

D I A R Y
of
A T R A V E L I N G
P R E A C H E R

VOLUME V
May 2003 - November 2004

H.H. INDRADYUMNA SWAMI



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shifting the paradigm

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Dedication

*To Vyacheslav, King of the Siberian Gypsies: We are blood brothers now,
and I will not go back to Godhead without you.*

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my editors, Umapati Maharaja and Ken White, for their continued efforts in polishing up my diary chapters. Many thanks also to Advaita Candra Dasa and Jal Keli Dasa, who work hard to make the diary books quality productions.

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FOREWORD

I NDRADYUMNA SWAMI is one of the most successful Vaisnava preachers today. His preaching centers on taking Krsna Consciousness to the nondevotee world, especially in the form of Krsna's holy names. Although his preaching base is Poland, he travels throughout the former USSR, the USA, South Africa, and Australasia. Wherever he goes, his message - Srila Prabhupada's message - is the same: chant Hare Krsna and be happy.

This Swami is not an armchair prophet, sitting in a cozy office issuing dictums to preachers in the field. At fifty-five he lives the life of an itinerant, sleeps on the floor, eats what his assistants eat (or less), and is always on the front lines leading the charge of a battalion of Lord Caitanya's army. Whether on Harinama in the street, on a festival stage before thousands, or in a remote village of Siberia, Maharaja is the undisputed inspiration and example for the hundreds of dedicated souls who chant, preach, and serve with him.

Leading the charge has its perils, and its blessings. Maharaja knows the fatigue of age, the disrespect of drunks and punks, and the persecution from established churches - and he also knows the miracles of preaching, the taste of the holy name, and the blessings of guru and Gauranga.

In his *Diary of a Traveling Preacher* series he recounts his preaching adventures, both internal and external, thus revealing the work and the heart of one fully dedicated to the mission of Lord Caitanya. I read Maharaja's exploits as he sends them to me, and I'm always awed and inspired by his unique dedication to a service Srila Prabhupada emphasized above all others. By reading Maharaja's lucid narration of his traveling exploits, I feel I am there with him - or rather that I should be there with him.

Diary of a Traveling Preacher stirs the hearts of those touched by one of

Prabhupada's most famous statements: "If you feel at all indebted to me, then you should preach vigorously like me." I hope this volume inspires its readers to follow Maharaja's sterling example. We need to be reminded of the miracles preaching has produced in the lives of those who have taken Lord Caitanya's message to heart and preach widely.

If ISKCON had one hundred devotees as active as Indradyumna Swami, it would be leading the spiritual revolution Srila Prabhupada envisaged for the world. If you are not among the hundred, drop what you're doing and join in. If you can't embark upon this challenging nectar-ocean of preaching, make your home a preaching base and support Indradyumna Swami in his efforts. That will certainly give you a place in the history of Lord Caitanya's sankirtana movement, a history that is being narrated, in part, in *Diary of a Traveling Preacher*.

—Sivarama Swami



BACK ON THE TOUR

May 15-26, 2003

ON MAY 15, I flew from Los Angeles to Ukraine for Nrsimhadeva Caturdasi. I felt uplifted to be going back to Eastern Europe and to my responsibilities on the festival tour in Poland, but the 36-hour journey, with connecting flights in Detroit, London, Warsaw, and Kiev, left me reeling.

Indeed, I was not ready for the young man who approached me at Kiev Airport and began preaching to me in broken English about the Second Coming of Christ and the need for redemption. He ended by asking for a donation.



Indradyumna Swami arriving in Ukraine

"I don't have any money on me," I told him with a smile, "but I will be happy to share my own understanding of God with you."

As we sat, I told him about the personal nature of Krsna and how we awaken our love for Him by chanting His holy names. He listened attentively, and then he asked if he could give me a donation. "I wanted a donation from you," he said, handing me some bills, "but somehow I feel inspired to give you one."

From Kiev I caught a domestic flight to Dnepropetrovsk, where I was met by several devotees. At the local temple, I quickly showered and changed clothes, and then I went to a hall in the city for the first evening of the festival. Jet lag was setting in,

and I nodded off on the way, but I soon awoke to the roaring kirtan of a thousand devotees gathered to greet me. During the next three days we chanted and danced in great happiness.

Even so, I missed the company of my Godbrothers. For years I have attended festivals throughout the former Soviet Union, often in the association of thousands of devotees, but it was always with at least two or three Godbrothers like Bhakti Bhringa Govinda Maharaja, Niranjana Maharaja, or Purnacandra Prabhu. I was always glad to be with them, as it takes immense spiritual energy to enliven thousands of devotees for days at a time.

This time, I led most of the kirtans and gave all the classes, and because my own birthday had come, I was the focus of attention. So while speaking or leading kirtan I often kept my eyes closed, something I rarely do. I wanted to envision my own spiritual master, the previous acaryas, and my closest Godbrothers and to remember that by their mercy alone am I able to do anything in Kṛṣṇa consciousness.

*dasavat sannataryanghriḥ
pitṛvad dīna-vatsalah
bhratrivat sadṛse snigdho
gurusv īśvara-bhavanah*

“To respectable persons he [Prahlaḍa Maharaja] acted exactly like a menial servant, to the poor he was like a father, to his equals he was attached like a sympathetic brother, and he considered his teachers, spiritual masters and older Godbrothers to be as good as the Supreme Personality of Godhead.” [*Srīmad-Bhāgavatam* 7.4.32]

Then I flew to Warsaw. The devotees wanted to greet me with the customary etiquette, but even as they were garlanding me, I was already asking about the preparations for the Festival of India. Half-mindful of the pleasantries, I was wondering how things were progressing for the first festival of the season, in Brodnica, just two days away.

Nandini daśī, however, could not wait to tell me about that day’s filming of a Harinam party for a new movie by Jerzy Stuhr, one of Poland’s best-known movie producers. Stuhr himself plays the lead, a man who joins the Hare Kṛṣṇa movement after a life of struggle and spiritual searching. The final scene shows him shaved up in a dhoti and kurta chanting with the devotees on the streets of Warsaw.

Nandini told me how Śrī Prahlaḍa and a kirtan party had met the

film crew in the center of Warsaw that morning. When Stuhr arrived, his make-up and wardrobe team were at a loss as to how to dress him for the scene and asked the devotees to help, so Jayatam das shaved him up in the dressing room and helped him put on a dhoti and kurta as well as tilak and neck beads.

As the kirtan started and the cameras rolled, a crowd gathered, and many of the people recognized Stuhr. As per the script, he went into the crowd, who were amazed to see him chanting and dancing with the devotees, and handed out invitations to the Sunday Feast at the Warsaw temple. The people were thrilled to accept flyers from the hands of one of Poland's highly visible media personalities.

After the filming, Stuhr joined the devotees and took prasadam. When Jayatam asked if he had met the devotees before, Stuhr said he hadn't but that he had been aware of them in Poland since his youth. He saw us as people who represent peace, happiness, and goodness in society, and he wanted to say in the movie that by following Vaisnava principles, people can live without hypocrisy and falsehood.

Just then the film's female lead joined them, still aglow from the blissful kirtan. "The final scene, where the devotees are chanting, is the best part of the movie," she told Stuhr. "Without them it would be empty."

The film will be released in September, and it's expected to be an enormous box-office success, like all of Stuhr's other works.

Then we set off for our base north of Warsaw, a two-hour drive. Nandini and Radha Sakhi Vrnda briefed me on the Brodnica festival. Opposition to the event was building: Priests in the local schools were warning the children not to attend, and shop owners, fearful of reprisals by the Church, had refused to let devotees put up festival posters in their shop windows.

Jurek Owsiak, the organizer of the annual Polish Woodstock Festival every summer and an ardent supporter of our movement, inadvertently added to the tension in an interview in Poland's prestigious *Polityka* magazine. Upset with the attitude of the Jesus People at last year's Woodstock, he said he was not inviting them this year. Then the interviewer asked if the Hare Krsnas would be invited. "Krsna, yes! Jesus, no!" Jurek replied with a smile.

Jurek Owsiak is a devout Catholic. He is highly respected in Poland, and his words carry weight, but his acceptance and tolerance of other religions is not appreciated by some, and the magazine's use of the quote for the headline to its article attracted attention even in rural Brodnica.

On the other hand, signs that our movement is gradually being ac-



Jurek Owsiak, an ardent supporter of our movement

cepted in Poland continue to manifest. As we headed north, Radha Sakhi Vrnda received a call from the town secretary of Brodnica. A woman had just stormed into the mayor's office and demanded an explanation from the mayor himself: Why was a dangerous sect allowed to hold a festival in the very heart of the city?

The mayor showed her our brochure on his desk. The Hare Kṛṣṇa Movement represents the culture of ancient India, he told her, and added that he was pleased to offer this to the people of Brodnica. Poland will soon be joining the European Union, he said, and it was time for Poles to open up to other cultures and traditions.

The woman was flabbergasted. She turned and left without another word.

It does seem that our struggle to push forward Kṛṣṇa consciousness in Poland is beginning to bear fruit. And why not? Srila Prabhupada once said that the only thing that can stop this movement is internal difficulty— either our own material desires or conflict within. If we are strict with ourselves, always following the regulative principles and chanting our rounds, and if we maintain respectful and friendly relations with the devotees we serve alongside of, our movement will spread.

“Sri Caitanya Mahāprabhu wanted to preach the sankīrtan movement of love of Kṛṣṇa throughout the entire world, and therefore during His presence He inspired the sankīrtan movement. Specifically, He sent Rupa Gosvami to Vrndaavan and Nityānanda to Bengal and personally went to south India. In this way He kindly left the task of preaching His cult in the rest of the world to the International Society for Kṛṣṇa Consciousness. The members of this Society must always remember that if they stick to the regulative principles and preach sincerely according to the instructions of the ācāryas, surely they will have the profound blessings of Lord Caitanya Mahāprabhu, and their preaching work will be successful everywhere throughout the world.” [*Caitanya-caritamṛta*, Ādi 7.171]

There is, however, one stubborn factor that does hinder our festivals and makes them messy affairs: Rain.

It poured buckets as we drove north, becoming heavier with each kilometer. It had been unseasonably cold and wet for two weeks in the region—definitely not the weather we wanted, as we rely heavily on a successful first festival. It sets a precedent for staging festivals in nearby towns.



Rain, hindering our festivals and making them messy affairs

The Mayor of Brodnica is sympathetic to our movement, and he had allotted the town's center square for the event. "By giving you the best place in town," he said, "I am sending a message to all the other towns in this region. If you are successful here, you will have no problem getting permission from other places."

Nonetheless, if it rained, the show would not go on, despite any amount of preparation. As I looked to the skies, I couldn't help wondering whether the dark clouds could possibly dissipate within 48 hours.

The next day the temperature rose a few degrees and the rain lapsed into a drizzle, but on the morning of the festival I was disappointed to find it was still drizzling. I put on my raincoat, covered my head, and went to the temple. During Srila Prabhupada's guru-puja, all the devotees chanted and danced in hopes of a successful beginning to the tour. Suddenly, at the height of the kirtan, the clouds parted a little and sunlight came peeking in through the windows. I turned to Gaura Hari das. "It's a sign from the heavens," I said. "Everything's going to be all right."

By mid-morning, the tent crews were busy setting up the festival. Sri Prahlad and I took a Harinam party around town one more time, distributing what was left from the invitations given out over the previous few days, 20 thousand all in all. Gradually the skies cleared, and by afternoon it was a beautiful day. The crew finished setting up on time, just as the women were putting the final touches of color on the tents. At 4.30 pm., our bhajan band began a soft kirtan on stage as all 120 devotees took their places in the shops, exhibits, restaurants, dressing rooms, and other areas. Now we would wait for our guests.

It was an anxious moment. We had been working hard for six months making arrangements, obtaining licenses, raising funds, and creating new

exhibits. There wasn't any reason to think no one would come—they'd been coming for 13 years—but this was the first festival of the year.

The mayor's words kept running through my mind: "If you are successful here, you will have no problem getting permission from other places." I waited on the edge of the stage, the very place where I had sat nine months ago, when I watched thousands of people leave the final festival of last season. My heart was racing.

Then they started to arrive—not just one or two at a time but in big groups, pouring onto the festival grounds, smiling and laughing, ready for the show. The crowd soon swelled to more than three thousand, with many gathering in front of the stage. They wanted the music, the dance, the theater, the books and the prasadam.

I jumped down from the stage and began milling through the crowd. I felt at home again, mingling with the people as they experienced the wonderful world of Kṛṣṇa consciousness. There was no place on earth or in the heavens I would rather have been.

I couldn't help smiling. "This is only the beginning," I thought. "There are forty-eight more festivals to come."

No doubt the sun won't always be shining, and certainly our opposition have their plans, but with more than nine thousand people coming to the three-day event in Brodnica, we had achieved the auspicious beginning that the mayor and all of us had hoped for.

The Great Festival of the Holy Names had begun in Poland.

*akhīla bhuvana bandho prema sindho jane smin sakala kapata purne jnana hine prapanne
tava carana soroje dehi dasyam prabhu tvam patita tarana nama pradur asit yatas te*

"O friend of all the world! O ocean of love! The populace has become full of deceit and bereft of knowledge. O my master! Kindly give them shelter at Your Lotus feet, for the holy name, uplifter of the fallen, has become manifest from You." [Sarvabhauma Bhattacharya: *Srī Gaurāṅga-mahimamṛta*, Susloka Satakam, Text 21]

2

GARLANDING HEADS OF STATE

May 27-31, 2003

THE SUCCESS OF THE BRODNICA FESTIVAL was confirmed the next day, when a local newspaper published a front-page article about the event. Under the headline “Hindu Festivities in Brodnica,” it ran a large color photo of a devotee painting gopi dots on the face of a girl. Regional television also ran a 10-minute report about the festival using our own footage.

Our camera was a gift from Sunil Madhava das, president of the Chicago temple. When Sri Prahlad and I visited Chicago on our recent tour of America, Sunil Madhava Prabhu kindly bought us a professional digital camera for the Festival of India. The camera is of a higher standard than those of most Polish television crews, so local television stations gladly accept our footage, which is an asset to our advertising.

But victories often come at the expense of something dear. In the afternoon, Nandini dasi approached me with a dejected look on her face.

“What’s the problem?” I asked.

“The festival in Ilawa, one of the biggest towns in the region, has been canceled by the mayor,” she replied. “His secretary just phoned and said that he read the article about Brodnica this morning and that we are not welcome in Ilawa. When I asked if we could come and speak to him, she said there was nothing to discuss, and hung up the phone.”

As we were mourning the loss, Nandini’s phone rang again. This time her face went pale, and I knew why. “Another festival canceled?” I asked.

“Yes,” she replied. “The head of cultural affairs in Nowe Miasto said that some city councilors visited the festival in Brodnica and that they were not interested in having a foreign religion introduced to their town.”

I was restless for the whole day. I kept envisioning all the people who would have come to those festivals, and I know well the crowds. Our festivals are the biggest event of the year in most towns, and many peo-



The biggest event of the year

ple come dressed in their best clothes, looking for relief from the boredom and drudgery of their lives. They are eager for excitement and entertainment, and a few are genuinely searching for an alternative to material life. Our transcendental experience of the spiritual world provides all this and more. It was painful to think that people were being denied this opportunity by a few narrow-minded politicians.

That night I fell asleep with mixed feelings of happiness and distress, gain and loss, victory and defeat. I was happy for the people of Brodnica but lamenting for the people in Ilawa and Nowe Miasto who would have surely flocked to our festival. It might be decades before the sankirtan movement comes back to those towns.

“What a loss!” I kept thinking. In *Bhagavad-gita*, Krsna tells Arjuna to be above loss and gain, but this instruction is about personal desires. When it comes to the Lord’s service, a devotee will feel loss and gain even more strongly than a materialist.

My anxiety continued the next morning as I paced the temple room chanting my rounds. I tried to focus on the holy names, but I kept thinking of the canceled festivals.

Suddenly, Jayatama das came up to me with a smile on his face. “Srila Gurudeva,” he said, “I have good news. The town secretary in Nidzica phoned to ask if we could provide an hour-long cultural program to entertain the Polish and Swedish prime ministers. They will be visiting the town on the day of our festival next week. They want to encourage citizens to vote for a referendum on Poland’s entry into the European Union.”

“Tell them we accept their gracious offer,” I said, so surprised I could not say anything more.

“Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.”
[Psalms]

Nandini and Radha Sakhi Vrinda were out the entire day looking for towns to replace the canceled festivals in Ilawa and Nowe Miasto. In the evening they returned, also with good news.

“When we walked into the mayor’s office in Rypin, we had a pleasant surprise,” Nandini said. “He greeted us with ‘Hare Krishna, ladies.’”

Nandini continued. “‘I was expecting you,’ he said. ‘I know you had a successful festival in Brodnica, but that your festival in Ilawa has been canceled. But don’t worry. We’ll be happy to host you here. Speak to my secretary, and she’ll make all the arrangements.’”

The second festival of the season was held in Lidzbark. We were given a large parking lot next to the town hall to stage the event, but we were barely able to fit our stage and tents into the area. When several thousand people came on the first day it was a tight fit for everyone. As I approached the stage to give my lecture, I even heard people complain that there was little room to move.



*Indradyumna Swami and
Radha Sakhi Vrinda dasi*

“Krsna has trapped them,” I thought. “They’ve been moving here and there for millions of lives. Let them be still for a moment and hear the absolute truth.”

I then spoke to my captive audience for 20 minutes, explaining that we are all spirit souls trapped in the material world and that we can achieve liberation by chanting the Lord’s holy names.

When I stepped down from the stage, a devotee came and told me a reporter was snooping around the festival taking photographs and speaking with guests. I am always wary of the media, and I wanted to protect our recent good coverage, so I watched him carefully.

The reporter saw me and spoke to Jayatām. “Tell Indradyumna Maharaja not to worry,” he said. “I am sympathetic to your movement. Years ago, I lived in the Warsaw temple as a devotee. He can expect a favorable article soon.”

Although the Mayor of Lidzbark had a clear view of the festival from his office window, he seemed reluctant to come down. In the evening, however, he was walking around the grounds with his two teenage daughters, both of whom were wearing saris from the fashion booth, and they were all enjoying themselves. He stayed until our band, Village of Peace, played its last song.

Nandini went to him and asked him to open the next day's festivities from the stage. He agreed, but then didn't show. When Nandini tried to find out why, his secretary suggested a reason: "This morning's sermon in church probably scared him," she said.

Our third festival was held in Dzialdowo. It is a village of about 10,000, and 27 of our brahmana-initiated devotees come from there. We expected quite a crowd, but I was apprehensive because the spot allocated for the festival by the city authorities was some distance from the center of town. Even more disturbing, it was next to a big, unattractive, dirt parking lot.

But in the end, the parking lot turned out to be a convenient facility for the many people who took the trouble to drive from town to the festival. By the Lord's arrangement, the parking area filled with over a hundred cars and became a spiritual asset for yet another successful festival.

For days we meticulously rehearsed our one-hour stage show for the visit of the Polish and Swedish premiers in Nidzica. On the morning of the show, however, we were let down: the secretary at city hall called to say that the premiers would leave immediately after their speeches to meet U.S. President George Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair in Krakow.

"Don't be too upset," she said. "You can still perform for the other dignitaries." Her promise could hardly soothe me. My heart felt grievously wounded to think that the premiers would be absent.

Just before noon, I went with 16 other devotees and walked up the steps to the medieval castle on the hill above Nidzica, where the program was to be held. As we approached the main gate of the castle, the security personnel stopped us. Even though they knew we were part of the program, they still made us open our harmonium case and boxes of prasadam to show that we were not concealing weapons.

Then we took our positions in the courtyard with hundreds of other people. When the premiers arrived, a brass band played the Polish and Swedish national anthems. Finally the premiers stood on a podium and spoke about the benefits of EU membership and about the isolation Poland would suffer by not joining.

Vara-nayaka das thought we might be able to go onstage and present the leaders with books and garlands, but when he asked the Polish premier's Chief of Staff, he was told it was not the right mood. Vara-nayaka then quoted the slogan printed on all of our festival posters and invitations this year: "One Europe—One World," insisting that this was indeed the mood of the speeches. The official was not convinced, but he

did compromise. “You can give garlands to the premiers as they leave the castle for their vehicles,” he said.

Vara-nayaka and two matajis went to present the garlands, but first the security guards conducted a body search on them and even inspected the garlands. They were then led to a waiting area near the castle entrance, and an officer was assigned to watch them.

The Swedish Prime Minister, Goran Persson—in the company of the state governor, the governor’s deputy, members of the Polish parliament, and regional mayors—was the first of the leaders to reach the gate.

Vara-nayaka stepped forward. “We are from the Festival of India,” he said, “and we would like to offer you a flower garland.”

Mr Persson seemed impressed. “Is the garland made of real flowers?” he asked.

“Yes, it is,” Vara-nayaka replied.

“And it will stay fresh for two weeks,” he added playfully.

“How is that?” Mr Persson asked.

“Indian magic,” Vara-nayaka answered.

“I will be meeting Russian President Vladimir Putin in St. Petersburg in a couple of days,” Mr Persson said with a smile. “If what you say is true, I will present this garland to him.”

By this time the Polish Premier, Leszek Miller, had joined them, and both leaders accepted the garlands from the matajis as media photographers clicked away. The premiers then posed for pictures wearing the garlands and flanked on each side by devotees.

At the end of the official program the premiers departed, and the devotees and dignitaries walked back to the courtyard for our performance.

Afterwards, the devotees joined some of the town councilors in the castle dining room to celebrate a successful afternoon.

It was a pleasure to see the councilors accept our gifts and prasadam, and the mayor of Nidzica received a *Bhagavad-gita* from Vara-nayaka. “You don’t know how happy you have made me with your participation in this event,” said the mayor. “Mr. Persson noticed your people, particularly the Indian dancers, and sent an assistant to ask me about them. I was proud to tell him the town is hosting the Festival of India. I would like to invite you to my office on Monday so I can officially thank you for your gifts and for sharing your culture with us.”

The next day, at the conclusion of our festival in Nidzica’s center square, Rama Acyuta das told me that he had exchanged pleasantries with two well-dressed couples in the book tent. Each couple then bought a copy



The festival's booktent

of every book in stock. I asked Rama Acyuta if he knew the people.

He smiled. He was saving the best for last. "Maharaja," he said, "the couples were the mayor and the deputy-mayor and their wives."

"What?" I said. "They bought a copy of all our books?"

"Yes," Rama Acyuta replied. "The mayor stayed up late last night reading the *Bhagavad-gita* and decided he wanted to read everything Srila Prabhupada had written."

A devotee nearby turned to me. "How is all this happening, Maharaja?" he asked.

What could I say? I could not fathom the magnitude of all that had happened over the last few days. "It must simply be the causeless mercy of Lord Caitanya Mahaprabhu," I said. "He is flooding this land with the nectar of His holy names."

"The lotus flowers of Lord Caitanya's eyes were covered with flowing drops of honey that were His tears. The hairs of His body stood up and He trembled in ecstasy. In a voice choked with bliss He called out, 'Hari! Hari!' I pray that the Supreme Personality of Godhead, Lord Caitanya Mahaprabhu, the son of Saci-devi, may give you all a great festival of nectar of the transcendental bliss of pure love for Krsna." [Srila Prabodhananda Sarasvati: *Sri Sangita-madhava*, Chapter 16-conclusion]

3

ASPIRING TO BE A LOYAL DISCIPLE

June 1-5, 2003

WHEN NANDINI AND RADHA SAKHI VRINDA visited the Mayor of Nidzica, as he had requested, he congratulated them for our three days of successful festivities. Ninety-five percent of the town was in love with Hare Krsna, he told them.

“What about the other five percent?” Radha Sakhi Vrinda asked.

The mayor’s face became serious. “The priests in Nidzica were vilifying the festival from the pulpit and going to schools to deter the children from going,” he said. “But I see our community as tolerant and open, and I encouraged the citizens. Because you gave me good publicity by entertaining the dignitaries at the castle, I am indebted to you. The next time you visit, the town will accommodate the entire festival group in our best hotel.”

Later, I thought about how things had been going better on the spring tour than I had expected. Of course, two festivals had been canceled, but we had found other venues, and the publicity generated in Nidzica was invaluable. The following evening, however, I received an email from my astrologer friend, Shyamasundara das, reminding me of a conversation we had had when I was in America. He had told me that the period from the start of June through mid-July would be difficult and I would face much opposition.

As I contemplated his email, I remembered that I had kept notes of our talk, and after a search I discovered them at the bottom of my bags. “A time of confrontation, fighting, and expending great amounts of energy to defend yourself,” they said. “Many challenges, disputes, intrigue. You will eventually win the war, but you will lose a number of battles.”

It seemed hard to believe. We were having such a wonderful tour. But Shyamasundara’s calculations are rarely, if ever, wrong.

“Don’t think there are no crocodiles just because the water is calm.”

[Malayan proverb]

I awoke with a start the next morning, bracing myself for any eventuality. I didn't have to wait long. At 9.30 am Jayatama das came to my room as I was working at my computer and put the morning edition of the local newspaper on my desk.

"Hare Kṛṣṇa Sect Poses as Cultural Event," shrieked the headline. The front-page article went on to discredit the tour in every way imaginable, accusing us of gun-running, drug-trafficking, kidnapping of children, murder, and extortion. It didn't have to be fact to convince the simple, farming community. As far as they are concerned, newspapers tell the truth.

Minutes later Nandini came to my room. "Śrīla Gurudeva," she said, "my phone hasn't stopped ringing. City councilors, heads of culture houses, and police from around the region are calling to question our authenticity. Two towns have canceled."



We decided to play tough...

We immediately held a tour council meeting and decided to play tough: The newspaper would have to publish an apology or face legal action.

Nandini and Radha Sakhi Vrinda went to Mlawa, one of the larger towns to cancel. The town secretary had previously been sympathetic, but now she angrily accused us of wanting to stage a festival to start a center for cultists. When Nandini and Radha Sakhi Vrinda told her the accusations were false, she said she would believe that only if she saw an apology in the newspaper.

Just a day earlier, Nandini and Radha Sakhi Vrinda had convinced the Mayor of Ilawa (the first town to cancel last week) to allow the festival to continue. As our Harinam bus headed there to advertise the revived event, the two matajis made their way from Mlawa to Ilawa for a noon appointment with the mayor in the hope of signing a contract before we started Harinam.

As we got out of the bus in Ilawa, Nandini called me from the town

hall. "The mayor and the city council have agreed to the festival in principle," she said, "but the mayor will be in a meeting for about two more hours. He said to start advertising and he'll sign the contract as soon as he is free. It seems certain, but sometimes when we chant on the streets it attracts our opposition. Someone may even complain to the mayor before we get his signature. On the other hand, we have only two days to advertise."

I made the decision to risk a Harinam. I was sure that the mayor's sincerity would override any opposition.

It was a beautiful day with many people on the streets. Sri Prahlad was in top form as we chanted and danced with abandon, winding our way through lanes and alleys for two hours, distributing more than 3,000 invitations. We pasted up more than 100 posters throughout the town. We worked hard, and it was an especially hot day.



"Sri Prahlada was in top form"

When we finished we were exhausted, especially me. At 54, I'm starting to have trouble keeping up with a five-hour Harinam six days a week. But I have to. By going out, I encourage the devotees, and when they're inspired, the people are attracted and come to our festivals.

I got into my van and leaned back in the seat for a moment's rest. Suddenly my phone rang. I immediately felt something was wrong. After years of sankirtan, I have a sixth sense. It was Radha Sakhi Vrinda. "The mayor refused to sign the contract," she said. "The priests in Ilawa saw the Harinam and complained. You know how much power they exert. The



A moment's rest...

mayor would lose his job if he didn't comply."

If we had waited just two more hours we would have had the contract in hand, but there would have been no Harinam, and with only one day left it was uncertain how many would have come without advertising. Nevertheless, I blamed myself for the decision.

"War is mainly a catalogue of

blunders." [Winston Churchill]

The only consolation was the phone call Nandini received from the sheriff of Ilawa as we left town. "I'm supposed to reprimand you for pasting posters at the bus stops," he said. "It's not allowed. But the real reason I'm phoning is to apologize for the mayor's decision to cancel your festival. I'm embarrassed to call myself a citizen of this town."

Despite the heartfelt apology, the cancellation meant at least 5,000 people might not hear the holy names, taste prasadam, or read Srila Prabhupada's books in this lifetime. Is that not a catastrophe worth publishing in the newspapers?

Everyone was silent as we proceeded to Lipno for the season's fifth festival. To divert my mind, I picked up volume two of *Sri Brhat-Bhagavatamrta*. As I read the first chapter, I marveled to think that there is a world free from the turbulence of this one, and I dreamed for a moment that someday I could go there.



"The duty of the disciple is to fulfill the mission of his spiritual master"

But then something else came to mind. "The duty of the disciple is to fulfill the mission of his spiritual master before he even thinks of going back to the spiritual world," I thought. I put the book down, and my anxiety came back as I thought about the loss in Ilawa.

When we entered Lipno an hour later, the scene before us took me by surprise and lifted my spir-

its. The mayor was onstage, opening the festival before a crowd of thousands.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he said, his voice booming over the loudspeakers, “it is indeed an honor to host this great event in our town. I invite all of you to enjoy these festivities over the next two days. We have an opportunity to learn about the culture of India. I now officially open this Festival of India.”

I don’t usually cry (my heart is hard, like stone), but the roar of approval from the crowd, the sound of sweet victory so soon after defeat, brought tears even to these illusion-covered eyes of mine.

O Srila Prabhupada, surely you must share with us the pain of defeat and the happiness of victory in pushing on your mission. Please bless us with the courage to face our opposition, the intelligence to make the right decisions, and the spiritual strength to bring your message to the people. And by your grace, may we one day achieve perfection.



I now officially open this Festival of India.”

*param gopyam api snigdhe
sisye vacyam iti srutih
tac chruyatam maha bhaga
goloka mahimadhuna*

“The *Vedas* say that to a loyal disciple one may speak the confidential secret. Therefore, O most fortunate one, now please hear the glories of Goloka.” [Sri Brhat-Bhagavatamrta, Part Two, Chapter I, Text 6]

4

GIVE NO QUARTER, SHOW NO MERCY,
TAKE NO PRISONERS
June 6 - June 11

THE FESTIVAL IN LIPNO was one of the most memorable in the 13 years of our Polish tour. News of the mayor's rousing speech to open the event spread throughout town, and even more people came for what was supposed to be the second and final day.

But the people wanted more. A group of citizens went to the Mayor before the festival ended and asked him to let it continue a third day. It didn't take much to convince him, and when we were told that he agreed, we also agreed. In order to reciprocate with the people, we announced that we would hold a Vedic wedding the next day. I ended the evening by asking the people to bring fruit and flowers for the bride and groom.

The next day, as we drove through town on our way to the festival site, I was surprised to see big crowds of people carrying bunches of flowers and wrapped gifts walking towards the festival grounds. I even saw a group of little children, too poor to buy flowers, plucking them from the gardens of people's houses and running away towards the festival before the owners caught them.



First Vedic wedding in Lipno

We opened the festival with the wedding of a young Russian couple, Yoga Nrisimha das and Manorama dasi. The attendance was even larger than the previous two days. The grounds were packed with thousands of people, and local television had come as well. As I looked over the excited crowd, I shook my head in amazement, thinking that it was all the will of the people. By

their desire alone, we were there for a third day.

Everyone's attention was riveted on the one-hour ceremony. In the little village of Lipno, nothing ever happens. No performing artists ever come, and there isn't even a movie theater. The circus that passes through the region once a year never stops there. As I looked at the faces in the audience, I could see that they were getting more than they had ever hoped for. They were all smiles.

Many people cried as the couple exchanged garlands. Scores of children threw rice on them at the end, and when Yoga Nrismha and Manorama came down from the stage into the audience, they were deluged by hundreds of flower bouquets.

The people, already appreciative of the festival, were now in love with the devotees. We quickly cleaned the stage, and when the entertainment started again, there was a huge round of applause. When the crowd surged forward to the front of the stage, our security had to quickly jump in front and calm them down.

When the Ramayana play started, everyone froze and remained still until the end of the drama. Some devotees told me later that when Jatayu was killed by Ravana, they saw some people with tears in their eyes. I couldn't resist a little joke. "This is the Crying Town," I said with a smile.

When I started a bhajan on the stage, people gave up whatever shyness they had left and started to dance. The children in particular danced wildly.

When I finished, the mayor came up on the stage unannounced and took the microphone from me. He stood before the citizens for a few moments to get their attention, and then he thanked our festival for coming and contributing so much to the town. I could see that he was speaking from the heart. He said it was the biggest event in living memory and asked us to come back again. As he spoke, I saw a number of people cry-



Sri Prahlada das conducting the sacrifice



The Ramayana-play



Indradyumna Swami's bhajan

ing.

Our Village of Peace reggae band played for the final act, and hundreds of people of all ages danced. When the band ended, I said a final goodbye to the audience, but when I finished, hundreds of them began to scream in unison: “More! More! More!”

When they realized the program was indeed finished, many rushed forward and began hugging the devotees. I had never seen anything like it. I must honestly say that I came to love those people as earnestly as I love the devotees of the

Lord. As our buses left, many surrounded us, and typical of them, cried.

Someone might dismiss their crying as mere sentiment, but I would counter that the object of their crying was Kṛṣṇa—His pastimes (the Ramayana), His devotees (separation from them), and His glories (the festival). Their crying was the first awakening of true spiritual feeling in the heart.

As we drove away, I had to consciously put all the sweetness behind me and turn to the battle we were fighting on several fronts. Throughout the day, I had been in contact with Nandini and Radha Sakhi Vrinda, who were giving me a running report on their efforts to save a number of festivals in jeopardy. It was all coming from the bad publicity we had gotten in a single article on the front page of a local newspaper. Determined, the two matajis had gone back to Ilawa, where the mayor had given in to pressure from the town priest and canceled our event, even as we were on Harinama advertising it.



I came to love those people

They discovered that the abrupt cancellation of the festival had angered many citizens. Our festival in Brodnica, the first of the season, had been a great success, and the news had spread everywhere. People in many towns, including Ilawa, were honored that we wanted to have the

festival in their towns, but when Nandini and Radha Sakhi Vrinda, tried to meet the mayor, they were told he was “out of town for three days.”

Infuriated by the lie, they contacted the local radio station. A newspaper listened to their story and agreed to run a half-page article on the unfair decision. Two other radio stations immediately began telling the truth about the cancellation on their news broadcasts. Once again, the people were on our side.

Unable to save the festival in Ilawa, Nandini and Radha Sakhi Vrinda quickly drove to Rypin, a town they had secured to replace the Ilawa festival. The town secretary had called them and told them the mayor was getting cold feet about the festival after hearing about the damaging article and receiving a visit from the town priest that morning.

After two hours of talks, Nandini and Radha Sakhi Vrinda convinced the mayor, and he signed the contract. Then they went to see the spot he had allocated, a nearby soccer field.

The man in charge of the field had already heard about the contract. “I know you people,” he said. “I’ve been to one of your summer festivals up on the coast. I am proud of our mayor. He showed the courage to stand up for what is right and not back down.”

But biggest challenge was the local newspaper, which in and of itself was causing all the problems. Jayatam das had visited them with a letter demanding a public apology. When Nandini and Radha Sakhi Vrinda followed the letter up with a visit to the head office, they were told in no uncertain terms that the newspaper would not retract what it had written.

They sent me an SMS on my phone and asked how to proceed. They sensed that the newspaper might print more malicious things about our festival programs.

“Speak to them again,” I said. “Give them one more chance.”

They wrote back that the editor was continuing his defiant stance.

I immediately sent a text message: “Give no quarter, show no mercy, take no prisoners.”

Without waiting another minute, they called our lawyer, one of the best in the country.

Between the local priests, who seem to be working together to stop our festivals, and the threat of this newspaper, which has shown its power to disrupt our programs, we have a strong opposition working against us now. We must diligently protect our festivals. By Lord Caitanya’s mercy, these festivals have the power to awaken spiritual feelings amongst some of the poorest and most fallen souls in the land.

Srila Prabhupada told us that purity is the force that will enable us to succeed in any and all preaching. I resolved to focus more carefully on my spiritual practices, praying to gain the strength needed to win.

*urdhva retas tapasy ugro
nityatasi ca samyami
sapanugrahayoh saktah
satya sandho bhaved rsih*

“A rsi is one who is celibate, who is fierce in observing vows, who eats moderately, controls his senses, is able to curse and bless, and adheres firmly to the truth.” [The sage Devala]



VAIKUNTHA PARK

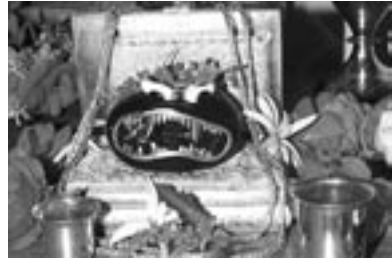
June 11 - 20, 2003

HAVING SEEN THE POWER OF THE MEDIA to bless or curse, I closely followed our lawyers' dealings with the newspaper. We had demanded either an apology or the right to publish an article by the Festival of India presenting our side. The editors were sure we would back down under pressure (and no doubt they wielded more power), but unknown to them, we held the trump card.

*vidiksu diksurdhvam adhah samantad
antar bahir bhagavan narasimhah
prahapayal loka-bhayam svanena
sva-tejasa grasta-samasta-tejah*

"Prahlada Maharaja loudly chanted the holy name of the Lord Nrsimhadeva. May Lord Nrsimhadeva, roaring for His devotee Prahlada Maharaja, protect us from all fear of dangers created by stalwart leaders in all directions through poison, weapons, water, fire, air and so on. May the Lord cover their influence by His own transcendental influence. May Nrsimhadeva protect us in all directions and in all corners, above, below, within and without." [*Srimad-Bhagavatam* 6.8.34]

After five days, the newspaper gave in and printed our rebuttal. I was jubilant. We had won without a legal battle, set a precedent for fair coverage of the festival, and published what the town secretary of Mlawa needed to grant permission for the festival, which she had canceled because of the earlier report.



Indradrumma Swami's Nrsimha salagrama



Colorful, special style of Harinam

With the victory under our belt, we returned to our festival programs with renewed vigor and enthusiasm. We began Harinam in Ostroda, a town of 40,000 people, three days before the festival, with a colorful kirtan party of 60 devotees. We have developed a special style of Harinam, with 20 women in front and 20 in back. Twenty men playing

musical instruments form the middle of the Harinam, while both groups of women dance in synchronized patterns.

It makes for a stunning effect, the men wearing chaddars and the ladies in colorful silk saris, gopi dots, and beautiful silk garlands. People stopped to watch the parade go through their town, and when we passed by apartment blocks, many waved from open windows.

The second day of Harinam took place on Pandava Nirjala Ekadasi. Almost 150 tour devotees observed the full Ekadasi, abstaining from all food and drink. I was especially pleased with the Harinam devotees, who chanted and danced in the sweltering heat for hours as they distributed invitations to the festival.

But my heart sank when I saw the place the city had given us. It was a small field in a park in a seedy, low-class part of town not far from the railway station. The grass was uncut and surrounded by a rusty fence. There were many rundown apartment blocks in the area.

I arrived as the set-up crew was putting up the tents, and I had a feeling that the location would scare people away. And I was right. That day only 600 people came. To confirm my suspicions, I asked some of the guests, and they said the area was a dangerous part of town that people avoided. Nevertheless, we went on with our program, and by the mercy of the holy names, we transformed the park into Vaikuntha, at least for a few hours.

Word spread, and on the second day, the crowd swelled to 1,500. A local gypsy clan came out in numbers as well, but it was obvious that many people felt uncomfortable around them. The gypsies could sense it, and they kept to themselves.

Then halfway through the festival, as I was speaking from the stage, a fight broke out at the back of the crowd between the gypsies and some drunken boys. I kept speaking, hoping that people might not notice, but it took some time for our security to break up the fight, and a number of

people were disturbed and left.

I was disappointed to see them leave, but I could understand. I also feel anxious sometimes. A devotee may be forced by the nature of his service to deal with people inclined to low-class behavior, like drinking and fighting, in order to try to deliver them. Nevertheless, by the grace of the Lord, a preacher is protected from the influence of such association.

“The devotees in the Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement are preaching all over the world in accordance with the order of Sri Caitanya Mahāprabhu. They have to meet many karmis, but by the mercy of Sri Caitanya Mahāprabhu, they are unaffected by material influences. A sincere devotee who engages in the service of Lord Sri Caitanya Mahāprabhu by preaching His cult all over the world will never be affected by *visaya-taranga*, material influences.” [*Srīmad-Bhagavatam* 5.1.20, purport]

Later, another incident caused me further concern. During the final bhajan, I saw a group of skinheads walking around the park. It’s easy to spot them with their angry faces, tight jeans, bare chests, and big black boots. It was obvious that they were not there for the festivities. I watched as our security people approached them and a discussion took place.

After the bhajan, one of the security men came to me. “These people have come to check out the situation,” he said. “If they see an opportunity for troublemaking, they’ll come back later with their friends.”

“Do you think they’ll return?” I asked.

“I can’t say for sure,” he said. “They saw we have ten security personnel here. And we have alerted the police.”

At the end of the festival that night, I announced that we would have a Vedic wedding the next day. As in Lipno, we knew a wedding would draw a large crowd despite the unfavorable location and the incident that had happened.

As I was driving to the festival the next day, I called ahead, and I was happy to hear that 2,000 people had already come for the wedding. I relaxed a little. “It seems things are back to normal,” I thought.

But I was soon reminded of the precarious nature of this mate-



*Indradyumna Swami, Nandini dasi and
a security man*



Announcement at the end of the festival

rial world. As we entered Ostroda and passed the train station, I was shocked to see an elite force of police confronting a group of 60 skinheads who were walking towards our festival. The police, in bulletproof vests with helmets and batons, had some of the skinheads on the ground, while others were against a wall with their hands up as the police frisked them. Four officers stood by with dogs on leashes. The skinheads were angry and were shouting obscenities at the police. A few of them were injured and bleeding.

I turned to a Polish devotee in the van. “Were they on the way to our festival?” I asked.

“Maharaja,” he said, “it’s Sunday, and there’s nothing happening in this town today but our festival. They weren’t on their way to a picnic.”

Suddenly, the police stopped all traffic, much of which had slowed down to watch the scene, and ordered the skinheads to start walking in the middle of the road towards the police station. Surrounding the group and armed with dogs on all sides, the police marched them down the road with two vans, lights flashing, in front and in back of the group. A few of the skinheads resisted and were further bloodied by the security forces. It was quite a spectacle. I shuddered to think what would have happened had the police not intervened.

When I arrived at the festival site, it again looked like the spiritual world. Our women had decorated the stage beautifully, and Sri Prahlaḍ was adding the final touches to the yajna sala. The bride and groom, my disciples Dinanath das and Rasamandali dasi, waited patiently nearby. A melodious kirtan was playing, and I walked onto the stage to welcome the people. As I began the wedding, the crowd stood mesmerized by the exotic event.

Throughout the ceremony I noticed the gypsies standing to the side, watching from a distance. I felt sorry for them, and later in the evening, I approached them. I was surprised to find that a few of the teenagers spoke English. I asked them if they had learned it in school.

“We don’t go to school,” one of them said.

It was another surprise. “Why not?” I asked.

The youth motioned to the crowd with his hand but remained silent.

I decided to change the subject. I suggested that the young people walk around and enjoy the exhibits on India, the vegetarian restaurant, and the spiritual fashion booth. When they looked back at me without saying anything, I excused myself to go lead the final kirtan.

Many local children came on stage and sat down to chant with me and the other devotees. I noticed a little gypsy girl standing shyly in front of the stage, and I motioned to her to chant with us. She hesitated for a moment, but then ran up to join us. When I asked her to sit close to me, a number of the children around me moved away. I mildly admonished them, and told them to come back. They hesitated for a few moments then gradually returned, but they kept their distance from the girl, who was visibly hurt by their rejection.

