



Slave nation: engraving from an 1885 book on the founding of the so-called "Congo Free State".

Letters from the heart of darkness

Dr. Ludvig Moberg, ethnographic collections, and the logic of colonial violence

by **Johan Hegardt**

A year or so ago I came across 26 letters sent from the Congo Free State by Ludvig Moberg (1866–1935) to his mother Sara (1843–1927) and his brother Axel (1872–1956). Sixteen of the letters are to Sara and the rest to Axel and were written between 1893 and 1896. The majority is from 1894 and 1895. The addressees being his younger brother and his mother, the letters differ in tone and content. I have not yet been able to read them all in more detail, but I believe that they are special because they were written by a highly educated person. As far as I understand it, the majority of those that served in Congo, be they Swedes or others, lacked higher education.¹

In the mid-1890s, Ludvig's brother Axel was a student at Lund University. He would later become a professor in Semitic languages and a translator of Arabic literature. Between 1926 and 1936, he was head of Lund University. In a letter to Ludvig, Axel asks for some Arabic objects. Ludvig replies:

You write that you would like some Arabic objects. It is difficult to get hold of such objects here, because

contacts with the Arabs are far away and only due to "warfare," but those taking part in the campaigns might find some objects for you. The caravans that come down here have changed people many times and negroes from the parts where contacts with the Arabs are intense do not come down here. I might find something for you among the workers from Senegal who have been in contact with Arabs and have their education from them, but I have so far not seen much except some smaller amulets. I have however spotted some workers that skillfully write Arabic and I will try to find something for you among them.²

What Ludvig probably mentions here is the brutal Arabic slave trade, organized by the notorious Zanzibar-based Arabic slave-raider Hamed bin Muhammed el Murjebi, known as Tippu Tip, a man who King Leopold at first negotiated with. At the time, white state officials launched campaigns against the slave traders, and it might be such campaigns that Ludvig refers to when he talks about "warfare". Adam Hochschild has shown that these



Dr. Ludvig Moberg with three of his five children in his home in Djursholm in 1923. Courtesy of the Moberg family.



Matadi. From Dr. Moberg's photo album. Courtesy of the Moberg family.

anti-slavery campaigns were in fact not as glorious as one might think.³

Axel had two daughters and three sons. All three sons would become professors in different disciplines. I have not been able to trace his daughters. One of Ludvig and Axel's sisters, Ellen Chatarina Moberg (1874–1955), became a politician and a pioneer in developing nursery schools and co-founded with her sister Maria Elisabeth (1877–1948) the Fröbelinstitutet in Norrköping, an institute educating kindergarten teachers.

In the letters to his brother, Ludvig mentions names such as Émile Zola and Ernest Renan among others. Ludvig mastered French, German, and English and had some knowledge in Portuguese and Spanish. He and his wife Maria (born Svård) had five children, all of them living their lives in the upper socio-economic strata of Swedish society, but none of them made a career at the universities like Axel's children. These examples show that the family had a long tradition of education and academic scholarship. As such, the letters might be rather unique, also reflecting the fact that Ludvig was not a missionary, but a physician.

The Congo Free State

In this capacity, Ludvig Moberg served as a functionary for the Belgian company *Compagnie du Chemin de Fer du Congo* in the Congo Free State in 1894–1895. The Belgian company constructed a railway between the port city of Matadi and the inland city of Leopoldville named after the Belgian king Leopold II, who was the owner of the colony. Leopoldville is today called Kinshasa and is the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo. The reason behind the railway construction was that Livingstone Falls, stretching approximately 300 kilometers between the port cities of Matadi and Boma and the inland city of Leopoldville, hindered transportation with steamers between the inland and the Atlantic Ocean. Transportation had to be taken care of by carriers – or caravan men – forced by the colonial authorities to do the work. We will meet them later in this essay.

