



MARIA STOMBERGER

Day 13 day of the trial, 25 March 1947.

(After the recess).

Chairperson: For now, the questioning of Austrian witness Stromberger will take place.

Ask the witness in, please.

The witness has provided information about herself as follows: Maria Stromberger, 49 years old, nurse, single, Roman Catholic.

Chairperson: What are the motions of the parties as to the mode of questioning the witness?

Prosecutor Cyprian: We discharge the witness from the oath.

Defender Ostaszewski: We discharge the witness from the oath.

Chairperson: By mutual agreement of the parties, the Tribunal has decided to question the witness without an oath. The witness is advised of the obligation to tell the truth in all honesty, and of the criminal liability for making false declarations.

Chairperson: How did the witness find herself in Auschwitz and what can you tell us with regard to the accused himself?

Witness: Am I to start with the moment of my arrival at Auschwitz, or with the preliminary story?

Chairperson: Whatever you see as appropriate.

Witness: In July 1942 I was transferred from Carinthia in Austria to a municipal hospital for infectious diseases in Królewska Huta [Chorzów]. The transfer was on my request. Because in my homeland, I had chanced to hear various things about what was happening in the East, I wanted to see whether these stories were based on truth; for as an old Austrian, I couldn't believe it. We have always been a tolerant and humanitarian people.



So I was transferred, and on 1 July 1942 I took over the post of a sister on the infectious diseases ward. There, apart from other, civilian people from this camp, I had an opportunity to encounter two prisoners from Auschwitz who had been released during the incubation period of typhus, which is a 21-day period – luckily for them, for if they had fallen ill while still in the camp, they would have ended up the same way as other prisoners. I don't know their names; one was a gasworks worker, arrested by the Gestapo and sent to Auschwitz for not working during one shift, and the other, I think, worked at a nitrogen factory. Both of these men were feverishly shouting terrible things while hallucinating, they were suffering from indescribable terrors, we had to lock them up in separate rooms in the isolation ward. The fever was such that one of these patients hit me. I nursed them until they recovered. It took five weeks for the poison that had settled in their brains to dissolve in the body enough to consider them normal people. I interrogated them: "What were you saying? Are the things you were saying in the fever based on truth, or was it just a result of your hallucinations?" Then these people, putting their hands together, said: "Sister, if you love your life and ours, do not mention these things. It's all true".

All these things provoked me to go to my regional council in Katowice. As a free nurse, I fell under that region. The office was held by an older sister.

I will also add that I recalled the two men telling me, in their fever, that nurses who wore the same uniforms as me worked in Auschwitz.

In view of this, I went to this older sister from the regional council for sisters, and I asked to be transferred to Auschwitz. The sister was very surprised but also delighted, and she told me she was very happy I had taken the national-socialist ideas to heart, and didn't ask me at all whether I was a party member. The sole fact that I expressed readiness to go to Auschwitz spared me her questions.

On 1 October this sister informed me that my transfer to Auschwitz was approved. Dr. Stefan, a doctor of the municipal hospital in Chorzów at the time and a sworn enemy of national socialism, who had been forcibly transferred to this remote hospital, said to me: "Sister, have you completely lost your mind to want to go to that cave?" To which I answered: "Yes." Because I wasn't allowed to say more about the matter.

On 1 October 1942 I began my work in Auschwitz.



When I arrived, I was received by the adjutant of the accused, who is sitting here at the bench of the accused, *Hauptsturmführer* Molke. He said this to me: "Sister, this is going to be a hard work for you. The Germans are doing a job in Auschwitz, admittedly a terrible one, but necessary for us".

I would like to add here that these words I'm citing are word for word; they are etched in my memory.

Then he said: "The things that are happening here are to be treated as a national secret. The spiritual burden will be great, for strong men have broken down here. The front is child's play compared to Auschwitz. This is where, for example, the cleansing of Jews takes place. Apart from that, the mortality rate among the Aryan prisoners is, on average, 7-8 thousand a month. Now sign this slip, saying that you will remain silent on the subject on all that you see and hear here, also towards your companions, otherwise, it will cost you your life".

