

MELBOURNE PRESS CLUB

Press Club Lunch 27 August 2003

Speaker: Greg Roberts

Ian Henderson: I've really been looking forward to today's lunch. It's something a little different for the Press Club. And I was telling Greg just earlier, I approached with trepidation the task of writing a little synopsis to introduce him because the more you look into the highways and byways of his life you realise what a complex, interesting and extraordinary life he's lead. And to sum it up in a little nutshell is extraordinarily difficult. I think when I got up here to tease you about this lunch I referred to him as an international man of mystery. Well, he's certainly that . But I tell you what, there's a lot more as well.

I'm happy to say Greg did confirm and he's here today to take you through some of the highs and lows of a roller-coaster life. I think that's about the only thing you can really describe it as. For those of you who don't know much about him, though I suspect if you're here today you're probably a little bit primed, Greg Roberts could probably be best described as a colourful character who's crammed several lifetimes into one on both the wrong and right side of the law. He's had many guises: a poet, a revolutionary, the man most wanted by Victoria Police, a prisoner, a gun-runner, a freedom fighter, an author and a philanthropist - he's run a clinic for poor people in Bombay. His mum described him once as a good man who had a bad three months. A failed marriage took him to heroin, which led him to crime. He became *the building society bandit*. A polite, well dressed and as you'll hear, well-spoken scoundrel who robbed seven building society branches – one of them twice. He ended up in a maximum-security cell in Pentridge but managed to escape over the wall in broad daylight. His flight from the law took him to three continents and more jail in Bombay and Germany. He bears the scars of beatings in Pentridge, the notorious Arthur Road Prison in Bombay and also has a few other scars from frostbite in Afghanistan. There are mental scars as well but I'll think as you'll find out Greg Roberts is not a vengeful man. Along with the money laundering and passport forgery, he also ran that clinic for the poor in Bombay. And he even acted in a "Bollywood" movie. Extradited back to Australia twelve years ago he served out his time and was released in 1997.

Determined to make sense of his kaleidoscopic life he turned back to his first love, which was writing. He comes to us today as a survivor and a newly published author with already as I've told you an extraordinary track record of sales and an extraordinary story to tell. *Shantaram* is book one of a trilogy, a novel based on fact with some of the names changed to protect the innocent and the not-so-innocent. The Press Club of course doesn't endorse all of Greg's past activities but we do admire a man who can come through the hard road with his sense of humanity intact. And what you are about to hear I think will be an eye-opening insight into a life on the edge. But then Greg's more than capable of speaking for himself. Ladies and gentlemen, Greg Roberts.

Greg Roberts: There was a war. Prisons are predicated on war. There are a lot of men who don't think of themselves as prisoners of war in prisons but they in fact are. And without being involved in that war I got dragged into it. And I got told tomorrow's the day and you're going to get killed along with three other men who happened to be friends of mine. So that meant that I had to get ready the battle gear

ready to go into battle. And the battle gear is prison slang for the body armour that you use to protect yourself from a knife attack in a knife fight. And what you do is you tear the covers off hardcover books. You might ask yourself sometimes why so many men in prison who can't read and write have hardcover books in their cells. This is the reason. So I did that and I tore the covers off Stendhal's *Charterhouse of Parma*; off Schiller's *Essays on Reason*; Shopenhauer and his essay on Beauty and Esthetique; on the hard covers from Thomas Mann, from Hermann Hesse; from William Faulkner, Lawrence Durrell and I used them to make body armour and tore my sheets into strips and tied those cardboard covers around my body under my clothes, put them around my arms and bound them on tightly and put on my prison jacket and went out to battle.

When I returned to my cell on the way back I had to dispose of the two knives I'd used in the knife fight cos they were exhibits "A" and "B" and I came back into the cell and then had to dispose of the body armour. Hard covers are very hard things to destroy. I had no knife. I had no scissors and so I had to tear those things to pieces with my teeth. They were stained with blood, not all of it mine. And I tore them to bits as I sat there next to the toilet in my cell with blood running down my mouth and my chin, onto my chest. And I cried my eyes out because I was destroying what I saw as a writer and an artist as the most profound and beautiful things that we produce in our civilisation: wisdom, beauty, love all of it torn to pieces by me sitting there like a beast tearing these things to bits and throwing them down the toilet and flushing them away.

That's the situation I found myself in when I without going into the details of my own life – I think Ian's right people know who I am and what I did. So I'm a philosopher who turned to crime dropped out of university, committed a string of gutless, stupid armed robberies, as every armed robbery is a cowardly ridiculous thing to do. On the one hand so absurd that it's almost funny. On the other hand it's so cowardly and gutless that it resonates in the hearts and minds of the people you rob for the rest of their lives. And when you wake up and realise what you've done you live with it every single day and every time you shave. And I busted out of Pentridge prison and I found myself in India, set up a clinic in a slum. I wish I could say that there was something philanthropic about it. The reality is it happened to me it didn't come from me. And found myself in Afghanistan smuggling antibiotics; the most significant weapon in any conflict anywhere in the world today. You can't win wars with bullets alone. You can win them with antibiotics and medicine and we smuggled antibiotics, gold, passports and guns into Afghanistan then went to another mission in Sri Lanka, which was a worse war. And one day people will probably sit down and tell the full story of how one of the most beautiful places on earth became the most wretched. And eventually after a lot of other adventures and travelling the world and smuggling and what have you I was recaptured and put into a prison in Germany with all the terrorists of Europe and eventually came back to Australia, finished my time and wrote my book. I had the great good fortune to meet Henry and Margot Rosenblum and they've been with me ever since and supported me in the writing of the book. But what I wanted to do today was to tell you about three people – I think it's important - they're not in this book – but they're three people I wanted to tell you about and there is a limited time so I'll have to do it fairly quickly. The first person, I met him sitting in my favourite dive in Bombay. It's called Leopold's Restaurant and Beer Bar and people come from all over the city in fact all over the world to transact illegal business there. And it's a marvellous place to have lunch and do black market business, which I was doing. And so I was sitting there enjoying myself and a guy

