

Maria Stromberger: A Nurse in the Resistance in Auschwitz

SUSAN BENEDICT

Medical University of South Carolina

During World War II, Maria Stromberger (Figure 1) was employed, by her own choice, as the Oberschwester (head nurse) in the SS (Schutzstaffel, Nazi Security Staff) infirmary of Auschwitz, one of Nazi Germany's most infamous concentration camps. While there, she risked her life numerous times to save Polish inmates from torture and death. For this, she was made an honorary member of the Austrian Union of Former Prisoners of Concentration Camps,¹ but she has otherwise received little recognition for her bravery.

Auschwitz has come to symbolize the extermination camps of Nazi Germany. It was both the largest concentration camp and the largest killing center.² It is located on the outskirts of Oświęcim, Poland, 50 kilometers (km) southwest of Krakow and 286 km from Warsaw.³ The idea to build a camp in Poland began in 1940 by the SS and the district police because there was no facility adequate to hold the large number of Polish resistance prisoners. The first buildings of what was to become the Auschwitz concentration camp were fourteen one-story army barracks and eight two-story buildings built during World War I as "a seasonal emigrant workers' station for the national employment bureau."⁴ When the decision was made to enlarge this complex to a concentration camp, 300 Jewish residents of the town of Oświęcim were brought to the site to prepare the foundations for additional buildings.⁵ In May 1940, thirty German political prisoners were brought to Auschwitz to become functionaries (minor officials) in the camp hierarchy. These men received the first Auschwitz prisoners' serial numbers. The first transport of 728 Polish prisoners arrived on 14 June 1940. Auschwitz became the main concentration camp in Poland and eventually covered 40 square km. By March 1941, there were 10,900 prisoners, most of them Poles. Construction continued with the idea of eventually housing 30,000 prisoners in the main camp and establishing a second camp (Birkenau, also known as Auschwitz II) 3 km away for 100,000 more prisoners. By 1943, the main camp, Auschwitz I, held 30,000 prisoners.



Figure 1. Maria Stromberger as seen in an Auschwitz exhibit honoring members of the Auschwitz-Birkenau underground resistance movement, September 1999. Reprinted with the permission of Susan Benedict.

Construction began on Birkenau in October 1941, with much of the work done by women who were going to be imprisoned there.⁶ Portions of Birkenau consisted of long wooden buildings originally designed as stables. With the addition of Birkenau, the prisoner population of Auschwitz was 80,839 in January 1944.⁷ Auschwitz eventually was comprised of three separate camps—Auschwitz I, Birkenau (Auschwitz II), and Monowitz (Auschwitz III)—and became the largest extermination center for the implementation of the “final solution,”⁸ the Nazi plan to kill all Jews.

The SS Revier

Eventually there were several hospital blocks for prisoners in Auschwitz I and Birkenau, and the Revier (infirmary) for SS personnel located directly across from

Crematorium I in Auschwitz I. The SS Revier was a well-equipped field hospital, staffed by SS physicians, orderlies, and, beginning in 1942, Red Cross nurses.⁹ From the SS Revier, one was able to look through the windows and see the gas chamber and Crematorium I (three furnaces capable of burning 340 bodies per day¹⁰). The nursing personnel of the Revier were able to see the trucks bringing the prisoners to the gas chamber and the SS men climbing on the roof to drop the Zyklon B (hydrogen cyanide) that was released into the gas chamber to kill all those inside.¹¹ A former prisoner who was assigned to work in the gas chamber described the scene from hell on earth:

Two of the SS men took up positions on either side of the entrance door. Shouting and wielding their truncheons, like beaters at a hunt, the remaining SS men chased the naked men, women and children into the large room inside the crematorium. All that was left in the yard were the pathetic heaps of clothing which we had to gather together to clear the yard for the second half of the transport. We removed suit-cases, rucksacks, clothes and shoes and piled them higgledy-piggledy in a great heap in a corner. Then we covered everything with a large tarpaulin.

