

Sr. M. Ozana Krajačić

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# The Drina Martyrs



Their Lives and Martyrdom

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Zagreb, 2011.



# Forward

We have here in hand a brief overview of the lives and martyrdom of the Drina Martyrs. This booklet is a reminder of what a weak person can suffer and endure if supported by the grace of God and sustained through daily renewal of his faith in the One who loved us first (cf. 1 John 4:10).

The aim of this booklet is not to describe in detail the lives and deaths of the four Sisters from Pale, as this has been done elsewhere particularly in the book by Sr. M. Slavica Buljan, *Zavjet krvlju potpisan (Vows Signed in Blood)* or in the testimonies of eye witnesses, as in the book written by Fr. Anto Baković, *Drinske Mučenice (The Drina Martyrs)*. These lines here only wish to point out a basic direction and inspire us on our own way on the path to sanctity.

Man is but a wanderer on this earth. He can only travel with surety if he knows the destination of his travels and follows the signposts along the way. The saints are like signposts on our journey in life showing us the way and what we need to take along on that path. Therefore, may this brochure be a help to find the right direction and spiritual refreshment while we are on the road and effected by our time, which suffers so from lack of time.

Let us talk to the witnesses. Their words carry a special weight because they come from personal experience. These are people who have known the Sisters personally and have lived together for some time

with them or who even in some way or another shared their Way of the Cross. Convinced of the faithfulness with which the martyrs remained steadfast even at the threat of death, these people recognized them as radiant signposts that encourage those who struggle in their own lives against the darkness, the cold and storms.

These witness statements and the other information taken make up the *Positio* (2008) which was delivered to the Congregation for the Causes of the Saints in Rome. This foundational document in the process of the beatification and canonization of the new candidates of the altar, was the basis upon which the final decision on the martyrdom of five Sisters from Pale, Bosnia-Herzegovina was declared.

*Sr. M. Ozana Krajačić, FDC*

Zagreb, April 2011

# Introduction

*“Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven! (Mt 5: 11-12)*

These words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount are an appropriate introduction for a description of the sanctity of the lives and the martyrdom of the five Sisters of the Daughters of Divine Charity, known as the Drina Martyrs. Sr. M. Jula Ivanišević, Sr. M. Berchmana Leidenix, Sr. M. Krizina Bojanc, Sr. M. Antonija Fabjan and Sr. M. Bernadeta Banja who were killed in December of 1941 because of hatred for the Catholic faith and their religious vows.

Their martyrdom is not a separate or isolated case but rather it is embedded in the sufferings and horrors of those times, of the thousands of innocent victims in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia and the world. It was the fruit of various ideologies which aimed to eradicate dissent to achieve their own objectives. Their special targets were priests and Religious and church buildings.

In such an anti-religious climate, the whole religious community suffered the martyrdom of a convent whose members came from various countries: two were Croatians (one of Hungarian origin), two Slovenes and one Austrian Sister.



In these circumstances of war and persecution, hunger and cold, accusations and death threats, these Sisters remained loyal to Christ and to their vows – even to the shedding of their own blood. Therefore, they can rightly proclaim the words of St. Paul: *“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword. No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us”* (Rom 8: 35-37).

Because of the spread of the fame of the sanctity and martyrdom of these Servants of God the process for the beatification of these Sisters was begun in December 1999 in Sarajevo. After the successful completion of the process at the diocesan level (2003) and in Rome (2010), on 14 January 2011, Pope Benedict XVI signed a Decree of Martyrdom, thus confirming their beatification.

# Biographies of the Sisters

## Sister M. Jula Ivanišević

Sr. Jula Ivanišević (Kata) was born on 25 November 1893 in Godinjak near Nova Gradiška in Croatia. Her parents were Nikola and Tera, nee Šimunović. She was baptized the next day on 26 November in the parish church of St. Anthony in Staro Petrovo Selo. The Ivanišević family had eleven children, five of whom died in infancy. Kata grew up and matured in a Christian environment, in which the family prayed together and where there was regular attendance at Sunday Mass and on feast days and, more often than not, on weekdays too.

She attended the elementary school in her village; she was a very good student. However, her reports reveal that due to poverty, she stopped going to school after Grade 4. So at the age of eleven she stayed at home helping her parents wherever it was needed. Even at that early age her parents noticed that she was a special child and was different from her siblings. Her elder sister Terezija said that she radiated goodness and was an example for all of them in obedience to her parents.



She showed great interest in the Lives of the Saints which she read whenever she had spare time or when in the pasture. Whatever she read she then recounted to the children and her peers who happily gathered around her.

There is an event in this period of her life which shows us how Sr. Jula was personally prepared for sacrifice, fasting and renunciation. When she was ten she made a private vow that she would not eat meat. We do not know the reason behind her fasting. Sister Ljiljana Abianac, Sr. Jula's niece states: "In the desire to follow the saints she had read about, she would give away any meat that her parents had given her to take with her while tending to the livestock and she offered the bacon to the other children and would only eat the dry bread they had prepared. She did not eat any meat until she entered the convent."

In her youth, she was exceptionally modest, with a natural brightness, polite in her manner and simple in her dress habits. She felt more drawn to silence and prayer rather than to amusements. With her friends she often visited the churches in Zapolje and Staro Petrovo Selo where happily she led the popular devotions. She profoundly felt the call of God in her heart. Therefore, she said she would not marry because she wanted to "serve Jesus". Tera Ivanišević, her friend says: "I remember Kata well. We were good friends when we were young. She was always pious, even in her youth (...) When she went into the con-

vent, she bade us farewell and told us she was going to serve her Jesus.”

Kata told her parents of her desire and decision when she was eighteen years old. Two years followed. It was only after the death of her mother that she was able to carry out this decision. About this, her niece Anka Horvatović reports: “My mother (the eldest sister of Sr. Jula) always told us how Aunt Kata wanted to go to the convent but her mother would not let her go because she was her right hand and she thought they would not be able to manage without Kata. She said that while she was living she would not let Kata go.” Meanwhile, Kata prayed fervently to God. She nursed her sick mother; and postponed her entry into the convent for two years. Immediately after the death of her mother, she fulfilled her decision.

She was accepted into the Congregation of the Daughters of Divine Charity in Sarajevo in 1914. After only a few months learning German, she left for the motherhouse in Vienna where she began her religious formation. At that time the Congregation was not yet divided into provinces so the formation houses for the Congregation were in Vienna until 1919. As a candidate and postulant Kata remained for one year not far from Vienna in Breitenfurt and then went into novitiate where she received the name Sister Mary Jula. She made her temporary vows on 16 August 1916 in the mother house church in Vienna and her final vows on 29 July 1923 in Holy Rosary Church in Sarajevo. Later, her younger sister Mara would en-

ter the same Congregation as did three nieces and one grandniece.

After the profession of her vows, Sr. Jula was transferred from Austria and went to Bosnia. During her religious life she was assigned to various duties from household chores to the more laborious work in the fields (of the Congregation's farms). She served in the orphanage in Zagreb and more than once was entrusted with the office of Superior. While in temporary vows, she spent seven years in Breške not far from Tuzla which was a large community that dealt with agriculture. The Sisters remember her for many good qualities but most of all for her obedience and willingness to help.

