

## Jacques Huyghebaert - the Triumph of a Humble Man

It feels as though I have known Jacques for a lifetime; so much does this rounded personality impact on people who have the same outlook. To be accurate, though, it was sometime in the year 1992 that my neighbour knocked at my door. My clearest memory of that meeting is of him saying that he had a ceaselessly inquiring mind. Subsequently, I have met many mutual friends who have known him since 1991.

That first meeting was very brief and there was little follow up. Twelve years later, in April 2003, my family circumstances having changed, I sold him my house. He was in the Czech Republic directing negotiations but his wife, Inoka, was in Bandarawela. From first hand experience I can say that Jacques is a tough, but fair, negotiator; however, reflecting on my sixteen years' experience of him, I can assert that it's only when he's dealing with somebody else's money that he's really mean!

The year 2004 was to prove a decisive one for STC Gurutalawa. Jacques fell in love with the school! January saw us both living in Golf Links Road, Bandarawela. He, as a family man, whose main concern was with fitting his young daughters into Sri Lankan society. I was with my mother; my wife and children in Maharagama. My work required me to visit various schools in the Uva Province; I usually found myself offering advice to younger, and better, teachers than I. The tedious part was bus travel to remote schools; the reward was walking the last bit.

Rebecca and Sharon were eleven and ten respectively. Although neither parent had English as their first language, the children's language was perfect British English. The International School in Prague must have had British teachers. By now I knew that the Huyghebaert fortune was quite adequate to send the imps to a school in England. That is what I told Jacques; but no, he wanted to understand the system of education in Sri Lanka. Could I please take him to a typical Sri Lankan school?

When Jacques walks around in Sri Lanka, he can be spotted a mile away: he's white. It wasn't just the regulations that stood in my way; it was also the prevalent xenophobia. But the villages and the estates were different. The first village school was Mathetilla Vidyalaya. There were fewer than a hundred children, eleven teachers. We got there half an hour before the interval; the Principal was most interested in the foreigner, more so when he found out that this wasn't a tourist. The children quizzed him; somehow language differences didn't seem to matter. Yes, his wife was Sri Lankan. When a man and woman like each other they contrive to meet, fall in love, and finally, they get married. Yes, they had two teen-aged daughters etc.

Despite his lack of local languages, this man was so much at home with these villagers! Leaving the school, we saw a large, solidly constructed house. "If I lived in that house, I would send my children to this here school", he said. I was horrified: "Was this yet another cynical foreigner who said things to please us natives? He may find it inconvenient to school them in the U.K. - the obvious place for effective English medium education, if you could afford it; but he would probably buy himself a mansion in Pelawatte (the guy could afford it after all) and send the kids to the Overseas School." Aloud, I only said, "There will be a problem of language."

Visits to the Vidyalayas at Makul Ella, Horadorowwa, Doolgolla, and Ambegoda followed the same pattern. One Maha Vidyalayam, that at Newburgh, was visited four times, and I feel that our visits made a significant contribution to the heroic efforts of the Principal, Mr S. Rajamanikkam, to raise some children, at least, to a position of dignity. One visit was to assist Mr Tom Hunter, World Bank Consultant, who wanted to meet the parents, students, teachers and officials of Newburgh M.V. all together. It was natural for us to later see the

little feeder Vidyalayams at Nahavila and Gowerakele. Great as their needs were, we realised that there was little we could do for them. More could be said about how we all benefited from the experience, but it is time to relate the visit to the school that came fourth in chronological order: S. Thomas' College, Gurutalawa.

On our visit to Makul Ella, Jacques had commented on the vast tracts of grassland and how he would love to have some horses there. After Mathetilla, in whatever corner of my brain it was that was involved, I had placed Jacques "on probation" for clarity of purpose. But now, there seemed to be a pattern to his eccentricities, after all. So, I related to him my schoolboy misadventures with horses at Gurutalawa. I said that it would be difficult for me to devote a whole day to showing him this private school; however, combining it with a large village school near Boralanda, or the Muslim school at Gurutalawa would leave us little time to see what my alma mater was now like. The little village school at Horadorowwa would be ideal. If any reader is puzzled by this seeming duplicity let me explain that in theory any adviser working for the Ministry of Education could assist a recognised private school; in practice they do so only if the school makes a specific request. Also, my work had to be the art of the possible, and I had acquired a reputation for unconventional thought and action. I had known the then Guru Headmaster, Mr Geethal Mendis for forty years. When he joined the staff in 1964, I was still a student; but later I had taught there for ten months in 1967/68; so we had been colleagues.

