

On Pilgrimage - February 1977

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Summary: Reflects on the dignity of work, manual labor, and her childhood chores. Talks of reading the novels of Chaim Potok and decries continuing anti-Semitism. (DDLW #194).

Peter Maurin was always talking of the primacy of the spiritual. It was in the depths of the Depression that Peter came to me as an answer to prayer, and his was the Little Way of St. Therese (though I did not think much of the Little Flower and her Little Way at that time).

It was a time of unemployment, and people were glad to get a five-dollar-a week job in 1933. "Home Relief beef" was being distributed by the city government for the unemployed, and it was generally thought by the poor that it was the starving or even diseased cattle that were being killed off by the government to feed them. They used to bring us cans and cans of it in exchange for clothing. We were, and are, always being supplied by our readers with clothing, and the unemployed came for clothes and brought their beef in exchange. They were always hoping that a prosperous look as to clothing would bring them WORK, for which they would be paid.

Emphasis was always on the pay, not on the work itself. None of them had what Peter Maurin called "a philosophy of work." The Germans and Italians who lived upstairs from my own first-floor apartment had it in their bones, as Peter did. They kept the back yard spotless, and there was a garden there and several small fruit trees that blossomed; the street in front of the house, as well as the sidewalk, was always clean. The halls were spotless and so were the apartments. There was no heat in the house, but there was hot water

Man should live by the sweat of his own brow, rather than by the sweat of someone else's. There was spiritual work and intellectual work, of course, but, combined with manual labor, it created the whole man, the integrated man at work.

Sometimes, when I am writing an article like this, I remember my mother telling us children at the supper table about when she was a little girl and lived in Poughkeepsie, N.Y., and the river froze over solid so that you could walk to the other shore. And how her father had been wounded in the Civil War and a gash in his throat kept him from speaking above a whisper, and she, herself, worked

in a factory at the age of twelve and made shirts, until an intelligent aunt told her to write to the government about a pension for this family of seven. The pension came through, and she went back to school and then took a business course at Eastman's famous business college, which brought her to New York City and marriage with my father at the old Episcopal Church on Perry Street in Greenwich Village.

The tales she told us of her life on the Hudson River, and of her grandmother's brothers, who sailed out of New Bedford, Massachusetts in whaling vessels, and of Uncle Lybeus, who captained a ship in the harbor of New York which dredged the channel and kept it open-a mudsucker, I have heard it called! These winter days and a frozen-over Hudson River make me think of my mother's tales of "when I was a little girl."

Work

We were brought up to esteem the idea of a philosophy of work, though we did not call it that. Perhaps we all loved books too much to be very thorough in our manual labor around the home. But I always enjoyed my evening reading, after supper dishes and homework, with a grate fire of soft coal sending out soft, hissing flames, and a bowl of apples on the round, green table in the middle of the room which we all sat around at night "with our nose in a book," as my mother called it. We had plenty of manual labor around that comfortable house, with its wall-to-wall carpeting, which had to be swept every Saturday. And the grate that had to be cleaned out daily, the evening fire laid, and supper to help with, the dishes to wash, and a baby brother to rock to sleep when he was teething and fretful. There was work enough after school for a whole family, of one kind or another, and our lives were very full, growing up.

We were talking about work in this way, Sister Teresa and I, and talking about all the work there is to do around a house of hospitality, and how some of our guests are destructive, and some constructive, and how the Sermon on the Mount was a very handy meditation, to keep on an even keel. We have sisters here with us from various orders, Franciscans, Good Shepherd, Dominican, even a Carmelite from Louisiana. How ever-present in every good work are these sisters, these nuns. I do not know which term to use. Together with the other young women here they form a stimulating crew. All are good at mental, manual, and spiritual work. We meet together for Vespers in the evening at Maryhouse, as we do at St. Joseph House and at Tivoli.

February

Outside my window, as I write, small boys on the street are having snow fights, and today's downfall of snow has been cleared away from the front of some of the apartment houses across the street, and some householders have sprinkled

salt for the safety of the passersby. There is still wet snow clinging to the young tree across the street, whose slim branches reach almost to the third floor of the house opposite. I am watching that growth, marking in my mind's eye that the topmost branch reaches to the top of the second story window. Perhaps by the time our readers get this copy of the Catholic Worker the buds may be starting to swell. I remember always that these trees were planted and cultivated in nurseries on Riker's Island in the East River, where the prisons are. And I remember to pray for the prisoners there.

Winter Reading

It is very exciting to come across a new story teller to distract the mind from the winter doldrums, which set in now and again. The long spell of zero weather in New York (even in Florida there was bitter cold weather) means intense suffering for the poor and homeless. Our own parish church, The Nativity, opened its big recreation room downstairs from the church for those who needed shelter. Men were found frozen to death in some heatless flophouses uptown, and God knows how many were picked up dead in other parts of the city. My reading is an escape to get away from the contemplation of so much hardship and misery.

What have I been reading this month? For one thing, **Jews Without Money** by Michael Gold, published in 1930 by Horace Liveright, and reprinted in paperback by Tower Publications. I found an old copy, falling apart.

And then I suddenly came across Chaim Potok. I have read three of his books this last month, starting with **My Name is Asher Lev**, the story of a child who grew up to be a great artist. And last week, I read **The Chosen** and **The Promise**.

One interesting thing-these books are about Brooklyn, and, having grown up the first seven years of my life in Brooklyn, it was intensely interesting to get this picture of the Williamsburg section, where the Hasidic Jews are settled, and to learn more about the Hasidim of today. Martin Buber first introduced me to this Franciscan-like movement of Jews filled with fervor and the joy of a St. Francis, the men dancing and singing at celebrations. In the book titled **In The Beginning** I read of the strong resistance movement among Polish Jews during the War, and how money was sent over to Poland not only for arms but for passage money to get to this country for sanctuary. I am just beginning this last story now, and it is hard to read. I think if I had begun to read Chaim Potok's stories of children with this novel about the anti-Semitism which existed in Brooklyn in the Thirties, I could not have gone on to his other books. It would have been too painful an encounter. There had been anti-Semitic meetings at that time in the basement of one of the Catholic churches. Stories of the international Jewish bankers and their control of the world's money were told, and when we tried to distribute the Catholic Worker outside these meetings we were all but mobbed. Our papers were torn from our hands and thrown back

into our faces, and when I tried to protest, “But our Lord, Jesus Christ, was a Jew,” the people coming from the meeting shouted at me, “But He’s a long time dead!”

When I wrote an article about the growing anti-Semitism in our country, and brought it to one of our prestigious Catholic journals, I was advised to stick to my “delightful, little, informal essays.”

The other two books by Potok, **The Chosen** and **The Promise**, were sheer joy to read, and the religious customs which the Jews follow so faithfully (and from which so many of our own Catholic customs stem), their sense of the sacramentality of life, their way of dressing, of keeping the Sabbath, their devotion to the Scriptures, the Talmud, the Torah-the holy books, the holy days-all of this impressed me.

Also, the emphasis on memorizing. How much had to be “learned by heart!” It made me read again the tenth book of St. Augustine’s Confessions, which was on Memory!