

Mario Kleff

Without Fear

Robert Collins

Thiti Teerachin

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DEDICATION

Mario has, indeed, a fascinating character; a driven individual who knows what he wants and generally knows how to get it. His sheer will and commitment leads to its own way in privacy and in business.

He prefers a companionship of leopards rather than a common family life. He builds up his own cars and motorcycles and stands the consequences of an uncompromising and creative lifestyle.

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I could not have ended the biography without their warmth and support by providing documents, video and photo material and long meetings that I recorded.

I would like to mention once again that I don't think I could understand Mario Kleff's story if I hadn't written about him pre-2010 during my work for Rem Thailand. Mario Kleff is a great designer and architect and blessed with his beautiful wife Meow, his daughter Ming Ming and the leopards Fasai & Typhoon. Not to forget his loyal friend Som-O.

Thiti Teerachin alias Mario Kleff told me the other day: "I like your work and your spirit",
and this is the same way in which I like him.

1 THE HUNSRÜCK

The Hunsrück is a 124-kilometre expanse of rolling hills, low mountains and sweeping forests in southern Germany. It lies in the triangle formed by the confluence of the rivers Rhine and Moselle and is part of the western German state of Rhineland-Palatinate. It stretches from Koblenz in the north to Trier in the south, close to the border with Luxembourg.

Hunsrück is a magnet for nature lovers. Nature-based tourism is widespread. Its many forests are home to red deer, roe deer, foxes, badgers and pine martens while the keen-eyed visitor may even spot the occasional European wildcat or Eurasian lynx. To Mario Kleff, a young boy growing up in the 1970s, it was an adventure playground.

Mario Kleff was born in 1967 in Boppard, a small, sleepy, tourist town nestling on the banks of the Rhine in the northern extremity of the Hunsrück and famous as a wine growing centre. Mario was an intelligent, creative and artistic child. He inherited those characteristics from his father's side of the family and rapidly learned to appreciate the art and beauty around him with the talent to depict what he saw on paper or canvas.

Boppard was the home of Heinrich and Adelheid Kleff during the early years of their marriage. Heinrich was born into an old, once aristocratic German family in Magdeburg in 1943 while Adelheid Jakobs came from working class roots in Gondershausen, 20 kilometres to the south. The class divide was to become the source of family discontent in the years ahead.

Mario Kleff was the second of Heinrich and Adelheid's three children. Jörg was born in Boppard in 1965 and Nicole in 1971 in Viersen close to Düsseldorf. Although he has no memories of it, Mario spent the first two or three years of his life living with his parents and siblings. It was a brief period of unity in an otherwise dysfunctional family life. Parental arguments were frequent and as the family gradually grew apart, Heinrich immersed himself in work. Adelheid, a sports teacher at the time, remained with her daughter in Idar-Oberstein where a conspicuous US military presence provided social opportunities for the young Mario during his visits and opened his eyes to American culture.

By the age of five Mario found himself in a new home with his paternal grandmother, Christel, and her second husband, Heinz Hentrich. The country life afforded by the Hentrich family home in the sparsely populated area of Sauerbrunnen opened a whole new world for Mario. The tall trees, the babbling brooks, the winding forest paths and the teeming wildlife struck a chord inside the young boy. He was a loner and there was nothing to distract him from nature. When friends living nearby wanted him to join in a game of football, he preferred to set out alone in the forest. Before the age of ten, he would regularly take his camera with him on walks of up to 20 kilometres, recording on film the beauty that he saw in the trees, birds and animals of the forest. He was at one with nature for

the first time.

His grandmother, Christel, belonged to a dying generation; one that valued social standing above all else. She was unable to dissociate herself from her mother's aristocratic roots. They pervaded her life and, ultimately, destroyed any possibility of family unity that might have existed. She was obsessed with the etiquette of aristocratic living and projected that upon her young charge. But she was educated, well-read and musically gifted; family traits which were passed on to Mario in his formative years. Father Heinrich had been a talented amateur painter and Mario's great grandmother, Irmchen, an accomplished pianist. During frequent visits to her chateau, Mario used to love listening to Irmchen play and by the age of six he was being tutored in piano and violin.

Like Mario Kleff's father, Irmchen was also an artist and had taught Mario the rudimentary skills of painting when he was five years old. Before the age of 10, Mario was an accomplished artist, creating pictures of the landscapes and animals of his surroundings using charcoal, coloured pencils, watercolours and even oil paints. He saw beauty in buildings, mountains, rivers and, despite his tender years, also the female form.

Christel's husband, Heinz Hendrich, was an entirely different individual; a working-class man who provided for an unappreciative wife and unselfishly gave his time to the stepson and step grandson he loved. His marriage to Christel was certainly not a match made in heaven. Bereaved by the war, Christel was on the lookout for a suitable replacement husband, and although Heinz fell short in that requirement, she fell in love with his Teutonic good looks.

Sauerbrunnen was a quiet spot along the four kilometres of road that linked Pfalzfeld and Emmelshausen. And that suited Mario just fine. The rural location nurtured his growing interest in wildlife and quenched his thirst for adventure while frequent visits to his mother in Idar-Oberstein, the largest town in the Hunsrück, gave him an entirely different kind of experience. Known as a gemstone town, Idar-Oberstein's bars, restaurants, discos and nightclubs provided a major recreational diversion for thousands of US servicemen and civilian staff from the nearby military base at Baumholder.

Located a few kilometers south of Idar-Oberstein, Baumholder had been a small, residential community of fewer than 5,000 inhabitants. But all that changed in the 1930s when Hitler's Third Reich selected Baumholder as the ideal location for a large military training area as part of Germany's rearmament programme. So, in 1937 the Nazi government acquired 22,000 acres of land, displacing 842 families from 14 different villages around Baumholder in the process. Construction began after they were resettled in the surrounding area and, by 1938, 20 houses, an officer's camp with post headquarters, a quartermaster depot and separate barracks for each company were completed.

