

## **A Short Sketch of My Years before Coming to Canada**

I was born on June 1, 1881 at Popielow, district of Opole, province of Silesia, as the eleventh and last child of Paul Sylla and Anna Bautsch. At the time of my birth, Silesia was a province of Prussia - Germany, but my village was all Polish. I was baptized on June 4, 1881 in the old, small church of Popielow, and received the name Anthony of Padua. On April 1, 1887, I began the village Catholic School where I completed all eight elementary classes on March 30, 1895. From the school we walked two by two to the nearby church to assist at Mass at 6:00 a.m. Classes started at 7:00 a.m. and lasted only during the forenoon, in order that the children might help their parents in the afternoon. In the summer I walked to school barefoot, like all the other children. At school I learned German. The use of the Polish language was not allowed, whilst at home we always spoke Polish. I could speak and read Polish but not write. If the teacher heard or found out that a child spoke Polish, the child was punished by strikes on the hand with a bamboo stick. However, all church services were conducted in Polish, except for a few sermons a year which were in German. I received my First Holy Communion in my twelfth year. I was not a regular altar boy because I lived too far from the church.

From my early childhood I had the feeling to become a priest. I made a chasuble out of paper and other objects which are used at Mass and I said a kind of a Mass, such as I was able to. To make incense, I spread flour over hot coals in a censer made of a small tin can. In our garden there was a wayside shrine with a picture of The Sacred Heart. I used to decorate it with flowers, pray and sing in front of it. Quite often, I was interrupted by a passerby, at whose approach I ran away. In the early winter of 1894, a certain Lay Brother, Michael Pawolek, who had joined the Oblates in western Germany whilst he was working there, came to visit his family in Popielow. He inspired his nephews, John and Francis Pawolek to go to the Oblate College in Valkenburg, Holland. I became acquainted with this Lay Brother and the Pawolek brothers and volunteered to go with them. I applied for acceptance at the St. Charles Oblate College [juniorate] at Valkenburg, Holland, for the school year starting in the fall of 1895, but my application was accepted only for the following year, 1896. In the meantime, I was joined by one of my friends, Richard Gawlitta, who later became a Salesian priest. I graduated from the College in the early summer of 1902, after six years of studies. I had started the College with 42 co-students, out of whom only twelve were ordained priests.

I decided to join the congregation of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate and started my novitiate on August 14, 1902 in St. Gerlach, Houten, which was located very far from St. Charles College. After one year at novitiate, I was sent to Hunfeld, near Fulda, Germany, to start my Seminary [Scholasticate], located at the St. Boniface Monastery, which comprised two years of philosophy and four years of

theology. After the first year of philosophy, I made my perpetual vows on August 15, 1904, in the Congregation of the Oblates. I also belonged to the St. Luke Academy whose aim was to teach and practise the art of painting and photography. On the feast of St. Luke we had an exposition of our paintings, mostly crayon sketches and water-colours.

In my third year of theology, I was ordained a priest by the Bishop of Fulda, Joseph Damianus on May 28, 1908. My first Mass celebration at home was on the day of St. Mary Magdalene, on July 22, 1908. Before the Mass, my dear old mother came to the parish house, and I knelt before her to receive her blessing. That day the weather was dull and rainy. Fr. Neutwig, a parish priest in Popielow, under whose guidance I had prepared myself for the juniorate in Valkenburg, was not present, but later he wrote me a letter which read: "The rain is a symbol of God's blessing. The fact that it was raining on the day of your first Mass was a sign that God's Blessing will accompany your future work."

In July 1909, I graduated from the Seminary [Scholasticate] at Hunfeld, Germany, and received my call for Canada.

## **My Call to Canada**

Toward the end of my Scholasticate in Hunfeld, near Fulda, Germany, all graduates, to whom I also belonged, were anxiously waiting for the order (“Obedience”) from Rome in which the Superior General of the Oblates would tell us to what missionary work each of us would be assigned. About July 15, 1909, the closing time of the scholastic year, one by one we were called into the office of Father Superior to receive the Obedience which had been issued on June 22, 1909. All the Fathers and Brothers (seminarians) waited outside in the courtyard to shower us with their congratulations and best wishes for our future missionary work. My assignment was to join the Vicariate of Alberta-Saskatchewan, Canada.

