

reflection

Bellagio Centre

A Place for Contemplation, Writing and Purposeful Discussion

by Sayeed Ahmad

AN idealistic American woman Ella Walker heiress to the Hiram Walker fortune bought a villa on the picturesque Lake Como in Italy in 1928. After a two years renovation based on a study of the origins of the building which dated back to 1537, Mrs Walker moved in with a large staff of servants and gardeners. She had married the head of the Italian branch of the princely Thu und Taxis family, the Duke of Duino and became known as Her Serene Highness, Ella, Principessa della Torre e Tasso. The Villa Serbelloni named after Alessandro Serbelloni, member of another great Milanese family had been lived in and its vast gardens of fifty acres improved during the two hundred years of occupation by Serbelloni family members. The terraced grounds sloping off from the present day villa and the design of the rose gardens and walks were contributions of Alessandro Serbelloni whose stone statue on the eastern wing of the building is dated 1788. His successor Duke Ferdinando Serbelloni settled on the property after his retirement as cavalry general in the Austrian Army. He constructed the carriage road from Bellagio town at the hill bottom upto the villa in 1842, which is the main approach road used today.



A panoramic view of Bellagio village

This impressive mansion set on the top of the Bellagio hill promontory is the Rockefeller Foundation Centre. Mrs Ella Walker, lived until the age of 84 years but was childless. She was a warm hearted and sophisticated person, much loved by her husband's family. Before she died in June 1959 at the Villa Serbelloni, in the spacious and airy room which is now the library, Ella Walker gifted the property and its exquisite furnishings, plus an added two million dollar endowment in the Princess' last will for the "promotion of international understanding". It was Mr Dean Rusk, the Rockefeller Foundation's President at the time, who later became J F Kennedy's Secretary of State who persuaded the Foundation's Trustees to accept the gift and its responsibilities. Since 1959 this idyllically placed centre in the Italian Alps has been run in the motto of the Rockefeller Foundation's mandate "to serve the well being of mankind throughout the world" and I and my wife were invited by Rockefeller Foundation New York to Italy for a month — long residency at Villa Serbelloni. Although we had been sent brochures and photographs of the centre, what we experienced on arrival was beyond all one's imagination. We arrived at Milan's Linate airport on 12 August 1998 and were received by a chauffeur who drove us along a beautiful circuitous hill road forty miles to Bellagio. We reached the Villa's huge iron gate which opened automatically and drove up the carriage way, leading to the main building. At the entrance was Madam Gianna Celli, widow of Mr Roberto Celli who had been in charge of the Centre till his death in 1989 and in whose name the Celli Fund provides allowances to visiting scholars. We later became good friends of Gianna, the administrator of the Bellagio Study and Conference Centre.

We were ushered to our room on the ground floor of the villa as I had requested since I was convalescing and

did not want to climb stairs much. The room was large and with high ceiling and furnished in beige, white and grey. There were tall hanging woven tapestries from ceiling to floor, which Gianna told us were the original ones from the Serbelloni family. The furniture was painted Italian wood remade in the 16th century style; the wooden floor had Belgian carpets and a brass and iron chandelier in the beamed roof gave a feeling of old grandeur. The view from our tall window gave us a magnificent scale of perspective from sky to sloping gardens. As the waiter put our suitcases into two walk-in closets, we looked out to see the lush shrubs, hedges and cypress trees cascading five tiers down to Lake Como, a blue sapphire under the azure Italian sky. An arched doorway led to the attached study built in a stone tower with arched ventilators far up at the roof level. A door with iron balcony opened out to another angle of the lake. The study was fitted with a Hewlett-Packard computer and on the desk was the best gold embossed Italian leather writing equipment. The perfection of the arrangements, down to providing pins, clips, scotch tape, paper pen, pencil, scale and file covers was meticulous. There was even a blotting pad in case one used an ink-nib!

The luxury of the situation was yet to come. Bed sheets were changed everyday, and towels, seven kinds, were changed even if one wiped on it only once!

Meals were served in three places. Breakfast on the long terrace overlooking the hills, and the villages across the lake, or if it was chilly, inside an exquisite tapestry draped room. Lunch was either on the terrace or in the grand dining room fitted with crystal chandeliers and mirrors and period paintings. The table linen was damask or Irish linen and the cutlery silver-plated. A printed menu was provided for each meal bearing the Rockefeller em-

blem. What to speak of the food, there were all kinds of Italian delicacies turned out in style by the three master chefs and served in style by liveried waiters. I had already informed the Centre that I had diet restrictions and so they worked out a special menu for me, providing fish fresh from the lake, and turkey, poultry with a variety of pastas. Sweet deserts were prepared for me, but I always partook of the wonderful ice creams, gelatos and nibbled the mouth-watering sweet dishes. Fruits were plenty, grapes and figs from the orchards of the villa. Though I don't drink there was a grand layout of pre-dinner cocktails and after dinner liqueurs, besides a variety of not less than four herbal and green teas and coffee, cappuccino, espresso and brewed.

