



The Betty Letters

My Dear Grandchild,

The very real threat of terrorism has come to Hongkong. The Hongkong Government has alerted the population as to the best course of action to take in the event that they suspect that something suspicious is taking place. The managements of some of the largest commercial buildings recently sent out a circular to owners and occupants, reminding them to be vigilant lest terrorists attack. The warning was released just six days prior to the fourth anniversary of the terrorists' attack on the twin towers of the World Trade Center in Manhattan, New York. To refresh your memory, on the morning of September 11, 2001, nineteen terrorists hijacked four commercial aeroplanes, flying two of them into the twin towers of the World Trade Center. A third terrorist gang crashed their aeroplane into The Pentagon, in Arlington, Virginia, while the fourth aeroplane crashed in a field in rural Pennsylvania (it is, generally, believed that this aeroplane would have attacked the White House but for the brave passengers who, successfully, attacked the hijackers, thus thwarting their plans). Of the nineteen men, who carried out the hijackings, fifteen of them came from Saudi Arabia, while the remaining four terrorists came from Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Lebanon. They were all affiliated to the al-Qaeda network, a radical Islamist group, led by Saudi exile, Osama bin Laden, who is dedicated to waging a holy war (Jihad) against the United States of America. Today, the Hongkong Government is on the alert lest some of these radicals or their sympathizers decide to attack targets in these four hundred and sixteen square miles, known as Hongkong. Many Hongkong residents have received a booklet from the Hongkong Police Force, suggesting what to do in the case of a terrorist attack. Extra guards have been placed on duty at the entrances of many commercial buildings and one is told that, if one sees suspicious people, unattended or unidentified belongings, boxes or packages, or unexpected deliveries, to be on one's guard. Across the road from the Consulate General of the United States of America, there are police, permanently on duty, now. They are watching, keeping track of the comings and goings at the largest diplomatic mission in Hongkong. Who would have thought that Hongkong would have to concern itself with terrorists, belonging to the al-Qaeda network of Osama bin Laden? But that is the terrible truth of today's world: Nowhere appears to be safe, any more. Who would have thought that terrorists would have attacked at a beach resort at the popular tourist destination of Bali, Indonesia, where, in October 2002, Jemaah Islamiyah killed two hundred and two innocent tourists, mainly Australians. In one of the houses of a member of the Indonesian terrorists, who carried out the Bali murders, it was discovered that he had been 'worshipping' Osama bin Laden in a manner, depicting paying homage as to a living deity.

The world has, always, had terrorism, of course, in one form or another, you know. The accepted definition of terrorism is a form of politically motivated violence; the treat or the act of such violence, primarily aimed at civilian targets. The victims of a terrorist attack are, usually, incidental to the actual, intended target, which may be far from the actual commission of an act and, as the world has seen in the case of the Bali killings, it had little to do with Australia, the murdered Australian youngsters, or even Indonesia. Some of the terrorists of old are considered the heroes of today. Take the story of Masada, as an example. Here we have a case of about nine hundred and sixty Zealot Jews who rebelled against the Roman Authority of Titus Flavius Sabinus Vespasianus (known today as Emperor Vespasian). Masada is in the Judaeian Desert, atop a mesa, about one thousand three hundred feet above the Western Shore of The Dead Sea. These nine hundred and sixty Zealot Jews, history has recorded, in about 66 AD, seized the fortress of Masada in a surprise attack, massacring the Roman Garrison there. The Zealot Jews, comprising men, women and children, were hated, intensely, by Rome and the Roman Tenth Legion, which was intent on obtaining revenge for the terrorist attacks on their comrades. The Zealot Jews were led by Elazar ben Yair, who decided that, rather than allow the Jews to be taken prisoner by the Roman

