

Excerpt

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”Min UD-Krönika” (My Foreign Ministry Chronicle)

Botswana 1982-86

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Botswana, former Bechuanaland, is the geographical size of France but with a population of only one million people in 1982. In 2006 the population had raised to 1,7 million inhabitants. The country became independent in 1966 following protection from Great Britain since 1885. The independence was gained without bloodshed but Botswana was totally dependent on South Africa with respect to exports and imports. Without a sea route and with the Kalahari Desert in the west bordering Namibia and Angola, Zambia and Zimbabwe in the north, and South Africa in the east and south, was there only one export and import route, the one through South Africa. At independence in 1966, Botswana was according to the United Nation’s judgment, one of the world’s poorest countries. This would come to change when diamonds were discovered in the country after 1966. However, it took some time before foreign aid and infrastructure was in place, for the development to be triggered. Swedish assistance focused on helping with water reticulation, town and regional planning, educational system and other areas to assisting the country to be economically independent. The large country in the south, South Africa was being plagued by apartheid. The white regime took to various expressions of power, among others attacks inside Botswana, which were directed by South African commando troops. The South African military simply flew into Gaborone, a few kilometers from the border and bombed homesteads where they believed that ANC members operated. People were shot to death in and outside houses from helicopters, which hovered in the air. ANC (African National Congress), the South African opposition movement was accused of having training camps in Botswana and that Botswana harbored some ANC leaders in the country. One morning a few weeks before I leave Botswana, I am taking a shower when I suddenly hear automatic gunshots. My spontaneous reaction is—not again! But the attack could only mean another South African attack. Not to be able to do anything, not knowing exactly what had happened, felt awful. Later, a press conference was held at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs – it was confirmed that South African troops had flown in and indiscriminately killed innocent civilians only a few kilometers west of Gaborone.

The four years I spent in Botswana would turn out to be the best experience throughout my foreign affairs’ time. The work was interesting in a small embassy, which extended to SIDA responsibilities. Ambassador K-G Engström gave me the liberty to operate independently, which at times felt like my feet did not fit into the big boots. But the feet grew with time. K-G and I had bumped into each other in South East Asia, and, not to forget, also in Stockholm in 1982 before I travelled to Gaborone for job orientation. A Botswana delegation visited Sweden in the beginning of June 1982, with Finance Minister Peter Mmusi as Head of Delegation, to discuss the Swedish development assistance to Botswana. I was assigned the responsibility to prepare the program for the visit with, among other events, a trip to Kiruna to study the iron ore mining. In addition, the delegation would have to experience the northern nature in some way. There was a suggestion of an air trip over the northern Swedish mountains, “fjällen”. But I had a feeling that if the natural powers did not show mercy, there was a great risk that the experience would be an unpleasant one. Instead I planned, on my older sister’s suggestion, rafting on the Torne River. I did not envisage that this could be a dangerous adventure and neither did I realize that Botswana did not live with, or might not be comfortable with river trips. A large part of Botswana is desert and shrub bush. My boss at the

Foreign Ministry then, Sten Rylander, did not have any objections; neither did my boss-to-be, K-G Engström—so I proceeded with the plans for the river rafting.

Following arrival to Kiruna, we visited the famous Kirunavaara mine and were taken down to 1000 meters depth by vehicle. No, I was not amused and neither was one of the members of the delegation. He had had bad experience from work in South African mines and never wanted to venture into a deep mine again. Notwithstanding my claustrophobic feeling, it was fascinating to be so deep under earth or rather rock... and to watch the work there under. But I was relieved to come up to the daylight again.

My intuition was real – the weather was not particularly good during the first days in June and I was pleased we did not have to fly into the mountainous world on the foggy day. We instead travelled by a rental bus to Jukkasjärvi where we would, by the river, board the rubber rafts, dressed in raincoats, and lifejackets—of course. We were divided into two rafts and the first stretch was on calm waters. Soon after we approached the falls in the beginning some “kind falls”— so we could slowly adjust. Finance Minister Mmusi asked, a bit worried, if this was safe. I answered with a tremble in my voice and with fingers crossed that it was! I had no clue



if it was safe or not! K-G Engström, a northerner, thrived like fish in water, and with a confident and experienced northerner at the oars I felt quite safe. Suddenly we came to bigger and stronger falls and we got knots in our stomachs when crossing them. Just before the highest fall, Pauranki, the rower urged us to shout out the name as loudly as we could, Paurank!!, many times while he rowed toward a very deep-water whirl. But the fear disappeared in the brush of

the fall. Everyone wanted to continue—it was extremely exciting!

