

Three Missionaries I Knew

By Yang Sepeng

I HAVE missed my favorite pastor at the Cosmopolitan Student Church of Manila—Mrs. Mary Boyd Stagg—who, through her life more than her Sunday sermons, had brought unbelievers by the thousands to the feet of the Master. So have other church-goers by the hundreds. They certainly would not hear or see her again, not until the day "When The Roll Is Called Up Yonder."

Mrs. Stagg, or "Mother Stagg" as every one used to call her, Dr. Hawthorne Darby and Miss Helen Wilk, the last two being former director and manager, respectively, of the Emmanuel Cooperative Hospital, have paid a great price with their lives for their unswerving and unselfish devotion to the Filipino people during the enemy occupation. Yet their supreme sacrifice is hardly known outside of the members of the Cosmopolitan Student Church. For that matter, there is no one today who is working for the official recognition and reward of their services in the resistance movement. Knowing Mother Stagg, Dr. Darby and Miss Wilk as I do, I am absolutely sure, however, that if they were alive today, they would not even like their work mentioned much less demand compensation for their services.

WAR was already a certainty as the year 1941 drew on a close and many Americans, afraid to be caught in the Philip-

pinas which was sure to be a battleground, hurried home in any available means of transportation. There were, however, many who considered their business and personal interests in this country too valuable to be abandoned so that they decided to remain come what may. Not a few held the belief that American might would be able to repel any attack on U.S. defenses in the Philippines, hence they disregarded the warnings of the times, only to find themselves at the mercy of the Japanese conquerors barely three weeks after the treachery on Pearl Harbor.

But the three women, whose work among the Filipinos was a life mission, were not alarmed at the approach of war and stoically, if not gladly, faced the inevitable. For completely ignoring the war the brutalities of which were daily enacted in China and Europe and continuously reported in the Manila press, these three heroes and martyrs of the resistance movement did not regard their stay from the mere love for adventure and excitement. It was rather a chance in a lifetime for them to prove to themselves that as missionaries the mere approach of danger would not shake their will.

When rumors of war persisted, friends urged Mother Stagg to go home to the States. But realizing her Christian stewardship, she refused to leave, saying that her place was here in the Philippines and that the Filipinos needed her.

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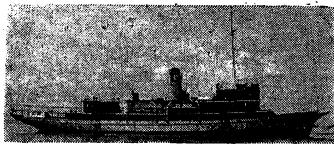
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The war overtook Mother Stagg here; so it did Sam Boyd, one of her two sons. Lionel Stagg, the other son, was in America then. So were Mary Stagg and Margaret Ann Stagg, the latter of whom Mother Stagg was able to send home shortly before the outbreak of the hostilities.

I met Mother Stagg in 1939 and shortly after I was converted to Protestantism. The spontaneous friendly fraternity, the harmonious and affectionate church atmosphere that immediately impressed me worked toward my speedy conversion. The sincerity and honesty seen by outsiders were only long-range, though unmistakable, insight into her personal charm. She possessed a power in her soul which was not hard to the touch, and seemed to give way before other physical obstacles, but slowly permeated and calmly consumed "with the patience of the years," the hardest granites.

For six months Mrs. Yang, my wife, stayed with her and she was so charmed that when she left, her respect and affection for Mother Stagg grew beyond bounds instead of diminishing which usually happens after a long association.

Words are inadequate to describe the tenderness and affection which characterized the life of Mother Stagg as a missionary and social worker. She was so unselfish that the interest she took upon people, whether in trouble or not, was indeed a warm love which one experiences only with his or her own mother. She was so prepossessing that her life was like a magnet that drew iron filings towards her. Such qualities accounted for the large number of converts to the Christian faith for the twelve years of the Staggs' ministry in the Philippines prior to the war, not including the period under

the Japanese when her work and those of Dr. Darby and Miss Wilk assumed a different nature.

