

Winner K. Simposya
My experience in Germany

Winner Simposya ist zunächst als Leiter einer Delegation zambischer LehrerInnen mehrmals nach Deutschland gekommen, zuletzt aufgrund einer privaten Einladung. Sein Staunen ist spürbar, wenn er die ersten Reiseeindrücke beschreibt, die tadellosen Straßen, die Bauwerke und das reibungslose Funktionieren von Technik. Wenn er vergleicht, wie anders Leben und Bildungswesen hier und dort organisiert sind, sind Anerkennung und der Wunsch zu vernehmen, davon etwas mitnehmen zu können. Aber auch Stolz auf das Eigene klingt heraus, auf funktionierende Gemeinden und volle Kirchen, anders als in Deutschland sind Gottesdienste keine „one man show“ sondern Gemeinschaftsaufgabe. Der Vergleich zeigt auch auf Bereiche, die kein Äquivalent haben, wie die sozialen Sicherungssysteme: „Sobald du keinen Job mehr hast, stehst du draußen im Regen.“

Three times 1994, 1997 and 1999 we visited Germany. For the first two years I was leading groups of participants on exchange programmes and on the third occasion I was with my wife. On each occasion we stayed there for at least three weeks living with German families. These family homes became our bases. We could travel away to visit other places, sometimes for days and then return to base. The families that hosted us were of those Germans who had been to Zambia on Exchange programmes before or were planning to come to Zambia in the near future on a similar exchange programme. When on the exchange programme I was on duty as an employee of my Council. It was my first time to go to Germany in 1994 but this was not the first exchange programme, there had been others before. On the third time in 1999, when my wife accompanied me, I was on a private and social visit.

Travelling and arriving – first impressions

Travelling, especially overseas, always excited me. Twice, in 1994 and later in 1997, the General Secretary at the Christian Council of Zambia (CCZ), Rev Violet Sampa Bredt, assigned me to lead delegations to Germany (of ten selected persons among them principals, headmasters, lecturers, teachers, students

and ministers), on Zambia/Germany exchange programmes. The Christian Council of Zambia and the Pädagogisches Institut, Haus Villigst, Schwerte, Northrhine Westphalia had been engaged in these exchange programmes already many years. Groups on the programmes consisted of nearly the same number of men and women. Again in March 1999, we were pleasantly surprised when my wife, Hilda Simposya and I were invited to celebrate the 50th Birthday of Harald Lehmann, a colleague in Germany. My experiences in Germany are based on what transpired on these three visits. I mix what was experienced on these visits as I refer to them, without following any order.

When the day of departure for Germany came, on all occasions, we had already checked that our travelling documents, passports, tickets, visas and health insurances, were in order. Time seemed to drag. Sooner than later it was time and we were aboard one of the big Boeing aircraft. On all three trips we spent many long hours flying during the night. I rarely sleep, in the real sense of sleeping, while in flight. I am more awake than asleep. When I was with my wife I was conscientious that I was the guardian and guide to my wife, having been to Germany twice before. I was making running commentaries explaining to her what was happening aboard the airplane and wherever we were. At one point my wife drew attention of KLM Air-hostesses enroot to Amsterdam. They admired her hair do which was plaited in a pyramid fashion, lines running from the lower part of her head to the top where a bundle of hair was rounded up in a pony. First they hesitated but later asked if they could touch her hair. She gladly obliged them. They were visibly happy to have done so.

When dinner was being served, Hilda did not feel hungry due to excitement. She said, " I have no appetite for the food but I must eat it because Harald has fully paid for it." We laughed together. While all this was happening we were in very jovial mood. No doubt, enjoying the flight, my wife was excited and mentally busy recording as many impressions as possible to relate later to family members and friends upon our return to Zambia. She was enjoying the flight as much as I was. On one or two occasions we hit an air pocket that caused the aircraft to dip down but quickly stabilized. It caused us a bit of fright but it was only for a while, we quickly stabilized and continued our flight.

