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M. J. Heisey and Nancy R. Heisey, *Relief Work as Pilgrimage: "Mademoiselle Miss Elsie" in Southern France, 1945-1948*. Lanham and London: Lexington Books, 2015. vii + 168 pp. Bibliography and index. \$80.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-4985-0810-0; \$79.00 U.S. (eb). ISBN 978-1-4985-0811-7.

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On August 15, 1945, France's High Court condemned the World War I hero, Marshal Philippe Pétain, to death for wartime actions amounting to high treason. As the summer of 1945 cooled, the hunt for war criminals continued in heated national political spheres, as well as in local communities. Accusations of collaboration choked the air. Simultaneously, rationing continued for key services and many foods. Electricity was turned off every couple of days in alternating regions. Military operations may have drawn to a close, but the social and economic effects of the war were harder to end.

In this historical landscape of political recrimination, ideological division, and economic strain, French, American, and international relief agencies continued to deliver shelter, food, clothing and healing to displaced war refugees, indigent French children rendered impoverished or orphaned by the war, and the unemployed. By 1945, one U.S. relief agency, the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) headquartered in Chalon-sur-Saône, operated five children's colonies. Until 1948, these colonies delivered housing relief and more to hundreds of French and foreign children.

Into this hurly-burly arrived an American woman of diminutive build and strong spirit, but under-informed about the political theatrics surrounding her. Elsie C. Bechtel came on a Christian good-will mission. MCC hired her on a two-year contract to "help out" with "European relief work" as it was called in Akron, Ohio, the place of Bechtel's Anabaptist upbringing. Bechtel was thirty-two years old, single, and excited when her troop ship, the *Argentina*, sailed from New York on September 14, 1945. Speaking no French, she arrived in Le Havre with a fellow passenger who informed Bechtel of the magnitude of destruction awaiting her. Allied bombing had claimed the lives of 10,000 of Le Havre's civilians, he warned. Despite being culturally unprepared, this small, blond, bespectacled woman disembarked. She protected herself with a spiritual shield forged in Christian modesty, pacifism, and humanitarianism. The discipline of her convictions sustained Bechtel during her service at the Mennonite children's colony at Lavercaintière (in the département of Lot), located in France's southern Massif Central region. Among the many services accomplished by Bechtel was the recording of a diary. It noted her observations, experiences and criticisms of French life during the early years of French postwar reconstruction. This treasure was discovered by M. J. Heisey while conducting research on her first book, which explored the pacifism of the Brethren-in-Christ. [1] Bechtel's diary is the focus of the Heiseys' current study.

The book, *Relief Work as Pilgrimage: "Mademoiselle Miss Elsie" in Southern France, 1945-1948*, represents the collaboration of two sister-scholars, M. J. Heisey (a historian of U.S. pacifism) and Nancy R. Heisey (a professor of biblical studies and church history). The two scholars are not specifically trained in French history and translation of French documents fell to Nancy Heisey, the duo's scholar of religion.

Chapters one, two, three and five present the Heiseys' analysis of Bechtel's diary within the disciplinary contexts of women's autobiographical writing, Christian pilgrimage studies and Mennonite pacifist history. Chapter four is Elsie C. Bechtel's richly annotated one-hundred-page diary.

The Heisey discovery is made exciting by the present dearth in English of published eyewitness accounts of France during the period of immediate postwar reconstruction. For this reason alone, Bechtel's diary offers undergraduate students and period researchers a valuable source for understanding the deep, often disempowering, and highly gendered social destruction left in World War II's wake. At the same time, viewed from the perspective of a passionate, American, Mennonite woman determined to make a difference in the lives of children, the diary provides historians with a glimpse of the blend of naiveté, ambition, and frustration Americans brought to their efforts to liberate and rebuild Europe.

