

# Sister Victoria Wiethaler, SSND

*Learning From Children, She Taught the World*

By: S. Victoria Wiethaler, SSND

Sister Victoria Wiethaler of the Milwaukee province grew up on a small Bavarian farm. Seven brothers and sisters followed her. She relates, "Our two-room school was taught by capable SSNDs. We profited much by their teaching of catechism and Bible History.

"A mission magazine gave me an insight into the needs for helping in Africa. My desire to go there began during the seventh grade. I asked our pastor if he thought I would make a good sister. Since I wanted to be a missionary, but did not know such an order, we decided that I should join the SSNDs. The more difficult task was to get my parents' permission. On our small farm we had few machines. Every hand that could help was important. I thank my generous parents for letting me go.

"After finishing my education in 1933, I was happy to get into a classroom. In 1936, I was teaching first grade girls in Stadthof. Every so often a girl would say to me, 'Become a lay teacher and you can stay with us.' Since I loved the girls this was a powerful temptation.

"On October 31, 1936 we received a notice from the state department stating that, beginning with January 7, 1937, lay teachers would take over our school and

**Sister Victoria Wiethaler, as she looked in her 1973, Milwaukee "Pictorial Directory" photograph.**



us two candidates. I remember she showed us two rather large photos, one with our sisters in St. Louis helping black children and a similar one of Puerto Rico. I thought this could be an opportunity for me to be with black children in America since I never reached Africa. It helped me to make my decision."

Sister Victoria relates, "One of our violin teachers in Munich, Sister Salvia Seefelder, was gifted with a deep understanding of Holy Scripture and she helped us candidates to judge the political happenings in Germany correctly. She filled my heart with the belief that if I trusted God, He would help me in times of need. This trust was especially necessary during the first months in America when studying English became a headache. But good friends like Sisters Egduna Stoiber, Protasia Greppmeier, and Benno Schwinn lightened our hearts.

"After living in Milwaukee five months, I was missioned to St. Michael's, Chicago, to teach a second grade. Sister Coronata Schuster, who taught the other second grade, became my guardian angel. I lacked the simple terminology needed for the classroom. I spent one month in Sister Coronata's room listening attentively and writing down the directions she gave

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we were dismissed. That Stadthof was on the first list of closures was especially difficult for us since Mother Theresa had attended the school and later taught there. Immediately Mother Almeda visited our convent to help us in our dismay. She also spoke to

the children and memorizing them. October 7, 1938, was my first day teaching 63 second graders. That was the largest group of children I ever taught - after five months in the country! I learned from the children and I hope they learned from me. Some children walked me home after school. I listened to them. I remember I couldn't distinguish the different sounds between color and collar. Slowly my ears became attuned. Sister Augustine Hammerschmidt, my understanding superior, helped me to keep my courage afloat.

"World War II started in September 1939. I remember being in the basement of our convent when a paper carrier shouted out the news. I knelt down, cried, and prayed. My three brothers were drafted even though my parents did not want Hitler to win the war. It was sheer agony. A few times a year, I could send a 25 word message home through the Swiss Red Cross and receive an answer on the same paper. And some of that was crossed out because we had restrictions on what we could say. Being in the classroom, took my mind off the political situation, and the natural cheerfulness of the children lightened my heart. After the war and the time of imprisonment, my three brothers returned home. (Josef was an American prisoner, Ludwig was a French prisoner, and Wolfgang had to spend agonizing years in Easter Russia - Siberia). I thank God for protecting them.

In the course of my teaching career, I moved from second grade up to the eighth grade. One of my missions was Sheboygan, Wisconsin. It was a very wholesome city, but one aspect bothered me. There was hardly any contact with people other than the white race. I felt a need for my pupils and the general public to expand their life experiences. It became my conviction that if one gets to know and appreciate a person of another race, one can never dislike or hate that whole race. I kept on mulling this idea over in my mind until the possibility of an action became clear.

"With the permission of my superior and the pastor, I contacted the Sheboygan Press for an interview. The press accepted my plan and printed an article explaining it. African-American children from St. Boniface, St. Francis, and St. Michael schools in Milwaukee were invited to spend time during the summer vacation in Sheboygan and surroundings by families who wanted to participate. An attractive picture of black children set the stage. My own companion sisters doubted the feasibility of this plan. To my great joy the first person eager to take a child was the wife of a Lutheran Minister. The plan had skipped over religious barriers and quickly many families opened their doors in welcome. The visiting children were delighted to have a vacation, ride bikes, see live chickens, and have fun in a park. A few boys stayed at a ranch and learned to groom horses and ride them. I hope all the people of Sheboygan look back on those days in 1967, with as much love and gratitude as I do.

"My class was invited to a counter-visit in Milwaukee. Some boys went to St. Boniface School. Having a meeting with Father James Groppi touched their spirits with enthusiasm for his ministry.

"In 1968, I was called to our generalate in Rome to work as a simultaneous translator at a General Chapter of our Congregation. Four of us sisters attended a preparatory school for translating. I heard that the meeting would follow parliamentary proce-



*Sister Victoria Wiethaler, (at right) as a candidate in Stadtamhof, Bavaria, in 1936, is pictured with her 1st grade class of girls.*

dures. The non-American sisters were not acquainted with this method. To help them I translated the procedures into German and had several practice sessions with the sisters. It opened my eyes and my heart to many of our sisters with whom I could relate, knowing German and English.



*Sister Victoria pictured at the SSND Generalate in Rome with refugee children in 1970.*

*In 1977, Sister Victoria is pictured at Hope House in Milwaukee, WI, with the children she taught and cared for.*



"I worked at the generalate till 1970 as a translator. During that time I was able to organize the German speaking sisters in Rome in a group that met periodically for spiritual input. I remember Father Bernard Haring, CSSR, was our speaker several times.

"In 1970, I returned to Milwaukee and taught at St. Stephens' for two years. There I had my first opportunity to teach a small number of African-American children. They were a joy to me. Then I was called back to Rome as a translator. On my way, I attended a Better World Retreat with Bavarian sisters. One retreat director urged me to join the Better World Movement and work in German speaking countries. The movement had been launched in 1952, by the spiritual renewal crusader Father Ricardo Lombardi, SJ, to conduct dialogue retreats throughout the world. I lived through many hours of searching and praying before I asked my community leaders for advice and finally their permission to join the group. I remember

my interview with Father Lombardi who was willing to accept me.

"In Rocca di Papa, the center of the movement in Italy, I underwent a rigorous training for my new work. Then Father Lombardi asked me to accompany him to Germany to attend a retreat he gave, and to start my work. I joined teams of priests, religious, and lay persons to conduct days of recollection, retreats, and dialogue workshops. I worked largely with women, lay and religious, in Germany, Austria, Luxemburg, Switzerland, and northern Italy. My headquarters was our motherhouse in Munich. God opened to me the beauty of many lands and especially many people. I experienced the Kingdom in new ways.

"In 1977, I returned to Milwaukee for a period of rest. Later, I served the province as a councilor for two years. Then I became a volunteer at Hope House Milwaukee, a shelter for homeless families. I helped the smaller children in relating to one another and in playing games, especially with legos. Most of the children were African -Americans and they were very trusting.

"Every so often in my life I had a relationship with the African-American race for which I am very grateful. I thank God for His goodness to me in leading my ways."



*Sister Victoria with family members on a home visit to her homeland in Bavaria.*