

## Stanislawa Leczynska



### "the Midwife at Auschwitz"

The following is taken from *Maternal Love of Life: Texts About Stanislawka Leszczynska*, edited by Bishop Bejz, 1988.

#### **Introduction to hell**

Stanislawa was arrested in Lodz on February 18, 1943, with her daughter and two sons. The sons were sent to the labour camp at Mathausen and Gusen to work in the stone quarries. She and her daughter, Sylvia, were sent to Auschwitz where they arrived on April 17, 1943. They were given the numbers 41335 and 41336, tattooed on their forearms. They would remain as mementos of the camp.

They were deprived of all possessions, stripped, shaven, and given camp clothing – striped overalls and some underwear. Sylvia recalls that she received two left-foot slippers and a slip. All of the clothing was infested with lice. Stanislawka spent two years in the women's facility at Auschwitz, working as a midwife in three different blocks. The "sick-ward" in all of these was the same: 40-meter long bare wooden barracks heated by single brick stove. Because the camp was situated in a low-lying area, the barracks were frequently flooded with 2-3 inches of water. Within the sick-ward were three layers of bunks, lining both sides of the building. Up to three or four women would sleep on the filth-covered bunks at a time. The straw "mattresses", ridden with vermin, had long ago been ground nearly to dust and thus provided little comfort. Most women were left to lie on nothing more than wooden planks.

Stanislawa recalls the conditions the sick inmates had to contend with: "In the winter, when the temperatures were very low, icicles formed on the ceiling from the breath and perspiration – one silvery rod next to another. When, in the evening, the lights were put on, they glittered beautifully. They looked like one great crystal chandelier. But under these icicles, people slept and sick women delivered their babies."

The brick stove, says Stanislawka, "served as the only place for deliveries, because no other... arrangement for the purpose was available. The oven was only lit a few times during the year... Thirty bunks nearest the oven constituted the so-called maternity ward."

Stanislawka goes on to describe the misery of life in the camp: "In general the block was dominated by infections, stench and all kinds of vermin. Rats were abundant.... The victims of the rats were not only sick women but also the newborn children." There were 1,000 to 1,200 patients on average in the sick-ward. Of these at least a dozen died each day.

"In these conditions," explains Stanislawka, "the fate of the women in labour was tragic, and the role of the midwife extremely difficult. There were no antiseptics, no dressings, and no medicine, other than a small quota of aspirin." The food, such as it was, consisted mainly of "decayed, boiled greens."

Initially, Stanislawka had to manage on her own, with occasional help from her young daughter. "The German camp physicians – Rhode, Koenig and Mengele – could not, of course, 'soil' their medical vocations by giving help to non-Germans...." Later, she was aided by female physicians who were themselves prisoners. As evidence of Stanislawka's deep humility, she placed very little emphasis on her own remarkable work. Rather, she spoke of the "greatness of the doctors, their devotion, [which] is frozen in the eyes of those who, tormented with the bondage of suffering, will never speak again.... The physicians did not work there for fame, approval, nor for the fulfillment of professional ambitions. All these motives were put aside. There remained only the medical duty of saving life in every case and in every situation, compounded with compassion for human suffering."

The illness afflicting most inmates was dysentery. Typhus also swept through the camp and, for a time, Stanislawka herself fell victim to the disease. She says that "the incidence of typhoid fever was, as far as possible, concealed from the *Lagerarzt* [the SS camp physician] usually by writing on the sick-list that the patient had the 'flu,' since those sick with typhoid were immediately liquidated...."

### **Small miracles amid the squalor**

During her imprisonment, Stanislawka helped deliver over 3,000 babies. But there was something even more remarkable than her trying to cope amidst these hostile conditions. As she explained to her son, the *Lagerarzt* ordered her to make a report on the infections and mortality rate for mothers and infants. She replied, "I have not had a single case of death, either among the mothers or the newborns." The *Lagerarzt's* response was a look of disbelief. "He said that even the most perfectly handled clinics of German universities cannot claim such success. In his eyes I read anger and envy." In a self-deprecating manner, Stanislawka attributed this to fact that "the emaciated organisms were too barren a medium for bacteria." However, her children and fellow inmates ascribe this miraculous record to causes more than natural.

