YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Peace Corps/ Foreign Missions Project

New Guinea

O. H. 676

FR. MARTIN JOSEPH KOPUNEK

Interviewed

by

Joseph Rochette

on

October 30, 1984

FR. MARTIN JOSEPH KOPUNEK

Fr. Martin J. Kopunek was born on September 24, 1929, in Lansford, Pennsylvania, the son of Vincent and Mary Orsulak Kopunek. His parents originally came from Czechoslovakia to settle in the coal region of Eastern Pennsylvania. There his father worked as a coal miner; his mother had previously been a maid in New York City. Fr. Kopunek is one of five children, three boys and two girls.

Fr. Kopunek attended grades one through eight in Pennsylvania before deciding on a religious vocation. He finished high school at the Sacred Heart Seminary in Geneva, Illinois before attending college at the Sacred Heart Seminary in Shelby, Ohio from 1949 to 1955. During this time he was prepared for the overseas missions as a Catholic priest. Fr. Kopunek went on to complete his education at Fordham University from 1956 to 1957.

Fr. Kopunek is and has been working as a missionary in Papau New Guinea for the past 27 years, presently on the island of New Ireland and previously on Manus, the Nimgo Islands, Lavongai, and Kavieng. His special interests include ham radio, shell collecting, auto mechanics, TV-Video filming, and music.

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INTERVIEWEE: FR. MARTIN KOPUNEK

INTERVIEWER: Jospeh Rochette

SUBJECT: New Guinea, Catholic church, Sacred Heart Missions, local customs, major people, events

DATE: October 30, 1984

R: This is an interview with Father Martin Kopunek for the Youngstown State University Peace Corps/Foreign Missions Project, by Joe Rochette at the Sacred Heart Retreat on Logan Avenue in Liberty Township, on October 30, 1984 at 10:00 a.m.

Could you give us a little bit of background about where you were born, where you are from, a little mini history?

K: My name is Father Martin Kopunek. I'm a missionary of the Sacred Heart. I've been working in New Guinea for twenty-five, twenty-seven years. New Guinea is in the South Sea Islands region, north of Australia and south of the equator. I was born in Lansford, Pennsylvania. It is a coal region in Eastern Pennsylvania. My parents are from Czechoslovakia and they were born in Czechoslovakia. They raised the family in Pennsylvania. My dad was a coal miner and my mother was formerly a maid for a Jewish family in New York City. I was raised in this small coal mining town and was going to school. My parents didn't know English too well because they came over from Europe when they were young. They grew up in America and never went to school here. They went to school in Czechoslovakia. My dad went as far as fourth grade. My mom went as far as sixth grade. My mom eventually learned English because she worked in New York. She even had a Brooklyn accent. My dad knew English, but he never learned to read and write in English. My mom read English newspapers and all very well.

We had five children in the family, three boys and two girls. One of my brothers died and he would have been the fourth brother. My third brother would have been sixth in the family. I went as far as eighth grade in school. I was born in 1929. Those were very hard times. We took everything for granted and didn't experience any real hardships. I guess our parents experienced most of the hardships during those times. We as kids took everything for granted. We may not have had all the stuff we could have had, but it didn't affect us much at all. We were poor for clothing and food and everything else. I imagine our parents struggled, but we didn't really feel it. When I grew up my dad never owned a car; we were just too poor to have a car. I never owned a bicycle. I owned a pair of roller skates. We had a good home. We had heat in the winter and we had enough food. I can't remember ever crying for being hungry. I know that I never had any money in mypocket. Whenever I went to the grocery store I always had to ask mom for a couple of cents to buy some candy. When we were growing up I know we used to buy cigarettes for one penny each at the store. We walked to school every day; we walked to church. My dad walked at least two miles to work every day. Then he would be gone all day working in the coal mines. He would wash in the so-called wash shanty at the mines. Then he would come home with dark eyelashes still and he was still dirty and would have to wash again at home. That was a constant job; he would get up at five o'clock in the morning and get home at two or three o'clock in the afternoon, but he had a full day's work. Every two weeks he would get paid. I remember him handing over his salary to mom and she would say, "Is this all?" I think he used to pocket some to spend with his friends in the saloon or beer garden. He used to buy some beer or whiskey and bring it home.

