
Public Property

Fritz finished *A Guide for the Perplexed* on January 29th, 1977. It was his wedding anniversary. He and Vreni had been married fifteen years. Once again, reading his completed manuscript, he was pleased and astonished at his work. He could hardly believe that he himself was the author of words so elegantly put together and with a content of which he approved so wholeheartedly. He was also relieved to have the work completed; the year ahead was fuller than any other since his 'retirement'.

Vreni was not happy with the programme he had ahead. She felt that he was overdoing things, quite apart from the fact that she was getting a raw deal. In November 1976 she had accompanied him to America to receive his prize for excellence from Carborundum. They had returned to England as dawn was breaking over London. The airport was deserted apart from the passengers from their aircraft. At passport control they parted company, Vreni leaving Fritz at the British desk while she went through the section for foreign passports. She had kept her Swiss nationality. It took her a little longer than him to complete the formalities and she emerged expecting to see him waiting for her but he was not there. Looking across the space between the two sections she saw him. He was lying on the ground, a crumpled heap of clothing. As she rushed over all he said was, 'I can't move my legs.' There was no medical officer around so early in the morning and it took some time to find a wheelchair. Eventually, in considerable pain, Fritz was

helped into a taxi and Vreni got him back to Holcombe and into bed. It took a week before the use of his legs returned. Extensive tests showed nothing wrong. Later that winter Fritz read in *Time* magazine that a mysterious illness had been sweeping through the United States. He convinced himself that the symptoms were the same as those of his attack. He did not regard it as a warning. Vreni disagreed. She suspected that exhaustion and whisky had not a little to do with it, and she knew that his planned programme for 1977 would be dangerous on both those counts. Travelling and duty-free goods went hand in hand. The more he preached non-violence, the more he seemed to do violence to his own person by pushing himself to the limits.

His crusade had taken on its own momentum. Fritz was carried along in its increasing velocity. His message seemed to reach the most unlikely bedfellows. No longer did he speak only to the young, the drop-outs, the followers of the 'alternative' movement. There was recognition in the very bastions of establishment, in some multinational corporations themselves. To name just two, both Shell in Britain and Migros in Switzerland approached Fritz for advice. The unity of his message was beginning to get through. If the basis of Western economic life, namely energy, was not unlimited, then alternatives must be found. Such companies as approached Fritz were far-sighted enough to see that the general assumption that nuclear energy would fill the gap was not good enough, that the problem was wider, requiring a completely different solution, encompassing the rethinking of production methods and organization. They recognized that the broadest application of the concept of intermediate technology as a key to a new, non-violent economics was also appropriate in the West. Fritz wrote:

The key words of violent economics are urbanization, industrialization, centralization, efficiency, quantity, speed. The violence, however, arises only from the absence of restraint, not from the things themselves . . . The problem of evolving a non-violent way of economic life (in the West) and that of developing the underdeveloped countries may well turn out to be largely identical. Wisdom and voluntary

self-restraint are likely to be more important elements in the new synthesis than the most conspicuous achievements of Western science and technology, although they, too, will find their proper place. The whole man will be needed, his moral qualities no less than his intellectual powers. All peoples and all races will have to make their own specific contribution.¹

Fritz's advice to multinational and national corporations did not shirk these issues, even if they were couched in language more comprehensible to his audience. He was realistic enough, however, to know that with the best will in the world, changes could not occur overnight. Everything he had proposed in the last twenty years had been based on sure organic growth, starting from where one was, not trying to do everything at once. He had no longer laid complete blueprints before people advocating total change in one go. Rather he encouraged them to embark on what he called 'building lifeboats'. He explained this quite simply: 'The only safe recipe for survival is deliberate experimentation. We have to develop a technology as well as an ownership structure to fit the new *material* and *social* conditions. How can we find the right answers without experimentation? Every sizeable company or other organization should run one or several semi-independent units which I should call "lifeboats".'² In practical terms Fritz meant that about five per cent of a company's research and development budget should be earmarked 'for totally unorthodox studies in the direction of smallness, simplicity and capital saving'. In this way, if the boat sank, then lifeboats, properly equipped with new experience, could save the crew. Five per cent would not constitute a radical change, yet it would lay the foundations for change.

