

Interview with Sister Rosalind Gefre (RG)

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CJ: They have an outdoor market. The people are very slavic looking. They are Ukrainians. There are virtually no Germans there anymore, but the architecture remains. The homes our ancestors built there on the steppes remain standing, and they're beautiful.

RG: Everything they did they did well.

CJ: They did very well. They continue that style on the plains of the Dakotas, so it was very interesting. The people I was traveling with were all former North Dakotans, I believe. We were struck by how much the landscape looked like the Great Plains, like North Dakota. It was a very spiritual trip for all of us, especially as each of us went to our [ancestral] villages and realized that if our parents or grandparents had not left, that that would be our story. It's a very humbling experience to go there.

RG: And still as we get older I think back. My grandparents who came from over there were months on the ship—they weren't over here in three days—and the hardships they endured. We're just writing a book about yours truly.

CJ: Yes, I understand April, 2003 your book will be published. I'll be anxious to read it.

RG: We're hoping. Joan sort of put the skeleton down, and I've been filling in. It is tremendously time consuming. Every minute I have I add to it. The cooking, for instance, the younger people depend upon it. Several of my nieces and nephews have said, "I'm going to come and write down how to make Knepfle or noodle." Slowly they're coming back to realize that when ones like my sisters are gone, then it's gone.

CJ: You are the torch bearers right now. Those of you who are the senior generation will be passing the torch before long, so it's a time-limited effort on the part of my generation to gather this knowledge. But there is so much more available in a written form than there was 25 or 30 years ago. And of course the World Wide Web has made the German-Russian community much more cohesive. We've all made friends of people we've never met via the internet because we share that same interest.

Do you know what Brauche is?

RG: I have often wondered—of course now these old people give Brauche—I don't know if there is any living—but I received the result of it. My ears were just running. I don't know what it was. They were just running, not the inside but the outside—and crusty. Open sores is what it amounted to. They were just wet all the time. I was young. I went to the doctor, and he couldn't do anything. Then someone said, "Elizabeth (my mom's name), why don't you take her to Mrs. Biegler's house?" So we went, and I remember her putting her hands on my ear and saying something. I had no idea what she said because I

speaking a different German from hers. But she said, "Now you go home and every day you say three Our Father's and three Hail Mary's to St. Anne, and I'll do the same." And that's what I did, and in a short time, maybe three days or so, it started to dry up. I also had a doctor's appointment, and I thought I better go. So we went, and he looked at these ears and said, "What are you doing?" Of course me and my mom lying said: "We are not doing anything." He said, "Well, you are doing something because the sores are healing, and they are not healing the way this would heal naturally." But he said, "Whatever you are doing, continue to do it." So I continued to pray, and the sores were totally gone.

CJ: Did it require another visit with Mrs. Biegler, or was it just that one time?

RG: I think we probably went twice. I think she just wanted to see what was going on. But they just were dry in a very short time. The doctor had given me some salve which didn't do anything. So that was my personal experience with Brauche.

CJ: Why would the family get a remedy or cure outside of the home if they had—you know, I grew up with Watkins liniment. Do you remember your family having cures?

RG: We had all of those. Do you remember the green drops? They cured everything. Depending what your sickness was, it was put either in hot or cold water, or you put it on a teaspoon with sugar. So we used those a lot.

We used mustard plaster when we had colds and lung problems. They were put on our chest, but you had to be very careful not to leave it too long because they would burn. Then there's liniment – a tablespoon every day. Now that I am older, I look at the directions and it says not to use internally, but we'd take a spoonful every day and you stayed well.

Chamomile tea was another thing for certain diseases. You could either drink or be put on [tape cuts out]. My sister just last year used Chamomile. Her husband had sores—I can't remember where the sores were—and they simply wouldn't heal. So she took Chamomile tea and sprayed that on his hand. The sores wouldn't go away, and doctors couldn't help. But she said in about two days the sores were practically healed.

CJ: Were there other things that went with this: prayers or incantations of any kind?

