

EPILOGUE

A MORMON WALDENSIAN GOES HOME

On a warm, humid August afternoon in 1985 I sat on a hill side above Torre Pellice. A huge chestnut tree spread its branches above me and the smell of hundreds of wild flowers perfumed the mountain meadow. My being in Italy was the fulfillment of a dream. Five years earlier in 1980, I attended the World Conference on Records in Salt Lake City. During Alex Haley's talk on Roots, I had a burning feeling that I too would write a family history. I knew that one day I would visit Italy and do research on my Vaudois ancestors.

In February, 1981, I enrolled in a Master's program in Family and Local History through Brigham Young University, Salt Lake Center. I spent the next three years learning the techniques of historical research. Midway through the summer of 1985, over half my thesis was written. On July 19th, my father-in-law, who was visiting from Hawaii, learned that Lily Hall, his eighty-seven year old sister living in England, needed help with her estate.

As Grandpa Stokoe had just celebrated his seventy-fifth birthday, sending him off to England alone was out of the question. As my husband was working, Grandfather suggested that he would like me to accompany him to Manchester. Grandmother Stokoe offered to take charge of our home and care for our three small children.

We had very little time to prepare for the journey. We were not even sure Grandfather's passport would arrive before our August 10th departure date. I had no idea whether or not the family business could be completed in time for me to make a quick side trip to Italy, or if my limited budget would cover the expenses for such a trip. Still I felt compelled to go. As I could not read or speak Italian, my husband was opposed to my traveling in Italy alone. So I had written to President Euvrard, of the Mormon Mission in Milan, asking if there was someone in that region who could meet and accompany me. I placed numerous calls to Mission headquarters while in England, but only one call got through. At nine p.m. the night before I left for Turin, someone finally answered the phone at mission headquarters. "Is President Euvrard there?" I asked. "No," said the male voice and hung up before I could ask the next question.

Thursday night I was feeling very much alone, as I walked up and down the concourse in the airport near Turin. I was trying to suppress a feeling of rising terror when I encountered a group of tourists at the far end of the terminal. Wonder of wonders, they were speaking English. They greeted me. One woman cashed my traveler's check and the group invited me to go with their party to Turin. I was shown an inexpensive hotel where I spent what remained of my first night in Italy.

I awoke the next morning to the realization that traveling in a country where I could not speak the language might be more difficult than anticipated. As the morning wore on, my worst fears were realized. I had trouble ordering breakfast. All the banks were closed and I could find no place to cash my travelers checks. Although I had a map, I was constantly lost. Turin is a city of huge massive orange buildings and many short, dark Italian men who seem to have nothing better to do than gather in groups on the streets and leer at the women. Under the circumstances, I began to feel very threatened.

It was not until early afternoon that my bus pulled into the sleepy little town of Torre Pellice. The combination bus and train station was located in a recessed island near the edge of town. Huge maple trees shaded the cobble stone streets. The picturesque buildings and homes reminded me a little of Bavaria. Bees hummed and birds sang in the afternoon sunshine but there was not a soul in sight and that troubled me more than a little. Even the souvenir shops were closing. It was almost as if I had come upon an Italian "Brigadoon."

Unaware that the traditional siesta time in Italy is between 12:30 and 3:00, I walked through deserted streets, past a park and several elegant villas and up a winding road that led into the foothills above the city. Trees shaded the narrow roadway and a faint scent of pine reminded me of the canyons above my home in Sandy, Utah. Feeling a little more relaxed, I found a secluded spot beneath a chestnut tree and I spread my rain coat. I sat down and looked down over the tiled roofs of the homes and shops in the village. I thought of the Mormon missionaries who arrived in these valleys in August of 1850, one hundred and thirty-five years ago and of the Waldensian families that converted to the Mormon faith. I contemplated the sacrifices these people made in leaving their homes, crossing the great ocean and trekking across the barren deserts of the American frontier.

I sat there a long time, absorbed in the sights and sounds of the alpine valley. I felt very grateful to be there. I heard the jingle of cow bells on the hill above and the sound of someone chopping wood in a pasture nearby. The smell of fresh pine had a calming effect. I felt strongly that somewhere in these valleys I would find answers to the questions that had plagued me most of the summer--questions that centered on the issue of authority.