In 1890, Joseph Conrad traveled to Matadi to work for a Bel-

gian shipping company that transported commodities up and down the Congo River from Leopoldville and further east into the interior. As is well known, his book *Heart of Darkness* is based on his experiences from the six months that he spent in the Congo Free State working for the company. Conrad writes:

I came upon a boiler wallowing in the grass, then found a path leading up the hill. It turned aside for the boulders, and also for an undersized railway-truck laying there on its back with its wheels in the air [...] I came upon more pieces of decaying machinery, a stack of rusty rails...A horn tooted to the right, and I saw black people run. A heavy and dull detonation shook the ground, a puff of smoke came out of the cliff, and that was all [...] *They were building a railway.* The cliff was not in the way or anything; but this objectless blasting was all the work going on.⁴

I am not sure that Conrad did witness this because the construction work had hardly begun when he was in Matadi, and he worked on the river from Leopoldville and eastward, not west of the city where the railway construction was taking form. He could have read about the construction later during his work with the novel or seen parts of it when returning from Leopoldville to Matadi on his way back to England after ending his contract. In fact, when Moberg left Congo in 1896, the construction of the railway had not even reached half way between Matadi and Leopoldville, as far as I understand it.

The Congo Free State was the consequence of the 1884–1885 Berlin Conference, when the world powers, including Sweden, agreed that King Leopold could have access to the colony. It is no surprise that Sweden took part in the conference. Even though Sweden lacked colonies, the country was integrated into the world economy that was based on the structures of colonialism. The deal was that every one else could have a bite too, including Sweden. King Leopold argued that the objective was for the

“EVEN THOUGH SWEDEN LACKED COLONIES, THE COUNTRY WAS INTEGRATED INTO THE WORLD ECONOMY THAT WAS BASED ON THE STRUCTURES OF COLONIALISM. THE DEAL WAS THAT EVERY ONE ELSE COULD HAVE A BITE TOO, INCLUDING SWEDEN.”

colony to bring civilization to the area, something that Conrad also believed in before he left for Congo.⁵ This was of course a lie. Instead, they were burning villages and killing local people on a massive scale.⁶ Moberg writes: “They are burning villages in ‘the name of civilization.’” He places “in the name of civilization” in between quotation marks, which implies that he does not agree. But in the same letter he also writes that he hopes to make good money.⁷

The railway was finished in 1898, and Conrad published his novel in 1899 as a three-part series in *Blackwood's Magazine*. The book was first published in 1902. Conrad's novel sparked an organized international opposition against King Leopold's genocidal activities. Eventually, the Parliament of Belgium annexed the Congo Free State and took over its administration on November 15, 1908, as the Colony of the Belgian Congo. Tim Stanley writes: “Estimates for the number of people killed range between 2 and 15 million, easily putting Leopold in the top ten of history's mass murderers.”⁸ It is the most terrifying example in the history of colonialism, as discussed in detail by Adam Hochschild in his book *King Leopold's Ghost*.

CONRADEXPAINS: “They were no colonists; their administration was merely a squeeze, and nothing more, I suspect. They were conquerors, and for that you want brute force – nothing to boast of, when you have it, since your strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of others.” And he continues: “They grabbed what they could get for the sake of what was to be got. It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it in blind – as is very proper for those who tackle the darkness.”⁹

What Conrad's protagonist Marlow expresses in the novel is very close to the truth. But Conrad can also be criticized for words such as “They were no colonists” because he here neglects that colonialism always is a question of oppression, but he does have a clear point when he argues that “They grabbed what they could get for the sake of what was to be got.”



The railway under construction. From Dr. Moberg's photo album. The text reads: “Les travaux du chemin de fer du Congo. Une tranchée vers Bembesi. 72 kilom. De Matadi. Congo 1894.” Courtesy of the Moberg family.

Conrad can also be criticized for viewing Africa and Africans from a Western perspective, for example, that the people are backwards, something he expresses when he writes, “The *pre-historic* man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us – who could tell?”¹⁰ Hochschild notes, however, that “European and American readers, not comfortable acknowledging the genocidal scale of the killing in Africa at the turn of the century, have cast *Heart of Darkness* loose from its historical moorings. We read it as a parable for all times and places, not as a book about one time and place [...] Conrad himself wrote, ‘*Heart of Darkness* is experience [...] pushed a little (and only very little) beyond the actual facts of the case.’”¹¹

There will always be questionable sentences in a book written over a century ago, and we shall of course not neglect that, but if we read the novel as an experience we will be able to catch and understand the deep horror that Conrad witnessed, and I think that a close, but not uncritical, reading of Dr. Moberg's letters will also render us deep insights into the horrible goings-on in the Congo Free State.