French military units occupied the site at the conclusion of World War II and in 1951 the US military took over, building homes for American families along with schools, churches, clubs and warehouses. Baumholder is now home to the largest concentration of combat soldiers outside the United States with more than 13,000 American soldiers, airmen, civilians, and their family members.

The resulting economic impact on Idar-Oberstein was enormous. US dollars were spent as freely as the prevailing Deutschmark and were widely accepted by local retailers. Americans became major players in the local community, and it was a community that the young Mario liked very much. In sharp contrast to the rustic, rural life he led at his grandmother's house, Idar-Oberstein offered a taste of excitement and perhaps a glimpse of glamour. Mario revelled in it; so too did his mother. During his frequent visits to her modest Idar-Oberstein home he regularly found himself in the company of Americans, particularly black Americans.

Adelheid Kleff was a hedonist, determined to live life to the full in the Hunsrück's most cosmopolitan and socially

vibrant town. She lived in a modest three-bedroomed house that had been built for US servicemen and their families. It was surrounded by similar abodes inhabited largely by American military personnel, many of whom were black. They mingled freely with the local population and Mario found them engaging.

“Their culture was very attractive to me, and I loved their music,” he said. “I found myself living in the homes of black American families for three or four nights at a time. They opened my eyes and my ears to new music, far removed from the marches of Hitler and Wagner that I had been used to. And they took me to the cinema, which my family had never done. I loved it all and it enabled me to meet a number of fascinating people, some of whom were destined to become famous singers, thanks to the German disco scene which was emerging at that time. As an eight-year-old boy I got to know the Jamaican singer Precious Wilson very well while she was at Baumholder. I used to stand by the stage when she performed as a largely unknown singer in front of no more than a hundred people at a time. When I saw this beauty, I knew that one day I would love to have her.”

Precious Wilson went on to greater things. She had relocated to Germany as lead singer of the pop group Eruption in 1976 and went on to record top ten UK hits with *I Can't Stand the Rain* and *One Way Ticket* during the following two years.

The relationship between Mario's mother and paternal grandmother was at best frosty and at worst frozen. Christel and her son, Heinrich, were descended from an aristocratic family that had its roots in Prussia and Russia. Adelheid was not. In Christel's eyes, Adelheid's working class background marked her out as unsuitable material for Kleff family membership. An uneasy truce prevailed for the sake of young Mario, who took full advantage of the opportunities these two colliding worlds offered. But he was happiest when he was back at his grandmother's house. There he could indulge his passion for outdoor pursuits, encouraged by Christel's husband, Heinz, who taught him to shoot, to hunt, to fish and to be self-sufficient during frequent nights spent camping in the surrounding forests.

Mario Kleff was a bright child; too bright for his classmates in the Kant Gymnasium, the school he attended in Boppard. And so he was placed in a higher age group more suited to his heightened academic abilities. But it wasn't only in the classroom where the young Mario excelled. He was a gifted sportsman with particular talents for swimming, gymnastics and athletics. He learned to swim as an infant and during time spent at his mother's home in Idar-Oberstein he joined the DLRG, the German Life Saving Association, honing his swimming skills and achieving proficiency standards from the basic 'seahorse' through bronze, silver, gold and finally the 'totenkopf', or death's head. As a runner, he competed in the 100 metres through to 5k and as a gymnast he excelled at the floor exercises and the rings. Later, he spent up to two years studying and practising karate. The Kant Gymnasium was a 30-minute train journey from grandma's house along the 50 kilometres Simmern to Boppard line. This scenic railway meandered through lush forests, crossing two picturesque viaducts on its way to its destination. It was a pleasant and relaxing journey, especially as there were usually fewer than 20 passengers sharing the train's four or five carriages. The problem was there was no railway station in the vicinity of Mario's home. The train did, however, slow down as it approached, and Mario and his friends had to be agile enough to leap aboard as it was still moving. It was the same procedure in reverse on the return journey home. It was, as he put it, an adventure in itself.

While every town in the Hunsrück contained a castle, the countryside was also dotted with mansions. The Hentrichs lived in one of them, a 19th century house built in the lavish and ornate Gründerzeit style which was popular in Germany after the Franco-Prussian War in the early 1870s. Mario loved the house. Its sense of history, from its wooden furniture to the paintings hanging on its walls, inspired him to create art. And its well-stocked library was a veritable wonderland of knowledge just waiting to be explored.

Christel and her first husband, Friedrich Kleff, had met when the pair were active participants in the Hitlerjugend, the Nazi party's youth movement. Friedrich was a member of the Hitler Youth while Christel was a Gruppenleiter, a leader, in its female equivalent, the Bund Deutscher Mädel (BDM), the League of German Girls for those under

18, members of the Hitler Youth were tasked with ensuring the future of Nazi Germany and were indoctrinated in Nazi ideology, including racism. The BDM, on the other hand, used campfire romanticism, summer camps, folklore, tradition, and sports to indoctrinate girls with Nazi principles and to prepare them as future wives, mothers and homemakers in the Third Reich. As a result, Christel and Friedrich became fervent Nazi supporters and remained that way for the rest of their lives. In Friedrich's case that life was not very long. He subsequently became a *Sturmabführer*, or major, in the *Schutzstaffel*, more widely known as the SS, which became the foremost agency of security, surveillance and terror within Germany and German-occupied Europe. But he died from a shot in the head during World War Two while Christel was pregnant with her second child, Mario's father.

Mario Kleff recalled: "I don't remember whether my step-grandfather, Heinz, was of similar opinions or whether he simply went along with it for his wife's sake, but if a documentary featuring Hitler came on television in the 1980s, he and Christel would stand up and give the Nazi salute!"