It was a warm welcome that Geethal gave us; he showed us round the entire school, proudly pointing out the many features unique to Guru. I had already indicated the playground while driving in from Boralanda. Jacques was enthralled. The problems that Geethal spoke of, I could see, were being relegated to the class of the manageable. After almost three hours of walking around Jacques looked Geethal square in the face and said, "Yes, he could make the school viable; would the Headmaster explore with the Board of Governors the possibility of giving Jacques responsibility for certain aspects of its management?" Geethal was keen enough, but I now know that he was beset by many problems, so our message never got through to the Board.

Geethal Mendis went and Gladwin Canagasabai came; it made no difference. The change had to be more radical, or Guru would have to close.

During the next eighteen months Jacques visited the school three times on his own. On Feb. 13<sup>th</sup> 2005, we just failed to communicate with the Board, so went exploring trying to identify the most authentic of the three Katugaha Walauwwas in the area. It was meant to educate Sharon, Jacques' younger daughter, who, at the end of the exercise, stated that if we expected an intelligent kid like her to be interested in anything as zany as that, then we were dumbos.

Many moons later, in October 2006 I heard that unless the rich Seylan banker bought the school, Guru would finally close down. Jacques responded to my e-mail on the 15<sup>th</sup> of October from Edinburgh Airport, saying he would be in Bandarawela on the 18<sup>th</sup>. As soon as he was in his home we got down to work. I now lived in Maharagama and was teaching in an International School in Bambalapitya. But I had an ADSL Internet connection and telephoning after 9.00 p.m. was not too costly.

For the next two weeks the Manager of the school, Mr Christopher Gonawela, Jacques, and I worked furiously at arriving at some understanding of one another's point of view. Christo, always a busy man, was patient, thorough, and more than all else, fair. I once disturbed him at a meeting with the banker who was wanting the school; Christo was trying to let all those who were interested have the facts. No special favours for us, but he realized very quickly that in Jacques the school had found its saviour.

By the 30<sup>th</sup> of October 2006, Jacques had put his proposals into writing. Education would not be such as to encourage migration, although the aim was to produce a broad outlook. He had studied the newspaper advertisements and was convinced that an efficiently run Guru would satisfy a very real need. To bring it back to its "former splendour (was) not an idle dream", but it would need "strict financial discipline". Jacques realized that his task

would be made all the more formidable owing to his being a foreigner. He told the Board that "to be frank with you I must admit that although I was always received (in Gurutalawa) with courtesy, I noticed little interest and in the end no response, my intimate impression being that the people I met must have been thinking that I was in fact looking for a job or something else. Apparently no one believes that my real motivation could simply be a genuine and disinterested desire to help." [1]

On the 31<sup>st</sup> I was able to report to Christo that I was more than happy with the proposals that Jacques had formulated except for two unnecessary paragraphs about my having introduced him to the school. They look incongruous to me even today, but Jacques insisted that they should remain even if it should work against him. That's the extent of his fidelity.

Following more intensive work to make sure that he could fend questions from fifteen Board members, Jacques finally met the Governors of S. Thomas' on the 8<sup>th</sup> of November. He had met the Bishop and Christo before, and he emerged successfully from that meeting although he recognised only the well-known Cabinet Minister who had asked some searchingly intelligent questions. Jacques was given conditional approval for his plans, and then decided he would spend a week with the Warden at Mt Lavinia educating himself for the tasks that lay ahead. A number of key figures were identified; we appealed to them to meet Jacques and advise him. A brief recounting of the background and skills of the persons who met Jacques will show how systematically he educated himself for the labours that lay ahead.

The late **Mr "Koli" Wimalarajah**, Old Boy and former Farm Manager, was the most impatient of all the informants and the material that he placed before us was invaluable in showing us how Augean these stables were. He continued to guide us until his death in November 2007.

