

Perspective Digest

Volume 7 | Number 4

Article 12

10-1-2002

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Recommended Citation

Target, G W. (2002) "Mother Maria," *Perspective Digest*. Vol. 7 : No. 4 , Article 12.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pd/vol7/iss4/12>

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MOTHER MARIA

She put a smile on the face of death.

This is the true story of a very brave Christian.

She lived a good and useful life, dedicated to the greater glory of God, but it is the sort of death she died that is the *real* story.

The truth about it is something that no one alive today was ever meant to hear, and yet it goes on being told.

Some people who hear it think that what she did was futile, a senseless waste of her own life. But others believe that it is one of the most moving and beautiful deaths of recent times.

Though how can death be beautiful?

“There is no greater love than this,” said Jesus, “that a man should lay down his life for his friends.”

Elizabeth Pilenko was born in the south of Russia at the end of the 19th century. Her father was a wealthy landowner, and she was raised in high comfort: the best

food, linen sheets, the finest and warmest clothes.

Yet she was surrounded by the most desperate poverty.

All the peasants were serfs, or salves. They had no civil or legal rights, were not allowed to own either property or land, were overworked and half-starved, lived in miserable huts, and were flogged for the slightest alleged offense. Tens of thousands died from cold and hunger every winter.

Not surprisingly, there was much unrest. People plotted revolution to overthrow this tyranny. Often the secret police would arrest conspirators. Hundreds were executed each year, and many thousands were imprisoned or exiled to Siberia. But the plotting went on.

Elizabeth’s sympathies, despite

**At the time this article was written, in the 1970s, G. W. Target was a professional writer in London, England.*



*Her fellow prisoners found courage
simply by being with her.*

As soon as the Germans began to hunt for Jews in Paris, Mother Maria let it be known that her hospital would be a hiding place for them. For about a month it was a haven of refuge for the hunted.

her rich family, were always with the poor and the oppressed. It saddened her to see how her father's serfs were forced to live. Sometimes she smuggled out scraps of food to the workers in the fields, and gave her dolls to their children.

And so she grew up.

Clever, a hard worker, she was able at the age of 18 to leave home and attend the university in St. Petersburg. She met many revolutionaries, but, though sympathetic, took little part in political activity. Instead she wrote what we would call "protest poetry" and had two books published.

Then, in October 1917, the Russian workers and peasants, led by Lenin and Trotsky, rose in rebellion against their rulers. The revolution, it was said, was going to bring about a new kind of society.

But as the years dragged on it became clear that something was going seriously wrong. The people were still not free; tens of thousands continued to die of cold and hunger as they had always died. Men and women were still arrested, tortured, shot, imprisoned, or exiled, as they

had always been.

In 1923, unable to bear it longer, Elizabeth left her beloved but unhappy Russia, never to return, and went to live in Paris. There, full of sorrow and despair, she found comfort in the religion of her childhood, that of the Russian Orthodox Church. At last she became a nun, assuming the name Mother Maria.

Which is where her story really begins.

She worked in the worst slums of the city, scrubbing floors, tending the sick, visiting the old, teaching the children, and she soon became a familiar figure wherever there was pain or misery or someone in need of help.

Eventually she collected enough money to open a small hospital for the chronically sick and orphans, which she ran with the help of a few other nuns. So the years passed—years of poverty, hard work, and great joy.

And then, in 1940, soon after the start of the second world war, the German Army overran Europe, defeated the French, and France was placed under German military gov-

ernment.

Mother Maria now felt that it was her Christian duty to give all the help she could to the Jews. For the Germans had built extermination camps all over their newly conquered empire, designed to facilitate what they called the "final solution to the Jewish problem." And they hunted out Jews (and even those who helped them), packed them into cattle trucks without food or water, and sent them, millions of them, to their deaths in these camps.

As soon as the Germans began to hunt for Jews in Paris, Mother Maria let it be known that her hospital would be a hiding place for them. For about a month it was a haven of refuge for the hunted.

And then the Gestapo arrived.

Mother Maria was arrested and sent without trial to Ravensbruck.

When the gates slammed behind you at Ravensbruck, you could expect to live for another two or three months.

The camp was surrounded by high double-barbed-wire fences, and patrolled by savage wolfhounds trained to tear people to pieces. There were towers every hundred yards, mounted with searchlights and machine guns.

The prisoners were given one small bowl of thin soup a day, and one small slice of coarse bread, often moldy.

They were made to work long

hours in the nearby stone quarries, or to cut woods in the forests, which was then used to fire the ovens burning corpses day and night.

And some were made to gouge trenches out of the hard stony ground. When the trenches were wide and deep enough the guards would line up those who had dug them, old and young, men and women, children, babies in their mothers' arms, force them to clamber down, clubbing and kicking the slow, and then rake them with machine guns and rifles and pistols.

And then other prisoners would have to fill in the earth on the dead and dying.

And then start digging other trenches . . .

And every day, prisoners would be picked out at random during the morning roll call, told they were going to be given a bath, and marched away to what looked like a bathhouse.

A hundred or more naked men and women and children would be driven and kicked in, the iron door would be slammed and bolted . . . the poison gas would start pumping. . .

Afterward the corpses would be carted to the ovens.

And the ovens burned day and night, night and day, the thick black smoke hanging like a pall over the camp.

This was where Mother Maria was sent.

Yet she was such a good person, it is said—so kind, so cheerful that even in Ravensbruck she was able to go on believing in God, go on believing in Jesus Christ, and go on loving people.

Her fellow prisoners found courage simply by being with her.

She did what very little she could to care for them, help them, and give them the comfort of friendship and love.

“The Lord Jesus Christ,” she is reported as constantly saying, “loved me enough to die for me. Is it too much that I should try to live for him? Is he not here with us?”

And the most astonishing thing of all is that even the guards respected her! These brutal men, whose daily work was mass murder and torture, were somehow so touched by her simple goodness that they left her alone.

After the war this is what one of them said at his trial: “She was known to us as the wonderful Russian nun, and we didn’t want her to die. Her death was a mistake, and we were sorry it happened.”

The months and years passed.

She became thin and ill, little more than a living skeleton. Her clothes were in rags, her frostbitten feet wrapped in strips of old sacking.

Her teeth had rotted away. She had sores and ulcers all over her body. According to reports, however, she was always kind, always cheerful.

“She was a saint of God,” said one of the few prisoners who survived. “To be with Mother Maria was to be with Jesus Christ, was to know what a *real* Christian ought to be like.”

And then, one morning, some women prisoners were lined up, naked and shivering, outside the bathhouse. A young girl, perhaps aware of what would happen, began to scream hysterically.

Had she been allowed to have gone on screaming, she probably would have frightened the others, who might not have gone on filing in so quietly.

Two guards moved toward her, their clubs ready to smash her to the ground.

Those who saw it say that Mother Maria hobbled forward, and put her arm around the girl’s shoulders, and kissed her.

“Don’t be frightened,” she said. “Look, I shall go in with you.”

And she went into the gas chamber to her death with the girl, a smile of great peace and happiness on her beautiful old face.

It was Good Friday, 1945. The war ended a few weeks later. □

