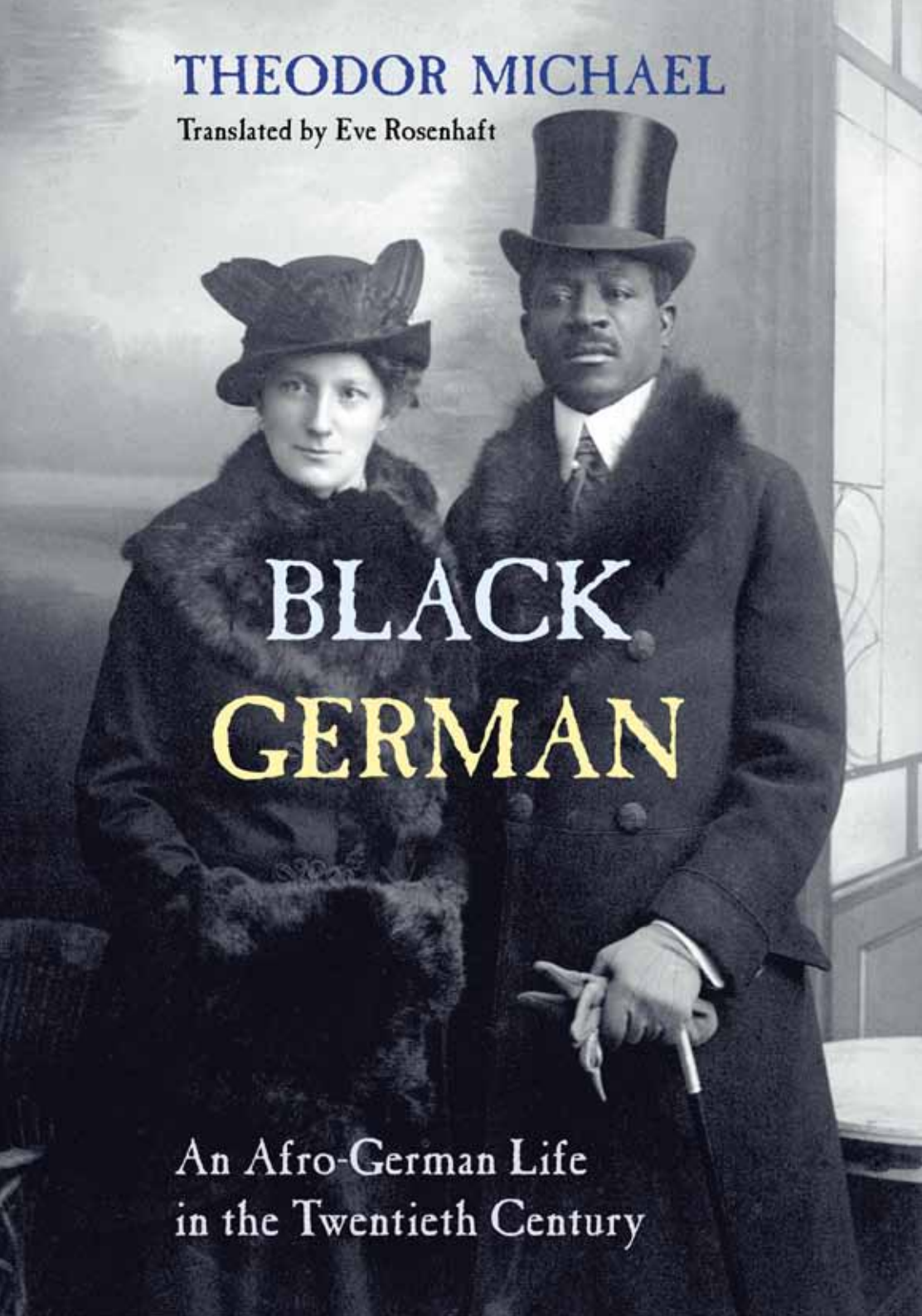
THEODOR MICHAEL

Translated by Eve Rosenhaft



BLACK GERMAN

An Afro-German Life in the Twentieth Century

Black German

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Theodor Michael

Translated by Eve Rosenhaft

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By Theodor Michael
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Translator's Preface

Many readers will pick up this book looking for the story of a Holocaust survivor, and it is certainly one of the few works of testimony that give us first-hand insights into what black people experienced in the Nazi "racial state". Readers should start at the beginning and read on to the end, however, since what Theodor Michael has done is to tell three overlapping stories from the privileged perspective of a long life fully lived: a German story, a black story and a story of global diasporic consciousness. Equally important, he is self-consciously inserting himself into a continuous chain of storytelling in which black Germans explain their history to each other. *German* and black, he is first of all a member of the generation born of the collapse of the German Empire, which was shaped most certainly by the crises of the 1920s and 1930s and the horrors of National Socialism, but went on to build West German society after the second collapse of 1945. *Black* and German, he is able to tell that German story from the perspective of the members of the first Black German community. He thereby adds a German voice and a German dimension to what we know about the experiences of the first and second generations of African colonial subjects who settled in Europe. Personal testimony and historical research have taught us a good deal about travelers and migrants from Africa who arrived and stayed in the European nation states from colonial empires that survived into the mid-twentieth century – those of Britain, France, Belgium and Portugal – and also about the persistent connections between African Americans and Europe. Theodor Michael's story reminds us that the experiences of African diasporic subjects were always transnational and that black Germans were always part of Black Europe.

