

Interview with Sister Joan Nuss (SJ)

Conducted by Jocelyn Renner Tang (JT)

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Sacred Heart Monastery, Richardton, North Dakota

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JT: This is February 1st, 1998. I am Jocelyn Tang, a volunteer interviewer for the Germans from Russia Heritage Collection, North Dakota State University Libraries at Fargo, North Dakota. It is a pleasure to visit with Sister Joan Nuss, and we are here at Richardton, at The Sacred Heart Monastery.

Sister Joan, I'm going to ask you a few questions about your family history. Are aware of what village your ancestors came from in Russia? You believe they came from the [Beresan] colony of Muenchen, in the district of Kherson in South Russia, and the county of Ananjaw. Now, did both sets of your parents come from here or grandparents?

SJ: They both came from Russia, but my mother was from a different place in Russia.

JT: Sister Joan, you were you born here. When were you born, what is your date of birth?

SJ: November the 22nd, 1917.

JT: 1917. And your parents, were they born in America or in Russia?

SJ: No, they were both born in Russia.

JT: How old were they when they came to America?

SJ: Well, my mother was 19 when she came over accidentally. Her brother was supposed to come, but then he got called into service so he had to go to war. They told my mother to go on in Manual Wanner's name [her brother's name]. They had a hard time. When they were on the ship, they thought it was a man. She said, "No, I'm a girl." [They asked] "Why you got a man's name?" She said, "I can't help it." They badgered her a bit, but they told her to go by that name or else she wouldn't make it. She had a hard time on the ship.

JT: What happened to her on the ship?

SJ: They were going to put her in with the other guys - where the men, you know, in that department. They had told her to be sure and go by that name and don't change it or else she would be sent back. But she made it across. Then when she came across, when she came to Dickinson here, that would be her brother-in-law, Mr. Mischel, he went down to pick her up on that train and brought her home to my aunt's house, Rosella Mischel. Then he said, "You visit for awhile and I'll go out and get a pail of coal and put it in the stove so it's warm in here."

He would not tell them who they were - he didn't introduce them. By the time he came in, they had each other around the neck and both were crying!

JT: They were sisters?

SJ: They were sisters and he never told them. It was a shock to my aunt.

JT: Oh, I'm sure! So, how did she [your mother] get from New York to here?

SJ: That I don't remember.

JT: And then your father came. How old was he when he came to America?

SJ: I don't remember, but he was only early 50's or 49 years old when he died here [in America]. My mother only got married after she was over here, I don't exactly know - he was here longer before my mother was in the United States.

JT: Okay. Where are your parents buried?

SJ: My dad is buried in Dickinson and my mother is buried in Dickinson. They went to the farm that belonged to Schefield; they had a lot out there. They resold it, and they went to Dickinson cemetery, St. Joseph's Cemetery.

JT: Are there iron crosses on their graves?

SJ: I don't know, not iron, but concrete or something.

JT: Are they the crosses, those old German from Russia type cross grave markers?

SJ: No, no. They had those concrete - a little bigger than this, you know, with their names on. They had to get rid of the crosses. They couldn't cut the grass; they were in the way.

JT: They made them take them down?

SJ: Yes, so they can go right over them [grave markers] with the lawn mower.

JT: How many brothers and sisters did you have in your family?

SJ: There were twelve of us and three died as infants: Sebastian, Frankie and Francis. No, he was about twelve years old [when he died].

JT: What did he die from?

SJ: Flu. There was a real bad flu and he didn't make it.

JT: Now, when a child died, did they have a wake or did they keep the body in the house, then, before the funeral?

SJ: They kept the body, I guess, in the house. My dad was in the house and my little brother was in the house.

JT: You remember your little brother?

SJ: I remember he was only three days old when he got buried.

