

A hope in hell

Scores of children live in Nepal's prisons. Fionnuala McHugh reveals how personal tragedy has led Philip Holmes to help them

THIS is a story of how a private tragedy in an English suburb has taken on a public dimension in an Asian country. It is about one man's effort to make something good come out of an unimaginably sad act. And in a very literal sense, it is also a story about imprisonment and liberation - and how freedom of the spirit can be found in distant, unexpected places.



Great escape: Philip Holmes with the first seven children to be sponsored by the Esther Benjamins Trust

On January 4, 1999, a dreary Monday morning, Esther Benjamins took her own life. She hanged herself in the house in Church Crookham, near Aldershot, which she shared with her husband, Lt Col Philip Holmes. He was the one who found her body. She left a brief note saying that life without children was unbearable. The couple, who had been married for 10 years, had unsuccessfully gone through all the painful procedures connected with childlessness. At the age of 43, Esther Benjamins - a strong-willed, independent, caring Dutch woman who worked as a judge in Holland - decided she had had enough.

"She ceased to recognise herself in the last year," explains Philip Holmes. "She did not like what she had become. She rejected what she had become, she rejected her body. The way she died was the way she lived: she didn't like what she saw, she had a solution and she went for it."

In the week that followed, Philip Holmes, who is originally from Northern Ireland, made several decisions. He decided to leave the Army after 17 years as a dentist with the Royal Army Dental Corps. He decided to leave England. And he decided that he wanted to set up a trust in his wife's name. In those early days, he wasn't sure exactly what form that would take except for one objective: it would help children.

The British headquarters of the Brigade of Gurkhas is in Church Crookham. Some years before Esther Benjamins died, the Government had allowed the families of serving Gurkhas to accompany them to this country. As a result, there were Nepali wives and children strolling around the housing estate where she and Philip Holmes lived. "That's how she got to know them," explains Holmes. "Esther was very intrigued and fascinated by them."

At the time of her death, the couple were sponsoring a child in Nepal through the charity Actionaid. To Holmes, therefore, it made sense to look at Nepal as a starting-point for his own fledgling charity, although he had never been to that country or, indeed, to Asia. Last November, he travelled to the kingdom in order to assess where he could direct his energies and - though this is not a phrase he would ever use, because he is a man who likes to get on with things - to find some practical outlet for his grief.

Nepal is full of child-related problems: there are street children, disabled children, children in prostitution, orphaned children. But while Holmes was there, he heard about the children who live in the country's prisons. Nobody knows exactly how many there are, scattered throughout 73 jails, but a local Nepali documentary recently came up with an estimate of about 250. These children have committed no crime but, because their parents have been incarcerated, and because no one else will take care of them, they have little choice but to exist in the jails too. They become prisoners by default, subject to the prison regime and to the potentially violent moods of other adult prisoners.

Holmes heard about an organisation called Prisoners' Assistance Mission (PAM), which has a refuge for children who have been taken out of the male and female jails in Kathmandu. He met PAM's field worker, an indefatigable young woman called Indira Rana Magar, who liaises between the children, their parents and the prison authorities. It is Magar who has to assess the risk factor of a child remaining in prison; she decides whose need of removal is greatest. But as PAM has little money, its hospitality is necessarily limited.

Magar told Holmes that there were seven children currently in jail whose situation (ill-health or possible sexual abuse are usually the most pressing criteria) meant that they had to be taken to safety as soon as possible. She needed to make sure that someone would sponsor their welfare.

"I said to Indira, 'Get them out'," recalls Holmes. "I was sticking my neck out a wee bit, I wasn't consulting with my trustees.

I was sure they'd support me, and of course there was no problem about it, but if there had been, I'd have paid for those children myself."

On December 4 1999, exactly 11 months after Esther died, seven children left Central Jail and were entrusted to the care of the Nestling Home in Kathmandu, which is run by PAM. On that morning, through the trust set up in her name, they had become Esther Benjamins' children.

