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Paul, the Multi-lingual Child

Memories of a Missionary Wife

by Johanna Bohner

Basel

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If in Africa a small child is born to a missionary family, not only do the parents and their friends in the neighborhood rejoice; but so do the Negroes who inhabit the country there. Such was the case, when in May of the year 1889 in the Negro city Christiansburg on the golden coast, Paul first saw the light of the world. The black children with their curly hair, dark, glowing eyes filled with curiosity asked whether the baby had brought something for them, and whether their future playmate was a "man child" or a "woman child"(a boy or a girl). Older girls asked with "sweet words" if they might be permitted to hold the new arrival for a time. The Negro women came and said: "aikô! aikô! Gbeko le eye feo pî!" (The usual congratulation of: Luck! Luck! The child is very beautiful). They stroked the child's rosy cheeks, felt his hair, even his nose, and continuously exclaimed: "Oh! How is his face so beautiful? What a slim neck he has! What a beautiful forehead!" Other women imparted good pieces of advice; one of which was to give him plenty to eat, so that he would become big and strong. The heathen women were of the opinion that he needed a Kauri-shell, or a leopard's tooth, or a red tail feather from a parrot, a bird claw, or some other magic charm to bind in his hair, so that he will not become jinxed or ill, so that no malicious glance or curse could harm it.

It was always a joyous occasion when the small one was allowed to take walks in the evening. Of course, he was first carried by his nursemaid and accompanied by several smaller girls and boys. One girl carried the milk bottle along while a boy carried a lantern in his hand; another boy carried a stick and went in front in order to scare snakes away from the path. The little chap was so happy, if around 4 or 4:30 in the afternoon, he was dressed to go for walk. In Africa, where it is so hot that sun burns down on the part in your hair, you cannot go out with the children any earlier. Paul's walks took him from the mission settlement Salem, which lies just outside of the Negro city Christiansburg, about 10 minutes along the beach, where the child's god-uncle, Dr. F., lived in an old mission house. How gladly little Paul stayed there in the familiar rooms, where he could feel the brisk sea breeze.

Directly behind the house you find yourself standing on the shoreline, where the salty waves roll and strike the jagged Rocks. The waves begin to foam, bubble and hiss as they splash high above the rocks, just like when water and fire mingle with one another. As you go a bit further along the shoreline, the beach flattens and one can find all kinds of seashells and starfish in the white sand. Perhaps you will see a Sailboat with swelling sails in the distance or perhaps a Steamboat traveling from Europe. In such cases the joy and excitement is great because one may anticipate letters or news from loved ones. When you return home you typically have to light your lantern, even if it's only 6:00 because when one lives near the equator the sun rises at 6:00 in the morning throughout the whole year and similarly sets at 6:00pm every evening, making the day equivalent to the night. Due to the poisonous snakes, scorpions and centipedes, the lanterns must be lit during the times when the moon does not provide light. If, however, the full moon pours its light over the African landscape, then one must keep a cool head, so that you do not suffer any injury from the moon's rays.

A popular trail also leads back into town. It's a narrow path between tall grass and brushes which leads to a small bench, where the missionary brothers and sisters from Salem, from Christiansborg or from the neighboring city Accra frequently meet during the cooler parts of the evening. There you would arrange which Missionary couple you visit for tea and with whom you would spend the remainder of the evening. Indeed, everyone traveled along this path, the dear Sister Missionaries from Europe traveled toward their assigned stations in the inner part of the country. They used this same trail when they were tired or sick and feeble from their work, and awaited the steam boat that would carry them across the ocean to their European homeland. There we would pick up some of them on the beach and others we would guide to there.

A special excursion was the trip to the port Accra, which was about a half an hour away. Here you would use a two-wheeled cart strapped to a respectable old donkey. Paul thought it was so hilarious when he sat next to his father in the two-wheeled cart and was once permitted to hold the reins in his hands. And oh, how the jackass gracefully pranced about. He didn't mind when the spirited, Negro youth in their birthday suits would jump inside behind him and would shout for joy because of him. When he was trotting, it also didn't disturb him, when the Negroes danced, cheered and made music under the moon light, on the streets and places of the city, so that they became a real heathen spectacle.

The way to Accra then goes through the city of Christiansborg with its earthen huts, and then not far from the beach, up a small hill with knobby tamarind trees on left and right. They were all affected by the strong, sharp sea wind, so that they stood there slanted and bent as if from old age.