They used to take us on trips into New York; that was a real big event every summer. My mom had a lot of friends in New York City because she worked there before she got married. We always went back to Brooklyn to spend part of the summer at least. We would go by train. It would come right into our hometown and take us right into New York City. From there my mom would know the way to get around on buses and on subways. I remember many pleasant days on the beaches, Jones Beach, Rockaway Beach, Coney Island. We would also go fishing and swimming there in the summer. I remember walking over one, big mountain. We started at seven o'clock in the morning and wouldn't get over to the other side until about ten o'clock in the morning. That is how we spent our vacations in the summer.

R: In your environment that you've just explained, what sparked your interest in foreign missions?

K: I remember distinctly one missionary; he was a Jesuit priest. He came to preach a mission at the church. I can still visualize him. He spoke about his work in the foreign missions in Africa. He described it so clearly and vividly that it captured my imagination. I always remembered that, he being a priest and working in the foreign missions. He talked about the lions and wild animals, his adventures through the jungles. That always was very active in my mind. Another thing too was a parish priest, a very young parish priest, Father John Neupauer. He was a very active, energetic priest. He was very close to the kids. He played sports, was on the baseball team, formed a basketball team, formed the youth group. He was very easy to get along with. We gravitated towards him because the pastor, he was a terror. Everybody was afraid of him. As an altar boy I had one eye on the altar and one eye on him because I thought I would get clobbered if I didn't genuflect right or something like that. We just shivered in our boots when we had to talk to him. Having that associate priest, Father John Neupauer there, that was a big relief. A lot of the kids liked him very much. That impressed me very much, the work of a priest.

R: What is the formation of your order that you have to go through?

K: At that time they were taking students into the seminary training for the priesthood after the eighth grade. When the opportunity came out, I remember the sister asking if anyone wanted to be a priest, and I put up my hand. It was almost natural. Before I knew it I had an application and I signed it. Before I knew it I told my mom that I was going to the seminary and she didn't have any objections. When it was time to go at the end of that summer I remember her getting me one morning saying, "Marty, it's time to go. The bus is going to come. If you want to go you can go, but if you don't want to go you can stay and go to school with the rest of the kids." I told her, "I'm going." Maybe it was a sign that I just wanted to get away from home. That was in 1943. The war was already on. I saw a lot of kids moving around there and going into the Army and Navy. I was only thirteen, but I knew some of my friends were forging their names and not giving their correct names and getting into the army. My mind was not to stay at home, not at all.

R: How did your family react as far as you being a missionary and going away?

K: They experienced that situation before because my brother went overseas when he became a priest. He also went to New Guinea. When I wanted to go, I could see where it was kind of tough to have two overseas. My older brother,

Vince, stayed home, though. He is still a priest and is here at the retreat house. He spent nine years in the missions. I spent twenty-seven.

R: What do you remember about any kind of training, as far as language . . .

K: I had a full high school training. I had Latin, German, Hebrew. We didn't have French. We had a complete and thorough high school education at the seminary in Geneva. That was quite a distance for me to travel 1,000 miles from Pennsylvania out to Chicago. I made that trip once a year, in September. I stayed all year and went back home for the summer. When I went further on to college we had a seminary college in Shelby, Ohio. Then I had my theology and philosophy training in Shelby, Ohio too. I was there for eight years. While we were there they sort of trained us for overseas work. As usual they gave us a complete and full training of everything, every subject in philosophy and of course a full range of theology. Besides that they also trained us for outside work. They encouraged us to become involved in working with our hands, to make ourselves useful on the farm. They pulled us, drew us into that kind of work. I helped to milk cows, put up fences, tore them down. I helped harvest corn and wheat, planted potatoes, picked potatoes out of the field with my hands. We dug ditches and drains and everything. We had to sweep the floors of the seminary, wash the sink, clean the toilets. There is nothing that we were not exposed to. We worked in the laundry. We ironed clothes. We washed. We hung wash on the line. We peeled potatoes in the kitchen and celery. They rationed out our time from start to finish. At five o'clock in the morning we were up-and-at-them. We were in church by six. By seven o'clock we were finished with church, and by eight o'clock we were already in the classroom. We couldn't talk in the hallways. They regulated our smoking, our reading habits, what magazines we read and what newspapers we were allowed to read. We were regulated all the way, disciplined all the way.

