

Mother Mary

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For those who knew Mother Mary, her most striking trait was that she belonged to no standard type. An Orthodox nun, she would have never fitted in any convent and constantly shocked her more traditionally Orthodox friends. Born in a cultured and well-off family, in Czarist Russia, she became a revolutionary. Her fellow members in the Socialist Party were horrified because she studied Orthodox theology. Twice married and mother of three children, she was no home-maker and home life meant little to her. Highly intelligent, gifted, well educated, she never learned how to earn enough money to support herself and her family. She was at her best when helping people in extreme distress, the derelicts of society, but she was certainly not a “social worker,” nor a “philanthropist,” – just a friend feeling comfortable among friends. She wrote beautiful poetry and was fascinating to talk to, but was utterly negligent of her appearance: a steel-rimmed “pince-nez” perched precariously on her nose; when she became a nun, her veil was never spotless or well ironed and wisps of hair escaped it; she wore old down-at-heel men’s shoes, that were never polished. She never knew how to keep her opinions to herself, could never conform to accepted standards. She was utterly fearless in times of danger.

Mother Mary, or Elizabeth Pilenko, which was her secular maiden name, lived through a time in history which was exactly right for this kind of personality. A secure, traditional happy childhood in pre-revolutionary Russia, ended when Lisa Pilenko was 15 years old and became involved in the intellectual and revolutionary ferment of those days. She was expelled from school and at the age of 17 married a young man, who drank very heavily, in order to “save” him, though she was deeply in love with a famous Russian poet who was her friend. By the time she was 18 she was mother of a baby girl.

When the Russian revolution of 1917 took place, Elizabeth was 25 years old, divorced, and leader of the Social Revolutionary party of her area. Eight months later Communists took the power in their hands and Elizabeth was thrown headlong into the tragic struggle of civil war, siding with those who fought communism.

Escapes, imprisonments, facing execution squads, fabricating false documents, masquerading, using her quick wits and her fearlessness to save people, -- her life-story of that time would read like an adventure book too fantastic to be true. Sometime during the turmoil she married again and became mother of little boy and girl.

In three years the adventure of civil war was over and together with a million other “white” Russians, Elizabeth was swept out of her country. The family settled in France in dire poverty. They all lived in a basement room. They slept on mattresses without sheets. They ate off one common dish, with a couple of side plates, for there was not enough crockery, not even a knife and fork for everyone. They ate poorly, their health

and appearances deteriorated. Elizabeth earned money by painting scarves for a fashion shop, working 12 hours a day and earning almost nothing. During these bitter years, her baby daughter died from meningitis, the little boy showed signs of developing tuberculosis, and the eldest daughter was in sore need of more care and attention. Elizabeth's second marriage broke down and ended in separation.

Gradually the life of Russian émigrés in France sorted itself out. Those who were practically minded and hard-working overcame difficulties and found their feet. Some drifted on to chronic unemployment, miserable destitution, drink. Some artists won recognition. The younger generation struggled to obtain professional education. Church life grew stronger, more dynamic. The Orthodox Seminary of St. Sergius was founded and became a center of Christian thought. An Orthodox youth movement developed into an active lay service to the Church.

Elizabeth Pilenko threw herself increasingly into Church work. It was apparent from the start that she had a unique talent for making contacts with outcasts – the chronically unemployed, the drunk, the criminal, the insane, the dejected. She became a familiar figure as she sought out these people, peering short-sightedly into bars for her own special “customers.” She sat and wept with them, listened to their problems, told them: “Because you are very much down, you’ve kept your souls hot.” She did what she could for them, and wept again because she knew it was not enough. “I would like to become mother to all the poor people of the earth” she said.

The Archbishop of the Russian Church in Western Europe encouraged her to become a nun. “I could never be a good nun,” answered Elizabeth. “I know,” said the bishop, “but I want you to be a revolutionary nun, bringing your ideas into life. It is terrible that people think only about their spiritual comfort!” Elizabeth became “Mother Mary.” A heavy chain-smoker, she stamped out her last cigarette as she entered the gates of St. Sergius Church for her consecration as a nun.

