

BATTLE AGAINST DESPAIR

THE refugees' encampment — tattered tents and crude huts of grass and sticks — lay at the foot of the Himalayas at Pokhara. Six hundred men, women and children were huddled together in the most appalling poverty, living on a mug of rice a day, drinking infected water . . . in an atmosphere of despair and apathy.

This was the scene which greeted three Cambridge graduates who had each given up "safe" jobs when they learned the terrible plight of thousands of starving Tibetans in Nepal who had fled their country with the Dalai Lama in 1959.

But the story doesn't start there. It started a year earlier at the peaceful town of Battle, Sussex. The boys, then students, were visiting a Cambridge University children's holiday village where there were 30 Tibetan refugee children. They took an instant liking to the Tibetan boys and girls and became interested in their background.

Pemma, the sister of the Dalai Lama, was visiting the village at that time and she told them of the privations and hardships Tibetan displaced persons were enduring in India and Nepal.

Although they did not discuss it very much, the germ of an idea had been sown in the minds of the

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The refugees from Tibet had

escaped the Chinese but they

had lost the will to live. Then

three Cambridge graduates

came to give help . . . and hope

Report by Peter Larsen

The refugees' camp at Pokhara, though lacking in refinements, was a workmanlike job.

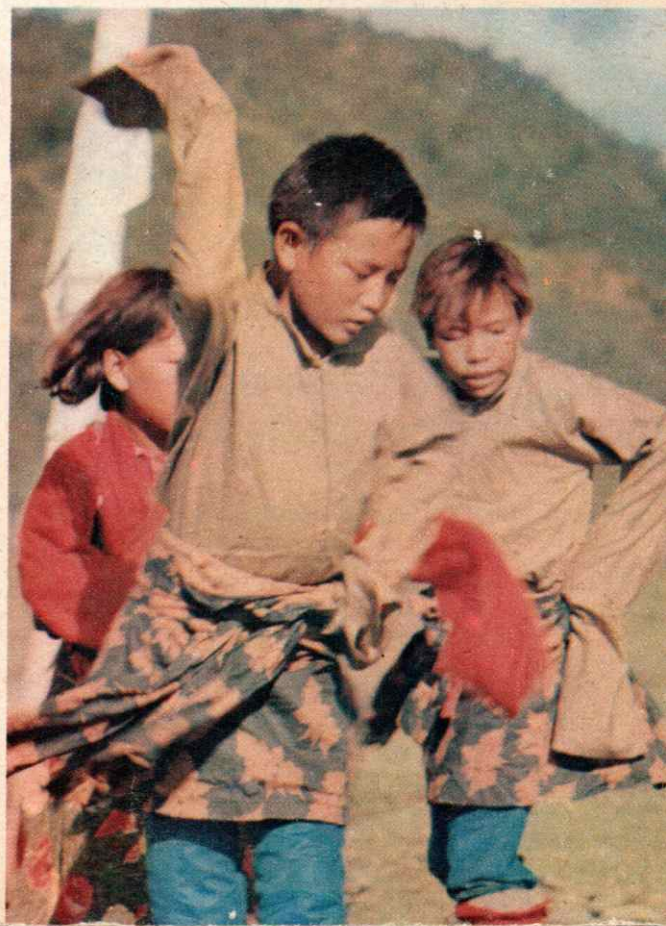




David MacPherson (with hat), who was in charge of the housing project, and Roger Catchpole (left) supervise the building of a wall.



ABOVE: Tibetan children shield their faces from the dirt thrown up by the supply plane taking off. RIGHT: the children were encouraged to retain their traditional dances.





There were well over a hundred youngsters at the camp—and meal times were a mixture of gobbling and laughter. **BELOW:** in the early days the Tibetans' diet was virtually nothing but rice.



