

Lee Maria Kleiss

October 21, 1926 December 15, 2005

Lieselotte Maria Kleiss, known as Lee, was a seeker, a refugee, a scientist, a teacher, a mother, and a Friend.

Lee was born in Frankfurt, Germany on October 21, 1926. Her mother Charlotte was a social worker, her father Felix an engineer. Felix soon vanished from his daughter's life. Charlotte said he died "tragically;" Lee later suggested her father was damaged from being held as a prisoner of war at the end of World War One, and the marriage did not last.

The Nazis came to power in Germany when Lee was seven years old. Although Lee's family had been professing Christians for several generations, both her parents had some Jewish ancestors, and this fact caused problems for Lee and her mother. Due to this "tainted" heritage, Lee was forbidden to join the Hitler Youth program. This kept her isolated from many of her peers, but she also thereby avoided the group's indoctrination in Nazi ideology.

One incident that struck home came when Lee was not allowed to play the role of Mary in a Christmas play because she had Jewish ancestors. When she pointed out that Mary was also a Jew, from the line of David, she was sent home for being arrogant. Having been raised as a Christian, she hadn't thought about being "a Jew" until that incident.

Charlotte wrote about the growing fear of the Gestapo and government spies during these years, and the frequent disappearance of neighbors and acquaintances, who were denounced for disloyalty and never seen again. As the Nazi government also moved to take control of the churches in Germany, Charlotte and Lee became part of the "Confessing Church," an alliance of churches which refused to submit to Nazi rule.

"We could not meet openly we Confessional Church believers," Charlotte recalled. "We met in the basement of the minister's mansion (which also contained a Sunday School and other church activity rooms). Yet we would not have dared to meet in one of these rooms. We met in the basement, which we called the Catacombs. Some of us had to stand at the door to watch for signs, whether the Gestapo was appearing. With shivers I am thinking of the time when the warning came through that the Gestapo (secret police) was approaching. Silently, we had to leave through different exits, not as a group, but individually.

"Besides the meetings, which were kind of dangerous, typewritten notes were passed from house to house to our members. But even this had to be discontinued because our minister's typewriter was confiscated (later on, his salary also). However, fortunately, this minister stayed alive."

The next minister was not so lucky. "He was an ideal of a clergyman," Charlotte wrote. "Young, enthusiastic, convinced, as well as convincing and last, but not least, courageous. What he meant to my young daughter was unbelievable. He was a support to her in these disastrous times, and I am sure had a paramount influence on her character. As mentioned before, homelife had become different for a child such as she during the Nazi regime, more so since she was excluded from the Hitler Youth Program. So Lieselotte looked forward to her Sunday School lessons. They were an inspiration to her. She also felt at home with the other children in the group. However, this joy was of short duration. Among other things, Hitler's picture had to be placed on the Sunday School wall. There was no other way but to comply, but the minister turned the chairs so that the Hitler picture was in back of the children. (The year must have been 1936.)

"Whatever reason there had been is not known, and never will be known, but the minister mysteriously disappeared, probably shot while so-called 'escaping.' Well known and famous is the story of Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer who regarded Hitler as Antichrist and who believed it a Christian duty to 'eliminate' him. He[Dietrich], his brother Klaus and many others who resisted Hitler were executed. Bonhoeffer is well known as an author, whose books are translated into many languages."

In November of 1938, Lee and Charlotte saw firsthand the bloody results of the Kristallnacht, the coordinated Nazi attacks on Jewish synagogues, shops and homes all over Germany. Charlotte understood that her family

was to be targeted as well. She began looking for a place to find refuge from the increasing oppression, and her eyes turned toward the United States.

After much anxious waiting, their emigration to America was approved, and Charlotte left for America first, followed by Lee a month later. Lee arrived in America on March 17, 1939. Even as a youth, Lee had a sense of youth and adventure; she enjoyed the attention of the ship's crew who gave her a "hilarious" farewell; she also enjoyed playing with the real live bears that were also on the ship.

The Quakers had long been influential in Lee's and Charlotte's life. At the end of World War One, they were involved in an early feeding program by the American Friends Service Committee in Germany.

As Charlotte wrote of this, "It is beyond description what it meant to the Germans when the Quakers came in February 1920 to bring food to the most needy, namely the children and nursing mothers. If it had been the food alone, it might have been forgotten in later years. It was the spirit that prevailed. Even the unaffected, that is the ones who were excluded from receiving the "Liebes gaben," the "gifts of love," were touched. The children who were most undernourished had to bring a foodcard medically signed. On the back of it was written in German, 'This food is contributed by Americans and distributed by the Religious Society of Friends, who for 250 years have held that love and good will, not war and hatred, will bring about better world conditions.'

