Ibraimo Alberto and Marcia C. Schenck¹

10 Paths Are Made by Walking: Memories of Being a Mozambican Contract Worker in the GDR

When I meet Ibraimo Alberto, I recognize him immediately. He is the man with the hat. Today, it is a narrow-brimmed black hat, very similar to the one he is wearing on the cover of his autobiography. During our interview, I see pictures of Ibraimo wearing a cowboy hat, a broad-brimmed hat, the color of which is hard to determine in the black and white photograph, and various other head-dresses. Today, Ibraimo asks whether the hat can stay on during the interview. It is part of his style, an expression of his personality, and timelessly fashionable, he remarks with a grin. The hat has stayed with Ibraimo throughout his often-tumultuous life.

Ibraimo's story begins to take shape for me like an extensive collage that spreads out over the big conference table that stands between us as we talk. Pictures emerge: a certificate of excellence for Ibraimo's work in the GDR, a pennant of his sports club after reunification. These artefacts appear like flags to mark the unclaimed territory on the tabletop. There are constantly reemerging themes: Ibraimo the protector, Ibraimo the boxer, Ibraimo the hat connoisseur. Ibraimo artfully spins the web of his life in front of me, using the artefacts and themes to signpost his winding path. He speaks intently, often relating stories in the

¹ First of all, I would like to thank Ibraimo Alberto, without whose patience and generous willingness to share his memories this contribution would not have been possible. When I approached Ibraimo with this idea, he was immediately keen, on the condition that he did the talking and I did the writing. So, here we are. As the co-author of this piece I have taken off my academic hat and slipped into a new role, that of Ibraimo's hand and pen. I have thus not fact-checked or otherwise verified this story but have written down the memories that Ibraimo wanted to share with me about his life in the GDR and beyond. I have decided against using a first-person perspective because I want to make explicit the layers of interpretation inherent in the co-creation of this text. During May and June 2019, Ibraimo and I met in Berlin and he told me stories which were intended for a wider audience. I listened and transformed them into a piece of writing, which we then edited together. In the process, our subjective lenses combined into the present text. A note on language: our conversations took place in German and Portuguese and I wrote this text in English, which I then translated back for Ibraimo during the editing process. Further, I would also like to extend my thanks to the International Research Center Work and Human Lifecycle in Global History at the Humboldt Universität zu Berlin for allowing us to use their wonderful facilities for our meetings. And lastly, I would like to say thank you to Daniela Lehmann, Eric Burton, and Immanuel Harisch for their helpful comments and suggestions.

form of direct dialogue. His hands underscore his stories with emphatic gestures. Ibraimo takes this chance to talk about his life seriously. It is important to him to speak about the wonders but also the injustices that he has experienced as a black man in the GDR, and later in unified Germany. It is his larger goal to foster intercultural understanding through the sharing of memories. That is why he has agreed to share his recollections of life in the GDR, and of its legacies with which he continues to live.

Ibraimo has written his autobiography together with Daniel Bachmann, published in German in 2014.² This article is not just an English short version but zooms in on Ibraimo's life as a boxer in the GDR and is grounded in his memories as he shared them with me in 2019. Alexandra Piepiorka and Eduardo Buanaissa, in this volume, analyze the memoryscape that emerges as a result of the lived experiences that saw people travel along the axes of the socialist world. They reflect in detail on the role of memory in the production of intercultural spaces of remembrance. I will now turn towards Ibraimo's memories.

The Travels of the Man with the Hat

When I first met Ibraimo at a conference in Magdeburg in February 2019, I had already read his book and thus approached him to ask whether he would be interested in contributing a chapter to our edited volume.³ He said he was willing to do so—provided he could do the talking and I did the writing—offered me the informal *Du*, gave me a big hug, and handed me his business card. The motto on his business card reads: “Wege entstehen dadurch, dass man sie geht” (“paths are made by walking”). Nothing could be more appropriate for a life such as Ibraimo's, including as it has migrations big and small, forced and voluntary.

Ibraimo's first transcontinental journey took him to Europe, straight into the heart of East-West divisions, into a city where cold war rivalries had become

2 Ibraimo Alberto and Daniel Bachmann, *Ich wollte leben wie die Götter: Was in Deutschland aus meinen afrikanischen Träumen wurde* (Köln: Kiepenhauer & Witsch, 2014).

