

Interview with Sister Emma Buresh (EB)

School Sisters of Notre Dame, Mankato, Minnesota

Conducted by Carol Just Halverson (CH)

July 27, 1998

Mankato, Minnesota

Transcription by Joy H. Stefan

Edited by Mary Lynn Axtmann

- CH:** My name is Carol Just Halverson. I'm a volunteer interviewer for the Germans from Russia Heritage Collection, North Dakota State University Library in Fargo. It is a pleasure to be with Sister Emma Buresh here in Mankato, where the interview is taking place. We're going to start with number 1. What is your full name and your date of birth?
- EB:** Sister Emma Buresh; May 6, 1929.
- CH:** Where were you born?
- EB:** I was born on a farm, 14 miles northwest of New Hradec, North Dakota.
- CH:** What county is that in?
- EB:** Dunn County.
- CH:** In Dunn County. Were you born in a hospital and was your birth attended by a physician or a midwife?
- EB:** I was born at our farm home and the midwife was my Grandma Buresh.
- CH:** She welcomed you into the world, your grandmother. How nice. Where are you in birth order?
- EB:** I'm a middle child; almost middle. There are six children and I'm the 3rd one.
- CH:** What is your nationality?
- EB:** Czech.
- CH:** And your father's name?
- EB:** Louis.
- CH:** Louis Buresh. And your mother and her family name?
- EB:** Agnes Jirges, J-I-R-G-E-S.
- CH:** Were your parents born in this country?
- EB:** My mother was born here. My father came over from Crimea when he was 2 years old in 1902.
- CH:** So he is of Czech ancestry born in Crimea.
- EB:** Yes.

- CH:** And there are 6 in your family; you are in the middle you say? Were there other family members or relatives that entered the religious life?
- EB:** I have one relative, Sister Margaret Buresh. And I had a brother that was a priest.
- CH:** I see.
- EB:** He is deceased now.
- CH:** And Sister Margaret, how is she related to you?
- EB:** Our dads are brothers.
- CH:** I see, so she's your cousin. Discuss your parent's support for your interest in the sisterhood.
- EB:** When I first presented it to them, I had talked about my Sunday coat, and I had said I'd like to wear that to high school the next year, that I'd need a new coat for Sundays. And my mother says, "Where are you going to go to high school?" And I said, "I'm thinking of Mankato. I'd like to be a Sister." She started crying and my dad said, "You'll never make it because you're so soft hearted. You're going to cry yourself back home." But they were very proud to think that I had chosen the religious life.
- CH:** How did you know that you wanted to enter the religious life?
- EB:** I think the calls are rather mysterious, and I think it probably started... I was a boarder in the elementary grades at New Hradec, and one of the Sisters, the head person in our government of the Notre Dame Sisters, was out there and the principal came down to the kitchen where we were peeling vegetables. There were over 16 boarders at that time. She said, "I think Emma is one who is going to be a Sister." And that's the first time that it came to me. They always say these calls come from God, but upon invitation from a human.
- CH:** So you hadn't ever entertained the thought before that, but this elder recognized a gift in you.
- EB:** I don't think so.
- CH:** And then, did you think about it for awhile, after that?
- EB:** I think I was in 7th grade then, and it was pretty much a decision that I made, that I knew I was going to go.
- CH:** How did you feel when she, out of thin air, said, "Emma I think you are Sister material?"
- EB:** I think I felt sort of special, that she would think that I would be a Sister. I was scared, because I knew I'd have to go far away from home. And it was very difficult for me because our family is very close, and that part was hard.
- CH:** Boarding while you were in elementary school, was that far from home?
- EB:** 14 miles.
- CH:** So you only saw your family on weekends?
- EB:** That's right. We came on Monday and went home on Friday.

- CH:** From the time you were little?
- EB:** Well, 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grade I was a boarder; 4th grade was the grasshopper time, so we went to the public school close to our home. And then 5th grade I came back.
- CH:** When you say it was the grasshopper time, what does that mean?
- EB:** That's when the grasshopper plague came. All our crops were eaten up, so they couldn't afford to send us to a boarding school. So we stayed at home and went to the country school.
- CH:** Were all of you boarding at the same time, or how was the decision made who would be a boarder and who wouldn't?
- EB:** Well, my oldest... well the three oldest ones were boarders. My brother, Louie, Veronica, and I... and then Lynn. Lynn was a boarder too and by the time the two youngest ones came we had moved to Dickinson, and so they went to school in Dickinson.
- CH:** And they didn't have to board, but did they also go to parochial schools?
- EB:** Yes they did. Both of them.
- CH:** So religiosity was very important in your family.
- EB:** Yes, yes.
- CH:** Was there a lot of Holy Scripture reading and prayer in your family life?
- EB:** Not really. I often think of that when I talk to people and Sisters, and they say that. We prayed our morning and night prayer together, and prayer before and after meals, and of course Sunday obligation was very important. Then if there was special devotions... like we had devotions during May on Sundays. We always drove in for that at night. So we came in for mass in the morning and then we drove in for that at night.
- CH:** 14 miles... that was a long trip.
- EB:** Yes, that's all country roads. So in that way, but as far as scripture goes, I would say no. We did not read scripture. The Bible was not something that we... I don't even know if we had one in the house. I'm not sure.
- CH:** So your parents just kind of lived their faith.
- EB:** Yes. They were good people.
- CH:** Their actions...
- EB:** They were active in the parish. If there was anything to do... my dad was a carpenter so he was called on quite often to do work there.
- CH:** The Sister that identified you as a potential person for religious life, and you said your parents were very proud... were there any other relatives that influenced your decision?
- EB:** I think probably my brother. He was a priest, and he was probably somewhat influential in that decision also.

