

Sister Mary Berenice Petrauskas, OSF

Born: March 14, 1930

Entered our community: September 8, 1951

Returned to God: April 10, 2019

Sometimes when we want to tell the story of our sister's life and ministry for her Wake Reflection, we are blessed if she followed the community's requests to write her autobiography and vocation story. For our good and faithful Sister Mary Berenice we are truly blessed for these documents were found in her file:

- 1980 My Trip to Lithuania: her detailed story of nine days visiting her uncles Stanley and Frank and cousins with the opportunity to visit other family and her former homestead and schools. Hopefully Berenice shared this momentous trip with our sisters on her return.
- 1990 Friday's Child (her first attempt at her life story which she promised she would write.) The reference, we assume, is from: "Monday's child is fair of face, Tuesday' child is full of grace . . . *Friday's child is loving and giving*, Saturday's child works hard for a living. . . ."
- 2001 A list of "What I do as a clerical assistant" - 25 items ending with: "I love my work. It keeps me busy and very happy."
- 2003 My Vocation Story: Her uncle Fr. Joe greatly influenced her decision but prayer was "the love of my life. The convent was a natural thing to do to stay close to God. This life is just right for me. I thank God for my vocation."
- 2005 Her letter to the President of Lithuanian pleading for one of her Lithuanian cousins who should have inherited her father's farm which had been confiscated by the Communists. In her autobiography Sister Berenice wrote that she met this cousin, her husband and baby in 1980 when she visited Lithuania.
- 2011 My Autobiography – This truly tells her story.

Let us begin quoting a combination of Sister Berenice's two autobiographies:

"I am Sister M. Berenice Petrauskas. I was born and raised in Lithuania until we had to flee the Communists on October 7, 1944 and land in Bavaria, Germany. My father's name was Norbertas Petrauskas and my mother's name was Vladislova Dakineviciute Petrauskiene. There are four girls in our family: Hedwig (Hedy), Grazina, Regina and Irena. I was Grazina. Irena died as an infant. I was born March 14, 1930 in Rinkavos Dvaras, maternal grandmother's estate in the southern part of Lithuania.

We lived for sometime on our dad's farm until it went bankrupt. Then our maternal grandmother invited our dad to be her farm manager. Her husband was killed by the Bolsheviks in 1920 and she remained a widow until her death at the age of 93. My life on the farm was very busy, but fortunate – good food, clean environment, fun-loving sisters, doting grandmother and concerned parents.

I attended elementary school for four years and after passing the required examination I was promoted to the first class in the secondary school. I joined my older sister, Hedy. We boarded during the school year with a reputable family.

We lived with our grandmother until the summer of 1943. When our mother died on Good Friday, April 23rd, our uncle priest, Father Joseph Dakinevicius took us to his parish because the Russians were passing through Lithuania for the second time. Young girls were mistreated by both ‘butcher’ armies, which passed through Lithuania during WWII.

The summer of 1944 was pivotal for us. We dried bread and made quick plans to escape the returning Red Army. The defeated German army was returning to their Deutschland. Packing the wagon with essentials, Uncle Joe, a friend and the three of us drove out amidst fierce gunfire. We headed toward Germany by way of Klaipeda.

When we reached Prussia we witnessed the horrors of war. Injured animals bleating from pain and immobility, lavish homes evacuated and left empty and meticulous farms were abandoned. In Konigsberg our horses and wagon were taken away by the Gestapo SS men. Taking the first-class train across Germany we arrived safely in Bavaria. As we rode we saw the demolition of many railroad stations. The bombarded burning cities looked like lit Christmas trees to me.

In the Swiss Alps there is a calm village of Pfeffenhausen. Here an elderly but congenial pastor welcomed us. What a relief! Also, what an act of God’s providence. His assistant had just passed away and had left a beautifully furnished two-story house for us to occupy. We lived in it for over two years. A Catholic teacher, barred from teaching in the public school by the Nazis, came to tutor us all.

In Germany we lived until 1947 when a group of Lithuanian ‘orphans’ were permitted to leave for America. I do not consider myself an orphan because our dad became a freedom fighter and he was killed by the Russians while crossing our longest river in the summer of 1947.

We arrived in Bronx NY and after a few weeks in Yonkers we arrived in Pittsburgh where Mother M. David received us. We then found ourselves in St. Francis Academy. All three of us graduated from the Academy. After my graduation I entered the convent on September 8, 1951. Sister M. Loyola received me into the community. Sister M. Gertrude was our mistress of novices. There were ten of us. Now only three are remaining.

I obtained two degrees – Bachelor and Masters of Elementary Education from Duquesne University. In 1983 I pursued the science of computers at Point Park College at Sister Marian’s suggestion which I greatly appreciated.

I loved to work. I was a teacher of grades 1 through 6 for 29 years and taught CCD for 16 years. My favorite pastime was playing Scrabble with the sisters. My most sorrowful time was when our Uncle Joe died and later my dear sister, Regina. The most joyous moment was when Sister M. Virginia permitted me to go to Lithuania in 1980. There I visited Uncle Stanley and Uncle Frank, my mother’s brothers. Uncle Stanley, a physician, spent over ten years in Siberia and is my godfather.

I worked in the motherhouse kitchen, laundry, was sacristan and a receptionist until I became a clerical aide in South Catholic High School on the South Side and two years in our St. Francis Academy office. Since 1988 I continued my duties as a clerical aide to the Administration at our Motherhouse.

My secret wish is to write a book and title it ‘HOPE.’ The rich experiences of my long life are recorded in my ‘memory disk.’ As soon as our General Superior grants me some time off I’ll begin to write.

Prayer, work, religion and politics were my favorite topics of discussion with anyone who wanted to hear it. All I can say is ‘Bless the Lord for all the good He has done for me.’ I loved being a sister.”

Thus ends Sister Berenice’s story in her words. It is difficult to add other words to her short terse sentences. We all loved Berenice and somehow knew she took great pleasure in her strong political views which were sometimes opposite ours. We truly valued her clerical skills. Even Dennis Wodzinski, our former archivist, wrote: “Our Archives are full of documents prepared by her hands and the various office machinery that she mastered over the years.”

In 2011 Sister Berenice began to have some health concerns and worked part time on her clerical duties at the motherhouse. When she moved to Westminster Place with our other sisters in 2014 she made fun of the little kitchenette in her room and asked the staff to get rid of the microwave. She had little use for the mini-fridge. Her room was always emptied of excess “anything.” But she did love those butterscotch candies and always needed a giant supply of them.

Sister Berenice’s Paschal Mystery of suffering was constant back pain and a failing body but she was always happy to let us know she got her “opioids” for the pain. She seemed happy to just live in her room and on her floor, still doing her own laundry but letting the staff take care of her dresses. She would often remark “You’re so funny” when sisters teased her. It is not surprising that, just last Tuesday when we visited her and she was told that she must cross a bridge alone but Jesus is waiting for her on the other side, her response was “You are **so** funny!” Could it be she really knew God would call her later that night?

Sister Berenice had experienced much suffering in her early life and maybe the bridge to Jesus was funny to her since she also had experienced God’s providential care many times during her 89 years. We can just imagine she has begun that book called HOPE since her final General Superior, Jesus, is giving her lots of time off to do it!

Eternal rest to you, dear Sister Berenice. We will miss you. Be at peace.

-Written by Sister M. Berenice Petrauskas
- Compiled by Sister Peg Markey