RG: We basically did not pray; but my sister, the one I just mentioned, who is about 85 or 87 years, prayed for whatever she was healing. I made a week's seminar way back when and learned how to pray. We either said the Prayerful Prayer or said the Rosary, but generally we wouldn't pray out. For healing we wouldn't lay hands on people and pray for healing. We most likely did it quietly: which we did, we prayed or with a family prayer we prayed for Aunt Mary for whatever she had. I do lots of it and some of it is hands on; like yesterday, I was spending time with a friend who had cancer, and before I left she said, "Would you just lay on hands." I did [A84?] a lot to lay hands on people and pray. Another thing that I've been thinking a lot since you asked me about this interview: You know what I see tremendously healing, and people I think have no idea. The one thing is touch; just touching people. The other thing I see a lot is hurting people. Some people call me and say, "I just need to talk with you." They're upset or whatever. That just happened the other evening, this young woman called just needing to talk. I started to respond and just sort of carried on in my own. When she finished, she had tears over the phone saying, "I don't know what it is about you, but always when I talk to you I feel healed." I have reflected on that, and I have heard that a lot. People say that to me a lot.

This gentlemen—I have no idea who he was—but at the [A100 saints, I massage at St...called saints] he took my hands and said, "Oh, those hands are so beautiful, and they are such healing hands." Now whether he experienced something [I don't know], but God can do that. You know I couldn't claim, but I do pray a lot with people. I pray a lot for healing, but I can't claim and say all this healing has happened.

But I am back in "natural healing" again [A09 -12]...I have a real desire. Years back, I wanted to start going back and asking [Brauche] people who are still alive and ask, "What did you do? And how did you do it?" They are mostly old people and live so far away. The young people just lay hands on people to heal them.

CJ: When you were a child living in that community there was Mrs. Biegler that you identified. Do you know of other people who were in her category, either in midwifery role or any men who did bone setting or that kind of healing?

RG: You know there was a [A122 Gutskenien], and she in the olden times did everything. They did massage. They didn't spend an hour like we do doing massage, but they would do massage; they would do adjusting of bones. They would know what to give you for certain sicknesses. Another help was Camphor [A126] that was used a lot. I had asthma when I was younger. One of these natural methods was that I should take hot boiling water, put it in a pan, and then put a towel over me, and put Camphor in the boiling water. I just hung over that and breathed that in.

CJ: Where do you suppose they got their knowledge?

RG: I think that was from way back at home. Like my grandmother—I think it was a hand-me-down.

CJ: If that's true, they must have known, like you know. Although you are not eager to call yourself a healer, you know that you have healing skills. They must have known that also. What I'd like to know is: Did somebody identify them and say, "I have knowledge to share with you, like you're doing with your massage schools?" How did they get trained?

RG: I can call my sister and she can fill me in, because she has a good mind. Another thing which I can remember my family doing: We were out running around and stepped into a nail, and we had pussy sores. She would take milk and put bread in it. Again she made—I don't know what you call it [150]—and put that on the damaged area. We rarely went to doctors when we grew up; it was all these natural things that mom did.

CJ: So there were the healing arts within the family that everybody just sort of knew. Then there were those areas where your mom's skill wasn't good enough for your sore ears, and clearly the doctor of western medicine, his skills didn't work either. So your mom knew about this Mrs. Biegler, who was an immigrant herself. She might have gotten her training from someone in the old country. Of the healers with whom you had a familiarity with in Emmons County, were they all female or were there any males?

RG: What I can remember they were all women.

CJ: And did they also serve in a midwife capacity, do you think?

RG: Yes, Maude was a midwife. When you got babies Maude would come to the house.

CJ: What was her last name?

