

András Sándor Kocsis

40 days

IN AN ORPHANAGE IN KENYA

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A DIARY NOVEL

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*This book is dedicated to the memory of my grandfather Sándor Tóth,
a minister of the Reformed Church in Hungary, to my mother Viola Tóth,
and to my father József Kocsis.*

*I am grateful to my wife, Erika Csák and my sons,
Erik and Bence for their understanding.*

No-one gets to choose where they are born

When you pick up a book to read, you do not even consider that this fact alone represents a privilege, a gift. You have a home, you are sitting in a cosy armchair, you know how to read, you are wearing comfortable clothes to match your activity, you have had breakfast with your family. It is ordinary for you, and you take it for granted.

An orphanage or a children's home is a term we most often encounter in novels or maybe in newspaper articles. Rarely do we come into direct contact with children who call it home or were, one way or another, "born" into one. It is, however, a reality that exists in our world, although hidden in the background. There may be a host of reasons why someone is left an orphan. Their parents may have given them up, they may have been torn away from their family by war, or they may have fallen victim to natural disasters. They start their lives at a severe disadvantage.

When the orphanage in question is located in a country where there is rampant poverty and life is hopeless, the disadvantage multiplies. András Kocsis undertook to travel to Kenya. For 40 days, he shared his life with the residents of such an orphanage. He was teaching them, listening to them, and learning from them.

The African continent is unfamiliar and mysterious to us. We may associate it with deserts, slave trade, ceaseless civil wars, but also with its special flora and fauna, or with news of gold and diamond mines. On the other hand, an inevitable question regarding Africa is whether the developed world has repented the crimes of colonialism and whether it has been seeking to make amends.

It would be a collective responsibility of the human race to share the resources of the Earth as brothers and sisters should and to ensure that the affluent should help those who suffer any disadvantage. Pope Francis has spoken up on many occasions in the defence of those starving, seeking refuge, or being persecuted. He particularly concerns himself about the vulnerability of children.

András Kocsis' account steers readers in this direction. It confronts them with the fact that we in Europe or in other fortunate countries of the world live in prosperity, while people born into "third world" countries are destined to live in poverty and hopelessness. His account is intended to sensitise readers, with the gentleness, humanity and openness that count as his trademark. At the same time, it inspires you to learn from these children the greatness of soul, a hidden treasure almost forgotten by our civilised, prosperous society. Let us learn to see the world through slightly different eyes.

Let us accept him as our expert guide, heeding his experiences and message. Let us pick up his latest book and read it.

Miklós Beer

Prologue

You know, good things come in small packages... My Mother, all of 156 cm tall and created from pure love, used to reiterate this phrase whenever we hugged each other. I was an intensely curious kid. As early as at 12 or 13, I was absorbed in the notions of space and time. After tormenting myself for roughly a year, I gave up trying to comprehend them, feeling they were unattainable to me, considering my limited abilities. Ever since, I have spent my days understanding and living our human existence in this world.

I was a top manager for 36 years, and I spent practically all of it in the realm of books, which was a great gift of life for me. By my second university degree, I have a connection with sociology, which has taught me that in the world around us there is no black or white; it is the comprehension of the gradients that makes us capable of understanding our environment.

A fundamental Jewish philosophical idea has been with me all my life, whereby the only way to live a full life is to leave the world a better place than how you found it. For decades, my life was determined by the responsibility and loneliness of being a manager, along with its joys and ruminations; throughout that period, I had Books coursing through my veins instead of blood.

But all things must come to an end. In January 2024, I passed this wonderful work on to my colleagues.

When my friends learned about my intention to leave for Kenya to help out and teach in an orphanage, many were afraid for me. Some even remarked “you live so well that you don’t know what you should do with yourself anymore”.

What was the actual motivation behind my decision, besides the fact that it was met with maximum understanding from my wife, Erika and my two sons? A number of things. I am not a God-fearing person, but I believe in the fundamental notion of Max Weber’s Protestant ethic and some of the basic values that have been around for millennia, such as solidarity, which you find among the principal tenets of all religions.

My maternal grandfather was a minister of the Reformed Church in Hungary, whose way of thinking and ordinary acts played such a decisive role in my life and actions. Like all reformed ministers, he also had a motto: “Love never fails” (1 Corinthians 13:8). On the other hand, my determination was rooted in a serious amount of reading I did as a child and a young man. Since the age of 16, I have read everything concerning Albert Schweitzer. I was fascinated by the humanity and simplicity of this brilliant man, who has been almost completely forgotten by today. He was a philosopher, an ethicist, a physician, and a world-renowned pipe organ player, one of the best Bach interpreters of his age.

Born in 1875, Schweitzer enrolled in a faculty of medicine after learning that there was a severe shortage of physicians in Gabon and graduated in 1912.