Individuals who asked Fritz how to live in a new world would get similar advice. No one needed to be discouraged, for even small steps were important, like home bread baking, growing one's own vegetables and generally trying to simplify one's life. And because he understood the difficulties of swimming against the tide, he always advised people to join other individuals and groups with similar interests. His gentle, understanding, yet radical approach, appealed both to the

'alternative' movements, the readers of *Resurgence* - students and self-sufficiency people who were trying to return to a life of simplicity - and those at the other end of the spectrum, in big business. There was something in his message for everyone, which, combined with his sympathetic and delightful manner, bridged the unbridgeable gap between the establishment and the anti-establishment.

Once again it was in America that the range of his appeal was shown most clearly. In February 1977 he returned there for a six-week coast-to-coast tour and had an overwhelming reception. Lecture halls were filled to overflowing. In Ann Arbor, Michigan, he talked to an audience of five thousand. In many places the biggest halls were not spacious enough for the waiting crowds and loudspeakers had to relay his words to adjacent rooms. Thousands of young enthusiastic Americans had adopted him as their guru. Yet their enthusiasm left him despondent. Fritz feared that it would evaporate as quickly as it had appeared and never become translated into the hard action necessary to transform the world. 'He saw a danger that his words could be inflated into gas balloons, which would carry people gently over the landscape of the world's problems at a considerable height, in the illusion that their trip was changing life below.'³

There were others, it seemed, who had the opposite worry: that Fritz's tour would be followed by radical action. Half way through, as his audiences grew daily, he was suddenly provided with a police escort. Threats had been made on his life which the police were taking very seriously. There were suggestions that Fritz's opponents came from the most powerful industrial and business interests in the United States, who recognized the danger to their existence if Fritz's message really caught on and became policy and practice. They did not like to be told that the idolatry of giantism was responsible for 'a system of production that ravishes nature and a type of society that mutilates man'.

Fritz was more hopeful about influencing policy than wide-scale practice in America for, unlike on his previous tour, by 1977 his message had penetrated into many other levels of American life. Jerry Brown was no longer alone among politicians in his support and the many State Governors,

prominent academics and industrialists who wanted to meet Fritz gave the tour a nightmarish quality. There were no gaps in his schedule for rest, let alone to prepare his lectures. So many meetings, discussions and lectures had been arranged that even at breakfast Fritz was expected to give of himself. Those closest to him, who had organized his tour and who professed to understand fully his message, seemed unable to put it into practice on this tour, pushing Fritz beyond the limits of his endurance. Never before had Fritz felt so exhausted. The preacher of gentleness, non-violence, concern for people and their needs was driven with insufficient concern for his needs until eventually he felt at breaking point and thought he would have to cancel the rest of the tour. It was at that point that he received an invitation to meet Jimmy Carter at the White House. It gave him new strength to continue and ended the tour on a high note. With Carter's support, Fritz hoped that there might at last be some progress in the move to sanity. But the usual optimism could not dispel the fundamental weariness and he returned to England in the middle of March utterly exhausted.

His exhaustion was apparent in his lack of buoyancy. He had been exhilarated by his visit to the White House but his fatigue was deep and there was no time to rest. April was filled with numerous meetings and short trips to the Continent, and in May he returned to the United States. I.T.D.G.'s success and growth was accompanied all the time by worsening financial crises which fell on his shoulders, and he turned to the U.S.A. for assistance. The occasion for his visit was a conference. It summed up all that was wrong with the modern way of life. The entire visit was spent underground in a conference centre where everything from the light to the food was artificial, and all the while they talked. His despondency grew.

