Chapter 6

Dorothy Day

Summary: (DOC #206) Recounts the misery of New York in 1916, her loneliness, and life in tenements among the ethnic poor. Describes her first newspaper job with The Call, the competing social ideologies, and sporadic strikes and protests.

IN JUNE, 1916, I left the University of Illinois for good. I had been there for two years and to this day I haven't the slightest idea what I learned in classes. All my education had come from outside.

The family was moving to New York again. We had all been born there except the youngest, and we had been ten years away. In a few months I would be eighteen. I lived at home while I was looking for a job but as soon as I found one that autumn on the New York Call, the Socialist paper, I left to take a room down on the East Side.

Up to that time, I had been imbued to some extent by a Messianic idea of the masses, but at that time I was filled with a morbid pity for those who lived in slums. All that summer I was in a state of depression, as I walked the streets of New York making up my mind what to do, where to live.

In the first place I felt unbearably lonesome. Not that I wanted to stay at the University, but I missed my companions, my friendship with Rayna Prohme. She had been the first real friend I had ever had, and we had shared everything with each other for the last year. Now I was alone. There was no one to talk to, no one to take walks with and discuss problems of the world. I had grown away from the family and after my crowded life at the university, New York was a vast wilderness.

For weeks I was oppressed by the misery of human existence. The people I saw in subways, in crowded eating places, walking the streets, sitting on park benches, or looking for work, all seemed miserable and hopeless. The city was unbearably hot and airless. For days it seemed that I talked to no one. I walked the streets in solitude and my heart wept within me for the ugliness of all I saw. I could not but believe that all whom I met were as miserable as I.

When I was in the subway I felt closed in, trapped. When I walked the narrow streets of lower New York through the tenement districts I felt that I was caught, that never again would I feel happy or free. It was hot that year and children slept on fire escapes and roofs, and men and women sat on the streets all night. People lived in the streets; and the foul odor of decaying garbage, the fetid odor

from the dark hallways of tenements, sickened me. “Where youth grows pale and specter thin and dies,” I thought, remembering a poem Rayna and I had read together, “Where but to think is to be full of sorrow and leaden-eyed despair.”

As soon as I got work on The Call, I went down Pearl Street where I worked, down Cherry Street, and walked up and down tenement stairs investigating the furnished room signs. There were not many of them, for the tenement apartments were small, some even two-room flats. I came across backyard houses, shut in between the high walls of warehouses and factories and other tenements. I came across many a house with backyard toilets. (In 1938, more than twenty years later, there are still backyard toilets in this, the richest city in the world. A tenement collapsed last year on Staten Island, killing nineteen and injuring many others. Whole families were wiped out. Two days before, building inspectors had gone over the house and passed on it as safe although even then several feet of water were lapping against the walls in a sub-basement, undermining the foundations. In February, 1938, a tenement collapsed on the East Side, but thanks to a woman tenant noticing an ever widening crack in the building, and notifying the police, the families were moved out just before the building fell in.)

Cherry Street is a street of “homes,” not of rooming houses. There are Syrian, Italian, Greek, and Jewish stores, and the room I finally found was in the home of a Jewish family.

The hallways were dark and evil smelling. There were tile floors, usually slimy with filth. The hallways were narrow with a door on either side opening into the front apartments. At the dusky end of the hall were two more doors entering the rear apartments. The stairs led up for five flights with windows looking out into areaways. The apartment where I found a room was on the fourth floor, front. There were three rooms to the apartment, only the front room with windows on the street.

The front room was used as dining room and bedroom as well as living room, and the kitchen also had folding beds in it. I had the one bedroom with a little gas plate, which I bought myself on which to cook breakfast. There was a bed with an enormous feathertick on top of it, a table, and a chair. These filled the room. There were two doors, one into the kitchen and the other into the hallway. There was one window looking out on an airshaft, but because there was only one flight above, my room was light. I could lie in bed and gaze up at a little patch of sky.

In the two front rooms lived a tailor and his wife and four children. For my bedroom I paid five dollars a month, and probably the rent of the place was ten dollars for the family. There was no electricity, no bath, no hot water, but the children and the mother and father were always clean, thanks to the public showers around the corner and the place was always neat and smelled of good baking.

The tenement was only one of the thousands in the city. Laws had been passed twenty-five years before condemning them, still they remained, the owners not

much concerned about the misery of the occupants.The fire escapes were obsolete, the windows were too small. Doors, hallways, and stairs were wooden, and every winter there were fires in which men, women, and children lost their lives. There was no central heating. Every family had to heat its own apartment. In some families where the men were employed they used coal. In other families the younger boys would go down to the river and fish up driftwood for the fires.

Some families used their gas ovens for a few hours or just trusted to the gas heat from cooking to warm their homes. Some big tenements had been remodeled to the extent of putting in hot water but not heat. I lived in one such house once, and the family next door used to draw their washtubs full of hot water the first thing in the morning, hoping that the steam would take the chill off the place. Most of the kitchens had two washtubs next to the sink with the partitions between them taken out so as to form one long bathtub.

When the apartments were cold they smelled dank. There was a peculiar odor of burned grease and of dirty clothes. And of course there were bedbugs. I complained quite a few times until I realized what a hopeless struggle it was.

