



The human touch

PHOTOS BY JEAN-PIERRE REVEL

Jean-Pierre Revel has a way of witnessing rare moments. Men so engrossed in a game of chess they are oblivious to four people stomping down a staircase just next to them. A little girl selling oranges just beneath a sign that reads: "Who knows the future? No one." A nurse feeding a premature baby in a neo-natal intensive care unit.

Often, at such times, he is able to capture the moment on film, transforming it from rare to lasting — which is interesting and somewhat surprising given the fact that Revel has spent his career as a doctor, not a photographer.

"But the two go very well together," Revel says as he explains how being a photographer has somehow helped him to be a better doctor. "As a photographer you must concentrate both on perspective, the whole picture, and on focus, the most essential part of the picture. This has helped me immensely to analyse problems as a doctor because it is easy to lose perspective or, conversely, to overlook particular details."

Revel received his medical degree from the University of Lille, France, then graduated in tropical medicine and public health. Apart from a few years doing post-graduate research on the epidemiology of disasters, he has spent his career as a physician working throughout the world in humanitarian contexts. In 1990, he joined the International Federation's staff as a public health specialist.

His work has taken him — and his camera — to all corners of the globe. Over a period of approximately twelve years,

Revel travelled and lived in 16 African countries. Since he began working for the Federation, he has worked in some 20 different countries, many of them in the Middle East, Eastern Europe and Central Asia. He worked on the Thai border in 1979 and 1980 and was deeply moved by the plight of Cambodian refugees fleeing their country. When asked to name his favourite part of the world, Revel does not hesitate to say it is Asia. "Mainly," he emphasizes, "it's the people who make the difference."

People are no doubt his primary concern, and his success — as physician and photographer alike — pivots on the fundamental respect he harbours for all people. "As a doctor," he explains, "suffering is always the point of departure. But suffering is not necessarily sad, miserable and hopeless. Suffering is also a concrete sign of life. The rationale for my work is to help alleviate pain, but it is the people I am trying to help who are in charge. They are in command of their own lives. We doctors are not, in fact, magnificent or glorious, we are just little handcraft men."

This fundamental respect is evident in Revel's photographs.

In the reflection of a wise man in Brazil who is able to recall accurately every drought in the region from the beginning of the century. In the smile of a boy who has tied so many small pieces of string together to fly his kite on a crowded street of a refugee camp — a smile that conveys the spirit of humanity that endures despite the tragic reality of his world.

