

Janet Hermans (1936 –2014)

By Sandy Grant



Janet Hermans was a graduate of Mount Holyoke College and while at Mount Holyoke, she did a semester at Oxford University. Later in life, she also earned a master's degree in Applied Anthropology from American University. Janet Hermans, as many will know, died in California on 18 September 2014. She had left Botswana earlier in the month in order to be a family stand-in. She had a sudden pain, was whipped into hospital, diagnosed with extensive cancer and within days, was gone. The shock waves reverberated and in no time the brilliantly created 'We Love Janet' website with its subtitle, the story of an inspiration, was inundated with comment from around the world. If there are others who still wish to add a comment, they may find <http://www.janet.hermans.net/> to be a revelation.

It is a remarkable outpouring of love, admiration, gratitude, and memory recall from those of us who shared some part of her life, her personal interests and concerns, family first of course, then music, choral singing, books with relevance to this country and the San. Evidently she touched so many people in so many different ways. But there she was, a newly married, very beautiful wife, ex- Woodrow Wilson High School in Washington DC, and afterwards university, ensconced in, of all places, the Imperial Reserve, Mahikeng from where the British were still administering the Bechuanaland Protectorate. Then the move to the new Gaborone and the start of new friendships, with not least, the Stephens, Hardies, Hinceys, the Murray-Hudsons, the Landell-Mills, the Egners and the Winstanleys. And dare I suggest, with the new Vice President and later with another.

Then, there was an emerging new interest –The Botswana Society, with its massive symposia, its journal (*Botswana Notes and Records*), new friendships, with Alec Campbell and the beginning of a long lasting working partnership with Doreen Nteta and her in and out involvement with the Society over such a long period. And my own special appreciation for her support when in 2006/2007 the Society was left hanging on by its finger tips, and she stuck with Derek Jones and myself in helping the Society to survive for another day. And then the establishment of Maitisong opened another door for her –she participated gleefully in David Slater's 2006 production of the Mikado. And, I believe, in several others. Music meant much to her –hence the baby grand piano in her Kgale home –but her taste was extraordinarily broad ranging from Chopin to Bob Marley and even, and excitingly, to the *segaba* and *setinkane* which she learnt to play at a Ramatea music workshop.

Then there was her life long involvement with the San which was tweaked by a week long trip from Mahikeng into the Kgalagadi with the legendary George Silbebauer –an idea, which, she explained was encouraged by the then Resident Commissioner, Peter Fawcus – something which tells

us much about both him and her. For the next forty/fifty years, she built on what she had then seen and learnt and became a friend, a well-informed supporter and constant advocate of San rights, unattracted and unimpressed by grandstanding. Shelagh Willet found the right word for it when she referred to Janet's modesty. Others referred to her generosity, her sense of humour, her sheer love of life, and her unaffected charm. But with Janet gone, the San have lost a most wonderful and understanding friend.

But the same goes for that extensive community, here and abroad, which has sought to educate us about people who are different, and to provide them with sensible help, the Marshal family, Megan Biesele, Bob Hitchcock, Sidsel Saugestad, Willemien le Roux, Maitseo Bolaane, Shelagh Willet and others. For the San, the 50 or so years since Janet first met them with Silberbauer have been years of turbulence, hurt, injustice and protracted court cases. Middle-aged now but still beautiful, she stuck around, holding on to her views but taking up a mid-way position, which enabled her to talk to both protagonists. She was that rare individual, who is so obviously decent and unchallenging that differences of view between two sharply opposing views are reduced.

Looking back, we see Janet with the new Botswana, going through its early years, its first struggles, problems, achievements and mistakes. Initially an observer –family needs being her first concern and then, when opportunity allowed, a participant and a Janet who moved with ease, adjusted as this country shifted from one era to another –finding fresh interests, friends, reveling in the new whilst relishing the old. A divorce –hurtful for everyone –a new, enlarged life, and the holding on to earlier relationships and the development of new ones. A grandmother now, older, of course, but still stunning, a cherished home in Kgale View with Ann and Mattias as immediate neighbours with Sieglinde and Gus not so far away. And then the sudden, horribly unexpected end in far away California which leaves so many of us puzzled as to how it could have happened, an ache, a huge regret but ultimately an appreciation for everything that she was and did. A lovely, decent lady who we have been so fortunate to have known.

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