Never Bow to Racism
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A Personal Account

of the Ecumenical Struggle

Baldwin Sjollema
NEVER BOW TO RACISM
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World Council of Churches
150 route de Ferney, P.O. Box 2100
1211 Geneva 2, Switzerland
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For my wife, Jet,
and for our children,
Suzanne, Inge, Anne-Marie, Emilie, and Frederik
and our grandchildren,
Franny Clément, Mathilde, Loic, Alexis, Max, Zoé, Ella and Augustin
Preface

I do not write to hold on, but to let go, to set memory free, to let myself be: myself and all those who allowed me to be what I am now – whatever that may be!
– Chris Minnaar, *The Changing Face of African Literature*

Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.
– George Santayana, *The Life of Reason*, 1905

We live in history, and we also live with its consequences. We are not only the objects of history, but also its subjects. We cannot stand aside from it. We also make history, and we make decisions that affect our lives and those of others. We make deliberate choices and ask ourselves whether we are right.

During the 20th century, we were subjected to the traumatic experience of war and annihilation. We were confronted with violence and destruction as well as prosperity and happiness on a scale as never before. It was indeed, as Eric Hobsbawm has written, an age of extremes.
The 20th century was also the time of the ecumenical movement, and the creation of the World Council of Churches (WCC) as its most visible and outspoken instrument.

From its very beginning, the WCC was confronted with some of the world’s most crucial socio-economic and political issues. One of those was racism, which dangerously threatened the unity of humankind.

Today, we have to admit that, in spite of all our efforts, we have unfortunately not made much headway in combating racism. As the many crises in our world continue and intensify, it is important to take stock of what has been done.

The welfare state was one of the social victories of the 20th century. By now, we have forgotten the political and social traumas of mass insecurity: we have forgotten why we inherited those welfare states and what brought them about. The young generation takes social stability for granted and demands less state interference and less taxation. We describe our goals exclusively in economic terms: growth, prosperity, efficiency, output, interest rates, stock markets. But these cannot be ends in themselves.

My question is whether, in our 21st century, we are as committed to ideals as we were in the 20th. The 20th century was the time of the ecumenical ideal, but is that ideal still as alive as it was then? Do we remember why the ecumenical ideal came into being? Why was the WCC created and what was and is it all about? How many churches and Christians have become introverted and interested only in their own small worlds, just as politicians have become nationalistic.

The general feeling tends to be: that was then, and this is now. All we have to learn is not to repeat the past. We seek to forget rather than to remember; to deny continuity and proclaim novelty on every possible occasion. The 20th century is hardly behind us, but already its fears and ideals are slipping into obscurity. Lessons are ignored. Perhaps this is not surprising: the recent past is hardest to know and understand. But one of the most dangerous illusions today is that we live in a time without precedent, that what is happening now is new, that the past has nothing to teach us.
Whether we like it or not, the past hangs heavily over the present. We cannot escape history. The message today that the past is behind us and we may now advance without the burden of past errors into a different and better world is no doubt in part due to globalization. But we should not forget that the economic globalization of the 19th century was no less disruptive; simply, its implications were felt by fewer people.

This lack of concern about memories of the past is worrying. We seem to have lost the understanding of what war means. And countries that won the war seem to have lost peace. Sometimes the Holocaust, the genocide of the Jews, is presented as an exceptional crime, the 20th-century evil never equalled before or since. But are we that sure it cannot be repeated elsewhere? Terrible genocides have already taken place since.

One of the characteristics of the 20th century was the rise and fall of the state. After the emergence of autonomous nation-states during the early decades, we witnessed the decline of their power at the hands of multinational corporations and transnational institutions. Also, and most important with regard to issues of racism, we see the accelerated and uncontrolled movement of people within and between continents. How do we, how can we live together as people of different cultures, races, and religions? Unless we take these issues far more seriously, we run the risk of seeing similarly evil situations arise in the future.

When the churches met at the assembly of the WCC in Uppsala in 1968, they were confronted with a world in turmoil. One of the major issues was racism. The assembly decided that priority attention had to be given to combating white racism with particular emphasis on Southern and South Africa. We were living in the post-colonial period when the political independence of the former colonies had almost been achieved, but not their economic liberation.

