

Interview with Belvina Koehler
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Interviewed by John LeDoux and Jane Schutz

LeDoux: Okay, we're talking now with, is it Mrs. Vina Koehler?

Koehler: Yeah, Belvina. But they all call me Vinnie.

LeDoux: Okay. Could you spell your first name for us please?

Koehler: B-E-L-V-I-N-A.

LeDoux: Okay. For the record could we have the date of your birth?

Koehler: October 30, 1896.

LeDoux: Okay.

Koehler: 1896 I was born.

LeDoux: Okay. Can I ask where—were your parents born in this country?

Koehler: No, my father was Norwegian. He came from Norway when he was 19 years old. My mother was born down in Dayton here. And my grandfather had a brickyard where they made brick and my father got to working there and he met my mother and they were married. There's my parents up there.

LeDoux: Oh, uh, huh. Can I ask you, what was your mother's maiden name?

Koehler: Vasser.

LeDoux: Vasser, uh huh. Do you recall what area of Norway your father was from?

Koehler: Bergen.

LeDoux: Bergen. He was from the town of Bergen then.

Koehler: Yeah.

LeDoux: Uh, let's see now you grew up then where?

Koehler: Two and a half miles from Elk River. My father and mother married, they bought eighty acres of land out there and they built a little house on it and started farming. And my dad used to go, if you remember they used to have these farmers institutes in the wintertime and he always went to all of those and took the farm paper and he got to be a very good farmer. Because he bought another hundred and sixty acres – went this way and then forty went that way. So then we had 240 acres of land.

LeDoux: Oh.

Koehler: I had four brothers. Two brothers older than I was and two brothers younger and then – then we had another – I had one sister and a brother younger than I was. And we all worked on the farm together. There was no fooling around or playing all the time you know. You – so when I was married – we lived just across the border from Sherburne County and Anoka County. That's my husband's picture here on this little one this side. That's the Holzems. And then my husband died. And Mr. Koehler's wife died and we were married and we thought we'd get married and we could be together, wouldn't be alone, but he's been gone now seven years, and I'm alone anyway. But--

LeDoux: Uh, huh.

Schutz: Uh, huh.

LeDoux: Did you go to a country school then?

Koehler: No.

LeDoux: Out in the country? You went to the school in Elk River?

Koehler: Elk River. I went through the eighth grade and when my brother Elmer was born, I stayed home to help out at home and he was born the 11th of November and I – I couldn't get back to school till I was – till January and then I wouldn't go back because I had started the first grade and I could never make up two – two months' work, you know, so I just stayed home and got passed the eighth grade. I don't know if it would have helped me an awful lot if I had learned algebra and some of that other stuff. If it would have made me any better farmer or gardener.

LeDoux: Uh huh.

Schutz: Uh, huh.

Koehler: That's what I like to do anyway, is garden and.

LeDoux: Uh huh. How large a town was Elk River would you say back when you were growing up?

Koehler: Town wasn't very big then. There wasn't – you could count the families in our parish on the finger of my hand.

LeDoux: Oh, it was that small.

Koehler: And the Catholics – there wasn't too many Catholics then and you know what we were. We were the mud under their feet really till after a while they – they decided we knew something too. But – but, you know, I think you find that in all the small towns where there – there's a minority of Catholics. There wasn't too many that lived right in town. They were more like farmers. That's the way.

LeDoux: Most of the Catholics lived out of the town itself.

Koehler: There wasn't too many families in town, no. Not Catholic families. But- but we had a good parish. We-when I was really small, I think it was Father Livings was stationed at Princeton and he used to come down and say mass here. And for a while they only had mass once a month and then Father Trobec came and we had mass twice a month. Then we- the church built up and we got Emma Faust. And that was pretty good. But we've had a lot of different priest here. Father Livings, and Father Zitter and Father Thunk and Father Meyers and Father Willenbring. We-we had- well the man that owned the hotel he was Catholic and then my brother-in-law lived right down town so Father Trobec used to stay there a lot when, you know, when he first came to town. And then one Sunday he came out to our house for dinner, and I stayed home from church to cook dinner for the priest, can you imagine that? I thought of it often afterwards, you know, but at that time well, of course we hadn't been able to go to church so much. We-we all had Sunday forenoons-we all knelt down and said our rosary and that was the best you could do. Because we could have went to Dayton, but there wasn't no bridge then, you had to cross in the- with a ferryboat.

