

## No more bullets! by Elsa Vogel

*'It is August 1944. The occupation of France by the Germans has gone on for four years, but now there is a great excitement that the Allies have landed in Normandy and are approaching Paris. I was born and bred in Paris and, having lived through all of the occupation, am now nearly 19 years old, studying at the University of Medicine. Like everyone else, I am waiting for the moment when we shall be liberated.'*

There were so many rumours and counter-rumours about the Allies arrival that riots broke out between Germans and resistance leaders in several streets. I was visiting a friend's home when we heard, right under our window, a German tank draw up, and at the end of the street we saw an American tank that had just entered Paris. Oblivious to any danger, we stared, fascinated – until suddenly there was an explosion. Someone in our building had thrown a bottle onto the German tank. We quickly closed all the shutters and waited for some kind of retaliation. Nothing happened - what a relief!

Nevertheless, we stayed in for three days, not daring to go outside, and I phoned my family to explain why I could not return home. While we hid we were living on only one potato a day. Then a neighbour told us that a lorry load of vegetables may arrive at the store on the corner – my friend and I offered to go and join the queue. About forty of us were waiting when a little Volkswagen (called in those days a Sedan) pulled up with two German soldiers in it. One got out with a machine gun and began to fire at the whole queue. We were the last in the queue but when it came to our turn, there were no more bullets left...

It is difficult to say what I felt at that moment; amazed at being alive and yet distraught at what devastation was around us. We ran to the flat to fetch my father's friend who was a doctor - he moved quickly to call the emergency services and make sure all the wounded were taken to hospital. After that, my hatred for the Germans knew no limits.

The next day the radio announced the arrival in Paris of the Allied forces. We all went to the Arc de Triomphe: thousands crowded the avenues and square; the people were almost delirious with joy to see all those British, Americans, Canadian and Australians— and Free French—parading in front of us. Suddenly, from the roof, bullets were fired into the crowd. A French militia quickly went up to find the snipers - six German soldiers, who I thought would be taken prisoner. I was wrong - all were killed right there in front of us, and their bodies thrown into a lorry. I was stunned. I certainly didn't like Germans at that time but felt that was not the way to treat prisoners - and who knows - those men were probably obeying orders. It was a time for all of us of great joy – but also great fear. What did the future hold for my generation with so much hatred around?

In the months that followed, two friends, one at the University and the other a Girl Guide leader, told me of their involvement with an organisation called MRA (*Moral Re-Armament*, today re-named *Initiatives of Change*, or *IofC*). Their family were pioneers and the aim was to bring reconciliation to the countries of Europe devastated by the war, especially for France and Germany to discover a lasting unity and peace. As they spoke, I felt a spark surging in my heart and the word reconciliation resonating strongly in my mind. At that moment I knew deep down that my life should be dedicated to bring that reconciliation and trust to a much divided Europe and world. Soon I was to discover that for such a vision to become a vibrant reality, it would need to start in my *own* life and family.

### *The Family Story*

My father was a Norwegian industrialist living in France. He had two families: one legal, living in France in another city, and one outside marriage, living in Paris. Three children were born from this second union - I and my two siblings, who never lived with him and never bore his name. He used to visit us once a month and my mother would go and travel with him 'for his business'. We were told that he was a friend of the family. Only much later did we realise that he was our father, but no word was ever said.

In those days, 88 years ago, to be born illegitimate carried a real stigma. It was most important to hide such a thing, especially if you came from a good middle class family – which meant that when I was born I was taken to a *nourrice* (a combination of a wet nurse and nanny) for three years, and came back to the home of my grandmother and mother as an adopted child. Later on, when I could understand, I was told that my parents had died in a car accident and that I had been given up for adoption. A similar thing happened with my brother: he was told that his parents were missionaries in China and could not take care of him. With my sister it was different. She was born away from Paris and after a while was brought home from the hospital in a shopping bag. All those lies made life very complicated, very insecure - and I was always wondering: 'Where do I belong?'

I was eight years old when I discovered the truth about my family. When something is not right around you, you get suspicious. My grandmother had a bag. She always had it with her and if we came near her she would keep that bag close. One day I decided that I would look into that bag. In it I discovered the birth certificates that confirmed that we were all the biological children of my mother! We were never told anything by anyone – father, mother or grandmother - and we never dared to ask any questions. The certificates said 'father unknown'. I felt hurt and ashamed.

