

**Blessed Mary Stella
And Her Ten Companions:
Memory, Testimonials, Graces**

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FOREWORD

Dear Readers of this third volume in the series of CSFN's Spiritual Formation Notebooks,

With this greeting I turn both to the Nazareth Sisters and to persons outside of our religious communities but variously connected with us, to all holding in special care the memory of the Blessed Martyrs of Nowogrodek.

This volume differs somewhat from the two that preceded it. Already the title brings a splendid introduction to the matters within this book: "*Accept this my humble and complete sacrifice. Blessed Mary Stella and her ten Companions: Memory, Testimonials, Blessings.*" In taking her vows, every Nazareth sister requests that the sacrifice of her life be accepted. Would Sister Stella, when saying these words, have at all foreseen that these words would come true in her life in such a literal way? Would the other Sisters, who by God's Will later joined this Community of Martyrs, be able to foresee this? Certainly not. This plan was known to God alone.

Let us remember that this volume, which contains both historical and spiritual truths, is being published during the Year of Consecrated Life. Pope Francis invites us to reconsider our past with gratitude. The materials collected in this book are a response to this invitation. The written matter is enhanced with photographs, to even better illustrate the events described. We hope that making this book available to the widest possible audience will also help broaden the cult of the Blessed Sisters of Nowogrodek, whose love-filled intercessions still obtain many blessings from the Throne of the Lord.

My gratitude goes to all those who have contributed to the creation of this volume. This notebook is not the work of one author, but rather a collective effort. First of all, my thanks go to the people of Nowogrodek, to Father Chaplain, and to our sisters for writing the testimonials. I thank Sister Beata Rzepczyk for preparing the biographical sketches of the Blessed Martyred Sisters, the historical commentary, and the valuable references which supplement the historical testimonial of Father A. Zienkiewicz (former Chaplain of the Sisters in Nowogrodek's Fara church) with current historical data. I thank Sister Ruth Kawa for writing commentaries and the overall editing of this Notebook, and to Sister Amanda Litwińska for proofing the completed Notebook.

May we be moved by what we read in the pages of this Notebook, and may we be capable of giving our lives -- as a complete self-sacrifice -- to glorify God and give comfort to His people.

In the love of the Holy Family,
Mother Jana Zawieja, CSFN
Superior General



Beatification picture of Blessed Sister Mary Stella and her Ten Companions,
painted by Jerzy Kumala, 1998

Sister Bożena Anna Flak

“AWAKENS” IS A GOOD WORD

Quietude is one of the most fascinating spiritual ambitions of a human being. It is difficult to attain and at the same time often the subject of criticism because it supposedly hides something.

No, it hides nothing. It awakens. It takes away the confidence of the over-confident but reinvigorates the thinking of those thoughtful among us. It awakens. “Awakens” is a good word.

For the Nazareth sisters of post-war times the scene of their co-sisters’ martyrdom in Nowogrodek is part of the family landscape. In 1948 in Philadelphia, Adam Styka painted a painting whose reproduction circled the world. The artist’s vision – the dawn, the pit, the yellow sand, the cross between the victims and their executioners, the inhumanity of those condemning and the superhuman strength in the attitudes of those condemned – nourished the imagination of several generations.



The death of the eleven Nazareth Sisters of Nowogrodek as envisioned by artist Adam Styka, 1948.

I first saw a copy of Styka’s Nowogrodek Martyrs painting as a Nazareth novice in Ostrzeszów, where I arrived as a candidate. I do not recall the painting impressing me in any special spiritual way, but I recall being angry at the “bad German,” whose literary iconic type immediately appeared in my high-school-girl’s mind. Only with time did I understand that it was not about the German. With time the question arose: what was it all about?

Another version of this story, occasioned by the beatification and painted by Jerzy Kumala (Kraków, 1998), corresponds with the event. On the wings of the veil, over the clouds, above the Fara Church -- the Martyrs stand in glory! Stella, the guiding star of the community, leads her sisters with trust and strength, no longer towards martyrdom, but rather towards the glow of Resurrection.

Whence came the strength to offer themselves in exchange for saving the lives of the imprisoned Nowogrodek townspeople? asked the Holy Father during their beatification. *Whence did they draw the courage calmly to accept this cruel and unjust death sentence?* The question posed by the Vicar of Christ in St. Peter's Square sounded calm and deeply human. From where comes the strength to accept such premature quietude? How is it possible to conquer fear in the face of the silence of forgetfulness? How can one not have doubt in God's eternal memory, when everything around appears to be denying His very existence?

On August 1, 1943, almost the entire Nazareth community of Nowogrodek perished, a community distant from even their closest Eastern Poland homes in Grodno, Vilnius, Lviv. On Sister Stella's Congregations, the twelfth sister, Małgorzata, did not come with the other sisters summoned to the police station. She worked in the hospital in secular clothes for a time unnoticed by the Gestapo. Did she even then appear to Sister Stella's visionary intuition as the one chosen by God to become in her time His voice on behalf of the Silenced?

The questions awakened by the death of the Martyrs of Nowogrodek, both papal questions and our own, are often wordless addressing life more than death. Although this may sound absurd every death is the harvest of life.

The grace of dying a martyr's death counts among those gifts which we cannot deserve. Freely given, it still requires a congenial environment in which to root and come alive. Such environment is wisdom coming from a mature personality and faith which organizes human relations.

The Nowogrodek sisters had met all the pre-conditions for a beatification process to be counted among martyrs. They lived their faith and they witnessed broad and wide the Christian values which the Nazi regime was systematically destroying. They were not engaged in any political conspiracy work. They did not divide people into enemies versus friends. But daily they practiced the commandment of love, sharing all they had with everyone.

When the lightning of arrests struck Nowogrodek homes and was about to strike the sole remaining priest, they tried common sense. Sister Stella reasoned logically in the name of the sisters and herself: *"My God, if a sacrifice of life is needed then let them execute us instead of those who have families,"* and later: *"Father is much more needed than us."* This moving reasoning before God is not even a prayer. It is an understanding of loving parties, a shared decision in a situation demanding action. Minimizing losses makes sense, seems to be her logic, formed as she was on the pattern of the Holy Family, the "Mom" of the Nowogrodek youth as she was often called.

The congregation's archives contain a handful of information and memoirs about each of the Martyrs. The eldest was 55 years old, the youngest 27. Four had not yet made their perpetual vows. Three had received teacher training. Next to a few names we find this note: *"She has received no education."* The Nowogrodek sisters were not extraordinary when seen from a human

perspective. They were a community like many others. Originally passionately unwelcome in the multi-faith community, they weathered the test. They opened a dormitory for youngsters, then an elementary school. They took care of the White *Fara* church of Mickiewicz.

They lived from the labor of their hands, farmed a large garden and kept livestock. The future martyrs knew the pain of daily work against all obstacles. They lived under one roof, ate the same bread, although diverse in their temperaments. Some sisters were physically stronger, some were ill. They were very much like us, but yet different. What sets them apart and what they mastered was unity in fundamental matters. A unified posture in the face of eternal choices and values held them TOGETHER until the end.

The beatification of the eleven sisters, ordinary sisters but living strong, is a phenomenon which reverberates on many levels: national, ecclesiastical, and individual. Until the end and trusting in Eternal Love, those faithful women grew quiet before God to the point of self-annihilation. First they gave themselves to His Merciful Will, then with dignity they walked into a firestorm of bullets. Before the sacrifice they forgave their executioners. So deep was their knowledge of humanity which often knows not what it does, so spacious was their freedom. They died on their knees hands folded in prayer.

On March 5, 2000 in Rome, the capital of capitals, the glory of the Belarussian church was sung. Blessed with martyr blood that church was again awakening to life. It was singing. All Nazareth sisters were singing in joy on that day. Their communities were seeing their reflections in the Blessed community of Nowogrodek, the most splendid legacy of this Congregation, as the Pope said. On that day many for the first time heard that a human soul naturally gravitates towards sainthood, the essence of its deepest being.

Whence came their strength? Whence are we to draw the strength to build ourselves? Strengths, talents, blessings - God sends those to us. Moreover, He Himself is strength and He makes a sacrifice of oneself possible through a daily life of service.

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BOUND TOGETHER BY A SHARED DATE OF DEATH



Sister Mary Stella of the Most Blessed Sacrament Adela Mardosewicz (1888 - 1943)

She was born on December 14th, 1888 to a relatively well-off family in the village Ciasnówka in the Nieśwież district, then under Russian rule in Russia Minsk Governorate. Because Russian language use was compulsory in offices and schools (which changed somewhat in 1905), Adela for four years attended a Russia-influenced school in Kiemielnice. After the death of her mother, she was taken in by a relative with whose financial and logistical support she finished the teacher training college of the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth in Vilnius. The college, which trained public school teachers, functioned secretly. The Sisters were barred from officially teaching such topics by the Russian authorities. They presented themselves as lay persons to set up a weaving school and under this cover conducted teacher training. Adela Mardosewicz earned her degree in those difficult, undercover conditions. She joined the congregation at the age of twenty-two despite a serious obstacle, a heart defect. Mother Laureta Lubowidzka decided: *“Not only healthy Sisters are needed in the Community,”* memoir of S. Speranza, AG CSFN). After completing her postulancy in Vilnius she left for her novitiate in Italy. After making her first vows in August of 1913 she returned to Poland. Until 1920 she lived in Częstochowa, from where she was sent for a short time (May to July, 1918) to Kalisz, to learn about the organization of a Nazareth school. She then again traveled to Italy, where in 1921 she made her perpetual vows taking the “mystery”- the Most Holy Sacrament. Upon return she worked in a number of the congregation’s houses: in Częstochowa (twice), Kraków (twice), Wadowice, and Stryj. In those houses she played numerous roles: a house mother in the dormitories, financial manager, sacristan, and embroiderer. She arrived at her last assignment in Nowogrodek probably in the fall of 1936. Until September of 1939 she worked as a house mother in a dormitory, a financial manager, and a nurse. Sister Stella at that time became known first and foremost as a person full of faith and love for God and for her brothers and sisters. Sister Veritas noted: *“She was the mirror of the soul of Mother Foundress”* (AG CSFN). She cared not only for her pupils but also for the poor people of Nowogrodek.



**Sister Mary Imelda of Jesus Host
Hedwig Żak (1892-1943)**

She was born December 29, 1892 in Oświęcim into a relatively wealthy family. Her father was a public official. Jadwiga finished grade six at a common public school then took to tailoring. At age nineteen she joined the Congregation of the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth and, after postulancy conducted partly in Wadowice and next in Vienna, she began her novitiate in Albano, Italy along with Sister Stella. After making her vows she was transferred to Lviv, where she spent six years working in a school. From a women's seminary in Lviv she received a certificate of master gardener of a Fröbel-style garden. Imelda's stay in Lviv occurred during an unusually difficult period for the city's residents during World War I, and subsequently during the Polish-Ukrainian battles for Lviv. These difficult years spent in Lviv undoubtedly affected the later, deeply trusting attitude of Imelda. Among the sisters, she was considered very intelligent but scatterbrained, yet also a very humble person. After her perpetual vows taken in Rome in January, 1921 she returned to Poland and in December, 1922 she passed her high school equivalency exams as an extern student. She served in various facilities of the Congregation. In Warsaw, Stryj, Grodno, and Łuków she worked according to local needs, as a teacher in elementary and middle school, as a dorm mother, a childcare worker in an orphanage, and a sacristan. In 1936 she arrived in Nowogrodek where, until the start of World War II, she taught in the elementary school. During the war she took care of the sacristy in the Church of the Transfiguration, the *Fara* church. She had the gift of being thankful for everything she received.



**Sister Mary Raymond of Jesus and Mary
Anna Kukulowicz (1892-1943)**

She was born on August 24, 1892 in Barwaniszki near Vilnius, which at the time, was under Russian rule. Only for a few months did she attend the village school. Afterwards she studied at home. Priests at the time would in fact recommend to her parents that they not send their children to Russian schools. Before joining the Community Anna helped her parents on the homestead and was an aspirant for two years in Vilnius.

She joined the congregation in Vilnius in November of 1918. Her novitiate took place in Grodno where in March of 1922 she made her first vows. She also took her perpetual vows there in March 1928. Sister Raymond was usually delegated to do household chores such as: cleaning, dining room (cafeteria), and farming. She spent time at various sites of the congregation: Vilnius, Stryj, and Rabka. After 1934 she arrived at her last assignment in Nowogrodek. She cleaned in the school, and, as needed, helped in the kitchen, laundry, and the garden. Sister Celina, the Superior in 1938/1939, perceived Sister Raymond thus: *“she worked like an ant despite her rheumatic ailments. Having a fiery temperament she burst out with impatience more than once, but how well was she able to humble herself and apologize to the sisters for her unpleasantness.”* (Memoirs of Sister Celina, AG CSFN). During the war years, when the Sisters’ school building was taken over by a soviet grade school with Polish as its language Sister Raymond cleaned that school and ran a breakfast buffet. During the German occupation she helped with household and farming duties and spun flax and wool.



**Sister Mary Daniela of Jesus and Mary Immaculate
Eleonora Józwik (1895-1943)**

She was born January 25, 1895 in Poizdowo in the Podlasie region under Russian rule. Eleonora did not attend school beyond a three-month evening course. She helped her parents with household and farm duties. Eleonora was accepted to the Congregation of the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth in January of 1920. Due to the Polish-Bolshevik war she was a postulant for an entire year and a half which in turn shortened her novitiate in Grodno from July, 1921 to February, 1923. After her first vows she spent time in Lviv working in the laundry, kitchen, and cleaning at the school. She took her perpetual vows in Grodno in 1929, after which she left for Kalisz where she served guests and visitors. In September of 1932 she arrived in Nowogrodek, where she again served guests and also took care of the sisters' dining room and the school kitchen. In Sister Daniela's life silence, obedience to rules, and obedience to her superiors, all played an equally important role. At the beginning of the occupation Sister Daniela, who was not physically strong, contributed by selling goods to the public. However, after correspondence exchanged between Mother Fides Tomkowicz, superior of the Vilnius convent, Sister Daniela discontinued these activities. She took on lighter handiwork: weaving and tricot knitting, as well as serving as the Chaplain's attendant.



**Sister Mary Canuta of Jesus of the Garden
Josepha Chrobot (1896-1943)**

She was born May 22, 1896 in Raczyna, in the Wieluń district, under Russian rule. She did not attend school but helped her parents with household and farm work. Her parents wanted her to marry young Stanisław. Unexpectedly, after a dream of her Groom awaiting her in Grodno with a gift of a red dress, she chose the path of her calling to be a Sister. She was accepted in the Congregation of the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth in April of 1922. After postulancy in Częstochowa she left to spend her novitiate in Grodno, where in July of 1925 she took her first vows. Next, she stayed in Stryj and Lviv working in the kitchen, was a portress, and a shoemaker. She took her perpetual vows in July, 1931 in Grodno after which she left for Nowogrodek. While there Sister Canuta worked in the kitchen, where, even though she was of frail health, she was distinguished for her unusually strong work ethic. She never complained and, when things became difficult, she left for a moment to the chapel.



**Sister Mary Sergia of the Sorrowful Mother of God
Julia Rapiej (1900-1943)**

She was born on September 8, 1900 in the village of Rogożyna in the Augustów region under the Russian rule, into a farming family. She did not attend school as she was not adept at reading and could not write. She was accepted into the Congregation of the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth in Grodno in December of 1922 where she started her novitiate in February, 1925. In September of 1925, after a year of novitiate, she went to the United States of America with a group of sisters, and where in Des Plaines she completed her novitiate. After making her first vows she spent some time in Saint Anthony Convent in Philadelphia. There she helped with various household chores. After making her perpetual vows in April, 1932 she returned to Poland. Sister Sergia accepted this decision with great joy and she expressed her willingness to remain in Poland permanently. In response to the sisters' concern about the situation in Poland, with the looming threat of impending war and repressions, she responded: *"(...) that she is not afraid of that, that she has nothing else to give the Lord Jesus for his love, that she wants to give Him her life and is not afraid of martyrdom"* (cited by Sister Edwina Malarczyk in a letter to Sister Provincial about Sister Sergia's stay in the U.S., AG CSFN). After her return to Poland, on February 2, 1933, Sister Sergia was assigned to serve in Nowogrodek where she helped in the kitchen and at other odd jobs. During the war she helped Sister Gwidona with housekeeping. The other sisters found Sister Sergia to be first and foremost very prayerful and humble.



**Sister Mary Gwidona of the Mercy of God
Helena Cierpka (1900 – 1943)**

She was born on April 11, 1900 in Granowiec near Odolanów under Prussian rule, into a farming family. There is no information about her educational background but in light of Prussia's schooling requirements, compulsory schooling for all children, it must be presumed that Helena went to school, albeit a German one. She joined the Congregation in Lviv in February, 1927. She completed her novitiate in Grodno where she took her first vows in January of 1930 then stayed on until July of 1933. Next, she left for a newly formed community in Ostrzeszów. She

was involved in house duties, worked in the fields, and in the garden. In July of 1935 Sister Gwidona left for Grodno to prepare for her perpetual vows. After making her vows she was sent to Nowogrodek in 1936. There, she mainly took care of the garden and the household where the work was hard and exacting. Even so she was blessed with deep peace in her soul. Exactly such an image of Sister Gwidona - deep in prayer, hard-working, and cheerful - remained in the memories of sisters and residents of Nowogrodek.



Sister Mary Canisia
Eugenia Mackiewicz (1903 – 1943)

She was born on September 27, 1903 in Suwałki then under Russian rule. Her father was an officer in the Russian army. Eugenia came from a family of many children with longstanding religious traditions. She had four brothers and sisters. One of her brothers was an army priest, chaplain, and catechist. In 1913 she began attending a Russian public middle school in Suwałki. Due to the outbreak of World War I she left Suwałki twice. She also attended first, second and third years of middle school in Mohylew on the Dnieper River. After the death of her mother in 1918 she returned to Poland with her family, continuing her studies in a Polish public middle school in Suwałki until the school year of 1921/1922. After completing middle school she wanted to enter the Congregation but changed her mind out of consideration for her father. Then she continued her education at a teachers' training college in Suwałki. After completing that program she worked as a teacher. Between the 1929/1930 and 1932/1933 school years she worked in Szczytniki (near Brześć on the River Bug) living with her father and brother. After the death of her brother she asked to be accepted to the Congregation. She was a postulant in Warsaw, then left for six months to Ostrzeszów, and later to Vilnius where she stayed until the end of the school year. She completed her novitiate in Albano (near Rome) and after making her first vows she returned to Poland in July 1936 where she became a teacher first in the school in Kalisz and from September 1938, in Nowogrodek. During the Soviet occupation she continued to work as a teacher albeit in secular attire. Nonetheless, after some time the Russians discovered that Eugenia Mackiewicz was a sister. Because of then-impending repressions she left for the convent in Grodno, where she hid away under another name. She returned to Nowogrodek only after the invasion of the German occupying forces. During the occupation just as before the war she prepared children for the Holy Communion. She also taught Polish, history, and mathematics in secret classes. Sister Canisia was righteous, open, and unusually conscientious. By nature of a lively temperament she worked hard to manage her impetuosity and she did have some serious health problems.



**Sister Mary Felicita
Paulina Borowik (1905-1943)**

She was born on September 30, 1905 in Rudno in the Lublin region at that time under Russian rule. Nine days after giving birth to Paulina her mother passed away. Family members took over the responsibility for raising Paulina and her siblings. Paulina did not attend school but helped with housekeeping. Before entering the Congregation she belonged to the Third Congregation of Saint Francis. She was accepted in the Congregation in March of 1932 in Kalisz. She completed her novitiate in Grodno, and in January of 1935 she made her first vows. From there she was sent to serve in Nowogrodek where she was assigned a duty that, as Sister Veritas put it: *“gave her much practice in humility because she was assigned as a helper to whichever sister had the most work in cleaning the dormitories and the home.”* During the Soviet occupation she worked as a housekeeper in the Sisters’ school which had been transformed into a Soviet elementary school. Sister Felicita always lived in the shadow. She was little known to the residents of Nowogrodek. She was modest and humble, never imposing on anyone, always deferring to others and grateful for being accepted into the Congregation. Paulina’s shyness and humility are not surprising, considering how early she was orphaned by her mother.



**Sister Mary Heliodora
Leokadia Matuszewska (1906-1943)**

She was born on February 8, 1906 in Stara Huta under Prussian rule. Her parents owned a farm. Sister Heliodora finished fourth grade at a German elementary school. Later she worked in an elastics factory in Grudziądz while rooming with her sister. During this time she became actively engaged in the life of the local parish, belonging to all possible church groups and eagerly participating in the holy sacraments. She undoubtedly deepened the faith she had brought from home and also developed her organizational skills. She was accepted into the Congregation in January, 1933 in Kalisz. In July 1935 after completing her novitiate in Grodno where she made her first vows she left for Nowogrodek in July 1935. She was assigned numerous household tasks cleaning at the school and being a portress. Sister Heliodora was characterized by integrity, honesty, diligence, and innate intelligence. She was loved not only by the sisters, but also by the residents of Nowogrodek. Sister Veritas wrote: *“Full of true joy and God's bliss. Eyes and mouth always smiling. At that, she was energetic, hardworking, nimble and adept at her work - whatever she took on, she always did well”*. During the Soviet occupation, she was in charge of housekeeping at the home of the director of the then-Soviet-run school (a Russian and a party member), and during the German occupation she devoted herself to handwork, weaving and sewing.



Sister Mary Boromea
Weronika Narmontowicz (1916 – 1943)

She was born on December 18, 1916 in Wiercieliszki, near Grodno (Poland). Her parents were provincial nobility. Before joining the Congregation she helped out at home. She was accepted into the Congregation in December 1936 in Grodno where she also made her first vows after completing her novitiate. Immediately after taking the vows and before the war started Sister Boromea arrived in Nowogrodek where she mostly worked in the laundry. She was the youngest sister in the community. During the Soviet occupation she worked as a school custodian at the Russian school which replaced the Sisters' own establishment in their building. After the school was shut down she helped with household and farming chores. She applied herself to live according to the Congregation's rule. Although not of robust health she was very hardworking. Her lack of education caused her to be placed into the second choir, sisters performing physical labor and household work. She had a strong feeling of belonging in the noble class so she naturally resisted being treated in the same way as her peers from peasant families. She found it hard to accept criticism, to get a grip on herself and she tended to cry often. Twice during the war Sister Boromea left Nowogrodek. First (precise date unknown), she went home at the request of her parents and with her superiors' permission. She did not stay long however because, as she wrote to her novitiate mistress "*something inside rushed me to return to the sisters.*" She said good bye to her parents and returned to Nowogrodek. The second time in the summer of 1943 she was on vacation in a small village about ten kilometers from Nowogrodek, because Sister Stella had doubts about allowing Boromea to take her next vows the following year. In her memoirs Sister Speranza wrote: "*Mother Superior was inclined to extend her stay in the village. But Sister Boromea insisently asked to be allowed to come to town for a few days.*" God Himself responded to her pleadings. He wished for Boromea to unite with Him not through vows but through actions.

Even these days, every Nazareth sister still pronounces the same Vow Formula which the Martyrs of Nowogrodek also pronounced during their perpetual vow ceremony:

I beseech you, O my God, (...)
to accept this humble and complete sacrifice of myself
and to grant me the grace of fidelity and perseverance in this Congregation (until death).

NAZARETH SISTERS OF NOWOGRODEK

Killed in August
in midsummer

No one is to blame
They alone were culpable
They left the door of their home open
to better hear the call from the darkness
and they thought aloud
of their brothers
in each person.
not on their own behalf
in other words
they wanted a say in a significant matter
having seen through a weakness
of the Most High

And in the brightness of day
an angel came
he transformed prater into blood

Their first grave – in the woods
When you go there someday
and it is summer again
you must first cut
through the meadow
full of flowers

Sister Bożena Anna Flak

MEMORY

Slowly but surely the recognition that the death of the eleven Sisters from Nowogrodek, one of many war crimes against the innocent had the hallmarks of conscious self-sacrifice. This triggered the Church's legal proceedings. The informational process started on September 18, 1991 followed by beatification proceedings finalized on March 5, 2000. The work on the *Positio* brought to light from the Congregation's archives valuable source information about every Sister-candidate for beatification. Testimonials of those who observed the daily lives of the Sisters in that community and of witnesses of the Nowogrodek events became evidence in the beatification

proceedings. They then served as materials in preparing and publishing brochures and other materials about the Sisters including books.

The most important book publications (arranged by year of publication) are:

- ✓ Jan Warczak, *Aureola nad Nazaretem* (A Halo over Nazareth), Munchen (Munich) 1947
- ✓ Maria Starzyńska, *Jedenaście klęczników* (Eleven Prie-dieux), Rome 1992
- ✓ *Błogosławione Męczenniczki z Nowogródka. Profile biograficzne* (Blessed Martyrs of Nowogrodek. Biographical Vignettes), Rome 2000
- ✓ Sister Noela Wojtatowicz, CSFN, *Opowieść o błogosławionych Męczennicach z Nowogródka* (The Story of the Blessed Martyrs of Nowogrodek), Warsaw 2012
- ✓ Bożena Malec, *Śladami miłości. Opowieść o błogosławionych Męczennicach z Nowogródka* (In the footsteps of love. The story of the Blessed Martyrs of Nowogrodek), Warsaw 2012.
- ✓ Sister Barbara Gromada, CSFN, *Naznaczenie i wybór. Historia s. Małgorzaty Banaś, dwunastej nazaretanki z Nowogródka* (Designation and choice. The Story of Sister Małgorzata Banaś, the twelfth Nazareth Sister from Nowogrodek), Warsaw 2012.

Among the publications about the Nowogrodek Martyrs a special place is held by the testimonial of Father Alexander Zienkiewicz. It was published as a manuscript under the title “Ofiara przyjeta” (No Greater Love) in Rome in 1968, by the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth, on the 25th anniversary of the eleven Sisters’ deaths.

Father Zienkiewicz’s personal account found in this volume has been enhanced by references containing necessary historical commentary. As Mother General noted in her *Foreword*. Sister Beata Rzepczyk authored those references as well as the introduction outlining the historical context which prevailed in Nowogrodek in 1943. She also authored the biographies of Sister Stella and her ten Companions. Father Zienkiewicz’s biography was authored by Sister Danuta Koziół.