Tenth Legion – because it was clear that the Zealots would not be able to withstand the might of this division of the Roman Army – determined that his men should kill their wives and children and then they, themselves, should commit suicide. Only two women and five children were said to have survived, it was discovered when the Roman Tenth Legion stormed the fortress. The dead lay everywhere, it was recorded by Flavius Josephus, who chronicled the event. According to Flavius Josephus, he had been told by one of the women survivors of Elazar ben Yair's final speech to the Zealots. He is reported to have stated:

'Since we, long ago, resolved never to be servants to the Romans, or to any other than to God Himself, who alone is the true and just Lord of mankind, the time is now come that obliges us to make the resolution true to practise. We were the very first that revolted against Rome, and we are the last that fight against them; and, I cannot esteem it as a favour that God has granted us, that it is still in our power to die bravely, and in a state of freedom. Let our wives die before they are abused, and our children before they have tasted of slavery, and, after we have slain them, let us bestow that glorious benefit upon one another mutually.'

This leader of the Zealots, then, ordered that all of the belongings of his followers be destroyed, with the exception of the food, for he determined that the leaving of the stocks of food would be testament to the Tenth Legion that the mass suicide was not due to a lack of food or other necessities of life, but that the Zealots preferred death before slavery. Interestingly, there is no reference in the Talmud (the body of Jewish Law, comprising The Mishnah and The Gemara) about Masada, the rabbis of the day, obviously not wanting to insert it because, according to Judaic Law, suicide is proscribed. For about one thousand five hundred years, the story of Masada remained hidden from sight. No doubt, those educated, religious Jews, who knew of the mass murders and suicides of Alazar ben Yair and his followers at Masada at about 66 AD, were happy to keep the secret buried for more than one thousand, five hundred years due, most likely, to the embarrassment of the horrible deed, as they perceived it to be at the time. It was not until 1920 that the story became widely known.

The above précis story of Masada reminds one of the Japanese Imperial Army, during the conclusion of World War II in the South and North Pacific Islands and how the soldiers of Emperor Hirohito preferred death before the dishonour of being taken prisoner by the American Army under General Douglas MacArthur. They, even, told their wives to take their children and to jump with them from the highest hill in order to commit suicide by being crushed on the rocks below. Today, in Israel, members of the Israeli Defense Force take the oath: 'Masada shall not fall again!' Masada has become a symbol of Jewish survival. And all because nine hundred and sixty Zealot Jews, back in 66 AD, determined to murder their wives and children and, then, to commit suicide, themselves. It is strange how the use of the word 'murder', replacing the word, 'suicide', either damns the deed or glorifies it for eternity. One would have thought that, after so many centuries had elapsed, man would have learned how to live in harmony with his fellow man rather than to turn his attentions to the most expeditious method of killing his fellows. Wild animals of the forests kill indiscriminately, not out of hatred, but out of necessity: They have to eat other animals in order to survive. There is no hatred in the mind of a lioness as she brings down another animal in a hunt. The very idea of hatred does not enter the mind of a wild animal. Only man is permitted, it seems, the luxury of the mental state of pure hatred. Perhaps, only by understanding hatred, may one acknowledge the existence of love: The unity of opposites, as the Greek philosopher, Parmenides (about 500 BC), would have put it. It is a pity, is it not, that man is able to have advanced his knowledge, over the past fifty thousand or so years, from the simple act of creating tools to the calculation of the weight of subatomic particles and their erratic movements, but he cannot control his innate propensity to hate his fellow man and to perpetrate – and, I suggest, to enjoy – the commission of atrocities against him? How far has man, really, progressed, philosophically, from the days of Thales of Miletus in 585 BC, Thales, generally considered to be the 'father' of Western philosophy. I suggest: Not very far.

Talk to you next week.

Chief Lady

While TARGET makes every attempt to ensure accuracy of all data published, TARGET cannot be held responsible for any errors and/or omissions.

If readers feel that they would like to voice their opinions about that which they have read in TARGET, please feel free to e-mail your views to editor@targetnewspapers.com or targnews@hkstar.com. TARGET does not guarantee to publish readers' views, but reserves the right so to do subject to the laws of libel.