I had rewritten "Origin and History of the Waldensians" the first chapter of my thesis, five times. There were as many historians that advocated the theory of apostolic origin for the Waldensians as there were who counted it legend. Was there a grain of truth in it? Was it possible, as some claimed, that the Waldensian Church had preserved Christianity in its purity? Were these valleys the last strongholds of ancient Christendom? I had found one small piece of evidence that seemed to tie the Malan family into the early Christian Era. Family tradition had it that the surname Malan

originated in North Western Italy and was originally a term of abuse used on the early Christians. It originally meant "the Leper." In time, that name had been adopted and accepted as a noble surname.

Additionally, the Malan family possessed a very old family crest. The crest bore the date 1250, the motto GOD IS MY REFUGE and mountain peaks in the background symbolized the Cottian Alps. This evidence convinced me that this was indeed the ancestral home of the Malans and although there was no way to prove it, possibly this family was among the early Christians whose ancient ancestors were persecuted in the arenas of Rome.

I had spent two days researching at Cambridge University Library before leaving England. I had looked at many old manuscripts relating to the ancient Waldensian Church, but overall my search had been disappointing. From whence did the Mountain Church derive its authority? The Cardon and Malan families had found the Mormon concept of authority appealing. Evidently, in 1850, the authority issue was of primary importance to the converts in the Alpine valleys. I wondered what specifically had caused some people like Berthelemy Pons to be dissatisfied with the Mountain Church. I wondered how the modern Waldensian Church compared to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I hoped to find answers to these questions in Torre Pellice.

Suddenly it occurred to me that not a soul on earth knew where I was. I had read that Italy was a country notorious for kidnapping and thefts. What if someone hit me over the head and stole my money? What would my husband and family do if I never returned? These thoughts jarred me back to reality. I had no clear plan, and no idea where to go to find answers to my questions. In fact, I was not even sure how to get back to the train station, or where I would spend the night.

As I made my way back into the town, the only person I encountered on the deserted streets was a petite Italian woman with large brown eyes who spoke a little English. She could understand me only when I wrote out questions on my note pad. "I have studied this area for three years and want to find a Waldensian guide to help me locate points of interest," I penned. "Is there someone you can recommend?" She seemed to understand and indicated that I should follow her to the train station. There she made a phone call. A few minutes later she explained in broken English that I should go with her.

We walked up through the village past the shops and restaurants, the interiors of which still showed no signs of life, though by now it was late afternoon. We passed a little park and walked on until we reached Via Arnaud, a street lined with several lovely two story buildings with elegant facades and well manicured lawns. We entered a very large building where we encountered the most activity I had seen since my arrival in Torre Pellice. Several mimeograph machines were cranking out stacks of papers. A

squad of young workers were answering telephones, relaying messages and assembling pamphlets. I was escorted up to the large conference room on the second floor.

Two huge portraits of men I recognized hung on the walls in this very beautiful and spacious room. One painting depicted General Charles Beckwith, benefactor of the Waldensians. He was painted leaning on the cane which supported his wooden leg. The other portrait was of Reverend William St. Gilly, the portly Anglican priest who had written at least two accounts of his travels in the Protestant valleys. The petite Italian lady disappeared into an office and minutes later a tall, elegant, well-groomed woman with gray hair appeared and addressed me in flawless English: "Are you a member of the Synod," she asked?

I replied that I was not, explaining that I was a graduate student from Salt Lake City, Utah, who had come to the valleys to do research on the Waldensians for my Master's thesis. I told her that I had just arrived in Torre Pellice and as I did not speak Italian, I needed the services of a guide. The woman referred me to "Foresteria Valdese," the Waldensian-operated motel just a short distance from Waldensian church headquarters. There I met Adrianno, the proprietor, and Anna Maria Ribert, an eighteen-year-old Waldense girl, who would serve as my guide during my three day visit. The petite Italian woman with the beautiful dark eyes left me after seeing me comfortably settled at Foresteria Valdese.

