

Interview with Sister Mary Isabel Kathrein (SM)

Conducted by Michael M. Miller (MM)

July 27, 1998

School Sisters of Notre Dame, Mankato, Minnesota

Transcription by Margaret Templin

MM: This is Michael M. Miller, the Germans from Russia Bibliographer at North Dakota State University in Fargo. It's a pleasure to be here at Good Counsel in Mankato, MN with the community of the School Sisters of Notre Dame. It is a special pleasure for me to be here with Sister Mary Isabel Kathrein who was my first grade teacher at Strasburg. In one of her first assignments as a member of the community, but I am going to let Sister introduce herself and we are going to ask some question and continue our interview. It is a real pleasure to be here with you Sister and to complete this interview on this 27 of July. And what is your name.

SM: Thank you Michael. My name is Sister Mary Isabel Kathrein and I was born April 14, 1921.

MM: And was that your original birth name?

SM: No, my baptismal name was Helen Mary Kathrein.

MM: And where were you born?

SM: I was born on a farm eleven miles northeast of New England, between Dickinson and New England.

MM: Now, were you born in a hospital or you were born with a midwife?

SM: My mother had a midwife.

MM: Your mother had a midwife?

SM: Right.

MM: And where did the midwife come from?

SM: She didn't live too far from us. She seemed to be a very poor woman. Later on when I grew up and realized that she was the one who had assisted my mother at my birth, I thought that's strange that she lived in a very poor humble home about three or four miles from where we lived.

MM: And she assisted in the birth of many children in the area?

SM: Yes, very many children. Right.

MM: Now your parents were born in the United States?

SM: No. My dad was born in Setchen, Hungary, in 1897, and came to the United States with his mother when he was just six years old. His father had come to the United States twice before that and the second time they lost track of him. So, Grandmother picked up her three boys, my dad had two brothers, he

was the middle one. Grandmother sold everything that she had in Hungary and came over. They found him in the hospital. I think it must have been the Dickinson hospital because he had worked for someone near Gladstone or Lefor North Dakota. When Grandmother came with the three boys they went to Glendive, Montana where Grandpa had a brother living, they lived there for some time before Grandpa purchased land between Dickinson and New England, the land which later on belonged to my Dad.

MM: What about your mother. Was she born in....

SM: She was also born in Hungary, and I think maybe in the same village as my dad but they didn't know each other. Her parents stopped in Chicago, lived there, earned money and then when they felt they were able too they also purchased land in the Dickinson area. My mother met my dad, I guess, as a teenager.

MM: And the native language?

SM: They spoke German, the German that they spoke in Hungary. It's a dialect different from the German Russian dialect, but I think it is quite similar. I know my brothers had many friends among the German Russian boys. Our farm was, as I said, between New England and Dickinson. We could see the sun shinning on the windows in the St Pious church. In the evening when the sun hit the windows we could see that reflection of light from our farm. I never got to the church there until I came to Good Counsel. One of the Sisters had given me a book that I was to give to the Sisters at St. Pious. So my mother and dad took me to Mass there one Sunday so I could return this book to that Sister.

MM: When you grew up south of Dickinson did you speak German in the home?

SM: We did at first. Yes, but once I started school it was English. Then we children spoke English. I think my mother and dad sort of insisted on that, in order to help us, to make it easier in school. I don't remember that I had any problems and I learned to read very quickly. My dad was a reader and I used to sit next to him wanting to read so badly. So they let me start school when I was only five years old. In the country school where I was to attend they had all boys. The teacher, who was a man, sent word to my parents after the first day that I was the only girl and it would be better, since I was only five years old, to stay home another year. I did. That was disappointing for me because I wanted to learn to read.

MM: Did you go to country school?

SM: Yes, the first five years.

MM: Oh, you did go.

SM: And then we had a visit from the pastor at St. Mary's in New England. It must have been in the summer months after I finished the 5th grade. I had indicated that I wanted to be a teacher. I think I must have made my first holy communion that summer and that was my first experience meeting Sisters. Since I had always wanted to be a teacher, I thought, wow, maybe I'll be a Sister. I can still see the Sister who was standing on a kind of platform outdoors. It was a porch like attachment to the building. The wind was blowing furiously and you know we had those long gowns and veils. Everything was blowing and I can still see that. I think that is when I got the idea that's probably what I'm suppose to do.

MM: And you were like

SM: I was like eleven years old.

MM: Oh, imagine that.

SM: Yes. And so when the priest came to visit our family, my mother and dad told him that I had indicated that I had an interest. He immediately arranged with the Sisters that I would come to St. Mary's school. I was only a fifth grader when I got to St. Mary's. I was to enter the sixth grade, and was a little tall for my age which seems to be unusual because I'm not too tall now. The Sisters thought I was. I'm sure it was a ploy that they used, since they thought I wanted to be a Sister. They would get me going fast, so, they put me in the seventh grade.

