

A prophet is not without honour save... in own country and amongst his own people

There was one last avenue left for me to pursue. I was loath to go down it, but I knew it had to be followed to its conclusion. It was the Valderano link. The reason I was so hesitant was because I felt I could anticipate the outcome already. It did not augur well for British complacency.

My mood had been induced partly by a wicked cartoon from the New Yorker. It was a brilliant drawing, instantly recognisable as an aging James Bond (the original Sean Connery version). He was shuffling away in dressing-gown and slippers, with the aid of a Zimmer-frame. There was a redoubtable middle-aged female nurse in attendance in starched uniform - unmistakably Miss Moneypenny. The caption read:

'No, Commander, we are not going to Islamabad, we are going to the bathroom.'

I suppose it is nothing more than the update of an old joke. Every dog must have his day. The 18th Duke of Valderano's day had been long, long ago. It had to be all of twenty years since Michael Ivens had suggested introducing us.

So far as I could remember, Valderano had gained his formidable reputation for insight into terror, insurgency and guerilla warfare alongside the partisans in the north of Italy towards the end of the Second World War. This was before he had assumed his many Italian and Sicilian titles, as they would have been unlikely to cut much ice with the mostly communist partigiani. His more prosaic name was Ronnie Waring.

He had gone on to valiant deeds in the early, tense days of the Cold War. This, in turn, had led to his appointment as an instructor at the NATO War College near Lisbon. With the 1974 revolution in Portugal, he was moved on to lectureships in Rome and London, as well as the United States and Brazil. Other countries of special interest to him were Angola, the Congo, Mozambique and Zimbabwe. At much the same time, mid-1970s, he set up a Research Foundation for the Study of Terrorism. One of my special interests as a consultant to the Boeing Company at that time had been the subject of the hijacking of civil aircraft and that was to have been our common ground. Valderano's Research Foundation was to attract any number of august names but, unfortunately, a lesser enthusiasm for funding.

He had the satisfaction of being chairman of a board, which included Senator 'Little John' John Tower, Sam Cummings, Paul Channon, Nathan Adams and the Archduke Otto von Habsburg, amongst many others from Europe, Latin America, the Far East, Asia and even Africa.

From what I could gather, none of these good people felt the urge sufficiently to put in their own money. So far as our story is concerned, the next significant milestone came when Sir John Biggs-Davison, M.P., was invited by a 'German Foundation' to attend an Afghan Conference in Munich in order to meet Afghan leaders. Sir John had asked his old friend Valderano to stand in for him.

In the event, he was not much taken with the 'wild and woolly' leaders presented to him. However, he appears to have taken a shine to Kakojan Niazi, who may just have been organising the whole show in the name of the German Afghanistan Foundation, and whom I believed, from the evidence collected in Germany, to have been associated with certain elements of the German fund-raising campaigns.

As to the subject of the conference, Valderano's lecture to Kakojan Niazi had been along the lines of a highly perceptive priorities appreciation.

There was no point in attempting to kill every Russian. They would only send more to fill the live training-ground gaps. Anti-tank weapons weren't going to do the job either. Any tanks knocked out would get replaced with later models. No, their Achilles heel was helicopter gun-ships and, more particularly, their crews. What was needed was ground-to-air missiles, the American-manufactured Stinger and/or the less predictable British Blowpipe. These would tip the scales by reducing Russian air dominance. All this must have been music to Kakojan Niazi's ears. He found that Valderano was not only the answer to the maiden's prayer, but that he was also about to have his prayers answered.

In fairness to Valderano, Kakojan Niazi was already well played in. He was highly experienced. After studying Dr Nassery at close quarters, he had moved on to HELP, followed by his German Afghanistan Committee exposure. He had been around for a long time and had become a familiar figure at conferences ever since 1984 at Geneva.

In all probability, in such a forum, he could have been introduced to Valderano by somebody of the calibre of a former British ambassador at Kabul, who, as an aside, could well have added his own personal endorsement, to the effect that, in the vituperative Afghan snake-pit, Kakojan Niazi was refreshingly apolitical and had been involved at the sharp end from the very beginning.

Kakojan Niazi would have missed no opportunity to insinuate the names of common acquaintances met at other conferences held in Geneva, London, New York or elsewhere.

Whatever the facts, his credentials were deemed to be beyond reproach. With such a prestigious name and the national flag of Germany flying on the visiting card, who indeed would have the temerity to question them? Let alone make so bold as to ask to meet a fellow German member of the Foundation? Furthermore, Kakojan Niazi spoke excellent German and the Bonn address can only have added to the good impression. He was reading German law and may even have worn a western-style suit, as opposed to the more alarming Afghan garb.

The man filled the need. He was just the type of operator for whom the Anglo-American 'cousins' were on the look out. At the time, he must have been part of an Afghan élite, not to be labelled as a political hothead. His sobriety would have stood out amongst all those 'wild and woolly' leaders.

The upshot was that Valderano was sufficiently taken with Kakojan Niazi to invite him to visit him in London. There he would have been wined and dined to death like Pocohontas, by all the right 'OK' people from both Houses of Parliament and, who knows, White's Club itself.