When we had finished, a new batch of several hundred people poured into the empty yard. The prelude to death was repeated with equal brutality and with the same ending. Finally there were about 600 desperate people crammed into the crematorium. A few SS men were leaving the building and the last one locked the entrance door from the outside. Before long the increasing sound of coughing, screaming and shouting for help could be heard from behind the door. . . . After some time the noise grew weaker, the screams stopped.¹²

Resistance in Konzentrationslager Auschwitz

The horror of the camp highlights the bravery of some of the prisoners in their struggle against the vast extermination system. The resistance movement included all deeds that were done to help fellow prisoners, to damage the camp's killing process, or to spread information about the camp to the outside world.¹³ Because the punishment was so severe—often torture and death—acts of resistance took extreme courage. Not only was there fear of being discovered in a helping act by a guard, there was also the possibility of being turned in by a fellow prisoner who would be rewarded for this treachery.

When viewed retrospectively, the resistance movement in Auschwitz took three forms: (1) actions to aid prisoners in their physical, spiritual, and moral survival; (2) actions that documented the deeds of the Nazis and exposed these crimes; and (3) actions that undermined the Nazi system. Inmate acts of resistance

often appeared small but could be life-saving, such as stealing food, smuggling medicine, and hiding the sick. One of the more controversial acts was performing abortions on pregnant prisoners. If a prisoner was found to be pregnant, she would be killed. The Hungarian physician Gisella Perl stated that it was up to her to save the life of the mother, even if it meant killing the unborn child.¹⁴ When childbirth did occur, the infants were strangled or died of starvation within a few days of birth. If discovered by the guards, both mother and infant would be sent to the gas chamber.

So desperate were the inmates to survive that acts regarded outside Auschwitz as unethical came to be both necessary and admired as forms of resistance. For example, stealing food and medicine was such a necessity that it was called "organizing," and those who had the access and ability to do so were a valuable link in survival. Even prostitution, if it allowed one to live or helped others survive, was acceptable in the otherworldliness of Auschwitz.

Despite communication with officials in the Austrian state of Vorarlberg, where Stromberger once lived, little is known about her life before her time in Auschwitz. Attempts to trace her family have been unsuccessful; therefore, much of what is known about her comes from her testimony at the trial of the Auschwitz commandant, Rudolf Höss, and from the sworn statement of Edek (Edward) Pys,¹⁵ a former Auschwitz prisoner with whom she worked. Both these archival documents are testimonies taken under oath and have no inconsistencies between them or with secondary sources.

Maria Stromberger was born on 16 March 1898 in St. Veit, Austria, and in the 1920s moved with her sister Karoline Gräbner to the town of Bregenz. She was unmarried and Catholic.¹⁶ She was over thirty years old before she was able to train to be a nurse, a dream she had had since childhood. Then, according to her sister, she "became a nurse 'body and soul'."¹⁷

In 1942, while working in a hospital in Austria, Stromberger requested a transfer to an infectious disease hospital in Königshütte, Poland. She requested this transfer because she had heard rumors of things that were happening in Poland and wanted to see for herself whether they were true. As an Austrian, she found the stories difficult to believe because "we always have been tolerant and humane in Austria."¹⁸

In the hospital in Königshütte, she met two male patients who had been released from Auschwitz. In the delirium from the fever of typhus, both men "suffered such states of horrible anxiety and fear" that they had to be isolated and remained in quarantine for five weeks.¹⁹ After their recovery from the acute phase of the illness, Stromberger asked them about the things they had revealed during their delirium. Both, according to Stromberger's testimony, "folded their hands together and begged: 'Nurse, if you value your life and ours too, do not mention

anything you have heard to anyone; it is based on truth'.²⁰ The two men mentioned that they had seen nurses in Auschwitz wearing uniforms like hers. This gave her the idea to transfer to Auschwitz.

