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Translated from Polish to English
The life of Janina Fitz 1918 - 2008

“I Always Prayed”

“This is almost impossible to write or too difficult to imagine.” These words have been heard by many from the lips of Sr. Nina, of the history of her life. Her experiences of enormous suffering become an example of a strong faith, hope and undying zeal for serving the Lord.

Sr. Janina (Nina) Fitz was born into a German family living in Eastern Poland whose ancestors settled in the vicinity of Swierza near the River Bug about 300 years ago. Her parents, Br. and Sr. Ryl, received the truth because of the evangelistic work which was started in Poland before the war. Those responsible were Br. Stahn, Br. Kasprzkowski and Br. Wojlowski from Poland and Br. Tabacznski from America. The class was located in Swierza. Br. and Sr. Ryl consecrated in 1922. The class met in Br. and Sr. Ryl’s home. It was known as the “Swierz Hollenderski Ecclesia.” Br. Ryl was elected an elder in the class which in 1925 numbered about 60 members. The class fared well spiritually. Sr. Nina remembers well Br. Gumiel, Grudzien and Gladyssek who served them regularly.

After the year 1930 the Ecclesia meetings divided between the free brethren and members of the Epiphania persuasion. Nina remembers many guests in her parents’ home. She remembers the visits of Br. Stahn of Poland and Br. Tabacznski from America who came to visit from Polesia and said they saw “apostles,” meaning brethren. The word may sound like an anecdote, but it is true, and you can have a small idea how the brethren live. “Apostolowie” similar to “Postoly” is the word for shoes made from the top layer of bark. The home was meagerly furnished and the temporal food very plain. Soup was served in a large bowl. Each one took turns to eat from this bowl. The visiting brethren remarked that the hospitality was very sincere and their knowledge of the scriptures and the love of the truth was worthy of emulation.

Sr. Nina consecrated at age 17. She was not able to go to school, but was reared in a Christian atmosphere of love and unity. She taught herself to read and write. She loved to read the Bible and the works of Br. Russell, volumes etc., and various Bible literature.

Sr. Nina recollects a point in her life when she was confronted with a proposal of marriage by a person who was not in the Truth. Not having anyone to help her make a decision, thinking perhaps this person would eventually become interested and give his life to the Lord, she married him. After a number of years, she realized she made a mistake. At this point the battle of maintaining her faith began.

Her difficult trials began at the onset of the war. In 1939, Polish territories located beyond the Bug River was taken by Russians. About a year later Hitler's army took half the ecclesia to Germany, about thirty members of the class. Unfortunately, 15 other members of the church fell victim to a cruel murder in 1942 committed by a gang of Ukrainians, killing all those who could not manage to escape. They burned everything, including almost all the brethren's biblical literature. Sr. Nina's family survived. This was evidence to her that God watches and hears the prayers of those who sincerely offer prayers to Him. During the war oft times there were surrounding perils and atrocities of beastly nature aimed at the Jews by the Germans, which Sr. Nina witnessed, making a deep impression upon her mind of the sad picture of tragedies upon God's chosen people.

In 1943 Nina's father moved to Germany and the rest of the family followed him. They lived about a year in Ratenhof in Eastern Germany, 30 km from Elba. In the year 1945 the Russians overtook this area. The German families that settled in Poland were urged to go back to their land beyond the Bug River. To return seemingly was a better proposition than to stay in Germany. However, if Sr. Nina would have stayed it would have been better for her. But the Lord arranged matters differently. Sr. Nina always trusted in God's overruling providence and whatever He would permit, it would be what she needed for her spiritual welfare. The decision was made to move back to Ukraine. It was here that began the nightmarish experiences in which more than one lost his health, hope and faith and eventually his life. Nevertheless Sr. Fitz survived and her faith was not broken, but through much prayer for sustaining grace, she was able with the Lord's help to endure all things.

The Russians transported them by truck to and from the border on the Bug River, then by train and promising them land, a home and peaceful conditions and money. But they were cruelly deceived and condemned to live in extreme poverty in Siberia. Shortly upon arriving by train in Siberia they brutally separated the families. The men were taken to a cruel prison and the women and children were left alone. Sr. Nina's father and husband were sentenced to five years. Sr. Nina and her nine month old daughter spent six months in a terrible prison. These were probably the worst months of her life. After one and a half years, the separated families (Sr. Nina's father and husband) learned that they were alive and where they were.