- CH:** Deciding on a religious life at a young age like you did, going on to high school... where did you go to high school?
- EB:** Here. At Good Counsel in Mankato.
- CH:** So it really meant leaving home. That's 600 miles at a very young age, I mean you were 14?
- EB:** Yes.
- CH:** It meant that you were leaving social activities. How did that feel for you to be leaving the social life that one would have in a regular high school?
- EB:** I think I made up for it during the summer.
- CH:** So you would go home during the summer then, and live?
- EB:** Yes, and I'd go home for Christmas too.
- CH:** So, coming home meant that you could be involved in all the social life. Did that social life still revolve around family life and religious life?
- EB:** Yes, but there were other things too. I don't know if you know too much about the Czech nationality. Our weddings are a huge celebration, so we were invited to many weddings. My dad was a special groomsman, where he had all kinds of verses memorized that went with all the dishes that were served and the blessings that were given. So whenever he was the groomsman, we all went. I think he was groomsman 28 times in his life.
- CH:** My word!
- EB:** So we went to a lot of weddings. And we knew a lot of people.
- CH:** Your family was deeply immersed in the Czech culture then.
- EB:** Oh yes, very much so.
- CH:** What filled your life when you entered the Sisterhood, socially, let's say.
- EB:** Socially... I was a teacher and I was involved with parents, and especially, not the first years but later on, we were often invited to people's places. I think in Strasburg, every Tuesday the 4 of us who were teaching there would go to somebody's house after supper, and we spent time with the family and they used to serve some little lunch. So it was a lot of family... families that we worked with. And of course, the community. I always lived in big communities... you know, 14, 18 Sisters. So we had fun times there. Those of us who loved to dance, we danced. Those of us who loved to play cards, played cards. Those of us who loved to walk, we walked.
- CH:** So entering the religious order did not mean that your whole life was centered around simply worship and work. There was a lot of fun activity.
- EB:** I couldn't have done it if there wouldn't have been.
- CH:** Oh, coming out of that exciting Czech culture, yes.
- EB:** No, we made our fun.

- CH:** When you left to go to the convent, what did you take with you?
- EB:** Well, for high school, it was the usual clothes, like anybody else. Of course we had uniforms to wear for school, but the other clothes were the same as always. When I left for... when I entered the community after high school, there wasn't much you took with you. There was very little because you donned the long black dress right away when you came to the candidature. And there wasn't a need for a lot. Like I don't need much now either.
- CH:** But leaving home at 14, what was it like? Were you scared?
- EB:** Oh yes. I cried. I remember one time my mother said to me, "Emma, if you don't want to be a Sister, know that you don't have to." And I said, "I know that. I want to, but it still is hard." It was difficult. I always teased, I always say that I visited the bathrooms more often than anybody else to shed a few tears, because I was lonesome.
- CH:** Sure.
- EB:** And I start crying now, when I think of it. Then when I came home, the welcome was so wonderful that it was... we knew we were loved.
- CH:** You were able to correspond?
- EB:** Oh yes.
- CH:** So letters were an important part.
- EB:** Oh yes. And my mother... I still have some of my mother's Czech letters that she wrote.
- CH:** That she wrote to you in Czech.
- EB:** And I saved one, surprising, that it still has a 3-cent stamp on it.
- CH:** Really! [laughter] Oh, you were an immense source of pride for your family. I think you know that.
- EB:** She wrote weekly. And she would always put a dollar bill in there.
- CH:** Would she?
- EB:** To cover the postage when I wrote back. [laughter]
- CH:** It must have been wrenching for your mother to let you go at that young age.
- EB:** It probably was. But if it was, she didn't let it be known.
- CH:** She knew that you were doing important work.
- EB:** I think so, and every time I went to a new mission, they always made a point to come and see you. I think it was once they saw that you were happy, with your work and your place, you were okay. They'd come to every new place, no matter where it was, whether it was Winona, Wabasha, New England, New Hradec...
- CH:** Your parents had to come and just make sure you were safe and happy.
- EB:** I think so.

- CH:** When you came to high school, it was a new and foreign environment, and you were with other young women from many different cultures and lifestyles and languages. What was that like?
- EB:** In the beginning, until you get to know the people, it was a little difficult because I was a little on the shy side at that time. But you know once we got into it, you made friends, and you looked forward to coming back in the fall, so you could renew the friendships.
- CH:** The common language was English?
- EB:** Oh yes.
- CH:** So even though... was your first language Czech?
- EB:** When I entered 1st grade, I spoke very little English. We had a Czech 1st grade teacher, so we were able to communicate at that time.
- CH:** But New Hradec was a Czech community.
- EB:** Yes.
- CH:** But even as your young siblings moved to Dickinson, did they live in a Czech neighborhood?
- EB:** No.
- CH:** So your younger siblings didn't have the deep immersion in the culture that you did.
- EB:** No. I can speak it quite well. My youngest brother and sister cannot. And that's because, like you said, they were taken out of the Czech environment.
- CH:** Could I ask what year you were born?
- EB:** 29.
- CH:** 1929. What was a typical daily schedule like at the convent when you entered the convent?
- EB:** Okay, the convent, not the high school. When I first entered, we had our morning prayer and then we had classes, and we had night prayer together. There were days that we spent working in the laundry; there were days that we spent working in the garden; and we recreated. We were fans of baseball. We'd go out on the diamond and play baseball a lot. We hiked. We knew the area around here pretty well.
- CH:** And in your garb?
- EB:** Yes.
- CH:** You would play ball in your garb?
- EB:** Yes. We'd take our habit and we'd pin them up like this, and put a pin back here, and away we'd go.
- CH:** So nothing could stop you.
- EB:** No. We did have a much lighter garb for things like that, that we'd change into that.
- CH:** Okay. But even with your headpiece you would play baseball, you would go hiking, you would do all those things that a normal 14-year-old would do.

- EB:** Are you familiar with our first veils?
- CH:** Yes. You couldn't... no peripheral vision for you!
- EB:** You couldn't drive with it. The drivers would put a different veil on when they drove.
- CH:** They would.
- EB:** Yes.
- CH:** But what a wonderful community you lived in!
- EB:** That didn't stop us.
- CH:** And all of that sense of community helped you deal with homesickness, or did you ever entertain the thought of leaving?
- EB:** Yes. Yes. I did in my 1st year of candidature. It was really a very difficult year, because so many of us were so rambunctious. I think in kind to quiet us down, because we rebelled. Three of us went home, which was very difficult, because two of those were very good friends of mine. I know I wrote to my brother, the priest, and said, "I'm thinking deeply about this." He said, "Well, if it's not for you, Emma, well you will know." And then he quoted scripture and he said... what was that line? It was just in readings the other day. Something about God will let me know. I can't think of it now. And that sort of settled it. But once I was professed, I did not ever think of leaving. It was in my formative years.
- CH:** Sure. So there was a period of deep indecision. Were there many times that you thought, oh, am I in the right place, am I...?
- EB:** I don't think so. I felt very comfortable. I think I'm a workaholic, and I think that I entered into my work everywhere, so strongly, that I didn't have time to think that.
- CH:** How long does it take to be a postulant, to be a novice?
- EB:** It differs with different years. Now, for me it was 2 years postulant, 1 year information and the other year I was out teaching, without much background. Then nobitiate, I was 1 year. Then in 3 years... then I received the black veil. In 3 years I renewed my vows, and in 3 more years I made a final commitment. So really we have 6 years to think this over, before we make our final commitment.
- CH:** What kind of training did you take once you chose a career?
- EB:** Okay. I received my bachelors degree. I went to, I think, 5 places. I went to Dickinson University, I went to Mankato State here, I went to St. Catherine's in St. Paul, and I went to Mount Mary here, so I had 4 colleges before I finally got my bachelors degree, but see our thing was we had 2 years of college when we went out, and then we received the rest of our education during the summers.
- CH:** Oh.
- EB:** So it took me like 6 summers to finish off my bachelors degree.
- CH:** But in some of those... some of those were secular institutions.

