

Return to Pakistan

Stephen Swann

"This is the captain speaking. There is fog over the city of Lahore and we are not able to land. We have enough fuel to circle for some time but if the fog doesn't clear we will have to fly to Karachi and land there."

There was an audible groan from the passengers, notably from myself; nobody relished the prospect of being stranded in Karachi for days, nine hundred kilometres away. Actually, my first plan had included a stop in Karachi to see some friends but the lack of connecting flights to Lahore meant that I had had to delete that from the itinerary and use Lahore as the base for my first visit to Pakistan for thirteen years. Now, a delay of a day or more in Karachi would upset my best laid plans and cause inconvenience to the friends who at that very moment were waiting for me at the airport.

Thanks to a small lump sum from a very modest teacher's pension for the ten years I taught in England before going to Pakistan in 1980, I found myself in a position to take up an invitation from some friends I met in Sangre de Cristo, Santa Fe, in 1986, and organize a journey of a lifetime to New Zealand and Australia. This gave me the opportunity to take in a visit to my old friends, former students and colleagues in Pakistan on the way.

Going to Pakistan was always a bit of an adventure but even more so at the beginning of December 2007. The political situation, a state of emergency prior to general elections, the recent return from exile of political heavyweights like Benazir Bhutto, later tragically assassinated, and Nawaz Sharif, both dismissed former Prime Ministers, the radicalization of the North West Frontier Province, the rise of militant fundamentalism, all these factors put an extra element of risk into the enterprise. But the Brothers had told me that everything was peaceful and calm and I was willing to give it a go in order to meet again the people I had lived and worked with for fourteen years. Nevertheless, it would help if I could start from where I was supposed to – from Lahore.

There was nothing for it but to sit back and relax as we went round in circles through the mist which rises up on winter mornings from the River Ravi, one of the five rivers, the *panj ab*, of the Punjab. I hoped we didn't stray too close to the Indian border, which is only about 30 miles down the road. I thought of the people who would be waiting for me down below, Pervez and Tariq, two former students I have known since they were children of twelve and living in the Khushpur Hostel when I was posted there in 1981. Both were a little differ-

ent from the other 85 teenage boys who lived in the Hostel and went to school in that Catholic village.

Tariq was from a Protestant family but somehow related to former Brother Gilbert, who died a few years ago. Most of the boys had very strong family backgrounds – you are nobody without a family in the Punjab – but Pervez had had a difficult start in life and his family had disowned him. So, over the years I paid special attention to him, eventually putting him through technical school, letting him stay in the hostel during the long summer holidays when he would do maintenance work, and later, keeping an eye on him when he was an unpaid apprentice in a roadside car repair shop in Lahore where he lived in a graveyard, literally, with the family of two other hostel boys. The father of that large family was the gardener of the convent school of the Sisters of Charity in central Lahore, the graveyard was from the time of the Raj and was at the far end of the school property, and they lived around it. On visits there I often saw towels and clothes drying on the crosses and monuments. Pervez moved on from there to a number of driving jobs and eleven years ago became the chief driver of the school and the right-hand man of the Sisters. He can be proud of what he has achieved. He always did have a lot of personality, energy and honesty, but he has proved himself to be a fine, loyal man, now married with two children and doing a good job. We have kept in touch over the years.

Tariq's life has been less dramatic, he did a degree and when I was eventually posted to the school in Faisalabad and was responsible for the computer department, he was already there and became my assistant. We spent a lot of time together and have been good friends ever since, regularly chatting on MSN Messenger or over Skype. I was looking forward to meeting his wife and two children.

After ten minutes of circling, the Emirates captain informed us that the fog had lifted slightly and we had been given two minutes to make a landing. It sounded risky but nobody objected and before long we were on the ground in Lahore.

As befits a country in the front line of the fight against terrorism, airport procedures were strict and time-consuming. To the usual scrutiny of passport and visa was added the taking of a photo which was then compared with every other photo on the system. All the officers were very meticulous women, supervised and protected by a num-

ber of doughty men. We were the only plane to land and it was a very long time before we were through and collecting baggage. Then out into the morning air of misty Lahore where I was quickly recognized by Tariq and, with a suitable garland and bunch of flowers, was led through the curious throng. Pervez was there with his two small sons and one of the school vans. We loaded up and got under way to the convent of the Sisters of Charity where Pervez had negotiated a room for me for the three nights I would be in Lahore.

