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Father Joseph Miller Memoir

M614. Miller, Father Joseph b. 1910

Interview and memoir

1 tape, 24 mins., 9 pp.

GERMAN-AMERICANS PROJECT

Father Joseph Miller recalls his feelings and thoughts regarding World War II, Adolph Hitler, and attitudes toward German-Americans.

Interview by Leslie Leamons, 1972

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Tape also contains Gertrude Schmidt interview

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PREFACE

This manuscript is the product of a tape-recorded interview conducted by Leslie Leamons for the Oral History Office on March 12, 1972.

Daniel Horton edited the transcript.

Father Joseph Miller was born in Illinois in 1910. After completing his education, he studied for the priesthood and has served in several parishes in central Illinois. In 1960 he moved to Springfield, Illinois to serve St. Peter and Paul's Church. As an American of German descent Father Miller was interested in the reactions of Americans to Germany and German-Americans during World War II.

Readers of this oral history memoir should bear in mind that it is a transcript of the spoken word, and that the interviewer, narrator and editor sought to preserve the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. Sangamon State University is not responsible for the factual accuracy of the memoir, nor for views expressed therein; these are for the reader to judge.

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Father Joseph Miller, February 12, 1972, Springfield, Illinois.

Leslie Leamons, Interviewer.

Q. How long have you lived in Springfield?

A. Since September of 1960.

Q. Where did you live before that?

A. Well, I was stationed in Marine, Illinois, a little town about ten miles east of Edwardsville. About 75 miles from here. It is in Madison County.

Q. When did your family come to the U.S.?

A. Well, my mother was born and raised here—name of Grossheim. Her parents came from Europe, from Prussia, I think. My dad came over around 1894 or 1895 from Germany, and I know that they were married in 1898. My oldest brother was born in 1899; he is the only one born in the last century.

Q. What did your father do?

A. He was a glass blower. He learned the trade in Europe. And in that particular time, a lot of the people from Germany and Lithuania and different countries of Europe would—the young men would get out mainly to get out of serving in the army. You had to serve three or four years in the army, and they would go by the underground railroad

and sneak out of Europe and come over to the United States. Now, if they had a trade they didn't have much trouble getting work in the United States, so he had a trade as a glass blower, and he went to Alton, for the simple reason that there was the Owens Illinois Glass Works, one of the biggest in the world at that time. He got a job there and undoubtedly that's where he met my mother, because she was working there. And they got married. His mother was French-- she came from Alsace-Lorraine, from Metz, this was a kind of border line between France and Germany. So he could speak French and German. But they only spoke German together because Mother couldn't speak French.

Q. What are your earliest recollections of Adolph Hitler?

A. Well, after grade school I went to [the] Seminary and I was there from 1924 to 1936. And since I was born in 1910, I must have been around twenty years old when he came into power. Evidently, he came into power around the early 1930's. I don't know exactly when, but in 1933 or 1934. And we went to a rather strict school, so we never got many outside papers. But at that time the school that I went to was a rather German background and the reason I went there was that the tuition was paid for me. My father died in 1924, when I was thirteen years old. It was paid for so I went there, but it had a German background. And they thought, in the beginning, that Hitler was a national leader and that he might reunite the country and get rid of much of the unemployment and get the country back on its feet. Some thought it might be good because the people were sending over all kinds of food, and all kinds of help to Germany because the mark

had gone down to nothing in value. One hundred thousand marks meant nothing because it was just paper money and so they thought, "Well, maybe he could get us back on our feet." That was the beginning.

