

### **In conversation with Prof. Jean Nordmann about humanitarian work**

*Born in La Chaux-de-Fonds, a small town in Switzerland - in the mountains of the Jura - Jean Nordmann had an easy childhood. He went skiing right from the door of his parents house where his had a manufacture of Swiss watches. He grew up with an older sister, who taught him how to read at the age of five.*

*He studied a subject which was a mix of medicine and biology, a special training aimed to do research. During his studies he got bored rather quickly, so asked the lab leader of a well-known department at the Medical School if he could work for one of the teams in his department. This is how he ended up in neurobiology. After a remarkable career as a lab leader and professor, he decided to leave his institute at the age of 44 to devote himself to humanitarian work. For more than 20 years he worked as a delegate and head of mission for the International Committee of the Red Cross, UNO and various nongovernment organizations (NGOs). He was stationed in many African countries as well as Papua (Indonesia), Afghanistan and Ex-Yugoslavia. Today, as a pensioner he runs a Bead & Breakfast in Basel. This is how we met. I spent my birthday at his place and he made it very special.*

*Trigger warning: We are talking about war here, this might not be easy to cope with for everyone.*

### **What did you investigate as a neurobiologist? Did you find it fascinating?**

We were interested in finding out how nerve cells communicate with each other and with cells from other tissues, but you have to understand that people tend to misunderstand Science. 99 percent of the time you do tedious work, you have to repeat an experiment over and over and it's only at the end, that you have the pleasure to analyze the data and that the job gets interesting.

I was lucky because I was appointed professor at a very young age. I must admit that I loved what I did, I was basically married to my research. Teaching PhD students was part of my job, which I found rewarding, because these young people were really interested in Science.

### **What did you learn about the human brain?**

Beside beautiful and amazing things I understood, that despite the human memory, mankind does not learn much regarding how to avoid violence.

### **Despite being a successful researcher, you decided to leave science in your mid forties. Why that?**

Nobody believed me at first, when I said I would quit. But after 24 years of more or less living in the lab, I wanted to give some of my years to the children who grow up in war torn countries. But the joke is, that I always remained a scientist, because when I was on vacation, I went to visit a friend of mine in the States, to work (or play!) in his lab. **You never stop to learn something! I learn about science still today, even though I have long been retired.** I am still a scientist from top to toe.

**Are there any similarities between leading a lab and being a head of mission?**

The way you have to defend a project in Science is the same as the way you have to defend your presence in a region, when you have to deal with armed soldiers or the Chief of the Police or the President. **You have to explain your thinking and find convincing arguments.**

**What was your motivation to do humanitarian work and why did you choose to go to Afghanistan and Africa?**

At the beginning **helping children was my biggest motivator**, but through my work I realized that everybody is happy to be helped.

I never choose my assignments, but rather accepted to go wherever the organization I was working for sent me. The main difference to other places is the war. In our streets there is no war. If you work in an area where there is a war going on, you cannot expect to see what is called development, you just need to think and act quickly. This was closer to my way of working. Besides that, I don't mind to live in conditions which are different from here, as far as housing, eating and working is concerned.



Nomade – Badakhshan Province – Afghanistan 2003

**How did your family react to your ambitions?**

My children were already old enough to go to university and they understood my reasons for changing my career path. Even my parents, who at first did not quite understand why I gave up a permanent position with a good salary, were very supportive. **What I realized very soon was the role of the media in conflicts.** My mother kept all local newspaper articles about the wars that I had been to and I was shocked about what was written in these articles. Half of it was not true, from my perspective and in contrast to what my parents could read in the papers, our life was not dangerous every single day.

What people don't understand is, that **even in war, not every second is dangerous.** What is **difficult to cope with is, that you never know when an attack comes or if it will ever happen.** The uncertainty is the problem. But that does not mean we constantly worked under attack.

**How did you communicate with people in the countries you work in?**

In countries where I did not speak the language, I always had an interpreter. Sometimes this made things more complicated, because, say, you want to speak to the head of a rebel group, you would rather prefer to speak to this person alone. But my experience with national staff was excellent. They always did a fantastic job.

**Without the national staff humanitarian organizations could not work.** This is why in my opinion there should have been no discussion about pulling the local staff out of Afghanistan. They should have been brought to our countries. Without these people our work was worth nothing. **They are the link between the international organizations, the NGOs and the authorities and the population.**

**What were your goals working in war territories and what did you hope to achieve?**

We had plenty of goals, for example **delivering assistance to the population, hospitals, clinics and orthopedic centers** etc. To give you an example, we brought prosthetics to people who lost a limb (or both) because of landmines. We also were assisting people to find their beloved ones, lost because of the war. We visited prisoners or were teaching armed forces International Humanitarian Law. Just to name a few.



Workshop and prosthesis – Faizabad, Afghanistan 2004

**It's important to realize that whatever you do will finally be small.** When I was working in science I was working sometimes with electron microscopy. So whatever I was doing later, I imagined I had an electron microscope, which would turn the little things we achieved into something big!

