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AUTHOR/KEY FIGURE

Ernest Mancoba

FACTS

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Dateret efter datering på dansk version af talen.

General comment:

Engelsk version af Ernest Mancobas tale i anledning af Ejler Billes 90års fødselsdag d. 6.3.2000. Slutningen af talen mangler i denne version, se dansk manus og bog. Talen findes på dansk og i renskrevet form i bogen Ejler Bille 90 år, udgivet i forbindelse med udstilling på Silkeborg Museum 7.10.-3.12.2000 og Gl. Holtegaard 15.12.2000-4.2.2001.

Transkriberet, resumeret og annoteret af Karen Westphal Eriksen.

Mentioned people:

Ejler Bille

Sonja Ferlov Mancoba

Erwin Graumann

Florence Mancoba, née

Mangqangwana

Richard Mortensen

Christian Poulsen

Vincent van Gogh

Archive:

Ferlov Mancoba-arkivet.

TRANSCRIPTION

When I was a little boy in South Africa, many many years ago, I lived together with my family, in a kind of ghetto for mineworkers, known under the name « Comet Location », which belonged to the East Rand Property Mines, in the middle of the goldfields along the Rif | Reef], near Johannesburg in the Northern Transvaal.

One day in our little tin-box house, where my mother had just been delivered with yet another child, (as, allowed by her initiation to the know-how, transmitted through an old tradition for women, in case of need, that is: alone and without help), and I had been given permission to enter the room, where she was resting with the new baby in her arms, I asked Her: "But, Mother, I have already four sisters. Why is it never a boy? When are you going to give me a brother, with whom I can play, so that I never more will feel lonely, when my comrades are not present?"

"Listen, Ernest, she answered, stop complaining so childishly. Whether it be a boy or a girl is absolutely indifferent. Even if I well understand that you wish someone to play with, we must be glad for the children God will send me. And, besides, your brothers, you'll find out in the wide world." Some years later, as I had become a young man and was tempering with woodcarving, in the hope of becoming a sculptor, in my land of birth, I had to admit that if one wished to be an artist, then one had first and foremost, to be able to be oneself – which, as I could understand, can never be the case as long as one is not considered as a fully free human being, the which I never thought possible, for the rest of my coming life in the Northern Transvaal, my home province.

So I decided to rely on my mother's word and find somebody who could speak with me from human to human, even though it be across frontiers, and even far away from the land of my fathers? With the hope that it might, at long last, establish a deeper understanding between people, here as well as there.

On the evening, when I lost sight of Africa's coastline, on board the steamer "Balmoral Castle", and sailed away on life's big ocean, towards my destiny, I had no idea, though, how the latter already lay, as if it were, pre-ordained by secret forces, which, at times, in a strange way, direct men's course - whatever they may think. The first European to whom I spoke, was an english 'old mariner', whom I had first met on the ship, and then later again on the mainland, in a pub of the harbour, in Southampton. Of what he told, I remember only that he had sailed on many a ship, along his life, and that the boat that had represented most for him, bore a name that I was never to forget, since it came to symbolize my existence

thereafter on the new continent where I had arrived , and which was so different from my Africa: the boat's name was 'All Alone'.

How it happened that I did not quite end up in such a plight, so despairing for a man coming from a culture, in which none at the time, was left in loneliness, is a mystery to me.

Anyway, it is a fact that when I came to Paris in 1938 from London, where I had been accommodated by my benefactor, Bishop Smythe, whom I had met at Fort Hare (the first institution, with university status for blacks, in South Africa - that had just opened), he had already contacted the director of Ecole des Arts Décoratifs, rue d'Ulm, who in turn had asked the assembled students whether anyone could take care of a new comrade, who was supposed to arrive from London, next day. The condition being, naturally, to speak and understand the English tongue, which was not so common a thing in France, at the time. Only one arm had been raised. It was a dane who was studying sculpture at the institution. Christian Poulsen was his name. Many times thereafter has he told me how surprized they all had been, when instead of one of His British Majesty's fair-haired subjects, in tweed jacket and bowler-hat, as expected, there stood in front of them a dark son of the deepest Africa.

