

HISTORY

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 10, 1942

A NIGHT AT TREASURE ISLAND

By Bertrand Roy, p.m.é.

Is this Treasure Island? Is it here the refuge of the buccaneers of the famous adventure novel Treasury Island of Robert Stevenson? In what deep grottos were the pirates hiding the gold and silver stolen on the Spanish galleons in route for Seville?

We are on Pines Island in Cuba on November 10, 1942. It was a day of exploration for Marcel. He lets his imagination run while taking some fresh air on the central place facing the church of Nueva Gerona, the main locality of the island. What forgotten treasures are waiting to be discovered in that new mission of the Foreign Missions Society?

Marcel Gérin accompanies Monsignor Edgar Laroche, Superior general and Nérée Turcotte, first assistant. They are coming to Cuba as scouts. These days, they are visiting the pastoral region of Batabanó, south of Havana. Bishop Arteaga, archbishop of Havana, wants to entrust that part of his diocese to the priests of the Seminary of Pont-Viau and their first mission will be the parish of Nueva Gerona on Pines Island.



Nuestra Señora de los Dolores In1942, parish church of Nueva Gerona, Isla de Pinos, Cuba

Since their arrival on the island this morning, after a night trip by steamship, the three visitors are invited by Father Atanasio de Mokoroa, a Basque priest who is a parish priest in that place. While visiting the church and the nearby Catholic school and the office of the mayor up front, they talked with him about the resources and the needs of that large parish of about 6 000 faithful.



In 1978, the Isle of Pines became a training place for the youth of the communist world and was named the Isle of Youth. Photo by pavalena/Shutterstock

This evening, Marcel can imagine pirates hiding here their booty, but Edgar and Nérée rather remember the bandits they knew in Manchuria. They think especially about the missionary confreres who are still over there. No news from them since nearly one year, except a recent letter of Belgian missionary expelled from Manchuria. They would be safe and sound, but interned in the bishop's house in Szeping kai under the surveillance of the Japanese soldiers who control the territory.

From Manchuria to Cuba

Drawing from the reserve of cigars of Father Atanasio, Edgar and Nérée end the day by answering his questions about the situation of the missionaries in Asia. Since the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor last December and since the United States and Canada have gone to war, the missionaries of the Society are being closely watched in the regions controlled by the Japanese. In Manchuria as well as in the Philippines, they are limited in their movements, if not confined in internment as citizens of an enemy country, which is also the painful fate of the Japanese living in Canada.

How long will last that war that causes so much suffering and uncertainties? The apostolic vicariate of Szeping kai was rapidly growing under the leadership of Bishop Louis

Lapierre. Parishes, clinics, and schools multiplied. A minor seminary was founded for the formation of future priests. Around fifty priests of the Society have been sent to Manchuria until now. The new apostolic prefecture of Lintung was created in 1937 in a part of the territory entrusted to the priests of the Seminary of Pont-Viau. That so promising undertaking is now put in jeopardy. What does the future have in reserve?

Edgar was in charge of the mission of Lintung until 1938. That year, he came back to Canada for the second general Assembly of the Society during which he was elected Superior general. As such, he became the first successor of Canon Roch who, worn out by work and sick, passed away last December 21 « Qui bâtit, pâtit » (« Who builds, suffers »), he used to say. He gave everything to the hundred priests he sent in the missions since the foundation of the Foreign Mission Society by the bishops of Francophone Canada in 1921.

Edgar or Monsignor Larochelle as we call him nowadays carries on that undertaking which these days takes him to Cuba with Nérée and Marcel. These last two are part of the 18th missionary sendoff of the Society. Since the opening of the Seminary of Pont-Viau, each year saw leaving for Asia a new batch, first towards Manchuria in the north of China, and then for the last five years towards the island of Mindanao in the south of the Philippines. This year, the passage is closed due to the war. For how long ask Monsignor Larochelle and his young missionaries in formation, like Marcel Gérin and company?



