

Article in the Daily Record on the extraordinary life of Sister Margaret, a native of Addiewell

She looked small and frail walking in the hospital grounds. She had come to see the people in Bosnia's backwoods – those not so much traumatised by war, as neglected in its aftermath.

We had travelled to Bakovici, a psychiatric unit for 250, north of Sarajevo. This small figure was neither visitor nor relative. This was an 80-year-old Edinburgh nun, Sister Margaret, who, for five years, has devoted her life and that of her small convent in Leith to helping the people caught up in this latter-day Holocaust.

'Being here is like a dream come true,' she said. 'I never imagined I would get out here at the age of 80. It's fantastic to see people actually wearing the clothes we sent out.' On the wards, some of the patients grabbed Sister Margaret by the hand. Others threw their arms around her. At times she was overwhelmed – especially when one woman made it clear she admired the nun's white cardigan. Immediately Sister Margaret took it off and gave it to her. She did the same with her rosary.

The Scots nun was in at the founding of Edinburgh Direct Aid, the charity, now world famous, which has done so much for Bosnia. The convent and their band of packers – known as the A team – have packed more than 60 tons of aid, consisting of food, baby clothes, toys and medicines. After five years of this, EDA decided it was time Sister Margaret saw the fruits of her labours. They had toyed with the idea of taking her to Bosnia in one of the convoys. But they felt it might be too much for a woman of her years.

'Load of rubbish,' she scoffed when I told her. 'The reason I didn't go on a convoy was because the parish in Leith comes first. It was too dangerous in Bosnia and I'm needed at home.'

For Sister Margaret, her work with EDA started when she was unloading donated goods at the home of Dr Denis Rutovitz and his wife Jeanne Bell. She noticed the house was a shambles. The couple explained that volunteer Christine Witcutt had been murdered on a mission to Sarajevo. Sister Margaret set about cleaning the house and making tea for the grief-stricken. 'I had to do something,' she said in Sarajevo last week. 'Here were these people risking life and limb, encountering sniper fire and shelling as well as road accidents, and then this tragic death.' The visit marked the start of a working partnership.

EDA was like an octopus. It grew arms and legs. After a while Jeanne and Denis's home was overflowing with black bags – as was the Leith convent. The charity moved its operation to a warehouse and got six lorries. Sister Margaret said: 'The more work we did, the more familiar we became with the people's needs. They had no electricity, no gas, no phones and very little water. The details were so painful. About 30,000 women have been raped in the war. There was an unwanted baby boom for which nobody was prepared. No soap, no cream, no nappies, no bottles. Babies and dirty clothes shared the same water. EDA made up family parcels. At the beginning I gave them sweets to throw from the lorries. But the children were running out in front of the lorries, so that had to stop. Then the children wanted pens. So we took pens – everything we could lay our hands on. The people of Bosnia sent messages back to the convent saying we had brought them hope when the rest of the world had forgotten about them.'

Visiting the hospital last week, we met an 87-year-old woman called Luca and her daughter. The rest of her family had been killed and their home destroyed. They had nowhere else to go. She

feared she would end her days in a psychiatric hospital. The next visit brought Sister Margaret to the edge of tears. It was a hospital for 180 severely handicapped children in the nearby village of Drin. These children were abandoned during the war, after fighting broke out in the grounds of their hospital. Nurses fled in terror, leaving the children alone. When help finally arrived it was too late for some. Five children lay dead – one with his head stuck down a toilet in a misguided attempt to get a drink of water.

I saw a little girl called Mirna. She was standing up in her cot. She had a red, raw hollow socket where her eye had been. Inside the socket was a palpating red muscle. I wanted to run away. But I picked her up and hugged her. She hugged me back tightly. She needed contact. Above all, she needed an operation on her eye. Both the hospitals we visited have new physiotherapy centres, brought from Scotland by EDA.

Jeanne Bell of EDA said, ‘We still desperately need Sister Margaret to help us. During a war adrenalin keeps people going. But once the fighting is over, a fatigue sets in – like post traumatic stress.’

EDA has a new project in store. It involved a village called Biljani near Kljuc. The schoolmaster, a Serb, betrayed the villagers by identifying the Muslim men in Bilyani for the Chetniks. The men were taken away on two buses. When one bus broke down, the men who couldn’t squeeze on the next one were shot in cold blood. The rest were never seen again. EDA are helping the widowed women and their children re-build their homes. Help, as usual, will come from a tiny corner of Leith. Sister Margaret said: ‘There is so much good going on here. But winter is approaching and food is scarce. If something isn’t done, the children in hospital will starve. I am so proud of the Scots. They have helped make all this work possible. And, between you and me and the Daily Record, even though help came from all over the world, the help from Scotland was actually the most appreciated.’

Back home in Edinburgh, Sister Margaret is known in certain quarters as Mother Teresa - a tag she dismisses with a shrug. She prefers to be known as ‘a beggar for Bosnia’. Sister Margaret lives with three other nuns in the parish of St Mary’s Star of the Sea. But she is no ordinary nun. She has a colourful past which she is secretive about. She does occasionally let little snippets emerge. She trained as an electric welder during the war, then as a car fitter and a joiner. ‘I wasn’t a nun then and anyway all the men were away at the war. Somebody had to do the dirty work,’ she said.

Scotland’s Mother Teresa was born in Stoneyburn in 1917. Her mother died when she was eight and she left school to care for her younger brothers. On her sixteenth birthday, her father – a miner - was killed in an accident in the pit. She was married briefly to a sergeant in the Seaforth Highlanders who was killed in the battle of Cannes. Further questions about her past were actively discouraged. ‘If you print anything I don’t want printed, I’ll sue you and send all the money to Bosnia,’ she said.

She didn’t decide to become a nun until she was 34. Her sole memory of the journey to the novitiate in Liverpool was of two priests who saw her off at Waverley Station. Each gave her a packet of cigarettes. ‘I smoked the whole way down to Liverpool,’ she said, screwing up her face. ‘Never again’. Sister Margaret has no side to her. She treats everybody the same away – referring to women as ‘hen’ and men, including Archbishop Keith O’Brien and Sir Tom Farmer, simply as ‘son’.

Sir Tom Farmer, who invited the Daily Record out to Bosnia to cover Sister Margaret's visit is also one of the nun's biggest fans. He said, 'I grew up in Leith and have known the nuns at the convent all my life. I am 100 per cent behind the work they do there. In a sense I think they are unsung heroes. I invited the Daily Record out to follow Sister Margaret because I wanted the readers to see for themselves the devastation left behind in Bosnia. I gather that things are more difficult than ever, even though the war is over. There is need aplenty, but no money.'

Nicola Barry

Date of the article is not unknown, probably the late 1990s.