

Sister Mary Imma Mack, SSND

Silent Strength in the Midst of Chaos

By: S. Mary Imma Mack, SSND

- Passages excerpted from her book "Why I Love Azaleas"

One September morning in 1944, I was once again on my usual weekly trip to Dachau. Nearing the camp, I was suddenly overcome by an unexplainable fear. I didn't have the courage to go any farther. Then I saw a little side road. The thought flashed through my mind that I could avoid all the guards and still get to the garden by taking this road. So I turned off the main road. After a while the side road led into a little wood. Summoning up all my courage, I drove on. All of a sudden I was stopped by an SS-guard. Terrified, I got off the bicycle. He barked at me sharply: "Show me your papers!" Then I was even more terrified since I didn't have them with me. I never took them along by design. After thinking for a second; I said resolutely "I'm not showing my papers. I'd rather turn back," and tore my bicycle away from him with a jerk. The guard was so stunned by my spontaneous reaction that he did not stop me from going back down the narrow road again.

"During the first week of Advent, [1944] Father Schonwalder told me that he had a very important assignment for me from Father Pies. Then he handed me two unsealed letters from him. One was addressed

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to Cardinal Faulhaber and the other to Johannes Zawackie, a Jesuit brother I myself was to read them first before passing them on to the addressees so that I would know precisely what they contained. Then Father Schonwalder told me that Karl Leisner, a deacon who had been imprisoned in the Dachau Concentration Camp for a long time already, was seriously ill in the infirmary. Father Pies [SJ] looked after him as a friend and sometimes also gave him nursing care.

Sister Mary Imma (Josefa) Mack, as she looked in 1944, as a candidate in Freising, Germany, near Dachau.

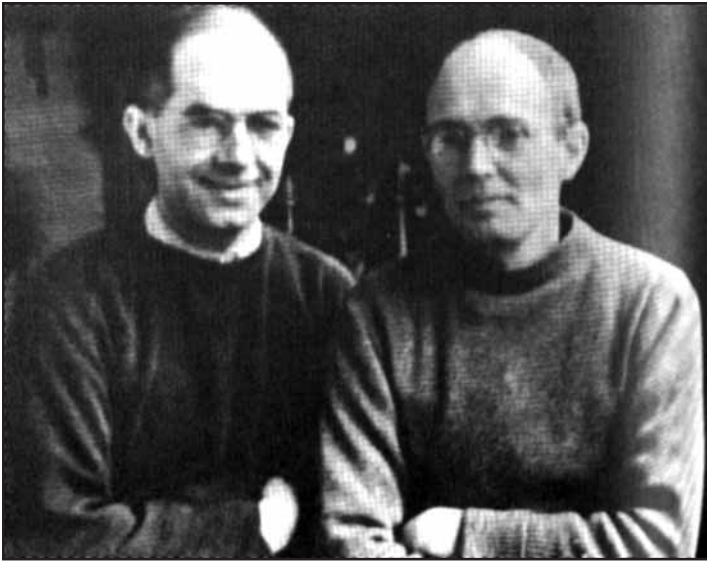


A French bishop had recently been put into the priests' block. Father Pies, together with Karl Leisner and Bishop Gabriel Piguet, had considered the possibility of the bishop ordaining the terminally ill deacon in the camp chapel. Various things would be needed, however, and the details were given in the two letters. Father Pies had told him that I, accompanied by Brother Joannes, was to deliver the letter to the Cardinal in person. I was to orally confirm Father Pies' written request for the approval of Karl Leisner's ordination, and Brother Johannes could support my statement.

I was to bring the written permission to Dachau the next week...

Sister Mary Imma (Josefa) went to Munich accompanied by Brother Johannes and spoke with Cardinal Faulhaber who gave the necessary permission as well as holy oils, stole, and ritual book. All were to be returned after the ordination along with "credible documentation."

"The ordination took place on Gaudete Sunday, the 17th of December. [1944] Father Karl Leisner



Otto Pies, SJ, with Deacon Karl Leisner.

celebrated Eucharist for the first time in the camp chapel on the feast of St. Stephen, December 26th. On the 27th I was again in Dachau. Father Schonwalder gave me the documentation for the ordination and those articles necessary for the administration of the sacrament which I had received from Cardinal Faulhaber with the request to bring everything back again...