"From our part of the world, we saw only the good will. However, when reading accounts of the history of AFSC, I realized what tremendous courage was needed to carry out their plans. The Quakers, or Religious Society of Friends as they are also known, became an important part of my life then. Little did I know at this time that the Quakers would become an important part of my later life. I did not, and could not know of all the blessings that still were in store for me."

In fact, nearly twenty years later, it was a Quaker connection that brought Lee and Charlotte over to America. They lived in a Quaker community in Pennsylvania before moving to Minneapolis, Minnesota in the summer of 1940.

Lee finished the sixth grade before following her mother to Minneapolis. By the fall, she skipped three grades and began the 9th grade. In June 1944, both Lee, shortened from Lieselotte, and Charlotte became American citizens.

Lee's Educational Journey

Lee graduated from West High School, Minneapolis as valedictorian in June 1944 and enrolled that fall at Grinnell College in Iowa. She graduated from Grinnell in 1948 with a B.A. in chemistry and a minor in mathematics. She then earned a Master of Arts from Columbia University in physical chemistry. In 1953 she was awarded a PhD by Columbia, one of the first women to receive a doctorate in chemistry there. Both Lee and her mother, who received a Master of Arts from Columbia at the same time, were praised for their work in the university's honors programs.

Lee was a teaching assistant for two years while attending school. She co-wrote an article "The Effects of Intravenously Administered Aminophylline on Cerebral Circulation and Metabolism in Man," published in the Journal of Clinical Investigation in 1950.

Lee traveled widely over many years, so much so that we have not been able to track her journeys in any complete detail. Some sources say she trod the Great Wall of China, rode a camel in Saudi Arabia, and she herself said she had been in Afghanistan and Nepal. From 1952-1954 Lee lived in India and Pakistan, perhaps through the AFSC. In 1954 Lee taught and began a community college-type Science Department at Egbado College, Ilaro, Nigeria. She lived in Nigeria for two years.

The Bruderhof, Primavera, Paraguay

In 1953, Lee and her mother visited the Bruderhof, a religious community in Primavera, Paraguay. The Bruderhof (or "Society of Brothers") was founded in Germany in 1920. As a Christian pacifist body, it was driven out of the country by the Nazis. The members first sought refuge in England. Then during World War Two, facing anti-German sentiment, they went to Paraguay, the only country willing to accept such a Christian pacifist group of refugees.

We did not find any clear statement by Lee about why she found the Bruderhof attractive. Nevertheless there were numerous educated people of her generation, not a few of them Quakers, who were drawn to what were called "intentional communities" after the upheavals of World War Two. As one online description states, "The Bruderhof is a peace church whose members do not serve in the armed forces of any country. Rather, they model a way of life that removes the social and economic divisions that bring about war. The goal of the Bruderhof is to create a new society where self-interest is yielded for the sake of the common good." It is easy to imagine how such an ideal could appeal to Lee, after her personal experiences of Nazi oppression, war and its aftermath.

When joining the Bruderhof, new members gave up all their property and capital to the group. When Lee left Nigeria in 1956, she moved to Paraguay and lived with the Bruderhof for four years. While there, notwithstanding her doctoral degree in chemistry, Lee did child care, and much manual labor, usually in the laundry with other women. Others who knew her there say she was happy in the community. But she chafed against the group's rigid subordination of women, and managed to wheedle her way into a daily gathering of men in her community where the group's "real business" was done. This assertiveness and leadership got Lee into trouble with the group's rulers, and eventually, in 1959, she was expelled..

Shortly afterward, internal problems developed among the Bruderhof leadership, which resulted in a purge of most of the members in Paraguay and the closing of the settlements there. Many others like Lee were left penniless and traumatized, to find their way back to the United States or Canada and start their lives over.

Hundreds more members of Bruderhof communities were expelled over the years under similarly trying circumstances. In the summer of 1962, Lee visited as many ex-Bruderhofers as possible in Europe; and was involved in starting a round-robin newsletter for ex-Bruderhofers to support and heal from the effects of their experiences there. While the community's ideals may have been wonderful, the result became cult-like, with an arbitrary, top-down leadership that didn't fit with Lee's independence of thought. Lee later said that it wasn't until she read the book *The Cost of Discipleship*, by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the martyred theologian of the German Confessing Church, that she saw the Light: that despite the group's stated devotion to Christ, to follow Jesus, Lee needed to leave the Bruderhof behind.