It was obvious that Adrianno was very busy making room assignments and checking accommodations. But he graciously agreed to help. I told him I had no car but wished to see as much of the area as possible before I returned to Turin Sunday night. Andrianno explained that there was no bus service on weekends, and under the circumstances, the best method of travel would be by taxi. "You will need somewhere to stay."

"Could I possibly stay here?" I asked.

"We are over booked as it is the opening of our annual Synod," he responded, "But perhaps I can make some arrangements for you. Would it be a room only or room and board?" I carried in my purse what I considered my survival insurance--a large can of protein powder and a note with the word "Latte," Italian for "Milk." I figured in an emergency I could live on "Slim Fast." So his offer of "board" and a room was gratefully accepted. "Foresteria Valdese" proved to be an excellent location for my work. The room was clean, comfortable and modern, and the meals, served up family-style in a large banquet hall behind the motel, were excellent.

Anna Maria and I spent the latter part of the afternoon walking around Torre Pellice. She pointed out her school, which was across the street from church

headquarters, the college of ministers next door which is now abandoned (today Waldensian pastors train in Rome), and the oldest Waldensian temple (church) in the city. The Temple at Coppiere was built in 1555 and has been remodeled several times since.

Anna Maria introduced me to her mother (who was a hostess for visitors at the school). She escorted me to the bookstore and post office. I could not help but contrast the Waldensian Church headquarters in Torre Pellice with the Headquarters of the Mormon Church in Salt Lake City, Utah. As I did so, I came to realize what a small, obscure Christian community I had been writing about. During our walk about town, Anna Maria and I ran into the Italian woman who had guided me to Waldensian Church headquarters. Through my interpreter I learned that the woman with the beautiful eye's was Giogrina Salvino, a history professor from Turin. She was in Torre Pellice to visit her aged mother, who resided in a Waldensian rest home not far from the ancient temple of the Coppieri.

At 7:30 we assembled for dinner. The few Waldensians at my table who spoke English began to question me, wondering why I had come to the valleys. I explained my purpose was research for a Master's thesis and added that my second great-grandmother, Lydia Pons, was born in Angrogna. One man sitting across from me smiled warmly and said: "And so, you have come home."

Indeed, it was as if I had come home. That morning in Turin I had felt so threatened. No one seemed able to understand my needs or help me find my way. It was not until I arrived at the headquarters of the Waldensian Church that I discovered I had found a safe haven.

That evening, a list was circulated listing people from all over the world who would be participating in the 1985 Synod. I scanned the list to see if I recognized any of the names. I was surprised to see Frank Gibson, Executive Director of the American Waldensian Aid Society, among the participants. I had written to Frank in New York in May to ask for information about the Waldense. Frank responded by sending the information I needed and asked if I had knowledge of the Mormon colonies in Utah. I replied that the colonies were the subject of my research. He then wrote back asking if I could provide him with a copy of my thesis upon completion. When I learned that Frank would be in Torre Pellice, I asked Adrianno if he would introduce us.

Saturday Morning, Anna Maria, and Adrianno's 17-year-old daughter and I, toured Angrogna in a taxi. We visited the church where my Pons family had worshiped before they were baptized into the Mormon church. We hiked far back into the hills, passing the monument marking the place where the Waldensians met in 1532 and made the decision to join the Protestant movement. Anna Maria guided us through a wooded area (that reminded me of Mill Creek Canyon) to a natural cave where the

Waldensians sought refuge during the days of heavy persecution. I tried to remember the sights and sounds of that hike for I was sure that this was a trail my ancestors knew very well. We visited the "School of the Barbi" hidden high on a hillside, where in the fifteenth century pastors studied in secret. We visited a Catholic church with its ornate altar, crucifixes, candles and statues. It provided a good comparison with the starkness of the Waldensian temples. Pointing to the paraphernalia of Catholic worship, Anna Maria said, "We don't believe you need all of that to worship God."

