



Sister Maria Kajusa (Stefania) Trznadel, an Ursuline of the Roman Union, was born in 1910 in Kamień in the Diocese of Przemyśl. Sr. Maria Kajusa came from a large, pious farming family, the richest in the village. She had four siblings. Stefania's early childhood coincided with a difficult period during World War I when the village passed into Austrian and Russian hands. Kamień was not an important strategic point, but it had to provide soldiers and food, which subsequently caused hunger and impoverishment for the inhabitants. After the end of the war, Stefania started attending primary school, of which she completed three classes. She then continued her education for six more months in a farmers' school. As a child she was mysterious and closed and liked to read books. She was interested in the Tertiary movement, which her sister, Franciszka, was associated. She joined the Third Order of St. Francis at the age of ten and was probably accepted as a full member at the age of thirteen.

She was a friend of the other tertiaries and the girls had meetings together, had their altar in the parish church, and together they participated in processions carrying the statue of St. Francis. Stefania led a lifestyle according to the tertiary rule: she recited the prescribed prayers, tried to attend Mass, did not go to parties, prayed a lot and was hardworking. When she was thirteen she experienced a conversion, and following this greatly appreciated the sacrament of confession. She often took part in pilgrimages. Up until she entered the convent she helped on the farm and enjoyed sewing.

The decision to choose the religious path was initially met with opposition from her father, but this resistance was overcome when a neighbour joined the convent. It is impossible to determine why Stefania chose the Ursuline Sisters. She had applied to two convents in Krakow but was not accepted due to overcrowding and so she decided to apply in 1931 to a convent in Poznan, far from her family. She was a candidate in Krakow helping in the kitchen, laundry and bakery. She was a person eager to help, very fast and energetic. After this initial trial period she came back to Pokrzywno, where she was accepted as a postulant. Her destiny was to be a lay sister who was engaged in physical work, combining the contemplative life with the active "in the fulfilment of her activities in God's presence and inner concentration". She was admitted to the novitiate and was given the religious name Maria Kajusa. During the novitiate she worked in the barn. During this time she became known as a selfless, faithful and loving person in community life. She made her first vows in 1935, receiving a predicate from Our Lady, Mediatrix of All Grace. Following her vows she stayed in the convent in Pokrzywno and continued to work in the cowshed. She had under her care the candidates and novices. At work, she was focused and faithfully observed silence.

Before her perpetual profession, she experienced difficulties relating to her faith: she was tormented by scruples, she felt abandoned by God and prayer came to her with difficulty. She made her perpetual profession on July 17, 1938. None of the family came to these celebrations, because of the distance. Her family had never visited her, she did not go to the family home and contact was only by letters. Nevertheless, the family was convinced that Sister Kajusa's choice was right, as well as the fact that she was happy in the convent.

Following her profession she worked for a few months in the laundry with a lot of dedication and she was responsible for it at the beginning of World War II. She voluntarily stayed in Pokrzywno and didn't leave with most of the other sisters.

At the end of 1939 she started to have problems with her heart. The illness and convalescence lasted about six months. It was an important period of change in her life and other sisters

noticed that she became more gentle, slower and less demanding. She prayed more and the transformation was noticeable to those around her. After the period of convalescence, she worked in the kitchen, then in the garden. Certainly, this work required a lot of effort from Kajusa, but she tried not to show fatigue and encouraged others. In the days of the approaching army front, she was focused and had full trust in God. She did not get involved in conversations and communicating what was going on around her. On the eve of her death, she was only concerned about whether the priest could reach the sisters with the sacrament of confession.



Sister Maria Akwila (Maria) Podskarbi, an Ursuline of the Roman Union, was born in 1909 in Gorzyce Wielkie (c.a. 100 km from Poznań). She came from a large, middle-class farming family and had eleven siblings. Her father, Andrzej Podskarbi, was known both as a good farmer and a quick-tempered person. He also dealt with trade. Her mother, Franciszka, a hardworking person, took care of the religious upbringing of the children.

At the age of six, Maria began her education at primary school. It was a difficult time for the family. Her father took part in World War I, and economic difficulties were felt by many families. Maria and her sister were seriously ill at that time due to a lack of vitamins and insufficient food. The primary school and a tailoring course completed Maria's education.

Maria was known as a person who liked solitude; she did not participate in the social life of her peers, although she had a friend, Andrzej, who also chose the path of a religious vocation. Together with her friends she took an active part in the life of the parish, in

services and processions. She also often prayed at the roadside cross and because it was a long way to the church, she took part in common family prayers. In 1930 she made a pilgrimage to Częstochowa, which was a deep experience for her. Such a trip was a big event for pilgrims, and Maria also witnessed a miraculous healing at the shrine of the Madonna of Jasna Góra.

