

Pakistan - a home with a difference for Hamilton's Cooper-Flühler family

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Pakistan – A Home with a Difference for Hamilton’s Cooper-Flühler family



Pennell High School building and furniture prior to re-opening in 1995



Pennell High School staff in the courtyard when the Coopers returned for a visit in 2007

PAKISTAN (Urdu: Land of the Pure) – 881,913 km² carved out of India after Partition from the British in 1947 as a land for the Muslims, and now the 5th most populous country in the world with a population exceeding 212 million people. Pakistan - created out of conflict to bring peace to the Indian subcontinent but still at enmity with neighbouring India and cautiously friendly with Afghanistan, Iran, China and the West. Pakistan – land of contrasts: dry deserts, fertile plains, the mighty Indus, the majestic Himalayas boasting the treacherous K2 (8,611m), sprawling teeming cities progressive in technology and with one of the fastest growing middle class in the world, and tiny remote traditional villages, multiple ethnic groups, traditions, clothing, languages and beliefs. Pakistan – our home, life and work for 12 years from 1991.

After a rigorous selection process with the New Zealand Church Missionary Society and 3 ½ years of theological, cross-cultural and world religions training, we set out with our young family (Aimee 6, David 4, and Nadia 18 months) to work with the Church of Pakistan in the field of education. We

settled in Peshawar, North-West Frontier Province to do 2 - 3 years of intensive language learning of the national language Urdu, escaping the sweltering 40-50° summers to the hill town of Murree. The children attended a small International school and we all made friends and became involved in both the Pakistani and ex-patriate communities. After a 6 month furlough back in NZ in 1994 to see family, give the children time in Hamilton schools and fulfil speaking engagements, we returned, but this time 200km south to the ultra-conservative walled town of Bannu, 15km from the Afghan border.

Paul had been asked by the Bishop of Peshawar to rebuild the once well-known but now dilapidated, Pennell High School (PHS) founded in 1865. On re-opening day there were only 21 children of kindergarten age and 2 Pakistani teachers. Some toilets were repaired, water and electricity connected, office and classroom furniture resurrected and purchased and two crumbling classrooms repaired. Three years later there were 150 smartly uniformed primary-aged students, 6 renovated classrooms and more local

teachers – both Christian and Muslim. By this stage, the school was running out of classrooms to renovate and desperately short of funds to continue growing. Paul spent considerable time writing funding proposals for the Pakistani government, Denmark and Finland and finally secured enough to continue the large project, including resourcing to senior high school and the building of much-needed teacher accommodation in order to attract quality Pakistani teachers to this remote location. Long working days were spent pouring over architectural plans, working with the contractor, supervising the building project and interviewing and hiring workers and teachers, as well as overseeing a skeleton staff of the local hospital. Belinda helped with teacher training, curriculum development and setting up a library but her main job in the early years was home-schooling the children until one by one they went to Murree Christian School, a boarding school in the foothills of the Himalayas, an 8 hour road trip away from Bannu.

Although our children were now quite some distance away from us, we always made the most of our holidays together.



First school assembly in 1995



Assembly in 2007 in front of a renovated block



The Northern areas of Pakistan are stunningly beautiful – not dissimilar to Switzerland’s valleys and mountain ranges but minus the chalets perched on hillsides and the excellent quality roads. In fact, some of the narrow, hair-pin pot-holed roads over mountain passes would definitely be the envy of the “Top Gear” team! We had picnics in meadows or beside pristine mountain streams, enjoyed roadside freshly cooked food, stayed in quaint hotels of various quality, explored towns and villages with ancient ruins, picked rubies out of rocks, tasted fresh apricot soup, saw marmots and yaks, rode mules over glaciers and even camped on the highest polo ground in the world. Our photo albums are full of wonderfully different holidays, sometimes with visitors from New Zealand, including Paul’s parents and Belinda’s Mum and Aunt and sometimes with ex-pat and Pakistani friends, many of whom also stayed with us in Bannu.

During our 7 years in Bannu we made close friends with our Pastor and the young Deputy Principal of PHS, their wives and families, developed friendships in the Muslim community and became an integral part of the minority Christian community, many of whom were labourers, street sweepers and poor. With 90 % of the PHS children from Muslim families and 10% Christian, the school became a valuable bridge supporting positive communication and relations between the two communities. In order to make the PHS education accessible to poorer families, 10% of all the school fees were placed into a scholarship fund and used to subsidise the poorest families – primarily Christian,

but a few Muslim and Hindu families also benefited. All families became increasingly proud of their children being PHS students as the school’s reputation for quality education for boys and girls, Muslims, Hindus and Christians was established.