### **Planned parenting in Auschwitz**

When time for delivery approached, the already famished mother had to give up her bread ration for a time in order obtain a sheet which would be used to make diapers and clothing for the child. Needless to say, the Nazis did not provide such things. To make things worse, there was no running water in the barracks which made cleaning diapers a risky experience, since inmates were not permitted to move freely in the block. Any cleaning had to be done surreptitiously. Finally, there was no extra food or milk allocated for the infants. But simple

neglect apparently did not satisfy the camp administrators. Thus, criminal inmates were employed to dispose of the troublesome infants.

Until May 1943, all the children born in Auschwitz were drowned in a barrel. These operations were performed by *Schwester* [sister] Klara, a German midwife who [later on] was imprisoned for infanticide. "As a *Berufsverbrecherin* (one guilty of occupational crime), and thus forbidden to practice her profession," says Stanislaw, "she was entrusted with a function to which she was more suited." Later, Klara was aided by a German prostitute, the redheaded *Schwester* Pfani. "After each delivery, the mothers were able to hear the characteristic gurgle and splashing water" as their babies were disposed of.

The situation changed somewhat in May 1943. "Aryan-looking" children, with blue eyes and fair hair, were spared *Schwester* Klara's treatment and sent to a centre in the town of Naklo to be "de-nationalized." There they would end up in orphanages, or were placed with German parents.

"Hoping that in the future it would be possible to recover these children, to bring them back to their mothers," Stanislaw explains, "I organized a method of marking the children with a 'tattoo' that would not be recognized by the SS guards. Many a mother was comforted by the thought that some day she would be able to find her lost happiness." Meanwhile, the fate of those left behind was hardly improved. The infants slowly died from malnutrition. Among the countless tragedies witnessed by Stanislaw, one in particular, stands out.

"I vividly recall a woman from Vilno, sent to Auschwitz for giving help to the partisans. Immediately after giving birth to a child her number was called out. . . I went to excuse her. This did not help but merely intensified anger. I realized she was being called out to the crematorium. She wrapped the child in a dirty piece of paper, pressed it to her breasts. . . Her lips moved noiselessly. She tried to sing her baby a song, as mothers often did there, murmuring to their infants various lullabies with which they tried to compensate them for the piercing cold and hunger, for their misery. However, she did not have the strength. . . she was unable to emit a sound . . . only large copious tears came from under her eyelids, flowing over her unusually pale cheeks and falling onto the head of the tiny child condemned to death."

Stanislaw Leszczynska concludes her brief but terrible memoir with the following remarks: "All of the babies were born alive. It was their purpose to live." Of the infants who remained at Auschwitz, "scarcely thirty survived the camp. Several hundred were sent to Naklo. . . About 1,500 were drowned by *Schwester* Klara and Pfani. More than 1,000 died of cold and hunger." These figures cover the period from April, 1943, when Stanislaw arrived, to the liberation of the camp in January, 1945.

### **Other accounts**

In view of Stanislaw's reticence, we must rely on family members and fellow inmates to give us a more complete picture of her heroic activities. Her son Bronislaw reports that upon her arrival in the camp she tried to conceal her midwife identity card. "With this in hand, she stopped a German doctor in the camp, which was an act of courage in itself, punishable by death. She showed him her document. . . He thought about it for awhile and decided that she would perform the function of midwife in the so-called 'maternity ward.'" There she met the aforementioned *Schwester* Klara who informed her that each child delivered was to be declared "still-born," leaving it up to her as to how to "dispose" of the baby. Says Bronislaw, "She later beat my mother on the head. . . for not abiding by her instructions. . . She was then called to the *Lagerarzt* and he ordered her to perform infanticide if she wanted to survive. He was surprised when this

small, weak woman, whom he could crush with his boot, replied: 'No, never.' Why they did not kill her then, no one knows."

