

8. In Training For Mission

The soon to be created Commission on Ecumenical Mission and Relations had decided that the new era of mission required more training of missionaries or "fraternal workers" as they were to be called. The candidates for mission needed to be psychologically ready for their assignment as well as to be aware of the dramatic changes happening politically in the world. There were places in the world where Western missionaries, particularly Americans, would be disliked and rejected because of their nationality. The intense three month training would engage all these scenarios.

Since this program was to be a long term effort, the Commission had decided that a permanent missionary training center would be needed. As the permanent training center was being planned, the location of a temporary site for the program was left to Don Smith. Don and his committee had chosen a geographical span between the New York offices of the Commission and Princeton Seminary in west New Jersey. The middle of the span centered in Morristown, New Jersey. After a concerted search of the area, the committee located Sam Sains' Hotel in Mount Freedom which had facilities to house and feed the mission candidates. Sam Sains' Hotel was a Jewish summer resort hotel.

I had become acquainted with Jewish resort hotels after World War II through my friend Jerry Pospisil. The family of Jerry Pospisil, my East Side friend from Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church years, had purchased an old farm in the Catskills in Liberty, New York. It was situated in the midst of a large concentration of summer resort hotels that catered to the Jewish population of New York City. The summer resorts were centers of high class, and not so high class, entertainment which made them highly popular in the Jewish community. The resorts were popular as places where talent scouts could hear singers, stand up comedians, actors and actresses as candidates for night clubs, Broadway, Vegas and Hollywood. Some of the better known Jewish entertainers of the 1950's had their beginnings in the Catskill resort hotels of what became known as "the Jewish Alps."

During summer of 1946 and 1947 Jerry invited Bill Kosar and me to the Pospisil family farm in Liberty for a weekend. We would make our excursion around the countryside on Saturday nights to investigate what was going in Grossinger's and some of the lesser-known places on the "borsch circuit." The more highly popularized spots like Grossinger's had spotters who could tell a paying customer from gate crashers. We were distinguishable so we would be gently ushered off the premises. In other less known operations we were usually able to get by and to listen to the talent any of who might someday show up on a Broadway stage or a Hollywood screen.

Sam Sains' Hotel in Mount Freedom was not in the same category as the popular Catskills' resorts. Sam Sains was a more low scale operation and probably less expensive than his Catskills' counterparts. Sam Sains had a regular clientele who were interested in the relaxation, the good food, the gossip, and the card games, mostly pinochle, which the Sains' resort offered. In September 1956 Sam Sains had just finished another successful season. He had to work hard to keep his staff through the Fall because they would head South after the summer season ended. The workers he wanted to keep for the Fall were his kitchen and serving staff. He had a Swedish cook and a retinue of ex-alcoholics, some were still imbibing, who did the work in the kitchen. We discovered later that some of the crew took a portion of their pay in whiskey. This situation would provide some interesting dynamics during our stay at Sains' Hotel.

When I arrived at the Sains' Hotel, Eunice had already established our quarters for the training session. The wives who had remained at the Claremont Apartments had arrived at the hotel one week before we returned. Families had the first choice among the available living quarters. Sam Sains' business had grown and he had recently built another wing to the residential quarters. Eunice was able to get two rooms, one in the old wing and one in the adjacent new wing. Fortunately the rooms were attached. During the week I was away, Scott and Kerry had locked themselves in the room. Eunice had the added task of talking three year old Scott through the process of unlocking the door.

The facilities of the hotel were simple. There was the residential areas. There was the dining area. There was the lounge area. There was also the card room. The card room - the card game played was pinochle - was to serve as our lecture

area, after we pushed the tables out of the way. The dining area also served for some of our larger meetings. A child care service was provided so both members of the family could participate in the lectures and discussions. Our major needs would be found in Morristown, a substantial New Jersey town. Fortunately, Morristown had a fine hospital which was a relief to Eunice as she prepared for the birth of our third child. As we began the training program, Eunice was in the eighth month of her pregnancy.

