

Interview with James Jonah, former FES scholarship holder on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of FES New York

Werner Puschra: *I'm sitting here today with James Jonah, former Permanent Representative to the United Nations and former Minister of Finance and Economy of Sierra Leone. James Jonah received a scholarship of the FES many years ago. And my question to you is, James, how did you come into contact with the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung first? Was it in your own country, in Sierra Leone?*

James Jonah: No. I was at Harvard at that time. I had two favorite professors. One was Carl Friedrich, and the other one is Rupert Emerson. At the end, as I was approaching my masters, I was not clear what I want to do. I did not want to take a PhD. They were urging me to take a PhD but I said no. I was a very strong nationalist, and I wanted to go back home very quickly. But they told me, no, you are a promising student, you have done so well. So I went out with Dr. Emerson and I said, okay, look, what you suggest is take some time off and think about it. I said what am I going to do? Then they told me that there is somebody on campus who was looking for some people for the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. I forgot the name of the man. I can visualize him now.



Werner Puschra: *Okay. Which year was it?*

James Jonah: This was in '59, end of '59. He was a student himself. So they arranged a meeting with him. I told him -- I said I didn't want to go -- not to study but to do some research. And so he said he can arrange it with Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, which he did. And then just after I met with him, I had a Ford Foundation grant to study -- to go to the Middle East. So I said, okay, I'll continue both. So after the Middle East research, I went directly to Germany. In this country, I met a man, who was either linked with the Socialist Party, SPD, or with the FES. I don't know which one, but he himself was a postgraduate student.

And then, this is very interesting now because after I came from the Middle East, I spent some time in Geneva writing my report. I had studied -- they had me to look at the attitude of Arab students, Arab youth towards the Arab-Israeli dispute. That was work. Then I came to Bonn, to FES. At that time, they used to have a small office in Koblenzer Straße. So I went there and I noticed myself. And I think it was a big surprise because they weren't putting an African; they were putting an American. And first I had this lady saying that there's someone else because they cannot recall my name.

And then I met with the director, and we discussed this. I said I met this man who pushed me and I want to be able to do some research and everything. So then he said to me, do you speak German? I said, no, I don't speak any German. He said, okay, the first thing we are going to do, we're going to send you to study German. Then in the meantime, I went to stay somewhere in Bad Godesberg, and then I

stayed there until I was -- they sent me to Rothenburg ob der Tauber Goethe-Institut. That was my first encounter with Ebert Stiftung.

Werner Puschra: *Do you remember the name of the director you met?*

James Jonah: It was Grunwald. So they arranged that for me. I remember he told me one night to come back. I proceeded to the Heimvolkshochschule Bergneustadt. It became my home really.

Werner Puschra: *So this was all '59?*

James Jonah: No, 1960.

Werner Puschra: *1960 already. And for how long did you stay in Germany? First the language course?*

James Jonah: Yes. I was supposed to stay for three months but I finished in two months because I was very lucky with Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. The way they did it in Rothenburg is like a small village. They don't speak any English. So they put you in a family and you spend -- this was almost six hours course every day but you stay with a family, and they want you to be able to -- I was very lucky the people I stayed with, they were both teachers. So when I come from the school, they help me also at home, so I finished it quicker, I finished in two months.

Then they suggested to me whether I would like to spend some time in Munich, München, and that was very important to me. I was staying in the house of the Weiße Rose in Munich University, and I stayed there I think for about a month. And there I got to know about the Geschwister Scholl Institute. I never knew in my studies there was a resistance inside Germany. It was a big shock to me. So I decided I wanted to do some research on that.

Luckily there were a lot of people who were still alive, one was the wife of a professor who was killed, who was guiding me. So she had good memory. She remembered, for example, the sister, you know, the one who also was killed when she was distributing leaflets. So I got to meet people who knew, I got to know a good many people who were at the time in the university and explained what happened.

You know, most of these were medical students, and they were exempt from military service, but during their vacation, they were supposed to go to the front as medical orderlies. And it was while they were there they saw the brutality of the war, and they came back and started resistance among the students about this kind of war and there began this secret resistance. They worked from homes themselves, this professor. So it helped me a lot.

So when I finished that, I went to Bergneustadt then, one year. Learning began, because after this resistance, from my research, when I was talking to people who were there in Munich and observed what happened, even the execution, all of these things, I wanted to know how was it possible for these things to have happened in Germany? I had certain questions because Karl Friedrich actually was a German. He was one of the -- was a Jew but he came to Harvard actually, I think, from Heidelberg.