You know, looking from outside, what you achieve is nothing, **but for the people in the country it can be quite a lot. Their smile is important to me.** We once brought back a child to a mother after two years of being apart. Both of them thought the other one was dead. To see their faces when they were reunited was extremely rewarding.



Family reunion, Eastern Province Congo 1996

### **How did you achieve these goals?**

What I have learned is, that **you have to be extremely patient to make things work.** In order to achieve your goals, you have to get to know the people, you have to talk to them. Sometimes it takes a lot of time until you get the permission to work in a difficult area. I remember one case when I was patient enough to wait three months to meet with the high authorities of the country. From that point onwards, things went easy.



Women and children in a camp for displaced people, waiting to receive assistance  
South Darfur, Sudan 2005



A boy who lost his parents, working around the town to get some money for living  
South Darfur, Sudan 2005



This old man had tears running along his cheeks, because for the first time in his life, he did not even have a single drop of tea to offer to a visitor  
Hodh ech Chargui, Mauritania 2008

**Let us dig deeper into you teaching international humanitarian law. How did that work?**

You know, **a lot of soldiers have no idea about International Humanitarian Law.** I should have gone to the capitals of some well known countries for that matter! No, but seriously, even in the Swiss army, the basic training is performed without any mention about International Humanitarian Law. Part of it was already implemented in 1907, concentrating on the fighting soldiers. After World War II it was amended by laws protecting the civilian population and political detainees. The truth however is, at least from my experience, that – even if people understand the law - hardly anyone follows those rules. Just look at the Vietnam war or what is happening now in Ukraine and you will understand what I mean.

But on a more optimistic note, sometimes it works! In one mission, I was assigned to, **the fighting parties completely changed their behavior after learning about humanitarian Law and the way they looked at their enemy changed.** That was interesting to see.

The major change within the last 20 years is, that **things will not be forgotten so quickly.** In other words, **investigations will be done, to find out what was really happening during the war.**

**Did you ever feel like giving up?**

No! I have a head like a stone. If I want something done, I go up to the end. **There is nothing more rewarding than to give a perspective to people.** If there is a family, who has nothing to eat and has lost the father and you can provide them with something, so they have a possibility to survive, that's very rewarding. I have visited detainees and because of our visits, they were assured that they will not disappear. I still have a letter from those times, where prisoners thank us, stating that **without our support they would have committed suicide.**



**What was your most difficult deployment?**

Perhaps the one in Bosnia-Herzegovina, because like the people in Ukraine now, it felt like they were cousins. It was a war next door. When I came in and saw all these prisoners it reminded me of World War II. **The only reason for them to be there was politics. They were brothers and suddenly became enemies.**



Following shelling, fetching water becomes one of the major activities for a population living in a developed town, Ex-Yugoslavia 1994

**Which qualities are important in doing humanitarian work?**

**Patience and perseverance** are, I believe, important. I will give you an example: I was working in a region where we needed a paper form the high authorities to get in. It was difficult to obtain these papers. At the heart of the problem was in fact a competition between two ministers. One of them at one point asked me to come to his office. So I put on my tie and rushed to get there. But I was made to wait. Three hours later his secretary left and I asked him if the minister was aware that I was still there. He said he assumed he would. Another two hours or so later the minister left his office and saw me waiting. He asked: "What are you doing here?" and I answered "Well, you called me at noon." "I completely forgot about that", was his honest answer. I told him that I thought he wanted to perform an experiment to see, if white people from Europe can stand the very hot climate for five hours without drinking. Shortly later, I was not only provided with food and drinks, but also with a paper that allowed us to work in the region mentioned above. We were the only ones who ever received such a paper and I am sure it was only because of me sitting there for five hours.

**Personal contacts to build up trust** is another thing that helps. In Africa there are often checkpoints guarded by child soldiers. I always went, as head of mission, with my local colleagues to talk to these children. I took the time to have a proper conversation. After a while they knew us. Because they knew us and trusted us, we were able to pass every checkpoint. Once the president called me to inform me that some of his people had been released by rebels. His problem was that he could not send anyone to go and get them, because we were the only ones allowed into this territory. So we took our three cars to pick the people up. We passed all checkpoints with no problem, because the child-soldiers knew us due to our previous numerous conversations.



All on one bike, better than walking  
Soldiers in Faradje, Eastern Province – Congo 2010



Freedom fighter, South Darfur – Sudan 2005

**How did you cope or do you cope with what you saw and experienced?**

For one, you don't have a lot of time to think about yourself during the assignment.

**Everything came back when I stopped to work after 22 years. I am not sure I will ever cope.** I saw people crying, being killed, mass graves, intestines of people used as a rope for checkpoints and more.

**Which piece of advice do you have for young people who would like to follow your footsteps?**

First, there is a difference between someone who works for a humanitarian organization at the age of 25 versus someone who is 55. At an older age you may be able to accept things you cannot change. On the other hand, you are more likely to be accepted as an authority.

What I usually tell young people is this: **Work in your own country first, and then go to the tough places. And don't stay too long in one place. If you do, chances are, that you will never leave.** So change your assignments.