The Heinrichs did, however, encourage and satisfy a hunger that Mario Kleff had for knowledge. Unlike Mario's mother, Christel had had the benefit of a good education and instilled its virtues into her grandson. Her house contained a library, resplendent with a fine array of books, and so Mario became an avid reader, not of the usual fairytale fare of children, but of science, nature, art and music. Even politics. By the age of 10 or 11 Mario Kleff was reading books by Friedrich Schiller and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. For his 11th birthday he received a limited edition book by Richard Wagner, Hitler's favourite composer, explaining the tortuous process by which he had composed the epic opera *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, popularly known as the Ring Cycle. Before he was 12 years old, Mario was given a signed copy of a book by the infamous Joseph Goebbels, Hitler's Minister of Propaganda and one of Christel's favourite authors and politicians. He also had a copy of *Mein Kampf*, Hitler's 1925 manifesto which describes how he became antisemitic and outlines his political ideology and future plans for Germany. The books kindled Mario's interest in the Nazi movement leading him to delve deeper into the subject.

"Between the ages of 10 and 13 I became very interested in the Nazi era and everything that happened in World War I and World War II," he said. "I devoured all the information I could get. Who was Hitler? What was a Nazi? What did it actually involve? What impressed me were Heinrich Himmler's military strategies and Joseph Goebbels' propaganda concept, and as a young artist I liked all the Nazi graphics and symbols. I loved the swastika, the uniforms, the castles and I even loved the women dressed in a military style. I found it all amazing."

Every activity that Christel and Mario jointly engaged in contained an element of education. There was little or no room for play. With a hankering to rekindle her long lost aristocratic roots, Christel taught young Mario the finer points of aristocratic etiquette, laying down the rules of acceptable behaviour.

"She always thought she was someone special," Mario said. "My grandmother showed me how to walk, how to sit. There were specific rules on how to eat, how to drink, how to behave. There was no affection. My grandmother didn't understand what love was. She didn't even love her husband."

Her husband, Heinz, was a decent fellow, a tall and handsome man with blond hair and Aryan good looks. He devoted his time to providing for his family and raising rabbits on his large property. But Heinz was a working man. He was a truck driver who came from a working-class background and that did not fit in with Christel's grand plan for the Kleff dynasty. Despite the fact that Christel was totally financially reliant on Heinz, he was belittled, his background disparaged and denigrated in much the way that Mario's mother's was. Yet although he was held in such low esteem by his wife, Heinz had plenty of time for Mario.

Step grandfather and step grandson would regularly take weekend excursions into the Hunsrück, camping overnight at one of its many natural beauty spots and preparing their meals on an open fire. One of their favourite destinations was the Lorelei, a 132-metre-high slate rock on the banks of the Rhine at Sankt Goarshausen. It is steeped in folklore

and mythology. For more than 200 years the Lorelei has been a favourite subject of poets and composers, including Shostakovich, Mendelssohn and Liszt. According to legend, Lorelei was a beautiful maiden who sat on the rocks, combing her blond hair and luring distracted seamen to their deaths on the rocks below. The Freilichtbühne Loreley, built at the height of the Third Reich in the 1930s, is an open-air amphitheatre now used for theatrical performances and rock concerts. Perched on top of the rock, it occupies the spot that Lorelei herself might once have done. The Lorelei was a magical place for the young Mario who loved nothing better than to emerge from his nearby tent at around 5am, clamber up the rock face and watch the early morning boats ply their trade between Koblenz and Mainz.

“I loved Heinz,” Mario said. “He had such a big heart and while my grandmother taught me the old classical, aristocratic rules of how to behave in life, my grandfather showed me real life. He showed me the forests, the animals and took me to museums, galleries and castles. It was the family members from non-aristocratic backgrounds who to me were normal people, trying to make my life pleasant.

“Heinz was largely responsible for nurturing my love of nature. I think, ultimately, that created balance with the world represented by my grandmother. The irony is that although she never worked a day in her life and after many years of putting her husband down, she died in poverty, a penniless and bitter woman.” Mario loved the woods, and he loved the aristocratic outlook. He would travel the world in the shoes provided by Christel and Heinz.

Despite her flaws, Christel was a constructive influence on Mario Kleff's formative years. But she wasn't the only one. There was also Irmchen, Christel's mother and a grand lady who was a product of Prussian aristocratic stock. She was an imposing woman who lived in a small, lavishly decorated chateau, populated with uniformed staff, and situated between Simmern and Kastellaun. Irmchen was another who had married beneath her station. Her husband had been a military man who became a successful businessman. He was also a forest ranger responsible for managing the wildlife over several hundred square kilometres of the Hunsrück. Irmchen lived to be 103 and the young Mario had the opportunity to spend time with her and her husband on many occasions. They introduced their great grandson to even more wonders of the Hunsrück, giving him the benefit of their extensive knowledge of the flora and fauna of the region and taking him on visits to many of its vast array of monuments and structures.

Mario Kleff's father, Heinrich, was most notable for his long absences. Despite that, he and Heinz Hentrich were Mario's boyhood heroes. Heinrich was the younger of Christel Kleff's two sons. His older brother, Hermann, had joined the French Foreign Legion and died in Morocco in unknown circumstances. He was an uncle that Mario never met.

Heinrich never knew his father, who died before Heinrich's birth in Magdeburg in 1943. Heinrich studied mechanical engineering which opened the doors to international travel for him in the 1970s. He set his sights on Africa. His more than 20-year love affair with the Dark Continent began in 1973 when he took his first post in Libya. For several years he divided his time between Africa and Germany, but after 1976, when Africa became his principal focus, his visits back home became increasingly less frequent. His early career in Germany was spent largely on construction sites, levelling land in preparation for all manner of civil engineering projects.

Heinrich had a very special skill. He was an expert operator of heavy earth moving equipment; one of the best in Germany. It meant he never needed to look for work, work looked for him. He could, as Mario put it, flatten a hill and leave it as level as the putting surface on a golf course. His work took him to remote areas where he preferred to operate alone, rising at 3am each day and working in the dark to avoid the blistering mid-day sun. He was frequently joined by his son who loved nothing better than to perch himself on a plank next to Heinrich in the single seat cab of a Caterpillar tractor and watch his father dexterously manipulate the controls whilst reconfiguring the landscape.

Mario Kleff was good at learning by watching. Noting the absence of a steering wheel, he quickly realised that the giant machines were manoeuvred by two brake levers, one for the left wheel track, the other for the right. A third, larger lever controlled the speed and a smaller one the three forward gears and one reverse.

