

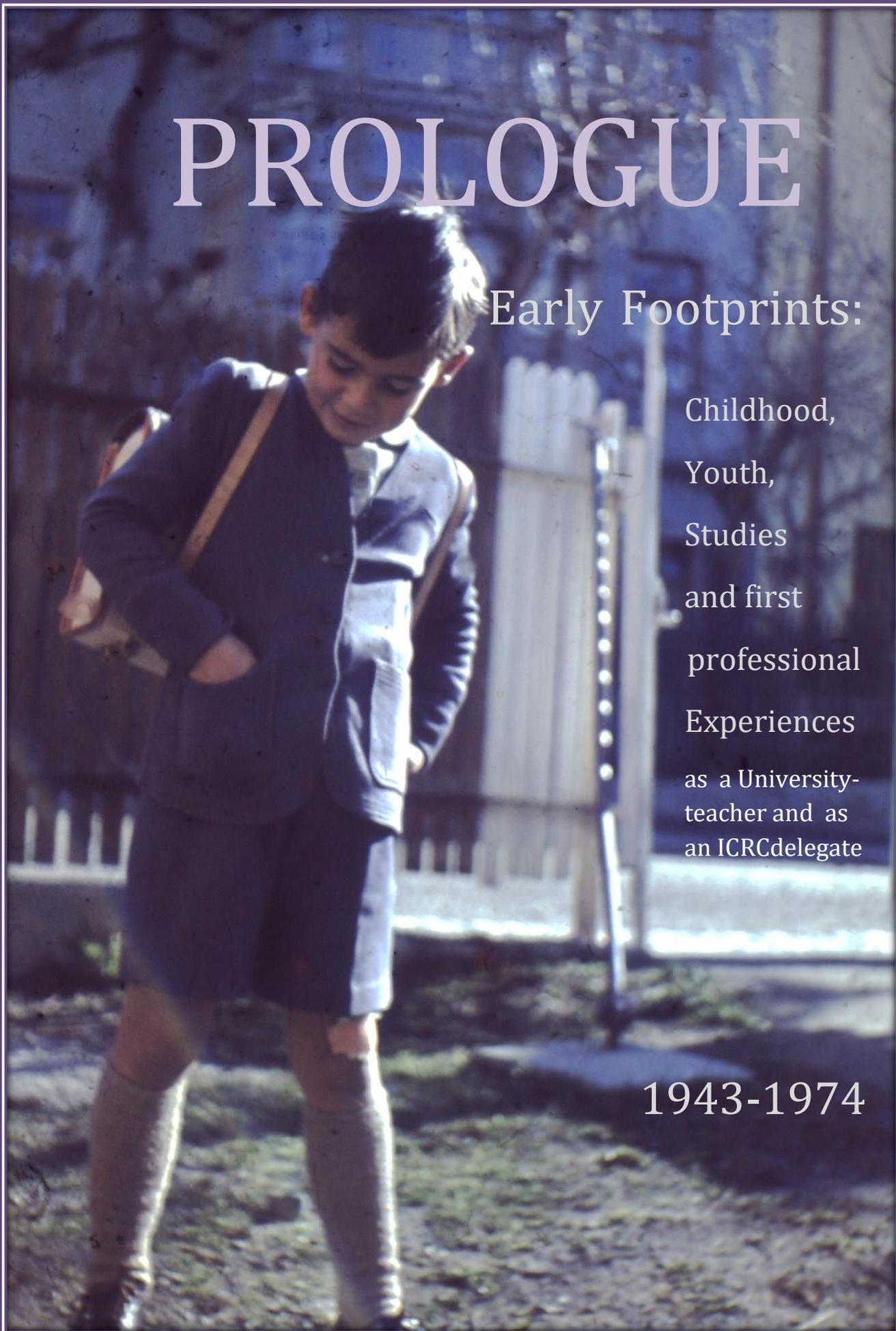
*1943 – 1974*  
*PROLOGUE*  
*Ethnographer's*  
*Field-Research among the*  
*Anyuak in South Sudan*

# PROLOGUE

Early Footprints:

Childhood,  
Youth,  
Studies  
and first  
professional  
Experiences  
as a University-  
teacher and as  
an ICRCdelegate

1943-1974



## I

## Childhood and Adolescence in Davos, Switzerland

The itinerary of my research has to start somewhere, and, naturally, it should start with my childhood and with my local origins. I was born in a beautiful environment, in *Davos*, on the last day of August 1943, at 13.35 hours at 1600 m of altitude. My birth was painful. I came out of my mother with the buttocks first; my mother would tell me how she had screamed!

I am of simple origins. I mean this only in a social and economic sense because if I now think of my parents' personalities, I realize that in fact I must be of noble descent. Moreover I was born in paradise. The natural environment of my childhood was lavishly luxurious, with charming valleys and colourful mountains, with forests, rivers, animals, birds and fish. I was also born into a cruel world, in 1943. Though I lived in Switzerland, the impacts of war had taken an early possession of my mind; I have always suffered from an excessive sensibility and was often hurt for no good reason. All my life I have tried to cover these wounds or at least tried to hide their scars, but I could only succeed when I was able to help other "vulnerable groups", as the ICRC calls people who are only indirectly affected by the terrors of war.

From my early childhood I can still clearly remember one incident. I was walking with my mother on the main street of Davos; I was only four years old and it was winter. Suddenly, a long, heavy icicle fell from the roof of an iron shop, missing me by only ten centimetres but hitting my mother on the head. She fell unconscious to the ground and was carried by horse sledge to the hospital. I cried, was in shock, fearful for my mother's life. I wouldn't have had any chance had I been hit. To all evidence, a guardian angel must have been protecting me already at that time. I was so lucky that the icicle did not fall on me, and more than lucky that my mother survived.



*With my sister Burga in Davos*

I am not superstitious, and I have seen too much misery and injustice to believe in the goodness of our world. Rather, I share the belief of the Anyuak who doubt that God is human let alone interested in the fate of creation. If humans are suffering, it is not because of God; suffering is human and has human roots. God is purely spiritual and doesn't care about people on earth. Yet, my life is nothing but a series of "miracles" that can't be explained except through the secret work of a guardian angel. Luck? No, you can't be lucky all the time, can you? Talking about guardian angels sounds very strange, even to me. But how would you otherwise explain that I happened to miraculously survive so many incidents, that I never became the victim of certain harmful events? I am not even thinking here of the possibility and indeed likelihood, of being killed, deliberately or by accident, during the many years I spent in war torn countries. Indeed, the number of deadly dangerous situations I have been exposed to can't be counted. I am thinking rather of my personal "luck", my "*Baraka*", as people in the Sudan would say. As a boy, I fell backwards out of a moving train and as a mountaineer I was carried off by an avalanche. When climbing in France, a huge cube of rock dashed through a narrow chimney towards me but was squeezed just two metres above me. In Sweden I drowned in a river and only regained consciousness some time after my friends had pulled me onto land, and in the frozen emptiness of Kazakhstan, at six o'clock in the morning, our land-cruiser slipped from an icy road, overturned several times while rolling down a

steep hill, until it eventually crashed into a tree on the other side of a channel. The car had landed on its roof and left us hanging helplessly in our security belts. In South Sudan, I was strangled by cruel thirst after having walked five days through the wilderness without water, was bitten by a Black Cobra, and survived several serious malaria attacks as well as many other terrible diseases and I managed to escape death miraculously when the Ethiopian Army furiously fired at me with machineguns and rockets in an attempt to get me and my children “dead or alive”. “*Why are you not dead now?*” the Anyuak asked me when they realised that I had survived a snake bite known to be absolutely deadly. They were deeply worried that I was possibly not a “pure”, that is “a truly human” being but perhaps a kind of spiritual entity; the white colour of my skin could well support such a frightening idea. Yet, I had also heard the King crying when getting himself lost in the wilderness. “*Oioioi!*”, he lamented, “*God helps only three times! And now he has already helped us three times!! Oioioi, what will now happen to us?!*” How many times has my “*Baraka*” helped me to escape certain death? My mother was convinced that I could not survive without her being alive; she died at nearly one hundred years of age, not freely. She was surely among my most active guardian angels but my father protected me as well by his strong belief in life. “*For Heaven’s sake*”, he said, “*we should at least have a minimum of trust in God!*” My father divided the responsibilities for my survival: he would assume responsibility in case I perished in the mountains and my mother would be held responsible in case I drowned, he was scared of water. It appears that they took their protective role very seriously! At all instances, friends were often there as well to save me,



well aware of the fact that I would never be able to make it all alone; men and women of all ages covered me with love, children adopted me to be their father. I don’t know how much it has helped me to receive so much spiritual and physical support from the people I have met but I have experienced their blessings in a very substantial way during all my different lives. I was meant to protect people from the horrors of war or to assist them in their fight for peace and human dignity but eventually it was me who was rescued and was shielded by them from misery. “*Let’s praise The Lord for having created Kwacakworo*”, *Majok Nyang Kuol*, one of my “lost boys” once said in his prayer. Instead of thanking me for having helped him stay alive, he referred to some higher authority. I am not pious enough to comment on such a belief but certainly I was never sure what I was heading for and what could happen to me. I was just moving in search of something I felt within me but wasn’t able to name. I moved through my life like a bark floating on a river, supported by the water, pushed by the current; somehow I made it down to the estuary, by a sheer miracle!

