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Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan

May 22nd 2003
From The Economist print edition

Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan, refugee chief, died on May 12th, aged 70

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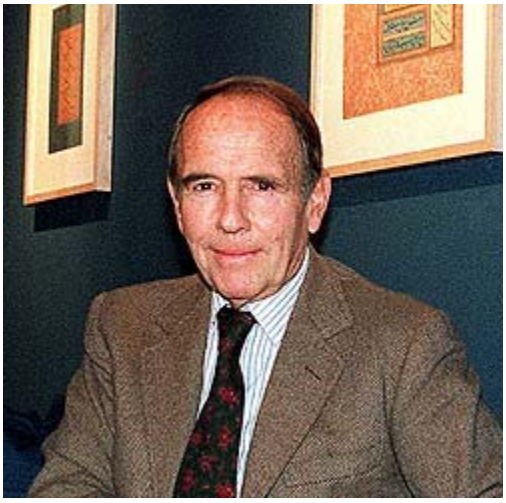

IT is lunchtime at the Château de Bellerive, Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan's home on Lake Geneva. His guests are being served the elegant food associated with the prince's kitchen. But the prince and his wife Catherine are content to have a dish of brown rice and an accompanying salad. Can it be that they are not hungry, or is the prince making a gesture: that although he is a rich man he has humble tastes? No one is so impolite as to ask, but the guests may talk about it later.

The prince could be a puzzle even to those who claimed to know him well. Was he a prince at all? He was a prince of the Ismailis, a Shia Muslim sect that has some 20m followers. His father, Aga Khan III, who traced his bloodline to the Prophet Muhammad, was the leader of the Ismailis. The British royal family, which knows a thing or two about heredity, recognised Sadruddin as a true prince and he was treated accordingly.

Sadruddin (the name translates as “defender of the faith” in Arabic) was disappointed that his father did not name him as the next leader. But father apparently believed that his son lived only for pleasure. Sadruddin's much publicised life with his first wife Nina, a model, may have made it seem so. “Myths and labels become attached to people,” he remarked later, “giving them a reputation that does not always correspond to reality.” It could be that his father had mixed up Sadruddin with his half-brother Aly, who was briefly married to Rita Hayworth, a Hollywood star, and was indeed a tearaway. In the event, when the Aga Khan died in 1957, the crown, and the title Aga Khan IV, went to Sadruddin's nephew, the present holder.

Sadruddin was then 24. At that age disappointments can usually be overcome, particularly if, like the prince, you have advantages. He had had an elitist education, at Le Rosay in Switzerland and Harvard. He spoke several languages, including French from his mother, a Parisian, and Persian and English from his father. The amount of his personal fortune was unknown (like that of the Ismailis, whose followers are expected to contribute 10% of their income to the sect). But it was certainly adequate. With these assets to sustain him, Sadruddin discovered what was to be his life's work, to improve the lot of the world's refugees.

Statues and people

Like many people who came to do good work for the United Nations, Sadruddin drifted into the organisation, rather than setting out to make it his career. As a student he started an art collection that eventually became one of the finest in private hands. He recalled that at one time you could pick up a page of ancient Islam calligraphy for as little as $100, many times less than it would be worth now. He became concerned about the fate of Nubian statues threatened by the construction of the Aswan High Dam in Egypt, and in 1958 was taken on as an adviser by UNESCO, the UN's cultural branch. He discovered that the dam not only threatened Nubian statues but that some 100,000 Nubian people were being moved from their traditional homes. People were clearly more important than statues, however precious. In 1959 Sadruddin became an assistant to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and applied to the job the code of morality and responsibility of his faith. He was made deputy high commissioner in 1962 and in 1965 at the age of 32 was appointed to the top job.

The problems that followed were far graver than those of the Nubians (who were eventually resettled in Egypt, albeit in inferior territory). Bangladesh was born in 1971 out of the break-up of Pakistan, creating hundreds of thousands of refugees. In 1973 Idi Amin expelled thousands of Asians from Uganda. At the end of the Vietnam war in 1975 thousands fled the country. And so on. He was good at getting rich countries to be generous. Perhaps only a rich man can be a successful beggar. The elder George Bush was a friend: they played tennis together. Mr Bush found the urbane European an agreeable contrast to his Texas circle.

Sadruddin stepped down after 12 years, the longest any refugee chief has held the job, but returned to the UN at times of crisis to give help, notably in Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation and Iraq after the first Gulf war. He seemed the favourite to become the UN's secretary-general in 1981, but the Soviet Union vetoed his candidature, claiming he was too pro-western, and vetoed him again in 1991. Around that time stories circulated that the prince was a secret agent for the British, using his job as a cover for intelligence gathering. It was almost certainly nonsense, but the Russians may have believed it. Sadruddin insisted that he had equal sympathies with eastern and western peoples. His description of himself as “a citizen of the world” was a fair one.

He bore this second big disappointment in his life stoically. An even greater disappointment was the realisation of how little had been done for the world's poor. In a speech not long ago he said that in 80 countries people's incomes were lower than they were ten years earlier. The number of people in poverty, earning less than $1 a day, was stuck at 1.2 billion. His meal of brown rice was a heartfelt gesture. Give him that.