

M. J. Heisey and Nancy R. Heisey, *Relief Work as Pilgrimage “Mademoiselle Miss Elsie” in Southern France, 1945-1948*. Lexington Books: New York, 2015. Pp.185. Hardcover, \$80.00 USD.

Using the personal writings of Elsie Catherine Bechtel, who was a relief worker in a children’s shelter run by Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) in post-war France, M.J. Heisey and Nancy R. Heisey explore how women contributed to MCC’s relief efforts. Through Bechtel’s own words, readers are submerged into the difficulties of post-war life, as well as the loneliness and challenges of relief work. Bechtel’s reflections on her service offer insight into the everyday dynamics of service in a foreign country under the trying circumstances of post-war reconstruction. Despite the growth in literature exploring the experiences of women in Mennonite and Brethren in Christ (BIC) communities, the story of women’s contribution to relief work still remains hidden. Single women like Bechtel, as well as married women like Elfrieda Dyck, performed an essential, though often under-acknowledged role in organizing, administering, and carrying out this work.

Over the course of five chapters, the authors shed light on important themes related to service, such as the cultural dislocation experienced by relief workers, relations between MCC workers and local personnel, and the opportunities for personal growth offered to women through this type of work. Elsie Bechtel struggled to adapt to the food, language, and conditions of her temporary home. Language, especially, isolated Bechtel from others; nonetheless, she worked hard to develop the skills necessary to communicate with the children and her co-workers. The relationships Bechtel developed with her co-workers ranged from close to distant and tense. Yet, from her descriptions, it is clear that local

workers performed an essential role in the operation of the children's shelter; without the knowledge and skill of these workers, much of the work performed by MCC would not have been possible. Often overlooked, these people acted as intermediaries between North American volunteers and the local society. Finally, the book displays how service work created opportunities for women to undertake leadership roles, even if they struggled to assert their authority, as witnessed when Bechtel became the director of personnel.

Unfortunately, the question of what makes Bechtel's service an example of pilgrimage is not fully answered. As the authors acknowledge, Bechtel never made this connection and her writings reveal very little about how her service influenced her personal spiritual journey. While her desire to serve was at least partially religiously motivated—one cannot discount the reality that for many Mennonite and BIC women, service was one of the few opportunities for travel—does this mean that all religiously motivated service must be considered pilgrimage? Nonetheless, this book begins to fill important holes in the history of Mennonite and BIC women, revealing their contributions to relief efforts, as well as the process by which they adapted to new cultural environments and found confidence, purpose, and personal strength through their work.

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