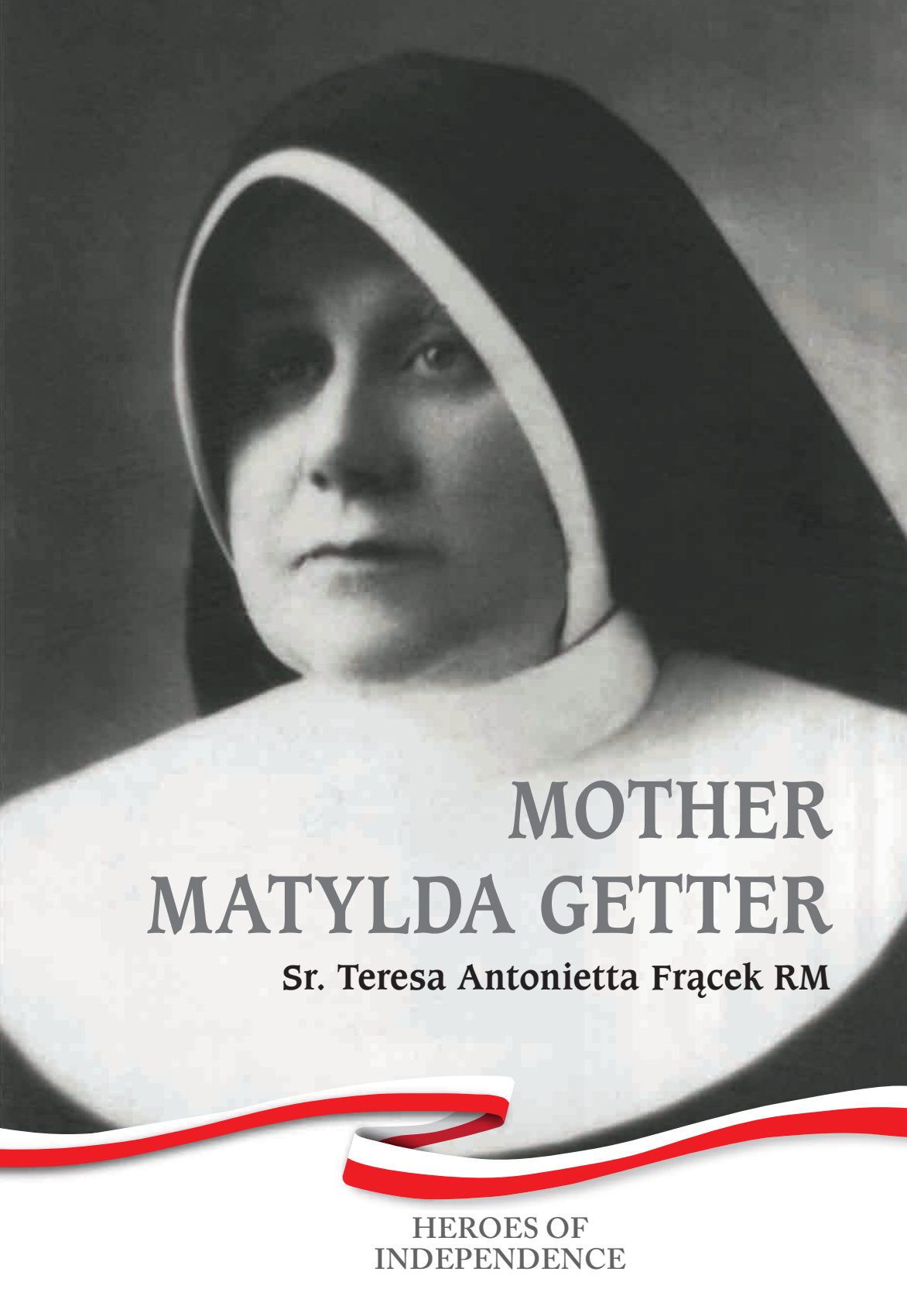




MOTHER MATYLDA GETTER

Sr. Teresa Antonietta Frącek RM



HEROES OF
INDEPENDENCE



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NARODOWEJ

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INDEPENDENCE



Matylda Aleksandra Getter (1870–1968) opened her heart and the convent doors to save Jewish children.



MOTHER MATYLDA GETTER

1870–1968

A nun from the Franciscan Sisters of the Family of Mary (RM) Congregation, Mother Matylda Getter was the founder of twenty-five educational and care institutes, honored in the fields of education and charity, decorated with the Order of Polonia Restituta (1925), the Gold Cross of Merit (1931), and the Gold Cross of Merit with Swords during the Warsaw Uprising (September 27, 1944), as well as posthumously with the “Righteous Among the Nations” medal (1985). For eighty-one years she shared the fate of the Family of Mary congregation and influenced the direction of its development, working in positions of responsibility as a teacher, caregiver, and mother superior of convents in Odessa, St. Petersburg, Warsaw, and the Warsaw Province. She is deservedly among the outstanding representatives of the Polish nation. During World War II she saved over 750 Jews, more than 500 of which were children.





Birth certificate of Matylda Aleksandra Getter, daughter of Karol and Matylda, née Niemyska.

The Getter Family

Matylda Getter was born on 25 February 1870 in Warsaw, the daughter of Karol, a butcher, and Matylda, née Niemyska. We know little about her family and her younger years. She did not include any genealogical information in her memoirs.¹ The family home was located in the Wola district at 8 Krochmalna Street and belonged to Matylda Getter's grandparents, Antoni and Krystyna (née Muczyńska) Niemyski. Her father's family was less well-off and lived in an apartment in a tenement house on Ciepła Street. Matylda Getter's paternal grandparents were Karol and Ewa, née Bisoll (or Biroll). Both families were from Warsaw and had probably lived there for at least four generations.

¹ Main Archives of the Franciscan Sisters of the Family of Mary Congregation, 97 Żelazna Street, Warsaw, (hereafter ARM), Records of the Congregation (hereafter AZ) II 60, Personal documents and correspondence of Mo. Matylda Getter.



Matylda Getter, née Niemyska,
mother of Matylda, Warsaw, ca.
1900.



Charles Getter, Matylda's father. On the
reverse, in Matylda's handwriting: "My
Own Father", Warsaw, pre-1886.

After their wedding in 1864, which took place in the midst of the January Uprising, Karol and Matylda Getter settled permanently at 8 Krochmalna Street, where Karol Getter ran a butcher shop. He was a member of the mercantile elite of the capital and was unquestionably affluent.

Krochmalna Street had its own lore. The street of the Jewish proletariat, as well as of poverty unimaginable today – it was a hotbed of prostitution and crime. This knowledge makes it easier to understand why Matylda Getter decided to help Jewish children confined to the ghetto. From childhood she had observed the poverty and marginalization of her Jewish neighbors, simply from living in the heart of the Jewish quarter.

According to family tradition, the Getters came to Poland from Austria at the end of the eighteenth century. This line of Getters, of Catholic faith, had no genealogical connections with another family of



The Family of Mary convent on 97 Żelazna Street in Warsaw.

the same name from a Protestant denomination.² Evangelicals of this name can be found as early as 1788.

Karol and Matylda Getter had ten children: seven sons (Karol, Władysław, Czesław, Antoni, Henryk, Juliusz, and Edmund) and three daughters (Matylda, Izabela, and Maria). Matylda was the oldest of the sisters. We know that even though she did not keep close contact with her family as an adult, she turned to her relatives for help during World War II and took care of them in time of need, even taking them into the congregation's houses.³

² Information about the Getter family was provided to the author by Dr. Krystyna Jakubowska, Mo. Matylda Getter's niece and Alicja Getter, her nephew's wife (Warsaw, August 21, 2006).

³ Of Matylda Getter's two sisters, Izabela (1885–1963) was educated at the sisters of the Family of Mary in Odessa and after their merger with the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary Congregation, entered that order, taking the name Teresa of Jesus. After World War I she worked in Tunisia (1920–1925), maintaining sporadic contact with Matylda by letter; she died February 2, 1963 in Cambo, France. Matylda Getter's files include several letters in French from her sister Izabela (ARM, AZ, II 60). Her second sister, Maria, who was unmarried, worked in Warsaw, and after retiring, lived as a resident in the house of the sisters of the Family of Mary in Warsaw, at 53 Hoża Street. She died on September 1, 1966, at the age of 90, and was buried in the Bródno Cemetery, cf. *Kronika Domu Prowincjalnego Zgromadzenia Sióstr Franciszek Rodziny Maryi*, 53 Hoża St., Warszawa, 1966.

When she was a teenager, a great tragedy struck the family. In 1886 her father had a mysterious accident, which was reported in the Warsaw press. When he found out that his friend Edward Reich (Reych), a well-known Warsaw brewer, had suddenly fallen ill, he quickly went to help him at his brewery on 33 Grzybowski Place. Unfortunately, the visit ended in a double tragedy – not only did Reich die, but Getter as well. According to the press report, he suddenly collapsed and died.⁴ The tragedy did not end there, because the next day, the Getters' servant committed suicide from grief, probably blaming himself for being unable to help his employer.

These accidents caused a shock in the family and led to its impoverishment. Certainly, these events also had a great influence on Matylda Getter's choice of path for her life.

Looking into the family history of Getter's mother, it can be seen that she had genealogical ties to a well-known priest and chaplain of the Polish Army, Ignacy Skorupka (1883–1920).



Mother Florentyna Dymman, founder and Reverend Mother Superior of the Family of Mary congregation.

At the Girls' School at the Family of Mary

From 1881–1884, Matylda Getter took her education at a private girls' school in the Bogusławski mansion at 97 Żelazna Street, run by the sisters of the Family of Mary, who had been active in Russia and the [former]* Kingdom of Poland since their foundation was formed; the sisters had to operate in secrecy due to the tsarist repressions against

* Note: Hereafter referred to as 'the Kingdom'.

⁴ *Kurier Warszawski*, no. 230, 1886. Karol Getter is buried in Warsaw's Powązki cemetery, near gate I, in the tomb of the Miecznik and Niemyski families; his wife Matylda, née Niemyska, who died in 1904, is buried in the same grave.

religious orders. Only much later did she learn that she had been cared for by nuns whose congregation had been founded in 1857 in St. Petersburg by Fr. Zygmunt Szczęsny Feliński (1822–1895).

Established in 1862 with government approval, the boarding school was a self-contained institute for about eighty girls who lived in the Family of Mary house. It was headed by a committee consisting of lay people and those in religious orders. Admission to the boarding school was generally decided by the ladies of the committee and the General Government. The Mother Superior, Florentyna Dymman (1828–1906), together with her educational and administrative staff, provided the girls with exceptional care and heartfelt tutelage.

Matylda graduated from the boarding school and received her certificate in 1884, the last year of the institute's existence; about which she wrote:

“On March 19, 1884 by order of the state authorities, the girls’ school, dormitory and common school were closed. I can still picture the scene vividly in my mind today. On that day, when we were gathered in the schoolroom after a three-day retreat, Mother Dymman, accompanied by several sisters, came in and announced to us: ‘I have come to bring you sad news. But this unhappiness concerns us as much as it does you. The girls’ school, the dormitory and the common school will be closed from tomorrow. Your parents have already been informed. Local girls and those who live near Warsaw will leave the house today, while those who live far from Warsaw will leave tomorrow. We will say goodbye now, because it would be too painful for you, and for me to say goodbye to each of you separately.’ A short, almost wordless goodbye followed. Mother Dymman made the sign of the cross on each of our foreheads and we kissed her hand as we left.”⁵

⁵ Mo. M. Getter RM, *Wspomnienia. To, co najbardziej utrwaliło się i pozostało jeszcze w mojej pamięci*, Warszawa–Niepokalanów 2007, p. 39.

In the Family of Mary

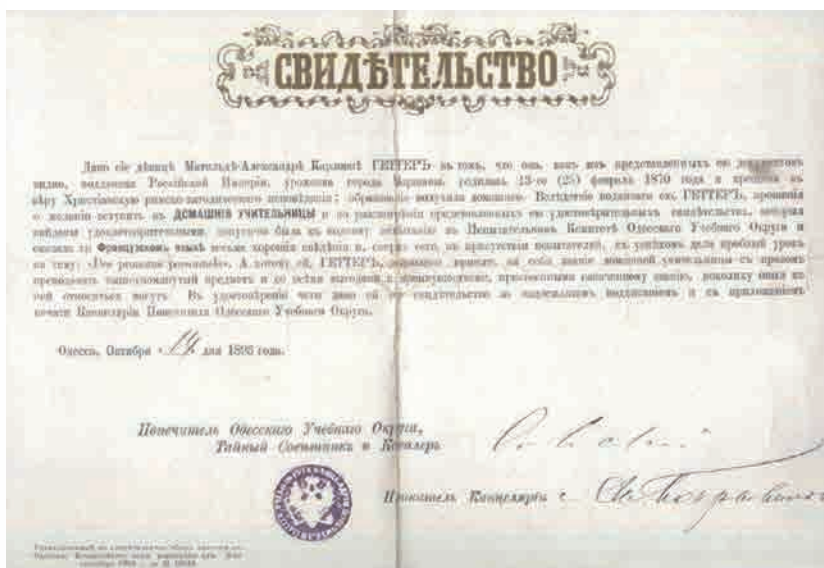
After finishing her schooling, Matylda returned to her family home. She had to decide what to do and where to direct her steps. Warsaw was changing before her very eyes. Krochmalna Street was clearly becoming more and more a Jewish street. Eight houses of prayer, a mikvah, and the Haberbusch and Schiele brewery had been erected there. In 1908 the family of Isaac Bashevis Singer, winner of the Nobel Prize for literature, moved into number 10.

