



A dream  
come true  
THE STORY OF KHARANG

Margaret Barr



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MARGARET BARR

(Edited by Roy W. Smith)



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## Foreword

Every denomination—indeed, every organised body of any kind—has a few individuals for whom there is felt a general and widespread affection. With the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches one of these special figures was undoubtedly Margaret Barr. An Honorary Member of the General Assembly, a much-loved visitor to the Annual Meetings of that Assembly when she was in Great Britain, Margaret Barr was admired and (one might almost say) revered by all who knew anything about recent developments in India and elsewhere.

In the General Assembly Directory she almost appeared a very ordinary person. Trained for the Ministry in the normal way at Manchester College, Oxford, after gaining a degree at Cambridge, she started in her ministerial career as Minister of the Church of Our Father at Rotherham, where she served from 1927 to 1933. She nevertheless, as this book will show, had in her heart the desire to serve the people of India, and especially of that part of India where the people were poor and far removed from the development of Western civilisation—in Assam, where the conditions were primitive and the autonomous development of a Unitarian outlook was something unparalleled anywhere else in the world.

This book, in which she tells her own story of the work which she did for the Khasi people in Assam, gives all the possible details of the way in which she served the Khasi folk, and explains her overpowering ambition to serve the people of that country through difficult and trying years. It will give some indication of the reason why the Unitarian community, in Great Britain and in the United States of America, felt a deep and binding affection for her, and contributed time and money and labour to helping her to make her Khasi folk get a measure of education and religious freedom which might otherwise have never been theirs.

Yet, at the same time, she had a deep and warm feeling for her



fellow-Unitarians everywhere. I recall, during her last visit to Britain in 1972, attending a meeting in Bristol, at which her protégé, Devison Marbaniang, was to speak. I was at that time the Minister of a Church in Kent, and, with my wife, was spending a brief holiday period in the West of England. And when our dear Margaret arrived at Lewin's Mead Meeting, the site of that Bristol gathering, she smiled at us that inimitable smile, and said: "What on earth are *you* doing here?" This was within a few days of her installation as an Honorary Member of the General Assembly, and when she was awaiting an eye operation.

In these pages she tells, in her own unmistakable style, of her work in India. She outlines her attitude to many things, especially her general approach to the missionary appeal of some churches. The book must be in some measure a memorial of her attitude, and of her work for Unitarianism in an area where it was something new and something freshly worked out by an Indian community which had thought their own way through to an approach which she did so much to foster.

She wrote this book in her last months. She posted it to London, at periods spread out over these months. It was written in odd chapters at odd times. And it owes a lot to Mr Roy Smith, Deputy Secretary of the General Assembly, who has visited Assam and who knows far more about the general set-up in that part of the world than most of us in the British Isles. To Mr Smith, then, this book owes much. But clearly it owes most to Margaret Barr herself. It must be in some measure a tribute to her memory. It will go far to suggest the basis for the very warm affection which so many of us felt for her before her lamented death in 1973. To Margaret Barr it pays unconscious tribute, even though she wrote it herself. To her we would all wish to contribute a word of love and a word of thanks. She was never a missionary, as this book makes very clear. She wished to help the people of Assam to help themselves. She never thought of herself at all; she thought only of them. But to her, even more than to them, this book is an indication of our long and lasting admiration and praise.

John Rowland

## 1

### How it all began

This is the story of a dream that has almost come true.

I suppose it is always difficult to tie down a dream to any one moment, especially when, like this one of mine, it owes its rise to more than one incident in the career of the dreamer and to their subsequent development and merging. There was certainly no question of the Kharang Rural Centre emerging mature and fully armed like Athene from the brain of Jove; at first the dream, like any other new-born infant at the human level, was weak and helpless and might never have survived the slings and arrows of its early years had not its parent, the dreamer, been already a tough self-willed young woman approaching thirty years of age.

Sometime in the late twenties when I attended the Annual Meetings of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches for the first time I heard there a stirring address by the Rev Griffith J Sparham in which he spoke of the existence of an indigenous little Unitarian movement in the Khasi Hills of Assam and of the courage, vision and simple faith of the man who had founded it. From that moment my fate was sealed; and when, not long after, the Rev Magnus C Ratter, who had been sent to India by the General Assembly Council to explore the possibility of a project in the Khasi Hills, returned and reported that something should certainly be done to help the Khasi Unitarians but that he himself was not prepared to accept the post, I promptly wrote to the committee my 'here am I, send me', pointing out that my double qualification as a trained teacher as well as a Unitarian minister made it sure that I should find in the Khasi Hills a useful sphere of service. The reply, while politely acknowledging the suitability of my application and the excellence of my qualifications, added that 'no committee would

take the responsibility of sending a woman alone to such a lonely post.' As the possibility of finding a husband to escort me seemed remote (we who were in our late teens when the First World War ended had long since learned to think of ourselves as the lost generation whose potential husbands had been swept away in that blood-bath and to realise that we must stand on our own feet and carve out careers for ourselves), perhaps I could find a 'minister's wife', a woman friend to share my dream and throw in her lot with mine. A suitable candidate was at hand, a friend made at Fellowship of Youth camps and conferences, sharing my love of adventure and simple life as well as my Unitarian faith; but she had recently started her teaching career and was finding it interesting and challenging. Moreover there were ageing parents to consider, so after many lengthy discussions she reluctantly refused and I set about winning by devious tactics what looked like a lost battle.

From Mr Ratter I had heard about a school in Calcutta under liberal Brahmo influence which catered for the education of girls from many different religious backgrounds. Hitherto, hoping to avoid controversy on this issue, the school had left the question of religious education out of its syllabus; but the old Brahmo lady who dominated the scene and who with her sister, Lady Bose, wife of Sir JC Bose the famous Indian scientist, was one of the leading educationists of Bengal at the time, had begun to feel that something could be done to introduce the teaching of World Religions if someone with the necessary knowledge and a willingness to experiment would join the staff of the school. A letter of recommendation from Mr Ratter to Mrs PK Ray brought me an immediate invitation to join the staff of the Gokhale Memorial Girls' School as resident housemother in charge of the boarders, with a few Junior Cambridge classes in English and Mathematics and the rest of my time free to work out an experiment in the teaching of World Religions to the whole school, from the kindergarten at the bottom to the Senior Cambridge and Intermediate Arts classes at the top. I accepted, resigned from my post as minister of the Church of Our Father in Rotherham and sailed for India in October 1933.

But before proceeding with the story we must first go back a little further and explain how it came about that I, born into a Methodist family, came to be attending Unitarian meetings and later held for six years the position of minister in a Unitarian church.

As I have just said, I was born into a Methodist family and remained in that church until I went as a student to Cambridge University at the age of twenty-one; but for several years before that I had been restless, finding so much in the teaching of my church that my maturing mind could not understand and refused to accept blindly. The Doctrine of the Atonement I found especially baffling. How could the loving Father-God taught by Jesus require the horrible cruelty of the Cross before he could forgive sinful men? Surely this was a direct denial of his own teaching in the Parable of the Prodigal Son? And how was it possible for Jesus to be the 'only-begotten son' when he himself had taught that all men were sons of God, and when history showed so many great and good souls even before the time of Jesus? What about the Buddha, Lao Tszé, Confucius, Socrates, Ashoka and the Hebrew prophets? I got no satisfactory answer to these puzzling questions from my minister and class leader and I hated the sanctimonious atmosphere of evangelical revival meetings.

During my first year at college I joined the college branch of the Student Christian Movement, made friends with girls belonging to many other churches and started accompanying them occasionally to their services. Amongst them was a Unitarian and one Sunday I went with her. 'Then felt I like some watcher of the skies when a new planet swims into his ken.' I knew at once that I had come home and the quest for a religious affiliation able to satisfy me intellectually, emotionally and spiritually was ended. The Unitarian Church at Cambridge could do all that—and more. It was wonderful to find a leader who was both a scholar and a saint, conducting public worship with a dignity and reverence and speaking of other religions with a genuine respect that was wholly different from anything I had heard at Missionary meetings during my Methodist days,

at worst with nothing but condemnation and even at best with a patronising tolerance which always gave place in the end to a re-affirmation of the complete superiority and uniqueness of Christianity.

It was wonderful to find myself joining in hymns such as 'One Holy Church of God appears through every age and race', 'Life of ages richly poured', 'Wherever thro' the ages rise the altars of self-sacrifice', as well as hymns of personal devotion such as Martineau's 'Where is your God, they say?' and many others written by Unitarians, and to discover that some of my favourite 'Christian' hymns had been written by Unitarians, eg 'Nearer, my God, to Thee'. Most wonderful of all was the discovery that central to the teaching of the Unitarian Church was the conviction that had long been growing on me, that the place to find God was not in anything external (even the Cross of Christ) but in the hidden depths of my own being. It was this discovery that brought my religious life into harmony with all that had most appealed to me in the poetry that I had learnt at school: Emily Bronte whose *Last Lines* contains a magnificent affirmation of her conviction that the 'God within my breast' was to be identified with the Spirit which 'with wide-embracing love . . . animates eternal years, pervades and broods above': Wordsworth's finding of the 'something far more deeply interfused' in Nature 'and in the mind of man': Masefield's 'O little self' and hosts of others. Perhaps these poems are not much read nowadays; but remember that I became a Unitarian in 1921 and that none of the 'slings and arrows' of a long and strenuous life have done anything but strengthen the bonds then formed and deepen the roots of the tree then planted—the tree of the Unitarian faith that I have found for over fifty years sufficient to my every need, intellectual, emotional and spiritual, and which still and increasingly continues its work in my life.

During my six years at Rotherham, and influenced to some extent by the example of my sister, Mary, who had recently resigned her position as a teacher in India under the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society and joined Mahatma Gandhi as one of his full-time village workers, I had been studying the

Indian National Movement and doing what I could from pulpit and platform to help to educate British public opinion to the cause of Indian Freedom. So the first thing I did on arriving in India was to go to the ashram where Mary was living in the hope of meeting Gandhi himself.

Those were stirring times in India and if a newcomer had any previous contact with what was going on she was apt to be caught up at once into the flood. My sister had written to Parsee friends in Bombay to ask them to meet me on arrival, and then speed me on my way to Wardha. Accordingly I was met at the docks by a gentleman speaking faultless English and clad in the white home-spun cloth which was the badge of Congress workers and sympathisers. He took me to the home of the Parsee lady to whom my sister had written—a beautiful house looking out over the bay and a garden full of well-kept brightly coloured flower beds and fruit trees. I was shown by a bare-footed, white-clad servant to a comfortable room looking out over the garden where a tray of fruit and coffee was awaiting me and a private bathroom was at my service. I made myself at home and was sitting at ease enjoying the sights, sounds and scents coming in through the open windows when the door opened and an exquisite, dainty Parsee lady wearing no jewellery but a sari of delicate, evidently expensive fine home-spun cotton, came smiling into the room.

'Mrs Captain?', I asked.

'Yes', she replied, 'But not the one you were expecting. This is her home and she was hoping to welcome you in person; but she was arrested two days ago and is now in gaol. I am her sister to do the honours of her home, show you round Bombay and see you onto the train this evening.'

I suppose none of this should have taken me by surprise. I had known for a long time that many of the finest, wealthiest and highest ranking people in India were to be found amongst Gandhi's followers and friends, but the tendency to think of his followers in terms of teeming masses of illiterate, hungry peasants was strong enough to make me feel nonplussed by this astonishing welcome and the atmosphere of luxury and comfort in

which I so unexpectedly found myself immersed.

Early next morning I was met at Wardha by Mary and the next day was taken by her to meet Gandhi. My somewhat clumsy attempt at an Indian greeting was forestalled by his stretching out a long brown arm to shake hands while he signalled to one of the people squatting around to bring forward a chair for me. I accepted the proffered hand-shake (the only one I ever got, as by the time we next met I had been long enough in India to be treated as one of the family and not as a raw new western arrival) but refused the chair, having been rehearsing cross-legged squatting assiduously ever since arrival.

Many of the Friends of India people with whom I had been working in England were known to him, so for some minutes we chatted about them. Then just before I rose to go I said, 'What do you really want your English friends to do, Bapu?'

Like a flash came the reply, admonitory finger raised, face alight with the famous mischievous toothless smile, 'Keep out of gaol now. Don't go getting mixed up in politics. Find some constructive work to do.'

'And constructive work I suppose means village work', said I.

'Of course', he replied, 'what else is worth doing in comparison with serving those who need you most?'

It would be untrue to say that even then the dream was fully born; but it was certainly conceived at that moment and its birth became just a question of time. Village work such as Gandhi would approve; the call of Hajom Kissor Singh (*See Appendix II*) to feed his lambs and develop his religious work in the villages of the Khasi Hills; surely it should be possible to combine these two distinct but not at all incompatible calls.

The dream, though still vague and formless, was alive and real.

## 2

### Khasi preliminaries

The following May, when I got my first holiday from the school in Calcutta, I paid my first visit to the Khasi Hills and spent some weeks touring the village churches. The rains were beginning and we had some very wet and slippery walks as we trudged from church to church, staying in village homes, cooking our meals and drying our clothes over smoky wood fires and causing consternation in one or two places where a white woman had scarcely been seen before and a white Unitarian woman was a nine-days wonder.

There were difficulties of course, especially in matters of sanitation; for where the only toilet is the jungle and the entire population of the village turns out to watch and follow the minute an interesting stranger leaves the shelter of the house in which she is staying, there are obvious problems! But the young niece whom my guide and interpreter had brought with us for just such purposes did yeoman service in leading me to suitably secluded spots and keeping the children, dogs and pigs at bay. In parenthesis I should add that this young woman, to whom I was never able to speak as she knew no English and I at that stage knew no Khasi, later married a policeman and in 1944 died in giving birth to a daughter whom I subsequently adopted and who since 1947 has been a vital and integral part of 'The Dream'.

It was during this trip that I got my first experience of Khasi rain. One day, for which a walk of about 23 miles had been planned, we were just about to make our usual early morning start when the heavens opened and such rain as I, though brought up in the Pennines, had never seen in my life before descended in sheets. In bright British style I turned to my guide

and said, 'Hadn't we better wait a bit? It can't go on like this for long.'

I shall never forget his look of withering scorn as he said, 'If you wait for rain in the Khasi Hills you might never start at all.' Without another word he marched to the open door, put up his umbrella and disappeared into the downpour. So I bade a hasty farewell to my hostess, put up my umbrella and followed him. Being still too new to the life to have mastered the noble art of walking barefoot, the only sensible way of treating the monsoon, in five minutes my socks were drenched, my shoes full of water and cascades were streaming down my person in all directions, especially down the arm that was holding the umbrella. However, before lunchtime the sun came out; and when we do see the sun in the Khasi Hills in May it is worth seeing. So we reached the end of that day's march dry after all.

It was during this trip also that another of the hazards of life in the Khasi Hills was presented to me for the first time. I was sitting in a village deep in a book when I was suddenly conscious of the sort of rumbling and shaking familiar enough to town-dwellers when a heavy lorry passes along a nearby road. It drew me from my book and with a start I realised that we were at least fifty miles from any such road.

'What's this?' I called to Ekiman.

'Earthquake,' came the laconic reply.

'Do you get them often?'

'No, perhaps six or seven times a year.'

Though the rumbling and shaking had died away I was surprised to find myself trembling, and even after all these years I still do. Earthquakes seem to be things that the body finds it very difficult to become inured to. So here was something else that I should have to learn to live with.

But in spite of embarrassments, difficulties and prophecies of doom I still look back on that first visit to the Khasi Hills as one of the most exciting and enjoyable holidays of my life, and as things turned out it certainly proved the watershed or point of no return from which my life-work was to flow. It was during those long days of walking that 'The Dream' began to take

shape as it became clear to me that here in this remote outpost was work for me to do which would enable me to obey both the commands that I had heard; the one from Hajom Kissor Singh, the founder of the Khasi Hills Unitarian Movement, to encourage and help his little flock, and the one from Gandhi to find some constructive village work to do.

From then on till the termination of my contract with the Calcutta school I spent all my holidays in the Khasi Hills; October 1934, May and October 1935 saw me hiking from village to village rucksack on back, making valiant attempts to master the art of barefoot walking and picking up a working vocabulary in Khasi. The last began in earnest in May 1935 when I arrived for my third tour to find to my dismay that, though Ekiman had made all arrangements for the tour, including a carrier to accompany me the whole way, he himself did not intend to go with me again.

'You'll never speak Khasi while I'm there to translate,' was his explanation of this unexpected decision. He was right of course, and from that tour my real Khasi life began.

But alas! The carrier though willing and strong did not know the paths as Ekiman did and one day's march, which should have been about 23 miles, lengthened itself out to more like 30 through our taking a wrong turn. The village for which we were making seemed to get further and further away and at every step my whole exhausted body cried out for rest. All the food we had taken had long since been eaten, we were already about two hours overdue and no one in the party seemed to have the least idea where we were. In short we were lost! I plodded on reminding myself of feats of endurance of which I had read: war exploits, explorers, pioneer missionaries. Surely, I thought, what others could do in the cause of patriotism, science or a (to me) repulsive and incredible faith, was not beyond my power in the cause of freedom, justice and universal brotherhood to which, both as Unitarian and Gandhian, I was committed. I recalled Scott's words in the Antarctic, 'how much better has it been than lounging in too great comfort at home', and took heart. The sun had set and darkness was rapidly drawing in, as it does

in latitudes where there is little twilight, when a sudden turn in the path brought us the welcome sight of the village we were seeking only ten minutes' walk away. I followed the carrier into the house where we were to stay and the room that had been prepared for me. Without waiting for my bedding to be unpacked or a meal to be prepared I slipped off my sandals and sank down on the plank bedstead. It was after 10.30 in the morning when I awoke stiff in every joint and muscle but otherwise none the worse and more convinced than ever that this was where I belonged and for this end came I into the world.

Only on one subsequent occasion can I remember being so tired as I was that day. That time I was alone, trying to do the thirty mile journey from Shillong to Jowai in one day. I knew every inch of the track and which of the many short cuts were worth taking; so many of them added more in steepness and rough surface than they saved in mileage and were not worth the trouble, as long experience had taught me. What I had not learnt, however, was the inadequacy of an English packed lunch and sandwiches and cake compared with the quantities of rice and meat which I had previously taken on all long hikes in the Khasi Hills. While still many miles from Jowai my provisions were exhausted and so was I. I had heard the expression 'drunk with fatigue', but never before had I had personal experience of the condition. About three miles from Jowai the path crossed a little stream over which was a plank bridge; I knew there was only one plank but I could distinctly see two. I sat down by the roadside for a few minutes to collect my scattered wits and giggle at myself in a drunken sort of way before advancing cautiously, struggling to focus and feeling forward with my stick to find out which of the two planks I could see was the one by which it would be safe to try and cross. When I got home the young woman teacher who was living with me at the time took in the situation at a glance as I came weaving blindly up the path. Coming to meet me she half dragged, half carried me into the house and laid me down on a mat on the floor near my bed. Then she fetched a charcoal brazier from the kitchen and a kettle of hot water. Without ado she stripped off my clothes,

gave me a warm sponge-over from top to toe, rubbed warm mustard oil into my aching body and bundled me into my pyjamas.

'I knew you wouldn't want a meal,' she said, 'so I've got a mug of rice-water and milk for you.' This prescription is our unfailing remedy for all occasions when, for any reason, solid food is out of the question, as warm mustard oil is for all occasions of muscular trouble. Never have I been more grateful for these homely Khasi treatments and the intelligence and common sense with which they were so promptly resorted to and applied. I drank my night-cap, sank into bed with a sigh of contentment and knew no more till the morning.

It was not till the end of my second visit to the Khasi Hills in October 1934 that I felt sufficiently sure of myself and of the welcome that would be mine if I decided to live and work there to write again to the General Assembly Secretary in London, pointing out that the reason for the committee's previous rejection of my application no longer held good, as I was already on the spot so there was no longer any question of their 'taking the responsibility' of sending me. The reply to this acknowledged the justice and reasonableness of my case but added that the matter was complicated by the fact that 'the committee had since entered into negotiations with another applicant for the post.'

It is not often that I am stirred to excessive indignation and I can remember no other occasion in my career when I burst forth into such an angry tirade as I did in reply to this. It was monstrous that my chances should be jeopardised merely because, having rejected my original application, the committee had entered into negotiations with someone else during the time that inevitably had to elapse while I was fighting my own way there! The upshot of this was that the other person chivalrously withdrew and the committee graciously allowed me to have an experimental year in the Khasi Hills on the expiry of my Calcutta contract. This came in November 1935 and, after a short holiday in South India while my successor at the school settled down to taking over the religious education programme, and a



return visit to make sure that all was well, I took my way bag and baggage in April 1936 to my new sphere of activity in the Khasi Hills.

### 3

## Calcutta stepping-stone

Before continuing my account of the Khasi project it will be well to interpolate here some record of the two and a half years I spent in Calcutta.

The post there was in the first instance little more than a convenient stepping-stone to enable me to get to India. Since I had no funds it was necessary that I should have a post to go to and this one came to hand providentially at the critical moment. But I had no intention of remaining long in Calcutta and my contract with the school there was for two years only, enabling me in my vacations to spy out the Khasi land and get confirmation of the fact that there and only there would lie my life-work. Had that not proved to be the case I should probably have joined Gandhi; I should certainly not have stayed long in Calcutta. I have no love of cities anywhere, and for Calcutta I conceived at sight a positive dislike that has only deepened with the years.