Each of the graduating group got ready to go home to say good-bye to his family and friends. On the eve of our departure, we convened in the convent church in order to receive the Apostolic Mandate of the Church with her blessing and to dedicate ourselves to the work assigned to us under the protection of the Immaculate Virgin Mary. As a response to our dedication, every member of the community approached the altar and kissed the feet of all of us who had been assigned to missions in foreign lands. After this ceremony, each of us took a train bound for home, leaving it to the house management at Hunfeld to arrange for our transportation and passage overseas.

I stayed at home until the middle of September 1909 visiting all my brothers and sisters and friends and finally to bid them good-bye. Although my vacation lasted two months, it seemed to be too short. The time soon approached to leave home and everything that was dear to me. My brothers, Robert and Paul, together with my dear mother, brought me in a buggy to the nearest station of Lowen (Polish Lwowek), a two-hour ride. As we stood on the station platform exchanging a few last words, we heard the whistle of the approaching locomotive and soon the train stopped at the station. A last handshake with my dear mother and brothers and I boarded the train as it slowly started to move. I looked out the window and saw the sad look on my mother’s face, I could sense that she was heartbroken, and I waved to her. It was our last farewell in this world. She died during my third year in Canada.

From Lowen, I traveled to Breslau (Wroclaw) and then across Germany, to Hunfeld. There, I met Missionary Oblates Frs. Joseph Schuster, Joseph Guth and Franz-Xavier Rapp, with whom I would be traveling overseas from Hamburg, Germany to New York on the steamer S/S Cleveland of the Hamburg-America Line. The ship made stops at Southampton, England and Cherbourg, France. During the crossing of the Atlantic, I was very sick for three days. Lying in the stuffy cabin with a badly upset stomach, I thought that even in purgatory it could not be worse. At last, we landed in New York, USA, in the port division of Hoboken, New Jersey. We

arrived in the morning of Holy Rosary Sunday, October 4, 1909, but were not allowed to leave the ship until the early hours of the afternoon.

What a thrill it was to set foot on the American continent for the first time! A stream of people was moving from the ship and dispersing on the platform, meeting relatives and friends or looking to claim their luggage. In this noise, the English language sounded everywhere, but I could not understand a word. I did not expect it to be so because I had studied English at the seminary in Hunfeld with Fr. John Wallenborn OMI, as well as on the ship, but it apparently did not help me to understand it now, the pronunciation of words being quite different. We were happy when a representation of the “Raphaels Verein” loomed on the scene. This German association was taking care of the immigrants from Germany. Before we sailed overseas, it was notified of our arrival in New York. Its agent spoke German with us and gave us many helpful hints. He helped us to retrieve our luggage from the ship and dispatch it to Winnipeg. He arranged for our transportation and traveled with us to the “Leo House” in New York, which was a quasi-hotel for traveling clergy.

We took the underground railway from Hoboken to New York, which sped along with lightning speed. Seated comfortably, I kept looking at the passengers. I was quite taken aback to see men who were dressed like perfect gentlemen, chewing gum, a habit considered very unbecoming in Germany.

After we settled down in the “Leo House”, we were eager to leave and do some sightseeing. And surely there were many things to be seen in New York. Our first walk was to St. Patrick Cathedral, a beautiful church in Gothic style. At the time we entered it, a priest was saying the Rosary from the pulpit in English, of which I did not catch a word for he was reciting it too fast. The recitation of the Rosary was followed by Benediction of the Most Blessed Sacrament. During the service, a collection plate was passed around. Not knowing the American customs, we abstained from showing our generosity.