BELOW: thanks to the generosity of the American people and Nepal Red Cross, the standard of the camp rations gradually improved.



three Cambridge men: Roger Catchpole, the biologist and holder of a diploma of Education, 27, from Lewes; David Macpherson, 24, from Lichfield, B.A., Hons. degree in History, and the Diploma of Education; and John Pearce, 24, of Truro, the economist and teacher of modern and medieval languages.

Half in jest, as his train pulled out of Battle station, John Pearce shouted to the other two: "See you in Nepal in '65!"

The other two grinned back . . . little realising then that they would, in fact, all meet again in Nepal a year later.

Yet that year their ways ran separately. Roger went to teach in Canada; John taught in Nigeria, and David went back to Cambridge to finish his studies. When they met again—in the summer vacation of 1964—they discovered that each had been thinking seriously about doing something practical about the situation in Nepal.

When the three men arrived in Pokhara in 1965 they found nearly 600 dejected, demoralised refugees, existing on a combination of charity and begging, in an encampment which had been half washed away by recent monsoon rains.

The Tibetans, most of whom had been nomads, had lost all their possessions, including large herds of yaks and goats which had either been stolen by the Chinese or perished during the tough trek through the Himalayas.

Another hazard was Pokhara's altitude. The homeless Tibetans were acclimatised to living at 10,000 feet in their homeland. Pokhara is only 2,000 feet above sea level. For days the refugees suffered from lower altitude; they found breathing a difficult and painful business, and many of the elderly died of bronchitis.

When the three Cambridge men arrived, morale couldn't have been lower amongst the Tibetans. It seemed as if they had taken on an impossible task.

The Tibetans gave many reasons for fleeing their

native land but the most common one was to escape from Chinese atrocities and brutality. Some spoke of how they had been forced to work 20 hours a day, sleep 30 in a room 15ft. x 15ft. and live on one mug of rice a day. Others showed bullet wounds and scars. And the majority of families were grieving the killing of one or more of their relatives.

While they were prepared to talk about the things they had suffered, the Tibetans showed no desire to co-operate with the Cambridge men or even make them welcome. Fortunately there was a French anthropologist at the camp who had got to know the Tibetans well. He listened with enthusiasm as the three explained what they hoped to accomplish—if only the Tibetans would pitch in and help. For without the refugees' co-operation, they could achieve nothing.

The Frenchman patiently introduced the three men to the heads of families and persuaded them to make a "Mancha", a ceremonial tea with which Tibetans traditionally welcome visitors.

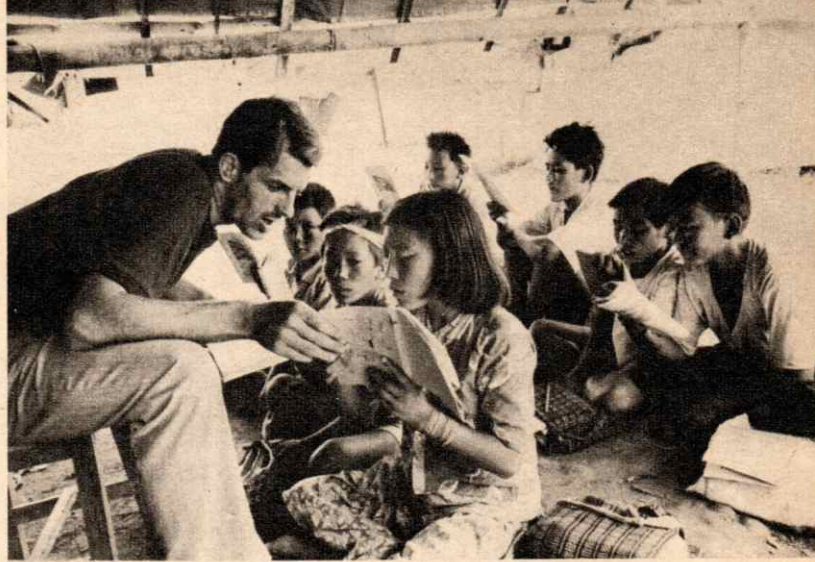
The Tibetans agreed, reluctantly, but when they all sat round sipping the Mancha and the Frenchman began to outline the Cambridge men's plans, they began to take an interest. Perhaps there was some hope for them after all, they thought. And soon the Tibetans were discussing a working solution to their problem, how the three men could work with the Tibetans' own system of authorities.