Nevertheless the 'stepping-stone' proved an unexpectedly interesting and worth-while place for a short sojourn. It brought me into touch with many prominent people; it gave me some insight into the calibre of upper- and middle-class Indian girls from many different backgrounds and the culture in which they were rooted. Above all it enabled me to study world, and especially Indian, religions at first hand both through books and through people.

The work itself—working out a scheme by which children of many faiths could be taught together 'to respect religions other than their own'—proved fascinating and an account of it can be found in my little book *The Great Unity* written in 1937. I was delighted to find later that this universalist approach to religious education was one of the corner-stones of Gandhiji's Basic Education, the words in inverted commas above being his.

Many interesting people came to the school to see Mrs PK Ray, among them the Liberal politician, Shastri; the poetess Sarojini Naidu; the famous scientist Sir JC Bose, whose wife was Mrs Ray's sister; Mrs Ray's grand-daughter Monorana Bose, who lived with her and who later became Inspectress of Schools for Bengal; and many others. There was a steady stream and rarely an evening passed without visitors. Sometimes the talk was in Bengali, and then I just went on with my own work undisturbed by the, to me, meaningless noise. But sometimes they all talked English and then I pricked up my ears and learnt a great deal about the attitude to the national movement and all it stood for from high-caste educated Indians closely involved with the British Government. A sentence in a letter from Mrs Ray before I left England in 1933 sets the tone, 'Of course we are all nationalists here, but we don't talk about it.' I knew when I read that that I should not stay long with people like that while Gandhi, Nehru and all the other national leaders were spending the best years of their lives in gaol because they were unwilling not 'to talk about' their national aspirations.

However, in spite of this and other disagreements, I found Mrs Ray one of the most fascinating people I have ever known; resembling Queen Victoria in both appearance and character, she was a born dictator. But she had more sense than the old Queen in that, on the death of her husband, instead of nursing her grief in the country, she threw herself with redoubled devotion into the work for girls' education that he had always encouraged her to do. Despite her dictatorial ways she had a heart of gold and was always quick to retract if she was proved wrong. This happened on one or two occasions on the subject of Hinduism when, on consulting some pundit friend, she found that I had been right and she wrong.

'You know more about my religion than I do,' she said ruefully on one of these occasions and, instead of being resentful about it, seemed delighted to think that she had secured someone so well fitted to conduct her experiment in religious education. I think she thought me a bit of a fire-brand, as doubtless I was; but with all my faults she loved me well and when I finally

went to the Khasi Hills she wrote, 'You call me Didima (Grandmother) but you do not love me or you would not leave me.' In her heart she knew that my call to the Khasi Hills was a genuine one, but it was always difficult for her to admit that any call to service could possibly be of more importance than to serve her and her school. Dear Didima! My life has been richer for knowing and loving you.

Another thing that developed during the Calcutta years was my feeling about Christian missionaries. My father, fearful for my welfare on plunging into an all-Indian environment, wrote to an English lady in charge of a Mission school near to the one where I was living. She duly called and invited me to lunch. I went and found there the sort of set-up that I later discovered to be common in Mission centres, where the Indian staff had their own mess and quarters while the English ones pursued their English ways and ate their English meals. I never went again. I had gone to India to identify myself with Indian life and to be one of them. I had no wish for them to think of me as *in any way*, through either Government or Missions, identified with the British in India save by the accident of my birth which had made me British.

As a footnote to this chapter here are some extracts from letters to my parents during the Calcutta years, treasured by my mother and found among her papers after her death in 1939.

Dated 4 January 1934

Miss R (*the missionary lady mentioned above*) looked me up soon after I arrived, and has been very kind in inviting me to her school. I have only been once, however and shall not go any more for the present. It was a kind thought on your part but it would have been better to have waited for a while. The fact is that if one is going to win the confidence of educated Indians one must first clear oneself absolutely of the suspicion of having any contact with missionaries. Incidentally, of course, one has to clear oneself also of the suspicion of having any contact with the Government. But that's another story.

My whole motive in coming here was to meet and live

with and get to know and if possible win the confidence of *Indians*. To have been running after missionaries as soon as I arrived would be the surest way to fail in my purpose. When I have been here long enough to have established myself in the estimation of the people I am living and working with, I shall be able to be friendly with white people with impunity. But for the present I want to show them (ie Indians) without any possibility of mistake that it is *their* friendship that I value and, above all, that I loathe the missionary attitude as much as they do. This does not mean that I am not grateful to you and Miss R for your kindness and trouble. But there are times in life when gratitude and good manners stand in the way of one's work, and then they must take a back seat.

As regards Mary (*my elder sister who had recently given up her post with the Missionary Society and joined Gandhi as one of his full-time village workers*) I'm afraid I'm a bad person to consult. My ideas on these matters differ so vastly from yours that it seems almost useless for me to tell you what I think. My view, for what it is worth to you, is that she is a thousand times better employed now than she has ever been, reckoning the value of her employment either in terms of service to God and man or in terms of service to India. And there are no other terms I think in which either she or you would wish to reckon.

No, I haven't met Andrews. I should like to. He is one of the very, very few Christian missionaries in India who is widely and generally beloved and respected. And that, I think, is due to the fact that he is far more a Gandhi-ite than a missionary, like Verrier Elwin, Forester Paton and a few more.

Yesterday I paid a flying visit to Tagore's school which is quite near here. We only had a few hours there, but I hope to go again sometime and explore more thoroughly. It's a lovely place—Shantiniketan, Home of Peace—that's its name and its nature too.

Dated February 1934. To my father.

If you were to *read* my letters you would not find it necessary to accuse me of making fantastic statements. I never

said that I loathed missionaries. I try not to loathe any of God's creatures, though I come fairly near to doing so sometimes in my feeling for some of my countrymen (and women) out here—and mosquitoes! What I said I loathed was the typical missionary attitude. And that statement I repeat. Every week I spend in India only makes me more sure of my loathing for that. That some missionaries (about one in a thousand) are the salt of the earth I have no doubt (eg Andrews, Elwin, Paton), but their attitude is something vastly different from the typical missionary attitude. If it were not so they would not be the salt of the earth.

You say you cannot understand the power of Hinduism over educated men. Have you ever read any of the Hindu scriptures? If your 'knowledge' of Hinduism is confined to what you have been told at missionary meetings, I do not wonder at your difficulty. Try reading the *Gita* and some of the Tamil poets and extracts from the *Vedas* and *Puranas*, and the difficulty will rapidly vanish. Hinduism at its best contains at least as much to attract intelligent, thoughtful people as does orthodox Christianity—perhaps more, because it combines tolerance with its other virtues—the virtue which both Christianity and Mahommedanism are woefully lacking in. As to the appeal of Hinduism to the poor masses, that of course is partly due to superstition, as is the case also with Roman Catholicism, and partly to the simple beauty and dignity of many of the Hindu saints and teachers. For these people it is character that matters not theology, and in the production of saintly characters Hinduism is as fertile as any religion in the world—in the present age probably more so than any other.

As regards your remarks about the Government, I suppose if I were sensible I should ignore them, as it is silly for us to quarrel. But things of that kind make me even more angry now that I have seen a few things for myself, even than they did before I came here. You say that the Government is influenced by the illiteracy of the millions. Granted, but who made them illiterate? Before Britain came to India there was a school in every village. A hundred and fifty years ago the masses of India were more literate than the masses of England. Yet you people claim that Britain is

ruling for India's good. You further make the utterly untrue statement that 'in spite of the high moral teaching of the best Indians the fact remains that they have personally done very little for the millions.' It is just NOT a fact. The pioneer work for the uplift of the masses was done by men like Ram Mohan Roy. And in the last ten years far more has been done for the untouchables by Mahatma Gandhi, the Hindu, than has been achieved by all the Christian missions in all the years of their activity here. Nobody who knows India today would dream of questioning the truth of this—even the missionaries who confess, some of them somewhat ruefully, that he can do what they cannot. Your letter reads for all the world like a missionary meeting address, which is doubtless why it has made me unduly angry. As to scrupulous courtesy to those with whom I do not agree, I assure you that in spite of all evidence to the contrary, my behaviour in that matter is and has been exemplary. But it's birds of a feather who flock together, you know. So where missionaries congregate *I don't*. That's all—so the strain has not been very severe on either side.

Dated March 1934. To my mother.

As I said to Daddy in my last letter, if you would take the trouble to *read* my letters and to devote to them a small portion of the intelligence which you undoubtedly possess, it would be better for the tempers of all concerned. In which of my letters have I ever suggested that I did not acknowledge 'the true greatness of the Victorian era?' Of course it had its greatness—its John Bright and the Reform Bill, its Robert Owen and Keir Hardie, its Browning and Morris. . . . The only thing that I can remember having written that might have led you to write such nonsense is that casual remark I made about the Victoria Memorial positively reeking of Victorian imperialism. And you took that to mean 'an unbalanced judgment' and sweeping denunciation of the Victorian era. Nay, Mother, have a bit of sense. Surely it was obvious that what I was condemning was not the Victorian era but *imperialism*. I should loathe that building just as much if it represented Roman, Persian, Japanese, Georgian or Muslim imperialism. The only

difference is that, with the exception of the last three, all these are dead and one cannot have the same lively loathing for a corpse as for a savage monster which continues to stalk through the land devouring the bodies, minds and souls of men, women and children. Roman and Persian imperialism are dead. But Victorian . . . still lives, crushing this land like the insatiable monster it is, and my loathing for it deepens in intensity with every day that I live here. If this is to have an unbalanced judgment then I admit the charge. And it will be a happy day for India when a few more of my smug self-satisfied countrymen lose their balance too. I suppose the perfect type of the 'balanced person' is the one who sits on the fence, swaying gracefully . . . with one leg on the imperialist and one on the democratic side, prating eloquently (like Baldwin) about liberty and justice and the Englishman's loyalty to these things. If that's the kind of 'balanced judgment' you want for me, then I'm afraid you are doomed to disappointment. No, my dear Mother, for good or ill the issue is joined and this ugly duckling of yours is enlisted once and for all in the ranks of those who are pledged to fight to the death against the monster Imperialism and its ally War. . . .

I suppose this ought to be a birthday letter (*her birthday was on 29 March*) . . . There's only one birthday present I should like to send you and I'm afraid that's not possible—namely a dose of my 'unbalanced judgment' which would bring you down once and for all on the side of the fence on which I am fighting. Daddy, I'm afraid, is already on the wrong side. But you, I suspect, are still on the fence. I should like to be able to call you ally.

Same month—March 1934. To my mother.

As regards your comments on martyrdom, I could not resist a smile at your truly magnificent disregard of logic. Do you really believe that the heroism with which people defend a creed is any test of the truth of that creed? Does the fact that thousands of Hindus suffered martyrdom rather than embrace Islam in past centuries make Hinduism the last word of God's truth? Does the martyrdom of ancient Norsemen at the hands of 'Christians' (recounted

for example in the Heimskringla, a tenth-century Icelandic saga) make their pagan religion supreme? Would you allow that the death of Servetus and many another Unitarian proves the truth of the Unitarian faith? Does the willing self-sacrifice of Nin (*my eldest brother killed in action in Flanders in 1916*) and his generation make the last war anything other than the mean and unworthy thing we now know it to have been? Surely one of the great tragedies of human history is the fact that in every age many of the greatest martyrdoms have been for unworthy or mistaken causes; or because people were so wedded to the creed for which their fathers had suffered that they could not recognise God's truth when presented in a new form by the prophets of their own day.

I think Whittier is one of your favourite hymn-writers; do you know this one of his:

Wherever through the ages rise  
The altars of self-sacrifice,  
Where love its arms has opened wide,  
Or man for man has calmly died,

We see the same white wings outspread  
That hovered o'er the Master's head;  
And in all lands beneath the sun  
The heart affirmeth, 'Love is one.'

Up from undated time they come,  
The martyr-souls of heathendom,  
And to the cross and passion bring  
Their fellowship of suffering.

And the great marvel of their death  
To the one order witnesseth—  
Each, in his measure, but a part  
Of the unmeasured Over-Heart.

It's the LOVE that is one, Motherkin, the love and loyalty and heroism—not the creeds (partial and misty truths) for which they died. Don't mix up two wholly

different things. And for goodness sake don't be misled into believing that by stepping forward to new things you are betraying or dishonouring the martyrs of the past. On the contrary, to do so is the only way of truly following them. It was what they did themselves, the greatest of them—'each, in his measure, but a part of the unmeasured Over-Heart.'

Whittier was a universalist, like your affectionate daughter,

Margaret.

Dated 21 April 1934. To my mother.

It seems impossible for us to understand one another. Here you are again wildly exaggerating what I have said. When have I ever said or implied that England's rule in India either is or has ever been 'all evil'? Nothing in this world is all evil, as everybody who has ever tried to do social work of any kind rapidly discovers. I wonder if you realise how completely, in making the remarks you do, you are allying yourself with those who have been the enemies of progress in every succeeding age. Those who defended the Inquisition because, though sometimes unjust, it had much that was good about it. Those who defended slavery on the grounds that slaves were better off under a good master than they would be if free. . . . Those who countenance war on the grounds that it is sometimes, apparently, the lesser evil. Do you read Bernard Shaw? Read *Androcles and the Lion* and note particularly the part at the end where Petrovius decides to go on worshipping 'the gods that be' while Lavinia continues her worship of 'the God that is to be.' I try to be Lavinia. That is the whole difference between us.

To say that we can't say and do things as Jesus did is true, of course, but utterly beside the point and the very essence of defeatism. Nobody has ever said and done things as he did (with the possible exception of the Buddha), but that has not hindered his disciples in every age from trying their little best to echo his words and imitate his actions.

And do not cheat yourself with the thought that the things I am saying and doing now are the irresponsible

excesses of rash youth. They are nothing of the kind. I know that to one's parents one is always a child. But let me remind you that I was 35 last month, as you should know who bore me. That is not young. It is the time of life at which—if at all—a woman will achieve something—the time when experience of life has checked and corrected 'the first fine careless rapture' of her enthusiasm, but when she has not yet begun to be conscious of the frost of age chilling the blood in her veins. Remember too that six years as minister of a church in an industrial town during a period of industrial depression has given me some knowledge of life that I should never have gained in 60 years of comfortable, middle-class security and seclusion.

That we should fail to see eye to eye is natural, for we belong to different generations, and the War has made the gap between your generation and mine even bigger than is usually the case. But that we should quarrel is *unnatural* and deplorable . . . Have you ever read the *Bhagavad Gita*? I have come to the conclusion that it is impossible to get the full depth and beauty of the teaching of Christ without knowing the *Gita* also. Just as it is impossible to get the full depth and beauty of the *Gita* without knowing the Sermon on the Mount. The two have a tremendous lot in common—more than I ever dreamed. At present I am taking Islam with the girls. There are some good bits in the *Koran* and I think Mahommed has been so badly misunderstood and misinterpreted by his followers as Christ has by Christians. There's a gentleness and tolerance about many of his utterances that one does not usually associate with Muslims. But in spite of this I find it difficult to work up the same enthusiasm for Islam that I have for Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism. But it's all very interesting. . . .

Dated 6 May 1934. To my mother.

I got your nice letter of April 11th last week. As you say, our premises in religious matters are so different that there's not much sense in trying to discuss. What matters, after all, is not that we should all *think* alike—heaven forbid!—but that having experienced God in our own way, we should each see to it that the fruits of experience are to be seen in

our lives *and* that we should be ready to admit that other people's paths to God, though different from our own, may be equally effective. That is the point on which I find myself most at issue with Christians. I quarrel with nobody for finding the Real Presence of God through Christ, so long as they do not deny that for another with different traditions and different background, Krishna or Buddha may be the living incarnation of God; and so long as they see to it that the chief thing is the *experience* and not the theology with which they rationalise it.

Dated 3 January 1935. To my mother.

My work continues to thrive, though slowly. I'm reading a fascinating book by an American woman, L Adams Beck, called *The Story of Oriental Philosophy*, published at one dollar by the Cosmopolitan Book Corporation, New York. It should be read by every westerner, especially those who have read *Mother India*. I rather fancy it was written as a counter-blast to the latter. The pity of it is that it's always the foul things that are the best-sellers, while no-one ever hears of ones like this that I am reading.

Dated 31 January 1935. To my mother.

I thought I had mentioned before about my having met Sir JC Bose. His wife, Lady Bose, is the sister of the old lady, Mrs PK Ray, with whom I live here so I see them fairly often. They're a nice old pair. The old boy is always friendly when we meet and I have had one or two interesting talks with him. . . .

I do a little public work now and then but mostly the days pass placidly in school. Last week I addressed a small public meeting on War Resistance. And once a fortnight I take a little service at the nearby Brahma Samaj, followed by discussion. And I've suddenly acquired a (quite unmerited) reputation as a debater and am getting roped in for opening debates. I'm doing one next week for the All India Women's Conference. The fact is their women have no experience whatsoever in such things and want coaching and practice. So I do my best to help.



Dated 9 September 1935. To my mother.

There's a lot of controversy here at present on the subject of religious instruction in schools, the prevailing opinion being that, since such instruction is always and necessarily sectarian, it is better to have none at all. So Mrs Ray last week invited several of the big guns of the Education Department to come and see our experiment. To our surprise two or three accepted the invitation. So on Friday last I had to give two demonstration lessons in the presence of an august assembly. It was great fun. Fortunately the children rose to the occasion nobly, so all went well. And I think the visitors were really impressed. One of them laughingly suggested that, as they too had all been badly brought up in the matter and knew nothing about it, I had better start classes for the Secretariat! I took lessons with two different groups—a set of big fourteen-year olds, and a set of my first form babies aged about nine. The latter were particularly sweet, drinking in everything I said with eager enthusiasm and falling over themselves in their anxiety to answer my questions.

The last extract sounds as though I could have done more for Religious Education if I had stayed in Calcutta. Perhaps I could, but it was not to be. Already I was quite sure that the two-fold call to rural welfare work could not be ignored. And in the following Spring I took a final farewell of Calcutta and turned my eyes (and my steps) to the everlasting hills.

## 4

### The real Khasi beginning

My commission from the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches in London in 1935 was to go and live in the Khasi Hills for one year, exploring the ground, deciding what needed doing and what I thought I could do, and then return to England and report. The first year, therefore, was to be experimental and tentative. This being the case I decided to spend the wet half of the year in Shillong, where the winters are cold and the rainfall not excessive, and the winter in Jowai. I did some educational work in both places and came to the conclusion that Shillong would be the best centre to start permanent work from, it being the seat of the Government where I could meet influential people and see what was already being done in Khasi education. Moreover at that time there was no motor road to Jowai, nearly forty miles away, so that if I lived there I should be cut off from civilization during the monsoon. To go there and visit also the little scattered Unitarian groups twice a year during the winter was part of my plan, but Shillong was the place I chose to settle in.

It was not a very exciting year. But it was enough to confirm my already strong conviction that there was a valuable contribution that I could make both to the Unitarian Movement and in the wider field of Khasi Education, and that this was indeed the place where my life-work would be done.

A valuable contributor to this decision was the Director of Education for Assam (the last Englishman to hold the post). I came to Shillong with an introduction to him from one of the Indian leaders of the Scout Movement. He had been to England and knew that there was no colour bar and that Indian students at British universities were accepted without any hesitation; but he had worked long in India and knew how different

things were there. So when he said of our Director of Education, 'He is the only Englishman in India who has treated me as a man and not an Indian', I knew that here I should find a kindred spirit and an Englishman with whom I could work. I loved him at sight and found him not only a congenial person, but also keenly interested in and sympathetic to my hopes and purposes for Khasi education which he had long wanted to liberate from the stranglehold of the Missions. Unfortunately he remained in the post only till 1941; but our work together was fruitful and stimulating while it lasted—and even dramatic, as the sequel will show.

Early in 1937, full of hope but very unsure of my ability to make English people see with my eyes on the subject, I sailed off in a German cargo-boat from Calcutta, generously helped with the fare by one of Gandhi's rich friends.

It was a lovely voyage as far as Malta but there a terrific storm arose which dogged us for the rest of the journey. I had got my sea-legs by then and was undisturbed save by the dismal howlings of the tigers, elephants and other jungle animals which comprised the cargo destined for German circuses. The baby elephant gave up the struggle and had to be buried at sea. I have always hated circuses but never felt so bitter about them as then. We discovered later that the last day of our voyage was so stormy that all cross-Channel shipping was stopped for twenty-four hours. So we must have had the Channel to ourselves as we went chugging along to Antwerp where I transhipped, while the unfortunate circus animals were taken on to Hamburg. I got an Antwerp-Harwich packet the next day, 'butting through the Channel in the mad March days', and arrived safely in London in time for the Annual Meetings of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches.

I was called upon to speak at the Meetings and then given a tour programme to all parts of the country to tell people what I wanted to do and secure as much support as possible for the project. The burden of my message, which became almost like a gramophone record with repeated reiteration, was that I was not going to resemble a missionary even remotely; that my aim

was not to take on the leadership of the Khasi Unitarian Movement, but by improving educational opportunities to enable them to get educated leaders amongst themselves and so strengthen the self-reliance which had been one of the outstanding qualities of their founder, Hajom Kissor Singh. Further I explained that the educational work I wanted to do would be equally for everyone who chose to avail themselves of it and completely non-proselytising, unlike the education given in Mission schools.

