Facing Prague's demons

John Leggat

by Jan Urban

I stand in a narrow underground corridor with a group of young American students and feel panic rising inside. 'Some memories should not be brought back.' Some warped entrepreneur has turned the former Communist secret police preliminary detention cells into a hostel. 'Spend a night in a Communist prison!'

This is my first visit since I was a 'guest' here, well before the Velvet Revolution of 1989. My students barely remember that year. They are in Prague for a semester studying the Change—the end of the Communist era. Why didn't I keep the course purely academic, I ask myself. This is crazy!

The iron bars have been sawn away from the small, high window of a narrow cell; a narrow ladder has been added to comply with fire regulations. Cheap wall-to-wall carpet covers the once filthy concrete floor. Toilets replace the rotten hole in the corner. And, above all, there is a handle on the inside of the cell door.

So much effort to humanize the place—but for me it brings back more than I would want. These were interrogation rooms. At the end of a winding cellar corridor I even recognize 'my' cell. Today it is Room 16. Its heavy metal door, with its peep-hole and small flap through which the guards pushed metal food bowls, is painted screaming orange.

We walk back upstairs and step outside. We talk for a few minutes. It is clear that the students have been shocked. Perhaps they understand a little more what I repeat in every class: 'Don't make judgements without trying to understand the motives behind deplorable human behaviour. You will often find out that you would have acted no differently. You, too, would become informants to try and keep your kids in high school or to get rare foreign medicines for your mother.'

It is enough for today, and we part. Then someone touches my arm and says 'sorry'.

It is two weeks after 11 September. That day has changed the lives of these New York kids for ever. They all had to go through shock, enduring time when they did not know what had happened to their dear ones. And all this in faraway Prague. Amazingly, all their families were safe. But the students came as close as possible to facing loss, and that brings reality. We cannot keep the course dry and academic.

I turn round a corner and walk through the busiest part of Prague. It is mind boggling. A few minutes ago I was 'back then'. Click. I am walking through an average Western capital of a NATO member country. Back then I was nothing—the property of the regime, a powerless rebel without a passport, with no rights and no hope, a hunted survivor and loser with hatred as my only motivation. Click. I write articles about the Czech Republic negotiating entry into the European Union. I teach a course in a New York University campus in Prague. Back then I muddled through decades of a seemingly impregnable totalitarian regime. Until it happened I never believed that I would live to see its end.

> ‘For me it brings back more than I would want. These were interrogation rooms...’

My first students after the Change were a pale, silent and ill-educated lot who turned into revolutionaries and ideologues. They seemed too steeped in the system to change.

Five years later the students still hotly debated the world in terms of 'left-wing' and 'right-wing', but the world around them asked different questions. Their homeland—Czechoslovakia—separated into two countries, and eight hours' drive away the Yugoslavs, our former friends, killed each other by the hundreds of thousands.

My present Czech students are better educated, well travelled, self-confident, and care nothing about ideologies. For them, joining the European Union is natural because they live and think European, they *are* European. They are the first Czech generation to understand that solving society's problems will take time, resources and the ability to negotiate compromise; that it needs moral values and patient discussion rather than strict adherence to a particular ideology.

They meet with my American students in Prague's Irish pubs, Chinese restaurants or Joe's bars. They look the same, communicate freely and think that their parents' generation made some stupid and globally irresponsible mistakes.

My generation had the same feeling back in the Sixties. We all grew up on Bob Dylan's *The times they are a-changing*, and felt that Stalinism and the Cold War were over. Then in 1968 the Soviet tanks came, to be followed by a perverse 'normalization' back to harsh totalitarian rule and the Cold War.

Click. The dreams of that time are today's reality. There are no borders, the free flow of ideas, students, beer drinkers. It is even better—there is no naïvety that could trip these young students up. They want to understand things before changing them. They—Czechs and Americans alike—even want to understand our past far more than my generation does. We have spent most of our lives silently fearing those demons that I had to meet. For these students, studying my demons and my contemporaries' frightened silence is looking into history.

The city already looks as if there never were any demons. Letting go of the demons of the past and allowing the next generation to live without them is as close to a happy ending as one can get. The times they are a-changing.

Jan Urban is a former dissident and now a commentator for Radio Free Europe.

NEXT ISSUE

Lead story: How a city in Virginia, USA, gave birth to an international network for inter-racial dialogue

Feature: Community development in Stutterheim, South Africa

Healing history • Transforming relationships • Building community

FOR A CHANGE

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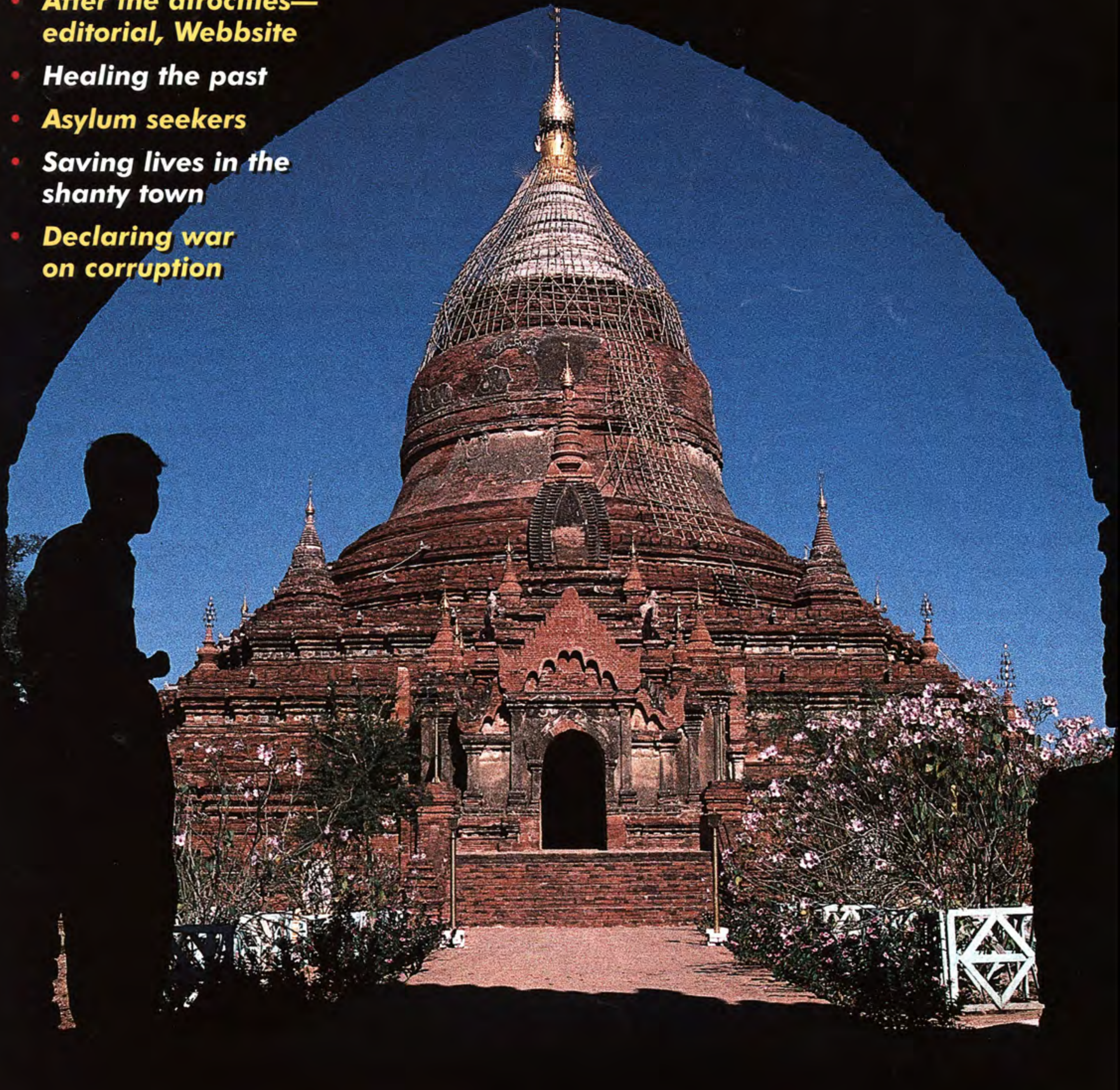
- *Declaring war on corruption*



The Cross and the Bodhi Tree

EAR TO THE GROUND

by John Bond, Canberra, Australia

11 September

The destruction of New York's World Trade Center has sent a tidal wave of fear across much of the world. It has crashed down on Australia's shores, and support for isolationist policies has surged.

Each year several thousand asylum seekers, fleeing places like Iraq and Afghanistan, arrive by small boat in Australia. Few of us could ever have imagined that our Navy would be deployed to turn back these boats. It is happening now—perhaps because we are on the eve of an election, and the Government's strong action has proved popular with voters.

Strong record

It makes me angry to see our country adopt policies which merely shift the problem elsewhere. Especially as we have a strong record of helping resolve these matters through international initiatives.

Australia developed the plan which led to the UN-supervised elections in Cambodia in 1993. At the time Cambodia was in chaos. The elections laid the basis for a reasonably stable civil society.

Had this not happened, I suspect that thousands of Cambodians would have fled in the years since then, many of them arriving in Australia.

Study circles

Multi-ethnic groups are springing up around the country, determined to overcome the xenophobia. Here in Canberra a Muslim-Christian dialogue has begun, and the first meeting was so constructive that the Indonesian Embassy hosted the next.

Could the tragic events in the US lead to greater understanding between the 300,000 Australian Muslims and the wider community?

It is hard to envisage this when international events are tearing us apart. But there is a precedent. In 1990, after a succession of governments had failed to make much impact on the terrible social conditions of Aboriginal Australians, the problem was handed to the Australian people. A Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation was formed. It promoted a programme bringing Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians together in 'study circles'. Tens of thousands responded. New understanding grew. People began to acknowledge the wrongs done to Aboriginals, and to work for healing.

Ten years later, a million Australians took part in walks to express their commitment to overcoming the disadvantages which Aboriginal people endure.

Greatest threat

Were a similar movement to grow between Muslims and non-Muslims, it would benefit us all. Because the greatest threat to our well-being is our ignorance of the region in which we live, including Indonesia, which has a larger Muslim population than any other country. This ignorance probably makes us more susceptible to terrorist attacks.

AIDS

AIDS is spreading through South-East Asia and into the Pacific. If it becomes rampant there, the epidemic will not stop at our borders—particularly as many Aboriginal Australians live in precisely the conditions conducive to the spread of AIDS.

We can help answer this looming tragedy—if we understand and respect the cultures of our neighbours. Only then will we be able to help bring the change in popular culture vital to limiting the spread of AIDS. We need to recognize that Islam is an ally in this. Across the world, the countries which have proved most resistant to the spread of AIDS have largely been Muslim. Indonesia's rate of infection is one third of Australia's.

Compassion alive

We are confronted with the stark fact that Australia cannot isolate itself from its poorer neighbours. Will we respond like those Americans in the 1860s who believed that their country could continue part-slave, part-free? Civil war forced them, at immense cost, to adapt to new international realities. Will we be forced, or will we willingly embrace the region in which we live?

Fortunately, a host of Australians have embraced it. Fear may have dulled our compassion, but it hasn't killed it. Recently our Minister of Immigration warned us not to help asylum seekers who escape from our squalid detention centres. Thousands responded that they will help them, even if it means going to jail.

I was one of them. I believe that we will make our greatest contribution to the defeat of terrorism by making Australia a country which treats every person with dignity, not least asylum seekers. ■

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Cover: Ancient *stupa* in Bagan in central Myanmar
Photo: David Channer

IN MY VIEW

The power of the powerless

Those of us who saw them will never forget the TV images of planes crashing into the World Trade Center in New York, with terrible loss of life.

