



It requires an act of faith to think that sending food into ambiguous and changing political conditions is worthwhile. But our hearts tell us that feeding the hungry is right, whatever their politics. And, certainly, any effective work for return to renewal comes from strong, clear-thinking people who have some private sources of food from outside, not from frantic mothers unable to nurse their babies or from workers dependent completely on government supplies. Children who starve now will not win the long struggles of the future.

—EUGENE ENGLAND, Food For Poland Press Release, 8 March 1982

A BULLET AND A VISION: FOOD FOR POLAND, 1982–1985

By Mitch Davis, Michael G. Sullivan, and Ronald J. Ockey

In 1982, I was a recently married, returned missionary taking Gene's class in Mormon literature. One day, he ended our discussion a few minutes early and began to talk of his concern for the people of Poland. I remember thinking that whatever was going on in Poland was a long way from Provo, Utah. But for Gene, there was a very clear connection.

Gene related how he had been in the crowded Vatican Square months earlier when a man directly behind him had attempted to assassinate the new Catholic Pope. In fact, the bullet whisked past Gene's right ear, causing ringing and pain for quite some time. Gene was convinced that the attempt on the Pope's life had occurred not because he was Catholic but because he was Polish. Gene believed the Lord was going to use this new Pope to help tear down the Iron Curtain, beginning in Poland.

Gene spoke of his conviction that the Solidarity labor movement was destined to play a key role in tearing down that wall and explained how Communist government officials were attempting to starve Solidarity into submission, especially during the cold, Polish winters. If folks from the United States could get food to those in the movement, if we could keep them alive and encouraged, there was hope for the fall of Communism in Poland . . . and East Germany . . . and Russia. . . . Suddenly, I realized what Provo had to do with Warsaw: if we could link arms

with the Pope and feed Solidarity, we might someday be able to send missionaries into the Eastern Bloc!

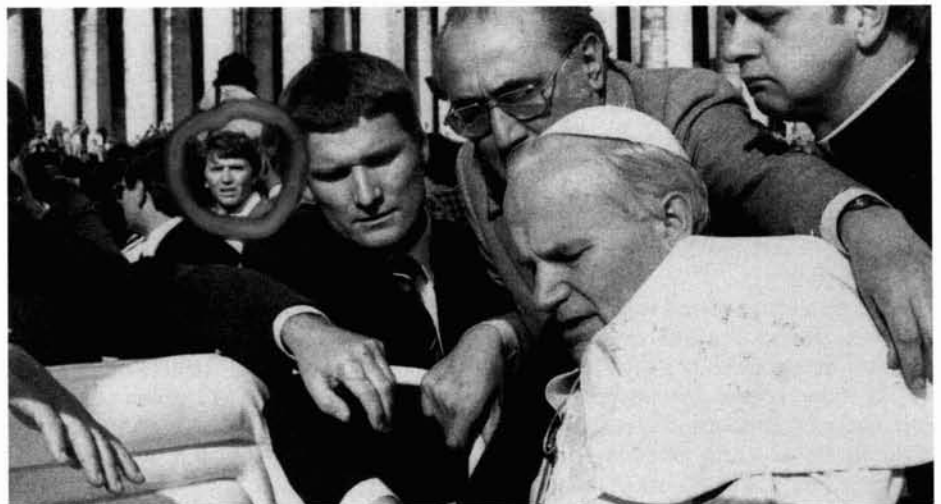
So I volunteered to help, and before I knew it, I was the de facto president of the student chapter of Food for Poland. My wife Michelle and I immediately went to work in the offices of this charity organization.

Michelle compiled a list of potential donors on a borrowed computer while I struggled to convince students at other universities (Berkeley,

Yale, Stanford) that a bona fide movement was emanating from BYU.

—Mitch Davis

As Executive Director of Food for Poland, I had almost daily contact with Gene during the months that turned into years beginning in early 1982. When he approached me to direct the efforts for Poland, he explained his belief that the current struggles in Poland could be a linchpin for freedom, or the loss of it, for the people of many countries. It wasn't just that Gene had been a witness to the shooting, it was more. He had a testimony of the need and a vision that more than just a single "do good" event was needed if freedom was to be given a real chance. Someone must mount a sustained effort, and he could not do it alone. He had to convert others to this vision, people who would be willing to work together to make it a reality.



Gene's presence (circled) at the shooting of Pope John Paul II on 13 May 1981 convinced him that the struggle for freedom in Poland was the linchpin for freedom for people in many other countries.

PHOTO FROM THE COVER OF *DAUGHTER*, 14 MAY 1981

Gene's efforts gained many converts. Hundreds, possibly thousands, of volunteers worked during those years in almost every state across the nation.

