

Article about Erwin Franzen in the "Tageblatt" newspaper in Luxembourg

Alan and Brigitte Sillitoe

August 20, 2019



This is an article about Erwin Franzen in the Tageblatt, one of Luxembourg's main daily newspapers.

A reporter from the newspaper interviewed him for several hours, but had to condense the content to fit the allocated space.

Erwin travelled extensively throughout the world both before and after joining the movement, and worked for some time for the Middle East Times.

[Attached is a scan](#) of the original article in German with some pictures and [a rough English translation](#) of the text with some helpful annotations added by Erwin.

Moonies, Mujahideen and the CIA: The incredible life of the Luxembourger Erwin Franzen

There are people who lead a normal life: work, family, leisure. And then there's Erwin Franzen. The Escher looks back at 68 years on a life story, which is actually almost unbelievable. Mass weddings, the Apocalypse, war reports and CIA information are just a few of the things of which the pensioner can tell.

By Laura Tomassini

The Café Casablanca in Esch, just before 2 pm: The man sitting on the terrace looks inconspicuous. He is waiting to answer the questions of a young journalist. He has his recording device with him, for his own examination of the narrative and out of habit - for years he sat on the reporter chair. Today the roles are reversed. Interviewee: Erwin Franzen. In focus: his life. The portrait is not about the ordinary story of an Escher, because Erwin's reports sound like he took them from an adventure novel. The pensioner plans to eventually publish a book.

The boy from the "Hiehl" (an area in Esch town close to the French border, where most residents worked in the iron mines in earlier days) in the former Italian quarter in the house with the number 33. "Right next to the wash fountain, the last house (on that side of the street) next to the stairs up to the train tracks," says Erwin. (There are no rails anymore today but up to 30-40 years ago many trains laden with iron ore from the mines used to pass right behind our house). He did not know a modern toilet (in his early years) as he and his five younger siblings, like many Escher families in the early '50s (we did not have modern toilets until sometime in the early 1960s), used a hole in the inner courtyard (actually it was an outhouse with a squat toilet - you squatted over the hole). The son of a strict Catholic mother and an atheist who left room for the faith of his wife for the benefit of his children, Erwin was fascinated early on by religion and spirituality. But when he was in his teens he struggled with questions about Jesus and this thing about the Trinity. The young Escher began to look for answers outside of Christianity.

In 1972, Erwin came into contact with Islam for the first time. Through his short-term work at Luxair, he received a free air ticket. He wanted to travel as far away from Luxembourg as possible, because Erwin could not fit into the everyday life of the Grand Duchy, nor did he seem able to find a (female) life partner here. The destination of his choice: the Middle East. The goal was the Iranian capital of Tehran, where he met Taffy (full name: Iltaf Hussein Mughal). The young Kenyan with Indian roots persuaded Erwin to accompany him on an adventurous trip to Pakistan, sharing expenses, especially for fuel. Two weeks, a blizzard and a quarantine due to lack of cholera vaccination later Erwin's wanderlust was definitively enflamed. He knew he did not want to stay in Luxembourg.

The paranoia of the 70s

"Erwin was eleven years old when the Kennedy-Khrushchev showdown took place and Kennedy was shot dead a year later. Thus, a certain paranoia, which then prevailed throughout the world, hit fertile ground in him (affected him very much -- especially the Kennedy assassination and aftermath, and the Vietnam War). He wanted to get out of the danger zone and with his jobs at the steel mill,

the bank, in the office, he never found what he really wanted. He always wanted to go out into the world, "recalls Erwin's younger brother Gilbert.

(Caption under picture of myself above the moraine of the Batura Glacier in the Karakoram Mountains, with beard and in Pakistani garb:) Early on Erwin felt that he did not fit into the Luxembourg society and developed a strong urge to travel to distant countries.

Just nine months after his first trip, the then 21-year-old traveled east again, this time by car from Luxembourg via England to Saudi Arabia. The plan was to accompany Taffy and his family as a backup driver to the Hajj pilgrimage. Said and done. But to travel to the holy cities of Medina and Mecca, Erwin had to convert to Islam. "In the Saudi Embassy in Damascus I officially became a Muslim and got my new name Omar Hussein, " recalls the 68-year-old.

With his new identity, the Luxembourger was finally allowed to enter the Holy City. "After that month, the family did not need me as a driver anymore, so they suggested I marry a girl from Saudi Arabia (whose family they knew in Jeddah) and try to get a scholarship to study at the Islamic University in Medina." But Erwin did not have enough money for the necessary dowry, and besides he was not at all ready to settle down.