- EB:** Yes. And then my masters I got from Creighton, and that again was summer school. I attended there 7 summers.
- CH:** So you would go from wherever it was you were working, move physically to Omaha, just to study for the summer... there wasn't much time for fun for you. You were really working hard.
- EB:** Yes, yes. In fact, some years, school would be out, I would go and teach a 2-week religious vacation school, and then I'd go to Omaha and then I'd come here for retreat and I'd go back and go right into a school situation.
- CH:** Without a break.
- EB:** Without a break. You know, to be a teacher, it wasn't so bad, but once you became a principal, then you had summers to prepare. And I know after I was through with my education it was such a relief to have the summer to finish off things and start new ones.
- CH:** Just time off to gather your thoughts and think about your life. Where was your first station? Where did you go first?
- EB:** Lonsdale, Minnesota, a Czech community. It was delightful.
- CH:** Really? Oh, the Sister in charge of you knew what she was doing.
- EB:** I think so.
- CH:** Yes. Were they surprised to get a North Dakota nun who was immersed in the Czech culture and the language?
- EB:** You know, in our early years, there was so little connection with the parents. We didn't have any PTO meetings, we never were...
- CH:** Really!
- EB:** No. You just strictly taught and weekends, if you were in the cities, I'd go to school on weekends, but no, I think the people there... you were there as a teacher, period.
- CH:** They didn't recognize that you were also an ethnic Czech person?
- EB:** Oh yes, there were people who would come and speak Czech with me. They knew that, yes. But we didn't get to know a lot of people. Until later on, I would say... I'm trying to think... how did my first... 15, 20 years, that was the school situation. And if we went to meetings, we'd stay for the meeting, but not the social part. We were asked to leave.
- CH:** Really!
- EB:** Yes.
- CH:** I'm so sorry, because you could have just reinforced that Czech culture for your students and...
- EB:** Yes, but that changed.
- CH:** But your mission was really to teach education and religion.

- EB:** Yes.
- CH:** And be a Christian person 1st, and be a Czech person 2nd.
- EB:** Yes.
- CH:** Before leaving Good Counsel, how did you learn about the community and school in North Dakota where you would be teaching?
- EB:** Well, I taught in Minnesota for a few years. I taught at Lonsdale for one year, and that was during my postulancy. Then I went to Wabasha, Minnesota, and I was there until October 11th. I remember very vividly, because my dad was ill at the time and when I came home from school one night, the principal said, "Sister, we're sending you to North Dakota." And I said, "Is my dad ill?" She says, "No, you'll be missioned at New England, North Dakota. Two of the Sisters were asked to leave the place by the pastor and we're sending you and another Sister there to take their place." No preparation, I left the place without saying goodbye to the children, because I went the next morning. I came home at night. I packed, the next morning I went off on the train, and I came to Wishek.
- CH:** No closure for you.
- EB:** No, no termination. I've had many since then, but that one I didn't. I was just a young nun there. I didn't even think but that's just what you do. I came there and it was a boarding school, so you had charge of boarders and you taught, and you worked 48 hours a day. [laughter]
- CH:** I would say.
- EB:** And it was so strange because I remember our principal was up at the high school and the grade school, and she came new with me. So she was thrown into this. So I was really on my own. This was my 2nd year of teaching only, so until I think it was Thanksgiving, I'd been teaching from this one book and I went to one of the other Sisters and I asked about something, and she said, "That's not a social studies text. That's your reading book." [laughter]
- CH:** So no way to prepare your curriculum, nothing. You were just thrown into this classroom, sort of baptism by fire.
- EB:** Absolutely. Strong fire. And I had students who were fire too.
- CH:** And no warning about your students. You walk into the classroom cold.
- EB:** The only warning I got from one of the Sisters was she gave me the names of all the kids, and I said, "Thank you." And she said, "Ah, after a few days you probably won't be thanking me." She was right.
- CH:** Oh...
- EB:** I won them over. It was a wonderful year, but my first week was, oh, they tried me to the nth degree.
- CH:** And you were a young 2nd year teacher.
- EB:** That's right.
- CH:** Were these German Russian students in New England?

- EB:** That's right.
- CH:** Some of them speaking German, or no?
- EB:** No, it was all English. Nobody spoke German there, not that I remember.
- CH:** Can you tell me where New England is located? What county and what city is it closest to?
- EB:** New England is 28 miles south of Dickinson, and it is in Hettinger County.
- CH:** What age group were you teaching?
- EB:** 5th grade.
- CH:** Ooh... those 10-year-olds.
- EB:** Next year I went to 6th, and the next year I went into 7th. I had the same ones.
- CH:** So you had the same students!
- EB:** It was wonderful.
- CH:** It was, once you made it through the Hell Week, then things were fine.
- EB:** Yes, the Hell Week.
- CH:** Then you got the right book for the right class...
- EB:** You bet!
- CH:** And then you were able to really make a difference for them. Do you still hear from any of those students?
- EB:** Yes! Yes, I do. See, I taught in Dickinson for 12 years before I came here. I'm here only 2 years. And I even had some of the... I wasn't teaching, I was principal there, but anyhow, some of my former students from New England had their great-grandkids in school.
- CH:** No!
- EB:** Yes. So I came in contact with them. It was interesting.
- CH:** So you were in New England and then you left,
- EB:** For quite a few years.
- CH:** And where did you go from New England?
- EB:** From New England I went to St. Andrews in St. Paul. I had 3rd and 4th grade there. That was very different, being a farm girl and being sent to a city like that. But I got into it okay and I got to love that place also.
- CH:** And how long at St. Andrews?
- EB:** 4 years.

