

LAUDATIO

PRESENTATION OF THE *ADÈLE DUTTWEILER'S* PRIZE TO THE SOURIRE DE CHIANG KHONG

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The prize-giving ceremony is always a solemn moment filled with emotion; when the prize is the one of Adèle Duttweiler's Foundation, it has, in addition, the humanistic dimension of the great Lady and refers to one of the thesis she stood up for so well: «*To serve in the most religious sense of the word, which means have faith in what is good in the human being*»². On this day, I would say what is good in the child.

You give me a great honour in that I can praise the remarkable work done in difficult conditions, by two young women, as well determined as clear-sighted, in the middle of an environment as dangerous as the «Golden Triangle», which rather revives pictures of human beings traffic, of opium fragrances and the distant memory of Asian readings... How were these two young women able to create an institution for some disadvantaged children in this remote area of North Thailand, at the porous and perilous borders of Burma and Laos? How did they manage to maintain it and gradually develop it, to such an extent making it a model institution that many countries could copy? And how have managed the exploit of being accepted by diverse ethnic groups as well as by the overzealous Thai administration?

To say that this prize comes just at the right moment is an evidence, on the one hand to recognize the work accomplished and to reward a remarkable charitable organization and the people who animate it on site as well as in Switzerland but on the other hand, to reinforce, if this was necessary, the determination of our prize-winners and enable them

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² Migros, 1950 : The 15 thesis of Gottlieb and Adèle Duttweiler (extract of the thesis nr 1)

to carry through a part of their projects to come. With this award one does not only mark the past; we favour also the future and we express the will to see the already very large Sourire de Chiang Khong expand even more!

A story of an encounter

Nothing seemed to destine the encounter on this planet Earth of Prapapone Khotsanlee, Thai teacher, widow and mother, and Barbara Gautschi, travel agent, of Geneva origin and more familiar with bathing or snow holidays than with humanitarian activities. Yet, by the two of them, at a certain moment of their life, a symbolic and generous decision: leave for a certain time the routine world of teaching and the temperamental tourists of faraway destinations and offer one year of their life to the more destitute. So here are our two heroines letting go of their habits and meeting by chance in Pattaya by the nuns of "Bon Pasteur", at the institution «Fountain of Life» looking after children who should be sent to school and soon rather after young girls prostitutes, listening, counselling, comforting... One year of complete dedication. One year also to get to know each other and to become tame. One year to decide to do something together.

1. A first stage: the reflection

This year of living in community in contact with the humanitarian world and in symbiosis with the misery of these little girls, abused, has definitely affected the hearts of Barbara and Prapapone. The first one could have gone back to her «all inclusive» trip organisation and the second one find her way back to the classrooms. No, they choose to turn the page of a world a bit too artificial or too rigid. They could also have stayed in the large Thai city, famous for its brothels, its gaming rooms and its exploited children; yet they feel they have to distance themselves of the Sisters to do something else, closer to their initial preoccupations: the education of children; they decide to leave to Africa. With a first stop in Geneva to get their breath back. From discussions to consultations, from remarks to encounters, they finally said to themselves that it is in Thailand one has to work, there where they have some network and there where they speak the language and there where they is so much to do. After three months at the end of the Lake, they close their suitcases and leave for the Golden Triangle.

2. The apprenticeship

The two friends do not return to Pattaya but go to assist Father Rangsan Phanurak, catholic priest and brother of Prapapone, who is located in the remote areas of Northern Thailand close to the Burmese border and who ministers the catholic parishes and the catholic Centre of Chiang Khong, in this muddle of diverse populations, where mingle a few Thai and mostly very diverse native populations born of Karen, Hmong, Lahu and Akha ethnic groups and where are cumulated very different religious practices, particular ways of living and traditions still deeply rooted. To say that Father Rangsan is doing some evangelization would be a little exaggerated: he mostly does social work, work of

assistance and support to the families and a little schooling. He provides assistance to some persons who have Aids, to victims of different traffics, to orphan children. The two friends fully enrol with him in these daily activities, which allow them to understand the mentality of these populations, which make them near the reality of the children and of the families of these regions forgotten by the main power and by the official schooling circuits, and enable them to form very precious relations with the village chiefs.