3 The symposium “Respekt und Anerkennung” [Respect and Recognition] brought together former Mozambican contract workers and former Mozambican school children in East Germany with East German experts who worked in Mozambique and actors from politics, the development sector, the Lutheran church and the academy and took place in Magdeburg, February 22–24, 2019. The conference proceedings have been published; see Birgit Neumann-Becker and Hans-Joachim Döring, ed., *Für Respekt und Anerkennung: Die mosambikanischen Vertragsarbeiter und das schwierige Erbe aus der DDR*, Studienreihe der Landesbeauftragten (Halle/Saale: Mitteldeutscher Verlag, 2020).

Image 1: Ibraimo in cowboy hat and jeans posing at a photographer's studio in Berlin at the beginning of the 1980s (image in the possession of Ibraimo Alberto).

manifest in the very cityscape: to East Berlin. Ibraimo came to the German Democratic Republic (GDR, or East Germany) on June 16, 1981, as an 18-year-old teenager thirsting for life, eager to embrace the new world he was about to encounter, to absorb all the education he could before returning home. He and his two third-grade friends, Fernando António Macajo and Manuel João Diego, had decided together to migrate to the GDR because they wanted to take the opportunity to receive an education.⁴ Neither of them had the faintest idea about the

⁴ See Franziska Rantzsch in this volume for a study on the negotiations between the representatives of the GDR and Mozambique with regard to the labor mobility scheme that brought Ibraimo Alberto and his friends to the GDR. See Marcia C. Schenck and Francisca Raposo in this volume for a discussion of an education migration scheme between Mozambique and the GDR.

GDR or what life there might look like. They only knew that it was a country in Europe, inhabited by white people. Ibraimo, the cowboy, was ready to explore the Wild East and the urban jungle of East Berlin. His hat made him invincible and his glasses (Ibraimo needed no glasses except for fashion reasons) let him see the world in a new way.

Ibraimo felt like he now was somebody: a traveler, a learner, an important young man, making an investment in his and his country's future. Intertwined, both futures would follow a path to success: while the young, recently-independent People's Republic of Mozambique was to develop through industrialization, Ibraimo was to learn a profession and return as skilled laborer and eligible bachelor who had explored Europe and in the process amassed not only stories but also material goods with which to support both his extended family and future nuclear family in Mozambique. "Nos somos continuadores!" is the slogan that comes to Ibraimo's mind, nearly 40 years later: "We are the continuation of the Mozambican revolution!" That was a sentiment close to young Ibraimo's heart. Aiding the revolution and working towards personal success were not exclusionary, but on the contrary, were interlocking goals, as Ibraimo understood the objective of his future return migration. Asked about this, more than a quarter of a century after the collapse of socialism in both Mozambique and East Germany, Ibraimo is not sure whether he ever believed in socialism. He was proud of Mozambique and he wanted development for his home country. He found himself living in two socialist people's republics and as such was active in the respective party organizations, but he cannot remember having been a particularly fervent supporter of socialism as a political doctrine.

At first, the young migrants were still very much connected to their previous lives in their respective home regions across Mozambique. This was a time before cellphones. Most migrants were only able to write letters home, but much more important than the written word (with which sometimes neither migrants nor their parents were overly familiar) were photos. Ibraimo and his friends sat for professional portraits in photo studios across East Berlin to document their journey. These were carefully orchestrated displays of a life Ibraimo and the other young workers lived as much—if not more—in their dreams as in reality. They wanted to send home images of successful young men and women who could afford to buy the latest fashionable clothes and pose with consumer goods. Their pictures also illustrated friendships (sometimes with white friends or extras, more often with one another) and playfulness. I am young, I am strong, I have travelled a long way, and I am invincible, these photos seem to say. They do not show the drudgery and long hours of work, the darkness and cold, the unfamiliar food, and the struggle to learn a foreign language (German) through another language (Portuguese) that was rarely the migrants' mother

tongue.⁵ This was also the case for Ibraimo. Looking at the young Mozambican cowboy, who is exploring the city of East Berlin not on horseback but on foot, not guarding cattle but hunting for consumer goods and enjoying touristic sites, I recall the motto on Ibraimo's business card: paths are made by walking. With these professional photos, Ibraimo and his friends wanted to convey to their friends and families at home that the path they were walking now was a prosperous one. The temporarily lost sons and daughters were basking in material attainments and enjoying their explorations of a far-away land in Europe, inhabited by foreign white people.