At the top we pass by the English court, the hospital and several living quarters for government officials, surrounded by gardens. While the foam-capped waves of the ocean roll incessantly against the beach, the eye gazes inland across the wide prairies, and on the distant horizon you can see the blue outline of the mountains. On the rocky shores of the seaport Accra, there is row of large merchandising stores, which buy palm-oil, ivory, cocoa and rubber from the Negroes, products to be shipped to Europe. Along these stores is the Mission Merchandising House which we visit during our stay. It is a lively event, when the black cellar men put their barrels together and the robust Negro workers roll them down to the beach and load them into the boats. A variety of European items are piled in

the shop, and the black buyers stare with greedy eyes and line up at the counter in order to equip themselves with the European treasures. Here we can also place our orders. There is even a book store cares for the spiritual well-being of the negroes, provided that they can read. But hardly any of the blacks can read, and even many of the older Negroes hold the wondrous European book of wisdom upside down in their hands when they look at the curled letters. These symbols, so they believe, can talk. But the book is no use to him anyways, even if he puts on a thick pair of glasses.

One day our Paul was allowed to go into the Christiansborger mission workshop, where the mission smith and his black apprentices worked on the iron. Paul was not more than a little surprised to find a little baby that was the same white color as he had. That was strange for him, because all of his playmates had very dark skin color and wooly curled hair.

How Paul loved to visit his small friend! The child was very tender and weak, so much so that his father often expressed: oh, if only my boy were as strong as little Paul there! For he was a sturdy chap for his age. But how wonderful are the ways of God! When, to the delight of his father, the feeble Wilhelm grew up to be a strapping adolescent—as you will hear later—the young body of our Paul had already lain for a long time in Africa's soil.

Against all expectations the weak child thrived. His mother is particularly joyful. When he was three weeks old, preparations would be made for baptism. After suffering from several episodes of fever the young mother managed to recover enough that she could think about the small child's baptism. But Alas! A bad fever breaks out a few days prior to the baptism. The doctor hastened to come, and did what he could, but it was in vain. The missionary brothers and sisters stood mournfully around the sick bed of the young woman. As if through a storm, the Lord took her from her husband's side. She passed away on Saturday; the baptism of the little one was supposed to be on Sunday. It took place next to the coffin of the mother. We then accompanied the deceased out to Christiansborg's cemetery, where there are already many graves of missionaries or their wives. Another missionary's wife looked after little Wilhelm until he could return to Germany.

Meanwhile, our Paul had also suffered much with the climatic fever of West Africa. When his friend, Wilhelm returned to Europe, Paul suffered from particularly bad ulcers. It was during this time that his parents were permitted to go to the mountain station of Aburi to recover there, in a healthier environment of higher elevations. We will now accompany him on this little trip.

Because neither the railroad, nor the stagecoach, nor the Streetcar could be used as a means of transportation to drive up the mountain, we were dependent upon the hammock, a piece of canvas was fastened under and over a stick, which was either made of palm or bamboo. Each end of the stick, from which the hammock is hung, is taken upon the head of a Negro, who then marches along in a lively trot, while the mother lies in it and holds Paul next to her in her arms. The way leads first through an endless prairie. Only occasionally do you see bushes with an enormous Raobab or a Euphorbie upon which the crows and the wild doves have their look out. On the high grass stocks the colorfully feathered birds and other inhabitants of the foothills nod. Now and then little hamlets with huts of earth emerge from the grass. Only after several hours of long travel does the landscape change. In the place of high grass there are low

bushes and dense wood that stretches for hours along the mountain range. Many Negro villages full of diligent farmers are located here. There are many types of plants such as corn and other fruits of the field. The little villages are surrounded by orange, lemon, and mango trees. You hear the glad sounds of the children from the village streets, where they romp. The Negro youth, who do not know the burden of school and oppressive lessons, spend the whole day outdoors.

Finally we turned towards a larger village and through its orderly gardens and the church, immediately recognized it as a mission station. It is Abokobi, our old home where we had lived over a decade, where we rest here for the afternoon. Quickly many people arrived to greet us as old acquaintances. We visited our former neighbor, the black teacher Paul Fleischser, who even speaks German because he was once in Germany while in his youth. But while he was there, he had been homesick for his pepper broth and the usual stink-fish with cornbread that he didn't last long in a foreign country.