- RG:** All I know is Maude. All of us were born at home, and most of my sister's children were born at home. Maude was there. My mom would sometimes deliver if it was stormy, and you couldn't get to these people. Then Mom would do deliveries.
- CJ:** So your mother had some midwife skills too.
- RG:** She did it sometimes for her own children.
- CJ:** How many children did your mother have?
- RG:** There were thirteen of us.
- CJ:** So she knew what the process was. And all born healthy?
- RG:** Yes, every one of us. I had a little brother that died when he had whopping cough. He was about one. But all dozen of us lived. My brothers all died younger, but the oldest one died at the age of 80, the other two in their 60s, and one in his 50s. But all my eight sisters: I think my oldest sister is 92, and the youngest [A129 tape cuts] and my oldest sister is now in her 90s and all-in-all she had 21 children. She has 16 children still living; 5 died within a year or two, but they were alive. All the rest of the 16—one of them died. [A190 tape cuts] and none of my family is in nursing homes. They're all taking care of themselves and their husbands.
- CJ:** In the Strasburg area?
- RG:** Yes.
- CJ:** Amazing!
- RG:** One of my sisters just had to stop gardening. She had the garden in but around July or August she had a heart attack. She came home from the hospital where she had by-pass surgery and in two weeks time, against doctor's orders, she was out in the garden hoeing. She can't wait until spring.
- CJ:** They go to traditional doctors for that kind of care, but do you think they still do a lot of their own medication?
- RG:** Magdalene still does.
- CJ:** What would she be doing?
- RG:** Well, like her husband had these sores. The doctors couldn't do anything. That's when she put that Champol on. Every now and then a grandchild was sick, and she worked on him.
- CJ:** So wonderful, that's how healing skills are passed on.
- RG:** When I go home I always wanted to bring a recorder—and either I don't bring the tapes or I forget the recorder—because I know the time is limited. And Magdalene's the sharpest of them.
- CJ:** If I could find someone to interview her, do you think she'll be willing?
- RG:** She'd love it.
- CJ:** What's her full name?

- RG:** Magdalene Mastel.
- CJ:** And where does she live?
- RG:** I can call and give you her phone number.
- CJ:** Okay.
- RG:** Magdalene Mastel 701-493-2473.
- CJ:** And where does she live?
- RG:** Edgeley, ND.
- CJ:** Oh really.
- RG:** Yah.
- CJ:** And she lives in her own home?
- RG:** Yes, she's sharp.
- CJ:** How old is she—about 85 you say?
- RG:** I think about 85.
- CJ:** Have you been to the Hague church? Katie Wald wrote the history of that church. I have forgotten what her maiden name is [Glatt].
- RG:** Katie Wald is from Edgeley.
- CJ:** No, she's from Hague. Yes, there are Walds in Edgeley.
- RG:** Do you know Longs?
- CJ:** Yes.
- RG:** Well my niece is married to one of the Longs.
- CJ:** Susan is married to—are they the ones with the triplets? They rented my farmhouse for a few years. So then are you related to Mrs. Schmidt? Do you have a sister named Schmidt? I am thinking of the wrong Susan, because Susan's grandmother was midwife when my brothers were born. My parents lived in the Zeeland area until 1944 and then moved away like many families did: the Longs, Aberles, Matherns and Mastels.
- RG:** The Mastels were some of the first ones around Strasburg that moved to Edgeley. It seems like there was kind of an exodus.
- CJ:** There was, from that community and then from Wishek. More of the evangelicals that moved were the Ketterlings and the Justs; like my dad and my uncles moved in 1944. But I worked in Edgeley when I was in high school at an implement dealership, so I know that I met your brothers-in-laws. No, it was Heidinger Implement.

