

On Pilgrimage - October 1970

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Summary: Sketchy account of her around-the-world trip and two obituaries of long-time Catholic Workers, "Smokey Joe" Motyka and Peggy Baird. (DDLW #504).

If I started to report all my impressions of Australia, India, Africa, England it would take a volume and I hope all my notes which I have kept in disjointed fashion, but very faithfully, will come out some day in book form. Certainly there is not room to do justice to such a trip in the columns of this eight-page tabloid which is always overflowing. Or to do justice to the people we met on the way, beginning with Fr. Roger Pryke and Fr. John Heffey who were responsible for the trip in the first place, since they sent Eileen Egan and me the round trip tickets.

They say they met me first back in the time of the second world war when they were seminarians, evicted, one might say, from Rome and on their way back through the States to the west coast where they took ship for Australia.

They said they came in on the breadline at Mott Street, and received hospitality at the Easton Farm and in our houses all the way across the country. There is an Australian **Catholic Worker**, edited by John Ryan, a house of hospitality run by Brian Noone and Mary Doyle and a farming commune, the head of which is Fr. Heffey.

We spoke at seminars every day from eleven to four and often in the evening, in Sidney and Melbourne, and also at schools and seminaries, so we can say that we worked our way to and from Australia, where we stayed three weeks.

The tickets purchased for us meant we had stopovers on the way back, at Hong Kong, in India at Calcutta, New Delhi and Bombay; at Dares-Salaam (Port of Peace) in Tanzania; a day in Rome and a week in England. We suffered the cold in Australia where it was still winter, a flood in Calcutta, and a day of bombings (150 were exploded the day after we arrived, after warnings in the press to stay off the streets), had peaceful visits with old friends in New Delhi, twenty-four hours in Bombay and a week in Tanzania, and finally more speaking in England. On leaving London, high-jacking was at its height and we had to pass through some kind of a barrier at the airport which lit up on discovering any metal in our clothes or baggage. Even our handbags were inspected.

Eileen Egan will give a complete story of our visit in India where of course we saw Mother Teresa in Calcutta, and I will write more at length in the next issue about Tanzania and the work of this country's Catholic and Socialist president who recently spoke at the U.N. and at

Maryknoll general chapter meeting in New York. Tight security measures kept anyone from hearing him or meeting him personally at either place, but we will hear the tape of his talk at Maryknoll and be able then to give an account of the Ujamaa villages which are part of the socialization plans of this new and advancing country in East Africa.

Here is a leader who is engaged in a peaceable revolution, socializing or nationalizing the land, and the schools and hospitals which were started by the Maryknoll order. I delight in this remarkable and peaceable happening.

The speeches of Julius Nyerere, of Tanzania, have come out in paperback, published by Oxford University Press. To me, the Arusha Declaration sounds like Peter Maurin's ideas incarnate.

Since I came back I have been reading about Kenneth Kaunda, president of Zambia, a neighboring and even larger territory which used to be part of Rhodesia. He and Julius Nyrere in Africa, stand in my mind with Cesar Chavez, Danilo Dolci, Vinoba Bhava, Dom Helder Camara, Mrs. Martin Luther King, Ralph Abernathy, and others who have the vision and the integrity which enlightens our minds and brings us bright hope for the future. God is with them. May He bless and protect them.

HOME AGAIN

The reason it is so difficult to write more this month is that I am faced with the necessity of writing the obituaries of two dear friends, both of whom have been with us for many years.

Here at St. Joseph's House of Hospitality we are overrun with youth both on the farm and in the city and these young ones throw themselves into the work with such fervor and such a spirit of joy that the older members of the community are being renewed constantly in the spirit of the work. There are tensions of course, race tensions and class tensions, and those between the old and the young, but the pains are growing pains. No one can say the Catholic Worker is stagnant.

Joseph Motyka 1903-1970

It was not so many years after the Catholic Worker started in the thirties that we met "Smokey Joe" as he called himself, who gravitated between Mott Street where we were living then, and the Bowery where he had many a comrade. It was some years before he really settled down and became a "Catholic Worker." It was in the time of our greatest need when the second world war was on, and so many young men were away in the military service or in conscientious objector camps. Arthur Sheehan remained with us, but he spent a good part of his time travelling around with Peter Maurin. Dave Mason kept the kitchen and soup line going besides getting out the paper with Arthur. Smokey came into his own then, sitting at a desk in the office, receiving visitors, helping mail out the paper. He refused to recognize David, kept at a distance from Peter and Arthur and always insisted ever since that he and I kept the work going all through the war.