- JT:** Oh. So, from the time after he was born - and then he died immediately after birth or he died when he was three days old?
- SJ:** I don't know how long [it was] after he was born.
- JT:** Do you have any memories of what your parents or aunts or uncles told you about living in the old country, living in Russia?
- SJ:** Not too much, because my mother was only about three months old when her mother died. She died through childbirth when she was born. So, it wasn't very long and she was adopted out.
- JT:** Your mother?
- SJ:** My mother was adopted out; she was a orphan over in Russia. And then, it was about a year and a half afterwards, her father died over there. That's all I remember them saying.
- JT:** Sister Joan, I'm going to ask you some questions now about your religious life and why you decided to become a nun and who and what influenced you. Growing up, can you remember any particular religious customs practiced in your home? Did you have a God's corner or like the Rosary? Can you tell me any of your memories concerning that?
- SJ:** We had a God's corner; it was all my mother's pride. She set that up every Saturday, everything and all. She had artificial flowers on there, homemade, real pretty. They had tin cans and they opened them on the top and they cut slits in them all the way around. Then they made the flower and put it in one of those slits, and they bend the flower open, and it was just like real flowers on the little altar, you know. It was big, high [with] steps down, you know. Beautiful. It was her pride always to fix it up.
- And, of course, we always said usually something special during Lent; we always said the Rosary all together. My dad usually led it. It was all in German those years. In fact, when I entered the convent, I could hardly pray in English, you know! Everything was German.
- JT:** Do you think that over in Russia, did they have these little God's corners?
- SJ:** I'm sure that's where they got it from.
- JT:** Your mother never said anything if she had that when she was growing up?
- SJ:** She never said. Maybe not as big, maybe just a little table with a statue on it and a bouquet of flowers, if they had any homemade flowers like that.
- JT:** So, a lot of your praying was done in German?
- SJ:** In German, um hum.
- JT:** Do remember celebrating Feast Days or Holy Days or Name Days? What could you tell me about Holy Days?
- SJ:** Yes. Holy Days were always holy to us. Easter Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday were all three just like Easter Sunday. They were kept holy; went to church on those days. I don't know if that was the custom over there, that they brought it here or not, but those were three Holy Days.

Then Name Days, my dad's was Stephen and I had two brother Johns, you know, Frank and then two brother Johns. We kept them holy too. Christmas was a big thing, Christmas Day. Then St. Stephen Day was my dad's and St. John was my brother John's. John wasn't always home, but we kept the day holy anyway.

JT: Do you remember special customs you did on Christmas or foods that maybe they did over in Russia and then they did it here too?

SJ: They didn't have so much food at that time that I remember. It was in the '30s, you know. It was kind of poor and we didn't have much. Like we lived on potatoes and meat and meat and potatoes, you know. We seldom had dessert or anything, you know, because we had no deep freeze or anything; we had to butcher as we needed it.

One time they were out of meat and Dad said, "Boys, we'll slaughter the cow, the calf out there because there's no [food]." "Oh," he said, "We have the skin!" Then the inspectors were supposed to come. Then the boys said, "Should we had hide the skin?"

My dad said, "No, leave it right there. If he asks us why we butcher without yet asking permission to butcher –" (It was real bad there for awhile in the '30s, oh, yes!) He said, "If they ask me why we butchered it without asking them, we tell them there was nothing to eat in the house." That's how honest my dad was. So they left it [the skin] there but they [the inspectors] came there but they never asked [about it].

JT: At what age did you enter the religious life?

SJ: Twenty-three.

JT: Twenty-three? Okay. Did somebody influence you, you know, a particular person or an event?

SJ: A teacher, a Sister. I liked her so much; she died a few years ago. There were two Sisters, but especially the one, Sister Jeninzia from Annunciation Priory from Bismarck. She was always so good and so kind that I wanted to go for a Sister. When we were small, we always had dishtowels over our heads. And we'd have Ma's little sherbet dishes for chalices and had [a] Christmas bell. And then we'd have those wide wafers that come in a package like this; we used those for Communion hosts. We were always playing Sisters!

JT: So, and your family encouraged you to be a nun, I mean, they didn't -

SJ: They said, "It's your choice; you do what you want." My stepdad said, "Sister, if you don't like it, you're always welcome back. This is your home as long as I live." He said, "Do what you feel what you want." They never told anybody they should go or not.

JT: Where did you go, then, to be a nun?

SJ: Garrison. And my two sisters didn't know about Garrison. They went to Rochester [Minnesota]. Of course, we all work down there. Sister Florentia had relatives down there that were Sisters, I think three or four of them, and so they entered there [in Rochester].