R: In hindsight now do you see that that did prepare you?

K: Oh sure. It didn't hurt us at all. I speak this way because in our group I have about twenty other missionaries besides myself working alongside with me. I think out of all the priests that were working down in New Guinea, maybe we lost two or three priests who had left the priesthood. All kinds of reasons are connected with this of course. The training that we had was sufficient for us to do our work. And it's happening; the guys are still at it. They are really hacking it in the bush; it is not easy at all.

R: What were your first impressions after you first went to

New Guinea?

K: I was as young as you. I considered nothing as an obstacle. No physical hardship was big enough to dissuade me or persuade me to be doing something else. I had a lot of physical hardships. It was something new and different.

R: To get a feel of where you worked could you just give me an idea of the environment that you were in physically, like geography and the ethnic groups?

K: The first impression that I got of New Guinea when I stepped off the airplane was that it was tremendously hot. It was like walking through a bakery. The majority of the people are black, and coming from a white society it just sort of puts you around a big umbrella or net. Once you are in that sort of environment for a while you get to know the people and the people are not bad. You find out that they laugh and cry and have the same hopes and desires; they have the same struggles as anybody else. You begin to associate yourself with them very quickly. The fact that they can smile and they are happy too, it is sort of convincing that this isn't bad at all. In certain ways and in certain things they look up to you. You exhibit a lot of outsidedness. You are bringing a lot of things new to them just by your personality. This reaffirms your commitment to try something different, and it is not so bad. I never operated out of fear. I was never afraid or scared, never, even though I knew there could be a lot of dangers. For example there was poison, sorcery. A thought like that never came to my mind. There were also a lot of physical dangers of course, walking through the jungle or paddling a canoe up the river, crocodiles, traveling by boat on the sea with a canoe, sharks all around. Strangely I've never allowed something like that to shake me; I don't know why.

R: What would you say were the hardest things to get used to?

K: I think isolation. Isolation holds the greatest fear. Even today, even though I've been there twenty-five years, isolation is still a big thing. I've learned how to keep myself busy. You do all these hobbies and everything else and keep busy in order to overcome this isolation. Sometimes that has bad effects; you become inward. You think of yourself too much. Isolation is not the fact . . . there are a lot of people around. It is not that you are living on a cloud all by yourself. There are a lot of people around, but the people cannot communicate with you. You try your best always to communicate, but you get tired of it. Being the communicator you are always trying to generate a conversation. You are always putting something forward to talk about, but then there is no rebound or reaction. Nobody can create a converstaion with you. Maybe this is for myself because I like to talk

to people or I like to listen to people. To travel 100 miles it takes me three and a half hours on a bumpy road. I could sit in a car with a fellow and he may say five or ten words in three hours.

R: Sometimes in our country we think we have to keep communicating and talking all the time.

K: I get tired of talking; I like to listen too. Some people don't believe that. (Laughter) We have one guy in the missionary order and he continually talks. He is never tired of talking. That is how he overcomes his isolation. That is the most difficult thing. I have had all kinds of other problems, finance, not having enough money to do the job that is expected of me, or I don't have the proper materials or machinery to do my job. They are big things and they can cause a lot of depression too. I've never really been depressed. We've lost some missionaries because of that; they just couldn't make it. What I mean by lost is that they had to withdraw and come back to the States. That didn't happen too often. We didn't lose many missionaries like that. Coming back, our training was really apropos; it was perfect for what we had to experience.

R: Could you describe a typical day? None of them probably are.

K: In a way you can't program anything down there in places like that. For a typical day I would be up at 6:00 in the morning. I would get to bed at midnight, maybe even 1:00. That left me an eighteen hour day. This day included some relaxation too. At night I read. At 6:00 I would get dressed really quick and by that time some of my workers driving the trucks would be milling around to get the keys, to get the gas. My parish runs a trucking service because we are situated on a road and we are in that area where people are involved in business. We, as a parish, provide that service because they don't have enough money to own trucks yet. The parish does it and it is a good thing whereby we can really help the people to get produce into the market, which is 150 miles away. The trucks are going somewhere every day practically. I have to get up not only for the sake of these trucks to get moving and started fast, but also because I have mass, church service every morning. I am at the school at eight o'clock in the morning. I don't teach, but I have to be there. I want to be there; I don't have to be there. Between six and eight o'clock I have already had mass. I had breakfast and I have the trucks on the road. By nine o'clock I am more or less free that I can do my office work. Between nine and twelve o'clock I do my office work. People come in for business relating to the school, the church for baptisms, for any clerical work. I have some workers working at the parish plantation. Things break down and I have to attend to them, make sure that they