Because of her poor health and heart problems she spent a year in Sarajevo to regain her strength. She returned and was entrusted with new responsibilities. Her whole demeanor radiated a spiritual strength which was contagious to others. In the *Biographies of the Sisters of the Province*, it is noted of her: "What was lacking in her in strength was made up for in her care, patience, and tranquility." Stressed also is her great trust in the providence of God which helped her to overcome all the difficulties in her life.

In 1932 she was appointed as the Superior of the convent in Pale which she was until the day of capture on 11 December 1941. Thanks to the goodness and spiritual maturity of Sr. Jula, there was a spirit of unity, prayer, sacrifice and love in the community.

Many testimonies about her human and moral qualities have been received, especially from the Sisters who often visited Pale to recuperate or to give service. Sr. Imakulata Orban remembers her as an angelic soul, friendly and dynamic, and always ready to help or do something. Her profile outlines Sister's spirituality: "Keenly and fully enthusiastic for her vocation. As a Superior, she was reasonable and just. She was always a true Sister and a true mother, that's why we all loved and respected her."

Other Sisters remember her as an exemplary religious who lived in constant union with God which radiated a special peace and interior harmony. In the obituary it was written of Sr. Jula: "She had great confidence in Divine Providence and she never feared that her prayers would not be heard." This trust was the fruit of her deep prayer and her great devotion to the Holy Spirit.

The Sisters remember her as a woman filled with understanding who with her pleasant simplicity influenced all that were around her. They considered Sr. Jula a saint. Her niece, Anka says: "When I used to visit her in Josipovac near Tuzla, I always felt happy to be near her, as if she were a saint."

Some of her letters which have been preserved, reflect the beauty of her soul and her genuine humility and her filial devotion to the Virgin Mary. In one of these letters to her niece, Sr. Ljiljana, then a young girl, she wrote: "Strive with all your might to follow the most Holy Virgin particularly in her mo-

desty and humility. Humility is the foundation of all virtue while pride is the beginning of all evil." Fully aware of her own weaknesses if she did not cooperate with the grace of God, in the same letter she writes: "We are all weak and pathetic as long as we live on this earth so we need lots of grace and the help of God. Pray, pray often, if only briefly, because only prayer can save us from perdition."

Sr. Julia was martyred at the age of 48.

## Sister M. Bernadeta Banja

Sr. Bernadeta Banja (Terezija) was born on 17 June 1912 in Veliki Grđevac near Bjelovar. She was baptized the next day in the parish church of the Holy Spirit. Her father, Josip was a young widower when together with his son Mirko and mother Klara he left Kapošvar, Hungary, some seven kilometers from Subotica and settled in Veliki Grđevac, Croatia. He soon remarried a young lady, Tereza Kovač whose parents were also Hungarian immigrants.



Josip and Tereza had thirteen children, however, six died in early childhood. Terezija was their twelfth child. She grew up in an exemplary Christian family as described by her elder sister, Rozalija Tomaić: "Mom and Dad were members of a Third Order, they lived a harmonious married life and led each of the children on the right path (...) Dad had built a small altar in our house. We would pray before it and our neighbors would visit and pray with us, particularly in May. Our parents passed down that spirit of prayer to us children." Her brother Miško mentions how the expression, "devout like the Banja family" was used in the village.

In addition to piety, Joseph and Theresa taught their children to be hard working and honest. Rozalija says: "Father was a farmer who also made belts



and straps. Mother was a housekeeper. They were diligent and passed on this diligence to us children." Prayer and work marked Theresa's life from her very youngest days.

She attended primary school in Veliki Grđevac and spent her free time helping her parents in everyday work. As she tended the cattle in the family pasture, with her rosary in hand she looked for quiet little place to pray or read. Although she loved quiet times, she was a happy and lively spirited young girl.

When Theresa was still quite young she told her parents of her desire to dedicate herself to God in religious life. Her sister Rozalija says: "She said that God was calling her and that she wanted to go that way." She remembers her sister saying, "I would rather die than not live out my vocation." At the age of seventeen with the blessing of her parents she left her family and entered the convent.

In June 1929 she was accepted into the community of the Daughters of Divine Charity in Koprivnica where she remained as a candidate for several months. After that she was sent to Sarajevo to the formation house. In August 1930, she entered the novitiate and was given the name Sister Mary Bernadeta. During her second year as a novice, she had Sr. Berchmana Leidenix as her directress of novices. Sr. Berchmana taught Sr. Bernadeta about the beauty and greatness of total dedication to God through the vows and explained the path of evangelical simplicity and the Rules of the Congregation.

On 15 August 1932 she made her temporary vows and on 28 August 1938 she made her final vows. Two months after her first vows she went to Pale where she was transferred to work in the kitchen. That was her only transfer.

As a candidate she was observed to be obedient, serious, reliable and very diligent. Her director in the candidacy, Sr. Maksimilijana Wiesner recalls: "I never had to repeat myself twice to her. She was conscientious and obedient and ready for any sacrifice." Obedience for her was not a matter of nature but a costly lesson and she was constantly working on herself. A remark about her obedience can be read in a report from before she entered the convent: "By nature she tends to be proud but tranquilly accepts any criticism because she has learned self-control."

The testimonies of her fellow Sisters emphasize her human and Christian qualities. Sr. Bernadeta was for them an example of sacrifice and diligence. She tended to her duties in the kitchen with extreme patience and prepared the food with great love and care. Sr. Irena Hočevar sums up her qualities in one statement: "Dedicated to minute detail." Other Sisters point out that she was satisfied with everything, she never complained about anything. Sr. Vitalija Oletić says that she often helped her in the kitchen and describes her as: "Truly a good Sister. I don't recall her ever having been irritated or impatient. She was always recollected."

As she was small in stature, she had plenty of opportunities to practice patience and to accept herself and the tasks assigned to her. Sr. Rosa Gavran a fellow novice says: "She had to use a little stool to reach the pots at the kitchen table or stove. You could see she was very adept at this. She accepted what she lacked heroically and we had the impression that she bore it with joy."

Sr. Valerija Trgovčević says that she was small in body but great in spirit. She concluded: "When I recall everything I know about our Sister, I can briefly and succinctly say: she was created in body and soul by the hand of God to be for those with whom, under whom and for whom she lived. She was the little heart and pulsating artery of our little community in Pale." Other Sisters confirm also this. They remember her tireless and cheerful zeal in the kitchen which at that time, was still heated with wood and when water had to be brought in from the well it was not easy and called for much work and sacrifice. Sr. Beata Tomić says: "It was rather exhausting but we never noticed that anything was difficult for her."

Sr. Bernadeta was martyred at the age of 29 years.

## Sister M. Krizina Bojanc

Sister Krizina Bojanc (Jožefa) was born on 14 May 1885 in Zbure near Šmarjetske Toplice in Slovenia. She was baptized the same day in the parish church in Šmarjeta. Her parents Mihael and Marija, nee Bizjak, had five daughters and one son who died when he was six. Jožefa was the second child in her family.



