

## **Russian Germans and the Ursulines of Prelate, Sask., 1919-1934**

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The saying, "Everything that happens in the world is part of the great plan of God running through all time,"<sup>1</sup> aptly articulates that all events have their place in the ongoing history of salvation. To a large extent history is truly the story of the migration of peoples with certain set patterns repeating themselves with the evolution of isolated events often converging in a single event of significance.

Such is the story of St. Angela's Convent at Prelate, Saskatchewan, the backdrop of which is, the emergence of three evolutionary movements in history: the migration of German peoples to Russia and thence to the Americas;<sup>2</sup> the founding, growth and expansion of the missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate in Provence, France (1816)<sup>3</sup> and the persecution of religious in Germany during the Kulturkampf under Chancellor Otto von Bismarck (1872-1887).<sup>4</sup> Thus to tell the story of the Ursuline Sisters of St. Angela's, is to trace the story of these three historic movements.

### A PILGRIM PEOPLE

When Catherine the Second, a German princess, ascended the throne of Russia (1762-1796), and saw the vast stretches of fertile

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<sup>1</sup> Tryon EDWARDS, *The New Dictionary of Thoughts*, U.S.A., Standard Book Company, 1966, p. 529.

<sup>2</sup> Monsignor ABERLE, *From the Steppes to the Prairies*, Dickinson Bismarck Tribune Company, 1963, pp. 11-17.

<sup>3</sup> Jean LEFLON, *Eugène de Mazenod*, Vol. 11, New York, Fordham University Press, 1960, p. 43.

<sup>4</sup> *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. II, New York, McGraw Hill Book Company, 1978, p. 932.

land lying fallow, she remembered the poverty and overcrowding in her native land. Given a chance, the German peasant could contribute to the growth of agriculture in Russia. Hence, soon after her invitation July 22, 1763, German farmers and artisans from Alsace-Lorraine began colonizing the plains on either side of the Volga River.<sup>5</sup> Similar invitations went out in 1804 from Alexander I (1801-1825)<sup>6</sup> to southern Germany, offering areas above the Red Sea, and from Alexander II (1855-1862)<sup>7</sup> in 1862 who invited the Bohemians and Moravians to settle the Crimean peninsula. These invitations accompanied by liberal promises induced thousands of families to look for a better life in Russia.

For more than a hundred years the Germans in Russia enjoyed autonomy and freedom, making incalculable contributions to the agricultural development of their adopted country. However, the reforms of 1862, by Alexander II, deprived the colonists of their rights and privileges and, as the social climate changed, these pilgrim people once more looked to the possibility of migration to better lands.

Close upon investigations into the possibility of settlement elsewhere the Americas became the new haven of hope. The constant flow of emigration lasted for forty years until the outbreak of World War I which put a stop to it and brought Russia to the threshold of the Bolshevik Revolution.<sup>8</sup>

As colonists in Russia the Germans had the care and services of dedicated Franciscans and Capuchins.<sup>9</sup> Here in America it was not until 1898 that the German Oblate missionaries training in Huenfeld, Germany, joined the German Russian immigrants settling in Western Canada. Winnipeg had become the Gateway to the west

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<sup>5</sup> Karl SUMPFF, *The German Russians: Two Centuries of Pioneering*. Bonn, Atlantic Forum, 1971, p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph HEIGHT, *Paradise on the Steppe*, North Dakota, 1972, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Vol. 1, Chicago, Helen Hemingway Benton, Publishers, 1978, pp. 475-477.

<sup>8</sup> ABERLE, *op. cit.*, pp. 11-17 and 61-71.

