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The Beginning of a Thrilling Story: Campus Muengersdorf

In this episode of "Fragments of History," German historian Barbara Schellenberger takes us back to the origins of the Muengersdorf Campus in Cologne, Germany. Through her stories, we will explore how this residence, founded in 1966, has played a crucial role in the holistic education of students from various parts of the world.

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The story of Campus Muengersdorf in Cologne dates back nearly six decades, to 1966. From its early days, this residence was open to students from all over the world and of different faiths. Its primary mission has been to provide young women with a holistic education rooted in Christian values, complementing their university studies. In this episode, we will retrace the residence's first steps, learn about

how the initiative began, and meet some of the key figures in its history.

Opus Dei: early steps in Cologne

The history of what is now Campus Muengersdorf began on October 12, 1956, when three young Spanish women arrived in Cologne to establish Opus Dei's apostolic work with women in Germany. These young women were Carmen Mouriz, Ana María Quintana, and Hortensia Viñes Rueda. Waiting for them at Cologne's Central Station were two German numeraries: Käthe Retz, an assistant professor at the University of Bonn, and Marlies Kücking, who had just started her university studies.

One of them, Ana Quintana, recalled that when they arrived in the city, she was deeply struck by the sight of so many buildings still in ruins and by the construction everywhere. Germany was entirely immersed in

the process of rebuilding after the Second World War.

Although I won't go into the details of the country's economic and social state at the time, it's important to highlight one crucial detail for our story: the population was 54 million, and there was a shortage of housing. Naturally, the shortage affected student accommodations as well as family homes. In Cologne, in particular, the number of students at the University and Technical Schools was steadily increasing, and there was not enough student housing available to meet the need.

A few figures put the situation into context: at the beginning of the 1960s, the University of Cologne had approximately 15,000 students, of whom about 3,170 were women. However, the city had only 12 student residences, with a total of

1,026 places, and only 235 were designated for women.

The young women of Opus Dei, knowingly or unknowingly, responded to this urgent need by establishing a residence for female university students in Cologne. Saint Josemaría had asked them to develop this university initiative with an apostolic spirit. Like the residences that had arisen in Spain since the 1930s and in other cities worldwide over the next two decades, this residence in Cologne contributed to fostering apostolic work among young people.

These five women of Opus Dei were not entirely alone in starting this project. A few years earlier, two Opus Dei priests had arrived in Germany: Alfonso Par and Antonio Jiménez. After a long search, they found an apartment for the newly arrived women on the second floor

of a building located at Hülchrather Street, number 6. Although the apartment was in poor condition, with the help of some acquaintances and many workers, they managed to open the Eigelstein Residence, which housed 20 students, within a few weeks. The first Mass was celebrated there on December 2, 1956.

The first women

Who were these five women? The eldest of the three Spaniards, Carmen Mouriz García (1925–2017), was 31 years old at the time. She had studied at a German school in Madrid and was a practical-minded woman with a decisive character. Like most middle-class young Spanish women, Carmen had not gone on to higher education, but she had trained in dressmaking. She learned about Opus Dei through her sisters, who attended classes of Christian formation at the Zurbarán

Residence in Madrid. In 1951, Carmen asked for admission to Opus Dei as a numerary.

Her practical sense and adventurous spirit were key in the early apostolic projects of Opus Dei in Germany. Carmen was part of Opus Dei's regional government for many years. Later, in 1981, she moved to Rome to collaborate with the central government of the Prelature. In 1988, she returned to Spain, where she lived until her death in 2017.

Ana María Quintana (1928–2022) had a different temperament. She was born in Santander in 1928, and was inquisitive and studious from a young age: she had a great desire to keep learning. Her parents' house was full of books, and she made frequent trips to the local library. In 1949, she earned the title of State Accountant. While working in Bilbao, she came into contact with Opus Dei

and asked for admission as a numerary in 1952.

Ana was practical and intellectually curious. She spoke excellent German and easily won people over with her friendly character. For many years, she was responsible for financial management in the office of the regional advisory of Germany. She passed away in late 2022 at the age of 94, in Campus Muengersdorf. She had played a decisive role in its construction.

