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**Teresa Olearczyk\***

## **The Moral Skills and Professional Attitude of Midwives The Pedagogical Implications of the Moral Attitude of Stanisława Leszczyńska, a Midwife from Auschwitz-Birkenau**

### **Sprawności moralne a postawa zawodowa położnych Pedagogiczne implikacje postawy moralnej Stanisławy Leszczyńskiej – położnej z Auschwitz-Birkenau**

**Abstract:** The cognitive aim of the study is to show the importance of moral skills for the professional attitude of midwives in extreme social situations. The research project was carried out using the example of the midwifery care provided by Stanisława Leszczyńska to women giving birth in the Nazi concentration camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau. The research methods used were analysis, synthesis and case study. Formally and materially, the article fits into the sub-discipline of pedagogical biographical studies. The main conclusion of the research confirms that coherent moral attitudes in extreme situations result from the process of self-education in the area of specific moral skills. It is suggested that the relevance of pedagogical areteology in vocational training and education should be restored.

**Keywords:** midwifery, procreative pedagogy, areteology, moral attitude, pedagogical biographical studies.

\* Teresa Olearczyk (ORCID: 0000-0001-6660-2379) – PhD in social sciences, professor at the Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski Kraków University (UAFM). She works in the Department of Family Pedagogy and the Department of Social Problems and Resocialization at the Faculty of Psychology, Pedagogy and Humanities at KAAFM; contact: [teresaolearczyk1@gmail.com](mailto:teresaolearczyk1@gmail.com).

## Introduction

Life is a mystery of maturation that takes place from its beginning to its end. Silence is the secret of every person and self-work is a path to man's fulfilment. Stanisława Leszczyńska, a Polish midwife imprisoned in the German Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp (camp number 41335), was a person of internal discipline. Her moral attitude is an appropriate case study for demonstrating the relationships between developed moral skills and the professional ethos of a midwife. The research described in this article was conducted using the methods of analysis and synthesis of archival materials and diaries concerning Leszczyńska's life, particularly the period she spent in the camp and her work as a midwife. The research falls within the sub-discipline of pedagogical biography.

The most important document constituting the starting point for interest in Leszczyńska's figure was her account of her stay in the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp, entitled *Raport położnej z Oświęcimia* [A Midwife's Report from Auschwitz], published for the first time in 1965 in the journal *Przegląd Lekarski* [Medical Review].<sup>1</sup>

Interest in the author of the report increased after her death on 11 March 1974, as evidenced by the correspondence of the initiator of the periodical *Zeszyty Oświęcimskie* [Auschwitz Notebooks] and a witness in the Nuremberg trials – Dr Stanisław Kłodziński – with people who knew Leszczyńska from the concentration camp.<sup>2</sup> Bishop Bohdan Bejze was involved in promotional activity, and in the third volume of the work *Chrześcijanie* [Christians], which he edited, he included an extensive biography of Leszczyńska by Alina Nowak.<sup>3</sup>

In recent years, Leszczyńska has been described many times in various publications in Catholic journals, recalling her character and even testifying to the development of her cult. Her life is described in a collection of biogra-

1 S. Leszczyńska, *Raport położnej z Oświęcimia*, „Przegląd Lekarski” 21 (1965) series 2, No. 1, pp. 104–106.

2 *Listy do dra Stanisława Kłodzińskiego*, in: *Macierzyńska miłość życia. Teksty o Stanisławie Leszczyńskiej*, ed. B. Bejze, Warszawa 1984, pp. 115–127.

3 A. Nowak, *Stanisława Leszczyńska – matka bezbronnych 1986–1974*, in: *Chrześcijanie*, vol. 3, ed. B. Bejze, Warszawa 1978, p. 341.

phies entitled *Dziewczęta z Auschwitz. Głosy ocalonych kobiet* [Girls from Auschwitz: Voices of Saved Women], published in 2018 and prepared by Sylwia Winnik.<sup>4</sup> Leszczyńska's heroic attitude and activity became the topic of a scientific conference organized by the Archdiocese of Łódź on 3 March 2020. The midwife from Auschwitz has been described in many biographies<sup>5</sup> and memoirs. She is also the main protagonist of a literary biography entitled *Położna z Auschwitz* [The Midwife from Auschwitz]<sup>6</sup> by Magdalena Knedler and a documentary film *Położna* [The Midwife] by Maria Stachurska, who also prepared an extensive, popular science biography of the Servant of God, based on previously unknown source materials from her family archive.<sup>7</sup>

