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E. (Father) Weitzel Memoir

W439. Weitzel, E. (Father) b. 1927

Interview and memoir

1 tape, 20 mins., 8 pp.

GERMAN-AMERICANS PROJECT

Father Weitzel discusses the German-American religious community in Springfield and their feelings toward Germany during WWII.

Interview by Leslie Leamons, 1972

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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 5, 1972.

In this memoir, Father E. Weitzel discusses his feelings toward Germany during World War II. He talks about the German men and Brothers in Springfield and the Bunde organization.

Readers of the 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 E. Weitzel, Springfield, Illinois, March 5, 1972.

Leslie Leamons, Interviewer.

A: . . . and as a consequence the parish gradually begins to move away. German was no longer taught in schools, sermons were given only in English, and other than German people began to move into the parish. So that by, certainly by 1949, after the Second World War, the parish lost completely its national nature, and became a territorial parish open to people of all nationalities. The same was true of St. Peter and Paul's. Neither one of them . . . there are no German national parishes in the diocese of Springfield at the present time.

Now, another institution that had a strong German orientation up until the time of the Second World War was St. John's Hospital. In the earliest days the hospital was, of course, founded and operated and staffed by nuns, by sisters who came from Germany. They came from the northern provinces, I believe, of Germany and they established a, what they call, a province or a territory over here. Their Motherhouse is in Riverton, Illinois. Now, they had a real direct contact with the sisters in Germany. They constantly went over there for more and more vocations down through the years. In the period before the First World War and the period after the war, up until the time of Nazi Germany, and then with the beginning of hostilities with the attack on Poland September 1, 1939, well, there was a cut-off and they were no longer able to communicate with the headquarters of the order of the Franciscans, of the hospital Sisters of St. Francis in Muenster, Germany, which is where they were located. This is where they still are located. So during that time, they stopped then at the beginning of the war, and the beginning of hostilities in 1941; then after that they had to get all their vocations from the United States and no more sisters came over from Germany. As a matter of fact, the sister who was in charge of the whole community at the time that the war started remained in office until the end of the war, because it was impossible to have any kind of communications with the Superior General in Germany.

Actually the Second World War was strongly influential in taking away the German flavor of the community. Although, even if you go out to the Motherhouse now, over at St. John's, there are still a large number of sisters who were born and raised and had their education and even their training in Germany--who still speak the language. And who still go back frequently to visit relatives in Germany, keep up a real active contact with the people over there.

Now, I can remember during the Second World War two things: I was an employee of the hospital at that time. I was a junior in high school at Cathedral Boys' High School and I worked there as an elevator boy. There was one of the nuns there, well a number of the nuns had strong ties and

they would communicate with their families, their relatives back in Germany, and send packages over, foodstuffs and clothing and things like that were shipped in small parcels to relatives in Germany. Frequently there was a sister here from Sacred Heart parish--her name slips my mind, I tried to think of it last night--and I would send, I would do the mailing for her. I'd take the packages down to the post office and mail them. She sent quite a bit of things like coffee, chocolate and clothing that she could garner and send over there. Now, also just about that time a new electronic device called the diathermy machine, a machine that produces internal heat and is used in the, oh, for sprains, for muscle damage and this sort of thing. The diathermy machine as I understand it--now I'm not trying here to be scientific, this is my understanding--can be easily converted into a short-wave radio and so the sisters during the war were subjected, from time to time, to investigations from the Federal Bureau and from other organizations, to keep a constant check on this equipment as to whether or not they were using it to contact people in Germany perhaps to give them information. But I think the sisters proved loyal Americans and didn't do this. So those are my biggest recollections during the war with the organizations that were here.

Also you had, of course, the Franciscan Brothers out at Riverton who run St. James Trade School. Now, this also is a group of brothers that have their foundation in Germany and up until very late, in fact in the late 1950s or early 1960s almost 90 percent or better of their vocations, the ones that they kept, came from Germany and many of the brothers out there, in fact I think German is still very much the language in the house out there. They have a much, much stronger loyalty to Germany and ties with Germany than do the sisters. The sisters, for all practical purposes, have only a kind of a very loose association with the Motherhouse in Germany, but the brothers, I think, still have a strong tie. They are, if you'll pardon the expression, very "Dutchy," still very "Dutchy." I hope they won't mind my putting that on tape. In my estimation, one of the mistakes they made, I think, in coming over here was that they didn't try to Americanize, adopt American ways, and this of course turned a lot of vocations away from over the years because American boys just couldn't take that Prussian type of discipline and the strong German flavor that existed.

