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JOHN C. DeBOER, Executive Director

June 22, 1981

To: John E. Buteyn

From: John C. DeBoer *JCD*

Subject: Oral History Concerning John J. DeBoer, Principal, Voorhees College, Arcot Mission, 1922-1940

In March, 1980, when I was in India on study-travel leave (accompanied by my wife) I visited Vellore, which had been my home as a boy. While we were in Vellore the present Principal of Voorhees College, Dr. Jayakaran Isaac, held a reception for us, inviting also those who had personally known my father, Dr. John J. DeBoer, while he was Principal.

One by one these persons stood and recalled incidents involving them and my father and mother. Several recalled the three main points of a speech my father had given about: Gandhi, the saint; Tagore, the poet; Nehru, the rebel. It was a most moving experience, and I asked that those who had spoken put their words on paper so that they might be preserved. (One of those who was present, the father of the present Principal, died soon afterwards.) They were kind enough to do so, and the papers were recently sent to me. I enclose them herewith.

It seems to me that these papers would make a valuable addition to the archives of the Arcot Mission.

Let me add a bit of my own "oral history." Our family came home on furlough in 1928. Our return to India was delayed because my father was asked to be Acting Secretary of the Board of Foreign Missions, R.C.A., while the Secretary, Francis Marmaduke Potter, was on a one-year visitation program. This was when the headquarters of the R.C.A. were at 25 East 22nd St., New York. We returned to India in 1931.

The 1930's were the years when the control of the church in the Vellore area was passing from the missionaries to the delegates from the congregations--the Arcot Assembly. At the beginning of the decade I recall that "Mission Meeting" (the gathering of missionaries held annually in January in Vellore) took several days--longer than the deliberations of the Arcot Assembly held the same week. Most of the important decisions were made by the missionaries. At the end of the decade Mission Meeting took part of a day and the Arcot Assembly took several days. The transfer of power to the Assembly was resisted by several missionaries, who had some harsh things to say about my father, who was a strong advocate for the independence of the Indian church as well as nation. But I suppose this is the reason why he was remembered so warmly 40 years after his death.

Rev. Dr. John DeBoer M.A. Ph.D

As I know him: I.B. Rajendiran B.A. B.T.
Retired Principal, U.T. Trg. School
Viruthampet, Vellore 6.

It is a great thing to be a contemporary of great people. They enrich our ideas, attitudes and our behaviour to a very great extent. Much more so when you are able to live directly under them, enjoying their friendship, affections and love, as I did with the Rev. Dr. John DeBoer, Principal, Voorhees College and High School.

First I was a student in the Voorhees High School and Christian Hostel, of which he was the head (1925-30) and later I was a student in the College (1930-1932).

Very often he would see me in the Reading Room, which was a part of the Principal's Residence, College House as it was then called. He looked into the magazine I was reading. (There were magazines like the Atlantic Monthly, Time, Intelligencer--forerunner of Church Herald, and of course there were also the Reader's Digest and Saturday Review--all belonging to him. And we Christian Hostel boys were invited to visit his reading room.) "You may be reading them to idle away your time," he said to me, "but read them with seriousness. You will be benefitting much." And after some days he came to me with his own book, "Platonic Theory of Knowledge," the thesis he wrote for his doctorate. He made me to think on great things, great themes, etc. He was a genial friend to many of us, though we were quite young teenage boys.

Picker is a picker

Four of our hostel mates were unable to pay our hostel fees. It was natural to go to a missionary for some help--mostly gifts. But he was willing to help us earn the money. Outside the windows of his office there was and is a tennis court. "You see those boys--illiterate boys--are earning as much as ten rupees a month picking balls for the players. Why don't you work to earn the money?" They agreed and began to work picking balls. As the tennis players among the staff were few, some rich college boys were taken into the college Tennis Club as members. While the members of the staff called for balls, these college student players noticed that some college boys were picking balls. The staff called out the names of the boys, but the student players called out, "Picker, ball here." The student pickers were offended and complained to the Principal. "Doctor, our classmates call us 'Picker.' We feel humiliated." Dr. DeBoer said, "They are right. When you pick balls, you are a picker. I would be offended if a player should call me by name and ask for the balls, because DeBoer is Principal. But when I pick balls, I am not DeBoer but a picker. So when you pick balls, you are a picker. Is not this right?" The boys saw the point and were satisfied; more than satisfied, they learned something new.