List of Abbreviations

AG CSFN – the General Archive in Rome of the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth

APCH CSFN – Archive of the Chicago, USA, Province of the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth

APK CSFN – Archive of the Kraków Province of the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth

APW CSFN – Archive of the Warsaw Province of the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE EVENTS IN NOWOGRODEK IN 1943

During the summer of 1939 the situation in Poland became very difficult. Although Poland obtained a guarantee of aid from England and France in case of German aggression on Poland, at the same time on August 23 Stalin and Hitler signed a pact of mutual non-aggression. The pact, signed by the chiefs of German diplomacy (Joachim von Ribbentrop) and Russian diplomacy (Vyacheslav Molotov), did not create a serious threat to Poland until a secret protocol was added about the division of control in Central-Eastern Europe including “*in case of territorial-political reshaping of the territories of the Polish Republic...*” Of course that clause in the secret protocol turned out to refer to mutual aggression against Poland. The Germans attacked Polish territory from the West on the 1st of September while the USSR invaded from the East on September 17. According to the agreement and after additional protocol changes executed on September 28, 1939 the two powers divided Polish lands along the Pisa-Narwia-Bug-San Rivers. Until June 1941 Nowogrodek was under Soviet occupation while after the German attack on the USSR on June 22, it was incorporated into the newly formed Reichkommissariat Ostland¹ as the General Kommissariat Weissruthien (General Kommissariat Belarus)². The situation of churches and faith communities varied in the various European territories occupied after 1939 by the Third Reich.

No consistent regulation was enacted regarding Christian churches. Policy regulating religious matters followed the rules and goals of every specific region and its faith communities³. Hitler's policy regarding the Catholic Church on the occupied Polish lands was subsumed into the overarching program of exterminating the Polish people. Whatever the specific methods employed, the implementation of this extermination program in the particular regions of the lands annexed to the Reich and the General Governorate proceeded consistently. Hitler's government recognized that Polish Catholic clergy were particularly untrustworthy because they formed a leading group in Polish nationalism. They acted as the "government of the souls" and propagated "nationalistic Polish chauvinism." The Church was seen by the Nazis as a source of moral and psychological support for the occupied Polish people.⁴ Hitler's occupying government's policy towards the Church was conditioned by the positions of various worldviews, peoples, and political strategies⁵. Despite varying treatment of churches in unique administrative regions it is possible to name certain common strategies: extermination and repressions towards the clergy, the removal

¹ W. Roszkowski, *Historia Polski 1914-1990 (The History of Poland 1914-1990)*, Warszawa 1991, pp. 84-105 (hereafter: W. Roszkowski, *Historia Polski...*)

² Z. Boradyn, *Niemen rzeka niezgody. Polsko-sowiecka partyzantka na Nowogródzczyźnie 1943–1944 (The Niemen as a river of discord: Polish-soviet partisans in the Nowogrodek area, 1943-1944)*, Warszawa 1999, p. 27. See footnote 25.

³ J. Sziling, *Polityka władz niemieckich wobec związków wyznaniowych na obszarze okupowanej Polski (German policy towards religious organizations in occupied Poland)*, printed in *Martyrologium duchowieństwa polskiego 1939–1956 (Polish clergy martyrology 1939-1945)*, eds. B. Bejze, A. Galiński, Łódź 1993, pp. 511–516. (Hereafter: J. Sziling, *Polityka władz...*)

⁴ Z. Fijałkowski, *Kościół katolicki na ziemiach polskich w latach okupacji hitlerowskiej (The Catholic Church in the Polish territories during Hitler's invasion)*, Warszawa 1983, p. 372. (Hereafter: Z. Fijałkowski, *Kościół katolicki...*)

⁵ J. Sziling, *Polityka władz...*, pp. 28–29; c.f. Z. Fijałkowski, *Kościół katolicki...*, p. 373.

of national elements from churches and services, the cancellation of Polish national holidays, and the limiting of church holidays, the dissolution of activities of Polish church-related organizations shutting down of all church publications, discontinuation of all seminaries by prohibiting new enrollment and faith-based schooling, limitation of religious services, limitations on the funding sources, and destruction of church/religious national cultural treasures.⁶

The tenets of the occupying government's policies towards the Catholic Church in the former Nowogrodek district which during the occupation was part of the General Commissariat of Belorussia, resembled those in other Polish territories. But here additional factors complicated matters – Belarussian collaborators with the Nazis and the push for Belarussianization.

Already at the beginning of November, 1941 the German powers required termination of all priests' permits and the filing of new applications stating such details as these: day, month and year of birth, faith/denomination, nationality, how long had he worked as a priest, political activities, who nominated him to his post, was he local or a newcomer, and how many years in that area. This was especially strictly observed in the former Slonim district. In certain districts churches were closed for a certain period of time and processions outside the church were banned. The occupying forces then ordered that sermons be conducted in Belarussian. However, this order was not implemented since priests did not speak Belarussian and most believers did not want to listen to sermons in that language⁷.

The occupying forces strove to use the pulpit for their own goals by ordering priests to make announcements from their pulpits about new edicts, contingents, laborer exportation to Germany, and even about repressions against resisting population members. Nonetheless priests were able to sustain a close relationship with their parishioners⁸.

In Nowogrodek the Germans did not desecrate or seize churches but they focused first and foremost on destroying the clergy⁹. Making use of the experiences amassed in occupied Poland

⁶ Sziling, *Polityka władz...*, s. 29. Information about the situation of the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth (Nazareth Sisters) in occupied Poland, gathered by H. Markiewicz and B. Stelmaszczuk, is found in the collective work in this cycle: *Studia i materiały do historii Chrześcijaństwa w Polsce* – volume VII (Study and materials for the history of Christianity in Poland – vol. VII), in the series *Żeńskie Zgromadzenia Zakonne w Polsce 1939–1947 (Communities of Women Religious in Poland 1939-1947)*, Lublin 1994; and also in the work by F. Tomkowicz, N. Rutkowska, *Zgromadzenie SS. Najśw. Rodziny z Nazaretu i Jego wkład w dorobek polskiego Millenium (Congregation of the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth and its contribution to the achievements of the Polish Millenium)*, volume 4, Rzym/Rome 1957. (Hereafter: F. Tomkowicz, N. Rutkowska, *Zgromadzenie...*).

⁷ T. Krahel, *Archidiecezja wileńska (The Archdiocese of Vilnius)*, in: *Życie religijne w Polsce pod okupacją 1939–1945. Metropolie wileńska i lwowska, zakony (Religious life in Poland under occupation 1939-1945. Metropolies of Vilnius and Lviv, Religious orders)*, red. Z. Zieliński, Katowice 1992. (Hereafter: T. Krahel, *Archidiecezja wileńska...*).

⁸ T. Tararuj, *Diecezja Pińska*, in: *Życie religijne w Polsce pod okupacją 1939–1945... (Pinsk Diocese: Religious life in Poland under occupation 1939-1945)*, op. cit., pp.82–83. (Hereafter: T. Tararuj, *Diecezja Pińska...*)

⁹ E. Borowski, *Martyrologia duchowieństwa w diecezji pińskiej w latach 1939–1956 (The martyrology of the clergy in the Diocese of Pinsk 1939-1945)*, in: *Martyrologia duchowieństwa polskiego 1939–1956...*,

and Vilnius they decided foremost to target and repress the Polish “leading classes” which included priests as well as sisters,¹⁰ who offered spiritual services, aided and supported families of those who had been arrested or executed, and helped soviet prisoners, Jews and partisans. Arrests were conducted even during services, blessings, and holy mass¹¹.

The methods of extermination were diverse: from execution by firing squad, through asphyxiation in gas chambers, to being burned alive. Priests and religious arrested in Nowogrodek between 1942 and 1943 were killed in that same region¹². They were not taken to concentration camps erected in Polish territory nor to Dachau. The death toll during that period of time in Nowogrodek numbered around 60 priests and nuns¹³.

Arrests and other extermination of the clergy in the General Commissariat of Belorussia were conducted, just as in other political territories, by the Gestapo police. Their actions were centrally controlled by the Reich Main Security Office (RSHA)¹⁴ who worked in conjunction with

op. cit., p.100. (Hereafter: E. Borowski, *Martyrologia duchowieństwa...*).

¹⁰ General Archives of the Ursuline Sisters of the Heart of Jesus in Agony in Pniewy, P. Leśniewska, *Dzieje domów za Bugiem cz. Lubcz (History of the homes beyond the Bug River, part: Lubcz)* One example could be the Ursuline Sisters of Jesus’ Heart in Agony in Lubcz: On November 21, 1941, the sisters were removed from the castle to a Jewish house at the town square. The chapel in the new home could only be used by the Sisters now. On June 28, 1942, allegedly due to some secret report, but really as part of the policy of destroying religious orders, the sisters were arrested and next day transported to the prison in Nowogrodek. Local people asked the German authorities to free the sisters. Many signatures were collected. This occurred 5 weeks later. J. Sziling, *Polityka okupanta hitlerowskiego wobec kościoła katolickiego 1939–1945, tzw. Okręgi Rzeszy Gdańsk – Prusy Zachodnie, Kraj Warty i Regencja Katowicka*, Poznań 1970, pp. 44–46. (Hereafter: J.Sziling, *Polityka...*) Well known is also the order of Arthur Greisner, governor of the Warta District (Warthegau), of March 14, 1940, implementing the destruction of convents. Item 12 in that order regarded the dissolution of convents and monasteries, religious societies, and foundations, as contrary to moral principles and national policy. J. Sziling asserts that the extermination variant which was being implemented in the Warta District was also implemented in the territories belonging to the Soviet Union before 1941. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

¹¹ T. Tararuj, *Diecezja...*, pp. 83–84; T. Krahel, *Archidiecezja...*, p. 44.

¹² E. Borowski, *Martyrologia...*, p. 100.

¹³ A. Galiński, *Eksterminacja inteligencji polskiej latem 1942 w Nowogrodzkiem (tr.: The extermination of Polish intelligentsia in the summer of 1942 in the Nowogrodek area)*, in: *Biuletyn Głównej Komisji Badania Zbrodni Przeciw Narodowi Polskiemu Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej* (tr.: *Bulletin of the Central Commission investigating crimes against the Polish nation, of the Polish Institute of National Memory*), v. 33, ed. R. Juszewicz, Warszawa 1991, pp. 191–196. (Hereafter: A. Galiński, *Eksterminacja...*)

¹⁴ J. Sziling, *Hitlerowska polityka wobec wyznań religijnych na ziemiach polskich z uwzględnieniem problemu eksterminacji (tr.: Hitler’s policy towards religious denominations in Polish territory, with focus on the issue of extermination)*, in: *Zbrodnie i sprawy. Ludobójstwo hitlerowskie przed sądem ludzkości i historii (tr. Crimes and cases. Hitler’s genocide facing the judgment of humanity and history)*, ed. Cz. Pilichowski, Warszawa 1980, p. 217; J. Sziling, *Polityka ...*, p. 57. The Reich’s Main Security Office (RSHA) was created by order of Reichsführer SS and chief of German police, Heinrich Himmler, issued on September 27, 1939. RSHA was headed by the chief of security police and security forces (Chef der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD) Reinhard Heydrich, and after his death by Ernst Kaltenbrunner. They

local party, administrative, and police leadership¹⁵. Charting the overall course of church-related policy was the responsibility of the deputy governor of the district or region. At the same time the German Secret State Police (Gestapo) was primarily an organ for executing such policy and passing opinions about local matters to be passed up the chain of command. The Gestapo received direct orders from the local chief of security police and security services or from the Gestapo headquarters in Berlin.

Gestapo offices included clerks responsible for matters related to religious concerns but most of the orders and ordinances were signed by chief officers not such clerks. At the security police and security services conference on religion/church issues which convened in September, 1941 in the Reich Main Security Office in Berlin, SS-Sturmbannführer Hart, in referencing police orders declared: *Unser Endziel ist die restlose Zerschlagung des gesamten Christentums* (Our ultimate goal is total destruction of Christianity as a whole.)¹⁶. All mass police action against Polish clergy was also centrally planned in the RSHA¹⁷. The Gestapo security police of Baranowicze undertook the extermination of priests and nuns in Nowogrodek and its surrounding areas¹⁸.

reported directly to Himmler. RSHA was composed of the following offices: The Nazi Party's Sicherheitsdienst (SD; SS intelligence service) and the Sicherheitspolizei (SiPo; "Security Police"). The SiPo was composed of two sub-departments, the Geheime Staatspolizei (Gestapo; "Secret State Police") and the Kriminalpolizei (Kripo; "Criminal Police").

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 58.

¹⁶ J. Sziling, *Polityka władz...*, s.27, c.f. Archiv des Instituts für Zeitgeschichte in München, Fa 218. In a totalitarian state (such as the 3rd Reich) only one ideology has the right to exist and dominate. The Nazi ideology focused on subordinating everything to national-socialist goals. Eliminated was anything inconsistent with this ideology. Hence a war on Christianity, and especially on the Catholic Church, was unavoidable, as they did not accept the tenets of the national-socialist party (NSDAP), which preached racism and neo-paganism. C.F. Z. Fijałkowski, *Kościół katolicki...*, s.17.

¹⁷ J. Sziling, *Polityka ...* s.65–66.

¹⁸ A. Galiński, *Eksterminacja...* s.186–187.

**REVEREND ALEXANDER ZIENKIEWICZ
(1910-1955)**



Alexander Zienkiewicz was born August 12, 1910 in the Lembówka village in the Vilnius region to Casimir and Jadwiga Wróblewski. He was baptized on the August 29 in the parish church in Duniłowice. During 1920-1926 he studied at the Duniłowice elementary school, next in the Lower Seminary of Duniłowice, then at the Lower Seminary in Nowogrodek, and then in the Bishop Boy's Middle School in Drohiczyn. In 1931, after getting his G.E.D. he began his studies at the Thomas Aquinas Seminary College in Pińsk. On the April 3, 1938, he was ordained by the Ordinary of the Pińsk Bishop Kazimierz Bukraba and he took over the responsibilities of his ministry. In April of 1939 at his own initiative he was nominated parish priest or rector of the main church in Nowogrodek, chaplain of the Nazareth sisters, and the prefect of the Nowogrodek middle school. In 1942 he was nominated dean of Nowogrodek and the general vicar for the Northern part of the Pinsk Diocese. In this era it was impossible not to notice the effects of German repressions against the Polish people and the Church. At the beginning of 1943 Father Zienkiewicz was the only remaining priest in Nowogrodek.

In April of 1943 he received from Mother Stella the resolution of all the Sisters offering their lives in exchange for saving from death numerous arrested members of local families as well as the priest himself since he was so necessary to the people.

After the martyrdom of the eleven Nazareth Sisters from Nowogrodek he hid away in many locations and many homes. In March of 1945 he led the exhumation of the Sisters' bodies from the place of their martyrdom, their forest grave, and their re-burial in a new grave near the Nowogrodek *Fara* church.

In 1946 with many other residents of Nowogrodek he left in a sizeable organized group for so-called "Recovered Lands" in the West of post-war Poland. First he stopped in Gorzów Wielkopolski, and next in Syców in Lower Silesia where he began working with youth as a prefect in local schools.

In 1947 he was transferred to Wrocław where he took on responsibilities of prefect at the Pedagogical High School as well as priest at the newly formed home of the Congregation of the Nazareth Sisters. Between 1951 and 1958 he was the vice-rector and rector while at the same time teaching courses and giving lectures at the Seminary College for Clergy in Wrocław. From 1959 on he directed the Clergy Division at the Archbishop's Curia and in 1963 he was appointed chaplain for college/university students at the Archdiocese. He is remembered as "Uncle" by many generations of Wrocław students. Father Zienkiewicz was a canon of the Cathedral Chapter in Wrocław and a prelate. As students' chaplain he managed the Central Quarters of University Ministry dubbed "Number 4" (from its street address) and performed the duties of the rector of St. Peter and Paul church in Ostrów Tumski.

Father Zienkiewicz was the author of many books on topics relevant to ministry and clerical work as well as memoirs of the martyrdom of the eleven Sisters from Nowogrodek including the brochure "No Greater Love" published in Rome in 1968. On the August 1, 1973 he organized the first reunion of the "Nowogrodek family" to which he invited the city's former residents whose post-war fates scattered them around Poland far from their original homeland. Since then the tradition of meetings of subsequent generations of people from Nowogrodek continues uninterrupted "at the House of the Mother at Jasna Góra", as Father Zienkiewicz put it.

The last months of Father Zienkiewicz's life were spent in the House for Retired Clergy. He died on the 25th of November, 1995 and was buried in the clergy tomb at Saint Lawrence Cemetery in Wrocław.

On November 10, 2010 the beatification process of the Servant of God Father Alexander Zienkiewicz began in Wrocław.

Sister Danuta Koziel

NO GREATER LOVE

PRELUDE TO THE SACRIFICE

Lifting the veil

G.K. Chesterton once wrote that it is very difficult to prove manifest truths. It is equally, and perhaps even more difficult for a man to describe events in which he has been deeply involved, which he has experienced with all faculties of his soul. This is especially true when the recollection of them inflicts pain such as that of being burnt with a fiery brand or having living flesh torn with pincers. While the wounds were still are and bleeding; while the roar of the war engines and the salvos and groans that are the blood freeze in one's veins were still audible, it was out of the question to think of putting these experiences into writing.



Drawing by Sr. Eliza Grzywaczewska, CSFN

By now, the sand beneath the birch and pine trees of the woods in Nowogrodek, has absorbed the victim's blood. The survivors' wounds have closed and the passage of time has softened the harsh outline of events... Is it worth lifting the veil?... Is it worth revealing to the public eye that indescribable sacrifice, pain and crime?... Would the victims themselves desire it? There can be no doubt about their indifference to human glory. But we, on the other hand, cannot remain indifferent when the glory of God, the triumph of good and the truth of sacrifice are at stake.

Should these reminiscences kindle in any soul a spark of divine love; should they help to overcome even one impulse to egoism or faintheartedness; should they engender a spirit of peace, sacrifice and justice, or bear any fruit whatsoever, then it is worth lifting the veil which, at about 5 a.m., On August 1, 1943, hid from the eyes of the world, under a thin layer of sand, the bodies of eleven Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth.

The reminiscences which follow will serve also as a historical record because the events related are truly to fact. Minor discrepancies regarding James and dates may have crept in because the account is based on personal recollections and on oral reports of witnesses. But in general only indisputable facts are given and additions, coloring and conjecture have been avoided. When conjectures have been included, they are reported in that particular light.

The Story of the Christ the King Convent before the Outbreak of World War II

Divine Providence operates through men, making use of trials and difficulties to inspire them to noble deeds. It tempers its instruments and prepares them for sacrifice in the fire of suffering and adversity. We find that this was also dispensation of Divine Providence in the case of the Nowogrodek convent of the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth.

The convent itself had been founded in trying circumstances. First there were protracted negotiations between the saintly shepherd of the diocese of Pinsk, His Excellency Zygmunt Lozinski, and the Superior General of the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth, Mother Laureta

Lubowidzka. Then followed the problem of finding a site. Bishop Lozinski gave the Sisters the care of the parish church known as “Fara.” Built in the 14th century by Prince Witold, this church was made famous by the events that took place within its walls. Among these were the marriage of King Wladyslaw Jagiello and Sonia Holszanska in 1422 and the baptism of Adam Mickiewicz on February 2, 1799.

The Sisters were to have occupied a building opposite the church attached to which were two farmhouses and about twelve acres of garden and meadow land. It so happened that when they arrived on September 4, 1929, they property was under lease to the mayor of Nowogrodek who saw no reason for giving up his tenancy. There ensued other difficulties and complications which almost made it impossible for the Sisters to settle in the town.



Nowogrodek, ruins of the castle of Mendog and the white Fara

Only the firm stand of the bishop and of the Sisters’ Superior General, saved the situation.¹⁹ A few months later, supported by the good will of the municipal authorities and of Mr.

¹⁹ APK CSFN (Archives of the Krakow Province), *Kronika Domu Chrystusa Króla w Nowogródku, spisana przez pierwszą przełożoną – s. Florę Nagłowską (The chronicle of the home of Christ the King in Nowogrodek, written by its first superior, S. Flora Nagłowska)*, mps. pp. 2–6. Bishop Zygmunt Łoziński so instructed the Sisters: Do not leave *Nowogrodek, persist on your post! This is God’s Will, and mine*. S. Flora also noted that the General Superior Mother Laureta Lubowidzka so wrote in a letter to the Sisters struggling with many challenges at the beginning of the community’s existence: *Decidedly, absolutely, persist in your post. We may not give up, this is a matter of a Home under the Name of Christ the King. He must be victorious; we must fight for His Kingdom. We must fearlessly survive all difficulties, because great*

Beczkowicz, the Voivode (governor) of Nowogrodek, the Sisters took possession of the new convent.



The convent of the Nazareth Sisters and a fragment of the school building

The spiritually neglected souls of the Poles of Nowogrodek soon felt the beneficial influence of the kind-hearted sisters. The main parish church became the epicenter of God's radiance. Up to 1863, it had been the parish church, standing alongside the church of St. Michael which belonged to the Dominican Fathers. When in that year, the Russian Occupation authorities ordered closing of one of the churches, the parish church, or "Fara" as it was called in Polish, being smaller and in need of repair, was the one to be sacrificed. Closed and abandoned, it threatened to fall into ruin.

In 1918, Poland's great hour struck at last – the hour of national independence- and the town of Nowogrodek was included within the boundaries of the Republic. Both civil and ecclesiastical authorities undertook the restoration of "Fara", their beloved national monument, but the work went slowly. The coming of the Sisters speeded up the restoration of the Church.

things shall happen there. The Sisters settled in Antowilski Zaulek (Antovil Mews) in an unfinished house given up by a Belarussian family. Heartened by the words of the Bishop and their Mother Superior, they did not passively exist among the difficulties, but started looking for new work. Into their tight quarters they accepted four girl boarders, who also received French lessons from one of the sisters; they taught a handcraft course in knitting, etc., which various girls gladly attended, even Muslim ones; they organized religious education classes; they visited the sick, dying, and abandoned, bringing them care and spiritual and material support. Through such service, the Sisters exerted powerful influence on the diverse community of Nowogrodek.

Whereas, up to 1929, only the walls had been repaired, by 1931, there was a new roof, and interior improvements, including the renovation of the altars, were under way.

The local population frequented the church in increasing numbers and soon established friendly relations with the Sisters.

The elementary school started by the Sisters in 1931 was another source of progress. Increasing enrollment and local appreciation of their work, led to the erection of a new school building in 1933. As a result of their efforts and aided by the cooperation of the people and especially by a local landowner, Count Jan Jundziłła-Bałinski, the children were accommodated in a new, well-equipped, one-storied wooden structure by September 1934.²⁰

There now began a revival of Catholic Polish culture and Nowogrodek once more assumed the Catholic character which it had enjoyed before the uprising of 1830 and even up to 1863²¹. The apostolate flourished... hope grew...



Students and sisters gathered in front of the school, including: S. Veritas Piątkowska, S. Regina Budzyńska, S. Dominika Derus – headmistress, S. Augustyna Kruger.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 3. Sister Flora wrote in the Chronicle of the Home of Christ the King, that in 1930 the Sisters opened a co-ed elementary school in a rented building. In 1932 the Sisters' lease for the building was terminated, effective in 1933. That situation caused the erection of a new school, which lasted from February through September 1933.

²¹ AG CSFN (General Archive of the Order), O. Piotrowski, *Moje wspomnienia (pamięci zamordowanych przez hitlerowców 11 sióstr nazaretanek Nowogródzkich w sierpniu 1943 roku) (My memories, in memory of the 11 Nazareth sisters of Nowogrodek murdered by Hitler's army in August 1943)*, 1978, excerpt. In the inter-war period, Nowogrodek was a multicultural town. Undoubtedly, one of its crowning achievements at the time was the fact that the population -- Tartar, Jewish, Belarussian, and Polish -- lived peacefully, mutually respecting their customs and beliefs. The Tartars assembled for prayers at the mosque, the Jews in the synagogue, the Russian-Orthodox in their temple, Catholics in the church of St. Michael (and after 1930 also in the Church of Transfiguration, or the *Fara*).



First communion, 1931. From the left: S. Miriam Łopacińska, S. Flora Nagłowska, an unidentified Greek-Catholic priest, Bishop Z. Łoziński, S. Dominika Derus, S. Stanizja Stubieda

The Outbreak of the War and Life in the USSR

1939... Nowogrodek, situated outside the main theater of war, did not suffer immediate material disaster, even though it did live through the inexpressible tragedy of that September onslaught.

But suddenly, on Sunday morning, September 17, news reached Nowogrodek of the crossing of the Polish frontier by Soviet troops. Panic gripped the town and streams of refugees headed for Lithuania. The Sisters and their chaplain remained at their posts. Only some weeks later did Sisters Celine and Veritas leave Nowogrodek for Vilnius²². The duty of the Superior was then taken over and carried out to the bitter end by Sister Stella.²³

²² AG CSFN, *Wspomnienia s. Fides – Dionizji Tomkowicz – niepoufne III, pisane na prośbę wikarii generalnej s. Klary Netkowskiej (Memoirs of S. Fides – Dionizja Tomkowicz -- not private III, written at the request of the Vicar General S. Klara Netkowska)*, mps. *Wspomnienia s. Fides – Dionizji Tomkowicz – poufne II*, mps. (Dalej: *Wspomnienia s. Fides...*). Sister Fides wrote that the soviet entry into town caused some sisters to panic and seek refuge in friendly homes: "...but most of them stopped and that is when Sister Stella came forth, to answer the question 'where to go?' She said: 'Where to? To Lord Jesus!' This calmed down the Sisters, who entered the chapel and with no more fear awaited the arrival of the soviets. And even those who had left slowly began to return." The author also wrote that Sister Rufina, then staying in Nowogródek, also left at the time.

²³ AG CSFN, excerpts of a letter of S. Fides Tomkowicz from October 28, 1939, to Superior General Mother Laureta Lubowidzka. S. Fides wrote: "...S. Stella acts as an assistant, for she speaks Russian, and is brave and resourceful, and can manage things on her own. The school there is in a very precarious position and future prospects are none. AG CSFN, *Wspomnienia s. Fides...*, op. cit. In her memoirs, S. Fides wrote: S. Stella was able to maintain amongst us sisters, moral unity. All sisters loved her..."

Meanwhile there were rapid changes in the town. Before long the Sisters were removed from the school and from their convent. Only the farm sheds and a section of the garden were left to them. In the spring of 1940, these too were taken. Finally they were left with no alternative but to change their religious habits for secular dress and to seek employment.

Mother Stella went to live with her cousin Mrs. Sikorzyna. Sister Canisia continued to teach in the school for some months and sister Małgorzata worked in the hospital. These both lived with the Bołtuć family. Sister Imelda, who went on with her duty as sacristan, lodged with the Chmara family. Sister Daniela, housekeeper to the chaplain, found residence with the Żukowski sisters.

Sisters Raymond, Felicita and Boromea were employed as cleaners in the school which had been run by the Sisters, but which was now functioning as the Soviet Polish School. In this capacity, they were permitted to reside on the premises of their lost convent.