The pace continued. June passed in a haze of lectures and brief visits home for a change of clothes. The strain was beginning to tell. Fritz was less optimistic, sometimes irritable. A colleague, Jack Wood, who had known Fritz for twenty years, saw this change with anxiety. 'You are going to kill yourself if you go on working at this pace,' he warned Fritz. Fritz merely shrugged his shoulders and, with a whimsical smile, replied:

'Well, someone has to do the work.'

In July he set off again, breaking new ground, this time to Indonesia and Australia. In Indonesia he suffered from pains which he put down to indigestion. In Australia he was taken over by a small film company to take part in a film about deforestation. He was very enthusiastic about this for trees had become his latest passion. He had long agreed with Gandhi that India's problem would be solved if every person planted a tree every year for five years. For years he had belonged to a group calling themselves 'Men of the Trees', interested in reclaiming the Sahara, and he watched with dismay as the abuse of trees made the production of more Saharas more and more likely all over the world.

He thought of trees in terms wider than that of conservation, believing that they held the answer to the world's food problem. He admired their beauty as well as their function as the most wonderful three-dimensional food producers, which sheltered animals grazing under their branches while benefiting from their enriching deposits on the soil around. Trees could be grown on land less suitable for crops, and while producing food they would also add to the preservation and health of the countryside. When an old American conservationist, Richard B. Gregg, sent Fritz some books on trees Fritz learnt of the trees that produced high protein beans or nuts which could be milled into flour and his enthusiasm knew no bounds. Several dozen protein bearing trees were eventually acquired and planted in the garden at Holcombe and the Soil Association agreed to set up a project to work on the idea.

The Australian film, called 'On the Edge of the Forest', gave a horrifying picture of the violence of deforestation. It was a stark contrast to the gentle, elderly man who walked with great wonder through the forest, marvelling at its resemblance to a great cathedral, and at the same time not failing to notice the beauty of the miniature eco-system at his feet. As the film ended, Fritz was seen walking slowly into the distance and disappearing into the sunlight. It was to be prophetic.

On his return Fritz appeared to have made up his mind to start reducing his commitments in earnest. He informed the

directors at I.T.D.G. that they must begin to think about a successor for him. 'After all,' he said lightly, 'who knows what will happen to me.' Jack Wood, present at the meeting, was sure that he would never see Fritz again.

On a domestic level Fritz spent the month of August, the lull before his next bout of travelling, tying up various administrative ends. It was also a family month. August 16th was Fritz's sixty-sixth birthday and the family celebrated it with him at Holcombe. We met again on August 27th for Christian's birthday. That second evening, surrounded by his family, Fritz was in a strange mood. The wine and whisky flowed freely and he seemed to indulge himself even more than usual. As well as Christian's birthday, he was celebrating a preview of the first copies of *A Guide for the Perplexed*, which he had just received. As he showed the copy to me he said, 'This is what my life has been leading up to.' A little later he and I talked about several marital problems in the family. As I had been happily married for seven years I asked him, 'Do all relationships have to have these crises?' He was silent for a moment and then, for the first time since my mother's death, began to talk to me about his relationship with Muschi. He told me of their very real problems, which, he said, were largely of a spiritual nature, and how, in the end they had resolved their difficulties, particularly through her illness and death. 'You have to decide that these things [marriages] are for keeps and find a way through the difficulties,' he concluded.

Later that evening Fritz decided to make a speech. It was long and emotional and he was visibly moved as he spoke. He spoke of the debt that the men of the family owed to their wives, particularly of his own to Vreni, and exhorted his sons not to forget to cherish the women they had married.

When we said goodbye, I asked my father if I could have a copy of *A Guide for the Perplexed* to take on holiday with me. A few days later, on Saturday September 3rd, the promised copy arrived, just as we were preparing to leave. The inscription moved me greatly. He had written: 'To Barbara Wood, whose existence fills me with admiration and delight, from E.F. Schumacher, alias Papa.'