The incident with the icicle that had fallen on my mother’s head is the only bad experience of my early childhood, except perhaps the memory of my sister and her friends who didn’t want me to play volleyball with them. They were four years older than me. All I positively remember from my childhood is nature, mountains and valleys, snow and stars, a few friends who shared my often secret and dangerous adventures, and of course the members of our family. During the weekends, my parents took us children to the mountains to collect flowers or berries. It was so wonderful, the world smelled so intense. Spring, summer, autumn, each season had strong colours and different shades of light. I guess that I was happy then. I was very stubborn in achieving whatever I had planned for but I lacked any social ambition and avoided big gatherings of people. As a child, I dreamt of becoming a night watchman, in the hopes of getting a dog for free. I also dreamt of becoming a daily labourer, removing the snow from the streets with those extremely heavy three spiked ice axes but I knew that I was supposed to replace my father one day and take over the painting business he had inherited from his father and grandfather. I would

have liked that. My father was an artist, philosopher and a craftsman all at the same time, but he was ignorant about the art of doing business. Consequently, lack of money was a big problem but the children never suffered. We didn't feel a lack of anything. It was only later when wondering about my own behaviour that I came to realise how much I was marked by the family's economic instability. If my father's business had been more successful and if my father's generosity had known some limits, to all probability I would have taken over the family business and become a painter like my ancestors, and like them, I would have failed in doing business! I would have been satisfied because like my father I love to work manually; it gives me the needed space for thinking and for gaining distance from my thoughts at the same time. As it was, I continued to go to school, without having any clear vision for a future. There was not enough money to allow both children to go to the university. Since I was the son, I was chosen to receive a higher education, a privilege my sister would never forgive me for. "*If it had been me*", she would lament later, "*at least I would have become somebody!*" I am sure she was right in her presumptions but I just couldn't make it.



*Kwacakworo's aunt (Annie Perner), mother (Marianne Perner-Schröder) and father (Paul Perner)*

As a child, I hardly went anywhere. The world was big enough at home. I hated to spend holidays outside of my village. Actually, I didn't like holidays, I liked to go to school. And I was happy when I could be with my father; I loved to watch him working, was happy when he allowed me to climb up the 10m high scaffolds; and I admired my father's good humour, his courage, his friendliness. I loved his laughter, his way of joking with his labourers. At the time, there was no television or radio to distract children, and we had no car to move around in, but we didn't miss anything. In winter, we jumped from the roofs, skied, rode toboggans or played ice-hockey. In summer, we cycled to the end of our valleys, picked berries, watched wild animals or walked up the mountains. Hiding on the banks along a tiny river, we schoolboys would even try to smoke "*Marylong*", a brand of cigarettes showing a black haired woman on a yellow cover. "*Marylong*" is the only souvenir of my childhood I can still purchase in a kiosk! Nobody knew what we were doing, but surely we were very adventurous and quite brave when we got injured. I was both reasonable and irrational. We were wild and inspired. Children have to create their own world, all according to their imagination, in forests, on the riverbanks or in the deep snow.

This desire to create an inspiring environment where one would feel at home has followed me to all places; it helped me to feel well in spite of all the misery I came to witness. Whenever I moved somewhere, I tried to make the place hospitable and pleasant: I planted gardens for the mind and the

body to take a rest, even in places where there was only sand, where there were only stones or where the only flowers were cactus or thorny trees. The greater the horrors of war, the greater the need for a place where people could find relief from the noise and confusions of the light and enjoy calm and serenity, in the shade of a tree or under an open night sky, building peace of mind. The most beautiful garden I created was in Afghanistan, paradoxically in the place where our homes were bombarded and shelled almost continuously, by day and by night. The sunflowers grew high; I counted 62 flowers on one single stem! There was a small, empty fountain which I filled with water, stones and flowers. The grass grew very tall and the grapes completely covered the walls of the house, hiding the sacks filled with sand which were stapled there for our safety. Even the suspicious Taliban Commanders who were our neighbours couldn't see me nor my close friend *Marguerite Pillonel* when picking flowers or taking an ice cold bath. There was even a "wi-mac", as the Anyuak would call it, a fireplace where one would sit in the evenings, smoke, talk and look at the stars without wasting a thought. I can still see *Reza Gul*, a poor woman from the *Hazara* people and how she continued to iron our clothes very carefully in the midst of the most horrible bombardments, completely ignoring all terror and noise for the sake of hope and human dignity. Reza Gul seemed to be a garden herself, a sunflower like a thought of love. My garden would console people like her and assure them that they are not alone.

Much more sober and peaceful than my small garden in *Kabul* was the "kind of garden" in *Lokichokio* in the land of the *Turkana* in Kenya. I had laid some big stones on a tiny piece of dry land and very early every morning I raked the sand and poured water that remained in my thermos from the night before onto the stones. I did all of this with some kind of Japanese devotion. "This we don't believe", the *Turkana* said, "These stones will not be growing." They were very wrong, the garden *did* grow, becoming more beautiful day by day: "Beauty is not in flowers", *Buddha* has been reported as saying. "Beauty is in the way we are looking at them". Sometimes, I moved the stones, thus changing the design of the universe and making people wonder. The *Turkana* were convinced that I was crazy, and loved me for it.

If I don't recall much about my education at home, it is because my parents gave me a lot of space to develop and to discover myself. This was their way of educating us: we should learn from them, not through orders. I felt completely free and was sometimes somehow "out of control", growing up in liberty, unbound, independent and politically conscious at an early age. My father called me "a wild Arab", he meant a horse! My parents were very social minded, kind and generous, and they loved to meet people, to talk and to laugh with them. From them I learned to have compassion, to be modest, tolerant and forgiving in spite of my terribly critical mind. From them I learned not to hate anybody but to try to understand. I also learned to admire the beauty of all the things found in nature but also to appreciate the value of handicrafts and other human works of art. Both my father and my mother believed in the goodness of people, that's why they managed to remain so optimistic. "I don't know why I am always so joyful", my father used to ask himself. As for myself, I know that this is the only way one can overcome the often so depressive realities of life and survive as a human person. Solidarity and joyfulness are essential for making life bearable. We can't find inspiration, courage and hope in ourselves but we can find it in other people, and possibly in God. When leaving Afghanistan after two years, people thanked me, not for what I had done for them but for what I had given them without being aware of it. "You know", they said, "The reality of our life is so horrible that we are always depressed, without any hope. But thanks to your cheerful spirit, we could laugh and be happy at least for a short while. You made us remember that life can be kind and human; you can't imagine how much we appreciated this."

Though neither my mother nor my father had been fortunate in their personal life, both had this rare capacity to make other people happy. In fact, my parents were so deeply human and understanding that I wish I would have inherited more of their qualities. But shouldn't I also wish to have inherited less of my father's search for spirituality, his thirst for beauty and taste for solitude, or my mother's existential submissiveness, her amazing unpretentiousness and terrible hunger for love? If I really keep only good memories from my parents, I wonder from where I inherited all my weaknesses: my terrible impatience and quick irony, my candid naivety, that inclination for permanent self criticism close to self destruction or my filmy sensitivity and that occasional outbreak of intellectual pungency, that strange distance from myself, those permanent doubts about the meaningfulness of my existence, that religious inclination to death, the feeling of being abandoned, lost and lonely, and that shyness and fear of being loved? In short all that feeling of "*not being made for this world*"? My parents of course observed my behaviour and worried about my thirst for solitude. They realised that I was "different" and solitary, and they felt how much my spirit in spite of my appearance of being self-confident, joyful and strong, was fragile and thus very breakable. Fearing that "*I wouldn't make it*", they blamed others and themselves for having pushed me to the outside. Indeed, the relationship among the members of my larger family had been so embittered by jealousy and occasional naughtiness that children even less sensitive than me would have preferred to stay away from so-called domestic happiness and search for harmony and affection somewhere else. Yet, I can remember that I was always puzzled by how my parents worried so much about my future, asking myself a lot of questions about the reasons for their fear. They seemed to have had good reasons; surely they knew reality better than I did. It was only later that I came to realise that I was simply born as an outsider, a young relative to *Laurence of Arabia*, *L'Etranger* or the *Steppenwolf*<sup>1</sup>, but while growing up, I didn't seem to miss anything. On the contrary, I led an emotionally rich life and was full of energy. I climbed all the mountains of my region! I was positive minded, just sometimes lost in deep thoughts and girdled with books. I have no reason to dig further and bring more light into the grotto of my childhood which perhaps wasn't as



*Climbing the Ago di Sciora in the Southern part of the Grisons... (Photo by André Roch, 1961)*

bright as my memories pretend but which definitively was not a place of darkness. The memories from my childhood actually take so little space in my mind and are so unspectacular that I would not have felt the need to ask questions if it had not been for this introduction to my life story. In fact (but perhaps

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<sup>1</sup> At the age of seventeen, I was reading with great personal interest „*The Outsider*“, by Colin Wilson (London 1960). The sentence "*The Outsider's business is to find a course of action in which he is most himself, that is, in which he finds the maximum self-expression*" (p.75) helps to understand the need for an outsider (like Lawrence) to find concrete activities through which he can give himself some kind of substance and personal identity.

wrongly), I feel that my existence as a self-conscious person started only later on, outside of Europe. If it is true that one needs some distance to recall things, does it mean that I have no distance from my childhood that I am still at the point where I started, in the mountains, in my native wilderness, following my instincts rather than my mind? People sometimes tell me that I am still “sleeping like a child”. Am I dreaming? The space of my childhood seems to be open-ended like a grotto leaning on the sea.

