

Inheriting an Immigrant Heart :Reflections on Immigrants and the SSND Charism
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In 1943, as American and German armies clashed in Europe, I happily entered first grade at a school founded by Mother Caroline in 1880 - St. Joseph, Yorkville, Manhattan. Many classmates were born in New York of German immigrant parents. We knew little English, and spoke only German at home. Manhattan was always filled with soldiers and sailors on leave, so we were advised not to speak German in public since it was the language of the enemy. During the war, SSND primary teachers in New York had to be bilingual. We children soon became fluent enough to converse with our Irish classmates!

However, our parents were not so fortunate. German newspapers were scarce, and the mails were not reliable. Every German family in the neighborhood was worried about relatives involved in the war, either in the Nazi Army or in cities and villages which were bombed. I remember my mother and some of her friends frequently buying the *New York Times* and then going up to school after dismissal. The sisters would read the paper and then translate in German the events of the war in Europe, especially what was happening in our parents' parts of their homeland. At that time no one had a TV.

These acts of kindness to our immigrant parents made a very deep impression on me. The special bonding between the sisters and our families in wartime helped us to know one another as real people who cared for one another. Our mothers baked in gratitude and we children carried many plates of German cookies and cakes to the convent. I can still hear my mother practicing the pronunciation of the names of our 1st and 2nd grade teachers: Sister Karla, Sister Leodegar, Sister Rigoberta, Sister Leonilda. I know now that some of these sisters were worried about their brothers in the U.S. Army fighting in Germany.

In 1947 when I was in 5th grade, the whole school celebrated the 100th anniversary of SSND coming to America - coming to our city, New York! We were filled with pride and excitement. Our teacher, Sister Clementia, a very strict, creative, artistic woman of Slovak background, opened our imaginations to envision the sisters' long stormy ocean voyage. Standing in Battery Park, we saw the boat land, and saw Theresa and Caroline take their first steps in America. We listened and laughed when we heard Theresa's first impressions of New York. With her passion for SSND history, Sister Clementia passed on the founding myths and stories - the risky, courageous beginnings, the poverty and hardships, the adventures on stagecoaches and riverboats. She gave us Theresa holy cards, SSND comic books, SSND pins - we treasured them all. I particularly loved her creative, imaginative ways and later found them part of my own teaching style.

My attraction to this adventurous group of women was nourished by my parents' strong connection with their Bavarian roots as they courageously made a life in a new country. In 1954 when I was sixteen my mother took my brother and me to Germany for her first visit back to her village. Bombed cities were slowly being rebuilt and parts of our Munich Motherhouse were still in ruins. Some East European refugees were with us on the return trip, and I remember women in babushkas kneeling on the deck, crying and raising their arms to the Statue of Liberty as we sailed by. Adventure, wanderlust, and a feeling of belonging to the whole world accompanied my desire to leave home and enter SSND, and somehow this seemed to make sense to my parents. Each experience of being sent to a new mission was accompanied by a deep feeling of belonging.

And now in my 50th year as an SSND, I find myself orchestrating another exciting SSND adventure - our Atlantic- Midwest Province Celebration on July 31st - a Sunset Boat Ride. I was named *Boat Concierge*. Last summer at the Generalate I gained more insight into our 1847 journey by reading some primary source material in German. As we prepare to celebrate the 160th anniversary of SSND coming to New York, I look back and see so many instances where the charismatic SSND "leaning" toward immigrants, the refugees, the dispossessed, was and is now a very special part of my life.

In summer of 1974 I went to Vietnam during the war and worked in Saigon orphanages with the German Red Cross and sisters of other congregations. I flew home with five Vietnamese orphans - all younger than 8 months - to hand over to their waiting adoptive parents. My work there helped to sensitize people back home to the suffering of the ordinary Vietnamese. It certainly opened me to their suffering and beauty. Currently I am tutoring a Vietnamese priest in English so that his sermons can be understood.

For two years I taught night classes in English to the "Boat People" in the early 1980's - people from Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand. I involved many of my high school students and some of our sisters in the tutoring of Indochinese children. In my work with the homeless women of New York for 11 years, I kept a special eye on those recently arrived immigrants whose English was so poor that they could not speak for themselves to navigate the systems in order to obtain proper medical and legal help.

Right now I live in our SSND Formation House in a multi-ethnic neighborhood in Brooklyn - Russian, Jewish, Chinese, Italian. We are preparing for the graced entrance of a Haitian woman as Postulant in our community. Mondays I teach at St. James School in Chinatown, Manhattan, a very poor school, giving extra help to those children whose first language is Mandarin or Spanish, and whose parents do not speak English.

Tuesdays I teach Conversational English at the Maura Clark/Ita Ford Center in Brooklyn to people from Mexico, China, the Middle East, and Latin America. I

teach Mexican bus boys who want to be waiters, veiled Afghan and Lebanese mothers who hope to speak to their children's teachers and help with homework, older Hispanic women who hope to go to the doctor without an interpreter. Some of these students will be trained in community activism - green spaces for playgrounds, lessening of graffiti, garbage, and drug problems in neighborhoods. Traveling to the Center involves an eight subway round trip. On six of these subways no one shares my skin color and so it feels like I am traveling all over the world. Sometimes when I get weary hopping on and off all these trains, I think of Theresa and Caroline and all their stagecoaches and riverboats.

This summer when 300 of us sail in the same New York waters which carried Theresa and Caroline to the shores of America, we will pass by the Statue of Liberty just as the sun is setting and sing the *Salve Regina* in union with all SSNDs. Emma Lazarus' poem honoring immigrants is carved at the statue's base. Irving Berlin put it to music: *Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore; send these, the homeless, tempest tossed to me - I lift my lamp beside the golden door!*

Had the Statue of Liberty been there in 1847, I am sure our first SSNDs would have exclaimed: *See! That is why we came- that is why God called us to America!*

It is said that "biology is destiny." True, but much more - history and geography are also destiny. Born and raised in a German immigrant family in New York during wartime, living on an island surrounded by waters which welcomed ships from all over the world, educated by loving SSNDs whose wide open hearts embraced immigrants - all this is part of my own deep feeling and experience of global awareness and connectedness.

The hearts of Theresa and Caroline leaned toward immigrants, and we SSNDs continue to lean toward immigrants, because we have inherited our Mothers' hearts!