

Interview with Catherine Miller (CM) – Part II

Conducted by Betty Maier (BM) and Christ Maier (CM)

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- BM:** This is October 18, 1995 and we are at Catherine Miller's home in Linton, North Dakota. I am Betty Maier, a volunteer interviewer for the Germans from Russia Heritage Collection at North Dakota State University Libraries. We are going to do interview two, actually part two. The questions are more personal in nature, and Catherine you feel free to ask questions that are comfortable for you. We are going to start by asking you some questions about marriage and relationships. Our purpose is to get a better understanding of our ancestry, so let's start.
- BM:** How did your parent's marriage differ with your observations of some of your brothers and sisters. I know you didn't get married, but I'm sure you had family that you observed.
- CM:** Well, my mother and dad, what they called years ago was "kÀ?_Àpple"; they were match mated while my brothers and sisters always dated their spouses about a year or so before they got married.
- BM:** What did your parents teach you about family life?
- CM:** Not much, it's just my observation. They never did teach us much, but just by observing what was going on.
- BM:** What were some of the traits and virtues that you learned from them that helped you when you were working with children?
- CM:** Discipline was one. There was never what they say nowadays, "You're grounded for something." If they asked you to do one thing and you didn't do it right away they said, "I told you," that was enough. You didn't have to have another warning that you had to go and do what you were asked to do. I cannot remember my dad ever giving me a spanking. Mother would give me a slap or the others also; but my dad's words were stern enough when he said them and meant it, that we did not need any other discipline. That was enough, just by hearing dad's voice, we knew he meant what he said.
- BM:** Were there certain values in your family that the children were expected to do or follow like honesty, or...
- CM:** Oh definitely. Be sure and be honest and fair to everybody, respect each other's rights and privacy.
- BM:** Did the husbands and wives have equal authority or rights?
- CM:** In our family, yes. There was equal authority; and if we asked something like "Could we do this?" and they didn't know what they wanted us to do and should we get to do it. They would say, "Go and ask Mother, or go and ask dad." But as a rule, we usually went to Mother first and sometimes she would say, "Well, why don't you go and ask Dad?" For some reason it was always easier to ask Mother for

something we would like to do. But many times, she'd seemed to sense that we were afraid to go and ask Dad; and she would not give her answer. She would just say, "Go and see what Dad has to say about that."

BM: Well, they were really sharing.

CM: They were, yes.

BM: Were you able to express your feelings of anger, sadness, fear and criticism?

CM: Not too much, because I think we were expected to use our own feelings. Once in awhile we did express our anger or fear, but not too often.

BM: Was there love and affection shown in your family?

CM: It was just taken for granted that we were loved. Love was equal among us all.

BM: Did they show any affection or...

CM: No, not like they are now, like hugging. There was nothing like that.

BM: Was there competition between the boys and girls?

CM: In some ways, like probably in playing games or in working. But some of my sisters were able to keep up with the boys in working if they tried to do better than the girls. Some of my sisters could, I myself couldn't because I was kind of a weakling or whatever. I was sick at an early age in my life and was always treated a little different than the others. I got the easier jobs, while the others had to do the heavier work.

BM: Did your sisters tell you that?

CM: Many times. Like during harvesting time when we would have to go out and pitch hay in the box or shock. At that time, I had already injured my back. Mother would say, "Well, you go and lay down and rest during the noon hour" and my sisters said, "We have to do the dishes, and she gets to lay down." You know she has a sore back and has to rest.

BM: We talked about children being disciplined. Were there changes from your grandparent's generation or your parent's generation do you think, or is that a hard question to answer.

CM: That is a hard question, because I did not know my grandparents that well.

BM: Was there a difference between your parents and, maybe, your brothers and sisters?

CM: Yes. I know the oldest brothers and sisters; the parents were more strict than with the younger ones. It was a little more lenient. They got to go out more often than we did, like parties or whatever, than we did at first.

BM: Do you think the discipline was more effective for the older ones than for the younger ones?

CM: I don't think it was more effective; it was just as my parents grew older, they became a little more lenient.

BM: Were there disagreements between family members, and how were they settled?