- RG:** There's a Miller from Wishek and he's got a TV station by Coon Rapids [Minnesota] and also Edgeley area. He called me about a year ago. He had never met me, but he had heard lots about me. Believe or not, he had me on for a whole hour. It was so neat, and he's German. We talked about the Wishek sausage. When I go home, I might go to Edgeley and to Linton where my sister Mary Vetsch lives and I'd bring sausage.
- CJ:** Well, George Just who makes the Wishek sausage is my dad's second cousin.
- RG:** Is that right! Well every loves that sausage.
- CJ:** Here's another small world story: George Just's niece is my good friend Char Wiest, and she is another person I'll be interviewing. She is a "Healing Touch" practitioner. She's a licensed HT practitioner. And you two are my primary candidates for the part of this project where I want the readers to understand that Brauche continues today. And that it was not witchcraft. It was not something to be suspect. It continues today with practitioners who take that mandate, who recognize that calling and learn what they can about a person's body—their bone structure, their muscles—and try to help people in contemporary life. And have an awareness of what they eat, how they feel, what they think, and their connection with the higher power: How all of that contributes to their illness or their wellness.
- RG:** That's very true. I have a niece from Wishek who is married to Joe Holzer. She's my oldest sister and they had a daughter who went on a fast because she thought she was fat. She really wasn't, but she thought she was, and she didn't eat. Basically, she was dying. Then she went to one of those people [Braucher] and is alive and well today. I think it was...I have to check this with Katherine...but I think it was a teaspoon or tablespoon of oatmeal.
- CJ:** So this happened in recent years?
- RG:** Recent years, yes.
- CJ:** So she took her to someone who had a healing gift because western medicine couldn't help.
- RG:** I am going to call Katherine to see what it was. Also, I don't know where we got it—maybe from calves or cows—but we used to have these things we'd get on our hands. We called them [A304 vartzna], warts I guess you'd call it, but you couldn't get rid of them. I know my sister Caroline's son had some of those, and she took him to one of those women (Braucher), and they [the warts] practically fell away in no time at all. Another time one of them also took vitamin E. I'll call my sisters and see what I can find out.
- CJ:** We might need another session. I don't want to take more than an hour of your time; so we have about fifteen minutes.
- RG:** [A315 tape cuts out often for the next few minutes] all these hard things that had gone on [A317-18] so I dropped dead, and they put me in the hospital. He put me in there and everyday he came and said what happened. I told [A325-26] and he made me promise that I would complete high school, as I had no high school or college education, and he would let me out of the hospital. He said, "Well, do you promise?" and I said, "No" and he said, "Well then stay." I would probably be there forever so one day I said yeah, I'll take that GED test, and I did! [337-39]...she just gave me a massage. I didn't say I got this or that, [A341] want to help people, and I still go to workshops. Last week I went to Fargo, and I took a strenuous two day seminar. It is "body" work. It's not strictly massage, but it's another way how you

manipulate the body. Often times the problem may not be in the back: The problem may be up here on the shoulder. Anyway, I've been so successful at helping people. It's more of a push: deep, deep work. I continue this, I'm 73, and I just try to get more educated on massage and help more people. The massage is tremendous, but there are "body" works out there that are just tremendous. Here's an example: you know when you have frozen shoulders: there was this young man, about 40, who could only raise his arms so high. Those arms were frozen. Within a half hour, he could stretch both arms back and forth. That's what that "body" work does.

- CJ:** You have another new avenue of healing open that has presented itself to you. Here you are at 73, when others are thinking retirement, and you are looking at a new door that has opened for you, and how you can help other people. Certainly your "higher power" has wanted you to do this because look how strong your arms are. I'm looking at your hands: They aren't even swollen or arthritic looking.
- RG:** No, they're not.
- CJ:** No.
- RG:** I don't think I have arthritis in my body.
- CJ:** There's a reason: You have a job to do. I mean the "higher power" is saying, "Sister, you're not done." And here's a whole new area of learning for you. I have a question: As I read about your mother and her illness, saying "I need to have a massage," how did you even find someone to do it, because when I think back to the 1960s massage parlors had a very shady reputation? As I read in your biography portion, I remember the fight you had, I remember it very well. So how did you even find someone to give that massage?
- RG:** Well, mom knew a woman who lived down the road.
- CJ:** Was this in Aberdeen?
- RG:** Aberdeen, South Dakota. In fact, this is very interesting because there was a little girl living there. I learned that this little girl's mother didn't want this child, and so the grandmother took care of her. And she came to our massage school and I didn't know her because she was a little girl [when I last saw her].
- CJ:** She did?
- RG:** I didn't know she was this same little girl, but I talked about this woman in Aberdeen, Rose Obermeier, who massaged me. She broke down crying and said, "I never heard anybody talk as nice about my grandmother as you."
- CJ:** So her grandmother didn't have community support in what she was doing, do you think?
- RG:** Those days I think they did, but you just go and nobody cared about it.
- CJ:** Did she consider herself a healer or a Braucher?
- RG:** She did massage.
- CJ:** So, had she had any training do you think?