What these photos did not show was the shock that Ibraimo and others experienced upon arriving in East Germany. Ibraimo, who says of himself that he is an anxious person, suffered from disappointment and alienation, and struggled to adapt to the different climate and cuisine during his first few weeks. He felt isolated, betrayed, and at the mercy of those around him. Living in a country about which he knew nothing, where he could neither speak the language, nor any other language that would help him communicate with the inhabitants, was a deeply unsettling experience for Ibraimo. He felt that he had been lured to Germany under the false promise of education and was instead confronted with menial work in an industrial slaughter house. He wanted to return. But he believed that were he to return before his time was up, he would spend 14 years in a labor camp in Mozambique working off his travel costs. Not knowing what to do, he stopped eating. In the period immediately after his arrival, Ibraimo's chosen path looked gloomy and dangerous.

Becoming a Boxer

It might have all ended disastrously, had Ibraimo not had a dream. On the bus back from Schönefeld airport on the fateful day of June 16, 1981, a fight broke out. Teenage Ibraimo did what he always did. He went straight up to the aggressor and demanded: "Beat me, not him. But I will hit back!" Fifty-two heads turned, eyes expectantly on Ibraimo the protector. And in this moment Ibraimo's dream crystalized in his mind. He was going to learn how to box in East Germany.

He lost no time in asking the Mozambican intermediary and translator where he could learn boxing in this new land. The translator was used to many ques-

5 Katrin Bahr's text in this volume examines the other side of the coin, namely photographs taken by East Germans in Mozambique.

Image 2: Ibraimo and his friend Manuel João Diego training (image in the possession of Ibraimo Alberto).

tions from the recently arrived, but never before had he encountered such a request with such urgency. He did not know, but the German teacher assigned to the new worker-trainees of the meat processing plant, *VEB Fleischkombinat Berlin*, promised to inquire. Two months after his arrival in the GDR, Ibraimo started boxing at *Tiefbau Berlin*, a sports club of the *VEB Tiefbau*, a publicly-owned civil engineering enterprise. At 18, Ibraimo had no formal knowledge of boxing, so he started with the very young boys of 12 to 16, but that did not deter him. He was still wary of moving about the city by himself and so he persuaded his friend Manuel João Diego to accompany him. That was the beginning of two amateur sports careers that made headlines in East Germany.

To Ibraimo, boxing was not just a sport: it became central to his self-image. When he tells the story of his life, it begins with a small boy in the North of Mo-

zambique who had an innate drive to protect the weak and needy. There was not a single fight in the boy's village or the boy's school that took place without that boy going up to the aggressor and stating: "Before you hit him, hit me!" The reply would come: "But you are a good person, we want to attack the boy behind you." And the little boy Ibraimo would reply: "But he is as good a person as I am. We are all good people." Sometimes the fight would dispel as quickly as it had brewed. In other instances, young Ibraimo would have to physically fight and sometimes got badly beaten. Ibraimo the boy not only got into fights for noble reasons, but also for necessity. He had to protect his food from older youths who attacked him on his way to school, and to defend himself in class from older boys during unsupervised school hours. With all this fighting, young Ibraimo dreamed of learning how to box—not simply to be more effective in terms of self-defense, the older Ibraimo underscores—but to be a better protector. Yet, Ibraimo could not find boxing training anywhere near him in Manica and so he buried the dream and kept on fighting the only way he knew. Until one day on the bus from Schönefeld airport, an opportunity emerged to finally become a boxer.

Boxing in the GDR

Ibraimo's travels half way around the globe, to an unfamiliar country called the GDR, would have meant nothing to him had he not been able to start an amateur boxing career which saw him become Berlin Champion in September 1983. Even today, boxing is more to Ibraimo than a sport. It has been a valve, a mental challenge, an avenue for integration, and a tool for self-defense. Boxing was what made his life in the GDR enjoyable and protected him from overt and covert racism. Without boxing, his life in the GDR would have been miserable, Ibraimo states bluntly. But boxing gave him a purpose and a social network of teammates and trainers on which he was able to rely. His successes in the ring gave him a reason to feel proud and provided his life with the purpose and mental challenge that he could not find in his work. He worked in a meat-processing factory, *VEB Fleischkombinat Berlin*, from 1981 to 1986, and later as group leader in a glass factory, *VEB Glaswerk Stralau*, from 1986 to November 1990.