The Uppsala assembly requested the WCC to develop a programme within the WCC itself that would give the example to the member churches, and this is how the Programme to Combat Racism (PCR) came into being. It was controversial from the very beginning because of the decisions that were taken, in particular with regard to
the grants to liberation movements by its Special Fund to Combat Racism. And later the debate became heated because of the WCC’s call for disinvestment by multinational corporations from South Africa and for an end to bank loans to the apartheid regime. Many wondered whether it was right for the churches to involve themselves in socio-economic and political questions. Should their mandate not be limited to preaching the gospel? We were criticized and attacked by some of our key member churches and by both secular and church media for being one-sided and transgressing our mandate. We were considered too progressive, playing into the hands of extremists and communists. Why was all this necessary? Was there not a more peaceful way of doing things?

I have tried to write part of the story of the WCC’s Programme to Combat Racism, the part that I know. With all the mistakes that we no doubt made, I believe it is worthwhile to remember the recent past and to try and see PCR’s history in the context of that ecumenical period, and as part of the history of the second half of the 20th century. What was it that was demanded from us and how did we try to respond to the challenge before us? How did the churches react to the demands made by the racially oppressed, particularly in Southern and South Africa? What was apartheid about, how did it come into being and what was needed to overcome this particular evil? Of course, I don’t pretend to have all the answers. But I hope this book may be seen as a contribution to clarifying what we were after.

But there is another reason for writing. I want to give an account of what drove me personally to involve myself in this ecumenical challenge. In hindsight, I see my involvement in the work of the WCC as a direct sequence of my experience in the Second World War. The guiding element in my life has been resistance; resistance to injustice and in particular to racial injustice. That did not make life easy, either for me or for those around me. Because the PCR took the bull by the horns, it was highly controversial. The fact that we did so became the hope of many finally to see the beast of racism tamed.
Thus this book is an attempt to render an account to the next generation – and in particular to my children and grandchildren – and to describe my ecumenical and my personal experience, in the hope that it may stimulate them and perhaps others on their road as well.

Perhaps past experience can help to understand the perennial complexity of the issues of life that we continue to face today.
Acknowledgments

I want to express special gratitude to my friend and former colleague, Thomas Wieser, who greatly encouraged me while I was writing and who commented on various drafts. I owe thanks to Joan Cambitsis for her interest and patience, and her willingness to correct my manuscript and turn it into readable English.

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Finally, I am most grateful to the World Council of Churches for publishing my book.
Abbreviations