Strangely enough, this man never realized that he had broken the rule of silence himself with his elucidations. Not until later did I learn to recognize and understand that this came from the need to tell somebody about it, which everyone living in Auschwitz had.

This is what my reception by Höß's adjunct looked like.

I started wondering whether I should go back through the camp gate to the outside, but I resisted the temptation and stayed on.

At the commandant's office, I had to sign an appropriate slip, where, apart from different unimportant rules of the camp, it was emphasized that it is forbidden to talk to the prisoners, or to dispatch letters to family members of these prisoners; also, the oath of silence was included there.

Later I reported to the camp doctor's assistant, Dr. Entress, who has already been punished following the liberation of the camp in Dachau. Doctor Entress informed me that I was to be assigned to nursing the sick in a room for the camp SS men.

On 30 October, I began my service in this SS sick room. I was not allowed in the preventive camp. However, before my arrival, a few German nurses were assigned to the women's camp in Birkenau. And, to my shame, I have to confess that there was a sister there, Frieda Schirdemann, a petite person, and very nice, but who was one of the most cruel German

nurses. This sister has dishonored our uniform forever, because she beat the prisoners. There was a Dr. von Botmann there, an indolent and lazy man who let this nurse do whatever she wanted, and this nurse beat prisoners who were weak, shaking, standing before her as if petrified – she beat them with a *harap* [a hunting whip]. Women were afraid to approach that nurse. Every prisoner whom this nurse called to her sick room knew that she would not come out alive. But this is just an aside.

This also applied to German and Austrian prisoners, for such women were in the Birkenau women's camp as well. This sister Schirdemann got blood-stained diarrhea, was transferred to Górny Śląsk [Upper Silesia], to a hospital for infectious diseases, and then was appointed as a station nurse of a kindergarten in Górny Śląsk.

Before I began my service in the camp, Dr. Entress told me that a telegram had come from Berlin, which said that service in certain preventive camps was forbidden to sisters and German nurses, because such service was too great a burden. So if this ban hadn't come, I would have also been assigned as a nurse to the camp in Birkenau.

But because typhus fever broke out among the SS men, I was assigned to serve among those SS men ill with typhus fever. And in these different hospitals in the camp, different ranks of orderlies were hired as skilled laborers, also in the women's camp in Birkenau. I managed to get into the women's camp in Birkenau twice, and three times to the men's camp in Auschwitz. Also, a man from the SDG [*Sanitätsdienstgrade*] smuggled me into the camp, and once I went there with the Chief Medical Officer. Whenever I went to the original men's camp in Auschwitz, it was always with an *Oberscharführer* and through the *Krankenbau*.

I would like to note here that on these excursions I was only stopping to find out about the relations there. What I experienced there was so terrifying that it took me a long time to regain my spiritual composure.

What was happening in Auschwitz has already been clarified enough by former prisoners, so I would like to mention only those things that had a decisive effect on my opinion of SS men and of the whole national-socialist regime.

I had the opportunity to watch what was going on in the courtyard from the SS sick room windows. Later, the gas chambers and crematorium there were stopped, and the work was taken up in Birkenau.



From the windows of that building, I saw the original gas chambers and the original crematorium, which were later moved to Birkenau. Only one street was between us: here was the sick room, and there was the crematorium and the gas chambers.

I will describe one incident I saw from the window. There was a boy there, maybe 7 years old, who had on a sailor suit and blond hair – he looked so nice. He took the clothes off and folded them nicely, and in the meantime, his mother, with a baby in her arms who might have been around one and a half years and who had already been stripped naked, put the baby in his arms, so that she could also take her clothes off. And then they went inside.

Now another incident. Once, this was in January 1943, the day was exceptionally cold even though I was dressed warmly – this was before noon in the so-called staff building – I hear some terrible wailing, not even human. I stopped dead in my tracks and at that moment three trucks passed by me, loaded full with naked men who were shivering with fevers and stretching their gaunt hands towards me – after all, I was standing by the road in a sister's uniform – but I couldn't help them. They were going to the crematorium in Birkenau. They were already free.

