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Heini: the Little Cameroonain (English Tranlsation)

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Heini, The Little Cameroonian

II.

Memories of a Missionary Wife

by Johanna Bohner

Basel

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3 When you travel from Bonaku, the Basel Mission station in Cameroon, diagonally across the wide Wuri River, you come to a peninsula on the other side of the shore, from which rises the Mission station and the Negro city, Bonaberi. It was here that little Heini's cradle stood. It was the year 1895 when first he saw the light of day. He was a robust, lively boy, and in time he learned to speak Duala, the language of that country, like a native. He also understood the English lingo of the so-called Kru-negroes who lived in Cameroon as foreign workers. However, the German language remained foreign to him because he spoke Duala not only with the people of Cameroon, but also with his parents, and the other missionaries he came in contact with.

His friends were the local children, with whom he faithfully shared all he received. For this reason, the children liked him and in return let him partake of treats which delighted the stomachs of Cameroonians. Because of this he was allowed to taste Miondo and Ekoki. The first of the two is made from "Stockjams," a mealy root, which has to be buried several hours in the mud of the river, and then mashed into paste. Then it is wrapped in banana leaves, and tied together with Bast fibers, so that it forms long, thin sausages which are then steamed. Ekoki, in contrast, is prepared from coarsely ground corn, or from the gutted core of a pumpkin. This is mixed together with red pepper and palm-oil. Often times, you will add thick beans as well. This mixture is cooked as a dumpling, or steamed inside a leaf.

4 If you have a piece of fish with it, it is as tasty and exquisite as the best pudding. Still, nothing enticed little Heini like rice. When he heard the clatter of the steel-plated spoons coming from the children of the house, he could not contain himself. "Don't you hear that they are eating rice outside?" He shouted eagerly, and he was off to invite himself to dine with the servants of the house. He was ecstatic when he got a little rice, and a lump of salty fish.

His little friends also took him with them on their walks. He was only allowed to go with them just past the city Bonaberi, and there in the trees above, they observed the

grey parrots, which circled about in droves. How vivaciously they chattered in their green habitat! There was such cawing and shrieking, every evening, until each of them found their own, undisputed resting place! Or he was allowed to sail along the riverbanks with his friends in a small canoe. He was happiest on the water, especially when he could take a cruise down the river with a “sango” (European) in a sailboat or even in “Musango,” the mission’s motorboat. What could be better than a journey down a scenic river? In the thick swampy forestry, you can see the silly monkeys jumping from tree to tree and the shy squirrels. At the river bank, there are gatherings of herons and flamingos fishing. Wild pigeons and white seagulls darted over the water. This scene brought the small one a lot of pleasure.

When he was a little bit older, he was allowed on occasion to accompany his father on his preaching trips, of course only to the nearest lying villages along the river banks. The local blacks were extremely happy to see a white child, for many of them had never in their whole lives set their eyes on one.

5 They were particularly astonished when they heard him speak their own language. They enjoyed conversing with him and gave him fruit or other things to make him happy.

He was able to take two big trips with his parents: One was on the mighty Sanga River and the other was to Buea in the Cameroon Mountains. To go to Sanaga, we used the “Musango,” and took a day to travel. First one travels down the Wuri River (or the Cameroon River) until they come to a Gulf, into which the Cameroon Rivers flow. Then you cross the wide surface of the water until you run into the Sanaga River. In this area, on higher terrain, is the Lobetal Mission station, where we feel good and at home in the circle of the mission brothers and sisters. Everything was familiar to us at the station: the pretty little church, the school with the dormitories and the cooking places, the handsome mission house and the large cocoa plants!

6 Here as well Heini found little white friends, with whom he became quickly acquainted

From Lobetal we traveled further up the river until we came to the mighty Edea Waterfalls, where the water of the Sanaga roars over the rocks. On another day we went home without meeting one gorilla, even though the people heard the cracking sound of animal’s footsteps in the forest. On the way, we visited the sisters of the Catholic mission in Marienberg, which also lies on the Sanaga. The sisters had about 24 Negro girls in their care. Some were infants. The older girls were kept busy working in the house, studying at school, or working on the plantation.

The journey to Buea up into the mountains wasn’t so easy. By ship one could only travel as far as Victoria and then after that, the path ascended into the mountains. Back then, there was no proper mountain road and the path was uneven and slippery. Part of the time the path had to be traversed on foot, however, when the path was smooth you could ride in a hammock. On the first day of the journey, travelers could make it halfway to Buea and then spend the night at a post in the mountains. A cottage that was covered with corrugated metal took us in. The following day, one could finish the journey to Buea, which lay on the slope of Mt. Cameroon. How different the coast was from the heights of the mountain! The view would make a person just want to shout out spontaneously, “How beautiful!” The sheep, goats, and chickens are bigger and healthier here than in the lowlands. Here there are even whole herds of cattle that graze in the lush

meadows. One is reminded of Switzerland with its high mountain pastures and even more so when you hear the beautiful voices of the natives, who yodel in their own way.