As Matylda Getter had long felt a calling to the religious life, she decided to join a convent, about which she wrote:

“From the very beginning of my calling, I intended to join a convent of Carmelite nuns. The Family of Mary was relegated to second place. When I had to make the final decision, at the moment when my future was at stake, I went to my confessor for advice, in the church of St. Anthony on Senatorska St. There were no remaining Reformed fathers at that time. If any of them were left, it was only as lay priests, because the monasteries had been abolished. The confessor I went to was unknown to me. I heard this answer from him: ‘You will go to the Family of Mary, because it is now necessary to save poor children and to work within this country.’ Here I must mention that when I asked his advice, I did not mention to him that I knew the Family of Mary. My indecision disappeared.”⁶

The confessor’s advice became a guiding light for Matylda throughout her religious life and educational and charitable activities. On April 10, 1887, at the age of seventeen years and two months, she entered the Congregation

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 36.



Home-school teacher diploma obtained by Matylda Getter, no. 12077, Odessa, October 14, 1893.

of the Sisters of the Family of Mary in Warsaw, at 97 Żelazna Street, which operated secretly in the Kingdom and the Russian Empire. Outwardly, the sisters were regarded as lay people, but in practice there was no denying that they were consecrated. “Ordinary people, authorities, and even the police considered them spiritual persons. Why the government tolerated them despite the prohibitions will remain a mystery,” wrote Matylda Getter.⁷

The more liberal policy of the Tsar was due to improved relations between the Holy See and the St. Petersburg court. It should be noted that in 1883 Father Zygmunt Szczęśny Feliński returned to Poland from Siberia after twenty years of exile. However, he could not stay in the Russian partition and settled in Galicia.

Religious and Intellectual Formation in Odessa

After a stay of a few months in Żelazna Street in Warsaw, Matylda was sent for further religious formation to Odessa. She began her novitiate

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 35.



Matylda with her younger sibling: brother Antoni or Henryk and sister Izabela in Odessa.

with the vesitation ceremony on December 10, 1887 in the congregation's house in Odessa, called Maria's House, the family estate of Maria Drzewiecka, who at the time performed the duties of the novitiate mistress as well as those of the mother superior, although formally Mother Kazimierz Herman had those responsibilities. Mother Drzewiecka⁸ had

⁸ Maria Drzewiecka, Maria of St. John in the order (1846–1933), had a significant influence on the renewal of Catholic life in Podolia – cf. K. Górski, “Matka Maria Drzewiecka”, *Prąd. Miesięcznik Związku Polskiej Inteligencji Katolickiej* (Lublin), 1934, vol.



Matylda Getter, Odessa, ca. 1893.

belonged to the Family of Mary since 1878; she was accepted into the congregation by Mother Florentyna Dymman, officiating in Warsaw.

Mother Dymman entrusted her with the organization of a religious community in Odessa, as well as opening an institute with vocational training for girls. As well as realizing those tasks, Mother Drzewiecka, working together with the sisters in secular garb, cooperated with the Charitable Society, engaging in its fruitful benevolent work in Podolia.

After two years, on December 8, 1889, Matylda Getter took her first vows, and then on January 23, 1895 – her perpetual vows. We do not know whether she received a religious name during her vows, but it is certain that she served only under the name Matylda; she did not use her second given name, Alexandra, which appears only on her birth certificate and on her teacher's diploma. In Odessa, Matylda graduated from a Russian school with eight classes and after passing the examinations, she received a home-school teacher diploma with a specialization in French, issued to her by the Odessa Academic District on October 14, 1893.

A photograph of Matylda with her younger siblings, a brother and Isabella, survives from her early Odessa period. It can be assumed that thanks to Matylda, one of her brothers (Antoni or perhaps Henryk) star-

26, p. 225; *idem*, "Drzewiecka Maria" [in:] *Polski słownik biograficzny*, vol. 5, Kraków 1939–1946, p. 413; ARM, AZ II 44, Teresa Antonietta Frącek RM, *Maria Drzewiecka (1846–1933)*.

ted his education in the state-sponsored schools in Odessa, and Isabella was admitted to the Odessa girls' school of the sisters of the Family of Mary that was conducted in the home of Maria Drzewiecka.

Teacher and Guardian

From 1890–1898 Matyllda Getter worked as a teacher and guardian for the girls at the congregation's Odessa institute in Maria's House. Thereafter, despite her young age, she served as the superior of a shelter for poor children in the suburb of Moldavanka (1898–1903), which was a legendary, mainly Jewish district in Odessa, often portrayed in literature. It was the equivalent of Krochmalna Street in Warsaw. She also went to Rome twice during this time, in 1893 and around 1900, accompanying Superior General Drzewiecka, who

had great confidence in her. In Rome, both mothers had the spiritual guidance of Fr. Bernardo dal Vago di Portogruaro, Superior General of the Friars Minor as well as the Assistant General, Fr. Raphael Delarbre, who looked after the congregations that had accepted the Franciscan rule of life; since 1889 the sisters of the Family of Mary in the Kingdom and the Russian Empire were part of the Franciscan family.



Father Zygmunt Szczęśny Feliński (left), founder of the Family of Mary with Father Konstanty Lubieński, initiator of the consecrated life for women in St. Petersburg as well as the first contemplative Family of Mary (1856–1859), St. Petersburg.



Sisters with their wards in St. Petersburg, on Vasilyevsky Island, no. 25/27, 14th Line.

Youth Workers in St. Petersburg

In 1903, Mo. Florentyna Dymman, Mother Superior of the Family of Mary, sent Sr. Matylda Getter to the establishment for girls in St. Petersburg; that had its beginnings in 1857 and was considered one of the most well-organized educational institutions in the Russian capital. For the next five years, Matylda was associated with the central house of the Family of Mary, located on Vasilyevsky Island at no. 25/27 on the 14th Line, and its two branches: Krylovka, found on the 15th Line in St. Petersburg, as well as a dacha in charming Nikolaevka-on-Neva.

The Family of Mary educational and training institute in St. Petersburg, founded by Fr. Zygmunt Szczęśny Feliński, was run by the sisters in their own house from 1859. There was an orphanage, a sewing room, a liturgical vestments workshop, and a hospital. A spacious chapel, two stories high, served not only the sisters and children, but also local Catholics. Chaplain's duties were performed by Fr. Wincenty Majew-

ski,⁹ a professor at the St. Petersburg Roman Catholic Theological Academy, a friend of the congregation's founder, and after Fr. Feliński's appointment as archbishop of Warsaw, administrator, advisor, and spiritual director of the children and nuns. The establishment was at the same time the general house of the Family of Mary and the center of their educational and charitable activities.

Maria Siemaszko, an alumna from St. Petersburg, who had acquired her teacher training and worked for many years in education

in St. Petersburg and Warsaw, while reminiscing about the times when she was under the care of the sisters, especially Matylda Getter, recalled their beneficial influence on the youth. She considered the institution to be "built on a foundation of love of God and neighbor – with indigent young Polish females in mind, the majority being orphans living as expatriates." About herself she writes: "I had the good fortune" to be a ward in "this House of God", being educated first in Nikolaevka, then in St. Petersburg, where "I was a witness to the Congregation's experiences, both joyful and difficult."

Children between the ages of seven and twelve were raised by the sisters and educated at Nikolaevka, while 160 girls (aged twelve to nineteen) were educated at the 14th Line in St. Petersburg. Both homes were staffed by nuns and several lay people, "creating a democratic-Christian family where equality and justice prevailed, as well as irreproachable order and



Sister Matylda Getter, tutor in
St. Petersburg, ca. 1905.

⁹ Fr. Wincenty Majewski (1832–1905), ordained as priest in 1859, professor of the Roman Catholic Academy in St. Petersburg, prelate of Mogilev Cathedral chapter.

cleanliness,” recollected Maria Siemaszko. “The educational direction was rational: solid teaching, along with serious and thoughtful preparation of young people for life. Care was taken to develop spiritual fortitude and a steadfast attitude in the face of obstacles met in the pursuit of the highest goal, based on moral principles.” After completing their education at the school, the girls gained further qualifications and education according to their interests and talents. Some received the right to teach in elementary schools [grades 1–7]. Others gained professional qualifications at the local school and obtained a teaching certificate; many were trained in various professions: trade, dressmaking, and needlework in white and colors. Learning was not completely subordinate to the official Russian school curriculum, and the sisters showed great flexibility in teaching through responding to the needs and creativity of the youth. According to Maria Siemaszko, “many respectable and well-educated women went out from the Institute into the world”. The Institute did a lot for the education and enriching of the minds of Polish women, more than would have been possible in then-current conditions. A joyful and pleasant atmosphere reigned.¹⁰

Maria Siemaszko also expressed her opinion on the children’s mistress, Matylda Getter, as well as her educational methods:

“The strongest, most radical influence on the youth was exerted by the Mistress, the good young mother, Matylda Getter, ‘Matusia’ [Mom], whose tact and balance, together with great kindness, exquisite elegance, and charming grace, were combined with the originality of the way in which she interacted with the youth and influenced their psyche.

Matusia took the ‘heart to heart’ path with young people, and this constrained us to submit to her will. [...] We felt like her children, whom she took in and raised wisely, taking care of everyone all together as

¹⁰ ARM, AZ X 12, M. Siemaszko, *Wspomnienia z Petersburga i Mikołajówki*, Warszawa [ca. 1953], MS, pp. 1–5.

well as individually. She even cared for her pupils' siblings and showed them how to look after them, thus developing their social instincts.

The older students cared for their younger counterparts, whom they had to assist with their education, consequently developing a sense of joint responsibility for one another. Matusia had an outstanding ability to perceive and accurately assess character.”¹¹

In Nikolaevka, in a so-called dacha located high on the banks of the Neva River, forty-five versts [old Russian measure, about two-thirds of a mile] from the city, was an affiliate of the St. Petersburg house. It was a large estate with several buildings, its own marina on the river, an in-house chapel, flower, fruit and vegetable gardens, a fishpond and a small wood, as well as an extensive courtyard and a field for sports and games. It was also the household supply base for the St. Petersburg house.

“Charming Nikolaevka – a place where small children were brought up during the year and simultaneously a summer resort for older girls, pupils of the St. Petersburg home – it was the center for health, recreation, pleasant entertainment, and wonderful excursions, in which the dear Reverend Father, Jan Cieplak participated more than once. Polish to the core – later a martyred archbishop – Fr. Cieplak instilled a Polish identity into the souls of children and young people through talks, teaching, and patriotic songs sung along with him. Fondest memories are enduringly associated with the unsurpassable Matusia, radiant, vivacious, and setting everything in motion, as well as the excellent mother, Waleria Stawicka. Performances and plays developed the artistic talents of the youth and were a source of delight.”¹²

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 10.

Mother Getter's Role in Unifying the Family of Mary with the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary Congregation

After the death in Warsaw (1906) of Superior General Florentyna Dymman, Mother Getter remained in St. Petersburg, although according to sources, she was secretary general to the new Superior General of the Congregation, Mother Kazimiera Herman, who resided in Odessa.¹³ Mother Getter did not write about her role in her memoirs, but she extensively described Maria Drzewiecka's efforts, approved by Mother Herman, to unite the Family of Mary with the French Congregation of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary.

In order to learn more about the goals and spirituality of the missionaries, several sisters from the Family of Mary were sent to the general house of the missionaries in Rome, at Via Giusti 12 (currently 18). Among them was Sr. Matylda Getter, an enthusiast of this union, as she herself wrote. During her stay in Rome she learned of the death of the Superior General, Mother Kazimiera Herman, who had died in Odessa on April 8, 1908. She did not attend the Chapter, in session in Odessa on June 1–2, 1908, which, following the suggestions of Mother Maria Drzewiecka, decided to unite the Congregation of the Family of Mary with the French Congregation of Franciscan Missionaries of Mary. Mother Getter's stay with the missionaries in Rome lasted over four months, from March 19 to August 2, 1908. During that time she translated the Missionary Sisters' Directory from French into Polish.¹⁴

The union with the Missionary Sisters was to give the sisters of the Family of Mary the status of a congregation approved by the Holy See,

¹³ ARM, F-f-8, Teresa Helman, Notes.

¹⁴ Mo. M. Getter, *Wspomnienia...*, pp. 99–100.



The main house of the Family of Mary sisters in Warsaw at 97 Żelazna St.

which they could not obtain as an organization operating in secret in the Russian Empire. In effect, the Family of Mary was incorporated into the Missionary Sisters' congregation and ceased to exist as a separate religious institute.



Pupils, sisters (in secular attire) and tutors in front of the statue of St. Joseph in the garden, 97 Żelazna St., Warsaw.

Mother Superior of the Warsaw House

After her training in Rome, Mother Getter returned to Poland and at the end of 1908, assumed the duties of mother superior of the main house of the former Family of Mary in Warsaw at 97 Żelazna St., a childcare and educational institution, which housed twenty-seven sisters and about sixty children.

