

**Servant of God Sr. Magdalena Maria Epstein, OP
(Poland) 1875-1947**

*Established a small hospital adjacent to the
Daughters of Charity dispensary.*

Established the first School of Professional Nurses in Krakow in 1911.

*Established the modern University School for
Nurses and Hygienists in Krakow.*



Maria Epstein was born on August 2, 1875, in the Pilica castle near Olkusz to a wealthy family of a convert, Warsaw banker of Jewish descent, Leon Epstein. Her mother, Maria, from the Skarżyńska family, belonged to the class of the Polish landed gentry. In her childhood, Maria's family moved to Krakow. Maria was an only child. She had three half-brothers and a large family to which she was very attached. From her family home, she developed a deep sense of patriotism and received a comprehensive education. She knew several foreign languages. From her early childhood days, Maria showed great compassion for the distressed and the suffering. After the deaths of her parents, though she had no professional training, she completely sacrificed her life to help the ailing and the poor.

Before the First World War, she lost all the property inherited from her parents. Not only did she endure it calmly, but she was also able to take care of five elderly people from her former ministry, with whom she shared everything she had for the rest of their lives. She was characterized by a sense of responsibility for others and a great desire for charity.

Charity work

During the partitions, the only possibility of organized charitable activity was provided by charitable associations. Maria started working in the Association of Women Economists, whose aim was to care for and help the poor. Ladies collected money, materials and clothing, reworked and repaired it, and sewed new ones. They met regularly. After a few years, Maria, despite her young age, became the president of the Association. Her apartment turned into an office and a meeting place. In addition to her activities in the Association, she organized a reading room and simple nourishment for workers.

In 1909, three members of the Association accidentally came into contact with the work of a small dispensary run by the Sisters of Charity. The sisters worked without a doctor providing medical and material assistance. Meals were provided in the same room where they made dressings. Cooperation with the Association of Women Economists brought a change in this situation. With the collected funds, a room intended exclusively for an outpatient clinic was equipped, and medical training for staff in the field of emergency assistance was organized. One initiative gave birth to another. An operating room was organized at the infirmary, and the next stage was the opening of a small eight-bed hospital. Volunteers from the outpatient section were on duty day and night. Over time, they understood that professional nursing preparation was necessary to work with the sick. It was then that Maria Epstein had the idea of organizing a nursing school in Krakow.

With great effort, thanks to contributions and private donations, funds were obtained for the renovation and adaptation of a barn, donated by the Daughters of Charity for the needs of the future school. The opening of the Nursing School took place on November 5, 1911. Since there was no registered nurse who could officially take up the position of the school's director, this position was taken by Dr. Wacław Damski – vice-president of the Krakow Medical Chamber, but in fact it was managed from the beginning by Maria Epstein. Maria and several members of the outpatient section were students of the first class of 14 people. Together they ran the school, at the same time learning in it.

Maria and her colleagues took care to provide a high level of teaching for these future nurses. Maria ensured that their education included a spirit of patriotism and religiosity. She also cared for her own spiritual development and zealously carried out religious practices.



Resourceful director

From 1914-1916, Maria Epstein organized short First Aid/nursing courses which were run by the graduates of the [Krakow] school, and were aimed at Red Cross volunteers. Each group of trained volunteers was to take over the running of a designated military hospital located along the front-line or sometimes deep within the country. The groups were directed to work in Polish units serving in the Austrian Army.

Maria Epstein and her companions directed this action, at the same time working in Prof. Rutkowski's surgical group at the front and in sanitary points at the rest station for soldiers, at the Krakow railway station. Maria was involved in helping the victims of the war through the Ducal-Episcopal War Victims Relief Committee. This committee, under the leadership of Prof. Emil Godlewski, ran infectious hospitals, vaccination points and disinfection stations. Maria Epstein was, for some time, a supervisor in a hospital in Bielcza near Tarnów, where, as a result of the great concentration of evacuated population, epidemics broke out: dysentery, typhus and typhoid fever. At the same time, she conducted the training of nurses and organized additional medical facilities. She remained in each facility as she launched the works, and then, together with Prof. Godlewski, she carried out inspections of subordinate institutions. Their efforts largely contributed to the extinction of the epidemic.