At another time another group of boys were sent out for non-payment of fees and went to him for help. He asked one boy, "What is the matter? Why did not your parents send you money?" The boy replied, "I am a poor boy, sir. My mother, a widow, is a menial worker--one who cuts grass and sells it for houses, and sometimes she earns not enough to meet the daily needs of the large family." Dr. DeBoer said, "That's not menial labour. See, my gardener needs help to cut the grown grass. You go and help my gardener and cut the grass. I will pay you in advance enough to pay the hostel fees. Learn the dignity of labour." The boys were pleased. They were not obliged to anybody. They were dependent on no one. They understood the meaning of "Learning and Earning."

III. He had special care for Christian boys from the rural areas of the mission. Once the Manager of the Hostels sent out a couple of boys for not paying their fees in time. When they went to Dr. DeBoer, he was quite sorry. "Where will you go?" he said. "Back to our villages. We have to go and remain until our parents get the money. That means we lose our classes, too." Immediately he sent for the Manager. "If these boys cannot

go to the college, you and I cannot remain here. Remember, Voorhees College exists for Mission boys in particular and not for rich Hindu boys. Please keep this in mind." Then he advanced money to make up the deficit. He showed everyone concerned why the College, particularly Arcot Mission College or Voorhees College, exists for the poor rural boys.

IV. A great disciplinarian as he was, his class was disturbed one day by one boy in particular. He looked at him seriously for a few seconds and then he said, "You are excused." The boy did not understand and so he sat down thanking him for his mercy as understood. Dr. DeBoer was furious. "Did you understand my words? When I say you are excused, you simply go out of the class at once. Go out!" He taught the full report of the words, "You are excused."

He enjoyed eating with us on dinner days in the hostel. Particularly he liked our rasam (pepper water). He would have a big bowl full of that rasam and drink it.

Mrs. DeBoer--a small but beautiful lady. A doll-like figure beside this big Dorai (Dr. DeBoer), she was equally gentle and jovial, a kindly lady, a mother who would make us all to feel at home in her house. If three or four of us were to go to her for a chit chat, we were welcomed very heartily. After a little while she would call "Thamboo" (the name of their cook) and within the next few minutes this dark man with a white turban would enter with cups of good tea on a tray for all of us.

TEACHING TABLE MANNERS

Dr. and Mrs. DeBoer for the first time introduced the idea of giving us (remember most of us are from villages) an opportunity to eat as the Westerners do using spoons, forks, napkins, plates, saucers and cups. You know, we Indians use spoons only when our hands are dirty or when there are wounds in fingers. Generally we eat from any cone, plate or leaf plate with our right hands. The left hand should not come near our plat or leaf. At weekends or holidays we were invited for dinner, two at a time. When I went in for the first time and sat at the DeBoer's dinner table, what do I see? I see no food or vegetable or meat--just the things with which we eat. Spoons (two) one side, forks which we have never handled, clean napkins neatly folded, an ornamental bowl of water, a knife, glass tumblers, a jug (China or glass) and an empty plate in front of you. You offer grace on empty plates. But to make us feel at home, in the middle of the table were almost all the items of food we were going to eat--rice, vegetables, slices of bread, butter and meat sauce, cakes, etc. The cook, Thambusamy, came in clean white coat and turban with gold rimmed spectacles and served the food. We saw just how Dr. DeBoer used his spoons, forks to cut and eat his food and began to do the same. But after dinner Dr. DeBoer says, "I see you eat like an Englishman, keeping your fork in your left hand." I laughed at the remark, but since this was my first experience of eating like a Westerner I knew nothing. He laughed more heartily than others did. Looking back I see now how simple and ordinary it is to eat at a table as a Westerner, but then it was something very great--an endearing and enduring experience, wherever I go. I was there thinking of our struggle for political independence and so naturally the table talk veered around politics.

