

The exhibit of the Sisters of Notre Dame was highly commended and at the close of the Fair, which lasted six months, a diploma and medal were awarded to fifteen of our houses in Massachusetts, Lowell's parish and day schools being among the favored ones. *St. Columba, St. Columbus, St. Columella, and St. Colum.*

Annals from the Archives

“War and War and War” Sr. Julie de la Sainte Famille’s (1873-1958) World War II Letters

Motherhouse of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, after the 1940 bombing
snnenheritagecentre.org



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—When Sr. Julie de la Ste. Famille was elected to serve as one of General Councillors in Namur, Belgium for the Sisters of Notre Dame in May 1938 at the age of 65, she surely had a good idea of the possibilities that lay ahead. With Belgium located directly to the west of Germany, danger was less than 400 miles away. Only two months before, Austria had been annexed to Germany and tensions were high in Belgium. The Belgian people had suffered terribly under German occupation during the First World War. Fearing another war was unavoidable and desperate to protect his people, King Leopold III of Belgium proclaimed the country neutral in 1936. Unfortunately it did not prevent the German invasion in May of 1940, nor the over four years of occupation that followed.

As a member of the Sisters of Notre Dame General Council, Sr. Julie’s work involved assisting the Congregation’s Superior, Sr. Monica of the Passion, in many ways. One of her duties was to write letters from Sr. Monica to the American congregation of Notre Dame sisters during a crucial time in world history. And because Sr. Julie’s roots originated in Boston, her personal letters to her family are valuable part of the Boston/Ipswich archives. Both collections of letters—the ones written in her official capacity as General Councillor and the more intimate ones to her family—offer an insight into a time that is almost out of memory for most of the people today.

Sr. Julie de la Ste. Famille was born Julia Christina Chisholm in Cambridge, MA on November 5, 1873, the daughter of Colin (1840-1902) and Catherine T. (Carroll) Chisholm (1853-1916). She was named after her grandmother, Julia (O’Bryan) Carroll, a name that her cousin, Clare, took when she entered the Sisters of Notre Dame 20 years later as Sister Loretto Julia Carroll. Julia Chisholm was the oldest in the family and the only daughter. She had four younger brothers, Joseph, William, Colin and Donald. In 1897, at the age of 24, Julia entered the Sisters of Notre Dame and a couple of months later was sent to Namur for her novitiate as Sister Julie de la Sainte Famille [Julie of the Holy Family]. Because of her age, it’s most likely that she had already completed college. She began teaching English at Trinity College in Washington, D.C. in 1901 and remained there until 1922 when she returned to Boston to teach both English and Logic at Emmanuel College. She stayed until 1929, went back to Trinity until 1931 when she was named the President at Emmanuel. In 1934, she returned once again to Trinity to teach until her election as General Councillor in 1938. No doubt, Trinity College felt the loss as Sr. Julie “symbolized the best of English teaching at Trinity College.” [Mullaly, [Trinity College, The First Eighty Years.](#)]

The first letter found in Sr. Julie’s personal correspondence housed in the archives was written from the Motherhouse in Namur on October 6, 1939 and addressed *To Old and Young Folks at Home*. After telling her family that “*our letters are just as likely to go to the bottom of the sea than reach their destination,*” she says that “*we have passed some anxious days here. . . all kinds of things have been packed up and placed where we hope they will be safe, but no one knows whether a place is safe or not. . .*” Though she doesn’t mention it by name, one of the valuables that were hidden by the Sisters in 1939 and kept from destruction when Namur was bombed in 1940 was the Treasure of Oignies, a collection of 50 pieces of silver and gold created in the 13th century. “*From the first, we have been told that Liege and Namur are very dangerous places, especially as both are fortified cities.*” A month later, she penned an official letter to the congregation telling the sisters that “*the Belgian army is still guarding the frontier. . . there are a million men under arms in a total population of 8,200,000.*”

Julie's most frequent correspondent in her family was her brother Joseph's wife, Ruth. "You cannot image what a joy it was for me when I came up to our room after breakfast to find your letter in the letter-box at the door." She went onto assure her sister-in-law that food remained plentiful and life continued as normally as possible. "I could never tell you how good everybody is to me here. The Belgians are such a home-loving people, and so devoted to their country that they regard my staying here as nothing short of heroic. I was happy at Christmas-time to have some of the Belgian Superiors write to me that my willingness to remain here had strengthened the courage of many sisters who were nearly sick with fear of the war. . . the stories they tell of what happened [during WWI]. . . is enough to chill the blood in your veins. Another thing that makes their position different from mine is that their brothers and nephews are all in the army. . . "

