

To Be A Man Is Not Easy ~ Caught Between Two Worlds. Interview With Samuel Oteng



Samuel Oteng is the name. In 1987 I went to Austria. After a few years I got the papers ready and my wife came to join me where I live, a small town called Graz. Our children were born in Austria. Two, a boy and a girl, both go to school. As a family we are settled in Graz and have no intention to move away, moving now would hurt my children's education and their social life

with their friends. My son Godfred, who is twelve, attends what they call the 'Gymnasium' over there and my girl Precious, who is eight, is at the primary school. Precious says she likes where she lives and she has a gang of white girlfriends with whom she feels free and happy. She also loves nature. Our part of the country is beautiful and she does not want to move to a big city. I am the same in that way, I love the natural beauty of where we live. No, we won't move.

Also, after all, I have my work and I'm much involved in the community. Specially our church. Apart from what I said about the children and their education I have been working in that factory all my years and I do not want to lose the benefits and start all over again in London. But otherwise, yes, sometimes we dream of moving to England!

The problem is that most of our Ghanaian friends move away from Austria to the UK. As soon as they have their Austrian passport you see them going, one by one. All the time we lose more friends. It is true that living circumstances for Africans are much better in England as compared to, especially, Austria. In Austria black people are isolated because Austrians stay away from us. It makes life difficult that way. People in England are used to Africans and all kind of other nationalities and they are friendly. Of course the language too plays a role. That's why my people leave.

As I said I am not going to go to England like my friends. They challenge me: 'you are an Austrian citizen and so you can freely move to anywhere in Europe'. But no, we stay in Graz.

What I don't like is being the eternal outsider. The work also is hard. I get up early come back late, hardly see my children, my wife works too, so hardly see her at all. And now we face this exodus of Ghanaian friends leaving for Britain. Others are talking about it, some are packing. We stay where we are but it is sad to stay back here alone.

Do you think I could get a job as a bus-driver in Austria? Or any job where you get in touch with other people? No. Not in Austria and especially not in Graz where we live. I tell you, in the beginning people were afraid of me. When I would board a bus for example all other passengers would look at me. I sit in the front, they all move to the back. If I sit at the back they quietly stay in the front of the bus. All the same that was eighteen years ago and things are changing. When I came I was the only African in town and people would always look at me and sometimes point: 'Schwartz', which means 'black-man' and I would just feel bad. Anyway I was lucky because I got a job. I still have that same job after more than 15 years. I work in a factory and there at my workplace I feel at home and they like and respect me there.

As soon as I came to Austria I wanted to be one with the people and I quickly learned their language. Not just German, but their particular dialect and way of saying things. I use certain sayings the way they do and it surprises them and it amuses them too! I felt that if I learned the language they would accept me which in a way was true. Now there are more Africans working in the factory and I am often asked to be a middle man, to translate and settle disputes. So in the work area I am all right and I know I am appreciated which is important for me.

When I came things were extremely hard as I said. Some people really had never seen a black man and one woman asked if her child could touch my skin and then she gave me money. I did not like getting money for that!! Many times you would walk on the street and people would give you money for they think that all blacks are poor and beggars because the TV always shows Africa in a bad light.

But I learned the language and I learned it well so that I speak it like a man from that village. And with my work I have no problem at all. And I believe I want to stay at that place till I get pensioned and then I have something for the future too.

Blacks now have a bad name which is partly understandable. The Nigerians sell drugs because they have no patience to wait for a work-permit and basically they don't like to work. Waiting for a work-permit can take a long time. During that time they feed you and you get some pocket money so there is no need to become

impatient. However the Nigerians spoil it for us blacks, so now when they see a black they say 'Ah, a drug-dealer'.

When you have your work-permit it is still hard to get a job. As soon as they see your face they say no, this job is not for you, or no, we cannot have a black man for the job. When I later showed my passport to show that I am an Austrian they just laugh me in the face, not even understanding how they insult me. They say no, we need a real one, a real Austrian! Also you cannot get a room to rent, it is impossible. As soon as they see you the room is no more available. That's life for us in that village.