The popularization of Leszczyńska's achievements and the subsequent opening of the beatification process prompted many people who personally knew the midwife or members of her family to send reports and testimonies to the episcopal curia in Łódź and other church authorities. The most important of these is a letter from the members of the Club of Former Prisoners of Nazi Camps in Łódź, signed by 16 people with their first name, surname and camp number, dated 1 May 1989 and addressed to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints in the Vatican.<sup>8</sup> Importantly, she was commemorated in the form of the Chalice of Life and Transformation of the Nation, offered by Polish nurses on 3 May 1982, on the 600th anniversary of the presence of the image of Our Lady at Jasna Góra. At its base, there are ivory images of Saint Jadwiga of Poland, Saint Jadwiga Trzebnicka, blessed Maria Teresa Ledóchowska and Stanisława Leszczyńska.<sup>9</sup>

4 S. Winnik, *Dziewczęta z Auschwitz. Głosy ocalonych kobiet*, Warszawa 2018, pp. 199–201.

5 K. Dąbrowski, *Leszczyńska Stanisława*, in: *Encyklopedia katolicka*, vol. 10, ed. E. Ziemann, Lublin 2004, coll. 856–857; K. Gabryel, *Stanisława Leszczyńska 1896–1974*, Łódź 1989; S. Kłodziński, *Stanisława Leszczyńska*, „Przegląd Lekarski”, 32 (1975) No. 1, pp. 1–9; J. Kulik, *Stanisława Leszczyńska*, „Wiadomości Diecezjalne Łódzkie”, 58 (1984) No. 5–6, pp. 126–129; A. Nowak, *Stanisława Leszczyńska – matka bezbronných 1986–1974*, pp. 314–345.

6 M. Knedler, *Położna z Auschwitz*, Kraków 2020.

7 M. Stachurska, *Położna. O mojej cioci Stanisławie Leszczyńskiej*, Warszawa 2020.

8 Archdiocesan Archives in Łódź, no sign., Klub b. Więźniarek Obozów Hitlerowskich do Kongregacji do Spraw Kanonizacyjnych, 1 maja 1989, pp. 1–8.

9 *Kielich życia*, ed. M. Starzyńska, Warszawa 1981.

### Prewar period

Leszczyńska was born on 8 May 1896 to Jan Zambrzycki and Henrietta (Henryka) née Glaesmann. She was baptized the next day in the Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Łódź. Her godparents were Antoni Zdradek and Julianna Czaja.<sup>10</sup>

In her memoirs, Leszczyńska described her childhood with restraint, 'I grew up in difficult conditions.'<sup>11</sup> Her parents decided to emigrate to Brazil in search of better prospects that would enable them to change their financial situation and improve their social status.<sup>12</sup> The entire family's journey to Bremen consisted of numerous transfers, from where on 30 March 1908, as part of a group of 115 passengers, they sailed to Rio de Janeiro on the Erlangen, a ship owned by Norddeutscher Lloyd.<sup>13</sup> Travel conditions for European emigrants going to Brazil were far from comfortable. They reached the destination port on 28 April 1908 and settled in Rio de Janeiro. Stanisława's father tried to develop his own business. The family talked about his business partner's dishonesty, which is why they decided to return to Łódź in 1910. Her mother enrolled Stanisława and her brother Aleksander in a German school, where classes were conducted in German and Portuguese.<sup>14</sup>

10 Archives of the Parish of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Łódź, Księga ochrzczonych Parafii Wniebowzięcia Najświętszej Maryi Panny w Łodzi 1896, vol. 1, No. 1407, p. 705.

11 AKaŁ, b. sygn., Klub b. Więźniarek Obozów Hitlerowskich do Kongregacji do Spraw Kanonizacyjnych, pp. 1–8.

12 In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Polish society, particularly the lower classes, was affected with 'Brazilian fever'. In 1885, thousands of copies of the appeal of the president of the state of Parana, Alfred d'Escragnole Taunay, known as the 'Letter to the Poles', were distributed. It talked about the 'promised land' in the New World and initiated the mass economic emigration of over 115,000 people to Brazil from 1892 to 1912. J. Mazurek, *Kraj a emigracja*, Warszawa 2006, p. 57; W. Breowicz, *Ślady Piasta pod Piniorami*, Warszawa 1961, pp. 57–58; M. Kula, *Historia Brazylii*, Wrocław 1987, p. 95.

13 J. Mazurek, *Kraj a emigracja*, pp. 53, 57; W. Breowicz, *Ślady Piasta pod Piniorami*, pp. 57–58; M. Kula, *Historia Brazylii*, p. 95.

