

A Knight For A Day

Dorothy Day

The Catholic Worker, December 1979, 5.

Summary: A tender reminiscence of Stanley Vishnewski, the first to join her after she met Peter Maurin. Recalls how he saved her life, his companionship, generosity, and those who delighted in him. "I miss Stanley." (DDLW #601).

A dear friend of mine who had no particular faith said in his last illness, "Don't mourn for me. But play, on the phonograph, Strauss's **Death and Transfiguration**, and recite as a prayer the twenty-third psalm, **The Lord is My Shepherd.**"

I think of that as I mourn for Stanley. I can't help but mourn. I miss him.

Stanley was the first Catholic Worker to arrive after my meeting with Peter Maurin. He was a seventeen-year-old Lithuanian from Brooklyn, and it was in the Depression, the early-thirties. (His name was really Stanislaus Vishnaukas, but in the Brooklyn school he first went to they found it difficult to pronounce and changed it to Stanley Vishnewski. I personally knew only one of the family, "Little Walty," who was much bigger than Stanley. He, or still another brother, worked in a vast steel mill in Baltimore which I visited once. Their father was a tailor, and clothed his children well.) The first issue of **The Catholic Worker** had come out – a few thousand copies. Stanley's version of our meeting was that he had met this "little, old lady" (I was in my mid-thirties) carrying a typewriter and with knightly gallantry, had offered to carry my burden. That was the beginning of a long association.

He had, indeed, all but saved my life on two different occasions. The first was during the National Biscuit Company strike when mounted policeman were called out to disperse a mass picket line. I had been distributing leaflets about the right to organize, and Stanley was helping me, when one of the police on a huge horse all but pressed me against a wall. Stanley got between me and the horse and its rider. The second time was when a crazed veteran, who had smuggled food into Biafra, Africa and who went "out of his mind" occasionally, stalked down the long hall at Tivoli, passed Stanley's room, and came and threw himself on my bed, burying his face on my shoulder to weep. I could only gasp—"I am not your mother and you are very heavy!" But Stanley was right there in an instant to place a strong hand on his shoulder and say—"The dinner bell just rang." This seemed to bring normalcy to a tense situation, and later the man's friends came after him.

Stanley used to come, these recent years, and have dinner with me every evening, and we watched the television. He loved long walks – especially along Fourth Avenue, where second-hand book shops abound. Many a book he found for me to read or re-read.

And then, the sudden announcement – “Stanley is dead!”

Since he, himself, had a bad heart attack some years ago, he was living in Maryhouse, down the hall from my room. He was like an official guest master and delighted in taking new, out-of-town volunteers on walks. He had gone on many a speaking trip these last years, and the little, crippled children at Dorothy Gauchat’s Our Lady of the Wayside loved him (as adult audiences did, too). He had a marvelous slide show of the Catholic Worker history over the years. And his famous story, too, about the hungry lion, delighted old and young. I miss Stanley.