Bob Merrill

Starting with CARE, working with Palestinian Refugees in Jordan, and the '*Necesiteux'* (needy) after Algeria's independence (where I met Lois), my whole career has been in international development.

I worked with the Palestinian refugees 1961-63, i.e. when the West Bank was still a Protectorate of Jordan. While CARE had activities on both East and West Banks, most work was on the East Bank in the refugee camps. At that time. CARE worked quite closely with UNRWA [UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East]. Thus, I drove quite a bit between Amman and Jerusalem… I lived in Amman but had a small house on the back side of Jebel Zetun, the Mount of Olives, in Jerusalem.

I will try to get Lois to write a little about her work with MEDICO.  Although MEDICO was founded by Dr. Dooley in Vietnam, Lois worked as a med tech on a team at Beni Messous Hospital outside of Algiers (1964-5). This was just after the Algerian war for independence. For example, before the French Army left, they wired the ‘block opetrior’ (surgery block) of the main hospital downtown with dynamite. Lucky the Algerians discovered it before French could set it off.

I worked in Oran (setting for Camus’ book La Peste (The Plague)) in charge of a large scale PL 480 [Public Law 480, US government-sponsored] feeding program for low income families.

# WWII Work Camps

**UNA Work Camp**

I heard about United Nations Association (UNA) work camps in graduate school in 1960 and decided to join one which was building houses for *Volksdeutsch* refugees in Austria.

Since I was planning to hitchhike around Europe, anyway, I basically started in England, took a ferry from Dover to Calais, hitchhiked across northern France through Saint-Quentin (a French city whose name is pronounced not like that of the US prison but rather *San kon ton,* as a French family corrected me) and intoGermany*,* which, in 1960, was quite friendly to hitchhikers. I therefore made it across southern Germany and into Austria and Salzberg in a few days. where I met a friend from Illinois and enjoyed a few days at the Salzberg music festival…such beautiful music and fabulous setting. After taking a train to Linz, I made my way to *Horshing biem Flughaven* (Horshing near the airport, which was American during the war) and to the campsite, which was basically a collection of barracks where *Volksdeutsch* families still lived. Volksdeutsch, literally *German people,* wereessentially ethnic Germans who had settled in East Europe generations ago and could therefore speak the local languages such as Bulgarian, Romanian, Czech, etc., as well as German. Thus, when Germany invaded East Europe during World War II, they found a readymade cadre who not only knew the local language and culture but were also loyal to Germany. They were therefore perfect to staff local German administrations. However, near the end of the war, as Russian troops advanced west, the Volksdeutsch were forced to flee and wound up in refugee camps, mainly in Austria which, after the war, was neutral.

Each day we would go out to the work sites to help various families build their houses. What I liked most about the camp was not only its international flavor, British, French, Spanish, Austrian, but also the people themselves. They were very industrious--this, of course, would be their new home--and very friendly. As I look back on it, perhaps more so since I was probably the first American they had met…and also had blond hair and blue eyes. Ironically, as we made friends and stayed for beer and schnapps with the families after work, soon out came the family album, and there would be the man we were working with all day in a German uniform with *Sicherheistdienst* (security service) bars on the lapels.

The situation came into clearer focus when I biked over to Mathausen, a former concentration camp or *Konzentration Lager or KZ*, as I would learn in German. Mathausen was located on the Danube just east of Linz and had not been renovated yet. With a minimum of guards, I easily got in. Too bad I didn’t take some pictures. In addition to the piles of rubble, there were piles of ash from the large smoke stacks, a lot of graffiti on the walls and the barred windows of buildings. Totally grim is not the word for it. As opposed to the commonly known extermination or death camps, Mathausen was more of a forced labor camp. However, out of some 195,000 prisoners in the camp from 1938 to 1945, 55-60,000 died. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Nazi_concentration_camps> details the extent and location of the Nazi concentration camps throughout Europe.

Although this provided a different perspective on our work at the camp, we continued to work…and drink with our ‘Komeraden’. I even made up a ditty in English and German while working with a couple of young Brits from Oxford: “Here we sit *shifting shutter* (sifting gravel), shutter shifting after sundown.”, and made people say it fast. Later, I visited many of the good friends I made at the camp when I hitchhiked throughout Europe.

