

Two Accesses to a Fascinating Country

On the occasion of the upcoming 20th Anniversary Jubilee of [Deutsch-Nepalesische Hilfgemeinschaft](#) (DNH - or the German-Nepalese Help Association), Ms. Doris Keppeler asked us to write a small article concerning our *Aktion Medikamentenbeschaffung* (collecting of medicaments) for the 23rd issue of the *Nepal Notizen*, the official magazine of [DNH](#) which is published once a year. We agree very well with her desire and hope we don't miss the point with the following article, because the humble action of collecting medicaments itself isn't worth being reported.

We just collect medicaments for Nepal, which is more than necessary due to the catastrophic health care there, and is just a little bit of practiced humanity. Our efforts are possible through direct support from two physicians whom we have befriended, and indirectly through the assistance of multiple pharmaceutical companies whose representatives often give out samples of different kinds of medicines to doctors. From there, our task is to catalog, wrap up, and send the medicine by post.

This report turns out to be a very personal one, seen from a very subjective point of view, without proclaiming objective, scientific evidence. It's just an account of our "doubled" access to a country, which perhaps might not be that unusual after all.

The term "Nepal" evokes quite different associations in different people. I will include us in this observation, since our "first" access to this country "somewhere in the Himalayas" was not that different from the normal access of ordinary tourists who decide to visit the country. We (my brother and I), two real mountain fans, were just like all fanatics—very keen on climbing as many summits as possible. However, we don't see ourselves as mountaineering freaks, climbing mountains by hook or by crook. This passion was limited from the beginning by our monetary resources. Besides, the experience called mountain climbing surely isn't achievable by checking off a list containing the names of famous summits. But that's another story!

Let me return to the story at hand. After becoming very familiar with the mountains in the European Alps, we thought about getting a new kick from a more remote destination. Why this should be Nepal, I can no longer recall, but there is definitely something mystical about this term which we in some way couldn't shake from our consciousness. This is something like what Rainer Krack writes in his handbook about Nepal:

"Nepal, a country with thousands of mountains, gods and legends: there are just a few countries in the world which have the magic attraction of this Hindu state between the 8,000 meter peaks of the Himalayas and the hot lowlands of the so-called Terai. The highest mountains on earth make it a wonder of the world and the widespread, mostly unaltered culture also spellbinds the one who just likes looking at the mountains from a more modest distance. Nepal has something for everyone, whether he/she is a climber, a culture freak or simply a holiday maker." (1994, S.7, original in German - translated by J.W.K.)

We were also rendered spellbound by this country on our first visit in 1996. We wanted to explore it and, as we had always done on former tours into other countries, we wanted to do it by ourselves. For this we chose the Helambu-Langtang Trek. But the one who likes to discover the heart of this country first gets confronted with the reality of its capital. I think many of you readers who try to recall the first hours in this city will agree with our percepts.

Kathmandu, at the very first moment, is overtaxing to normal European senses in every relation. Eyes, ears, and lungs, basically everything that comes in close contact with this city and its inhabitants will be encumbered to its limits. And therefore it's not only the impression of a multiplex and unaltered culture that is digging in your mind, but also the impression of a society which is encumbered to its own pain threshold. Even more than that, it is a metropolis which is smothering under the weight of its own masses of men and women and their products. And so it wasn't only the Hindu and Buddhist history all around that was fascinating us but the poverty and sense of lack that we faced, in material things as well as with regard to medical issues. We especially found the life of the street kids to be very crass and humble. It was an impression of a life that seemed to be ended before it really got a chance to begin.

During our trekking through those fascinating high-alpine landscapes of the region called Helambu and through the cleft wilderness of the Langtang Valley we were also confronted with situations which are definitely unknown in countries of the so-called "First World." The simplest medical problem can be life-threatening due to the fact that there is no medical care in the way we are used to it.

Those impressions we took home in 1996 and back once more to Nepal in 1997. As a matter of fact we returned to Nepal to see more of its fascinating landscapes. This time we chose the Sagarmatha region. We planned for this trip to take about four weeks, but due to first-class weather and excellent planning we were back in Kathmandu after just three weeks and waiting for our flight back home. This time we got the chance to get in touch with the other side of this country in a much closer way, the side which isn't usually seen by the eyes of tourists. So those catastrophic living circumstances having already been engraved on my mind from the last visit, and because of my interest in the possibilities of social work in non-European countries (I am a social worker in Germany), we contacted [CWIN](#) (Child Workers in Nepal Concerned Center), an NGO, which was founded in 1986 by a group of students from Tribhuvan University out of concern for the problem of child labor and the living conditions of Nepalese children in general. We were impressed with what we saw and by what had been done with the simple resources they had. After all, that's what CWIN writes and it is something with which you have to agree implicitly:

"Child welfare is not a charity nor is the development of children merely a technical matter. Rather, children should be the basis of national development."

On the other side the reality paints another picture:

"Nepal paints a very grim picture regarding its children. Nearly 60 % of the total child population live the most underprivileged life where denial, neglect and exploitation are an everyday reality. The majority of Nepali children lack access to adequate nutrition, health care and education. Moreover, they are forced to enter the labour

market as child labour. The majority of children in Nepal suffer greatly from hunger, malnutrition, diseases and exploitation. They are denied their childhood."

Both quotes have been taken from the 25th Jubilee Issue of the [CWIN](#)-owned magazine [Voice of Child Workers](#), but they describe very clearly the antagonism we also felt and which exists between what children should mean for a society and the actual reality.

These quotes could also describe our "second" access to this fascinating country from our very personal point of view. Really getting to *know* a country, therefore, is more than just exploring its beautiful and touristy side. No country lives solely from its landscape and tourist attractions. It's the general social setup and the socioeconomic reality that forms a country and its society.

We never wanted to keep our eyes closed to this second access to a country. Out of this access this idea grew, to support the work of organizations like [CWIN](#) and [DNH](#), with the simple resources we possess. Until now we have tried to put this idea into action within the bounds of collecting medicaments and we want this to continue. As long as we can count on the support of the physicians we will make this contribution.

That said, this is just a humble contribution, and the time spent registering, wrapping up and sending the medicaments by post is very good to handle. But for us it means more than that. It's just a small offering for a country we have come to love despite all real-life antagonisms (or perhaps because of them). After all, as is generally known, many small drops of water can make a stone fall apart.

As Ignatio Silone once said:

"You have to take the world as it is, but you shouldn't leave it this way."

Translated by Jürgen W. Kriks

(My special thanks at this place to my very close friend Carla C. Lovett who did me the very kind favor of rereading and editing this article)