I felt an especially close association with Smokey because he had been in the marines at the time when they were overrunning the mountains of Nicaragua, in pursuit of Sandino, the national hero who was at the head of the forces opposing the United States interference and exploitation. And I at that time, in the mid or late twenties was a worker in a communist affiliate, the Anti-Imperialist League, together with some old Communist friends who were contributing medical supplies as well as publicizing the situation. My job was to write the news releases. And now I had become a Catholic and Smokey and I were fellow-workers in a Catholic endeavor to build up a decentralist, libertarian, or in other words, an anarchist-pacifist social order.

Of course every now and then Smokey would yell out of the side of his mouth, "Don't call me a pacifist!" and followed it up with excoriations against the yellow-livered scoundrels who were afraid to fight, that infested the Catholic Worker. But just the same, he loved us all, was fiercely loyal and faithful to what in his irate moment he called "The Catholic Shirker."

He delighted in telling me about his relatives, and his nieces who became nuns. They were second or third generation Polish and I met a number of them when I went for the funeral of one of his brothers. The older generation were bakers and lived in Brooklyn and Smokey used to horrify the young ones around the CW by talking of kneading the bread as grapes are crushed, in the old country, he said. The smallest of the children were so fascinated that they insisted at the Easton farm on trampling grapes and elderberries with their feet when we were trying to make homemade wine, but we would not let them try it out on bread dough.

Smokey baked on board ship and when we would let him, he made pies for us in the old kitchen at Mott street. They were perfect to look at but tough as to crust. Once in a while he visited the farm,—once every five years, to tell the truth. But the countryside put him in a panic and he got back to the city jungles as fast as he could.

It would not be a complete picture if we did not tell how he loved children, and when we had babies in the house he loved to babysit. One woman had who came to us had twins and Smokey liked nothing better than to sit out front with them in their carriage and show them off. I would trust him any time as a babysitter.

Here at First Street he had a table by the door on the second floor where he mailed out papers to all the new subscribers and wrapped carefully those which were sent abroad. He always kept me supplied with papers wrapped ready to be mailed. He took messages from our visitors when everyone had disappeared at some meeting and when evening came. After dinner which we have at five thirty, an unfashionable hour, he sat in the doorway and enjoyed his beer. He touched nothing during the day, and at first when we moved to First Street, he used to amble down to First Avenue to the corner bar. After a few attempted muggings which he interrupted by swinging in all directions and roaring enough to awake the dead, doubtless frightening off his assailants, he waited patiently at the step of our emergency door and sitting there in the dusk so as not to arouse the appetites of some of our other fellow workers, he enjoyed his evening refreshment.

He attended most of the Friday night meetings, and always stayed up late, because I could hear him stamping up the stairs around midnight just outside my room, to the fourth floor where he shared a dormitory with a half a dozen others.

Then, just three days before I returned from England he got up in the night ill and fell to the floor in what must have been a heart attack. Pat Jordan hastened to Nativity Church for Fr. Pickett, and Smokey received the last rites, at home, surrounded by the men whose labors he shared in this his adopted family. We were glad he died at home. The requiem Mass was offered by a young priest Father Denis Dillon at our parish church. His nephews and nieces had Masses offered for him at their respective churches, and Arthur J. Lacey and I went with them to Mt. Holiness cemetery in Butler, New Jersey. His body now rests in beautiful surroundings, where Mike Herniac, Fred Lindsay, Bill Harder, Mike Solitto and Henry Nilson also rest in peace.

Peggy Baird (1890-1970)

Our Peggy who was so much a part of our lives these last ten years, died peacefully Sept. 23 around supper time and was buried in our parish cemetery not far from the Catholic Worker farm at Tivoli. I was in England when she died and did not get home for the funeral.

She had said to me before I left, "It takes so long to die." It was nearest thing to a complaint she ever made. She was much beloved by all the community at Tivoli. I had known her since I was twenty years old when I went to Washington with her to picket with the suffragists in front of the White House, more because of our interest in the treatment of prisoners than any interest in the vote. We were both anarchists in our own ways, even then. She was seven years older than I, knew all the literary crowd around Greenwich Village, had been married to Orrick Jonns who died before I met her and was not yet married to Malcolm Cowley.

She was an ideal cellmate and we spent sixteen days at Occoquan Workhouse and the Washington, D.C. jail, sentenced to thirty days, but pardoned by President Wilson after we had served sixteen of them. We were on hunger strike for the first ten days. I have written about this in more detail in my book, **The Long Loneliness**.

There were long lapses of time in our friendship. Peggy had a timeless quality which meant that coming and going, as I was, from Chicago and New Orleans, and various other places, I usually was her guest when I arrived back in New York. It was she who persuaded me to buy a beach bungalow on Staten Island after I sold my first book to the Boni Brothers.