Over one hundred people were involved in the Study Fellowship program - half of them were children. Of the children over half were under two years of age. This made for a very lively environment. The foyer of the hotel before meals was often the scene of races between two year olds and toddlers scrambling across the floor toward the dining room. The children overwhelmed the scenery at Sains' Hotel. We were a very young group of applicants - most of us in our late twenties or early thirties. Don and Betts Davis had four children in the same age range as our family. Don was a doctor bound for India. The Roadarmels had two young children and were bound for Thailand. I had known the Roadarmels at Wooster. Ron and Edith Seaton added their children to the gang. They were also Wooster grads bound for India where Ron would serve as a doctor. Don McCurry, a UP/NA pastor, his wife and children were to go Pakistan. Byron Haines and his wife were also assigned to Pakistan. Yen and Muriel Whitney and their youngsters were bound for Africa. The Whitney's were the only Afro-Americans in the group. The Bob and Louise Hermanson slated for Brazil, and the Messenger's bound for Thailand added their children to the merry gang. As we counted all the children in the dining room we knew there was no lack of playmates to keep Scott and Kerry happy.

This Study Fellowship was a joint undertaking of both the Presbyterian Church, USA and the United Presbyterian Church of North America. This was preliminary to the joining together of the two churches and the two mission boards into one church and one mission agency. For the most part the UP/NA folks were bound for countries with Muslim populations which meant they were being assigned to Egypt, Pakistan, the Sudan and Ethiopia. The PC/USA people were bound for Southeast Asia, South Asia, Africa and the Middle East.

No time was wasted in getting the proceedings at Sains' Hotel underway. Dr. Howard Hannaford, who had been a missionary to Japan, was the Dean of the Study Fellowship. He and his wife oversaw the day to day schedule of the program and directed any questions they could not answer to Don Smith. Don Smith made regular round trip visits to Sains' Hotel from the New York office. He answered any of the technical questions regarding visas, travel and shipping arrangements. He also was in touch with the various lecturers and brought them with him when they were scheduled to speak. The Hannafords were continually available to make sure that all the local arrangements at the Sains' Hotel were adequate - particularly for the large number of children.

We quickly became acquainted with one another, often through our children, but also by our table assignments at dinner with other missionaries. All efforts were made for people to intermingle and to engage in conversation about their work and the countries and churches to which they were being assigned. India had the largest number of applicants. It was also the country which would be the most difficult to get visas for mission assignment. Those on medical assignment to India often had the least difficult time, since medical skills were given priority in the sub-continent. We became aware that technical skills were high on the list for those seeking overseas assignment. Skills related to development were also in great demand. Teachers and nurses were highly regarded as persons providing important services to a country. The skills which people had were determinants to their being issued visas to the country of their assignment.

Much of the conversation between people at the Study Fellowship centered around difficulties in getting visas. Newly independent nations often looked upon Christian mission as a Western intrusion. Their primary question was: "Can the work for which the missionary is being invited not be done by a national?" Evangelism, which had been the major mission focus in past years, was now expected to be done by the national churches. Evangelism was no longer a priority category in the call of missionaries. Nor was it the primary category among those gathered at the Sains' Hotel. We were in a post-colonial era when newly independent nations were sensitive to the dominance of the U.S. culturally, politically and economically. Christian evangelism was often associated with U.S. cultural dominance. At the same time the overseas churches recognized their own needs. The war had left many of the churches with the

need to rebuild and expand their institutions and programs. The churches were also caught up in their nation's development and assessing their part in that development. It was this vision which set the agenda for their personnel requests to the U.S. churches.

It did not take us long to recognize the framework within which we would be working. From the beginning the Study Fellowship lecturers, the studies we were pursuing in preparation for our assignment and our discussions together focused on the dramatic political changes in the so-called Third World. The phrase which ran through the presentations of the lecturers and which continually entered into our conversations was "the revolution of rising expectations." The "rising expectations" we learned were the peoples' hopes of moving beyond their "poor country" status and arriving at higher living standards. Here the emphasis was on the modernization of their country's institutions and the development of a technology which would bring them into the new world. For the new leadership of these countries this meant moving away from being the provider of food stuffs and raw materials and becoming producers of modern equipment and appliances. Since we were representatives of this modernization, we saw the need to help people understand both the advantages and the shortcomings of modern technological change.

We had also to overcome any tendencies we had toward believing we had all the answers. Heavy emphasis was placed on being learners. We were to approach all of our tasks and our relationships from the stance of being listeners. "Listening" was the by-word at the Study Fellowship. We would need to get inside the culture of the people we would be living with. I could pick up refrains from the words we had heard at the Meadville meeting from both Eugene Nida and Bill Smalley. Their expertise was in language-learning and from this learning gaining insights into the culture of the people. We heard this again at Mount Freedom, but now it was integrated into the larger picture of being aware of the values built into a society.

