The small city of Tucumcari, New Mexico, on the eastern side of the state not far from the Texas border, was home to St. Anne’s Parish School, staffed by Adrian Dominican Sisters – and to the Szabo family.

Louis Szabo and Florence Murphy – he of Hungarian descent and born in Alma, Texas, she of Irish extraction and from Clarksdale, Illinois – met in 1927, some years after both families had moved to New Mexico. Florence was a schoolteacher in Miera, New Mexico, when she decided to join a club for Catholic singles, and she and Louis were matched up as pen pals. Three years later, the couple married and settled in Tucumcari.

Louis was a machinist for the Rock Island-Southern Pacific Railroad as well as a farmer. He never finished high school, but he had taught himself how to repair locomotives, how to farm, and how to do electrical and plumbing work. “My dad was a silent, hard-working man who loved nature, had a thirst and respect for knowledge and was known all over this area for his helpfulness, honesty and generosity,” wrote his daughter Eleanor, the future Sister Ann Rozalia, in a July 28, 1980, St. Catherine letter.

Born on August 12, 1932, Eleanor Isobel Szabo was actually the second of twin daughters, but little Rozalia Ann died just five hours after her birth. Delivery took place at home, since the town had no hospital then, so when Florence developed severe complications Louis arranged for her, his sister Mary, and Eleanor to travel by train to Oklahoma City and a hospital there. One of the family’s goats, Bee-bee, also made the trip in a crate Louis made for her, in order to provide milk because Florence was unable to nurse her baby; but as it turned out, Bee-bee was so stressed by the travel that she quit giving milk and “I was a Carnation baby after that,” Sister Ann Rozalia wrote in her autobiography.

An aunt lived in Oklahoma City, and while Florence was in the hospital for several months, Eleanor and her Aunt Mary stayed with Aunt Teresa. Finally, all were able to return home, and Eleanor’s early childhood was spent surrounded by family and developing her lifelong love for animals and art. Besides the goats, sheep, and cows on the farm, the Szabos had everything from cats and dogs to birds, turtles, fish, rabbits, and chickens at their home in town. “Neighbors said we should call our home Szabo’s Zoo,” she wrote.

She began school at St. Anne’s just after her sixth birthday, and found her artistic abilities encouraged by her teacher, Sister Anthony Gliha. She wrote in her autobiography that she had fun in school and did well, but when she got to first grade and was told after just one week that she was going to be promoted to second grade, she found herself struggling with the more advanced reading because she did not have the vocabulary she would have been taught in first grade. It was a difficulty that continued throughout her grade school years.

Some of the negative aspects of school were allayed, however, when her teachers discovered her aptitude for music. She had already learned to play piano through private lessons from about age five and a half into third grade, and when she was in sixth grade, she learned to play the organ from Sister Henrietta Zulke. She also joined the school choir and helped with music in the classrooms as well. “I really found my niche,” she wrote.
By this time, Eleanor also had a little sister to dote on. Florence and Louis had their next child, whom they named Frances Ann, when Eleanor was almost ten years old. “As soon as she came home, I connected with her so much that I think I did more than Mama did to take care of her,” she wrote. “I took her for rides in the buggy and we would cuddle up in bed together. When she got bigger I took her for a ride in the basket of my bike and she loved it but when we got home, Mama didn’t love it. That was not a choice any longer.”

As time went on, Eleanor spent more and more time outside of school hours around the Sisters who taught at St. Anne’s, and she came to see their personalities and how much fun they had – including the time Sister Anthony Ann (Clara) Patricks asked Eleanor if she could ride her bike … an adventure which only lasted until Anthony Ann’s fifteen-decade rosary got caught in the bike chain. “All of a sudden I saw beads flying in all directions over the grass,” Sister Ann Rozalia wrote.

And so, from sixth grade on, Eleanor knew she wanted to become an Adrian Dominican Sister, and as soon as she graduated from Tucumcari High School in May 1950, she started making preparations to head to Adrian. She traveled across the country by train and arrived at the Motherhouse on June 25.

Just three months later, in September, Mother Gerald sent her to St. Mary’s School in St. Clair, Michigan, to teach music, replacing a Sister who had taken ill. She remained there for the rest of the semester, returning to Adrian in December to receive the habit as a novice as well as her religious name – her twin sister’s name, but switched around.

Sister Ann Rozalia made profession in December 1951 and continued her studies at Siena Heights College (University) for the rest of the school year before being sent to Guayama, Puerto Rico, to teach third grade at St. Anthony’s School. She wrote in her autobiography that given her skin coloring and her Southwestern roots, people tended to assume that she was Hispanic and spoke Spanish, but her only knowledge of Spanish came from her high school and college classes and so she was extremely grateful for the native-born Puerto Rican woman who served as her classroom assistant. But then during Lent her first year there, she realized that as she prayed at the Stations of the Cross she was doing so in Spanish. It was a breakthrough that led her to be able to go beyond the school’s walls to work with the people of the area on their needs.