- CH:** 4 years. And do you get any warning when you're going to be leaving? Does the order simply come down from your superior and...
- EB:** Today we choose our own. We don't get anything; we aren't sent anymore.
- CH:** Alright.
- EB:** We may be asked if we'd consider... like I was asked to consider service to the community because I've been a Sister 47 years and I've never really given service to the community. So I was asked to consider a position here and I thought I was at... I was at a place 12 years and I stayed not longer than 10, because I'd feel I'd get into a rut. Things are just fine, not doing any changing... the challenges are not. So I did ask to be changed, and then they asked if I'd come here. But in the early years, no, you would come in for the summer and during the retreat you'd get this small piece of paper saying... or if you didn't come in the papers were mailed to your place where you were and they told you whether you were staying or going.
- CH:** So your future was decided for you and you knew better than to make long-range plans because it could change.
- EB:** Yes.
- CH:** Okay. You went to that small community, that Czech community in Minnesota. Then you went to New England for...
- EB:** I went to Wabasha, but only for a couple of months.
- CH:** That's right. Okay, Lonsdale, Wabasha, New England – 5th, 6th, 7th grade - then St. Paul for 4 years, so by this time you have 9 years of teaching. Then what?
- EB:** And I got my bachelors degree.
- CH:** By now have your bachelors degree, from however many institutions you've been studying at. You certainly have been working hard. And at what age are you now?
- EB:** Oh gosh... late 20s.
- CH:** Late 20s. Okay, now after St. Anthony and St. Paul, where did you go?
- EB:** Then I went to Sheffield, North Dakota, another boarding school.
- CH:** Another boarding school, not too far from Dickinson, not far from New England. And how long were you there?
- EB:** I was there 5 years.
- CH:** And that's also a boarding institution, so you have 48-hour days.
- EB:** That was where we had no janitor.
- CH:** And no janitor.
- EB:** The pastor took care of the furnace, so we didn't have to do that.

- CH:** Oh, but you got to do all the rest?
- EB:** All of the cleaning, yes.
- CH:** Oh, my. And how long were you in Sheffield?
- EB:** 5 years.
- CH:** This is another German Russian community.
- EB:** Yes.
- CH:** So now you've been teaching 14 years.
- EB:** And in this community, the children spoke German. I mean they spoke English.
- CH:** The spoke English.
- EB:** But at night, like during recreation, before study hall, you'd always... if it was not nice outside we took care of our own group in our classroom, and they would teach me German. So I learned some things like [392], and I knew all the pieces of furniture on the table, but I have forgotten those.
- CH:** Any similarity to Czech?
- EB:** None. Not a word.
- CH:** None. So that's 5 years in Sheffield. Are you more attached to this community when it's a boarding situation?
- EB:** Oh, absolutely.
- CH:** Because you become much more like family to the children?
- EB:** You have to, because if you don't, I mean they're the ones that suffer. You're almost like their mother, really.
- CH:** So you're their parent.
- EB:** And you get to love them, you really do.
- CH:** And you get to be the disciplinarian, and you get to be the mentor, and...
- EB:** And the nurse, and the doctor, and...
- CH:** Boy.
- EB:** And the healer.
- CH:** And you get to decide when to dispense an aspirin, and all of that.
- EB:** And get up at night.
- CH:** So 15 years into your 47 years of your teaching career, you're in Sheffield, and then where did you go?
- EB:** After Sheffield I was made principal at New Hradec.

- CH:** At New Hradec. So you're back to your 1st ... to your home! To where you grew up.
- EB:** And then I had children of my former classmates.
- CH:** Amazing.
- EB:** Yes. And how I got that one... I was at Creighton by then, and I came here for retreat a day late, and I came to my bedroom and under my pillow was an envelope. And the envelope said, "you're being made principal." I wasn't anymore ready to be a principal than I was anything else. So that was very difficult. That was a hard part.
- CH:** How did they base their decisions? Your superiors, how did they base their decisions on what you should do and where you should go?
- EB:** I think mostly it comes from recommendations from people with whom you've lived. Especially your former principals, and that's where mine came from.
- CH:** Okay.
- EB:** A Sister who was my principal felt that I would do well in this line.
- CH:** So your principal at Sheffield felt that you would...
- EB:** No, not she. It was a different one. The one in Sheffield and I didn't get along too well But it was the one at New England that I was very close to. She just felt, she recommended me I guess.
- CH:** How did it feel to open this letter and...
- EB:** Oh, terrible! If it had been a teaching position, I'd have had no problem with it. But this came... I never wanted to be a principal in my life. That was one thing, when I went for my masters degree, I said, "I'll go on one condition, that I don't have to be a principal. Because most people went out for masters. But I loved it after I got into it. I was 32 years in it.
- CH:** Really, you had been 15 years as a teacher, and you were really flung into... even though you had gotten the education to prepare yourself to be a principal, your heart wasn't in it, it wasn't what you felt as a calling.
- EB:** No, I was a teacher. But now I was principal and teacher. We had a boarding school at New Hradec, and you were principal and you were a teacher.
- CH:** Oh, my word. Wearing three hats.
- EB:** I taught 7th and 8th grade. Yes.
- CH:** Now, by this time, is the State Board of Education also coming down with lots of rules and regulations?
- EB:** Don't you know that we have all these forms to fill out, and then another thing we had there. We had one public school classroom. 3rd and 4th grade was a public school classroom.
- CH:** Within your school system?
- EB:** Yes.

CH: Oh.

EB: So we had no crucifixes on the wall or anything. And one morning we were going to mass. We went to religion at 7:00, and a car drove up, and the man informed me he was from the state department to come and observe this teacher.

CH: In that secular classroom.

EB: Yes.

CH: I see.

EB: We had never had anybody come out. This was the first time that this happened. And when he left, he just told me, "She's doing a good job. Everything looked okay." And with weeks we got a letter saying that we are discontinuing to be under the state department in that classroom. See, she was paid by the state also, because we are putting religion into it. We had gone to mass at 7:00, which was not a part of our schedule. And we pleaded to have it remain, and no, they were finished with us.

CH: Oh, no.

