

The Call of the UN to rebuild the world: A tiny Group's response 1948 - 1960

On April twelfth, 1948, there was great jubilation among the women of a small sewing group in Great Neck, N.Y. They had formed an association to help the needy children, mostly in war-torn Europe. A memorandum had just arrived from the United Nations permitting them to add "United Nations" to their title, thus recognizing the group as an affiliate of the most prestigious world body. The significance of the memorandum conferred honour and responsibility on them. They welcomed their new status with awe; they also considered it their reward and challenge. Immediately, they proceeded to place their house on a footing worthy of its name - "The United Nations Women's Guild."

The latest war had completely changed the political landscape of the world. The centre of the collective power had shifted from Europe to North America and symbolizing that fact, the new custodian of world peace, "The United Nations," was established in New York.

The members of this Group had accompanied their husbands who were among the first recruits of the U.N. from Geneva. They could well remember the days when their husbands were grappling with the issues of war and peace in the chambers of the League of Nations and they were knitting and sewing, hand in hand with the members of the SOS (Save the Children Federation), adopting their motto of a 'warm sweater for each child.'

That epoch was gone.

It was a new beginning. They pursued the same mission of giving a helping hand to a child for a better life. They quickly realized that to become a part of the U.N. even as a volunteer group was a big step forward in their charitable work.

These families from Geneva were international in character. They had chosen Great Neck as their home because of its proximity to the U.N. whose temporary head quarters had been established in Lake Success not too far from New York City. It was natural for them to get together from time to time. As a consequence, a sewing group was created to keep up their old Geneva ties. Friendly Teas combined with their charitable work for SOS was the specialty of these meetings, and Great Neck proved to be a fertile ground for such events.

Those housewives were responsible citizens of the world and definitely aware of their own worth. It was their initiative that led them to ask for an official seal on their activities and Charlotte Boudreau, a dynamic personality, had already discussed this with the members. As soon as the memorandum came granting their wish, Jane McAfee called the first meeting at her home to ratify the naming of the organization as "The United Nation Women's Guild." The date was 22 April, 1948. The members present on that day were:- Mesdames Boudreau, Butterworth, Mequet, Roigt, Godet, Van de Vekene, Giraud, Karkacheff, Macguire, MacMahon, and, of course, the hostess, Jane McAfee.*

* Draft report, Page 3, by Dorothy Lawler: 1983.

This new development was an exciting piece of news. They happily endorsed the formation of the Guild. Little did they think or know that history would record the occasion as the birth of the Women's Guild, and that their names would be treasured as the founding members of the organization headed by Charlotte Boudreau and Jane McAfee.¹

As soon as word went out announcing the creation of the Guild, new members began to join the group. Their contribution towards the growth of the Guild was no less important than that of the founding members. Together they left an indelible mark on the pages of history. These were Mesdames Protitch, Frank, Rodzianko, Vigier, Hadjioannides, Read, Cordier, de Rosso, Le Bosquet, Pelt, Verbrughe, and Lippetz.

With the increased membership, credentials began to change. They were no longer only from Geneva, they were also from different parts of the world, all converging on the U.N. But the Geneva tradition was still strong. The members continued to sew and knit for SOS sponsored children. However, there was a world of difference between Geneva and New York. Soon the members concluded that there should be a reorientation in their thinking. First, there could be no denying of the fact that the focus of the Guild was moving away from Europe to Asia, Africa and Latin America. Secondly, the motto of a 'warm sweater' was no longer viable for an organization like the Guild, not even relevant to most of the countries whose members now belonged to it. The huge colonial empires had broken down to clusters of independent nation-states. Each of these was proud of its political freedom but many of them were in dire need of help to free themselves from hunger, disease and illiteracy.