In 1916, after the resumption of the School of Professional Nurses, Epstein again became its headmistress, struggling with great financial difficulties both at school and in her own home. From 1920, she sought funds to run the school. She received the help of the Rockefeller Foundation and the consent of the Jagiellonian University to launch the University School of Nurses and Hygienists as an auxiliary study of the Faculty of Medicine of the Jagiellonian University. She was appointed headmistress of the same School. In the direct circle of Maria Epstein's collaborators as a director, apart from Anna Rydlówna (her successor, sister of the Young Poland poet Lucjan Rydel), prominent figures of the Krakow circle of professional nursing included: Blessed Hanna Chrzanowska (beatified on April 28, 2018), Teresa Kulczyńska and Maria Starowieyska. Together they formed the first editorial committee of "Pielęgniarka Polska," a monthly professional nursing publication. Thanks to the energy and perseverance of Maria Epstein, the headmistress, the school, despite very difficult conditions, developed successfully.

Fulfillment in God

Despite her success in organizing various works of charity and forms of nursing education, which culminated in the establishment of the University School of Nurses and Hygienists, Maria Epstein felt that she should serve only God, behind the cloister. In shaping her spiritual desires, an important role was played especially by Archbishop Metropolitan of Krakow Prince Adam Stefan Sapieha. The development and formation of Epstein's Dominican vocation was also influenced by her numerous contacts with cloistered sisters of the Order of Preachers in Krakow's Gródek, dating back to 1918. At a mature age, when she was 56 years old, her inner



desire to join the community of nuns of St. Dominic, in which she took the name Magdalena, was fulfilled. She enriched the community with her humility, love and zeal in religious life. To the question posed to her as a postulant: "What caused you to enter the monastery?" She replied: "*The desire to strive for a higher perfection and to offer a sacrifice of myself to God, for the Homeland and priestly vocations in Poland.*" After passing the administration of the University School for Nurses and Hygienists into good hands (at the end of 1930), she joined the enclosed Dominican convent in Grodziek, Krakow, on March 24, 1931. There she spent 16 years setting a good example of humbleness, love, and zeal for the monastic life. At the center of her devotion she placed the Crucified Christ.

During World War II (1939-1945), most of her family members, due to their Jewish origins, died at the hands of the Nazis. She, on the other hand, succumbed to the left-sided paralysis of the body. She endured her sufferings, especially for the last five years of her life, with submission to God's will and

offered them for the intention of the sisters' quick return to the mother convent in Gródek. The sisters had been deported to the convent of the Poor Clare Sisters. During her stay in the monastery, her spiritual director, apart from the Metropolitan Prince Archbishop Adam Stefan Sapieha, was also Blessed Father Michał Czartoryski OP. Sister Magdalena Maria Epstein died in the odour of sanctity on September 6, 1947, and was buried in the Rakowicki Cemetery in Krakow.

On September 30, 2004, Cardinal Franciszek Macharski in the church of the Dominican Sisters in Gródek opened the beatification process of the Servant of God Sister Magdalena Maria Epstein. The diocesan stage was completed on April 20, 2007, and the case file was handed over, through the postulator general of the Dominican Order, to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints in Rome.¹ The decree on validity of diocesan inquiry was issued the next year on November 28, 2008. In 2022, the *Positio* was being elaborated on.

From the spiritual notes of Sister Magdalena Maria Epstein, OP:

*"I want to love Jesus for the present and the future time;
for all those days when I did not love Him enough.*

*To perform all our duties only for love of God and with care about the salvation of souls.
To try to be pleasing to God in everything.*

*When our thoughts drift apart from God and we forget about his presence,
we should often say ardent prayers with our hearts.*