But, only a few days later, when confidence and friendship was beginning to emerge between us , he told me that if, as I pretended, I had come up North in search of a true dialogue with a new generation of artists in Europe, then I was very lucky for he could introduce me to a certain group of danish surrealists* living at the moment in Paris.

Next day , therefore, we left together the "Latin Quarter" and "Rue Monsieur-Le-Prince", where I lived, and we went up Boulevard Saint Michel, towards and past that undomitable lion, dedicated to the National Defense, which stands on a pedestal at Place Denfert-Rochereau (but which would show itself to be all too tame once the war began), and then onwards to Eglise d'Alesia, until, after going down a little discreet blind-alley on the right, one ended in a sort of inner courtyard or little square, over which rose an oldish building which, I have heard , can still be seen nowadays. We went up the wooden staircase, and the moment after, once Christian had knocked on the door, I was standing in front of a young man whose clear eyes and open face radiated with honesty and friendliness. It was my first vision of Ejler Bille and this, how our first meeting started. Straight-away we felt at ease with one another. We began a dialogue and a friendship which, (I ignored it then) was to last (with some interruptions) throughout a whole life. Bille told how the young in Europe were in the middle of a revolt against the still-born art, which is called

'academism', and how, in their attempt, they had relied, for inspiration and support, among other things, on the expression, which, up till then had been considered the childish amusement of 'wild tribes', while I expressed how much it had meant for me to come in contact (through certain artists who had emigrated to my country or through photographic reproductions) with Van Gogh's paintings or with great artists from the 'Renaissance'. I explained also, how what one in Europe called "Art" was closely linked, in Africa, to people's daily life and had to do, at the same time, with the magic world.

When we took leave of one another on that same evening, Bille suddenly added: "Ernest, I actually know some one who would be very interested*, I am sure, in all you have said about Africa and Art, and whom I would like you to meet. On my next visit to Impasse du Rouet, I encountered, for the very first time, Sonja Ferlov, the sculptor and my future companion of a lifetime.

It was very exciting for me, on these occasions, to hear about how the young surrealists, in such northern abodes, as Denmark, had reproduced sculptures and masks from Africa (especially those of the "Kjersmeier Collection"), in their magazine 'Linien'. I also understood that 'Linien' represented both a vital battle for the human expression and at the same time, a meeting place or a platform, where different conceptions, could be confronted, that, simultaneously, helped artists and the public in a forward searching effort. This movement had indeed already contributed to a clarification of modern thought and art, even though it at a later stage may have been obfuscated, metamorphosed, and willingly or unwillingly, diverted from its original significance, project and possibilities

On the basis of what I came to know through these discussions with Bille and Sonja, I was in full accord with them about the attitude and positions they had taken — together with Richard Mortensen, one of the founders of the movement and a close friend of Sonja's- namely that surrealism or the new art should not be a reaction against Reason (however much the latter had been misused in Europe by the ideology of Progress, with the subsequent tendency towards a certain deification of science. The which we thought a great danger, especially at a time when all the chaotic forces of Nihilism, were marching the goose-step right over Mankind's most vital values, to the point of trampling down the little flower itself of any possible future.

Bille had indeed as neighbour a man who was a living example of what could happen when pure instinct in a people was being manipulated and flattered to the point of losing even the last impressions of basic wisdom.

He was a refugee called Erwin Graumann, a painter of the 'Expressionistic' school who had been persecuted by the 'Brown Power' in Germany, for having once given shelter in his studio to some of its political opponents. As he had made the mistake to try to renew his papers at the Embassy, after telling him to go back home in order to having them changed, they had stamped a big 'Nicht Gulticht' on his passport. So he was surviving as he could, in very dire conditions, for, in the eyes of the French he remained a German and an enemy. He had painted a very fine picture, which Sonja was to remember for the rest of her life. It represented the the greyish roofs over Berlin.

Many times, since this first occasion, have I sat with these my new friends and exchanged point of view about the expression, about humanity, and the situation in the world, seen exhibitions together; visited other artists and common friends or helped each other in the dauly, until the moment when this blessed little period (which, in my case, had not lasted more than two years) came to a brutal end when one day somebody knocked at my studio, rue Hippolyte Maindron and Destiny stood on the door-step, dressed up in a "vert-de-gris" uniform.

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KILDER TIL DANSK KUNSTHISTORIE

NY CARLSBERGFONDET

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