AACC  All Africa Conference of Churches
ANC  African National Congress
BCC  British Council of Churches
CCIA  Commission of the Churches on International Affairs
CCME  Churches’ Commission for Migrants in Europe
CCPD  Commission on the Churches’ Participation in Development
CEC  Conference of European Churches
CIMADE  Comité inter-mouvement auprès des évacués: Inter-movement committee for aid to evacuees
CLSA  Christian League of Southern Africa
CWME  Commission on World Mission and Evangelism
CWS  Church World Service
DRMC  Dutch Reformed Mission Church
EABC  European-American Banking Corporation
EDCS  Ecumenical Development Cooperative Society
EIRIS  Ethical Investment Research and Information Service
EKD  Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland: Evangelical Church in Germany
ELTSA  End Loans to South Africa
EMPSA  Ecumenical Monitoring Programme in South Africa
EU  European Union
GRAE  Revolutionary Government of Angola in Exile
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ICCR</td>
<td>Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility</td>
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<td>ICEM</td>
<td>Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration</td>
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<tr>
<td>ICN</td>
<td>International Christian Network</td>
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<tr>
<td>IEC</td>
<td>Independent Electoral Commission</td>
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<td>IFOR</td>
<td>International Fellowship of Reconciliation</td>
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<tr>
<td>ILO</td>
<td>International Labour Office</td>
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<tr>
<td>IMC</td>
<td>International Missionary Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>IUEF</td>
<td>International University Exchange Fund</td>
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<tr>
<td>IWF</td>
<td>Lutheran World Federation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MPLA</td>
<td>People’s Movement for the Liberation of Angola</td>
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<tr>
<td>NATO</td>
<td>North Atlantic Treaty Organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>NGOs</td>
<td>Non-governmental organizations</td>
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<tr>
<td>NLM</td>
<td>National liberation movement</td>
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<tr>
<td>OAU</td>
<td>Organization of African Unity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAC</td>
<td>Pan Africanist Congress of Azania</td>
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<tr>
<td>PCR</td>
<td>Programme to Combat Racism</td>
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<tr>
<td>PLO</td>
<td>Palestinian Liberation Organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>SACBC</td>
<td>Southern African Catholic Bishops’ Conference</td>
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<tr>
<td>SACC</td>
<td>South African Council of Churches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SACTU</td>
<td>South African Congress of Trade Unions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCS</td>
<td>Swiss Bank Corporation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEG</td>
<td>Staff Executive Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWAPO</td>
<td>South-West African People’s Organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>TRC</td>
<td>Truth and Reconciliation Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UBS</td>
<td>Union Bank of Switzerland</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNCTAD</td>
<td>United Nations Conference on Trade and Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNHCR</td>
<td>United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNITA</td>
<td>National Union for the Total Independence of Angola</td>
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<td>WARC</td>
<td>World Alliance of Reformed Churches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WCC</td>
<td>World Council of Churches</td>
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<tr>
<td>WSCF</td>
<td>World Student Christian Federation</td>
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<tr>
<td>WUS</td>
<td>World University Service</td>
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<tr>
<td>YMCA</td>
<td>Young Men’s Christian Association</td>
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<tr>
<td>YWCA</td>
<td>Young Women’s Christian Association</td>
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I was born in 1927 in Rotterdam, in between two world wars and just before the infamous crash of the New York Stock Exchange in 1929, which made many millions of people all over the world jobless. I would become aware of this much later. Mine was a privileged family, and we enjoyed the benefits of it. The economic crisis was never discussed in front of me or my younger brother, Bernard.

The origins of the Sjollema family – mostly teachers – are in Friesland, which, like Scotland, in the past aspired to becoming independent. My grandfather (and godfather), Bouwe Sjollema, was the last in our family to speak Frisian. He was proud of his background and loved to sing the Frisian national anthem to us!

Nothing in my young life predicted that I would be active in a church, let alone that I would become involved in church or ecumenical work. My parents and grandparents were liberals. My mother’s family were Huguenots who migrated to the Netherlands in the 17th century; they belonged to the French-speaking Reformed Church in
Holland, in which I was baptized. But I never went to Sunday school. Every now and then, my mother would read us stories from the children's Bible – as part of our education, we had to know what the Bible was about. But that was it. My father wanted me to study law and succeed him as a lawyer.

But the Second World War changed our outlook. The German invasion of the Netherlands in 1940, the air raids that destroyed my home town Rotterdam, and the Nazi occupation of five long and difficult years led many Dutch people to actively or passively resist the brutal Nazi regime. Parliament was dissolved, political parties and trade unions were banned, and the media were censored. Political life came to a standstill. We were governed by a German Reichskommissar appointed by Hitler. Queen Wilhelmina and her government fled to London; she became our national symbol, but she was far away from our daily struggle to survive.

Thus the role of the church was significant. It provided one of the few forums for free discussion, although we always had to be careful: *der Feind hört mit*, the enemy is always listening. Many more people than usual were eager to hear the message from the pulpit of our churches. For some, and certainly for me, Bible study became a significant instrument in resisting the racist Nazi ideology, particularly when anti-Semitism was legalized.

The Jews became outcasts; they were systematically persecuted and sent to Auschwitz. But it was not only the Jews who were the target of the Nazis: all those who openly resisted and refused to cooperate were in danger of being arrested and deported. In this situation, the churches spoke out regularly and clearly on several occasions and showed solidarity with the discriminated. What was said from the pulpit was no longer theoretical: it related to daily life. This struck me as something very important. Not much later – in May 1945, the very day the Canadian troops liberated Rotterdam – my future wife and I were both confirmed and became active members of the Netherlands Reformed Church.

