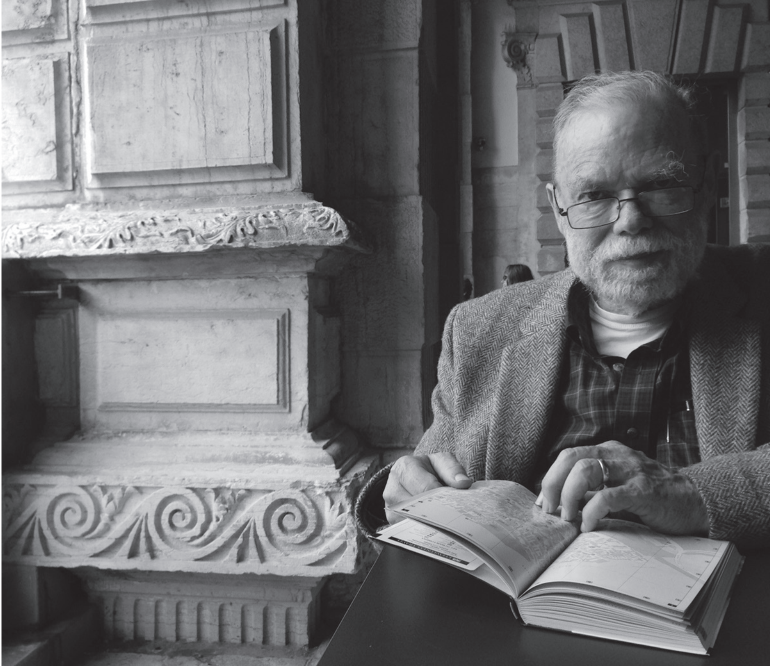
Writing Straight with Crooked Lines

A Memoir

Jim Forest

Maryknoll, New York 10545



PROLOGUE

Telling the Truth

One of my childhood ambitions was to be an archaeologist when I grew up. Photos in *National Geographic* magazine of archaeologists sifting earth for fragments of earlier civilizations and lost cultures fascinated me: foundations of forgotten cities, buried temples, secret graves, yellowed bones, faded wall paintings, bright mosaics, golden coins. . . . The past was a vast, barely mapped continent. I wanted to be one of the explorers.

Writing an account of one's life is a kind of archaeology, but instead of digging trenches into multilayered tells, I'm digging into the rubble of my own memory which, like earth, hides more than it reveals. One of my discoveries is how many fields of memory resist the shovel. There are acres of my gray matter where signs have been posted that warn, "Do not enter." It doesn't take long to realize that these are signs I've created myself, protective barriers that surround areas of pain and failure, lies and deceptions, selfish choices and unhealed wounds. Sins. I've discovered that my memory is a scrapbook full of blurry and doctored photos and torn-out pages.

I sometimes think of Father Mikhail Zhakov, a fierce monk with a wild red beard whom I met in the north of Russia in 1988. I was writing *Religion in the New Russia*, a book about religious life in what was still the Soviet Union, a state in which vast numbers of Orthodox priests, monks, nuns, and lay people had been imprisoned, tortured, enslaved, and murdered. Studying my face, he asked, "Will you tell the truth in your book?" Even at the Last Judgment I doubt I will be subject to a stricter scrutiny. Father Mikhail was a living outpost of uncombed, God-haunted, ready-to-be-martyred old Russia. I had to gather my thoughts before replying. "It isn't easy to know the truth," I answered, "and even harder to tell it, but I will try to know the truth and try to tell it." With the gaze of an icon, Father Mikhail charged me, "Truth, truth, but only truth!"

Knowing the truth and telling it are both challenging tasks. Having seen a barn from one or two sides, I might say with confidence that the barn is red only to discover later on that the unseen sides are blue. In testifying that the barn was red, I haven't lied, but neither have I told the truth. Guesses became assumptions, and memories are unreliable. I was sincere and was attempting to be honest, but I was mistaken. Would that it were as simple to describe the architecture of myself. I am not only one color, and I have more than four sides. Even what we have witnessed with our own eyes and ears and have vivid memories of is not 100 percent reliable. Innocent people have been executed because of the faulty memories of sincere and honest witnesses. Writing this memoir I've repeatedly found my memory in error. Whenever I can, I have tried to check my memories against the memories of others and look for verifying evidence.

