Servant of God Stanislawa Leszczynska
(Poland) 1896-1974
Polish midwife for 38 years, no child or mother died under her care
Delivered over 3,000 babies in Auschwitz.
Known as "Angel in Auschwitz Hell."

Stanislawa Zambrzycki (married, lay woman) was born on May 8, 1896, to Henryka and Stanislaw Zambrzycki in Lodz, a portion of the partitioned Poland controlled by the Russians. Stanislawa had seven siblings, five of whom died in infancy. Two younger brothers remained.

At the time of her birth, and since before 1795, Poland had been partitioned between the rulers of Russia, Prussia (Germany) and Austria. As an independent country, Poland disappeared from the map of Europe until 1918. When Stanislawa was five years old, her father was called up to serve in the Russian Army in Turkestan which he did for five years. Her mother worked 14 hours per day in Poznanski's Factory in Lodz to provide for the family and Stanislawa took over the care of her two younger brothers and household chores.

Stanislawa began Waclaw Maciejewski's private school, taught in Polish, at age seven as her parents tried to preserve their culture while under foreign rule. In 1908, the family emigrated to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, looking for better living conditions. There Stanislaw attended school and studied in both Portuguese and German. In 1910, they returned to Lodz, settling in one of the poorest districts, Bulatach. There her parents ran a shop in which she also worked while continuing her education in a junior high school.

Her father was drafted again for World War I (1914-1918) and support of the family fell upon her mother and now also Stanislawa. Stanislawa still found time for charity work and time to pray. She believed strongly in Divine Providence.

When Stanislawa was 20 years old, she married Bronislaw Leszczynski. To their union were born four children: Bronislaw, Sylwia, Stanislaw and Henryk. An important family event was meal times when they met together, talked and shared their day.

When she was 24 years old, from 1920-1922, Stanislawa attended the State School of Obstetrics (Panstwowa Szkola Poloznicza) on the Karowa in Warsaw studying to become a midwife. During the next 38 years that she served as a midwife, no child died, nor did any women who gave birth under Stanislawa's care. She would go to a woman in labor, any time, day or night and make the sign of the cross as she entered the house, over herself and over the woman who was to give birth and, finally, over the child after he or she was born. If it was a complicated delivery, she petitioned the Mother of Jesus for help.

During WWII, she collected and donated food to Jewish families who were her friends and lived in the ghetto. Her husband and sons took part in the September defensive battles in 1939. Bronislaw and Stanislaw worked as paramedics in a miliary hospital. Her youngest son, Henryk, worked with the firefighting team in Warsaw to extinguish fires following the bombings. Her husband, Bronislaw Leszczynski, had been working as a typesetter in the Kotkowski printing house in Lodz. Her husband and son helped make false documents for Jews to enable them to escape their pursuers.

Arrested by the Gestapo in February 1943, her two sons, Henryk and Stanislaw were sent to the stone quarries of Mauthausen-Gusen concentration camps. Her husband managed to flee the Gestapo but died in the Warsaw Uprising in 1944. Stanislawa and her daughter Sylwia, a medical student, were transported to Auschwitz-Birkenau (Oswiecim) where Stanislawa became prisoner no. 41355. In the concentration camp, she worked as a midwife for two years.

When the German midwife Klara fell ill, Stanislawa asked Dr. Mengele if she could take over her duties. The German woman, Pfani, told Stanislawa that there was an order to treat every born child as dead, to which she did not agree and so was beaten. She still did not listen. The German women, Klara and Pfani, up until May 1943 had drowned all children born at Auschwitz. Over 3,000 children were delivered by Stanislaw Leszczynska, and no newborn or mother died at birth. Dr. Mengele could not believe that none died because even in the best university clinics, this was not the case. Stanislawa prayed before each delivery. Many were baptized. She secretly tattooed infants born with blue eyes and fair hair, who were removed from the camp and sent to Naklo to be brought up to become "real Germans, so that after the war they could be recognized. Stanislawa delivered the babies in horribly unsanitary condition surrounded by filth, turmoil, disease, rats, lice, shortage of water, in hunger and cold. Her only supplies were a small pair of scissors like the ones used to remove cuticles, a kidney basin with a solution of potassium permanganate, a very limited amount of cellulose fiber tissue, some bandage to tie the umbilical cord, and a bowl of water to wash the neonate and the mother. After wrapping the infant after delivery, Stanislawa always baptized it with water or a herbal brew, named the newborn and reminded the mother of the first Christian catacombs.

