

We had a fantastic afternoon together. The soccer was really exciting. We cheered and we yelled out against unfair moves. We drank some Chilean beer and reminisced. We talked a lot about Chile, its economy and people, important projects, laws, human rights. We shared experiences. We analysed scenarios and ventured to make predictions.

Close comradeship; intelligent intellectual conversation; an exciting sporting event to add; very interesting discussions – the few hours we enjoyed together flew by as if only a few seconds of time.

Soon it was time for me to return to my motel.

Another week packed with business meetings and another flight followed by more movements and move activities.

Life is full of friendships and good memories and even more things to do.

But Shabbat is Shabbat, the focal point of each week, where time moves in its own time frame as an integral part of living life.

Shabbat in East Timor

In February 2000 I was invited to visit East Timor by the East Timorese freedom fighter, its official leader and now President, Xanana Gusmao. I spent ten days there together with a few leaders of the CNRT (Council of National Resistance) – commanders who had survived nearly 25 years of armed resistance against the brutal Indonesian invasion. At that time, East Timor was nearly broken. UN forces, led by Australia, helped save this little nation from genocide and assisted in rebuilding the country, enabling East Timor to become the first independent new nation of the new millennium.

This was probably one of the crazier projects of my life. It has left me with a deeply enriching experience – but that is a different story. What I'd like to share with you now is about the Shabbat that occurred within those ten days.

It was very hot and humid along the entire coastal region. There were mosquitoes infected with malaria and dengue fever. The water was not drinkable. In stark contrast, in the mountainous inland region – with some peaks as high as 2,500-3,000 metres – the air was fresh and cool; there were no mosquitoes; there was lots of pure, chilly water from natural springs, tasty

tropical rainforest fruits and plenty of fish, brought freshly caught from the pristine waters of the sea.

East Timor is a small island between Australia, New Guinea and Indonesia, only about 700 by 100 kilometres: a beautiful place inhabited by friendly, warm-hearted, decent people. Only about 700,000 of them have survived.

I felt myself highly sensitised to the plight of this people and motivated to assist. On the plane flights back home (there were four consecutive flights) I wrote a heartfelt poem before falling into a deep sleep. Although it is very personal I include it, to share my feelings and thoughts.

Lafaek¹⁴ is Timor

24 February 2000

To Xanana and his people
With love and respect
From your new and loyal friend
Ron G. in Melbourne

*The Philosopher and Poet cries
With the salty tears of the sea
For the thick red blood of his people
Which flooded his land as the
Heavy downpouring of the monsoonal rains*

*The enemy from without sought to
Obliterate his homeland of her life
To plunder and pillage and rape and destroy
To remove and replace for the greed of the few*

*And to pervert from within with poisoning the minds of the hungry,
the poor, the oppressed and confused.*

¹⁴ Lafaek (in Tetun, the common dialect of East Timor) is how they call their country, likened to a crocodile which became transformed into the island of Timor.

*In a thoughtless attempt of genocide
Which was hidden from view in our world.*

*The people alone defended themselves
To try to survive and live on
In a very pure way without help from outside
They moved up through their steep mountainsides*

*Little by little, from day to day
Together they stood side by side
The thin subtle thread of the spirit of life
Was as thick and as strong as steel chain*

*One people as one from within
they strove, united by their own common cause
They struggled in death for their life to
Preserve, the soul of the people so pure*

*For twenty-five years at great sacrifice
And deprived and in personal pain
But enriched in a way so strange in our
Day, so simple, advanced all the same*

*Yet lost in our world which has blinded
Itself as it moves far away from true life
Our everyday thoughts are so filled with the
Fog ... trivially caused by ourselves*

*The Aussies arrived and everyone breathed a
Full breath of the cool mountain air
Which is filled with a rare and sweet fragrance of life
At a time we together all share*

*An explosion of life sprouted out of the earth
As the womb of the people produced
The coffee, the fruits and the corn and the rice
All smiled and the children, these children broke forth*

*A profusion of life reproduction abounds;
Baby buffalos, chickens and piglets and goats
Farm animals as well as home hounds*

*The trauma, the pain and the loss all so fresh
But their hearts and their minds find new peace*

*Their friends from outside were so kind to
Them all; these uniforms gentle and good*

*The children so pure with their smiles so sweet
“Hullo Misterr!” they call day and night
With a trust and a hope for a future naive
As they strive and they work in bare feet*

*These children, these faces, these thousands of faces –
The little sweet faces – the future of Timor
Its beautiful, beautiful faces.*

*A people united so morally
As they share and they plant and they eat
Such a strength which is bound with an ethical
View as clear and as clean as a pure mountain spring*