At work, Ibraimo was always successful. He was elected as head of his brigade as early as 1982. His gregarious and open character and his reputation as protector of the weak made him an obvious choice for his colleagues. In 1988, Ibraimo received a medal from the mayor of East Berlin for "excellent productiv-

ity in the socialist competition.”⁶ Yet, his work was never a source of satisfaction for Ibraimo. Ibraimo spent much of his time doing sports. He organized soccer competitions between Mozambicans from different companies across East Germany, and he played in an otherwise all-German team, *Turbine Treptow*. His real passion though was boxing.

Ibraimo describes boxing as a conversation using one’s hands. It requires awareness and concentration. It is not brute violence, but physical interactions that are governed by strict rules. Ibraimo thinks of boxing as an exchange. In many ways, boxing to 18-year old Ibraimo became the conversations he could not have otherwise, because he still only spoke a few words of German. It became the cultural exchange that rarely took place outside the training room and boxing ring for him. Ibraimo lived in a hostel near Tierpark that only housed foreign workers, a living arrangement he remembers as fun because of the parties that were thrown every weekend, but also as isolating from East German society. His brigade at the meat-processing plant combined workers from different nationalities, including Mozambican, Mongolian, Polish, and German, and relations were generally amicable, but during break time, everybody went to sit with their own national groups in the company canteen. Not so with boxing. In Ibraimo’s memory, he and his friend João became inseparable, trained together, travelled together to and from training and supported each other. But the support did not stop there. Their East German trainers and the other boxers from their club, young and old, stood behind them. They taught the two young Mozambicans the ins and outs of boxing and physically protected them from racist attacks.

Ibraimo recalls his first fight as if it were yesterday. He had been training for a year, when his coach Rainer Kühn told him that he was ready to compete. They chose an opponent who was a good match for his weight class and experience level, but on the day of the competition, the opponent bailed. Ibraimo was furious because he wanted nothing more than to fight. In the end they found a man who already had experience of seven fights. Despite the experience mismatch, Ibraimo decided to brave it out. He won. It was the moment in which Ibraimo found his style. The minute he entered the ring, Ibraimo says he became a wild animal that needed to defend its territory. He mercilessly attacked and attacked, and attacked, and attacked again.

⁶ The full German text reads: “In Anerkennung hoher Leistungen und beispielgebender Initiativen im sozialistischen Wettbewerb wird Ibraime (sic) Alberto als Mitglied eines sozialistischen Kollektivs die Medaille für ausgezeichnete Leistungen im Wettbewerb verliehen. Berlin 7. Oktober 1988.”

That style served him well, and only one year later Ibraimo had boxed himself to the top of Berlin's amateur sports scene and became city champion. During this time Ibraimo represented Berlin in different cities and was loaned to different clubs such as *Berlin TLC* and *Dynamo Berlin*. He remembers that when the others in his team had fun on the bus to competitions, he sat by himself and went through all the different scenarios of a fight. He would discuss the different strategies with his trainers and teammates. Ibraimo did not allow himself to lose focus. He had a goal. He had a passion. He had a mission.

Ibraimo's focus paid off. From 1985 onwards, he and João competed internationally for Mozambique. They bought training suits and designed the Mozambican national outfit for boxing. When Ibraimo recounts these stories his eyes still light up. He was proud to be able to bring fame to his home country. Ibraimo recounts how his East German coach became the Mozambican national trainer. Sadly though, the trainer had no emotional connection to the country and there was no money in it. That was the end of the Mozambican boxing team. Ibraimo's disappointment is still palpable many years later.