[end side A - begin side B]

- RG:** ...there was a blind gentleman in Aberdeen who went to this Swedish massage school for the blind in Chicago. He helped me get a 500 or 600 hour correspondence course in massage and then this gentleman [B5 tape cuts] can you believe he did all that for free for me, so that's where I got hands-on [training]. Then when mom died, I went to Fargo, North Dakota, and there was another blind who [B7] who I went to weekly for further help. What I do, I want to do well.
- CJ:** One more question. My parents didn't go past 8th grade either. That was a very common thing. My mother is 83 years;
- RG:** You didn't go to school in those days, you had to work.
- CJ:** Right, I guess her brother who is now 70 had the opportunity to go to high school, but didn't. So of her family of ten, one sister and one brother went to high school, the rest did not. So when you say you didn't go to high school, I understand why you didn't. It wasn't because you weren't smart, it simply wasn't done.
- RG:** Well, you had the farm. Who'd carry on the farm? And who'd have the money—thirteen miles to town—that was the other end of the world.
- CJ:** Even if it didn't cost to go to school, you had to pay for food—room and board.
- RG:** Right.
- CJ:** That's why my parents couldn't go. The reason my father's children went on to high school and college and advanced degrees is because he was denied. He was one who wanted to go to high school and was recommended because of his high scores, but his stepfather said, "No, he's just going to be a farmer." And that shaped my father's view of education. That's why he moved his family to another county, where our grade school was a half-mile away. He provided cars—when I went to high school, there was a school bus, but there wasn't any when my siblings graduated in 1957. But that shaped his view. We were all going to college whether we liked it or not because he didn't even get to go to high school and that denial of it. But not everybody wanted to [go to high school] or thought it was necessary. Where did your self-limiting belief come from when that physician said to you, "You need to get your GED?"
- RG:** You know it probably happened—I lived with those educated Sisters. The Sisters of Saint Joseph are very highly educated, and I'm seeing people who have education were up here and the little dumb farmers were down here. I think that's probably where that came from.
- CJ:** And do you think that is not only something you felt here, but maybe heard as a child? That that's why priests and nuns were held in such high esteem—and physicians, you know, people even outside of the Catholic community, if they had an education of any kind, they were sort of elevated and put on a pedestal.
- RG:** You know, I don't think there was an issue made of it in my home. I just put lots of heavy things on myself. [B37] But I was always going to be quite perfect. I mean I wasn't going to sin, and I had high goals. I think maybe I put those on myself. Because the Sisters could write nice letters, and [B40 when I

entered...]. In school, we spoke English up to the 8th grade, but we whispered in German. [B43...] "I may not speak German. I must speak the American language." That was the punishment, usually after school.

- CJ:** And your parents would not have challenged that teacher, because the teacher was up here and you had a peasant existence.
- RG:** I don't think they really ever found out, because I got so good—I said God planned and got me ready for massage by milking and writing—I got so good I took three pencils at once [to speed up the writing punishment]. We were about a mile from school, we would run home, hurry up, get undressed so mom didn't know we were late. Because I think, in those days, the teacher was always right.
- CJ:** I think it's a very common thing. When our ancestors came they were actually fairly well educated. But the first generation had to work so hard to get established, and for the second generation, just being able to go to grade school was a big deal. They didn't have lofty goals for you at that point. What made you decide to go to the convent?
- RG:** I'm a public school product, but in the summer we had Sisters for two weeks and man! They were gods themselves in my own mind. Again that's my own—they really weren't gods, but they were just so wonderful. They were very nice to us. And just seeing them may have started some spark, but I remember as a little girl it was my goal to become a Sister. I had no idea how, I was just was going to do it. Then when I got into my teen years, of course, other things became more important and I put it aside, but I knew I had to make a decision for the Convent. And I'm very, very grateful. I am so grateful.
- CJ:** How did you choose this religious order? [Presentation Sisters of Saint Joseph]?
- RG:** I have a stepsister. My mother remarried after my father died when he was 42 years [B67-68]. I didn't know the difference between Sisters. They were all Sisters [to me]. That's how I came here and again how wonderful!
- CJ:** Do you have the support of your order in the work that you are doing?
- RG:** Now they think I am great, but I stood very much alone. What happens in crisis is many times people don't come forward [B77]. It was probably about a year doing massage and I'd be crying [B74]. I'd be at Saint Catherine's all day and some evenings, and I got very lonely. They didn't say that I can't do massage, but the message was very, very clear every time I'd ask. That was the message I got. [B76]
- CJ:** In your heart, do you believe that it was because of your massage mission and they didn't embrace that at that time?
- RG:** Oh, definitely.
- CJ:** It's been a long hard road. Occasionally I see, read or hear someone who went to you, and I am reminded again of you going before the city council in Edina—because I've lived in St. Louis Park [neighboring suburb] all these years—and how difficult it was, and what you have done to legitimize massage.
- RG:** [tape cuts out often next few minutes] My heavens, not only was I battling [B84], I'd go to the park there that I rented [B85]. The first few massage classes, many students did not tell their families they went to a massage school [B87]. Massage has become very reputable, but times were hard. Not only did I battle

