

Travels with (Mother) Merlene



by Meredith Jones Gray

Delbe Byers Denda saw the sign in the glass display case of the “old” Administration Building (now Nethery Hall). A European study tour. That sounded like so much fun. The self-admitted “gypsy” of the family, she brought her husband George back to see it and told him, “If we don’t go now, we’ll probably never get there.” The young couple splurged on a movie camera and a new red, gold and black plaid suitcase for their European adventure. It would be their trip of a lifetime.¹

The *Empress of Canada* sailed from Montreal on June 12, 1964, carrying the Dendas and the other members of Andrews University’s first European study tour. The thirty-three travelers, under the direction of English teacher and brand new PhD Dr. Merlene Ogden, could hardly have guessed that they were beginning an Andrews tradition, that theirs was the first of thirteen study tours over the next thirty years.²

Inspired by a European trip she took through her alma mater, Union College, Ogden brought the idea to undergraduate studies at Andrews: students could spend the summer traveling through Europe, visiting important literary, historical, and cultural sites, and earn six college credits. That first summer of 1964 the group visited sixteen countries, ranging from Pompeii, Italy, to Oslo, Norway. They traveled four weeks in the British Isles and six on the Continent, all for the now amazing sum of only \$1,150 each.³

The journey by ship from Montreal to Greenock, Scotland, was part of Ogden’s economical travel plan. In 1964 it was no luxury cruise but still the cheapest way to cross the Atlantic. All together the tour group spent eighteen days sailing the Atlantic as well as the

North and Irish Seas and the English Channel.⁴ Ask any member of the ‘64 tour about memorable moments, says Ogden, and someone is sure to bring up the overnight boat trip from England to Ireland. Second-class tickets afforded the travelers accommodations in dormitory rooms: one for all the male passengers and one for all the female passengers. Below them, in the hold, cattle mooed all night long. Around 4 a.m. a woman came through the dorm, loudly offering them in her strong Irish accent, “Tay? Anyone for tay?”⁵

Memories spill over. And although they are the memories of the 1964 study tour, they trigger similar reminiscences for the alumni of every subsequent Ogden tour. In ‘64 it was Farrell Gilliland who couldn’t resist the heady freedom to speak one’s mind on any imaginable subject at Speakers’ Corner in Hyde Park, London. The *Student Movement* reported, upon the group’s return: “After observing the techniques of the seeming ‘crackpots’ preaching from atop soapboxes and ladders, Farrell drew a crowd by waving a magazine in the air, then began a rampage on England’s sending thirty buses to Cuba.”⁶

For the travelers, high points of the summer often included meeting the “locals.” The Mods and Rockers of England in the ‘60s made an impression on those first Andrews tour members. A Mod in Chester introduced Lori Ann Powell Foll to his clique’s “high-heeled Italian boots, kid gloves, red jackets, and chrome-covered bikes.” The students also met members of the opposition in Liverpool—for 1964 was the year of the famous Bank Holiday clashes between the Mods and Rockers. After some persuasion, the tour’s fearless leader, Dr. Ogden, climbed on behind one of the



Facing page: The 1964 European study group. Pictured are: (left to right) **Anne (Gilliland) Kantor** (BA '66, MA '75); **Marguerite Ross** (BA '50), assistant tour director; Donna Golke; John Nelson; Merlene Ogden, tour director; Pam Calvert; **Judy McClure** (BS '65); **Barbara (Eichmiller) Bort** (BS '66, MA '67); **Farrell Gilliland** (BA '65, MA '66) and **Carroll (Blair) Dunston** (BA '64).