Being a black boxer in a white man's country was an ambivalent thing for Ibraimo from the start. In his East German opponents' minds, it was often not Ibraimo Alberto who entered the ring, but Muhammad Ali or George Foreman. Some were already afraid before the fight began, and Ibraimo quickly learned how to incorporate that into his strategy. But there were just as many fights when Ibraimo was not met by awe but by blank hatred. Especially when his team went to fight in Dresden and Magdeburg, Ibraimo felt racism emanating from both the audience and his opponents. That, he says, made him fight like a predatory animal. His trainers, he recounts, would never understand what came over him at these occasions. Only he knew. He was defending himself from much more than just the fists of his opponents. They were fighting about something more important than winning or losing this or that competition. Ibraimo felt the weight of defending his personal honor and the honor of every black man on planet earth. He needed to make the audience see that this "ape" knew a thing or two about boxing. He needed to make his opponents crumble under his fists because he knew how hopeless it all was. In the face of racism, Ibraimo felt himself standing on the losing side. Even when he walked away victoriously, his team would have to wait just outside the ring and embrace him with their masses of sweaty, muscular bodies to guard him safely back to the bus, back to Berlin. Ibraimo remembers these moments as sweet moments of boxing success, but also tainted forever with racism.

Boxing, however, did more than just expose the bigotry of some parts of the GDR. Boxing also allowed Ibraimo and João privileges that other Mozambican worker-trainees and workers did not have, such as mobility but also—paradoxi-

Image 3: Ibraimo fighting a boxer from VEB “Schwarze Pumpe” (image in the possession of Ibraimo Alberto).

cally—the opportunity to settle. For instance, Ibraimo proudly remembers international boxing competitions in Copenhagen, Moscow, and Budapest. Travel to the other side of the iron curtain was prohibited for the average Mozambican worker-trainee, but sport let Ibraimo cross what, even to most GDR citizens, was the insurmountable anti-fascist bulwark. And while boxing allowed Ibraimo to be mobile and travel along new paths to different countries, it also afforded him the ability to continue on the path on which he had set out in East Germany: it allowed him to put down roots. Ibraimo tells me he became a GDR citizen in 1988, a process that in the end needed him to make the tough decision to give up his Mozambican citizenship. Ibraimo, unlike his boxing partner João, did not lose much sleep over that issue, because he saw the center of his life to be in

East Germany.⁷ Overall, Ibraimo declares, life in the GDR was good because of the sports. The GDR fully supported Ibraimo's boxing career and once he had a contract, he was released from work to attend training camps. Between work, sports, and parties in his free time, time passed, the GDR fell, and the machines around Ibraimo came to a grinding halt.

Boxing in a Brave New World

While the GDR crumbled, Ibraimo boxed. When his Mozambican co-workers at the *Glaswerk* on the Stralau peninsula phased out of his life and returned to Mozambique, he took it out on the punchbag. João, his partner in crime for many years, also left and Ibraimo found himself alone. Ibraimo trained some more. As the world fell to pieces around Ibraimo, the sport gave him focus and strength.

The winds of change blew through East Germany like a cyclone, swept Ibraimo up, and dumped him in the small and isolated town of Schwedt. The town lies in Brandenburg state, on the left bank of the river Oder which marks the border with Poland. Schwedt has a special history, marked by substantial growth during the early days of the GDR—from 6,000 to 52,000 inhabitants—due to the petrochemical industry (PCK-Raffinerie). It then saw rapid decline in employment possibilities after German reunification, resulting in the outmigration of almost half of its population.⁸ Here, against the dramatic changes of the reunification period, emerged a personal treasure: Ibraimo was in love and soon his family began to grow. Still, the city of Schwedt and its surroundings proved less welcoming to Ibraimo and his family as time passed. Once again, boxing remained as Ibraimo's constant, the pillar of his self-worth, and the defining characteristic of his place in the community at large. While all the East German box-

7 Unlike Ibraimo, the majority of workers decided to return. Fernando Machava, in this volume, examines how fellow worker-trainees fared after their return back to Mozambique, describing a return in the expectation of riches and the good life but soon falling from grace and struggling to survive.

8 Schwedt was situated at the very fringes of the GDR but connected to the Druzhba pipeline which was constructed in the early 1960s as Comecon project to connect Russian oil to several countries in the Eastern bloc. While this was hugely important, the city was, apart from oil, also known as the country's biggest potato supplier, for paper factories and for the notorious NVA (the army of the GDR) prison. See Marc Langebeck and Alexander Goligowski's *Brandenburg aktuell*, May 6, 2014 special on the future of Brandenburg, "Die Kunst des Schrumpfens," published on May 7, 2014, <https://www.rbb24.de/politik/thema/2014/gehen-oder-bleiben-bei-traege/gehen-oder-bleiben-die-kunst-des-schrumpfens.html>, accessed July 2, 2020.

