

## **Akka Janssen bio for memorial at Tisarana May 1, 2017**

On our walks together, Akka would sometimes let drop some fact about her life before she made the big move to Lanark County from Toronto.

We'd be walking along, she'd slip something into the conversation, as if it was inconsequential or I already knew it. I would stop and stare at her: "What?? – You went to university in Capetown, South Africa??"

My job today is to share some of the chronology of her too-short life. Of course, aside from dates and times, so much of a person's life is a mystery to everyone else.

At age 11, Akka was at school in Khartoum, Sudan, learning Arabic and French (along with some English). She was living there with her parents, Gerard and Anna, and her siblings Nango and Geer.

By the next year, when she was 12, she was no longer studying Arabic. Instead, she was in boarding school in Holland, working hard on her Dutch and English.

But to back up a bit.

Akka was born in Ceylon (now known as Sri Lanka) on Wednesday June 20<sup>th</sup>, 1956, at 3:30 in the morning, at the St. Joseph Fraser Nursing Home in Colombo.

Her parents, Gerard and Anna, grew up near each other in Holland and, newly married, had moved together to Ceylon in 1955. Akka was their first born.

Akka, as most of you know, is not her given name. Her legal name is Mary Therese – Mary after her maternal grandmother [Bonma?] and Therese after her paternal grandmother.

Akka is Sinhala for big sister. It was a bit startling to me, during the months I spent recently in Sri Lanka, to keep hearing girls and young women being summoned by the term Akka.

I thought about bringing in a world map and a pointer – old school -- so I could show you the many places that Akka lived and visited in the just **first** 23 years of her life.

So far, we have Ceylon, Sudan, Holland and South Africa – moves that were all related, directly or indirectly, to her father's work as an executive with the Bata Shoe Company.

But notably, between Ceylon and Sudan, the family moved to Canada – more specifically to 10 Shepherd Square in Willowdale, North York, Toronto. They lived there from 1962, when Akka turned 6, to 1967, the year she turned 11.

It was while they were in Canada that Akka and her younger sister Nango (Sinhala for little sister) and brother Geer gained another sibling -- baby sister Anne.

As we know, Canada eventually became home to almost all of them – the exception being Nango who -- for now at least -- lives in the United States.

So Canada, from 1962 to 1967 -- 50 years ago, the year of Canada's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday. You should know that the family did get to Expo 67 in Montreal – one month before their June departure for Sudan.

Now, a short quiz. Just kidding.

So, for Akka, first Ceylon, then in 1961 to Kent, in England – oops, I forgot that one earlier. At 5 years old, before the move to Canada, Akka attended Middlesex County School.

Ceylon, England, Canada, Sudan, Holland, and then, 1971 to 1978, South Africa.

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The family home was in Durban, but the rest of Akka's family left South Africa in 1974, the year she turned 18. Akka stayed on another four years to go to university, where she studied psychology and English.

That Akka went to university in Capetown is just so – exotic, to me. My point of reference for this time in her life is the documentary *Searching for Sugarman* about the musician Rodriguez, obscure in North America, who was a big star on campuses in Apartheid era South Africa. Yes, Akka said, his music was a backdrop to her university years.

I almost forgot. A crucial fact to know about our friend Akka is that on May 25<sup>th</sup>, 1973, she received the first pay cheque from a part time job --- at Kentucky Fried Chicken in South Africa.

If I had known that while she was alive, I certainly would have tried to tease her – queen of healthy and delicious food -- about it.

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From here on, things get a bit hazier for me, though I know they are in sharp relief for all of you who knew Akka her whole life, or at least for much longer than I did.

Akka moved to Canada in 1978, when she was 22. I assume that she lived on her own, or with friends. An early Toronto job was at DUCA, a credit union that was established in the 50s by Dutch Canadians. Akka was of course fluent in Dutch. It is here that she met her friend – and future roommate -- Corrie.

Akka and I were walking in Murphy's Point Park this past fall when she let slip about her world travels, in 1980/1981 with Corrie. I've always been a bit jealous of people who did this in their (relative) youth. They travelled through Europe, Africa, and South America.

In September 1983, Akka married Vladimir (Wally) Lechky and together they moved into a house in High Park. Their son Alex was born in March, 1986 and Steph arrived in Sept 1989.

That marriage ended while the boys were still quite young.

On the CV that she laboured over while she lived here in Lanark County, Akka didn't list any employment before she joined the publisher Harper Collins in 1998 but we all know Akka was rarely idle.

Her career at Harper Collins spanned from 1998 to 2005, and she worked her way up to being a well-regarded subsidiary rights manager, acknowledged as a key player in many of the books that she had a hand in.

But her passion – working with plants and the earth, creating beauty – led her to take the bold step of leaving her secure -- if also demanding and underpaid -- publishing job to set up her own gardening business. She worked at that in Toronto from 2005 to early 2011.

Akka got to know this part of the world, Lanark County, from her travels here with Alan, to visit friends Dunn and Tracey. She moved here on her own and settled first in Perth, in a small apartment on Drummond St., followed by another small one on Beckwith and, eventually, to her home here at 1550 Old Brooke Rd.

On May 5, 2016 her grandson Niko was born to Steph and Katarina. As you likely all know, her delight in Niko knew no limits.

In an unlikely foray into the public Internet, Akka shared a picture of herself standing in the woods, and described herself. This was pre: Niko so I have added the word grandmother. She wrote:

Woman, mother, grandmother, sister, daughter, niece, aunt, cousin, grand-daughter, sister-in-law, friend, best friend, oiseau, adult, child, divine, ordinary, lover of nature, lover of birds, lover of words, lover of rock and water, lover of light, believer, cook, dreamer, writer, schemer, giver, doer, helper, yogini, gardener, artist, here.