The family lived together until 1891, when her father went to America to search for work. However, after a short time they lost all trace of him. Her mother was left alone to bring up her children and was challenged to use the yield of their fields to feed her children. She was a very pious woman and gained her strength from going to daily Mass and receiving Holy Communion. She was very concerned about raising her children in the Christian spirit. After losing her young son, she dedicated her daughters to the protection of the Blessed Virgin and prayed before her altar regularly.

Because of her family circumstances, Jožefa stayed home until she was thirty-six years old to help her mother and sisters. As an adult she was introduced to some Sisters from the Congregation of the Daughters of Divine Charity who were raising funds in Slovenia to support their schools and boarding schools in Bosnia-Herzegovina. A strong desire to dedicate

herself to God in religious life was awakened in her. This precipitated her decision and she entered the convent in Sarajevo. Just one year later her younger sister Angela followed in her footsteps taking the name of Sr. Alfonza.

Sr. Krizina was accepted on 28 December 1921. Very quickly she was seen to have special qualities that came from the upbringing she had received in her family, she was particularly obedient and observant and thoughtful of others. She was totally dedicated to those around her, forgetful of self. She entered the novitiate on 27 June 1922 where she was given the name Sister Mary Krizina. She took her first vows on 28 June 1923 and three years later made her final vows on 5 August 1926.

Sr. Krizina lived in Pale on two separate occasions, as well as in other convents in Bosnia, particularly those that had their own rural properties where the Sisters worked the fields to supply food for the schools and residences run by the Congregation. She cared for the cattle, worked the fields, washed the laundry and tended to general household duties. Sister Ljiljana Abianac describes her by saying: "She was very quiet, recollected and devoted to God. She was reserved and diligent like a bee."

Her fellow Sisters describe her as being very shy but very conscientious in her work, reliable and ready to sacrifice herself. She had a fine gift of observation and knew just when to jump in to help someone. She was very compassionate and was able to

comfort those in need. Sr. Krizina was a simple, modest and humble Sister. Sr. Blanka Kralj says: "She didn't bother anyone with her problems and was never unsympathetic to anyone. Privately, she prayed quietly for her work to be blessed and often prayed for her Superiors and fellow Sisters. In a word, she was totally dedicated to God and so ready for Him. So, God took her to himself."

She was a person of prayer, patience and dedication to God's will. She gained strength in prayer in order to carry out her everyday tasks and to give of herself for others. Sr. Beata says: "She was filled with God and God was always in her thoughts. That could be seen in her demeanor."

Just how important Mass was to her can best be described through an incident that occurred in the forest in Pale where she worked with Sr. Ligorija Murn. Sr. Ligorija reported: "As she was a little older, she had some difficulty working in the forest and one day I saw her crying. I asked her if the work was too hard, and got the answer that her work was not hard but that she missed going to Mass and Holy Communion every day."

She came through Jesus and his Heart to Mary. On the true and solid foundation that was laid in her family, she extended her life of virtue during the rest of her life. Among her fellow Sisters she was recognized for her exceptional Marian spirit, for her love and dedication to the Virgin Mary. She dedicated her entire

life to Mary and counseled her Sisters to pray to Mary for she was our “good mother and sure helper”.

Her spirituality was evident in the fruits of her sincere and dedicated love for her fellow Sisters. They all experienced her care so that no one was overburdened with too much work. She was guided by an evangelical spirit which was evident in her always choosing tasks that were more difficult rather than opting for easier jobs. Sr. Vinka Udovičić, then in temporary profession recalls: “When we worked on the most arduous jobs in the fields, Sr. Krizina always took the hardest jobs and left the easiest tasks for me.”

In April 1939, at her own request, she was transferred back to Pale. No one ever knew her motive to be returned there, all that we know is that she had already lived in Pale (from 1925 to 1927), but was transferred then because she was afraid of working with the barn animals. Whether it was her motive now out of “choosing what was the hardest,” we do not know; her reasons are known only to God. Some light may be shed on her decision by what Sr. Vinka often heard her say: that she would like to die a martyr’s death. Perhaps this hidden desire was what motivated her not to spare her own comfort and life, but to unselfishly share of herself and attend to the most difficult of tasks which required additional sacrifice.

Sr. Krizina died a martyr’s death at the age of 56.

## Sister M. Antonija Fabjan

Sister Antonija (Jožefa) Fabjan was born on 23 January 1907 in the Slovenian town of Malo Lipje (not far from Novo Mesta), which was then under the jurisdiction of the Hinje parish but today belongs to the Žužemberk parish. She was the third of five children of Janez Fabjan and Jožefa, nee Kralj, who adopted three of Janez's older children after the death of his first wife. In 1911, the father fell seriously ill and died leaving her mother alone with eight children. She struggled in the fields to support herself and her children, but she did not neglect the Christian education of the children. Jožefa's younger sister Amalija Pružan reports: "Our mother didn't just struggle to feed us but she raised us in a spiritual atmosphere. We prayed every day in our house and went to Mass every Sunday."

Her mother placed great trust in her eldest daughter, Jožefa. Even though she was intelligent and capable, the family circumstances were such that she only completed four years of primary school. At that time her mother fell seriously ill and so Jožefa had to take care of them. In 1918 the family was struck with enormous pain and a new loss, the death of their mother. So, the children, still minors, were left without both of their parents and were left to the care of relatives.





Jožefa was only eleven when this happened. She was entrusted to her mother's sister, Marija Poznik, a very devout woman who continued to raise her in a Christian spirit and strengthen true values in her so that they were the orientation of her life.

One day Jožefa confided to her aunt that she wanted to dedicate herself to God in the Congregation of the Daughters of Divine Charity. In April 1929 she left Slovenia and went to Sarajevo in Bosnia where she began her religious life. Already as a candidate she excelled in obedience and conscientiousness in her work. In March 1930 she entered the novitiate and was given the name Sister Mary Antonija. Her novice directress in her second year in the novitiate and during her preparations to take her vows was Sr. Berchmana, a wise and experienced Sister with whom she was later to share the palm of martyrdom. Among other qualities listed in a report written before she took her vows is: "enthusiasm for religious life and conscientiousness in fulfilling religious obligations." She made her temporary vows on 19 March 1932 and final vows five years later on 28 August 1937.

Sr. Antonija worked in the garden, and laundry, and in those convents that had a farm to support the schools and boarding schools of the Congregation, she also worked in the fields. Very quickly though, the first symptoms of illness appeared and she was sent to recuperate in Pale. As her health stabilized, she took up her usual duties again. Two years later, in 1936 she underwent surgery and after recuperating

she was transferred back to Pale where she remained until her martyrdom.

