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## TAIL PIECE

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### Memories of Foyles A Personal Account of Working in Azerbaijan

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Last year, I worked in Azerbaijan for six months for the Leonard Cheshire Centre of Conflict Recovery (LCC) as a logistician, co-ordinating the medical Fast Track Programme. My job involved visiting the refugee camps, and arranging for pre-selected patients to travel to the hospitals in Baku. I visited the hospitals frequently, to discuss the care and treatment of patients, to pay for the required medicines, to see the patients themselves, and deal with any unexpected problems or situations. The job also necessitated liaising with other organisations as well as government officials. It's worth mentioning that I have no medical experience, and so even the environment of the hospitals and the language of medicine were disorientating at first.

I immediately realised that one of the most important qualities required to work, and live, in Azerbaijan, was patience. The slightest matters take a long time to achieve, whether it's paying the phone bill, or establishing the exact diagnosis of a patient. Any schedule for a day's work in Azerbaijan has to be flexible. Sometimes this can be potentially awkward, as when LCC had arranged for a plastic surgeon, Professor Roberts, to visit Baku for a few days to help perform a number of long-standing operations. For once, the patients all appeared at the hospital at the appointed time, and Professor Roberts, the interpreters, and I, arrived at 10 am, as arranged with the Azeri plastic surgeon, Professor Kafarov. Professor Kafarov greeted us all very cordially, provided us with tea and cake, clearly delighted to receive such a guest from England with whom he could communicate on a professional level.

We drank tea while Professors Kafarov and Roberts discussed medical matters via interpreters. It was clear, throughout my stay in Azerbaijan, that the doctors thirsted for contact with colleagues from other countries, having become isolated from their own centres of education, often in Moscow - they didn't even have access to modern medical journals and textbooks.

After about an hour, the patients were still having obligatory tests and completing the paperwork necessary before the operations could take place. After more tea-drinking, I left to visit the other hospitals, and learnt

later that Professor Roberts had performed his first operation at 2 o'clock.

Professor Roberts was very understanding of the situation, but I still wondered afterwards why Professor Kafarov hadn't forewarned us of these tests or the inevitable delay. Often, though, such questions are futile in the circumstances. Maybe he assumed we'd turn up later, maybe he forgot about the tests, maybe a four hour delay didn't seem significant to him, or he just wanted time to meet Professor Roberts. And, on reflection, the delay wasn't that significant. All the work was done, the operations performed successfully, and Professors Roberts and Kafarov both learnt about the surgical techniques used in each other's countries.

It's not always that easy to be patient, though, especially when you're aware of all the other jobs you intended to accomplish in the course of the day. When attempting to find one particular doctor, to discuss a patient's treatment, we'd often be waiting for an indeterminable time. Sometimes the doctor would appear, greet us, and disappear again, promising to return shortly; or we'd be talking to him, and one of his numerous phones would ring, or another doctor would come in and disturb him for a while - interruptions which might result in his hurrying out of the room. And of course, by the time I discovered from the interpreter what his parting words had been, he'd gone - this was particularly frustrating if he'd assumed that the matter being discussed was now resolved, whereas I was left with questions still to ask.

Visiting this particular hospital reminded me of stories about World War One - they'd be long periods of inaction followed by a quick burst of action - suddenly the doctor would appear, and make it clear that he only had a moment to spare; so, having waited, I'd fire through my questions as efficiently as possible, trying to extract as much information as I could before the meeting was brought to a perfunctory end. While waiting for the doctor, I often wished I knew some meditation exercises so that I could lapse into a trance until he appeared. Sometimes the interpreter and I just got frustrated and left, only to meet the doctor gesticulating to us in the corridor. Displays of impatience or mild annoyance on our part would occasionally encourage him to

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focus on the matter in hand. But generally the trance method was preferable, and more productive. And it was necessary to remember that this particular doctor was always co-operative when treating LCC patients.