In the crowd, the mood was light and people were enjoying themselves. Many teenagers began dancing in front of the stage, and soon some adults joined in. The children on stage were especially blissful, and at one point, all of them except the gypsy girl stood up to dance. But then, as the kirtan reached a peak, one of the children grabbed the hand of the girl and pulled her into the dance. Her eyes lit up, and she smiled as she began dancing along with the other children.

When gypsies saw their little girl dancing happily with the other children, they all joined into the kirtan in front of the stage. There were a few tense moments, but soon in the ecstasy of the kirtan, people grabbed the gypsies' hands and everyone danced happily in a circle.

"This is probably the first time in the history of Ostroda that the gypsies have felt welcome," I thought.

Seeing it all happen before my eyes, I called out the words of Narottam das Thakur loudly through the sound system: "*Golokera premadhana, hari-nama-sankirtana!* All glories to the holy names, which have descended from the spiritual world!"

After an hour, I brought the kirtan and the festival to a close. Once again by the grace of Lord Caitanya and the special protection of Lord Nrsimhadeva, we had put on a successful festival.

People left the park slowly, wanting to savor every moment of the special atmosphere. A few stayed on, asking questions and exchanging addresses with devotees. Finally, they too turned and disappeared into the night. Chances were we wouldn't come back to Ostroda for many years, if ever, and I would never see these people again. Still, I felt blessed that I could help them take their first step towards Krsna.



*The people of Ostrada beginning their journey
home, back to the spiritual world.*

For most of them, it would be their only contact with Krsna consciousness in this lifetime, but for all of them, it had been the beginning of their journey home, back to the spiritual world. And for a fortunate few, it could well be the beginning of a deep spiritual awakening. When the very last person had gone, I also turned and left, my mind already thinking about the next town where our festival would melt the hearts of

yet another crowd.

“I expect to pass through life but once. If, therefore, there be any kindness I can show, or any good thing I can do to any fellow being, let me do it now, and not defer or neglect it, as I shall not pass this way again.”
[William Penn]



NOW THERE IS HOPE

June 21 - 27, 2003

OUR LAST FESTIVAL of the spring tour was in Mlawa. The newspaper that had slandered us was also in Mlawa, so I was a bit nervous as we drove into the town with a busload of 60 devotees for the first Harinam. The newspaper had printed our rebuttal, of course, but people in general are more inclined to bad news than good, so I feared that the people of Mlawa might be indignant.

We arrived in town as thousands of people began a busy morning shopping in an outdoor market near the center of the city. Fruit and vegetable stands and stalls selling varieties of clothing, shoes, and other commodities packed the area, with crowds milling through the small lanes.

The market was open only half a day, and I wanted to give out as many invitations as possible, so I had some extra devotees come, and



A busload of 60 blissfull devotees eager for harinam

I asked the kirtan party to move at a quick pace through the market and surrounding streets. Sri Prahlad led a powerful kirtan with his accordion as the devotees danced in ecstasy. Whatever doubts or suspicions people may have had were quickly dissipated in the sunshine of the holy names. As people smiled and waved we practically flew through the market, distributing a record 6,000 invitations in 90 minutes.

I woke up the next morning anticipating a big crowd at the festival, only to be disappointed by dark clouds on the horizon. As the rumbling clouds headed south towards Mlawa, I offered them my respects, remembering Lord Krsna's instructions to the Pandavas in *Mahabharata*:



Ready for harinama

During the battle of Kuruksetra, Aswattama launched a brahmastra weapon at the Pandavas. So powerful was the weapon that even the Pandavas could not destroy or counteract it. Being fully surrendered devotees, they immediately turned to Krsna for shelter. The Lord told them that when opposition is stronger than oneself, it is best avoided. He told them to take off their armor, lay down their weapons, and offer obeisances to the brahmastra. If they did so, Krsna said, they would render the brahmastra powerless. As the weapon raced towards them, all the Pandavas except Bhima took off their armor and laid down

their bows and arrows. Bhima stood defiant. Just as the brahmastra was about to hit them, the other Pandavas forcibly took off Bhima's armor and threw his weapons to the side. Then all of them bowed to the brahmastra as it passed harmlessly overhead.

My anxiety was quickly forgotten when I arrived at the festival site. I was happy to see that the authorities had given us the street next to the town hall and blocked it off to traffic. The tent crew had spent all morning setting up on the prestigious spot, but just as people began entering at 5 pm, my worst fears came true, and the rain started pouring down. Some people took shelter of the tents, but many simply turned around and went home. "So much for the potency of my obeisances!" I said to myself.

The rest of the day it alternately rained and held back. Nevertheless, 400 or 500 determined people attended. Among them was a girl who approached Jayatama das and me as I was signing books at the book table. She looked me over for a moment. "Yes," she said, "it's you. Can I show you something?"

"Of course," I replied, intrigued by her enthusiasm.

She opened her wallet and pulled out a photo of her family and me posing next to our festival stage.

"It was taken in Kolobrzeg three years ago," she said. "I always remember that festival. It was one of the best days of my life."

She reached in her bag and took out the *Science of Self-Realization* and

Srīla Prabhupada Līlamṛta in Polish. “I bought these two books at that time,” she said, “but I want to return them now.”

I was surprised. “But why?” I asked.

“I just can’t understand them,” she replied. “I’ve tried, but I’m not very intelligent. I have concluded that there’s no hope. I’ll never understand God.”

I had things to attend to, so I introduced her to Vara-nayaka das. “Try to convince her to keep the books,” I told him.

When I saw Vara-nayaka later, he told me the girl was going to think it over and come back the next day.

As the festival closed that night, only a few people were still there. As rain poured down during the last kirtan I noticed a few drunks, a social worker with some retarded children, and several deaf people standing motionless in front of the stage. This was not the crowd I had expected.

The next day it rained even harder, but whenever there was a break in the weather, people would appear from the nearby apartment buildings and run over to the festival. Gradually the weather began to change and eventually cleared completely, so by 8 pm we had a normal crowd. They made up for lost time by hurriedly passing through the exhibits and buying books and gifts. The restaurant sold out in no time. But with only two hours left, I was disappointed. The festival simply wasn’t the success I felt it could have been had it not been rained on.



Gifts from the boutique

The only consolation came when I went onstage to lead the final kirtan. I was amazed to see that the crowd was one of the largest of the spring tour. They applauded when a devotee came forward and gave me a huge garland of marigolds reaching down to my ankles. As evening set in and the bright streetlights illuminated the area, I started a kirtan and was happy to see many people from the previous day, including the drunks, the deaf people, and the retarded children.

I was feeling exhausted, so after a few minutes I called Sri Prahlad to take over the kirtan. True to form, he soon had a large crowd dancing blissfully. The deaf people, who had stood motionless in front of the stage the night before, began dancing wildly. Because they couldn’t hear the rhythm, their dancing wasn’t in time with everyone else’s, but that

didn't hold them back. Jumping and twirling around with big smiles, they encouraged one another in sign language.

On the other side of the stage I noticed that the drunks (who were just as intoxicated as the night before) were dancing around in a circle. Despite their stupor, they maintained their balance. "Hare Krsna!" they screamed. "Hare Krsna! Hare Krsna!"

Suddenly, one of the retarded boys jumped up and started dancing. At first the crowd was a little repulsed by his uncoordinated moves, but his enthusiasm was infectious, and soon much of the crowd began to dance. I called Jayatām over. "Film the kīrtan," I told him.

He slowly panned the camera across the crowd. "No!" I shouted, trying to keep my voice above the rising kīrtan. "Film the deaf people and the drunkards! Look how they're relishing the holy names!"

Suddenly Jayatām's eyes opened wide. "Śrīla Gurudeva!" he shouted. "Look! There's the girl who showed you the picture! Look how she's dancing!"

About an hour later, Śrī Prahlād wound up the kīrtan. For a moment the people stood silent and motionless, trying to fathom what had just happened. It had been their first kīrtan, and many seemed overwhelmed.

We often end a festival by honoring our youngest guests for their enthusiasm in kīrtan, so I came to the front of the stage and chose five of the best dancers from among the children. I asked them to join me on-stage. As five little girls came forward, I gave them each a silk sari from our spiritual fashion booth. The crowd went wild.

As I was making the presentation, I glanced out of the corner of my eye and saw the retarded boy who had enlivened the crowd with his dancing. I called a devotee over and asked him to bring the boy onto the stage. The boy came and stood next to me, smiling from ear to ear. I put my arm around him and announced to the crowd that we wanted to give him special recognition. I took off my long marigold garland and carefully put it around his neck, and the crowd broke into thunderous applause.

I turned to say a final goodbye to the people, but they wouldn't stop clapping, so I smiled and waved goodbye. When I came down from the stage, Varā-nayaka was waiting for me. "Śrīla Gurudeva," he said, "do you remember the girl who wanted to return the books?"

"Yes," I replied, "I saw her dancing in the kīrtan."

"That's right," said Varā-nayaka. "She told me that after that kīrtan she feels there is hope for her now, and she's decided to keep the books."

"Such is the power of the holy names," I thought and headed back to my car. I walked slowly, savoring the last minutes of the spring tour.

I saw the deaf people waving to me from the other side of the road, and I waved back. A few steps further, the group of drunks approached me and took turns shaking my hand. Then, just as I was getting into my car, the retarded boy came running up to give me a big hug. As I returned his tight embrace, I said a little prayer and asked Kṛṣṇa to continue to give him mercy.

And why wouldn't He? That night I had seen with my own eyes that Lord Caitanya makes no distinction between the sinner and the saint, the gentle and the ruffian, the scholar and the fool. A disappointing festival had suddenly become one the best of the season, and my heart was completely satisfied.

*tri bhuvana kamaniye gaura candre vatirne patita yavana murkhah sarvatha sphotay-
antah iha jagati samasta nama sankirtanarta vayam api ca krtarthah kṛṣṇa namasrayad bhoh*

“When Lord Gauracandra, the most attractive personality within the three worlds advented in this universe, all the fallen souls, including the lowborn and foolish, began to wave their arms in the air excited by the congregational chanting of the holy names. We also were completely fulfilled because of our taking shelter of the names of Kṛṣṇa. O my Lord!”
[Sri Sarvabhauma Bhattacharya: *Sri Gauranga-mahima*, Text 44]

7

HELP FROM ABOVE

July 2 – August 8, 2003

MATHURANATH DAS AND I WERE THE FIRST TO ARRIVE on the Woodstock field, two weeks before the great three-day event. Although 52 bands and 500,000 people would soon come here, only a few rabbits now scurried across the large grass field that was once an airfield. The German air force launched its first bombardment of Poland from here at the beginning of World War II.



The first to arrive on the Woodstock field

After the war, the region became part of Poland, and Jewish freedom fighters trained on this field to fight in Palestine (now Israel) in 1946. As I lay on the grass looking up at the sky, I thought how ironic it was that in a few days this field would host the biggest musical event in Europe with the theme “No Violence, No Drugs.”

Jurek Owsiak, the organizer of the massive event, had once again invited us to participate with our Krsna’s Village of Peace, as the village fit well into the theme of his festival. This year, at his insistence, we planned to increase both the size and activities of the village.

It would be no small task. Last year, our main tent was filled with over 10,000 young people a day. When I asked the tent company if we could rent a bigger tent, the man in charge just laughed. “It’s the biggest tent in Europe,” he said, “and nobody but you

people can fill it to capacity.”

We decided to build some extra exhibits and a Vedic Temple where 50 people could fit in for kirtan in front of our tour Deities. The Russian devotees had designed and built an impressive structure, with scaffolding as a base and plywood cut in intricate patterns. After being painted, it looked like a real Indian temple. Using the same techniques,



*The impressive structure looked like
a real Indian temple*

they also built a huge Vedic gate, which people would pass through when they came into the village. We also had plans to increase our prasadam distribution from the 90,00 plates of last year, to 100,000 plates. Fifty tons of foodstuffs had already been donated, all free.

It would take a marathon effort to put up such a village, so for a while I just relaxed, taking a rare few moments’ rest from an already intense schedule on the beaches of the Baltic Sea coast up north. Since the beginning of summer, three weeks earlier, we had put on 18 major festivals along the coast.

I thought back on the success of those events. We had introduced tens of thousands of people to Krsna consciousness. Still, I couldn’t focus my mind on any particular festival. My mind was a blur of many Harinams across the sands of crowded beaches, of thousands of people standing before our stage applauding, of many more browsing through our exhibits or enjoying prasadam in our festival restaurant or standing in long lines to get gopi dots painted on their faces.

What made it more difficult to focus was that we had been doing the same thing for 13 years. Sometimes the face of a little girl dressed in a sari dancing before our stage or a man inquiring in the question-and-answer booth came into focus. But was it 1990 or 2003?

We have seen the results brought by so many years of festivals on the coast. We saw them while we chanted down the crowded beaches, carefully moving our Harinam party of 100 devotees along the little spaces in the sand between the people. “Look, Mommy!” a child would yell. “It’s Hare Krsna!” and the parents would send the child forward to get an invitation to the festival.

Many people waved, and many smiled. Only a few were antagonistic—a sign that we were winning a decade-long battle with anti-cult propaganda in the country. I speculated that the church found it diffi-



"Look, Mommy, it's Hare Krsna!"

cult to keep up such abuse year after year, whereas we derived unlimited enthusiasm from our yearly festivals. And, so it seemed, did the people.

satyam eva jayate: "Truth will always prevail"

But for the moment, I was exhausted, and I wondered how I would lead 450 devotees in setting up Krsna's Village of Peace and staging a great yajna of the holy name for three days. As I fell asleep in the soft grass, I prayed for mercy.

A half hour later I woke up, a dog licking my face. I shouted "Hare Krsna!" and pushed the animal away. Wiping my face with my hand, I sat

up and saw an old man on an equally old bicycle beside me.

"Welcome to Zary," he said enthusiastically. "I've been waiting all year for you to come back."

I was still half asleep. "All year?" I said.

"Yes," he said, "not only me, but many other residents of Zary. Will there be a wedding at Krsna's Village of Peace during Woodstock? The last one was two years ago."

"Yes, there will be," I replied, rubbing my eyes.

"Well then I'm going to video it," he said. "I videoed everything in your village last year, and spent the rest of the year traveling all around Poland showing it to my family and friends."

"Really? I said.

"Yes," he said, "and whenever I come back to Zary, I visit this field and remember you people. I have lived in Zary all my life. I saw the German bombers take off from this field when I was very young. But the memories of your festivals here are the strongest in my mind. They are so beautiful."

His words touched me deeply. He was an old man and had no doubt been through many experiences in life. But somehow, the mercy of Lord Caitanya had made the greatest impact of all upon him. "Whatever great efforts will be needed to set up this year's Woodstock festival," I thought, "it will be worth all the trouble."

And just to convince me, if I still had any doubts, a young girl ac-

accompanied by several friends, came up as I was speaking to the man.

“Hari Bol, Maharaja!” she said enthusiastically. “Thank you for all the postcards you sent me and my friends during the year. We liked the ones from India the best.”

“Oh, you are most welcome,” I said. “What is your name again?”

“I’m Paulina” she replied. “And I’m 9 years old.”

“She keeps a picture of you on her bedside dresser,” one of the girls said. “And she talks about you every single day too. And you know what?”

“What?” I asked.

“She has kept her promise to you, to chant six rounds on the beads every day. I saw her.”

Paulina proudly showed me her beadbag, with a little hole in it from where her thumb had rubbed through from chanting.

“Thank you,” I said, looking at Paulina.

“This year we want you to give chanting beads to the rest of us too,” said Paulina’s friend.

“Hari bol!” answered the others in chorus.

But just as I couldn’t distinguish the multitude of festivals we’d done through the years, I couldn’t remember these girls, whom I’d obviously had an exchange of Krsna consciousness with last year. They brought out a photo of me with them at Woodstock, but it didn’t bring back a distinct memory. I’ve stood with thousands of people for photos

at our festivals through the years. But the eagerness of these young people for devotional service was proof of our previous contact, and so I sat on the grass with them for over an hour and did my best to encourage them further in Krsna consciousness, telling them pastimes of Krsna.

At the end, the youngest one spoke. “Will you pull the big red chariot again this year at Woodstock?” She said. “My parents want to know. They want to invite my aunt and uncle from Germany if you do.”

The next day, huge trucks rolled onto the field to deliver the big tents for Krsna’s Village of Peace. Smaller trucks came to offload the nylon siding and the heavy metal frames for construction, and a team of 30 men began putting up the large frames. It was a noisy affair, with all the big trucks and machines, and sometimes a huge metal piece would crash to



Three Ratha Yatra parades on three consecutive days at the Woodstock festival

the ground with a loud noise.

But it was all music to my ears. We were building a small replica of Vaikuntha, the spiritual world, on the four acres of land assigned to us by the festival organizers, and we would soon be inviting thousands of conditioned souls inside. And to get into this spiritual world, there would be no special requirements- only the causeless mercy of Lord Caitanya Mahaprabhu.

And come they did, when we finally opened the village on the first day of the Woodstock festival. They poured onto our festival grounds. My good friend Bhakti Bringa Govinda Maharaja estimated that at one point there were 30,000 people in Krsna's Village of Peace. I asked him how I could describe the event in writing. "No one can understand," he replied, "unless they come here to see."

He was right. How does one convey the satisfaction of seeing 100 thousand people eating prasadam in our village? How does one describe the ecstasy of the book distributors who sold 2,800 books in those three days, or of the performers on our main stage, as thousands of people (sometimes as many as 10,000) loudly applauded their bhajans, dramas, lectures, dances, and bands? How does one recount not one, but three Ratha Yatra parades on three consecutive days, passing among an ocean of tents on the main field, where each and every festivalgoer could not help but see the cart and hear the chanting of the holy names? How can one imagine the daily scene of hundreds of young people in different tents around our village, chanting and dancing to kirtans led by such stalwarts as Sacinandana Maharaja, Kadamba Kanana Maharaja, and Deena Bandhu Prabhu? But even these men could hardly keep up with the demand of the young people for unending kirtans. By the last day, most had lost their voices and had to settle for just speaking, not singing.

That evening, as I walked past the meditation tent, I saw a tumultuous kirtan going on inside. At least 60 people were dancing wildly, loudly chanting the holy names. Curious as to who could be leading such a kirtan, I looked inside and was amazed to see a young woman in a scant bathing suit (and wearing big black boots) playing the harmonium and leading the kirtan. Her friend was playing a small drum, the kind we were selling in our gift shop, and another friend was playing kartalas. There was not even one devotee in the tent, but these three girls, intoxicated by the holy names, were leading a kirtan that had sixty other young people chanting at the top of their lungs. When I returned two hours later, their kirtan was still going strong.

Throughout the entire three days, the four acres of our village pul-

sated with kirtan, stage programs, long lines of people eager for prasadam, and endless questions and answers about the process of Krsna consciousness. At one point, I noticed a large group of distinguished persons wandering through the village, looking at our exhibits and taking particular interest in our large ratha cart, parked right in the middle of the field.

I asked Radha Sakhi Vrinda to speak with them. After a few moments of conversation, she excitedly waved her hand to me, indicating that I should quickly come over.

I went right over. "Srila Gurudeva," Radha Sakhi Vrinda said, "I'd like to introduce you to the governor of the state, the chief of police of the state, the head of the fire department of the state, the chief health inspector of the state...." She went on to introduce me to various other dignitaries.

"They came specifically to see Krsna's Village of Peace," she continued, "and they like it very much."

I shook the governor's hand and thanked him for coming.

"I very much appreciate what you are doing for these young people," the governor said, "and I can see that the bad things people sometimes say about you are simply not true."

The others in the group all nodded in agreement. "It's obvious that your presence here at Woodstock keeps things peaceful," said the chief of police. "How much food do you plan to distribute?"

"A hundred thousand plates," I replied.

The police chief was speechless.

I could not help smiling. "We have a lot of help from above," I added.

"I'll be taking lunch with Mr. Owsiak in an hour," the governor said, "and I understand your group is catering for that. Is that right?"

"Yes, sir," I replied. "Every day we cater for the organizers and all their support teams of three hundred people. I hope you like the food."

"I'm sure I will," said the governor. We shook hands again, and they left.

On my way back to our base that night, I was falling asleep, exhausted by the day's activities. I laughed to myself, thinking that during Kartika each year, I pass the month in utter peace in Vrindavan, softly chanting the holy names in the company of many saintly persons. Here I was at Woodstock, surrounded by thousands of people engaged in all sorts of illicit activities. For a moment, I hankered for that peaceful atmosphere of Vraja, but I quickly caught myself, remembering that to attain that transcendental abode would require sharing the holy names of the Lord to the

fallen souls at Woodstock for many lifetimes to come.

As we drove on, we passed by a group of young people heading into town to shop. When I stopped at a red light, a group of at least fifty of them, three playing guitars, walked past loudly singing Hare Krsna, Hare Krishna, Krsna Krsna, Hare Hare, Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare.

What was this great miracle Lord Caitanya was enacting at the Woodstock Festival?

And so it went for days. If all the devotees who were present would write down their own experiences, we might well produce a voluminous book. But again, could words ever capture the mood of such an enormous yajna?

Then suddenly, as quickly as it had begun, the Woodstock Festival was over. A couple who had stayed in our village for three days turned toward us as they left. "We never even made it to the main stage," they said, laughing.

The devotees in our Food For Peace tent stayed up until 6 AM the next morning distributing prasadam to the kids and then, exhausted, they closed the tent and went home. When I went back down to the festival site at 8AM to oversee the breakdown of our village, I was surprised to see a long line of about 400 young people, still in front of the tent. Then I noticed a small opening in the tent, where every so often a ladle of rice would appear and empty into the cup or plate of one of the kids.



Surabhi dasi, serving prasadam around the clock

I went closer and finally into the tent. To my surprise, an older Polish devotee woman, Surabhi dasi, was slowly giving out prasadam, sometimes nodding off to sleep. "I've been up all night," she smiled.

I was even more surprised when she pointed to 10 large containers of rice, halavah, and papadams that had not been distributed. I opened the tent flaps even wider and began to help her distribute the rest of the mercy. I telephoned for more help, and within an hour, a crew of devotees came, and we continued distributing prasadam until noon.

As we cleaned up, I marveled to think that the tent had served prasadam almost continuously for over 60 hours. Just as we were leaving, another devotee arrived. She was taking a tally of all the paraphernalia left at the site. With pen and paper in hand, she casually asked how many plastic plates were left.

“Actually, not a single one,” I said. “We ran out an hour ago and put the last portions of prasadam into the kids’ hands.”

Her eyes opened wide. “That means we distributed exactly 101,000 plates,” she said.

I closed my eyes. “Srila Prabhupada,” I said silently, “please accept that as an offering at your lotus feet.”

I started walking back to my car. Then, to my surprise, the old man on the bicycle came riding up. It almost seemed like part of a script.

“Another great festival!” he said. “Congratulations.”

“Thank you,” I replied.

“I hope I’m around when you come back next year,” he said. “You know I’m quite old. If I leave before the next Woodstock, I’ll take my video with me and show the Good Lord what you are all doing down here.”

He went pedaling off slowly, then looked back. “But I’m sure He already knows,” he said.

“I pray that He does,” I replied under my breath.

“In public places I glorify your mercy, which is granted to even low creatures, and which enables me, even though I am lowborn, to live in this forest of Vrindavan— the place where Your great devotees, filled with pure love, aspire to take birth even as a blade of grass.”

[Srila Rupa Goswami, *Stava Mala*, Volume 2, Utkalika vallari, text 66]



A SWEET RAINCLOUD
August 17 - September 1, 2003

IT TOOK 50 DEVOTEES THREE FULL DAYS to break down our festival at Woodstock. By the time we left, not a soul could be seen on the huge field. As we drove away, I thought back on the success of our festival. Most of the 500,000 people who had come to Woodstock had passed through our site at some point and experienced the blissful world of Krsna consciousness.

We rounded the last turn onto the main road, and I looked back. I felt empty inside. I would have to wait a full year to experience such a great yajna again.

*saiveyam bhuvi dhanya gauda nagari
velapi saivam budheh
sa `yam sri-purusottamo madhupates
tany eva namani tu
no kutrapi niriksyate hari hari
premotsavas tadrso
ha caitanya krpa-nidhana tava kim
viksyepunaraibhavam*

“The fortunate town of Navadvipa remains on the earth. The sea-shore remains. The city of Jagannatha Puri remains. The holy names of Lord Krsna remain. Alas! Alas! I do not see anywhere the same kind of festival of pure love for Lord Hari. O Lord Caitanya, O ocean of mercy, will I ever see Your transcendental glory again?” [Sri La Probodhananda Saraswati, *Sri Caitanya candramrta*, Chapter 12, verse 140]

As we headed north, my attention turned to the final two weeks of our summer festivals along the Baltic Sea coast. If anything could come close to the taste of preaching at Woodstock, it would be the 12 festivals

that lay ahead. Well-to-do families take their vacations along the coast, providing a golden opportunity for reaching the higher echelons of Polish society.

After we arrived at our base near the sea, the devotees took a much deserved three-day break while I waited impatiently for the festivals to begin. One day, several devotees returned from a swim at the beach near Pobierowo.

“Srila Gurudeva!” they said excitedly, all talking at once.

“As soon as we walked onto the beach, people began crowding around us.”

“They were asking us when the festival in Pobierowo would be.”

“They want to know if there will be a new theater this year.”

“How many Indian dancers will be performing?”

I couldn’t help picking up their enthusiasm. “What did you tell them?” I asked.

“We told them the Pobierowo festival would be in two weeks.”

“It would be the final one.”

“One family said they would extend their vacation an extra week just to come.”

Four days later, we started Harinam on the beaches of Ustronie Morskie, where we would hold the first festival. All of Europe was in the midst of a sweltering heat wave, caused by monsoon weather in the sub-Saharan desert of northern Africa. The beach at Ustronie Morski was so crowded that with our kirtan party of 80 devotees, we could hardly make our way onto the sand.

I was happy to be back on sankirtan, and I felt like a thirsty man who had finally found water. I wanted to have an exchange with the people, so I told a devotee to ask the first couple we met if they would come to our festival.

“Of course we will come,” the man said. “We’ve been waiting for you.”

His wife smiled. “We plan our vacation each year around your festivals,” she said. “Summer wouldn’t be the same without you.”

Three days later, a crowd of thousands came to the festival. It was easy to see the difference between those who had come before and those



Back on sankirtan; like a thirsty man who had finally found water

who were coming for the first time. The newcomers were a little reserved at first, but the veterans came to the festival with an enthusiasm much like what I had felt doing sankirtan on the beach again. They headed right for their favorite spots—the restaurant, the gift shop, the book tent, a front row seat on the benches in front of the stage. I saw their eagerness as an initial but real stage of Kṛṣṇa consciousness.

*tamasi ravir ivodyan majjatam aplavanam
plava iva tanitanam svadu varneva meghah
nidhir iva nidhananam tivra duhkhamayanam
bhisag iva kusalan no datum ayati saurih*

“Lord Kṛṣṇa, who is like a sun rising in the darkness, like a boat to the drowning, like a sweet rain cloud to those dying of thirst, like fabulous wealth to the poverty-stricken, and like an infallible physician to those afflicted with the most painful disease, has come to grant auspiciousness to us.” [Śrīla Rupa Goswami, *Padyavali*, verse 51]



*The tour Deities, Sri Sri Gandarvika Giridhari
in the book tent.*

I started walking around and wandered into the book tent. Our tour Deities, Sri Sri Gandarvika Giridhari, stood there on a beautiful carved wooden altar, placed between tables displaying Śrīla Prabhupada’s books. The Deities are over 200 years old, and with Their beautiful clothes and ornaments, They captured the attention of anyone who walked into the tent. I was surprised to see a family down on their knees in front of the Deities, crossing their hearts, as Catholics do in church. After saying a few prayers, they stood up and walked out.

I turned to Madhuvati dasi, the pujari. “That was unusual,” I said.

“Not at all, Śrīla Gurudeva,” she replied. “People often kneel down before the Deities and pray when they come into the tent. I’ve seen guests stand there reverentially for fifteen or twenty minutes. I’ve even seen people speak to Them.”

The pleasant weather kept up over the next two weeks, and for once I didn't worry about rain and wind, the natural enemies of our festival tours. We had record crowds in each and every town.

One evening, as I was speaking from the stage in Mrzezyno, a man dressed in shorts and a tee-shirt caught my eye. He was standing in the crowd, listening attentively, nodding in agreement as I explained Krsna consciousness. Suddenly I recognized him. He was one of the security guards we had hired during the spring tour. After my talk, he came to thank me and said that he had just come to the coast.

"When I first started working with you last spring," he said, "I had almost no interest in spiritual life. I just did my job, looking out for troublemakers, but while I was there, I was hearing you sing, listening to your lectures, and watching how you people act. Something changed inside me.

"When I went home after your spring tour, I couldn't stop thinking about all of you. As soon as my summer vacation came, I drove up here with my wife and kids. We plan to attend every festival."

"Every festival?" I asked.

"It may sound strange," he said, "but I never get tired of these festivals. There's something magical about them."

Lord Caitanya was quickly soothing my feelings of separation from preaching at Woodstock, and at the year's last festival, in Pobierowo, He satisfied my heart.

The devotees had mixed feelings on that day. We all knew it was the last festival of the year, but we had little time to lament. We were busy with the biggest crowd of the year.

We had chanted on the beach that morning, but around noon it began raining, bringing an end to the longest period of good weather on the coast in living memory. Everyone on the beach had to find shelter, but even though the skies cleared in the late afternoon, no one went back there. They all came to the Festival of India.

Every tourist in town must have come. I was sure of that because like on the beach, it was difficult to walk through the festival grounds. People were everywhere—the restaurant, the shops, the booths, crowded in front of the stage. Of particular interest was our towering Ratha Yatra cart, which we had put near the stage. Towards evening we put a light inside the canopy, making the cart look like a gigantic lantern. It was a real crowd-pleaser. People lined up to take photos in front of it.

At one point, I noticed a man standing in front of the cart, looking at it, shaking his head as if in disbelief. I was wondering what he might

be thinking, so I went up to him with Rama Acutya das. “Is there some problem, sir?” I asked.

He kept his eyes fixed on the huge cart. “I can’t believe it,” he said. “It’s the real thing. It’s a Ratha Yatra cart.”

I was surprised that he even knew the right name. “How do you know what a Ratha Yatra cart is?” I asked.

He turned to me for a brief moment, then looked at the cart again. “Nine years ago I worked in a coal mine in the south,” he said. “It was a dismal job, and dangerous too. One time, some of my colleagues were killed when a mineshaft caved in. I didn’t go back into that black hole again. I quit my job and stayed home, praying to God to deliver me from this horrible world.

“One day I decided to go to the town library and look for books about spiritual life. As I searched through the shelves, I found the *Caitanya caritamṛta*, translated by Bhaktivedanta Swami. There were eight volumes. I glanced through the first one, but I couldn’t understand a thing. I decided to check it out anyway and take it home. When I went to the desk, the librarian smiled. She said the book had been there for years and I was the first person to take it out.

“I was desperate for spiritual knowledge, and I read the book over and over. Gradually, I began to understand it. Two weeks later, I went back for the second volume, and the week after, for the third. I didn’t do anything but read day and night. After several months I had read all eight volumes at least twice.

“I learned a lot. I was amazed by Caitanya, an incarnation of God. And there was the explanation of the five ways to love God. I had never imagined that spiritual life could be so profound, so deep.

“My favorite part was the Ratha Yatra festival where Caitanya sang and danced with His people. I lamented that I had been born too late to take part in those historic times.

“Sometimes Swami mentioned a movement that was spreading all over the world, a movement whose followers sang Hare Krishna, like Caitanya. I wrote to the addresses in the books, but never received a reply. I prayed to God to help me find the movement, but to no avail.

“Then this morning, as I lay on the beach after a swim, I suddenly heard people singing Hare Krishna. I sat up with a start. I couldn’t believe my eyes. There must have been a hundred people, many with drums and cymbals. It was as if the books I’d read about Caitanya were coming to life.

“But one thing confused me: there was no Ratha Yatra cart. For

this to be real, there had to be a Ratha Yatra cart. At first I thought you people were doing a theatrical performance, but then I thought, ‘Maybe this is the movement that Swami wrote about. Is God finally answering my prayers?’

“I took an invitation, and when it started to rain I went back to my hotel. I was waiting anxiously for the festival to begin. When the time came, I walked quickly from my hotel. When I came near the festival site and heard the singing, I started to run, and I soon found myself at the entrance. But there was such a crowd! I couldn’t see anything. I pushed my way through the people and made it onto the field.

“I was stunned by it all: the colorful tents, the big stage, the singing. But was it real? Was it Caitanya’s movement? Then suddenly, to my amazement, I saw the Ratha Yatra cart. I walked over here and touched it. The Lord has answered my prayers. I have found Caitanya’s movement.”

Several devotees had gathered to listen, and when he finished we were all speechless. I was overwhelmed by his story and the mercy of Lord Caitanya.

He was still looking at the cart. “Excuse me if I seem a little emotional,” he said. “I hope you understand.”

“I do understand,” I said.

He turned to me with tears in his eyes. “What do I do now?” he said slowly.

I took his hand. “You weren’t born too late,” I said. “You’ve come at the perfect time. You can help us spread this movement. The saints say that Lord Caitanya is present wherever His devotees are serving Him.”



The saints say that Lord Caitanya is present wherever His devotees are serving Him.

*ratharudhasyarad adhipadavi nilacala pater
adabhra premormi sphurita natanollasa vivasah
sa harsam gayadbhih parivrtta tanur vaisnava janaih
sa caitanya kim me punar api drsor yasyati padam*

“Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu danced down the main road in great ecstasy before Lord Jagannatha, the master of Nilacala, who was sitting on His car. Overwhelmed by the transcendental bliss of dancing, and surrounded by the Vaisnavas who sang the holy names, He manifested waves

of ecstatic love of Godhead. Will He again become visible before the path of my eyes?” [Srila Rupa Goswami, *Stava mala*, Prathana Sri Caintanyastaka, Verse 7]



HE LIVES FOREVER

September 1 - 15, 2003

SOON AFTER THE LAST FESTIVAL in our four-month tour of Poland, Sri Prahlad and I flew to Rome to meet with some devotees about planning festivals in other parts of Europe.

On the flight down, I sat behind an elderly couple from America on their way to Rome to celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary. They were hard of hearing, and they reminisced loudly about their wedding in 1953 and their honeymoon in Rome. Their story was full of dancing in the bars and cafes, of fine wine, gourmet food, and visits to the historical sites of the city.

"Remember the Pantheon?" the woman said. "And all those architectural wonders?"

"Yes, of course," her husband replied. "The only thing we missed was the Coliseum. This time it's a must."

"O yes," she said. "All my life I've wanted to see the Coliseum."

"All your life you've wanted to see the Coliseum?" I thought. "Surely life is meant for more than seeing relics of the past. You're old now. You should be more concerned about your future, about life after death."

Then I thought about my own future. "Be careful," I told myself, "and don't get pulled into the charm of ancient Rome while you're here."

After we landed, Sri Prahlad and I were picked up by several devotees. As we drove through the city, I didn't allow my eyes to be drawn to the many ancient buildings. "No sentiment for me in Rome," I reminded myself.

As we approached our temple in the old quarter of the city, the driver spoke to me. "Maharaja," he said, "were you here when Srila Prabhupada visited Rome in the 1970s?"

I had to think for a moment. Time takes its toll on one's memory.

"Well yes," I said. "Actually, I was in Rome with Srila Prabhupada in 1974."



An Italian book about Srila Prabhupada's visit to Rome in 1974. (Indradyumna Maharaja – grihasta at that time- is the second from left)

A few blurry images came to mind: Srila Prabhupada taking his noonday massage on the veranda in the first Rome temple, his servant asking Dhananjaya, the temple president, why Prabhupada's prasadam was late.

"Nearby is the famous Coliseum," the driver said as we passed several buses unloading tourists with cameras and video recorders. "I heard that Srila Prabhupada once visited there."

His comment triggered my memory. "Yes he did," I said, as my mind flooded with visions of that morning when I went with Srila Prabhupada on his walk. I remembered the tourists gawking at the mammoth 2,000-year-old structure

and Srila Prabhupada enlightening us about the temporary nature of the material world:

"These buildings were constructed by highly intellectual men" he said, "but they enjoyed, say, for a hundred years. That's all. Then their bodies changed. These Romans—they constructed big buildings just to enjoy, but they had to leave it by nature's force and accept another body."

[Morning walk, May 24, 1974]

Srila Prabhupada was instilling a spirit of detachment in us while we were in the prime of youth. How fortunate I am to have had his association! As I struggled to see the Coliseum through the buildings, feelings of love for my spiritual master welled up in my heart.

Suddenly I laughed to myself. "Remember," I thought, "you're not going to feel any sentiment for the relics of ancient Rome."

But there was no harm. Instead



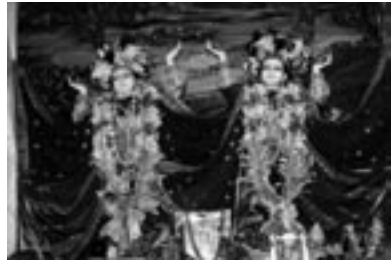
A picture taken during that morning walk in Rome

of reminding me of an ordinary love affair, the Coliseum had awakened feelings of a more Kṛṣṇa-conscious nature.

*yuvatinam yatha yuni
yunam ca yuvatau yatha
mano 'bhīramate tadvan
mano me ramatam tvayi*

“Just as the minds of young girls take pleasure in young boys, and young boys take pleasure in young girls, kindly allow my mind to take pleasure in You alone.” [*Nectar of Devotion*, Chapter 7, Further Considerations of Devotional Principles]

We arrived at the temple in the late afternoon. The building is nestled in a picturesque part of Rome and serves as a restaurant and preaching center. The streets packed with tourists awakened memories of sankīrtan processions I’d taken out in Rome as far back as 1973. I began to long for the nectar of chanting in such an ideal environment again, so I asked the local devotees if there was any chance Śrī Prahlaḍ and I could take out a chanting party.



The Gaura Nītaī deities in the Rome centre

“Yes, of course!” answered several devotees at once.

“Whenever you want,” the temple president added.

That evening, I gave a *Bhagavad-gītā* class in a packed temple room. Afterwards, I talked about a few memories of Śrīla Prabhupada’s visit to Rome in 1974. Then I asked for questions. A boy who had been sitting in front, smiling the whole time, spoke up. “Did you ever touch Śrīla Prabhupada’s lotus feet?” he asked.

“Well yes, once,” I replied shyly, “when we performed guru puja in Paris on his arrival in 1973.”

“Only once?” The boy asked.

“Yes, just once,” I replied, a little curious as to his prodding.

“Actually, you were more fortunate than you remember,” he said as he handed me a photograph.

The lights were low in the room and the photograph was in black and white, so for a few moments I couldn’t see it clearly. But when my eyes ad-

justed, I saw myself kneeling down, respectfully helping Srila Prabhupada on with his shoes, as he stood majestically before me with his cane.

“It was after his lecture here in Rome, in 1974,” the boy said. “A few months back, I was walking down the street in my devotee clothes, and a gentleman came up to me. He said that years ago he took many photographs when Srila Prabhupada gave a public lecture in Rome, and he asked if I would be interested in seeing them. He invited me to his studio, and when I went there he gave me several photos.”

My heart pounded as I looked in amazement at a most precious moment in service to my spiritual master. Somehow, my receiving the photograph just now, 29 years later, made it even more precious. I touched the photograph to my head and thanked the Lord for this wonderful gift.

“O handsome, fragrant tamala desire tree blooming in Vrndavana forest and embraced by the madhavi vine of the goddess ruling this forest, O tree, the shade of whose glory protects the world from a host of burning sufferings, what wonderful fruits do people find at your feet!” [Rupa Goswami, *Utkalika Vallari*, verse 66]



Harinama in the narrow streets of the old city of Rome with Sri Prahlad singing and playing accordion

The next evening, after our meeting, the devotees gathered in front of the temple, and with Sri Prahlad singing and playing an accordion, we started dancing down the narrow streets of the old city. Locals and tourists alike waved and smiled as our blissful kirtan party passed one famous tourist site after another.

We stopped at the Pantheon, one of the oldest buildings in Rome, and soon a large crowd gathered. After a short while Sri Prahlad turned to me. “Why don’t you speak?” he said.

He finished the kirtan and handed me the microphone. With the help of a translator, I gave a 20-minute talk about Krsna consciousness. Speaking impromptu on the street is one of my favorite services. It is a challenge I love—speaking out against the status quo of sinful activity and decadence in this age of Kali and convincing an audience that Krsna consciousness is the positive alternative, all in a few minutes.

As the devotees started chanting again, I dropped back to rest awhile, watching them disappear around a turn in the road. Suddenly, an elderly man ran up to me and grabbed my arm, talking excitedly.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I don't speak Italian."

"I visit the temple sometimes," he said, switching to English. "Is there going to be a festival?"

"Well, yes," I replied. "Tomorrow is a special day: Radhastami."

"That's great!" he said. "I was at the one the Swami did in 1974. He spoke so convincingly about the suffering of this world and how there is a spiritual world where there are no problems. He even said that you can dance with God there."

"You were at Swami's lecture too," he continued. "You put the master's shoes on after his talk."

I was amazed. "You remember that?" I asked.

"I remember everything about the program," he said.

"Swami never spoke to me personally," he continued, "but the things he said in his talk made a lasting impression on me. And despite all the honor he was getting, I saw he was aloof from it. He was there just for us."

"When I heard he passed away a few years later," he continued, "it was like losing a friend. Do you know what I mean?"

I could well understand his feeling of loss. "Yes, I do," I replied. "But in many ways, he's still here. It may be hard to understand, but if you come and join the chanting party for a little while, I think you'll feel his presence."

He hesitated for a moment, then agreed.

"And if you come back to the temple," I said, "I'll tell you more about Swami."

"Okay," he said, and his smile came back.

We started down the street toward the kirtan party.

"He lives forever by his divine instruction, and the follower lives with him"

[Srla Prabhupada's dedication of *Srimad Bhagavatam* to His Divine Grace Srla Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati Maharaja]

10

LESSONS ON THE ROAD

September 15 - November 1, 2003

AFTER THE MEETINGS IN ROME, I went on a whirlwind tour of temples in Kazakhstan, Russia, and Ukraine.

These countries share a common past of authoritarian communist rule, and their present situations are similar: weak economies, unemployment, crime, and political uncertainty. Although some things have changed superficially since these countries were freed and took up democratic rule, the pace of progress is slow and the struggle for existence as real as ever. Most of my disciples live in this part of the world, and as their spiritual master, I share their happiness and distress as they struggle with the material world and advance in Krsna consciousness.



Kirtan with the Ukrainian devotees

When these disciples are sometimes overcome by the strong force of the material energy, I must practice tolerance and patience in my dealings with them, like a father with his children. While in Russia, I learned of one disciple who, in a moment of spiritual weakness, joined the Russian mafia for quick money. Through bad association he gradually gave up his spiritual practices. He lost his intelligence and engaged in many criminal activities. One day he ran away in fear, with the mafia in close pursuit. He managed to elude them for some time, but fearing they might find him, he robbed a bank and let himself be caught. Now he sits in jail in relative safety. Recently he wrote that he is chanting again and asked for spiritual guidance.

On my trip through Ukraine, my heart went out to many disciples who, like most people in their country, live a meager existence, earning a wage of no more than \$100 a month. On their insistence only, I would

accept their donations of \$10 and \$20 bills for my preaching programs in other parts of the world. In fact, I kept their donations in a special pouch marked “For Kṛṣṇa’s service only,” not wanting to spend their money on my bodily needs.

