

MOUNTAIN HOUSE · CAUX

PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL

11th July, 1988

Dear Friends,

That familiar Monday morning feeling, for the first time this summer: the struggle to fix in words on the screen and on paper something of the magic of this place. I don't envy myself! The conference proper has only been going for three days, yet there is such a whirl of impressions to capture, such a myriad of incidents, phrases and people. Of course, the numbers had steadily been rising for some days, as friends from as far afield as Australia arrived to help carry the conferences here (two generations of the Herds, and Lorna White). Part of the miracle every year is to see how this complex beast, the conference centre, comes to life, and yet there is no great chief (at least on earth!) who plans it all, and who orders the moves of those who answer the call to come and help.

On Friday afternoon Giovanni Bersani, the Member of the European Parliament, arrived by car from Strasbourg with several of his colleagues, along with the Koechlin and Charles Danguy, for a Mediterranean Dialogue. Bersani himself left again on Saturday night, after several hours of free and intense discussion, satisfied that the idea that was born two years ago over a breakfast table here, between himself and Ramez Salamé from the Lebanon, has taken on a life of its own, and is growing to sturdy infancy. This year there were more people from the countries around this area taking part (60 or so), and he felt the level of thinking and reflection had also gained in depth.

As a humble translator, I've caught some flavour of it all. Ramez is here with six other Lebanese, representing the major communities of that suffering land, including one well-known senior Muslim thinker. An Israeli doctor, who has worked for many years in the occupied territories, talks humbly of drawing out the demons among his people - there is a humble, listening quality in him and his compatriots. This most delicate of the problems around this sea is not avoided, but yet does not become a source of conflict.

The Turkish ambassador from Strasbourg speaks about the need for us all to find a clear sense of our own identity - an interesting echo of a phrase in the Caux conference invitation (worth reading again, by the way). Then he listens to four Greek Cypriots giving something of their experiences and vision for their part of the world. They talk of the beginnings of reconciliation between their leaders and their countries. We can write a new page of history, they say. Charis Waddy gives a masterly input about the spiritual heritage of the Middle East, the birthplace of the three great monotheistic religions. She talks of the arrogance on the Northern side of the Mediterranean that has undermined our capacity for service. There are problems in plenty, but despair is not our heritage, we have a contract with the future, she says. And all of this in scarcely two days!

Which brings us to Sunday, yesterday. It is too soon to talk about it. We haven't had time to digest it, to pass on to each other

the gems of the day. My conviction was that it would be one of the great days in the history of Caux - and I think it was. We marked the fifty years of Frank Buchman's call for a moral and spiritual re-armament with 100 and more guests from the region, friends, suppliers, authorities, and a galaxy of diplomats from Geneva and Bern (including the Swiss ambassador to the UN, and one of the top Swiss foreign office officials). All the continents were represented.

I promised myself, and you, that I wouldn't mention the weather once this summer in my letters, but I'm afraid I'm forced to break my word already (but all my friends encourage me to do so). The weather has been unsettled, but we planned on a big buffet in the dining room, a vast space in the middle clear of tables, and a host of tables on the terrace. So the day we ordered dawned cloudless and clear, and we were blessed with a perfect Caux day, the garden and lawn at their very best, the view clear and breath-taking as ever.

Guests were welcomed at the entrance and in the promenoir for coffee and cold drinks before the meeting in the great hall. And quite a challenge it was to craft the meeting part of it too. Amongst all the diplomats we had the American ambassador and his wife ('call me Joe'), a Soviet diplomat, his wife and son, (he brought a bag of books for us, and left a contribution at the desk for the expenses of the day!), the deputy head of the Chinese diplomatic mission with his wife, a South African couple, two men from one of the front line states in Southern Africa - the usual MRA spectrum, only more so!

I like these great days when you feel that everyone is doing their part of the same thing. All those who came in specially to help for the day, all those who worked so hard from the telephone operators and secretaries, to the service, the cooks and the gardeners (the latter were aided by a retired couple of Swiss farmers, for example).

The enclosed press story gives you very little of the flavour of the meeting. Hatem Akkari from Tunisia, spoke with his wife, and Frédéric Chavanne from France and Morocco spoke too, with his wife beside him, about their work to bring understanding between the Muslim and the Christian worlds, between East and West, founded on their own developing friendship and brotherhood. Hatem's little son wriggled in his arms, pulled his father's hair, ran around the platform. And it was in no way distracting, just natural and relaxed. The five members of the Sentis family spoke about moving from monarchy to democracy in the home. 'You'd never see an English family speak together like that,' commented a British journalist. A young German woman - who has just finished her studies of music, and who played for us with a friend after she had spoken - also struck the journalist with her story of taxes repaid. Philippe Mottu and Bill Jaeger spoke - Philippe had organised the first MRA conference at Interlaken 50 years ago, and Bill had led the meeting in East Ham Town Hall at which MRA was launched.

There was humour and depth, and the day reached beyond politeness and banalities to touch the hearts of many who are on the way to becoming real friends. A deep breath, a prayer of gratitude, and on we go. Our thoughts do wing their way to all of you around the world - Caux is in so many ways a reflection of only part of this world network of friends, this amazing family, and our conferences are only an echo of the patient and faithful work of so many 'on the ground'.

Yours ever,

Andrew Stallybrass