

POST-WAR MISSIONARY

by Phares Horman

I was one of the early missionaries called into Europe after World War II. My assignment was to the French speaking countries of France, Belgium and Switzerland. Because our Mission President, James L. Barker also spoke Spanish and Italian, the countries of Spain, Italy, many islands in the Mediterranean, and French Africa were also included in our mission.

President Barker performed the correspondence and contact work for all of these areas. I was transferred to work in Nice, France which is located on the French Riviera and close to Italy.

The war had barely ended and the residents were still suffering from the lack of food. Utilities were rationed and could only be used a few hours per day. The ruins of warfare were evident everywhere.

There were only four missionaries in Nice. Because of its proximity to Italy we became the beneficiaries of all news pertaining to Italy. It was against the law to proselyte in Italy. A few members in Italy who survived World War II wrote letters to our mission. These members asked for copies of the Book of Mormon and any news about the Church. I read the letters and pondered what to do for them. President Barker asked me several times to visit the members in Italy, but it was a very difficult task.

Let me illustrate what an eighteen-year-old missionary was up against. Friends that we met in Nice told us how Southern France had been cut off from the rest of France until just before our arrival, because of the demise of the railroad during the war. They recounted how they had to eat flowers, their main export to make perfume in order to survive.

In Strasbourg I saw building after building still in ruins. The debris was everywhere and had only been cleaned off most streets. The food situation was pathetic in France and even worse in Italy. Nearly everything was rationed and was not available. Milk was restricted to children and required a ration ticket for each glass of milk. Each slice of bread required a ration ticket and it was not always available, even in restaurants.

The Church eventually recognized the severity of the living conditions in Europe and decided to send assistance. I was there when Elder Ezra Taft Benson ordered the food and assisted in its distribution to the members. What joy and thanks were expressed when a full meal became possible. Clothes were also received. One of the missionaries received an overcoat which was a great blessing.

Electricity was rationed in our apartment. We were allowed to use three small light bulbs of 30 Watts each, for two or three hours a day. We cooked on a gas stove with similar limitations. We often ate cold food because the gas pressure was so low that nothing could be cooked. We learned to cook and eat at odd hours to match the gas pressure. There was no refrigeration and no washing machines. We would dress and undress in our beds, under the covers, to keep warm. Our coats would also go on top of our covers to give us additional warmth. Many missionaries became sick so the mission home was moved to Geneva, Switzerland where food and fuel was available.

We had been so successful as missionaries in Strasbourg that all the missionaries were evicted from the Alsace-Lorraine province. This required us to go to Italy each three months to obtain a new visa. As a consequence of this problem, I spent many weeks in Milan, Rome, Naples and even took

a few side trips to Pompeii and Venice.

Italy was even worse off than France. The railroads had been bombed severely and transportation was difficult. Trains were starting to run regularly but one had to be very careful to only ride first class to guarantee a coach that was usually on time. Second class often turned out to be a box car with straw to sit and sleep on, which sometimes had been contaminated. Third class was often an open flat bed. The air was rank going through the many tunnels. They would help us occasionally by putting fresh straw in the box cars and allowed us to close the doors at will.

I was informed that at that time the train only went as far south as Pompeii on a regular schedule. Further south, the tracks had not all been replaced from their bombed out condition and when one was sold a ticket to the boot of Italy, one had to be cautious because many extra hours of flat bed travel were often experienced by even first class passengers. Food was available in restaurants in Italy, although quite expensive. I spent many hours going through Vatican City and became completely familiar with many other Italian cities while waiting for my visa time to lapse so that I could re-enter France.

I spent many hours teaching about the church on each visit. Many people spoke French, but occasionally someone could be taught in English. It was against the law to proselyte in Italy. However, teaching while riding on a train was loosely regulated and guarded conversations were performed. For example, the persons riding with us would ask why Americans were in France and Italy. Then we would tell them about the Mormons in Utah and their religion. The reply was universally the same; Italy had been led into the war by a dictator who suppressed religion and that they did not like their mandatory Catholic religion. Many asked to be baptized after talking to us but we could only tell them to wait until Italy became free and missionaries would come officially into the country, or to see us in France where we were able

to perform baptisms. A few of them did come back to Nice and were baptized.

President Barker, our mission president, would often give me the addresses of Saints in Italy and ask me to contact them. One such person was Vincenzo Di Francesca who lived in Sicily. (This was the man who had found part of a copy of the Book of Mormon in a trash can.) I explained to President Barker and others why I felt that I could not visit him. But the truth of the matter for me was that it was just too risky and difficult to negotiate the unfamiliar trains to get to the boot of Italy and then negotiate an unfamiliar boat ride to get to Sicily. Of course another problem was to find him in Sicily when we did not have his address nor the city in which he lived and the fact that he spoke Sicilian which was unfamiliar to me. It would require conversing in Italian all the way to the boot of Italy and then conversing in Sicilian thereafter in an unknown war disaster area.

I started a basic course and practiced speaking Italian each time I was in Italy. I carried copies of the Book of Mormon in Italian and gave them out freely.

The word was reaching our mission office that Vincenzo Di Francesca was aging and that someone must reach him before it was too late. We did not wish him to die before baptism. He had converted people around him, started a small congregation, and followed everything exactly according to our scripture. But it was a pathetic situation and although every missionary that was near Italy was contacted to go down and perform this function, it was impossible until a year or two later when conditions improved. He was eventually contacted and the story had a wonderful ending with him as our newest convert.

As I look back in time, I realize that I had been honored by being one of the first missionaries in France after the war.