On Pentecost, May 12, 1940, the day before Namur was bombed, Julie wrote to Joseph and Ruth from Brussels after an unsuccessful attempt to return to the Motherhouse. In her next letter to Joseph and Ruth written on August 21, 1940, she said, "you have probably heard of my safety through Sister Loretta Julia, and heard also of the great loss that has come to our Congregation in the destruction of our Motherhouse. I had a feeling all along that the place would be destroyed, and that was why I sent letters and various things home to be cared for. . . I cannot tell you how I loved that dear old Maison Mère and all the memories it enshrined! We are all trying to make our sacrifices generously, thanking God that no lives were lost there."

No doubt, her family continued to live in fear for her safety. She also worried about them. Her youngest brother Donald, a Maryknoll missionary, had been sent to Chuwa, Nepal, not long after Nepal declared war on Germany. "I have heard nothing from Donald since he wrote to me of his change of address. He was reappointed to the place where he was first pastor, and which he liked so much—Chuwa. I have written almost every month; but I have no indication that he received any of the mail I sent." She also wrote to Joseph and Ruth of her worry for them on November 22, 1940. "I need to tell you how I long to have some news of you and the children. Nothing has come since I received Betty's French letter at the end of April. I am anxious lest you are not well, the two of you. And I wonder if Colin will be included in the summons to military training, and if Betty is still at Tyngsboro and if this is Katherine's year to graduate—and oh! so many other things!" Her fear for Joseph's health was real enough. He died in 1945. Julie never had the chance to see him again.

It seems that Sr. Julie's attempts to get other letters through during the German occupation between 1941 and 1944 failed. She finally succeeded in 1944 by sending small postal cards to her family. "The change of address is due to the fact that our temporary convent on Rue Pepin is now, like our old home on Rue Julie Billiard, a mass of ruins. Six of our dear Sisters were killed when the chapel collapsed as a result of bombardment on August 18. The others who were injured have recovered. . . . The sorrow of our loss mingled with the joy of our liberation. Our soldiers have made a splendid impression by their discipline, their efficiency and their friendliness. One of them came to see me some days ago—the brother of Sister Claire Loretto."

Sr. Julie left Brussels on June 30, 1946 and visited family and friends at Emmanuel during that summer. It must have been a bittersweet reunion, with one brother gone and everyone changed forever. She returned to Emmanuel in 1949. In 1954, while still at Emmanuel, she finished writing History of the Rules and Constitutions of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur. Sr. Julie de la Sainte Famille died in Worcester, MA on March 12, 1958.

To view more of Sister Julie's personal letters, go to <http://boiparchives.omeka.net/collections/show/3>

Sr. Julie's
Dec. 1, 1944 letter
to her family in
Massachusetts

December 1, 1944
All my dear ones:
Ten minutes ago I learned that postal cards may be sent to the United States, and my very first one is to you. The joy that I should naturally feel in being able to write to you again is mingled with a fear that had been growing in my heart for months that some sorrow has befallen you. God grant that I am mistaken and that you can soon tell me that you are all well. A person unknown to me brought a message here two weeks ago that my nephew was at a college about twenty miles from here and asked for three rosaries. I sent the rosaries and a letter but heard nothing further. My inquiries were all fruitless. You understand how fully I share your anxiety, and how much it would have meant to me and to you all if I could have seen him. You will notice my change of address. You have probably heard that our convent was destroyed. I was not hurt at all, but six of our dear Sisters were buried beneath the ruins of the chapel. Damage is near us all the time, but I have never regretted staying here. My prayers and all the wishes of my heart go each and all of you especially at Christmas. Give my love to Colin. Your loving Sister Julie SSND.

Sources consulted for this article

- ◆ Sr. Julie de la Sainte Famille Letters, 1939-1944.
- ◆ SND Correspondence, 1842-1958.
- ◆ Trinity College, Washington, D.C.: The First Eighty Years, 1897-1977. By Sr. Columba Mullaly, 1987.
- ◆ Sisters of Notre Dame Entrance Records, 1877-1973.
- ◆ Ancestry.com
- ◆ The Treasure of Oignies. King Baudouin Foundation, 2013.

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