

Sister Consilia Schmidl, SSND

Taken from "Enlarge The Space Of Your tent" by" S. Victoria Wiethaler, SSND

Sister Consilia Schmidl from the Milwaukee province relates, "As I grew, up I received the training to become a master seamstress, but in my heart was the desire to be a missionary. Yet, my mother was convinced that we had enough missions in our own country. She talked with Sister Zacharia Mayrhofer, the superior of our local SSND convent. Sister took me for a visit to our motherhouse in Munich and our mission in the Au. I met Reverend Mother Almeda and everything was settled for my entrance. I received the education of a needlework teacher and then was sent to Hassfurt to teach needlework to all grades and sewing to adults. After three years, the government ordered our school to be closed to religious teachers. Mother Almeda sent word that any candidates or young sisters who were willing to move to North or South America, should let her know. I did, and my missionary desire became fulfilled."

Sister Consilia relates, "I was born in Pfaffenhoffen in beautiful Bavaria on November 28, 1911, of good Christian parents as the third of five children. Since we lived alone on a hill with no neighbors around us, we became a very closely-knit and happy family, but this was not to last too long.

"When the First World War broke out in August 1914, my father had to leave our happy home to join the army. I remember so well how we missed him. I also recall how our mother used to trim our house with fresh garlands and welcome home signs whenever father was permitted a short furlough. The end of the war was almost inevitable during the fall of 1918, when all able-bodied men were drafted for a last fierce battle in France. My father must have had a premonition because he found leaving us very difficult. The heartbreaking message that our father was fatally wounded came in December. This was the saddest day of our lives. We children hardly recognized our mother the next morning who at 36 years, had turned white overnight. However, life had to go on.

"Besides caring for the five of us, mother had to take care of the farm. Soon her health gave way. She was advised by the doctor to put us into an orphanage and go to rest in a sanitarium. Mother would not hear of it. So with almost super human strength and trust in God's providence she kept going. Surprisingly, she lived to be 76 years old! A few years after our father was killed, the parish priest advised mother to marry again. It was hard for us children to accept a new father.

"At 14, I decided to become a seamstress like my aunt, whom I greatly admired for her character and great skill. This decision meant I had to be removed from my home and all those dear to me. Only God knows how terribly I suffered from homesickness. This personal early experience was a great help when in later years I was with the aspirants in Prairie du Chien. Many times these young girls came for comfort and help and sympathy in their homesickness.

"Before I finished learning the trade, I made a retreat in a Benedictine Monastery. The retreat master told us that if anyone wanted to see him he would be available. That was not my intention at all. But somehow, when I passed his door it seemed that someone pushed me there. Against my will I knocked at the door. When I entered and still had my hand on the doorknob the priest pointed at me and said in a very solemn voice. 'You belong to the convent.' Then and there he made plans for me to enter a Benedictine Convent, go to Jerusalem for a year's novitiate and then to Africa. I was truly at peace and was happy within. However, it was not all that easy. First of all, I didn't tell anyone, but kept the King's secret! I took my exams and went home to begin my own career. Things went so well that my high ideals soon started to waver. But the more I ran away from God, the more God haunted me. Finally after about a year, I could resist no longer. But how to tell my mother? I could not make myself do it, so I wrote a note and put it under the Christmas tree with the other gifts. Can you imagine her surprise? There was joy and there was sadness-all in one. But no one wanted

to hear about Africa. My mother went to our sisters in Pfaffenhoffen. The superior invited me and took me to Mother Almeda in Munich. I was sold! My entrance day was decided.

"For me, the three years of candidature were like heaven on earth. I loved this quiet and silent atmosphere and the well regulated life, but one day it was different. I happened during the Hitlerputsch. We were told to be ready to leave at any moment if the terrorists would invade us. We waited trembling as never before. The rebels passed us by. However, they did their killing and burning in the city.

"After passing our exams as needlework teachers, we candidates were sent to our missions. I went to Hassfurt, a convent of 12 sisters. I taught knitting and sewing in grade school. During these years Hitler grew in power, and even some sisters thought he was a good leader. I was against him. To win me over, I was ushered into the sisters' community room so that I could listen to one of Hitler's famous speeches, but this did not change my mind. To this day, I still wonder how I got by without ever saying, 'Heil Hitler!' By and by, it became more clear that Our Fuehrer did not live up to his promises. Religion was not needed in the schools any longer.