Developing an allergy to sugar cane, the island’s principal crop, necessitated her reassignment in 1955. She was sent to Cleveland, Ohio, to teach at Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Over the course of six years (1955-61) she taught several grades in addition to giving piano lessons after school and on Saturdays. She completed her bachelor’s degree with a major in Spanish during this time, in 1959.


During her time at All Saints, she was offered a scholarship to Aquinas Institute in Dubuque, Iowa, and spent a year there from August 1972 to August 1973. It gave her the opportunity to study alongside not only other Catholics, but Lutherans and Episcopalians as well. She also got to spend the Christmas holidays ministering to patients at a nearby hospital, which she called “a very sacred month to me.” Also while she was at All Saints, she earned a second bachelor’s degree, this one in art, from California State University-Hayward.
On September 3, 1977, she received a shocking call from her mother telling her that her father had just died of a heart attack. That led her to request that once the school year was complete she be allowed to go to a school in New Mexico so as to be closer to her mother, and she was able to move to Albuquerque to teach at Our Lady of Fatima School.

The rest of her life in ministry was spent in New Mexico. Her years teaching at St. Mary’s School in Belen (1980-1988) were a time of both highs and lows; she was honored by the diocese as a Distinguished Teacher of the Year and earned her Master of Religious Education degree from the University of St. Thomas in Houston, Texas, but she also mourned the loss of her mother in early 1988.

After that, Sister Ann Rozalia was a liturgist and pastoral minister at a Native American parish, San Juan in San Juan Pueblo – where she immersed herself in the culture and language of the Tewa people and was “adopted” by them – from 1988 to 1992; taught at Our Lady of the Annunciation School in Albuquerque (1992-1993); and finally was a pastoral assistant at the San Lorenzo Mission in Ramah (1994-2000), an area populated mostly by the Navajo. One particular highlight of these years at the Mission was that she was able to help the priest, Father Steve Pispecky, fulfill his dream of building a church on the property. Besides her various administrative duties toward that goal, she designed the stained-glass windows above the altar.

After spending several years living in Albuquerque, first with Sister Kay Muzzy and then with Sister Marlene Kuhnlein (to say nothing of a multitude of cats over this time), Sister Ann Rozalia returned to Adrian in late 2011 to live at the Dominican Life Center. There, she and Sister Mary Helen Mack formed the “Lovers of God’s Creatures” group for animal lovers, especially Sisters who missed their own pets.

Sister Ann Rozalia died on April 10, 2019, at the age of 86. The cover of the worship aid for her funeral Mass, and her memorial card, bore a picture of Christ which she had painted as her final project to complete her Master of Religious Education degree.

Among those who provided remembrances at her wake service were Sharon Pikula, who remembered how much Ann Rozalia loved the people at the Mission and how she supported Sharon’s journey toward becoming an Associate; Sister Kay Muzzy’s sister-in-law Martie, who talked about Sister Kay and Sister Ann Rozalia’s close friendship and the way Sister Ann Rozalia loved people and animals, especially her beloved cats; and Sister Ann Rozalia’s three nieces, a nephew, and a cousin, who spoke of her relationship with them and the countless other people whose lives she touched.

Her deep connection to people, animals, and the Earth was also recalled by Sister Mary Catherine Nolan in her homily for Sister Ann Rozalia’s funeral Mass. “I regard her greatest characteristic as a lover of all of God’s creation,” Sister Mary Catherine said. “… Ann, may the angels lead you into Paradise and lead you into the arms of our creator whose works you so loved.”

Left photo: Little foot, Sister Ann Rozalia’s five- to six-month-old male kitten. Far right photo: In the art room at the Dominican Life Center.

Left photo: From left, Sisters Barbara Gentry and Dorothy Jeanne Burns, physical therapist Glady Nguyen, and Sister Ann Rozalia Szabo in the physical therapy room of the Dominican Life Center in Adrian. Right photo: Sister Ann Rozalia poses in front of the bulletin board for an organization of animal lovers at the Dominican Life Center in Adrian.
Members of the 2010 Diamond Jubilee December Crowd are, back row, from left, Sisters Kieran Therese Quirke, Mary White, Ann Rozalia Szabo, Shirley Smith, Jeannine Therese McGorray, Geraldine Maloney, and Sean Morley; middle row, from left, Sisters Rita Crotty, Lucy Ann Quinn, Loretta May, Noreen Burke, Genevieve Jeziolkowski, Marlene Kuhnlein, and Janet Michael Hudspeth; and front row, from left, Sisters Lila Watt, Carol Denise Koenig, Virginia Beattie, Maria Goretti Browne, Ellen Kennedy, Joseph Eilese Hukle, and Donna Markham (Prioress).