8 The fruits grown in the mountains are almost twice the size as the fruits grown on the coast. Here even our potatoes thrive, something that we cannot plant along the coast. Likewise, it requires less effort here to grow our European vegetables. The mission station, Buea, lies 1000 meters above sea level. Further up, the mountain expands into a wide lava field with cinder cones that rise up in different places. This and several craters indicate that the Cameroon Mountain is a live volcano, that just recently grumbled and bubbled in the center. On April 26, 1909, the villagers who lived on the mountain were frightened by a fierce earthquake. The ground shook under their feet and they were able to hear several daunting thunderous claps. A few days later, masses of fire rose out of three openings in the peak, and a stream of glowing lava rolled down the mountain. It had been so many years since the mountain spit out lava that no one thought the volcano was still active. Only the oldest of the villagers could remember many decades ago when the mountain last spewed lava, which came down, destroying their fields. The large cracks and deep gullies that crisscross the mountain landscape are the result of previous eruptions.

Our stay in the cool, breezy Buea was good for Heine. But he needed to go down from the mountaintops, home to his beloved Madiba (water). Still, he was happy to return to his black friends with whom he used to play. When the school children were learning from their books, he swiftly retrieved one for himself, wanting to imitate them. If they asked him if he could also read, he candidly replied, "Yes, I can". He believed in his innocence that he actually could, as he could recite many songs and the Our Father prayer in the Duala language, although he was no more than two years old.

9 That, he supposed, was reading; reciting this and that from a book. Once the school children embarrassed him. Many students came from out of town and gathered in the yard to sing a few songs. Then they called the little European and said, "Come, be our teacher!" He came to them and stood shyly in front of them, not knowing what exactly to do.

10 Eventually they exchanged a few words and he ran off without saying goodbye.

Soon thereafter, there was a festival day for Heini. His little friends from Lobetal came with their parents, in order to travel to Europe. How happy he was to play with his friends! It had been a long time since he had seen a white child. Sure enough, the joy lasted only a few days; then he had to say his farewells, and the boat left for the homeward journey to distant Europe. He didn't want to leave them anymore, and when he had to, he cried more bitterly than he ever had in his life. And he never saw them again in his life.

However, the black children of the land who were with him every day served as a substitute. They loved and admired him a lot. The little Edimo, who we already knew as Paul's playmate, became Heini's friend as well. His brother, the teacher Ekolo, used to live in Bonaku but was transferred to Bonaberi; but was now moving to Bonaberi; and Edimo moved there with him. In the meantime, he had gotten big enough to participate in

the market trading. For this, he possessed a little canoe, and it made him happy to take his little friend Heini with him from time to time.

In Heini's immediate environment—namely among the so-called house children—our Martha was the undisputed Queen. She was a stately figure of large, sturdy build and of a rather dark skin color, with full hair and mild-friendly features. All of the other children in the house happily organized themselves under her leadership and willingly followed her instructions. It's not that she demanded so much from others, no, like the biblical Martha she was always the first among them to go to work.

11 She understood how to deal with little children especially well, and would never grow tired of caring for them. In this she had a special talent. Because she treated the little ones with such love, she won the hearts of the children immediately. One time, when a little Makala (white one) could no longer be with her, he cried for several days and did not want to eat or play. He continually ran around the house and called after her: "I'm looking for my Martha! I want my Martha!"

Martha really was a queen by Cameroonian standards, because she was one of the six wives of our chief, Lobe. Such chiefs in that country were called kings and rulers. They had their own palm orchards and plantations, and as heathens they always had several wives. As wealthy people, they would increase the number of their wives and from time to time they would buy even more, although a woman like that was expensive in Cameroon. At the same time they stand at the head of the village and serve as their judge. Martha had heard the gospel and also adopted it. Her husband and master sent her to us for a little while so that she could receive an education. She would have gladly stayed with us longer but, when her time was over, she had to fulfill her duties again and return to her royal husband.

Massina was from Jaunde, which lies far away in the inward part of the country. She, too, had to come to us for her education. Her husband belonged to the black army brigade. He was very devoted to his German superiors and a diligent soldier. He was therefore promoted and among his fellow soldiers held the rank of a Sergeant. He bought his wife Massina from a chief for 70 Mark and sent her to be taught a little culture from us on the coast.