<sup>9</sup> Aloysius KESSLER, *Geschichte der Diocese Tyraspol*, Dickinson, George Aberle Publisher, 1930, pp. 13 and 19.

not only for immigrants but for missionaries as well.<sup>10</sup> This had started in 1841 when Bishop Bourget of Montreal visited Eugène de Mazenod, founder of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate and Bishop of Marseilles in France, and returned with four priests and two brothers. Bishop Provencher of St. Boniface, Manitoba succeeded in receiving two missionaries. Thereafter a long list of famous missionaries who gave dedicated service to the Church in the west was to follow, including such great names as Alexandre Taché, Louis Langevin, Vital Grandin, Émile Legal and Albert Pascal.<sup>11</sup>

#### ST. JOSEPH'S COLONY

Just before 1900 German Russian immigrants to the United States had settled in the states bordering Canada. Finding the soil too sandy for wheat growing, however, many decided to move to the Saskatchewan prairies. With the help of Mr. Frank Lang, a teacher from Minnesota, they established the Catholic Settlement Society. Seventy Saskatchewan townships, beginning with Wilkie in the north and extending to Ermine in the south were settled. Bishop Pascal, O.M.I., sought German priests from his own Congregation and wrote to Huenfeld, while Bishop Émile Legal of St. Albert sought government support by writing personally to Sir Wilfrid Laurier, then Prime Minister of Canada.<sup>12</sup> Bishop Pascal's request was answered and fathers Theodore Schweers and Joseph Laufer became the first Oblates to arrive for St. Joseph's Colony. The event of their arrival was commemorated on May 12, 1905, with the celebration of Mass, said by Father Schweers in a tent near Leipzig, Sask. These two missionaries were soon joined by other Oblates whose dedication, faith and hard work speak for themselves even to the present time.<sup>13</sup>

Meanwhile, other groups of Germans from Russia, Roumania, North Dakota and Eastern Canada began to settle the Happyland

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<sup>10</sup> St. Joseph Parish and School privately published for their 60th Anniversary, 1966, *This is the Story... of a People of God*.

<sup>11</sup> *Der Marienbote*, Oblates of Mary Immaculate, 1905-1955.

<sup>12</sup> Bishop Pascal made a personal visit to Huenfeld to obtain priests., pp. 4-6.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 4-6.

Municipality south from the Saskatchewan River and west to the Alberta border. Eventually, it was to become known as the St. Francis Xavier Colony. These settlements too, eventually came under the care of the Oblates. Other German communities scattered throughout the province also became the pastoral care of the Oblates. Many of these early communities where Oblates cared for the spiritual welfare of the people were later to be the first places where the Ursuline Sisters of Prelate came to teach and minister to the needs of the German Russians in Saskatchewan. Nearly all the present members of the Ursuline Congregation are the daughters of these German Russian families who lived in the communities where the Prelate Ursulines first taught.<sup>14</sup>

#### THE ARRIVAL OF THE SISTERS

The war clouds that spread over Europe, in the first decade of the twentieth century revived memories of the Kulturkampf in Germany in the hearts of many religious there. Fearing a renewal of persecution in the event of war, the Prussian Confederation of Ursulines commissioned the Superiors of three member houses, Mother Xaveria Loens of Cologne, Margareta van Svanhof of Breslau and Theresia (and her sister Ignatia Breme) of Haseluenne, to travel to the United States to investigate the possibility of a foundation there, not only as an expansion of the Ursuline apostolate of education among immigrants, but also a place of refuge in time of danger. The trip was made in July, 1911. On returning, the advisability of a foundation in America was accepted by the Superior's Conference in Breslau. Mother Xaveria Loens agreed to superintend the project, but it rested for the time being as the United States had no satisfactory opening in the areas visited just at this time.

This brings our saga closer to the immediate steps leading to the coming of the Ursuline Sisters to Prelate. In April, 1912, Mother Xaveria Loens received a request for at least five Ursuline teachers from Father Hilland, O.M.I., pastor of St. Joseph's Parish in Winnipeg. The Benedictine Sisters who had hitherto conducted

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<sup>14</sup> After the death of Mother Clementia on July 5, 1961 there were no Sisters from Germany left.

classes in the parochial school were being recalled by their Bishop in Duluth, Iowa.