So I've got little bits. And this is very interesting. There was so much blockage among American academics in Germany. They don't want to study Germany. They don't want to do anything. So I wanted to know where the thing ended. It's hard to believe this time where you can get papers going back to the '30s. And it's interesting you have to put like this at that time. This is now 1960. You have like a year. I spent about three months going through the papers in Germany from the '30s up to the end of the war to get a good grasp, and that helped me a lot.

And while I was doing this, in one meeting about Carlo Schmidt and Herbert Wehner, well, at that time in Germany, this was I would say around August, September 1960, Africa and the emergence of independence going towards deepening. So here was this African and they went to talk to me. And then I remember one time they were talking to me and then they asked how do you know all these things about Germany? I said I was doing research and they were shocked that an African would get in trouble with this. So they began to supplement my understanding. So that's how I got to know them very well because they used to have a kind of seminar which was - how was it called – Auseinandersetzung mit dem Kommunismus.

James Jonah: That's a real theme. They have many of those seminars, and they will have people who will come for about a week then another group will come. So I'll be going to mix with them, and then they began to explain to me this new rule, new Germany. So that was my education. And then there was a woman there; I think her name was Nora if I'm not mistaken. She was the liaison with students. She used to arrange, as a consultant with Grunwald, they made me go to many German cities, meet with the mayors, as a guest of the city, and it was a real education. They arranged many of these in many cities; Freiburg, Hamburg, Bremen - all these. So it was a very rich experience to have with these people. So they changed my whole outlook. As I say, I was a very intense nationalist, and they convinced me that it's good to have an international approach.

Werner Puschra: *I mean, at that time, it was certainly a big achievement because it was the start of the nationalist movement in Africa and the success with decolonization, independence.*

James Jonah: I was a student leader. I'm not Gorbatschow. They were shocked. They said, what happened to you? I had to explain to them, look, because what I've got; look what nationalism took value to Germany. That was the argument. It doesn't make any sense. In the end, it leads you down a road which will bring you to social conflict. So that was the lesson I drew from them. But it was for me -- those 14 months were the best time in my life, really the best time in my life.

Werner Puschra: *That's good. And afterwards, what did you do afterwards?*

James Jonah: Okay, while I was there, now my mind was changing. And not only did this kind of seminar. They were bringing most regularly German students, European diplomats. It used to be like weekends. So I was always interacting with these people. I said, okay, now I will go for my doctorate. Then somebody came there, and we were talking, and I was talking about some of my research. He was a German professor. I said it's sad that they have not been able, in the field of political science to be able - how you capture evolutionary events in research. He said, oh, he said, it's being done now. I said,

where? He said MIT. I said, MIT, no. In fact, in Cambridge when I worked, I lived not far from MIT. I said, no, MIT is a scientific institution; they have nothing to do with politics. He said, no, they have started. And he gave me the name of the professor called Karl Deutsch.

So he said this man is one of the assistants to Karl Deutsch. I wrote to him in German. And he was very much impressed because of my German. I spoke more idiomatic German, and he was very impressed. How can an African speak German so much? So he told me, look, we had come to recruit for a PhD program, but it's not easy because we are going to use people with mathematical background. And so I told him people studying at Harvard. I gave him the names of Rupert Emerson and Carl Friedrich. He said, okay, I'm going to consult these people, and he did. And he came back to me. He said they spoke so highly of you, we are going to offer you a fellowship. If you come during the summer, we would put you through a special course in mathematics, which is what I did. So I came.

Before that, I was asked to do research also on the youth in the SED, in East Germany. And to know why -- what is the cause of the backwardness of their economy. At that time, many of the failure of economic development, they were having that your culture and history had a lot to do with the development. But I said that we really are all the same culture. Why is it? So I was doing the research when they built the wall. I was in East Germany, East Berlin.

Werner Puschra: August '61, 13th of August '61.

James Jonah: Yeah, I was there. But they were so friendly to me in East Germany, all the time I used to go there, at the university and talk to students. So I crossed back, I was still in - what do you call it - Dahlem, where the University is.

I was staying there in the student area. So I came back there. I left Munich after that because at that time, I already had got the fellowship. I was just finishing all of this. So when I came to MIT, I became the man that everybody wanted to talk to about Germany because they don't have people who studied in Germany.

So I was the real man everybody wants to talk to. I was sent to Washington, sent to this and that to explain. And I remember a lecture before a very large audience in Washington. I never made distinction in my life between Jewish and non-Jewish. It turned out there was a lot of Jews there. So I talked about the holocaust and I talked about the resistance in Germany during the Hitler period. This was before the film came out to these people. They never heard about it, too, and they were so hostile to me. They thought I had been brainwashed in Germany, you know.