Fr. Joseph Guth had close relatives in New York, the Hellinghausen family. After he located them, he brought us the good news that we were all invited to come and stay with this family. We were fortunate to be able to say Mass at Holy Family Church to which that good family belonged. Two of their sons were kind enough to show us some of the attractions of New York: many churches, parks, skyscrapers, museums, etc. We enjoyed our stay in the American metropolis, but Canada, not the United States, was our destination. Therefore, we expressed heartfelt thanks to the kind family for the friendship they extended to us and went to the railway station, whence we traveled through Syracuse and Buffalo to Toronto. We liked the American and Canadian coaches; they were like halls where one could walk up and down the aisle, more so than the coaches in the old country which divided into small compartments

for six to eight persons. One conductor amused me, when, on our approach to Syracuse, he stood in the centre of the coach and shouted very solemnly: "The next station is Syracuse." In the old country this was unheard of. It seemed to me to be a strange novelty to have advertisement posters of a variety of wording and shape posted along the railway line, something one did not see in the old country (Germany). When we stopped in Buffalo, we experienced the first wet snowfall which was weighing very heavily on the still green tree branches. After a short visit to the Missionary Oblate Fathers, where Fr. Michael Fallon OMI was Provincial Superior (later on he became Bishop of London, Ontario), we headed for Toronto and Winnipeg. Our meals in the dining car were limited in choice as we did not understand the words on the menu such as "French-fried potatoes", for example, which were a part of every meal. The partly wooded and partly stony stretches of Western Ontario made a gloomy impression on us. After having passed through the bleak part of that province, a new view opened itself to the wide plains of Manitoba which were dotted with busy villages and towns, amongst them Winnipeg, our destination.

At the CPR station in Winnipeg we were greeted by the Polish Fathers who were in charge of Holy Ghost Church on Selkirk Avenue. Here in Winnipeg, the "divisio Apostolorum" took place. I stayed at the Holy Ghost Parish while Frs. J. Schuster, J. Guth and Franz-Xavier Rapp stayed at the German Holy Family Church on College Avenue. From Winnipeg, at a convenient time, each of us took a train for his final destination - Fr. F. Rapp for Regina, Fr. J. Guth for St. Joseph's colony and Fr. J. Schuster for Prince Rupert.

In order to find out which mission or parish in the Vicariate of Alberta-Saskatchewan to which I would be assigned, I wrote to my Provincial Superior, Fr. Henri Grandin OMI, nephew of Bishop Vital Grandin OMI, who at that time, September 1909, was in Quebec City, taking part in the all-Canada Synod. His answer was: "Go to Banff, Alta. Fr. Hubert Hermes is your local Superior." I stayed in Winnipeg for two more weeks, enjoying the hospitality of Fr. Charles Groetschel OMI, a Moravian who had arrived in Canada in 1901 as parish priest and superior of Holy Ghost Parish. As we were in the month of October, dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary Queen of the Holy Rosary, I often led the evening service in the church, reciting the Rosary at the Grotto and giving the Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament at the high altar. The Grotto of Our Blessed Lady of Lourdes was on the left side of the church, facing the congregation.

The bitter Canadian winter was slowly approaching. It was frosty, and a cold wind blew over the wide plains of Manitoba. I desperately needed some warm clothes. Fr. Francis Kowalski OMI, the assistant to Fr. Charles Groetschel OMI, went with me to different stores to buy me a good fur coat and other winter apparel so that I would be

prepared to withstand the Canadian winter.

At last, after all preparations were made and goodbyes exchanged, I took the CPR train for Banff, Alberta. Before boarding the train, the Fathers of Holy Ghost Church sent a telegram to Fr. Hubert Hermes OMI announcing my arrival. My train crossed the southern part of the Canadian Prairies covered with light snow and, as we passed through many villages and towns, large piles of straw could be seen on the fields, a sign of a rich grain crop that has been threshed in late fall. At the station of Regina I was glad to see once again Fr. Franz Rapp OMI, my traveling companion to Winnipeg, who had come with his superior, Fr. August Suffa OMI and other Fathers to meet me. Fr. Suffa and other Oblates were in charge of St. Mary's Parish in Regina. After a short exchange with Fr. Rapp of our impressions of this new land, the train conductor shouted "All aboard!" and the locomotive began to move toward Calgary, continuing its trek across the wide stretch of prairie land.