The signing of the U.N. Charter in the name of 'We, the people' had touched many hearts in many corners of the world. It had opened up a vista of hope and regeneration for the people who were anxious to dedicate themselves to nation-building activities as if thereby they would be able to heal all the wounds that had been inflicted on human society for so long. In a short span of time, a number of international agencies had sprung up around the U.N. Capturing its significance, journalist Walter Lippman said in an address to the U.N., "You make peace and keep peace, but that is not enough - you have to build peace."

In this atmosphere, it was not difficult for the Guild to find a place for itself. It did not shy away from offering its minuscule contributions in the midst of a vast network of humanitarian operations that was spreading all over the globe. The Guild was only a speck on the map of the U.N. - but it was unique. It was run entirely by women volunteers. The Guild had only a handful of volunteers but it took up the challenge boldly. They had the understanding of the problem and knew how to nurture a seedling into a fruit bearing tree.

At this critical point, the Guild found exactly the right person in Dorothy Cordier - wife of the Executive Assistant to Secretaries-General Trygve Lie, Dag Hammarskjold and U Thant. Her organizing ability made her an invaluable member of the Guild. During the first ten years, 1949-59, when the Great Neck Group was almost synonymous with the Guild, Dorothy Cordier held the position of president for three terms. In that

¹ Letter from Mrs. McAfee - Newsletter 1977.

capacity, she made significant contributions in broadening the outlook of the Guild and raising its aspirations to a higher level.

As soon as Dorothy Cordier joined Great Neck, she found a place for their meetings in the Hall of the local Community Church. That made it easier for the members to attend the meetings regularly. The next step was the formation of an Executive Committee to organize the functions of the Guild in a professional manner.

The first meeting was held in 1949 with Madame Pelt in the Chair. There were three other officers - Jane McAfee, vice-president, Dorothy Roigt, secretary, and Aline Butterworth, treasurer. This set a most useful precedent. In time, all groups formed their executive committees in the same way.

In the meantime, several smaller groups had begun to function elsewhere, but all looking up to this mother group for guidance. Within a short time, the leadership recognized that to hold all the groups under one umbrella and to give it cohesion, they should be structured and operated in a uniform way. In addition, there should be an apex body having the authority to keep them within a single framework. Of course, all this had to be accomplished without encroaching on the autonomy of the Groups, which was accepted from the beginning as an integral part of the make-up of the Guild. No wonder, the writing of the constitution became an exercise in tight-rope walking.

The first general meeting was held in 1952. The first Co-ordination Board met in 1953, though its composition was not yet agreed upon. It was decided that the Board should consist of two members from each group, one of whom would be the director. Even the procedure of selecting the president of the Guild became controversial. In this uncertainty, Dorothy Cordier was chosen to be the first president of the Board. Mrs. Trygve Lie graciously accepted an honorary position as patroness. Being faced with an odd situation for lack of consensus, the members quickly appointed Tressa Benson and Luba Rodzianko to head a committee for the preparation of a constitution and a set of by-laws. The work started immediately but it took until the sixties to complete and ratify it by the general membership.

In spite of this drawback, the work in the guild did not really suffer, thanks to the autonomy of the groups. The purpose of the Guild had already been clearly defined thus - "to assist children in need throughout the world and to serve as a mutual bond and centre of interest for women connected with the United Nations and the specialized agencies." The members not only believed it but their heart was in it. They were ready to give their labour of love freely without being much concerned about rules, or caring for the trappings of position on some committees. They followed their own initiative and maintained their own momentum.

In 1951, the U.N. had moved to its permanent Headquarters in New York on the banks of the East River. This led to different groupings of U.N. families in and around the city, and as a result, some of the smaller groups folded up and others became much stronger. The centre of power of the Guild followed the same route, away from Great Neck to Manhattan.

By 1954, the Guild looked stable and well defined. There were now five groups, and in chronological order:

	Name	established
1.	Great Neck	1948
2.	Parkway/Queens	1949
3.	Manhattan	1951
4.	Westchester in Scarsdale	1953
5.	Secretariat in U.N.	1954

In 1950, the membership had increased from the original ten or so to seventy-two. By 1960, that figure had grown to over one hundred.