Theodor Michael's German story begins as the story of an immigrant family doing its best to get on in Berlin's proletarian milieu. Marginal even to this world in many ways, often relying on continued contacts with "home" and a network of "countrymen", Theodor's father, Theophilus Wonja Michael, struggled with physical and psychological ill health after the death of Theodor's mother, and that precipitated Theodor and his brother and sisters into the care system and into the hands of foster parents. This memoir provides a fascinating inside view of Weimar's youth welfare system and its impacts on children. Because the children all ended up working in circuses, we learn here not only about the physical and emotional harshness of the lives of "circus children", but also about how the circus business and other overlapping performance milieus (including film production) worked in Germany in the 1930s. The circumstances of forced labor in a private armaments factory and the terrors of life in wartime Berlin are depicted in detail here, as are the uncertainties of the moment of liberation and Soviet occupation in 1945 and the conditions for navigating and coping in the emerging system of Displaced Persons camps. We see through Theodor Michael's eyes the pleasures and challenges that young survivor and refugee families faced in building their lives in a social landscape dominated by getting by and making do, usually with the help of the black market – and the shock of the currency reform that precipitated the consolidation of the two German states in 1949. His post-war career introduces us to aspects of the history of West German theater and broadcasting, the health care and social insurance system, labor unions and education, the emergence of African Studies in Germany and German policy towards decolonization and the new African states. We even learn something about archaeology and – through an unlikely twist – the early West German intelligence services.

But of course the ways in which Theodor Michael experienced the German twentieth century were shaped by the ineluctable fact of his being black. When he characterizes himself as "a German in a grass skirt", he reminds us that his intermittent though in the end highly successful and satisfying life in the theater was rooted in a constraining and increasingly compulsory stereotype – from "acting

the African" in human menageries, to playing exotic roles in early films, to the decision of the Berlin social workers that with Hitler in power black children would be safest in circus families, to the racial policies of the "Third Reich" that meant that that kind of performance was the only way in which black people could earn a living.

Significantly, Theodor Michael allows us to see that his own and his family's story was not exceptional, but rather typical of a generation of German colonial subjects. The number of men (and women) like Theophilus Wonja Michael who traveled to Germany from the Reich's African colonies between 1884 and 1914 was substantial; those who stayed and settled down, almost always with white partners, were fewer in number, but they constituted the beginnings of a black community. As Theodor Michael's memoir confirms, they knew each other, and increasingly they acknowledged not only friends and relations from the "homeland" – for the Michaels and indeed most other colonial immigrants of their generation that was Cameroon – but other German colonial subjects and finally other Blacks as their "countrymen"; Theodor Michael's use of that term is very telling. He also shows us how far this black community was embedded in the wider white community – not least through ties of family. The intensified proletarianization and marginalization that Theophilus and his family suffered were largely a consequence of Germany's defeat in the First World War. The fact that Germany lost its colonies meant that the young black community could not grow through in-migration. The Versailles Treaty which ended the German colonial empire also contributed to a political atmosphere that was poisoned by revanchism and increasingly overt hostility to black people, reaching its first peak at the beginning of the 1920s in the "Black Horror on the Rhine" campaign. It was a familiar cycle of racism (popular and official), unemployment or underemployment, ill health and emotional stress that made it difficult for Theophilus to sustain his family and his second marriage. And Theodor is startlingly candid about how his own marriage to Friedel recapitulated that pattern – though with a happier outcome. As he puts it, the "economic miracle" passed them by, and that had everything to do with the fact that he was black.

Of course, the fact that he was black also meant that his experiences of National Socialism were not those of "ordinary Germans". As a certified "racial alien", he was excluded from educational, work and training opportunities and even from the possibility of military service which might have offered some prospect of escape. What weighed on him most was "fear, nothing but fear", the need to keep his head down and not be noticed. He was oppressed not only by his own circumstances but also by the knowledge that worse things were happening to other members of the black community: forced sterilization, the breakup of families, death in prisons and concentration camps – all driven by the regime's determination that *Mischlinge* – people of "mixed blood" – like him should not exist. He is characteristically honest and insightful in comparing the ambiguous quality of his own survival with that of the Jewish *Mischlinge* – spared the worst but not unscathed. But he also makes clear how the condition of being a "racial alien" was compounded by the peculiar status of former colonial subjects: once Germany's colonies had ceased to be German and passed under the control of other colonial powers, those Africans and their children ceased to have a formal relationship with Germany, irrespective of where they had made their homes. This was true even before the Nazis came to power and confirmed (almost) across the board that they were stateless. Being stateless, and accordingly not German as well as not white, meant that when Theodor Michael was forced to labor for the war effort it was as a foreign worker; but having been raised German and black, he experienced little solidarity from his fellow forced laborers. And of course he *was* different from them, an insider to German society who had been forced out without ever leaving the country.