Resistance against oppression and solidarity with the discriminated would become and remain guiding principles in my life. And as time went on, other crucial questions also preoccupied me: What do
liberation and freedom really mean? How can we be reconciled with “the enemy”? And how can we break the endless chain of revenge that haunts our different histories? There were no ready-made answers. But during my ecumenical involvement, I became aware of at least some of the elements that matter.

The challenge to be part of the ecumenical movement became even more pressing when I heard Martin Niemöller speak at a youth rally in Amsterdam in 1946. He was well-known and admired in Holland as a German who had dared to oppose the Nazis and who had been made to pay for his outspokenness by years in a concentration camp. What he had to say struck me as genuine. He not only apologized and repented for what his fellow country people had done to the rest of Europe; he also made a sharp analysis of the post-war situation and called for young people of different nations and confessions to face the issues that lay ahead and to avoid another war through an unambiguous joint ecumenical involvement. His appeal did not fall on deaf ears! Two years later, Jet, my future wife and companion, and I together attended one of the public sessions of the first assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Amsterdam in 1948. What I saw and heard there awoke in me a passion to become part of the ecumenical movement “somehow and somewhere.”

But for that I had to prepare myself. The wish to go in a different direction from what my father expected of me became clear only at the end of my military service in 1950. I switched from law studies to sociology at the University of Utrecht, and from that point on I never looked back.

In 1953, when I left the University of Utrecht (provisionally: I returned in 1967 to complete my masters in sociology), the post–Second World War reconstruction process in the Netherlands had been largely completed. The country had suffered badly from the Nazi occupation, but thanks to the enthusiasm and energy that characterized the generation of our parents – who were then in their forties – the nation had regained its economic and social strength. However, it was going through a major political crisis that was to have long-term consequences.
The end of the war signalled the beginning of a worldwide process of decolonization after the Japanese defeat and surrender in 1945. The Netherlands was the third biggest colonial power in the world. The people of Indonesia (Dutch East Indies) were fighting for their independence, but the Dutch were not ready for a transfer of power. Theirs was a brutal and misguided military effort, involving some 150,000 Dutch soldiers in a so-called police action. For obvious political reasons, there was never any mention of a “war,” which is what it really was. Finally, the Dutch were forced by Indonesian freedom fighters and under pressure from the UN to abandon colonial rule and to hand over sovereignty to the Indonesians. The Dutch government had misread the signs of the times. Indonesia proclaimed its independence on 17 August 1945, but it took until 1949, after much bloodshed and loss of life, for the Dutch to accept an official transfer of power.

Just before we married in 1953, the WCC informed me that I could apply for a job with Dutch interchurch aid and service to refugees in Utrecht. That was not really what I wanted. My strong desire had been to work somewhere with refugees in Africa, away from Holland. The idea grew when I spent a short time working in Munich in the summer of 1951 as part of my sociology studies in Utrecht. Two Dutch friends of mine – Jan van Hoogstraten, whom I knew from a Student Christian Movement camp during the war, and Ton van der Burg, both working with the World University Service (WUS) – had told me of the possibility of a job with WUS for a couple of months in a refugee camp near Munich. This appealed to me. I lived in a house with other refugee field workers and had my own car with US license plates, because at that time Munich was in the American-occupied zone of Germany.
I started my job in the Dutch interchurch aid office on 1 December 1953, immediately following my honeymoon. The director was Oncko Heldring. He and his wife, Lucy, quickly became very good friends and I could not have had a better and more interesting and intelligent first employer. I had been told that I was to assist the director, but when I asked him whether it wouldn’t be a good idea to go through the pile of his unanswered mail, he said smilingly, “No, don’t worry, just leave it there, those letters will answer themselves in three months’ time!” From that I concluded that I would have to invent my own job description, and for a short while I helped to resettle some White Russian refugees, victims of communism.

However, early in 1954 the WCC (with whom I had already been in touch earlier regarding the White Russians) asked me to be their resettlement officer for refugees and deal with applicants for emigration to the US among the more than 200,000 Dutch Indonesians who were repatriated to Holland after Indonesian independence. Most of them had been born in Indonesia (including some 15,000 South Moluccans who had served in the Dutch colonial army). Many had at least one parent of Indonesian descent.