Dr. DeBoer, even before coming to India, was evidently interested in our struggle for independence and therefore he lost no opportunity to contact and cultivate the friendship of the greatness of our country? Did he not study about the non strange manner in which Candhiji guided our struggle for independence, based on truth and non-violence, "Satya Ahimsa," suitable to our spiritual and religious background.

Two of our Christian college students were selected to attend the biennial world conference of the World Student Christian Federation in 1931 at Allahabad, the home town

of the Nehru family. As an outing the delegates were allowed to visit "Ananda Bha Wan," the home of Pandit Nehru. It was open to the public even though the Nehrus were living there. Our college boys were fortunate to meet Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. Pandit Nehru was kidding these two when they told him that they came "from Vellore in Madras state." "Ah," he said, "then you come from Voorhees College." "Yes," said the boys, pleased that Nehru should know about their little junior college in the distant South. Then their joy knew no bounds, for Nehru said, "So you are students of DeBoer." There were then no hand cameras as we have them now. But there was a photographer who was taking pictures for those who could pay for them. Our students approached Nehru and asked him to sit for a picture with him. Not only did he agree readily, but also brought his wife Kamala Nehru with him. These two sat on two chairs and the boys stood behind the chairs. They saw Indira, a girl of 13, plucking flowers in the garden near the place where they were standing for the picture. One of the boys said, "Will you please call your daughter for the photo?" "You go and call her if you want, and it is up to her to accept or not to accept your invitation." When they called, she accepted and came to sit with her parents. But Nehru said, "The Vellore boys invited you, so you go and stand between them." A copy of the picture where the two Prime Ministers are, is still with one of them at Chittoor. It is because of Dr. DeBoer that these boys were lucky to get that singular picture.

On 31-8-1927 Gandhiji visited Vellore and Dr. DeBoer invited him to speak to the Voorhees Boys' High School and College. As usual Gandhiji was squatted on a soft pillow on the table and Dr. DeBoer presided over the meeting. He said, "This day is one of the memorable days of my life. We had to study the philosophy of Gandhi while yet I was in college. I never imagined that I would ever meet so great a man in person and much less preside over the meeting in which Gandhi speaks." And that is that.

On the sudden death of Dr. DeBoer in 1940 many of us thought and said that he met with an untimely death. But after 40 years, when I see the sad event in the true perspective, his short service of 18 years was complete in itself. He came to India with a Mission to reveal Christ to us and succeeded in full because in the eighteen hours of his classroom lectures on the Sermon on the Mount he expounded the meaning, structure and the content of the Kingdom of God. After Gandhi extolled him for the way he expounded the Sermon on the Mount, Dr. DeBoer said, "My mind and understanding are small, for I could talk only for 18 hours (2 periods in a week for 9 weeks). But a great man like Gandhi, it is, 180 hours to expound the meaning and importance of the Sermon on the Mount-- $\frac{1}{2}$ an hour a day for 6 months."

I. B. Rajendiran

Dr. John J. De Boer was a great Christian genius and kind administrator.

