**Life is unpredictable**

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Life is unpredictable, we often say, and that is true, both as regards individuals, family and friends, and structurally. In a way, the most constant in our life is change, yes, a constant change, yet also with many things staying the same. If we want a certain change to happen, that is mostly positive and good. But if it is enforced on us, it would mostly lead to difficulties and problems. The worst form of change is caused by natural disasters and manmade disasters, indeed wars and armed conflicts, destroying what we have, what we have built and what we dreamt to build, tangibly and non-tangibly. If those that we had planned a life and future with are gone, life may never be the same again. To everyone in Ukraine, this is the situation, and to many in Russia, too. Just a few weeks ago, everything was different and better.
Just after 9/11, I spoke with an Afghan refugee in Pakistan, who had been a pharmacist in Afghanistan, and he had lived a quite good life, with hopes and aspirations for the future, for himself, his family and town. “But then things changed suddenly”, he said. “In the blink of an eye, I saw everything I cherished turn into dust. Now I am a refugee in a foreign land, without any of my family members. I have become a math and science teacher in a refugee school. The children help me get through the day and they give me some hope, as I also try to give them hope and strength to get through the days and recover from loss and trauma”, said Waheed Khan.
Wars and conflicts are always devastating. I don’t need to tell Pakistanis that, having experienced wars also after the terrible independence struggle leading up to 14 August 1947. Alas, Kashmir is still not free. In my home country, Norway, people still talk about the 5-year German Nazi occupation, 1940-45. My father was a war prisoner for a year till independence on 8 May 1945, and my primary school teacher, too, who was tortured badly. He was limping and had physical scars on his wrists after having tried to end his life because of terrible suffering during imprisonment. He and his wife remained childless.
When independence came, and it was springtime, too, people were ecstatically cheerful. My uncle talked to us children about how his wife, my father’s sister, had walked on foot the thirty or forty kilometres to be at the port when the ship landed in Stavanger with the freed war prisoners, including her brother, who became my father some years later. My uncle used to joke about it, well, in his pedagogical way, since my aunt was a small woman and it must have been quite strenuous for her, he said. She was the most selfless woman I could think of, concerned about what shape her brother was in, physically and psychologically; the last war winter had been terribly cold in the Oslo region, where the large Grini Concentration Camp was situated, with up to 5,500 prisoners, of them 900 women, mostly in makeshift barracks. A few blisters on aunt Inger’s feet in her gym shoes at independence would just be a tiny token of her compassion.
Wars and armed conflicts, even refugee situations, bring out the worst and the best in human beings, we sometimes say. But I am not quite sure that we realize how cruel wars can be, for those who are directly involved, those who wait at home, many times receiving messages about fallen soldiers, their owned beloved ones, or they see some who were injured on veterans’ day, in wheelchairs or otherwise, “leg less, arm less, blind or insane”, as a famous Australian song so figuratively describe history from WWI, many times termed the cruellest of wars, at least till that time. No stories about courage and heroism can compensate for the real truth.
As a pacifist, I find all war and armed conflict unacceptable, also violent resistance. Some will say that is a cowardly position; others will say that if everybody behaved that way, there would be no wars any more. However, when a war rages, such as it does in Ukraine now, none should be judge over others. Last week, I said in my article that I also find it problematic that Ukraine has made it illegal for men between 18-60 years of age to flee the country, because they may be called for military service to protect the country in the war against Russia. True, the resistance that the military and civilians show is impressive and brave.
Since the war began, people in Ukraine have flocked to their houses of prayer, which mostly means churches in Ukraine since the majority belongs to the Eastern Orthodox Church; now it is Lent, their month of fast. This time, as in catastrophes everywhere, people place their trust in God, those who are strong believers and those whose faith is less strong. The Pope has addressed the war in prayers and public statements, and he has sent senior clergy from the Vatican to Ukraine. To many people, the only thing they cling to is their faith and prayer, giving hope, too, as they try to look after and help each other.
Till this time, over two million refugees have fled Ukraine thus far, eighty-five percent women and children, mostly to EU countries, neighbouring countries and some to other European countries, and about a hundred thousand to Russia, although many are sceptical to these ‘safe routes’ and the protection they will be given. The EU and other European countries have opened their doors on a wide gap, welcoming refugees in a fast track system. The policies adopted for fast track systems are entirely different from those Europe applied in the relatively recent refugee crisis in 2015-2016, with an influx of about one and a half million refugees. I am proud of the Europeans this time. Yet, I can’t help also compare to the previous crisis, and to refugee crises elsewhere in the world. Even this time, it has been reported that sometimes, darker skinned refugees have not been treated as well as Caucasians. Ukraine is known for having many good universities, hosting foreign students from Asia and Africa, who now are among those who have to flee war and conflict. Generally, though, let us learn from the way the refugee crisis in Europe is handled this time—which is the way we should always treat people in need, refugees or others who need help—we all become better human beings from that.
I hope that the war in Ukraine ends very soon, so that the healing and rebuilding can begin and people can return home. Let us hope, too, that we then can say, ‘never again, about this war and all wars. For that to become reality, we need a broad programme for a ‘Culture of Peace and Democracy’ all over the world, as I mentioned in my article last week. In the meantime, I will remember the kind heart of all people like aunt Inger, whom I mentioned when my father came home from war prison after WWII. But we must do more than be kind-hearted and pray, we must also take concrete actions to create the world God Allah wants all human beings to live in.