In the evening when I arrived at Calgary, I was confused as to what section of the train I should go. When traffic was heavy, the trains split into two sections for the journey through the mountains to Vancouver. Not being aware of this and not understanding English, I wanted to board the front section which turned out to be not the right one according to my ticket. The conductor was kind enough to lead me to the rear section, assuring me that I would reach my destination. The train sped along during the night through the foothills of the mighty Rocky Mountains. A full moon lit up the countryside so that through the window I could see the hills and the snow-covered mountains. I was told that Banff was right in the mountains, but where was it? Would the train stop there? Would the conductor tell me that I have reached my destination? Midnight had passed and a deep silence invaded the coach. The train crew, having nothing to do, sat quietly and dozed. Lights were dimmed and some of the passengers stretched themselves out on the seats and continued their slumber. The shriek echo of the train whistle, boosted by its frequency, enhanced my anxiety about the arrival at my destination, when suddenly there I was finally at Banff, eighty miles west of Calgary, and not aware of it at all. The train was stopped for a while but I was still in the mood to continue my journey to Banff, my final destination. Suddenly, Fr. William Brabender OMI showed up in the coach and shouted excitedly: "Hurry up, Father Sylla, come out of the train. You're at Banff." Quickly, I grabbed my satchel and landed on the platform of the rustic station of Banff. Soon the train continued to move and head for Vancouver.

Fr. William Brabender, who at that time was holidaying in Banff, knew that I was coming. Fr. Hubert Hermes OMI, who was in charge of Banff and district, had earlier received the telegram from Winnipeg saying that I would arrive in Banff on October 28, 1909 in the morning. He had, however, received a sick call and asked Fr. Brabender to meet me at the station. I knew Fr. Brabender well from Hunfeld,

Germany, where we spent our seminary years together. How happy I was to see him! Now, I could speak to someone with whom there was mutual understanding..

During those final hours of my lonely train ride, I had tried to have a glance at my future home town: high mountains, all around, their crests covered with snow, a house here and there, hidden in between the trees. “Where is the monastery in which I will live abide? Where is the church where I will offer Mass and preach God’s Word?” I asked Fr. Brabender these questions when we were walking along a path from the station, on the road leading to Banff. Not knowing Canada, flights of my imagination drew for me pictures of grand Oblate institutions and the fine churches of Europe. What a disappointment it was when Fr. Brabender led me to a two-room cottage and said: “This is our rectory.” The rooms we entered were cold, the bed was not made, the floor needed sweeping and papers and books lay all around. “Now, Sylla,” said Fr. Brabender, “we have to make fire in this little stove. You take the ashes out and I’ll get some kindling ready.” I looked into the little stove; it was full of ashes. To clean the stove and carry the ashes out was the initiation into my missionary life in Canada. Soon, the small room became comfortably warm. “Where are we going to say Mass?” “Here, in this church,” was Fr. Brabender’s answer. This little log church, covered with siding outside and V-joints inside, built by the Oblate Lay Brothers, was far from the poorest church in Germany or Poland, but such was the House of God in the pioneering times of Canada. After Mass, I questioned Father again: “Where are we going to have our breakfast?” In regular rectories and convents, breakfast was served at a certain hour in a friendly dining room. “Come along with me, and we’ll get something to eat.” We walked along the main street of the small town of Banff and reached the King Edward Hotel. Here I would have my meals whenever I happened to be in Banff.

In the afternoon of October 28, 1909, Fr. Hubert Hermes OMI returned to Banff from a sick-call. He welcomed me as his co-missionary and advised me about my future work. I was to be his co-missionary for Polish, Slovak and all Slav people who lived in Canmore, Bankhead, Exshaw and all along the CPR line from Calgary to Laggan (later called Lake Louise). With the passage of time my missionary work extended to Calgary, Lethbridge and all points in southern Alberta, where Polish or Slavic people could be found.

My first look at Canmore would occur on the following Sunday, October 30<sup>th</sup>. In order to make preparations for my arrival, Fr. Hermes left Banff for Canmore on the morning train on Saturday, October 29<sup>th</sup>. He cleaned up the so-called rectory and bought a stove for its living room. He stayed in Canmore till I would come there on Sunday morning, October 30<sup>th</sup>. Before leaving Banff, Fr. Hermes bought a ticket for me and instructed me to go to the Banff station, board the train and get off at Canmore, two stops east of Banff, and meet him at the church.