**Goethe Institute**

After speaking, or trying to speak German, at the camp, I decided I better learn some proper German. So, I enrolled in a Goethe Institute in a small town between Munich and Garmisch-Partenkirchen, *Kochel am See*. Goethe Institute courses are total immersion, i.e., living with a German family and studying German in German. Since the course was in German and students were from many countries, the professors had to be quite imaginative in getting the concept and meanings of words and grammar across to the students. However, I didn’t see much of the German family who owned the house where I lived. In fact, my first roommate was from Syria, Nadir Omari (I couldn’t believe he wrote from right to left!), who spent most of his time in the local café with other Arabs. My second roommate was Mike Yarrow, a Quaker from the U.S. Mike had longish dark hair, a short beard and a somewhat hawkish nose. Biking back and forth to school each day, we often got yells, “*Jude, Jude, gehe weg*!” At first we didn’t know the meaning but soon learned it was, “Jew, Jew, scram! Yep, in 1960, antisemitism was alive and well in Germany!

**Jugenlager Friedland**

While the Goethe Institute taught me good grammar, I still couldn’t speak ‘*fliessend Deutsch*’, fluent German. Then I learned there was a position with the Deutsche CVYM, German YMCA, in a refugee camp in northern Germany. Jugenlager Friedland ( Youth Peace Camp) was a well-known refugee camp for Germans coming from East Europe and had been converted for young men escaping from East Germany before the Wall was built in 1961. It was located in the Harz Mountains near the University of Gottingen and the city of Kassel. My job was to counsel the youth arriving from East Germany and teach them some English. Most of them had had nine years of Russian but no English. So I started an informal English class Monday, Wednesday and Friday evenings, *Lerne Englisch mit Bob aus Amerika yede Montag, Mittwoch und Fritag abend.* I didn’t do too much preparation as it was unstructured and the students mostly wanted to ask questions and learn about life in *Amerika.* Although most of the boys had been factory workers and farmers without much higher education, I met several educated young men, one of whom had studied at the University of Leipzig. We became good friends and he asked me if I would ever be going into East Germany. I said I would really like to…if I could get in. So we began to plan on it.

**Leipzig**

Every year Leipzig holds a large international trade fair, *Leipzige Messe,* for which it issues short term visas. I therefore got one to visit Leipzig, and my friend notified his friends when I was coming. We were to meet at a certain date and time on the steps of the Leipzig *Haupt Post,* the main Post Office. After driving through Prague, Czechoslovakia--which I thought was beautiful, but where I could only stay one day due to my visa--and Dresden, East Germany, which was still *ausgebombt* (bombed out) from the British/American bombings, I arrived in Leipzig. Given my American clothes and a small Fiat with international license plates, I wasn’t hard to recognize. The friends were actually a church theatre group, *Spielschau,* so, after getting to know me they even included me in one of their performances. I was a *Herr Blod,* meaning *Mr. Crazy or Wacky,* Needless to say, the name and my accent brought the house down.

Since it was 1960, during one of our many political discussions (in the attic of the church), I asked whether the government was going to build a wall between East and West Germany, as was rumored, and whether the group would stay or flee to West Germany as their friend had done. Surprisingly, they all said they would stay. When I asked why, given the lack of freedom, Christian, the informal group leader, said, “We don’t want this country to become a land of “cows.” There has to be some resistance to this regime.”.

I realized just how threatening the limited freedom was when we went on a picnic outside the city. During the picnic, a police car with *Volkspolozei* or *VOPOs* (Peoples Police) drove by, and the whole group just froze and looked down. Can’t blame them; the *VOPOs* looked fearsome in their uniforms and polished high boots.

Later, when I was about to leave, one of the girls asked if she could come along, mainly to see West Berlin. At this time, before the Wall was built, the main checkpoints were between East Germany and East Berlin. Since she was with an American with international plates going into East Berlin, it wouldn’t be so difficult. However, her/our bravery was to be tested when we took the U-Bahn (subway) from West Berlin, where we stayed, to East Berlin to have a meal and see Kurt Weill’s *Drei Groschen Oper* (Three Penny Opera) at a price one fifth of what it cost in the West (the countries had a 1:5-mark exchange rate). On the final night, on the way back to West Berlin, two VOPOs boarded at the last station in East Berlin. Since the next station was in West Berlin, they could arrest anyone with an East German ID card who was going in that direction, on the assumption that the person was trying to escape to the West. As the VOPOs walked slowly up the aisle asking for IDs, “*Ausweis bitte, Ausweis bitte,”* my companion froze…in fact, we both froze! To this day, I don’t know what happened, as I usually don’t think that fast, but as they came abreast of our row, I started chatting in loud American English, “Wasn’t that a good play? Isn’t Kurt Weill wonderful?”, etc., etc. and she began nodding her head. The VOPOs looked down at us and said, “*Ach, Amerikaner!”* and passed on. She left the next day, taking the U-Bahn back to East Berlin and a bus to Leipzig. We sent post cards for a time, but they soon trailed off. I’m sure the *Spielschau* group continued to provide resistance right up to 1989 when the Wall came down. Although she’s probably a grandmother by now, she probably remembers that incident on the U-Bahn…just as vividly as I do.

