

On Pilgrimage - October/November 1977

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*Summary: Discusses several books she is reading including Sigrid Undset's **Kristin Lavransdatter** and Chekhov's **The Island**. Recalls Undset's escape from Nazi-occupied Norway to the United States. Comments on recent events regarding prisoners at home and in Central America. Concludes with a description of the Little Brothers and Charles de Foucauld of whom Peter Maurin said "This is the spirituality for our day." (DDLW #582).*

"If a book is worth reading," said Martin Corbin, a former editor of the **Catholic Worker**, "it is worth reading three times."

A heart condition has meant much time for reading, these last few months. I am reading Sigrid Undset's **Kristin Lavransdatter** again, which I read on Staten Island years ago. It was first printed in 1923 by Knopf, and was reprinted over and over. The Nobel Prize edition came out in 1927. It was in 1926 or thereabouts that I first saw it, in the hands of my friend Freda, who lived next door. While she was reading it, her beach house remained unswept, her husband and son unfed.

Freda had gotten the book at the tiny Huguenot town library. It was a small library, but one could order books from other branches. Mike Gold, my Communist Party friend, who lived nearby had saved the library for the community by going around, door to door, getting signatures from the residents of the new housing developments springing up. The librarian told me this herself.

I had never liked historical novels, but **Kristin** was great. As the years passed, I recommended it to all the women in the Catholic Worker movement, and they were spellbound by it too.

After the Second World War started, Sigrid Undset came to this country and visited us at Mott St., and told me she had been lecturing on **my** book, **From Union Square to Rome**, on the night the Nazis invaded Norway. She made her escape by the skin of her teeth (she had been denouncing Nazism), and, traveling through Sweden, Finland, the USSR, and reaching the Pacific, she came to the United States and lived quietly in Massachusetts until the war was over.

Some clippings from the **New York Times** and **Washington Post** that Bill Oleksak sends me, make **The First Circle** look like an innocent tale in the field of experimentation. In that book, prisoners of the state are put to the task of trying to invent a way of identifying the human voice over the telephone. The hardships portrayed by Solzhenitsyn, are nothing compared to news accounts of CIA activities - - a "program of experimentation with drugs," tested on****prisoners, etc!

And terrible news stories from Central America - - Jesuits ordered to leave El Salvador. They stay, under threat of being killed. (It was at Edna Kenton's flat in Greenwich Village, years ago, that I first read of the early Jesuit **martyrs**, and the place of their martyrdom at Auriesville, N.Y.)

Since I cannot do any traveling these long months, not even to Tivoli farm, I am traveling with Chekhov, to the island of Sakhalin, a prison island he visited, making the long trip across Siberia. The book, **The Island**, was given to me by Virginia Gardner. It was she who was responsible for the trip I was able to make to Moscow in 1972. She was working for Corliss Lamont, who gave the money to Jerome Davis to treat me to a tour of Soviet Russia. Nina Polcyn took the tour too. A great trip - - unforgettable!

A Spirituality for Our Day

Away back in the thirties, when Peter Maurin was my daily guest, "indoctrinating" me with Emmanuel Mounier and his **Personalist Manifesto**, he told me the story of Charles de Foucauld and the spirituality of this "desert father," whose Little Brothers now live in slums as well as deserts, and are priests as well as brothers, and earn their own living by the sweat of their brow, in factories or at other manual labor. The Little Brothers among us now live in a slum, yet surround themselves with beauty. Taking a grimy apartment in a miserable East Side tenement, they just see that it is scrubbed and cleaned, bright and shiny, painted well so it will last, and then, so simply and barely furnished that the Crucifix and holy ikons light up the place. Peter Maurin gave me the life of Charles de Foucauld to read. He said, "This is the spirituality for our day."

I must write to Angie Calvert of the Kansas City Catholic Worker, who needs help badly, especially after a flood.

The very energy of my desires to write, to keep up the chronicle of the Catholic Worker and its workers exhausts me! I keep thinking, "at least I can write; the least I can do is answer letters, because it helps other houses to keep going." But I am remiss in this task and beg our readers' forgiveness.