My mother and my two grandfathers were from the far *North of Germany*. My father met my mother in Munich, married her in *Ütersen*, a small town in Northern Germany, and took her, by the force of love, to the mountains in Switzerland. These were the times of the second world-war when it was not pleasant to be a German in Switzerland. The social environment in Davos was very harsh for my mother, unfairly hostile and often brutal; my mother was unwelcome in my father’s family. She didn’t speak the local language and had a different, more open character. As children, we were brought up as proud Grisons and never felt the desire to go to Germany, even though our maternal grandparents were living there. I visited them only twice. At the age of six, I had seen *the North Sea* at *Sylt* for the first time, was fascinated and scared by the noise and size of those huge green waves; I have a picture of me standing in front of those threatening waves, smiling, showing how brave I was. Next to me stands my maternal uncle, a medical doctor; unfortunately, it’s the only memory I have of the person my mother had loved most. Ten years later, I went to my mother’s birth town, *Itzehoe*, to visit my grandparents for a last time. My grandmother, the mildest and most peace loving person I have ever met anywhere, died the very day of my departure for Switzerland. I also travelled to Germany because I had been invited by good friends of the family to their house on the river *Aller* in *Verden*. Verden is a small town known as the home of horse riding. I fell in love with horses, learned to ride, and galloped in the company of a young, wild “native” youngster, *Bernd Eggersglüss*, through dunes and forests on that unforgettable racing horse called “*Baroness*”. Riding became, after climbing and skiing, my third great passion. Sometimes, when mounted on a horse and jumping over hurdles, I felt like a horse myself. I spent many weekends with the family of the famous Swiss ice-hockey player *Bibi Torriani*, the father of my best school friend, in *Bad Ragaz*. We used to ride in the region of *Maienfeld*. Bibi Torriani called me “*Lester Pigott*”, referring to the most successful British jockey of the time. For once, I wasn’t called by the name of a wild beast, but something very wild was linked even to this name. For a while, I was also engaged in the life of boy scouts. At that time in Davos, the boy scouts were a gang of adventurers, quite anarchic, fearless explorers of that space of freedom which only childhood can provide. We formed a close conspiracy with snow covered mountains, forests, rocks, gorges and waterfalls, swearing to keep our exciting secrets to ourselves. A few names of lasting friends remain from that time: “*Koala*” (*Hans Wehrli*), “*Jaguar*” (*Marco Torriani*), “*Kim*” (*Christian Weber*), “*Cantate*” (*Hans Issler*), “*Froggy*” (*Otto Wild*), “*Hansi*” (*Jean-François Roch*) and “*Simba*” (*Romano Torriani*). By the way, my own boy-scout name was “*Puma*”, the Mountain lion or Panther of South America...

From my father who was a poet in his heart, I inherited another passion: a terrible thirst for reading in general and poetry in particular. I read day and night. We had plenty of books at home, and my father would never refuse to give me money to buy books but I was surely a bad reader. I completely lacked distance but participated always personally, almost physically, in the works of fiction. To me, reading was like eating food in good company, for taste, for pleasure and for digestion, and I could never get enough of it! Much of my adolescence was occupied by Albert Camus, to the extent that I turned into “*un homme révolté*” myself, full of fire, burning inside myself but I also remember spending evenings walking through our forests reading sober Chinese poetry. “*You have to be mad to be a poet*”, a French saying goes, and concerning me, that may well have been true. There was not much space for thinking of myself, let alone for leading the “normal” social life of a teenager. No dancing, no drinking. True love was yet to come. I was happy in places where I could engage myself physically and spiritually, in the mountains, in forests, among animals, and in books, far away from other desires. My life was

balanced between nature, rocks and snow, and a world of fiction, open horizons and waves of words which reached my mind from another shore of existence: a hungry young Steppenwolf searching for food in the early morning of his life.

If the greater part of my childhood and adolescence had been dominated by nature, the last years of my time in school were more and more influenced, that is, overshadowed, enlightened or deepened, by mainly French and German writers. I realised that my greatest interests were in the field of literature; it was in literature that I found my satisfaction even as an adolescent. When I discussed my plans to study French literature with my Godfather, Prof. *Werner Kägi* from Zurich University (he was one of the most respected and influential Swiss personalities of my father's generation), he strongly supported my plans, saying "*that would be a very solid fundament for life*". What life, I thought. Did my Godfather feel that, eventually, literature would not be enough for someone so impatient and demanding as me? My future was open, remained vague; nothing was promised.

That was my childhood in Davos. "*That's the end of it*", as the Anyuak would say, adding "*Nothing more*".

Though I have spent all my life in foreign countries, I returned to Davos whenever I got a break. I have never in my life felt homesick, and, perhaps with the exception of the Congo where I served my apprenticeship in African cultures, I felt at home wherever I worked. Yet, Davos stayed in my mind. "Davos", that was mainly our old house and my family. I often blamed myself for leaving my parents alone, especially when they had grown old. We exchanged letters and talked, whenever possible, by phone; but these conversations were nothing but a delicate exchange of affectionate lies, both sides pretending to be well and in good company, well aware that there was no truth in our talk. I worried about them and I knew how much they worried about own my safety, my health and my spiritual welfare. I felt responsible for them, wanted to give them something in return for the love they had given me in such a generous manner. I am not sure if I was able to give them all of what I would have wished but I know that they understood and were appreciative. We had always expressed our feelings in indirect ways, avoiding sentimentalities; we would never use the word "love", terms of affection were not part of our vocabulary, and there was no need for such talk. Feelings of love and tenderness were kept in the safe of our hearts, well protected from doubts, dust and misunderstandings. This lack of language was sometimes bitter to experience, and yet it helped all of us to remain strong. The best I could bring them from abroad were the many friends I had made in all parts of the world. These friends frequently came to visit us in Davos, turning our small but cosy house into a palace where all the splendours of the world would radiate and illuminate our fantasies. These guests were young men and women, students and workers but also more prominent persons such as a heads of state, ministers, ambassadors, artists, judges, professors, heads of missions, physicians, conductors, generals, anthropologists, delegates, journalists, photographers, freedom-fighters, sculptors, the Archduke von Habsburg-Lorraine, the President of the International Committee of the Red Cross, the Chief-Justice of Kenya and even a truly immortal Spirit, his Majesty the King of the Anyuak. The visitors stemmed from various nationalities, understood their identity to be *Acholi, Afghan, American, Anyuak, Argentine, Atuot, Australian, Austrian, Bari, Belgian, Cameroon, Canadian, Chinese, Columbian, Danish, Dinka, English, Finnish, French, Georgian, German, Hazara, Indian, Iranian, Irish, Italian, Khazak, Kenyan, Madagascan, Norwegian, Nuba, Nuer, Pashtu, Peruvian, Scot, Shilluk, Swede, Swiss, Sudanese, Russian, Tajik, Turkmen, Turk, Ugandan* or *Uzbek*, and yet they were all of a same kind and shared a same identity: they were all exquisite examples of truly human beings. "*A guest is an angel sent by God*", an Arab saying goes. Our guests were guardian angels of our usually self-conceited spirits. That my mother had such a long and mainly happy old age (she narrowly missed her 100th birthday), was very much thanks to all these friends who had helped her keep her trust in life and gave her the physical energy to remain strong. There were no

borders in the hearts of our family, people and ideas were warmly welcomed at all times. The arrival of a guest was always understood by our family as a true blessing which helped us to survive and allowed us to renew our trust in humanity. Friends were the treasure of our existence, at home and abroad.

## II



*Davos in the Grisons, Switzerland.*

## Studies and early professional experiences

Studies of French, Scandinavian and Comparative Literature in Aix-en-Provence (Southern France), in Uppsala (Sweden) and in Zürich (Switzerland).

I wasn't prepared for going far, geographically at least. My grandfather had walked from *Kuden* in *Schleswig Holstein* in the far North of Germany down South as far as *Constantinople*. There, he contracted tuberculosis that brought him, on his way back, to *Davos* which at the time was a world-famous health resort. He married there but died young, leaving behind his four children at a very early age. In contrast to my grandfather, my father's holiday dream had been to simply spend some days in a village called *Bergiin*, just a few kilometres outside of Davos, but of course, he would never manage it. Like me, he never wanted to leave the people he loved. So why did I leave home? Perhaps the experiences I had during my Military Service in *Frauenfeld* helped me feel the need to cross the narrow borders of Switzerland. Or perhaps it was just coincidence and good luck. In Davos, I used to accompany the well-known Swiss alpinist *André Roch*. He planned to make a film on extreme rock climbing with the renowned climber *Georges Livanos* and myself as protagonists. I left with him for the rocky coast of the *Calanques* near *Marseille* in *Southern France*, where Livanos used to train with a small group of "sistogradisti" in preparation for his bold ascents during the summer in the Dolomites. Though that film was never finished, it became the starting point for a new beginning in my life; I got to remain in Southern France! Sheer luck made this possible. My family was not rich enough to pay for my studies abroad, so the very idea of studying in France was completely unrealistic. I rented an empty cabin in a camping resort. In the summer, the cabin was the spot to buy tickets to stay at *Camping St. André* in *Aix-en-Provence*. It was closed now in late November, already cold and not a single cat around. The cabin's walls and roof were sheet metal, the room was empty; there was neither furniture, water, toilet nor light. There was a shelter up the hill where geese were kept where I could wash myself in ice-cold water. There was no electricity in the cabin but whenever I touched the door I got an electric shock because the wires passed over the cabin's roof, touching the sheet metal. I had to open the door with a piece of wood. I filled the room with newspapers, especially *Le Nouvel Observateur*, and I slept on the floor. All of that was quite terrible but I had to start somewhere, and it was better than nothing anyway.

