

Enlarge the Space of Your Tent,
Victoria Wiethaler, SSND, 2003

Sister Arimathea relates, "I was born in Achenmuehle, near Rosenheim, Bavaria. I am the oldest of a family of twelve children, seven girls and five boys. Our house was part home, part store, and part carpenter's workshop. When I was eighteen years old, my mother called me to her bedside after the birth of a child and said to me, 'Ann, if you still want to go to the convent, you must leave us now, otherwise we will get too much used to you.' I was puzzled but also encouraged, and entered the candidature in Munich. I was trained as a needlework teacher in Munich-Au. I was blest to be under the care of saintly Notre Dames. We were trusted as adults, much was given, much was expected. As 'Bonnet Sister' after my state examination, I taught needlework in Ravensburg. From there, I was sent to an art school in Berlin to study vestment design. After my return to Ravensburg, I worked in the liturgical sewing department until reception in August 1937.

"Later, my mother told me that she had wanted to be a nun herself, but had no chance to do so. On their honeymoon in Altoetting (the most famous shrine of Our Lady in Bavaria), my dad and mother asked Our Lady to give them at least one daughter with a religious vocation. When they realized that I had a leaning toward the religious life, their desire was fulfilled.

"As far back as I can remember I wanted to be a missionary. Yahweh said to Abraham, 'Leave your country, your family, your father's house for the land I will show you.' When the sisters of the generalate asked for volunteers to go to foreign countries because of Hitler's order, I gave my name. I signed up for Argentina and began to study Spanish. However, God decided otherwise, and obedience called me to England in January of 1939. Sister Clara Foeckersperger was also destined for England. Sister Calasanctia Keinz met us in Dover and took us to Faversham. A few days later, we traveled to our destination in Woolwich. Shortly before lunch, we arrived at the convent. The sisters were at school. Quite forlorn we stood in the community room and looked down at rows after rows of drab houses with their ugly chimney pots. 'I will never feel at home here,' I thought. At lunch, we were introduced to the community, five nationalities and we felt better when we met the welcoming smiles of the sisters especially of those from our homeland. During evening recreation, I was asked to tell a story in English which called forth much fun and laughter and eased my tension. Now, I had to listen and pick up courage to speak. Soon I went to work: sewing, answering doorbells, observing teachers in the classroom, speaking with the children, cleaning, preparing lessons and materials. Then I was ready to give my first needlework lesson. I cannot remember details, but I can still hear one of the

girls say, 'poor old sister' and see her head drop when she looked at my young face.

"During the summer months, we young sisters managed a few walks to the top of Elington Hill. It was a real delight to look down at the beautiful landscape below. This luxury was denied us when in September 1939, the war broke out. An outdoor shelter was built, the basement passage and a large room there were shored up, children were evacuated. To augment our income, our parish priest ordered vestments used in the liturgy. I was happy to use the skills I had been trained in. In June 1940, the bombing became more frequent and by the end of August we were really engulfed in the 'London Blitz.' By then the state schools had been closed so our enrollment rose. Our way of life had to change considerably. We slept now in the outdoor shelter on boards, fully dressed in our night habit and soft veil. We changed at 6:00 a.m. and went to holy Mass in the parish church. When this became too dangerous Canon Monk walked up to the convent to save his sisters. During the nights we shared our shelters with people who sought refuge; many of them were complete strangers but felt safe with us.

"As time went on, the need arose to accept first graders as weekly boarders since their mothers were engaged in 'War Work.' We could accommodate six little girls. I was assigned to care for them and slept with them in the shored up basement room. Summer came, the time to pronounce my Final Vows. I was eager to have a few quiet days to prepare for it.

"One experience will linger in my memory forever. During High Mass in our chapel at the end of the retreat. Sister Waldeberta Gampl and I pronounced our Final Vows, August 11, 1944. It happened that a bomb dropped in the vicinity. Immediately the priest clasped the ciborium to himself and we all, bending low, expected the inevitable. It exploded, 'But why are you fearful O you of little faith?' He it was who was content to let us live.