Very rapidly, they realize an enormous need: a very large number of children do not have access to school, nor primary, nor obviously secondary and their family circle cannot provide it to them. There is no doubt; it is for these children deprived from the elementary right to education that something has to be undertaken.

3. The patronage

After two years of work at Father Rangan's side, they start to put together a very simple system of patronage for the children of the area, enabling them to go to school, paying for the transport expenses, the books and the scholar material, the uniforms and keeping a very close contact with the schools that receive the children, sometimes even buying material for the classes.

The money of the patronages is collected in Switzerland, thanks to the direct involvement of Barbara's family, in the environment of the cousins, close relations and friends of friends; a chain of solidarity is formed this way, in a very spontaneous and informal way.

But these patronages have their limits and postulate that the children are more or less taken in charge regularly, have a family and a place to live not too far away from a school. Nevertheless, even when they have all that, these children are sometimes in danger, with drug-addicted parents or suffering from Aids or simply living in extreme destitution conditions.

4. Clear legal structures

In 1998, the need becomes clearer: one is heading towards a long term charitable organisation, which cannot only rely on patronages. The welcome of children must take place in good conditions, in a durable project and taken in hand in an efficient manner. In this way was created in Geneva the Association « Le Sourire de Chiang Khong », under the impulse of the Gautschi family and with the assistance of personalities of the region.

During the same time, a foundation under Thai law is set up which will receive its official recognition in 2003. The presence of a legal entity on site, run by well-known persons in the area and in Thailand is essential to receive the support of the authorities and facilitate the administrative steps, in particular the important relations with the school. This foundation is the management organ of the House responsible in front of the Thai government for the activities undertaken in Thailand.

5. A first and then a second house

In 1999, Barbara and Prapapone rent a first house in Ban Huai Sak, Chiang Rai, to receive 24 children. These children of the region that are welcomed are those left to take care of themselves, deprived of schooling and often living in very difficult conditions. Very quickly, there is a need for more space, for more children, to meet the constantly growing demand of parents, of village chiefs or of religious leaders met during visits in the field.

So, a new house is needed; a new ground is acquired in February 2003, in Ban Sarapi, close by Chiang Rai. Immediately the construction work starts for the fence and the two ponds, the main building which consists of the canteen and the dormitories. The building site continues with the construction of the kitchen building, the water tower and the boring of a 70 meter deep well. In 2005, the building site is nearly finished and 75 children move and find their place on brand new premises, friendly, clean but who remain modest and adapted to local reality. This group can start the new school year in May. But they are still 25 children left in the first house.

For the new school year in May 2006, the Home is able to accommodate the entire of its 99 children. Furthermore, the Sourire financially supports the schooling of some 80 children who remain in their villages. The survival of the centre is ensured by more than 180 patrons mainly in Switzerland.

Today, the new centre welcomes 120 children and ensures their transport to the official schools of the area. Furthermore it has not stopped ensuring the follow-up of a nearly identical number of students in the villages, to enable them to have access to governmental schools close by, to support these schools and encourage the parents to send the children to the school centres.

The next step is that one of the projects! Thanks to the Adèle Duttweiler Foundation to enable Barbara and Prapapone to continue their dream; the objective is, at term, to be able to construct a few more pavilions and welcome some 200 children and to support as many in the villages.

Fifteen years later, Barbara and Prapapone are still present, more than ever at the steering wheel of their house; they have definitely abandoned the clients of the travel agencies and the school desks, but they fulfilled a dream and established a beautiful friendship.

An exemplary realization

I must confess to you not having visited the House of the Sourire; I saw the very beautiful film directed by Claude Schauli; I have spoken with Barbara and several persons close to the Association. But, on the other hand, I had the chance in my professional life to be able to visit numerous institutions, centres, homes, in different parts of the world, including in Asia. What I wish to underline in front of you, Ladies and Gentlemen, is the exemplary aspect of this work.

What is exemplary about it?