Our other neighbor, the worthy old Paulo Mohenu, formerly a savage, a notorious fetish priest and later a fearless Christian and Evangelist among his people, is no longer among the living. He used to be with us daily, and especially when we would be passing through with other missionary brothers and sisters he liked come by to evening tea. One time he said to me: Now I know 70 missionaries. He was also sincerely interested in the parents and siblings the missionaries and gladly listened when told of them. His wife suffered from and infestation of the so-called Guinea worms, long, thin, twine-like threads that nest themselves in the joints and cause the victim much torment, until they finally pierce the skin and poke their heads out, so that one try to pull it out gently. The old woman was also nearly blind and used to say: "Helatae hi ebe anumyam" (a sick face had nothing beautiful to look upon). The native priest Engmann and David Akotyia, the smith and other village dwellers also came to greet us.

In the afternoon we continued further. For two hours long, we still had to cross the hot plateau; then we stood at the foot of the mountains. The road winds quietly up the street up the mountain until we reached the top. On the back of the mountain, our hammock carriers trot lively between the lovely woodland of palms trees, piled cotton trees and other foliage. The fresh breeze felt immeasurably good to us, having just come out of the muggy plains. From the high point we enjoy the loveliest view of the sun-burnt plain below and the shimmering ocean in the distance.

Soon we will be in Aburi, our rest station. Oh, how rich and how youthfully fresh are the plants here! How delightful is the air here, so healing, so balmy and energizing! How lovely are the walks in the morning or in the cool evenings under the always green domes of the palm trees. How your breast swells, and the head feels freer and lighter than in the humid hazy atmosphere of the lowlands.

The tired bones become more elastic, and our mood lifts after the pressure of feverish blood. To be sure, we still have the malaria poison in the body, but gradually the fever leaves us and our strength increases. Several week at this high altitude and with good care we gradually return to health. We leave Aubri with our Paul newly strengthened and we go back to the coast of Chritiansborg.

* * *

Soon thereafter, we were transferred to our new mission field in Cameroon. So we had to bid farewell to the golden coast and depart on our journey. This gave our Paul many new things to see, and the ride to Cameroon was quite interesting, although the room on the Woermann-line's small steamer was confined. How our Paul liked to crawl up the narrow spiral staircase to the deck where he could see the wide, blue sea and watch the passing steamers. Sometimes, one could also see fish along the side of the ship or jumping high out of the blue waters. As long as the steamer moved at full speed, we did not lack a cool breeze; but when it stopped at one or another port, or traveled up an arm of the river, such as the Niger or Kalabar River, in order to pick up a load, the heat was simply unbearable.

After a four day journey during which we had passed the Spanish island of Fernando Po and the beautifully situated Victoria at the foot of the Cameroon mountains, we reached our future home of Cameroon. Already on the beach we were welcomed warmly by the leader of the mission school and his pupils. In German they sang, "Praise the Almighty, my soul, adore Him!" etc.; amidst strains of this song, we happily settled in our new home of Bonaku. But a hard beginning and many sorrows awaited us.

Across the broad Wuri River, at the Bonaberi Station, there then lived a young missionary family very much alone. We had hardly been in Cameroon a month when that missionary fell extremely ill. At the station, where several missionaries lived, there was always someone who could care for the sick. But our dear God had decided to relieve him of his post. The young widow, in deep mourning, stood next to the grave of her husband. "What God does, he has done right," we sang together to console ourselves with God's word. A few weeks later, a conference was held in Bonaku, which was attended as far as was possible by all the missionaries from other stations. During this, there laid, at the station of the Victoria, one of the missionaries fallen sick with nephropathy. With anxious hearts, we awaited a message from them. The steamer comes and brings the sick man along, because, one hoped, the sea air would do him good. Now he lies in our corner room, the sick man feeling visibly relieved under the vigilant care and airy room. Our station is not unknown to him because he was here a few weeks ago. At that time, he was also ill but recovered so well that he could again return to his post. But this time, he could not recognize his environment or fellow missionaries because the illness left him completely blind. He requests that we come to his bed. We do it gladly and when we leave his sick bed, we are consoled and strengthened because he praises God more than he laments. He sang the song, "Jesus, blessed peace!" glorifying God's love which had been revealed through Jesus Christ.

From day to day we look for signs of improvement, but his condition remains fairly constant. All the sick man can withstand is a bit of fresh milk. On the same day, a family celebration is supposed to take place among the Missionaries.

The bride of one of the missionaries arrived from Europe by the steamboat; and the bridegroom was waiting longingly for the wedding day. He planned to move to his Bonaberi Station with his young wife, to begin work there. The wedding is set for next Tuesday, and one hopes that perhaps by then our sick man could get a little better. Sunday arrives, and on this day the sick man is especially happy, because it is a beautiful Sunday. By evening, he wants to rest a little because he feels so weak and tired. He lies on his side and falls asleep – never again to awaken in this life.

