

IMMIGRATION OF SCHOOL SISTERS OF NOTRE DAME TO AMERICA

“Enlarge the space of your tent
Stretch out your tent cloth unsparingly”
Isaiah 54:2

We School Sisters of Notre Dame want to document certain important happenings in the history of the congregation during Hitler’s time for various reasons. We hope to show how our SSND community was able to adjust to difficult times, how different persons dealt with difficulties, how our lives were enriched through them, what gifts God gave us to share with others, what gifts others used to help us. We also want to share with other immigrants how we adjusted and to give insights to people who work with immigrants. It all leads up to the purpose of showing how, through God’s help, good can come out of evil.

Blessed Sister Antonina Kratochwil, SSND, became a martyr in Poland because of Hitler’s regime. She is a light for all School Sisters whose lives were affected by Adolf Hitler. Thousands of sisters in many countries had their lives changed. Here we want to concentrate on the sisters who left Germany and found new homes in North America, South America, and England.

CHAPTER 1 BACKGROUND

Adolf Hitler became the chancellor of Germany on March 23, 1933. His National Socialist frame of mind dominated his philosophy. It was the foundation of his principles for education according to his motto, “You are nothing; your nation is everything.” He did not formulate an educational system, but set down guidelines in *Mein Kampf* which had to be followed.

On the basis of these guidelines, the main purpose of education was not the acquisition of knowledge but the development of a healthy body; therefore, physical education was allotted five hours of teaching per week while religious education lost its importance and, in time, was completely abolished. Next to the physical training, which also was destined to be used in military service, political schooling was essential. It had to give knowledge of the party, dedication to the leader, and especially race consciousness. These aims could be best achieved in biology, German, geography, and history.

For feminine youth, the military aspect was not to be neglected. Motherhood was emphasized but predominantly as service to the nation, namely, to bear soldiers for the state.

To achieve these ends indoctrination in the classroom was not sufficient. The Hitler Youth was formed and divided into several groups, with the purpose of teaching the National Socialist world views and physical fitness. The boys, 10-13 years of age, formed the Jungvolk and the girls of the same age, the Jungmaedels. The 14-18 year olds belonged to the Hitler Youth. This was the unalterable way of training the German youth into National Socialist beings.

That the School Sisters of Notre Dame stood in the way of achieving Hitler's goals of education, is evident. "For us, education means enabling persons to reach the fullness of their potential as individuals created in God's image and assisting them to direct their gifts towards building the earth. Like Mother Theresa, we educate with the conviction that the world can be changed through the transformation of persons. Thus, our ministry demands a Christian vision of what the human person is called to be and what the world is destined to become." (YAS, Constitution, # 22) Hitler's government chose the exclusion of the sisters from the educational sector as the most effective method to hinder their opposing influence. Process: demand that teachers take an Oath of Allegiance to Hitler. The sisters refused.

"Why did Hitler become powerful so quickly?" is a question often asked. History discloses a main reason. Germany lost WW I. The Peace Treaty of Versailles did not bring peace to Germany. Woodrow Wilson's Plan of Compassion in dealing with the enemy was rejected and the plan of the allies, a plan of severe restitution, was accepted. Year after year, Germany was depleted of many resources such as ships, minerals, livestock, and other goods. It had to give up land and lost its overseas colonies. It had to pay about \$33 billion in War Reparations to France and The Netherlands. The country became a nation of hungry, hopeless people. This condition weakened Germany's democratic postwar government.

During the 1930's a strong national movement led by Adolph Hitler gained power. He promised to ignore the Treaty of Versailles and to provide work for the masses. Many people trusted him and joined his workforces, especially for building autobahns. The National Socialist party was established and Adolph Hitler expected the citizens to join it, but many realized by and by that his philosophy overemphasized the state and had little interest in other values.

A new program for the reeducation of the teachers was carried out in three steps:

- Proof of Aryan descent,
- A deepening appreciation of the National Socialist train of thought
- Reform of teacher education.

The first step presented no problems, however, the other steps did not correspond with the philosophy of Christian education. To quiet anxious Catholics about the new trends, a Concordat between the Vatican and Germany was ratified on September 10, 1933. It safeguarded religious freedom and the right to practice the Catholic faith in public. But in 1935, it became evident that the National Socialist party had no intention of following the

rights provided for in the Concordat. The slogan became *one People, one Reich, one Law, one School* which led to the open battle against the denominational schools.

The readiness of the American Commissariat to welcome German sisters was a great relief for Mother Almeda. She decided which American province each sister should join. During the years 1935-38, the Baltimore province received six teachers, four kindergarten teachers, three needlework teachers, and eleven homemakers. The Mankato province was joined by four teachers, two kindergarten teachers, two needlework teachers, and one homemaker. To the Milwaukee province came fourteen teachers, four kindergarten teachers, five needlework teachers and five homemakers. The St. Louis province received two teachers, one kindergarten teacher, and two needlework teachers.

Each sister has her own story of making her decision to leave her homeland, of receiving the permission from her parents, and of adjusting to a new world. Written accounts of some sisters document their responses to questions, e.g., reasons why they chose to leave their homeland and how they adjusted to life in a new culture.