Indeed, 1,932 persons died during the building of the railway,

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1,800 black and 132 white.¹² This indicates that on average 16 white people and 225 black people died every year during the construction between 1890 and 1898. Moberg worked for two years, and he thus could have witnessed the death of 500 black people and 32 white people during his time in Congo. In his letters, he describes the death of many people, most of them white. Moberg writes:

In Matadi some strong and healthy men have died and people are a little scared. Among the 39 persons that the company have sent home, most of them have been sent back due to diseases before they had ended their time here. Most of the illness is dangerous forms of fever. Among those that left were a French engineer, a very nice man, maybe the best man that I have met here. He should have left earlier, but had only two months left on his contract of two years. Yesterday I was told that he did not come further than Boma before he died. He had a family in France with two children and talked a lot about his family.¹³

Various sources give different numbers, but some 600 Swedes are believed to have been contracted to work in Congo. The picture is that the majority were seamen or military men, and many of them, but not all, were poorly educated. For the time being, I do not know how many of them died in Congo. Moberg did encounter some Swedes, for example, Anders Sjöcrona who worked as an engineer for the *Compagnie du Chemin de Fer du Congo*. Moberg writes: “There is not as much life here as it is in Kengé of course; we have been 4 to 5 whites here, Sjöcrona (sic), ‘a cosseptable,’ (sic) a technician, myself and a supervisor.” He continues: “Once when we got hold of some Danish aquavit, Sjöcrona (sic) and I thought that it was like music from home and for some evenings we took a drink from the bottle together with some sandwiches and sardines in a very motherlandish way – but the bottle was soon empty.”¹⁴

IN HIS BOOK *Vit man i svart land* [White man in black land], the Swedish missionary Arvid Svärd divides the white people in Congo, including the Swedes, into three categories:

The first: An international scum, flocked from all directions, failed beings, dysfunctional wretches, those that must disappear into the fringes of life, adventurers, with a ravenous appetite on life, those that could not afford a conscience. They found a place free of any restrictions out there.

The second: honest bookkeepers, craftsmen, NCOs, that very innocently dreamt of adventure and money in the newly found black wonderland under the equator, men, that in an unfortunate ignorance of reality jumped straight into something, that came very close to hell on Earth. It happened that some after some time in service came half insane to a missionary and begged for help. But – what could he do? They could not stand it any more! A bullet in the forehead ended often a life, which in Europe would have become a respectable and impeccable life. They had not understood that they would be thrown into a “whirling maelstrom of unrighteousnesses, cruelty and undisguised human passion.”

The third: men with character, conscience and decency. They protested and had to face the consequences. Some disappeared. It was easy to state that a rhino had killed X. Others were thrown out. And others emphasized, after returning: “We will never go back.”

It was namely the men behind the system: its creators, the coupon cutting [*kupongklippande*] shareholders and the governors, that carried the responsibility.¹⁵

That missionaries “helped” both black and white people in Congo and that they protested was of course heroic. But Svärd was himself a missionary, and his book is about a missionary. We must not forget that missionaries have had their part in the systematic social and religious oppression of people in the colonies.

Nevertheless, Svärd is probably very close to the truth, and the majority of non-black people from around the world working in Congo had lost something in their home country – money, work, a wife or a family, or something else. This means that they probably also had lost their trust in themselves and in society and therefore also had lost their moral compass. But this is not only true for Congo, but a rather common description of people in other colonies too.

HELL IS ALWAYS HELL, but as we know there are different levels in hell and Congo was the lowest of them all, hell on Earth, as Svärd puts it. This makes people extremely brutal, which was the case in the colony.

If the British and the French had some idea of how a colony should be governed, there were no such ideas behind Congo, but, as Conrad describes it, the whole point was to grab what they could get for the sake of what was to be got. Moberg, for his part, writes:



"Two Congo veterans that took part in the building of the Congo Free State. Sea captain Tage Jönsson from Brunflo and engineer Anders Sjöcrona from Helsingborg." Published in Svenska Dagbladet 1937.

You think that the Negroes here are savages, but most of them come from British colonies where they have received education and some are very advanced and speak fluently both English and French, for example, my male nurse from Sierra Leone. The black [he uses the word "black" here] boiler men working on the railway engines do their job as good as the white.¹⁶

What he points to here is that there is a difference between colonial administrations, which also underlines Conrad's distinction when he writes, "they were no colonists." But even though there are distinctions among colonies, colonies are of course always troubled by the logic of colonialism and its violence.

Who was Dr. Ludvig Moberg?

