

On Pilgrimage - July/August 1970

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Summary: Admires and is grateful for the help two workers gave them: Mike Sollitto, now in the hospital, for his food errands; and Jean Goldstone, recently died, for his engineering help in preparing their First Street house. (DDLW #502).

As I sit down to write this column Mike Sollitto is in Bellevue Hospital under special care, and I must take this opportunity to say how grateful we are to that institution for the good care we have received over the years for the members of our large Catholic Worker family.

This is the third time he has been in the hospital this spring and summer, and he very much wanted to stay at home and be nursed. But he had only praise for the service he had there, and the good meals they served him. Now he is in serious condition indeed.

When Mike came to us in the fifties, he used to help us on the Peter Maurin Farm in Staten Island. But he had been brought up in the city and soon settled down with us and chose his occupations as most of us do around the Catholic Worker. He had a push cart of sorts, made from an old baby carriage and used to walk from Spring Street where we lived at that time all the way to the Fulton Fish Market to get our weekly supply of fish, which was always enough for not only Friday dinner for fifty or sixty people, but for fish chowder on Saturday.

We lived off the fat of the land, as old Agnes, widow of the barge captain used to say, but in this case it was the sea. One restaurant used to give us sword fish. Ed Barry who worked at the Municipal Building and ate down at the water front on Fridays got this gift for us which went on over the years.

Another one of Mike's errands was to go to the East side baker and get the day old bread, Jewish rye and pumpernickel, as well as the white bread. Now that Mike has gone lame these last years, the baker himself delivers it. Right now our bread bill has reached astronomical proportions, almost nine hundred dollars, but I hear that Ed, who sits down every Saturday morning and figures out how to spread the money out to all our creditors, has brought it down quite a bit.

Now that Mike does no walking, he presides over the long center table in our mailing room, which is also the television room, and is the hangout for the men who make themselves responsible over the month for the job of cutting the gummed addresses and sorting them into their proper labeled envelopes, ready for the grand job of mailing out the 80,000 or more copies of the Catholic Worker nine times a year, and our semi-annual appeals. Mike, John, Louie, Denis and Andy and many others take on this responsibility and for some weeks of the month it is a busy scene.

Even visitors who have a little time to spare are pressed into service and join with men of all nationalities and all occupations and backgrounds in the common task of mailing out the paper.

As I write Pat Rusk is telephoning to see how Mike is and the reply is “satisfactory.”

Jean Goldstone

Everyone around St. Joseph’s House of Hospitality knows Mike and inquires after him many times a day. Visitors from other houses of hospitality in other cities get to know Mike and feel how much he is a part of the work here.

But in a way we are a parochial group here, in that the crowd in the New York Catholic Worker doesn’t know much about the other houses of hospitality and the people in them.

I’ve always said that New York City itself is made up of many little villages, Italian, Ukrainian, Polish, German, just as this street where we live is Italian, Puerto Rican and Afro-American with a good sprinkling of hippies. (The other day, the FBI were in looking for Weathermen.) So our own people in this First Street House know nothing about what has been going on up on 147th St. and Lenox Avenue, Harlem, and the group of us who are concerned about a project there.

The workers on that project, an experiment in cooperative housing, are Rita Davis who lives in the house being worked on, a twenty-family corner house with stores on two sides; Ruth Collins, who went through real estate school to learn all about buildings, mortgages, codes, landlords and dealings with banks, etc.; John Coster, a lawyer who is a member of The Association of Catholic Trade Unionists, and a teacher in a labor school in Brooklyn as well as being a member of a law firm on Lexington Avenue; Bill Horvath, a Lutheran bricklayer of Hungarian descent, one of the editors of the CW, at present working in Boston, whose letters are occasionally printed, and who has studied the cooperative movement in England and in the Scandinavian countries; and Jean Goldstone, playwright, economist, and nicknamed by me the Engineer because I myself was most closely associated with him and got to know him while we were buying and rebuilding this house on First Street, four years ago.

When the Chrystie Street house became impossible to live in, what with faulty drains, a leaky roof, sagging beams, etc., Jean, Ruth and I looked over a few houses which we had been referred to by the real estate firm which rented us our former headquarters and apartments. Jean’s job was to go from cellar to attic to find out how solid and sound these buildings were and to advise us about repairs needed. He seemed to know everything about construction and foundations, so I got to calling him “the Engineer.”

When we came upon the house at First Street, and the down payment had been made and the two mortgages arranged for, and the rebuilding began to meet the requirements of a most rigorous building code, before we could get a certificate of occupancy, Jean took over in earnest. He saw the entire job through from the shell that it was to the finished product and that meant the installation of the furnace, hot water boiler, plumbing, electrical work and all other details which make our life so comfortable here.

One time when the heating system broke down in the dead of winter while the work was going on, Jean sat most of the day in a stone-cold house, waiting for the plumber. There were contractors, electricians, plumbers, painters and so on, and he saw to it that the work got done. When contractors are working on a number of jobs at once, and materials such as steel beams are not delivered, it seems the work will never get done. Sometimes I thought that Jean did not get the gratitude he should from the young ones around the Catholic Worker who were impatient to get into the new house.

This same devotion was put into the Harlem project these last few years, and in spite of ill health and his own writing on the social system which he was trying to finish, Jean gave his time to what a lot of the Harlemites began to call the Rita Davis project. With a bad heart he went up and down the five flights of stairs, and up and down to the basement, accompanying plumbers and electricians, and supervising the cleaning out of area ways.

Finally his heart failed him, he was taken to Bellevue and after a few weeks of suffering, died. It was a shock and great loss to us all. He was a great soul, very Jewish, very sad and pessimistic at times about wrongs ever being righted or justice done. But he worked on, tirelessly. If we ever got discouraged, his warm smile cheered us.

Jean was sixty-six years old. "Greater love no man hath than this, that he give up his life for his friends." Certainly Jean wore himself out serving his brothers, black and white. And since God **wills** that all men be saved, let us think of Jean when we say those words of the Lord's prayer, Thy **will** be done. May eternal light shine upon him, and may he rest in peace.

Local Pilgrimagining

Most of the time my headquarters has been right here at First Street since the last issue of the CW came out. But there have been a few visits to the farm at Tivoli and two visits to my sister at Kinderhook and two very brief visits to my daughter in Vermont.

Now I will set out for West Virginia where I will visit not only Alderson Prison but also the Catholic Worker farm at West Hamlin. This is again just a few days away from home, home being New York.

But August fourth Eileen Egan and I will fly to Australia, our fare paid by friends there. We have meetings and seminars planned for Melbourne and Sydney and we will visit a house of hospitality and a farm there. Flying home we will stop in India for a week or ten days, and also in Tanzania. We have had our yellow fever shots, and still must get small pox vaccinations. Our visas are all in order and we are looking forward to this trip which will finish in England at the Pax Conference there. We hope to be back home by the feast of St. Francis, and will send news along the way for the September issue.