Halfway, the rowers steered toward the shore and we went on land. There was soon a fire, coffee brewing and grilling of char. The temperature in the air was below +8 degrees C and the ice had only a few days earlier left Torne River. But after grilled char, flatbread, beer and coffee, the temperature inboard started to rise. Peter Mmusi sat on an old tree log and warmed his hands on the fire. He looked like he was contemplating about nature’s differences—or perhaps similarities, in Sweden and Botswana.

The trip took eight hours in all. The falls’ height for the tour was 60 meters. It was a great experience which I was glad I had suggested. But the Foreign Ministry wondered later who in the whole world had approved the plan for this adventure! I did not think about that during the dinner we enjoyed in the old community center in Jukkasjärvi village.



We were served with smoked, sliced reindeer heart, minced bear beef and, ice cream with cloudberries for desert. I know that no one who was part of the trip would ever forget it. A couple of months’ later I had proof of that when I landed in Gaborone to start working at the Swedish Embassy, and met members of the delegation at various venues. Finance Minister Mmusi always approached me to talk about Pauranki.

It was too early in the year to see the midnight sun but a climb up to the top of Dundret hill gave the Botswana delegation a feel of the so-called northern light, even without the midnight sun. It was not too far away as it did not get completely dark that night.

Botswana suffered from drought during the four years I lived there. We were required to ration water and it was prohibited to watering the garden. When I had arrived my lawn was green, however, it slowly turned into sand. We used water from dishwashing to keep some flowers alive to give some colour around the house. It was, of course, worse for the wildlife, and Botswana's livestock. In the beginning of the 1980ies, there were 4 million cattle, 4 cattle per capita, but in reality only 4% of the population owned the largest share. Meat contributed to a third of Botswana's export. In Lobatse, 80 kilometers south of Gaborone, was the hemisphere's largest abattoir, which I visited once however deciding that that one time would be enough for the rest of my life.

My house was the Swedish ambassador's former residence, on 65 North Ring Road, neighbouring the President's State House. K-G Engström and his wife Eva moved to a bigger residence, purchased by the Swedish government, and which had a bigger garden and better entertainment area. Charlotte and I moved into the North Ring Road house with, for us a large area, a swimming pool and a beautiful terrace with a roof. The two sisters, Gladys and Anna Mangwa, took care of the household work and lived in a house behind ours. Gladys became like a sister and friend, and her sons played with Charlotte. Anna was deaf and dumb and therefore not so easy to have contact with but we understood each other all the same. I had a large association with Swedes and other nationalities and entertained quite often in the house or outside on the terrace.

Visitors from Sweden were welcome – I want to mention my 76-year maternal aunt Ninni, a most courageous woman! Formerly a nurse, she was tiny and slim, but strong. She came to Botswana just before when we were preparing to move into the house, at Christmas 1982. As always, she helped with the unpacking and a number of other things. Ninni was indispensable with house moves, both to and from “somewhere”. A year later, 1983, she landed in Gaborone again, and we went on our first safari trip together with Ulla Beckman (SIDA colleague). “UllaBeckman” became her name, as Charlotte believed that that was her first name and this worked well for distinguishing between the two “Ullas”. So, Ulla Beckman, used to safari trips in comparison with Ninni, Charlotte or I, rented a 4WD Land cruiser. We packed all necessities and started to drive toward the north-west part of Botswana, near the border with Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The first stop was Serowe, where we spent the night with our good friends Gitta and Hasse. We also spent one night in Francistown before heading towards Kasane. Thereafter we drove into the Chobe game park to the “Chobe Lodge” where we had booked rooms. Aunt Ninni offered to pay for the accommodation—not a cheap lodge.

We had just come into the Chobe game park when an elephant bull in the middle of the sandy road blocked us. He flexed his enormous ears and did not look friendly at all. I was behind the steering wheel, the heart was not where it should be, Charlotte fascinated by seeing an elephant and aunt Ninni, fearless, says—stop—I have to go out and take a photo! —We stopped spontaneously, but Ninni did not get her wish—of course. Suddenly we were surrounded by an elephant herd on its way from the river heading toward a grazing area. Following all the elephant stories I had heard, I remembered, luckily, that one in a situation like this should stay calm and not, for example, hoot, drive forward or reverse... but to simply let the elephant herd pass. Simply and simply... as soon as the nerves calmed and the elephants had passed, I continued the drive.

Elizabeth Taylor remarried Richard Burton at Chobe Lodge, for the second or third time—I can't remember. At the lodge, also the Swedish King Karl XVI Gustaf and Queen Silvia spent

some days during their honeymoon in 1976. The lodge was relatively empty during our visit. We spent a dark night by candlelight as the only light. I spent a sleepless night despite that I had got information on the time frame within which the elephants usually moved to and from the river. We had to leave the park, preferably without meeting the herd again!