Talking of air bumps I had a chilling experience in 1997, on Air Zimbabwe Boeing 767. We flew into a storm I do not know why the Pilot could not avoid it. It was more frightening than what happened on KLM. The Boeing 767 aircraft shook violently in the storm. The Pilot tried hard to stabilise the aircraft as it swayed this way and that way. Aeroplane wings flapped against the storm as if they were about to break. Passengers screamed, cried and shouted for their dear lives. Some of them wanted to run but found there was nowhere to run to. There was a great commotion. I recall well how perplexed and hopelessly I looked this way and that way, but in vain. The crew tried hard to calm us but the screaming grew even fiercer. After what may have been 30 minutes of flying under such terrifying conditions, the pilot succeeded to get the aeroplane under control. We had all given up hope and thought that was our end. No explanation was given until the following morning when the Pilot apologized saying that we had ran into a storm, adding that five others aeroplanes had hit the same storm. By then we were over the Mediterranean Sea. The incident had happened an hour or so after taking off from Harare International Airport. God was in absolute control nothing catastrophic happened to us. However, it is good we can refer to it as historical and unforgettable experience.

Flying was by night, when we woke up the following morning we found ourselves transposed from Zambia to Germany. It seemed like a dream. But it was not. Both on 30th July 1994 and on 11th August 1997 respectively, we landed at Frankfurt International Airport. In 1999 we landed at Düsseldorf airport on 20th May 1999 having earlier landed at Amsterdam and then transferred to another flight. For me it was always excitement even on my second and third visit.

The weather was very favourable. We had feared it would be cold in Germany. We were so glad that emerging from the aircraft the air felt so warm that we had to remove extra warm clothing on our bodies. I could not believe it. I had muffled myself in sweater, jacket and over coat. I compelled to put them off before stepping on the Germany soil.

Frankfurt airport complex is a city by itself. There are so many aircrafts of different sizes shapes and colours. Many workers some driving other service vehicles about the airport while yet others are doing maintenance work within

the airport. Overhead you hear and see aeroplanes coming to land and others taking off. It is simply wonderful. In amazement participants glance at one another, happy to be on the programmes and in low tones say, "Yes true, this is Germany." We are baffled even more when we ride on a self-driven train taking us out of the airport. It is fully automated. I had never seen such a train moving without a driver before. The same was true to many colleagues. However, I was pleased to discover there was one.

On the two exchange programmes, after checking out at Frankfurt we travelled by road to Villigst, Schwerte in Northrhine Westphalia. Upon arrival there we discussed the proposed programmes and finalised them. The programme became our guide for the rest of the visit. Then we dispersed with our hosts and hostesses to their respective homes. These homes were our bases from which we went out to explore what Germany had in store for us for the following twenty-one days.

Our programmes were arranged in such a way that we visited places of historical, cultural interest, institutions, industrial and recreational places and people.

More wonderful experiences as we leave the airport by road to other cities. We see on the road heavy traffic. There are many vehicles of all sorts, cars, pick up, vans, buses, containers, refrigerated trucks, fuel and other liquid tankers etc. Here and there you see trains cross a road and running parallel or across the road the other side. Our guides/hosts tell us that we shall have a chance to ride on one of the trains later. The traffic is heavy but vehicles are very fast. Speed limits are indicated at appropriate places. Once on the autobahns speeds limits are higher. Our driver and guide tell us "We are on Autobahn/Motorway." We hear it but do not understand it yet. We agree mechanically. "But what does it mean Motorway?" One or two of us say they know the motorways. We ignore and reserve the subject for later discussion. The road signs are meticulously done such that one is able to see very clearly where one wants to go. The road network is fascinating. Now and again you see and approach a fly-over bridge, go round it you are over or under the fly-over bridge heading in the other direction. All the sides around us are well covered with evergreen vegetation. All along the road you see no litter of any kind. No pieces of broken glass, plastic and paper bags thrown about the road. You sniff

crisp, clean and fresh air. Again our host reminds us that Germany is very particular about her environment. He needs not elaborate for we see for ourselves. When you cast your mind back to Zambia (by the way this idea of comparing the two countries is running through my experience), you feel suffocated to think of the litter, plastic, paper, broken glass and abandoned old wrecks of vehicles and 'mountains' or heaps of rubbish all over including streets of Lusaka the capital city. It gives you a thought for the day. Shortly we are home, you clamber out of the car and stretch yourself trying to orient yourselves. "Come in please we have arrived", the hosts invite you in their home.