JT: And then, were you able to go home on vacation?

SJ: Once a year we went home.

- JT:** Once a year.
- SJ:** Right. Oh, as a Sister? Every three years; every three years, but now we go [home] every year.
- JT:** Could your family come and visit you here?
- SJ:** Well, they were dead before we ever moved here.
- JT:** Could your family visit you in Garrison when you a young nun, could they come and see you?
- SJ:** No. The years were poor, they couldn't make it; they couldn't make it that day. They only came for my reception; it was my dad, and my brother, and my sister-in-law and my stepbrother. They came down for my profession or reception, it was. When I became a nun, only my mother came down and my brother. But when I, later on, when I got the ring -
- JT:** How old are you when you get the ring or how many years do you have to be in training?
- SJ:** Five, those years we had five, but I think they got more now. Depends.
- JT:** Okay, and then you had a reception.
- SJ:** Right. And then I got the ring at St. Leo's in Minot [North Dakota]. Then I celebrated my silver jubilee over at the abbey and my golden jubilee I celebrated at the motherhouse. It was the first time I celebrated something at home, in the convent.
- JT:** When you first went off to be a nun, were you able to write letters to your family or could they write to you?
- SJ:** I think once a month we were able to write, but now you write whenever you want.
- JT:** But back then it was once a month.
- SJ:** And they opened our letters that time, but now they don't.
- JT:** Oh, they did? Was it hard for you not to see your family?
- SJ:** Yah, I was attached to my mother, especially after Dad died, you know, we had no dad.
- JT:** We're talking now about when Sister Joan went to Sister school as a young girl.
- SJ:** We went to St. Joseph's School in Dickinson and I was in the first grade; and there was one Sister there, she was very hard on me. I used to get slaps; in the second grade it was worse. I got slaps right and left on the ears when I put the long division on the blackboard and had the wrong name, number on the board. I had one [slap] on the left side and one on the right. Then I had earache for many, many years until I finally went out to Schefield School, a public school. The teachers were fairly nice there; at least I wasn't hit. And I really hated Sister school and I do to this day. But I know there are a lot of good Sisters now, and they can't hit the peoples like I was.
- JT:** Did your parents do anything when they found out that you were disciplined like that?
- SJ:** No, we never told my parents. They were up in years already, you know, they were in their middle [40's], close to 50 by then. Why should we torture them with that? We'd tell our sisters and brothers at home, you know. And besides, you just got to bear it, you know. There's another place in heaven for us.

So, then, I went to Rochester to work and then when I want to go for Sister, I said to my dad, "I'm not going to Sister school; I would like to go to the public school." The other five had to drive to Sister school and they had a room up there and I didn't want a room up there.

Then I told my mother and my mother said, "I'm not the boss. You have to go and tell Dad."

So I told my dad and he said, "Well," he said, "I'll let you go up there if Frances goes with you to walk to public school, but I will not let you walk alone." Because there were mean animals in the pastures, you know. And so I asked Frances, of course, she's a Sister today too, if she would walk with me to public school and back and she said yes, so she and I went to public school.

Then I went to join the Sisters at Garrison. I went on the Soo, on the train [line] Soo, and I went to Garrison. I stayed at the hospital overnight to catch the train the next morning real early. Sister had said she would call me when it's time and she forgot. She came in, she said, "Mary Eva," she said, "I forgot to call you. Why don't you get up real fast and I'll have coffee done and ready for you. You'll have to hurry to get over to the Soo." So I went downstairs, I had my coffee, grabbed my bag and went over to the Soo and I forgot to check my trunk.

So, the man stopped the train. I heard him say "woooo," he was going to stop it. They left me on; I didn't check nothing, my trunk. And I got to Garrison and I didn't go off, I was sound asleep. It was early in the morning. Sister Barbara Ann was down at the depot to meet me. She walked down; the rest of the Sisters were in church already at Garrison. She said to the conductor, "Isn't there a girl in there that's supposed to come to the convent?"

He said, "No! There's just one little one in there sleeping." I was 17 years old, you know. I was small for my age, you know, I was about 105 pounds. And so he said, "I'll check with her and see if it's her."

