

RAISSA MARITAIN

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Raissa Oumansov was born in Russia on August 31, 1883, into a Jewish family. Her extraordinary talents were early apparent and their recognition played a role in the family's decision to emigrate. Their goal was New York but they settled in France and here Raissa flourished even more, intellectually, although she drifted from the religious practices of her family. Yet, when asked in her baccalaureate examination in philosophy what she wished to learn, she replied, "To know what is, monsieur." She entered the Sorbonne at seventeen, a very good year. It was then that she met Jacques Maritain.

For sixty years, from 1900 until 1960 when Raissa died, she and Jacques seemed but two sides of the same coin, perfect complements to one another. She was the mystic, the poet, the eternal feminine, he was the scientist, the philosopher, eventually the theologian. He called her *dimidium animae meae*, half my soul. It was not that the one lacked what the other had, but rather that some things predominated in her and others in him.

When they met, each a student of science, they had both abandoned the religion of their families. Jacques came from Protestant stock, though

his father had been a non-practicing Catholic, he was now agnostic. In their studies they found nothing that answered to their deep-seated desire for comprehensive answers. There are questions we associate with the young because they have not yet become dulled to them. What does it all mean? What is the point of human effort in a vast and seemingly impersonal universe? When Raissa was nineteen and Jacques twenty, they resolved to commit suicide if they did not within a year find some reason for living.

In a time when mystifying teen-age suicides abound, with motivations apparently of the most banal, we may miss the seriousness of the resolution this young couple made at the beginning of the century. Fortunately they found the only answer to that great Why. They began to read a writer whom they had never met, certainly not an ordinary or indeed successful writer. His name was Leon Bloy. His novel, *The Woman Who Was Poor* ended with the haunting sentence, "There is but one tragedy, not to be a saint." They went to see Bloy.

Earlier, following the lectures of Henri Bergson, the Maritains had been eased somewhat from materialism, but with Bloy they found a robust exponent of the belief that the drama of a human life is played out against an eternal background. Bloy was, they felt, a pilgrim of the Absolute. In his life, the salvation offered by faith in Jesus Christ and in his Church, was the paramount fact. Beside that, nothing else mattered. The young Maritains were overwhelmed. They helped him financially -- he was as desperately

poor as the heroine of his novel --, they came again and again, eventually the grace of faith was given them and they entered the Church on June 11, 1906, along with Raissa's sister Vera. Their godfather? Leon Bloy.

The devotion of Raissa's older sister Vera had begun when they were children in Russia. When Raissa married Jacques and they went off to Heidelberg where Jacques studied biology for two years, Vera joined them. She would be with them to the end of her days.

If Jacques and Raissa came into the Church together, she was to take the lead in several ways. From the beginning, Raissa felt drawn to the fullness of the spiritual life, to mysticism, to contemplation. Moreover, she was the first to read St. Thomas Aquinas and to urge the Angelic Doctor on Jacques. Jacques was destined to become the leading Thomist of his time, to develop the principles of Thomas and to apply them and expand them in ways undreamt of by Thomas himself. To be a Thomist was not to cultivate the thought of the past, but to make fruitful in the present eternal truths.

Back in France, Jacques became engaged in editorial work and then in teaching, but their friendships show the influence of Raissa. Artists, writers, poets and thinkers began to congregate around them. Entering whole-heartedly into Catholic life, they wanted both to live it to the fullest - - early on they acquired a Dominican spiritual director -- and to share it with others. They were influential in the coming back to the faith of many

nominal Catholics and the conversion of others.

The founding of the Thomistic Study Circle in 1920 was a natural development which reflected the union of the intellectual and spiritual the Maritains had expressed in *La vie d'oraison*, translated as Prayer and Intelligence. If the pursuits of truth and beauty do not spring from a life of prayer they cannot effectively attain their ends. How odd this sounds to our secularized ears. Yet it was a message to which many thinkers and artists responded.

Recently in Paris, I stopped in at the little side chapel in Saint-Severin where daily Mass is said. On the chapel walls was an exhibition of drawings of Rouault, an artist whose connection with the Maritains was stressed in the notes for the exhibition. The religious themes of the painter were appropriate for the setting. Rouault was only one of the artists who found in the Maritains an inspiration that had something to do with the Holy Spirit.

In 1940, when France fell to the Germans, the Maritains were in this country and it was here they spent the war years. Their anguish at the fate of their country, their nostalgia for it, led Raissa to write, almost therapeutically, her memoirs. *We Have Been Friends Together* and *Adventures in Grace* recall their friendships and the special nature of their relations to others. These memoirs put a generation of Americans in touch with a world they had never known, friends they had never had, in a way

that suggested a relevance beyond the Maritains.

Raissa wrote far less than Jacques, but then that was not her dominant vocation. Hers was more appropriate to her sex. Indeed her views on the differences between men and women struck a recent biographer as old-fashioned and "quasi-fundamentalist." They certainly are out of step with current trends, but then hers is the perennial outlook. Women would do well to reflect on what she has to say to them about the feminine.

The loss of Raissa in 1960 was cruelly hard for Jacques, who had thirteen more years to live. In 1963 he published her journals, along with a number of occasional writings. For Jacques, the preparation of these for publication was a labor of love. She is revealed to us as a woman of contemplative and mystical depth, whose understanding of poetry -- she herself was a poet -- is profound. She wrote of poetry as a spiritual experience, a phrase with a determinate meaning in her usage. But it is perhaps the short texts on prayer, on the relation of God to men, and on Christ that engage the reader more.

In 1973, Jacques joined the other half of his soul. They share a common grave in Kolbsheim.