Another time, in the political department, which was under *Untersturmführer* Max Grabner – one part of this barrack was the political department, and the other was the post department – I heard the scream of a tortured Polish man who was being interrogated. Dazed, I leaned against the wall. While he was being dragged out, I saw that shreds of flesh literally hung from him. In this state, he was put back in the bunker. Those surrounding him were young SS men. A few of these inhuman guards were laughing and saying: "Sister, you will often hear the Auschwitz siren".

These are the three experiences that led me to do what I will talk about later. I am, in the end, an Austrian. I felt like an accomplice, I was doing all I could to try and help the prisoners, but these were just empty fantasies on my part. No one there would have been able to stop anything in any way. In the SS sick room, there was a *kommando* of Polish prisoners. I was in contact with these men. It was exceptionally difficult to gain the trust of these bitter young people. But in the end, I managed to, and I have to say, I found comfort with them. As a sister, I had the opportunity to hide a little bit of food for the prisoners, out of the rations intended for the SS men. The orderly service in this SS sick room, and especially SS man Kolfuss [Kaulfuss] – a German from the Sudetes – was watching me.



In January 1943 I was denounced to Dr. Wirths, my boss at the time. The Chief Medical Officer called me and said to me, because he valued me for my brave strength and because I had done the SS a great service as a sister: "Sister Maria, I am unfortunately forced to inform you that I hear from all sides that you are too motherly and humane towards the prisoners. I wouldn't like to see you behind wires, and I'm warning you. I admit (he said) that many of these prisoners, especially from our sick room, are faultless people, but they still remain our enemies. I would like to let you know, as a sister, to be a bit more careful". Then I answered him: "Chief Medical Officer, I am sorry that I have caused dissatisfaction, but do not forget that I am not an SS man or a guard. I am a sister and, as such, am not obliged to use their methods. If you are not content with my conduct, then please report me to the political department, but I categorically object to beating with a knout, and I request a transfer". *Oberscharführer* Ontel [Ontl] was present while this conversation took place. Dr. Wirths patted my arm and said: "Sister Maria, you are staying here, I will defend you from further slanderous attacks". The next day, Kaulfuss wanted some milk, but I didn't give him any because I truly didn't have any milk. Then this man started using various platitudes: "The milk was apparently drunk by prisoners, that is nice management!"

In Auschwitz, it was necessary to fight with any weapon – this, I want to say at the start. So, I accidentally overheard two prisoners, one of whom was a tailor in the sick room and the other was from the dental clinic, saying that this same Kaulfuss, while drunk, had torn up the portrait of *SS-Reichsführer* Himmler the day before. Then I staked everything on this one card. I went, once more, to Dr. Wirths and I asked for Kaulfuss to confront me and prove his accusations against me in the presence of the Chief Medical Officer. That man went pale with terror when I accused him, in the presence of Dr. Wirths, thus: "If an SS man, who is such a stickler, tears a photograph of his leader to pieces, he has no right to suspect a sister who fulfills her duties." In this way, I hushed up the whole matter and nobody else ever dared to go against me.

I would like to start by saying that events on the Eastern front were, so to speak, a barometer for Berlin. When Stalingrad happened, a telegram came to Auschwitz from Berlin – I couldn't familiarize myself with it, it was prohibited – but I was informed of this.

The telegram asked why the mortality rate among the Aryan prisoners in Auschwitz was so high. Then we were presented with a slip to sign, all of us, even those within the orderly



corps. This slip read, more or less: "I have been informed that torturing and arbitrary killing of prisoners is forbidden, and that signing death warrants is an exclusive right of Adolf Hitler and of *SS-Reichsführer* Heinrich Himmler". This slip was handed to me by *Unterscharführer* Richter. He was an SS man, I think from the Dresden area. I read this slip and said to *Unterscharführer* Richter: "Tell me, what do I need to sign this kind of slip for. I haven't killed anyone yet, and I haven't signed a death warrant". At this, *Unterscharführer* Richter laughed and said: "Sister Maria, please sign this slip, it's only an illusion".

All the while, all of these things, as could be seen, were still taking place. Executions and so on continued. SS and superintendents were getting the so-called war-merit crosses for their service. They were all being given promotions and decorations, regardless of what they could be used for. I was also presented by the Chief Medical Officer Dr. Wirths for a decoration, though not for torturing prisoners in various ways, but because I also acted as a sister to the SS men.

