

# Bruderhof Women

My first encounter with the women of the Bruderhof followed a week spent among the poorest people of New York City. There, the faces of the older poor pierced my heart. Harsh acquaintance with life and death, hard work, failure, and loneliness all had etched a strange art of defeat.

At the Bruderhof, many women's faces also told of hardships and wounds, but the results were different. An aura of joy and hope reflected a life where burdens have been shared and where something whole and vital has been sculptured out of death.

At first, all seems well with the universe in the impeccable, colorful, Old-World Bruderhof. But life has not always

## A TESTIMONY TO LOVE

been idyllic for the community. Many women here have experienced hunger, disease, poverty, and the misery of watching babies and others die. Some members lost Jewish friends and family through Hitler's reign of terror. The community itself has undergone death and rebirth.

Having been braced for rigidly defined roles, I was surprised that men do a lot of dish-washing, kitchen work, and child care, while some women work

at computers and hold administration jobs. I was amazed to learn that burn-out is almost unheard of in this productive, family-oriented community. Adults enjoy peaceful, orderly meals served by *men* while the youngest children eat elsewhere. Many of the women are quite outspoken—not letting up in the slightest around their male counterparts. It is understood that the wife, first of all a sister in Christ to her husband, must lovingly confront her spouse with the truth where this is needed.

There have never been women elders at the Bruderhof. Yet the community's book, *The Early Christians* by founder Eberhard Arnold, notes: "Even Origen pointed out that only one of the judges of Israel bore the name of prophet: Deborah, a woman. 'This grace is determined by purity of mind alone, not by difference of sex' (Origen, Homily on Judges 11)."

In the interview that follows, several women of the Bruderhof speak of their struggles and joys. Hela, Miriam, Burgel, Ellen, Lois Ann, Dorie, Ruby, and Sibyl were all kind enough to spend time with me, sharing their insights into the Christian life and the special gifts of women.

It was their faces, the faces of the Bruderhof women, that compelled me to return to do this interview. I hope to visit again to learn more from these strong, pure, lively women whose faces all seem to be so free from resentment and bitterness, so full of light and peace.

—Connie Nash



☛ How did you come to the Bruderhof?

I was born in Germany of Jewish parents. In 1938 my family moved to South America to escape the Nazi persecution, and after the war I found out that *all* my friends had perished in the Holocaust. A question burned within me: why was I protected?

I joined the Student Christian Movement and began attending Methodist church services. Soon after, I married. My husband and I were very restless. We read Catholic writers and studied other reli-

gions, but nothing captivated us until a chance meeting with a few Bruderhof members. After a visit to the community in Paraguay, nothing could stop us. It was a straight line to this life.

—My parents were Philadelphia Quakers. They met several brothers from the Bruderhof and decided to see what their life was like in Paraguay. I went with them at the age of seven or eight. In the eighth grade, I fell out of a tree and felt that God saved my life for a reason, that life wasn't just chance.

During my high-school years, I visited relatives elsewhere. But life with just the nuclear family seemed to have so little meaning—you just live for your own children and grandchildren. At the Bruderhof, I felt that life was lived for the kingdom of God. That was the kingdom I wanted to give myself to.

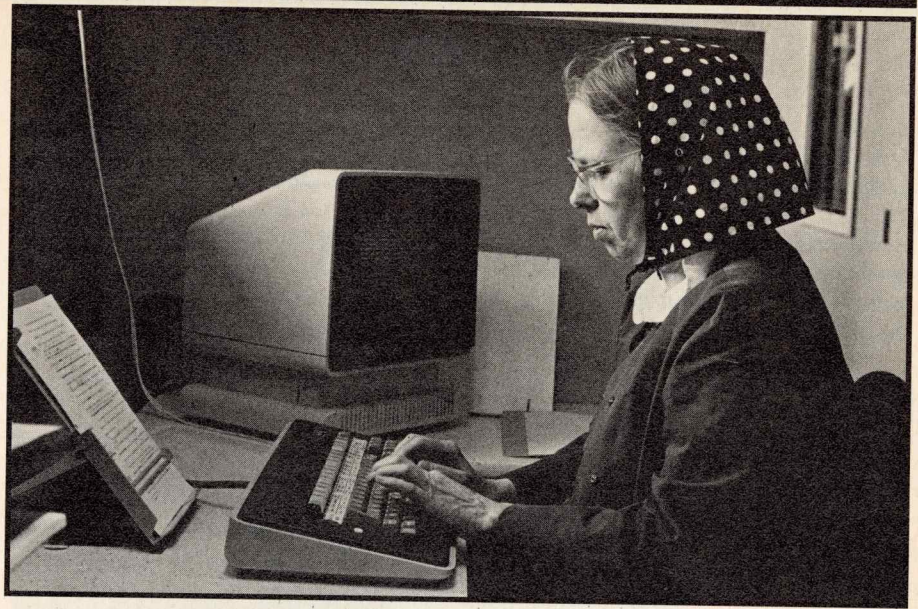
—My family is Jewish, and I grew up and went to high school in New York City. I joined the community in England in 1953. When I first saw the Bruderhof, I thought: "This is a wonderful life, but it's not for me. How could I leave my family and my people?" But everything I saw and experienced pointed me toward Christian community—this one.

