

Hans Tunnesen

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Summary: An obituary for Hans Tunnesen who live and worked at the Catholic Worker for thirty years. Sketches his life, portraying him as a wonderful bread-baker, lover of work, carpenter, and a man of faith. (DDLW #528).

Last month Tom Sullivan wrote of the life and death of a Trappist priest, one of our Catholic Workers, and this month I recount the death of a worker, Hans Tunnesen.

It was hard to see Hans going from us. But we were prepared for it, as he himself was this last year. He lived in great pain, bent over with it, in fact, as he took his daily stroll down the lawn, along the river. There he contemplated the tankers, freighters, tugs and barges which went up and down the Hudson—up to Albany, which I had never thought of before as a port city.

“Yes, it has as deep a harbor as Bayonne,” he told me. He had himself cooked on tugs all around the harbor of New York form many years before we met him during the Second World War. He knew the harbor as he never knew the city. He came to us from the city, of course, from Bellevue Hospital where he had been laid up with an infected foot which kept him on crutches.

Released from the hospital, he was given shelter at the Seamen’s Institute at South Ferry, and daily he walked uptown (on crutches) to our Mott Street house to partake of our early morning coffee and bread. It was good pumpernickel and Lithuanian rye, day-old bread which we bought from a lower East Side bakery.

It was wartime, and we were so short of help that Smokey Joe always boasted that he and I kept the CW going those war years. He was ignoring Dave Mason, Arthur Sheehan and Fr. Clarence Duffy whose age, illness, or priesthood had kept them from being drafted. It was true—all the young men had gone—there was no longer the dazzling array of youth that lightened the Bowery area by volunteering their vacations, and in some instances gave us literally years of work.

Off to Sea

So Hans came in one early morning to cut the bread for the line, a hard job since it needed a strong arm. But he could not endure the city. Another volunteer

took his place, and Hans became cook at Maryfarm, Easton, Pa. That farm overlooked two rivers, and it had the joy and glamor of all beginnings.

Fr. Pacifique Roy, a Josephite was living with us then, and other priests came and gave retreats. But Fr. Roy and Hans and John Filliger, the farmer, together with three girls from the Grail—who had come to help us for a few months—did all the work. No one could keep up with them.

Hans had been born on a farm in Norway, and he and his twin brother had gone to sea at the age of fourteen. Hans was not a man of many words. We had to piece together his past. He spoke with a strong accent (as Peter Maurin also did) till the end of his days.

“Our mother packed our little sea chests and off we went, sailing all over the world. I was cabin boy. Our father was at sea, too.”

Hans’ travels meant three ship wrecks; once in the Gulf of Mexico the crew lost everything. There was no compensation, they ended “on the beach.” It has always appalled me how the bureaucracy has made the filling out of forms so impossible to so many of the poor, that they have over and over again been defrauded of their rights—one of the seven deadly sins of our time.

Hans lived as waterfront people lived, all his days, until he came to us. Perhaps it was a year or so after he came that he said to me with his usual wry humor, “When I first came here I thought I was in heaven, sitting down to table with priests and college fellows, and all these beautiful young girls.” (He had quite a leer, an inoffensive one, when he spoke of the girls.) “But I sure found out it was like every place else. They were like everyone else.” An enigmatic remark, a sad remark in a way, but it also meant he felt perfectly at home with us—that he was dealing with reality. “All is not gold that glitters.” “Handsome is as handsome does.” (My own mother humorously was fond of these aphorisms.)

Carpenter and Baker

Hans loved to work. He had a companion in Fr. Pacifique Roy, a French Canadian, who piped our water down to house and barn from a hillside spring, and who installed electricity, cemented over the barn floor and the cow stalls to make a great hall which was dining room, living room and kitchen. Hans’ kitchen coal stove, large as it was, was not adequate to heat it, so Fr. Roy built a great fireplace with chimney extending up thru the library-sitting room and then thru the roof. Two loft dormitories were on one side—on the other side, the chapel.

Hans cooked and baked and helped Fr. Roy with carpentry. There was an abundant supply of food including fish and chicken which the priest knew how to wrangle from the chain stores on Saturday nights (food that would spoil, if kept, but we had a big population to eat it).

