

Sister Bernarde Lang, SSND

A Journey from the Farm Fields of Bavaria to the Beaches of Guam

By: S. Victoria Wiethaler, SSND

In her autobiography Sister Bernarde gives a detailed account of her life, "I, Caroline Lang, was born on January 27, 1917, the third of fifteen children in beautiful, then royal Bavaria. Four of the children died in early childhood.

"Beginning with grade three, I was hired out to farms for the greater part of my childhood to watch the cows. In our section of Germany, the cows had to be driven out to various meadows. Times were hard after World War I and at home there was one less mouth to feed. Besides watching cows and attending school I received valuable training in performing domestic chores and helping with work in barns and out in the fields. I also learned early in life how to get along with various folks. At the same time, we have remained a close knit family up to the present moment.

"Life changed for the better with my entrance into the convent on May 1, 1930. I thoroughly enjoyed my six years of the German Teacher Training Program in Weichs and Munich. I was nineteen in 1936. Upon being missioned to Peiting, my classmates said, 'Are you lucky!' It was Peiting's ideal convent community life that gave me my love for Notre Dame. Every so often we visited the grave of Sister Bonaventura Fink.

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"One must understand that in Germany there is quite a close union of church and state. Therefore, the schools were and are tightly controlled by the state. As I was a practice teacher, my supervisor was Mr. Wolf. After our first conference he called all of us religious teachers aside and told us that it was absolutely useless for us to remain in the convent and

Sister Bernarde Lang as she looked in 1938, shortly after arriving in Milwaukee from Bavaria.



that we could keep our promises just as well out in the world. That left little hope for the future. After that, five of us at Peiting offered for the foreign missions. Four of us candidates including today's Sister Bonaventure Schneeberger, Sister Margit Loeffler, and Sister Mary Berga Axtner were sent to the United States and one sister was sent to South America.

"After one year of candidature and one of novitiate in Milwaukee, I began my teaching career of forty-four years. My assigned missions were in large cities and small towns. I thoroughly enjoyed the classroom. But I had just begun teaching when World War II broke out. This severely affected my family. Four brothers and one sister were on various fronts. I became an enemy alien. Thank God, America was good to me. On October 12, 1943, I became a U.S. citizen. During the war years I suffered much anxiety about home. In 1944, a blotchy Red Cross message informed me that my brother Nikolaus was KIA (killed in action). This message reached me six months after his death. In 1946, a card from France told me that my Reverend Brother Max was a United States prisoner of war. Shortly after being released he wasted away with leukemia. In 1955, I received an air mail letter from home containing the death card of

my father. He had died unexpectedly in my mother's arms.

"After twenty years, thanks to the goodness of the congregation, I was permitted my first home visit. What a reunion! Of course, the little brothers and sisters had grown up and there were three empty chairs.

"Since I had originally volunteered for the foreign missions, I followed the impulse to offer for Guam. In a small way, I felt compensated by my service of eight years on the island. No, it didn't call for converting the pagans, but we sisters were much needed and greatly appreciated as teachers and witnesses to the faith. All of us were involved in CCD work in many of the villages. I was fortunate to spend one summer on Wake Island teaching CCD to the children of the airforce personnel.

"On Guam, I cherished some of my greatest religious experiences, such as the burial of two bishops and the consecration of one, the visit of archbishop Pearce for Fiji, who was the primate of the Pacific area. He even paid a visit to my classroom. The clergy days which brought many missionaries from the so called

outer island to Guam, included non-Catholics. I think Guam ranks tops in its devotion to our Blessed Mother under the title 'Our Lady of Camarin.' Occasionally some missionaries would stop off at our convents. I loved to listen to their experiences. At the same time, one could sense their need to talk to someone. The Church arranged valuable religious workshops, bringing in experts from the East-Asian Institute and from as far as Melbourne, Australia. Other fringe benefits for me were a retreat on Rota and a Jubilee Celebration on Saipan. After my first two years on Guam, an evening overseas call brought me the shocking news that my mother had died of a stroke.

"Before leaving Guam, I was encouraged to teach at our school in Harbor Springs, Michigan. After four years, when the Social Services demanded that the boarding school be discontinued, I decided, after much discernment, that the time was ripe for me to change my apostolate. It gives me great joy and comfort to spend myself in community service for our retired sisters here at the Mount Carmel convent in Mount Calvary, Wisconsin. May God be praised for my colorful life and all my global experiences."