



PROJEKT LILLIE

THE FOUNDING OF THE VILLAGE OF KARIBIB

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The traveler who today (1934) travels from Walvisbay in a 1st or 2nd class compartment into the interior of the country rarely thinks that the time is not too far away from our days, when the wide Namib belt was not so easy to cross. Back then, the railroad was a beautiful dream of the future for the old and new settlers of our young German colony.

All traffic up from Walvis Bay was carried by ox wagon. And progress was slow, also due to the extremely heavy road on the lower section. It took an experienced wagon crew to keep the loss of draught animals as low as possible, which was always the case due to overwork, meagreness and lack of pasture and water. Bleached carcasses of dead oxen lay along the way as silent witnesses to the misfortune.

An old report from 1895 gives us a brief picture of the traffic and the dangers on the old freight road when it says: "At the end of November 1895, members of the mission left the bay in two wagons. It was a horrible road, covered with ox bones. A few weeks earlier, the Finns (who have their missionary activities in Ovamboland) had lost 82 oxen and 5 wagons. The road could not have been any different, because in one year, 880 loads had been brought into the country, of which over 500 passed through Otjimbingue. 10 to 12,000 oxen passed through Otjimbingue as draft animals in the course of last year.

It was impossible to foresee what consequences the unexpected outbreak of an indigenous uprising or the serious outbreak of an

livestock disease would have for the only means of transportation. The connection with the coast and thus the entire supply could come to a standstill. In 1892/93, the spread of the lung disease had already led to alarming conditions. And Hendrik Witbooi did his best to deter the freight drivers from doing their business.

Southwest was soon to be afflicted by a far worse enemy of livestock farming. Despite containment measures, the Cattle plague (Rinderpest) entered the country from the eastern border in 1897. Immediate control through vaccination prevented the complete destruction of livestock, but the losses were sometimes very high.

As great as this setback was, it had the positive effect that the construction of a railroad was finally considered, which alone could help the country to develop and settle intensively.

During spring 1897, a private committee consisting of Privy Councillor Schwabe (father of Lieutenant Schwabe) and Lieutenant Troost had formed, which drew up a project for the construction of a light railroad from the mouth of the Swakop to Otjimbingue. By the sea, the first beginnings of the soon blossoming harbor town of Swakopmund had been laid for several years on the north bank of the river, which was completely free of dunes.

The dependence on the English port of Walvis Bay as a starting point for the German hinterland was not sustainable in the long term for many reasons.

The original plan was to run the narrow-gauge railway only as far as Jakalswater, where in reasonably good rainy years there was enough pasture for the wagon teams that were to take over the further transport. A paragraph in the Damara land concession of the South West Africa Company stood in the way of rail operations. The German government granted this company the sole right to build and operate a railroad from any point between Sandwich Harbour and the Kunene for a period of ten years from 1892. According to Leutwein's report, the emergency situation into which the country had fallen as a result of the cattle plague made the government overlook the company's claims and carry out the railroad construction from imperial funds.

As head of the Otjimbingue district, which also included Swakopmund, Lt. Schwabe had evaluated each of his journeys in the vast area with a view to finding a favorable route.

He wrote a series of essays about this in the colonial newspapers, from which the following is taken:

„There are 4 main lines that could be considered for the construction of a railroad:

- *Along the edge mountains of the Swakop as close as possible to the river on Modderfontein-Otjimbingue.*
- *Close south of the Khuosmountains on Jakalsfontein or Modderfontein-Otjimbingue.*
- *North of the Khuosmountains via Ubib to Okongava.*
- *Via Hoeseb-Oukas to Karibib.*

Although the lines mentioned under 1 and 2 have the advantage of

the shortest route as well as a direct connection between Swakopmund and Otjimbingue, it still seems worth considering whether one of the lines 3 or 4 might be preferable. They leave Otjimbingue to the south. This would have the great advantage that the railroad would pass between Otjimbingue and Omaruru - quite in the middle at Karibib - and would be more convenient for the very busy traffic of northern Damaraland and a connecting line to the north would be easy to set up.”