All this made me very rebellious and difficult to live with. I began to steal money from my mother, my piano teacher and even from a shop. As it went on, my mother decided to put me in a strict Catholic convent called *La Sagesse* for two years to see if they could do something for me. Unfortunately I came out rather the same!

I came back home at thirteen and began studying to prepare for my first communion at the Presbyterian Church, but I still wrestled continually with the unfairness of life. Some weeks before I was due to take confirmation, I was walking in the streets of Paris and I said to myself;

'I will not take that confirmation, since society has given me nothing!'

As I continued walking I heard a voice deep in my heart saying:

'You don't need a physical father. I am your Father and you are my beloved daughter. I will look after you for the rest of your life if you live as I want you to.'

It was amazing. I didn't say anything to anyone about it, but the next day on waking up I thought:

'If God loves me so much I will stop stealing money'. And I did, from one day to the next. Faith was born in me. I was fifteen. In the end I decided I would go for confirmation, and after finishing secondary school I went to study at the school of medicine in the University of Paris.

### *A Lesson in Silence*

I would like to come back to those two young women who I met whose families were engaged in the work of reconciliation with MRA. Being immediately interested in what they did, I asked them more about it and one of them invited me home for a chance to talk. I asked them:

'I have a faith, I go to church and I pray regularly. What is it that you have and I don't?' They told me that they had found an extra dimension to their faith. They had begun to take time in silence to reach deep into their lives, gaining divine wisdom, inspiration, direction and even correction. They also taught me the importance of looking at my own life in the light of principles like absolute honesty, purity, forgiveness and love, which are cornerstones in any faith. When one of them asked if I would like to take part in one of these times of silence, I rather reluctantly accepted.

Well, it was a moment of truth. I realised I was constantly lying to hide my family situation. A thought came to me: 'You have been hurt but you have also hurt others. You are clinging on to bitterness. Be honest with your mother and thank her for having brought you up.'

My first reaction was: Impossible! Although it took a year, I eventually did it. I experienced a great sense of liberation; it was a big step on my journey of faith. My mother was working abroad at that time and she never answered my letter, but nearly ten years later when we talked about the whole thing she told me that it had meant a lot to her.

I realised that my faith needed to be practical and lived out every day. After two more years at medical school I felt a call to give my whole life to the work of reconciliation and the adventures of faith through the work of MRA. I spent time learning a lot about this new way of life and after two and a half years I felt led to serve in Latin America. In the summer of 1953 several Brazilians, from all sectors of life, had travelled to a conference at the village of Caux in Switzerland which was MRA's international centre. They were

captivated by what they heard, and eventually decided to invite ten people to go and help them spread those ideas in Brazil and the continent of Latin America. I was among those invited.

While in Brazil I found myself living alongside young people who had had similar family problems to mine. As we talked together, I realised that I still felt deep down that we were victims of our parents' choices. It came as a shock to realise I still had so much bitterness. So I gave an ultimatum to God: 'Give me a full answer to that bitterness or I will stop working for you.'

The answer came in a time of reflection next day:

'If you are still bitter and hurt, it is because you blame others and don't accept any responsibility yourself.'

'I didn't ask to come into the world!' I argued. But with great care I felt God taking me back to when I was eight and discovering the truth about my family situation. He showed me how, at that time, young as I was, I had closed my heart, chosen bitterness and had carried that bitterness around for fifteen years. That choice had been mine - it was not made by my father or my mother - it was made by me. I felt God was saying that he was as concerned about that as he was about the circumstance of my birth.

Though it was hard to accept, I knew it was true. The bitterness went and never returned. I understood that you cannot be a victim all of your life; you have to decide to be responsible for the choices you make and move on. It was then, in my heart, I knew I belonged to the family of the Creator.

### *Traveling through the Continent of the Heart*

Now I come back to those Brazilians who invited ten of us to Brazil. Three months later, four of us - I and three young men - were on a very old boat called *Cabo de Hornos*, en route to Santos and Rio de Janeiro. It took seventeen days at sea to get there, but when we arrived it was worth it. One of the Brazilians at the conference had been a leading industrialist, Luis Villares and his wife Leonor. Back in Brazil he told us, 'The lungs of a country are the lifeline of that country. If they do not work that country chokes and does not grow - and that is what is happening to Brazil today. The ports are run by violent men, rival unions, crimes are happening every day and the companies of navigation have stopped docking there. It has brought a catastrophic collapse to Brazil. Constant strikes are wrecking the ports.'