MM: Oh my heavens.

SM: Yes. So I skipped the sixth grade, went to the seventh grade, was at St. Mary's for two years and then after graduating from the eighth grade that following fall I came here to Good Counsel. I was only thirteen years old. When I think back, if I had been more mature and done some thinking I would never have done that, because I was the oldest in the family. There were many younger ones. I should have stayed at home and helped my mother and dad. I do think that if I had stayed at home I might not have gone to high school. My younger brothers and sisters shortly after me, not all of them but some of the older ones, did not get to high school. Maybe three or four of them.

MM: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

SM: Twelve. There were twelve of us. Three of them were born after I left.

MM: Oh my, and what was your father's name?

SM: John J. Kathrein.

MM: And what year was he born?

SM: He was born in 1897, in Setchen Hungary.

MM: And your mother's name?

SM: Elizabeth Margaret Hoffman and she was born February 26, 1903.

MM: And you were the oldest?

SM: The oldest, right.

MM: And how many are still living in you family?

SM: My brother John, who was next to me, died four years ago and my sister Catherine died when she was only thirteen or was she twelve years old, maybe thirteen. My first year of teaching.

MM: I see.

SM: No. My sister Barbara tried it for one year. She came here as an aspirant. She was here as a sophomore and tried it for one year and didn't think she wanted to continue, so she didn't.

MM: Who do you think had the most influence in your decision to go to the sisterhood?

- SM:** I don't think anybody did, Mike. When I saw the Sisters, I knew what I was suppose to or wanted to do. I must have been a very determined youngster because as a freshman I returned home only at the first year's end. I didn't even come home for Christmas and Easter. Travel was so far and so expensive at that time. My mom and dad, with a large family, could not afford to spend that much money. So I came home during the summer and, of course, helped with the farm work. And at the end of summer my mom and dad said, "We can't send you back. We just don't have the money." It was the second week into school. I don't think I pestered them but, they saw how disappointed and intent I was about going back, so they finally let me go.
- MM:** School had already begun.
- SM:** Yes. So I was two weeks late coming to Good Counsel as a sophomore. After that they just let me come. They supported me. I remember when we received the white veil but I had not taken vows, as yet. They had come here for my reception. My dad said to me, "Now if you feel this is not for you. If you change your mind, be sure you come right home." And I knew that it was hard to let me go. But after I took my first vows there was no indication that they were hoping I would change my mind.
- MM:** So they were supportive?
- SM:** Very supportive, considering all of the children way down the line. By the time I took my first vows the second last one was born. Another one was born after that, my baby sister Barbara. I was not fully conscious of all the implication.
- MM:** Do you remember when you were twelve or thirteen years old?
- SM:** I was thirteen years old and I knew what I wanted and that was it.
- MM:** And that was your focus.
- SM:** Yes.
- MM:** What Sisters were at New England at that time?
- SM:** The School Sisters of Notre Dame. Sister Edith then later on Sister Villanova came. My mother and dad liked her very much. She had come from Chicago and knew some Kathreins in Chicago and that interested my parents very much. You know, after twenty, let's see it would be twenty seven years ago this fall I was assigned to Trinity High school in Dickinson. For twenty-five years I was only a few houses down the street from my mom and dad. I was able to assist them, take care of their business, help them in many ways, particularly, after my dad died. My Mother was alone for a few years. I was a great support to them in my latter years. It was all providential that I was able to return to them and assist them when unable to do so as a youngster.
- MM:** And the amount you took over to the sisterhood.
- SM:** Right.
- MM:** When you came here at thirteen from North Dakota there weren't that many Sisters, young woman or girls that were here. Did you get homesick?
- SM:** You know I don't recall that very much. I lived over what we called the aspiranture, that's that square building over there across the road. We had close to a hundred girls in that building maybe eighty-five, I

don't remember the exact number. The freshmen, juniors, seniors and boarders were in separate buildings. They were in the academy. When they went home for Christmas and holidays I couldn't go. Father Sheld who was our chaplain was just a gem, he was so good to me. He would take me to his home in eastern Minnesota to be with his family. So for Christmas and Easter I always went. He had a younger sister who befriended me and came and stayed with me one Easter vacation, that helped. I think I was homesick more though later on when I would go home. There were the little brothers and sisters that I became very attached to during the summer months. Then it was hard.