The majority of the Dutch colonial settlers had been prisoners in Japanese concentration camps during the war, and returning to their home country was an emotional experience for them. But for those of Indonesian origin – and they were the great majority – the evacuation was traumatic. They had Dutch nationality, and thus they were not considered to be refugees as such. The Dutch government and the general public in Holland believed there would be an “invisible integration” of these people into Dutch society. But the “repatriates” felt differently. They considered themselves victims not only of the Japanese occupation but also of decolonization. They received a lukewarm reception and felt they were discriminated against by the authorities. There were no signs of acknowledgment of their past or of the significant contribution they had made to colonial rule. They felt
like second-class citizens in Dutch society and demanded some form of recognition and compensation. They had served their Dutch colonial masters and now saw no future in a newly independent Indonesia since they were afraid of being treated – and with some reason – as traitors by the Soekarno regime. But after they arrived in Holland they soon found out that the climate there was cold in every respect: not only geographically but also culturally, politically, and socially. They were in fact refugees and thus a burden.

On a more personal note, I should add that my mother, as national president of the Dutch Union of Women Volunteers, was co-responsible with the Dutch Red Cross for the reception, on arrival by boat in Rotterdam, of the Dutch Indonesians, most of whom had never been in Holland before. They were given clothes, food, and a first welcome before being bussed to reception centres all over the country. My job – at the request of the WCC – was to help large numbers of these same people to leave Holland and to emigrate to the US. So in a sense my mother and I were both involved in the aftermath of colonialism and concerned with helping its victims. In fact, my maternal great-great grandfather, Frederik s’ Jacob, had been governor-general of the Dutch East Indies (1881-84) and thus was the highest Dutch colonial authority, though only for a brief period. For centuries, the lives of many Dutch families were intimately connected with the East Indies, through civil administration, commerce, and the military, as well as politically and through the Christian missions. Many fortunes were made there, in the sugar, coffee, and tea plantations or in the oil industry (Royal Dutch Shell).

The hurdles

It was understandable that some of the more enterprising among these Dutch Indonesians wanted to emigrate elsewhere, and a chance came up under the US Refugee Relief Act. In February 1953, following floods that ravaged much of the agriculture in the south-western part of the Netherlands, the US government agreed to include, in its
Refugee Relief Act, a special category for these flood victims. The US needed farmers and thought this was an occasion not to be missed. However, only a few victims were interested, and the quota of 15,000 remained largely unfilled. The Dutch government seized the opportunity and negotiated with Washington the inclusion in their stead of Dutch Indonesian repatriates. And thanks to the determined efforts of US Senator Francis Walter, this effort largely succeeded.

Thousands of Dutch Indonesians desiring to leave registered at the American consulate-general in Rotterdam. But many of them were of mixed Asian-European blood. So here was another hurdle: most immigration countries, and in particular Australia, Canada, and the US, had white immigration policies and strict selection criteria. In the end, though, some 50,000 managed to emigrate, and about a third of those went to the US.

Before they were allowed to leave for the US, however, they needed an affidavit of support in that country, a job, and a financial guarantee for the first year. Church congregations in the US were willing to provide these affidavits on the basis of a detailed dossier. Thus I had to interview each family and decide whether they would be able to integrate into American society. But nobody in the US had any idea what kind of people “Dutch Indonesians” might be.

In order to gain a better understanding myself about that vast country, I was sent to the US for a couple of weeks in June-July 1955, just before the birth of our eldest daughter, Suzanne. I sailed from Rotterdam on the MS Waterman together with hundreds of Dutch emigrants to Canada. In order to pay my passage, I was supposed to organize information sessions on life in Canada. As I didn’t know much about the country, I was more than happy that soon after departure a storm broke out and most people were sea-sick until the end of the voyage! It did not affect me too much, but most people stayed in their cabin for the rest of the trip and my counselling was no longer needed. We stopped in Halifax, where most emigrants went ashore. From there we sailed on to New York on an almost empty ship. During the trip I made acquaintance with the chaplain on board, who happened to be the son-in-law of Dr W.A. Visser ‘t Hooft, general secretary of the WCC. Like me, Mario Musacchio
had little to do, and we had a good time together discussing the ecumenical movement.