“There was no clutch to worry about and although there were three-foot pedals, I was too small to reach them,” said Mario. “However, as they did the same job as the levers, I figured I could operate the machine without them.”

His chance to find out came when his father sat him on his lap and let him operate the largest earth mover in the Caterpillar range, the 49-ton D9. Soon he was competent enough to operate the huge machines without his father’s help and there were times when the pair operated separate tractors simultaneously; one driven by the experienced expert, the other by his seven-year-old son.

However, it wasn’t all plain sailing for the precocious youngster. On one occasion a road construction project required some marshland to be cleared, a job for one of the lighter tractors because of the soft ground conditions. Heinrich set to work and quickly discovered the ground was too soft, even for the lightest Caterpillar, and his machine became stuck in the boggy ground. The more he tried to manoeuvre the vehicle out the more entrenched it became. Heinrich himself was trapped in the cab for leaving. It was to risk being sucked into the swampy ground himself.

Mario, who witnessed the entire episode from the safety of firm ground, was sent back to the deserted camp about a kilometre away to seek help. That help came a short while later in the form of a giant D9 with the boy at the controls. He attached a steel cable to the three-pronged articulated ripper at the rear of the D9 and pulled his father’s-stricken machine out of the marsh. Unfortunately, the novice driver made too sharp a turn in the process, causing the two hydraulically operated arms which raised and lowered the ripper to snap. The damage amounted to several thousand marks.

Facing a bill that amounted to more than a few months of his wages at that time, Heinrich decided to take responsibility for the incident, fearing a bigger problem if it emerged that his seven-year-old son had been at the controls. It was a ploy that didn’t work.

“The owner of the company was a millionaire,” said Mario. “He was a friend of my mother, and he had a young son of his own. I don’t know how he figured it out, but he picked me up and said: ‘You are the son of your father, and you were driving the D9 weren’t you?’ He was more excited than anyone and so he absolved us from responsibility.”

Mario was undeterred by the experience and honed his driving skills on more conventional vehicles in the company of his father. Heinrich was an avid amateur racing driver and took his son along to weekend events in which he competed. These included hill climbs and track competitions, occasionally at the world-famous Nürburgring circuit which also gave Mario the opportunity to experience the thrill of Formula One racing.

Heinrich was a skilled mechanic and converted his Ford and BMW saloon cars to full race specifications. The cars were loaded onto a low loader which in turn towed a camper trailer. The Kleffs set off to race meetings where they made camp along with 30 or 40 like-minded petrol heads. “I loved it,” said Mario “and I made myself useful with a pressure washer cleaning the cars and doing what I could with an oil can. At the same time, I learned to drive a road car under my father’s supervision.”

Heinrich was a large man with a striking appearance. He was strict and unforgiving, angry with and not grateful to his son for the incident with the Caterpillar D9. “The reason was because whatever I did, I was expected to do correctly, and I hadn’t,” said Mario. “He also hated stealing, lying and indiscipline and he had a very quick temper.”

That temper led to frequent arguments with an equally fiery Adelheid, his wife. Combined with heavy drinking, which both were prone to, the marriage was on an unstoppable course towards divorce, which occurred in the late 1970s. “Their drinking was a major factor in their break-up,” said Mario, “yet after the divorce my father never touched a drop of alcohol again.”

Police were called to the couple’s home after one particular heavy drinking session. Heinrich and Adelheid were arguing and there had apparently been an altercation with a third person. Two or three police cars drew up outside the couple’s house. That clearly irritated Heinrich who grabbed a gun and fired several shots at the waiting vehicles. He was arrested but after questioning at the police station was released without charge.

Despite this, Heinrich had been an attentive father. But it all changed when he became an international traveler. After 1976 he spent up to a year at a time in foreign climes, interspersed with the occasional, fleeting visit back to Germany, usually around Christmas. Mario looked forward to his visits and whilst they were brief there were times when he didn’t get an opportunity to see his father at all.

“Of course, I missed my father,” Mario said, “but looking back I don’t think his continued absence damaged me at all. As brief as his visits were, I enjoyed seeing him and I looked forward to receiving the gifts he would bring me, but I accepted it when he had to leave. I remember during one visit, when I was very young, he asked me what present I would like. I said I wanted a dog. Together we visited a number of breeders and eventually he bought me a beautiful Afghan hound. Then as quickly as he arrived, he was gone again.”

As the years rolled on and his visits became even less frequent, Heinrich maintained contact by telephone and often regaled his son with his exploits in the Sahara Desert. Then, when Mario was nine, the invitation came: come to father. For Mario, the lush greenery of the Hunsrück was about to be exchanged for the parched, sun-drenched sands of the Sahara. Africa was calling.

2 OUT TO AFRICA

Mario Kleff's ability to self-educate prepared him well for his journey to Africa. The fact his reading material consisted of books more likely to appeal to students 10 years older meant he had already studied the topography, climate and economies of North African countries on the Mediterranean seaboard. He was excited by the prospect of spending time in these new, exotic surroundings, but he was even more excited by the prospect of reuniting with his father, a man with whom the telephone had been his principal connection for several years. Most of all he dreamt about once again sitting alongside him on a giant earth mover and helping him reshape the landscape, this time part of the Sahara Desert.

At the age of nine Mario Kleff was to make the journey alone, but he was unfazed by the prospect. He was about to learn something new, to experience something he had only read about in books and told about by his father. He had been almost an itinerant within the Kleff family structure; initially living with his parents, then his grandparents, occasionally with his mother and sometimes with his great grandparents. It had made him fiercely independent and supremely confident in his ability to surmount any obstacles that life cared to throw up. So the prospect of making his first ever flight in an aeroplane while travelling the 2,000 kilometres between Frankfurt and the Libyan capital, Tripoli, held no fears for him.

Heinrich Kleff had initially not wanted his son to join him. He felt Mario would be missing too much school and that he would have to spend too much time on his own because of work commitments. But Heinrich gradually relented under Mario's persistent requests and the day finally came when the boy was to fly to Libya and reunite with his father. Arrangements had been made for Heinrich's employer to collect Mario from his grandmother's home at Sauerbrunnen and drive him the 90 kilometres to Frankfurt Airport for an early morning flight to Tripoli where he was to be met by his father.