Sr. Nina, her mother and children rode on the train from the prison to Iskitim in the vicinity of Nowosybirsk, Siberia. Were it not for their strong faith, their will to survive and fight against cruel reality, they would not have been able to endure the trip. Sr. Fitz sold some of her clothes to a soldier for a little rice and some apples, not realizing how long this food was to last.

Minus fifty degrees in a small hut, cold, snow, wind, darkness and hunger were the conditions in which she had to go through for twenty nightmarish years. How do you fight the cold and cruel dungeon around where all the trees were cut down, where the house is full of snow, and the children must sleep in a hole dug in the ground, where it reaches a weak flame lamp? How do you fight hunger, the monthly food rations for 6 kg of soy beans and 4 buckets of potatoes and bread cost 100 rubles in earnings of approximately 150 rubles per month? Could you brethren imagine those poor children lined with snow and left in a cold hut, while the mother had to work with a superhuman effort to make a meager living to barely keep alive?

Five long years Sr. Nina worked very hard tending twenty cows three times a day and in between times had to build shelters for the animals and that with frost-bitten hands. Sr. Nina worked diligently and honestly always wanting to please God, praying fervently for wisdom and a humble heart. Those in authority praised Sr. Nina for her sincerity in her work, promising her more money which she knew she would not get; she was not looking for praise from the people, always praying for wisdom and a humble heart.

In the face of cold, hunger and hard work, private prayer for Sr. Nina was a joy and the reading of the Bible in secret was a source of spiritual strength. Spiritual and religious life in Siberia did not exist; it was strictly forbidden and punished. For possessing and reading Bible literature, singing songs, and the smallest example of religious gatherings as well as any correspondence and the use of the Polish language was severely punished with a new prison sentence. Nevertheless, Sr. Fitz had a hidden Bible and hymn book, and often seeking strength and uplift, the Lord heard her prayer.

After five years Sr. Nina's father and husband were released from prison, which for her was evidence of the Lord's care. Even though they were together their circumstances were no better. Is it easier to work in a collective farm with arduous toil than in the quarries during the mining of lime stone or a superhuman effort on their loading and unloading the burning lime? Or loading the cars and laying stones in the 25-meter ovens? This was no work for a woman. The limestone gave Sr. Nina a rash all over her body, her eyes were bloodshot and it made her very nauseated. They had to work without a break otherwise they would be severely punished if they did not make their quota.

In spite of the years of dark clouds and hopeless slavery, there were faint glimpses of freedom. The blessing of mail brought Sr. Nina a copy of the Fifth Volume from her family which she guarded zealously having the spiritual support of her father and mother. Sr. Nina and her parents planned to have the Memorial which had to be in great secrecy because they were surrounded by informants. If even an inkling of knowledge of the plan was revealed it would mean severe punishment and being shot. Germans, Polish, Russians and Jews were killed by the Trojka or Communists. Such cruel executions were witnessed by a sister who lived many years in Siberia.

Through the twenty years life as a convict in Siberia, Sr. Nina did not lose faith in God nor neglect her consecration vow, and did not lose hope in God's care, although declaring her faith in God or in the Truth would mean death. For ten long years she had to obey strict rules not to leave her village without permission. Many times she had only two or three hours sleep and worked above human power, without food in severe cold, yet she survived not losing hope. Traveling to Kirgizi [Russian Republic of Kyrgyzstan/Kyrgyz] was not true liberation from slavery, neither did it improve conditions of life, but it certainly was a great change in Sr. Nina's life. It was a move in which Sr. Nina would be able to put her terrible life in Siberia behind her, but never out of her mind. This system of oppression and destruction of human beings will always stay in the minds of those who survived it. The worst is behind them and God did not forsake those who trust him supremely. This is now the year 1968.

Sr. Nina lived in a little town called Frunze near the capital city of Kirgizi [Kyrgyzstan]. She had been away from the brethren for twenty-five years. Still under the communistic rule she had to be very careful not to identify herself religiously or to be caught at a meeting without being sentenced to pay a large fine for even a small offense. In spite of this Sr. Fitz met with her mother to read the Fifth Volume. For a number of years, ignoring the severe restrictions, she met with the Jehovah's Witnesses. She was led to this because of strong yearnings for fellowship, but she could never agree with the teachings of Witnesses, particularly regarding the date of the Presence of Christ and the time of the Memorial of our Lord's death. Sr. Nina did not neglect the observance but observed at the full moon and so alone she partook the bread and the wine.