Schutz: Uh huh.

Koehler: So, we did go once in a while down to Dayton to church. So- you had to-you had to get your religion the best you knew how. And my-my father was a convert. He had-had only one brother and he was a Lutheran minister in Norway-so I don't know if my dad ever wrote him and told him about it or not.

Schutz: Oh.

Koehler: So – my father was very good – very good Catholic. So – I just thank God for that.

LeDoux: The pastor mentioned that there were Masonic lodges in town – that was quite strong. He also mentioned there was kind of a feeling against the Catholic. So you would – you would agree with that then there was a--

Koehler: Well, yes, we – you know, they didn't really pick on us and say something about it but you had that feeling all the time that they were against you. But one winter we had a teacher when I was in the third grade that – she was from Little Falls, she was Miss Richards and we couldn't go to church on Sunday, the Sundays that we had church, of course, we could go, but she used to come down to the church and teach us catechism on Sundays. And she got by with alright. They liked her I guess. Everybody liked her.

LeDoux: Uh huh. Was this do you think simply because they were Protestant and you were Catholic or was there an ethnic thing too? Was it because that the people of Catholic Church was of one ethnic group and they were of another or?

Koehler: Well, I don't know. We just had – I just had that feeling that we were – they were against us, but, we – at that time we didn't have much. We didn't have nice clothes. I know I just had little ribbons in my hair and they used to remark about that. And course, my mother did

gardening and we used to bring vegetables along to the – to the hotel where they'd buy them from us. And my brother and I used to peddle vegetables in a horse and buggy around town in the summertime. So, of course, that had – that had nothing to do with the church, but it helped – helped out. Helped us out anyway.

LeDoux: Your heritage would be Norwegian and German then?

Koehler: No, my mother was French.

LeDoux: French. Uh huh.

Koehler: People in Dayton most of them were French at that time. I guess it is different now.

LeDoux: The name Kohler almost sounds German sounding.

Koehler: Well, that's – my first husband's name was Holzem and they came – they came from Germany. When they had the three children and they had nine--

LeDoux: Your first husband, his name was Holzem?

Koehler: Yes.

LeDoux: And he was – what nationality again now did you say?

Koehler: German.

LeDoux: German.

Koehler: And then Mr. Koehler next-next-lived next-we were neighbors. And they had been brought up together as boys, my husband and you know, the two families were really.

LeDoux: Uh huh.

Koehler: And then his wife died of childbirth. So we decided we'd get married and live together and we-my son took over the farm and we came here to town. The Holzems had been on that farm since 1873.

LeDoux: Uh huh. What-when were you married then to Mr. Holzem then? When did you get married to-do you remember the date?

Koehler: Married in 1915, 22nd of September.

LeDoux: And then when did you marry Mr. Koehler?

Koehler: I don't remember that as good. It was the 7th of September, I think. No, it was in June, I think. I don't-now I don't remember. I don't I wouldn't want to say because-but.

LeDoux: Is there-is there any one nationality that, oh, seemed to be predominant in the church? Were there more Germans than Irish or Norwegians than--

Koehler: No, I think my father was the only Norwegian. There was-there's now more Hungarians afterwards, you know, when we got a little-there was more Hungarians than any other nationality.

LeDoux: When did-roughly did they move in then, was this many years ago now or?

Koehler: What?

LeDoux: When did the Hungarians start to come into the church roughly?

Koehler: They-they were living out there as a little child, but I didn't really recognize them so much, you know. Now that I-after I got older. And they didn't talk English. And of course, we-we didn't visit together so much, you know. Now, I know them all now, but at that time when I

was a kid there wasn't very many of us that-there was some French and I think the hotel keeper was French. His name was Blanchette (?), Blanchette, that would have been French.

LeDoux: Uh huh.

Koehler: And there was a family here by the name of Valaire (?) and there was Eusaws (?) and there was Dorrells (?)-That's all-that was all French. Least my mother was French.

LeDoux: Uh-huh.

Koehler: But you'll laugh. I never heard my father say a word Norwegian. And his name was Soren and he never told us what his name was. He always-S. M. Lanter--his name. The people in Fr-in Dayton they always called him Nat, Nat Mathias. And when I was about 14 years old we had like a 4-H club and there was a boy there from Becker, I think, and his name was Soren and that's the first time I knew what my father's name was.

Schutz: Um.

LeDoux: Um.