The day after that release, in a car park behind the guesthouse he was staying in, Holmes had his own personal breakthrough. He was suddenly overwhelmed by what had happened in the past year and by a sense of desolation. But there was also the realisation that, unexpectedly, sweetness could come out of a bitter loss. "It was one of the times you really miss Esther," he says, almost to himself, as he recalls that moment. "But she knows exactly what's going on. I'm sure she does."

Philip Holmes returned in April to Nepal to check up on the progress of the seven children, to visit the prisons of Kathmandu for the first time and to make further plans for the Esther Benjamins Trust. His arrival happened to coincide with Nepali New Year, a time for new beginnings and new plans, and a time for taking stock.

"At midnight on New Year's Eve 1998, Esther came in to the room and she said, 'I want you to have a good 1999', and I didn't know then that she meant, in spite of what's going to happen . . . She knew what she was going to do."

It's early on a cool, grey morning and Holmes is sitting on a wall outside Kathmandu's Central Jail waiting for the assistant governor, Chudamani Sharma, to take him on a tour of the prison. As he talks about his wife's death, Asia blooms vividly around him - a man passes a live chicken through the prison gate, a parakeet tap-dances on a guard's shoulder and a group of hilltribe women, wearing nose-rings, squats further along the wall carrying another live chicken and kebabs of fish.

Holmes' life, in this new Nepali year of 2057, seems to have become simultaneously simpler and vastly more complicated. When his wife died, he reduced his existence to its material essentials. "My thinking has been very, very clear since day one. Really, it seemed to be other people flapping around me. I haven't wavered for one moment. I could talk about this in religious terms." He pauses, hesitating to sound offputting but wishing to be honest. "I can see that there's a pattern in what happened."

He and Esther met on a ski-lift in 1987. Shortly afterwards, Benjamins, who was then working as a social worker, came to London with a group of disabled children, rang Holmes, who was in Inverness, and went up to see him. They were married on August 4 1988.

A decade later, she had become a judge, doing an exhausting commute to Holland every week, but was increasingly troubled by the fact that she was childless. Benjamins was Jewish, and the Holocaust - and in particular what had been done to children in concentration camps by the Nazis - preyed horrifically on her mind. "She was an incredibly strong character," says Holmes. "But she became burnt out. She deteriorated very rapidly at the end. We were looking at adoption the year before she died, but it's not that simple . . . for people in that mindset, everything becomes very complex."

Late last summer, after he had cleared the house and given her clothes to a Jewish charity, Holmes set out to do the walk from St Bees Head, in Cumbria, to Robin Hood's Bay, on the east coast. "I came to a certain point in the Lake District where I'd been nine months previously with Esther on our last holiday, when she'd obviously been very severely depressed. She was already dead then, she was dead before her dying. She didn't want to go out, but I took her to the top, I said, 'Come on, you can do it'. And she did it, but she wasn't happy. And when I found myself on that same walk, I was in bits. I knew how she'd felt that day."

In answer to the obvious, unspoken, question, he says, "I was never angry about what she did at all. I never allowed myself to get into negative sentiments, even to feel guilty." He is silent for a while, sitting on this prison wall in a far-off place. "She was very close, very tangible at the beginning of the year, but then I had a feeling that she'd peacefully moved on when she saw I was okay."

Holmes moved to Holland where Esther, who commuted there for her work, kept a flat. Because he's a full-time volunteer for the trust, he has to make his Army pension go a long way, and England has become too expensive for him. Kickstarting a charity isn't easy, especially in Nepal, which is overrun with NGOs (Non-Governmental Organisations), bureaucracy and corruption. Holmes is possibly the least corruptible individual one could hope to encounter running a charity, but it's a frustrating task.

Still, Mr Sharma, the assistant governor, is a valuable ally. On this spring morning he eventually appears at the front gate of

Central Jail's male section and escorts the waiting party inside. There are two signs at the gate: the one on the right (hanging over a clock, as if to emphasise the physical reality of doing time) reads "Suffering is Part of the Great Awakening", the one on the left says "Fascination is the Root Cause of Suffering".