- MM:** Then it was your decision to go. There wasn't a lot of influence from someone back home other than encouragement. Encouragement but not influence.
- SM:** Right. Support mostly. I know my parents didn't encourage me, in fact, I realized later on that they didn't even want me to go. They wanted me to stay at home, but they did not interfere with my plans.
- MM:** I see. Interesting. Of course, you were going at thirteen. That was the beginning of thinking of sisterhood at that age.
- SM:** Yes, it was. As I mentioned before my dad was such an avid reader. I would sit next to him in the evenings and I would bring books home for him to read from the country school, you know. When I was in second grade I was already reading on the sixth grade level. That, I think, influenced me most with my dad. His love for reading, and I learned a lot just by reading.
- MM:** Did they get any newspapers?
- SM:** No. I think once in a while my dad brought home a magazine, but there were no newspapers for us in those days. I don't know where my dad picked up his reading material. I know I would bring books home from school. I would listen to the eighth graders when they would have book reviews, after they had read and reviewed the book. The minute that book went on the shelf I would grab it.
- MM:** What about your friends when you were so young. What did they think of you, leaving at such a young age?
- SM:** I remember one of the boys saying to my mother she's too young she shouldn't be going. We were on the farm and were always very busy. We didn't have much time to associate with other young people. Our cousins lived over the hill from us and on Sundays we would get together with them. After I left I may have written to them. They wrote to me once or twice, but we didn't have any communication through writing. I would see them when I would return home and that was it.
- MM:** When you came to Good Counsel. As you look back to those early years, your teenage life, who had a great influence on you? Any special Sisters that you really became attached to? That was very important to guiding you when you needed counseling.
- SM:** The Sister who was in charge of us was very good to us, and very supportive. I remember having crying spells and I wouldn't be surprised if those didn't come from being lonesome but I wouldn't admit that to myself. So if I was hurt about something she would be very comforting and would talk to me. And, of course, in those days they would correct us for any little faults that we committed. I being very sensitive, would cry over that. She was very nice about it all. I liked her, and all the sisters that taught me, and loved going to school.

MM: Studying was never a problem for you. But do you remember the day you left home? Who brought you here?

SM: I came by train.

MM: You came by train, but do you remember who brought you when you left?

SM: Yes. My mother and dad took me to the train depot and I left. I traveled all the way to St. Paul. My mother had a cousin in St. Paul, a Sister Flora, who lived at Strasburg at one time. She was teaching high school at St. Matthews. She is very mixed up now. She is on the second floor, and has to be in a wheel chair. She goes back to the past a lot, is preparing to go to school and is not in school any more. I stopped at St. Paul and stayed with her for a day or two then they put me on a train and I came to Mankato, there was a train between Mankato and the cities at that time. I remember traveling with some of the girls that were coming to Good Counsel. Of course, they took me in.

MM: Do you remember what you brought along?

SM: Just the clothes I needed. You know, Mike, we struggled so that I never had any spending money when the other girls would buy candy. They supplied candy maybe once a week and then the girls could buy some. I never bought any because I didn't have the money. I was very conscious that they were struggling at home and that I could not be an added burden to them.

MM: But they supported you for the schooling.

SM: Oh, yes.

MM: Do you remember some of those school days in the farm school?

SM: The country school? Yes. I was the only one in my grade all those years. I used to finish my work ahead of time. I remember I loved to draw. So I would draw everything around me; draw maps, fill in all the counties, and the towns. At Christmas time I would draw everything that had to do with Christmas. So I read and I drew.

MM: How far was the country school from your house?

SM: About a mile. We had to go across the field and over a hill. The country school was on a hill but we couldn't see it from our place.

MM: And you would walk there?

SM: Yes, in wintertime we would take our sleds along and when we went home we would sit on the sled and slide down the hill half way home.

MM: Were some of the other children of all different ethnic backgrounds?

SM: No. There may have been one other German-Russian family and the others all were Hungarians.

MM: So they were mostly all English spoken?

SM: Oh yes, but they also knew the German.

MM: They did?