So, he went in and tapped me on the shoulder. He said, "Are you going for a Sister?" I said, "Yes, but not until I get to Garrison."

He said, "This is Garrison. There's a lady waiting out there." (That was Sister Barbara Ann.) So when I went off the train she said, "Are you going for a Sister?" She wanted to be sure it was me.

I said, "Yes."

"Well," she said, "come and follow me." Then I got scared. I thought I was going to follow the Lord but not her!

JT: So you were 17 when you went to be a nun? I thought you were 23?

SJ: Gosh, I forgot. That was when I entered, that was when I went -

JT: You entered at 17?

SJ: No, I went to work at St. Mary's Hospital at Rochester. That's what I did at 17. I stayed there until I was 23, then I entered the convent. I went home and entered the convent at Garrison. I got a mistake there.

JT: That's okay. Do you remember that anti-garb legislation?

SJ: Yes, I remember that well.

JT: What do you remember about it?

SJ: Well, all I remember is, I was in Bismarck at the time and I was not a sister yet. Yes, I was already - and we had a man there, he was not a Catholic. And they had that thing so twisted in the [news] paper, how you were supposed to vote. Instead of for the Sisters to take the garbs off, he voted for the good thing, but he didn't want to [vote for it], he wanted to vote opposite. But he didn't know it until after the answers came out, until after the doings!

But I felt kind of bad. I really liked the long garb, those beaded cords, I really liked those yet. In those years you never heard anybody leaving [the convent] either like nowadays.

JT: So were you teaching in the public school at that time?

SJ: Oh, no! I'm not a teacher. I didn't have no schooling, just [to] eighth grade.

JT: Oh, okay. So you never had to give up your garb?

SJ: No, I never had to give up mine, but some of our Sisters did, and they were some older Sisters that did. They took it real nice; I was surprised.

JT: Sister Joan, I'm going to ask you about some Christmas customs. Can you tell me what *Belzenickel* is?

SJ: Yes, and *Christkindl*, too, we had -

JT: *Belzenickel* was a man?

SJ: He was dressed in a - like a fur coat and long hair, you know, and tied down around with a strap down. And they came to your house and if they say you weren't good, you got licked, you know.

JT: You got [licked] with what?

SJ: They got licked. He had a strap, a *Riemen*, you know, it hung down on his side. And he would lick them. Oh, in the old country they had one, which my mother told us about the *Belzenickel* when we first learned. It's in my mind all the time, when I hear that word, I think of that story.

JT: What is it?

SJ: Well, there was a couple there and they had a boy and a girl, 14 and 15. They didn't obey their parents too much, you know. They were always running ahead of them, and so one time the *Belzenickel* came there and he asked, "How are your children?" They said, "Well, they don't obey us anymore. We don't know what to do with them, we cannot handle them."

The dad said, "Take them out; take them away. We are fed up with them." So the *Belzenickel* took this boy and girl out and never brought them back. Then the parents, after midnight, went out searching. Nobody could find them - no clues. He had murdered both of them over by the barn, cut their heads off. Since that time I don't like the *Belzenickel*.

And the Christ Child was good. She was dressed in white. She had a veil on and a wreath, and she would bring us - we'd get a little package from her for Christmas, you know.

JT: So the Christ Child was a girl, a female figure?