Heinrich's employer arrived at Sauerbrunnen in a limousine, a top of the range Daimler Double-Six and Mario was instantly smitten. He had been used to travelling in the gas-guzzling Buicks, Pontiacs, Fords and Chevrolets of his American friends in Idar-Oberstein, but this was altogether an entirely different matter. He loved the smell of the leather upholstery, the walnut veneer, the dark green paintwork and the roar of the 5.3 litre V12 engine. Above all he loved the beauty of it.

"I knew instantly that I wanted one and promised myself that one day I would have one," said Mario. "It was a desire that remained with me for many years until I realised how much it would cost to buy one and how much its unreliability would cost me in repairs!" Nevertheless, a passion for motor vehicles had been ignited and it was to manifest itself in a number of unique ways later in his life.

Less than four hours after departing Frankfurt, Mario's Lufthansa flight touched down in Tripoli in the oil rich state of Libya, ruled over by the military dictator Muammar Gaddafi. The existence of the military regime was evident in the run-down terminal building which was in desperate need of renovation that was to come a year later. In the small arrivals hall armed soldiers mingled with Arabs, clothed in their traditional white robes, and Europeans, mostly Germans, in western suits. But there was no Heinrich Kleff to be seen.

Mario waited, convinced his father had merely been delayed and would eventually arrive to collect him. Thirty minutes passed, then forty. Still no Heinrich, so Mario approached a female member of the airport staff and asked her to put out a message for his father on the public address system. 'Would Herr Heinrich Kleff please report to the information desk where his son is waiting for him.' That would do the trick. But fifty minutes passed and there was still no sign of Mario's father.

It was a situation that would leave most nine-year-olds in floods of tears. But Mario was too excited to panic and saw it as a challenge that required an imaginative solution. It came in the form of a sign held aloft by one of the clutches of drivers waiting at the airport to collect unknown passengers. As the small crowd in the arrivals building slowly drifted away there remained a few drivers, one of whom held a sign bearing the name 'Ohl', the name of the Frankfurt-based company which employed Heinrich Kleff. Accompanied by his new-found female friend, Mario approached the man. Did he know Heinrich Kleff? Yes, indeed he did. Could he take Mario to him? No, he could not because Heinrich was 1,000 kilometres to the south-west and this particular driver was going to a different Ohl camp in an entirely different direction. But what he could do was transport him to a midway point where another vehicle could take Mario to the remote desert location where his father worked.

Setting off around midday, Mario found himself sitting in the back of a pickup truck with a couple of other passengers. Soon the asphalted roads of Tripoli gave way to dust tracks in the scorched, lifeless desert. Peering at the vista from the back of the pickup, it occurred to Mario that the view was not dissimilar from the one he had had from his window seat hours earlier during his inaugural flight. There was virtually nothing to see, not even a filling station, during the eight- or nine-hour trek across the desolate landscape. Mario sat among the petrol cans used to refuel the pickup on its journey. The consequence of running out of fuel did not bear thinking about.

The pickup trundled through the desert until the early evening when it arrived at a cluster of stone-built homes. Among them was a general store selling basic provisions including food and drink. Mario was told to wait there. In an hour or two another pickup would arrive and take him to the camp where his father worked. With that the first pickup departed and Mario was left alone in the remote settlement. Inside the store there was a wooden bench on the sand floor where he could sleep if he wanted. But he was too excited for sleep and decided to wait outside for the arrival of his next ride. An hour passed, then two, and still no pickup.

"I was getting rather concerned at that point but there was nothing I could do, so I just waited," said Mario. "Then much to my relief the second pickup arrived between three and four o'clock in the morning."

There followed another three-hour journey in almost total darkness before the pickup arrived at the desert camp shortly after daybreak. The camp was a curious affair which resembled a detention facility rather more than a base for construction workers. It was surrounded by a steel fence topped by barbed wire attached to rusty metal posts. Yet it was open, rendering the apparent security measures largely redundant. It was also large, perhaps 200 metres wide and 300 metres deep with rows of prefabricated houses on one side and workshops, storerooms and heavy earth-moving equipment on the other. There was also a prefabricated canteen, large enough to accommodate 100 people, despite the fact there were only between 30 and 40 on site, and there was a large, raised concrete swimming pool. Everything had been designed to be moveable in case the camp needed to be relocated as the project progressed.

That project was the construction of an oil pipeline across the desert. Heinrich Kleff's task was to create the access roads necessary for the fleet of trucks to transport equipment and materials to where they were required. The desert at this point did not consist of smooth sand and rolling dunes but rather rocky outcrops, some of which were large enough to contain caves. Heinrich and his giant Caterpillars were there to carve a path through them.

Just as the pickup carrying Mario entered the main gate, he spotted his father walking from one of the prefabricated houses to the canteen for breakfast. Hearing the cry of 'Papa!', a stunned Heinrich stood rooted to the spot when he saw his nine-year-old son running towards him. Instead of scooping the boy up in a fatherly embrace, a slightly vexed Heinrich gave Mario a playful punch and exclaimed: "What are you doing here? You are supposed to arrive tomorrow!" Heinrich had been given the wrong information owing to a breakdown in communication with Ohl's German head office, hence his absence from the airport the previous day.

By the time he arrived on site, Mario had been travelling without sleep for 24 hours, but he was not tired. "I was excited and hyperactive," he said, "so sleep was the last thing on my mind. But my father had to work, so he took me to the two-bedroomed chalet he was living in, showed me where I was to sleep, and left me there alone for the rest of the day."

Welcome to Africa!

