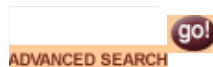




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## Havana Corner: The Loss of a Miracle Maker

By [James Suckling](#), posted Wednesday, December 10, 2003

The November 28 death of Richard Meerapfel should be etched in cigar history books, even though many people have never heard of the man. Meerapfel, 52, was the maestro of Cameroon/Central African wrapper tobacco, the sweet-flavored leaf that covers some of the most sought-after cigars in the world, including Arturo Fuente Don Carlos, Ashton Heritage and General Cigar's Partagas. He died of a sudden heart attack in Miami while visiting family and friends.



"The cigar world has lost one of the great experts on tobacco," bemoaned Carlos Fuente Jr., a close friend of Meerapfel's and one of nearly 100 friends and family who traveled to southern Germany for his burial service on December 5. "Sure, he knew Cameroon wrapper well, but he knew all the great tobaccos in the world...plus he was instrumental in creating the first blend for our Don Carlos line. I am really going to miss him. He was a great friend and a great family man."

Rick, as most of his friends (myself included) called him, was an amazing character. He could tell what you were smoking 100 feet away just by the smell of the cigar in your hand. "That's Cuban, isn't it," he would say, as I puffed on a Bolivar (no band) or something else when I came to his house or office in Brussels. "Let's see. That doesn't look very good, James. Why do you smoke that stuff?" he said, only half joking.

He was always critical of Cuban cigars, even though he had a deep love for Cuban tobacco. Rick spent close to a year in the late 1970s living in

the Vuelta Abajo and training under some of the legends of leaf there. "Nobody knows how to treat tobacco better than the Cubans," he would say. One of his sons, Joshua, 23, has been working this year with the Cuban Padrón family in Nicaragua. "The old guys in Cuba sure knew how to get the most out of their tobacco. Who knows now? But the Cuban method for processing was the best in the world when it was done properly," Rick would say.



The Meerapfel family is still legendary in parts of the Cuban tobacco world. "They were known for selecting the best tobacco and paying a very good price," said one aged grower near San Luis, ground zero in the tobacco heartland of Cuba for the best wrapper. "After the revolution, they were still very good customers -- very knowledgeable." Rick's father,

Heller, is credited with buying a large part of the Cuban tobacco crop in 1959, just after the revolution.

However, Rick Meerapfel's greatest achievement was growing tobacco in Africa. "If it was not for Rick, there would be no Cameroon wrapper anymore," says Fuente. "He saved the wrapper from extinction. The French pulled out in the early 1990s and it was all over. Rick went to Africa and saved the wrapper."

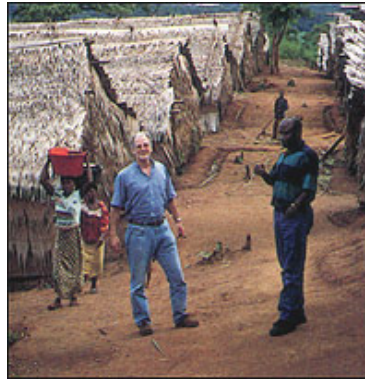
Meerapfel went up against incredible odds when he decided to create CETAC S.A., Compagnie d'Exploitation des Tabacs Centrafricains, a privately held company between the Meerapfel family and Africans. It grows, contracts, processes and ships premium tobacco from Cameroon and the Central African Republic. There are actually two CETACs now, one in each country.

I went to central Africa with Rick in 1997, and it seemed like the end of the earth. It was the stuff that war correspondents talk and write about -- crazed border guards with AK-47s, corrupt government officials, muddy impassable dirt roads, filth and deprivation, impoverished inhabitants -- you name it, we experienced it. The week before our arrival, French troops had slaughtered 100 or so locals in Bangui, the capital of the Central African Republic, during a coup attempt on the government. I was very scared indeed.

"That's not our problem," Rick said stoically. "We are here for the tobacco and to run a serious business. Politics do not concern us." For some reason, that didn't help my reservations about the trip.

Meerapfel did everything in Africa with honesty, integrity and seriousness, although he was the first one to see the funny side of things. I once spent half a day walking through the Central African jungle visiting small growers who lived in various tiny villages attached to small dirt paths. The growers lived in mud huts with nothing more than a blackened iron cauldron as a possession. Meerapfel spoke through an interpreter explaining how they should grow and harvest their tobacco, and when they should ship it to their central warehouse for processing. "James, it's good to have you here with us," he said while walking through the thick vegetation, the sun burning the backs of our necks. "One of the last tobacco technicians from our company who was on this path had a small problem here. A leopard attacked him. Luckily, he had a hunting knife and managed to kill the cat." I, to this day, am not sure if Meerapfel was joking. He had a wicked sense of humor.

He took very seriously what he was doing for Africa. Not only was he building the global reputation for great tobacco, he was helping the people of those two countries. He was a legend with the locals in both countries. "It means a lot to me," he often said. "We are helping the Africans help themselves." Through his company's work, where he employed about 5,000 people, they were enriching the lives of more than 100,000 people, from small farmer to local mayor.



I still remember his words one day when one of his bulldozers broke down about 15 miles from his base in Gamboula, Central Africa. They couldn't get the parts in Africa to fix it and the machine was stranded on some mud-soaked road out in the middle of nowhere. The bits needed would not arrive for another week or so from Europe. "People have no idea what it takes to put up a building or anything else around here," he said, shaking his head in frustration. "It really is against the odds. You have to be determined to do it. Otherwise, you will never succeed. However, should we fail, there will be no more wrapper coming from Central Africa. So I am not going to fail. I don't want to let down the Africans, either."

I thought about that moment and others when the rabbi spoke during his graveside service last Friday in a tiny cemetery about a half hour's drive from Karlsruhe, Germany. The holy man said that Meerapfel was a kind of "miracle maker." And that it was as if he had a "revelation" to do good in Africa. This seems very true to me, and at the same time he brought pleasure to cigar smokers everywhere. He liked to think about the latter, since he always loved a great cigar, preferably with a good glass of Scotch.

Meerapfel is survived by his wife, Ginette, 51, and their children, Jeremiah, 26, Joshua, 23, and Melissa, 18. His sons and his father, Heller, 82, will continue to run their family company, M. Meerapfel & Söhne. It celebrated its 125th anniversary in 2001.

*Photos by James Suckling*

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