

# ALL OUR YESTERDAYS - ALL OUR TOMORROWS

EAY SECRETARY GENERAL REPORT 2001 to the EAY GENERAL ASSEMBLY, MAY 2001

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## Siberia

The fast train is thundering over the Siberian Taiga. It is Tuesday night the second of January 2001. We flew in to Jekaterinburg and caught the Trans Siberian - a long, powerful train with the proud name RUSSIA painted on the side of the big, black locomotive. It was running all the way from Moscow to Vladivostok. It took us 22 hours of Russian Taiga to reach Novosibirsk.

The temperature was 25 degrees below zero. The frozen Taiga was visible in the cold light from a full moon. The train was a small, thin, black string of life in the wide, enormous landscape, above us, far, far away, millions of stars. It was the second night of the new millennium. We felt small.

Out there in the Siberian night were the remnants of the Gulag, the concentration camps where millions of people had perished. It was a train ride through dark memories of pain and tragedy.

Edward Shornik, the YMCA secretary, took us, Michal Szymanczak, Misha Guskov and myself to the YMCA-camp outside the city. There were 120 young people and the temperature was now 38 degrees minus. Their warm welcome somehow brought the distant stars a little bit closer. We stayed with the kids for a few days. We reached Orthodox Christmas Eve. The temperature crept down to 45 degrees minus.

I talked with the kids. Dima, 18 years old, told me how it had been to grow up in these changing circumstances. Atheistic Kindergarten, then the big change, the fascination about all western, travels, experiences. Then to realize that the western world had serious shortcomings, hypocrisy, double standards, it was far from paradise. Then back to the own confusion in Russia. "People have no ideas!" Said Dima. He tells me the story about the big, colourful windsock and the modest compass. The windsock is dancing in the wind, one time here, the next time there, and he mocks the compass, always staying the same way, to the north. And the compass is whispering to himself: "At least I know where I am going!"

Dima tells me that he will stay here, that he will work to help his country find its course.

It is Christmas Eve. During the afternoon it was 48 degrees minus. Inside the children sit in small groups in darkness, a candle is being handed from one to the other. Young voices sharing an important moment of the day or a thought. Some of them are translated for me. They say: "I feel good here!" "I have found a friend." Then one girl says: "I believe in God."

Afterwards the parents talk to me. "We have been brought up as atheists. We were proud of it. Now our children talk to us about God."

I go for a walk alone - it has dropped to 52 below. But the stars are no longer distant, they are close as friends - I saw the Star of Bethlehem in the eyes of a child in Siberia.

In the coldest night of my life I saw the Christmas star - and it did me good.

## **Albania**

The Airbus 200 aircraft is creeping around the Albanian mountains and descending towards the bottom of the valley in front of Tirana. The first thing I observe from the air is a lot of brown mushrooms. Coming closer I see that they are no mushrooms, but military bunkers, concrete, solid and with small openings for machineguns. They are spread out everywhere, 300 000 of them, and they dominate the landscape, gives you a surreal feeling of being in the middle of a war-zone.

One of our friends refers to "Our Dictator" all the time. Our Dictator worked with the Russians, and we fell in love with the young soldiers. We sung Russian folk songs. Then Our Dictator changed his politics, and we had Chinese soldiers coming and we sung Chinese folk songs, which we did not understand. The whole world was our enemy and we built bunkers to protect us against everybody. If a religious symbol was found in our house, it was reason to spend years in prison or camps.

Albania - the most isolated of all dictatorships in Europe. The lighthouse of Marxist-Leninist Maoism in Europe. What did we know about Albania in all those years? Nothing, or less than nothing.

I remember vaguely the newspapers writing about the anarchy in Albania in 1996/97.

Guns everywhere, people being murdered in thousands.

Now Michal and I were driving in a car up into the mountains to the city of Korce. I saw the realities behind the newspaper-articles. Every second km we passed a gravestone with pictures of young and old people having died along the mountain road. All dated 1996 or 1997. Those days, in the EAY we were discussing the EAY Role and Strategy 1997-2002. We were shown a mountain pass where two of his young scout leaders had been shot; they were passengers in a passing bus.

I turned my face away from the gravestone and looked straight into a brown, ugly bunker. Even here in the beautiful mountains the ugly footsteps of Our Dictator.

We were driving fast, it was important to reach our goal in daylight. The big customs officer was hired for our security. He was a good driver, but the roads were narrow and the mountains steep, very steep...