As the vision born from Gene's experience grew, individuals from all across the country and organizations great and small began to call and work every day on ideas about how the American people could help in Poland.

—Michael G. Sullivan

There were rallies in Salt Lake City and Logan, Utah. There was a statewide proclamation by then-Governor Scott Matheson. There was a sneak preview of Polish filmmaker Andrez Vajda's pro-Solidarity film.

In the end, we hit upon the idea of a nationwide "Fast for Poland!" which encouraged individuals across the country to skip two meals over their Christmas holiday and send the money saved on those meals to us. The idea caught hold both within and without the BYU community, and we raised more than a million dollars.

—M. D.

Ronald Ockey, legal advisor and volunteer for Food for Poland, accompanied the first airlift of goods to Poland in the spring of 1982. As he met with Bishop Domin of the Polish Catholic Church, Ron recalls the bishop's thanks as, "It means so very much to us to know we're not alone."

The following month, upon meeting a shipment in Gdansk, at the very shipyard where Solidarity had first taken root, I was among many who saw container after container coming off the ship. Those supplies were going to be received by families, hospitals, and others in need.

The Catholic Church used its considerable influence within the country to provide distribution assistance. That night, while having dinner at a monastery, I received word that my wife had given birth, a little early, to a healthy, beautiful daughter. My host, the local Catholic bishop, knowing that as a Mormon I didn't drink wine, suggested we toast her birth with something else. He hurried about and finally returned with two bottles of baby carrot juice—from the shipment we had just unloaded that day! It confirmed to me that Heaven approved of the work we were doing in Poland and gave me hope for the future.

That spring, we also hit upon the idea of a national convoy of relief supplies. We had dozens of groups collecting across the United States, but they had no way to ship their goods. This problem was solved through the "Friendship Convoy," a loose caravan of tractor-trailers donated by several trucking lines. The convoy started in California and

made its way through the country, picking up donations, eventually arriving in Chicago. There, with the assistance of the Polish-American Congress and Catholic Relief Services, shipping containers containing hundreds of thousands of pounds of consolidated supplies were loaded onto ships for transport to Poland.

When the Friendship Convoy arrived in Chicago, I had the privilege of greeting the trucks. It was the first of May, "Constitution Day" in Poland. Sponsored by the Polish-American Congress, the convoy was the centerpiece of a parade held by Chicago's Polish community. The parade drew more than one-half million people. I had the wonderful opportunity to speak from the reviewing stand and offer a message of hope, conveying to those gathered that many had now grown to hold the Polish people within their hearts. That afternoon, as Bishop Bernadin, then archbishop in Chicago, put his arms around me, he thanked the "Mormons for doing more than anyone else for the Polish people (pause) . . . than anyone 'west of Chicago.'" Then, with an embrace, we turned to the television cameras and thanked the people of America.

While millions of dollars of aid was shipped over the years, without Gene England, Food For Poland would not have been attempted and would not have succeeded. His vision, unconventional ideas, eloquence, resourcefulness, tireless work, and inspiration shaped, supported, and sustained everything that was accomplished.

—M. G. S.

It was characteristic of Gene's lifetime commitment to principles of truth and right not to be dissuaded by risks. He constantly stressed we should not be "timid" in trying to do good works. His own efforts reveal no evidence of timidity in such matters. His personal courage was exemplary and continues to inspire.

—Ronald J. Ockey

I thought of Gene—and the Pope—some years later when a young man in our ward received his mission call to Russia.

—M. D.



AT THE SIGNING OF THE STATE OF UTAH PROCLAMATION FOR FOOD FOR POLAND
(Standing L-R): Eugene England, Mitch Davis, Ron Ockey, Father Lynch, (Salt Lake Catholic Diocese), Michael Sullivan
(Seated): Governor Scott Matheson.

On one trip with two hundred thousand pounds of flour for the people of southern Poland, the archbishop of Krakow took me aside and asked if I knew how much bread all of this flour would make for the people in need? I replied that I didn't, but I hoped it helped. He proceeded to tell me that it helped well beyond the nourishment of the body, because the flour would only make an average-size dinner roll for each person who needed it. But "its worth was far beyond the nourishment of the body. It was nourishment for the soul of each person who ate the bread because they would know that they had not been forgotten."

—M. G. S.

Mitch and Michelle Davis and their children now reside in Colorado. Mitch is the producer and writer of The Other Side of Heaven, a new movie released 14 December 2001. (See story, page 77.)

Michael G. Sullivan is a businessman in Salt Lake City where he resides with his wife Christine. They are parents of five children. Amy, the daughter born while Michael was in Poland, is a student in political science at BYU and often spends her birthdays doing relief work for people of one country or another.