I am a religious man. My religion has helped me, my church, my wife, my family. I worked hard to build a church in Graz. It is a Pentecostal church and I worked together with an Austrian Pentecostal pastor. Then gradually the pastor became worried because by and by there were more Africans worshipping there than white people. He did not like that. I had put much of my energy in building up the church and I lived in a room on the second floor.

When the Austrians did not want the blacks anymore they told me to move out. I negotiated meetings and we reconciled. What we decided was that the whites would have a certain time to worship and the blacks another time. It never worked. I understand we have certain habits that they despise. We decided not to be loud for we are always loud, for example. Still eventually I lost my room in that church and had to look for a house. I moved out of there but I still worship in my church and often translate for the pastor from German into English. In the church I was always the middle man between the blacks and the whites, they needed me that way. I understand the mentality of Africa but came to understand the people of that part of Austria too. Often they would call me to solve conflicts. You see so in a way I really belong there although I belong to Ghana.

Because I had a work-permit and a passport I was entitled to subsidized housing. But I tell you it was very, very hard to get a house. When you get a room then all that live in that neighborhood want to leave or they harass you till you move out again. Anyway now I have a house, I have my own apartment.

I often come to Ghana, every year if I can. I always send money and for my parents I have built a large house here in town. During my last visit they asked me for a big truck to use as a commercial vehicle. I consented but did not have such money in Austria and decided to borrow money towards purchasing the truck. I made a loan. Up to now I was not capable to repay the loan. My father

said to me all the income from the car is for you to repay your loan. Then afterwards we will generate money for our family here in Ghana. I had to borrow 10,000 euro and still I am in debt.

When last year I came to Ghana and I saw that my father was driving the car or has someone driving it, I asked how much money did you make? He avoided an answer but finally I understood there was not a penny saved, nothing! All kind of talk, excuses about car repairs, what not. I became very infuriated and disappointed, particularly with my father. I went back to Austria and discussed all with my wife. Now that I am here again I came unannounced just to see things for myself. So that is why I came and that is why I want to sleep away from my own family's house which is almost like an insult to my mother but what can I do. If I would sleep there then I tell you, day and night, all the time, every minute of the day they will be in my room and all over me. Asking, demanding, complaining. It is such a big problem to me that I cannot face it. That's why I lodge away from them. At least when I leave their house and I leave their town and I enter my room I have peace. So recently I had this big family-meeting. I had come with a purpose and with the help of God I was to carry it out. They were all sitting there, my mother, my father, my relatives, other children, many people.

I start by asking how much money my father now has assembled as income from the truck. He says none. What I feel is that I sink. More fury when my father says that I have to pay for repairs for the car.

I already had found out that he has a new wife somewhere in the south and with her he has new children too. All that money that he makes goes to his new wife and nobody sees it. My own mother knows it too but she just lets it happen because she does not know how to speak strongly. My wife says she is too weak. That's why I have come to talk with all of them and I had to make a surprise visit otherwise I would not see them.

This meeting was one of the hardest days in my life. It was like a funeral. Everybody was weeping, my mother was weeping, my father was weeping, in the end everybody was wailing as at a real funeral.

I could not take it but I took it and then I came home and told all to my friend Osei who is my in-law and I wept. Then I went to bed but could not sleep and it is hard to concentrate and think clearly. What I had to tell them was this: That I take the car away from them and sell it. I may have told them I do not want to come to Ghana again, ever. But yesterday I went back to the family amazingly enough it

was kind of a healing experience to be together again after all that anger and crying.

All the same later again I hear more bad news and the healing is over! Past! My father has not only generated no income from the car but has made debts up to the tune of 1700 dollar to one person. (Seemingly he is not the only one). I hear the police came yesterday night to lift him from his bed in Kumasi and arrested him. My father was taken to jail.

Early this morning Samuel left to Kumasi to bail his father out of jail. That is where Samuel is today, with his father at the police station in Kumasi.

It's likely he will spend all the money that he brought to Ghana to repair and sell the car, pay the debts of his father and bail him out of jail.

Samuel's debt in Austria is still unchanged. He will for the time have to stop building his own house in Accra, which is meant for Samuel and his wife after they have retired.

Samuel threatens never to set foot in Ghana again. That's how furious and disappointed he is.

Caught between two worlds and nowhere fully at ease! Right now, while Samuel is still in Ghana, Austria is the less troubled place for him. But back in Austria...?