

Enlarge the Space of Your Tent
Victoria Wiethaler, SSND, 2003

Sister Gisela relates, “After having taught for six years English and French in our secondary school in Ravensburg Wuertemberg, near Lake Constance, Hitler closed our flourishing school in 1937, a blow to us seventy SSNDs and many other people. With clenched fists, the students walked to the auditorium to hear the official announcement of the tragic fact. Classrooms had to be changed to bed-sitting rooms for single ladies who wished to spend quiet days in our house. I had to take the meals to their rooms with my knitting and crocheting work, since I had to entertain the ladies as well. In that way I was occupied for a year and a half without teaching.

“As more of our schools were closed, Mother General Almeda sent out circulars asking for volunteers to serve in the United States or in England. I declared myself ready to go to England though this decision did not at all agree with my local superior. After a short home visit in Regensburg, I went to the motherhouse in Munich. From there, an assistant from the generalate traveled with me by train and boat to England.

“In Faversham, Kent, I found to my joy five Bavarian sisters in the former Carmelite Priory, an old house badly in need of repair. We had only about twenty pupils. The Catholics could not pay even the low fee. The Carmelite Prior, Father Lynch, guessed well that our income was scarce, so he sometimes brought us a loaf of bread and garden produce. Later he suggested that two young beautiful sisters take up the second collection at each Sunday Mass. Mother Isidore Schumacher agreed to that and the people were generous to us, *friendly aliens*. To be recognized as such, we had to take an oath that we did not want to have anything to do with Hitler.

“May 27, 1940, there was silence at the breakfast table till Mother Isidore said in German, to make our good homemaker sisters understand, ‘I must send you to prison.’ ‘Internment’ whispered Sister Christa Schmitt. After some more short instructions, we rushed to our bedrooms to pack a three-week supply of clothing. I packed also my umbrella not having heard that umbrellas were not allowed. They were considered weapons. About 9:00 a.m. the children arrived for school, but we had only time to bid a hasty, tearful farewell to everybody including the three American sisters and to Sister Anselm Hartleib. After a hearty and silent handshake, we left for the unknown. Neither those we left behind nor did we know where we were going.”

We read in *Foundations of the School Sisters of Notre Dame in England*: “After the capitulation of Belgium, the government of England feared an almost immediate invasion. An area twenty-five miles deep was marked off as ‘restricted area’ and Faversham was included. One morning, without warning, the police called at the convent and within half an hour they led the six German sisters away to be interned – destiny unknown. They were put on trains, marched through towns with labels around their necks, tagged like refugees, till at last they arrived on the Isle of Man.”

Sister Gisela relates, “The next morning a very kind priest took us to Bradda Glen, a big hotel surrounded by a park-like garden with many small tables and chairs on the lawn. In an enormous dining room, we met many of the three hundred German and Austrian women. We were able to do various services for many of these women during our stay.”

The *Foundation of the School Sister of Notre Dame in England* reports, “Gradually, the sisters were treated with some consideration and given sufficient freedom to attend Holy Mass in the local church. One of their numbers took over the sacristy work while another instructed a convert and taught Jewish children.”

Sister Gisela continues, “August 3rd was the happy day when the superintendent announced at dinner ‘The Notre Dame Sisters may go home!’ We rose full of joy while everybody rejoiced with us in a prolonged applause. Mother Isidore’s answer to our telegram said, ‘Come to Lingfield.’ In Lingfield, where Sister Anselm lived with twelve little girls, there were not enough beds for them as well as for us. Sister Anselm slept with the girls on an easy chair. Sister Hildegarde Volk, our superior, made up her bed in a bathtub. One morning a big truck stopped at our garden gate. The driver unloaded furniture including bedsteads, lots of bedding, and even some canned fruit. All this came from a rich lady whom we sisters did not know. What a help that was!

“The Divine Providence continued to work for us. Canadian soldiers had a camp so close to us that we could hear them singing. On Christmas Day, their captain arrived with a big parcel, a precious gift for us. In the spring of 1941, two Canadian soldiers dug up part of our garden for us to plant potatoes.

“We lived in those unusual circumstances until March 1945, when the army left Batnor’s Hall, an old Manor House. We seven pioneering sisters moved in with 25 boarders. The former owner of that extensive property was Lady Ruffy, a non-Catholic and an excellent business woman. She would discuss matters only with Sister Hildegarde, and never spoke with the rest of us sisters. That lady of nobility still lived in a cottage on the grounds of the property. She wanted to plant a fast growing fence between our garden and hers, but her sister, who was a Catholic and who was very friendly to us, intervened before the order reached the gardener. After about two years, Lady Ruffy asked for instructions to be

received in the Catholic Church. When asked what made her come to this decision, she said, 'The silent influence of the sisters.'

"When I left England in 1982, three hundred pupils attended the primary school and about two hundred the senior school in Lingfield. After all I have experienced during my 43-year stay in England and the preceding 15 years teaching in Germany, it is with great joy that I thank God for all these wonderful years, as well as for the ability to spend my years now in the Motherhouse Villa in Waterdown, still actively serving my sisters. Praised be Jesus Christ throughout eternity. Amen.