Back in Europe, a period of helplessness (*correct translation would be something like "cluelessness", but in reality it should be restlessness*) followed. Erwin stayed afloat with jobs in Luxembourg and England, but he did not really know what he wanted to do. "There was a lot of back and forth in my life and I could never settle down anywhere in those days. At the end of '74 I became very strange ", he says with a wry smile. The source of this weirdness was the novel "The Call of the Wild" by Jack London. The tales of nature and wilderness inspired the young adventurer looking for a new plan for the future: "I thought a nuclear war would break out between the US and the Soviet Union, and humanity would exterminate itself . "

He decided to start a new civilization in some corner of nowhere in the southern hemisphere: "If there was a chance to survive, then in Patagonia. That's why, first of all, as a survival test, I wanted to go to British Columbia in the west of Canada to live alone and completely in harmony with nature. "

With barely \$ 500 as a starting budget he set off in March 1975 to put his plan into action. Equipped with light luggage and a lot of determination, the young Escher went to New York to catch a train to Montreal from there. Along the streets of the Big Apple, Erwin kept encountering strange characters who preached about the end of the world and the last days of the earth - exactly his thing. He was persuaded to attend a lecture. As it turned out, they were followers of the Unification Church of the controversial Korean Sun Myung Moon. "Then I was invited to a three-day workshop in Barrytown. Since it was still a little early in the year to go north and I was not particularly well equipped for the cold, I went with them, "said Erwin.

The small, not insignificant detail of his short-term visa (*my original I-94 US stay permit was valid only one day!*) was shrugged off by the "Moonies" - they would take care of that. After several trainings Erwin was converted. The anti-Communist, Christianity-derived doctrines of Moon fascinated him. But here, too, after a short time the adventurer caught the travel bug again. "Erwin had been seeking deep religious feelings back then, and maybe found them there, at least for a while. Especially the dynamic life with other young people in the Moon movement was certainly interesting for him. But in the long run he could not be expected to follow the political line of the leader of this movement,

because through his travels he had become a cosmopolite, "says Gilbert, who over the years has always stayed in touch with his brother.

Erwin decided to leave his new friends for awhile. An almost extraordinary portion of luck was his constant companion on his way to California. With a "space blanket" against the cold, he started on the highways of North Carolina - always on guard against so-called "Smokeys", the highway police who would pick up illegal hitch-hikers like him (I actually walked many rain-soaked miles along Interstate Highway 40 across North Carolina). His first ride (it should really say longest, as it was certainly not the first) was with a man in a blue car taking Erwin through the Appalachians, across Tennessee, Arkansas, Oklahoma, all the way to New Mexico. The further journey was less smooth: failed tramping (hitch-hiking) attempts, the accident of a dubious acquaintance, the theft of all his belongings. At the latest after the sentence "I want to play with your Peter," Erwin had enough and decided to return to the Moonies. This was the start of his journalistic career. On November 7, 1976, Erwin's application to the (Unification) movement-owned daily The News World, which was to publish its first issue at the end of the same year, was accepted and his path led him back to New York. Initially responsible for national news, the young Escher was quickly transferred to the international department.

(Caption under late 1976 picture of some News World staffers including me:) Erwin (last row, 5th from left) took his first journalistic steps together with other members of the movement at the Moon newspaper The News World. (This photo should have been credited to Doug Wetzstein, as I told them).

"That was around 1979, when I went in and out of US Congress (buildings) almost every day (attending and reporting on congressional hearings, especially on the Panama Canal treaties). I was illegally in America at that time, my passport had expired over two years earlier. " Erwin's only identification: a small badge from the newspaper. US officials did not seem to notice his illegal stay in the States and Erwin made friends in the right places: "I got a lot of information from the Pentagon and the CIA. Among other things, each year I received the approximately 300-page report from the Secretary of Defense to the US Congress, from Donald Rumsfeld under President Ford, Harold Brown under Carter, and Caspar Weinberger under Reagan. "

Annual Reports of the CIA

In the following years, too, Erwin received all kinds of information for his research. One of his direct contacts was ex-Navy Captain Herbert Hetu, who under the new CIA Director Stansfield Turner opened the very first Public Affairs Bureau of the intelligence service. Due to increased investigations by the US Senate, the CIA was forced to justify its activities to the outside world. This was a lucky break for the young journalist: "I did not have a degree, nothing (never finished high school). Just read a lot and studied by myself. But in those days everything was much more open than it is today, and such information was not yet top secret. "

In 1981, Moon announced the founding of a new newspaper for the Middle East based in Cyprus. "The idea was to create a publication that was free of the political influence and bias that characterized most of the Middle East editions. Some of the journalists who worked for us later made a name for themselves with other media companies. James Lamont wrote for us in Cairo and is now editor-in-chief of the Financial Times, Giles Trendle wrote from Beirut and is now managing director of Al Jazeera English, Ben Wedeman provided us with texts from Syria and subsequently

became longtime CNN correspondent for the Middle East, " explains Thomas Cromwell, Erwin's former boss and editor of The Middle East Times.

