

Dear friends and relations,

The publication of two books last year and recent interactions between the Namibian and German Governments have a common thread and give rise to my writing this Newsletter. It takes us back 100 years, to the period 1904 – 1908 more precisely, when the Herero and Nama people in Namibia rebelled against the land grabbing that Imperial Germany was ruthlessly pursuing. As you will read these pages you might ask why some of the gruesome detail was not previously accessible information. You will also be reminded how deep a wound it leaves for the southern Namibians to this day, a wound toward which those in whose name it took place, have done and are doing little or nothing. Just icy silence! Notably from the German community in Namibia!

On 21 May 2011 Ursula Trueper, the author of *The Invisible Woman – Zara Schmelen*, and descendent of Zara, had an article published in the Berliner Zeitung. It evokes aptly what the two publications and the possible or imminent return of human skulls from German institutions back to Namibia, have in common. Ursula has given me permission to translate her article into English and to publicize through this Newsletter. For those who find it easier to read it in German, the original in German, is attached to this email.

In the early part of the 20th century the 3rd generation after Hinrich and Zara Schmelen lived in Namibia. Not all, as some had moved to Germany and others to South Africa. It is the

generation of eight children born to missionary Heinrich and wife Hanna Kleinschmidt (Hanna, or Johanna being the middle daughter of Zara and Hinrich), who lived when the rebellion and consequently the atrocities took place. Two daughters had married Finnish missionaries and lived somewhat distantly from the colonial manifestations, in the far-north Ovamboland. The Ovambo people were spared real German rule as the colonial project ended in 1916 when South African Union troops defeated the German Schutztruppe in Namibia, two years into the First World War. The German occupation of Namibia had simply not yet reached the northern parts of the country despite laying German claim to Ovamboland at the 1884 Berlin Conference. Think about it, if it had not been for the Herero and Nama rebellion German rule might well have asserted itself in the north. And the Finnish missionaries did their bit to neutralize German rule in the north.

With the consciousness and awareness of today I am keen to know if our forebears were perpetrators of the extraordinary human rights violations that took place at that time. That generation of born Kleinschmidts were 25% Nama and one can surmise that they had connections and allegiances on both sides, the colonized and the colonizer. Whom did they side with? Or did they silently observe.

Ludwig Kleinschmidt (born 1857 in Rehoboth, died in 1929 in the Wilhelmstal district) is the second last child of that generation about whom we know that he was directly caught up in the events. Attached to this email is a photo of him, standing with a sheet of paper in his right hand. Seated on the right is *omuhona* Manasse of Omaruru, seated, with *omuhona* Samuel Maharero standing on the right next to him, both leaders of the Herero people. On the left is Governor Theodor Leutwein, commander of the German troops in Namibia. The picture was taken in 1895 in front of

the German fortification in Omaruru. Ludwig was a *folk* or interpreter, having command of both the German and Herero languages. One might presume that he also spoke Nama. Interpreter in the negotiations (or diktats imposed by the colonizer) was his job, other than also being a farmer somewhere between Otjimbingue and Karibib. There are some indications that he and some in the missionary community were hostile to German actions after 1904. How vocal this was is not clear.

Herewith the translation of Ursula's article that appeared in the Berliner Zeitung.

FORCE IS MY POLICY

As a colonial power Germany erected the first concentration camps in Africa, brutally exploiting the people of Namibia. It would seem that the present German Government does not want to be reminded of this.

Johanna Kahatjipara was planning to be in Berlin on 21 May this year. She and other members of the Namibia delegation had planned to ceremonially receive the skulls from the Charite University in Berlin, and to return with them to Namibia, where, after some 100 years they are to be finally laid to rest. That was the agreement reached between the Namibian and German Governments. But.....

