

14. Thank you for the Friendship! – a Letter

By Brigitte Haage-Hussein

Dear Denis,

I still remember exactly where I met you for the first time. It was in 1996 at a meeting in Cologne University. Edelgard Nkobi, my long-time friend and your future wife, had made me curious. Finally I would see and hear the ‘only white man convicted in the Rivonia Trial.’ The meeting room was full. Everyone was listening very attentively. The young women and men grew more and more enthusiastic. And I too was deeply impressed by your speech about the great hope in the new anti-racist South Africa.

The German branch of your organisation Community H.E.A.R.T. had just been set up in Essen with the help of Edelgard. So there was plenty for us to talk about. But my dear friend spoke in the weeks after the meeting noticeably often about you, very enthusiastically too. And when I sometime later saw in her flat the big portrait photo of you on the wall and heard from her that ‘Denis, to save on hotel costs’ had stayed at her place, I understood what there was between you. All the same, it was quite a long time before she came clean. I was very happy that my Edelgard, buffeted by fate, would be able to finally experience such a happy partnership once more. Thank you for that too, dear Denis.

When I agreed to write for this celebratory book, I had no idea what a storm of feelings it would arouse in me. For days I have been plunged into my early years ... So much has come to life again! When did my interest, even love for the African continent (and later for a

man from Africa) begin? And why did I find (and still do find) Africa in particular so fascinating?

I was just about to start the eleventh class when our school, which had a friendship agreement with the Leipzig Herder Institute, received students from Sudan as guests. Young men from the country which had just become independent were to be at university in the GDR to become academics, and were learning German at the legendary institute.

More meetings followed. My parents invited one of the students from Khartoum to cake and coffee on Sunday. In our neighbourhood it caused a bit of a stir, a 'negro' coming to visit. The first black skinned human being the neighbours had ever seen was in April 1945, at the end of the Second World War, in Leipzig: a US soldier who was parked in a front garden and, as people angrily reported, had driven over the only blossoming peach tree for miles!

The conversations with the new acquaintances from what had been till then a completely unknown world awakened my curiosity to find out more. In the German Bookshop and in the second hand bookshops, many of which still existed in Leipzig, I sought and found books about Africa which I simply devoured. And I bought the odd book too, when I had saved up enough money from holiday work. I still possess them all! They now fill many bookshelves. The oldest book in my Africa library was published in 1896. Yes, that's right, 117 years old! I stumbled upon it in a Rostock second hand shop. Its title: 'Stories and Songs of the Africans.' Publisher: a certain A. Seidel, 'Secretary of the German Colonial Society.' The great discovery of the colonialists ... 'that the negro thinks and feels as we ourselves think and feel.' But then immediately Seidel's qualification: 'However, his ability to think has remained on average at a relatively low level of development.' An idiocy characterized by racism which unfortunately is still proclaimed to this day, and not only by empty headed types in pubs, as we know, dear Denis.

Probably the first book of eye witness reports to appear in the GDR, *And so God created Apartheid*, was written by a Swiss man, Jean Villain. He had succeeded, disguised as a 'business traveller,' in getting deep insights into the inhuman system of racial segregation. When I read these reports, I was already a student of journalism at Leipzig University and Edelgard my fellow student. Most of us were

very interested in politics or we wouldn't have chosen this course. All the same I wanted at the time to work as a theatre critic or general cultural editor after leaving university. Unlike Edelgard, who was already intensively involved in studying foreign politics and especially Africa. Her dissertation theme was accordingly 'The press in Ghana.' In March 1957 Ghana had been the first country south of the Sahara to win its independence. Edelgard could provide the best information about the ideas of Kwame Nkrumah, whom people called 'The spear point of the rebirth of Africa.' Her thesis was so brilliant that her professor immediately proposed that she should undertake a preparatory course for a doctorate. But Edelgard preferred to go into journalistic practice.

In autumn 1964 we both began our careers in the capital of the GDR, in Berlin. Edelgard worked first on the editorial board of a newspaper, but soon transferred to ADN, the large and only news agency of the GDR. I worked at the Berliner Verlag (Berlin Publishing House) on the editorial board of a weekly journal for women.