My reception was mixed. There were those who immediately dismissed the whole idea on the grounds that Unitarians never had and never would do missionary work, therefore under no circumstances would it be right for them to undertake a project which, at least on the surface, would look like missionary enterprise. Others on the other hand would have felt happier about it if they could have felt that most of my time would be devoted to the Unitarian Churches. On this razor edge I tried to balance.

Quite early on, however, something happened that strengthened my position. At the first meeting to which I was called to meet the members of the special committee appointed to go into the whole matter, while doing my best to explain what was so clear to me, I sensed that I should have difficulty in steering a middle course between the two opposing points of view. There was one person present, however, who said not a word, giving me no clue to his position. This was Mr GG Armstrong, one of our elder statesmen, greatly and widely beloved and respected. As I left the room at the end of the meeting I found him waiting for me. He put his hand on my shoulder and the words he spoke have been in my ears ever since: 'I am taking on myself on this committee a watching brief to defend your right to conduct this work *as you think best.*'

I was speechless. What I needed more than anything else at that critical moment was the assurance that someone of importance amongst us, someone with the wisdom that only years and experience can give, had confidence in what I was trying to do and in my ability to do it. That assurance was now mine; and when, a few months later the women of our churches decided to

raise enough money to pay my salary for the next three years, I knew that the green light was shining and that I could go ahead in confidence. I should add here that that offer by the women was renewed year by year without a break till I became an old-age pensioner in 1964; and even today they remain my best and most loyal supporters—not, of course, the gallant and generous-hearted band who made the original decision, since there are very few survivors of that generation today, but their successors year after year, many of whom have never even met me, but who have given open-handedly to help me to make The Dream a reality.

So the end of 1937 saw me back in Shillong, back on the job, and with a clear mandate to make what I could of it. The next chapter will tell of the ups and downs of the six years till I next visited England, in 1943.

After that epoch-making encounter at Essex Hall in 1937 I had no further contact with Mr Armstrong. Early in 1939, however, he sent to *The Inquirer* a statement of his 'conversion' to pacifism, on reading which I wrote to him welcoming him to the noble army of pacifists and telling him how much his words in 1937 had meant to me. I have no copy of my letter, but this is his reply.

From North End Road, Golders Green, London. 26 June 1939.

My dear Margaret Barr,

Your wonderful letter of April 23rd was handed to me at the opening reception of the General Assembly week. It moved me so deeply that I did not know how I could reply to it. It would be very sad if my shrinking from the task led you to doubt that your letter was more than welcome—a doubt at which you seemed to hint in your first sentence.

I felt and feel very greatly honoured, though troubled at the same time. It is wonderful and uplifting to receive such a letter from such a source and I can only hope to deserve it in the future. But no one knows better than you how precious is testimony when one has tried to help one that has succeeded. I must leave it at that!

My 'conversion' to pacifism was a distressful process and

the happiness and peace of mind which conversion is traditionally supposed to give only slowly but I think surely comes to me. None of us can have much of any kind of peace of mind just now, though I am deeply convinced that the nations will avoid war despite their leaders.

God bless you, dear, for your kindness, and in your splendid work.

Yours,  
Geo. G Armstrong

## 5

### Shillong friends and a dramatic interlude

The next few years were busy and rewarding, especially in the new friendships made. First in importance among these was Ellen Giri, the most completely kindred spirit that I have ever found among the Khasis. During my time in Shillong in 1936 she was away in Calcutta doing a course in physical education, having been chosen for a new post as PT instructress to all the girls' schools in Assam. On my return from England she was sent by the Director of Education to visit my little school and see if she could help me with my children's PT. We were friends at sight and soon became very close indeed as we discovered many other matters on which our minds were running on the same lines. One of these to my surprise was Indian Freedom. Most Indian Christians I had met, and all Khasis so far, I had found to be either pro-British or, at best, luke-warm. There was nothing luke-warm about Ellen. The friends she had made in Calcutta, first during her MA (Hons) course in History and later during the PT course, were many and varied and, except for the Christians, unanimously behind the National Movement. They also belonged to many different religions and their friendship, together with her study of History, had taught her how tawdry and unjustified was the Christian claim to superiority or uniqueness. She had too brilliant a mind to be led in blinkers by anyone and became passionately indignant when, later, when our friendship began to be known, people in her church began to say that it was my evil influence that was responsible for her unorthodox and revolutionary ideas. I was indignant too, for nothing could be more untrue or more unjust to her own real greatness. Our friendship was due entirely to the

fact that she had independently arrived by her own strivings at many of the conclusions that I, fifteen years her senior, had also reached independently at about the same age; and, of course, to the mutual affection and trust that deepened steadily as the years passed.

It was on her introduction that I met Lady Reid, wife of the Governor of Assam at that time. Ellen was a favourite with Lady Reid who had been partially responsible for her selection for the PT post; and, on hearing about me and my school from Ellen, Lady Reid sent me a message to go and see her. This caused consternation amongst the friends that I had made amongst the staff of the local European Girls' school who lived in civilized style and knew what was expected of visitors to Government House. With great generosity they offered to make me presentable in a decent frock, hat, gloves, stockings, shoes and handbag, even lipstick. Fortunately my common sense prevailed. It was obvious that, if Lady Reid was going to like me, it must be ME that she should meet, not a dressed up doll. So off I went in my nicest home-spun frock, socks and sandals—in short the wardrobe that I always wore.

We chatted for about an hour about my hopes for Khasi education, my own little school and a number of other things including Unitarianism, of which she seemed never to have heard. As I left she said she would like to see my school and I knew that I had formed another friendship that would endure. As indeed it has, enriching all the years since with occasional letters and visits of a few days to her home in England every time my journeyings have taken me to England. She gave me unwearied encouragement with my educational work during those early days; and before leaving Assam she even allowed me to give her name to the new school that I built in 1942. It is still the Lady Reid Non-Sectarian School though it was taken over by the Government in 1949.

An important contact made during this period was Mr Chandra Nath Roy. He attended the first public meeting that I called to discuss the possibility of opening a completely non-proselytising and non-sectarian school. Belonging as he did to

the leading non-Christian Khasi family he knew how difficult it was for non-Christian Khasis to get their children educated without submitting them to the mischievous influence of the all-powerful Mission Schools and he was quick to appreciate my aim and to trust the genuineness of my intentions. His father, Jeebon Roy, the greatest Khasi of them all, had been a close friend and encourager of Hajom Kissor Singh, the founder of the Khasi Unitarian Movement, so perhaps my being a Unitarian had something to do with this immediate reaction. He joined my committee forthwith, never missed a meeting and rendered invaluable service later as treasurer when I was away in England during the War. The development of my work during this period (1937 to 1943) owed more to him than to any other one person. Withal he was a very lovable old man, and his daughters and his sister's daughters are among my best friends to this day.

We come now to the dramatic interlude promised in the title of this chapter.

In 1940 the Government decided to open a High School at Jowai. The Director of Education, knowing that if an educated Khasi Christian (and there were no others to speak of) got the post of Head, it would be little more than a glorified Mission school, sent for me and implored me to accept the post. I poured scorn on the idea, reminding him that my heart was in the laying of foundations in Primary schools not in undertaking the thankless task of cramming academic knowledge into children with no foundations. He agreed, but then came out with a staggering offer: if I would take on the High School with a good graduate staff they would also open at Jowai a Training School for Primary teachers. I could leave most of the High School work to the staff and devote my own time to training teachers for the Primary schools of the whole district; so that in a few years time the children coming to the High School would be coming from schools run by my own trained teachers and according to my own methods. This was a fascinating proposition and would give me far wider scope for service to Khasi education than I could ever get by staying in my own little school in Shillong. And, as Jowai in those days was little more than a village, I

should be in close touch with all the villages of the district and so could answer the two-fold call to do rural work that I had got from Gandhi and Hajom Kissor Singh. Moreover the War was at its grimmest and news from England made me feel that it might be the most sensible thing I could do to earn an independent income for a few years. I therefore, though with misgivings, accepted the post and for the whole of 1941 was Headmistress of the Jowai Government High School.

Towards the end of the year, when there was no word or sign of the starting of the Training School, I went to see the Director who told me that he had failed to get the Government to agree to the scheme.

'You've let me down,' said I indignantly.

'No', he replied, 'I'm as keen about this as you are. It's the Government that has let us both down.'

'But if I can't have the Training School I don't want the High School, so what can I do?'

'You might try seeing the Governor, but I don't think it's much use.' He phoned forthwith to the Governor's private secretary and got me an immediate appointment.

Sir Robert Reid, urbane and kindly as ever, said, 'My dear Miss Barr, do you realise that there's a war on? I'm afraid there is nothing I can do about it. The Government won't hear of proceeding with the scheme at present.'

'Then I've been sent to Jowai on false pretences. I made it perfectly clear that I would only go *on condition* that I was allowed to train teachers for the Primary schools too, and if I can't do that then I don't want the job.'

He shrugged his shoulders. 'I'm sorry,' was all he said.

I went straight home and sent in my resignation. Later I was delighted to find that Lady Reid was on my side. She wrote, 'Perhaps you will have cleared away some cobwebs in Jowai. But you are right not to stay.' It was only then, on finding that I was after all returning to my Shillong school, that she allowed me to give it her name. Her visit to the school early in 1942 was one of her last public appearances before leaving Assam for good.

With a sigh of relief I gave up Government service, which I had never wanted, and went back to the peace and freedom of my own private school for another year of concentrated work. But the War news was growing steadily blacker and grimmer, and letters from friends at home had begun to make me feel that unless I shared at least a part of the ordeal that they were so gallantly facing there would be an unbridgeable gulf between us for the rest of our lives.

So early in March 1943, after a fortnight staying with Lady Reid in Calcutta, I once again set sail for my motherland. The Mediterranean was closed and it was nine weeks later in mid-May that we finally docked at Liverpool after dodging submarines all the way from Cape Town. And it was not till a year and a half later, in December 1944, that the ban on civilian travel was lifted and I was able to return to my home in India. In spite of the set-back to my work caused by this long absence, and in spite of the many sleepless nights I spent in London while flying bombs and V2s zoomed overhead, I have never regretted this decision to throw in my lot with my country at that crisis in her history.

I have many letters from Ellen Giri. Perhaps the following short extracts will suffice to give some impression of the calibre of that multi-faceted personality.

Dated 17 March 1941, soon after I had started the Jowai job.

I hope you are feeling more settled there now in spite of the pathetic little note you wrote me. It roused all my maternal instincts and made me want to protect you from all the nasty talks which people are so fond of saying just to cast a slur on somebody they are not fit even to wipe her shoes—not that you wear shoes, my dear, but shoes and sandals are the same aren't they?

Don't regret, my dear, for choosing to go to Jowai. I know it must be difficult for you. I would have hated it myself just because at the present I want heaps of friends to talk to and have a nice time. I don't know why, Margaret, but I seem to have become more selfish now, less willing to

give myself up to doing work for others. All the plans and dreams I used to have for social uplift etc are being pushed a little further into the background. I do so want Don and Be (*her young brother and sister*) to be educated that I seem to centre all my thoughts on that. At the same time I want to enjoy life too, not in any bad way as the world would say, but just to laugh and sing and dance and forget all troubles while I am young. I feel the weight of my responsibilities for my family (*her father and elder sister were both dead and the only elder brother already married, so she was the responsible head of the family*) and I wish they could be lighter. They are making me old before my time and I am afraid. Of course I will never shirk my responsibility. I am not and will never be a shirker, but you know what I want. I want to fly! I am restless, physically, mentally, spiritually. I wish you were here and we could go for a long hike, it will put sense into my senseless head. I do miss you, you know, nobody else understands me, except perhaps Mother, but I don't like worrying her.

Forgive me, my dear, for troubling you with all my whims and thoughts when you have so much to do yourself. I am just selfish.

Is your school getting on better? I know it must be awful. . . . You will succeed, my dear, I know you will help the next generation to *think* and not have everything poured down their blessed throats. If only our people would think and not just leap in the dark we should have a different kind of religion, civilization and everything worth fighting for. You have sacrificed and are sacrificing such a lot, and any sacrifice is never wasted however small it is and you will see the fruits of your sacrifice.

I must confess that another reason of my refusal to go to Jowai is that I am not yet ready to do so as a sacrifice. Money of course comes first with me *now*—and next comes pleasure and company, the many friends I have here and all over Assam. I cannot leave them yet. If ever I go to Jowai at all it will be because you are there.

M. is getting on with his book (*M. was a mystical English friend experimenting with Universal Religion and at that time a devoted Muslim*). He came to tea last Tuesday and we talked



seriously for the first time before the other guests came. He is a reserved young man, Margaret. I am quite afraid of him. We agree on some points, but while he takes those things very seriously and shapes his life to them, to me they are just passing thoughts forgotten the next minute. I feel myself small and petty in front of him—I gamble with my life—and if there is a life to come, I am afraid I am lost. I shape religion and God to my own desire, while it is just the opposite with people like M. it seems.

Margaret darling, you have got my scattered brain, mind, heart and pen in these four pages. They will make a beautiful 'Confession of a Topsy Brain'. I just hope that it will not clog your busy brain.

When shall I see you? Lots of love from Mother and me,  
Ellen.

Undated. Probably late 1941 or early 1942.

(I had given an address at the first conference convened by Lady Reid's Educational League. The other speaker was the senior lady missionary, headmistress of the big Girls' High school in Shillong. Lady Reid was in the Chair. I have often wondered since how her friendship for me survived the strain of this incident, as I seized the opportunity to give full expression to my ideas about Khasi education which, till my arrival on the scene, had been for over a hundred years in the hands of the Missions. It must have taken all her tact and charm—both very great—to achieve her Chairman's summing up without disrupting the League.)

About your paper. It was killing. I was thrilled to bits while listening to you. You brought back all my childhood days in the Laban Primary School. The caning we received if we did not know how to spell 'Blei' or 'pop' or 'Soitan' (*Khasi* for 'God', 'sin' and 'Satan'). And Tuesday afternoons when we had to take our Testaments to school, read as many verses as we could from the N.T., then the long prayers of the masters. While we all little tots of 5, 6, 7, were closing our eyes tightly two or three monitors would be having canes in their hands and watching if there is any whispering or opening of eyes; the offender of course gets a good

whipping usually on the head as that was the only exposed part in a crowd sitting on the floor. So different from the happy care-free children I have seen in your school.

I am glad you spoke out so bravely. That is what the so-called Khasi educationists need. I wish I could have met O. but unfortunately he is out on tour and I have not seen him since. He is the executive power in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills and could do a lot if he chose. . . . But the influence of the bad side of Christianity, the teachings of the Missionaries, is still holding him in its grip. Educationists must have no religion except one—faith in the child. . . . It was a strong dose of quinine, Margaret, but is it strong enough to uproot the fever? What a task we have got to drive that fever out of Khasi Education! But some day we'll do it, you and I working together. When will that be?

The O. mentioned in this letter was the Khasi Deputy Inspector of Schools. Ellen's assessment of him proved all too correct as the sequel will show. He once complained to me that he was always in trouble as the non-Christians said he was too pro-Mission, and the Mission (to which he belonged) said he did not do enough for them. He had not the sense to tell both sides that he was neither pro nor anti anyone but always pro justice and true education and anti narrow-mindedness and favouritism. Alas! that was just what he was not.

Soon after I started my school the Director of Education sent him to inspect it. His report was staggeringly good, ending with the words, 'I could never have believed that Khasi children could be so alert and so happy.' From one who knew the inside of every Primary School in the Khasi Hills that was high praise indeed. Yet he never did anything in those years of struggle to help me to get a grant or a piece of land on which to build, though he could hardly refrain from commending, in words, a school which the Director, the two Chief Inspectors of the State and even Lady Reid herself had visited and commended.

A different situation arose, however, in the case of a school which none of these august persons was ever likely to visit and where he did not expect that even I should be likely to penetrate.

In a little jungle village a few miles below Cherrapunji, a few years before this a young Bengali had come to live. He was a competent homoeopath as well as a teacher; he loved the Khasis and, as he had no family ties to speak of, he decided to devote his life to this village and the neighbourhood. I was taken there by the Swamis of the Cherra Ramakrishna Mission on one of my early visits to them and was thrilled by what I found as the post-script to this, culled from the school's Visitors' Book over thirty years later, will show. The only opposition in the village came from a few of the Christians who were dismayed at the thought of sending their children to a school run by a Hindu and had started one of their own and applied for a grant. The Inspector was sent to investigate and reported that as the village was not large enough to have two schools a grant should be given to the Mission school and the New India School should be ordered to close. This bad news was duly relayed to me and the battle was joined.

I knew that village and knew that both justice and the cause of Khasi education, which I had deeply at heart, demanded that that injunction should be reversed. I knew too that any unbiased person would agree with me. So I told the Commissioner with whom at that time I was on friendly terms.

'Let's go and have a look,' said he. 'Have you friends in Cherra to stay with for a night if I go to the Circuit House?'

I had, so off we went in his car to Cherra, and the next day I took him down through the woods to that lovely village to which, in those days, there was no motor road. We got there early and inspected both schools; the Mission school had about half a dozen children in attendance; the New India School was crowded and there were 56 on the roll. Then we had lunch with the Bengali and his helpers and returned home.

The Commissioner's report to the Director and Minister of Education, much more strongly worded than anything I could have achieved, included words to the effect that the New India School was the best school he had ever seen in a Khasi village (as the Director told me later) and, though he agreed that the village was too small for two schools, it was not the New India

School that should be ordered to close. The outcome of this was another ruling from HQ to the effect that both schools should be allowed to continue for a year without grants after which the less efficient one should be closed.

It was some time before I was able to pay another visit to that village, but when I did I found the school flourishing and everything I had written about it and the village was truer than ever. It is still there in 1973, a haven of light and culture, affiliated now to the Ramakrishna Mission; and my friendship with that self-sacrificing, idealistic but practical Bengali is still one of my most precious links with the Khasi Hills.

Extract from the Visitors' Book of the New India School, Sohbar.

Dated 19 November 1939

I had no idea, when I was brought here yesterday by the monks of the Ramakrishna Mission at Cherrapunji, what I was going to see on arrival here. I had been told that there was a school run by a devoted Bengali doctor for the benefit of the village. But that was about all I knew. The surprise I got on arrival was therefore proportionately more astounding and delightful.

First I found a uniquely beautiful village even in this land of lovely villages. Second I found it cleaner and better kept than any of the many jungle villages in which I have stayed. The children are clean, alert, obedient and have beautiful manners—four qualities that I have sought in vain in other similar villages in the Khasi Hills. And the adults exceptionally hospitable, sincere and self-reliant. That these outstanding features are due to no small degree to the work of Tarani Babu during the last ten years I have no doubt whatever.

Furthermore, I found here sundry factors equally surprising and equally satisfactory. I found that the school is entirely non-sectarian and without trace of the vicious motive of proselytization which poisons so much educational work in this country.

I found (*and this was confirmed in conversation with the Sirdar,*

*the elected village leader*) that the village is almost solidly behind Tarani Babu in his work, except for a few people who want some sort of narrow sectarian education for their children. There is no doubt that he has, and deserves to have, the confidence of the village.

I found that he is teaching the people to be self-reliant and self-supporting by means of cottage industries. And, last but not least, I found all the villagers I talked to, both children and adults, have a clear idea of their Indian citizenship.

These are great achievements. And if so much can be done in one village through the work of one enlightened and devoted worker, why should not similar results be obtained throughout the country?

I shall do all in my power to put this school on a more satisfactory financial footing, so that its magnificent work may continue and develop uncrippled by lack of the necessary funds.

It scarcely needs to be added that the work is shot through and through by a deeply and truly religious spirit, so that religion in the true sense is being taught to the children at every moment, though doctrinal religious instruction is not given.

In all these things the school appeals to me as a model of what a village school should be. I am delighted to have come here and shall look forward to seeing it go from strength to strength in the years that lie ahead.

Signed: Margaret Barr  
Upper Laban, Shillong

It was fourteen months later, in February 1941, that I went down there again with the Commissioner.

Re-reading the above so many years later I realise more clearly than ever before the extent to which I was influenced by this man and the work at this school. Everything that I aimed at, when I started village work myself ten years later at Kharang, was strengthened by what I had seen at Sohbar—a good grounding in general education for anyone who wanted it; an introduction to cottage industries; stress on the fact that citizens

of the Khasi Hills were also citizens of the larger Motherland, India (teaching all too often neglected in most existing Khasi schools); and above all, religion as a way of life, divorced completely from any form of indoctrination but present every minute of the life of the person who believed in it. All this I have tried to do. All this and much more Tarani Babu has been doing for over forty years. Is it any wonder that our friendship is precious to us both?

One more letter from Ellen Giri:

Dated 18 July 1951

Margaret dear,

Thanks for your letter. It is really a help to know that there is one person like you who could understand how things are because you have had to face them all. I feel as if I have one foot already in the grave, wherever I turn I cannot see any light. What I said once seems to be on the point of fulfilment, 'The Khasis will break my heart.' Such fearful opposition against Basic Education. . . . The Government also is very lukewarm about it. Not a single resolution passed at the last Advisory Board meeting (in November last year) has been carried out. I brought up again, as we did together at the meeting before you went away, the necessity of moving the Training Centre to a rural place; nothing done, of course. Practically every worker in Basic schools is dissatisfied; so much red-tapism and delay, by the time that sanction is given for the purchase of seeds the sowing season is over—things like that which make us mad, and then they blame us for not implementing the 'self-supporting' aspect of Basic. I am really fed up and in great doubt whether to stay or leave.

