Sister Carol Louise Hiller, OP
1921-2019

St. Rose of Lima Parish on Detroit’s east side was where Elizabeth June Hiller and her playmates – Harvey, Billy, Sonny, Harold, and Harold’s little sister, Shirley (the latter two the nephew and niece of Adrian Dominican Sister Ruth Grates) – spent many hours together doing typical childhood things: playing on Sonny’s swing set and monkey bars, eating cherries straight off of the tree in Harold and Shirley’s yard, hanging out under Elizabeth’s back porch in inclement weather.

Having four boys as friends was no impediment to Elizabeth, the future Sister Carol Louise. “I was a first-class tomboy determined to keep up with anyone in the neighborhood,” Sister Carol Louise wrote in her life story. “I had skinned and bloody knees to prove that determination.”

Elizabeth was born at home on October 11, 1921, to Ludwig and Caroline (Franz) Hiller. Ludwig was born in Vienna, Austria; his family came to America because the Emperor was conscripting young men for military service and out of the Hillers’ six boys, two were already in the army. The Hillers settled in Forestville, in the “Thumb” area of Michigan, but when Ludwig was old enough he moved to Detroit. He and Caroline married in 1916.

Ludwig was a master carpenter and plumber while Caroline was “an accomplished homemaker and a whiz at managing money,” Sister Carol Louise wrote. “All the years of the Depression she paid the bills, kept up insurance, and found enough money to help two of my widowed aunts survive and raise their families of several children.”

Starting first grade at St. Rose of Lima in 1927 was the beginning of an adventure. Her mother tearfully delivered her to the classroom door, where the little girl quickly kissed Caroline goodbye, pushed her away, “and happily waved as I slipped away,” Sister Carol Louise wrote. “I knew I would like school, and I did, every minute of it all through my life.”

Ludwig and Caroline’s daughter may have been an only child, but she was loved and nurtured by both the Hiller and Franz families, which gave her ten uncles, ten aunts, and about fifty cousins. She grew up in a warm and happy home, even during the difficult times of the Great Depression which saw Ludwig without a job for some seven years. Even right before the stock market crash of October 1929, he had to be out of work for some time when the steam pipes he was installing in the new Fisher Building – whose “Golden Tower” became a Detroit icon – exploded and badly burned his face. “I remember my mother’s great anxiety when Dad did not come, and did not come, home from work, and her stricken look when he was finally delivered at the front door covered in bandages,” Sister Carol Louise wrote.

When it was time for high school, she continued on at St. Rose of Lima for a year and then, after taking summer courses in typing and shorthand at Southeastern High School, transferred there for the rest of her high school experience, taking a business course along with the regular college prep classes. She wrote for the school newspaper and was its news editor her senior year.

During perhaps her sophomore year, her teacher asked the class what their future plans were, and her answer was that she wanted to go to college at the University of Detroit. “I had loved the Jesuits
ever since I was old enough to know about Jogues and his companions so I wanted to attend U of D,” she wrote.

There was only one problem, however: the university at that time was all-male, something she did not know. "It brought down the house," she wrote. But as it so happened, U of D became co-ed the year she graduated from Southeastern, 1939, and she was able to realize her dream.

She had known from the time she was quite young that she wanted to enter religious life, and after her freshman year of college she began exploring various communities. The congregations she looked into at first were not encouraging, but then her counselor at U of D introduced her to his cousin, Adrian Dominican Sister Ellenita Boyle.

Sister Ellenita brought her to Adrian for a visit and she met Mother Gerald Barry, who gave her an application to take home. Elizabeth was not interested, but Mother Gerald told her to take it “just in case.” When she explored a couple of other communities and did not get good responses from them, she wound up filling out the form.

On November 1, 1941, she arrived in Adrian to begin her postulancy, and received the habit and her religious name in August 1942. Ludwig died just two months after seeing his daughter become a novice.

Sister Carol Louise completed her bachelor’s degree work in English at Siena Heights College (University) in 1943, made profession on August 20 of that year, and that very afternoon was on a train to Chicago headed for her first mission at St. Rita’s School. She spent the entire trip praying to teach an upper grade, but one of her St. Rita’s compatriots, Sister Ann Lawrence Theisen, met her at the station and excitedly told her she would be teaching first graders.