Mother Mary's “convent” was the shabby old house on Rue Lourmel. With several volunteer assistants Mother Mary ran it as a hostel, refectory and employment agency for the unemployed. A small church was arranged in a kind of shed next to the house and young Father Dimitry Klepiin with his wife and two young children joined her, becoming chaplain. Much of the hard manual work was done by Mother Mary. She cooked and scrubbed and shopped, going without sleep and food, she spent herself in a mission to the “down-and-outs,” serving as interpreter for Russians in prisons, in law-courts, in insane asylums, lecturing in God-forgotten little mine-towns for groups of Russian stranded there.

Mother Mary's personal life was being stripped down, as if preparing her for her calvary. Her daughter married and returned to Russia. After a few happy letters came the sudden news of her death. I remember Mother Mary kneeling down, her head touching the floor, immobile throughout the memorial service in the Rue Lourmel chapel. What thoughts went through her mind, what feelings seared her heart for that dearly beloved daughter to whom she had never been able to give a secure and happy childhood? Iuri, the remaining

son, always closest to Mother Mary, was a student at the Sorbonne and decided to prepare for priesthood.

World War Two. German occupation of Paris. Gradually and inevitably Mother Mary was drawn into serving the most desperately deprived ones, -- the Jews persecuted by the Nazis. Smuggling food parcels into prison camps, hiding Jewish families in the hostel, preparing false documents and leading them to new hiding places, -- all was in the day's work. Father Dimitry baptized those few Jewish people who genuinely wished to become Christian, but to the others he gave baptismal certificates, scores and scores of them. Iuri served as a guide to new hiding places. The house was crammed full with desperate people, often hysterical in their fear. Under the strain Mother Mary's manner became peremptory. She was an officer directing her troops -- the job had to be done quickly and without fuss. It was Father Dimitry who soothed the frightened, who took their sorrows to his own heart. Many years later survivors were to remember Mother Mary with respect, but it was Father Dimitry who inspired their love.

During the days when 7500 Jews, more than half of them children, were interned in the large stadium "Vel d'Hiv", Mother Mary managed to penetrate the building and spent several days there, finally smuggling out four Jewish children, hidden in garbage cans.

The end of all this activity is easy to guess. The first one to be arrested was Iuri in February 1943 while Mother Mary was away. Father Dimitry's arrest followed and he tried to protect Iuri by shouldering all of the guilt. "And if we release you," asked the German official "will you promise never again to aid Jews?"

"I can say no such thing," answered Father Dimitry in his usual timid and gentle manner. "I am a Christian and must act as I must." "Jew-lover!" screamed the official and struck Father Dimitry across the face. The frail priest recovered his balance. Still calm, he raised the Cross from his cassock. "Do you know this Jew?" he said quietly. The blow he received felled him.

Learning of Iuri's arrest Mother Mary hurried home and was immediately arrested too, as well as two more men on the staff of Orthodox Action.

A group of 400 prisoners were assembled in the prison yard to be shipped to a French prison camp. His cassock torn and dirty Father Dimitry was laughed at. To amuse a group of watching typists, an S.S. man began pushing him, crying out "Jew! Jew!" Father bore it calmly, but beside him Iuri began to cry. "Don't cry," said Father Dimitry. "Remember that Jesus Christ had to bear greater humiliation. This is nothing beside that."

For some time the four prisoners of Orthodox Action remained in prison camps in France. Just once, with the help of friends, Mother Mary and Iuri happened to meet. At dawn Mother Mary stood at a certain window, Iuri managed to sneak out of his building into the yard. For a few minutes barely they looked at each other and exchanged a few words of encouragement and faith. The friend who watched said that never will she

forget that light of happiness and love that shone in their faces. They were never to see each other again.