At the liberation and in the months that followed, the unclarity of his status as a dark-skinned, stateless native speaker of German complicated his passage to freedom. As with many Displaced Persons (DPs), loopholes, gaps and ambivalences in the system challenged his inventiveness and tenacity but also provided opportunities for self-fashioning: for a brief period the Afro-German became an "American", but one with disheartening insights into race relations

in America that were afforded him because both black and white GIs *saw* him as black.

For other black Germans of Theophilus Wonja Michael's generation and their children, the break in German colonial rule that set them adrift in the 1920s and threatened to make them permanently stateless was resolved to some extent when the new mandate powers, Britain and especially France, acknowledged their responsibilities to former German colonial subjects as "protected persons". A number of the Michaels' countrymen were thus able to obtain French passports and escape from Nazi Germany to France, which held the mandate for most of Cameroon and Togo. To be sure, the fact that James, Juliana and Christiane all ended up in France is largely fortuitous in this context, since Theophilus's birthplace, Victoria, was within the British mandate. It nevertheless seems particularly apt that the Michaels should have shared in the wider process of physical and intellectual traffic between Germany and France. Not the least fascinating chapter in Theodor Michael's story is his encounter – and struggle – with the concept of *négritude* and the emerging pan-African consciousness when he was studying in Paris in the first years of decolonization. We learn much of the power of those connections when he allows us to follow his reflections on the entanglements of African political consciousness with German social theory and philosophy; we see these working themselves out as he comes "home" intellectually to embrace an identity that is both African and German. Turning back to the German scene, his account also illuminates the moment in which the term "Afro-German" was coined, as a moment when two generations of black Germans met. The publication of *Farbe bekennen* (published in English as *Showing Our Colors*) in 1986 by women of the post-war generation, children of African American GIs and new migrants from Africa, led to Theodor Michael's engagement with members of a new black German community, related to the first not by "blood" but by shared experiences of racism and identity-building. His life is thus simultaneously extraordinary and exemplary, in showing how diasporic identity emerges through encounters across geographical and generational borders. If the shock he felt a few years later when he

experienced at first hand the racist violence that has scarred reunited Germany is palpable, his determination that racism can be faced down inspires confidence that with time it will cease to be a surprise to anyone that the person standing in front of them is German – and black, too.

As he reminds us himself, Theodor Michael's experiences were not unique, and there have been other memoirs of black Germans of his generation published in the past twenty years. The best known of those is Hans Massaquoi's *Destined to Witness*, first published in English and then in German translation in 1999, and subsequently made into a German television mini-series. Marie Nejar's *Mach nicht so traurige Augen, weil du ein Negerlein bist* came out in 2007, and Gerd Schramm's *Wer hat Angst vorm schwarzen Mann* in 2011. Each reflects a distinct black German experience: Massaquoi (born 1926) was the illegitimate son of an élite Liberian and a German mother; he grew up in Hamburg, survived the war in Germany and emigrated to the United States in 1950. Gerd Schramm was born in Erfurt in 1928, the son of an African American father who was murdered by the Nazis, and survived internment in Buchenwald concentration camp himself to make a life in the GDR. Marie Nejar was the daughter and granddaughter of francophone and anglophone Afro-Caribbean seamen; born in 1930, she grew up in a multi-ethnic community in the Hamburg docklands, experienced life under the Nazis as a child (including on the same *Münchhausen* film set as Theodor Michael), and became a singing star in the 1950s. Theodor Michael is the only survivor of the cohort of children of German colonial subjects – and thus of the first self-conscious black German community – to have written a memoir. From that point of view alone it is worthwhile considering *Black German* as a text whose author has made some strategic decisions about what to tell us and how. Chief among these is not only his adoption of the terms "Afro-German" and "Afro", but his insistence on using them anachronistically or, better, in an anticipatory way. Since they only came into use in the 1980s, self-consciously echoing the then-current term "Afro-American", the way they feature in *Black German* emphatically signals a trajectory (real if

uneven) in the growth of diasporic consciousness that began before the words themselves were invented. Michael does not refer directly to the political activities of his father's generation (which are outlined in the explanatory notes below); he sees the relationships between his father and his African "countrymen" and "uncles" from the child's perspective and is above all aware of the limits of their solidarity. But that longer history may explain the intellectual, and later active, engagement with black liberation politics from *inside* the German political scene that is what most clearly distinguishes his memoir from others (Massaquoi was involved in African American culture and the civil rights movement in the United States).

One of the things he is certainly doing with his memoir is carrying on the conversation *among* Afro-Germans that began (or restarted) with the publication of *Showing Our Colors*, from a generational perspective that allows him to tie together some of the narrative/biographical threads laid down in that text and to comment on them. While other memoirists describe their personal experiences at greater length, reflecting as they go on the racial politics of their situation, Theodor Michael foregrounds a detailed account of his formal education and engagement with political theory in West Germany and France the 1950s and 1960s. Here, as when he steps out of the historical moment of his personal narrative to write about the Tuskegee airmen, he is speaking to younger generations of Afro-Germans, reminding them that there is a global history of which their own lives and concerns are a part.