- SM:** Oh yes.
- MM:** But you heard them at recess, for example, would they speak German?
- SM:** No. We weren't suppose too.
- MM:** I see.
- SM:** No. If we got caught speaking German I think we were punished.
- MM:** Oh, really.
- SM:** Yes, because they wanted us to learn to speak English well and we did. We picked it up and my mom and dad, of course, supported us at home. I think they used to speak German to each other, but to us they spoke English. We learned the German but after we left home we didn't use it any more. I can still understand it now. When I was in Germany, Switzerland and Austria I could understand the German that was spoken there, and could translate for the sisters who were with me.
- MM:** You went through the stages of Sisterhood a little different from the girls who came here after high school because you had gone through high school here.
- SM:** Yes. But many of the girls had gone through that period of time with me, because we lived together. We were called aspirants because we were aspiring to enter religious life.
- MM:** How many Sisters are still with you from your class, do you remember?
- SM:** In my class there are four. And then the others entered after high school. There were eleven of us and there are nine of us left. Two of them died and one left.
- MM:** When you were in school here at Good Counsel they encouraged you to go into a profession? What did they encourage you to do?
- SM:** Teaching. Actually we finished high school and then went right on to college work. During the summer months we took college courses. And I don't remember what the exact reason was. I was a postulant two years, no, three years instead of one. Three of us entered the postulancy as seniors. They said they were too crowded there so they sent us here and we became postulants as seniors. After we finished our senior year they sent us to the schools to teach after only the summer months of hurried preparation.
- MM:** You mean eighteen years old?
- SM:** Right. They gave me the first and second grades to teach and you know that is difficult.
- MM:** You mean during the school year?
- SM:** Yes.
- MM:** What was the reason why they went out so young, was it because of a shortage of teachers?
- SM:** Well, yes there was a demand. You know, they needed teachers. My experience was my practice teaching. So I lived with the Sisters and taught with them. I don't know how I did it, but my children won first prize at the county fair with their drawings.

MM: Where was this?

SM: This was in Madison, Minnesota.

MM: Madison, Minnesota.

SM: Yes.

MM: What year was your first official position after you had...

SM: After I took vows?

MM: Yes.

SM: Then I went to St. Stanislaz in St. Paul.

MM: How old were you then?

SM: I was only twenty.

MM: Well then you had your college education.

SM: Not all of it. We went to school during the summer months to earn credits and I got my college degree the summer after I took final vows. That was six years. I took all my courses during that period of time just through summer school. During the year I remember taking a course in German from one of the sisters who I lived with taught me. We were required to have a foreign language at that time and so I took German.

MM: Right, but those years when you were a postulant and novice did you get home very often?

SM: No. I only got home as a candidate once, at which time I went home. As a novice we didn't go home. When we were candidates we could have company once a month, but I was so far away and never had company.

MM: Then you were teaching and studying at the same time so you could get your degree because the state allowed it at that time, for certification.

SM: Right. I remember taking the street car from St. Paul to the Hill. Did you ever hear of the Hill school?

MM: Yes.

SM: Jim Hill's mansion on Summit Avenue. Well that's where we had classes. The next year I was transferred to Minneapolis. So on Friday night I would take the street car. In the winter time when it got dark early or was dark early in the morning; then I would stay overnight in St. Paul and have class in the morning and go home at noon. Otherwise, I would take the street car early in the morning and go to St. Paul for those classes. Some of our Sisters taught Saturday classes.

MM: What was your first assignment in North Dakota?

SM: In North Dakota my first assignment was Strasburg.

MM: And what year was that?

SM: 1948.

MM: Before you left for North Dakota at least, you knew the state because you had grown up in New England. It was different in Strasburg because it was quite far away.

SM: Yes.

MM: Did they prepare you, tell you anything in preparation for this assignment in Strasburg?

SM: I was going to Mt. Mary that summer. That was the summer I got my bachelor degree. During that summer there were rumors that some of the Sisters were going to Strasburg. The anti-garb law that had been passed and the Sisters would be asked to go. I was thinking that I would be going. Harriet, the Sister you met last night, and I were there that summer. We traveled together on the train and, of course, were having a lot of fun. When I got home, I was stationed at Holy Childhood in St. Paul at the time. I had been there only one year. It was a new school and we had just opened it, so I was eager to stay another year. The next morning, during morning prayer, we got a call that Mother Superior wanted to see me at St. Agnes. So I took the street car and went there. The first thing they said, they didn't ask would you go they just said I'm sending you. She whisked me off to another room and they had clothes there that they had me try on. They provided me with the clothes I would need, not all of them. The Sister who was my superior at Holy Childhood in St. Paul had suggested that I get a perm. We went to her sister's house and she gave me a perm. That was the only perm I ever got. My hair got so frizzy and so curly you as can see in the digest that I have. I thought none of that any more. I was the first Sister of Notre Dame to ever get a perm.

MM: Then you, of course, at that time weren't able to decide on where you wanted to be assigned. It was....

SM: No, in those years, up till about fifteen or twenty years ago, maybe. When I went to Trinity I was ask to go. I didn't choose. There was never a place I decided to go to or had an interview and agreed that this was where I wanted to be assigned. My last assignment was Trinity in Dickinson, but at that time we were given what was called an obedience. It was a card in an envelope on which we were asked to go to a certain place, teach a certain grade, or to perform a certain responsibility.

MM: When you went to Strasburg were there some other Sisters who went with you?