The Heiseys present Bechtel's annotated diary as a single chapter within their book. It begins in October 1945 with her arrival at Lavercaitière. In preceding weeks, Bechtel had encountered a cast of important relief workers in Chalon-sur-Saône. There, she received updates concerning the MCC mission in France and met the MCC leadership team. Many of these American Mennonites had been on the ground in Europe since 1939. Henry Buller and his wife, Beatrice (Rosenthal) Buller, figured importantly in her accounts. Beatrice was a Jewish refugee from Germany. She had escaped to France before 1940 and there married a Mennonite, Henry. By 1945, Beatrice had converted to Christianity. Bechtel met other important MCC personnel who also delivered nationwide relief from Chalon. They included the unfortunately named Samuel J. Goering; John Fretz, a Canadian truck driver who delivered donations; and Clifford Lavers, a make-shift civil engineer who designed and installed barracks at the five colony sites: Le Dolivet (Plottes, Saône-et-Loire); Château Mont Simon (Vescours, Ain); Mont des Oiseau (Weiler, Bas-Rhin) Château du Vain (Anetz, Loire-Atlantique) and Lavercaitière (Lot). In 1947, Atlee Beechy was appointed director of MCC Europe programs and in December 1946, Charles Cocanower replaced Henry Buller, both changes made much to Bechtel's dismay. The account of MCC management meetings provides an important historical picture of how large amounts of private U.S. dollars flowed through France after the war.

The Bullers' history also alerted Bechtel to some of the hazards risked by Mennonite relief workers. Vichy had arrested the Bullers in 1942. The couple joined the entire U.S. diplomatic delegation and approximately one hundred U.S. journalists indefinitely detained in a hotel in Baden-Baden, Germany until March 13, 1944. Only when the Nazi government agreed to a prisoner swap with the United States did the delegation members return home. The Bullers, however, repatriated to France, still committed to their relief work. Bechtel uncovers the story of how Mennonite operations continued during the expulsion period through her evolving friendship with Augustin Coma, a culturally Catholic, religiously agnostic, Spanish refugee who independently directed the MCC children's colonies from 1942 to 1944.

Augustin Coma is the hero of Bechtel's diary and a key to understanding the complexity of relief organizations' reliance on local service providers. Coma was an accomplished Catalan businessman, active in the pre-Civil War grain trade. During Franco's forces' encirclement of Barcelona, Coma used his skills and connections to organize the delivery of food relief to an all-but-starving Catalan population. Under Coma's direction, until his late departure in 1939, 30,000 children were fed daily. From 1942 to 1948, Coma traveled between Lavercaitière and MCC headquarters, stabilizing operations and ensuring the needs of the colony's eighty-nine refugees were met. He attended MCC meetings, appointed the colony staff, including its French director, Louis Forestier (Bechtel's nemesis) and the Spanish personnel director, Josephine Pepita Borea. Coma also tutored Bechtel in French each night and gave her crash courses on relief operations. Bechtel learned quickly under Coma's tutelage and rose in the organization to supplant the Europeans formerly occupying leadership positions.

Indirectly Bechtel suggests that the American MCC directors (first Henry Buller, then Charles Cocanower and Atlee Beechy) treated Coma unfairly. Unfortunately, the Heiseys disengage from some disturbing evidence of discrimination that could be better analyzed to highlight Mennonite prejudices against the Spanish. For example, over a period of seven years, Coma's wife, Maria Delores Gonzales de Coma; his son, August; and his daughter, Amelia, remained inaccessible to him, trapped in Franco's Spain. Why did American MCC officers not dedicate as much energy to the case of Coma family reunification as they did to obtaining vacation visas for the holiday pleasures of their American staff (Bechtel describes Mr. Buller moving mountains to secure her a visa to the United Kingdom for a vacation in 1946 and similar MCC efforts to obtain for her a visa for Switzerland and Italy in 1947)? Exploring the MCC's role, or lack thereof, in Mr. Coma's failures to obtain permission for his family to come to France, would have deepened our understanding of the manifestations of bureaucratic racism that prevailed during this formative period of international Christian relief work. Furthermore, as relief operations slowed down toward the end of 1946, the MCC was quick to give Coma notice, while continuing to rotate untested Americans into directorship positions. Despite the slight, Coma continued to serve the MCC in a voluntary capacity until 1948. The Heiseys declare a desire to "encourage interest" in "quiet stories" of marginalized actors within the relief system who faced difficulties in crossing borders and effecting war-zone travel, but they leave unplucked the rich archival material of the MCC staff reports that might illustrate how a quieting of non-Mennonite workers happened (p.xviii).