14 M. Stachurska, *Położna. O mojej cioci Stanisławie Leszczyńskiej*, pp. 59–60

Leszczyńska had learned German, though at a quite low level, at school in her hometown of Łódź, where the German-speaking population lived. Education in Brazil deepened her knowledge of the language, which proved very useful in the later stages of her life. She also retained the ability to speak Portuguese. They stayed in Brazil for two years. When her parents left Brazil, 14-year-old Stanisława stayed with her aunt and uncle to complete her education. In her parents' opinion, the fact that she was left abroad and later returned to Poland on her own proved her independence and maturity.<sup>15</sup> In the autumn of 1910, after a journey of several weeks by ship and several days by train across Europe, Stanisława returned to the district of Bałuty<sup>16</sup> in the city of Łódź, carrying her suitcase and a basket with a monkey in it. The money earned in Brazil ensured the Zambrzyński family a peaceful life. They bought a one-storey house at Żurawia Street in Łódź.

After returning to Poland, Leszczyńska continued her education at the Wacław Maciejewski pro-gymnasium (incomplete middle school, covering only a few lower grades), from which she graduated in 1914. From 1920 to 1922, she studied at the Municipal School of Midwives in Warsaw, from which she graduated with distinction.<sup>17</sup> Then she started working as a midwife in Łódź. She worked as a midwife until her retirement in 1957. Having registered at the Chamber of Midwives, she opened a private practice. In her biography, she noted very briefly, 'I liked and appreciated my profession because I loved little children very much. Maybe that is why I had so many patients that I had to work for three days without sleep.'<sup>18</sup>

This attitude towards her work is confirmed by numerous reports from both her children and outsiders. In her memories about her mother, Sylwia Leszczyńska-Gross stated that 'She loved her professional work very much and was delighted with every newborn child.'<sup>19</sup>

15 Ibidem, p. 61.

16 Ibidem.

17 Ibidem, pp. 96–98.

18 S. Leszczyńska, *Mój życiorys*, in: *Miłość Macierzyńska życia. Teksty o Stanisławie Leszczyńskiej*, ed. B. Bejze, Warszawa 1984, pp. 14–16.

19 S. Leszczyńska-Gross, *Matka w pamięci dzieci*, in: *Macierzyńska miłość życia*, p. 55

Leszczyńska quickly gained a reputation as a very good midwife, not only in the district where she lived but also in other districts of Łódź. Some pregnant women who were expecting to give birth came to the city and stayed with friends or relatives just to call for Leszczyńska to deliver their babies. The midwife was often called at night or even 'three times in the same night'.<sup>20</sup>

Sometimes there were funny situations when she was called at the least expected moments. Sylwia Leszczyńska-Gross recalls that while with her mother at the Popular Theatre at a performance of *The Bohemian Dancer*, Stanisława was called to deliver a baby. She accepted such calls without reservation.<sup>21</sup>

Leszczyńska and her husband took care of their children's religious development, teaching them the principles of faith and moral attitudes. Her daughter, Sylwia, recalled years later:

In order to bring us closer to heaven, she also gave us patron saints. My brother Broniek was consecrated to Saint Joseph, obliging him to daily, although short, but special prayer; Mom loved Saint Joseph because he was meek and silent. She consecrated me to Saint Teresa, whom she treated with special devotion; she consecrated my brother Stanisław to Saint Stanisław Kostka, who was strong in searching for the way to God. My brother Henry to Saint Antoni Paderewski, the respect for whom she inherited from her mother. The Mother's saints are saints with Baby Jesus, and Baby Jesus is a new act of worship and joy for my Mother.<sup>22</sup>

The couple also cared about the good education and cultural development of their four children. Their sons Bronisław and Henryk played the piano, zither and accordion, and would go to concerts at the philharmonic. In 1937, their oldest son Bronisław began studying at the Faculty of Medicine of the Jan Kazimierz University in Lviv. The younger children: Sylwia, Stanisław and Heniek, studied at the middle school in Łódź. In 1939, having graduated from secondary school, Sylwia was admitted to the same Faculty of Medicine as her older brother. The entire family spent the last holiday before World War II in good

20 H. Leszczyński, *Matka w pamięci dzieci*, in: *Macierzyńska miłość życia*, p. 50.

21 S. Leszczyńska-Gross, *Matka w pamięci dzieci*, in: *Macierzyńska miłość życia*, p. 57.

22 Ibidem.

spirits in Rosanów. Meanwhile, the social and political mood in Łódź was slowly changing. People began to antagonize each other. At the end of August, the Leszczyńskis were forced to return immediately to Łódź.