But perhaps we also recall other images from earlier in the year. The protests at the G8 Summit in Genoa and the ring of steel around the leaders of the rich world. The violent farm occupations in Zimbabwe. The refugees plucked from certain death by the captain of a Norwegian freighter who was then not allowed to land them on Australian soil. The other asylum seekers trying, night after night, to find their way through the Channel Tunnel to Britain, sometimes even on foot.

What do all these images tell us?

They tell us that in a world that has shrunk, through globalization and communications, the two thirds who live in or near poverty now exist cheek by jowl with the third who live in comparative wealth and ease. Furthermore, the powerless too often find themselves humiliated by the arrogant way in which the powerful wield their economic muscle, military might and technological wizardry.

As long as this continues, the problems on our TV screens will not go away, whatever the result of the military campaign. Drinking a cocktail of resentment, envy and desperation, the powerless will exercise what power they can. The terrorist will use means that are cruelly devastating; the landless will occupy land; the migrant will use the only power he or she has—their hands and their feet and their dogged determination to achieve a better life.

And as we go to press, there are other images—bombing raids, more and more refugees, young service people risking their lives, queues being checked for anthrax poisoning....

What can the rich world do? Obviously those who perpetrate acts of terrorism must be brought to book, with the least possible loss of innocent lives—no easy task. But we must also learn to consult and show that we care. This is not soft sentiment, but hard practical reality. The powerless are so often excluded from the councils of the powerful, their fate decided on the other side of the globe. Their envy and hatred—as well as their desperation—stem, in part, from this sense of exclusion and humiliation. As for caring, the Jubilee 2000 campaign for debt relief pointed the way, by identifying one cause of poverty and working to rectify it.

On a broader front we need to develop respect towards other cultures and faiths and to moderate the excesses of western market capitalism wherever they appear.

What better determination to take into a new and unpredictable year? *Hugh Williams*

http://www.forachange.co.uk

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FOR A CHANGE

- closes the circle between faith and action, action and faith. It is for anyone, anywhere, who wants to make a difference to the world.

FOR A CHANGE believes

- that in a world torn by ancient hatreds, the wounds of history can be healed.
- that in the family and the workplace, relationships can be transformed.
- that in urban jungle or rural backwater, community can be built.
- that peace, justice and the survival of the planet depend on changes in attitudes as well as structures.

FOR A CHANGE

- draws its material from many sources and was born out of the experience of MRA/Initiatives of Change.

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A NOTE ON INITIATIVES OF CHANGE

Initiatives of Change (formerly Moral Re-Armament) works for moral and spiritual renewal in all areas of life. It was born out of the work of Frank Buchman, an American who believed that change in the world must start with the individual.

Initiatives of Change is open to all. Its starting point is the readiness of each person to make what they know of God and eternal moral values central in their lives. This personal commitment to search for God's will forms the basis for creative initiative and common action: standards of absolute honesty, purity, unselfishness and love help to focus the challenge of personal and global change.

These ideas have given rise to an international community of people at work in more than 70 countries in programmes which include reconciliation; tackling the root causes of corruption, poverty and social exclusion; and strengthening the moral and spiritual foundations for democracy.

David Channer

Beyond the smoke of Turtle Hill

Film-maker Alan Channer describes the journey that has led him to make 'The Cross and the Bodhi Tree', a film about Christian encounters with Buddhism.

David Channer

The Monastery of Turtle Hill looks out over the rice fields and the minefields of north-west Cambodia. It was desecrated during 'the Pol Pot time', like nearly every other Buddhist monastery in the country. Today it has been rebuilt, and its ruined *stupas*, which house the ashes of the dead, have been refashioned in concrete.

Shortly after my father and I arrived at Turtle Hill, three nuns led us to the door of one of the new *stupas*. They told us it would be 'safer from thieves'. And so we found ourselves living in a room with a Buddhist shrine—talking by candlelight, taking baths out of an earthenware tub and sleeping on wooden boards above the ashes of the devout of a bygone time.

The next evening, there was a knock on our door. An orange-robed monk led me out into the dusk, down the sandy track that wends around Turtle Hill. Kerosene lamps flickered through windows, and nuns in white robes paced back and forward in meditation, or sat on the steps of their huts chewing betel nut.

> 'I'd expected a nun in a closed order to enter with less lightness of step'

When we reached the monastery's crematorium, the monk suggested we meditate. The warm night air was trembling with an incessant chorus of crickets and frogs; popular music from the village was drifting in the breeze and somewhere in the darkness an old monk was coughing, children were laughing and young students were chanting the Pali scriptures.

It was Christmas Eve. As I sat on the uncomfortable floor, I couldn't help wondering what my Christian friends would make of what I was doing.

Five years later, I've directed and produced a documentary film on Christian encounters with Buddhism, and my understanding of what was going on at Turtle Hill has deepened. Making the film has been a journey of spiritual growth.

It all started during the summer of 1996. *The Serene Life*, a film on peace-building in Cambodia which my father and I had made, had just been screened at an MRA international conference in Caux, Switzerland. Shortly after the showing, I found myself drinking tea with an Australian businessman called John Wood.

'That film is a Buddhist film, isn't it?' John asked.

'Well, it's made for a Buddhist country,' I replied.

'So, what about you? Are you Christian?'

'Yes,' I said.

'Look, that's interesting,' he went on. 'I've lived in Asia for many years. I know many Asians who are good people but who are not Christians. However, back in my church in Melbourne, I'm told that all these other religions are on a loser. Now here at this conference, I can see that people of all faiths are welcome—and that's kind of nice. My question is, is it just nice or is it about what Jesus says in the Bible? What do you think?'

I replied that when I had asked a Buddhist monk how he found working alongside Christians, he had smiled and said, 'With the living Christ we have no problem.'

'Do you want to make a film on that?' asked Wood. 'On the Christ-like approach to non-Christians? I think it's important. You'll need money. I'll wire you a couple of grand. Call it burn money. Don't worry if you never succeed. It's worth a try.'

There was a magnitude to the idea and a lack of easy answers that began to fuel my interest.

Mother Rosemary: 'Thank heavens I'm not expected to know'

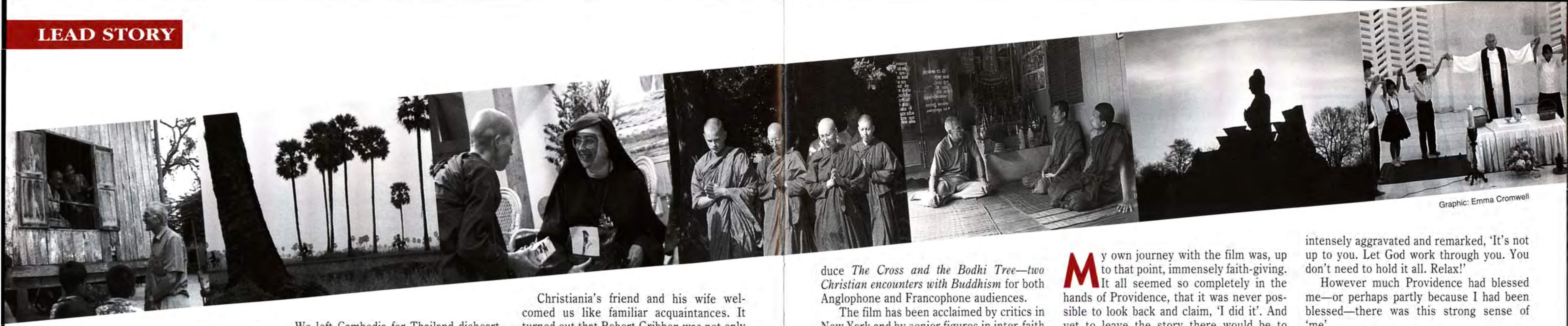
I could think of only one person to consult on the feasibility of the concept—and so I found myself waiting rather tensely in a small sitting room at the Convent of the Incarnation, in Oxford. After about 20 minutes, Sister Rosemary breezed through the door. I'd expected a nun in a closed order to enter a room with rather less lightness of step.

I plunged in and said I'd come because I was looking for advice about whether to make a film on a Christ-like approach to Buddhism. Sister Rosemary threw her head back, laughed and said, 'Thank heavens I'm not expected to know about the Christ-like approach'. I was taken aback. 'One of the gifts of the contemplative life is going more deeply into the unknown,' she continued, 'and into being known.'

After about an hour of conversation, she gave me her conclusion: 'I'm sure it would be good for you to look into a Christ-like approach to other religions, but I shouldn't worry whether or not you succeed in making a film.'

I walked out of the convent feeling slightly different about almost everything.

Fr François Ponchaud: long haul through the wilderness



Graphic: Emma Cromwell

Beyond the smoke of Turtle Hill

About one month later, Dr Christiania Whitehead, a researcher in her mid-20s, made an appointment to visit our London studio. She'd been impressed by *The Serene Life* and was wondering if she could work with us on any future inter-faith project.

I told her about our idea, and she suggested that a friend of hers, who had just finished his doctorate in theology at Oxford University, might like to help. He was on his way home to Melbourne in Australia. I met him briefly in his study and he gave me an overview of the differing approaches to religious pluralism.

Later that year my father and I were invited to present *The Serene Life* at a national seminar for politicians, soldiers, monks and educators in Cambodia. John Wood told us that he wanted to meet us there, but never showed up.

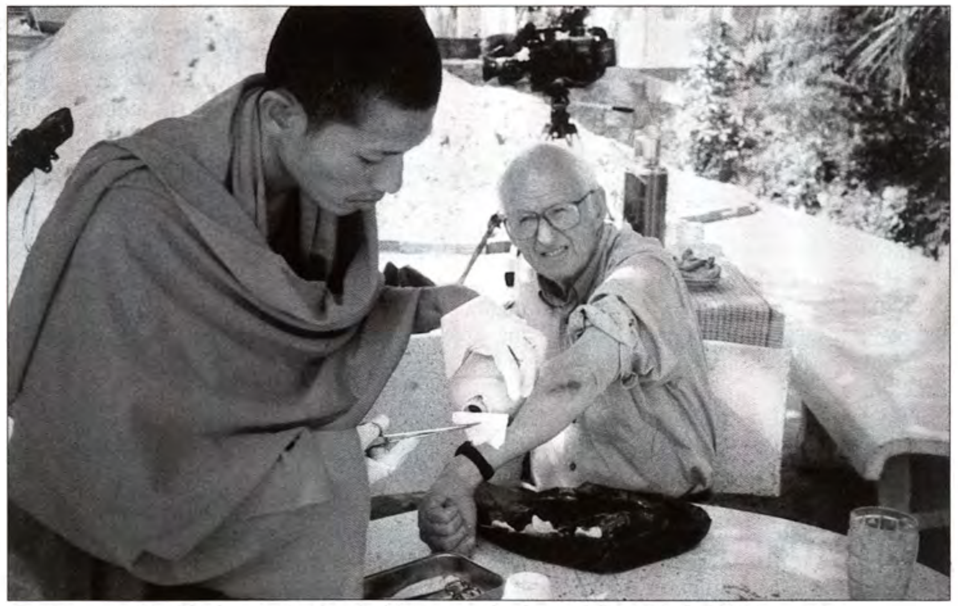
We left Cambodia for Thailand disheartened. Then, on the eve of our return to London, a fax came from John asking if I could go to Melbourne to discuss progress on the film.

I paced up and down the Bangkok hotel room, with the air-conditioning on maximum, wondering how to respond. Concrete progress on the film had been slight and my health had been poor. But I decided to go. The next day was a blur of travel offices, visa forms, taxi rides, traffic jams and a flight bound for Melbourne.

I met John Wood on the 19th floor of a towering office block. He told me about Robert Gribben, a theology professor, whom he was anxious for me to meet, and I told him about Christiania's friend, who lived in Kew. But I didn't have his phone number and he seemed to be ex-directory.

'OK,' said John, 'let's just get in the car and go to Kew.'