Despite many years without meetings and fellowship with brethren, Sr. Nina's faith did not weaken, although she admitted that at times when she relied on her own strength, she was not able to discuss Truth with the members of the Witnesses. The Lord richly blessed Sr. Nina and helped her to witness among the people. Although Sr. Nina did not feel the spiritual oneness with the Witnesses, she deeply appreciated their work, zeal, courage and perseverance to endure penalties, persecution and arrests, and also the help given to her in everyday life. After the death of Sr. Nina's husband a year after they left Siberia, she had to take care of the home and a large farmstead. She raised the children alone, and worked as a night watchman, which was extremely dangerous and exhausting. Thanks to her extremely hard work and tenacious attitude, supported by the Heavenly Father, Sister Fitz provided the children with everything they needed in order not to experience more hunger, cold and misery, and to be able to learn. The elder of the Witnesses, Br. Denis, helped Sr. Nina a lot. She in turn shared the fruits of her labors with her friends and neighbors.

After many years Sister Fitz managed to establish contact with her family and lived to see the first visit from Poland, allowing her to receive the missing volumes and other literature and magazines. These brethren sent her regular journals of "*Na Strazy*" and other literature. Reading was always her passion, and she grew in knowledge in the understanding of the Bible and above all grew in strength of the Spirit which enabled her to survive the enormous trials and experiences. "I always prayed," Sr. Fitz says, "and God listened to me."

During the Gorbachev reforms, Sr. Fitz lived in Kirgizi in poverty, in an atmosphere of fear of informants. Sr. Nina experienced much because she attended the meetings with the Jehovah's Witnesses even though the ban on reading the Bible was lifted, yet meeting together for worship was still forbidden. More than once they had to flee through the back door not to be caught by the head of the informants, to find them meeting with the Scriptures. Penalties for illegal assembly were often higher than the monthly salary for the work. However, Sr. Nina expressed appreciation for brethren how they diligently preached the Gospel with much zeal. Even their children would distribute booklets and Sr. Nina herself oftentimes witnessed the word of God to the people, who observed Sunday as holy but did not even know the name of Jesus.

When Gorbachev introduced freedom of speech and religion, the Jehovah Witnesses started to organize many conventions and held immersions in which even nine and ten year old children were encouraged to be immersed. Sr. Nina confronted the Witnesses with the teachings in the Sixth Volume concerning baptism especially of underage children and their lack of understanding what baptism into Christ's death means. Sr. Nina did not hesitate to tell God's mercy to her acquaintances and neighbors, the importance of working on one's character developing love brings fruitage. Indeed, it is very important to Sr. Nina to realize character development and to overcome the weaknesses of the flesh and in turn develop virtues of love, kindness and justice.

With the freedoms that Gorbachev introduced in the USSR, started another wave of problems and experiences. Sr. Fitz does not hesitate to tell of the incidents that happened in Kirgizi as "anarchy" in which one can best describe the communistic government as "beastly." In those twenty years in Siberia, more than once she experienced pain and suffering, witnessed the injustice, misdeeds by the soldiers and heads of the Russian government. Now here in Kirgizi she had to witness more than once the acts of lawlessness and anarchistic terror.

Unemployment and inflation began to follow the great waves of anxiety, theft, murder at the hands of the Nationalists. The Kirgizi Muslims began to demand the expulsion of the Russians and briefly banned the use of the Russian language. One of the worst times was when we had a severe winter, lack of fuel and money, schools were closed, a water and food shortage, even bread for which one had to wait in long lines. We lived in a great fear of being attacked, raped and robbed. The danger came both from the local residents and bands from the hills of Uzbekistan. Sr. Nina feared that she would lose her only cow which gave the milk and nourishment to her, her family and some neighbors. All the time she never ceased to persevere in prayer.

There was a possibility to move to Germany where the natural brother of Sr. Fitz lived. Sr. Fitz decided to leave Kirgizi which did not hold any prospects of better conditions. In May 1994 her daughter, son-in-law and two grandchildren arrived in Ludwigburg near Stuttgart.