My climbing friends in Marseille found my situation intolerable, even embarrassing, and they tried to help me. By chance, Georges Livanos knew someone who had herself been a prominent alpinist, a woman in her late sixties who impressed everyone with her feverish eyes and her aristocratic name: *Madame la Marquise Sylvia d'Albertas*. When Livanos asked her if she possibly knew somebody who could allow me to rent a decent room cheaply, she felt rather insulted: "*Je vous en prie, Monsieur, how can you imagine that I know people who would be renting rooms?*", she asked angrily. But eventually she told Livanos that "the young man" should come and see her in her "*Pavillon*", situated 100m away from her husband's castle, le *Château d'Albertas*. Their castle was situated in *Bouc-Bel-Air*, a small village built on rocks between *Aix-en-Provence* and *Marseille*. The meeting with that very singular lady took place in a beautiful park which had been designed by *LeNôtre*. For the innocent and quite handsome mountain boy that I was, this first meeting turned out to be a very peculiar and strange experience in itself, however with great consequences for my life. Eventually, I was offered a large room in the castle and even a daily meal, free of charge! In the beginning, I felt like a young protagonist in a horror movie. The family d'Albertas was said to have made "*la gloire de la Provence*" (the glory of Provence) but had, in my eyes at least, lost much of its glamour. The chapel, the library, the prison and most of the rooms stood empty. The resident parson was a homosexual drunkard who liked "the music", the female sculptor was ugly and without good taste and the quite old Marquis, very short and ghostlike, moved

around with a stiff back and white, shallow eyes. The Marquis, of course, didn't like seeing me in his castle and quarrelled with his twenty years younger wife: "*How can you pick up a young boy of no proper descent from the street?*" he asked her with a loud and piercing voice, but Madame la Marquise didn't care. Whenever she didn't feel like quarrelling with her husband, she simply returned to her *Pavillon*, a place situated slightly higher than the castle; the Marquis was unable to move there because of his weak heart. Thanks to my naive innocence and the fact that I did not speak French well, I managed to keep the Marquise and the rest of the inhabitants at a distance. I don't know how I succeeded in this, for Madame la Marquise did really try everything to attract my interest, sometimes even by throwing herself "completely exhausted" on my large French bed, hoping for help and recovery but in vain: I was useless! I guess I was not grateful enough for her generosity, but what should I have done? The poor Madame was fifty years older than me!

*In Marseille with  
Sonja and Georges Livanos  
and Roger Lepage (17-7-62)*

This life was absolutely unrealistic, a piece of fiction, and in a practical sense, it was not really easy; I still hate to remember the dinners in that huge, beautifully decorated dining room where everybody made great fun of that young



stranger who obviously was so lost in French civilisation. Indeed, I felt like I was tied naked on the table, a captured prey spread among dead birds, forks, candles, long knives, sticky sauces, greedy eyes, poisoned vegetables, bony fingers and home grown potatoes. "*Do you like music?*", the parson would ask again and again, and everybody would laugh loudly. Spanish servants flew around like bats, silently and without a smile; I was told not to touch them. Fortunately, I spent my days at the university and my weekends in the *Calanques* near Marseille which helped me accept life in the castle, a life which was closer to drama than to any reality, yet it *was* real!

Situations can change quickly. Only three months after my arrival, the old marquis passed away and with him disappeared all the other inhabitants as well, with the exception of a red-eyed son who was looking after the fields or hunting small birds, and one young and extremely shy Spanish servant who I remember well because she had a moustache. La Marquise herself remained in her *Pavillon* at the end of a hundred metre long Boulevard. I stayed behind alone in my big room in the empty castle during the cold winter. The *Mistral*-wind knocked by night at my windows, pushing me closer to the glowing fire. As usual, I spent all of my evenings in the company of books, ending each day by reading one chapter of *Montaigne's "Essais"*. On Wednesdays I listened to "*Le club des poètes*", a highly emotional radio transmission on poetry where a voluptuous voice called for fraternity and solidarity among poets; it was a truly mystical experience, an intense, shivering prayer for a world full of love. French chansons warmed up the half dark room as well. Troubadours like *Jacques Bertin, Felix Leclerc, Serge Lama, Georges Brassens, Jacques Brel, Michel Aubert* and *James Olivier* were among the friends who accompanied me and my books during the lonely nights in the castle, protecting me from fears, doubts and the noise of rattling shutters.

When spring arrived and I was more acquainted with the place, I asked the young Marquis if some of my friends could stay with me, and he kindly consented, however under the condition that I wouldn't disturb him by asking for bed sheets and towels. The young Spanish servant would manage all that. From then on, the fairy tale became enjoyable. Not only could I stay for two entire years for free in the castle and have the opportunity to study literature, language and French civilisation at the *University of Aix-en-Provence*, I could also continue to spend my weekends climbing in the *Calanques* on the shores of the Mediterranean and visit most of the historic places in the *Provence*, such as *Vauvenargues*, *Orange*, *Arles*, *les Baux* and *Nîmes* or the equally famous sites along the *Côte d'Azur*. At the yearly jazz festival in *Juan-les-Pins* and in *Marseille*, I enjoyed listening to great musicians and singers like *Charly Mingus*, *Eric Dolphy*, *Thelonius Monk*, *Ella Fitzgerald*, *Gerry Mulligan*, *Sarah Vaughan* and *Miles Davis* who played a green trumpet at two o'clock in the morning, turning his back to a superb full moon standing motionless over the sea. Several times I went to the *Camargue*, the land of the *Saintes Maries*, of winds, wild grass and gipsy guitar music; I enjoyed flying on the back of small wild horses along a sea of sheer beauty, barefoot and with a waving mane, leaving clouds of white sand behind me. Literature, poetry, concerts in the cloistral courtyards of *Aix-en-Provence* and excursions to *Cézanne's Mount Ste. Victoire*, pine forests and wild valleys melted with the soft, arid but intense beauty of the *Provence*. Looking back, I realise that I was living in a dream, in a world full of sensual pleasures and friendship; it was the first and the last time my body felt light, free and unbound. I was in love with *Câline*, galloping with her on red earth through green pine forests up to a secret pool hidden in the rocks. Spiritually, I had lost my emotional heaviness and stubborn thoughtfulness; bright sunshine had chased my existential doubts away. I felt strong and young, my mind blossomed, my body was suddenly full of sensual desire. I had turned into a "*Marseillais*", had adopted the engaging accent of the place, mastered even dirty words. I had become joyful and witty, at least when in company; and I was in excellent company most of the time, when studying or climbing. Yet when underground and sitting at the smoky fire in my big room in the castle, poetry, novels and politics continued to take possession of my mind. The correspondence which I had with a brilliant adolescent from Geneva is a witness to the violence of our language, our poetic sensibilities and rebellious engagement. That young poet, *Alexandre Leupin*, would end up as a renowned professor in medieval literature. All this was before 1965, but already "*times were changing*", as *Bob Dylan* had prophesized. I was to change, too. Soon, in Sweden, discussions on the Vietnam War would move to the centre of our human preoccupations and take my mind into much more sombre directions. *Bob Dylan*, *Joan Baez*, *Leonard Cohen*, *Ravi Shankar* and the musicians of *Woodstock* would follow me up to the North.

It was all about poetry. The mountains, peaks, valleys and abyss of my spiritual environment had many names: *Fernando Pessoa*, *Giuseppe Ungaretti*, *Konstantin Kavafis*, *Rafael Alberti*, *Giorgos Seferis*, *Hermann Hesse*, *Robert Creeley*, *Wladimir Majakowski*, *Juan Ramon Jiménez*, *Dylan Thomas*, *Günther Eich*, *Berthold Brecht*, *David Rokeah*, *Thomas Stearns Eliot*, *Franco Fortini*, *Paavo Haavikko*, *Vincente Huidobro*, *Paul Eluard*, *C.Drummond de Andrade*, *Pablo Neruda*, *Jannis Ritsos*, *Rainer Maria Rilke*, *Hans Magnus Enzensberger*, *Marina Zwetajewa*, *Sergej Jessenin*, *Ingeborg Bachmann*, *Miguel Hernández*, *Orhan Veli Kanik*, *Nelly Sachs*, *Lawrence Ferlinghetti*, *Jack Kerouac*, *Allen Ginsberg*, *Volker von Törne*, *Albrecht Goes* and *Andreas Gryphius*, to mention just a few of my favourite poets. When moving to the *Provence*, I had taken along a tape of the Swedish poet *Gunnar Ekelöf* reading his poems! His voice, resembling heavy, painful breathing, left me stunned with fascination. I didn't understand a word of Swedish yet had the feeling of getting the message: "*If one has come so far in the meaninglessness of life*", he said, "*everything becomes interesting again*". That was an invitation to start life from zero! I intended to learn Ekelöf's tempting musical language, in France! In *Aix-en-Provence*, I met with students from many Nationalities, among them many Scandinavians. One Swede and one Norwegian became my closest friends, *Dag Ekman* and *Arild Kjerschow*. They took me to Sweden, for

holidays first, then for studies. I was fortunate, my friends were generous and rich; they paid for my living when studying in Uppsala and took me to all parts of their attractive countries. My friends had beautiful sisters, cousins and friends, so emotionally I continued to be spoiled! Officially, I entered *Zurich University* and I studied there for three years but whenever possible I returned to Sweden, both for sentimental reasons and because I wanted to learn Swedish. I studied Scandinavian languages and literature in *Uppsala* and elsewhere, wrote about Swedish music for the Swiss Radio and did research at the university. I even dreamed in Swedish.