Mother Getter did much for the development of this institution. Up to 600 children attended the school. Closed officially in 1887, it continued its educational activities in an open sewing workroom, which conducted Polish education in secret under the guise of vocational training. Mother Getter not only enlarged the house for the needs of the school by adding four classrooms, but also accepted more children for

Mother Matylda Getter
in Warsaw – she conducted
official business in this outfit,
ca. 1913.



The youngest wards of the sisters at 97 Żelazna Street in Warsaw, ca. 1913.

boarding and vocational training in the sewing workroom. She opened a four-grade co-educational public school and a nursery (1908–1909); the former was to prepare poor children for the first grades of secondary school. She organized clandestine evening courses in Polish for four high school classes and small groups of pupils. She took care of the institute's affiliates at 53 Hoża Street in Warsaw and in Kostowiec (in the Pruszków district today), where she established a school for rural children (1912). Funds from the sale of the Polish institute of the Family of Mary in Maribo, Denmark, were earmarked for the expansion of the Warsaw house (the transaction was decided at the meeting of the Odessa Chapter in 1906 and mandated by the Superior of the Missionary Sisters in 1908).¹⁵

In 1912 Mother Getter celebrated twenty-five years of religious life. She traveled to Eingraben, Austria, for the jubilee celebration (at the invitation of the Superior General of the Missionary Sisters), and then visited the Missionary Sisters' institution at Châteles, France.

In the Family of Mary Once More: The 1919 Union

The union of the Family of Mary with the Missionary Sisters, although carried out in accordance with canon law, was not permanent. Significant differences in the purpose, spirituality and charisms of the two institutes emerged, which called for remedial measures. At the request of the sisters and with strong support from the Warsaw clergy, Mother Getter ordered the secession of the sisters of the Family of Mary from the Missionary Sisters in 1913 in order to save the legacy of Archbishop Feliński and the spiritual heritage of the Family of Mary as well as its

¹⁵ Mo. M. Getter, *Wspomnienia...*, p. 121; Archives of the Franciscan Missionary Sisters of Mary, Rome: Famille Marie, Odessa Cathedral Chapter records, June 1, 1908; Archives of the Ordo Fratrum Minorum, Rome, Monache Russe-Polacche, Letter of Mo. Maria Drzewiecka to the General of the Order of Friars Minor, May 6, 1907. Photocopies of these materials can be found in ARM (nos. 915 and 885).

Matylda Getter, Superior
General of the Family of Mary
from 1914–1919.

After their separation from
the Missionary sisters, the
Warsaw sisters continued
to wear secular garb, but
at home they wore a veil and
a long dress with a cape.



Hospital for wounded Russian soldiers (1914–1915), 97 Żelazna Street, Warsaw. In the garden – soldiers poisoned by German gas near Skierniewice. Mother Getter as a nurse, third from the right.



Hospital for wounded Russian soldiers, Mother Getter, back row center.

property. As a result, eighteen sisters and three houses – two in Warsaw at 53 Hoża Street and 97 Żelazna Street and one in Kostowiec – separated from the Missionary Sisters.

However, eleven houses with more than 130 sisters of the Family of Mary in the Russian Empire, in Yalta, Kiev (two houses), Krasilov, Slobodka Krasilovskaya, Odessa with its two affiliates, and St. Petersburg with Krylovka and Nikolaevka remained in the community of the Missionary Sisters and were separated forever from the original congregation of the Family of Mary.¹⁶

In 1914, the Ordinary of Warsaw helped this small segment of the Family of Mary headed by Mother Getter. Although the papal decree released the sisters from their vows made with the missionaries, it also ‘secularized’ them thus returning them to lay status. Archbishop Aleksander Kakowski did not disregard the decree, but taking into account the situation of that time – the outbreak of war and the needs of the archdiocese –

¹⁶ Mo. M. Getter, *Wspomnienia...*, pp. 11–115.

he ordered the sisters to continue their religious life and activities among children, to choose from among themselves a general superior, and even to open a novitiate, assuring that after the war he would try to regulate their legal status in the Vatican. He indeed kept his promise of assistance.

During World War I, Mother Getter, fulfilling the duties of Superior General in Warsaw (on Żelazna St.), comprehensively helped those in need. In the novitiate building in the garden, she organized a fifty-bed hospital, with an operating room and a chapel, for wounded Russian soldiers. Admitted there were a group of

soldiers wounded during the battles near Łowicz as well as those poisoned by gas during fights with German troops near Skierniewice.

After the liquidation of the hospital on May 26, 1915, she opened an after-school club with meals for children and youth, and also took care of about 450 poor people, who benefited from meals at the cloister gate during the war years.

In the years 1914–1919, Mother Getter, as Superior General, headed the regenerated Family of Mary in Warsaw, under the oversight of the Cardinal Aleksander Kakowski, the Ordinary. In 1917, she began negotiations with the Superior General of the Family of Mary in former Galicia, Mother Zofia Kończal, regarding the merger of the two branches of the Congregation, Warsaw and Lviv, separated by partitions and operating independently since 1889. The official union of both branches of the congregation took place in the restored Homeland on May 21, 1919. Approximately 500 sisters from the Galician branch and



Mother Getter in the Family of Mary habit, 1919.



Mother Matylda Getter surrounded by children, 'Ognisko' at 35 Zamoyskiego Street Warsaw, ca. 1930.

80 sisters from the Warsaw branch joined the union, which was led by the current apostolic inspector in Warsaw, Achilles Ratti, later a nuncio and Pope Pius XI.¹⁷ After the union, Mo. Getter with the Warsaw sisters, adopted the religious garb of the Family of Mary, introduced in 1889 by the founder and used by the sisters in former Galicia.

Founder of New Educational and Childcare Institutions

After the union, Mother Getter left the Family of Mary convent at 97 Żelazna St. in Warsaw and organized a home for orphans, casualties of World War I, on Zamoyskiego St. in Warsaw's Praga district; she called it the Family of Mary 'Ognisko' [Hearth]. Nearby at number 35 was the Jan Wedel chocolate factory, built in the 1920s.

¹⁷ Records pertaining to the union of the Family of Mary with the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary Congregation are kept in the Archives of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary in Rome, in the fonds: Family of Mary (1908–1913). However, documentation related to the union, dissolution, and subsequent union with the Lviv Family of Mary, is held in the Vatican Archives in the fonds: Archivio della Segreteria di Stato, 1913–1919, and in Archivio degli Affari Ecclesiastici Straordinari, Polonia, 1919, no. 547.



Chapel in the Family of Mary 'Ognisko', 35 Zamoyskiego St., Warsaw, ca. 1935.

Matylda Getter was the superior of the Family of Mary 'Ognisko' from 1919–1936, with a short cessation, when she ran the house in Płudy¹⁸ (1925–1927). The first 'Ognisko' chaplain was the aforementioned Fr. Ignacy Skorupka, who, during the Bolshevik invasion in 1920, set out for the fields of Radzymin, leading the youth with an ivory cross received from Mother Getter, which shone in the light of the rising sun. The priest died, but God gave the victory.

In agreement with the next Superior General, Mother Janina Wirball, residing in Lviv at 45 Kurkowa Street, Mother Getter, sensitive to social needs, devoted herself to founding twenty-five new educational and childcare institutions, both in central Poland and its north-eastern reaches, in the following towns: Międzyzlesie – 'Zosinek' (1920); Sejny – an orphanage, a preschool, a home for the elderly, and a dormitory (1921); Warsaw Praga – 'Loretto' (1921); Augustów (1923); Chotomów (1923); Płudy (1924); Białolęka (1926); Międzyzlesie – 'Ulanówek' san-

¹⁸ Today Płudy is part of Białolęka.



Mother Matylda Getter, second from right, during the awards ceremony for the Order of Polonia Restituta, April 30, 1925.



From the right: Mother Matylda Getter, Kazimierz Koralewski – board president of the Warsaw Health Insurance Fund, Mother Róża Czacka – president of the Society for the Care of the Blind in Warsaw, and Cecylia Walewska, an activist in the women's movement.

atorium (1927); Ostrów Mazowiecka – orphanage (1928); Pustelnik – ‘Jutrzenka’ children’s home (1928); Brańszczyk, Brwinów, and Struga (1929); Studzieniczna (1930); Raków (1932); Ostrołęka (1934); Dłutowo (1934); Dzisna (1935); Vilnius, Wilejka, Wirów, and Mickuny (1936); and Niekasieck (1937). As well as these houses there were homes at the military garrisons in the towns of Budzław, Modlin, and Grudziądz.¹⁹

The Polish state attached particular importance to the orphanages established within garrisons. In 1923, *Polska Zbrojna* [Armed Poland] published a lengthy article about a new home in Modlin, in which the children of those who had died defending the homeland were living. Mother Getter enjoyed a great deal of admiration at that time: “She is a well-known and admired social activist, full of initiative and untiring diligence,” wrote one journalist. Cyprian Godebski, a writer and the first commander of the fortress, was also patron of the new institution.

Most of these institutions were homes for children, located in secluded places, surrounded by greenery. The largest of them brought together as many as two hundred girls in Płudy, while the smallest in Brańszczyk had thirty boys. Mother Getter avoided the name ‘orphanage’ and gave the houses names such as ‘Jutrzenka’ [Morning Star] in Pustelnik or ‘Strzecha chłopięca’ [The Boys’ Thatch] in Brańszczyk, ‘Uzdrowisko dla dzieci’ [Health Resort for Children] and ‘Ostoja zdrowia dziecka’ [Child’s Health Haven] in Międzyzlesie. She tried to make the child-rearing system similar to that of a family.

In the largest children’s home in Płudy, Mother Matylda Getter educated children in ten groups, in ‘families’, consisting of children of

¹⁹ We can find information about Mo. Getter’s activities in tomes retained by the Warsaw house on 97 Żelazna Street (ARM, AZ I 32): Minutes from the Committee Meetings of the ‘Family of the Blessed Virgin Mary’ Shelter, vol. 1 (1905–1912), vol. 2 (1913–1928), vol. 3: Minute Book of the Association titled ‘The Family of Mary Institute’ (1928–1937); Minute Book of the Immaculate Province of the Franciscan Sisters Congregation of the Family of Mary, Warsaw, vol. 1 (1937–1944), vol. 2 (1945–1957).



Map showing the congregation's division into three provinces in Poland.

different ages. Each group had a separate building, for example: Chochlik, Echo, Jutrzenka, Kościuszko, Kruszyna, Mały, Pensjonat, Polonka, Rusałka, and Zacisze – the names were linked to characteristic features of the building and its location in a large wooded area. To this number of houses it is necessary to add a school, an enclosed cloister (a building for sisters) and an isolation ward for sick children near Wiśniewo. In the largest children's home in Pludy, Mother Matylda Getter educated



Mother Getter with sisters and associates, Międzyzylesie, Ulanówek, 1939.

children in ten groups, in 'families'. She called the institutions in which older girls stayed hostels (e.g. in Warsaw at 53 Hoża Street and 97 Żelazna Street). In her concern for the education of the children, she made sure that there were schools on the premises or in close proximity.

Mother Getter was also publicly active, co-organizing campaigns to help orphans. This issue was especially important when the struggle for the borders of the second Polish republic ended. In 1923 she was a signatory of the appeal to the citizens of Warsaw to collect money to help orphans – victims of the war. In the capital itself there were about ten thousand of them. Matylda Getter appeared in good company,



Mother Matylda Getter – Superior of the Warsaw Province, 1936.



Map of pre-war Poland with the Warsaw Province borders highlighted.

among others, with the First Lady of Poland – Maria Wojciechowska. The ladies, who were also directing the ‘Polka Repatriantom’ [Woman to Returnees] Committee, used these words to address Warsaw’s inhabitants: “Warsaw, wake up! Open your eyes and make haste. Hurry, so that it will not be too late. Let not the physical and moral eradication of Polish orphans weigh against you in the balance of great general justice.”

Her involvement in aiding people suffering from epilepsy was also of great importance. Countess Pelagia Popławska, née Jełowicka, nicknamed ‘The Piggy Bank Lady’ and an organizer of the Aid and Care Society for the Neurotic and Mentally Ill, died in 1915. After her death, the organization, located in Hoża Street, found itself in a very difficult situation. It was taken over by Mo. Getter – “known among the poor of



Provincial House, 53 Hoża St., Warsaw. View from the garden side.

the capital” – as was often written about her. She came to an agreement with the association’s current Board of Directors headed by Prelate Fr. Roman RembIELiński and moved the institute to Mińsk Mazowiecki. At the beginning of World War I it was brought back to Warsaw, where it had a nomadic existence for several years, moving from Narbutta St. to Rakowiecka St., and from there to Sielce. Finally, in 1925, the institute was moved outside Warsaw to Otrębusy, near Brwinów.

National Awards

Mother Getter’s contributions in the field of childcare were highly appreciated not only by society and the church authorities, but also by the government of the Second Republic of Poland. By presidential decree in April 30, 1925, she was decorated with the Order of Polonia Restituta as well as the Officer’s Cross for that Order. The decoration took place in the headquarters of the Ministry of Labor and Social Services, and the order and diplomas were presented by Franciszek Sokal, a minister at that time. Six years later, by presidential decree on November 9, 1931, she received the Gold Cross of Merit for her achievements in the field of educational and care work.

Superior of the Warsaw Province

In 1934, the Congregation of Franciscan Sisters of the Family of Mary, along with the general house in Lviv, numbering 1,201 sisters and 168 convents, was divided into five provinces, three in Poland with the motherhouses in Lviv, Poznan and Warsaw, as well as houses in Brazil and Romania.