Several testimonies from Sisters who knew her exist describing her human and religious qualities. Sr. Ljudevita Torbašinović recalls that from the beginnings of her religious life Sr. Antonija “took her vocation very seriously”. This was confirmed by Sr. Vinka who lived with her and was able to get to know her closely: “We weren’t that close at first because she seemed a little too serious. But as we worked and lived together we became close and I saw that she was a very good religious. Even though our work was quite difficult especially in the summer heat we did everything for the love for God.” Sr. Vinka knew her as pious, conscientious and diligent which motivated her too, to live her religious life with more commitment. She was a singular role model and especially in the following: “I never ever heard her say anything against our Superiors or any of her fellow Sisters.”

Everyone testified that Sr. Antonija spoke rarely and was a quiet and considerate person. She spoke only when absolutely necessary or of any use to her fellow Sisters, or if she wanted to say something about the spiritual life. Sr. Valerija was very impressed with her tranquility, the fruit of continually working on her religious formation. With regard to her integrity, “Integrity was one of the features of her calm nature. She was filled with the Spirit of God.” Sr. Valerija goes on to describe her Sister’s spiritual profile: “She was an ideal Sister who encouraged others

with her shining example and arduous life until her martyrdom.”

Sr. Ligorija recalls her life principle which she had learned from her aunt, her mentor. She says: “When Sr. Antonija was with me in Betanija she spoke to me of her aunt and said that she always said, ‘Whoever does you evil, do good to them’, like the Gospel says. And she did just that.”

In the book of obituaries of deceased sisters it is written about Sr. Antonija, that she excelled above all in obedience and humility, which was evident in her relationships with God and others. Working in the garden, laundry and at household duties led her to discover the value and beauty of the small things in life and hence she never strove for things too high.

She loved God above all, sacrificing her love to Him in the work she did every day. Her work was steeped in prayer. She often visited the chapel, recalls Sr. Anita Vlahović, where she prayed silently and recollected.

Her love for God kindled in her a special love for her neighbor as is noted in the obituary “We never had to ask her to do something because she always saw what needed to be done and was always ready to assist.”

Sr. Antonija suffered a martyr’s death four years after making her final vows when she was just 34 years of age.

## Sister M. Berchmana Leidenix

Sr. Berchmana Johanna (Anna Karoline) Leidenix was born on 28 November 1865 in Enzersdorf on the Fischa River, not far from Vienna, Austria. Her parents were Michael and Josefa, nee Benkhofer. She was baptized two days later in the parish church of St. Thomas. In the Leidenix family there was another daughter Mathilde (later to be Sr. Bernarda). A third daughter was stillborn.



The family was soon left without their father, leaving their mother Josefa with her two daughters facing a difficult social situation. Mother Franziska Lechner, the foundress of the newly founded Congregation of the Daughters of Divine Charity in Vienna (1868) took in both girls in 1878 receiving some government support for them from the District of Schwechat. Karoline was twelve. During her schooling she felt the call to religious life and decided to become a member of that religious Congregation.

She entered the novitiate in 1882 and was given the name Sister Mary Berchmana Johanna. She took her first vows on 20 August 1883 and her final vows on 17 August 1892. Immediately after taking her first vows she was sent to Bosnia, then a mission country, where she remained until her death. She worked in schools established by the Congregation and was a

very capable and dedicated teacher. Later she conducted private lessons for gifted Catholic, Orthodox, Muslim and Jewish children. In addition to all her duties she taught religious instructions.

During World War I, she cared for the injured and ill in the German military hospital in Višegrad. The hospital administrator personally expressed his gratitude for Sister's assistance during the war and amongst other things commented in a letter in 1915: "Whoever has seen our hospital left it with great thanks and praise. This is largely due to your kindness, dear and respected Sr. Berchmana. Seeing that the military command has withdrawn the Sisters from the hospital, I wish to extend my personal gratitude and that of our patients for your Christian and Samaritan sacrificial care."

In 1931, while in her sixties, Sr. Berchmana was appointed as the director of novices in Sarajevo. In this educational role, she tried to inspire the hearts of the novices to the love of God, for the Church and for one's neighbor, and this is confirmed by the Sisters she trained. Sr. Beata Tomić considered her to be a holy woman and a true mother: "She was a very holy and pious woman. She was a mother to us all. She fought for us like a lioness." Sr. Imakulata Orban recognized her as a "religious woman following the Sacred Heart of Jesus", an ideal nun, and a "living example for us all, who were then young nuns." She goes on to say: "She was my champion in the novitiate in Sarajevo ... a shining example in prayer and

sacrifice. She was generous and friendly. I learned that she had a great love for God, the Congregation and her neighbor.”

Sr. Berchmana was a woman of deep faith. She spent much time in the chapel, deeply immersed in prayer. Sr. Ljudevita Torbašinović reports that one could see that she possessed living faith and great love for her Betrothed Jesus. Sr. Ljudevita adds further: “She used all her might to prepare us properly for our future religious life and to come closer to our dear God.”

All the Sisters say that she was wise and very intelligent yet humble and modest. She had many opportunities to practice and develop her excellent characteristics particularly while learning Croatian which in fact was not her native tongue. Sister Ljudevita explains: “As she didn’t know Croatian very well, often she would say something wrong and we being young would sometimes laugh out loud. However, when she realized what we were laughing about she did not take it to heart but calmly and humbly accepted our laughter.”

She could compel herself in everything, Sr. Inviolata Jakov recalls, never requiring anything special for herself because of her age. Even though she suffered from asthma she endured her suffering patiently and gave herself completely into the hands of God. Sister Ilijana Ivić recalls that, “There were occasions when she suffered greatly but she quietly bore all her pain”.

She was distinguished for her resoluteness, precision, justness and self-discipline which in turn she expected from the novices. Sr. Apolonija Pečnik tells us: "She was good but she was strict, very precise and she expected us to be like that too." In the Obituary of the Daughters of Divine Charity there is a note that says: "By nature she was very strict but she had a great desire to instill the proper spirit into her young novices so that they would become good religious women."

Of Sr. Berchmana it can be said that a truly ecumenical and missionary soul burned within her. During her stay in Breške near Tuzla she taught not only Catholic children to read and write but also Muslim children and was given the nickname the 'Turkish nun'. She was well known by this name in Pale when she arrived there for the second time in September 1939 when she turned 74. That same year the *Catholic Weekly* wrote about her: "Sister Berchmana is located in Pale. She is the one of the first Sisters who came to Bosnia. She has done great deeds in the school, the novitiate and outside the convent. We dearly refer to her as the 'Turkish nun.'" She has done a great deal for the children and other citizens of Pale of the Orthodox faith and that is why they call her the 'Serbian mother'.

Two months before her death while speaking to Father Ksaver Meško, Sr. Berchmana summarized her entire life: "I am infinitely grateful to God for two things, that I was born and raised in the Catholic faith and that I became a Sister." She then had no idea that

it was in honor of these two values, faith and religious calling that she was to suffer a martyr's death.

She was killed on 23 December 1941 in the forest near Sjetlina when she was 76 years old.