In Zurich, I was fortunate to study at a time when two of the last century's most outstanding Professors were teaching at the University: Prof. *Georges Poulet* and Prof. *Paul de Man*. Both professors were not only absolutely fascinating speakers but also personalities of great humility. Their teaching turned into a spiritual experience. Prof. Poulet's lectures were extremely captivating and therefore attracted hundreds of students but Prof. Paul de Man's lectures were intellectually so challenging that only a few students would risk leaving class with a headache. When Paul de Man died in 1983 at the age of 64, he was eulogized by the President of Yale University as "*a tremendous light for human life and learning ...after whom nothing for us will ever be the same... He was one of the great thinkers of his age...*" In Zurich, Prof. De Man had actually taught *Comparatistics* as a visiting professor from Yale University, and comparative literature (French and Scandinavian) was precisely the field in which I wanted to specialise. I don't know why I dared to ask Prof. De Man to become the director of my thesis, but it was surely not because he was intellectually so sharp and demanding. Instinctively, I had felt that the earnest though very gentle Paul de Man was a lonely person, very shy and breakable, and that's why I felt such deep sympathy for him. I guess that he accepted me for similar reasons. Among all the students, I was the only one with an accent from Southern France and that alone made me special. Prof. De Man was not a fake like so many self-conceited persons in the academic world, he was truly humane. Fortunately, he found pleasure and interest in meeting me. First, he asked me to write on "*Irony in the work of Kierkegaard and Baudelaire*" but after having spent one whole summer in Norway reading Kierkegaard, I found the subject too daring for my intellectual capacities and gave up. Prof. de Man then had the idea to compare the French writer *Stéphane Mallarmé* with the Swedish poet *Gunnar Ekelöf* with the condition that I translate Ekelöf from Swedish into German. Though Prof. De Man gave me high credits for my thesis<sup>2</sup>, I now feel that I shouldn't have tried to be so complicated and academic in my language. What remains positive from that thesis are my translations of beautiful poems from Swedish into German. After the PhD- ceremony, Prof. de Man invited me to his home for a chat to discuss my future. He suggested that I conduct some ethnographic field research, "*amongst the Eskimo or so*", he added. At that moment, I thought he was joking. To all future evidence, Paul de Man could not only read books, he could also read minds and plunge into the unconscious of somebody like me. Whenever I received a letter from him, I felt greatly honoured.

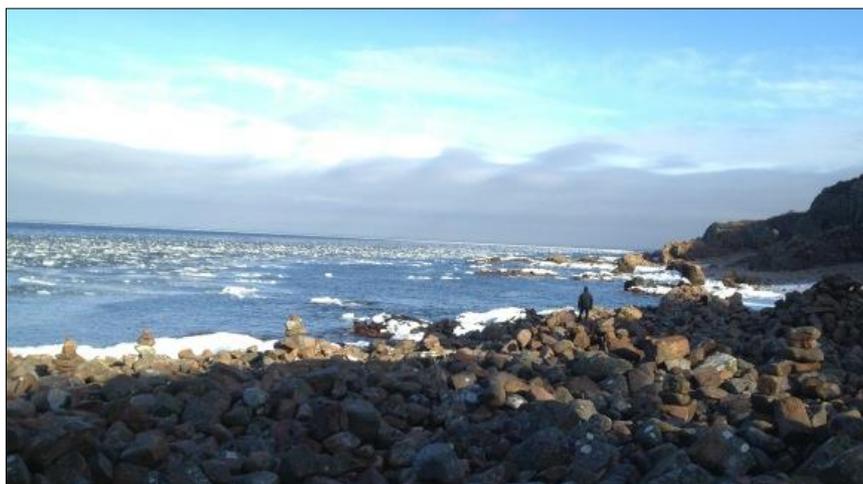
In Zurich, I had no time for a so-called student life. I slept in a cold room underground, with neither water nor toilet; but it was very cheap. I spent most of my time in Davos anyway. Since my military service I have hated fog and stinking rivers. It was at home where I really worked, writing on *Baudelaire*, *Eluard*, *La Bruyère*, *André Pieyre de Mandiargues*, on the critic *Jean-Pierre Richard* as well as on *Racine*. I received a special prize from the University "for outstanding quality" for my essay on *Phèdre (Le récit de Thérèse)*. (I was too shy to attend the big ceremony held during the annual University day!). At one point, I also wrote a paper on "*The changes of the terms for 'evil' in the history of French language and literature*"; I found that a very interesting topic. I have always been very interested in

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<sup>2</sup> „*Gunnar Ekelöfs Nacht am Horizont und seine Begegnung mit Stéphane Mallarmé*“, published by Schweizerische Gesellschaft für skandinavische Studien, Helbing&Lichtenhahn, Basel 1974

languages, and am not very liberal when people do not care about making mistakes. In my professional life I have started to study, along with modern European languages, a number of “foreign” languages, such as *modern and old Provençal, Urdu, Marati, Kiswahili, Vietnamese, Sudanese Arabic, Farsi* and *Russian*, but unfortunately I never found enough time to concentrate fully on learning them. Even though the outcome of my “efforts” was rather miserable, I do not consider this time spent a loss. Language is not only the bridge between people, it is also the key to people’s spiritual universe. Dreaming in Swedish, in French or in English is not the same, even if the same dream is dreamt by the same person. When asked to translate an Anyuak sentence, I realise how difficult it is to jump from one mental universe to another, how the same words change meaning when put into a different language. In Anyuak, even counting geese crossing the sky opens new dimensions in understanding, even silence has a different meaning in Anyuak or in English.

During my leisure time, I continued to go to the mountains but now more often in winter than in summer, and whenever possible by full moon. I spent my holidays in Sweden where my friends had summerhouses, at *Lidarände* in *Hovs-Hallar* near *Båstad* on the shores of the sea, in *Bjärka-Säby* at *Kringstorp* near *Linköping* in the forests and on small enchanting lakes. In winter we went to *Dalarna* where friends had a small house in a place called *Sälen*, enveloped ourselves with darkness, spirits and dreams. Twice I ventured to *Lapland* for excursions in the wilderness, looking for bears and adventures and drowned on one occasion in the violent, ice cold *Rapa River* (I was saved by a thin rope so my friends managed to pull me onto land). Frequently I went to visit my friends in Norway. I still feel these round warm stones in the sea under my bare body at *Folehavna* or at *Sandö* where we read books, talked and drank while watching the wind beat the blue waves of the sun. This was a wonderful time, though very different from the time I had spent in the Provence. It was extremely romantic on the one side, with songs, candles, piano music, sorrowful sunsets and shining eyes, but very restless on the other, with a lot of violent discussions, shouting and tears throughout the night. *Ingmar Bergman’s* dramatic spirit was so close that it became almost physical, and indeed, because my friends’ enchanting summer resort is situated on the fissured black rocks high above the turbulent sea, the famous movie director came in person to my friends’ place to premier yet another of his deeply depressive films on the agitations of the human soul! The stormy place, by the way, is called “*Lidarände*”, a name promising “*The End of the Suffering*”, - a whole programme for my future life!



*Lidarände, "the end of the suffering"*



1971 in Algiers

## Teaching French Literature at the University of Kisangani in the Congo (1970-1971)

How did it happen that I went to the *Congo*? Why would I move from the strong, warm light of the Provence and the more intimate shades of Northern Europe to the darkness of the rainforest? And why would I leave my family and friends? Objectively, there was no reason for it. But subjectively, there was no reason to restrict my life to myself.

Even close friends sometimes felt the need to look for explanations, and some even dared to reach conclusions. One friend compared me to *Rimbaud* who at a young age had left Europe for Ethiopia in order to find new sensations; it was explained as an escape from reality into the exotic world of new sensations, as an attempt to get rid of fiction and plunge into crude reality. But objectively, I didn't have any reason to run away from anything and I didn't have any business plan. I was merely searching for "*something else*", wanting to venture into the unknown in order to discover something new: "*aller au fond de l'inconnu pour trouver du nouveau*", as *Baudelaire* had put it. But concerning my relationship with *Rimbaud*, it is surely true that I felt, like him, to be "*un autre*" (*somebody else*); could it be that I was searching for that "other", yet unknown stranger, existing somewhere out of myself?

The fact was that, after I finished my studies, I didn't have any plans for the future. I just wanted to wait until something happened. I didn't need to wait long. "Destiny knocked at my door": I received a letter from an organisation for universities based in Geneva. I was asked if I would be interested in the post of an "associate professor" of French literature at the university in *Kisangani*, in the Congo; that was before the Congolese dictator *Mobuto* changed the name of the country to "*Zaire*". I don't know how

that organisation got my name, perhaps they were just informed about people who had finished university; possibly it was Prof. De Man who had recommended me and given them my contacts. Happy that I did not need to think of any further plans for my future, I accepted the offer and jumped into the unknown without hesitation; for the first time, I left Europe. I wasn't reasonable, of course, and I failed to ask other people for their opinion; I didn't even imagine that there was anything unusual about becoming a university teacher immediately after having finished my studies, at the age of only twenty-seven. I didn't know much about the Congo. I just remembered having seen the new leader Patrice Lumumba on TV: first when insulting the King of Belgium when he paid a last visit to the Congo at the moment of independence, and then, only some months later, when being tied up by thick ropes and driven away in a jeep. The picture of the captured and humiliated Patrice Lumumba will never disappear from my memory; I strongly identified with the hero at this most painful moment in his life. In spite of such remembrance, I didn't expect to meet with violence, I had no fear. On the contrary, I was quite enthusiastic and curious, leaving any possible doubts about my engagement behind with my stunned parents.



