
Stefanie Zweig
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Nowhere In Africa: 'I had no idea I remembered every scene of my childhood'

I was five years, six months and seven days old when I first fell in love. It was to be for life. Owuor was his name. He swept a stunned, frightened little girl - who until then had thought all people were white-skinned and everybody talked German - off her feet, threw her into the sky and called her a "toto". That was the first word of Swahili I learned: it means child.

Nowhere in Africa (Nirgendwo in Afrika)

Release: 2001

Country: Rest of the world

Cert (UK): 15

Runtime: 141 mins

Directors: Caroline Link

Cast: Andrew Sachs, Diane Keen, Juliane Koehler, Juliane Kohler, Matthias Habich, Matthias Hobbich, Regine Zimmermann

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In June 1938 my mother and I arrived in Rongai in Kenya. For the previous six months, my 34-year-old father had been working out there as a farm manager, trying to forget that in his former life he had been a respected barrister and notary public. Having studied only Latin and Greek, he neither knew English or anything about cattle or crops. It took me years to understand why my parents told friend and foe that they hated farming, but "we owe our lives to Kenya".

We were Jews - in our home country in fear for our lives, in Kenya "bloody refugees", and after the outbreak of the second world war "enemy aliens". By 1938 the Nazis had robbed my father of his profession, his dignity, and all hope that he would be able to stay in Germany. Concentration camps were a Jewish reality. Whoever could and had the foresight and the money, emigrated to other countries; that we escaped to Kenya was mere coincidence. When my father was advised to do so by a friend, he did not even know that Kenya was a British colony in east Africa. The colonial authorities only demanded £50 per head for an entry permit. The low price decided for him. Even so, without the assistance of the Jewish community in Nairobi, he would not have gathered the sum in time to get his wife and daughter out of Germany.

Having learned Swahili with the speed and eagerness of a child longing to talk to people other than her parents, I loved everything about Kenya. I loved its beauty, sights and sounds, the animals and birds - but most of all the gentleness of the African heart, the people's wit and their laughter. Owuor, a man from the tribe of the Luo, our "houseboy", sensed my parents' bewilderment, grasped their hands and guided our lives from the first day to the last. He left Rongai with us, accompanied us to Ol Joro Orok in the so-called "White Highlands", and while my father was in the army, he stayed with my mother in Nairobi. At that time, this was a most unusual decision for an African. Africans were seen by the majority of the Europeans as "natives" with no sense of loyalty, and were frequently abused as dumb and lazy. Knowing nothing of the country's prejudices, my parents felt the same about Owuor as he felt about us. My autobiographical novel *Nowhere in Africa* is not only dedicated to my father, but also to Owuor. He taught me to see, smell and hear.

In 1939 school became compulsory for Europeans. Because the war broke out at the same time, I blamed Hitler for the heartbreak of having to leave my parents and the farm. The Nakuru Government school was 200 miles from home and I hated it. I was an only child, pampered by adoring parents, homesick, shy and speechless - I could not speak a word of English and I had no idea what was expected from me. Having learned the language, I thought it my filial duty to be top of the class - school fees were £5 per month, my father earned £6, and I wanted him to feel that he was investing his hard-earned money well. It complicated my life that swots who were not good at sports were extremely unpopular at Nakuru.

Loathing boarding school and its rigid discipline did not keep me from loving the English, their literature and history. I had an unforgettable teacher who fed the insatiable 11-year-old with Dickens, Thackeray and Shakespeare. Hamlet was the second man of my life. To this day I read Shelley, Keats and Robert Browning. To quote Rupert Brooke, one of my first idols: there is some far corner of a foreign field that is forever England.

Unfortunately for me, I had to learn far more than my teachers were prepared to teach me. By the age of 10, I knew where Auschwitz was and what "not getting out of Germany in time" meant - my grandfather and two aunts were murdered in concentration camps. I never talked about that at school. Neither did I let my parents know that I worshipped British fairies, and dreamed of waking up one day and not being a little refugee girl, embarrassed by a mother with a horrible accent and by a father who had no idea who Wordsworth was. Only when he joined the British army in 1944 and visited me at school in his sergeant's uniform was I reconciled with having been born in Germany and having a surname which tied English tongues.

I knew early in life that my dearly-loved father was pining for his old profession and a country which did not brand him a foreigner the moment he started talking. So it did not come as a surprise when immediately at the end of the war he announced that we

were going back to Germany, but I still feel the shock. Now it was I who had to give up home and language, tradition, loyalty and love. In April 1947 we arrived in Frankfurt. The allied bombs had left the town in shambles, people lived in rags and houses without roofs, woke up hungry and went hungry to bed. Electricity was rationed, good manners and decency even more. It took us (my brother was one year old) 10 months to find a place to live. Till then we were lodged in one room at the former Jewish hospital, spending our days hunting for food and our evenings wondering why nearly every German we talked to told us that they had always hated Hitler and had felt pity for the persecuted Jews. Even my father, appointed as a judge immediately after arriving in Frankfurt and happy to have his only wish in life granted, got to wondering whether the Germans had lost not only the war, but also their memory and sense of shame.