I saw further evidence of the struggle for existence in southern Ukraine when I gave a darshan to 30 children of the devotee community in Dnepropetrovsk. The young audience included some kids from the congregation. When I asked how many children chanted japa, all but two raised their hands. Those two children, sitting just in front of me, turned out to be a brother and sister, 11 and 9 years old respectively.



Darshan to 30 children of the devotee community in Dnepropetrovsk

I innocently asked why they didn’t chant, and the boy shot back, “Our father’s a drunkard and a thief! What do we have to thank God for?”

I was unprepared for such a sharp answer, and as I gathered myself to reply, his sister started sobbing. “I want to chant,” she said, “but my brother won’t let me.”

“Why should we chant?” he shouted at her. “You think anyone cares for us?”

A silence came over the room. I put my arms around the two children and hugged them. “I care,” I said. Then I let go.

The boy turned to his sister. “Okay,” he said, to my surprise, “you can start chanting, and if you want, I’ll chant too.”

For the rest of my three-day stay in the temple, they wouldn’t leave my side, and during kirtans they jumped the highest of all. On their last day in the temple, they came into my room with tears in their eyes.

“We have to go back to our village for school,” the boy said.

“But we wanted to give you a donation,” his sister added.

Then they handed me all the money they had— the equivalent of two dollars— but I wouldn’t take it. When I saw how upset they were that I wouldn’t accept their offering of love, I opened up my “For Kṛṣṇa’s service only” pouch, and they happily put their donation inside.

That morning, the devotees were rehearsing a marriage ceremony in the back yard of the temple for a festival in the park that afternoon. While I was looking on, I noticed an old couple watching us from their

porch just a few feet away. I asked a devotee who they were.

"They sold us the house we use for our guests," he said. "Then they wasted the money on gambling and liquor. They're quite bitter now."

But I noticed the old woman couldn't help but smile as she watched the young couple rehearse the wedding. Afterwards, I walked over and sat down on a chair next to them, much to their surprise.

"Did you like the wedding rehearsal?" I asked.

The old man scowled. "What's there to like?" he said.

His wife remained silent.

"Don't you speak to him," the man said to her.

"I'd like to invite your both to the festival we're having in the park this afternoon," I said.

The man was obviously startled by the invitation. "We're not interested," he said, "and besides, my wife can't walk. She's crippled. Can't you see? She hasn't left this house in six years."

"It's going to be a wonderful program," I said. "Indian dance, theater, singing, and music." The old woman's eyes lit up.

"I'll send a car for you," I said. "We'll pick you up at your doorstep and bring you straight home after the program."

For the first time the old woman spoke. "Konstantin," she said, "can't I go? I haven't been out in such a long time."

Her husband relented. "Okay," he said, "you can go—but not me. They took our house away."

I arranged for a car to pick up the old woman at 4:30 that afternoon. The devotees put her in the seat and drove her to the park. When she arrived, I had her brought before the big stage and we gave her a seat in the front row. She seemed amused by the way people were looking at her, as if she were a celebrity.

And wasn't she thrilled when the show started! She rocked back and forth during the Bharat Natyam dance, clapped her hands during the bha-jan, and cried during the wedding. And to my amazement, as I led the final kirtan from the stage, I saw her chanting Hare Krsna along with us.

After everything was over, I went down to help escort her to the car waiting to take her home. When she was in her seat she called me over and took my hand. "Young man," she said softly, "this was the best day of my life. Thank you." Then she kissed me on the cheek.

As the car pulled away, I noticed she'd put some money in my hand. I shook my head and put it in my special pouch. "I'll really have to find a good service for all this," I said to myself.

As I left the temple the next day, the devotees crowded around the

car and had a big kirtan. There were so many that my driver was worried about how we would get away and make it to the airport in time.

“Drive slowly” I said. “I’ll open the window and ask them to move aside.”

As we drove carefully down the street, devotees threw fruit, flowers, and even coins through the open window. We picked up speed and broke free from the crowd. Then we sped off to the airport. I gave the fruit and flowers to my driver and put the coins in my special pouch. It was quite heavy by now—the accumulated offerings of love from my disciples and well wishers.

When we arrived at the airport, I was one of the last persons to check in for the flight to Warsaw, Poland. After getting my boarding pass, I changed the local currency I had received during my visit. It came to \$200.

I carefully put it into my pouch. “This is two months’ salary in this country,” I thought, shaking my head.



Devotees threw fruit, flowers, and even coins through the open window

As I was late, I proceeded straight to customs and passport control. In Ukraine, one has to fill out a form declaring how much money one is carrying, both upon entering and leaving the country. As I had no money coming into the country, I filled out the departure form and declared \$200.

I was in no anxiety. Customs officials are only concerned about large sums of money going out. Little did I know how greedy they would be for my disciples’ offerings of love.

“Show me your money!” barked the customs official in English.

“I only have two hundred dollars,” I replied.

“Show me!” he said louder.

I could tell something was up. I pulled out the \$200 and showed it to him from a careful distance.

He looked around to make sure no one was watching. “You must give me one hundred dollars customs tax,” he said.

I knew from years of traveling in and out of Ukraine, that there was no customs tax for travelers, so I put the money back in my pouch.

“Quickly!” he said, looking around him again.

“Sir,” I said, “you know as well as I do that there is no such thing as

customs tax for someone carrying this amount of money.”

“Give it now, or I won’t let you go any further,” he said impatiently.

I could see he was determined, but so was I. I wasn’t about to hand over the money I’d received with love from the little boy and girl, the old woman, and the devotees as I’d left the temple. No way!

The customs official grabbed my passport, put it in the drawer in front of him, and locked the drawer. He was smiling with confidence. “You’re going to miss your flight unless you give the tax,” he said.

Angry at his audacity, I leaned over the counter. “Go to hell,” I said.

It may not have been the most tactful thing to do. He picked up the phone and called several other customs officials over. As they talked off to the side, it was obvious that they were all in on the effort and for me to appeal to higher authority would be useless.

Another customs official, apparently of higher rank, then came around the counter. “Come with me,” he said as he led me to a nearby office.

With the rest of the officials behind him, he turned on the computer and made a show of looking for something. “Ah!” he said. “Mr. Tibbitts, you’ve had some trouble in this country before, isn’t it?”

“What do you mean?” I replied.

“Some criminal activity,” he said with a little grin.

I knew what he was up to.

“Shall we blacklist you?”

One of the customs officials, younger than the rest, looked at me from the back and shook his head from side to side. He was giving me a silent message: “Don’t do this. Don’t fight them.”

I hesitated for a moment. These criminals were stealing Krsna’s money. But if I didn’t give in, my disciples and I would suffer a worse fate. I wouldn’t be able to visit Ukraine again.

I decided that discretion was the better part of valor, and I slowly slid a \$100 bill across the table.

The customs officer slid my passport across the table.

I gathered my things, stood up, and walked towards the door. As I walked out, an official standing there put out his foot, and I tripped and fell to the ground. Because I had not closed my handbag properly, everything spilled out onto the floor. Without looking back at the customs officials, who I imagined were getting a good laugh, I collected my things on my hands and knees and then stood up and left.

As I went through passport control without incident and proceeded

quickly to the departure gate, I tried to understand what lesson Krsna was trying to teach me. I was angry that I had been forced to give away the money of my disciples. And I was disgusted by the behavior of the customs officials. I concluded it was just another of the rigors of being a traveling preacher and one more lesson from the road to make me more humble and dependent on the Lord.

*trasto smy aham krpana vatsala duhsahogra
samsara cakra kadanad grasatam pranitah
baddhah sva karmabhir usattama te nghri mulam
prito pavarga saranam hvayase kada nu*

“O most powerful, insurmountable Lord, who are kind to the fallen souls, I have been put into the association of demons as a result of my activities, and therefore I am very much afraid of my condition of life within this material world. When will that moment come when you will call me to the shelter of Your lotus feet, which are the ultimate goal of liberation from conditional life?” (“Prahlada Pacifies the Lord with Prayers,” *Srimad Bhagavatam* 7.9.16)



WILL WE HAVE HARINAMA?

November 2 – December 17, 2003

AS MY FLIGHT CIRCLED OVER SARAJEVO, Bosnia, waiting for permission to land, I saw that the first snow of winter had already fallen on the city. On our descent, I also caught a glimpse of the ancient mosque in the city center. During my last visit, seven years ago, Muslim soldiers attacked our Harinama procession there. The people of Sarajevo were shocked by this provocation on foreigners, only months after a prolonged war in the Balkans had ended, and they came by the thousands to our festival the next day to express their sympathy.

As the devotees drove me to an apartment, my mind was filled with vivid memories of how the city had looked seven years ago, with almost every building damaged by the war, so I was surprised to see that they had almost all been repaired.



*The house next to the Hare Krishna temple,
bombed a few days into the war.*

“International funding built the city back up quickly,” said Damodar Prema.

“Things look normal here now,” I said as we passed through the downtown area.

“Only on the surface,” said Damodar Prema. “There are still thousands of international peace-keeper soldiers here. If they were to leave, a civil war would erupt immediately. The tension between the Muslims, Serbs, and Croats in this area goes back centuries.”

“Remember the mosque you chanted by last time you were here?” he continued. “It’s right over there.” He pointed down a street.

I couldn’t look. I still see the mosque in my dreams. One doesn’t

easily forget angry men stabbing devotees and beating them mercilessly on the ground.

“Maharaja,” said another devotee, “some devotees are asking if we’ll have Harinama while you’re here. We haven’t had one since the day you were attacked in 1996.”

I did not know what to say.

Damodhar Prema noticed my hesitation. “There is no law against it, Maharaja,” he said, “but there are two opinions among the devotees. Some say the time is right to chant on the streets again, and others caution that Sarajevo is seventy percent Muslim.

“What do you think?” I asked.

“I’m not sure” he replied. “There’s an unspoken agreement among the different religions here that none of them will agitate the situation by openly proselytizing. But then again, Harinama is our means of spreading our faith, isn’t it, Maharaja?”

“Yes,” I replied, “but it might better to wait to wait for a more favorable time. There’s a saying: Fools rush in where angels fear to tread.”

I became lost in thought. “Did I just give a realistic assessment of the situation?” I wondered. “Or was I speaking out of my own fear?”

The devotee community had grown significantly since my last visit. There were now 100 members, but they still did not have a temple. Despite the millions of dollars that have been spent on reconstruction in Sarajevo, unemployment is high and devotees have difficulty finding work. They meet regularly in each other’s apartments, but the sense of a devotee community is lacking because of not having a fixed center to congregate in.

I also discovered that their difficulties were not only in finding work and getting a temple, but in forgetting the war as well. It was an especially brutal war, with the city of Sarajevo under total siege for years. The Serbian army encircled the city and mercilessly shelled the streets each day without discrimination. People would stay inside their homes for months, fearing to walk outside even to find fresh water and food.

Later, a devotee came to see me for a personal darsan. “How are you doing in your spiritual life?” I asked.

“Maharaja,” he said, “I can’t get up early in the morning. I just wake up and go back to sleep.”

“That’s not good,” I replied in a stern voice. “You should be up before sunrise to chant your rounds.”

He looked down at the floor. “It’s because of the war, Maharaja,” he said. “I’m still traumatized by it all. It was so horrible.”

“Oh,” I said, softening my voice, “I’m sorry to hear that. Just be patient. You’ll get better sooner or later.”

“But will he?” I wondered. “I can’t even look down the street where my Harinam party was attacked, and this poor boy went through four years of war. Better I offer some practical spiritual advice.”

“Actually,” I said, “the holy names are the only real solution to our fears of material existence.” Then I quoted a verse:

*apannah samsrtim ghoram
yan-nama vivaso grnan
tatah sadyo vimucyeta
vad bibheti svayam hayam*

“Living beings who are entangled in the complicated meshes of birth and death can be freed immediately by even unconsciously chanting the holy name of Krsna, which is feared by fear personified.” (*Srimad Bhagavatam* 1.1.14)

He looked up at me, hoping for more advice, but I left it at that. I knew that if I wanted to be effective in my preaching, I too had to deepen my faith in the holy names, and deep faith comes after years of concentrated chanting and service.

A devotee girl came to see me. “I just want to forget the war and get on with my life,” she said. “If it weren’t for the happiness I find in Krsna consciousness, I couldn’t deal with the experiences I had in the war.”

She was young, so I was curious about how she had experienced the war as a child. I listened attentively, trying to grasp the ugliness of material life through her in order to deepen my own detachment from this world of birth and death.

*drsta maya divi vibho khila dhisnya panam
ayuh sriyo vibhava icchati yan jano ayam*

“My dear Lord, people in general want to be elevated to the higher planetary systems for a long duration of life, opulence and enjoyment, but I have seen all of these through the activities of my father...” (Prahlada Maharaja, *Srimad Bhagavatam* 7.9.23)

“My family is Muslim,” the girl continued. “When I was seven years old, my next-door neighbor, who was Serbian, shot at me six times as I

walked past his house. I remember the bullets whizzing past my head. I ran home and told my father, who was an officer in the Bosnian army. I don't know if he tried to do anything, but several weeks later my father disappeared and was never seen again.

"A few weeks later, the Serbian army in the hills fired several rocket-propelled grenades onto the street where I was playing with my friends. The explosions tore a huge gash in my head. I went into a coma in the hospital when they operated on me without any anesthetic. There were so many casualties in Sarajevo every day that the doctors ran out of it.

"But the whole experience eventually brought me to Krsna consciousness. I will never leave this movement."

I believed her, and I appreciated her conviction, which made my own even stronger.

"Although some of us begin as gurus for our disciples, it seems that these disciples are sometimes more fortunate than we are... Actually many of them are elevated personalities." (Tamal Krishna Goswami, from *Vraja Lila*)

My appreciation for the power of Krsna consciousness increased even more when I asked another disciple how she became a devotee.

"When my son joined the movement, my husband and I were very upset," she said. "We tried everything we could to dissuade him from becoming a devotee. Months later, when he was drafted into the army to fight in the war, we thought it was the best thing that could happen to him, but when he was killed on the battlefield two weeks later, we were devastated. We didn't know whom to turn to. We found his *Bhagavad-gita* in his room, and as we read it, it became our only shelter. As a result, we ourselves soon became devotees."

I had been looking forward to a public program the devotees had organized to help people forget the war memories that haunted the city, but I was soon reminded of the dark past. As I was lecturing to the audience of 300, I spoke about death as one of the miseries of material ex-



Public program in Sarajevo where Indradyumna Swami gave lecture to 300 people.



Bosnia's first-ever Vedic wedding.

istence. Suddenly 10 or 12 people in the audience got up and walked out.

I leaned toward my translator. "Why are they leaving so early?" I asked under my breath.

"It's what you said about death," she answered. "People still can't deal with the fact that they lost so many loved ones in the war."

Despite the constant reminders of the karma of Sarajevo, our devotional programs elevated us beyond the dualities of material existence. We held several events, including a nama yajna where we had kirtan with the devotees for many hours in a rented hall. Another was Bosnia's first-ever Vedic wedding. I performed the ceremony for Damodar Prema and Manjari Rupa in a small hall near the center of the city.

At first I wasn't sure how successful the program would be. We had advertised the historic event for 5 PM sharp, but when the time came, hardly any guests had arrived.

"Where are all the people?" I asked a devotee.

"It's Ramadan," he said, "the holy month of fasting for the Muslims. They only eat after sunset. At that time, the whole city slows down. Wait a few more minutes, and guests will start to arrive."

By 6 PM all the guests had indeed arrived, and we had a particularly sweet vivaha-yajna.

When the devotees saw me off at the airport, they thanked me again and again for coming. As I waved my final goodbye from passport control, a boy called out to me. "Maharaja!" he shouted. "Maybe next time we can have a Harinam through the city!"

"Yes," I said to myself, "the day will come when the time will be right and my faith in the holy name will have deepened."

*kah pareta nagari purandarah
ko bhaved atha tadiya kinkarah
krsna-nama jagad eka mangalam
kantha pitham urari karoti cet*

"Lord Krsna's holy name is the only auspiciousness in this world. If one keeps it in his throat, then what is Yamaraja, the king of the other world, to him? What are Yamaraja's servants to him? (Sri Anandacarya as quoted in Rupa Goswami's *Padyavali*, verse 21)

22

HANKERING FOR HOME

December 18, 2003 – January 30, 2004

EARLY LAST DECEMBER, I was at the airport in Warsaw, checking in for a flight, when I heard someone call out, “Hari Bol!” I looked up and saw that it was a stewardess passing by with a flight crew. I was busy at the ticket counter, so I just smiled back.

I was on my way to London, where I would catch a connecting flight to an Islamic country. An hour later as I entered the plane, I saw the same stewardess, and she greeted me again with a cheerful “Hari Bol!”

“Hari Bol!” I answered. I looked at her badge and saw that she was the chief purser.

After we were airborne she came by and sat on the armrest of the seat directly across the aisle from me. A few passengers raised their eyebrows, but she was not disturbed. “I can afford it,” she said. “I’ve been with the company for twenty years. I’m retiring next month.”

“Congratulations,” I said.

Her face became more serious. “You know,” she said, “I was married to a Hare Kṛṣṇa devotee when I was young.”

My own eyebrows went up. “Oh really?” I said.

“Yes,” she answered, “but he’d left the movement by the time we met. He was a disciple of the founder, Swami Prabhupada. He referred to his departure as blooming.”

“Yes,” I said, “that’s the sound an object makes when it falls into the ocean. When a devotee leaves the movement and falls back into the ocean of material existence, we call it blooming.”

“Well he certainly struggled with his decision to leave,” she said. “He didn’t actually tell me that he had been a devotee until late into our marriage. For years I saw him wrestle with conflicting interests. On the one hand he had a deep interest in spiritual things, but on the other he had an uncontrollable urge to enjoy the material.

“One night we got drunk, and on an impulse he took me to your

center outside of London, the place George Harrison bought you. I don't remember much, but when he started to cry in front of the altar, we were asked to leave. It's the only time I ever visited one of your temples.

"As time went on, my husband succumbed to his material passions and started to take drugs. In a desperate move to help him, I got the principal book of your faith, the *Bhagavad-gita As It Is*, from a friend. My husband had spoken of it many times. I must have read that book ten times cover to cover, hoping to learn what had once satisfied the soul of my husband.



Bhaktivedanta Manor in London

"As I learned the *Gita* I began sharing my understanding with him, wanting to revive his faith. I even memorized certain verses and would repeat them when he was really down and out. As his drug addiction deepened and he began stealing to maintain it, I often searched feverishly through the *Gita*, looking for passages or words of advice that would turn him away from his decadence.

"But it was of no avail. After some time the combination of drugs, internal conflicts, and pressures of life caused him to go mad, totally mad. I had to commit him to a mental hospital. He has never recovered and is still there to this day."

She had been speaking with emotion, and several other passengers were listening in. They looked as amazed as I must have.

"It was a painful loss for me," she continued, "and I never remarried."

Then she put her hand on my shoulder. "But do you know how I survived that and many other trials in my life?" she asked.

"How?" I asked, almost on behalf of the other passengers listening in.

"The philosophy of the *Bhagavad-gita*," she said with a relieved smile. "I still read the *Gita* every day. It's in my carry-on luggage up front. If it weren't for that book, I'd probably be in the same madhouse as my former husband."

"I'll be retiring soon and plan to buy a little house in Wales," she continued. "And you know how I'll spend much of my time?"

"No, Ma'am," I said. "How?"

"Reading the *Bhagavad-gita*," she replied.

Suddenly the flight ran into turbulence and the “fasten seatbelt” light came on. The stewardess nodded a little to confirm her last statement, and got up to go. As she was leaving, I called out to her. “Ma’am,” I said, “can I have the address of the mental hospital? I’d like to try and help your former husband.”

She shook her head. “No,” she said, “I can’t do that.”

“Please,” I said. “It’s important to me. He’s my spiritual brother.”

“I’m sorry” she replied, and she turned to walk down the aisle. “I wouldn’t want to open that chapter of my life again.”

When the plane landed and the passengers began to disembark she was standing at the door, smiling politely as we filed out. I stopped and gently tried to encourage her to tell me where her previous husband was, but she wouldn’t give in.

“Move on!” a man shouted behind me.

I thanked the stewardess for sharing her story with me, but I walked out of the plane with mixed emotions. I was elated to have met someone who had found such shelter in the teachings of *Bhagavad-gita*, but distraught to hear how another, a Godbrother, in fact, had failed miserably to do the same.

In a men’s room in Heathrow Airport, I changed from my devotional clothes into something more Western and waited to board my connecting flight. I felt a bit uncomfortable, as I had to remove my neck beads and Brahmin thread and replace it all with a New York Yankees baseball cap.

I was on my way to one of the more conservative Islamic states, and in order to understand the country more, I had bought a book on Shariah, the Islamic law that governs strict Muslim societies. As the flight took off and I started reading, some of the laws raised my eyebrows again, more than once.

Shariah states that a murderer must be killed in the same way that he murdered but can be set free if the bereaved family agrees to take some money instead of having the murderer killed.

A thief must have his hand cut off, and if he steals again, he will lose the other hand plus a foot.

A man may keep four wives but cannot keep two sisters as wives.

Women must be fully covered at all times except in the privacy of their homes.

I began to realize the strictness of the country I was entering, and as we were landing, I pushed my Nrsimha salagram deeper into my bag, hoping that if I was searched, the customs officials wouldn’t find Him.

It didn't work. After clearing immigration, I approached customs control and was stopped by two women in burkas, the full black dress worn by Muslim women with even the eyes covered by a black veil. The women asked me to step to one side. Then two men in starched white robes came over and asked me to put all my belongings onto a table. As I laid my saffron cloth out they looked surprised, but when I put my Srimad Bhagavatam on the table their eyes opened even wider.

"What is this?" the man asked in broken English.

"A storybook," I replied.

"What is in the shoulder bag?" he asked.

"Not much" I replied, pretending I didn't know he wanted to see it.

"Put it on the table," he said.

I had no choice, and after a few moments they were inspecting my japa beads, and to my horror, my Nrsimha salagram.

"My Lord," I prayed silently, "please forgive me."

One of the customs officials started to smell the salagram. "What is it?" he asked.

I was so distraught I couldn't reply.

"What is it?" he repeated impatiently.

"What does it look like?" I said, not wanting to further my grief by having to refer to the salagram in some mundane way, and in front of the Lord Himself.

"It looks like a stone," he said.

"So?" I replied.

And he put Him back in the bag.

They seemed eager to inspect the rest of my belongings, but suddenly another official came up. "Are you a soldier?" he asked me.

I saw my way out of the predicament. "Yes, sir" I replied with confidence thinking back on my days as a marine. "Lance Corporal Tibbitts. First Infantry Battalion, United States Marine Corps. My company is on duty in this region."

"Fine," he replied. Then he turned to the other men. "Let him go," he said.

As I walked out of the airport, loudspeakers from nearby mosques



"It looks like a stone," he said.

reminded the faithful that it was time to bow toward Mecca, and a number of men spread their rugs on the ground to pray. I even saw several cars stop and men get out on the sidewalk to bow.

My contact picked me up, and we drove to the place where I would be staying. As in other strict Islamic states, I noticed the streets were clean and everything seemed orderly. Bars, discotheques, and nightclubs were conspicuous by their absence, and men and women did not mix freely. It was easy to distinguish the two: the men wore bright starched white robes, and a number of women wore dark black burkas, covering them from head to toe.

"Put your baseball cap back on," my host said as we pulled up to his house.

"It's only a few meters to the front door," I said, a little surprised.

"It only takes one complaint here," he said soberly.

Programs were held in the evening in different houses, quietly, behind closed doors that blocked any noise. I was told that programs were not forbidden but any excess would not be tolerated.

During my visit, I favored lecturing more than kirtan. I had plenty to say because I had plenty of time to study. Confined to my room and not able to wander outside freely, I managed to read *Teachings of Lord Caitanya* from cover to cover in seven days.

I wasn't used to being inside all day, though, and at one point I became restless, almost desperate. "I'd like to go home," I said out loud to myself one morning.

But then I looked in the mirror and scolded myself. "Home?" I asked. "A home? You're in the renounced order. You should be ashamed of yourself!" Then I imposed a small punishment on myself for my momentary lack of sannyasa dharma. "Tomorrow," I vowed, "I will fast all day."

The day after my fast, my host came and said that we were going to drive out of town for a program with workers from India. "Laborers from abroad?" I thought. "Sounds like it will be a real simple program."

As we drove through the countryside, I noticed many date trees lining the road. My host turned to me. "Shariah states that you can receive a huge fine for indiscriminately cutting down a date tree," he said.

"Really?" I replied.

"Yes," he said, "and God forbid if you hit a camel with your car. They are a protected species here. And if you do hit a camel, you'll get instant karma. They are so top-heavy, with their long spindly legs and heavy bodies, that they immediately come through the windshield. Many people have died in that way."

“That’s interesting,” I said.

My host turned to me with a puzzled look. “Interesting?” he said.

“Not interesting in the sense of entertaining,” I said, “but in a curious way.”

His misunderstanding of my comment only added to the frustration I was feeling from living in isolation, and I was feeling the rigors of my self-imposed fast the day before. “I’d sure like to be in Vrindavan right now,” I said to myself.



“I’d sure like to be in Vrindavan right now.”

We pulled up to an old warehouse. “I’ll make this real quick,” I thought.

I pulled my Yankee baseball cap squarely over my forehead, adjusted my belt, jumped out of the car, and walked quickly towards the entrance before any of the locals would notice me, as was the usual procedure.

As I entered the reception office, I was surprised to hear a wonderful Bengali kirtan tape over the sound system. “Sounds from the spiritual sky,” I said to myself. “It’s almost like being in Mayapura.” I closed my eyes and paused for a moment to take in the auspicious sound.

My host took my arm. “Let’s move into the main room,” he said. Reluctantly, I tore myself away from my brief moment in the spiritual world.

But what a wonderful surprise was waiting for me! As I opened the door, I was stunned to see a group of 40 Bengali men, many in dhoti and kurta, playing mrdangas and kartalas while chanting the holy names and dancing in ecstasy. It wasn’t a tape I had heard after all. It was a live kirtan.

A devotee was singing and the others responded:

“Gaurangera duti pada, jar dhana sampada, se jane bhakati-rasa-sar.”

It was *Savarana-Sri-Gaura-Mahima* (The Glories of Sri Gauranga), a song from Narottam das Thakur’s *Prarthana*: “Anyone who has accepted the two lotus feet of Lord Caitanya can understand the true essence of devotional service.”

“Gaurangera madhura-lila,” the lead singer sang loudly, *“jar karne prabesila, hrdoya mirmala bhelo tar.”*

And again came a chorus of voices in their mother tongue:

“Anyone who has accepted the two lotus feet of Lord Caitanya can understand the true essence of devotional service.”

With their arms upwards and their eyes to the sky they sang:
"Je gaurangera nama loy tara hoy premodoy, tare mui jai bolihari."

"One who simply takes the holy name of Gaurasundara, Sri Krsna Caitanya, will immediately develop love of God. To such a person I say, 'Bravo! Very nice! Excellent!'"

The men were dancing gracefully, and their faces and movements were full of feeling. They were so absorbed in kirtan rasa that they didn't notice I'd come in.

Suddenly they saw me, and they all dove in front of me, offering obeisances. I stood there embarrassed, feeling unworthy of the attention of men who displayed such feeling for Lord Caitanya.



Who can be more merciful than Your Lordship within these three worlds?"

One of them handed me a drum and I started to sing slowly,

"Sri-krsna-caitanya prabhu doya koro mor, toma bine ke doyalu jagat-somsare."

"My dear Lord Sri Krsna Caitanya Mahaprabhu, please be merciful to me, because who can be more merciful than Your Lordship within these three worlds?"

Oblivious to where we were, we dove again and again into the nectar of chanting the holy names for over an hour. Though we were strangers, the joy of the kirtan made us one spiritual family, and we chanted and danced with abandon, as if we had known each other for years.

After bringing the kirtan to a close, I asked them to suggest a subject for my talk. A small chorus of men spoke up. "Speak about Gauranga Mahaprabhu," they said almost in unison.

So I told about the pastime of Lord Caitanya's taking sannyasa. When I got to the part about the barber cutting Mahaprabhu's beautiful long black hair, several of the men had tears in their eyes.

After an hour, I concluded, and because it was getting late I stood up, but they immediately put a mrdanga in my hands. "More kirtan!" they said. "More kirtan!"

"Who has come to enliven whom?" I thought. "These men are very merciful to me."

Again we had kirtan and then relished a traditional Bengali feast, complete with Lord Caitanya's favorite preparation, a leafy vegetable called sak. At the end, I was inundated with Bengali sweets.

In the three hours I spent with those men I learned an important lesson. In their association I became oblivious to the discomforts of being in a foreign land and felt perfectly at home, in a spiritual atmosphere. I realized that although my preferred places of residence, the holy lands of Vrindavan and Mayapura, were far away in India, they are in fact manifested wherever devotees are chanting the Lord's holy names. It was a valuable lesson and one I pray I will not forget.

“When Krishna descended on the earth, He appeared in Vrindavan. Although I am presently living in America, my residence is in Vrindavan, because I am always thinking of Krishna. Although I may be in a New York apartment, my consciousness is there, and this is as good as living there.” [Srila Prabhupada, *Path of Perfection*, Page 128]

23

A GIFT OF GRACE

January 31, 2004

THIS CHAPTER CONSISTS ENTIRELY OF LETTERS written by, to, or about Lance Ackerman, a South African devotee. His first letter is to Sankarsan Prabhu, a dear Godbrother of mine based in Austin, Texas.

December 1, 2003

Dear Sankarsan das,

I am trying to locate a devotee who taught me a great deal many years ago. He headed up the Temple of Understanding in Durban, South Africa, in 1987. His name was Indradyumna Swami.



: Indradyumna Swami preaching during Rathayatra in Durban

He then went on a trip up the Amazon, and since then I have lost track of him. I would really love to talk to him again. He inspired my life at the time and started me on the road to higher consciousness.

I should be most happy if you could help me with this or steer me toward someone who could help me

locate him.

Hare Krsna, Lance Ackerman

December 3, 2003

Dear Lance,

Please accept my blessings.

Here's a hot link that you can use to e-mail Indradyumna Swami.

indradyumna.swami@pamho.net

Hoping this meets you in good health,

Always your well-wisher, Sankarsan das

December 8, 2003

Dear Indradyumna Swami,

I am not sure if you remember me.

I first met devotees in Durban, South Africa, back in 1988. I was lucky enough to stay at the Temple of Understanding and even sat in meditation with you. The year after this I had to undergo national conscription in our defense force. I turned to the temple yet again and went through this as a religious objector, never carrying a firearm and somehow managing to stay vegetarian through out the whole two-year ordeal. I cannot begin to tell you how much the devotees helped me—

collecting me on Sundays and taking me to Misty Hills [the Krsna Farm outside of Johannesburg], and then stuffing me full of prasad and sending me back with enough for the week, as well as some to give to all the others in my camp, many of whom had never heard of Krsna.

Whenever I complained about how terrible my situation was in this “war environment” I found myself trapped in, you would laugh and tell me Krsna was placing all these obstacles in my way to make me see that the only way forward in this age of illusion was Krsna Consciousness. You would say the sooner I resigned myself to the truth, the better for me.

When you heard that I spent a lot of time in the Bushveldt and had no *Bhagavad Gita* to read, you gave me a small copy. This fit in the ammo side-pockets of my pants and meant I always had access to the word of Krsna.

When I look back and realize how many blessings Krsna was bestowing on me at the tender age of 19, I now realize you were correct: there was only one real choice for me. Unfortunately, hindsight is always better and not a privilege you have when you most need it.

Unfortunately, I eventually fell back into my material ways and now find myself, at age 35, lost in maya and understanding less than I did when I was 19.



Preaching along the Amazon River

In 1994 I was diagnosed with a disease called cardiomyopathy and am now bedridden and battling for each breath I take. I often thought of contacting you and asking you for guidance, but never have until now.

Recently, when my heart dropped to a working rate of just 17%, the doctors installed a pacemaker. For a while it seemed like the miracle I had been waiting for. However, this was short-lived, and I developed something called atrial fibrillation. The result was that I eventually had to go to the hospital to have my heart shocked back into rhythm.

It was at this point that something happened which told me I had to contact you for guidance. In the hospital my neck beads, which I had been wearing since you placed them around my neck, fell off and left me in fear of demonic powers. It felt like Krsna was deserting me, or perhaps it was me that deserted him?

Now I find myself in a state of depression, wondering about suicide. But my belief in karma will not allow me to do that either.

Please help me. I do not know who else to turn to.

Hare Krsna, Lance Ackerman

December 10, 2003

Dear Lance,

Please accept my blessings. All glories to Srila Prabhupada.

Thank you so much for your letter, which brought both joy and sadness to my heart. Joy that you have contacted me after so many years (I do remember you!), and sadness to learn of your severe illness.

I would like to help you, as I can understand that you may be nearing the last stage of your life. Of course, life is eternal, and if we are devotees of Krsna we are simply evolving slowly towards our service in the spiritual sky.

The Lord may be giving you notice of your imminent departure, and like Maharaja Pariksit (who knew he had only seven days to live), you should become very, very serious now about hearing and chanting the glories of the Lord. There are specific duties we have at every stage of life, and the duty of one approaching the final stage is to completely absorb himself in *sravanam-kirtanam*, hearing and chanting about God.

Should you survive your present ordeal by the grace of the Lord, there will be no loss in such hearing and chanting. It is always auspicious! But if you are to leave your body in the near future, such hearing and chanting is the best way to prepare yourself for death.

A devotee can make a lot of advancement at the last stage of life. I have seen it many times. It is sort of like a sprinter who on the last lap

sometimes gets a second wind, which propels him ahead to win the race.

So begin making an extra-special effort to advance towards life's ultimate goal, love for Kṛṣṇa. Leave behind all other considerations. Just focus on what you know is right and is in your best interest: Kṛṣṇa consciousness. You are in the most favorable circumstances for doing just that. The Lord knows best what we all need to make progress in Kṛṣṇa consciousness. So there is never anything to lament.

I am coming to South Africa in January. I will be there until February 28. I would love to come and visit you, wherever you are. We can talk more deeply then.

But know for sure that I'm with you all the way. Somehow you have remembered me after all these years. You can count on me to help you in your present situation.

I look forward to hearing from you again . . . and seeing you soon.

Your servant always, Indradyumna Swami

December 18, 2003

Dear Indradyumna Swami,

Thank you! Thank you! Thank you! I would like nothing more than to see you.

I have never forgotten you, because you had such a lasting impact on my life. I knew what you would tell me, so there were no surprises, but to think that I may have your association again leaves me ecstatic!

I am going to immerse myself in hearing and chanting, something which I have long since stopped doing.

I will tell you, it is not the thought of death that scares me, because I understand and realize it is just another step along my spiritual path. What does concern me is the way in which I will die. It is a very painful process indeed. It also makes your arrival seem a very long time away.

I also worry about the effect of my death on those around me— my family, who have been my strength during this period of my life. They are not devotees, or even remotely close to devotees, so I will need to talk to them and explain Kṛṣṇa consciousness so that they can understand.

I live quite close to the airport and would gladly send someone to collect you. I am afraid I will not be in a position to come to get you personally at this stage. But I long to speak with you!

Just hearing from you has filled my heart with joy and lifted me a great deal. I am going to work very hard to survive until you come.

I am at a loss as to what else to say, so I will just say goodbye and go find my beads and begin chanting.

Hare Krsna, Lance

December 24, 2003

Dear Indradyumna Swami,

I am Lance Ackerman's sister. Lance died yesterday after a long debilitating illness. He spoke to me about your forthcoming trip to South Africa, which he was very excited about. He was determined to stay well long enough to meet with you. He was overjoyed to hear from you.

Lance and I have shared a home for many years. I had watched him getting weaker and more reliant on his family over the past few years. Since May of this year he had been permanently bedridden. Throughout all this he lived fearlessly, with love, joy, compassion, and intelligence, even at the worst times.

Recently, however, he became fearful, filled with anxiety and anger. When your email arrived he was about to go back into the hospital. Except for twenty-minute catnaps, he had not slept for weeks. He was despondent, in constant pain and discomfort. But after your letter arrived he slept peacefully for the first time in weeks. He made a remarkable recovery and did not have to go to the hospital. He was no longer fearful or anxious. He was relaxed and said he felt at peace.

He said that for years he had lost touch with his beliefs, but felt he was now on the right track again. He was happy and serene. Your letter gave him great comfort.

I am heartbroken that my little brother has gone. I will miss him terribly. I wanted him to hang on at any price. But I am also grateful that he found an inner peace before he died and that he was able to let go when he was ready, without fear. I thank you for that.

You had a great impact on his life. He tried to describe why he felt so joyful to hear from you, and what sticks in my mind is what he described as your passing on to him a special grace— a grace that touched him at the very end.

With thanks, Gail Ackerman

January 31, 2003

Dear Gail,

It was with great sadness that I received your letter.

I was so much looking forward to meeting Lance again after many years. As you said, he wrote to me only a few weeks ago, asking for help in the difficult times he was going through. I am content that I was able to give him solace in the last moments of this life.

His spiritual quest grew more and more important to him in his last days. I suppose this is natural for all of us. That he died peacefully is a sign that he achieved a level of spiritual understanding and satisfaction for which all of us can be proud of him.

Like you, I will miss him. But I am sure that Lance's higher goals have taken him to a place more beautiful than the one we live in now.

Thank you for taking the time to write to me. I appreciate it very much.

Sincerely, Indradyumna Swami

24

NAROTTAM! NAROTTAM! NAROTTAM!

January 30 - February 10, 2004

“WHY DO YOU WANT TO VISIT MY COUNTRY?” the Bangladesh Ambassador asked suspiciously. “We’re the poorest people on earth.”

“I know, Sir,” I replied as I adjusted my Yankees baseball cap, “but in a BBC survey several years ago it was determined that the people of Bangladesh are the happiest on earth. I am curious to find out why the poorest are the happiest. My country, America, is the world’s richest, but came in a disappointing seventh place in the survey in terms of contentedness. Obviously, happiness is not synonymous with material prosperity.”

“I’m intrigued by your reasoning,” the ambassador said. “I’m a Muslim, and the Koran teaches the same principle. I’ll make an exception and grant you a visa. As an American, you’d normally have to obtain it at our embassy in America, not here in a foreign country.”

“Thank you very much,” I replied, for I had been unsuccessful in applying for the visa at Bangladesh embassies in three other countries, and was relieved to have been granted it before leaving the Islamic nation I was visiting.

“I’ve got one request, though,” the ambassador said. “Please come to my residence this evening for dinner. My wife is an excellent cook and she is preparing stewed lamb. We can continue our talk about the illusion of material happiness.”

I had to think quick. An invitation to an ambassador’s house is rarely refused.

“I’m so sorry, Sir, I have a flight out tonight,” I replied.

“Well, here’s my card. Next time you come and stay with me,” he concluded.

As I got up to leave, the ambassador took a photo guidebook from his desk. He then quickly signed it and gave it to me with a handshake. It read: “To Mr Tibbitts with love. May you find the happiness you’re looking

for in our beautiful Bangladesh. Mohammed Ilah.”

I had no doubt I would find happiness in Bangladesh, but it would be of a specific nature. The former Indian State of East Bengal (known as East Pakistan after the partition of India by the British in 1947) became the sovereign state of Bangladesh in 1972 as a result of the war for independence. Being part of India’s rich spiritual past, it contains many holy places especially dear to the followers of Lord Caitanya. Numerous devotees of Lord Caitanya took birth there and the Lord Himself performed many sankirtan lilas throughout Bangladesh’s towns and villages. The capital, Dhaka, was a favorite preaching place of Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati in the 1930s. He once called Dhaka a second Vrindavan, because it contains more than 700 magnificent Radha-Krsna temples.

I would be traveling to these holy tirthas with a dear godbrother, Radhanath Swami. Months ago, we had met in our travels and discovered that we shared the same attraction to the pastimes and songs of Srila Narottam das Thakur, one of the principle acarayas in our Gaudiya Vaisnava sampradaya, who appeared after Lord Caitanya’s departure from this world. We had longed to visit his birthplace, Keturi, in Bangladesh, for years. Our trip was a dream come true for both of us. I would be meeting Maharaja and several of his brahmacaris in Dhaka the next day. My visa had come at the last moment!

As I was packing my bags that afternoon for the overnight flight to Dhaka, I realized I needed a number of toiletries, so I left the apartment where I was staying and took a short walk to a local store just across from a large mosque. On the way back, three young Oriental women ran up to me in apparent distress. Sensing they might be in danger, I instinctively stepped forward to help when suddenly they threw their arms around me and said in unison, “Nice American man need a lady?”

In the split second it took me to realize they were prostitutes, one of them drew closer to kiss me. Yelling out “Nrsimhadeva,” I broke free from their grasp and ran down the street in a state of shock that prostitutes would operate on the streets of such a strict Islamic country. When I returned to the apartment, several devotees saw me. One said, “You look like you’ve seen a ghost!”

“Worse,” I said. “Some prostitutes accosted me. I feel contaminated by their touch.”

“Take shelter of Haridas Thakur,” another boy suggested. “He was also attacked by a prostitute, but was protected by the holy names of the Lord.”

I recalled the incident during the flight that evening and prayed:

“Dear Namacarya, please give me shelter at your lotus feet and free my mind of any impurity.”

At Dhaka Airport I handed the immigration officer my passport and a form all passengers had to complete with their personal details. I was in nondevotee clothes, as Hindus comprise only 10% of the population and there is sometimes tension between them and the majority Muslims. After studying the form for a moment the officer looked up and said, “You wrote that you’ll be staying in a hotel, but you didn’t mention which hotel. You have to tell me which hotel or I can’t let you in.”

I was stunned. I had no idea of the name of any hotel in Dhaka. I stood there for a moment, and then the officer motioned me to a nearby room. Suddenly, an Indian man who was watching us stepped forward and chastised the officer.

“For goodness sake, man, he’s a tourist. How is he supposed to know which hotels we have here? Foreigners don’t come here often and when they do we can’t treat them like this. Let him in through!”

Somehow his words worked and the officer stamped my passport. As I collected my baggage the Indian man walked by and whispered softly, “Hare Krsna. Have a good trip.”

Outside the terminal I met Radhanath Swami and 12 brahmacaris from his temple in Mumbai, also all in nondevotee dress. We took prasadam and then sat in a nearby field to discuss our itinerary. We had only 10 days and had to select which tirthas to visit. We decided to begin our journey at the birthplace of Rupa Goswami and Sanatana Goswami in Jessore in the southwest of the country. Our guide, Caru Candra das, the regional secretary for the Bangladesh yatra, quickly purchased our tickets and two hours later we were on our way.

During the flight Radhanath Swami leaned over and said to me, “Maharaja, I have a suggestion. Before visiting the home of Rupa and Sanatana we should first visit Benapol, which is only a 45-minute drive outside Jessore.”

“Fine,” I replied, not bothering to ask which pastime took place at Benapol. I trusted that Maharaja knew best, as he is familiar with the tirthas of Lord Caitanya and his followers.

As I reclined in my seat, exhausted from the long-distance flight, I reflected on my good fortune to be traveling with Maharaja and his men. “I need it,” I thought, “especially after that encounter with the prostitutes.”

Just as I was about to fall asleep curiosity got the better of me. I opened my eyes and looked over at Radhanath Swami. “What pastime

happened in Benapol, Maharaja?" I said.

"Oh, that's where Haridas Thakur delivered the prostitute who approached him," he replied nonchalantly.

I practically jumped out of my seat.

"What's wrong, Maharaja?" he said, amazed at my reaction.

"I'll tell you when we get there," I said, "but I think the Lord has answered my prayers." I was thinking of a passage from Srila Bhaktivinoda Thakura's *The Bhagavat: Its Philosophy, Its Ethics & Its Theology*:

"Do the spiritual masters, after they disappear, bestow their mercy upon the living entities? The souls of great thinkers of bygone ages, who now live spiritually, often approach an inquiring spirit and assist him in his development."

