

## Chapter Seven

### AFRICA

What happened to Hermann after he left Berlin? Most letters that he would have written to his wife have been lost but luckily Marie kept a few that she received from him while she was in England.

He wrote to her from Windhoek in August 1933 having been in the country for ten days, saying that he had much enjoyed the long voyage although it was good to be on land again once he had landed. On board ship he spent some time learning some English and practised typing apart from taking part in, or observing others playing, games. He met some people who might help him make useful contacts, all of which was good.

The ship called in at Las Palmas where he had been once before with Eva and he was pleased to again see the streets through which they had wandered then. Together with some fellow passengers he undertook a motor trip and saw something of the countryside.

As the ship sailed along the west coast of Africa the passengers saw the lights of Dakar but they did not land again till they reached Luanda in Angola where it was 'pleasantly warm' - it was of course midwinter. He was impressed with attractive and clean appearance of the city. He pointed out that the greater number of inhabitants was 'Negroes' but even they seemed clean and decent - I am translating what he wrote then. He explained that many were in the employ of the colonial Portuguese government and were used as minor officials and police officers. He must have taken, and enclosed in his letter, a photo of a traffic cop in white shorts. His amusing remark about that was that when the man realised he was being photographed he allowed the traffic to do its own thing because he wanted to ensure that he would appear properly on the photo.

The ship was in Luanda for a short time only and the very next day it landed at Lobito. He was vastly interested in the development of this town with its natural harbour. A railway had been built that travelled right across Angola to the border of the Belgian Congo to reach Katanga with its valuable copper deposits. He was very

interested and tried to obtain as much information as was available about this railway line, no doubt with an eye on possible future involvement for himself there.

A few days later his voyage ended as his ship landed at Walvis Bay. His impression of that harbour town was not very good - he called it a desolate nest, but explained its political importance to South Africa and the fact that it had always been British property and not German. As it is a natural harbour it was developed by South Africa after the 1<sup>st</sup> World War because there was no suitable harbour in Swakopmund, just a short distance further north. When the family landed there a few months later Marie was struck by the large corrugated iron barn in Walvis Bay. Otherwise she observed only sand and more sand. This was her first impression of Africa.

Passengers that disembarked there never did spend more time than absolutely necessary in Walvis Bay, so Hermann moved on to Swakopmund - a journey of about thirty minutes. He spent a short while in this attractive holiday resort as he wanted to call on a few contacts there. He liked the little town with its well-kept gardens, carefully preserved behind wooden fences to protect the plants from the desert wind. When the family arrived there Marie mentioned that she found Swakopmund a wonderful surprise after the disappointment of the first impression of Africa in Walvis Bay. In later years we children were to get to know Swakopmund well. Hermann himself spent as little time as possible there as the climate brought about asthma attacks.

In his letter he explained that the Namib Desert started just beyond the outer boundary of the town. He explained the impact of the desert and the dry rivers, which, should it suddenly rain, could create havoc. Some acquaintances drove him to a farm there in the desert on the edge of a river and with much interest he listened to the tales of their lives and experiences. He was impressed by the beauty of the desert and described the colours of the sky at sunset, and then added: 'but you can't live there'.

He then explained that if you wanted to get to Windhoek you travelled by train - again something we were to experience more than once in later years. He explained why the trains were that much slower than in Germany but added how comfortable they were. Almost unknown to travellers in

Germany you could sleep on the train and somebody even made up the bed for you! Having left Swakopmund in the evening he saw nothing of the countryside till the next morning. By the time he could see something of the country it was already quite green and the nearer the train got to Windhoek the more attractive the countryside looked.

He arrived in Windhoek and found it a *wunderschöne Stadt* [a beautiful town] situated among high mountains and though it was winter at the time the trees were green, only the earth was grey and dry. He was told by the people there how lovely it would be in the spring. He reported that it appeared that most of the inhabitants seemed to be German-speaking and only very seldom did you hear English or Afrikaans - a short explanation as to that language followed. Yes, of course there were many black people, but they were living separated from the whites and were not permitted on the streets after dark. [Note that this was in 1933. Apparently he didn't think that this was in any way wrong.]

In spite of the fact that the inhabitants of Windhoek only numbered about 4 000, the town appeared much larger - explained by the large properties and houses built on them because there was so much space. [A year or so later Walter aged 6 was walking to the post office with his father and observed: "Papa, Windhoek is much bigger than Berlin, isn't it?"]

As Hermann was writing to Marie he told her about the various schools where German was spoken and he thought she would enjoy being there. He added that, of course, at the time he was writing he could not say yet whether his family could join him there but he was longing to hear from her. She could write to a post box number that he gave and added that he had rented a room there that he found very comfortable. He gave no explanation as to what a post box was and that there was no way that he could rent a room in a post box!