"Bechtel as pilgrim" is the theme explored throughout chapter two and alluded to throughout the text. Certainly one might call a trip to 1945 France—a place deprived of electricity and running water—an odyssey, but never does Bechtel herself claim her experience as pilgrimage. Traditionally, the Heiseys explain, Christian pilgrimage was defined as an intention to visit holy places. The Heiseys offer a vague expansion to the old definition that includes, as pilgrimage, encounters with people generally and in particular, "pacifists' engagement with the suffering of displaced people" (p. xvii). Missing for me is a more straightforward conclusion about pilgrimage as transformation. What change did this pilgrimage have on Bechtel's religious and intellectual consciousness? Bechtel acknowledges the transformational nature of her French experiences, summarizing that she received more from the people at the colony than she could ever give back. However, in the diary, Bechtel does not articulate a concrete understanding of exactly what it was she received nor the impact it made upon her, either then or in later years. In their interviews with Bechtel a half-century later, the Heiseys might have pushed the older Bechtel to specify what impact her years in France had on her subsequent life, but such questioning and analysis is not woven into the creation of this new definition of pilgrimage. Readers are left to glean a silhouette of a new Bechtel emerging, but the authors leave a deliberate and systematic interpretation of the nature of Bechtel's transformation to future scholars.

The Heiseys help readers understand how Bechtel balanced her private religious intentions with the refugees' personal religious beliefs or, more often, their rejection of belief. Bechtel was very aware of the prohibition against proselytizing that had been agreed to by the faith-based aid organization in the contracts signed between France's Third Republic and the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC). One colony director, Louis Forestier, a fierce defender of republican *laïcité*, frequently lodged complaints against Bechtel, even threatening to fight her with appeals to political officials and through editorials in the local newspaper if she did not stop teaching the children Bible verses. Although Bechtel perpetually pushed against such restrictions by reading bible stories to children each night and staging Christmas pageants each year, her work never adopted the aggressive evangelistic forms embraced by postwar Protestants like the Reverend Billy Graham. Instant conversion was never her goal. Instead she peddled a soft-sided missionary message through example, hoping that by choice, girls in the colony, even communist co-workers, might come to see the love and promise of hope in Christ's message as practiced by his Mennonite servants. For Forestier, her approach threatened French commitments to the separation of church and state, but the impression left on the children seems to have been as Bechtel intended. When the Heiseys traveled to Lavercantière in 2006, they interviewed

one among several gathered refugee alumnae from the colony, Sara Serrano Abadie. Abadie specifically praised the Mennonites because they “kept their religious life for private sustenance; they never proselytized” (p. 161).

Yet in a November 1946 letter, Bechtel confided to her sister, “I am beginning to think that just the presence of someone here who believes and is decent does more for these people than one can realize” (p. 87). She wanted to share her faith with others because faith gave her hope. She believed that the loneliness, poverty, and alienation of the colony children and adults mandated some source of hope. But she rejected the utopian dreams of her communist colleague, Giselle. During the same period, her diary records deep questioning about practiced religion: “I find it so silly that the church should fight about neck-ties and covering strings when there are things so much more real to think about. How much of a Christian am I? What do I really have to offer these people? What can I give them that will change their lives? Do I really believe the things I think and say I do? Or do I believe them because some one (sic) told me to believe them” (p. 110).

Such self-questioning is common in today’s mainstream Protestant dialogues but, in 1945, this type of recorded doubt bordered on radical skepticism for an eastern Mennonite. I wish the Heiseys would have discussed Bechtel’s religious transformation in the text and with her. As a reader I want to ask Bechtel whether her discussions about materialism and spiritualism with Giselle “the communist” co-worker changed her view of Christianity? If so, how? Chapter two could and should elaborate on how Bechtel changed her beliefs and attitudes based on her relief work. The authors note that, “refugees crossed boundaries of belief, culture and history to align themselves with Mennonite work” (p. 39). Was the reverse true? Analysis rather than description of how Mennonites, especially Bechtel, crossed boundaries, cultures, and history to align themselves with French reconstruction and reconciliation might strengthen the assertion that Bechtel’s relief work was a new form of pilgrimage.