Sisters Gwidona and Sergia were able to keep an eye on the Sisters' confiscated property from the neighboring house of the Romanowicz family, with whom they were living. Sister Heliodora accepted the position of domestic servant with the family of the headmaster of the school – a Russian Communist²⁴. He had already engaged three of the Sisters in the school and he recognized and appreciated their exceptional qualities as employees. That was why he asked for a “nun” to do his housekeeping. He once observed, “You can trust nuns; they work well and do not steal.”

Sister Heliodora, energetic and full of apostolic zeal, soon exerted such an influence on the headmaster's wife and child and even on the headmaster himself that she came to be regarded by them as an authority, not only in domestic, but also in moral matters. This family of atheists began to adopt Christian ways. A crucifix and religious pictures found their way into their home and the carefully prepared blessed food at Easter brought tears to the eyes of the blinded, or perhaps merely intimidated member of the anti-religious party.

The Sisters kept in touch with each other through their attendance at Church where most of them met twice daily – for morning Holy Mass and for evening rosary. Since the outbreak of the war, the bishop had approved daily recitation of the rosary in Church during Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament.

²⁴ AG CSFN, excerpts of letter from S. Fides Tomkowicz to Superior General from August 20, 1940: *...their entire family in 7 locations. Some are working. They are writing more often now, but it is impossible to go there.*

See AG CSFN, letter of S. Imelda Żak to Superior General from December 11, 1940. S. Fides, in a November 28, 1940, letter to Superior General Mother Laureta Lubowidzka wrote: *Stella herself is keeping quiet, but there were letters from the younger ones. They are working and managing.* Sister Fides Tomkowicz, as an experienced superior in Vilna, supported the Nowogrodek sisters with advice, because it was difficult to communicate with the Provincial authorities in Warsaw (when Vilna and Nowogródek were under soviet occupation, while Warsaw was under Nazi occupation). Information received from Nowogródek was sent to Rome in coded letters, where for example Sister Stella figures as “Mother,” while her flock of sisters are “kids,” the Holy Father is “Grandpa,” the Superior General is “Grandma.” S. Fides also tried, in her letters to the sisters in Nowogródek, to bolster the authority of Sister Stella, to whom she passed on the duties of a superior. See AG CSFN, letter to Superior General from March 13, 1941.

Catholic life which had been shaken to its very foundation was gradually returning to normal and even becoming more fervent. Young people flocked to Church on Sundays and increasing numbers of the faithful received Holy Communion. The altars were decorated with flowers. The Russians admired the fervor of the people and remarked ironically that the churches in Nowogrodek operated to shifts whereas the factories had only one.

But as time went on, the Polish population in the town decreased. The mass deportations to Siberia and Kazakhstan of February 11, 1940 and April, 1941, ordered by Stalin, struck a crippling blow to the Polish element. Atheistic propaganda was intensified but none the less, churches were full. Wild flowers were sent for the altars even from far-off Kazakhstan. By the spring of 1941, the Polish population of Nowogrodek had dwindled considerably and the second part of the history of the convent of Christ the King was drawing to the close

THE GERMAN OCCUPATION

Before the Occupation of Nowogrodek

“The Germans attack...!”

This news released on the morning of June 22, 1941 must have shocked the whole world and not least the Poles of Nowogrodek.

The Sisters were busy with their life of prayer and work, but they shared fully their country's misfortunes, disappointments and hopes. Simple, humble souls, such as Sisters Felicita and Sergia, were probably more occupied with thoughts of God than with news of world events, But this particular news became a loving reality. That very afternoon, German aeroplanes machine-gunned barracks in Nowogrodek. Next day, squadrons of bombers made their appearance; the earth trembled and quaked; the horizon was hidden by smoke out of which burst flames of fire. On Tuesday, June 24, the first bombs were dropped although there were no troops. Most of the population had sought refuge elsewhere though no one expected that on Saturday, June 28, Nowogrodek would become the target of squadrons of bombers which for some three hours rained down a hail of bombs upon an open defenseless town.

Nowogrodek which crowns the highest point (325 meters – 1066 feet) of the hills of the upper Niemen, looked like a volcano erupting smoke and fire. Fortunately, there were few civilian casualties as most people scattered to the neighboring fields and hamlets. The Third of May Street where the Sisters lived was not badly damaged. Only one young girl, Regina Jesman, was killed. The bombs aimed at the school did not reach their target and the damage caused was negligible. The parish church was hardly touched whereas the Church of St. Michael suffered severe damage.

The New Order

German forces entered Nowogrodek on July 6, 1941. At first no terrorist measures were used. People felt at ease and even said that the rumors of German brutality in central Poland were exaggerated.

A meeting of the townspeople was held to elect a mayor. Since Jews were excluded from the meeting, Poles were in the majority and Mr. Smolski, a Pole, was elected mayor. Within a few days, a prelude to future atrocities shocked the town, when the commandant gave orders for the

shooting in the marketplace of some dozen Jews accused of supposed insubordination. A few paces away from the bleeding bodies of the victims lay on the ground, a brass band blared with callous unconcern. Only the holes in the rows of charred houses, like empty eye sockets, gaped at the robust jolly musicians in their impressive uniforms. Amid smoldering ruins, stench and smoke, lilting strains of Strauss' waltzes echoed against the stumps of blackened walls, creating the macabre, infernal atmosphere.

Terror Begins

This the beginning of the reign of terror. The military police executed several Pole and White-Russians suspected of communist sympathies. When I appealed to the Commandant at headquarters on behalf of some of them, I was told: "Zu Spät" – "Too late."

In the wake of the troops moving eastward came S.A., S.D., and S.S., divisions who organized a form of civil administration.²⁵ One of the firsts of this administration was the shooting of Mayor Smolski and other leading Poles on charges of "sabotage" against the orders of the German authorities. Panko, a White-Russian, became mayor. On August 8, 1941, the Jews were herded into a ghetto, and simultaneously one of the largest mass-executions was carried out in the woods behind the barracks²⁶, about a mile from the site of what was later to be the grave of the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth.

The Germans, intent on inciting antagonism between the White-Russians and the Poles, hinted at autonomy and even independence White Russia. The nucleus of the new national organization was to be the so called White-Russian Welfare Society.

At the same time, all forms and signs of Polish culture were being eradicated. All Polish schools were banned. A small group of White-Russian intellectuals responded to the German efforts, but the peasants remained wary and distrustful of the invaders and leaned toward the Poles.

The Situation of the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth

The Sisters, taking advantage of the political changes, returned to their convent and were seen once more in their religious habit²⁷. Soldiers were billeted in their school. Among them were

²⁵ A. Galinski, *Eksterminacja...*, op. cit., pp. 186-187. Like in other occupied territories, so also in Nowogródek and the former Nowogródek District, Hitler's invaders installed their own administrative structures, with extensive security services. The Nowogródek region was included in the General Kommissariat of Belarus. It was one of four general commissariats included in the so-called Reichs Kommissariat Ostland, or RKO. The General Kommissariat of Belarus was divided into main kommissariats, which in turn were subdivided into county-size units. The town of Nowogródek, with its county-rank kommissariat, was part of the main kommissariat of Baranowicze. The top authority in the Kommissariat of Belarus was, until September 1943, Wilhelm Kube, whose underling was Frenz, the commissar from Baranowicze. The head of the security unit in Baranowicze, responsible for the Nowogródek voivodship, was Alfred Renndorfer. The Baranowicze post of Gestapo was run by Peter Pechertrz, a.k.a. Perartz. These commanders had at their disposal not just the units of the security police in towns and the gendarmerie stations in townships, but also the support of Belarussian, Lithuanian, and Latvian police units, and several divisions of the 13th special Belarussian battalion of the S.S. as well as prisons in county towns and a penal colony in Koldyczewo.

²⁶ A. Galinski, *Eksterminacja...*, op. cit., p. 187. The final closure of the Jewish ghetto was completed in late spring-early summer of 1942. During a conversation with Mr. T. Strembosz in Warsaw on January 10th, 1995, he asserted that only individual Jews managed to escape into the woods or hide in Polish homes.

²⁷ The Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth were the only female order in the area which continued to wear habits.

some Catholics who showed the Sisters a certain amount of consideration. But as time passed, the position of the Poles, and therefore also of the Sisters, became increasingly difficult.

With a few local exceptions the merciless German rule of unprecedented terror and oppression in the town and district of Nowogrodek, antagonized both Poles and White-Russians. The arrogant young "Gebiets-kommissar" Train instigated this policy and put it into execution.

In the spring of 1942, both Soviet and Polish guerillas went into action. At first the Germans ignored them saying, "But the woods are ours." The Germans however soon lost control of the woods and the villages and were left with the towns and some fortified posts. Realizing this, they began to retaliate; they organized raids and spread terror. Polish nationalism and the Church were relentlessly persecuted.

The occupying forces stationed in the neighboring police headquarters banned the use of Polish in churches and the White Russian Welfare Association repeatedly put forward suggestion for the use of the White-Russian dialect instead. The priests however did not give in and where Polish was officially, they decided to use Latin. But in the churches in Nowogrodek, Polish was retained to the end.

A New Assault on Religion, 1942

As a result of this language dispute, religion suffered a serious blow in Nowogrodek during the night of June 28 to 29, 1942. Among the outstanding Poles arrested were many priests, some of whom were even dragged from the altar. Among the imprisoned clergy was the Reverend Dean Michael Dalecki, Reverend, Joseph Kuczynski of Wsielub and Reverend Stefan Siczka of Brzozowka. After the initial shock, the Catholic population regained its equilibrium, arguing that the Germans would not dare commit criminal acts on innocent priests; the Sisters too were of this opinion.

But suddenly on July 31 came the fatal news that was to shatter these slender hopes. The priests, with the exception of Father Siczka, along with dozens of Poles had been shot at dawn in the little woods behind the barracks. Now, no one any longer counted the observance of the law by the Germans or on humane civilized treatment from them.

Father Siczka confirmed that no enquiry or investigation had preceded the execution. He attributed his own release to a whim of the Gestapo or perhaps to the intervention of the White-Russian mayor, and deployed the fact that he had been separated from his condemned brethren.

Gradually the Polish Catholic population recovered from the shock. The people recognized their obligation to remain at their posts and to carry out their duty in spite of threats.

New Complications for the Sisters

The Germans set about forming a division of the White-Russian army known as the Ragulites from their White-Russian leader, Ragula, a Nazi collaborator. These Ragulites took possession of the school which the German troops had abandoned and driving the Sisters from their convent sent them to live in a nearby house which had been once occupied by the Jews. Only the farmhouse and a shed, used as a laundry, were left to the Sisters.

The Sisters always left this house early in the morning to avoid attracting attention. They attended Holy Mass and then spend the rest of the day working on the farm. In the evening they

went to the parish church where the rosary was still recited daily with the fervor of previous times and they then returned to the Jewish house for the night.

It was only in churches that Polish religious, national and cultural life was safe from the interference of the invaders and their White-Russian collaborators. Hence, even Poles whose moral lives had been questionable and who had been indifferent in the practice of their religion attended Church in search of moral support. The Sisters did all in their power to enhance the solemnity of the services.

Sister Canisia not only did catechetical work but at the request of her pupils' parents organized secret classes in Polish language and history.

Groups of children met in private houses. Even though great caution was used and numbers were limited to fifty, the White-Russians got wind of what was going on and reported to Panko's police. Panko, however, was sympathetic toward Poles and as he himself related to a Polish woman, he ignored the report. A later one however reached the Gestapo.²⁸

Strengthening of Religious Life in the Parish

In the spring of 1943, the already tense atmosphere became even more strained. Reverses on the Eastern front, the increasingly daring acts of the Soviet guerillas and of the Polish Underground forces led to a search for offenders. The Germans, and still more White-Russian collaborators were particularly irritated by the practice of religion in the church "Fara" which had become a center of religious life and a source of comfort to persecuted Poles.

The inspiration which had prompted their national bard, Adam Mickiewicz, to follow Christian and national ideals, was still alive in the spirit of the people of Nowogrodek among whom were those who were bowed down under the heavy yoke of evil, those who were taking part in military activity and those who had continued at their carpenter's bench awaiting the call to be of service to their country.

The Church was not a meeting place for belligerent groups nor were the Sisters involved in any form of conspiracy. They continued to pray fervently and earned their daily bread working on their little farm and accepting orders for yarn and knitwear. All the Sisters, with the exception of Sister Małgorzata who worked in the hospital, continued to wear their religious habit.

First Holy Communion, Spring 1943

Early in the Spring of 1943, Sister Canisia, in addition to her other work, zealously undertook the preparation of children for their first confession and Holy Communion. War had

²⁸ AG CSFN, Memoirs of S. Speranza, Maria Bortnowska, acting Mother Superior in Nowogrodek from August 1944 to July 1946r, (hereafter: Wspomnienia S. Speranzy...); excerpts of letters from S. Fides Tomkowicz (Superior in Vilna) to Superior General, and after her death in 1942, to Vicar General -- from October 28, 1939 through August 15, 1944, (hereafter: Wyjutki z listow S. Fides...); Memoirs of S. Veritas, Jozefa Piatkowska, On the Occasion of the 25th Anniversary of the Death of the Martyr Sisters (1943-1968), (hereafter: Wspomnienia S. Veritas...). Sister Veritas was part of the Nowogródek community from October 1939. Sister Speranza Bortnowska and Sister Fides Tomkowicz, who wrote memoirs about the 11 sisters (mostly based on the account of Sister Małgorzata Banaś), as well as those of Sister H. Sikorzyna (who was closest to them), make no mention of any report regarding the secret schooling. It appears that the idea of conspiracy and secretive activity was alien to the sisters, especially the least educated ones like Sisters Sergia and Felicjta.

disturbed the normal holding of classes for children who were to be prepared for the reception of the sacraments. Sister Canisia searched out older children whose instruction had been neglected and those who had not yet had the opportunity to make their First Confession and Holy Communion.

Just as if she had a premonition of impending catastrophe, Sister agreed with the chaplain not to defer to the following year any child who was of age and she held two and even three courses of instruction for less capable children.

The working of grace and the touching sight of the children receiving their First Holy Communion made a deep impression on the decimated population. The children's choir trained by Sr. Canisia moved the Congregation to tears and the innocence of the white-clad boys and girls aroused, even in the tepid, greater love for God and virtue, and hope for a brighter future. There followed a marked increase in the number of communicants.

Violence Resumed, Summer, 1943

Religious fervor was increasing and simultaneously guerilla activity was being intensified.²⁹ Soviet and Polish guerillas occupied the little town of Iwieniec; to this the Germans retaliated by sending a detachment with orders to carry out mass murders, and to burn and mutilate without scruple or mercy. Among the victims were Reverend Dean Aulich and his assistant, Reverend K. Rybaltowski; Reverend J. Bajko of Naliboki and Reverend P. Dolzyk of Derewna.

Further violence was now anticipated in Nowogrodek and in fact, it broke out during the night of July 17 to 18, 1943.³⁰ Few were the families who did not have to mourn the arrest of a father, son, relative or friend. The majority of those arrested were young men. Lamentation and weeping suddenly changes into angry though mute rebellion, when the news leaked out the prisoners were to be exterminated.³¹

THE WAY OF SACRIFICE

The first Mention of the Sacrifice

The chaplain and the Sisters – sentinels of the parish church – offered to God earnest prayers, heart-rending entreaties, desperate supplications and promises.³² Their burden would have been beyond endurance had they not been sustained by the power that flowed from the Sacred Heart of Jesus, throbbing for them in the tabernacle. Their souls, strengthened by that power, were being made ready for the sacrifice.

²⁹ Z. Boradyn, *Niemen rzeka niezgody...*, op. cit, pp. 38–39.

³⁰ The arrests were carried out by the Gestapo from Baranowicze. About 180 people were taken: men, women, and a large group of youth.

³¹ AG CSFN, S. Veritas, *Wspomnienia...*, op. cit. Sister Veritas recalls that Sister Małgorzata, while walking to the hospital along the prison wall, observed a piece of paper falling from a cell window. She picked it up and walked across the street. It bore three words: "Sentenced to death."

³² APW CSFN (Archives of the Warsaw Province on the Order of the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth), a 1977 letter by Wanda Dobrzyńska regarding the Nowogródek community. The author writes that despair set in after the arrests and many from the arrestees' families came to the Sisters asking for their prayers.

In the afternoon of the dramatic day, the suggestion of sacrifice was put into words for the first time when I met Mother Stella. She said with her characteristic simplicity, *“Oh God, if sacrifice of life is needed, accept it from us who are free from family obligations and spare those who have wives and children in their care. We are even praying for this.”*³³

The next day brought some relief. Various rumors were being circulated but they all excluded death by shooting. With the passing of another night, tension lessened and there was talk of the prisoners being sent to labor camps in Germany.

No records exist identifying the persons or means used by Divine Providence to interfere with the plans made for the execution of the prisoners. One possibly credible explanation be that a newly arrived group of the Gestapo had made the arrangements in the absence of Traub who returned to Nowogrodek the day before the executions were to take place. The steps taken during his absence wounded his pride and as a result he interfered with the carrying out of the executions. His objection was that the Gestapo had disorganized offices and institutions by arresting experts and some of the most reliable employees. Traub flew to Minsk, the capital of White Russia, where he prevailed on the Central Administration to change the sentence. The result was that some of the prisoners were released and the rest deported to Germany on July 24, 1943.

The Second Mention of Sacrifice

The general situation still remained precarious for many as it did for the writer of these reminiscences. After the night of the arrests it became common knowledge that my name was on the Gestapo list. It had been mentioned in two neighboring homes, in the Kwacz family when their son Mieczysław was being arrested and in the Żodziewski family when the father was being seized.

The house where I was living stood between those two houses but for some unknown reason it was omitted during the raid. However it was not certain whether the search for me had been abandoned. Many suspicions were put forward. In any case the threat of arrest hung over me.

I put my trust in Divine Providence and continued to visit the hospital and to fulfill my priestly duties during the day. The nights I spent away from home. Sometimes I slept in the sacristy; at other times parishioners risked their lives to give me shelter but most often I spent the nights in the stable loft on the Sisters' farm. Days passed and the Gestapo continued to lurk in the town and in the neighborhood.

Religious services went on as usual in the parish church – Holy Mass in the morning and rosary in the evening while the Sisters prayed with increasing fervor.

Several days after the deportations of the prisoners, as I stood in the sacristy doorway with a heavy heart overcome by sadness which formed a sharp contrast with the beautiful summer weather, Mother Stella approached me and once again with the utmost simplicity said

³³ AG CSFN, *Wspomnienia s. Speranzy...*, op. cit.. Franciszka Boniszewska came to visit the sisters the Sunday before their deaths and that is what she recalled: *“I met Mother Superior at the entrance gate. She was strangely pleased at my arrival and, taking advantage of the noon recreation time, she called all the Sisters to come out to the yard and converse with me, which she had never done before. We talked about current events, and when Mother Superior said “I would give my life to save them,” then the other sisters, one after another, said: “And me too,” “And me,” “Why only Mother, we all would.”* AG CSFN, *Testimony of H. Sikorzyna about the circumstances of death of 11 Sisters, given in Rome October 12-29, 1948.* (hereafter: *Testimony of H. Sikorzyna...*). She also described the Sisters' readiness to make a sacrifice of their lives in her testimony from 1958.

spontaneously: *“O my God, you Father are more needed here on earth than we, so we are now asking God, if further sacrifice is needed, to take us rather than you.”*

They Climb the Hill

Several days passed. It was Saturday, July 31, 1943, and I was preparing for the evening rosary devotions. Mother Stella came into the sacristy. At once I detected anxiety and apprehension in her face. She told me what had happened an hour earlier. A German in civilian clothes had been to the Sisters with a verbal order from the commandant, requiring the Sisters to appear at police headquarters with the superior at 7:30 p.m. that evening.

“What can this mean and what should we do?”

“And what do you think Mother?” I asked.

“I think they might send us to Germany for forced labor, at least those of us who are healthy enough.”

“I think so too.”

*“If they should keep those who are deported at headquarters, I will ask if all of us could go home for the night to prepare for the journey. There is no other alternative.”*³⁴

At 6 p.m. the rosary began as usual and afterwards the Sisters went home. There was several people waiting for confession and having confessed them, I went to the door of the Church. The Sisters in their black habits and veils were walking quickly in pairs up the Third of May Street. They were just passing the Mazurkiewicz house on their way up the slope leading to the square – no doubt harboring foreboding thoughts. Those of the townspeople who saw them then were laying their eyes on them for the last time.



Nowogrodek, 3rd of May Street. The Sisters walked up this road, following the Gestapo Summons.

Although the summons did not carry for me any indication of the horrors which were to follow, fears began to beset me. I could not swallow the supper prepared for me as usual by the Żukowski sisters with whom Sister Daniela had lived. After sunset I went to the Sisters’ farmhouse. There I found Sister Małgorzata who having come home after her work in the hospital was looking after the property as Mother Stella had directed. She too was troubled and uneasy. We tried to console each other saying, *“They will surely be back soon.”* But at the same time our apprehension was growing.

³⁴ AG CSFN, *Wspomnienia s. Speranzy...*, op. cit. The same account is confirmed by Sister Speranza. At about 5 P.M., the sisters were summoned to the Gebietskomisariat for 7:30. They were convinced that they would be selected (at least some of them) for labor in Germany. Sister Małgorzata declared willingness to stay behind, to watch over the church and house, and complete some urgent work. Sister Małgorzata asked Sister Stella to sign any documents in her name or to summon her to the station, if necessary.

They do not Return

Night fell... 10 o'clock... it was time to go to bed. I climbed up to my sleeping quarters in the hayloft, said my prayers, lay down and tried to fall asleep but I couldn't. What was the matter? Whenever I closed my eyes, I saw the black figures approaching the house. I would jump up, peer through a crack in the roof but there was nobody, no Sisters. It was just an illusion which repeated itself over and over again. Into my anxious mind came thoughts of possible bloodshed but I put them aside and sought grounds for hope: Perhaps they had been physically fit for work in Germany? Perhaps the medical examination had not been completed? Or perhaps they had already been deported?

It was unreasonable to allow for the possibility of criminal action. Harmless women... nuns...No! In spite of all the crimes that had been committed, in the case of the Sisters it could not happen.

Dawn broke. Nature awakened. A lovely, calm morning heralded in the day. But I saw everything with eyes clouded by fear and pain.

An Accepted Sacrifice

All through Sunday morning we watched and waited for the Sisters. At 9 a.m., Holy Mass was offered in the parish church. Everything proceeded as usual but the Sisters' empty pews attracted attention and evoked unspoken forebodings. A sense of mourning filled all hearts and after Holy Mass there were questions, uneasy conjectures, rumors.³⁵

At last came some more reliable information: the Sisters were not in the prison; neither were they at police headquarters or at the commandant's office. So much was unknown... but then, where were they? Word spread that they had been taken to a hospital at Nowojelen, a small town with a railroad station, about 13 miles from Nowogrodek. But how could that be possible. No convoy had left the town and it was well known that private cars had not been running for months because of the danger from guerrillas lying in ambush. There was little foundation to all of this. Yet people tried to believe it and even add their own details.

For over a year now I was the only priest in Nowogrodek and so, after celebrating Mass at "Fara," I went to St. Michael's to say Mass there. Before Mass I went into the confessional and there I heard the ghastly news. The Sisters had been shot that morning.



The Sisters took this crucifix with them. It was the sole witness of their pre-execution night.

³⁵AG CSFN, *Zeznania H. Sikorzyny...*, op. cit. Before the fate of the 11 sisters was revealed, not only Sister Małgorzata and Father Zienkiewicz, but all the closest neighbors were filled with anxiety and concern. They struggled not to lose heart, counting on the sisters' return from the police station. In the early morning of August 1, 1943, H. Sikorzyna and Jadwiga Żukowska (the Sisters' neighbors) went to the police station and to the prison, to locate the sisters and bring them any necessities. It turned out that the sisters had never entered the prison and at the police station a German official from the pacification group would not give out any information. When he was asked three times, he became irate. The resigned women went to the Mass without succeeding in any way.

I became as if paralyzed; streams of questions tortured my mind: How could this be? Innocent women... Without a trial? Treacherously and in such haste? The world appeared to me as a huge torture chamber controlled by unleashed demons. Only the Unbloody Sacrifice of the Mass brought me solace in my state of depression.

Naïve and absurd rumors circulated in the town.³⁶ The staggering truth gradually seeped out giving rise to speechless consternation until finally, some days later, it became common knowledge.

I decided that I myself had to break the sad news to Sister Małgorzata so as to spare her some of the pain and I did so while she was praying at the foot of the altar in the empty Church. When she somewhat regain her composure, she arranged to slip out of the town with two other women, in search of the grave. They found a fresh, hastily-covered mound, not quite three miles from Nowogrodek, in the direction of Nowojelen, in a small wooded area, a few hundred feet off the road.

Kneeling down, Sister Małgorzata scraped off the earth with her hands and in a few moments she uncovered the leg of a corpse. She tore off the garter to find out if the body was that of one of the Sisters and now the monstrous truth came to light. The garter bore Sister Sergia's clothing number.³⁷

Tears rolled down the cheeks of the now bereft and lonely Sister. The two women also wept. When their first grief had subsided, they had to leave the hallowed spot. They closed up the hole they had dug out and they placed on the mound a small cross they had brought with them. A larger cross was out of the question for the moment.

SOME PARTICULARS OF THE CRIME AND SACRIFICE

The Executioners

The impression made by the perpetration of this dastardly crime on the innocent Sisters surpassed everything the Poles of Nowogrodek had so far experienced. Mournful silence reigned in the town. Of what value were words in the face of the enormity of this tragedy and sorrow? No

³⁶ AG CSFN, *Wspomnienia s. Speranzy...*, op. cit. The Gestapo purposefully spread such rumors, while the people did so innocently.

³⁷ AG CSFN, Sister Flora – Maria Nagłowska, *Jeszcze o Nowogródku – dopełnienie jego dziejów, Rabka 11 III 1976*, (hereafter: s. Flora, *Jeszcze o Nowogródku...*). In searching for the Sisters, Sister Małgorzata had the company of Halina Sikorzyna. Sister Flora wrote that Mrs Cieślakowa also went with them. In order not to attract attention, the women took with them a basket and a small shovel, as though they were going mushroom picking. And Halina Sikorzyna carried her 6-month old daughter Stella in her arms. AG CSFN, *Wyjątki z listów s. Fides...*, op. cit. Based on Sister Małgorzata's account, Sister Fides wrote that on the garter was inscribed the name "S. Sergia." Sister Sergia used to live in the United States, where sisters marked their clothing with their names. So a piece of clothing had not a number on its hem (as was the custom in Poland), but a sister's name. A few months after the execution Sister Małgorzata again went to the grave, to check whether the sisters' bodies were not moved somewhere else. She had difficulty locating the grave, because it was obscured by a line of dug-outs which appeared there. Only after the Nazi forces left the area, in July 1944, one could safely go to the grave. AG CSFN, *Wspomnienia s. Speranzy...*, op. cit. In August 1944 two sisters from Vilna arrived to Nowogródek, Sister Speranza Bortnowska and Sister Weneranda Kaźmierczak. Together with Małgorzata, and with the help of generous parishioners, they made an earthen mound on the grave, covered it with sod, put up a cross made of birch branches, and put a little fence around the grave. Father Zienkiewicz returned at the end of October. In the first days of November, with a group of parishioners and three sisters, he went to the grave of the murdered 11 sisters and blessed it with Holy Water.

one even dared to ask for details. Furthermore, whom could one ask? The Gestapo had acted in the customary manner and so under cover of official secrecy. In spite of this, some particulars about the execution leaked out and after piecing them together the following conclusions were reached.