*Congo river near Kisangani*

I have only a few pleasant memories from that time, but still, I don't regret my decision. If one can learn from negative experiences and one's own mistakes, in the Congo I have learned a lot.

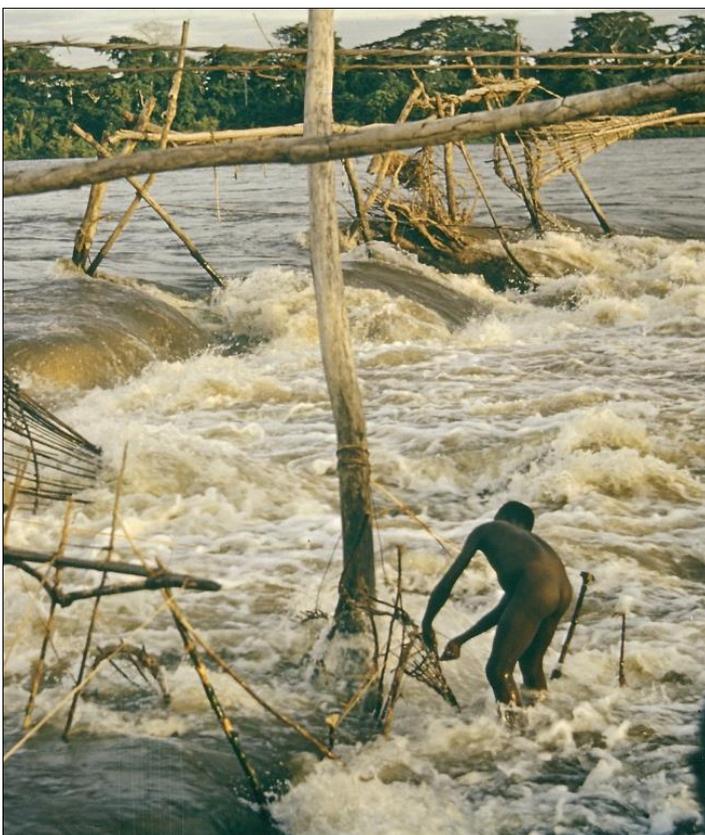
Professionally, there was nothing, the university was a chaotic place, closed most of the time, and for the remaining days, the students were on strike. The atmosphere was very explosive, both students and teachers were threatened by Mobutu's rabble, often arrested and thrown out of the university, accused of being revolutionary. The situation was rather hopeless, and I guessed that the strikes were not so much about teaching or the change of examination dates but about liberty of expression and freedom. If you were not interested in politics, Kisangani was the place to change your attitude: there was violence and hatred wherever you went. Lumumba had been killed eight years earlier but the fire of hope he had lit in the heart of the tortured Congolese was still burning and this not only in his home town Kisangani. Mobutu had only been in power for a few years and ruled with an iron fist; opposition

was not tolerated, so the students suffered most directly from the dictator's oppression. The students were extremely angry and their protests often turned violent. Periodically, Mobutu's military parachute jumpers entered the university campus from the sky, to shoot or arrest students and occasionally to liberate some abducted professors. The high tensions at the university corresponded to the heat and the extreme humidity of the place; Kisangani is situated exactly on the equator. At the time the town was still in ruins, charmless and extremely poor. The foreign university teachers were told to stay in a kind of ghetto outside of the town, in complete isolation from the population; privately, they only had social contacts among themselves. I made a few friends, among them some students and a very kind Swedish nurse, *Alice Sandblom*, probably the only person in the compound who was in close touch with the common Congolese because she also worked in a hospital. I can still see Alice jumping over snakes blocking the doorway between the kitchen and the living room; she seemed to be dancing with reptiles. The foreign professors invited themselves over occasionally, but otherwise the life in Kisangani was green, dumpy and lonely; only disease would feel at ease. One of the two things I recall was a big explosion which was believed to be the start of a new revolution but which in fact was nothing but the powerful explosion of a boat on which the captain had smuggled ammunition. There was a car on that boat belonging to French friends who had been waiting for its arrival for more than six months., Now it had disappeared forever in the river Congo, that almost motionless witness of so many terrible explosions of human hatred. The other thing I remember was an incident which occurred at night on a lonely path through the rainforest. In the company of *Ruth*, my kind American neighbour, I walked home from the cinema. It was forbidden for university teachers to walk on that road during the dark hours, but it was also forbidden to travel in any taxi where the driver was accompanied by another person. Such taxis did not exist, because no driver would risk his life driving all alone. So we decided to go on foot anyway. While we were walking, Ruth informed me that someone was walking behind us. "Why not", I responded, "*the road doesn't belong to us!*" She then told me that the man was coming closer and closer. "Why not", I answered, "*he is walking faster than us!*" A few seconds later, someone jumped me, threw me to the ground, grabbed my jacket and ran away with it; it was the best jacket I ever had. I am still amazed that I had not seen him approaching let alone heard him before he jumped me. "*I had seen him coming running*", Ruth said, suddenly smiling, "*but I had decided not to warn you anymore*". Quite a few professors got hurt being attacked in Kisangani, but because I hadn't been aware and would never have expected anybody to attack me, I didn't show any sign of resistance; I was easy prey. So in spite of the loss of my jacket, I had actually been very lucky: my innocent naivety and Ruth's silence had saved me!

What I took back home from my time in Kisangani was positively decisive for my future: I learned how *not* to behave! I don't know if it was really necessary to isolate the university teachers from the rest of the town; perhaps it was. The fact that we were separated from "the people" guaranteed that no lasting relationships could develop; when leaving the Congo, we were possibly almost as ignorant about the inhabitants as we had been before. All we had experienced was oppression, fear and terror. All we could take home were impressions, colours and emotions, memories of humidity, sudden nightfall, of sickness, vermin and snakes, of gunfire, explosions and running people, but almost no friends. I felt very frustrated to be somewhere and yet be deprived of getting close to the local people. Among the memories I keep is the frightening feeling of moving through the rain forest in complete darkness, surrounded by strange noises and the nervous movements of invisible people running for safety. I recall also my pleasure listening to the people's very special way of speaking French: instead of using the word "to look" (*regarder*), they would use the more sophisticated term "to contemplate" (*contempler*), as if "looking" would be something purely superficial. Or, they wouldn't say "I am very tired", but their language would recognise body and mind as two distinct entities and explain that "*I have to put my body to rest, it is very tired*" ("*je dois reposer mon corps, il est très fatigué*"). My

favourite Congolese expression was, however, the extraordinary sentence “*Je souffre beaucoup de la souffrance!*” (“*I am suffering much of suffering*”). What seemed to be a simple pleonasm was to me a perfect description of a state of depression.

I also recall my visit to the acrobatic *Wagenia*-fishermen at the light blue *Stanleyfalls* who were dancing on the wooden stages in the middle of the dashing river. These people taught me one day how to play a game where one has to move chisel stones from one hole to the next. I still play this game with small, soft stones which I collected later at the shores of *Lake Tanganyika* in *Burundi* and call it “*Wagenia-game*”. I also keep strong visual memories of the *river Congo*, this massive, heavy movement of slow time, staring at people with the green eyes of greedy crocodiles. I recall a popular race between canoes heading straight for the sunset, and I also remember a very obscene native dance in front of the Catholic Church and can still hear the wooden sound of the *Tam-tam* drums which allow people to send their secret messages across the river. I remember an ice cream shop where a foreign lady dropped her yellow ice cream and saw the children joyfully licking the smashed ice cream off the dirty ground. I remember well the face of Dr. *Carrington*, a gentle missionary who tried to teach us *Kiswahili* even though the language spoken in Kisangani was of course *Lingala*, the language of Congolese music. The most beautiful remembrance of my time in Kisangani was a noisy and yet romantic evening when a young band played music in a local park. There was the moon, there were these shining instruments, thrillingly elegant dancers, and this wonderful Congolese sound which can be so inspiring, sentimental, full of joy and very sad at the same time. I would have to wait many years until I again experienced similar emotional moments with highly inspired young musicians, and felt comparable sensations of pure happiness and deep melancholy. That would be thirty years later, in the year 2000, and again it happened in the Congo, though not in the Congo-Kinshasa but in the *Congo-Brazzaville*, among the ghostly ruins of the tortured town of *Dolisie* in the rebellious province of the *Niari*.



*The Stanley-falls in Kisangani*

At the end of 1970, after my first year in the Congo, the authorities in Kinshasa decided to move the faculty of arts to *Lubumbashi* in *Katanga*-Province. The reorganisation of higher education in the Congo would take months and the universities would be closed for that period of time. The professors had the choice of waiting and preparing themselves to move or to resign. I decided to leave. I had enough of adventures in which I was nothing but a powerless observer.