For 46 years being a widow, Sr. Fitz did not forget her covenant she made with God. Her desire was always to serve God. Her hope was to gain eternal life even if it was at the feet of the Highest, just to be under His protection. In spite of difficult suffering both physical, mental and spiritual which Sr. Nina experienced in Siberia, in spite of the crimes she witnessed in times of war, in spite of hunger, cold, sickness, heavy work, lack of sleep, even though she lost her child, her husband and dear parents, and in spite of the persecution because of the Truth, Sr. Nina did not lose her deep faith in God. Sr. Nina also had hope in the nearness of the Kingdom. She always felt God's care and encouraged others to pray in faith and hope. She sees the answer to her earnest prayers not only in the fact that she is still alive, but also in the fact that in spite of everything she was never brutally attacked and robbed or ravished which happened in the lives of many people. Sr. Nina is thankful for this and for everything she experienced because she believes it was permitted for her spiritual good and salvation.

The desire and burden of Sr. Nina's prayers at this time is that those near and dear to her would recognize the truth and consecrate their lives in the Lord's service. Sr. Nina, in faith and zeal, reads and studies the Bible and the works of Br. Russell which was and is her favorite pastime in her leisure moments even to this very day. She is very thankful for the nourishment of the scriptures and Biblical helps. Sr. Fitz is now [in 1995] 77 years old, and has a good understanding and is able to participate in the studies and worship. For 46 years her desire was always to find herself in the fellowship of the brethren and in oneness, faith and spirit. At the sixtieth anniversary of her consecration to God, the good Lord fulfilled her dream. From Ukraine, then Germany, from faraway Siberia in Kirgizi and finally to Stuttgart, Germany and now in the Frankenthal Ecclesia with the brethren, just like it was before the war. Even though Sr. Nina does not speak German she enjoys the unity. She enjoys also the present conditions of her life. And with a smile she says, "Even in this life she found paradise."



Addendum:

Jerry Leslie 2009

We first met Sister Janina Fitz in 1998 at the International Convention in Miskolc Hungary. Hearing of her remarkable experiences, we arranged a visit with a few other brethren to ask questions and gather her history. Then we visited her again in the home of her daughter in Germany in 2002. Here are some notes from those visits. They may vary a little from the above carefully composed article, because of our quick note taking. The notes follow the nature of the conversation, rather than in exact historical sequence. However, there may be some details that surfaced here and not elsewhere.

1998 visit in Hungary:

Before the war and the Stalin oppression era. First Hitler came to Ukraine, then the Russians came, then Hitler came again. In 1942 they came from Germany. They could have gone back after the war. The same cultural system was introduced to that place. They had their own possessions. Nina was a young consecrated girl of 24 when the storm began.

As Bible Students, they got together and decided not to go back to Germany. They knew what Hitler was up to. "If the Lord arranges for us to die, so be it." Hitler didn't like them.

Br. Stahn and Br. Oleszczynski used to visit their class. The class of 30 consecrated stayed. It was a big class – up to 70. When Johnson started, they split up and made another class. There were quite a few children of consecrated. Two years went by. Many brethren were killed. Only 15 survived. At harvest time they had lots of land and a big house. They ran away. For two years the Germans took over.

Then the Russian front took over. The Russians took them to Siberia for 20 years. Sister Janina was alone – no other brethren. For 20 years she and two children survived – it was a miracle.

Siberian labor camps under Stalin: In winter it was 50-55 degrees below zero. No one had the right to go anywhere without "papers." She lived on 5 kilograms of potatoes, soybeans, 100 grams of bread for the children (bad quality – she motioned as if it were unpalatable). The two children were young – one was 1 year and one 6 years. They lived in a very small house (her hands gestured to a small area). Nothing in it, no lights. In winter it was caked in ice inside and outside.

She milked 20 cows 3 times a day. Her hands became very swollen. They got so bad, she couldn't deliver the required quota, so they decreased her food ration. While milking, she had to leave her children without supervision. They had very little to eat.

Stalin killed 40 million people. Her husband died 30 years ago. He had been put in a high security prison. He was beaten and terrorized. He was innocent, but he was accused by people who were paid for false accusation. He was beaten, lost all his teeth, and his lung was damaged in the beatings. He lost his faith and his mind was damaged when they poured oil into his nose.

Sr. Janina only had a Bible and a hymn book. She snuck them into Siberia with her. If she said one word about God, it would add 10 years to a prison term. They were treated like political prisoners.