Complying with the summons they had received, the Sisters had arrived at the police headquarters, the former office of the mayor, at 7:30 p.m. Soon after they had entered the office, the raised voice of the German and the replies of one of the Sisters were heard in the corridor. These were probably insults and curses directed at the victims, now branded as criminals, and attempt at self-defense by the Sisters who spoke German – Sister Gwidona and Heliodora.³⁸ Their defense must have infuriated the German whose shouts and curses became louder.

About an hour later, a coverer motor truck drew up in front of police headquarters. The Sisters were led out from the building under escort and ordered into the truck, while a group of Gestapo officers remained on the steps of the building, puffing away at their pipes and cynically exchanging jokes.

The vehicle halted two miles from the town. Several civilians accompanied by Gestapo officers left the truck and went towards a small pine wood facing the barracks and some hundred yards off the main road. After examining the place, they began to dig a trench.

In the meantime the sun had set and the neighboring farms and houses were sinking into the evening calm.³⁹ But, gradually, the surroundings became animated: cowherds were driving home the cattle; wagons creaked and dogs whined. The officers must have realized that such conditions were not too favorable for an execution and afraid of moving farther afield, they returned to the truck and drove back into town to police headquarters.

The Sisters spent the short summer night in the cellar of the building. What they endured there is known to God alone.

A local Tartar, the central heating stoker in the police building, related in strict confidence that he had seen, on the floor of the cellar, traces of the Sisters outstretched bodies. Evidently they had prepared for their journey to eternity by lying prostrate in the form of a cross. The secret of their interior struggle, of their sublime Gethsemane, they took with them to eternity.⁴⁰

³⁸ AG CSFN, *Wyciągi z ksiąg Zgromadzenia, dane personalne Sióstr (Excerpts of the Books of the Congregation, the Sisters' personal data)*. Sisters Gwidona and Heliodora knew German well, because they came from the former Prussian partition area.

³⁹ AG CSFN, *Zeznania H. Sikorzyny...*, op. cit. The testimony reads, inter alia: "A woman maintained that she had seen two cars and a truck stopped close to a small and not thick forest. This was on July 31, about 9 P.M. The woman came closer to the truck and heard what seemed to be women's voices saying prayers."

⁴⁰ Ibid. A Belarussian office worker who was on duty that night at the station against the order of the Gestapo observed the Sisters and saw that they all prayed loudly together until morning. AG CSFN, *Wspomnienia S. Speranzy...*, op. cit. Sister Speranza Bortnowska, after arriving to Nowogródek and a year after the sisters' death wrote this based on information she received from local people and from Sister Małgorzata: "The Sisters alighted, were led into the cellar which had stood unused for a long time. *They spent the night there, on the bare ground. The day after their exodus, visible on the floor were worn silhouettes, as though of persons lying the cross, and damp spots from tears or breathing.* (...) An Estonian man, forced to participate in the execution, observed through some opening the Sisters' conduct during that last night. In his opinion the room was small and the sisters would lie down singly, taking turns. At that time the other sisters prayed standing up. During the prayer the sisters had a crucifix they had brought with them, with the figure of Christ crucified. That cross was left behind in the cellar, preserved by one of the families, and returned to the Sisters in Warsaw in 1993.

The next day, Sunday, August 1, 1943, at about 4 a.m., two vehicle, a taxi and a truck, stopped in front of the police headquarters. The Sisters, exhausted after their night of agony, were herded into the truck. This time the vehicles were driven to a place about 3 miles from the town, beyond a forester's cottage known as Batorówka.⁴¹

There, some hundred feet to the left of the road leading to Nowojelen, a pit was dug in a birch and pine grove and the bodies of twelve victims, after being brutally shot, were pitched into a bloody grave. The twelfth victim was a boy from a nearby village⁴²; he had been held in town for the previous few weeks and it is possible that he was employed to dig the pit. He was shot, most probably, to eliminate an undesirable victim.

The Victims

No details are available about the Sisters' behavior in the face of death or concerning the actual execution. From the position in which the bodies were found at the time of exhumation, it must be assumed that some of them were badly wounded rather than dead when they fell into the trench. Some of the bodies were found curled up in a position which is unusual when death is instantaneous. Some were in a sitting position; the skulls had not been crushed, which led to the conclusion that the shots had been fired from small pistols although experts did not rule out the use of automatic weapons firing from a distance.

It appears that, at their own request, the Sisters wore their habits during the execution.⁴³ This and other similar details were learned from one of the Gestapo officers who had taken part in the execution.⁴⁴ Sunday, he appeared once more, probably shortly after the execution. He asked for breakfast. He was heavily intoxicated and unable to conceal his nervousness. During the meal he became more and more excitable. Suddenly he held his head in his hands and exclaimed: "*Oh, how they went to their death! You should have seen them!*"⁴⁵

"*Who?*" inquired the woman.

⁴¹ AG CSFN, *Wyjątki z listów s. Fides Tomkowicz*. (tr.: *Excerpts from letters of S. Fides Tomkowicz*). This source mentions that two women whose house was close to the site of the execution, who also saw a covered truck the previous night, from which delicate voices could be heard, stayed up instead of going to bed: "... *At about 3 A.M. a car arrived carrying people with shovels. This vehicle went by the women's house and drove into the forest. An hour later the secreted women saw a covered truck which drove in the same direction.*"

⁴² AG CSFN, *Wspomnienia s. Speranzy*. Sister Speranza claimed that he had left at dawn from a neighboring village.

⁴³ AG CSFN, *Wyjątki z listów S. Fides*. The Sisters were forced to take off their veils (some had those slung over their arms), so the killers could aim better while firing at the backs of their heads. Sister Fides wrote: "They wore their habits, their veils off, set aside, but some had those slung over their arms. Some faces could be recognized. Others' had faces deformed or completely blown away by the bullets (the shots were to the head)."

⁴⁴ 49 AG CSFN, *Zeznania H. Sikorzyny*, op. cit.; see also Sister Flora's *Jeszcze o Nowogródku...*, op. cit. The execution was carried out by Gestapo men from Baranowicze. This was a special pacification unit, which traveled from town to town to easier perform executions (and was hence called a "flying unit").

⁴⁵ AG CSFN, *Wspomnienia s. Speranzy*, op. cit.; *Zeznania H. Sikorzyny*, op. cit.; see also Sister Flora's *Jeszcze o Nowogródku*, op. cit. Details of the Sisters' conduct during the execution come from 2-3 people who participated in the execution: a German man from Latvia, an Estonian man, and a third person, the officers' chauffeur, who probably only observed. The German officer from Latvia and the Estonian reported consistently that only one of the Sister's requests was met: to remain in their full habits. The Sisters' conduct became ingrained in their memories. They were convinced of their innocence, that they committed no crime deserving of death. The chauffeur (who ate with the Cieślewicz family) could only understand the event as resulting from an error.

“Why, don’t you know?... Your nuns...”

“The Sisters?...”

“Yes, it’s all over with them... But keep your mouth shut or else...” and he made a gesture to indicate what happens to those who do not hold their tongue.⁴⁶

Some days later he arrived again for breakfast. He was equally drunk and excitable and it was evident that his thoughts and imaginings were revolving round his memories of the scene which had seemingly impressed him more than any other he had witnessed or had conducted. This time he was not able to control his emotions or trend his thought. While eating he exclaimed “Yes, indeed they were innocent,”

The incoherent utterances and above all, the reactions of this particular member of the shooting squad, make it clear that a halo of glory, not of this world, surrounded the Sisters – the so called weaker sex – as they fell into the pit, saying to God from the depths of their souls, “Yes, Father.”

We dared to entertain the hope that after their total sacrifice of self for those near to them, “Even to this day,” their souls were conducted by their triumphant Spouse “into their Father’s house” where there was an end to their suffering and where they entered into life eternal. Meanwhile, their bodies reposed under a thin layer of sand in the shade of the birches and the pines in Nowogrodek.

REASON FOR THE EXECUTION

It proved impossible to discover the Gestapo’s immediate reasons or pretext for murdering the Sisters. Rumors circulated that the whole thing was a mistake. It was said that the Pallotine Sisters who had a house in Nowogrodek and another in a village named Rajca, were the ones to have been executed. The Rajca convent happened to be in the district controlled by the Soviet guerillas and the Sisters were suspected of contacts with them and of giving first aid to the wounded. This gave rise to talk among the White Russians that the Pallotine Sisters were in sympathy with the “red bandits.” On the basis of this accusation, the Germans may have intended taking action against them but the Gestapo’s ignorance of the local situation caused the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth to be the victims instead – victims of a mistake.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ AG CSFN, *Wspomnienia s. Speranzy*, op. cit. From Sister Speranza’s memoirs, written based on Małgorzata’s and others’ accounts, we know that the Estonian man (in some accounts described as Latvian, so we may be speaking of two persons or one), who observed the Sisters the last night before the execution, as they waited in the cellar, stated: „But in the forest they all knelt down, they prayed, and kneeling said their good-byes. Mother Superior blessed each of them. They took the last blow kneeling down.”

⁴⁷Z. Kaperczak, *Siostry Misjonarki Apostolstwa Katolickiego (The Missionary Sisters of Catholic Apostolate)*, w: *Życie religijne w Polsce pod okupacją 1939–41. Metropolie wileńska i lwowska, zakony (Polish religious life under occupation: 1939-1945)*, ed. Z. Zieliński, Katowice, 1992, pp. 401–405. But the error theory is disproved by the fact that the Germans had deported the Pallotine sisters in July 1943 (thus before the execution) to Korelicze, and their buildings were incinerated. Those sisters were aware that this was punishment for their help to the partisans. Moreover the Pallotine sisters helped Jewish families and conducted secret education. APW CSFN, *Z przeżyć s. Małgorzaty – Ludwika Banaś po rozstrzelaniu sióstr (spisane przez s. Florę Nagłowską w 1975 r.) (From the Experiences of Sister Małgorzata -- Ludwika Banas -- after the execution of the sisters, written down by Sister Flora Nagłowska in 1975.)*. The error theory is also disproved by the conduct of the Nazis from the flying brigade after the execution. If this had been error, they would have been searching for those responsible, and not for Sister Małgorzata, the sole surviving

Such a supposition is not improbable and this very conclusion could be reached from the words “They were innocent,” uttered by the Gestapo officer after the execution. Yet it must also be understood that the occupying forces would never have pardoned the “guilt” incurred by the Sisters who taught catechism and whose sympathies were with the Church and with their suffering fatherland. It is known in fact, that the Sisters from “Fara,” had for a long time been on the black list of the White-Russians who were collaborating with the Gestapo. Under orders from the Germans, committees of the White-Russian Welfare Society had been compiling and keeping up to date, lists of names of the more prominent Poles and even White-Russian Catholics, submitting them to the secret police, who in their turn, on the slightest provocation, transferred certain names from these to other lists on which names were replaced by numbers given to those who were to be exterminated.

The Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth in charge of “Fara” represented for the White-Russian activists and for the Germans a nucleus of religious and national life, and had therefore incurred their hatred. Threats and forecasts of the extermination of that “nest” of Polish nationalism were heard occasionally. Yet White-Russian collaborators, such as Regula, Jakuciewicz and Romanowicz were utterly bewildered and horrified by the cynicism of this wanton crime on the part of their overlords.⁴⁸

Stranger still was the fact that the murder caused surprise even to the German police stationed in the locality. The deputy police chief used to give orders for knitwear to the Sisters and this was how I had made his acquaintance some weeks prior to the execution. A few days after the murder he came to the Sisters’ house and found me with Sister Małgorzata. When I asked him what had happened to the Sisters, he said they most likely had been imprisoned or deported to Germany. I told him about the rumor of their having been exterminated. He gave a start and looking visibly moved said: “Unmöglich!” – “Impossible!” But he promised to look into the matter. Less than two days later he returned, appearing agitated and answered my mute question with his eyes. Then, turning away his head, he whispered “Ja” – “Yes.” His eyes filled with tears and he left without another word. Later on when I was being hunted down by the Gestapo, he rendered me valuable service and once rescued me from a desperately dangerous situation. No doubt he was trying to expiate the crimes of his inhuman compatriots.

The workings of Divine Providence in the destinies of men and in the conduct of human affairs, will remain forever an inscrutable mystery.

EPILOGUE

The Priest’s Escape

Peace had not yet come for those who were still among the living. The Forty Hours devotion held in “Fara” in combination with the feast of Transfiguration, August 6, brought some solace, but the vacant pews in front of the altar – the Sisters’ places – remained with us as a grim

sister. The hunt for sister Małgorzata also suggests that the order came from Berlin and that local officials were powerless to change it. Even the hospital’s German director was unable to guarantee Małgorzata’s safety.

⁴⁸ The collaborators’ reaction to the sudden death of the sisters indicates that they were not after all suspected of nationalist activities. It was generally known that none others than collaborators supplied the Gestapo with lists of people suspected of resistance activities and connections with partisans.

reminder, The number of the parishioners had diminished and the attendance at church was smaller than in former years.

Some days after the closing of the Forty Hours devotion, a truck drew up in front of the house in which the larger number of Sisters lived, this time to loot the Sisters' personal belongings. Only the little farm shed, where the bereaved Sister Małgorzata was in hiding, was left unmolested. The Sisters' habits and veil were made into dresses for the wife of the German engineer Fegenhauer and for the wives of other Nazi officials.⁴⁹

I committed myself anew to Divine Providence and carried out my priestly duties as usual. I presided daily at the recitation of the rosary from which the suffering hearts of the Polish people derived comfort and strength, until there came an interruption. On the evening of August 11, 1943, the service was drawing to a close. I was saying the last invocation of the litany of Loreto when I heard the sudden opening of the communion railing and felt a sharp tug at my arm. Bolesław Łojko, a former law student of the Stefan Batory University in Vilnius, knelt alongside of me and whispered breathlessly, "*The Gestapo have come for you. Fly for your life.*" I reached immediately for the monstrance, blessed the faithful, replaced the Blessed Sacrament in the tabernacle and disappeared through the sacristy door. Panic seized the people, most of whom rushed to the exit.

The Gestapo, I was told later, broke into my room where they found the landlord, J. Fiedorowicz.

"*Where is the priest?*" they demanded.

"*In church.*" He promptly replied.

"*When will he return?*"

"*In about half-an-hour, I think.*"

With their revolvers in their hands, the officers searched my room, looked into the landlord's apartment and rushed out in the direction of the church. The sight of people gathered in front of the church after the services, momentarily balked the Gestapo who returned to the car, exchanged a few words with the officer in it and then rushed into the church. But I was no longer there. They found Sisters Małgorzata and asked for the priest. She told them that the services finished and that he had probably gone home. The Germans then looked around the church, went back to their car, took one more look into my room through the window and slowly drove back towards the center of the town.

In the minutes given me by the Providence, thanks to the help of friends, I was able to reach the cellar of the nearest house. After changing into civilian clothes, I went out with two elderly ladies as if going for a walk in the park and reached a nearby settlement, Bracianka, where I was offered my first hiding-place. The Gestapo paid two more visits to my room. But I had made my escape.

These events could appear to be a natural outcome of favorable circumstances. But I was convinced that a higher power and higher strategy were responsible. I vividly recalled Mother Stella's words, "*We are asking God to take us rather than you, if further sacrifice is needed.*"

⁴⁹ AG CSFN, *Wyjątki z listów s. Fides Tomkowicz (Excerpts of letters of S. Fides)*, op. cit; see also *Wspomnienia s. Speranzy*, op. cit. Sister Fides wrote: "... a few small pictures were found on the road and a veil was seen changing hands at a market... And, as sister Speranza reported, Sister Małgorzata had previously managed to hide some of the Sisters' belongings."

No matter how serious the dangers to which I was later exposed, I never lost the hope and confidence that I would survive those sinister times. If I ever did succumb to fear or depression, I regretted it sincerely. To-day, I am absolutely positive that the Sisters took my place on the sacrificial pyre.

Return to “Fara”

On March 15, 1945, Nowogrodek witnessed an unusual funeral cortege. Out of the woods behind the barracks, large number of Catholics, Russian Orthodox and Mohammedans followed the processional crucifix and the priest vested in black. Over the snow and ice covered road they walked before a long line of sleigh bearing coffins and large boxes containing the remains of sixty-three victims of the massacre of July 31, 1942. Among these were two priests. They were laid to rest in the Catholic cemetery in a common grave over which a simple cross was erected with the inscription:

Here lie sixty victims of Hitler’s crime committed on the 31st of July, 1942 in the woods behind the barracks. At the exhumation and burial service on March 15, 1945, the following bodies were identified:

1. *Rev. Michał Dalecki, Dean of Nowogrodek*
2. *Augustyn, Leon*
3. *Bartoszewicz, Witold*
4. *Brodowski, Mieczysław*
5. *Burhard, Józef*
6. *Dawidowicz, Jan*
7. *Derdelewicz, Tadeusz*
8. *Federowicz, Wincenty*
9. *Fengler, Józef*
10. *Ilczuk, Władysław*
11. *Jarmilowicz, Waclaw*
12. *Jurewicz, Leonard*
13. *Kaczmarski, Ludwik*
14. *Łętowski, Kazimierz*
15. *Przygoda, Hipolit*
16. *Piotrowski, Wiktor*
17. *Puljan, Michał-Władysław*
18. *Sanowski, Bronisław*
19. *Siemierowicz, Kazimierz*
20. *Stolle, Rudolf*
21. *Stupnicki, Tadeusz*
22. *Świsłocki, Jerzy*
23. *Szagiciewicz, Stefan*

and the three brothers:

24. *Wojnicki, Robert*

25. *Wojnicki, Alexander*

26. *Wojnicki, Franciszek*

Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord.

The remains of the Rev. Józef Kuczyński and of two other persons were taken to another cemetery for burial.



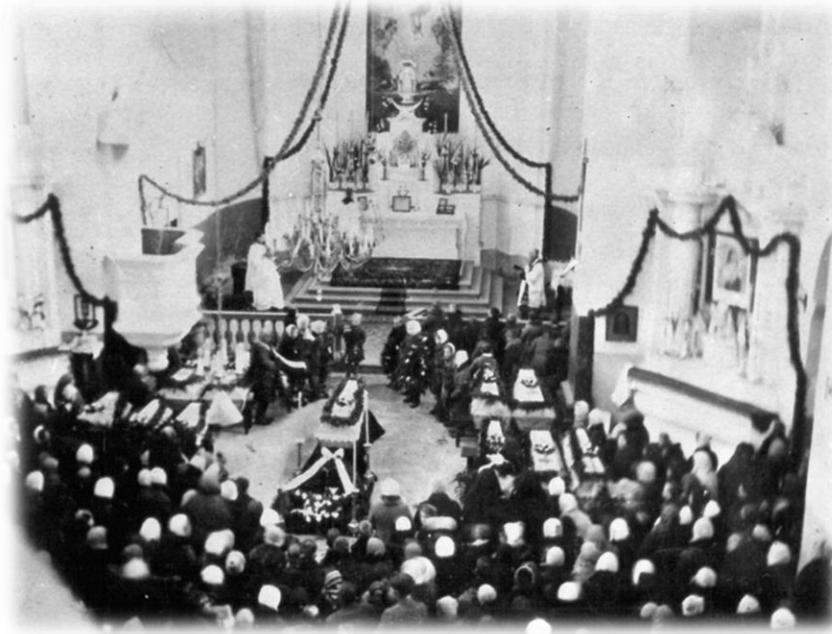
“The royal procession,” reenactment

On the feast of St. Joseph, March 19, 1945, a similar, though smaller funeral procession, covering a distance of three miles, passed through the streets of the town up to the parish church. This time the coffins contained the remains of the eleven Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth.

The townspeople, “Fara” and its solitary bell greeted the returning “exiles” with reverent solemnity. The coffins, borne upon the shoulders of parishioners, were set down in the church in the spot where the Sisters had once knelt in prayer.

There were flowers and lights in abundance in the Church. Holy Mass was celebrated and after the service, the remains of the victims of the reign of terror were carried aloft once more on the shoulders of friends to their common resting-place in the church graveyard.

The coffins, covered with wreaths, flowers and foliage, were lowered into the grave one after the other with Mother Stella’s in the center, Sister Imelda’s and Sister Canisia’s on either side, and then the others.



Funeral Mass in the main church on March 19, 1945.

The chaplain based his eulogy on the scriptural text, “*Visi sunt oculis insipientum mori, illi autem sunt in pace*” – “*In the eyes of the foolish they seemed to die, but they are at peace. Truth and justice,*” he said, “*cannot be killed. Often, after being brutally trodden under foot, they rise again giving birth to new values. The foes of truth and justice may appear powerful and may be temporarily victorious but they ultimately suffer a crushing defeat. No man falls in vain; no sacrifice is futile because from each sacrifice God calls forth new strength and kindles new faith. Neither, Reverend Sisters, has your sacrifice been useless. Today we are still incapable of estimating its value because this is not yet the hour of its fruition.*”

Handfuls of earth were thrown upon the coffins... people in the crowd sobbed... little by little the grave was filled in. A plain wooden cross was placed on it with a rugged, unhewn stone beneath, bearing the words:

Here lie the remains of the eleven Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth, executed by the Nazi, August 1, 1943.

Every year, with the return of spring, beautiful flowers adorn the grave. The surrounding earth is heavily tramped on, not only by feet but also by the knees of the faithful who have not forgotten their martyrs and who continue to come to pray at their grave.

Father Alexander Zienkiewicz



NEAR THE SISTERS' GRAVESITE

Year-long-passed since the funeral day
Once again March sun on us shines
Silver crosses thrust heavenward
White Fara basks in sun's rays anew.

Tenderly caressing those crosses, the sun
Kneels on the martyrs' graves
Its golden forehead close to the ground bowing
As if nothing could compare with their death-agony.

Amidst the fringes of the evergreen play
Cemetery breezes rustling the leaves –
Before grave-mound mourners' heads bow
Prominent mission cross hovers.

O Lord! When by this tomb we kneel
Souls seem to flee to a world beyond.
Former moments long past before our eyes stand.
Wounds bleed afresh, suffering renewed as in days of yore.

Thorny despair rends the breast anew
Acute pain wrenches our hearts
The echo of requiem bells fades
But re-emerges our enemy's phantom – executioner.

He scattered blood-filled seeds in our tilled terrain
And a horrible calamity blighted the earth
Crimson harvest he gathered
And though mighty, he too into grave-dust turned.

Ah, the blood of innocent victims outpoured
And so much suffering... torture... copious tears
Believers, unbelievers there at the Lord's feet
Before His Majesty humbly submit.

O Mighty God! By the Sisters' holy blood
Through their sacrifice, Lord have mercy!
Return freedom to Poland! Raise our fallen nation!
Immortal God! Punishment revoke!

Nowogrodek, March 19, 1946



The author of this poem, Maria Dobrzyńska-Karawajska, was born in Nowogrodek and stayed there until her death in 2013. She came from a deeply religious and very patriotic family. She was a seventh generation descendant of “Maciek nad Mackami” (“Matthew of all Matthews”) Dobrzyński, who had been immortalized in the epic poem “*Sir Thaddeus, or the Last Lithuanian Foray: A Nobleman's Tale from the Years of 1811 and 1812 in Twelve Books of Verse,*” by Adam Mickiewicz.

She attended the School of the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth, was a courier for the underground Home Army, and witnessed the events of 1943: the arrests (two of her brothers were among those arrested in July) and the deaths of the eleven sisters. Maria Dobrzyńska formed a close relationship with the twelfth Sister, Małgorzata Banaś, who survived and later took care of the *Fara* church. She testified about Sister Małgorzata’s heroic life, service, and apostolic spirit.

After Małgorzata’s death in 1966, Maria in turn took care of the *Fara’s* sacristy. She faithfully helped the new generation of Sisters and ardently shared with the visiting sisters the mission of their Predecessors who had raised her and were her dear friends.

During Sister Małgorzata’s simple but difficult life she chose by staying in Nowogrodek she preserved and cherished the memory of the past, patriotism, and the beautiful Polish language. She wrote heartfelt, simple verses often dedicated to her brother deported to the prison camp in Norylsk, about the Polish land, the beauty of nature, family, and the Sisters, who were close to her heart. Writing helped her satisfy the need for community and helped her retain her national identity.



The grave with surrounding garden, by the side of the Fara,
photo from 1950s



The grave of the Eleven Martyrs by the Fara church, 1980s photo.



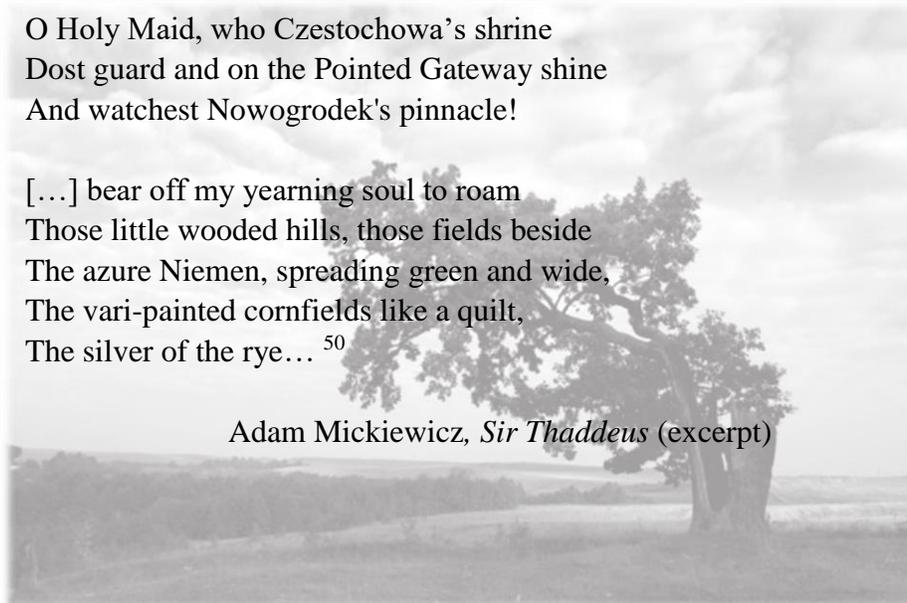
A boulder marking the spot where the remains of the Martyrs lay for 46 years.

