Mother Maria Skobtsova (1891–1945)

Elisabeth Behr-Sigel

Note: Elisabeth Behr-Sigel knew Mother Maria and most of her inner circle of friends in Paris. Her article, slightly abridged in this translation, was published in *Le Messager orthodoxe*, issue 111 (November 1989). Behr-Sigel lived to see Mother Maria's formal glorification by the Ecumenical Patriarchate in 2004 and died the following year at age 98.

Avant-garde poet in the sophisticated intellectual milieu of Saint Petersburg, member of the Socialist Revolutionary Party in Russia, twice married and divorced, mother of three children, later a devoted nun of the Russian Church in exile, and finally a member of the resistance in occupied France who was deported to the Ravensbrück concentration camp, where she died shortly before the liberation: such was the path of Mother Maria Skobtsova's life.

Childhood and Family Background

Elisabeth Pilenko was born on December 8, 1891. Her family belonged to the Ukrainian landed aristocracy. One of her eighteenth-century ancestors married Proskovia Romanova, sister of Empress Anna. Her father created a model vineyard operation near the town of Anapa on the shore of the Black Sea. There Elisabeth experienced a happy childhood that ended, however, with a tragic event: the premature death of her father. This event tormented the adolescent girl. Mother Maria, writing later, referred back to the crisis:

> The only thing that tormented me, the one question that required an answer was this: Do I believe in God? Does God exist? Then came the answer: my father was dead. The thoughts that jostled together in my head were quite simple: this is an unjust death. Therefore there is no justice. And if there is no justice, there is no just God. If there is no just God, there is no God at all. I had broken through to the adult secret: God does not exist. The world is full of misery, evil, and injustice. And so my childhood came to an end.

Saint Petersburg

At that time, Elisabeth was fourteen years old. Shortly after her father's death, her mother decided to settle in St. Petersburg, where the family had connections among those close to the imperial court. But the young girl, whose talent as a poet was already evident, spent her time in avant-garde literary circles. The Russian imperial capital was then a major center of the Russian religious renaissance of the beginning of the 20th century. Elisabeth forged ties with the symbolist poet Alexander Blok. At eighteen, she married Dmitri Kouzmin-Karavayev, a young lawyer and member of the Social Democratic Party. The young couple made frequent appearances among the refined elite that gathered around the writer Vyacheslav Ivanov. . . .

Eventually she grew weary of the hollowness of the discussions in this social milieu. She reproached the progressive intelligentsia for interminably discussing revolution without ever being willing to act or to sacrifice their lives for it. She was evolving toward a mystical populism, a messianic idea of the Rus-

sian people and land. She wrote in 1913, "I am for the land, for the simple people of Russia. . . . I reject the uprooted, soulless cultural elite." For Elisabeth, as for Dostoyevsky, the "fertile motherland," source of life, was sacred. Christ, however, remained on her horizon. . . . "The people need Christ," she wrote. At this time she also experienced the desire to deepen her knowledge of the Orthodox Christian religion. She became one of the first women, if not the very first, to take courses (as non-resident day student) at the St. Petersburg Theological Academy. Her marriage, meanwhile, had come apart. A divorce made the rupture final.

Revolution and Civil War

When the Russian Revolution broke out, Elisabeth was an adherent of the Socialist Revolutionary Party, an idealistic movement that combined, not without some confusion, Russian populism—with its aspirations for *pravda* ("truth-justice")—with the ideals of Western democracy. Everyone knows the outcome of these efforts, how the cynical realism of Lenin's Bolshevik party triumphed in Russia, eliminating the Socialist Revolutionary majority democratically elected to the first constituent assembly.

Fleeing from Bolshevism, Elisabeth went to the family estate in Anapa in January of 1918. Elected to the municipal council of the town, she performed the duties of mayor. This she managed under the difficult and dangerous circumstances of the Civil War following the seizure of power by the soviets. In August 1918, a group from the White Army occupied Anapa. An independent government was set up in the province. Accused of collaboration with the local soviet, the young woman was brought before a military tribunal. In the end, the tribunal imposed only a symbolic penalty; one of the judges was a young officer Daniel Skobtsov. Having fallen in love with Elisabeth, he soon married her. Two children, Yuri and Anastasia, would be born from this union.