The following day we went on a game drive with the hotel's guide and watched all sorts of wildlife. Unfortunately no lions!



Charlotte and I went on a number of trips in Botswana with friends and relatives during our four-year tour. Aside from my sister Eva and brother-in-law Kåre and their children there were several other visitors. It is impossible to describe safari trips in words—they have to be experienced! But a brief summary would be: fantastic nature, nights in tent or car, predators, herbivores of different types, vultures, beautiful birds, scorpions, a snake here and there, thorn bushes, unbeatable clear stars, Victoria Falls in

Zimbabwe, beautiful camping fires with grilled filet steaks, bought in lengths, and a blend of sounds from birds and insects. At the Third Bridge, which is constructed from wooden blocks, there was a nice resting place compared with the first and second bridges, on the road to Chobe Park. The Third Bridge is generally known. There it was possible to swim in the crystal clear water, but one had to watch out for crocodiles.

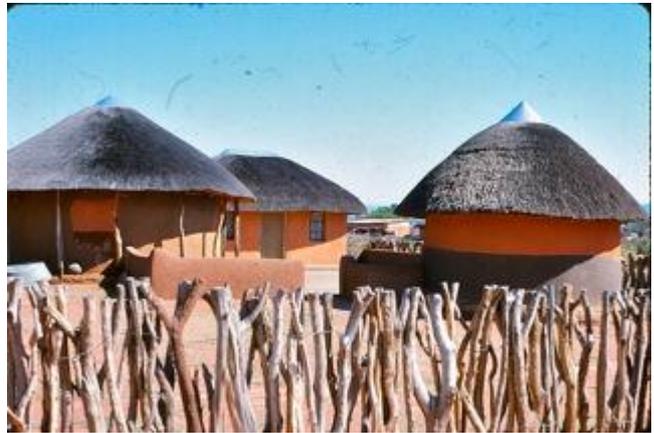
During the time in Botswana I gained significant personal development, both in relation to my work and socially. I managed to balance between my work and being a single mother. Gladys and Anna of course ensured that the household worked well and that Charlotte was picked up from the daycare. The help at home also made entertainment more manageable.

Small embassies tend to demand that one takes care of everything. The Ambassador gave me significant responsibility and let me take part in the reporting to the Swedish Foreign Ministry. He was a great mentor. There were times though when it was tough not to have anyone to consult with or refer to in sudden situations. I experienced that when Swedish residents in Lesotho, where K-G Engström was accredited, phoned to request an evacuation as a result of rumours of an expected invasion from South Africa. I contacted the Foreign Ministry in Stockholm but got the response that—it was we on the ground that had a better judgement of the situation. So it was only to hold the bull by the horns! I encouraged the Swedes to maintain a close and tight contact with the other Nordic representatives in Maseru and, of course, with me in Gaborone. There was in the end, no evacuation and I could take a deep breath.

Development assistance to Botswana was being handled by the embassy's SIDA department, its staff, in case of need, were of great help to me. Consular matters were few, except for renewals of passports. Swedes were in Botswana to work, not on holidays, and none lost his/her passport, there weren't any accidents, but I remember one person who rapidly had to go to Pretoria for medical treatment by a special plane, which was arranged by the Embassy. Administrative matters were taken care of by the Embassy assistants, Elizabeth Åkesson and later her successor Eva Benckert. I participated, with pleasure, in the short wave radio communications with the Foreign Ministry. All staff posted to the Embassy and SIDA office took turns to go on courier errands to Pretoria in South Africa. I took Charlotte with me on

one of the trips, which raised curiosity and surprise among white people. How could I as white be walking around with a dark-skinned child? Two elderly white women were so curious that they actually came forward to ask whose child it was. I could see that they couldn't digest or believe me when I answered clearly that she was mine. At the passport control on the South African side, there was similar curiosity—who is the mother. I responded by saying that they should ask Charlotte. We were then allowed to pass.

I learnt to know many Batswana, the people in Botswana. They were natural, friendly, generous and happy. There was never a problem to socialize. Trips to the bush exposed me to nature and I learnt to have enormous respect for nature from the experience with the elephants, buffaloes and other wild animals, in a world where nature's law rules. But maybe I could have learned something, even of lions had I only had the luck to meet them!