The response to this request was the decision to send a contingent of nine Sisters representing three houses of the Federation 1) Mother Clementia Graffelder of Cologne (31), one of the youngest; 2) Mother Antonia Hebestreit and Sister Anna Katherina Wuesthof of Dorsten; 3) Mothers Agatha Schrameyer, Xaveria Suttecliffé, Ignatia Brene (superior), Klara Erpenbeck and Sisters Laurentia and Natburga Brak of Haseluenne. They left Cologne on August 16, 1912 amidst farewell ceremonies that included the official transfer of the group to the jurisdiction of Archbishop Langevin, O.M.I., of Winnipeg. The Sisters travelled on the vessel the Bremen, which carried them across the Atlantic and which arrived in New York Harbor on August 28. There they were greeted by a delegation from Leohaus, the Hospitality Inn for German immigrants, who prepared them to take the train to Montreal. After a sleepless night aboard the C.P.R. they arrived in Winnipeg, Manitoba on August 29, 1912.

530 College Avenue in Winnipeg was to become the cradle for three Ursuline Communities in the Saskatchewan prairies. Father Hilland lost no time in acquainting the Sisters with the extra-curricular activities they were expected to conduct. Would they conduct a school for refugees, a sodality for young ladies, and the St. Agnes Association for young children? Mother Xaveria Suttecliffé would teach music lessons after school; Mother Ignatia would contribute articles to "Western Kanada," published in St. Joseph's parish. Mother Klara Erpenbeck and Sister Natburga Brak would accompany Father Cordes to Windhorst, Saskatchewan,<sup>15</sup> to help him in establishing a parochial school in the parish.<sup>16</sup>

Two-hundred twenty children, aged 6-14, boys and girls were enrolled the first day at St. Joseph's School in Winnipeg. The youthful, energetic Mother Clementia Graffelder was entrusted with the 80 beginners. Her cheerful, outgoing disposition made her adapt readily to the open and non-monastic life-style that became

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<sup>15</sup> Windhorst was also one of the German settlements that came into being through the help of Mr. Frank Lange and his Catholic Settlement Society.

<sup>16</sup> The Windhorst venture did not succeed for lack of support from parishioners.

necessary. The remaining 140 students were divided among the four remaining teachers. All lessons were in German except English, reading and language, which were taught by Irish-born Mother Xaveria Sutcliffe, who was the only English speaking Sister in the group. She was the "floating teacher," who visited each classroom to teach her subjects. The salary per Sister was \$20.00.

There was no time for adjustment which the circumstances and conditions of a foreign land imposed on these Sisters who were accustomed to teach refined young ladies within a cloistered monastery. The change of climate and the change to an open-ended environment often held bewildering surprises. The zealous young Oblates with whom they worked and whose seminary training had oriented them to a missionary life-style, showed little sympathy and understanding for the difficulties the Sisters were experiencing in a strange new land. Added to the strain of classroom work the Sisters were expected to take part in parish activities to which they were unaccustomed. For the parish bazaar that first November, they contributed 62 needlecraft articles all done during the late hours of the night. There were other difficulties too; accidents, illness, night disturbances by anti-Germans.

The biggest disappointment however, was the fact that the Archbishop gave no permission to build an Academy. The Sisters of Jesus and Mary were already conducting a prosperous academy and the Archbishop felt that the Ursulines should not build another. This became the clinching problem which drew the foundation in Winnipeg into question. On January 12, 1913, a cablegram from Mother Xaveria Loens in Cologne read: "Give up Winnipeg, keep Windhorst." Mother Ignatia reported the message to Father Joseph Riedinger, O.M.I., the assistant to Father Hilland who was then ill. Father Riedinger was furious at what was to him an outrageous decision. He was staunchly supported by the Archbishop.

Three weeks later the Archbishop received a letter from Mother Xaveria Loens giving reasons for the notice of withdrawal. She asked that at any rate Mother Ignatia be returned to Germany because her presence was required at the Motherhouse. She was also in poor health. It was during her farewell visit to the rectory before leaving for Germany that Mother Ignatia met Abbot Bruno of Muenster, Saskatchewan. The Benedictine Abbot spoke to her of the flourishing St. Peter's Colony, founded in 1903 (eighty miles

East of Saskatoon), and of his desire to have German Sisters take over the parochial schools in the colony. An academy boarding school would also be allowed them. This chance meeting was later recognized as the hand of God.