Koehler: You know, he was a shy person and I suppose to him he didn't hear that any place else and he thought that was a funny name and he-he wouldn't tell. Because- there was some reason he wouldn't tell us. Of Course, we never asked him you know, out right. You don' ask your dad something like that, I guess.

LeDoux: Can-can I ask you was-was English always used in sermon as far as you can remember? It was always in English?

Koehler: Oh, yes.

LeDoux: Uh huh. There wasn't any problems with, oh, people who were German or Hungarian that couldn't understand the English at all or?

Koehler: Well, the priest never-well, I guess once in a while-it seems to me one time we got a-a Hungarian priest here to hear the confessions, you know. It was--

LeDoux: I see.

Koehler: It was kind of hard, but of course, they got so they could talk to us, you know, talk. And of course, my dad learned to talk French. Much as-faster than he-he never said anything in Norwegian. I don't know why. Of course, I never asked him to but, you know, it was I think now I would because I got more interested in the nationality when I got older, I guess. But, no, he was a good dad. And I had one sister and she got cancer and she died quite a few years ago. I have one brother that's older than I am. He's living in Tulsa, Oklahoma. He's living yet. There's two of us out of seven. So--

LeDoux: Has- has the church --was there any time that the church really grew quite rapidly or has it always stayed the same pretty much?

Koehler: Oh, no. No, it got bigger all the time, you know. We built the-Father Gall was here when -- no, Father Trobec was here when we built the church.

LeDoux: Uh huh.

Koehler: The-the farmer came in with horses, you know, scorescrapers (sp.?) and we built first the basement church and then we had to walk up steps on the west side. And then finally they decided they'd have it-they dug that out and they put walls there and they opened the church up on the south side and just walked in. It's kind of nice for us-us older people because the plan for

the church would have been about that high and then that many steps where you would have gone up.

LeDoux: Uh huh.

Koehler: And it works real good now. Only that it's getting small.

Schutz: Uh huh.

LeDoux: Was that the reason that they did build a new church, because people were coming in and the other structure was just too small?

Koehler: You know that was one of those little, you know, those little white--

LeDoux: Framed.

Koehler: --white churches

LeDoux: Framed church. Uh huh.

Koehler: And Father Trobec used to--and then we--we had a heating stove in the front of the church, you know, with a kind of jacket around it--halfway around it. And then when Father Trobec was here we got a furnace, and he took care of the furnace. And that was just put under the church, there was no basement under the church. It was just dug out and put in there (Inaudible). Father Trobec used to get up there and shovel the snow off the roof. Nobody knows how hard he works. And then he had to get sick, had a stroke and--

LeDoux: He was quite energetic in helping churches get started and keep going, wasn't he?

Koehler: Oh yeah. We all like-all like Father Trobec. Even if I did stay home from church (Indiscernible). Wasn't that funny? I never thought about it at the time and he never said anything. We had a topped buggy and we-my husband went to church and brought him out after church for dinner. Of course, he'd been-he was out more often than that but I mean the people of the parish used to take him out. You know he had to come down here on Saturday night and then he-it was a long day. And that was when he was stationed at the orphanage in St. Cloud part of the time. So. Yeah, well

LeDoux: And then in about 1918 you got a resident pastor here that lived here then?

Koehler: Yeah, that was Father Trobec.

LeDoux: That was Father Trobec.

Koehler: Father, Father Joe, Yeah.

LeDoux: Okay.

Koehler: Well, we-everybody liked him and they worked with him, you know. That's when we started the Christian Mothers here. We had an Alter society, but we didn't do much. And we had a mission and, you know, and I got a hold of one of those Mother Love prayer books and-and so we talked about it and we—one of the ladies and I went in and asked Father Joe if we couldn't have a Christian Mothers Society here, and he said, "Sure." So we had it for-well, I forgot just when it was, but it must have been in the 20s.

Schutz: So you kind of helped start organizing it?

Koehler: Oh, yeah. Ethel Pink (?) and I went and talked to Father. And we got along pretty good and we'd-we'd have bazaars and stuff and everybody-everybody would help. Now I go to church

and I feel like I'm in a strange parish. It isn't hardly, you know, any of the older ones. At that time I was one – one of the young ones and those – all those others are either moved away or they – they live up north of town around the cemetery. That's where I'm going. So, yeah, it's--

LeDoux: Were there a lot of people as Elk River grew that you know, left town, and new people coming in constantly? Did this happen more and more?