We returned about noon and had lunch in the banquet hall. I occupied a table with Mireille Gilles, a delegate to the Synod from Switzerland and Susanne Labsch, a seminary student from Germany, training to be a Waldensian minister. Mireille was very interested in my research. She said she had learned only last year that there were "Mormon Waldensians." She would return to Uruguay where she published a monthly newsletter for the Waldensian church. Mireille asked if I would write an article on the Mormon colonies for her newspaper. I agreed and took her address. Both ladies commented on my good fortune to be in Torre Pellice for the Synod as the most sacred ceremony in the Waldensian church was about to take place--the ordination of the new ministers. Five young candidates had taken exams that morning and would be giving their maiden sermons later in the afternoon. Mireille and Susanne encouraged me to attend the service.

I met Frank Gibson after lunch. We spent a long time discussing the Waldensian movement in America. Frank explained that as the valleys became so overcrowded and people were forced to leave, the Waldensian church did a very courageous thing. Leaders told emigrants not to organize Waldensian churches in their new locations, but to go into the world and become part of established Protestant churches. There they were to do as the spirit directed. I realized that though the leave-taking of the original Mormon converts was not without bitterness, the second wave of Waldense who settled in Utah, were sent to their new homes with the blessings of the Mountain Church.

My own warm reception among the Waldense tended to reinforce the feeling I had five years earlier at the World Conference on Records. It all came together as their belief in "doing as the spirit directed" meshed with our understanding of personal revelation. I felt a deep sense of wholeness as I realized that as a modern-day "Mormon Waldensian," I had bridged the gap between the old world and the new. However, my questions on divine authority remained unanswered.

After our visit, Frank introduced Tom Noflke, a Waldensian minister from Pramollo. He had lived in America for a time and spoke excellent English. Tom pointed out that Italy is divided into four districts and that each district is subdivided into circuits. The Synod in Italy is the General Assembly. It includes the Swiss Church as well as all other Italian Waldense Churches. Representatives to the Synod are elected

yearly. Although the Waldensian Church in South America has a different Synod (assembly,) regulations and general beliefs remain the same for members world-wide. The beliefs of the Vaudois were fixed at the Confession of Faith in 1655. Their statement of tenets is comparable to our "Articles of Faith."

I asked Tom if the Waldensians had an administrator comparable to our president Spencer W. Kimball, whom we Mormons regarded as a prophet, seer and revelator. Tom was a bit awed by that. He explained that no one among the Waldensi would make such a claim. Tom said the Waldensian church is led by a Moderator who is elected by the Synod for a seven year term. Each August, the Synod meets in Italy for one week to ordain new ministers and conduct the business of the church.

Tom explained that the bible is the foundation of Waldensian belief. Bible lessons are chosen by Waldensian ministers, but the Synod had the responsibility of approving the text. A new translation of the bible has recently been adopted in Italy for Protestants and Catholics alike. This translation came forth as a result of the Ecumenical Commission. Tom sees the Waldensian Church in Italy as an alternative to Catholicism in that country. He feels that the role of the church and its members is to be faithful to the teachings of the bible. Waldense are admonished to do social work, promote peace and help minorities. Additionally, they are expected to take part in local governments and play the role of the Christian in national affairs.

The five young ministerial candidates--three women and two men--were scheduled to preach that afternoon at two different temples. I went with Anna Maria and her mother to the Temple at Coppieri. I enjoyed hearing the congregation sing an Italian version of what we Mormons know as "How Gentle God's Commands." The sermons followed, after which a rather unusual thing happened. Members of the Synod rose one by one to critique the sermons. My Mormon background had not prepared me for this. A Catholic monk, who had converted to the mountain faith, explained that this was common practice during the training period and necessary to ensure that these new young pastors were adequately prepared for the work.

After dinner that evening I went off with several of my new found friends to a reception given by the town council for the delegates and observers. Many came from Protestant churches all over Europe. By now, my presence at their various gatherings had come to be expected and I was treated as a representative from the "Mormon colonies" in Utah. At the Saturday evening reception, I engaged in a discussion with Reverend John L. Wynne, pastor of two Presbyterian Churches in Ireland. I explained genealogy and temple work and the Mormon practice of baptism and sealings for the dead. I quoted from the biblical text, "Else what shall they do which are baptized for the dead, if the dead rise not at all? . . ." (Corinthians 15:29).