Q. Do you recall some of the feelings toward Hitler before the war?

A. Well, through the course of the War—around 1938 over there, but we didn't get it until 1940—as time went by then, of course, everybody began to see what Hitler was like. Because he was really bent on not only putting Germany back on its feet, but conquering the world and being another Napoleon and his ideas that the Germans were the elite race and all must be subject to them, the "master race," [and] prejudice and discrimination against the Jews. Of course, we lost hope and trust in him. At least that was our impression there at school that I went to. Then later on—I came out in 1936 and was a priest—well, by that time we—at least I—was entirely disillusioned. Then, when it came to 1938 or 1939, they began to ask for chaplains and every diocese tells you have to volunteer a certain number of priests for chaplains. So I was a young priest and wrote into the bishop, who chose some, and I was not chosen.

Q. Which church were you at, at that time?

A. I was in Taylorville. From 1936 until 1942. And then, in 1942, I went down to Marine, a little German community. It was between Edwardsville and Highland. I was there for eighteen years and then came up here.

Q. What was the attitude of society at large towards you, since you

are of German-American descent, as the War progressed? Could you notice any hard feelings?

A. No, I remember a little bit when I was just a little bit of a kid during World War I. There was a lot of hard feelings. The Germans were looked down upon and mistrusted and all that. As far as I was concerned, I was considered as much American as the next guy because I was born and raised in this country. My mother was born and raised in this country and my father had been dead since 1924. So they didn't seem to associate me with being any more German than the next American citizen was. I guess I was too far removed from my ancestors coming over to this country. Too much Americanized by then.

Q. Did you have any contact with your family in Germany, before the War began?

A. No, I wouldn't have any idea if there are any relatives or anybody living [there]. I don't remember my father ever going back; of course, he died in 1924 when I was thirteen years old, so . . . I don't remember him going back.

Q. Do you remember any mainly German organizations in your area just before or during World War II?

A. There were none down in Marine. I was down in Taylorville a couple of years and there was none in Taylorville; I don't remember any or even hearing of any. Now, in Clinton County there were a lot of Germans and even there you didn't hear of much of these Bunds.

Q. What do you recall about the Bund?

A. I don't recall much about it at all. Just reading about [it] once in a while. I think I would read something about them being active in St. Louis because St. Louis was originally a German city and they had the hall that they would meet in and the German people and things of that sort. But there was no one I knew personally involved in it.

Q. What was your opinion of them?

A. Of course, I was only thirty miles from St. Louis, in Marine, so we would hear a lot about what was going on. We'd get the St. Louis paper and everything.

Q. What was your opinion of the Bund?

A. Well, I didn't think it was big enough or important enough to bother about it. I just thought it was—there will always be people who will be pro-German. And if they're Czechoslovakian, they had their halls down there; they had their Polish halls around East St. Louis, they would gather in. And I just thought it was another nationalistic organization of some kind. They would gather together and sing their German songs and talk German together like the Czechs, or the Poles, have their particular halls. And down in East St. Louis and St. Louis, too, the different nationalities called them . . . the Germans called them Bunds, the others, I guess, called them by their national names. I know that they were being watched, but I don't think it was very serious.

Q. Do you recall any problems of German-Americans in Taylorville?
I believe you said you worked there until 1942.

A. No, there were all kinds of nationalities. It was a coal mining town, Taylorville, and although there were Germans--some of the farmers around there--but not too many. Not too many Germans. It was certainly a mixed nationality; Italians, and there were Lithuanians down there, and the Poles, Czechs. The kind of people who work in the coal mines.

Q. Do you recall anything about the prisoner of war camps in Springfield?

A. No, I don't. I didn't know any existed. Was there one?

Q. Yes, I believe there was, Camp Douglas. Do you recall any Chinese soldiers stationed in the area?

A. No. But I read about the Japanese out in California. And at that time in Hawaii, during the war years, they were kind of being persecuted, and being rounded up and watched. But then later on they went over to Europe and they were evidently some of the best fighters we had. And I guess it was kind of a shameful thing that we did in treating these poor Japanese-Americans. They proved to be . . . oh, I guess there's exceptions to almost any nationality, but they were just loyal Americans, like I guess anybody in this country. And even in Hawaii.

Q. Okay, thank you very much, Father.

END OF TAPE