According to a Portuguese proverb, "God writes straight with crooked lines." It's a truth that my life bears witness to. God wastes nothing, not even our mistakes.

Chicago, 1942

Red Diaper Baby

I was a "red diaper baby"—both my parents were members of the Communist Party during my childhood, though Mother resigned somewhere in my teens. What exactly a Communist was I couldn't have explained to anyone, except that it meant occasionally walking with my mother for an hour or two on Saturday afternoons as she went door to door, trying, with no success that I can recall, to enlist subscribers to the *Daily Worker*, a paper published by the Communist Party from its headquarters in New York. My brother Richard and I were also sometimes brought along to the monthly meetings of her Communist cell group, made up of six or seven local people. Their living-room discussions, to my young ears, sounded very dull indeed. No uprisings were being planned. "Revolution" was a word I heard only in school, and there it was highly approved of: the American Revolution of 1776.

That Mother would turn out to be on the left edge of politics was certainly not what her parents had imagined or intended. She was born May 26, 1912, to a family that had money in the bank. Marguerite Hendrickson was the daughter of Charles Hendrickson, a lawyer of Dutch descent whose father had been a justice of the New Jersey Supreme Court.

Our first ancestor in the New World was Utrecht-born Hendrick Hendrickson, who earlier, if Mother's narrative is correct, had been navigator of *De Halve Maen* (*The Half Moon*) on Henry Hudson's first New World voyage in 1609. *De Halve Maen* was a Dutch ship with a Dutch crew; the only non-Dutch person on board was Hudson, an Englishman who had been hired by the Dutch East India Company to find a "northwest passage" that would greatly shorten the trade route to Asia. Instead Hudson won a place in history by sailing up the river that was later named after him.

The Castello map of Nieuw Amsterdam—today's New York City—provides a bird's-eye view of the most important Dutch settlement as it was in 1660 and also indicates property ownership. A house belonging to a Hendrick Hendrickson is shown on the southeast corner of Breedstraat, now Broadway, and Waalstraat, today's Wall Street. Far from being an artery of finance, the original Waalstraat was a quiet lane just inside the wall that served as the town's northern defense. Today the plot of land where the house stood is the location of a bank as well as a subway station entrance. Who lived in that long-gone house? Was it the same Hendrick Hendrickson who had been Hudson's navigator? Or a son? These are unanswered questions.

The only physical fragment of our Dutch roots that came down to us was a battered, centuries-old, dark red Dutch wooden shoe that served as a silent reminder of where some of our ancestors had originated. My mother kept it on a window ledge in the living room.

Even before entering high school, Mother aimed not for marriage but for higher education and a career, far from a common choice for women in those days. More than once she told my brother and me that her acceptance by Smith College in Massachusetts had been front-page news in the *Red Bank Register.* Searching the web, I recently found that front page; it was dated September 18, 1929. Four years later, Mother graduated *summa cum laude*, another front-page news item in the local paper. She went on to study social work at Columbia University in New York, but it was her undergraduate years at Smith that pleased and shaped her most. In one of my favorite photos of her, taken when she was in her eighties, she is proudly wearing a Smith College T-shirt.

It was also at Smith that Mother took a leftward turn, as did so many people during the Depression, from the down-and-out to the privileged. Soon after graduation, she signed up as a Communist. She met my father through the Communist Party and married him in New York in June 1934.

Communism is dense with ideology, yet Mother never struck me as an ideologue. I can't recall her ever trying to convince my brother or me of any Marxist dogma. For her, Communism boiled down to doing whatever she could to protect people from being treated like rubbish. She had meekly accepted the doctrine of atheism simply because it was part of the Marxist package. Yet in my experience neither of my parents were at war with God or Christianity.