I am quoting this only to give proof that ambition and all bad impulses were bred there. There was, for example, a guard there, Mandel [Mandl], I don't remember her first name, who had a very amiable appearance, quite pretty, about 20 years old, but she was the devil incarnate.

In the winter of 1943 – what I'm telling you about now, I was told by Rieghagen. By chance I read in one of the Polish newspapers the name of one of the 400 butchers of Auschwitz, it was Rieghagen. I suppose it was a printer's error. So this Rieghagen was a teacher of gymnastics and sport by profession, a highly intelligent man, one of the few people there with a university education. This Rieghagen always shirked what didn't suit his own inclinations, and that's why he was never promoted in Auschwitz, he was only a *Rottenführer*. He worked as a disinfection foreman for delousing, etc. This Rieghagen told me in the winter of 1943 that he and *Unterscharführer* Schatkus, some kind of *Volksdeutsche*, I think, were working as medical orderlies in the women's camp in Birkenau. At the time, orderlies were transferred frequently. Rieghagen was a disinfector in the women's camp. These two people were observing what comes next. I am describing what these two SS men saw and told me about.

800 Aryan women, French, came from Paris. For the whole week, they were under the charge of guard Mandl, whom I've already mentioned. They were without any food, in an ice-cold block. After a few weeks had passed, they came looking for them to put them



to work. This was to be done as follows. These prisoners had to stand in front of her, turn their backs to her, and Mandl would give them a kick with a boot in the lower back. As long as an exhausted prisoner still had enough strength to stay on her feet, she was capable of working; but if she fell on the ground, her fate was already decided. I am recounting this on the strength of what Riegenhagen and Schaugust had observed. They couldn't say anything to defend the prisoners, but Riegenhagen said: "Ms Mandl, what you are doing is sabotage. How are they supposed to work for us, the way you treat them?" At this, Mandl complained to *Sturmbannführer* Höß. These two SS men were summoned the next day to report. There, the *Sturmbannführer* told them that Mandl's standing in Berlin is such, and she is such a useful person, and that Riegenhagen and Schaugust must go to her and excuse themselves for their inappropriate attitude towards her. A short time afterwards, Riegenhagen was transferred, nobody knows where, in connection with this tale, of course, but I don't know the details.

I also wish to inform Your Honor:

In 1944, my health was declining and I could no longer maintain my self-control, and I didn't want to come back from my leave to the camp, I wanted to escape from Bregens to Switzerland. I informed Edward Bisch of this plan, he was a prisoner I worked with every day, I told him: "I can't do this anymore". The next day, Reinoch – everyone called him Zbyszek – came to me and asked: "Sister Maria, you don't want to come back to us anymore. I'd like to ask you now to do something for us. Give up this plan and come back to us. We have a very important task for you to do. We don't have anyone here to act as our intermediary. In case you get into danger here, we guarantee you will be able to protect yourself in time. After all, this thing will not last long". To this, I agreed: "I will come back to you".

In the early summer of 1944, the operation regarding the Hungarian Jews began. There were Jews from Terezín [Theresienstadt], and from other places. Then we were, once again, given a slip to sign. The whole corps of orderlies was called, along with us sisters, to Dr. Wirths, and he gave us a piece of paper to sign. It contained three sections. The first section said that we were to keep silent regarding all the details of the prisoners' lives, under pain of death. The second section said that Jewish property was public property, and it is prohibited to appropriate any part of it. And the third sections went as follows: "I pledge to cooperate with all my strength and the means at my disposal during this operation". Everyone signed the slip



because everyone had to. I waited until I remained in the room with Dr. Fischerem and Dr. Tilo [Thilo]. I told them: "Allow me, gentlemen, I will read this paper once more". It was given to me to read. Then I told the Chief Medical Officer: "The first section is about the obligation to remain silent, I've already signed this kind of obligation. The second section says that Jewish possessions are public property – alright, I am no thief. And the third section, this one concerns me. I will not sign this, it is not in accordance with my views. In normal times, I would lose my diploma and the right to perform my medical duties, if I caused the death of even one patient, even just by lack of supervision. Advise me, please, what should I do in this case?" To this, Dr. Wirths said to me: "Cross out the disputed section". So I took a red pencil and crossed out this section, and above this, I put my signature next to the first two sections. That slip had to be signed by everyone, including civilian workers, that is, from the central construction management etc. There was, for example, a certain acquaintance of mine, a Ms Bauer, who worked in the central construction management bureau. She wanted to follow my example. Then, the head of personnel gave her a choice: "Either you sign, or you're facing a concentration camp". And then she signed it, because she was scared. And there were many like her.