I was never top of my class again. Having only talked German to my parents during the holidays, I had to start with a new language for the third time in life - at the age of 15 far less keen to do so than at the age of five. Learning German so that I could read and write and get rid of my English accent took me a couple of months; the assessment as to which is my mother-language is still going on. I count in English, adore Alice in Wonderland, am best friends with Winnie-the-Pooh and I am still hunting for the humour in German jokes.

All the same, I did not keep language from deciding my future. For 40 years I was arts editor at a daily newspaper in Frankfurt, longing to be a freelance writer. I never dared, but comforted myself by writing children's books. In 1994 the most successful of them - *A Mouth Full of Earth* - was awarded a prize in the Netherlands for best children's book. That encouraged me to write my first novel, the story of a courageous father who taught his daughter not to hate. *Nowhere in Africa* was published in 1995. Till then I had no idea that I had remembered every scene of my childhood. Although I had been to Kenya twice and knew that I still spoke Swahili, I was astonished how the language flooded my memory while writing. Hoping that the book would at least find a publisher (which it did within 10 days), I am still amazed that it was a best-seller.

Having written reviews all my working life, and knowing that a book and the film it inspires are not to be compared, I did not even try to be involved in the making of *Nowhere in Africa*. My contact - and friendship! - with director Caroline Link began after the film was done. When I first saw *Nowhere in Africa* and Africa's beauty swept the commonsense out of my head, I did not shed a tear. I resolved to forget everything that I had remembered. But that very moment the actor Sidede Onyulo, a man from the tribe of the Luo, threw a stunned little girl into the sky and called her a "toto". Then I knew what I had always presumed: my love story was a never-ending one.

• *Nowhere in Africa* is showing in the London Jewish film festival on April 1 at the Screen on the Hill, London NW3 (box office: 020 7435 3366), and goes on general release on April 4. For more information on the festival, email ljff.subscribe@btinternet.com.

NOWHERE IN AFRICA (Nirgendwo in Afrika) (2001)

One wants very badly to condescend to a film like *Nowhere in Africa* (*Nirgendwo in Afrika*). Like a multitude of other middlebrow efforts, it has large ambitions it can't fulfill, and it strains to say big things about a subject it hasn't really thought through. But somehow, one can't write the whole thing off. The subject matter is so suggestive on its own that it allows you to go on your own mental journey, riding over director Caroline Link's visual and analytical deficiencies to find the material's implications. True, that's not as good as having a real director give you ideas that send you further, but it is enough to keep you watching with no real pain.

Based on an autobiographical bestseller by Stefanie Zweig, *Nowhere in Africa* tells the story of a Jewish family that flees Nazi Germany for the somewhat more forgiving landscape of Kenya. The journey is, to put it mildly, a jarring experience: father Walter Redlich, a lawyer back home, must content himself with a position as a farm caretaker, though that's a minor problem compared to the culture shock that the move engenders. Mother Jettel--who impractically made sure to pack the family china--is completely at sea in the grasslands; surrounded by people with strange customs who don't speak her language, she has difficulty coping. Their daughter Regina thrives, however, making close friends with cook Owuor (Sidede Onyulo) and insinuating herself into the culture of the native Kenyans--leading to heartache when the war ends and Walter wants to return home.

There's cross-cultural madness all over this property, and in the postcolonial hands of, say, the Claire Denis of *Chocolat*, we'd have ourselves a whiz-bang picture. Unfortunately, the hands in question belong to Caroline Link, who doesn't seem to know what she's got. Instead of riffing on the fertile confusion between German Jews, English colonialists, and the African tribesmen who must deal with them both, Link digs in with a rather conventional narrative line and barrels through until it's done. Never mind that the story broaches serious issues of European arrogance and the fallout on Africans, or the possibility of cultural exchange between Regina and her friends: the film is locked on the core family and never strays outside long enough to make any finds. Thus the character of Owuor is such an adjunct and pushover that he flirts with becoming an Uncle Remus caricature, and the bulk of Regina's interactions with tribespeople take place safely off-camera. This lack of curiosity is inexcusable, both for its political implications and for the film's claim to artistic seriousness.

