



# Regina Cornelsen Francois: My life - so far



I consciously grew up in the generally very exciting, enlightened and turbulent sixties in post-war Germany. That was a period of international awakening for my country. I was sucked up in my contemporaries' bending over backwards against prejudices and the adoring of all cultures and all races.

On one hand America was idolized by us teenagers, because we perceived America to have progressive attitudes in most walks of life. On the other hand we harshly criticized America on the humanitarian level, and actually felt superior to the Americans as a people.

We viewed American women as skinny movie-star moms wearing high heels and petticoats in the kitchen, as shady saloon girls in the Wild West or shallow Southern Bells with slaves fanning them all day. We viewed American men as bloodthirsty Indian-hunting army types, as filthy, glorified cowboys with one or two heroes amongst them, as a bunch of sleazy fat-bellied Ku Klux Klan's men stringing up all negroes or cool rock stars, that made us avoid the German language when it came to music.

Where were we educated in that direction? The movies and TV series!

On one hand the Germans were idolized by the American teenagers, because they admired our background in history, castles, the sagas, the arts, the beer and the wine. On the other hand their criticism on the Germans also was on the humanitarian level, and thus they felt superior to us. They viewed German women as klutzy Fraulein Helgas, as curvy Gretchens serving the beer in the gardens or simple, old-fashioned housewives. They viewed German men as beer drinking noisy beer-tent-musicians or stiff-lipped Gestapos and Nazis who gassed all the Jews.

Where were they educated in that direction? The movies and TV series!

What did we know about American negroes then, other than they were poor, good old simple minded slaves, mostly mistreated by their owners.

So during those years with all that confusion, I had the romantic notion to really find the right and wrong.

In 1949 I was born in Coburg in the northeastern corner of Bavaria. Coming up I remember some old ladies telling the little kids when they were bad: "The black man is coming to get you!" I had no idea what that could mean. When I saw the artistic Coburg coat of arms with the unmistakable negro-profile of St. Morris, I really liked the looks of him, and was not too scared to be a little bad, for I secretly wished that "black man" to come and get me. Still, the vision of "black man" expressed some kind of danger!

There were the most interesting stories in the children's books, like in the "Struwwelpeter" that all kids knew, the story about the black boy and the card-game "Schwarzer Peter" (Black Pete): When you got stuck with him, you lost the game. Even though he was not bad, just lonely, alone - black and you were laughed about getting stuck with him!

Then there was a black man in the train - a real big black man, my first black contact! Panic struck me when I first saw him. His eye contact with me was like a sword through my heart. My curiosity dictated my undeniable need and courage to follow him to his compartment. I had to see him from close-up, touch him, smell him, and sink into the until then unknown feeling of total, most beautiful mysterious revelation.

After we moved to Bamberg, there were the collections in the Catholic church, called “Bread for the World” for the hungry children of Africa. I can never forget the pictures of them on the collection-cans, reaching out for us and our contributions.

When I was about ten years old there was the movie “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” where all the negroes were good, but nothing but slaves and servants.

Also in 1959 I met at the speed-roller-skating championship in Bamberg the Italian world-champion Sergio Rossi and we exchanged talismans. He gave me his luck-bringing little African black baby-doll! I won that speed-skating championship and still have the talisman.

When the American Army went to maneuvers, passing through our street with their huge tanks and jeeps with air-shaking noise, I saw the black soldiers throwing candies and coins to their audience, i.e. us children. Every once in a while I thought I recognized the black man from the train. So I began to believe that there is a reason, why I was so possessed with the black race.

Having moved to Nuremberg, I started to read and collect stories from many nuns who went to work in African villages. I saved the old “Schwarzer Peter” card in my collection box. I drew black children roller-skating, emblazoned all my school folders with negro-drawings, decorated my room with maps of Africa and wrote down all the capitals, tribe names and languages. My parents supported me in many ways.

One day my Dad brought me a magazine that told the story of Dr. Albert Schweitzer. His picture got its place in my sacred collection box. We all know that he was a man of infinite greatness, who dedicated his entire life to the service of humanity. He was also a man of abundant talents, being a musician, theologian, philosopher and a medical missionary, practicing the true ethics - the ethic of reverence for life, meaning that all life is sacred, including that which from the human point of view seems lower in scale.

