

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS.

PBM - 39
Belgian Congo Settler

Sternwheeler "Reine Astrid"
En Route down the Congo River
from Stanleyville to Leopoldville
March 12, 1955

Mr. Walter S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
522 Fifth Avenue,
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

The 155-mile road from Manono to Kapona is not much better and not much worse than other roads in the southwestern Belgian Congo. But it was on that road that we had our first real automobile trouble in Africa and, as a result, spent a day with a new Congo settler. We had left Manono early that morning and it was about two in the afternoon when we got across the Luvua River, halfway to Kapona. It had been hot all day--especially down on the river ferry with the hills on either side and the glare of the sun on the water.

It was a relief to climb out of the River valley, along an escarpment that ran through a patch of thick forest with the mountain wall on our left and a drop of a hundred feet on the right. But when we reached the top of the escarpment and started across rolling grass country the sun beat down again with shimmers of heat rising from the stony road ahead. The country was empty. We had not seen another car or a truck since we had left Piana Mwanga, on the other side of the River.

Then, as we climbed a little hill and went around a curve at the top, there was the noise of a stone hitting the underside of the car and I stopped. It was not a new noise--the road from the Northern Rhodesian Copperbelt through Elizabethville and Jadotville is covered with stones and in places where the road is single track the hump in the middle is high enough to brush pebbles along the chassis with a continuous pinging sound.

The noise that made me stop was louder than any of the others. And it did not make the clear ringing tone which would have meant that the stone had hit something harder than itself and had bounced off harmlessly. When I got out, kneeled down and peered under the car, I saw oil pouring from the bottom of the oil pan in a steady stream. I made a few feeble efforts at plugging the hole; then gave up and contented myself with catching the remaining oil in the cooking pots.

It was not until the following morning that I was able to plug the hole with a few rubber hot patches and get the car moving towards Kapona once again. I stopped every mile to check the leakage--the patches were merely held in place with black friction tape--and when we were still about 10 miles from the town, the leak began again. I saw a house set high on a hill above us and made for it, up a steep driveway. When we stopped on a stone terrace in front of the house, Julie and I hurled ourselves out of the car and shoved the pots under the oil stream.

Two Africans came towards us with complete unconcern, as though it was an everyday occurrence to have a man and a woman in an MG come roaring up to the house, leap out with pots in their hands and dive under the car. I asked them where the bwana was and they said, with identically doleful expressions, "Bwana est mort." Moss Hart couldn't have written a better line for them.

Tactfully, I began a conversation about bicycles and the wealth that might result from a ride into Kapona and a speedy return with a roll of friction tape and a gallon or so of oil. The Africans quickly explained that there was another bwana

living on the other side of the hill.

I followed one of the Africans over the hill at a smart pace. We practically trotted the whole distance, about a mile, before we came to a neat, weathered brick home standing at the top of a rise overlooking a rolling valley. The out-buildings were also of brick and the lawn in front of the veranda was neatly cut and marked off with whitewashed stones. An electricity-generating windmill whirred in the breeze and five or six Africans were busy in a shed, repairing a two-wheeled cart that looked as if it had rolled out of a painting by Millet.

The African led me to a door set in the side of a garage. An open-bodied Chevrolet pick-up truck stood outside and as we went up a few steps I saw the room was an office. At a desk sat a youngish, dark-haired man wearing an often-washed khaki shirt. He was writing with a fountain pen, and as I knocked on the frame of the door he looked up, then rose and came around the desk to invite me in. He wore khaki shorts, standard dress in Central Africa, and heavy work shoes. I was still panting from the climb as we shook hands and for a few moments I sat on a straight-backed chair beside the desk without saying anything but "attendez un moment, s'il vous plait" while I caught my breath.

Then I introduced myself and he told me his name, Jean Lebrun. He spoke a little English, he said, and he explained that he had learned it while serving with the Royal Navy in England during World War II. I told him what had happened and he smiled when I told him that no one, not even an African on a bicycle, had passed us during the afternoon, night or morning. "It is very lonely, that road," he said.