With the help of her elder sister Pelagia she was secretly preparing to enter religious life. After revealing her desire, she initially met with opposition from her father but with time he gave his consent and accepted the choice of his daughter. It is not known what her motives were for choosing to enter with the Ursulines. She was given the address of the sisters in Poznań – Pokrzywno by a person who had known the sisters.

Maria came to the convent in Poznań - Pokrzywno in 1931, from where she was sent as a candidate to Stanisławów (now Ivano-Frankivsk), where she was a laundry assistant. After this initial trial period she came back to Pokrzywno, where she was accepted as a postulant. She was to be of a lay sister, who was engaged in physical work, combining a contemplative life with an active "inner focus and activity in the fulfilment of her work in God's presence". She was admitted to the novitiate in 1933 and was given the religious name of Maria Akwila.

During the novitiate, despite her fragile health, she worked in the laundry. At that time, she had the reputation of being a responsible person, and faithful, especially to keeping the silence during the day including recreation. She read willingly about St. Elizabeth of the Trinity and the works of St. John of the Cross.

She took her first vows on July 17, 1935, accepting the direction of the Holy Trinity as the focus of her whole inner life. Following her first vows, she stayed at the novitiate house among the professed, where, apart from working for the novitiate, she was also a role model for the younger sisters. In her work she had a special approach to washing church linen. She did it with respect and great care, and she taught the novices helping her. She felt happy in the convent, as she made her request to renew her vows.

Before her perpetual profession, Akwila had health problems that could have become an obstacle to her profession. However, she was admitted for profession at the usual time and she made her perpetual vows on July 17, 1938 in the Roman Union of the Order of St. Ursula into the hands of M. Benedykta Bolewska. At that time she worked in the garden and, as before, was responsible for the novices working with her.

At the beginning of the Second World War, she found herself in mortal danger as she was surprised by some German soldiers at a haystack and was subsequently threatened with death for hiding weapons or spies. During the occupation, she initially worked on a convent farm that had been taken over by the Nazis. Here she also tried to support herself and help the younger sisters.

These difficult living conditions made her seriously ill, probably with tuberculosis of the eye. In spite of her ailments, she remained patient with the disease. After the improvement of her health, she took up work again, initially lighter, and later took over responsibility for the laundry. She fulfilled her duties faithfully despite the approaching army front, trying to avoid unnecessary anxiety and conversation. She was ready to accept every will of God.

The location of the convent had an impact on the future fate of the sisters. There was a military airport in nearby Krzesiny and so during the offensive of the Red Army, the sisters in the convent found themselves in the middle of the warfare. After capturing the airport, groups of Soviet soldiers ransacked houses in Pokrzywno, in search of war booty, which was often alcohol. They assaulted women they came in contact with, including religious sisters who were still in secular clothes at that time. On the morning of the 25th January 1945, the sisters put on their habits, hoping that their religious dress would protect them. It should be noted that at that time the sisters did not live in the main building, but in a small house called the "red house" located near to the convent. The community had gathered there for dinner. Throughout the whole time the sisters were disturbed by groups of soldiers, allegedly looking for Germans who had gone into hiding. Having found the sisters they demanded five of them, threatening to shoot in case of escape. The eldest responded in Russian that all of them had vowed chastity and could not meet their demands.

Sr. Kajusa, in the confusion of that evening, maintained a calm and sober reaction, defending the younger ones, often not understanding the danger. She was seen struggling with a soldier who had thrown a sister on a table. Most of the sisters managed to escape. One of them, who was near the house, heard shots and came back to see Sr. Kajusa in convulsions. She ran away from this sight, and when she came back after some time, the body of Sr. Kajusa was already immobile.

When the sisters started to run away, one of them was grabbed near a window by a soldier and held tightly by the hand. Sr. Akwila ran up, pulled her out of the attacker's hands and ordered her to run away, and even, paralyzed with fear, pushed her towards the door. The soldier

grabbed Sr. Akwila and pulled her to himself. When he tried to take her in his arms, Sr. Akwila knelt down, with one hand she embraced the leg of the table, with the other hand she squeezed the cross worn with the habit. The soldier shot her and she died from the first bullet.

Both sisters were buried only on February 14th in Poznan - Pokrzywno, in the convent cemetery, where they rest to this day.

Sister Akwila and sister Kajusa died as many women had, as victims of Red Army soldiers. Until the end, they cared for other sisters and defended the dignity of women and consecrated persons.