Mr. James was the sole clerk cum bill collector (college fees) of the Voorhees College when Dr. J.J. De Boer was Principal. This man had five children all girls. It happened, that during the checking and auditing of accounts it was found that he had misappropriated about five to six hundred rupees out of the college funds. When this was communicated to him he was seen to tremble for he was a thin nervous man. Dr. J.J. DeBoer did not let it out to anybody. Do you know what that great Christian doctor did. He called the writer and said '' James'' you are tired - you need some rest and change and so you better to home and dress up and join me to go to Madras for a couple of days. Come prepared to stay with me there''. He took him to Madras and he kept him in the Spencer hotel and for two evenings he took him to the Beach and without any threatening and pressure he got his confessions - and brought him back to Vellore and announced his decision on the affair. ''Writer James works hard and he has five daughters to care for. His salary is very low and I propose to increase his salary from fifty five to seventy five and deduct Rs.15/- per month for his debt to the college so that his net salary will be five rupees more than what he gets now. I understand his difficulties very well. In India it is very expensive to bring up girls and he has five girls''. That's the way the great man dealt with this case. No scandle - No dismissal, no heart breaking and no beckerings. - Dr. J.J. De Boer made good the whole amount from his personal funds and later he collected a part of the amount from the writer and the rest he forgave. And so Dr. J.J. De Boer one of the few who said the Lord's prayer with a clear conscience '' Forgive our debts as we forgive our debtors'' Matt 6.12 . The amounts mentioned may not be exact but the story is true.

Late. I.B. RAJENDERAN
Retired Principal
Union Mission Trg. School,
Vellore.

STATEMENT MADE BY K. ISSAC IN THE PRESENCE OF MRS. AND
Dr. DeBoer On 3.80 at the Voorhees College, Vellore

I am an old student of the Voorhees College, Vellore during the period 1937-39.

On passing the S.S.L.C. Examination in 1957, I met the Principal, Dr. De Boer for admission. After getting my application form from me, he wrote on it as follows:-

ADMIT
Half fees
Sd/- J.J.D.

Looking at the entry I said, Sir, I am a poor boy. I cannot afford to pay half fees. He said, If you are a poor boy why do you want to come for College studies? I replied, Sir, it is because I am poor I want to come for College studies so that I may improve my status after graduating. He looked at me with a smile and got back the application form from me and struck off what he wrote and wrote again FULL FREE. I always look back at this act of his greatness and kindness with a heart full of gratitude.

As Secretary of the History association and the Tennis club of the College I had close connection with the Principal. One day he sent for me. With shivering I met him in his bungalow, He said meet ERMA. She came with all smiles and said, Isaacs, I have your article LADIES IN VOORHEES. I want to give a little finishing touch to the same. I was relieved of the fear. She very much appreciated my article.

I can never forget the De Boer family because but for his Christian love in making me a free scholar, I would not have been what I am today.

God bless the De Boer family,

K. Isaacs, B.A.,L.T.,
Retired Headmaster

LATE DR. J. JOHN DEBOER

Dr. John J. Deboer came to India as a Missionary of the RCA in USA. He was one of the precious few Missionaries who came with high academic qualifications, ideals and aspirations. Soon he arrived he took charge of the Principalship of Voorhees college bringing with fresh ideas of learning and Missionary work, through the church institutions. Straight away he began to devote himself more towards learning the Indian mind, the circumstances of the Mission field, the educational system of the country in general and that of the University of Madras in particular. It was during his time that in 1930 that the Vellore Electric Corporation was inaugurated so that Vellore could have electricity. Dr. Deboer as the Principal of the college took the earliest opportunity to get electricity to the whole College campus and the Hostels. It might be stated that DeBoer began to modernise the college set up and introduce up to date ideas of education, teaching and relationships among the students, the teaching faculty and the public. He endeavoured hard to explore some of the archaic ideas of systems which were in vogue before he came. He wanted to discourage the Mission compound mentality of the Christians and widen their outlook towards their attitude to non-Christians. Either he organised or revitalized the YMCA the CE Society, the Sunday schools and the SCM towards enlightening the Vellore folks as a whole and Christians in particular for a better way of love.

His sermons in mostly the churches in our areas and his public lectures were liked by people irrespective of religion and caste. He took keen interest and active part in church councils all over India to try to enliven the thinking of Christians towards bringing Christ to non-Christians.

As the Principal, Professor, teacher and administrator he was unique and won the lasting love and admiration of students. If Christian students ~~and subjects~~ liked him non-Christians loved him. His teaching of English and subjects was up to date and fitting to the level of Indian students in those days. He paid weekly visits to the Hostels and actively participated in the prayers and functions of all the students in the Hostels. He participated in the sports and games of the college and the hostels.

