

Josef

Fr Gerard Garrigan, O.S.B.

I wrote a short prose piece in 2019 about a homeless Ukrainian American man I met in the 1970s at the New York Catholic Worker when I was there. Dorothy Day was alive and still living at the New York Catholic Worker in those days. When the war in Ukraine began, my memory was cast back to Josef. He personalizes for me the great suffering endured by the Ukrainian people in the twentieth century and now again, sadly, in the twenty-first century.

Yes, it was a long time ago, and in a place that now seems a world away, that I came to know old Josef. It was in the 1970s in the Bowery, years before Giuliani would clean up the Lower East Side, long before it gentrified. Josef was a bald, pudgy so-called Bowery bum, having lived his life before the more dignified 'homeless person' term entered popular parlance. Josef, having no home, stored his entire wardrobe on his person, layers of old sport coats on his back, God knows how many pairs of pants layered on his stocky legs. How excruciatingly hot this must have been on the streets in summer. Josef's crowning fashion touch for me was his delightfully incongruous pair of white old-school canvas Converse Chuck Taylor All Stars basketball sneakers. Where he picked those up, I have no idea. I doubt he knew the storied hoops history of that classic basketball footwear.

Josef had somehow come by one lens from a broken set of eyeglasses and a tattered paperback Ukrainian-English Bible. Josef would engage me at the soup line at the Catholic Worker, at East First Street at Second Avenue on the Lower East Side, by sitting next to me, that lens in hand. He would evangelize me reading aloud from his Ukrainian-English Bible with his thick Ukrainian accent. 'I the vin, ye the brinches. No one inter into the Fodder except true me.'

I remember once that someone started smoking there in the soup kitchen and Josef went crazy. He leapt up and started shouting, 'No smoken! No smoken!' Then Josef pointed his index finger and mimicked the sound of

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a machine gun. 'Eh! Eh! Eh! Eh! Eh! Eh! Eh.'

I came to understand that, while a boy, Josef's parents had been killed by the Communists in the Ukraine. Then, during the Second World War, Josef was imprisoned by the Nazis when they overran his country. I took it that his outburst triggered by the man's smoking was somehow a flashback to when someone would try to escape from the Nazi prison camp and the prison guards would mow the escapee down with machine gun fire.

I do not know whatever became of Josef. I assume he long ago went to his eternal reward which I have no doubt he received for his faithful street evangelization efforts in the poverty stricken and alcohol ravaged Bowery. Years ago, I wrote a poem about Josef which I wish I could find. Its conclusion went something like this:

Josef, your branch has been gnarled and twisted
But has clung firmly attached to the life-giving Vine.

Please God, Josef, you have by now entered into the Father, through your beloved Christ, the life-giving Vine.

May you rest in peace.

Gerard Garrigan is a Benedictine monk of Saint Louis Abbey, a foundation of Ampleforth Abbey, in St. Louis, Missouri USA. He first came to know of Thomas Merton by reading his father's copy of *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Subsequently, as a monk, he lived with two Gethsemani monks at Sant' Anselmo, the International Benedictine College in Rome, and became friends with the current prior of Gethsemani who stayed with the monks of Saint Louis Abbey.