In 1913, he travelled to Lambaréné, where he founded his hospital in absolutely rudimentary conditions. He penned this story in his book *On the Edge of the Primeval Forest*, which was republished in 1990 by Kossuth Publishing House, where I was working as a newly appointed director.

Still alive back then, Schweitzer's daughter visited Hungary, and she signed her father's book for me. Let me quote an excerpt from the book:

"If a record could be compiled of all that has happened between the white and the coloured races, it would make a book containing numbers of pages, referring to recent as well as to early times, which the reader would have to turn over unread, because their contents would be too horrible. We and our civilisation are burdened, really, with a great debt. We are not free to confer benefits on these men, or not, as we please; it is our duty. Anything we give them is not benevolence but atonement. For every one who scattered injury some one ought to go out to take help, and when we have done all that is in our power, we shall not have atoned for the thousandth part of our guilt. That is the foundation from which all deliberations about "works of mercy" out there must begin."

Between 12 and 14 years of age, I read all the books by Ernest Hemingway that were published in the Hungarian book market at the time. He, too, played a significant role in my becoming a publisher. I loved his openness, his sometimes ruthless sincerity, his heroes: Robert Jordan and old man Santiago. His writing *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* fascinated me; I decided to visit that fabulous place if I have the opportunity. Now I had it. And I did cross into Tanzania for a day – it is merely 120km away from Bura. Unfortunately, it was only from a distance that I could see the mystical, eternally snow-covered Kilimanjaro that was almost always enveloped in clouds, guarding its secrets.

Another reason for my decision to get away from our deranged world divided by political and religious conflicts was to get to know another culture and another form of existence. I wanted to experience the kind of direct opportunity to help that such excellent persons as Hungary's best-known Methodist leader Gábor Iványi and Hungary's most popular Catholic bishop Miklós Beer practice on a daily basis, with whom I have had the privilege to participate in a number of similar joint activities.

I would like to give my dear readers an account of those forty days I spent in Kenya, day by day, both in words and in photos. I must remark that I encountered a slight methodological problem with dictating my journal. Every day, I certainly sought to record accurately what I experienced, felt and thought that day. Obviously, it includes certain details that annoyed me or puzzled me, while I knew I would encounter



a new and unknown world and lots of unfamiliar people, customs, and mentality here. Even behaviours that may significantly differ from my own. I had been preparing for it beforehand, knowing that forty days were just forty days, and those would be about a culture, customs, and morals of the same value, only different in nature, and I would have to tolerate it entirely.



Finally, I owe gratitude to the President of the Taita Foundation dr. Emese Borbély and her co-workers, who have been contributing their volunteering work to supporting the orphanage in Bura for years and years. Also, to the Sisters of the Order of Saint Joseph and to the all-round in-house helper Consolata, all of whom make these amazing children's everyday lives more liveable. Contributing to their opportunity to have a future.

I went to the Kenyan orphanage to give, but instead I was the one to receive, and I received much more.

András Sándor Kocsis

Day One

Wednesday, 10 July

I had decided to keep taking notes and jot down all that I go through and experience. But once here, I was literally swept away by the events, and it was hard to get myself to sit down in front of a sheet of paper or a computer. Then, afraid that not only the hours but also the days or weeks would rush by, I decided to make audio recordings of my daily accounts summing up my experiences, instead of penning a written report. I would dictate them to my phone; it is always with me and always ready.

The story began with a post by a diplomat of Hungarian descent living in Gabon, which I found on the Internet a few months ago, about the Taita Foundation set up to help an orphanage in Kenya. That post about the orphans touched me so deeply that I immediately contacted the President of the Foundation, dr. Emese Borbély, who was surprised but also glad to receive my request. Then, a process was set in motion, as a result of which here I am in Bura, sitting by the window in my room, quietly puffing on my pipe and blowing the smoke out through the barred window, while watching a mount in the Taita Hills. It is because I am certainly not allowed to smoke in front of the children. This makes me yearn for two things every day: in the morning, to be with the kids again, and, in the evening, to smoke a pipe, finally.