Denis, at that time you were already in prison in Pretoria, forced to serve your several life sentences.

We knew a lot about conditions in your country. We already had many acquaintances and friends from southern Africa who were able to study in the GDR and lived in our country in exile. I can still remember how happy a Sudanese comrade was to tell me that finally there was a woman in their group. That was Joan! Joan Oehme, South African born, was an important and always reliable source of information for me when I was later working as editor in the department of foreign politics.

Our media reported about everything that we could find from Africa, despite the limited possibilities. I remember how often we voiced our protests, as when the world learned of the murder of Patrice Lumumba in the Congo in 1961. In Leipzig even today there is a Lumumba Street, although after 1990 many other street names were changed, as no longer 'up-to-date.' Even the memorial to the great man is still complete, with a copy of his bust, which had 'disappeared.'

Again and again we had new ideas for the many, many solidarity actions with the ANC, against the Apartheid regime and for the support of all peoples who struggled for freedom. To this very day the

annual bazaars on the Berlin Alexanderplatz organized by the Journalists' Union of the GDR are legendary. Every year the 'whole of Berlin' filled the square. The political and 'economic' success was enormous. I know, because I spent many hours on the stand of our editorial board, how generously people donated money.

International solidarity with the liberation movements was so to speak our daily bread. In the 1960s there already existed the Afro-Asian Solidarity Committee of the GDR. Yes, a government initiated organization. These days the achievements of the solidarity 'directed by the state' are freely discredited. But don't you think that you and many, many other people would have been spared great suffering if at that time every government and state had implemented the UN resolutions against racism, against Apartheid, against colonialism?

Edelgard and I not only met regularly in these years at press conferences of the Solidarity Committee and at many other meetings on the themes of our journalistic work, but were also close at a private level. Many pictures come before my inner eye: for example, when Thomas Nkobi, treasurer of the ANC and father of Edelgard's husband Zenzo Nkobi, was received by the GDR as a VIP and visited his son and daughter-in-law. That must have been in 1970. In the little living room typical of new GDR flats there wasn't enough room for all of us, so that only the little child's chair was left for his wife. But it was such a hearty meeting.

Or: I can still feel my nervousness just before my interview in 1981 with Alfred Nzo, then ANC General Secretary. In 1978 an official embassy of the African National Congress had already been set up in the GDR. And now I as a journalist could put my questions to the ambassador! Most of our knowledge of Africa had for many years been so to speak at second hand.

We two women lived close to each other in Berlin, and our similar family circumstances bound us together: husbands from Africa, children of the same age, the same experiences and cares. We always had a lot to tell, and you know that Edelgard loved to talk at length about (almost) everything. But her main topic was definitely southern Africa. That was why Lutz Haage, my second husband, called her 'our Africa encyclopaedia,' when we were travelling with her, first in 1998 in Zimbabwe and later also in South Africa and Botswana. The right answer to every question straight away! I found it amazing how, on

trips in the area round Bulawayo, she always found the right way even out of the densest thicket, although she had not been there for a long time.

Edelgard had followed her husband to Africa with their two daughters in the mid 1970s. He had successfully completed his education as a photographer, financed by the Solidarity Committee of the GDR, and was urgently needed in the headquarters of the Rhodesian liberation movement, Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU), in Zambia. Quite a few people in our circle of acquaintances shook their heads at the time, at how Edelgard could give up her secure life and even more that of her children for totally uncertain circumstances. After all, at the time a successful end to the liberation struggle of the black majority in Southern Rhodesia was not within sight. I understood my friend's decision and knew that if any woman could come to grips with the most adverse living conditions, that woman was Edelgard! I was not wrong.

I myself was able to 'step on African soil' for the first time in 1969, to visit my husband's family in Sudan with him and finally get to know my mother-in-law who at once took me to her heart. I felt as if I would have been able to find my way blind in Khartoum, as over the years before I had heard and read many detailed descriptions over and over again. I could describe the square for the camel trade, the appearance of the mud houses, the black goats on the streets, the Nile, the mosque. But on the spot I experienced a real culture shock, particularly because of the poor living conditions, although compared with those today they could almost have been called 'well-to do'. Or rather, at the time there were not such sharp social differences as in Sudan today. No beggars on the streets and no luxury palaces.