I found it hard to tell in Azerbaijan whether I was dealing with a situation well or not. During my stay, I spent a particularly frustrating week trying to collect the documents necessary for the import of some incubators, donated by LCC to hospitals in Baku. In the end, I was referred to the ominously named Department of Statistics in order to get a registration form stamped. When we got there, the official equivocated, and seemed to be suggesting that we hadn't got all the right documents, or that there would be a delay in stamping the form, which we needed to present to the customs office as soon as possible. I became angry, and told the official (through my interpreter as usual) that we'd waited long enough. After more heated discussion, he stamped the form, and I remember thinking that perhaps my annoyance had been effective. Later, though, my interpreter expressed her surprise that I'd been so short-tempered, saying that the official had stamped the form as a favour - so perhaps my attitude had almost jeopardised the situation, or been ineffectual at best. The official certainly gave no sign of being either disconcerted or perplexed by my behaviour - maybe it seemed natural to him, maybe he respected me more, maybe less, or maybe he was indifferent to my response and would have stamped the form anyway. In Azerbaijan, it's often difficult to unravel the meanings and motives behind various actions - and you're just left with the vague sense that you have so much more to learn about the culture.

On reflection, I think patience was more effective in Azerbaijan, as long as patience isn't confused with passivity. It was often necessary to combine patience with quiet assertiveness in order to get anything done - if you tried waiting at the back of a queue in an Azeri post office, you'd be there all day. On the other hand, becoming angry seemed more a sign of weakness that might have been exploited - but I'm sure these are lessons which the army emphasises as well.

My second main subject, and one which arises from the situations which I've already described, is the difficulty of working in a foreign language. It sounds self-evident, but working in Azerbaijan might have been easier if I'd not only been conversant with the language of medicine, but also if I'd been able to speak Russian or Azeri fluently. I did learn a little Russian while I was there, but never enough to work without interpreters.

Working in the refugee camps or hospitals

was never like the interviews you see on television, perhaps at a Nato briefing or similar event, where one individual speaks, the interpreter translates, the other speaks, their interpreter translates, and a balanced and civilized conversation ensues. Instead, in the camps, understandably enough, several individuals would approach me and speak in a language I didn't understand; meanwhile my interpreter would be assailed by several others, while the doctor would be addressing us, and perhaps shouting at the more vocal members of the crowd. It was always essential to try to achieve some degree of calm before proceeding with a surgery - in the camps, we tried to regulate the flow of patients into the doctor's room one by one - often harder than it sounds - otherwise it seemed that no patient would have received a fair audience. But even then the proceedings were often arduous or confused - the patient and his or her relatives would be describing the patient's condition, the doctor and nurse would give their views simultaneously, and the interpreter would join in, so that a whole conversation would pass before I could ascertain what was being said. And because I was responsible for arranging any necessary treatment, I often had to ask numerous questions before the situation became clearer, since the language, medical terms, and culture were all unknown to me. Sometimes, perhaps, I asked too many questions; sometimes not enough. But even though I didn't understand the language, there were times when I realised that, in the midst of the general hubbub, the interpreter seemed to have missed or misconstrued a comment. Usually it transpired that the interpreter hadn't translated something because it was irrelevant; at other times their omission turned out to be important. Or else the interpreters would make their own contributions to the conversation - often justifiably, since they understood the culture more than I did, but occasionally they'd say something to a patient or doctor which was misleading or ill-judged, and which I might only find out about later.

The interpreters' job was certainly difficult. I admired both interpreters for being able to speak English, Azeri and Russian, for coping with stressful situations, and tolerating my own occasional frustration. Sometimes they'd be drawn into a conversation and I'd have to prompt them to translate, but a more common problem was that someone we met would give vent to a torrential monologue, which we'd have to interrupt in order to give the interpreter a chance to interpret. Also, in a country like Azerbaijan, interpreters don't just interpret words - they interpret situations and gestures; give advice on appropriate behaviour; and information on the historical and cultural background of their country. If

they sometimes amended what I said in the act of translation, this was generally because their version made more sense, or was more acceptable, in their culture. For these reasons, being able to speak a foreign language doesn't necessarily make working in that country more straightforward. I felt that the interpreters made situations that were culturally confusing, not just linguistically confusing, much clearer. Also I think that a team comprising an English representative and Azeri interpreters, one of whom was a refugee herself, was more in keeping with the ethos of co-operation promoted by LCC, and I'm sure made our work in the refugee camps especially much easier.