Probably because she had grown up in a home without economic

worries, Mother's adaptation to ascetic Communist ideals wasn't 100 percent successful. While we lived in a small house on the south edge of Red Bank, New Jersey, with only three cramped rooms plus kitchen and bathroom in a mainly black underclass neighborhood and had no car, not every economic choice suggested voluntary poverty. Although Mother spent money very carefully most of the time, it wasn't because there was no money to spend. In fact, in addition to having a good job as a psychiatric social worker, Mother had inherited an investment portfolio from her parents. Along with the *Daily Worker*, dividend checks and stock reports came steadily into the mailbox on our porch. Checking the financial pages of the *New York Herald Tribune*, Mother kept an eye on the value of shares in AT&T, Bell Telephone, and Standard Oil. One of her bywords, inherited from her father, was "never touch the principal, spend only the interest"—not a Marxist maxim. Thanks to the inheritance, our house had been purchased for cash—not a penny was owed the bank, nor did Mother buy anything on credit. She was dead set against debt.

Throughout her life she was devoted to her neighbors and would do anything for them, but dealing with behind-the-counter staff in stores betrayed her well-to-do upbringing. She expected *Service* with a capital "S," and complaints were delivered with hurricane force. I didn't envy the powerless sales people who were her usual target.

My brother Dick and I with our mother circa 1954

On the occasions when she went to the movies, she brought Dick and me with her. At times we were the only children in the audience, as was the case with *The Moon Is Blue*, a comedy about two playboys, each attempting to coax a young woman into bed but finding in their target an anthracite determination to remain a virgin until her wedding night. It was 1953; I was not yet twelve. Though the story left virtue triumphant, the film industry's Breen Office, responsible for enforcing the Motion Picture Production Code, judged the script as having "an unacceptably light attitude towards seduction, illicit sex, chastity, and

virginity." Bucking the censors, director Otto Preminger refused to pasteurize the film. It was banned in three states, but that only enlarged audiences in the other forty-five. At the time I was unaware of the controversy, though I knew there were no matinee showings and that I was the only kid in my class who had seen it. What I remember best about the film is not its story but Mother's laughter. Afterward I asked her what the word "virgin" meant. "A woman who is determined to sleep alone," she said, then adding a joke. "Do you remember those huge stone lions that guard the main entrance to the New York City Public Library?" "Sure," I responded. We had walked by them many times on day trips to the city. "Those lions," she said, "roar whenever a virgin passes by."

Mother's laughter, at its most extreme, seemed to me life threatening and, when delivered in public, embarrassing.

But laughter was needed. Outside the theater, the Cold War and the McCarthy era meant that people like my parents were living in very unfunny times. Dad was one of a number of leading Communists who were arrested in September 1952. Uncle Charles, Mother's only brother, delivered the news the same day. He parked his black Buick in front of our house, knocked on the front door as if with a hammer, refused to come in when invited, and instead waved a page-one headline in Mother's face: FIVE TOP REDS ARRESTED IN ST. LOUIS. The principal "Red" was my father. My uncle shouted out his rage at the scandal of his being linked to such people (even though my parents were long divorced by then), stormed off the porch, and drove away. I don't recall Mother having managed to say a single word. I watched the scene from an adjacent window. I never saw my Uncle Charles again.

"Your father is in jail charged with 'conspiring to advocate the overthrow of the United States Government by force and violence,'" Mother explained to my brother and me that evening. "But you have to look at those words very carefully." She then pointed out that Dad was not charged with any violent act or even with advocating violence but "conspiring to advocate," which meant talking with other people about advocating violence sometime in the undated future. "But it isn't true," Mother added. "Your father hates violence and doesn't own a gun—he hates guns." At least I understood the last sentence. (After half a year in prison, Dad was freed on bail. Several years later, when the case was pending before the US Supreme Court, the Justice Department dropped all charges.)

In that period, we became aware that two FBI agents had been assigned to interview not only Mother's employers and co-workers but also our neighbors. One weekday, while Mother was still at work, the two blue-suited agents knocked on our front door and, displaying their badges, walked in. They then proceeded to fingerprint my brother and me. "Say hello to your mother," one of them said. They both laughed. Dick and I were left with the challenge of scrubbing the ink off our finger tips.