*Survival assured by our world round about
To the faces, these faces
These sweet pretty faces of children
All looking out*

*At their friends from outside who have
Come to help and to build and
To teach and to share*

*An innocent people who forgive and don't hate
No revenge only justice they seek
A trusting people with nothing but hope
But with everything meaningful dear*

*We from without must take control of ourselves
And look hard and think harder within from without
With respect and with care and a focused approach
As all givers, receivers must share*

*Our common bond which links all humankind,
Which maintains our humanity –
A sensitive balance of self-esteem
Within a culture so pure and unique*

*We must carefully view our well
Intentioned attempts,
Our motivation and the satisfaction it brings
For in the end, our dear friends from within
Have their own lives and dreams of fine futures ahead*

*The clear danger now
Again hidden from view
Exploitation from without of within,
This danger's most difficult to detect
As it's void of an enemy form
But subtle as clouds form to darken the skies
Blocking sunlight and every thing*

*We from without in our haste to give help
Need to help our dear friends from within
In their need in their time in their way
In their land as their culture should
Always stand*

*Lafaek is their land as the legend is told
Lafaek chose to turn to Timor
Lafaek is so strong in its culture so pure
Which within gives without as its lure*

To rebuild we all start but to what we

*Must care from grass roots and then up
From its strength we all share*

*Not imposed from the top from outside
But from where
The soul of the people is there.*

I became closely associated with these kind, gentle and very poor people because I empathised with their silent suffering, identifying their traumatic experiences as being similar to those of my own people during the Holocaust.

Most East Timorese survivors did not openly talk about their past. However, I heard some terrifying stories and eyewitness accounts of how at least half of their population was murdered.

We lived very basically in East Timor. I had no problems maintaining my kosher diet. One night I even slept in an orphanage in Laga (a remote eastern village), run by Salesian Sisters; four “angels” mothered over one hundred children there, with meagre resources. During dinner, the Mother Superior said to me, “So you come from the land of the Father,” – confusing Israel with Judaism and Australia.

There were only a few hours of electrical power each day and not even every day. Water was electrically pumped. They grew their own food and had a small truckload of rancid maize which had been delivered by the UN food aid program. They seemed to be happy with their lot in life.

I burst into tears when we drove into the orphanage in our four-wheel drive late on Thursday evening and saw the children. They were illuminated only by our headlights, sitting in their orphanage courtyard. We heard their sweet little voices singing some songs of welcome to us in beautiful harmony – pure, harmonious, melodious music from angels in the dark.

That night I slept on a broken old steel bunk bed with a mosquito net hanging all around me. There were my three CNRT¹⁵ travelling companions sharing this little room, with frog and insect noises audible from a nearby bog.

¹⁵ National Congress for the Reconstruction of East Timor.

But I slept like a baby that night. It was pitch dark until the early morning dawn arrived to beckon us into a new day.

I went for a few hours to Ailieu, a remote village hidden in the mountains which had served as the CNRT headquarters during the Indonesian military occupation and continued to function as such. I met General Cosgrove at a very moving ceremony in which roles were formally handed over and the East Timorese tribal leaders officially wore their tribal attire again and publicly followed their inherited customs for such formal occasions. After that amazing military ceremony I briefed the East Timorese leadership, as requested, regarding a socio-economic model to rebuild their country and then had lunch with their military commander, Matan Ruak, in his house.

So much activity in such a short time.

We drove through much of East Timor. We saw a lot. We did a lot. We worked hard. There was so much to do. And Shabbat was approaching fast.

I had asked my hosts to make sure that I would arrive at the place where we would be sleeping Friday night – wherever it might be – no less than two hours before sunset, so as to have enough time to prepare for Shabbat. I explained to them that from sunset on Friday evening until after dark on Saturday night, I could not drive, but had to rest in one place – my “home” for the Shabbat.

We drove to Baucau (East Timor’s second largest city after its capital, Dili), a coastal town on the eastern side of the island, arriving mid-afternoon. There was an open fruit and vegetable market on both sides of the street in the centre of town. We came to a broken white house which had seen better days under the colonial Portuguese administration some decades ago.

This was to serve as my home for Shabbat. I was shown my room and unpacked my few things. The communal bathroom had a leaking faucet which dripped into an old bathtub which overflowed onto the stone tiled floor, running over the stone floor and out of a hole in the wall into the garden.

The water was very cold. I felt as if I was immersing myself in a traditional *mikveh* (ritual bath) and imagined myself in Jerusalem on a wintry afternoon two or three thousand years ago. My bathing was extremely brief. I dried myself, feeling frozen but refreshed. I dressed for Shabbat. A few minutes

before sunset I lit the two Shabbat candles on a brick in my room and, with my *kipph* (skullcap) on my head, closed my eyes and made the Shabbat blessing over their flickering light, just as my wife does every Friday evening, as our mothers had done over the years. My blessing felt very deep and meaningful.

