

GORDON MARTIN

PRESS CLUB 4.4.06

I've spent much of my working life as a broadcaster. And when I'm sitting alone in a radio studio, though millions of people round the world may be listening, I feel perfectly at ease. It's a bit different when I'm faced with an audience, as I am now. I can tell at once whether or not I'm boring them. Though I think on balance journalists are not likely to be bored. Oscar Wild, the play writer and wit, said journalists are in fact people who spend their lives apologising to you in private for what they've written about you in public.

I am in fact primarily a survivor ; and I'm delighted to have survived to take part in this splendid occasion. Perhaps you'll allow me to tell a couple of stories to demonstrate my capacity for survival. I was in Congo, precisely in Katanga, 46 years ago to cover the chaos that set in as soon as the Belgian colonisers left. I was the target of poisoned arrows, shot from bows by black men, who looked even more terrifying since they were painted white from head to foot – the witchdoctors told them that this white paint had magical qualities and would protect them against bullets. As a result of this and similar experiences, I fell very sick, and ended up in hospital in London. I'll never forget one evening when I woke up in my hospital bed to find myself surrounded by men in black coats, looking like vultures or undertakers. They were members of the management of Reuters, for whom I was then working. They'd clearly come to say goodbye – but, to their surprise, and I hope pleasure, I did survive.

Looking back on those times makes me realise how much communication have evolved. Now, correspondents have video-phones and instant contact to their headquarters. In my day, one depended on the local telephone system, sometimes with unforeseen results. On one occasion, I arrived in Teheran to cover a magnificent banquet given by the late Shah in the ruined city of Persepolis. I put in my telephone call to London, and the operator said there would be a seven-hour delay. Now in those days before the Ayatollahs, the national drink of Iran was vodka and lime. By the time my call did come through, I had consumed so many I could no longer pronounce the phrase two thousand five hundredth anniversary, which was what the Shah was celebrating. So I asked the BBC to read that phrase themselves in the studio in London.

On another occasion, I was in Libya, covering the talk-over there in 1969 by Colonel Qaddafi. I was sitting in my hotel room one night in Tripoli, waiting for my telephone-call to London, when an armed soldier burst in. What you say London, he asked. I explained I was still waiting for my call, but I read him the script of what I planned to say. He then went over to my bedside telephone and told the operator to put me trough to London. As I picked up the telephone, he stood next to me, and then moved away. The apparatus crashed to the floor – the telephone cable had got entangled in the holster of the large pistol he had in his belt. But the connection with London was not broken, and a startled BBC technician in the BBC asked what the noise was. Nothing much, I said, just an armed solder in my room.

I retired from the BBC in early 1988, and then spent some month covering the departure of the Soviet troops from Afghanistan for The Daily Telegraph. And at the end of the year they asked me to come and work for them in Geneva.

Soon after my arrival in Geneva, where back in 1957 I had worked for Reuters, and where I had paid many brief visits over the years, I joined a small group of journalists and others who were working to create a Press Club in Geneva. It was an uphill task, and not everyone in the city administration was convinced that a Press Club would be an asset for Geneva. But we succeeded. And, thanks to the generosity of Geneva and the Federal authorities, private sponsors and others, the Geneva Press Club was installed in the magnificent premises where we are now, the Villa Pastorale. I can think of no Press Club in the world, and I have visited and belonged to many, which has a more splendid settings.

One of the reasons that led me personally to work for its creation was the belief that such a Club would help bridge the gap between the city of Geneva and the Palais des Nations. The Genevois, if you'll forgive me for saying so, are in some way isolationist, and the inhabitants of the Palais are self-satisfied in their Ivory Tower. It seemed to me that a Press Club could play a role in bringing about a rapprochement of these two worlds and be *a lieu de rencontre*. I would still like to see a bar in place to provide a venue when there are no scheduled events programmed. And I think the Club has indeed given a new dimension to the concept of Genève Internationale. It has become part of the scene. Much of this is due to the energetic hands-on leadership of Guy Mettan, and I would like to express my appreciation of the work he and his Committee have done. The list of distinguished speakers Guy has brought here is truly impressive: only a few days ago in the same week we had Madame Calmy Rey, and a couple of high-ranking Ukrainian officials. The Geneva Press Club has earned a place among the world's most interesting and active.

I had the privilege of being the Club's first Vice-President. But I never thought that one day I would be asked to join the distinguished group who make up the Committee of Honour. It is an honour which moves and touches me profoundly, and of which I shall always be proud. I am lucky to be a member of London's most prestigious Clubs, The Travellers, which was founded in 1819; prospective members had to prove they had traveled at least 500 miles from London. But I do not have the same sense of intimate involvement there that I feel for the Geneva Press Club.

With characteristic modesty, Leon Davico has not mentioned the fact that he holds an honorary doctorate from one of Britain's best universities, Durham. It was conferred on him by Peter Ustinov, who had just become Chancellor of Durham in 1992. Describing the occasion, Peter Ustinov speaks of Leon as an old and tireless colleague from UNICEF, UNESCO and the High Commission for the Refugees, just back from a mission of mercy to Sarajevo. Sir Peter adds that all those newly-honoured lived their lives according to their principles and sense of values. And, he added, they grace the University with their spirit.

So, a final story. It concerns the building of a railway tunnel in Switzerland. The Swiss authorities called for a interview a number of firms competing for the contract. They called in a German engineer, and asked if his company planned to bore the tunnel straight through mountain from one end, or if they would start at both ends. The German replied that modern technique involves starting at both ends. Question – and what if they don't meet in the middle. The German was scandalised – with German technical expertise, he said, that is impossible. The Swiss then interviewed engineers from several other countries, and finally an Irishman. They asked him the same question, and he also opted for starting the tunnel from both ends. And what if they don't meet in the middle? Then, the Irishman answered, you'll get two tunnels for the price of one.

I feel that membership of the Geneva Press Club has given me two benefits for the price of one – great help in my professional journalistic life, and, socially, a wonderful sense of friendship and comradeship. In my capacity as a member of the Committee of Honour, let me promise that I will do all in my power to ensure the continued success of the Club. And, for the honour you have given me, and the trust you have shown in me, may I say in conclusion a simple and heartfelt Thank You.