Two years later, this became the springboard that enabled Erwin to return to the lands of his very first major adventure: "In 1983 I had written a long article about Afghanistan and my then-editor Dana Watkins had noticed my interest in the region. Other media sent journalists to that area, so he asked me if I wanted to travel from Pakistan across the mountains to Afghanistan with the Mujahideen. "

Already in August '84, Erwin and a Japanese Moonie accompanied the guerrilla group of Mujahideen leader Abdul Rasul Sayyaf into the Afghan war zone.

"Right behind the border near the town of Tari Mangal in the Kurram Valley, the troops had set up their tent camp. There we were allowed to interview Sayyaf. " What Erwin did not know at the time: The mujahideen leader, who was supported by the Saudi Arabian intelligence service, had organized the first foray into Afghanistan by the future leader of Al Qaeda Osama Bin Laden, in June of the same year.

Sayyaf's activities in the conflict with the Soviet Union provided the young reporter with opportunities to take impressive photos and write reports for the Middle East Times. "The mujahideen hid in the mountains, whence they attacked the Afghan army camps with 82-millimeter mortars, DShk machine guns, and so-called Zikuyak cannons (she misunderstood this: the 14.5-mm caliber "Zikuyak" -- Soviet-designed ZPU-1s -- were used in the mountains to fire at aircraft)." There was plenty of shooting in the area, and also during his second and third trips to Afghanistan in the years that followed, Erwin was never far from the line of fire.

In 1987, the Mujahideen led the journalist on his third trip to Afghanistan since the war began over a pass into the Kunar Valley, where a garrison of Russians was to be attacked (this is not correct -- Shigal Tarna was an Afghan Army post, which also protected some pro-regime civilian housing -- I don't know if there were Russians there) : "From our observation post you could see the Spetsnaz special forces outpost on a neighboring mountain peak through binoculars. The leader of the Hezb-e-Islami-Yunus-Khalis group with whom we were traveling conducted the attack on walkie-talkies. "

After several shots, the mujahideen hit their target - the answer was the hissing of rockets from a multiple rocket launcher directly above the heads of the group. "I took two quick pictures, then we had to run away," recalls Erwin. The Russians had opened fire on the attackers. "They shot at us from three sides, for hours until late into the night. We climbed up the cliffs, everything exploded around us, so the valley was brightly lit. "

After this dangerous experience and the mysterious disappearance of another Moon member (in Afghanistan). Erwin was done with mujahideen reports. He finally began to think about family planning. The Luxembourger first met his wife Tomoko, with whom Erwin is still happily married today, at a mass marriage in South Korea's Seoul. There, in a so-called "Blessing" on October 14, 1982, the head of the Unification Church had married 5,837 couples, including the then 31-year-old and the eight years younger Japanese.

Time for family planning

However, the couple first lived together only in Tokyo in 1988 - six years after their actual Moonie-

style wedding. The legal marriage took place in the summer of '87, of course, as always in an unusual way. The traditional Shinto ceremony took place in an ancient temple at the foot of the volcano featured in the James Bond movie "You Only Live Twice", where 007 Sean Connery also celebrated his wedding.

In June 1989, the Franzens had their first baby in Athens. In 1994 the lineage was augmented in Luxembourg by a second son, followed by child number three two years later. The shared photos of the Franzens from all over the world testify to a lot of love and cohesion. But the wild years are finally over for the five-headed troupe, as Erwin reveals: "The last four years we have lived in Rodange, and we will stay here until I can no longer climb the stairs." So it's back to the roots. Erwin has not been back to America since 1982, but he did maintain a connection to the land of unlimited opportunities even in the Grand Duchy - at least through his 24 years as a receptionist in the American cemetery. Erwin has been enjoying his pension for three years now, spending some of his time to work on his notes and to record his life for posterity. Because - let's be honest - adventure stories don't appear only in fiction; sometimes just the life story of an (almost) ordinary "Hieler boy" is enough.