



Helen Kowalska (left) is shown in Lodz, Poland, with her sisters Josephine (center) and Eve. This rare photo of Helen before she entered the convent was analyzed by forensic experts due to doubt about its authenticity.

A PROMISE NEVER TO SHAME HER FATHER AGAIN

Did this incident inspire Helen Kowalska to become a saint?

Excerpted from *Faustina: The Mystic and Her Message*

During the 16 years that Helen spent in her home village of Glogowiec, there was one event that left a deep imprint on the family's collective memory and also left its mark on the future saint. It was an ordinary country dance, one of many organized in the nearby town of Swinice Warckie. No one remembers the date. It might have taken place in 1919. The goal of the festivities was a noble one: The proceeds were earmarked for the needs of the parish. Josephine, the oldest daughter of the Kowalskis, was invited to the dance. From the family's varied accounts of the event, one might gather that either the parents sent Helen to accompany her sister, or Josephine convinced her to come along. Their father supposedly knew nothing about them going out, which seems unlikely.

The girls enjoyed themselves for what must have been a long time. They came home late. In one version of the story it was 10 o'clock, but according to another, it was after midnight. To add insult to injury, the girls

were accompanied home by a certain Mr. Kociurski. Stanislaus Kowalski wasn't asleep; he was up waiting for his daughters. "Is this how I raised you, so you would bring shame and disgrace onto my house?" he reproached them, very upset.

For Helen, her father's reprimand was a ground-shaking experience. She knew that he was disappointed in her. He had gotten so angry at her, and this, supposedly, for the very first time. Thereafter, when she was asked to go to a dance, she would say that she had to ask her father. But that event had deeper repercussions. Helen said as much to her sister Jeannie when she visited Helen in the convent in Warsaw. She admitted — as Jeannie recalled years later — that when her father got angry with her, she desired to "never bring shame on her father again, but would try hard so as to give him a good reputation and solace, and not disgrace."

Was it then, indeed, that she decided to become a saint? Like one of the saints in the

stories read aloud by her father at home? “I desired to become a great saint from my earliest years,” she would write years later in her *Diary* (1372).

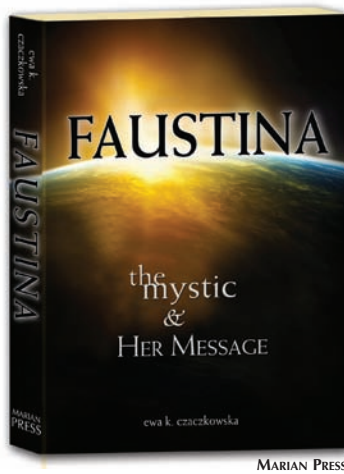
Helen wanted to be obedient to her father, but she defied him on one point — she entered the convent. The dictates of her heart and God’s call were stronger than her parents’ stubborn refusal.

Yet, before this took place, Helen left home to work in the city. On a little over seven acres of arable land, Stanislaus Kowalski was not only unable to provide an education for his eight children or dowries for his daughters; he couldn’t even feed or clothe them. For this reason, once the Kowalski daughters were old enough, they worked as maids to earn a living and to help their family. This was the typical course of events for children from large peasant families. From their overpopulated villages, where there was too little land and too many hands to work it, young people would venture out into the wide world to make a living, sometimes going as far as the New World across the Atlantic. In Polish cities and towns, men would hire themselves out as day laborers, and girls as housemaids.

The Kowalski household must have been utterly poverty-stricken, since the parents agreed in 1916 to allow their 8-year-old daughter Natalia to leave home in order to work in the home of distant relatives, where she took care of the younger children.

Helen was older when she first left home to go work — she was 16. For one or two years, she had already been talking to her parents about going away for work. She argued that her father’s work was arduous and that she didn’t have anything to wear on Sundays; she had the worst dress. Her parents agreed. It just so happened that an acquaintance of the Kowalskis, Jane Lugowska from the neighboring village of Rogow, had recently mentioned that her sister Leocadia Bryszewska was looking for a maid. She lived in Aleksandrow, near Lodz. Helen left. It was the year 1921.

She returned to Glogowiec one year later. It was then that she first asked her parents’ permission to enter the convent. Years later, Marianna Kowalska recalled the words of her daughter: “Mommy, I must enter the convent.”



***Faustina: The Mystic and Her Message* will be available in November.**

Both parents, however, flatly refused to give their permission. Her father argued that he was in debt and had no money to pay for the dowry required by various congregations at that time. Helen told her parents that she “didn’t need any money,” because “the Lord Jesus Himself will lead me to the convent.” But she didn’t get anywhere. Her parents were tough, and they didn’t agree.

Natalia recalled that it was probably then that their

pastor, Fr. Roman Pawlowski, urged Helen’s father to sell the family’s cow to provide his daughter with a dowry and postulant’s wardrobe, since she had such a great desire to enter the convent. Her father wouldn’t hear of it because “how will we make a living with such a large family?” And in any case, the cow was needed to pull the plow.

Since she couldn’t enter the convent, Helen left once more to work as a servant. This time she worked in Lodz. It was probably during this period — from 1922 to 1924 — that she used to come to visit her parents. But from the moment she left Lodz for Warsaw in 1924 and entered the convent, she didn’t visit Glogowiec again until 1935 — 11 years later. She returned as a nun named Sr. Faustina. She had seen her parents only once since 1924, when they travelled to Krakow for Faustina’s first profession of vows in 1928.

Sister Faustina came to Glogowiec from the convent in Vilnius after being alerted by her family to her mother’s serious illness. Marianna Kowalska was having severe attacks of acute liver pain. Having received permission from her sister superior, Faustina boarded the train on Feb. 15, 1935. She was in Warsaw by morning, and by eight in the evening, she had already arrived in Glogowiec. “She came to my room, praised God, and knelt down beside me, by the bed, and said at once, ‘Mommy, you will get up yet.’” Thus, Marianna Kowalska recalled the words of her daughter after many years.

To her own astonishment and that of the rest of the family, Marianna immediately sat up in bed on her own. “I saw her — already I got well. The next day was Sunday. She was getting ready for church. My husband harnessed the horse, and I went to church with them. And I have been healthy to this very day,” said Marianna Kowalska in 1952.