**Agadir, Morocco**

After two workcamps to assist the settlement of refugees mainly from WWII, I volunteered for a third workcamp mainly to assist in the reconstruction of Agadir, Morocco after it had been hit by an earthquake in 1962. After stopping in Spain (mainly to run with the bulls in San Fermin), I finally made it down to Agadir, where the work camp was …and I contracted dengue fever (called Breakbone fever by the GIs in WWII). Luckily, there were some American medical missionaries there who nursed me back to health. There was also a Dutch nurse among the volunteers who offered to travel with me back to Holland. She too was a lifesaver in that she spoke some French and organized passage on a Dutch freighter to Amsterdam.

When I finally returned home, I was practically a skeleton…my mother gasped when she saw me. Although I was weak and skinny, the trip did confirm one thing: I didn’t care to make a career in America. Since I didn’t want to work for the State Department or the International Cooperation Administration (ICA), the precursor to USAID, I applied to CARE (Cooperative for American Relief Everywhere). I was accepted and went off to New York for their training program. At first, I was assigned to Sierra Leone, West Africa, but later, as fate would have it, to Jordan.

# CARE – JORDAN 1962-1963

Given the fact that its neighbors are Syria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Palestine, Jordan is a fascinating country not only in its relation to geography but very much in its own right. Essentially, Jordan can be divided into two major areas. One is the West Bank (of the Jordan River), what was Palestine but after the 1967 war is called the Occupied Territories. The West Bank includes Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Hebron, ships of Jewish refugees from Europe sailed to Palestine in contravention of Britain’s UN Mandate. In 1947 the UN finally voted on whether Palestine should be partitioned between Jews and Arabs. The vote in the General Assembly, which was much smaller then than it is now, was positive by two votes. The Arab States subsequently declared war on the portion allocated to the Jews…and lost. Some 800,000 Palestinians were therefore driven from their homes and became refugees. They remain refugees up to the present time in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. Having won the war and enlarged their territory, the Jews declared an independent state of Israel on May 15, 1948. Since then, mainly with the support of the United States, Israel has become increasing powerful. By 2022 the remnants of the former Arab portion of Palestine had become extremely fragmented, largely due to increasing Israeli settlements on the West Bank. While the Israeli-Palestinian conflict continues, given the fact that Israel is now a developed and powerful country, it is no longer a contest between equals.

**East Bank**

In 1962, Amman (the ancient Roman Decapolis city of Philadelphia) was a small city spread over three hills, Jebel Ashrifia, Jebel Lwebdeh and Jebel Amman, with neighborhoods defined by three traffic circles. Given its rapid urbanization, today it has more than 10 traffic circles spread over many hills and valleys. In 1962, before the 1967 war, one could travel from Amman down to Jericho in the Jordan Valley, up to Jerusalem and into Bethlehem and Ramallah without any checkpoints. Since I arrived on Eid Al-Fitr, the celebration at the end of the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, the CARE Chief of Mission had arranged a trip to Wadi Rumm to be hosted by local Bedouins (*Bedou* in Arabic) and then into Petra.

In Arabic, ‘wadi’ is a dry river bed similar to *arroyo* in Spanish. Essentially, Wadi Rumm was a centuries-old river bed which had eroded the desert, leaving huge pinnacles of red sandstone rocks jutting from the desert floor. It had recently provided a very scenic setting for the filming of “Lawrence of Arabia” starring Peter O’Toole as Lawrence and Omar Sharif as Prince Faisal. The U.S. Film Institute cited “Lawrence of Arabia” fifth on its 100 Movies List, and the British Film Institute called it the third greatest British film of all time. Direction signs to various stages, canteens and toilets were still strewn about the site. It was also my first acquaintance with Bedouins and their camels, as we slept in a Bedouin tent and I could hear them belching all night (their tongue is just an extension of their esophagus). Lucky I was younger at the time, because riding a camel is very difficult. One had to hang on, while the camel lurched forward then backwards to get up, and then do the splits in the saddle to stay on. That night I ate my first *mansef,* a pyramid of rice covered in goat meat in a yoghurt sauce and pine nuts. The *piece d’resistance* was the goat’s skull on top with the eyes to be eaten with your hands. Needless to say, they offered the eyes to the foreign guests. I think I passed mine to the Bedou next to me.

