

Saint Marie Skobtsova of Paris

July 20th

Troparion (*Tone 1*)

Through the sufferings which the saints have endured for Your sake, O Lord, we beseech You to heal all of our infirmities, O Good Friend of Man.

Elizaveta Pilenko was born in 1891 in Riga, Latvia. She was called Liza. Her parents were devout Orthodox Christians. Her father died in 1905, which caused her to abandon her faith in God. The family moved to St. Petersburg in 1906, a hotbed of revolutionary ideas. She noted there were no heroes in the movement, no one giving their lives for others. She began to discuss theology and gradually was drawn back to her faith. By 1910, she married. The marriage only lasted 3 years, during which time Liza gave birth to her first daughter. While civil war was raging in Russia, Liza was appointed mayor of Anapa. She hoped she could keep the town's essential services working and protect anyone in danger of the firing squad. But as the front lines of the civil war moved back and forth across Anapa, her life was again in danger. Now re-married, she and her husband, a teacher named Daniel Skobtsov, realized that their only hope was to escape to the West.

Their long and difficult journey took them first to Georgia, then to Istanbul, next to Yugoslavia, and finally to Paris, which they reached in 1923. It had taken three years to get there. Two more children had been born during pauses along the way. In the hard winter of 1926, each person in the family came down with influenza. All recovered except Liza's daughter, Nastia, who became thinner with each passing day. After a month in the hospital, Nastia died. It was a turning point in Liza's life. It became clear to her that she must devote the rest of her life to Christ's commandment, "Love one another." She felt called to become "a mother for all who need maternal care, assistance, or protection."

In 1930, Liza was appointed traveling secretary of the Russian Student Christian Movement, work which put her into daily contact with Russian refugees throughout France. Liza began to envision a new type of community, "half monastic and half fraternal," which would connect spiritual life with service to those in need, in the process showing "that a free Church can perform miracles." She had come to understand that Christ was present in the least person. "We ought to treat the body of our fellow human being with more care than we treat our own," she wrote.



Her bishop, Metropolitan Evlogy, aware that Liza's marriage had collapsed, was the first person to suggest to her the possibility of becoming a nun in the middle of Paris, helping people who had no one to turn to. In 1932 Liza was professed as a nun. For the rest of her life she was known as Mother Maria.

From the beginning, Mother Maria's plan was "to share the life of paupers and tramps." With financial help from her bishop, she rented an unfurnished house. Donated furniture began arriving, and also guests, mainly young Russian women without jobs. To make room for others, Mother Maria gave up her own room and slept in the basement. When the first house proved to be too small, a new location was found -- a three-story house at 77 Rue de Lourmel in a section of Paris where many Russian refugees had settled. Here she and her co-workers could feed a hundred people instead of twenty-five. The former stable in back was converted into a small church.

Mother Maria's credo was: "Each person is the very icon of God incarnate in the world." With this recognition came the need "to venerate the image of God" in each person.

It was far from an easy life. Often there was no money at the end of the day, but then the next morning one or several gifts arrived. Mother Maria sometimes thought of the old Russian story of the ruble coin that could never be spent. Each time it was used, the change given back proved to equal a ruble. It was exactly this way with love, she said: No matter how much love you give, you never have less. In fact you discover you have more -- one ruble becomes two, two becomes ten.

Mother Maria and her collaborators would not simply open the door when those in need knocked, but would actively seek out the homeless. These included children. A part-time school was opened.

She was certain that there was no other path to heaven than participating in God's mercy. "The way to God lies through love of people. At the Last Judgment I shall not be asked whether I was successful in my ascetic exercises, nor how many bows and prostrations I made. Instead I shall be asked: Did I feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit the sick and the prisoners? That is all I shall be asked."

In 1939, Metropolitan Evlogy sent a priest to Rue de Lourmel to assist Mother Maria. Father Dimitri Klepinin, then 35 years old, was a man of few words and great modesty who proved to be a real partner. Among other helpers was Mother Maria's son, Yuri.

The last phase of Mother Maria's life was a series of responses to World War II and Germany's occupation of France.

Paris fell on June 14, 1940. With defeat came greater poverty and hunger for many people. The house at Rue de Lourmel became an official food distribution point. Russian refugees were among the special targets of the German occupiers. In June 1941, a thousand Russians were arrested, including several close friends and collaborators of Mother Maria and Father Dimitri.

Early in 1942, Jews began to knock on the door at Rue de Lourmel asking Father Dimitri if he would issue baptismal certificates to them. The answer was always yes. With baptismal certificates, they hoped not to be punished by the occupiers for being Jews.

In March 1942, the decree came from Berlin that Jews in all occupied countries must wear the yellow star. The order came into force in France in June. Jews were

forbidden access to nearly all public places. Shopping was restricted to one hour per day.

In July came the mass arrest of 12,884 Jews. Almost 7,000 Jews (two-thirds of them children) were brought to the Vélodrome d'Hiver. Held there for five days, the captives were at last sent to one of the most notorious concentration camps, Auschwitz. Few survived.

Mother Maria had often thought of her monastic robe a godsend in her work. Now it opened the way for her to enter the stadium. She was able to work for three days in the stadium trying to comfort the children and their parents and distributing what food she could bring in. She even managed to rescue a number of children by enlisting the aid of trash collectors who smuggled the children out in trash bins -- until the Nazis barred her from the stadium.

Early in 1943, the long-expected event happened: Mother Maria, Yuri and Father Dimitri were arrested and soon after were sent to the first of several concentrations camps.

The final destination for Yuri and Father Dimitri was a camp named Dora. Both died there in the early months of 1944. A final letter from Yuri was discovered in a suitcase of his possessions returned to Rue de Lourmel:

"I am absolutely calm, even somewhat proud to share mama's fate. I promise you I will bear everything with dignity. Whatever happens, sooner or later we shall all be together. I can say in all honesty that I am not afraid of anything any longer.... I ask anyone whom I have hurt in any way to forgive me. Christ be with you!"

Mother Maria was sent in a sealed cattle truck to the Ravensbrück camp in Germany, where she endured for two years. Here she managed to help those around her and even made an embroidered icon of the Mother of God holding a cross that supported her crucified Son.

One fellow prison recalled that Mother Maria "was never downcast, never. She was full of good cheer, really good cheer. She was on good terms with everyone. She was the kind of person who made no distinction between people no matter what their political views might be or their religious beliefs."

By March 1945, Mother Maria's condition was critical. She had to lie down between roll calls and hardly spoke. Her face, a friend recalled, "revealed intense inner suffering. Already it bore the marks of death. Nevertheless Mother Maria made no complaint. She kept her eyes closed and seemed to be in a state of continual prayer."

The last day of her life was the day before Easter. The shellfire of the approaching Russian Army could be heard in the distance. Accounts vary about what happened during the last hours of her life. According to one, she was simply one of those selected to die that day. According to another, she took the place of a fellow prisoner, a Jewish woman.

Although perishing in the gas chamber, Mother Maria did not perish in the Church's memory. Soon after the end of World War II, essays and books about her began appearing.

On May 1 and 2, 2004, at Saint Alexander Nevsky Cathedral in Paris, Mother Maria, her son Yuri, Father Dimitri Klépinin, and their friend and co-worker Ilya Fondaminsky were officially recognized as saints. The Holy Synod of the Patriarchate of Constantinople established the 20th of July each year as the day of

their remembrance.

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