But it helped me a lot because after I finished by PhD, the UN asked Harvard, MIT, I think Columbia or other universities that they need a German expert. At that time, now this was in '62 turning '63, the big problem as you know was access to and from Germany. You know and remember the speech of Kennedy in '63, in June '63. So Harvard and MIT recommended me. They said this is the man we know who knows Germany. The UN was completely surprised. That's how I got to the UN. I never applied to the UN.

Werner Puschra: *So they were looking for a person with German knowledge and knowledge about Germany, and they hired you, an African. That's great.*

James Jonah: And when I came to the UN they were shocked. They didn't think I was an African, too.

The same thing I had when I went to Germany and they were shocked because of me being an African. But then I kept on. They were very close to me all the time in the UN, very, very close with the Germans because at that time, Germany had an observer status. I was helping them a lot, a lot with the African delegation because it was not easy for them when they had the observer status. It was very difficult.

Munich is like my second home. Any time I go to Europe, I would go and spend time in Bergneustadt, you know.

Werner Puschra: *So you were advising the German representation at the UN which had an observer status.*

James Jonah: Yeah. They knew about my stay in Germany because I was really lecturing a lot in America about Germany. People, they didn't know much about current development in Germany, so I was trying to explain some of the problems within the SPD. Even today, they confuse CSU and CDU. They don't see the slight difference. All these number of things, I used to explain all these different parties and what were the problems because just after -- before I left, there was the grand coalition which was the only way the SPD can explain it could govern.

And this is where I discussed. I'll say this is the only way. They have to have confidence. So then, I'm lucky in 1991, there was a lot of pressure that I should become secretary general of the UN. It began before Pérez de Cuéllar became secretary general. But, I mean, as a matter of principle, when the OAU nominated Salim Salim, I felt that it is completely wrong for me to come out. Anyway, it would've been vetoed. I said I will not do that. So when Pérez de Cuéllar came in, I worked with him. By the time I was finishing, the African group said no, you are the most experienced man we have in the UN.

So I advised them that they should not send one candidate because I say one candidate isn't fair. So I was one of five, including Boutros-Ghali, but I'm opposed, in principle, I'm opposed to campaigning for the office of the secretary general. I'm very convinced that to campaign for the office means you can never be an effective secretary general because if you go to the big five and ask them for support, they're going to ask you what is the quid pro quo? So I always criticized this. So I refused to campaign.

But surprisingly, when the voting began, I came third even without campaigning. But in the end, Boutros-Ghali won, and then he asked me to stay and help him. And I became the first chief of political affairs in the department. Then in '93 there was a coup in Sierra Leone so they came to us; meaning, the people in the coup that they don't know how to govern and they want me to come and help them and take over the department of education. Initially, I said yes, but Boutros-Ghali convinced me that because of my international reputation, I should not be involved with military people.

So I had to retreat, and the way I retreated was to say to them, look, I made a promise to come to help you. I will come, but I will come with a different capacity. Let us have an agreement that there will be

two years of transitions for many people to win or lose and I will manage it, which is what I did. I became the chief electoral commissioner for two years.

And then what about democracy? And the plan I had with Boutros-Ghali like I will come back to the UN. But then at the two years, they said, you cannot leave us. And the common will made was I will come as the Permanent Representative and I would then be helping Boutros-Ghali and that was it. So there was, when I came back, Boutros-Ghali's fight with the Americans. And for the first time in my life, I had to fight the Americans because I disagreed with them when they said to oppose Boutros-Ghali. I felt he was a very good secretary general. He was very independent. So after they vetoed him, Ms. Albright pushed Kofi Annan whom I knew. He walked in my office. He was very weak. I know him. He was a very, very weak person. He was two years in my office but they wanted somebody they can control.

But immediately, I was asked to go back as minister of finance. So I went to Ministry of Finance in Sierra Leone. Then they tried to persuade me to come back to write my memoirs because they said, your memory of the UN is so vital that Carnegie gave me a foundation grant, so I became a fellow for them when I came back.

***Werner Puschra:** Okay, very good, a fascinating story. Thank you very much. And it all began in Bergneustadt.*

James Jonah: That's interesting indeed. From Harvard to Bergneustadt! This is quite a step actually. Very often people think of it the other way round, from Bergneustadt to Harvard. It was a very good step doing it the other way round!

Interview: Werner Puschra, FES New York