In the beginning, the Guild was open only to the wives of the U.N. staff members. In 1954, the women staff members were also admitted if they had full-time jobs in the U.N.

Each group began to hold regular monthly meetings where the members could congregate easily, enjoy each other's company and combine with it some useful work for the children - their ultimate objective. These meetings usually ended with some tea or refreshments prepared by the members thus creating a very congenial atmosphere. These also became perfect occasions for the newcomers to get acquainted with the U.N. community. Many lifelong friendships were forged in this manner - a gift of the United Nations.

Gradually, the members began to organize various fund-raising activities. Bazaars and Fairs were the most attractive outlets to sell their handicrafts and display their culinary talents. Other events included Dinner-Dances and Fashion Shows which also produced some money for their Charity Fund. This was a happy combination of fun, entertainment and good deeds. They were comfortably settling down to such events.

But there were others whose vision of the Guild was larger than life. They could not accept this image of domesticity delineating its voluntary work within very narrow limits.

With the creation of the Board, a solution was found. The groups could follow their trodden path while others, in the name of the Guild, were free to explore new avenues for more challenging work.

Just at this point, in 1953, a call came from UNESCO, requesting the Guild to help run one of their fund-raising programmes. It was an opportunity to add a new dimension to the Guild. After some deliberation, the Board accepted this proposal. A sales booth was established in the Visitors' Lobby under the supervision of Luba Rodzianko.

Some excerpts from the writings of the early members-historian will tell the story in more detail.²

"In August, 1953, the United Nations Women's Guild accepted to sponsor, for three months, the UNESCO Gift Stamps Drive to help reconstruct the educational system in Korea. Wonderful volunteers from all groups of the Guild started converging six days

² All the quotations here were taken either from the writings of Luba Rodzianko, Dorothy Lawler, or from the Guild newsletters. Everything is held in the Guild archive.

a week to the UNESCO booth to sell (at 25 cents each) the UNESCO Gift Stamps issued by the U.S.A.”

“Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjold launched the UNESCO drive by purchasing the first set of stamps from the president of the Guild, Dorothy Roigt. He commended the Guild for undertaking to conduct this appeal.”

“Both morally and financially, the Drive was a great success. In the Spring of 1955, \$34,370.99 had been raised and allocated: \$10,000 to the Working Boys School (Shoeshine Boys) in Seoul, \$5,000 each to the Y.M.C.A. Hostel for Homeless Girls and to the Vocational School for Orphan Boys; \$14,000 to the Children’s Ward at the National Rehabilitation Centre in Tongnae.”

UNESCO wanted the UNWG to continue with the Drive, but for lack of volunteers, the Guild had to discontinue the contract. However, with permission from the president, Luba Rodzianko offered her personal services to UNESCO. With help from a few more members, the Drive continued for several more years, still under nominal patronage of the Guild. The untiring efforts of Luba Rodzianko were appreciated by everybody and she was awarded the UNESCO Bronze medal in recognition of her outstanding service in the years 1953-65. The ties between the Guild and UNESCO were finally broken in 1965 when the UNESCO office in the city took charge of the Stamp Drive.

The Guild newsletter of 1965 ended with the following passages - “Mrs. Rodzianko is still faithfully in charge of Public Relations and Liaison (of the Drive). Loyal manning the booth in the General Assembly Building are Mesdames Hadjioannides, Hopkins, Kiss, Pilarski and Vasudev. Mrs. Bihlet is also back with the UNESCO Drive.”

“Since Aug. 1953, a total of \$165,266.53 has been raised: allocations have been made to 41 countries, 5 U.N. agencies or International Projects.”

It could be easily said that “the UNESCO Drive was the first large fund-raising effort by the Guild. It paved the way to further fund-raising on a still larger scale”. It was a turning point in the history of the Guild.

Charlotte Boudreau was right when she eulogized, “the Guild learnt to grow with UNESCO.”

