**EVANS ODULA ; MY EUROPEAN STORY.MY INDELIBLE MEMORIES.**

Evans , a young man from Kenya , who has been harboring the passion and interest to make a trip to Europe finally made it this year, and below is his account of events and reflection of his famous long awaited visit to Europe.

**VISA APPLICATION PROCESS**.

Visa application to Europe is not a walk in the park, it a herculean task which can leave you heartbroken with shattered dreams like it did to me in my past four attempts since five years ago. Despite having an invitation and the necessary papers, the outcome of that process is always has no predetermined outcome and you are always not sure what will come out despite having a succesful visa interview.

The process is tiresome right from making online appointments to the security checks at the embassy and the trickiest part is the visa interview which has strings of questions by the consulate staff at the counter. As you struggle to answer questions directed to you, you will also be treated to similar struggles by others on the counters next to you and perhaps the saddest scenes are of the people you see coming out with their heads down perhaps being sent to gather extra documents or have been denied the visa .But finally for me, this time round , I was lucky. My visa application was successful and it was delivered to me by the security firm in Mbita our nearest town. And it was so funny as I had to pray four times before opening the parcel for fear of a negative outcome, but has fate would have it ,My long awaited trip to Europe was rife and ripe, it was my big day under the sun. The long awaited celebration began.

**PREPARING TO LEAVE**

Days and night counted, and finally it was my time to leave, I had a mixed feeling of happiness of finally realizing my dream, but also of sadness of leaving my people and homeland. I had to shade tears when I finally went to kiss my young boy who was a sleep, but I realized I had to go –no otherwise. I went to church that morning of Sunday as usual for my final plea to the almighty God for Journey mercies and left with the country buses to Nairobi, a journey which takes a whole night .We arrived in the morning and later that evening I left for Paris International airport from our Airport in Kenya.

**AIRPORT SECURTY CHECKS**

The security checks are thorough, I felt like terrorist myself, but I understand that they have to secure those who are boarding planes due to the rise in terrorism globally. But for someone who was experiencing it for the first time, it was tiresome .

**BOARDING A FLIGHT**

I was stepping into a plane for the first time in my life after getting a card I was told is called a boarding pass, I saw the air hostess, inside of the plane, somehow fear engulfed me , but the dream to go overseas kept me smiling. It was somehow hard for me to get my seat on the plane, but the air hostesses were so kind and they guided me .From how I asked questions and from my naïve look and silly questions, they could tell that this truly a person from deep down in the remotest part of the world in the middle of nowhere going abroad for the first time.

It was time to leave the Kenyan soil, the announcements were made in deferent languages, I was keen on the English part .We were told to tighten our belts as the plane was taking off .When it was finally off, it is a bit of a funny feeling, but courage made me withstand it and we were on our way to Paris. I enjoyed the delicacies on the plane, though there were no famous Kenyan foods, but I knew the hard part of forgoing our food had just started and I was already psychologically prepared. I want to confess on disturbing my kind neighbor on the plane for many things I needed to know, but this young man from Turkey was so kind always smiling back at me before responding to my questions with kindness and tenderness perhaps understanding my naivety.

**CHANGING OF FLIGHTS.**

After a long flight, we arrived at the Paris Airport, a big place it is .Let me not forget to say that landing is also making one to have a weird feeling a mixture of fear and excitement also engulfed me , but I was happy to step on the French soil for the first time, a place I had just read about on the world map and history books. The airport is so huge with many people rushing to catch flights as well as people sitting waiting for their flights. I realized how tricky it is to know where the terminals for your flights are due to the size of the place. But I saw how the TV screens; the announcements which are made at every interval were very useful to me. I also noticed how kind and useful the airport security is to the naïve travelers like me. I can’t forget to mention the traffic at the airport of very big planes something which I didn’t expect.

**MEETING MY FRIENDS IN AMSTERDAM**

After France I was boarding plane to Netherlands Amsterdam, to meet Ria and Ina , my long time friends and supporters. I was particularly keen to meet Ina having been friends for long and not being able to meet in person. When I arrived, I didn’t know how to get to the place where we were supposed to meet, I asked and asked, but I couldn’t make it. My phone also went off, I couldn’t charge it , I also didn’t know how to make use of the airport wifi.I was in total darkness ,but luckily enough, I had my name being announced to report at the information center .It is at this point where I was directed on the place I was to meet my friends. They were shocked to see me, perhaps they had given up on meeting me, since time had passed, but finally we met, hugged, talked and took some drinks. It was nice feeling meeting Ina who has supported our projects with kids and even Ria in Holland .Being that Ria has been to Kenya a few time to teach focusing and also she has been supporting youths to proceed with their education in Kenya. When it was finally time to depart, we hugged again, took photos and also received some pocket money from them and I was happy to have met them.