"Mother Almeda sent a circular to the missions in late fall of 1936, asking whether any candidates or young sisters would like to go to North or South America. Here was my chance. I might be a missionary after all, although it would not be in Africa. On my way to Munich I did not know whether I was the only one who volunteered. To my surprise, there were sixteen of us - five from my needlework seminary! What a reunion! We prepared for our novitiate, sewed our habits, and attended instructions.

"Mother Almeda knew that most of our group of sixteen had little or no knowledge of the English language. She wanted us to get to know our Holy Rule before we left Germany, but where would she send us? The Munich motherhouse was overcrowded with more than one hundred novices. So she divided us into two groups. Nine were sent to the Brede in Westphalia and seven went to Breslau in Silesia. When the year was over, we met in Munich. After our retreat we pronounced our vows on April 1, 1938,

and said good-bye to our dear ones. Mother Almeda sent us with candidates and professed sisters to the United States. Because of severe sea storms, I was so sick that, on the day of arrival in New York, I could hardly stand on my feet, but when we saw a group of sisters coming toward us, the same kind of sisters we had left behind in Germany, our joy was so great that soon we were ourselves again.

"Now, as I look back over the many years I lived in this country I would not want to have missed even one of those days. Those of us who were privileged to live in the motherhouse on Milwaukee Street know of the true religious spirit that was so inspiring, the blessing of the Adoration Chapel, the enthusiasm of the young recruits, candidates and novices, and the beautiful Corpus Christi processions. My first year there, when I could neither speak nor understand the English language, I gained more in my spiritual life than all the other years combined. The Lord has His own ways. Thank You, God! What you have hidden from the wise and the prudent, you have given to the little ones, and in ample measure.

"During World War II we were enemy aliens and were very much restricted in our communication with our relatives. After the war, Germany was in dire need. Our Reverend Mother Almeda came to visit us and spent much time in packing care packages. I remember she made the tapestry her packing room. We all helped her. The items she wanted most were children's shoes. Some of us German sisters were adopted by kind American families, who provided us with care packages for our relatives. How grateful we, and our dear ones, were for this charity.

"I spent 12 years in the so-called tapestry room. On the side, I taught aspirants how to knit and sew and gave classes to adults on Saturday afternoons. When the aspiranture was move to Prairie du Chien in 1950, I had to leave the dear motherhouse to go with them. How I missed the motherhouse.

"The years in Prairie du Chien were the most difficult of my life. We were short of help, and I was with the girls day and night. I had two large dorms to supervise and frequently we had sleep-walkers and talkers. In summer, the bats often disturbed us, and the heat was almost unbearable. In August 1956, my stepfa-

ther died, and the same year in December my mother, too, was called home to God. I did have enough experience to know that life is not all roses and that the dark night was part of the journey, so I tried to accept whatever the Lord sent.

"After nine years, we moved to our brand new motherhouse in Mequon-Notre Dame of the Lake. At first we lived wherever we found room until the new aspiranture and gym were completed. It was interesting and exciting to see those buildings go up. By 1960, we moved into our own quarters. Vocations were booming at that time. It was a thrill to see our beautiful chapel filled to capacity with aspirants, candidates, novices and junior sisters. Who would have dreamed that after a few decades the motherhouse in Mequon would have to be sold because of a decline in vocations? In 1979, the aspiranture was closed. I chose to go to Elm Grove and arrived there in August 1982. This transfer was sweetened since Perpetual Adoration was also transferred from Mequon to Elm Grove. It was like a happy reunion.

"In the late 1950's we were permitted home visits back to our native Germany. I made my first home visit in 1963, the year of my silver jubilee, also the year when we changed to a more modified religious garb. On our way to Germany, Sister Margarita

Schneider and I stopped in Rome where we were invited by our Reverend Mother Ambrosia Roecklein to help with the sewing of the new garb. Three days after we arrived, Pope John the XXIII died. We had the privilege to attend his funeral- an unforgettable experience. We also were there for the election of Pope Paul VI. Before we left Rome, after a three-week stay, Mother Ambrosia took us to the church of our Lady of Good Counsel. What a joy!

"From Rome we flew to Germany where our relatives anxiously awaited us. What a joy it was to be together again! At this first visit I found it very difficult to converse in German. A special treat was the ordination and First Mass of Sister Margarita's nephew to which my family was invited. All my home visits were happy events. I'm most grateful to our congregation.

"Thinking back over my life in America, I am most grateful to Mother Aquina, Mother Fidelis, and Mother Andrina who gave us such holy examples in their lifetime. I have never regretted coming to this country and I would do it again. I followed the Lord's will, and instead of becoming a Benedictine in Africa, I am a happy Notre Dame in America. God be praised now and for all eternity." ■