When she wrote to her sister of this plan, Stromberger stated her hope that she would be able to do some good. Her sister tried to discourage her from seeking the transfer.²¹ Nevertheless, Stromberger went to the regional nurses' registry in Kattowitz, where she received her assignment. The older nurse working in the registry was quite surprised at Stromberger's request to go to Auschwitz, but at the same time delighted. She told Stromberger that she could see how Stromberger "cherished the National Socialistic [Nazi] idea about our Volk [people]."²² She never asked whether Stromberger was a member of the National Socialist party and, in fact, there is no evidence that Stromberger ever was a member. Upon hearing that Stromberger's request for a transfer to Auschwitz was granted, a very different response came from Dr. Stefan, the physician at the hospital in Königshütte, who asked her, "Nurse, have you lost all your reasoning to want to enter this hell?"

Life and Work as the Head Nurse of the SS Infirmary

Stromberger began her assignment as Oberschwester of the SS Revier in Auschwitz on 1 October 1942. She had hoped to be assigned to one of the prisoner Reviere, but a rule prohibited Aryan German nurses from working with inmate-patients.²³ Other nurses working in the SS Revier were described by an inmate:

Schwester Margarethe Mzyk from Silesia. She was the girlfriend of Spiebontl but did not mind the company of other Germans. Her husband, whom she rather neglected, often came to visit in Auschwitz. She was not to be trusted.

Schwester Meta was an older woman from Silesia who spoke Polish well. She was bothersome, always tried to please her superiors by doing extra services. No one really liked her and one had to be careful talking with her.

Schwester Magdalene came from Bonn and was the girlfriend of the Chief of the Political Section, Hans Schurz.²⁴ There were about a dozen nurses employed in the Revier, many of them from Flanders. Upon arrival, Stromberger was greeted by the assistant to Commandant Höss, Hauptsturmführer (captain²⁵) Robert Molka. He told her that her task would be very difficult but was absolutely necessary. Everything was to be top secret. Included was the necessity to "purify ourselves from the Jews."²⁶ Stromberger was then asked to sign a paper

swearing her absolute silence, and was told that if she talked about the events of Auschwitz, she would “pay with her head.” Stromberger stated that she felt like turning around and leaving. At the main office of Auschwitz, she had to sign a similar statement, which included in addition that there were to be no conversations with inmates and no letters were to be transported to family members of inmates. She signed the oath of absolute silence about the events of Auschwitz.

The screams of the people being herded into the gas chambers could be heard in the Revier. Stromberger described “inhuman howling and screaming” from naked men loaded in trucks on a very cold January day. The men were sick and shaking with fever as they were being transported to the gas chamber. On another day, she observed the following taking place at the gas chamber adjacent to the crematorium:

A boy, maybe seven years old with blond hair, took off his little sailor suit and carefully put it down. His mother stood next to him holding a 1- to 1½-year-old child in her arms. The baby had already been undressed. The mother put the baby carefully into the arms of the little boy in order to undress herself and then they walked into the gas chamber together.²⁷

Stromberger stated that these events made her, as an Austrian, feel guilty and determined to help the inmates whenever she could. She thought she could best do that by contacting the Polish inmates who also were working in the SS Revier. Although “it was hard to gain the trust of those young, bitter men,”²⁸ she eventually did and was able to gain their confidence.

These Polish male prisoners worked in the Revier, and several belonged to the camp underground resistance. The first to establish contact with Stromberger was Edek Pys, who worked in the Revier kitchen.²⁹ Pys, born in 1922 in Rzeszow, Poland, was arrested because “a lot of young men were being arrested so that they would not do anything foolish” at the annual commemoration of the Polish constitution celebration two days hence. Over forty were taken to the prison in Schloss (Castle) Rzeszow, and within less than eight weeks they were taken to Auschwitz.