One reviewer's comment on Bonhoeffer's book may suggest its value: "What did Jesus mean to say to us? What is his will for us today? Drawing on the Sermon on the Mount, Dietrich Bonhoeffer answers these timeless questions by providing a seminal reading of the dichotomy between 'cheap grace' and 'costly grace.' 'Cheap grace,' Bonhoeffer wrote, 'is the grace we bestow on ourselves... grace without discipleship.... Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a man [or woman] must know.... It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life.'"

Was submerging her individuality in the Bruderhof "cheap grace" for Lee? For at least two years after her return to the US, she begged to be readmitted to the group. Years later she wrote of a sense of opening that occurred after a visit to one of its communities, where her plea again fell on deaf ears:

"It was only by reading *The Cost of Discipleship* that finally after two whole years I saw the light. That for me to follow Jesus I had to make a 180 degree turn and STOP aiming, craving, desiring to return to the Bruderhof In the bus ride back to Detroit through Pittsburgh, where the interstate is elevated and one could see into peoples windows I JUST FELT THE WARMTH AND LOVE FOR PEOPLE TO EACH OTHER that is so sadly missing on the [Bruderhof]."

In a more vernacular comment, Lee wrote not long before her death that: I am opposed to dual citizenship and

dual loyalties. I'm not an American, I am a HUMAN. I almost got arrested trying to cross into the Congo on my way to Nigeria because I refused to put down Caucasian - I only wrote in HUMAN. After a 48 hour stand still we 'agreed' I would leave the line blank and they would fill in Caucasian after they let me proceed. No wonder this stubborn person could not survive in the [Bruderhof]."

Lee's connection with fellow ex-Bruderhofers continued through her adult life. When she learned about a family that was expelled from the group, and left with no funds as refugees in Canada, Lee loaned them money to get started again (they later paid it all back). In 1997 she put up money to bail out an ex-Bruderhof member who had been arrested in a feud with Bruderhof leaders. She ended up losing several thousand dollars in the process. As late as the summer of 2000, Lee attended a conference for ex-Bruderhofers in Rhon, Germany. Lee kept in contact with some of them until a few weeks before her passing through both the Internet and the telephone.

Return to America

After returning to the US, Lee became an Assistant Professor at Monteith College, Wayne State University, in Detroit, Michigan, from 1960 to 1964. Then Lee moved to Indianola, Iowa and continued her teaching career at Simpson College. She gained tenure in 1969 and was an Associate Professor when she moved to Fayetteville NC in 1975 to continue her career at Fayetteville State University.

While in Iowa, she adopted two young African American children, Christina and Suzannah. She also spear-headed the Open Door Society, an organization for families who have adopted children considered "hard to place." She and her children spent her sabbatical year 1971-1972 in England, doing research at Leicester University and taking trips to the European Continent.

Lee in Fayetteville

Lee began teaching at Fayetteville State University (FSU) in September 1975, retiring August 1, 1998. Her mother Charlotte died in 1985. In the last years of Lee's time at FSU, her physical condition began to deteriorate. She reported having had polio, perhaps as a youth, and its effects returned in the mid-1990s. Pain and weakness in her legs made walking increasingly more difficult. Then one day in May, 1997 she left her house to walk 30 feet to her car, and collapsed, unable to cover the distance. She could not stand, and was obliged to sit on the driveway for several hours until a mail carrier came to her house and found her; fortunately, the weather was good that day.

As her mobility was sapped by illness, she spent her last years teaching at FSU using a scooter for transportation. But she did not submit easily to the decline of her physical condition. She continued to take care of her daughters, then the grandchildren Jacinta and Stephon until adulthood. She traveled to Europe for a Bruderhof ex-member gathering, and was active in Quaker organizations and with the Fayetteville Friends Meeting (FFM). She was a Quaker House Board Member as well as serving as Clerk for FFM. She began a scholarship for chemistry students through the Cumberland County Community Foundation. She spent her last few years in the mountains of western North Carolina, at Celo, where she passed away on December 15, 2005 from colon cancer.

It was said that Lee marched with Martin Luther King; she was reportedly jailed perhaps as a result of this. She was active in SERVAS, an international host of person-to-person peacekeepers. She was active in or made donations to various organizations in which she believed, including ProLiteracy Worldwide, Mountain Area Information Network and the Union of Concerned Scientists. She offered suggestions in 2001 for the Jordan Lake Interbasin Transfer. She attended Grinnell College reunions in 1994, 2000, and 2002. She knitted many, many sweaters to be distributed to needy children overseas.

Daughter Tina's phrase on Lee's passing is that Lee went "running joyously singing into the Light."

This sketch of Lee's life was researched and drafted by Susan Lees and Chuck Fager. It was delivered at a Memorial meeting held for her by Fayetteville NC Friends Meeting, held at Quaker House on Fourth Month (April) 2, 2006.