

III. Eastern European Martyrs

1. Poland (1943)

Martyr of the Company of the Daughters of Charity.

1. Sr. Maria WISNIEWSKA, DC *of the Province of Cracow, born 23 March 1905 at Gniezno (Poland), died 19 November 1943 at Poznan.*

In 1941, by order of the German Authorities, Sr. Maria was summoned to Racot, near Koscian, to look after invalids. She used her free time to prepare secretly the Polish children for Holy Communion and to teach them to read and write in Polish a procedure strictly forbidden by the occupying power. As a true patriot she held on to the Polish standard. Acting as an agent and collaborator of her former parish priest, she used to come and go frequently between Poznan and Racot.

In October 1943 she was arrested at Racot and thereafter imprisoned, first there, afterwards at Koscian, and subsequently moved to Poznan to Fort 7. She had to undergo frequent bouts of interrogation by the Gestapo, after which she emerged, on two occasions, so cruelly tortured as to lose consciousness. Practically every bone in her body was broken. Sr. Maria had to wear a mask covering her whole head, so badly beaten was it that it resembled a single wound; nearly every hair of her head was torn out, her face horribly deformed; her teeth had all been pulled out, her lips swollen and bleeding. She could not stand erect, and had to remain leaning forward, her arms stretched away from her body. The unfortunate sister could neither eat nor move unaided. Above and beyond these tortures, she was often returned to her cell firmly bound. Sr. Maria endured all this with a truly heroic patience. Her fellow prisoners would often hear her singing hymns and saying the rosary in which she would join with her companions.

Accused of taking part in the conspiracy, she was executed by gunshots fired by Hans Walter, Commandant of Fort 7. It was this same man who accompanied her mortal remains to the crematorium and insisted on an autopsy to find out the source of her extraordinary endurance. He found no answer to this quest, but we, for our part, know that the life and actions of Sr. Maria were always motivated by the love of God, the neighbour and her native land. Even at the times of utmost suffering, her attitude won the admiration of all, even her executioner likened her to Our Blessed Lady and they called her "Heilige Maria" (Holy Mary).

A simple commemorative plaque can be seen today on the wall of Bunker 57 in Fort 7 of Poznan. It recalls the martyrdom of our beloved Sr. Maria, martyred for the faith.