But this is not his only imagined audience, and being attentive to the *négritude* in *Black German* can also make us alert to the multiple ways in which Michael expresses his embeddedness in German, and later West German, culture and values. When he repeatedly reminds us of his attachment to "old Prussian" values, we may see it as a small, perhaps ironic, gesture of nostalgic resistance – bearing in mind that in 1945 the Allies specifically required that the Prussian territorial *state* be broken up, as a more than symbolic way of breaking the nexus of militarism, big-business lobbying and agrarian landlordism that Prussia was seen to represent. Similarly, Michael gestures towards

fellow West Germans of his generation in ways that are simultaneously ironic and affectionate when he uses in passing politically coded language that they will recognize – "no experiments", "normalization". And then there are his explicit statements of faith in West German democracy and a non-racist future, his endorsement of the activities of the intelligence services and his assumption that West German policy towards South Africa was informed by naiveté about apartheid, his incomprehension at the student protest against Léopold Sédar Senghor in 1968. Younger activists and scholars, black and white, would challenge these views, and they don't always sit comfortably with the other stories Michael tells, but they also bespeak a generational perspective – one shaped by the lived contrast between National Socialism and post-war democracy.

Traduttore traditore? In most respects, Theodor Michael's story speaks for itself, not least because he means us to see at its center the struggle to name and to assert an identity which is both black and German, for himself and for others. We can be grateful that he has lived so long and retained such a clear memory, but more important, that his friends and family did persuade him to share his experiences with such openness. An educated man of broad experience, he writes in a style that is distinctive, ranging from the conversational to the academic; I hope I have succeeded in capturing his voice. He has incorporated a substantial amount of historical detail into his personal memoir. With his permission, I have supplemented this with some explanatory notes (numbered in the main text) and a historical chronology to assist readers and students who may not be familiar with the historical events that form the background to his story or with some of the named individuals who were historical actors in their own right.

Having first "met" Theodor Michael through his early published testimony and in the archival records, I have taken a particular delight in getting to know him through his own words and through personal correspondence. I am grateful to him for his support.

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enthusiasm and vision made the translation project possible. Sara Lennox helped me to see even more clearly what is fascinating and valuable about the text, and also to improve my translation. The publication was facilitated by the financial support of the School of Histories, Languages and Cultures at the University of Liverpool. Finally, I am grateful to the Arts and Humanities Research Council for funding the research that informed my translation and to my collaborator on the AHRC project, Dr Robbie Aitken.

Eve Rosenhaft
Liverpool
August 2016

One man says: "Yes, it was exactly like that."
The other: "But it wasn't like that exactly."

Black German

White Mother, Black Father

When I was born in Berlin, the year 1925 was just fifteen days old. Fourteen days earlier the Apostolic Nuntius Eugenio Pacelli, later Pope Pius XII, had delivered the congratulations of the diplomatic corps to Reich President Friedrich Ebert. Nobody expected that barely two months later Friedrich Ebert would be dead. After his death the aged Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg, a living legend since his victory over the Russian army at Tannenberg, became President. Of course I knew nothing about all this; people told me later that I had enough trouble of my own getting into the world and staying alive. My mother was already seriously ill when I was born, and she died a year later.

She came from a family of solid Prussian craftsmen and farmers in Jersitz, a little village near the provincial capital Posen. It must have been a small revolution in itself when in 1910, aged twenty-five, she left for Berlin, the capital of the Reich. And there, of all people, she met my father, who came from a completely different part of the world. I know nothing more about their meeting. It didn't interest me at all as a child. Later I would have liked to know more, but by then both my parents were dead. My mother's relatives were no help either. Every time my father's name came up they went quiet. For as long as I can remember he was a taboo subject in my mother's family.

But I know from the stories my older brothers and sisters and relatives told that my mother was an intelligent, good-looking woman. She could even play the piano. Wherever there was a piano, she would sit down and play without sheet music. It was always a mystery to me how that could have happened. Her family in Jersitz could never have afforded a piano, let alone piano lessons.

I can only speculate on why she left her country village. When she and my father married in 1915, she already had a son, Herbert.

An illegitimate child in those days – it must have been very hard for a young woman. Maybe she thought it would be easier to get on with the boy in the big city. But Herbert didn't grow up in her new family. My mother had two younger sisters, my aunts Else and Friedel. Both had lost their fiancés in the First World War and never married. They took Herbert in and raised him. After my parents were married three more children were born in rapid succession, my older brother and sisters James, Christiane and Juliana.

My own memories begin with my father's second wife, whose name (like my mother's) was Martha. The marriage didn't last long. She divorced him after about a year.[1] I was just under four years old. She wasn't up to the strain of being married to an African. Neither of my father's wives had known anything about the African traditions and social attitudes that my father and his countrymen brought with them from Cameroon. Their behavior and expectations collided with the ways people lived in Europe in the twenties and thirties of the last century. My father was hardly ever at home, and my stepmother had her hands full with someone else's four ungovernable children. Still, when she left the rest of the family behind she would gladly have taken me, the baby, with her. But my father wouldn't allow it.

All my father's subsequent efforts to find a wife and a mother for his children failed. The women were certainly interested in my father, for he was handsome, imposing and well-mannered; he had charm. But four children between four and thirteen, that was just too much for them. Especially since my father had no regular income, no solid foundation for his large family.