TESTIMONIALS

O Holy Maid, who Czestochowa's shrine
Dost guard and on the Pointed Gateway shine
And watchest Nowogrodek's pinnacle!

[...] bear off my yearning soul to roam
Those little wooded hills, those fields beside
The azure Niemen, spreading green and wide,
The vari-painted cornfields like a quilt,
The silver of the rye... ⁵⁰

Adam Mickiewicz, *Sir Thaddeus* (excerpt)



Landscape in the Nowogrodek area

The landscapes described in Mickiewicz's verse stay in the hearts and memories of the descendants of clans and families who had lived in the Nowogrodek area for generations. These included the descendants of those who arrived from central Poland, the Mazuria lake district, and the Dobrzyn region and the descendants of those who received (from Marshal Piłsudski) homesteads in this region for their sacrifices in the Polish-Soviet War. They are the Poles of the Nowogrodek area. Their fathers and brothers mobilized into the Polish army in 1939, either perished while defending Polish borders, or if they did not seek refuge abroad, they were captured and murdered in the Katyń forest. Their families, especially the homesteading ones, were deported in 1940 to Siberia and Kazakhstan. Those who remained experienced war-time occupation, both soviet and Nazi. Resistance movement, fighting in the Underground Army, partisan activity – all these brought terror to families and homes. After the Red Army's "victorious" march through the Belarus Socialist Soviet Republic no room remained for Poles desiring to live in the Catholic faith according to their ancestral traditions. They faced a choice...staying on with a soviet passport or deportation to Poland. Mass deportation of those who for generations held the Nowogrodek area their dearest fatherland was termed *repatriation*. Few remained, mostly to care for those unfit to leave. If they chose to stay it entailed humiliation, isolation, and a heroic will to remain on their fathers' land.

The Nowogrodek family is a community of once-Nowogrodek people scattered around Poland and the world connected by the *Fara* church and the years spent in the Sisters' school.

⁵⁰ This "Invocation" is a renowned fragment of Adam Mickiewicz's epic poem "*Pan Tadeusz*," or "*Sir Thaddeus, or the Last Lithuanian Foray: A Nobleman's Tale from the Years of 1811 and 1812 in Twelve Books of Verse*." Czestochowa and Ostra Brama are places of Marian worship with notable shrines of the Blessed Mother. Kenneth Mackenzie, published by J.M.Dent & Sons Ltd. – London, England

Father Alexander Zienkiewicz, the Sisters' Chaplain who attributes his survival to their sacrifice, after moving to the city of Wrocław (which welcomed many that were forced to move from the Eastern borderlands) quickly initiated re-unions for alumnae of the Sisters' school in Nowogrodek. The old ties of friendship and neighborliness were thus revived. Reminiscences found understanding ears as did trust in the meaning of the Sisters' sacrifice. Memories were reinforced. The desire to give thanks to God for the fruits of this sacrifice that was found in the lives of the survivors and their families grew continuously. The very first gathering of the Nowogrodek Family organized by Father Zienkiewicz on Aug. 1, 1973 at Jasna Gora Shrine in Czestochowa, began an annual tradition. Those gatherings continue today still in the spirit of thanksgiving for the blessings brought by the Martyred Sisters' prayers. Many who participated in those annual pilgrimages gave formal testimony in the beatification proceedings and, as the Nowogrodek Family, participated in the Beatification ceremonies in Rome on March 5, 2000.

The Nowogrodek Family is deeply connected with the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth through their family spirit, unique to the Nazareth charism. The Nowogrodek Family comprises the former students of the Sisters' school and family members of the Martyred Sisters.

Their spiritual leader is now Reverend John Adamarczuk. For many years this role was fulfilled by Sister Zdzisława Trojanowska (born and raised in Grodno) who was replaced by Sister Józefa Kobiela in 2011.

Every year the Nowogrodek Family gathers at Jasna Góra shrine around the August 1 anniversary for prayer and reflection. At Christmas and Easter time they traditionally meet at the CSFN Provincialate in Warsaw. In June they make a trip to Belarus, where their roots are. Time mercilessly limits the eldest generations' participation in those gatherings. Eyewitnesses to the Sisters' daily lives in Nowogrodek have grown scarce. That is why every recollection or memory about them and their school must be recorded. It is expression of our sisterly gratitude and our respect for all the good created together. Financial support also bears witness to the close connection of the Nowogrodek Family and the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth. After the school building was recovered by the Sisters and converted to convent use, the expertise and advice offered by Tadeusz Kułakowski, engineer, turned out to be invaluable. He supported this renovation and then extended his help to the *Fara* church.

In the reminiscences printed below, from the official testimony given by Nowogrodek inhabitants and from privately submitted letters, we shall find the common theme of friendship with the Sisters, which started in 1930 in Nowogrodek.

THE NOWOGRODEK FAMILY

...I CAN FEEL THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT CONVEYED BY BLESSED NAZARETH SISTERS

The Sisters had an immense impact on my life, especially its spiritual dimension. I attended their wonderful school having been born in Nowogrodek. My parents owned a large wooden house surrounded by gardens, with a veranda facing Third of May Street on the same side of the street as the *Fara* church. The house still exists and is now inhabited by four Belarussian families. Between the years 1920 and 1923 my Mom worked as a teacher and she decided to teach me the material from first grade so I could start school from second grade. Unfortunately the situation changed. Mom fell ill and was hospitalized in Vilnius.



It was late fall of 1934 and the school year had long begun when Dad took me to the school run by the Sisters. I remember a huge bright hallway which I walked with Dad, gripping his hand. I was quiet and scared. Dad spoke some words to a sister, probably a homeroom teacher. She walked me to a crowded and noisy classroom. I heard laughter from every corner. Clearly everyone felt right at home and here I was, three months into the school year, a newcomer unknown to anyone and clearly scared. I was assigned a seat in the first row since I was short. After a brief prayer the lesson started and that is how my education began.

I remember that Sister Dominika was the school's headmistress, Sister Canisia (Eugenia Mackiewicz) taught religious education, and Sister Veritas taught physics and math. Sister Canisia had received excellent teacher training. She had graduated from teacher's college. She arrived in Nowogrodek in 1938, she came from Kalisz where she also taught at the school run by the Sisters. She was a great Religious Ed. teacher, demanding and strict, but loved and trusted by the children. I was deported to Kazakhstan in 1940 but I heard that during the soviet and German occupations Sister Canisia taught not only catechism but also the Polish language, mathematics, and ran the parish choir. I testified in the beatification proceedings and I talked about the many values, spiritual and intellectual she had conveyed to me and how they still bear fruit in my life today. The older grades were also taught by lay teachers: Zofia Sokołowska taught Polish, Janina Adamczyk physics and math, and Janina Apostołówna taught gymnastics and music.

Every student brought a sandwich and a bottle to school, a quarter-liter bottle with tea, milk, or warm cocoa. The dining room belonged to Sister Daniela (Eleonora Jóźwik). During the long recess Sister Daniela strolled among the kids, carefully checking if everyone had lunch to eat. She looked into every child's home and family situation which made life easier for many. Thanks to her efforts the poorest or orphaned students had their school fees waived. My home situation was somewhat difficult though not for financial reasons. My Mom stayed eighteen kilometers outside of Nowogrodek in an army homestead which my Father had received for his participation in the Polish-soviet war of 1920. Dad had a license and ran a store. Both my parents were very busy and the maid didn't always manage to prepare lunch for me. Sister Daniela helped on those occasions. She was always very caring, warm, and understanding. She was very protective and motherly toward us. I remember this Sister in my prayers and through her intercession I receive spiritual strength.

In 1936 I received my First Communion. We started preparations in second grade, when more religious education hours were added. The Sisters made the Catechism interesting even to the wild kids we were at the time.

Unfortunately the grim war times soon arrived. The summer of 1939 was gorgeous and sunny. Thousands of flowers bloomed in our garden and gorgeous fruit appeared in the orchard. But in the first days of September my Father, an officer, was enlisted and joined the Polish Army. He was assigned to the unit in the Brześć (Brest) fortress. I remember his words of farewell at the train station in Nowogrodek: *"If I end up in German hands then I may survive, but if in soviet hands then I will not be back."* And he never came back. He was murdered in Katyń.

Time flew by. On September 17 the Red Army entered Nowogrodek taking over the territory up to the Niemen River. I attended the Nazareth Sisters' School until October, 1939 when the school was closed and the Sisters took off their habits and moved into private homes. For some time until spring I went to Elementary School No. 2 named after Józef Piłsudski which was located in a white collar subdivision in the outskirts of Nowogrodek but it was not the same. Everyone lived in fear. The spring of 1940 was filled with terror. The Soviets have made many arrests, especially among the intelligentsia. We got a visit from NKVD, the secret police, who wanted to check whether we were planning to cross the "green border" into the *Reich*.

Finally, on February 10, 1940 the first deportations took place, of families of homesteaders, military personnel, and police. Our turn came on the night of April 12-13. At 3 A.M. rifle butts slammed against our front door. Mom was prepared. In a strong voice she ordered me and my sister Alina to get dressed and put on two shirts each. The search lasted until 6 A.M, at which point the NKVD soldiers and civilians with red armbands gave us an hour to pack some things and food for the road and then loaded us onto a horse-drawn wagon. The horses climbed up Third of May Street with a lot of effort. Frightened people came out to the sidewalks. The Sisters sent us off with the sign of the cross. On the wagon the wicker basket with clothes looked like a coffin.

Mom spoke excellent Russian and since WWI she was familiar with the soviets. She knew we would not return to Nowogrodek. At the last minute she walked into the bedroom, took my First Communion picture off the wall, and pushed it into a bundle with sheets. This picture spent six years with us in exile in Kazakhstan. It was not meant to hang on a wall there, since we lived in mud huts, but it still reminded me of Nazareth. It now hangs on the wall of my room in Warsaw. It is over eighty years old and still in the same frame. It represents the Last Supper. Below is this inscription: *"Memento of the First Holy Communion, Kulakowski Tadeusz Albert made his communion in the Fara Church in Nowogrodek on May 31, 1936."* Signed: *Fr. Mieczysław Kubik*. This picture gave me strength and courage throughout my life not only in exile. I pray before it and I feel the power of the Spirit conveyed by the Blessed Sisters.

Father Mieczysław Kubik was the chaplain of the Sisters until 1938 when Father Alexander Zienkiewicz arrived. I have few memories of Father Kubik. I recall him as being jolly and cheerful and playing the piano during national holiday celebrations at school. He was executed by a German firing squad in 1942 in the woods near Nowogrodek.

The Sisters used to send food packages to people deported to Siberia but I do not recall whether we ever received them in Kazakhstan. After returning to Poland in 1946 I found out that the Sisters were executed by the Germans on August 1, 1943. This was a painful experience.



Members of the Nowogrodek Family on the forest path leading to the place of the Sisters' execution.

The Nowogrodek Family on a pilgrimage, June 2011.



Today only ten of us – former pupils of the Sisters' school in Nowogrodek are still alive in Poland. Since about 1980 we have been organizing pilgrimages to our home town. We visit the marker in the forest called "Batorówka" where our Sisters had been murdered. Mass is said there and we pray. Then, in silence and self-communion, we walk back by the forest path. That path had been tread by the eleven Martyrs who gave their lives for over one hundred Nowogrodek people. This is always a powerful experience for me. The Sisters stand before my eyes working with great commitment in "our school."

I wrote my memoirs about the School and the Sisters on the 14th anniversary of the elevation of these Blessed Eleven Martyred Sisters to the altar, by Holy Father John Paul II, on March 5, 2000 in Rome. I was present during that glorious ceremony.

Tadeusz Kułakowski, Warsaw, March 2014

MAY GOD BE PRAISED FOR GIVING US OUR BLESSED SISTERS

I was a pupil at the elementary school of the Sisters since 1930. I have very fond memories of that school. We were being raised by all the Sisters. I had most interaction with Sister Daniela who worked in the kitchen where we ate lunch. We brought our drinks in bottles as thermoses were still unknown. Sister Daniela was a very caring, supportive person. She taught us how to behave at table as well as gardening in our small school garden. I also remember Sister Dominika, the headmistress. She kept us on a short leash and gave us many wise directives which came in handy in adult life. I have a holy picture signed by Sister Dominika which



I treasured through six years of exile in soviet camps and which I cherish until today. I visited Sister Dominika's grave in Częstochowa. She avoided the fate by an execution because she was taking novices to Vilnius.

I went to Rome for the beatification ceremony of the Martyrs of Nowogrodek, and for a private audience with Pope John Paul II. These events strengthened my faith and helped me feel just how close the saints are to us.

I often pray to the Martyred Sisters for health and an easier life and I am already ninety years old. Providence allowed me to be present during the exhumation of the Sisters of Nowogrodek when their remains were brought from the outside the church into the chapel in eleven small coffins. I personally picked up pieces of bones and cloth and placed them in their little coffins. Although these were their bones, for me, the Sisters are still alive and they intercede on our behalf with God to send us blessings.

August 1 this year (2014), the anniversary of the execution falls on a Friday. This is also the first Friday of the month and I get a visit at home on that day from a priest with Holy Communion. I am happy that on that very day I will be able to receive our Lord Jesus into my heart, the very same Jesus who in 1943 welcomed our Beloved Sisters into heaven and who now is walking me to a meeting with them.

May God be praised for giving us our Blessed Sisters.

Anna Sokołowska, nee Kułakowska, Warsaw, July 2014

I REMEMBER SISTER DANIELA BEST...

I attended the Sisters' school in Nowogrodek between 1932 and 1939. I passed my exams to junior high but the war interrupted my education. The Sisters' school was private, with high standards, exceptionally well run, and discipline was strict. Apart from religious education and celebrations of church holidays, like a Christmas pageant and religious processions, we were trained in the love of the Fatherland. We participated in school assemblies and sang patriotic songs. I remember Sister Daniela best and I have good memories of her preparing lunch. She warmed up our tea, cocoa, milk, and we brought our own sandwiches. I did not know the other sisters. The news of the Sisters' despicable shooting by the Germans shocked the town. Great sadness descended on the people.

In 1940 I started working. I did not participate in the first or second exhumation because I had left for Warsaw on the first train to join my brother. My parents sent me there so I would avoid arrest by the soviets.

It so happened that I spent twenty years abroad in Argentina. After all those years when I returned to Poland I met with my friends at pilgrimages to Częstochowa and Nowogrodek. We shared sweet memories of our early years spent in the Sisters' school and we prayed for the murdered Sisters. I owe the Sisters the foundation of my upbringing and education. I thank God and my Parents for sending me to this school. I was happy that I could participate in their unforgettable beatification ceremonies in Rome which I experienced profoundly in the depths of my heart.

Irena Żelazek, nee Sielicka, Wrocław, 2014

IN MY OPINION THEY ARE SAINTS

I lived in Nowogrodek from birth in 1933 until 1946. In 1939 I started attending the School of the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth but right away the soviet army took over the town and the new authorities closed the school. The sisters stopped wearing their habits and started working in various ways to make a living for example, in hospitals, and as domestic help.

In elementary school then still Polish, Sister Canisia taught me in first grade. After the school closed I only saw the Sisters at church. At that time the Sister and Father Zienkiewicz were preparing my age group for First Holy Communion in secret of course. There was no shared public celebration. When the Germans took over in 1941 the Sisters again started wearing their habits. Father Alexander Zienkiewicz, who had been in Nowogrodek since 1938, decided to give the group deprived of a public First Communion a celebration. A special service was held with the kids in white clothes and a group photo was taken. I still have that picture today.

I don't remember when Sister Małgorzata, who survived, acted as the caretaker for the sanctity in *Fara*. My Mom often talked to Sister Małgorzata after Mass. She was always smiling and cheerful. I have this vivid picture in my mind, when after an evening service on July 31, 1943 the Sisters did not go back to the convent. They walked in the opposite direction towards the town center, where they had been summoned to the police station. We were all very curious about it. They walked in pairs, two side by side. Sister Canisia caught up with me. I knew her best because she was my teacher. She spoke a few words to us. Then, with a smile, she walked on.

After some time we found out that the Sisters all perished. There was great sadness among the people. Father Zienkiewicz was also in danger so he went into hiding and left Nowogrodek. When the soviets returned so did Father Zienkiewicz and he stayed with us until the very last train transport to Poland which was in 1946.

Let me return to 1945 again. Father Alexander obtained permission to exhume the remains of the Poles executed by firing squad in a nearby forest and also to exhume the Sisters' remains. I went to the funeral services of the Sisters, who were buried next to the main church. Sister



Małgorzata said she wanted to be buried with the Sisters. She was a very brave and heroic person. When we were leaving for Poland, Sister Małgorzata asked us to take a letter to the Sisters in Warsaw. I remember Mom and me delivering that letter.

During those cruel times I was a little girl and unable to experience this crime properly. Only much later after many years I was shocked that innocent sisters could be murdered like this. When I think of them now I imagine those last hours and moments of their lives. I often entrust my problems to the Blessed Sisters asking for their help. I feel that I am being heard. In my memories and in my mind they are saints.

Teresa Anuszkiewicz, nee Sielicka, Wroclaw, 2014

I THINK OF THE SISTERS WITH GRATITUDE...

I so strongly wish I could answer the posed questions seriously and heartily but it is difficult because in 1939, when I finished school and passed my exams to junior high I was only twelve years old. So my memories draw on naïve childlike recollections.

The school left me with the best of memories: a pleasant atmosphere, an upbringing consistent with that at home, attractive interiors, and order and peacefulness which prevailed. The Sisters as well as lay teachers never raised their voices and it remains a mystery how they managed to exact from those wild kids such calm and proper behavior. At school we only interacted with the Sisters who taught. They were Sister Veritas, Sister Dominika (headmistress) and Sister Canisia who taught handiwork and crafts, ingraining in us patience and precision in work, and Sister Daniela, who ran the school kitchen where we ate lunch at a common table. That meal was accompanied by schooling in proper table manners.

When holy days or other celebrations arrived, Sister Regina would appear. She was Mother Superior, beautiful and dignified. We saw the other Sisters during activities related to cleaning the church, the school, and tending the garden. It should be remembered that the church was lit by candles. Caring for candles, candlesticks and chandeliers was probably quite a chore. The wax from unburned candles, after being shaved into thin flakes, was used for preserving the wooden floors at school. These flakes were strewn on the floors before a long recess. By running over them we would rub the wax into the floors. Any leftovers were swept up and then the expansive floors were polished with a heavy, manual floor buffer.

Sister Canisia's classes came in extremely handy when I found myself in exile in Kazakhstan in 1940. Embroidery, crocheting, and knitting skills allowed me sometimes to make some money and sometimes to make something for my Mom or myself. Mom and I stayed close to the Nowogrodek people whom we cherished. Memories of the Fara church and the Sisters were part of our shared longing. We recalled the silence of the church, the atmospheric May devotions, the Sisters' beautiful singing, the smell of incense and flowers, the embroidered cloths on the altar.

After returning to Poland from Kazakhstan and six years lost to education, it turned out that the education I had received from the Sisters was sufficient to place me in an "accelerated" junior high school in Bydgoszcz, where one school year covered two years of regular educational programming. Having studied French at the Sisters' school was a great advantage. After two years

in that junior high I passed final exams which qualified me to take entrance exams for a one-year introductory course at Gdańsk Technical University. And that is how my life's path was opened.

Many of the Nowogrodek Family think that the Sisters' intercessions have caused so many of us to survive the war, to return from exile, from German and soviet prisons and to survive the difficulties of partisan life. At long last we all met happily in a large group under the Sisters' hospitable roof in Częstochowa and then quite regularly we would visit the convent, Fara, and the Sisters' place of execution in Nowogrodek, and at long last we participated in the Sisters' beatification in Rome.

I owe those friendships which we cherish even seventy years later, to the Sisters' prime schooling. I think of the Sisters with gratitude because although I do not believe in God I never heard even a word of correction or complaint and always felt like a member of a large family. More could be said about the Sisters' role in my life. For instance, precisely thanks to their influence, my twelve year old girlfriends maintained correspondence with me in Kazakhstan. They sent me books choosing not silly thrillers or novels, but the history of Polish literature by Chrzanowski and some of Mickiewicz's works, thanks to which upon return I had at least some sensible knowledge in my head.

Alina Taylor, nee Syrtowtt, Gdańsk 2014

...WE WERE FOLLOWED BY THEIR PRAYERS AND SACRIFICE

Nowogrodek is a beautiful town on a hill surrounded by meadows and forests full of small wooden houses amid greenery and lilac bushes riotously blossoming each May. That is where the Sisters settled and opened a popular co-ed elementary school. I went there between 1932 and 1939 in which year, as I finished school also my happy childhood came to an end. The Bolsheviks invaded us.

I loved that school and attended it happily. I remember quietude and feeling safe. I also remember the kitchen stove on which stood a large pot with hot water in which we placed our bottles with drink (cocoa, tea, or milk) so they could warm up for lunch. A lay Sister oversaw this process. The Sisters made sure the floors were clean by waxing and polishing them and I liked to slide on those floors in my house slippers. We met the other Sisters in the coatroom and in the garden. They were very hard-working and quiet, but sometimes they said a few words. One time I recall one sister admired my organza dress sown for a school performance because we usually wore uniforms with navy aprons. Sister Canisia was our teacher. She had some health problems and you could see suffering on her face.

When the war broke out we quickly escaped from Nowogrodek because we were on a list for deportation deep into Russia. We were warned by a Russian woman who took pity on my Mom and her four small children. Father had left earlier, for Lithuania. If he had not done so he would have been long dead. This way we all escaped alive. Nobody from my family perished, probably because God accepted the Sisters' sacrifice.

Years later I realized that the Sisters' schooling shaped my attitude in life. After all we were followed by their prayers and their Sacrifice. I realized that God acted this way and still is. I



am now approaching ninety years of age and I am still active for which I thank God. I also thank Him for giving me a wonderful husband who died less than a year ago. God used us as servants of his church whenever possible and wherever we could do good. We would repeat after Jeremiah (20, 7): *“You seduced us, Lord, and we allowed ourselves to be seduced.”*

Danuta Łukaszewicz, nee Szarejko, Wrocław 2014

THEIR REQUESTS AND DIRECTIVES BROUGHT ORDERED INTO OUR DAILY LIVES

My six years in the Sisters’ school was a time of gaining knowledge, deepening religious life, patriotism, but also work for others, co-existence in a community, and developing friendships which would survive until today.

The same Sisters, who at the time of the German occupation gave their lives in sacrifice, had lived alongside us while we were their students. They took care of the church and made sure the coatroom, kitchen and hallways (where we played during recess) were in order. Only later did we understand that they watched over us from the moment we entered the school. We discovered that their careful attentiveness, and their requests and directives brought order into our daily lives. The time of war tested our ability to apply what we learned at Nazareth to the often difficult decision-making during the time of occupation.

The Sisters’ impact on the Nowogrodek community at that despicable time was beyond comprehension. *Fara* was the center of prayer and freedom. Services took place irrespective of all else. The occupying forces changed. Father Zienkiewicz was gone for a time but Sister Imelda still adorned the altar with flowers and gathered deacons and us, former students, around her to conduct Rosary services. While mending albs she sang in her clear soprano: “my needle grows flowers on this cloth...” Sister Canisia taught the Bartnicki boys and prepared them for Communion. After the fire of Nowogrodek I lived in the same house as she did, and often saw her hastening to her lessons. Sister Heliadora gave away clothes to those who had lost everything in the fire. My Mom gratefully accepted stockings and undergarments. Sister Małgorzata (probably after the other Sisters’ martyrdom) hid away Lola Meszkes in the chapel of St. Expeditus. Lola was about to be arrested and later we took her by sleigh to Zabłocie near Nowogrodek. These are the few events from those times that remain in my memory. The Sisters’ attitude towards other people, their selfless generosity to the point of giving their lives, all this taught us how to behave, how to make choices and decisions and how to Congregation our system of values.

Zofia Białynicka, Warsaw, 2014

Fragment of a letter by Czesława Piotrowska, nee Zwierko, written in March 2004 to Sister Zdzisława Trojanowska, born in Grodno. Sister Zdzisława, before passing in 2014, for years helped organize meetings, reunions, and pilgrimages of the Nowogrodek Family.



Reverend and Beloved Sister Zdzisława,

As Easter approaches I turn my thoughts to my childhood days so as to better experience this holy time. The Lenten retreat that the Sisters organized for the students in Nowogrodek was held in the gymnasium. Morning retreat sessions began with Mass and the afternoon ones ended with an evening prayer. I remember that one day I waited for the afternoon session at school because home was far and the roads were bad with melting snow. Sister Daniela called me to the dining room insisting that I eat something hot. I said I had my sandwiches but there was no way not to obey her. I recall that the soup I was given was the tastiest I had ever had in my entire life. Then we had confession. One was pure for Easter, just like white cloth, or so I felt then. Starting on the morning of Good Thursday, services were held in Fara and you couldn't miss them. I will never forget Father Mieczysław Kupik washing the feet of elderly men in the cold church in temperatures below freezing outside. Then we had Friday prayers. The boys kept watch over Christ's Tomb and the girls in veils praying. The bell rang for *Gloria* on Good Saturday during the Mass. How solemn it all was....

In the afternoon and evening we baked cakes with Mom, aunt Dobrzyńska and my cousins. We were glad to help with beating batter for fluffy cakes, making Mazurka pastries, washing dishes, and licking all pots and pans. We decorated cakes with almonds, raisins and other delicacies, which often found their way into our greedy mouths. The last job of Saturday was baking ham wrapped in bread dough on a huge pan in hot stove which must have taken four hours. The ham was cooled in the bread crust, then it was opened and cut only on Easter, to be juicy and fresh.

At dawn we went to Resurrection services. The streets were filled with people walking toward the church of St. Michael as church bells rang throughout the city. *Surrexit, Surrexit dominus vere... Alleluia... Alleluia... Alleluia...* the choir was singing. Then we had a special breakfast for the whole family, joined hands and recited a prayer. We also prayed for those who our deceased family members and friends, who that year could not sit at table with us. Father Alexander Zienkiewicz would join us and other friends. Smigus-dyngus⁵¹ started already on the first day of Easter and ended a week later. There was always someone still "behind" for having not been splashed or not having splashed anyone.

In later months, May and June, Father Alexander often came to visit us with young people for company. We sang patriotic songs and walked the fragrant meadows covered with chamomile blossoms and bluebells. Alongside the alley where we played volleyball grew multi-colored strawflowers. In central Poland I saw only yellow ones but there we had many colors. As years passed and we grew older, we developed crushes on each other.

⁵¹ "Smigus-dyngus" is an old Polish Easter Monday tradition, involving dousing friends and family with water, when they least expect it.

And today I am wondering where to send notices about the pilgrimage to Grodno and Nowogrodek, who may still be able to go. (...) Being there makes us feel good because we can share our joys, sadness and life wisdom. In the street, like before the war, we can run into Zosia, Alina, or Ania, sometimes Hania, Danusia, or Czesia. It does not matter that they don't have braids or wear school uniforms any more. Their faces are still kind, open, and smiling. (...)

