

Shaped by Sisters
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“She gave her life for others”

Our Sister Martyr: Blessed Julia Rodzinska¹

Shortly after World War II, a survivor of the Stutthof concentration camp contacted our Dominican Congregation. She claimed that a Sister of our community was nothing short of a saint. While Sr. Julia’s Sisters may have considered her just another unfortunate victim of Nazi brutality, her fellow prisoners saw her as a hero. She preserved their morals, their dignity, and sometimes—literally—their lives. One fellow prisoner, Ewa Hoff, insisted that, amid those of numerous nationalities and religions who saw Julia’s witness, she “will not fall into oblivion.” This is the story of a life that Ewa Hoff and others demanded should be told.

Shaped by Sisters

Sister Julia was born Stanislawa Rodzinska in southern Poland in 1899. Her father, Michal Rodzinski, recorded proudly that he had personally delivered this, his second child. Michal was an organist for the parish church, a talented composer and man-of-all-trades who took on various jobs to make ends meet. His wife Marianna helped where she could, but a long-term illness took her life when Stanislawa was only 8 years old. Times must have been tough for the whole family—Marianna left two sons and two daughters—as Michal battled rheumatism in his fight to provide for his kids. Then, only two years later, he died from pneumonia, leaving Stanislawa and her siblings orphans.

Some relatives agreed to make room for the boys, Julian (14) and Ludwik (8). But since no one stepped forward to care for the girls, the parish priest arranged for Stanislawa (10) and her sister Janina (4) to stay with the Sisters of St. Dominic, who served in the parish. The Superior there was Sister Stanislawa (b. Julia) Leniart, a loving force who left such an impression on the girls in her care that many of them called her “Mom.” An orphan herself, Sr. Stanislawa Leniart had been raised by the very foundress of the Sisters of St. Dominic, and thus was able to pass on many lessons about Mother Kolumba and the Sisters’ charism firsthand.

So, with the Sisters, the Rodzinska girls found a home and a holistic education. This included housework, needlework, and taking part in the Sisters’ parish ministry: primarily teaching catechism classes, serving the sick of the village, and accompanying with the dying. Such experiences undoubtedly shaped young Stanislawa Rodzinska, who for some time expressed interest in becoming a Sister herself. Although she was a notably good student—she began college studies to be a teacher—she put studies aside to enter the convent in August 1916.

“To Love God and To Want to Serve God”

Before she became a novice, in August 1917, Stanisława was expected to pass a canonical exam which included describing her aim for religious life. Stanisława wrote about her desire “To love God and to want to serve God” (*Miłość Boża i chęć służby Bożej*). The next day, she received the Dominican habit and the name Maria Julia, and began to more systematically learn how to love and serve God in the charism of the Sisters of St. Dominic.

After novitiate, Sr. Julia resumed training to be a teacher, along with working in an orphanage the Sisters had recently opened for casualties of World War I. Her creative and organizational talents emerged as the Sisters arranged plays and art exhibitions to fundraise for the orphanage. Thanks no doubt to her own childhood experience, Sr. Julia also showed unusual tact, empathy, and motherliness for the orphans.

Sr. Julia spent a year or two teaching school as well, before being moved in December 1922 to Vilnius (now in Lithuania) to help open and staff a Shelter for Orphans. Here she also taught in the public schools, and established a reputation as a demanding but fair teacher, knowing how to remain cordial with students, motivate them, and strengthen weaker students’ self-confidence. Years later, students remembered her with gratitude and affection, recalling that she was always prepared for lessons and taught them in an interesting and understandable way.

“Mother of the Orphans”

The Vilnius administration soon took notice of Sr. Julia’s educational abilities—within five years, she was appointed school administrator. She also took on various responsibilities within the Dominican Congregation, including, from 1934 on, serving as superior of the convent in Vilnius as well as head of the Shelter for Orphans.

All of these responsibilities did not seem to exhaust Sr. Julia’s energies. Instead, she initiated several projects that were ahead of her time, such as after-school tutoring and summer camps for the poorest children. She did everything possible to educate students who would otherwise not engage in school. Teaching the value of prayer, Sr. Julia witnessed to her own love of the Eucharist and the Rosary, and even established a chapel of sorts for her students. Continuing to show understanding of orphans’ sensitivities, Sr. Julia made sure that those in her care were not poorly dressed or targeted by their peers; she was also known to slip sandwiches on the desks of children whom she knew had little to eat.

Under her direction and fundraising abilities, the Shelter for Orphans expanded. Because of her excellent management of the orphanage, Sr. Julia received many awards from city officials, money from which went to support the children. Her work earned her the title “mother of the orphans” from the Society of Vilnius.

Convent life did not lack Sr. Julia’s attention either. While she demanded careful and dutiful work from her Sisters, she also supported their initiatives. But she was especially known for her emphasis

on prayer: she made sure Mass was available each day, organized retreats for Sisters of other houses as well, and stressed faithfulness to community and private prayer. Visiting priests and religious found a hospitable house under her care.