My stay in the US was quite interesting. My programme was set up by Jan Van Hoogstraten who then worked for Church World Service (CWS) in New York, the refugee programme of the US council of churches. I was sent to the mid-west, Iowa and Michigan; had numerous meetings with Americans, many of Dutch descent; and had to “preach” (give a message) in church services and to “sell” Dutch Indonesians families. This was not always easy, because people wanted to know – discreetly, of course – whether these people were white or Asian. In one case, I talked about a bar-keeper and the congregation was interested, thinking our barman was a milkbar man – “no alcohol in our community”! Well, I told them he was just that, and once back in Holland I told the man that from now on he was a milk-shaker and he would have to prepare himself for that job accordingly if he wanted to stand a chance. Which, incidentally, is what he did – and he got the job.

My return to Holland was quite different. I was booked by the Dutch government as its guest on the modern and beautiful tourist liner MS Maasdam, a flagship of the Holland-America Line, of which my grandfather, Frederik s’ Jacob, had been a director (1922-33). I was given a VIP cabin next to the captain on the highest deck. To my surprise, on arrival in Rotterdam – the journey took five days – several journalists were waiting for me, all anxious to report how many sponsors I had found in the US. And since I had been rather successful, contrary to other NGOs who had gone before me, I got some headlines in local and national newspapers.

The procedures

In a normal working day, not only in Utrecht but all over Holland, I called up and interviewed about seven or eight persons or families, a procedure that was tiring but interesting because of their stories. For some, it was clear from the outset that the person was still living so
much in his or her colonial past that chances of resettlement in the
US had to be considered slim. I had to tell them I was unable to help
them – obviously not an easy message to convey.

In one case I interviewed an elderly man, who thought he could
leave his wife in the waiting room while he himself insisted on stand-
ing in front of me, clearly thinking in colonial terms that I was his
master. It took me quite a while to explain that he would not fit into
American society.

For each person, a dossier was established and sent to the WCC
in Geneva to be studied and forwarded to Church World Service in
New York. In turn, CWS sent these dossiers to different churches
in the US for sponsorship. In Utrecht we regularly received the visit
of US church officials who wanted to meet and interview applicants
themselves. That proved very helpful, as they took a personal interest
in getting people placed back home. It also meant that Jet and I had
to entertain them, which was pleasant but time-consuming and some-
times complicated because our children Suzanne and Inge were still
very young. The job also involved developing close relations with the
Dutch government department responsible for emigration, and not
least with the American consulate-general in Rotterdam.

But there was one big obstacle with the Americans: the question
of having to prove that Dutch Indonesians were more than 50 percent
white ("Caucasian"). This we refused from the beginning, and I made
this clear on behalf of the WCC to the American consul-general. We
could and would never indulge in a racist game because it was con-
trary to our faith and to the policies of the WCC. After a while the
Americans stopped asking. The Dutch government in turn succeeded
in having the refugees identified as "ethnic Dutch," which more or
less solved the race issue, at least on paper.

As work increased, I needed qualified help for the interviews and
the administration, and I appointed Jan Möhringer, who had been
educated in the US (Moody Bible School) and who knew the situa-
tion there quite well. Later on Bill Allard joined us: he had worked
with the YMCA. We became close friends and he provided consider-
able support (just as the Hungarian revolution started and Hungarian
refugees poured into Austria, WCC Geneva recruited him to become its chief resettlement officer in Salzburg).

Fortunately, the WCC in Geneva was fully responsible for the resettlement budget in the Utrecht office. In the end we needed four people to do the work. In about five years (which went beyond my time as the responsible person for the WCC operation in Holland), out of a total of 15,000 persons we helped to resettle some 3000-4000 in the US. Nearly all of them wanted to go to California because of the climate, but that was not possible, at least not initially. Most congregations and parishes volunteering to sponsor Dutch-Indonesians were on the east coast or in the mid-west. But after a year in the US, the refugees were on their own and they could move westward on their own initiative.

