'I can't take any more!'

By this time the two former friends were hardly speaking to each other and had to call in local elders to mediate. My father was desperate not to give up the school so agreed to pay Naeem a return on his share of the investment. He had no idea how. Fortunately another old college friend called Hidayatullah stepped in and agreed to put up the money and take Naeem's place. The new partners again went from door to door, telling people they had started a new kind of school. My father is so charismatic that Hidayatullah says he is the kind of person who, if invited to your house, will make friends with your friends. But while people were happy to talk to him, they preferred to send their children to established schools.

They named it the Khushal School after one of my father's great heroes, Khushal Khan Khattak, the warrior poet from Akora just south of Swat, who tried to unify all Pashtun tribes against the Moghuls in the seventeenth century. Near the entrance they painted a motto: WE ARE COMMITTED TO BUILD FOR YOU THE CALL OF THE NEW ERA. My father also designed a shield with a famous quote from Khattak in Pashto: 'I girt my sword in the name of Afghan honour.' My father wanted us to be inspired by our great hero, but in a manner fit for our times – with pens, not swords. Just as Khattak had wanted the Pashtuns to unite against a foreign enemy, so we needed to unite against ignorance.

Unfortunately not many people were convinced. When the school opened they had just three students. Even so my father insisted on starting the day in style by singing the national anthem. Then his nephew Aziz, who had come to help, raised the Pakistan flag.

With so few students, they had little money to equip the school and soon ran out of credit. Neither man could get any money from their families, and Hidayatullah was not pleased to discover that my father was still in debt to lots of people from college, so they were always receiving letters demanding money.

There was worse in store when my father went to register the school. After being made to wait for hours, he was finally ushered into the office of a superintendent of schools, who sat behind towering piles of files surrounded by hangers-on drinking tea. 'What kind of school is this?' asked the official, laughing at his application. 'How many teachers do you have? Three! Your teachers are not trained. Everyone thinks they can open a school just like that!'

The other people in the office laughed along, ridiculing him. My father was angry. It was clear the superintendent wanted money. Pashtuns cannot stand anyone belittling them, nor was he about to pay a bribe for something he was entitled to. He and Hidayatullah hardly had money to pay for food, let alone bribes. The going rate for registration was about 13,000 rupees, more if they thought you were rich. And schools were expected to treat officials regularly to a good lunch of chicken or trout from the river. The education officer would call to arrange an inspection then give a detailed order for his lunch. My father used to grumble, 'We're a school not a poultry farm.'

So when the official angled for a bribe, my father turned on him with all the force of his years of debating. 'Why are you asking all these questions?' he demanded. 'Am I in an office or am I in a police station or a court? Am I a criminal?' He decided to challenge the officials to protect other school owners from such bullying and corruption. He knew that to do this he needed some power of his own, so he joined an organisation called the Swat Association of Private Schools. It was small in those days, just fifteen members, and my father quickly became vice president.

The other principals took paying bribes for granted, but my father argued that if all the schools joined together they could resist. 'Running a school is not a crime,' he told them. 'Why should you be