are kept running. I could give all this work to other people, but I don't have the money to pay them. I have to do a lot of the work myself. I can't send my lawn-mower to be repaired; I don't have the money to get it repaired. I have to fix it myself. My hands get dirty just like any mechanic's. If something is wrong with the brake line on the car I get the spare parts, find them and put them in myself. I have a young native lad to help me; he is learning at the same time. I don't have anybody, can't pay anybody to do anything. My bishop give me $150 a month; that is what I have to keep my mission going with. I have eighteen churches to take care of; I have two trucks, a car, and a motor boat. Missionaries have to keep moving; there are no slouchers. They are not waiting for pennies to fall from heaven. They have to hack it; they have to work. My Sunday collection is eight to ten dollars a Sunday for my church. All the other seventeen churches, if they collect any money that remains at the place; that doesn't come to fill my pocket because they have their expenses to pay out of that money. They have to pay their catechists. If they need their church painted they have to use their money; they can't come to me for a handout. They know this. Every church within the parish has its own little bank account. They have their own passbook. I'm a cosigner on all their expenses. They budget their money for the salary of the catechists; they budget their money for payment to the teacher; they budget their money for aiding the sick and the old people, bringing sick people to the hospital, buying them food if necessary. All these spiritual and corporeal works of mercy we try to encourage the people to do.

R: How does the church relate to local beliefs or customs? Are there any problems?

K: No. We don't take the use of sorcery as an obstacle to their religious beliefs. We are of the opinion that these practices are so inborn, incultivated in them that they can't separate themselves. It is impossible to mentally or spiritually separate themselves from their beliefs in the spirits. If we were to try to rub this out of their lives we would be doing a tremendous disservice to them because this is their gut feeling. We, of course, encourage prayer and fasting and sacrifice according to Christian lives, and they do that. Deep down when the crunch is on they always go back to the medicine man. I personally don't get excited if they do. I believe a lot of our missionaries, American missionaries, do not get excited about that either. This is part of their culture, their gut feeling. This is in their bones. Maybe in time they will find that as a lesser thing to do, but at the present time it is still going on, the calling of the ancestors and worship, or the calling of the medicine man in to do a special job on a person who is

sick. That continues to be done and we don't get excited about it; we would be foolish if we would. That is our attitude; that is our approach. Many times Catholic missionaries are clobbered for spoiling people's customs and culture. What I see of it down in New Guinea, at least down in our area, we've actually helped to preserve their customs. If the missionaries were destroying culture, there would be nothing left today, one hundred years later. We would have wiped them out. It is a falsehood to say that missionaries are destroying culture! No, what missionaries do is they allow the people to judge for themselves the good and the bad. Not everything in any culture is bad; there are a lot of good things. A lot of the good things are still preserved today. You go to New Guinea today and their art is still preserved. They are still dollowing a lot of customs regarding weddings, marriages, funerals, gardens. We see no conflict, no contradiction.

R: Is frustration ever a problem?

K: With the local people?

R: Yes.

K: Yes, and there are suicides. Marriages, families are breaking up. Unfaithfulness is one of the reasons and then not being able to communicate. The people down there did not know anything about communicating within a family group. That was a real problem. Their customs sometimes go contrary to the type of family that we have. Their culture has the extended family, not the close family that we have. Through education and their participation in the western world they are more or less coerced to go into a family system like we have. They can't remain in their old family ways. The young people of today, they look at the old system as very futile, very hard. Many young men are roaming around in the village today because they don't have a penny in their pocket. They can use their ancestors' lands, but they can't use the proceeds, the fruits of their labors. The money that they make from the production of copra is not totally their's; it has to go back to the clan. That is where a lot of unhappiness is, and that is where the big gap is between old people and young people. Young people have been educated and want sort of a freer life, but yet they are prevented from being free by their older people because they want to hang on to the old customs. We have a lot of problems in that regard. That is where as a parish priest I am involved very much with the young people, and old people, just on this issue. When I got to this parish they said, "Father, we don't have any dances for young people here." I said, "What?" It is one of the only sources of entertainment a young person has