came up to me and said I've got a job. I've got a holy man. You lived in this slum. I'd moved out of it at that time and I'd lived in the slum for 18 months. And he said he needs to find someone. I said sure. It's pretty easy. He said no this guy is really good. He's a sneak thief. And he robbed this holy man. Holy man was opening his purse. The kid grabbed it and ran away. And every time he's tried to find him the kid's too quick for us. So you lived there and they all trust you. You were the doctor there. But we need to find this kid. Will you do it? And I said well I have to meet this holy man. So I met him And I liked him. He looked like Jesus Christ. His name was Leslie Fernandez. He was a Goan Indian living in Bombay. And with long black hair and a long beard and these dazzling eyes. And he said I absolutely have to find this boy. I said sure. All right, I'll help you.

And while we searched for the kid, he told me a story. And his story was he'd been a successful young businessman in Bombay and a holy man had come to him and he said you have to follow me. And he said yeah, right. And he said no, no you have to follow me. And he went home to his parents and he said I met this weird guy today. He went back the next day to the same restaurant and the fellow said you have to follow me. And this went on for weeks until finally he was so agitated that he said I've got to do it. And he went to his parents and said I've got to follow this holy man. I don't know where he's going to take me but I have to do it. And his parents were shocked. Giving up his career and so on. So he went to see the holy man. They finally acquiesced reluctantly. And the holy man said let's go. And he said where are we going? We have to get the elephant. And he said we have to pick up the elephant. We're going to ride an elephant across India. And that's the holy mission and you have to join me on it. And he said well, what are we going to do? How long is it going to take us? About five years.

And it did take five years and that was his initiation into becoming a holy man. At the end of it he became an ascetic and he lived the life of a holy man and that five-year journey brought him into his own wisdom.

So I heard this story as we were searching for the kid and we went through the slum. And eventually we did find this kid and we went to the hut where he lived. And I stood in the doorway and I said if you try to run out I'll slap you and he said OK, why? And I said there's someone who wants to meet you and I'm not going to let you out of here. And he said OK. So in came the holy man and he shrank back. The kid's thinking oh my god, it's the guy I've robbed. And the holy man walked up to him and I had no idea what he was going to do. I thought if the holy man wants to start kicking him and believe me there are holy men in India who will kick you. I've met quite a few and when they get into business they drive very hard bargains but don't ever try to do business with a holy man in India. But anyway he instead approached this kid and I watched and thought, if he starts kicking this kid I'll have to stop him. But he didn't. He approached him and he touched his feet, which is a gesture that you use when you greet your father and mother in India. He touched his feet and then he reached up and held his hand and he said, please forgive me for opening the purse in front of you and giving you that temptation. And the kid said, all right I forgive you. And he said, and now I forgive you. I've been searching for you everywhere because I've wanted to tell you that I forgive you. The kid accepted that and that was the end of it. I wish I could say he went on to lead a blameless life. He didn't. He went on to do even worse crimes. But he never robbed another holy man. But that stayed with me, that experience and it lingered with me.

Now the second person I want to tell you about is a woman named Bashka Jacobs who lived in Bombay and she was a gorgeous, beautiful, radiant being who made her

living in the city buying textiles and sending them back to the illustriously named Maddies Sport Productions in New York. And Bashka have a wild flower show of red hair and was an extravagantly, beautiful woman in this city and I was attracted to her like most men I think with one part lust, one part respect and one part a kind of lusty admiration for her. And I became very close to her and a very dear friend. And I used the wisdom and brilliance of this person whose every utterance was clever and radiant. I used that for one of the characters in my book I took her cleverness and I gave that to a character in the book.

Now Bashka used to have in the window of her apartment a seven branch candelabra and a word written in Hebrew across the front. And the word was *shalom* in the window of her apartment on the ground floor. And one day the window was smashed and *Die Jew scum* was written on the wall underneath it. And then underneath that was *OK*. And so I went to see her and saw the shattered window and the broken stuff inside and she was upset at that when it had first happened. And I said yeah OK leave this with me. So I went away and I contacted a friend a friend of mine, Bejanu Rani who runs a protection racket in Bombay or the biggest branch of it. And he keeps a van for the purpose and he was a good friend and I was at that time recruited by the Bombay mafia. So we went hunting them. And we found them. I guessed that they had to be English and there were only a couple of hotels in the city where all the pommy guys hang out and all stay together when they come to Bombay. And so we tracked them down through all the contacts that we had we found them. And they were two skinhead guys who were in Bombay who'd just by chance had gone past this window and seen it and thought here's an opportunity to hurt somebody. So we persuaded them, the five Iranian guys and me, persuaded them to accompany us in the van. And we put them in the back of the van and then drove them to Bashka's place and I got out and went to see her and when I arrived it looked like there was a small riot taking place and I ran in ready to fight. And instead I saw Baskha and she said darling it's so great to see you. We're having a party. I've been searching for you all day. I couldn't invite you to the party. And I got in there and it was a huge celebration. And her reaction to what had happened was to invite every friend she knew in the city and she knew just about everybody and invite them together to celebrate the things that she loved in her life and the things she loved with them. And I looked at it and the window was being repaired by some guys and stuff was being cleaned up and people were partying and dancing and enjoying themselves and she said so you're here and I said yeah um got to take care of some business. So I went out and we drove the skinheads to a beach and Bejan who runs the protection racket got out and took them out and took their blindfolds off and untied them and put them down on the beach. And said if you guys ever do anything like that again in this city I'm going to cut your hands off on this beach and use them for frisbies. And I don't know if he'd ever done this in life but when he described how amazing it is to throw a human hand, how you actually hold it by the thumb and to throw a severed hand how amazingly they spin. They were convinced and they ran down the beach as cowards usually do and they ran down the beach and they ran away. But that experience with Bashka gave me another insight. I turned up with men tied in a van and she threw a party. And I learned a lot from it.

