Saint Maria Skobtsova of Paris

By His Eminence Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

She was a rare personality, overflowing with strength and energy. She lived the commandment to love one's neighbor in an extraordinary way. She knew life in all its stark reality. She experienced marriage and divorce, as well as a mother's grief at the death of her children. She consecrated her life to monasticism in "the desert of this world." Her life resembled the ministry of a deaconess who washed the feet of the suffering and destitute, especially her fellow countrymen who had fled Russia and found themselves displaced in Paris. She rebelled against every form of stagnation. She wrote poetry, delivered theological and philosophical lectures, and interpreted contemporary reality in the light of evangelistic love. She died in a Nazi concentration camp, consumed by fire, shortly before the end of the Second World War.

This remarkable woman desired to live the monastic life in the world and to bear a message of consolation to a suffering world. She became known for her disregard of social conventions, her rejection of spiritual comfort, her radically simple evangelistic way of life, and her desire to serve the poor and the suffering—in whom Christ is found.

She was born in 1891 in a city in southern Russia, to devout Orthodox parents. She believed in the Lord Jesus and regarded love for people as the path leading to love for Him. She therefore sacrificed everything—her time and her health—to help those who were in desperate need of food, drink, and shelter. She searched for them in the narrow streets of Paris and beneath its trees, then brought them to the house she had rented for their sake, to shelter them and protect them from the bitter Parisian cold. She firmly believed that there was no other path to Paradise except participation in the Lord's mercy.

Her marriage was unsuccessful. After it collapsed and one of her children died, Metropolitan Evlogy encouraged her to embrace monasticism "in the desert of this world." She took the name Mother Maria and began her work in a rented house that was not fully furnished. She therefore had to wrap herself in blankets and sleep on the floor beneath an icon of the Mother of God.

On the very first night, benefactors gradually began sending furniture, while guests began arriving at the same time. At first, most of the guests were Russian women. To make room for others, Mother Maria gave up her own room and slept on an iron bed in the basement beside the water heater. She transformed an upstairs room into a chapel and enlarged the dining room so that it could be used as a hall for lectures and discussions.

After two years, the house could no longer accommodate everyone. She therefore searched for a larger one, where she was able to feed a hundred hungry people. She transformed its back garden into a chapel. There, her guests could catch their breath until the time came when they were able to resume their lives once again.

The work continued to grow. She rented another building and designated one of the houses for families in need and the other for single men. She also acquired a farm that was transformed into a convalescent home, where a group of women deprived of every consolation found refuge. No one knows how many souls this Russian nun saved in France during the German occupation. Hundreds? Certainly—and perhaps thousands, for she never kept count.

Mother Maria could have left Paris as the Germans advanced toward the city. She could even have departed for America. But her decision was firm: “If the Germans occupy the city, I shall remain here with my elderly women. Where else could I possibly send them?”

At Pascha in 1940, Mother Maria wrote:

> “Death rules over the entire world. At this very moment, I know that death has struck hundreds of people, while thousands await their turn. I also know that mothers are waiting for the postman and tremble whenever the mail is more than a day late.”

Hunger and poverty intensified after the fall of Paris. The authorities designated Mother Maria’s house as a food-distribution center. This opened the way for her to enter a Nazi detention center, where she worked for three consecutive days, consoling the children and their parents, assisting them, and distributing

whatever food she had been able to obtain. With the help of sanitation workers, she saved the lives of many children by hiding them in garbage containers and smuggling them out of the detention center.

On February 8, 1943, Nazi security forces arrested her son, Yuri, and took him and his elderly grandmother to an interrogation office. On February 10, Mother Maria was arrested together with thirty-four other women because she was sheltering Jews fleeing arrest in her house. She was deported to Germany. Her son Yuri and Father Dimitri, the priest who served the house chapel, later died in prison.

Mother Maria, prisoner number 19263, remained in the concentration camp for two years. She was placed in Barracks 27, situated in a corner of the large camp, not far from Barracks 31, which was filled with Russian prisoners. She was able to establish friendships with many of them.

She believed that her only way out of the camp would be through the crematorium. She therefore asked one of her fellow prisoners, whom she hoped would survive, to deliver an oral message to Father Sergius Bulgakov, Metropolitan Evlogy, and her mother:

> "In my present condition, I must accept these sufferings, knowing that this is how things must be for me. And if I must die, I will receive it as a blessing from above."

In a postcard she was permitted to send to several friends in Paris, she wrote:

"I am still healthy and strong, but I have grown old."

Her work in the camp varied. For a time, she worked with a group of women who were forced to pull a heavy iron roller along the roads and entrances of the camp for twelve hours each day. At another stage, she worked in a weaving workshop. Her strength gradually began to fail, and her legs could no longer support her. During roll call, one of the prisoners would serve as a crutch for her. When her health collapsed, her friends would no longer accept any portion of her food, as they had so often done before when she sought to keep others alive.

As the Red Army approached from the east, those in charge of the concentration camp reduced the quantity of food and increased the number of prisoners housed in each barracks. By March 1945, Mother Maria's condition had become critical. She had to lie on her bed between roll calls and rarely spoke. Her face bore the signs of approaching death. Yet she never complained. Her eyes remained closed, and she appeared to be in a state of unceasing prayer.

Mother Maria died on March 30, at the age of fifty-three. That year, the date fell on Great and Holy Friday, while the sound of the approaching Red Army's bombardment could be heard.

Accounts of her death differ. According to one, she was simply one of the many prisoners selected to die that day. According to another, she took the place of a fellow prisoner—an account wholly consistent with the noble life she had lived. In either case, she consciously offered herself to the flames, and in doing so helped all of us to accept the Cross.

She was illumined by the peace of the Lord and transmitted that peace to us. Although she perished in the gas chamber, she did not die in the Church's memory. The survivors of the war who had known her continued to speak of her faith, her thoughts, her convictions, and her work as a nun of extraordinary character who had spent many years helping people living on the road of despair.

On January 16, 2004, the Ecumenical Patriarchate proclaimed her a saint, together with Father Dimitri and her son Yuri.