

Comminos

8 November 1991

Dear Hilda and Rusty,

A letter you sent to Stelios last year seems to have been lost in the shuffle of our move. Sorry that it's taken this long to write a proper letter, but it has been a very hectic year of settling in. But I try to make time toward the end of the year for my at least annual letter-writing, so here goes.

Firstly, you asked for a transcript of the interview with M.B. Yengwa; all of my material has gone to the South African History Archive in Johannesburg, so you can get it from them. As for the quote from Stelios, he would like to see what you are using, if possible, as the quote you excerpted in that letter was quite out of date, since we have returned.

Well, here's a bit of our news. Last year at this time the Comminos-Frederikse foursome had just left Zimbabwe - "forever", as the kids lamented - and we were pondering our planned move southwards from other continents. We first travelled to the UK and then the US, trips pegged to the launch of my book, and most importantly, to a trip to visit my family, the first trip to the States in more than three years.

We flew back to southern Africa right after New Year, and spent a few days in Harare, dividing our time between two challenging tasks: 1.) trying to pack our belongings into our car - everything that hadn't been sent with the moving van, meaning all the suitcases we would be living out of until we found a house and summoned the van-ful; and 2.) trying to get the South African Trade Mission to give me the required visa for getting into South Africa. This latter task proved the most difficult; they gave it only at the very last minute, and after a lot of prodding.

Then we nostalgically drove southward. January 5th, the day we set out, happened to be Stelios's birthday, so we stayed overnight at the Great Zimbabwe national monument, for old time's sake and as a way of celebrating, and to mark our departure from a country that we are all still very attached to. There was one last snag in our plans, as the South Africans refused to let us through, and we had to wait two days at the border post until the Joburg ANC office sorted things out - a great introduction to The New South Africa, and to the fact that it is now a combination of forces that is calling the shots.

It took until May for me to finally get sorted out, with regard to my status in South Africa. I had played by the book, filling all the forms relevant to Stelios's right as a ware Suid Afrikaan to import his foreign wife - especially since my children are also SA citizens. After the full year's delay in getting an entry visa, I was told upon arrival to apply for a work permit and await the processing of my permanent residence application. To make a long story short, Pretoria finally and rather belatedly

notified me that, in accordance with the government's agreement with the ANC re: the repatriation of exiles, all ANC members' spouses are "regarded as South Africans". After another delay, they put that in writing, and it's now stamped in my passport, and they're even sending me a Book of Life. So I feel "at home" in some ways, although I know, coming from a family of immigrants as I do (Italians and Dutch who sailed to the US) that internalizing the fact that I have truly immigrated for good will be a longer and more profound process. What's more important, though, is that the kids feel settled. They always knew that we would go back to South Africa (at the age of 5 the prescient Alex once told me that he schemed he would be in South Africa before he was ten years old, and he wasn't wrong!)

The delay meant that we hardly had time to see old friends in Joburg - where Stelios and I both lived before we left South Africa in 1982 - and also to see Stelios's family in Nelspruit, because we needed to leave enough time to be in Durban for a few days before the start of school on January 14. Still, the reunion with Stelios's family (he had seen them in 1990, but the kids and I hadn't seen them since we all met in Swaziland at Xmas-New Year 1984-85).

When we got to Durban we were lucky in that a friend of ours offered his grandmother's flat, which was vacant for a few months, for us to stay in while we looked for a house. The flat was very granny-ish (said Granny bein 97!) and not really conducive to two eight-year-olds, but we managed. Actually, the most difficult part was that Stelios had to leave town a week after we arrived, to go to Tanzania, where there was an important ANC donors conference, and a workshop on vocational training at the ANC's big training centre in Dakawa, and to spend time at ANC Projects in Joburg. So the kids and I muddled through the start of our new life in Durban on our own.

Nikki and Alex are at a government primary school called Manor Gardens, which is located right by the University of Natal, where I am working. The formerly all-white school opened to all races via a vote in late 1990, in accordance with the government's gradual desegregation plans. So this year for the first time there are two or three black children in each class. N and A have sometimes found it difficult to adjust, for school in Zimbabwe was a less competitive, high-tech affair, and they have found the kids more critical and the environment less accepting than they were used to. At the same time, the school here is much better, academically. In Zimbabwe there were 38, even 42 in a class, and here there are 28 to 30 at the most - although that certainly will change, as the previously over-resourced white school system opens up to a wider community.

The school has computers, and a "media centre" instead of a library, and uses an innovative "theme" type of integrated studies approach, instead of the traditional discrete subjects. Yet the school's cultural offerings seem not to have changed with

the times: hymns and Mickey Mouse, and very little that is South African or African. Alex is the shortest in his class and was teased a lot in the beginning - and romanticized Zimbabwe, where he recalls no teasing - but he has now made some good friends with boys who have the same interests as his (i.e. books, chess, computers.)