First of all, the fundamental idea that prevails the «philosophy» of the home (one would say colloquially the concept, today), that is to consider the children as persons in their own right, to trust them and to believe in their skills. Children, even in serious difficulty, even victims of tragic circumstances or abuse, or exploitation, are above all human beings that must be respected.

I read through the approach of our two prize-winners a very big respect of the children as persons; indeed they must be helped, taken in charge, educated and led. But they must not be «assisted» and one must not substitute us for them. One must hold out one's hand to them, open their eyes, do with them, to make them actors of their own destinies.

Here lies the great lesson of this house. The children do not only do their bed and tidy up their stuff, but they carry out all the community tasks, whether domestic (cooking...) or for survival (manage the agricultural production...). The team surrounding them are very few and their role consists to gradually entrust the responsibility of the children's care to themselves. Not too much responsibility that they could not assume but the awareness that the work (of cleaning, of planting rice, of the harvest of mangos ...) must be done at a certain moment, in the respect of clear instructions and that each child to whom a task is given is fully capable of achieving it. And, in the daily reality, it does indeed assume it.

The Children's Rights Convention does not ask more than to consider children as human beings in development but capable, depending on their age and maturity, of many actions, thoughts and opinions. The Convention expects then from the States and from the institutions that work with children that these can participate.

It is certain for me that at the Sourire de Chiang Khong, one does of course smile (sourire), one often has fun but mainly **one participates!** One has even gone to the extent of creating a children's committee that can put forward opinions, complain about decisions or make proposals of general interest: the Children's Republic, to quote the nice expression of the famous Polish educationalist, Janusz Korczack, famous institution director and who militated in favour of the active involvement of the children from their youngest age.

This constant involvement of the children in all activities has several advantages: first of all, it gives them considerable knowledge in different fields of actions; often it is mother of transmission of traditions, of know-how and of cultural elements; it avoids that the children stay unoccupied or distracted for too long; it allows to continue the educational intervention on other basis than school and class and in offering some dynamics that often liberate a space or a way of expression different and more adapted to each; it offers the adults a unique observation field of the child, on its potentialities, on its limits, on its probable or possible future.

But this way of making them participate, where the older ones look after the younger ones, has also a great advantage: the one of reducing the adults presence to the

absolute necessary, therefore to be able, with little means to offer many places of accommodation. As Westerner, used to very Swiss standards and often to very heavy administrative traps, to some questionable «Quality Systems», I can only be surprised by the small number of adults taking care of the children (five professionals for 125 children and another 125 assisted children in their villages), of the smooth running of the institution, of the absence of difficulties, of the peaceful atmosphere and ... of the smile of the children!

The Sourire de Chiang Khong gets a lot from the conjugated smiles of Barbara and of Prapapone; we must not delude ourselves: without them, without their determination, without their courage and their clear-sightedness, no home, no taking in charge and hundreds of children left in the lurch of education.

To be left in lurch of education means not to exist, be the prey of all the traffics and of all the abuses, be the ideal prey of big predators who act ruthlessly in this area. The contribution of this Association – Foundation is therefore essential, in terms of prevention, in terms of transmission of knowledge and preparation to life, in terms of responsibility and in terms of service to the region, to the country and to the cause of the children.

Therefore what is done at the Home of the Sourire is exemplary and is worth being replicated elsewhere. As far as it is possible of course to clone Barbara and Prapapone. Cause as everyone knows, one can have the most beautiful institution, the best elaborated concept and the most dedicated workers ... if the management is not human, firm, lucid and determined, the institution will not meet the children's needs.

What I see in Barbara's and Prapapone's work are those qualities. As their personal action is supported efficiently by a collective action, in Thailand (Foundation) as well as in Switzerland (active Association between Geneva and the Valais), all the ingredients are present to bring efficiency and success to their enterprise and mainly to bring the children what they lack of: a good education, in the respect of their skills and the affectionate attention due to their situation of vulnerable children.

I congratulate the Adèle Duttweiler Award's Foundation for this excellent choice and I express all my admiration to Barbara, Prapapone and to all those who surround them, who support and encourage them.