The third person I want to talk to you about is a man who committed a horrendous crime and came into prison. He was a Bosnian Serb in a time before that actually meant something when really it was just Yugo. But of course now we know he was a Muslim, Yugoslavian at the time. He came into the prison and his defence throughout the court case before he actually came to prison was that the moon had captured him

and had turned him into a moon man and had made him commit this crime. So this was his defence. So naturally when he came into the prison he was greeted that night people said he's in, he's in he's coming in tonight on the escort. And we were all in our cells and men started "Aoooh" howling like wolves and shouting out moon man, moon man, and that's the nickname he got.

Now, prison is a place that one way or another once again it's predicated on war in a sense. It's also predicated on bullying on many levels. And we always find the weakest link in a prison, men do and they crush the life and hope and dreams from that weakest link. It's what prison does. And they found this man and they looked at him he was a very quiet, gentle man who had committed this crime in the midst of a madness that really was there in him and that evaporated after that. And he found himself in a prison environment where he couldn't speak English and was a very timid, quiet man so everyone picked on him.

And when he would kneel to say his prayers on his prayer mat on his cell, he was a Muslim, the guys would wait every day for this opportunity and then push the door open and throw a bucket of water on him. Now he couldn't eat any pig products and so they'd always manage to make sure that there were bits of bacon pushed into the mashed potato in his food. Or even for instance his ice-cream once – we got ice-cream once a year and they got bits of bacon and pushed it inside and smoothed it ever so that he would eat through it and then realise that he'd been eating this *haram*, forbidden food.

And he was tormented in this way until one day he was making his way back from the industry gang where he worked and he was stopped at a check point where we all were and that's a time for a search. And they went to pat him down and he said no. And they said come on and he said no. And a man who translated for him came forward and spoke to him and then said to the officer on duty. He won't let you pat him down because he's got eggs under his arms. And the officer said well, throw him in the shower and squirt him with DDT. And he said, no, no, no, he's got pigeons eggs underneath his arms. And the officer said, what do you mean pigeons eggs? And he said he got them from a nest on his window of his cell. And he's got them taped under his armpits with bandaids and he's trying to hatch them because the mother left them. So the officer said well, let me have a look. And they had a quick look. And he said you can just have a quick look because he doesn't want them to get cold. So he showed them and sure enough there's eggs taped under there with bandaids. He said, nothing in the rulebook about this better call the senior. So the senior came down and had a look and he examined it and said eggs. Throw him in the shower. No. Pigeon eggs. He said yeah well let me have a look. And he had a look and he went nothing in the rule book about this better call the chief. The chief had a look and he said, better call the governor. And the governor came down and had a look and said, well I don't see any harm in it. So long as he washes himself below the waist and keeps himself clean I reckon we can let him do it. Let him get back to his cell. Well that night it spread through the prison that moon man had eggs taped under his armpits and was hatching them. So everyone was interested in it and fascinated by this and people turned up and sure enough one of the eggs hatched. So the word spread through the prison. Moon man hatched an egg and he's got a baby pigeon in his cell. Well every man in the jail, toughest, vilest guys in the prison were coming in going moon man can I have a look? And he'd go sure and show them and they'd go oh, ity bitty. And they were bringing from the horticulture and from the garden they were bringing worms and bugs and whatever they had. I got a fantastic worm mate. It was a beauty. And I had to fight three men for it, let me tell ya. And they brought it up and they fed

this thing up and sure enough it survived, it grew and a day came to cut to the chase when it had to be liberated. And we assembled all of us with the chief of the unit and the senior prison officers and everybody else, we assembled out onto the tennis court which was the muster area for A division in Pentridge. And moon man came out and he threw this bird into the air and it fluttered around and then landed again. And he threw it up again and it fluttered around and eventually it went off into the world and it flew away. And we stood there crying because of course it was free and we wanted it to be but we weren't. And we watched that thing leave and every single one of us was transformed by it, every man in the place. And that experience of seeing that transformation occur in all of us and being part of it myself is part of what I wanted to say about the three stories I've told you today.

When I first was invited to do this I was only one step into the publicity carousel that's been whirling me dirvishly around the country for the last few weeks. And I sat down and started to write a speech and I thought wow I've got all these journalists in one place I'm going to tell them this and that. Now I'm at the end of a three-week process and I've met fifty journalists by phone or in person from print, radio and TV. And what I've discovered is in fact from all of them without exception - and you know I could mention names of people but there's no need to because it's every single one without exception - came to me with a profound readiness to engage with the book, intellectually and spiritually; with sympathy and compassion; with understanding and with an intelligence that was sharp and that was born of experience. Something that astonished me and it was a lesson for me in bigotry I've got to tell you because I was overwhelmed by the experience that I met with every single journalist I've spoken to in this country.

So I don't want to tell you what to do. I want to tell you to keep doing it. It's a wonderful thing. I can only tell you from my experience. You know people come up to me and say it's such a bleak picture. The world is so bad. It's so terrible. It's so awful. Look, I've been chained to a wall in two continents and tortured. I've been in two wars. I've been wounded in battle. I've been in experiences that no human heart should ever have to be transformed by. I've been through those things and my perspective isn't like that. I think if you stand back and look at the world, the world is a wonderful place, full of wonderful people.