The Abbot, who was on his way to Klagenfurt, Austria, to petition for Sisters of St. Elizabeth for the Humboldt Hospital, was determined to visit the Haseleunne Community as well. He did. And Mother Theresia, the Superior, was so impressed by his “prudent and intelligent” approach that she now entertained the earnest desire to transfer her Sisters to the colony under his direction.

Meanwhile Mother Xaveria Loens, in June of 1913, having come to Canada for a visitation, found it necessary to withdraw the Sisters from Windthorst. She took Mother Klara Erpenbeck directly to Muenster to investigate the question of a foundation there. Everything held the promise of a pioneer life of sacrifice, but also of a peaceful, ordered life. Above all, Abbot Bruno had won the confidence of the Sisters and Mother Klara declared herself ready to take charge of the school in Muenster.<sup>17</sup>

#### ENTER SCHWEITNITZ

At the same time in August of 1913, five Ursulines from the Motherhouse in Schweitnitz, Silesia, had taken up residence in a parish school in Gregory, North Dakota. From the beginning it was clear that this venture held no promise for the future. Canada beckoned. The Haseleunne group in Winnipeg were in the process of transferring from Winnipeg to the St. Peter's Colony in totum. The Cologne Monastery now withdrew from the joint foundation in Winnipeg and gave its three Sisters, Mother Clementia Graffelder, Mother Angela Haselkus and Sister Thekla Bonus the option of joining either the Sisters of the Haseleunne Monastery in Bruno, or those of Schweitnitz who now took over Winnipeg as well. To complicate matters further, during this time there also came a request from Father August Sufka, O.M.I., for Sisters to staff his fourteen room parish school in St. Mary's Parish in Regina. Added to this, the fall of 1914 saw five more Sisters arrive from

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<sup>17</sup> *Seeking New Horizons*, Chronicle, Ursuline Sisters of Bruno III, p. 7.

Schweitnitz, bringing the total in Winnipeg to 13. Then five of that group left for Regina.

In the fall of 1915, Father Joseph Riedinger, O.M.I., was transferred to Grayson, Sask. He immediately began to prepare the way for the Ursulines from Winnipeg to staff the one-room Separate School and open a boarding school in the Oblate Mission House there in his village.<sup>18</sup> Three Sisters arrived, among whom was Mother Clementia Graffelder. Meanwhile in Winnipeg during the closing years of the World War I, tensions began to run high as soldiers began returning from overseas and anti-German feeling in the city worsened. Fearing for the lives of the Sisters, Archbishop Sinnott decided to close the convent in Winnipeg and thus the remaining Sisters joined the group in Grayson, Sask. Among them was Mother Clara Scholl, a German teacher who had come from York, Nebraska, U.S.A.

In the spring of 1919, shortly after the closing of the convent in Winnipeg, Father Riedinger was transferred to St. Francis Xavier parish in Prelate, Saskatchewan, and became its first resident pastor. He did not leave Grayson without the promise of three Sisters who he himself named: the two from Cologne – Mother Clementia and Sister Thekla and Mother Luitgardis Kratochwill who had wanted to return to her Motherhouse in Schweitnitz, but who was willing to go to Prelate for as long as she was needed. She in turn was named Mother Prefect for the new foundation at Prelate. Prelate was accepted as a dependency of Schweitnitz.<sup>19</sup>

#### ST. ANGELA'S CONVENT

On May 31, 1919, St. Francis Xavier parishioners of Prelate turned out to witness the blessing of the site selected for the building of St. Angela's Convent – a parcel of land on an elevation at the north end of town. Sod was turned and the excavation for the foundation and basement began at once. Father Riedinger succeeded

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<sup>18</sup> *Chronicles*, Ursulines of Grayson, pp. 12-13.