After the division of the congregation into provinces in 1936, the scope of Mother Matylda Getter's work expanded greatly. Under the invocation of the Immaculate, she was appointed Superior of the Province of Warsaw (consisting of 404 sisters working in forty-four convents, within six dioceses, and in the boundaries of four voivodeships), and governed for three consecutive three-year terms (1936–1945), initially based in Warsaw at the Żelazna Street motherhouse.

The main activities of the sisters in the Warsaw Province were focused on the education of children. The sisters ran twenty-one orphanages, eight day-care centers, and seven dormitories for female high school students, as well as a hostel for working girls in Warsaw; taught in ten elementary schools (five of which were their own), worked in three hospitals and three outpatient clinics, and in the convents, helped the poor and the sick.

When Mother Matylda assumed her new function, she voiced some meaningful words, demonstrating her love for her homeland and the direction of her educational activities for the younger generation:

“After God, the Homeland is the greatest moral value for our Congregation. We want to serve our beloved Homeland first and foremost by educating the youth entrusted to our care to be good citizens who are aware of their civic duties.”²⁰

²⁰ ARM, AZ III 53, Minute Book, vol. 3, July 22, 1935, pp. 256–257.

In 1938, during a meeting of the General Chapter held in Lviv, Mother Getter presented the plan to move the provincial headquarters from the Warsaw home on Żelazna St. to an old wooden house on 53 Hoża St., located closer to the railroad station.

Just before the outbreak of war in Poland the congregation had 1,120 sisters and 160 convents organized in three provinces. Educational and care work in sixty schools, forty-four orphanages, fifty-eight day-care centers, and twenty dormitories, along with a wide range of care activities in seventeen homes for the elderly, fourteen hospitals, eighty clinics and infirmaries, mostly in villages, were at the forefront of the sisters' activities in the framework of the entire Franciscan Sisters' of the Family of Mary Congregation. Over 60,000 people (children, youth, the elderly and the sick) came within the array of their activities, including 3,500 children (1939).

Mother Matylda Getter in the Face of War – 1939

The aggression of Nazi Germany against Poland (1939), the occupation and ensuing displacements, round-ups, arrests, and executions, the extermination of the Polish population, along with the annihilation of the Jewish population all sowed terror and fear. This reality had to be faced by the Family of Mary Congregation, which before the war was one of the most numerous religious communities in Poland.

Although the war as well as the terror of German and Soviet occupation limited and hindered the congregation's educational, caregiving, and charitable activities, the sisters, sharing the fate of the nation, sacrificially helped the victims of the war: displaced persons, the homeless, those in danger of arrest, prisoners, poor families, and above all, orphaned children, by taking them into their institutes and organizing new homes for them.



53 Hoża St., Warsaw. Sisters of the Family of Mary with Mo. Matylda Getter (center).

An illustration of Mother Getter's activities conducted in the provincial house in Warsaw at 53 Hoża Street during the September campaign is in the following particulars: in September 1939, about 500 fugitives found shelter there and a first-aid station was in operation, as well as first-aid units composed of sisters, who set out by night on the Radzymin road to help the wounded.

Matusia, as Mother Matylda Getter was called, entrusted herself to Providence and she daily called upon that Divine Providence, encouraging others to do the same. She had a peculiar intuition for danger, as the following events testify. In the last days of the siege of Warsaw, under the unceasing attack of the German air force, at a certain point Matusia ordered the sisters to take the children and flee to the cellars of the brick houses on the other side of Hoża Street. She had hardly closed the gate behind the last group when a three-ton bomb hit the house, broke through the roof, pierced the ceiling and fell in the very place where the sisters and children had just been. It did not explode; had it done so, it would have blown apart the wooden house and everyone present. In the evening, the sisters came to see what had happened to the house. They found Matusia in the kitchen, cooking a pot of groats so that the sisters could feed the children. The deliverance of the Hoża St. house was considered a miracle.

Throughout the occupation, the kitchen in 53 Hoża Street was operative and used by about 300 poor people daily. From here Mo. Getter supervised the action of bringing aid to those who had been arrested, cooperating with covert cells in prisons. There was also a documentation unit there, which issued new documents for people in hiding being hunted by the Germans, as well as for Jews. On her initiative, small groups met for clandestine classes in the formational school, and the Pedagogical High School of the University of the Western Lands; catechism courses were also held there. The means for rescuing Jewish children led through the motherhouse.

Special mention must be given to Mother Getter's dedication to rescuing children. She never refused to take in children who had been arrested or were in difficult material conditions. Thanks to her, twenty-two orphanages functioned in the Warsaw Province throughout the occupation and she established nine new ones to replace those liquidated by the war. She made sure that her wards had proper living conditions, that they were educated, and that they had a serene, family atmosphere. She supported the sisters and orphanages in the Lviv and Poznan provinces.

During World War II, Mother Getter, while caring for the sisters of her own province, also ensured the care of the sisters and houses of the provinces that were located within the borders of the General Government, and materially supplied the shortages suffered by the houses and sisters in Lviv and Mszana Dolna, as well as the Polish and Jewish war orphans they had taken in. She did not close any houses; on the contrary – she opened nine more. She undertook extensive action to help civilians, the army, underground formations, displaced persons and Jews. She sustained the spirit of the sisters through personal contact and circular letters, organized meetings of nuns, conventions of superiors, retreats and anniversaries, and disseminated directives and pithy maxims: “Help whoever is in need and do not turn anyone in”.



The convent in Płudy took in forty children of Jewish origin.

A Spontaneous and Organized Action to Save Jews

The sisters spontaneously joined the relief effort as part of their activities and the local needs. This was necessitated by the tragic situation of the Jews, condemned to extermination by the German occupier; it should be remembered that according to Hitler's plans, the same fate awaited the Poles. This spontaneous action was put into an organizational framework. It was directed by the Superior General of Lviv, Mother Ludwika Lisówna (1874–1944) and in Warsaw, by Mother Matylda Getter, the Superior of the Warsaw Province, who had her base in the old wooden building at 53 Hoża Street.

While the example of the mother superiors was most effective, the top-down initiatives of the religious authorities were realized thanks to the generosity and dedication of the sisters who bore the burden of responsibility for the concealed Jews' safety – day and night in orphanages, educational and care institutes, hospitals and residences for the sick. Almost every convent of sisters of the Family of Mary par-



Children on a walk, 19 Chełmska Street, Warsaw. Center, in a plaid coat, Maria Malinowska (now Maria Widera from Belgium).



Children with the sisters, near 19 Chełmska Street in Warsaw. Middle row, third from the left, Alinka Zajączkowska (now Zipora Kamon), living in Ramat Gan, Israel.



Polish and Jewish children,
97 Żelazna St., Warsaw.

ticipated in this dangerous action. According to the sisters, saving the lives of those in danger of death was a duty of conscience; an exceptional situation required exceptional sacrifice, even at the cost of one's own life, and it was well known that any help to Jews was punishable by the death penalty, which the Germans executed in a cruel way. It was particularly strictly enforced in Warsaw, where the largest ghetto in Europe was located, housing about 450,000 Jews.

In occupied Poland, people from various backgrounds, political groups, classes, and professions

aided the Jews. Catholic diocesan and monastic clerics, congregations of nuns, and representatives of other churches joined together, realizing the concept of Christian love of neighbor in those inhuman times.



School of the Family of Mary sisters at 97 Żelazna St. in Warsaw.
Among the Polish children are Jewish children.

Save a Life in the Name of Christ

At the age of 70, Mo. Getter became involved in rescuing Jews with amazing energy and dedication. She was a person who “radiated goodness, love, and kindness”. According to the opinion of witnesses, her greatest contribution was in saving Jewish children. Jan Habdank stated: “Her energy, wisdom, practicality, and fearless courage shone out fully during the Nazi occupation.” Jews or their messengers approached her, asking her to take in a child. “I do not know what I valued more in Matusia”, wrote Róża Łubieńska,²¹ who knew her well from before the war, “whether male reason or female sensitivity, quick decisions or her sense of organization, always the right judgments, or perhaps inexhaustible patience in helping everyone, or the readiness to deny herself at any time of day or night.”²²

“In rescuing Jews,” she said, “I rescue a human being.” She saved human life, which has the greatest value. According to Irena Sendler, “Mother Getter undertook to accept every child led out of the ghetto”, and she did.

She rescued in the name of Christ. She firmly stated, “Whoever comes to our courtyard and asks for help, in the name of Christ, we cannot refuse.” She was well aware that rescuing Jews could result in death, and she was afraid. Her secretary, Sr. Teresa Gober, recalls, “Matusia was afraid, she trembled at times like an aspen leaf, but she believed that God would never do harm to a person who does good to another out of love.” For that reason she never refused help to any child or elderly Jew. She believed that it was “God Himself who sent them,” and thus “we must help them.” And in encouraging the sisters to hide

²¹ Róża Łubieńska (1897–1984), founder of the Handmaids of the Children of Mary Congregation under the patronage of Our Lady of Czestochowa and St. Joseph, president of the Infant Jesus Association for the Care of Abandoned Infants, and founder of the ‘Patronat’ Society for the Care of Prisoners. She was active in Krakow.

²² Testimony of laypersons regarding Mo. Getter: ARM, AZ II 60, Jan Habdank, Maria Niklewicz, 1968.



Małgosia Frydman with her mother Łucja and younger sister Irenka in the ghetto, Warsaw, 1942.

Jewish children, she said: “Maybe thanks to our sacrifice the Lord God will protect the institutions and Polish children from worse dangers.”²³ Numerous accounts of the sisters show that Providence was watching over the congregation in a special way. Not one sister was lost for hiding Jews and despite the terrible destruction of the orphanages in 1944, despite displacement, exile, and the battles of the Uprising – apart from two exceptions – no Polish or Jewish child died in them, but the number of wards actually increased from 3,500 to 5,500 in 1945.

Mother Getter involved dozens of sisters from her province in this

action. In every convent and educational institution, in which 30–200 pupils were gathered, Jewish children were hidden. The educational institute in Płudy had the largest number of Jewish children – forty; in ‘Nazareth’ in Międzyzlesie, there were three elderly Jewish women in hiding; in ‘Zosinek’ up to seventeen Jewish children; in ‘Ulanówek’ twelve Jewish children; in two houses in Anin, as well as in Białoleka and Kostowiec were each hiding twenty Jewish children; in the houses in Lviv and Warsaw – twelve to fifteen; and several each in the others.

Sister Janina Kruszewska recalls that when she received another order to transport a Jewish child from Warsaw to Płudy, she said, “Ma-

²³ ARM, AZ V 4, Teresa Gober, Recollections about Mo. Matylda Getter (written up by Sr. Teresa Antonietta Frącek), Warsaw 1971, MS.

tusia, I'm terribly afraid, at the Gdański railway station the Germans have tightened passenger controls." To this she heard the answer, "Look what beautiful eyes this child has." Those words allayed the strain.

A Duty of Conscience

According to the sisters, saving the lives of those in danger of death was a duty of conscience. This was a simple human duty, to reach out a helping hand to those condemned to death. From the sisters' accounts, it seemed there was no other way to act; an exceptional situation demanded exceptional sacrifice, even at the cost of one's own life. In spite of the awareness that helping Jews, hiding them, or facilitating their escape would result in death, the sisters followed the evangelical calling of Christ and the voice of their conscience. The orphanages of the Family of Mary were brimful with Jewish children since, as the sisters and people outside the congregation affirmed, "They did not refuse to help children who were at the risk of certain death." The superiors and sisters risked their own lives, the lives of Polish children, the safety of the institutions, and the property of the congregation; they bravely endured repressions and searches by the Germans.

A great many Jews, children, youth, and seniors passed through the modest wooden house on 53 Hoża Street, the abode of Mo. Getter in Warsaw, from where children were directed to orphanages, girls to work with trusted families, and the elderly to the congregation's convents situated in seclusion. A number of Jews were continuously in hiding in the Hoża St. Provincial House itself.

Hiding Jewish children was associated with constant concern for their safety. Mother Getter had a group of selfless sisters who transported children from Warsaw to the congregation's houses, to private families, to Warsaw hospitals, and especially to doctors on Płocka Street in Wola. Sisters Janina Kruszewska, Apolonia Lorenc, and Stefania Miaśkiewicz, who transported the Jewish children, experienced many



Ewa Szaldowska from Lviv,
Anin, 1943.

terrible moments during German searches at railway stations and on trains.

From the memoirs of Małgorzata Mirska, who came to Hoża St. together with her younger sister Irena, we learn what emotions pulled at the hearts of those children. She writes: “I was terribly afraid because I had a horrible appearance, an ‘undesirable face’ [...]. As I walked through the gate, I was aware that my fate would be decided behind it – life or death. Mother Superior Matylda Getter looked at us and said, ‘Yes, I will take [them].’ It seemed to me that the heavens had opened before me.” Both girls stayed under the care of the sisters in Płudy until the liberation.²⁴

The Heart-rending Journeys of Jewish Children to the Family of Mary Homes

Most often, Jewish children were directed to the congregation’s convents by Mother Getter, but this was also done by acquaintances of priests and family friends, social welfare departments, or the Central Welfare Council (Rada Główna Opiekuńcza). However, there were exceptional cases. A distraught mother left her child at the Płudy site on the day the Germans were sending the Jews to Henryków to be shot. Danuta Rajska was brought to Płudy in a sack. Another girl was brought from the Warsaw ghetto in a trashcan. Also finding shelter here were Anna Zabielska – transferred from Izabelin, Irenka and Małgosia Mirska from the Warsaw ghetto, as well as Janina Dawidowicz, who was later transferred to a house that was resettled from Łomna to Warsaw.²⁵

²⁴ Account of Małgorzata Acher, April 20, 1983.