So many strange things that we have seen or not seen or heard before are happening. You are quite confused. You do not know even a bit of what you are doing. Nor do you know what to say. When I was with my wife both of us were dumfounded and thanked God for our many blessings through friends who had enabled us to have our 'second honey moon' in Germany. "This is our life time experience for sure!" we said.

While we are figuring out where we are and comparing it with home, we are invited round a table to tea and coffee with a lot of cakes. The weather is unusually warm in years, we are told. We agree with them because we feel it. For instance at the airport as soon as we emerged from the aircraft we were compelled to remove our overcoats and sweaters. After our tea we are scattered and depart to various places of our individual hosts and hostesses. Before we disperse, on behalf of other participants, I thank and tell our hosts/ hostesses that we look forward to enjoying our stay in Germany.

We had been driving for about 45 minutes when my host pulled up. We were at my base for the next few days. "First things first " said he. I was introduced to the families and made to feel at home. I was conducted on geographical tour of the house. I could freely move about the house. I easily accessed essentials for my comfort. I knew where to find the bath tub or showers, pantry, kitchen, dining room, water closets and sitting room. The scenario was repeated even when I was with my wife.

I was very impressed with the way our hosts and hostesses availed themselves to me. They are really sincere in their desire to help me feel at home. I learnt later that most of the other participants had the same experience. This made it

easier to talk with them on intimate and personal basis. They went out of their way to make us comfortable.

So far a picture is forming that there is great population of motor vehicles, planes, trains, and the road network is excellent with good signs in clean surroundings.

Over-head, are high voltage electricity cables crossing. Reception is good. As you warm and open up, effective communication develops between you and your hosts/hostesses. You even offer to help out with little housework, such as removing and cleaning plates, ironing sometimes. But you are told to sit and relax. When you insist to do something your wish is granted. Such were the incidents we experienced at different levels.

Living religion

Sundays had their thrills. I observed how splendid church buildings and cathedrals were conspicuously dotted in cities. In our briefing we established that many Germans were protestant church members. They contributed money towards church work that entitled them to membership of religious especially Christian organizations. I recalled many projects and programmes carried out by donor funds in Zambia. Organisations like the Christian Council of Zambia also benefit from such donations. However I was struck by one thing: Church attendance. While the churches were spacious, attendance by members was disappointing. The church services we attended were poorly visited. Worship too was more of a one-person show unlike in Zambia. There the affair is jointly done. Sunday service is lively and exciting, the congregations join in. How we wished the empty church halls were transposed to Zambia. Many congregations badly needed church buildings. They struggle to build but it takes years to construct a tiny church building. But I recognised it as difference between Zambians and Germans. It may well be cultural difference.

Industry and social system – a comparison

Visits were made to nursery, secondary, high and grammar schools, schools of the handicapped and special education institutions, coal mines, Opel Motor

Assembly, churches, old people's homes, and water works. Cologne cathedral and steel works, water works, tourists' resorts at Norderney islands. Of all the places we visited I was very impressed by the following:

Scaling the cologne cathedral, going down a coal mine, Opel motor assembly and various schools (from nursery to the University of Bochum) and social services and clinics and hospitals. There are many places that were visited but which I have no scope to capture for the purpose of this write up.

Zambia is a mining country. It is one of the great Copper producing countries yet I have never gone underground. In Germany I managed to go 1000 metres underground to where coal was mined. The experience of going down by cage and observing coal being mined was frightening and at the same time interesting. I still keep a piece of coal I picked down from one mine as a souvenir.