Pioneros de la Misión de Cuba (de izquierda a derecha) Nérée Turcotte, 40, Nicolet; Marcel Gérin, 29, Sherbrooke. 69 padres canadienses, como fueron llamados en Cuba, serán enviados a esta misión de 1942 a 2011. FOTO Archivos SME.

After specialized studies in missiology and Canon Law, Marcel hoped to leave for the Philippines and meet up with the twenty or so confreres already at work in the new mission of Davao. Many among them were his study companions in Pont-Viau. While maybe they are captives of the Japanese army or isolated in the jungle with their Catholic communities, where is he? On Treasure Island! With Nérée, a veteran of Manchuria who accompanies him while waiting for the arrival of the others who will follow, maybe around ten of them within one year. What happened?

Why Cuba?

In the context of war affecting many countries that received missionaries, like the Asian countries, the Roman authorities ask the institutes concerned to redirect towards the Churches having a dire need of personnel, the missionaries they cannot send in those countries for the time being.

Faced with the impossibility to go to Manchuria or to the Philippines and to open new fields of action for the available new priests, Mons. Larochelle then has taken the necessary steps during the last months to obtain a new missionary territory. That is how a request for an urgent demand for personnel from the archbishop of Havana in Cuba is relayed to him by the apostolic Delegate in Ottawa. There is a great lack of priests on the whole island of Cuba and the presence of Canadian missionaries would be greatly appreciated, especially in the rural areas and in the small fishing towns.



January 25, 1942, somewhere in southern Mindanao Island in the Philippines (from left to right: name, age, diocese of origin) Lionel Labelle, 31, Ottawa; Charles-Eugène Ouellet, 38, Sainte-Anne-de-la-Pocatière; Rolland Hébert, 28, Montreal; Clovis Thibault, 32, Sherbrooke; Conrad Côté, 33, Quebec; Jean-Bernard Bazinet, 29, Ottawa. PHOTO SME Archives.

Talking with Father Anastasio, Mons. Larochelle says that that request was accepted with some conditions. First, the missionaries sent to Cuba must be able to find in that place the funding needed for their subsistence and the development of their activities, since the current budget of the Society does not allow new expenses. Only last year, a new house was opened in Québec for the first year of missionary formation. Also, a monthly missionary information magazine was launched to reach a large public.

On the other hand, since community life is fundamental in the Society, its priests must not be dispersed here and there, hence the importance of exercising their ministry in the same territory under the leadership of one of them in collaboration with the local bishop. As Nérée points out in the conversation, the ministry of the Canadian priests in Cuba will resemble that of their confreres in the Philippines, that is, serve the Catholic communities that were for a long period without a priest especially in the countryside and remote areas.

The reason why the Society exists, insists Mons. Larochelle, still remains the mission in «pagan» land by giving priority to the Chinese mission. It is the identity of the Society, its public image in our country. For example, its stand at the missionary exposition which took place lately at the Saint Joseph Oratory presented the front of a Chinese pavilion. In addition to its new mission in Cuba, the Society has also accepted this year to serve the Chinese Mission of Montreal.

Tit for tat, Father Atanasio observes without fail that the veterans of Manchuria, like Edgar and Nérée, will always be welcome in Cuba and will not lack work. In fact, there is an estimate that around 200,000 Chinese live in Cuba. Would they have discovered Treasure Island?

Missionary Ville-Marie 1642-1942



In 1942, on the occasion of the third centennial of the city of Montreal, a big missionary exposition was realized at the saint Joseph oratory on Mount Royal. With the theme «Ville-Marie missionary 1642-1942, » the exposition presented the work of the French missionaries at the beginning of Montreal and the one that the French Canadian realized in their turn in many countries in the world. The organizing committee, presided by Mons. Edgar Larochelle, p.m.é. made sure to have the collaboration of around thirty missionary communities. From September 17 to October 4, that exposition welcomed more than 250 000 visitors.