## **The outbreak of World War II**

After the Germans invaded Poland, Leszczyńska's husband and sons immediately engaged in conspiratorial work. Stanisława continued to work as a midwife. In September 1939, many German families arrived in Łódź from the Soviet Union and southern Europe. Many German women trained as midwives. Despite this, local German women preferred that their babies be delivered by Leszczyńska, who enjoyed a very good reputation. Moreover, they asked the administration of the Chamber of Midwives to restore her license to practice the profession which had been taken away at the beginning of the war.

When Leszczyńska was called to assist at a delivery one night, on her way to the woman in labour she repeated the prayer, 'Holy Mother, come to help, even if only in one slipper.' She was widely respected. When illnesses occurred in Jewish families, those in need asked for her intercessory prayers.

Leszczyńska's husband found employment in a German printing house. Stanisława, working as a midwife, had a permit and could move around the city during the curfew. Similarly, her sons, Bronisław and Stanisław – employed as tram conductors – could travel safely around Łódź at night. This created favourable conditions for family members to get involved in anti-German conspiratorial activities.<sup>23</sup>

On the night of 19–20 February 1943, the entire family was arrested. Stanisława and her daughter, Sylwia, a second-year medical student, were imprisoned in the women's prison at 13 Gdańska Street in Łódź, while two of her sons were imprisoned at Sterlinga Street (then Robert-Koch-Str.) In April, the women were deported to the concentration camp in Auschwitz-Birkenau

23 K. Gabryel, *Stanisława Leszczyńska 1896–1974*; S. Kłodziński, *Stanisława Leszczyńska*, pp. 1–9; J. Kulik, *Stanisława Leszczyńska*, pp. 126–129; A. Nowak, *Stanisława Leszczyńska – matka bezbronnych 1986–1974*, pp. 314–345; S. Leszczyński, *Matka w pamięci dzieci*, in: *Macierzyńska miłość życia*, p. 36; S. Leszczyński, *Autobiografia*, in: *Historia radiologii polskiej na tle radiologii światowej*, Kraków 2000, p. 606.

(Oświęcim-Brzezinka) and the men, after the investigation and verdict, were sent to the concentration camp in Gross-Rosen.

### **A prisoner at the concentration camp in Auschwitz-Birkenau**

Auschwitz was a kind of time capsule, enclosed in the nightmare of everyday experiences. Under the camp conditions, it was easy to lose humanity and become indifferent, insensitive and hardened in the face of the enormity of evil. In the camp, Leszczyńska was given number 41335. Initially, she was sent to work transporting clay. In May 1943, she took up the position of a midwife at the maternity ward because the German midwife Schwester (Sister) Klara,<sup>24</sup> who had been sentenced to stay in the camp for illegally performing abortions, fell ill. The German woman was known for killing newborns admitted to the camp by drowning them in a barrel standing near the maternity ward, following camp procedures in force until late spring 1943.<sup>25</sup> Initially, Leszczyńska was assisted in her midwifery work by her daughter, Sylwia, and when she fell ill, she was replaced by a Polish woman, Rufina Karwowska, a qualified midwife.<sup>26</sup>

According to Bronisław Leszczyński, the eldest son of Stanisława Leszczyńska, his mother showed the camp doctor (Lagerarzt) a document authorizing her to practice as a midwife. After some consideration, the camp doctor allegedly agreed to engage Leszczyńska as a midwife in the camp. It is interesting how Stanisława managed to keep this document during her arrest and the later search performed at the beginning of a prisoner's stay in Auschwitz.

Bronisław explained that during his stay at the detention centre at Gdańska Street in Łódź, all documents had been taken away from Leszczyńska and the certificate authorizing her to practice as a midwife had been thrown on the floor as it had been stated that she would not need it. The imprisoned

24 It was probably Klara Kerkow, camp number 837 – Archives of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, HygieneInstitute, segregator 16, pp. 92–93.

25 S. Leszczyńska, *Raport położnej z Oświęcimia*, p. 5; M. Ciesielska, *Szpital obozowy dla kobiet w KL Auschwitz-Birkenau (1942–1945)*, Warszawa 2015, p. 77.