My shock soon went because I experienced the euphoria in the weeks after the so-called May Revolution, in which the hated military dictatorship had been overthrown by young officers with Jaffar Muhammad an-Numeiri at their head. Infectious! All the hopes of better times, the many plans, projects and ideas of the people who wanted a progressive development in Sudan and a life worthy of a human being for everybody in the country. We went from one meeting to the next. Because I 'came from a socialist country' I became an involuntary 'expert' and speaker at meetings, for example with

teachers who wanted to organize education for all children and with new contents.

Two years later, when we were in Sudan again, we had to experience the opposite, the military coup in July 1971 with shootings in the streets, with curfews as early as the afternoon, with much fear of not escaping unharmed. An-Numeiri, once the bearer of hope, had betrayed his ideals of progress for everyone in the country.

Back home safe in Berlin I began a post-graduate course in Arabic Studies at the Leipzig University. And so it was settled that I would work exclusively in the field of foreign politics. As a reporter I was able to travel to Somalia and Mozambique. I am still happy today that I could be there in 1975 straight after the liberation movement, FRELIMO, had taken over the government in Maputo after 500 years of colonialism. And that at the time Graca Simbine, the newly appointed Minister for Education, wife of the President Samora Machel, gave me an interview. Later, on her state visit to the GDR, I met her again. Today she is married to Nelson Mandela.

Dear Denis, like yourself in South Africa after the fall of Apartheid, the people from the former GDR can now travel all over the world, if they have the money. So Lutz and I were happy to accept Edelgard's invitation to Bulawayo in 1998. At that time Edelgard had taken over from you the task of overseeing projects of Community H.E.A.R.T. in Grahamstown and Cape Town. We went with her and the result continues till today: South Africa has become like a second homeland!

We have experienced such a lot since then, in more than a decade. If I wrote about it, it would fill a book! After all, our visits to South Africa, if they were all added up, would come to two years of life!

To finish, I would like to mention a few more unforgettable experiences: the concert the great Miriam Makeba gave in the stadium at Grahamstown, on the occasion of the hundredth anniversary of Rhodes University. Hours before she appeared, the lawns of the stadium were already fully occupied, black and white and Indian and other ethnicities separated from each other – as I noticed sadly. But as Makeba gripped her public more and more with her beloved songs and her vivacity, the people who had been separated got mixed up and pressed forward, dancing and singing along. Wonderful!

And just as unforgettable, the time I could spend with you in your house and especially at your chores and ‘duties’ and projects, when Lutz was at the language school.

I am still moved when I think of your speech at the Law Faculty of the University of Cape Town; the auditorium full to the last seat with refreshing, lovely young people; black skin colour dominated. It was the same as at our first meeting at Cologne University: everyone hung on your words during your talk about the struggle against Apartheid, your time in prison, the years since 1994. Enthralling, as you always succeed in being and, as few people manage, often interrupted with your wonderful humour, so that serious though the subject was, there was a lot of laughter. I would love to have this gift, this talent of yours! At the end there was a standing ovation for you, with applause that seemed as if it would never end.

It was such a pity that Edelgard was no longer there. The best friend of yours and mine had lost her struggle against that insidious cancer in 2006. I miss her very much.

Dear Denis, best friend, now we offer you the tribute of such applause in our thoughts. We can always learn anew from you, that life really is wonderful, as you spontaneously shouted out at the Rivonia Trial, when the verdict was announced and it was not the expected sentence, death by hanging, but life imprisonment.

Yes, life is wonderful. In spite of everything! Thank you, thank you for your friendship.

Brigitte and Lutz

We bear within us
essence of all gods
Gottfried Benn (translated)

Brigitte Haage-Hussein worked as a journalist and editor for nearly three decades on foreign themes for various magazines and newspapers of the Berliner Verlag in the German Democratic Republic. She also held positions as a specialist at Humbolt University, at the Bundestag, and in a documentation centre. Currently she is a guide to the cultural riches of the City of Leipzig and other cities in Saxony. She often visits South Africa with her husband Lutz Haage.



Denis, Edelgard, Brigitte at Cape of Good Hope 2006
Foto: Goldberg collection