12 Massina was big and strong, but she suffered in the coastal climate and was often sick. Only little by little did she become accustomed to it and she got better. She had great skill for handwork, but she was not very good at reading and arithmetic; in this she tried our patience. She knew each individual letter well, but when she put the letters and syllables together she would become confused. She was willing to do all kinds of work, and one could be content with her behavior. Only she could not stop stealing, even though she wasn't poor. For example, she owned a lot of clothes, and her husband always sent her presents, because he was well off. One time he shot an elephant and got 300 Marks for it. If I ever lost something and asked her if she had taken stolen it, then she could look me unabashedly in the eyes and with total certainty, claim: I'm completely certain that I don't have it and I don't know anything about it. However, if I opened her large suitcase, there would be the fat roll of thread that I had lost. That girl could have gotten the string she needed from me at any time. Stealing had become second nature to her.

Mole, the “Red One”, was a stubborn girl, petite, but very strong and sturdy. She was willing to work and was good at it, but something weighed her down. She lived continuously in fear of being taken away by the man to whom she had been pawned. It was no wonder that one day she hid herself and couldn’t immediately be found; because she had heard that the man she feared was on his way. He actually did come and she had to go with him; but we spoke words of comfort to her and gave her hope that she would become free again.

13 We also went to the German Governor for her sake, and the man had to let her go, because he hadn’t bought Mole, she had only been handed over to him as a pledge for a debt. Later another man married her.

Zondo was a faithful girl, who loved the truth and did not have the bad habit of stealing. She had a rather dark skin color and was slim in stature. She had a great love for Heini, and he was devoted to her as well. Once we sent her away because of disobedience, but we had to send for her again, because the boy could not endure his homesickness for her. She was always very anxious about him and never let him do without. She made no demands for herself and had a modest sense. She was poor since childhood and therefore, she was thankful when I, from time to time, would give to her a clay pipe and tobacco for her mother. The man, that had bought her as his future wife and to whom she had to return after we left, was a rich dealer who visited her and brought her presents often.

14 But she thought of the future with a heavy heart, for she would have to live together with two more of her husband’s wives. How thankful are Christian women, that in Christianity the man is only allowed to have one woman as his wife!

Among our house servants we must not forget Zacharias, our young, friendly, chef. He was well trained in the culinary arts and was always quick and clever in his craft. Admittedly, he had to be quick with his work, for he could not simply get the meat necessary for the table from the butcher or from the meat market. Whenever he had to deliver meat to the lunch table he had to slaughter it himself, whether it was a chicken or a sheep, a goose or even a young ox every now and then. Only occasionally would a lucky hunter have antelope or venison to sell to him. And not only did he have to be a butcher, but a baker also, for in Cameroon there was no bakery where one could buy European bread or pastries. Our Zacharias had to make all of that himself, but it came easily to him. If, during the morning, he prepared the dough with fermented palm wine, by four in the afternoon the appetizing bread was already baked. Of course, little Edimo had to help some - carrying wood, or peeling jams (a type of large potatoes), washing the pots or shelling the peanuts, and whatever else could be done by hand. In a word, he had to play the kitchen boy sometimes. But Zacharias understood his duties - one had to give him that. Even when there were many guests to care for, he could still keep his routine, and whatever he brought to the table was so tasty that the governor himself spoke in appreciation.

16 The Kru people were our boat people. We had four of them at the station. They came, like all of their people, from the Kru coast of Liberia. They usually work only a year and then take their earnings back home with them. As long as they are in the service

of the Europeans, they also take a European name, because their native names are too hard for foreigners to remember. Their European names are often very comical, for there is one named "Pea Soup," another, "Little Steamboat," and another, "Africa." There may even be a "Bismarck," or "Prince Albert." One of them is their captain, whom they must absolutely obey and who accounts for all of them. He speaks for them and is responsible for them. If one does a dumb prank he is punished, even if it is the captain's own brother. The Kru-people are extraordinarily familiar with water and understand how to steer their boat well. Our Heini gladly trusted himself to these people whenever it came to water. The Wuri that lies in Bonaberi is a wide river that can be hazardous to cross during the flood season when giant ocean-waves flood the area.

The teachers, from the small villages that belonged in the Bonaberi district had to come to Bonaberi in order to meet and discuss their text for Sunday's sermon. Heini knew all 21 teachers by name and was pleased every time he saw them. Many of them were absent from time to time whenever they, their wife, or their child were sick, which was not an unusual event. Every Sunday these teachers had to preach the word of God to the black people of the land, because it was not possible for the missionary to be in every Christian village at once even if he traveled frequently.