I have been to many academic centres all over the world, but Bellagio's experience is unique in that it isolates the scholar from the outside world and gives him the stimulus to contemplate whatever he wishes. Throughout the day no one was visible (except the discreet staff) and each scholar would retreat to his or her studio. All (except a few) of the studios were located in the wooded grounds of the villa, in the small 16th century rooms constructed of stone wood and mortar, fitted with computers and audio visual systems. There was a main library (Ella Walker's bedroom till 1959 which has a decorative painted ceiling) filled with wooden polished shelves, full of books presented by all the scholars who had lived in the centre. I was thrilled to learn that Anita Desai from India, Saadi-al-Hadithi an Iraqi music archivist now settled in London, Archer Geoffrey writer and diplomat of UK Andre Vauchez Director of the French school in Rome and poet Alan Williamson of Berkely California University, among many other acknowledged names, had begun or developed their innovative work at Bellagio. Another smaller library housed the Eu-

ropean classics and there were two reading rooms where newspapers and journals in English, French, Italian and German were available. A collection of cassettes and CD's of classic European and American composers and also videos and cassettes of residency scholars were placed for the listening and viewing pleasures of residents.

During the day most scholars would take their lunch packets supplied by the kitchen on request and would pursue their studies or reading etc. in the quaint studios in the forests or on the cliffs overlooking the lake. The hours between 10:00am to 5:30pm would be thus spent in scholarly pursuits. Those who wished would once in a while go hiking, jogging or take the excellent ferry trips to villages like Varenna, Gravadonna and Como for sightseeing. Every place is filled with history and archaeology sites dating to Roman times and upto the 15th century renaissance period and later. Everything is carefully preserved and maintained. The people of Italy respect their culture.

The evenings were extremely pleasant. Residents would sign up their names to present a talk each evening in the Music Room or Conference Room, if audio-visual was needed. This was a marvelous way of coming to learn about the area of study of each group member. For instance I made my presentation on Playwright/Actor "Habib Tanvir on the modern Indian Stage" and my wife Perveen Ahmad gave her presentation with slides on "Legends and Myths in Nakshi Kantha Art". We had a most interesting orchestral music presentation through a recorded symphony by Dan Welcher on the story of the Hawaiian sun god. There were also thought provoking talks on drug addiction and control in America by Dr David C. Lewis, Brown University Providence, and Barbara A. Koenig who spoke on the obscure subject of "Examining the practice of managed death". She discussed American

culture and biomedical ethics, the cultural space surrounding death and the process of dying which is contested territory. Another intellectual was a woman Oksana Zabuzhko, Senior Research Scholar of the Ukraine Academy of Sciences. She explained in her manuscript about women writers in the Colonial Culture under Communism. Mr Alan Williamson presented his collection of poems "Patterns more complicated: new and selected poems." He is a follower of Zen Buddhism. The talks were about forty-five minutes, followed by question time which the scholars felt would be useful in bettering their analysis and interpretation. The discussions would spill over at the cocktails from 7:30 pm to 8:00 pm which preceded dinner.

Then Madame Gianna Celli would announce dinner and lead us to the dining room. There is a custom at Villa Serbelloni that residents should dress up for dinner, men in ties and jackets, women in evening or national dress. It was very ceremonial and graceful. My wife was the only one who wore sarees and was greatly appreciated for the drape of the lovely silks. At the dining table we would switch places according to our desire, thereby getting opportunity to talk to different people each day.

In our group of twenty-two scholars, we arrived at the Centre on different dates and would leave in sequence on different days. Thus there were occasions for saying farewell to some of the members and welcoming new entrants. The spirit of camaraderie ignited a lot of jokes and humour, and there were two or three persons who would take initiative to put up funny skits, or speeches which would highlight the characteristics of the out-going persons. I really enjoyed this because all the members were erudite, highly intellectual persons, but also enjoyed a joke at their own expense. This something we sub-continents lack.

The atmosphere at the villa was really extraordinary. After dinner we would move out onto the terrace as the

moon came up over the hills and lit up the cypress trees and shimmered on the calm lake. Those who enjoyed after-dinner liqueurs or coffee would chat and recount their activities of the day; the sound of laughter would echo across the lake and rebound from the hills. Some would go to read the papers or listen to recorded music.

The Rockefeller Foundation also invited specialised research scholars for three to four days conferences at the villa. They were brought here to conclude their study subjects for final placing to various institutions, and would hold meetings separate to us. The presence of these specialists at dinner and breakfast gave an impetus to our conversations, as they were collectively working on subjects of global concern such as environment, oceanography, genetics etc. Among these visiting experts some volunteered to play music on the piano and flute, adding to our enjoyment. We also gained much knowledge about the research and planning that goes into worldwide policy making. Bangladesh figured in the conference discussions on oceanography.