Revisiting Botswana 2006

To return after twenty years to the place I loved and thrived so well during four years, makes me nervous, excited and a bit scared while on my way to Gaborone. It is September 2006. To see the reality that must have changed feels like a big challenge. This would be the first time I return to a former working place (aside from New York and Paris). The flight from Johannesburg to Gaborone brings back old memories—heavy turbulence in the air, as had always been the case on this route. I am reminded of the first time I landed in Gaborone in 1982 in an old DC 3. The terminal building was as adorable as a shoebox. The trip was also bumpy, in a plane that I have only heard of, and seen on a picture and which my father always said was one of the safest planes in the world. I had stood at the old “shoebox” airport many times when foreign presidents and prime ministers landed to participate in meetings or celebrations of some kind, at the end of the diplomatic row (lowest in the ranks and service time) of ambassadors and chargé des affaires. At times I had the USA's ambassador standing next to me—the Russian ambassador was the Dean of the Diplomatic Corps and as such he was the first in line to greet arriving dignitaries—but the American Ambassador felt that it was nicer to be next to me. At least that is what he said. He did not like to be number two. Had the Dean come from another country than the Soviet Union, he would probably have stayed as number two in line.

Gaborone had definitely changed. In 1982 there were approximately 40 000 inhabitants. Now, in 2006, there were roughly 350 000 people. There were shopping malls, business centers, new vehicles and well-dressed people. There is immaculate cleanliness and neatness everywhere. I felt sad to see all high walls around almost every house. Even around “mine” at 65, North ring Road. Here, at least I would look through the iron-gate, and am also allowed to go through to take some pictures. The place looks the same but, wow, trees and bushes have grown! No doubt in 20 years! I don't understand why I am surprised. The Chinese embassy is still there right across the road. It had earlier been built in a traditional Chinese style. In 2006, I see a bunker-like building made of iron and concrete. So boring! I take a few steps along the road and look at the State House—also surrounded by thick and high walls and gates which one cannot see through. Not the case before!

I am so pleased to recognize the surroundings. Women chat and talk with lovely explicit laughter! The guard sits half sleeping outside the gate at the small hotel Innisfree, where we

stay. The greeting “rituals” come back from somewhere in my head and I melt into the past that once was. I watch the weaving birds building their nests in frenzy, I listen to the strong sound of the cicadas, I admire the amazing colourful bougainvillea bushes and I draw in the strong smell from the syringes and jacaranda trees. The whole nature is in full harmony with the ever-blue sky. There is always sunshine in Gaborone! So is my memory! And so is it when I revisit.

Together with friends, Agneta Groth and Tor Eriksson, part of the Swedish group that gathered in Gaborone to celebrate 40 years of independence, I travelled to the north to revisit the Chobe Park, and also at the same time take a trip to the Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe. In reaching the lodge in Kasane in the northwest Botswana, we did not finish unpacking before rushing out on a river cruise at sunset. I experience, again with much happiness, crocodiles, hippos, elephants, birds, baboons, waterbucks, and other wildlife. Back at the lodge that is ‘unter Deutsche Leitung’ (under German direction, as announced at the reception) dinner awaits. At 19.35, there is a knock on the door and someone says urgently, in the middle of our gin-and-tonic drink and biltong (dried meat), that dinner is being served! Oops, we almost march down the stairs to the dining room where the other guests are sitting with spoons in hand ready to eat the soup that has already been served and is probably cold because of us coming late. We had not realized that there was such orderliness. The main course is warthog fillet. No thanks, I do not feel like eating that again. The morning thereafter I am met by a warthog grazing on the lodge’s side of the fence of the garden. I stood like frozen on the steps of the hotel room as I did not wish to fight it. The next evening came a hippo along the other side of the fence, later to be joined by his whole family. We hear the croaking of frogs along the riverbank. Cicadas! The black Botswana night, with has the most beautiful star sky in the world.

The visit to Victoria Falls in 2006 claimed almost a whole day due to slow passport control formalities at the border. We had a short visit to the beautiful falls even though they, due to drought, were not as spectacular as we had earlier seen them, some twenty years ago.

Hailey’s Comet was, according to information, more clearly seen from the Kalahari Desert, when it appeared in the autumn sky (in Botswana) in 1986. I had, then, a visit by my sister Eva and her family. We stood at the Zambezi River bank and all, except I, pointed to the star/comet, the Hailey’s Comet! I was worried about the crocodiles that could waylay near the bank... so I have never seen the Hailey’s comet. Neither did I try to point at it. But I am happy all the same.

The last morning in Kasane we went on a guided tour in the Chobe Park. There had been reports the previous day of lions seen not too far away and that was exactly what we had wished to see. The guide tried his best, including pointing at lion footprints in the sand. But no lions! This means only one thing—I have to return to Botswana!