

Ashes & Light

Auschwitz to Hiroshima

Interfaith Pilgrimage for Peace and Life

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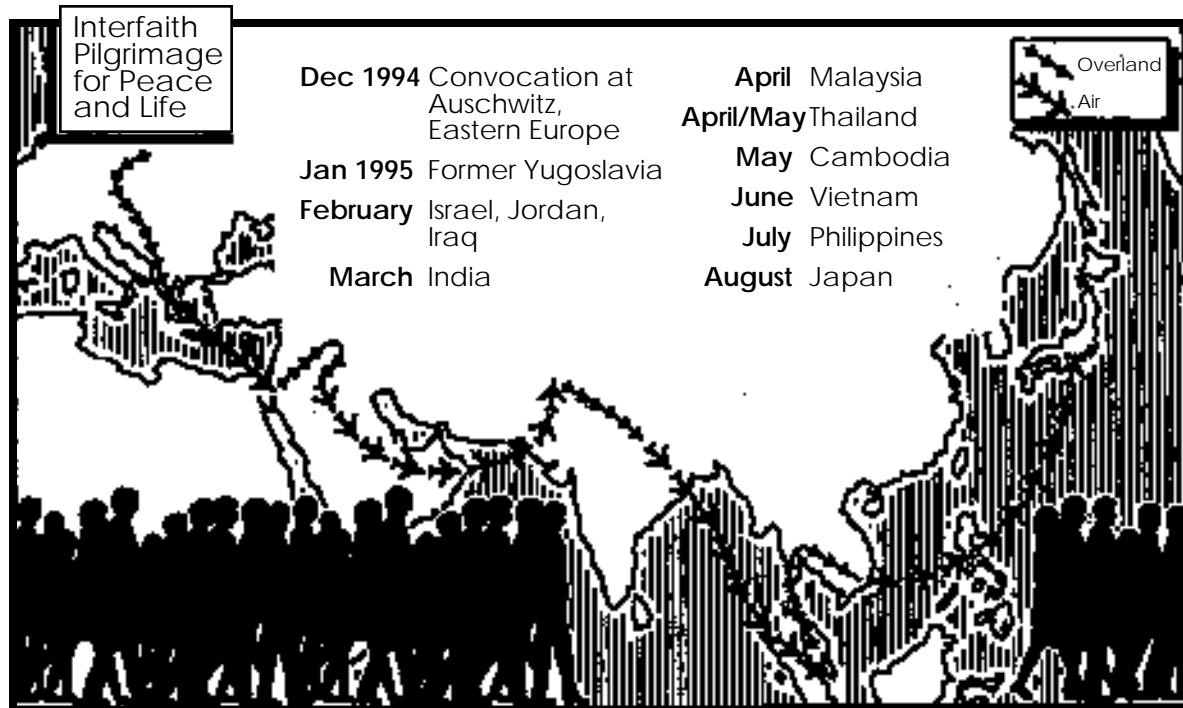
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How are we
to sing the
Lord's song
in a strange
land?

If I forget
thee, O,
Jerusalem,
Let my right
hand wither,
Let my
tongue
cleave to
the roof of
my mouth,
If I do not
remember
thee!
—Psalm 137

W

e dedicate this account of the *Interfaith Pilgrimage for Peace and Life 1995* to the thousands who gave us hospitality, who guided us through their countries; who met us on the roads and in the temples, the wats, the churches, the dojos; who told us their stories and listened to ours; who have joined the struggle for peace and who have suffered for the sake of justice.

We have learned from you. We have grown by knowing you.