Elizaveta Skobtsova with the children. (www.pravmir.com/the-challenge-of-a-20th-century-saint-maria-skobtsova)

Without renouncing her socialist-revolutionary ideal—perhaps even because of it—Elisabeth took part in her husband's struggle against Bolshevism. Daniel Skobtsov became a member of the ephemeral Ukrainian government, but the vagaries of the Civil War ended up separating the couple. After the defeat of the White Army forces and the evacuation from Crimea, exile became the only option. A pregnant Elisabeth embarked at Novorossysk with her mother and her eldest daughter, Gaïana (born from her first marriage), on the last boat leaving for Georgia. After a nightmare of a sea voyage, Yuri was born, safe and sound, in Tblisi. Elisabeth's husband managed to join them at Constantinople, where, one year later, Anastasia was born. Following the flood of Russian émigrés, in 1922 the entire family settled in Paris, now the capital of "Russia in exile."

Death of a Child

In Paris, the Skobtsov family experienced poverty and total insecurity, the difficult fate of those officially designated as *stateless*. All of these

material hardships were completely overshadowed, however, by the tragic illness and death of Anastasia during the winter of 1923–1924. Following a diagnosis of meningitis that came too late, the young child was carried away in a slow and painful death. The death of the child whose name meant "Resurrection" broke her mother's heart. But paradoxically, the Living God, this God in whom Elisabeth had ceased to believe after the death of her father, reentered her life through the same emotional breach. She experienced the catastrophe as a mysterious divine "visitation," but also as an anticipation of the Last Judgment. As she sat near her dead child, the mother wrote these lines:

> I never understood what repentance meant, but now I see with horror how contemptible I am. Throughout my life, I have been wandering along pathways with no exit. Now I want to commit to the clear way, the purified path. Not that I believe in this life, but in order to justify, understand, and accept death. Nothing is greater than the commandment, "Love one another." To follow love to its end; to love without exception. Then everything becomes clear, and this life, which otherwise would be nothing more than an abominable burden, is justified.

"The death of a loved one is a door that opens suddenly onto eternity," wrote Mother Maria later. "By visiting us, the Lord reveals the true nature of things: on the one hand, the dead skeleton of a human being and of all creation, mortal; on the other, the spirit of fire, the giver of life. The consoler who consumes and fills all things."

From that moment on everything was different. Elisabeth's entire existence was dominated and penetrated by an intuition, both terrifying and joyful, of the eschaton. "The old has passed away, behold, the new has come" (2 Cor. 5:17). Elisabeth felt called to be witness in the *here and now* of the new reality of "love without limits":

> Of holiness, of works, of dignity
> Nothing can be found in me. Why have I been chosen? . . .
> I can only raise up my arms; I could not say
> Who knocked at my door, nor when . . .
> Calling me to struggle against every evil.
> Against Death itself.
> O my heart, know your emblem. That it might shine bright on the flags!
> Inscribe on your banner: "We will exult in the Lord!"
> Then your canticle will resound in the blaze of the flames,
> Then, my heart, you will receive Grace.

A Diaconal Ministry

Concretely, the life of Elisabeth Skobtsova took a new direction. The ties between husband and wife became strained, and they separated in 1927, though maintaining a friendly relationship. Elisabeth committed herself fully to the organization Russian Student Christian Action [Action Chrétienne des Étudiants Russes or ACER], a youth movement born spontaneously in the heart of the Russian émigré community. ACER saw itself as a movement *in* the Orthodox Church. Its activity found strength in the celebration of the eucharistic mystery. But the movement also benefited from the impetus of the Russian religious renaissance at the beginning of the century, which had renewed the dialogue between the intelligentsia and the Orthodox

Church. Some prominent intellectuals, such as the Marxist economist Sergius Bulgakov and the libertarian philosopher Nicholas Berdyaev, experienced genuine conversions. These "major converts," whose faith had passed through the test of doubt, inspired a youth movement that aspired, in exile, to "ecclesialize life" (to use an expression invented by the young believers themselves)—in other words, to penetrate all of life, in its social and personal dimensions, with the light of Christ. In this way, culture [*culture*] would become worship [*culte*] "in spirit and in truth."