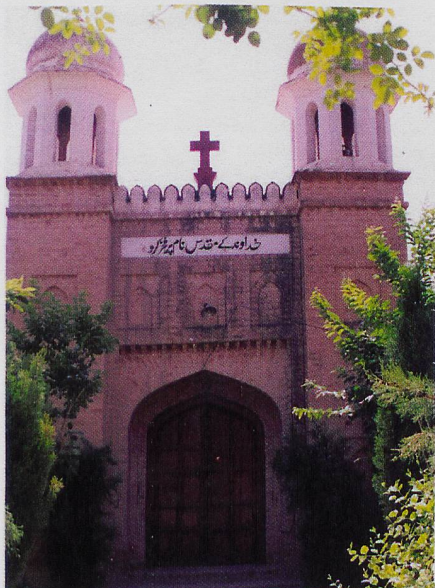
PHS quickly became recognised on the national education scene when in its first year of students sitting the national external Matric Exams, 5 out of the top 10 places in the regional education board of over 3 million students were taken by its students. PHS now is about 1000 strong from kindergarten to Year 12, still gaining top results in national exams and many of its alumni have gone on to become doctors, lawyers and highly educated professionals – hugely encouraging from an area where regional literacy levels at the time were below 15% for boys and a pitiful 9% for girls.

Although our time in Pakistan was cut short due to tragic events post September 11, we were privileged to have been involved in the vital work of education in a small, conservative area of this amazing country and all our lives have been made the richer for those 12 years spent there.

Now as Christmas approaches, fond memories of Christmas spent in Pakistan spring to mind. Being a 96.4% Muslim majority country, there is neither the Christmas commercialism so obvious in Western countries nor many outward signs of this Christian celebration. So, like so many Christians, we created our own customs – daily activities based around our large appliqué nativity calendar, decorating the outside of our

huge mud-brick bungalow with strings of fairy lights, erecting an enormous Christmas tree in our lounge, making cards, Christmas decorations and gifts, fattening a turkey or two and baking, including lots of ‘Weihnachtsguetzli.’ For 2 weeks we hosted numerous Christmas meals for Muslim and Christian families as well as for the staff of PHS and the hospital. The feasts, comprising of chicken and beef curries, rice, flat bread, custard dessert, fruit salad, local sweets and chai (milky tea) were mostly eaten sitting on thin mattresses on the floor of our lounge. With Muslim families, sometimes the men and women would eat in separate rooms and we women always wore a head scarf for modesty. Of course the entire family always wore the local clothes, ‘shalwar kameez.’ We were also often at the receiving end of the generous hospitality of our Pakistani friends and we had all become comfortable with the segregated company depending on the family, sitting on the ground and enjoying different curries. On the evening of the 24th, local carol singers (singing in Urdu and Punjabi) often did the rounds knocking on our door singing lustily, although not always tunefully, and were rewarded with sticky sweets or cakes. We then dressed in our finest ‘shalwar kameez’ and attended the midnight church service in Urdu (10.30-12.30am) to see Christmas day in. The next morning after another church service, we would have our own very traditional feast with our closest expat friends. One year, due to a shortage of gas bottles in the town, most of our Christmas dinner was cooked outside on an open fire. The fattened and freshly slaughtered turkey was juicy and succulent, having been

continued on page 12



The Local Bannu Church (up to 2003)



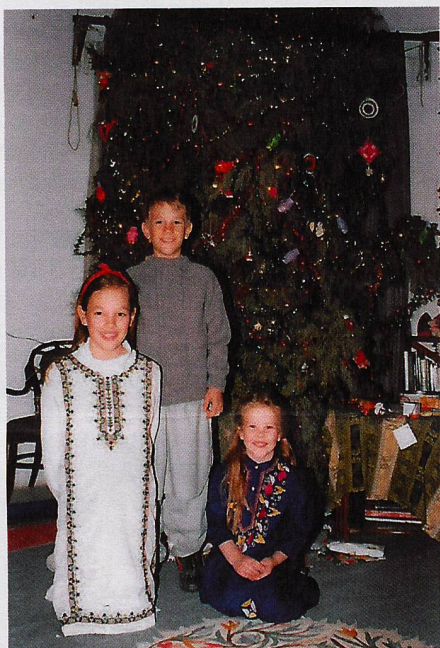
A typical example of Christians at worship (men separate from women who have their heads covered, a type of accordion accompanying the singing)