city council, but I had to appear before two judges. There were people who wrote to my [religious] community or called them and said you need to get rid of her.

- CJ:** But you could remain in the order? Who made that decision? Apparently no one pursued having you ousted.
- RG:** Except one time I did write a letter, during this time, that I was going to leave the convent, but I forgot to sign it. Then one of the Sisters wrote a letter [B95-96...] "You're massaging and massaging men! I'm a nurse, and I never even gave a back rub to man as a nurse." Then I was forbidden to massage men. I was massaging the clergy in Fargo, I was [B100...]. One of the nice things—it is like God is almost—is I don't remember what individuals did. And that is so wonderful, and the other, I think well that's where they were.
- CJ:** That was their reality at that point, and hopefully they've grown. Then what ever took you to the St. Paul Saints [baseball team]?
- RG:** Well, the Saints called and said they want to do fun things, and they were wondering if I would start offering massages. At first I got excited but, you know, nobody would sit down during the games for a massage the first two times, and I'd even give it to them for free, because all I wanted was for them to sit on the massage chair. They said, "If you go behind the door, I'll do it, but in the public, forget it." "It's for free," I said. "No, thank you," [they said]. I had another friend who did massage with me, and we would keep massaging each other just so they saw what it was about. If anybody would sit down, I would have them for one-half hour or an hour—as long as they stayed. Then slowly people started to come. Now we don't even have to ask anymore; they just come.
- CJ:** Well, you certainly are not through with your mission, as you keep opening schools. Aren't you amazed now that you don't have to twist anybody's arm anymore to let you do what you're being called to do because it's become so legitimate?
- RG:** Yeah, and people still ask, "Would you come and work with us." We have five schools and five or six clinics. I still am very, very busy. To all our new classes in all the five schools I go and spend three hours. What I do is establish ethics—morals. You either massage or you don't massage. You must be nice to the client. You're not just out there to massage [B128]...all of us need bread and butter. I try to set standards.
- CJ:** Now what I just heard you say is exactly what I read about Brauche through the ages. a) You are an instrument of the Lord. b) You are not doing it for the money; you're doing it for personal remuneration; you're doing this because it is a calling, and you're calling upon the Triune God to assist in this healing. c) You're there to be quiet and let the Spirit work. Those are three of the things that we in our research can glean as the mandate of a Braucher. Then the fourth point you are doing in a more sophisticated way. The old Brauchers—even the Pennsylvania Dutch perform a form of Brauche. They were our relatives back in Germany who came here while we went to Russia, so if you think of that time period. They brought healing practices to Pennsylvania. Our ancestors took their healing practices to South Russia. If you were one of those gifted persons, not only was your mandate to heal, but to identify other people who have that [Brauche] gift. Your job was to share that knowledge with them so that it could perpetuate. That's what you are doing in your schools. You are a Braucher!

RG: As you know, I hug practically everybody, and that's been a sore spot way back. I still have a passion for Brauche. And what I have discovered is the hug. I'm finished massaging and so I say, "You know what, you need a hug." People fall on their arms and often times they break down and sob. I feel that is tremendously healing, and I just started thinking about those things, but that hug is very, very important. I've never had anybody say, "I don't want a hug."

CJ: Was your family of origin a touching family?

RG: No, it is something that happened inside of me. They do it now, but I'd come home and hug my brother and he'd say [B162], but my family, they were not huggers. It was just something that started to happen to me, because I felt people needed [B166].

CJ: This is interesting.

RG: This is wonderful and I'll call Magdaline...

[End of tape]