Camp regulations required that Jewish infants were not to have their umbilical cord cut and tied. As soon as they were born, they were to be thrown, placenta and all, in the "shit-bins." Though punishable by death, Stanislawa ignored this rule. She delivered the babies of Jewish prisoners, baptized them, too, and gave the infants back to the mothers. Most died of starvation because the mothers were forbidden to breast-feed them and even if they could, had little or no milk.

How did Stanislawa survive in the midst of all this misery? She writes in her book, Midwife's report from Auschwitz:

> This is what made me stronger every day and every night I spent on strenuous work, the toil and sacrifice being just an expression of my love for the little children and their mothers, whose lives I tried to save at all cost. Otherwise, I would not have been able to survive.[1]

Stanislawa was released from Auschwitz in February 1945, and she returned to Lodz and continued to work as a midwife until the mid-1950's. In 1957, she wrote a book titled, *"Report of a midwife from Oswiecim."*[2] In 1970, she met with mothers from Auschwitz and their saved children.

Stanislawa Leszczynska died March 11, 1974, from intestinal cancer. When Pope St. John Paul II visited Lodz in June 1987, he recognized Stanislawa Leszczynska as an example of Christian heroism. On April 9, 1992, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith gave permission (nihil obstat=nothing stands in the way) to initiate the Cause for the Canonization of Stanislawa. On March 3, 1992, the Decree establishing the Tribunal for the Canonization of the Servant of God Stanislawa Leszczynska was issued.[3]

The following is "*A midwife's report from Auschwitz*" written by Stanislawa Leszczynska (1896-1974) Midwife, Auschwitz-Birkenau survivor, No. 41335. The paper was originally delivered on 2 March 1957 during a Polish midwives' jubilee held in the health department of the Baluty district of the City of Lodz:[2]

I spent two out of the thirty-eight years of my professional life working as a midwife imprisoned in the women's concentration camp at Auschwitz Birkenau.

There were plenty of pregnant women in the transports of women brought to this concentration camp. I worked as a midwife in three blocks which were all alike in terms of structure and interior furnishings, except for one detail—one of them had a brick floor. The three blocks were wooden barracks about 40 meters long, with numerous gaps gnawed in the walls by rats.

The camp was located on a lowland area with clay soil, so whenever there was heavy rain, water flooded the barracks and there were up to twenty centimeters of standing water on the floor, or even more in lower lying barracks.

Three story bunks lined the two long walls inside each barrack. Each bunk had to accommodate three or even four sick women on a dirty straw mattress full of the vestiges of dried blood and excrement. So it was overcrowded; patients had to let their legs hang down from their bunk or pull their knees up to their chin. The bunks were hard and uncomfortable, as the straw filling in the mattresses had long since crumbled into dust, and the sick women were effectively lying on bare boards, which were not at all smooth, but parts of old doors or window shutters from demolished buildings, with "panels" which pressed and cut into their flesh and bones.

A brickwork stove in the shape of a trough ran lengthwise along the middle of the barracks. It had a fireplace at either end, but they were hardly ever used for heating. Instead the "stove" served as the only place viable for childbed, since no other facility, however makeshift, had been provided for this purpose. As there was no heating, the premises were savagely cold, especially in winter, with long icicles hanging down from the ceiling, or more precisely from the roof.

The thirty bunks nearest the stove made up what was known as the "maternity ward."

The block was full of infectious disease and a nasty smell, and it swarmed with worms of all kinds and rats, which bit off the noses, ears, fingers, toes, and heels of the women who were so ill and drained of energy that they could not move.

I did my best to chase off the rats from the patients, taking turns with a woman on Nachtwache (German "night watch duty"). We were helped by convalescing women, taking turns to get a couple of hours of sleep. The rats, which had fattened on human corpses, were as big as huge cats. They were not scared of humans, and if you shooed them away with a stick all they would do would be to duck their heads, dig their paws into a bunk, and get ready for their next attack. They were attracted by the stinking smell of the seriously sick women, for whom we had no water to wash nor a clean change of clothes. When a woman was in labour, I had to fetch the water to wash her and the baby myself. It took me about twenty minutes to bring a bucket of water.

The vast numbers of worms of all kinds exploited their biological supremacy over the dwindling vitality of the humans. Not only the sick women but also the newborn babies fell victim to the endless onslaught launched by the rats and vermin. Death came quickly to these human bodies debilitated by hunger and cold, and tormented by their ordeals and diseases. There was a total of 1,000–1,200 patients in the block, and every day 10–20 of them died. Their corpses were taken out in front of the block and there was a daily report documenting their tragedy.