Now on the following day, a day we had anticipated with joy, we must hold a funeral instead. And so it often occurs in Africa: one thing becomes another. Considering the one who had passed on, we were at least comforted by his strong faith. All of us who stood before his deathbed were left with an inextinguishable impression of his childlike sense, of his comforting belief in God's will, and of his living hope of eternal life. And so we experience something like the Apostle's triumphant creed: "Death, where is your sting; hell, where is your victory?"

Two days later we quietly celebrated the wedding of our friends and the missionary took his young wife over the river to Bonberi, to their home.

Now we look back at our young Paul. It has been a year since he arrived in Cameroon. The surroundings were new, and the language that he heard was new and foreign as well. It was the language that had built a gulf between him and the little Duala boys, who would so happily attach themselves to him. But also the Basango, the Europeans, didn't understand his Accra language, while everyone had understood him in Christiansborg. But the small lad knew how to help himself. Since he noticed that every white man understands and speaks German, he paid special attention to this language he had not yet learned, and it was not long before he could make himself understood.

Right away he started attending school with the Cameroon boys class and tried to answer them in their language. They asked him: O mende po e? Are you coming? So he answered them: E, na mende po! I will come. In this way, he soon learned the Duala-language much better than us grownups. He mixed all three languages (Accra, Duala, and German) in dealing with his mother. However, with other people he always knew exactly which language he was to use in order to be understood. If his father said something to him in German, that he should inform the Cook, an Accra Negro, then he runs off to deliver the message accurately translated into the Accra language. If he were asked to give orders to a Cameroonian, then he would translate the command from the German, or from Accra, or from the Duala language. Likewise he could convey the request of a Duala boy into the German. Now in Cameroon, we had a crew for the ship and workers from the Liberia coast, the so-called Kru-people; who spoke neither German, nor Accra, nor even Duala, but in their dealings with Europeans, they would use a sort of broken English. Paul learned this language quickly as well so that he could serve as a translator for the Kru people. The children took occasional pleasure in having Paul recite which languages he could speak. If you asked him: O topo nje? (what languages do you speak?) And he would say in all simplicity: I topo German: I speak German; I topo English: I speak English; I topo Akra: I speak Accra. I topo Duala: I speak Duala (the Cameroon Language).

He liked to talk to the pupils in middle school. He wanted to know if they gave the correct answers in class, or if they received a trashing from the teacher. Everyone at the school enjoyed the inquisitive and multilingual boy. Whenever foreigners would come to us, they would pay special attention to him, because at that time he was the only white boy in Cameroon. One small black boy, Edimo, was an especially close friend.

He shared everything he got with him, in exchange for which Edimo willingly shared his rice and salty fish. From him, he also learned to make himself useful. He helped set the table, move chairs up to the table and lay out the napkins. Before the prayer, he would close all the doors and windows in order for the room to be quiet. He liked to go watch the missionaries as they worked, particularly in the carpenter's shop and the locksmith's, or in the store, where the

natives would occasionally go to exchange their belongings for European goods. He especially liked to stay in the workshop with Father Sch.. And when Father Sch. took Paul in his arms, he was overjoyed. It was a particularly happy day whenever an “aunt” could come visit, like one of the ladies from the hospital or “Auntie” Anne from the Baptist mission. He would ask if he could take the nice blue cups out of the cabinet for coffee that day, or if he should bring out this or that lovely thing. However, he was most pleased when one of his favorite “aunts” from Bonaberi would come, if he were allowed to go over there. Then they had to travel by river, which was for him a most glorious occasion. If his father had to go on a preaching trip and the boat was needed for such an excursion, Paul would immediately ask if he would take him along. Paul eventually considered the matter a given that he should go along on river trips, and he would notice immediately when the boat was being prepared and his father was getting equipped for the trip. If he found that the sun was too hot that day and thought it would be more prudent for Paul to stay home and his father departed during naptime, there would be lots of crying afterward. “Oh, why didn’t you tell me that father would go away? I don’t care if it’s hot. You know I would have gladly gone along with him anyway!”

He gradually came to know all the villages along the riverbank: Bonabela, Bonapriso, Bonanjo and he knew all the names.