<sup>19</sup> *Chronicles*, Grayson. In June, 1919, Mother Clara Scholz, an Ursuline who had come from Nebraska, U.S.A., to join the Sisters at Winnipeg and from there to Grayson, came to Prelate but remained only a short time before returning to her convent.

in inspiring his parishioners with zeal and enthusiasm for the project. Neighboring parishes in the colony came to the support of the project as well. People came forward with generous donations, free labour and loans. Some, too poor for any of these, offered to take the Sisters on collection tours in the country, using their 1915 models. The generosity and loyalty of these people remains as an unmistakable witness to their faith and charity.

No wonder it came as a bolt of lightning in a clear blue sky, when in the midst of construction, notification arrived from Mother Ignatia Möegische at Grayson: "After due deliberation our Sisters have decided to relinquish completely the foundation at Prelate, originating from Schweitnitz. We have neither the personnel nor the means to sustain such an institution. Until further notice, Mother Luitgardis Kratochwill and Mother Clara Scholz may stay if they are needed. I have been asked by Cologne to send Mother Clementia and Sister Theckla back to their Motherhouse."<sup>20</sup> Nothing, however, daunted Father Riedinger who continued the building project. He knew exactly what he would do and was confident he would succeed. He began immediate negotiations with the Cologne Motherhouse to come forward and accept the Prelate House as a dependency.

Meanwhile, the Sisters had taken residence in a private house in the village and had begun teaching the Catholic children in the town hall. One student, after May 31, was Anne Ziebart from nearby Blumenfeld. She had shown interest in the religious life and was brought to town daily for private lessons.

On November 19, the cornerstone was laid and on December 8, the ground and main floors were ready for occupancy, and the Sisters moved in. Besides living quarters for boarders and Sisters there were two classrooms and a chapel. A third classroom was added when the chapel was partitioned with sliding blackboards that could be raised and lowered so that when needed it could serve as part of the chapel. This enlarged chapel served the parish for many years as winter chapel and became witness to the faith of the parishioners who joined the Sisters and boarders not only for Mass

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<sup>20</sup> Grayson had been negotiating for autonomy and a local novitiate. Assumedly the Motherhouse, in granting autonomy, asked that Grayson take responsibility for the Prelate foundation.

on week days, but for morning prayers said before Mass. It was an inspiration to see mothers with babes in arms climb the hill to the Convent.

Within a year the private school in the Town Hall which included Grades I to V was discontinued. The Public School therefore rented the classrooms at the Convent and the Sisters continued to teach in them.

The people soon learned to look to the Sisters for comfort in times of illness and death. Boarders, too, were cared for in time of illness. One incident concerned a former boarder who had become a teacher. On a visit to the convent, Mother Clementia diagnosed her to have measles. She put the dear girl to bed in a room next door to hers so she herself could care for her until she could go back teaching. Another incident concerned the young people who arrived at the convent in deep distress. It was too late for the young woman to get to a hospital on time. Everyone sprang into action, including Father Riedinger. A Sister was dispatched to the village to call the midwife. Mother and baby came through fine.

Again, the father of a family was seriously ill and was advised to go to Rochester. His wife wished to accompany him so the Sisters offered to care for the children in the convent during the parents' absence. Examples such as these serve to illustrate the ways in which these first Ursulines were called to minister to the needs of the people at that time. Clearly, the cloister never interfered where the needs of the people had to be met.

Father Riedinger had envisioned not only a Convent Boarding School which provided the catholic and educational needs of immigrant children. His dream included the establishment of a centre for the nurturing of religious vocations among the daughters of German immigrants. The beginning was made when Anne Ziebart moved in with the Sisters on December 8, 1919 and was formally received as a postulant. She received the religious habit on November 19, 1920, to become Sister Elizabeth. By pre-arrangement she went to the Ursulines in Chatham, Ontario, for her canonical year of novitiate. Father Riedinger saw his dream take shape.