It is not possible for me to describe everything here, for when I speak, it awakens it all in me again and tears these wounds open. I could describe much more, such as the relations in Auschwitz, which were so complicated that one cannot even imagine what was going on there, in Auschwitz, if one didn't spend time there. But I wanted to say one more thing, which may be valuable for my compatriots to hear, namely that a simple SS man was also treated inhumanely and cruelly. After all, I could see for myself in what state these SS men got into, coming to the SS sick room. I saw, for example, people from among the SS men who were on duty on the turrets for 12 hours with no food, while the command, guards, and the management led a simply wasteful life. Höß's successor, Liebenhänschel [Liebehenschel], introduced some changes with regard to this, but that's why he was in Auschwitz for just four months. Not long after he took over the post in Auschwitz, a smear campaign was launched against him. Liebehenschel began his job in Auschwitz in winter 1943, and was already transferred to Lublin in March 1944, for disciplinary reasons, allegedly because he lived in cohabitation with an SS man.

I would like to go back once again to the moment I was going on my leave. This was in the autumn of 1944. That Zbyszek suggested then that I establish contact with some

intermediary person, who would connect me, the camp, and a resistance movement working outside the camp. He told me: "Sister Maria, this will not be completely devoid of danger for you. If you are caught, you won't be able to get away with it". I answered him: "I know this, but this isn't important. Thousands and thousands of the most wonderful spirits have perished in Auschwitz, medical greats, artists, musicians – what difference does one person like me make".

In the end, we carried a few of these photosensitive plates out of the camp – I don't know what they contained. Apart from these, there were medical records from the *Krankenbau*, the original camp in Auschwitz. I think they were for the year 1942. I was unlucky with these two books. I couldn't get rid of them. I was supposed to go to Chrzanów and hand them over there, but in the meantime the following accident occurred. This Zbyszek who was in contact with me – there were a couple of Austrians and Poles there apart from him – they wanted to escape.

An SS man was also one of them. The five of them bribed a driver from the transport department with 10 thousand francs, but this driver was a spy; he seemingly agreed, got with them into the car, and drove them straight to the Political Department. As a result, one of them took strychnine that same day, and Zbyszek did the same the next. The rest were hanged. The only one to survive was Edward Püsch, who was to participate in the escape, came to the agreed upon place but didn't know the number of the car, and, furious, went back to the sick room, looking for Zbyszek because he thought the others had ditched him. Half an hour later, he found out what fate he'd escaped.

In the end, these incidents happened one after the other, and I could no longer remove those books. In the meantime, we took over a hospital on that side of the station, and this hospital was bombarded on 26 December 1944. I had a difficult articular problem at the time, and the Chief Medical Officer ordered me to house rest. During this raid, the bunker designated for the sisters collapsed. With the help of a Yugoslavian named Mira, a 19-year-old girl who had been in the camp for four years, I managed, in spite of being able to use only one arm, to find, among the rubble, these two books, which were in a case. The next day, I went to Edward Püsch and asked him to arrange it so that I could give the books away, for one had to presume the raids would happen again, I could die, and then such important materials would be lost. The next Sunday, I think it was 29 December 1944, I gave the books to Natalia Spak.



