

Marie Murray Lufkin, RSCJ

August 22, 1932 - September 20, 2015

Describing a mortified person, Mother Stuart wrote that “she plays fiddle excellently.” She could have been describing Maisie Lufkin. Almost all her life she exercised secondary roles, assisting others who were in charge, enabling them by her efficiency and gifts of organization to do their job. A close friend wrote, “I think Maisie was a creative enabler. She helped people use gifts she may not have had herself.” Yet she had many gifts, intellectual, artistic, musical, practical. She lived a life characterized by rich and varied experiences, through all of which runs a thread of helpfulness.

Marie Murray Lufkin, known to all as Maisie, was born in New York on August 22, 1932. Her parents were Elgood Mouton Lufkin and Marie Murray Lufkin. She had two older half-brothers from her mother’s first marriage. Her home life was somewhat troubled, and she was sent to boarding school as a teenager at the School of the Holy Child in Suffern, New York. She loved Suffern and was happy there. An incident that foreshadowed her future may find its place here. In those post-war years, the school was sending used uniforms to schools in Japan. Maisie put a note with her name in the pocket of her uniform jacket and sent it off. Who got the jacket? A child named Koko Nagano. Both she and Maisie would end up as RSCJ!

Graduation from Suffern was followed by a year at Rosemont College, also a Holy Child school. In her sophomore year she transferred to Manhattanville College of the Sacred Heart, and there she got to know the Society. Maisie was very active in the college’s renowned Pius X School of Liturgical Music and its other musical activities, and she was devoted to Mother Josephine Morgan, the director of Pius X. Through course work and participation in the liturgical life of the college, Maisie acquired the competence in Gregorian Chant and choir conducting that would stand her in good stead later on. Her brother Tom was around, and Maisie got him dates with her classmates. One of these resulted in marriage and gave Maisie a sister-in-law. She graduated in 1954 with a degree of Bachelor of Arts in history and music theory. She was attracted to Maryknoll, because even then she thought of foreign missions, but the Society won out. After a year working as a secretary for the editor of *America*, the national Jesuit periodical, she entered at Kenwood in September 1955, under the direction of Mother Marie Louise Schroen. As a novice she was choir director. She made her first vows in March 1958, and after a year in the “black juniorate,” joined the Kenwood community, where she was the choir director for both the school and the religious community in addition to a full load of teaching. Even at the beginning she was a demanding – and courageous – teacher. She gave Barbara Bowe, in her first year as a student at Kenwood, a D in writing, the only D she ever got. Barbara, who went on to achieve renown as a biblical scholar, never forgot and credited that D with learning from Maisie how to really write.

In 1961, Sister Lufkin moved to Convent of the Sacred Heart, Greenwich, where she taught while pursuing a Master’s degree from Manhattanville in summers. In 1963 she left for Rome for probation, again under Mother Schroen’s direction. She was professed on February 4, 1964.

From 1964 until 1974 Sister Lufkin served successively at Convents of the Sacred Heart, Nottingham in Buffalo, New York; Greenwich and Ninety-first Street, New York. At various times she was curriculum coordinator and guidance counselor in addition to teaching English and history, religion and French and directing choirs and glee clubs. At all she excelled with a straightforward, practical approach that was at the same time solid and innovative, based on understanding of the needs of students and faculty. In a statement of philosophy of education, composed sometime during these years, she asserted that real education is possible only when people work *with* one another, when they listen to one another and together surface needs and values. In the end, she said, “education *is life*, not just preparation for life.”

Work in the schools, however, was not the whole of life for Sister Lufkin. In 1973 in response to a province questionnaire, she stated that she felt a need for some distance from school work and for some type of pastoral work with poor people. That summer she had taken part in a program for migrant workers in Bay City, Michigan. This experience put her in touch directly with people who were poor and

oppressed, and it awakened in her a desire to minister to the poor that would find fulfillment only much later. In the meantime, in 1974 she was invited to join the provincial team of the former New York Province with residence at Greenwich. She described her approach to this work as an effort “to enable each person in the province to grow in freedom to serve and to try to be sensitive to the Spirit in others so that together we can know where the spirit is leading us.” She enjoyed her work on the team and living in community with the other team members with whom she became close friends. There was opportunity for humor and celebration. One person tells: “When it was time for my birthday, Maisie said, ‘Wait til you see what I got you for your birthday!’ I cringed, how could I drum up enthusiasm for whatever it might be? The celebration was to be in the Noroton cabin. When I arrived, there were two huge boxes wrapped in brown paper in the room. Out popped Peggy Brown and Kit Collins!” Maisie had arranged it all.

Her term on the provincial team ended in 1982, and it seemed to Maisie that it was time to fulfill another long felt desire to serve abroad. She wanted to experience the Society’s life in another culture and another part of the world, “to deepen my own understanding of our mission and to broaden my horizons.” The choice was made for Korea. She taught English at Song Sim College for Women in Puchon for two years, returned to the States for a year to assist the head at the CEDC, only to go back to Korea for intensive language study and another year of teaching English. During that last year she lived in the novitiate community and shared in the formation program. She loved the young people, and many now middle-aged Korean RSCJ have spoken about Maisie’s presence when they were young nuns. She wrote that, although she felt welcomed by the Korean religious and while she admired them and their culture, she found it impossible to enter into life there completely because of the difficulty of the language; she was not able to achieve fluency.

In 1990 Maisie returned to Greenwich, this time as assistant headmistress. Again she used her creative mind, experience and insight into the educational needs of girls to develop a new approach to learning and curriculum. She shifted the focus from achievement to effort and the value of risk, even if it meant mistakes and setbacks. At the same time she gave expression to her concern for the poor by working with others at the school to establish a liaison between the Convent of the Sacred Heart and the Carver Center, a social service center in Port Chester, New York. The relationship created has endured for more than twenty-five years. That concern for diversity in education and the option for the poor were central to Maisie’s spirituality, according to one who knew her well..

In 1993 Maisie moved to New York and joined the staff at Little Sisters of the Assumption Family Health Services, where several RSCJ were already working. She acted as administrative assistant to the director and taught English as a Second Language to mostly Hispanic women of East Harlem. She found this teaching very satisfying and often described the joy of seeing her students achieve some mastery of the language, which opened doors to them. While in New York, she served a six-year term as area director, earning the respect and gratitude of the provincial team, who wrote to thank her saying, “There is nothing people have asked that you have not been willing to do...” She continued to live at 118th Street in East Harlem – a community established at her insistence while she was on the New York provincial team – and to teach at Little Sisters until her program was suspended. After a time she found another setting that allowed her to do some ESL tutoring, but then her health began to decline and it was necessary for her to give it up. Her last years were marked, not only by ill health, but by sorrow at the deaths in a short time of two members of her community. In the summer of 2015 Maisie was sent to Albany, when the state of her health gave cause for alarm. While she was in the hospital for evaluation, Marie Lufkin died Sunday, September 20. Her life was celebrated at a Mass of Christian Burial on Monday, September 28, at Ninety-first Street, in New York.