It was a strange moment when I pressed the intercom buzzer next to a large iron garden gate and then recognized the responding voice. 'Um, hello,' I said. 'This is a bit strange, but we met a couple of months back in Oxford—I'm a friend of Christiania's—and I happen to be in Melbourne now and....' The garden gate opened.



Alan Channer

Cameraman David Channer is treated by a monk after a fall at Turtle Hill Monastery.

Christiania's friend and his wife welcomed us like familiar acquaintances. It turned out that Robert Gribben was not only a mentor of theirs, but that he had married them!

We all went out to dinner with Robert Gribben in a Melbourne restaurant. Robert praised the intellectual rigour of Sister Rosemary's order and emphasized the significance of Christian-Buddhist encounter in south-east Asia. John Wood was impressed. The project was on.

I remember walking on air, through a leafy suburb, in the sharp Australian light and a sea breeze, enjoying the unfamiliar birdsong. 'Your ear shall hear a word behind you saying, "This is the way. Walk ye in it." '

I related this experience of 'Providence' to Christian friends in a fellowship group when I got home (although I avoided sharing the details of Christmas on Turtle Hill). They felt I must be on the right track. And yet the most significant event of Providence was still to unfold.

In May 1997, I heard that a French Catholic priest, François Ponchaud, who had worked in Cambodia since 1965, would be visiting Paris. I realized that I would need an interpreter. Quite quickly, I realized I would need a particular interpreter, Mary Winstanley—not so much because she'd already shown interest in my work as because she'd shown a vague interest in me. As it happened, she had already planned to be in France at the time.

Tea, supper and a four-hour conversation transpired. As he was leaving, Father Ponchaud looked back at us and said to me, with a wink: 'When you next need some interpreting, bring her to Cambodia.'

All the elements for an extraordinary dénouement were in place. Mary and I married and had a daughter, who was christened at the Convent of the Incarnation. Christiania became her godmother. Sister Rosemary was elected Mother Superior of the Sisters of the Love of God and agreed to be interviewed for the film. Father Ponchaud also agreed to appear, and shortly afterwards was awarded the Légion d'Honneur by the President of France for service to Cambodia.

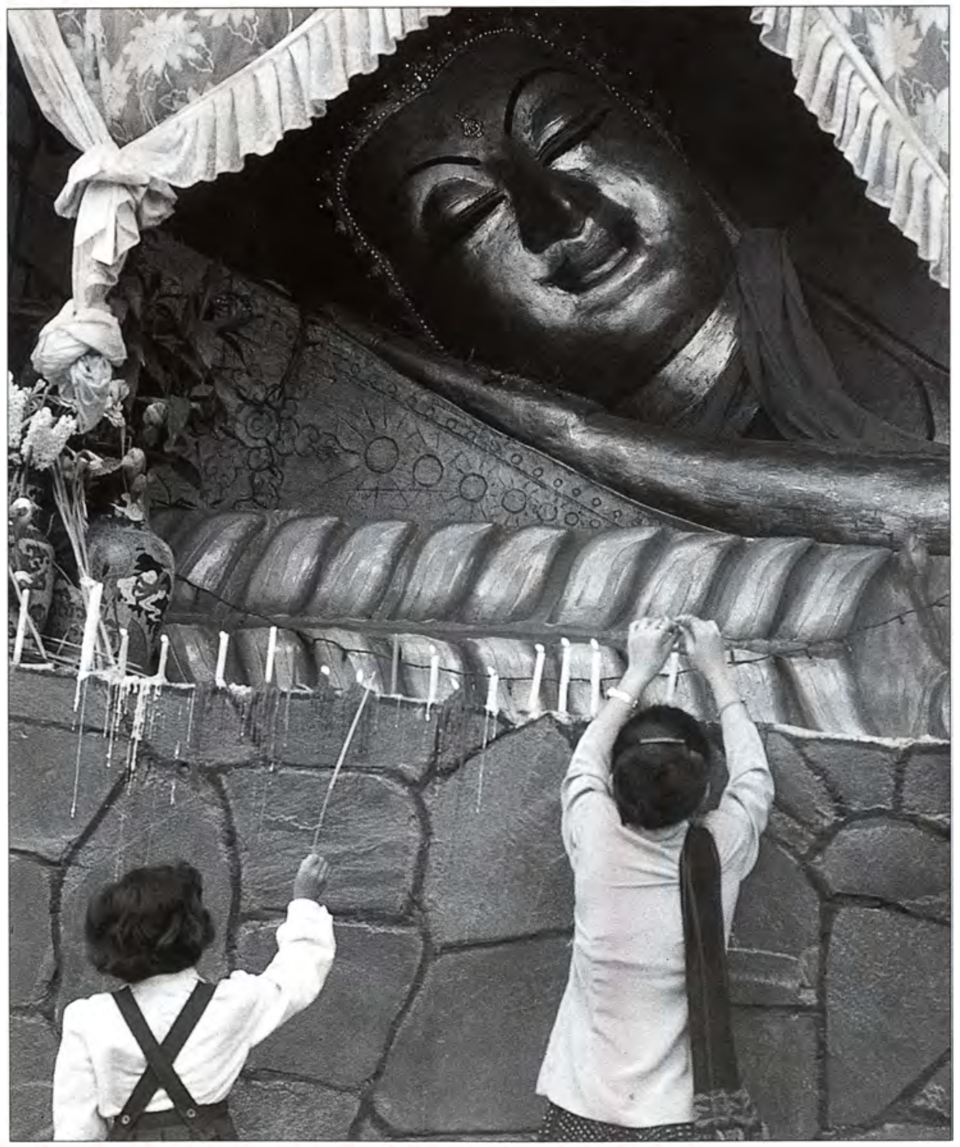
Mary and I have worked together to produce *The Cross and the Bodhi Tree—two Christian encounters with Buddhism* for both Anglophone and Francophone audiences.

The film has been acclaimed by critics in New York and by senior figures in inter-faith work in both Paris and London. Perhaps most fulfilling, though, was the response of Monsignor Felix Machado, Under-Secretary of the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue at the Vatican. 'This is a very powerful film,' he said. 'Some of the images are extraordinary. It is a film on Christians encountering Buddhism positively and making sense of it. It is very helpful in our dialogue.'

My own journey with the film was, up to that point, immensely faith-giving. It all seemed so completely in the hands of Providence, that it was never possible to look back and claim, 'I did it'. And yet to leave the story there would be to leave it half-told. For a great giving by Providence was followed by a great stripping away.

An early intimation that work was needed on my ego emerged during the filming of Mother Rosemary. As our interview with her got underway, we began to experience technical problems that might seriously compromise the quality of the result.

Mother Rosemary noticed me getting intensely aggravated and remarked, 'It's not up to you. Let God work through you. You don't need to hold it all. Relax!'



David Channer

A mother and child light candles at a Buddhist shrine in Cambodia.

However much Providence had blessed me—or perhaps partly because I had been blessed—there was this strong sense of 'me'.

It reminds me now of a conversation with an American Jesuit brother in a Buddhist temple in Phnom Penh. 'Praying for humility....' he remarked. 'You know what happens? God always answers—something gets at you!'

The sea-change in the fortunes of our film team began when we started to run out of money. John Wood just disappeared; we heard later that he'd lost out in the south-east Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s. We worked intensively on funding proposals for charitable trusts, but the results were insufficient. We decided to finish the English version of the film in faith, running the risk of going into debt, in order to enter a prestigious international film festival. It wasn't selected.

Then came the French version. Every single English word had to be weighed for accuracy, emotion, idiom and fluency.

Should 'gradually' be 'graduellement' or 'petit à petit'? Nun wasn't necessarily 'nonne'—it could be 'religieuse'. And what about 'craving'? Should that be 'cupidité' or 'avidité'? Theologians, convents, Buddhists and family in France had to be phoned. French-Pali dictionaries had to be consulted. Meanwhile, a funding proposal for the French version was also rejected.

Deadlines slipped, other initiatives were shelved. Was the film worth all the effort anyway?

In the midst of this, my father became seriously ill. He started to act as if in delirium.

'I've got a rope round my head which we'll need in Hollywood,' he told me.

A few days later he was rushed into hospital unconscious. He spent a month there recovering from a reaction to medication he had been given for post-shingles neuralgia.

The future of our film company itself was now in question, and I found myself feeling a deeper empathy with the content of the film. For while Mother Rosemary gave herself to the vocation of prayer in her twenties, she later experienced that 'prayer went dead'. And 10 years after Father Ponchaud gave his life to building up the Catholic church in

Beyond the smoke of Turtle Hill

Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge razed every church in the country to rubble. Thirty-eight of his 40 students were lost in the killing fields.

The spiritual journeys of Mother Rosemary and Father Ponchaud have not been about the joy of conversion—the honeymoon with God—but about the long haul through the wilderness into the open spaces beyond.

Two weeks before the public launch of the film in London, I got a call from Mary's father in Paris. Her mother, Annie, who had been in hospital with a bout of severe depression, had just taken her life.

Suddenly there was searing pain and searing love all around us. There was screaming protestation against the hand of fate. And in the night, a long sobbing. Nothing could change what had happened.

'Why should one moment of dark distortion end her life?'

'I have so much more love to give her.'

'How will we live without her?'

'Oh God, I can't remember the Bible verses she would have wanted.'

'Which clothes shall we dress her in?'

I'm writing the last words of this article the day before her cremation, surrounded by the most painful circumstances and barely able to concentrate. Although my pain is less than that of my wife and in-laws, I too can feel deeply shocked. Why did this have to happen to *me*? Yet as I surrender to the unfolding, I start to know the meaning.

Images blur—smoke billowing from the crematorium at Turtle Hill, the orphaned and widowed nuns whose smiles and hospitality were like Annie's....

Annie was born into a staunchly atheist family in rural Burgundy. She had an immensely painful childhood. She embraced the Catholic faith in adulthood and died with a much-loved Bible by her side. Her Buddhist meditation practice, with its emphasis on awareness, self-understanding and letting go, often gave her freedom from deep mental turmoil. *The Cross and the Bodhi Tree* will be launched with a dedication to Annie.

Suddenly I am reminded of the Buddha's words on loving kindness:

'Just as a mother protects with her life, her child, her only child, so with a boundless heart, should one cherish all living beings—radiating kindness over the entire world, spreading upwards to the skies and downwards to the depths.'

Somehow, I am beginning to sense that all beings eventually return to Love. Working to accept suffering and working to alleviate it are interconnected sides of life.

Trying to make sense of Providence's giving and Providence's taking away on my own journey, I've been reading the poetry of the Sufi Muslim Jalal al-Din Rumi. It seems to be referred to in a little story which compares, almost incredibly, the believer with a chickpea, jumping in the pot as the water boils and crying out, 'Why do you set the fire on me?'

God answers, 'When you were green and fresh, you drank water in the garden; that water-drinking was a preparation for this fire.... Do not leap away. I am boiling you so that you may get taste and flavour, so that you may become fit to eat and mingle with the spirit.... Your self-surrender is God's eternal purpose.'

The Cross, the Bodhi Tree (under which the Buddha was enlightened) and 'Islam' all seem to point to that life-giving surrender of self—to the pain of growth and to the light of ultimate reality.

The spiritual journeys of Father Ponchaud and Mother Rosemary point there also; indeed it is there that their integrity, courage and joy find their source.

I have learnt from them and from the journey of making the film. I've begun to understand that even Providence's stripping away can be a great gift in this life. In a strange way, the film has worked far more on me than I have on it. ■

'The Cross and the Bodhi Tree—two Christian encounters with Buddhism' is available from FLTfilms, 24 Greencoat Place, London SW1P 1RD, tel: 020 7798 6020. Introductory price in Europe £15.99 for individuals, £24.99 for charitable organizations and £34.99 for educational institutions (including complimentary study guide, postage and packing and VAT).
E-mail fltfilms@post.com

David Channer

Say sorry? Impossible!

Mary Lean hears how Joseph Wainana's quest for revenge turned into a campaign for reconciliation.

