

## They called her her simply, Mother . . .

by Jeff Dandoy

May Elian is a journalist in Beirut, Lebanon who is married to an Egyptian Presbyterian. She came to the United States in October as a speaker for the Presbyterian Peacemaking program, talking to church and school groups about peacemaking in Lebanon. She was my guest for an afternoon, in between speaking engagements, so we came to Clairvaux Farm for lunch and a tour of the facility by Bobby Gordon. But I got to show her our chapel and inside we looked at the wall-hangings and icons which decorate it.

She recognized the icon of Martin Luther King, Jr., but then she asked me "Who is that?", pointing to an icon of a matronly American woman, dressed with a touch of lace around her neck, granny spectacles, and white hair pulled back in a bun. I said, "That's Mother Jones." And my friend from Lebanon asked, "Who is she?" I told her she was a labor organizer from the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, which didn't do much to explain why her icon is sitting next to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s. So I'm going to send a copy of this article to May by way of further explanation.

Mary Jones really did believe in the importance of motherhood, and when she began signing her letters simply "Mother" it was because she had taken on that role in the lives of countless working poor people in Appalachia and across the country. From Greensburg, Pennsylvania in December of 1910, at the age of 80, "Mother" wrote, "I have been up to my ears in a strike of miners here. I have not had a moment to spare. 20 thousand men and women are here to be looked after. I have not had a moment to spare for the last six weeks. I just got back after ten miles going and coming in a blizzard to a house away from civilization. I found the father down with Typhoid fever, the mother and six children shivering with cold, no clothing, not a thing to eat."

Mary had been a mother herself,

married in 1861 to an iron molder in Memphis, Tennessee, and after six years of marriage stayed at home raising their four children. In the span of a week, her life was torn apart. She writes, "In 1867, a yellow fever epidemic swept Memphis. Its victims were mainly among the poor and the workers. The rich and the well-to-do fled the city. Schools and churches were closed. People were not permitted to enter the house of a yellow fever victim without permits. . . . All about my house I could hear weeping and cries of delirium. One by one, my four little children sickened and died. I washed their little bodies and got them ready for burial. My husband caught the fever and died. I sat alone through nights of grief. No one came to me. No one could. Other homes were as stricken as mine."

Mary moved back to Chicago. But in 1871 the city burned to the ground, leaving 98,500 people homeless, including Mary Jones. She lost everything. And it was soon after that experience that she began her work as a labor organizer, moving across the country from one labor strike to another. She never really tried to have a home again. She made her home among the needy families she was trying to help. So in 1910, when testifying before a congressional committee, she had a hard time stating where she was from. This is a transcript of her opening testimony:

The Chairman: "Please take a chair. Where do you live?"

Mrs. Jones: "I live in the United States, but I do not know exactly in what place, because I am always in the fight against oppression, and wherever a fight is going on I have to jump there, and sometimes I am in Washington, sometimes in Pennsylvania, sometimes in Arizona, sometimes in Texas, and sometimes up in Minnesota, so that really I have no particular residence."

The Chairman: "No abiding place?"

Mrs. Jones: "No abiding place, but wherever a fight is on against wrong, I am always there. It is my pleasure to be in the fray."

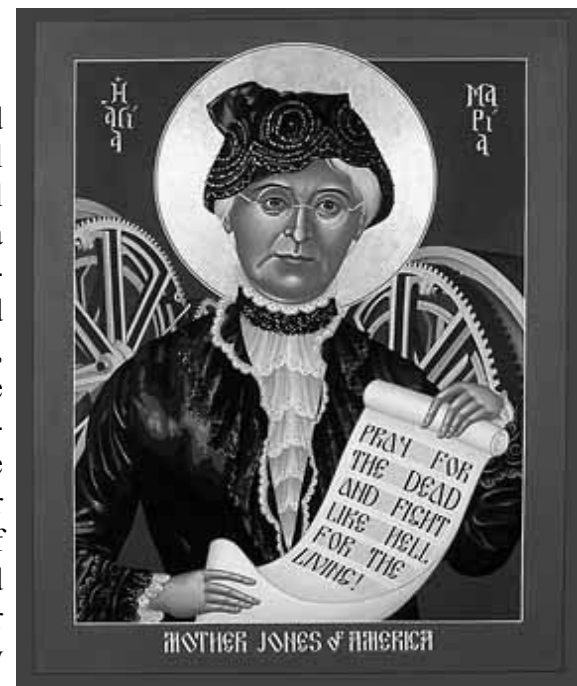
Mother Jones was a popular

speaker. She advocated for and organized mill workers in the South, coal miners in West Virginia and Colorado, steel workers in Pittsburgh, railroad workers in Birmingham, as well as fighting for the rights of Chinese immigrants in California. She developed a passion for ending the exploitation of child labor in mines and factories. Child labor laws were commonly ignored by parents who needed the income to survive and by factory and mine owners who welcomed the cheap labor.

In 1903, a hundred thousand textile workers in 600 mills in the Philadelphia area went on strike for a reduction of the work week from sixty hours to fifty-five. Sixteen thousand of the strikers were children. Labor historian Philip Foner describes Mother Jones arrival in Philadelphia that summer:

"She was appalled by the fact that every day little children, some not more than ten years old, came into union headquarters, 'some with their hands off, some with the thumb missing, some with their fingers off at the knuckles. They were stooped little things,' she observed, 'round shouldered and skinny.' When Mother Jones tried to get newspaper publicity about the plight of these children, newspaper men advised her they could not carry the stories because the mill owners held stock in the their papers. So she replied: 'Well, I've got stock in these little children and I'll arrange a little publicity.' She thereupon organized an industrial 'army' of child textile workers to march from Philadelphia to President Theodore Roosevelt's summer home at Oyster Bay on Long Island, some 125 miles away, and win the president's support for the abolition of child labor."

In a letter to President Roosevelt, written on their way to see him, Mother Jones reminds him of the cost that these young strikers are paying, and she makes an appeal through scripture:



"The manufacturers have threatened to starve these children, and we seek to show that no child shall die of hunger at the will of any manufacturer in this fair land. The clergy, whose work this really is, are silent on the crime of ages, and so we appeal to you. It is in the hope that the words of Christ will be more clearly interpreted by you when he said, 'Suffer little children to come unto me.' Our destination is New York City, and after that Oyster Bay. As your children, may we hope to have the pleasure of an audience?"

Roosevelt wished to avoid involvement and when Mother Jones did indeed show up for a visit at his vacation home on a Sunday afternoon with three children in tow, she was turned away. But the march attracted national attention and, as a result, state legislatures passed tougher child labor laws and law enforcement was upgraded. In a speech in New York City on that march, Mother Jones observed, "One hour of justice is worth an age of praying."

In 1913, at the age of 83, Mother Jones was arrested in West Virginia on the charge of conspiracy to commit murder. Shooting had broken out between striking miners and mine guards and the labor leaders, including Mother, were put on trial for the killings and convicted. She had led a march of miner's children through the streets of Charleston. She was sentenced to twenty years in prison.

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