Max Bodenheim

By Dorothy Day

The Catholic Worker, March 1954, 3, 7, 8.

Summary: A tender remembrance of poet Max Bodenheim and his wife Ruth who were murdered. Recounts the many times her and Max's paths crossed, his tormented and difficult life of poverty, and Max and Ruth's coming for hospitality to the Catholic Worker. Comments on Ruth's flirtations and unseemly newspaper accounts of their life. (DDLW #663).

Every day at twelve thirty a bell calls us to the rosary in the library at Chrystie Street and those who wish to, gather together from the house to pray for peace. Sometimes mothers and children waiting for clothes are caught sitting there, and participate in prayer if they wish, or just sit. Slim goes on rocking in his chair, a cigar stuck in his mouth if he has one. Generally the attitudes are those of reverence and attention. Some kneel, some sit, some crouch over chairs in strange grotesque positions.

Rosary

One day last February Max Bodenheim and his wife Ruth came in around eleven thirty and said that they had been evicted from their furnished room, that he had a broken leg in a cast and they needed shelter. Could they go to one of the farms? There was more room at Maryfarm, and Charlie would drive up that day, so Max settled himself in the library, directly in back of the table where the statue of the Blessed Mother stood, to wait for Ruth to bring their few belongings from a friend's house. He was caught there when the rosary started. My glimpse of him in back of the statue, the flowers and the lighted candle was such that I was distracted indeed. I could not help but think, "Poor Max, suddenly caught like this, with dozens of ragged down and out people coming at the ringing of a bell into the room, planting themselves all around him and praying. He must think that he was being besieged that they were praying at him, or for him!" Afterwards I found Ruth sitting on her suitcase in the hall, a picture of abandon, reading some of Max's poems which she was sorting out from a broken suitcase by her side. I apologized. "We're not forcing prayers on anyone," I told her. "It's just that it's the only place we have to pray."

Max A Catholic

"Max is a Catholic," she said then. "Baptized, made his first communion, he was confirmed too, down in Mississippi where he was born. His mother was from Alsace-Lorraine." Later I found that she herself was baptized. According to her story one of the parents was Catholic, probably her mother since her name was Fagan. She herself was a Libertarian Socialist and attended the meetings of that group, and carried around with her pamphlets about the Labor movement. I have one of them in my desk now.

Visit to Maryfarm

They went with us to Maryfarm and stayed there for a month or six weeks, and then because she had become embroiled with a Russian guest who kissed her hand and flirted outrageously with her while he crudely insulted her husband, I drove the Bodenheims to Peter Maurin Farm on Staten Island. It was a bitter day and she had a touch of the flu and didn't want to leave. She had been enjoying her flirtation. She was 35 and her husband was 65. She was a beautiful woman with strong Jewish features, with a splendid figure and a great warmth of manner. She could have played the part of Judith or Esther.

Max occasionally came to Mass, but Ruth said she believed only in love. And perhaps she should have added compassion, because certainly that is what she felt for her husband. She had met him on the street one rainy night and found him in such a forlorn condition that she had started taking care of him. They were married two years ago, not long after they met. Max had been divorced by his first wife Minna and had not seen his son for eight years.

Old Friend

I had known Max for many years, in New York, Chicago, and later in Staten Island. When Gene O'Neil recited "The Hound of Heaven" to me in the back room of an old saloon on Fourth Street, Max had been one of the habitues of the same place, writing poetry then on the backs of old envelopes. I remember one long poem he and Gene and I wrote, taking turns at writing the verses. Max didn't drink much then and he was a hard worker beginning to turn out novels and books of poetry which never sold very well, and trying to get money by poetry reading which used to make us all laugh. He had lost most of his front teeth then, and between his pipe and a lisp and a stammer it was hard to understand him. He was never a very prepossessing person in spite of the picture the newspapers drew of him as a Don Juan.

I ran into Max later in Chicago, still reading poetry, and then some ten years later, when I was living on the beach in Staten Island, and taking care of a number of children for the summer from the Hoffman School for Individual Development, his son Solbert was one of the number. He was ten years old, a serious little boy, good and diligent, playing and reading, eating and sleeping, and giving no trouble at all. Max used to come crown once a week to see him and give him lectures on ethics and conduct. When Solbert grew up and his parents parted he didn't see Max any more and when he married and had children of his own, they had nothing to do with their grandfather. Max told me this when he was staying with us.

He and Ruth remained with us at Peter Maurin farm until after Easter, and on Easter Sunday Max went to Mass, and I was glad that it was a sung Mass. Ruth used to go into town once a week to try to sell some of Max's poetry so that they could get a room again. Once she sold one to the New York Times and they rejoiced for weeks. It didn't bring them much more than ten dollars. When she was away in town Max would not eat and every now and then, from a long silence, he used to ask me, "Do you think my beloved wife will be back

this evening?" He didn't do much talking, but every day or so he would produce another poem.

He lay on one of the two beds we set up in a warm hall bed room, and rested and smoked his pipe and wrote.

Spring

When spring came and the warm weather and his leg was better, Max and Ruth disappeared. Ruth came back later to get some things he left in a seaman's duffle bag and she and her companion, a young lad rather somber and silent, walked down the road to the train about eleven. It was the last I ever saw of Ruth or Max. Last week they were murdered on Third Avenue, in the room, of a young fellow who had given them shelter. Max was shot and Ruth beaten and stabbed.