The philosophy of complete self-abnegation and the unshakeable faith in Christ's promise of finding life after losing it for His sake, proved to be of tremendous influence in the social service and underground work of the three women. As if careless of death, they were absolutely unafraid, and almost immediately following the entry of the enemy troops in Manila, Mother Stagg, Dr. Darby and Miss Wilk were upon tasks that did not appertain to women of their training.

Unlike all other Americans, they were never concentrated at all, except after their arrest in 1944. Fortunately or unfortunately, their connection with the Cosmopolitan Student Church and the Emmanuel Cooperative Hospital which the

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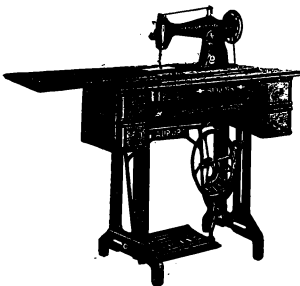
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Japanese believed correctly as indigenous, accorded them freedom. So their religious and social service work suffered no interruption. Their immunity affected Sam Boyd Stagg and Clara Ruth Darby, a sister of Dr. Darby who had been a U.P. professor. While others were panic-stricken, moving uneasily from one place to another, they remained at their posts.

During the first three months of the occupation, their underground activities were very meager, consisting merely of keeping up morale among the population through assurances of ultimate victory for the Allied forces, transmitting news broadcasts which they heard over their clandestine radios, relaying morale-building information and the like. Their church work was taking in more of political propagandizing than "spreading the words of God." In fact, they realized their responsibilities as the only representatives of America in the midst of a people that was in need of strengthening.

As the Bataan-Corregidor campaign closed and guerrilla resistance gathered momentum, their activities extended to charitable work. They gave away clothing, medicines, food-stuffs and money from out of their own savings, and however hidden these ministrations were done to returned soldiers from Bataan or guerrilla operatives and soldiers themselves. A Miss Consolacion Abaya, deaconess who resided with the Darbys and Wilks at the Emmanuel Cooperative Hospital, testifies to the underground work of the missionaries. She says that wounded and otherwise sick "boys" as Dr. Darby and Miss Will used to call the guerrillas, had been treated, hospitalized, fed and the like at the hospital. Even the men employees of the institution that kept changing often were guerrillas them-

selves.

Mother Stagg who lived at the parsonage had contacts with the Straughn guerrillas and the two others and Miss Abaya with Marking's Fil-American guerrillas. They soon solicited contribution from other people and gathered arms hidden in the City and smuggled same to the guerrilla bands.

A story is told by Miss Abaya of a time when the late Cushing went to the hospital one bright afternoon. He brought away with him a radio set. In 1943 the coming in and going out of underground operatives at the hospital was a daily occurrence. The location of the hospital, being much out of the way, however, was an advantage.

At the Cosmopolitan Mother Stagg was as much in the risky underground as her two colleagues, if not more. She kept arms in the premises. It is said that in view of the dar-

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ing activities of the three women, the flickering light of democracy was burning only at the Emmanuel Hospital and in the church.

Such a fervent spirit was contagious and the three women kept it spreading like particles of yeast. They won people to resistance movement and had them contribute to the cause in varying amounts in cash or in kind. There was one Co Ban Ho, an alien who through the appeals of Mother Stagg gave to the guerrillas ₱85,000 in cash. For the act Co paid for his life as did the rest.

Days, weeks and months did not go fleeting by but dragged on in tedious slackened pace. And suffering under the heels of Japanese tyranny, the Filipinos grew restive. The cruel occupation troops, on the other hand, understood the meaning and moved to check the upsurge of patriotism which was as evident in Manila as it was in the provinces although less violent. Daily raids brought brutalities, and arrests filled Fort Santiago and other prison compounds.