I am amused about an observation he made about horse riding. He must have met people who owned horses and were riders because he mentioned that people did ride, and he was going to try it soon. What's more, when she came she would also have to learn to ride. I cannot imagine him on a horse nor did any of us ever do any horse

riding in Windhoek.

The next letter was written in September and was to reach her on her birthday. He first expressed his hope that this was going to be the only time for many years that she had to celebrate her birthday away from her family. He then added that he hoped she had already heard from her mother that he had wired her to make arrangements for the whole family to embark towards the end of October. He encouraged her to use her time at school well as it would be necessary for her to start school once she had arrived in Windhoek.

He ended his letter with a realistic description of what the country was like now that he had been there a little longer:

*“You’ll be surprised that there are no green fields, and no forests and meadows. But one gets used to that and the country offers many other attractions. And above all there is always sunshine. Of course, by the time you come it will be hot because then it will be summer but in Windhoek there is always a cool breeze so mornings and evenings are cool. Soon after you arrive the school holidays will start, so it is really important that you do some schoolwork while you have the opportunity”.*

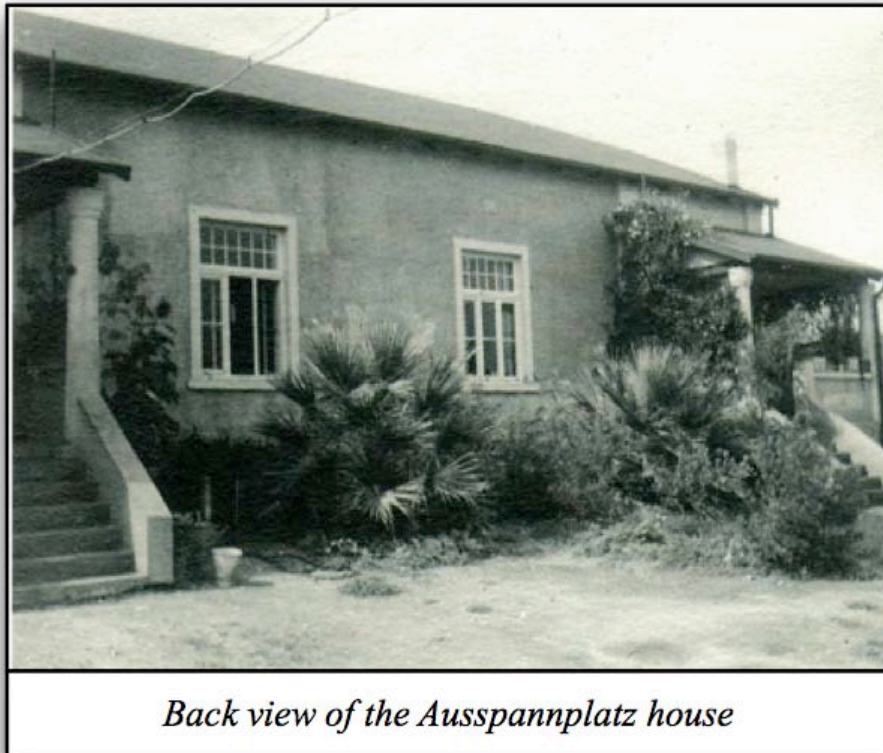
So he had decided that he could bring his family to this country. He had certainly made contact with many people and must have hoped that he would be able to generate an income there. We do know that there was an income from his inheritance as the house in Halle was rented out and both he and Anna received some money from that. From some correspondence we have it seems that the sale of the Lankwitz house had not been successful and that a lawyer had trouble settling that sale. But even if money was forthcoming from various sources it was not enough to feed a family.

I don’t know if he was in contact with Ernst Rudolf prior to us setting sail but it is quite definite that the business he embarked on would not have been possible without the active participation of Ernst Rudolf. This was the time when karakul pelts were fashionable and karakul sheep were becoming big business on the farms all over South West Africa. The business Hermann started was to buy some karakul rams that were then rented out to farmers for a certain time. After a set time they were collected and taken to another farm. To this purpose a lorry was bought which Ernst Rudolf

drove. Did Hermann doubt his own ability to be able to drive or did he not want to try? On the other hand Eva was instructed on how to handle this car and she hated it. She never became confident and luckily she was never called upon to use this skill.

This of course only developed over the first year after our arrival. Prior to the family arriving Hermann hired the furnished house on the *Ausspannplatz* and set about getting it ready for the family. In retrospect it is amusing that a white woman was hired as a cook, and she no doubt advised about the employment of black servants.

It is obvious that the date that the family was to set sail was a little later than he had anticipated when he wrote in September, but it must have been with much joy that he could once more travel to Swakopmund in mid December. And so it was that he was standing on the wharf in the harbour in Walvis Bay and could shout "*Huka*" when he spotted his children on the deck of the *Adolf Woermann*.



*Back view of the Ausspannplatz house*