SM: Oh yes. Well I hadn't made retreat, so they were having a retreat in St. Mary's in New England. At that time, many of the Sister from there didn't come back to Mankato for their retreats. They would make them in North Dakota at St. Mary's because St. Mary's had the accommodations for several sisters because of the boarders place. I went there for retreat and met Sister Lusida, and Sister Josepha. Sister Richard Anthony came with Mother Bardardia. They came before us, I think. Who else? Oh yes, Kathleen Rother. After the retreat was over Sister Lusida and Sister Josepha and I took the bus to Bismarck. There we were going to change buses and take the bus to Strasburg. When we got to Bismarck the bus to Strasburg had already left and we were stranded. We didn't know anyone in Bismarck except that some of the Sisters remembered, Sister Daniella Kuhn had a sister living in Bismarck. So we stopped at St. Mary's church and asked for this sister's address. The name I think was Welder, that's Sister Thomas Welder's mom and dad. The priest gave us their address because they belonged to St. Mary's. We got a taxi and went there but couldn't go into the house. In those days we were not permitted to go into people's homes. So we stayed in the yard and we didn't know what to do but Mary Ann said "My husband isn't at home but after he comes home from work we'll take you to Strasburg." Sister Mary Thomas and her younger sister and brother were still children at that time. They played in the yard and

visited with us. Finally, you have to go to the bathroom, what then? So we had to go into the house. Mary Ann said, "Now that you are in, you stay in and we will have supper. Then after supper we will go." That is how it ended. When we got to Strasburg that evening Mother Bardardia was still there. She was our provincial at that time. I think we had called to tell her what had happened. When we told her, she just laughed. She thought that was such an interesting happening.

MM: So you got to Strasburg?

SM: When we go there, they had a hail storm. The trees were stripped of their leaves. All of the Crabapples had dropped in the yard. I can still see the place, it looked so desolate. The old convent, which had been a church at one time, really was not inviting. There were so many areas in that building that needed renovation. Father Thomas and Father Matthew were there at the time. During the year Father Thomas had the place painted, and renovated. The kitchen and all were done very nicely and it became a comfortable home for us.

MM: There were how many Sisters there at the time?

SM: At the time there were 9 of us. We are in the digest, all of us standing on the front porch. Sister Lusida was there. Sister Thomas Aquinus was there but she left the community. Sister Mary Joyce came the second year.

MM: What do you remember about the first days of being in the school at Strasburg?

SM: Oh, I remember that very well. The first weeks we prepared for school and we went to our classrooms in our habits. The youngsters met us if they came to see us or when we would go to church. The people saw us there in our habits. In the meantime we were preparing our clothes we had received from Mankato. The first morning when we got up, we dressed in our secular clothes. The hardest part was to leave the house and go to church for Mass and Communion. In those days we would walk together, usually two by two. We were in marine suits, which they gave us. They got them very cheaply or for nothing. I think they got them from the army surplus store, they were nice and neat. Most of us had a marine suits and when we came down the street in those marine suits the old man on the corner was gaping at us. We just couldn't stop laughing, and we laughed all the way to the church because it struck us so funny. We went to Mass, had breakfast and after breakfast we had to leave the house to go to the school. We just had to push ourselves out. It was hard but once we did it, it was OK. Did I tell you about the flag?

MM: Why don't you tell us about it.

SM: I had neglected to put the flag out in the classroom when I got everything ready for the first day. After we prayed we turned to the flag and gave the salute. After we finished I realized that the flag wasn't there. So I said to the youngsters, "Did you notice anything missing?" They guessed all sorts of things. Finally little Anthony Rice piped up "Sister Mary Isabel is missing." He said it so pathetically. They had met me dressed in my habit. That morning I was dressed in secular clothes, so to them I was missing. One other time two brothers, I had first and second grade also. After Mass one morning one of them said, "No, that's not our Sister." The other "Yes it is." "No, it's not our Sister." The older one said, "Yes it is just look at her face you'll know." On Sunday we were dressed in our village garb.

MM: Now were the children you had in the first and second grade all English speaking?