Nikki has lots of friends, but also complains that South African girls are too interested in "Barbie dolls and pocket money". Alex is doing guitar lessons and Nikki, piano, and they both enjoy that. But their very favourite pastimes have to do with the fact that they have acquired a sweet puppy and the bicycles they were promised on their 8th birthdays at the end of 1990.

I am working at the Education Policy Unit. It is located at the University of Natal, but is part of the National Education Coordinating Committee, which was set up by the democratic movement during the State of Emergency, and is now trying to respond to the continuing education crisis in this country. I am working on a one-year contract, doing a little book aimed at parents, teachers and students, that I started last year in Zimbabwe. It is about the Zimbabwean experience of schools integration draws lessons for South Africa, and the manuscript will be completed by February 1992. I am writing at home, because it is, as always, difficult to write in a busy office, so I am able to be a bit flexible with my time - which is nice for the kids. When we first came they were at "aftercare" every day after school, and that was a bit heavy going.

Soon I must contemplate my next move. I think it may be in the direction of radio - the area where I originally began working back in the US, and a field to which many people feel is vital for South Africa to devote more resources, given the high rate of illiteracy and lack of electricity, still, in many rural areas and even urban townships. I do volunteer part-time work for the Durban Media Trainers Group, and we are planning a Community Radio Training and Production programme for those who have not had the opportunity to explore a potential career in radio. There is great need for more training: of radio journalists, announcers, disc jockeys, technicians, programme directors, station managers, etc. - but specifically in the area of "community radio".

Stelios is very, very busy trying to realize the goals of the Skills Training and Employment Project proposal which he designed last year. It is now an independent pilot project, based in Natal, with the goal of ultimately creating such programmes in several other centres. STEP (or Khupuka, Zulu for "step") is currently under the Education Development Trust in Joburg, so the STEP office is currently in the EDT's Durban office, which is downtown. Stelios currently has one person working with him, a quantity surveyor, but as soon as they acquire the premises for the centre and solidify all the funding for the project, there will be many, many more people involved.

Stelios was also elected to the ANC's Durban Central Branch executive, as well as the inter-zonal executive, so he is often busy at meetings at night. We have some friends here among the returned exiles who we knew from Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Zambia, although most people have gone to Joburg. We came to Durban because Stelios had always wanted to settle here, after spending eight years during his university and law school days. I really like it: the vegetation is so lush, the strong Zulu and Indian influences make for a nice cultural mix, and of course, there is the sea! Stelios is really enjoying being able to do sea fishing again. Although many people find the humidity too much in summer, having grown up in the humidity capital of the USA (Washington D.C.); I have some kind of systemic immunity, and actually find drier climates unhealthy. Unlike Joburg, where so many different African languages are spoken, here in Natal the vast majority of people speak one language - Zulu - so I am trying to learn Zulu, and am currently finishing the second of two Zulu language courses I have been able to take through the my work, at the university.

We spent February and March looking for a house, and in May we moved into a lovely old (built in 1905) house with a wrap-around verandah and an established garden with tall palm trees, cycads, a jade vine over a pergola. It is in Bellair, which has traditionally been a white working class neighbourhood with railway workers' housing, in the southern suburbs, out toward the Indian township of Chatsworth. These factors have meant that house prices haven't yet soared to the ridiculous heights they have in the more "fashionable" parts of Durban. We like it because the houses have character and there's lots of green around.

One of the wonderful things about being back in South Africa is that we are able to see Stelios's family again. We spent a lovely Easter holiday with yaya and papous in Nelspruit, and they loved being with their grandparents - especially in such a scenic part of the country. It is also nice being in the same country with friends who we used to only see at irregular intervals during their visits to Zimbabwe.

Our address and tel. number, for future reference:

6 Moins Road
Bellair
Durban 4094

*How is your book going?
Hope you are both well.*

Love,

Julie + Stelios

Ben H. Clarke
1557 Oriole Lane
Los Angeles, CA 90069

Dear Hilda and Rusty,

We haven't forgotten you! Your friendship means a great deal to us.

The reason these greetings come so late is that Mary's hands refused to cooperate during the holidays, and Ben is a much better carpenter than a scribe.

We are both well and doing our "thing" - Ben still trying to make a hole-in-one and applying his green thumb to our garden - and Mary still trying to save the world.

We hope that 1992 is one of good health and happiness for you.

HAPPY NEW YEAR!!!

Love,

Mary-Ben

My timing is really bad! These cards were ordered long ago, so I guess they will now be reminders of other times.

Hilda! I am alarmed to hear about the thrombolis. You must take better care of yourself!

And the book - by now it must be at the printers.

I am going to see a doctor who does with a combination of natural chemicals (in the earth) that is supposed to abate joint pain. If it works, I'll let you know. I miss you!

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