After my father and Martha Schlosser (that was my stepmother's maiden name) were divorced, it fell to my elder sister Christiane to play the maternal role in the family. She was the one who cared for the younger children, did the shopping, cooked the meals, kept the house in order and helped the others with their homework. Father loved us very much, but as much as he loved us and with the best will in the world he wasn't in a position to fulfill his fatherly duties. He began to doubt himself. At some point he started to drink and really couldn't cope. Christiane, too, was certainly overwhelmed, because at barely

thirteen she was only a child herself and was still at school. But with all the responsibility she grew up quickly in those years.

One of my earliest memories is taking cod liver oil to prevent rickets, what we called "the English disease" in those days. That was a major production every day with three loudly protesting children and a fourth who had to hold the bottle in one hand and spoon the disgusting contents into their mouths with the other. As the youngest, I had a special role to play. I whined a lot, cried at every opportunity, and told on the others to my father. And the result was that he favored me. My brother and sisters thought that was pretty horrible. I was – and still am – a slow eater. I liked save the tastiest bits for the end. My brother and sisters were much quicker and then reached for my plate to steal what I had saved. They really didn't like me. They were probably unconsciously blaming me for the death of our mother.

My father was a tall, striking presence with noble African features. He was proud, commanding and quick to anger. But he was also good-humored and ready to give his all when someone asked for help. That was a quality that caused trouble in both his marriages. Almost any time he came home he dragged along one or more of his "countrymen". On other occasions they just turned up suddenly and were entertained as a matter of course. In the years of the Weimar Republic the African diaspora in Berlin was made up mainly of people from the German colonies and their families. For us, all Africans and everybody who – in modern terms – was black was a "countryman", no matter where they came from or what their nationality was. We children called them "uncle" and "auntie". That included all the children and grandchildren of those "countrymen", who would later be called "Afro-Germans".

On such occasions, what my mother and later my stepmother saw was additional mouths to feed. We children weren't exactly delighted either when "countrymen" turned up. Because according to the good old African tradition it was always the guests who got the best bits, and we had to hold back.

Our Roots in Cameroon

According to our family records, my father, Theophilus Wonja Michael, was born in Victoria, in Bimbialand on the Atlantic coast of Cameroon, on October 14, 1879 – five years before the establishment of the German colony there. Today this region is known as Malimbe. His extensive family was originally called M'Bele, also spelled (and pronounced) "M'Bella". William Bell, known in German colonial history as the man who negotiated the treaty handing over the territory of the Dualas to Germany, also came from this family; Bell is the same as M'Belle.[2] The Europeans had trouble pronouncing it and left out the "M". My father's grandfather was baptized on St Michael's day, and Michael has been our family name since then.

One of my father's ancestors was Bona N'golo Mbimbi a M'Bele. He gave his name to what would become Bimbia. It may be that this was the origin of "Bimbo" as a pejorative term for Blacks. He had been one of the notorious African princes who grew wealthy and powerful at the time of the slave trade. The word "chief" and other similar terms found in European sources are misleading. These were men who constituted the élite among their peoples in a social structure that was for the most part feudal on this strip of the coast. But by the time the Baptists arrived from the Caribbean in the middle of the nineteenth century and established themselves in Bimbia with the Victoria Mission Station, the power of these princes had largely dissipated. The first Europeans to arrive in the territory reported on endless fights and conflicts between the leading families, on the intrigues and conspiracies that they carried on against each other and among themselves. Some of these potentates weren't sorry when the European powers – England, France and Germany – suddenly showed an interest in these strips of coastland. They were hoping to use the foreigners to pursue their own personal interests.

As we know, that isn't how it turned out. The Germans won the competition for Cameroon, and they had ideas and aims of their own, quite different from those of the native potentates. From about 1875 onwards merchants from Hamburg and Bremen had begun to trade with the "chiefs" on the coast. Those merchants wanted to carry on their business freely and extend it into the Cameroon hinterlands. But this was blocked by their African business partners, who had monopolized the inland trade themselves. The Germans weren't prepared to accept that, and demanded that the representatives of the government in Berlin enter into so-called "treaties of protection" with the native princes and kings. At first this proposition contradicted the plans of the then Reich Chancellor Otto von Bismarck. He was actually completely opposed to colonies, because he thought that maintaining them would only cost the government money and bring nothing but the kind of trouble that the new empire could not afford so soon after the end of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71.

But the notorious "Scramble for Africa" had begun and in the end the Reich government responded to the demands of business. Gustav Nachtigal, the German consul in Tunis, was sent to arrange the treaties with the African princes. In those treaties their territories were misleadingly named "protectorates" (*Schutzgebiete*), an ambiguous term. The use of the word *Schutzgebiet* for German colonies became established and persisted beyond the end of the German colonial empire.

Cameroon was now *de facto* a colony of the German Empire. I assume that the African princes who put their crosses at the bottom of those treaties didn't know the exact wording of the documents. For one thing most of them could neither read nor write, because from their point of view learning was "work", something inappropriate for the "aristocracy". Only later, when the missionaries set up schools to which mainly underprivileged families sent their children, did they notice that they had made a serious mistake. Children from "aristocratic" families suddenly felt themselves disadvantaged by comparison with "non-aristocratic" children, and that led to social conflicts of which the colonial authorities were completely unaware. For another thing,

the original wording of the written treaties was changed beyond recognition in the process of successive oral translations. I can't imagine that those princes would have voluntarily signed away their authority, their independence and their lands to a foreign power.