26 M. Ciesielska, *Szpital obozowy*, p. 79.

woman had picked it up and kept it.<sup>27</sup> Her daughter – Sylwia – recalls that when Stanisława's personal belongings were requisitioned after her arrival in Auschwitz, she took the preserved certificate out of her purse and 'hid it as a wad in her hand'.<sup>28</sup> According to Andrzej Strzelecki, an employee of the Auschwitz Museum, such an event was almost impossible because after arriving in the camp, Stanisława had to go through a bath and disinfection.<sup>29</sup>

Leszczyńska served as a midwife until the camp was liberated by the Red Army on 27 January 1945. In this position, she opposed clear orders from the camp authorities to kill newborns and delivered several hundred babies. According to Bronisław Leszczyński's account, his mother's work in the maternity ward began under the supervision of Sister Klara:

Schwester Klara instructed my mother, by order of the Lagerarzt, that a child born should be considered dead, but left my mother a free hand as to how to carry out the order. She then hit my mother on the head and tore out the rest of her untrimmed hair for disobeying her orders. ... She was later called to the Lagerarzt, who ordered her to commit infanticide if she wanted to survive. He was surprised when this small and weak woman, who could be crushed with one shoe, said: 'No, never.' It is unknown why she wasn't executed at that time.<sup>30</sup>

The situation described by Leszczyński was possible because prisoners who were on the medical staff had the opportunity to talk to SS doctors during routine visits to the hospital barracks or in other situations. The condition being that the prisoner had very good knowledge of the German language. Leszczyńska knew German, which she had learned in Brazil, so she could have talked to the SS doctors (Mengele, Rhode or another).

According to the account of the prisoner Maria Śliz-Oyrzyńska, Stanisława said to her fellow prisoners in the maternity ward: 'I will never be a Herod for

27 B. Leszczyński, *Matka w pamięci dzieci*, in: *Macierzyńska miłość życia*, p. 83–84.

28 S. Leszczyńska-Gross, *Matka w pamięci dzieci*, in: *Macierzyńska miłość życia*, p. 61.

29 W. Gnacikowska, J. Podolska, *Przybądź w jednym pantofelku. Opowieść o Stanisławie Leszczyńskiej, położnej z Oświęcimia*, „Gazeta Wyborcza. Łódź”, 31 października – 1 listopada 2007, p. 9.

30 B. Leszczyński, *Matka w pamięci dzieci*, in: *Macierzyńska miłość życia*, p. 84.

the innocent.<sup>31</sup> Regardless of the situation in which Leszczyńska refused to kill newborns, it should be stated that her work as a midwife documented below confirms that she was guided by this principle and acted accordingly.<sup>32</sup>

In the initial period of operation of the women's camp, pregnant women, considered by the camp authorities as undesirable and unfit for work, were killed. This practice lasted until 1943 under Action 14f13, which was implemented at that time. Prisoners were injected with phenol intracardially or sent to gas chambers.<sup>33</sup> If pregnancy was diagnosed in women staying in the camp hospital, the sign 'SB' (Sonderbehandlung, special treatment) was entered on their registration cards, which was the code for a death sentence.<sup>34</sup> If a mother managed to conceal her pregnancy and give birth to her baby in the camp, both she and the newborn were killed shortly after delivery.

Children were born alive but later died en masse from starvation and cold. Each mother of an Aryan child received half a litre of expressed milk, which was supposed to be enough for her and the child. Such 'grace' was shown only to Aryan children. However, Jewish babies were drowned in a barrel standing in a separate corner of the block and Sister Klara and her assistant, Sister Pfani, made sure that this fate befell every Jewish child. With clenched hearts, the women listened to the gurgling of the water in which the victims of Nazi hatred were dying. An hour later, the bodies were thrown outside the block, where they were torn apart by camp rats. Leszczyńska ignored orders from above to kill Jewish newborns. She fulfilled her duty as a midwife conscientiously. She cut the umbilical cord, tied it, wrapped the baby in cellulose wad-

31 M. Stachurska, *Położna. O mojej cioci Stanisławie Leszczyńskiej*, pp. 197–198; *List Marii Oyrzyńskiej do Stanisława Kłodzińskiego z 18 kwietnia 1974 r.*, in: *Macierzyńska miłość życia*, p. 121.

32 Irena Wiśniewska, who worked in the camp hospital, confirms that Stanisława Leszczyńska saved children. In her memoir, she writes: 'Fortunately, I also had the opportunity to work with Mrs Stanisława Leszczyńska. As soon as a child was born, she immediately tried to seize it and hide it from Black Miya, as the prisoners called the German woman they feared.' S. Winnik, *Dziewczątaz Auschwitz*, p. 29.