**If someone wants to actively get involved in helping the needy, are NGOs a good place to start?**

The first thing I tell people is, that **there is a lot to do here, in our own countries**. There are the people living on the street, there are children that are not well looked after, there are many old people who need help and, of course, the refugees. So **you don't have to go to Afghanistan or Africa to help**.

**You published a book called "Beauty in Bitterness". It contains pictures you took on your assignments, to show them to your family. How did the collection end up in a photo-book?**

A lady who is involved in the culture of the Basel life saw my pictures and convinced me to show them to the public. She managed to organize an exhibition. I provided the pictures and wrote short texts about the stories of the people in the pictures. After the exhibition, we decided to turn it into a book. I found it interesting to see that people found the pictures beautiful until they read the text below and found out about the circumstances. Some of them started crying when they realized what was hidden in the photograph.

I understood however, that **people tend to forget quickly, because they have to**. We cannot live with such a hard truth forever. It was the same when I told my stories after the end of a deployment. Friends invited me to hear about my work, but after five minutes the conversation moved on to softer topics. I can't blame anyone for it, but it happens to all of us involved in humanitarian work. It's too difficult to listen to, because it's very painful in the first place and because people perhaps realize that they are living a much better life than people in other parts of the World. They **feel helpless about it. We prefer to forget or we don't ask because we are afraid of the answers**.

**And today, are you rather optimistic or pessimistic about the state of the nations?**

There are always two sides in a coin. I am running a Bed & Breakfast now and I meet a lot of young people who are doing wonderful things, but if I look at the newspaper in the morning, nothing but bad news, no mention of positive stories!

**I love to see that there is a big wave of support for Ukrainian refugees in Switzerland**. But let's face it, they have straight blond hair and a light tone of skin. However now **people start to realize, that we are making a difference between refugees from different countries. My hope is, that people will be more open to refugees also from other parts of the World**.

**You are using your income from the B&B and donations to support various projects across the globe. Can you explain what these projects are?**

Absolutely! Let me name them one by one:

- 1) A **school** (which was build in part with the money of the B&B) **for AIDS orphans** in the **bush of Central Africa**.
- 2) A **family in Africa has two boys and adopted six orphans**. Moreover they accommodate a lady with two small children who left her village after her husband was murdered. Despite their small salaries they do not have enough to support this large number of people. We try thus to help them.



- 3) A **small project which allowed a youngster to get a new leg (prosthesis) after he was shot at**. He lives in a village located a region where Boko Haram is active. Donations pay his medical treatment and school fees. He's by now first of his class and needs to get a new prosthesis every two years.
- 4) We support little **Angel, who lives in the slums of Kenya**, so with all her problems she can live and get medical treatment. She was abandoned when she was only a few hours old. Anita found her and adopted her. Then a fire destroyed their home. On top of all, a few months after birth, Angel was diagnosed with **"autism"** disorder. She is now starting to walk and to talk. She loves to sing.
- 5) We pay the **university fees for a brilliant young girl in Poland** (the daughter of an amazingly knowledgeable guide who we met in Auschwitz) and for her brother, as well as for the **daughter of a colleague of mine who lives in Mostar (Bosnia)** and has worked with me during the war in ex-Yugoslavia.

**These costs amount to 46. 000 Euros per year.**

#### **How can people support your charity?**

First of all let me say this: we need NGOs, but it is also true, that if we have a closer look at how much money really reaches the people we want to help, then there is a huge gap. But I insist, we should help International organizations and NGOs.

In my case the projects are much smaller. I have chosen the families, because I know them, so they are the lucky ones. I know that there are millions of others, who are not supported. So you could discuss about this approach, but what donors like about our projects is, that they can be assured, that 100 percent of the money reaches the people we are committed to.

#### **If people want to donate right away, these are the bank details:**

Bank Account School Africa  
Jean Nordmann  
Hebelstrasse 85  
4056 Basel

IBAN: CH81 0840 1000 0543 5183 9  
SWIFT: MIGRCHZZ80A  
Migros Bank AG  
Aeschenvorstadt 72,  
4051 Basel  
Switzerland  
Clearing: 8401

**Do you have any final piece of advice to give?**

I do not really like it so much to give advice. I would never have thought how big the impact of the story of my life is on other people. They find it amazing that being a professor, doing a job in research that I loved, I could quit for doing humanitarian work in war torn countries. So some people come to me to ask for advice on how they should live their lives.

**My advice is this: As long as you don't hurt anyone, do whatever you want! And secondly: There is no need to go to Africa to make an impact. We also need people to help in our society.**

**Thanks for sharing your story with me and my audience Jean! We very much appreciate it!**



**My interviewee today was:**

Jean Nordmann (born 1948) – Studies and PhD in neurobiology in Geneva, Switzerland, postdoctorate in Cambridge and Göttingen. He resigned as Director of Research at Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, France in 1992 to work for International Organizations and NGOs. He now lives in Basel.

If you would like to reach out to Jean directly then please either

Email him at: [nordmannjj@yahoo.fr](mailto:nordmannjj@yahoo.fr)

Or call him on his phone: (+41) 061 321 93 42