and they take it away from them. They, the old people, are ultraconservative in many ways and it is devastating to young people. The young people do not want to partake in village affairs. When it comes to vote, elections--what do we want to vote for? It is bad for the future and the present ongoing development. There is a lot of friction, and that is bad in any kind of a community. The bad effects of all this development that we have introduced and started is not going to be automatically good. At the present time there are a lot of new ideas coming in, kids going to high school, college, universities coming back home. It isn't all turmoil yet, but you can almost visualize something is going to be in the works in twenty years from now.

R: Over the time that you spent in New Guinea, what events or people stand out in your mind?

K: I think the biggest event was the independence celebration day when Papua New Guinea was allowed to rule itself. This was a great event. It was great for the Australians too, who are the caretakers of that part of the world for the United Nations, the United Nations trust territory. It was sort of the peak of their work for preparing Papua New Guinea for self-government. From the point of view of the people themselves it gave them a lot of status and gave them a big boost forward that they have reached the point where they can begin to do things by themselves and for themselves. I think that was the biggest thing that ever happened in New Guinea since the time when it was discovered by the early settlers and being developed by the people from Germany and France and England, who went there as colonists. That was a big event and it took a lot of this colonial spirit away, out of the country. The outsiders were always doing everything and running everything. That is gone now, and that was beautiful. People could be suspected of walking around being depressed and being stepped on. The whites were getting all the big jobs and they didn't have too much to say. Things were done without their knowledge and stuff like that. Once independence came there was a big shift, and that was a big event for the good in that country.

I know a lot of blacks, native New Guineans, who were very important for this. Michael Somiare eventually became the prime minister and is still the prime minister after nine years of home rule. There was a period of two or three years where he was ousted out of the government. This was because of internal politics, but then he got back in again. He is definitely a great leader and has his head screwed on good. He is a distinguished person. He commands a lot of respect by all kinds of people. His alternate there, Julius Chan, who took his place in the interim for two or three years, he is a very notable person, a very nice and respectable

person too. He gives everyone due honor and respect; he is no slouch or ruffian. He is no dictator.

They both are very respectful of customs of people. They sincerely want to do a lot for the people, roads and better medicine and better education. They want the people to work; they don't want people to be out there with a hand getting a handout, no sir. They don't encourage any welfare programs. They are trying to draw all kinds of industries in to take part in the development of the country. They are a very fair government. There are no big signs or blaring signs of embezzlement or bribery yet in the government, which is good. They have devised a constitution saying--we are a Christian nation! And they follow through on that. There is no separation of church and state. Any government program, there are always church people in it, representatives from the churches. Not only the catholic church, but other churches. They help a mission school as well as a government school. They expect and want every school to teach religion in school, not after school but during school time. Our Catholic teachers are in the same sort of pool of teachers like any government teacher and they get assigned out. It is all regulated according to rules, church rules and government rules. The government pays our teachers, Catholic teachers, for the work that they are teaching. The teachers get paid directly by the government. Also the nurses in our mission hospitals get paid directly by the government. New Guineans look at it this way, whether you are a Methodist or a Catholic you are still a Papua New Guinea citizen; you are equal! Your religion doesn't make you any kind of different person. If you are a Catholic you still have the right to get the same amount of things in your school and hospital as somebody else. That is something nice for a young country only ten years old.

R: What other groups or organizations from western countries are in New Guinea now?

K: Do you mean religious denominations?

R: Yes.