EB: So then in mid-year, we had to start paying this teacher's salary, and we had to get money for that. We had to have extra fundraisers. Of course, she didn't get the salary she got from the state department, which was not good either.

CH: Oh, my goodness. So that's an example of some of the things that the state would simply hand to you. So here you are, taking your orders from a superior Sister, and running the school, and the state comes along and says because you have mass at 7:00 we aren't going to treat you as a secular classroom. Oh, my goodness, so another baptism by fire.

EB: Yes.

CH: In your career path. How long were you in New Hradec?

EB: 5 years. The reason I left there was that the bussing started for South Heart, and the people in the area... a bus came to your door, and so you're going to send your kids there, you're not going to send them to a boarding school. So the enrollment dropped considerably and they were going to close the school that year and I said there is no way I can close my alma mater. And I'd been here 5 years and I knew the people didn't want to close the school. So I was asked to transfer, to leave the place, and then the Sister that came after me closed the school.

CH: What a painful thing. I think you were wise. I wouldn't want to close my school.

EB: I couldn't. I could not. I put my heart and soul into this place.

CH: Yes.

EB: And I really felt I had a good thing going. I did.

CH: Sure. And you must have had a real attachment to the community and the parents.

EB: That was my home community, and I went to school there. And I had come back and was principal for 5 years.

- CH:** Did the children grieve the closing also, do you think?
- EB:** I would think so. I wasn't there. But I know the parents did not want it. It was the heart of the community there.
- CH:** We're going to continue on with your teaching year, after you left New Hradec. Where did you go?
- EB:** After New Hradec, I went to Winona, Minnesota for 5 years, and I was the head teacher in the junior high there, and I also taught full time.
- CH:** So you taught full time and you were sort of the chairperson of the junior high department. And that was 5 years in Winona. So now, you have been teaching 20+ years, and then where did you go following Winona?
- EB:** From Winona I went to Strasburg.
- CH:** Okay. What did you think? Had you any knowledge of Strasburg, North Dakota before you got that notice?
- EB:** Lawrence Welk. [laughter]
- CH:** Lawrence Welk. That's what you knew about Strasburg.
- EB:** Otherwise, I didn't know anybody there. And yet, see I was not principal at Winona, but I went back as principal at Strasburg, and I looked forward to that. It was closer to home and I had heard a lot of positive about Strasburg. People who had been there really liked it there. So in that way there was no fear in my going there. I had the experience and the other thing is that I enjoy being in a rural area. So that was sort of a positive for me also.
- CH:** You didn't feel any negative about the idea of going to Strasburg from... by now you've had both rural and urban experiences, and rural really appealed to you. But the only real knowledge you had of Strasburg as a town, or the community was their number one son, Lawrence Welk.
- EB:** Yes.
- CH:** And you were going there as a principal. This was after the anti-garb rule of 1948, and following the two high schools... were there still two high schools when you got there?
- EB:** Two high schools, two grade schools. Right across the street.
- CH:** From each other?
- EB:** Yes.
- CH:** Were there any shared... did the secular high school and the parochial high school share anything?
- EB:** No, there were a lot of anti feelings yet at that time, I think because of the split that happened, you know. I would say the principal of the elementary school... I can't think now... Mrs. Whitey I think was her name. She was friendly with us and we'd come to their Christmas play, and we would invite them for things, so the kids would come over and I did not find any... as far as the children go... they got along real well. It was more the generation before that and before that. So I did not find that in school, that would have happened.

- CH:** Were you the principal of the elementary school?
- EB:** Yes.
- CH:** So there was dialogue between the secular and the parochial school.
- EB:** Some. Not as much as I'd have liked.
- CH:** You would have liked more.
- EB:** When I think of other places I've been at where the feelings were so good.
- CH:** And how did you feel about going back to a German Russian community?
- EB:** You know, I found it very similar to St. Pius.
- CH:** Did you? In Sheffield.
- EB:** Yes. There was some speaking in German there yet.
- CH:** There was? Among the students also?
- EB:** Oh yes.
- CH:** And this would have been...
- EB:** Especially the ones that came from... I forget what the town was... we called them Kriegermers [? 590]. Crickermers [?], because they lived in the crick.
- CH:** Oh, in the Crick area?
- EB:** Yes. I don't know what the town was close by. They were lovely children, just really nice. And they had a tendency to speak more of the German than the others. But we always encouraged them not to speak German in school, because you could understand what was being spoken.
- CH:** Sure. Well, this would have been in the 1960s?
- EB:** Yes.
- CH:** So our popular culture... so at that time our popular culture was really English focus, and not multi-language focus like it is today.
- EB:** No.
- CH:** Those children, did they speak with an accent if they spoke English?
- EB:** Oh, yes. Yes.
- CH:** And did you have a lot of fun with that?
- EB:** We did sort of, because... I don't know what it was the kids were tested for and this one gal said, "Imagine, Sister. She thinks I have a speech defect." [laughter] But we sort of, we teased about it. Not with the children, we never did, but as staff sometimes we sort of joked about it, you know how things were said. I just enjoyed it, I thought it was such a fun thing.

- CH:** Did you get to know the parents at all?
- EB:** Yes. That's where we went every Tuesday night. We sent out a form, always, when school started and we'd ask any parents who would like to have us come and visit them to discuss their children, their homes, and to send in the form. And I would say the majority of them did, so many that we couldn't visit all of them. So after supper, we'd have our prayers and supper, the 4 of us at the elementary school, we'd get in the car and go out in the country and we'd visit with these people, and it was just delightful because the family units were so neat. The children were right there with us. The mother and the dad. And we'd talk about school, and about anything. And we'd close with a little prayer time. I always prepared some prayer, and some scripture reading. By then scripture was a very important part of my life. And then we'd have lunch with them. We told them we did not want a meal, but they'd usually have something to drink, and probably cake or something like that. It was just such a neat thing, and so I did get to know the people there quite well.
- CH:** What a contrast to the boarding school experience.
- EB:** Yes.
- CH:** Where the parents would drop off and pick up. And here you are in their home setting.
- EB:** Oh they were free and the nights were yours.
- CH:** Oh yes. And you could join a book club if you wanted to. You could do a lot of different things.
- EB:** Yes, yes.
- CH:** Was there an opportunity to provide service to the greater community? Did you have a chance to meet other people who were not of the Catholic tradition?
- EB:** No, I don't think we did.
- CH:** No?
- EB:** Not usually. We knew of them because they were still connected to St. Bens. They went to school there, a lot of them, and they were very friendly to the school. I can't think of what the main religion was there at that time. I can see their white church over there, but we never went to their church or to their activities. Not there, we didn't.
- CH:** Not in Strasburg.
- EB:** No, but there was no animosity there. The animosity was between the Catholics in the community.
- CH:** Oh, okay. So there was some earlier strife that just trickled down.
- EB:** And see you had people in the Catholic community who had their children in the grade school and people in the Catholic community who had their children in the public school. And that's where the tension was.
- CH:** Were there two separate church communities also?
- EB:** No.