## Mary's Home in Pale

At the beginning of World War II, in 1941, Sr. Jula, Sr. Berchmana, Sr. Krizina, Sr. Antonia and Sr. Bernadeta lived in Pale, near Sarajevo in their convent known as Mary's Home. The convent was founded in 1911 as a place of rest and recuperation for sick Sisters from St. Joseph's Institute in Sarajevo and for other guests. Two years later an elementary school was built next to the convent. It was active until 1919 when the government of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes closed the school down and turned it into a Serbian elementary school. After their school was closed the Sisters dedicated themselves to their original apostolate. They took in and cared for all those who needed rest, recuperation or any other form of assistance, the poor, displaced and refugees. Sometimes during the summer months more than sixty people a day would receive food. After 1927 the Sisters were permitted to teach religious instructions to Catholic children in the Serbian elementary school in Pale. Sr. Berchmana was responsible for catechesis.

The Superior of the convent from 1932 was Sr. Jula Ivanišević. Under her leadership the Sisters continued their ecumenical, pastoral and charity work until 11 December 1941 when all five sisters were forcefully taken away and killed.

Sister Jula's niece Sr. Ljiljana often stayed in Pale as a young girl. She remembers the hard work that

Sisters Krizina and Antonija did in the field, barn and laundry, the untiring Sr. Bernadeta in the kitchen, Sr. Berchmana's patience even in her old age and the ever so capable Sr. Jula who took charge of all the activities of the house and jumped in to assist with any job that needed to be done.

In October 1941 the Sisters took in a Slovene priest, Franc Ksaver Meško who had been expelled from Slovenia by the supporters of Hitler along with three hundred or so priests. After his arrival Holy Mass was celebrated in the convent chapel every day which was a consolation and support for the Sisters up until the day they were taken captive.

Franjo Milišič, an assistant in the convent told us that the Sisters kept cattle and poultry and handled all the duties and tasks in running the household. He felt that the Sisters treated him with respect as a worker and also respected his countryman of Orthodox faith who came from time to time to help them plow their fields. He fondly recalls the goodness he experienced in their presence on countless occasions: "They were very good to me, not even a mother could have been as good."

Sr. Antonina Majnarić gives testimony of the exceptional care Sr. Jula gave when Sr. Antonina had a lung disease and was sent to Pale to recuperate. She also says that the Sisters were "all good-hearted, lovely people, they were full of love".

The selfless work of the Sisters and their assistance without charge to people with various needs was

known to all who lived in that region and the convent was often colloquially referred to as the 'poor man's hospice'. Franjo Milišić comments on this: "They gave so much to the poor and gave them anything they could manage to, from lamp fuel to salt. They didn't differentiate about whom to help. They helped the Orthodox and our people. I never heard a bad word about any of them."

The Sarajevo *Catholic Weekly* occasionally reported brief articles about the Sisters in Pale referring to them as good benefactors. In 1942 the weekly wrote: "Their neighbors were exclusively of Orthodox faith yet they were Sisters and friends and benefactors to them all. All of the Sisters regardless, were not only ideal religious women but diligent bees working their small farm. They were good, virtuous, simple and caring."

All our testimonies stress that the Sisters helped everyone without taking note of whom they were nor of what faith or nationality. During World War II with the emergence of refugees and displaced persons such opportunities multiplied.

In April 1941 members of the then Yugoslav government with General Simović at the top spent some time in the convent in Pale as they fled from Belgrade. It was under their roof that the government held its last meeting before they continued their flight. They thanked the Sisters for their kind hospitality.

A special feeling of love and togetherness was perceptible amongst the Sisters and in their convent.

Sr. Imakulata who was a frequent guest in the community in Pale describes: "The community numbered five Sisters. We could say that it was a community of five angels. The community was ruled by a spirit of prayer, sacrifice and love." Sr. Fabijana Šimić claims: "They were true religious women. They did everything that was asked of them and did what was possible for them. I would love to have more of these Sisters." Sr. Ljiljana considers them to have been ideal Sisters and says: "Their work, lives and piety in my opinion were exemplary."

The Sisters were especially distinguished by their love towards their neighbors which is evident in comments by residents in Pale and surrounding villages populated mostly by Orthodox and Muslim inhabitants. When one neighbor – an Orthodox man – became ill, "Sr. Jula took him tea and nursed him", says Sr. Ljiljana. She continues: "When peasants from the Orthodox Romanija mountains passed through to go to Sarajevo to the market, they would stop at the convent briefly to take refreshments and eat something."

Zvonimir Stilinović, who comes from Pale often met the Sisters as a young boy when visiting the chapel for Mass on Kalovita mountain some three kilometers from the center of the town. He describes the opinion of Catholics that lived in that area about the Sisters: "We observed the Sisters as they worked and prayed. They were our examples in human and religious behavior (...) The Sisters represented for us a notion of humanity, goodness, kindness and exemplary

behavior." He was aware that the Sisters had a good reputation amongst the Orthodox population: "As far as I knew then the Sisters had a good name amongst the local Orthodox, or at least amongst the majority. They respected them for their sacrificing manner. I don't know that anyone ever threatened them. The Orthodox people who lived with us in the old town condemned their capture."

In March 1942, after various stories were spread, confirmation arrived that the Sisters had been killed, the Provincial Superior, Sr. Lujza Reif wrote a report notifying all the Sisters in the Province of their death. She referred to them as the best Sisters she had lived with and found some comfort in the fact that she had known them. In her circular letter she wrote: "I need not describe our sorrow and pain for them. The only comfort we have is that as you know, they were our best Sisters, true religious women, diligent and conscientious. There are not many of us who did not experience the goodness, kindness and sisterly love expressed by Sr. Jula and her fellow Sisters. Who will replace them, I do not know."

## Perseverance in Spite of Threats

By September 1941 it was already dangerous in Pale. Despite the dangers, the Sisters decided to stay with the people and to support them and encourage them. Beyond that, they knew they had proven themselves as good to all and therefore they did not feel they had to be afraid for their lives. With their presence and continued activities they testified to the love of God towards all men, regardless of whom they may be. In September the battles became more intense and closer to Pale. In the Chronicle of the Sarajevo convent we find a remark which shows the behavior of the Sisters under this threat, it states that despite it all they “continued to work in peace.”

On 16 October, two months prior to their death, Sr. Jula wrote to her sister Jula Horvatović describing the horrors of war that took place on the railroad line, their only link to Sarajevo: “A great evil has started, there is suffering all around us. Everything is being devastated and burnt to the ground around us. There is looting and confiscation and people are turning wild, worse than wild animals. (...) We are awaiting the fate our dear God has prepared for us. The danger is great but now we cannot go anywhere because the turmoil is everywhere. Dear God give us a good and happy death for that is all we need.” Fully aware of the

danger to their lives, she said, "it would truly be a miracle from God for us to escape this evil alive."

While praying and suffering for peace in the world, particularly in Bosnia, Sr. Jula admits that human nature is fragile and unstable and recommends herself and her Sisters in prayer: "Pray for me to remain steadfast and for us to manage to overcome this as we are all weak and are afraid of these atrocities and misfortunes."