I have come to feel more and more that Basic Education can never be the concern of Government. Basic schools must be run privately by people who have strong faith in Basic principles and who have the capacity to run them and to inspire confidence in others. The Government should only give financial help with no interference and red tape. But alas! for the Khasis will there be one school then?

Not one of us is working for the love of it, we are calculating all the time. I cannot therefore blame anybody for the present state of affairs. It seems everything is working together for bad because we do not love God or principles.

We must have a long time to plan things together, Margaret; both you and I must not fail; if we work together we can't. That is the only silver lining that I see behind this dark cloud—the thought of the school that we are to run together as soon as I can afford to retire from Government service.

Much love as always,  
Ellen.

Another very important and lasting contract arising from my friendship with Ellen is due to the fact that it was she who introduced me to the Ramakrishna Mission. She had become friendly in Calcutta with a young law student destined to become one of their Swamis; and in 1938 he was sent to take charge of their school at Cherrapunji. As Ellen shared my passion for long hikes we decided to walk over and pay him a surprise visit. This occurred in October 1938.

As the swamis are monks and not allowed to entertain lady visitors, beds were made up for us in a classroom at the school. The refectory, however, was common ground and there we were plied with sumptuous meals.

As I had heard rumours in Shillong that the Mission was trying to convert the Hill Tribes to Hinduism (Indian Christians always find it difficult to believe that other people with a concern for religion, especially if they call their organisation by that anomalous name 'mission', are not as fervent proselytisers as themselves) I took an early opportunity of asking the young Headmaster (who was not yet a monk, but an acolyte) what their aim was in the Khasi Hills.

His answer still rings in my ears thirty-five years later: 'If the boys and girls who come to our schools turn out to be better Khasis, better Christians, better Muslims, better men and women and better citizens of India and the world, for having passed through our hands, we shall have fulfilled our aim.'

This was so complete, albeit so succinct, a summary of my own aim that I have never forgotten it and I knew at once that I should find kindred spirits in the Ramakrishna Mission. The passing of the years, during which I have seen much more of its work and made friends with several of the swamis, has done nothing to dim that memory and has steadily deepened the friendship then begun. Readers who are interested may find a longer account of this swami in Christopher Mayhew's book *Men Seeking God*; for he is none other than the Swami Lokeshwarananda who Mayhew interviewed and who is now Head of a large educational institution for boys in West Bengal. During my serious illness in Shillong in October 1969 three swamis from the Shillong centre visited me in hospital and a few days later two more came from Cherrapunji.

One memorable outcome of the dramatic interlude related earlier on was the making of another of the most precious and enduring of my Shillong friendships, Evelyn Shullai. She was one of the young teachers appointed to the staff of the Jowai school; young, lively, intelligent and very beautiful. Though she had had all her own education through the schools of the Mission to which she belonged, she fully agreed with me as to the need to improve methods and standards. She is now, thirty years later, the most competent and far-sighted of the leading executive officials of the Education Department of the new state of Meghalaya. She married the Science master of the Jowai staff but he died of pneumonia during my absence in England and before the birth of their daughter, now almost as lovely as her mother. He was one of the best and most lovable of all the Khasi men I have ever known. There are shining exceptions of course but on the whole, especially in the villages, Khasi men are a drunken, lazy and irresponsible lot, vastly different from their women-folk. So the untimely death of this man was a disaster to the country as well as to Evelyn.

A desperate letter to me in England telling of the birth of her child, her dislike of staying on in Jowai or of returning to a Mission school, brought a cable from me to the acting Head of the Lady Reid School to create a job for her there. On my return at

the beginning of 1945 and the resignation of the acting Head in order to take up politics, Evelyn took over the Headship of the school and worked with me till her marriage to a retired English Army officer who took her away to Calcutta. After his death a few years later she returned to Shillong and plunged into the educational life of the State.

We have been close friends all through the years and when I was lying dangerously ill in September 1969 she came helter skelter to Kharang in spite of the transport difficulties and stayed to nurse me for two days and nights before I was finally carried off to hospital in Shillong. Though she has never been intellectually so close as Ellen, who saw eye to eye with me on everything even including religion, the bond between Ellen and me of mutual affection and trust has weathered over thirty years and is still one of the strongest ties that bind me to the Khasi Hills.

Letter from Mrs Evelyn Shullai, Shillong. Dated 7 March 1957.

Dear Kong Barr,

. . . I wanted to write to you as soon as Kong Ellen died as I wanted you to get the tragic news from me first, but unfortunately in all the confusion, Beris (*Ellen's sister*) could not find your address . . . I feel so lonely and lost without her. We had shared so many things together, we had laughed and cried together and now I have nobody to turn to.

I am writing this letter to let you know, Kong Barr, that my school is doing very well. The High School section has Class IX now and my Montessori section has 180 children. I had to refuse admission to so many children. . . . They are so sweet but it is really a tiring job looking after them. There are four teachers now in the Montessori section. I love my profession, Kong Barr, and it was you who taught me to love it. I shall never, never forget that . . .

In moments when my achievements seem lamentably small and unimportant, I take comfort in the thought that I may in some measure belong to the noble band of those who, in a

memorable article in *Faith and Freedom* some years ago, Francis Terry decribed as 'Maiutic Personalities' whose chief importance lies neither in their message nor even their doings, but in the part they have played in helping something to come to life in others that might never have been born without them. The above letter suggests that for one person at any rate that may be true in my case.

One Shillong friend whom I have omitted to mention and who helped me a great deal during the years 1940 to 1943 was Mr GD Walker, ICS, Commissioner, Assam. He was among the small group of Shillong people leaving India early in 1943 so I saw a good deal of him during the nine-week voyage home. I met him first in 1940 just before I went to Jowai and he gave invaluable encouragement during the time of the starting of the Lady Reid School. He was a delightful companion with a love of hiking and a well-stocked mind, not to mention a ready wit.

When I walked into his drawing-room for the first time, invited to tea on the introduction of a mutual friend, I found him poring over a Greek Grammar. He had never studied Greek and felt that his life would be incomplete if he went to the grave without ever having read Plato and Greek dramatists in the original, so he was teaching himself. I had forgotten most of mine but soon began to get it back as we studied together. His house was only a few minutes' walk from my school where I was living before going to Jowai and again on my return from there. So we began to spend all spare evenings together, I knitting and he reading aloud—Shakespeare, Browning, all sorts of long-buried treasures. He was not much of a clubman and as his wife, an artist sister of Mary Agnes Hamilton, had gone home at the beginning of the war to see it through with her sisters, his evenings were apt to be lonely. I either went at tea-time and returned home early or I went for dinner and he walked home with me after an hour or two reading. On fine Saturdays we went out in his car to some spot in the outskirts, had a long hike and a picnic lunch and got back in time for tea. The excellent exercise and luxurious living that this entailed, and above all the intellectual companionship, afforded just the stimulation that I

had been in need of and did me the world of good.

We met again on each of my subsequent leaves in 1949, 1956 and 1963 and kept in touch by correspondence in the intervals until he died aged nearly ninety early in 1971 only a few weeks before I got back once more.

In March 1942 he wrote the following statement about the value of my work in the Khasi Hills:

I have watched with interest the progress of education in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills under the guidance of Miss Margaret Barr. She has in my opinion taken the right line in insisting, contrary to common practice, on laying a foundation with the very youngest pupils. Her methods have attracted a small band of keen and intelligent Khasi teachers who follow her lead with enthusiasm and success.

The people of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills are rent with factions, under the influence of the old-fashioned sectarian missionaries. Miss Barr's influence is all for unity, and among her friends and supporters are several of the leading young intelligentsia not only or even principally among the 'unconverted' but also among those brought up in the narrow Christian missions. Her field is therefore very much wider and more fertile than it ever could have been had she confined herself to confirming the churches of her own denomination. And it is from the young people that the spirit of unity and breadth of outlook and sympathy, so badly needed here, will spread.

Miss Barr's work I have known intimately for more than a year now in my thirty-fourth year as a Government official in Assam, and I can testify to the light and hope it is bringing into these lives only recently reclaimed from barbarism.

Signed: GD Walker,  
Commissioner, Assam

To conclude this chapter about Shillong friends here are some letters from Lady Reid.

From Woodbridge, Suffolk. Dated 13 January 1972.

Dear Margaret,

I am so glad you are going to write this book and hope very much it will be published. You most certainly have my permission to use any of my letters or anything in them in your work. I only hope you may find some use of them. Be sure you let me know how you get on, any help I can give, I will . . .

The initial correspondence that laid the foundation of this precious and enduring friendship was in 1940. I had written to her about some books she had asked me to send her and my letter continues:

Since writing the foregoing I have received your very kind invitation to your Garden Party on March 13th. I shall of course be replying formally but I want also to explain to you personally why I cannot accept.

I do not know how much you know, or have guessed, of my way of life here. I live amongst the poor exactly as one of themselves and never go into Society at all except occasionally to public meetings or for matters connected with my work. That I ever visited Government House at all was due to your kind interest in my work and not because I had or have any desire to get involved in the social life of the town. If it is a crime to be a hermit and possess only a hermit's wardrobe, then I must plead guilty. But I think you will agree that a Garden Party is no place for such.

Your kindness and encouragement have meant so much to me that I could not bear that you should misunderstand or think me unappreciative or churlish. That is why I have written this fully and frankly.

Her reply. Dated 8 March 1940.

I had the Garden Party invitation sent to you because I thought you might like to enjoy the gardens and the Band in the same way that the Oxford Sisters do who come each year and tell me they look forward to it. The question of dress didn't occur to me as I thought it didn't worry you very much and we do not expect people to 'dress up' for the occasion unless they wish to do so. I am sorry you should



have mistaken my intention. I had no idea of trying to drag you into social life. I believe in letting everyone live their own life. I have enjoyed my talks with you very much and might quite easily have invited you to lunch with us if I thought that the subjects that interest you and me would also interest our other guests! Of course I would not dream of considering you either unappreciative or churlish. I honour you for the life you lead and for the very far-reaching sacrifices you make, and the last thing I should wish to do is to patronise you in any way or drag you anywhere you did not wish to go.

And now I think we both understand one another.

My reply. Dated 9 March 1940.

Not for one moment did I misunderstand your motive in inviting me to your Garden Party; I knew it was prompted by pure kindness, but I had to refuse it all the same. For the first time I see that there may be some virtue in a uniform. If I wore a uniform like the Oxford Sisters I could go anywhere without offence. But to turn up at your Garden Party in the clothes I always wear is not possible. For though you yourself would understand, your guests would not. And how could I do something which the public could hardly fail to regard as an insult to you? It is only when one is as famous as Mr Gandhi that one can turn up at Buckingham Palace in a loin-cloth and shawl and not be misunderstood! But I cannot regret the incident. That you should have replied as you did, and so promptly to set my mind at rest, is the crowning act of graciousness on top of all your previous ones. And I shall never forget it.

During the winter 1939 to 1940 I was trying to get a piece of land in a central position on which to build a new and larger school as we were at the time holding school in a rented house. Lady Reid did all she could to help me both with the Deputy Commissioner for a piece of Government land and with a private owner, the Nawab of Dacca<sup>8</sup> who owned some beautiful and suitable sites. She was also anxious to start a Nursery School for the children of Government House servants. The following letters deal with these two matters.

Dated 12 December 1939. Government House, Shillong.

I am sorry you should have been worried. I wrote to the Nawab of Dacca on November 29th. I have been expecting an answer daily. Would you like me to wire to him and try to extract an answer before you go away? [*I was due to leave for my usual winter tour of the village churches.*] I will do so if you like. It may be the only way to get an answer!

Dated 13 December 1939.

We return from tour February 1st. Please come and see me then to talk about my proposed Nursery School. I agree with you that there are *many* difficulties but none, I think, unsurmountable. I sent a reply-paid telegram to the Nawab of Dacca and am awaiting his reply.

A negative reply from the Nawab set her agitating on my behalf among the government officials and ministers.

Dated 8 March 1940. Government House, Shillong.

I have tried to get into touch with Mr Cantlie [*the Deputy Commissioner, Khasi and Jaintia Hills*] but he is out on tour until after the 18th. As soon as he returns I will see what I can do.

I am terribly sorry for all this delay and uncertainty. I know how hard it must be for you. It is almost impossible to get any consideration of any proposal out of either Ministers or their secretaries while the Session is on.

You have been so courageous all along. Don't lose heart now. I don't mind your writing to me whenever you feel like it. In fact I hope you will as things are apt to get pushed to one side. I will do all I can to help you.

Lady Reid was at this time busy organising an All-Assam Women's Education League. Her next letter concerns this. I was, of course, behind her in this venture.

As regards the Education League I want you to watch very carefully that energy is conserved in certain well-defined channels, otherwise there will be so much dissipation that nothing will be achieved. We all have our pet ideas and I think these should be carefully tabulated, discussed and

then a decision taken on a 4 year plan, so to speak. In this way we shall not lose the enthusiasm of those whose suggestions are not adopted for the immediate future.

My pet ideas are:

1. Medical inspection of Girls' Schools
2. Better buildings and space.

Someone said Primary Schools first. Someone else said higher wages for school-teachers; all these mean funds and I think we shall have to be content to start with some very modest demands so that we may have our suggestions sympathetically received. Take as your guiding principle, 'let's be practical and come to hard facts'. A lot may be done by propoganda to improve conditions without much money; we must educate the school-teachers to contrive light, air and space wherever possible.

During 1940 I was training a Khasi girl to be the teacher for Lady Reid's Government House Nursery School. Towards the end of the year I wrote to her to tell her of my acceptance of the Jowai post. Her next letter deals with these matters.

Dated 6 February 1941.

It is a great disappointment to me that you will not be here for when we open the School, to guide our faltering steps.

Personally I shall miss you more than I can say. I hope we may yet have more talks together either here or at Jowai. I shall always be glad to hear from you and know how you are getting on.

The little School will be ready about March 20th, I'm told. I should be very glad if you would see to the finishing touches and that the furniture is complete for me, so that we may be ready to open school on our return.

Not long after, Lady Reid was awarded a Kaizer-i-Hind Medal for public service. I must have written her reproachfully about this. I wonder now at my temerity.

Dated 15th January 1942. Government House.

Thank you for your letter with the two books I asked you to

send me. . . . I would like you though to change the tense of 'I had put you in my mind' . . . to the present tense, for the fact that I have to accept this so-called decoration does not change me myself at all! You are the *only* person who has understood my dislike of what I feel is the false position I have been thrust into.

On March 7th 1942 Lady Reid opened my new school built on the central site that she had helped me to secure from the Government.

Dated 7 March 1942. Government House.

I was given this 100 rupees to use for any purpose which I like to choose. I can think of no one who would spend it to better advantage than yourself. It is with very great pleasure that I send it to you to seal the ceremony this morning. I enjoyed it all so much and I hope that everyone else enjoyed it as much. The atmosphere was delightful, the children so natural and unselfconscious. I am very happy to have my name associated with something which is so much after my own heart. You know well the faith I have in you and in all that you do. Your work has been started in much tribulation but for that very reason it will have strong foundations and will bear a very goodly edifice. Like your own school building it will be genuine throughout with nothing that is not stable and sure in it.

My love and friendship will remain ever with you.

Dated 10 April 1942. Government House.

My dear Margaret (*my Christian name for the first time*)

Before leaving Assam I must write to tell you how very highly I appreciate the work you are doing amongst the Khasis. You will know that from my giving you my name for your school. I hope that if you go home on leave you will not fail to return. Your foundations have been well and truly laid I know and the prospects of the future are bright, but unless you return to guide them in the building of the edifice much of all your work will lapse into a second-rate instead of a first-rate edifice. It is hardly surprising when

one remembers the rapid development of these Khasi folk. There are such tremendous potentialities in them but they need the constant inspiration and the mental stimulus that you only can give them. You have their absolute love, trust and confidence. See that you never let them fall short of all that you and I wish for them. . . .

Dated 17 April 1942. Government House.

. . . Your letter gave me such a lot of happiness. . . . It is a great joy to me to read what you wrote about our friendship. You are quite right that I do know and understand. To me you have been a breath of fresh air always, and have helped me more than you can know to retain a better perspective of life in general.

I hope that even if our ways lie apart you will always keep in touch with me, and let me know of the things I have been so interested in and of the people I love, among whom I include yourself. . . . Here is my farewell greeting which I think you will like:

'May you have a safe tent and no sorrow as you travel.

May you keep a heart like the morning, and may you come slow to the four corners where man says good-night.'

I believe it is a Red Indian farewell and assumes that the earth is flat!

My love to you and may your work prosper exceedingly. . . .

Dated 18 June 1942. Calcutta.

. . . I was very much amused at your remarks on Mrs Small's boys (*a group of English boys that I was helping to teach English and Maths*). I think, like you, that children brought up in this country are nasty little brutes, but it isn't their fault, poor lambs. Mrs R tells me the children of rich Indians are far far worse. I think the parents are so much to blame in their own manners. Look at the way they treat their servants. Perhaps you have been spared much of that shaming experience. I worked in the Calcutta Health Exhibition and I saw a lot of arrogance and bad manners which made me want to kick them! I confess I can curse servants with the best of them when they are slovenly and

work badly, but it's the ordinary day-to-day politeness which is so utterly lacking and greatly to that we owe the loggerheads we are now at with the Indian leaders. . . .

I don't seem to mind the heat so much since I donated some of my blood to the Blood Bank. Perhaps it coincided with a drop in the temperature. The welcome, sheer genuine feeling for myself alone which I have got from old friends here has made up for all your lovely hill breezes. It may be hot outside but there's much more warmth in my heart these days and soon I hope to feel less bitterness over the searing wounds given me by Shillong—I shouldn't say that but qualify it by saying given me by some in Shillong. . . .

With my love, and there's at least one thing I value greatly which Shillong has given me and that is your friendship—and that of Silverine and the other Khasis. . . .

Dated 30 January 1943. Calcutta.

My dear Margaret,

Thank you for several letters and for the leaflet on Unitarianism which I found most interesting.

I am hoping to see you soon, so shall not write you a proper letter, but this is just to let you know that you will find a welcome waiting for you whenever you come to Calcutta. I imagine you will only be given long enough to wire and in that case you will probably arrive before your wire! So be it.

I love to hear your school is to be raised to High School. I know what a wrench it will be to leave it. . . .

Dated 15 February. Calcutta.

. . . Right you are, we shall expect you on the 28th inst. It will be lovely to see you.

I am sending you with my love my photo for your (my!) school on the occasion of its elevation to that of a High School. I hope you will like it. If you care to get it framed up there I will complete the gift by paying for the framing of it.

I have long wanted to give you this but I thought I would wait awhile until the time came for us to leave, but I want

you to have it before you go.

I shall feel that I am looking down upon your steady progress in the years to come and thereby sharing in it in some small measure. . . .

Finally, a tribute to my work from Lady Reid:

Dated 23 August 1943. Pinner, Middlesex.

My dear Miss Barr,

I am very glad to have this opportunity of paying my tribute to your great work amongst the Khasi people. I have watched this as you know over many years and have been able to observe your methods closely in our own little Government House School run by one of your specially trained teachers. I am convinced that you will do great things for the Khasis by these modern methods of education, but only if you can continue your work there for a good many more years, so as to consolidate it.

I suppose the Khasis are not the only people who need help for a long time, but I have been very much struck by their tendency to fall away when inspiration is removed. The thought that you may not be able to go back in October fills me with consternation as I know you only came home in order to raise funds and bring yourself even more up to date, so that you could expand your work and carry it to High School standard in the school to which I am proud to have given my name.

The fact that you are single handed in your work makes it essential that you should return; quite apart from just carrying on there would be no chance of future development and we both know how desperately needed this development is if the future is not to see the same disasters we have seen so often in the rest of India, namely masses of young people with just enough education to want clerical jobs only, and not enough to show them how to live fully and usefully.

I think there are very great possibilities in the Khasi nation and I would be deeply grieved to see them lose so much, as they would by your non-return.

Yours sincerely,  
Signed: Amy H Reid.

## 6

### Preparation for rural work

All this time I had never lost sight of the fact that my ultimate destiny was to live and work in a village; but still another period of preparation was necessary before that was possible.

So on my return at the end of 1944, after consolidating and putting new life into the Shillong school, I went for six months training in midwifery, knowing that this particular skill would be invaluable when I finally settled in a village. The Medical Superintendent of the Women's and Children's Hospital in Shillong was a Scot, Dr Elizabeth Gemmell. She invited me to stay with her in her quarters at the hospital and a very interesting time it proved to be. She was an unusually capable and delightful person and, in addition to allowing me to attend her midwifery lectures and take turns with the other midwifery trainees in conducting normal labour cases, she also took me with her to the operating theatre where I watched a number of interesting operations and amputations. And though, since living at Kharang, I have never been without a trained midwife and so have never needed to practise the skill myself, I have always been grateful for the experience gained by six months as a member of the staff of a hospital. While there also I discovered the small motherless daughter of the girl who had accompanied me on my first Khasi tour in 1934 and I took her for my own.

Soon after this, on hearing that the Government of Assam had decided to introduce Gandhi's Basic Education scheme in which I had long been interested, I decided to go to his ashram at Sevagram in Central India and see the training scheme at work. Ellen Giri, who was also keen about this, went with me. This was shortly after Independence, and riots had broken out in Calcutta, so we had to do the journey by a roundabout route via Lucknow. I did not stay long but what I saw convinced me that that was the kind of education I believed in. Ellen was equally keen and never tired of entering into my plans and saying that

just as soon as she could get her own children's education off her hands she would resign from Government service and come and help me to organise a tip-top rural high school on Gandhian lines.