²⁵ ARM, AZ VII 91, 184, Accounts of the sisters: Janina Cieśliczka and Ludwika Peńsko; ARM, AZ VIII 97, 99, Janina Dawidowicz’s letters to Mo. Tekla Budnowska,



Jewish girls among Polish children: Ewa, Marysia, Krysia, Lusia, Janka, 45 Kurkowa Street, Lviv, 1944.



Jewish child wearing a small cross, 45 Kurkowa Street, Lviv, 1944.

Among those under the care of the sisters were: a three-year-old girl with a Hebrew tattoo on her right side, found in a burrow under

Recollections of Małgorzata Mirska, Warsaw 1983 as well as an entry in the memory book. See also: E. Kurek. *Dzieci żydowskie w klasztorach. Udział żeńskich zgromadzeń zakonnych w akcji ratowania dzieci żydowskich w Polsce w latach 1939–1945*, Poznań 2012, pp. 195–200.



Wartime orphanage, Polish and Jewish children, Lviv, 6 Słodowa Street, 1944.

a sidewalk; a four-year-old boy brought from the ghetto by a Gestapo officer (bribed by the child's father); a girl brought by a policeman; Jasia (who now lives in London); little Marysia; seven-year-old Inka Szapiro, evacuated from the ghetto and given into the care of the sisters by her guardian, Adela Domanusowa. The latter wrote: "There she found shelter and a kind, warm welcome. The Mother Superior, her secretary, and the catechist agreed to take the child in after talking with me, not without risk. They turned out to be people with noble hearts and Christian courage."²⁶ The boarding school in Żelazna Street was situated in a distinct way – it adjoined the ghetto from two sides. Certainly due to this circumstance, more children passed through it than were recorded in the archives of the congregation.

²⁶ ARM, VII 196, Account of Sr. Teresa Reformat, Warsaw 1973, 1976; ARM, AZ VIII 83, Account of J. Wernik, Warszawa 1974; Account (regarding Inka Shapiro), contained in: *Ten jest z ojczyzny mojej. Polacy z pomocą Żydom 1939–1945*, ed. W. Bartoszewski, Z. Lewinówna, Kraków 1966, p. 332.

A little girl whose parents had been murdered was brought to the ‘Divine Providence’ institute at 19 Chełmska Street in Warsaw by a farmer from the Łowicz region; two other girls also found shelter there – one of them had wandered in the fields and slept in a dog kennel after the loss of her parents. Maria Malinowska, now Maria Widera (living in Belgium), and Halinka Zajączkowska, now Zipora Kamon (living in Ramat Gan, Israel), were also rescued through the institute and remained in contact with the sisters.²⁷ The nuns rescued 180 children from a burning house bombed by the Germans on Chełmska Street, but seven sisters died under the rubble (1944).

Jewish children were sent to Anin by Mo. Getter, but they were also brought by Prelate Fr. Marcelli Godlewski from the Warsaw Ghetto. Once he carried out an infant under his coat. Amid twenty Jewish boys, yet another infant found shelter there – torn from the breast of his dead mother at her execution site. Little Jerzy, whose mother was arrested by the Germans, was cared for by neighbors and placed under the care of the sisters. One of the boys had the surname Grinberg. Tadzio Łuszczzyk and his little sister Teresa were sent to Anin by their mother who was unable to care for them. Fr. Godlewski most likely brought Adam Feller from the ghetto. The Family of Mary sisters from Lviv brought Ewa Szałdrowska to

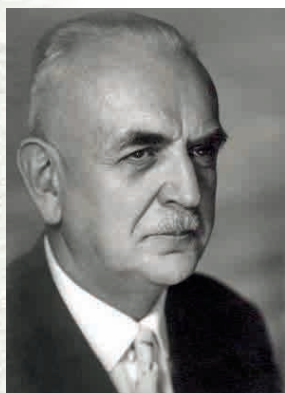


Anna Henrietta Kretz:
“Oh Sister, be my mother...”
Sambir, 1944.



Maria Szkolnicka, hidden
in Podhajce, with Sr. Helena
Chmielewska, Koperniki, 1950.

²⁷ ARM, AZ VII 53, Account of Sr. Olga Schwarz, Warsaw 1971; ARM, AZ VIII 101, 117, 105, Accounts of Jewish women: Maria Widera, Pola Hajt and Zipora Kamon; the latter came to Poland in 2017 with her daughter and two grandchildren – they visited the sisters in Warsaw on September 18, 2017.



Director Jan Starczewski



Fr. Marcelli Godlewski

Mo. Getter, who sent her on to Anin. Andrzejek, little Jędrus, Julek, and Zygmus as well as sixteen-year-old Hanka Sokołowska went there as well.²⁸

A Conventual Franciscan and tailor from the Lviv monastery, Br. Norbert Wojciechowicz, brought a six-year-old child to the orphanage at 45 Kurkowa Street in Lviv and gave her to the sisters of the Family of Mary for upbringing. Janka was given into the care of the sisters by her mother. It is not known under what circumstances Łucja Keller, as well as Ewa, Marysia, Krysia and others (twelve children altogether), knocked on the convent door.²⁹

Jewish children were taken care of in the orphanage at 6 Solodova Street in Lviv: Maria Kuśnirska, Bronisława Malinowicz, Ewa Szlam, and Antonina Słonina. Mother Superior Janina Wirball wrote about them in 1942: “We have twenty-three children, really poor – without clothes, without shoes, poverty in the fullest sense of the word.” In the next year the number of children rose to thirty-six and elderly people were also concealed there.³⁰

²⁸ ARM, AZ VII 89, 136, 162, 271, Accounts of the sisters: Maria Charyton, Anna Korman, Stefania Miałkiewicz, Kamila Kułakowska, and Maria Graczyk (150); ARM, AZ III, Accounts of Jewish wards: Juliusz Brzeziński (138), Adam Feller (140), Jerzy Szczeciński (139), and Tadeusz Rosentreter (120).

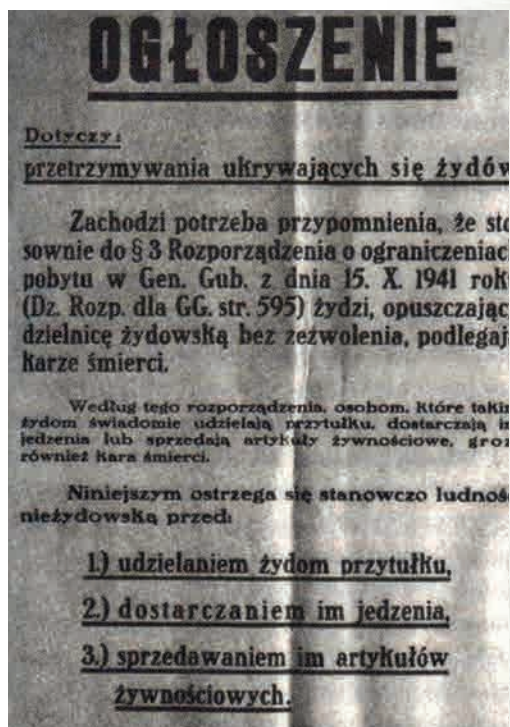
²⁹ ARM, AZ VII 203, 303, 321, Accounts of the sisters: Aniela Sawicka, Kostowiec 1973, Cypriana Moskal, Irena Chuda (photograph); ARM, AZ VIII 107, Account of Jewish ward, Janina Glińska-Ronis; ARM, AZ III 19, Records from the General House of the Franciscan Sisters of the Family of Mary, 45 Kurkowa St., Lviv “Spis sióstr, dzieci i lokatorów” [List of Sisters, Children and Residents], 1944; see *Kronika klasztoru Franciszkanów we Lwowie*, Kraków 2008.

³⁰ ARM, AZ II 60, Letters of Mo. Janina Wirball to Mo. Matylda Getter, 1942–1943; ARM, AZ III 20, Convent records from 6 Słodowa St, Lviv; ARM, AZ VII 320, Account of Sr. Józefa Wasilewska.

In Mirzec the sisters cared for two little girls, one of whom was found in the forest by a policeman. In Podhajce an infant was dropped off at the Gestapo post, as was Marysia Szkolnicka, handed over by the RGO [Central Welfare Council].³¹ Sister Blanka Pigłowska transported Jewish children from the Warsaw Department of Social Welfare to the foster home in Łomna, in the Turka powiat.³² Local people sent Jewish and Roma children to the orphanage in Sambir; the sisters took in Ania, who after the execution of her parents came running and said to Mother Superior, “Sister, be my mother, I don’t have parents anymore.” They also took in an infant left at the orphanage door in a basket (both of these still maintain contact with the sisters).³³

Cooperation

In the action to save Jews, Mother Getter and her sisters cooperated with officials from the Department of Social Welfare of the City Council of Warsaw, in particular with the extraordinarily dedicated director



The death penalty was threatened to all those who helped Jews.

³¹ ARM, AZ VII, 22, 93, 293, Accounts of the sisters: Franciszka Kostek (Mirzec) and Helena Chmielewska (Podhajce); ARM, AZ VIII 112, Account of ward: Regina Kateganer – war name Maria Szkolnicka, now Maria Damaszek, USA.

³² ARM, AZ VII 85, 177, 189, Accounts of the sisters: Tekla Budnowska, Zofia Olszewska (correspondence), and Blanka Pigłowska; ARM, AZ XI D and S, Letters from wards Janina Dawidowicz and Lidia Kleinmann (Maryla Wołoszyńska – Lidia Siciarz).

³³ ARM, AZ VIII 103, 116, Accounts: Anna Henrietta Kretz-Daniszewski and Jerzy Bander.



Mother Matylda Getter, 1943



Lila Goldschmidt



Mary Goldschmidt

Jan Starczewski (aka Andrzej Korecki), who not only supervised and approved their work *ex officio*, but also supported and safeguarded it, visited the sisters, advised and imparted courage to them, issued documents for Jewish children, and largely financed their upkeep.

The arrest of Jan Starczewski in 1943 and his incarceration in Auschwitz, and later in camps in Germany, was a great loss for the Social Welfare Department and the orphanages. Mother Getter continued to cooperate with the Welfare Department, headed by Antoni Chaciński, and with the head of the Social Welfare Section, Jan Dobraczyński, as well as with Jadwiga Piotrowska, Irene Sendler, ‘Żegota’ – the Council to Aid the Jews, and the Central Welfare Council. She cooperated extensively with members of the clergy, especially with Fr. Marceł Godlewski, the provost of the All Saints parish in the Warsaw ghetto, with members of the underground, and with private individuals, including Professor Stanisław Popowski of Warsaw. He saved many Jews that were later hidden by Mo. Getter (at his request, she hid Bianka Perlmutter, daughter of Arnold and Stefania Perlmutter).

There was real danger hanging over the sisters’ houses. In 1942 six orphanages of the Family of Mary received eviction orders. These were houses in Warsaw – in Hoża, Żelazna and Chełmska streets, and outside Warsaw – in Brwinów, Międzylesie, and Płudy.

Thanks to the sisters' prayers and efforts, no evictions took place, but the threat was still present, especially in Lviv, Sambir, Kostowiec, and Warsaw (at 19 Chełmska St.), where Jewish children were hidden and some of the rooms were occupied by the German army. The terror of the occupation, checks and searches, the constant surveillance, and the threat of being arrested and shot for hiding Jews increased the fear and risk, and yet the sisters did not give up.

Assistance for Older Girls

Mother Getter also took care of the older girls, among whom were two sisters, Lila and Mary Goldschmidt from Lviv, who came to Warsaw in 1941. In their post-war accounts, they explain how they found their way to the convent in Hoża Street.

Lila Goldschmidt (born September 29, 1922) came into Mo. Getter's care in tragic circumstances. She was arrested with 'Aryan papers' by the Kriminalpolizei, but after four months she was released, about which she writes:

"I will never forget that moment to the end of my life. Mother Getter was in a small garden on Hoża Street, I approached her and said that I had nowhere to go, that I was Jewish and therefore a fugitive from the law. To which Mo. Getter answered me and I quote her words here: 'My child, whoever comes to us and asks for help, in the name of Christ, we cannot refuse.' Out of the whole war period, out of all my terrible experiences, this is one of only a few moments that has remained in my memory, as fresh as if it had only happened just now." (Milan, December 20, 1983)

Lila's younger sister, Mary Goldschmidt (born in Lviv in 1924), wartime name Maria Krawczyk, came to the sisters' convent on Hoża St. in 1943, "after the uprising and the burning of the Jewish ghetto."



Fr. Tadeusz Puder

“‘What would you tell me child?’ Matusia Getter asked me. I told her that the police were on my trail, that I couldn’t return to my apartment, that I was Jewish and that I didn’t know where to go with this life force that was so desperately beating in my heart. That day I stayed on Hoża Street. [...] One day Matusia Getter gave me a tiny medallion, saying: ‘I know you don’t believe in this, that doesn’t matter, because I believe in it, keep it with you. I still have it to this day.’ [...]”

