

On Pilgrimage - January 1976

Dorothy Day

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Summary: Three obituaries: Describes her friendship with Helen Iswolsky which began in 1941, living at Tivoli farm, ecumenical activities, and her last illness; Paul Lavalle, a friend and worker with Peter Maurin; Fr. John Kane, a priest near Tivoli. (DDLW #566).

Death has been termed “the last enemy” and every year in the spring we celebrate Christ’s victory over death, and His resurrection from the dead. “Death is swallowed up in victory.” So how can I write sadly of the death of Helene Iswolsky, who lived with us in Tivoli for eight years, and of Msgr. John Kane, our pastor at Tivoli, and of Professor Paul Lavalle, Peter Maurin’s old friend, all of whom died this last month?

Helene I will write of first, since she was my most dear friend ever since she came from France in 1941. She was a writer, an historian, a scholar, a translator and teacher. We were most privileged to have her with us for many years at Tivoli. She kept an apartment in New York, and two years ago she moved all her extensive library and papers from NYC and Tivoli to the little Russian center she founded at Cold Spring, N.Y. There, meetings of **The Third Hour**, an ecumenical group, were held. We hope to have a brief account of this in a future issue of the **CW**, if we can persuade one of Helene’s Russian associates to write it for us. Perhaps Dr. Basil Yanovsky, author and physician (like Chekhov) will write it.

In Helene’s great heart there was room for many loves, and she considered herself a member of the Catholic Worker community as well as a leader of the **Third Hour** group, which worked for peace between the Churches: Russian Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican, and, indeed, all Protestant groups.

Meetings were held at least annually in various churches, also in the Union Theological Seminary, and our Catholic Workers were much interested in them all. **Concordances**, one of John XXIII’s favorite emphasis, was basic.

Helene’s life would make a great biography. Daughter of a Russian diplomat, Helene and her family were in Japan, where Alexander Iswolsky was ambassador, when the Japanese-Russian war broke out. Her father was the last ambassador to France under the Czar when WWI began, and, vacationing in Russia that

summer of 1914, she caught the last train which pulled out of Moscow on the way to Berlin where her mother was visiting friends.

Again they were on the last train from Berlin, arriving in Paris from Berlin when World War I was declared in 1914. She nursed the wounded in Paris during that war.

World War II meant her departure from France in 1941, when the Germans occupied Paris, and she arrived in this country some time later with her mother and brother, to stay temporarily at Countess Tolstoy's farm for Russian refugees.

Our friendship began early. Her friends, Jacques Maritain and Emmanuel Mounier, were the leaders in the personalist and communitarian movement in Paris which had inspired Peter Maurin to start the CW movement here.

My own love for Russian literature—Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Chekhov—drew me to Helene at once. (She gave a course on Dostoevsky at Vassar College once, and at our retreat house at Maryfarm, Newburgh.) I used to say that some day Helene and I would set out together to take that long train trip from Moscow to Vladivostok.

A Noble Soul

Her small room at Tivoli farm was filled with books and records of Russian music. Two windows looked out on a tree-covered hillside, and there was a bird feeder outside one window. Her bed was anything but comfortable—a narrow cot, one of a donation of sixty or more beds from the Jesuits when they closed down their house in Hyde Park, N.Y. One comfortable chair, a table and typewriter, a chest for her clothes, a closet, and, of course, many ikons made the room crowded but attractive.

She volunteered to keep the guest book, and she helped us entertain the many visitors who stopped at the farm. It was easy in the summer when there was all outdoors and the magnificent view of the river and the shabby but impressive old mansion, which General de Peyster put up more than 125 years ago. “A decaying mansion” as it is described now, it has given hospitality to many a student and wanderer over the years we have spent at Tivoli.

If the weather was inclement, she sat with the visitors in the large, common room which was shabbier yet, what with broken-down but still usable furniture, and the many bookcases crammed with books, not to speak of half-a-dozen children at play. Deane Mowrer was her able companion in answering the constant inquiries as to what the Catholic Worker was all about.

Helene cleaned her own room, and often the bathroom on her corridor, and cleared tables and often waited on guests, epitomizing Peter's edict—“The scholar must become a worker, and the worker a scholar”—as a way to overcome class war. I often thought of the phrase “noblesse oblige” in connection with Helene.

She was a noble soul and set an example to us all in her disciplined life of work, translating, teaching Russian and writing her memoirs, for which we hope to find a publisher.

A Family Vigil

Today, as I write this, the snow is falling thickly and heavy gusts of wind make it come horizontally at times, as though from the North Pole itself. Helene died Christmas eve at Highland Hospital in Beacon, New York, not far from Cold Spring where she had rejoiced in her little Russian Center. Her suffering had been great, but there were no other people in intensive care so the nurse in charge allowed one or two of us to take turns sitting by her bedside. We kept constant vigil for some weeks. She was able only to write two or three word messages, or inquiries, to us, what with the necessity for a tracheotomy and an oxygen tank.

Brothers Victor and Patrick were her constant companions (coming from the little monastery, Our Lady of the Resurrection, on the grounds of Marist Brother's Hall at Cold Spring). I had the joy of watching with her daily for hours at a stretch, both of us strengthened by the psalms and gospels which she motioned for often. When she died, Brother Victor and Marguerite Harris were with her, one or the other holding her hand. Helene and Marguerite had traveled by car all the length, if not the breadth, of the Soviet Union, from Leningrad to the Black Sea, years before. What great love she had for her country to the very end. Now her prayers will be overshadowing it, I am sure.