After the raid, the Chief Medical Officer of all German concentration camps, *Standardführer* Lolling, came from Berlin; the orderly corps stood for the assembly and he informed us that we, that is the hospital, would be transferred to a different place because of the bombings, that, of course, we would be reduced, and that he would have to disappoint certain SS men who were hoping they were going to be sent to the front, for they would have to stay in Auschwitz, as he could not give up a single one of these people, and Auschwitz itself was considered the front. Later Wirths had a conversation with Lolling regarding me. On 5 January 1945, a telegram came from Berlin, saying that sister Maria Stromberger was to report to *SS-Führung Hauptamt* on 7 January. I received a letter from my boss, but didn't open it. It was allegedly meant for the doctor who was going to treat me. I would like to mention that during my illness, apart from two weeks, I was always on duty.

At the time that Dr. Wirths was treating me, I was often surprised deep in my heart that, as a doctor, he wanted to give me such great amounts of morphine. I didn't suspect anything yet, but when I got to Berlin, the chief nurse in the Red Cross saw me and, from her behavior towards me, I realized something was wrong. This woman told me: "Where does this nervousness come from?" To which I replied: "Chief nurse, you're forgetting I was in Auschwitz." Then she said, surprised: "But this had nothing to do with you." I told her: "I'm sorry, but I can't close my eyes or shut my ears." At this, she handed me over to the neurological hospital in Prague. The doctor there, an *Oberscharführer*, was very reasonable. He took my medical history, and once I told him everything, asked: "And apart from this, you have nothing more to tell me?" I told him: "I am a smoker; apart from this, I don't have any sins." Then he asked: "And what about morphine?" I ask: "Morphine? I do recall that Dr. Wirths left me 250 g of morphine every night by my night table, but I never used it. I took dolantin, which doesn't contain morphine. Anyway, you can find out if this poison is in me, I will gladly take the test." To this the doctor said that, according to my medical history, I was a morphine addict.

Chairperson: Is the witness finished?

Witness: I stayed in the hospital for three weeks, and was later transferred to a different place. With this, my stay in Auschwitz ended.

Chairperson: You said it would have been madness to give the prisoners any help.

Witness: For me, it would not have been possible to help them.



Chairperson: Why was it impossible for you to help the prisoners, if you were a sister?

Witness: I was a nurse of the sick. You gentlemen must have misunderstood me. Whatever a single person could do, that is give some bread and some milk, or bring a letter – that was all very little.

Chairperson: So you are saying that you could help, and did in fact help, but that such help was minute.

Witness: Naturally.

Chairperson: This help was of no consequence?

Witness: I saw thousands of “muslims” [prisoners extremely exhausted by famine] there who could barely stand on their feet.

Chairperson: In what part or sick room did you work?

Witness: In the main medical SS camp. It was the original SS sick room. There were four sick wards there.

Chairperson: Did you have any contact with the accused?

Witness: No.

Chairperson: Never?

Witness: No.

Chairperson: You mentioned these declarations containing the third section, that everyone will serve the country and the regime with all their strength. You mentioned you did not sign this section, but put your signature above it.

Witness: Yes.

Chairperson: You mentioned before that, that another person was threatened that if she does not sign it, she will be put in the camp.

Witness: Yes.



Chairperson: Did you suffer no consequences for not signing that declaration?

Witness: No, I didn't. I would like to say that this was strange, but if someone seemed so unwilling to do something, I was always very lucky in cases like this.

Chairperson: Are there any questions for the witness?

Defender Ostaszewski: I have questions. You testified you were in the SS hospital.

Witness: Yes.

Defender Ostaszewski: SS men were sick with typhus?

Witness: They were sick with that as well.

Defender Ostaszewski: Were there any terminal cases?

Witness: Yes, there were. But they didn't die there, in the sick room, when they were examined and it turned out that their condition was poor, they were transferred, in years 1942-1943, to the garrison hospital in Katowice.

Defender Ostaszewski: Did SS men, in the face of grave illness, show remorse or regret for the murders committed?

Witness: No. I must say that few of these SS men who had typhus fever endured the illness bravely. It was precisely those who maltreated the prisoners in the most brutal and cruel ways who feared for their life the most.

Defender Umbreit: You were asked by the Tribunal whether you had had any contact with the accused Höß. I think there has been a misunderstanding. The question is, have you ever encountered the accused?

Witness: Not the accused himself, but I did nurse his wife for a while, when she got seriously ill during childbirth.

Chairperson: I have no more questions. The witness is free to go.

I order a recess until 4 PM.