At the time there was an urgent need for English speaking candidates with teaching certificates. As if in answer to prayer, Mrs. Ellen Marx, a widow teaching in a nearby rural school, showed

interest. Assured that neither her age – she was 44, nor her widowhood was a barrier, she entered in 1921 and became Sister Margaret.<sup>21</sup> She was Irish, a woman of deep faith and solid piety, of wide experience and a mature outlook. Through her the infant community gained prestige and the confidence of the parents whose children she taught. Her premature death, May 10, 1929, was mourned by her Sisters and parishioners alike.

Yet another answer to prayer was English born Gertrude Baker who became Sister Teresa. She was trained from the London Conservatory of Music in both piano and voice, and became instrumental in laying the foundation for St. Angela's School of Music. Having travelled widely she spoke both Polish and French besides her native English. But more than this, from the time she entered at age 50 until her death in 1949, Sister Teresa's deep spirituality and dedication to the Ursuline ideal of love and service to God and neighbour, particularly toward her own Sisters in religion, were a constant source of edification to all who knew her. She served the community as novice mistress for many years.

Other candidates soon followed from the Prelate area. A visit from four parish priests of the St. Joseph Colony in 1923 began the flow of postulants from that colony. Gradually they came also from other areas and from cities as far away as Prince Albert and Winnipeg.

#### ST. ANGELA'S, A DEPENDENCY OF COLOGNE

In January, 1920, Father Riedinger was to write and thank the Superior of the Cologne Motherhouse for allowing her Sisters to stay: “. . . I need them absolutely,” he said. He begged for two more and pleaded that Prelate would be accepted as a dependency.<sup>22</sup>

When spring came Father Riedinger went to Cologne himself to present his case in person. The Superior's letter to the Cardinal-Archbishop for permission gives some insights into the situation “These Sisters are begging for help because their work is increasing

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<sup>21</sup> Archbishop O.E. Mathieu of Regina had given permission for candidates to be vested in the religious habit pending autonomy and a local novitiate for Prelate.

<sup>22</sup> Archives, Ursuline Sisters of St. Angela's, Prelate, Sask.

continually. Their request had to be turned down because we ourselves do not have enough teaching Sisters. Despite our repeated refusal, their spiritual director came at the beginning of May, 1921 to present his case in person. Their Lord Archbishop wishes to declare the foundation autonomous if another Sister joins them ... With the consent of my council, I wish to grant Father Riedinger's urgent request and allow Mother Hildegard Foerg<sup>23</sup> to go to Prelate for an indefinite period of time."

Not only Mother Hildegard, an elderly Sister, but Sister Engelberta Schickenberg, still a Junior, accompanied Father Riedinger to Canada in the fall of 1921. On November 3, three weeks after arrival, Mother Hildegard wrote to a niece in Germany: ". . . We arrived at Prelate ... A neighbouring priest, Father Philip Funke, O.M.I.<sup>24</sup> and some catholic people came to the station to welcome us. Three cars took us to church where everything looked festive. After a greeting of welcome ... the *Te Deum* was sung. It was very soulstirring moment for me. In the convent another welcome and a banquet awaited us. I was really surprised to see such a beautiful spacious convent. I felt at home at once ... I was among Kölner (Cologne) Sisters ... more than happy I came to help. They overwhelm me with kindness and cannot do enough for me."

About the people she writes: "The majority are German Russians. . . . There are some Irish and Scottish families who belong to the upper classes<sup>25</sup> ... Life is hard and rough here, but it is also beautiful and rewarding ... Both priests and people are happy that the Sisters have come ... The people bring us chickens, eggs and Kuchen, so the new Sisters have something good to eat. I was all in love with the children," she continued. "They are good and eager to learn. I teach German and needlework. . . . There is going to be a big bazaar before Christmas, so that the debts can be paid and work on the interior of the convent can be resumed in spring ...

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<sup>23</sup> Mother Hildegard had asked to go to Canada at an earlier date.

<sup>24</sup> Father Riedinger had remained behind in Montreal to wait for money to pay for the remainder of the trip.

<sup>25</sup> Likely she found the Irish and Scottish less rustic and better educated than the German Russians. A copy of Mother Hildegard's letter was obtained from her niece and translated into English by Sister Veronica Heit while she was in Germany.