Ordained a priest in 1918, Sergius Bulgakov taught dogmatic theology at the St. Sergius Institute of Orthodox Theology in Paris, founded in 1925. He became Elisabeth's confessor and spiritual father. She established close ties with other members of this new Christian intelligentsia, such as Berdyaev, church historian Georgy Fedotov, and Konstantin Mochulsky, who wrote biographies of Nikolai Gogol and Fyodor Dostoyevsky. A special place in her relationships was reserved for Ilya Fundaminsky-Bunakov, a Socialist revolutionary like Elisabeth . . . of Jewish origins, but as later events would show, of Christian sympathies.[1]

In 1928, Elisabeth Skobtsova became ACER's itinerant secretary, charged with visiting groups of Russian students in various university cities around France. She traveled throughout the country, giving lectures in Lyon, Marseille, Toulouse, and Strasbourg. But she could not allow herself to be restricted to the university setting. With increasing frequency, she visited housing developments in industrial regions as well, where Russian émigrés, newly reduced to working class status, had found work in mines, foundries, and chemical factories. In the course of her peregrinations, she discovered among her fellow exiles the chronically ill; the tubercular, the alcoholics, those no one wanted; Russians interned in psychiatric hospitals where no one could care for them because, for lack of a common language, communication had proved impossible. Her vocation as she began to understand it was not only to deliver brilliant lectures, but to bring consolation, to listen to confidences, and sometimes, when possible, to offer concrete help.

One of her poems from this period speaks to the discovery of this vocation:

> What use to me clever intelligence
> what use bookish words
> when everywhere I see the dead face
> of despair, of nostalgia, of suicide.
>
> O God, why is there no refuge?
> Why are there so many orphans and abandoned ones?
> Why the wandering of your bitter people
> in the immense, eternal desert of the world?
>
> I want to know only the joy of giving.
> Oh to console with all one's being the suffering of the world.
> Oh that the fire, the cries of bloody dawns
> might be drowned in tears of compassion.

Without bearing the title, Elisabeth was in fact exercising the ministry of a deaconess or, better, of a "spiritual mother." After her lectures, people would press forward to speak with her in person. A line might form in front of the room where she had spoken, as if in front of a confessional. Forlorn men and women would tell her of their lives and share with her their intimate dramas. From these experiences there

[1] At the camp in Compiègne, shortly before the deportation to Germany, Fundaminsky-Bunakov was baptized by Fr. Dmitri Klepinin.

arose in her the desire to obtain an official ecclesial ministry. Later, after she had taken religious vows, she obtained authorization from her bishop to preach after the Liturgy when she visited provincial parishes. But she was thinking especially of a total gift of herself to God and to her fellow man—to God through her fellow man—when she asked to take monastic vows.

This desire, however, would come up against several obstacles. For many traditional Orthodox Christians, Elisabeth's past, her political commitments, and especially her two marriages were incompatible with entry into monastic life. There is, however, a canon from the era of Justinian (sixth century), which allows for divorce when one of the spouses, with the agreement of the other, desires to embrace the monastic life. With considerable generosity, Daniel Skobtsov accepted the ecclesiastical divorce. On the basis of this agreement and Justinian's canon, Metropolitan Evlogy, spiritual head of the Russian Orthodox parishes in Western Europe, was able to accede to Elisabeth's wishes. The ceremony of monastic profession took place in March 1932 in the church of the St. Sergius Institute. The metropolitan himself presided and gave to the new nun the name of Maria, in remembrance of the great penitent St. Mary of Egypt. Perhaps the metropolitan saw in this new Maria a restorer of traditional feminine monasticism, the absence of which he so deplored in the ecclesial entity he directed. Others, like Berdyaev and Fr. Lev Gillet, feared that the monastic habit she adopted might prevent the new Mother Maria from fulfilling her true vocation.