And I want to say to you to the people to the journalists to anyone here who can speak to the other journalists who aren't here today, the one's I've had the honour and the privilege of meeting keep doing it and don't let the world make you harder. Don't let the world change you or embitter you or diminish your capacity for forgiveness and love, that which you've shown to me. I admire it and I'm grateful for it.

And I'm also grateful for this opportunity today. Thank you very much to everyone involved. It's been a privilege and a pleasure to speak to everyone so thank you.

Ian Henderson: Greg is happy to take questions. I'm sure there are dozens. Could I remind you of the protocol? Please just identify yourself and if you're from an organisation, that as well. It's common courtesy. Who'd like to kick it off?

Yes, I will. Do you remember me?

GR: Yes, I'm trying to put a name to the face.

PC: Patrick Casey, criminal barrister.

GB: Yes, hello Patrick.

PC: Ian introduced you earlier by saying that it was a failed marriage that brought you to heroin. Is that correct?

GR: I wish that it were that direct because it would certainly let me off the hook a little bit. The reality was that I left school at sixteen to be with the girl I loved. We got married on my eighteenth birthday. I went to night school, got a scholarship to go to university and went to uni and was enjoying my life there very much and was getting honours in my subjects and so on. But I was very committed to political causes and while I was busily storming the barricades on political issues another man stormed the barricades of my own home and my marriage fell apart and I lost subsequently the custody of my daughter. And I was too weak and immature just simply not strong enough in my heart and in my mind to do what men should do in that circumstance which is work hard and make money because your kid is going to need it. I fell apart and on that night as I sat in the dark in my house a friend came to see me and said you lost the custody case today and I knew you'd be like this and gave me my first hit of heroin. And I was an overnight junkie. It seemed to solve all the problems in one go. And of course it doesn't. It rolls all your problems into one huge snowball that runs across your life and extinguishes any chance you ever have. But that's how it happened. It's not just gee failed marriage end up in prison. It was a weakness in me to deal with it and to engage with it in a mature way.

IH: Come on be brave. He doesn't bite.

Andrew Rule, Good Weekend, Fairfax: I found one of the most effective stories was in jail in Pentridge you had a pet mouse. You left the cell and something happened to the mouse. For some reason it really touched me.

GR: Yeah, you know we do this. You kind of adopt as moon man did with the eggs you adopt animals and try to find some gateway, some portal through which you can have an emotional contact with the world. And a mouse entered this cell that that I was in and I trained it with breadcrumbs, conditioning, to come to me and to take food from my hand. Which it did and which a mouse will do as I discovered in solitude and silence and with that sort of endless patience that you have in prison. And when as often happens there was a routine rotation and I was moved from the cell the man who took my cell said – I was moved to another cell. You're constantly moved around in prison for security reasons – and the man who took the cell was someone I knew and I thought I understood and I told him about the mouse. I said it comes out every night and you can feed it and this and that. And the next day he brought me into his cell to show me the mouse and he'd captured it and he'd crucified it on a broken piece of ruler with thumbtacks. And it was an expression of such horrendous cruelty that it shocked me even though I was surrounded by cruelty to human beings including my own. It shocked me so profoundly but what it made me understand through that is that sometimes when you try to do things in the best possible way and you try to do things for the best possible reasons the results that come about can be beyond your capacity to predict them. And they can be negative results. I had tried to engage with this creature and through my engagement it had ended up being horrendously and cruelly tortured and so on. So that experience I wanted to put that in the book because I

wanted people not to make a comment about men in prison but to make a comment about our own engagement with the world and how careful we have to be.

Jan Harkin, Leader Newspapers: I wanted to thank you for one of the stories that you told. Quite a few years ago I was speaking to a man who'd been on the jury that found the moon man guilty...

GB: My God!

JH: ..and it happened to be on the day that he was sentenced. And this man was a plumber from the western suburbs. He had quite a tough exterior but he was in tears because he said because they had believed that he would get psychiatric help if he was found guilty and he had just heard that day that instead he was going to Pentridge. It was enough to make this man cry to hear that he was going to Pentridge. And he'd obviously just being in the courtroom with him had touched him to that extent. Thank you for the story.

GR: Thank you Jan. Thank you for telling me that. I can tell you that after this when anyone new came to the prison and you'd get a young gangster who would come in and think there's a weak link and would make an approach the others would immediately flock to him and say that's moon man. You leave him alone. Moon man is sweet. He's one of us. And so on. The help that he did get eventually - he got none through the system - but the help that he did get came from his heart. And he touched all of the men around him and they protected him. Thank you very much for telling me. That gives me a closure with that that I could never have anticipated.

Kate Ashley Griffiths, Leader Newspaper: Just interested in a bit more about your life as a bandit and do you know what sort of affect that had on your victims, if you like?

GR: I received letters from...I can tell you that a couple of the robberies that I did people laughed with me. And although they didn't make this clear in their statements, the reality is that they did and I did too. And I went back to one place and opened the door and I'd robbed it before. And the ladies there said, hello luv it's you again. And I said yeah. And they said well you'll be wanting some of this and they put money on the counter. I didn't ask for it. I might have been going in there to make a deposit but I wasn't. So there were cases like this.

There was one young guy I robbed a place and I said is that all the money and he said that's it. And it was about fifty dollars. And I said there's got to be more than that. And he said no. Well there is this. And he pulled out a wallet that was very chunky. And put it on the counter. And I said what's that? And he said it's my severance pay. And I said I don't rob workers. I rob businesses. Put it back in your pocket. And he made a statement to that effect. And he said I can't believe it. I offered him all this money that was mine and he wouldn't take it.