At last the refugees were to become an organised community.

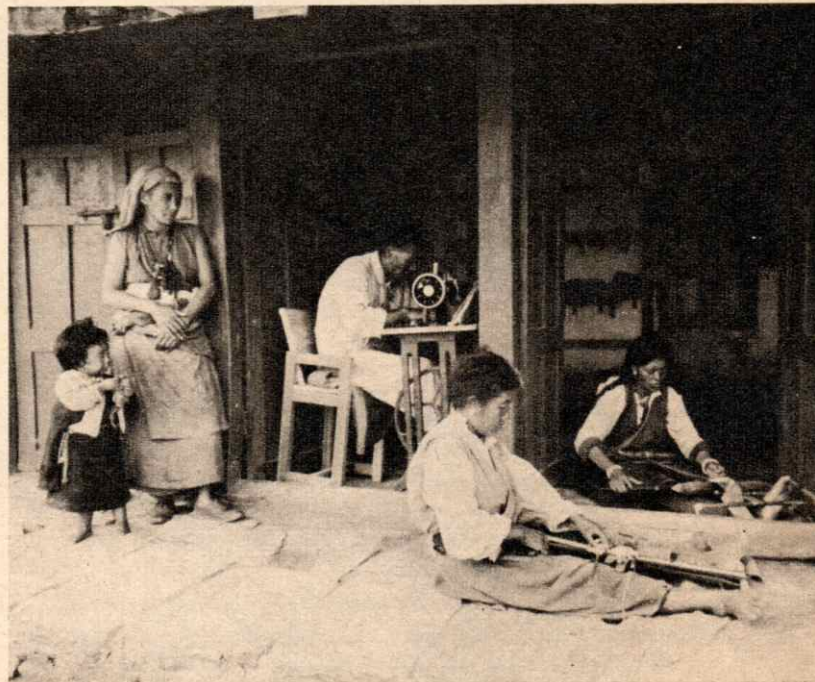
First priority, Macpherson, Pearce and Catchpole all agreed, was the children.

They set up an outdoor barber's shop, and one by one the children were given hygienic crops. Then followed a delousing session accompanied by much chatter and excited laughter. The children were also encouraged to start washing themselves daily and their clothing every other day. What simple medicines the three men could get hold of — mainly from the Nepal Red Cross — they used to combat the unsightly sores on the children's bodies.

Now the children's parents began to be interested.