The Catholic women and even the children help in making articles for this project ... I will look after the needlework exhibit."<sup>26</sup> Meanwhile, her younger companion, Sister Engelberta, a talented musician and choir directress, could not adapt to the pioneer style of life of St. Angela's and soon returned to Germany.

In August, 1922, St. Angela's was accepted as a dependency to the Cologne Motherhouse, and Mother Clementia appointed Superior. Taking matters in hand, she visited Cologne and returned with Sister Hyacinth Renonet, professed in 1921 and in her late 30's. The latter remained in the Ursuline Convent at Chatham, Ontario, for a year of studies in English and Canadian methods of teaching. She came to St. Angela's in the summer of 1924. In the fall (September-December) she attended teacher training courses in Regina and merited the Third Class Teachers' Certificate.

Father Krist could now have Sisters for the St. Michael's parish at Tramping Lake. Mother Clementia accompanied Mother Hildegard and Sister Agatha<sup>27</sup> to meet Sister Hyacinth who came directly from Regina. She helped them settle in a two-storey frame Teacherage. Sister Hyacinth was assigned the teaching of Grades IV-VII in a room in the church basement used also as winter chapel, while Irish born Miss O'Neil continued to teach the primary grades in the one-room cottage school that had been moved into the village from the country. Mother Hildegard, in charge of this small community, would teach needlework and music while Sister Agatha (Mary Kolinowski) would be busy with the domestic work.

Early in 1925, Father Riedinger, ever on the move in search of recruits, visited the Ursuline Convent in Bruxelle, near Winnipeg. He was allowed to interview Sister Pascal (Mary Curley) who was a second year novice and 32 years old. She had spent seven years in the Argentine and for three years had held a secretarial post with

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<sup>26</sup> There would be debts for many years and the annual bazaar remained a must in the thirties to supplement the meager income of the community. The post war years were partially difficult for the Motherhouse which could give no financial support to the new foundation at Prelate. To further help, the archbishop gave permission for collecting money in the colony (begging). Mother Clementia also made collection trips to the United States.

<sup>27</sup> Sister Agatha was one of the first three vocations for St. Angela's Convent from St. Joseph's Colony.

British Information in Buenos Aires. While there she learned Spanish fluently and came to Canada as the secretary to the Deputy Minister of Trade and Commerce in Ottawa. Through her influence with the Deputy Minister she procured passports for three Sisters to come from Tildonk, Belgium, who had been displaced during the war. She ended in joining the Ursulines at Bruxelle. Besides being fluent in three languages, she was a talented musician and dramatist. Sister Pascal was influential in laying the foundation for St. Angela's Drama productions. As a person, she is remembered as deeply prayerful. She could make saying Rosary a joy for her students. With Sister Philippine (Rose Hammel) she opened St. Angela's second mission at Quinton, Saskatchewan, in 1927.

On August 15, 1927, six of the nine candidates who had been invested in the religious habit beginning in 1922, began their canonical novitiate year. Three postulants, one from Winnipeg, Man., one from Prince Albert and one from Luseland, Sask., were given the religious habit and entered upon their first novitiate year with the other six. Three other candidates waiting for their turn could not be released from their teaching positions, and had to wait for one, two and three years. The community membership now stood at sixteen. The future looked bright. The second floor of the convent, with two large dormitories for boarders and sisters, a study for sisters, a spacious sewing room, eight private bedrooms and a visitor's room along with a smaller dormitory now became ready for occupancy for the increasing number of boarders and sisters.

Near tragedy struck St. Angela's in February of 1928, when fire broke out on the second floor while everyone was on the first floor having their midday meal. The people of Prelate sounded the alarm and themselves were on hand to put out the fire. Smoke obscured the origin of the fire and much unnecessary damage occurred to the contents of the convent which were, of course, not insured. The estimated damage: \$8,000.00. Once again the people of Prelate in their unflinching loyalty to the Sisters rallied to their aid in every way they could.

