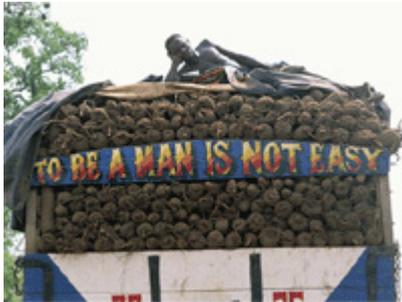


To Be A Man Is Not Easy ~ The Conference Participant. Interview With Osei Takyi



I was invited to a conference and that is how I arrived one early morning at the airport of Frankfurt. Forty three years old, first time overseas, big airport and sleepless night. I tried not to show my anxiety and then I saw my friends Rudi and Susan and they hugged me 'Welcome to Germany'. At once I felt good. But also cold and strange. I saw no leaves on the trees. They said you are lucky it is spring now, look at the first green leaves. But wherever I looked the trees looked bare and dead to me. I was in a dream. We drove to their house and then the sun came through, I brought it with me they said! After dinner it was still light outside.

Here in Ghana sun-up 6, sun-down 6, but not over there. I was exhausted and wanted to sleep but sleep would not come because of the light and all the strangeness.

Next morning was Sunday and we went to Church. It was a huge building so I thought there will be thousands of people worshipping there but I saw only twenty-five or so grey haired people. Then we saw another church which they had turned it into a restaurant which I did not want to believe. But I saw it.

In the afternoon we drove to a restaurant with all the participants of the conference and we had pizza. My first time pizza and I had to chose between mushroom, fish, spinach, I don't know how many choices and so finally we tasted them all and overate! That I enjoyed and that night I slept.

Next day the program started with a visit to a special school for mentally handicapped children. I was amazed to see all their equipment. The atmosphere was good, not much discipline like here in Ghana, no, a lot of liberty for the kids, I even saw some children smoking, the bigger ones, they would go out and have a smoke. In Ghana, never!

They were friendly and asked me so many questions that I was amazed how very free they were and how much they wanted to know about Ghana. They had made

paintings and we were to unveil them. The week was wonderful, every day another program, discussions in small groups about development, a forum on globalization, more visits to schools and mostly meeting each other and the German people and looking around seeing the town. We were catching the European spirit. Their town was so serene and quiet, not at all like Ghana where we make noise playing our speakers and so on. I really liked that quiet, it marveled me. Even the train is quiet, straight and swift and well oiled. Two different worlds which I kept comparing. Hospitality is higher in Ghana but the noise level too. In Germany at times they are friendly and at times they just walk away from you when you ask a question. Sunday we closed the conference with a party and we all sang and danced and had fun. Then we left. I took the train to Austria to visit my in-laws there. The next ten days were like a visit to another Ghana, the Ghanaian society in Graz in Austria. The train ride was a new experience. It was cold in the train and at each station there was police who asked me for my passport and ticket. They take your passport and after some time, fifteen minutes or so, bring it back. I understand they look for illegal immigrants but I became very tired with it for I wanted to sleep and at least six times they woke me up because of papers. Then we reached Vienna and it was early morning of the next day. I asked for the train to Graz. The police came with dogs to inspect my bags and they took twenty minutes searching everything, even flipped my bible to see if nothing was hidden in it. Then I took a taxi to another station and found the train to Graz. I admired the landscape, high mountains capped with snow, so beautiful that all the way to Graz I made pictures instead of catching up with sleep. Three hours later I was in Graz and called Samuel's wife to pick me up. She had to work so in a rush she showed me the kitchen and was gone and I was alone! I slept at once and in the evening I heard Samuel open the door and heaven broke loose! We made so much happy noises that even the neighbors came out to see if all was well. We are happy, we said. I was so happy to be united with Ghanaians again and on top of it they are my real family! While the parents worked their boy showed me all of Graz. He is twelve. He is the one who had time so after school he showed his town to his uncle! I was there for ten days and visited all the Ghanaians from Nkoranza who I all know well. Lunch, dinner, talking, dancing, music, catching up! It was small Nkoranza! In Graz we went to church with the Ghanaians, Samuel's church, and that was great, that was real worship, a full church like here in Ghana! Like being home. The church is underground so the noise does not disturb other people.