Congo was not unknown in Sweden. The Swedish newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* mentioned Congo almost every year from 1870 and onwards. The whole process, from Stanley's famous expeditions up to the collapse of the Congo Free State in 1908, is covered, and Congo is mentioned in 27 articles in 1883 and in 96 articles in 1885. There are advertisements in the paper for tea from Congo, the political situation is covered, and Swedes who died there are mentioned. Those who left Sweden for Congo are also mentioned, and we find a short notice that Ludvig Moberg is on his way to Congo in *Dagens Nyheter* on December 14, 1893. The note reads: "To Congo. Medical student Ludvig Moberg born 1866 and son of the deceased hospital doctor in Norrköping Vilhelm Moberg has entered his services in the Congo Free State. He has travelled from Antwerp to Congo."¹⁷

As we read from the note, Ludvig Moberg was himself the son of a physician who had held a high position within the hospital in Norrköping. With the background he had, he had no reason to travel to Congo, but as with most others who left for Congo



Dr. Moberg's villa – "Larsbo" – in Djursholm, 1906. Courtesy of the Moberg family.

Moberg had his sorrows. He was in love with his cousin Maria Roth, but she did not love him, and off he went.¹⁸ Two years and 26 letters later he returned, and with him he had a collection of objects. Moberg writes:

The authentic Congo Negroes, that live for themselves, are of course real "bêtes sauvages," [wild animals] even though they too have come in contact with Europeans – missionaries, traders and aquavit – which has had some impact on them. In general the Congo people are intelligent, which many examples show, for example, the objects that they make. I hope that I before I leave will be able to collect some of their handicraft, weapons and household objects, because it would be interesting to bring them home as a memory from here.¹⁹

In her book *On Longing*, Susan Stewart writes:

We might say that this capacity of objects to serve as traces of authentic experience is, in fact, exemplified by the souvenir. The souvenir distinguishes experiences. We do not need or desire souvenirs of events that are repeatable [...] It represents not the lived of its maker but the "secondhand" experience of its owner. Like the collection, it always displays the romance of contraband, for its scandal is its removal from its 'natural' location.²⁰

But objects were not the only things that he brought back with him to Sweden. In one of his letters, Moberg writes: "In one aspect I may be pleased with myself and the situation. I have not had one death during the latest 2 months among the 500 workers that I care for. The other department with 800 workers has had one or two deaths every day." After that he places in brackets

“I AM COOKING A SKULL FROM A POOR CARAVAN MAN THAT WAS FOUND DEAD BESIDE THE ROAD. IT IS THE FIFTH SKULL THAT I HAVE COLLECTED. I HOPE TO BE ABLE TO COLLECT MORE SKULLS BEFORE I RETURN TO EUROPE.”

the following: “(I stop writing because I need to attend the fire in my ‘kitchen.’ I am cooking a skull from a poor caravan man that was found dead beside the road. It is the fifth skull that I have collected. I hope to be able to collect more skulls before I return to Europe.)”²¹ In another letter he writes about the caravan men: “The only people that I see from where I live are the by force and threat of violence and for the state contracted caravan men that pass by my small house, mostly in the hundreds and with their stuff on their heads and their long sticks in their hands.”²²

Both Conrad and Svärd mention the caravan men. Conrad when on his way from Matadi to Leopoldville: “Next day I left the station at last, with a caravan of sixty men for a two-hundred-mile tramp.”²³ Svärd underlines: “The caravan trail between Kasongo and Tanganyika is strewn with bodies of dead caravan men, almost as under the days of the Arabic slave trade. Mistreated, malnourished carriers die in the hundreds. The smell of rotten bodies cover the clime, we call it the Manyema’s perfume.”²⁴

It was very common to force people to work for the Congo Free State, and the point of building the railway was to make transportations easier and to get rid of the time-consuming caravans. It is probably one of these men, forced to work until he died, that Moberg collected the skull from. There is no explanation for why he collected skulls in the first place, but he studied medicine for his exam when returning to Sweden.

FREDRIK SVANBERG WRITES in *Människosamlarna* [Human collectors] that Moberg returned with four skulls that he donated to Uppsala University in 1896. They are described in the University’s catalog as: “4 Skulls. Negros from Congo. Fiott-spraks tribe. From the West Coast, the area Cataract, a-c South, d North of Cataract.”²⁵

Cataract means waterfall, and skulls a-c were collected south of the waterfall and d was collected north of the waterfall. Svanberg mentions that Moberg might have collected the skulls close to Kinshasa, but Moberg never reached Leopoldville. In fact, his last letter home is from Kimpese, not even half way between Matadi and Leopoldville. When writing the letter about the skulls, Moberg was in Kenge, a place not far from Matadi. This means that all four skulls must have been collected far west of Kinshasa.