3 LIFE IN THE DESERT

Mario Kleff had travelled 3,000 kilometres from the comfort of his home in Germany to one of the most inhospitable places on earth, the Libyan Desert in the north-east corner of the greater Sahara. It was a barren, parched and rocky wasteland devoid of water, vegetation and habitation. The scorching sun meant that summer temperatures regularly reached a blood-boiling 50 degrees or more, yet they could plunge after dark with winter nights frequently reaching well below freezing. The Ohl camp offered little relief. It was a purely functional workplace, the only concession to home comforts being the large, concrete swimming pool, raised above ground to keep the temperature of the water it contained down to an agreeable level.

On the face of it, Libya had nothing to offer the young Mario, but that was all about to change. Mario quickly learned that there was a beauty about the apparently lifeless desert that few appreciated, and he was going to make the most of it.

Ohl's accommodation was rudimentary, a series of 30 or 40 temporary, white painted cabins, each consisting of a small kitchen diner, two even smaller bedrooms and a toilet. Personal hygiene was undertaken in an open, communal shower block where privacy was a minor consideration.

The Kleff cabin was located near the camp's main gate and was one of 20 or 30 identical, white-painted structures which comprised the camp village. The cabin had air conditioning, a television capable of showing Libyan channels when the weather permitted, and a radio which required astute manoeuvring of an antenna in order to pick up faint traces of a distant station broadcasting in a language the Kleffs could understand. His father, Heinrich, had turned to the Muslim faith and learned the Arabic language. Outside the cabin door, planted in the sand, there was a small bush with dark green leathery leaves, kept alive by an adjacent water sprinkler. It was a reminder that, elsewhere on the planet, luxuries such as gardens actually existed.

Stepping outside on his first day, Mario's first mission was to explore the camp. Despite the facility occupying around 60,000 square metres of desert real estate, searching it was not an onerous or time-consuming task. Camp life, such as it was, revolved around the canteen, but the majority of the camp's employees left the site promptly after breakfast only to return as the sun went down. During the day the site was largely deserted, populated only by a few maintenance workers and caretakers.

The greater part of the camp was occupied by various steel structures, all of which had taken on a reddish-brown hue as the result of the all-pervasive rust. There were two huge steel buildings the size of aero plane hangars. These housed motor graders, the massive earth movers used for carving access roads out of the desert where Ohl was constructing oil and water pipelines. There were also repair shops, a machine cleaning facility, warehouses and

storage buildings. The canteen was part rusted steel, part brick-built and measured some 30 by 20 metres. With no air conditioning for the comfort of its diners, the canteen relied on its many windows and large, open door to provide ventilation. Behind it were several rusted steel water towers and petrol tanks and a shop supplying basic necessities. Everything was rust red if made from steel and white painted if it was not.

Supplies of food, fuel and water arrived regularly by trucks from elsewhere in Libya, as would the pickups bringing new recruits and family visitors and departing with those returning home. The Ohl camp was a transient community with frequent comings and goings.

Life within the camp followed a fairly unbending routine. Rising before dawn, the grader drivers and pipeline workers would gather in the canteen for breakfast and 30 or 40 minutes later would exit in masse into the desert, returning only in the evening when the sun dipped below the horizon. Only a handful of people remained in the camp during the day, including Mario.

“There was absolutely nothing to do.” He said. “I couldn’t even use the pool in the daytime because the sun would burn my skin. If I was lucky, I would see my father on a Sunday, which was supposed to be his rest day, but even then, he would frequently go out to work. He had little time for me, so I was mostly left alone. I was ready to explore.”

Boredom set in quickly at Camp Ohl. After his first few days there it was time for Mario to broaden his horizons. That meant leaving the compound. The golden rule when stepping outside the perimeter fence alone was always to keep the camp in sight. The changing nature of the desert, the absence of landmarks and the almost total darkness after the sunset meant it was easy to become disorientated and get lost. It was, however, a rule that Mario had little intention of obeying. Furthermore, there was danger in the form of packs of wild dogs, scorpions, poisonous spiders and venomous snakes.

Ignoring the advice, Mario set out on foot most days, venturing further and farther in every direction into the desert, occasionally straying 5 or 10 kilometres from the camp. When not exploring on his own, he would ride all day on one of the trucks spraying water to damp down the dust where the machines were operating. Alternatively, he would hitch a lift on a motor grader operated by an amenable driver and ride into the desert where men were working.

“Sometimes I would sit with a Moroccan or an Algerian driver and sometimes a European driver, I didn’t care,” Mario said. “I would go with whoever was happy to take me because I just wanted to be out of the camp, sitting in a cab, even with no air conditioning, in the baking sun. It didn’t matter how far from the camp we went. Everywhere looked absolutely the same. The desert was flat and through the heat haze you could see for maybe 20 or 30 kilometres.”

Mario Kleff was a gregarious child. He liked to sit and chat with people in the camp and watch them work, helping to polish the fleet of earth movers in an effort to make himself useful. It made him popular with the drivers and that helped allay his father’s fears about him spending so much time out of the camp. The desert terrain fascinated him. Everywhere he would see flat, open expanses of white sand littered with stones and the occasional dried bush. His vivid imagination pictured a river or a lake a million years ago that had long since dried up leaving this drab and seemingly lifeless landscape.

Mario quickly learned that terrain like this was anything but lifeless. It was the habitat of snakes and scorpions which hid under the rocks to avoid the heat of the sun. “I learned to recognise stone formations where I would find black scorpions,” he said. “Black ones were the least dangerous. Generally, the smaller the scorpion the more dangerous it is. The black ones and the brown ones are harmless. The small green ones, yellow ones and light brown ones are very dangerous. If they sting you, they can kill you.”

Mario's lack of knowledge of North African wildlife at the time made him blissfully unaware of the potential dangers he was facing. While the black scorpion possessed a sting roughly equal to that of a hornet, there were others that presented a much greater threat; the deathstalker for instance. The yellow deathstalker grows to about six centimetres long and a low dose of its venom can prove lethal. The powerful mixture of neurotoxins delivered by its sting can induce excruciating pain and whilst unlikely to kill a human adult, it could be life threatening to a child.

Mario would turn over a rock in the desert and find as many as twenty scorpions scampering underneath it. At first, he was happy just to observe them. Later he would collect them and take them back to the camp where he made wooden boxes to keep them in. Soon he expanded his collection to include brown, green and yellow scorpions, sand or horned vipers, cobras, camel spiders and tarantulas. But keeping them alive was the big problem.