Setbacks did not dampen the zeal of Father Riedinger, so it is not surprising to read that the next venture to which he gave himself was to erect a private hospital on the convent grounds. He hoped to receive the help of the Sisters of St. Elizabeth of Humboldt as nursing staff, but here he failed. Thus when the

hospital was ready for opening, a lay staff of three with four Ursulines to care for the kitchen, laundry and general maintenance took over. This arrangement continued until 1935 when St. Joseph's Hospital was taken over by the municipality and became a Union Hospital for Prelate and district. With several intervals of opening and closing, this hospital was finally closed in 1968.

A difficult period for all were the years of the Depression. No less was this so for St. Angela's. But this very difficulty proved to be a significant factor in the growth and expansion of the Ursuline apostolate of education. Acute unemployment made it impossible for some Sisters trained in the teaching profession to obtain positions in village schools. Thus the Sisters hearkened to the request from rural school boards south of Prelate, who were unhappy with their English protestant teachers. Rural people had contributed to the welfare of the Sisters during the Depression as well as anyone else. It was not uncommon for parents to pay their children's tuition with farm produce. Their claim to the Sisters held a strong attraction and so with the approval of the clergy and Bishop Villeneuve, O.M.I.,

of the new diocese of Gravelbourg, three schools were accepted in the Rosenthal parish.<sup>28</sup> The vacant rectory became the home for four Sisters, one for each school and a housekeeper. In summer, two or three miles was not too far to walk, nor was it beyond their challenge to drive with horse and buggy, or with a cutter in the winter. School opened March 1, 1932.

The following year seven more Sisters, after completing Teacher Training were sent to the rural schools across the colony. All resided in two-room teacherages which were as necessary an appendage to the school as was the school barn. Each teaching Sister had as a companion either a student Sister or a postulant.

SISTER BENEDICTA GUTENBERG'S DIARY:  
EXCERPTS FROM 1933 AND 1934

Some of the early experiences in the rural schools are aptly expressed in Sister Benedicta's diary: "On March 1, 1933, with a

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<sup>28</sup> The colorful place names of the various communities in the colony indicate from where they came in Russia: Rosenthal, Blumenfeld.

blizzard raging, we motored . . . to the Rosenthal School – a very shabby looking one-room building. .. a good mattress and other bedding had been brought from the Krasna rectory. We lit the coal-oil lamp, unpacked our box of groceries ... and began to prepare supper on a small camp stove 20" high. We stoked it for the night but had to refuel it several times before morning came ...

“My first morning at school ... 45 students, Grades I-VIII .. . no records of any kind ... the children were far below standard. The only textbook ... reader, speller and arithmetic. The last two covered the courses from Grade II-VIII. There were no textbooks for history, geography or science – for history there was an old Britannica reader in a sparse library. The school board supplied exercise books, pencils and erasers.”

These diary excerpts illustrate what was the general atmosphere and condition of the other eleven rural schools staffed by the Ursulines of St. Angela's as well. Perhaps the most painful difficulties cannot be described: such as a promising young Sister of 21 dying of typhoid fever. For people of faith, hardship and heartbreak are viewed with the trust that nothing is without significance and that everything does indeed have its part to play in the great plan of God running through all time. This faith was born out of the simple and strong pioneer trust of their parents and was nurtured by the fearless faith of those who led the early community to maturity and confidence.

What emerges about the kind of women this life style formed is both edifying and inspiring. We see young immigrant women giving themselves energetically to the Ursuline Apostolate among their own people in the rural schools. With imagination and genius they worked to develop their latent talents and abilities in order to be faithful to St. Angela's charism and to reach their students in areas where it most counted: “to educate for life.” Back at the Motherhouse for the weekend they learned from one another the lessons they taught throughout the week.

These early women many of whom are still alive and working energetically today, paved the way for future candidates who have learned that to be an Ursuline Sister of St. Angela's at Prelate is to be totally for God in and among his people. God, who had led his people through the wilderness, cared for them. He brought them to the promised land of Canada and continues to care for them.