One of the nightmare experiences of my childhood was the electrocution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, the couple convicted of helping the Soviet Union obtain US atomic secrets. Mother was convinced that the Rosenbergs were scapegoats whose real crime was being Communists and Jewish as well. I doubt it ever crossed Mother's mind that either of them might in fact be guilty. Their conviction, she felt, was meant to further marginalize American Communists along with anyone even slightly to the left. The letters the Rosenbergs sent to their two sons from prison were published from time to time in the *Daily Worker,* and some of these Mother read to my brother and me. How we wept that morning in June 1953 as she read aloud newspaper accounts of their last minutes of life.

It's a safe guess that we were the only people in the neighborhood receiving the *Daily Worker.* A thin tabloid, it came rolled up in a plain wrapper without a return address. But as the chilly winds of the McCarthy period began to howl, the time came when, far from attempting to sell subscriptions, Mother began to worry about being on the mailing list at all. It was no longer thrown away with the trash like other newspapers but was saved until autumn, then burned with the fall leaves.

In the early fifties the FBI was systematically informing employers if someone on their payroll was a Communist or "a Communist sympathizer." In either case, the usual result was that the employee was fired. Thousands lost not only their jobs but, unable to meet mortgage payments, their homes as well. I know Mother worried about what would happen if she, a single parent with two children, were suddenly unemployed. Her inheritance wouldn't last long. Providing her employers with no excuse for firing her was the reason that she was never late for work and never took off a sick day. I doubt that the State of New Jersey ever got more from an employee than they got from her. "Why don't we have a car—everybody else has a car," I asked Mother when I was old enough to be puzzled that we depended so much on getting around

by foot and bus or in my Aunt Douglas's car. "I don't want us getting used to having something," she explained, "we couldn't afford to keep if I lose my job."

I'm not sure when Mother resigned from the Communist Party and we stopped getting the *Daily Worker*. Her resignation wasn't something she told us about at the time. At the latest it would have been in 1956. I recall how shocked and disgusted she was by the Soviet Union's brutal suppression of the uprising in Hungary, an intervention slavishly supported by the Communist Party in the United States. But it may be that her resignation occurred earlier.

Demonstrating with my mother toward the end of her life

Even though an ex-Communist, Mother held unalterable, radical social values. "'From each according to his ability,' as she told me; 'to each according to his needs.' Only we're not ready for that yet. But I've never changed my mind that we should aspire to this."[1]

She battled local politicians for many years over a wide range of issues—racial integration of the local all-white volunteer fire department, roads, water mains, zoning issues, transportation for the old and handicapped, food

1. The quotation, though pure Marx, has a distinctly biblical ring. In the Acts of the Apostles, the community of first-generation Christians in Jerusalem is described as holding all things in common, with distribution made to every man according to need. "And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul. Neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had all things common. And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And great grace was upon them all. Neither was there any among them that lacked, for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold, and laid them down at the apostles' feet: and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need" (Acts 4:32–35).

banks, housing for the poor, etc., with many a walk in the neighborhood collecting signatures for petitions.

Christianity became central to Mother during her last four decades. A key event in her return to the Methodist Church in 1960 had been reading, at my suggestion, Thomas Merton's autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*. When I told Merton about this, he laughed: "Your mother is my book's first convert to Protestantism!" No doubt there were other books, plus an inclination that had roots in her childhood, that were also important factors. She had been an occasional, back-door Methodist even while a Communist, but from about 1961 onward Mother never missed a service unless she was ill. She also took an active part in all sorts of adult activities, becoming one of the church's most engaged members.

When she was in her mid-seventies I took her out to lunch at a particularly nice restaurant—One Potato, Two Potatoes—in Nyack, New York, the town where I was working at the time. A few nights before I had seen the film *Reds*, a remarkably accurate portrait of American radicals and writers in the early years of the twentieth century. I was trying to remember the lyrics of the socialist anthem, "The *Internationale*," which she had used as a lullaby when Dick and I were children and which had been sung in Russian in the movie. I asked, "Do you remember the words?" Though the restaurant was crowded, and in any event wasn't a place where anyone but my mother would burst into song, without hesitation she sang the *Internationale* straight through: "Arise ye prisoners of starvation, arise ye wretched of the earth, for justice thunders condemnation, a better world's in birth. . . ." At the end—tears glistening on her cheeks and me still scribbling away on a napkin—she said, "With a hymn like that, how could you not be a Communist?" A hymn? For Mother it was.