"They didn't live very long because of the heat," he said. "Occasionally I would put a scorpion in with a camel spider to watch them fight!"

The camel spider can grow up to 15 centimetres in length, the venomous sand or horned viper up to 80 and the more venomous cobra averaging 90 to 120 centimetres. Without antivenom treatment, their bites are fatal. To catch them Mario had to acquire a new set of skills. Scorpions were the easiest to catch. "At first I would turn over a stone and put my hand down, just to let them run over it so I could feel what they were like," he said. "Then I discovered I could catch them by grabbing them by the tail. The people at the camp were stunned, because no one had taught me how to do it."

Camel spiders were difficult to catch. "You had to be very quick to grab one because of the speed with which they moved. If you missed, they were likely to run up your arm and over your body. It was a very uncomfortable feeling."

The snakes also provided a tricky problem. Mario learned to spot tell-tale signs in the sand which indicated their presence, but he realised he was in no position to catch them alive. "Catching them with my bare hands wasn't really working," he said. "So, I had to think of something different."

He managed to acquire a large pair of heavy leather gloves used by welders in the camp repair shop to protect their hands. The gloves helped him to capture his first snake, a creature of about 120 centimetres in length which was later revealed to be a Nubian spitting cobra. It remains one of the deadliest snakes in North Africa.

Perhaps fortunately in the circumstances, Mario had dealt the snake a fatal blow in the act of capturing it. Had he not done so, the cobra would have been capable of delivering a fatal bite or squirting venom into Mario's eyes which would have blinded him. The powerful neurotoxins in the cobra's venom attacks the nervous system and induces paralysis. Therefore, even a non-fatal bite would likely have led to death as the camp and its rudimentary medical facilities were several kilometres away.

Such considerations were the last thing on Mario's mind as he picked up his victim and trudged back to camp with it. "It was my first snake, and I was proud of it," he said, "so I took it back to the camp and walked into the canteen with the dead snake draped over my arm. The Ohl workers were astounded that a young boy had no fear in catching such a venomous snake with his hands. My father wasn't there at the time, but when he came his initial reaction was to complain, first because I hadn't listened to him and second because of the danger he thought I had placed myself in. But he was also secretly proud of me because his fellow workers had admired what I had done."

It was clear a more effective technique was required if Mario was to capture snakes alive. Fortunately, locals who worked at the camp knew exactly how to do it using a hollow tube through which a length of cord with a loop on the end could be inserted to snare a snake. Mario made several of his own and used them to catch numerous snakes which he popped into a bag and took back to the camp to add to his growing menagerie.

Catching up to 10 snakes a week, Mario soon had quite a collection which he housed outside his cabin in the wooden boxes he made in the camp workshops. But what he had not realised was the effect the heat of the sun would have on them. The attrition rate was total, and Mario was dismayed. He loved the vivid patterns of the snake skins which decomposed when the snakes died. Then the same locals who had taught him how to catch snakes taught him how to remove the skins and preserve them.

“The snake skins were things of beauty and I wanted to keep them,” Mario said. “I learned that the trick is to roll them in salt and leave them for a week or two to preserve them. What I didn’t realise was it was illegal to take them to Germany. When the time came to go home my father told me I had to leave them all behind. But I managed to sneak about ten of my snakeskins rolls into the country and I kept them on display in my home for the next decade. I also had a couple of snakes, a horned viper and a sand viper, preserved in formalin in brown glass which I somehow managed to smuggle in. They were for my mother. She later transferred them to a bigger container and kept them on display in her living room.”

Heinrich came to realise his son’s interest in desert wildlife was not a passing fad and decided it was better to encourage him rather than dampen his enthusiasm, despite the obvious dangers the creatures posed. He also had a growing pride in his son’s achievements which had drawn such a positive response from camp residents. Heinrich could also help. He had the skills necessary to preserve his son’s quarry, but that would require substances that were not available in the camp.

Heinrich was a workaholic. He spent most of his waking hours at the controls of his motor grader. A break was needed; one in which father and son could bond by swimming together in the Mediterranean, shopping in a bazaar somewhere and obtaining the materials necessary to preserve scorpions, snakes and spiders. The destination was Tripoli, Libya’s capital and largest city located a thousand kilometres away on the Mediterranean coast.

It was Mario’s first major excursion out of the camp, albeit only for a long weekend. The pair set off in a white Datsun pickup with another father and son team from the camp. The Datsun was not only their transport but also their sleeping quarters for the weekend. Two days’ driving eventually saw them arrive on asphalt roads on the outskirts of Tripoli. Rows of makeshift shops with their goods displayed on the bare floor lined each side of the road. While Heinrich bought a few shirts, Mario’s attention was drawn to enormous watermelons for sale. “There was nothing like that in the camp, so we bought a few and loaded them on the back of the truck,” he said. “My father also bought the substances to make the solution I needed to preserve my reptiles.”

Driving onward to the coast, the weary travelers had only a couple of hours in which to splash in the Mediterranean before it was time to return to Camp Ohl. “There were soldiers and military vehicles everywhere,” Mario said, “but I was too young to appreciate the political significance of that at the time. We made one more visit to Tripoli sometime later, and during it we were stopped by a military vehicle in the desert outside the city as a car cavalcade passed in the distance. We could see flags on the front wings of a couple of the cars and my father said: ‘That’s Gaddafi!’”

The trip to the Mediterranean was intended to be a highlight of Mario’s nine-month stay in Libya, but he did not see it that way. To him it was merely interesting. He was far happier back at the camp, tending to his wildlife collection and searching for more in the surrounding desert. There were a handful of other youngsters in the camp, mostly the sons of Ohl employees who were visiting their fathers for a few brief weeks in the school holidays. Mario tried to be sociable by joining in the occasional game of football or basketball, but he was essentially a loner, happier exploring by himself in the desert. Engrossed as he was with the creatures he was collecting, his thirst for more knowledge of the wildlife of Africa remained unquenched. Africa, the real Africa, had so much more to offer than the Libyan Desert.

