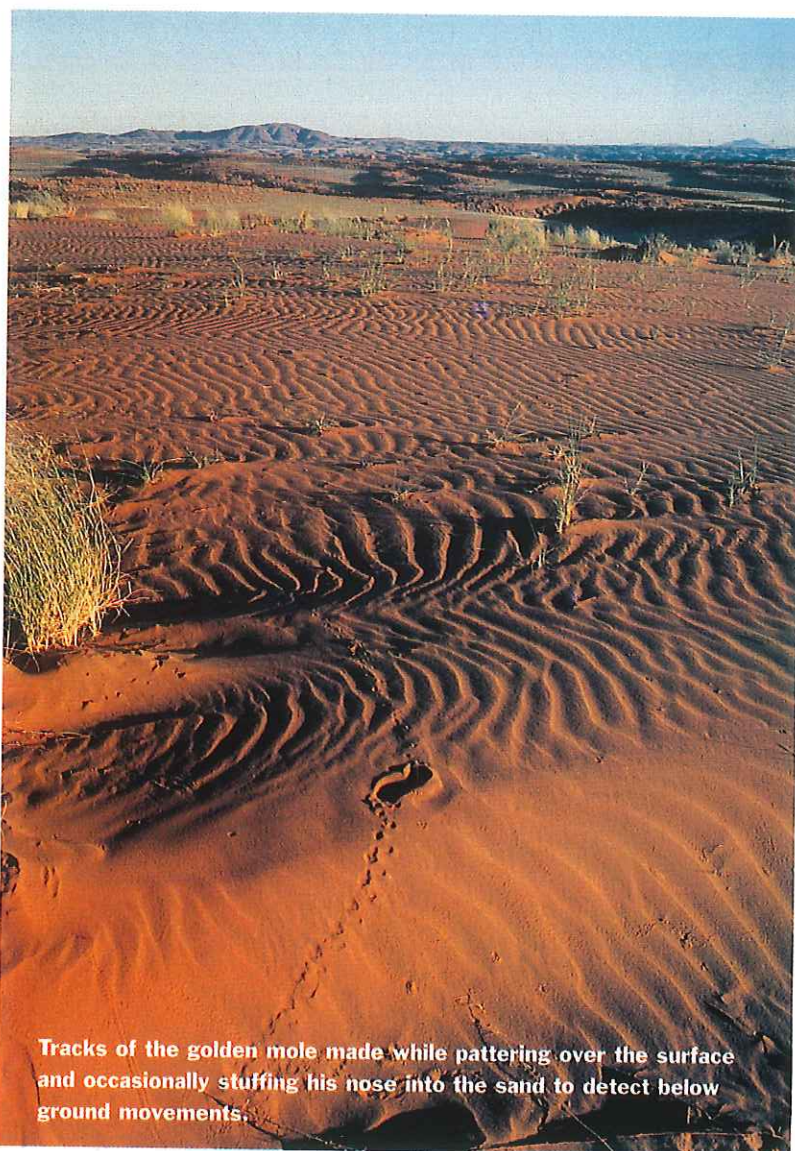
**BY JEAN FISCHER**

Only in 1963, when serious research was started in the central Namib, were specimens actually seen and collected. The pioneering biologists who established the research station in the Namib at this time, saw the curious tracks and went to considerable trouble to unearth the elusive creature that made them. One of them writes: "Only after many more unsuccessful attempts, (were) two specimens secured. This was achieved after a severe sandstorm had raged during the afternoon. While walking at night with lamps, fresh furrows were detected and, by digging, these specimens were exposed about 15 cm below the surface. These were the first two complete specimens of this subspecies."

The Namib animal is referred to as a subspecies, *Eremitalpa granti namibensis*, as it lives as a population that is geographically separate from the others in the Cape that are *granti granti*. The scientist whose name is doubly honoured this way was from the British Museum of Natural History, and was somehow involved in the early collection and description of the species.

So how does this strange creature actually lead its life? Its elusiveness makes this a difficult question to answer, but we do know some of the basics. It likes to live on dunes that have scattered clumps of grass and low bushes, which happen to be where termites and the worm-like larvae of beetles also congregate. During its nocturnal wanderings it shuffles along on the surface, occasionally stuffing its nose into the sand. When it comes across a hummock where food is abundant, it dives into the sand as easily as a dolphin into water, and swims with paddling movements of its short legs. It possesses claws like spades for this very purpose. Below surface, supposedly, it can better detect the whereabouts of this prey by their vibrations as they move through the sand. It circles about chomping every available morsel, then moves off in a random direction to find the next such "patch" of food. While small insects make up most of the diet, the golden mole will take whatever it finds and can overpower. So dune crickets, beetles, spiders, and even small lizards and geckos are fair game, but they are encountered very much more rarely than termites and larvae. Whilst on the surface, the mole is itself easy prey for nocturnal predators such as owls. Foxes and jackals are less of a threat as the mole dives if it hears or feels anything approaching over the sands towards it.