ing clubs changed their names, and no longer were affiliated with the socialist factories from which many had originated, the boxers stayed. Ibraimo now boxed for what had been the club of the *PCK Chemie* in Schwedt but was now known as *Uckermärkischer Boxverein 1948 Schwedt e.V.* (Uckermark Boxing Club 1948 Schwedt). Ibraimo began boxing in the national second division and moved up after one year to the first division (the Bundesliga). Ibraimo remembers that his success was untarnished. He had a secret weapon. He was able to lose weight, or what he calls to “make weight”, like nobody else. His nickname from that time—“Ali, the world champion of making weight”—attests to that. His normal weight would have been about 75 kg, but he managed to slim down to 63 kg for fights. Ibraimo’s amateur boxing career was the center of his life until he had to retire at the age of 37. But even then, he did not hang up his gloves but continued to train the next generation and got certified as a coach and referee. By the time of his retirement from competitive amateur boxing, the world around Ibraimo had fallen to pieces and was in the process of putting itself back together. The GDR was no more and its former citizens were now struggling to make a living in unified Germany.

At first, Ibraimo thought he had escaped the worst upheavals of the reunification ramifications. He married Birgit, an East German nurse who he had met after a boxing accident in Schwedt hospital in the fall of 1989. Their first child, a daughter, arrived in November 1990. With that, it was clear to Ibraimo that his future would be in Germany. A second child, a son, followed. The family still lived in Schwedt. During that time, Ibraimo remembers working for intercultural understanding, against all odds. He often had to take on the role that he was so familiar with from his childhood, that of a protector. He protected not only his family and himself, but also other migrants and Germans who needed his protection, in his role as representative for foreigners’ issues. While his wife continued working as a nurse, Ibraimo worked for the city of Schwedt as translator and advisor to the many refugees and asylum-seekers who arrived from Yugoslavia and elsewhere in the early 1990s. Ibraimo became very successful, not only knowing how to knock out his opponents in the boxing ring, but also interacting with and mediating for the many international sojourners who found a new home in Schwedt. As a result of his work fostering integration and intercultural understanding, Ibraimo studied social work at a college in Potsdam from 1997–2002. He still works as social worker with refugees in Berlin and remains active in anti-racism work.

Despite his evident people skills, one day it all became too much even for Ibraimo the protector. After a group of Neo-Nazis came to one of his son’s soccer games and threatened to kill him and another boy of Vietnamese heritage, Ibraimo felt that he could no longer guarantee the safety of his family. They packed

their belongings and left Schwedt under cover of darkness that very night. Their idea was to look for “inner German refuge” as Ibraimo calls it, in the “West”, meaning the former West Germany. Ibraimo says that I should have no trouble locating this tragic event in the newspapers because at that time he became famous for another reason, as “the last black man” fleeing Schwedt. At first, the family stayed in a rented holiday home close to Stuttgart until they received an offer that they could move into a flat in Karlsruhe. Ibraimo remembers thinking that life in Karlsruhe was far from perfect, but that he noticed that people were different, in that they sat next to him on public transport. According to Ibraimo, this was impossible in Schwedt. In Karlsruhe, life returned to a new normal and every family member worked through their own trauma of having survived racism in various forms. Eventually, however, the marriage broke apart and Ibraimo now found himself back where it had all started, in Berlin.

Image 4: Ibraimo never loses focus.

New Paths on Old Routes

When Ibraimo walks through Berlin today (yes, more often with a hat than without), he, like any East German Berliner, sees two cities. He walks the streets of the capital of the united Federal Republic of Germany and his eyes meet those

of the hipsters, businessmen and women, politicians, migrants, and tourists who dominate the streets today. But in his mind, he sees the East German Friedrichshain and Stralau peninsula, where he used to work in the 1980s. His memories of the rather greyer and more dilapidated city are juxtaposed with the new information his retina sends to his brain. What emerges is a city of memories, in a city where new memories are made daily.