The road from intention to action, however, was rather bumpy. Already on obtaining a visa, I hit unexpected obstacles. To begin with, you can only enter Kenya in possession of an electronic visa. However, the photo I enclosed was rejected on the grounds that my ear was not fully visible in it. Then, it was hard for them to comprehend that I was not going to stay at a hotel but in an orphanage. It happened in spite of the actual invitation letter they were holding in their hands, which explained in detail that I was to work in the Taita Foundation's orphanage in Bura as a volunteer and teach them whatever I know and they might need. As opposed to the difficulty of getting a visa, obtaining a flight ticket was pretty quick. The credit for that goes to staff member of Tensi travel agency, Éva Balázs, who offered me various travel options in a matter of just a few days. Ultimately, I booked a ticket for an Emirates flight that seemed a good deal. Before travelling, however, I needed vaccination. For a trifling HUF 75,000, I obtained protection against Hepatitis-A, typhoid fever and meningitis. But not against the infamous yellow fever, as it turned out no vaccine is administered to persons above sixty years of age. I inquired anyway, and I was reassured that yellow fever was fortunately not a major risk in that region of Kenya. Now only the risk of the other dreaded disease, malaria had to be eliminated. Ultimately, I managed to buy the medicine in Nairobi only, at an astronomical price. In Hungarian forints, it cost HUF 42,000 for each week of my stay. The Kenyan government – naturally – exploits the fears of people coming from far-off countries. So, if you wish to buy the medicine here, you should think of your health and not your wallet.

Still before leaving home, I tried to prepare thoroughly for the journey. I had read the manual for volunteers, which contains a lot of truly detailed information, primarily about scary things, of course. Just like side-effects listed in medication information. In reality, of course, there is no danger

from scorpions, neither have snakes been spotted frequently anytime in this decade. The warning mostly targets tourists visiting the beaches, and probably not only for security reasons but obviously also to boost the sale of insurance policies. I am definitely not going to hit the beach; I did not come here to swim.

Many people were surprised at my decision. My friend who said ‘apparently, you live so well that you don’t know what you should do with yourself anymore’, later regretted their cynical remark. They certainly had no way of knowing what I had been going through in the previous few months or years. I had been a top manager for decades and I had got seriously fed up with it. I am not the only follower of Cincinnatus, who turns his back on his old life and starts a new one. This is how my earlier role model, Albert Schweitzer acted, or, more recently, Imre Somody, the founder of Hungarian pharmaceutical Pharmavit, or Péter Küllői, who abruptly left his successful career as a banker in Hungary to be able to found Bátor Tábor, the ‘*Camp of Courage*’, that brings to hundreds of children with disabilities so much joy that money cannot buy. I have been “decompressing” in two stages. After leaving the big publishing house I worked for, I also transferred management of my small publishing house to my colleagues. My plan is to focus my remaining energies on community service and helping in the future, in a way similar to my Kenyan “adventure”. I have kept a single “management” function in *XXI. Század Társaság*, [21st Century Association of Hungary] because community efforts are worth much more than individual ones; in other words, I believe that the social responsibility of intellectuals is important.

Day Two

Thursday, 11 July

Not long after conferring the Hazám [*My Homeland*] prizes, I left for Kenya; for the record, it was on 11 July 2024 that Emirates Airlines flew me to the fabulous Dubai in the space of five hours and thirty minutes, where I had to endure slowly passing indigestion and twelve hours of waiting. Another five-hour flight, and we landed in Nairobi. From the capital of Kenya, I had to take a train to my post. Luckily, Sister Rachel, the head of the orphanage booked me a train ticket in advance – booking was compulsory, by the way. I was given a code to use at the train station to print my ticket. I admit I was worried whether I would be able to do it. The haughty European man is prejudiced about the state of information technology in the “third world”. Digitisation in Kenya may have been still in its infancy ten years ago, but today everything works practically just like at home. Ultimately, printing the booked ticket posed absolutely no problem.

Before the train left, however, I had a free afternoon in Nairobi. Still from home, I exchanged text messages with a great guy called Charles via WhatsApp. We agreed that I would spend a night in Nairobi, and before that he would show me the city in the afternoon. But at the airport, it was not Charles who welcomed me but his brother, Roland. We agreed that he would drive me around the city for fifty dollars.



Mzungu



Ultimately, the city tour was cut pretty short, although we did a great deal of driving. Over four million people live in Nairobi, and even though you can see neat neighbourhoods, elegant streets and skyscrapers, your overall experience is – just like in the films that take place in the region – masses of people crowding the streets where everyone is selling something. Accompanying phenomena – in terms of sights and smells – are fires burning, meat cooking, lots of waste and rubbish lying all around. Vital information: knowing the local customs is useful, taking them into consideration is strongly advised. Before going sight-seeing, I had to exchange currency. Everyone advised me against visiting exchange stalls without a



*It was refreshing
to see the garden
of the hotel run by nuns*

local man on my side, otherwise a “mzungu” is easily swindled. “Mzungu” means a white person; children shouted “mzungu” to me everywhere as soon as they caught sight of me. The money exchange – with Roland present! – went all right. But we still had anti-malaria medication to buy. In a mall – which is pretty much the same as in Europe – we found a decent pharmacy, yet I managed to buy only two cartons of pills there, whereas I needed four cartons for four weeks. So, we had to find another mall to get the other two cartons. And hours were relentlessly passing by. We were driving from one place to another. However, it was not only shopping that gave me a headache but also my phone. I was told by the