At first, Pys didn’t trust Stromberger because he had “known other unpleasant nurses.” They spoke only of their duties, with Stromberger giving orders and Pys carrying them out. One day, a prisoner intentionally ran into the nearby electrified wire encircling the camp, a common form of suicide. Upon seeing this from the Revier window, Stromberger “fell over.” Pys stated:

The next day she showered questions over me. How could that be—who was that man—why did he run into the barbed wire? Furthermore, she asked me some questions about myself.

Over the course of further conversations, Pys told Stromberger about himself and the other inmates and the reasons for their imprisonment. As mutual trust developed, Stromberger began to "take extra care of us." Working with Pys and another prisoner, Edugeniusz Niedojadlo, she was able to save for the inmates some of rations intended for the SS, including chocolate, fruit, and champagne. She gave another inmate, Teddy Pietrzykowski, the key to the attic, so that he could pick out medications.³⁰ Other Polish inmates began to trust her when a guard found a large container of milk that had been hidden by the inmates, and Stromberger claimed that it was hers so that they would not be punished. It was then that the inmates knew that "Maria was on our side and would even take some risks to help us."³¹ Pys stated that she had a great deal of sympathy for him and cared for him in a motherly way but without neglecting the others.

It wasn't long before this activity was noticed by one of the SS men, Alfred Kaufuss, and he reported her to Eduard Wirths, her physician supervisor, in January 1943. Wirths summoned her and told her he had heard that she was being too humane and motherly when dealing with the inmates. He warned her that, although the inmates working in the Revier were not criminals, they were still the enemy.³²

Stromberger responded:

Dr. Wirths, I am sorry that I caused you this dissatisfaction. Please remember that I am neither an SS man nor a guard. I am a nurse and as such I am not duty bound to act the way they do. If you are dissatisfied with my actions, please report me to the Political Department. I do not want to become such a villain here and I ask for a transfer.

Wirths told her that she should not transfer, and that he would protect her from "further slander."³³ Eventually, Wirths recommended Stromberger for an award for providing excellent care to the SS men who were patients in the Revier.³⁴

Work in the Underground Resistance

As the inmates' trust in Stromberger increased, she took on dangerous assignments. In early 1943, only a few months after her arrival, she began to smuggle medicine and food for the prisoners into the camp. One inmate who worked in the SS sewing shop, Hunia Hecht, said that Stromberger always came with something when the guards were absent: food, medicine, and news of the outside

world. She was warned by the resistance that she would likely be killed if she were caught. She replied that many people more important than she were being killed.³⁵

Stromberger was able to hide food, medicines, other contraband, and even sick prisoners in the bathroom of the SS Revier. When Pys had typhus, he continued to march to work every day despite a high fever because inmates with typhus were sent to the gas chamber. Stromberger hid him in the last stall of the bathroom, making a bed for him on the floor.³⁶ She ordered the SS men not to use the bathroom, telling them that infected clothes from typhus patients were stored there until they could be disinfected.³⁷

Christmas 1943 was the occasion of an extraordinary act by Stromberger—one that certainly could have cost her her life. She smuggled into the infirmary wine, champagne, and good food. She created a makeshift table in the attic and covered it with a clean white bed sheet. She then prepared and served a Christmas dinner to the Polish prisoners who worked in the infirmary.³⁸

In 1944, it appeared that the camp underground resistance organization would have to be liquidated because they were unable to establish and maintain contact with the outside world. Pys was asked by one of the group's leaders to ask Stromberger if she would help. Pys told her that to be involved with the resistance was serious and dangerous.³⁹ She agreed to help and become the contact person. Her first assignment was to smuggle out a bundle of letters from prisoners and deliver them to a contact in Königshütte. When all went according to plan, the resistance group decided to use her for future missions. She was frequently asked to deliver packages around the village of Oświęcim, and even to SS who were sympathetic to the prisoners. The camp resistance members were advised to make frequent contact with Stromberger. They were assured that she was reliable and quick.⁴⁰ In one instance, she exchanged passwords with an SS officer in the camp and received from him a package containing a pistol.⁴¹ Stromberger was also a source of information to the prisoners. She was greatly respected by the commandant of Auschwitz, Rudolf Höss, and could pass information she learned to the prisoners. She also passed on information that she overheard from the SS and the guards.