From Jessore Airport we took a taxi to Benapol, a small village in the jungle. It was dark when we arrived, but Haridas Thakur's bhajan kutir was still open. I almost ran to it and falling down before his murti repeated my prayer for mercy. As I studied the altar I was curious to see the murti of a shaven-headed woman in a white sari, the same size as that of Haridas Thakur.



Deities in Benapol: Haridas Thakura and Laksahira

"That's Laksahira, the prostitute who was sent by a government official to make Haridas Thakur fall down," Radhanath Swami said. "The idea was that soldiers hiding in the foliage would catch them in union and arrest and defame Haridas Thakur. But after listening to Haridas Thakur's chanting of the holy names for three days, Laksahira became purified and surrendered to him. He initiated her and she became a great devotee."

I prayed for the mercy of Haridas Thakur and Laksahira.

That night we slept in a darmsala on the property and I had a wonderful dream. All night I dreamt that myself, Radhanath Swami and the brahmacarīs were dancing around the courtyard of Haridas Thakur's bhajan kutir. In fact, I woke up several times, but when falling asleep again would have the same dream. In the morning I awoke feeling purified. For the rest of the trip I never again thought of the prostitutes who attacked me. Such is the mercy of the "soul of a great thinker."

The next day we went to Rupa and Sanatana's birthplace outside Jessore. Like most of the other holy places we would visit, there wasn't

much to see. After partition, the minority Hindus were persecuted and many of their temples destroyed. The policy continued after the founding of Bangladesh. Thus, wherever we would go, all that would be left of most tirthas was one or two reminders of the lilas that manifested there. This was particularly true at the home of Rupa and Sanatana. All that was there was a single tree. But when we learned it was the very tree under which the goswamis did daily bhajan, we ourselves nestled under it and had kirtan for several hours. Often a holy place is built up with many shrines and temples to attract pilgrims and impress upon them its importance, but here we had only a single tree on which to focus. As we were chanting in the simple jungle environment, I was thinking that one day it, too, might become a renown holy tirtha. For the moment it remains hidden from the world, retaining a charm rich in Gaudiya history and saturated with mercy. As the hours passed, I closed my eyes and absorbed myself in the holy names at the spot where Rupa and Sanatana chanted the very same names.



The ISKCON temple in Bangladesh

Our next destination was ISKCON's large temple a few kilometers away. As we drove there I inquired from Caru Candra why the temple was not built at the auspicious site we had just visited. He replied that the local Muslim authorities would not sell it to us, so ISKCON accepted an offer from a Hindu organization that owned land nearby.

It proved to be a better arrangement, because the ISKCON land is situated in the center of 96 Hindu villages. It is a more secure location and we have a captive audience. In fact, when the beautiful temple was opened in 1999 after years of construction, more than one million people from all over the country attended.

Two days later we flew to Rajshahi in the northwest, a short distance from Keturi on the banks of the Padmavati River. As our car rumbled along the dirt roads leading to the isolated village my heart beat in anticipation of the darsan ahead. I was praying that we'd find more than a single tree. I wasn't disappointed. Though Keturi consists of only 40 families (38 Muslim and two Hindu), we were happy to discover a small, walled temple compound just outside the village.

One of Narottam das Thakur's major contributions was organizing the inaugural Gaura-purnima festival, the yearly observance of Lord

Caitanya's appearance, at Keturi, with many important Vaisnavas of the time attending, including Lord Nityananda's wife, Jahnava mata. At that historic event, Narottam das Thakur installed six Deities—five Krsna Deities and one pure gold Lord Caitanya Deity. The six Vaisnava devotees currently living at the lakeside temple, built by a pious Hindu businessman more than 100 years ago, told us that Jahnava mata collected water from the lake for cooking for the Keturi festival, and to this day the water is used only for the purpose of cooking. I was unable to discover what happened to most of the Deities— Sri Krsna, Vallabha-kanta, Radha-kanta and Radha-raman. I do know that Vraja-mohan was sent to Vrindavan soon after the installation and the Gauranga Deity was moved to India during the war for independence. I noticed, however, six beautiful salagram-silas on the altar. When I later inquired about Them, the pujari told me They were from the Keturi festival era.



The pilgrims approach Narottama's place of spiritual practice near Kheturi

We spent most of the next day hearing and chanting. It was clear that being literally in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by paddy fields, there was nothing to do but fully immerse ourselves in hearing and chanting. The following day, however, a trip was arranged to a small hill where Narottam das Thakur did his daily bhajan. It was a 4km walk through the fields, and I was again struck by the fact that such a tirtha was so isolated. There was only a small stone asana with no inscription marking the spot. Of course, the fact that there was no significant shrine didn't diminish its spiritual potency, so we again immersed ourselves in bhajan and japa, trying to open our spiritual eyes and see the sanctity of the place with spiritual vision.

In the afternoon, we visited the place on the Padmavati where Narottam das Thakur received the special mercy of Lord Caitanya. Once while having kirtan with His associates in the village of Rama Keli, Lord Caitanya began calling out, "Narottam! Narottam! Narottam!" and fell to the ground unconscious. When He awoke He revealed that soon a great devotee named Narottam das would take birth and would be instrumen-

tal in carrying on His mission. Mahaprabhu told the devotees that He would deposit his prema (love of God) in the Padmavati, and at a certain time Narottam das would take bath there and attain pure love of God. Years later, when Narottam das was still a boy, he bathed in the exact spot where Mahaprabhu had deposited His prema and immediately he was overwhelmed with ecstatic love for Kṛṣṇa. Imbued with that mercy, he was constantly floating in the ocean of love of God and was empowered to spread that love everywhere.

As we searched for the precise location of the lila, we came to a small Vaisnava temple on the banks of the river. Inquiring further, we discovered it was indeed the place. The devotee couple and their two children who oversee the temple were overjoyed by our unsolicited visit. Because Bangladesh is a Muslim country, it is rare that devotees visit such holy places. The man excitedly showed us the tree under which Narottam das Thakur had bathed and which the couple worship daily. We paid our obeisances to the tree, had kirtan there and then bathed in the sanctified waters nearby. I had brought a two-liter plastic Bisleri water bottle for the occasion, and after emptying it carefully filled it with water from the holy river.

As we were preparing to leave the next morning, I went to the main temple at Keturi to take a last darsan of the Deities. The pujari was doing a quick puja of the salagramas, and I was surprised to see him simply throw some water over Them, dry Them quickly and place Them back on the altar. It was a simple worship at best. He didn't massage Them in oil, which is customary, or even offer sandalwood paste or Tulasi leaves. When I saw the small fruit plate he offered Them I became disappointed. Just then the superintendent of the temple appeared and I brought the seemingly poor standard of worship to his attention.

He hung his head and said, "It's true what you say. I've tried to impress this on the priests for years but they don't seem to care."

I thought, "These are such important Deities, a part of the pastimes of Narottam das Thakur. They deserve more than this," and decided to take a chance.

"Narottam das Thakur is a great source of inspiration for me," I said. "He's a great preacher and a deeply realized devotee. He's one of my heroes. I often think of him while preaching his message in western countries."

Pausing for a moment and praying for mercy, I then said, "Would you consider giving me one of those salagramas? I'll take good care of the Deity, offering Him opulent worship. And He'll be part of Lord Caitanya's

preaching movement in the West, inspiring many devotees.”

I was stunned by his reply.

“I’ve been observing your group closely,” he said. “I can see that you are sincere Vaisnavas and that you all have deep affection for Narottam das Thakur. So take any salagram you want. Just indicate to the pujari which one you desire.”

I had already chosen the principle salagram on the altar. He was the biggest one, exquisitely beautiful and smooth as glass. He had a big mouth with two enormous cakras inside. A sweeping cakra also came around His side.

“I’ll take Him,” I said, motioning with my head (not my finger, which is considered impolite in Vedic etiquette).

The superintendent instructed the pujari, who took the salagram off the altar without any apparent emotion. He quickly put Him in my hand. I stood there, my hand trembling, trying to fathom the mercy I had received.

When I went back to my room to collect my belongings for our departure, I showed the Deity to Radhanath Swami, who was struck with wonder.

“He’s so majestic,” were his first words. “You are so fortunate. You’re taking a part of Keturi’s history with you. Who is He, which incarnation?”

“Because of His large mouth and cakras, He’s surely Nrsimhadeva,” I replied. “But because he has that tusk coming around the side, I think He’s also Varaha. And from what I learned from the late Viswambara Goswami, of the Radha-Raman temple in Vrindavan, that small cakra inside could indicate that Laksmidevi is present. I think this sila is Varaha-Nrsimha. But let’s call Him Keturi-nath, Lord of Keturi.”

“That’s wonderful,” Maharaja said.

“Tomorrow we’ll offer Him an elaborate bathing ceremony, with lots of Tulasi leaves and a big feast,” I concluded.

Sadly, we then left Keturi, the holy abode of Narottam das Thakur’s pastimes. While clutching the precious gift to my heart, I considered that not only our small group of pilgrims had received the good fortune of Keturi but so, too, would many Vaisnavas around the world.

We visited several other holy tirthas in the following days, such as those of stalwart associates of Lord Caitanya like Pundarik Vidyanidhi, Vasudeva Datta, Mukunda Datta and Murari Gupta. We even visited the ancestral home of Lord Caitanya’s father, Jagannath Misra, an ancient array of stone buildings in the jungle in northern Bangladesh. But our ex-

periences in Keturi left the greatest impression upon me. After Keturi I hankered to get back to my preaching services in the West. In more ways than one, I had received special mercy—and I wanted to share it with others.

I didn't have long to wait. At Dhaka Airport, while in a lounge preparing to board my flight out of the country, a Muslim holy man approached me. As a security measure, I was dressed in nondevotee clothes and sported a two-week beard. Many Muslims assumed I was one of them, and had been respectfully addressing me with salamalekam (greetings). This particular man pointed to my bottle of special water and said in broken English, "Allah Akbar! I'm very dry. Very thirsty. Please water."

I froze. He wanted to drink from my bottle of water from the Padmavati River where Narottam das Thakur had received prema. Every drop in that bottle was sacred. It was capable of giving more than liberation, it could give love of God. But he thought it was just an ordinary bottle of water. I hesitated for a moment, and several Muslim men looked at me. Obviously, you don't refuse a Muslim holy man's request for a simple drink of water. So I handed him the bottle and he proceeded to drink with gusto. I watched in shock as he guzzled more than half the bottle. He then turned to me and said, "Allah has been very kind to me today!"

"Yes, indeed He has," I replied with a smile.

I thought, "My preaching has already begun. Even before leaving Bangladesh I'm sharing the good fortune of my pilgrimage with others. Indeed, this must be the perfection of visiting a holy place."

*gaur amara, je-saba sthane, koralo bhramana range se-saba sthana, heribo ami,
pranayi-bhakata-sange*

"All those places where my Lord Gaurasundara traveled for pastimes I will visit in the company of loving devotees."

[Sрила Bhaktivinoda Thakur— *Suddha-bhakata*, from *Saranagati*]

25

REMEMBERING GOSWAMI MAHARAJA ON HIS
DISAPPEARANCE DAY FESTIVAL
February 11– March 11, 2004

Dear Tamal Krsna Maharaja,
Please accept my most humble obeisances. All glories to our beloved master, Srila Prabhupada.

Goswami Maharaja, this is the first time I have visited your samadhi mandir in Mayapura. I have often walked past the samadhi since I have been here, but I could not bring myself to come in. Please excuse me, but in my heart of hearts I have still not reconciled myself with your leaving. It is too painful.



*His Holiness Tamal Krsna
Goswami Maharaja*

“What is the most painful thing in the life of a devotee?” Lord Caitanya Mahaprabhu asked Ramananda Raya.

“But for separation from a Vaisnava, I can think of no unbearable pain,” the governor replied.

I have realized very little in my 35 years as a devotee, but I can say that as a result of your departure I have grasped those words of Ramananda Raya. Separation from you has left a wound in my heart that has yet to heal, and I know it never will. I can only think of the words of Narottam das Thakur about his friend Ramacandra Kaviraja:

ramacandra sange mage narottama das

“I shall always hanker for the company of Ramacandra Kaviraja”

Goswami Maharaja, it is the nature of saintly persons to give their mercy to those less fortunate. By the grace of the Lord, I was blessed to have your association almost from the very beginning of my devotional life. The first time I met you was in France, and you asked me to lead kirtan. Throughout the years, whenever we were together, you would often ask the same of me.



The Samadhi of Tamal Kṛṣṇa Maharaja in Mayapur

I don't know what you liked in my pretentious chanting, but your encouragement gave me hope that one day I could develop a genuine feeling for the holy names, such as I saw in you. As a boy acts simply to attract the attention of his superiors, I always liked to sing for you. Perhaps by the mercy of your disciples I will get to sing for you today and my mind will overflow with precious moments

of our association once more.

I miss you more than I can say, for life without you is not the same. Your guidance was essential to my progress in spiritual life, especially when I was faced with major decisions. For the little problems, or even the intermediate ones, I could find a solution in the words of sastra or in the association of my immediate friends and companions, but it was only you, my wise and experienced Godbrother, who could solve the most complex issues.

One time I was faced with a serious dilemma when my beloved friend and associate Sri Prahlad had to decide between service on our tours in Poland or service here in Mayapura, in the Gurukula.

The thought of losing Sri Prahlad was more than I could take. We had built up the powerful preaching of the holy names together in Poland over many years, but I did not want to interfere with his desire to serve here in the holy dhama. For months Sri Prahlad and I discussed the problem, but we could come to no conclusion.

Finally I turned to you. I trusted you and was always sure you'd give the right answer. You seemed as if of another generation of devotee, a special and select breed of Vaisnavas who had been trained and refined in the personal association of our beloved Prabhupada.

You were a Prabhupada man. For me, you are the first and the best to bear this title, the most prestigious title an ISKCON devotee could ever have. When I asked you what to do about Sri Prahlada, you reflected for only a moment.

"Why this or that?" you said. "Why not this *and* that? He can serve six months in Poland and six months in Mayapura each year."

It was the perfect answer, and I thank you for that, Goswami Maharaja. Sri Prahlada and I are both happy that his service on the tour continues and that with his help the school here continues to expand.

But my life is not over, and there will be many such questions in the years ahead, maybe even more difficult. I'll miss your clear and concise answers and the assurance they always gave. And no doubt your disciples feel the same.

Goswami Maharaja, I want to add that I especially miss your lectures. After our Guru Maharaja, you were my favorite speaker on the *Srimad Bhagavatam*. I especially liked those lectures meant for inspiring us to push on our movement. You had imbibed Srila Prabhupada's pioneering spirit, his desire to take the chanting of Hare Krsna to every town and village, and I would feel boundless enthusiasm whenever you spoke about sankirtan.

I remember a lecture you gave in France. It was 1984, and our yatra was at the peak of development after years of effort. Your lecture was right to the point: All our success had come from the mass distribution of Srila Prabhupada's books. This was a fact, and your words confirmed Srila Prabhupada's point that sankirtan was the source of all auspiciousness and success.

And how expert you were in delivering this message! The verse we were reading that morning was about something else, about the pastimes of Maha Visnu and the creation of the material world. Afterwards you came up to me with a smile and told me that you could dovetail any verse into a sankirtan class because sankirtan was the essence of service to the Lord in this age.

I have been especially absorbed in thoughts of you during the Mayapura festival this year, Goswami Maharaja, as it was you who gave me the thumbs up here in Mayapura to accept the renounced order and increase my service to the Lord. My GBC had agreed to the proposal but said I needed your approval to enter this asrama. I was nervous when I approached you in the Long Building, but you simply smiled, welcoming me into the sannyasa order that you so expertly upheld.

Then you spent several hours giving me instructions on how to proceed carefully but always with conviction about the value of sannyasa dharma. Goswami Maharaja, I come before you to today with a happy bit of news: This Gaura Purnima marks the 25th anniversary of my taking sannyasa here in this holy dhama, with you present. It is only by the mercy of our Guru Maharaja and your brotherly love and care.

Goswami Maharaja, now I've finally made it here to your samadhi mandir and have had to come to terms with your departure once and for all. Yes, you're gone, but I know you're firmly fixed in service to Srila Prabhupada, either in Goloka or, by his will, within the material world.



Mayapur, Gaura Purnima 1979: The sanmyasa initiation of Prabhavisnu, Sivarama and Indradyumna Maharajas

Please bless me that I may have the same resolve, that I may desire only to serve Srila Prabhupada, be it in America or Asia, in happiness or distress, in heaven or hell. I'm prepared to follow you, as I have always done, knowing that I'll taste the bliss of full surrender in preaching the sankirtan movement of the Lord.

Goswami Maharaja, just one last question, if I may. I am sure that at ceremonies such as this one, well-

wishers like you not only know our desires and hear our prayers but also respond. Please, then, instruct me once again and put me at ease. Tell me, How can I progress to the point where I know I can join you again in service to our beloved Srila Prabhupada? I liked your mood of service to our Guru Maharaja and your preaching spirit, and I'd be happy to assist you again.

You once asked me to travel with you, "for the rest of our lives," as you put it. I lament now that I didn't take up your offer, but I come before you today ready to fulfill your command. I look forward to serving you in what is left of this life and whatever lies beyond.

Your servant and grateful friend,
Indradyumna Swami



THE JOLLY SWAMI

March 12 - May 1, 2004

I WAS WAITING FOR SRIDHAR MAHARAJA in the arrival hall at London's Heathrow airport. Finally he appeared and started walking slowly toward me. He smiled as he came close. "What chapter of the diary are you up to?" he asked.

I immediately hugged him. "I just sent out chapter 12," I answered.

He smiled again. "I guess I'll be in the next chapter," he said, "but I won't be around to read it."

I couldn't answer. It was true, what he had said. He was in the terminal stage of liver cancer, and he was going to the holy dhama of Mayapura to spend his final days.

Two days earlier, in Durban, South Africa, I had received an email from Maharaja's disciple Mayapura das. Maharaja was in Vancouver, Canada, and needed a liver transplant. Mayapur wanted to know if I could provide financial help.

I wrote back immediately saying that I would be happy to help in any way I could.

Mayapura wrote back just 10 minutes later. "The doctors have just said that Maharaja cannot receive a new liver," he wrote. "Besides his hepatitis C and cirrhosis, they discovered three places where cancer has affected his liver, making him ineligible for the transplant because the cancer has spread elsewhere. There is nothing that can be done now. It's only a matter of days or weeks before Maharaja leaves his body."

Mayapura went on to say that Maharaja wanted to travel now and give some last association to his disciples.

I immediately phoned Maharaja in Vancouver.

"Sridhar Maharaja," I began, "this is the last stage of your life. You only have a few days or weeks left. I think it is best you go to one of the holy dhamas in India and prepare for your departure. You have spent the better part of your life preaching. You have the right to spend the last few

days in the holy dhama. The annual Mayapura festival is coming up soon. Your disciples can see you there.”

I insisted until Maharaja agreed.

“Will you help me get to Mayapur?” he asked.

“Of course,” I said.

Maharaja gave the phone to his sister Fiona. She walked a short distance away and spoke softly into the phone.

“The doctors say he won’t survive the flight to India,” she said, “but I think we should try anyway. I know India’s the best place for him now. I have already looked into a flight. One of his disciples here can accompany him, and you can meet them in London on their one-night stopover.”

Now I was with Maharaja at Heathrow Airport. We walked from the arrival lounge to the car waiting outside. Many of Maharaja’s European disciples crowded around him. He was groggy from the long flight and obviously in pain. Taking a role that I would hold for the next 10 days, I allowed Maharaja to speak to his disciples for a few minutes and then told everyone he had to go to the hotel to rest before his flight the next morning. A few disciples, obviously upset that they couldn’t spend a few more precious moments with him, glared at me. I didn’t take offense, but Sridhar Maharaja spoke up.

“From now on,” he said, “all of you do whatever Indradyumna Maharaja tells you. The nature of this illness is that certain gases accumulate in my stomach and go to my head, making me giddy. It is called encephalopathy. Sometimes they may even cause me to fall into a hepatic coma. Either way, I will be unable to decide what to do. So from now on Indradyumna Swami is your authority.”

But I had to give in, so I told the 20 disciples present to come to the hotel that evening for a short darsan.

At the hotel, I helped Maharaja take his kurta off. I was shocked to see that his entire abdomen was dark purple.

“The blood vessels are starting to break inside,” he said.

He started to smile. “When the big ones go, I go,” he said.

I was amazed at his composure, but it was only the beginning. In the 10 days that I would be with Maharaja, I would never detect even the slightest fear of death. In fact he often joked with us about it. Later on, Ambarisa prabhu would comment that ordinarily when someone is approaching death it is a great drama, but Sridhara Maharaja made it almost humorous. He was always jolly, up to the end.

I could see why he had the nickname Jolly Swami. Years ago in Bombay, two affluent life members—Mr. Brijratan Mohatta and Mr. M. P.

Maheshwari—affectionately began calling him The Jolly Swami because he was always happy, and the name stuck. Even Maharaja's website was called The Jolly Swami.

Maharaja bathed and rested briefly, and I allowed his disciples to come in. For most of them it would be the last darsan, and the atmosphere was intense.

Even before they sat down, Maharaja began to speak. "When I leave," he said, "you may cry for a few days, but then return to your services. I never had a family of my own. I

took sannyasa when I was a young man, but when I accepted disciples I benefited tremendously. I felt emotions I had never thought I had. Surely such relationships will not end when I die."

"When I leave, we can be together in a more significant way," he continued. "Service in separation is the highest. I love all of you very much. The king is good for the people, and the people are good for the king."

As Maharaja was speaking, I found myself writing down everything he said. I had heard such wisdom before, but somehow it carried more weight coming from the mouth of one who was about to die. I concluded that wisdom is not simply the words themselves but also who speaks them and when.

After offering words of gravity to his disciples, Maharaja returned to his more natural mode and lightened up the atmosphere. One disciple approached him with a rather simple painting of Radha and Krsna. At first Maharaja struggled to keep his eyes open. It was late, and he was heavily sedated. Looking at his swollen purple belly and bloated face I wondered how he had the strength to entertain so many people.

He opened his eyes and came to consciousness. Then he gazed at the painting of Radha and Krsna and smiled. He turned lovingly toward his disciple and then to the audience of devotees.

"There's talent in this picture," he said. "It's unmanifested, but it's there."

Suddenly everyone burst out laughing. He had cut through the heavy atmosphere in his usual way with his humor. Some devotees continued laughing, but others quickly remembered the reality at hand and their



Kavicandra Swami and Sridhar Swami in Mayapur a few weeks before Maharaja's passing away

faces became serious again.

As I was watching, I kept remembering Srila Prabhupada's remarks to his disciples from his deathbed: "Don't think this won't happen to you."

It was certainly sage advice, but seeing a Godbrother my age going through the same stage of death somehow made it all the more real. "I too will soon be on my deathbed with my disciples around me," I thought. I admired Maharaja's ability to give eternal wisdom in such a condition, and I watched more closely, preparing my own self to give my final instructions.

Later on Maharaja began drifting off to sleep. Someone offered me a plate of prasadam, and I began to eat. Then I realized I hadn't eaten or slept in over 32 hours, since leaving Africa to join Maharaja.

A few minutes later Maharaja came to and asked for prasadam. Somebody brought it to him. He looked at me. "Aren't you going to eat?" he asked.

"I have already eaten," I said. "I assumed you would be fasting."

"Eating is the one thing I'll never give up," he said. The room lit up again with laughter.

It was nearing midnight, and I stood up and asked the devotees to leave. Suddenly one of Maharaja's disciples handed me a letter of recommendation for brahminical initiation, from a temple in Slovenia.

I looked back at him incredulously. "It's almost midnight," I said.

"There was no opportunity before," he replied.

Maharaja stirred. "What's happening?" he asked.

"There are five devotees here who want second initiation," I said.

"I won't be around to give you instruction," Maharaja said to the devotees. "It's better you take second initiation from Indradyumna Swami."

Some of the prospective initiates started to cry.

"Maharaja," I said, "I'll do it as a service to you, but I feel it's better you give the initiation while you're still living. I'll help your disciples after you go."

"All right," Maharaja said.

I felt awkward instructing Maharaja because I considered him very much senior to me. We had traveled together for almost one year in 1986, and I was happy to take the subordinate position. He said at the time that we made a good team, but he always made the important decisions. I had no problem with that, as I respected the fact that Maharaja had had so much of Srila Prabhupada's association. I have always considered it a rare

privilege to associate with Godbrothers or Godsisters who actually served in Srila Prabhupada's personal association. They often have a special love for him, and it is infectious.

A nearby clock sounded the stroke of midnight. "We will have to do the initiation now," I said. "All of the initiates can move forward, and Maharaja will speak the mantra out loud so you can hear."

There was no question of Maharaja giving the gayatri mantra individually to each disciple. The darsan had proved too strenuous for him, and he was lapsing into moments of unconsciousness. I remembered his sister's words to me over the phone—that the doctors said he probably wouldn't survive the flight to India—so I expected he could die at any moment.

As the initiates moved forward I asked those who didn't have second initiation to leave the room. Maharaja slowly opened his eyes, and then to my amazement gave a clear, concise, and Kṛṣṇa-conscious talk on the importance of brahminical initiation. Towards the end he began to nod out again, so I asked him to give the mantra right away.

As his disciples listened attentively he began chanting the gayatri mantra, word by word, but I became anxious when he reached the third line and started slowing down. He was having difficulty concentrating—again a combination of illness, exhaustion, and the powerful painkillers he had to take just to go through the journey he was on.

Suddenly he couldn't remember the next line, but true to form, he smiled and looked over at me. "You say the mantra," he said, "and I'll repeat it to them."

I was surprised, but considering the time, place, and circumstances, I began saying the rest of the mantra word by word, and Maharaja repeated the same to his disciples.

But by this time, I was also fading from exhaustion. At one point I forgot where I was and hesitated for a moment. Maharaja looked at me and smiled. "We can't make any mistakes here," he said.

He looked out at the devotees present. "One of you brahmanas say the mantra to Maharaja," he said, "Maharaja will say it to me, and I will then say it to the new initiates."

And so it was that the five devotees received their mantra. Then with tears in their eyes, they stood up to say goodbye to their spiritual master for the last time in their lives. The departure of all the devotees from the hotel room that night was one of the most intense experiences I've had in my life as a devotee. They left slowly, trying to extend every moment for as long as possible. They inched their way backwards to the

door, their tears running down their cheeks, focusing all their attention on their spiritual master. Maharaja had tears also, but he held back his feelings and gave final blessings to his disciples.

As soon as the door closed Maharaja collapsed in bed and fell into a deep sleep.

The next morning I woke him up with great difficulty. At first he didn't know where he was or what was happening. "Maharaja," I told him, "you're in London, on your way to India to prepare for leaving this world."

He became more conscious and smiled. "Yes," he said, "I have three desires: to make it to Mayapura alive, to attend the installation of the Panca Tattva Deities, and to participate in the Gaura Purnima festival."

"Then we'd better get going Swami," I said. "Time is running out."

Several devotees helped Maharaja pack his things while I went to my room to arrange mine. I carefully put the white plastic gloves and surgical masks I'd purchased into my hand luggage should the need arise. The doctors had told Maharaja that his disease would cause him to vomit a lot of blood when he died. In fact, the pressure in his body might well cause the blood to burst from his eyes, nose, and ears. They warned that because of his hepatitis C, the blood would be highly contagious for a number of hours. I considered the risk involved in traveling with Maharaja, but felt it would be minimized by careful handling of the situation when it arose.

In the car on the way to the airport, I asked Maharaja for his passport and ticket. I looked at them to make sure everything was in order, but I found what looked like an error. "Maharaja," I said, "your ticket is only to Calcutta. There's no return section..." My voice trailed off as I realized my mistake.

Maharaja smiled. "A one-way ticket home," he said. "*Mam upetya tu kaunteya, punar janma na vidyate.*" [But one who attains to My abode, O son of Kunti, never takes birth again. — BG 8.18]

When we arrived at the airport, I asked Maharaja to stand back a little as I checked us in. Airlines don't allow terminally ill patients to board flights, for obvious reasons. And Maharaja, with his bloated features, pale skin, and swooning posture, clearly looked like someone on the verge of death.

In fact, when the woman at the counter checked Maharaja's passport photo and looked at him, she seemed to hesitate for a moment. I thought quickly. "Bad case of the flu, Ma'am," I said, "but he's almost over it."

"Oh," she said, "I thought it was something serious."

I thought about Maharaja first desire: to get to the holy dhama. "Oh

no,” I said, putting on an air of confidence, “not at all.”

After immigration we boarded the flight. Both our tickets to Calcutta had been sponsored, and by the grace of the devotees we were in business class. As soon as Maharaja sat down he went out, and I reclined his seat a little to make him more comfortable. He didn’t wake up until three hours into the flight.

He was groggy. He looked outside and told me we were going the wrong way.

“Huh?” I said. “What do you mean?”

“You didn’t see the sign?” he asked. “It pointed toward Vancouver.”

I had been warned that the gases in his abdomen could affect his reasoning, so I smiled. “It’s okay, Maharaja,” I said. “I’ll tell the captain, and he’ll make the necessary changes.”

Maharaja lay back down and went to sleep again.

As the plane sped through the skies I sat next to Maharaja chanting loud enough for him to hear. I was thinking about how he could die at any moment, even in his sleep, and I felt responsible that should that moment come, he would be hearing the holy names.

He awoke two hours later, moaning in great pain. I quickly popped two painkillers in his mouth, and within minutes he calmed down.

A stewardess noticed what was happening and walked over. “Is anything wrong?” she asked.

Maharaja amazed me by immediately taking the opportunity to preach to her. “There’s always something wrong in this world,” he said. “At any given moment we’re struggling with birth, disease, old age, or death. Therefore an intelligent person should try to get out of material existence and go back to the spiritual world.”

“That makes sense,” the stewardess said. “Is that what you’re doing?”

“Yes,” Maharaja smiled, “that’s exactly what I’m doing.”

“How can I learn how to do that too?” she asked. I sat up in surprise.

Maharaja reached into his handbag and pulled out one of Srila Prabhupada’s books, *Perfection of Yoga*. I was even more surprised.

“By reading this,” he said.

“I’d love to have that book,” she said. “Let me get my purse, and I’ll give you a donation.”

In 10 minutes she came back with a 10-pound note.

“This is for the book,” she said as Maharaja handed it to her. Watching the exchange go on reminded me of how Srila Prabhupada had

preached up to moment of his death. Sridhar Maharaja was following in his spiritual master's footsteps.

Next Maharaja turned to me. "Can you give me one of those peanut-butter-and-jam sandwiches in the bag," he said.

"That might not be the best thing to eat," I said, "considering your liver disease."

He laughed. "At this point there's no question of curing this disease," he said. "I'd rather enjoy prasadam and die earlier than start fasting and live a little longer."

I gave him the sandwich and when he was halfway through it, a five-year-old Bengali boy came up and stared at Maharaja. The business class cabin was filled with well-to-do Bengali's returning home from the West.

"Can I have some?" the little boy asked.

Maharaja stopped eating and looked at the boy.

"I'm hungry," the boy said.

Before I could intervene, Maharaja smiled and gave the boy part of his sandwich. Not waiting a moment, the boy immediately bit into it and rewarded Maharaja with a big smile.

As the boy was taking his second bite, his mother came and thanked Maharaja. "You are so kind to my son, Swamiji," she said. "You are giving the remnants of your food to my son. Thank you."

"Where are you going Swami?" she continued. "To your temple in Calcutta?"

"No," said Maharaja, "as a matter of fact, I'm going to Mayapura to die, Mataji. I have liver cancer, and the doctors have only given me a few days to live."

I knew that the lady would be distraught to learn that her son was eating the sandwich of a dying man, so I managed to interrupt.

"Yes, yes, Mataji," I said. "He's going Mayapura to die, meaning that he wants to give up all his material desires and become fully engaged in the service of the Lord."

"Oh," she said. "Very nice Swami. Please bless my son one more time."

Maharaja rubbed his hand on the boy's head, and the boy and his mother left.

Just at that moment a Bengali man came up to Maharaja. He had been watching us since we boarded the flight. "I have been observing you, Swami," he said, "and I can see that you are renounced. You are eating little, sleeping little, and preaching to the misfortunate souls on this plane. I want to give you one of my sons, Swami, my eldest boy. Take him as your

servant.”

For a moment Maharaja was speechless. Then he smiled and looked at me. “A little late, isn’t it?” he said to me.

He turned to the man. “Thank you, sir,” he said, “but I’ll have to decline. I’ve only got a few days to live.”

Maharaja was exhausted. He fell back into his seat and went to sleep. His seat was reclined like a bed, but Maharaja was a big man with a severely bloated belly, and I could see he was uncomfortable as he moved around in his seat, moaning. I would shift his position every once in a while to make him more comfortable. He would drool sometimes, and I would take a paper tissue and clean his face. At one point, he urinated. Unable to do much, I arranged his cloth in such a way that it could dry. The air became chilly, so I put his socks on his feet.

I noticed a few of the other passengers looking at me curiously, but I didn’t care. I was relishing the service. I was thinking that finally I could do some seva for a senior devotee. Most of the time it is I who am taking menial service from other devotees. “But I like it better this way,” I thought, “not being the object of the service, but offering it.”

When Maharaja finally stopped moving, I took the last piece of the sandwich and ate it. Then, feeling exhausted but purified, I fell asleep.

*visayavista murkhanam
citta samskaram ausadham
visrambhena guroh seva
vaisnavocchista bhojanam*

“The medicinal herb to purify the minds of fools absorbed in sense pleasure is faithful service to Sri Guru. The diet is the remnants of food left by the Vaisnavas.” [Sri Sarvabhauma Bhattacharya, *Sri Gauranga-mahima*, Susloka Satakam, Text 8]

We both woke up just before landing at Calcutta airport. Maharaja reached over with both arms and gave me a long hug. “Thanks, Indie, for bringing me here,” he said. “I love my Godbrothers so much.”

It was a genuine affection that Maharaja would express often in the days leading up to his departure. While many of us would lament his deteriorating condition, he seemed only to focus on the good qualities and service of those who visited him. For me, it was another manifestation of his total lack of fear in the face of death.

There was an upbeat mood in business class as the stewardesses



"I love my Godbrothers so much."

Atmavan manyate jagat

"A person assesses others according to his own mentality" [Source unknown]

When we landed, Maharaja and I felt a sense of relief. His first desire was close to being fulfilled: we weren't far from Mayapura. After we cleared immigration and customs, I helped Maharaja walk out of the terminal. I had to hold him up, as his condition was deteriorating rapidly. Once, when he gasped with pain, I held him tighter. "Almost there, Swami," I said.

Again he smiled, despite the agony he was experiencing.

Maharaja's disciple Mayapura das was waiting outside for us and helped Maharaja to the van that was waiting. We put Maharaja inside and laid him down on a mattress that had been provided for the four-hour journey to Mayapura.

On the way, Maharaja spoke with affection about his disciples. In particular, he reminisced about the service of Mayapura das, his first disciple. It was nectar to hear his reminiscences, but painful as well, for there would not be many more in this lifetime.

We were so absorbed in the discussion that at first we didn't hear the big kirtan on the road leading up to our property in Mayapur. I was the first to hear it, and when I looked out the window, I was stunned. The entire GBC body had come to greet Maharaja, as well as many sannyasis and other senior devotees. Hundreds of other devotees had assembled as well. Everyone was chanting and dancing to a blissful kirtan led by Danavir

served a meal of fresh fruit, buns, cheese, and drinks just before landing. People were talking and laughing, standing in little groups here and there.

But I didn't share their optimism. Being with a man about to die, I was sober and reflective. In my mind, I addressed the people. "You fools," I thought. "What is there to rejoice about? Sooner or later we will all have to die."

I imagined the scene to be like the Titanic: people partying on the decks, as the ill-fated boat raced towards destruction on the high seas.

Goswami.

“Maharaja,” I said, “the devotees have come to receive you. Look.”

We lifted Maharaja a bit so he could see outside the front window, and when he saw the kirtan party, tears started rolling down his cheeks and he couldn’t speak. Then slowly, he recovered his voice. “How I love my Godbrothers!” he said.

At that moment I realized how important a place Godbrothers have in one’s life. Just as one cannot love Kṛṣṇa without the mercy of the spiritual master, one cannot love the guru without the help of one’s Godbrothers. All three are intimately linked. Srila Narottama das Thakur sings, “*Harī, Guru, Vaiṣṇava, Bhagavata Gīta*”

Because of the mass of devotees converging on our van, we had to slow down. As we inched our way along, many senior devotees came to the side window of the van to greet Maharaja and pay their respects. It was a touching sight to see the love expressed between Maharaja and these men. He had served alongside many of them through the years, and it was obvious that the camaraderie they had developed in service to Guru and Gaurāṅga ran deep.

We finally drove through the big gates and then up close to the temple of Sri Sri Rādhā Madhava. By that time, news had spread of Maharaja’s arrival and an even bigger crowd—over a thousand devotees—had assembled. “A hero’s welcome,” I thought, “and well deserved.”

I helped Maharaja out of the car and began helping him towards the temple to take darsan of the Deities. But at one point he pushed me away, as if disturbed that he even needed help. I didn’t take offense but rather thought of him as an old soldier, distraught by the fact he needed help. Maharaja had been an active preacher throughout most of his life. He once told me that he would prefer to go down fighting than to die lying in bed with a prolonged illness. A noble sentiment for any preacher, but after a few steps Maharaja began to falter, and I had to catch him to help him along again.



Srīdhara Swamī arrives in Mayapur

We entered the temple. Maharaja stood before Sri Sri Rādhā Madhava and the eight gopis, his eyes focused on Their divine forms. He then surprised everyone by raising his arms and dancing a little. Ever in-



Sri Sri Radha Madhava in Mayapur

tent on learning the art of dying, I watched him intently, and I thought about a passage from *Krsna Book*:

“The flames increased as the wind blew very quickly, and it appeared that everything movable and immovable would be devoured. All the cows and the boys became very frightened, and they looked toward Balarama and Krsna the way a dying

man looks at the picture of the Supreme Personality of Godhead.” [*Krsna Book*, “Devouring the Forest Fire”]

Afterwards several of us helped Maharaja to his room. Many devotees accompanied us, and the room soon filled with devotees wanting to see him. Despite his condition he was the perfect host, receiving their blessings, words of appreciation, and encouragement.

But soon it became obvious that the long journey from Vancouver and the darshan were taking their toll on Maharaja. His abdomen appeared alarmingly swollen with liquid. A doctor was called and those who were allowed to remain in the room were very sober as Maharaja lay there with his eyes closed and the doctor checked his stomach with a stethoscope.

Suddenly Maharaja opened his eyes. “It’s a boy, Doc,” he said. The room exploded in laughter. He was still the Jolly Swami.

That evening, we were having kirtan in his room. Maharaja asked to see me, and I went over to his bed. He was lying down, so I leaned down close his face. He spoke softly. “You’ve done your duty, Maharaja,” he said. “You brought me here safely. I’m grateful. Now my disciples can take care of me. You haven’t been to the Mayapura festival for years. You should participate in all the functions. The devotees will be happy.”

I protested. “But Maharaja...”

“There’s no discussion,” he interrupted. “Come to my room in the evenings and sing bhajans. That will be enough.”

During the next week, while preparations went on for the upcoming installation of the Panca Tattva Deities, I would go daily to Maharaja’s room. Though there was some talk of special doctors and miracle cures, I knew that Maharaja’s time had come.

One evening I told this to him. I wanted him to focus on hearing and chanting about Krsna—the final duties of every devotee preparing for death. “You’re right,” he said. “Let’s have more kirtan. I only want to stay alive long enough to see the installation of Panca Tattva and participate in

the Gaura Purnima festival. My only anxiety is that after Gaura Purnima, my Godbrothers will leave Mayapura.”

We increased the bhajanas and kirtans in Maharaja’s room up until the installation of the Panca Tattva Deities. That event was grand affair, unlike anything I’d ever seen before. Over five thousand devotees attended, and somehow Maharaja also participated by pouring auspicious substances over the Deities during the abhiseka ceremony. Watching from a distance I thanked the Deities for fulfilling Maharaja’s desire to be present that day.

The next day, I came to say my final goodbye to Maharaja. I had to return to my services in the West. It took me a long time to get up the courage to go into his room. I entered, and in a sober mood asked Mayapura das if I could see Maharaja. Maharaja was in the shower, but he overheard our conversation. “Come on in, Indie!” he called out.

“But you’re in the shower, Maharaja,” I replied.

“That’s okay,” Maharaja called back. “I’m just finishing up.”

I opened the door and found Maharaja wearing a gamsha, leaning against the shower wall. He could hardly stand, but he was smiling.

“I’ve come to say goodbye, Maharaja,” I said. I had to hold back my tears.

“Oh Indie,” he said with his usual equipoise, “we’ll meet again. Don’t worry. Service to the spiritual master is eternal.”

“I know,” I said, “but it may be some time before we see each other again.”

Maharaja thought for a moment and began to smile. Then he broke out into a song that we both knew from our youth: “Happy trails to you, until we meet again.”

Once more, he had made a difficult moment light and laughing I left the room. But when I got outside, the reality that I wouldn’t seem him again in this life overcame me. Walking back to my taxi, I tried to conceal the tears that came to my eyes, as devotees came to say goodbye to me along the way.

Two weeks later, on the auspicious appearance day of Srinivas Acarya, I was in Laguna Beach speaking with Giriraja Maharaja just outside the temple when the news came that Sridhar Maharaja had passed away a few hours earlier in Mayapura, peacefully gazing at a picture of Srila Prabhupada. It was exactly one week after Gaura Purnima.

No matter how much one is prepared for such news, it always comes as a shock. Giriraja Maharaja, softhearted as he is, immediately became overwhelmed with emotion. Waves of sorrow also overcame me,

but I soon checked myself and slightly smiled. I thought about how Lord Caitanya had been kind to Sridhar Swami. In appreciation for unswerving service over many years, the Lord had fulfilled all three of Maharaja's final desires, then took him to a higher destination.

I thought about what Srila Prabhupada had written after the passing away of Jayananda Prabhu: "Kṛṣṇa has done a great favor to you, not to continue your diseased body, and has given you a suitable place for your service." [Letter, May 5, 1977]

Sridhar Maharaja, as you said, you won't be around to read this chapter of my diary. But in fact I'm the unfortunate one, as I can't see the glories of your next chapter of life. No doubt it's a wonderful chapter in service to Srila Prabhupada and most likely spiced with this humor of yours, which lit up the lives of so many in the past.

I will miss you dearly, Maharaja. I am indebted to you in so many ways, most notably for teaching me the art of dying. But you will remain in my heart forever as a well wishing friend—until we meet again. As you said in London, "Surely such relationships will not end when I die."



The jolly Swami.

He reasons ill who says that
Vaisnavas die
When thou art living still in
sound!
The Vaisnavas die to live, and
living try
To spread the holy name
around."

[Srila Bhaktivinode Thakur]

27

THE PAMPERED PRINCE

May 2 - June 1, 2004

AS MY FLIGHT CIRCLED OVER WARSAW waiting for permission to land, I looked out the window at the city below. Even from the sky, Warsaw wasn't attractive. Once one of the more beautiful cities in Europe, it was leveled by relentless bombing by the German air force in World War 2. The rebuilding of the city was done by people who had little appreciation for architecture or design. Nevertheless, I looked forward to my arrival. Poland has been my prabhudatta-desh, my assigned preaching field, for 15 years. In effect, I was returning home.

I'd been away for nine months, traveling, preaching, and fundraising for my festival tour in Poland. I'd worked hard and had grown noticeably older. In fact, at 55, I was feeling the rigors of traveling more than ever. In South Africa, a devotee asked me about it. "Aren't you getting a bit old for those daily Harinams and festivals you have in Poland?" he asked. "You have trouble just walking up the stairs these days."

"Older, yes," I replied, "but not as old as all that."

