

Agnes Leakey Hofmeyr

A Plea of Collective Guilt



by Alan Levy

*Kikuyu
buried her
father alive
on Mount
Kenya —
and she
apologized to
the tribe*

Watching the newscasts from Bosnia, Haiti and Rwanda, I often wonder whether the human race can ever be saved from itself. Ancient grudges erupt decades and centuries later in the form of wholesale genocides that must be etching new patterns of grievance and vengeance to be remembered for generations. But then I meet an Agnes Leakey Hofmeyr, and once again I take hope.

Forty years ago in Kenya, her father, white farmer Gray Leakey — a first cousin of Dr. Louis Leakey, the anthropologist who would discover the world's oldest human fossil six years later — was abducted by Mau Mau terrorists, laid in a shallow grave on the side of Mount Kenya and buried alive as a human sacrifice. A prophetess had decreed that, to offset recent reverses, a particularly good man must be offered to their gods.

In the agony of grief, Agnes' South African husband Bremer Hofmeyr, a Presbyterian minister, wrote a poem structured to speak in her father's voice. One stanza reads:

*Of all the madness man has known
This stands alone
The spirit world exacts as price
My sacrifice
Unfathomed human reason deems
My offered life to aid their schemes —
That blood propitiate restores
A failing cause.*

As for Agnes, she was in inner turmoil: "I was filled with hatred towards the black people. I wanted revenge. I felt there could not be a God to allow such things to happen. I kept imagining my father in a grave with earth and stone being thrown over him. I took cold comfort from the fact that he was a diabetic and could not go long without insulin. Perhaps he had fallen into a coma. I prayed that this might have been the case. I wept tears of anger, sorrow and pity all mixed up."

But then she, too, heard her father's voice — from her last visit to him. On the way from Nairobi airport to the farm, they had stopped at a British-run detention camp and spoken with Mau Mau leaders who aired the humiliations and injustices they had suffered. Their words in English were her father's as he translated from Kikuyu — and now she remembered them:

"One man told us of an occasion when his dog had barked at a white man. The man had pulled out his gun and shot the dog. The African said, 'White men's dogs have often barked at me, but if I had shot one I would have landed in jail.' Each had his own story. One said, 'We were taught not to get drunk on beer, but we saw white men getting drunk on whiskey, and what is the difference?' Another, 'We were told as Christians we should have only one wife. But we saw white men being unfaithful to their wives, and then coming to church and singing hymns on Sunday morning. What were we to believe?' Bitter and disillusioned, they had turned against Christianity and the white man. Mau Mau, they felt, offered them a chance to win back and run their



She brings to the Czech Republic a message that reconciliation takes more than just forgiveness.

own country" — which they did in 1963.

Shaken by what she'd heard, Agnes had walled herself off from any personal sense of guilt by "saying to myself that it was other whites, not I, who had done these things. We were not all bad, and look at the many good things we had brought to Africa." But now, in mourning, yet another voice came to her. And it said, "You must be responsible for the sins of your race, just as you are responsible for your own wrongs."

Almost 30 years after her father's 1954 martyrdom on Mount Kenya, Agnes and Bremer Hofmeyr were attending a Moral Rearmament conference high on another mountain at Caux in the Swiss Alps. They were dining with their friend Stanley Kinga, a Kenyan politician who had joined the worldwide peace-and-virtue movement's fight against apartheid. In the middle of the meal, Kinga turned to her and said: "Agnes, there is something I've never told you that I think you ought to know. I was one of the committee in the Mau Mau that chose your father to be a sacrifice and planned his death."

Agnes couldn't believe her ears: that this man — who had just campaigned to win her cousin, Philip Leakey, a seat from an all-black community as the only white member of Kenya's parliament — had plotted her father's unspeakable murder! She asked him to repeat his words. Then she said quietly: "Thank God we have both learned the secret of forgiveness or we could never sit here."

The Moral Rearmament conference was on reconciliation. At the next night's session, Agnes and Kinga spoke together from the platform on how unity can come through change, even in the most dire situation, if you forsake bitterness and hatred while fighting harder than ever to bring about a change of heart.

A white-haired woman of 77 whose appearance and hearty serenity are reminiscent of former U.S. first lady Barbara Bush, Agnes Leakey Hofmeyr was in Prague and Brno to promote *Překročit násilí*, the Czech edition of her 1990 memoir, *Beyond Violence: A True Story of Hurt, Hate and Hope*. She said that the question most often asked of her is: "How can you forgive?"