—As a child, I lived a very "normal" life in the Midwest. Both my husband and I became interested in radical concerns in college. My husband's experiences in the navy led him to become a pacifist. After reading Thoreau and other back-to-nature books, we joined an intentional community in the mountains of North Carolina. There we met visiting Bruderhof members who were looking for a place to start a community in this country. We were impressed by what we saw of their life together, and we eventually joined them.

—I became interested in radical social outreach because I wanted to help the poor and work for peace. The liberation of women was also one of my chief concerns. My husband was a conscientious objector and was in prison for six months during World War II.

We joined that same back-to-nature community. During that time, unrelated to the community, we experienced Christ changing our lives.

When we chanced to meet some



**Bruderhof women are no strangers to technology.**

Bruderhof members, we found their lives and what they told of their community to be the fullest living out of the gospel that we had experienced.

—My father's stint as an air-force officer in World War II dragged our family up the East Coast from Florida to New York. My parents never discussed religion, and I became a determined atheist at the age of fourteen. In prep school and college I preached atheism to all who would listen.

Later, I tasted "success" in the slick-magazine milieu, but my marriage fell apart. I allowed myself to be taken to the Bruderhof to prove that I would hate it. But instead, something in me said, "There is a God, and I have come home." Soon my daughter and I moved in. We have been here ever since.

☛ Many Christians have been influenced by the Bruderhof's vision of community. Yet they wonder if the women of the Bruderhof are given an equal role. Do women have a voice in the community?

**W**e have an obligation to speak out whenever or wherever we sense the Spirit prodding us to speak. This is true for all members—both men and women. Since every decision made here must be unanimous, any one proposal or any one *no* holds a lot of weight.

But we want the authority to come from God, not from us. I don't think that the Bible teaches us to seek authority or position, no matter who we are.

—We want to take the Bible very seriously in everything. We see in the Bible

a picture of the man representing Christ to the family in all humility, love, and servanthood. This is not a position of power. There is tremendous abuse because of the destructive nature of power. This problem is not solved, however, by placing a woman in a powerful position.

☛ How do you keep authority from becoming abusive?

**T**here are no pat safeguards against anything. It's our own fault if we let someone become more powerful than he or she should be.

—Sometimes a pretense of "holiness" might be just a mask for inverted pride. We tend to be allergic to charismatic leadership—as opposed to God-directed leadership—but we continually need trial by the fire of repentance. And if we find that someone among us is abusive, that person needs to either change or leave.

☛ In his book *In the Image of God*, Heini Arnold [son of Eberhard, the community founder] says that the intimacy between bride and bridegroom can, in Jesus, have a redemptive, softening effect "that can release man from his ego." In what way?

**W**e vow never to follow our partner in wrongdoing. We promise to speak with each other about what we see as

pride or a barrier to communion. Truthfulness is organic to all of life.

—The husband and wife are first of all brother and sister in Christ, with all the communion and responsibility that is included in that sacred relationship.

☛ What if you can't come to agreement with your marriage partner?

If we cannot reach peace together as a couple, then the servants of the Word, our community instructors and guides, have the responsibility to help us.

Some of us who are new to the community have had some especially difficult marital struggles. Some of us come here with deep emotional wounds, and all of us are trying to shed our old ways of thinking. The help we've received from the servants has led to much healing.

☛ What happens if someone leaves a spouse?

If someone should leave his or her partner, the one left at the Bruderhof is encouraged to stay. Often the separated partner returns, and there is mutual correction and forgiveness. If the one who leaves does not return, the bereaved spouse does not divorce or remarry but remains faithful in celibacy as a witness to Christ's faithfulness. As long as an unfaithful partner lives, there is always hope for reconciliation. Remarriage would denote the end of that hope.

—If there is no reconciliation, at least the bereaved partner has the solace and support of the Christian community, with all the practical and spiritual benefits that such an extended family can bring.

☛ How do you encourage openness and honesty while avoiding the pitfalls of either nit-picking or smoothing over problems?

I took a course in college on politics, and we were told that in politics you should never admit to a mistake. It's OK to make one—just don't admit it. I was horrified! How can anything be resolved if no one admits to making mistakes?

We all fail, but God gives us permission to start over. To say humbly, "I made a mistake," and to be told, "You

are forgiven and can start over again"—that is basic to unity.

—If there is something loveless between us, we have learned to deal with it on the spot. What we do has no value if we're not doing it in peace with one another.

Nit-picking happens when your vision gets too small, causing you to lose the true vision. When we maintain the same goal—to grow in the kingdom—then we want that for ourselves and for each other. When the church is truly alive, there's a fire that purifies, and our pet desires are shattered. If that fire is there, then there's always a fight for truth.

☛ Many parents who hold beliefs counter to those prevalent around them fear that those beliefs might threaten their children's lives or well-being. Do you allow your children to be exposed to physical danger and other trauma because of your vision and your struggle for truth?