Swiss Specialities

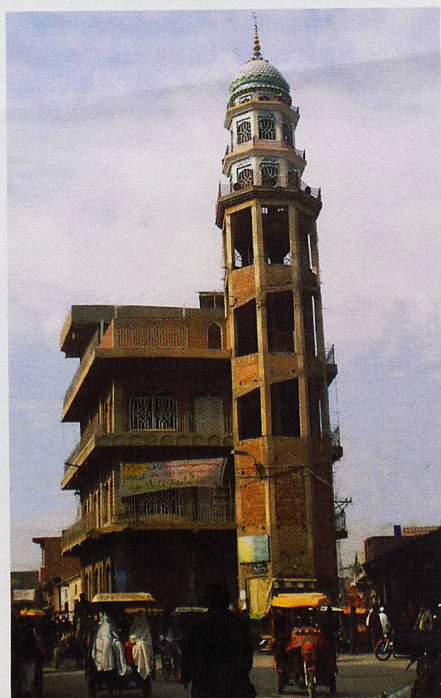
boiled in a huge cauldron for hours and was accompanied by our usual roast vegetables, fresh shelled peas, steamed pudding and Christmas cake.

So before your mouth waters too much, I take this opportunity to wish you "bara din Mubarak" – "big day congratulations" or Happy Christmas! Christmas is a time to be with family and be reminded that we are part of the millions of Christians throughout the world, celebrating Christ's birth.

Belinda Cooper-Flühler



Cooper children in 'shalwar kameez' at Christmas, 1996



A corner of Bannu town with the closest mosque in the foreground. Note the forms of transport and the typical attire of all women in the streets in Bannu.



Bündner Nusstorte

Ingredients

Dough

- 275 g flour
- ¼ tsp salt
- 75 g sugar
- 175 g unsalted butter, cold and in pieces
- 1 egg, beaten
- (or a store-bought short pastry dough)

Filling

- 150 g sugar
- 4 tbsp water
- 125 g walnuts, roughly chopped
- 25 g slivered almonds
- 200 ml cream
- 1 tbsp honey

Instructions

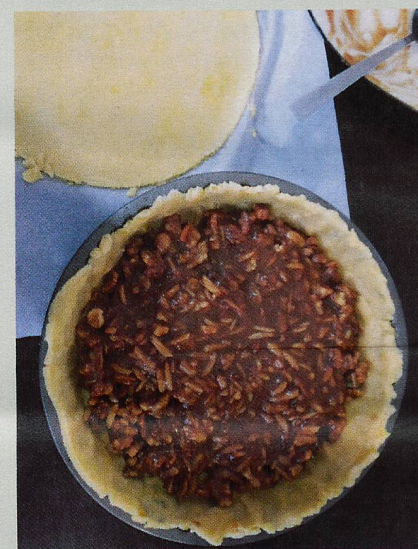
1. To make the dough: In a bowl mix the flour, salt and sugar. Add the butter and rub to a crumbly mixture. Make a mould in the middle, pour in the egg and put the dough together. Wrap the dough in gladwrap and put it in the fridge for 30 mins.

2. To make the top: Roll out 1/3 of the dough on baking paper, cut out a round circle the same size as the baking dish (approx. 24 cm Ø), put it into the fridge for 15 mins.

3. For the base of the baking dish roll out another 1/3 of the dough. Roll out the rest of the dough and put on the sides of the baking dish. Prick the base of the dough with a fork, then put it in the fridge for 15 mins.

4. For the filling heat sugar and water in a wide pan without stirring. Once it starts boiling, reduce the heat and move the pan around until you've got a light brown caramel. Take the pan from the hotplate.

5. Add the walnuts and almonds and mix well, then pour in the cream and put the pan back onto the hotplate. Cook it on a low heat to reduce the liquid a little.



6. At the end add the honey and let the filling cool down.

7. Pour the filling onto the dough base, lay the border of the dough on top edge and put a few drops of water on it. Finish it with laying the top circle of the dough on top.

8. Bake for approx. 55 mins. in the lower half of the oven at 180° C. Enjoy!

Recipe written and tested by Brigitte Hofer