Reading all I could by him and about him convinced me to my destiny. So I did a lot of writing to various addresses in search of him until a Dr. Rudolf Stern came from Africa to visit Germany. Actually he visited me at my parents’ house. He advised me to become a midwife and then join them in Lambarene.

When I was about eleven years old my Mom took in a “mixed” German boy Willie about the same age. His single Mom was working in a factory all day, so he had nobody. Willie was my second black contact.

My Mom went everywhere with both of us, no matter how critical she was looked at by just about everybody, in the neighborhood, in the stores, on Dutzendteich pond, in the Stadionbad pool, on the skating ring etc. I was very happy with my new “brother” and Mom overcame the cultural limitations with pride.

A class trip for a few days to the youth-hostel at Burg Feuerstein brought the until then greatest adventure into my life: A whole class of African students were there - a real African contact! My friends from Labenwolf High School who all were aware of my “African Tick” climbed onto the roof with me. From there we could observe the Africans through the windows, but I had to separate myself and actually enter the African room. In a dream coming true I played table tennis with the Africans and got a couple of telephone numbers. I told all of them that they would be more than welcome in my parents’ house whenever they would come to Nuremberg.

One day one of them took me up on my invitation. My parents played along with it, but had to pay for their hospitality with critically nagging neighbors and the rumor that I was not quite normal.

That was about the time that Germany’s economy went up so fast that they had to “import” workers from foreign countries. All of a sudden, the teachings about never to prejudice any person of other race or culture that we had received seemed to fade in respect to young girls. Now the parents were ashamed when their daughters associated with foreigners. The more adventurous young females were looked down on in an uncomfortable way. Now I understand our parents’ concerns, but then I surely did not.

Those were the days when my anti-social anger started to really prosper. I got absorbed in Buddha’s writings, in which he emphasizes the difference between morals and ethics. I could not believe how lucky I was to have discovered his writings that were already 2600 years old. He also describes that one does not have to be “normal”, because “normal” means nothing else but just “being like the norm”, like the majority. I decided to live as I think is O.K., not what the masses think, not to worry about why people judged me in their way, following the motto: “Und ist der Ruf erst ruiniert, dann lebt man völlig ungeniert” (With reputation on the fall, I live without any shame at all).

After seeing the movie “Lilies in the field” with Sidney Poitier, I imagined myself playing the role of his fiancée. Of course his picture was added to my sacred box. Before then, I flunked my year at Labenwolf and transferred to the Sigena High School for the last year. My best friend there was also an adventurous girl, with the same name as mine, Regina.

After graduation my plan was to become a midwife to go to Dr. Albert Schweitzer and Dr. Rudolf Stern. However, I was one year too young to go to midwifery school, so I had to figure out what to do in the meantime.

My Mom supported my lust for adventure: She found a newspaper ad from California, where a German man, who was married to a real American Indian woman with two little children, was looking for a German household-year-girl - and there I went. Back then that was quite a venture. Nobody I knew had ever flown in an airplane before or could afford more than a five minute phone call to USA more often than about twice a year.

Mom had no idea that my plan was not only to be the nice little babysitter and cook. I was so certain that my calling was to change the world in respect to racism - and this was my opportunity! Remember, those were the days of Angela Davis, Eldridge Cleaver and Dr. Martin Luther King.

California! There I was and I loved it. However, there were no blacks anywhere close to where my host family lived. As soon as I read about those frequent riots in the paper, I made connections with the blacks who were involved. I got on the bike after my duty-hours to find my way to where I thought I belonged. It did not take long for me to find out that the more sophisticated group of young blacks wanted absolutely nothing to do with me. In fact, they called me nasty names such as "white bitch" or "trashy white girl". It hurt so bad!

It was at the simpler class of blacks where I was welcome. I even felt a special kind of love from all the moms - it felt so good! Now I knew what stack of cards I did fit into. I loved the music they were listening to, all black of course. The only white singer that I fell in love with was Janis Joplin. I listened to her song about "Bobbie McGee" over and over.

When I came back home to Germany, I was ready for the next step: Midwifery school to move on to my calling, Africa. In the meantime, my Sigena friend Regina had gotten married. I told her how adventurous the USA can be for us. Before long, Regina had convinced her new husband to take a job-offer in Chicago.