On the flight out of Johannesburg that day, I smiled when I saw the headlines of a newspaper quoting Nelson Mandela at a large function the day before. "I am enjoying myself so much," said Mr. Mandela, "that although 85, I feel like a young man of 55."

After arriving in Warsaw, I immediately caught a local flight to Katowice, in the south. I arrived exhausted, having traveled 21 hours from South Africa. The devotees picked me up and drove me to Bielsko Biala, where we were holding the first festival of our spring tour. I



A one-hour kirtan; I couldn't have wished for a better homecoming...

walked into the hall and onto the stage, where I delivered a short lecture and led a one-hour kirtan. I couldn't have wished for a better homecoming.

This spring we have organized our festival tour differently than in previous years. We have arranged for small halls that accommodate two to three hundred people in towns where we have large congregations. The idea is to allow our congregations to associate more with the devotees and to let people who become interested in Krsna consciousness as a result of the festivals to associate with the congregation. In the summer we will return to the format of outdoor venues with larger crowds.

After the festival in Bielsko Biala, I was driven to an apartment where I fell asleep and woke up 10 hours later. After doing my puja and chanting my rounds that morning, I jumped into a sankirtan van going out to publicize the festival in Katowice that evening. But although I was eager for the kirtan, I found myself unprepared for the situation on the street.

Katowice is an industrial town of 200,000 people. Unfortunately, 30 percent of the population are unemployed, and on an average, those that have work, make less than \$100 a month. Such conditions are a breeding ground for poverty and crime, all of which became apparent as we stepped out of the van.

It was a chilly morning, with a light rain falling. The pungent smell of burning coal, used to heat the buildings along the street, immediately filled my nostrils. Ugly gray concrete buildings, symptomatic of the reconstruction of postwar Poland, crowded the scene, and from manholes came the stench of an outdated sewer system. Old cobblestone streets, remnants of a bygone age that had survived the last war, added to the dismal nature of the scene with their blackish-gray color.



Sri Prahlada das leads harinama in Katowice

People gave us strange looks as we assembled on the street for Harinam. They were unfamiliar with devotees, and some laughed while others heckled our Vaisnava clothes.

We drew silent, cold stares from a group of skinheads, ever our arch-rivals, assembled on the corner across the street. Instinctively, I felt my kurta pocket to make sure my canister of tear gas was there.

It wasn't. I had left it in my closet in Warsaw at the end of last year's tour. I cursed myself. Though rarely if ever used, the tear gas gives a sense of security when devotees perform Harinam on the unpredictable streets of Kali-yuga cities.

We started Harinam, but few people took notice. As brilliant as the devotees were in their colorful dhotis and saris, the modes of passion and ignorance prevailed on the street. People moved along staring straight ahead, preoccupied with work (or the absence of it), school, and numerous other anxieties.

And we weren't the only ones vying for their attention. There seemed an unusual number of drunkards panhandling for money to buy cheap drinks available in the seedy bars. If anyone attracted attention it was the street youths, boys and girls heavily tattooed, decorated with dull jewelry protruding from pierced ears, eyebrows, and lips, and dressed in baggy pants and shirts. With nothing to do but hang out, they seemed almost natural in the bizarre spectacle before my eyes.

As I was adjusting the strap on my mrdanga, I came too close to the pedestrian traffic, and a man passing by knocked my shoulder and sent me reeling back a meter or two. He didn't even look back to say he was sorry.

I felt overwhelmed by the atmosphere. I was wet, uncomfortable, and feeling out of place. I began to wonder whether the devotee in South Africa might not have been right. Was this the proper place for an aging devotee? As the Harinama began building up momentum, I tried to come back to my normal self. After all, I'd been doing street Harinam for years. What had gone wrong?

On the plea of getting something from the van, I went back and sat there awhile. After 15 minutes I figured out my problem. For months I'd been traveling and preaching in different parts of the world, and while doing so I had received the honor and respect naturally given to one in the renounced order of life: receptions, garlands, words of praise, and soft bedding with silk pillows. Fine food awaited me in every house, and luxury cars drove me to programs where I met the rich, the famous, and even heads of state. It was all in the name of service, but I sensed it had left me somewhat of a pampered prince.

Now mixing again with the miserable downtrodden masses, I felt out of place. The opulence and respect I had received had contributed to a loss of the compassion so necessary for a preacher on the street. "From now on," I vowed, "I will be more cautious in dealing with opulence and fame."

A verse entered my thoughts:

“My dear brother mind, the despicable desire for material honor and distinction is compared to a shameless and low-born prostitute who eats dog meat, yet she is flagrantly dancing in my heart. How then, can the pristine love of pure devotion to Sri Kṛṣṇa ever find a place in my heart? You will simply have to serve the unalloyed devotees of the Lord, who are His intimate associates and stalwart supporters. They alone can drive out this prostitute and enthrone pure love of Godhead within my heart.” [Sṛīla Rāgunātha dāsa Goswāmī, *Manah Śikṣā*, Verse 7]

Looking again towards the street, I closed my eyes and prayed for mercy, reflecting on a poem I often recite when I find myself in difficult situations during preaching:

O Master! If you are merciful to us once again, then even though we are trapped here on the shores of the ocean of death, we will finally behold a change for the better.

Then once again we can blissfully remember the holy name of Kṛṣṇa, and again have firm faith in your “Vaikuntha message.”

Once again you will make us dance to the pure holy name of Kṛṣṇa. And you will personally dispel any confusion caused by Maya.

O Sṛīla Prabhupāda! You personally suffer to see the suffering of the fallen conditioned souls. On this day of your separation I am utterly despondent.

[*Viraha Astaka*: “Eight Prayers in Separation From My Spiritual Master” by His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedānta Swāmī Prabhupāda, Octet 5, verses 5 - 8, December 1958].

I jumped out of the van and headed down the street. This time the familiar smell of burning coal came as a relief, reminding me of many previous blissful days preaching on the streets. When I caught up with the Harinam party, I chanted my favorite sankīrtan verse, shrugging off any last hesitancy to preach:

*kabe jībe doya, hoībe udoya,
nija sukha bhulī sudina hrdoya
bhakativinoda, koriya binoya,
sṛī ajna tahala koribe pracar*

“When will there be an awakening of compassion for all fallen souls, and when will this Bhaktivinoda, forgetting his own happiness, with a meek heart set out to propagate by humble entreaty the sacred order of Sṛī Caitanya Mahāprabhu?” [Bhaktivinoda Thākura, *Saranagati*, “Kabe Ha’be Bolo,” Verse 8]

Despite my renewed enthusiasm, I didn't find a significant change in the people's lack of interest in our Harinam party as we wound our way through the streets. I even wondered whether we'd get a decent crowd that night. It was important for us to have a good crowd, as the festival was an experiment in breaking from our tradition of large outdoor public events. Although we wanted to concentrate on smaller audiences, it would be in vain if no one came.

Though I had effectively dealt with my own doubts earlier in the day, I now became apprehensive about whether our new preaching strategy would work. On the way back I expressed my feelings to Sri Prahlad. He replied that even if a few people came it would be a success. He told me the story of a family in Warsaw who had come in contact with us:

Vara-nayaka prabhu had contacted a reputable lawyer for advice in a legal matter. At their first meeting, Vara-nayaka asked the lawyer whether he knew anything about our Hare Krsna movement. The lawyer smiled and sat back in his chair.

"Well as a matter of fact," he said, "I do."

"As you know," he continued, "it is a tradition in our country that twice a year the local priest visits the houses of the congregation. Just last week our priest visited us to bless our home and ask about our welfare. While we were all sitting together in the living room, he asked my eight-year-old daughter if she liked going to church.

"'Oh yes, Father,' she replied.

"'That's nice,' the priest said. 'Do you have a favorite song you like to sing about our Lord in Heaven?'

"'Oh yes I do, father,' she said.

"'Please sing it for us,' said the priest, 'and let us be blessed.'

"To the surprise of everyone, my daughter stood up on the sofa, put both arms in the air and rocking back and forth with a big smile on her face began singing 'Hare Krsna Hare Krsna Krsna Krsna Hare Hare, Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare.'

"My wife and I were dumbfounded, and the priest was in a state of shock. He was uncomfortable and didn't know what to do, so he stood up, excused himself, and left.

"I then turned to my wife. 'Where in the world did she learn that?' I asked.

"'You remember the Festival of India?' she said. 'We went there last summer up on the coast.'

"'O yes,' I said. 'Of course. The Festival of India.' "

I laughed at the story. "If only the Lord would send such an angel

tonight,” I said.

When we arrived at the hall that evening, once again I was unprepared for what I found. But this time, unlike the display of maya on the street, it was the display of Lord Caitanya’s mercy. I arrived 30 minutes before the program, and I was stunned to see all 350 seats taken and the aisles filled up with people as well.

Most surprising was that many of the guests were the same people I had seen on the street. There were businessmen, housewives, children, and students. A number of the tattooed youths were sitting on the floor, quiet and well behaved, waiting for the program to begin. Even a few drunks had managed to get in. Feigning soberness and good behavior, they had somehow taken front row seats. Then as I scanned the audience more carefully, I saw to my amazement three skinheads in the corner, looking somewhat uncomfortable in that prestigious hall.

I made my way with difficulty through the crowd, and when I reached the front I turned around to look at the audience. The atmosphere was electric with excitement, and many were talking about the program to come. I heard the word “Krsna” again and again. As so many times before, I marveled at the great mercy of Lord Caitanya.

*lokan samastan kali durga varidher
namna samuttarya svatah samarpitam
sri gaura candrair hari vaisnavanam
namnas ca tattvam kathitam jane jane*

“Out of spontaneous compassion He restored all the people back to consciousness, and through the means of His holy name enabled them to pass beyond the impassable ocean of the age of quarrel. Thus by the golden moons of Lord Hari and the Vaisnavas the news of the Names of Krsna was told from person to person.” [Srila Sarvabhauma Battacarya, *Susloka-Satakam*, Text 46]

Our small group of 15 devotees put on a simple but attractive stage presentation of bhajan, dance, theater, and a lecture. The people loved it. It seemed it was over before it began, and I soon found myself at the book table, signing books.

Suddenly I heard a voice: “Hare Krsna, Srila Gurudeva.” Because of the noisy crowd I couldn’t tell where the voice was coming from. Then a little hand with a bouquet of flowers came up in front of my face. “This is for you.”

I looked down and saw a little girl dressed in a sari with a big smile on her face.

I smiled back. "Well thank you," I said. "What's your name?"

"My name is Kamila, and I'm nine years old," the little girl said. "Don't you remember me?"

"Well not exactly," I said. "I meet many children in my travels. But thank you for the flowers."

As she was just a child, I wanted to finish the encounter quickly and find a serious adult to preach to.

"We met two years ago," she continued, "at another of your festivals in this city. I saw you chanting in the rain that day. When my neighbors told me they were going to your festival, I wanted to go too."

"You saw us chanting in the rain?" I said. I thought about my hesitancy to join the kirtan in the bad weather that morning.

"Yes," she said, "and that night at the festival, when you saw I was interested, you talked to me and told me stories about Krsna."

Suddenly I remembered the little girl.

"And I never forgot you," she said. "I pray to you every morning when I wake up and every night before I go to sleep."

My eyes suddenly stopped searching the crowd for an older guest, and I looked down at her. "You do?" I asked.

"Oh yes," she said. "I am so thankful to you."

"You are?" I asked.

"Yes," she said. "And as I promised you, I have been chanting three rounds on the japa beads you gave me every day. Srila Gurudeva, this time I would like to ask you for a spiritual name."

"Are your parents devotees?" I asked.

"No," she said, "and they're divorced. I live with my mother."

"Oh I see," I said. "Well what will she think if I give you a spiritual name?"

"Why don't you ask her?" the girl said. "I brought her to the program tonight. She's just over there. I'll go get her."

She ran off and within moments came back with her mother.

"I'm pleased to meet you," I said as I shook the mother's hand.

"I am more than pleased to meet you," the mother said. "You have done so much for my daughter. She loves you very much. The walls of her



Indradyumna Swami signing books at the festival in Katowice

room are covered with your photos. I must admit that when she came home from your festival two years ago, I was quite upset. She had gone without my permission.”

“But my irritation soon changed into astonishment,” she continued. “She used to be such a naughty child, so difficult to handle. But after her one meeting with you she changed so much. So how could I complain when she prayed to you every day and chanted on the beads you gave her?”

“She was even reading your movement’s books. As an eight year old, she couldn’t understand much, but what she did understand, she shared with her friends at school. One day in religion class, when the priest was speaking unfavorably about other religions, my daughter stood up and challenged him. ‘All religions are good,’ she said, ‘and people have the right to choose the one they want to follow.’ When she told him she was a follower of Hare Kṛṣṇa, he went speechless.

“She was asked to leave the class for good. And recently I was called before the school administration. They told me that if she continues preaching about Kṛṣṇa to her schoolmates, she’ll have to leave the school permanently.

“They know she doesn’t eat the meat served in the cafeteria but brings it home and gives it to the family dog. What would they say if they knew she doesn’t even do that anymore? She makes little balls of sweets, offers them to your picture, and then gives them to the dog. I have the fattest dog in the neighborhood.

“But believe me, I’m not upset. I realize that I have a special daughter. She’s taught me so much. Because of her I am now reading the *Bhagavad Gīta*.”



The Lord had sent a little angel.

The little girl was standing before us, softly chanting on her beads.

“She’s been so anxious to meet you again she can’t sleep at night,” the mother added.

Kamila smiled and looked up at me again. “Srila Gurudeva,” she said, “I’d really like to have a spiritual name, but someone told me I have to chant 16 rounds and be your follower.”

“Children can get spiritual names,” I said, “and I can’t imagine a better follower than you.”

I thought for a moment. “We’ll give you the name Syama-līlā dasī,”

I said.

She immediately bowed down. When she stood up, she had tears in her eyes. “I’m so grateful,” she said.

I looked at her mother. “And we’re both grateful to you,” I said.

Syama-lila hugged me and said goodbye.

I closed my eyes and thanked the Lord for fulfilling the wish I had shared with Sri Prahlad that day. The Lord had sent a little angel.

I looked to the sky and vowed I would never again hesitate to go out and preach the glories of the Lord— even in the rain.

*dasyam te krpaya Natha
dehi dehi mahaprabho
patitanam prema data
syato yace punah punah*

“O Mahaprabhu! I beg you again and again. Please be merciful and give me Your service, for You are the bestower of love of Krsna to those fallen into the jaws of the serpent of samsara.” [Srila Sarvabhauma Bhattacarya, *Susloka-Satakam*, Text 10]



THE CITY OF SCISSORS

June 2 - 12, 2004

OUR SPRING TOUR HAS BEEN GAINING MOMENTUM as we travel from town to town in southern Poland. As a result of well-organized publicity we have even had to turn people away at the door at some programs because the halls quickly filled to capacity. It is a bittersweet experience: sweet to see the overwhelming interest in Kṛṣṇa consciousness, but bitter to see souls turned away after they have waited millions of lifetimes to come to Kṛṣṇa.

Despite the growing interest, I continue to notice some apathy toward our movement among the general mass of people when we go on our chanting parties. One can easily feel the mood of the public by being on the street. Fewer people take interest in our kīrtan parties than previous years, and it is not uncommon to get cold stares and even rude remarks.

I have preached in Poland since 1989, and I have seen the changes in the country firsthand, so I can tell that the present coldness toward us comes from the so-called material progress. Although material progress brings facility and comforts, it is a double-edged sword, also bringing immorality and degradation, mostly because of an increase in meat eating, intoxication, illicit sex, and gambling. A preacher is not surprised though: being versed in sastra, he's prepared for the advance of Kali Yuga.

*tvam nah sandarsito dhatra
dustaram nistitirsatam
kalim sattva-haram pumsam
karna-dhara ivarnavam*

“We think that we have met Your Goodness by the will of providence, just so that we may accept you as captain of the ship for those who desire to cross the difficult ocean of Kali, which deteriorates all the good qualities of a human being.” [Sṛimad Bhagavatam 1.1.22]

We decided to decrease our security on the spring tour this year because the hall programs would be much smaller than before, allowing us to give more attention to our audiences. But seeing the animosity of people toward us on the street, we have felt obliged to take measures to protect ourselves in some places.

The local congregation leader in Walbrzych, Trisama prabhu, organized a police escort for our two-hour Harinam through the streets. Four policemen walked along with us, and we even had a patrol car with lights flashing in front of us. As we started Harinam that day, the officer in charge smiled and motioned that we should chant down the middle of the street. People waved at us, and shop owners came out to see the fun. Many good-hearted people enjoyed the “parade,” and we got a large crowd at our program that evening.

Nevertheless times have changed, and I often find myself reflecting on the gradual loss of piety among the Polish people and the resentment toward us among some of them. Relief comes, however, at those moments when I see people’s lives touched by Kṛṣṇa’s mercy through our efforts to preach. Seeing transformations in people lives is the only reward a preacher hopes for.

An example is a relatively new devotee who lives in Walbrzych. After the guests had left our program, I asked him whether he had invited his parents. He replied that his mother and father were divorced but he had invited his father, who lived nearby. His father, however, was inimical toward Kṛṣṇa consciousness and had vehemently refused. Thus the boy was amazed when halfway through the program he saw his father sitting in the audience.

After the program, his father came up to him. “Son,” he said, “please forgive any misunderstandings I had about this movement. I enjoyed the program immensely. You have my support for what you are doing.”

“What about your mother?” I asked.

“Oh my mother has no problems with my being a devotee,” he said laughing.

“My mother is very conservative,” he continued, “but she accompanied a close friend, on the friend’s request, to the Warsaw temple last year for a Sunday feast. My mother was so impressed with the program and the blissful nature of the devotees that she prayed to ‘the God on the altar’ to please make her son a Hare Kṛṣṇa devotee. At that time I was heavily involved in drugs and criminal activities.

“Three months later I met devotees and joined the movement, and I gave up all my bad habits. At that time, my mother told me of her fervent

prayer. She is so grateful to ‘the God on the altar’ that she thanks Him every day in her morning and evening prayers.”

As our tour went on, I was especially looking forward to our program in Kielce, a moderate-sized town of 100,000 people nestled in a beautiful forested region of Poland. In 1993 we had a small but successful festival there, and I remembered the people as especially pious.

Our congregation members there were eager to have us return, and in recent weeks, they had gone out of their way to put up hundreds of posters. I considered hiring a security firm, but I remembered the warmth of the people, and when I heard of the growing interest in the festival within our congregation, I decided against it.

My decision would prove to be a mistake, however, and almost cost us dearly, for Kali-yuga has firmly taken root in Kielce since my visit in 1993.

I had my first hint of trouble as we drove through the center of town. I saw that many of our posters had been ripped down. This has always been a sure sign of antagonism. When we arrived at the hall two hours before the program, 10 devotees from the congregation were waiting for us. Their faces were anxious.

“Snila Gurudeva,” one of them said, “two young men from a right-wing political party just came here and told the director of the hall to cancel our program or be prepared for the worst. They told him we are a dangerous sect and they will stop our festival one way or another. We had to convince the director that we are not a cult. He was obviously afraid of the threats, but he tentatively agreed to let the festival go on.”

“I suspected something was amiss,” I said, “when I saw all the posters in town ripped up.”

“Yes,” a devotee replied, “and yesterday the same youths were grabbing invitations from the hands of the devotees on the street. When they threatened violence, the devotees had to stop.”

“How many are they?” I asked.

“For now we’ve only seen two,” came the reply.

I paused for a moment. “It’s just two local men,” I thought, “so we can go out on Harinam.”

Before each festival, we have a powerful one-hour kirtan to add a last touch of publicity, but on this day the preparations—setting up the stage and decorating the hall—were late, so Bhakta Dominique, the main organizer of our spring tour, asked that most devotees stay behind to help. Thus our little Harinam party of six devotees went blithely out onto the streets and into the jaws of the lion.

We had only been chanting 10 minutes when we were attacked from behind by several men in their early twenties. I was leading the kirtan party down the street, so I did not notice the scuffle at the back. But then I heard Narottam das's voice above the kirtan. "Let go!" he was shouting. "Let go!"

I reeled around and saw that one of the attackers had wrested the microphone and small amplifier from Narottam. Then the man head-butted Narottam's face, but Narottam was undeterred and grabbed back the microphone and amplifier. The kirtan came to a stop, and we confronted the men.

As soon as I saw their faces I remembered the attack on our Harinam party in Sarajevo, Bosnia, some years ago. As in Sarajevo, the men's eyes were full of hate and their lips were trembling from anger. They stood with clenched fists, ready to attack us at any moment. I also noted that they all wore the same gray-colored t-shirts with an insignia and writing in small print. As I reached for my canister of tear gas, I saw from the corner of my eye a number of other youths surrounding us.

By a quirk of fate there were no Polish devotees on the Harinam. For a few moments our attackers were put off-guard in the heated exchange of words because we were speaking in a foreign language. But just when they motioned to their friends to come forward, Sri Prahald spoke up in broken Polish. "Don't use force," he said. "Tell us what you want."

One man put his face close to Sri Prahald. "All right," he growled in Polish, "I'm advising you to get out of here immediately."

We had only seconds to decide what to do. "Let's have kirtan," said one devotee, undeterred by their threats.

But as Sri Prahald and I looked at each other, we conveyed the same thought without speaking a word: "Remember Sarajevo." I won't go so far as to say our exchange was telepathy. Let us simply say it was the result of a camaraderie developed after years of preaching together. It wasn't the first time we had faced such a situation.

In Sarajevo we had initially repulsed an attack by three Muslim men on our kirtan party. Devotees had fought back and smashed one of the attackers through the plate-glass window of a store. But then instead of retreating in the face of a superior aggressor ("Discretion is the better part of valor") we stood defiantly and chanted Nrsimha prayers. Thirty men then ruthlessly attacked us with pistols and knives. The rest is history.

Sri Prahald and I nodded our unspoken agreement. "Okay," I said, "we're pulling out."

We put away our instruments (but not my tear gas) and started

walking slowly in the direction of the hall. But I became suspicious when I saw one of the men walking just in front of us, off to the side, while speaking on his cell phone. He was glancing back at us from time to time. “We’re walking into a trap,” I thought.

Sri Prahlad took out his cell phone and called Dominique to tell him we needed someone who could speak Polish.

After walking a few more steps, I saw a group of skinheads coming down the street from the other direction. I could see that the man in front of us and the skinheads were speaking on the phone together. The skinheads began rubbing their knuckles and looked around to see if there were any police in sight. I also looked around. There were none to be seen.

Suddenly I remembered my Nrsimha mantra. “Why haven’t I chanted it yet?” I thought. At that moment I remembered Uttara, the mother of Maharaja Pariksit, and how she called out for Lord Kṛṣṇa when she saw a nuclear weapon coming toward her:

*Uttarovaca
pāhī pāhī maha-yogin
deva-deva jagat-pate
nanyam tvad abhayam pasye
yatra mrtyuḥ parasparam*

“Uttara said: O Lord of lords, Lord of the universe! You are the greatest of mystics. Please protect me, for there is no one else who can save me from the clutches of death in this world of duality.” [*Srimad Bhagavatam* 1.8.9]

In a fraction of a second another thought raced through my mind. “Here is the difference between a pure devotee and me,” I thought. “She remembers the Lord at every moment, and I forget Him at the slightest hint of danger.”

And so I chanted the mantra for the first of many times that day.

Just then Dominique came around the corner and asked what the trouble was. Sri Prahlad pointed out the man in front of us, and Dominique courageously approached him. Because Dominique was dressed in ordinary clothes and carried an air of authority, the man with the cell phone seemed a little taken aback. Apparently it caused him to call off the imminent attack of the skinheads. Our Harinam party quickly turned the corner and walked a few meters more to the safety of the hall.

“That was a close one,” I said to Sri Prahlad.

“Too close,” came his reply.

Dominique soon returned, and we discussed the situation. The main problem was that earlier in the day these men had told the director of the hall that they would return to disrupt our festival. Obviously, next time they would come with their friends and sympathizers.

I asked Dominique who they were, and he told me they were part of a Christian-based political party with radical views. They believed that Poland was only for Poles and the only religion in Poland should be Christianity. In recent years, the party has attracted many young men, who propagate and deliver their message with force. In areas where they are strong they do not tolerate public demonstrations contrary to their ideology.

Apparently Kielce is their party headquarters, and the local people rarely, if ever, hold outdoor public functions out of fear of them. More than once they had attacked such programs, resulting in bloody fighting and chaos.

“I suspect they were the ones behind the attack on our festival program in Tomaszow a few years ago,” Dominique said.

I looked at my watch. The program was to begin in one hour. Considering that we had no security whatsoever, I proposed that we cancel the event. It wasn’t worth the risk of injury to our devotees or guests. We would be far outnumbered. Dominique thought for a moment and suggested we notify the police of the situation. I reminded him how unreliable the police had been in Tomaszow. Dominique then suggested we hire a reliable security firm to protect us.

I thought for a moment. “It sounds reasonable,” I said, “but I want 15 security men here in 30 minutes, or we cancel.”

Dominique went into action. It was easy to inform the police, but finding 15 professional security men in a town the size of Kielce in a few minutes would be almost impossible. Generally, security firms want at least three days’ notice. Dominique called seven companies, but they either were closed by that hour or didn’t have the manpower available.



*Bhakta Dominique playing guitar during
a Village of Peace concert*

Time was of the essence. People, eager as always for our show, were already arriving, and the hall was filling up. I knew that it would be an easy job for the thugs. All they had to do was show up as they did in Tomaszow with baseball bats, smash a few people and cars for three or four minutes, and then run for it. I looked at Dominique. "You've got five minutes more," I said.

He called the last security firm in the phone book and explained our problem. The man in charge said he could be at the hall in 20 minutes with 15 men. But we'd have to "pay a heavy fee."

Dominique looked at me. "I've got a firm," he said.

"How much will it cost?" I asked.

"Twelve hundred dollars," he said.

My eyebrows went up. "Twelve hundred dollars!" I gasped.

"But the show will go on," Dominique said, "and that's what's important. I'll raise the money from the congregation. Don't worry."

I paused and thought for a moment. Many people had already come, and we had a reputable security firm to protect us. "Okay," I said, "let's go for it. But I want all of our children out of here now. Put them in that van and take them with some of the mothers to a safe apartment. We'll pick them up after the show tonight."

I didn't want to take any chances. I knew how determined a group of fanatics can be.

We waited anxiously for the security firm to show up, and we locked all but one of the three entrances to the hall. Now that we were determined to go on, devotees busied themselves with last-minute preparations, but all eyes were turned toward the street where the men would come from.

As the hour approached, one fearless devotee stayed out on the sidewalk in front of the hall, distributing invitations. I saw a group of men surround him ready to fight, just as the first of the security vans arrived.



Indradyumna Swami and the security team

By Krsna's grace two policemen on street duty saw the potential trouble and broke up the situation. The devotee quickly retreated into the hall.

The men on the security team were all huge and mean looking, with enormous muscles. They gathered and took quick instructions from the head of the security firm. He was a well-dressed man, and I breathed

easier when I learned that he was in charge of the anti-terrorist force in the region. The men all took strategic positions around the hall. Three of the biggest stood shoulder to shoulder in front of the entrance. Some of the guests who arrived at that time laughed at the display of power. They were unaware of the situation and probably thought it was part of the act.

When 10 of the troublemakers assembled on the other side of the street looking toward us, I saw the security men fidget a little—not from any fear, I thought, but bracing themselves for a fight.

A devotee sensed my concern. “Don’t worry,” he said. “They’re used to it. This town is called The City of Scissors.”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“This is the stronghold of that right-wing political party,” he said. “Their youth organization is infamous for fighting with scissors. It’s their trademark, and they’re not afraid to use them, but these security men have dealt with them before.”

I walked into the hall and onto the stage. I was surprised to see a full house. Of course, considering that all our previous programs had had full houses, I shouldn’t have been surprised. Still, the trouble brewing had made me think that attendance at the program would be sparse, but the people knew nothing of the potential danger.

For added safety, we had the front entrance to the hall locked and secured. If there was to be a fight between our opposition and security, the guests didn’t have to know about it.

In the meantime, Sri Prahlad had a quick meeting with as many devotees as he could muster and showed them a small stairwell leading up to a metal platform above the stage. “If trouble comes,” he told them, “all the women should immediately climb up there.”

We then started our opening act, a bhajan, but I could hear tension in the voices of the devotees. I noticed that unlike other festival bhajans, where the devotees’ eyes were serenely closed, all the devotees had their eyes wide open, looking at the audience.

After the bhajan, Keli Cancala dasi came on to perform an Odissi dance. As she began, I took the opportunity to slip out the back door to see what the situation was outside.

I was not surprised to find a



Bhajan during the festival in the City of Scissors

number of the political youths facing off with the security men. Although the security outnumbered (and outsized) them, they were unfazed and determined to break up our festival. One of the security men motioned for me to get back in the hall. Stepping back slowly, I watched several of the youths try to force open the locked entrances.

At that moment Dominique came out. One particularly tough-looking youth, apparently their leader, recognized him from the previous encounter on the street. He pulled an invitation out of his pocket. "I demand that you let me in," he said.

"No way," Dominique said, and he motioned to the security men to remove them. The youths conferred with each other for a moment and then left, obviously with another plan in mind. As they left, one of them stopped in front of Dominique, who stood there fearlessly. The youth slid his hand across his own throat in a threatening gesture.

"We know who you are," he said, "and we will get you. We'll be back soon, and this time nothing will stop us."

Suddenly Narottam appeared from behind and said I had to come quickly, as it was time for my lecture.

"My lecture?" I thought. "How will I lecture in this frame of mind?"

As I came back in the hall, the director approached Dominique and said he had to unlock all the entrances. "Rules and regulations say they have to be open at all times," he said. "I just can't leave them locked any longer. There are too many people here."

The fact that all the entrances were now open made me nervous. I had seen how those youths had tried to force open the same doors to get in, even in the presence of the security team.

As a precaution, I stopped by the dressing room on my way to the stage. I took my CS gas from my bag and carefully placed it in my kurta pocket. Then I grabbed a wooden axe handle and hid it under my chaddar. I kept my running shoes on.

I walked onto the stage and sat down on the seat provided. As I adjusted myself, I wondered if any spiritual master in the past had ever ascended such a holy seat armed with weapons at the ready.

As the translator and I adjusted our microphones, I saw a security man take his position near the stage, just two meters away from me. As he sat down, his eyes scanned the crowd and the three open entrances.

Despite all these precautions, I knew that only the Lord could protect us from the imminent danger. I closed my eyes and joined my palms, and I slowly recited a prayer, as I usually do before beginning my lecture.

But this time, instead of calling on the mercy of the acaryas, I called on the mercy of Lord Nrsimhadeva:

*durgesv atavy-aji-mukhadisu prabhuh
payan nrsimho 'sura-yuthaparih
vimuncato yasya mahatta-hasam
diso vinedur nyapatams ca garbhah*

“May Lord Nrsimhadeva, who appeared as the enemy of Hiranyakasipu, protect us in all directions. His loud laughing vibrated in all directions and caused the pregnant wives of the asuras to have miscarriages. May that Lord be kind enough to protect us in difficult places like the forest and battlefield.” [Srimad Bhagavatam 6.8.14]

Then I prayed silently to Srila Prabhupada to give me the ability to focus on my lecture so that the people who had come would have the same opportunity to understand the philosophy as those who had come to our previous festivals.

The audience of 150 people listened respectfully as I began my lecture. I explained the importance of the human form of life in being able to understand spiritual knowledge. I slowly developed my talk to explain that we are not these bodies and how the soul transmigrates to another body at death. But as I continued, I began losing my concentration, remembering the threat of the angry young man to come back with his comrades. At one point my focus went from the lecture to the open entrances. It was only with great effort that I forced my mind back and continued speaking.

Several times, as my translator was repeating what I had said, I had to bring my mind back to my lecture. “Stay fixed,” I would tell myself. “This may be the only time these people ever get to hear the absolute truth.”

When I finally came to the end of my talk, I felt I had not done



May Lord Nrsimhadeva, protect us in all directions

my duty well, but as I stood up, there was thunderous applause from the audience.

After our theater group performed, Sri Prahlada led the audience in a session of meditation on the Hare Kṛṣṇa mantra. But he also appeared apprehensive. Instead of closing his eyes, as he usually does in the session, he kept them wide open.

The program was coming to an end. On the suggestion of the security men, we had kept our acts short so we could finish the festival before dark. They told us that the youths would most likely return under the cover of darkness. And because we had upstaged them, they would be doubly angry and eager for revenge.

As we sat down for the last kīrtan on stage, I looked at my watch and saw I had only 10 minutes before the designated time to finish. Then suddenly Dominique appeared and told me that prasadam was late and I'd have to chant for at least half an hour.

I started kīrtan slowly, but the people could not contain their enthusiasm, and I had to pick up the pace. Soon they were clapping wildly and chanting loudly along with us. Some even got up and danced in the aisles. A number of children came right to the front and began dancing blissfully back and forth.

Within a few minutes the hall became Vaikuntha, the spiritual world. I marveled at the mercy of the Lord: while danger swirled around us like an ominous whirlpool, Sri Caitanya Mahāprabhu was busy delivering these people by the sweetness of His holy names.

*sarvataṛa bhajataṁ jananaṁ
trataṁ samarthah kīla sadu varta
bhaktaṁ abhaktaṁ api gaura candras
tatra kṛṣṇamṛta nama danaṁ*

“The news broadcast by the saints is that all the avatars of the Lord are indeed capable of delivering Their devoted followers who worship Them. However, Sri Gaurācandra delivered both devotees and non-devotees alike with His gifts of Sri Kṛṣṇa's ambrosial names.” [Sṛila Sarvaśhauma Battacārya, *Susloka Satakam*, text 42]

Devotees and guests dove and surfaced in the nectar of the holy names, and for a few moments even I myself forgot the danger at hand. But when the kīrtan ended, I remembered the advice of our security. I thanked the people for coming and asked them to move quickly to the

entrance hall, where prasadam was being served.

As the guests took prasadam, the devotees quickly packed our gear and put it in the vans. Within minutes we were ready to go.

The security team seemed on red alert as the evening sky became darker. Several times they pointed to their watches, indicating we should finish quickly. Although there was a relaxed and joyful mood among the guests, the security team was anxious to move them on. Word came that there was an unusually large assembly of unruly men gathering on the city square a hundred meters away. “You must all leave now,” the chief of security said to us.

Most of the guests had left by that time, and I asked the devotees to quickly clear the hall. Dominique sent a van with three security men in it to pick up the children and women at the apartment, and when they arrived, all of us jumped into our four vans and started to pull out. Darkness was descending.

The security team escorted us in their cars to the city limits. When we reached the road to Warsaw they turned back. We were then on our own. But at that moment, I realized that in fact we had never been alone—not even for a second. The all-merciful Lord had been with us the entire time. Otherwise, how had we escaped certain injury and defeat and tasted the sweetness of victory and success?

*yatra yogesvarah krsno
yatra partho dhanur dharah
tatra srir vijayo bhutir
dhruva nitir matir mama*

“Wherever there is Kṛṣṇa, the master of all mystics, and wherever there is Arjuna, the supreme archer, there will also certainly be opulence, victory, extraordinary power, and morality. That is my opinion.” [*Bhagavad Gīta* 18.78]



Distributing the mercy in Kielce

29

COUNTING MY BLESSINGS

June 13 - 16, 2004

AFTER LEAVING KIELCE, where we successfully defended our festival against right-wing extremists, we arrived back in Warsaw at midnight. I fell asleep by 1:00 a.m., but woke up at 4:00 because of a terrible nightmare, where I dreamt skinheads broke through the barrier of security men and beat up the devotees. I sat up on my bed, wide awake, unable to forget the drama of the previous day.

I thought about a lecture I had recently heard by Srila Prabhupada where he mentioned that in days of yore people often dreamt about the Lord because of their constant engagement in His service and meditation upon His lotus feet:

“In the evening, in the village, everyone would assemble in a place to hear messages from *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. They would discuss while coming home and would go to bed thinking that memory. So they’d sleep and dream *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*.” [Srila Prabhupada lecture, May 31, 1972, Los Angeles]

My mind kept turning. “I also regularly hear the messages of Godhead and discuss them with my friends,” I thought. “Why then do I dream of skinheads and hooligans? Obviously, it is due to their intense association.”

“I spend most of my time in such association, day after day, year after year,” I thought. “What will happen if I remember such people at the moment of death, when all the events of one’s life pass before one, just like a movie?”

Before getting up to shower, I prayed to the Lord that in my final hour, He Himself would incarnate in my mind as the dominant force and personality.

*vayur anilam amrtam
athedam bhasmantam sariram*

*om krato smara krtam smara
krato smara krtam smara*

“Let this temporary body be burnt to ashes, and let the air of life be merged with the totality of air. Now, O my Lord, please remember all my sacrifices, and because You are the ultimate beneficiary, please remember all that I have done for You.” [*Sri Isopanisad*, Mantra 17]

After breakfast I asked Sri Prahlada if he would like to take a japa walk with me in a park.

“That’s unusual for you,” he said, “to take a walk in a park.”

“I need to get away to someplace in the mode of goodness, just for an hour or so,” I said.

“All right,” he said, “lets go.”

We drove to a nearby park, and we walked around softly chanting on our beads and appreciating the lush greenery and beautiful flowers. I remembered the old saying, “God created the country, and man created the city.”

For a moment I felt as if I wanted to stay there, but I knew I couldn’t, and we left after half an hour. But it was enough simply to have had a glimpse of the saner side of life, and it confirmed the need to preach in the madness of the concrete jungles.



*Indradyumna Swami and Sri Prahlada das
chanting japa in a park.*

We returned to our apartment. Radhe Shyama das had already packed our van, and we were ready to go. As I got into the car, my cell phone rang. It was Bhakta Dominique. “The program tonight is in Bialystok,” he said. “It’s a four-hour drive. When we arrive, we’ll set up the hall and you can do Harinam with the rest of the devotees.”

“Fine,” I replied. “We’re looking forward to it.”

“But there’s something I must tell you,” he continued. “Bialystok has a reputation for being another one of those tough towns like Kielce.”

“Here we go again,” I said under my breath.

“What’s that?” Dominique asked.

“Oh nothing,” I said. “Just counting my blessings.”

“Be careful during Harinam in Bialystok,” Dominique said. “There’s

a major football match at five PM and a heavy-metal concert in the evening. There'll be plenty of people walking around looking for trouble."

"Trouble's becoming my middle name," I said.

"What?" asked Dominique.

"Oh just joking," I said. "Something from my American past."

We drove off, and I took a map out of the glove compartment. I turned to Govinda Prema, a Polish devotee. "Where's Bialystok?" I asked.

He looked up. "We're going to Bialystok?" he said.

"Yes," I said, "that's where the festival is tonight."

"It's in the northeast, on the border with Russia," he said. "People are a bit backward up there, from another era."

His eyes opened wide. "Some of them practice black magic," he said.

"Come on," I said. "You're kidding me. It's the 21st century."

His look became serious. "I'm not kidding at all," he said.

Then I remembered how Srila Prabhupada had confirmed that such things do exist in some places, even in modern times.

"Such witches are called *khecari*, which means they can fly in the sky. This black art of witchcraft is still practiced by some women in the remote northwestern side of India. They can transfer themselves from one place to another on the branch of an uprooted tree. Putana knew this witchcraft, and therefore she is described in the *Bhagavatam* as *khecari*." [*Krsna Book*, "Putana Killed"]

"Great!" I said. "Rightwing extremists and skinheads one day and witches the next. Do the security firms up north know how to deal with witches who ride on broomsticks and perform black magic?"

As a precaution, I took my japa beads and began softly chanting the Holy Names of the Lord.

*sarvany etani bhagavan
nama rupanukirtanat
prayantu sanksayam sadyo
ye nah sreyaḥ pratīpakah*

"May the glorification of the transcendental name, form, qualities and paraphernalia of the Supreme Personality of Godhead protect us from the influence of bad planets, meteors, envious human beings, serpents, scorpions, and animals like tigers and wolves. May it protect us from ghosts and the material elements like earth, water, fire and air, and may it also protect us from lightning and our past sins. We are always

afraid of these hindrances to our auspicious life. Therefore, may they all be completely destroyed by the chanting of the Hare Krsna maha-mantra.”
[*Srimad Bhagavatam* 6.8.29]

As we drove northeast, the countryside turned from green fields to thick forests with lakes and streams. I noticed many old wooden houses dating from the previous century, and as we got closer to Bialystok, I was surprised to see farmers plowing their land with horses and old-style plows.

“Govinda Prema was right,” I thought. “It’s as if time had stood still here.”

But the real surprise came just a few kilometers outside of Bialystok. We passed many roadside stands selling rustic brooms made from the branches and twigs of trees. I had never seen anything like it in all my world travels. It was right out of *Grimm’s Fairytales*.

“Look at that!” I said to Sri Prahlad.

“What about it?” he said, unimpressed. “Those types of brooms are practical for outdoor use.”

“And for flying in the sky?” I asked.

No one answered, so I left it at that.

We entered the town and searched for the center square. Ominous black clouds were descending over the city. It looked as if it might rain at any moment.

At the square we were met by several congregational devotees. “Srila Gurudeva,” said one, “the police just told us that rival groups of fans are in town for the football match, so we can’t roam about the streets with the kirtan party. We have to stand in one place where the police can watch us.”

“We’ll never distribute all our invitations like that,” I said. “It’s three p.m. now. The match doesn’t start until five. I think we can go out for an hour without any difficulty.”

I saw a few of the local congregation members disappear down the street.

“Okay, Prabhus,” I said, “let’s everybody get ready for Harinam.”

They responded slowly. It wasn’t because they knew the risks of Harinam that day in Bialystok. Not everyone was aware of that. It was because they were still spooked by the incident on Harinama the previous day, when the political extremists stopped us and later tried to stop our festival. The devotees were still jittery.

“All right,” I said, “We’re going out for an hour to advertise the fes-



The mercy of the holy names

ed, “Hari Bol!”

I wheeled around. I thought we were being attacked again. But he was simply expressing his joy, as the kirtan party picked up speed—and a little enthusiasm.

After 100 meters, the kirtan started becoming blissful. Sri Prahlada, true to form and focused as always on the holy names, was building up a melodious and powerful kirtan. Gaura Hari das, catching his mood, was playing a rhythmic mrdanga beat that permeated the street. With kartalas chiming in time, devotees were soon caught up in the ecstasy of the holy names. Gradually their apprehensions disappeared, and they began chanting loudly and dancing blissfully.

The sun, as if on cue, broke through the clouds, flooding the town with light. The sunshine bounced off the colorfully dressed devotees, making them sparkle with blue, red, and yellow, like vaidurya jewels.

The devotees had overcome their anxiety, fear, and lamentation. They were chanting from their hearts, and the people on the street be-

tival. Everybody move forward. Let’s go!”

Our fearful and reluctant kirtan party moved out, looking more like a funeral procession than a blissful assembly proclaiming the glories of God. Devotees had trouble even looking at the people.

I was jittery too. I knew the problems we could face, and I hadn’t had much sleep the night before.

Suddenly Narottam das shout-

came enlivened. Everyone seemed to be smiling. Many waved, and a number of kids passing by on their way to the football match gave a thumbs-up to our joyful band. The tempo of the kirtan increased even more, and the joy of the devotees spilled out into the streets. The whole atmosphere changed.

What a contrast to the events of the previous day, to the nightmare that still lingered in my mind, to my



The program in Bialystok

dark expectations for Bialystok! I stepped back for a moment in amazement. “Where are the witches?” I thought. “And where are the tough boys looking for a fight? Where are the backward people who live in the past?”

All of them seemed transformed, at least for the moment, by the mercy of the holy names.

The festival that night was the biggest and best we had ever had inside a public hall. People from all walks of life came, young and old. Even rival football fans forsook their match to come with us and chant and dance.

