

A Bumpy Road

The English translation of my last but one book 'Het Gouden licht van Afrika' was just as insane as the book itself.

I had regained the publication rights. But I didn't know anything about translating, nor about contracts, let alone about foreign publishers. It was my deepest wish to have this book translated into English. Being the partner of a former tropical doctor, who is a frequent speaker at conferences abroad, I became aware that his colleagues were curious about this novel, that took place at a mission hospital in Tanzania.

My publisher already had made clear to me that they didn't see the point of that. "Just take the translation costs." They mentioned an amount of 8,000 Euro. Later it turned out that that didn't tally. In the meantime I continued writing and published a book about my own Dutch family.

And then it happened. One reader considered that family saga so beautiful, that he wanted to read the Africa book as well.

He then E-mailed me: "This book deserves an international audience!"

I agreed, but told him that all my attempts to do so had foundered. And that a translation would cost at least 10,000 euro.

Some months later he contacted me again. "I have been thinking about it ... find a translator, you'll get 10,000 euro from me."

Suddenly I had a maecenas!

This all took place in 2016, the year in which two of my five fantastic brothers had died shortly after each other and I was devastated by grief. His gesture brightened me up. Because at such a moment you have to get active. That means: looking for a translator. I started with translators from the list of the Dutch Foundation of Literature. Most of them thought it was a great project, but they pulled out: 'No time because fully booked until the following year!'. In addition: 'Paid too badly!'. Especially that.

During that search I learned a lot about 'Translating' and got more and more respect for that profession. First of all: a translator should feel affinity with your text, and preferably also for you. Because you enter into an intense relationship with each other. At least, in my case.

For this book I had given up my well-paid work as a journalist.

At that time everybody declared me crazy, but the book was like a millstone round my neck and had to be written. Of the three English test translations that had been made, one was out because at the last moment the translator decided that this job was too bulky in addition to her regular commercial work. Because my rate was too low, she would have to do it in between other tasks.

Translation number two just did not touch me, although I could not prove why not.

Number three, an English lady who lived in Amsterdam for 30 years, was a cartoonist by profession. Until then, she had translated only scientific texts. My book would be her first novel. But my visual writing style appealed to her.

I had her test translation read by a professional and he gave me the golden tip:

'She can do it, but give her space and tell that it may be somewhat looser.'

And so it happened. With the help of the lawyer at the Authors' Union, a simple contract was drawn up in which rights and duties of both parties were described.

We signed the contract with a cup of coffee in Amsterdam. That was the first time we met.

After reading the first chapter, I was in the seventh heaven. Her English text sparkled, danced and sang, exactly as I had hoped.

Reading her smooth sentences, it seemed as if a hatch opened in my head and the sentences came to me like new.

What a joy to read your own text! Familiar and new at the same time.

All in all, the job took almost a year. We sporadically saw each other and she e-mailed questions like: "What do you mean by 'boerenbonte stof?' and 'What kind of apple pie did you eat at those nuns?'"

During the translation I continued my journey to an English publisher and got rejection after rejection. Even a marketing lady from Random House with 30 years of experience, who really believed in my book, gained nowhere a foothold.

'They do not even respond!' she said in horror.

In the end I started working with a small Dutch publisher who knew the English language market and could have it printed via Amazon. That also costs money!

At the beginning of May 2018 the paperback was ready and at the end of May I was allowed to give a copy to Jane Goodall (aged 84), the famous chimpanzee researcher who made a flaming plea for the environment in Carré in Amsterdam. My book describes a meeting with her first husband: baron Hugo von Lawick, who later became world famous with his wildlife films and photo books.

He died in 2002, the year that the Dutch edition of 'The Golden Light' was presented.

In 2018 the documentary 'Jane' appeared, based on film fragments shot by Hugo and rediscovered in 2014.

At that time Hugo and Jane were still together and had a two-year-old son, exactly as old as our daughter.

Whereas I then had been very interested in the education of that toddler, the documentary answered all those questions I had wondered about. Jane's 'Grub' had been sitting in a huge cage during the day, to protect him from the chimpanzees.

By now Grub is 51, building boats in Dar es Salaam and hating monkeys.

Then, at age 3, our daughter Natasja ate fried grasshoppers. By now, 48 years later, she works as an engineer at a company that grows insects. That she still speaks a few words of Swahili, keeps her lectures in fluent English, and eats grasshoppers, opens doors when she is for her work in Africa.

Regarding the long road that had to be travelled before the translation was a fact, I now can say: It was a bumpy road!