Life Magazine 1968: "The cry that will be heard" What a picture! I felt it, I had to draw it with tears in my eyes, right along with those on the picture and with an older face, just knowing that it will take a while before it will be heard. So the picture from Life and my own interpretation went into my secret collection-box along with the "Schwarze Peter" card and Sergio Rossi's little African talisman.

I went to midwifery school in Stuttgart. All students had to introduce themselves and talk about their background and their plans. I told them about my calling to Africa. The answer was: “Oh, she likes negroes.” Again, after crying into my pillow, I remembered: “Und ist der Ruf erst ruiniert ...” Since I had no accomplice there, I did my own research about negroes. What I found were the get-togethers of students from upper African families and the black NCO-clubs where there was so much fun in music and dancing!

Little did I know that my “black associations” brought real negative side-effects, such as a nurse in my school who was caught stealing morphine. She claimed to have done so because of my association with negroes. I had no idea how her unjust accusations could ruin my life’s dreams in the long run. I knew that I had done no wrong other than abusing the “morals”. Still I enjoyed the school and all the away-from-home black and white adventures. It did not bother me that of all the supervisors and nurses only one really seemed to like me: Sister Waltraud who was most eager to hear all my stories.

After two years of hard but fun work and training, the job-search went on for all my classmates. I did not look around because I knew that I was going to the missionary work in my Africa. However, two unexpected things happened:

- 1) I was interviewed for the missionary assignment and was informed that the hospital advised them not to accept my services because of my immoral personality, along with that morphine issue. That was the day that I thought I should just perish away from this world. I was not worth living. Still I got a position at the hospital of the university in Heidelberg but soon found out that they were warned about my “abnormal” personality.
- 2) Shortly after starting there, I developed a serious case of hepatitis, due to having delivered a hepatitis baby in the hall without any glove protection. So it started out badly, went on badly, and I stuffed a little “weed” into my American cigarettes, that the old midwives loved to take, even though they hated me: Got caught, got fired.

In the meantime I had made friends with a young Jamaican lady, a dancer. We took a flat together and I started designing and sewing hats that were great style with the black G.I.s back then: Lots of work, little money. I was happy somehow, seeing the glass of water half full, not half empty.

After a few months I decided to start a new life around my parents. I moved back to Nuremberg and got a temporary test position in the hospital, after they inquired about me at my last position, of course. By then my Sigena-friend Regina had moved to Chicago with her husband.

Everything seemed nice and lovely until one day I decided to walk from home to my nightshift for exercise. That very evening in 1971, right in the front of the “Soul Corner” club, I met Wilbert. We liked each other right away and fell in love. We met at “Soul Corner” regularly and had great times with the black G.I.s and their German girlfriends, dancing to that black music, eating pig-feet and drinking Whiskey. Wilbert and I dated almost every day, the hospital colleagues saw us and I got fired again.

I was lucky enough to land a position at the then very new hospital in Fürth. There I lied, informing my supervisor before signing the papers that I was engaged to a negro. Lucky me: The rather old lady found it most interesting, courageous and great. Finally I felt like a respected hospital midwife who loved every moment of her job and gave the utmost of herself to it. I bought myself a cute Karmann Ghia roadster and enjoyed life all over. I had told my parents about my boyfriend but we silently decided never to talk about him.

Three months went by with all the happiness and great love, but shortly before Christmas Wilbert told me that his time in Germany was over right after the holidays. My dear friend Sister Waltraud from Stuttgart invited us to come and spend the holidays at her house. What a real friend she was.

When Wilbert left, I was very sad, assuming that it all must have been nothing but a temporary affair from his point of view. I just worked away, not talking about my heartache to anyone. I dug out Janis Joplin’s “Bobby McGee” again, listened and cried.

A few weeks later all of a sudden I got a letter from Wilbert with enough money to buy an airline ticket. He wanted me to come visit him in his home, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, so he could introduce me to his parents! I knew too well that I could not tell my parents I was going to see my black boyfriend, so I said that I was going to visit Regina in Chicago and booked my flight. Arriving in New Orleans on January 11<sup>th</sup>, 1972, we travelers found out that there was no flight going to Baton Rouge because a couple of hours before bloody riots in the black community had broken out. With \$25 in my pocket and only having Wilbert’s address with me, I had no choice but getting there. When I finally made it, I met his parents and the great number of siblings, nieces and nephews - but not Wilbert! He had broken the curfew regulations in order to find me and did not return.