- CH:** So they all worshiped in the same church.
- EB:** If you didn't discuss education, you were okay. Like you'd have families, brothers and sisters, who were separated.
- CH:** And that's what you came to.
- EB:** Yes.
- CH:** That's a very...
- EB:** It was hard.
- CH:** Tricky, political tightrope.
- EB:** We talked about it and we were told it would take another generation for this to go away.
- CH:** Among your students, did you recognize certain students with greater potential that you would identify and say to them, like you were suggested by one of the Sisters?
- EB:** You know, I think that's one thing that we have lost. The invitation part, and I think it's coming back. We are talking more about it. I did speak about my vocation in religion class, and there were a lot of questions from the students, but I don't know if I ever went to a child and said, "I think that you would probably be a good Sister." And I think that's one place where we have failed. The invitation part.
- CH:** That invitation to even consider the option.
- EB:** I remember one girl who was thinking about it and she would come and visit with me quite often. But she got married; she's happily married and has a nice family.
- CH:** When you would visit those families, did they serve any traditional German Russian food that you remember?
- EB:** Oh yes. We had kuchen, that's one that I remember. Several times we'd have that. And then there's another one, that it was dough with pumpkin in it?
- CH:** Blachinda.
- EB:** Yes, blachinda. They would serve that. I remember when I was at St. Pius, we had a cook that did all these things.
- CH:** Oh, you did.
- EB:** So she made borscht and blachinda, often. In the fall of the year, when the pumpkins were there, the kids would help her cut up the pumpkins. So I remember that.
- CH:** In the Strasburg area, where it was not a boarding school, what would you do as a professional if you encountered children whose parenting styles didn't feel comfortable for you?
- EB:** There were a few, yes. See at that point we'd call the parents in.
- CH:** Oh you did?

EB: Yes, like for our parent conferences, there were times we had the parents in alone, and then there were times we'd invite the parents and the child to discuss the problem that was existing there. I was always told the German nationality is very stubborn, and I would disprove that. Those people there wanted a good education for their children, and as far as I can remember, the 5 years I was there, there was perfect cooperation.

CH: Between the staff and the parents and the children.

EB: Yes. They trusted the teachers...

[end of side 1] [reset counter to 000]

EB: They were no different than the Czech bazaars, they had Bingo... their foods were probably a little bit different, that they were more on the strudel... I had never eaten strudel before. There were times they had strudel in soup for their meal, and that was such a big thing. But as far as customs for Christmas and times like that, I was not aware... They were pretty much into the ordinary, like everybody else.

CH: By the 1960s the Germans had... it was 60, almost 70 years since immigration, and 2 world wars that were very anti-German, and that would have influenced it, plus chances are the parents of the children you were dealing with had maybe gone through high school?

EB: Yes.

CH: And in public school, so there was the process of Americanization had certainly moved in there by that time. Television, outside influences that were certainly promoting Americanization, and it would have been the precursor to Viet Nam, or were some of your students moving into the Viet Nam era?

EB: You got me... I'm not sure about that. I think it was pre-Viet Nam.

CH: Pre-Viet Nam, so chances are some of your parents were Korean War vets, or maybe even World War II vets, so they had been around.

EB: I just remember one thing. I used to invite, for my social studies class in the 7th and 8th grade, I used to invite 2 people in to speak to the children. It was Grandpa Wickenheiser [022] and Grandpa Kramer [023]. They came in and they spoke. They came over from the old country...

CH: From Russia?

EB: From the old country and they would speak to the children on this. It was interesting because I related so well with that because my grandpa came from Crimea, which was Russia, but a Czech settlement, and they came from close by there, but a German settlement. So they were relating to the students what they had gone through and how they came over here and how they found their place. It was so similar.

CH: What a wonderful idea.

EB: Oh, it was.

CH: To bring someone in from the community.

- EB:** Well, I asked the one. I asked Grandpa Kramer to come, and he said, "oh, no, I don't think so." And then he talked to Grandpa Wickenheiser [032], and he said, "well, let's do it together." They wouldn't stop, they just kept on and on. The kids had questions...
- CH:** Sure. So these were men who lived in Strasburg?
- EB:** Yes.
- CH:** And who had immigrated, so they had the immigration experience.
- EB:** And they had their grandkids in school, so it was delightful.
- CH:** Oh, what a great experience for those children, to have that opportunity.
- EB:** And some of them had never heard their grandparents talk this much about it. They had a whole class asking questions, so they drew so much more out of them too, you know.
- CH:** That's right. We're going to talk a little bit about Vatican II and how that affected your religious life. Was there any warning when things changed, as per the decree of the Vatican?
- EB:** I think as a community there was because we had been talking about changing dress. We were in the habits of the beginning of Notre Dames. So the preparation there was that... oh, we came together and we modeled different dresses, the different Sisters. Then we voted on that, made a choice. So there was that preparation. And then when we went into street clothes... we still went into a long habit then, you know. When we went to street clothes, there it was pretty much on your own. When you were ready, you could move into it. I remember very clearly how I went shopping and got my street clothes. And it was sort of an exciting time. It was exciting when we moved into that. Then as far as our lives go... they were so relaxed, because before Vatican II, we could go home twice in our lifetime to visit our families.
- CH:** That's all?
- EB:** That was all. Then after Vatican II, it was we could go 5 times. Then it relaxed some more, slowly, so now there is really no stipulation how often you go. We are asked to take only about a 2 to 3 week vacation, and that we spend as we wish, so that part was relaxed considerably. Then the other part that was so different, the part in education, is that we were free to go to meetings, stay for the whole thing, free to attend parish functions, social functions. We'd even stay for the dances, and we'd dance, you know. We started having parent-teacher conferences, which we didn't have in our life before that, so there was a real relaxation there. Plus, before that we dealt with the kids and that was it. We didn't call the parents in very often, and of course you didn't have to, because kids at that time were so well behaved. They didn't have the freedom either, that they had after. I would say in education there was a change, in dress there was a change. In spirituality there was a change also, because up to this point, our spiritual life was prayer together, an hour of meditation together, and after at night, prayer together again. Whereas, when the changes came, we still had our morning and night prayer, our vespers and laws together. But the meditation was on your own. You could do it in the morning, you could do it at night, you could do it in your room, you could do it in chapel, that was up to you. So there was a real freedom given, that the responsibility was not put on you. You took your own responsibility to do these things. And it was wonderful. I had my meditation in my bedroom in my recliner, and I could really pray. Before that I'd go to the chapel for an hour and I'd sleep. It was hot, it was muggy, you were sitting next to people close by... so it was a wonderful change.