Meanwhile, research on the integration of these people has shown that most of the migrants settled successfully. They moved up the social ladder quickly, in spite of the fact that their diplomas were not recognized in the United States. About one-third were able to buy a house within five years. None disappeared into ethnic ghettos. One of the reasons for this positive development seems to have been the support they received from the sponsoring congregations. Fears about racist behaviour on the part of the receiving communities were clearly unfounded. Most immigrants lost their Indonesian traditions and accepted “the American way of life,” although it was also reported that Dutch-Indonesians in California – like other ethnic groups – frequently created their own social clubs.

My three years in Utrecht were an interesting and instructive period. I was on my own and had to improvise, but I also found myself moving in Dutch emigration circles with a much longer history than the WCC. Although I was their junior, it so happened that the WCC and its partner Church World Service in the US were much more successful in finding sponsors than all the other organizations with a similar aim, including the Roman Catholics. This sometimes created tensions with my senior colleagues in other agencies.

Occasionally I went to report to Geneva, where I got to know the worldwide WCC refugee resettlement staff, notably Edgar Chandler, its director, and Margaret Jaboor, his deputy, a stern and
hard-working Scottish woman, who did most of the day-to-day work. She would telephone me at least twice a week to find out how our work was going.

In 1954, I attended a WCC fraternal workers retreat organized by Ken Baker at the Ecumenical Institute, Bossey, near Geneva, and was greatly impressed by the Bible studies led by Suzanne de Dietrich, a small woman who, despite her severe physical handicap, spoke with great authority. Her passion for life combined with a passion for reading the Bible critically was an eye-opener: the Bible suddenly became related to daily life and to history. I was also impressed by the fact that she listened intensely and that she was open to our questions—she was not the usual theologian defending certain theories or dogmas. In fact, she was a lay woman, trained as an engineer, and as a biblicist she had a keen interest in making us discover the Bible stories for ourselves. During that retreat, together with other participants I began to discover the meaning of the word *oikoumene* as the whole inhabited world and not just the unity of the churches. This proved of crucial importance for my future ecumenical understanding and involvement.

But at that Bossey retreat I also encountered, for the first time since the war, committed Christians from Germany, and this confronted me with the question of reconciliation. Was it possible to be reconciled with the Germans? And what would it take? In May 1940 they had invaded our country and after five days the Dutch were forced to surrender. The Luftwaffe bombed and destroyed large areas of my home town, Rotterdam—a terrible experience. Fortunately, we as a family were spared, but the scars of that war and the five-year occupation (1940-45) by the Nazis remained. All the more so as the only brother of my mother, a reserve officer in the Dutch army, had been killed by the Nazis. The war had meant untold hardship, and many people had taken an active part in the resistance movement. Nazism was an evil racist system, responsible for killing millions of people all over Europe. It was especially responsible for the Shoah.

But at Bossey I was confronted not by a system but by German people of my age—I was then 27 years old. They struggled with a horrible legacy, and they were a generation anxious to listen and be
forgiven. It became a genuine encounter between persons opening up to each other and trying to come to terms with the past. What was essential and quite new for me was to realize how much many ordinary Germans, too, had suffered and been the victims of the same diabolical system. For me, our meeting at Bossey was an important beginning on the way to reconciliation.

Later, in the 1960s and 1970s when I was a Geneva WCC staff member, German colleagues – Werner Simpfendorfer and Ulrich Becker – were among my best friends and reconciliation became concrete, but not before long discussions and my coming to understand their own suffering at the hands of the Nazis.

At the end of 1956, just before leaving for my next job in Vienna, I went for a couple of days to Taizé in France on a personal retreat under the supervision of Frère Max Thurian. Taizé was small at that time and the services were still held in the original small village church. I found it difficult to submit to the discipline of the order, and especially to the austere character of Frère Max, who later converted to Roman Catholicism. But it was an experience I would remember: the silence and the spirituality of the place and of its brothers, the time for meditation, and the beautiful landscape of Burgundy.