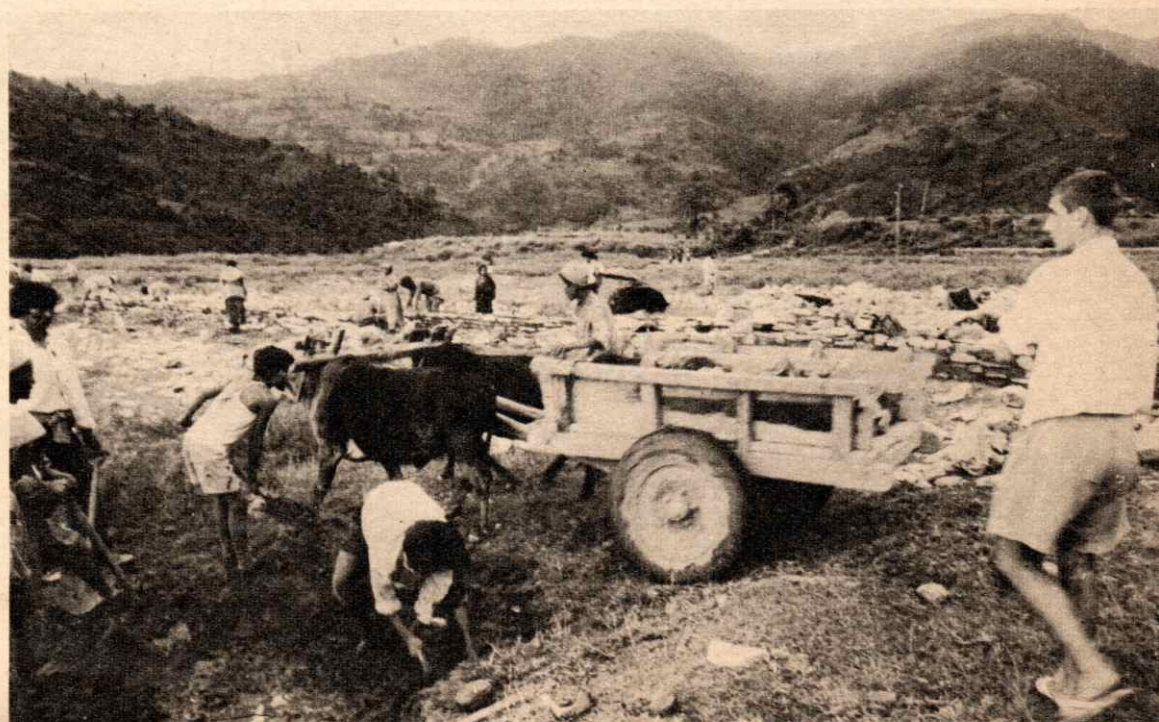


Roger Catchpole discovered his Tibetan pupils were intelligent and quick at learning English.



While their men built houses and dug sanitation trenches, their womenfolk weaved and sewed clothes ready for the severe Nepal winter.

Under David MacPherson's guidance, the Tibetans, young and old, soon learned how to lay foundations for their new village; their only form of mechanical help, a cart drawn by oxen.





Under the shade of a huge tree, the camp meet periodically to hear letters from the Dalai Lama read to them by their spiritual leader's official representative, Sonom Nunchuk.

By improving their own personal hygiene they discovered that their morale began to soar. They helped the Cambridge men to dig latrines on the edges of the encampment, and taught their children to wash their hands before eating. The general health of the refugees rapidly improved, and the number able to work rose from 30 to over 300.

With such a large working force, it was essential to delegate authority. This the Cambridge men did by using the Tibetans own chiefs: one to every 100 people, lesser chiefs for working parties of tens, and two higher chiefs with divided responsibility for the whole encampment.

If they were to win the respect, therefore the co-operation of the Tibetans, Catchpole, Pearce and Macpherson realised they must live in the camp, Tibetan-style. They built themselves a hut of grass and bamboo, which served as living quarters, store, office and meeting place.

For the first three months they lived on the basic Nepali diet and endured the same privations as the Tibetans; but it became increasingly obvious that they would have to raise the standard of living in the camp if they were to make any real progress.

About this time their campaign for funds in England was beginning to bear fruit. Several organisations, including the Save the Children Fund, gave vitamin tablets, shoes, clothes, soap, school meals, toys and tarpaulins to give the school a proper roof; the Nepal Red Cross Society started a clinic; the Norwegian Refugee Council provided carpentry and agricultural tools and money for a farming project; the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees paid the

Cambridge men's salaries, administration expenses and provided the hard cash for new buildings and other developments.

Yet though they themselves were setting such a fine example, it was some time before the three could convince the Tibetans of the need to work. But as the days passed, more and more Tibetan men rolled up their sleeves and got down to digging ditches and building new huts with aluminium roofing in preparation for the next monsoons. They also convinced the refugees of the necessity of boiling water before drinking; as a result, the high incidence of dysentery dropped dramatically. Gradually they established a six-day working week, with hours from 7-11 am and 2-6 pm. And the encampment began to take on the appearance of a thriving community.

By now the three Cambridge men had christened their bamboo hut "Tibnep House" . . . and there was usually a continuous stream of people of all ages coming in, not to mention chickens trying to steal the stores, rain leaking through the roof, mosquitos and dust.