- CH:** So basically, would you applaud the changes that came with Vatican II?
- EB:** Indeed. Absolutely, absolutely. I think they were wonderful for us.
- CH:** Were there others who didn't like it?
- EB:** Oh yes. We still have them.
- CH:** Still do?
- EB:** We still have some.
- CH:** Regretting Vatican II?
- EB:** They just think that we lost something when we left the church that we had, the other rules and all that was put on us. We still have a few of them.
- CH:** But you were a principal then, during the time that the changeover was made. So your role... you religious life changed, your spiritual life changed, but so did your career.
- EB:** Yes.
- CH:** Were there times when you went eeeeeeeek?
- EB:** Well, yes, I can think of some instances. I think the first time I came in with my hair showing, one of the boys said, "Sister, you look good, but you could use some Grecian Formula." [laughter] I remember that so well, because I was so hurt. But we laughed about it. I tell that joke often. "You could use some Grecian Formula."
- CH:** Your age didn't show until you took your headpiece off!
- EB:** That's right. And I come from a family that the gray hair comes early in life, so I had streaks of gray quite early.
- CH:** And of course this young boy couldn't have known how damaging that was.
- EB:** And the other thing that changed with II, was really up to this point we had to report at home at a certain time. On weekends if we wanted to go up to the classroom, we had to get permission. Whereas now, you were free. You could stay in the classroom as long as you wanted to stay, you could go there on Saturday, you could go on Sunday. So when I went there on Saturday or Sunday, I often had company. You know kids would come and we'd do fun things there. To the children and the parents, you know the human element came in, which really bonded you so much more closely.
- CH:** It made religion so much friendlier.
- EB:** In fact, I still have a parent who just wrote to me from Strasburg a few weeks ago, because I was in New Hradec for a centennial celebration, and there was a big write up in *The Bismarck Tribune* about it. And she had read this, and she said, "you know I had lost track of you from Strasburg." And she cut this out and she sent it to me. I thought that was interesting.
- CH:** How many lives you have touched.
- EB:** Martha Burnhardt, yes.

- CH:** And so many children you have.
- EB:** Oh yes.
- CH:** Looking back to that young girl in school in New Hradec, who was in the classroom, and the teacher you weren't even too fond of... approaches your group and...
- EB:** Oh, I was fond of the teacher. I liked her.
- CH:** But she was very strict.
- EB:** Yes. They all were.
- CH:** So you were fond of her but a little afraid of her.
- EB:** Probably. I respected her, quite highly.
- CH:** So, here it is, how many years since that time when you were 13?
- EB:** Gosh, 53 or 54 years ago.
- CH:** 54 years ago when she made a statement that altered your life. Here you are at the Moter House working. Do you think that you'll be called to go anywhere else? Or do you think you're here to stay.
- EB:** I don't think I'll be called. If I go somewhere else, it'll be my choice. I'm just thinking back to when I was at home just a few weeks ago, and I met some of my former classmates. And they all said, "Oh, I'm retired, and I'm doing this and I'm doing that." And I just laughed, and I said, "Well, I'm not retired, and I probably never will be." I mean, while I can work. At 69, I'm still going strong, and I feel good about it. I love my work here. The only thing I'm thinking, I know I won't be here for good. I have a 3-year commitment, and I have 1 year left. It would be up to the council to offer me another 3-year commitment, and if they would, I would take it. Then I'm thinking, after that, if there's something I can do in school... not a classroom anymore, but like an aide for students that need special help, or working in the library, I'd be very open to that.
- CH:** You still feel a calling.
- EB:** Oh yes. I'm an educator at heart. I think that stays and has been a wonderful part of my life.
- CH:** The most noble profession there is.
- EB:** I think it is. In fact when I was at New Hradec, it was so interesting, because I had been gone from there for about 30 years. And they asked me to introduce the Sisters that are there, so I got up, and before I introduced them, I said, "You know, I stand here as a very proud woman. They say that it takes 30 years to get the rewards of being an educator, and here the man in charge of this whole planning was my former student." The emcee for those speeches was my former student. And the man who was on the side, directing the people, was my former student, so I said, "30 years later I am reaping the rewards of being a teacher." It was just wonderful. And then I said I'm sure there were more people who were been my students. You should have seen the hands that waved, so it was...
- CH:** What a wonderful homecoming for you.

- EB:** It wasn't my homecoming; I went there for the celebration. But yet, just to be able to say this to them, to my former students was... it was so go to have been their teacher and see them.
- CH:** Little did they know that you weren't sure that you wanted to be a principal there.
- EB:** You've got a good memory... [laughter] Yes, that was New Hradec.
- CH:** That was New Hradec.
- EB:** But see, the thing I really thought of, the scripture says to Jesus, "you are not accepted in your own home territory." Here I was going to my own home territory, and I thought will I be accepted by these people who know me so well? And I was. So it worked out very nicely.
- CH:** Perhaps because you left and came back.
- EB:** Probably. There was a long time in between.
- CH:** And major mistakes elsewhere. Had your experiences elsewhere.
- EB:** But coming as principal though, that was new. It was my fear. They didn't know about that.
- CH:** What a wonderful career you've had.
- EB:** Yes, I've been blessed.
- CH:** Would you like to address anything that we haven't discussed in our interview?
- EB:** It seems like your questions... I looked through them... they really include a lot. They really touch on aspects of a person's life. Probably one other thing, you know, talking about Vatican II, is the openness I have received in the faith. I've gone to church with friends, I've received Eucharist with friends in other denominations, and I've made some wonderful friends. I've had teachers from other denominations that have been just super, just splendid. So I think that's an area that has opened a beautiful part in our lives, that we're all one in the spirit of the same God. Nobody has, you know, a special part of the religion part. We're together in this, and that has really been a good think in my life.
- CH:** So Vatican II is what changed all of that?
- EB:** Absolutely.
- CH:** The walls are down.
- EB:** Yes, absolutely. They certainly are.
- CH:** You made the adjustment, it sounds, easily. Trustingly. But what about your peers who really struggled with this?
- EB:** You know, I had just such a hard time understanding it here. Maybe because I was so happy with these changes, I guess, so it's hard to understand why people aren't. And yet I have to look at my parents who had such a hard time with the guitar being brought into church. That was a desecration for them, almost.
- CH:** Was it?