Ibraimo's current life as a German citizen in Berlin is a legacy of the socialist dreams that expanded the world for Mozambicans like Ibraimo. Young Mozambican boys, girls, men and women were sent to Cuba, East Germany, the Soviet Union, and other countries of the Eastern Bloc, to go to school, to work, to attend universities, to take part in military training and professional job development workshops. Without the labor migration program that brought up to 21,000 Mozambican workers in their late teens and early twenties to East Germany, he would have never set foot on East German soil. Without setting foot on East German soil, he would not have had a boxing career, he would not have met his East German wife, and they would not have had children. If he had stayed at home, or if he had returned in 1990, there are countless scenarios of what might have happened. The two extremes are that Ibraimo might be dead as a result of the 16-year war in Mozambique, or alternatively he might have become successful at home with a combination of luck, relationships, and his boxing knowledge. Either way, he would most certainly not be sitting in Berlin with me today to talk about his past.

When asked how he remembers the GDR, Ibraimo brings up the metaphor of an oven. He explains that just like in an iron oven, it is nice and warm inside, and good things are in the process of being cooked. Yet, looking from the outside, you do not have a clue what is happening inside. It might get too hot, and, when you finally open the oven, you see that everything has already burned. When he first arrived, he knew nothing about the GDR. Later, there was a lot that Ibraimo came to enjoy. The friendships he formed, the parties they had, the clothes and consumer products he was able to buy, the travels he was able to undertake, the soccer matches he played with Mozambicans and Germans, and of course his boxing. But—and it is a big but—his memories of the GDR, just like his memories of his traumatic post-GDR experience in reunified Germany, circle back to the experience of racism. He remembers two types of racism. Firstly, the everyday, chronic, verbal kind; a poison that slowly sets about decomposing the self-worth even of a boxing champion and protector of the weak. Secondly, he remembers the immediate, acute, life-threatening kind of racism. Both seep into your very being, rewire your memories, stay with you forever. It was the latter, though, that made Ibraimo leave everything behind after his son was threatened. All Ibraimo had to protect him until the police arrived was his

own muscle strength, against the odds of a group of more than 10 ferocious Neo-Nazi boys. Nobody bothered to look into the oven. It is too late now. Everything is burned. The fear has never left Ibraimo.

Ibraimo accuses the average GDR citizen of a lack of interest in the people that came from abroad to work and train in the GDR. While he established friendships, he also encountered indifference and hostility. He credits a certain measure of protection from racist expressions in the GDR to the *Volkspolizei* (People's Police) and to their omnipresence. Ibraimo was not surprised at the outbreak of racist violence after reunification. To him, these actions were on a continuum with the GDR he had experienced before, where the illegality of racism merely led to it being capped and contained, not eradicated. In the end, in places like Schwedt, racism and xenophobia were able to grow to such proportions that Ibraimo reports even his friends became afraid of inviting him over for fear of themselves becoming targets of the wrath of the xenophobic. Ibraimo felt he could no longer trust the police to protect him and his family. But Ibraimo also gives a glimpse into the complicated notions of belonging in Schwedt, in that local people who he describes as Neo-Nazis protected him against outside Neo-Nazis, claiming the boxer is "one of us." In this complicated interplay between notions of masculinity, race, and belonging, we can see why Ibraimo might have seen hope in fighting for a peaceful and multicultural Schwedt during his 20 years in that town. For everything he has lived through, he has maintained a forgiving attitude. He speaks of the possibilities of understanding between people of different colors and life experiences and he takes us as an example. Our sitting at a table, a black man in his fifties and a white woman in her thirties, my listening to him telling his stories. Our project of giving voice to his memories so readers might gain an insight into a Mozambican former contract worker's recollection about his life in East Germany and the legacies thereof.

As Ibraimo and I are walking towards Friedrichstraße station on our respective ways home, he looks at me and relates a story that is at once funny and sad. In 1981, shortly after his arrival, he was exploring Berlin with a friend. They were taking in the new sights and taking pictures as any tourist would. When they came to Friedrichstraße, they did the same. Very soon, they found themselves handcuffed and held by the East German police for the afternoon. They did not have the faintest idea what was happening to them or why they were spending hours in police custody. When their translator finally arrived, after what seemed like an eternity to the two frightened teenagers, they learned that they had stumbled upon an inner-German border where it was strictly prohibited to take pictures. Today, Ibraimo, along with everybody else, can take pictures and traverse Friedrichstraße in whichever direction he likes. This is his freedom

as a German citizen. That citizenship, and the rights that come with it, are an important legacy of the pan-socialist links which connected Mozambique to East Germany, and which continue to reverberate into the present, embodied in the lives of people like Ibraimo.

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