

**1995-01-12**

**SENDER**

Wonga Mancoba

**RECIPIENT**

Zubeida Jaffer

**FACTS**

Document type:

Letter

Date explanation:

no date on letter, no envelope, Wonga recites after their first trip to South Africa, between 26 Oct 1994 and 12 Jan 1995

Sender's location:

Paris

Recipient's location:

Cape Town

Mentioned people:

Janub "Jane" Gool-Tabata

Mentioned locations:

District 6, a neighbourhood in Cape Town occupied by the so-called "Malay" community prior to apartheid in South Africa

Kalk Bay, a village south of Cape Town

Archive:

Estate of Ferlov Mancoba

**DOCUMENT CONTENT**

Ernest and Wonga write to thank the recipient for her hospitality during their recent trip to South Africa. For Ernest, the return to the country of his birth came after he had been away for 56 years; for Wonga, it was his first visit to South Africa.

KILDER TIL  
DANSK  
KUNSTHISTORIE

NY CARLSBERGFONDET

Very Dear Zobeida,

A long frustration it has been for us not to have found enough peace of mind to give you before this the expression of our gratefulness and love. True we might have sent you earlier a token greeting a simple sign of life, a concise testimony of our feelings, but we really wished to find an occasion when we could go deeper into ourselves and come up with a better and truer message from the very bottom of our heart. Alas! the hectic state of our daily life since we came back in Paris - exhibitions, painting projects and the writing of memoirs - has not allowed for a real pause in which to collect our thoughts and give you a fit expression of what we for so many months now had intended you to know.

As we, for a couple of days, have found that little breathing space, at last, we would like to receive herewith the long delayed but deep-felt testimony of our infinite gratitude for the way you welcomed us home and helped us in Capetown last year, and also for the unbelievable generosity and kindness with which for a long, unforgettable day you did set your whole self at our disposal, but above all for being the person you are.

Know, dearest friend, that not only what you did for us - introducing us to your own friends - driving us around in your father's car, but the very gift of your golden presence made these few hours one of the most moving moments in our homecoming, which was in itself, a long succession of emotional meetings, gatherings and reunions, after nearly a life-time's absence.

Your graceful modesty together with that true solidarity of yours which would not content itself with being a mere spiritual principle in a general way but had to find expression in such a particular gesture of effective friendliness, have gone directly to our hearts and touched us in the deepest sense.

It was of immense importance for me, Ernest, to be given such an occasion of being reunited with the Malay community and of returning to that section of my people and my past over the gap of so many years which I rather had thought would have, as for so many others less happy, swallowed my last hopes of seeing again the shores from where I did set to sea for the adventure of my whole adult life, the which, I then ignored, Destiny had decreed should be spent far from my land of birth.

That day which your kindness dedicated us was marked, I strongly felt, by that same impression of necessity which seemed at certain moments of my life to have guided my steps. How else could I explain the coincidence, the strange happenings and meetings that took place during these few hours as during our first visit to Capetown a few months before.

Does it not strike you as extraordinary that after you picked us up that morning at Kalk Bay, drove us to the Museum, and showed us some parts of the Malay quarter and District Six, when the moment, at midday, of going somewhere to eat had come, and after we had considered some other places, you should have had the inspiration to suggest that we went to your friend's parents who had opened, you told, some kind of restaurant at home for the people she guides in her city-tour. And in spite of her being absent herself that we still should have decided to go up-hill to that beautiful place with a terrace and that breathtaking view over the bay and the Table Mountain.

# KILDER TIL DANSK KUNSTHISTORIE

NY CARLSBERGFONDET

That was already a marvellous occasion and circumstance, which allowed us to meet such delightful people as that unbelievable family so characteristic of the Malay part of our people. It was already a great privilege, for me Wonga, to come in contact with a vital aspect of the moslem culture, one that is both so humanistic and so little known to the rest of the world, I mean the sufi which I do not know how, it came to be, has had clearly an influence on the kind of islam we were in the presence of during these too brief moments, as we stood above the mosques and the minarets, on that hill top, overlooking the multicolored houses of the Malay quarter. And for me Ernest to come back to the same kind of reception, I had received in the old days under my stay in District Six, was beyond my wildest dreams. The generosity of the welcome was in the traditional Malay manner, and the infinite variety of dishes we were offered with such kindness and openness reminded me of the way I had been received in the Gool family, nearly 60 years before.

But what was so dumfounding to us and not to be believed, was to be told by the father and head of the family of the identity of our hosts. After his return from the mosque of which we had heard the muezzin's call, on arriving, while we were sitting on the terrace enjoying our aperitive drinks, we were made to understand, as he was telling the story of his people originating from Java, and of his own family, that, was it chance, pure hazard, Destiny, or could it be some higher form of Providence? - had brought me back for our first meeting with the people in Capetown, to a home belonging to a branch of the very same family where I had been received some sixty years earlier: the Gools.

The strangeness of this coincidence reminded me Wonga of another unexplainable happening, during our first stay in Capetown: The first time I took the train from Kalk Bay to the city, when I entered the compartment in the Main Station, on my way back, a man was sitting on the seat opposite me. After some time he asked me if I was not the son of that African painter who had just returned from exile. I said yes indeed. He too was of Malay origin, and had also, he told me, just come back from exile in Lusaka. He started to speak about Jane Gool, who, he told, was still in Harare. I surprised him by telling him that I just had met her the day before, in Capetown, and that she had come back. He continued on the same subject, and as he was evoking her brother, the train just passed a building, which the man pointed to, saying that just there, Goolam had had his medical practice in the old days. All this seemed so unreal and miraculous to me, and put me in such a state of disbelief, that the man had left and got off at the following station, before I even had time to ask him for his name.

Although I never have been a mystic either by my upbringing or in my beliefs, these strange events have puzzled me and made me feel part of a design which I neither comprehend nor understand, but which I would be, both, dishonest and shallow to disregard. Similarly, our meeting with you, and what led to, we also regard as an event of a marvellous nature. But one can also ascribe it to the unbelievable kindness of your offer, to drive us around in Capetown; which provoked this magical meeting with the Malays. In a more general way one can say that without the natural goodness in man no miracle would be possible - even if sometimes, a purely human virtue does not seem to suffice in the wonderful things that can happen to one.

But, anyway, as we never will be able really to see through these high mysteries, let it suffice that we put ourselves individually, in the state of seeing the Good in the human being whenever we are in the presence of it. And let us then revere it and cherish it in those in which it flourishes. Human love and solidarity, the highest virtue in our species, will always be the soundest basis on which to rebuild together with our fellow men, what we are and have been for many centuries in danger of losing: Our spiritual integrity.

# KILDER TIL DANSK KUNSTHISTORIE

NY CARLSBERGFONDET

Our first impression of you, on that day, was later confirmed by what we heard of you from other sources. It is rare that past actions beautify such a young life as yours. When it is the case, they make it a jewel, not <sup>only</sup> of appearance and transient beauty, but of everlasting magnificence, because it was carved and chiselled by courage and dedication, and tried in the fields and hardships of a life-and-death experience.

Now, beautiful Zobeida, we hope that you will take good care of yourself in a time where dangers can be perhaps less obvious, and Good and Evil more difficult to ascertain, or to unmask. But we are convinced that you have the sure instinct of a tried innocence and that you will find your way towards the happy future which the country of which you are such an eminent citizen, and yourself deserve.

Your friends