I was unable to thank him for the day before, on September 2nd, he had left for a week's lecture tour of Switzerland. He

was not as well prepared as usual for this trip. Only the first lecture was really thought out. It turned out to be one of his best and was received enthusiastically by an audience in Caux composed of Moral Re-armament followers. Ironically, he had accepted their invitation largely because the fee financed his fare for the rest of the tour. Afterwards, a young Indian journalist interviewed him and his delight in the company of such a charming young lady was captured by a photographer. The next morning, September 4th, he boarded a train bound for Zürich. What happened next is unclear. Some time between ten and eleven a commotion broke out on the train. 'Someone has been taken ill.' The train was stopped at a small town where a hospital was alerted to take the patient. Passengers looking out of the windows saw a large man being carried out to a waiting ambulance. Behind him came a railway official carrying a suitcase and a rather broad-brimmed hat. On arrival at the little hospital it was confirmed at once that the man was dead. Police coming in to identify the body found their job very easy. One officer remarked, 'He might have been prepared, everything is so orderly.' From the neat collection of documents, he identified: Dr E.F. Schumacher: Economist: Address: Holcombe, Wealdway, Caterham, Surrey, England. Telephone . . . Next of kin . . .

A few days later Vreni had a vivid dream. She was sitting in the drawing-room at Holcombe in front of the open fire when she suddenly became aware that Fritz was in the room with her. She looked up and saw him sitting in his chair. 'I just wanted to tell you what happened,' he said. 'On the train I suddenly felt ill and thought it was indigestion. I went to the toilets but it got worse. As I came out I saw a food vendor coming towards me. I asked her for help. Then I died.'

'Did you want to die?' Vreni asked.

'No,' he replied, 'but I was ready.'

September 4th had been a Sunday. At Holcombe a young mother's help called Tessa Midgely had gone into the kitchen sometime between ten and eleven while the rest of the family were at church to make herself a cup of coffee. As she put the kettle on she was startled by a crash on the kitchen floor. She turned to see a cup had inexplicably fallen out of the cupboard. It had broken into too many pieces to be repaired. She saw

that it was Fritz's cup. Later that afternoon the police called with the news that Fritz had died.

I spent September 4th reading my new copy of *A Guide for the Perplexed*. I had never so much as glanced through *Small is Beautiful* having, I thought, heard its contents over and over again throughout my teens. But the new book, although also containing material about which he had talked a great deal, absorbed me from the minute I opened it at the first page. I forgot about children, unpacking and meals and some hours later my husband Don found me amongst the suitcases utterly oblivious of the chaos around me. That evening, unaware of what had happened in Switzerland that morning, I wrote an enthusiastic letter of congratulation to my father.

Early the following morning the news reached me. I returned to Holcombe immediately. That train journey was the only opportunity I had to mourn my father. The world had reached Holcombe before me. He had become public property.

Fritz Schumacher's death was followed by a mixture of emotions. Hundreds of letters expressed a sense of personal loss at the death of a man many had encountered, perhaps only once at a lecture, through an article or by reading *Small is Beautiful*. There was a feeling of floundering and again and again the question arose in a variety of forms, 'How shall we manage without him?' He had provided hope and inspiration to so many. Yet there was also a feeling of celebration, not for his death but for his life. His passing was not talked about in hushed tones but with positive energy: 'What shall we do now? We must not lose his momentum, we must build, carry on where he left off.'

On November 30th, 1977, not three months after his death, several thousand people came together in just such a celebration at Westminster Cathedral. Some came no doubt out of curiosity to hear Jerry Brown speak at the service, others came to hear Yehudi Menuhin and the gifted pupils of his school pay their tribute (for Fritz had been to talk to the pupils and been well received). But the crowds were there to celebrate Fritz: the atmosphere of joy told that. It was clear that Fritz's sudden death was not the removal of a vital prop. His unstinting work had ensured that throughout the world candles of

hope had been lit. His personality, which had bridged the gaps between so many diverse groups, no longer provided that loose unity but he had sown seeds that had begun to grow. There was much talk about Schumacher Centres, organizations to carry on where he left off, societies, publications and buildings to be named after him. The discussions were not always conducted in the spirit of peace and reconciliation that he would have wished. Different groups had understood different parts of Fritz's message and few saw it as a whole. As one observer put it, 'It is a bit like the early churches. Everyone thinks they have got hold of the truth but each one has got a different part.' It seemed that a most important part of Fritz's message was sometimes forgotten: to start from where you are and grow from there, rather than build up a vast structure which ends as an empty shell or hot air balloon of words.

