THE CONGREGATION DURING THE WORLD WAR II

The first four decades of the 20th century constituted a period of tremendous growth for the Congregation. Unfortunately political unrest was also developing in Germany during this time, which ultimately culminated in World War II. The Sisters in Germany were affected early on by this latest war since Hitler and the Nazi regime closed Catholic schools and restricted the works of clergy and religious Congregations. Correspondence out of Germany was censored by the Nazi government and so the Sisters were compelled to send their communication to the United States through Belgium. In 1940 Germany occupied Belgium and almost all reliable communication between Germany and the United States ceased. Letters from the Mother House in Aachen that did make it to the United States were often coded. Sometimes letters from Germany referred to “night adoration in the basement.” By this the Sisters meant they had spent the night sheltering from air raids. The United States officially entered the war in December 1941, after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. By early 1942 direct communication with Germany was prohibited by the United States government. What little communication the Sisters received was through the Red Cross or U.S. soldiers. Some of these soldiers knew of the Sisters in the United States and therefore recognized the Sisters in Germany by their habits. They tried to send whatever news they could to family in the U.S. who would then send word to the Sisters.

Some Sisters in St. Clare Province in the United States trained as Air Raid Wardens, and Sister Marguerite Held taught Red Cross certified first aid classes.
Food, gasoline, tires, and building materials were rationed in the U.S., and, therefore, many building projects and repairs were put on hold. Sister Bibiana Yost, assistant cook at St. Clare Convent in Cincinnati, was injured while riding in the freight elevator, and the parts to fix the elevator were not available for many more months. A new Novitiate building was planned for St. Anthony Province in the U.S. but could not be built until after the war.

Requests to help the poor continued during the war, even though the complete lack of direct communication with Germany meant Mother General Rufina Thelen could not give her permission to open new foundations. Through the intercession of Cincinnati Archbishop John T. McNicholas, St. Raphael Convent opened in 1942 as a social service center in Hamilton, Ohio.

Red Cross facilitated letter. The Red Cross acted as a neutral party for sending communication between Germany and the United States. These letters, like other communication, were often received months after they were sent.
The building was the former home of the Schroder Family. In January 1943 the Sacred Congregation of Religious postponed the next General Chapter for the duration of the war. Throughout the war the Sisters in the United States followed news reports of the war in Europe. They knew that Aachen and many other cities were under constant attack yet they did not know if the Sisters in Germany were safe. Unfortunately at least 30 Sisters died from injuries received in the bombings and many more fell ill or died because of the lack of food, constant evacuation, and rampant disease in Germany. Only six houses in Europe escaped any damage during the war and twenty were totally destroyed. By the time Aachen was liberated by Allied forces only three sisters remained in the Mother House. The rest, along with most of the city’s residents, had voluntary, then forcibly, evacuated Aachen. Sadly during this time Mother Rufina Thelen died on March 17, 1944. The Sisters in the United States did not learn of her death until September 8. They assumed First Counselor Sister Siegfrieda Beule was acting Vicar General but on September 30 learned that just before her death Mother Rufina had instead appointed Sister Maria Victoria von Brentano. The end of the war in 1945 brought much rejoicing but also much sorrow as the Sisters in the United States finally began to learn the full extent of the suffering their Sisters in Germany and Belgium had live through.

Letter from Harry Korte, brother of Sister Ephrem Korte. Harry Korte was the first person to notify the Congregation in the United States of Mother Rufina’s death. He shared news from Sister Ephrem whenever he could.