After her retirement in 1977, Mother became a student at nearby Brookdale College and took classes there on wide-ranging subjects for about twenty years, until she was too weak to continue. Conversations with her during those two decades would invariably turn to what she was studying at the time, which might be history, sociology, anthropology, theology, or law. Even when she lost all but her peripheral vision and had become legally blind, she was undeterred, reading with the help of a scanning device that hugely magnified letters on a TV screen. A word of more than four of five letters would often overflow the screen area, but Mother doggedly read on word by word. For nearly ten years she used this machine in the college library for hours at a time, often five days per week. The librarian showed us a book in which users signed up for the device. With only a few exceptions, page after page was packed exclusively with the signature "Marguerite H. Forest." Finally the college, when upgrading library equipment, gave her the older machine to have at home. For a decade afterward, it was anchored to the dining room table.

During visits late in her life, I was repeatedly struck by Mother's "one day at a time" way of life. She had never been nostalgic. She had little interest in either past or future, but a tremendous engagement with the present. Her opinions hadn't mellowed or faded. Over lunch she expressed her pleasure about a letter to the editor my aunt had sent to a local paper, a protest against capital punishment. Aunt's point was that we should leave the taking of life to God.

In the summer of 1997, while doing a few errands in Red Bank, I stopped at a free food kitchen called the Lunch Break to drop off a box of unused light bulbs Mother had found in the cellar. One woman at the Lunch Break asked me, "Is Marguerite still going door to door?" This was a reference to my mother's frequent efforts to gather signatures for petitions. I assured her that she was still going strong. The volunteer laughed—"You sure got yourself some mother. Nothing can stop that lady!"

On my next visit I found her in surprisingly good shape and spirits. She couldn't get around easily, but you would hardly notice that the world she saw was increasingly a blur. Nothing was in focus. Her hearing was good. She was very alert, though when tired she couldn't quite remember if I was Jim or my son, Ben, who lived nearby. She was slower in doing things and used her four-footed cane inside the house. I found her dismayed that her text-magnifying device was broken; it

had become unplugged, as I discovered. The book she was reading at the time was about life in Israel-Palestine at the time of Christ.

Mother in her Smith College T-shirt

In old age, the ideals of her youth and young adulthood sprang back to life with renewed vigor. Despite being an ex-Communist, once again she often spoke of Communism in glowing terms. When I told her the ideals were fine but that in practice every country that had tried Communism quickly ended up being a hellish place to live, she was resistant to hearing it, though when I described visiting a forest near Minsk where, in the Stalin years, truckloads of people were shot and killed each and every day, year after year, their bodies filling many pits, she was horrified. But by the next day, what I had told her about Lenin's and Stalin's atrocities was forgotten.

During her last few years I could see that Mother was much less able to get around, much quicker to tire. The television was on most of the time, mainly tuned to the Discovery Channel. Her world had shrunk to about the size of the house. Recent news wasn't in her thoughts, except during those moments when it was mentioned. She was amazed to be told how many great-grandchildren she had. "Goodness! Imagine that!" I once told Mother that her granddaughter Anne took great pride in having "so adventurous a grandmother." She responded, "Yes, I am adventurous." It struck me that even then, when she could hardly cross the kitchen without becoming exhausted, she put it in the present tense.

Mother's beloved sister, my Aunt Douglas, died in August 2001, age ninety-four. Though face-to-face visits had become infrequent because of the distance between their two homes, they would be in touch with each other by phone several times a day. Her sister's death was a signal that it was time to go.

Death came the night of December 8 of the same year. Earlier in the evening Mother repeatedly asked Norma Whisky, the live-in Jamaican woman who was caring for her day and night, to leave the front door unlocked "because my sister is coming to get me." My son Ben was with her when she exhaled her last breath. She was eighty-nine.