- SM:** No, remember I mentioned little Ursella Keller. Some of them spoke German, they didn't know any English but they learned the English as they learned to read. I didn't find it much of a problem. It was hard for them, harder than it was for me, but I didn't speak German to them. I could have but I don't think they would have understood my dialect. I could understand them if they said anything in German, like a word or two. So, I would translate for them. They picked it up very quickly. By Christmas Marie Wolf, Albert Wolf's niece had learned everything in the pre-primer and the primer. She turned to the back of the book and said, "I know all those words." That's how quickly they learned.
- MM:** So they would come to school probably knowing more German than English.
- SM:** Right. As I said Ursella didn't know any. She did know some English words she had learned from her older brothers and sisters I'm sure. She was one of the younger ones, and she was not able to converse until after Christmas and then she started to talk.
- MM:** The church too. Were the sermons in German?
- SM:** We had a German and an English sermon. During the German sermon I would try to listen and follow. It was so hard, so I would settle back and relax and have my own thoughts.
- MM:** But what about the Sisters that didn't know any German?
- SM:** They didn't have the same problem I had because I had the little ones. The others already knew English but if any of the youngsters talked German on the play ground, of course they weren't suppose to, but if they did the other Sisters didn't understand them. I think Sister Richard Anthony knew a little German but she was in the high school. I remember we practiced our German just so we could talk to the older people or understand them. We would end up laughing, and would have so much fun saying things in German. Of course, some of us would say things differently then we would have to compare. It was interesting.
- MM:** Were there people in Strasburg that you remember that actually couldn't converse with you in English?
- SM:** Some of the grandmas and grandpas. It was so long ago.
- MM:** But all the parents could?
- SM:** The parents could speak English, but it was the grandpas and grandmas and they have been gone for many years. Those who lived down the street we would meet after Mass. Most of them didn't attempt to talk to us because they knew we didn't understand.
- MM:** Did you have teacher parent conferences?
- SM:** No, not in those days. The first time I had a parent teacher conference was in Bismarck. I came back to North Dakota later on after the anti-garb bit, after having been sick. I got sick while I was in Strasburg and left in the middle of the year. Then I was out of school for one-half year. It was after that I came to Bismarck and we started parent teacher conferences and I liked them. I thought it was so good to meet the parents. You understood the youngsters so much better. You knew where they came from. I know the youngsters reacted differently since we met their mom and dad. I think it was important to them.
- MM:** The years you were in Strasburg there were no PTAs?
- SM:** No.

- MM:** None of those things.
- SM:** None of them. The only time we met a parent was when they would come to pick up their children.
- MM:** You would come home periodically to Good Counsel?
- SM:** Yes.
- MM:** Were they inquisitive about what it was like teaching in a school where they had to accept your clothes and all.
- SM:** Oh yes. They were interested. They would question and marveled at us and what we did.
- MM:** You learned to accept it quite well?
- SM:** Oh yes. Right after the first year when all of that emotional strain was over with. After that it was just something we did.
- MM:** Do you remember if there was much discussion amongst the students and the parents about this whole issue?
- SM:** Oh I'm sure there was. I don't remember that much about it. They didn't like what had happened, but it was the law.
- MM:** How did your parents react to this?
- SM:** My dad was very disturbed. They belonged to New England and I made retreat at New England. After the retreat was over they came to visit me. My dad didn't say very much but I knew from his looks. When we talked about it and when my mother and I talked about what I needed, he just shook his head and was very unhappy about it, my mother was too. They came to see me. In 1953 I left. I left after Christmas. I contracted Hepatitis, some of the youngsters had it and that is how I picked it up.
- MM:** At that time you could not go into the home?
- SM:** No.
- MM:** So did you have a chance to experience the German food?
- SM:** People were good to us. They brought us that good homemade sausage. They brought us that kuchen you talked about. They also brought us vegetables. Sister Daniella was our cook and she was marvelous.
- MM:** Did you have to do your own cooking?
- SM:** No. We had a home service Sister. I remember, she didn't have to change clothes. Do you remember little Clara Baumgartner, a beautiful child. One day after school she walked home with me and Sister Daniella was in the garden in her habit. She got all excited and said, "Sister, she is out there with her holy clothes on."
- MM:** Did you have time for recreation?
- SM:** Yes. After supper we always had recreation until seven. That was it. Then we would do our school work until bed time. We always had to retire at 9:30.