The original of that treaty covering the Malimbe/Bimbia territory has been lost. My grandfather and several other princes who ruled the land then had each marked it with a cross. Their names were written below the crosses. The journalist and African traveler Hugo Zöller took an official part in the signing of the treaties and published a book about it in 1885, entitled *Die deutschen Besitzungen an der westafrikanischen Küste* (The German Possessions on the West African Coast). My grandfather appears there under the name "Freeborn"; Freeborn is a rough English translation of the Duala name Wonja or Wonjange or Wonjunge. Even when I did research in Cameroon, I wasn't able to find out any more than that about my family's roots.

One of the few positive aspects of German colonial rule was the introduction of schools. Most of them were run by the Christian missions, and my father had the good fortune to be able to attend one of those. The aim of all young Cameroonians, especially the ones from aristocratic families, was to get to Europe one way or another, so as to take advantage of the knowledge, progress and wealth of that continent. My father was one of those young men who were ready to head out, hoping to escape the narrowness of tribal society, the paternalism of the colonial authorities, and all the aspects of life that were so different from the ones that the representatives of Cameroon who traveled to the First Colonial Exhibition of 1894 in Berlin had enthusiastically described when they returned home. Europe, Germany seemed like the Promised Land. But those who actually managed to get to Germany found themselves facing conditions and experiences that had nothing to do with paradise. And that hasn't changed.

My Father's Story

It isn't exactly clear when my father arrived in Berlin. According to family stories, it was as early as 1896, but his presence is only documented from 1903 on. Before that (the stories go) he was supposed to train as a priest at a Christian mission school in England, but he ran away from there and went to Germany. He was able to do that because he had identity papers identifying him as an inhabitant of the German protectorate. There is also evidence that he worked on the construction of the Berlin Underground system. It was one of the few ways in which he could make a good living as an unskilled worker. It was certainly not an aristocratic job. Official registers from that time describe him as a "laborer".

At the beginning of the 1920s he appeared as an extra in silent films. My brother and sisters and later I too accompanied him to the studio and were also hired. In an early silent version of Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* Christiane played Puck and James and Juliana were fairies. That was before I was born. Their teachers weren't enthusiastic about these engagements, since when the children were working in films they obviously couldn't attend school.

Life with our father was always exciting. He was always trying to improve his own income and ours, for example when he negotiated with the movie bosses over what we would be paid. He liked to take his children along. And they behaved "like Africans" – they made a lot of noise. That meant that the negotiations were always kept short, to his advantage, since the men he was dealing with were desperate to get us out the door as soon as possible. My father deployed similar tactics when there were major purchases to be made. He preferred to be the first into the shop on Monday morning, because he knew that the shopkeeper wouldn't let him get away without buying something, and that gave him a good opportunity to haggle. Those small shopkeepers

were often Jews. But his behavior had nothing to do with the anti-Semitism that was already growing at the time. I'm certain he had no idea what that was all about. He just liked to bargain.

That sort of episode was typical for him. One of his friends told me years later about another one: there was a time, probably before the First World War, when my father had a considerable amount of money. I don't know exactly how he got it. Maybe the family in Cameroon sent him goods that he was able to sell in Germany. In any case, he was "solvent". People urged him to put the money in a bank. He took this advice, went to the bank and laid the money on the table. The bank clerk issued him a savings book, picked up the money and disappeared. There stood my father with no money but with a little booklet in his hand whose purpose he didn't understand, wondering what this bank person had done with his banknotes. So the next day he went back to the bank and demanded to see the money that he had paid in the day before.

The bank clerk in turn demanded to see the savings book, but my father didn't have it with him. He only wanted to see the money and to know what the bank had done with his money – whether it was still there, where it had actually gone. The two of them couldn't reach an understanding. The bank clerk couldn't see any reason to negotiate with someone who wanted "to see his money" and couldn't even prove he was a customer.

Finally he persuaded my father to go home and fetch his savings book. No sooner said than done. My father went back into the bank, presented the savings book, and demanded "to see his money". So the bank person wrote out a receipt, scribbled something in the savings book and sent him to the till. There the cashier gave him the money. My father counted it, everything was in order. He pushed all the money back across the counter, said "Thank you" and asked for his savings book back. He was refused. The money had been booked out, the savings book cancelled. He could take "his money" away again. But that wasn't what he wanted. There developed a long, loud discussion, with other customers and bank employees joining in. The bank could do without customers who held up normal business because they just

wanted "to see their money". The lovely brown and blue banknotes ended up where they had started: in an old cigar box.

Time passed. The inflation came. The old banknotes became worthless. My brother and sisters discovered the cigar box and used the lovely blue and brown notes as play money in their play shop. But that drove my father wild, because he couldn't – or wouldn't – understand that the notes no longer had any value. He was convinced that sooner or later they would regain their old value. After all, it said in so many words that they could be exchanged for gold at any time – and more important, that was confirmed by the signature of the Kaiser. My father surely knew that there was no longer a Kaiser, but in his view that was a temporary situation. What he didn't know was that it wasn't the Kaiser's signature. And that was that. The banknotes landed in the cigar box again, and in the play shop things were once again bought on credit.