The next day we drove up the desert road and into Petra where CARE had a feeding station. Petra, Greek for ‘rock’, is an archeological city in southern desert which was the capital of the Nabatean Kingdom about the 4th century BC. The Nabateans were nomadic Arabs who developed Petra as a regional trading hub based on its proximity to the main trading routes at the time. One enters by a very narrow chasm called the *Siqh*, formed by flash floods, which opens into a huge temple façade called *Al Khazneh (*the Treasury) carved out of red sandstone. From there, the valley widens out to more temple ruins and a small amphitheater built by the Romans. Since CARE’s feeding station was in one of the caves, I went there several times during my time in Jordan. The last time was in the spring of 1963 when I brought my parents on what turned out be a harrowing adventure.

Due to the feeding station, CARE was allowed to drive into Petra through the Siqh, which we did in a 1960 Ford Fairlane about as wide as the Siqh itself. While touring the various sites, it began to cloud up and I said we better get back to the car and try to get out while we could. As we began to take the road to enter the Siqh, it began to rain hard, so I stopped, took off my socks and stuck my foot in the growing current…which was full of rocks and practically took my foot off! Reluctantly--and luckily, it turned out--I said to my parents, “Don’t think we can make it,” and backed the car up on a hill. By the time we got out of the car and got our things, the car was marooned on the hill by water. A flash flood had come through the Siqh. When we finally walked back over more hills and arrived at Nazzal’s camp, a tent camp and small restaurant for tourists, we learned that a party of some 20 French nuns coming through the Siqh had been caught up and washed away by the flood. The whole affair made international news, and the next day Jordan’s King Hussein helicoptered in to greet and comfort the tourists…including my parents and I! It was three or four days before we could get out, since the road had been totally washed away and littered with boulders; even Nazzal’s camp supply vehicle had been turned end-over-end in the Siqh, and the supplies, sheets, towels, etc., were strewn along the passage. We hitched a ride back to Amman with friends from USAID and read of the tragedy in Time Magazine. My mother, who had been taking slides up to that time, therefore had a drama to show the women of her WSCS, Women’s Society of Christian Service, back home. After the first slide of a trickle of water in the Siqh, the women asked her where the rest of the pictures were, and she said, “We were fighting for our lives!”

To the east of Amman is the desert leading into Syria and Iraq. Since the whole area was once a part of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey had built a railway down to the Hijaz for pilgrims. The Hijaz, a region on the east coast of the Red Sea, contains both Mecca and Medina, the holy cities of Islam. Thus, in WWI, since the Hijaz Railway carried mainly Turkish troops and supplies, it was a primary target of T.E. Lawrence and his Arab legion, who comprised the eastern flank of General Allenby’s drive through Syria to defeat the Turks. Lawrence and King Faisal had hoped to create a United Arab Republic. However, at the Treaty of Versailles that ended WWI, France and Britain divided the area into four states. The French looked after Syria and Lebanon, and the British oversaw Iraq and Jordan, while Palestine became a League of Nations mandate.

In spite of the politics, it was a wonderful area to explore with Arab guides. To me all the terrain looked like a desert, but to the Arab guides, each small rise was a *jebel* (hill or mountain) and a low area, a *wadi.* As I came to know the area, I began leading mini-tours out to Qasr Azrak (a medieval fortress from the Umayyad Caliphate), one of Lawrence’s outposts, and the Hijaz Railway, which National Geographic has featured for its scenery and history.

# ALGERIA 1963-65

After some two years in Jordan, I was posted to Algeria, another Arab country, but totally different from those in the Middle East. Although Algeria is a part of the North African *Moghreb,* including Morocco and Tunisia, which were French colonies, Algeria was actually a legal constituent territory of France. It was and still is composed of three *Departements,* or provinces: the Algerois, with the capital in Algiers, the Constantinois in the east with the capital in Constantine, and the Oranais in the west with the capital in Oran. I was assigned as the CARE representative in the latter, the western region which borders on Morocco. To me Oran was the most cosmopolitan of the three since it still had a strong Spanish influence and had been made famous by Albert Camus as the setting for his book *La Peste* (The Plague). My apartment, on the eighth floor of No. 12 Boulevard Front de Mer, had three bedrooms with a panoramic view of the harbor. Due to the exodus of the French after Algerian independence, the apartment had been declared *bien vacant,* or ‘vacated’ by the owners, and was therefore available through the local government at a modest rent.