The photograph (*see photo attached*) is blurred and has been heavily retouched. It shows three men in uniform. One smokes a pipe. Another one is looking on. A third is bending down toward a box into which he is placing something round. The picture has something contemplative or casual about it until you look carefully, and see what the man is busy packing. In the background, stacked in neat rows are human skulls. The accompanying text states that a box of Herero skulls had recently been sent by the troops of German South West Africa

to the Pathology Institute in Berlin, where they were to be subjected to scientific scrutiny. The skulls, whose flesh was removed by Herero women using glass shards so they could be sent, belong to fallen and hanged Hereros.

"Imagine that you have to scrape the skin off a skull you recognise as that of your brother, your sister, your mother, your daughter or your son. Imagine the horror of having to live with this in later life. Imagine that you have to die with this memory. Imagine that as a descendant of the Herero people you live with this knowledge". Johanna Kahatjipara is 58 years old and lives in Namibia's capital, Windhoek. She was born and grew up in the small town of Karibib. When she first heard of this story she did not want to believe that it was true. She was shocked and deeply hurt. Being a member of the delegation to Berlin is tied up with the history of her own family. "When I was young", she writes in her email, "my aunt Metha Kavetjurura told me, that an uncle, Hakiria Kavetjurura, was amongst those people whose skull was taken to Germany."

The photograph was published in 1906 for the first time – as a postcard – apparently this did not evoke offence in Germany. Namibia was still a German colony known as German South West Africa. And there was war. The indigenous people, the Herero and Nama had risen against the colonial rulers as they were forced to cede more and more land to white traders and farmers. The response from Germany has been quoted many times, "Force with blatant terrorism and even the exercise of cruelty, was and is my policy. I destroy the rebellious tribes with floods of blood and floods of money". These are the words of General von Trotha. Any assumptions that these words were meant to have symbolic meaning for those who resisted, are ill founded.

The intention was to settle German farmers on a grand scale in German South West Africa. The fact that people already occupied this land did not concern the colonial rulers. When

they realized that the Africans were not going to give up their traditional land without resistance, an argument arose amongst the settlers on how to proceed. A public debate ensued as to whether one should subjugate the rebellious people such that they would serve as an eventual labour force, or whether it was preferable to exterminate them. Because one belonged to a superior race, one was actually executing a law of nature, if [through this] the 'inferior race' was destroyed and their riches appropriated.

However, precisely here in Namibia, the alleged superiority of the whites was by no means evident by the end of this bloody encounter, in which more than ten thousand soldiers, equipped with the latest technology were required to subdue and keep a few hundred poorly equipped African guerrilla fighters in check. [Due to this] it became all the more important for German 'scientific research' to prove their superiority to the rest of the world, ... by taking detailed measurements of skulls.

To break the back of the resisters, the Germans erected concentration camps, which – even then – they called concentration camps. "My aunt Metha as a child, lived with her mother, my grandmother, in the concentration camp in Karibib", reports Johanna Kahatjipara. "The first time I heard of these things was as a child because I always tried to eavesdrop on the conversations between my grandmother and her friends. They would whisper about these things and would chase us out of the house, because they did not want us to hear about this. But aunt Metha spoke openly about these things."

The principle of extermination through physical labour was first experimented with in these camps. Men, women and even children lived here in catastrophic circumstances. Nearly every second prisoner died of ill health, malnutrition or exhaustion. Historians believe that only some 20% of the former eighty thousand Herero survived and that of the Nama people about

half died in the war or during imprisonment. This justifies the term genocide, even though the term was then not known. All their land and cattle were confiscated and declared state property. The land was then sold on to settlers. To this day the former owners have not been compensated.

A particularly appalling concentration camp existed in Swakopmund. "From the early morning till late at night, every workday, on Sundays and holidays, work had to be performed under the truncheons of the supervisors," missionary Heinrich Vedder wrote concerning the camp. "On top of this, the food provisions were less than adequate, rice without anything else was not enough to support the weakened bodies of people who had survived in the veld and who were accustomed to the hot sun of the interior and could therefore not survive the cold and unrelenting pressure to work. Like cattle, hundreds were driven to their death and like cattle they were buried."