Sister Janina Osierdzie, who took special care of me (I hope I’m not mistaking her surname [Osińska]), never tried to change my faith. She gave me a booklet for the services with the words, ‘Learn these prayers by heart, this may be useful to you.’ I realized that the directive came from Matusia Getter, so I knew that the convent was not looking to draw more sheep to the Christian flock, however, knowledge of the Catholic religion could sometimes help when hiding under false papers. At that time, every word, every unanswered question, every stammer, could result in imprisonment, torture, or death. [...] The prayer book accompanied me often, but the awareness of the respect for my own religion that I felt from Matusia, her respect for my adherence and the recognition of my values and traditions was my greatest support.” (Paris, account written in Senegal, January 15, 1984)

Mother Getter hid children with distinctly Semitic features among the sisters or with families, constantly watching over their safety. The older girls were placed as housemaids with befriended families. With

Mo. Getter's help, more than thirteen Jewish girls passed through Irena Chacińska's house. She sent older people of 'unacceptable appearance' to work or to hide in the orphanages: in Płudy about ten Jews performed various household functions, a few more worked permanently in Pustelnik, Kostowiec, and in Warsaw on Chełmska St., or in the newly founded religious houses in the capital and in the provinces (Anin, Brzezinki, 'Nazaret' in Międzyzlesie, and 'Robercin' in Wola Gołkowska). Jadwiga Skrzydłowska spent some time in the latter, and she recalls the sisters' gentleness: "They must have realized who I was, but they did not let me feel it and treated me kindly and well. In Międzyzlesie, of the four Jewish women in the 'Child's Health Haven', one was a doctor.

Baptismal Certificates for Jewish Children

In order to save Jews, Mother Getter and her sisters collected Catholic baptismal certificates and birth certificates from various parishes in Warsaw and elsewhere. An attestation of baptism was an important document, but if the Germans found out that its holder was Jewish, such a document would not save him. Issuing a certificate to a Jew was also punishable by death, both for the priest who issued it and for the Jew who received it. The Germans equally persecuted Jews of the Mosaic religion and Jews of the Catholic faith.

The example of a Catholic priest of Jewish origin, Tadeusz Puder (1906–1945) who was rector of St. Jacek's [St. Hyacinth] Church in Warsaw, bears witness to this. When the Germans ordered that Jews should wear armbands with a star, Archbishop Stanisław Gall, in agreement with Mother Getter, sent the priest as chaplain to Białoleka Dworska, where the sisters of the Family of Mary ran an orphanage for boys, in order to protect him from repression.

He was arrested by the Germans anyhow (April 24, 1941). Many people in the underground tried to get him freed, including the sisters of St. Elizabeth and the Family of Mary. In accordance with an arranged

Województwo } Wilno
Powiat }
Gmina }
Rz.-Kat. Parafia } Sw. Jana

Nr aktu 102
Rok 1936

Świadectwo urodzenia

WYDANE NA ZASADZIE KSIĄG METRYCZNYCH

Zaswiadcza się, że Zygmunt Zdzisław Kulas
urodził się dnia osiemnastego września
w Wilnie tysiąc dwieście trzydzieści osiem 1936 roku
z ojca Kazimierza
z matki Romany Siodłowskiej Tymlowskiej

Zgodność powyższego świadectwa z oryginałem stwierdzam.
Wilno, dnia 1 m-cia września 1936.

Urzędnik Stanu Cywilnego *[Signature]*

Birth certificate of Zygmunt Zdzisław Kulas from Vilnius.

plan, he was sent as a patient to St. Sophia hospital in Żelazna Street, and from there he was carried off and taken out of the ghetto on a coal cart on November 7, 1942.

For some time, Fr. Puder hid with his mother in Warsaw, and when he was threatened by further danger, Sr. Janina Kruszevska, on the order of Mo. Getter, took him, dressed in the religious habit of the Family of Mary, by train to Płudy. From there she took him to Białoleka, where the sisters hid him in the sewing room, in a hiding place behind the closets. The Germans searched for him several times in Białoleka but did not find him. In critical situations, he was dressed in a habit and taken to a trusted neighbor as a sick nun. The last time he was in the habit was when the front line was looming close and the house was evacuated to Płudy (September 18, 1944), where the Germans were. The house found itself in the heat of battle and 500 children from several establishments, among them a hundred Jewish children, sat in its basement. Only the mother superior and the two sisters who watched over him, knew that Fr. Puder remained in Płudy until the liberation (October 24, 1944). He survived

the war, enjoyed freedom, and visited Mother Getter in Brwinów. Hit by a Russian truck in Warsaw, he died in the hospital on January 27, 1945.

Priests issued fictitious certificates, but many Jews were baptized. Not all of them did this simply *pro forma* for a certificate – there were those who did it out of conviction. Taken out of the ghetto and hidden by several people, Małgosia Mirska came to Hoża St. with a baptismal certificate, which had been given to her by the parish priest in Tamka St. For her, baptism and religious observances were not just a formality, but were supported by a deep inner conviction.³⁴

The Family of Mary sisters themselves also tried to obtain certificates for hidden Jewish children. In Lviv, they cooperated with the parish of St. Anthony in the production of certificates. Dr. Helena Krukowska exposed the new certificates to a quartz lamp so that they took on the color of old documents. Sr. Blanka Pigłowska produced certificates in the parish of St. Mary Magdalene in Lviv for the Jewish women at Łomna. She first wrote down the names of the children from the index of the parish registers, whose age corresponded to the Jewish women hidden in Łomna and then asked the parish office for copies of those registers, without giving the priests any details.³⁵

To this day thirteen certificates are preserved in the Family of Mary Archive in Warsaw. They come from parish offices in various parts of Poland: Grodno, Lviv, Wadowice, Vilnius, Brańszczów (Volkovysk poviat), and also from Warsaw parishes – St. Barbara, St. Florian, St. Jacob, Holy Cross, St. Wojciech, and All Saints. They served the children in Anin, in the house of Fr. Godlewski, and in the nursery run by the sisters in Villa Lotha at 19 Poniatowskiego Street (now 19 Zorzy Street) from 1941, which was under the patronage of the Delegation of the Polish Welfare Committee

³⁴ ARM, AZ VIII 99, Account of Małgorzata Frydman-Mirska Acher, Warsaw 1983.

³⁵ ARM, AZ VII 172, 189, Accounts of the sisters: Anna Martyna Neugebauer and Sr. Blanka Pigłowska.

for Wawer. These children were not baptized, so their baptismal certificates remained with the sisters after the war (three certificates have been identified: Zygmunt Zdzisław Kulas, Juliusz Lenarczyk, and Ewa Szałdrowska).

Several baptismal records have been kept with the annotation: "Obtain a certificate from Fr. Foeks, i.e. Director Fr. Piotrowski in Włocławek". The blank form 'Birth and Baptismal Certificate' has survived; it bears the stamp of the parish of Dobrzejowice and the signature of the parish priest, Fr. Stanisław Piotrowski; his signature was even authenticated by Fr. Józef Rosiński. The parish of Dobrzejowice (Włocławek diocese) was then in Wartheland, and its provost, Fr. Stanisław Piotrowski, was in hiding in Warsaw, collaborating with Mo. Matylda Getter. This certificate was meant to be used for a Jewish child; it was only necessary to insert the appropriate details.³⁶

The Warsaw Uprising

The participation of Mo. Getter and the provincial motherhouse in the preparation and course of the uprising cannot be overlooked in her biography. For Mo. Getter, 1944 was a very difficult year. She fell ill at the beginning of the year, disabled for several months by a heart attack. She spent that time in Międzylesie, in her favorite 'Ulanówek'. However, she continued to give instructions to the sisters. When she received news of the imminent outbreak of the uprising, she returned to Warsaw and went to work. For a long time, food and bandage materials had been collected on Hoża Street, with the help of the neighboring dairy.

The provincial house in Hoża Street was the headquarters of the commander of AK sub-district VII 'Obroża', Lt. Col. Bronisław Krzyżak, pseud. 'Kalwin', and the 'Zaremba Piorun' battalion, fighting

³⁶ ARM, AZ XI, Certificates from the war and occupation years.



The provincial house in Hoża St., where the commander of AK sub-district VII 'Obroża', Lt. Col. Bronisław Krzyżak (center), had his headquarters.

in the area of Emilia Plater, Koszykowa, Wilcza and Wspólna streets – a support point. The nuns gave up part of their premises for an insurgent first aid station, joined rescue and first aid teams, and brought food, nursing, and spiritual aid. They prepared meals for about 1,100 people: the Home Army command stationed in the house, the insurgents from the nearest district, the wounded and the medical staff (over 150 people) in the insurgent hospital, which was moved from Hoża St. to Poznańska St.

The doctors and staff officers of AK sub-district VII 'Obroża' emphasized not only the importance of such material help but also highlighted the "great kindness" of the sisters, and "the understanding of needs and the full dedication to work for common good". The sisters served the insurgents with their chapel, set up in the basement, where prayers were held continually. The local chaplain, Fr. Adam Śniechowski, and Fr. Jakub Przewoźny provided spiritual ministry. More than a dozen weddings of young insurgents also took place in the chapel. Mother Getter organized wedding receptions for them.

The wedding of Róża Nowotna and Jan Walec was recorded as the first in the city center during the uprising. It took place on August 12, 1944, in the sisters' chapel, which had survived the fire. They were students. Students both assigned to the medical service of the 'Zaremba Piorun'



Covering Company District VII AK 'Obroża'.

battalion in the hospital organized in the premises of the Sisters of the Family of Mary on Hoża Street. The groom was a Calvinist, and it was necessary to obtain permission for the Roman Catholic rite. Róża recalls a conversation with Mother Superior Getter, who advised her, "Do not try to win your husband over to Catholicism. If by your actions you lead him to change his church that will be an achievement." For twenty years they wore the rings chiseled from a machine-gun bearing by a friend. "Mother Superior prepared nasturtium sandwiches from the convent garden for the wedding reception" (recollection from 1968).

An eye-witness recalled the wedding of platoon sergeant Olgierd to a nurse in the nuns' chapel and the modest wedding luncheon: "In addition to a cup of coffee, each of the revelers received a delicacy they had not seen in a long time – a tiny piece of bread with a slice of tomato."³⁷

The sisters also rendered the final Christian service to the fallen insurgents by participating in their funerals. A cemetery for insurgents was established in the monastery courtyard by the statue of St. Joseph.

The priest at the time, Edward Materski, later a bishop, registered death certificates.

When the uprising collapsed after sixty-three days of fighting due to the overwhelming superiority of the German forces, the sisters

³⁷ S. Bayer, *Nie byłem Kolumbem*, Warszawa 1977, p. 104.



Cemetery surrounding the statue of St. Joseph.

prepared food parcels for the insurgents from the ‘Zaremba Piorun’ battalion who were being taken prisoner.

The heart and soul of all these actions to help the insurgents was Mother Getter, a seventy-four-year-old nun, still full of vitality and a spirit of devotion to the national cause. Eyewitnesses testify to her self-sacrificing attitude. The chief commander of the Central First Aid Station, speaking about her assistance to the hospital, calls her “unforgettable, irreplaceable, and remarkably wise and kind-hearted.” Major Józef Załoga, intelligence officer of the AK sub-district VII ‘Obroża’, in assessing her attitude, added: “Nothing that was human was foreign to her.” A cleric recording the death certificates of insurgents wrote: “In August 1944 [...] I saw the heroic attitude of the sisters. It was here that I met Mother Matylda Getter, ‘Matusia’, with her keen insight into all the problems of life and with a heart open to everyone.” The insurgent authorities appreciated the sacrificial stance of the ‘Mother Superior of the Family of Mary Sisters’ – she was decorated with the Golden Cross of Merit with Swords on September 27, 1944.

The attitude of Mother Getter and the sisters in Hoża Street was witnessed by the opinion of doctors, among others, the hospital head, Dr. Edward Drescher:

“The behavior of the Family of Mary sisters, led by Mother Getter, in the first hours of the uprising was very significant for the portrayal of their moral and patriotic attitude: in the general mood of turmoil and uncertainty (given the front line ran only about 100 meters from the congregation’s building), the sisters showed extraordinary calmness, composure, cheerfulness, and faith in the success of the action, which had a great impact on the hospital as well as the soldiers. A similarly dignified and patriotic attitude was shown by the sisters, with their Mother Superior in the vanguard, during the dramatic moments of the collapse of the uprising and their farewells to the hospital staff.”

After the collapse of the uprising, Mother Getter and her sisters had to leave both their house and Warsaw. However, she left the house in Hoża Street unlocked so that any wanting to enter it would not have to break down a locked door. She stayed in Brwinów, but as soon as possible after the liberation, she returned to Warsaw and Hoża Street. She began searching for the sisters who had been deported by the Germans to the Ravensbrück concentration camp. She wrote coded letters to them and sent food parcels. She instructed Sr. Kinga Pietrzykowska, who had been spared from the camp, to rebuild the devastated, burnt house at 97 Żelazna Street. She lifted the sisters’ spirits and helped them rebuild the destroyed orphanage.

Going the Distance – The Final Stage of Life

Mother Getter concluded her ministry as Provincial Superior in 1945, but remained at Hoża Street and under the new Provincial Mother, Aniela Stawowiak, served three terms as Superior of that house (1945–1954), then stayed at Hoża Street as a retiree for the next five

years. She spent the last years of her life in Płudy (1960–1968), enjoying expressions of warm memories and gratitude from sisters, clergy, and laity alike. She died there on August 8, 1968.

