

OUR LOVE AFFAIR WITH THE MARSHALLESE

I first saw the Marshall Islands in the summer of 1945 on my way to the Marianas. We landed in Kwajalein to refuel, but spent a couple of days there for reasons that I cannot recall.

From Kwajalein we flew past Enewetak to Guam, then on the Tinian. I did see some Chamorro people on Guam, but on Tinian we only saw prisoners of war—a few Japanese and quite a few Koreans. I do not remember very much distinction being made between the latter groups, and I had to learn in time that the Koreans and Japanese were mortal enemies. The Koreans we found on Tinian had in effect been slaves of the Japanese. In truth, there were very few Japanese, as they had mostly killed themselves rather than surrender.

After the war's end, we still flew regularly, and I was fortunate to visit Guam on a number of occasions, to visit Truk and Ponape, and to see a good many Pacific islands from the air. Their beauty was very striking, and I vowed to bring Addie Leah to that part of the world as soon as I could.

After the war the entire Pacific Basin was under the control of the United States Navy. For example, a Navy plane flew to Ponape at regular intervals with a medical doctor aboard who treated patients after setting up an office under one of the palm trees.

The Navy doctor wanted to have an office with some shelter, and also a place where patients could be examined with some privacy. So the request was made to purchase some land where a small facility could be build. The offer included a survey that would enable deeds to be made, questions of ownership solved, and order would prevail. Explanations of each facet of the proposal were made. The Navy asked how soon they could do this. The Ponapeans deliberated for some time, and finally returned with their answer. It would take a hundred years. It was of course news to the Americans, for they did not know that whereas the land was owned by someone, the coconut trees were owned by someone else. For someone to have full and complete ownership in the manner

described to them in the American concept of a deed, one would have to wait until the palm tree died, one hundred years being their anticipated lifetime.

Now, here's a pretty mess. What we want is to be fair in the simplest way. We are just trying to be helpful here. Anybody should be able to see that! How do we continue the discussion? This is but a tiny illustration of the inevitable complications when we try to interact with Pacific Islanders.

Herein lies the first lesson; our culture is not their culture, and whatever we propose, it will take a lot more time to accomplish than we can imagine. And Americans are not patient.

The Navy's control over this area of the world ended in 1951 when the Trust Territory was established by the United Nations.

Continental Airlines began regular service to "Micronesia" in February of 1971. I fulfilled my vow to take Addie Leah to that great part of the world, the two of us arriving in June. The air route was established for the Department of the Interior who administered the Trust Territory and the air passengers were almost entirely government employees. So it happened that we were the first genuine tourists on Ponape and Truk. One lady took her entire staff aside and pointing to us, said, "See? I told you that real tourists would arrive!" This is an honor lost in history but we remember it well.

We also visited Yap and Palau, and it was in Palau that circumstances led us ultimately to have a Marshallese family of our own.

It was a Sunday, and we found a church on Koror, the principal island in Palau, a country now called Balau. It was a mission church founded by a group of German Christians when Germany controlled that part of the world prior to World War I. The area was controlled by Japan after that time until we arrived during World War II. After church we met the pastor, who invited us to his home, being doubtless quite curious about his Sunday morning visitors. We immediately heard a fascinating history. The pastor was Herbert Lang, and his father was an SS trooper who was executed by freedom fighters in German occupied territory before the war's end. Herb's pregnant mother and two children (Herb was the oldest) made their way afoot to East Germany, and to

avoid the Russians made their way from there to West Germany soon after the war ended. The original church was the Liebenzell Church, and they had had a mission effort in several parts of the world including Palau. Their church was reestablished in New Jersey after the war, from where they still function. Herb was supported by the New Jersey office and received a very small sum each month to operate a high school for boys, named Emmaus School. The boys came from a good many parts of the Pacific area, including the Marshall Islands. We heard of the many good things that the school was accomplishing, and were especially touched by the great need for help. We resolved to send Herb some money each month recognizing that a sum not so very considerable to us could make a huge difference in Herb's budget.

We also heard about the girls' school that was on the island of Bablethaup, and how marginal they were.

One of the great problems was that whenever a young man would happen to make it to the US, the cultural shock was such that he tended to isolate himself from everyone, pine for home, and fail in assimilating any valuable part of American culture. Herb mentioned there was need was for a boy to live in an American home for some time before college was attempted.

From our trip to Palau grew a plan, and it unfolded like this. The following year, 1972, our son Chip, just thirteen, went to Palau to go to school for one semester. This was a tremendous learning experience for him, but when he brought Elimelek home with him, it was a learning experience for all of us. Our lives were changed forever.

Elimelek joins the family

Elimelek was Marshallese, his father's original birthplace being Likiep Atoll. During the war his father was a scout for the Japanese Army in Kwajalein Atoll, and was living on the island of Roi or Namur at the northern part of the atoll. During the invasion by the American Army of those two islands, he decided that the Americans were going to win, and awaited his chance to surrender at a moment when he thought he might not be shot. That worked out fine, and within a few days he became a scout for the American Army. Thus began a

long tie of Elimelek's family with Americans and it lasts until the present moment.

The boys left Palau, and then flew to Guam, Truk, Ponape, Kwajalein, Majuro, Johnston Island, and Honolulu. Concerned that we might lose track of them somewhere along the way, I had friends check on their arrival and departure at each of their stops. As soon as they left one spot I had a message to that effect, usually by telephone. A long time friend, the manager of Honolulu's AEC office, Bill Hills, met the boys in Honolulu and put them up at a high-rise hotel. They stayed up all night watching television! Oh the joys of being in America!

Elimelek lived with us for almost seven years, graduating from high school in Los Alamos and then going to Sterling College with Chip. He returned to the Marshall Islands in 1977, and lives on Ebeye, an island in the Kwajalein atoll.

The story has not yet stopped, for two of Elimelek's daughters spent a school year with daughter Nancy and John Bonnema in 2005.

Suffice it to say that we now have Marshallese great-grand children!



EJ's family in the year 2000

Brownlee, Jabkol, Roxanne, EJ, Marlia, Mon Lisa, Lan, Elisa