Sr. Julia's life was not without pain though: from childhood, she had had stomach troubles, which led to a serious operation in 1937.

War comes to Vilnius

Then World War II came to Vilnius, with a bewildering succession of political occupations. In September 1939 the Soviets took over the region; in October, they gave Vilnius to Lithuania; in June 1941, it was occupied by the Germans. Residents had to adjust to three different governments within a short time, and the Sisters' work became increasingly difficult under anti-Catholic regimes. In September 1940, they were dismissed from their teaching positions, but—determined to influence the children in their care as long as possible—the Sisters tried to serve as support staff. To make this possible, they received permission to wear secular clothes. In January 1941, however, the Sisters were ejected from their convent and had to scramble to find other residences and work.

As superior, Sr. Julia had a daunting burden: finding homes and jobs for her Sisters, which was not easy in a war-time environment hostile to Poles. She was able to place some sick and elderly Sisters as house-maids with kindly families, while she and others found lodging with the Nuns of the Visitation. Sr. Julia did not rest there: she joined in underground activities to pass on the Polish language and history, as well as the Catholic religion, subjects that were being suppressed and replaced by Lithuanian policies.

In March 1942, the Archbishop of Vilnius, the faculty of the Theological Seminary, and almost all monks and nuns in Vilnius were arrested—only three Congregations were spared, including the Dominican Sisters. These arrests intentionally disrupted the Church's underground activities, one of which Sr. Julia took over: procuring food for retired priests, who were otherwise left destitute. She also made sure to visit her own Sisters in the various housemaid positions, and to encourage them spiritually. And, while no documentary evidence was left to be found, Sr. Julia was widely known to take part in the Archbishop's efforts to save Jews.

In Lukiszki Prison

On July 12, 1943, Sr. Julia and three of her Sisters were arrested at the Visitation nuns' residence. They were taken to the Lukiszki prison, which the Gestapo used for round-ups and reprisal mass executions. While the others were held in a collective cell, Sr. Julia was placed in solitary confinement in cell 31B, a cement closet so small that she could only sit. There was insufficient air and no room to stretch or move. In addition, prisoners at the Lukiszki were tortured brutally—or subject to threats towards their loved ones whom the Gestapo claimed to already have in custody. Sr. Julia endured these conditions for a year. Despite the pressure, no evidence was found of her work for the Jews, nor of the charges for which she was arrested: political activities including contact with the Polish partisans.

Probably the greatest source of Sr. Julia's suffering was being deprived of the sacraments; surely, she must have relied on the one thing available to her, and which she had always treasured—prayer. One prisoner who passed Sr. Julia as she was being led from the isolation cell recalled that peace and interior recollection radiated from her face. Her Sisters at the General House heard that Sr. Julia was suffering unspeakably, but with faith that God's Providence would allow her to persist until release.

Julia's fellow Sisters were released from the Lukiszki, but she was not. Instead, in the sweltering heat of July 1944, the forty-five-year-old religious was transported via cattle car to the concentration camp Stutthof. The cattle car itself was a terrifying ordeal, with numerous deaths from famine, thirst, unsanitary conditions, and lack of fresh air: corpses of the dead lay on those still alive. The trip took four days, to traverse about three hundred miles. Sr. Mirosława Dombek, O.P., said in her research summary on Blessed Julia: "Only deep faith and prayer could have strengthened one so that, after one year of imprisonment in the isolation cell, she did not succumb to depression. This state of incessant prayer accompanied Sister Julia in each period of her life."

Stutthof: "where everyone forgot what love meant"

Once she arrived at Stutthof, Sr. Julia was given the number 40992, badged with a red triangle to designate her "political criminal" status, and assigned to the Jewish section of the camp. Life in this part of the camp was designed to exterminate as many prisoners as possible, with rampant starvation, beatings, and unbearable workloads. Conditions were unspeakably dirty and the local climate and water were conducive to lung illnesses. German women who were imprisoned for immoral conduct were made guards in this section, and mockery and other forms of humiliation—both from them and the S.S. guards—were routine. As part of the systematic psychological terror, prisoners were assembled daily so that some could be arbitrarily "selected" for execution.

In conditions like these, where prisoners were systematically degraded to appear less than human, their reasoning changed and morals seemed to disappear. But Sr. Julia refused to let the inhumanity triumph. She actively sought out others to help and reminded others of their morals and human dignity. Ewa Hoff described, "She was noble, always willing to help and support people. She carried out a mission of mercy in the camp where everyone forgot what love meant."

Sr. Julia's goal was to never ignore a fellow prisoner's need for the sake of her own survival. She shared her limited rations and somehow arranged to procure warmer clothes for those who suffered from the cold more than she. Her maternal skills continued to show—as Ewa Hoff recounted once being awoken, "She touched me delicately, in a way that only a mother can do to awaken a child: I have some soup for you, and I would like you to eat while it is still warm. It is why I have to awaken you." Such behavior made other prisoners aware and ashamed that all they did was focus on their own survival.