A farewell Mass was celebrated in Płudy on August 9, then the body of Mother Getter was taken to the chapel in the General House in Warsaw at 97 Żelazna Street. There on August 10, Bishop Jerzy Modzelewski led other priests in concelebrating and conducting a Mass in her intention, with numerous sisters in attendance. After the mass, Mother Getter's casket was taken to the Church of St. Karol Boromeusz in the Warsaw Powązki cemetery. Mother Getter's funeral ceremony took place there at 10 a.m. on August 12. Bishop Wacław Majewski conducted the ceremonial funeral Mass with a number of other priests, after which the deceased was escorted to her place of rest. She was buried in her congregation's oldest grave, next to Mother Florentyna Dymman.

The death of Mother Getter aroused great sympathy, along with a wave of memories, condolences, and sentiments worthy of citation.

Mother Getter was characterized by uncommon energy and strength of action. She was remembered as an exceptional organizer of orphanages and caregiver of children. She was known everywhere as Matusia, and enjoyed the respect and recognition of church and state authorities, the friendship of lay people, and the gratitude of her wards. Those who knew her emphasized the expression of her wise, penetrating eyes, her accurate judgment, intelligence, and attitude full of dignity and patriotism, as well as a heart open to the needs of all.

Jan Habdank wrote that Mother Matylda Getter made her greatest contribution in saving Jewish children. "Her energy, wisdom, practicality, and fearless courage shone out in all their fullness during the Nazi occupation" (1968). Maria Sobańska added: "Kind, dear and so godly, she did so much good in her life, always helpful and self-sacrificing" (August 26, 1968).

Dr. Zofia Szymańska wrote the following about the rescue of Jews by Mother Getter:

“Mother was resolutely fearless. Word of this reached the ghetto. Through the wall [...] the Centos [the Polish-Jewish children’s aid society] workers were in constant contact with Mother Getter and they often managed to save someone from annihilation. [...] The Family of Mary Congregation saved several hundred Jewish children, thanks to Mother Getter. In the course of long conversations with me, Mother never stressed this fact; she regarded it as completely natural.”³⁸

She also said of Mo. Getter, “She was a wonderful, most human embodiment of the Gospel of love” (Aug. 30, 1968), and wrote about postwar meetings with her in the article “Mother Matylda Getter”:

“Mother Getter, then about eighty years old, was the epitome of clarity of mind, accuracy of judgment, intelligence, and knowledge of human nature. In her many years of life, she had seen and lived through so much, such a gallery of human characters had gone before her eyes, she was the witness of so many ups and downs, so many unfulfilled wishes, and unmet human ambitions, that she could confidently say – nothing that is human is foreign to me. She was characterized by an immense understanding of human needs and great forbearance for them. She loved people and her prevailing need was to come to their assistance.”³⁹

The opinion of Maria Siemaszko, a teacher working in Warsaw and Mo. Getter’s former ward from St. Petersburg given here:

³⁸ Z. Szymańska, *Byłam tylko lekarzem*, Warszawa 1979, pp. 203–205.

³⁹ *Tygodnik Powszechny*, September 22, 1974.

“Having observed people and life for many years, I have come to the conclusion that Mother Matylda Getter is the embodiment of God’s wisdom, a model of a nun characterized by an outstanding sensitivity of heart to the moral and material distress of others, and unreservedly devoted to the affairs of the sisters of the Family of Mary Congregation. She was happy in her calling, and always attentive to the highest inner quality of a man as well as his usefulness to human society.”⁴⁰

In 1974, the sisters in Hoża celebrated the centenary of their work, still in the old wooden house. The Primate of Poland, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, who participated in the celebration, said in reference to Mother Getter’s abundant activities: “So much goodness, sacrifice and dedication had accumulated in this house that when the neighboring brick houses fell as rubble, this wooden house survived.”

On the site of the old house, bowed by time, a new one was built, preserving the memory of Mo. Getter and her generosity in rescuing people. Through her work she fulfilled the evangelical call of Christ: “Whoever receives one such child in my name, receives me” (Matthew 18:5), which is akin to the Talmudic verse: “He who saves a single life, saves the world entire” (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin, 37a).

From the same period, comes a characteristic opinion about Mother Getter expressed by Sister Benedicta Woyczyńska, Superior General of the Franciscan Sisters Servants of the Cross (from Laski and Piwna, 1950–1962):

“I personally knew Matusia – Mother Matylda Getter. I came into contact with her on Hoża Street in the house of the sisters of the Family of Mary. She took us in during and after the war there, when we did not have our own domicile in Warsaw.

⁴⁰ ARM, AZ X 12, M. Siemaszko, Recollections from St. Petersburg and Nikolaevka, Warsaw CY [ca. 1953], MS, p. 22.

“She had a heart and hands full of good deeds for everyone. In life it is rare to find someone who is really that good. She could not refuse her benevolence and help to anyone in need. And the poorer and the more in need of help, the greater was Matusia’s instinct of loving-kindness: ‘How can I help?’ I have heard many such cases.

Dr. Róża Nowotna-Walcowa also told me how Matusia had arranged her wedding at the home in 1944 during the Warsaw Uprising and how much wise advice she had given her. I wanted to write at least these few sentences, because my heart is full of honor and love for Matusia.” (April 28, 1974)

The power behind her work was her deep faith and unwavering trust in divine providence. She possessed the gift of prayer, which permeated all her actions – “she lived and radiated God.”

In 1982, Bishop Władysław Miziołek, a witness of the wartime activities of the Sisters of the Family of Mary in Międzyzlesie, Anin, Pludy, Pustelnik and Warsaw, recalling the merits of the congregation and Mother Getter in the action of saving the Jews, said: “If trees were planted in memory of all the Jews saved by the sisters, a great forest would arise.” As chaplain of the children’s institute in Międzyzlesie ‘Zosinek’, he knew from personal observation about the involvement of the sisters in the action of rescuing Jewish children.

Testimonies of Rescued Jewish Children

The letters and memoirs of Jewish children demonstrate how they lived through their stay in convents under the care of nuns. These voices of the survivors testify to the help they received during the years of terror and to their gratitude to the nuns, who not only saved their lives, but also gave them a home, a heart, and a family atmosphere; to save them,

they risked their lives, the lives of Polish children, and the functioning of their institutes and congregations.

Lidia Kleinmann, daughter of a doctor from Turka on the river Stryi, whose wartime name was Maryla Wołoszyńska, rescued in Łomna, was one of twenty-six Jewish children hidden there among 120 girls. She wrote with gratitude to Superior Tekla Budnowska:

“Dear beloved Mother: I have returned in my thoughts to those terrible times of war for these many years, which have passed almost imperceptibly. I am grateful to God that even in such a tragic period I met the sisters who not only saved my life, but also gave me a home, affection, and a moral foundation. It seems to me that I came out of that period without any major psychological damage. [...] I can say with my hand on my heart that Łomna was my home” (1983).⁴¹

“Many years have passed since Mother opened her warm heart to take into it children condemned to death. Often I often wonder – what could I have possibly done to deserve this gift of life from God? I still vividly remember the sunny house in Łomna, the chapel with the picture of the Holy Family above the altar, the Christmas tree and the carols, and Sister Zofia, Sister Blanka and the beloved kind eyes of Sister Superior. [...] I remember Łomna with tenderness and love. The sisters instilled in me a moral foundation and strength for all life’s adversities. [...] Maryla Wołoszyńska – Lidia Siciarz” (1985).



Maryla Wołoszyńska,
hidden in Łomna,
Warsaw and Kostowiec,
photo Warsaw, 1943.

⁴¹ ARM, AZ VIII 106, Account of Lidia Kleinmann (Lidia Siciarz), letters to Mo. Tekla Budnowska and others, and photographs.

“When Sister Blanka brought me to Łomna in 1942, I was ten years old and had a bundle of experiences that to this day I cannot recall. For me, Łomna was a sheltered island in a deep sea of unhappiness. Thanks to a group of honorable people who extended a helping hand to me as well as many others, I survived the war. I feel deep love and gratitude to Mother Tekla, Sister Zofia, and Sister Blanka for their care, kindness, and understanding, and to my companions in Łomna, as they were my family then.” (Letter to Józefa Wiśniewska, 1993)

Another alumna, who found herself in Łomna, and later in Warsaw and Kostowiec after hiding in various places, wrote: “I can clearly see that Divine Providence was watching over me in all that I have been through” (Kostowiec 1945).⁴²

Alinka Herla, now Lea Balint, living in Jerusalem, who was rescued by Mo. Getter in Brwinów, has kept in touch with the sisters for years. She talks about her stay under the care of the nuns: “I was with the sisters in Brwinów as if in paradise – at a time when hell was raging all around” (1997). With gratitude she writes: “In my travels around the world I always remember you. I would not have survived without your heartfelt and unconditional help, without your dear convent, I would have never seen the wide world” (2002).⁴³

After visiting Brwinów with her daughter Anat in 2008, she wrote the following words in the memory book:

In 1943–45 this house was my refuge from the German occupiers. This house was heaven for me in a cruel hell. I am always warmly received and welcomed in [this] home. From it I have carried away

⁴² ARM, AZ VIII 104, Recollections of ward T.B. (surname known to the author), Kostowiec 1945.

⁴³ E. Kurek, *Dzieci żydowskie...*, pp. 185–188.



Alinka Herla, rescued in Brwinów, 1945.



Lea Balint with her daughter Anat at the sisters of Family of Mary in Brwinów, July 22, 2008.

many moral values and learned to care for other people. I love you. Alinka Herla – Lea Balint, Jerusalem.”

“Thank you for opening the gates to us, and to my Mom’s memories. Until now, these were just stories left behind from the past, or sometimes a terrible war. Now I see that in your kindness you gave my Mom a safe haven and something that was like a home, and a normal childhood. You should be blessed for these acts of saving children’s lives and for your educational work today.”⁴⁴ Anat Balint

An extremely difficult situation during the occupation was shared by a girl (born in 1930) with distinctive Semitic features, Małgorzata Frydman Mirska, now Acher, living in Paris, who found rescue in Płudy under the care of Sr. Aniela Stawowiak. Upon hearing of her death, she wrote:

“I can’t believe I won’t see Mother Aniela in this world again. She was a refuge for me during the war years. I will never forget, when I was so afraid while the Germans were searching, how Mother Aniela put her hand on my head and said, ‘Nothing can happen to you in a house where there’s a chapel.’ The strength in her voice and the beautiful look in her eyes reassured me.” (June 4, 1960)

⁴⁴ ARM, AZ VIII 102, Lea Balint’s letters and entry in the convent chronicle in Brwinów, 2008; ARM, AZ XI B, Recollection (recorded by Sr. Teresa Antonietta Frącek), Jerusalem; Lea’s visits with the sisters in Warsaw, October 5, 2017 and October 8, 2018.



Małgosia Mirska rescued in Płudy.



Małgorzata Frydman Mirska, now Acher, Paris.

In 1983, Małgorzata, while in Warsaw for the fortieth anniversary of the ghetto uprising, visited the sisters of the Family of Mary in the general house at 97 Żelazna Street, and wrote the following words in the memory book:

“With great affection and love I remember Mo. Matylda Getter and Sister Superior Aniela Stawowiak, who saved my life when they took me into their home in Płudy at the beginning of September 1942, where as a frightened, dark-haired Jewish child, I found aid and asylum. Małgorzata Frydman Mirska-Acher, Warsaw, April 20, [19]83.”

The recollections recorded on tape at the time include her testimonial:

“Mother Aniela was a beautiful person. She had wonderful gray-green eyes. I can still see her in the eyes of my imagination and I would give anything to have a picture of her. I never saw her upset. She had an extraordinary calmness within. Once, when the Germans came to Płudy, Mother Superior hid me in the attic. I was trembling with fear, and she put her hand on my head and said: ‘My child, nothing can happen to you in a house where there is a chapel.’ After those words, and after touching her hand, I calmed down completely.”

“During the war there was a story under the name ‘Hotel Polski.’ The Germans and the Committee to Aid Jews said that they would exchange Jews who were in hiding, for German prisoners in America



Anna Henrietta Kretz-Daniszewski, Antwerp (Belgium), 2017.



Author Janina David, war name Danuta Markowska, in a 1944 photo from Warsaw on the cover of her book *A Square of Sky*. Today Janina Dawidowicz lives in London.



Janka Dawidowicz, London, ca. 1970.

for big money. Upon hearing about this, my mother came to Mother Getter and said, 'Please Mother, I can't stand the strain anymore, I'll do the exchange. I will gather up the things I have in safekeeping at my friends. Let Mother give me the children, and we'll go to America.' 'Ma'am,' said Mother, 'do you still trust the Germans? Those children were entrusted to me until the end of the war by Mrs. Szyszkowska, and I will not give them back until the end of the war.' In this way Mother Getter saved our lives once again."⁴⁵

Anna Henrietta Kretz, who was rescued in Sambir, ran to the Polish orphanage after the execution of her parents and said to the superior, Sr. Celina Kędzierska: "Sister, be my mother, I no longer have parents," and there she found rescue. During her visit to Warsaw she wrote the following words in the memory book of the General House of the Franciscan Sisters of the Family of Mary:

⁴⁵ ARM, AZ XI M, Recollections of Małgorzata Frydman Mirska-Acher, Warsaw 1983, letters from 1983–2018.



