Eleven years without Sophia

We miss her. Eleven years after her daughter Sophia disappeared in Murchison Falls National Park, Marije Slijkerman continues to fight for answers, determined to ensure her beloved daughter is never forgotten.



Sophia was a medical student from The Netherlands.

Did you know? Sophia's colleague says the young intern was eager to learn new things, how fast she picked things up, and had a desire to be useful, and was willing to help with everything.

BY MARIJE SLIJKERMAN

This year October 28 ,fell on a Wednesday. 'So what?' you might think, dear reader. For us, a Dutch family in Amsterdam, this date marks the beginning of the ultimate nightmare: a missing child. On this date in 2015, also a Wednesday, our beloved Sophia disappeared in Murchison Falls National Park. Another year has gone by. Another year, filled with pain and despair. Another year without answers and the daily confrontation with her absence. No child is as present as a missing child.

I vividly remember how we took her to the airport, with her new backpack and new hiking shoes. Never could I have imagined that I would see one of those shoes lying along the Nile riverbank, surrounded by other odd items belonging to Sophia. But that is what happened. *[**Editor's note: the writer prefers to talk about her daughter in present tense**].*

The firstborn and only daughter, Sophia is a bright and gifted child, blest with musical and artistic talent. After finishing secondary school, she decides to become a doctor. Passing all exams effortlessly with good grades, she acquires her Bachelor's degree in Medicine in the early summer of 2015. She is 21 years old and decides to take a gap year before continuing with her Masters in Medicine.

Sophia arrives in Uganda late August for an eight-week internship in Lubaga hospital in Kampala. She is quickly taken by the country and its people, as is clear from her elaborate weekly reports we receive. She enjoys her work in the hospital, especially the maternity ward, and gets on very well with her local colleagues. One of them, a midwife, told me how eager Sophia was to learn new things, how fast she picked things up, her desire to be useful, and willingness to help with everything. On her last day in hospital, Sophia writes: 'I am really sorry my stay here is over. All the people in the hospital are so sweet. I will truly miss them and hope to be back one day. Who knows, as a doctor of Tropical Medicine?'

Her stay in Uganda is to be concluded with a two-week trip through the country, with two Dutch fellow students and a Ugandan driver/guide. They leave Kampala on October 23.

On the sixth day of her journey, October 28, Sophia disappears, around 6.30pm, very soon after arriving at the student centre in Paraa in the national park. It is a very low-budget accommodation, owned and run by Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA), mainly used for their employees. A place not really fit for tourists, no security to speak of. Companions and the tour guide were aware that Sophia was not well. The guide should never have taken her there.

The circumstances surrounding her disappearance are unclear. The initial investigation left a great deal to be desired and police quickly jumped to the conclusion, without evidence, that it must have been a fatal accident. End of story. Convenient too. However, for us it is not that simple, certainly not for a mother who, from the beginning, has a strong feeling that something is wrong, that there is more than meets the eye.

The insecurity about her fate, the fight between hope and despair, it has dominated our lives ever since. As former Minister of Internal Affairs, Jeje Odongo, concluded when I met him a few years later: "It is clear to me that this case has not been taken seriously and has been kept at a local level far too long".

When I first travelled to Uganda, I was looking forward to being acquainted with a new country, but most of all, to see my daughter in a white coat, working in a Kampala hospital. Two weeks after my arrival the trip turned into an unimaginable nightmare and I left Uganda a broken mother. Since then, I have travelled back 27 times. Those journeys have not been easy and have taken a toll on our lives in many ways; mentally, physically and financially. I have tracked down witnesses, written articles, done interviews, spoken with many people and kept lobbying for more investigations, hoping answers would be found for the many, many questions we have. A life surrounded by question marks is not a peaceful life.

A few new investigations were started since that dark day in October 2015. Some never took off, due to various reasons, such as insufficient funding. Another was derailed by the Covid-19 pandemic that took over the world in 2020, and remained unfinished. Several private investigators proved to be disappointing. Not to mention the number of people who claimed to know Sophia's whereabouts, clearly only intent to monetise our tragedy. I also recall a year when meeting a new CID deputy director on each consecutive trip, four in total. Moreover, every time telling Sophia's story anew. In the spring of 2022 another investigation was started. Despite sharing a trove of useful information, my request to be involved was met with silence. However, I was promised a report after three months. Those three months turned into 18 months and the report produced more questions than answers. I wrote a substantiated review, which received no response.

Another year passed and I had the opportunity to speak with the President. I expressed my sincere disappointment and frustration with the lack of real progress. H.E offered help and introduced me to a member of his staff. Unfortunately, this person left State House and I was again left with empty hands. All I know is that there is another report, somewhere.

Dealing with a missing child is extremely difficult, if not impossible. Psychologists worldwide speak of 'ambiguous loss', a loss that is unclear and uncertain. It is seen as the hardest and most complicated form of grief. It is ongoing; there is no closure or resolution.

We still go by 'when nothing is sure, everything is possible' and I am a staunch believer in miracles. They do happen. In the meantime, there is no other option than to keep fighting to find out what happened to our smart, kind-hearted and beautiful Sophia and work hard to make sure she is not forgotten. We miss her so very, very much.



Sophia and her mother. PHOTOS/COURTESY OF MARIJE SLIJKERMAN