

JUOZAPA KIBELAITÈ

1907-2006

Age when rescuing: 34

Profession: Nun

People rescued: 1

- A nun who spent her entire life raising other people's children.
- Contributed significantly to the Jasonys orphanage.
- Created a safe space not only for abandoned children, but for abused women as well.

Juozapa was the eighth of 11 children in her family. Her father, Antanas Kibelis, died young, so all household worries rested on the shoulders of her mother, Bronislava, who did her best not only to feed and clothe the children, but also to educate them. Juozapa completed the Šilalė Progymnasium. During the restoration of independent Lithuania, she got involved in the activities of Catholic organisations. She took her first vows in 1932, and in 1933, she was sent by the convent to another part of Lithuania – Utena. In 1940, when the Catholic organisations were abolished and the monks were expelled from their monasteries, the sisters who worked in Utena also had to leave the institutions where they worked and disperse. Sisters Juozapa Kibelaitė and Zuzana Janušaitytė went to Samogitia, to live with Juozapa's relatives. They stayed there until July 1941, when they were both called to work at the Utena orphanage after the war broke out. They found a huge mess when they arrived – the head of the orphanage had run away, and the children had been distributed to the people of the village. There were only three old employees left. Little by little, the people from the villages returned the children who had been given to them to the orphanage. Once again, there were about 60 children there. Sister Juozapa was appointed headmistress. The orphanage was again allocated 15 hectares of land. It was necessary to work the land and raise animals in order to feed the orphans. During the war, Sister Juozapa and the other nuns rescued a three-year-old boy with an injured eye named Aleksander Shinder at this orphanage. After the war, the child's parents came back for him.

In 1944, as the front approached, buildings collapsed as the retreating Germans bombarded Utena non-stop. The large barn, and especially the basement below it, served as a shelter. When they heard the rumble of aeroplanes or saw lights hanging over the city at night, the sisters would take the children to a hiding place in another building, wrapping the little ones in blankets and carrying them there. The older children helped as well. When the war broke out, the sisters stayed on at the orphanage. It was decided to separate the older and younger children. The older ones, who were already attending school, were left in Utena, while the younger ones were moved to the Jasonys manor, four kilometres away. In 1947, the nuns who decided not to leave the little ones moved with them to Jasonys. Juozapa became responsible for the farm work. The other sisters also worked there. **So the Soviets, with no other way out, employed all the sisters in the Jasonys orphanage, even though they knew they were nuns.**

At that time, all that was left of the Jasonys manor was the one-story residential house, the sauna and a few small farm buildings, as the other ones had been burned down. There were also 30 hectares of land for an auxiliary farm. The number of children being brought in from various distribution points and orphanages was increasing. The number of employees was increasing as well. The working conditions were hard. Despite the difficulties, the sisters began repair and construction work. They added another floor to the residential building and reconstructed the farm buildings, equipping some of them with living quarters. A large brick building with a hall and dining room for the children was built, as well as two other buildings, one of which housed a laundry room and sauna, and the other – rooms for employees. Gradually, the living conditions changed for the sisters, the employees, and especially the children. The Jasonys orphanage had become comfortable and cosy, and a true home of the Fatherland. The orphanage was in a gorgeous environment – large flower gardens dotted with colour from spring to late autumn, a pond, a forest right there, and beautiful rooms decorated with traditional Lithuanian patterns.

The orphanage was maintained with state funds, so it had to be run in an orderly fashion. Audits were done annually and lasted for a week. Inspectors came not only from Vilnius, but also from Moscow. Wanting to show off, the Utena District authorities and the Orphanage Department of the Ministry of Education would bring guests not only from Lithuania and other Soviet republics, but even from abroad. Everyone who came saw the same thing – **this orphanage differed from all the others in terms of order and how well the children were cared and provided for.**

The children loved the good sisters, who were like doting mothers to them. One of the orphans, Danutė Mirauskaitė-Ambrozaitienė, is grateful for the care and love she was given there, and looked after Sister Juozapa with the compassion of a true daughter right up until her death. In her memoirs, Danutė writes: “... *That’s how I found a second mum in the winter of 1950, and not just her, but at least two at once. These were Sisters Juozapa Kibelaitė and Zuzana Janušaitytė. ... I remember how the forest brothers would knock on the window at night, and Mum and Stefa would go and give them some food. And in the daytime members of the destruction battalions would come and have to be fed too. ... They took the children on various excursions – to Vilnius, Kaunas, Palanga. They needed money so the children could go on the merry-go-round or have ice cream. There was no cash, so they had to make some. They raised a little bull that the villagers would take their cows to, and that’s how the children got ice cream. ... Thanks to everyone’s dedication and thoughtfulness, the children were well cared for, well fed, and nicely dressed. They took in women who had been cheated on by men, abused or lonely. They found work for themselves there and shelter for their children. ... Even many years later, the children who once lived in the orphanage, now grown men and women, would come to visit. They knew that in Utena near the church, in the red brick house, they would find loving hearts.*”

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