She received 200 rubles for one month. One kilo of bread was 100 rubles. One bucket of potatoes was 50 rubles. They had some rice. She milked cows for 5 years. If they didn't work, they couldn't live. Her hands became very swollen from milking cows and her feet became frostbitten. She made grass into soup.

She didn't know about any other brethren. JW's and Baptists were able to assemble, but she was not allowed to visit them. Stalin believed in no God but himself.

Then she worked for 15 years of hard labor in a stone quarry. Then she worked at a large stove 30 meters high. She had blood all over her legs and blood in her eyes. It was such physically hard labor. It was where prisoners were sent to die. Every night she prayed to God.

The Russian soldiers raped the women. She saw everything, but God spared her that experience. God will not give more than we can bear.

They left Siberia when Stalin died. The Bible was still forbidden. Gorbachev allowed more freedom. Her brother was in Germany. He visited her once in Siberia. He was not allowed to come again. He wanted to bring them to Germany.

When they were allowed to leave Siberia, they went to Kirgizi [Russian Republic of Kyrgyzstan/Kyrgyz]. Then they started to have meetings secretly with JW's. There were no Bible Students around. There she met a family of JW's.

She had been 20 years in Siberia. It was "Sodom and Gomorrah." She was so glad to get away. She just worked hard and didn't get involved. They were closely guarded at all times, so no one could steal anything.

The JW brethren helped her and studied the Bible. Then her brother in Germany invited her to Germany where she could meet with Bible Students. She was the only one in Siberia under Stalin. They had one cow and that was taken from them. Her children came back with her. Her daughter is a doctor and a Baptist. Her son is not interested in religion.

She can't cry about anything that happened to her now.

A following visit in Miskolc somewhat expanded from the above:

The Russians were coming across to Ukraine and burnt their house. The Russians were pushing the German border back. These were terrorist bands of Russians. She followed the retreating Germans. They accepted people fleeing. She nearly got to Berlin, but the Russians finally overtook the German line and she was in a mass of people taken prisoners. Russians were capturing German nations for slave labor.

It was sometimes 60-70 degrees below zero. Her house in Siberia (a shack) had a stove in the middle of it. Something is more important than food. It is hope of the kingdom. She memorized hymns to keep her sanity.

She was 20 years in Siberia (5 years milking cows and 15 years in a quarry) during the Stalin years. Then 20 years in Russia before Gorbachev. After more than 50 years of exile, incarceration, deprivation and terror, she finally was able to leave in 1994, and returned to Germany to be with her brother (not in the truth). He gave her a sealed letter which he had received from her close friend, a sister in the truth about 10 years older than she, who had escaped when Sr. Janina was captured by the Russian front. In the letter this sister told Sr. Janina how to find the Bible Students, which she then did.

Notes from our visit with Sr. Janina in Germany 2002:

Traveling on to Stuttgart, we and Br. Allen Springer visited a few days with Daniel and Barbara Kaleta and their three beautiful children. Daniel took us to visit Sister Nina (Janina) Fitz, 85 years old. She lives so simply and contentedly in a little apartment. It belies the magnitude of suffering she experienced for 50 years in Russian labor camps in Siberia including Novosibirsk and Kirgizia Kyrgyzstan.

We have heard several accounts from her harrowing survival. But this time we heard a story that only a mother could tell. She had two infant children in Siberia. She was required to milk twenty cows daily, even in minus 50 degree weather. Having no one to care for the children, she dug a hole in the earth under the unheated house to place the children until she returned each evening. All the day, while milking cows, she would pray that the children might be alive when she returned. Under such conditions, one daughter died. She now lives with the other surviving daughter, whom she adores.

We asked her if she has anything from those years. She produced a small tattered Bible and said, "only this, nothing more is important." When asked what sustained her in those times, without hesitancy, the answer was, "prayer." Sister Nina clings to almost no material things of this life. In the middle of a rather simple room was a bowl with some apples and oranges. When we left, she said, "here take these with you. I saved them for our visit." As we left the apartment, Nina sat in the window with a beaming smile bidding us farewell.

Sister Janina Fitz died of a stroke at 90 years of age in March 2008 in Frankental Germany. Brother Daniel Kaleta conducted her funeral memorial service.

See: <http://dabhar.org/priv/zdjecia/nina/PogrzebNiny.htm>

Luke 8:15



1 Corinthians 15:43