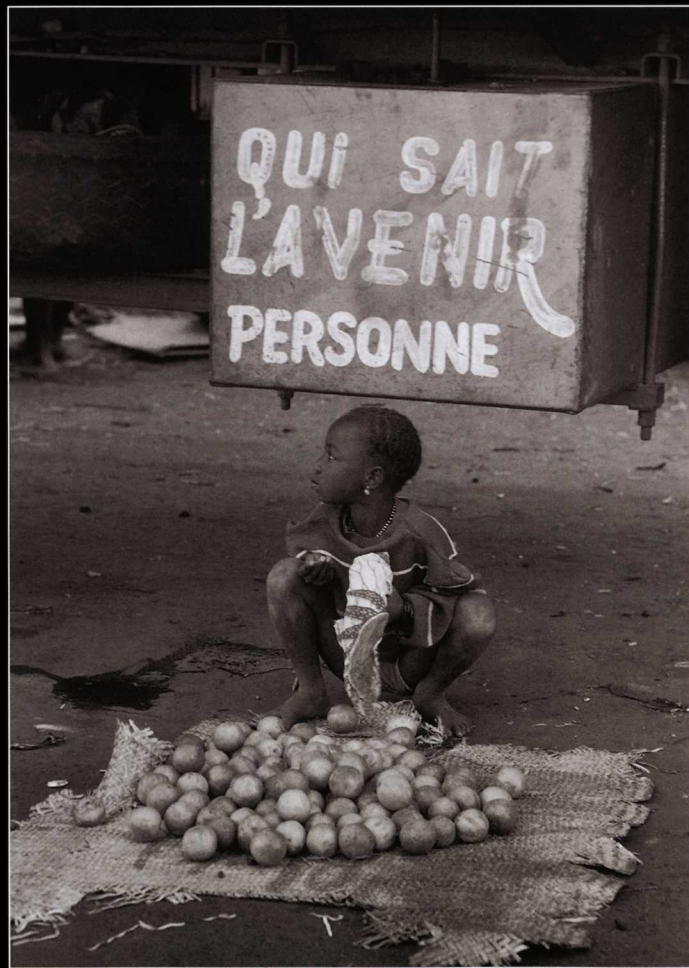
Barbara Geary

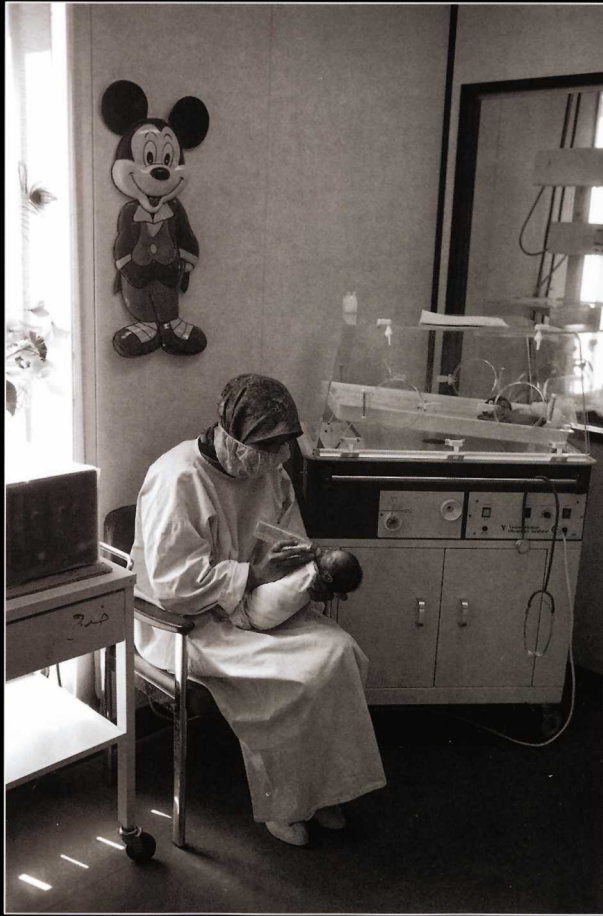
Barbara Geary was formerly the co-editor of Red Cross, Red Crescent. She now works for the Rolex Awards for Enterprise in Geneva, Switzerland.



Mali, January 1990 ▶

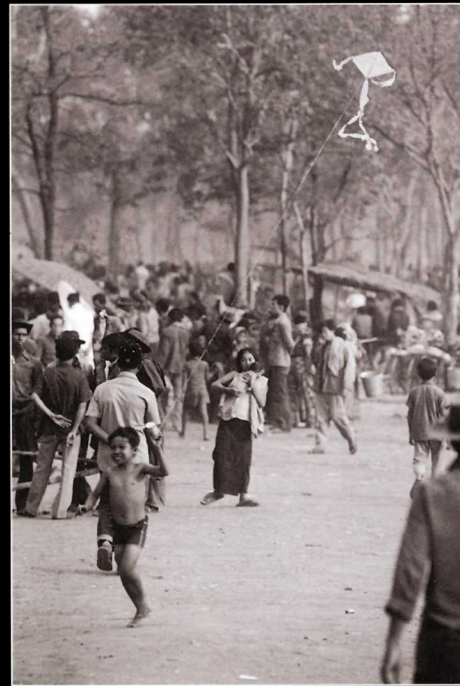
◀ Minsk, Belarus, November 1990





Brazil, May 1993 ▶

▼ Vietnam, December 1979



◀ Iraq,
February
1994