India was going through freedom struggle during those days when Dr. DeBoer was the Principal. Not only did he sympathize with the aspirations of Indians to become free from the British Yoke but at the same time he gave liberal encouragement to students to agitate and fight for their freedom without impairing the studies. He had befriended most of the Indian leaders of that time, like Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, Dr. C. V. Raman and the father of India Nation Mahatma Gandhi. He lost no opportunity to try to invite them to Vellore for some function or another at the college or the YMCA or any other organization. His speeches on Indian National Affairs were very much appreciated. He was hailed as the friend of India and of the several speeches he delivered one is still remembered by most of his students, colleagues and well wishers. That is his Marathon speech on the Saint "Mahatma Gandhi" the poet Rabindranath Tagore and the Rebel (Nehru). It was published in almost all the leading News Papers in India and afterwards in some Magazines he invited Mahatma Gandhi during his time for a two day stay at Vellore as the chief guest of Dr. John D. Boer. Dr. DeBoer's attachment and association with some of the National leaders and his encouragement of Indian to fight for their freedom led the Government to suspect him as one of those opposed to British Raj and he was for some time under the shadow of the C.I.D.S.

DeBoer has left behind a great name which he won quite in a natural way. So long as Voorhees college goes on he will be remembered as one of its or even the best of its Principals.

His demise left a void. The grownups and the young had tears to shed for him. The Vellore public was stunned to hear the news from Kodāikanal that he suddenly passed away from a cerebral hemorrhage. Soon as Mahathma Gandhi was informed of his death, he sent a personal message to the Editor of the Vellore Guardian a Weekly of those days saying "It is a personal loss to me that Dr. John J. Deboer passed away".

Dr. DeBoer cared more for individual contacts. He tried to learn the names of all the students and liked to call them by names.

As a Missionary Principal of the college he was true and faithful to his calling. He took part in direct and indirect evangelistic work. He conducted retreats and Bible study classes to Christian students and Christian workers. He cared for the poor students and poor people. He was so charitable that he gave money to many people when they approached him for help.

May God bless his children and their families.

Dr. M.J. Sudarsanam
Retired Professor of History
Voorhees college.

Dr. DeBoer (A Pioneer Principal)

John J. DeBoer,
John the Baptist,
John the Saint,
Looked he - nobler !

Great in height
Deep in thought
Heart of gold with
Thoughts untold,
A Mighty mind!
In every clime
He was sublime.

To think of Dr. DeBoer is to think of a great man. Yes, he was indeed a great Principal - one of the greatest I had ever known, both as a student and as a member of staff. Few could equal him and much less excel him.

More than half a century has passed away, but this great Principal's memory lingers still in our minds. And we have nostalgic memories of his stay at Voorhees Campus, radiating his endearing personality, scattering sunshine, wherever he went.

Dr. DeBoer had such commanding figure that he could easily be the leader of men. His demeanour was dignified, his movement majestic, his look piercing and his voice powerful. He was a serious man. He rarely smiled. Perhaps he was smiling in his sleeves, as it were, at the vast majority of mankind wasting their smiles or laughter.

This great Principal was always dressed immaculately, his favourite colour being grey. How grand he used to appear in his Palm Beach grey suit, with his shining stiff collar and a beautiful tie to match. Of course his shining shoes highlighted his dress.

His lectures were highly enlightening and inspiring. And we used to listen with rept attention what Dr. DeBoer said about Macaulay and Johnson.

He was a man of deep sympathy and great understanding. He had endeared himself to generations of students by evincing keen interest in their well being be it in the Lecture Hall, during examinations, in the Hindu and Christian hostels of those days and in the playfields.

He was really a great American but a good Christian and a great admirer and fellower of Gandhiji with whom he stayed for a number of days at Wardha.

Dr. DeBoer was a good teacher, a great philosopher and a very fine gentleman and a great Principal. He was a great man indeed !

Dr. B.S. SWAMIDOSS
Retired Vice-Principal
Voorhees College, Vellore