**LIFE IN BERLIN-GERMANY**

I arrived in Berlin and I was met by my friend Kipper , Kipper runs SONNED, a German organization who is promoting permaculture activities in Kenya and other countries. After meeting Kipper , we walked and he told me that we had to catch a train to where they live. It was also my first time on atrain as well. After a short while, we arrived at the train station which is I realize is equally busy just as the airport .I saw people rushing to catch trains, I saw the elevator I saw a lot of new things, it dawned on me that I had to finally shackle of the naivety and live up to the new life and new things that the European culture was offering. The trains were operating on a strict time not fit for someone from Africa where time is not well managed. I saw how the infrastructure in Europe was amazing, right from the aerial view in France and my visit to Holland and finally in Germany. I started to take notes, I started to compare and contrast, I plunged into a reflection about what I was seeing, and what is happening back home. It was a deep and silent soliloquy and monologue. What struck me most was the level of organization of the public transport system as compared to our chaotic bus terminus full of motorbikes, dust, and buses. I learnt why we are called developing countries, truly we are still developing. Kipper was talking to me, but a times I was finding myself lost in the deeper thoughts about the level of development I was witnessing.

**THE FOOD.**

When we first got inside a restaurant, I was asked about what I could eat, but I had no answer despite the fact that I wanted some food. I had to check with him what the food in the menu looked like. I was familiar with pitzer –the famous Italian dish. This I knew from the guests who visited me and were fondly talking about it.Kipper ordered it and I enjoyed it .It was a new beginning for me to stay longer without taking our staple foods, something which I have eaten day in day out since I was born. I arrived finally at the SONNED permaculture community, where they lived as a community, with a farm, shared a kitchen, their offices and great things relating to permaculture.I stayed in the guest room in their flat and I really enjoyed it .Despite the fact that, life in Europe lacks the rich social life we have in Africa where we are together most of the time. I somehow felt lonely and somehow missed it since I only had interactions with appointments, but kipper did his best as we were with him most of the time.

**LONG DAYS;**

Despite being there during slightly warmer days, the length of days took toll on me. It somehow affected my sleeping circle and my body to also adjust. I could wake up early in the morning and find the sun up. This made me felt like I had over slept as we normally use the sun in Africa to gauge the time.

**PERMACULTURE FESTIVAL**

While staying there I participated in the activities of **SONNED** and the festival was one of them. The festival was showcasing the deference in lifestyle in Africa especially with the fast food and consumerism characteristics. It was well attended; we had a lot of fun with the music and the food. I gave a talk about my work in Rusinga Island and I responded to many questions from my audience who felt moved with the achievements we have realized.

**PERMACULTURE TALKS**/**PRESENTATIONS.**

I gave many other talks in deferent parts of Berlin with the help of Kipper and I realized how important it is to create awareness about global warming .

**VISITING PLACES OF MY INTEREST.**

With the guidance of Kipper , we took bicycle rides to various places in Berlin, I visited the famous Berlin wall, I realized how knowledgeable my friend kipper was about the history of Germany Europe ,I really enjoyed it and also took photos.

We went to green parks where we saw remnants of communities who were still trying to protect nature and share the powerful message of conservation. Again my friend had a good knowledge of the places. One place which struck me most was a place called the a piece of land which had a good ideas and things to see about permaculture .And there is the place where I met a lady who was working on bees as well and I also encountered the stingless bees which are not as aggressive as the our bees. I was touched with the level of passion amongst communities to protect and restore and I realized that people who have interest in protecting nature are always motivated.

One lesson I also learnt was the humility, kindness and open mindedness from my friend Kipper and the people I met .We were being offered food, Kipper took care of my expenses, I didn’t have to pay for my accommodation and he was always with me showing me places or organizing something for me despite his busy schedule. He made me attend various meetings and I really enjoyed my stay there.

**HEADING TO VIENNA**

I finally took a train to Austria; it was stressful to change trains as well. My friend Bernard helped book trains to Austria. I had the chance close to the window to be able to see the countryside on my way to Austria. I was going to stop to meet Bernard Grubber to see his farm and the permaculture training center.

Due to the some delay, missed a train and this made the person who was there to meet leave before I arrived. My friend Bernard had to make calls to Kipper to check my ware bouts, it was so funny Evans was getting lost in Europe, several miles from home. I arrived late, I was now aware of the free wifi at the train stations as well and I made a call to Isabella and Clemens and they had to call Gruber who also asked his dad to come and pick me.

I stayed with Grubers family, saw his farm, his food forest, his wonderful training center he is building ,visited his other farms .What struck me most again was the level of kindness and amiable love. His parents were amazing. After my short visit there, I left again after two nights to see Hans , another friend of Bernard who is doing so well with bee keeping .Gruber s father drove me again to the train station and there I took a train to see Hans bee keeping project on my way to Vienna.

On the night before I left, I also gave a talk to Grubber s friends and neighbors about the work we are doing here in Kenya, I used a PowerPoint presentation and also a video about our work which is also available on you tube.

On the train I saw nice places, landscapes, and met nice and some open minded people and always had one or many thoughts flowing about me .I was not missing home that much as I was engaged with work and discussions.