The Bellagio Study and Conference Centre runs on a gilt edged budget of the Rockefeller Foundation New York, but I feel that the wealth of human resource which takes shape at the Centre is incomparable. The Villa Serbelloni is a place where scholars and thinkers come and are free from everyday demands. They are in a surrealistic state where they may be deeply introspective and clear their minds of all worries outside their subject. The other advantage is that by bringing together small groups of scholars in a variety of disciplines, from all over the world, the residents gain access to subjects they may never have read or heard about. This fulfills Rockefeller's purpose of creating international understanding. Thirdly and perhaps most of all I wish to give my tribute to the far-thinking woman Madame Ella Walker, who visualised the existence of such a centre for the enhancement of humanity.



Conversation at lunch table with the scholars.

fiction

Encounter with Konok Champa

by Ahmed Sofa

MContinued from last week
AMA rolled out the quilt and put it on the bamboo platform. As she was placing the roll on the platform, the prayer mat was displaced and dropped down on the floor. Mama told, Ashu just see, this is your grandpa's prayer mat. Then Ashu recalled his grandpa. Grandpa used to sit upon the prayer mat like a small hillock and could not raise his head because of the weight of age. Grandpa died at the age of five times twenty and ten years. Grandpa suffered much. Even today, when Ashu silently tries to pick up the sound of the air, he hears the groning of grandpa.

Mama gave him a small piece of sugarcane. Then and there, he started biting to squeeze out the sweet juice. When

he reached in front of their yard, found a man approaching in rushing speed. Flowing scarp on his shoulder is moving to and fro. Ashu surprised to see that unknown person. He enquired Ashu, which is the home of Amena's father. Ashu pointed the house there which is roofed with the corrugated sheet. Then the man asked again which is the way to approach Rameez marchant's home. One fair looking boy came out and said, please do come this way. The man asked the boy, what is your relation with Rameez marchant. The boy answered with pride, he is my papa. The man wiped out the sweat of face with the scarp and said, then tell your papa to attend the feast to Raquib Munshi's house in west village, with whole family. Then he rushed to the house of Amena's father. Ashu was stunned. Both of the neighbours of their left and right

are invited to the feast. Only Ashu's family is excluded. The word feast brought saliva to his month. Smell of deliciously cooked soup and meat began to beat his nostrils. He came back home and asked with sullen face, mama both Rameez marchant and Amena's papa are invited to the feast, why we are excluded. What is the fault with us? Mama heaved a deep sigh, Sonny we are poor. Nobody invites poor people to the feast.

Mama has just gone out with the small cane basket in hand. But mama's words began to ring in Ashu's ears. Ashu we are poor, very poor. On the platform of the vegetable garden, that yellow bird sitting with hanging tail as if asking Ashu you are poor, very poor. The evening breeze that soothes the world with sweet touch almost telling the same thing, Ashu you are poor, very poor. Ashu walked past the boundary of

their home. The cow shed of Amena's papa and then, came under the Shonaloo tree. The place is covered with the strewn out Shonaloo flowers. Zarina, the younger sister of Amena, Hashu, Zolekha all are conversing in a whisper. When they saw Ashu, Zarina asked do you want to be bride groom in this marriage game? Just have a look at Zolekha with the ornaments of Shonaloo flower, what a beautiful bride she is! Pretentiously Zarina unveiled the face of the bride by removing the short sari. Look Ashu, in the whole world you will never get a bride like this. Just get agree. I am your mother in law. Put on the crown of jackfruit leaves on your head. Let me go and find out the priest for solemnising the marriage. At first Ashu was very pleased. It is really a matter of luck to have a bride like Zolekha. Suddenly the utterance of

mama came alive in his mind, Ashu we are poor, very poor. There was a shock wave in his whole body. Everything tasted bitter to him. He shouted out to Zarina, no I would not be a bride groom in this rich people's marriage game. Ashu walked away. While crossing the graveyard, the Chatim tree with its branches, foliage and leaves remembered his eight brothers and sisters are sleeping under the extending shadow. Ashu whispered a prayer, Allah, may their soul rest in peace. Ashu walks slowly and thinks, if someday his eight brothers and sisters wake up from the deep slumber of the graves, it would be a miraculus event. He ask himself again, do the miracles happen to the poor people like Ashu. While passing graveyard, he saw his mama, with one of his neighbouring woman, Plucking up the green tender kolakochi leaves with a

long stick attached a hook at the tip. The other woman gave a gentle push to his mama, oh, elder sister Rahima, have a look, your sonny Ashu is coming this way. Mama warned, Ashu do not go very far and Ashu said, yes.

Ashu came to the field walking past the graveyard and tank. Winter crops abound the field. The green chillis took red hue. Ashu recalled the fairy tale which he heard from his grandpa. Green chillis became suddenly crimson red by stealing the beauty of a princess. Ashu felt the spirit of the sweet princes within him, in the colour of the ripe chillies. There came yellow flowers in the bushes of the pulse seeds. Ashu found one butterfly is hovering over his head. Its painted wings reminded him the wedding sari of the blusful daughter in law of the Kazi family.

To be continued