

Jonas Visits Peter Maurin Farm

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Summary: A tribute to a hard working and sometimes problematic Lithuanian guest at Peter Maurin Farm. Quotes his recitation of his life of hard works and worries about a pension. "Here is a man who has worked hard all his life, who lives in poverty but is not destitute, and is always cheerful and ready to serve; we all love him." (DDLW #770).

Jonas arrived at breakfast time. We had just come from nine o'clock mass. For the summer it was at eight o'clock because the mothers were free of getting children away to school. Already our Spanish friends had been at work cementing the top of the cesspool, which they just put in. Already Hans had been at work painting the screens in the hot early sun.

Jonas started out from Williamsburg at quarter to seven, walked across the bridge, then to Warren and Washington street to get peanut butter fresh ground and not burnt for the children, five pounds of honey from a nature food store, Lithuanian rye bread and liverwurst to take care of all the unexpected guests which come to the beach. He always collects all the newspapers left on the ferry as he comes over and we have the Journal of Commerce, the Wall Street Journal, the Mirror, the News, the Christian Science Monitor, the Times, the Herald Tribune, and Journal. (This happens in town also. We get all the daily papers from half a dozen of our "family" in town.)

Usually Jonas starts the visit by giving us a health talk on what to eat and then he goes out to find some part of the gardens to mulch or play around in. This usually arouses a storm from some member of Staten Island family who do not want their vegetable gardens, grape arbors etc. etc. interfered with.

Everyone has had sad experiences along these lines. Sweet potato plants have been pulled up, confused with wild bean, grapes have been pulled up, confused with wild bean, grapes have been pruned to the ground and smothered with mulch and never seen again, a whole field of asparagus dug up and planted in grass, all our nicotiana flowers weeded out of the front garden. "But it is better to fight than to be lonely," Stanley says, speaking of community. He is another Lithuanian.

Jonas was born in Lucerne, Pa., in 1898. Both parents were born in Lithuania and he was baptized by the first Lithuanian priest in that neighborhood, Fr. Burba.

He went to two years of high school, started work at fifteen at bookbinding. His father was a musician and a coal miner. He had a four-piece band of his own and could play any wind instrument. He had powerful lungs, Jonas said. He had to take time off for the weddings, which took three days, and three weekends additional. Jonas said he can play nothing himself but a player piano or an accordion into which one could insert a roll just as in a player piano.

Jonas worked in the bookbindery seven and a half years. There were nine girls to do the collating and sewing, and seven men doing the binding. Then his thumb was cut off by a broken cutter, which came down a second time at one pressure of the lever. His thumb was sewn on again by a Welsh doctor by the name of Davis. It took two and a half months to heal. No insurance, no pay. He was only getting four dollars a week in this second or third year of his work. When he left after 7 1/2 years he was getting nine dollars.

Then in 1918 he went into Western Union telegraph work. "Those were the only two real jobs as a boy. I got \$35 a month and board in camp cars. We repaired the telegraph lines. First I dug holes, I was a 'grunt' first, then I was a line man. Good healthy work, better than book binding. I worked with them until 1949. I had been laid off about ten or fifteen times."

"Since Roosevelt there was unemployment insurance, but only when you worked twenty weeks. Western Union was unionized some time after '41. Anyway, in Newark it was AFL and in N.Y. it was CIO. When we got a raise in Newark it was five cents an hour and in N.Y. it was 26 cents an hour. I was laid off Sept. 28, 1949 and I have no pension, no seniority rights. If you are out over four years you have no seniority rights and no pension. I could not get back in, was overlooked in favor of younger men who do not stick it out. It is dangerous work. I fell once in the Pocono Mountains and once in Kearney and Patterson. I fell with a broken pole; the second time I fell from a black jack pole, from the spur coming out and I slid and had my arms full of black splinters from the pole."

"Now I am too young for old age pension and too old for work. So now I take around displaced persons when they look for work. One time I almost got a job, but they told me to bring around my birth certificate. They thought I was ten years younger than I am. I have done translations for neighbors, interpreting for the courts, but they took three or four months to pay; interpreting at unemployment offices; writing letters and so on. I have never had relief but I am in debt, borrowing \$32.20 each month for my rent. How will I ever pay it back? Maybe I will get work. Maybe I'll save it out of my pension when I get it. When I worked I got \$78 a week. I don't know how much I will get for my old age pension."

"My apartment is heated only for an hour or so in the morning and again at night and the plumbing is bad and the ceiling is failing in. I am on the sixth floor, a 42-family building, mostly Puerto Ricans. It used to be Polish, Russian, Hungarian, Lithuanian, Irish. There are two Lithuanian churches and one Irish in my neighborhood."

Every Friday night Jonas makes sassafras tea for our meeting.

Here is a man who has worked hard all his life, who lives in poverty but is not destitute, and is always cheerful and ready to serve; we all love him.

D.D.