Janka Glińska, rescued in Lviv, now Shosh Ronis on a visit to the sisters in Warsaw.

“In memory of Sister Superior (Celina Kędzierska from Sambir) and the other sisters who, at the risk of their own lives and in terrible conditions, hid me and other Jewish children and helped us to retain faith in people, which we could have lost forever along with our lives. May the memory of their deeds never fade, because with their deeds they have shown that love of neighbor can lead to the highest nobility and heroism. I will never forget this. May I be worth it. Hanna Kretz (from Belgium), Warsaw, October 21, 1993.”

The hiding of Jewish children was coupled with the sensitive issue of religion. Each child had to have some kind of document. Most often it was a birth certificate and a baptismal certificate. In principle, children who had already been baptized came to the sisters. Older children understood their situation and were baptized only in exceptional cases. There were known cases of older girls converting to Catholicism. Their baptisms were kept strictly secret. The meaning of faith, receiving baptism and joining a Catholic community in the terrible ordeal of war, is illustrated by Janina Dawidowicz, baptized in Warsaw in 1944. An encrypted telephone message regarding her was made from Mo. Getter to Mo. Tekla Budnowska, superior of the institution in Łomna: “Sister, will you accept



Adam Feller with his wife and three daughters on a visit to the sisters in Anin, June 25, 2015.

God's blessing?" To this question there was no other answer but "Yes, I will", and Janka was transferred from Płudy to the care of Mother Tekla.

Janka recalls: "My greatest desire in Warsaw then was just to be accepted into your circle. It was necessary to save not only my life, but also my mind. Having lost everything and everyone at such a young age, I was in great need of this commitment and I would have suffered greatly if I had not been accepted then, for whatever reason. Apart from that, I had my parents' permission to do so. Besides, after leaving the hell [ghetto] where I had lost my faith in people and the existence of any good on earth, I entered an environment where I was taught about the existence of love, and God's love for people. It was an absolute revelation to me. I believed, because without that faith I could not have survived those subsequent years at all. And despite of my later doubts and breakdowns, something remained in me from those years of faith."⁴⁶

One of the girls rescued by the sisters in Lviv was Janka Glińska (wartime name), now Shosh Ronis, who spent sixty years searching for

⁴⁶ ARM, AZ XI D, Janina Dawidowicz's letters to Sr. Zofia Olszewska, London, January 11, 1975, no. 3.

the sisters and the convent where she had found rescue (1942–1944). She found them in Warsaw, and upon receiving a list of children with her name on it and a photograph in which she recognized herself in a group of children, she wrote:

“Finally, after sixty years, the ends of my life are coming together. The information regarding my stay at the convent of the Marian sisters made a great impression on my entire family. Looking at the photos and the register which had my name on it, they all had tears in their eyes. [...] I will never forget my meeting with the dear sisters who represent for me the love of God, in whose name they sacrificially saved children and adults from death.”⁴⁷

In 1995, wartime alumnus Adam Feller from Israel visited the house and sisters in Anin. With a feeling of gratitude, he returned there in 2015, not alone, but with his family – his wife and three daughters – so they could get to know the place and the nuns who saved his life. In the memory book he wrote these words:

I remember this house from the years 1943 and 1944. I stayed here for fourteen months. The house was run by Father Godlewski and the sisters, who were mothers to the Jewish children [...]. The priest was a father to the Jewish children. Both he and his fellow brothers were not afraid to risk their own lives to save us, the children of Jews (Anin, 25 June 2015).⁴⁸

⁴⁷ ARM, AZ XI R, Letters from Janka Shosh Ronis of Israel to the Family of Mary sisters in Warsaw, 2003.

⁴⁸ ARM, AZ VIII 140, Testimonial of Adam Feller written in the memory book, June 25, 2015.

In August 2014, another former ward, Jerzy Szczeciński, knocked on the sisters' doors in Anin, Białoleka, and Warsaw, and in July 2016 and 2018 came Juliusz Lenarczyk (a wartime name – his birth certificate is preserved in the congregation's archives); they came to see the places once again and to thank the sisters for the lives they had saved. Tadeusz Rosentreter (wartime name Tadeusz Łuszczek), for whom Anin was almost a family home, affectionately referred to it as "our Anin" and often visited the house there. This is his testimonial:

"For us, the war kids – I was probably the oldest of them – the villa of Fr. Provost Marcei Godlewski at 5 Leśna Street, was 'our Anin'. That was how we shouted, coming back tired from long walks: 'You can see Anin! You can see Anin already!' [...] Were it not for the visits of the Germans looking for Jews, one could say that our everyday life was normal, the sisters took care of us, and we had regular meals, study, prayer, and fun."⁴⁹

Righteous Among the Nations

Several hundred Jewish children and seniors owe their lives to Mother Getter and the Sisters of the Family of Mary. Exactly how many Jews did Mo. Getter save? It is impossible to calculate, as nobody kept records since this was a covert action. Irena Sendler was also unable to say how many Jewish children she had led out of the ghetto. When the latter was asked by Lea Balint in Jerusalem, on what basis she claimed that 2,500 children were saved, she replied that Mother Getter had given her this number. Sendler's biography clearly testifies that Mother Getter was

⁴⁹ ARM, AZ VIII, Testimonial of wards from Anin: Juliusz Brzeziński (138), Jerzy Szczeciński (139), Adam Feller (140); ARM, AZ XI R., Tadeusz Rosentreter's letters to Sr. Daniela Zemla in 2008.



Diploma and medal “Righteous Among the Nations,” awarded to Mo. Matylda Getter.

committed to taking in every child taken out of the ghetto and she did, so she was well aware of the number of saved children.

After the war, Mo. Getter never talked or wrote about the rescued Jews. She felt that this chapter of her work was closed.

On the basis of limited documentation and eyewitness accounts, we can calculate that on the scale of the entire congregation, the Franciscan Sisters of the Family of Mary saved over 750 Jews, including more than 500 children and young people, as well as 250 or so elderly people, by hiding them in their orphanages, nursing homes, and convents, as well as with private individuals. In addition, they provided short-term assistance to about 400 Jews, and for a longer period of time, helped more than 150 people.

It is hard to say whether these figures are complete, since Jewish children from the war still turn to the sisters looking for traces of their rescue in the religious houses; sometimes those traces are found and this increases the number of those rescued. Entire religious communities were involved in hiding Jews in orphanages, educational institutions, nursing homes, and hospitals. However, 120 sisters of the Family of Mary were the most deeply involved in this action. This was the contribution of the sisters of the Family of Mary to the general action of aiding Jews; those saved on Polish territory numbered anywhere from 80,000–300,000.



Ceremony at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem.

Honoring Mo. Matylda Getter

Matusia was posthumously awarded the medal 'Righteous Among the Nations' (1985). The medal and diploma were received in Jerusalem by Mo. Gabriela Danuta Janczewska, then the General Superior of the Franciscan Sisters of the Family of Mary Congregation.

On this occasion on September 14, 1986, a special ceremony was held at the Institute for the Remembrance of the Martyrs and Heroes of the Holocaust in Jerusalem, with the participation of alumni whose lives the sisters had saved. These were: Margaret Acher of Paris (formerly Małgorzata Mirska rescued in Płudy), Lea Balint from Jerusalem (rescued by the sisters in Brwinów), Hanna Fajgenbaum and her mother Aleksandra from Tel Aviv with her family (rescued in Izabelin and in Płudy).

One of the participants, Anna Zabielska (Hanna Fajgenbaum), who came from Tel Aviv with her mother Aleksandra, her son and her granddaughter, gave this testimonial:

"It was our duty to participate in this ceremony, which in our eyes is akin to honoring the memory of Mother Getter, to give her honor as one of the 'Righteous'. Mother Getter is a symbol of the order and



During the ceremony a tree was also planted in memory of Mo. Getter on the Hill of Remembrance on the Avenue of the Righteous.

of all the sisters who sacrificed their lives to save people, especially children. When we were standing in front of the photograph of the children, where it was written that one million children had been exterminated, I pointed to my son and granddaughter and told the Mother Superior, that this was my victory over the Germans, because I was also condemned, and if we were standing here as four generations [also with her mother saved by the sisters in Izabelin], it is thanks to the order and your benevolence.... My family was complete.” (1987)⁵⁰



Professor Benek Sharonim, Jerusalem, September 14, 1986.

Prof. Benek Sharonim of Tel Yitzhak, recalling the action to save Jewish children led by Mo. Getter through the Sisters of the Family of Mary, stated:

“Matylda Getter, who unites us, belongs to those wonderful and noble figures, not only of the Polish nation, but of all mankind. I doubt, and per-

⁵⁰ ARM, AZ VIII 98; XI Z, Letter from May 13, 1987.

haps I am even certain, that I, in her place, could not have done what she did in that terrible period, when life was being conducted at the very depths of that appalling horror and hell. I often mention her in my lectures to our young people and I will never forget her.” (Letter to Sr. Teresa Antonietta Frącek, October 19, 1997)

In 2009 the National Bank of Poland honored three people who were especially exemplary in aiding Jews. It issued two coins – one of two zlotys and one of twenty zlotys, with the inscription: “Poles saving Jews: Irena Sendler, Zofia Kossak, and Sister Matylda Getter”. The coins were presented to the heroines’ families or communities, during a ceremony that took place at Belvedere Palace [Warsaw] on December 2, 2009.

Subsequent Medals

The Yad Vashem Commission for National Remembrance in Jerusalem has so far honored eleven sisters of the Family of Mary (in addition to Mo. Matylda Getter – 1985) with the medal and the title ‘Righteous Among the Nations’: Sr. Helena Chmielewska (2014), Sr. Celina Kędzierska (2015), Sr. Tekla Budnowska, Sr. Zofia Olszewska and Sr. Blanka Pięłowska (2016), Sr. Olga Schwarz, Sr. Aniela Olszewska, and Sr. Bernarda Lemańska (2018), and Sr. Aniela Stawowiak, Sr. Romualda Stempak and Sr. Ludwika Peńsko (2019). Rescued Jewish women endeavored to bring this about; their documentation was supplemented from collected archival sources.

New Findings

More than seventy years have passed since the end of World War II. Material losses have been assessed, devastated towns and villages have been rebuilt, but the wounds inflicted on the human heart, especially on children – victims of the war, both Polish and Jewish, have yet to heal. Despite

the passage of years, the Congregation of the Franciscan Sisters of the Family of Mary in Warsaw is still visited by the children of war, looking for their roots, families, hiding places, and identities. Often the persons concerned are no longer alive, but members of their families do this, wanting to link their lives to the bygone times of history. They continue to search, driven by a spark of hope. Often there are no traces and no documentation.

Sometimes, however, a diligent search leads to remarkable finds. New traces appear, a photograph, a note, a memory, an entry in a book, or a new interpretation that sheds light on the complicated history of human life during the cruel years of German occupation. Sometimes it is only after sixty or seventy years that war children discover their Jewish roots; this brings with it intense experiences. But there are also Jews who discover their Polish roots and search for documents to give proof of that. Gabriel Muszyński of Szamotuły, a ward of the sisters of the Family of Mary, is one of those whom the turmoil of war took to the Warsaw ghetto; after the war, he found himself in Israel.

Gratitude to Matusia and the Family of Mary sisters is preserved by Jewish children saved during the war. Janina Dawidowicz, called a blessing of God by Mother Getter, wrote years later:

“My debt of gratitude, incurred during the war at the Sisters of the Family of Mary, is impossible to repay. I owe them for saving my life, but not only – I also owe them for saving my faith in human goodness, the value of sacrifice, love for my neighbors, and the trust in a Higher Power. The experiences of war would have forever destroyed all of that which my parents had instilled in me, had I not landed in this institution. (Letter to S. Teresa Antonietta Frącek, London, November 15, 1983)

Mother Getter left behind memoirs that cover only a portion of her rich life and activities – from her entry into the Family of Mary in 1887 up to 1939. These were published in 2007.

These are only a portion of the activities of Mother Matylda Getter and the Congregation of the Franciscan Sisters of the Family of Mary, who, during World War II, guided by their conscience and the call of the Gospel to help their neighbors, saved the lives of Jews by hiding them in their convents, in children's homes, hospitals and care institutes, even though this was threatened with death. This is what self-sacrificing Poles did. The one who could, saved. Undoubtedly, they are the 'Righteous Among the Nations', though often without the medals or honorary certificates. By saving Jews, Mother Matylda Getter and the sisters, as well as lay people, fulfilled the duty of conscience, aware that human life is of inestimable value.

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Table of Contents

The Getter Family	4
At the Girls' School in the Family of Mary	7
In the Family of Mary	9
Mother Getter's Role in Unifying the Family of Mary with the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary Congregation	18
Mother Superior of the Warsaw House	20
In the Family of Mary Once More: The 1919 Union	22
Superior of the Warsaw Province	34
Mother Matylda Getter in the Face of the Outbreak of War in 1939	35
A Spontaneous and Organized Action to Save Jews	38
The Warsaw Uprising	56
Going the Distance – The Final Stage of Life	60
Testimonies of Rescued Jewish Children	64
Righteous Among the Nations	73
New Findings	77
Selected Bibliography	79

Matka Matylda Getter

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