

Book Reviews
Providing eye care on the periphery

Gertrud Stiehle, *Erika Sutter: Seen with Other Eyes – Memories of a Swiss Eye Doctor in Rural South Africa*

Basler AfrikaBibliographien, Basel, 2013

124 pp

ISBN 978-3-905758-33-4

CHF15.00

This book uses a biographical lens to trace the life story of a Swiss-born woman, Erika Sutter. Born and raised in Basel, in the early 1950s she decided to leave Switzerland to work in South Africa, at first as a laboratory technician at Elim Mission Hospital in the Northern Transvaal (now Limpopo Province), and later, after obtaining medical school training, as a doctor at this same hospital.

Chronologically organised, this book begins by discussing Sutter's early life in Switzerland, including her family, education, initial work activities, and her motivations to leave for South Africa in 1952 as a member of the Swiss Mission Society. The middle part of the book then considers her first four years working in the laboratory at Elim; her decision and efforts to train as a medical doctor from age 40 at the University of the Witwatersrand; her further specialist training in Ophthalmology in Basel and London; and her return to work from the mid-1960s as the head of the Ophthalmology Department at Elim Mission Hospital. There she provided, for almost 20 years until her retirement in 1984, much needed "eye doctor" services, which restored or improved the sight of countless African patients.

An important part of this book, chapter seven, entitled "The Most Meaningful Years in Erika's Life: The Care Groups", moves beyond an analysis of Sutter's curative, hospital-based work, to consider her primary health care activities. Written by a different author - the only one of its kind in this book - it discusses her preventive and community-oriented eye health outreach work that was started in the last eight years of her working life in South Africa. The author, Frances Lund, who was a lecturer in Social Policy at the University of Natal (today, the University of KwaZulu-Natal) when she first met Sutter, was the person who actually convinced Sutter to write this book as a way to address questions regularly asked about her by Lund's students who read material penned by Sutter in one of her courses (p viii).

Lund's chapter, which I found the most critically-engaged of all the chapters, traces Sutter's eye health "care groups" activity, which she began with the assistance of Selina Maphorogo; a South African-born colleague and interpreter, upon whose community insights, knowledge, and language skills Sutter depended. From the mid-1970s, this self-help programme sought to train local women living in poor, under-resourced Bantustan villages around Elim Hospital to become health educators tasked with disseminating information about practices to encourage good eye health. This was done with the aim of preventing common eye diseases, but also, importantly, to try to reduce the high rate of preventable blindness that debilitated

Book Reviews

many people living within these communities. In a more balanced manner than most of the other chapters in this book, Lund focuses on the successes of Sutter's programme, which continued even after she left South Africa, and which is now a movement with approximately 2 000 members in over 200 villages, but also considers a number of problems and difficulties faced by these community-oriented programmes.

The penultimate chapter of the book examines Sutter's retirement years back in Switzerland after 1984, including her speaking engagements and teaching undertakings at the International Centre for Eye Health in London and the Swiss Tropical Institute in Basel. It was also in these years, with more time on her hands, that she was able to write more extensively (including books), about her medical and community health care work in rural South Africa. The final chapter, entitled "A Final Look Back and Forward: A Conversation between Erika Sutter and Gertrude Stiehle", provides a conclusion to the book, in which Sutter reflects on key issues and aspects of her long life.

When considering the potential audience for this book, in my opinion it is well suited for a popular audience. Had this publication been geared towards an academic audience I would have liked to see a more in-depth analysis of broader historical context issues, such as the changing history of Elim Mission Hospital; the effects of repressive apartheid policies on her own life as well as the lives of her co-workers and patients; more extensive endnotes and bibliography sections that list a larger number of references beyond Sutter's own publications; and a more detailed and more critical engagement with the sources used.

Indeed, there is very little critical engagement with the sources used in this book. In an introduction-type chapter entitled "In Lieu of an Introduction: Immersing Myself in the Life of Erika Sutter", the author Gertrude Stiehle notes how she used "dozens of audio recordings, letters, other documents and information from people who know Erika and her story" (p 1). Yet, none of these additional sources, so essential to producing a more rounded and corroborated account of the biographical subject's life, makes it into the text, or even into the endnotes or bibliography section. As a result, the reader is not able to weigh up the value of these other documents and recordings.

Furthermore, while we as readers are told on the back cover that "For the creation of this biography, Erika Sutter spent many hours with the author, her friend Gertrude Stiehle, telling the story of her long life .", Stiehle provides little discussion of pertinent issues related to oral history methodology that affected the writing of this book. Stiehle includes many long quotations, which are meant to stand as the authentic "voice" of Sutter. In addition, in Stiehle's prose sections, it is often difficult to gauge where Stiehle and Sutter's thoughts and opinions converge. As a trained anthropologist, one would have expected Stiehle to reflect more critically on the collaborative nature of this biographical enterprise, particularly on some of the strengths but also challenges of using oral testimony as the primary source base.

Book Reviews

Shifting power dynamics in the interviewer (and friend)-interviewee relationship, personal biases and motivations, as well as significant omissions that affected the construction of this account, are not analysed. Without this methodological engagement, the book comes across in a non-critical, hagiographical manner in a similar vein as many other books written about missionary medical heroes.

To end on a positive note, this book's easy to follow story line (which includes many directional sub-headings), its clear prose (which includes a good translation from German to English), and many photographs, does bring to life the story of a remarkable woman medical doctor, which should be enjoyed by popular audiences. Published in the Basler Afrika Bibliographien series entitled "Lives, Legacies, Legends", it falls perfectly within the mandate of this series to publish "personal narratives and written histories related to life in southern Africa", including "biographies – on the topic of the 'Swiss in Africa'".¹ For both European and southern African popular audiences who read this book, I think that it will encourage greater understanding about some of the historical opportunities and difficulties faced by a person who lived an accomplished and interesting life, and who managed to move between the usually separate worlds of Switzerland and South Africa.

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¹ See <https://baslerafrika.ch/en/publishing-house/publications-shop/series/>