In Korce we met some young teachers. They were interested in building a YMCA. They wanted to build the new YMCA around a fellowship of single parents, which already existed in their city. What a modern approach, I thought. Then I realised that the single parents were single because their wives or husbands had been killed in recent years.

## **Balkan Conference**

In February this year we organised the Balkan Conference for Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Albania, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, in Skopje. The days before the

conference I had made plans to visit Tetovo, but for urgent reasons had to go to Prague to our office. A few weeks after the battles started in the mountains around Tetovo.

The battles of today reflect the history of yesterday and the history of hundreds of years back.

Ljuban Tevdovski, a young YMCA leader from Skopje, a student of history of art, wrote to us shortly after the conference:

“For more than ten years of the building of the new reality of the Balkans all of the nations from the former Yugoslavia showed their frustrations and the primitively thought face of the nationalism. The Serbs with Miloshevic made a dream for Serbia as a regional power, Serbs and Croats made plans for dividing Bosnia, in Croatia exodus of Serbs was made, in Bosnia (Republic of Serpska) exodus and ethnic killings of Croats and Muslims were made, in Kosovo exodus of Albanians and then exodus of Serbs were made.”

Ljuban writes more:

“Dear friends, I would like to share with you another very important issue. From the perspective of the present situation my concerns were not just about our and your safety, but also about an issue, which will effect us and our work in Macedonia and in the region in future. I already had opportunity to speak with some of you and to tell you that in these ten years young people in Macedonia were the main protagonists and that they were working very hard to establish a society of tolerance, equality and understanding and that they very strongly believed in these goals. That was the only guarantee for peace and it prevented the huger conflicts in the whole region. Today’s situation, dear friends, is threatening us to ruin the hopes of the young people, their faith in a better future and their enthusiasm to work for it.”

The Balkan Conference was a very, very encouraging event, among other things that happened, the State President received Michal, Stefano Tomarelli and Sonja Novotni. The Balkan YMCA-leaders will meet again in the early autumn for a second event, this time a training course for young leaders.

The importance of this co-ordination in the middle of a turbulent area of Europe cannot be overestimated. We need to do these things, and we need to do more.

I will give Ljuban a last sentence before we go to Armenia:

“...we also mentioned that one of the main reasons of establishing YMCA in Macedonia is to approach the conflict region of Kosovo. I very seriously think that starting from today we should work together on prevention from the spreading of the conflicts and get involved in the process of stabilization of the region.”

While I am writing this speech, the situation is becoming more and more critical.

## Armenia

I sincerely hope that I am not offending my very close friend Ashot Kocharian when I refer to my first travel to Armenia inside an old Tupolev 134. When I left the aircraft I understood for the first time why the Pope always kneels down and kisses the ground after flying.

The Executive Committee had a wonderful week in Armenia in March this year. We participated in the celebration of the 1700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Church of Armenia being declared as a State Church. The leader of the church, the Katholikus in St. Echmyazin, received us.

There I had the honour to present the following statement:

*"The European Alliance of YMCAs recognises and condemns the genocide committed against the Armenian people at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.*

*In the course of its work with the Armenian YMCA, the European Alliance of YMCAs has developed a greater understanding of the trauma experienced by the Armenian people as a result of the continued indifference of much of the world to this genocide.*

*As a Christian youth movement, the European Alliance of YMCAs believes that failure to acknowledge the injustices of the past contributes to their repetition in the future.*

*With this conviction, the European Alliance of YMCAs appeals to YMCAs all over the world to similarly recognise and condemn the genocide committed against the Armenian people."*

It is impossible to understand anything in Armenia if you do not go back to 1915 and the following years when half the population was killed. France recognised the Genocide a few months ago. A handful of other countries have done so earlier, but most of the world has never recognised it. Hitler used it as an argument for Holocaust when he said in 1939: "Who today remembers the extermination of the Armenians?"

Next day we were taken to a beautiful church outside Yerevan, in the mountains. I had been there before, so I was standing outside, looking over the Ararat-mountains, where Noah had landed thousands of years ago and where life had started all over again after the big flood...

Then I was hearing beautiful music from the church, distant voices. But the church was empty? Nobody was there. I went into the dark, old church and saw white dressed angels dancing and singing. It was the beautiful surprise prepared by Yerevan Ten Sing. There were tears in my eyes when I saw the young generation lifting up a copy of Noah's arch and placing it in front of us. Hope for the future - life will start all over again. All our tomorrows...

### **Where is your God?**

I can still hear her voice: "Where is your God, Johan Vilhelm, where is your God in this pain and tragedy?"