But there are cases where you go in and you see the fear. And you know the fear. And I got something of a Ph d in fear in the following twenty years. I know that fear and I know that I put that fear into them. There were people who were deeply afraid. Now two of the people who were I think afraid wrote to me when I received my sentence and I received a sentence of twenty three years and they said that they thought the sentence was too much. And they said we were angry at you but we think the sentence

was too much. And they with - strangely enough we were just talking earlier about the Victoria Police and the armed robbery squad – the armed robbery squad came to see me and they said we think it's too much. We deal with this every day and we've got guys who shoot people in armed robberies getting ten years and you used a toy gun and get twenty three years. It doesn't make sense. We're going to appeal if you don't. And they actually launched the appeal with me, the Victoria Police, and they provided evidence. And it was a successful appeal. They reduced it on appeal. And two of those people had written to me saying we're still angry with you but we think that twenty-three years is too much.

In the two and a half years that I did in that time I received two more letters from people I'd robbed saying you know I want to understand about this. You know I'm thinking about it a lot and it keeps coming up and I want to know what's going on. And so I wrote to them trying to explain how ashamed I was and how much I regretted it and how I live with it every day. And we had a bit of rapport. But they are the only people I heard from directly. The bottom line that I know from having had fear put into me for twenty years in prison and on the run is that I put fear into them. They didn't give me money because I was well dressed or well spoken or polite or whatever. They gave me money because I made them afraid. And there's no mitigation of it no matter how you do it if you know what I mean. So that's the best I can answer that. There were only four people who contacted me directly. And of the others I know that I put fear into them. Even the ones who laughed you know.

Greg McDougall, Nine Network: Ian said he introduced you as a few weeks ago as an international man of mystery. Given the experiences that you had would you say that what you went onto once you came out of Pentridge and were for all intents and purposes on the run was there a need for living to be able to live or was there a need for adventure? I guess what I'm getting at is what you went through in Pentridge and subsequently do you get from that a sense of immortality that enables you to launch into more exciting, more dangerous adventures after that if you like after that?

GR: There is in a sense... gee that's a huge question and it's got so many parts in it's answer. When we escaped we thought that we needed a third man. We got out and we were ready to go and our third man in the morning was on an escort going to the country jail. And he looked at us and went you know he can't escape with us. So we approached the eight toughest, evilest men we knew in the prison and said we need a third guy. One by one we went to them and we said we're going and one by one they said no worries, doc we're with you mate. I'm going mate. When are we going? And I said in about an hour. And they went oh, well um look mate I've only got to do seven more here and then four in a medium, two in a country jail and I'm home mate. I'm practically home mate. And one by one they all backed down. And these were men who had the whole jail bluffed. And I looked at those guys and thought hang on a minute these are men everyone's frightened of them. Even the prison officers are frightened of them.

But there was something in that experience that they didn't have the heart to do that if you know what I mean. They couldn't do that. And it taught me something about courage and what it really is. And courage is not something that you do outwards. Cowardice is what you do to people if you know what I mean. And courage isn't what you're afraid of when you're outnumbered. It's what you'll do to others when you're in the majority, when you've got the strength. That's what cowardice is. And courage similarly is what you're prepared to do what risks you're prepared to do when

everything is on one roll of the dice. And that experience of standing on the front wall gave me a perspective. I was never as afraid again of an individual event as I was leading up to that. Something changed in me.

What it does to be on the run. On the one hand you're liberated and free and there's an exhilaration that goes with it. And you rush around the world and rush into experiences that you otherwise never would have. On the other hand being an escaped man, a man on the run, a wanted man means that you lose your mum and your dad and your daughter and your friends. You lose all those contacts who make you who you are. You lose every association that defines you as a human being. It's the annihilation of yourself: the extinction of you as a person. You become a zero in life and you have the attitude that your life really doesn't mean anything because for every one of us here it's the people we love and the people who love us that give us meaning. That's why we exist in the world and that's how we exist through the love we give and receive. And if your not getting that and you can't give it then you really are empty. And you fill that emptiness with adrenalin. And I did things and I did missions and ran around the world doing things that no sane person would do. It's a kind of insanity that recklessness that goes with being on the run and being in exile. And I experienced that to the full. I hope that answers that.

Question: Just wondering if you could tell us a bit more about what you were doing in Sri Lanka?

GR: Yeah, sure. At the time the Indian peace keeping force had entered.....(the Sri Lankan leadership) needed a peace-keeping force to come in and to try to settle down the conflict between the Tamil Tigers and the Sinhala majority in the country. And he tricked the Indians. He kept pleading with them saying look these Tamils who are doing this came originally from India. So you've got to come and help us. But the Indian government kept refusing saying no. So he said you know what? I'm going to ask Israel to send a peace-keeping force and the Israelis are very happy to do it so I'm going to send them there. And so Rajid Ghandi said OK, OK, keep them out . We'll come in. So the Indian peace keeping force came into Sri Lanka.and then caught between all of those groups in the heart of it was a group of Tamil muslims. They're not part of the Tamil Tigers, which is a Hindu organisation largely. They're a very small minority of people who had no guns, no weapons, no power, no voice and they were preyed upon by everybody. And my mafia boss in Bombay was a Muslim who asked me to pose as a journalist and to go into Sri Lanka – great guys by the way. Amazing how many doors... You know it was an insight for me. Journalist press pass and doors open for me everywhere which is bizarre. And not just that: people giving me things free all the time. OK. So I went to Sri Lanka and posed as a journalist. And my object was to smuggle passports, gold and money and other documents to this group of Tamil Muslims who were on the Trincomalee – Jaffna Peninsula – but on the Trincomalee Road. To get in there and get this stuff to them and help them get out so that their leaders of that community could get out of the country, which they subsequently did. And they went to London and they started to help there own people from there. And along the way it was just a horrendous conflict. Every morning there would be - we had to march on a road – any journalist who's been there will know you had to get your passport stamped every day or your papers to justify your existence in the country at a checkpoint. And we had to walk the Trincomalee Road and on that road every day there were human heads staked out every 200-300 metres. There was a different head on the fence post of people who had been kidnapped the

night before and tortured and interrogated and killed. And there's a limit I think to how many severed heads you can see without it doing something to you. And it did to me.