Central Jail is 85 years old; it was the first prison built in Nepal and it is still the biggest. The initial surprise for anyone who has visited prisons in England is how open and unrestricted it appears to be. In Western prisons, the air is filled with guards yelling ahead as visitors approach, and the noise of massive keys being rattled and clanked. The sound that rises in the air here is the continuous slap-slap of flip-flops as a thousand men pad aimlessly around the courtyard, under the shade of the kimmu trees and the New Year bunting, as if in search of their lost village life. It's true that Mr Sharma himself clutches a key in his hand, but it looks incapable of locking anything bigger than a filing cabinet.

The presence of children is immediately apparent. They bob in and out of view, disturbing and incongruous, like flashes from the wrong film. Here is a little boy running around with his toy - a flimsy stick with two wheels attached - momentarily carefree, until an adult prisoner pretends to strike him, and the child flinches. There is a shaven-headed boy in a striped pyjama top (and this unbidden image of the concentration camps has its own particular resonance). Inside, in the sleeping quarters - a dark, fetid cavern of lumpy mattresses - a toddler is propped up in the gloom between two men who are eating rice.

No child should live in these surroundings. Tuberculosis is rife, and parents often have to eke out their 700g daily rice ration among several offspring. The mental stability of some of the inmates is clearly questionable. And the crimes of which these men are accused - many are convicted but some, caught up in Nepal's judicial system, wait for years just for a trial - are serious. More than a third are here on charges of murder (there is no death sentence in Nepal); a quarter are accused of drugs-related dealings; another quarter are human traffickers who have led Nepali girls across the Indian border into a life of prostitution.

Today, Indira Rana Magar, who has accompanied Holmes, is particularly worried about two brothers, Raju, who is eight, and Krishna, seven. They have been in Central Jail for six months with their father; before that, they were in another prison in a remote corner of Nepal for at least a year. The boys look ill - unkempt and dejected, scarcely capable of raising their eyes. Their father, convicted of murder and grinning uneasily beside them, is mentally ill, and also suffers some form of paralysis. In Central Jail, if the parent cannot take care of the child, then no one else is likely to do so, and the brothers are sliding into a spiral of neglect.

For Holmes, feeling his way through the hurdles of fund-raising for his small charity, the decision to sponsor these children is not easy. Given that their father is in prison for life - defined as 20 years - it's a long-term commitment, and he has to be there financially for the duration.

In January, he filled in a 46-page application form for funds from the National Lottery Board so that he can pursue plans to build refuges for children in other parts of Nepal. He applied for £125,000 and has undertaken to raise £40,000 himself in the next three years, in addition to the £15,000 he has already pledged. He has no idea how much the original seven children - plus these new boys - will cost him over, say, the next five years. But, of course, he says yes.

Esther Benjamins is buried in a Jewish cemetery in Groningen, in Holland. "Esther used to say, when her father died, that she never went to his grave because he wasn't there. And I hold the same outlook, I never go back to her grave. I'm not into headstones or things like that. I'm into living memorials."

Holmes, sitting on the wall outside Central Jail, glances over at the prison gate. "I've chosen a piece from Isaiah to put on a brass plaque on the wall when we build our refuge. I chose it before I thought of helping children in jail so it's funny that it's so appropriate."

He begins to recite, from memory: "Thus, says the Lord, to Cyrus his anointed, I will go before you and level the swelling hills. I will break down gates of bronze. I will hack through iron bars and you will know that I am the Lord, Israel's God, who calls you by name."

Holmes thinks about those Old Testament words for a while, and then he adds, "Esther was the sort of woman nothing ever stopped except, at the end of the day, childlessness. That was the last bronze gate that she failed against, and I wanted that to be broken as well. That is going on the wall when this is up and running. For me, that's the true memorial."