—the pilgrims

*Each of us longs to find his Jerusalem, her Jerusalem;
Each of us is that wanderer in a strange land.*

*What would it take to bring us home?
Caring for the world itself—its earth, its waters, its seas and air:
the sources of its abundant life;*

*Caring for one another, for our fellow human beings,
regardless of race or ethnicity;*

*Caring for all the world's children, who will soon begin to
hold the world in trust,
Just as we received the world to hold in trust
from our forebearers.*

*Never as a possession to exploit,
Always as our home to cherish.*

—Dr. George Wald, Nobel Laureate

F

oreword

by Dan Turner

The *Interfaith Pilgrimage for Peace and Life 1995* took eight months, covered nearly ten thousand miles (over three thousand of them on foot) and crossed through eighteen countries. Reverend Gyoshu Sasamori, organizer of the Pilgrimage, describes the motivation for such a journey:

We started our journey at one of the most tragic places of the war, where there was a massive killing industry. We ended it at the place where the first atomic bomb was dropped on human beings, ushering in the possibility that all humankind and the Earth herself could be destroyed. This is why we walked on Pilgrimage. We offered prayers for the victims of all wars. We heard the voices of the victims in our hearts: voices of survivors; voices from the war zones; voices from areas of conflict. All those voices, overcome with sorrow, seeking hope.

Civilization is
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electricity, nor
airplanes, nor
to produce
nuclear
bombs.
Civilization is
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humans, nor
to destroy
things nor to
make war.
Civilization is
to hold
one another
in mutual
affection and
respect.

—the Most Venerable
Nichidatsu Fujii, Founder of
Nipponzan Myohoji



Photo: Skip Schiel

I believe that if we face the painful facts of history unflinchingly and convey the lessons drawn from them to future generations, we will be able to bring peace to the souls of those who died in anguish in time of war. From the loss of their precious lives, we can establish new values today and for the future. In the words of my Teacher (the Most Venerable Nichidatsu Fujii, Founder of Nipponzan Myohoji):

“Civilization is not to have electricity, nor air-planes, nor to produce nuclear bombs. Civilization is not to kill humans, nor to destroy things nor to make war. Civilization is to hold one another in mutual affection and respect.”

The vision Reverend Sasamori helped bring to life is chronicled in this document, which is written by the pilgrims themselves and echoes the yearnings of those we met on our journey.

The purpose of the Pilgrimage was to remind people that in 1995, the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II and the

twentieth year since the end of the war in Vietnam, conflict and devastation will continue if the human species does not turn itself powerfully to the work of peace and reconciliation. The “interfaith” aspect of this pilgrimage was made manifest through pilgrims from all the major religious traditions (Jewish, Buddhist, Catholic, Protestant, Muslim,

Hindu) as well as those professing no religious affiliation. This was also a walk for all the Earth’s species because in every conflict the environment and all of Nature’s creatures suffer as much as people do. It was a reminder that *All life is sacred* and *All beings are related*.

In the past, traditional pilgrimages were always to holy places made sacred by an apparition or a person of unique sanctity. The irony of this Interfaith Pilgrimage was that it began and ended in places of unbelievable horror. The Pilgrimage began in December 1994 at the Nazi death camps of Auschwitz and Birkenau in Poland where over one and a half million people, mostly Jews, were murdered during the Second World War. It ended in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, in August 1995 on the fiftieth anniversary of the United States atomic bombing of these two cities,

where nearly two hundred thousand civilians lost their lives. Linking these two places of pilgrimage, suffering and reconciliation was a journey through countries that bore the scars of old conflicts and some that were still

incurring the wounds of present day wars. In each country, we met with citizens on both sides of the struggles, past and present, and prayed with them. We discussed the importance of peace with compassionate justice which includes compromise and, if possible, forgiveness.



A wise old Jewish professor in Israel, Ezra Ben Gershon, who is a Holocaust survivor, gave us wisdom on the matter of forgiveness of one's enemies when he told us that sometimes forgiveness is not only extremely difficult but impossible: "Who can forgive the Nazis? Most of them are dead as are their victims. The present generation did not suffer the camps and killings. And how do you forgive such monstrous evil? Forgiveness is a very difficult act to express at this time. But, *we can stop the cycle of hatred* and this is far more important than all the attempts at forgiveness."

This journey for peace and reconciliation resulted from the commitment and dedication of Gyoshu Sasamori. Reverend Sasamori is a Japanese Buddhist monk of Nipponzan Myohoji, a Buddhist Order that is active in building peace pagodas around the world and seeking to abolish war. This religious organization of monks was founded in 1918 in Japan by the Most Venerable Nichidatsu Fujii Guruji (1885-1985) for the sole purpose of working for world peace by walking, chanting and drumming wherever there is or has been war and conflict.