Then I climbed the Cologne Gothic Cathedral up to the top. I felt sense of achievement after doing it to the top, having satisfied my ego. I was coming down as a successful warrior returning victorious from a battle. It was while I was high up on the Cathedral that I was shown the Radio Deutsche Welle (RDW) station. Below the Cathedral the River Rhine provided its waters for ships seen ploughing it. I have happy memories of that experience.

Steel works in Dortmund was another memorable experience I had. The big steel factory and associated products, is daunting. I was surprised to see a relatively small number of workers employed due to automation. Sections of the plant were managed by machines themselves or robots. Big steel sheet rolls and steel bars could be seen rolling off the conveyer belt.

Unemployment is not bad in Germany. On the other hand the people are hard workers. Labour is very expensive. Unlike in Zambia, I was impressed to see one lorry driver loading beers, spirits and soft drinks on to a truck. I was told he also went and off-loaded the items at different destinations singled handed. In Zambia it would need a lorry mate to load and others to off-load in many instances. I know it is because our labour is too cheap. If it were in Germany we could not even pay for the many house or domestic servants many of us employ. The contrast is interesting to note.

At Opel motor assembly in Bochum I observed how parts of a car and other components from other towns (i.e. seats, batteries, fuel tanks, or shock absorbers etc) are fashioned, fitted to form the framework of a vehicle. Then all

other required components fitted at the right time. Eventually at the end of the assembly line a finished car emerges flashing lights and indicators coming for final check up before its shipment to its prospective buyers within the country or abroad. I learnt that 1200 cars were produced per day. Storage is critical. However, that aspect is taken care of by producing cars strictly to confirmed orders. Some vehicles could be seen being shipped to their destination on special vehicles that take about 20 vehicles at once. And yet other cars are shipped by trains. I learnt how important it was working as a team at a shift. A group of 8 or so persons manned a section. Any laxity or absentism would greatly disrupt the flow of cars on the assembly line. It goes without saying that employees are well paid. Because of doing the same piece of job many times over they become very proficient. There is also the risk of losing job. So workers are faithful and diligent at their work schedules. Workers are rewarded for their creativity if they could find a better way of doing a piece of work on the assembly line, or working for some time accident free. Reward could be in monetary form or elevation in position at work. To me I found it to be very encouraging. Workers are well motivated.

At the Water Works I was impressed greatly. I traced the water treatment process from the well and fallows to the reservoirs before it was distributed to consumers. The standards are very high, meticulous and rigorous. The network is equally laborious as well as inclusive. Big pipes carry water long distances to the consumers. When I tried to compare with what is obtaining in most water suppliers in Zambia I was convinced we are rather lax or have an "I don't care" attitude. We fall far short of the standard required in Germany.

Visits to secondary schools from nursery to the university were an eye opener. We saw how schools are managed and how students behaved. One thing struck me was the adequacy of facilities for all. Education is provided for all children irrespective of the mental or/and physical abilities, capacity to or not able to pay. Students with special abilities or handicapped are all provided for in schools. On one occasion we tried to compare with Zambian situation, "It is as difficult to be in school in Zambia as it is to be out of School in Germany", was our conclusion. Learning/teaching materials are available in sufficient quantities. Institutions are staffed with suitably qualified personnel. Spacious classrooms with proper furniture were remarkable. We do not have such facil -

ities. We envied our counterparts in Germany. We wished we could transfer some second-hand material and equipment to Zambia but for the custom duties that would be levied on such goods.

We answered many questions raised by students. Some of the questions were silly and trivial but genuine. We also enjoyed informing the students in some cases even their teachers what was obtaining in Zambia. Hilda Simposya pleasantly surprised me to conduct Geography of Zambia and discuss with few university students Zambian education system. She handled the discussion very well. At home Hilda always shied away teaching even though she is a nursing sister and midwife by profession.

At some handicapped institutions we were pleasantly surprised to see what students were capable of doing. They handled machinery and produced nice articles in the workshops. We discovered to our dismay, that there were handicapped people in Zambia better than those we saw whom were discarded and declared worthless. With a proper exchange programme we could learn how we could help rehabilitate our many nationals languishing in the country as written off.