A typical evening saw John Pearce trying to balance the books by the flickering light of a small kerosine lamp on a rickety table; Roger Catchpole and David Macpherson discussing a technical problem with some of the Tibetans against a background noise of thunder bouncing from surrounding hills. Chophe and Tundup, two English-speaking refugees who have become a vital part of Tibnep set-up, translating the ideas and words of the Cambridge grads to the Tibetan chiefs—while at the same time preparing a fantastic culinary concoction comprising cream

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Sonom Nunchuk (right) talks to one of the village leaders in his room; the room contains Buddhist holy books, a shrine, silver vessels in which fresh water is put daily as a mark of respect, and photographs of the Dalai Lama.



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onions, tomatoes, potato powder, milk, cheese and the rare piece of meat.

The next important step was to introduce projects to help make the Tibetans self-supporting. The first was the Tibetan tea shop in the local Nepalese village. The second, a tailoring business. And much later, when funds were more plentiful, they appropriated a building near the Pokhara air-strip and turned it into an hotel.

Tourists who flew in from Katmandu to see the magnificent views of the Himalayas were attracted by its quaint character, and the hotel became a paying proposition. A shop, selling Tibetan handicrafts, was opened in the hotel—and as an additional tourist-draw, three Tibetan women were given pitches outside the main door to weave and sew.

But although the air-strip brings prosperity to the Tibnep refugee village, it can also bring about the reverse effect. During the monsoon season, the grass runway is frequently reduced to a quagmire and cannot be used.

When supplies cannot be flown in from Katmandu it means they must be brought in by yaks—and this sort of trekking takes as long as seven days. And on more than one occasion the three Cambridge men had to intervene as tempers flared amongst the refugees when supplies have been late.

In fact, it is this very dependence on the Pokhara airstrip and the Red Cross for free rations that will, eventually, give Tibnep village its toughest challenge. For the rations will be stopped by the end of this year—and the Tibetans will have to support themselves on what they can sell and what they can grow.

To help them achieve self-sufficiency, the UNHCR/Red Cross have bought twelve and a half acres of land, and negotiations are in hand with the Nepalese to buy more. Already the foundations for a new Tibetan village have been constructed, and building will start in the spring. Neither the Cambridge men nor the Tibetans had any practical experience of farming, but with the help and know-how of a nearby

Nepalese agricultural station, a rice crop, summer vegetables and lentils are already growing—and six more acres are being worked for winter wheat, an unusual idea for Nepal.

But time is short and much remains to be done. Yet the Cambridge men have discovered that they cannot force the pace. They advise and consult with the Tibetan chiefs at all stages of each project, showing them the easiest and most efficient ways of doing things without actually giving orders. Giving orders, of course, would be much simpler and quicker. But it wouldn't help the Tibetans to feel responsible or prepare them for the time when they will be on their own.

The refugees are rapidly learning new skills from Nepali craftsmen. Where possible they work alongside the craftsmen on building sites, helping stone masons and carpenters.

The young Tibetan men and youths have joined apprenticeship schemes for various trades . . . for one day they will be responsible for the development of their village. It is also hoped that the Tibetan children (some of whom can now speak English thanks to the three Cambridge men) will be able to fit into the Nepali school system. At the moment, Tibnep's school comprises six classes with only bamboo partitions to separate them—and as much of teaching is in the form of loud chanting, the volume of noise produced is at near-deafening proportions!

Now, with their great adventure nearing a successful conclusion, Pearce, Macpherson and Catchpole are already looking to the future—to other refugee camps that might need help. But first they hope to meet the Dalai Lama in India on their way back to England later this year. By then they hope the Tibetans will be running the new settlement themselves.

But that won't be the end of the story. The three are looking forward to the time, some five years hence, when they will make a return visit to Tibnep to renew contact with their Tibetan friends . . . and sit round once again for a cup of Mancha tea.