Back in Shillong the Government took over my school to be the first Basic Training Centre for the Hills, keeping me on as Principal until Ellen and the rest of the group of graduates, who had gone for training with her, should be back and I could leave the Centre in their competent hands. This happened in 1949, so at last I was free to turn village-wards.

We had already chosen the village of Kharang, about sixteen miles from Shillong, from which all the Unitarian churches were fairly accessible. But there was still no house there for me to live in, and the sudden death of the wife of the Director of Education who had been so good to me made me decide to pay one more visit to England while Ekiman Singh was seeing to the building of my house. The Director had left India a few years earlier; he and his wife had bought a small private preparatory school in Somerset and had just started working there when she died. It seemed the least I could do to go and lend a hand for a few months, so I asked for four months leave from my committee in London and went off to Somerset to help re-organise the school.

Early in 1950 I resumed my own job and an exhaustive tour was arranged for me, first in the British Isles, then to Canada and the United States of America, including taking part in the Centenary Celebrations of Pacific Coast Unitarianism at San Francisco. Then by air across the Pacific to Sydney to take greetings from the Unitarians of the United Kingdom to those in Australia and New Zealand.

At the end of 1950 I was back in Kharang; my house was ready early in 1951 and my daughter, now seven years old, and I were duly installed.

My original plan had been to invite young men from the village churches to come for training in village leadership; but this proved abortive owing to the lack of young men in the villages having even the requisite nodding acquaintance with reading and writing to be able to profit by such training or even enough knowledge of proper Khasi to be able to understand what I



Madan Laban Church and Library, Shillong

The Unitarian Church at Jowai







Two duties for Margaret Barr



said. It seemed best therefore to start another school. I had not intended doing this at least till Ellen should be able to join me; but the logic of events drove me to it.

It was a very small school, with only four boys and four girls—all teenagers—plus my little daughter. An excellent objective account of this may be found in Bruce Findlow's *Kharang* (Lindsey Press 1954). Bruce was with me for a year from early 1953 to 1954. Those were the palmy days when I could have long-term helpers and friends from overseas with impunity. One of the obstacles to progress during the last decade has been the closing of this fruitful channel of international cooperation owing to wars and rumours of wars on India's North-Eastern and East Pakistan borders to which the Khasi Hills are so near.

A year after Bruce's departure his wife, marking time while her husband was finishing his ministerial training at Manchester College, Oxford, resigned her post as Matron in a Sydney hospital and came to help me for a year. The Health and Maternity work of the Kharang Rural Centre dates from that year. She proved a perfect companion, firm as a rock in a crisis, as when a passing cyclone carried off the entire roof of the school kitchen—twenty-eight ten-foot corrugated iron sheets firmly clamped together—to a distance of about fifty yards, as though the roof had been made of cardboard. Mary was sympathetic and understanding and, like Bruce before her, quite undismayed by the primitive conditions under which I lived. One of my happiest memories of that year is of the little services we used to hold on Sundays which we took turns to conduct with the help of *Hymns of Worship*, *The Oxford Book of Mystical Verse* and any of my other books in which suitable readings and prayers could be found. Another happy memory is of accompanying her to a village home to conduct a confinement case. How different our village conditions of midwifery must have been from the hospital conditions in which all her previous experience had been gained; but this too she took in her stride.

By the time she was due to leave early in 1956 it was already six years since my last overseas leave, so I decided not to take a new batch of schoolchildren but to accompany her to England.



Of the existing batch three boys went home, one was accepted for teacher training at the Lady Reid Basic Training Centre, one of the girls returned to Mission work and the other three I sent to the Kasturba Gandhi Memorial Centre in Gauhati to learn more about Gandhian ideas and methods than I could teach them. The Centres run by the Kasturba Gandhi Memorial Trust exist to train village girls for village work and are to be found all over India.

Three days before Mary and I were due to leave a crisis was caused by the young woman whom I had engaged to carry on the maternity work, returning from a holiday to announce that her parents would not allow her to stay on during my absence, though Ekiman and his wife lived in the next house and she could have lived with them as I had planned. I was the more enraged by this calm announcement in view of the fact that I had told her six months earlier when Mary and I began to make plans that this would happen and I had urged her to let me know in time to find a substitute if she decided not to stay, so that the work already started would not come to an untimely end.

I left at dawn the next morning to go to Shillong and see what could be done at such short notice. I was fortunate. One of the girls who had been my fellow-trainees at the Women's and Children's Hospital nine years earlier and had always said she wanted to do village work had returned from working in an American Mission Hospital in East Pakistan and was out of a job. I found her and told her of my dilemma; her response was immediate. Of course she would help me out and if I would give her one day in which to prepare, she would return with me the following day. We discussed the details of the work and it was not till she got up to go that I reminded her that she had not asked what her salary would be. I knew that I had found a kindred spirit and away we went together to Kharang the day before Mary and I were due to leave. And when we actually did leave the following morning she had already set off, black bag in hand, to conduct a confinement in a nearby village. That young woman was Maida Wallang, of whom there will be more in following chapters.

## 7

### Tragedy, new assistance and a near crisis

After a short and comparatively uneventful leave in England I again set sail for India, this time via Cape Town for a visit to the Unitarian Church there. On arrival I found a large batch of letters awaiting me; the top three were from friends in Shillong telling me of the sudden death of Ellen Giri. This was and has remained the most shattering blow that fate has ever dealt me, not only personally but also to my hopes and dreams for the future of what I was trying to do at Kharang. I knew now that the Rural High School for which we had planned together so eagerly would never materialise. But I knew too, when I got over the first dizzying impact of the blow, that I must continue to work there, as she would wish me to do, and do what I could single-handed to salvage as much as possible from the wreck.

On passing through Gauhati on the way home I called at the Ashram. The girls enjoyed their year there and earned golden opinions from their instructors; but they found difficulty through not being fluent in any language except Khasi. They had learnt a little Assamese and Hindi but not nearly enough to take the midwifery course that both they and I wanted. So I took them back to Shillong where the Red Cross Maternity and Child Welfare Centre conducted classes in Khasi without any religious restriction, whereas the Mission Hospital accepted as trainees only girls belonging to the Mission Church. They all took the elementary course followed later by a more advanced course in village nursing and are all doing excellent work, one somewhere in the interior of the Khasi Hills and the other two, both Unitarians, with me here at Kharang.

Now that Ellen's death seemed to have killed my plans for educational development it seemed sensible to develop as much as possible in the field of Health Welfare which has been ever since that time central to the work of the Kharang Rural Centre.

Moreover, on my return I found that Maida Wallang had been as good as her word in my absence—and better! Unlike her predecessor she had not spent her time sitting at home till called to a case but had been doing magnificent work visiting the women in their homes and winning their confidence. The outcome of this (till then) novel approach was that she very soon found herself able to cope with the work, so she sent an SOS to her brother Dranwell who, like the dutiful Khasi brother he was, at once left his job as junior assistant in the office of the Deputy Commissioner in Shillong and went to join her.

On my return therefore I found them both installed, living somehow on her salary and doing first-class work. Though untrained for medicine or dispensing, Dran had spent a good deal of time accompanying two doctor friends, one Khasi and one Bengali, to the villages watching their treatment of simple ailments and generally making himself useful. Both recommended him for the sort of untrained work that can be so effective in villages. He was also an extremely good Jack-of-all-trades and was building a new house for the school when I first met him. I asked him if he would care to stay and, on hearing that he would, I promptly added him to the staff. He later married one of my midwives and has been ever since the Centre's chief tower of strength as dispenser, builder, repairer, driver of the jeep when we have one and all-round assistant to me. It is now fifteen years since we started working together and our mutual affection and trust deepens with the years. One excellent thing about him is that he knows better than to trust his incomplete knowledge and untrained skill in cases too difficult for him and he goes to consult one or another of his doctor friends in Shillong whenever a patient's case baffles him and administers things like TB injections only on doctor's orders. He almost certainly saved my life by fetching a doctor from Shillong when I lay dangerously ill in

1969. His contribution to the development of the Centre during the last fifteen years is incalculable.

Maida too stayed on until 1965 advising the younger nurses and helping them to develop the department of Maternity and Child Welfare, and we only parted then because, as the youngest daughter of a Khasi family, her first duty was to care for her old mother. So she went back home to Shillong, ran a creche for the Assam Council of Social Service for six years, and is now back with me promising to stay as long as I need her.

However, let us go back now to 1954 when an unguarded remark by Bruce Findlow in a letter to the Lindsey Press about the forthcoming publication of his book, *Kharang*, almost precipitated a major crisis which must be told in full, though until recently (1972) I had forgotten all about it. Whether this fact denotes an ostrich-like obstinacy or an enviable capacity for dismissing from consciousness unpleasant things that would hinder progress if allowed to fester is for the reader to judge. All I know is that it happened and, until the discovery of a pile of old papers when this manuscript was already half-written, I had no memory whatever of what I now know to have been more critical for the future of my work than anything else that has ever happened.

The unfortunate remark of Bruce's was to the effect that what I was now doing at Kharang was completely different from what I had been doing previously. This was wholly untrue as he would have known if he had seen me at work in Shillong. The only thing that had changed was the place; but as I had been telling everyone for years that a town was not a suitable place for the training of village children and that I must aim at having a rural centre as quickly as possible, I should not have been unduly concerned even if I had known that he had made that remark. I was the more stunned therefore when the following letters arrived early in 1954.

Dated 5 February 1954

From the Rev John Kielty, Secretary of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches, London.

Dear Miss Barr,

Your report was presented to the Overseas and Foreign Committee on Thursday and there was considerable discussion. Apparently there is a strong feeling in the Women's League that the work has changed considerably from what they understood you went to do in the Khasi Hills. They seem to hold that the Churches are not now receiving your attention as formerly because you are more engaged with the Kharang Rural Centre, and apparently Mrs Sokell is finding disturbing murmurs which she feels can only result eventually in a serious diminution of contributions from the League branches.

On the other hand, other members of the Committee took the view that you had gone out to serve the Khasis and that with the passing of time new needs had been revealed and that you were now attempting to meet those needs. I think what brought the matter to a head was this question of medical services and the entertainment of visitors. No vote was taken, of course, but I was asked to place these facts frankly before you and ask you to give us a statement setting out the considerations which now govern your activities among the Khasis.

It is a case of your making quite clear to our people that while the Churches are not being neglected your work is of a bigger nature than just ministering to a number of scattered churches and helping to ensure that there is some education available for Khasi children. We would like you to show how you have become aware of crying needs that simply had to be met and how you are now endeavouring to meet them.

A statement will be made at the Annual Meetings of the Assembly based upon your reply to this request, and in this way we hope we shall be able to carry with us not only all the Committee but those of the Women's League Branches particularly who generously contribute to your work and yet are uneasy about its nature today.

My Committee are delighted to know of the help you are receiving from the Canadian Unitarian Service Committee and they feel that this is a strong factor in your favour, and you may rest assured that it will be used to the full when the statement is made at the Annual Meetings.

May I say that I hope that you will not take this as an adverse criticism, though I agree cold print may convey that impression. What we are anxious to do is to forestall any lessening of interest which unintelligent criticism can so easily cause. I assure you that most of the Committee are with you and all are agreed on the need to clarify the position, and to justify the clear new emphasis in your work. Some feel that this is particularly necessary in view of the likelihood of our publishing Mr Findlow's book. This book deals very faithfully with a splendid experiment, but it makes quite clear that the church work is only a very small part of your activity.

You must realise that this is not an easy letter for me to write, and I hope you will read it several times before replying, and that you will bear in mind that it is only goodwill allied to a clear realisation of what could go wrong in this country that prompts it.

With kind regards.

Yours sincerely,  
John Kielty.

This letter was accompanied by another beginning 'Dear Margaret' and signed 'John', designed presumably to thaw any impression of coldness or formality that the above might have made. My reply to these was also dual; but first here is another letter received a few days later from the recently retired Secretary of the General Assembly, the Rev Mortimer Rowe, who had been very closely in my confidence ever since 1937. He was doing a lot of work for the Lindsey Press at the time and was therefore concerned with the 'to be or not to be' or 'when to be' of the publication of Bruce Findlow's book, *Kharang*.

Dated 15 February 1954. London.

Dear Margaret,

The day after I had written to you and Bruce purely as from the Lindsey Press Committee, I learned that even while I was doing so a discussion had been taking place in the Overseas and Foreign Committee about your work, and that behind that discussion (and some division of

opinion) there has been a certain amount of unrest here and there in the Women's League to the same effect. By this time you will have received John Kielty's official letter to this effect. I was not wholly unaware of the existence of this questioning, but did not know that it was likely to 'come to a head' as one might say. Further enquiry causes me to write this letter to you 'off my own bat', and to raise the practical question—not entirely off my own bat—ought we to hold up for the moment the issue of Mr Findlow's booklet, in which (to quote from his letter to me) your Introduction and the rest of its contents make it perfectly clear that your present work is 'especially in its relationship to the Khasi Unitarians very different to the work she did in previous years . . . and to state categorically that it is not church work in the ordinary sense or missionary work in any sense at all as some people still think.'

That is precisely what I thought myself, in a detached sort of way, when I read the typescript of the book. Detached, because I am not Secretary of the GA nor a member of the O and F Committee nor a critic of your present schemes and the complete break with your original Khasi activities; but having learnt of the unrest referred to above, taking shape in the form of a letter to you from the Committee, I am a little alarmed. I even wonder whether you yourself will comprehend it as clearly as you should. Let me put it to you as I fancy it appears in the minds of sundry Unitarians who have misgivings. They are probably thinking somewhat thus:

When Mr Ratter went out he devoted himself entirely to strengthening and encouraging the actual Unitarian congregations in the Khasi Hills; so did Miss Barr at first and we heard a lot about it and applauded it. Then she convinced us of the importance of tackling the problem of efficient education on up-to-date lines and religious liberalism for the benefit of the next generation of Khasi children, and again we were won over, though it gradually became clear that the adult congregations were inevitably receiving less direct attention. We were proud, however, of the success of her schools, ending in their being officially

taken over. But now just what is it that she is endeavouring to do? We have read this and that about it from time to time, but where do the struggling Khasi Unitarian congregations come into the picture? Not even (judging by Mr Findlow's remarks above quoted) in the remote background—they have quietly disappeared offstage, and if we read Mr Findlow's book the picture is largely one of Miss Barr surrounded by a small batch of youngsters beginning the elementary education experiments all over again elsewhere, whatever ambitious plans she may have of this growing into a full-scale Rural Training Centre. It is at this point that the questioning is apt to take a concretely critical form and become a little blunt: of what service is this latest development to the dozen scattered Unitarian hill-congregations among the Khasis? And, now that I know that it is being asked and is in danger of being pressed to a satisfactory answer, I am apprehensive of the result of hurrying Mr Findlow's book into print; for it is obvious that its premature appearance would not help to allay the misgivings in advance of your own statement of the case.

You are good enough to count me as having been 'a friend in need' in past days; believe me, in writing this personal and utterly unofficial letter, with its invented statement of floating criticisms, I am trying to 'put you wise' in the same spirit of friendship. . . .

All the best!

Yours sincerely,  
Mortimer Rowe.

My replies to these:

*Informal.*

Dated 22 February 1954. Kharang.

Dear John,

Your letters of February 5th reached me last week. Very many thanks. I have obediently done as you asked me to do before answering. I have read them both several times, and also re-read my recent report and *The History of the Kharang Rural Centre* that I sent you last April. Put all together they make interesting reading but make it difficult for me to be

more explicit than I have been or to understand whence misunderstanding has arisen. The enclosed letter for the Committee and article for *The Inquirer* will, I hope, put things right.

Your second letter, re stipend etc, seems better dealt with at the personal level and there are also one or two other matters that I want to raise at that level, hence this. It has always been one of my prerogatives, ever since I have been on this job, to be allowed to approach my Secretary as a human being and personal friend as well as qua Secretary (Ask MR!) . . .

*Formal—for the Committee.*

Dated 22 February 1954. Kharang.

Dear Mr Kielty,

In answer to your request for 'a statement setting out the considerations which now govern your activities among the Khasis', I enclose a copy of an article that I have just written for *The Inquirer*. As the article states, I have been overlooking the fact that people may not know as much about my doings as they should and that there may be some misunderstanding among subscribers to the India Fund. I am grateful to the Committee for reminding me of this fact. In view, however, of my recent long report, following at an interval of only nine months on the even more detailed *History of the Kharang Rural Centre* and copy of my letter to the Khasi Unitarians which I sent last April, I am at a loss to understand why there should be any lack of understanding among members of the Committee, as your letter seems to suggest there is.

I hope the article will answer the main point you raise, but I must add to it brief replies to certain other points, these to be for the Committee only.

#### 1 DISTURBING MURMURS IN THE W.L.

If W. L. members deduce that I am not *visiting* the churches as much as formerly they are quite correct, but they should bear in mind two things which naturally I do not proclaim in *Inquirer* articles:

a I am not as young as I was and find the long tours too arduous now.

b I have never refused any request from any church in the Union for my services and I am still ready to give the churches more attention than they are willing to accept.

#### 2 MAINTENANCE OF VISITORS

In asking the Committee to consider making some financial allowance for this, I intended that they should do so only if they accepted my statement that it has been proved in the last twelve months that such visitors are an aid to efficiency and a virtual necessity. (I might mention in passing that this is another situation which would not have arisen had there not been a 100% failure on the part of educated Khasi Unitarians to visit and work at the Kharang Rural Centre.) In the case of my first visitor, it has occurred to me that some members of the Committee and the W. L. may feel that there should have been some prior approval of his coming. If this is so I would point out (as I thought I had already done) that Findlow came as a private visitor without any official status or any support from official funds. His fares and other travelling expenses he met himself and his upkeep at Kharang was my personal responsibility. This should be made clear to anybody who has erroneous views on the matter.

#### 3 MEDICAL SERVICES

I hope I have made it clear in my *Inquirer* article why these are necessary. I must add that they would have begun much sooner had qualified help been available.

#### 4 CANADIAN HELP

If it is really necessary to support my work by public reference to this, perhaps you should know that as a result of a press interview in Vancouver in which Dr Hitschmanova referred to the maternity work here, a single individual has donated a further \$500, so that a second Khasi midwife can begin work at once. I am at present trying to find one.

#### 5 FINDLOW'S BOOK

I hope it will be borne in mind that this is about the *KRC*

and not the Khasi Unitarians because my need was for companionship, and Findlow therefore spent the bulk of his time at the Centre instead of touring about the Khasi Hills generally. An additional reason why the churches do not receive larger mention is, I understand, because his opinion of them is not high and therefore he prefers to say as little as possible.

#### 6 MY LAST REPORT

It has occurred to me that some members of the Committee, noting that I report an expansion of my work and that it takes on the character of a long-term project, may be worried by the thought that I am expecting the GA to maintain this work beyond my own years of service. I want to make it quite clear that nothing I have reported is necessarily intended to bear that implication.

In conclusion, may I say that I am quite ready, as always, to elaborate and explain what I am doing or proposing to do, but I would ask the Committee to bear in mind that Khasi village life is so completely unlike civilised Western life that it is by no means easy to convey in written words the nature of my own activities or the goals at which I am aiming. As I stated in my report, I truly believe the last year to have been the most fruitful of all those I have spent in India, and the report was supposed to make this apparent to the Committee. I hope the absence of any comment from the Committee on the report as a whole does not mean that it is a failure in this respect.

Perhaps I should add one small comment on the little word 'NOW' in the sentence in your letter that asks me for a statement 'setting out the considerations that now govern my activities among the Khasis.' Except that they become clearer and more compulsive with every year I work here, those considerations are *exactly* what they have been since the beginning. I hope *The Inquirer* article enclosed herewith will make this clear.

With every good wish to you and the members of the Committee.

Yours very sincerely,  
Margaret Barr.

To the Rev Mortimer Rowe

Dated 25 February 1954. Kharang.

My dear Friend in Need,

Your letter of February 15th has just arrived. Very many thanks.

I suppose it was inevitable that misunderstandings should arise, though I have been at some pains on every leave to forestall them. The main difficulty is the insuperable one of describing in words (whether written or spoken) a state of affairs so utterly beyond the range of experience of any of the listeners or readers. Feeling strongly that there was need for clarification and that a report from a sympathetic yet critical eye-witness would do more than anything to provide it, I last year suggested that Findlow be asked to do a tour of the churches this summer before getting engrossed in his college work and while his experiences here were still vivid. I was disappointed when this suggestion was turned down, especially as in the interval the need for clarification appears to have come to a head and I have no option save to try and do it through the medium of written words alone.

First let me say that the day before your letter came I posted to *The Inquirer* a long article which I hope they will publish, designed to clarify things as well and as briefly as I know how. You had better ask the editor to show you this. I have sent a copy to J. K. also for the Committee in case *The Inquirer* refuses or delays it.