In these difficult times the Sisters entrusted themselves to God's providence and to the goodness of their Orthodox neighbors for whom they always did good, the Provincial Superior, Sr. Lujza Reif explains. Sr. Jula says the same. Firmly leaning on Him who knows what is best, Sr. Jula writes: "We place ourselves in God's hands as he knows what is best for us. If our souls are to be saved with our lives being saved, God will save us from the hands of our foes, if not, then he will take us to himself."

It is because of this belief and trust that the Sisters decided to remain in Pale. There they prayed for peace and for the Church, inspiring others to do so also. "Pray to our dear God to give peace to the world", said Sr. Jula to her relatives in a letter dated 16 October. The evil spirit is behind all these atrocities, Sr. Jula is convinced. She calls on everyone to pray for the "Catholic Church because the evil spirit is doing evil in the world and leading people to hate and turn against each other and kill."

On the morning of 11 December, the day they were taken captive, Sr. Jula once again writes a pray-

er for peace in the world. In her Christmas card to Sr. Franciska Dušić in Zagreb she wrote: “May our newly born Savior bring blessed peace to this troubled world.” It is significant that in her last, but very brief letter she mentions the word peace several times.

Based on these testimonies we can conclude that the main motive for the Sisters remaining in Pale was to pray and sacrifice themselves for peace particularly in “bloodstained Bosnia”, as Sr. Jula describes it on 11 December. For the last time she recommends herself and her fellow Sisters in prayer so that they may – in these circumstances of evil – remain constant and faithful to the end: “Oh this bloodstained Bosnia, that has never for centuries had peace. Help us to pray and sacrifice so that this evil comes to an end and that we may pass into a better life where we will not see so much evil around us. Stay with God and pray for us as the days are evil.”



The convent Mary's Home in Pale



# The Capture of the Sisters

The attack on the convent occurred on 11 December in the late afternoon when it was already getting dark. Sr. Jula had not yet returned from the center of Pale where she had gone to buy some flour. The remaining four sisters were in the house along with Fr. Meško who was staying in the attic.

When they heard the shooting, yelling and loud banging on the convent door, three Sisters - Sr. Krizina, Sr. Antonija and Sr. Bernadeta – ran to Fr. Meško's room, knelt down and prayed that he absolve them of their sins. As she was too old and ill, Sr. Berchmana remained downstairs. At that moment a group of Chetniks forcefully broke down the door and came into the house and forced everyone out into the snow. They had just gathered in the courtyard when Sr. Jula arrived, and to the great surprise of the Chetniks she immediately joined her Sisters.

According to eye witness statements that heroic act by Sr. Jula shows her great love for her fellow Sisters and her readiness for martyrdom. Based on an account by Franjo Milišić, Sr. Jula's assistant, the event was described in the Chronicle: "As she returned to the convent she heard a great deal of shooting on the street a little distance from our house. (...) When she arrived in the yard, loud yelling could be heard coming from the side of the children's dormitory and school. Shouting could be heard: 'Bravo, brother Serbs, stop them, catch them alive, what good are they to us

dead! In full awareness that she was placing her life in mortal danger, this good Sister, the leader of her fellow Sisters said: 'I'm going to my Sisters!' and headed towards the house while her assistant ran back into the village followed by a shower of bullets."

Based on her own recollections and what she was told later, Sr. Silva Rabič wrote the following: "Sister Jula realized what was going on. Whatever she had in her hands she passed on to her assistant and said, 'Franjo run wherever you can, they'll kill you but I have to go to my Sisters!' And she headed off home." Several minutes later all five Sisters, along with Fr. Meško were taken away towards Sjetlina, and then Goražde while the convent was looted and then burnt.

The group was joined that same evening by several young girls from the neighboring Children's Home, but they were later released. During the four day trek across the Romanija mountains and forests the Sisters who had been taken away without appropriate clothing and footwear suffered greatly in the extreme cold, they had to cross through the deep snow and wade through frozen creeks often falling or stumbling along the way. Vesna Petrić recalls her memories of these scenes: "We followed the images of the night and some dark figures were climbing up towards Rakovac (at the foot of the Romanija mountains). The snow crunched under their bare feet, noses froze, with air condensing to steam. It was a horrific winter. The aged Sr. Berchmana often stumbled and fell down, I followed right after her on the nar-

row path with the other prisoners following behind me." Somewhere about halfway along the way, the enfeebled Sr. Berchmana is separated from the group and left behind in a hut.

The Sisters were made to stay during the nights in abandoned sheds or in Orthodox homes where sometimes they were offered coffee with a little milk and honey. They were tired, frost bitten and exhausted.

Apart from descriptions of their outward appearance, eye witness testimonies tell us valuable information about their inner attitude which was obvious through their behavior. Above all they point out that the entire time they kept silent and prayed. They didn't whine, despair or seek mercy – even though, everyone knew they did nothing but good for everyone.

In one Orthodox home where they briefly rested, the Sisters knelt down on the floor and prayed quietly. Their hosts resolutely stood up for them explaining that these Sisters did so much good for the local population; the host kept repeating: "O good Lord, save us!"

A prisoner soldier Juraj Rupčić recalls that the Sisters broke their silence and prayer only to ask out of concern about Sr. Berchmana.

At times the Sisters looked frightened but even then they did not lose their sense of compassion for those around them. Štefica Tomić, nee Prešnjak, also taken captive recalls: "We young girls cried the entire time. The Sisters comforted us and told us to pray and that nothing would happen to us." When Fr. Meško began to shiver due to the cold, Sr. Krizi-

na wrapped her woolen shawl around him. He describes this Christian gesture of love in his book which he wrote after being released and returning to Slovenia: "...it was very dark, and she gave me her large shawl so I wouldn't freeze."

The Sisters in Sarajevo received news on 12 December that the Sisters had been taken captive and that the "house in Pale was burning and that no one knew the fate of the Sisters". In her Christmas circular written on 15 December, the Provincial Superior, Sr. Lujza Reif wrote calling for fervent prayer for her Sisters who had been taken captive and whose fate was still uncertain. Pray like them, the letter notes, "that the dear God preserves them from human madness and that He gives them the strength to resist any danger to their souls and bodies and for them to persevere in goodness. (...) We place our trust in our dear God to help our Sisters and save them from any evil". She continues to say: "The trial is great but God's help is even greater. May the Lord be praised and glorified for everything."

The convent in Pale burnt to the ground. The Sisters from Sarajevo found nothing but cinders where the chapel and altar of the Mother Most Admirable once stood and the melted ciborium. The lid was still on it however. Sr. Silva says: "we opened it with deep reverence and kissed it. We could not hold back our tears. The interior of the ciborium clearly showed marks of five burnt communion hosts. Five impressions on the memory! The five victims!"

## Faithfulness unto Martyrdom

While the girls and Sr. Berchmana were left in Sje-tlina, the other Sisters were taken in for long questioning and were ordered to continue on to Goražde. They were told that they would look after wounded Chetniks. They arrived in Goražde in the evening of 15 December and were housed on the second floor of the King Peter Karađorđević barracks by the Drina River. About midnight the Chetnik soldiers came at them to have their way with them. The Sisters resolutely refused and rejected them. They did not waver even at the threat of death and – as Fr. Anto Baković testifies – they stated that they would “rather die than give in to what you want from us!”