A further notorious concentration camp was on Shark Island just outside Luderitzbay. On 28 September 1905 the [South African] Cape Argus quoted an eyewitness who reported: "children, some not more than five years old have to join the workers. The weight they have to carry bears no relationship to the strength of their bodies. I have seen women and children break down. When they fall, the soldiers in charge beat them with whips, with all their might, until they get up again".¹ The most prominent prisoner on Shark Island was Cornelius Fredericks. He was the leader of particularly brave and resilient Nama fighters hailing from the area around the mission station of Bethanie. Until 1906, he and his guerrilla fighters remained a threat to the German troops, after which he was taken as a prisoner to Shark Island. One year later he was dead from exhaustion. Till today Cornelius Frederick is celebrated as a freedom fighter – and until today the rumour persists that his skull is amongst those

¹ Based on Ursula's article the Cape Argus is planning an article for the coming week.

taken to Germany.²

Many German research institutions retain the skulls of Nama and Herero fighters to this day, no less than 47 of the skulls lie at Berlins Charite hospital. The Namibian Government has long demanded the return of their remains. Now the moment appears to have finally come. But the date seems to move from week to week. The Namibian media have reported that the German Foreign Ministry has tried to exert pressure on the Namibian delegation not to speak of the "war excesses" of that time. This suggests that they want to avoid that the matter of compensation is raised. The resentment in Namibia is enormous; "who are these Germans who want to dictate to us what we should say" the NamSun newspaper reported.

The Namibian Government has also expressed caution, to 'separate the question of the return of the skulls from the matter of compensation'. They want to avoid complications at a time when, [starting in May], negotiations on development aid were due to take place. This involves vast amounts of moneys (of course only a fraction of what Germany would have to pay if the Nama and Herero families who suffered were compensated). "I have no idea what will happen" writes Johanna Kahatjipara, "or whether I will travel to Berlin. In the meantime, what I do is wait".³

² Chief David Frederick, now in his 70s is the grand nephew of Cornelius Frederick. He lives in Bethanie, next to the Schmelen house. As I reported in previous Newsletters, I have met him on several occasions. Eloquenty he recalls the history of his people and that period. He is likely to be part of the impending delegation to Germany.

³ I sent Ursula's article to the Editor of the Windhoek Allgemeine Zeitung, the German language Namibian daily paper, suggesting that they might want to reprint it in their paper. His response was unsurprising. According to him the German readers of Namibia are continually and critically engaging with the issues the article raises. "The article in the Berliner Zeitung is aimed at a readership the author seems to consider completely ignorant. That is different in Namibia, where not only German speakers but

I sigh deeply every time new weight of culpability comes to rest on the community I hail from. But as I have indicated before, building the possibility of a reconciled future cannot happen without knowing, confronting and acknowledging that which happened, notably if the truth is as horrible as it is here, and has been suppressed. Like elsewhere in the world, Chile and Argentina are pertinent examples, the abuse of power such as we are concerned with here, will rear its head again and again until one day it is acknowledged and confronted, albeit by the children or the children of the children of those in whose name these things took place.

To my knowledge none of the other boys of that missionary generation, or their sons ever joined the Schutztruppe, the primary instrument of suppression.

The two books I make reference to at the beginning of this Newsletter are

GERMANY'S GENOCIDE OF THE HERERO – Kaiser Wilhelm II, His General, His Settlers, His Soldiers, by Jeremy Sarkin, published by UCT Press with James Curry.

ISBN 978-1-91989-547-5 (2010)

THE KAISER'S HOLOCAUST – Germany's Forgotten Genocide and the Colonial Roots of Nazism, by David Olusoga and Casper W. Erichsen. Published by Faber and Faber.

also concerned Ovaherero and sometimes Namas concern themselves with these matters and comment on them publicly." --- Well, well.....

ISBN 978-0-571-23141-6 (2010)

Both books are important though the more scholarly, is the book by Jeremy Sarkin.

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Regards,

Horst.