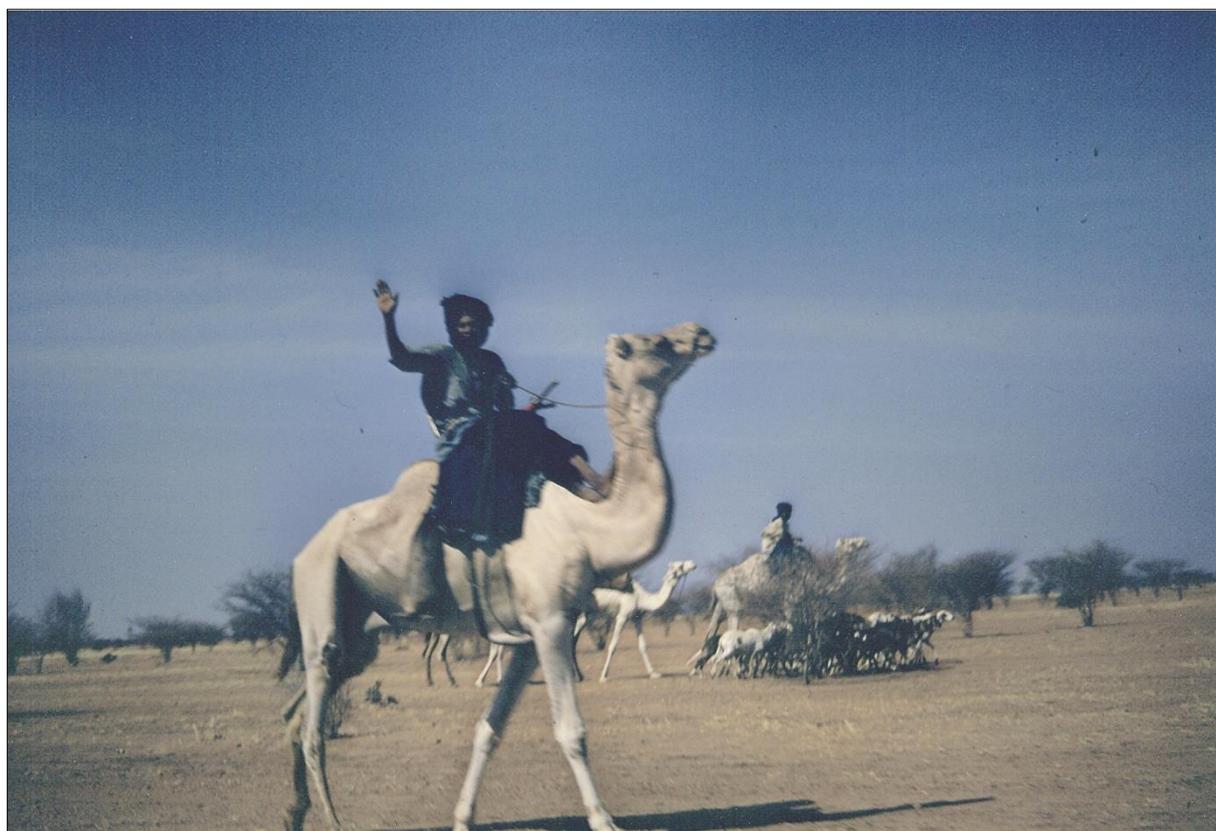


The stay in the Congo allowed me to travel and to see other parts of East, Central and North Africa: I travelled eastwards with a friend from the university and his family. We visited *Goma*, *Bukavu*, *Rwanda*, *Burundi*, crossed the *Serengeti*-park in *Tanzania* and went up to *Tanga*, eventually reaching *Kenya* from where we returned to *Kisangani* via the *Murchinson-falls* and its lazy crocodiles in *Uganda*. These were very pleasant holidays in nice company. We saw plenty of wild and rare animals and enjoyed sailing on the Indian

Ocean on effervescently green waters. I remember best a small hotel somewhere in Kenya where I was surprised by somebody entering my room at five o'clock in the morning, chanting with a soft, gentle voice: "*Early-morning-tea, Sir!*". I opened my eyes to the appearance of a tall, deeply black young man dressed in white who put the tea plate carefully on my bedside table. I couldn't believe what had happened to me. I felt I had awakened in another age! "*Sir*", he had called me! Did he really speak to me? Was it real, or was this a fairy tale as well?

With a car lent by my friends, I eventually left *Kisangani* and returned to Switzerland via the *Central African Republic*, *Chad*, *Cameroon*, *Nigeria*, *Niger* and *Algeria*. My old Swiss friend from the Grisons, *Andreas Auer*, accompanied me. In those days, all the roads were still natural and in extremely bad condition. Consequently, the trip was tiresome but full of anecdotes, funny and less funny. One night in *Agadez*, we went to the cinema, but left early. My friend backed the car out of the place, striking a motorbike which had been parked behind our car. The night was black like coal and in those times cars didn't have any backlights. The police discovered our sleeping place the same night and confiscated our passports. We were told to come to the police station the next day. After a night full of worries, we went to the court early in the morning and found the judge with the owner of the motorbike. We told him our story. The judge was very polite and quickly understood the problem: "*You are coming from very far. Imagine, that far! From the Congo!!*" he began his speech, immediately reaching his conclusion and the verdict: "*Well, myself, I never had the chance to travel far. However, I can imagine that such a long journey makes people extremely tired, exhausted even. And this I know from my own experiences very well indeed. When you are very tired, very, very tired, it can happen that you can't see clearly anymore... Fatigue can make you blind! So this case is simple. You are not guilty of anything, this just happened by accident. Please give this fellow some money, so that he can repair his motorbike, but don't give him all that he has asked for, that is much too much. Just give him something.*" The mere idea of travelling so far had made the judge very tired, he became lenient and full of sympathy, even compassion. My friend was a jurist and as such was even more impressed by the unexpected verdict than I was. This was a great lesson in African wisdom and humanity! We were relieved. Fortunately, after his compensation, the owner of the motorbike was happy as well.

Before closing this chapter on my first experiences in “darkest Africa”, I would like to add a short anecdote which reveals more about the African character than any analysis could. During our trip across Africa, we camped one cold night somewhere in a desert in *Niger*. We tried to make a fire but could only find thin branches of thorny bushes; our fire was miserable. Suddenly, at the onset of night, we observed on the horizon an old woman approaching. She was carrying a big load of wood on her head. When she came closer, she looked at us from a distance, and to our surprise she left her path and started walking in our direction. When she reached us, she threw the whole load of firewood to the ground, and without saying a word, she turned and left. We had never experienced such generosity. It was simply unbelievable. Deeply impressed by so much spontaneous kindness, we warmed ourselves by the god sent fire. When looking into the rustling flames, we could only think of that kind old woman who, after a long day of hard work, returned home empty-handed. Why did she help us? Would she have a fire tonight for cooking a meal? We would never know. Never in my life shall I forget that old woman and her load. She had carried the heart of Africa on her head and had given it to us as a gift. Unselfish and natural, happy to help us in our indigence! That old woman remains in my memory as a symbol of love, kindness and unselfish generosity, and as a symbol for the whole of Africa: its rivers, forests, savannah, birds and animals, the dusty sun and the sailing white moon, the clouds stapled horizontally in the open space, and all the people labouring daily in the arid fields of human dignity.



*Greetings from the desert in Niger*

## Missions for the International Committee of the Red Cross (Geneva) in Bangla Desh, Vientnam and India (1972-74)

I began my professional life as a lecturer in French literature at the University in Kisangani, a job which I left because the Faculty of Arts had been moved to Lubumbashi. After the Congo, I had to search for another job. For reasons which probably had poetical and musical roots<sup>3</sup>, I focused my interest on *South America* and, to a lesser extent, *Indonesia*. In the hopes that there would be a vacancy somewhere, I wrote to various universities in those countries, no less than thirty of them, expecting to be lucky enough to receive at least one positive response. In preparation for possible employment in South America, I decided to learn Spanish and went to *Barcelona*. At the same time, I applied to the *International Committee of the Red Cross* in *Geneva*, with the aspiration of being accepted as a delegate. I was promised employment but was asked to first improve my English; indeed, all my knowledge of English dated from my school days. After Spain, I travelled therefore to *England*, attended a language course in *Bournemouth* in the South and later spent some time in *London*. Even though I was all alone and didn't meet anybody, the days spent in London were culturally very exciting, grandiose even, with plenty of visits to art museums, cinema, modern ballet, theatre and concerts, including the magnificent original performance of the musical "*Hair*". I had never been in such a big city and looked at buildings and people with blunt amazement, puzzled, scared and fascinated simultaneously. I fear big crowds of people, noise and unrest and feel therefore more at home in the mountains and in the wilderness but this does not mean that I am not attracted by all the frenzy of faces and colours, of noise and smells, of dust and smoke, of light and obscurity, of all these wooden figureheads of mankind dressed as living persons, exposed in show cases, moving hastily through crowds and mouldering heaps of electric light, with umbrellas and sparkling eyes, freezing, laughing, pushing, queuing, crossing roads, jumping on buses at the last minute. "*One day*", I said to myself, looking absentmindedly at the crowds from a distance, "*One day, all these people will vanish forever behind the heavy red curtain of death, lonely victims of their personal destiny*". Big cities bring out the deeply melancholic side of my character, make me mild and sad; "*The appearance of these faces in the crowd; Petals on a wet, black bough*", *Ezra Pound* wrote about the faces he observed in the Metro.