Chris Lancaster

Joseph Wainana with bicycle, video machine and generator

Twice in one year, Joseph Wainana was driven out of his home by mobs from an opposing ethnic group. He planned revenge, but chose instead to forgive. He now devotes all his time to promoting reconciliation between Kenya's 42 tribes.

Wainana, a member of Kenya's majority Kikuyu tribe, grew up in Eldoret in the Rift Valley, the traditional lands of the Kalenjin tribe, who now dominate the government. 'We went to school together and played together,' he says. 'I knew their language and traditions and whatever they went through, I went through.' When at the age of seven he ran away from home, because of his parents' harsh treatment, he sought refuge with a Kalenjin family. And his first marriage—which failed because of his parents' disapproval—was to a Kalenjin girl.

In 1978, Wainana married his present wife, Ann, and in 1979, he started work with the Ministry of the Environment. They set up home near Eldoret, and by 1992 had six children, aged between 13 and two.

That year, their world was destroyed. Kalenjin warriors attacked their community, burning down the houses and looting their property. The Wainanas fled with their children and Joseph's elderly mother, and took refuge in a church with hundreds of other people. When they returned home they found nothing left. Wainana chokes up when he tells me that not only his cows and sheep, but also his treasured motorbike, had been taken.

'The Kalenjins had declared that all Kikuyus must go back to their own land, in the Central Province, where I had never been. I had some little money in my pocket, so we boarded a bus.' They got off the bus when the money ran out, and found shelter with a friend in Laikipia, another area where Kikuyus and Kalenjins lived side by side.

A few months later, the Wainanas found themselves running for their lives once more, after another Kalenjin attack. This time they ended up in Ndaragwa, where a stranger took pity on them and offered them a home. 'He gave us a small shelter, eight foot by eight foot, for the nine of us to sleep, eat and cook in.'

Devastated by these experiences, and by the loss of everything he had worked for, Wainana set his heart on revenge. He planned to go to Uganda to buy guns and to train some young Kikuyus to fight back. To do this he needed money—and he decided to ask for a loan (without revealing what for) from Alan Knight, an elderly white man who was a mentor to his nephew, Joseph Karanja. Both Knight and Karanja were active with MRA (now Initiatives of Change).

Knight was not as easy to fool as Wainana had envisaged. 'He saw the bitterness I had on my face, and he asked if I hated the Kalenjins. I tried to say no, but he could see.' Knight suggested that they should be quiet and listen for God's voice in their hearts. Wainana realized that both he and the Kalenjins were Christians who hoped to go to the same heaven: so if the Kalenjins went to heaven, where would he go when he died? 'Either I had to forgive them or to no heaven would I go. What should I do? Go and say sorry to the Kalenjins when I had lost everything? Impossible!'

Wainana told Knight and Karanja what he had been planning. 'I could not stop my tears because I felt God was speaking to me.' In the end he asked for the fare to Eldoret, where he sought out some of his Kalenjin friends from before the clashes. 'I could see how sorry they were. They said, come, Joseph, we are going to work together to stop this.'

In 1995, Wainana resigned from his job, so as to devote all his time to working for reconciliation through MRA's Clean Election and Clean Kenya campaigns. He used his retirement money to buy land and build a house. He spends most of his time travelling from community to community promoting reconciliation, democratic values and environmental awareness. As he doesn't have a car, he travels by bicycle, with video machine and generator strapped on the back—and, sometimes, an AIDS awareness speaker riding on the front.

There were further tribal clashes before the elections of 1997, and with elections due again in 2002, Wainana feels reconciliation is more needed than ever.

With his younger children still at school, living without the regular income of a paid job is challenging. 'We have no problem about food, because we have planted our land,' says Wainana. 'People sometimes give me money to help my family: but I often worry what we are going to do about school fees next time they are due. But when I tell my wife I want to look for a job, she says, "No, you promised God you would serve." ' ■

PEOPLE

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Edited by Anastasia Stepanova

White Flower Day today and (bottom) a century ago

Return of the White Flowers

White Flower Day—a popular charitable event of the 1910s—has made a comeback in Nizhny Novgorod in response to the increase of tuberculosis (TB) in Russian cities.

Its roots go back to the TB epidemic at the beginning of the 20th century when a league to fight tuberculosis was established. Branches of the League were set up in different cities, including Nizhny Novgorod.

In August 1911 the first 'White Flower Day' took place. It was a social event of the same order as the opening of the Nizhny Novgorod International Fair and the Christmas Ball at the Governor's Palace. 'From one street to another, from Zarech'e over the bridge, up the hill and in the opposite direction there were white rivers flowing,' stated the chronicles.

Getting involved in charitable work was very popular among the upper classes, especially high society girls, as it was a good means for self-realization and demonstrating care and concern for the poor. 'Almost everyone wore a white flower pinned to their hat or jacket as they walked around the city park. Those who didn't were frowned upon.' It became a fashion: one perfume-maker even created a new fragrance called 'White Daisy'.

The main aim of the event was not only to raise funds but also to inform people about the symptoms and consequences of TB. 'It used to be called the revolutionaries' disease as it swallowed up the fighters for a brighter future who were sent into exile or to prison,' says Alla Balashova, the main initiator of today's event in Nizhny Novgorod. 'At times of social and economic instability, when people work till they are totally worn out, they become easy targets.'

The events of 1911, 1912 and 1913 were so effective that the need to raise funds disappeared. But 85 years later TB came back to Russia including the Nizhny Novgorod region. 'The situation was really desperate, especially in children's TB hospitals,' says Balashova. 'So the revival of the White Flowers was not that romantic.'

In August 1998 in Nizhny Novgorod the number of children aged under 15 with latent TB infection totalled about 54,500 (23 per cent of that age group) and about 21,500 older teenagers (39.2 per cent) were also affected. Balashova, who is the main editor of the Sluzhenye NGOs' newsletter, learned of these hair-raising statistics at a TB conference and was inspired to launch the initiative. 'There is not enough medicine or food for children nor the necessary medical equipment for treating them,' says Balashova. 'The hospitals are overcrowded with children with TB—and most of them need serious repairs.'

The Sluzhenye Association (which supports local community groups) and local NGO leaders decided that all the money collected would go to help hospitals treating children with TB. On White Flower Day 1998—just like in 1911—doctors lectured, volunteers distributed leaflets, orchestras played and a ceremonial procession took place in the city centre.

By the end of the event more than 52,000 roubles (just over £1,000) had been raised in cash and kind from companies and individuals' donations.

White Flower Day 1999 aimed at raising funds not only for children but also for prisoners.

Over the last four years over 1,000 volunteers have taken part and a lot of coins have been put into charitable boxes. The event has united people of all ages and occupations.

'It was so genuine', comments Balashova. 'A private entrepreneur taking some money out of his pocket or an old lady carrying a sack of apples from her garden—neither of them expected public praise.'

Anastasia Stepanova

New hope for Tiedoli

For the last 40 years Mario Tommasini has campaigned for better social conditions for the most vulnerable people in his home province of Parma, Italy. His latest project is bringing the small mountain village of Tiedoli back to life.

It all started in March 1965 when, having just been appointed alderman, he visited the Provincial Mental Asylum of Parma, for which he was responsible, and was horrified by the appalling conditions people were working and living in. In five years he emptied the asylum and found new arrangements for its 1,200 inmates.

Over the following years, working in different capacities, Tommasini closed down all the province's orphanages, found an alternative to prison for young offenders, organized work for the mentally handicapped with the help of local industrialists and eliminated special classes for children with learning difficulties. His pioneer work led to his strategies being applied nationally. To sceptics he always replied, 'Excessive? I know.'

For the last ten years his main focus has been the elderly, who are becoming the majority of the population. Many of them, either because of their state of health or because of their financial situation, have to go to old people's homes. 'They can't choose, that is not right,' he says. 'The social worker should not share the life of the elderly person, but should be a guest, whom one is free to welcome in or not. The elderly person should feel master in his or her own home.'

The pilot project in Tiedoli is already underway. One of Italy's problems is the exodus of young working people from the mountain areas, which cover three quarters of the country. Many villages have not had marriages and births for scores of years. Tommasini visited the mayor of Borgotaro, the highest municipality in the province of Parma and asked him which of the villages under his jurisdiction was the worst off. The mayor replied, 'Tiedoli'.

There Tommasini found only the parish priest and 78 old people. The parish was the only social structure existing. There were no shops, no schools, no public transport and the Catholic workers' club had closed down. The priest agreed to open up the club, light the wood stove and invite the population. Tommasini and he also worked out what was needed to prevent the elderly from moving to old people's homes.

The church handed over two lovely old stone houses, whose conversion into seven flats for the elderly has just begun. The Catholic workers' club is now permanently open and staffed by volunteers.

Some young people have moved in and begun to develop the unique resources of the local land. They are rearing wild goats, free-range rabbits, black pigs and especially beef cattle, fed exclusively with local grass and hay.

On 1 March 2001 the Tiedoli project was solemnly inaugurated with a Mass presided over by the Bishop and with the president of the region and all the local authorities in attendance... and there was a baptism as well, a new hope for Tiedoli.

Adriano Costa

Freedom of the airwaves

Not many people are alive to tell the tale that they have been knocked down by Idi Amin, Uganda's President from 1971–79. Radio journalist Peter Onebe not only survived this encounter but also being declared state enemy number one by Amin's successor, Milton Obote.

As a young man, Onebe planned to become a lawyer, but changed his mind after staying with a journalist's family in the US during a student exchange year in the mid-Sixties. 'I wanted to devote my life to working for peace and defending human rights,' he says. 'I realized that in a law court I would only defend one person. If I went into journalism I could work for the peace of the whole country.'

Peter Onebe: kept on commentating

He joined the Ugandan Ministry of Information in 1970 and has served in the press corps of six presidents—some of them notorious for their intolerance of criticism.

His close call with Amin, however, was based on a misunderstanding. 'I was broadcasting with a remote mike, and had to get very close to Amin as he spoke to the Minister of Agriculture. Because there were no wires, he thought I was a spy and hit me twice.' When Amin's bodyguards noticed that Onebe kept commentating as he fell, and that the same words were coming out of his engineer's handset, they said, 'This is Radio Uganda'. That, says Onebe, saved him.

Later, when Amin arrested Princess Elizabeth of Toro, his former foreign minister, Onebe's report for ABC news alerted the world to her plight. Pressure from President Kenyatta of Kenya eventually led to her being released and whisked out of the country.

Amin fell from power in 1979 and in 1980 his predecessor, Milton Obote, was voted back into office. Onebe first fell foul of him when he asked about the rights of Rwandans living in Uganda, a group Obote opposed because many had served in Amin's security forces. As a result, he was marked as an opponent to the government.

But it was a question asked live on Radio Uganda on Obote's return from the 1982 Conference of non-aligned countries in India that threatened Onebe's life. At the conference Obote had supported the removal of US forces from the demilitarized zone between North and South Korea.

'What assurance do these two countries (North and South Korea) give to the world that if the forces in the demilitarized zone are removed they will not fight again?' Onebe asked at the live press conference on his return.

The Vice-President snapped back, 'Is there anyone else from Radio Uganda who has been paid by his master to ask questions?'

'I had stepped on the tail of the most dangerous snake in the world,' says Onebe. 'I sweated—I knew I would be arrested.'

In fact, he remained free because of the popularity of his broadcasts, but he was unable to work for the next eight months and lived under constant fear of arrest or assassination. Eventually he was reinstated, but barred from the presidential press corps, which he only rejoined after Obote was overthrown in 1985.

Onebe first came into contact with Initiatives of Change (MRA) through the efforts of his compatriots to fight corruption. Its approach, he says, made him 'more content' and helped him to forgive the people who had hurt him and his tribe. He even began to 'see Obote and Amin in a new way'.