The police caught this demented friend, Weinberg, three days later, as he himself sought for a place to sleep in the basement of a rooming house on Twenty-first Street.

Newspaper Stories

I read the account of this brutal slaying in all the papers February eighth and it was an ugly story indeed, with all the worst of Max and Ruth portrayed, the story of a drunken Bohemian, a clown, an exhibitionist, a lecher and of woman who was loose in morals, depraved in appetite, loving Max for his prestige as writer and Poet and finding her satisfaction in the passions of younger men. Only the Daily News gave him some credit for achievement and mentioned that he had won poetry awards, that he was the author of fourteen novels as well as several books of poetry. In spite of this achievement, his life had been spent in dire poverty.

Ruth herself had told me that he had been married a second time to an invalid on whom he had lavished what care he could from the sale of the popular rights to his books which came out in twenty-five-cent editions. For a few hundred dollars to pay for food and medicines, and doctors and later her burial, he had lost all his royalties.

The whole story was an ugly, sordid tale of poverty, drink and passion.

How often I have felt that a solid tide of evil is held off from us by the Blessed Sacrament in our midst, here at the farms, and houses. By our daily communions we hold it back, it is dissolved like a mist by the Sun of Justice.

We each of us could say, as we read this tragic story of death, "There but for the grace of God, goes each one of us."

Burial

Max was buried in a family plot in New Jersey and a rabbi officiated at his funeral, the expenses of which were paid by the poet Alfred Kreymborg. He had many friends at his funeral and many followed him to his grave. There certainly

was no possibility of a Catholic burial, since he had not practiced his faith since childhood.

Ruth believed only in love, she said, but she was in love especially with herself, her own beauty, which she used to inflame others to desire. (The horrible part of it is, I have seen good and pious girls playing with mens feelings, playing with their own, taking delectation in temptation, using those dark deep forces of sex, "to influence for good." Their kindness is particular kindness, their friendship is particular friendships. As St. Augustine says, we need to love all as though we loved each one particularly. In spite of jealousy each one must see that we love all, all the others, most dearly. And it is so hard to love some, and so often whatever we do in love is repaid with bitterness, hatred and reprisals. This is good pruning for us, of our self love. By the very pain we feel, we know the measure of our pride, our desire to use our influence, our love.)

Bare Bones

How little we were able to do for Max or Ruth. The bare bones of hospitality we gave them. If we had loved them more, if Ruth had found more love with us, perhaps she would not have wandered around trying to bestow it, trying to bestow the only warmth and light and color she knew in the ugly grey life around her. We were able to do so little, God must listen to our prayers for them, and maybe it was that by the very violence of their death, the terror and pain of it added to Christ's suffering for them, their sins were wiped out that last awful moment and the gates of eternal life were opened up for them. I see this through a glass darkly.

Another Victim

And poor Weinberg, child of no home, placed in a Hebrew orphanage at an early age, kept in a mental hospital at ten years old, and never once visited by his mother, released at the age of seventeen to go into the army, serving there for seven months and then released again as unfit for public service, shut off from life and from people, without faith, without hope, without love, earning miserable meals by miserable work, dishwashing, that only job open for the unskilled, the unorganized, the crippled mentally and physically. He took the only kind of love he knew, bodily love, from wherever he could find it, in this case from a woman as mentally clouded as himself. In papers found among her things there was a record of her having been in a state hospital herself.

There was violence in Ruth. She wanted men to fight over her. It is instinct in many women to wish to be so desired that men will pay any price for their favors and, where there is no money, blood will do.

The murderer cried out, "I have killed two communists; I should get a medal." There was malice in the smile he turned on the police and the reporters.

But Max was only a poet, and his sympathies with communism were because they spoke in terms of bread and shelter, and he had lived long with hunger. Drink was his refuge, because drink is often easier to get than bread. When he was

young he wrote free verse, but those last years, when he was most disorganized, his verse became formal and stylized. Every day that he was with us he worked on a series of sonnets, dedicated to each one of us, polished, stately, courteous, often obscure, and he came to meals happily to read them aloud for our applause. I remember one especially that he wrote to Agnes, widow of a barge captain, who had been helping us for some years. And I loved this delicate appreciation of her sweetness and diligence, her care for our comfort.

Agnes had charge of the second floor bedrooms and the linens and bathroom, and never a word of criticism comes from her lips for such wild disorder as accompanied such guests as Max and Ruth. No matter how comfortable a room–how tidy when they entered–it was soon a shambles of dirty clothes, rags, dust, cigarette butts, tobacco, newspapers, bits of food, onions, bread, apples cores, empty coffee cups, paper bags, scuffed shoes, dirty socks.

May They Rest in Peace

The newspapers commented on the sordid unheated room on Third Avenue and Twelfth Street where their bodies were found, and I thought, as I read, how over and over again in our houses of hospitality, I have seen just such rooms, reflecting the grim and cheerless chaos of the minds of its occupants. There is a comfortable disorder and the sordid disorder of people who do not love the material, though they seek all their pleasure in it. In trying to save their lives, they lose them.

In trying to live the life of the flesh, the Bodenheims were most hideously tricked. May their poor, dark, tormented souls rest now in peace.