

Mrs. Anna Schneider, wife, mother, teacher and refugee

Terrorists, refugee camps, forced emigration, starvation, and narrow bomb escapes- all sound like recent headlines.

But in this case they are part of the life story of Anna Schneider, a former teacher at OLMA who passed away on March 6, 2021. This is a revised copy of an article that appeared in the OLM Parish Newsletter in the spring of 2002, which has been reviewed by her sons, Bernhard and Degenhard, after her death.

Anna arrived in Pearl River, NY in 1953 and relocated to Park Ridge the following year.

Born in Yugoslavia into a comfortable German family (whose roots she traced back to 1796) Anna had fond memories of growing up in a town where Catholics, Lutherans, Jews and Orthodox Christians shared a peaceful existence.

Looking back, Anna remembered her fourth grade teacher, Sister Bernadine, instructing the class to make the sign of the cross when passing a church. "The day may come" she said, "when you may only be able to say a silent, "Jesus, I love You." That day came in 1941 when Germans troops occupied her hometown, now called Zrenjanin.

Her ancestors had originally moved to Yugoslavia from the southwest region of Germany in the Black Forest as the Austro-Hungarian Empire expanded. That experience was to be re-lived by Anna and her family when in 1944 they fled from their home. They left with only one change of clothing and whatever would fit into their knapsacks, certain that they would be returning. For four years they traveled by foot, truck or wagon.

Once they traveled in the coal car of a train, thanks to Anna's mother who had hidden some of her jewelry in the bottom of a cup. Besides several refugee camps, where their daily meal consisted of a cup of coffee, a cup of soup, and one piece of bread, Anna also lived for a time in a barn. Occasionally she was able to work in exchange for a few food stamps. Once, when her brother was caught staring into an orchard, he was beaten severely as a deterrent to stealing. She witnessed horrible sights such as rape and torture, and she herself was almost buried during a bombing.

In 1948, having finally settled in Wessingen in the southern part of Germany, she married Tom Schneider, whom she had met while he was being treated at a veteran's hospital. They were married for 46 years. She and Tom had two boys, and life was often difficult for them. Some members of the family had moved to America in the 1920's and in the 1950's they

sent Anna passenger tickets on the SS United States so that she and her family could join them in New York.

For Anna's husband, who was the town's mayor, it was a difficult decision. However, Anna felt comfortable with the move, despite not knowing how to speak English (perhaps the many American movies she had watched gave her confidence!)

"My earliest memories of America were of all the food in the Pearl River supermarket," Anna recalled. Anna and Tom found jobs, and eventually they both became US citizens. In the evenings they studied English while her mother watched the boys.

One day, after settling in Park Ridge, a neighbor urged Anna to return to teaching since Our Lady of Mercy School was looking for new teachers. After talking with Father Lillis and Sister Mary Ricci, who said "Only God could have sent you here!" Anna was hired to teach first grade.

Anna taught for 23 years and was a member of the parish choir for many years, from the time it was directed by Marie Mulhern.

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May she rest in peace!