- CM:** Sometimes by the parents and sometimes we had to settle our differences by ourselves.
- BM:** Did you ever observe any disagreements between your parents, would they talk it out?
- CM:** They would talk it out, yes.
- BM:** Did they ever go outside for advice?
- CM:** No they did not. They settled it among themselves, or there would be days when they wouldn't talk to each other for a day or so, but then it gradually came back that they settled their differences by talking it out.
- BM:** Were older family members ever consulted about matters such as finances and farming practices?
- CM:** No, there was not.
- BM:** How were grown-up children treated when they had conflicting religious and marriage decisions?
- CM:** Well, my oldest sister was dating a Protestant; and my dad disapproved of it. So she went and got married outside of the Catholic church which was our religion. When my Dad found out that she married outside of the church, he said, "Now I disown you. I don't want you to come home anymore." This was in April of 1940; and by July 4th of that same year, my sister could no longer take it, because she was close to Dad. For him to forbid his daughter to come home, she could not take that. Her husband didn't have a car. They lived in Bismarck, North Dakota, and they would ride with some friends. So they were coming to Linton, and she asked "Would you take us along to my dad's farm?" She did come and at first it was hard for my Dad to accept that. But when my sister was expecting her first child, her husband went with her to the Catholic church and had their marriage blessed. This child, when she was eleven months old, came down with diabetes. At the age of two and a half years, she passed away; and then my brother-in-law joined the Catholic church. This made my Dad very happy. It affected my mother's feelings too, but she could accept something like that better than Dad could. From then on or maybe even before my Dad would go there; but if they went to Bismarck, they always stayed at their place overnight. Usually when they went to Bismarck, they stayed two or three days to visit relatives and friends. Then my oldest brother moved there and the second brother moved there, but dad would always go back to my oldest sister, he always wanted to sleep there. That was his second home. That's how much different it was within a few years that he accepted her. After that it was his same daughter again that she was, before she was married.
- BM:** Did your grandparents or parents have friends outside the family with whom they shared private thoughts and emotions and feelings?
- CM:** Yes, they had friends. The neighbors and the relatives, but not like counseling like now a days.
- BM:** It was more like socializing, right?
- CM:** More like socializing, yes.
- BM:** How did your grandparents or parents view other relationships?
- CM:** They would visit and be very close to their family and neighbors. They would get together to visit and play cards, have parties every now and then. In German, Catherine says which means, "The relatives were good with everyone."

- CM:** That means that all kinds of neighbors, they had Protestant neighbors which they would go and visit. But in younger years in my age, we were not supposed to go and visit those Protestants, because they were afraid of intermarriage. But when my grandparents and my parents were living next to the Protestants, they would go and they would have this "Freundschaft"; and they would visit each other. But I think the only reason they didn't like for us to visit with the Protestant neighbors is, because of the intermarriage. Other than that, but later years, we did get to chum around with those neighbor children.
- BM:** Of course, you were in a public school too out there.
- CM:** Those were all Catholics.
- BM:** Oh, were they?
- CM:** Yes, we had a Catholic community there.
- BM:** Were they close to their aunts, uncles and cousins?
- CM:** Very close. In fact, two of my parents cousins, we even had to call them uncle and aunt.
- BM:** Did any of them move away from the community, and did they still keep in touch?
- CM:** Not very far, they were all within traveling distance; they did not move out of state or anything.
- BM:** I think we sort of covered this, who made the money decisions in the family?
- CM:** It was decided between mom and dad. They made the decisions together.
- BM:** Were there other ways of borrowing money, now I know this is probably in the thirties so...
- CM:** Back in the thirties, when we did have no crops, then they had to borrow money from Feed and Seed. They had to make those loans, but they had to be repaid after we had some crops again. And that was not like borrowing money, there was credit at that time. People trusted you. They figured that you would come back and pay your debts, which always was done. That was one of the things that my parents stressed, that you always pay what you owe to anybody.
- BM:** So there were some of those family values coming out of there again. Now we have already established that religion was a very important part of your home. What were some of the most important religious teachings in your home?
- CM:** Daily prayers together and Sundays were spent at the church. Everybody got to go to church on Sundays.
- BM:** Did you find comfort in those?
- CM:** Yes, I did find comfort in that. Our church was about two and a half miles from home; and after my oldest brother had married, there was thirteen of us, parents, ten children and a sister-in-law. All thirteen of us got into Dad's big Buick, and we drove to church.
- BM:** All thirteen?
- CM:** All thirteen were in the car, yes. It was a big enough car. There were four in the front seat and in between the front and the back seat they had made little benches. The little one sat on there and mom

and dad were in the back and then one or two of the others on the seat and held a few of them. All thirteen of us went to church.

BM: Dedication. Were you frightened about any part of your religious training?

CM: I wouldn't say I was really frightened about my religion, but going to confession; most of the time, I was very uncomfortable with that.

BM: Were you encouraged or discouraged by having your religion?

CM: We were always encouraged. We used to have like what they call CCD now. It was catechism in those years and on Saturday evenings. Mother made sure that we all knew our catechism, so that by Sunday when we come to church that we knew our catechism lesson. Dad kind of made sure that we did too; but he could not read or write so he could not teach us about catechism. The only thing he could teach us was what he memorized.

BM: That was in German?

CM: Yes.

BM: Were you allowed to question any of your religious teachings?

CM: I don't think we really did question.

BM: How did your family get along with the people that weren't German-Russian, that were of a different ethnic group?

CM: We did not have them around our area, but like I said the only thing they disagreed about sometimes, which I said earlier about not visiting the Protestants because of courtship. That was the only reason, but we never had any other ethnic group around. Not to this day have I lived among any other ethnic groups, but the German-Russians.

BM: How about the other German families? Were there any prejudices to those that were German, but not Germans from Russia?

CM: No, there was no prejudice, and all of our neighbors and friends were from German-Russian communities.

BM: Were you afraid to say you were German at any time?

CM: No, I was never afraid of saying that I was German.

BM: So you were comfortable that you are German-Russian even during World War I and World War II, but I was comfortable about it in World War II. We spoke German during that time always.

