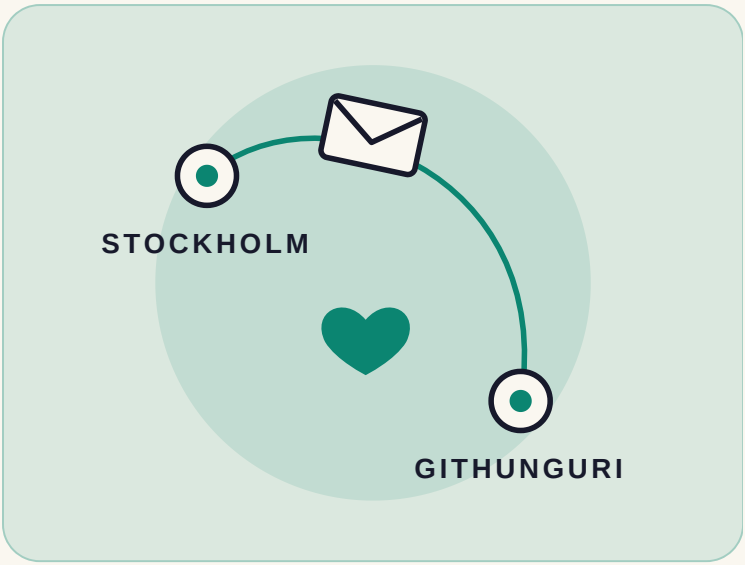


SWEDEN & KENYA

# The $15 that crossed two continents

A Swedish teacher sponsored a Kenyan boy she never met. Decades later, he came looking for her.

| | |
|---|---|
| WHERE | Stockholm to Githunguri |
| WHO | Hilde Back, a preschool teacher, and Chris Mburu, the boy she sponsored |
| WHEN | 1938 to 2021 |

4 min read

CHAPTER ONE

# The story

In 1938, a teenage girl in the German city of Gelsenkirchen was told she could no longer go to school. The reason was that she was Jewish. Her name was Hilde Back.

In January 1940 she reached Sweden as a refugee. Her parents did not survive the Holocaust. They were killed in the camps at Theresienstadt and Auschwitz.

Hilde stayed in Sweden and became a preschool teacher. Later she trained other preschool teachers. For about 35 years she lived in the same apartment in Stockholm.

Later, she joined a project in which teachers supported children in Kenya. She paid roughly $15 a month, and she never met the child. In the film about her, she says it felt like a drop in the ocean. She sometimes wondered whether it helped. She kept paying anyway.

She explains why in the film. She had been helped herself when she came to Sweden.

## Meanwhile, in a village in Kenya

The child was a boy named Chris Mburu, from a village near Githunguri. He grew up in a mud house. Secondary school was not free, and in his area most

families could not afford it. At one point he was even threatened with expulsion from primary school because the fees were unpaid.

Hilde's money kept him in school, from primary through the end of secondary. He was a very good student. He went on to the University of Nairobi and graduated in 1990. Then he won a place at Harvard Law School.

> **He thought of her as "this angel who walked into my life and fixed it."**
>
> CHRIS MBURU, AS QUOTED BY JTA

Mburu joined the United Nations and worked on human rights. His job included investigating genocide and crimes against humanity. The woman who paid for his schooling had lost her parents to genocide.

## The search

Around 2001, Mburu started a small scholarship fund for children from his home area. He named it the Hilde Back Education Fund. He had lost contact with Hilde and had never thanked her in person.

So he went looking for her. With help from people in both countries, he found her in Sweden. Not long after, he stood in the arrivals hall of Nairobi airport, holding a sign with her name on it.

| ~$15 | 2001 | 98 |
| --- | --- | --- |
| a month, for years | the fund in her name begins | Hilde's age when she died |

She was in her eighties by then. In his village she was met by a choir, a feast and traditional robes. She was made an honorary Kikuyu elder. She still insisted her gift had been small. Mburu called her his second mother.

The story reached many more people through a documentary, *A Small Act*, by Jennifer Arnold. It premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 2010. The film is honest about the limits, too. Only ten scholarships were available, and two of the three children it follows did not win one.

Hilde Back died in early 2021, aged 98.

## How it unfolded

- **1938** Hilde is barred from school in Germany.
- **1940** She reaches Sweden as a refugee.
- **1990** Chris graduates from the University of Nairobi.
- **2001** The Hilde Back Education Fund begins.
- **2010** *A Small Act* premieres at Sundance.
- **2021** Hilde dies, aged 98.

CHAPTER TWO

# What makes it special

Most inspiring stories are about people who did something huge. This one is about a gift so small that the giver barely noticed it. Hilde never knew where the money went. Mburu never knew who she was.

OUR TAKE

*It is also a story about a chain. Someone helped Hilde when she arrived in Sweden. She helped Chris. Chris built a fund that has backed many more children.*

CHAPTER THREE

# What we can learn

## 1 Make small giving automatic

Hilde doubted her gift mattered, yet she kept it going, month after month.

**Try this:** Set up one small standing monthly transfer for a cause or a person this week.

## 2 Pay forward the help you received

Hilde gave because she had been helped.

**Try this:** Write down two people who helped you in a hard time. Do one concrete thing for someone in that position today.

### 3 Turn gratitude into a system

Mburu didn't just say thanks. He built a fund that keeps going year after year.

**Try this:** If you run a business or a team, turn one good deed into a repeatable process.

### 4 Tell someone what their help did

Hilde had no idea what her money had become until Mburu found her.

**Try this:** Message someone who changed your path. Say what you do now because of them.

### 5 Look for the exact gap

For Mburu, the gap was a school fee.

**Try this:** Ask the person you want to help what exactly is blocking them.

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ONE THOUGHT TO TAKE AWAY

## You will rarely see where a small kindness ends up. Do it anyway.

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## Sources


**Roger Ebert**
Review of A Small Act

**Daily Nation (Kenya)**
She fled Nazis, lived to help poor

**Harvard Law School**
A Small Act Multiplied

**JTA**
Review of A Small Act

**Fact-check note:** Reports give the monthly gift as roughly $11 to $15, and sources differ slightly on the exact date of Hilde's death. Lines marked "Our take" are interpretation. Everything else comes from the sources above.