Heinrich Kleff was due for a holiday. Rather than return to Germany, he thought an adventure with his son was more appropriate. Plans were drawn up for an arduous journey south of more than 2,000 kilometres on unmade roads through Algeria, Niger and down into Chad, arriving at the wildlife-rich oasis of Lake Chad where Mario could get his first glimpse of giraffes, elephants, hippos, crocodiles and big cats in their natural environment.

A fleet of five vehicles gathered in the Ohl compound to start the epic journey. There were several vacationing camp employees along with a number of local helpers. Only three vehicles were headed for Chad, but all five set off in convoy, two peeling off an route for another destination and reuniting later at an intermediate waypoint for the return journey. There were no hotels, towns, restaurants or filling stations, just the occasional community of small, stone huts where the band of travelers could perhaps buy a drink and some watermelon. Everything necessary for the journey had to be carried in a supply truck laden with food, water, fuel and necessities such as spare clothing, soap, towels and toilet paper which made living outdoors a little less demanding.

Land Rovers were to be both transport and accommodation for two weeks. Two of them were making their way to Chad in tandem, the second being occupied by a work colleague of Heinrich's. During frequent meal breaks and overnight stops in either the desert or the semi-arid, sub-Saharan areas of Niger or Chad known as the Sahel, a canvas awning was slung between the vehicles to provide protection from the sun, but the group still slept in their vehicles. Meals were devoured al fresco and cooked on butane gas stoves, or occasionally on open fires. The journey, every bit as much as the destination, was an experience of a lifetime for young Mario Kleff.

The landscape during the three-day trek south took on different characteristics as the journey progressed. Large parts were dominated by sandy terrain. Starting in the stone-strewn Libyan Desert, the convoy entered the mountains, but even these took on different characteristics as they approached Niger. Mountains gave way to the central Sahara where the convoy skirted the towering dunes, then the flat, sandy desert before finding itself in a wasteland dominated by large rock formations and sparse vegetation in the Sahel. After yet more desert, the convoy emerged into the green, flooded grasslands and savannas surrounding Lake Chad, journey's end.

The large, shallow lake, after which the country takes its name, straddles the borders of Niger, Nigeria and Cameroon, and provides fresh water for 30 million people who live in the countries which adjoin it. It is also a natural watering hole for a wide variety of wildlife.

“The trip was tiring and uncomfortable,” Mario said, “but it was also exciting and the only way to get to this wonderful spot with its abundance of wildlife. You could see everything from giraffes to elephants, from zebras to hippos. It was like nothing I had seen before or, indeed, since.”

For several days the party moved around the lake, stopping on the higher ground to observe animals as far as five kilometres away over the vast expanse of the Lake Chad basin. There were hundreds of them to see, but to stay in one spot too long was too dangerous, so the Land Rovers were constantly on the move, keeping to the higher ground to have a better view of the surroundings and its occupants.

At one particular stopover Mario wandered a short distance from the vehicles and spotted movement in a bush about 100 metres away. It was clearly a member of the cat family taking an afternoon nap, but which member was a mystery. Mario's natural curiosity got the better of him and he ambled, slowly, towards the bush to get a better look. Sensing the approaching stranger, the sleeping cat arose from its slumbers and equally slowly made his way towards the human interloper. The cat was a leopard, large enough to kill a man, let alone a nine-year-old boy, with a single bite. As the leopard approached, Mario became transfixed, silently rooted to the spot with a mixture of excitement and fear.

At this point, the occupants of the three Ohl vehicles became aware of the impending confrontation between

human and wild cat. They grabbed their rifles and prepared to shoot. But it was already too late. Mario was too close to the leopard for them to be sure of shooting the feline and not the boy, so instead they waved their guns and raised their voices in the hope that it would scare the creature away. But it had no effect. Standing a matter of centimetres in front of Mario, the leopard arched its neck forward, twitched its nostrils and simply sniffed at the human ahead of him. Mario, in turn, reached out and touched the creature that confronted him.

It was a seminal moment in Mario Kleff's life. He had made contact with his first leopard. It was to change his life forever and lead to a strong and lasting relationship with this particular species of the animal kingdom which, possibly more than anything else, helped define his later life. But this particular leopard had done its job. Content with smelling his potential prey, it simply turned around and sauntered back to the bush to resume its snooze.

As usual, Mario was in trouble with his father. Heinrich's anger at his son's disobedience in wandering away from the group was tempered by relief that he had survived a potentially fatal encounter with a dangerous wild animal. But for Mario, his father's wrath was secondary to the life-changing encounter he had just experienced.

Following the two-week sojourn in Chad, life in Camp Ohl returned to what passed as normal. But all good things came to an end and soon it was time for Mario to return to Germany. He did not want to go. He wanted to stay with his father and live in Libya, but he knew that was not possible. He had spent nine months in the desert of North Africa without any formal education. School was beckoning back in Germany.

Mario Kleff made the return journey to Tripoli airport on a pickup in much the way he had arrived nine months earlier, but this time he was accompanied by his father. As Heinrich hugged his son in a farewell embrace moments before Mario boarded his Lufthansa flight back to Frankfurt, little did the boy know that it was to be the last meaningful contact he was ever to have with his father.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert Collins alias Colin Roberts is a British writer who lived in Pattaya from 2008 to 2022. During his stay in Thailand, he contributed articles in Rem Thailand. In his past few years, he worked for HSBC (UK), Citiate Publishing (UK) and gained a number of experiences as a editor at Construction News (UK), Cathedral Publishing Services (UK) and The Royal Gazette, a Bermudian, English -language daily newspaper. He was also a reporter at Liverpool Daily Post & Echo and in the West Cheshire Newspapers. Rober Collins died in 2022.

Thiti Teerachin, a Thai national, the director of WandeeGroup Asia Co., Ltd who worked as a co-author with Robert Collins on the biography Mario Kleff: Without Fear. Thiti Teerachin is the copyright owner.

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