

1995-10-30

SENDER

Ernest Mancoba, Wonga Mancoba

RECIPIENT

Elza Miles, John Miles

FACTS

Document type:
Letter

Language:
Engelsk

Date explanation:
date on letter

Sender's location:
Paris

Recipient's location:
Johannesburg

DOCUMENT CONTENT

Ernest and Wonga write to Ernest's biographer, Elza Miles, of their gladness of the end of apartheid in South Africa.

TRANSCRIPTION

(transcription by W. Sze]
[sender address: 153 rue du Chateau.]
[addressed to: Elza and John Miles
[date: 30 Oct 1995]

Very dear Elza ,very dear John,

Our pen -on this paper - at last! - can hardly allay our confusion for not having been able yet, to express the deep,deep gratitude,which,since we have not found the occasion and the forces to do it properly,our family,for the lack of an outlet have kept in the silence of our hearts,to the point of bursting;

Now we wish our words and our love could rise above our shortcomings,to fly over the continents of old age and daily plodding and over the infinite oceans of human inconsistency,down to your hospitable home and your,may be,puzzled,but we trust,forgiving selves.

Coming back from this second voyage in our beloved South Africa has been almost as impossible as the first time,because our minds, in spite and long after our bodily return ,were still down there among you all.For several months ,we have lived in such a state of dazed disbelief at all what we had experienced,at the kindness and understanding which we had met for Sonja and our family,from so many people,known and unknown, and at the truthfulness,the goodwill and dedication to the human future, which was so evident everywhere we went,that it has taken us longer than we would have thought to come down from these heights to the routine of daily life in our sated,materialistic, self-satisfied Europe,where,although everybody well knows that we,sooner or later,will have to wake up to spiritual and moral responsibility,there reigns a pervasive feeling of "the later the better".

It is for us a reason of great hope and confidence to have seen our brothers and countrymen, miraculously,coming to their senses, and turning away from the brink to which they were being pushed by racial

bigotry and colonial blindness, to face the hard fact and principle of human equality, which some, perhaps, have had the leisure to disregard, owing to certain historical circumstances, for a given number of centuries - only a brief instant in the voyage of mankind - but is basic to the human integrity, that makes us what we are and without which our species, now at last and from now on, put in the presence of itself, on the whole surface of the earth, would be without a future and doomed.

We must feel privileged to have lived this moment in time, this watershed in human fate, where the decisive choice will have to be made: "In all our diversity, be one - or die". Up till now, tribes, nations, empires could live and develop without bothering about other parts of humanity, which they had not met, may be, or even ignored that they existed. For the first time all humans know of the existence of all others, and can, if they wish, come in touch with them, by meeting them physically, in a mere number of hours, and even by means of the latest technology, in a virtual way, instantaneously, for any kind of dialogue that is desired. But at the same time, all nations are capable, or will soon be, potentially, of developing means of total destruction of our world. The choice, has therefore, become an immediate, tangible reality, which no one can, any longer, choose to avoid.

The world-wide protest we just have seen, against French atomic tests, is a sign of this new awareness, although still somehow, in our opinion missing the point by an unbalanced view of the real nuclear dangers and the mistaken proportions in judgement, together with a strange blindness in most of the protesters to the political manipulations of the bigger powers, playing with the fears of ordinary people to prevent lesser ones from acquiring the same kind of weapons with which they, more dangerously and on a larger scale, threaten others.

The future will show, we believe, that only the respect of each nation and race by the other, can ensure a true peace and security. Nothing but the sincere recognition of the integrity of our species, beginning with the acceptance by each individual of the other, if not as a brother, at least as his equal, can give us any future. In the past, oppression was made possible by either the use of brute force or by the universal shackles of ignorance, but it will become less and less feasible, as the first is cancelled by the fear of total destruction and as the other is at least potentially receding, through the means we have of rising the standards of education,

and thanks above all to the unquenchable thirst for freedom and democracy. We are therefore nearing the point in human history, when mutual respect is becoming the "sine qua non" condition for common survival.

It is for us, in this perspective, a great honour to belong to the nation which after having been, so to speak, the laggard in this evolution, has become, willy-nilly, the avant-garde of the new awareness, because it has understood that it is an absolute precondition to its own immediate future, whereas other nations still might have a certain, but rapidly narrowing, margin, in this respect. Each of our countrymen should, as most do, feel the thrill there is, in spite of the dangers along the road, to participate in the building of the spiritual, philosophical and material world that will ensure Man's survival in the next millenium.

Apart from these considerations, which have grown in our minds since our return, we have been well enough, although I, Ernest have felt a little tired, at times.

We were very happy to have been invited by Elske, the other day, and it was a good thing to have a little echo of your voice, Elza. Even only for a short moment to have renewed the contact and our dialogue, has warmed our hearts.

We have also taken up our painting again. And I Wonga have worked recently on some portraits, and have started on a series of paintings and drawings, where I try to work myself into a personal understanding of the so-called Tradition, from the point of view, as best I can determine it, of a timeless, and as far as possible integrated Humnity. This stand-point is somewhat problematic, because you always belong to a certain time and to a special group of people, but the true artist, in my opinion, must always try to speak as a representative of universal Mankind, even if it is from within the given boundaries of a particular time and on a certain spot in space. This is what enables Homer to describe the wars of the Iliad, from the point of view of the gods, and Aeskylos to picture the enemy itself in his play "The Persians", without any shade of nationalistic deformation and propaganda which others would have fallen into, that feel a mistaken solidarity with their co-citizens. The responsibility of the artist, is as much towards Humanity past and to-come, as towards his contemporaries, especially if their interests and prejudices make them

blind and deaf to what he is trying to say. He must naturally do all he can to reach their attention and be understood by them, but not to the point of betraying his own spiritual identity and message.

The other day, I, Ernest, had the surprise of having a contact with Dawn, the kind lady from Fort Hare. She told us that the University wished my presence for the 80th-Anniversary of the University's foundation. I said I would be very honoured, and would do all I can to be present. Especially as they offered us a place to stay, and even to pay for the expenses of the voyage. If it is possible, physically, for me, at the time, to do the effort I will, with all my heart. It would be an occasion for us to see you all again. One cannot have too much of such good things as meeting family and friends. It seems that after such a long dearth, the days of plenty have come, in the form of what would then be my third visit to South Africa in 15 months, or so. But I am looking forward to it with an unsatiated expectation, because I will never, after all, be able, at my age, and with the time that is left me, to make up for all the occasions of meeting my people, of which the historical context has robbed me in the past.

So, until I know more about Fort Hare's proposition, we both embrace you and ask you to greet for us all the friends we have down South and not least your sons, Paul and Carl. And now since words must have an end, we send you, dear Elza and John, our warmest thoughts.

Your brothers [signed: Wonga and Ernest]

KILDER TIL
DANSK
KUNSTHISTORIE

NY CARLSBERGFONDET

133 Rue du Chateau
75014 Paris

October the 30th 1993

Very dear Elza ,very dear John,

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Your brothers

Wonga and Ernest Mancoba