

March 2017 My Father and the Zulu Sailor in Hong Kong
by Leonie Dobbins

My father, Louis Rencken, was an interpreter in the Justice Department in South Africa. He worked in the courts where Zulu was spoken ----- in the provinces of Natal and the south-eastern Transvaal.

His father made him leave school after the 8th grade to work on the farm. But my father loved reading and educated himself. After his father's death, the farm was sold and he, with my mother and their children, moved to Durban, a harbor city on the Indian Ocean. There he began to work at the magistrates courts, interpreting Zulu, English and Afrikaans.

Several years before he retired, he was promoted to Chief Inspector of Interpreters in the Zulu-speaking areas. This involved travelling the court circuit and testing the applicant interpreters and making sure the interpreters were doing their work correctly.

The Zulus used to say that if it was dark and they couldn't see my father, only hear him, they thought he was a Zulu.

Early in 1980 the Hong Kong government requested the South African Department of Justice to send an interpreter to Hong Kong. They needed a Zulu speaking interpreter to translate in the matter of the Queen versus Phillip Bafo Ndlela. He was a Zulu seaman charged with the murder of a Zulu compatriot, Sosibo, in Hong Kong on the 1st of January 1980.

Louis flew to Hong Kong in April 1980 and was met by the South African Consul-General, who introduced him to the acting Chief Interpreter of the Colony --- a Chinese man.

Before the courtcase began, Louis met the accused, Ndlela, who was so happy when Louis spoke to him in Zulu! He had not heard his mother tongue for 4 months, because his prison warders and fellow prisoners were all Chinese. After they had talked, Ndlela was concerned that he would have to pay for Louis' travel expenses. My father said no, but jokingly added that he might claim some cattle from him when he, Ndlela, returned to South Africa.

The Court Case: The accused pleaded not guilty to murder, but guilty to culpable homicide. The story was that seven Zulu seamen had gone ashore on New Year's Eve. They walked around, ate and drank beer and also bought more beer to take back to the ship.

Apparently the deceased, Sobiso, was pestering the accused, Ndlela, to buy more beer. He refused, saying he had no more money. Sosibo continued to harrass Ndlela, going so far as to punch him over Ndlela's right eye, so that he later needed stitches.

Of course all the sailors were fairly drunk by now. Ndlela mopped away the blood and hurried to his cabin, grabbed a ship's knife and stabbed Sosibo in the head and chest. Sosibo was taken to the ship's hospital and transferred to the Hong Kong hospital, where he was certified dead on arrival. The head injury caused his death.

The judge agreed that the accused had been severely provoked, and the influence of alcohol had played a role. However, the accused was found guilty of culpable homicide and sentenced to seven years imprisonment. The Counsel for Defence, Mr. Sedgwick, pleaded that any term of imprisonment to be served by the accused in a Chinese jail would be added punishment, because of the loneliness among foreigners. It was also pointed out to the judge that the accused, upon returning home, might face a demand for compensation by the deceased's relatives.

So the decision was made to appeal against the sentence. This appeal was heard two days later and the full bench, consisting of the Chief Justice and two judges, reduced the sentence to five years.

My father spoke to Ndlela after the trial. Ndlela said he regretted what he had done. He asked my father to visit his aged mother and tell her what had happened. She lived in the rural area of the Pietermaritzburg district in Natal. Upon his return to South Africa my father went to visit the mother to tell her what had happened.

Before my father left Ndlela, he begged my father to ask the warden to change his diet occasionally. He said they ate too much rice, and he really longed for corn porridge. My father said he would see what could be done,

In a court case that requires an interpreter, the interpreter is very active. The lawyer talks, the interpreter listens, interprets into the other language. Then the other party talks, and the interpreter listens and interprets back into the first language. He does not get a break, but is constantly at work. My father said that at times it was very stressful to be in court all day. But he enjoyed helping and he was very good at his work. Especially as he had left school too soon to even graduate from high school.