[For this act of compassion and heroism, S. Imma Mack received the "Femme Chevalier" award from the French government on Dec. 19, 2004. She was recognized as a peacemaker to all imprisoned in Dachau regardless of nationality.]

Her parents had heard from friends that they had seen Josefa at Dachau. In the following excerpt S. Imma explains both her conversation with her parents and the title chosen for her book.

"At Christmas, my mother sent me a package which also contained a letter from my father. He had written that various persons had told him that they had met me on the way to or from Dachau. Until this time, my parents always thought that I was well taken care of by the sisters in Freising, but now they had to hear repeatedly that I was apparently away a lot. They were concerned and wanted me to explain why the word "Dachau" always came up in the conversation.

I talked about this letter with Sister Vigoris who thought that it would be better not to answer in writing. She and Sister Saba [local superior] would consider the possibility of my spending two weeks at home in January. Shortly after New Year's, I went to the plantation in Dachau once more, where I said that I would be taking two weeks' vacation at home with my parents. On my way back, I would stop there again. The prisoners, wanting to give my parents some happiness, gave me four pink azalea plants to take to them, a moving gesture from these poor men. Until then I had hardly ever seen azaleas with such beautiful blossoms, and I was enormously happy to be able to surprise my parents with them. After visiting the camp, I left my bicycle at the Steinbuchler's and took the passenger train through Ingolstadt and

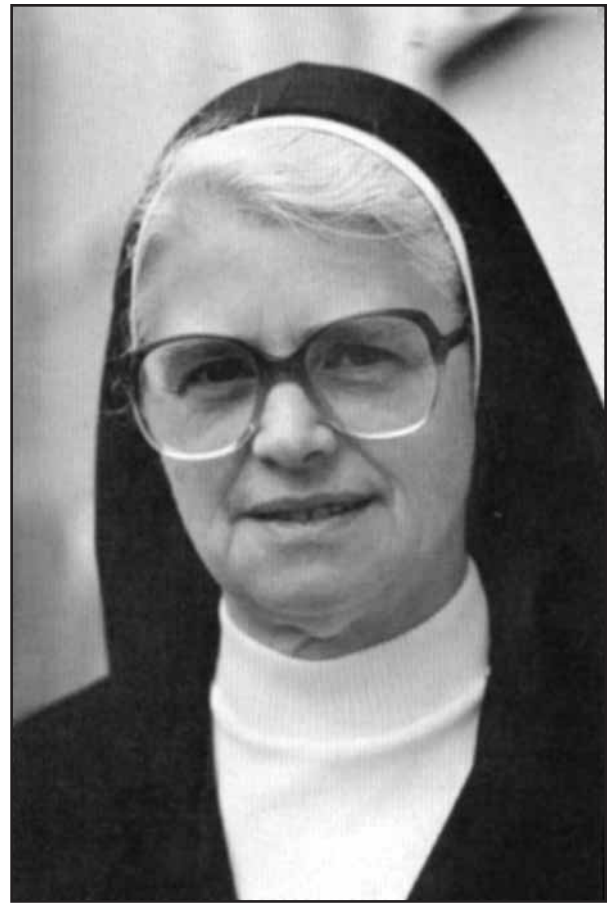
Sister Mary Imma (Josefa), (far left) pictured with her family.

Her parents heard of her trips to Dachau from concerned neighbors.



on to Adelschlag, Mockenlohe's train station. It was already dark when I came home. My mother was overcome with surprise and joy - her eyes were filled with tears.

This first evening I was alone with my parents. My sister, five years older than I, lived with her little boy in Eichstatt - her husband was a medical orderly in Russia. My brother, three years younger than I, was in the Labor Service. After supper I knew my parents were waiting to hear about my trips to Dachau, so I brought up the topic myself. Although they grew frightened and noticeably concerned about me, they still made every effort to understand - yes, even more! In the end, they were in agreement with what I was doing and I got the impression that my father especially not only approved of my trips to Dachau, but was even proud of me. It was clearly a satisfaction for him that I was allowed to go and actually did. Indeed, he himself had always suffered because he had had to hold back his aversion for the regime and could not express his disapproval more openly..." ■



Sister Imma Mack in 1988, as a needlework teacher and community member.



Candidate Imma (Josefa) Mack (far left-front row) at the entrance to the Children's Home in Freising, Bavaria. The second from the left is Sister M. Saba Gigl, Local Leader.