

VISITING SRI LANKA

by Maurice Forster

"Since our Treasurer Maurice Forster had indicated that he would be visiting Ceylon in December, it was suggested that he contacts both the Ceylon Burgher Association and the D.B. U with a view to explaining the set up of the Eighty Club, and the need for the CBA and the DBU to cooperate with us to a much greater extent than as at present, if we were to make a success of helping poor Burgher families in Ceylon." (Minutes of ECM meeting of 27th August 1983)

The Eighty Club was barely a year old but it was already evident to the Committee of Management that our potential for helping the disadvantaged members of our community could prove to be too demanding for the individuals working with us in Colombo: Rev. C Jansz, Dulcie Leembruggen and Averil Bartholomeusz had helped to assess potential beneficiaries and distribute ECM funds. The ECM committee depended most on Averil whose responses were always positive and prompt. But it was felt that working through an organization would give greater stability and help widen the scope of ECM assistance.

The ECM was already assisting the Ceylon Burgher Association (CBA), the CBA had over 60 beneficiaries but its membership was eroded by emigration to Australia and its prospects of long term survival seemed poor. The Dutch Burgher Union (DBU) on the other hand, had its own premises, a staffed office, a 'Social Service Section' that was a recognised government charity and a committee experienced in administering social services. The ECM committee realized that the DBU had the structure to carry our program of assistance to the community in the long term. However there was initially some reluctance in the DBU to accept this fledgling organisation from Australia as a partner. Another difficulty was that at the time there was little or no dialogue between the two organisations in Colombo. Fortunately for the community the then President of the DBU, Justice Percy Collin Thome had vision and influence and he convinced the DBU committee of the value of working with the ECM.

The Secretary of ECM in her report for the year ended 30th September 1983 stated: 'After many months of negotiating with the Ceylon Burgher Association and the DBU where families who were receiving an allowance of Rs 35 and Rs50 respectively per month, financial assistance sent by us raised the allowances of all the families to Rs 70 per month from August this year. 12 of our families will also receive Rs 70 per month.' There were 63 CBA and 12 DBU beneficiaries. I left for Colombo with a cheque covering the payments for all these beneficiaries. The generous supplementation referred to in the Secretary's report laid to rest the outrageous view expressed in Colombo by some, that the ECM merely wanted to use the DBU to transfer monies to friends and relations in S.L.

The DBU premises were offered for a joint meeting but the venue was not favoured by the CBA. Finally a meeting was held at the Aratheusa Church in Wellawatte which was attended by Justice Percy Colin- Thome and Amyas De Kretser from the DBU and Col. Noel Jansz and Lorensz de Kretser from the CBA, I represented the ECM. and well remember the wet and cloudy evening the five of us met in the dark empty church and talked. After I had described the ECM's formation and objectives we got down to the detail of our requirements for assisting needy Burghers. It had been hinted to me previously, that Col. Jansz was opposed to the peculiar membership rules of the DBU. It highlighted to me the importance of obtaining a commitment from the DBU that it would not apply these rules to our beneficiaries I sought and received assurances from both DBU delegates that they would not object to Burghers of whatever descent, being taken on as beneficiaries.

I then shifted the discussion to future administration of the CBA beneficiaries in the event of CBA losing its office bearers to emigration, and was pleasantly surprised with the size of CBA cash reserves. I gave the meeting an assurance that the ECM had every intention of continuing the supplementation of benefits and would even make full payments when CBA funds ran out. By the time the meeting ended continuation of payments to the CBA beneficiaries through the DBU was assured. Another important assurance obtained from the DBU was that it would send a copy of the annual audit report of its 'Social Service Sector' to the ECM.

Some days later Pamela & I were invited to the DBU Christmas party and I was asked to address the gathering of beneficiaries and members. I explained the role and operations of the ECM and stressed that what we had was largely Burghers helping Burghers. This helped to dispel the belief some beneficiaries had, that their payments came from the Australian Government!!!!

A visit to Averil Bartholomuesz on the day she set apart monthly, for her 'family' of people in need, was a very emotional experience. For here one physically made contact with Averil's 'family' sat and had a meal with them and, because the numbers were small and the people so much at ease with Averil, one had opportunity to talk to them individually. Besides the meal, each family received Rs 7.50, and a parcel of bread and rissoles to take home for their evening meal. Averil showed me all her accounting records with which were kept in great detail. It was at this meeting that Pam and I started the first sponsorship of a deserving boy, making payments through the ECM. Years later we were rewarded to learn that he obtained a degree in economics.

Dulcie Leembruggen who with assistance from the Eighty Club tutored disadvantaged children, was the next person we visited. and through her the family "D". The 'Ds' lived in a shanty home, set with many other such dwellings on what was quite clearly a road reservation. The father was an 'odd-jobber' and both parents spoke what we called in Ceylon: 'Broken English'. This was the first Burgher home I visited where there was not a trace of reading matter.

At the time of our visit the rate of unemployment amongst the Burgher community was around 30%, compared to less than 15% in the major communities in S.L. At a home in Kandy we met Fr. Barsenbech a priest with long connections to education who confirmed that Burgher children were indeed facing a crisis in education. The future of these children looked even more dismal than that of their parents. Our resolve to help the youth in our community finned after seeing evidence of unemployment and poverty in the Burgher community on the 1984 visit to Sri Lanka.

Our next trip to S.L was in 1997. We planned to be present when beneficiary payments were made and arranged to interview students for the sponsorship program. I can well remember some of the parents and children, most of whom cheered up at prospect of being sponsored. But I remember most vividly the grandmother and two grandsons I could not help: Grandma acted as spokes person for the two fit looking light eyed young men; unmistakably Burgher, but unable to speak in English. They had not come for sponsorships or handouts; they had come with the hope of making some contacts so that they could get work - And "what was their work"? I asked. "Cutting latrine pits" was the answer. Their difficulty was that the baas' favoured the Sinhalese workers. The boys hoped that by coming to the DBU they would get some patronage from Burghers. I referred them to Harold Speldewinde . (As I write I think of the Burgher begging on the street, but not wishing to talk in English lest he lose help if it were known he was not of the majority race.) I think with gratitude of my many non-Burgher friends in S.L. who have said to me "it is good something is being done for these people". But wonder at the few Burghers in Australia who do not see the need for positive discrimination to lift an under class.

Welfare benefit payments were well organised with President Harold Speldewinde and several office bearers participating. Payees presented in an orderly queue, were identified, signed an acquittance and received their individually packaged and labelled allowances. The contact between committee members and the beneficiaries personalized the giving. It was exciting to see the increase in numbers of beneficiaries since our last visit in '83/84.

(Excerpt from the 21st Anniversary Souvenir, Eighty Club Melbourne, 2003.)