The Reverend Sasamori had spent nearly two years traveling through the countries in which we would walk. He contacted people who would help develop the structure to provide shelter and meals for the pilgrims. He made arrangements for us to meet other organizations, officials and the people of the towns and villages where we would be staying. He helped shape the pilgrimage into an event that would touch thousands of lives through contact and prayer, and would change the lives of the pilgrims forever.

Every pilgrim was responsible for financing her/his own participation in the the pilgrimage and for keeping the fol-

lowing conditions: To participate in interfaith prayer service every morning; to maintain physical strength for the walk (daily average 20 miles); to be responsible for one's own security in areas of conflict; to abstain from drinking and drugs; to follow the guidelines of regional local organizers.

The decision each of us made to join this Pilgrimage came about for different reasons, influenced by the unique backgrounds of each. One pilgrim, Debbie Habib, describes the moment when she learned of her fellow pilgrims' motivations:

On a warm India morning with *chai* (tea) in hand, five of us sat under a tree at the Gandhi Darshan Ashram in Delhi, sharing experiences and reflections of our journey thus far. In this small circle, we represented four different countries on the globe: Japan, Germany, Chile and the United States, and ranged in age from eighteen to fifty-seven. We five women, so similar, so different, all shared a common experience of having met in Auschwitz on December 4, 1994 to embark on the *Interfaith Pilgrimage for Peace and Life*.

We started our journey at one of the most tragic places of the war, where there was a massive killing industry; we ended it at the place where the first atomic bomb was dropped on human beings...

—Reverend Gyoshu Sasamori



Photo: © 1994 Daniel A. Brown

In place of
the war
against the
poor, we
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a world
movement
to renew the
exhausted,
deadened
human spirit,
that we may
learn anew
to care for
each other
and this
earth.

—Dr. George Wald



Photo: Skip Schiel

I asked each woman to share what had initially moved her to join this Pilgrimage. The responses varied. Atsuko, not yet finished with high school and questioning her future, saw a small article about the pilgrimage in a Japanese newspaper. Minutes later she called the Nipponzan Myohoji Temple for more information. Brother Sasamori answered the phone. Knowing she needed time to think and learn before pursuing university and a career, she made the decision to join, though convincing her parents and teachers was not easy.

This is Olga's second pilgrimage with Nipponzan Myohoji, the first being in Sri Lanka. Olga, a mother of four, describes her home in Chile as a beautiful place and existence that she has worked hard to attain. "Prayer is strong," she said. "I had to go to walk and meditate in the big monastery that the world is." Her eighteen year old son Toto joined her.

Heidrun first met the Nipponzan Buddhist monks and nuns on the Walk for a Nuclear Free Zone in Europe. She recalled walking in the rain and being deeply touched by the chanting. In May of 1994, Heidrun went to Sarajevo with 150 women from all over the world carrying supplies and messages of solidarity. After a presentation to a group about her

experiences in Bosnia, someone from the audience handed her the Pilgrimage informational flyer and she knew that she would go.

Ariel had been working in the Boston area teaching art to inner-city teenage boys. As part of a desire to "connect more with the spiritual" in her life, she attended a day of mindfulness offered by Claude, a Vietnam veteran, who is also on the Pilgrimage. Ariel had been considering a long solo backpacking journey, but when she heard about the Auschwitz to Hiroshima walk it seemed to click with her desires to make changes in her life and connect with like-minded people and experience diverse cultures.

And so for our own reasons, for oneness, for peace, we walked, met and prayed with thousands of people across half the Earth. The words of Dr. George Wald, Nobel Laureate, whose spirit gave impetus to the Pilgrimage which is chronicled in this document, provided a further inspiration:

The time has come for the true regeneration of humanity. In place of the war against the poor, we must begin a world movement to renew the exhausted, deadened human spirit, that we may learn anew to care for each other and this earth. Many hunger for this. Can we now fill this need?