It makes sense that the mole should shelter under a hummock during the day, when temperatures on the surface are sizzling. But it came as a surprise to scientists to learn that the mole actually behaves like a "cold-blooded" reptile when it is resting, and allows its body temperature to drop far lower than most other



Tracks of the golden mole made while pattering over the surface and occasionally stuffing his nose into the sand to detect below ground movements.

mammals do. In the sand, it is not surrounded by a parcel of air that could insulate it from the surroundings, as are all other animals that live in burrows. It therefore opts to simply let go of trying to keep its temperature constant, and goes into a kind of deep sleep, almost like unconsciousness. In the afternoon its internal clock (that all animals possess in some form) tells it to start waking up for the night's activity, and it slowly raises itself out of the deep slumber, and goes about its business. By this exceptional behaviour it saves itself the energy that would be required to keep a constant temperature, and lives to face another night in the desert.

As far as is known, golden moles lack any sort of underground burrow system. It is tempting to think that they must make a hollow of some kind in which to give birth and raise their young, but no such structure has ever been found. Of course, fate is stacked against the poor scientist who tries to answer this question, as digging into dune sand is like trying to empty the ocean – sand just keeps flowing back in to the hole! Elaborate structures to hold back the sand while digging a hole five metres across have been tried, and whole dune sides have been excavated, but the wily golden mole still holds this secret to itself.



Namibians have now borne fruit. In every Ministry there is at least one highly qualified civil servant who was able to study through a scholarship arranged by the CCN. During this period she also worked with the late Danny Tjongarero to establish legal aid to obtain more effective legal defence for disadvantaged Namibians.

"If you are living your life in transit you have to have a dream," says Schimming-Chase. Little did she dream that she would be appointed as Namibia's first ambassador to Germany.

Her first diplomatic posting was as *charge d' affaires* to open the Namibian mission in France, but was recalled after ten months to be appointed as ambassador to Germany. "I felt that an immense honour had been bestowed on me, also because

of the historic links with Germany. I was acutely aware of the trust that had been placed in me, and that the task ahead was primarily to stimulate economic interest in Namibia, and to improve bilateral relations between the two countries. If these two aspects had improved during my term of office, I would have accomplished the task."

Adding lustre to her term of office, was a State visit to Namibia by Chancellor Helmut Kohl, and a

reciprocal State visit to Germany by President Sam Nujoma. During her term as non-resident Ambassador to Austria, she accompanied the President on a State visit to that country.

Proof of her popularity was an endless round of farewell parties before her departure for Namibia in September last year. "She was held in high esteem, not only in government circles and by members of the diplomatic corps, but everywhere she went," says Jean Sutherland, news editor of *The Namibian* newspaper,

*"... Our country has the potential, the resources, and the right kind of constitution to sell Namibia as a favourable climate for investment – either as individual investors or with Namibian counterparts. Improving export trade is an indispensable part of the development of a country," she says ..."*

who was a guest of the German government during President Nujoma's visit.

Looking back on the years when her children were small and she was coping with a heavy work load, she comments that: "It wasn't perfect, but you're doing the best you can. You try to spend quality time with your children, and try to teach them a sense of justice and correctness. You tell them that freedom has a commensurate responsibility. I also tell them that we



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the right kind of constitution to sell Namibia as a favourable climate for investment – either as individual investors or with Namibian counterparts. Improving export trade is an indispensable part of the development of a country," she says.

Schimming-Chase says that she owes an enormous debt of gratitude to Ambassador Debrah of Ghana, who came to Windhoek to put the fledgling diplomats through a rigorous programme. The Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defence were the only two Ministries to be introduced after Independence, and had to start from scratch. The Minister of Foreign Affairs, Theo-Ben Gurirab, decided to start off on a high note and asked the "guru" of African diplomacy, as Ambassador Debrah is known, to share his expertise and experience with Namibian diplomats.

Her childhood home was in the Old Location which, for many Namibians is more than just a place, but one rich with childhood memories, and the backdrop for subsequent tragic events which sent many leading Namibians into exile. She says that: "As a child, my

*"... Her childhood home was in the Old Location which, for many Namibians is more than just a place, but one rich with childhood memories, and the backdrop for subsequent tragic events which sent many leading Namibians into exile ..."*

first awareness of right and wrong came from my parents, Otto and Charlotte Schimming, who were the living embodiment of Christianity, and a sense of justice and fair play."

