A TAILORS TALE

I am not really a tailor, but this is a story about tailoring, of sorts, and mostly about the power of the human spirit.

One cold March day in 2017 I had trudged to Calais Auberge warehouse after learning on the ferry from Dover to Calais that the charity I had enrolled with was ‘out of action.’ The warehouse was (is) situated an hour’s walk from the ferry port, and I had no intention of going back to England .

The manager asked me,

“Can you sew?”

In the cavernous gloom, Nigel led me to a high mound of apparent rags , in fact clothing with holes, coats needing new zips, sleeping bags ditto, and tents that had been slashed . Since the ‘official demantelement’ of the Calais Jungle items were abandoned as refugees fled the police who randomly made overnight raids to move refugees out of the area. Raids accompanied by tear gas all over the fields of the Pas de Calais, in line with local policy to ‘rid the area of refugees’, while the local mayor and the British government sustained their refusal to offer any humane response to the hundreds of refugees going there daily, instead moving them on (the French) and building more fences (The British).

Refugees simply want to be somewhere safe, and are glad to be offered essential food and clothing. Volunteers want to help as best we can and sewing clothing was as good as other ways. I found the confidence to say ‘yes’ to Nigel, in spite of faded memories of school days fifty five years earlier when I had been thrown out of sewing lessons as I preferred to read a book.

Why not , I thought, as I picked over the pile, discovering several more piles, mostly sleeping bags needing new zips. Grubby, smelly, and a few warm winter jackets optimistically hung on clothes racks awaiting yet more zips. On a shelf was a lone electric sewing machine beside a box of threads. A sewing person had been here already.

Thence began my love-hate relationship with sewing machines , good, bad, broken (or recalcitrant when the weather was very cold), and with mounds of stuff awaiting repair. This appealed to me on many levels, eco-friendly, conserving instead of chucking away, purposeful and satisfying.

That corner grew from one rickety table to several, then a few months later a wit named it ‘Sew Ho’ and put up a decorated banner bearing this name in colourful applique. Chairs were added, and kitchen volunteers would wander up and offer to help, as a break from peeling endless vegetables . Most were young people who simply did not know how to sew on a button and were hoping I would teach them, but many were skilled, older people glad to spend a day putting a new zip into a good coat, like the surgeon from Berlin who had given up her weekend to volunteer there. Or the engineer, Phillip, from Singapore who was there with his wife for their summer holiday, and figured out ways of fixing the hardest types of zips. And the bus driver from Tokyo, there for his holiday of three days. In that corner bonds were forged as everyone exchanged tales of happiness and sorrows and a shared vision of equal human rights. During the winter that followed it became ‘rat corner’ after a very dead rat plopped out of a sleeping bag I had just picked up to sew. An energetic student put on a fundraiser at her Uni and more sewing machines appeared. The corner became a friendly sweat shop of eager sewing men and woman from all over the world, communicating as best they could in Portugese, Italian, German, broken English- though the main topic of conversation that summer of 2017 was “Why is Britain leaving Europe, has your country gone mad? “ ( usually in very hurt tones).

More sewing machines appeared, including an industrial one. Getting this up and running took some research but eventually thanks to an enterprising man from Kent, Phil Kerton, spare parts were found and he, a Catholic, and two women, Quakers got it going . This meant many sleeping bags were made fit to be used, aided by salvaging zips from tents that were beyond repair and using them instead for sleeping bags.

One day Nigel asked me if I could take in the legs of all jeans and turn them into ‘skinnies’. Surmising that refugees are entitled as any one of us to be fashion conscious, I was chastened when he explained that wide-legged jeans make running at night from the police very difficult. Next I was asked if I could reduce jeans to several sizes smaller , “Because most refugees are small and we have too many large sizes.” So, working from principles gleaned from ‘Zen and the Art of motorcycle maintenance’, ( i e work out how something is put together then work backwards) I was able to slice my way through dozens of large and mostly posh jeans, getting a grim satisfaction as I sliced along, musing on the absurdities of fashion with all its ephemera and snobbery and exploitation of workers ( and idiots like me in the past blithely prepared to pay exhorbitantly). But I have to add a rider here because the results of all this devoted work were, by the nature of the situation, ephemeral. With nowhere suitable for washing clothes, scabies can quickly develop, and many clothes got dumped at roadsides or dangled from hedgerows like sad puppets, or chucked into rivers, creating more pollution.



