**Dr Ruth Pfau**

**9th September 1929 – 10th August 2017**

It is sad to hear of the death of Dr Ruth Pfau .The St Francis Leprosy Guild have supported the MALC centres in Karachi for many years. Dr Pfau died on 10th August 2017 aged 87. She arrived in Karachi in 1960 on her way to India. She stayed in Pakistan working with leprosy there. She won numerous awards from Pakistan, from Germany and other parts of the world for her work with leprosy. She became familiar with Presidents and governments of Pakistan and Germany.

Ruth Pfau was born in Leipzig in 1929, one of five children. Her father ran a publishing business. She grew up in Nazi Germany. Indeed her best friend, Gabi, who was Jewish, disappeared from school and nobody wanted to tell her where she had gone. Although the Pfau’s house was destroyed, they managed to survive the war and the bombing. Thanks to a British serviceman turning a blind eye, she managed to escaped from the Russian occupied sector of Germany on foot, to join her father in Wiesbaden.

Ruth wanted to study medicine and she went to Mainz University. She was not a Catholic, and one night she attended a meeting where an elderly Dutch woman who had been held in a German concentration camp and was preaching love and forgiveness. Ruth, who was German, asked her, “How do I become a Christian?” The reply was simple, “Pray.” Ruth was almost an atheist at that time, but she started to mix with Catholic students at Mainz and later at Marburg. She had become a hospital doctor, dealing with Gynae and Obstetrics. One day, a young man she was particularly fond of, asked her to marry him. She was waiting to say yes, but found herself saying, “Sorry but I just can’t. I have a vocation.”

Ruth decided to enter the Daughters of the Heart of Mary in Paris, where she mixed with novices from many different cultures. This order of nuns was founded in France during the French Revolution and from the start they had no distinguishing religious habit, but live as women in the world, taking vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Ruth would have liked to have returned to East Germany but was advised to go to India. Her application for a visa got nowhere even after a year. Someone suggested it might be easier to reach India via Karachi.

Ruth arrived in Karachi and joined Berenice Vargas, another of her order from Mexico, a pharmacist, who had been asked by the local Archbishop to work with those with leprosy in 1958. She had named it the Marie Adelaide Leprosy Centre, named after the co-founder of the Daughters of the Heart of Mary. Berenice wrote to her parents, “I can tell you everything but I cannot describe the smell.” The first Urdu words she knew were subah (morning) and sham (evening) when medicines are given out. Patients gave her the affectionate name, Sister Subah Sham.

Berenice persuaded Ruth to accompany her to McLeod Road where the leprosy colony was. Ruth at once “saw men and women, blind, with disfigured noses, wasted hands and feet, suppurating wounds emitting a fetid stench, living in the midst of overflowing sewage, buzzing flies, and rats gnawing at rotting flesh.” Ruth decided she had been led to her calling and decided to stay in Pakistan. Ruth flew down to Vellore near Chennai in India for an intensive six week leprosy course run by Dr Paul Brand (another leprosy hero).

Ruth returned to McLeod Road with great enthusiasm. At that time many doctors would refuse to treat leprosy patients. Ruth found another doctor who would, as well as an ophthalmologist. Ruth would escort her patients to the eye hospital on the bus so that their sight could be saved.

A friend of Berenice, a Dr Zarina Fazelbhoy, a dermatologist, and wife of a wealthy businessman, helped visited their clinic and offered real help. About this time, 1962, Queen Elizabeth was visiting Karachi. A journalist covering the visit happened to visit Dr Pfau’s clinic. An article appeared in the German newspaper “Bild”, which caught the eye of the head of the German Leprosy Relief Assocation. He was interested to hear of a German nun working in Pakistan and offered help, not only supplies but the services of a fully trained nurse. With the help of German bishops, another building for a medical centre was found in Karachi. Ruth and her staff moved into the new building by night to avoid neighbours’ objections. Ruth and Zarina fought the objections in the Courts and won.

In 1965, there was a short war between India and Pakistan. The German embassy advised Ruth to leave. She stayed with her patients through the bombing. The war only lasted about 17 days.

A six month course was devised to train leprosy technicians and many Pakistanis were trained, enabling them in time to have centres all over Pakistan. Having so many workers enabled her to have leprosy centres all over Pakistan, therefore bringing leprosy under control. Ruth and her colleagues have always gone out in search of their leprosy patients, not only in Pakistan but in Afghanistan too.

A German lady wrote to Ruth. She read about Ruth’s work with leprosy and remembered her as the young doctor who treated her when she fell off a bus in her home town. She was a bank employee, and she started a group called the “Friends of Karachi”. They raised millions of Deutschmarks for Ruth’s centres in Pakistan.

Dr Pfau and her colleagues always had real help from many Pakistani men and women like Dr Zarina Fazelbhoy to support MALC’s efforts, help which continues to this day. One day at a new centre, a businessman visited. “There are no beds,” he was told. The next day, six new beds were delivered.

Some cases:

Ruth was walking along a mountain path and slipped, spraining her ankle. As her colleagues were helping her up, she noticed a pair of eyes peering out of a cave. The man was a lepromatous case, and he had a high fever. He had lice in his hair; his clothes were in tatters; he said he had been abandoned by his family. They took him to Rawalpindi to hospital. It turned out his family were all being treated for leprosy, and he was the father. Once treated, he was reunited with his family.

In 1980, in another village near Gilgit, they were told about a cave, and after a steep climb with the local paramedic, Ruth found the cave. She stretched out her hand into the darkness, and a hand grasped hers. She had found a 14 year old girl, cold and in rags. Ruth wrapped her cardigan around the girl who was called Adina. Her family refused to take her back. The paramedic offered to take her into his own home. She was treated successfully and later married the paramedic’s younger brother. They went on to have four healthy children. The story was made into a film on Pakistan television.

Later Ruth received permission to go into Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation. She was driven through the streets of Quetta by the Mujahideen in a Toyota Landcruiser, and crossed into Afghanistan at daybreak. After a two day journey, they reached Hazara Jat. Ruth and her team were told by a mother of a family that there was one of her daughters, 26 years old, who had leprosy but they were told she was not alive. They walked into a dark cattlepen and Ruth was shocked by a disfigured face with red eyeballs protruding from her sockets. Her nose had gone. Her mouth was disfigured and she could barely speak. They said they had come to treat her. She threw the medicine into the paramedic’s face, and it took them an hour to persuade her to start treatment. The daughter’s name was Zakia. She was subsequently cured medically, but had to stay in MALC’s home for the handicapped, where she lived a happy life for the next twenty years.

Later Ruth Pfau made various visits to Germany. An old friend spoke to her at a book signing. This lady had picked up a book written by Ruth and saw her own name in it. At the book signing, she introduced herself to Ruth. “Do you recognise me? I’m Gabi.” The two embraced and wept together.

Ruth Pfau was granted honorary Pakistani citizenship. She said her heart was in Pakistan. She lived simply, wearing clothes which were gifts from friends, or grateful patients. The gold in the award medals she received, were melted down to provide dowries for her female patients. She suffered from migraine but did not allow it to affect her work. She managed to have a great influence on the many leprosy technicians in the way they viewed women and treated them. Many hundreds of houses were built for leprosy patients thanks to funds raised in Europe. The staff at MALC celebrate all the religious feasts of Islam and Christianity. Ruth Pfau was “confined” to bed in her hospital in the latter days, but continued to get into a wheelchair to do her “ward round” , visiting her patients.

Dr Ruth Pfau – may she rest in peace.