Some of us were children at the Bruderhof in England during the war. We remember the sirens, the bombs, the uncertainty—those memories never leave us. We knew there were no guarantees. Yet there was a joy among the grown-ups, and we often felt we were on a great adventure. The quiet faithfulness of the adults helped us the most.

—We try to teach our children to be brave at an early age, both in accepting a little pain without complaint and in standing up for the truth among their peers. We teach them that our way of life might well lead to suffering.

—If we forego faithfulness in order to protect our children, we are likely to remove them from the protection that they otherwise would have in the kingdom of God. Our human protection is so flimsy anyway. What if the children should have no spiritual protection against evil? Isn't that more dangerous in the long run than merely physical danger?

And yet we must always ask: are we putting our lives and the lives of our children on the line for God and the kingdom or merely for our own reasons?

☛ Heini and Annemarie Arnold believed that reverence for the child

is the basic element of a good family life. Do you see children as your mission?

The children are *one* of our main "mission" tasks. Through them we understand more about God's love and the Spirit of joy and playfulness.

—It isn't healthy for children to be the center of everything, but for some groups the mission is everything *but* children. The little ones of such groups grow up to rebel against their parents' values. Is it pleasing to God if we lose our children in trying to win others? We think children, particularly the ones God has given to us, are a top priority.

☛ Many of you are single. The Bruderhof is largely oriented around children and families. What are some difficulties and advantages of being single at the Bruderhof?

When I came to the Bruderhof in my thirties, I certainly didn't come here to get married. The ratio of men to women is not in our favor! But I don't know where else in the world I would be with children the way I am now. I don't know where else I would be taken into a family with so much love. When we join this life through believer's baptism, we give up our own lives. Then, if marriage is given through the church—that is wonderful. And if one stays single—that life too is wonderful.

—It has been more of a struggle for me. I have contrasted my life here with my former life outside the community. I have chosen to live here. I have taken the vow required for lifetime membership. I had to face the fact that life here most likely means celibacy. To be honest, it has been painful to give up my desire to pour out love toward a husband and children. But the sacrifice to give up marriage—should that be the case—is small compared with the great joy of living the committed life.

—I'm single, and when everything is considered, I think it is largely the same whether you are single or not. It is a matter of following Jesus to the end. Sometimes it's hardest to follow Jesus when things are going well. No matter how bad

things are, no matter what blessing each day holds—we want to follow Jesus.

☛ In 1920 the founders of this community wrote, "We are a working community of disciples of Jesus who have left everything to dedicate our lives entirely to love and to productive work." Have there been occasions when you have strayed from this goal?

**W**e are as vulnerable as any other group. Community magnifies the best and the worst in each of us. The seeds of any type of sin could begin here, but we seek the light of Christ to expose these weeds before they take root.

—During the time in Paraguay, the community sometimes existed as a mere shell. We went through the motions, but our faith was not deeply rooted enough to survive the devastation of suffering and poverty. I had four little ones, and I asked myself: is this life enough for us? I answered "no" and felt utterly helpless. But it wasn't in me to find a way out.

Yet there were a few who kept very much alive *who* they were living for. They helped the rest of us back to Jesus. And then there was renewal.

—In more recent times our communities have gone through similar struggles. Not all of us have remained together. We are ashamed that sometimes something else takes the place of Jesus among us. Once, when the joy of community became more important than the Lord, I wandered away, confused and close to despair. Then I found Christ as my center again. The community again placed Jesus in his rightful place, and I returned. It is possible that our Lord will be displaced again. But if this happens, now I have my foundation.

☛ Do you ever wonder if you'd be more fulfilled somewhere else?

**T**hat is such an adulterous question! We made this vow to one another because we see this as the most fulfilling human commitment on earth. To seek self-fulfillment is like a downward drawing pool: the seeking always leads you to difficult, endless questions. What if? If only? You feel like you've always missed

out, and you become filled with hate and aggression. I know those feelings—I've been there. But this community has taught me that there is something so much greater than that in life.

☛ How do you see your life in this community as part of the kingdom of God?

**W**e are not a finished product. We fail many times. Yet somehow the Spirit

that has gone on before us and will continue when we are gone.

Seeking after the kingdom is the basis of our lives, and it is this seeking that provides the atmosphere for wounded ones to find rebirth among us. The kingdom of God is unity of hearts: a testimony of love.

☛ What would you tell people outside the community who want their lives to be more meaningful and



**An aura of joy reflects a life of wholeness sculpted from hardship.**

of God keeps coming to us through our weakness—because of our weakness. We're told to be a city on a hill—along with all the others who seek to give their lives to something beyond themselves. We don't have to be a nation or a continent. It's God who touches the millions anyway.

—We can't put our lives into words. But we believe the Holy Spirit seeks the lowest place, like water running down. When we put ourselves in that low place, we are merely part of the flowing stream

honoring to God in their own situations?

**T**ake a good look at your relationships. Forgive one another. Pray for each other. God is everywhere, and God will be with you in your struggle. Seek to serve others and live for something beyond yourselves.

—If we make room for God, then a window will come from heaven. Open that window: it puts light in the whole room—anywhere!



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The Other Side

