

Sister Ruth Strothmann, SSND

La Isla del Encanto

Puerto Rico: First Mission outside the Continental United States

Kay O'Connell, SSND, 2003

Additional information taken from: Enlarge the Space of Your Tent, Victoria Wiethaler, SSND, 2003.

“I’m not concerned to be a German, Puerto Rican, or Chilean...”

Sister Ruth was born in Essen, Westphalia, in northwestern Germany. She recalled, “My mother Elizabeth was a woman strong in love and faith in her God and in the Catholic Church. My father Fritz was a Lutheran but always willing to support us in our Catholic faith. I shared my childhood with my brother Henry, seven years younger than I, in a warm and friendly atmosphere. As an adolescent I enjoyed life, especially with a group of good friends, until God came with His serious proposal for a religious life.

I struggled against the thought for years, but the witness of religious women I had received from the School Sisters of Notre Dame, the only community I knew then, was drawing me to join them. When I finally made an end to my fight and gave in to God’s gentle bother, I had to finish my schooling in order to go on to further studies. Then God took over to guide and help me in a way which I see now as a marvel. I studied to be a kindergarten teacher in Breslau, Silesia, at the Notre Dame Seminar. When I had finished my studies the Provincial Superior of our Westphalian province, Mother Canisia Bruggemann, who was later put in prison by the Nazis, sent me to Elbersfeld.

I returned to this place after my novitiate as a kindergarten teacher. “In October 1933, Reverend Mother Almeda came to our mission on visitation. I met Mother in a private conference, but she did not mention volunteering at all. When Mother was speaking to the assembled sisters she said that she needed one more young sister for a new kindergarten in Puerto Rico and what about Sister Ruth. I was horrified. However, after I thought it over, I went to Mother Almeda privately and told her that if I could be of any use at all, I would go. This meant I would have to study more English and Spanish. I liked English so I was glad to do that. Then I went to the Brede for some months to learn Spanish. I met Mother Medulpha and she settled my assignment.”

Sister Ruth wrote for her parents’ permission to go to Puerto Rico. Her mother was very distressed at this request, but her father gave his consent quickly, saying, “Whatever is in my power, I will do.”

Five sisters went to America on the **SS Bremen** in 1935; for the kindergarten in Puerto Rico, Sister Luzentia Wiesbock and Sister Ruth, and three house sisters for the states. Sister Ruth continues, “Three weeks after landing I was

sailing to Puerto Rico, my second home. Not the kindergarten, but the *Costura*, a home for working girls and women, who produced exquisite handmade goods, was my place for thirty years. Under the tropical sun near the ocean and in contact with new customs, I grew warmer and nearer to the people on the enchanted island. Our harmonious community living was supportive in the sharing of work and prayer in order to serve, especially the poor, and also the not-so-poor among the friendly people of Puerto Rico.”

Many people sought sister out to talk to her, to share their joys and sorrow, doubts and prayers. Sister was generous with her time and had a compassionate heart.

In 1964, Mother Mary Paschal Carton wrote to the island sisters requesting sisters to work in Chile. Sister Ruth relates, “When Mother Paschal took my offering as a volunteer to Chile seriously, I began to tremble, and fear entered my life. Again Mother’s plea, “If you refuse, I do not know what I will do,” gave me the strength to make the sacrifice.

Six pioneers went to Santiago in 1964. Sister Mary Anne O’Connor and Sister Ruth were assigned to give a religious formation to candidates of a new *Franciscan Pious Union*. They started in 1965, in a private home in San Felipe, with three novices and eight candidates. The new Bishop Don Enrique, saw how difficult the situation was and dissolved this new offspring.

The bishop told the women to go home or join another congregation. Sister Mary and Ruth were asked to do catechetical work. Sister Ruth says, “The years that followed for me in Chile were a purifying term. I lost some self-esteem and security, but stayed there to be a companion to Sister Mary, who loved everything that Chile had to offer. It took four years before I felt that I really belonged there. The dark night vanished and my heart was able again to enjoy friendship and God’s goodness in nature and in his personal love.”

For 20 years Sisters Mary and Ruth worked in San Felipe. Sister Mary stayed in catechetical work, and Sister Ruth became the administrator of the Diocesan Center and was involved with helping the bishop with his visitors and correspondence. At the end of the coup and afterwards, they had an opportunity to stand with the oppressed and politically threatened. Don Enrique was a star of courage and justice for all the people. When the bishop became ill, Sister Ruth went to the mountains to care for him. While there, she also took care of the retreat house and the workshops which were planned for the country people by the government. The church in Chile became very progressive in the post Vatican II era.

Sister Ruth continues, “At her visit to Chile in 1984, Sister Kay O’Connell invited me to come to Wilton. I was not ready as yet, but took the thought for consideration and by the end of the year decided to follow the new call. In

1985, I left my beloved Chile and my friends with pain, but I was received with great kindness in Wilton, where I became peaceful in following my last call in my journey to God, who has done marvels for me and in me. I am not concerned to be a German or a Puerto Rican or a Chilean, the land where I suffered and loved the most, or to be an American. But I want to be a loving friend to so many whom God has sent to me to help during my life, and who have enriched my life by their goodness.”