I asked if he had any oil and a roll of friction tape and he was just about to answer when there were footsteps on the stairs and a woman came in. She was about 28, blonde, and wore her hair long and curled under at the ends with a great pile of it on top of her head, very much like the style that was popular in the United States during the war. Her dress was not modish--it was the sort of print you would expect a woman living far from stores to choose from a Sears Roebuck catalogue for everyday wear.

She looked at me inquisitively, then asked her husband in French who I was and what I wanted. He answered, telling her how I had broken down and needed oil and tape, adding that he was just about to go and look for them. She bemoaned Jean's inhospitality in a few well-chosen words, then turned to me and said, in halting English, "Would you like some coffee?"

I said I would love a cup but my wife was waiting for me to return. "Perhaps your wife can come here to have some coffee also?" she asked. I gratefully said yes, and Jean was sent off in the truck to fetch Julie. Mrs. Lebrun and I walked towards the house. "It will be good to see your wife," she said. "It is very lonely here on the farm. My sister was living at Manono but she will leave soon to return to Brussels with her husband. He is a doctor."

I asked her where she had learned to speak English.

"I also was in England during the war," she answered.

"Is that where you met your husband?" I said.

"Oh, no," she said. That was in Belgique where I was after the war." She said that they were married a week before Jean was scheduled to leave Belgium to take a job with Géomines, a Belgian Government-owned mining company in the Congo. He left her behind and she joined him five months later. That was a little over three years ago.

Since then, I learned later, Jean had left Géomines to take up farming. Their red brick house on the hill is the manager's house; the big house on the other side of the hill where the MG was spilling its life's blood was the home of the owner. He had died a few months before and his wife had returned to Belgium, leaving the whole place in Jean's hands. The Lebruns have produced two children, Patrick, old enough to pull things off tables, and a three-month-old screamer with a French name that sounded like Becky. Becky was beginning to make loud noises inside the house as we came up the steps to the veranda.

Mrs. Lebrun found me a towel and a bar of soap, then showed me to the bathroom while she went off to tend to Becky. Africa is a wonderful country, and I was never more fully aware of the fact than when I stood in front of the bathroom mirror. Where else would you find a perfectly respectable farmer ready to drive off in a Chevrolet pick-up, leaving his wife and children to the doubtful mercies of a straggly-bearded American with wildly uncombed hair, the grease of the underside of an automobile spread liberally over his face, his fingernails smashed, his hands grimy and bleeding and his clothing covered with a mixture of Congo road and engine oil?

I stripped to the waist and cleaned myself as well as I could, then turned with a sinking heart to put on my dirty shirt again. There was a knock at the door and Jean came in, holding a clean white shirt. "Put on this," he said, and I didn't argue.

When I came out, coffee was brewing on the table in individual contraptions, one to each cup. We sat and talked and smoked strong Congo cigarettes out of a red and yellow packet. Jean told us of his farm. I say his farm, because he spoke of it with real affection and a proprietary air, as though the 1100 cattle were his own and the good prices they brought as beef in Manono and Albertville went into his own pocket. He spoke of the difficulties of obtaining water--how he wanted to build a reservoir near the house so that water would not have to be carried a half mile up the hill during the dry season. He plans to increase the size of the herd to 2000 to keep up with the demand in the growing town of Albertville.

Jean and I left the women and drove over to the big house in the truck. On the way I asked him why he had come to the Congo. "When one is very young and has been married, things are very difficult in Belgique," he said. "There are not so many good jobs and there are many persons to take them. So, one comes to the Congo." I asked him how he felt about political rights for Natives.

"I am too busy here to worry myself on politics," he said. "We are too few to have arguments about the rights of the Natives. My Natives are too busy also," he added with a smile. "There is much work to do."