"Since January 1944, enrollment had been high. We needed more classrooms so we rented the vacant house next door. After the war, we bought the house with garden and front lawn and opened a kindergarten there. For some years, I was privileged to teach these little girls and boys. They were a comfort to me and a super tonic at that very difficult time of my life.

"After the five terrible years, the nation began to breathe freely on May 7, V Day. The people were wild with joy and eager to clear up all the debris, build up anew, and repair damaged property, public and private. The government allocated a fair percentage of funds to this purpose. An architect was sent to assess the damage we had suffered. I remember his surprise when he saw us working hard. 'Nuns' he said 'were expected to do nothing but teach and pray.' He allotted the largest sum of First Aid to the chapel saying, 'It is the sisters drawing room.' To my mind this was a splendid witness on both sides.

“Now that some measure of stability was achieved we were anxious to hear news from our families. I can remember only one Red Cross letter. Its message of twenty-five words was more confusing than enlightening. Now, we had to face the truth, the pain. My brother Paul had lost his right arm fighting in Russia. Peter had come home with malaria, but was called again for one of the last battle in Frankfurt-Oder. He was declared missing. John, seventeen, was also called up toward the end of the war. He managed to get away via the North Sea. My young sister, age fifteen, wrote, ‘We are so hungry, we would like to lie down and die.’ Tears flowed freely when I read this. With food from our own rations and the help of friends who supplied secondhand children’s clothes, we were happy to ease their sufferings a little and bring joy into their lives.

“It is always a red letter day at home when a care parcel arrives from England. Gratitude, above all to God, who has been our protection and strength throughout the war. God is never outdone in generosity. My entire extended family experienced God’s goodness at my parents’ 50th Wedding anniversary. My father suffered from cancer of the throat and had undergone surgery. Therefore, at the sacred moment when he was to give again his solemn yes to his partner at High Mass, we all held our breath to hear the almost inaudible response. It was a thrill never to be forgotten. In the stillness of the evening, mom, dad, and I shared memories over a cup of tea. Suddenly dad whispered, ‘Ann, I thank God every day for my cross. It has brought me close to him’. At that moment, my heart overflowed with amazement, gratitude, and inexpressible joy. I marveled at my parents’ faith and spirit of sacrifice. They had been a constant challenge and encouragement during times of crisis and the ups and downs of my life. My mother’s favorite prayer was, ‘Oh God, how good, how great you are.’

After the war **Sister Arimathea** served the children and her sisters in Woolwich, Crowborough, and Lingfield. She had hoped to spend her remaining years in England. She said, “I loved the English countryside. I felt at home with the people.” However, God spoke again, “Leave your county...” “My provincial thought it would be better for me to come to the motherhouse in Waterdown. It was decided that I travel with a group of sisters from England to the Province Gathering in August 1985 and stay in Canada. I flew to the strange country with different culture. I knew a few sisters who had served in England but most of them were strangers. But our group was received heartily and all the sisters were helpful during the Gathering.

“On September 1, I was introduced to my new ministry: pastoral care for our sick and infirm sisters. I thought it was a privilege to be with them and perform little acts of kindness to ease the burden of these suffering members of the Mystical Body of Christ. I felt a kinship with Joseph of Arimathea and this helped me to adjust unexpectedly well. However, later, health problems forced me to retire. I had to undergo several surgeries, and now I am a patient in our infirmary. I take it as God’s way to tell me that it is more important to be than to do.

I strongly believe that I have been called by God as the story of my life makes clear. Before I was conceived in my mother's womb my whole life lay open before Him. As I look back, God's providence runs like an open thread through all of it, times of deep joy, times of intense suffering. Both have helped me to mature. It was difficult to be uprooted again in 1985, to adjust to a new culture, especially now, that the aging process makes changes more difficult. However, only God knows what is needed to complete His work."