There is no answer in the letters as to why he collected the skulls. The relation between studying medicine and cooking skulls is also rather far-fetched. The only answer to the question why is found in Svanberg’s book. Collecting body parts was a part of a culture of collecting and believed to be positive for scientific research.

Sweden was of course not alone, and it has a difficult history

when it comes to this very precise form of anatomic research dating back to the mid-19th century, culminating in the establishment of a racial-biological institute and the introduction of eugenic policies in the 1920s and 1930s. In fact, it did not end until the 1970s – a deep and tragic history discussed in numerous books, articles, and television programs over the past decade.²⁶

AFTER RETURNING to Sweden in 1896, Moberg made a decent career in medicine. He became a docent (associate professor) at Karolinska institutet in 1905. His specialization was dermatology, the branch of medicine concerned with the diagnosis and treatment of skin disorders. He lived in Djursholm, a fashionable and at the time liberal suburb north of Stockholm, where he died in 1935.

In the Museum of Ethnography’s yearbook for 1939, we read – under the headline “Gifts” – that *Doktorinnan* Maria Moberg, Stockholm, has donated 31 objects from the Belgian Congo to the museum. The objects are from Upper and Lower Congo, and among the objects there is a large shield, probably from the Ubangi area, spears, arrow heads, a knife with a broad wooden case with copper ornaments, probably from Bateke or Bamfumo, one ivory trumpet, one beautiful clay pot with ornaments, and a head stool with an ornamented face. The text ends with the conclusion that many of the objects are not manufactured anymore in the Congo area.²⁷ An educated guess is that this has to do with the fact that Congo in 1937 had been completely robbed leaving millions dead, because, in Conrad’s words, “It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale.”

Many ethnographic collections around the world are based on what Stewart has called “contraband.” They were unlawfully collected, although Ludvig Moberg probably did not do anything wrong. He did not steal things. Instead, it was the context and the logic of colonial violence that made it possible for him to collect not only objects, but also human skulls. Important here is also the logic of civilization and modernization, and as Moberg himself writes, “they are burning villages in ‘the name of civilization.’” Modernization and civilization are words highly approved of by those who “grabbed what they could get for the sake of what was to be got,” as Conrad put it.

The website at the Museum of Ethnography lists 31 objects from Ludvig Moberg. Each object has an identification number followed by a short description and the names Ludvig Moberg and Maria Moberg. Only 3 out of the 31 objects have a photograph connected to the description. The objects have been cleansed of any former meaning and context.²⁸ The information on Ludvig Moberg on the museum’s website is from the Swedish newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet*’s yearbook from 1936.²⁹

Svenska Dagbladet used to publish yearbooks where important events during the past year are mentioned. They obviously thought that the death of Ludvig Moberg in 1935 was important enough to publish. Ludvig Moberg is also mentioned in many other biographic encyclopedias. What is interesting is that his years in Africa are not seen as very important and are only mentioned briefly. It appears that he himself maybe not regretted, but at least had a complicated relationship to his experiences from his years in the “Heart of Darkness”. In letters home at the end of his contract, he is critical of the *Compagnie du Chemin de Fer du Congo*, of black people, and of the whole situation in Congo, but at the same time he has ambivalent feelings for his return and asks himself in the letters if he will be able to tackle the hectic life at home, accustomed as he is to the slowness of time in Congo.

MOBERG DID RETURN, and the objects that he collected are today stored at the Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm. In the last letter to his brother Axel sent from the steamer *Ambara* off Lisbon on February 8, 1896, Ludvig asks where Maria Roth might be. Two years in the “Heart of Darkness” had obviously not weakened his feelings for her. Eventually, it would be another Maria – Maria Svärd – whom he married and who would donate his “souvenirs” to the Museum of Ethnography two years after his death.

I have in this essay tried to show how complicated such collections are. It is well known that ethnographic museums today are contested and face problems of what to do with their collections. Repatriation is sometimes a solution, but not always. At present, the only way forward is to do in-depth research on the histories of the museums, the histories of the different collections in each museum, and of course on the collectors themselves. ✕

Johan Hegardt is an associate professor
in archaeology at Uppsala University.

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