Those were difficult days not knowing if he was amongst the dead. Finally his name was in the papers, mentioned as one of the riot prisoners. When his Dad finally managed to get him released, we met many of his relatives in Baton Rouge as well as New Orleans. I was accepted with open arms, lots of food and drinks and most fun-conversations and laughs.

I went back to Germany without having made great plans with Wilbert. I was too shy to ask: “What’s next?” Again, I did not hear from him for a while, until his letter came informing me that he will come to me with a one-way-ticket! I had to tell my parents that I must get my own apartment now and also why. At that point they asked me what he is doing for a living and I had to honestly confess that I had no idea and I did not care either.

It did not take me long to find a pretty, brand new and furnished apartment right between Nuremberg and Fürth. The owner was very happy to have a well respected midwife from the hospital with a good salary to rent his place for the \$300 that it was advertised for. I believed that it would be wise to tell him about my companion’s nationality and race. He replied: “Oh, that’s fine with me. As I said: \$500 for the rent.”

After Wilbert’s arrival, my life at the hospital stayed great as well as my single visits with my parents, when we never mentioned him, but he could not get any job, so we started making those leather hats again, and had a lot of fun distributing them at the barracks, the “Soul Corner” in Nuremberg and “Rampo’s Room” in Fürth.

After finding out that his job-search was totally useless, we decided to get married and move to his home. There he expected to get a job right away with all the respect due to him as a Vietnam veteran. We got married in July 1972 and had only two guests: Sister Waltraud and Erich Sasonow from “Rampo’s Room”. My parents had left town for that day, hoping that I would change my mind. Shortly after the event they invited us to meet their son-in-law. Pappi wanted to go have a beer with him, right next to the main railway station, but was not served, because he was with the black man.

Three months later I was pregnant and we moved to Louisiana. Adventure lust was still burning in my heart thinking that I could change the world somehow. It was a rough start: Two more people in the small and overpopulated house of Wilbert’s parents in that poor neighborhood, even though the inside was super-clean and pleasant. My mother-in-law was always cooking, my father-in-law working and hunting and Wilbert was out daily looking for a job. Meanwhile I was stuck in the house, because walking there was a poor choice. A job for my husband only materialized a couple of weeks before the birth of our first child. It was as a security officer at Southern University. We managed to buy a little old beaten-up car and rented a small room at an old lady’s house in a pitiful neighborhood, sharing the bathroom with her.

After a couple of weeks my labor pain started. When it was five minutes apart we went on to the state hospital where all the welfare recipients have to go. They were all black. I was treated as if I was just picked up from the street. Even telling the nurses that I was a German midwife



did make no difference. Knowing that my baby should be born within the next hour or two, I was shocked when I was examined in the hallway and sent home.

As soon as we came back to our little room, the press labor started and Wilbert delivered our daughter Carmen. We tied the navel cord with shoe-strings and cut it with kitchen scissors.

Finally Wilbert found a job at a chemical plant, with much better pay and insurance, so I allowed myself to get pregnant again. We knew that he will get help to buy a house without down-payment because of his military background. Having learned about the racial situation, I went looking alone with my white self in order to be able to buy anywhere - not only in a poor black neighborhood. So we purchased a pretty house in a white neighborhood. After moving in, every day we found raw eggs thrown onto our garage door and dead fish into our front yard. Soon there were "for sale" signs at all our neighbors' houses. Our new black neighbors and we turned out to be a fun-loving, helping each other community.

The birth of our son Joachim Abdul was at a good hospital, done very similar to what I expected under normal circumstances.

When the children were one and two years old, I decided to find a job, so I could afford to travel to Germany. To my big disappointment my midwife degree was not accepted and I had to work as a nursing assistant. The only black workers at the office were the cleanup people who were not invited to the office parties - just like me.