Reverend Wynne must have found our discussion interesting, for Sunday

morning we met and attended Sunday services together. I spent some time prior to the service explaining my Mormon beliefs. I asked John if the format of Waldense meetings was similar to that of his Presbyterian services. He told me that the two were alike, except "they stand when they sing and sit when they pray."

Giorgio Tourn delivered the morning sermon. Pastor Tourn is a distant cousin of the Utah Cardon family. He is also the acknowledged intellectual leader of the Waldensian Church in Italy. Reverend Wynne asked what songs we sang in our services. I named a few, explaining that one of my favorites was "For the Strength of the Hills we Bless Thee," a hymn we Mormons revised from an original poem by the Vaudois poetess, Felicia Hermans. He was familiar with the hymn but was sure it was written the English poet, Sylvester Horne. He said they often sang the song in Congregational services. It appears in their hymnal as "For the Might off Thine Arm We Bless Thee." I found nothing in the Waldensian service that differed from other Protestant services which I have attended.

At lunch my new friends explained how very special the afternoon service would be and that I must go early in order to secure a good seat. I was at a disadvantage in the afternoon as my friends were seated in a section reserved for official delegates. So I sat in the row behind them, without my customary translator. The services began when the five new ministers filed into the church. These were followed by the delegates and observers along with Waldense Church officials. The formal entry of these leaders was symbolic, for there was a time when the mountain church was not allowed to meet openly and new ministers had to be ordained in secret. Over three hundred delegates took their places as the meeting began.

Guido Collucci preached a very long sermon after which a song was sung and then the ordination took place. The act of ordination was conducted by Senior Pastor Collucci. It was conducted by the laying of his hands upon the heads of the candidates with a special prayer. At the point of ordination, the whole gathered congregation lifted their hands to a position as if they, too, were ordaining the new ministers. They kept their hands in that position throughout the prayer of ordination.

Reverend Wynne later explained that Pastor Collucci, who was presiding, had been appointed to his post by the Synod at the 1984 meeting. He was therefore acting, by the authority of the Waldensian and Protestant church leaders there assembled. Evidently, the Waldensians believe that the authority to act came from the members of the Synod. "But much more importantly," Reverend Wynne pointed out, "Pastor Collucci was doing the ordination, in the name of and by the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ. Thus we see them as being in the authentic evangelical succession."

During graduate school I had researched the calling and ordination of leaders in an LDS Stake over a ten-year period. The result of my research was

Heritage and Future of the Willow Creek Stake (prepared and distributed under the direction of the Stake Presidency, Sandy Utah Willow Creek Stake, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1983.) It was interesting to compare the calling and ordination of an LDS Stake Presidency with the ordination of the Waldensian ministers. The Waldenses, along with the entire Protestant world, have a much different concept of authority. And it was the Mormon concept of divine authority that the early converts found so appealing. That concept, together with many instances of dreams and manifestations, was the motivating factor that motivated my Waldense ancestors to leave the mountain church and emigrate to Utah.

As I returned to Turin on the train Sunday night, I realized that I had found the answers to my questions. Most protestant denominations believe their right to act in the name of God comes through personal revelation, a sense of being called to the work, formal religious training and the approval of church leaders. They have no knowledge of priesthood keys and divine authority which is central to the gospel of Jesus Christ as we Mormons understand it. Through my visit to Torre Pellice and my attendance at the 1985 Synod, I had come to understand that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is unique in all the world. It is no wonder that my ancestors embraced Mormonism with such enthusiasm and commitment.

As I bid goodbye to Torre Pellice and my Waldense friends, I felt some of the feelings that my ancestors probably felt over a century and a half earlier. I would not see any of them again. However, a part of me would remain in Torre Pellice and with those who each day "vote their conscience" by doing good somewhere in the world. My attendance at the Synod provided a foundation for an understanding of the Mountain Church. I had come to realize that these Protestants are indeed good people. They follow the Biblical injunction to "love thy neighbor." For they took me in and went out of their way to treat me as "the long-lost daughter who had come home." For those of us who share this unique heritage we can be proud to be "Mormon Waldensians."