Dear Sister, I cannot imagine you not being able to come with us. How will you manage those five days in Warsaw with us there in Grodno and Nowogrodek?

I am sending you heartfelt kisses and hugs,

God bless,
Czesława Piotrowska

A letter from the Nowogrodek Family after a Christmas meeting on January 9, 2012.

Reverend Mother Superior Marianna, Dear Sister Zdzisława and all Beloved Sisters,

Thank you so much for the splendid Christmas celebration. Many left the meeting with teary eyes. They live alone forgotten by their families. We are all elderly and don't hear or see very well. We apologize on everyone's behalf for some confusion during the speeches. Everyone wants to be together, talk to each other, and that's why this happens. Here we can meet in a pleasant setting which many of us do not experience often. These meetings are special experiences for us as the Sisters' former charges. We reminisce about the old times when in Nowogrodek the Sisters organized Christmas pageants and children's parties at our School. We become "kids" again.



T. Kułakowski and H. Helszer – always grateful

Our parents and invited guests, the Sisters' Chaplain, and some important people from town would come to the Christmas plays. We hand-made special playbills listing those performing in the correct order. Those bills were handed to guests and parents on entry. Some were very beautiful, artistically executed by children with special talents whose later success we would hear about. The school choir performed first conducted by our teacher Jadwiga Apostoł. Children with a special musical talent were in the choir. Later our school friends performed. There was Jesus, Mary, St. Joseph, the shepherds of course, the Three Magi, angels, King Herod, and devils. I recall how one four-year old angel during the show got scared of the devil and ran from the stage crying. There was a lot of laughter and things to talk about for years. Mother Superior herself comforted the Angel, taking her backstage to show the soot which the "devils" used for makeup. The angel was a younger sister of siblings attending the Sisters' school.

At the end of the Christmas play always came the so-called “living picture.” The manger was brought in. The Blessed Mother, impersonated by Teresa Żmigrodzka, wore a beautiful veil of white silk and a beautiful blue dress. St. Joseph was a student from a higher grade appropriately dressed. Jesus, Henio Bułhak, with a small cross in his hand sat on hay in a white shirt down to his ankles with pretty blonde locks. On both sides of the manger were placed tall ladders on which, high up, little girls were sitting dressed as angels. At the very top of the crossed ladders stood Archangel Gabriel played by our Hania Kosteczka (now Helszer). The curtain was then opened and everyone stood silently and still. The audience was mightily silent and ineffably enthralled, and the specially invited photographer would take the picture with a loud crack lighting, caused by the chemical mix of powdered magnesium and a strong oxidizer which at the time was used for the light. Those photographed usually looked spooked, if the photographer did it wrong. Then the audience applauded and the curtain was repeatedly opened and closed. People walked home telling their relatives and friends about their wonderful experience. And we triumphed.

The Christmas party was always held later during the carnival season.

In the middle of the gymnasium stood a huge, ceiling-high Christmas tree beautifully decorated. Sister Daniela had a long stick topped with a wick and a hood. With this tool she lit the candles and sparklers, which for us were the greatest attraction. Sister Daniela always kept watch. Amazingly, the tree never caught fire though it was adorned with our hand-made decorations and paper chains of colored tissue paper. Our parents waited in the hallway but peeked in at us to see how we entertained ourselves. There was line and chain dancing and various skits. At the end of the party Saint Nicholas would arrive dressed like a bishop with two angels. He distributed gift packages with candy and fruit and we then walked home with our parents, talking about our impressions from the party.

We thank you, Beloved Sisters, for everything you did for us in our lives, you and your Predecessors. We thank you for Nowogrodek, Żdźary, Częstochowa, Czerniakowska Street (in Warsaw), Kalisz, Wrocław, Rome, and all other places which we visited recently: Grodno, Minsk, Lida, Iwieniec....

We remember you all in our prayers and we ask you to remember us. We were given the fate of living through the horrific war time together, and we still often draw strength from your prayers and your sacrifice for us and our families.

We are fewer and fewer and health is not the same; we can't be sure what tomorrow will bring.

God Bless us all!

The Nowogrodek Family

SISTERS' TESTIMONIALS

Many Sisters would probably be able to and would wish to share their personal thoughts about the Martyrs' special presence in their lives, the conversations they had, the shared stirrings of the heart, the blessings stemming from their service in Nowogrodek, and their involvement in the beatification proceedings of Sister Stella and her Ten Companions. Here we include only selected testimonials of Sisters from various Provinces. Each Nazareth Sister, indeed, each one of us can ask herself a question about the presence of the martyrs in my life, the spiritual impulse for my life today as a consecrated person, the impulse that comes from their sacrifice. And God will hear the answers.



All fruit needs time to grow from seed, and then form a flower. The mystery of life, of its calling, typically reveals itself slowly. But sometimes, through special grace, it can be glimpsed like a flash. Since the Martyrdom of the Sisters, the story of Sister Canuta's *red dress* has been vividly alive among the Sisters. Probably every postulant and novice strengthened her faith and gained blessings by studying a slim brochure copied on poor quality paper. A few versions exist of the Red Dress story, which recounts Sister Canuta's (formerly Józefa Chrobot) calling to convent life. Some are anonymous, some authored, like the one written by Father Jan Warczyk as a short story published in London's weekly "Życie" (Life) in the March 21, 1948 issue. We quote here the most precious version, because it is the most credible free of ornamentation and imagined dialogue. This restrained and honest version is the testimony of late Sister Ezechiela Szupenko and we quote it in its entirety.

This striking detail of Sister Canuta's martyrdom was also noted in the memoirs of Speranza Bortnowska. In July, 1944 Sister Speranza came to Nowogrodek from Vilnius, for two years. Until her departure for Warsaw in August, 1946 she stayed sometimes in the convent and sometimes with families, and she took care of Fara and taught religion in Nowogrodek and Wsielub. Sister Speranza participated in the Sisters' exhumation and until expatriation (for she from that region and graduated from a junior high school in Vilnius) cared for the Sisters' grave. Her account of the March 19, 1945 exhumation bears the seal of eye witness authenticity.

Both accounts, Sister Ezechiela's and Sister Speranza's, are included in the brochure titled "Sacrificing for Their Brothers," written in 1981 by its author, Sister Deodata Markiewicz, and dedicated as follows: "To my Congregation and to those who owe their survival to the lives sacrificed by the eleven Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth of Nowogrodek."

THE RED DRESS

A RECOLLECTION ABOUT THE LATE SISTER CANUTA, FORMERLY KNOWN AS JÓZEFA CHROBOT

I was stationed in Grodno between 1924 and 1925 as submistress in the Novitiate. Sister Canuta was a novice at the time and she told me the story of her vocation to Nazareth.

She had lived with her parents in a village near Wieluń. She was pious but never thought of religious life. Her parents began to persuade her to get married. She did not object and they had her engaged to a neighbor's son, Stanisław. There have already been two announcements in the parish church. Józia felt a little uneasy but she wasn't sure why. She prayed ardently and then she had this vivid dream. She was praying on her knees, and heard a strong male voice saying: "Józefa, do not marry Stanisław because your beloved awaits you in Grodno. Your wedding will take place there and as a wedding gift he will give you a red dress." She immediately woke up but seemed to be still hearing the Voice. And she was so moved by that Voice and its strange timbre that she immediately told her mother that she would not marry Stanisław. Nothing helped: neither her mother's warnings against believing in dreams nor her father's anger, not even the fact that Stanisław and his family took offense. She stuck by her decision. But she did not know what to do. Neither she nor anyone around knew what Grodno was. Only after her brother returned from the army did she find out that Grodno was a town in Poland's eastern borderlands.

This whole affair became known to the parish priest who chastised his parishioner for believing in dreams, for breaking off the engagement without good reason, and causing confusion in the village where people talked about Józefa's stupidity. Józia cried, her mother cried, her father was angry. Finally Józefa's mother decided to take her to the Częstochowa shrine of Jasna Góra to get help from the Virgin Mary. In the miraculous chapel Józia stared into the face of the Virgin, tears in her eyes, and begged: "Blessed Mother, tell me please what I should do because I do not know what the Voice was asking of me!" And that is when she clearly heard in her heart a command to enter a convent. Immediately all doubt and fear left her and she was ready to fulfill the Virgin's command. She looked around the chapel and saw two sisters leaving. She ran after them and right there in the vestibule she said that she wanted to join a convent. The sisters (the Nazareths), though surprised by the form of this declaration took her and her mother to our home right by the shrine of Jasna Góra.

While waiting for Mother Superior, Józia told her mother about the inner voice in her soul which she took to be the Virgin's answer to her uncertainty about her future. The mother also accepted it as God's will and supported Józia's decision. Mother Superior gladly agreed to accept the new candidate who had maternal support. Mother Superior explained the conditions Józia would have to meet and that the young lady would serve her postulancy in one of the sisters' homes, and then her novitiate in Grodno. Józia shivered inside. Grodno was something confirming the truth of the Voice from the dream because she had not mentioned the dream to Mother Superior. Overjoyed, she returned home and, after the necessary preparations, she returned to cross the threshold of Nazareth in our Częstochowa home. After a year-long postulancy, she traveled to Grodno. But even there she did not talk of the dream. Only on the day of her vows she said that her dream was becoming true but not completely. Where was her wedding gift? "I have a Groom now, but where is the red dress?" Other sisters explained that the red color probably meant love with which she would wear the black habit. She was not convinced by this explanation.

She only understood the mysterious Voice's forecast on August 1, 1943. On that date she died in Nowogrodek at the hands of Hitler's firing squad together with ten other Sisters.

Sister M. Ezechiela, Janina Szupenko

Warsaw, February 23, 1978.



Procession of coffins of the eleven Nazareth Sisters exhumed from their forest grave, on their way to Fara.

THE EXHUMATION OF THE NOWOGRODEK SISTERS

On March 19, 1945 the remains of our Martyred Sisters were moved. Their grave was located in the small woods on the fifth kilometer on the road to Nowojelnia. On March 18 two sisters and a few friends went to the grave to make preparations.

The top layer and frozen turf had to be broken up with picks, the hollow trenches, and a pathway was made for horse-drawn wagons. Early in the morning on the nineteenth, we all went with the priest and many, many friends to the opening of the grave. The grave was not too deep. The Sisters lay in various positions and they were not "pressed" together. Apparently they were shot from rifles, so they fell while still alive, then died in the grave.

For instance Sister Canuta was kneeling in a corner on one knee with her hands folded in prayer and her head bent down. What a sight that was! They all lay in their habits, the veils lay to the side, and their hands were folded prayerfully. Mother Stella lay at the very bottom -- she must have gone first -- and after her Sister Gwidona and Sister Heliodora. Last were Sister Canisia and Sister Raymond. There was almost no smell. It had filtered out through the sand. The vestments were very well preserved. The bodies not too black, even pale, bones covered with skin, and the heavier ones still had flesh on them.

They were all placed in white coffins of wood boards. Each coffin was surrounded by a wreath and on top they had a cross with a wreath like for a wedding and a palm leaf below.

In each coffin we placed a sealed bottle with a piece of paper stating the name and date of death. At noon, the funeral procession with a cross and the priest at the head left the forest taking the eleven coffins, each on a separate sleigh with horses.

The people approached the entire event with piety as if performing some holy ritual. In the church the Sisters' coffins were placed exactly where they used to kneel to pray. Prayers for the deceased were said and then Father Rector celebrated Mass in white vestments because of the feast of St. Joseph.



Sr. Małgorzata before the Blessed Sacrament

The weather was beautiful and rays of sun shone on the coffins. After the service we again first moved Mother Superior. The new grave had been dug right by the church behind the mission cross. But this time Mother Superior did not enter the grave first. Father Rector had her coffin placed by the grave, on a mound of earth, so that all the other Sisters made their last procession before their Mother.

Mother's coffin was lowered last and chunks of soil fell on them all. It was bright and quiet, holy and solemn. In everyone's minds they went down as victims who with their own lives and blood had paid for the lives of the priest and brothers condemned to die but who thus survived.

Sister M. Speranza (Bortnowska)



A Nazareth Sister praying in church (current view of the interior of Nowogrodek Fara)

...FROM THE ELEVEN SISTERS I AM LEARNING THIS TRUTH: LOVE IS STRONGER THAN DEATH

From my earliest years in Nazareth I approached the Mystery of Nowogrodek with deep emotion, admiration, and reflection. Our Martyred Sisters spoke to me from the depths of their Nazareth lives in the shadow of the white Fara, in the language of heroic love and sacrifice. I did not expect to ever visit that holy ground. But several times now I have been able to kneel in the Sisters' prie-dieux, the silent witnesses of the decision made by Sister Stella and her community to give their lives for their brothers and voluntarily walk the path to a place of martyrdom. Every encounter with traces of their hidden lives, their apostolic mission, and death stirred in my soul questions about my own readiness to accept such form of consecrated sacrificial life. They nudged me to look for answers. Among many memories of this historic and yet personal event, I shall select the episodes which deeply ingrained themselves in my memory and stay in my heart like ever-burning flames.

One of the deepest experiences of the Nowogrodek Mystery was on August 1, 1993 the 50th anniversary of the Sisters' martyrdom. Many sisters gathered in Nowogrodek on that day coming from Rome, from the General administration, from both of the Polish provinces, and from Belarus. With many other sisters and lay persons I spent the night of July 31-August 1 praying in the Sisters' kneelers, which they had left behind fifty years earlier. Reverend Mieczysław Iwanicki from Rawa Mazowiecka led a unique prayer vigil service giving thanks for this demonstration of love being stronger than death which the Sisters provided through their deaths. He called on the Sisters to intercede on behalf of the Church, their religious community, and Belarus and asked God for their prompt beatification. Everyone who contemplated the Sisters' sacrifice on that night of darkness and light deeply experienced everything that was part of their martyrdom. Following in their footsteps, at dawn on August 1 we went to the forest, to the place of their sacrifice. I will never forget the Anniversary Mass celebrated in the forest by an eyewitness of the Nowogrodek event, the same one in whose presence the Sisters expressed their readiness to sacrifice their lives - their chaplain and pastor of Nowogrodek's Fara, who had faced Nazi repressions.

Father Alexander Zienkiewicz opened the Liturgy by kissing the earth on the Grave in the place of the execution and said something to this effect: *"Before celebrating the Holy Sacrifice, the priest kisses the altar where relics of saints are placed. This place of their (the Sisters') sacrifice is now a holy site just like an altar. The blood of the Eleven Martyrs which was spilled here has bought the lives and freedom of so many individuals."* The tearful crowd came in the solemn procession to the forest, listened to the Priest-Witness, while a chorus of sisters repeated the words Sister Stella said in the name of her community: "If a sacrifice of life is needed, then accept our lives, Lord!" I shall not forget that day that stirred so many emotions in my heart, amazement and admiration over the shape of this sacrifice which stamped its seal of love over the authenticity of our spirituality.

Later, as the general superior, I had many more opportunities to experience the mystery of martyrdom of the Sisters, both while kneeling by their sarcophagus on which 11 lights perpetually burn, and while at the site of their sacrifice. This last "yes" they said to God's will grabbed at my soul and shamed me for fearfully dragging my feet when faced with pain and suffering.

I also recall my meeting in Nowogrodek with God's Servant, Sister Małgorzata. Her modest grave, covered with flowers, spoke to me about the mystery of her heroic life and bloodless

sacrifice in the service of those afflicted by the war. Her faith was strong for them, she comforted them in doubt and made sure they had relationship with Jesus in the Eucharist.

At the grave of that 12th Martyred Sister I took to heart the challenges directed at myself and Nazareth.

The 15th anniversary of the beatification of our Martyred Sisters revives in my heart all those things that went into organizing the event for which I and my administration were responsible. The date of March 5, 2000 which the Vatican had set for the Sisters' beatification stirred up various feelings in my heart. Although overjoyed about such a great blessing yet filled with human weakness, I contemplated the vast scale of the tasks with which we were confronted. Are we going to successfully prepare everything, I wondered? Will the brochures be printed in time? Will the reliquaries and commemorative medallions be prepared according to the templates agreed upon? What will the weather be like in those first days of March? – After all the beatification will be taking place in St. Peter's Square in Rome. All those worries and questions weighed down my soul and tempered the joy of the approaching holy day! But the help and support of the Sisters in the General Administration, prayers for the support of our Blessed Foundress and the awareness of the importance of this historic event - these factors outweighed doubt and uncertainty.

I cannot express what was happening in my soul at dawn on that unforgettable day, March 5, 2000 when I stood in St. Peter's Square filled with thousands of pilgrims and hundreds of our sisters. This first beatification held during the Year of the Great Jubilee was bathed in golden sunlight under azure skies; it lifted our hearts and thoughts to the heights occupied by the Saints who accompanied our Sisters in beatification. When during *Gloria* a painting of our Sisters was unveiled only tears could express the happiness filling my heart. Our Eleven Martyrs were now elevated to the altars by the Church! Together with our Mother Foundress they form the heavenly Nazareth at the side of the Holy Family.

The beautiful homily of our Holy Father, John Paul II, the procession with the gifts from the Congregation and the Reliquary of the Blessed Martyrs, Holy Communion from the hand of the Holy Father, the masterful singing of the Sistine Choir, the sisters lost in prayer, and throngs of people from all over the world – all this infused my soul with joyful gratitude. The meeting of all the sisters in the Generalate over a shared post-beatification dinner was an explosion of joy and happiness. The day ended with a ceremony conducted by Father Vito Calabrese, General of the Oblates of St. Joseph consisting of the unveiling and blessing of a memorial plaque with representations of the Martyrs, and veneration of their relics.

I consider it a special privilege that our Congregation's Mass of thanksgiving the day after the beatification, celebrated by Cardinal Kazimierz Szoka with the assistance of cardinals and many bishops, took place in St. Peter's Basilica. In that place, I was able to thank the Holy Father and the entire Church for the blessing of the Beatification of our eleven Martyrs, express my gratitude to the hierarchies of Poland and other countries, and all those who were present at the Beatification, and pray in thanksgiving.

With deep feeling I recall the special audience with the Holy Father, John Paul II, where on my knees I asked for a blessing for the Congregation represented by about six hundred sisters who arrived in Rome from all corners of the world. The Holy Father directed some beautiful words

to us thanking us for the gift the Martyrs of Nowogrodek are for the Universal Church deriving from lands now within Belarus territory. We know that the Holy Father had deep veneration for the eleven Martyred Sisters. I know from Sister Tobiana, a Sacred Heart sister serving at the Pope's side, that he placed the relics of the Blessed in the hallway between the vestry and the altar in his papal chapel, and that he kissed them reverently on his way to celebrate the Holy Sacrifice.

The Mystery of Nowogrodek spoke to me with particular clarity during the blessed time of our preparations for the beatification. I shall forever hear in my soul these words about them: "...how they walked..." first through their daily hidden lives in the Nowogrodek community full of devotion and sacrifice only so they could later, primed with faith and love, walk courageously towards the terrifying blackness of the grave prepared for them so they could lay down their lives for those of their brethren. Kneeling in amazement and admiration I am learning from the eleven Martyred Sisters the truth that love is stronger than death. I think and peer deep into my soul to study the direction of the daily Nazareth path I tread. I accept the words of Blessed Sister Stella, "If a sacrifice of life is needed..." as a challenge to every one of us, Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth. I contemplate them as words directed to me personally. Just as the Galilean Nazareth, just as the eleven Martyrs, so also I should be ready to sacrifice my life. I believe that for every one of us, Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth, the martyrdom seal on the hidden lives of the eleven Sisters is a warranty of the vitality and timelessness of charism which if authentically experienced, bears fruit in the form of the highest examples of love.

Mother Maria Teresa Jasionowicz, Jesus the Good Shepherd Province
Superior General 1992 – 2001

...FOR ME THEY ARE A MODEL OF BEAUTIFUL GROWTH TO FULL UNION WITH JESUS

The encounter with the Blessed Sisters from Nowogrodek which left a permanent mark in my heart took place in the first year of my novitiate when I was reading Father J. Walczak's book titled "A Halo over Nazareth." The experience of encountering the Sisters was so powerful that I felt as though the Sisters lived right next to me making their sainthood close and real.

A few years later God gave me the blessing of becoming a theology student at the Catholic University in Lublin and writing a masters' thesis about the lives and witness of the eleven Martyred Sisters of Nowogrodek. I was then able to meet and interview the witnesses of those events who are no longer living today – Father A. Zienkiewicz, Father M. Wilniewicz, Father W. Hładowski, Maria Dobrzyńska-Karawajska, and Sister Teresa Sabina Kosińska. Listening to their testimonials, I also experienced afresh the power of the communion of saints. It taught me greater sensitivity to God's presence in our individual experience on the path we have chosen and in our calling. It was a lesson in living history for me and of living faith and constant listening to the voice of God. Reading closely the questionnaire answers received from the school's alumni where the Blessed Martyrs worked, and finding out and studying various sources in our Congregation's archives, the Diocesan archives, national archives, and in libraries allowed me to more closely touch the mystery of the gift of the Sisters' vocation in the context of their time in which they lived, its conditioning factors, and the history they were making. I understood that the way to sainthood leads through ordinary faithfulness to that which is entrusted to us every day.

The Blessed Martyrs of Nowogrodek are for me the model of beautiful growth to full union with Jesus. This process occurred in regular daily existence, ordinary duties, weaknesses, and struggles. I am in awe of the Sisters' simplicity, their ability to be for each other in their very diverse community, for their ability to be there for the families among whom they lived and, ultimately, for which they were able to give their lives. I was and am heartened by the Blessed Sisters' attitude of being at the disposal of the people of Nowogrodek who could always come to the Sisters to be heard, no matter what time of night or day. Those people often emphasize that these were "their Sisters" in the sense that the Sisters completely gave themselves, their will, heart, and time to God and to people.

I often call on the Sisters' support to help me be faithful to prayer, trusting in God's guidance through my superiors, to help me persist in renewing the daily *fiat* and in constantly wondering over the gift God has given me by calling me to the Congregation of Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth.

I consider it a great blessing that for many years, a few times every year, I have been able to visit Nowogrodek and spend time at the source where the Sisters' love and faithful service matured.

In the places where they lived, prayed, visited with families, where they spent their last night on earth and where they were shot, I reflected on the mysteries of their lives and God's guidance. Their witness has encouraged me to be ever more trusting and faithful to Jesus.

When I helped Sister Zdzisława Trojanowska during the meetings of the alumni of the Sisters' school I had the opportunity to form closer relationships with them, which last until today. I am edified by their attitude, their faith, their manners, which as they emphasize, they forged at school by preparing for the sacraments and interacting with the Sisters. The Martyrs were for them, and also are for us today, an excellent example of unity and faithfulness in the service of the mission of which the school was a key element.

May the Lord be praised in the gift of the Eleven Blessed Sisters, in the life of every Sister of the Holy Family of Nazareth, and through them, in the life of every family.

Sister Józefa Kobiela, Holy Name of Jesus Province

THEY OFTEN GUIDED ME, WHISPERED, WHAT I SHOULD DO AND HOW I SHOULD ACT

On the way to my first assignment in Belarus at the end of 1990 I knew very little about our Martyred Sisters, just what I had read in Father Zienkiewicz's "No Greater Love". At that time I was working in Szczuczyn and together with Sister Stanisława Kuczyńska we would take our youth to visit the site of their martyrdom in the forest. And that is how my "friendship" with them began. Later, in September, 1991 I participated in the events of the second exhumation when the Sisters' earthly remains were moved from their temporary grave by the church to a sarcophagus inside, in the chapel of the Mother of God of Nowogrodek.

What connected me with the Martyrs spiritually was that I was able to live in Belarus for sixteen years (seven of them in Nowogrodek). I prayed kneeling where they kneeled and by their sarcophagus; I met people who knew them and remembered their service, love, and goodness; and

frequently visited the site of their martyrdom in the Batorówka forest. But the crowning factor was my participation in their beatification ceremonies in Rome.

I cherished those blessings very much. They inspired me and gave me strength to undertake difficult tasks because that is what they had done, that is the witness the Martyrs left behind. I felt that they often guided me, whispered what I should do and how I should act.

My love for the Blessed Sisters did not end with my departure from Nowogrodek. They are still very dear to me and I believe that they support me on my path with Jesus and in every service I perform in Nazareth.

Sister Marianna Walesiuk, Holy Name of Jesus Province

THEY ARE STILL HERE TODAY AND THEY UNDERSTAND OUR SITUATIONS

The presence of the Blessed Martyred Sisters is so deeply etched into our daily lives that it is difficult to pick just a couple examples of their oversight over us. While serving in Nowogrodek we constantly felt their presence often encountering situations so difficult that our only hope and support were the Blessed Sisters. We often traveled to various parishes with presentations about our Sisters. The story of their service and martyrdom left nobody indifferent. People's tears of emotion, admiration, hope, and faith told us that our Sisters did not just at one time sacrifice their lives here, but that they are still alive today and understand our situations.

Nowogrodek was never an easy assignment. The challenges experienced by our Sisters at one time continue even today. Sometimes such hopeless situations developed that we found comfort in the fact that, at least just yet, our lives were not being taken. Just when we would hit bottom, their help would unexpectedly arrive.

I recall this one situation. It was harsh winter weather, -35 degrees Celsius (-31F) outside. We had our own boiler room with two furnaces for Sentra heating, and a one for heating water. First, the water furnace died but we managed somehow to heat water on the stove. Then one of the central heating furnaces began to leak, and then the other one. The stoker was completely drunk. We had +3 Celsius (37F) inside. We swaddled the water pipes so they would not freeze and crack. That is when I broke down. I was upset that the Martyred Sisters would forget about us. I shared my grief at their Sarcophagus with pain and reproach and right then the phone rang. It was a man who had earlier asked us to pray for his very ill wife. He was calling to thank us for the gift of his wife's health. He said that on the very day when we started the Novena to the Blessed Sisters, his wife felt better and was now recovering and he believed she owed it to the Blessed Sisters. I took this as a "phone message from the Sisters" who deny help to no-one and as a sign that for us also the time of Resurrection will come. And really the problem was solved.

I will quote one more touching story, this time from Homla. At the request of the Rector, Father Sławomir, that parish received the relics of the Blessed Sisters. An older woman approached us after the Mass holding a picture of the Martyred Sisters, a black and white photo, very worn, depicting the Sisters standing over a grave. She said her house had burnt down. Only her children and this picture survived. Her whole family considered these Sisters their guardians. Without ever hearing the story of their lives and deaths the family venerated the Sisters as though they were saints.

The site of the Sisters' execution is for me one of the greatest Sanctuaries. The forest has an incredible quiet charm which induces contemplation. I then ask myself: As I follow the footsteps of the Sisters' who walked this way to their martyrdom, do I have in my heart at least a little of their faith but especially their love?