Q: What were your feelings for Germany just before the war was declared?

A: I really don't think that I had too many feelings for or against Germany before the war was declared. For several reasons, first of all I was too young and I really wasn't--to use the term that would be acceptable today--politically oriented. I really didn't think in terms of what was happening. I wasn't aware of world situations and the like. I was about a twelve or thirteen-year-old kid and my own home, my own family was not the accumulated power of German families. My father was American-born and really we didn't know the language. My father didn't speak the language, the language was never used in the home. My mother was Irish and we didn't have German food, German styles of food.

Probably about the only thing, we had some of the strictness of my dad but you really couldn't say there was much. My father certainly was not pro-German or anti-German, there just wasn't, it just was not a factor in

our home. So I would say really that I really didn't take on an anti-German sentiment until the beginning of hostilities, December 7, 1941. I think we were led to believe that we were never going to get in the war. The President promised the nation he would not send American boys to fight on foreign soil.

And then, of course, as you can . . . as history records there was a tremendous propaganda program started in our country. And we hated Nazis and we hated the Nisei--the Japanese--we hated the Italians--Mussolini's people, the Fascists--with a passion and there was a great deal of anti-German, anti-Italian, anti-Japanese sentiment in our country and I felt very good about it, I thought this was the way it should be. Hitler was out to conquer the world and we were out to stop him. I have honestly felt that in both world wars, the Germans were wrong; that they made a serious political misjudgment. Unfortunately, we contributed by, I think, not getting into the League of Nations for political reasons under President Wilson when we could have and maybe have made a contribution and maybe have prevented the harshness of the peace terms that Wilson and Orlando and the others, Bosch, worked out. Maybe General Bosch wasn't involved in that but the Four Powers, the Four Allies, I think, really were unfair. I think Germany was mistreated, but I don't think it's because I'm German, I think this is because of the after effects that German people were mistreated after the First World War. And had we given them the kind of peace that we gave Europe after World War II, probably probably it would have prevented the Second World War.

Q: What are your earliest recollections of Germany?

A: My earliest recollections are, I suppose, around 1936 or 1937, and I can only remember these because there was one student in grade school with me whose family had strong German leadings. And of course he would talk about the Bunde and about his grandfather getting German newspapers and about what was happening over there with Hitler. But I suppose that really as far as, well you knew that Hitler had supplanted the President--Von Hindenburg--and Italy, too but I meant to say that my memories, my pre-war memories of Hitler are rather vague. He was kind of a name, it wasn't really until, well until December 7, when we were attacked, well I suppose maybe a little earlier when England was so ferociously attacked in 1940. And I do remember being in the Senate Theatre here in town, I think it was the Senate, I was there for a movie and all of a sudden they stopped the film. They lit up the stage and a man came out on the stage. At that time the big attraction in the United States was the 1939 World's Fair in New York and he announced that they had just dimmed the lights on the Polish pavillion at the New York World's Fair because the German Panzer divisions had just invaded Poland. So I do remember that. But other than that I would have to say rather vague and I'm not really too knowledgeable about Hitler until really we got involved in the war.

Q: You mentioned the Bunde, give your recollections of that organization.

A: Very few. I seem to . . . my thought about this since you mentioned the question the other day, and about the only think I can remember about it is, of course, that they were a group of black-shirted pro-German people. As I remember them of course it was this one young friend of

mine who talked about it a great deal, was kind of the idea was to preserve a spirit of German nationalism in the country: German customs, German newspapers, German habits and also to collect money, I suppose, for the German people. But seeing it as an organization that was kind of a tool of Hitler, and of Nazism, I can't say that I really have that kind of a clear recollection of it. So I have to say not too much, really, just from, almost from this one student, this one young kid I went to grade school with.