*yatreḍyante katha mrstas
trsnayah prasamo yatah
nirvairam yatra bhutesu
nodvego yatra kascana*

“Whenever pure topics of the transcendental world are discussed, the members of the audience forget all kinds of material hankerings, at least for the time being. Not only that, but they are no longer envious of one another, nor do they suffer from anxiety or fear.” [*Srīmad Bhagavatam* 430.35]

20

THE CITY OF DOOM AND THE TEMPLE OF FIRE

June 17 - 27, 2004

THE SECOND HALF OF OUR SPRING TOUR WAS GOING WELL, and I was looking forward to the final program, to be held in Olsztyn in the north. Though our tour had been marred by run-ins with rougher elements of society, no real damage had been done and the festivals had brought good results. The congregation had been strengthened, and many people had been introduced to Krsna consciousness, some of them potential devotees. Olsztyn would be the icing on the cake.



Indradyumna Swami and Radhe Syama das

It wasn't to be, however. Disaster struck in a very personal way, halfway through the program. It would be one of my darker days.

After finishing my lecture to an especially receptive audience, I went outside to get a book from my van. My driver, Radhe Syama prabhu, always stays by the van to protect it during programs. He was chanting nearby, and when he saw me coming, he opened the passenger door and

went around to the back door to take something out.

I settled into the passenger seat. Suddenly I heard a noise, and I looked out the window. I sat up in alarm. A group of some 15 hooligans was walking quickly toward the van. "Who are they?" I thought. "Maybe the young men from the political party in Kielce coming for revenge."

I thought about our belongings in the van. I locked the door on the driver's side and jumped out the passenger side to confront them. I knew we had no chance against them—two older men with no other devotees in sight—but I grabbed a stick and stood with it behind my back.

But as they came closer, their mood changed, and they started laughing and joking. By the time they reached us, they seemed almost friendly. One of the bigger boys, in a tight white t-shirt, Levis, and black boots, grabbed my neck and pulled me close. He put his forehead on mine. His forehead was covered with sweat, and his breath reeked of liquor.

"You like skinhead music?" he said in accented English.

I opted for diplomacy. "Why not?" I replied.

His face took on a smug, sarcastic smile. "What's a good skinhead band?" he asked.

Failure to answer would be an excuse for him to become violent, so I tried to think of a skinhead band, but my mind was blank. I had never heard skinhead music.

One of his friends, even more drunk, gave me a hint. "Nazi Action!" he shouted.

"That's right," I said. "Nazi Action."

The hooligan pushed me back against the van.

I noticed Radhe Syama trying to close the back door, but the hooligans were holding it open. They were laughing and joking. Three or four more of them moved toward the back and surrounded Radha Syama. I quickly walked to the back, grabbed the door, and slammed it shut.

It was a tense moment. I stood there with a smile on my face, playing their game.

One of the bigger hooligans put his arms around me and squeezed me tight. "Very funny," he said, and muttered something in Polish. Sweat was dripping from his head onto my neck. His embrace was unbearable. Finally he let go and spit on my foot.

I saw some others reaching in through a side window. I turned to stop them. Suddenly Gokularani dasi walked up. She had come to take something from the van. Several of the hooligans came toward her, and one put his hand on her shoulder. I jumped forward and knocked his hand away. Then I grabbed Gokularani and pushed her into the van. I slammed the door shut. "Lock the door!" I shouted.

I turned around and braced myself for more trouble. But the hooligans left suddenly, as quickly as they had come. They were no longer laughing and joking. They had become serious and walked away without looking back. I couldn't figure it out.

I walked back into the hall, feeling a little shaken. "Are you all right?" a devotee asked.

"Yes," I said, "I'm okay."

It was time for the last kirtan, and I was supposed to lead. I went

to the restroom and washed my face and neck to get rid of the sweat and grime the hooligans had left there. Then I washed the spit off my foot. I looked in the mirror and started talking to my reflection. "Sometimes it's rough out here," I told myself, "but that's what it takes to spread the movement. Now put yourself together and get onstage."

As we left the hall that night, several devotees approached me. They told me how sad they were that the spring tour had ended. I was also sad that it was over, but my sadness was nothing compared to what I would feel the next morning.

After my morning shower, I asked Radhe Syama prabhu to bring me my Deity paraphernalia so I could begin my puja. He came back 20 minutes later, his face ashen. "Srila Gurudeva," he said, "I've looked everywhere for the bag with the paraphernalia, but it's nowhere to be found. I fear the hooligans stole it yesterday from the van."

I swung around. "What?" I said. "Have you asked the other devotees if they've seen the bag?"

"Yes," he replied, "and we've looked in every conceivable place."

I was devastated. I had packed that bag for the upcoming summer festival tour with all the special Deity paraphernalia I had collected during my 34 years as a devotee: puja material, weapons for my Nrsimha deity, thrones, necklaces, rare pictures, and more.

"We've informed the police," Radhe Syama continued, "but they say there's little hope of recovering the bag."

I just sat there with a sinking feeling in my stomach. My only consolation was that none of my Deities were in the bag.

Throughout the day I thought about the paraphernalia and lamented the loss.

That night as I drifted off to asleep, I thought about the thieves. No doubt they were laughing over their carefully orchestrated theft, but in reality they were the real losers. They had come so close to the all-merciful movement of Lord Caitanya, but they had only acquired heavy karma. They would soon eat the bitter fruit of their act.

"The universe was purified by the transcendental lilas of Lord Gauranga, but the enemies of the Vaisnavas were ever deprived of the pleasure of those pastimes." [*Bhakti-ratnakara*, Narahari Chakravarti, Chapter I, verse 52]

That afternoon our tour committee held a meeting to analyze the spring tour and to begin making final preparations for the summer. The subject of security came up, and we decided that, all things considered, we needed to increase security, but the expense was not in the budget, so I

volunteered to go and collect the money in the seven days before the first summer festival.

That evening Nandini dasi contacted our travel agent in Warsaw. "Please," she said, "Find a reservation for either Dubai, Durban, or London."

"That's an unusual request," the travel agent said. "Exactly which city does he want to go to?"

"It doesn't matter," Nandini replied. "Any one of them will do."

The next morning, Nandini came to see me. "The travel agent called this morning," she said. "It's the beginning of summer, and all the flights are booked up for weeks. She's very sorry, but the only thing she can offer in the Middle East is a flight tomorrow to Baku, in Azerbaijan."

"Azerbaijan?" I said. "Is that all that's available?"

"Yes," she replied. "That's all there is for now."

I reflected for a moment. "I certainly can't raise funds there," I thought, "but I can visit my disciples in Baku."

Then I realized I hadn't been there in seven years.

"Okay," I said. "Baku it is."

The next day I flew out of Warsaw to Baku. As the plane took off, I kept thinking of the Deity paraphernalia. "What a loss!" I thought. "What a loss!"

Those items had been my constant companions in service to my Lords for decades. Each and every item, even if apparently insignificant, was worshipable.

"He hastily sewed together a small cloth bag as a temple for his Deity. That small bag glowed with a divine light. Lokanath Goswami hung it around his neck and carried Radhavinode with him wherever he went." [*Bhakti-ratnakara*, Narahari Chakravarti, Chapter I, verses 337-338]

I sighed. I would carry this loss with me for the rest of my life.

My flight landed in Baku early the next morning.

Azerbaijan is bordered by Russia, Georgia, Armenia, Iran, and the Caspian Sea. Oil refining is the country's chief industry. Baku is a port on the western coast of the Caspian Sea, close to major petroleum fields.

Security was tight when I landed. Azerbaijan is technically at war with Armenia over Karabachos, a large tract of land south of Baku, claimed by both countries. In spite of a ceasefire, there are daily skirmishes, and soldiers are killed on both sides. Travel outside the country is restricted for men of military age, so many of my disciples waiting outside the airport terminal had not seen me since my last visit, in 1997.

Coming out of the airport, I was greeted by a wave of hot desert air

and an enthusiastic kirtan party. Few senior preachers visit Azerbaijan, so the devotees were especially happy to see me.

I was also happy to see them. I always find that devotees who live under repressive governments or in poor countries have a special appreciation for Kṛṣṇa consciousness. Their kirtans are longer and sweeter, and their questions after class are deeper and more relevant to solving the problems of life.

On the way to the temple, I asked the devotees in my car about changes in the country since my last visit. I was surprised to hear that two years ago the government closed down all but 20 of the 350 spiritual organizations in the country. We were one of the 20 that were accepted and officially registered as bonafide religions. I considered this quite a success in a Muslim country.

But despite the official recognition, the devotees could practice and preach Kṛṣṇa consciousness only in the capital, Baku, and in no other cities or provinces. And services could be held only in the temple compound.

"That means no Harinam processions?" I asked. "No Ratha Yatras, and no hall festivals in the city?"

"Yes, Maharaja," they replied.

"How do you spread the faith?" I asked. "How do you make devotees?"

"They let us distribute books on the streets," one devotee replied.

"Yes," said another. "They don't consider it an effective way to spread our movement."

I smiled and thought about Srila Prabhupada's famous letter to Tamal Kṛṣṇa Goswami:

"Regarding Samkirtan and book distribution, both should go on, but book distribution is more important. It is brihat kirtan. In Tokyo airport one boy had come up to me asking if he could speak with me. I said yes, and then he asked me 'Swamiji, where do you get all that knowledge in your books?' Of course it is Kṛṣṇa's knowledge, not mine. But the effect is there. So for wider kirtan book distribution is better. Book distribution is also kirtan." [Letter, October 23, 1974]

When we arrived at the temple, there was a large assembly of devotees waiting in the driveway (they didn't step an inch out of the compound). They were having a loud and enthusiastic kirtan. Neighbors were peering out from their windows, and some children ran behind our car calling out "Kṛṣṇa! Kṛṣṇa!" Small groups of mustached men watched my arrival with curiosity as they stood nearby, fingering their Muslim prayer beads.

As I got out of the car, I heard loudspeakers from a nearby mosque calling the faithful to prayer. I marveled how here, in a land of Islam, the holy names of Kṛṣṇa were resounding. “This is my treasure,” I thought. “This is my fortune— to witness the modern-day miracles of Lord Caitanya’s movement.”

*kim ascaryam kim ascaryam
kalau jate saci sute
stri bala jada murkhadyah
sarve nama parayanah*

“O what an astonishing thing! O how wonderful! When the son of Saci took birth in the age of Kali, women, children, dullards and indeed people of all description became fully absorbed in chanting the merciful names of Kṛṣṇa!” [Sṛila Sarvaśhauma Bhāṭṭaṇṇyā, *Susloka-Satakam*, text 33]

As I walked into the temple room, I noticed heavy Persian carpets decorating the floors and walls. They seemed out of place in the sweltering heat, but it was a local tradition.

Aside from the carpets and a simple altar, there wasn’t much to see. The scene reflected the poverty and simple life of the people. But again, it only facilitated the devotees’ appreciation for the opulence of the holy names of Kṛṣṇa. I remembered from my last visit that they had a special taste for this opulence.

I kept my lecture short. Then I took up a drum and plunged with the devotees for two hours into a nectarean kīrtan of the holy names. How I relished that kīrtan! The devotees were eager to chant, and I took delight in the fact that I was doing kīrtan in the heart of the Islamic world. Shouting out the names of Gaurāṇṇa as loud as I could, I danced with glee that afternoon on the swirling patterns of the Persian carpets.



How I relished that kīrtan!

At the end of the kīrtan, all the devotees fell down in prostrated obeisances on the floor, some of them crisscrossing over each other. I kneeled among them, drenched in perspiration, and they responding

loudly as I chanted the Premadvani prayers.

*hare krsna rama nama gana dana karinim
soka moha lobha tapa sarva vigna nasinim
pada padma lubdha bhakta vrnda bhakti dayinim
gaura murtim asu naumi nama sutra dharinim*

“He makes the gift of the song of the names ‘Hare, Krsna and Rama’, and destroys all obstacles such as sorrow, delusion, greed and suffering. He gives the devotional service of Lord Krsna to the multitude of devotees who are eager for the shelter of His lotus feet. I fall down swiftly to offer my prostrated obeisances to the Lord in His golden form, who holds a string of meditation beads.” [Srila Sarvabhauma Bhattacharya, *Susloka-Satakam*, Text 23]

For the next few days, we repeated the same thing over and over: class, kirtan; class, kirtan; class, kirtan. The devotees had an unquenchable thirst for mercy, and they relished every drop of nectar in the holy names. I was in a kirtan man’s paradise, there in that oasis of a temple in the desert of Azerbaijan.

Early one morning, a devotee came to me with a list of 10 people wanting initiation. “How long have they been waiting?” I asked.

“They’ve been waiting patiently for seven years,” he said, “since your last visit.”

“That alone is sufficient qualification,” I said. “They’re all accepted without question, each and every one of them.”

I performed the initiation ceremony in the courtyard of the temple.

The day before I left, I asked to go into the desert to the Temple of Fire. I had gone there the last time I was in Baku, but that visit had been brief. It was an ancient Vedic temple in the outskirts of Baku, and I wanted to know more about it.

As we drove out of town, I turned to a devotee who knew about the site. “This place has remained undisturbed for centuries,” I said, “but how is that possible in a country where the religion is known for destroying Hindu temples?”

“It is some distance out of Baku,” the devotee said, “and sometimes it is covered with sand from sandstorms, so no one bothered with it. When Azerbaijan became part of the former Soviet Union and religion was restricted, the temple was indirectly protected because no one took interest

in it, and the site became a garbage dump. When Jawaharlal Nehru, then prime minister of India, came to Baku in 1960, he visited the temple. Afterwards he requested the Russian government to clean up the site and establish it as a protected historical monument, which they did.”

The history of the place, with its natural-gas fires coming out of the earth, goes back thousands of years. The earliest written records of it date back to the followers of the ancient Zoroastrian faith, which preceded Islam. These people were mainly worshipers of the elements, and fire was their main meditation. In the fourth Century BC, they worshipped at the site.

After an hour, we arrived at the temple. It is an impressive structure, built by ascetics from India many centuries ago. From the 15th to the 18th centuries, Baku was one of the most important trade centers between Azerbaijan and India. Goods were brought by traders from India and then sent by sea to Russia and Western Europe. Some historians say the site was frequented by Indian sages for thousands of years. These descriptions conform to Srila Prabhupada’s statement that Vedic culture once flourished all over the world.

I entered the sacred compound with the understanding that I was visiting an ancient Vedic holy place. The compound is surrounded by large walls, with a main temple in the center and 26 other rooms. Small fires emanate from the rock floor of each room, and ascetics used to live in the rooms, worship the fires, and perform severe austerities.

The Azerbaijan government has decided to promote tourism there and recently installed dioramas of yogis performing austerities in many of the rooms. In one room, there is a diorama of a yogi lying on limestone, a severe skin irritant. In another room, a yogi is standing in heavy chains. The display board says he has vowed never to sit again. In another room, ascetics are fasting to death while meditating on the sacred flame.

Of course, such austerities have nothing to do with bhakti yoga,



The temple of fire in Baku

which aims at awakening one's love for God through devotional activities, but it was fascinating to see the ancient site where sadhus attempted to become detached from this world of birth and death.

In one of the rooms was a register with the names of hundreds of visitors who had visited the site over the centuries:

1671 Streis, Dutch sailor; 1733 Lerh, German traveler; 1743 Ganvey Johnas, English merchant; 1780 Reinegs, Russian scientist; 1825 Keppel, German Traveler; 1879 Donovan, English Traveler; 1903 Jokson, American scientist.

There was also a book with references to the site from the writings of others who had visited the ancient site:

"Near the well was seen a volcano, erupting fire for eight or ten mouths. They call this place 'Ateshgah', which means the home of the fires. Even nowadays it is honored by Hindus and herbs. They come here to worship from different places and throw silver and gold coins and even keep two dervishes to guard this sacred fire." [Villot, French Missionary and Traveler, 1689]

"Here, near the fire some were cooking for the settlement Sroganny ates-gava, called so up to this fire. Others were burning lime. Two descendants of the ancient Persian tribe, newcomer Hindus, and fire worshipers were passively sitting around the wall, built by them and prayed, gazing at that flame gushing out of the ground and worshiped." [Kemper, German Traveler, 1683]

"Situated in the southern part of Russia, the city of Baku represents many things, noteworthy of full and deep attention of the visitors of all kinds. But without any doubt, inextinguishable fire is the unique phenomenon, attracting the glances of travelers." [I. Berjozin, Russian Traveler, 1842]

As our government guide, a young woman in her late teens, took us around, I noticed that the doorways were very low. I turned to my translator. "Why are the doorways so low?" I said. "Ask the guide whether it means the practitioners were small in stature."

"Oh no," the guide answered through the translator. "It was a way of making people bow in humility as they entered to worship the sacred fires that came from the earth. They were practicing to become saints."

"But Srila Prabhupada was a modern-day saint," she continued.

We all looked at one another in surprise.

"He taught people all over the world how to love God in a simple way," she said.

"She knows about Srila Prabhupada?" I asked the translator.

The translator spoke with her briefly, then turned to me. “She says she has never met him,” he said, “but she hopes to, some day. She knows all about his mission to America in the 1960s. She wants to know if he will ever visit Azerbaijan.”

My eyes welled up with tears. There, in that remote part of the world, someone was speaking about and inquiring with such faith about my spiritual master.

I paused for a moment. “I’m sorry,” I said. “He passed away many years ago.”

She looked down, visibly affected. “Such saints are very rare in this world,” she said.

“Yes, they are,” I said, appreciating the fact more through her realization than mine.

“How do you know about my spiritual master?” I asked.

“I bought a book about him last year from one of your members on the street in Baku,” she said through the translator, “I learned to appreciate him from that book.”

“All glories to book distribution,” I said under my breath.

The whole discussion had taken my focus away from the temple, and so I continued my questions about the Temple of Fire.

The guide pointed out the fire burning in the main temple, in the middle of the compound. The main temple was a simple but impressive structure. On the top was a trident like those carried by worshippers of Lord Siva.

Nearby, another fire was burning in a smaller structure. When the yogis departed from this world, our guide explained, they were cremated there and their ashes taken back to India and placed in the holy Ganges River.

“What surprises me,” I said, “is that these fires are still burning after thousands of years.”

“The present fires are from gas piped into the site,” she said. “In 1883, the first digging for oil in this region took place nearby. As a result of the drilling, the natural gases just under the surface of the earth escaped, and soon all the fires went out.

“Of course, your yogis explained it differently,” she continued, “and maybe more accurately. They said that by drilling, the excavators created a wound in Mother Earth’s body, and the gods became displeased and withdrew their mercy—the fire.”

“The yogis then cursed the rulers,” she continued. “They said that this region would be plagued by war and poverty for centuries. Then they

went back to India. And it's a fact. Although we produce so much oil, we are at war and we remain poor."

It was getting late, so I paid my obeisances and left that holy place with a deeper appreciation of Vedic history, and more important, a greater appreciation for my spiritual master, inspired by the words of a young Muslim girl who understood him to be a genuine saint of our times.

"The Vaisnavas are internal forms of the blissful mellows of Sri Caitanya's samkirtan movement. Because they distribute the gifts of love of God, their consciousness is always purified. They are all great souls. Indeed, Lord Krsna empowers them as equal with Himself and they rescue the people from the cycle of birth and death." [Sri Sarvabhauma Bhattacharya, *Susloka-Satakam*, verse 39]

21

ON THE HOUSE
June 28 - July 10, 2004

I FLEW BACK TO POLAND from Baku, and as soon as I arrived, the tour committee held its last meeting for the summer festivals. The first order of business was security.

"I found three security companies we can choose from," Jayatam began. "Which one we take depends on Srila Gurudeva's recent collection." All eyes turned towards me.

I hesitated. "Well ...," I said, "ummm ... actually, I didn't bring anything back. I spent the week in Azerbaijan with my disciples. It's a poor country, but we had some great programs."

Jayatam seemed a bit worried. He did not want to argue, but he was concerned about our safety. "Then what about security?" he said. "The hooligans on the streets caused us a lot of misery on the spring tour."

"Some of our own men are trained in security," I said. "Other than, that we'll just have to depend on the Good Lord."

On the flight back from Baku, I had partially memorized an appropriate verse, knowing the subject would come up. I began speaking:

*raksatv asau madhvani yajna kalpah
sva damstrayonnita dharo varahah
ramo dri kutesv atha vipravase
salaksmmano vyad bharatagrajo sman*

"The Supreme indestructible Lord is ascertained through the performance of ritualistic sacrifices and is therefore known as Yajnesvara. In His incarnation as Lord Boar, He raised the planet earth from the water at the bottom of the universe and kept it on His pointed tusks. May that Lord protect me from rogues on the street. May Parasurama protect me on the tops of mountains, and may the elder brother of Bharata, Lord Ramacandra, along with His brother Laksmana, protect me in foreign

countries.” [*Srimad Bhagavatam* 6.8.15]

As we had no other recourse than to take shelter of the Lord, there was no further discussion on the topic.

And there were matters of more immediate concern. The weather bureau was predicting the coldest and rainiest summer in 10 years. As our caravan—a large semi-trailer, three buses, seven vans, and an assortment of other vehicles—headed north towards the Baltic Coast to begin the festival season, the weather bureau’s gloomy prediction manifested itself right before our eyes. Rain poured incessantly all the way to the coast.

In fact it continued non-stop for one week at our summer base as we put the final touches on our festival paraphernalia. The devotees had worked all winter putting a new face on our festival: many new tents made to look like colorful Indian temples and many new exhibits and stage productions.



Harinama in Dzwirzyno while dark clouds hovered over the town

We were eager to show our upgraded festival program, so with great expectations we went on Harinam in Dzwirzyno three days before the first festival. But echoing the dismal predictions of the weatherman, dark clouds hovered over the town, and as soon as we got out of the buses they

poured down rain. We quickly retreated back into the buses and waited patiently for the rains to abate. As soon as the showers stopped we jumped out again, onto an almost empty street.

It was the first time in 15 years that I had seen so few people on the streets of a summer resort. The locals told us that less than 40 percent of the normal summer crowd had shown up. “Everyone is holding back until the bad weather recedes,” a shop owner told me, “and in the meantime we’re going bankrupt.”

Despite the bad weather I took the Harinam party down to the beach. I was surprised to see a few hundred diehards lying on the beach, trying their best to enjoy the few rays of sun that had broken through the clouds. The wind was blowing, and they had barricaded themselves behind little walls of cloth. We went forward, oblivious to the elements, chanting and dancing against the wind. Several times strong gusts blew whole bunches of invitations out of the hands of the distributors, who ran

to retrieve the flurries of colorful paper blowing down the beach.

Despite the austerities, the devotees were blissful. We had waited all year for this moment, and a little wind and rain weren't going to dampen our spirits. The contrast of the dismal weather and the attractive Harinam had people mesmerized. At one point, a large man came running towards me. Before I could react, he put his arms around me, picked me up, and twirled me around. "You're back!" He shouted with a big smile. "You're back! The festival is back! We've been waiting for you!"

There was no need to say anything. He'd said it all.

Despite the unending rain, we managed to distribute 5,000 invitations in three days. Then we held the festival in Dzwirzyno. By Krsna's grace the rain held back that afternoon, and several thousand people showed up early for the event. A photographer from a famous magazine was there, shooting away.

"I can't believe you people," he told me. "You're so courageous to attempt an event this size on the coast this summer. It's unbelievable how many people have come."

"Our festivals are always successful," I said. "They're the will of the Lord, rain or shine."

Nevertheless we had to use discretion in choosing which towns to hold our events in. Small places were out of the question. We could only hope to be successful in larger towns, but they were few and far between.

I talked about it with Radha Sakhi Vrnda, our in-charge for contacting town officials. "What about Ustronie Morskie?" I said. "It's a good-sized town."

"Srla Gurudeva," she replied, "it was only because the town secretary was away from Ustronie Morskie last year that we managed to get permission for the festival. He doesn't like us at all. Two years ago when I went to the town hall, he literally screamed at me to get out of town."

"Beggars can't be choosers," I said. "And we don't have many options. You'll have to try again this year."

Radha Sakhi Vrnda looked apprehensive. "It's Mahaprabhu's desire," I continued, "and along with



Radha Sakhi Vrnda dasi

the instruction of the Lord, comes the ability to execute it.”

The next day she called me. “Srila Gurudeva!” she said excitedly. “I just came out of the town hall in Ustronie Morskie. I was so scared to go in. Fortunately, the town secretary was away again. I was able to see the mayor himself. He received me warmly. First he took my hand, kissed it, and then asked me to sit down. I told him of your desire do to a festival in his town. He smiled. ‘Yes, of course,’ he said. ‘You are welcome. We’ll give you the market place. Many citizens told me how much they enjoyed your event last year, and the same people are already asking when you’ll be back this summer. With the bad weather and small crowds, we need you more than ever.’”

And so the contract was signed - all by the strong desire of Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu.

prthivite ache yata nagaradi grama sarvatra pracara haibe mora nama

“In every town and village, the chanting of My name will be heard.”
[Caitanya Bhagavata, Antya 4.126]

But reverses continued. In one village, minutes before our program was to begin, a surprise storm blew the tarpaulin top off our 12-meter-long stage. The fury of the storm sent guests scrambling for cover under our many tents. They all waited for the storm to pass, and then instead of going home, they wiped the water off the benches and sat back down for the program. Not a single person in the crowd of 800 people left. The show went on, even without a top for the stage.

An even more pleasant surprise came the next morning. Sri Prahlad told me that a special guest was waiting to see me at the reception desk in the school where we were staying. I rushed downstairs, but I did not see anyone who looked like a VIP. I wondered whom Sri Prahlad was talking about.

Suddenly I heard a familiar little voice: “Srila Gurudeva, I’m here.”

I looked down and saw nine-year-old Syama-lila dasi, whom I had met during the spring tour. She was standing there with a little suitcase and a sleeping bag.

“Syama-lila!” I said. “What are you doing here?”

Her mother stepped forward. “We’ve come to join your summer tour,” she said. “What can I do? She talks about you constantly, day and night. She even calls out your name in her sleep. When she heard you had a summer festival, she pleaded and pleaded with me to come.”

Syama-lila grabbed my hand. “We’ll do Harinam with you,” she said.

“How did you get here?” I asked. “By bus or train?”

"We saved up to take the bus," the mother replied.

"Saved up?" I asked.

The mother looked down. "We're quite poor," she said. "Ordinarily I couldn't afford such a long bus ride, but we used our savings."

Later that evening I met them again. "I just received a letter," I said. "Someone read a chapter in my diary about Syama-lila. He is asking if he could sponsor her schooling."

The mother began to cry. "Last year I couldn't afford schoolbooks for her," she said.

Syama-lila spoke up. "Mommy," she said, "we'll only accept this money if you promise not to buy cigarettes or liquor with it."

"Yes, darling," The mother replied. "I'll stop those things today. I promise. Your Krsna is so kind to us."

That evening when I downloaded my email, I noticed a short message in Polish. It wasn't the first time. For several weeks, I had been ignoring similar short messages in Polish. I receive over 100 emails a day, so I have to be selective about what I answer during the festival tour season.

But this time, I noticed six exclamation marks after the last sentence, so I asked a Polish devotee to translate the message for me. I was stunned when he handed me the paper:

"Gurudeva! We have written you six times. This is our last chance. We are the brother and sister you spoke to last year at the festival in Mrzezyno. We live in an orphanage in Gryfice. We can't come to your festival in Mrzezyno tomorrow because our orphanage doesn't have a car. Please come and rescue us!!!!!! Hare Krsna, Kristof and Ella"

I called Nandini dasi. "Look up an orphanage in Gryfice. Tell the director that we'll send a bus to pick up all the kids and bring them to the festival in Mrzezyno tomorrow."

"Srila Gurudeva," she said. "Please excuse me, but I have some urgent matters I'm working on."

"Treat this as most urgent," I said. "There are some little souls out there crying for mercy. We can't ignore them."

"Okay," she said, "but it won't be easy. Orphanages are usually under the direction of the Church and they may not like it that we get involved."



Gopi dots on the house



Saris from the transcendental fashion booth.

One hour later Nandini called me, “Srila Gurudeva,” she said, “it’s amazing. I called the director of the orphanage and told her about our festival tomorrow in Mrzezyno. I was a little apprehensive, but she immediately agreed. ‘Oh the Festival of India,’ she said. ‘I’m one of your fans. Yes, come and get all of us tomorrow. We’ll be waiting at 4 p.m.’”

Nandini continued: “I told her. ‘Okay, we’ll send one of our buses. And please pass a message to Kristof and Ella: Gurudeva is waiting for them.’”

The next afternoon, as a light rain fell before an approaching storm, the bus arrived at the festival site with 40 children from the orphanage. I didn’t remember Kristof and Ella by more than their names, but I stood at the door of the bus, confident they would recognize me.

Sure enough, as the door opened they were the first ones out. They came running towards me and Ella jumped into my arms. “Gurudeva!” she cried out. “You have rescued us!”

By this time all the other children had surrounded me, smiling and laughing.

Kristof spoke up. “We told all the kids about you,” he said, “and we have all been waiting the whole year for the festival to come back.”

I called Nandini and Jayatam over. “For these kids,” I said, “everything is on the house.”

They stood there looking confused. “I’m sorry, Srila Gurudeva,” Jayatam said, “What does that mean, ‘on the house?’”

“It means you give these children whatever they want for free.

Sweets from the restaurant, saris from the fashion booth, gopi dots at the face-painting tent, gifts from the shop. Whatever they want and as much as they want.”

Nandini, always prudent and practical in managerial affairs, looked at me dumbfounded. “Srila Gurudeva,” she said, “there are 40 children here. Who will pay for all of



The children from the orphanage at the festival in Mrzezyno

this?”

“Don’t worry,” I replied. “I’ll go out and collect the money during the break before the Woodstock festival.”

Nandini smiled. “In Azerbaijan?” she said.

I laughed. “Probably not,” I said, “but let’s not worry about that for now. We’ll make it our business to take care of these orphaned souls, and in turn the Lord will take care of us. Have no doubt.”

“If one tries to spread Kṛṣṇa consciousness all over the world, he should be understood to be performing the best welfare activity. The Lord is automatically very pleased with him. If the Lord is pleased with him, what is left for him to achieve? If one has been recognized by the Lord, even if he does not ask the Lord for anything, the Lord, who is within everyone, supplies him whatever he wants.” [Srimad Bhagavatam, purport 8.7.44]

22

A LESSON FROM AN OLD CLEANING MAN

July 11 - 15, 2004

SINCE THE BEGINNING OF OUR SUMMER TOUR it has rained every day, and unseasonably cold weather has prevailed. One couldn't imagine more unfavorable circumstances for outdoor festivals. Advertising the programs has become a cat-and-mouse game with the weather. Each day we start Harinam under threatening dark clouds and chant until the rain starts. Then we find shelter from the downpour, wait for it to stop, and begin again. This goes on for hours each day, and after many weeks it has become a test of our determination.

It is also a challenge for the thousands of festivalgoers who brave the bad weather to come to our festivals, only to have to dash into our tents many times throughout the programs when it rains.

I find myself praying for good weather, not like a worldly person might in order to enjoy the summer, but in the wish that our festivals may go on and people may receive mercy. Five hundred years ago, the Supreme Lord Himself intervened when the sankirtan movement was threatened by rain:

“Srla Locana dasa Thakura’s *Caitanya-mangala* also relates that once at the end of the day, when evening clouds assembled overhead and thundered threateningly, all the Vaisnavas were very much afraid. But the Lord took His karatalas in His hands and personally began chanting the Hare Krsna mantra, looking up toward the sky as if to direct the demigods in the higher planets. Thus all the assembled clouds dispersed, and as the sky became clear, with the moon rising, the Lord began dancing very happily with His jubilant and satisfied devotees.” [*Caitanya Caritamṛta*, *Adi-lila* 17.89, purport]

But there is a silver lining in these dark clouds that have hung over the Baltic Sea coast for most of June and into July: People come to our programs because they have nothing else to do. In fact, the festivals have attracted many who would not ordinarily come. When Radha Sakhi Vrnda

went to the town office in Revel to sign a document, she happened to meet the mayor and invited him to the second day of the event, in a field just across from the town hall.

“Actually, I went yesterday,” the mayor said. “I was watching you people from my office window in the morning, and I saw you put up your stage and tents in the bad weather. There must have 20 men braving the wind and rain. They were professional and well organized. I was amazed at how they transformed that old soccer field into a beautiful theme park by evening. So I came in-cognito and had a wonderful time.”



An old soccer field transformed into a beautiful theme park

And then there are those who have come regularly throughout the years. In Niechorze I met a man who came riding into the festival grounds on his bicycle in the pouring rain. He took off his raincoat and smiled at me. “I live 30 kilometers inland,” he said, “and I ride my bicycle to your festivals along the coast every day.”

Ten minutes later, I met a 13-year-old girl having gopi dots painted on her face. “This year my parents did well in business,” she told me, “and they offered to send me on vacation to Italy or France. I told them I wasn’t interested and that I would rather wait here for the Festival of India. I’ve been coming every year since I was eight years old. It’s always the best part of my summer.”

As she was speaking, claps of thunder shook the sky and suddenly it began pouring rain. I ran into the astrology tent for shelter and found Prahlad Nrsimha prabhu talking to a woman doctor.

“She’s been coming every summer for three years,” he said. “She understands the importance of chanting Hare Krsna, and she’s been trying to chant throughout the year, but she thought that chanting meant singing loud and dancing around the room with one’s arms in the air. She says that this is difficult at her office. She’s happy to learn that she can chant on beads too.”



Prahlad Nrsimha Prabhu in the astrology tent

A couple I saw later that day told me they had met at our festival four years ago and were married six months later. The wife said she saw her then husband-to-be dancing in one of our kirtans. "He must be a spiritual person," she thought, and later she started a conversation with him. They told me they come back every year to celebrate their first meeting by joining in the kirtan of the holy names.

Then I visited the public restroom near the festival grounds, and I complimented the old cleaning woman. "This is the cleanest public toilet I have ever seen in Poland," I said. "Thank you very much."

She was struck. "I've been working here 10 years," she said, "and you're the first person to ever thank me. But I'm not surprised. You're good people. I've watched your festival from a distance for years now. Everyone leaves your program smiling."

"Can you come also?" I said.

She looked surprised. "You're inviting me?" she asked.

"Yes," I said, "to dinner. I'll come get you at 6 p.m. and we'll have dinner together in our vegetarian restaurant."

She looked down. "I'm an old woman," she said. "No one has ever asked me. You know, I..."

She stopped. Her eyes had welled up with tears.

I took her hand. "I'll be back at six," I said.



Niti Laksa das repairing the generator

But at 5:30 p.m., just an hour into the festival program, our big seven-ton generator broke down. The maintenance crew told me that it appeared to have been sabotaged. "It seems someone poured water into the fuel tank," Niti-laksa das said.

Not everyone appreciates our programs. We have to be always on guard against the envious. So I was 20 minutes late for picking up the old woman. I went with Gaura Hari

das and Nandini dasi.

She wasn't there. An old man was sitting in her chair, bent over preparing a bucket of water to clean the toilets. "She went home," he told us. "She wasn't feeling well."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said. I looked at the thin, gray-haired, poorly dressed old man, and I felt sorry for him.

"Do you know the old woman?" I asked.

"Oh yes," he replied, "she's my wife. We've worked together here for years. Can you imagine that?"

"No," I said, "I can't."

I immediately regretted my answer. I was afraid I had insulted the old man, so I tried to smooth things over. "I don't think there's anything wrong with working here," I said. "I meant to say I..."

"Don't worry," said the old man. "I know it's not the best work, and it doesn't pay well, but we get by."

He paused. "And do you know how?" he asked.

I was afraid I would put my foot in my mouth again, so I didn't answer.

"By reading the *Gita*," he said slowly.

Gaura Hari, Nandini, and I looked at each other in amazement.

"Yes," he continued, "your *Gita* makes sense of everything. You can clearly understand the soul by reading the *Gita*. No other religion has such a concise explanation of the soul, reincarnation, and karma. If a man kills someone and then himself dies soon after, how will he be punished unless he's born again? Reincarnation explains why some people are born into misery and others into good fortune."

For a moment I thought I was dreaming. Was the old cleaning man really speaking Vedic philosophy?

"Take the material body," he continued. "It is only dead matter. How can it be activated unless there is the presence of the soul? That's why it's wrong to kill animals. They also have souls. God created beings so they could live, not so they could be killed."

I was struck by his clear logic.

"A man works all his life," he continued, "and he gets a pension to live out his remaining days, but the cow gives milk all her life, and then people kill her. It's wrong. And the whole world is suffering the reaction in the form of wars. Therefore God sends messengers at different times to enlighten us to these truths, but people just don't listen. What can be done?"

Gaura Hari turned to me. "Sometimes I think you exaggerate in your diaries," he said, "but I'll never think that again."

"You know," I whispered to him, "that's the same thing Dharmatma prabhu said after we survived a serious car accident near Jagannath Puri."

I turned to the old man. "But there is an answer," I said. "We can have festivals like these to help people understand."

"Yes," he said, "you're right. Go on with your festivals. Let people hear the truth."

I had to return to the festival to give my stage lecture. “One more thing,” I said. “Can you and your wife be my guests for dinner tomorrow evening at the last night of the festival?”

He looked surprised.

“Please,” I continued. “We’d be honored.”

“All right,” he said, “thank you.”

He stood up and picked up the bucket. “I didn’t know what real religion was until I read the *Gīta*,” he said softly, half to himself, as he disappeared into the toilets.

Srila Prabhupada’s words came to my mind: “Therefore we stress so much in the book distribution. Somehow or other, if the book goes in one hand, he will be benefited ... If he reads one *śloka*, his life will be successful... Therefore we are stressing so much, ‘Please distribute books, distribute books, distribute books.’ “ [Lecture, January 5, 1974, Los Angeles]

23

NERVES OF STEEL

July 16 - 24, 2004

WHEN WE WOKE UP on the morning of Monday July 12, we couldn't believe our eyes. The sun was shining and there wasn't a cloud in the sky. Devotees ran outside just to have a look. For weeks on end, we had struggled with the rain, wind, and cold. One by one, devotees had come down with colds and flu, and at one point I had even thought of canceling the rest of the summer tour.

The blue skies and the first warm breezes of summer made us feel as if a huge weight had been lifted from our spirits, and after our morning program we eagerly prepared for Harinam and the festival that afternoon in Pobierowo. But as we often experience on our festival tours, a golden opportunity was nearly ruined by a potential setback.

I was buckling my seat belt when Nandini dasi came up to the car. She is calm and collected even in the most trying of times, but I can tell when she's facing a threatening challenge by a slight squint in her eyes.

"The villagers want to throw us out of the school," she said without emotion. "It's the first time we are using this school as a base, and the villagers are suspicious. Vicious rumors are circulating. They want us out in 24 hours."

I was stunned. "Even if we could leave, which we won't," I said, "there's no way that 220 devotees and 48 tons of equipment can be moved out of here in 24 hours, and that with no place to go. Why the sudden drama?"

Although only 15 minutes into the situation, Nandini had already done her homework. "The regional bishop sent a letter to the local priest, who read it at Sunday mass yesterday," she said. "It was the usual rhetoric, warning the villagers about us being a dangerous cult. They're afraid we'll kidnap their children."

"We have a contract with the school, don't we?" I asked.

"Yes," she said, "but they could probably get someone in position to

annul it. And they appear to be working fast. The regional chief of police is on his way here to investigate us. People say he is tough and uncompromising—and hates cults.”

I thought it was time for a bit of humor. “Great!” I said. “We’re not a cult.”

I thought about something I had once read in the *Globe and Mail*: “After all, what’s a cult? It just means not enough people to make a minority.”

No sooner had I spoken than a police car pulled into the driveway. The windows were tinted, and we couldn’t see inside. Suddenly a large man in uniform stepped out, sporting a big mustache and an even bigger scowl.

I was caught off guard, and I wasn’t exactly sure how to proceed. Should we hold a quick tour committee meeting and confront him all together? Or should I speak to him with just one or two committee members?

Nandini stepped forward. “I’ll handle this,” she said.

She approached him with a smile and held out her hand in greeting. “Officer,” she said, “we’re happy that you’ve come. There are a number of misunderstandings circulating around town, and I’d like to speak to you about them.”

The police officer was taken aback by Nandini’s direct approach and openness, and he nodded his head in agreement.

“We’ll discuss it in the school office,” Nandini said. “Please come this way.”

There was nothing more the rest of us could do, so we left for Harinam.

“Srila Gurudeva,” a devotee said, “do you think we should have stayed back and done something to help?”

“Chanting Hare Krsna will be the biggest help we can offer,” I said.

“The universe becomes joyful by the sankirtan glorifying You and becomes attracted to You. The raksasas, asuras, danavas, pisacas and others, however, becoming fearful, flee to the different directions.” [Srila Visvanath Cakravarti Thakura, *Sarartha Varsini* commentary on *Srimad Bhagavad Gita*, Chapter II, verse 36, purport]

Three hours later I received a call from Nandini. “Everything is okay,” she said. “I anticipated the questions the police chief would ask, so I first showed him all our official papers. He immediately understood that we are registered with the government and that all foreign devotees on the tour have valid visas. I also showed him many letters of appreciation about

our festivals from different mayors around the country.”

“It didn’t take much to convince him,” she continued. “He was actually a kindhearted man, and he was interested in yoga. At one point he even started telling me about how difficult his own life is. We discussed a little philosophy, and then he left. He said not to worry. He knew the people who wanted to throw us out of town and said he had the power to keep them quiet.”

It wasn’t the first time—or the last time—that Nandini’s ability to deal with those in a position of authority saved the day. The next incident was only hours away.

The Harinam in Pobierowo that morning was especially blissful. We chanted and danced through the town and gave out thousands of invitations. At one point we stopped near a market area and I asked Sri Prahlada to give a little talk. As he was inviting the people to the festival, a well-dressed man sitting on a bench called me over.



Harinam in Pobierowo

“I’ve been observing you people for years,” he said in English. “I’d like to be part of what you’re doing. Not in a religious sense, mind you. I’m Catholic. But I see there’s so much culture behind what you’re doing. Can I join in somehow, or contribute in any way to your making people so happy?”

“Yes, of course,” I replied. “Come to the festival this afternoon, and we’ll speak some more.”

We got one of the biggest crowds of the season that afternoon. I felt completely satisfied. The late afternoon sunshine accented the beautiful colors of the stage and the tents. I watched almost a thousand people walk into the festival, and I felt proud to be part of a wonderful spiritual heritage that was slowly but surely capturing the hearts of the people of Poland. Then, just before the stage show started, I saw the mayor of Pobierowo walk in. She is an old friend of ours, and my joy knew no bounds.

“I’m so happy you are back,” she said to me. “Tourists have been coming to the town office for the last two weeks asking when your festival would come.”

I called Radha Sakhi Vrnda dasi over to show the mayor around our festival site. The mayor looked pleased with all the new tents and attractions we had. I saw her again later that evening, laughing during the stage



The mayor of Pobierowo at the festival in her town

production of Krsna's Vrndavan lila.

Everything was going smoothly. There was an air of auspiciousness everywhere, and I relaxed for the first time in weeks.

Suddenly an official red-colored car sped onto the festival grounds from the main road, and a fireman ran out. I had Nandini go quickly to speak to him. He seemed anxious during their talk, but after a

few minutes he calmed down and then to my surprise sat down on one of the benches in front of the stage to watch the *Ramayana* theater.

"Apparently some envious man called the fire department and said that our festival presented a serious fire hazard," Nandini told me. "The caller said we were cooking outdoors on the field and there was no fire exit for the thousands of people attending the event. He also said we had no fire extinguishers."

"Of course the fire chief saw that we aren't cooking in the open," she continued, "and I also showed him our fire extinguishers. Then he relaxed. 'Anyway,' he said, 'I wanted to come to your festival, but I had to work today. Now I have a perfect excuse to stay for awhile and enjoy the show.'"