- MM:** That was pretty much standard?
- SM:** Yes. We all got up at the same time. This is not being done any more. Now people go to bed when they want to. We still pray together.
- MM:** What about your weekend activities.
- SM:** Well at Strasburg we had to take care of our hair, which was put up for the coming week. Sister Daniella did our washing but we helped with our ironing. I learned how to cut hair and give perms so I was busy with that. We always did our cleaning, and we were very clean. We cleaned on the weekends. We checked our papers and prepared for the coming week. We never went any place except to the dentist or doctor, you know. And, of course, we entertained each other. We went for walks, played games and listened to music. It was really peaceful and not stressful at all.
- MM:** Were you involved with church activities?
- MM:** No. Sister Lusida and I had church work. We prepared the alter for Mass, we cleaned around the sanctuary and the sacristy. Sister Mary Thomas was also there. Mary Thomas Cavan died, she used to sing on Saturdays. If there was a high Mass we would help with the choir.
- MM:** Did you find a problem with the German Russian children and their English at times? Did you have a problem with certain words that they couldn't get in English when you would have the first and second graders?
- SM:** I don't remember anything in particular. You know the younger children are quick to pick up the correct pronunciation. So they were OK. I think the other Sisters had a little trouble because once they learned to speak the English and got mixed up with the German they had more of a problem. But the little people what they had to say in school was correct. I don't recall that I had any problems.
- MM:** Do you remember specifically some students who stand out in your mind, that you wonder what happened to them in their career or students that were really bright as youngsters.
- SM:** I just remember youngsters. I wish I had I had kept a log, the names at least but I didn't. I was transferred quite often and one time I said to our school supervisor, "Why is it you are transferring me?" She said, "We can use you in so many places." But that wasn't good for me. I loved the children, loved all my classes and then had to be up-rooted and that was hard. So I lost many names, there are some I met later on in years. I remember the Fishers, and I remember first names. I remember Maxi Keller and the other little Keller, his cousin. Was his name Billy? I remember one day when I was checking his workbook at my desk. The others were working and he stood next to me and all of a sudden he was smoothing my arm. Just like that, I didn't let on that I was aware of what he was doing. I guess he just felt comfortable with me. Cute! Maxi had to stay after school one day because he had a tendency not to complete his work. When he was finished, I was working at my desk, he was putting on his coat. He looked at me, I can still see his little face, his big eyes, "You sure have to be tough to be a first grader," he said. He was such a little squirt, you sure have to be tough.
- MM:** When you look back to being here at Good Counsel and then going back on to Dickinson where you spent a greater part of you life in the library profession. Well that was some what of a switch. When you think back to those years in Dickinson, what are your thoughts.

- SM:** Well in between I moved up in the grades. I had third, fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth. Then shortly before going to Dickinson I also had the high school library in Waodso MN because I had started my Master's Program in Library Science. So they asked me to do the library, in which I had some experience. I was in the cities for one year. I was a traveling librarian. I traveled between two schools. I was at St. Francis for two and a half days and two days at St. Matthew's school. Then I was transferred to Dickinson. When I think back, it seemed to have been the easiest thing, to go into that high school library. It was Sister Petranilla and Sister Mary Judith who had been there before me and had built up a wonderful library from the beginning. Trinity High School was new when our sisters were assigned there. And so it was in perfect working order. All I had to do was continue. I didn't have to make any changes until as the years progressed I saw the need for changes then took care of them. The young people were just so neat. The Sister who had been there before me had found it hard because she didn't get along too well with the young people. They bothered her and, of course, the youngsters picked up on that so they made it hard for her. She was kind of demanding, and was critical of them. When I came I had no problem with them. I liked them and they responded to me and so we got along for twenty five years. I could have stayed there for some more, but I felt twenty five years was long enough. I did want to come to Good Counsel before I was not able to do anything, to retire when I was unable to do any kind of work. And so a year ago this past July, I came to Good Counsel to offer community service.
- MM:** When you reflect on all the changes that have taken place at Good Counsel, from when you entered the Sisterhood and now. It has been quite a change here.
- SM:** Right. But you see I used to come back here during the summer months for retreat also the first years for summer school before I went to Mt. Mary College. So it was a kind of gradual thing and was always aware of what was happening.
- MM:** So you have come back now to Mankato. When you look back to all those years in North Dakota what do you think sometimes? First, you were at Strasburg early in your career. Then you experienced a whole different kind of ethnic setting in going to Dickinson. It was quite different.
- SM:** Yes, but in between I was in Minnesota. I was in Red Wing. Clements and in the cities. I was also in Bismarck. Wherever I went I liked it, and was accepted and able to get along. When I think back now I was blessed, Mike, all along.
- MM:** You always had good experiences?
- SM:** Right. In school.
- MM:** When you were in Strasburg you were surrounded by a lot of other Sisters. Was that a setting where there were a few Sisters? Was there homesickness from some of the other Sisters?
- SM:** If they were homesick I don't remember that they dwelt on it.
- MM:** You don't remember that, comforting each other?
- SM:** No. We had so much fun, Mike. We supported each other and enjoyed each other. We worked together and I know that most of the Sisters, even those that followed us later on, talked about how much they loved it at Strasburg.
- MM:** When you were at Strasburg from 1938-1953 do you ever remember the Lawrence Welk band?