Next I must dissociate myself from part of the sentence which you quote from Findlow's letter to you. My present work is in no way 'different from the work (I) did in previous years', except that in previous years, while my work was in Shillong where the Unitarian leaders could profit from it by having a good school for their children, they co-operated with me, whereas since I came out here they have stopped doing so, and the only Unitarian support I now get is from the members of the Kharang Church. Ever since I started work in the Khasi Hills my work six days a week has been in secular education. Have I ever made a speech anywhere that did not make that clear? It was designed to help the Khasi Unitarians by producing a generation of better



educated ones. It has done so. My present work has exactly the same design, as is clearly understood by the Kharang Unitarians who are sending their children to my school. The only difference is that it has changed its location. And if it is no longer succeeding, this is because the Unitarians (except the Kharang ones) are not making use of it as I had hoped and intended. All through my years in Shillong I was a school-teacher all the week and attended church on Sunday, preaching and visiting the sick whenever I was asked and doing a quick tour of the out-lying churches during the winter holidays. Since coming to Kharang I have done exactly the same, except that the prolonged tours to the jungly outposts are becoming too arduous for my advancing years. Never has my work been 'missionary' work. Have I ever made a speech that did not make *that* clear also?

Now for a few comments on your hypothetical reconstruction of what is going on in the minds of 'sundry Unitarians' in England. I certainly did more touring during my first year, but by the time of my first leave (in 1937) I had already decided that the time spent in that way, though a delightful way of spending my school holidays, was largely wasted from the point of view of value to the Movement. That was why I sought and obtained sanction to embark on more specifically *educational* work. I felt then, and I *know* now, that if anything is to be done to make the Khasi Unitarians worthy of the name they bear, they must first have some better educated and more enlightened leaders. *All my work has been and still is with that major aim.* And the answer to the 'blunt' question comes here and can be equally blunt: the service of this latest development (the KRC) to the scattered Unitarian congregations is exactly what they choose to make of it, no more and *no less*. It *can* be no more and it will be no less. If they send me young men to train for village work they will get far more benefit than they ever got during my years in Shillong. The service is here waiting to be poured into the village churches as surely as the service of Manchester College Oxford and the Unitarian College Manchester is waiting to be poured into the home churches. But no one can force anyone to undergo such training and, if no one volunteers for it, then

what? Should I down tools, admit failure and go home, leaving Hajom Kissor Singh's blind and uncomprehending followers to sink or swim as best they can? Or alternatively, should I change my whole policy and begin doing what *would* please and satisfy them—spend my time going about the hills, preaching in the market-places like the missionaries, making vast numbers of converts, and/or extracting vast sums of money from overseas for them to invest or waste to their hearts' content? Or should I do as I have done and am doing—keep the service open for them to avail themselves of as soon as some blind eyes among them are opened, and meanwhile, in the name of Unitarianism, do a piece of wide and much-needed social and education work? There can be no possible doubt as to *my* answer to that question. The only question is whether the people who are supporting the work would give the same answer. The sorry truth of the whole matter is that the Khasi Unitarians are still too ignorant to have the least idea how ignorant they are. Were it not for the thought of the brave man who founded the Movement and my life-long desire to see his work bear fruit, I could never have carried on all these years. I suppose I have been remiss in not stating these things baldly long ago, though they are hardly things that can be put into *Inquirer* articles. I should have thought, however, that anyone following my work from the start and reading between the lines would have got a pretty shrewd idea of the true state of affairs from the articles I have written since 1951.

It is true that Findlow's book is only about the KRC and not about the churches. This is due to the fact that he wrote on the assumption that *Khasi Calls* still exists and is read and, as that deals with my work for the churches, his book was designed to complement it by giving a picture of the other side of my work. The church work continues as of old, but it was no part of his intention to write about it, and the framework of his book would not readily admit such facts as that I attend church regularly, and preach and take women's services or give spiritual comfort to the sick whenever asked; in fact that the churches, so far from having 'faded off-stage' occupy exactly the same place in my life as they have done all along. Moreover, he believes that, even if

I did no church work at all, my present work at Kharang would deserve the same degree of support from England as I had had in the past, because he recognises the crying need for social work (both educational and medical) in the villages and is as loath as I am to allow all the credit for such work to go to Gandhi and the Quakers. Surely there is scope for one small piece of this desperately needed work to be done in the name of Unitarianism. The Canadians at any rate think so. They have sent me \$500 and another 500 is to follow in April for carrying on and development of the medical service. But perhaps they have different ideas from English Unitarians as to the relevance of social service to the Unitarian message. Perhaps I should also point out that, whereas Raymond Holt in his book *The Unitarian Contribution to Social progress in England* appears to have had some difficulty in proving that some of the people whose social service he was anxious to claim for Unitarianism really were Unitarians, here is a piece of social service in which there can be no possible shadow of doubt; everyone who has ever heard of Margaret Barr knows that she is a Unitarian and that the work she does, whether inside the church or outside, is done *in the name of Unitarianism* and financed very largely by Unitarians.

I shall some day have to write a book on 'Life's Little Ironies'. What about these?

1. 1934 to 35. Trying to persuade the O and F Committee to let me take on this job. Refused because, on consulting the Secretary of a *Missionary Society* (NB) you were told that 'under no circumstances whatever would any *Missionary Society* take on the responsibility of sending a single woman *to such a lonely post*'. (My italics.)

1954. In vindication of this verdict I reported to the Committee that the major cause of my inefficiency was too much loneliness, and that, knowing this, I had tried having a guest for a year as a private experiment, of expense to no one except the guest and myself. And having found, beyond possibility of doubt, that such visitations had become a necessity, I requested the Committee to give a ruling as to

whether I should be allowed in future to finance (or partially) such visits from funds. My report and request have been passed over in silence.

2. 1937. My first leave. Everywhere I met the objection that it was contrary to all Unitarian precedent and principle to do 'missionary' work and had to reiterate till I was weary that I was NOT going to do 'missionary' work, and that I felt justified in offering myself for the job, *not* because I was a Unitarian minister, but because I was also a trained teacher, since the work as I saw it, would be principally in the realm of education.

1954. Having patiently pegged away for 17 years at the work I thought I had persuaded you all to allow me to do, I am now reproached for 'neglecting the churches'. After all I have only one pair of hands—and feet.

Well! Well!

This is a personal reply to a personal letter, but please make any use of it that you think would be helpful. My only desire is that the truth should be made clear to all concerned. To that end I hope *The Inquirer* will not delay the publishing of my statement (*My Line of Work*), and I'm inclined to think that the publishing of Findlow's book should be expedited for the same reason. For if support of my work can only be secured by suppressing the truth about it, then it were better to do without the support. . . . I cannot help feeling that if the key people had seen all the things I have sent recently—*My Line of Work*, *The History of the Kharang Rural Centre*, and other letters and reports that I have sent to the Committee—the present awkward situation might not have arisen.

In conclusion let me thank you from the bottom of my heart for writing as you did and thus giving me the opportunity to write this and make things clear to one who, until a few years ago, was more closely associated with my work than anyone else and who, though he may no longer be either Secretary of the GA or a member of the O and F Committee, is still an honoured and trusted 'leader in Israel', and, I have no doubt, a power behind the throne.

With grateful and affectionate regards,

Margaret.

There are several references above to *The History of the Kharang Rural Centre* and *My Line of Work* and, although there is some repetition of parts of the story which I have been unfolding so far, I hope that readers will find interest in the reprinting of some statements in this book. (see Appendix I)

## 8

### This Missionary business

On my first leave in England in 1937 I flogged this issue as I thought to a stand-still, as it was clear that the to-be-or-not-to-be of the Khasi job depended on my ability to satisfy the then leaders of British Unitarianism on this point. For many of them perhaps most, there could be no question on the matter—Unitarians did not, never had and never would do ‘missionary’ work. And it was only when I had succeeded in convincing them that my aim was to be what Leonard Mason so beautifully describes as a ‘Bridge-Builder’, and at the same time to make a Unitarian contribution to social progress in an area of the world where there happened to be an indigenous Unitarian Movement already in existence, that it was decided to let me try, some of the old die-hards still muttering in their beards about the thin end of the wedge and such.

In this year of grace 1973 one does not expect that there will still be misunderstanding, and I had assumed that a chapter on it would not be necessary. But only last year the *Unitarian Universalist World* carried a Khasi photograph with a caption referring to me as a missionary. I sent a vigorous disclaimer which was duly published, but if this can still happen in the UUA it is clear that this short chapter must be written after all.

It is true that my first few years in India, living among non-Christians and more or less closely identified with the Nationalism Movement, had shown me a very different side of missionary life from the one generally presented at missionary meetings in England. And my sister’s decision, after a decade or more of service as a Mission School teacher, that she could serve God, India and the world better as one of Gandhi’s village workers than by remaining a missionary, had added materially to the weight of these new impressions. Yet I never, in any of my

addresses or articles, made any attack on missionary work as such. I merely made clear that, as a Unitarian and a believer in the essential unity of all true religion at its deepest levels, such work was not for me, nor was I asking for Unitarian support for anything of the kind.

This being granted and the hubbub having died down, I went on with the work, keeping clear of missionary entanglements, which was easy to do as none of the local missionaries showed the slightest desire for my acquaintance; and my addresses on subsequent leaves reported that work and had nothing more to say on the missionary issue save when, generally in answer to questions, it became necessary to resolve misunderstanding.

The following correspondence with a fellow-Unitarian may perhaps throw some light on how I tried to deal with such misunderstanding when it arose.

I met him first on my leave from India in 1937 when I paid a visit to his farm in Somerset and he organised a jolly Garden Party to raise money for the India Fund. In 1944, being at a loose end, my tour of the churches ended and no hope of a return to India, I wrote to him offering my services as a 'land-girl'. He replied that his mind boggled at the thought of me as a land-girl, but they would be most happy to have me as their guest for as long as I cared to stay, far from the madding crowd and about as safe from air raids as anywhere in Britain was at that time. I arrived just as the potato harvest was beginning; a group of schoolboys with a teacher in charge had just arrived to lend a hand, so I trotted happily to the field with the boys and did my share of the first day's potato-picking. The next day I was almost too stiff to bend, but my hikes in the Khasi Hills had taught me that the way to conquer fatigue is not to give in to it. So out I went again day after day and was still triumphantly working when the harvest ended, all was safely gathered in and the boys went back to school. Then only did I submit to my host's oft-reiterated urging to relax and rest. After another week or so of holiday and fun, cementing my friendship with him and his family, I returned to London and the unwearied hunt for a chance to return to India. When I left he apologised for having

misjudged me and added that if I ever wanted a testimonial as a land-girl he would be happy to give me a tip-top one, unless he was short of labour himself at the time in which case I must come back to Somerset. I remained on friendly terms with them all and never failed to visit them whenever I was in England.

The following letter therefore, written in October 1956 after I had spoken at one of the London churches at a meeting at which he was not present, came as a shock:

Dear Margaret,

I cannot express how much you have upset me over your sneering at our missionaries. I know there are black sheep, and the ones near you may be the worst of the lot, but by and large they have been mainly doctors and welfare workers and many of them given their lives for the oppressed, whose fellow-countrymen could spare but little service to help. What about Albert Schweitzer? Would Africa be the better without him?

Olive (*his daughter*) goes out to New Guinea as a missionary nurse for 3½ years at a salary of £1 per week. In addressing our congregation last Sunday she said, 'We are fighting disease, we are fighting fear, fear of evil spirits and witch-doctors.'

Congress have warped your judgment Margaret and it's a pity. I hoped great things of you but now you are queuing up behind the officials to have a kick at the missionary and I don't like it.

Yours sincerely [*followed by his full signature, though we had been on Christian-name terms since 1937*].

Here is my reply:

Dear N,

Your letter was awaiting me on arrival here yesterday and, as I know you too well to believe that you would do me or anyone a wilful injustice, I am writing at once to tell you that I think you must have been misinformed. And in case you are basing your judgment on the short comment in last week's *Inquirer* I am taking the liberty of enclosing a letter that reached me by the same mail as yours, sent on by Ethel

Kay to whom it was written by a member of her old congregation at Richmond, as it gives another eye-witness' reaction to the same meeting and the same address.

If anyone has told you that I have ever made an attack on missionaries I assure you that they have misinformed you. I agree with every word you write about them and have, in almost every address, used very similar terms. All that I have said is that I, AMB, am not and have never been a missionary as that word is generally understood, meaning by it one whose good works are done with the hope and motive of converting people from other religions to some brand or other of Christianity. This has been the burden of my song for the last twenty years; it was the burden of my address in your barn when first I visited you in 1937, as it was of all my addresses on that first tour when I was fighting for the job and should never have been given it had I not succeeded in convincing the churches that I had no intention whatever of violating the age-old Unitarian antipathy to proselytisation or the claim (so tragically common in Christian missionary circles) that one religion alone has got the words of life.

The injustice in your letter is therefore two-fold, first in accusing me of saying unkind things about missionaries which I have never said or thought, and second in the most unworthy suggestion that I am queuing up behind the officials to have a kick at the missionaries now that the official Indian Government is no longer pro-missionary, as it always was in British days. That would indeed have stung had there been a grain of truth in it and, coming from anyone whose affection and judgment I cared less about than yours, would have been treated with the scorn it deserved and ignored. The exact opposite is the truth. In 1937, while the 'official' world in India was still pro-missionary, I had far more to say on this issue than ever since, and have been able progressively to diminish this emphasis on every visit since. That it should still be necessary (generally, be it noted, in answer to questions) for me still to disclaim the title is due to the fact that there are still those amongst us who have not understood what I have been at such pains to explain.

And my explanation is in no sense an attack on missionaries; it is merely a re-statement of the fact that, as Unitarians, we do not do and have never done that particular kind of work.

Schweitzer has long been one of my heroes and his statement in *On the Edge of the Primeval Forest* of the motive which originally took him to Africa was one of the major inspirations that took me to India. If the word 'missionary' meant in general the sort of work that he does, then I should be proud indeed to share it with him. But I think it would be true to say that he has never tried to convert to Christianity a single Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, Jew, Parsee or member of any other of the world's great religions. There would not, I think, be many missionaries in India who could or would wish to have the same said of them. It is this vital difference that I tried to make clear. I am sorry if I failed.

I am most interested to hear your news of Olive. Her heroism and idealism have all my admiration. It is unlikely that she will long remain a Unitarian, but whether she does or not my heartfelt blessings go with her in her work. Nurses do grand work everywhere and especially when they work among 'the poorest, the lowliest and the lost'.

As always,

Yours affectionate,  
Margaret.

His reply was dated 7 November 1956:

Dear Margaret,

Thank you very much for your kindly and Christian letter. That is the trouble I suppose I should really say 'world-religious' letter!

There are advantages about being a naughty noisy little boy like me, in that people like you take trouble to explain and be kind to us, which I suppose is one of the answers to 'Except ye become as little children'.

The tenour of your letter rebukes me far more than any argument would have done.

[*There follow two pages of friendly news about his farm and family, quite in the style of our old correspondence, concluding:*]

Goodbye Margaret and God bless you. I am returning the Richmond letter, it is the kind that does one good when one is older.

Yours,  
Norman.

## 9

### Midsummer madness

Let me turn now to the critical and formative educational work of the Centre during these years.

I had known before I left in 1956 that the school was destined to change its nature. No longer should I take children with little or no initial schooling. A group of children from a village some seven miles away had already passed the Government Examination for promotion to the Middle School standard, some of them brilliantly. They had expressed themselves willing to wait a year for me if I would promise to take them when I got back. They arrived in force, eight or nine strong, the day before I had told them to come.

'Oh yes,' they said when I pointed this out, 'but if school is to start tomorrow we had to come a day early to settle in.'

As they had all brought essential supplies with them this posed no insoluble problem; and I knew that with this group there would be no question of 'creeping like snails unwillingly to school' and that we should soon be friends. We were, and the few years that followed, with them and a few who came from other villages including Kharang, taught me more about teaching than all my previous career put together.

The Middle School course was officially for three years but by the end of the second year I had four children who had completed the syllabus, so I sent them in for the Examination. To everybody's surprise, mine most of all as this was my first experience of preparing children for Government examinations, they passed brilliantly, carrying off the first, second, third and fifth places out of all the candidates from the whole district, over a hundred in all. This re-inforced my confidence in my methods and strengthened my belief in Basic Education; for my school was 'Basic' in so far as we devoted a great deal of time to extra-



curricular matters such as crafts, farm work, weather records, account keeping, house-keeping, star-gazing, etc. It was a resounding triumph, and how Ellen would have rejoiced had she been there to see! I regretted then that I had not sent up the entire group, but it was providential that I had not, as that would have made the next step difficult.

When the results came the question arose as to what these children should do now. They all wanted to stay at school but none of their parents could afford to send them to school in Shilong and there was no Rural High School to send them to. I therefore put a novel proposal to them: if they would act as pupil-teachers, teaching all the Khasi subjects to the younger children and leaving me only English and Arithmetic, I would devote all my spare time to preparing for them the High School course that they would need. I pointed out that there was no question of their having a know-all teacher; we should be studying, in addition to the English and Mathematics that I could manage fairly easily, General World Geography, Economic Geography, English and Indian History, Hygiene and Elementary Science—theoretical only as we had no laboratory facilities. All of these I had either never studied or forgotten during the forty years that had elapsed since I left school, so we should have to study together finding from our text-books the answers to our problems. I was soon to find that even English was not as easy as I had thought for, though I could speak, read and write my mother-tongue with reasonable facility, the contents of the grammar books used in Indian schools contained much of which I had never heard—the difference for example between ‘a prepositional phrase’ and an ‘adverbial adjunct’!

The suggestion acted like a charm; they would do their best as pupil-teachers with occasional help from me as to methods, and we would study together morning and evening while the younger children did the housework and cooking.

If I had realised what I was taking on I might have hesitated, for the doings of the next three years proved quite the maddest that I have ever embarked upon. But it was good that I did not, for those years were the busiest, happiest, most stimulating and

most exciting that I can ever remember. Visitors during those years—the Rev Mabel Beames of Godalming was the only long-term one—will recall that lesson preparation often kept me busy far into the night and left little leisure for the fellowship that had graced the Findlow years. It was probably the best thing I could have done and doubtless deep down below consciousness was the need to transcend the grief and desolation that had followed Ellen’s death. However that may be, the plan worked triumphantly. Year by year we sent in groups of children for the Middle Examination and, though no other group ever achieved the brilliance of the first one, we never had a failure and generally managed to get all except one or two through in the First or Second Division; children who had been taught everything except English and Mathematics by the pupil-teachers of the first batch, willing but untrained.

At the end of another three years, though the Matriculation course was really for four, the original group were ready to try matriculation. Unfortunately the Government is stricter about boys than girls and will not allow the course to be done in less than the prescribed number of years. So the two boys of the group had to wait a year, but the three girls of the original group sat for the examination early in 1962 and, though only one passed in the Second Division and the others only in the Third, we again secured cent per cent successes—an unprecedented record for a village school with only one teacher. But of course there was still no High School and these exploits had only been allowed by the authorities because I was considered an adequate private coach.

I have been guilty of a number of rash and foolish acts in the course of my checkered career, but the frenzied activity of those years was quite the maddest and most worthwhile, so perhaps it is good to be mad sometimes.

At the end of 1961 when another group of children passed the Middle Examination, and the three big girls were within a few months of their matriculation, I decided that it was time for me to relax and take another leave. So early in 1962 I left one of the boys in charge of the few children remaining in the school, went

to spend a few months each in Shillong and Calcutta to be ready in the autumn to take two Unitarian girls to England to join their respective places of higher studies when the new academic year started in October.

I recall that in 1960 something happened that might have put a sudden, horrible and premature end to all my doings; and this is another story, dramatic enough at the time, but with a happy ending.

There was a rabies epidemic in the district and Dran, the only licenced gun-holder was called out several times to shoot mad dogs. As we had no dog, my beloved Rip having died a year or so earlier, I was not anxious. Then one evening my cat Polly, dearly loved since her kitten days in 1953 and the mother of endless litters of beautiful kittens, came in dragging one leg and looking weak and ill. I took her on my knee by the fire and tried to coax her to take a little warm milk. She refused but sat still on my knee. Phinos, my foster-daughter, was sitting beside me. Suddenly, with a snarl, Polly turned and dug her teeth into my hand, something she had never done before in her life; and when Phinos, as dismayed as I, tried to pull her away from me, Polly turned and bit her also. Then, with a sudden access of strength, she leapt off my knee and disappeared into the night; we never saw her again.

By this time suspicion had dawned, so after bathing our wounds with permanganate of potash, having supper and sending Phinos to bed, I got out my Home Medicine Manual and looked up 'rabies'. Sure enough, though dogs are the most common victims, other animals, including cats, are known to have it. I decided that we must go to Shillong the next day and went to bed early—but not to sleep. My hand was throbbing and my mind busy with plans.

In the middle of the night, hearing restless movements from the next room where Phinos was sleeping, I called to her. Yes, her hand was hurting too so I suggested a soothing cup of tea. She came through to my room and put the kettle on the little oil stove I kept there and as we sipped tea I told her that we should have to get off to Shillong very early in the morning to go to the

doctor. She was delighted; she always enjoyed going to Shillong with me.