The Heiseys also ground Bechtel’s diary in a tradition of women’s autobiography. In this endeavor, the authors leave an array of central themes of religious identity, women’s sexuality, and American prudery listed, but unexplored. Bechtel’s treatment of the refugee character, “Annie,” offers a case in point. Annie was a French woman, presumably an evacuee from northern France. She was about Bechtel’s age in 1945 and she had two children living with her in the Lavercaitière colony. Her youngest, a boy, was the offspring of an amorous affair with a German soldier, a treason for which Annie’s husband was divorcing her. Annie’s father, who shunned her, lived somewhere in the north. When historians think about the most destructive aspects of refugee displacement and wartime female vulnerability with all its psychological lacerations, we should study Bechtel’s Annie. She embodies the horrors of falling into “refugeedom.” Forestier and Coma sympathetically allowed Annie to live at Lavercaitière doing odd jobs. They recognized her children’s maternal need and Annie’s precarious economic and fragile psychological state. Bechtel, along with all the other Spanish and French women working at the Lavercaitière colony, despised Annie. Annie didn’t behave like a proper lady or an appreciative refugee. She invited random men into the chateau to sleep with her. She lacked discipline to finish her assigned duties. She harassed other staff members. She neglected her children. Frequently she ran away. Bechtel records Annie’s affairs with voyeuristic detail. She denounces Annie in her text, puts her on trial in her mind and condemns her, an adulteress. Yet inexplicably, each time Annie flees, each time she sneaks a man into her bedroom, when she hides in the attic threatening to kill herself with a knife stolen from the kitchen of the Spanish cook, Bertran, and even when she ends up arrested for stealing 5,000 frs. to buy food, Bechtel tries to rescue her—not with religion, but with friendship.

At play in this story are the biographies of two rebellious women, one a quiet Mennonite pacifist, the other a wayward French refugee, permanently unsettled from the destruction wrought by war. Bechtel’s diary gives Annie, perhaps all “Annies”—who we, as historians and current observers of Syria’s rejected, house under the flattening category of refugee—a voice, a face, a life, a heart broken. Through Bechtel’s puritanical gaze on Annie, we also come to better know the discomfort endured in Bechtel’s small moral

universe, hemmed in by American cultural assumptions about marriage and sexuality and the Mennonite religion's gentle, but firm ostracizing of spinsters. If Elsie Bechtel made a pilgrimage while on her trip to southern France, she was led on it by Annie to all the forbidden places of her own heart. In her diary, Bechtel acknowledged and lamented the affective boundaries erected by her strict Mennonite upbringing. Did the Heiseys dare ask Bechtel about her ebulliently recorded adoration of Coma when they visited her? Her praise of Coma surely transgressed acceptable definitions of platonic love. Do the Heiseys reinforce a one-dimensional definition of Mennonite women's sexuality by eschewing a multi-perspective analysis of Bechtel's relationship with Coma? An opportunity is lost by the reticence of the authors to imagine a young, unmarried Mennonite woman, alone in a foreign environment falling in love with her married, and hence forbidden, tutor. Or are these the facts to which they refer as "private," and so choose to omit (p. xviii). The desire to read Bechtel's efforts to save Annie as an articulation of Bechtel's frustration with, but also envy of Annie's sexual freedom seems well-founded in the text. In simply labeling Bechtel's attention to Annie as "critical," the Heiseys forego an opportunity to understand Bechtel as a multi-dimensional, rebellious, if ultimately obedient woman, formed by her conscious, as well as subconscious feelings. Such unasked questions and narrowly interpreted renderings eclipse the fullness of Bechtel's emotional pilgrimage.