Above (top to bottom): Dr. Merlene Ogden provides a "photo op," posing with an English Rocker, 1964. // Farrell Gilliland holds forth at Speakers' Corner, London, 1964. // Members of the 1976 tour group enjoy Sabbath services at the Waldensian church of Ciabas, Italy.

black-leather-jacketed, motorcycle-riding Rockers.⁷

For the Dendas, like many of the tour members in years to come, the trip was a coming home and a search for the past. George and Delbe left the main group for a week to go to the town of Korbach, Germany, where George had lived before emigrating to the United States, and visit his brother. One of his old schoolteachers and people from the church he had attended welcomed them with open arms. Delbe was thrilled with this glimpse into George's background and made one of her favorite purchases of the trip—a German *dirndl*.⁸

Unbeknownst to the members of the '64 tour, they were forging many traditions that would last through the tours to come: trying to take notes in a "jouncing bus" during mobile classroom lectures,⁹ spending a memorable Sabbath in the Waldensian country near Torre Pellice in Italy, visiting Adventist sister institutions such as Newbold College,¹⁰ and making lifelong friends. At the end of the summer, there was what would become the traditional accounting—an informal gathering of tour statistics that testified to the exhilarating and exhausting pace of the tour: "A careful count revealed having visited the appalling number of 90 cathedrals, 25 palaces or castles, and taken 23 boat rides. They traveled 16,500 miles in sixteen countries—all in 83 days. As students, they studied; they took a total of five tests and had almost daily lectures."¹¹

The end-of-tour survey also painted a profile of each group: Who spent the most money? Who spent the least? What was the favorite country? What was the most unusual souvenir acquired? The Dendas surely must have won that category in 1964. In each country they purchased a local cheese for Delbe's father, making a very smelly suitcase to carry home!¹²

What accounted for the huge success and popularity of Ogden's tour tradition, all begun that summer of 1964? According to her, the long-term relationships that she built with European contacts such as hotels and bus companies. For year after year, Bill or Eddie or Paul drove for her tours and became part of the close-knit tour "fam-

ily"—another hallmark of the Andrews study tours.¹³ In 1964, Marguerite Ross, teacher at the campus elementary school and Ogden's co-chaperone for the trip, organized a "family" celebration for the Dendas' wedding anniversary near Collonges, in France.¹⁴ The tour group of 1974 actually dubbed Ogden "Mother Merlene."

The pleasure of the trips also hinged on Ogden's gift for planning a variety of activities, providing not only a wealth of historical, literary, and art-related sightseeing and information but also the fun of shopping, skiing, photo opportunities, and chairlift excursions in the Alps, to name only a few.

Looking for your spot on the bus seating chart every morning, watching the sheep on the rugged hills of the Scottish highlands, having a water fight on a hot day in London, hanging on for dear life while at the mercy of a substitute Italian bus driver, attending a Shakespeare play in Stratford-upon-Avon, eating lunch surrounded by chiming cows on a mountain in Switzerland, walking the barbed wire perimeter of Dachau, seeing the stained glass windows of Sainte-Chapelle in Paris for the first time. For the students of 1964 and twelve tours to come, their summer in Europe and all the memorable moments on the Andrews Study Tour with "Dr. O.," would prove to be the trip of a lifetime.

¹ Delbe Byers Denda, telephone interview, 15 August 2006, Berrien Springs, Mich.

² Merlene A. Ogden, telephone interview, 9 August 2006 [the day before Ogden left with a tour group bound for ten days in Scotland], Berrien Springs, Mich.

³ "Ogden Heads European Tour," *Student Movement*, 2 October 1963, 4.

⁴ "Two Summer Tours Offered Study Abroad," *Focus*, January–February 1965, 3–4.

⁵ Ogden interview.

⁶ "Memories of Europe," *SM*, 24 September 1964.

⁷ "Memories." This event is recorded for posterity on p. 164 of the 1965 *Cardinal*.

⁸ Denda interview.

⁹ "Two Summer Tours."

¹⁰ "Passports, Shots Precede Trip," *SM*, 22 January 1964, 2.

¹¹ "Memories."

¹² Denda interview.

¹³ Ogden interview.

¹⁴ Denda interview.

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