33 H. Kubica, *Kobiety ciężarne i dzieci urodzone w KL Auschwitz*, Oświęcim 2010, pp. 7–8.

34 J. Olbrycht, *Sprawy zdrowotności w obozie oświęcimskim*, in: *Okupacja i medycyna. Wybór artykułów z „Przeglądu Lekarskiego – Oświęcim” z lat 1961–1970*, selected by J. Rawicz and the Editorial Committee of „Przegląd Lekarski”, Warszawa 1971, p. 32.

ding and placed it next to the mother on the bunk. Jewish children died after a few hours because Jewish women were not allowed to feed them.

However, if Aryan children had 'Nordic' features, they were taken from their mothers shortly after birth and sent to the Third Reich to be Germanized. The scenes where mothers were separated from their children were tragic. There were cases where some women were sent to the gas chamber with their baby immediately after birth. As Leszczyńska herself recalled in the newspaper *Dziennik Łódzki* [Łódź Daily] in April 1973, she delivered the first baby in May 1943, from a woman of Roma origin, who was later sent to her death in the gas chamber.<sup>35</sup>

The first documented delivery in the Auschwitz camp took place on 22 July 1943 and a prisoner number was given to a newborn child only on 18 September 1943.<sup>36</sup> Children received prisoner numbers in order, just like all new arrivals in the camp: boys from the male number series and girls from the female number series. Numbers were usually tattooed on the children's thighs or buttocks, rarely on their hands.<sup>37</sup> Each newborn was registered in the camp and at the Civil Registry Office (Standesamt II). The name of the town of Auschwitz and the street of Kasernenstrasse were entered as the place of birth. From the spring of 1943, camp practice changed in this respect. The Germans did not murder Aryan children and allowed them to live, but they shared the fate of other prisoners and received camp numbers. Mostly, however, they died as a result of diseases and difficult conditions. Death came quickly after birth, but for many it was in the terrible conditions of the crematorium furnaces.

Leszczyńska's generosity in her work as a midwife was documented in some accounts of people staying in the camp, preserved and published in Maria Ciesielska's book. She was not just a midwife, but a mother to everyone, a therapist,

35 S. Leszczyńska, *Ostatni krąg piekieł*, interviewed by M. Jagoszewski, „Dziennik Łódzki”, 12–13.04.1970, No. 86 (6749), p. 4.

36 H. Kubica, *Dzieci i młodzież w KL Auschwitz*, in: *Auschwitz 1940–1945. Węzłowe zagadnienia z dziejów obozu*, vol. 2: *Więźniowie – życie i praca*, eds. W. Długoborski, F. Piper, Oświęcim-Brzezinka 1995, p. 189.

37 Among the children who were not tattooed were those born to German prisoners and to women who arrived in transports from insurgent Warsaw (their mothers did not have tattooed numbers either) and children intended for Germanization.

constantly present and extremely mentally resilient. She had a seriously ill daughter, Sylwia, in the camp. She devoted her entire life and activities to saving the lives of unborn and newborn infants, as well as to supporting their mothers.<sup>38</sup>

The terrible years of her stay in Auschwitz fully revealed her spiritual greatness and inner maturity. Leszczyńska radiated inner strength, showed no fear, exuded peace, prayed, and watched over women in labour. She sang to them as they gave birth in inhumane conditions on a cold stove. She organized everything that could be used to make nappies and took personal care of each newborn. She carried water in buckets herself because the sick were not allowed to leave the block. If the water in the kitchen tap was turned off, she prepared a decoction of herbs in various ways, which parturient women were given to drink. First, she washed healthy newborns, then sick ones and those with wounds on their bodies. She was afraid of spreading infection between the infants and she had to bathe them all in the same water.<sup>39</sup> She mastered the camp 'organization' to perfection – she knew who to ask for a piece of cellulose wadding, sometimes some antiseptic or material for nappies. She had good relationships with many female prisoners who worked in the Kanada warehouses (the buildings that were used to store the stolen belongings of prisoners), from where she brought 'camp treasures' for those giving birth.

### **Care for the religious and spiritual life of women in the post-partum period**

Many memories of both regular and functionary prisoners,<sup>40</sup> who worked in the maternity ward as medical staff have been preserved. These include

38 M. Ciesielska, *Szpital*, vol. 1, rozdział: *Opieka nad kobietami ciężarnymi i dziećmi urodzonymi w obozie*, pp. 77–86: statements of witnesses heard in the Hoss trial.

39 *Macierzyńska miłość życia*, p. 133; M. Ciesielska, *Szpital obozowy dla kobiet*.