After a long and vicious war with France (1954-62), Algeria had finally won its independence. Thus, many, if not most, of the local French, or *pieds noirs,* who had lived there for generations, working either in commerce or government, were leaving. This also applied to the *colons,* or owners of large vineyards which supplied Algerian wine in bulk to be blended with, and strengthen, French wines. Although the French-Algerian war is not well known in America, it was probably the first and longest guerilla war against what was felt to be an occupying power. While using bombs and explosives in the cities, the Algerians, or *maquis,* also controlled most of the countryside. To prevent the entry of additional troops and material, the French installed wired barricades along the borders with Morocco and Tunisia. The U. S. were to adopt many of the same tactics in Vietnam.

CARE was one of the first international relief agencies to enter Algeria after the war. Since Algeria had essentially been an integral part of France, the national infrastructure, i.e., roads, railways, airports, ports, power supply, etc., was quite advanced, as were the utilities, water supply, sanitation, heating and electricity in the cities and towns. The major evidence of the recent war could be found mainly in the Algerian parts of the cities, *souks or kazbahs,* which were either demolished or walled in. In fact, when CARE took over the administration of MEDICO, a medical relief organization, it was found that the departing French had wired the surgery units of the main hospital in Algiers for demolition.

The main activity of CARE/Algeria was a massive feeding program for the poor using surplus wheat under PL480, a US law that allowed surplus American produce to be shipped to developing countries for food and self-help programs. Given the devastation after the lengthy war, a large portion of Algeria’s population, mainly in the rural areas stretching as far as the Sahara, qualified for the program. Thus, as the representative in Oran, I was responsible for receiving 10-to-20,000-ton American ships and ensuring that the cargo, mostly bulgur, or hard wheat, was transferred to the mills, milled into the grain (semolina) that was used to make the local food, *cous cous,* and shipped to the various cities and towns in the region. While the French logistical firm *Societe Generale* handled the off-loading, milling and transportation, my team had to make sure that the final distribution was to the *necessiteux,* the needy, as defined by those families earning less than the local median income. Since so much of the population was needy, often we would find USAID sacks of grain still in the warehouse since “…there was not enough to go around.” It therefore took a great deal of travel and time to convince the local authorities to attempt to distribute the food to the most needy in their communities. Given the size of the region, I can only guess at the extent to which the local officials actually did this. At least, I learned a great deal about the country, its history, its geography and its politics…and, of course, improved my French.

**How I Met Lois**

About once every two months, I had to drive to Algiers (about 300 miles east) for meetings with CARE/Algeria staff. At one of the meetings, I noticed that a Cuban ballet was performing at the opera house. Where else could an American see a Cuban ballet, so after work I went down to buy a ticket. Of all things, while waiting in the ticket line, I heard a loud conversation among women…in American English; so I walked up to introduce myself. It turned out to be a group of American nurses who worked for MEDICO, an international medical assistance organization that CARE was administering at a local hospital, Beni Messous. So we all bought tickets together. However, their jeep had broken down, so one of the first things they asked was whether I had transportation. Since I had driven in from Oran in my Peugeot 403, I said sure. After the ballet—I don’t remember much about it except that it was very colorful--we all decided to go *Le Residence,* a French disco in the hills above the city. The first gal who jumped into the seat next to me was really cute, so at the disco I asked her to dance. Turned out she was the medical technician on the team from Minnesota. Small world, another mid-westerner…in Algeria of all places!

The next day we took a walk along the beach looking for oysters. Since she had been in Algiers for some time, I thought she would speak good French. It was not to be. I soon learned that oysters in French were *des huitres.* Since I worked in Oran, she and some of the nurses were happy to take the train out west and see the city. She came back a few more times so, one time, I took her to a seaside café west of the city. I can’t remember the name, but it was very simple; no menu and only plastic tables and chairs overlooking the sea. You just sat at a table and the waiter came with a large bottle of Mascara Red (Merlot), two baguettes and a cake of Camembert. After about half an hour, the waiter returned with a large black skillet full of saffron rice, fresh shrimp, anchovies, chicken, parsley, etc., just the best paella I’ve ever tasted! Shortly thereafter, Lois’ term was up, so once again I drove to Algiers and took her to the airport. She was leaving for Lebanon and Jordan, from whence I had just come, on the first stops in a trip around Africa! After some two months circumnavigating Africa, her final stop before returning to the States was Oran.