Saturday they all came to say goodbye and I left and took the plane to Amsterdam.

That flight was the best experience I had in the air because I saw Holland like a jigsaw puzzle with small green squares which were fields, I saw the houses and much water... so beautiful.

My Dutch friends Danielle and Oscar drove me to their home and right away we saw the flower fields. The next day we visited Schiphol, the airport. Planes from right, planes from left, planes every second or so, amazing. We saw Haarlem and a fishing village and a typical Dutch café, we saw my friend's parents and their friends and we all talked and laughed all the time. Amsterdam, the big city, they showed me the red-light district and I did not believe what I saw, that was a shocker. The women were half to three quarter naked and in glass-houses and this went on and on from one street to another and then a street with male prostitutes which we do not have in Ghana. Danielle and I walked for the whole day without tiring, twenty miles or more. When we wanted to we sat down and took a drink and then we walked again. I loved it.

The next day was [Ghana] again! A friend from Nkoranza took me through his city, Almere, and we ate fufu in the house. He works nights and the wife works days. They have one hour to meet! That's what I saw in Europe, people have no time to meet. In Austria the same. They are all tired and run around so much. This one goes here that one goes there and there is no time to relax.

I then went to Belgium with again another friend from Ghana. We talked, slept, ate, they could not let me go. We saw Antwerp, the big shops, I saw the traditional Jews, I saw everything. Then we returned to Holland. There's no border but police patrols there. My friend who I was driving said: 'look, they see two blacks, they will chase us'. Indeed, they stopped us at the highway from Antwerp to Holland. This is how they catch illegals, if you have no papers then you go back to Ghana straight! The next day my time was up and I took the train to Germany, a train as beautiful as a plane. I wore all my clothes on top of one another because of the cold. I had time to explore Dortmund and say goodbye to my good friends who organized the conference and together we went through immigration and we hugged and that was it. Back to Frankfurt this time was peanuts to me, I helped others to find their way! Before I knew it I was in the air again. Once back in Ghana I knew that I had really traveled! I suddenly got tired and it hit me that I was back. The heat! I felt it like a stranger! What country is

this! So hot and humid!

We went home and had stories to tell! I wrote a journal and every night I read and I remember because I don't want to forget all that I saw.

I saw Europe but I saw the Ghanaians in Europe as well. I knew almost all of them personally. I sympathize with them. They work very hard, it is mostly only working they do, making money. I said to myself now that I came back I have to talk about this to their relatives here at home. In Ghana they think those in Europe live in paradise but if anything they rather live in hell. They come home at night, you sit on the sofa with them, and they have fallen asleep while you talk! Some have two jobs, some have three. Too little time for their own children. They look after their families in Europe and also their families in Ghana. If only the people in Ghana knew! It is a slap in the face of a Ghanaian abroad who sends money home to see that it is squandered! Like Samuel! He works in a steel-factory, his wife has another job. Look at the father in Ghana, squanders the money, asks for more!!

I have to be an advocate for them in Ghana. Here we have the wrong impression. Of course someone comes from outside with a car and the wrong impression is already created. How much has that car cost! It may even be a loan, often people overseas make loans to help their family. No idea, here, and no gratitude but asking for more.

If you have no residence permit you have it tough! You wake at 1 am and make a little money distributing newspapers! Cold, in the night, always illegal and in hiding. People back home may think he is making a lot of money. He sacrifices for the family and they sneer at him for not sending enough money home. Many regret having gone but can't say it out of pride. In Austria blacks and all foreigners come second when there is work opportunity. Europe is good for Europeans but not for me to live. No, I will visit again and then I go back, I prefer to stay in Ghana. What I also saw is that most Ghanaians go to Britain. There they can talk their own English language and Britain seems to be friendlier towards the black man. Even in friendly Holland Ghanaians are leaving for England. It leaves those that stay behind lonely and dissatisfied, they lose their best friends. The children born outside are hooked to their new country but at least if you raise your children in England it is easier to come and go to Ghana because of the language. Britain is where the real Ghana community is.

I thought before about all these things and now I saw it all with my own eyes!