I should put one quick tag on there. I was there with a German journalist, who will remain nameless, a lovely man. And we walked along the road and the severed heads were on the posts but the bodies – anyone who's been there in that time in the 80s will know that this is how bad it was – and the bodies were burnt because they quickly became fly blown and so on in the heat. And we walked along the road and he said, well you know um, it is interesting to smell the burning bodies you know but in Africa I don't know what it is but they're eating, they're eating something. I don't like the smell when they're burning in Africa. This was a journalist who'd covered stories all over the world. And he said you know I can say that in Cambodia they actually smell good when they're burning. And I'm the escaped robber working as a gangster in Bombay and travelling around the world committing crimes and I was shocked. I said you've got to take a holiday. You know this job...

So that's what I was doing there. And unfortunately I ended up getting stuck. I had to live in a gravedigger's hut for about a month. And it took me about three years I think to get the smell out of my nose and out of my nostrils. And I had to hide in that hut for about a month and live there. And managed to get out though. So that's what we were doing there.

Lu Pin, International Chinese News Weekly: I have three questions. The first one is what thing is it that you're proud of the most in your life.

GR: Look, I'd have to say I know this is probably going to sound silly but there's almost nothing that I'm actually proud of. I live with regret and remorse for every harmful thing I've ever done and they accumulate and they live with you. This is where they live when you do as much harm. It lives right here. And you carry it with you every day. But I'm proud of my mother's love. I'm proud that my mother never stopped loving me. I'm proud that she has this endless capacity to forgive and to love. And she's still loves me and never lost for me. And I think there must have been at least a little something in me for her to hang on to that love for all the terrible things I've done in my life. So I'm proud of that.

LP: Thank you. The second one is that I suppose that the society made you change a lot but what hasn't been changed or will never be changed?

GR: In me as a person?

LP: Yes.

GR: I would hope now that my capacity for forgiveness will never change. It's not something that came to me through society except in the sense of being a human being living in the world. It came to me from the hearts and minds of people I met along the way. I had the profound privilege of meeting wonderful teachers. I had a day job as a Bombay gangster and a night job as a philosopher and I met people from every religion and from every branch of science. And they gave me pieces of wisdom – a different tessera in the tile in the mosaic which makes up I guess what you would call wisdom in a way. And part of that is an understanding that I had to forgive every person who has ever harmed me in my life. And I do. I don't hold any grudge against

anyone. I don't forgive myself yet but I forgive every person who has ever harmed me and I hope that doesn't change.

LP: The last one is how do you think about socialism and including the idea and the practice.

GR: Well a big question. I have to have a drink for that one. Thank you for asking that question. It's a very good question. Ok, I think that the motivation that moves people inspires people to be involved with socialist causes and socialism is mostly a benign one. But that the reality is as it's practised in the world is not benign. And I think that the basic, fundamental reason is that socialism is that for all of it's optimistic and altruistic underpinnings is based on conflict and proceeds from an understanding of society and the world which is a conflict based understanding. And I used to have that view. I used to look at things in terms of the unity of opposites and dialectical materialism and that things are always in conflict. And I don't see things that way any more. I see things in terms of resolution. And one of the insights I gained on this was from particle physics. We live in a universe that isn't based on competition. We live in a universe that is based on cooperation. Atoms don't compete with each other they combine to make molecules. And molecules don't compete. They combine to make complex organic molecules and so on. The universe we live in is based around cooperation. This room is based around cooperation: all of us in this conversation.

And so my view now rather than conflict is based around resolution. I don't think you can kill an idea with a bullet. I think you can only kill an idea with a better idea. And the best idea is love. And any action that we undertake has three components to it: the intention, the act and the consequences. And if the intention is a loving intention and the act is a loving act then the consequences are likely to be loving. But if the intention and the act aren't loving then the consequences are not likely to be. And unfortunately the reality in socialism is the intention can be very good. People are nobly and altruistically inspired but the action is one that's based around conflict and struggle. And that I think often brings about negative characteristics or negative consequences. Is that an answer for you? Thank you very much.

Clare Miller, The Age: Could you tell us some more about what you were doing in Afghanistan? Which side were you smuggling for?

GR: (laughs) I was smuggling for a man, my boss in Bombay, the mafia boss who paid ten thousand American dollars to get me out of jail in India. I went in there at 90 kilos and I came out four months later at 45 kilos covered in scars and I would have died had he not done it. And this man to me seemed to, he was a mafia boss, a mafia don of a small unit of the mafia in Colombo region and I went to work for him. He seemed to fill the father shaped hole in my life. And I not only respected and admired him, which is a strange thing to say I know in the context of crime and he was a senior criminal in the city but I did respect and admire him. But I loved him and I loved him as a son loves a father. And when he asked me to go to Afghanistan the war had been - six years from 1979 to 1985 - it had been six years under way and he came originally although he'd been forty year in Bombay - he came from thatregion between Pakistan and Afghanistan, near Qandahar. A group of his village people were fighting at the siege of Qandahar, laying siege to the city and trying to expel the Russians. And because they were not supported by America or any of the other