Social services in Germany are the envy of many in public institutions. They provide handsome retirement packages. It makes sense to congratulate one upon one's retirement in Germany. This is not the case at home. Going on retirement is like sending one to perpetual servitude and destitution. In Germany I learnt that when one is out of employment he/she receives allowances (although I was told people would rather get employment and earn their living than receive free handouts). The state means well because it wants its nationals to maintain their standard of living. They feel that if they are strong and healthy they should be in employment. At home in Zambia, no wonder we remain working as long as you have a job. As soon as you are out you are out in the cold. There are very few who live long after retirement due to stress. Security schemes are almost non-existent. Whatever security we have the contributions are very little hence when you retire there is so little to fall back on. It is better it was never mentioned we had security scheme. It serves no purpose at all.

Health care is another impressive social service I admired in Germany. Great care is taken to care for patients. Drugs are carefully monitored and stringent

measures taken to see medicines conform to scientific specifications. All nationals have health insurance. The number of doctors to patients is reasonable. Old citizens are cared in special old people's homes. A visit to one of the old people's homes touched me.

There was nothing of the sort to compare with in Zambia except to think of our extended family of taking care of their old relatives. I must add that the extended family system has suffered of late. This situation is being attributed to modern economic system. We are finding it difficult to look after so many individuals from meagre resources.

As a teacher I had taught geography and I enjoyed it. One of the economic geography areas I taught was the Ruhr valley region with its coal and steel industries. I had not known it before. However after my visit to Germany I know the area because we crossed it many times over. I was able to experience the industries that make Germany tick. I was very glad to tread the region that, until then, I had only known from lessons I taught.

Communication conflicts – and the role of an exchange programme

Reports from participants on the exchange programmes were similar in commending our hosts and hostesses for looking after us well. Unfortunately the treat is not reciprocated when Germans are in Zambia. Few experienced little difficulties on account of poor communication. It was not a question of language problem but lack of conversation skills.

- The guest was perceived to be anti-social it appeared as if the hostess could not entertain or had any topics of common interest to discuss. After evening meals the guest disappeared to sleep as soon as she had eaten. Of course that made the hostess to question if all was well with her guest. The hostess wondered if her guest was enjoying the services being rendered or not. The Zambian was encouraged to share with her hostess some of the Zambian topics of interest.
- There was one who thought his host did not permit him to have meaningful shopping. The Zambian participant lived at a farm far from city. He had one item he wanted badly he thought he would return to Zambia without it. When the item was purchased all went well.

- The third complaint was an embarrassment when one of my delegates offered to pray for a family she perceived they desired a child but could not have one. This was a mistaken notion. The couple was planning and had agreed between themselves when to start raising a family. It was a question of different cultural practice. Of course when the matter was brought to my attention we discussed it and had it resolved amicably.

The acquaintances that developed through exchange programmes have gone beyond the end of the programmes. In fact some have maintained to date. This to me is something that I have valued most for participating in the exchange programmes. We/I have cultivated deep and meaningful friendship. I have continued to relate and share experiences with my host/hostesses on personal level. We speak about Germany/Zambia with interest and from standpoint of knowledge. No more are we depending on hear-say but on personal experience. Some cultural practices are understood better than before. I had been told that I would be eating cold meats, bread and cheese, which I would never feel satisfied with. New participants to the programme had heard the same and were concerned about that. We had proved the stories wrong. As it is said, "seeing is believing" or "the taste of the pudding is in the eating." We ate to our satisfaction. Only personal experience could effectively correct that myth. Many of my generation and younger brought up under British colonial rule had known Germany through Hitler the German leader in the second World War, of course Hitler was a man of his own world. He had ideas and ambition of his own. He is not a representative of German people. As earlier referred to the generosity of Germans in donation to many projects in Zambia. I have experienced that only bringing our cultural experience together in this way brings a very healthy understanding. Listening to the evaluation of participants of the exchange programmes that I was involved in I find that hosting Zambians in German families brought them closer to deal with each other on a very personal level.