Through people like Luis and others, we were introduced to some of the leaders of the port. We (the young women) went to visit their families in a big *conjunto* (housing estate) where they lived. We were received warmly and soon became friends. Then, after a while, it was felt that we might invite some of those men (around twenty-five of them) to come for an evening in a small flat made available for us. They were from both rival unions, very tough. Some were illiterate, others more educated - either way you could say that there were probably more revolvers there than people that night!

After much heated conversation, each one blaming somebody else, one of the young men from Europe asked:

'God created the world, isn't that true?' The men nodded.

'If that is so, he must have had a plan for the world.'

They nodded again.

'How do you find it then?'

They shrugged - 'We don't know.'

The young man talked to them about how, through a time of silence, you receive thoughts with the power to unblock conflicts. 'If we take a time of quiet our conscience can put a thought in our heart.'

Then it was suggested that they would have a time of quiet. After a while Damasio, the toughest of them all and vice president of the illegal union, hesitantly told us what had come to him in this silence;

'Damasio, sell your two revolvers. One knife is enough.'

Some of us thought that was a strange thought. Nevertheless, the next day Damasio sold those two revolvers and eighteen months later, once people had seen that he meant business, most of the guns disappeared from the port. Later on those two groups, with their wives and people from other walks of life, were invited by the dockers of Santos for a weekend to hear of each other's experiences, and there was deep and moving reconciliation during that time. The two groups of the ports of Rio returned home united.

We women went on to visit some of the families two or three times a week and deepened our friendship with them. They were able to open their hearts to us and they too experienced deep change; along with their men they got a new vision for their country and how to make that vision practical. Corruption and crime went down greatly. Some of the men married the mothers of their children. Many of the dockers went back to the faith of their childhood. Much later the dockers were able to run a clean election campaign and most of those elected were men that had been exposed to the ideas of *Initiatives of Change*.

For twenty five years the port of Rio did not have any strikes. The main paper of Rio's headline was 'THE DOCKERS OF RIO ARE GIVING US ALL A REAL LESSON IN DEMOCRACY'. A film called *Men of Brazil* was made about their story – many of the dockers play themselves. Together they travelled to other communities, taking their experiences and sharing them with those who needed to hear them most, and sometimes we even had the privilege of going with them. They travelled to South America, Uruguay, Colombia, Peru, Central America, Italy, India, Canada and the US. They also decided to tackle another big problem of Brazil - the favelas. In those days nearly a million in Rio lived in those slums, in the worst conditions you could imagine.

A friend, an industrialist who had discovered his faith at an *IofC* conference, allowed the dockers to meet with two or three leaders of the big slums of Rio in a room of his. The dockworkers told them of their personal change and how it has brought about lot of new social conditions in the port. The slum leaders were interested. Then they were quiet together; and one favela leader said 'I think we must go and see the Governor of the state. We need to make him see that the favelas of Rio are not one million problems but two million hands which can be put to work'.

The favela leaders followed their conviction and amazingly the governor fully backed their initiative. The first thing they did was to invite the dockers, the industrialist and some of us to visit nearly two hundred and fifty favelas in Rio every Friday for several months. They showed their film, *Men of Brazil*, and gave their stories of change. There we made many friendships that would last a lifetime. To be walking through those favelas was like finding a little piece of heaven on earth.

After a couple of years, with the help of the Minister of Housing, nearly half a million favela people were rehoused in decent houses or flats in the suburbs of Rio. At the inauguration of one of the Villas (as they were called) a leader of a big favela said: 'I am very pleased today that these people have now a home; they have an address, but more than that, they have been given back their dignity.'

We also organised a big international conference – to which several Marxist leaders from the north of Brazil (which was very poor and neglected) were invited. Jarbas Leiros was one of them. He was a sincere Marxist but at that conference he found a totally new idea to live for. His first decision was to apologise to his father for the hatred he had harboured against him. He invited my husband and me to go back up north with him. He lived in a very poor house and could only afford one meal a day for his family. He did go to see his father: he came back a completely different man. Talking in the favelas that evening he said, 'Materially, I have nothing to give to my children, but what I've found is this; a treasure I could give to them and they will have it for life.'

To me, such a thing was a magic moment with which to feed my soul.

Having gone to Latin America initially for two years, I stayed for forty. It was a time of much learning but also great adventure – one of which was marrying my English husband, Laurie Vogel! He was a doctor of metallurgy and worked as an engineer for eight years. After meeting with a branch of the *IofC* in Birmingham, he decided to try applying some of their ideas to his job there. Eventually these ideas became so important to him that he felt called to give them all of his time. Laurie was also one of the ten invited to Brazil. After four years we fell in love, were married in Brazil and went on to live out together the calling we had independently chosen for ourselves years before. It was a great partnership. My husband learned to become a doctor of souls. And we learnt together that significant changes in societies are born when there is a deep change in an individual, and a calling for life follows.

