



Sister Fruktuosa Gerstmayer, OSB

1898 - 1952

PRIORY OF WONSAN, NORTH KOREA

It could have been a nightmare or a thriller film: heavily booted soldiers marching into the convent, rounding up the sisters, herding them into a truck to an unknown destination. It was May 10, 1949 in Wonsan, Korea.

Sr. Fruktuosa had no idea that such an experience awaited her when, 28 years earlier, as the youngest of 33 candidates who entered that day, she stepped into the gates of Tutzing at 9:00 p.m. She had actually arrived in Munich earlier in the day, but she decided to have a "last fling", making a thorough visit of the city. With three other latecomers she found herself on the last train to Tutzing. Since they came so late there was no time to give them instructions, so the three newcomers still had a midnight picnic with the chocolates they had in their bags, and told each other their life stories until the wee hours of the morning of the new day which was to begin their convent life.

As a postulant, however, Sr. Fruktuosa had no trouble observing novitiate rules as soon as she put her mind to it. At the age of 24 she was invested. She was such a big, robust girl that she was nicknamed "Heaven's Dragon" by the men at St. Gallen where she was assigned after her profession in 1923. She almost did not make it, due to an infection she contracted while working in the kitchen. A wound on her arm which she left unattended became so infected that the arm almost had to be amputated. With characteristic determination Sister Fruktuosa fought to keep her arm by daily bathing it with herbal medicine until the danger was over. She feared less for her life than for the fact that a one-arm novice might not be allowed to make profession. So she was able to pronounce her vows on February 2, 1923.

Sister Fruktuosa studies nursing until her perpetual profession three years later. In August of the same year (1926), she and Sister Eva Schütz were sent to the Korean mission, arriving in Wonsan in October.

Foundations, especially in a foreign country, are always hard. Sister Fruktuosa was part of such a beginning in Korea: an unfurnished house, a difficult climate, new environment, new culture and different customs and way of life. The learning of the Korean language was especially hard for her, and even after more than 25 years there, she needed an interpreter to make herself understood. But this did not hamper her mission. After spending some time in the kitchen, she had to exchange the ladle with the thermometer. She was assigned to put up a clinic. This consisted of a 2-by-2 meter room in a Korean house with a dark antechamber that always had to be heated because of its damp floor. This clinic later on extended to four rooms arranged according to European style and furnished with better facilities. There would be Sister Fruktuosa's field of work for about 26 years.

She did not just wait for patients to come to the clinic. She sought them out in house visitations which brought her to all the nooks and corners of the town. She herself said that there was no part of the town unvisited by her. According to Sister Chrysostoma, everyone trusted in her healing powers more than in the skills of doctors. In spite of her language difficulty, she had a remarkable rapport with the people, communicating with gestures and gesticulations, accompanied by gales of spontaneous and infectious laughter. She was understood because she spoke in the language of love. She had a special love for children and with glee she called them by her accustomed German pet names. Many almond-

eyed little tots answered to her Butzele, Ferkele, Dreckspätzle. The mothers of the children enjoyed the strange names which she gave to their children with obvious affection. She also took special care of the dying and, according to legend, was responsible for 5,000 deathbed baptisms.

This fruitful apostolate which Sister zealously did day after day for many years came to an abrupt stop when on February 25, the clinic was raided by the police and, for no reasonable cause, closed. Korea at that time was at a turning point in its history. The Japanese had been driven out and the Russians had taken over.

Sr. Fruktuosa went back to the kitchen as though nothing had happened. But something worse was in the offing. Two months later, on May 10, 1949, North Korean soldiers entered the Wonsan mission and took all the sisters away to the distant Pyóng-yang, where the Korean sisters were separated from the Europeans and detained in different prisons. The German sisters as well as the Benedictine monks were later taken to the concentration camp of Oksadok where they would be detained for five long years.

One can imagine the anxiety and insecurity of the detainees. The sisters were forced to wear men's clothes and to work in the fields along with the men, or in the kitchen to prepare the food for the other prisoners. They suffered from the cold in the damp, unheated barracks, especially during the bitter Korean winters. They saw their companions get sick and die in their midst, sometimes not being able to bury them at once.

When Sister Fruktuosa came into detention she was already sick from rheumatism and had twice suffered typhoid fever, which she had contracted from her patients. The fever had caused her to become hard of hearing, which—together with the language difficulty—made her feel acutely lonely and isolated. But she never lost her good humor. In fact, she tried to cheer up her cellmates from their depression by telling stories and cracking jokes, for which she had a unique knack. In spite of her swollen legs, she worked in the kitchen until August 1951, when she suffered a mild brain stroke. After some time she rallied and wasted no time in gathering all her strength to make herself useful. By the dim light coming from the paper window of the barrack, she tried to patch the already overly-darned clothes of the monks and sisters, making them last until they almost fell apart by themselves. After some time her condition got worse.

She was in such pain that no position, sitting or lying, could give her any relief. By the middle of August she could no longer get up. She was all swollen, and the skin of her legs became tough and leathery. While receiving the last sacraments, she offered her life for Korea. She suffered a second stroke, from which she never regained consciousness until her death during the night of September 15, 1952. She died in detention, one of the 16 who were not able to survive the life at the Oksadok concentration camp. Like them, she had no coffin. She was simply wrapped in a straw mat, but the sisters covered her body with all the flowers they could find in the mountain meadows.

Sr. Fruktuosa lies today, together with her companions in the camp cemetery on the lonely mountainside of North Korea. In life and in death she was a real missionary.