Her son goes on to recall Stanislaw's encounter with the notorious Dr. Mengele (who performed medical experiments on the inmates). Despite the gruesome setting, the following account is not without some humour. "When my mother opposed Mengele, who ordered her to kill babies being born in Auschwitz, he became furious. Describing this, my mother said: 'I only saw his long boots jumping back and forth... and I heard him shout: *'Befehl ist befehl'* [an order is an order]. "Recalling these words many years later, I realized that since my mother was quite small and she had the habit of looking down when she thought about something... she stood with lowered eyes and saw his long boots nervously jumping in front of her.... Was this terrible murderer (he was a physician after all) trying to explain away his order to kill newborn babies? In any case, neither then nor at any other time, did he raise his murderous hand against my mother."

On another occasion, Dr. Mengele entered the maternity ward. Seeing Stanislaw busy with deliveries, he said: "Mutti [Mother], you have earned a lot of money today. You must stand a beer." "How is one to understand this joke?" asks her son. "Mengele no doubt knew that the suffering inmates treated Stanislaw Leszczynska as a mother and commonly referred to her as 'Mother'. If consciously, or unconsciously, he referred to this, he at the same time showed respect to the maternal love and moral force which Stanislaw personified there."

One of the more fortunate inmates, Maria Saloman, gives us her impressions of Stanislaw: "For weeks she never had a chance to lie down. She sometimes sat down near a patient on the oven, dozed for a moment, but soon jumped up and ran to one of the moaning women. . . . When Mrs. Leszczynska first approached me, I knew that everything would be alright. I do not know why, but this was so. My baby managed to last three months in the camp, but seemed doomed to die of starvation. I was completely devoid of milk. 'Mother' somehow found two women to wet-nurse my baby, an Estonian and a Russian. To this day I do not know at what price [she did this]. My Liz owes her life to Stanislaw Leszczynska. I cannot think of her without tears coming to my eyes."

Stanislaw displayed as much common sense as courage. One survivor tells how she would procure water and, on occasions, a herbal brew which she used to wash the infants. Having to use the same water for all the babies, Stanislaw washed the healthy children followed by the sick ones so as not to infect the former. Kazimera Bogdanska explains that she was unable to nurse her tiny daughter. Nevertheless, Stanislaw informed her that she should still give the child an empty breast "so the glands would not stop working." "Mother was right," says Kazimera, "How lucky I was that I believed her. When liberty came in January 1945 and I was taken to a real hospital (since I had typhoid fever) the doctor allowed me to continue to give my child my breast devoid of milk. After some time milk returned. My daughter began to gain weight. . . . She started to become round and rosy cheeked. . . . Mother's wisdom and faith saved my only child."

## **Piety**

Above all things it was Stanislaw's great piety which sustained her and which she always tried to impart to others. According to Maria Saloman: "Before making a delivery, [Stanislaw] made the sign of the cross and prayed. She whispered a prayer in which she sought not only help and hope, but found strength to sustain her in her inhuman toil. She worked for us alone, day after day, night after night. Without a moment's rest, without any replacement."

One of the female physicians, Elzbieta Pawlowska, remembers that Stanislawka "was able to organize her prayers in such a manner that she got others to participate. . . . We would sit on the bunks. 'Mother' would start some prayer and then we would sing. We sang quietly. It was not possible otherwise. It was only a moment – some 15 or 30 minutes – but all was peaceful. There was an atmosphere she was able to create. I remember Russian women from nearby wards coming to participate."

Maria Oyrzynska says that one day, while assisting Stanislawka with a delivery, the latter took the baby, washed it, wrapped it in paper and a blanket and said: "Now the most important thing. We shall baptize the child." "I was the godmother," Maria recalls, "this was my first godchild. . . [Stanislawka] poured some water on the baby's head and said: 'I baptize you, Adam, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.' As godmother I took my responsibility very seriously and looked after Adam. Considering the camp conditions he lived relatively long. A whole three weeks."

Stanislawka Leszczynska she passed away in 1974 in Poland. She was commemorated in a "Chalice of Life," offered to the famous Czestochowa shrine at Jasna Gora by Polish women in May 1982, and in 1983 the Krakow School for Obstetricians was named in her honor.