- EB:** Of course that was for dancing, or something like that. So when I look at my parents and I think to myself, “well, there is something there that was so dear and so close to them in the church that they were brought up with, that it was hard to accept these things.” So I have a compassion for these people, that it must be very difficult for them, even if I have not found these changes difficult.
- CH:** Tradition is a very powerful force for people and if you are a tradition bound person, changing is almost like cutting off your arm. So if that is where your identity lies, it would be very difficult.
- EB:** I think one of the things that happened in Sheffield, that was so hard in this line... that’s when we changed. Our hair was [214] in the first half of [?] our habit, it was a little easier to wear, and my principal there would not change and she thought it was such a terrible thing. In fact, she went so far as to say our founder, Sister Theresa, would turn in her grave if she knew what we were doing. And here I wanted to step into these things. Plus we had gotten new [219] in English now. We were praying in Latin. She wouldn’t let us use these because she just felt we were not ready for it. So it was such a struggle to be with a person like that.
- CH:** She wasn’t ready for it.
- EB:** No, she wasn’t.
- CH:** So the rest of you could not be ready either.
- EB:** She was in charge, yes. It was really difficult. Even today, I still feel feelings of almost anger because of what I went through there. I was young yet, so I did not feel I could speak out as much. Today I would say, To Hell with it. We’re going to do it. But at that time...
- CH:** Caught in the middle between what the Vatican said and what the Superior was feeling, and being caught in the middle of their struggle. I’m sure that it...
- EB:** It was the first and only time in my life that I really struggled with a person that was in leadership. That was the only one that I can truly say I struggled with. Otherwise, I had very open people.
- CH:** What does that tell us about a culture that is so inflexible? About something that in the 1990s we look back and say, “what could be so bad about showing your legs, or what could be so bad about...” But we have to understand that in that time, that was her identity; her identity was attached to that headpiece, and that without it, it made her very vulnerable.
- EB:** I would think, yes. It was almost like inbred, I think. It was a must. I have to stay with this. We have not very many, but they are still living right here. We have a few. But I think because so many of us have made the step through...
- CH:** And survived.
- EB:** Yes, and so their voices are not heard or they are not as outspoken as we are.
- CH:** There must have been tremendous tension for you.
- EB:** And the others.
- CH:** The idea that the people who were your superiors, the people you worked for were in direct opposition to what was coming down from the Vatican, and they were so uncomfortable with it, and you were sort

of caught in the middle, and not groomed to have an opinion. It wasn't... critical thinking wasn't a part of your role at that point. You were there to serve and to teach.

EB: Teach and you did your job very obediently. But like I said before, as far as superiors go, that is the only superior, the only leadership, I found difficulty with, or found difficulty with me.

CH: And there wasn't a neutral forum for you to take this to.

EB: No. I was in Sheffield and we were far away from any town, and we did not leave, we did not have cars, so we did not leave the place unless there was some very special occasion or something. So we stayed there some years I came there in the fall and I never went anywhere all year. Just stayed there and did my teaching.

CH: The call to Sisterhood really does require surrender.

EB: Oh yes. And I think entering as young as I did, the material things did not become a big part of my life. Where I think today, they enter later in life. It's a much bigger call for surrender, because some of them have their own home, they have their own car, they have their job. So I look at women entering today... we just had 2 of them here 2 weeks ago who are thinking of entering, and I think of all that they're giving up. Whereas I didn't. I didn't have that much to give up.

CH: You didn't know what was waiting out there for you.

EB: No. If I'd have stayed home a few more years I probably would have.

CH: Was this common, for a young girl to enter the parochial high school here and simply stay?

EB: No, a lot of people from my class did not go to school here. They went to high schools in their hometowns. And see, for me, the only Catholic high school I could have gone to was New England. I don't know why I didn't go there. I went here instead. I think maybe because the Sisters helped me in my planning, and I guess I was just open to this.

CH: But at 13, in your frame of reference, could you even understand what 600 miles was?

EB: No, I had no idea how far I was going.

CH: And that would have been a long journey.

EB: Yes.

CH: You couldn't fly. The train was the only option. When you got on that train and it went on and on and on, did you say to yourself, what have I done?

EB: I don't even know what I thought. Looking back now, I remember leaving Dickinson. My mother was in the hospital at the time.

CH: Oh, your mother was ill.

EB: She was ill at that time. My sister was at home and the threshing crew was coming in, and she looked at me and said, "Emma, how can you leave me alone?"

CH: Oh, the guilt.

- EB:** So the first leaving was... the guilt...
- CH:** The guilt. Leaving your sister to cook for that crew. Leaving a sick mother.
- EB:** That was very difficult. And I remember going to the hospital to say goodbye to her before I boarded the train.
- CH:** That farewell had to be so bittersweet.
- EB:** It just seems that call is so strong that the other things sort of go on the side. That's the only way I can explain it.
- CH:** Answering that call. I have chosen you. I have called you by name. You are mine. Were you even aware of that scripture?
- EB:** No. Like I said, scripture was not a big part in our education there, nor was it in our family.
- CH:** But there was a call to leave and you did. And it's almost 50 years later.
- EB:** Yes, in 2000 it will be 50 years. Well, I'll be professed 50 years.
- CH:** Well, it has been a wonderful time for me. Thank you so much. I appreciate your sharing your time with us and I welcome you, if you look over any of these questions, and if you think you would like to add to them, if there is something we didn't touch because it's almost impossible in this time to hit all 53 questions. But I think we've given it a fair chance. But if there are other things that you think you would like to share with us, please feel free to write them out and send them to us. Thank you.
- EB:** It's been a good interview too, I think.