Monasticism Open to the World

In the summer that followed her monastic profession, Mother Maria visited several communities of women in Latvia and Estonia, former provinces of the Russian Empire where a regular and traditional monastic life had been retained. She returned from her travels persuaded more than ever that those traditional forms of monasticism were poorly adapted to the situation of Russian emigrés in Western Europe. They appeared to her obsolete and, moreover, contaminated by a "bourgeois" spirit, the polar opposite of the authentic radicalism of the monastic vocation. For many women, she seemed to notice, monasticism corresponded to a desire for a reassuring spiritual family. The monastery was viewed as a refuge, the monastic community as a family where one felt comfortable among one's own, snugly "protected by the high walls from the ugliness and the misery of the world."

This conception, she thought, might perhaps have been appropriate for other times. But this was an apocalyptic time, a sort of end of the world. Her premonition, we must not forget, was situated in the context of the 30s in Europe: the rise of fascism and *la Bête immonde* (the Great Beast). But it went beyond that. Under the influence of Lev Gillet, Mother Maria rediscovered the eschatological dynamism of primitive Christianity. She dreamed of a creative monasticism renewed in response to the call deciphered in the "signs of the times": a monasticism lived not in the desert or behind protective walls but *in the world*—fire and hearth ablaze in the middle of the city, as the great though neglected Russian theologian Alexander Bukharev envisioned it. Mother Maria sent monks and nuns everywhere a new challenge:

> Open your doors to the homeless thieves. . . . Let the whole world enter. Let the world destroy your magnificent liturgical edifices. Lower

> yourselves, empty yourselves—an abasement that will be nothing in comparison to that of our God. Assume the vow of poverty in all its devastating rigor. Reject all comfort, even monastic comfort. May your choirs be purified through fire, so that they reject every comfort. Then you will be able to say: My heart is ready, my heart is ready. . . .

For everyone, the only thing that matters is taking seriously the Gospel parable of the Last Judgment. Mother Maria exhorts:

> The path to God passes through the love of neighbor. There is no other way. At the Last Judgment, I will not be asked whether I have succeeded in my ascetical exercises. I will not be questioned about the number of my prostrations during prayer. I will be asked if I have fed the hungry, clothed the naked, visited the sick and the prisoner. With regard to every poor person, all the hungry, the imprisoned, the Savior said: It was I. I was hungry, I was thirsty, I was sick and in prison.

A House Open to All

The beginning of the 1930s in France was marked by a severe economic crisis. Russian émigrés were often its first victims. Mother Maria decided to open a house where all who arrived, as long as there remained even a little room, would be welcomed as brothers and sisters, whatever their condition. She had no money, but thought, like the Apostle Peter with his eyes fixed on Jesus, that one had to learn to walk on water. Thanks to some gifts (she was often helped by some Anglican friends), she managed to acquire a first house at 9 Villa de Saxe, in the seventh arrondissement. This first house soon proved too small, so she bought a dilapidated apartment building on the rue de Lourmel in the fifteenth. There the Russian nun with the broad smile and unruly appearance, whose dress often bore traces of her most recent efforts in the kitchen or painting studio, became a popular fixture. At "the rue de Lourmel"—the familiar designation for her project—lived two or three nuns; a priest who served as chaplain for the house butwas also a professor of theology at St. Sergius; several unemployed persons without other resources; some Russian delinquents who, after their incarceration, had no place else to go; and several patients who had been locked away as mentally ill, but whom Mother Maria had managed to free from the psychiatric hospital after judging them to be of sound mind or only minimally dangerous. Also occasionally in residence were some young women whom she had attempted to remove from a life of prostitution, various artists and dancers from the Russian opera, and members of a Catholic Gregorian choir.

Such was the "pandemonium"—the expression is from one of the chaplains of the rue de Lourmel. A chapel was set up in the courtyard and decorated with icons painted or embroidered by Mother Maria's nimble hands. There the priest attached to the house regularly celebrated the Liturgy and the hours. Fr. Lev Gillet provided this ministry for several years. Fr. Lev, a monk of French origin, who loved and supported Mother Maria, was also at times a source of inspiration for her. He was replaced, when he left France in 1938, by a young married priest, Fr. Dmitri Klepinin.

