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**From the Selected Works of Lester R. Kurtz**

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2001

**Hildegard Goss-Mayr**

Lester R. Kurtz, *George Mason University*



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Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 917281987]

Publisher Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## Peace Review

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713441298>

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To cite this Article Kurtz, Lester R.(2001) 'Hildegard Goss-Mayr', Peace Review, 13: 3, 457 — 461

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/13668800120079193

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13668800120079193>

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## Peace Profile: Hildegard Goss-Mayr

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Lester R. Kurtz

Hildegard Goss-Mayr may have done more than anyone alive to further nonviolence around the world. She was born into a culture of nonviolence despite the war raging throughout her childhood world. At the tender age of 12, she was among a crowd of schoolchildren taken to welcome Hitler on the Ringstrasse when he arrived in Vienna. As the Nazi leader's convoy approached, she could feel the people around her being gripped by his power and said to herself, "No, I can't get caught by that. I don't care if they kill me, I will refuse to put up my arm."

Exactly that kind of response had been nurtured by her family, a pacifist oasis in a desert of violence. Indeed, her father, Kaspar Mayr, was one of the founders of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation (IFOR). When Russian soldiers arrived at their house at the end of World War II, Kaspar Mayr put his family and their guests in the basement and cordially met the soldiers who were pounding at the door. He pushed aside their rifles and invited them in as guests, then called his family and friends to join them. The relieved and no doubt baffled soldiers eventually took off their rifles. Far from raping and pillaging, the conquering soldiers ended up sharing with her family and friends from their own food.

Hildegard studied in Vienna and New Haven, obtained a Ph.D. in philosophy but took up the family business, working for the IFOR in 1953. Over the coming decades she lobbied for peace at Vatican II, conducted training for participants in the Filipino People Power revolution, built up groups to oppose military dictatorships in Latin America, and initiated peacemaking projects in Rwanda and Burundi.

As she reflected on her life with members of our class visiting Vienna on a field trip from the European Peace University at Schläining, Austria, her face seemed to glow. She treated us nonviolent neophytes with respect and warmth and shared thoughtfully about her life as a nonviolent activist and a teacher of activists. It was a remarkable moment for all of us—the civil servant from the foreign ministry in Zimbabwe, the parliamentary speech writer from Pakistan, the psychologist working with young people on the streets of Bogota, the young lawyer from Vienna turning to peace work, the American sociology professor, and so on.

In the beginning of her work with the IFOR she was, she told us, "building bridges over the iron curtain." She recalled that "it was very difficult at that time

with all of the prejudices linked to these ideological projects. On this side they would call you a communist and on the other a capitalist.” At her center in Vienna she met her husband Jean Goss and they formed a partnership in nonviolent activism encircling the globe in the ensuing decades.

Unlike Hildegard, Jean was not born into a culture of nonviolence; his turn to nonviolence came after he had become decorated as a French soldier for killing so many Germans. He had wanted to kill Hitler but when he discovered he was not allowed to try, he asked himself whom he was killing. “It was not the leaders, but the workers like himself,” Hildegard reflects; “young people, fathers of children, and so on.” His unit went into battle; the 120 who began were reduced to 20 by the time they were taken prisoner. “He decided that he must respond against this total violence with the total of love and truth. The driving power behind this was his faith.”

When Pope John XXII convened the Vatican Council in Rome, Jean and Hildegard were there along with others who were trying to coax the Council into taking a stand against war. Jean took Hildegard to meet Italian Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani, known as an ultraconservative in church matters but an outspoken critic of war. (Jean had gone to the Cardinal’s office uninvited a decade earlier when the latter had declared *Bellum omnino interdicendum*, “War is to be altogether forbidden.”)

In meetings with more than 200 bishops at the conference the Goss-Mayrs urged the Council to expand Pope John’s 1963 encyclical on peace as part of a remarkable document that became *Gaudium et Spes*, the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*. They helped organize a group of 20 women, including Dorothy Day, who fasted and prayed for ten days. In the end, thanks in part to Cardinal Ottaviani’s impassioned speech in favor of it on the Council floor, the document was approved and the Roman Church went on record as being opposed to modern warfare and in favor of the right of conscientious objection to military service.

Having taken on the Vatican, the Goss-Mayr team turned its attention to trouble spots around the world. For example, they worked with Don Helder Camara, Archbishop Romero, and others to develop *Servicio Paz y Justicia* (SERPAJ) in Central and Latin America. While many opponents of military dictatorships were advocating a just war on the side of the poor, the Goss-Mayrs remained firm to their principles. They supported grassroots nonviolent activism notably working with SERPAJ, which was instrumental in the overthrow of dictatorships in Argentina and Chile (its secretary-general Adolfo Perez Esquivel won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1980).

One of the most remarkable missions on which the Goss-Mayrs embarked was when they were invited to the Philippines in the early 1980s by religious orders involved with poor people in Christian base communities there. At first, they had hesitated to go, she told us, because a civil war was tearing the country apart and they thought it might be too late to implement a nonviolent solution. They traveled around the country meeting with people in labor unions, base communities, churches, students, and others, and found many of them

searching for a nonviolent solution to the problem of the Marcos dictatorship. After the Gandhian resistance leader Benigno Aquino was assassinated, some spontaneous movements had emerged; the Goss-Mayrs met with his brother who informed them that the guerrillas had approached him. "With a few demonstrations you can't solve the problem," they told him. "We'll give you arms and then you can be the leader of the movement."

"We have to give them an answer," Aquino told Hildegard and Jean. "Can nonviolence succeed?"