I became committed (addicted even) to regularly going to the warehouse for up to a week most months, until March 2020 when Lockdown descended. Those sewing days took on a gentle rhythm Ghandi himself might have approved and while I felt happy to be part of the counter-culture among the younger generation supporting refugees against the casual official cruelties , I personally realized I had somehow been led to a place where I was honing skills I barely recognized in myself, feeling grateful each time, and seeing a tenuous link with St Francis . He also opposed all forms of social injustice and his own father was after all, a tailor. These days- icy cold in winter, balmy warmth in summer- were punctuated by lunches of delicious curries made in the warehouse, recipes from Somalia one day, Afghanistan the next, or Syria, each chef taking special care to pay proper attention to the mix of herbs, spices and nutrients. Each time I went ,waiting for me might be two or four hoppers full to the brim with sleeping bags, tents, while coats hung forlornly on rails. From time to time there were volunteers to cheerfully assist. Back home I scoured the east end of London to find zips at affordable prices, taking back over one hundred , at an estimate. And I set myself my own goal of completing everything before retuning,

( tally one September 11 2019: 40 sleeping bags ten coats).Frequently I took coats home to fix, returning them on my next visit. In between I described the situation there in articles that The Friend published and- more delightful surprises- in response some kind people sent gifts such as seam unpickers, or money.

And I became acquainted with Calais’s provincial pride that is charmingly expressed in garish lamp post decorations, sensitive flower displays and street events , ( not forgetting Bastille Day when fireworks erupt over the sea at sunset ) but , at heart, nimbyism that ignores geographic realities.

Lockdown, March 2020, and, in common with everyone I had to adjust to the changes that held no sign of change , no travel. But within eighteen months some kind of travel looked possible and I gleefully went to buy new scissors and zips and essential threads and I booked my crossing to Calais. An over-enthusiastic unthought-through plan because laws in France meant I might get stuck there if the required test before return indicated any kind of infection . After a further six months I was able to cross. On the way I chatted with a tourist who could not grasp my explanation of my reason for travel, why I was going to work in a warehouse, or why tents and sleeping bags get abandoned in fields.

“Camping? In Calais?” she asked,“Why don’t they go somewhere pretty like Provence, they could even plant flowers around their tents.”

In the chaos of those past eighteen months, funding had been pulled and only a very rudimentary system for clothes distribution was ongoing, all sewing machines but three dispersed somewhere including the beloved industrial one that had saved so much time. I was able to resurrect the notion of repairs, and a system cranked into action with only my own personal kit to hand. Gone, it seemed, were all the rainbow threads, the array of needles, the reinforcing tapes and paraphernalia that comprise an effective sewing workshop- until, up a flight of dusty stairs, once a fire escape, I uncovered most of Sew Ho, less all but two machines.

Summer 2022 and I found myself in a new place to stay where the owner took enthusiastically to the idea of repairs, letting me borrow her machine, and I happily repaired about thirty coats that week. Gone though were any ideas that tents might be repaired, but I managed to demonstrate ways of salvaging broken zips on sleeping bags.

More changes, more lack of funds, meant that the dots stopped getting dotted: everything got tidied away and focus had to be ( after food of course) on basics like shoes – but I discovered some coats stashed in a giant hopper. The only problem was – no machine because my friend had broken her machine and the two I discovered on the fire escape did not have the necessary power connecting leads. Determined to get these last ten coats done, I carried them back to England (it’s a half hour walk from the ferry to the station) and , enlisting the help of good old Phil one more, I put out an appeal for anyone keen on sewing and interested in putting zips in coats.

And so it was that two came forward, one a ninety year old nun, the other a young woman who works with a very well known couturier. More adventures as I hurried around London to divi the coats between three of us, exchanging coffee and coats on Blackfriars station, or Bethnal Green and discovering more good will and shared values.

Now they have been collected and taken back in Lavinia’s car. I find myself wondering who might be the thin young man ( for they mostly all are) swamped in his over large coat ( for these remaining ones were all ex-large), but hopefully warm as he trudges round that hostile town before going back to a damp field to spend the night. (I know that wood for fires is distributed each night from the warehouse).

Meanwhile even more funding has again been pulled and I have no idea what is happening about clothes distribution.

Elsewhere, rightly, the world is preoccupied by other wars , but the situation in Calais remains the same, and is nonetheless, a by product of wars and along with organizational chaos I have experienced and all part of mans inhumanity to man. And throughout the eight years I have been going there numerous people of good will have carried on working, preparing meals and sewing clothes, supporting refugees as best they can with limited time and even more limited resources.

Maybe this is how is always has been , blinkered, cruel leaders make the wars and the policies, and ordinary people see through the absence of compassion and harness their own. This keeps a well spring of good constantly emerging to remind us of the endurance of a hopeful spirit.