Mother Maria had decorated *her* chapel with love. But she barely tolerated the long Byzantine prayer offices (during which she admitted to boredom) and which she attended only

irregularly. She had so many things to do! She cooked meals and shopped at the markets. At dawn she could be found at Les Halles,[2] where the merchants knew her well and offered her the best prices or gave away perishable products before they went bad. Occasionally she would spend the night at the cafés or bistros near Les Halles, where beggars and the homeless would doze hunched over the tables. She would speak to them, particularly to the Russians abandoned by everyone, and invite them to come see her in an attempt to address their problems. Fr. Lev Gillet, who often accompanied her on these excursions, spoke of the special charism of Mother Maria during a recorded conversation devoted to her memory. Mother Maria possessed a special gift for listening, immense compassion for sinners, and respect for the poor and humble. The Lord had said to her, "Go live among the vagabonds and the poor; between them and you, between the world and me, tie a knot that nothing will break." A deaconess without the title, Mother Maria was nonetheless a typical Russian intellectual. Wearing her religious habit, she still smoked in public, shocking not a few observers and drawing upon herself severe criticism. An authentic social activist, she still adored discussion of theological and philosophical problems, often until late at night. The religious philosophical academy founded by Berdyaev met in her house and she took part in its meetings. In 1935, together with a few of her friends, she created Orthodox Action, an organization charged with directing and coordinating her ever-expanding social activities, a free spiritual fraternity of Orthodox Christian inspiration, and a society of inquiry and thought. She edited its journal, *Novii Grad* [*The New City*], which dealt with religious themes but also social problems and politics, in a spirit of ecumenical openness. . . .

In those years, Mother Maria experienced another great sorrow: the death of her eldest daughter, Gaïana, in Russia. She had returned to the land of her birth on the advice of André Gide. At the same time, the atmosphere in the house on the rue de Lourmel was often tense. Two opposing parties vied with each other more and more openly. The first consisted of Mother Maria and her friends associated with Orthodox Action. The second was associated with another nun, Mother Eudoxia, a woman of considerable virtue who, unlike Mother Maria, aspired to a traditional religious life centered on the *opus dei*, the celebration of the liturgical offices. The conflict was further poisoned by the presence of an archimandrite, pious and knowledgeable, but who lacked any sympathy for Mother Maria and did not understand her aspirations. Father Cyprian Kern supported Mother Eudoxia but instead of appeasing her threw gas on the fire. Mother Maria suffered from incomprehension of these tensions, but managed to overcome her bitterness, as she expressed in one of her poems of the time:

> I know the fire will be lit
> By the calm hand of a sister,
> And my brothers will look for the wood,
> And even the gentlest
> On my road all of sin
> Will say cruel words.
> My stake will burn
> —songs of my sisters,
> peaceful ringing of bells—
> in the Kremlin on the square for executions,
> or even here, in a foreign land,
> everywhere weighted down with piety.

[2] Then a large open-air market, now an urban shopping mall (—trans.).

From dead branches rises insubstantial smoke,
the fire appears at my feet,
the funeral song, louder.
But the shadow neither dead nor empty,
in it appears the Cross.
My end, my final end.

The End

The Second World War, so long anticipated by Mother Maria, broke out in 1939. After the debacle of 1940 came the German occupation, food shortages that struck the poor with special force, and soon the hunt for Jews, beginning with Jews of foreign origin. Mother Maria, who counted among her best friends the Russian Jew Eli (Ilya) Fundaminsky, did not hesitate for a moment in deciding what path to follow. Her house quickly became known as a place of refuge. Those who felt threatened by the danger could go there to be hidden, and efforts would be made to move them to safety in the Free Zone. Fr. Dmitri Klepinin delivered baptismal certificates to any who desired them. These things were common knowledge. It is said that Mother Maria was betrayed by someone who ate at her table. . . .

On February 8, 1943, the Gestapo came in her absence and arrested her son Yuri, a student at the time; Fr. Dmitri; and the administrator of Orthodox Action, Feodor Pianov. Mother Maria was told that they would be liberated if she presented herself to the German police. When she did so, she was herself arrested, but neither her son nor her friends were released. All four were deported, the men to Buchenwald and Mother Maria to Ravensbrück. Of the four, only Pianov would return.