groups he wanted to get supplies to them: antibiotics, gold, currencies, passports and Kalashnikovs and parts, even machine parts for refitting and retooling weapons. And the only way to do this was to have an American with them because at the time the Americans were funding the war effort. And the warlords who traditionally prey on every caravan that passes through there exacting tribute would have taken everything off us. But with an American on board they would have say mmm, we don't want to jeopardise the flow of money and guns coming from America so we'll just take a little bit and let him go. And so he knew that but he couldn't find an American who was crazy enough to do it. So he asked me to do it. So I came from Ohio with my very strange accent you know and took an American passport and I did that for him. And we went 39 men on horseback over the mountains near Chaman Pass from Pakistan into Afghanistan and we resupplied the unit. But it turned into a catastrophe and we got stuck on the mountain for four months in the peak of winter and I was wounded and evacuated from there. I had frostbite and I can tell anyone here the best medical plan I've ever encountered in my life is a Kalashnikov in the hands of an Afghan who loves you and who points that Kalashnikov at the doctors and says if you don't heal him, I will kill you. And the doctors worked in that Pakistani slum. They worked through the night with a diligence I've never seen anywhere in the world. And they saved my hands, which they were going to amputate. And they saved them and they saved me and pulled me through. But that's what I was doing there. I wish I could say I went there for some you know political reason, ideological reason. I went there because I loved the man who asked me to go.

Maria, Leader Newspaper: I wanted to ask criminals get sent to prison first and foremost to be punished and then to be reformed. But you had to escape prison to be reformed. So what are we doing wrong in our prison system.

GR: That's a huge question. Isn't it? The fact is eight out of ten men who go to prison go back. Our recidivism rate is around 80 percent. Which is a tragedy. When I came back I came up from two years in punishment unit, in H division in solitary and I got back to the mainstream and I walked into A division and the young guys surrounded the tier in the top and gave me an ovation. And I'm standing with a little plastic box and my little do-dads in it looking at these faces and I didn't know them and they didn't know me. They're all kids. They were applauding the fact that I'd escaped and stood on the front wall that I'd spent ten years on the run leading the kind of life that they thought was adventurous. And that I'd spent two years in H division and still had my head up and hadn't been turned into a monster. And they were applauding a legend and they saw me as something of a hero, which I'm obviously not. And I looked at those faces and thanks be to God I had the maturity to realise that it was a tremendous opportunity and a huge responsibility. So I tried to steer them in the right direction. I was actually eminently better qualified to steer them in the wrong direction than the right direction but I did my best.

One of the things I did was to institute a teaching program and I taught a program on the origin of the universe and the history of the universe to the prisoners from big bang until today. And one component of it for example was particle physics, which I'd learned along the way and had the privilege of sharing an apartment with a particle physicist. So I had gangsters who could hardly read and write walking around the prison saying no mate, no, no, no its to do with velocity, mate. The faster you go the weirder things get. No, no, no, no mate its do with diminution. You get real small you get real weird. It's quantum weirdness. And so on. They were discussing

Heisenberg's uncertainty principle. And I looked at those guys who were elevated by the fact that someone had given them the respect to say you're not too stupid to do this. You can do this. Doesn't matter what level of schooling you've had. This is human knowledge and wisdom and you can understand it and take it in. And they did. And it didn't help that the guy who was teaching them had stood on the front wall of the prison and run around the world as a nutcase, as a gun-runner, whatever. They respected the fact that I was teaching. They might not have sat in the same class with another teacher.

The point is this. I looked at those young men who were discussing everything from Cartesian dualism to Heisenberg's uncertainty principle and I realised that eight out of ten of them – it just hit me one day - are going to come back. What are we doing? I think it's all stick and no carrot when you go to prison. We tell every man who comes in if you do the wrong thing we'll do this and if you do the other wrong thing we'll do that and if you do the other wrong thing we'll take that away. No one says to you, if you do the right thing you can earn this, and this, and this, and this on some kind of gradual, rewarding approximations toward a desired goal. There's none of that incentive-based system.

Another one we are isolated from the community and we have a feeling if you cut people off, if you exclude them from the human family and drive them into exile, you exile them from what we are as a society, you create devils in exile. And they come back to haunt you. And that's kind of what happens in a prison. So interaction with the community would be fantastic: to open up prisons. There are a lot of people out there who will come into a prison and talk to prisoners.

How do we do it? It's not a vote winner. You have to spend more money. You have to hire more prison officers. Ask any crim who has spent a long time in jail and he'll tell you what's the best thing you can do in jail: double the number of prison officers. That's a reality. And you might think why would they say that. That's because with more prison officers you get more programs. You get more interaction. With less prison officers you're locked down. You know they can't cope. It's difficult for them to do it. And have opportunities for prisoners to interact with prison officers in a social sense. Why don't we? They're human beings doing a job. I came back old enough and experienced enough to relate to them as human beings. And my experience in prison when I came back was completely different to the experience I'd had as an angry young man who saw them as the enemy if you know what I mean. But there are a number of things but all of it comes back to understanding and sympathy, engagement. Seeing prisoners not as a small set of characteristics, or as a crime file but as a human being who can be saved. We can reach into them and save them if we want to.

Ian Henderson: I've got one Greg if you don't mind. You spent time in prisons with terrorists in Germany. You've been in a part of the world now, particularly Pakistan I suppose, which is a breeding ground for terrorism. Do you have any insights from your contacts in either place into the mind of terrorism?