- SM:** Oh yes. He came there one summer to play for us. The money he made when he performed for the people, he donated to us so we could renovate our chapel. Which we did in the convent.
- MM:** He came with the orchestra?
- SM:** Yes.
- MM:** Do you remember being there?
- SM:** Oh yes. I met him.
- MM:** He brought the entire orchestra?
- SM:** Right, and his family was there.
- MM:** Do the Sisters here still watch the show on TV sometimes?
- SM:** I haven't heard this past year. When we were in Dickinson we used to watch it all the time on Sunday evenings. I haven't seen it since I'm here. I don't know if it's still on or not.
- MM:** I don't know if it's carried on Minnesota Public Television or not. It may not be.
- SM:** Prairie Public would have it on but Minnesota perhaps not. I'm not a TV person. There are enough TVs here to go around. We are in smaller communities here. Where I am there are three sisters who are hard of hearing, so they turn it up kind of loud. Enough for me, so I go.
- MM:** You do more reading, anyway?
- SM:** Right, and listening to music. I love music.
- MM:** What do you think you are going to doing here in the future at Good Counsel?
- SM:** Well right now, this past year I learned to work at the switch board, so I relieve the regulars. I do some driving yet. I take people to the clinic, to the dentist, and to do shopping. I did drive last fall when Sister Emma and I went to the cities. She went to visit some friends. I took the car and drove to my sister's who lives in Fridley. Having done that before I knew my way. If I know my way I am ok, but there has been such a change in the road and streets in the cities. I said, "I don't think I want to drive there." I have driven to Red Wing, Wabasha, Bird Island, to New Ulm and those places around here.
- MM:** Do you think you are going to get into any kind work with books again here?
- SM:** I told you I helped set up the tape library. I worked with Sister Emma on that. Of course I am doing all of the work now that we have it set up. I kind of take care of it, but I haven't purchased any new tapes. I feel we need to get some new tapes. The Sister who has the library was threatened by me when I came. I felt I needed to get away from it for a year, so I did. I also said to Sister Emma that if in the future if there would be a need for me to help, I would be willing to. I should take you up there Mike, so you can see why we need to do something with that library. It has loads and loads of books, but we have so many old books. I think they have gotten Sister to weed but it's not nearly enough.
- MM:** Can you think of anything else you would like to add about our discussion today. I didn't reflect on all these changes Vatican 2 and religious life because that is a whole other issue. It is quite involved.

- SM:** Having been in Strasburg and having been in the anti-garb. Change over to what we wear now was very simple for me to do.
- MM:** For you it was not a big movement.
- SM:** It wasn't hardly any change at all. No. In fact I was the last one to change at Wabasso. All the others changed and here I was still in the Sister's habit. Then my sister from Fridley got after me. She said, "You come to the cities." She had made some outfits for me. She purchased some material from the Sisters in Dickinson when she went home to visit my mom and dad. She is an excellent seamstress so she made some outfits for me. I went to her house and came back changed.
- MM:** And oh my she has changed too.
- SM:** The youngsters were nice though. They accepted me.
- MM:** I wanted to ask you also. What are your thoughts about the importance of preserving this whole history of not only the people who have taught in North Dakota but this whole ethnic background? You see that's important.
- SM:** I marvel that we have people like you to be so interested and so dedicated in work like this. I think it is important. My dad was very much into our heritage. My mother not so much, but my dad was. We had a friend who was related to my brother-in-laws, John Michels. Do you know John Michels?
- MM:** Yes. I know who he is.
- SM:** He is related to two of my brother-in-laws. When he would come to Dickinson he would visit my dad and would play tapes that he had made. Having interviewed people from Hungary and Germany, you see he was a world wide traveler. I think he knew five languages. He could translate.
- MM:** The Hungarian Germans who came to North Dakota are not a large population like the Germans from Russia and yet they need to be preserved in some way. So it is good that people are doing that.
- SM:** Like John, being so interested in that, yes. But my brothers and I didn't associate with people from St. Pious and also in New England who were of German Russian ancestry, but after a while that didn't make any difference. You know, they used to call us the "Dummy unguaren". Then we would turn around and call them "Dummy Russians". You know it wasn't nice.
- MM:** But the kids didn't know. They heard it from the elders.
- SM:** I guess so. But after a while that was all lost.
- MM:** It's a good thing those days go so fast.
- SM:** Two of my brothers married German Russians and my sister married a German Russian, Joe Shaffer, who has died since. You know, that doesn't mean anything to us any more. Then there was a difference. When we stopped speaking German that's when the difference was put aside and not considered.
- MM:** I think the food, customs, and traditions are important to keep in perspective, but not where society is working together for friendships are wholly different. We are going to close our conversation today with Sister Mary Isabel Kathrein who came home to Good Counsel in Mankato Minnesota in 1997. She spent her years from 1948 to 1953 in Strasburg North Dakota North. She has shared some of her memories as

well as many others of her teaching career. Then she went on to librarianship. I want to thank you so much for our interview today and we hope that this will a benefit not only to us but to the archives of Good Counsel. Thank you.

SM: Thank you Mike.