On Mother Maria's attitude during her captivity we possess the testimony

Holy martyrs Ilya Fundaminsky, Mother Maria (Skobtsova), priest Dmitri (Klepinin), and Yuri (Skobtsov). Icon by Maria Struve.

of several of her co-detainees. Particularly precious for me was that of a niece of General de Gaulle, Geneviève de Gaulle-Anthonioz, who felt a profound friendship and great admiration for Mother Maria. Blessed with exceptional vitality, supported by an unshakable faith, Mother Maria was well equipped to resist the terrible ordeal of the concentration camp. "Everyone in the block knew her," remembered one of her companions.

> "She got along with young and old, with those with progressive ideas, with believers and unbelievers alike. . . . In the evening, gathered around her miserable pallet, we would listen to her. . . . She spoke to us of her work in Paris, of her hope to see one day the reunion of the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church. . . . Thanks to her, we rediscovered a little courage whenever, crushed by the ever increasing weight of terror, we felt faint."

On the sly, obtaining some thread in exchange for a ration of bread, Mother Maria continued to embroider icons, and even to paint a little symbolic

fresco representing the landing of the Normans in Great Britain. But the last months before the Liberation were terrible. Sick with dysentery, Mother Maria saw her strength fail her. She scribbled a message on a sheet of paper, addressed to Metropolitan Evlogy and her spiritual father, Fr. Sergius Bulgakov. "Here is my status: I fully accept my suffering . . . and I accept death, if it comes, as a grace from on high."

[3] Father Lev Gillet.

She who had so often comforted others then fell silent, as if plunged deep in an interior dialogue, of which one of her poems speaks:

> Here is my soul riveted to its solitude,
> Only You and I. Your light, my sin.
> Here I am arrived at the limit.
> Your sun points to the East.

Nothing is known for sure concerning Mother Maria's end. Separated from her companions, transferred to the Jugendlager (youth camp) where the sick and the wounded were left to starve to death, she must have expired, according to Geneviève de Gaulle-Anthonioz, in utter destitution and solitude. Some believe they saw her name on a list of female prisoners gassed the 31st of March, 1945. Some said that she had taken the place of a young Polish woman among those condemned to the gas chamber. A few days later, in the beginning of April, the camp was liquidated before the advancing Russian army. . . .

The fate of Mother Maria Skobtsova might appear to be a complete failure. Her two marriages fell apart and her children died prematurely. She may have considered herself responsible for the arrest of her son. She never saw the victory over Nazi barbarism, a victory she never ceased to hope for. Orthodox Action barely survived her. Within Orthodox monasticism she had no disciples. Yet she remains alive. Her passionate appeals never cease to challenge and awaken us. Perhaps her influence after her death is comparable in the Orthodox world to that of Dietrich Bonhoeffer in the Protestant world. Like him, she aspired to a "secularized" Christianity. Above all, she calls us to move beyond paralyzing structures of all kinds, toward him who is to come.

One of her friends said that in a dream he saw her walking through a wheat field. He cried out to her: "What's this? Mother Maria, someone told me you were dead!" Then, looking at him gently, she answered: "People tell so many stories. . . . You can see that I am quite alive!" The "monk of the Eastern Church"[3] who reported this dream to me said of Mother Maria that she is "a modern Orthodox saint." ❋

Elisabeth Behr-Sigel (1907–2005) was possibly the most significant female Orthodox theologian of the twentieth century. As a young Lutheran, she studied philosophy in Strasbourg alongside Emmanuel Levinas. She joined the Orthodox Church in 1929, after attending Paschal Matins celebrated by Fr. Sergius Bulgakov in Paris and meeting Paul Evdokimov, Vladimir Lossky, and Fr. Lev Gillet. She subsequently became an active participant in the Parisian Orthodox theological circle, and in 1976 completed a doctoral thesis at the University of Nancy on the theologian Alexander Bukharev. She was the author of many books and articles on Orthodox theology and spirituality.