

History of the Berlin Province
(Taken from *SSND Bond*, 1983)

“All the works of God proceed in pain.” This statement by our foundress also characterizes the history of the Berlin (Silesian) province. The “work” began in 1851. The prince bishop Melchior von Diepenbrock asked Mother Theresa for sisters for the episcopal city of Breslau to provide for the neglected youth. Mother Theresa answered the call and took over the orphanage “Ad Matrem Dolorosam” (To the Sorrowful Mother) as the first educational institution. The beginnings were difficult and demanded great sacrifice from the sisters. In a letter of May 18, 1854, Mother Theresa wrote: “The Mother of Sorrows, who very significantly led us by the hand into this side of Prussia, stands under the cross. It seems fitting that her daughters gather there with her:” where the cross is, there Christ is not far away.”

The young seedling developed. The number of members increased; the mission field broadened. In 1854 the first reception was held. By 1870 the Silesian province already had 13 missions.

The Kulturkampf in Prussia brought this grace-filled development to an abrupt end. The May Laws of 1875 declared: “All existing religious houses of teaching orders will be disbanded and are immediately placed under state protection until their dissolution.” On the first of May the state power interfered destructively in the development of the Silesian province. Its end seemed to come in 1875.

However the exiles found a new home and a new area of activity in neighboring Austria-Silesia. An old, empty convent in Weisswasser (Bila Voda, Czechoslovakia now) became the motherhouse of the Silesian province for the next 20 years. After the Second World War it became a place of refuge for our Czech sisters. A very richly-blessed work developed in the exile.

After a partial suspension of the “May Laws,” the sisters of the Silesian province could return to their homeland. Their work was limited to the education of girls in schools of higher education. The grade schools remained closed to the sisters.

In 1896 the motherhouse at Weisswasser was transferred to Breslau. The sisters could not move into the original house of the province, “Ad Matrem Dolorosam.” In the interim it had been given to another religious congregation. However, the empty theological seminary nearby soon became the new motherhouse. In 1897 the first investiture of 37 postulants was held here.

The province blossomed again quickly. From 1902 until 1921 the houses of the former Brede province, which was unable to maintain itself financially after

the Kulturkampf, were joined to the Breslau motherhouse. This “union,” again a consequence of state power, had a providential importance manifested after World War II when part of the group of exiled Silesian sisters found refuge, work and some even a part of the home of their youth at the Brede and on its missions.

The First World War with its political results meant a new violent break into the history of the Silesian province. It brought fear and privation to houses located along the eastern border of Germany as well as radical territorial changes. In 1923 the foundations lying in the newly-formed Republic of Czechoslovakia formed their own province. In 1924 the convents founded in Poland were consolidated into the Polish Vicariate with their own motherhouse in Lemberg. Nevertheless God was “at work” here.

After 1945 a new Polish province emerged in the area of the former Silesian province (and beyond it) where the exiled Polish sisters found a new home.

Despite all external opposition the Silesian province blossomed very quickly again. As the province celebrated its 75th jubilee in 1926, there were 583 sisters in 24 houses and 100 sisters in four houses in the vicariate of Poland.

National Socialism’s struggle with the church was directed most of all toward Christian educational institutions. Our last school was closed at Easter in 1941.

The provincial leader at the time, S.M. Juditha Neuman, had the charism and vision of Mother Theresa. She guided the work of education in new directions. Sisters were needed in church ministry and for Christian social work and were trained accordingly. She also responded to a call, already heard by Mother Theresa but one she could not follow at the time, namely the call to Brazil where German settlers were asking for teachers and child care professionals. The first missionaries left for South America in 1935. They established the present province of Porto Alegre in 1958, a province with which the Berlin province is still closely linked.

The outbreak of World War II in 1939 brought renewed intense suffering to the province. The Breslau motherhouse was destroyed by bombing in 1945. The convents experienced the horrors of escaping refugees or the atrocities of the Russian victors at the end of the war. Miraculously the homeless sisters in 1945 found refuge in Breslau in the house that in 1851 had been their first home, “Ad Matrem Dolorosam.” It had remained undisturbed. For a short time it again was the motherhouse for the sisters passing through with refugee groups. When Silesia became part of Poland the German sisters had to migrate. Two hundred who were fluent in the Polish language remained in the new Polish province. Many were graciously received into the Bavarian and Westphalian provinces. The remainder, about 320 sisters, lived scattered about in the Diaspora of middle

Germany. In this hopeless situation Divine Providence manifested itself. When social work was taken on by the sisters, a welfare home in Berlin-Niederschonhausen was entrusted to the sisters in 1938. The homeless provincial leader of the Silesian province fled to this house. From here she made contact with the wandering sisters until Mother Bettina Schaidl on behalf of Mother Almeda Schricker, the general superior, bought land in Berlin-Marienfelde for the homeless sisters.

New life developed from 1945 on. The province of Berlin included all houses in West and East Berlin and in middle Germany. They belonged to different political systems, yet they felt their bondedness all the more.

Once again the structural development of the province was violently interrupted. The building of the wall between West and East Berlin in 1961 and the severe regulations between West Berlin and the German Democratic Republic (Deutsche Demokratische Republik - DDR) led to an external separation of the sisters. In 1970 the eastern section of the province became the region of the DDR.

While the sisters of West Berlin can take part in diversified instructional and educational work, the ministry of the houses of the DDR is principally limited to 144 sisters in 15 houses who worked with handicapped children and adults as well as pastoral work.

Two lines from the constitution (*You Are Sent*) especially resonate with the sisters of DDR and form the core of their call and challenge:

In carrying out Christ's mission to bring all to oneness with the Father, we experience and accept the paschal mystery in our lives. (C.#5)

We are called and sent to deepen communion with God and among people wherever we are – in every place, in every time, in every situation. (C.#9)

The sisters of the DDR live in a very Protestant environment and in a situation of political division as well. Theirs is a call to be one among themselves and to promote unity at all times through loving response to every situation.

The sufferings of the past decades did not pass by without being felt by the sisters of the province still living today. Old age, sickness, and lack of new members threaten anew the continuation of the province. Yet a look at the wonderful salvation history in the course of 130 years helps us to look into the future with trust.