'There are a lot of wounded hearts in Uganda,' says Onebe. 'After my ordeal with Obote I realized I must use radio to free the minds of the population. I decided to get involved and heal.' He often broadcasts testimonies of reconciliation and inner change on his programme, from 8.00 to 9.00 am every morning, which is heard far beyond Uganda's borders.

Mary Lean

Saving lives in the shanty town

At the age of 23 Diana Patricia Pabón-Ramirez has already devoted more than a decade to tackling the social problems of her Colombian community, Paul Williams reports.

Michael Smith

Altos de Cazucá is a hillside shanty town on the outskirts of Bogotá, Colombia. It was built on a former sand quarry and is home to 70,000 people whose numbers are constantly being inflated by refugees from the fighting in the interior of the country.

Diana Patricia Pabón-Ramirez moved there with her family when she was six. ‘It has serious geological faults and most people lack basic public services,’ she says. When she was nine she joined a children’s group run by the local Catholic priest. She had been a member for about a year when a particularly bad landslide destroyed many houses and damaged others. Their partly-finished church was made available to house 30 families who had lost everything.

‘In this crisis I was appointed “Social Worker” for the youth group,’ she recalls. ‘I felt very important. I sat behind a table and wrote out badges for each family. I was able to do this because I was going to school and had learned to write. There was one bed for each family and they had to take turns to sleep on it.’ She allocated everyone tasks such as cooking or cleaning. Although she was only ten this was accepted without question. ‘I suppose people were just so shocked by the scale of the disaster,’ she says.

Now 23, she says this early ‘appointment’ set her on a path, from which she has never turned back, of working for the people of her community. Before long she graduated from the children’s group to an older group of which she quickly became President. In an effort to boost morale in the community they organized football and other games for the boys and taught dancing to the girls. ‘The lessons were very popular. We provided all the girls with white skirts,’ she says. ‘We would go to better-off areas to collect used toys, and then mend or paint them to give to the children as presents at Christmas.’

The hillside communities lived under the constant threat of violence. Armed, hooded men would appear, closing down shops and demanding ‘taxes’. Often lists of those earmarked to be killed would be posted up. ‘There were nine deaths a night on average. We decided this could not be tolerated and organized a series of awareness marches to help rally the community against the violence.’ Pabón was then 15 and was just finishing high school. She and others wrote and staged a street drama about violence. All the parents of the group and others in the community were invited to the first performance. It portrayed the devil as the agent of death.

Besides more ‘serious’ activities like holding courses on non-violence and forgiveness, fashion shows and Christmas parties were staged to boost morale. With all this they were reaching out from their own immediate neighbourhood into the other communities that made up Altos de Cazucá, bringing people together in a new way. ‘Gradually the gangs began to lose their grip on us. The killings, though by no means completely eliminated, came down to just two per day.’

By 17 Pabón had a job teaching at the school. Wanting to reach more of the teenagers across the settlement, she decided to break the taboo on holding activities at night and organized a bonfire feast. The bold, intimidation-defying move paid off as 90 turned up. With momentum established, they held musical events, dance concerts and fun days. The result was the formation of a new dynamic youth group which they called Revivir (New Life).

‘We decided that if we put our trust in God, no harm would come to us,’ says Pabón. ‘People thought I was sure of myself, but at first I was often scared. For the sake of the community I steeled myself to be hard. Sometimes I present a fierce temperament—but it’s not my real nature at all.’

Revivir was soon organizing events for the adults. They started by offering painting and hairdressing workshops. For the over-sixties there was the chance to make brooms and floor cloths, which, she says, ‘they took great pride in making to the highest standards’. The culmination of all this was the opening of a canteen. The rent was paid for out of the wages of Pabón and other friends who had jobs. ‘We managed to fit in five tables, each with five plastic chairs. Each day we gave breakfast to 210 children, sitting in relays. When they had all gone to school, 30 elderly people would follow who could be looked after at greater leisure.’ They were able to keep the canteen going for five months before funds ran out.

By now Revivir was becoming better known and it decided to join the Colombian National Assembly of Young People for Peace. ‘We were the only affiliated youth organization from the shanty towns,’ says Pabón. ‘No one there even knew where our settlement was. We didn’t have computers and e-mail like the other clubs, but we knew how to keep ourselves up to date—and we loved Colombia just as much as they did.’

Revivir was one of the groups selected to go on a peace mission to meet the leaders of the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC) at the Wells of Caguan in the demilitarized territory. As part of the peace process, regular weekend ‘hearings’ are staged on neutral ground where groups of Colombians can make suggestions on possible ways forward. Revivir was among the few organizations selected to make a presentation at this special hearing for youth that was to be televised live over National TV.

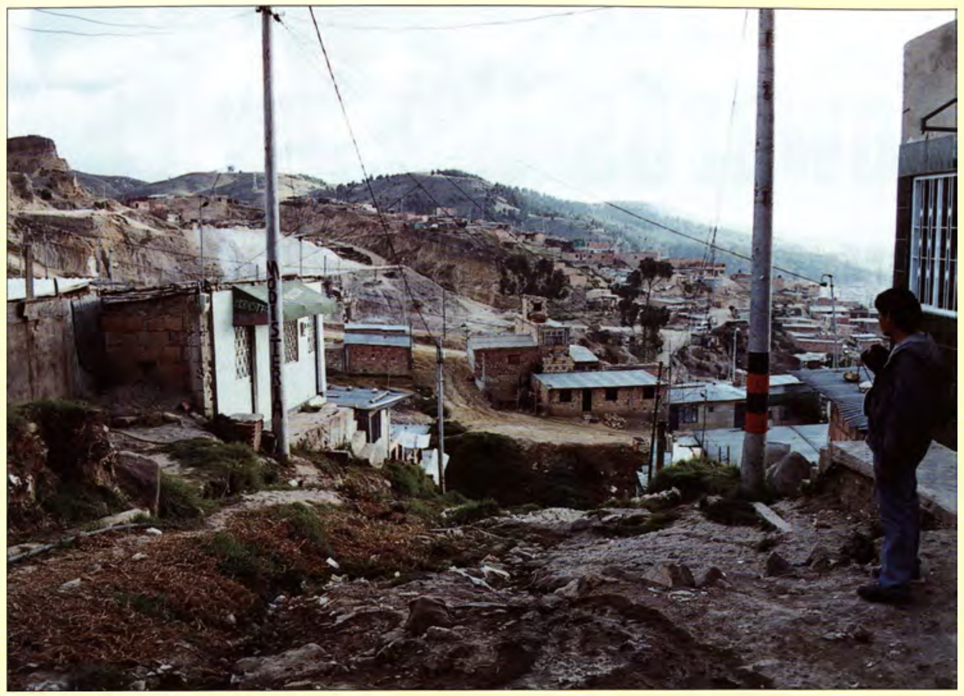
Pabón was the spokesperson. ‘We worked on our proposals through the night and had them written out on large sheets of card. At the meeting I began putting them directly to the guerrilla leadership who were all sitting on a table on the platform. What we said was not exactly what they wanted to hear and everyone went quiet. Someone even attempted to cut off the TV transmission. One of the leaders prevented this, but before I could challenge them on child soldiers and the fate of the disappeared people I was cut short.’ However she went straight up to the platform when the meeting had finished and presented all her points. ‘They were surprised and asked me to sit down at the table.’ Before she left the insurgent camp with her delegation, one of the most prominent FARC leaders wrote on her name tag, ‘the fighter for peace’. ‘If you have an ideal,’ he told her, ‘ you should fight for it.’

Deaths in the settlement still occur. ‘I have had to pick several bodies up from the streets with my own hands,’ she says. Tragically, one of them was her own brother. ‘I found him lying outside full of bullet holes and had to drag him into the house.’ Her other brother was attacked and badly wounded by a gang who wanted his baseball cap and shoes.

There are several on-going projects at Altos de Cazucá that she would like to see completed. ‘God will show us how. They won’t solve all our problems, but it is a part of the whole.’ She would like to see the young people in her group finish their studies and find careers that would enable them to support their families. She would like to see her mother housed in a more secure building and find a job that will not blister her hands. She prays her brother can make a complete recovery.

For herself, she would like to study sociology or social work to help her to work more effectively with deprived communities—her own and others. She would also like to see Revivir established as a foundation in its own right with its own building.

‘If you have a vision and are shown a better way, you do begin to live differently,’ she says. ■



Altos de Cazucá—killings down

FOR A CHANGE

‘It was exciting to read of all the efforts towards making the power of forgiveness a reality [in the last issue of FAC].’

Nia Rhosier, Custodian, Centre for Christian Unity, Renewal and Reconciliation in Wales

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Towards the future by way of the past

Memories are the primordial soup of politics, says German theologian Geiko Müller-Fahrenholz, and how we deal with them can determine the future. He spoke in London as military action began in response to the attacks on New York and Washington. We print extracts:

This is an awkward time to speak about forgiveness and healing. Just now it is difficult to look forward to the time when the processes of rebuilding can begin. But in the long term, it is always the peacemakers who must come to the fore.

I would like to explore this theme by talking about something that happened a few years ago, in a small village in Belorus.

The old German men had been in Belorus before, as young soldiers in Hitler's Wehrmacht. Now, 50 years later, they were back to build a home for children who had been affected by the fallout from the nuclear disaster at Chernobyl.

Towards the end of their stay, the men went on an excursion to Chatyn, close to Minsk, where a memorial remembers the crimes of the Wehrmacht during World War II. Afterwards, they sat down with their Belorussian hosts for supper. After the toast, one of the veterans got up, and struggled to say a few words. He described how he had fought in the war and been a prisoner of war in a Belorussian camp. And then, writes one of those present, he stopped.

'We all knew: now the moment had come when it wouldn't do simply to look back, but when something redeeming might happen. And it did happen. The man said that he was deeply sorry for what he had done personally, and what the Germans had done in Russia, and then he tried to say that this must never happen again, but his voice broke and he had to sit down because he was weeping so hard. The young people sitting around were overwhelmed, they wept too. An old woman got up, she walked over to this man, she was a Belorussian woman, she put her arms around him and kissed him.'

Forgiveness is about healing. Let me look at this story from different angles.

Memories stay alive

Memories are the medium in which our past stays alive within us. Happy memories are like a warm stream that sustains our present and protects us even in deep suffering. Painful memories, however, grab us with icy hands. If we are the subject of an evil deed, we are haunted by a sense of guilt. And when we are the object, we are haunted by feelings of hurt, helplessness and rage. Living with hurt keeps awake the memories of enforced impotence and dehumanization.

This applies both to individuals and communities. Memories are the matrix of our identity, individually as well as collectively. Our wholeness and well-being depend on whether we are at ease with our past or whether there are things we anxiously store away in some dungeon of our heart, whence they are bound to inflict us with sudden and sickening intensity. Memories are the primordial soup of politics.

In general, we do not manage our memories well. If we did, we would not need to repress and conceal so much. We are selective in our memories: we remember what we like to remember and conceal what pains us. This selective memory is the source from which wars and schemes of retaliation spring.

Struggling for words

In the story the old Germans and their Belorussian hosts have already been working together for some weeks. But the memories must have been their hidden companions.

Then, at last, after 50 years, one man stands up to face his past. Could he not have excused himself as ex-soldiers of all nations have done at all times—by saying, for instance, that he was young, and under orders?

Could he not simply have contented himself with the fact that building the children's home is in itself an admission of their guilt? Why does he have to say these words when the good intentions surely speak for themselves?

The words are needed. Memories must be named. They must be identified, or else they continue to linger on as nameless horrors, maintaining their hidden powers.

In the act of naming, this man returns to the point in his history when his guilt and pain began. He becomes the real master of his history, at the moment in which he is able to name its deepest and saddest point. He re-members: he puts together the broken parts of his life. He gives himself up, exposes himself, for all to see, a man who served a criminal regime, suffered in a Russian camp, a perpetrator, a victim, an old man, disarmed, in tears.