The Call was a morning paper, so I never got to my room until two or three in the morning. Mrs. Gottlieb used to try to keep the children quiet in the morning so that I could sleep, but by nine o'clock they were snuffling around the door waiting for me to waken. I had a portable phonograph that was a great attraction to them, and every morning while I dressed I used to put on a Fritz Kreisler record and I could hear the audience buzzing outside the door like a hive of bees. As soon as I opened the door, they came swarming in to sit all over the bed and the floor while I made myself a pot of coffee. Sometimes Mrs. Gottlieb and the children and I would go together to the public baths around the corner and luxuriate under the hot showers.

My salary in the beginning was five dollars a week. Within a few months it was raised to ten. My rent was only five dollars a month, and I cooked breakfast in my room. Some of the reporters from other papers with whom I was covering assignments used to treat me to dinner, and Mrs. Gottlieb left a plate of soup or fish for me at midnight so that I fared very well.

I have learned since that the poverty of the East Side is comparatively well-fed poverty. There are always the push-cart markets with all kinds of fruits and vegetables. Mussels were the cheapest of the sea foods, and you could buy a leg of chicken and cook up a pot of soup. The Jews and Italians knew how to cook and they did not mind haggling at the push-carts over pennies.

On the East Side both Jews and Italians joined in constant protest against their lot. There were constant bread riots that winter with mobs of women and children storming the city hall. On one occasion they marched up Fifth Avenue to the old Waldorf-Astoria and holding their babies on stout hips, shook their fists up at the windows. They lived on the streets from early spring until late fall and willingly joined in any protest afoot.

There are always protests on the East Side–streetcorner meetings, marches to the city hall, protests for playgrounds, recreational centers, for babies' clinics, better schools, against low wages, against the high price of living. Usually the protests grew out of some specific case of human misery–death in the family from a fire, starvation, eviction. The family that was suffering sat at home and mourned, and all the neighbors took up the cause and made their voices heard. Consequently, evictions were halted, relief came, playgrounds were built, houses were torn down, and conditions have somewhat improved. But with all the protest there is still no model housing for the very poor. What model tenements have been put up have come to those who could pay thirty to forty dollars a month rent. The poor still live in hovels, paying eight, ten, or fifteen dollars.

I enjoyed that winter in the slums and have never lived any place else since. If one must dwell in cities I prefer the slums of the poor to the slums of the rich. A tenement is a tenement whether it is on lower Park Avenue or upper.

There were several factions working for The New York Call. The managing editor, Chester Wright, was an American Federation of Labor man. Charles Ervin, who was on the paper in some business capacity and took Wright's place later as managing editor, favored the Amalgamated Clothing Workers which had had a long fight against the A. F. of L. Joshua Wanhope, the paper's editorial writer, was an old-time Socialist. Most of those working for the paper were Socialists, but there were a few I. W. W.'s and a few Anarchists. Those who favored the I. W. W. or the Anarchist movement, however, were more newspaper men than anything else. Otherwise they could not have worked for The Call as Socialism and Anarchism are fundamentally opposed, and the I. W. W.'s, advocating direct action rather than parliamentary action, were disrupters when they were most sincere.

There were two young men that I used to "run around with," William Randorf and Louis Weitzonkorn. They were both radical journalists at the time, but both had their vices which neutralized their work in the movement. Bill's vice was poker and Louis' playwriting. He used to run the Guillotine Column on The Call, and has now become a Broadway playwright, making money and name with Five Star Final. Randorf continues to play poker for weeks at a time but has remained to some extent in the radical movement writing labor articles and now and again editing The Daily Worker. At that time the three of us were interested in literature as well as labor and journalism and used to sit in Child's restaurant on lower Park Row every morning until two or three o'clock talking about the great novel, the great poem, and the great play. Louis was romantic, and his favorite play was Cyrano de Bergerac. He had a big nose himself. Bill's favorite poem was "Cynara."

I was only eighteen, so I wavered between my allegiance to Socialism, Syndicalism (the I. W. W.'s), and Anarchism. When I read Tolstoi I was an Anarchist. My allegiance to The Call kept me a Socialist, although a left-wing one, and my Americanism inclined me to the I. W. W. movement.

I do not remember any anti-religious articles in The Call. As a matter of fact, there was a long article by Dante Barton, vice-chairman of the Committee on Industrial Relations, which was an interview with Father John O'Rourke, a Jesuit, who preached at the Cathedral that winter. Reading it over just the other day, I was surprised to find many quotations from Pope Leo XIII and a very fair exposition of the Church's social teachings. I had paid no attention to it at that time. Catholics then were a nation apart, a people within a people, making little impression on the tremendous non-Catholic population of the country. The quotations from Father O'Rourke emphasized, as Pope Pius XI did in his encyclical on Atheistic Communism, that the bonuses employers handed out were merely bribes. However, at that time as too often even now, social justice was talked of in general principles and not applied to an immediate issue, to any particular strike.

There was little unemployment because the munition factories were working twenty-four hours a day. Although there were high wages, the cost of living went up steadily, so there continued to be strikes in industry. There was a street-car strike which petered out after many months. There were strikes in garment factories, smelting plants, sugar refineries, and week after week during that winter food riots went on. On the west coast Mooney was being tried after the Preparedness Day parade bombing and Bob Minor, the radical cartoonist, was single-handed in building up a defense committee which is still functioning to this day. Charles Ashley, out in Everett, Washington, was doing the same thing for the seventy I. W. W.'s being tried for murder after five of their own comrades had been shot down in a free speech riot. (Now, twenty years after, Minor is still a leader in the Communist labor movement in this country and Ashley is editing a paper in Soviet Russia.)