Jacques' many visits to Uva schools had enabled him to know what a Sri Lankan school was. However we needed an over-view of the system and Education Department regulations. **Mr R.S. Medagama**, retired Director General of Education is regarded as the finest historian of education in this country. He obliged by meeting Jacques at Bishop's House. A gentle, soft-spoken man, he is equally fluent in Sinhala and English. He has had long spells of work in the provinces, and also a good deal of experience abroad. Mr Medagama continues to advise us. Sound and cautious as he is, he has also shown us where we could apply common sense and work from first principles.

**Mr P. Samaranyake**, who was the finest Teaching-Principal that the Uva Province has ever known, had actually visited the Guru school around 1981. Mr Christopher de Silva was leaving and I hoped that the Board of Governors would accept Mr Samaranyake for Headmaster. But no, they did not want a Buddhist married to an Anglican; a conversion of convenience? I wouldn't have dared even suggest it!

The person who showed Mr Samaranyake around the school in 1981 was **Mr Richard Jayaraja**. Mr Jayaraja had taught at Guru for twenty-six years (no pension for the poor man, though) and his wife in the Muslim M.M.V. for about fifteen. Mr Jayaraja was, therefore, in a unique position to apprise Jacques about Gurutalawa in the seemingly blank years. Mr Jayaraja and Mr Samaranyake were later to visit Gurutalawa in February 2007 as part of an ambitious programme that would have brought Prof. Perera and many other experts in education as well to Guru, but that is another story.

**Prof. Indral K. Perera** was a Trinitian who had spent many years working in British Universities. For six hectic years he was Vice Chancellor of the University of Sabaragamuwa which had a campus at Rahangala, only three miles from Gurutalawa. Then during his sabbatical year he headed the Kandy branch of Colombo International School. He, too, has kept in touch with the present progress of the school.

Jacques had numerous brief meetings with **Mr Lanka Nesiah**, Secretary to the Bishop of Colombo. Mr Nesiah taught here for a year in the early nineteen sixties. I remember he taught me English in Form V.

**Mr Upali Panditharatne**, member of the Board of Governors, and the previous Manager of the school also had a long meeting with Jacques. Upali is from Uva and knows the area well.

Jacques was keen on meeting representatives of the Old Boys. He said he learnt much from **Mr Bandu Wanigasekera**, who has for years has written brilliantly using the pseudonym "Supuman".

The last person with whom he had a formal meeting with was **Prof. Amal Kumarage**, of the University of Moratuwa. Amal has had the distinction of studying in three of the S. Thomas' Colleges, all except Bandarawela; but to make up for that he was my pupil at Bandarawela M.M.V. The man who is now the authority on roads in Sri Lanka used to bicycle from the parental farm in Bogahakumbura to school in Gurutalawa.

How were these busy persons persuaded to meet Jacques? In the case of all except one I had long telephone chats and requested them to help with advice. A call from Bishop's House procured the Church's imprimatur; everyone whose assistance we sought responded positively. For all of them what mattered was that here was an honest man who would probably be able to get a free hand. There seemed to be pervasive disenchantment with the establishment. Everybody who met Jacques was impressed by his ability to listen for long periods, and his humble willingness to learn.

Jacques was sufficiently a realist to know that little would get done until Christmas and New Year were safely past, but there was another cruel twist. The Board of Governors realised that the "total change" that they wanted involved having a new "Chief Executive"; but they did not quite want to bell the cat. What I should like to make quite clear is that Jacques laid down no pre-conditions.

I remember that Jacques, my daughter (an Old Girl incidentally), and I visited the Welimada Zonal and Divisional Offices, Micklefield Farm and College (in that order) on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of December 2006. All of us, and the Headmaster felt tense and uncomfortable.

It was finally on Monday 6<sup>th</sup> February 2007 that Jacques officially took over.

I only realised one year later that when he first smiled at the assembled one hundred and fifty six students, he had just celebrated his sixty second birthday !

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[1] : Huyghebaert, Jacques: Proposal submitted to the Board of governors of S. Thomas' on 8-11-2006