The woman's kiss

If someone had told the Belorussian woman that one day she would kiss a soldier of Hitler's army, she would have found this obscene. But as she sees this man struggling with the truth of his life, he is no longer the enemy, but a human being. She recognizes something of her own pain in his tears.

How many women suffer when men go to war? Are not women the first to suffer when strangers invade their homes? This woman is one of millions past and present who have to go on living, dragging their hurts along, defiled, raped, dishonoured. But at this moment she knows nothing of retaliation. She sees another human being and kisses him.

It is much more than an easy consolation; this embrace is an absolution. Its message is 'I set you free'.

And the miraculous thing is that this embrace also sets the woman free. She transcends the old patterns of being nothing but the victim and she too becomes the master of her story.

Forgiveness is a double process in which both parties, the doers and the victims, need to return to the point where their pain began. Both sides have to travel back through the meanderings of guilt and hate to that point where their fate is chained together. Only when this interlocking chain is broken can both sides be free.

Priests in disguise

One man expresses what is on the mind of his entire group. He is strong enough to cry for them all. And one woman gives him the kiss of peace.

It is not necessary for all members of a group or a people to find the disarming words. There is something vicarious in both the confession and the absolution. In this little village, the unnamed man and the unnamed woman are serving as priests to their people, without knowing it, of course.

In the same way, when Willy Brandt knelt down at the memorial of the uprising in the Warsaw ghetto, this was a priestly act. He had himself been persecuted by the Nazis, yet as Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), he knelt down vicariously for all those who could not bring themselves to repent.

There must be some few who rise to the call of the priestly mission. There must be those who know that this mission consists not in sacrificing someone else but in offering oneself to step into the breach which evil, guilt and shame have opened up.

Corbis

The monument at Chatyn, which commemorates the Nazis' scorched earth strategy in Belorus

Chatyn and Katyn

Chatyn symbolizes the shocking 'scorched earth strategy' that devastated some 400 villages in Belorus. Their visit showed the old Germans what they had been part of, as tiny particles in the machinery of destruction.

But the reaction could have been quite different. 'Chatyn' sounds like 'Katyn', near Smolensk, where the massacre of more than 4,000 Polish officers by Russian troops under Stalin is commemorated. Does not the very similarity of the two names invite comparison and an easy way out—by saying that all peoples all over the earth have a lot to feel sorry about?

One of the German Protestant leaders who signed the Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt in October 1945 was Gustav Heinemann, who later became President of the FRG. He wrote, 'What we have done to the Poles, the Greeks, the Dutch, the Jews will not be taken from us because of what other nations have done or are doing.... The only way out is the confession of guilt. About this there can be no bartering.'

When we analyse stories of forgiveness there seems to be a third factor at work. Who or what creates the trust that a confession will be received in good faith? In our case it was the overwhelming experience of Chatyn. It might well have also been the feeling of trust in the village community. In other cases there are mediators who meet with sufficient trust from both sides to be able to make proposals.

I think this third factor is decisive—and that it points to something fundamental. It indicates that our relationships are not determined, but that there is always the element of contingency. A Rabbinical teaching says that before God made creation, he created the *teschuba*, the Hebrew word for change. It stands for the possibility of turning, of metanoia and transformation. In the heart of history is God's offer to make all things new.

The young people

The breakdown of the old man moved the young people around him to tears. They must have sensed that the confession and the kiss meant something of a healing for them too.

The unacknowledged and subconscious pain of older generations has a contaminating impact on younger ones. The sins of the fathers affect children to the third and fourth generation, and so do their sufferings.

The liberation that occurs between the two old people has a liberating impact on the young people as well. Their re-membering opens up new ways for the young folk and makes it a bit easier for them to move forward.

I wish that more grandfathers and grandmothers had the courage to break the spell that their tales of hurt and hatred cast on younger generations and so halt the 'sorry-go-round' of revenge.

Home for sick children

The old men returned to Belorus to build a home for children contaminated by the nuclear fall-out of Chernobyl. This is what classic penitential theology calls *satisfactio operis* or 'restitution'. In post-war Germany the term used was *Wiedergutmachung* (making things good again). But can there ever be a making good of historical injustice?

The Germans do not attempt to repair the damage done by the German army. Rather, they try to provide a few children with a better future.

Their deed serves various functions. It expresses the seriousness of their repentance. It meets a need of the other side: so it is an expression of burden-sharing. And, thirdly, it aims at facilitating a more humane future.

By setting us free from the captivity of guilt, shame and hurt, the processes of forgiveness make space for new covenants. As long as we have not really faced the demons of our past, all our alliances will be of a provisional nature.

If politics is the art of the possible, it is forgiveness that makes the art of the possible possible. ■

Ben Curtis/ Press Association

Romanian asylum seekers on the Sighthill Estate in Glasgow, where an asylum seeker was murdered last summer

Philip Carr

Welcome to Britain

Do we have to make the people who come to us for help so unwelcome, asks Mary Lean

In 1996, when I first volunteered to visit immigration detainees held near Gatwick Airport in south-east England, I had little idea of what a huge world issue I was getting involved in.

Since then applications for asylum in Britain have soared from 26,640 in 1996 to 80,315 in 2000. The news has been full of stories of desperate attempts to reach Italy, Britain and Australia—and of sometimes draconian responses to these.

Many European countries have seen similar increases. In the three years between 1996 and 1999 annual applications in Sweden and Switzerland doubled. They tripled in Austria, increased fourfold in Finland, fivefold in Norway and sevenfold in Ireland. Italy saw a staggering increase from 1,700 in 1995 to 33,400 in 1999, caused by the war in Kosovo.

Like all statistics, the figures can be misleading. People in Britain ask, 'Why do they all come here?' The answer, of course, is that they don't. By far the largest numbers of refugees are sheltered by countries in the global South, with Iran, Pakistan and Tanzania carrying the heaviest burdens.

Britain didn't even appear in the UNHCR table of the 40 countries who had the most refugees per head of population in 1999: Armenia tops the list with 84.2 per 1,000 inhabitants. Germany, 19th on the list with 11.9 per 1,000, still receives more asylum seekers every year than any other industrialized nation.

None of this is to deny that more and more people are knocking on our doors and governments do not know how to cope. The figures raise all sorts of emotions in host communities—fears of being 'swamped', of being pushed to the back of the queue for jobs and homes, of being taken advantage of, and, since 11 September, of letting in terrorists to plot our destruction.

There are of course grounds for some of these fears. Not every asylum seeker has a good case and not every asylum seeker tells the truth. But in our anxiety not to be a soft touch, it is often the most genuine who suffer. For seven months I watched one detainee, who had been tortured in his own country, become more and more depressed. Eventually he told me that the thing that was eating away at him was that no one believed he was a genuine refugee.

Asylum seekers are among the most marginalized people in Western societies today. In Britain, they often have to cope with months—even years—of uncertainty and humiliating restrictions while their claims are processed. And at the same time they have to deal with homesickness, the pain of exile, traumatic memories and fears for those they have left behind.

An unlucky—and increasing—minority of these people are also imprisoned, either in immigration detention centres, like the one I visit at Gatwick Airport, or in regular prisons. Unlike criminals, they have not been convicted of any offence, there is no limit to how long they can be held and it is often unclear to them why they are detained. Many become depressed or fatalistic as the weeks and months drag by.

The Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group, to which I belong, has some 80 volunteers, up to 50 of whom are visiting at any one time. Each is allocated to a detainee, whom they visit every week until the detainee is released, transferred or put on a plane.

My weekly visits over the years—to 18 people from 13 countries—have introduced me to the faces behind the statistics and to the darker realities of our world today. One woman's husband and toddler had been killed by thugs who were searching her house for papers; another had been abused by her husband and raped by strangers; another simply said, 'If I go home, no one will help me.' I cannot even imagine being in that situation.

I have visited a teenager who had no idea if his family in Kosovo was alive; another who had just heard his father was dead; and a third who had been beaten up because he supported an opposition party.

Others I have visited had not asked for asylum, but were 'overstayers' who had been in this country for years, working in useful jobs. One young woman had been born during a visit home by her Nigerian mother and so, unlike her older British-born siblings, was not a British citizen. Another woman had come here from India to marry and then been abused by her husband who had shopped her to the authorities when she left him.

I am not a lawyer, a doctor or an immigration officer: it is not my job to sort out these people's cases, to diagnose their illnesses, or to assess their eligibility to remain in this country. I am just there to be a friend, someone who cares and who will walk alongside them on their journey. The worst moments have been when I have been unable to help in the way someone has asked me to: the best when I have seen someone walk free after a bail hearing.

In the process, I have learnt to recite the days of the week in Arabic, to say 'See you next week' in Albanian and (after much sign language and drawing of vegetables) how to make Mediterranean-style tahini and aubergine salad. I have had my horizons extended and my stereotypes shaken—for instance, through visiting a Serb from Croatia during the Kosovo war.

How Western countries treat asylum seekers is, I believe, one of the great moral issues of our times. I accept that it is difficult to work out an asylum policy which is just, effective and compassionate; I accept that it is not possible to let everyone in; I even—reluctantly—accept that it may occasionally be necessary to detain people. But I am ashamed that so many who come to us for help are met with suspicion and disbelief.

I am ashamed too at the way this debate affects even those who have established rights of residence in the West. One person told me that she never tells anyone she is a refugee for fear of their reaction. Another spoke of how hard she used to find it when British friends casually asked her how long she would be here. In the present climate, an innocent enquiry can so easily be heard as: 'We don't want you.'

So I was pleased when, in October, the British Home Secretary, David Blunkett, pledged 'to take the stigma' from the asylum system, and to stop detaining asylum seekers in ordinary prisons. This—if he delivers—will be good news. So are his proposals to open legitimate channels for economic migration, to answer a labour shortage which is presently made up by illegal workers.

Two years ago, I met a young woman in detention who had been involved in political demonstrations in her country. She asked me if it was possible to fly from Africa to Ireland without changing planes in Britain. She explained, 'One day I will be able to return to my country, and I will want to travel in Europe, and to go to a country where they speak English. But after the way I have been treated here, I will never want to set foot in Britain again.'

Shortly afterwards she was released and last summer I ran into her again. Although she still did not know whether she would be allowed to stay, she had been able to study and fulfil some of her dreams. When I reminded her of our conversation, she wept at the despair she had felt. Then she said, 'I have since seen the other side of Britain.'

Last year, an Albanian detainee wrote to our coordinator, 'You and your group personify better than anybody the generous spirit of the English people.' In spite of the tabloid headlines, I know that this spirit exists—all over Europe. And, in the light of recent world events, it has never been more needed than today. ■

Mary Lean is Vice-Chair of the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group.

Sean Dempsey / Press Association

A young stowaway is discovered in Dover.

Declaring war on corruption

Central Prague

Michael Smith attends the world's biggest anti-corruption conference in the Czech Republic.

At the west end of Wenceslas Square in Prague, a crowd gathers around mime artists who show how greed and graft make grasping animals of us all. Nearby, a marquee houses an 'Art against Corruption' exhibition of posters, photos and bitingly satirical cartoons. On the street near the top end of the Square stand armoured personnel carriers—not from an occupying power of the Cold War but to guard against terrorism. The Velvet Revolution was, after all, over a decade ago, and despite current fears Prague citizens enjoy sauntering in the autumnal sun, in this most elegant of central European cities.

Two metro stations away, inside the Prague Congress Centre, the world's largest ever gathering of anti-corruption campaigners meets to discuss ways of combating the corruption that dehumanizes and impoverishes everyone in the global community. And which also, through drug trafficking, money laundering and security breaches, aids and abets terrorism. Some 1,300 people from 143 nations took part in the 10th International Anti-Corruption Conference, organized by Transparency International (TI) in October.

If you want to declare war on corruption you could announce your battle plans almost anywhere: Brussels, Washington, Moscow, Harare, Seoul or, indeed, in countless corporate boardrooms. The problem is so ubiquitous. Prague—the leading business centre of the old Austro-Hungarian Empire—was an appropriate enough choice. PriceWaterhouseCoopers reports that nearly 50 per cent of Czech companies perceive corruption to be widespread, compared with the European average of 23 per cent, though only five per cent of Czech firms admit to being victims of corruption.