But these efforts, important and worthy in their way, were less important than the less dramatic and obvious effect of Fritz's life. Fritz was a man of hope. The doom and destruction that was in his warnings never overshadowed the optimism and hope that the worst could be avoided or mitigated. He knew that throughout the world there were people, small people, humble people, whose response to his message had resulted in action, in a reappraisal of their lives. That had been the great message of intermediate technology, that it was possible for action to begin in the here and now. Fritz had become a man of the people, his work was for the people and it was the people as individuals and small groups who, he knew, would ultimately turn the tide to sanity.

The emphasis of his final years was always on action. Again and again he said: 'First must come the word - intellectual effort. But then the word must become flesh.' His words were directed always at reality, at those who would translate them into a new life. They were directed always at individuals because they demanded a personal response, an awakening of the heart. He had always been a man of action himself, a fact which had given his words substance. He had put his ideas into practice at the Coal Board, at the founding of the Intermediate Technology Development Group, with his involvement at the Scott Bader Commonwealth, and numerous concerns not mentioned in this book. He had ideas which, because of his death,

remained unfulfilled. He planned to begin a study of Islam to examine the implications of an Islam economics and he was working on setting up a study to examine the potential of trees for the future, work taken over by the Soil Association. Had he lived, he would no doubt have set many more ideas in motion. His role had been to awaken men's minds and inspire them into action. His last words to the world in *A Guide for the Perplexed*, published after his death, remain his memorial of hope and call for immediate response:

The generosity of the Earth allows us to feed all mankind; we know enough about ecology to keep the Earth a healthy place; there is enough room on the Earth and there are enough materials, so that everybody can have adequate shelter; we are quite competent enough to produce sufficient supplies of necessities so that no one need live in misery. Above all, we shall then see that the economic problem is a convergent problem that has been solved already: we know how to provide enough, and do not require any violent, inhuman, aggressive technologies to do so. There is no economic problem and, in a sense, there never has been. But there is a moral problem, and moral problems are not convergent, capable of being solved so that future generations can live without effort; no, they are divergent problems which have to be understood and transcended.

Can we rely on it that a 'turning around' will be accomplished by enough people quickly enough to save the modern world? This question is often asked, but whatever answer is given to it will mislead. The answer 'Yes' would lead to complacency; the answer 'No' to despair. It is desirable to leave these perplexities behind us and get down to work.

Notes

1 *Grown in German Soil*

- 1 This and further extracts from Professor Schumacher's memoirs are translated from H.A. Schumacher, *Lebenserinnerungen* (unpublished).
- 2 Quoted in William Guttman and Patricia Meehan, *The Great Inflation* (Saxon House) 1975, p. 203.
- 3 E.F. Schumacher, *A Guide for the Perplexed* (Jonathan Cape) 1977, p. 1.

2 *First Taste of England*

- 1 Cameron Fraser and Michael Cresswell in conversation with the author.
- 2 *Cecil Rhodes and Rhodes House* (a pamphlet produced by O.U.P.) 1929.

3 *Oxford*

- 1 E.F.S., report to Herr Dr Remke, German Rhodes Scholar Committee, 8.12.1930 (translation).
- 2 Alan Bullock, *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny* (Odhams) 1952.
- 3 E.F.S., letter to Dr F. Jessen, 25.8.1937 (translation).

4 *In New York One Walks on Air*

- 1 Werner Brückmann, *Kansas 16/3200* (unpublished).
- 2 E.F.S., draft for chapter 'Inflation and the Structure of Production' for Professor H. Parker Willis and John M. Chapman, *The Economics of Inflation* (Columbia University Press) 1935.