The Human Menagerie

After the loss of the First World War a third of the former territory of the Reich had to be ceded to neighboring powers, and Germany also lost its colonies. But that wasn't of much concern to the "protected subjects" from those lost colonies who were stuck in Germany. Not only my father, but other Cameroonians had founded families with German women. Unless they were citizens of one of the twenty-five federal states, they now had the status of "subjects of the former protectorates". In legal terms nothing changed for them at first. People were still assuming the colonies would be returned. There was a big parliamentary and public lobby for that. Former colonial subjects still had passports from the German Reich and could travel freely inside Germany as they had before the war. They could also travel abroad, but there was one thing they couldn't do: vote. It had been the same before the war, under the Empire; the colonies did not have the status of federal states, and accordingly they had no franchise.

Apart from that, some things did change. Nationalist parties and media and right-wing groups carried on a propaganda campaign against the stationing of African troops (mainly North Africans) in the French-occupied Rhineland. A general mood of hostility to Africans developed, and it affected German Africans and their families too. Of course the propaganda was directed primarily against France, the arch-enemy, but to get at the master they were kicking the dog. If they had had regular employment, Africans now lost their jobs ("He's taking work away from one of us."). Under these circumstances it was very difficult to find work. Especially since there were now millions of unemployed "Germans". And beyond that, they just weren't welcome anymore, the Africans who up to now had been officially known as the Germans' African compatriots. "They should go back where they came from!" was the general opinion.

My father didn't pay much attention to that kind of talk. After all, he had four children to feed. And so he and his family found a home in the *Völkerschau* – human menagerie – of the Holzmüller Circus, which rattled across Germany with a colorful troupe of exotic-looking musicians, dancers and performers.[3] In those days, any self-respecting big-top circus would get itself a *Völkerschau*. They shot up everywhere like mushrooms. There were plenty of people to staff them. For German Africans they were one of the few ways to make money, alongside film work, since "normal" occupations were now closed to them. In these human menageries they were supposed to portray "Africans" the way that people in Europe in the twenties and thirties of the last century imagined them: uneducated savages, without culture and dressed in grass skirts.

I very soon started to hate these human menageries and my own participation in them. My every move was stared at, total strangers ran their fingers through my hair, sniffed at me to see if I was authentic, talked to me in broken German and sign language, assuming I wouldn't understand. That started long before I went to school. And yet that was one of the happier times in my childhood. We children really enjoyed the irregular but colorful life that we led with our father.

At some point, it must still have been 1929, the Youth Welfare Bureau and the Guardianship Court got together to put an end to my father's wanderings with his children. It was observed that my father, as the official document said, "was not in a position to provide an orderly way of life for his four minor children". But – what was an "orderly way of life" supposed to look like in Germany in those days? Who was going to take on those "undisciplined", exotic-looking children, and what would become of them? The best thing for them was to stay in show business; that was where they belonged. But first stick them in the orphanage. So the family was torn apart, the children farmed out. To foster parents. Christiane ended up in the family of Mohamed ben Ahmed, who ran an "East Africa Show" and about whom I'll say a lot more later. She was fifteen by now, and was supposed to "learn" how to keep house. James was placed with the Moroccan troupe led by Abdulla Bonamanes. They specialized in vaulting displays, forming

human pyramids and executing the *salto mortale* in colorful fantasy costumes. James was slight and flexible and played the role of "top man" in the troupe.

Juliana and I found a good "respectable" home with Clara Krone, a very big-hearted, motherly woman who took on foster children because she had none of her own. And probably also because the Youth Welfare Bureau paid for the service. She earned her living by sewing, among other things, and I have very clear memories of the hours she spent sitting at the sewing machine. She sewed for me too; I was always well dressed, her pride and joy. She always acted as though I were her own son, especially with strangers. And I called her "Mother". I only realized much later how well she had educated me up to the age of eight.

On top of that, she owned a candy shop, though it was leased to someone else. To me she seemed ageless, but she was involved with a man who was much younger than she was and who lived as a "lodger" in our apartment. I remember him well as "Uncle Hermann". We lived on the top floor of a big tenement with a number of rear courts in Saarbrücker Strasse, with a broad view over the Prenzlauer Berg neighborhood.

From the apartment you could also see into the first of several rear courts. A hurdy-gurdy man often appeared there and played cheerful and sometimes sad pieces to the delight of all the tenants. Sometimes a skinny girl – or was it perhaps his wife? – was with him; she would sing so-called *Küchenlieder* or ballads. The audience would then throw pennies wrapped in newspaper down into the courtyard. We children couldn't be kept indoors and ran down into the yard to enjoy the performance close up. The poet and engineer Heinrich Seidel has memorialized the life of the hurdy-gurdy man in his poem "Die Musik der armen Leute" (The Music of the Poor).

Looking through the window we admired the garbage collectors, with their long leather aprons and thick gloves, as they dragged the heavy bins from the courtyards to the trucks in the street – two at a time, each with one hand on the handle and the other across his partner's back. Another big event was the arrival of the Bolle carts,

whose drivers sold milk and dairy products. In the beginning they were still horse-carts; later they were powered by softly humming electric motors. We children liked to hang on the back and be pulled along on our scooters. The sidewalk in front of the houses was made of large rectangular flagstones, perfect for playing hopscotch – a game that girls liked and which we boys just watched with fascination; we never joined in, because that was just "girlie stuff".