Hortensia Viñes Rueda (1929–2010), the youngest of the group, was intellectual and academic. She had studied philology. The residents there at the time described her as kind and having a good sense of humor. She eventually left Opus Dei and returned to Spain, where she continued her academic career. She earned her doctorate from the Complutense University of Madrid

and worked in Navarre for eight years, and then at the Faculty of Information Sciences in Madrid until her retirement.

The two German numeraries who welcomed the Spaniards at the Cologne station were Käthe Retz (1928–2018) and Marlies Kücking (1936). Käthe was an elegant and determined woman who had studied psychology at the University of Bonn. It was there, through a classmate, that she first heard about Opus Dei and its message of sanctifying everyday life in the world. To learn more about this new path within the Church, she decided to study for a semester in London, where Opus Dei had begun its pastoral work with women in 1952. Käthe asked for admission to the Work in the English capital in 1954.

Käthe had an excellent academic reputation. Her kindness and healthy

tenacity were part of the reason that she was able to find a suitable piece of land to build Campus Muengersdorf. In 1960, she moved to Austria to begin the apostolic work of Opus Dei in that country.

For her part, Marlies Kücking was born in Cologne in 1936. Her childhood was marked by World War II. After her father was sent to a prisoner-of-war camp and their home was partially destroyed, her family moved to her grandmother's house on the outskirts of Bonn. She learned about Opus Dei through a teacher at school. In her memoirs, she recounts that her encounter with Opus Dei was "love at first sight."

In January 1955, she attended a meditation in Bonn for the first time, led by a priest who spoke very limited German. Shortly afterward, she asked for admission to Opus Dei as a numerary. She lived in Germany

until 1964, then moved to Rome to collaborate in the Central Advisory, one of the bodies that assist in governing Opus Dei. She currently works in the General Archive of the Prelature in Rome.

Visit from Josemaría Escrivá

Ten months after the first numerary women arrived in Germany, Saint Josemaría Escrivá visited Cologne, accompanied by Blessed Álvaro del Portillo. He celebrated Mass for the first time in a women's center in Germany and spent time with them afterward. He remarked that he liked the house and the simple yet tasteful way it was furnished, which reminded him of the first student residence on Ferraz Street in Madrid. He encouraged them to dream of a large and modern house to open a new residence. In her memoirs, Marlies Kücking writes:

“The idea of looking for a good house that could accommodate a large number of students might have seemed crazy: we were barely managing to cover the most basic expenses! There were only a few of us, and even fewer earning a salary. (...) Later, I understood that his very human and yet supernatural way of inspiring apostolic activities was born of his holy life. He didn’t want us to worry about our current situation, but he did want to inspire us to look for a bigger house so that, with our apostolic work, we could reach more people. It’s not that he expected material means to rain down from heaven, no: but as a child of God, he trusted in divine providence. This faith drove him to accomplish things that were, from a purely human perspective, impossible.”

A large, modern residence

The young women took the Founder's suggestion very seriously. The first big challenge was finding a suitable piece of land. It wasn't easy. When they finally found something suitable, it was too expensive. This process went on for almost four years, a kind of roller coaster of hopes and disappointments.

In 1958 and 1960, Saint Josemaría visited the centers in Germany several times while traveling to other places. On one occasion, after returning to Rome, he remarked with admiration that what his daughters were doing in Cologne with little money and a lot of love for God was like a miracle.

The initial group of five women gradually grew, and several other people grew enthusiastic about the project of building a new residence, including the residents themselves

and some women who had gotten to know the Work.

One of them was Helene Steinbach (1924-1984), who asked for admission as the first female associate in Germany in 1957. Helene worked at a pharmacy near Cologne Cathedral. Among the customers, one man with an elegant appearance often caught her attention; he came in the mornings carrying a missal, suggesting he attended daily Mass at the cathedral. One day, she asked him directly whether she and a friend could visit him to discuss an important project. Marlies Kücking recalls:

"The baron, surprised, agreed. So, Carmen and Helene went to the Excelsior Hotel and explained to him that they were planning to build a student residence. Naturally, they also spoke to him about Opus Dei. The gentleman, Wilhelm Ritter von

Winterhalder, was impressed by their faith and confidence."