All of us would be expected to do language study in the major language of the area to which we were being assigned. This meant that often the work which we were being called to do would take second place. One of the keys to effectively carrying out your assignment was to be able to speak and read the language of

the people. This would also provide an understanding of the social relationships which were the fabric of the society. We were to be reminded of this lesson early in our Philippine experience when we fell in with Fr. Frank Lynch, S.J. and the work he was doing at the Ateneo de Manila.

In the meantime, our very presence at Sains' Hotel was providing us with our most appropriate cross-cultural experience. Here we were Christian missionaries being prepared for distant cultures living in an American Jewish setting. The whole ambiance of the Jewish hotel with its own cultural and kosher traditions came as a test for our preparedness to life overseas. Food regulations at Sains' Hotel required that milk and meat not be served at the same time. This caused a little difficulty in a dining room swarming with dozens of children under two years. Then there was the preparation of foods. If we were to eat in a Jewish hotel then we had to be prepared for Jewish cuisine. Most people were able to get through most of the time. But when Friday night came and codfish cakes were the fare, there was a silent rebellion. Hey, for a New Yorker that was no problem. I loved codfish cakes. I came under the suspicious gaze of a few unbelievers.

But the real test of our cross-cultural preparedness was yet to come. It was decided that we would celebrate all birthdays on one night. With fifty children all wanting their birthdays to be celebrated separately this was a large compromise. The night for the birthday party celebration was set. The Swedish baker had worked diligently all day on a huge mocca birthday cake, enough to feed the whole one hundred Study Fellowshippers. Came time for the birthday cake to be brought in with all its dazzling candles. The doors opened and the small, beaming, rotund Swede with his cocked white chef's hat rolled in the large birthday cake. As the door opened suddenly the room was filled with the aroma of rum. It wafted through the air so that all the corners of the room were filled with an intoxicating fragrance. People looked at one another in amazement. What was this? Our jolly baker had dumped a bottle of rum into the mocca to add to its flavor. Now that was proper fare for the regular Jewish clientele he was used to serving, but no one had clued him into the fetishes of the current customers. He cut the cake in generous slices to be distributed to all the tables. On this occasion we were sitting with a UP/NA couple who were going to Ethiopia. They looked down at the rum mocca birthday cake in disbelief. I did

not have the same scruples nor did I want to offend our Swedish baker's sensibilities. And by golly the mocca birthday cake was quite good. Eunice had to stop me from further cross-cultural experimentation.

Besides this venture, the Study Fellowship was providing us with more lasting experiences in cross-cultural relations. We had one special advantage in this learning. Among the people assigned to the training program was a Filipina, Luningning Asuncion. Not everyone at Mount Freedom had their own national informant on what to expect in your new home. Beyond being a helpful informant on Filipino life, expectations and issues, Luningning was a delightful addition to life at Sains' Hotel. Luningning told us her name in Tagalog meant "twinkling", as in starlight. She lived out her name during her stay with us.

Another person who appeared among us was Eduardo Mondlane. Eduardo was the son of a Presbyterian pastor from Mozambique. He was in the United States as a graduate student at Syracuse University. Eduardo was a crucial link to our continuing discussions on the issue of colonialism. His homeland Mozambique was still under Portugese domination. Eduardo's story of Portugese control of his country and the struggles of his people for independence provided a scenario which quickly won our allegiance to his cause.

Eduardo was first of all a warm personality. He did not try to inflame us, but spoke to us of the realities of people living as second class citizens in their own homeland. He made the issue of independence from colonialism come alive. He gave warmth to his story by expressing it in music. He sang and played the songs of his people's liberation on African drums. The beat and rhythm of his music had an overpowering effect on us. He would later pay for his part in the struggle for Mozambique's independence with his life. Eduardo returned to Mozambique with his American wife, whom he had met at Syracuse, and became the leader of FRELIMO. FRELIMO was the movement to free Mozambique from Portugese control. He was able to raise a liberation army which carried the fight for freedom into the villages and countryside. The headquarters for FRELIMO was located across the Mozambique border in Zimbabwe. Near the end of the struggle, Eduardo was killed by a letter bomb sent to him in Zambia. When I heard the word of his death, the image that

flashed through my mind was Eduardo playing the drums and singing the songs of liberation.