I prayed the *Kabbalat Shabbat* service; then I prayed the evening Shabbat service. I made *kiddush* over some kosher wine I had brought with me in a small flask. I sang a few *zemirot* (songs) in the candlelight and then walked down to a small dining room in the house where my hosts were waiting. There was no electricity. A wood fire burned in the stone fireplace, illuminating the room. Outside, in the courtyard, a young East Timorese girl had cooked a whole fish for me over a small wood fire, by skewering it through with a wooden branch of a tree and turning it slowly over the glowing charcoal. She had also baked a few vegetables on the fire and made me some hot tea to drink. There were also fresh tropical fruits – very sweet and tasty.

This was my Shabbat meal. It was delicious.

During my singing of the grace after meals and again after my recitation of the *Shema*¹⁶ before going to sleep, I thanked the Almighty for everything that He does and for protecting me. I thanked Him for giving us the Shabbat.

The next morning I washed my hands and face before putting on my *tallith* and reciting the Shabbat morning service. It felt so good and so rich. I sang every word and then took time to read the weekly portion of the Torah reading in English, just to enjoy it and to search for deeper meanings.

After this I made *kiddush* and indulged myself on a very tasty sweet bar I had brought with me. I sang a few songs, ate some fruit and drank some water.

Shabbat is such a special day. And that Shabbat was particularly special. I sat on a flat rock out in the courtyard under a beautiful tree in the warm tropical sun and read a book I had packed in my knapsack.

Later that morning my hosts took me for a walk around Baucau and we visited the United Nations command post where armed Thai troops were on guard.

Life is so strange at times. A handsome young man in his mid-twenties,

¹⁶ A liturgical prayer consisting of three Scriptural passages recited twice daily by adult Jewish males to affirm their faith.

casually dressed in a sporty civilian outfit, strolled out of the UN office onto its front verandah. His thick, but unmistakably English-educated Arabic accent pricked the air. We chatted. After a few minutes I asked him where he was from. "From Palestine," he comfortably responded. Even as a well-travelled young Australian aged fifty, this caught me by surprise.

"Yes, but where in Palestine?" I heard myself ask.

"From Gaza," he said.

"I've been in Gaza," I said. "You're a long way from home. Don't your people need educated young people like you to build your own country?"

The free scholarship to England and a high, tax-free UN salary appeared to offer a more attractive future to this young Palestinian.

This is the world we live in. "What is in it for me now" is the modus operandi and the culture of choice for so many westernised and privileged individuals. Makes it a bit hard for all the other people.

Thank G-d for Shabbat! It helps make the world an "us" place rather than a "me" place. The values, the ethics, the morality, the community, the continuity – all flow out of Shabbat.

Thank G-d for Shabbat.



My flight was being called. I woke up, rubbed my eyes and moved from the lounge to the plane.

As I fastened my seatbelt and my flight departed from Israel, I thought to myself: was a good humus in Abu Ghosh comparable to the *Kotel*? And was the *Kotel* comparable to my family in Melbourne?

Life is full of so many experiences.

Abu Ghosh is a friendly Arab Israeli village near Jerusalem, a nice place to visit. The *Kotel* represents the important historical foundations of Jewish existence and is a focal point of Jewish belief. It is also one of my favourite places: a very spiritual place.

My children and now also my grandchildren are the continuity of my people. We are alive and we are living a Jewish existence. To me, this is the ultimate which life has to offer.



Towards the end of the Pentateuch (Deuteronomy 29:9-14, 21; 30:19-20) we are told in no uncertain terms:

You are thus being brought into the covenant ... He is establishing you as His nation, so that He will be a G-d to you ... but, it is not with you alone that I am making this covenant ... I am making it both with those who are standing here with us today before G-d our Lord and with those who are not (yet) here with us today ... A future generation, consisting of your descendants, who rise up after you, along with the foreigner from a distant land ... (you must thus make the choice) to love G-d your Lord, to obey Him and to attach yourself to Him. This is your sole means of survival and long life when you dwell in the land that G-d swore to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, (promising) that He would give it to them.



G-d has guaranteed us that the Jewish people will survive to the end of time.

Who defines our Jewish identity: is it we ourselves, or others? How does our individuality fit in with the group? How does our group relate to us? Which group? Who defines the identity of the group?

Continuity – of what?

What for?

What do you want to be a part of?

What do you think? What works for you?