



Br Hugo Keller, S.J.
(1915-2007. In Zambia 1968-1985)

23 October 2007

Hugo Keller was born on 14 April 1915 in Neuallschwiel, Basel, Switzerland. He attended Grades 1 to 8 at the public school in Baden-Baden, Germany, and so was quite fluent in German. He emigrated to Canada with his parents and he became a Canadian citizen on 4 July 1947. He did say that his step-father was quite strict and that his discipline was at times very harsh. During the Second World War he served in the 31st Reconnaissance and Royal Canadian Mechanical Engineers, and was stationed to Canada where he rose to the rank of corporal. In the army he drove a water truck. After the war, he went to the Ontario Agricultural College, Guelph, where he earned a diploma in horticulture in 1948.

Before joining the Jesuits, Hugo journeyed to the Gethsemane monastery in Kentucky to discern if he should be a Trappist. After one month of prayer and discernment, he entered the Society on 24 December 1952 at St Stanislaus novitiate, Guelph, Ontario. This must have taken a lot of courage since by that time he was already 37 and set in his ways. Moving into a novitiate community made up of teenagers must have been difficult. He was quite mature and was blessed with a good sense of humor and so he could laugh resignedly at the stupidity and ignorance of those around him (both novices and fathers) when it came to matters agricultural or mechanical. He pronounced his first vows on Christmas Day 1954.

All of his early years at Guelph were spent in the garden. Hugo had Swiss-German genes which accounted for his professional exactness when working in the garden. Nothing was left to chance: all the rows were carefully measured, the plants evenly spaced apart, the precise amount of manure and fertilizer applied, and the regular watering schedule scientifically calibrated. Novices dreaded being sent to the garden because they knew they were in for an exacting schedule of work, which was carefully planned. In 1960 he went to the Jesuit Seminary in Toronto (Regis College) to care for the garden but he also did mechanical and maintenance work as well. In 1962 he went to Milford, Ohio for his tertianship after which he returned to Toronto to carry on at Regis College.

It came as a surprise to many when it was announced on the 1968 status that Hugo Keller was being missioned to the new overseas apostolate in Zambia. He had passed the half century mark a few years earlier and although his health was good and his physical condition strong, there was concern about his survival there. His background in horticulture and his experience in maintenance and mechanics proved invaluable both at Kasisi and at Charles Lwanga Teacher Training College. Hugo's determination and zeal helped him to stay in Zambia for 17 years.

While in Zambia he took great interest in studying dreams. Fr Roger Yaworski at his funeral Mass said: "I have many fond memories of Hugo. They come from part of a sabbatical that I spent at Guelph in February of 1997. I had the good fortune of telling Hugo that I was interested in dreams. The next day at breakfast Hugo had 6 or 7 dreams to tell me from the night before. This continued on and off for those 6 weeks I was in Guelph. One day I asked him why dreams were important to him. He replied 'what else would you have to guide your life?' He also interpreted one of my dreams in which I took a shirt that didn't belong to me. He said that was simple: "You are not as honest as you think you are". He was right of course, and I have never forgotten it.'

On hearing of Hugo's death, a former Provincial of Zambia wrote: "I wish to offer you and the members of your Province my condolences on the death of this wonderful worker and great companion. I lived with Hugo for five years (1980-1985) at Charles Lwanga. He really was a joy to live with – his colorful language (What the pot! End of the chapter! The cotton picking light is not working!) and his great stories. He also kept our community vehicles running, the garden in perfect order (when Bishop Corboy used to visit and seeing Hugo's cabbages in such a straight a line – he commented 'it was unnatural!'). After he left Zambia, I would hear from him a few times a year (until the last few years) and he would let me know when he had transferred a donation to the Mission Office from his benefactors for our use".

His latter years in Zambia were becoming difficult. He was in charge of a lot of equipment, tools and other valuable pieces of machinery needed for the daily grind of work. The constant battle of safeguarding his equipment and out-manoeuvring the thieves wore him down.

So at the age of 70, when most people have already retired, Hugo returned to Canada and went back to Guelph in 1985 where his long adventure in the Society had begun. He was assigned to the Farm Community as mechanic and jack-of-all-trades. It seems his six years there were happy and productive years. He spent 6 months in 1992-1993 repairing the plumbing in the Church in Annotto Bay, Jamaica which means that even at the age of 77 he was still able to operate efficiently. In 2001 he was transferred to the infirmary at Pickering where he died. Hugo Keller was in his 92nd year and 55th year of religious life at the time of his death on 23 October 2007. He was laid to rest in the Jesuit cemetery at Guelph, next to the farm land which he had nursed so carefully and so lovingly.