It was holiday time and no children were in residence at the school, so next morning after a quick meal we closed our house, left Maida in charge and set off in high spirits, covering the sixteen rough miles in record time and reaching the Pasteur Institute soon after eleven o'clock. We went straight to the Superintendent who took a grave view of the situation and said that we must certainly have the injections for fourteen consecutive days. I asked if he could give me the serum as my medical staff were experienced in giving injections of various kinds. No, the serum had to be kept in a refrigerator, so we must come to the hospital for treatment; the clinic closed at twelve so we were just in time to have the first dose there and then. This we did and I asked the doctor in charge if it would be all right for us to return home for my typewriter and writing materials and come back the next day, as it would be difficult for me to waste two whole weeks sitting around in Shillong while all my work was piling up at home. He took a dim view of the idea when he heard that it would mean another sixteen mile walk that day and again the next morning. Bengali doctors living in towns are never good hikers! But when I persisted he very kindly said that if we were late back the next day his quarters were on the premises and the porter would call him back to the clinic; but on no account must we miss a day.

So after hurried visits to Phinos' aunt at one end of the town and friends of mine at the other, warning them that we should want a fortnight's hospitality, off we went again and got home just as night was falling. The next morning saw us again on the road at dawn, Phinos carrying my typewriter and I my rucksack containing writing materials, letters and a few clothes. This time we were lucky enough to get seats on a potato truck after walking the eleven miles to the motor road, so we arrived before the clinic closed.

For the next fortnight Phinos stayed with her relations and had a good holiday in Shillong, which she always enjoyed. I stayed with my friends and got on with a lot of odd jobs, letters,

preparation for the new school year and whatnot; and at ten o'clock every morning we met at the hospital for those horrible injections.

When we said goodbye to the Superintendent I asked him if the treatment was cent per cent sure of success. He said that that was a claim that no one dare make and told me what symptoms to watch for during the next few weeks and to come back at once if either of us had any further pain or throbbing in the seat of the original wound, by now long since healed and forgotten. Then he added reassuringly that there was nothing to worry about as we had started the treatment at once, had been absolutely regular and, in any case, in Shillong they had not so far had a single case of relapse after treatment. Fortunately neither of us was destined to break that record. So we, along with thousands or perhaps millions of others alive and well in the world after being bitten by a rabid animal, have cause to bless the name of Pasteur.

Phinos, who was sixteen at the time of this dramatic interlude, is now the mother of a lusty three year old son who calls me 'Nini', that being the nearest he can yet get to 'Granny'.

## 10

### **VIP in the UK with sidelights on finance**

The bit immediately following has no real part in this story as it has nothing to do with the Kharang Rural Centre except in so far as a brief and very unexpected spell as a VIP ministered to my self-esteem and sent me back with renewed vigour for what lay ahead.

Soon after I reached England at the end of 1962 a letter from Boston, Massachusetts brought me an invitation from the American Unitarian Universalist Association to attend their Annual Meetings to be held in Chicago the following May to receive their Annual Award for distinguished service to Liberal Religion. This was breath-taking to say the least but as I had already accepted an invitation from a Canadian family to visit their home in Vancouver in June, so that little extra travelling would be involved, I accepted. In April I preached the Annual Sermon at the Meetings of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches at Edinburgh and in May I flew to America. It was a wonderful experience, the only frightening part being the address that I had to give as guest of honour at the Award Dinner. As eye trouble was making it impossible for me to use notes when speaking, I just trusted to the inspiration of the moment and told informally the story of my years in India. I need not have been frightened; the reception was tumultuous.

Readers may perhaps be wondering how it came about that I had been invited to Vancouver; and that brings us to a matter of major importance that has not yet been mentioned, though it is central to the story of Kharang.

When I had been in Canada in 1950 I had met Dr Lotta Hitschmanova, Executive Director of the Unitarian Service

Committee of Canada; she told me that mine was not the sort of work that they supported, so I had given the matter no further thought. Later, however, on finding how completely all-sectarian Kharang was and that I was supporting in the school children from at least five different religious groups, many of them too poor to make any contribution, she decided to help us after all and since 1957 a steady succession of needy Khasi village children have been adopted by generous Canadian foster-parents. Forty-two in all over the years have been sponsored for periods varying from a few months to ten years. It was one of these, with whom I had become close friends by correspondence and who remained on my foster-parent list for over ten years, who had invited me to visit them in Vancouver at their expense next time I should be in England. The sponsorship is ended now but the close friendship continues.

In 1959 Dr Hitschmanova visited Kharang in person and saw for herself what was being done there—not only schoolchildren being cared for and educated, but a great deal of valuable work in health and maternity care being done in all the surrounding villages. From then till today a generous grant has paid salaries to three full-time workers in this department. Our debt to the USCC can never be adequately told; without their help there would have been no Kharang Rural Centre to write a story about today. And my own debt to the personal friendship and unswerving encouragement of Dr Hitschmanova can also never be told or calculated or repaid. That the end of this financial help is in sight is right and proper; with new commitments in some of the emerging countries of Africa and in war-torn Vietnam it is natural that the USCC should expect India to stand on her own feet after twenty-five years of independence. In 1975 all grants to projects in India will cease, including Kharang. This does not dismay me in the least as one of my main aims all along has been to ensure that, during my lifetime, our finances should be put four-square on a sound base of safe investment and the Centre able to carry on its work unaided. This is one bit of the dream that has not yet quite come true; but it will if I am spared to remain in control for another five years.

During the years that the school was winning golden opinions from all beholders we had grants also from the Government of Assam and from the Unitarian Universalist Association of America which, with the invaluable help from the USCC enabled us to live on our income and invest in a Capital Fund all extra gifts or earnings that came my way. One of the most helpful and most faithful friends in this way was—and is—Miss Mary Lawrance of California; she visited me first in Shillong in 1939 and on her return to America went up and down the country telling of the Khasi Unitarians and of my work. Later she started a little group called 'The Friends of Margaret Barr' some of whom are still sending her occasional sums of money to send to me. All of this, since it was not earmarked for any special purpose, has found its way into the KRC Capital Fund.

My income has never been large enough to be taxable. But when one chooses to live far from the haunts of civilised man, thus at a stroke eliminating rent and rates, and further when one never spends anything on drinks, smokes, bets (not even a shilling on the Derby!), cosmetics or hair-dos, it is astonishing how money accumulates over a long life. This has been my way of life, always dreaming of the day when my Centre would be able to stand on its own feet. And now the dream has nearly come true, all my life's savings and innumerable gifts from friends, all safely invested in a Capital Fund already more than half-way to its target.

The end of 1963 saw me back in the Khasi Hills, after the somewhat heady experiences of the year and once more I found myself coaching a few Middle and High schoolchildren. But my strength was not what it had been and by 1966 this had almost petered out and the children scattered. Moreover a move was afoot in the district for the villagers themselves to start a Middle School, using as teachers the nucleus of my old pupils still living in the locality and hoping in due course to be able to raise it to High School standard; and when that happens the second bit of the unfulfilled dream will come true. It will never of course be the school of my dreams and of Ellen's dreams, but at least it will be a Rural High School catering for the needs of many of the

children of this area who would have no hope of higher education without it. This seemed to me the best thing that could possibly happen and I gave the scheme every encouragement. At the beginning of 1972 it received its first building grant and a small school-house has been put up.

But as the years passed it was becoming increasingly evident (though I was the last to realise it) that I was over-taxing my strength and few of my friends were surprised when in October 1969, in my seventy-first year, I suddenly went down with the first and worst of a series of illnesses that kept me in and out of the Shillong Civil Hospital till the end of the next year.

It was during this very serious illness, when my life hung in the balance, that faithful friends in Shillong, belonging to many different religious groups, got together, formed a committee and drew up a constitution by which the Kharang Rural Centre could be legally registered as a charitable society and its funds invested, no longer precariously in my private name, but in the name of the Society. This was done as soon as I was well enough to produce a signature that the bank would honour and since then everything has run smoothly, the money being in the safe and capable hands of Mr PM Ngap who is one of my oldest Khasi friends and treasurer also of the Khasi Unitarian Union.

Strictly speaking this is the end of the story to date. But I think there will have to be one more chapter.

## 11

### Fruits of solitude

So often people ask me if it is not a lonely life; the answer is no. For solitude is not loneliness; loneliness is involuntary, as of a man in a prison cell, and in almost all cases it embitters, corrodes and hardens. Solitude is voluntary, as of a hermit in his cave, and it strengthens, ennobles and illuminates. Solitary I have always been in a sense; lonely never. I chose to live here and still do, knowing that here and here only was the place where I could obey the two-fold call I had heard in youth and do the work that I had been sent into the world to do. And the older I get the more sure do I become that this is true and that to have acted in any other way would have led to bitterness, self-reproach and the divided mind that seems so tragically common today.

'Woe is me if I preach not the gospel,' said St Paul.

How well I understand him! Woe indeed would it have been to me if I had tried to evade the call that I had heard. That the call was a vastly different one from his is nothing to the purpose. If I have avoided this woe and the evils attending it and find myself today with ever-deepening tranquility in a distraught world, it is because I have tried to obey the call that came to me—to me and to none other!

And yet, of course, there is a sense in which I never have been even solitary. The hermit in his cell seeks God only in himself; that has never been my way. Though it becomes increasingly clear to me that 'the indwelling God proclaimed of old', whom I first discovered at the Cambridge Unitarian Church, is for every individual more important than anything outside himself and to seek Him in isolation would never have answered my need. Love and service have always come first in my experience. And though my life has been solitary in so far as congenial com-

panionship on an intellectual and spiritual level has often been lacking, always there have been children—children to play and dance and sing with and to read stories to in the long dark winter evenings, some orphaned, some handicapped, all poor; children I have loved and to whom I have given a start in life; not just the small family that might have been mine as wife and mother, but dozens of them, a never-failing stream. And how can life be lonely or even solitary where there are children around?

Moreover there have always been books and letters from distant friends, and best of all periodical visits to civilization, averaging out at about every six years, when I have been able to spend glorious weeks in the homes of close friends, renewing and deepening old friendships and embarking on new ones; and recharging all my batteries, intellectual and spiritual at conferences of ministers and other like-minded spirits. No, I cannot even call it solitude, still less loneliness.

I read some time ago in one of the Elephant Bill books, probably his wife's beautiful sketch *The Footprints of Elephant Bill*, that during the ten years or more of his forest life in Burma before she joined him, people often asked him how he could possibly endure, still less enjoy, what to most people would be intolerable loneliness. His reply was something to the effect that anyone could do the same provided they had some way of fully occupying their thoughts. His way was the companionship of animals, especially dogs and the wonderful elephants he knew so well and loved so dearly and made such magnificent use of when the Second World War came to Burma. Nothing could be truer to my own experience, though my way has been different. Not animals but children have been my salvation, each an individuality to be respected, developed and loved, each with his and her own special gifts, defects, needs and potentialities—a heart defect requiring constant watchfulness to guard against over-strain without turning the child into a hypochondriac; another threatened with TB involving extra nourishing food and frequent visits to the Chest Clinic; a lad showing signs of following his father in the role of the worst drunkard of his village; a teenage

girl whose flirtatious glances at the boys in class and tendency to disappear out of school hours led one to begin watching anxiously for signs of pregnancy; brilliant students to be guarded from arrogance; dull ones to be encouraged not to lose heart; slothful ones to be stimulated; over-active ones to be restrained. All this and far more, to say nothing of the eternal vigilance required to avoid the teacher's pitfalls—favouritism, sarcasm and the insidious, recurring temptation to give more than a fair share of time and patience to the bright and promising to the detriment of the dull and slothful whose need is so much greater. And always the full-time job of housekeeping for a large family—cooking, baking, jamming, supervising. And in the background always and the foreground during wakeful midnight hours, thoughts to nourish the deeper life of the spirit. No, I have never had time to be lonely.

During the monsoon months the nights here are disturbed by the thunder of torrential rain on corrugated iron roofs and, if the rain stops for a time, there is still the roar of flood waters coursing down the drains and the harsh croaking of frogs in the ponds. But for most of the rest of the year, unless a strong wind is blowing (and someone once defined the Kharang climate as 'plenty of everything') the nights are almost completely soundless. During the short Indo-Pakistan war at the end of 1971, indeed there were many unusual noises, gun-fire twenty miles away on the border and jets zooming overhead. But those were not typical Kharang nights. I often wake in the night and enjoy lying and listening to the silence which may continue for hours unbroken except for an occasional shrill squawk of a bird, alarmed perhaps by some marauding wild cat, the gentle lowing from the cowshed of a cow separated from her calf by the heartless humans who own them in the hope of getting a share of the morning's milk yield, or the piercing hum of a mosquito seeking what it may devour.

And sometimes, but not often and only on bright moonlight nights in the dry weather, a party of belated villagers, returning home from a service, wedding or archery contest, will pass along the path near our house singing tunefully or playing the little



homemade bamboo flutes that the boys make for themselves and use to pass the long hours of days spent on the hills, watching the cattle and seeing that they do not wander into any of the unfenced fields of potatoes, maize or hill-paddy. This is a sound I love, wistful and haunting, and when I hear it in the night there always spring to my mind the last two lines of Wordsworth's *Solitary Reaper*—'The music in my heart I bore long after it was heard no more.'

This absolute peace of the night-time is one of the things I love most about my Indian home, and miss most when I go anywhere else, even so short a distance as to Shillong, where religious celebrations, weddings and blaring radios frequently keep me awake all night and make my occasional visits to friends there less of a joy than they would otherwise be.

Someone once asked Gandhi if he had mystical experiences and he replied, 'If by mystical experiences you mean visions and trances and that sort of thing, no. I should be a fraud if I claimed anything like that. But I am very sure of the voice that guides me.' That is exactly how I feel. Mystical experiences such as Emily Bronte describes in some of her more striking poems I know nothing of. But, as I mentioned in the first chapter, the splendid assurance of her *Last Lines* that the God within her breast was none other than the Spirit which with wide-embracing love animates eternal years, pervades and broods above—this is the heart and soul of my faith too, the faith that arms against fear.

It is this central faith in the indwelling Spirit of God that was sown for me so long ago in the Cambridge Unitarian Church, that has sustained me through the fifty years that have elapsed since then and that grows increasingly more precious with every year that passes.

It is here at Kharang in the midst of all this wild loveliness that it has flowered and fruited.

So it is here that I, who hold it, belong.

*Margaret Barr*  
*Kharang*  
*1972 and 1973*

## Appendix I

First *The History of the Kharang Rural Centre* dated 30 March, 1953

### 1 The idea

The idea of establishing a rural centre in a place some distance from the large towns such as Shillong and Jowai, to serve as an educational centre for the Khasi Unitarians, was conceived many years before any action could be taken. Behind the growth of the idea was the realisation that an educational centre in a town such as Shillong would not provide the right environment for village young people, and that it was in the villages and the village congregations that the need for education was greatest. The plan was discussed with Ekiman Singh and had his approval and was made known verbally to the then leaders of the Unitarian Union at yearly conferences and they also acquiesced.

### 2 Preparation

First it was necessary to build up the two schools already established in Shillong, to provide them with a sufficient number of trained teachers to take over the work, freeing me for this new venture. In due course the Sunderland Memorial School was placed in the hands of Khasis and later the Lady Reid School was taken over by the government and finally left in the hands of Khasi teachers who had been to Sevagram for training in Basic Education. During this period of transition, believing I had the support of the Unitarian Union, I set about finding a suitable site for the new centre with the help of Ekiman Singh. After thorough investigations and mature consideration we decided that the village of Kharang, about half-way between Shillong and Jowai, would be a suitable location. It was accessible to a good number of surrounding villages and in a central position in relation to the scattered Unitarian congregations. Moreover, the area was one in which there were no large mission schools or other rural centres.

### 3 Progress

The village of Kharang was asked to provide land for the centre and, after I had paid a fee for admittance to membership of the village, land was given to us on a small hill about a mile from the

village beside the track from Shillong to Jowai. This was in 1946. Now we had a site and, in the absence of any objections to it, went ahead with plans to build houses on the land and enter into possession of it. To my great joy, Ekiman Singh (who was now President of the Unitarian Union) offered to come with his wife to live at the centre and to help with the running of it. We decided to build a house for him first. This was done and in 1947 he went to live there and became my assistant and Farm Manager at a salary of 75 rupees per month, provided from funds from overseas. It is worth recording here that all the funds for the establishment and maintenance of the centre have come from overseas, though not all the donors were Unitarians.

In 1950 I went on leave to England and then on a tour of Unitarian churches in the UK, United States and Australia, speaking in many places about the Khasi Unitarians and our activities in the Khasi Hills. While I was away the work of building and preparing the centre to receive students went on and I learnt with great pleasure, in a letter from Ekiman Singh, that he had made himself self-supporting by his work on the land at the centre and would no longer require the salary he had been receiving.

#### 4 Ready to begin

I returned to the Khasi Hills in February 1951 and, as a house was now ready for me at Kharang, went immediately to live at the centre. Early in March I went to Raliang for the Annual Conference and told it of the establishment of the centre and invited young men to come for training as leaders in their own churches. Scholarships would be provided in proportion to the degree of financial sacrifice involved in their coming. I explained that there would be two levels of religious education: work with me based on material in English for better educated young people from places such as Shillong and Jowai and work with Ekiman Singh for less educated village Unitarians. This was the original plan agreed upon by Ekiman Singh and myself and our hope was to provide the educated leadership which the churches needed. It was also intended that, where necessary, general education would be given also so that Unitarians could conduct small schools in their own villages and so that some of them could go on to become government salaried teachers. All this was set before the conference and a general invitation issued and we went back to Kharang ready and willing to begin the work for which the centre had been established.

#### 5 Disappointments

At least I believed that we were both ready and willing to begin work but after our return to Kharang, Ekiman Singh gradually

withdrew himself from the centre's activities and finally, on 10 August 1951, when I asked him to look after the poultry for a day or two while I went to Shillong, he gave a flat refusal. I had already been forced to do all the work of the centre myself for some time or employ hired labour and in this year, because of the complete failure of Unitarians to share in the work of the centre, the costs for labour were the biggest single item. As there has been some criticism of my failure to tour all the churches during the last two years, it should be mentioned here that once the President of the Union freed himself from any responsibility for the centre, it became impossible for me to leave it for an extended period to make such tours.

To my great surprise, it was not until May that a Unitarian came to the centre for training. It was never thought that a large number of students would be able to come but it was believed that, if provision was made to prevent them from suffering financially by their coming, there would be a few young people in the villages and towns prepared to equip themselves to serve our movement. In May, Carley came from Jowai and remained for three months after which he left with the intention of returning to college. He received religious education with my help and guidance, based on material in the English language. Ekiman Singh was invited to take part in these classes but, except for one or two appearances, declined. Carley studied well but did not seem to find conditions at the centre altogether congenial.

After his departure I was alone again with the task of maintaining the centre but without the students for whom it was intended, until, in November, a young Bengali of a Brahmo Samaj family came voluntarily to help with the farm work. This was Arun Roy whom I made Farm Manager at a salary of 75 rupees per month and he remained with me doing excellent work until July 1952. Towards the end of the year I decided to hold a conference at the centre of all the young Unitarian people who knew English and a few young members of the Brahmo Samaj, and invitations were sent to about fifteen. The object was to bring the young people together to explore the possibility of using their knowledge of English to translate religious material into Khasi for the benefit of the Union generally and the cause of liberal religion. The officers of the Union were purposely not invited so that the young people would feel free to talk and plan without restraint and using their own initiative. The venture was a complete failure. Only three people came and to this day, apart from the last minute excuses I received, I am unaware of the reasons for such a general refusal.

#### 6 A new beginning?

By now it was apparent that the centre was not fulfilling the pur-

poses for which it was established and, despite the coolness of the past year, I reverted to a habit of many years standing and discussed the whole situation frankly with Ekiman Singh. I was surprised to learn, nearly a year after the event, that some of my remarks at the Annual Conference in February 1951 had been misunderstood and that it was believed that I intended to work only with educated young Unitarian people, making no provision at the centre for the training of young villagers. Ekiman promised me his future co-operation in the work of the centre and we went together to the Annual Conference at Puriang in March 1952 where the misunderstanding was immediately cleared up. Ekiman Singh with, I thought, great courage publicly admitted his failures, and Carley spoke to the young people of the benefits he had received from his time at the centre. A new spirit seemed to have emerged and I went back to Kharang again, believing that now our work could really begin.

In the next two months, in a co-operative atmosphere, something was achieved. A Brahmo Samaj boy came for two months and a Unitarian from Nongthymmai also came to live and work at the centre for a while. In addition to daily study with these two, there was a weekly class to which Ekiman Singh and two local village teachers (both Unitarians) came. A third who lived  $3\frac{1}{2}$  miles away also came occasionally. Arun Roy continued to look after the farming side with the help of advice from Ekiman and training he received at the Government Farm. In May he decided to leave to take up engineering but promised to remain until August because I had decided, with the approval of Ekiman Singh, that as it was unlikely that there would be any students for me to teach during the bad weather from May to August, my time would be better spent helping the schools and churches in Shillong during that period.

I went to Shillong in May and worked there until July, in the schools in the daytime and with the young people of the churches in the evening. In July Arun Roy left the centre and a week later I went back to see what could be done to replace him. I stayed there ten days and had a long talk with Ekiman Singh who agreed to take over the entire supervision of the farm with the aid of local labour. While I was at Kharang, Daniel Lamin, with whose education I had been concerned in earlier years, came to the centre. He needed its isolation to try and overcome his urge to drink and was equipped to help with the farm work. Accordingly he was left there on probation and I returned to complete my work in Shillong.

By the time I returned to Kharang in September, having helped the young people of Laban and Jowai churches to put on a special feature 'Our Unitarian Heritage' at their anniversaries, Ekiman Singh had again withdrawn himself from the work of the centre.