"For me," she has written, "the key to forgiveness is to see how ter-

ribly wrong I myself am. As I wrestled with my problem through stormy nights of tears, more and more my thoughts focused on what we whites had done in Kenya and what the Mau Mau men had told us of their treatment by whites that had driven them into revolt. We whites were very conscious of the good things we had done. The blacks were very conscious of the bad things we had done. People are more conscious of where we have been hurt than where we have hurt others. I had to identify with the wrong things we whites had done and realize that I stood in need of forgiveness."

And she had done so — in a memorial speech on a visit to Kenya a year after his death. Introduced in Kikuyu as the daughter of Morungaru (her father's African name), she apologized to the natives "for the arrogance and selfishness of so many of us whites that created hatred in your hearts" and vowed to work all her life to avert future tragedies. The murmur of understanding that rippled through the crowd was not just for her English, but for her sincerity. "So perhaps," she concludes, "a key to the question 'How can I forgive?' is to look at another question, 'How much do I need forgiveness?'"

She and her husband, a Rhodes scholar from an old Afrikaner family whom she met in America during World War II, had organized postwar Moral Rearmament activities in Cape Town and then, in Johannesburg, had opened their home to all races. Hendrik Verwoerd, then the minister of native affairs, warned Bremer Hofmeyr gently, in a letter, that "frustration must inevitably follow for the black intellectual when he does not find the equality in everyday life which you give him in your mixed organization." When Verwoerd became prime minister a few years later, he opposed Moral Rearmament vehemently and denounced the movement at Cabinet meetings. A 1974 Moral Rearmament meeting was South Africa's first multiracial conference ever held in a hotel.

Překročit násilí is the first foreign-language edition of *Beyond Violence*. Its translation by Pavel Kolmačka came about after an editor and an English teacher from Brno, Jiří and Světa Hanuš, attended 1992's Moral Rearmament con-

ference in Caux. The Hanušes were struck by the relevance of reconciliation and forgiveness to their own country, where the Czechoslovak nation was dividing and not only were vigilantes drawing up random lists of thousands of "communist agents," but many decent Czechs were feeling cheated when the first generation of Velvet Revolutionaries' "we are not like them!" disdain for vengeance granted many well-connected communists access to capitalism's ground floor.

"We're seeing a similar situation in South Africa now," says Agnes Hofmeyr. "Ever since this year's [multiracial] elections, there are people who expected housing and jobs the very next week. But the hard work has just begun. To make democracy work will take at least as much dedication and care as it took to tear down the apartheid system."

Having watched old enemies bury hatchets in timber instead of each other in South Africa and Kenya, Agnes Hofmeyr knows that "unless you can forgive, you can't heal the wounds of the past. But they can be healed, as we've proved, if you do make an honest apology and take responsibility for your own mistakes and putting them right. Then you have something to pass on to other people. But it does mean sacrifice — sometimes even a sacrifice of your own culture." In her own case, this meant studying the Kikuyu culture in an effort to comprehend the ultimate sacrifice of her father.

The South African-born novelist and travel writer Laurens van der Post once invited Agnes to tea in his London penthouse and told her: "I want to be sure you understand that it was the greatest compliment that he was chosen by the Kikuyu for sacrifice. Only the best is good enough for the gods." And indeed she does recognize her father's entombment as "an honor by Kikuyu standards," though she adds wryly that "it may not be the standard I go for as a Christian."

Bremer Hofmeyr, who worked together with the Hanušes on securing Czech rights and providing illustrations for the Brno edition, died in April 1993 on the eve of great changes in South Africa, but his widow says she's "quite sure he's looking on from somewhere." And taking pride as well in their two sons: Murray is a high official of South Africa's Small Business Development Center, which is helping black entrepreneurs join the ranks of white capitalists. And Gray Hofmeyr is a movie writer-director, who filmed not only a biography of the Nobel Peace Prize-winning philosopher and missionary Dr. Albert Schweitzer, but also *Jock of the Bushveld*, an African children's classic that his mother "grew up on."

Visiting the Czech Republic for 10 days, Agnes Leakey Hofmeyr also takes pride that her brother Rea — now retired Gen. A.R. Leakey — was the British commander of World War II's exile Czechoslovak Liberation Army when it landed in France 50 years ago. He holds Czechoslovakia's highest postwar honor, the Order of the White Lion.

Beyond Violence is for sale in English at the Globe Bookstore. The Czech edition, Překročit násilí, is available at Czech bookstores or from its publisher, Nakladatelství Cesta, Vymazalova 4, 615 00 Brno.