It was not just anybody asking this question in the narrow streets of Yerevan, April two years ago. And it was at that time I decided to invite her to our Assembly. I wanted you to meet my very good friend, Alina Margolis-Edelman.

Her question brought me back to Umschlagplatz in Warsaw, the place in the Jewish ghetto where the Jews were forced into the train wagons bringing them to Treblinka.

Alina was there, as a young girl. She saw it, she lived it. There was uproar in the ghetto. Alina is married to one of the key leaders of the Jewish revolt, probably the most famous

hero of war living in Poland, the person who was quoted by President Clinton before the NATO intervention in Kosovo. Her mother smuggled her out of the ghetto. Therefore she is alive today.

Ala, among friends, does not allow me to talk much about her. She does not like it. She does not like to be an icon from a museum.

She got to know Michal when she came back to Poland to start a foundation for children in need, called "Nobody's Children". She came together with a friend of her, the wife of former President Mitterand of France. Why did she come from France?

Because in the mid 60s there was again an anti-Semitic campaign in communist Poland, and she came as a refugee to Paris with her children. Since then she has lived in Paris.

Coming out of the Nazi Holocaust, becoming a refugee from the Communist anti Semitic propaganda, did Ala end up in hatred and bitterness and revenge?

First of all, when we are with Ala, we laugh a lot, she has a wonderful sense of humour. She is interested in all kinds of modern technology, movies and books.

Her life has been spent with "Medecins du Monde" in Salvador, in Chad, in Russia, with the Vietnamese boat refugees, a few weeks ago she was in Moldova, one of the poorest countries in Europe and she almost demand that we start a YMCA there, because they need it. Rwanda, Kosovo and Chechnya have been on her agenda and she has organised computers for local YMCAs in Armenia. In fact she was one of the founders of "Medecins du Monde".

Her life is full of tomorrows.

I am sorry, Ala, because I say more than I am allowed to. But I wanted all of you to meet Ala exactly at this assembly when we are to discuss our plans for the future.

She is a European personality. At the same time a citizen of the world. She has lived through Nazi rule and Communist dictatorship; she has experienced the darkest yesterdays of European history. And still her life is full of tomorrows.

She is famous. She knows movie stars and writers, politicians and Nobel Price winners. Still she helps us with Training the Trainers, she goes to YMCA conferences in Armenia, she was in Skopje for the Balkan YMCA conference, and she comes here. She likes the YMCA. She thinks we could be much more radical, much more engaged in fighting against all kinds of injustice and violence. But she likes us and works together with us.

I am convinced that we as a movement can learn from an individual's life. That is why I want you to meet Ala tomorrow, when she will speak to us.

### **The dog will bark again!**

I have touched the Soviet Gulag, the concentration camps in Siberia. I have touched Holocaust, the nazi concentration camps. I have touched the Balkan nightmares, the Genocide in Armenia and the 300 000 military bunkers as an ugly symbol of the Albanian dictatorship. All part of our European yesterdays. We wanted to visit those yesterdays before we start talking about tomorrow.

Having met all those people, visited all those places and read all those testimonies, I see the disintegration of Europe, in the past. And I see how much of this disintegration still remains. And I see some of the reasons for the disintegration.

All the violence and darkness of our European yesterdays make me feel small and insignificant. I hear only grey and black music. Then I turn around and see the young girl in the ghetto of Warsaw, threatened by the biggest killing-machine in the history of mankind. She survived and even if she is still physically a small person, she has grown into one of the biggest personalities I know fighting rather successfully against violence and injustice. I hear the Blue Music of tomorrow, and it makes me feel strong, full of courage.

Preparing for this speech, I read Time magazine for April 2, and in their perspective of the new Europe, history is only like a distant background:

*Europeans in their 20s retain only hazy memories of the ideological struggle that divided Europe for 50 years. As a result, many young adults in the E.U. tend to be enthusiastic about extending membership to Eastern and Central European countries. Says Sara Priem, 24, president of the Young European Movement, a British pro-Europe grassroots group: "It's one of those issues that's easy to be strong on because everyone agrees with it. The Berlin Wall came down when we were 10 or 11, so for us those in the east are part of Europe. There's no divide in our heads."*

No one has benefited more from the steady erosion of that divide than those who lived on the other side. "Growing up in Hungary, you tended to think of Westerners as better than you were, but that feeling of inferiority has been overcome," says Balint Nemeth, 24, a Budapest native and student at the London School of Economics. "You don't feel you have to prove anything anymore."