Stromberger's smuggling became even bolder and she brought in pistols, ammunition, and explosives for use in a Polish uprising in the camp. Upon her return from a visit to her home town, Bregenz, she brought back two revolvers that belonged to her father and gave them to the prisoners. Additionally, she continued to bring in medicines including opium and glucose for the sick prisoners.⁴² Many prisoners were no longer fearful of death, but were afraid of the torture that often preceded it; therefore, Stromberger brought in poison for the

prisoners to take if they were caught. Two of her Polish inmate friends took the poison after being captured, thereby avoiding the horror of torture.⁴³

Stromberger was able to be so successful in her smuggling because she was allowed to go into the village of Oświęcim to shop for food. She dressed in the white coat of a nurse. Items to be smuggled were often concealed in matchboxes, pens, and food containers. Like the other nurses employed by the SS, Stromberger was forbidden to go into the main camps of Auschwitz and Birkenau. However, using the excuse of an errand, she was able to make three trips into each. She was thus able to portray the conditions of the camp accurately to the outside world by smuggling information and documents. The material she smuggled in a hollowed-out clothes brush became the basis for the first pamphlets distributed in Vienna by the resistance to describe the conditions in Auschwitz.⁴⁴ To further document the horror, Stromberger was able to smuggle out undeveloped film.⁴⁵

During 1944, Stromberger's health declined to the point that she feared that she would be unable to continue to work as a nurse in Auschwitz. She told Pys that she would not return there after her vacation. The following day, an inmate named Zbyscek came to her and pleaded:

Schwester Maria, I hear you will not return to us? Now I beg you to come back to us. We have important things to do here. For you we have a very important task. There is no one else around here who can be an agent for us. In case this would become dangerous for you, we assure you we will be able to take care of you at the right moment. The whole thing [the war] cannot last much longer in any case.⁴⁶

After returning from her vacation, she attempted to smuggle out some books with histories of inmates in the camp Reviars during 1942. This was unsuccessful because she was unable to make contact on the outside with the designated person. She kept the books hidden in her room in the nurses' quarters of the barracks. When the barracks was bombed on 26 December 1944, Stromberger was able to retrieve the books from the rubble. She went to Pys and asked him to find someone else to take the books because she was afraid the bombing would continue and the books would be found. Pys found an inmate, Natalia Spak, to take the books.⁴⁷

Early in the summer of 1944, the killing of thousands of the Hungarian Jews began.⁴⁸ Wirth gave the entire staff of the Revier a memo to sign saying that they would maintain their silence, refrain from taking the possessions of the Jews, and agree to take part in the action "with all my strength."⁴⁹ Everyone signed the memo but Stromberger, who said she wanted to read it once more. She stated:

I have already signed the first paragraph about absolute silence when I started to work here. The second paragraph about Jewish property concerns neither my work nor me. I am not a thief. I refuse to sign the last paragraph because I cannot agree to its content.

Wirths told her to just scratch out the last paragraph. Stromberger did so and signed her name above it. Upon hearing about her refusal, another employee wanted to do likewise but was told by her supervisor "either sign it or you will get into the concentration camp."

In December 1944, Stromberger was diagnosed with severe polyarteritis, and Wirths ordered her to stay in her room in the SS infirmary. She missed a total of fourteen days of work. On 5 January 1945, a telegram came from Berlin requiring her to report to the main SS office there on 7 January. When she arrived, the Red Cross nurse asked her why she was so nervous. Stromberger replied it was because she had been working in Auschwitz and could not avoid hearing and seeing all that went on there. She was referred to a neurological unit at a hospital in Prague. After taking her history, the physician asked her if she had anything else to tell him. Stromberger admitted that she smoked but that was her "only sin."⁵⁰ He then asked her about taking morphine. She replied that Wirths had always left 250 grams of morphine on her bedside table when she was ill but she didn't take it. She asked why they did not just test her for the presence of morphine. The physician replied that her history documented that she was addicted to morphine. She remained in the hospital for three weeks, and was then transferred to another hospital.