The Western attacks on Afghanistan began just as the opening ceremony was being held at Prague Castle, hosted by President Vaclav Havel. No one was condoning the evil of the terrorist atrocities of 11 September. But an unspoken question hung in the air: if the West and the world had had the courage to address corruption, might such evils have been averted?

Corruption protected evil dictatorships and led to the 'degradation of civilization', President Havel said. Corruption had a thousand and one faces and 'many of those who fight corruption risk not only a comfortable life but life itself'.

His Social Democrat Prime Minister, Milos Zeman, came to power on the back of a 'clean hands' election campaign and this ensured his place at TI's top table. But veteran Czech journalist Jan Urban remains sceptical: Zeman, he said, has since surrounded himself with a 'clientist clique' of *Nomenklatura* cronies. He will not have missed the remarks of Maria Livanos Cattaui, Secretary General of the International Chamber of Commerce: 'Political accountability has taken on even greater importance,' following the terrorist attacks and their aftermath.

No one knows more about political accountability, and risk to life, than prosecuting judge Eva Joly. She has faced intimidation and death threats since her seven-year investigation into corruption at French state oil giant Elf-Aquitaine. Her investigation led to the conviction of former foreign minister Roland Dumas. Judge Joly was one of several honoured as anti-corruption heroes at the presentation of TI's annual Integrity Awards. 'The fish starts rotting from the head,' she said. Corrupt leaderships from Chile to Italy had found loopholes to escape prosection and create barriers to investigation.

To emphasize the point, Peru's Justice Minister, Fernando Olivera, made a dramatic call for the extradition from Japan of discredited former prime minister Alberto Fujimori to face corruption charges in Peru. 'We have to win the war against impunity,' Justice Olivera declared.

Interpol's chief, Ronald Noble from New York, stressed that terrorism couldn't be beaten on the battlefield alone. 'If customs, police and security professionals are corrupt, no expense on high tech devices will provide our citizens with the security they deserve.' The most sophisticated security systems and dedicated personnel would be useless if undermined from the inside by a simple act of corruption. 'The strongest fortress will crumble if built upon sand.' Corruption and terrorism had to be beaten 'one person at a time' by bringing individuals to justice.

Surprisingly, here too was Ann Pettifor, co-ordinator of the Jubilee 2000—now JubileePlus—debt remission campaign. Jubilee and TI have not always seen eye to eye and one maverick TI official had bad-mouthed debt remission as a sop to corrupt regimes. But Pettifor stressed that transparent debtor-creditor transactions were imperative. And civil society organizations were needed to deter regimes from corruptly incurring foreign debt. Debt, she said, was a cancer in the economies of developing countries. Pakistan, for instance, spent 56 per cent of its national budget on debt repayment and only 18 per cent on the development of its people. 'This is a fertile ground for any form of fundamentalism,' she warned.

Transparency, accountability (in both the public and private sectors), good governance, legislation and institutional reform—these were the catchwords throughout the conference. Next to venal politicians, big business graft is often seen as the greatest villain. But how to turn good intentions into practice?

Brazilian businessman Ricardo Semler, Chief Executive of the $200 million public services company Semco, said that his company was about a third of the size it might have been 'had we accepted to play along with the (corrupt) rules of the game'. Instead they had acted as whistleblowers, and this had led to several arrests.

Once, government environment inspectors wanted paying off when they found that the company's paint tanks were located in the wrong place. Semler refused. They told him: 'You have a two-and-a-half year old son. Are you sure you want to do this?' Despite the threat, Semler decided to fight the criminal indictment they were threatening him with. But he also decided not to expose the individuals threatening him. 'I felt I could not take the risk in dealing with four or five people known to be extremely violent and who were telling us that they knew exactly where we walked every day, how my kid walked to school.' And Semler had no desire to be a posthumous hero.

Recently his company found that a subcontractor was paying off people in the social security department, in negotiating a contract with them. Internal e-mails flew in from Semco's staff saying that they should back out, even though it meant Semco lost a $1.1 million order. On another occasion, Semco was negotiating a contract with a Japanese trading company. The Japanese director told Semco that they would have to pay a three per cent 'commission': 1.5 per cent to him and 1.5 per cent to the company President. Ricardo Semler approached the President, who confirmed the demand. Semler refused.

Semler says that at the root of a lot of business corruption is the drive for success. What made billionaires go to work on a Monday morning? he asked. The answer had 'more to do with Freud or Jung than with [management guru] Peter Drucker. Many of these people are in a game because this is how they gratify themselves, how they test themselves against the world.'

Mexico's President, Vincente Fox, was fêted as he arrived for the last day of the conference. On his election on 2 July 2000, TI's Mexico chapter had presented him with a 10-point plan 'in favour of transparency and against corruption'. One of his first actions was to create an anti-corruption commission—unprecedented in Mexico, according to Government minister Francisco Barrio. Some 5,000 government officials have since been fired or fined. And civil society organizations have been invited to monitor the government's achievements. Mexico's electronic state procurement system, in the public domain on a website, is a first in Latin America. Ironically it led to a Mexican newspaper exposing a minor scandal, dubbed 'towelgate': President Fox's residence was being stocked with exorbitantly priced towels. It only went to demonstrate the new commitment to transparency.

The financier and philanthropist George Soros admitted that fighting corruption felt like a losing battle. 'But it is a battle that has to be fought.' He would like to see TI's annual index of the world's most corrupt regimes developed to become a 'score card' to measure progress on a range of issues, from transparent government procurements to the voting record of legislators.

Conquering corruption may be like scaling a mountain, as Cheryl Gray, Public Sector Director at the World Bank, put it. But at the Bank too the culture has changed dramatically in the last five years, she claimed, with an emphasis no longer just on loans but on good governance, and 'a systematic focus on poverty'. In a rural poverty alleviation project in Brazil, for instance, 94 per cent of resources go direct to the beneficiaries, some 7.5 million people. 'The days are gone when economists say that corruption is good because it greases the wheels,' she added.

She believed that reforming institutions would most likely change moral behaviour. But a workshop on the role of faith-based communities stressed the need to 'enhance the moral fibre and spiritual understanding of individuals', in the words of Thai Buddhist monk Mettanando Bhikkhu, of the World Conference on Religion and Peace. 'You have to have core values which tell you what is right.'

Corruption is still perceived as being on the increase. But what most encouraged TI's founder, Peter Eigen, was the coalition being built between governments, the private sector, international institutions and civil society organizations in the war against corruption. 'It seems to break the pattern of violence and confrontation' of the anti-globalization protests, he said. 'You cannot but be startled at the contrast.' Standing as a lighthouse against the rocks of corruption, TI, founded in 1993 and now operating in 77 countries, casts a beam of integrity across the world. ■

Jan Branc

Peter Eigen (second left), founder of Transparency International, talks with investigating magistrate Eva Joly at the Prague anti-corruption conference. With them are Laurence Cockcroft (left), Chairman of TI (UK), and Jeremy Pope (centre), Executive Director of TI.

Tackling corruption in Kenya

by Wanjiru Mungai

John Leggat

Kenya is a beautiful country with rich natural resources but it is rocked by corruption. The result is that though most people work hard they are trapped in terrible poverty.

I heard about corruption but always thought that it would never touch me. It was something others had to deal with. Then my father bought a piece of land. The former owner, realizing that she had lost something precious, wanted it back. Naturally, when she asked my father for the land, he asked for his money back. But she had already spent it. So she bribed the police and told them that she had never sold the land and that my father had forged her signature on the title deed.

The police arrested my father. Prison in Kenya is hell. I still cry when I remember visiting him and seeing him stripped of all his dignity. I was so helpless. It seemed that the honesty that he had always taught us had failed him. I promised myself I would sacrifice anything to make sure that such a thing would never happen again to him or me.

Meanwhile I had become involved with MRA (now Initiatives of Change) which had initiated a Clean Election Campaign to encourage people to vote honestly and responsibly. The campaign had some success and after the elections it became the Clean Kenya Campaign, which called on people to be honest. The campaign also indicated that personal integrity can change the course of a person's life, or that of a family or nation.

I did not have long to wait before I had a chance to prove my loyalty to my pledge.

Working as a secretary in a busy firm, I handled a lot of money. I worked with four others, my boss, her assistant and two clerks. The clerks had gone on holiday and, the evening before the rest of us were to start our vacations, the boss's assistant received about $300. He asked me to look after it. I declined as the banks were closed and I was about to go away. A few weeks later, while I was still on holiday, he called me and said that the money had gone missing from the office. I knew that I was innocent so I advised him to call in the police.

When we reopened the office the police came, and I confidently asked them to take our fingerprints. They made us write statements. My boss said that she had not touched the money. Her assistant had reported the loss, and was therefore not suspected. I had testified that the two clerks were away, so the police picked on me. Every morning, afternoon and evening they would come to my office and threaten to arrest me. 'If you will give us something small, we shall forget about the case,' they said. This made me erupt with anger—regardless of how big they were, regardless of how scared I was by the pistols they carried, I told them what I thought. Eventually they gave up.

We never recovered the money, but the fact that I did not give a bribe was important to me.

As we deal with major corruption we must avoid petty corruption. As the saying goes, to cook a big fish well, you have to know how to cook a small one. ■

Philip Carr

The Caux Round Table meets in London.

The quest for principled business

Bernard Marguerritte, a French journalist living in Poland and President of the International Communications Forum, reflects on what he heard at a recent meeting of business leaders.

On the day of the terrorist attacks on America I was sitting as an observer at the final day of a London session of the Caux Round Table (CRT) for members of the business and banking communities and NGOs. I had already been impressed by the quality of the discussions and the genuine concern for humankind expressed by many. But the atrocities added a new dimension and provided an element of tension and compassion to the debate.

On 10 September, at the beginning of the conference, Winston Wallin, chairman emeritus of Medtronic in Minneapolis and leader of the CRT, said that we could not accept a world in which 'half of the six billion people live on less than two dollars per day'. He added, in a sentence that was tragically soon to appear prophetic, 'It is not only a moral dilemma to have so many people on this planet living in poverty and receiving very little assistance from the wealthy, but it may ultimately turn out to be dangerous and destabilizing.'

In a similar vein, Charito Kruvant, another American company chairperson, pointed out that 'business is changing, becoming more responsible. But the time has come to go further. We should engage in dialogue with NGOs and act to reduce the ever growing inequalities in the world.' She also warned: 'If we don't, we will have tragedies.'

The final day was one of intense emotion, particularly for our American colleagues. I will never forget how the leaders of major corporations, in spite of their visible pain, said, in essence: 'This tragedy confirms that we have to fight for a better world, where individual people are respected, where the inequalities are not so great.' They all agreed that not only is there no conflict between ethics and efficiency, but that if we are not ethical we will have a world in chaos.

Charles Denny, former CEO of ADC Telecommunications, emphasized that business had a responsibility to be more than just a business. Wallin said that business had the means to fight poverty, with some $30 trillion to invest even after the stock market 'crisis'. But this would not work if it was not done ethically. Corruption could not be tolerated.

Raymond Baker, from the Center for International Policy in Washington DC, said that there was roughly $1 trillion of laundered money in the world, and that for every dollar of foreign aid given to developing countries, ten dollars of dirty money were going out. Laundering dirty money was particularly easy in the US where 11 resolutions designed to fight against corruption had died in the Congress Banking Committee. Obviously, the conviction prevailed in some business and banking circles that money laundering could be profitable. Now however things may have changed. Discovering that money laundering is also serving terrorism, President Bush has pushed for the adoption of measures to fight it.