Sr. Julia took on reputation for being always positive and helpful, never discriminating between nationalities nor religious beliefs. Prisoners of foreign nationalities looked to her to arbitrate conflicts.

In turn, Sr. Julia actively reminded her fellow prisoners of their religious values. Turning always to prayer as a source of strength, she led community prayer each morning in her barrack, a meeting made up of mainly Jewish women from various nations. A prisoner later described, “In her presence, you felt the need to pray”; despite the hellish atmosphere, Sr. Julia was known to be constantly immersed in prayer. Although religious practices were strictly forbidden in the camp, interlopers backed away in silence when they encountered Sr. Julia calmly continuing her prayer, undeterred, on her knees. Her fellow prisoners relied on Sr. Julia for her calm leadership in prayer: one evening, when she could not lead them, they cried in desolation but could not summon up the courage to organize prayer on their own.

Prayer was so valuable to Sr. Julia that she traded bread for a rosary. She also smuggled notes to another part of the camp, to arrange for a priest-prisoner to come over on a “work assignment.” While she risked her life by smuggling notes, she showed that others’ lives were invaluable to her: she also sent repeated notes to the husband of a fellow prisoner, until she effectively dissuaded him from suicide. This prisoner survived the camp; later he recounted that Sr. Julia had awakened hope in him that allowed him to overcome his fear of life in Stutthof. He was only one of the many depressed, beaten, and broken people who received words of hope and encouragement from Sr. Julia.

Her—primarily Jewish—prisonmates recalled years later how Sr. Julia spoke lovingly of the beauty and value of life as a religious Sister, and the customs she missed. The values that had shaped Sr. Julia’s life were passed on to those around her as she taught, by word as by example, to forgive those who inflicted suffering, to pray, and to trustingly accept God’s plans for one’s life.

“She gave her life for others”

Sr. Julia’s discernment of her own life’s end came in November 1944, when a typhoid epidemic spread through the camp to the weakest and most decimated: the Jewish women’s quarters. While healthier prisoners tried to distance themselves from those infected, Sr. Julia resolved to aid the sick. Prisonmates begged her not to: the Allies were approaching and the likelihood of surviving the camp increased; but to help the typhoid victims, in these conditions, meant certain death.

Barrack 30 was like a death-house of typhoid which no one wanted to approach...but Sr. Julia did. Those infected with typhoid were left lying in their own waste, helplessly “eaten by lice”, and dehydrated from diarrhea. Doing what little she could, she moistened their lips with water and comforted them by merciful actions and spiritual words. She even rescued one of those who had been left for dead, taking particular care of her so that the woman could survive the camp and return to her little daughter outside. While the woman did survive, Sr. Julia fell victim to the typhoid herself.

As Sr. Julia was overcome with typhoid fever, she clearly knew death was approaching, and prisoners witnessed tears come from her—tears and prayers for those loved ones whom she would not see again. Even as it became more and more difficult to move, Sr. Julia did not stop serving

others: her sick neighbors called her name and waited for her to lean over them. On January 5, 1945, Sr. Julia sent her only correspondence that still survives: asking a friend to forward news of her to her brother, she also asked for some basic necessities. Her letter shows a typical effort to bother others as little as possible—she asked for bread to be sent from a Sister whose “brother has a bakery, so she could easily help me.” The items she asked for—bread, fat, onions, citric acid, and soap—were Julia’s only hint of her lamentable condition.

On January 26, the Germans began to evacuate Stutthof because of the Allies’ advance. Some were left behind, including “several thousand Jewish women who are emaciated to the stage of semi-corpse and as such [were] not subject to evacuation.”² After the evacuation, chaos and disorganization overwhelmed the barracks. For several days, no meals were distributed, registrations were not kept, and the Jewish section remained strictly isolated.

Sr. Julia died less than a month later—only a few months before the camp was liberated. On February 20, those lying near her in Barrack 27 heard her murmured prayers cease. This was their notice that her soul had passed. Subsequent actions reveal much about conditions in the camp and Sr. Julia’s impact on others: although some took the opportunity to pull the crowns from her mouth, another person covered her body with a piece of cloth as it lay naked with those of other victims. This was a telling sign of respect.

The words of those who survived Sr. Julia perhaps tell it best: “Not only Catholic compatriots mourned her death, but also Russians, Lat vians, and others.” The Jewish women did not hesitate to call Sr. Julia a martyr and a saint. “She gave her life for others, died sacrificing herself; she was the Angel of goodness.”

¹ This summary was written with large thanks to Sr. Mirosława Dombek, O.P., for her research, published in 1998 and translated in 2008 as *Strength in Weakness: Life and Martyrdom of Julia Stanisława Rodzińska, Dominican (1899-1945)*, © Congregation of Dominican Sisters of the Immaculate Conception, Justice, IL.

² W. Mitura, *The Memories of a Stutthof Prisoner*, Warsaw 1978, p. 156, as quoted by Dombek.