Sister Stanisława Kuczyńska, Blessed Martyrs of Nowogrodek Province

AND THEY TOOK CARE OF THEIR HOME...

I first learned about the Martyred Sisters by reading "Eleven Prie-dieux." Then I learned about them through the beatification process, through the meetings of the former students of the Sisters' school that take place in Warsaw, and at last through the first sisters who traveled to serve in Nowogrodek in the 1990's. Somehow I never thought that God's will would take me to Nowogrodek too.

I traveled with trepidation in my heart, with very human fears and a feeling that this would not be an easy lesson in life. My first encounter with the place of the Sisters' martyrdom was a powerful as well as a strengthening experience for me. Later I went there a lot in search of more strength. After those visits I heard in my ears but perhaps more in my heart, the words they had heard: "*Stay on your post. Do not leave Nowogrodek. This is a matter involving the House of Christ the King.*"

And they watched over their house as well, in its most ordinary, prosaic, daily needs. When I used up the very last bit of sugar to sweeten tea for the workers and there was no sugar to be bought at the store, then suddenly pilgrims appeared at our white Fara, who had leftover food to share including four kilograms of sugar! The Sisters offered care and support when we ran into obstacles which seemed *insurmountable* when we needed to find building materials generally unavailable on the market. But most of all they watched over and supported human beings, when children from the orphanage were being prepared by our sisters for Baptism, when priests experienced Nowogrodek retreats and when faith-filled pilgrims asked for support kneeling by their sarcophagus.

And they watched over me, my faith and love, teaching me courage, trust, and confidence. The four-year long lesson in Nowogrodek was not easy but the teachers were superb! With our Mother Foundress I can say this: ""it was a time of the Lord's mercy". I am grateful to God and the Blessed Martyrs for this experience and for everything my heart feels when I say the words: Nowogrodek, the Martyred Sisters.

Sister Elwira Prokopek, Holy Name of Jesus Province

I AM THANKFUL FOR THE EXAMPLE OF COMMUNITY OF WEAK PERSONS WHO WITH GOD'S GRACE WERE CAPABLE OF THE GREATEST SACRIFICE

The Blessed Martyred Sisters of Nowogrodek are very dear to me.

I first read about their martyrdom in two brochures, "The Red Dress" and "No Greater Love" when I was sixteen years old. It was precisely from the blessed Sisters that I learned to come

to God with my life, to seek out His will, to entrust to Him the lives of those who by His grace, stood on my life's path. And I still do to this day.

In May, 1989 right after the beatification of our Mother Foundress I stood at the site of the Sisters' martyrdom for the first time. One had to push their way through thickets watching out for the earth's uneven surface beneath tall grass, signs of the labors of exhumations since this forest was a grave to others too, not just our Sisters. I felt that I was at a Holy Site. We prayed in silence staring at the small wooden cross and the basic informational plaque stating that here eleven Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth had been executed by a firing squad. I shall never forget the silence. I recall hearing in my heart the words of one of the executioners: "...*how they walked, how they walked...*" They walked to confirm before God what they had vowed, which was to give their lives all the way through to the end to the last drop of blood.

Six months later I traveled to Nowogrodek to fill in for Sister Teresa Kosinska so she could go on a retreat. It was God's will that I stay a little longer, until the Sisters' exhumation. I found great joy in taking groups of visitors and tourists around the Nowogrodek Fara, but mostly in bringing everyone closer to our Sisters' lives and martyrdom, and the life of Sister Małgorzata. Everyday ordinariness, simple services, helping in the kitchen, in the vestry, a little catechesis, work in the garden in all this I had the company of the Martyred Sisters. The beautiful testimonials of Nowogrodek's people who almost daily recalled the Martyred Sisters and Sister Małgorzata heartened me greatly, and their presence by the Sisters' grave, before they entered the church or right after they left, confirmed the truth of those testimonials. They came to the Sisters just as though they were still living bringing their joys and troubles, asking for intercession before God or, as they put it, to "*talk to the Sisters.*"

Two years in a row, on August 1, on their anniversary of martyrdom, I made my vows for the fourth and fifth year of my juniorate. That is when I truly understood the vow's formula: "*...accept this humble and complete sacrifice of myself...*"

The time and place that God selected for the beginning of my religious life was a generous gift for which I thank him until today. I am thankful for the example of this community of weak creatures who with God's grace were capable of the greatest Sacrifice.

Even today I often hear in my heart like a refrain: "...*how they walked...*" These words of an executioner are my examination of conscience. They shake me awake when I get lost.

Sister Alberta Sołowiec, Holy Name of Jesus Province



Sister Małgorzata at the site of the Eleven Sisters' execution

...THAT TIME SPENT IN THE FOREST

In 1990 I had the opportunity to spend a month in Belarus on mission duty performed with the Redemptorist Fathers. Per request of the provincial superior Sister Marietta Marciniak my stay got extended, so for the first time I spent two months in Nowogrodek.

It was the time of *perestrojka*. Many people were deciding to enter a path bringing them closer to God, by accepting holy sacraments. And those were not just Nowogrodek people. Using their vacation time, people came here from all around the former Soviet Union to visit their relatives, even from Kamchatka. I also prepared those people for the sacraments at the request of the Pastor, Father Antoni Dziemianko. We were very busy. Sometimes it happened I would literally run between the rectory and the church and the local *church women* would correct me and compare me to the Martyred Sisters in this and other situations. I did not understand it then. But later I understood that they were right, Sister Stella and her sisters were different. Even in their daily conduct they carried Jesus with them. Because of the amount of work that year I was at the Sisters' execution site only once.

On September 1, 1991 I had another opportunity to come to Nowogrodek this time for longer. It was the time of preparation for the Sisters' exhumation from the grave outside Fara and moving their remains to the sarcophagus in the church. I witnessed the exhumation and I saw how deeply the local people felt about it, even those who were not believers. Everyone was touched by the aura of God's mysteries, so very familial but also respect-filled.

In June, 1992 Father Antoni Dziemianko suggested that, together with local youths, we should clean up the site of the Sisters' execution. The cross which was there then was not very visible in the thickets and people from out of town had a hard time locating the spot.

And so for a few weeks the group cleared the forest area so a cross could be erected and some sort of a marker. The group included: Father Piotr Bielewicz, four teenage girls baptized in

the Russian Orthodox church, and prepared for their First Holy Communion by me, two young boys, Oleg Szpien from Nowogrodek and Marek Filar from Poland, and myself.

This was a very laborious process and quite difficult especially that we had a hot summer weather. We also had to collect rocks and boulders. In this task and in making the path, we were helped by the men who were building the marker and by a few townspeople from Nowogrodek. For me that time working in the forest was the hardest physical labor of my life and also a time of union with the Sisters. They spilled their blood there and I, with those youngsters, just some sweat. Since then the Martyred Sisters became important part of my life – something very much alive, authentic, and personal. Every time I returned to this place during the next 20 years I felt a special bond with them. I was filled with God’s peace and warmth and I felt the same in the church near their earthly remains. In my daily life a lot has changed as well. I now pray a lot more because of them, for them and for others, and I especially recommend prayers through the intercession of these Blessed Martyrs to young married couples and families.



The cross and symbolic grave at the site of the martyrdom of the Eleven Sisters

I could write much more, but will only describe a certain incident from the time when I was a superior in Grodno. It is related to the Sisters’ beatification. Most of the sisters working in Belarus were supposed to travel to Rome. Only the elderly and youngest sisters were expected to stay home. Meanwhile in our convent in Grodno for a few days we had had nightly visits from a certain maniac who would ring the doorbell until it was opened and then run away. The police did nothing. I found it hard to leave the sisters in this situation, but I was responsible for the preparations so I went. Every day I recommended the Grodno sisters to the care of the Blessed Martyrs. As it later turned out the man who had previously visited us stopped coming and never appeared again. All of us Grodno sisters were convinced that this was the work of the Martyred Sisters.

Sister Ewelina Bubała, Holy Name of Jesus Province

...I COULD PROUDLY SAY: I WALK THE PATHS OF THE MARTYRED SISTERS

“What’s so attractive in the East, Sister?” I often hear this question and the answer is not simple. But experiences related to those eastern locations, both those joyful and difficult ones, demand my return to the same places where they were experienced. That time reveals clearly that those were all unique and special blessings, given to me there and then.

I went to Nowogrodek in 1990 when still a junior sister and I stayed there for two years. I arrived before the exhumation, I was present for it, and some time after. It is impossible to wipe out the memory of their graves: neither of the first ordinary one in the forest covered with moss, nor of the second one, by the church, nor of the third one, in the sarcophagus inside the church. When I returned to Poland I could proudly say that I walked the paths of the Martyred Sisters. Long moments spent over the solitary grave in the forest, and even longer by the church, allowed me to feel the Sisters' tangible presence during the beginning of our difficult missionary work in Nowogrodek immediately after the Church was reborn in those territories. One such living evidence of the Sisters' presence was their kneelers. In those very kneelers the Sisters prayed in their last moments before going to the Gestapo station. When I prayed in them I received not only physical strength but above all spiritual energy for further apostolic work.

Not only physical objects helped me come closer to the Martyred Sisters. Sister Teresa Kosińska, Mrs. Maria Dobrzyńska, and others then still living were also very helpful. This was a piece of history of our Congregation which they gladly shared with me.

I participated in the Sisters' beatification ceremonies in Rome and in Nowogrodek. When I later worked in Grodno I often had the opportunity to be near the Sisters' sarcophagus and to breathe the unique air and atmosphere of that place. And although I am now many kilometers away from Nowogrodek my spiritual connection with the Martyred Sisters knows no limits. I don't keep to myself all that I experienced there or and still experience now thanks to the Sisters' spiritual support. I also encourage others to pray for their support, especially when dealing with difficult family situations. And I deeply believe in their power to intercede on our behalf before God. Here is the answer to the question: *"What's so attractive in the East for you, Sister?"* The attraction is that every time I go there, especially for a longer time. I leave behind a piece of my heart and bring back enormous gratitude for the blessings received.

Sister Hiacenty Kułak, Holy Name of Jesus Province

I FELT THEIR LIVING PRESENCE

Between 2001 and 2004 I had the privilege of leading the Nowogrodek community. My spiritual friendship with the Blessed Martyrs greatly deepened during that time.

I felt their living presence very keenly in my ordinary daily service at home, in church, at the site of their martyrdom. The Sisters made their presence known in various ways.

Every year many thousands of tourists, mostly from Poland, would visit Nowogrodek's Fara. Often they were groups following the trail of Adam Mickiewicz, who was baptized there. On these occasions the other sisters and I would familiarize the visitors with the story of our Sisters' lives and martyrdom, encouraging them to entrust to them any intentions and we promised that we too would keep them in our prayers. We recommended visiting the site of their execution and often went there together. Those were unforgettable experiences which left deep imprints in their hearts. This was proven by heartfelt thanks received in the mail for blessings received through the Sisters' intercession. One lady was thankful for her *"granddaughter's health for which she had begged in Nowogrodek, though [she] went here rather as a tourist..."* Another person wrote that he had *"deep faith that the Sisters would effectively intercede on behalf of his gravely ill wife"*

and that if God so wishes, that incurable illness would go away. Great things have begun to occur, which were proof of God's intervention and of the Sister's intercession." I often repeated that if ever even one person wished to enter and visit the Fara church, then we would have to serve them and open the doors because this could be someone who would find God here. And I know that this has in fact occurred.

On one occasion I met a man near Fara holding a guidebook in his hands. I asked if he would like to come inside the church and he said yes. I briefly told him about the lives and martyrdom of the Sisters and then invited him to our convent. We talked over tea for a long time. Finally the man asked me to pray for his ill mother and for him to obtain the blessing of faith, which he had lost in his youth. Until today prayers for those intentions keep flowing. The Sisters teach us that all human beings count in their uniqueness.

There were many similar incidents, but our dear Martyrs were also capable of surprising us. I know that when we were organizing a girls' retreat in Nowogrodek, I said just casually that the Blessed Sisters should make sure that "hundreds of girls" arrive. After the number of participants reached 95, I said "maybe that is enough."

I also want to mention that usually, during times preceding liturgical holy days or anniversaries related to the Martyrs, various difficulties would pop up and proliferate as though someone were persistently trying to throw a pall over their Sacrifice of life. But on the very day of each special occasion one could feel great peace and God's grace.

Thanks be to God for the gift of life and sainthood of the Blessed Sisters who are so very dear to me.

Sister Adriana Piechowska, Holy Name of Jesus

...MY BELOVED IS WAITING FOR ME IN NOWOGRODEK

I first heard about the Martyred Sisters of Nowogrodek even before I entered a convent. Somehow they captured me right away. At the end of my junior and during my senior year in high school I was already a postulant. It was the so-called "home postulancy." My desire to serve in Nowogrodek motivated me to learn the Russian language. "When I know the language, then perhaps they will send me." That's what I was thinking and I even prayed for it.

I found it hard to believe that Jesus "sponsored" a vacation abroad for me in Nowogrodek convent that had been recently returned to the sisters. After that amazing vacation filled with spiritual experiences I returned to Poland, but a part of me stayed THERE forever. The Martyred Sisters knew that very well.

A year later I found out that "*my Beloved was waiting [for me] in Nowogrodek.*" This was the most wished-for assignment of my entire life. There, on that soil, the Sisters were simply alive for me and very present. Their love for God, the priest, and the people was a bright light and a model how to undertake work both with priests and lay people. Yes, there were difficult moments and incomprehensible events, but one could always find guidance when they asked the Sisters for assistance. The unforgettable day of their beatification and the meeting with Pope John Paul II made it even clearer to me that everything in life makes sense when it is done out of love.

The Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth, including myself, began serving in Ekibastuz in Kazakhstan on September 4, on the same day as the Sisters did in Nowogrodek years earlier. True, the Pastor often told us that we came two weeks too early. Our apartment was not yet ready. But we later found out that before our arrival the priest and parishioners had celebrated a novena to the Blessed Martyred Sisters recommending our ministry into their care. So clearly we could not have arrived on a different date! Blessed Sister Stella and her community were for us a defense shield of sorts. What do you tell people who have never before seen a sister or heard about Jesus? The story of our Blessed Sisters and the testimonials of their lives always penetrate deep into people's hearts. Our small community and parish grew under the care of the Martyred Sisters.

Thanks be to God for the lives and sainthood of our Blessed Sisters!

Sister Bożena Stankiewicz, Holy Name of Jesus Province

... GOD DIDN'T MIND...

I first heard about the Nowogrodek Sisters in 1973 when I entered the Congregation of the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth. It was August and the song "*Eleven shots echoed through the forest*" still rang in the air as the Congregation was commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of their martyrdom.

My adventure with Blessed Sister Canisia began in the fall of 1991. That is when the beatification proceedings of Sister Stella and her Ten Companions began. Maria Starzyńska's book "Eleven Prie-dieux" was published, which not only described their everyday activities, work, and circumstances of their martyrdom, but also gave basic information about each Sister, such as where she was born, the parish of her baptism, etc. That is when I found out that Sister Canisia, Eugenia Mackiewicz, came from Suwałki and was baptized at St. Alexander church. This was the only church within a radius of several kilometers from Suwałki. There was no doubt that we came from the same parish. Even more, we were baptized in the same church and at the same baptismal font, we received our First Communion there, and perhaps made our first confession at the same confessional. That is where we participated in Sunday Holy Mass, received the Eucharist, and in that very same church our calling to Nazareth was born and ripened. I looked at her photograph in the book and her masculine features did not inspire sympathy in me. At that time I did not notice what I see today. Now I see differently perhaps because I know her better through testimonials of people who once knew her and who recall her "*careful, serious, and friendly gaze.*" When I look at her photograph today, and I have studied it dozens perhaps hundreds of times when working on her life story and that of her family, I see her deep, cheerful eyes harmonizing well with a slight mysterious smile, the eyes staring somewhere distant as though catching a glimpse of the glory which now surrounds her and her Sisters. This is a strong gaze of a person who knows what she wants and whose great nobility permeates her face.

When the book "The Blessed Martyrs of Nowogrodek" appeared just before the beatification ceremonies in 2000 describing the individual Sister's profiles, I had the impression while reading their accounts that they all formed a bouquet made up of the diverse flowers of sacrifice for their brethren, a bouquet that was laid at the feet of the Beloved. Every one of them was different. Each had her own unique temperament and character, each a separate life story.

They received their call at various ages, they came from all parts of Poland, from various family backgrounds and social origins. Each came endowed with abilities and talents needed for certain services within the Congregation. Each was at a different level of spiritual growth in prayer, her relation with Jesus, and her union with Him. Each had lived a different number of years in the Congregation and on earth. The war hampered their ability to completely give themselves to God by taking perpetual vows.

I began to read about Sister Canisia with renewed special interest, but here I was again disappointed. Her personality did not fit the mold of a saint. Perhaps the other Sisters fit that mold better. They were more pious, more kind, brought greater peace, and were more quiet, joyful, and modest. But she? She had an impetuous temperament, was exacting and harsh, and as teacher was nicknamed "Sister Discipline." One explanation was that this stemmed from her good will toward others. While demanding much from others, she demanded even more from herself. People also ascribed her harshness to physical pain. But they also noticed that not only did she strive to control her temper, but also that her effort was fruitful.

Before Sister Canisia's life story was made public one Sister, no longer living today, shared this opinion with me that the future Blessed Sister was very unpleasant in her relations with others. At least that is how she was perceived during some meeting, whose details I no longer recall. Hearing this opinion, I felt distaste. But with time a comforting, healthy thought appeared: God did not mind what sort of person she was in her relations with others or how she was perceived. These factors did not figure into choosing her as one of his Brides and Martyrs and into accepting on August 1, 1943 her sacrifice for her brethren. He needed eleven brides to save over a hundred fathers, sons, brothers, and a priest. God looked into her heart and saw her struggles with characteristics which she perhaps inherited from her father, a military man, or from her mother, a pious woman with a good, tender heart. She must have been important to Jesus if He patiently waited for 15 years which elapsed between her first call to follow a religious vocation and its fulfillment. Perhaps she needed to experience the pain of losing her brother, a priest just starting his life of service to the Church, for her to remember that God also had called on her in her youthful years.

Her decisiveness in following her goals, because one *must go all the way until the end*, turned out to be extremely useful in that timespan between deciding to give her life for her brethren and standing over the grave in front of a firing squad of German rifles, faithful until the end. When I discovered this, I realized that every single person has a chance to be a saint, that *God does not see as a mortal* and only He knows the mystery of the human heart. Often, as can be seen in the example of saints and mystics, under an externally rough temperament God hides from human eyes true sainthood known only to Himself.

I also realized that, when I walked to school year after year, I passed the house Sister Canisia was born in and where she had lived for over 20 years. That house stood so close to my own birthplace. I too had the same church on the way, and I stopped there often so I could, like she did, visit Jesus in the Eucharist because *one must always have time for that*, as she would admonish her older sister Jadwiga. And I thought to myself that she, seeing from up there that I (though not I alone) was walking in her footsteps along the same streets, that seeing this she chose me for the part which I play today in regard to her. Since 1992, every time I was on vacation with

my family in Suwałki, I would walk in her footsteps and not only literally on the same streets but also visiting the people and places with which she had formed a bond.

There were years, especially those early ones, full of newly acquired information; but there were also lean years, when I met no-one, found no-one, received no information connected with her person. I am deeply convinced that she would put people in my path, set up “accidental” meetings with them, so that I often found myself at the right place at the right time when someone was waiting, unaware that they too were part of my adventure with Sr. Canisia. I had such meetings in offices, on the street, in stores, even on trains. She inspired me to search, to explain. She prompted things, suggested ideas. Sometimes “her people” made prompts and suggestions while amazing ideas would appear suddenly out of nowhere like the proverbial “bolt from the blue.” She literally whispered to me about where and what. When I had trouble resolving some ambiguity, inaccurate information, I would ask her to find what I was looking for and it came along from her inspiration. I would tell her simply: “Look, you made a mess, now clean it up, please. I did what I could. I can’t do anything more for you. You are on your own now.” She did not always react immediately, but she did react, sometime years later as when her parents’ wedding certificate was concerned. And though there still are informational gaps I do believe that she will lead me to any information which has been preserved in material sources somewhere.

When I was asked to write this testimonial I picked up Sister Canisia’s photo and looked into her face for a long time. Sister Canisia *was a woman beautiful with God’s beauty*. We talked about her because at that time on September 27 was the 110th anniversary of her birth. On this occasion the ladies from the Maria Konopnicka Museum and I were preparing an exhibition about Sister Canisia at St. Alexander’s church and local television spread the news about it.

I am growing closer and closer to Sister Canisia. I see her focused and serious, inspiring respect in children and youngsters whenever she shows up in the school hallway, I see how they grow quiet when she enters the classroom and takes one look at them. But I also see her laughing, smiling, running through the meadow with the children, or going for a walk with them through the Nowogrodek landscape. I see how she does not hide physical suffering, but bears it all *out of love for Jesus*. And it is also difficult not to see her steeped in prayer before Jesus in the Eucharist, then carrying Him to families, to children, to those who needed Him. She must have had a close connection with Him if she missed Him so much that she did not try to hide it. I hear and see her glance full of longing when, returning from the Fara, she says: “*I so wish to go to Jesus already I so strongly wish for that.*” And she walked up the hill towards the Gestapo office, like Jesus along his way of the cross, anticipating that now, any moment now, her heart’s desire would be met. She would *go to Jesus*.

Blessed Sister Canisia is not a sugar-coated saint from a pretty picture, distant and unreal, but someone made up of flesh, bone, and blood, real, and ordinary, and for these reasons more and more close to me. Until now I used to see her more in historical terms, but I do hope that a close personal relation would deepen between us.

Sister Róża Szczecina, Name of Mary Province

...WE HAVE THE SAME FIRST AND LAST NAME

Life puts one in various situations. Sometimes the passage of time allows one to notice how God acts in our daily lives, how he leads and how he blesses us. When I now think back to the beginnings of my religious life I am struck by how Jesus surprised me on the day of my investiture.

While preparing for my novitiate I did not know what name I should take. During our retreat I read short biographical sketches about the Martyred Sisters, but very general ones, which did not reveal their lives in any detail. That is when the name one of them really spoke to me: Sister Daniela. I asked for it and on the day of my investiture I received it. Only after the ceremony the sisters told me that I also bore the same last name as Sister Daniela from Nowogrodek – Józwik. I thought that this could not be accidental, that here Jesus placed Sister Daniela in my life as someone close to me. I clearly felt that Sister Daniela Józwik of Jesus and Mary Immaculate would be someone particularly close to me, and important. And she did.

When I pray to and contemplate our Martyred Sisters, I always think of them as a community in life and death but S. Daniela is the closest one to me. I am fascinated with her personality, cheerful spirit, and faith in God. Her connection with Jesus was so simple and very strong at the same time. Already as a young novice I very much wanted my life to resemble hers. Quietude, goodness, joy, kindness towards other people – those were her characteristics to which I was drawn. When after novitiate I discovered that I would be serving as a religious education teacher. I often asked Sister Daniela for help because after all, she herself had always been among children. I asked that my Patron intercede on my behalf before God, especially at times of discouragement and various difficulties. I believe that she still does. Although my attitude is still not nearly close to that of Blessed Sister Daniela, I strongly believe in her intercession that helps me in my work with people. Her serene and kind attitude continue to challenge me, as I stand before children in the classroom.

I believe and feel deeply that Sister Daniela thinks about me before God. I always thank Jesus that at that time, before my investiture, He put the brochure about the Martyred Sisters in my hands

Sister Daniela Józwik, Holy Name of Jesus Province

...HE WAITS FOR EACH OF US WITH A UNIQUE WEDDING GIFT

My first contact with the Nowogrodek Martyrs was before I entered a convent. When I was reorganizing our parish library I ran into a book about them and I read it right away. To my surprise it turned out that one of the Martyrs, Blessed Sister Canuta, came from the same area as myself. The stories of her life and vocation were very close to me. I was amazed that God calls people to religious life in such clear, direct ways. At the time I was discerning my own vocation. I came to believe that if God is calling me to His unique service then He would guide me and show me what to do next. And that is just what happened. Many times, through various signs or the “prophets,” He would send, God pointed the way and strengthened my vocation.

The Martyred Sisters, especially Sister Canuta, made such a strong impression on me that I decided to take her name during the Sacrament of Confirmation. But ultimately I replaced the

unusual name “Canuta” with that of our Mother Foundress, whom I also got to know before entering the convent.

During my postulancy I was able again to study the history of our Martyrs and to renew my relationship with Sister Canuta. The story of her “red dress” still, until today, fills me with amazement and emotion. It is amazing just how much Jesus, can take care of His beloved, be generous with graces and endless Love. I think that, just as in the unusual case of Sister Canuta, so also in the more or less ordinary calling of each of us, Jesus dreamed of us at the very beginning of the world. He loved us, chose and called us to Nazareth to this particular community at this particular time, and He awaits each of us with a unique wedding gift. It might be a red dress.

Sister Marta Domagała, Junior Sister, Name of Mary Province

...THE LOVE FOR OTHERS IS THE MOST IMPORTANT THING

It is so easy to say the words: “*O most blessed Trinity, we praise and thank you for the example of Blessed Mary Stella and Her Ten Companions, Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth, who by imitating Jesus Christ, offered themselves as a sacrifice of love.*” It is in fact difficult to put it into practice in one’s life. One is easily fascinated by the martyrdom of saints and falsely believes that it was easier to be a martyr then, in the past. I thought that too when I first heard about our Nowogrodek Sisters. I am grateful to them not only for making their vocation real in such a beautiful way but also for showing me that one becomes a saint and martyr throughout one’s life and that everyone is called to sainthood on their own path.

What I especially loved in our Sisters was their selflessness and a sort of “race in sisterly love,” simple gestures, small acts of love, and daily renouncement of self. Every one of them was after all unique, everyone had many virtues and many weaknesses, but yet they were able to live together, love together and die together. They died beautifully because they lived beautifully. And I thank them for having been so very unassuming and simple and because of that they were so great. By their death our Sisters demonstrated to everyone that the love of neighbor is most important and by their lives they remind us that to love others we must first love one another.

Sister Emilia Pociecha, Junior Sister, Name of Mary Province

...I WILL BE MAKING MY VOWS THANKS TO THEIR POWERFUL SUPPORT

On March 5, 2000 I arrived in Rome for a pilgrimage organized by Franciscan University, where I was studying. We traveled by coach through the night and arrived around 9 A.M.. We immediately began a tour of the Roman Forum.

Although we had just arrived and this was my first visit to Rome I persuaded four of my friends to visit the Vatican with me to see Pope John Paul II celebrating the Angelus. We separated from our tour group and ran to the metro station. We followed signs and made our way towards the Vatican. When we arrived at the Vatican we were pleasantly surprised that they were just beginning the Gospel at a Sunday Mass. As it turned out it was the Beatification Mass. Although the Holy Father was really far away, I was deeply moved to see John Paul II and the crowds gathered at the Square.