Some two months after her arrest, in April 1943, Mother Mary was shipped to the famous women's concentration camp in Ravensbruck, Germany. It seems unnecessary to describe here the life, or rather the living death in a German concentration camp. Mother Mary, physically sturdy and of undaunted spirit, stood it for two years. Only a few personal details have reached us.

Her special concerns were the Russian women deported by Germans from USSR. They were singled out for particularly malicious persecution. Mother Mary opened up contacts. The young Russians were fascinated by this big nun who came to them without questions, suspicion and dogma; anxious, miserable as she was, to bring them hope and warmth. On Sundays they surrounded her, as she read to them out of the small New Testament she had managed to hide.

One day Mother Mary talked to a young Russian girl during roll call. The S.S. woman guard shouted at her and hit her viciously across the face with a belt. Calmly Mother Mary finished her sentence in Russian. The guard whipped her then and there mercilessly. Mother Mary bore in unflinchingly and said later to a friend: "I felt no hate for that woman – it was as if she wasn't even there."

Since Mother Mary was considered unsuitable for hard work she was assigned to cleaning latrines and knitting Army socks in a workshop. With snippets of colored wool she managed to embroider scraps of material, tiny gifts to her fellow prisoners. She managed a smile for all who came to see her. A Jewish mother came to her, -- she was being sent to an extermination camp with her two children:

"I cannot ask you to be brave," said Mother Mary and I do not think that you should try to keep a joyful heart. I can only tell you, with all my heart, that if it were possible I would go in your place. Remember that beside you walks the conscience of a better world. Your suffering helps to cleanse this world, hate will become guilt, and guilt will become understanding and love. You will not be forgotten." To her friends in Parish she sent a message "I submit completely to suffering, even to death. If I die, I shall see in this a blessing from Above."

Twice Mother Mary was transferred to a "Hunger Camp," where the sick were taken to die. With her fantastic ability to make friends and awaken devotion to herself, she managed to survive the first stay. But her strength was ebbing. Only skin and bones remained. Her eyes were festering, she was suffering badly from dysentery. The Camp Bloc Senior, a Polish woman known for brutality, was completely subdued by Mother Mary and tried to save her. She would let her go out to roll-calls at the very last moment and other friends bore her weight until the moment when the inspecting officer passed. She hid Mother Mary under a bed or in the loft. Helpless by now, Mother Mary wept to see so much love shown to her, such risks taken. On Good Friday, March 30, 1945, she failed to rise. Her number was noted, her glasses were taken away, and she was laid out

on the camp street with other sick and dying women. Her name appeared on the list of those who were gassed on March 31, 1945 on Holy Saturday.

Father Dimitry's and Iuri's fate differed only slightly from that of Mother Mary. They remained for a year longer in the French camp. Father Dimitry continued to act as a priest. A church was improvised, with up-ended wooden bed-stalls to form an iconostas. Prisoners painted icons and made a crucifix and sacred vessels. One of the prisoners wrote: "God reveals himself to men. But after knowing Father Dimitry I can affirm that God can also speak through a man. I learned what an immense spiritual, mental and moral help a man can be to other men, as a friend, a comrade, a confessor."

In January 1944 Father Dimitry and Iuri were transferred to Camp Buchenwald in Germany. Their bodies were completely shaved. They donned the stripped, pajama-style cotton uniforms and then were sent to a working camp near by, driving tunnels through the mountains. It took only one month to kill Father Dimitry. He contracted pneumonia and was dispatched to the death house. There the sick sat on the floor, shoulder to shoulder not a stick of furniture in the place, only several hundred dying bodies. On February 11, 1944, Father Dimitry was dead. Iuri was in better physical condition, but he developed furunculosis, considered contagious. A few days after Father Dimitry's death, he was taken away in a truck – "destination unknown." He was never seen again. It was presumed he had been shot.