My wish to become a delegate of the International Committee of the Red Cross corresponded with my education, my intellectual and political interests and my experiences in the mountains but my engagement reflected also my obstinate craving for meaning and fulfilment, that desperate search for spiritual consistency which I could only find outside of myself. Reading books and talking about literature was intellectually rewarding and inspiring but physically, reading was quite a lonely activity. It didn't allow me to start any lasting physical relationships with the people described. Books were good company indeed and gave me a lot of inspiration and ideas but they didn't return my feelings let alone give me support when I was in physical need. For me, literature was never more or less than to quote Baudelaire, "*une invitation au voyage*" ("*an invitation to make a journey*"), a journey through the destinies of people; an emotional, intellectual as well as a spiritual experience. As my Godfather had predicted, literature had become the foundation of my life but it had never been an aim in itself. I liked teaching a lot, even though only the discussions with my students gave me feelings of pleasure and personal satisfaction. The students seemed to appreciate my lectures but I could not imagine teaching at universities for the rest of my life. My mind needed to achieve very earthly, concrete

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<sup>3</sup> Amongst my favourite singers were the Catalan *Ramon*, the Spanish poet *Paco Ibanez*, *Violetta Para* from Chili and especially *Atahualpa Yupanqi* from Argentina.

things: to see with my eyes and to work with my hands. It was this desire of giving my human and political interests some physical and spiritual consistency that has led me into the field of anthropology and eventually humanitarian actions for the greater part of my life.



*The mighty Brahmaputra-River (called Jamuna) near Dacca in Bangla Desh*

My dream of working one day for the ICRC was realised in 1972, when I was sent to *Bangla Desh*, the former “*East-Pakistan*”, where a particularly cruel war had just ended with the liberation of this poverty stricken country. I was in charge of helping the *Biharis*, the *Urdu*-speaking former middle class, and some *Pakistani* and *Afghan* prisoners, first in the capital *Dacca* and later in *Chittagong* on the *Burmese* border, defeated by the local *Bengali* population who now had to seek refuge in overcrowded camps. The ICRC was to shield these denuded refugees against the fury of the *Bengalis* who were seeking revenge for all the cruelty they had previously endured.

It is absolutely impossible to go into the details of this first mission in *Bangla Desh* and indeed all the missions which would follow: *Vietnam*, *India*, *Afghanistan*, *Central Asia*, *The Congo* and *The Sudan*, names of beautiful countries which unfortunately are better known for misery and warfare than for the kindness of their inhabitants. My memories are closely linked to places and landscapes, unknown individuals and a few trusted friends, arrogant military commanders and drunken soldiers as well as prisoners, refugees and all the common people who had to suffer from the direct or indirect consequences of war. My memories are linked to permanent exposure to death, to exploding mines, to gunfire, explosions and bombardments, to ruins and burning huts, to aggressions, abduction, arrest and to persons killed, mutilated, raped or hurt. War is horrific and there is nothing nice to remember about it. War and other human catastrophes shed a very crude light on existence, on landscapes, houses and people alike; people in flight, running to save a piece of their lost humanity, trying to find shelter from the terrors of war.

The work for the ICRC was a great challenge but thanks to my previous activities, I was well prepared, both intellectually and practically. Existential questions had occupied my mind even as an adolescent. Books had opened the world outside of the mountains of my childhood, taken me on adventures, helped me to make discoveries and stimulated my mind; books responded to my desire to cross borders, to follow visions and to find answers to my existential questions. More concretely, books were also a source of information about the nature and history of people, about spiritual and religious matters as well as about the social, political and natural context in which people spend their lives on earth. Though reading was mainly an emotional, sensual, intellectual and spiritual journey, it was also a very real



*Graceful young Indian women.*

experience that would influence my comprehension of the world and guide my future interests. My interest in people was genuine, not linked to any professional duty. The ICRC didn't light a fire in me but kept it alive, nourished its flames and made it shine with even greater intensity.

On the more practical side, my previous experiences at home or in the mountains helped me as well when forced to cope with the often tedious conditions of a delegate's life. Physically strong and resistant, I was used to exposing myself to dangers and, if necessary, to taking risks. I wasn't afraid for my life, and I have never been a coward. When climbing, I had moreover learned to be both cautious and to keep my calm when something unexpected happened, and I was accustomed to taking care of others and assuming responsibility. I was able to overcome personal difficulties, and to handle delicate problems and make decisions. In the mountains you don't have the right to play; you have to be authentic, both your body and your mind have to fully concentrate on one issue. If you lose concentration, you are likely to lose your grip and fall deep.

I am not sure if experiences can change your character but surely you can learn from what you have experienced. The very peculiar conditions of war bring out qualities in people which under normal circumstances wouldn't receive any prominence. People change, become more selfish or more compassionate, and show cowardice or courage. I remember the Anyuak King defending one of his subjects who I accused of being dishonest: "*Yes, I know*", the King answered, "*he has that problem. But you should see him when things turn bad, when life gets dangerous and when there is need for a person who is courageous, brave, intelligent and skilful. So many people will fail and run away from danger. But this man is exceptional; he is one of my most trusted fighters!*" Circumstances give you the opportunity to display your qualities, and sometimes they simply direct your talents into new directions. I doubt that, if it had not been under these very special circumstances of stress, I would have been able to display hitherto unknown features of my personality. For example, I was suddenly able to control my emotions, even when almost exploding with anger, disgust or despair, and I would rarely lose my temper.

Never in my life have I felt superior to anybody and I have always avoided hurting even people I didn't like; this would earn me respect. I was modest, respectful and friendly and learned to show patience. I liked laughing and joking and could make even hard discussions bearable for all. I enjoyed spending most of my spare time with local people, learning about their culture and sharing their problems; I could make people talk and was able to listen. Thanks to such informal meetings, I could feel at home even in the most deserted and unwelcoming places and could find the needed strength and courage to work. Since I quickly developed the reputation of being sympathetic to the plights and problems of others, I gained respect and sympathy as well; envious critics of my personal engagement argued that my generosity was simply proof of my naivety and that I was deliberately ignorant of people's bad character but I didn't care. I hated academic discussions when there was need to act quickly. No wonder that I occasionally clashed with my superiors when my call for help was not answered immediately by a positive response. I was an outsider even within the organisations I worked for. Yet, I usually ended up receiving the necessary support.

Even though life as an ICRC-delegate was often difficult, filled with frustrations and deceptions, it was also inspiring and rewarding. There is nothing better in life than being able to help people, not only by giving them protection and by providing them with the means to survive but more importantly by restoring their human dignity. Since my personal help was asked for over and over again, the work for the ICRC made me almost destitute but mentally, emotionally and intellectually I became extremely rich. All people were very generous with me, in terms of gratitude and blessings, and especially regarding trust and lasting friendship. Indeed, what would my memories of landscapes, events and meetings be if there had not been all these courageous and kind people who protected me and helped me overcome my fears, hesitations and moments of frustration, my doubts and moments of hopelessness? Nobody can live alone; one needs relatives to find a place within oneself and to feel secure there. In times of war, reliable company is even more essential than in the usually less dramatic times of peace. When talking about myself, I am indirectly talking as well about the people who were with me, who were struggling, fighting, afraid, sharing with me moments of distress and joy; I was part of their identity, they were part of mine, even if, physically, it would only be for a short time. Shouldn't I mention their names just because they are so many of them? I should! *Alinazar Alinazarov, Hélène Biannic, Brigitte Braendli, Hasan Buriev, Gilles Carbonnier, Jean-François Darcq, Lolita Dauletmirsaeva, Dominique Gross, Cholpon Ismailova, Paivi Laurila, Tim Leyland, Sylvia Lokong, Tawab Omary, Pertti Pesonen, André Picot, Mihail Rakhmanov, Harald Schmid de Grüneck, Bahar Tirkeshovna, Mengesha Tsegay, Geoff Loane, Zalmai and Zamanuddin* were among those friends who played a crucial role in my life while working for humanitarian organisations and even afterwards. Other colleagues never left me even physically. They grew slowly but steadily into my existence, eventually turning into regular landmarks of my biography's itinerary: *Adok Gai Budice Jok, Laurent Giger, Marguerite Lacoste-Pillonel, Pascal Mauchle, Bernadette Peterhans, Tamila Shulukhia, Peter Stocker, Askar Umarbekov and Stephanie Weber* have remained with me for many years, stout pillars cut out of such hard wood that the worms of time have not been able to find entry. I would feel embarrassed if I was asked to explain why people loved me, why they cried whenever I had to leave them for good. Sincerely, I don't know. "*Why did you come if you go again?*" the Anyuak asked when I left them after a long time of togetherness. The Nuba or Afghans, like so many other people I had met, would express that same bitter feeling of irretrievable loss. I felt of course the same: why did I go again? We were all conscious that we would never meet again, that our farewell was meant to be forever. It was like death but death with great fear for each other's afterlife: we knew that it wouldn't be paradise. *What would happen to him*, they would ask themselves, and I would be as worried that something bad would happen to them. We were like parents and children, both at the same time.



*Kwacakworo working as an ICRC-delegate in Pamir (Tajikistan).*

I am not able to say to what extent and in what way my first missions for the ICRC facilitated my fieldwork among the Anyuak, but surely they did. Both the ethnographer and humanitarian worker can only be successful if he is resistant to stress and pressures, if he can endure times of loneliness and exposure to foreign aggressions, if he is physically and mentally strong enough to move through unfamiliar territories, and if he can adapt his behaviour and create a positive relationship with the local population and their rulers. Both of them have to be flexible, show interest and compassion for people's lives, their cultural background as well as their worries and problems. And, most importantly, both an ethnographer and a humanitarian agent must be able to accommodate himself to the conditions of work and enjoy the short time of their presence in a captivating human and natural environment: they have to remain themselves even when under pressure. In that sense, the time I spent with the ICRC was a kind of apprenticeship for my future engagement and activities, and in a way, a kind of introduction to my own personality, its capacities and limits.