Encouraged by the success of the Drive, the Guild turned its attention to a new direction. From the outset, the Guild had considered bringing out a book that would clearly define its international character to the outside world. A cookbook with authentic recipes from member countries might have been an answer; but UNICEF was already working on one. The Guild also had a second proposal from a member. Claire de Hedervy had suggested publishing a ‘book of Legends’ consisting of folk tales from around the world. Since 1950, she had collected twenty stories and had laid a firm foundation for the project. The Board gladly decided in its favour. A Book Committee was formed to explore the possibilities. Kathleen Read served as Chairperson with Dorothy Roigt and Silvia Godet as her associates.

The fifties was a propitious time for this publication. The name of the United Nations had a great appeal among the elite of New York; it was new and exciting. Even

McGraw Hill, a well-known publisher, happily agreed to work with the UNWG. The publisher sought out Harold Courlander, one of the world's foremost authorities on folklore, to be the editor and the contract was signed between the Book Committee of the Guild and McGraw Hill.

The real hard task began - the collection of stories. Because of the U.N. association with the project, it was imperative that the book should have one story from each member country. Second, each story had to be submitted to the delegation or government for their approval in writing. McGraw Hill was only interested if these conditions were met. Beyond that Harold Courlander, a ruthless editor, demanded that all stories be genuine folk tales. From the previous stock of twenty stories in the possession of the Guild, he accepted only five.

The Book Committee, under the able guidance of Kathleen Read, rose to the challenge. Hundreds of letters written on the Guild stationery went out from Kathleen Read's office to delegations, editors, publishers, illustrators and even to the Internal Revenue Service. Hundreds of stories were read and discarded. Only those which could stand the Editor's test were accepted. These stories had to be procured as donations since the Guild had no cash. In the end, everything fell in place. On the scheduled date of 24th Oct., 1955, the 10th anniversary of the U.N., the book came out with sixty stories bound and wrapped in a colourful jacket, designed by Roger Duvoisin.

The master stroke was the title of the book 'Ride with the Sun.' This was suggested by Kathleen Read who chose it from an old English Ballad - "King John and the Abbot of Canterbury."

The book was an immediate success and the reviews were full of praise. Even now, the Guild feels proud of the compliments received from the press in 1955.

A fine savory sampler of folk wit, satire and wisdom (New York Times)

Fresh and surprising...an unusual roll call of the world's folklore
(New York Herald Tribune)

A truly international book. A fine collection - Enchanting, Exciting, Educational
(Childhood Education)

The success was sweet and shared by many. But those who were familiar with the project knew that "as chairperson of the Book Committee during the initial stage and for five productive years after publication, Kathleen Read was responsible for much of the Book's success."

The Guild reaped the benefit of the royalties for decades and the total surpassed \$10,000 over the years. Money was not its only measure. The publicity it brought through radio, press and individual effort was remarkable. It was translated into fourteen languages. Although it went out of print in 1977, it was never forgotten. 'Ride with the Sun' will always stand as the first and foremost achievement of the Guild.

Still, this was not the whole story of the decade. The future was beckoning to the Guild to strike out on new paths and win fresh laurels.

The decade of 1950-60 was a period of great development. It was not only the Board and Great Neck that were floating big ideas, the Groups were also bubbling with creative energy. The Board was, after all, a mirror of the groups. All the Board members had their roots in their respective groups.

In 1959, Helena Skvorzov, the fund-raising chairperson of Manhattan, suggested that a linen Calendar Towel could be sold to raise money. In the sixties, the Towel became the hottest item for sale at the Guild booth.

About the same time, Cecile Antoine, director of the Secretariat group proposed that at the end of ten years, a yearbook of the Guild be made. That idea resulted in the annual Newsletter.

Westchester had the good fortune of holding their meetings at a prize location in Scarsdale in the Friends Meeting House. In the late fifties, their annual Bazaars were becoming almost a 'talk of the village.' An old member still lovingly looks at a faded snapshot which shows a row of chutney bottles on her kitchen counter that had been prepared to fill the advance orders from some Scarsdale residents. About that time, Ruth Olver's project of 'collecting learning tools' for children in Africa carried the name of the Guild around New York.