The women having to give birth in such conditions were in an appalling situation, and the position of their midwife was extremely difficult. There were no aseptic medical supplies at all, neither dressings nor medications; all the medicine allotted to the entire block was a daily ration of a few tablets of aspirin.

At first I was completely on my own. Whenever there were any complications, such as having to remove the placenta manually, which called for the attention of a specialist physician, I had to manage as best I could. The German doctors in the camp, Rhode, Koenig, and Mengele, could hardly be expected to "tarnish" their medical vocation by attending non Germans, so I had no right to ask them for help. Later, on several occasions I availed myself of the services of a Polish woman doctor, Dr. Janina Węgierska, who worked on another ward but was totally dedicated to patients; later still there was another, very generous Polish doctor, Dr. Irena Konieczna. When I went down with typhus myself, I was attended by the extremely helpful Dr. Irena Białówna, who looked after my patients and me with a lot of diligence and concern.

I won't write about the work of the doctors who were held in Auschwitz as prisoners, because what I observed surpasses my ability to say what I really feel about the tremendous dignity of the physician's vocation and the heroism with which they carried out their duties. The magnificence of these doctors and their dedication was the last thing their poor, agonized patients looked upon but will never be able to say what they saw. These doctors fought to save lives that were doomed, and for those doomed lives gave their own. All they had to treat their patients was a handful of aspirins and their own, great hearts. They were not working for the sake of a grand reputation or blandishment, nor to satisfy their professional ambition; all these incentives had vanished. What was left was just the physician's duty to save lives in all the cases and any circumstances she or he happened to encounter, augmented by the need to show sympathy for their neighbour.

The chief disease decimating the women was dysentery. Often their loose stools would drip down onto the bunks below them. Other serious diseases included typhus and typhoid fever, as well as pemphigus, which covered a patient's body with nasty sores and blisters. The emergence of a few of these pustules, some as big as dinner-plates, spelled death. We did our best to hide cases of typhus from the Lagerarzt (viz. the chief SS physician) by writing in the patient's medical record that she was suffering from "flu" because typhus patients were automatically sent to the crematorium. In practice no one managed not to contract typhus, because there was such a mass of lice in the camp that you just could not avoid getting infected.

It would be no exaggeration to say that about 20% of the putrid, overcooked weeds which made up the patients' staple diet were made up of rat feces.

These are the conditions I worked in day and night for two years, with no one to substitute for me. Sometimes my daughter Sylwia helped me, but the serious illnesses which were her lot, too, made her unavailable most of the time.

Women in labour went on the stove to give birth. I delivered over 3,000 babies. In spite of the appalling filth, the teeming vermin and the rats, in spite of the infectious diseases, the lack of water and other dreadful, indescribable things, something that was most extraordinary went on there.

One day the Lagerarzt told me to present a report on the postpartum infections and mortality rate for the mothers and newborns. I told him that I hadn't had a single death of a mother or neonate. He looked at me in disbelief and said that even the best German university hospitals could not boast of such a success rate. In his eyes I could see anger and hatred. Perhaps the extremely debilitated bodies of my patients were too poor a culture medium for bacteria to thrive on.

A woman about to deliver was compelled to give up her bread ration for some time in advance in order to exchange it for a sheet (or as they used to say, "organize a sheet"), which she could then tear up to make nappies and baby clothes, because, of course, there were no such things in the camp [to see how the conditions described by Leszczyńska compare to the situation in other concentration camps, see, for instance, the 2021 study "Childbirth in Stutthof concentration camp" by Agnieszka Kłys—Editor's note].

The ward had no water, so washing nappies was a big problem, especially as there was a strict prohibition on prisoners leaving the block, and a restriction on moving from place to place on the premises. Mothers dried nappies on their backs or thighs, because hanging them up where they could be seen was strictly prohibited and punishable by death. The rule was that there was no food ration for babies, not even a drop of milk. The babies were only irritated by their mothers' breasts which had been dried out by starvation. Suckling only frustrated them and aggravated their hunger.

Until May 1943 all the children born in Auschwitz were murdered in a most cruel way—drowned in a barrel of water. This was done by two German women, Schwester ("sister") Klara and Schwester Pfani. Sister Klara was a midwife by profession, and she was sent to Auschwitz for infanticide. When Stanislawa was appointed midwife an injunction was put on her prohibiting her from assisting at deliveries because she was a Berufsverbreherin (i.e. she had committed an offence in her professional capacity). She was appointed to perform a job for which she was far better suited. She was also appointed to a management job as Blockälteste (senior block officer). She was given an assistant, Sister Pfani, a ginger freckled streetwalker. Each birth was followed

by a loud noise of something gurgling coming from the room of these two, and then the sound of splashing water, sometimes for a fairly long time. Not long afterwards the mother could see her baby's body thrown out in front of the block and being pulled to pieces by rats.