We were so moved we decided to stay for the entire Mass. Someone standing near offered us their liturgical booklet which contained short biographies of the forty-one people who were being beatified that day. I recall being deeply moved by the story of the Sisters who had offered their lives. I have a photo from that Mass showing me and my friends standing in front of a banner with the Martyred Sisters of Nowogrodek. In the crowds I noticed a large group of sisters waving visible red-and-white scarves. I remember pointing to these sisters and saying I would like to be a religious sister just like them.

At the time I did not realize that those sisters were from the same Congregation as the ones I had met in Erie, Pennsylvania when I got to know then-novice Sister Trina Marie Ulrich. Only years later in Grand Prairie, Texas during a “Come and See” did we figure out that I had been present at the beatification of our Martyred Sisters. I believe that I will be making my vows thanks to their powerful support.

Blessed Sister Stella and Companions, pray for me!

Sister Faustina Ferko, Holy Family Province

(Sister Faustina wrote this testimonial while still a novice. She made her first vows on June 15, 2014.)

...I HAD NO DOUBT ABOUT WHO WE SHOULD ASK TO BE OUR PATRON

Before I left for Ghana I was at an Ignatian retreat (3rd week). One day we were reflecting on the excerpt describing Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem. What struck me most was His awareness of the approaching passion and death and readiness to fulfill the Father’s Will. Jesus did not back out, did not retreat, did not give up.

Another image that entered my mind was that of the Martyred Sisters’ last moments on earth. What were they thinking, once imprisoned? What were they feeling when, after the postponed evening execution, they awaited dawn aware that they would die the next day?

They knew that right then and there what they had prayed for was becoming reality. After all they had to be afraid, overwhelmed. I find it difficult even to imagine such a night and they lived through it. Thanks to faith and God’s help they were able to give their lives for their brethren.

I return to these images because they give me strength in times of doubt, when the thought of giving up sneaks in. When we were selecting a patron for our house in Ghana these two pictures were so strong and so vivid in my mind that I had no doubt who we should ask to be our Patron. My sisters agreed and so did the General Administration. One person’s idea was endorsed by the community which speaks with one voice. And in this way our convent, the house of the second community in Ghana, enjoys the patronage of the Martyrs of Nowogrodek.

I had still another thought when thinking of them as our patrons... The Nowogrodek Sisters are a model of communal living and starting a new mission. After all, their beginnings in Nowogrodek were not easy. The words they received during adversity, during that difficult beginning-- *persist, persist despite all* – give strength and certainty that we need not right away see the fruits of our labor, presence, even prayer. We too, when leaving for Ghana could not



imagine what awaited us. The awareness of the Blessed Martyrs' support and intercession helps us persist in the face of unexpected difficulties.

Sister. Angelina Fafara, Superior of the Blessed Martyrs of Nowogrodek Convent,
Yamfo, Ghana

along the same path

I go
along the same path
steeped in hope
a beckoning echo
but for them”stark questions
rooted
in naked thorns

I lift my thoughts
to intertwine
with thoughts of their
suffering
but for them
heaven split in two
as a consummation
swifter
than bullets

I pick up a fallen leaf
a hushed cord
but for them
the morning bird
awakened the forest to witness
and ordered the trees
to resound

S. Bożena Anna Flak



Bishop Antoni Dziemianko led the pilgrimage from Nowogrodek to the site of the Sisters’ execution and celebrated Holy Mass on August 1,

GRACES RECEIVED

God of mercy and compassion, through the merits of their martyrdom and by their intercession, grant us the grace we humbly ask... This prayer for graces through the intercession of the Blessed Mary Stella and her Ten Companions points towards the Giver of graces, God Almighty, and those who serve as His obedient *tools*. Having fulfilled His will in their earthly life, they received the gift of sainthood and the power to intercede for all intentions presented to them. Praise expressed in the words of the psalm (Ps. 115, 1) “Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory“ undoubtedly accompanies the interceding work of the saints when we hand our lives over to them or make pilgrimages to sites sanctified by their presence (in the past) and by their venerated relics (today).

The proof of the Sisters’ martyrdom have been numerous graces received through their intercession submitted by witnesses, *people from over there*, who were aware of the supernatural dimension of their sacrifice. To the requests from years ago for safe return from a concentration camp, for the presence of a priest in Nowogrodek, for health and protection in the

hard soviet times. Faithful Catholics from all over the world today add requests of their own: for health, safety for the family, the gift of conception. Such petitions offered with faith, and often during a Novena do not remain unanswered. Below we quote selected testimonials of the graces recently received and ascribed to the intercession of the Blessed Martyrs of Nowogrodek.

Evidence of the growing veneration of Blessed Sister Mary Stella and her Ten Companions is found in the fact that the CSFN convents constantly receive requests for materials and information about the Blessed Sisters from Nowogrodek. Common are also letters and requests for their relics. They arrive from places and countries in which we serve: England, Australia, Belarus, the Philippines, France, Ghana, Israel, Italy, Kazakhstan, Ukraine, the United States of America, Poland, and Russia. And it turns out that testimonials of sacrificing oneself for one’s brethren have universal appeal, that they speak in the tongues of many regions and cultures, because petitions have arrived also from Austria, Argentina, Saudi Arabia, Brazil, Chile, Spain, India, Ireland, Costa Rica, Malaysia, Mexico, Salvador, Switzerland, and Vietnam. There are official petitions, e.g. from parishes, but there are also individual ones. We quote as an example



Sarcophagus with the relics of Blessed Mary Stella and her Ten Companions in a chapel of the Nowogrodek Fara

a letter from Germany, which arrived at the General House in Rome on August 1, an anniversary of the martyrdom of the Eleven Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth.

The relics are presented in various ways. Sometimes this event is very ceremonial and formal. This was the case in Kalisz, when on March 4, 2010 the Congregation of the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth presented relics of Blessed Mary Stella and her ten Companions to the Sanctuary of St. Joseph, a site of prayer particularly devoted to preserving life and the family. The event was covered by Radio Maryja and TV Trwam. Among its participants were sisters from three provinces of the congregation, representatives of the Association of the Holy Family, and the school's pre-war alumni who provided testimonials about the Martyrs. These were Tadeusz Kułakowski and Hanna Helszer who survived the arrest with other Nowogrodek people thanks to the Sisters' sacrifice. The liturgy was celebrated by Grodno's Bishop Alexander Kaszkiewicz, assisted by the Ordinary of the Kalisz Diocese Bishop Stanisław Napierała and Bishop Teofil Wilski. The Congregation was represented by the provincial superiors of the three provinces in Belarus, Kraków, and Warsaw; and Sister Bożena Flak, the then general assistant, Rome whose recollections of this event are included here as well.

I HAVE DECIDED TO WRITE TO YOU...

I have decided to write to you and tell you about myself. Sister Raymond (Anna Kukołowicz) was the sister of my grandfather, Józef Kukołowicz. So apparently I am that Sister's grandnephew.

I first heard about Sister Raymond from my father. He died on August 2, 1999 so he never knew that she later was beatified. But I always felt GOD'S PROTECTION around me. Many times in my life death was near. But always, due to some COINCIDENCE, I would survive unscathed. People who witnessed those situations claimed I *have a powerful Guardian Angel by my side*. And my Mother said:

"It is your Grandmother who asked God for such protection because she always prayed for you." I was her most beloved grandson. If I tried to describe all those impossible situations a whole volume would be collected. But I must write about the last incident.

In early 2013 in February, I started experiencing pain in the fists of my both of my hands. The pain was so strong that I was unable to dress myself or press a door handle to open the door. So I would press down with my elbow, and when a handle was rounded I had to ask my wife to open the door for me. Doctors could find no diagnosis and no medications helped.

In June I was invited to a wedding where I was a witness expected to sign the marriage certificate. The marriage was at the church in New Vilnius. Father Wojciech, on seeing my name of Kukołowicz immediately asked if my family came from Barwaniszki. I said that my grandfather Józef was from Barwaniszki. So from this priest I again heard the story of Sister Raymond and the beatification. I heard news just before the 70th anniversary of the Sisters' murder in Nowogrodek and so I decided to visit the place. I saw the site of the martyrdom, their church, their convent, and I'll remember that forever. I prayed by the Sisters' sarcophagus and in front of the painting of Our Lady of Nowogrodek and I begged for my hands to stop hurting. While there I met Mrs. Czesława



Kniaziewa who, as it turned out, was carrying relics of the Martyred Sisters to the church in Kleck. She allowed me to hold those relics in my hands. I held them, and I asked for recovery. After returning home, I did not even notice when it happened, but at some point I realized that my hands were no longer hurting. What I had asked for did happen. I WAS HEALED without medications, without doctors, but only with THE WORD OF GOD.

Zbigniew Kukołowicz, Nemez'ys near Vilnius

FATHER, ENTRUST YOUR WORRY TO THE INTERCESSION OF THE SISTERS ON NOWOGRODEK...

I heard of the Martyred Sisters when their beatification was approaching. It has been fifteen years. I then read “Eleven Prie-dieux” by Maria Starzyńska. At that time we talked a lot about the Blessed Sisters on Radio Rodzina (“Radio Family”), everything was so clear. Kalisz, Ostrzeszów and so many good meetings with our contemporary sisters.

Later I became fascinated with a certain aspect of the events of July 1943 namely the context in which the Sisters laid their lives in sacrifice. The fate of Nowogrodek’s families was being decided. After mass arrests it became clear that losing so many people, often fathers of the families, would make the lives of those left behind dramatically difficult. The Sisters were sensitive to the conditions of family life. As Nazareth Sisters they understood that if those arrested were executed then the scale of the tragedy would be beyond measure. It would mean not only death at that moment, but also a great gap and a loss of people important for families in the future. Many homes would have been affected by that.



I could speak separately about the sacrifice for the priest but this testimonial is not about him.

By this introduction I only want to note that even before 2010 the Martyred Sisters of Nowogrodek were dear to me. I did not think then that they would come to my aid in a matter which I would never dare recommend in prayer. I felt it was a simple technical problem, not easy to solve of course, but not one in which heaven needed to be involved. That is what I thought then, even though I was a priest!

What is it all about?

I have been running the radio station called *Radio Rodzina* in the Kalisz Diocese for 16 years. As the director I take care of editing and programming current affairs, as well as equipment which is quite complicated pricey. I stress this because even a simple exchange of a broken piece is a big expense. A few months before March 2010, we had to deal with a very troublesome bug of the radio station responsible for transmitting the radio signal from the studio at 144 Złota Street in Kalisz to the tower of the parish church in Chełmce, where our transmission aerials are located. It is best when electric equipment either works or it doesn't. The hardest to eliminate is such a malfunction when a device can work for a long time and then suddenly it stops – even if only for a few seconds. And that was the case for us. Nothing could fixed the problem, not many repairs over many months by very experienced engineers, nor the listeners' complaints about interruptions

in radio broadcasting. Nothing! As I noted, purchase of new equipment at the cost of several thousand dollars was out of the question. It was a hopeless situation.

And here we were preparing for a prayer meeting in the intention of families and the defense of life at St. Joseph's Shrine in Kalisz. A solemn presentation of the Relics of the Blessed Eleven Martyrs of Nowogrodek was planned for March 4, 2010. That is when someone suggested: *Father, entrust your worry to the intercession of the Sisters of Nowogrodek. They are supposed to specialize in such difficult things, even technical ones. Sister Adriana has a special devotion to them.* And that is what I did! I asked Sister Adriana for prayer. And in fact I soon forgot all about it because previously broadcasting interruptions would happen, then they would stop for a while and then they would resume. But no longer! It finally dawned on me that my petition was heard. Believe it or not but since March 4, 2010 the above-the interruptions never happened again, not even a single time! Even our engineers and technicians would ask what happened, then would joke that I must have made a donation to the Sisters in exchange for prayer, to fix the transmission bug. Well, perhaps I am behind in this department. Today we no longer use that equipment - it had to be exchanged for unrelated reasons. But for over two years, until July 2012 with some surprise I was witnessing a miracle.

Since that time I have yet another connection with the Martyred Sisters. Yes, I am very grateful to them for fixing the equipment, but even more for their catechesis about heaven, the communion of saints, the support and help of those who are already with the Lord. And again, it is about family, this time Radio Family.

I thank Sister Adriana for her prayers here on earth related to this matter.

Father Leszek Szkopek , Radio Rodzina, Kalisz
on the Sunday of the Holy Family, December 28, 2014

FOR THESE BLESSINGS... WE THANK ALMIGHTY GOD

In thanking God for the gift of Blessed Mary Stella and her ten Companions, Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth, I would like to inform you about the blessings received through their intercession.

At the age of 33 our son was uncommitted and although he had many female friends he did not take steps towards getting married. My husband and I prayed for God's will to be fulfilled in our son's life. At some point one a priests gave me a holy card with a prayer to obtain graces through the intercession of the Blessed Martyrs of Nowogrodek. Our prayers through the intercession of the Sisters lasted for two years. At that time our son met a young lady eight years his junior and very religious. They got married and have been a happy family for two years now. We believe that only through the Sisters' intercession God shaped our son's life path.

Because the Nazareth Sisters are particularly engaged in matters of our earthly families, we also started praying in the intention of our god-daughter. Four years ago at the age of 22 she left with her boyfriend for Germany. They lived there together and at some point married civilly, having no interest in a church wedding. Here again the Martyred Sisters helped accomplish conversion. After a year and a half of praying novenas through the intercession of the Blessed

Martyred Sisters, our god-daughter received the sacrament of marriage. They are now a happily married couple and active in the Catholic Church in Germany.

We thank God Almighty for these blessings from the depths of our grateful hearts.

K. and K. Bianga

...THE HAND THAT HELD THE RELICS

Thanks to the intercession of the Blessed Martyred Sisters we received the gift of parenthood.

We received the sacrament of marriage in 1998 and, probably like many newlyweds, we did not think of children right away. After two years we began trying for a child but in vain. After a year of constant waiting and negative pregnancy tests we decided to undergo detailed examinations. The results were all very good but still no child.

God directed our steps to Zakopane, to the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth. We visited them every year. The warm, familial atmosphere quickly brought us and the Sisters closer together. During our annual visits we asked for prayers for children for us.

In January, 2002 we planned another trip to Zakopane with our friends. The day before departure we found out that friends would not be going due to illness. We started to hesitate if we should go without them. Fortunately, we did not change our plans.

On January 27, 2002 we again stood at the threshold of the Sisters' home in Zakopane. There were few guests, so it was easy to talk to the Sisters a lot. The breakthrough meeting with Sister Pawła Więcek (superior), Sister Teresita, and Sister Damiana occurred in the evening of January 30, 2002. After discussing the activities of the day we asked the Sisters for additional prayers for our offspring. That is when Sister Pawła suggested we pray with the relics of the Blessed Martyred Sisters. She held out her open hand, in which the relics rested. We did not feel worthy of those so we did not want to touch them not to mention take them with us to Białystok. The Sister patiently kept holding the relics in her open hands. On the way home we were not alone any more but in the company of the Eleven Sisters in their relics. From then on we felt unusual joy, internal peace, and mostly faith and hope. Every day we prayed through their intercession. And a month after returning from Zakopane we were going to have a baby!

The beginnings of pregnancy were hard. In April and May I was in the hospital due to exhaustion. But fortunately the pregnancy was not at risk. In May my husband returned the relics to Zakopane. The Sisters kept praying. In the eighth month I started to feel strong contractions and again found myself in the hospital. After the ultrasound test the doctors diagnosed deficiency of amniotic fluid. We kept Sister Pawła informed about the course of the pregnancy and with other sisters she prayed and repeated: "Think positive, we are storming Heaven."

During my fourth stay in the hospital the doctor asked if we would agree to amnioinfusion - adding amniotic fluids. We were terrified at the thought of interfering with the life of our little one, but we agreed to the procedure. We also worried about the CRP reading which was elevated suggesting an infection. I took an antibiotic for a month. During amnioinfusion, 380 ml of amniotic fluid was injected increasing the total volume of amniotic fluid for only one day. Because of this, two weeks before my due date the doctor decided it was time to end the pregnancy.

Remigiusz was born on November 24, 2002 weighing in at 6 lb and 21 in long. He was under the care of a cardiologist, nephrologist, and neurologist. He is now three and a half years old and he needs to see a specialist annually. He is the fruit of the Blessed Martyred Sisters' intercession, and of prayers of many Sisters of the Holy Family.

In May 2002 we again stood at the threshold of the Zakopane convent. We went to the chapel, to the relics of the Blessed Martyred Sisters, where we thanked God for the gift of parenthood and we thanked the Martyrs for their intercession and we asked again for new offspring.

We received that gift in April. This pregnancy was uneventful. Rafał was born on January 18, 2006 strong and healthy at 8.6 lb and 23 in. long.

Remigiusz and Rafał are our most wonderful gifts from God. We are convinced that we received the gift of parenthood through the intercession of the Blessed Martyred Sisters of Nowogrodek and through the prayers of the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth.

K. and T. Murkowski

...WE RECEIVED MANY BLESSINGS

We heartily thank you, Sisters, for your prayers. We have so far received many blessings through the intercession of the Blessed Martyred Sisters. The boy suffering from cancer is doing well and has a good prognosis. The adolescent girl who had previously caused difficulties is on a much better path now and doesn't cause worry to her parents. The children whose parents wanted to place them in an orphanage are now being raised by their father and have daily support of people of good will.

May good God reward you!

We would like to ask you to pray for our friend who is suffering from cancer and is awaiting surgery. I pray for strength and God's blessing for her.

Anna Drażkowska

Dearest Sisters,

On Wednesday after Easter I wrote an e-mail asking you to pray for my brother who was being unfairly kept in jail. We then prayed to the Blessed Martyrs of Nowogrodek.

On Thursday after Easter the first trial took place after being postponed from the Holy Week supposedly due to the judge's illness. My brother denied most of the accusations because they were lies although previously he was so resigned that he was willing to admit to anything. Everyone thought that he was giving up but the Lord was watchful. The persons who had falsely accused him were terribly inconsistent in their testimony. All doubts were diffused. The judge overturned the custody and the same day my brother was released. I have absolutely no doubt that it was the work of God Himself as an answer to the prayer of the Blessed Martyrs from Nowogrodek and your congregation.

I have no words to express my gratitude. I can only promise that whatever God sends, whether joys or difficult moments, I shall offer for your congregation and others.

Thanks be to God for your ministry. And may God bless every one of you!

Joanna

BECAUSE EVERYTHING STARTED A YEAR AGO IN NOWOGRODEK

[...] I have such good memories of my stay in Nowogrodek a year ago and the opportunity to get to know the Sisters! It was for me also a lesson in patriotism by getting to know the history of Poland!

As I previously mentioned my wife Anna suffers from multiple sclerosis.

This illness struck us like a bolt from the blue! I deeply believe that the Blessed Martyred Sisters will effectively intercede for my wife. I thank you for the promised prayers and the Holy Mass offered in Nowogrodek before the sarcophagus of the Blessed Sisters.

I trust that, if God so wishes, this incurable illness shall end.

Even now great things are happening. Anna is surrounded by excellent medical care. Without any connections she qualified for the newest therapy (with “interferon”) covered by the national health plan. I want to mention that the treatment cycle costs 12,000 PLN! By what miracle my wife so quickly qualified for this treatment only God Himself knows. And this is tangible proof of God’s intervention and, I think, of the Martyred Sisters’ intercession for whom I have deep reverence.

I ask for more prayers please. [...] I promise to pray for you, Sister, for Nowogrodek because everything started a year ago in Nowogrodek!

Arkadiusz Bielecki

...THE HOPE THAT I SHALL BE HEARD

...I used to go to the Batorówka forest at various times of the year. The sun was shining every single time I stood by the grave. I tell this to everyone I meet. The people of Nowogrodek can be proud to have such intercessors in the Sisters. One can turn to the Martyred Sisters with anything. The hope that one shall be heard is always there.

The Martyrs, like the Sisters currently serving in Nowogrodek, play an important role in my life. Their convent is like my family home. In 1998 I was diagnosed with liver cancer. After extensive testing the doctor told me that I had two months to live. My husband told this to the sisters who immediately surrounded me with prayer. The tumor took over the entire liver. It was not malignant, but also not operable. The only solution was to remove the organ. The doctors set the time for the surgery a few times and every time moved it. And, I am still living, although I should not be. My grandson was born prematurely. He had a small chance of survival. The Sisters again started to storm heaven. The Sisters also helped us to import the necessary medications from Poland. Little Marek has been prayed for by the Sisters.

Jadwiga Łysy, Nowogrodek

This testimonial was cited in the article titled ‘My Nazareth,’ by A. Wawryniuk, published in *Echo Katolickie* (Catholic Echo), October 4-10, 2014, page 16.



God is love, and whoever remains in love remains in God and God in him. (1John 4:16)

DEAR SISTERS IN CHRIST,

I am a student of theology and a seminarian in Germany. I discovered my calling a few years ago. Faith and God became the most important things in my life. Venerating the saints is very important to me and very helpful in my spiritual journey. While in the seminary I heard from faculty priests the story of the Blessed Sister Mary Stella and her Ten Companions, Martyrs from Nowogrodek. I read the story of their lives and was deeply moved. I prayed to them and experienced their help and support. My prayers were heard. They strengthened my faith and helped me in daily life. With great hope in my heart I ask you, Sisters, for the relics of the Blessed Sister Stella and her Ten Companions. The reliquary with their relics placed for public veneration at our seminar would be a great blessing for us.

*United in prayer,
Alexander Persch*

This letter, written in Italian, was sent from Germany on July 28, and received at the General House in Rome on August 1, 2013.

THROUGH A MEADOW FULL OF FLOWERS

Someone gives someone a sign, whispers that we are getting up and going to St. Joseph's chapel, then a procession from there. So we rise from the pews half bent-over before the humming cameras and struggle through the tangle of cables on the floor focused on just one thing not to stumble and fall! The crowd in the side nave shifts somewhat to make room for the sisters who in a moment will present to the city of Kalisz the relics of their Sisters, the Blessed Martyrs of Nowogrodek.

I tightly grasp the reliquary with both hands. It is not large but has its weight and its bottom stand clings to my hands. I close my eyes. The inner space so created allows me to focus, to turn my thoughts to the places where beats the heart of the now-happening history. The walls of the Kalisz basilica slowly recede. The crowds move away as do the voices of witnesses recalling the events of 1943.

No people there, just the forest, a green forest, enriched since spring with self-sown tiny oak trees, birches, and pines. It rustles with the emotions of the first pilgrims. In 1980 there was no large cross in this forest at the symbolic grave of the Martyrs. Communist authorities did not allow public worship or group visits to the site of the execution. So the first Sisters from Poland who went there, went there not in groups but in pairs, to kiss the holy ground of their modest Family. Rushing waters of memory find me again on my knees, in the cool moisture of moss. The guide from the Nowogrodek community that was still in hiding pushes some branches aside. On a young tree hangs a small cross to mark the spot. We walk away from that tree off to the side to cover the tracks so a path does not form. Perhaps someday freedom will come here...

I tighten my hands on the reliquary. I kiss the small glass behind which are tiny bone fragments of Blessed Sister Mary Stella and her Ten Sisters. I open my eyes and catch the eye of those standing closest to me. They have not missed my act of love and veneration. I move the reliquary a little to the right then to the left. Heads bow. There are tears of joy in the eyes of those who paid silent tribute. The Sisters of Nowogrodek led by their superior Sister Mary Stella mustered great courage. United by their intention of sacrifice they asked God who is love to work an exchange of love, to take their lives and save a priest and those who had families. The prayer of those defenseless women became a challenge to the forces of war and hatred. It grasped God's heart and the good prevailed.

I clenched both hands on the reliquary and tried to grasp the incomprehensible ways of Providence. I try in vain, to grasp what they felt, my sisters, as they went down the trench of death and annihilation. They trusted the Light for sure. But they could not know that God's generous winds will blow their names to the end of the earth. They did not know, absolutely not, that this day would come when they would reside permanently with the famous Kalisz Joseph, in the Sanctuary of Life. Our Father, who is in Heaven knows the names of all those who come to help him.



And in helping, the Blessed Sisters do not discriminate. In helping they are eager and hasty, because they feel for families, destroyed more by the sleek enemy of the seductive media which package bondage as freedom.

I tighten my grip on the reliquary. The announcer mentions the procession neatly using a fragment of a poem about the Nowogrodek sacrifice. We wind our way out of the crowd not through a flowery meadow, but again through a tangle of cables on the floor. We would walk through the center of the basilica. And suddenly peace. And then a thought, give them to me, all of them, those crowded in the church and those forced to stay outside. Give them to me, Christ the King, following the example of and through the intercession of Blessed Sister Stella and her Companions.

I tighten my grip on the reliquary. I give them all to You, Christ the King.

Sister Bożena Anna Flak





**Servant of God Sister Maria Małgorzata Banas
of the Heart of Jesus in Agony in the Garden
(Ludwika Banaś, 1896-1966)**

At this time the beatification proceedings of Sister Małgorzata continue in Rome. On March 10, 2014 in the Congregation for the Causes of Saints in Rome, a Petition was filed documenting the life and virtues of the servant of God, Sister Małgorzata. We believe that the example of her steadfast and humble faith, her faithful service to God, the Church, and people in the exceptionally difficult circumstances of political slavery will also today serve as a sign, a strengthening, and an example not only for Christians but for all those who have the opportunity to know her. We hope that God Himself shall confirm the sainthood of Sister Małgorzata's life with a miracle, which is required for beatification.

PRAYER FOR THE BEATIFICATION OF SISTER MAŁGORZATA

God of Mercy, your Son Jesus Christ lovingly fulfilled your will and his death became the source of new life for the Church. Małgorzata Banas, a Nazareth sister of Nowogrodek, in the following of Jesus accepted the challenges of her life and transformed them into a way of dedicated ministry to the Church. Grant that this faithful servant be counted among the blessed. May her witness of deep faith, courage and love of neighbor help us to remain faithful to Jesus and his Church. Grant our petitions through her intercession. We ask this in the name of Jesus. Amen.

**PRAYER TO OBTAIN GRACES THROUGH THE INTERCESSION OF BLESSED MARY
STELLA AND HER TEN COMPANIONS**

O most blessed Trinity, we praise and thank you for the example of Blessed Mary Stella and Her Ten Companions, Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth, who by imitating Jesus Christ, offered themselves as a sacrifice of love.

God of mercy and compassion, through the merits of their martyrdom and by their intercession, grant us the grace we humbly ask...(insert intention here)...so that like them, we may witness with our lives to the presence of the Kingdom of God's love and extend it to the human family throughout the world. We ask this through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Please notify the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth at Via Nazareth, 400, 00166 Roma, Italy, or e-mail: info@generalate.org; or the nearest convent of the Congregation.