What a beautiful picture of the new Europe! And my question to Time Magazine is:

How close can you come to a lie without actually lying?

The famous journalist John Berger, in his book "Pig Earth" from 1979 gives us a different perspective on history:

"In the mountains the past is never behind, it is always besides you. You come down from the forest at dusk and a dog barks somewhere near. A century ago, in the same place, on the same time of day, a dog barked when it heard a man coming down from the forest, and the time between the two incidents is nothing but an interval in the barking." (John Berger, "Pig Earth" 1979.)

History is always besides us! The dog will bark again.

*As a Christian youth movement, the European Alliance of YMCAs believes that failure to acknowledge the injustices of the past contributes to their repetition in the future.*

The dog will bark again!

**"... but He is still in Bethlehem."**

A friend of mine, Martin Meissner, once told me: "When I work with conflict, I never go for harmony. I go for the reasons behind!"

We have put up INTEGRATION as the key word for our new strategy. It is not harmony for the sake of harmony. Therefore we want to learn from all our yesterdays. The light of tomorrow is coming out of the darkness of the night, of all our yesterdays.

Øyvinn Sønnesyn always cites:

"Nothing worth having comes without some kind of fight; Got to kick darkness until it bleeds daylight..."

I am convinced that the stronger and deeper the knowledge of yesterday is - the stronger and deeper is the energy for tomorrow.

Alina is for me the prime example. She is Polish, Jewish, French, a citizen of the world. A survivor from Holocaust, a refugee from Communism her life has come out of the darkest yesterdays of our modern European history. Her energy for tomorrow is enormous and has shaped her life and brought her to almost all the disaster areas of the world.

The darkness of yesterday did not create hatred or bitterness, but love and care for the outcast, for the suffering of this world, in one word - true INTEGRATION.

Inspired by this example we set out to serve this process of integration tomorrow.

This will be the Role and Strategy for the EAY for the next years. The proposal is in your hands, it has been through a thorough process of debate in the National Movements, and we have received a strong and positive feed back for the main direction. It will be discussed and finalised here, after three years of work.

This strategy will be important, because we can hear the dog barking again. I can hear it from all corners of Europe: Xenophobia, racism, neo-Nazism, nationalism, ethnic cleansing, genocide, and violence.

But I also hear the Blue Music of tomorrow. When we assist Dima in finding the compass-course deep inside Siberia, when we try to include the isolated Albania in our bigger fellowship, when we bring together the young people of the Balkan countries to assist Ljuban and Sonja in their efforts to bring peace to their generation.

I hear the Blue Music when I see the Irish YMCA and their work for reconciliation in their country.

I hear the Blue Music when we build the Training Centre in this city to serve all our tomorrows, when we organise the Joint European Leadership Training Seminar every autumn, when we further develop the Training the Trainers scheme, the concept of Catch the Vision workshop, and use East and West, South and North to prepare for the big EAY Event in 2003 as a manifestation of the new integration in Europe.

But we are not the European Union, we are not the Schengen Treaty, we do not close the borders and we do not build Fortress Europe.

We are first and last followers of Jesus Christ, who was born in Bethlehem.

I have never been to Bethlehem.

I saw the star of Bethlehem in the eyes of a child in Siberia. A few weeks ago I saw the star of Bethlehem again, on the Slave Island Goree outside the coast of West Africa. When I was contemplating another dark yesterday of Christian Europe, the Slave Trade from Africa, a YMCA colleague from Bethlehem was standing besides me, Rifat Kassis. His stories about pain and suffering in the Middle East, today, brought me back to the cold night in Siberia.

Despite the warm Senegalese sun I felt cold.

Integration in Europe must mean sharing with the rest of the world.

Because all our tomorrows are our tomorrows only in the light of the Star of Bethlehem, in the light of the Son of Man and Son of God who came to serve mankind everywhere.

Standing on the African beach with my friend from Bethlehem at my side, the answer to Alina's question came to us through centuries of pain and suffering. Where is your God? He is in the pain, he is in the suffering, He suffers. He is still in Bethlehem!

But He is also stronger than pain, violence and death, because he is the creator of the Blue Music of tomorrow. In his hands is unconditional love. In our hands as YMCA we have nothing more and nothing less. That makes us invincible.

I am proud that we are walking into all our tomorrows accompanied by Him who lives and still prays: "That they all may be one..."

... but He is still  
in Bethlehem

**Johan Vilhelm Eltvik**  
EAY Secretary General