

TOM SANYA

The International Academic

If time were divided into a grid of squares, then Halina must have the ability to manage the activities in each of those squares effectively without any spill-over — at least so it seems from her unruffled appearance. In any encounter with her, she exudes a calmness that hints at a state of inner harmony. The attention that she gives when in contact with you can make you think that yours is the only business on her mind: the friendly hello in the corridors, the prompt and well-considered answers to emails, meticulous reading of voluminous texts at your request... It is only when you get to know about her tight euro-trotting programme that you begin to get a sense of how hectic a schedule she must be living each day. There is a mirror in Halina's office that ensures that she sees a visitor before they can see her. Could it be because of that mirror that she is ever well-prepared for a meeting in her office?

Halina was one of the first people I met at the Oslo School of Architecture and Design (AHO). Owing to the non-hierarchical introduction of those present, it completely escaped my attention in that first meeting that she was the Head of PhD School at AHO. I am from Uganda, and joined the PhD Cohort 6 at AHO with four others from Africa: two from Kenya and two from Tanzania. We joined rather late and, compared to the other students in the same cohort, we were behind schedule as we had missed some of the preparatory theoretical courses. In exchanges that followed, Halina reassured us that she would bring us up to the level of the rest of the students.

As we got to know her better, it became clear that behind her unperturbed aura was a lady with a great mastery of the landscape of knowledge and with a strong scholarly demeanour. I was also struck by her ability to undertake academic discourse in a variety of languages including English, French, Norwegian, German, Russian and even Latin. She indeed is a polyglot. As she talked, she exuded a competence that reassured us that we were in capable hands. Through well-targeted readings, discussions, and exposure to the right lecturers, the mysteries of PhD knowledge were slowly revealed to us. Concurrently, she did her best to integrate us into the academic milieu at AHO.

Using a broad approach more tilted towards freedom than to order, she helped us see beyond our individual topics to appreciate the different brands of knowledge and the interconnections there-in, as well the possibilities and limitations within each. At first it was all too abstract, too complicated, and too unrelated to our research areas. But initial worries quickly gave way to excitement as we freed our minds to receive the knowledge. We soon

capable of saying complicated academic words (like *phenomenological*, *teleological* and *tautological*) without biting our tongues. Given the particularly heady academic cocktail that she concocted for us, it was inevitable that the little boxes of our research topics were eventually smashed to open up our minds to broad new vistas of knowledge. High on the cocktail we, after some time, felt like accomplished scholars. I guess one could even detect in us a whiff of misplaced arrogance.

Some of the most memorable moments of my doctoral study so far are the group sessions with Halina and my African colleagues in which we discussed philosophical issues and undertook exercises in scholarly criticism. She gave us free reign to enthusiastically discuss the new grand ideas, to dream and to speak. Sometimes, when we were in danger of letting our petty internal rivalries get the better of us, she would skilfully diffuse the tensions. I suspect that we were her first protracted encounter with Africans — a new culture. Yet she seemed to be completely at home with us. She shared jokes and even invited us to coffee and cake at the end of the first hectic semester. Still, I must always resist the urge to ask her the question: “weren’t you scared of this group of Africans — maybe a little — perhaps, uh?”

During the discussions, she largely remained the unobtrusive moderator, only chipping in to encourage and to answer specific questions or to prop-up a colleague who was getting an unfair pummelling. We must, for at least some of time, as we fervently discussed the new concepts that were at best half-baked in our heads, have made erroneous arguments. Yet, she probably let us continue with a few errors sure, that in end, we would comprehend the big picture. And indeed I believe I have a fairly good idea of the big picture and feel confident when discussing issues pertaining to knowledge. I think that what I got from the exposure that Halina accorded us was not a specific kind of knowledge but rather the principles behind knowledge. That, I now appreciate, is much more valuable than knowledge on a specific subject. Now I’m confident, not because I know everything (for that is obviously impossible), but because in any academic discourse, nodes of recognition will illuminate to form a guiding framework that I can then fill-in with well-targeted inquiry.

I come from the fishing-eating culture of the Samia in eastern Uganda. Fish is so much a part of our culture that it is even generally believed that a Samia is capable of consuming the flesh through one corner of the mouth as the bones drop out through the other corner. To me, the most valuable benefit I got from Halina is that, if knowledge were a fish, she has not given me the fish but has instead helped me learn how to fish. This way, I am now certain of having a steady supply of fresh fish.

I vividly remember one day when I was scheduled to meet Halina. Disoriented by the winter weather, I was running late. I left a message on

her answering machine and when I finally got there 30 minutes later, I was expecting a severe rebuke for wasting the busy lady's time. I was however taken aback when she received me with her usual calm warmth and said it was good that I had at least left a message. And that is perhaps the most admirable quality of Halina: even as she takes her work seriously, she has the humility not to take herself too seriously. Thus one minute in a meeting, she will with gentle firmness ensure that you internalise an important point and the next minute she will, with genuine interest, ask about your mundane life in Africa. And all that will be punctuated with the odd joke. Yet she always remains focused on the issues at hand keeping an eye on the big picture as well as the minute points. She has an uncanny ability for not only deciphering the grander concepts within a text but also highlighting minuscule details like the omission of a comma.

My experience with Halina has reiterated to me that encouragement is better than coercion. By showing that she believes in me she has infused me with a self-belief that has helped me to face the challenges of doctoral study as they unfold. And through the exposure she has accorded during the study, I have learnt to see beyond my research topic to the interconnectedness of knowledge. I have especially started to see the interconnectedness of the design professions. The seemingly incongruous mix of fashion and industrial designers and architects, that we had in some of the PhD seminars, has helped me to see that we are all just designers who contribute to the making of artefacts. And that design is just a statement of intention — such that the role of the designer is not merely to design but also to ensure that the object (be it a building, an apparel or a tool) crystallises according to plan. That indeed for the wider society, just as objects must be created according to a design, a good communal plan must be backed up by a good implementation strategy so that the result turns out as intended.

Halina's proficiency in scholarly matters indicates that she has already scaled great academic heights. Yet as she does her duties, she seems to take great pleasure in what she is doing. This leads me to conclude that while climbing the mountain of her academic challenges, Halina finds it perfectly okay to enjoy the view. If I had to use one phrase for this amicable polyglot — who shares a joke as she guides a bunch of Africans through a complicated academic landscape, who is at home with the top echelons of academia as well as with the rank and file, whose schedule can take her across several countries in just a week, who can undertake intellectual discourse in a variety of languages — then that phrase would be 'the International Academic'.

Poem: The Amicable Polyglot

Latin is
the mother of many languages
Hussein had
the mother of all battles

Dunin who speaks Latin
Wins not with swords
But using words

The amicable polyglot
Wins with
Academic clout
To wean yet an acolyte