The brutal attack on the Sisters, one by one they tried to seduce, the beatings, threats and insults continued for more than an hour. The moment they started to rip at their religious habits, the Sisters tried to escape through the window. Sr. Jula opened the window on the second floor and called her Sisters to follow her. They called to Jesus to help them, “Jesus save us!” After the jump, injured with broken limbs they tried to run and escape however they were soon caught by their attackers and murdered and their bodies thrown on the shores of the Drina.

The Sisters’ screams and cries for help could be clearly heard in the house of Stojan and Jelena Baković who lived about 150 meters away from the

barracks. Marija Čolić, nee Baković, then just twelve years old recalls: "... in our home we could hear women's cries from the Chetnik barracks, we heard them scream: 'Jesus, save us!' Others called: 'Jesus, Jesus!' I heard those screams myself and remembered them well." Her younger sister Veronika Ostoja says: "When we heard the women screaming, mother and Mrs. Angelina Genda went out on the terrace. As the screams didn't stop, we too went out to see what was happening. I held my mother by the hand and we all heard the screams: 'Jesus, help! Jesus have mercy!' Even though mother did not know that these were Sisters she kept repeating loudly: 'Jesus, help them!'"

The priest, Anto Baković, who then was ten years old, vividly remembers what happened that night on 15 December. He says: "We children went to bed early that night but in the evening mother woke us up and opened the window towards the barracks. We heard women's screams and moans as if they were in front of our house and then we clearly heard the words: 'Jesus, Mary, Joseph!' Those words were repeated several times. We knew that the violence being committed was against some Catholic women and not on Muslims. That screaming lasted for about an hour."

Veronika tells us that the Sisters were ordered "to take off their clothes and leave their way of life and stop serving the Vatican". She concludes: "We knew that the slaughter of Catholics in that region and at-

tacks on these Sisters were acts of hatred against the Catholic faith.”

The soldier Juraj Rupčić, quartered that night with other prisoners on the ground floor of the same building heard the screams and moans and saw the last Sister as she fell from the window. He says: “we cannot for certainty say what happened but we can assume that the Chetniks attempted to dishonor the Sisters violently and they, in their attempt to free themselves of this violence, jumped through the window...”

It is written in the Sisters’ Chronicle, that there was a wounded soldier in a ditch near the barracks. In addition to seeing the Sisters jump through the window, he saw each one make the sign of the cross before she was stabbed to death.

Fr. Anto Baković tells us what he saw the next day, 16 December, on the shore of the Drina: “In the morning I got up as usual and went down to the Drina and at the walls of the barracks I saw four women’s bodies. I was sure they were nuns because of what I had heard the Chetniks say in front of our house. (...) Of the four women’s bodies I saw that morning, along the Drina, two were younger and two were perhaps middle aged as far as I could tell then. Each had a wound under her breast and a dozen all over their bodies. I counted the wounds...”

His mother, Jelena did all she could to have the Sisters’ bodies buried in the Catholic cemetery which could well have meant her own death but all was

in vain. The bodies remained on the shore of the river until well into the afternoon of 16 December after which, following orders they were pushed with a stick into the Drina. The Drina became their flowing grave.



The building of the former barracks, the place of the imprisonment of the sisters



## The Death of Sr. Berchmana

The oldest sister, aged 76, Sr. Berchmana was left behind half way from where the remaining sisters were taken and kept captive in a hut. She never saw her fellow Sisters again. As she was old and sick and almost blind, she often stumbled and fell along the way. She was completely weakened and exhausted from the fatigue, falls and injuries. They put her on a sled for part of the way but she kept falling off it too.

She was kept captive with a family in Sjetlina where the widower, Ilija Gelo lived with his two daughters. One of them says: "She slept in the same room with my sister Angelina and I, because we only had one room and a kitchen. Sr. Berchmana kept rather quiet and prayed and sometimes when we were conversing she would smile at us. When we had to go to bed she would ask us to leave the room while she undressed. When we brought her food she would say: 'I'm sorry that you will not have enough'. (...) She stayed with us for about ten days."

After some time, two Chetniks arrived and took Sr. Berchmana away on a sled. Ilija Gelo's daughter recalls that day and the Sister's rosary beads well: "Daddy told them to leave her because she was old, she could not walk. After an hour they returned and one of them had Sr. Berchmana's rosary hanging around his neck. I would have liked very much to have had

that rosary. I asked him to give it to me. He said that the Sister had given it to him as a gift and that he needed them."

Ilse Senisch (Kočović), a German prisoner in Sjetlina, visited Sr. Berchmana every day. She recalls that she was "calm and full of trust in God". When she learned that Sister had to go to Goražde to join the others, who already had been killed by then she ran to greet her: "She left with my best wishes; I wrapped her in a blanket and gave her a little food for the road...I believe that I am not being presumptuous when I say that her heart ached because she had to leave. They took her away. The coachman told us when he returned that she had joined her Sisters and was happy."

Sr. Berchmana was killed on 23 December near Sjetlina. According to Vesna Petrić and the other captives, news was heard in Sjetlina that she was killed on the Prača Bridge (the Prača is an estuary of the Drina). Vesna says that one day she was given the murdered Sister's black habit and ordered to make a Chetnik flag out of it.

The Sisters in Sarajevo got varying reports about the fate of the eldest Sister from Pale. Some said that the body of the elderly Sister was buried in the Sjetlina woods. As a result early in the Spring of 1942, two Sisters from Sarajevo headed out in search of her grave. About this Sr. Silva Rabič wrote: "The Sisters came to Sjetlina without being disturbed. They went from home to home and inquired about her. The

locals showed them isolated graves outside Sjetlina but no one knew about the exact spot of Sister's grave. Sr. Rolanda opened each shallow grave together with the people (...) we found everywhere only rotting men's bodies and soldiers' uniforms! There was no trace of the remains of Sr. Berchmana."

Despite all their efforts they never found her grave. Sister Silva concludes: "We've lost any hope of ever finding any trace of the remains of our dear precious Pale martyrs."



The school in Pale where Sr. Berchmana was teaching

## The Fame of Holiness and Martyrdom

News of the death of the Sisters spread rapidly to Sarajevo and the surrounding area. Even though it was wartime people spread the news of the incident and prayed for the intercession of the Drina martyrs as they were called. Here we present only some examples.

The priest, Špiro Vuković testifies in his letters from 1986 to 1991 that his veneration began in the summer of 1942 when he was a seminarian in Đakovo and was travelling through Bosnia. Because of the destroyed bridges he stayed and spent a few days with his friends in Sarajevo. In 1991 he wrote about his experience of this to the Provincial leadership of the Daughters of Divine Charity, noting: "Of course, what can I refer to but the situation of war at the time. I was interested in hearing all there was to know about the Drina virgins and martyrs. It was then on 7 July in Sarajevo that my devotion to their heroic acts and their readiness to sacrifice themselves to save their virginal honor began."