40 Functionary prisoners played an important role in the camp organisation. For their assistance in keeping the other prisoners under strict control, they were rewarded with considerable privileges. The use of that authority granted to the functionaries by the camp command often determined the fate of the numerous subordinate inmates [translator's note]. For more on this topic see: [https://www.majdanek.eu/en/history/prisoner\\_functionaries/9](https://www.majdanek.eu/en/history/prisoner_functionaries/9).

those of Maria Ślisz-Oyrzyńska, Janina Węgierska-Paradecka, Irena Białówna, Irena Konieczna, Jadwiga Salomon, Janina Strąk, Helena Gielzakówna, Zofia Raczyńska and Stefania Wiśniewska. When describing Leszczyńska, all of them emphasized her moral skills: patience, self-control, restoring hope to women in labour, giving a sense of security, unconditional devotion and titanic work. An important aspect of her ministry was bringing comfort to women whose children were dying. She saved them from despair.

Janina Strąk describes Stanisława's moral attitude as follows:

Her entire camp activity was nothing short of miraculous. Getting water or herbal decoctions to wash babies and women, getting cloths for nappies to wrap a baby. ... Only someone who was there will understand how difficult it was. ... She devotedly took care of infants and mothers who were extremely attached to their little ones, such as [their] desperate and tragic love. She was the only one who could comfort them. I would remember Stanisława Leszczyńska's name forever and in my mind, I honoured her with the highest awards for her attitude and work in the camp.<sup>41</sup>

Leszczyńska baptized each newborn child with water, regardless of whether the mother was a Christian or a Jew. She did not do it against the mother's will. They all agreed to her gesture and found comfort in it. Zofia Raczyńska describes the baptism of a child:

... (the mother's name was Danusia) and I know that this child survived Auschwitz. Leszczyńska played the role of a priest, I was the godmother, but in place of Danusia Witkowska, who was evacuated to another camp and recommended me for this role. Leszczyńska has remained in my memory as a noble person, devoted to others, performing her profession with total dedication and to the highest standard.<sup>42</sup>

Leszczyńska often gave names to newborns when their mothers, tired from the hardships of childbirth, had no strength. Ślisz recalls that the names Maria and Józef were popular. Leszczyńska made rosaries from the remains of dry

41 S. Winnik, *Dziewczęta z Auschwitz*.

42 *Ibidem*, p. 11.

bread and prayed aloud with the patients after finishing her work. She organized secret services, which were also attended by Jewish women. She taught them to say *The Lord's Prayer* and *The Hail Mary* in Polish. She often sang religious and secular songs, most often her beloved Portuguese song *Theresia de Jesus*, which she learned in Brazil. Singing was forbidden and prisoners usually did it secretly. Stanisława and her daughter, Sylwia, intoned the song: *Our Father Who Art in Heaven*. Singing added hope, a sense of community and faith.<sup>43</sup>

Jadwiga Machaj recounts her first meeting with Leszczyńska:

On a very cold night on 20 December 1944, I was brought to the barracks where there was a maternity ward. I came across a delousing room where women were lying on bare boards, wearing only their shirts. Fossilized. Blue. Two women were giving birth on a long chimney stove. There was no room for me anymore. I was told to wait. Then a woman in a white coat approached me. Her hair was grey and tied back. She asked, 'So what, my child?' She spoke quietly, but her voice was very soothing. I then admitted that I was very afraid, that it hurt and that I was probably going to give birth. She stroked my face and smiled. She took me behind the partition where there was a part of the barracks called the sick bay, put me on a bunk and started talking to me. She asked how old I was, where I came from, asked about my house, about my husband and what we would like to have, a son or a daughter. Do I have names chosen? She kept talking to me. She probably wanted to distract me from the pain. She also advised me how to breathe, how to position myself, and how to help the baby come into the world. I stopped being afraid. Her hands were tiny and delicate, her movements were gentle, calm, and at the same time efficient and fast. Childbirth became something completely different than I expected. I do not even know how long it lasted. At one point, Mom – that is what all the women there called her – said: 'You have a beautiful daughter.' She slapped the baby on the bottom a few times and then I heard a scream. She wrapped the baby in a piece of cellulose wadding and took care of me. She asked what name I would give my daughter. I did not know. And then she said words that I remember well: 'My child, please name her Eve – this will be the beginning of life.'<sup>44</sup>

43 M. Stachurska, *Położna. O mojej cioci Stanisławie Leszczyńskiej*, p. 48.

44 S. Winnik, *Dziewczęta z Auschwitz*.

Until 1944, infants who were several weeks old were taken away from their mothers and sent to a separate barrack, while the women returned to their work commandos. Young women in the postpartum period tried to feed their newborns, most of them in vain as they had no milk, and the infants would cry. Leszczyńska would quietly remove the placenta after a woman had given birth, throw it into water and then take care of the baby. Mengele often witnessed this. He would also ask if any Aryan children had been born because there was a transport to Nakło and blue-eyed and blond-haired infants were needed. Leszczyńska would make marks on a newborn's body which only the mother would recognise so that after the war women would be able to find those children taken away for Germanization.