### *Good Voices, Bad Voices*

Later, Laurie and I had the good fortune to spend over four years in Australia, New Zealand and Papua New Guinea. In Australia we travelled with thirty young men and women who, having finished secondary school, wanted to learn more about the ideas of *IofC* before going to university. They wanted Australia, populated at the time mainly with white people, to accept to be part of the Pacific and Asia and generously open their door for anyone from Asia who wanted to come. They also felt deeply for the aboriginal people

who were so badly treated. They had written a play, a musical called *Wake Up Matilda* that they hoped would carry a moral and spiritual challenge for whoever saw it. It told a story that showed the value these young people placed in their country and the vision they had for its future. We moved all over Australia to meet with people of all ages in schools, churches and industry – and the same in New Zealand, where we worked with Maori (the indigenous people) and Pakehas (the white New Zealanders).

In those years we certainly received much more than we gave. At that time Papua New Guinea was well known for cannibalism. We were invited there by the granddaughter of a cannibal chief, Alice Wedega, a formidable woman who had become a Christian. She had learnt how to make her faith very practical, so she wanted to give her people what she had discovered - the secret of silence and how it could lead to amazing changes. So she took us to the part of the country she was from. We met with a dozen of her tribe and in a simple way she told them that as human beings we had two voices speaking to our hearts, the good one and the bad one. She said that we need to be silent to know which one to obey. After being quiet for a while a young man got up:

‘The good voice has told me that we should end all cannibalism in our land and I should break my spear!’ He did so right there. It was quite something. One is not often a witness to such a scene, and it is a moment I could never forget.

### *An Unexpected Discovery*

I have written about these episodes in which I have been involved because I want young people who, like me, have come from a dysfunctional family and may sometimes feel left out, or with very little self-esteem, to know that each one of us whatever our colour— black, white, brown or yellow, illegitimate or legitimate, poor or rich—are needed, and can have a real part in this huge task of making the world a better place. Then we realise that we all belong to this diverse humanity, created by a divine wisdom, which is deep in the heart of each of us.

One day, while helping a friend to move house, I stumbled upon a small book about a man called Roald Dahl. I was intrigued, as I knew that that was the name I should have had if circumstances had been different for me. Reading further I discovered that he was a famous author of children’s stories; that his father was born in Sarpsborg in Norway, where incidentally I knew my father was born. Well, I thought, here’s a story I need to unravel. I asked one of my nephews to see if he could find anything on the internet about this Dahl family – and he did! I learnt that there were branches of the family in Britain, Norway and France. Buried in all this information I spotted clearly the name of my father – he was the brother of Roald Dahl’s father. I had suddenly discovered the family I belonged to, even if I found myself in that family *par la main gauche* (by the left hand) as they say in France.

My nephew managed to Skype one of the French relatives, who when asked about the family tree said, ‘I have given you all the descendents of the Dahls; there is no one else’. As I told this to my sister and her husband, we could not help but smile. They didn’t know all the secrets of the family. We decided to write to the Dahl family in France, not demanding anything but simply letting them know that there *were* other descendants and who they were. My sister wrote a very nice letter but no one answered for a while. Then a young man, a great-grandson of my father, phoned my sister one day and said that he had seen the letter and wanted to meet us. My first encounter with him was in France – I happened to be in Paris, so I telephoned him. We arranged to have lunch together, and what a joy those two hours were! I heard many things about my father that I did not know. We have stayed in contact and he and his mother have invited us to see them in the family property in Vendée.

Back in England, I naturally discovered more about Roald Dahl and some of his fascinating stories. I also read about his wife Felicity. I thought to visit the museum in Great Missenden, which led me to wondering whether I should write to Felicity suggesting that I visit her. It was not easy to decide, but I felt clearly one morning that I should. I received a warm invitation to visit. I stayed nearby, invited by good friends, and together we went to the ‘Gipsy’ home where the famous hut was where Dahl wrote many of his books. It was truly a memorable encounter - and what a friend she became!

What can I say after all that? Just that in my life there has been a *fil conducteur*, a silver thread, which has led me through the labyrinth, held by a powerful hand from somewhere above who cares deeply for us all.