In Azerbaijan, I soon came face to face with the seemingly limitless convolutions of the bureaucratic systems, which don't seem to have eased much since the time of communist rule. Although at times the bureaucratic requirements amused and baffled me, I soon realised that there was little point in arguing about these with officials - this proved to be entirely ineffectual. My most wearing experience of bureaucracy was the week spent gathering documents for the customs office when the incubators were imported. In scenes that wouldn't have been incongruous in a Kafka novel, we'd drive to the customs office at the airport, present the requested documents, be told, politely, that one more document was required, drive to another governmental department, discover that the necessary document could only be obtained on delivery of several other documents, which then had to be gathered before re-entering this bureaucratic labyrinth.

There were times when it seemed officials behaved in a deliberately awkward way, spinning out their demands, with the hope that I, or any representative of a foreign organisation, would become so frustrated that a quick bribe might seem a more viable option - but this is a simplistic, and largely inaccurate assumption, based more on hearsay than actual experience. For a start, it's possible to become a little over-suspicious, or just tired, when dealing with officials in a foreign culture, so that you imagine any official stonewalling is aimed personally at you, whereas the same treatment is meted out to everyone, and in certain instances, being a foreigner guarantees better treatment, not worse. And secondly, I grew to realise that life in Azerbaijan is far from straightforward for Azeris themselves - the fall of communist rule threw up a host of opportunities which coexist uneasily with former communist systems, so that a fervid form of capitalism operates alongside restrictive and paradoxical government regulations. I don't pretend to appreciate the mechanisms of the Azerbaijan political system, but I

realised that it's harder for an Azeri to manage a restaurant successfully, because of the endless requirements, than it is for a foreign organisation to operate an aid programme.

Oddly, though, the strictures of bureaucracy in Azerbaijan are sometimes juxtaposed with a surprising official laxity. I had my first experience of this contradiction as soon as I arrived in Azerbaijan. After leaving the plane, the passengers all queued in the arrivals area while passport officials scrutinised every passport for several minutes as if trying to break a particularly challenging code. We then moved into the customs area where armed security guards clustered around X-ray machines. What was striking wasn't this security, which you'd expect at a country's main international airport, but that this rigorous security was undermined by the apparent freedom with which waiting relatives, as well as eager taxi drivers, wandered through the customs area to meet the arriving passengers, without being subjected to any security checks at all.

A similar contradiction characterised the episode of the incubators. The incubators had been removed from the airport and installed in the hospitals on the very day that they arrived in Azerbaijan, while I'd been away. It was only after several months that the customs office made clear their demands for various documents which none of us had known about before. So my attempts to appease the customs officials later seemed all the more absurd compared to the ease with which they'd let the incubators through in the first place. Perhaps this apparent confusion arose from the willingness of the officials to co-operate; perhaps from an oversight - like so much in Azerbaijan, I still feel I don't understand the whole story - but that's what made living there so interesting.

When dealing with Azeri officials I noticed that they didn't like to admit to any concession, or to recognise a problem or miscommunication on their part, or to be seen to change their mind. This could be a sign of a culture which equates any form of hesitation with weakness (although these characteristics are no doubt shared partly by officials in any country); or perhaps the officials themselves were being observed critically by their superiors; or the habitual respect for authority instilled by communism hadn't yet transpired. These are only conjectures, and themselves subject to my own cultural standpoint. I can only conclude that, although I found myself constantly tempted to make premature judgements, and formulate conclusions - and it's fair to say that it would almost be impossible to work in Azerbaijan without basing your decisions on some form of assumption, however illusory or temporary - it's important to keep these assumptions

as fluid as possible, always prone to renegotiation or revision.

To end, it would be fair to add a couple of qualifying remarks. The first is that a restrictive and outdated bureaucracy is by no means unique to post-communist cultures, as anyone who's ever tried to buy a book in Foyles Bookshop will know.

Secondly, although I've focussed on the frustrations and complications of working in Azerbaijan, I could equally have spoken about the fascination of experiencing a different culture - but that's something which I hope you've either already discovered, or will do so in the future, for yourselves.