Hans taught us all to bake from that day to this, though now the new vogue among some of the young means that those emulating the Way of the Pilgrim with his sack of bread and Bible, bake bread made of wholewheat, rye, soybean flour, cornmeal, molasses and who knows what other nourishment all combined which has to be cut with a saw. (I do not know any “walking” pilgrims. Only hitchhikers.) But they all know how to bake good bread, too. And they like to experiment.

Hans helped work as carpenter on the chapels at the Newburgh farm later, and the Peter Maurin farm on Staten Island. His most triumphant baking exploits were at Peter Maurin farm where in a little brick shed, which had been a cannery, we installed a “surplus commodity” oven from an Army-Navy store which could bake for hundreds. Mixing the dough by hand in a huge wash tub, he produced a hundred loaves for our soup line which did not need a strong arm man to cut it and took into consideration the toothless.

Many a time former Bishop Shannon, then studying at Yale, drove down from New Haven to visit us and delivered a carload of our bread to our Chrystie Street House of Hospitality (always taking one fragrant loaf himself, “for pay” he said).

When I told of Hans’ baking at one of my speaking engagements, a judge’s wife gave me a hundred dollars (or more?) for an electrified mixer, and when she found that our editor and bursar, Tom Sullivan, had used the money for some pressing bill, she swore that she’d never give another dime. Tom was a city man and never went for this farm stuff! Why bake when we could get lots of free bread from bakeries and “day-old” cost sometimes as low as 5 cents a loaf?

Compline

Fr. Roy and Hans were a good team, but Hans, a non-churchgoing Lutheran, was not converted by Fr. Roy who heavily condemned smoking and drinking as “attachments.” Hans loved his beer and would walk miles to get it when appreciative guests used to give him a few dollars. He did enjoy going to Compline every night, especially since we sang the hymns. Coming up the stairs from the basement kitchen he’d say, “Shall we complain?” The word Compline was a mystery to his Lutheran training.

Fr. Shritz, an 80-year old retired priest from Minnesota, stayed with us a few years at Maryfarm, Newburgh. After “complaining,” Hans and Fr. Shritz used to sit down to a game of pinochle while they smoked big black cigars! Whether it was during or after the game that they discussed Lutheranism and Catholicism, I don’t know. But they studied Catechism and Hans remembered his, and accepted the mysteries the Catholic Church presented to him, and was formally “received” into the Church. From then on, a picture of the Virgin and a rosary hung over the bed. I have his rosary around my neck now. (There is no pocket in my dress.) His crucifix, a black iron Christ on a plain wood Cross, and a worshipping angel, a foot high (which probably came from some church Christmas

creche) on top of his wardrobe completed the decoration of his little ship-shape room. Not a superfluous thing in it, only a change of clothes, and a good, unworn suit put away for his burial. Nearly eighty, he was ready to die.

He did not want to go to the hospital. He had been only to emergency wards in the thirty years with us. Once he broke his wrist in a fall. Once he was bitten in the calf of the leg by an enraged sow when he was attempting to save her new litter from the boar, who had gotten into the sow's enclosure. (At that time we had sheep too, which devoured Stanley's large and perfect garden in one night when they were suddenly left out of their enclosure.) We were foolish enough not to want either man or beast imprisoned. Hans had lived close to beasts in his childhood and could have taught us much, but he preferred the sociability of the kitchen, especially the appreciative attentions of the girls.

My daughter and grandchildren grew up knowing him and he loved them all and visited with me when they lived in West Virginia, and literally watched their growth from birth. (Two were born at Easton, Pa., two at Stotler's crossroads, West Virginia, four at Staten Island, and only one in Vermont. The afternoon the day before he died, his voice was very weak, but he took out a bill from his wallet (ten dollars)—his entire worldly wealth—and said, "Send it to Susie" who is having her second child soon out in California.

When he died, he had one dollar and a dime in his wallet.

Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His little ones. He was anointed, there was a "wake" at the funeral parlor in Rhinebeck and those he loved said the rosary for the repose of his soul. He had earned his living literally by the sweat of his brow, and the suit he was laid out in was one he had put aside for the purpose less than a year ago. He gave us, and all who came to us, far more than we gave him, like so many of those who come in to us from "off the line." My heart swells in gratitude to him and to the dear Lord who sends us such friends and fellow workers.