What is certain is that after first introducing him to Sir John Biggs-Davison, Valderano saw fit to introduce him to all and sundry in both Houses of Parliament; he did likewise amongst his extensive connections in the American House of Representatives and the Senate. Then he wrote a letter of introduction to Professor Alan Sabroski, the Director of Strategic Studies at the American Army War College at Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

Since Valderano's purpose was without any doubt to do everything possible to help the Afghans in their efforts to expel the Soviets from Afghanistan, a specific introduction was given for Niazi to meet Senator John Tower. His relevance was as Secretary of Defense, Senate Armed Forces Committee, Washington, D.C. None of us cares to be told we may have been hoodwinked; and certainly not for eight years by the wily Pathan. The larger the ego, the harder it falls. It was going to need very careful attention.

Scrubber Stewart-Richardson was a long-standing member of White's, so I asked him first if he knew Valderano. He did not, but kindly volunteered to look him up in his members' list. He came back to say he thought he might have found him. This could have meant a listing under Waring. Anyway, I gave up on that route and decided on the most direct approach of all - a telephone call. Valderano sounded disarmingly charming. He was sorry to be unable to see me right away. He was just off to Portugal for a couple of months. If there were any papers I wanted him to see, his daughter would be sure to forward them. He would be only too happy to help if he could.

I put together some selected photo-stats of what I thought would be the most interesting prime source material and wrote a covering letter to say I should welcome an introduction to Kakojan Niazi. I could hardly be more direct than that.

I then walked the package round to the address he had given me in Knightsbridge.

As luck would have it (and in these matters, luck matters), the packet was too big for the letterbox, so I rang the bell. Nothing happened for a while. As I was about to try another flat, a voice answered. I stated my business, which was simply to leave an envelope on the hall table. But it was not to be as simple as that.

The Valderano flat was at the very top of the building with no lift. By the time I reached the top, I must have looked ready for a glass of water, but found myself invited to lunch instead by his daughter and Portuguese son-in-law.

Three months later, Valderano invited me to meet him for tea at White's. On arrival, on time, I gave the Ducal title and once I saw it was recognised, my own unadorned name. By now I had some idea what to expect. After all, I had visited his home, indeed met his daughter. Somebody had told me he affected a monocle. I need not have worried for one moment about failing to recognise him in a crowd. We had the whole place to ourselves. Perhaps he knew that this would be the case at such an hour. My impression was of a very tall figure with pebbly black eyes, and no sign of a monocle. He seemed to me to have stepped straight out of an Osbert Lancaster 'Maudie Littlehampton' cartoon, or possibly even earlier, Robert Benchley. His turnout was impeccable and he enunciated very distinctly but rather quietly.

Once he had established my interest in all this, he told me that in all his dealings with Kakojan Niazi, over eight or nine years, he had always found him to be totally honest and reliable. He was a patriot, and, to spell it out, in case it was a word unfamiliar to me, he said he was a man entirely motivated by a desire to help his country.

Latterly, however, he had become so disgusted with the feuding between the various political parties, the corruption and the inability to get the Afghans to work together, that he had given up all his political activities and wanted to have nothing more to do with them. In future, he would concentrate his energies on becoming a businessman, pure and simple.

Valderano found it difficult to believe that Niazi could have benefited in any way from funds destined for the Afghan Resistance. Although he may well have had his extensive travel bills paid, he was by no means flush.

For the record, he believed Kakojan Niazi to be responsible for sending considerable amounts of medical and other supplies to Afghanistan. However, he had told Valderano that a good deal of this was stolen in transit through Pakistan.

In Valderano's judgement, therefore, Kakojan Niazi was an honest and honourable man who did his best under well nigh impossible circumstances. He certainly was able to get some military aid as well as humanitarian aid to the Afghan Resistance.

In closing, Valderano said he was not in the least surprised that some German politicians and perhaps others in Germany and Afghanistan should have helped themselves to relief funds contributed to the Foundation. As he personally had long been convinced of the venality of most politicians, it would have been much more surprising had it been found that nobody had had their hands in the till! Valderano made the gratuitous point that he had had nothing to do with fund-raising himself. Plainly, Valderano was not to be budged in his loyalty to Kakojan Niazi.

I opened up on three initiatives, known to me, which I now supposed embraced Niazi's current field of business activity. The first was a hotel project in Herat, with his 'cousin' Ishmail Khan. I personally regarded this enterprise as unlikely to succeed. The other two were more grandiose still and had been touted round to the British and the Americans. The first was an airfield and, as off-set, there was a promise to discourage the growth of poppies, plus the offer of surveillance facilities to monitor Iran. The other was a dam to control the water supply there. I did add that I had always understood the waters disappeared into the sand anyway on the border!

To this, Valderano said he could see how Niazi could have been duped by German colleagues. He was to some extent naive in business - not being a professional business man, but having had only some training as a lawyer.

As for himself, he told me he had to confess that he was not enormously interested. He was now too old, too ill and too tired to care.

It hardly seemed the time or the place to go on to discuss the German Afghanistan Foundation special fund which had supposedly raised four million Deutschmarks for the stray dogs of Herat. Then there were the tons and tons of old clothes which had been collected all over Germany and were still not accounted for. And the maltreated 'equines' too would have to wait for other, more sympathetic ears.

Valderano was kind enough to say he had enjoyed meeting me and looked forward to reading my book. I asked if he had ever considered writing his memoirs, to which he replied that, since he was neither a seedy politician, nor a pop-star, nor a mass-murderer, nobody would be in the slightest bit interested in publishing them. Furthermore, he had spent a lifetime cultivating anonymity.

The silence that followed this statement somehow signalled the interview was over. I was left wondering about the purpose of the dukedom. I said nothing, but spotted the blank in his experience. He did not seem to know the Muslim world.