Readers of the diary will undoubtedly forgive the analytical reticence of the two authors, realizing the value of their work annotating Bechtel's diary and its timely publication. At the time of this writing, European states and United Nations member states are negotiating between themselves and with international rescue organizations about the quotas of Syrian refugees they are willing to shelter within their borders. A presidential candidate of a major U.S. political party is calling for the temporary closing of U.S. borders to Muslim refugees and immigrants. Fears about refugees' political proclivities, family connections, dole-loitering, and terrorist potential animate current political discourse. The logistical problems of housing refugees currently divide Parisians. Should makeshift shelters be created in the Bois-de-Boulogne near Paris's toniest arrondissements? Many residents of the Eiffel Tower district cry, "Non, Pas de Jungle-Calais au Bois de Boulogne!"<sup>[2]</sup> Internal strife and the growing fear of radical Islamic terrorism imported by refugees to France threatens the sanctuary France may offer to or withdraw from the refugees presently flooding into Europe. In 2015, 80,000 refugees applied for asylum in France, less than in other European countries.<sup>[3]</sup> Described as dirty, unemployed, and politically threatening, the same stereotypes of refugees resurface a half-century after the Holocaust. Although not a developed theme of the authors of *Relief Work as Pilgrimage*, Bechtel noted solemnly the tension between refugees and host communities in her last summative diary entry: "But I was soon to understand that there was always a [certain] underground war between the children of the colony and the peasants" (p. 147).

Harmony was a daily negotiation achieved between the Mennonite relief workers operating in Lavercaitière, their French staff, the peasants and town people, and the refugee children. Bechtel's diary notes that cross-cultural understanding arose from refugees and community hosts being in contact with one another. When the Heiseys visited Lavercaitière for a reunion of the colony's alumni gathered to honor the memory of Bechtel and to contribute to the Heiseys' research, Deputy Mayor Gilles Vilard opened a gathering with a speech about the importance of remembering the past. He said: "During these two world conflicts, the commune [Lavercaitière] clearly knew how to behave and respond to such an abominable situation with courageous and positive acts [hosting refugees].... We must also know how to understand what has happened and to make good decisions. This is why the work of memory that we are doing together [honoring Bechtel's relief work] today is essential. It must prepare us to look ahead and to be strong so that we can be better and more effective in the future" (p. 158).

These two quotes, the first from Bechtel and the second from the Deputy Mayor, Gilles Vilard, suggest both a historical conflict and a present-day conflict. Vilard remembers the good job done by the commune of Lavercaitière in hosting refugees during the lean years of the 1940s, but perhaps he should recall that the commune merely tolerated the Mennonites who cared for the refugees. Bechtel

remembers how tense the refugee and host community relationships were. Vilarid hints that the best outcome for the present is to research and remember the full picture of the past, so as to learn from it and apply its lessons to the future. I wonder what “lessons” the *Lotois* have learned about sheltering asylum seekers. I wonder just how joyfully the commune of 1942 welcomed the signing of the Mennonite lease on the abandoned Lavercantière château, given its new tenant’s determination to house one hundred refugees from Spain’s Civil War and from occupied France. I also wonder how closely the wartime community of Lavercantière resembles the bourgeoisie of Paris’s sixteenth arrondissement today. In worse circumstances than exist today, the commune of Lavercantière leased space to an international refugee relief organization. How many Syrian refugees will the commune of Lavercantière offer to host in the current crisis?

The Heiseys’ research hints at the necessity of a daily routine to keep peace between the refugees and the host community. Bechtel relied on Coma, prayer, and journaling. Her diary records that the best days in Lavercantière were those when the *Lotois* community and the refugees came together as one, on Christmas and Easter, at a table of French food. For Bechtel, prayer was food for the soul. But she recognized that most of the French and Spanish refugees preferred foie gras. Perhaps the Parisians today can share their caviar, make peace and welcoming a fashionable French practice again, and in so doing, honor the memory of Elsie C. Bechtel and Annie, as well as the good and not-so-good citizens of Lavercantière.

#### NOTES

[1] M.J. Heisey, *Peace and Persistence: Tracing the Brethren in Christ Peace Witness through Three Generations* (Kent, Oh.: Kent State University Press, 2003).

[2] TRTWorld AFP, “Parisians Revolt against Shelter for Homeless, Refugees,” March 19, 2016. <http://www.trtworld.com/europe/parisians-revolt-against-shelter-for-homeless-refugees-70881>. Accessed June 13, 2016.

[2] “Parisians Revolt against Shelter for Homeless, Refugees.”

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