Already one or two impressions were forming in my mind. It was noticeable how much the population had increased while I was away, going up by 50 million to a massive 170 million now. There had also been a huge increase in the number of cars, and, what was even more apparent on our white-knuckle journey through the comparatively empty Saturday morning streets, the traffic was even more chaotic than I remembered or could imagine. Pervez is a highly competent driver and the van muscled past pretty well every other vehicle in sight, animal- or motor- drawn.

Over a wonderful breakfast of fried eggs, parathas and curried lentils in Pervez's two rooms, the conspiracy of the Sisters became apparent. Because of the long supportive relationship I have had with Pervez he had been nominated my 'son' and his children had been told that their 'grandfather' was coming to visit them. Having seen me they were a little confused but I was happy enough to get to know my two 'grandsons' of four and seven years, Jason and Jonathan, and also Pervez's wife, Jacqueline, who the Sisters had found for him, a necessity in this land of arranged marriages.

A trip across the crowded, dusty city to Tariq's house confirmed my earlier impressions. Lahore now has a population approaching ten millions and at midday a good part of them seemed to be going somewhere rather fast. Passing by the High Court I was impressed by the number of police guarding the buildings against lawyers on strike since last March over President Musharraf's decisions affecting the Chief Justice. I was to pass that way a number of times during the visit and was shocked to hear, two weeks later, that twenty-four of those police had died in a suicide bomb attack.

I love Punjabi food and the lunch with Tariq's family lived up to expectations. His children ran around contentedly, vying for attention with the spicy chops and the chicken curry. Tariq is doing quite well in life; he and his wife speak good English, the children are healthy, and his brothers have stable jobs. But the future for all Christians in the country is rather uncertain. There has been an upsurge in fundamentalism in the last ten years and although Lahore appears to be the least extreme place you could imagine, not too many beards or

burqas in sight, events in other parts of the country make the outlook less bright now than it was some years ago.

By the time Saturday supper arrived, back at Pervez's house, I was beginning to realize that the fabled hospitality of the country could seriously affect my waistline. In the following week, I traveled to three different communities and to two other friends and was generously entertained in every place. Pakistan and other Muslim countries are renowned for hospitality not only to friends but to strangers; I wonder why it is that Christian countries, where the sharing of the Eucharist used to be at the heart of things, are not similarly renowned?

Multan

Sunday was another long day, as we traveled south-west first to Khushpur for lunch and then on to Multan, about eight hours in all. The school in Multan was the first established by the Brothers on their arrival in Pakistan in 1960. I remember Brother Lawrence O'Toole talking about Multan in one of his conferences at Inglewood in the early sixties. He had been there and, I am told, suffered from the incredible summer heat of the city. That same heat had sapped the will from the troops of Alexander the Great when they conquered the place in 327 BC and, deciding to give up war and go home, they sailed away down the River Indus, which passes nearby.

In the last few years, under the guidance of delegate superior Br Colin Griffin from Australia, the Brothers in Pakistan have undergone a rethink, a reordering of priorities and a reassignment of personnel. Local Br Zafar was appointed Principal of the English Medium High School in Multan, replacing, after over twenty years, Br Lawrence Manuel who, after a spell in Balgo Hills, Australia, an isolated community in aborigine territory, has now returned to his native Sri Lanka. The school has grown immensely since I last saw it, a boys college section was added and later a girls college, too. It continues to have the support of the people of Multan and its influence is felt widely. The Urdu school, Alban's Academy, on a different site and mainly for Christians, is also thriving. In both places I ended up, a surprise for me, addressing the assembled staff. The Urdu school staff took full advantage and finished up with a sing-song. It was nice to be shown around the English school by Br Shahed, one of my old-boys from the Khushpur Hostel. The Director of the community is Br Herman, whom I knew well from Karachi, and also includes Br Christie Dorus who, among other things, supervises the Urdu school and another school in Chak 133 about an hour's drive away.

[Next month Stephen moves on to Khushpur.]