Jeroen van der Veer, Group Managing Director of the Royal Dutch/Shell group, spoke about the 'Shell general business principles' that have guided his company for the last few years. Investment decisions were not made on purely economic grounds but took into account environmental and social considerations, he said. The consequences included creating a climate of respect for everyone working in the company; taking care of the environment; and rejecting corruption. Last year Shell had terminated 106 contracts and pulled out of two joint ventures because of partners' unethical conduct.

He added that this made good business sense. The success of the corporation would ultimately depend on its image and respectability. Van der Veer said that already 'young, bright people' were trying hard to join his company. 'Ethical and social concerns are obviously important to them.' He added: 'The message is getting through that "principled business means profitable business".'

Recently the well-known Polish writer Ryszard Kapuscinski argued that the West had built an amoral world, a world of entertainment and poverty. 'Our entertainment and pleasure is accompanied by an increasingly divided world.' In this situation, 'using the language of terror and hatred is to play with the detonator on a barrel of gunpowder'.

I would agree with Kapuscinski that the time for self-criticism is long overdue. We should take, as he pointed out, 'another look at the functioning of our economy and our media and at our attitude towards the Third World, towards the problems of poverty and exclusion'. Indeed, are we so sure that those who built or accepted this pseudo-civilization of hedonism, materialism, consumerism and deep social inequalities do not share in the guilt for the dreadful events of 11 September?

It is therefore extremely important that more and more people in the world, and maybe particularly among the business community, understand that the only way to combat terrorism is to build together a civilization of love, based upon respect for the dignity of the human person and social justice. It was comforting to see that the people of the CRT are in the forefront in this fight for the common good and for a better world for all. ■

Karen Elliott Greisdorf

WEBBSITE

by Robert Webb

A time for rethinking

For most Americans life has changed since 11 September. The events of that day and its aftermath have riveted indelibly on the American psyche how fragile were the peace and comforts we enjoyed. We had become too comfortable, too complacent.

War was something that happened elsewhere. With two oceans and all our military might to guard us, we thought we were immune from attack in this post-Cold War era. Such feelings partly explain why much of our media tended to ignore the larger world. The factors that foment terror were largely overlooked. Veteran CBS-TV News anchor Dan Rather holds himself and much of the news media responsible. With so little media and public concern about foreign affairs, many members of Congress had scant interest in international issues that impact America. That all changed on 11 September.

On that fateful day I was in Kharkiv, Ukraine, with a Cincinnati Sister City delegation at the official opening of a new American Center. It had been a joyous occasion, with the warm glow of friendship everywhere that late afternoon. Then the deputy chief of the US mission in Kiev relayed the news just received on her cell phone from the embassy.

Like millions across America, we were stunned. How could horror on such a scale target our country? Later, we were moved by the condolences from individual Kharkivites and, officially, through their Vice-Mayor and Secretary of City Council. Checking my e-mail, I found deeply moving messages of shock and sorrow from such friends as a Russian television journalist in Moscow, a Japanese woman at Waseda University (who lost a Waseda student friend on United Airlines Flight 93 which crashed in Pennsylvania) and, significantly, a Muslim professor in Uzbekistan who professed her love for America and sadness at what had happened.

'I returned to a vastly different America'

Such sentiments were universal. For example messages of comfort and condolence from 36 countries flowed into the MRA/Initiatives of Change office in Washington, DC. Palestinians living in the DC area said that most Palestinians were appalled at what had happened and branded as deceptive TV images that showed some rejoicing.

Despite all the support and sympathy Muslims have expressed for Americans, tragically a number of the six or so million in America have been harassed. Some veiled women fear leaving their homes. A Sikh, mistaken for a Middle Easterner because of his beard and turban, was killed. At the same time, many Americans have rushed to support those targeted. *The Washington Post* said bricks ferrying 'crude, racist remarks' ripped through the front window of the Old Town Islamic Bookstore in Alexandria, Va, managed by Palestinian immigrant Hazim Barakat. But afterward, the *Post* said, 'About 15 bouquets of flowers and more than 50 cards—some with money—arrived at his store. People from as far away as Tennessee and Nebraska called with condolences. A local businessman, who would not give Barakat his name, paid for a new window. Christian ministers and a rabbi dropped by to express their support.'

Clearly we Americans of whatever faith, race, ethnic origin or background need to reach out to and care for each other as never before. The tragic events have led many Americans to re-examine their faith—and how they are living it. Americans praying and feeling the need for closer community have packed places of worship. Family ties have tightened. Strangers often seem more aware of each other and exchange greetings. Yes, the America to which I returned is vastly different from the one I left.

While examining ourselves and what we're living for, I think we all need to root out anything in ourselves which would keep us from our neighbours at home or abroad, whether they are Christian, Jew, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh or of any other faith or no faith. In this troubled world at this critical hour, we clearly need each other.

Robert Webb is a former columnist and editorial writer for the 'Cincinnati Enquirer'. He lives in Alexandria, Va, USA.

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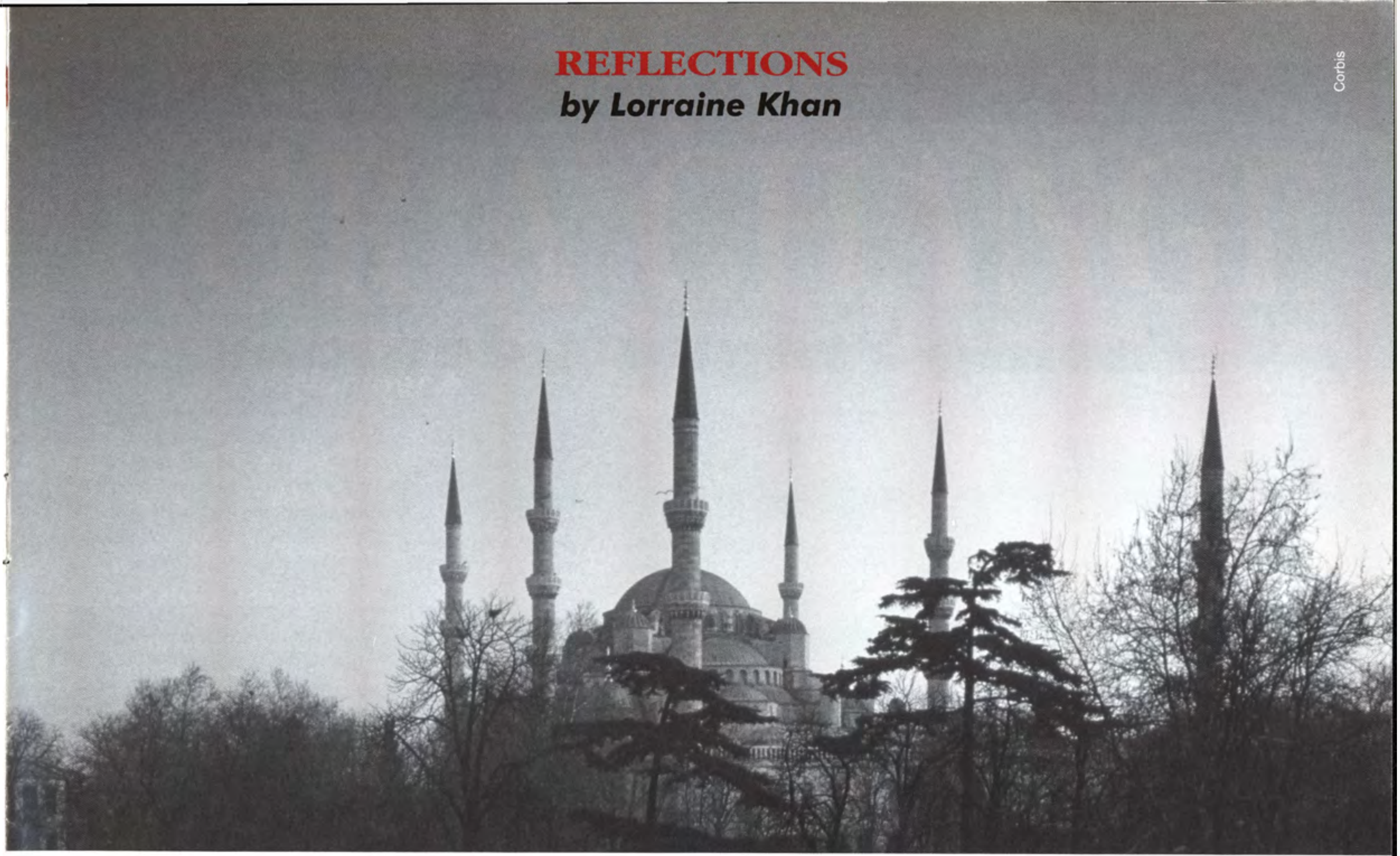

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The twain shall meet

Waving my husband, Idrees, goodbye as he flew off to his country of birth, Pakistan, after the tragic terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, I had mixed feelings. He was going to visit his family and, in particular, his brother who had suffered a severe heart attack. I had planned to accompany him but cancelled my trip on Foreign Office advice.

I recall travelling to Pakistan to get married in 1966. I, a Christian, had met Idrees, a Muslim, four years earlier in Cardiff where I worked as a secretary at the University. He was working as an operations research engineer.

Idrees's cousin, who was studying in London, tried to deter me from going to Pakistan by quoting 'East is East and West is West and ne'er the twain shall meet'. And a kindly professor of music, married to an Austrian Jew, quietly suggested that a good place for us to live would be 'anywhere in Scandinavia'.

But we lived in Pakistan for three happy years before moving to Teheran, Iran. By then we had our daughter, Sarah.

One summer we went by car to Pakistan. The journey took us through the Elburz mountains, east to Mashhad, the Shia holy city, and on through Afghanistan. Sometimes we would pass a rickety bus laden with people and animals. At the appropriate times the buses would stop and everyone would tumble out to say their prayers.

During the month of Ramadan Muslims fast during daylight hours. I remember my first Ramadan in Pakistan. Idrees and his brothers used to finish work early so that they could break their fast at home. They would play badminton on the lawn and the excitement would build up as the sun set and the time for *Iftar* came near.

The fast draws Muslims together all over the world. In their hunger and thirst they are reminded of people less fortunate than themselves. When people meet they ask one another, 'Are you observing the fast?'

On the 27th night of Ramadan Muslims observe the 'Night of Power' in commemoration of the Angel Gabriel's command to the Holy Prophet Mohammed to recite the Qu'ran.

This year Ramadan will fall before Christmas. Muslims have a great love of Jesus, and Islam is the only religion apart from Christianity which talks about Jesus and his ministry. The miraculous birth of Jesus and the virginity of Mary are in the Qu'ran, which also states that Jesus and Mary are sinless. Jesus is referred to as the Spirit of Allah and Mohammed as the Apostle of Allah. Muslims see Jesus as the bridge-builder between Moses and Mohammed.

In 1992 we attended a conference in Panchgani, India, on 'Reflection, healing and reconciliation'. We were deeply moved when we met a Hindu couple from Kashmir who had been abducted by young Kashmiris. Mr and Mrs Wakhlu spoke of their terrifying experience before the Kashmiris released them and were themselves captured by the Indian army. I realized that my husband, whilst sympathizing with their plight, would have torn feelings about the Muslims in Kashmir.

That evening a Muslim woman from Bangladesh gave a talk in which she castigated Pakistan. I thought this would be a further blow to Idrees and half expected him to say that we should leave. But, instead, he went to speak to the woman. She did not want to let go of her hurts—but that was her decision. We just have to trust the process and let go.

Each day at the conference we supported each other by prayer and quiet times together. When it was our turn to speak Idrees described the point in his life when he had overcome his resentment towards the British, the Hindus and the Sikhs for the bitterness and feelings of loss and hurt he had felt as a young boy during Partition, when his family lost their home. He then apologized to the Hindus and Sikhs in the audience for the suffering that some Muslims had caused their communities. He asked for their forgiveness.

There were tears and handshakes all round. Suddenly the conference was alive with people expressing feelings of regret. For the first time we felt we belonged. By dealing with his own need for healing my husband had something to give to others. ■