Koehler: No, there wasn't too many that left town, but well, I say this – this – we got a pretty big cemetery up there now. You know they – oh, there's some people that moved away. But oh, they come here from across the river and out towards Nowthen and all over there. They've built in – they say there are about 900 families that come here to church now. So I don't know what they're going to do. Father has mass on Saturday morning over at the nursing home and then he has mass at 7:30 at night and then at 7:30 Sunday morning and then 9:00 and 10:30 and then last Sunday he had a mass at 2:00 for the Murrays who had celebrated their 40th wedding anniversary. And the Sunday before he had a – had some – something like that too. So and I always thought a priest could only say two masses on Sunday but I guess – I guess you can – you have to say more sometimes.

Schutz: Uh huh.

LeDoux: Just getting back a little bit. You mentioned the Christian Mothers, were there a lot of church socials back then, more so than today or?

Koehler: Yeah, there – there was more. We had – we had lots of things, you know. We'd have big bazaars. We used to have bazaars start two – we'd have it two days. And you'd make all the food and so many people would bring different things in. And now, well, when you have something, it's more bought it seems. Of course, the people – we didn't have – we could make

the stuff cheaper than we could buy it, you know, so we – and the farmers would bring in chickens and we'd have baked chicken. And we'd make loaves and loaves of bread for dressing. And that made better dressing than bread – the bread you'd buy anyway. So, yeah, I suppose, maybe if we have to build more church they'll have to have – have more of those things. Course, now they have bingo every Sunday night. But I don't go. I'm – I live here alone and when I come home if I'm gone some place and I come home at night, I hear noises and I think there's somebody in the house and so I like to play bingo but I just have to stay at home, that's all. I – I'm afraid. I don't know why. I just heard so many reports about killing widows – killing widows. They wouldn't find anything if they come here because any money I got is in the bank.

LeDoux: I wanted to ask you in the – some of the changes that have taken place over the years such as the switch from the mass in Latin to English and things like that. What did you think about when they changed that? Did you like it or?

Koehler: It didn't bother me so much because I had a missal and the Latin was in one side and the English on the other. And I – it didn't make that much difference to me. I know it did bother some people, but it didn't – you know, it – if you – if you can read you can see that it was the same thing as the Latin as what the priest was saying. Of course, he had his back to us, but then, I don't know, if you're praying you aren't watching him so much and you – you get so you know just where – what part of the mass it is. It didn't bother me so much. But I know it did bother some people.

LeDoux: Uh huh. There weren't any that – that thought about possibly leaving the church or not going as much because they didn't like the mass too much?

Koehler: Well, there – there was one family across the river that went to the Cities to church, now why, I don't know why. They – they didn't like it – the English. But I – of course, if I'd go some place now where they I suppose would talk Spanish or something they – you know, the mass was in English, I could understand it but if I went some place to church and they talked even French, I wouldn't get all of it from that and German, of course, I lived with my German mother-in-law for 19 years and so I got to – I could understand pretty good. She'd say – she'd read a recipe from a German paper and she said, "Du muss das probieren." I should try it. So she – but.

LeDoux: How about – now they used to have just like a church organ, now they – the young people have – like guitars or something like that. How – what did you think about that when they started bringing in guitars and other things?

Koehler: Well, I tell you. I thought it was more like when Jesus was living then because you didn't hear them talking about organs then.

LeDoux: Uh huh.

Schultz: Uh huh.

Koehler: And I didn't know if they had organs at that time, you know, and they had string music. So that part didn't bother me.

Schultz: How about things where like you have lay people disturbing communion and things like that?

Koehler: Well, that – Father has to have help some place, you know that. And there's two ladies that distribute communion and when I – they give me communion they say," Body of Christ, Vinnie." And I say," Amen." And they – they make it more personal really.

Schultz: Yeah.

Koehler: But otherwise that doesn't bother me. But I don't – I don't take it with my hand. They have to put it in my mouth. I – I think I go out and dig in the dirt, I don't want the – Jesus in my hand. I'm maybe foolish that way.

LeDoux: Jane, did you have any other questions?

Schultz: No.

LeDoux: Okay, um – we're out of questions, but I just wanted to ask you is there anything we haven't asked that you would like to add?

Koehler: I don't know. I talked too much my mouth is so dry now.

LeDoux: Okay, that concludes this interview.