An hour later, a police car approached the festival. Someone had complained that devotees were caught stealing in one of the shops in town.



Krsna's Vrndavan lila

"That's simply not true," we told the police. "There is no evidence of this." They were somewhat convinced and went away.

I started to think that someone was doing his best to interrupt our festival.

Sure enough my suspicion came true. Just as darkness fell, I was

saying my final goodbye onstage to the big crowd in front of me when I saw two police cars, lights flashing, enter the festival grounds. I didn't want the audience to notice, so I kept on speaking, hoping the festival would end on a high note.

But after 10 minutes I could see something serious was going on, so I ended my talk, and people started leaving.

I ran to where the police cars were to find Nandini speaking to the police. She turned to me and quickly briefed me on what had happened.

“Our devotees have been going into a small grocery store near the festival grounds throughout the day,” she said, “but each time they would enter, the owner, a man in his 40s, would scream at them to get out. If they hesitated he would accuse them of stealing and threaten to call the police.”

I immediately understood who had called the firemen and the police.

“When Taralaksi dasi walked into the store an hour ago,” Nandini said, “the owner screamed at her, jumped over the counter, caught her by the hair, and dragged her out onto the street. He was screaming and yelling and telling all the passersby that he had caught a thief. Taralaksi was visibly shaken and distraught, and she came running back here to the festival grounds.”

Jayatam Jayasila das, Nandini’s husband, continued: “When Nandini heard the story and saw the condition of Taralaksi she called for Raksana das, our security man. I grabbed my video camera, and we all marched over to the store. We entered the store with Nandini in the lead. As soon as the owner saw us, he hid himself, but his two sons came out and started screaming at us with abusive language.

“At one point they threatened to call the police. Nandini stood there with her phone in her hand. ‘Don’t bother,’ she said. ‘We’ll call the police ourselves.’ At that moment the owner appeared, angrily waving a stun gun. We all moved back, but Nandini held her ground, standing in front of the man and calmly calling the police. When the three men became more even more belligerent, we all walked out of the store.

“They followed behind us, and as we stood on the pavement, one of the sons spit in the face of Raksana das. Raksana stood firm. Then they threatened Nandini, but she also stood firm. They were screaming over and over that we were thieves and had stolen from their shop. Nandini asked if I’d recorded everything on camera, and I said yes. Then we decided we should leave.”

As Jayatam finished, a policeman came forward. I looked around and felt disturbed when I saw a large crowd gathering to see what was happening. “This is exactly what I didn’t want,” I thought.

“We’ve spoken to the owner of the store,” the policeman said, “and he insists that you people were stealing. We’ve got two stories here, and

therefore we'll have to do an investigation. You'll all have to come down to the police station."

The crowd was getting bigger. "Oh no," I thought. "This will look very bad."

"You have to understand," the policeman said. "We don't know you very well."

Suddenly a voice came from the crowd, hidden in the darkness: "I'll vouch for them."

The policeman turned to look, and suddenly to everyone's surprise the mayor stepped forward. The crowd gasped. All the policemen stood up straight, in respect.

"These Hare Krsnas are good people," the mayor said. "I've known them for years. They would never do the things this man has accused them of. I'm proud to have them in our town, and you should also be proud."

She looked sternly at the policemen, and they shuffled a little at her strong words.

"The owner of that store has caused many problems through the years," the mayor continued. "Just recently he broke the jaw of a man he didn't like. He has assaulted other citizens of this town as well. No one is bringing him to justice. Now he has dared to drag one of our Hare Krsna friends by the hair. You have to do something."

"Well there is not much we can do," replied the officer, "unless someone presses charges and makes a case against him."



Jayatam Sila das and his wife Nandini dasi

"I will protect the citizens of my town," said the mayor, "and I will see that he gets justice for what he's done to my friends here today. I will personally file charges against him."

The mayor had spoken. The impromptu trial on the field was over, and the policemen nodded their heads in respect to the mayor. Then they got in their cars and drove away.

Nandini was smiling at the mayor's protection of the devotees.

Jayatam turned to me, smiling. "My wife has a lot of resolve," he said.

“And nerves of steel,” I added.

“Sometimes jealous persons criticize the Krsna consciousness movement because it engages equally both boys and girls in distributing love of Godhead. Not knowing that boys and girls in countries like Europe and America mix very freely, these fools and rascals criticize the boys and girls in Krsna consciousness for intermingling. But these rascals should consider that one cannot suddenly change a community’s social customs. However, since both the boys and the girls are being trained to become preachers, those girls are not ordinary girls but are as good as their brothers who are preaching Krsna consciousness. Therefore, to engage both boys and girls in fully transcendental activities is a policy intended to spread the Krsna consciousness movement.” [*Sri Caitanya-caritamṛta*, *Adi-lila* 7.31-32 purport]

24

UP ON THE HILL

July 25 - 31, 2004

AS I WORK ON THIS CHAPTER of my diary, I am at a loss as to how to begin and how to finish. The great Woodstock festival has just concluded. I don't know how to put it into words—Krsna's Village of Peace, situated on a small plateau over the festival site and looking like a temple on a hill, and the miraculous events that took place there over three days.

From every direction at the Woodstock festival, the 300,000 people who attended could see us. A month earlier, we were inspecting the general area with Jurek Owsiak, the main organizer. Jurek pointed to the plateau. "That hill's for Krsna," he said. It was a gift whose value we could only appreciate after Woodstock had actually begun.

At first I was a bit uneasy about the entire Woodstock site. It was a new location on the western side of Poland, next to the German border. Unlike the previous site in Zary, which was flat and easily accessible, the new area in Kostrzyn-nad-Odra was a field in the middle of forested region. It was a wild area, full of wasps, ticks, and mosquitoes.



The new Woodstock site in Kostrzyn

My apprehension grew when a local farmer told me about the place. "We suspect there are munitions left over from World War Two under the ground here," he said. "Often people find artillery shells and bombs when digging foundations for new homes or businesses."

"Where did they come from?" I asked.

"During World War Two, Kostrzyn was part of Germany," he said. "It was the last line of defense before Berlin, and it was well fortified.

In March 1944 the Allies bombed Kostrzyn for 14 days and nights with 3,150 planes. Ninety-eight percent of the town was destroyed.”

He pointed to the hill 50 meters away, where we would put up Krsna’s Village of Peace. “That hill took the brunt of it,” he said. “There was heavy artillery up there protecting the town.”

He looked in another direction. “You see those army men?” he said. “They are searching this entire area of the Woodstock festival with special metal detectors to find any shells or munitions left over from the war. Come with me. I’ll show you something else.”

We walked 50 meters in yet another direction, and he showed me a vast walled cavern in the ground. “The Germans hid their aircraft here,” he said. “It goes down three stories. The earth would open up and they would fly out of the ground.”

Our devotees worked for a week alongside the army men, clearing the land of bushes, old trees, and rocks. A tent company came in on an improvised road we had laid and spent the next three days putting up a tent 90 meters long and 30 meters wide. Then they proceeded to put up the smaller tents, which we would use to depict different aspects of Vedic culture. “This is really taming the wild,” I thought.

With the addition of water pipes and electrical poles, everything began to take shape, and in the last days before the festival, our devotee artists came and decorated our site with artistic structures, colorful cloth, and even a prefabricated Vedic temple. The site looked like heaven on earth.

Gazing into the small valley below, one could see huge preparations finishing up for the Woodstock Festival itself: a gigantic stage, 400 toilets, 40 telephone booths, numerous sinks and basins for washing, 2 poles that spouted water for showering, and a massive area of improvised shops and restaurants. I counted over 60 food stalls putting up signs displaying all kinds of food, but not a single one offering vegetarian fare. And I couldn’t begin to tally the number of stands ready to sell beer.

In nearby Kostrzyn people were wary of the devotees who flooded the town to shop and go on the Internet in the days leading up the big festival. In one store in particular, employees were assigned to follow all devotees who came in and make sure they didn’t steal.

The Woodstock festival lasts two days, but Jurek Owsiak is a close friend of ours and always lets us start a day early in appreciation for our contribution to the event. My heart was beating strongly the morning we opened our village. A great opportunity awaited us. Close to 300 devotees from the Baltics, Russia, Ukraine, and other parts of Europe had come to

assist our core festival group of 250 devotees, and that morning we busied ourselves dividing our forces between kitchen duties, service on the field, stage shows, and administration.

There was action everywhere as we made final preparations. Big trucks rolled onto our festival grounds delivering the last of the 30 tons of foodstuffs needed to reach our goal of 100,000 plates of prasadam. An enormous pot just to the side of our food distribution tent simmered with 3,500 liters of beans. Early comers gawked at the pot and the devotee who stood on a ladder stirring the beans with a huge wooden spoon.

Devotees put up freshly made signs on the tents: Yoga, Meditation, Questions and Answers, Ayurveda, Books, Gifts, Gopi Dots, Vegetarianism, and Reincarnation. But the most attractive tent of all was the temple, presided over by our Radha-Krsna Deities, Gandharvika Giridhari.

Great kirtaneers arrived just in time: BB Govinda Swami with his bhajan band from Kazakhstan, Lokanath Swami, and Sivaram Swami. Stalwart preachers followed: Candramauli Swami, Deena Bandhu Prabhu, Kavicandra Swami, Kripamoya Prabhu, Pancajangari Prabhu, and Umapati Swami. The stage was set.

And last but not least, late that morning, the sun finally broke through the clouds, bringing an end to the drizzle that had hampered our efforts for days. A cheer went up from all the hard-working devotees. Surely the demigods had been watching from their flower airplanes just above our site, and they had dispelled any last obstacles to our preaching. The good weather stayed throughout the entire Woodstock.

It was a real blessing. Had it rained, the steep access road up our hill would have become a mud slick, and few would have braved the climb. It was the only potential weak point on our site, and one I was conscious of at every moment.

At 11:00 am a devotee blew a conch, and as I tore down the red tape around our two-acre site, kids came flowing into Krsna's Village of Peace in huge numbers. Many went straight for the food-distribution tent, others to the stage program, which was just beginning. Our sound system, capable of addressing 50,000 people, was broadcasting Sri Prahlad's kirtan down into valley.

Within minutes, a reporter with a camera crew came up to me, and a woman introduced herself. "We are from the main television channel in Germany," she said. "Can you tell us something about the history of this Woodstock Festival?"

"Yes," I said, "and I'll tell you about Krsna's Village of Peace too."

"Oh excuse me," she said. "I thought this was the principal event."

Your site is so big and so attractive. Where are the organizers of the main Woodstock festival?”

“Just down there in the valley,” I replied.

She smiled. “We’ll be back,” she said.

No sooner had I seen them off than another television crew appeared. I did not have the time to ask who they were, so I just did the interview. I stressed that we are invited back to Woodstock every year because we support the themes of Woodstock: no violence and no narcotics.

“What positive contribution do you make?” the interviewer asked.

I smiled. “To begin with,” I said, “100,000 plates of delicious vegetarian food and a spiritual theme park with unlimited attractions: singing, dancing, yoga, theater, philosophical books, an Indian temple—

“Cut!” shouted the interviewer to the crew. The list was too long.

That night Jurek Owsiak called Nandini. “I saw Maharaja’s interview on national television,” he told her. “It was great. Maharaja said all the right things. We’re happy to work together with you on the Woodstock Festival.”

“Jurek,” Nandini said, “can you come over at 10:30 tonight, when our bands are playing, and officially open Krsna’s Village of Peace?”

“Yes, of course,” he replied.

That night, in a tent packed with over 5,000 kids, Jurek came on our stage and welcomed everyone to Krsna’s Village of Peace. The kids roared in approval. We were off to a good start.

The next day was the official opening day for the Woodstock Festival itself. Jurek called for 10 devotees to go with him on the main stage to open the event. With 200,000 kids watching and television cameras rolling, he asked the local fire chief to blow a whistle to begin the celebrations.

Then to my surprise, he pointed to us standing beside him. “In Krsna’s Village of Peace, just up on the hill,” he said to all the kids, “you’ll get the best food. Be happy they are here. They’re some of my best friends.”

The kids applauded in mass.

Such huge publicity for the sankirtan movement of Lord Caitanya is



The official opening of the Woodstock Festival

rare in Kali Yuga, and I relished every moment.

Later, Jurek's wife told us that the same night, when even more kids were assembled before the main stage to listen to one of their favorite bands, Jurek came out spontaneously and grabbed the microphone. His voice boomed throughout the entire Woodstock area. "If you think my friends the Hare Krsnas are a cult," he yelled, "then get out of here!"

He went on for 20 minutes glorifying our movement. The Lord works in many ways and that night He worked most wonderfully.

Three times a day, Kripamoya Prabhu and Sri Prahlada Prabhu led Harinam parties of 50 to 100 devotees into the valley to chant on the dusty roads crisscrossing through the sea of tents the young people were camping in. Most of the kids were intoxicated, the only good effect of which was that they danced more easily with us. We were obliged to take a security team of 15 men who protected us against those who had become bellicose from drinking.

Our entertainment and Harinam was written up in a major newspaper after the first day. "The devotees of Krsna have set up a beautiful village on top of a hill, overlooking the entire Woodstock festival," said the article. "Streams of young people can be seen walking up the hill at any time of the day or night. There they enjoy delicious food and cultural

entertainment from India. When the devotees descend into the valley with their singing groups, they are so attractive that even their enemies are forced to appreciate them."

Our stage show ran non-stop from 10:30 a.m. until 3:00 a.m. the next morning. We had rehearsed the performances for months and tried to make everything dynamic and professional. Especially appreciated were the *Ramayana*, with big masks,



Indian dance, yoga demonstrations and Ramayana at Woodstock

Krsna's Vrindavana lila, with big puppets, and the Indian dancers, the pantomimes, and the yoga demonstrations, all accompanied by music.

A wedding on the third and final day brought tears to the eyes on many of the thousands of people watching. Just after the wedding, I met a couple from Zary, where Woodstock had been held in previous years.

"Do you miss having Woodstock in your town?" I asked them.

"No," said the man, "We miss Krsna's Village of Peace."

The various tents throughout our village were filled to capacity most

of the time. The crowd in Questions and Answers often spilled out onto the field, despite the many benches inside.

And the temple tent was always rocking with the kirtans of BB Govinda Maharaja, Sivarama Maharaja, and others. “I came to Woodstock and parked my car near your village,” a boy told me. “I had to walk to the festival through your tent, but after I went in, I never left.

I didn’t even go down into the valley. And I’m not sorry. I came to hear my favorite bands but ended up listening to only one song, Hare Krsna, for three days straight.”

The last day of the festival saw our biggest crowd. Many young people came to hear our devotee bands—Village of Peace, Dhira, Radical News, and Nrsimha. At times the main tent was filled with as many as 7,000 kids.

On the last day, we stayed up all night distributing prasadam, and as the sun came up the next morning, I blissfully went back to our base to sleep a few hours.

Later that morning Nandini dasi, Jayatama das, and I went to see the mayor to thank him for letting Woodstock take place in his town. When we arrived, his secretary asked us to wait in the lobby, and we could hear a loud argument taking place in his office. Finally, the mayor asked us in.

“Is something wrong?” I asked.

“Those were businessmen from the town,” the mayor said. “They had set up many food stalls, and they were angry because they sold practically nothing.”

The mayor smiled. “Everyone went up to your village to eat,” he continued.

“Those businessman told me they had to throw away seven tons of meat because of you. When I asked them if they wanted to take any action against you, one of them smiled. ‘No,’ he said, ‘let them go. They didn’t mean any harm. Besides, they



Indian dance, yoga demonstrations and Ramayana at Woodstock



Kirtans in the temple tent



Kirtans on the main stage

lit up Woodstock with their smiles.”

“Did you go to Krsna’s Village of Peace?” I asked.

“I was there every day,” the mayor said. “I appreciated it because it was so clean. But my family and I missed out on the food because we couldn’t stand for hours in the long lines.”

“No problem,” I said, and I handed him a beautiful cake.

We left the mayor’s office and finished our preparations to go back up north and continue our summer beach festivals, but before heading out, we stopped to see Jurek Owsiak and his team, themselves preparing to leave from just behind the main Woodstock stage.

Jurek and I greeted each other with a big hug. “Thank you,” he said in English.

“Thank you,” I answered in Polish.

“Did you get to distribute 100,000 plates of food?” Jurek asked.

“Yes we did.” I replied.

“How did you like being up on the hill?” he asked.

I laughed. “It was like a fairy tale,” I said, “but if it had rained, it would have been a nightmare.”

“The angels were protecting us this year,” he said.

“No doubt about that,” I said. I envisioned Indra, Surya, and Vayu in their celestial airplanes.

“But we may not be so lucky next year,” he added.

Before I could comment, Jurek turned to his team members and closest associates who had organized the general Woodstock festival. They had all gathered to see him off.

“I want to make an announcement,” he called out.

They all stopped what they were doing and looked towards him.

“Next year, we’ll put the main stage where the food stalls were this year,” he said. “It’s a better vantage point.”

“And where will the food stalls go?” a worker called out.

Jurek didn’t offer an immediate alternative, as everyone knew the food stalls had not done well because of the popularity of our prasadam.

“Where the stage is now is a great spot too, Jurek,” another man called out. “It can be easily accessed by a concrete road and can be seen from anywhere on the field. What will you put here?”

Jurek was getting into his car. He looked back with a smile on his face. “It’s for my Hare Kṛṣṇa friends,” he said.

It was yet another gift, waiting for us one year down the road.

Before leaving town we made one last stop at the grocery store where devotees had been shopping throughout the festival. I braced myself to be followed again under suspicion of stealing. Instead, I was surprised to see all the cashiers with gopi dots painted on their faces. As I made my purchases, they smiled, radiant from the association of the devotees at Woodstock.

I smiled to myself thinking how the whole town of Kostrzyn—and 300,000 visiting kids—had been purified by our village on the hill. Once a place of unprecedented horror and suffering, the hill it had been transformed by the holy names of Kṛṣṇa into an abode of wellbeing and peace.

*jagad bandhor jagat kartur
jagatam trana hetave
yatra tatra hareh seva
kirtane sthapite sukhe*

“Wherever the service to the Lord, who is the protector and creator of the universes, and wherever congregational chanting of His names were well established, they set the worlds in peace.” [Srila Sarvabhauma Bhattacharya, *Susloka-satakam*, verse 48]

25

SHOOT FOR THE RHINOCEROS

August, 2004

AFTER THE WOODSTOCK FESTIVAL, we returned to the Baltic coast to resume our summer festivals. But no sooner had we arrived than Maya's forces dealt us a blow. We had chosen a town near our summer base and had signed the contract with city hall well in advance. Two days before the festival we did Harinam and flooded the town with thousands of invitations. Our colorful posters could be seen everywhere. Tourists were pouring in, and the whole town was buzzing about the upcoming event.

The second day I took the Harinam party out for another day of advertising. We chanted on the beach, occasionally stopping to speak to crowds about our festival the next day. At the end, we were exhausted. I crawled into my van after the Harinam was over.



Harinama Party on the Baltic coast

"You look tired," said our driver, Radhe Shyama das.

"True," I said, "but it's worth it. Many people said they'll come for the program."

Then my cell phone rang. It was Nandini dasi.

"Srila Gurudeva," she said, "I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but the mayor just canceled tomorrow's festival."

I gasped. Such things sometimes happen inland, where people are less familiar with us, but rarely on the coast where we have been holding festivals for 15 years.

"How is it possible?" I asked.

"The town secretary told me in confidence that the mayor received a bribe," Nandini said.

"We have to do something," I said. "We put our hearts and souls into the preparations for this festival. Last year over 5,000 people came to the same town with even less advertising."

"I understand, Srila Gurudeva," Nandini replied. "I'll do my best."

I explained the situation to the other devotees in the van. A brahmacari spoke up. "What does she mean she'll 'do her best'?" he said.

"I haven't got a clue," I replied, "but knowing Nandini, she's already in action."

Sure enough, an hour later Nandini's husband called me. "Srila Gurudeva," he said, "this is Jayatam. Nandini found the man who gave the bribe to the mayor. She spoke with him for almost an hour. He regrets his action but says nothing can be done. The mayor already has the money."

"How in the world did she find the man?" I asked.

"After speaking with you, she jumped out of the car with a determined look on her face," Jayatam said, "and she started walking in the direction of the area where the festival was to be held. There was a housing complex nearby and she stood there for ten minutes looking at the houses. Then she walked straight up to one house and knocked on the door.

"When a man answered, she said point blank to his face, 'Do you know anything about the Festival of India being canceled?'

"He was so startled that he started shaking. 'Yes,' he said, 'it's me. I did it. I didn't want to be disturbed by the noise so I paid the mayor.'

"Nandini scolded him and asked him to take the bribe back, but he said it was too late. She admonished him some more and then stormed off. I saw the whole thing with my own eyes."

A passage from the scriptures came to my mind: "These women have never undergone the purificatory rites of the twice-born classes, nor have they lived as brahmacaris in the asrama of a spiritual master, nor have they executed austerities, speculated on the nature of the self, followed the formalities of cleanliness or engaged in pious rituals. Nevertheless, they have firm devotion for Lord Kṛṣṇa, whose glories are chanted by the exalted hymns of the Vedas and who is the supreme master of all masters of mystic power" [Srimad Bhagavatam 10.23.43-44]

As we talked, Nandini was already in another town making emergency preparations for another festival the next day. As I finished speaking to Jayatam she called.

"We have the central park in the next town for a festival tomorrow," she said. "The mayor there was sympathetic to our problem."

"That's pretty quick," I said, "but it leaves only one day to advertise."

“It’s enough,” Nandini said. “Word is out, and people are already talking about the event.”

Early the next day our tired band of kirtaneers made a special effort and went out on sankirtan in the next town. When I saw some of them fading after four hours, I announced that we were stopping and going home. I turned to lead the way and after 20 steps looked behind me to make sure everyone was following. No one had moved. “Lets go!” I called out. “We’re going home!”

Again, no one moved.

“Srila Gurudeva,” said a devotee, “there are 2,000 invitations left.”

“Real troopers, these devotees,” I said to myself. We went on for another hour and a half and ended up distributing 7,000 invitations that day.

The efforts of the devotees were rewarded when 4,000 people came that evening, including many from the town where the festival had been canceled. Jayatama had arranged for two buses to wait at the site of the canceled event. The people were disappointed that the mayor there had canceled the festival, but they didn’t mind taking a 15-minute bus ride to the next town. For over an hour the buses ferried people back and forth. I couldn’t believe my eyes.

Usually I watch the crowd as it comes into a festival, but that night I watched the tired faces of the devotees as they looked up from their various services at the festival and smiled as people walked in. How proud I was of those devotees! I knew their selfless efforts would be rewarded by the Lord.

*ya idam paramam guhyam
mad-bhaktasv abhidhasyati
bhaktim mayi param krtva
mam evaisyaty asamsayah*

“For one who explains this supreme secret to the devotees, pure devotional service is guaranteed, and at the end he will come back to Me.” [Bhagavad-gita 18.68]

The next morning, as I was taking a little extra rest before the Harinam party left, my phone rang again. I sensed it was Nandini. I hesitated to answer, but I rolled over and pushed the receiving button.

“Srila Gurudeva,” the voice said, “this is Nandini. I have to tell you something.”

"Here we go again," I muttered, and waited for the next installment of sankirtan drama.

Nandini laughed. "The Indian ambassador to Poland has expressed an interest in visiting our festival," she said. "His first secretary just called me and asked what day they could come."

I sat up straight. This was something I had waited years for. In 1997, we were invited to participate in a festival honoring Indian culture in Swidnik, a town in the conservative eastern part of Poland, and the Indian ambassador at that time was also invited. When a local priest found out that the Hare Krsna movement was invited to the festival, he challenged the mayor, who to everyone's amazement called off the entire event. The Indian ambassador left embarrassed.

Although the media took our side and we received much favorable publicity, it strained our relations with the Indian embassy in Warsaw, and the people there became reluctant to be associated with us.

Nandini went on to say that the new ambassador had heard about our festival from a number of people and was eager to see it. "I hope things go smoothly this time," the first secretary had said.

"I'll make sure they do," I thought. "Such cooperation might even deal a death blow to the anti-cult movements in Poland."

Nandini asked what town would be the best to invite the ambassador to. I immediately thought of Kolobrzeg, the biggest and most important city along the coast. It was brimming with tourists now, at the height of the summer season.

"Phone city hall in Kolobrzeg," I told Nandini "and ask for an appointment with the mayor. If he agrees to give us the main entrance to the beach to hold our festival, we'll invite the Indian ambassador to open the event. It will be prestigious for the city."

It was a long shot. Although the area would be a beautiful spot with plenty of room for our festival, it was rarely, if ever, given to any group for an event. It was prime territory, on the most prestigious beach in Poland, where the wealthy, educated, and cultured often went. If the city officials agreed to give us that spot, they would be seen as endorsing our event. We had already held a festival in Kolobrzeg in late June, but in a large grass parking lot half a kilometer from the beach.

Nandini thought for a minute. "Srila Gurudeva," she said, "it will be a miracle if they give us that place."

"That's true," I said, "but let's shoot for the rhinoceros."

"What?" asked Nandini. "Shoot a rhinoceros?"

I couldn't help smiling. "It's American slang," I said. "It means try

for the impossible.”

“Okay, Gurudeva,” said Nandini, “a rhinoceros it is.”

That afternoon Nandini telephoned. “I called the mayor’s secretary,” she said. “At first he was reluctant, but then he thought about the idea for a few moments and went to speak to the mayor. He came back to the phone and said, ‘The mayor has agreed to see you in two hours.’ He sounded surprised.”

In the evening I was outside with several devotees, waiting for Nandini. Finally I saw her drive up with a big smile on her face, I slapped one of the brahmacarīs on the back. “Okay!” I said. “The beachfront’s ours! Let’s get into action!”

“Aren’t you going to speak to Nandini first?” he asked.

“She got the rhino,” I said.

“What?” he said. “She got a rhino? What are talking about, Srila Gurudeva?”

I started to laugh. “You’ll see soon,” I said.

Nandini had convinced the mayor to give us the site for three days, the three biggest days of the summer vacation. They made plans for the mayor and the Indian ambassador to open the festival on the first day. I envisioned thousands of people standing before our stage in the sand, listening to both dignitaries speak favorably about our movement. But my dream almost became a nightmare.

As the date for the festival approached, we began preparations for a bigger and more prestigious festival than we had ever before held on the coast. We started setting things up two days before the event. We put our big stage on the main boardwalk, facing the sea, and set up 20 large tents that spilled out onto the sand.



Harinama on the beach of Kolobrzeg

Setting up the festival site in the midst of the huge summer crowds was enough advertising in itself, but I took further advantage of the opportunity by taking the Harinam party out for five hours each day along the one-kilometer beach. The devotees were tired from two months of Harinam and festivals, but they chanted and danced in ecstasy. The weather was sunny and beautiful, and the beach and the

boardwalk were packed all day and half the night. In just three days we

distributed over 35,000 invitations.

“Don’t you think we’ve given out enough invitations?” a devotee asked.

“We’re not going out chanting just to distribute invitations,” I said. “The chanting party itself is a festival. In my eyes, it’s just as important as the main event. Big, beautiful and well organized chanting parties themselves create faith in the hearts of the people.”

I thought about something Srila Prabhupada had written: “The Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement has started performing *sankirtana-yajna* in different places, and it has been experienced that wherever *sankirtana-yajna* is performed, many thousands of people gather and take part in it. Imperceptible auspiciousness achieved in this connection should be continued all over the world. The members of the Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement should perform *sankirtana-yajnas* one after another, so much that all the people of the world will either jokingly or seriously chant Hare Kṛṣṇa, Hare Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa Kṛṣṇa, Hare Hare/ Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare, and thus they will derive the benefit of cleansing the heart. The holy name of the Lord (*harer nama*) is so powerful that whether it is chanted jokingly or seriously the effect of vibrating this transcendental sound will be equally distributed.” (*Srimad-Bhagavatam* 4.24.10, purport)

The Indian ambassador asked us to pick him up at 2 p.m. at the airport in a town 100 kilometers away and drive him to Kolobrzeg, where he would be officially greeted by the mayor. We told him that after his address from our main stage at 6 p.m. we would take him and the mayor on a tour of our festival grounds and then have a banquet in one of the tents. Afterwards, there would be a press conference.

I fell asleep that night feeling good. Everything was going our way: the prestigious site, the dignitaries, the media coverage, the weather ...

Then at 2:00 in the morning I was awakened by a loud “Boom! Boom! Boom!” It was thunder, shaking the windows in my room. I jumped up from bed and ran to the window. “Oh no!” I said out loud. “It’s not possible!” Then a flash of bright lightning lit up the dark room and confirmed my worst fears: a huge storm had descended over Kolobrzeg.

I couldn’t fall back asleep. I just sat there chanting as the rain poured down.

At 5:30 a.m. I woke up Jayatām. “Call the weatherman,” I said.

He sat up and rubbed his eyes. “Huh? Wha ...?” he said. “Uh, now?”

“As soon as possible.” I said.

Later that morning Jayatām came with the weatherman’s forecast: “Three days of stormy weather. Constant rain and heavy winds with hail-

stones.”

“Hailstones?” I said. “In the middle of summer?”

“That what the weatherman said,” Jayatam replied. “He even said it’s 100 percent sure.”

I was down at the festival site by 10 a.m.. The rain continued to pour and the offshore winds howled through the festival site. A number of boys from the set-up crew were struggling to tie down the tents, several of which seemed about to blow away. Other than our boys, there was not a single soul in sight, either on the long boardwalk or the beach.

I sat alone on the covered stage and looked out at the dismal scene.

By the afternoon the rain and wind had not abated at all. Ten or fifteen devotees came down to the festival site and sat with me on the big stage, looking out with long faces at the pathetic scene. By 3 p.m. some people appeared along the boardwalk with umbrellas, most likely unable to bear staying inside all day long.

“Perhaps if we have kirtan and beg for the mercy of the Lord, the festival will go on,” I thought.

“Grab the drums and kartalas,” I called out to the boys. “We’re going on Harinam.”

They looked at me in amazement. “They probably think I’m crazy,” I thought.

“Let’s go!” I yelled.

And so we went onto the wet boardwalk in our raincoats—a few devotees struggling with umbrellas in the wind.

“Chant louder!” I told the devotees as we danced down the pavement, while a few boys handed invitations to people, who were astonished to see us chanting in the rain.

After half an hour a devotee came up to me. “Srila Gurudeva,” he said. “Everyone already has an invitation from the previous days. In fact, some have four or five. All the devotees are soaking wet. They’re going to get sick.”

“You’re right,” I said. “Let’s go back.”

At 4:15 p.m. Nandini called me. “The ambassador is in the car with us,” she said. “We just left city hall and are taking him on a tour of the town with the mayor. We’ll arrive at the festival site exactly on time, at 6 p.m.”

“Great,” I muttered with no enthusiasm. I looked at the empty festival site as the rain poured down.

By 4:30 p.m. most of the devotees had arrived and were busy with final preparations for the festival.

At 5 p.m. I was doing a television interview on the stage when sud-

denly a few rays of bright sunshine broke through the dark clouds, lighting up the entire area. Everyone looked to the skies. Even the cameraman turned his camera upwards and filmed the sun peering through the clouds.

The camera turned back toward me. "What do you make of it?" asked the interviewer. She was obviously as surprised as everyone else.

"It can only be the good Lord," I replied. "After all, it's His event."

"His event?" she asked.

"That's all for now," I said. "We've got to get ready for the crowds."

She looked around at the empty festival site. "The crowds?" she said. "What crowds?"

But sure enough, within 45 minutes, as the sun continued to break through and dissipate the clouds, people poured out from their homes, apartments, tourist bungalows, and tents onto the boardwalk and the beach. A huge crowd began to gather in front of our stage. An equal number began browsing through our tents. As I marveled at the scene, I looked at my watch. It was 5:45. The mayor and the ambassador would arrive in 15 minutes.

We quickly swept the rainwater off the stage, turned our big generator on, and started the lights and sound. Within minutes our Indian dancers were performing onstage. They drew a crowd of more than a thousand. The sun was now fully visible, and most of the clouds had disappeared.

Suddenly I looked toward the boardwalk on my left and saw Nandini and Jayatam 50 meters away, strolling casually toward the festival site with the Indian ambassador, the mayor, and a number of city officials.

The hot sunshine caused the water on the ground to evaporate quickly and rise like steam, creating an almost mystical scene, as the dignitaries walked across the festival grounds and onto the stage.

I stood there dumbfounded. Everything had come together so quickly, and people were streaming onto the festival site.

The huge crowd was silent as the ambassador came to the microphone. I studied the audience and saw what appeared to be many wealthy and influential people. "They will certainly take the ambassador's words to heart," I thought. It was a historic moment in the spreading of Kṛṣṇa



Indradyumna Swami welcomes the ambassador

consciousness in Poland.

The ambassador's voice boomed out across the boardwalk and the beach:

"Ladies and Gentlemen,

"It gives me great pleasure to be amongst you today to inaugurate the Festival of India in your lovely city.



"It gives me great pleasure to inaugurate the Festival of India in Kolobrzeg.

"Polish interest in India dates back to the 15th century, when a number of Polish writers, soldiers, and missionaries started visiting India and fostered the abiding interest of the Polish people in the civilization, philosophy, art, and culture of India.

"In more recent times, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness has done tremendous

service in the spreading of Indian culture in Poland and other parts of the world. ISKCON has published several great Indian epics, including *Bhagavad Gita*, *Srimad Bhagavatam*, and *Mahabharata* into Polish and made these wonderful books available for our Polish friends.

"In addition, the hosting of these Festivals of India for so many years has helped in forming an international network of India-lovers. As you will see over the next few days, most of the artists and performers are from Europe and Africa.

"I will not be exaggerating if I say that the people associated with this festival are the real forces behind the spreading of Indian culture and civilization across Poland. They are the ambassadors of India here. And we are proud of this. Seeing such enthusiasm for spreading Indian culture, without any direct support of the Indian government, gives a feeling that is not easy to express in words. I can only say that it is the privilege of being born an Indian that I can find such great friends of my country here.

"I am really honored for all that they are doing for spreading the culture of my country.

"Thank you."

During the ambassador's speech many people nodded in agreement with points he made. When he finished there was a loud, sustained applause.

All I could think was, "All glories to Srila Prabhupada, Krsna's am-

bassador from the spiritual world, whose mercy is making all this possible!”

Then the mayor spoke. Afterwards, he and the ambassador left the stage and were escorted around the festival site and eventually into one of the tents for the banquet. At the press conference later that evening, one doubting reporter spoke to the ambassador. “Does this festival actually represent your Indian culture?” he asked.

“Oh yes,” the ambassador replied, “indeed it does, more than I imagined before I came here. In fact, these devotees are doing more to spread Indian’s rich spiritual culture than we at the embassy are doing.”

When he saw the reporter hesitating to write these favorable words, he moved his head in such a way as to oblige him to do so.



The banquet (The mayor of Kolobrzeg, the ambassador, the president of the India association in Poland and Indradyumna Swami)

As the festival came to an end and the ambassador left the tent for his hotel, I saw him give his card to Nandini. “We’d like to cooperate with you,” he said. “I have a number of proposals. Please come to see me in Warsaw next week.”

Just at that moment I heard the rumbling of clouds in the sky, signaling the return of the storm.

“Let it rain,” I said looking to the skies. “Let it pour.”

Sure enough, just as we ourselves left the festival site, the clouds opened up and it began pouring rain. But to my amazement, by the next morning, it was clear again and for the next two days, thousands of people enjoyed our festival on the sands of the most prestigious beach in Poland.

And what happened to the hailstones the weatherman had predicted, 100 percent sure? They must have melted in the sunshine of Lord Caitanya’s mercy, 100 percent sure.

“We should always be enthusiastic to try for shooting the rhinoceros. That way, if we fail, everyone will say, “Never mind, no one can shoot a rhinoceros anyway,” and if we succeed, then everyone will say, “Just see, what a wonderful thing they have done.” So if you are determined in this way, then you can try for it by begging for the protection of Krishna.” [Srla Prabhupada, Letter to Balavanta dasa, December 22, 1971]

26

VYASA PUJA OFFERING 2004

September 11, 2004



Dear Srila Prabhupada,

Please accept my most humble obeisances in the dust of your lotus feet. All glories to Your Divine Grace.

I have traveled a great distance to be with your devotees here at New Vraja Dhama in Hungary for this wonderful event. By the Lord's grace alone I have come just in time to relish the last moments of this day. Because this community is so much like the eternal abode of Goloka, both in form and in mood, I feel as if I've come back to the spiritual world, to your eternal home at the lotus feet of your beloved Radhe-Syama.

I have few, if any, qualifications to be here among the great souls who manifested this divine abode from the parched earth of this once-barren land. Even the newest recruits seem to be of a special caliber that I have not seen in my travels to other lands. What special grace have you bestowed upon these devotees for their surrendered service, which seems to have induced the heavens to descend upon earth?

It is my good fortune to bathe in their auspicious company for some days, refreshing and invigorating myself for the challenges that are yet to come. You once said that a preacher's life is not an easy one. I take this to mean that we cannot rest until all your work is done.

This work of saving the fallen souls defies the laws of nature, which condemn unfortunate men addicted to sinful ways and keep them in repeated birth and death for countless lives to come.

What wonderful deeds you performed, my glorious master, in delivering them in numbers never before seen in the history of the human race! We, your followers, have only succeeded in imitating your efforts, and with far less success than you. But it is our ardent desire that by our

combined efforts and cooperation, solidified by our love and devotion for you, we may match your efforts and cause the whole world to offer you the praise you alone deserve.

It is not impossible. In fact, it is more than probable, for you yourself said, "One day this Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement will save the world in its darkest hour."

Srila Prabhupada, I don't believe that the darkest hour lurks ominously ahead somewhere in the distant future. I believe it is right at hand, present before us at this moment. I have even seen this, for a preacher's duty is to go out among the masses, where he sees the sorrows and woes of unfortunate mankind.

I am thankful, Srila Prabhupada, that even in my old age, when it is hard to travel and preach, I am allowed to see daily the suffering in this cruel age of Kali. It brings me back to the reality of material life and to the urgent need to give people the positive alternative of Kṛṣṇa consciousness. What's more, it gives me faith and lets me see with my own eyes how your mercy comes in the form of your books, the holy names, the festivals, and the prasāda and miraculously transforms people's lives. Please bless me with such divine visions and wonders until the day I die.

Today my thoughts are immersed in you, my Divine Master, as never before. I meditate on your form, your pastimes, your desires, your example, your mercy, and your teachings.

I also meditate intensely on meeting you again, my dream from the very moment you left us. That moment seemed the hardest in my life. Little did I know that because of transcendental affection, aroused by service to your lotus feet, I would miss you more and more as each day passed.

Nevertheless, Srila Prabhupada, I am sure that by fulfilling your desire to save the conditioned souls, I will become qualified to serve your desires in the spiritual world, where you live forever with your beloved Lord. I hanker for that precious gift, and thus my solemn vow on this auspicious day is that I will continue giving your mercy to the fallen souls of this age, birth after birth, until that time when you call me home to be with you again.

I miss you and love you. Please shower your mercy on me, and on every soul who has forgotten the lotus feet of the Lord.

Your servant, Indradyumna Swami

27

MY CHEST SWELLS UP WITH PRIDE

September 12 - 24, 2004

THIS YEAR'S SUMMER TOUR was especially successful, with over 300,000 people all together visiting our programs, including the Woodstock festival. It was a sad moment indeed when the tour came to an end and most of the devotees packed up and headed home to return to school or work.

Even sadder, we had to cancel our autumn tour because of a lack of funds, so I decided to go to Russia for a month and visit a number of temples, some of which I had not been to in years.

I knew that the situation in Russia was tense. There had been a recent spate of gruesome terrorist bombings, and Chechen rebels had killed a number of people in a school in Beslan, in the south of the country. Devotees in Russia also warned me that the Russian Orthodox Church was bitterly contesting a recent grant to us by the mayor of Moscow: a choice piece of property near the center of the city, where devotees planned to build a big temple. The church had used all the facilities at their disposal to attack our movement with several huge media campaigns, which had split the general population, some in favor of us, some against us.

Besides that, recent government policies had brought on a sweeping resurgence of nationalism, so some devotees felt it might not be the best time for a lone American to be touring the country.

Nevertheless, I decided in favor of going, if only because I would not have another chance to see my disciples in Russia for the rest of the year.

The day after I purchased a cheap, non-refundable ticket, a well-wishing friend sent me a warning:

"Since you now have Moon in Kumbha you should know that the next six weeks are not going to be very smooth. Guru has already moved into the 8th Virgo, and Moon is also there. While Moon is in Virgo, both Sun and Mars will also move into Virgo—the 8th from your Moon.

Depending on what planetary periods you are running the effects will be modified for the worse. If it is going well, then it will slow down, if it is neutral then it will be bad, but if it is already bad, then it will be hell. It could prove to be as bad as a serious illness, an accident, or an attack on you. This should not be taken lightly.”

I would never cancel a preaching venture simply because of inauspicious stars. Preaching itself makes everything auspicious. Nevertheless, it's good to know when there's a dangerous curve down the road. I decided I wouldn't take any unnecessary risks.

Apparently my Russian disciples felt the same. When I arrived at Sheremetyevo Airport in Moscow, I found that they had arranged for a secretary and a bodyguard to travel with me. I accepted the precautions, but then I discovered that my bodyguard was carrying a loaded pistol.

I objected even though the pistol was legally registered. “Guns attract guns,” I told him. “Leave it behind. We have something much more powerful with us.” I showed him my Nrsimha Salagrama.



*We have something much more powerful
with us.*

Hatyam hanti yad anghri sanga tulasi steyam ca toyam pador naivedyam bahu madya pana duritam gurv angina sanga jam srisadhina matih sthitir hari janais tat sanga jam kilbisam salagrama sila nrsimha mahima ko 'py esa lokottarah

“A tulasi leaf offered to the lotus feet of the Nrsimha Salagrama Sila destroys the sin of murder. Water that has washed the lotus feet of the Nrsimha Salagrama Sila destroys the sin of theft. Foodstuff offered to the Nrsimha Salagrama Sila destroys the sin of drinking liquor. Sincere surrender to the Nrsimha Salagrama Sila destroys the sin of adultery with the wife of the spiritual master. Association with the devotees of the Nrsimha Salagrama Sila destroys the sin of offenses to the devotees. This is the extraordinary glory of the Nrsimha Salagrama Sila.” [Sri Agama, quoted in Sri Rupa Goswami's *Padyavali*]

As I walked through the airport, I could sense that the terrorist attacks had changed Russia into a security-conscious country overnight, much like the United States after the attack on September 11, 2001. There

were policemen and heavily armed men patrolling throughout the airport. People in general seemed nervous as they moved quickly to their destinations.

I noticed a number of posters on the walls with pictures of Chechen women known as black widows—suspected suicide bombers who might attack at any time.

We drove to an apartment where I would rest for a few hours before taking an evening flight to Yekaterinburg. On the way, I noticed other changes since my last visit. Russia had prospered materially. In fact, from the look of it, Moscow was on a level with Paris and London as far as fancy stores, nice cars, and well-dressed people go. It was a strong contrast to what I saw when I first came to Moscow in 1989.

“Yes, it’s true,” said Jananivasa das, my secretary, “and not only in Moscow. The economy of the whole country is slowly developing. One sign is that many people carry cell phones now. And among the young, CD players, computers, and video games are common. There is even a Russian version of MTV on television.”

“Because of the glare of technology, not as many young people are joining our movement as before,” he continued. “During communist times, everything was gray here, literally. Devotees stood out as they chanted on the streets in their colorful dhotis and saris. People noticed us, and young people saw Krsna consciousness as a positive alternative to the struggle for existence. That’s all changed. Now it’s mainly middle-aged people who join or become part of our congregation.”

