

# Loss and palliative care

**“ Everyone who is connected with palliative care, either as professionals or as patients or families, is familiar with the concept of loss. We all learn sooner or later to adapt and to try to accept both the big losses, such as bereavement, and the little losses such as decreased mobility, loss of independence or just the abandonment of a cherished dream.**

During the last few months, I have seen two new books that are especially relevant to the concept of loss in palliative care. They are quite different from each other in many respects, but I have had the privilege of knowing and working with both the authors. Both are linked by journalism of very different types.

Victor Zorza lived a most extraordinary life by any standards. It has been chronicled by Michael Wright as a publication from the International Observatory on End of Life Care.<sup>1</sup>

Victor was born Izrael (known as Salek) Wermuth in what was then Eastern Poland in 1925. As was the case with countless Eastern European Jewish families, there was huge suffering and loss of all civilised existence. In Victor's case there was loss of family, loss or change of identity, loss of political idealism, loss of culture and of language, of religion and worst of all, loss of accurate memory.

After the Second World War, Victor became a prize-winning journalist and a pre-eminent Kremlinologist during the cold war, as he was able to interpret the machinations of the Soviet political establishment from afar.

At the age of 23, his daughter, Jane, was diagnosed with melanoma of the toe. Unfortunately, the disease was aggressive and spread. Within two years, she required admission to Sir Michael Sobell House in Oxford in 1977, where she died after only eight days. Both Victor and his wife, Rosemary, were devastated and their journalistic response was to write about the nascent UK hospice movement.<sup>2</sup> In later years, Victor told me that as part of its thorough investigation of all its critics, the KGB had immaculate documentation of Victor, including a copy of this book about hospice care.

During the 1980s, Victor's response to his loss was to develop a deep interest in the micro-politics of Indian village life: another example of a society deprived of at least some of the luxuries of the West. It was on a trip back to the UK that he visited Russia and was moved by the suffering of Russian cancer patients. During the early 1990s, with the advent of *perestroika*, Victor was instrumental in the development of the Russian hospice movement. He found numerous collaborators, in particular Andrei Gnezdilov, who shared his enthusiasm for hospice ideals. However, he never lost his deeply sceptical view of Russian bureaucracy, a facet of his complex personality that sometimes militated against harmonious working relationships.

The second book is about loss, too, and how suffering has had a very positive effect. It is written by a young palliative physician in Hong Kong who developed an aggressive breast cancer. She writes under the nom de plume of Dr Hannah, and the small book is a compilation of her weekly diary entries originally published in the *South China Morning Post*.<sup>3</sup> She writes in extraordinarily frank terms about her diagnosis, treatment and the reactions of her husband, young family, colleagues and patients. Most importantly, she describes how she has learned from her illness and been sustained by her friends and her faith. At one point she says, 'Everyone has suffering one way or another but we do not live to suffer; we suffer in order to learn how to live. There is healing in the process as we learn to grow through suffering'.

Both these books must be read by all who try to understand loss and suffering. They illustrate some of the extremes of emotion that we may become immune to through over-familiarity. They also show how good can result nevertheless.

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Andrew Hoy, Editor

## References

1. Wright M. *Victor Zorza: a life amid loss*. Lancaster: Observatory Publications, 2006.
2. Zorza R, Zorza V. *A way to die. Living to the end*. London: Andre Deutsch, 1980.
3. Dr Hannah. *A mother's diary – a chronicle of life and faith through cancer*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong Book Centre Ltd, 2006.