After one such preaching excursion, he then held a religious service of his own back home with the Negro children, using what he had observed on his trip. He gave each child a book, and they all had to sing out with all their might, even though they did not know a single song by heart, and could read even less. But Paul sang for them and they tried to imitate him. In so doing, they observed the deepest reverence and possessed the most earnest faces. After singing, all of them had to position themselves for prayer; Paul prayed in his own way and everyone clasped their small hands together. It was a picture of childish innocence that was not lacking in a certain kind of devotion.

A year in Cameroon had passed. One day our little Paul caught a serious chill. It was the precursor to a serious fever, the so-called blackwater fever, which of all the diseases in Africa is the most dreaded. Paul’s whole body turned yellow like a lemon; chills and fevers persisted, fierce thirst and strong vomiting set in, and a great weariness befell this sick child. We did what was in our power and with God’s blessing, after days and weeks of sorrow, the severe illness passed. Although his cheeks got noticeably pale, he recovered gradually to the point that he was able to resume his afternoon walks. How happy he was whenever his mom, joined by his little sister, walked along with him. Sometimes they walked to Bonapriso, other times to Bonabela, or maybe only into the city Bonaku, into the carpenter shop, or in the yard in front of the house, where pleasant gum trees, guava and mango trees, perhaps even a breadfruit tree provided wonderful shade. It was likewise here that the agile Duala boys would scamper up to the top of the palm tree’s shoots, in order to retrieve the giant coconuts, which contain within their shell a refreshing drink like lemonade. Whenever such a coconut fell to the ground, our Paul happily clapped his hands and shouted:

“Quickly, crack the nut open! I’m thirsty and would very much like to drink the water!”

Now and then he was allowed to accompany his father on the sermon outings, if the sun was not too intense. He was delighted, when one day, while visiting a lady in Bonaberi, he was able to encounter a little child, who was just as white as his little sister at home. When he asked what her name was, the lady told him that she was named Lydia Clara. This was a puzzle to him because this was most assuredly the name of his younger sister. It was made clear to him that the little Bonaberi daughter was named Lydia Clara, in contrast to his little sister's name, Clara Lydia. It finally made sense to him and he was at peace.

No matter how alert he seemed to be, the pale color in his face never left him, and the climatic fever remained in his body. Before we knew it, we were horrified to find that the dangerous blackwater fever had returned. Those were difficult days and anxious hours. When he was on the verge of death and waxy yellow in color, he requested of his mother, who sat next to his bed: "Mama, Sing for me." And when she sang "As long as my Jesus lives and sustains me with his strength, fear and worry flees from me, my heart glows with love" – then Paul was satisfied. From the nearby schoolhouse rang the singing of the black schoolboys: "My Savior is my helmsman; there is none on earth so great in power and loyalty; he stands by me forever." That is what comforted us during these hard times; and through God's mercy even this episode of the difficult illness passed.

But his strength never returned to him. His health was so weakened, that it was unlikely that he would be able to withstand the African climate much longer. For this reason, we were glad that our return to Europe was fast approaching. But a fearful question rose involuntarily in our hearts: Is it likely that we will still bring the pale languid child to Europe? And if you asked him: "Would you like to go with us to the

European homeland?" then he'd say: "Oh yes, I would like to go, but I may bring all my friends with me. Right? Senge, Kalati, Edimo, and Buemba, Flä and Nima" – for such were the names of his Negro playmates.

We began to prepare ourselves for the journey home; but Paul was not to accompany us. A new case of the fever set in and put him back in his sickbed. He was tormented by a burning thirst that could hardly be quenched. Unfortunately, this time we could not get any ice to cool the dull water. He lay there burning with fever and breathing with difficulty. You could see how his already weakened strength deteriorated further and appeared to vanish altogether. His weakness meant that he slept most of the time. On the fourth day, he said with feeble voice "Mama, I want to see Papa." When his father came in from the next room and asked, "what do you want my child" Paul only looked at him for a while and then turned on his side. After his father left, he asked, "Mama, I want to see my little brother." When he was brought to the bedside, Paul just looked at him as well and then turned on his side. That was his goodbye. Afterwards he said. "Mama, it is so cold." That was the perspiration of death that lay on his forehead. A fearful difficult hour followed – and the child passed away.

Paul was three and a half years old when his short life ended in Cameroon. His early passing was also mourned by the natives, who called him "our child." They came in droves to see the child one last time. On the next day at noontime, as is the practice in hot countries, they accompanied him to the quiet cemetery of Bonaku. There, amidst the singing – "Let me go, let me go, that I may see Jesus" – he was laid to rest in Cameroonian soil with the hope that he would someday rise again.