Each lecturer we heard further broadened the boundaries and deepened the dimensions of our experience of the church's mission in the world of 1956. One afternoon Don Smith brought Pastor Martin Niemöller to our group. I had heard much about Niemöller during the war. He had been a German U-boat captain during the first World War. Then as Hitler became more aggressive and oppressive, Niemöller, as a Protestant pastor, spoke out against him and ultimately found himself in prison. Niemöller became an example of the necessity of the church to be vigilant in its efforts to speak out against willful and wrongheaded authority before it becomes entrenched. In the post-World War II period he was a harbinger of the movement which called for the church's involvement in political processes, particularly from a biblical and theologically critical point of view. It was this theme which was to be at the heart of the Evangelical Academy movement which began in Germany immediately after the Second World War. The Academy movement which spread across Germany and through German support to Asia and other countries centered upon the role of the laity in bringing justice to the political and economic structures in the world.

On the same note Hendrik Kraemer of Holland was invited to provide us a sense of the importance of the laity in the life of the church. Kraemer was an important figure in the sixth section on "The Witness of the Laity" at the Evanston Assembly of the World Council of Churches. As a layman himself he pointed to the importance of the lay people in the life of the churches as bearers of the Gospel. The issue for Kraemer was the importance of living out the witness in everyday life, in the occupations which consumed most people's waking hours. Kraemer had hit upon a vital key to the work of urban-industrial mission. I was to see Kraemer again in Japan at a conference on industrial evangelism in 1959 and by this time he was to have published his thoughts in "A Theology of the Laity." In his time at Sains' Hotel he was the laying the groundwork which was to become a major theme in our work in the next fifteen years.

Paul Devanandan of India was invited to present us with an approach to people of non-Christian backgrounds. Both Devanandan and Kraemer represented the

themes which had been part of the World Council of Churches' meeting in Evanston in 1954. Paul Devanandan was the founder of the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society (CISRS) which was based in Bangalore in South India. He represented the Church of South India's efforts to enter into dialogue with people of other faiths, particularly Hinduism. The CISRS was an outgrowth of his study and work to bring about dialogue between Christianity and Hinduism. Our discussion with Devanandan was to provide an opening to engage in dialogue with those of other faiths as we came as Christians to lands in which Christianity was a minority religion.

The lectures and discussions continued throughout our time at Mount Freedom. Eunice was moving into the ninth of her pregnancy in October as the Study Fellowship was in full swing. Most afternoons in October she would take a nap with Scott and Kerry. Both of them were fully active in the children's programs during the mornings, and by the afternoon they joined their mother for a quiet time in our rooms. As we pressed on near the end of October, the fall leaves which had reached their glory in Mount Freedom in mid-month, were fading and falling. Eunice slept uneasily on Sunday, October 28th. She had a doctor's appointment at noon on Monday. As she woke on Monday she sensed that this was to be the day of her deliverance.

Early Monday morning her birth pangs came closer together. We wasted no time getting her to the Morristown Hospital. The doctor had been summoned and Eunice was signed into the hospital. Without much ado she was prepared for the delivery room. By now I was an experienced father and waited for the word from the delivery room. The door swung open and the word came out. You have a very healthy daughter. Johanna Carol Poethig had made her boisterous entrance into the world. Another great day.

There was jubilation at Sains' Hotel on Monday, October 29th. Johanna was the first and only baby born at the Study Fellowship at Mount Freedom. Congratulations abounded as another prospective "fraternal worker" was added to the Sains' Hotel baby roll. Mrs. Sains, who was a cordial and responsive proprietor, two weeks earlier had initiated a baby shower for Eunice. It was one of the more festive occasions at Mount Freedom and provided Johanna her initial clothes for entering the world.

On Tuesday morning, I received a call from my Aunt Helen Wagner in New York City. Pauline Poethig, my ninety-two year old grandmother, had died on Monday as Johanna was being welcomed into the world. Aunt Helen was calling to ask me to perform the funeral service on Wednesday at the crematorium in New Jersey. One new life born, one old life passes away. As I thought about my grandmother and my sorrow in her death - the last in her generation, it was appropriate - this passing of the generations. I would later find these two lives even more connected. I discovered in the 1980s in researching family roots that the mother of my grandmother Pauline was named Johanna. We had chosen Johanna's name by chance, or had we?