The movie rights were bought by Pathe for five thousand dollars which the publishers, a struggling firm, and I shared.

I can never forget the spring day that we found the little house which was the scene of my conversion to the Church. Peggy wandered up and down the beach collecting not only shells but also the clams which the bait diggers dug up.

That was a new aspect of Peggy to me. Knowing her in jail, in the coffee house of the old Brevoort, in Greenwich Village, and now on the beach, I found in her a quality which remained with her through life—an intense love of nature, and so personal a contact with it that she made others see this beauty. It was a beauty which she integrated into her life. For instance, we washed and stewed those clams for supper that night, we enjoyed the earliest spring flowers she found in the woods on our way back to New York. If anyone ever lived

and enjoyed the present moment, it was Peggy. With her happy temperament, she savored every moment.

She was by that time married to Malcolm and they too found a little house on Woodrow Road from which Malcolm could commute to work, and where he had the quiet to do the reviews and essays which brought him fame as a man of letters within a few years. Peggy was a tumultuous housekeeper but a very good cook and a perfect gardener. She had been making plans for gardens ever since we had that spring day on Staten Island, and I was amazed to see the garden materialize. Within one summer she had made what was practically a wasteland adjoining the house she and Malcolm lived in, into something which rivaled the botanical gardens in beauty. It might have come out of the **House and Garden** magazine. Herbs and flowers—everything grew under her long able fingers. She was surrounded there, as she was at our farm in Tivoli, by her beloved cats, her books, her flowers, and of course her friends.

I do not remember how long Peggy and Malcolm lived on Staten Island—maybe three years—and I saw her often of course. But when they moved upstate New York, life began to change for both of us; for me, because of my conversion to Catholicism, and for Peggy because of her divorce from Malcolm, her life with Hart Crane in Mexico, and a subsequent marriage that took her to Washington, D.C. and later Atlanta. It was not until the Catholic Worker had been in existence for over twenty years that I saw Peggy again. For the last fifteen years, she lived with us, first on the Peter Maurin Farm and the last five years at Tivoli. She was the same Peggy, happy, serene, lover of beauty. She bought flowers for the altar of our little chapel for feast days, and saw to it that we had a well-planned and well-tended flower garden. Just yesterday I picked a lovely little bouquet of marigolds and asters and put them on the altar while we said Compline.

Once while I was travelling she wrote me a letter thanking me for not trying to convert her. I noticed that she joined saying the Angelus before meals as we used to do when we were a smaller group and more of a family than a hospice on the land. The concluding prayer of the Angelus is this:

“Pour forth we beseech thee, O Lord, thy grace into our hearts, so that we to whom the incarnation of Christ Thy Son was made known by the message of an Angel, may by His passion and Cross be brought to the glory of His resurrection.”

“Better be careful when you say that prayer,” I told her. “God takes us at our word.” I was quoting two people actually. John McKeon once said, “Does anyone mean what he is saying?” And Fr. Roy said, “God takes us at our word.”

Once she said to me that she would like to be buried with the “rest of the Catholic Worker crowd” in the little cemetery on Route 9G where Monsignor Kane has given us a plot. It was Fr. Jack English who confronted her with the question as to why she did not receive communion with us. She had decorated our chapel with flowers every Christmas and Easter for a good many years. “Why not?” was her answer to that, and Fr. Jack got her baptismal certificate from the church in Babylon, L.I. where she had been baptized as a child. After preliminary instruction, she received communion with all of us at the farm, from then on, until she died. As often as she could, she came to the chapel, but towards the last she had to

sit in her wheel chair up near the altar.

It seems often that for the younger one, babies and little ones, there is no generation gap. All her life Peggy babysat for her friends. Children loved her and her cats. She loved to dig in the dirt as they did. But the older young ones loved her too. Jeff Rudick, a twenty one year old Bard student who some months ago wrote one of the best articles we have had about Delano and his two months' work there, used to visit Peggy often. He serenaded her with not only his guitar, but his mouth organ, dropping the latter occasionally to sing in a voice that could be heard all over the house. She loved it. In the spring when she wanted to buy plants for the garden in front of the old mansion, he picked her up bodily and carried her to his car and took her into the greenhouses so that she could pick out the plants she wanted. He was one of the pall bearers at her funeral.

During her last months she set us an example of uncomplaining endurance, and always she rejoiced in life, appreciating God's bounty, His loving kindness and mercy. She did not go in for "spiritual reading." One was much more apt to find James Joyce's **Ulysses**, a detective story, or some poetry in her hands than the lives or writings of the saints. She did not read Charles Peguy's **God Speaks** to understand God's mercy. It is a wonderful thing to see how God's grace strikes one or another of us down.