I kept no night watches with her, but hours during the day. Many friends dropped in to bid her farewell. When Deane Mowrer came from the Tivoli farm and stood by the bed clasping her hand, Helene opened her eyes, which had been half closed all morning, and gave her a smile of unutterable sweetness. She recognized all who came from Tivoli and Cold Springs.

She was much loved. But from the two young brothers, Victor and Patrick, she had the most constant and tender affection and care night and day. She kept reaching up and smoothing Victor's cheek. He had been, for these last few years, as a son to her.

The cloistered Benedictine nuns from Regina Laudis had permission from the bishop to leave their cloister to visit Helene, who was a Benedictine Oblate, associated with them. They brought her the habit she was laid out in. She received communion daily, a small portion of the Host, brought to her by the Brothers or by Fr. Lee, of the John XXIII Center, when he visited her.

Helene died Christmas eve. All Christmas day, in a steady snowfall, she was visited by her friends and neighbors as she lay in the simple coffin before the altar in the Brothers' chapel.

The Mass was offered next day by Fr. Gino Piovesana, of the John XXIII Center at Fordham, in the Byzantine rite. And then, along sleety and snowy roads, the funeral procession drove north to Tivoli. Helene now rests in St. Sylvia's Cemetery, in the Catholic Worker plot given by Monsignor Kane, where twelve small, birchwood crosses indicate the graves of her fellow Catholic Workers.

Lilac bushes shield the plot from the highway.

Professor Lavalle

Professor Paul Lavalle, Peter Maurin's old friend who came to us in 1934, also died this last month at the home of Jacques Travers, a professor at Brooklyn College. The professor, as we always called him, and Peter Maurin had had a small Catholic Worker annex, one might call it, in a store in Harlem during the first two years of the Catholic Worker, from '33 to '35. They lived there, kept the store open for discussion, taught French and other languages (Professor Lavalle was a linguist) and were helped by Ade Bethune and Julia Porcelli, who both had classes in art and sculpture on Saturdays. The work was much appreciated by the neighborhood, and during a severe riot in the mid-thirties the black neighbors guarded the premises from window-breaking and arson-minded marauders.

Despite this protection of property, the (at first) enthusiastic white CW subscriber, who had given us free use of the premises, asked us to vacate because he could not agree with our "pacifist propaganda." I do not remember whether this was during the Japanese-Chinese war, or the Italian-Ethiopian war. Oh, the wars we have been through! This episode was an incident in a class and race war.

Professor Travers is one of our teachers, one might say, giving us many a talk on Charles Peguy, Emmanuel Mounier and other French writers whom Peter Maurin always praised for, their "clarification of thought." (Peter's program began with "round table discussions for the clarification of thought.") Jacques Travers also exemplifies the second aspect of Peter's program, "houses of hospitality." Despite a teaching schedule at Brooklyn College, he has always used his roomy apartment near Prospect Park as a small house of hospitality.

Arthur Sheehan, who died a few months ago, had done the same with his little apartment on Mott Street, and Paul Lavalle, "the professor," had spent some years there. Both Arthur (God rest his soul) and Jacques (may he be long-lived amongst us) made hospitality "a living word—a way of life." Professor Lavalle whose Mass was offered by Fr. Pierre Conway, O.P., was buried in the Conway plot at Calvary Cemetery, where Peter Maurin was buried in May, 1949.

Monsignor John Kane

We are also sad to report the death of Monsignor John Kane, who was Father Kane when we moved to Tivoli in 1964. He was the first to say Mass for us in the old schoolhouse chapel and to leave with us the Most Blessed Sacrament, which it has been our privilege to house for some decades now. When he expressed his wonder to me at being made a monsignor, I told him it was because he put up with us, “the offscouring of all” in more ways than one. I loved Msgr. Kane because he epitomized to me the great freedom, the diversity, and the liberty in the Church. I don’t know whether he ever read the **CW**. I do know that he subscribed to and had in his pamphlet rack the **Twin Circle** and **The Wanderer**, two journals which attacked us often for our positions on war and peace—and on the State (“War is the health of the State”). Though we were on friendly terms, he frankly said he considered us subversive.

But when Dorothy Corbin’s horse (the loan of which she had temporarily) ran up the road to the village of Tivoli and ate Msgr. Kane’s tulips, which resulted in an irate call from the rectory, the incident resolved itself amicably. The monsignor’s father had been a blacksmith, and the encounter resulted in a most friendly conversation.

Another heartwarming incident: a young man we knew, in a state of depression, rang his doorbell at 2 a.m. and was taken in and comforted. I love that word “comfort.” Literally, from the Latin, it implies being strong together. “Comfort one another,” we are admonished by St. Paul. May his soul and the souls of all the departed rest in peace.

I was sorry, indeed, not to have been at Monsignor Kane’s funeral Mass, for he had always been very kind to us. But watching at Helene’s bedside was my bounden duty at the time.

Karl Stern

Another dear friend who had spent a number of summer vacations with us at Tivoli, Dr. Karl Stern, died recently in Montreal. We’ve had no letters from our friends in Montreal and can give no details of his death now. He was a brilliant writer and a good friend to us all.