The Germans visiting the camp and the maternity ward could not believe that throughout Leszczyńska's work in terrible conditions, no woman in labour died and every child was born alive and healthy, with no perinatal infections. The Germans planned death for these children and they were born alive despite logic, science, conditions and expectations, thanks to Leszczyńska's sacrifice and heroism.

The midwife did everything to save the lives of unborn children from extermination. She risked her life this way. Behind the barbed wire of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, she said to the SS camp doctor, Dr Josef Mengele, 'No, you must never kill children.' She remained human, seeing piles of corpses in front of each pavilion, with the bodies of children among them and rats running around.

On the night of 18–19 January 1945, the evacuation of the camp began. Former prisoner Leokadia Niewiadomska (camp number 87945) described the atmosphere at that time:

An SS man came to the delivery block and told everyone to prepare for evacuation. Mrs Leszczyńska quickly baptized several more children. The women used every last bit of strength just to stand on their feet. There were many mothers with small children among them. They stood and waited for hours in the cold, without clothes, only in their shirts, with thin, black blankets thrown over their backs. They consoled themselves that evacuation might be a chance for salvation. It was a terrible night. The most seriously ill and mothers in labour knew they had to stay.

With no hope for survival. Mrs Leszczyńska, her daughter and Doctor Konieczna stayed with us. Without hesitation, they rejected the chance to be saved and remained with a handful of defenceless people – until the end.<sup>45</sup> Among the staff of the women's hospital, those who stayed with the patients included: midwife Stanisława Leszczyńska, Dr Katarzyna Łaniewska, Dr Alicja Piotrowska and Dr Irena Konieczna.<sup>46</sup>

Stanisława Leszczyńska died of cancer on 11 March 1974. She was buried in the St Roch cemetery at Zgierska Street in Łódź. Then, in 1996, her remains were moved to the crypt of the Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Łódź. Her beatification process is currently underway.

## Conclusions

Under the camp conditions, Stanisława Leszczyńska demonstrated a moral attitude that was consistent with the internalized system of values that she had developed at the earlier stages of her moral and professional formation. Her heroic attitude is the result of the process of moral self-education. Her ethical principle was the inviolability of the lives of a child and a mother. She was guided by the personalistic code of values. She turned out to be an outstanding personalist, not only a theoretician of the philosophical system but, above all, a practitioner who translated the language of personalistic norms into the ethical experience of a midwife's work. The analysed case study of Leszczyńska's moral biography shows the fundamental importance of areteology during upbringing and professional training. The midwife from Auschwitz retained her freedom of conscience in the most difficult of conditions – a direct threat to her own life and that of her daughter. Her moral biography confirms the medical worker's heroism and the fact that her freedom of conscience was grounded in the ontic dignity of the person and natural law, and not in the changing norms of statutory law or a temporary social system.

45 *Macierzyńska miłość życia*, p. 134.

46 *Ibidem*, p. 82.

**Streszczenie:** Celem poznawczym pracy jest ukazanie znaczenia sprawności moralnych dla postawy zawodowej położnych w skrajnej sytuacji społecznej. Projekt badawczy zrealizowano na przykładzie opieki położniczej sprawowanej przez Stanisławę Leszczyńską dla rodzących kobiet w nazistowskim obozie koncentracyjnym Auschwitz-Birkenau. Zastosowano metody badawcze: analizy, syntezy i studium przypadku. Artykuł formalnie i materialnie wpisuje się w subdyscyplinę biografistyki pedagogicznej. Główny wniosek z przeprowadzonych badań potwierdza koherencję postawy moralnej w sytuacjach granicznych jako rezultatu procesu samowychowania do określonych sprawności moralnych. Postuluje się przywrócenie znaczenia aretologii pedagogicznej w kształceniu zawodowym i wychowaniu.

**Słowa kluczowe:** położnictwo, pedagogika prokreacyjna, arteologia, postawa moralna, biografistyka pedagogiczna.

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