At the big house, Jean surveyed the wreckage of the oil pan. His African foreman had come with us, riding in the back of the truck, and the two of them discussed the problem of repair in a mixture of Swahili and French. Finally, Jean

turned to me. "I think it is best," he said, "that we try to fill the hole with couleur--almost dry couleur. I have done it before when my tractor was leaking the oil." While he spoke I tried to imagine what in the world couleur was besides color.

Jean saw the puzzled look on my face--he tried to translate. "Couleur," he said. "La peinture." He went through the motions of painting. "We will try after we eat." We pushed the MG into the vacant garage of the bwana mort and drove around the hill again. Before we went in to eat Jean and the foreman went to look for engine oil, tape and drying paint. I went along. I was curious to see what sort of relationship existed between Jean and his African labor.

We went into a long shed. I noticed there was no lock on the door and no provision for one. Inside were farm tools and spare parts for the Chevrolet and the tractor. Jean and the foreman searched together, lifting crates and boxes from the top of a big steel trunk in the corner. There were no shouts of command and no cries of anger when the foreman let go of his end of the crate before Jean was ready, causing it to slip from Jean's grasp and bang heavily on the floor. They were simply two men, working together.

There was no friction tape and only a little oil. "If you can go to Kapona you can buy oil there," Jean said. "It is only a little far." He explained to the foreman what he was going to need to fix the car after lunch. Then we walked towards the house. "Do you have difficulties with your Native labor?" I asked.

Jean laughed. "No difficulties. I do not beat them, but if they do not want to work I say, 'Finished. If you do not work, you go.' The--what do you call the Native who commands the others?--"

"Boss boy," I said.

"The boss boy is very good. Very intelligent. There is no need to say to him that something is to be done more than once. He would be good on a farm in Belgique. There are farmers who are here for a long time who say that it is good to hit a Native with a kiboko¹--that the Natives understand only beating. But my Natives do the work without the kiboko. It may be that I am not yet here long enough." He seemed pleased at this last remark and grinned at me to show that he had made a joke.

Lunch was magnificent, although Mrs. Lebrun kept apologizing for not being psychic enough to know that we were coming. I was thrown off balance a bit by the preliminary mountain of cold meats, cheeses, tomatoes, lettuce, sardines and hard-boiled eggs, and ate as though it were the whole meal. Then came soup, later steak, potatoes and endive, with fruit for dessert. During the meal we talked of the evacuation of the Fachens. Jean was worried that it meant another war. "I am just beginning my life," he said. "It would be hard to fight another war."

After lunch we collected the foreman and the repair materials and went back to the big house. The three of us took the board covers from the pit under the car and got to work. The foreman pried the stiff, puttylike paint out of the can and Jean packed it into the jagged hole. I wired on a bit of old inner tube as protection. When we were finished we crawled out of the hole. The foreman went off in the truck to get Julie and Jean and I stood on the terrace overlooking the valley.

1. Whip made of hippopotamus hide.

"It's a beautiful country," I said.

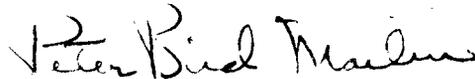
"Yes," said Jean as he wiped his hands on a turpentine-soaked rag. "There is much room here for farming. More than in Belgique. I will not want to go away. Even when the lions kill the cattle, it is not bad. We kill the lions and there are enough cattle remaining for us."

"Do you think that Europeans will be able to stay in Africa?" I asked.

Jean shrugged his shoulders. "Who can say?" he said. "Here, we do not yet have the problems that one has in the south. I hope that we can stay. It is a good country for the children. I think we can if we can continue to work well with the Natives."

The foreman drove up with Julie, whose arms were wrapped around a big bundle of fruit Mrs. Lebrun had given us "for the road." We poured our precious oil into the engine, waved goodbye to Jean, and started down the driveway towards the main road. When we curved beneath the terrace we could see Jean standing there, watching us go. He waved again, then was lost to view as we went into a grove of trees.

Sincerely,



Peter Bird Martin

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