CM: And to this day I am very happy to be able to speak two languages. My English isn't all that good, but I'm glad I know both languages.

BM: So speaking German doesn't affect relationships with other people in town or church? Is there an advantage or disadvantage you feel?

- CM:** Well, I think I have learned enough English that I'm not uncomfortable in town or in church; but my grandparents and parents when they used to go to town, everything was German. We went to the town of Wishek most of the time, and to this day we still can find some people there speaking the German language. Right in the stores.
- BM:** Do you think it's an advantage to be able to speak it?
- CM:** To me it is an advantage that I know German.
- BM:** For those who don't know English, but want to learn it, were there opportunities when you grew up?
- CM:** There were no opportunities in my days.
- BM:** How do you feel about a German brogue or accent?
- CM:** There have been times when I was embarrassed, but I don't let them make fun of me. I just use what I know; and as I grow older, I find that the others like the Norwegians or those who come over from Germany who immigrate now, they have trouble with that too. Especially with Scandinavians' different names...
- BM:** Even going from one part of the country to the other or to the South, Texas, or the Eastern states. They all have different brogues, don't they?
- CM:** Very much so.
- BM:** Do you have feelings about the survival of the German language in our community.
- CM:** Yes, I'm very proud that it was kept up. I was in Missouri in 1990, and one of the boys from here was a priest down there. The first thing when he was introduced, we did not know each other before that, but when we met and were introduced, well, he didn't grow up too far from where I lived. And then he said, do you still speak German? Then I said, "Yes, I can speak German well." Then we had a good German conversation going. To this day when I get to meet him, he always wants to talk German, because down there he doesn't have the opportunity; and he doesn't want to lose it.
- BM:** You really have to keep up with it.
- CM:** Yes.
- BM:** Let's go into the area of education. Now I know, you went to a one-room school, and the amount of time that you spent in school was predicated on the time of the year. How available were your educational opportunities.
- CM:** Well, I went through the eighth grade, and passed the eighth grade. I would have liked to gone on to high school; but it was in 1936, when I graduated from the eighth grade; and there was no money to send me. We would have had to go to town to board, and my parents did not have the money to do that. So we didn't get any more education beyond the eighth grade. However, I was fortunate, I had two older brothers and an older sister that were never allowed to go long enough to pass their eighth grade. They had to stay home and help with the work. I was the first one in the family that passed the eighth grade. So from then on, the two youngest sisters finally got to go to high school.
- BM:** Do you think your life would have been different if you had been able to go on?

- CM:** It would have been different. At that time, I always wanted to be a clerk in the store; but I do know if I had the education, I could have gotten a job behind a desk, where I would not have been on my feet or work so hard. I could have earned more money which I have never done in my life; I never did earn very much money.
- BM:** You say that, but you have to realize that as you worked with your brother on the farm you were co-workers.
- CM:** Yes, we were co-workers.
- BM:** So that was your livelihood. Let's go into politics. Were your parents interested in politics?
- CM:** Not really. Not going out politicking. No.
- BM:** Did your parents attend any political rallies?
- CM:** No, I don't think the political rallies were held then as they are nowadays.
- BM:** What political issues were your parents interested in? Were they interested in women's voting or prohibition? Do you remember them ever discussing that?
- CM:** I do not remember just what it was; but during the time Governor Bill Langer was in office, there was something going on. I don't know what it was, but my dad was very much on his side; the way he was treated. So many wanted to get him out of the Governor's office, but my dad thought whatever he did was the right thing.
- BM:** Do you frequently vote?
- CM:** Whenever I have the opportunity, I vote. I think that is our duty as a citizen here in the United States.
- BM:** Did your parents?
- CM:** Yes, definitely.
- BM:** Was there a president that your parents felt strongly about?
- CM:** Not to my knowledge. I just know about Governor Langer, that's all I remember.
- BM:** What political party were your parents interested in?
- CM:** Republican.
- BM:** Were you involved in certain political issues?
- CM:** No, I have not been.
- BM:** This concludes our interview. I don't have any more specific questions, but is there something that you would like to add that either I've missed or maybe there are some questions relating to family life and relationships or.....
- CM:** Well, going back to politics. I have a sister, my youngest sister, who is very much interested in politics. She is a Democrat, while I remained Republican like my parents. I get such a kick out of her: how she goes out and does campaigning when election time comes around.

BM: She is active.

CM: Yes, she is active.

BM: Is there anything else about our community, country, world, or anything that you want to make any additions too?

CM: Well, I really don't think I want to say anymore. I know our communities are much different now than it was in our time. There wasn't so much crime and all that, but it's just different nowadays. The way the families are raised and with both members of the household working. I don't think the family life is there anymore, like it was in my days when mother was home. Well, my dad was too. But in town mostly the mothers stayed home; and the dad had a job, where now it takes both parents to make a living. I'm sure if my parents had that opportunity to find some work, they probably would have done it too, because we lived very poorly during the dirty thirties. But there were no opportunities to go out and make more money.

BM: Thank you, Katie.

CM: Your welcome.