Despite the progress, however, Russia still has a long way to go, as I saw on the flight to Yekaterinburg, 1,000 kilometers to the east. Our 20-year-old, TU 154 plane, the most commonly used plane in Russia, was just as cramped, uncomfortable, and dirty as any previous flight I’d taken in Russia, and the stewardesses just as grumpy and rude.

When we landed in Yekaterinburg, it was obvious that the modernization happening in Moscow had barely begun there. It seemed as if time had stood still as we drove on a road full of holes into the city, passing old cars and trucks and looking at the endless gray concrete apartment buildings.

“The higher-ups in the Russian Orthodox Church are especially powerful here,” said Jananivasa as we drove along, “and they are very much against our movement. They send their people to harass the book distributors, often stopping their sales, and whenever there is a Harinam party, their people walk in front and in back screaming that we are a cult and dangerous to Russian society.”

That evening we had a program in a rented hall. When I arrived, I was taken aback. “It’s an old building, converted into a disco,” Jananivasa said. “It’s all the devotees could get.”

I smiled. “Well at least there’s plenty of room for dancing,” I said. I went in and looked at the concrete walls and the old wooden floor.

I stepped up onto the stage and sat on a cushion. When I looked around, I saw 400 beautiful devotees, their smiles an obvious contrast to the stony faces I had seen while traveling across the country. I started the program with a bhajan and then began to speak from Prahlaḍ Maharaja’s teachings in the seventh canto of *Srīmad Bhagavatam*.



Indradyumna Swami speaking from Prahlaḍ Maharaja’s teachings in the Srīmad Bhagavatam.

As I developed the theme of the verse, punctuating the philosophical points with verses, analogies, and stories, we were all transported out of the concrete disco into the world of Vaikuntha. “How powerful is this transcendental sound of the Bhagavatam!” I thought. “It makes the grayness around us disappear, and floods this hall with light and joy.”

*kṛsṇe sva dhamopagata
dharma jñanadībhīḥ saha
kalau nasta drsam esa
puranarko dhunodītaḥ*

“This *Bhagavata Purana* is as brilliant as the sun, and it has arisen just after the departure of Lord Kṛṣṇa for His own abode, accompanied by religion, knowledge, etc. Persons who have lost their vision due to the dense darkness of ignorance in the age of Kali shall get light from this Purana.”

[*Srīmad Bhagavatam* 1.3.43]

I didn’t want to stop, and I kept speaking for over two hours. Finally, Jananivasa pointed to his watch. Our time was up, and we had to leave.

On the way out, one of my disciples, Ragalekha dasi, approached me. She is a woman in her late 40s, and I remembered her as a faithful dis-

ciple who always made it a point to come to my programs when I visited Russia. So when she asked me to visit her apartment to see her Govardhan Sila, I agreed.

The next day, I went there with Jananivasa. I had several other appointments that afternoon, so I was in a hurry. “We’ll have to make this quick,” I told Jananivasa. But I was soon to be reminded that a spiritual master must never be so busy that he cannot take the time to reciprocate with and acknowledge a disciple’s loving service.

Ragalekha’s apartment was just one room in an old building in the center of the city. As I walked in, I was struck by the spiritual atmosphere. There were few possessions—a chair, an old wooden bookshelf, an altar for her Deity—but the mood was rich with devotion. Her Govardhan-Sila, named Lala, was sitting on a little cushion, beautifully decorated with flowers and simple ornaments. A variety of sweets were on a plate before Him.

Ragalekha, dressed in an old sari, sat shyly in the corner. The whole situation reminded me of a small, bhajan kutir in Vrindavan.

“Do you live here alone?” I asked her.

“I’m a guest here,” she said looking downwards. “This is Lala’s home.”

“Oh I see,” I said.

“That’s a nice realization,” I thought. Then I looked anxiously at my watch. My next appointment was in 30 minutes.

“Well what do you do each day?” I asked.

“I distribute Srila Prabhupada’s books,” she said.

“Do you do anything else?” I asked.

“No,” she said. “That’s the instruction you gave me 13 years ago.”

I stopped looking at my watch. I could hardly believe my ears. “You’ve been distributing books for 13 years?” I asked.

Jananivasa spoke up. “Srila Gurudeva,” he said, “all the devotees in Yekaterinburg know that Ragalekha’s been going out eight hours a day, six days a week, for thirteen years, distributing books, except when she’s sick.”

Ragalekha was looking at Lala.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I asked her.

“She’s too shy and humble,” said Jananivasa.

I felt tears coming into my eyes. I sat there looking at her. “Thirteen years,” I thought, “every day on the streets of Yekaterinburg, distributing my spiritual master’s books. What austerities this woman must have endured!”

I suddenly thought of the previous day and how I had complained to Jananivasa about the inconvenience on the flight. I felt ashamed of myself.

“She’s well known among the people in this city,” Jananivasa continued. “You can just imagine, so many years on the street, in the heat, the rain, the wind, and the snow. She’s out there when it’s 20 below zero.”

My tears started running down my face.

“And she doesn’t keep a ruble for herself,” he continued. “I’ve heard she keeps all the profit for you.”

Ragalekha reached under the altar, took out an old worn-out envelope, and shyly handed it to me. I opened it and saw US dollars inside. I handed it to Jananivasa.

Jananivasa took the money out of the envelope. His eyes started turning red and moist. “There’s 1,500 dollars here,” he said in a quivering voice. “It’s the equivalent of two years of wages for a working man in this country.”

I looked around at the chair and the simple bookshelf and into the small kitchen. Inside there was an old stove—and one pot.

“She only has that one sari she’s wearing,” Jananivasa said. “I’ve never seen her dressed in anything else.”

I handed the laksmi back to Ragalekha. “Here,” I said. “You use this money for buying a ticket to India this fall. I will be taking devotees on parikrama in Vrindavan for the month of Kartika. I want you to join us.”

Her body tensed up. “No, Srila Gurudeva!” she said and pushed the envelope back. “Please! The people who gave that money will get much more benefit if it’s used in your service than mine. Think of their welfare.”

I was speechless. “Who is this woman?” I thought. “Living so simply, serving the sankirtan mission of Lord Caitanya faithfully for so many years, desiring no fame or recognition, and showing such concern for the conditioned souls!”

I thought of something Tamal Krishna Goswami had once written: “Although some of us begin as gurus for our disciples, it seems that these disciples are sometimes more fortunate than we are ... Actually many of them are elevated personalities.” [from *Vraja Lila*]

“Srila Gurudeva,” said Jananivasa, “this morning she admitted to me that she took a break from her book distribution for the first time since you gave her that instruction 13 years ago. For two weeks she repaired her apartment, hoping you would visit.

“She had also taken the advice of the security guards at the open

market where she often distributes. For years, those big burly men used to throw her out of the market whenever they caught her distributing books. Finally they relented. They began to appreciate her determination and purity. Two weeks ago one of them said, 'Please take a break. You're here every single day. We're afraid you'll get worn down and influenced by the bad character of those around you. Please!'

"She took it that the Lord was speaking through them, and she took the time off. Gurudeva, we, your disciples, will arrange for her ticket to India. Don't worry. Already devotees here in Yekaterinburg have arranged things so she doesn't have to pay for the books she takes. They even pay the BBT for the books she distributes. When necessary they also help pay her rent, electricity, and water. She lives in another world. She just distributes books day in and day out and spends a little on the worship of her Govardhan Sila. She puts the rest of the money under the altar for you.

By now, the tears were pouring from my eyes.

Ragalekha came forward, with folded hands and tears in her own eyes. "Srila Gurudeva," she said, "please bless me that I may distribute Srila Prabhupada's books until the day I die and that I will always be a faithful follower of you and my Lala."

She started to pay full dandavats on the floor. Since women don't generally pay full dandavats, Jananivasa reached forward to stop her. I caught his hand.

"There's no harm," I said. "This woman is transcendental."

As Jananivasa and I walked out of the apartment, Ragalekha was packing her book bag. I turned to Jananivasa. "It was worth it," I said. "Meeting her was worth all the austerities, inconveniences, and dangers I'll ever encounter in your country."

I thought about the words of Srila Prabhupada: "These news are giving me new life ... In my horoscope just done, they have described although this is a critical period, if I pass through, I will live 100 years. Then I shall surely come to visit your farm ... The project is very nice. When I hear this report my chest swells up, being so proud of my disciples' achievements."

[Srila Prabhupada commenting on Tulasi das's service, quoted by Srila Prabhupada's secretary, Tamal Krsna Goswami, in a letter to Ramesvara dasa, August 22, 1977)



BLOOD BROTHERS

September 25 - October 15, 2004

AS I CONTINUED MY TRAVELS throughout Russia, criss-crossing from city to city, I wrote to my astrologer friend, who had warned me not to set foot in the country at that time. I told him I had not experienced any life-threatening situations apart from the usual austerities in traveling. His reply came quickly:

“It is a six-week transit, from September 16 to November 1. The final weeks will be the most difficult. Let me remind you, it is not a time to be traveling, while Mars is in your eighth house.”

But what choice does a traveling preacher have? He cannot pick and choose auspicious times and places to preach. He must go where duty calls, following the order of guru and Gauranga. And if danger should befall him, it should serve to make him more renounced and determined to free himself from the cycle of birth and death. Most important, it should help him to become dependent on the Lord.

“It is the duty of a mendicant to experience all varieties of God’s creation by traveling alone through all forests, hills, towns, villages, etc., to gain faith in God and strength of mind as well as to enlighten the inhabitants with the message of God. A sannyasi is duty-bound to take all these risks without fear, and the most typical sannyasi of the present age is Lord Caitanya, who traveled in the same manner through the central Indian jungles, enlightening even the tigers, bears, snakes, deer, elephants and many other jungle animals.” [Srimad Bhagavatam 1.6.13 purport]

Nevertheless I wasn’t inclined to throw caution to the winds, so when I boarded a midnight flight from Yekaterinburg to Samara, I chanted a mantra from the Narayana Kavaca, which I sing daily in the worship of my Nrsimha Salagrama-Sila:

*srivatsa-dhamapara-ratra isah
pratyusa iso ‘si-dharo janardanah*

*damodaro 'vyad anusandhyam prabhate
visvesvaro bhagavan kala-murtih*

“May the Supreme Personality of Godhead, who bears the Srivatsa on His chest, protect me after midnight until the sky becomes pinkish. May Lord Janardana, who carries a sword in His hand, protect me at the end of night [during the last four ghatikas of night]. May Lord Damodara protect me in the early morning, and may Lord Visvesvara protect me during the junctions of day and night.” [*Srimad Bhagavatam* 6.8.22]



*Indradyumna Swami worshipping his
Salagrama-Sila's*

After we landed and picked up our luggage, I found that one of my bags had been broken into. Several things were missing, none of great importance. And the thieves had played a joke by leaving an empty cigarette pack inside. Jananivasa was alarmed at the theft, but I just laughed. It was the least of what could have happened to us, considering the bad astrological period I was in. “More than likely,” I told him,

“the mantra minimized the effect of the stars.”

I had last visited Samara seven years ago, and I was pleased to find the temple in good condition and the devotees happy. It is to the credit of temple presidents in our movement that they are able to maintain their centers year after year. It takes a balance of sound management, good finances, purity, and preaching. Even if one cannot expand the preaching in a temple, Srila Prabhupada considered maintaining the status quo as creditable. “At least maintain what I have done,” he told the GBC before his departure.

My own service in visiting temples is to enliven the devotees, and during my short stay in Samara I tried my best by leading kirtans and giving classes. I also tried to meet and help as many devotees as possible. Often in my travels, devotees come to me with problems. While in transit, I cannot always resolve problems in a few minutes or hours, and sometimes all I can do is encourage devotees to maintain their faith by taking shelter in the holy names.

During a darshan in Samara, I spoke with a couple who had an unusual problem. The wife had been my initiated disciple for many years,

but her husband, although an aspiring disciple, had not yet taken initiation. After speaking with them for several minutes, I could tell he was a sincere person, so I asked why he not taken that important step.

"I cannot bear the thought of your having to accept my karma," he said.

"Accepting karma is one of the duties of an initiating guru," I replied.

He became silent. Then his wife spoke up. "My husband feels he was particularly sinful before becoming a devotee," she said.

"How is that?" I asked.

"I was in the Russian Mafia," he said softly.

Yet he seemed such a gentle soul. No doubt the process of Krsna consciousness had purified him through the years.

"You carried a weapon?" I asked.

"Yes," he said, "a sawed-off shotgun."

"Did you ever use it?" I asked.

He looked down at the floor and said nothing.

I decided to change the conversation. "But how does a Mafia man become a devotee of the Lord?" I asked.

Jananivasa spoke up. "I know another one of your disciples who was in the Mafia, Srila Gurudeva. He told me that he and his friend became interested in Krsna consciousness when they learned that the God we worship was born in a jail, was an excellent fighter, and danced with other men's wives."

Everyone started to laugh, but I felt it my duty to clarify his statement so as not to dishonor the Lord. "Yes," I said, "Krsna appeared in jail, but He was not forced to take birth like an ordinary man. He came out of His own sweet will. His fighting served to liberate even those He killed, and because Krsna creates all living entities, there's no possibility that anything He enjoys could belong to another man."

I again asked my prospective disciple, how he became a devotee. I knew that in the mafia a man is duty bound to a code of honor never to leave. One reason is that he may share confidential knowledge of the Mafia's dealings with others. Death is usually the punishment for trying to escape from the Mafia.

He looked up slowly. "I didn't leave the Mafia," he said. "They left me."

"They left you?" I asked.

"Yes," he said. "In time, every man in my group was either killed or arrested. I was the only one left. I was depressed, and I was going to take

my own life when one day my brother dragged me to the local Hare Kṛṣṇa temple and left me on the doorstep. The devotees took me in and were kind to me. Gradually I realized my good fortune in being there. Finally I surrendered and became a devotee myself.”

When the darsan ended they got up to leave. As they turned to go, the man’s wife prodded him. Finally he looked at me with a humble gesture. “Sṛīla Gurudeva,” he said, “will you initiate me?”

I looked over at my Nṛsimha-Salagram Sila on a throne nearby. I meditated on His transcendental form and considered my disciple’s request. “Yes,” I replied softly.

*durgesv atavy-aji-mukhadisu prabhuh
payan nṛsimho ‘sura-yuthaparih
vimuncato yasya mahatta-hasam
diso vīnedur nyapatams ca garbhah*

“May Lord Nṛsimhadeva, who appeared as the enemy of Hiranyakasipu, protect me in all directions. His loud laughing vibrated in all directions and caused the pregnant wives of the asuras to have miscarriages. May that Lord be kind enough to protect me in difficult places like the forest and battlefield.” [*Srīmad Bhagavatam* 6.8.14]

While checking in for our flight to St. Petersburg the next day, I noticed some commotion and shouting at one of the check-in counters. I asked Jananivasa to see what was happening. When he returned he said he couldn’t get close enough to see, but he added that tension in airports across the country was high because two planes flying out of Moscow recently were blown up in midair by Chechen terrorists. Newspapers were calling the anxiety in the airports “flying hysteria.”

“Yesterday in Moscow passengers themselves physically threw three Chechen women off a flight before it took off,” Jananivasa said. “In another instance a pilot himself forcibly took two Chechen men off his plane even though they’d passed all the strict security checks.”

“That kind of thing would never happen in America,” I said. “There’s strict control at the airports, but the pilots and the passengers don’t take the law into their own hands.”

“This is not America,” Jananivasa said. “It’s Russia.”

A few days later, I was reminded of people taking the law into their own hands. I was meeting with a family of disciples, during a large festival for devotees in Divnomorsk, in southern Russia. They were from

Vladikavkaz, a town a few kilometers from Beslan, where Chechen terrorists had recently held over 1,000 children and teachers hostage in a school for three days.

The terrorists and hostages were holed up in a gymnasium, and the terrorists hung explosives on the basketball hoops. On the third day, one of the bombs accidentally fell and exploded causing the ceiling of the gym to collapse. Many teachers and children were killed.

The official story was that when some children began to flee, Russian security forces stormed the building. According to my disciples, however, most of the security forces were elsewhere at the time and it was the townspeople, armed with guns, who stormed the school. In the ensuing crossfire many children and their parents were killed, including several friends of my disciples.

“Every second house in the region is affected,” a disciple said. “Even now, the wailing of those in grief can be heard throughout the many towns and villages in our region.”

They went on to describe the carnage and the suffering of their friends and neighbors afterwards. I could see it had deeply affected them, so at the opportune moment I quoted a few verses from *Bhagavad-gita* about the temporary nature of life. Then I spoke on the urgency for spreading Krsna consciousness. Because of our discussion and the graphic details of the siege, I was especially sober the rest of the day.

Coming within several hundred kilometers of the tragedy and meeting people who were directly touched by it had a deep effect on me. For several days afterwards, I found myself speaking more about the miseries of material existence than the joy of the spiritual world. During a question-and-answer session, a devotee raised her hand and asked if I could say something about the spiritual world.

“What’s the use?” I answered. “As long as we think we can be happy in this material world, we’ll never understand the pastimes of the spiritual world.” Then I proceeded to speak more about material existence.

But as the festival went on, my mood lightened up from the association with the devotees, the blissful kirtans, and the lighter moments. At an initiation ceremony the day before I left Divnomorsk, a woman in her



Initiation ceremony in Divnomorsk

80s, whose daughter and grandchildren were my initiated disciples, was taking her vows before me. After she promised to follow the four regulative principles, I asked her how many rounds she would chant every day.

She looked to the sky. "I promise to chant 16 rounds," she said and made the sign of the cross over her chest with her right hand.

I smiled. I could appreciate how a lifetime of piety had culminated in her initiation into the holy names.

Later that day I was speaking with a large group of devotees in my room. I turned to a family who came from a predominately Muslim area and had previously practiced Islam. "What are your spiritual names?" I asked.

"My name is Madira dasi," said the mother.

"My name is Nimai das," said the older boy.

"My name is Visnu Priya dasi," said the older daughter.

"My name is Lalita dasi," said the younger daughter.

Then the youngest child, a six-year-old boy, stood up. "My name is Mohammed," he said proudly.

Everyone looked at his mother. She blushed and then smiled. "It's his legal name," she said. "His spiritual name is Vrindavan das."

From Divnomorsk, I flew 19 hours to Vladivostok on the eastern coast of Russia. Despite the city's remoteness from the rest of the country, I immediately noticed how, like much of Russia, it had made significant progress since my last visit three years ago. Except for a few Russian-made cars—Ladas—most people were driving foreign cars. There were plans to open major hypermarkets like Auchan, Leroy Merlin, and Ikea. And here, like everywhere else I had been in Russia, the young people wore the latest fashions.

Of course such changes bring the drawbacks of material progress as well. Devotees confirmed that in the past 10 years, crime, violence, and drug use had increased to alarming rates throughout the country.

I could not help smiling when I heard that the government had taken unusual steps to fight the degradation. For example, throughout the country no advertisement is allowed for beer or liquor on television from 7 a.m. until 10 p.m.

And for the past three months, anyone caught swearing in the region of Belogorod, on the western side of Russia, faces a hefty fine of 500 to 1,500 rubles (\$17 to \$51 dollars) or up to 15 days in jail. Parents of offenders under 16 can also be penalized.

A total of 2,490 people have already been fined, most of them under 30, since police began cracking down on obscenities during the last

three months, and more than half a million rubles have been collected. The amount of the fine varies with the offense. It's worse if you swear in front of children or the elderly or in a place with many people, although no one has sworn badly enough to go to jail ... yet.

After spending three days with the 100 devotees and congregation members of the Vladivostok temple, I went to Krasnoyarsk, in far eastern Siberia, for the last stop on my one-month tour. Of all the places I would visit in Russia this time, Krasnoyarsk was the city I most looked forward to.

It had been almost three years since I had been there, and I wanted to see a Gypsy community where I had held a program during my last visit. I was curious about whether the people there had taken up Krsna consciousness. At the time, the local devotees doubted they ever would.

As we were collecting our luggage after the flight, I saw a group of devotees waiting for us outside. One man in particular caught my attention. He was dark skinned with black hair and a black mustache, and he wore a heavy, dark coat, typical of the Gypsies. I remembered him. It was Alexander, one of the more enthusiastic Gypsies at the program I had held.

As we left the terminal, he came forward and took my bag. We exchanged greetings, and he led us to his car. "I will be your driver while you are in Krasnoyarsk," he said with a proud smile.

"Oh," I said, "very nice."

As we drove into the city I asked him about the other Gypsy men who had attended the program. He paused a moment. "Some are dead," he answered, "and most of the rest are in prison."

Jananivasa turned to me. "Drugs and criminal activity," he said quietly.

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said.

Alexander smiled. "But our leader is well and eager to meet you," he said. "He still has the garland you gave him three years ago."

"Oh that's wonderful," I said. "Please convey my greetings to him."

"You can do that yourself tomorrow," Alexander said.

"We've arranged another program for you at the gypsy village," said my disciple Guru Vrata, the temple president in Krasnoyarsk. "Is that okay?"

"It's more than okay," I answered. "It's exactly what I prayed for."

But when I thought of the doubts expressed by the local devotees after the gypsy program last time, I wondered whether returning to their village would be worth the trouble. I turned to Alexander. "Alexander," I

said, “do you chant Hare Krsna?”

He gave me another big smile. “Sixteen rounds a day, Guru Maharaja,” he said.

The next day we drove through the hills surrounding Krasnoyarsk out to the Gypsy village. I could see that it wasn’t a normal Russian town. The dirt streets were full of holes and most of the houses were in need of repair. Children played here and there, but when they saw our car, they scurried into their homes and watched us with suspicion from behind glass windows. “Just like the last time I came here,” I thought.

The program was to be at the same home as the last time. As we got out of the car, I remembered the somber atmosphere inside—dimly lit rooms, thick dirty rugs, old paintings of Gypsy history, and the sound of Gypsy music coming from a tape recorder. I closed my eyes and chanted softly, mentally preparing myself to tolerate the darkness and ignorance.

But Lord Caitanya had a surprise waiting for me.

“Guru Maharaja,” said Alexander, “welcome to my home.”

“Oh?” I said. “This house is yours?”

Alexander opened the door, and immediately his family members and several other Gypsies broke into a melodious kirtan, accompanied with mrdangas and kartalas.

I looked around. The whole house had been transformed. The walls were newly papered in a gentle off-white color, the rugs had been removed, and the wooden floors had been sanded and varnished. The room was well lit with bright chandeliers, and there were beautiful paintings of Krsna’s pastimes on the walls. I felt as if I were entering Vaikuntha.

The crowd of enthusiastic Gypsy devotees escorted me upstairs to a room that had a beautiful altar with a framed picture of Panca Tattva. As we entered the room everyone dived enthusiastically to floor and offered obeisances.

“What amazing devotion!” I thought, and I bowed down slowly, all the while watching the scene unfold before me. They led me to a big chair, sat me down, and garlanded me. Then they brought the kirtan to a close.

In the excitement I hadn’t noticed a group of 10 or 12 older Gypsy men, obviously village elders, seated around the room, looking at me suspiciously. When two of them smiled slightly, I remembered them from my last visit. The others however were yet to be convinced that I had come to their village for a good reason.

Alexander spoke. “We’re very honored to have Guru Maharaja come to our home,” he said. “Although he is busy traveling all over the world, he has kindly agreed to visit our village again.”

“Yes!” shouted one of the elders, “And you invited him! You’re the black sheep among us!”

The atmosphere was tense. Then another elder spoke up. “Is your message more appreciated in some places than in others?” he asked.

I wasn’t sure whether his question was sarcastic or not, but I answered him anyway. “Generally,” I said, “I find our message is more appreciated where people are in difficulty. In such conditions they are under no illusion about the temporary miserable nature of the world and they are eager to hear about God.”

A one-armed man in a black jacket spoke up. “Are you accepted everywhere you go?” he asked.

“Not always,” I answered. “People are often afraid of what they don’t know. Just you like you Gypsy people. You are often misunderstood as well.”

That broke the ice. They all nodded in agreement. Now we had something in common.

“How do you deal with that misunderstanding?” asked another man in a more respectful tone.

“We’re not shy about letting people know who we are,” I said. “We’re happy to share our singing, dancing, and food.”

A man with a doubtful expression spoke up. “Would you be willing to watch our singing and dancing?” he asked. “Or is this just a Hare Krsna program?”

All eyes were on me.

“I am a guest in your village,” I said. “I’d be honored to see your culture.”

Suddenly there was a shout. “Vyacheslav is here!” someone called out, and the leader of the Gypsies walked in. Everyone immediately stood up out of respect. His status as a leader was made even more apparent by his large stature and prominent dark mustache. The atmosphere became tense again, and no one seemed to know exactly what to do.

I smiled and approached Vyacheslav with open arms. He also smiled and opened his arms. We hugged each other tightly for a long time.

Then we stood facing each other, hand in hand. “I still have the garland you gave me three years ago,” he said.

“Yes,” I said. “I know. Your people told me.”

“It shines with the warmth of your last visit,” he said.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw surprised looks on the faces of the newly come elders.

“Come,” he said, “be seated.”

"No," I said, "you first." I took him by his hand and sat him respectfully in a seat near mine.

"People don't always show us such respect," said one of the elders.

"That's because you are thieves," said Vyacheslav with a loud laugh.

Everyone burst out laughing.

"Krishna was also a thief," I said.

The elders raised their eyebrows.

"But your stealing brings grief to others. Krsna's stealing butter brings happiness to His devotees, who like to see his childish pranks."

Again there was laughter.

"Personally," I said, "I prefer to appreciate your good qualities rather than dwell on the bad."

Now the ice had completely melted.

"You see good qualities in us?" someone asked.

"Yes, of course," I said. "For example you have invited me back to your village and received me well. And like everyone in the world, in your heart of hearts, you are all devotees of God. You've just gone astray, that's all."

No one disagreed.

"Then we'll show you our Gypsy culture," a man said.

"Yes," I said, "I want to see it."

Several of the men shouted for a boy to come forward. The boy seemed to jump out of nowhere into the center of the room and began doing a Gypsy dance. He was talented, and he had everyone's attention, including mine.

When he finished, the men told him to sing, and he began. It seemed to me that I had never heard such a sweet and lovely voice in my whole life. When he finished, I asked him to sing again. The elders looked pleased at my request, and one of them gave me a thumbs-up.

After the second song, the boy sat down near the elders, and they all patted him on the back.

Suddenly, another boy, a little younger, turned to the first boy and spoke up.

"You sing beautifully," he said, "but if you were to sing Hare Krsna, it would be perfect."

You could have heard a pin drop. Everyone sat there, amazed.

Then the second boy closed his eyes and began singing Hare Krsna, also with a beautiful voice. His singing filled the entire room, and everyone seemed touched, even the elders.

When he finished, he opened his eyes and looked at the first boy.

“You see?” he said. “Now you chant.”

The first boy hesitated.

“Chant!” said the younger one. “Follow me!”

The younger one began singing Hare Kṛṣṇa again, and soon the boy with the golden voice began singing with him.

The elders smiled at their duet.

Then the first boy turned to me. “Will you please give me a spiritual name?” he said.

I looked at the elders. They nodded in approval.

I thought for a moment. “Yes,” I said, “you can be called Gandharva das, the angel with the honey-coated voice.”

Everyone applauded.

Then I took my harmonium and began chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa. Several devotees picked up instruments and accompanied me, and within a few moments the elders began clapping. A few of them chanted along.

Vyacheslav sat there with a big smile on his face.

After bringing the kīrtan to a close, I invited everyone to take prasadam. “How shall we sit?” I asked our host.

“We shall all sit together in a circle,” said Alexander. “That is our custom.”

“And ours too,” I said.

As the prasadam was being served, I told the devotees not to begin eating until Vyacheslav had taken his first bite. The elders looked at me and then nodded to each other in appreciation.

And did those men eat! It seemed I had only just begun when they had already finished.

After discussing Kṛṣṇa-conscious philosophy with them for over an hour, I got up to go. Everyone respectfully stood up. I went into the bathroom, and after washing up, I came back into the room. Vyacheslav, surrounded by the other elders, gave me a big hug. Then he grabbed my shoulders. “We are brothers,” he said.

“Blood brothers,” I said.

He smiled. “Yes,” he said, “blood brothers.”

Then he reached into his pocket, took out a large wad of money, and slapped into my hand.



Indradyumna Swami's Blood brothers

“Thank you for what you have done for us,” he said.

Then he turned to Alexander, the black sheep, and took both of Alexander’s hands in his own, a Gypsy custom for showing one’s trust in another. “Thank you for inviting them,” he said.

Then Vyacheslav and the other elders escorted me outside to my car. Just as I was about to get in, Vyacheslav asked a devotee to take a photo of us all together. “To remember you,” he said to me.

I got into the car, and we drove away.

As I turned around in my seat for a last look at my Gypsy friends, I saw Vyacheslav and the elders standing respectfully, the palms of their hands joined together. I closed my eyes and silently prayed: “My dear Lord Caitanya, please be kind and give these fallen souls Your mercy.”

*jīve purnodaya yataḥ karunaya ha ha ravair prarthanam he he kṛṣṇa kṛpā-nidhe
bhava maha davagni dagdhan janān trahi trahi mahāprabho sva kṛpāya bhaktīm ni jam
dehy alam maivam gaura hariḥ sada prakurute dinaka-nathah prabhuh*

“Having extended His mercy to the living entities beyond what He had ever given before, Gaura Hari, the only Lord and refuge for the wretched, called out with a prayerful plea, ‘Hey Kṛṣṇa! O ocean of Mercy! Protect! Please protect these people! O my master! They are burning in the great forest fire of birth and death. O ocean of mercy, kindly bestow Your service upon them.’” [Sṛila Sarvabhauma Bhattacharya, *Susloka-Satakam*, verse 63]

29

HIDDEN GLORIES

October 16 - November 1, 2004

I RETURNED TO WARSAW from my month-long preaching tour in Russia and immediately set out for another tour in Poland. After a night's rest, Sri Prahald das, Jayatam das, and I headed south, stopping on the way for a house program in Kelice attended by 15 devotees.

I was so exhausted I could hardly keep my eyes open, and I fell asleep during Sri Prahlad's opening bhajan. I woke up after a few moments, and I caught Sri Prahlad's eye. We both laughed.

Despite the austerities of being constantly on the road, we enjoy our service. We often get to bed after midnight, we have to tolerate the heat and the cold, and we sleep sometimes in a palace, sometimes on the floor, but we would not have it any other way. When one constantly feels the bliss of sharing Krsna consciousness with others, it is easy to tolerate the austerities encountered in traveling. And if one perseveres, then by the wmercy of guru and Gauranga, one has a chance of attaining perfection.

*tad evam kalau nama kirtana pracara
prabhava-naiva bagavata parayanta siddir darsita*

“On the strength of preaching Nama Samkirtan in Kali Yuga, one becomes seen as a siddha paramahamsa.” [Jiva Goswami, *Tattva Sandarbha* 274]

On the last leg of our journey we had some time to spare, and at one point, while we were driving, Jayatam turned to me with a question. “Srila Gurudeva,” he said, “would you like to visit a famous salt mine near the town of Wieliczka?”

“An unusual proposal,” I thought.

“Not really,” I said. “What does it have to do with Krsna conscious-

ness?”

“It’s one of Poland’s most historic sites,” Jayatam replied. “Rock salt has been extracted there from as far back as the 13th Century. Because of the hazardous work the miners were always more religious than other social groups. They had a custom of putting up a cross at the spot where a miner died. There are also many chapels built by the miners throughout the 300 kilometers of tunnels in the mine.”

“Underground chapels?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said, “and unique too. In 1697, when a chapel was destroyed by fire, a royal commission forbade the construction of any more with inflammable items. This prohibition resulted in developing a special style of rock-salt chapels, carved from the very walls of the mine. Some of them are centuries old.”

I started to listen more carefully.

“Some people visit the mine out of curiosity,” Jayatam said, “but many go as a sort of pilgrimage.”

“That sounds interesting,” I said. “A pilgrimage in Poland.”

My thoughts went back thirty years, to the time when I was distributing books in France. I would sometimes take my sankirtan party to the famous pilgrimage site at Lourdes, in the south of the country. The distribution was good there because the pilgrims were always in a pious frame of mind. I was often inspired by the spiritual atmosphere and the humble prayers of the pilgrims.

“Maybe we too can find inspiration in visiting the underground chapels in the mine,” I thought, “and what’s more, we’ll be seeing another unique feature of Kṛṣṇa’s creation.”

I thought of Srila Prabhupada’s words: “It is the duty of a mendicant to experience all varieties of God’s creation by traveling alone through all forests, hills, towns, villages, etc., to gain faith in God and strength of mind as well as to enlighten the inhabitants with the message of God.”

[*Srimad Bhagavatam* 1.6.13 purport]

“Okay,” I said to Jayatam. “Maybe this will help prepare me for my pilgrimage to Vrindavan next week.”

We bought our tickets and entered the principal mine shaft. “We won’t be able to see it all,” Jayatam said. “There are nine floors, all underground. The first one is 64 meters down, and the last is 327 meters.”

As we walked through the mine shafts, I saw signs warning tourists to keep to the designated path and not wander off. “Every year some tourists get lost,” Jayatam said, “and they are never seen again.”

We passed some of the first diggings, begun 700 years ago. In those

days miners worked with pickaxes and carried the salt up to the surface in big sacks. Further down, we walked through shafts where horses were used to haul the salt out. More sophisticated ways were later used to extract and haul the salt to the surface, including elevators.

“Unlike now, salt was considered an opulence in olden days,” Jayatam said. “In the 1300s, one third of the Polish kings’ income came from this one mine.”

We walked further and further into the earth. I was amazed at the beauty within. In one cavern we saw hundreds of shining stalactites and stalagmites made of hard salt. They had developed over thousands of years from water slowly dripping down through the earth. A huge cavern nearby was made up entirely of enormous crystals, creating a fantasyland of opulence.

Further into the mine we discovered a huge underground lake. A small sign posted on the bank said that the water was 30 percent salt, making it more dense than the Dead Sea in Israel. One could easily float on the surface of the lake, without going under. “Although it is difficult to drown in such a lake,” the sign concluded, “swimming is forbidden.”

At exactly 100 meters below the surface of the earth, we came across a wonder created by man - the beautiful chapel of Saint Kinga, the patroness of the miners. When we entered, pilgrims were kneeling before a beautiful intricate altar carved entirely from rock salt. The history of Saint Kinga was depicted in detailed carvings in the rock-salt walls of the chapel.

St. Kinga was the daughter of King Bela IV of Hungary, and it was she who discovered the rock-salt deposit at Wieliczka. On her marriage to the Polish duke Boleslaw the Chaste, she received a salt mine at Marmaros, Hungary, as her dowry, and she cast her engagement ring into the shaft of the mine.

On her way to Poland, she stopped with her retinue near Wieliczka, and she ordered that a well be dug. But instead of water, they found salt, and to everyone’s amazement, Kinga’s engagement ring was found in the first lump of salt extracted.

We walked further into the labyrinth. “As I mentioned,” Jayatam said, “salt was a rare and much-desired commodity in ancient times. They used to call it gray gold. On an average, they used to dig out 100 tons of salt a day here. It’s estimated that in the course of 700 years, enough salt was extracted to fill a train measuring one fifth the length of the earth’s equator.”

“As time went on,” he continued, “and the digging went deeper, the

risks increased. It is estimated that over ten thousand miners died here over the centuries.”

“That may explain why there are over 40 chapels,” Sri Prahald said.

“Yes,” said Jayatam. “Eight years ago, the mining stopped here, but people still come every day to pray in the chapels.”

We continued to explore the tunnels and caverns for several hours, appreciating the unusual beauty of this hidden part of God’s creation. “Okay,” I said finally, “that’s enough. Let’s get back to world of light.”

On our way back up to the surface, we passed St. Anthony’s Chapel, which like the other chapels was carved completely out of the rock-salt formation.

There we found more people kneeling and praying.

“Since 1698 mass has been said here daily,” whispered Jayatam.

I was impressed that such a tradition could exist uninterrupted for so many centuries. I thought about one of Srila Prabhupada’s instructions to us before his departure: “At least maintain what I have given you.”

“Not an easy task,” I thought, appreciating even more the humble souls kneeling before God in the chapel.

We came out of the mine, and our eyes adjusted to the bright sun. Jayatam turned to me. “Srila Gurudeva,” he said, “was our little pilgrimage worth your time?”

I thought for a moment. “Yes,” I said, “certainly. The rock salt chapels reflected the devotion of faithful and the hidden wonders of the earth, the glories of the Lord. Who wouldn’t be impressed?”

“Know that all opulent, beautiful and glorious creations spring from but a spark of My splendor.” [*Bhagavad Gita*, 10.41]

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AN OFFERING FOR SRILA PRABHUPADA'S
DISAPPEARANCE DAY
November 16, 2004

Dearest Srila Prabhupada,
Please accept my most humble obeisances in the dust of your lotus feet.

Today is the anniversary of your disappearance from this world 27 years ago. You once said that when the Lord disappears from the world, He simultaneously appears elsewhere in some other universe to begin His pastimes again. You gave the analogy of the sun: as it disappears on the horizon, causing darkness to descend, it simultaneously appears elsewhere on the earth, bringing the soft rays of morning light.

In a similar way, your disappearance from our lives has enveloped us in a long night of darkness that has yet to recede. No doubt your appearance elsewhere has given great joy to those who received you, but to this very moment, the fire of separation from you still burns within my heart. Out of social etiquette, such feelings are not often shared with others, but rather are kept confidential, to be expressed only at opportune moments, such as today.

Since the day you left, I have reflected many times on a letter you wrote to me soon after I joined your movement. It was as if you were preparing me even then for your inevitable departure from this world with words of consolation:

"I very much appreciate your feelings of separation, after my departure from Detroit. I am also feeling separation from my guru maharaja, but I always feel that he is watching over and protecting me."

Srila Prabhupada, I would also like to have the same conviction: that you are always watching over and protecting me, but I know I must merit such mercy. The spiritual master is by nature benevolent, but his sustained association, like that of the Lord, can only be had by steadfast devotional service over many years, or even lifetimes. Such association is not cheap

and must never be taken for granted.

The few opportunities I had to be in your association in this life - in New York when you gave me your own dhoti in appreciation for serving your mission; on the flight to London when we laughed heartily at what you called the humor of Kṛṣṇa in the antics of Charlie Chaplin; and in your room at the Bury Place temple when you slapped me on the back in fatherly appreciation - were certainly only your causeless mercy upon me.

In retrospect, I see those brief moments as an impetus to gain your association forever. The Lord Himself appeared before Narada early in Narada's devotional career but then suddenly disappeared leaving him with the following words:

*hantasmīn janmani bhavan
ma mam drastum iharhati
avīpakva kṣa yaṇam
durdarso haṁ kuyoginam*

“O Narada, I regret that during this lifetime you will not be able to see Me again. Those who are incomplete in service - and who are not completely free from all material taints - can hardly see me.” [Srimad Bhagavatam 1.6.21]

*sakṛd yad darsitam rūpam
etat kamaya te 'nagha
mat-kamah sanakairh sadhu
sarvaṁ muncati hṛc-chayan*

“O virtuous one, you have only once seen my person, and this is just to increase your desire for Me, because the more your hanker for me, the more you will become free from material desires.” [Srimad Bhagavatam 1.6.22]

Srila Prabhupada, I also hanker for your association and service. Therefore on this auspicious day, I will take my cue from the words of the Lord to Narada, I will refocus myself, and in the few years remaining in this life make every effort to become complete in my service to you and free from all material desires.

Just as a father takes pride in seeing his children grow, you take great pleasure in seeing us, your disciples, advance in spiritual life. Advancement implies becoming free from selfish material desires and rendering

constant service to you, but I cannot free myself from such selfish desires alone. I need your mercy.

Please help me kick out all unwanted things from my heart so that I can be a valuable instrument in your cherished service of preaching the glories of your beloved Lord. Only by serving this mood of yours here in the world of matter will I become eligible to serve your mood in the spiritual abode.

On many occasions I saw how strongly you wanted the fallen souls of this world to hear the holy names of the Lord, read His words of wisdom, and taste His blessed food. Once I walked into your room in New Mayapura and saw you looking out the window, as hundreds of devotees began to take prasad. As you turned around, you looked at me and although you said nothing, the tears welling up in your eyes were worth more than a thousand words. Your heart was melting out of compassion, seeing your devotees relish the mercy of the Lord.

Srila Prabhupada, please bring me to the stage where I can also cry out of compassion for the fallen souls, and with a humble heart go out daily to preach the divine command. In such a state of mind, I will lose all attraction to this material world and my only desire will be to become your servant birth after birth. Only by such service will I gain your favor and one day realize the truth of your words to me: that you are in fact always watching over and protecting me.

Forever your servant,
Indradyumna Swami

About the Author

Indradyumna Swami is a traveling preacher in the International Society for Krsna Consciousness. He joined the movement in 1971 in Detroit, Michigan, and soon after went to Europe to help establish Krsna conscious centers in France, Switzerland, Italy, and Spain. In 1979 he accepted the sannyasa order of life (a renounced monk) and in 1986 began preaching in Eastern Europe and Russia. He continues to oversee the development of the movement there, as well as give guidance to his disciples. For the past 14 years he has also organized a large festival program in Poland that introduces Vedic culture to hundreds of thousands of people. Traveling extensively in many parts of the world, he happily shares his experiences and realizations with others in the form of this diary.

For further information about Indradyumna Swami, his preaching activities, The Festival of India in Poland and latest books and tapes please visit his official website at www.traveling-preacher.com.

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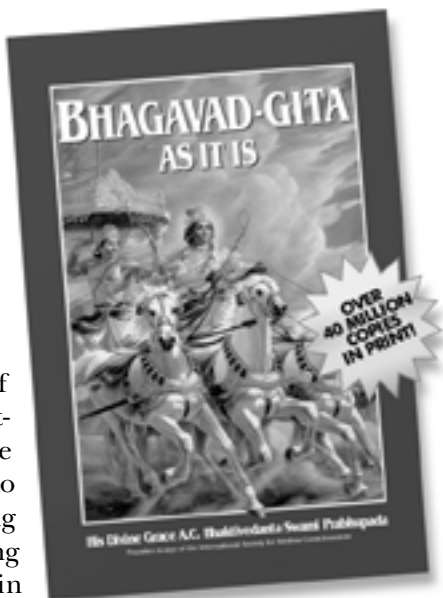
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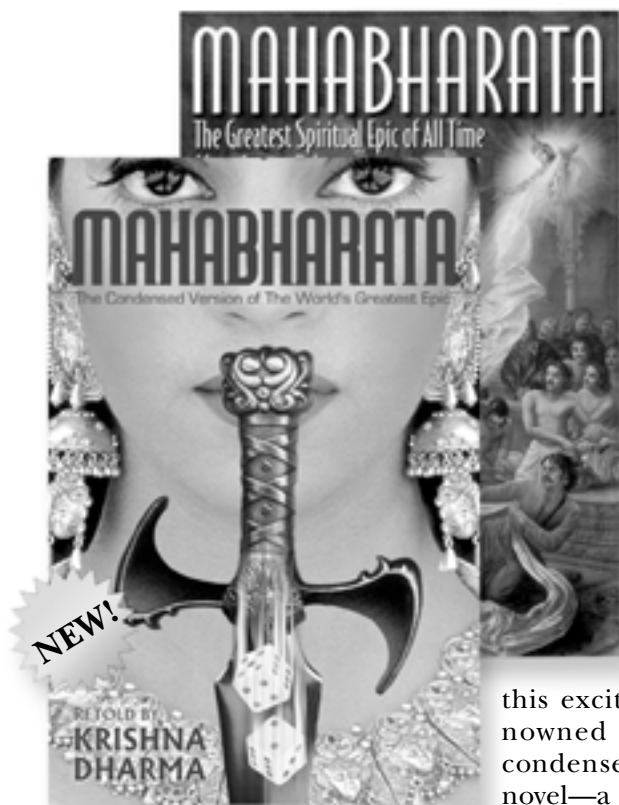
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