Their witness, he says, is a gift for the Catholic Church so he is zealously spreading the news of their holiness. As one who has venerated them for so long and has received many graces through their intercession, he is convinced that we need not fear "when one can so easily find such pearls of faith ever brilliant in martyrdom."

In an effort to inspire the faithful to honor the saints and martyrs from our own region and not just those from other countries – he mentions as an example, Saint Maria Goretti, a martyr of holy purity – he had a painting done of the Drina martyrs. The painting was the work of Sr. Paulina Semenčić from the Order of the Servants of Mercy and was displayed in 1986 in the sacristy of the shrine of Our Lady of Dobrić in Split..

The priest, Ante Lutter, in a letter in 1991 calling for the opening of procedures for their beatification presents some valuable details about the spreading of the word of their holiness from the very time of their death. He was a seminarian in Sarajevo. He talks of the strong resonance of the event among the people: “The incident of the death of the Sisters strongly resonated in Sarajevo among all segments of the population particularly, among the Catholics of Sarajevo. (...) it was immediately said that they were martyrs of the holy faith. It was publicly said: that they were martyrs because of their vocation and vows. As for me as a boy of fourteen, I can say it was the common conviction, that they were martyrs.” He recalls Fr. Ante Weiss, a chaplain in the cathedral parish in Sarajevo who did not comment in any great detail about the incident but rather repeated with conviction that they “were martyrs of their holy vows and the vow of chastity.”

The end of the war brought on a new very difficult period. People withdrew into themselves in fear and began to avoid speaking about the victims of the war and all those who went missing. Fr. Lutter says: “Sil-

ence had fallen over us all. Nevertheless, when someone was faced with some hardship or women faced a similar situation, the people pointed to the Drina martyrs as models of sacrifice and witnesses to their faith and Christian beliefs. As far as I am aware, no one ever thought or spoke of them in any other way except that they were martyrs of the faith."

He continues to describe the general belief among Catholics in Sarajevo about the death of the Sisters: "... hatred of holiness, of the Church and their sisterly vows. In them we saw an example of faithfulness to God and the vows they took, on the one hand, and horrific hatred for anything remotely Catholic or holy, on the other. There was no talk of any political issue or that they were Croat but only hatred for the sanctity of their lives."

He compares them to the first Christian martyrs and writes: "Everything was later covered by a wall of silence from which the figure of these holy virgins and martyrs burst through just like in the early Christian era." He concludes: "They remained faithful to their vows because they were true Christians and true religious women like the first Christians: it was better to die than to willingly commit a sin. In my opinion they were filled with Christ, their Spouse, whom they loved with all their being and that is why they sacrificed themselves for this super-natural value. I consider them as knights loyal to their oaths and vows and their sincere holy chastity."

News spread about the incident in Pale too. Zvonimir Stilinović, born in Pale testifies to the impressi-

on amongst Catholics there and says: "We, we spoke of them with respect and believe they deserve human and divine recognition because of the violence that was done to them. We believe that they are martyrs! (...) We do not see any other motive except that they were Catholics."

The news also spread about their death to Sr. Jula's home town, Godinjak. Her grandniece Kata Popišil, nee Ivanišević says: "News about the death of Sr. Jula caught up with us as we were returning from Sunday Mass on Christmas eve. It was hard to accept that she had suffered such a horrific death. At that moment, Jula, Sr. Jula's sister, began to sing the *Te Deum* in gratitude to God for her sacrifice. She recalls that her father said: "You will see, Kata they will be canonized one day!"



The place at Drina where were laying the bodies of murdered sisters

## A Message that Enlightens

From as soon as circumstances allowed, various groups of Sisters from the Congregation of the Daughters of Divine Charity have been coming to Pale and Gorazde and the Drina River with groups of the faithful to honor their Sisters. They listen in silence to a message that invites imitation.

These places speak louder than words. They preserve the memory of holiness that quietly without any fanfare was realized in the ordinary circumstances of everyday life. They preserve the memory of lives which were given to God and man completely and without counting the cost. A memory of faithfulness in small things, which with constant effort matured and developed into faithfulness to the maximum.

Fidelity to the ultimate – during difficult challenges and in evil circumstances– is preached to us in the Drina River. Here, with their own blood, these Sisters professed the vows they had made in words on their profession days and had renewed throughout their lives. It was here that they spoke their final. "Yes!"

Their lives and martyrdoms have inspired many who from 1941 to this day have recognized them as possessing ideals worthy of remembrance and worthy of following.

The Drina martyrs shine today with their demeanor, faithfulness, and message. They are a gift to the Church – as examples that inspire and attract. They are a constant challenge to people in religious life as



is stated in a letter from the Carmelite Sisters of St. Theresa of the Infant Jesus in Kloštar Ivanić: "We are living in a time that wants to quash the values of the soul and to deaden belief in ideals in the souls of consecrated lives. The Lord has put five wonderful lights, the Drina martyrs in a candelabra to be a constant challenge and inspiration to us to live out our consecration to the Lord more faithfully day by day, through small tasks, so that in difficult temptations like those they faced we can, with our lives say *fiat*."

That is an encouragement also for our families to remain faithful to the lives they have chosen and to be open to giving of themselves to others in all circumstances even at the price of suffering.

The Drina martyrs are a challenge to our youth. They encourage them to build their lives on values that will never be obsolete or fade and as eternal values, they can give true meaning to their existence granting them joy and security in their everyday lives.

The holy lives and martyrdom of Sr. Jula, Sr. Berchmana, Sr. Krizina, Sr. Antonija and Sr. Bernadeta speak a message to us all that there are values worthy of sacrifice in order to preserve our love and to have life in abundance (cf. John 10:10).

# Contents

Forward.....	5
Introduction .....	7
Biographies of the Sisters .....	9
Sister M. Jula Ivanišević.....	9
Sister M. Bernadeta Banja.....	15
Sister M. Krizina Bojanc .....	19
Sister M. Antonija Fabjan .....	23
Sister M. Berchmana Leidenix .....	27
Mary's Home in Pale .....	32
Perseverance in Spite of Threats.....	37
The Capture of the Sisters .....	40
Faithfulness unto Martyrdom .....	44
The Death of Sr. Berchmana .....	48
The Fame of Holiness and Martyrdom	51
A Message that Enlightens .....	55
Author .....	60



## Author



Sr. M. Ozana Krajačić was born in 1964 in St. Martin na Muri (Croatia), where she attended elementary school. After entering the Congregation of the Daughters of Divine Charity, she continued her schooling. She made her first vows in 1985, professed her final vows in 1990 and worked as a teacher of Religious Instructions. In 1994, she went to Rome and began studying at the Pontifical Theological Institute, the *Teresianum*. Sr. Ozana completed a doctorate in Spirituality. When she returned from Rome she worked in Religious Formation, held retreats for Sisters and lay people and often gave religious talks on the radio. As Vice Postulator for the Cause, she edited the journal "*Drinske Mučenice*" (Drina Martyrs) and in 2008 under the direction of the Relator, Fr. Jerome Fokcinski, SJ, she wrote the Positio of their martyrdom (summaries of the documentation that proves the heroic exercise of virtue).



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