But despite Link's foursquare determination to cling to a classic story, the raw material is so compelling that one can forgive it a few transgressions. There are enough hints of suggestive material that the attentive audience member can do their own homework; after a while, you start wondering what would happen if Regina decided to go native, or what it takes for a bourgeois homebody like Jettel to learn to love the Kenyan land, or why Owuor must finally abandon the family to whom he's been such a sheepdog. And as you see the stuff to which boring old Caroline Link is blind, you wind up shooting your own movie in your head and start to enjoy yourself. In fact, the speeding bullet of the narrative facilitates this, giving us tantalizing fragments that perversely serve to defeat its own forward motion and feed our daydreams as to what could have gone down outside the Redlich household. One shouldn't--as the foolhardy Academy recently did--mistake *Nowhere in Africa* for a real movie. It's a limited film without a single interesting shot, but it's also one with great fringe benefits should you find yourself watching it.
---Travis Hoover

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A Shallow Snob Transformed by Exile to Africa

By **STEPHEN HOLDEN**

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"Nowhere in Africa," the leisurely warmhearted chronicle of an upper-class Jewish family that flees Nazi Germany to start life over in Kenya, gives you the agreeable sensation of riding a slow train on an unsettled afternoon through a landscape of the past.

The story of Walter and Jettel Redlich (Merab Ninidze and Juliane Köhler), a successful lawyer and his beautiful, elegant wife whose lives are transformed once they relocate to Africa with their young daughter, Regina (Lea Kurka), is too rambling to cohere as a historical epic, and it lacks the romantic heft of a film like "Out of Africa." But despite a shaky narrative focus and dramatic reticence, its journey is consistently absorbing. As its events pass before your eyes, the movie suggests an episodic diorama whose attractive, complicated characters are held discreetly at arm's length.

Adapted by Caroline Link (who directed and wrote the screenplay) from Stefanie Zweig's autobiographical novel, the film has been nominated for an Oscar this year as best foreign language movie. (Ms. Link's film "Beyond Silence" competed in the same category in 1997.) It also recently won five Lolas, the German equivalent of the Oscar, including best picture and director.

The Redlichs' odyssey, which involves jarring cultural and economic shocks, domestic strife and the pain of exile, is painted as an almost warm and fuzzy series of learning experiences. Although the problems faced by the exiled family include a disastrous drought and an invasion of locusts (thrown in late in the movie as a dramatic afterthought), the sense of hardship and struggle conveyed by the film remains muted.

"Nowhere in Africa" is narrated by Regina (Karoline Eckertz plays her as a teenager) but focuses on Jettel, a vain, spoiled snob who eventually emerges as a self-reliant citizen of the world. By the end of the film, she has developed a deep attachment to her new land and extols the value of cultural differences. Ms. Köhler's delicate performance captures Jettel's vanity and shallowness without rubbing your face in them, and her metamorphosis into a more solidly grounded woman is subtle but convincing. Because the events are filtered through a young person's memory, the messier adult passions are tinged with a nostalgic glow.

The native Kenyans, especially the saintly Owuor (Sidede Onyulo), who becomes the loyal family cook, fit a little too snugly into a stock National Geographic stereotype of gentle, noble tribespeople living harmoniously with nature and viewing the European

arrivals with an affectionate amusement. Kenya was a British colony until 1963, but the movie conveys not the tiniest hint of resistance to European colonialism.

At the start of the film, in 1938, Walter is already living in Kenya, where he manages the farm of a gruff, short-tempered British colonial. When Walter summons his wife and daughter to leave their luxurious life in Breslau, they assume their visit will be a short one and that the Nazis will soon be ousted from power.

Walter instructs his wife to bring a refrigerator, but she fritters away the money on a fancy evening dress. Her frivolity precipitates the first of many domestic clashes that seriously strain the Redlichs' marriage. Jettel initially hates her new life and treats the natives like servants. She embarrasses Owuor by asking him to carry water, a task only the women in his tribe perform. She even looks down on her husband, now that he's a humble farmer no longer practicing law.

Regina eagerly embraces her new circumstances and befriends the native children her own age and learns their language, and the scenes of the girl frolicking with her African peers evoke an idyllic cultural merger.

Although the news arriving from Germany is dire (Jettel's surviving family members are deported), the movie doesn't dwell on the Holocaust. Once the war breaks out, the Redlichs are rounded up by the British and interned with other expatriate Germans in Nairobi, with the men separated from the women. Just when the future is looking the bleakest, Jettel has a convenient fling with a German-speaking British officer who arranges for Walter to manage another farm. But the incident, and Walter's lurking sexual jealousy, are treated cursorily.

Even in Africa, anti-Semitism is palpable. At school, Regina is one of a handful of Jewish children instructed to leave their desks and stand at the side of the classroom while the other students say the Lord's Prayer. The film follows the Redlichs until the end of the war, by which time the couple's attitudes about Germany have reversed. Walter, offered a judicial post in Hesse, is eager to return, while Jettel has no desire to go back.

"Nowhere in Africa," which opens today in New York, is a handsome film that lends both the landscape and the colonial life the elegance of a coffee-table picture book. Niki Reiser's African-flavored symphonic music (similar in style to Hans Zimmer's film scores) underlines the visual sweep. This is a movie that basks in the illusion that the past was so much prettier than the present.

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