They learned that the man worked at Thyssen, a major steel production company. He became interested in the project and promised to present it to Dr. Fritz Wecker, a member of the company's board in Cologne. Initially, Dr. Wecker thought it was a crazy idea. However, after visiting the Eigelstein Residence to learn more, he changed his mind and committed to paying for the land for the new residence. Despite the women's efforts, they couldn't find a suitable plot, so Dr. Wecker managed to secure a larger one from the city council than expected. It was 2,500 square meters, located west of Cologne, near the university and just a few minutes from the Sports College.

At the end of August 1961, the contract for the land was signed:

another “impossible” thing made possible. As a token of gratitude, the women of the Work invited Dr. Wecker and his wife to dine at the Eigelstein Residence. He remarked that, upon visiting Eigelstein, he had realized that no time was wasted there, and that work was done with joy. He was glad to think that the future residence would be the same.

The next phase involved finding funding to construct the building. The remarkable economic growth of the Federal Republic of Germany since the mid-1950s seemed to imply favorable conditions for fundraising, but it was not to be. Securing the money was a significant challenge.

Following Saint Josemaría’s example, they sought the intercession of Saint Nicholas, Opus Dei’s intercessor for economic matters. Little by little, small and medium-sized donations began to arrive. They also developed

a plan to finance the project, which included obtaining public funds, due to its educational importance to society. Between 1962 and 1964, they underwent many bureaucratic processes and interviews with authorities, accompanied by prayers for favorable responses. Finally, after more than two years of waiting, they received official guarantees for co-financing.

Meanwhile, the Church of Cologne supported Opus Dei's apostolic work. Both Cardinal Frings and the Vicar General of Cologne, Joseph Teusch, backed the project and contributed funds to make it a reality.

Construction, furnishing, and inauguration

The young women's role as "builders" of the project was no less challenging than that of securing financial resources. They had to negotiate and choose between

different offers, materials, and technical solutions, all without any prior experience in construction. It was a great relief when Saint Josemaría Escrivá arranged for an architect to assist them in August 1957, and they received the first sketches in 1961.

The final phase of the project involved furnishing the house on a very tight budget. They practically emptied their friends' and acquaintances' attics. The workers were surprised to see so much old furniture being placed in a new house. Dulce Sillero, the creative director of the facilities, refurbished old furniture and even made original chairs from pieces of beds. Some of the women sewed curtains, and together they worked out the finishing touches.

At the beginning of February 1966, some of the women moved into the

new student residence to supervise and advance the last tasks. Father José María Hernández Garnica celebrated the first Mass on March 13, 1966, in a room that had been set up for temporary use.

A few months later, in May, the new residence was officially inaugurated. They named it Muengersdorf, after the neighborhood in which it is located.

They celebrated the opening with a lecture by Professor Werner Beinhauer (1896-1983), a professor of Romance and Hispanic Philology at the University of Cologne, in the auditorium. The house was filled with students. This event marked the beginning of a long series of academic activities in collaboration with the University of Cologne.

Looking back

Nearly ten years of hard work had gone by since the Founder entrusted those young women with the task of building a large and modern student residence in Cologne. From a human perspective, they accomplished a remarkable feat, but in their eyes, they simply followed the Founder's advice with trust and relied on God's providence. At the same time, the number of women in Opus Dei in Germany grew significantly, with some contributing to the apostolic expansion in the Netherlands, Austria, and Switzerland.

Over the nearly 60 years since the inauguration of the Muengersdorf student residence, more than three thousand university students from 84 countries have lived there or participated in its activities. During this time, notable writers, artists, politicians, and contemporary thinkers have passed through Muengersdorf. Seminars, discussion

groups, and conferences have been organized, along with various social projects. The young women who participate in these activities grow as individuals and citizens, and if they wish, as believers as well.

In 2009, the building underwent renovations, and the name of the Muengersdorf Student Residence was changed to “Campus Muengersdorf,” a concept that encompasses three spaces in one: the university residence, the domestic management center, and the conference center. Both its infrastructure and its activities were updated to meet the needs of 21st-century students.

Since 2017, the seventh floor of the residence has been dedicated to a pilot project of “intergenerational living,” a concept now very popular in Germany, where elderly people also reside. Ana Quintana, one of the pioneers of the “Muengersdorf

project," passed away at the age of 94 in this very building. She was greatly appreciated by the younger residents, with whom she had formed friendships during her volunteer hours as the residence's receptionist. This project fosters a rich exchange between women of different generations, where they learn from and enjoy each other's company every day.

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