The youth worker who was responsible for us Michaels had grown up among performers and entertainers and had very good contacts with that milieu. And so she arranged for Juliana to join a group of tightrope walkers called "Rosetti". She got on very well there, but could only stay for two years; then an illness made it impossible for her to continue, and she came back to "Mother Clara".

School

One day I was handed a big paper cone filled with fruit and sweets and had to go to school.[4] It was very close to our house. On the first day, a boy about my age came up to me beaming and said, "Want to be friends?" Of course I said yes. He was called Horst, was known as "Hotte", had unruly straw-colored hair and freckles. His father was unemployed, like many other fathers. So like me, Hotte was allowed to eat the free school meals that an American Christian organization – I think it was the Quakers – provided for German children after the First World War. We met up, played and did our homework together. But his parents soon moved away and we never saw each other again.

All in all I really enjoyed school; I made a lot of friends there and always had company on my way to school. In the classroom we were still using slate boards in the first year, and ancient textbooks that had passed through the hands of generations of schoolchildren. I was a fast learner and was seated in the front row, where the best pupils sat. If you got bad marks, you had to move back, and if you were really unlucky you landed in the back row. Of course we all – it was a boys' school – developed quite a strong ambition to move right up to the front.

My first teacher was called Mrs Hering. We pupils always shouted "Miss!", because in those days most women schoolteachers were unmarried. Every time, she emphatically corrected that "Miss" to "Mrs". But there were dark sides to my good relationship with other children and schoolmates. Whenever the boys got up to mischief, as boys do at that age – and I was usually involved, if only passively – I was the only one who could be identified, because of the way I looked. My foster mother's advice: "Keep away from the bad boys." It didn't help much.

My father often came to visit us in Saarbrücker Strasse. Sometimes he took me with him on his walks around the neighborhood. On one

of our walks we spotted a parade of men dressed in brown. From the other direction there came a group with a marching band. When the two groups met there was a terrific fight. Suddenly we heard the alarm – tatootata – of the Berlin police and my father said, "Pick your feet up, boy, we've got to get out of here fast." The police were beating the brawlers in order to separate them, and we were afraid some of it would land on us. Naturally I didn't understand any of it. It was only much later that I realized what had been going on: it was Nazis on the one side and Communists on the other.

Politically, "Mother" and "Uncle Hermann" were on the left of the political spectrum. They occasionally attended meetings organized by the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and even the Communists (KPD). I remember Communist Party festivals that Uncle Hermann took me to, where there was a lot of talk about "Red Front". Uncle Hermann and I rambled on shank's pony right across Berlin, through Friedrichshain and the Tiergarten, and into the Zoo. He knew a lot of tricks for getting in without having to pay, and that impressed me. For example, he knew an unguarded emergency exit in the Busch Circus at the Börse S-Bahn station that was always open during performances, so we could sneak in after the start of afternoon shows when the ushers had gone off duty. I loved the atmosphere of the circus, with all the skills on show, the performers and their animals. But I hated with all my heart the role I had to play in it.

On one of the walls of the living room two pictures hung next to each other, portraits of the Reich Presidents Ebert and Hindenburg. A black ribbon was draped across the right hand corner of Ebert's picture. Religion was of no interest to Mother Clara and Uncle Hermann, and I wasn't expected to go to Sunday school, as the children's service was known in those days. Religious instruction was part of the school syllabus and we children accepted it like all the other lessons.

In fact I liked everything about school. The teachers, my schoolmates, the subjects. My favorite subject was drawing. Whenever I found a piece of blank paper I would draw all over it. And reading. I read whatever came into my hands. Newspapers, especially if they had pictures, magazines, books, just everything. I couldn't understand

most of it yet, couldn't really make sense of it, and drove everybody around me crazy with my questions. Especially Uncle Hermann. He knew everything about everything and had an answer for anything. But Mother and Juliana were my founts of knowledge in those days.

At some point my father made a casual remark that I noted but whose significance I wasn't really aware of at the time: "Children, it's not enough just to learn; you have to be able to do more than the others, or you won't make it." That is also about the last thing I remember him saying. He got more and more ill, and spent more and more time in the hospitals and institutions. He was at rock bottom socially and economically. His charm didn't work on women any more. His old friends weren't interested in him anymore; he had nothing more to offer financially and so his "countrymen" stopped turning up.

My sister Juliana later told me a little story from those days. In the next bed in the hospital there lay a man who had on his night table a picture of a man in uniform with a swastika armband. One day, after the neighbor's wife and children had been to visit, my father asked him who the man in the picture was, a brother or close relative? The man in the next bed was outraged. That was Adolf Hitler, of course, the leader of his party, who was going to take over the government and make Germany great again. My father pulled a surprised face and asked whether he was related to him, to which the other man of course said no. My father acted as though he just didn't get it. He just couldn't see how a man could have the picture of a stranger on his night table rather than one of his wife and children. He pointed to his daughters Christiane and Juliana, who were visiting, and then to the picture of four children on his own night table. In the end they both laughed about the misunderstanding. My two sisters, who had been getting worried as the conversation developed, were very relieved at this dénouement.