In this burst of activities, in spite of its smaller size, Queen's Group did not fall behind. Their members were working with the University Mission of Central Africa in Tanganyika. They also made small monetary donations to a hospital to buy sheets and other linen needed desperately.

During this whole period, the Groups never gave up their close contact with SOS. The amount of labour they put in supplying 'garments and comforts' for the children and the way they faithfully honoured the 'motto' of SOS, there could not be any price tag to measure its real value. It was all very true. But a new trend had set in that was also quite obvious.

Just as a picture even by an obscure artist could be more precious to its owner than a renowned painting on a museum wall, so is it true of charities. The Guild began to find more pleasure in selecting its own projects and raising funds in its own way.

Almost after its birth, in 1949, the Guild decided to help a school in Northwestern Greece providing each of their thirty children with school equipment, clothing, a pair of shoes, and a daily meal for a year. It cost the Guild \$150.00 and that depleted its treasury completely! But the contentment the members felt by establishing a personal contact could never be forgotten. So with their first cash fund from book royalties, they found a new direction for their donations. The project in 1949 had set an example and provided a new incentive.

Autonomy and financial independence, of course, within some prescribed limit, go hand in hand. From the start, the Guild decided that the common funds which accrued to it from joint operation would be controlled either by a joint committee or would be divided equally among the participating groups. The group funds, on the other hand, would be managed by the executive committee of each group. Equitable sharing was an important component in the chemistry of viable partnership that the Guild had learnt at an early age.

As for selecting the projects, the constitution, by two broad strokes, had laid down the following ground rules -

- a) All monies received from any fund-raising project of the Guild, or of any group thereof, shall be used solely to assist children in need throughout the world.
- b) All monies raised by an individual group shall benefit the purposes of the Guild and shall be administered by the Group.

The constitution was not passed until much later. But the rules laid down in it were observed even in the fifties because the constitution was the reflection of the wishes of the founding members, not the other way round.

The first newsletter of the Guild dated spring 1960 was in the making in 1959. A summary version of the reports made at the Annual General Meeting and published in the first issue would give a broad picture of the development of the Guild in the decade since its birth as outlined below.

- * It began with the address from President Winifred Tickner, announcing, "we launch our first newsletter."
- * This was followed by reports from the directors of the 5 groups, each describing its major activities during the past year including the financial operations e.g. funds raised and charities supported.
- * Common funds were managed by separate committees.
- * Special reports were submitted by special committees in charge of UNESCO Gift Stamp Drive and Book Fund.
- * Special reports were submitted from overseas - Bangkok and Ghana - where sister relationships had been established between the Guild and similar associations there.
- * A report was received from Peru where a past member, Mrs. Trueblood, had formed an association and was now asking for affiliation with the Guild in New York.

In all this, one could sense the stability and see the stature of a full-fledged organization ready to be formalized by a proper constitution. The agenda of the Guild in the nineties has not changed much from what was reported in 1960.

Most of the major decisions had been made, the track was laid and the engine was on the way. The founding members had demonstrated their remarkable ability to conceive and implement an idea. The time had come for the future members to take over the lead and guide the Guild to its destination.

Fortunately, the Guild had already acquired a strong feeling for its goal. It was fixed like a polestar in the minds of its members, and was embodied in the now famous poem of the Guild - the 'children's charter' written by Dorothy Roigt of Great Neck in 1953. She once said that on a special occasion the lines of the poem came to her mind unbidden, all in one piece, and so rapidly that she had to grab some paper to write them down in shorthand before they could escape from her for ever.

The words can no longer escape, they will remain in the embrace of the Guild inspiring and uniting the members in a worthy cause.

Here ends the saga of the fifties. With the memory bag full and the future set on its course, the Guild triumphantly entered the decade of the sixties.