- SJ:** A female, um hum, but this [*Belzenickel*] was a male.
- JT:** And that story your mother told you was a story she got from Russia?
- SJ:** Russia – that's a true story. That's a true story.
- JT:** And the *Christkindl* was a female figure and -
- SJ:** Dressed in white, in a veil and she had a wreath.
- JT:** So when Christmas came and these people came to your door, were you afraid?
- SJ:** Not when the Christ Child came, but we never had him [the real *Belzenickel*]. But we had a neighbor man who dressed up as a *Belzenickel*. He came to our house on the farm. It was during the depression too. He had called, I guess my parents or my brother, whoever it was, if he could come over on that night to see us, you know. The man who dressed up - when we heard about it, we didn't like him, so we all ran and hid. Some went in the clothes closet, way up on top. Some went down to the root cellar, and some went in those beds that we had folding, you know, folding beds. They opened the beds, two lay in there, and they rolled them, you know. We all hid; he didn't find a one. Were we glad!
- JT:** You were so frightened of him.
- SJ:** I think that's why we hid too.
- JT:** Do you remember any special Easter activities?
- SJ:** Yes, at Easter time we always got new hats and shoes. We didn't have nothing else. We took our shoebox and made the little Easter basket and nest right by our bed. And we had some sticks and candy in there. We didn't have much, but there was always something, you know.
- JT:** Do you remember anything called *Eierlesen*, egg roll[ing], *Eierlaufen*?
- SJ:** No, hm um.
- JT:** No? Okay. Were there special religious activities at Christmas or Easter? Like you went to church, you said.
- SJ:** Yes, we did.
- JT:** And the Mass was in German?
- SJ:** I think it was Latin, wasn't it? I don't think they had it in German. Latin.
- JT:** Oh, it was in Latin.
- SJ:** It was Latin, I think.
- JT:** Which member of your family do you remember best?
- SJ:** Which one? I remember them all because I pray for them every day. I have them in my mind all the time.
- JT:** Okay.

- SJ:** My mother.
- JT:** Who do you look up to or admire for portraying life's best qualities?
- SJ:** I don't get that.
- JT:** When you think of your family values, who do you think instilled in you your family values or who do you think portrayed what's best in life?
- SJ:** I think my sister Pauline.
- JT:** Okay, why?
- SJ:** Because we are very close together and we always write to each other, real often.
- JT:** Do you write in German?
- SJ:** No, I forgot my German. I took two years of German, and after I went to the convent, I didn't read German anymore. My dad would always write us three sisters a German letter for Christmas every year. But I couldn't read them anymore so I asked Father Stan Sticka. He always read them for me because I couldn't read the script. I could read some of the print but I couldn't read the written [cursive] you know.
- JT:** So growing up, did you speak German or English?
- SJ:** We spoke German most of the time until I entered the convent, because our parents did not understand English; they understood very little, but they could not talk English. I think Dad maybe did a little, very little.
- JT:** So, in closing, is there any important observation you want to share with us about growing up as a member of the Germans from Russia ethnic group?
- SJ:** Well, the older ones, they'd come to our house and they would always play cards. On Sundays, a certain Feast Day or Holy Day, they'd always come to our house and play cards. And certain times my parents would go up to their place. Of course, then the older ones were in one room; the young ones went to another room. We were never together because they played cards and had their fun and we played cards and had our fun.
- JT:** What kind of cards did you play?
- SJ:** Well, they played Whist and then they played *Zolle*. And I forgot how it goes and I cannot play it. I asked my brothers; we just don't know.
- JT:** Is it an old game? A game you played when you were growing up?
- SJ:** Well, yes, but we didn't get it to know well enough to remember it when my folks died. By the time they [died], we didn't know.
- JT:** And what is it called?
- SJ:** *Zolle*. *Zolle*, *Frau* or *Bisste*. They bid on those three always. And I don't know how to play it.

- JT:** Well, thank you. Oh, yes, I know, do you recall any experiences with midwives? Do you remember your mother having to go to a midwife to have her babies or any stories about midwives?
- SJ:** My mother did.
- JT:** She was a midwife?
- SJ:** Well, she wasn't one but she went to some [births]; she was called.
- JT:** Do you remember if they paid the midwives?
- SJ:** That I wouldn't know. They were neighbors, friends; I doubt if she got any pay for it. Or if the little baby was born [and] it was sick, they always called my mother up and asked what to do. Not always, but a lot of times they called her up [and asked] what to do.
- JT:** What would your mother advise? Like what kinds of things to do? Was it like a folk medicine or -
- SJ:** One time the neighbors called us up. They had a little boy and he couldn't pass his water so they called my mother [about] what to do. So my mother said, "You take a raw egg, break it open, and take the skin from one end of the egg and put it over his little penis." And later on he passed his water; he had no further problem. That was the medicine they used those days.
- JT:** Can you think of any other advice your mother might have given?
- SJ:** That's the only thing I remember, because I was over at my brother's place for over three years. And when I heard they were going to adopt me, then I went home. I missed out of a lot at home.
- JT:** Oh, sure! Okay.