Her father was adviser and secretary to Chief Hosea Kutako, an important figure in Namibian history and an early freedom fighter who fought against German rule in the early years of this century. Many years later, he played a leading role when the Chief's Council of the Herero people sent the first petition to the UN to highlight the plight of the indigenous people of Namibia. "My awareness of politics, as a very young child, came from sitting at the feet of Chief Kutako," she says.

Schimming-Chase embarked on the thorny path of a political activist at the tender age of 13, when she joined the Students Organisation of Young Azania (Soya), and the Youth League of the Non-European Movement. At the Trafalgar High School in Cape Town, she was exposed to politically committed teachers who taught a completely different interpretation of southern Africa's political history.

Her political activities continued during her studies at the University of Cape Town, and many of her companions in those years have reached prominence in South Africa, like the academic Dr Neville Alexander, and Dr Pallo Jordan who is now a member of the South African Cabinet.

Her mother, Charlotte, served as a role model for her daughters and stood firm against the popular attitude of that time that it didn't make sense to educate a woman. She also stood firm against the everyday manifestations of apartheid rule.

"I remember vividly one Saturday afternoon when I had to board the train for Cape Town. At that time, there were deplorably inadequate educational opportunities at home, and a handful of South African schools were the only option for Namibian learners. Although the train consisted of numerous coaches, only one was reserved for black Namibians. It was already crammed to the hilt. My amazing mother stood there on the platform and made a fuss. She reminded everyone within earshot that exactly the same money had been paid for the ticket as the people enjoying space and comfort. 'Charlotte, you'll be arrested,' said bystanders nervously. Eventually, another coach was coupled to the train. It was an impressive performance and taught me to fight for my rights," she recalls fondly.

In 1978, some exiles returned home after South Africa had agreed to the Western proposals for free elections and Namibian Independence – an event which only took place 11 years later. Schimming-Chase arrived home with her husband, a West Indian obstetrician and gynaecologist, Dr

William McDonald Chase, and their three children, Esi, Afra and Kweku. The couple divorced amicably some time later, because of her wish to remain in Namibia. "In any case, I was married to the struggle which would still continue for some years," she says, and adds that life as a single parent held few hardships because of the warmth and support of her extended family. "There was always some caring person at hand to see to the needs of the children."

For many years she served in numerous capacities in Namibian political organisations, both here and in exile. In the mid-eighties she was appointed deputy-director of the Commission on Inter-Church Aid, Refugee and World Service of the World Council of Churches and was based in Geneva. "These were relatively calm years, and I felt that I was able to do something for African people in terms of refugee problems and ecumenical aid," she says.

In the period before being posted to Geneva, she worked in Windhoek as director of education of the Council of Churches in Namibia (CCN). She was already looking ahead to the period of reconstruction after Independence, and felt that education should be directed towards this goal. "At that time, it was felt in some quarters, that the primary goal was to first liberate and then educate. I am a firm believer in education at all costs. You can't quantify an investment in education. Efforts to obtain scholarships for young

Foreign Affairs, dealing mainly with the UN, Commonwealth and Non-Aligned Movement.

In her free time, she pays regular visits to the family farm. "I derive considerable inner strength from these visits. It is an integral part of my life. I need this closeness to the soil and the rural lifestyle," she says. She practices transcendental meditation and is a qualified trainer in Reikki, which employs the use of universal energy in order to heal. Tennis is a sport she particularly enjoys, and on the home

front likes creative pursuits like design and dressmaking.

In the mid-eighties, at the height of the struggle, a journalist from the BBC asked how she saw the period after Independence. "There will be so much to be done – the Herculean task of reconstruction, and the policy of reconciliation – that there will be no room for bitterness," she replied.

And that still holds good to this day.



Photographed with Ambassador B Edler van der Planitz, Head of Protocol of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Federal Republic of Germany, at Venusberg – the official guest house of the German Government where President Sam Nujoma stayed during his State visit.



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**Chatting to guests at a farewell reception in a historic German castle, held in her honour by the German/Namibian Society and various other Namibian interest groups.**

are fortunate to be able to lead the lives we are living, and that it is our responsibility to give something back for the many good things we have received."

Now her two daughters are both established in legal careers. Esi qualified as an advocate and works in the Attorney-General's office, and Afra recently passed

the masters examination in International Law at the University of Rouen in France. Kweku is a first year student at the University of Namibia, and is considering the study of genetics.

Currently, Schimming-Chase is head of the Multi-Lateral Policy Coordination Unit of the Ministry of



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