**MEETING PEOPLE DOING GOOD STUFF**

I arrived at the train station where I was suppose to meet Hans, Hans wife came to meet me, Hans was with her, but was not feeling well. We drove home, but before we could arrive home, we passed by a wonderful catholic church. It was amazing to have a glimpse of how a church abroad looks like .I took many pictures since people at home really wanted to see the places I visited .We arrived at Hans place, I saw his bees and how they are processing the bee products like wax, I was also struck by the work of his wife with herbs, she showed me around on behalf of Hans who was not feeling well and later had a sumptuous meal together with Hans lovely family. Later one of his sons drove me to the train station still on my way to Vienna. It was so funny that it took me days to reach Vienna, but I was happy my friend Bernard organized the stopovers for me to see places and also to see the countryside on my way to Vienna to meet him. And as a result of this, I am planning to start a bee keeping project in Kenya with their support.

**VISITING ENV SCHOOL IN VIENNA**

Finally I arrived in Vienna, a town I have longed to see and visit. I was well received by Benard , we walked and took a tram to some part of the town. We had a nice food as we talked about plans for the next days for and place to visit.

Later on, he took me to stay with a young couple who were so kind and lovely. The lady Hanna , I think a former student of Benard in his Environmental training school in Vienna school was so interested in our work in Kenya and we kept talking about issues and global questions like climate change .And I was so much struck and inspired by her level of understanding of the Geopolitics .And this made me enjoy my stay with her there.

**VISITING A CONSERVATION SITE WITH ISABELLA**

I also met Isabella , the young bright hardworking lady who is in charge of our conservation project in ligongo hills .We shared a lot as we were heading to see a conservation site nearly at the border of Hungary and Vienna .I saw how conserving grasses and vegetation is key to protecting a landscape .And It gave me new insights on how things can be done .As a whole I felt recharged to take things to whole new level in Rusinga island where we are working on a similar project of trying to restore ligongo hills-Our defiled giant already trying to get back on its feet after many years of destructions.

Isabella drove me to places working on conservation projects including a conserved river bank as well as many places of interest. On our way back we drove into strawberry fields, eat the strawberry and carried home. It was a good adventure full of indelible memories.

I also visited the school where my friend Benard is work as a teacher , I met his students , I met the staff who were his colleagues teaching deferent environmental courses and the stories we shared regarding food security and food soverrienity was quite motivating and life changing.

I was toured around the school as king, I took time to learn some of the shrubs and trees in Europe , I saw great collections flowers and berries including the demonstration farm on top of the buildings. The kindness I have known about Benard was at play all the time. He will always check if I am ok and he further showed me places in the beautiful former palace. The pride about Vienna being a nice clean town was in him and I loved how he made use of his bicycle all round the town was amazing.

In his school, I gave a talk to his students, Benard thought he was challenging me to give a speech to his students, but as I had told him, punishing a fish by throwing in water doesn’t make any sense, giving me an opportunity to talk to students can’t be a big task or challenge to me, it is always my cup of tea and I loved the interaction as it sharpened my lecturing skills and it made me had a good feeling of some growth and maturity.

I have deepest respect for him as well for organizing the trip for me to see Vienna also with the help of Clemens and camillo all are his former students at his school. I saw parks and it also coincided with some celebrations in Vienna. Despite being deep inside the city, it was quite, no traffic jams, not even big crowds and it was a deep contrast to our towns herewith the pocket money he gave to me, I kept buying snacks and we really enjoyed together.

**HOSTED BY FRIENDS FOR DINNER**

Towards the end of my stay, former volunteer who stayed with me for some weeks invited me for some dinner and it was also nice to have variety of foods and drinks. It was nice and sad to see them host some Ukrainian refugees who had ran away from the conflict, but it was nice and kind to see Clemens family hosting them. We shared a lot with his family as well as with the Ukrainian family and we gave them the empathy they needed and it also changed my view of things .

**GIFT SHOPS**

One thing which also touched me was the gifts shops where I saw people putting clothes and other items they don’t need, a true demonstration of kindness and concern to fellow human beings.

**MEETING FIGHT THE FEVER TEAM**

I also met a group of ladies promoting the use of artemisia afra, a shrub use for controlling malaria,I agreed with them to promote it locally and the seeds they gave me have started to blossom. Their initiative is called fight the fever, just the same as the title of their movie about the malaria situation in Africa and the health challenges around access of malaria treatment including resistance to anti malaria drugs.

**WASTE MAMANGMENT**

Waste management is one other area that I realized was perfectly organized .Benard showed me a place where we had electronic, plastic, paper and other waste sorted out .And besides that I also saw various waste depositing places in deferent places in the towns I visited.

**THE EUROPEAN SILENT BYCICLE REVOLUTION**

Travelling across some countries in Europe made smile as I saw how the bicycle use has taken shape. It was nice to see people riding all through, from my senior friends like Kipper to Benard, I saw how concerned they are about the mother earth and the need to use simple and healthy transport.

I have just given a brief story of my visit, but a lot more are in my heart as I am unable to share all about the places I visited, but I felt it necessary to scribe and put some down in black and white. But I touched down a changed man with a full bag of lessons to implement and indelible memories .Above all I saw humility, I met kindness, I came across friendship and above all I want to expand our activities to do proper environmental education on topical issues relating to climate change and environmental education. And that makes me have some unfinished business with Europe and I pray to go again next year to even do more and continue learning to expand and promote our ongoing work in Kenya.