In September 1897, construction with a 60 cm gauge was started by a commando of the railroad brigade under the leadership of Prem.-Lt. Schrecker and Lt. Schultze and 5 non-commissioned officers. The intention to leave the construction tip in Jakalswater was soon abandoned, and after the Reichstag approved the funds, in which the then Governor Leutwein personally stood up for the interests of the country, it was decided to continue via Karibib-Okahandja to Windhoek.

On the southern side of the majestically beautiful Erongo mountains, which rises steeply to around 2300 meters above sea level, there is a wide area interspersed with a few rows of hills and with tall trees only along the river courses. In olden times, a spring gushed forth from the edge of an extensive limestone deposit, after which the Herero gave the place the name otjondjombo-imue - "one-well-place". The Bergdama called it #garibeb after a field plant that grows abundantly in the area. This later gave rise to the name Karibib.

It seems that Missionary Rath got to know the source in 1850.

On his return from the Erongo, where he had undertaken a reconnaissance trip, he came across a bare area and unhitched the oxen near the water. At night, Piet Gertze, his companion, woke the missionary because a rhinoceros had set up at the waterhole, where there was also a small shooting house. Piet shot at it, then the colossus moved away, and now they saw that there were two of them. Rath was no longer at ease - on the Erongo he had had to flee from two of these animals up a tree, his men had climbed onto the rocks - a "Thank God" escaped his chest, they reined in and soon arrived back at Otjimbingue. The area was also very rich in smaller game, with thousands of springboks populating the wide open space.

As the spring and the adjacent well holes provided sufficient water and the terrain was very suitable for large cattle, the Hälbich company from Otjimbingue had established a cattle station here. At the beginning of 1895, they purchased the site of almost 24,000 ha from the Herero chief Zacharias Zeraua and built a farmhouse west of the spring in 1897/8, which was occupied by Mrs. Hälbich's eldest son, Christoph, and his family. A store was also set up in the house, where the passing ox-wagon drivers could buy their groceries.

The farmers, who were the only white people within a 50 km radius, were not to remain in their rural seclusion for long. The railway line approached the place at the beginning of 1900 and the north-western slope of the so-called Heliograph Hill (from 1902 to 1904 a heliograph station was set up on this hill for the connection via Omaruru to Outjo) was soon bustling with life.

The first requirement for the railway construction was the availability of water. The 'railway well' was blasted out of the limestone and supplied sufficient water. At this time, the spring near the farmhouse dried up due to heavy use, but the wells continued to function. Lively building activity soon developed on the railway site. Initially, corrugated iron shacks were quickly erected, and at the same time the construction of permanent houses was started. Stones were quarried in the mountains and the land provided the clay for the bricks, which were only dried in the air.

On 30 May 1900, the railway reached the new station, 195 km from Swakopmund and 1165 metres above sea level. The beautiful station was completed in the same year. As Karibib is situated in the middle of the 382 km long Swakopmund - Windhoek railway line, the main workshop was set up here, providing good earning opportunities for several hundred whites and many natives, which in turn encouraged merchants and innkeepers to open their businesses at this young place.

For the Otjimbingue colonists, the routing of the railway via Karibib, 56 km from their village, was a hard blow. Even though the ox wagons still travelled to the coast in the early days, it was foreseeable when the lively through traffic would cease and the former main centre of the country would sink to complete insignificance. In their situation, there was only one solution for them: to move their main business to the new, rapidly developing town.

At the beginning of 1900, the E. Hälbich company was the first to start building its business premises with a spacious residential building.

This was soon followed by Rösemann & Kronewitter and later W. Redecker. Hälbich and Redecker also set up cart building workshops, as the ox cart, ox and horse cart remained the only means of transport for overland traffic.

As the trains on the Swakopmund - Windhoek line only ran during the day, Karibib was also important as an overnight stop due to the ever-increasing traffic. Guesthouses were built: *Hotel Rösemann*, *Hotel Rubien*, *Kaiserhof* and *Hotel Zum Grünen Kranze*. The trading houses *C. Bödiker & Co.* and *Damara und Namaqua Handelsgesellschaft*, the companies *G. Ahrens & Co.* and *Erhard & Schulz* set up branches. Residential houses were built and Karibib soon presented the image of a friendly, flourishing town. Its favourable location also made it the starting point for traffic to the north via Omaruru, until the Otavi Railway later established a direct connection with Swakopmund.