In May 1943 for some children the situation changed. The blue-eyed blond ones were taken away from their mothers and sent to Nakło to be Germanised. Whenever a baby transport left the block it was accompanied by the mothers weeping aloud to bid their babies farewell.

For as long as the mother had her baby with her the very fact of maternity itself was a ray of hope for her, but parting with the baby was terrible.

To secure a chance of identifying the abducted children at some time in the future and returning them to their mothers, I devised a way of tattooing the babies due for deportation. I did it in a way the SS men did not notice. Many a mother was consoled by the thought that one day she would find her lost child.

Jewish children continued to be drowned. This was done with unrelenting cruelty. There was no chance of concealing a Jewish baby or hiding it among non Jewish children. "Sisters" Klara and Pfani took turns to keep an eye on Jewish women in labour, which made it impossible to keep the birth of a Jewish baby secret. As soon as it was born, it was tattooed with the mother's prison number, drowned in the barrel, and thrown out of the block.

The remaining children suffered the worst fate—they died slowly of starvation. Their skin became thin and parchment like, and through it you could see their sinews, veins, arteries, and bones. Soviet babies survived the longest; about 50% of the women were from the Soviet Union [for a detailed discussion on the starvation disease in children in the ghettoes and comparison in respect to the data presented by Leszczyńska, see "Pediatrics in the Warsaw Ghetto," a paper delivered at the 2021 Medical Review Auschwitz conference by Agnieszka Witkowska-Krych—Editor's note].

Out of all the tragedies I saw there is one I remember most vividly: the story of a woman from Vilnius, sent to Auschwitz for aiding resistance fighters.

As soon as she had given birth her number was called (when prisoners were summoned to report they were called by their prison numbers). I went to excuse her, but that didn't help, it only infuriated the SS staff. I realized that she was going to be sent to the crematorium. She wrapped her baby in a dirty sheet of paper and pressed it to her bosom. Her lips moved in silence, perhaps she was trying to sing a lullaby for her baby, as mothers often did to make up for the cold, hunger, and torments their babies had to suffer. The Vilnian had no strength left to sing, only tears came from under her eyelids and fell on the condemned baby's head. It's hard to tell what was the most tragic: the simultaneous death of these two beings who were so dear to each other, or the mother's agony on watching the death of her child, or her dying before the baby and leaving it to its own fate.

Among all these ghastly memories there is one thought that lingers in my mind. All the babies were born alive. They all wanted to live. Only thirty survived. A few hundred were sent to Nakło for Germanisation. Klara and Pfani drowned over 1,500. Over 1,000 died of cold and hunger. These are approximate figures, but they don't include the period up to the end of April 1943. Contrary to all expectations and in spite of the extremely inauspicious conditions, all the babies born in the concentration camp were born alive and looked healthy at birth. Nature defied hatred and extermination and stubbornly fought for her rights, drawing on an unknown reserve of vitality.

So far I have not had an opportunity to deliver a midwife's report from Auschwitz. I am presenting my account on behalf of the mothers and children—those who could not tell the world about the wrong done them.

Prayer:

God, the Creator of life, who in Your goodness gives human families the gift of a new life,
make your Servant Stanislawa, who, in a spirit of love for mothers and children
protected them from death, find numerous and worthy followers among women
and obtain the grace of prompt elevation to the altars.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Send reports of graces received to:
The Metropolitan Curia
ul. 1 Skorupki 1
90-458 Łódź, Poland

References:

1) Stanislawa Leszczynska.. Medical Review Auschwitz. https://www.mp.pl/auschwitz/journal/english/206159,stanislawa-leszczynska Accessed 29 April 2022.

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Note: This biography is for all desiring to grow in holiness and follow His Holiness Pope Pius XI address to 2000 nurses assembled at Castel Gondolfo on August 27, 1935 for the II World Congress of Catholic Nurses (www.ciciams.org / www.nacn-usa.org): to *first and foremost bring the Christian supernatural, Christ* to our patients, *bring salvation to souls*. May it also help nursing students with your Nursing History course. Source: Diana L. Ruzicka (2022). *The Book of Nurse Saints.* Available at www.lulu.com/spotlight/Ruzicka