17 How wonderful it is to attend a small Christian community in the outlying areas, or what is termed 'branch'! Every Saturday afternoon the schoolhouse, that serves as a church on Sunday, is thoroughly scoured inside and swept outside. When Sunday comes, a Sabbath-peace resides over this holy-place, and the people rest from their labors and find their way to the church service. Four times a year the missionary celebrates communion with them, and interviews the baptismal candidates that are present. He has in-depth discussions with those who have enrolled in the baptismal preparation class; he inquires regarding the behavior of the Christians since his last visit, and speaks with individuals about this matter or the other. One automatically thinks of the first Christian communities that the apostle Paul visited and strengthened on his mission.

In Bonaberi, when there was a special Christian festival like a large baptism or missionary party, the teachers and Christians from all the islands and beach villages would arrive already on Saturday, or bright and early on Sunday, by way of canoe. Oh, what a joyful reunion filled with embracing and handshaking! In 1898 there was an especially beautiful and poignant baptismal celebration that was very large, for which Christians gathered from near and far. At the time, a total of ninety adults and children were baptized on a single day in Bonaberi, and the lovely new church was unable to contain the many visitors who were there for the festivity. Many people took their seats and found protection from the blistering sun under the matted roofs that had been built outside. The festive gathering made an overwhelming impression on those in attendance with children ready for baptism. It was a joyful day in the heathen land, one that no one would forget.

18 How often had our Heini stood there with wide eyes and watched the construction of the chapel. But he was not allowed to celebrate the beautiful event. No one suspected that the child's last hours were upon him. He was fragile, and the climate made him pale, but his playfulness hid the illness within that eventually took his life. Only gradually did a certain weariness set in, and his normally healthy appetite was gone. But when the

Musango, the mission's motorboat, or some other boat came, he was as playful as ever, and full of excitement, if he could go along.

The time eventually came when we would travel to Europe for a rest from Missionary work. There were only four weeks left before our departure, and when we looked at the pale child, we were happy that he would soon be in healthier air. We expected immediate improvement and invigoration just from the sea voyage. But little Heini let his head hang, and even Miondo did not taste good to him any more. We had to put him to bed because his forehead felt hotter and hotter. His father stayed with him and showed him pictures from Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. Heini looked at one picture and said, "That is the Savior on the cross." Those were his last words. The fever climbed higher, the cramping began, and the doctor could not do anything more for him. Heini opened his eyes once more and looked at us all, one by one; then he passed away.

Because there was no cemetery in Bonaberi, we had to take the small coffin over the river to Bonaku. The same motorboat that Heini loved to spend his time on came the next day for this purpose, and the coffin was taken on board. His father said, "Now Heini is making his last journey in Musango." In Bonaku, the teacher Ekolo spoke over his coffin and told the others how much the native people had loved the child, and how he spoke their language as his mother tongue, and that now his body would stay in their land on the Wuri river.

19 Many natives—together with the missionaries—accompanied him to his final resting place.

Now we had to travel alone to our European homeland. That seemed rather bitter to us, having so recently left behind our dearest in the land. But, the Lord's will be done! A Christian does well to say that, even in his hardest hour. — Besides us, it was Yondo, who took the child's passing her heart the most. She mourned for Heini as if he had been her own brother. As she entered the room the other morning, bright tears ran down her cheeks, and she couldn't stop asking where Heini was now, whether he had taken his coffin and clothes with him to heaven, and whether he had something to eat there. She felt bad for him, that he must be so alone there, without father and mother, without his playmates, without a friend at all. So spoke the heathen girl. Then we gave her some explanation about what God's word says about that place, where there will be neither suffering nor crying, separation nor pain.

Little Edimo was particularly sorry; he had lost a good friend in Heini. Soon afterwards, Edimo went to school in Buea. He got good grades there; but he could not bear the cold, wet mountain climate and died in the first years of his stay. He died as a heathen, but his Christian brother wrote that he had improved his conduct and had worked to the satisfaction of his teachers. "My mother", added Ekolo, "is a Christian, thankfully, and knows to take comfort over the loss of her son, and doesn't despair like those who have no hope."

20 In the calm graveyard of Bonaku, outside the city, the two brothers Paul and Heini rest beside each other, among several missionaries who returned home early. Leaving Cameroon, their father said, in view of both their graves: "We will never forget Cameroon, for two of our loved ones rest there." Meanwhile, he also found his place of rest in the soil of his homeland outside the gates of Speyer.

But the sacrifices of those who have been claimed by Cameroon's unhealthy climate over the last twenty years, particularly among missionary families, have not been in vain. Now, when we hear how the gospel had its beginning among the people of Cameroon, we are reminded of Zinzendorf's words:

There were many sown, as though they were lost;

But upon their graves is written: this is the seed of the Moors.