GR: Yes, I think so. When I was recaptured, the Germans said, we've got him. They did a fingerprint check. And they knew who I was and they said we've got the guy and the Australians said don't take any chances with him. He escaped from New Zealand twice and left two fingerprint trails. He escaped from Italy. He was captured and escaped. He escaped from Switzerland. He's a Houdini this guy. He's going to get out. Put him in the toughest, hideous jail you've got. And the Germans you

know..... I don't mean anything against them, but the Germans, ever-obliging in matters of the law, said sure ,and put me into (prison) which is a concrete silo in the heart of Frankfurt. And they've put me into a briar patch because they've put me in with all the terrorists of Europe. And what did I study at university? Political philosophy. And I knew the difference between the PFLP and the PLO and between (different German terrorist groups).....and I knew the history and exegesis of each group. And also I spoke German. I'd learned it along the way. I'd fallen in love with a German girl. That didn't work out but my love with Germany did and I learned the language.

But I went in there and I started speaking to them. And perhaps because I once again, as in the Australian prison with teaching those young men, the men in that prison respected me in some way because I'd been on the run and I'd been in two wars and my Interpol file was this long and in fact I was higher on the Interpol list than a couple of them., Much to their chagrin. They were terribly upset. And you know, I would willingly have swapped with them and said you know take my number. But I spoke to them and got to know them and one man said to me - he'd kidnapped people, held a plane hostage, killed people on the plane, shot the pilot and dumped his body on the tarmac – and he said when I get out of here - he was doing a 14-year sentence in Germany. Life with a 14-year minimum – and he said when I get out of here, I'm going to hijack a plane in a country where they had the death sentence because this is a terrible thing that I can't die. I can't be a martyr. And when I get out, I'm going to make sure. I'm going to fly that plane straight into a country. So that if the plane doesn't crash and I live, I'm going to be in a country with capital punishment and they'll kill me and then I can have my martyr's death. And five minutes into that conversation, where he'd said that to me and I thought this man is stark raving mad ...as I'd said before Winston Churchill put it neatly I think that “a fanatic is someone who can't change his mind and won't change the subject”. That's exactly what this guy was like. And I realised there's no way you can reason your way in to this man. There is no way you can sit down and talk to him on the basis of rational thinking and clear thinking and so on. You can't do it. You can't philosophise your way into him. I started talking about his family and I knew that his mother and sister had been killed in a refugee camp. So he started talking about that. And he opened up to me because he liked me or respected me. We got talking and then he told me about other members of his family who'd died and the woman he was destined to marry and had planned to marry who she'd died and how she'd been raped before she'd died and various things. And within a very short time I was holding this man, this feared terrorist. He was crying on my shoulder, sobbing and crying and I realised although there is no way with reason into the minds of these people and so on. There is a way still in there. We can get through. I know it sounds totally incongruous and incomprehensible but I've actually stood there and had this man crying on my shoulder. The way in is through love. I know it sounds a strange thing to do but it's the only way to get back into the heart to people like this and reach in and drag them back. What's in their mind? The same thing that's in the mind of every fanatic: a total absence in their activities of love. They are people who have had the love annihilated and they've locked, welded shut the ublia in their hearts and said their isn't any more. That's what it is. It's the same thing in every person everywhere who creates cruelty. Cruelty I think begins as an agony in the self before it's inflicted on others and we have to reach into that agony and find it and find a way to engage with it. I know that sounds difficult but that's the only insight I have. I couldn't

connect with him intellectually. I could only connect with him emotionally and through the heart.

IH: David, we'd better make this the last question.

David Poulton, MPC committee: I just had a question about what's next?

GR: Thank you. I'm writing a commentary on the book at the moment and putting that together. It's a project just to explain the layers of complexity that are built into the book and the layers of depth. It's a complex architecture. The first two drafts of this book were destroyed in prison. The first time it happened I came back from an exercise period walking up and down for an hour in a cage back to my cell in H division where you do 23 hours in your cell and one hour walking in the cage. And I came back and found the manuscript torn into pieces no bigger than a thumbnail and flowing out of the toilet. The most savage critic I hope I'll ever have. Man did that guy hate it. And then I waited and got out of the punishment unit and went to the mainstream, spent another three and a half years writing another 350 pages and then had that manuscript destroyed. And I sat on the bed in my cell surrounded by this dead manuscript and thought if I don't let this go it's going to be the writer that's destroyed not the writing.

I've been at the Writer's Festival and there's an empty chair at the Writer's Festival for all those writers around the world who are imprisoned for doing nothing more than writing. And you know I know this experience of the writer being isolated and destroyed and I had that sense of it then. So I went to see that officer and said you know I forgive you. And he said oh you do, do you? And I said, yes I do. I've travelled a lot and I've met a lot of men in a lot of circumstances and I think I know why you did it. And I forgive you and I think it's going to be a better book for that. For what you did. And when I said that he put his head down and he said I'm sorry. I'm sorry I did it. And you know he meant it. I think I got through to him. But the reality is that the book was a better book and it became - because of that thirteen year gestation period that actually helped me - the irony - and it was a far better book than if they'd just let me write it in the first place. And it became so complicated that I'm now putting a commentary together to sought of explain the Rubik's cube of how it works and its layers of depth. There is a sequel. I'm fifty thousand words into that. There is a book of poetry, which I've brought out. It's romantic poetry. I don't know how that's going to go. And there's a movie that will be made. I'm committed to Henry and Margot to do two more books in the series. I'm committed to the publishers who bought it at auction in London and who bought it at auction in New York to promote the book and to engage with them in getting those editions together. And I've been invited to get onto a speaker circuit here. Some people seem to think that I have something to say. So I've been invited to do that. And I'd love to do it, which is great. So yeah, there are a number of other projects that are all writing projects. But ultimately what I want to do is to go back to Bombay and fate's been lending a hand with this. And set up a mobile clinic that can park outside the slums and can do a better more formal and organised job of looking after, doing diagnostic first aid for the slum dwellers than I did with my ad hoc clinic in the slum when I lived there in Bombay. So all my efforts are directed in that direction. So there are many writing projects but all leading toward that. Thank you.