One member of the Auschwitz resistance who knew Stromberger, Hermann Langbein, speculated that her transfer out of Auschwitz may have been arranged by Wirths after hearing that she might be coming under suspicion because of her help to the inmates.⁵¹ Stromberger did not return to Auschwitz. Her two and one-half years of bravery in hell were over.

After the War

In early 1946, Stromberger was arrested by the French military government because she was suspected of having worked for the SS, and was accused of killing inmates by administering phenol injections into the heart—a common method of murder in Auschwitz.⁵² She was imprisoned in Brederis, Austria, and from prison wrote to Pys on 18 July to tell him of her arrest and to seek his help.

At present I am in an internment camp! I am suspected of having treated inmates with phenol during my service in Auschwitz. Don't laugh, Edek! This is serious!—

You know I am surrounded by Nazis, SS, Gestapo! I, their greatest enemy! And I have to listen to the complaints about the injustice of what people are now doing with them. Then I see in my mind's eye the experiences of Auschwitz.

I can see the fiery glow of the pyres; I smell the stench of burned flesh; I see the miserable processions of returning details, followed by the dead; I feel the choking worry about you that I had every morning until I saw you before me again safe and sound; and I could scream into these people's faces and blindly lash out at them. The craziest thing about it is that I still have to keep quiet, for otherwise they might boycott me. But this time will pass, too, and I shall be free again. What I shall do then I don't know. I feel so empty and drained, and I have no joy. It seems to me that



Figure 2. Memory sign for Maria Stromberger at the Sanatorium Mehrerau in Austria quoting Stromberger, "What I did was a human must, but sorry to say only a drop in the sea." Reprinted with the permission of Thomas E. Wanger, Austria.

I have scattered my wealth of love in Auschwitz. I have reached my objective. What more can I do?⁵³

Pys contacted another Polish former prisoner, Tadeusz Holuj, who published an article about Stromberger in the Krakow newspaper *Echo*. Following this, the president of the Society of Former Political Prisoners in Poland intervened with the French authorities. Stromberger was released in September after six months of imprisonment with a document stating that there was no evidence of wrongdoing on her part.⁵⁴ In 1947, she was a witness at the trial of the former commandant of Auschwitz, Rudolf Höss.⁵⁵

After the war, Stromberger never resumed her profession of nursing. She lived in seclusion in Bregenz, working in a textile factory.⁵⁶ On 18 May 1957, she died of a heart attack after visiting her dentist and having ten teeth pulled.⁵⁷ She was fifty-nine years old.

Stromberger has received little recognition for her acts of resistance. Soon after the war, she was made an honorary member of the Austrian Union of Former Prisoners of Concentration Camps.⁵⁸ In 1988, some young historians were successful in getting a trail in Bregenz named in her honor, and on the thirty-eighth anniversary of her death, 18 May 1995, the institution where she had worked in Bregenz dedicated a plaque to her⁵⁹ (Figure 2).

SUSAN BENEDICT, CRNA, DSN, FAAN
College of Nursing
Medical University of South Carolina
99 Jonathan Lucas Street
Charleston, SC 29425

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Translation by Anette Hebebrand-Verner, College of Nursing, Medical University of South Carolina, 99 Jonathan Lucas Street, Charleston, SC 29425, and Traute Page, MD, Charleston, SC.

Notes

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18. Protokoll der Zeugenaussage von Maria Stromberger in Prozess gegen den Kommandanten von Auschwitz Höss, 1947, Auschwitz Archives, file 5798.

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