Ronald J. Ockey is now an attorney in the Utah Attorney General's office. He and his wife Arline have a son who served a mission for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints . . . in Poland.

BETWEEN SCYLLA AND CHARYBDIS: CHAMPIONING MORMON STUDIES AT UTAH VALLEY STATE COLLEGE

By Brian Birch

GENE CAME TO Utah Valley State College in 1998 as its first writer in residence. However, as one might suspect, Gene was not a person capable of playing only one role. In characteristic fashion, he became engaged in a number of projects beyond this capacity, including London Theatre Study Abroad and the well-known effort to establish a Mormon studies program on our campus. Gene approached each of these projects with remarkable energy and creativity and had the unique ability through his persistence and passion to inspire others to share in his vision.

I first came to know Gene personally when Scott Abbott and I organized the Academic Freedom Symposium at UVSC. Scott, who had known Gene while both taught at BYU, recommended him as someone who could greatly contribute to our effort to foster open dialogue regarding an issue that had become a concern on our campus. His remarks, entitled, "Calculated Risk: Freedom for Mormons in Utah Higher Education," were a passionate plea for Utah higher education to cultivate opportunities in the academic study of Mormonism. Lamenting the current situation in the state's major public universities, Gene remarked:

If we were talking about a university that was 70 percent Black or Jewish, the point would be immediately clear. If such a university . . . did not have courses in Black or Jewish culture (literature and history and sociology, etc.), most likely taught by Black or Jewish scholars, that university would be a laughingstock; in fact, its academic reputation might well be compromised and its accreditation in serious trouble. But, even more seriously, it would be failing to

seize a great educational opportunity—that is, to engage the majority of its students where they can most directly and easily be reached, that is in reference to their own culture and belief systems. Such a university would thus neglect material and approaches that could be a great help in achieving perhaps the main purpose of a college education, which is to understand, both critically and appreciatively, the diversity of human cultures, including one's own, and thus become a genuine citizen of the national and world community.¹

Inspired by recent events

at Utah Valley State College, he sought to demonstrate that UVSC was at that moment, the Utah institution with the most academic freedom because of the willingness of the administration to acknowledge the largely Mormon student body and to address these issues in a way that is healthy for both Mormon and non-Mormon students. However, even a "calculated risk" can be dangerous. Employing Homer's famous metaphor for treacherous sailing, Scylla and Charybdis, Gene understood that this effort must be undertaken in a way that would avoid "the austere cliffs of secular disdain for religion" on the one hand, and "the whirlpool of cultural correctness" on the other. Gene could not have imagined how prophetic this analogy would turn out to be.

Gene's remarks became the catalyst for a vigorous discussion on our campus regarding how to approach the study of

Mormonism in a sensitive, yet academically rigorous, manner. Before these events, Gene had been teaching a course in Mormon literature in the department of English and literature but wanted to expand Mormon studies into other academic disciplines. About this time, Gene approached the Center for the Study of Ethics for support in creating more programming related to Mormon studies. The center was enthusiastic but aware that the issue would be sensitive and needed to be approached with care.

A year earlier, I had proposed that the center support a religious studies program to address issues in religious diversity, including, but not limited to, issues related to Mormonism. Since our projects complemented each other remarkably well, Gene and I were able to work together planning events that addressed our interests and passions. Gene immediately went to work organizing conferences and lectures, writing

Gene understood that this effort had to be undertaken in a way that would avoid "the austere cliffs of secular disdain for religion" on the one hand, and "the whirlpool of cultural correctness" on the other.

grants, and petitioning for more courses dealing with Mormon studies. He organized the first Mormon studies conference complete with film reviews, poetry readings, and public lectures. Wayne Booth presented a provocative and controversial paper on the potential value of religious hypocrisy, William "Bert" Wilson discussed his continuing study of the way Mormon missionary folklore functions in Church and mission culture, and Gene presented a personal essay on his missionary work in American Samoa. In addition to public events, Gene applied for and received a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities entitled "Enriching Humanities Curricula: Mormon Studies." The grant funded a year-long faculty seminar and lecture series. In his grant proposal, Gene argues:

Mormons, like most others, seldom realize they are cultural beings, and studying their own culture is a powerful way to help them see how culture in general works as they examine somewhat objectively, in an academic setting, how their own culture operates in their lives.

BRIAN BIRCH is associate director for religious studies, Center for the Study of Ethics, and assistant professor of philosophy at Utah Valley State College. He is also the chair of the annual "Religion and the Humanities" conference held each October at UVSC. He may be contacted by email at <birchbr@uvsc.edu>.