K: Methodists are very big. Lutherans are very big. There is the Church of England. We have Islamic groups, the Seventh Day Adventists, and the Jehovah Witnesses. There is a small group called the Bahai. Out of a total population of three million people, religiouswise you could say that two million are Christians. One million are still uncommited. Of the two million that are Christian, about one million are Catholic. The Catholic church is the largest, single-bodied church there. After that you have the Methodists who are very large, and then the Lutherans, and then the Church of England. The Catholic mission has been there since 1882; that is over one

hundred years. The Methodist church has been there a little bit longer, maybe by ten or twenty more years, that is all. The natives, the people of New Guinea, were greatly exposed to western civilization and western ways through the missionaries. The outside people, they brought in the material things, business. Burns Philp was a big company and is still a very large company. They started plantations and they did a lot of work with gold and seashells and timber. The Germans were strong on coconut plantations as well. All this outside development along with the work of the missionaries really started to churn things up fast within one hundred years. You go there today and there is a telecommunications system throughout the country. We have as good a telephone service there as almost here in America. We don't have Sprint or anything like that; we don't have television on our phones yet, but it is amazing where the telephone service has gone. T h e r e is no television yet. All these telephone systems are interconnected with a microwave system. These microwave transmitters are powered by the sun, solar powered. There are good airlines around the country. Every island has a couple of airports. The bigger towns all have jets coming in. Jets connect the whole country together.

R: Do you ever have any problems when you are going, for example, from New Guinea and then you come back to the United States, just getting used to . . .

K: No, not at all. We go for three years and then we come back for a couple of months. There is really no problem. I have no trouble speaking and talking. Sometimes we fall a little back on certain types of expressions, clothing and stuff; styles change and things like that. They are only minor things. I don't have any difficulties with the change of food or anything like that. The food that I do eat down there is very close to what I have here. It is not prepared in the same way, but basically I have two square meals a day and a light lunch. We have all kinds of good garden vegetables and I have a lot of fish and protein and stuff like that. I am not lacking many things. I may lack a variety of material things, but I have all the basic things and don't miss much when I leave here.

R: What would you say to someone who was considering working in the missions and they came to you and asked what you thought?

K: I would ask them what they know and what skills they have. A person must have a skill. I can't encourage anybody who just wants to go down there and work; he has to have some particular skill, whether he would be a help for a missionary in his business or a missionary in his evangelization as a teacher or preacher or whatever. He may be in some field of work like a mechanic or something like that. He would have to have some kind of a skill. If he is a carpenter he has to be a good carpenter. You just can't be a general handyman

A general handyman person, he would only be displacing some of the local people who need to learn a job also. You can't go down there and learn a job; you have to be able to provide a skill or fulfill a need that cannot be fulfilled any other way. This is the number one thing.

Number two is that he would have to be prepared to stay there two or three years and work without a salary. He would be given a living allowance and all the necessary things for getting along and living. He would be insured while he was down there. There would be a vacation, but only a vacation around the area. The Papua New Guinea government is also careful of who comes into the country. We would probably require any person wanting to join the mission group to make contact and we would get him in touch with a Catholic organization that would give him some evaluation and things like that. He has to subject himself to that. A lot of bishops are looking for people that can fit into the mission scene. Sometimes that is difficult, to fit into the mission scene. Anybody running away from something won't fit at all. Anybody that has a problem here or is searching and doesn't know what to do, or where to go and what to do, they won't fit down there either. A unique type of person will only eventually make his way down there. The life is tremendous. If you are a person who wants to give some years of his life, there are all kinds of openings. There are openings in teaching, vocational schools for boys and girls, high schools. We need instructors in mechanics, nursing, carpentry, agriculture.

R: Thank you for all the information. It was really nice talking to you. It was interesting. Is there anything you would like to add that you think is important?

K: I would just like to say that most missionaries that I've worked with, whether they are Catholic missionaries or Protestant missionaries, they are very generous people and sincere people. They are down there and they are giving themselves. What they all accomplish is something fantastic and beautiful. The reason I say this is because the people recognize this, the local people. They give the missionaries a lot of credit for what has been done. They have seen stability over these many years. The people's appreciation of this is demonstrated continually. They want the missionaries to stay and they want to see the missionaries continue what they have started and what they are still doing today. The people say that they are at the level they are at because of what the missionaries have done. It is not only the Catholic missionaries that I am talking about. When I go back I do not feel that I am going into a pagan country. I could go anywhere in the country and I know people all over the country because a lot of the kids went to school in our schools; they know me. I walk down the street and

they say, "Hey, Father!" They are not ashamed or afraid to talk to you as a priest. It is wonderful! I am going back after Christmas. I am only here on leave. I want to put in another three years.

R: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW