

Mother Maria Skobtsova: Saint of the Open Door

by Jim Forest

“No amount of thought will ever result in any greater formulation than the three words, ‘Love one another,’ so long as it is love to the end and without exceptions.”

Elizaveta Pilenko, the future Mother Maria, was born in 1891 in the Latvian city of Riga, then part of the Russian Empire, and grew up in the south of Russia on a family estate near the town of Anapa on the shore of the Black Sea. In her family she was known as Liza. For a time her father was mayor of Anapa. Later he was director of a botanical garden and school at Yalta. On her mother’s side, Liza was descended from the last governor of the Bastille, the Parisian prison destroyed during the French Revolution.

Her parents were devout Orthodox Christians whose faith helped shape their daughter’s values, sensitivities and goals. As a child she once emptied her piggy bank in order to contribute to the painting of an icon that would be part of a new church in Anapa. At seven she asked her mother if she was old enough to become a nun, while a year later she sought permission to become a pilgrim who spends her life walking from shrine to shrine. (As late as 1940, when living in German-occupied Paris, thoughts of one day being a wandering pilgrim and missionary in Siberia again filled her imagination.)

When she was fourteen, her father died, an event which seemed to her meaningless and unjust and led her to atheism. “If there is no justice,” she said, “there is no God.” She decided God’s nonexistence was well known to adults but kept secret from children. For her, childhood was over.

When her widowed mother moved the family to St. Petersburg in 1906, she found herself in the country’s political and cultural center – also a hotbed of radical ideas and groups.

She became part of radical literary circles that gathered around such symbolist poets as Alexander Blok, whom she first met at age fifteen. Blok responded to their unexpected meeting – Liza had come to visit unannounced – with a poem that included the lines: “Only someone who is in love / Has the right to call himself a human being.” In a note that came with the poem, Blok told Liza that many people were dying where they stood. The world-weary poet urged her “to run, run from us, the dying ones.” She replied with a vow fight “against death and against wickedness.”

Like so many of her contemporaries, she was drawn to the left, but was often disappointed that the radicals she encountered. Though regarding themselves as revolutionaries, they seemed to do nothing but talk. “My spirit longed to engage in heroic feats, even to perish, to combat the injustice of the world,” she recalled. Yet no one she knew was actually laying down his life for others. Should her friends hear of someone dying for the Revolution, she noted, “they will value it, approve or not approve, show understanding on a very high level, and discuss the night away

till the sun rises and it's time for fried eggs. But they will not understand at all that to die for the Revolution means to feel a rope around one's neck."

Liza began teaching evening courses to workers at the Poutilov Plant, but later gave it up in disillusionment when one of her students told her that he and his classmates weren't interested in learning as such, but saw classes as a necessary path to becoming clerks and bureaucrats. The teen-age Liza wanted her workers to be every bit as idealistic as she was.

In 1910, Liza married Dimitri Kuzmin-Karaviev, a member of Social Democrat Party, better known as the Bolsheviks. She was eighteen, he was twenty-one. It was a marriage born "more of pity than of love," she later commented. Dimitri had spent a short time in prison several years before, but by the time of their marriage was part of a community of poets, artists and writers in which it was normal to rise at three in the afternoon and talk the night through until dawn.

She not only knew poets but wrote poems in the symbolist mode. In 1912 her first collection of poetry, *Scythian Shards*, was published.

Like many other Russian intellectuals, she later reflected, she was a participant in the revolution before the Revolution that was "so deeply, pitilessly and fatally laid over the soil of old traditions" only to destroy far more than it created. "Such courageous bridges we erected to the future! At the same time, this depth and courage were combined with a kind of decay, with the spirit of dying, of ghostliness, ephemerality. We were in the last act of the tragedy, the rupture between the people and the intelligentsia."

She and her friends also talked theology, but just as their political ideas had no connection at all to the lives of ordinary people, their theology floated far above the actual Church. There was much they might have learned, she reflected later in life, from "any old beggar woman hard at her Sunday prostrations in church." For many intellectuals, the Church was an idea or a set of abstract values, not a community in which one actually lives.

Though still regarding herself as an atheist, little by little her earlier attraction to Christ revived and deepened, not yet Christ as God incarnate but Christ as heroic man. "Not for God, for He does not exist, but for the Christ," she said. "He also died. He sweated blood. They struck His face ... [while] we pass by and touch His wounds and yet are not burned by His blood."

One door opened to another. Liza found herself drawn toward the religious faith she had jettisoned after her father's death. She prayed and read the Gospel and the lives of saints. It seemed to her that the real need of the people was not for revolutionary theories but for Christ. She wanted "to proclaim the simple word of God," she told Blok in a letter written in 1916. The same year her second collection of poems, *Ruth*, appeared in St. Petersburg.

Deciding to study theology, she applied for entrance at the Theological Academy of the Alexander Nevsky Monastery in St. Petersburg, in those days an entirely male school whose students were preparing for ordination as priests. As surprising as her wanting to study there was the rector's decision that she could be admitted.

By 1913, Liza's marriage collapsed. (Later in his life Dimitri became a Christian, joined the Catholic Church, and later lived and worked among Jesuits in western Europe.) That October her first child, Gaiana, was born.

Just as World War I was beginning, Liza returned with her daughter to her family's country home near Anapa in Russia's deep south. Her religious life became more intense. For a time she secretly wore lead weights sewn into a hidden belt as a way of reminding herself both "that Christ exists" and also to be more aware that minute-by-minute many people were suffering and dying in the war. She realized, however, that the primary Christian asceticism was not self-mortification, but caring response to the needs of other people while at the same time trying to create better social structures. She joined the ill-fated Social Revolutionary Party, a movement that, despite the contrast in names, was far more democratic than Lenin's Social Democratic Party.

On a return visit to St. Petersburg, Liza spent hours visiting a small chapel best known for a healing icon in which small coins had been embedded when lightning struck the poor box that stood near by – it was called the Mother of God, Joy of the Sorrowful, with Kopeks. Here she prayed in a dark corner, reviewing her life as one might prepare for confession, finally feeling God's overwhelming presence. "God is over all," she knew with certainty, "unique and expiating everything."

In October 1917, Liza was present in St. Petersburg when Russia's Provisional Government was overthrown by the Bolsheviks. Taking part in the All-Russian Soviet Congress, she heard Lenin's lieutenant, Leon Trotsky, dismiss people from her party with the words, "Your role is played out. Go where you belong, into history's garbage can!"

On the way home, she narrowly escaped summary execution by convincing a Bolshevik sailor that she was a friend of Lenin's wife. It was on that difficult journey of many train rides and long waits at train stations that she began to see the scale of the catastrophe Russia was now facing: terror, random murder, massacres, destroyed villages, the rule of hooligans and thugs, hunger and massive dislocation. How hideously different actual revolution was from the dreams of revolution that had once filled the imagination of so many Russians, not least the intellectuals!

In February 1918, in the early days of Russia's Civil War, Liza was elected deputy mayor of Anapa. She hoped she could keep the town's essential services working and protect anyone in danger of the firing squad. "The fact of having a female mayor," she noted, "was seen as something obviously revolutionary." Thus they put up with "views that would not have been tolerated from any male."

She became acting mayor after the town's Bolshevik mayor fled when the White Army took control of the region. Again her life was in danger. To the White forces, Liza looked as Red as any Bolshevik. She was arrested, jailed, and put on trial for collaboration with the enemy. In court, she rose and spoke in her own defense: "My loyalty was not to any imagined government as such, but to those whose need of justice was greatest, the people. Red or White, my position is the same – I will act for justice and for the relief of suffering. I will try to love my neighbor."

It was thanks to Daniel Skobtsov, a former schoolmaster who was now her judge, that Liza avoided execution. After the trial, she sought him out to thank him. They fell in love and within days were married. Before long Liza found herself once again pregnant.

The tide of the civil war was now turning in favor of the Bolsheviks. Both Liza and her husband were in peril, as well as her daughter and unborn child. They made the decision many thousands were making: it was safest to go abroad. Liza's mother, Sophia, came with them.

Their journey took them across the Black Sea to Georgia in the putrid hold of a storm-beaten steamer. Liza's son Yura was born in Tbilisi in 1920. A year later they left for Istanbul and from there traveled to Yugoslavia where Liza gave birth to Anastasia, or Nastia as she was called in the family. Their long journey finally ended final in France. They arrived in Paris in 1923. Friends gave them use of a room. Daniel found work as a part-timer teacher, though the job paid too little to cover expenses. To supplement their income, Liza made dolls and painted silk scarves, often working ten or twelve hours a day.

A friend introduced her to the Russian Student Christian Movement, an Orthodox association founded in 1923. Liza began attending lectures and taking part in other activities of the group. She felt herself coming back to life spiritually and intellectually.

In the hard winter of 1926, each person in the family came down with influenza. All recovered except Nastia, who became thinner with each passing day. At last a doctor diagnosed meningitis. The Pasteur Institute accepted Nastia as a patient, also giving permission to Liza to stay day and night to help care for her daughter.

Liza's vigil was to no avail. After a month in the hospital, Nastia died. Even then, for a day and night, her grief-stricken mother sat by Nastia's side, unable to leave the room. During those desolate hours, she came to feel how she had never known "the meaning of repentance, but now I am aghast at my own insignificance I feel that my soul has meandered down back alleys all my life. And now I want an authentic and purified road. Not out of faith in life, but in order to justify, understand and accept death No amount of thought will ever result in any greater formulation than the three words, 'Love one another,' so long as it is love to the end and without exceptions. And then the whole of life is illumined, which is otherwise an abomination and a burden."

The death of someone you love, she wrote, "throws open the gates into eternity, while the whole of natural existence has lost its stability and its coherence. Yesterday's laws have been abolished, desires have faded, meaninglessness has displaced meaning, and a different, albeit incomprehensible Meaning, has caused wings to sprout on one's back Before the dark pit of the grave, everything must be reexamined, measured against falsehood and corruption."

After her daughter's burial, Liza became "aware of a new and special, broad and all-embracing motherhood." She emerged from her mourning with a determination to seek "a more authentic and purified life." She felt she saw a "new road before me and a new meaning in life, to be a mother for all, for all who need maternal care, assistance, or protection."

Liza devoted herself more and more to social work and theological writing with a social emphasis. In 1927 two volumes, *Harvest of the Spirit*, were published in which she retold the lives of many saints.

In the same period, her husband began driving a taxi, a job which provided a better income than part-time teaching. By now Gaiana was living at a boarding school in Belgium, thanks to help from her father. But Liza and Daniel's marriage was dying, perhaps a casualty of Nastia's death.

Feeling driven to devote herself as fully as possible to social service, Liza, with her mother, moved to central Paris, thus closer to her work. It was agreed that Yura would remain with his father until he was fourteen, though always free to visit and stay with his mother until he was fourteen, when he would decide for himself with which parent he would live. (In fact Yura, found to be in the early stages of tuberculosis, was to spend a lengthy period in a sanatorium apart from both parents.)

In 1930, the same year her third book of poetry was published, Liza was appointed traveling secretary of the Russian Student Christian Movement, work which put her into daily contact with impoverished Russian refugees in cities, towns and villages throughout France and sometimes in neighboring countries.

After completing a lecture in some provincial center, Liza might afterward find herself involved in confessional conversations with those who had come to hear her and who sensed that she was something more than an intellectual with a suitcase full of ideas and theories. "We would embark on frank conversations about émigré life or else about the past A queue would form by the door as if outside a confessional. There would be people wanting to pour out their hearts, to tell of some terrible grief which had burdened them for years, of pangs of conscience which gave them no peace."

She took literally Christ's words that he was always present in the least person. "Man ought to treat the body of his fellow human being with more care than he treats his own," she wrote. "Christian love teaches us to give our fellows material as well as spiritual gifts. We should give them our last shirt and our last piece of bread. Personal almsgiving and the most wide-ranging social work are both equally justified and needed."

"If someone turns with his spiritual world toward the spiritual world of another person," she reflected, "he encounters an awesome and inspiring mystery He comes into contact with the true image of God in man, with the very icon of God incarnate in the world, with a reflection of the mystery of God's incarnation and divine manhood. And he needs to accept this awesome revelation of God unconditionally, to venerate the image of God in his brother. Only when he senses, perceives and understands it will yet another mystery be revealed to him – one that will demand his most dedicated efforts He will perceive that the divine image is veiled, distorted and disfigured by the power of evil And he will want to engage in battle with the devil for the sake of the divine image."

Metropolitan Anthony, now the Russian Orthodox bishop in London, then a layman in Paris where he was studying to become a physician, recalls a story about her from this period that he heard from a friend:

[S]he went to the steel foundry in Creusot, where a large number of Russian [refugees] were working. She came there and announced that she was preparing to give a series of lectures on Dostoevsky. She was met with general howling: “We do not need Dostoevsky. We need linen ironed, we need our rooms cleaned, we need our clothes mended – and you bring us Dostoevsky!” And she answered: “Fine, if that is needed, let us leave Dostoevsky alone.” And for several days she cleaned rooms, sewed, mended, ironed, cleaned. When she had finished doing all that, they asked her to talk about Dostoevsky. This made a big impression on me, because she did not say: “I did not come here to iron for you or clean your rooms. Can you not do that yourselves?” She responded immediately and in this way she won the hearts and minds of the people.

While her work for the Russian Student Christian Movement suited her, the question was still unsettled in her life what her true vocation was. She began to envision a new type on 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.”

Father Sergei Bulgakov, her confessor, was a source of support and encouragement. He had been a Marxist economist before his conversion to Orthodox Christianity. In 1918 he was ordained to the priesthood in Moscow, then five years later was expelled from the USSR. He settled in Paris and became dean at the newly-founded St. Sergius Theological Institute. A spiritual father to many people, he was a confessor who respected the freedom of all who sought his guidance, never demanding obedience, never manipulating.

She also had a supportive bishop, Metropolitan Evlogy Georgievsky. He was responsible from 1921 to 1946 for the many thousands of Russian expatriates scattered across Europe, with the greatest number in France. “Everyone had access to him,” recalled Father Lev Gillet, “and placed on his shoulders all the spiritual or material burdens He wanted to give everyone the possibility of following his or her own call.” Metropolitan Evlogy had become aware of Liza through her social work and was the first one to suggest to her the possibility of becoming a nun.

Assured she would be free to develop a new type of monasticism, engaged in the world and marked by the “complete absence of even the subtlest barrier which might separate the heart from the world and its wounds,” Liza said she was willing to take such a step, but there was the obvious problem of her being married, even if now living alone. For a time it seemed the obstacles were insurmountable, as Daniel Skobtsov did not approve of his estranged wife taking monastic vows, but he changed his mind after Metropolitan Evlogy came to meet him. An ecclesiastical divorce was issued on March 7, 1932. A few weeks later, in the chapel at St. Sergius Theological Institute, Liza was professed as a nun. She was given the name Maria.

She made her monastic profession, Metropolitan Evlogy recognized, “in order to give herself unreservedly to social service.” Mother Maria called it simply “monasticism in the world.”

From the beginning Mother Maria’s intention was “to share the life of paupers and tramps,” but exactly how she would do that wasn’t yet clear to her. She lived in room made available to her by Lev and Valentina Zander as she contemplated the next step in her life.

That summer she set out to visit Estonia and Latvia on behalf of the Russian SCM where, in contrast to Soviet Russia, convents and monasteries still flourished. Here she had a first hand experience of traditional monastic life. The experience strengthened her conviction that her own vocation must follow a different path. It seemed to her that no one in the monasteries she visited was aware that “the world is on fire” or sensed that the times cried out for a new form of monasticism. In a time of massive social disruption, she wrote, it was better to offer a monastic witness which opened its gates to the desperate people living outside and in so doing participate in Christ’s self-abasement. “Everyone is always faced ... with the necessity of choosing between the comfort and warmth of an earthly home, well protected from winds and storms, and the limitless expanse of eternity, which contains only one sure and certain item ... the cross.”

It was clear to her that it was not only Russia which was being torn to shreds. “There are times when all that has been said cannot be made obvious and clear since the atmosphere around us is a pagan one and we are tempted by its idolatrous charms. But our times are firmly in tune with Christianity in that suffering is part of their nature. They demolish and destroy in our hearts all that is stable, mature, hallowed by the ages and treasured by us. They help us genuinely and utterly to accept the vows of poverty, to seek no rule, but rather anarchy, the anarchic life of Fools for Christ’s sake, seeking no monastic enclosure, but the complete absence of even the subtlest barrier which might separate the heart from the world and its wounds.”

Mother Maria had a particular devotion to saints who were classed as Holy Fools: people who behaved outrageously and yet revealed Christ in a remarkable way – such Holy Fools as St. Basil the Blessed, whose feast on August 2nd she kept with special attentiveness. An icon she painted contains scenes from his life. The Holy Fools were, she wrote, saints of freedom. “Freedom calls us to act the Fool for Christ’s sake, at variance with enemies and even friends, to develop the life of the Church in just that way in which it is most difficult. And we shall live as Fools, since we know not only the difficulty of this way of life, but also the exaltation of sensing God’s hand on our work.”

She saw that there were two ways to live. The first was on dry land, a legitimate and respectable place to be, where one could measure, weigh and plan ahead. The second was to walk on the waters where “it becomes impossible to measure or plan ahead. The one thing necessary is to believe all the time. If you doubt for an instant, you begin to sink.”

The water she decided to travel on was a vocation of welcoming and caring for those in desperate need. She began to look for a house of hospitality and found it at 9 villa de Saxe in Paris.

Metropolitan Evlogy remained deeply committed to Mother Maria's activities. When she had to sign the lease and had found no other donors, he paid the required 5000 francs. On another occasion, riding in the Paris Metro with the bishop, she voiced her discouragement about problems she was then facing. At that exact moment the Metro exited a tunnel and was bathed in the light of day. "You see," said Metropolitan Evlogy, "it is the answer to your question."

The house was completely unfurnished. The first night she wrapped herself in blankets and slept on the floor beneath the icon of the Protection of the Mother of God. 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 instead slept on a narrow iron bedstead in the basement by the boiler. A room upstairs became a chapel, its icon screen painted by Mother Maria, while the dining room doubled as a hall for lectures and dialogues.

In time the house soon proved too small. Two years later a new location was found – a derelict house of three storeys at 77 rue de Lourmel in the fifteenth arrondissement, an area where many impoverished Russian refugees had settled. While at the former address she could feed only 25, here she could feed a hundred. The house had the additional advantage of having stables in back which were now made into a small church. Again the decoration was chiefly her own work, many of its icons made by embroidery, an art in which Mother Maria was skilled. She thought of the new property as a modern Noah's Ark able to withstand the stormy waves the world was hurling its way. Here her guests could regain their breath "until the time comes to stand on their two feet again."

Her credo was: "Each person is the very icon of God incarnate in the world." With this recognition came the need "to accept this awesome revelation of God unconditionally, to venerate the image of God" in her brothers and sisters.

As the work evolved she rented other buildings, one for families in need, and another for single men. A rural property became a sanatorium.

By 1937, there were several dozen women guests at 77 rue de Lourmel. Up to 120 dinners were served each day, normally soup plus a main course that included meat plus plenty of bread supplied gratis by a sympathetic baker.

Mother Maria's day typically began with a journey to Les Halles to beg food or buy cheaply whatever was not be donated. The cigarette-smoking beggar nun became well known among the stalls. She would later return with a sack of bones, fish and overripe fruit and vegetables.

On rue de Lourmel she had a room beneath the stairs next to the kitchen. Here on one occasion a visitor found her collapsed in an arm chair in a state of exhaustion. "I can't go on like this," she said. "I can't take anything in. I'm tired, I'm really tired. There have been about 40 people here today, each with his own sorrow and needs. I can't chase them away!"

She would sometimes recall the Russian story of the ruble 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.

She would also relate a legend concerning two fourth-century saints, Nicholas of Myra and John Cassian, who returned to earth to see how things were going. They came upon a peasant, his cart mired in the mud, who begged their help. John Cassian regretfully declined, explaining that he was soon due back in heaven and therefore must keep his robes spotless. Meanwhile Nicholas was already up to his hips in the mud, freeing the cart. When the Ruler of All discovered why Nicholas was caked in mud and John Cassian immaculate, it was decided that Nicholas' feast day would henceforth be celebrated twice each year – May 9 and December 6 – while John Cassian's would occur only once every four years, on February 29.

Mother Maria felt sustained by the opening verses of the Sermon on the Mount: “Not only do we know the Beatitudes, but at this hour, this very minute, surrounded though we are by a dismal and despairing world, we already savor the blessedness they promise...”

It was no virtue of her own that could account for her activities, she insisted. “There is no hardship in it, since all the relief comes my way. God having given me a compassionate nature, how else could I live?”

In addition to help from volunteers, in 1937 another nun came to help: Mother Evdokia Meshcheriakova. Later Mother Blandina Obelenskaya entered the community. There was also Father Lev Gillet, thanks to whom the Liturgy was celebrated frequently. Father Lev lived in an outbuilding near the stable until his departure to London in 1938.

Yet life in community was not easy. Conflicting views about the relative importance of liturgical life were at times a source of tension. Mother Maria was the one most often absent from services or the one who would withdraw early, or arrive late, because of the pressing needs of hospitality. “Piety, piety,” she wrote in her journal, “but where is the love that moves mountains?”

Mother Evdokia, who had begun her monastic life in a more traditional context, was she not as experimental by temperament as Mother Maria. As the community had no abbess, there was no one to arbitrate between the two. For Mother Evdokia, though always in awe of Mother Maria's endurance and prophetic passion, the house at rue de Lourmel was too much an “ecclesiastical Bohemia.” Mother Maria's view was that “the Liturgy must be translated into life. It is why Christ came into the world and why he gave us our Liturgy.” (In 1938 Mother Evdokia and Mother Blandina departed to establish a more traditional monastery at Moisenay-le-Grand.)

Mother Maria clung to her experiment. “In the past religious freedom was trampled down by forces external to Christianity,” she wrote. “In Russia we can say that any regime whatsoever will build concentration camps as its response to religious freedom.” She considered exile in the west a heaven-sent opportunity to renew the Church in ways that would have met repression with in her mother country.

“What obligations follow from the gift of freedom which [in our exile] we have been granted? We are beyond the reach of persecution. We can write, speak, work, open schools At the same time, we have been liberated from age-old traditions. We have no enormous cathedrals, [jewel] encrusted Gospel books, no monastery walls. We have lost our environment. Is this an accident? Is this some chance misfortune?... In the context of spiritual life, there is no chance, nor are there fortunate or unfortunate epochs. Rather there are signs which we must understand and paths which we must follow. Our calling is a great one, since we are called to freedom.”

For her, exile was an opportunity “to liberate the real and authentic” from layers of decoration and dust in which Christ had become hidden. It was similar to the opportunity given to the first Christians. Of paramount importance, “We must not allow Christ to be overshadowed by any regulations, any customs, any traditions, any aesthetic considerations, or even any piety.”

Mother Maria’s difficulties at times made her feel a terrifying loneliness. “I get very depressed,” she admitted. “I could desist, if only I could be convinced that I stand for a truth that is relative.”

She was sustained chiefly by those she served – themselves beaten down, people in despair, cripples, alcoholics, the sick, survivors of many tragedies. But not all responded to trust with trust. Theft was not uncommon. On one occasion a guest stole 25 francs. Everyone guessed who the culprit was, a drug addict, but Mother Maria refused to accuse her. Instead she announced at the dinner table that the money had not been stolen, only misplaced, and she had found it. “You see how dangerous it is to make accusations,” she commented. At once the girl who stole the money burst into tears.

“It is not enough to give,” Mother Maria might say. “We must have a heart that gives.” If mistakes were made, if people betrayed a trust, the cure was not to limit giving. “The only ones who make no mistakes,” she said, “are those who do nothing.”

Mother Maria and her collaborators would not simply open the door when those in need knocked, but would actively seek out the homeless. One place to find them was an all-night café at Les Halles where those with nowhere else to go could sit as long as they liked for the price of a glass of wine. Children were also cared for. A part-time school was opened at several locations.

Fortunately for the community, their prudent business manager, Fedor Pianov, formerly general secretary of the Russian Christian Student Movement, at times intervened in cases where a trusted person was systematically violating the confidence placed in him, as sometimes happened.

Turning her attention toward Russian refugees who had been classified insane, Mother Maria began a series of visits to mental hospitals. In each hospital five to ten percent of the Russian patients turned out to be sane and, thanks to her intervention, were released. Language barriers and cultural misunderstandings had kept them in the asylum.

An inquiry into the needs of impoverished Russians suffering from tuberculosis resulted in the opening in 1935 of a sanatorium in Noisy-le-Grand. Its church was a former hen house. Her

efforts bore the unexpected additional fruit of other French TB sanatoria opening their doors to Russian refugees. The house at Noisy, no longer having to serve its original function, then became a rest home. It was here that Mother Maria's mother Sophia ended her days in 1962. She was a century old.

Another landmark was the foundation in September 1935 of a group christened Orthodox Action, a name proposed by her friend, the philosopher Nicholas Berdyaev. In addition to Mother Maria and Berdyaev, the co-founders included the theologian Father Sergei Bulgakov, the historian George Fedotov, the literary scholar Constantine Mochulsky, and her long-time co-worker Fedor Pianov. Metropolitan Evgoly was honorary president. Mother Maria was chairman. With financial support coming not only from supporters within France but from other parts of Europe as well as America, a wider range of projects and centers were made possible: hostels, rest homes, schools, camps, hospital work, help to the unemployed, assistance to the elderly, publication of books and pamphlets, etc.

Mother Maria's driving concern throughout the expansion of work was that it should never lose either its personal or communal character: "We should make every effort to ensure that each of our initiatives is the common work of all those who stand in need of it," she wrote, "and not [simply part of] some charitable organization, where some perform charitable actions and are accountable for it to their superiors while others receive the charity, make way for those who are next in line, and disappear from view. We must cultivate a communal organization rather than set up a mechanical organization. Our concept of sobornost [conciliarity] commits us to this. At the same time we are committed to the personal principle in the sense that absolutely no one can become for us a routine cipher, whose role is to swell statistical tables. I would say that we should not give away a single piece of bread unless the recipient means something as a person for us."

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, visit the sick and the prisoners. That is all I shall be asked. About every poor, hungry and imprisoned person the Savior says 'I': 'I was hungry and thirsty, I was sick and in prison.' To think that he puts an equal sign between himself and anyone in need. . . . I always knew it, but now it has somehow penetrated to my sinews. It fills me with awe."

Russians have not been last among those enamored with theories, but for Mother Maria, theory always had to take second place. "We have not gathered together for the theoretical study of social problems in the spirit of Orthodoxy," she wrote in 1939, "[but] to link our social thought as closely as possible with life and work. More precisely, we proceed from our work and seek the fullest possible theological interpretation of it."

Yet time was also given to abstract inquiry. Sunday afternoons were normally a time for lectures and discussions at rue de Lourmel. Berdyaev, Bulgakov and Fedotov were frequent speakers. In

addition there were courses set up during the week, including sessions of the Religious-Philosophical Academy that Berdyaev had founded.

While many valued what she and her co-workers were doing, there were others who were scandalized with the shabby nun who was so uncompromising to the duty of hospitality that she might leave a church service to answer the door bell. “For church circles we are too far to the left,” Mother Maria noted, “while for the left we are too church-minded.” Those on the left also saw no point in efforts to relieve individual cases of suffering, still less in time given to prayer. One must rather devote all one’s efforts to bringing about radical social change. There were also supportive friends, Berdyaev among them, who had little understanding of her monastic vocation, though for Mother Maria this remained at the core of her identity. “Thanks to my being clothed as a nun,” she commented, “many things are simpler and within my reach.”

In October 1939, Metropolitan Evlogy send a new priest to rue de Lourmel: Father Dimitri Klepinin, then 35 years old. He was a spiritual child of Father Sergei Bulgakov, who had also been one of his teachers. A man of few words and great modesty, Father Dimitri proved to be a real partner for Mother Maria.

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

It would have been possible for her to leave Paris when the Germans were advancing toward the city, or even to leave the country to go to America. Her decision was not to budge. “If the Germans take Paris, I shall stay here with my old women. Where else could I send them?”

She had no illusions about the Nazi threat. It represented a “new paganism” bringing in its wake disasters, upheavals, persecutions and wars. It was evil unveiled, the “contaminator of all springs and wells.” The so-called “master race” was “led by a madman who needs a straightjacket and should be placed in a cork-lined room so that his bestial wailing will not disturb the world at large.”

“We are entering eschatological times,” she wrote. “Do you not feel that the end is already near?”

Death seemed to rule the world. “Now, at this very minute, I know that hundreds of people have encountered death, while thousands upon thousands more await their turn,” she wrote at Easter in 1940. “I know that mothers wait for the postman and tremble when a letter is delayed by more than a day.” But she saw one gain in all this: “Everything is clearly in its place. Everyone must make their choice. There is nothing disguised or hypocritical in the enemy’s approach.”

Paris fell on the 14th of June. France capitulated a week later. With defeat came greater poverty and hunger for many people. Local authorities in Paris declared the house at rue Lourmel an official food distribution point – Cantine Municipale No. 9. Here volunteers sold at cost price whatever food Mother Maria had bought that morning at Les Halles.

Paris was now a great prison. “There is the dry clatter of iron, steel and brass,” wrote Mother Maria. “Order is all.” Russian refugees were among the particular targets of the occupiers. In

June 1941, a thousand were arrested, including several close friends and collaborators of Mother Maria and Father Dimitri. An aid project for prisoners and their dependents was soon launched by Mother Maria.

Early in 1942, their registration now underway, 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. The names of those “baptized” were also duly recorded in his parish register in case there was any cross-checking by the police or Gestapo, as indeed did happen. Father Dimitri was convinced that in such a situation Christ would do the same.

When the Nazis issued special identity cards for those of Russian origin living in France, with Jews being specially identified, Mother Maria and Father Dimitri refused to comply, though they were warned that those who failed to register would be regarded as citizens of the USSR – enemy aliens – and be punished accordingly.

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

There were, of course, Christians who said that the law being imposed had nothing to do with Christians and that therefore this was not a Christian problem. “There is no such thing as a Christian problem,” Mother Maria replied. “Don’t you realize that the battle is being waged against Christianity? If we were true Christians we would all wear the Star. The age of confessors has arrived.”

She wrote a poem reflecting on the symbol Jews were required to wear:

Two triangles, a star,
The shield of King David, our forefather.
This is election, not offense.
The great path and not an evil.
Once more in a term fulfilled,
Once more roars the trumpet of the end;
And the fate of a great people
Once more is by the prophet proclaimed.
Thou art persecuted again, O Israel,
But what can human malice mean to thee,
who have heard the thunder from Sinai?

In July Jews were forbidden access to nearly all public places. Shopping by Jews was restricted to one hour per day. A week later, there was a mass arrest of Jews – 12,884, of whom 6,900 (two-thirds of them children) were brought to the Vélodrome d’Hiver sports stadium just a kilometer from rue de Lourmel. Held there for five days, the captives in the stadium received water only from a single hydrant, while ten latrines were supposed to serve them all. From there the captives were to be sent via Drancy to Auschwitz.

Mother Maria had often thought her monastic robe a God-send in aiding her work. Now it opened the way for her to enter the stadium. Here she worked for three days trying to comfort the children and their parents, distributing what food she could bring in, even managing to rescue a number of children by enlisting the aid of garbage collectors and smuggling them out in trash bins.

The house at rue de Lourmel was bursting with people, many of them Jews. "It is amazing," Mother Maria remarked, "that the Germans haven't pounced on us yet." In the same period, she said if anyone came looking for Jews, she would show them an icon of the Mother of God.

Father Dimitri, Mother Maria and their co-workers set up routes of escape, from Lourmel to Noisy-le-Grand and from there to other, safer destinations in the unoccupied south. It was complex and dangerous work. Forged documents had to be obtained. An escaped Russian prisoner of war was also among those assisted, working for a time in the Lourmel kitchen. In turn, a local resistance group helped secure provisions for those Mother Maria's community was struggling to feed.

On February 8, 1943, while Mother Maria was traveling, Nazi security police entered the house on rue de Lourmel and found a letter in her son Yura's pocket in which Father Dimitri was asked to provide a Jew with a false baptismal document. Yura, now actively a part of his mother's work, was taken to the office of Orthodox Action, soon after followed by his distraught grandmother, Sophia Pilenko. The interrogator, Hans Hoffman, a Gestapo officer who spoke Russian, ordered her to bring Father Dimitri. Once the priest was there, Hoffman said, they would let Yura go. His grandmother Sophia was allowed to embrace Yura and give him a blessing, making the sign of the cross on his body. It was last time she saw him in this world.

The following morning Father Dimitri served the Liturgy in a side chapel at rue de Lourmel dedicated to St. Philip, a bishop who had paid with his life for protesting the crimes of Tsar Ivan the Terrible. Fortified by communion he set off for the Gestapo office on rue des Saussies. Interrogated for four hours, he made no attempt to hide his beliefs. A fragment of their exchange survives:

Hoffman: If we release you, will you give your word never again to aid Jews?

Klepinin: I can say no such thing. I am a Christian and must act as I must.

(Hoffman struck Klepinin across the face.)

Hoffman: Jew lover! How dare you talk of helping those swine as being a Christian duty!

(Klepinin, recovering his balance, held up the cross from his cassock.)

Klepinin: Do you know this Jew?

(For this, Father Dimitri was knocked to the floor.)

"Your priest did himself in," Hoffman said afterward to Sophia Pilenko. "He insists that if he were to be freed, he would act exactly as before."

The next day, February 10, Mother Maria was back in Paris and was also arrested by Hoffman, who brought her back to Lourmel while he searched her room. Several others were called for questioning and then held by the Gestapo, including a visitor to the home of Father Dimitri. His

wife, Tamara, sensing the danger she was in and aware that she was powerless to free her husband, left Paris with their two young children, one four, the other six months old. The three survived.

Arrested a week later at rue de Lourmel, Mother Maria saw her mother for the last time. “We embraced,” he mother recalled. “I blessed her. He had lived all our life together, in friendship, hardly ever apart. She bade me farewell and said, as she always did at the most difficult moments, ‘Mother, be strong’.”

Mother Maria was confined with 34 other woman at the Gestapo headquarters in Paris. Her son Yura, Father Dimitri and their co-worker of many years, Feodor Pianov, were being held in the same building. Pianov later recalled the scene of Father Dimitri in his torn cassock being taunted as a Jew. One of the SS began to prod and beat him while Yura stood nearby weeping. Father Dimitri “began to console him, saying the Christ withstood greater mockery than this.”

In April the prisoners were transferred to Compiègne, and here Mother Maria was blessed with a final meeting with Yura, who crawled through a window in order to see her. In a letter Yura sent to the community at rue de Lourmel, he said his mother “was in a remarkable state of mind and told me ... that I must trust in her ability to bear things and in general not to worry about her. Every day [Father Dimitri and I] remember her at the proskomidia ... We celebrate the Eucharist and receive communion each day.” He told his mother that his favorite prayer had become the Jesus Prayer – “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner” – and that it provided a way for him to stay close to her no matter what happened. Hours after their meeting, Mother Maria was transported to Germany.

“Thanks to our daily Eucharist,” another letter from Yura reported, “our life here is quite transformed and to tell the honest truth, I have nothing to complain of. We live in brotherly love. Dima [Father Dimitri] and I speak to each other as tu [the intimate form of ‘you’] and he is preparing me for the priesthood. God’s will needs to be understood. After all, this attracted me all my life and in the end it was the only thing I was interested in, though my interest was stifled by Parisian life and the illusion that there might be ‘something better’ – as if there could be anything better.”

In a letter Father Dimitri sent to his wife, he reported that their church was “a very good one.” It was a barrack room transformed, as many other unlikely structures had been in the past. They even managed to make an icon screen and reading stand.

For nine months the three men remained together at Compiègne. “Without exaggeration,” Pianov wrote after being liberated in 1945, “I can say that the year spent with [Father Dimitri] was a godsend. I do not regret that year.... From my experience with him, I learned to understand what enormous spiritual, psychological and moral support one man can give to others as a friend, companion and confessor...”

On December 16, Yura and Father Dimitri were deported to Buchenwald concentration camp in Germany, followed several weeks later by Pianov. In January 1944, Father Dimitri and Yura –

now in striped prison uniforms and with shaved heads – were sent to another camp, Dora, 40 kilometers away, where parts for V-1 and V-2 rockets were being manufactured in underground factories. Within ten days of arrival, Yura contracted furunculosis, a condition in which large areas of the skin are covered in boils. On the 6th of February, he was “dispatched for treatment” – a euphemism for sentenced to death. Four days later Father Dimitri, lying on a dirt floor, died of pneumonia. His body was disposed of in the Buchenwald crematorium.

A final letter from Yura, written at Compiègne, was discovered in a suitcase of his possessions returned from the camp to rue de Lourmel:

“My dears, Dima [Father Dimitri] blesses you, my most beloved ones. I am to go to Germany with Dima, Father Andrei [who also died in a concentration camp] and Anatoly [Vishkovsky]. 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, prisoner 19,263, was sent in a sealed cattle truck from Compiègne to the Ravensbrück camp in Germany, where she endured for two years, an achievement in part explained by her long experience of ascetic life. She was assigned to Block 27 in the large camp’s southwest corner. Not far away was Block 31, full of Russian prisoners, many of whom she managed to befriend.

Unable to correspond with friends, little testimony in her own words has come down to us, but prisoners who survived the war remembered her. One of them, Solange Périchon, recalls:

“She was never downcast, never. She never complained.... She was full of good cheer, really good cheer. We had roll calls which lasted a great deal of time. We were woken at three in the morning and we had to stand out in the open in the middle of winter until the barracks [population] was counted. She took all this calmly and she would say, ‘Well that’s that. Yet another day completed. And tomorrow it will be the same all over again. But one fine day the time will come for all of this to end.’ ... She was on good terms with everyone. Anyone in the block, no matter who it was, knew her on equal terms. She was the kind of person who made no distinction between people [whether they] held extremely progressive political views [or had] religious beliefs radically different than her own. She allowed nothing of secondary importance to impede her contact with people.”

Another prisoner, Rosane Lascroux, recalled:

“She exercised an enormous influence on us all. No matter what our nationality, age, political convictions – this had no significance whatever. Mother Maria was adored by all. The younger prisoners gained particularly from her concern. She

took us under her wing. We were cut off from our families, and somehow she provided us with a family.”

In a memoir, Jacqueline Péry stressed the importance of the talks Mother Maria gave and the discussion groups she led:

“She used to organize real discussion circles ... and I had the good fortune to participate in them. Here was an oasis at the end of the day. She would tell us about her social work, about how she conceived the reconciliation of the Orthodox and Catholic Churches. We would question her about the history of Russia, about its future, about Communism, about her frequent contacts with young women from the Soviet army with whom she liked to surround herself. These discussions, whatever their subject matter, provided an escape from the hell in which we lived. They allowed us to restore our depleted morale, they rekindled in us the flame of thought, which barely flickered beneath the heavy burden of horror.”

Often, Péry wrote, she would recite passages from the New Testament: “Together we would provide a commentary on the texts and then meditate on them. Often we would conclude with Compline... This period seemed a paradise to us.”

Yet, as was recalled by another prisoner, Sophia Nosovich, Mother Maria “never preached but rather discussed religion simply with those who sought it, causing them to understand it and to exercise their minds, not merely their feelings. Whatever and however she could, she would sustain the as yet incompletely extinguished flame of humanity, no matter what form it took.”

The same former prisoner wrote that “it was not submissiveness which gave [Mother Maria] strength to bear the suffering, but the integrity and wealth of her interior life.”

And all this happened in what Mother Maria described not as a prison but as hell itself, nothing less, a bestial place in which obscenity, contempt and hatred were normal and where hunger, illness and death was a daily event. In such a climate, many opted for the numbing of all feeling and withdrawal as a survival strategy while others, in their despair, looked forward only to death.

“I once said to Mother Maria,” wrote Sophia Nosovich, “that it was more than a question of my ceasing to feel anything whatsoever. My very thought processes were numbed and had ground to a halt. ‘No, no,’ Mother Maria responded, ‘whatever you do, continue to think. In the conflict with doubt, cast your thought wider and deeper. Let it transcend the conditions and the limitations of this earth’.”

One prisoner even recalled how Mother Maria had used the ever-smoking chimney’s the camps several crematoria as a metaphor of hope rather than being seen as the only exit point from the camp. “But it is only here, immediately above the chimneys, that the billows of smoke are oppressive,” Mother Maria said. “When they rise higher, they turn into light clouds before being dispersed in limitless space. In the same way, our souls, once they have torn themselves away

from this sinful earth, move by means of an effortless unearthly flight into eternity, where there is life full of joy.”

Anticipating her own exit point from the camp might be via the crematoria chimneys, she asked a fellow prisoner whom she hoped would survive to memorize a message to be given at last to Father Sergei Bulgakov, Metropolitan Evlogy and her mother: “My state at present is such that I completely accept suffering in the knowledge that this is how things ought to be for me, and if I am to die, I see this as a blessing from on high.”

In a postcard she was allowed to send friends in Paris in the fall of 1944, she said she remained strong and healthy but had “altogether become an old woman.”

Her work in the camp varied. There was a period when she was part of a team of women dragging a heavy iron roller about the roads and pathways of the camp for 12 hours a day. In another period she worked in a knitwear workshop.

Her legs began to give way. At roll call another prisoner, Inna Webster, would act as her crutches. As her health declined, friends no longer allowed her to give away portions of her own food, as she had done in the past to help keep others alive.

Friends who survived recalled that Mother Maria wrote two poems while at Ravensbrück, but sadly neither survive. However a kerchief she embroidered for Rosane Lascroux, made with a needle and thread stolen from the tailoring workshop at last came out of the camp intact. In the style of the medieval Bayeux Tapestry, it was a depiction of the Allies’ Normandy Landing in June 1944. Her final embroidered icon, purchased with the price of her precious bread ration, was of the Mother of God holding the infant Jesus, her child already marked with the wounds of the cross.

With the Red Army approaching from the East, the concentration camp administrators further reduced food rations while greatly increasing the population of each block from 800 to 2,500. “People slept three to a bunk,” a survivor recalls. “Lice devoured us. Typhus and dysentery became a common scourge and decimated our ranks.”

By March 1945, Mother Maria’s condition was critical. She had to lie down between roll calls and hardly spoke. Her face, as Jacqueline Péry 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. This was, I think, her Garden of Gethsemane.”

In November-December 1944, she accepted a pink card that was freely issued to any prisoner who wished to be excused from labor because of age or ill health. On January all who had received such cards were rounded up and transferred to what was called the Jugendlager – the “youth camp” – where the camp authorities said each person would have her own bed and abundant food. Mother Maria’s transfer was on January 31. Here the food ration was further reduced and the hours spent standing for roll calls increased. Though it was mid-winter,

blankets, coats and jackets were confiscated, and then even shoes and stockings. The death rate was at least fifty per day. Next all medical supplies were withdrawn. Those who still persisted in surviving now faced death by shootings and gas, the latter made possible by the construction of a gas chamber in March 1945. In this 150 were executed per day.

It is astonishing that Mother Maria lasted five weeks in the “youth camp,” and was finally sent back to the Jugendlager to the main camp on March 3. Though emaciated and infested with lice, with her eyes festering, she began to think she might actually live to return to Paris, or even go back to Russia.

That same month the camp commander received an order from Reichsführer Himmler that anyone who could no longer walk should be killed. While such orders had been anticipated and many already killed, the decree accelerated the process. With the help of Inna Webster and others to lean on, Mother Maria managed to continue standing at roll calls, but this became far more difficult when groups of prisoners were ordered into ranks of five for purposes of selecting those to be killed that day. Within her block, Mother Maria was sometimes hidden in a small space between roof and ceiling in expectation of raids in which additional “selections” were made.

Mother Maria died on the 30th of March – Good Friday as it happened. The shellfire of the approaching Red Army could be heard in the distance.

Accounts are at odds about what happened. According to one, she was simply one of the many selected for death that day. According to another, she took the place of another prisoner, a Jew, who had been chosen. Her friend Jacqueline Péry wrote afterward:

“It is very possible that [Mother Maria] took the place of a frantic companion. It would have been entirely in keeping with her generous life. In any case she offered herself consciously to the holocaust ... thus assisting each one of us to accept the cross She radiated the peace of God and communicated it to us.”

Although perishing in the gas chamber, she did not perish in the Church’s memory. Survivors of the war who had known her would again and again draw attention to the ideas, insights and activities of the maverick nun who had spent so many years coming to the aid of people in desperate straights. Soon after the end of World War II, essays and books about her began appearing, in French and Russia. A Russian film, “Mother Maria,” was made in 1982. There have been two biographies in English and little by little the translation and publication in English of her most notable essays. A 22-page bibliography of Mother Maria-related writings has been assembled by Dr. Kristi Groberg.

Controversial in life, Mother Maria remains a subject of contention to this day, a fact which may explain the slowness of the Orthodox Church in adding her to the calendar of saints. While clearly she lived a life of heroic virtue and is among the martyrs of the twentieth century, her verbal assaults on nationalistic and tradition-bound forms of religious life still raise the blood

pressure of many Orthodox Christians. Mother Maria remains an indictment of any form of Christianity that seeks Christ chiefly inside church buildings.