Daniel Lamin was made farm manager and began to study in his spare time. This year (1952) the response from young Unitarians had again been so disappointing that I was without students to teach and it became clear that the scope of the centre would have to be widened if my time was not to be wasted altogether and the materials and money already put into the centre not written off as a complete loss.

#### 7 A senior basic school

Without abandoning the original plan, I decided that the centre could best serve the surrounding village communities (and incidentally advertise the spirit of Unitarianism) by serving as a residential Senior Basic School. The idea received support from His Excellency the Governor of Assam, the Syiem Khyrim (local chieftain), the Assam Government Rural Development Officer and others, and was recommended to the village people at a durbar held on 1 November 1952. A new building was begun to serve as a girls' hostel and guest house and by the end of January 1953 we were ready to begin teaching. By then, one Unitarian boy had been sent by his parents (members of the Nongthymmai church) and two Unitarian girls who had been receiving schooling at the Sunderland Memorial School but who belong to Kharang village were coming daily for lessons to the centre. In February other village boys began to come from various places and now seven children are living at the centre and receiving general education on Basic lines and three girls are coming daily for lessons. Daniel Lamin served as Farm Manager until March 1953 but then had to leave, having been unable to overcome his failing. At the end of February a young Australian Unitarian, Bruce Findlow, came to help for a year with the work and is now living at the centre.

#### 8 Present resources of the centre

The land of the centre is all on one hill. Part of it has been cultivated by Ekiman Singh for his own use, part is under cultivation by those at the centre to help to meet its needs, part is used for grazing and the remainder is either wooded, uncultivated or built upon. Our livestock includes cows, pigs and poultry. The present buildings are a house occupied by Ekiman Singh, a house occupied by myself and the resident students and also used for cooking, dining and classroom space, and a third house which is nearing completion as a girls' hostel and guest house and is partly occupied by the visitor from Australia. There are also a cowshed and a storehouse which is designed to house a generating plant at some future time. In addition to supplies of textbooks for general education, the main house also contains my own library of books on religion and other

subjects and these are freely available to anyone at the centre who can use them. The centre's supplies come from three sources; some are produced on our own land, some are obtained in nearby villages and the remainder is purchased in Shillong or at Smit market and carried by those at the centre.

#### 9 Help from other sources

So far this account has been restricted to the relations between the Kharang Rural Centre and the Khasi and Jaintia Hills Unitarian Union, but while members of the Union have withheld their support or failed to make use of the centre as a training institute, there has been a good deal of help and encouragement from non-Unitarian sources and from further afield. His Excellency the Governor of Assam has taken a personal interest in the growth of the centre and is very anxious to see it for himself as soon as possible. Government officials concerned with rural or educational work in the hills have visited the centre and reported favourably on it. The support of the Syiem has already been mentioned. Finally there is the willingness of non-Unitarian families to send their children to the centre for schooling and the eagerness of young people to come from distant villages in search of education. There have been more requests for pupils to commence at the centre than can be provided for with the present facilities and staff, and some students have had to be asked to wait.

Overseas help deserves mention here. As already stated, all the funds for the establishment and maintenance of the centre have been specially subscribed for my work in the Khasi Hills by Unitarians in overseas countries including the USA, UK, Australia and New Zealand. The work is also supported by many messages of encouragement from abroad, and visits by interested people from beyond the limits of the Khasi Hills or the Unitarian Movement.

#### 10 The financial aspect

Since January 1951 about 8000 rupees have been received by me for use at my discretion in this and other work. The centre has absorbed the major part, heavy items of expenditure being 3243 rupees for building costs in the years 1951–52, 717 rupees for stock fodder etc in the same period and 900 rupees in salary for an assistant in 1952. While Unitarians have generally failed to make these investments produce dividends by their failure to come for training, help has been given to the few who did come and to others to go elsewhere for kinds of education which the centre cannot provide to the value of 1400 rupees in 1951 and 1952. This brief account of financial matters is not intended to be an exhaustive statement but

merely some illustrations of the use which has been made of funds from overseas.

#### 11 Publications

A small but important activity has been the publication of material about Unitarianism in the Khasi language. Arising out of the work done with Carley and the weekly class in religious education three leaflets were prepared with the help of Ekiman Singh and published. At the present time a small book on *Our Unitarian Heritage* is in the hands of the printer. This arose out of the work with young people on a special feature for their 1952 anniversaries.

#### 12 Conclusion

Nobody can escape the conclusion that so far the centre has failed in its principal aim; it has not produced a single trained leader for any Khasi Unitarian church—no matter what else it may have achieved or set in motion in the field of general education. In my view, the reasons for this failure are simple and two in number. The first is the lack of raw material from which to produce leaders: the failure of any village Unitarians to come for thorough training and the failure of town Unitarians to come for higher training or to place their education at the services of the Union. The second reason is the lack of consistent and continuing help from the President of the Union, Ekiman Singh, despite the fact that it was to give this that he came to live at the centre.

Various minor criticisms have been made from time to time: the position of the centre is too isolated, the climate too severe, the diet monotonous, and so on. If it be said that these are the reasons why the centre has failed, two questions can properly be asked. Firstly, why were these objections not made before the centre was so well established? Secondly, are these really the kind of disadvantages which will hold back a man from equipping himself to serve the religious movement to which he belongs?

The question of the future relations of the Khasi Unitarians to this centre is one which they must answer for themselves. The centre is now committed to operating as a Senior Basic School but the original plan can still be implemented if there are students willing to live and study and work at the centre, and if there is a Unitarian capable and willing to help with this work living at the Centre.

The Kharang Rural Centre is not a place where we divide people into classes according to their degree of education. It is not a place where some only study, others only labour in the fields and others only do the household chores. Everyone is expected to share in all the activities of the place and to make any special contribution he can as well. The aim now is to help the villages by providing self-

reliant teachers for basic schools. It is a wide social purpose and within it the Unitarian congregations can find their own need for trained leaders met, and at the same time help their fellow villagers. This is in every way in accord with the authentic Unitarian view of religion and life as found in our history and in the present day activities of Unitarians in other parts of the world. For this reason, if for no other, the work at Kharang is worth carrying on. It will go on and, I hope, go on with the understanding and practical support of the K and J Hills Unitarian Union, collectively and individually.

Secondly, *My Line of Work*, which was published in *The Inquirer* in March 1954:

It was something of a shock to be asked recently why I, a Unitarian minister in the Khasi Hills, was busying myself in providing education and medical services for Khasi villagers. One forgets the isolation of this corner of the world and the vast difference between life here and that in the countries from which most of the financial support for my work comes, and consequently one forgets also to give clear explanations from time to time to those who make the work possible. It is with this thought in mind that I have tried in the following to set out as briefly as possible the circumstances and opinions which govern my work among the Khasi Unitarians and Khasi people generally, and I hope that this account will serve to expiate any past sins of omission.

My original motive was to help the Khasi Unitarians to help themselves and contribute to the raising of the condition of their whole people. This was the motive of Hajom Kissor Singh in establishing Unitarian churches in these hills and my aim was to carry on the work he had begun. The Khasis are a very backward people, the Unitarians no less than the rest, and I want to see a higher level of knowledge among the Unitarians so that their Union of Churches will be a living power for good, both in relation to religious thoughts and to the pressing social needs of the people. But Unitarian congregations of uneducated people can contribute nothing either to the wider movement or to the local community. Moreover, Unitarianism cannot stand aloof from social problems in such a backward area as this. So I have, from the beginning, concentrated on providing educational opportunities for Unitarians for their own sake and in the hope of working through them and their churches towards a richer life for the people generally.

From my earliest days in these hills I have toured amongst the village churches when possible and come to know that it is in the villages that the needs are greatest, both within the churches and in the wider village community. I hoped that it would be possible to bring about a state of affairs in which the better educated town Unitarians would help their less knowledgeable village brethren and that they in turn

would apply their new knowledge and existing religious beliefs to the many social problems around them. This was the major reason for starting education work in Shillong first, but the years there, in comparatively civilised surroundings, were also necessary for me to acquire an adequate knowledge of the Khasi language and of Khasi ways of life and thought. I brought village Unitarians to the town for education and religious training but soon found that this was quite unsatisfactory and therefore began to plan a Centre for Unitarians in a central village location.

Eventually the Kharang Rural Centre was established sixteen miles walk from Shillong, to be a centre for training village Unitarians for work in their own churches and communities. It was also intended to provide general education when necessary and possible, and to help the surrounding villages directly as opportunities offered themselves. The main work, however, was based on the assumption that village Unitarians would come for training and the assumption that educated town Unitarians would help with the work. After two years waiting neither of these expectations had been fulfilled and so I turned to the secondary aims of the Centre but without abandoning hope that it would come to fulfil its primary purpose in time. Now that the Centre is working directly at community problems it may appear that social work has replaced church work, but this is by no means the case. Village residence, as distinct from the brief visits during earlier years, has not only made me aware of the urgency of the need for medical work and education in village areas and of the fact that village people are quite incapable of meeting their needs alone, but has also made clear that medical services, educational work, church work, short-term goals and long-term projects are all inextricably bound up with one another in an environment such as this. Two recent experiences will illustrate this.

A few weeks ago a Unitarian in Kharang village sent for me to give her spiritual comfort. She thought she was dying. I complied with her request but found that her greatest need was for invalid food. She was too ill to eat rice and there was no alternative in the village diet. I provided her with proper food from my medical supplies, taught her how to use it and took steps to see that she continued to take it. She is now well on the way to recovery. Naturally one limits spiritual comfort to Unitarians who ask for it, but clearly I cannot do the same with medical supplies when I know that non-Unitarians are in need of them and that there is no other person or agency within sixteen miles walk to provide them. More recently, the mother of one of the girls who is attending school at the Kharang Rural Centre suffered a miscarriage late one night. Knowing that there was a qualified midwife in residence here, the husband came for help when his wife appeared to be in danger. The midwife went and stayed throughout the night and successfully cared for the patient who would have had to send to Shillong for expert help



had we not been able to establish a small medical service at Kharang only a few months ago with funds from the Canadian Unitarian Service Committee. Had this Unitarian mother died (and people are dying almost daily in Khasi villages for lack of skilled attention) more than her own life would have been lost. Her daughter would have had to give up her education and go home to look after a young family and therefore a later period of Kharang life would have been deprived of the knowledge she will have if she finishes her schooling, and the Kharang Unitarians, with only a handful of literate members, would have been deprived of the educated leadership she will exercise among her own and the younger generation in the church.

I hope it is clear from these examples that 'church work', in any normal sense of the term, would be a highly inadequate field of work for me among these village Unitarians. What can I preach or teach to a congregation or Sunday School class in which a majority are illiterate, and what spiritual comfort can I give to the many who need medical attention if I do not try to make the illiterate literate and the sick healthy? I am certain that no Western Unitarian could live in this environment and not engage in practical social work. Putting it another way, the full range of my activities here *is* the appropriate 'church work' for the environment of the local churches. But, by its very nature, the bulk of it must also have an application beyond the limits of any particular church, because it would be wrong to discriminate between Unitarians and non-Unitarians in matters such as education and medical help. As a matter of fact non-discrimination itself has a positive value in these hills where Christian missions have for so long discriminated in their schools and even in their hospitals.

One advantage of the fact that the needs of the Khasis are many and varied is that I have always been able to find a task in which I could achieve something positive, and this in turn, it must be confessed, has helped to conceal a series of failures (or one comprehensive one) with the Khasi Unitarians as a whole. Despite many years' association with the best educated of them I have not been able to achieve four things which seem to me to be fundamental. Firstly, I have not been able to arouse their interest in Unitarianism beyond the Khasi Hills. Secondly, I have not been able to fire them with enthusiasm to raise the standard of church life in both town and village. Thirdly, I have failed to get them to look beyond their churches to their communities and actively engage in social work of some kind; had it not been so it would not have been necessary for me myself to engage so closely in meeting particular needs in the village areas. Finally, I have not succeeded in introducing into their religious thought and practice the principle of free inquiry (which their founder seems to have understood himself but to have failed to hand on to his flock) or the quality of 'religion as a way of life' so much needed in the Khasi Hills.

In so many years some mistakes are inevitable and perhaps my greatest one has been in overestimating the capacities of the Khasis themselves. I have had to change my plans more than once and in each case it has been in some sense a retreat from a too optimistic view of the Khasi Unitarians in particular and the Khasis in general, a slowing down to a rate of progress more suited to their stage of development as a race than to my own vision of a problem and its solution. I know now that the work to be done here—whether among the Unitarian churches or the people generally (and any distinction between the two is ultimately artificial)—cannot be completed in one generation no matter how many people set their hands to the task, because the handicap is in the people themselves, in the fact of their cultural infancy as a race. Perhaps this fact explains why, when I have sought the approval of the local Unitarians for some new plan and their co-operation in it, there has been only silence and immovability. Then it has been a case of going forward alone in the hope that eventually some Khasis would follow when deeds had spoken to them more clearly than words. Despite many disappointments I continue in this path because I know of no better one and much still remains to be done that can be done.



## Appendix II

The story of how the Khasi, Hajom Kissor Singh, became a Unitarian and founded the Khasi Unitarian Church is one of the romances of religious history and should have an honoured place in the larger story of world-wide liberal religion.

Belonging to the second generation of educated Khasis, Hajom Kissor Singh was born in the military station of Cherrapunji in 1865, some twenty-four years after the influx into the Khasi and Jaintia Hills of no less than 45 missionaries of the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Church. These missionaries had proceeded energetically to convert vast numbers of Khasis from animism to Christian beliefs and cultures, substituting the fear of hell for the Khasi fear of demons. They founded the first Khasi schools at which, in addition to the usual subjects, the children received instruction in the zealously-taught Christian religion. It was to one of these schools that Hajom Kissor Singh and his brother went and progressed with honours up to matriculation grade. Kissor did not reach university but over the years raised his own standard of education and particularly his knowledge of the English language. He had a considerable aptitude for religion and at the age of 15 was converted to the Welsh Calvinist faith. Not for long however! During the next few years his doubts increased and his conviction grew that there was a Christianity more akin to the religion of Jesus than the one in which he had received formal instruction. When he was twenty years old he left the Welsh Calvinist fold, encountering vehement opposition, and was fortunately put in touch by a Khasi Brahmo with the Rev Charles Dall, an American Unitarian missionary who had settled in Calcutta working with the Brahmo Samaj.

Kissor received from Mr Dall some Unitarian literature, including a volume of William Ellery Channing's writings from which came the joyful revelation that he was not alone in his faith, that in other parts of the world were like-minded people who called themselves Unitarians. And so Hajom Kissor Singh became a Unitarian and wrote in his diary at the time, 'In the Khasi Hills at present there is not yet any one, I think, who knows of this religion of the living God.' He resolved to further the cause of Unitarianism in the Khasi Hills and in his Jowai home on 18 September 1887 the first Khasi Unitarian Church service was held: to this day anniversary celebrations are held every year to

celebrate that historic date. From small beginnings—two men and one woman—in 1887 the Khasi Unitarian movement has continued to grow to present numbers of over 20 churches and some 2000 members.

Kissor was a really great man and a really great Unitarian; he was a poet and a writer of hymns. They are beautiful hymns, beautiful not only in thought but in language in which the thought was expressed. Furthermore, I have discovered that the Bible extracts which he included in his service books are not taken word for word from the Khasi Bible (ie the Mission translation) but translated by himself with astonishing results. Psalm 139, for instance, which in the Khasi Bible is in plodding prose, becomes in the Unitarian service book a magnificent piece of Khasi Poetry. And it is not that he achieved this at the expense of a literal interpretation of the thought; verse 9 for example, which in the Khasi Bible runs, 'If I take wings in the morning' (which sounds a little like setting off by daily air service to Madras) recaptures in Kissor's translation the magic of the Authorised version, 'If I take the wings of the morning'. It needed a poet to do that. He took the Beatitudes and the Lord's Prayer and a number of other passages from various parts of the Bible, all illustrative of what he believed to be the central truth of Christianity—and not Christianity only, but of all true religion, for he found it outside as well as inside the Christian tradition. And the foundation stone of the whole edifice was the great two-fold commandment: 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God and thy neighbour as thyself'. This message of the twofold nature of religion runs like a golden thread through hymn and service book which he prepared for his followers, and through everything that he taught them: love for God the universal Parent, and love for our fellow men; spiritual experience on the one hand; and the outcome of that experience in a life of active goodness on the other. On this strong foundation he built his church.

My early impression of the integrity of Hajom Kissor Singh has deepened with the years, confirmed many years later by a revealing incident at the Kharang School. It occurred at the time when I had in residence some twenty to twenty-five teenagers from different churches. The largest group was from the Welsh Calvinist Mission; two or three were from an American Mission called The Church of God; there were three or four Unitarians and some non-Christians.

On Sunday evenings we held a little service, conducted in rotation by the different groups using their own hymn-books and their own ideas. At our short daily prayer sessions, morning and evening, we followed Gandhi's way of using prayers, readings and hymns culled from the religions of the world. The little book of readings and prayers translated to Khasi, that I published during my early days in Shillong, is still in 1973 used by the children who live with me and by some Unitarian leaders in the churches. The children in the school, therefore, at the time of the incident about to be recorded, knew that my own wish was that

our periods of common worship should be regarded by no one as opportunities for proselytisation but should concentrate on the things that unite rather than those which divide.

All went well for several months and we had some excellent and thoughtful addresses from some of the older boys and girls. Then one evening when it was the turn of the Welsh Mission group, though the address was good, they had chosen as the closing hymn some horrible thing about washing in blood with a rousing chorus, 'The precious Blood, the Blood, the Blood'. I looked round the circle of faces and was interested to note that only the Christians were singing lustily. The non-Christians don't use hymns and rarely joined in any and the Unitarians to a man were as silent as I, though they knew the tune well and were looking on at the books of their Christian neighbours.

At the end of the service, while thanking those who had contributed, I took the opportunity of mentioning the offending hymn and pointing out that those words were such as no Unitarian could sing with conviction.

'There are lots of beautiful hymns in your book,' I said, 'Please try to choose for these services ones that we can all sing together without breaking the unity of spirit in which our services are held.'

Nobody said anything but three weeks later, when their turn came round again, we were treated to one of the best services we ever had. The address was on a reading from Buddha and the hymns were carefully chosen, the last one being 'Nearer, my God, to Thee'. At the end I spoke appreciatively and said that I had been specially delighted by the choice of hymns, adding, 'You probably do not know that the words of that last hymn were written by an American woman called Sarah Flower Adams who was a Unitarian'. A frozen silence greeted this remark, so I opened my book and showed them where in the index was the name of Sarah Flower Adams as the author. As this was greeted by an even chillier silence I asked to be shown a Welsh Mission book. I looked up the hymn in the index and found under Author the name of some Welshman—Edward Edwards, David Davies or some such. In amazement I turned to 'Rock of Ages', 'Lead kindly light' and other shining lights of Christian hymnology. They were all by Edward Edwards, David Davies or other Welsh names; there was no mention of Newman, Luther, Watts of even the Wesleys! Then I realised that the names given as 'authors' were the Welsh missionaries who had translated the hymns into Khasi.

When I read Pearl Buck's Autobiography several years later I found that this sort of plagiarism is common in China, where many of her novels and stories have been published in Chinese under Chinese names without a by-your-leave or any reference to the original author. So perhaps it is an Asiatic trait, which only makes more remarkable the difference in the behaviour of Hajom Kissor Singh who, in preparing a

Khasi Hymn Book for the use of his infant Unitarian movement, went to endless trouble, aided by Dr JT Sunderland, to hunt out the author of every hymn he translated, entering as his own only those which were indeed his own original compositions. There are many of these, as he was no mean poet and he probably found it easier to express his thoughts in his own poetry than to produce good translations of the poetry of others.

One hesitates to accuse those early Welsh missionaries of deliberate deception, though it is difficult to believe that representatives of so musical a people should really not have known the great names of Christian hymnology. Perhaps in Asia they thought no harm in adopting an Asiatic trait—if it is one. But to me the interesting thing about the incident is the light that it throws on the character of that remarkable man into whose labours I entered nearly forty years ago and in whose steps I still falteringly follow. Honesty, integrity and truthfulness in all things great and small; these were the keynotes to the character of Hajom Kissor Singh.

Another interesting aspect is one I stumbled upon by chance. I was taken one day to see his books; my eyes ran eagerly over the shelves: Martineau's *Seat of Authority*, Freeman Clarke's *Ten Great Religions*, Ramohun Roy's English Works, *The Sayings of Lao-tse*, a book about the stars, and so on. And then suddenly, one that riveted my attention, the *Boy's Own Conjuring Book*. There flashed into my mind a Chinese saying, 'The truly great man is one who does not lose his child-heart.'

Surely a man who, to the end of his days, keeps the *Boy's Own Conjuring Book* cheek by jowl with Martineau and Plato, is one who has never lost his truest greatness—the child-heart of the Chinese saying, which Jesus also praised.

## MARGARET BARR

One of the best-loved and most respected persons in the Unitarian churches was Margaret Barr, who died in 1973, leaving behind this book. She devoted almost all her working life to the Khasi people, in a remote part of Assam, with whom she worked on many different religious and educational projects. A friend of Gandhi, and of leading figures in India, she was widely admired for her whole-hearted devotion to the primitive people for whom she worked.

This book tells in graphic detail of that work, and in places is outspoken about the difficulties she faced and how she overcame them.

The book will become a classic of the relationship between a loved pastor and her primitive flock.

80p