Q: You mentioned earlier your feelings, especially earlier in the war, just around December 7, towards Germany when they were attacking. Would you give me some more of your feelings as the war progressed?

A: Well, I'd have to start out by saying that probably because of my upbringing I never really felt any foreign ties. We never considered ourselves--joked about it with my grandparents, my Irish grandparents often remarked about--the German portion of the family and this sort of thing, but nothing really very serious. Like a lot of families I know we were never really, it wasn't instilled into us. We weren't German-Americans, we were simply Americans at home and so we were never as children given any loyalties, never felt that I ever had any special loyalty to Germany or to Ireland, either one, as a matter of fact.

And, there I would say this, that my feelings, as the war went on, were exactly those that the American government wanted us to have. I think there was a great deal of anti-German propaganda which we readily absorbed. We were super-patriotic and I don't think this was bad either. Everyone or almost everyone wanted to go to the defense of this country and I would say this, that these are the people the government kind of told us to hate through their solemn propaganda, through pictures, through news articles, newsreels this sort of thing. I felt very anti-German, very much so. I resented them as a people. I thought they were wrong, I thought they had the Aryan attitude--minority attitude of the super-race was wrong--then of course began to leak out some of the things that they were doing against the Jews on medical experimentation. Of course, the Battle of the Bulge in 1943 and the great loss of American lives and all of these things . . . and to have friends and relatives who were being killed in the war, and of course, you felt like anybody who killed people were near crazy. So I would say that it increased, but again I think all I can say is this, this was not a cultural thing because the German culture was not implanted in our home, it was a propaganda thing that the government had more or less inflicted, not inflicted, I think developed this as a means of really carrying off the war.

Q: Being of German ancestry, the name Weitzel, did you notice any hard feelings toward you during the war?

A: The answer is no. I think that there, for example, we all know what happened to the Japanese-Americans who were placed in concentration camps and were deprived of their property and of certain constitutional rights. Now as far as I can remember, I don't think there was any anti-German sentiment in this area, at least among the people that I associated with. There was none of it that I can remember at, say Cathedral Boys' High School, none of this at all. I think we were all Americans and I would

say in the middle United States, in this area here, probably this kind of thing was at a minimum.

I think that out on the East Coast, of course you have the submarines oftentimes coming in close to the shore and you had people being let out of the submarine for sabotage work at nighttimes. You know, on both the coasts I think there was a great deal of this, but I would say around here that it was probably at its strongest in the First World War. There was a lot of it in the First World War. But to my honest recollection I can't remember, I personally, now there may have been, but I can't recall any. I don't even recall any negative attitude say towards the hospital like a decline in patient level or rejection of the sisters as nurses or even a let-down in the number of students who came to the school of nursing. I just don't recall them, really.

Q: What do you remember about the prisoner of war camp near Springfield?

A: Well, until you mentioned it, I think it was, I had almost forgotten it was here. Only on one occasion can I recall seeing a group of men and as I recall, now this is a way back, this was a long time ago, but I remember people wearing, seemed to me, wearing green uniforms and with a kind of a strip of yellow cloth on their back with letters, three letters in black: P.O.W. And of course as to how long they were there, how many were there, who were in charge of them, what happened to them I really don't know. I think it was, I don't even remember the extent of it that was in the papers in the 1940s or some of the people talked about. I wonder how many people in Springfield were really aware of it. I saw them once and that's about all I can remember.

Q: Do you happen to remember the name of this camp?

A: No.

Q: Do you recall any prominent German-American figures around Springfield between 1939 and 1945?

A: The answer I would have to say if you mean kind of as far as exuding a lot of pro-German attitudes or . . . no?

Q: Just a person who had achieved a certain degree of stature in Springfield.

A: I would say, well, one was a former pastor and I can't remember his name, of St. Peter and Paul's Church, was a well-known leader who was German. There was Father Goff who was the pastor of Sacred Heart Church. In the world of business, well, there was of course the people who ran Reisch Brewery were rather well-known and sold a lot of beer; the gold folks during the war. That's about all I really remember.

Q: Okay, thank you.

End of Tape