Her first three missions were all in Chicago: a year at St. Rita’s, four years (1944-48) at St. Kilian’s, and three years at St. Kevin’s (1948-51). She completed her master’s degree work in English at De Paul University in the summer of 1951 and was sent that fall to Mother of Divine Grace School in Cheektowaga, New York, where she taught fifth and then eighth grade and attempted to organize a library. Ironically considering she was later to become a librarian, she did not do all that well at it. “The one who succeeded me was not at all happy with my method,” she wrote.

Sister Carol Louise was at Mother of Divine Grace until 1958 and then spent a year (1958-59) at St. Albert the Great School, Oak Lawn, Illinois; two years (1959-61) at St. Agnes School, Iron River, Michigan; and a year (1961-62) at St. Patrick School, Joliet, Illinois. Then, upon earning her Master of Library Science degree from the University of Michigan, she embarked upon the ministry in which she would spend the next twenty-one years: school librarian.

Her first mission in that capacity was to Aquinas High School in Chicago, where she spent the years 1962 to 1966. During that time her mother, who had been living in Buffalo, New York, passed away, and Sister Carol Louise was able to fly both to Buffalo for the wake and to Detroit for the graveside service when Caroline was buried next to her husband.

After Aquinas, Sister Carol Louise went to Cardinal Newman High School in West Palm Beach, Florida, for a year (1966-67), to St. Thomas Aquinas High School in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, for six years (1967-73), and to Bishop Gorman High School in Las Vegas, Nevada, for three years (1973-76).

“Las Vegas opened whole new vistas in life for me,” she wrote; she took geology classes and spent many hours in the hills around the city. Her new-found interest in the natural world found even greater
expression when she answered an ad for a librarian at Monroe High School in Fairbanks, Alaska, and was offered the position.

She spent the next seven years (1976-83) in Alaska and did things she would have found unimaginable anywhere else: skiing, camping, painting, salmon-fishing, taking photos, flying in a bush plane, walking on pack ice, taking a small boat out close to calving icebergs and near huge oil tankers, and more.

“Sharing an ice-fishing hole on the Bering Straits with a tattooed Eskimo woman and listening to the ice breaking up on the Chena, Andrefsky and Yukon rivers is deeply moving. ... Watching the midnight sun, and hearing the music of the Northern Lights, is an indescribably spiritual experience.”

“Her demeanor was that of a quiet, methodical librarian but under that facade lurked the heart of an adventurer,” Sister Mary Keefe said in her homily at Sister Carol Louise’s memorial Mass.

Sister Carol Louise took a sabbatical year in Spokane, Washington, to research and write a book on the life of Bishop Francis Gleeson, and then served as school secretary at All Saints School in Hayward, California, from 1984 to 1990.

She retired at that point, living first at Villa Serra Retirement Center in Salinas, California, until 2004, and then moving back to Adrian to live at the Dominican Life Center. But there was one more ministry in store for her: after Hurricane Katrina devastated much of New Orleans in August 2005, she became one of the many Sisters from a number of communities who went to help. In her case, she spent three months in early 2007 at St. Mary’s Dominican High School; Katrina had flooded the school’s library, and she took on the task of ordering new books, setting up a new card catalog, and doing all the other things necessary to rebuild the collection.

“The Dominican Sisters of Peace and the staff and faculty of the school, especially the librarians, have canonized Carol Louise,” Mary Keefe said at the Memorial Mass. “… Carol Louise and many other Adrian Dominicans gave of themselves unstintingly in helping the people of New Orleans bring some kind of order into their lives.”

Sister Carol Louise died on August 24, 2019, aged ninety-seven, and at her request was given a “green” burial in the Congregation cemetery. “Carol was a woman of introspection, not afraid to ask herself the hard questions and not afraid to hear the hard answers,” Sister Mary said in her homily. “… In Carol Louise I see a woman who overcame her fears and responded with love in whatever situation she faced.”
From left: Carol Louise with her parents, Ludwig and Caroline Hiller. First Holy Communion. With her parents at Niagara Falls, summer 1941.

Left: Sister Carol Louise with her mother, Caroline Hiller.
Right: Sister Carol Louise with Sister Catherine Ormond Olds.

Right: Sister Carol Louise with her artwork.

Celebrating their Double Diamond Jubilee in 2012 (August Crowd) are, from left, Sisters Maureen Therese Masuga, Agnes Louise Stechschulte, Carol Louise Hiller, and Attracta Kelly, Prioress.