Several times in 1943 the Emmanuel Hospital was raided and searched, resulting in the arrest of some boys and punishment of the women. But no amount of punishments and threats discouraged the women who were already as much a part of the movement as the guerrillas and leaders ambushing the enemy on the highways or sniping at them in their garrisons and posts. Their defiance was a constant display of valor. They played with fire, no less. And their intensifying activities were manifested in the mounting contributions they collected and passed on to the forces of different guerrilla bands. They soon had contacts with the Ilocos, Visayas and

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probably Mindanao. Even copies of the famous and classic Confesor letter had been reproduced by them and circulated.

In one raid in which the Japanese Kempei-tai searched the hospital premises, lists of guerrillas that included their names were captured. So was propaganda literature.

Suddenly on January 28, 1944, at breakfast time Mother Stagg, Sam Boyd and Agustin Ortega, a dormitory boy, were arrested at the parsonage at 450 Taft Avenue. On that same day a mass arrest of suspects was made in which Juan Elizalde, Enrico Pirovano and Jose Ozamiz were among the prominent ones. Some 120 suspects were herded into Fort Santiago that day.

The following February 4 another mass arrest was made. This time Dr. Darby, Miss Wilk, Miss Abaya, Tito Dans and many other Cosmopolitan Student Church members were included. They were taken forcibly before dawn. The charges against each and everyone were: supporting guerrillas, spreading pro-American and anti-Japanese propaganda, membership in a huge espionage ring allegedly headed by a colonel who, according to the *Tribune* of July 11, 1944, was head of the U.S. Army military intelligence service before the outbreak of the war but was able to leave for the United States shortly before Pearl Harbor. This officer referred to was probably Lieue, Col. Evans, and the Japanese claimed that he was sent back to the Philippines in 1943 in a submarine.

Of Mother Stagg it was also charged that she sheltered two Chinese wanted by the Jap Kempei—Mr. Go Puan Seng

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and myself—and our families. Mother Stagg saw to it that those wanted were moved from one family to another among members of the Cosmopolitan church.

Needless to describe, the brutal tortures the missionaries received at Fort Santiago did not make them reveal names of guerrillas or others who supported the movement in whatever manner. Unbroken in spirit, they were never seen to grieve or repent. They were almost continuously in prayer and, although conversations were prohibited, the women missionaries comforted their cellmates and preached to them the gospel of Christ.

In their common sufferings resulting from cell congestion, meager food, insanitary conditions, beatings, and many other causes, Mother Stagg, Dr. Darby and Miss Wilk ministered unto the rest. Mother Stagg, herself quite sickly, forgot her own ailments and did whatever she could, such as massaging the aching limbs, back and bodies of her suffering fellow women prisoners. It was as though only her will kept her from breaking down.

Of souls saved they certainly had many during their confinement at Fort Santiago and at the Old Bilibid prison. Miss Carmen Chang, a Chinese teacher and of Buddhist religion, was very close to Miss Wilk, and she soon was repeating from memory Psalm 23 and praying as she learned from the missionaries who became angels, no less.

Mother Stagg used to express her sincere wish that she could own the guilt of men and women guerrillas who had been continually brought to Fort Santiago.

"It is better for me to be here in prison than for others as I have already undergone the severe punishments," she used to comment. She was so brave, so Christlike in her readiness to suffer and die for others.

"If I see these boys being tortured," Miss Wilk, too, had said, "I feel like sinking down, and I am glad I have shared

the sufferings they have gone through. If they (the Japanese) kill me because I have helped the Americans and Filipino boys, I am going to heaven."

Dr. Darby had spoken in the same vein, "I am unrepentant," Miss Abaya quoted her as saying: "I am content in whatever situation I am in. I have peace with God."

Nothing was heard of Mother Stagg, Dr. Darby and Miss Wilk. Then all of a sudden, through the testimony of some Japanese witnesses at a trial of a war criminal in Manila after liberation, it was learned that they had been executed at the Manila North Cemetery where they were beheaded and buried in one dugout. In another were interred the remains of Elizalde, Pirovano, Ozamiz and others.

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