I decided to turn my back to medical jobs and go to the all black Southern University to become an architect. I won a scholarship and had great five years studying every day and night and graduated with "magna cum laude". But my imagination about now being somebody was just that: imagination. All the architects in Baton Rouge were white. Coming with my Southern University papers I was treated almost like a prostitute looking for a job. I did get a drafting position for \$7 / hour only after 18 interviews. Wilbert was making pretty good money and every year I got almost \$1 / hour more.

When the children were about ten years old, we bought a beautiful big house with a guest house on the property, a swimming pool, a workshop, a little pond, horse stables and parking spaces for several cars. Little did we know that the countryside was heavily inhabited by many anti-black whites. We had done no research to find out that the children's school still had separated only black and only white graduation events, celebrations and parties. How very difficult it was for our children to realize their now "only black" position! I then felt such guilt to have forced my children into this position which was my choice, not theirs.

After having settled in pretty good, the overall economy took a dive and Wilbert lost his job. Certainly we could not pay the house note with my salary and his little unemployment check, so we took in a doctor's Tennessee walker horses for rent, took care of them and cleaned the stables, all for extra dollars. We built a rather big chicken house with old materials that we found in the stables, raised 50 chickens, and then sold their eggs, for extra cents. I sat up many nights at my drawing table, doing additions in house designs and some drafting for privately working engineers. We grew our vegetable garden and traded some of it for other foods with neighbors. After Wilbert's unemployment ran out, he found a job at a hotel, doing just about everything, for a little more than minimum wage.

It was about that time in 1987, when sitting on the swing in front of our little pond, I wrote a poem "Louisiana Song", including thoughts of black historians which I learned about at Southern University and knowing that "the cry that will be heard" had not materialized yet.

My black university inferiority feeling sent me to the white Louisiana State University, simply to test myself. I enrolled into the graduate program in night classes, and made a 4.0 average which helped me a lot in my self-respect. I was then offered a position at the men's prison in St. Gabriel to teach mechanical drafting. So I did, but only in some evening classes. I really enjoyed the goodness of it as well as the little fears that came along with it and the dark side of town things I learned there, e.g.: When one prisoner talked to another in a stupid way, the other said: "You're full of shit." Another one with a little more class would say: "You're full of it". Well, so I saw the possible connection of the "it" and the "sh-it".

I was able to land a job at a large petrochemical engineering firm where I was initiated to "Toastmaster International" and stayed the association's president for several years. Of course my speeches addressing racial issues were not liked so much. Finally Wilbert also was hired by a petrochemical firm in his learned trade as a mechanical electrician, making a decent salary.

By that time our children lived their lives and we lived ours. I felt no longer guilty for my children's situation knowing that it all will bring rich fruits, just like for myself, even if it takes a while to recognize it as such. I had grown thanks to all of it and my children had the same opportunity. So when my family went along the Gulf Coast for a weekend, it did not bother me anymore that I had to be the one to register in order to get a decent room with working A/C. At that time I went to a school for massage therapy to work with something that I enjoy: living bodies.

My high school friend Regina's new husband was a developer. He was in the process of building a place in South Miami Beach. I went to meet with Regina there and over a bottle of Cham-

pagne I signed a pre-construction contract for a condo right at the beach. So it happened: I moved to Miami Beach, telling Wilbert to join me as soon as he wants to.

My massage education was the best thing I could have done, because I made good money massaging the surfers and passing through celebrities. Soon, while teaching massage at a well established school, I was “discovered” by Christy Turlington and worked for her out of my house being flown to her to New York several times and opening the “Shore Club” spa. It was a great life!

After having reaped respect for my education and whatever else in namely places as the “Shore Club” and elsewhere, I opened my own business and got rid of all my hurting. I was “full of it” and “got rid of it”. By then, I had gone to school for colonic irrigation and learned about the reflex points from the colon to the brain, remembering the prisoners’ sayings which were so true.

I have my business now for several years. I love my job, love my clients, love what I learn from them and love my life. So now I literally work against the cause, not the symptom.

*Edited by Gerhard Jochem*

In his contribution to our bilingual book *transit nürnberg #4: USA!* titled *Two people who changed their world: The story of an exceptional German-American relationship* Dr. Harald T. Leder (LSU, Baton Rouge) writes more about Regina and Wilbert Francois putting their story in the historical perspective of racism and race relations in Germany and the USA.

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