

Sister Mary Benedicta Viebeck, SSND

Educator, Translator, and “Keeper of the History”

By S. Victoria Wiethaler, SSND

Sister Mary Benedicta Viebeck states, “I consider my whole religious life a challenging, enriching experience in SSND internationality. When I was a candidate in Bavaria, the government started closing schools to our sisters and the future of our congregation seemed unsure. I was stunned when Reverend Mother Almeda (Stricker) suggested I go to America, but I accepted the ideas as perhaps the only sure way to live as a School sister of Notre Dame. Shortly after my profession in Munich in 1938, I was among the last German sisters allowed to leave the country. I have never regretted the move, not even during World War II when communication with loved ones was near zero.

“The English I studied in Germany was learned from British teachers and I had difficulty picking up the American variations. I was soon sent to St. Peter’s Orphanage and parish school in Newark, New Jersey where I felt welcome and wanted, and very much at home from the beginning. This was due to the attitude and kindness of the community and the presence of Monsignor Thimmer, pastor of St. Peter’s School. He lived with us because he loved the children and was well taken care of by the sisters. St. Peter’s was originally German and the people were very friendly. (I still have friends there among the graduates of the parish school and the orphanage.)

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“After these first seventeen years in Newark, New Jersey, I was assigned to St. Rita’s in Brooklyn, for teaching the sixth grade. But this lasted only one year. In 1956, I was sent to St. Vincent Orphanage, Tacony, Pennsylvania, as administrator and convent superior. It was a large institution and even included refugee children from Cuba. When we were asked by the provincial superior to take in several high school teachers for the newly established St. Hubert’s High School we hesitated a bit, but then said, yes. What a benefit it became!

Sister Mary Benedicta Viebeck a familiar face at many General Chapters.



The children and the sisters had someone else to relate to and the high school teachers brought girls in as volunteers for our music therapy and craft programs, especially during the summer. I also managed to finish my course work at Seton Hall University and received a master’s degree in American History. In 1957, I had the privilege of making my first home visit to Germany.

“I have to tell you a funny story. After one of my talks in voice and diction class at Seton Hall, the instructor asked the class, “Did anyone perhaps notice any kind of accent in this talk?” Great surprise, questioning eyes, shaking of head, till finally one hand went up and the woman said, ‘I do think I noticed a slight but very becoming British accent!’”

“My term of office was completed in 1962; I was sent to the Institute of Notre Dame on Aisquith Street and taught history and government there, and German. The year 1967 found me in the Generalate house in Rome as administrator where I also assisted at the General Chapters in 1970, 72, and 74. I returned to Baltimore in 1970. In 1972 I was asked to move to the Notre Dame Preparatory School to open a German department. From there I was elected to the Provincial Council in Baltimore, 1975 – 1979. After this I went back to IND again but the reentry into school was hard. In December, 1980, I was rushed from the

Sister Mary Benedicta Viebeck states, "I consider my classroom to Mercy Hospital in a state of unconsciousness which turned out to be an epileptic seizure. I fell into the right hands and have not had any seizure since. I finished the year and stayed on another one because we had state evaluations coming. The language department got excellent ratings. We also had a highly educated Cuban lady in charge of Spanish.

The year I left teaching, Sisters Barbara Brumleve and Marjorie Myers were asked by the province to study our archives and research on SSND history in the United States. They were a bit dismayed when they found that many of our most valuable documents and letters were written in German. Someone gave the two researchers my name and I have been employed as translator ever since. Sister Barbara Brumleve in the preface to *The Letters of Mother Caroline Friess* was very kind in thanking all the translators. Sister Mary Benedicta Viebeck is mentioned specifically, 'Her knowledge of both German and English and her at-homeness with both cultures have been invaluable.'

"I also did some translations for Father John Rotelle, OSA, from Villanova, Pennsylvania, editor of the 'Augustinian Press,'

who wanted to share with his readers some of the outstanding research which was done by Augustinians in Germany about Martin Luther and about St. Augustine. He, too, was at a loss about getting all this valuable material into English, when someone, I still don't know who, gave him my name. Now I work under the direction of the Province archivist, Sister Marie Kevin Mueller, who is a dear friend of mine. I translate obituaries, chronicles, correspondence, etc. The dear Lord has his own way of doing things, if we can just hear his call and follow him."

Sister Benedicta was guest speaker at the 203rd anniversary dinner of the German Society of Maryland, November 8, 1986. She had been a long time member of the society. She spoke with faith, intelligence, and enthusiasm about the origins of our congregation. The attentive audience included a representative from the German embassy in Washington, who afterwards personally thanked sister for the inspiring address.

Sister represented the Baltimore Province at the Munich celebration of the Centenary of Mother Theresa and renewed her friendship with many sisters from around the world.