"Yes," they told him, "but you have to have training, as with a guerilla war. You decide. We'll go back to Europe" to await the decision. The political opposition met in their absence; they fasted, prayed, and struggled together for ten days. They then called the Goss-Mayrs back to provide five-day courses on nonviolence throughout the country with people from various sectors of society. Participants were asked to analyze the situation: where is the violence? Where are the pillars of injustice? What permits it to continue?"

"It's Marcos," they all said.

"We said 'No; look at the pillars. We are the pillars; we allow it.' Of course, they were furious and left for the day. That sort of exercise changes one's view. We're not just giving a method, but trying to rethink how we are co-responsible. We must first see our own responsibility, then work to bring about change."

Next, they looked at the options: passivity, counter-violence and nonviolence. Most people had chosen the first, of course, because if you acted you might be tortured or killed. "We asked them about the logic of violence and counter-violence. We had to undo the myth that counter-violence is successful in solving the problems. Then we discussed how to draw upon the tradition of nonviolence, as a way of life." Finally, the Goss-Mayrs went deeper into nonviolence as a humanistic, spiritual approach and their experience with it, noting examples of successful nonviolence and teaching skills such as dialogue, intensive listening, mediation, direct action, mobilization, and network building.

When the People Power revolution was launched, after Marcos tried to steal a presidential election by fraud from Corazon Aquino (Benigno Aquino's widow), thousands swarmed into the streets. Crowds of well-trained, courageous nonviolent activists stopped the tanks and troops in their tracks. Nuns and priests stood between warring factions of the divided Filipino military; others gave the soldiers bread and cigarettes and talked them into changing sides in the conflict. In the end, after a mere four days, Marcos fled the country and Aquino assumed office as the new president. What years of guerilla warfare had been unable to do, a nonviolent revolution accomplished in four days.

**T**he 1986 People Power insurgency inspired others to confront dictatorships with nonviolent resistance around the world from U.S.-backed Pinochet in Chile to the communist regime in China and finally to the Soviet Empire in Eastern Europe. "Nonviolence was not the only factor," she admits, "but it was very important that the changes in Eastern Europe took place with the power of nonviolence while for 50 years people had thought that we'd have to fight with the military."

Hildegard Goss-Mayr continues the struggle, with a current emphasis on the

Great Lakes region in Africa. One of our class members asked her about Rwanda and Burundi (students from there had just shown us a horrific documentary on the massacres). “Are there specific conditions when it’s impossible to talk about nonviolence?” one of them asks.

She answered with what we now understand is her typical but paradoxical fusion of realism and optimism. The best thing to do is to start to solve conflicts peacefully early on, she notes, “when the spiral of violence has escalated and there’s military violence, etc., it’s very difficult to intervene.” Indeed, the chance was there in Rwanda and Burundi but it was not taken. “There was a Hutu government and the Tutsis and liberal Hutus were persecuted. Everything was prepared for that violence; it was very late” when she arrived on the scene in 1993. At the root of the conflict was a power struggle rather than ethnic hatred. “They’ve lived together for a long time,” she explains,

... but now things have changed. Formerly one group worked the land and the other raised cattle; they depended on each other. But that situation was disrupted and colonialism worked to increase the friction. When you kill each other, you develop wounds and there is traumatization. The healing has to be done on different levels: economic and social levels are extremely important. There must be conditions for life for all.

She is now involved in efforts to promote healing, helping the victims to grieve and rebuild, perhaps to prevent another massacre. “If you can’t work out your sadness and you keep it inside,” she explains, “you move toward revenge.”

Never thwarted by gargantuan tasks, Hildegard Goss-Mayr is now promoting rebuilding in the African Great Lakes Region, taking advantage of the strength of the survivors, especially the women, many of whom have taken in orphans regardless of their ethnicity. In Burundi, small groups of Hutus and Tutsis meet together, sometimes spending a week together. They listen to each other and learn about their mutual suffering. They are trying to undo the chasm between them created by widespread violence and government collaboration with the forces of division.

Another student from our class asks why some people kill for religion and others promote peace. All the world’s religions require that people relate to each other with respect and love, she responded:

There’s a pedagogy of helping to develop a loving relationship with the other; we can trace this in the Qur’an, the Vedas, in other books of the religions. You have to overcome egos, hatred, and violence. In my opinion, religions betray this tradition when they begin to identify with power. For example, in the first three centuries, Christianity was fundamentally pacifist. Then when they linked up with the Empire, they betrayed this idea that you should respect the other. Then came the idea of the Just War. In Islam, you find the same thing ... In certain *suras*, if you kill one person you kill humanity.

**I**n recent years Goss-Mayr has been talking and writing about what she calls “deepening the work” of nonviolence. Although we have had considerable success in overthrowing dictators, we have not been so successful at building a nonviolent civil society in the wake of the revolution. In the Philippines, for example, the political change came very fast, but “there was not the necessary willingness in the middle class and upper class for social change and little work

was done there.” Nonetheless, the effectiveness of People Power was not forgotten; when President Ramos tried to stand for an unconstitutional term, Cory Aquino called for resistance and half a million people showed up to protest, forcing him to stand down. “The memory of nonviolent success is important when you start again,” she explained to us. “To me, nonviolence is a life attitude, not just developing specific methods. Injustice will always reappear and it will be a long-term task.”

When the United Nations launched its decade-long emphasis on the Culture of Peace and Nonviolence in 2000, Hildegard Goss-Mayr was still at work, speaking as one of its main proponents. She appeared at a symposium at UNESCO headquarters in Paris and echoed the themes she has struggled for and given witness to over the last half century, that nonviolence is more powerful than violence and provides the path to the future.

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