

Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, 1907-2005

by Jerry Ryan

On November 26, Elisabeth Behr-Sigel died while reading in bed. She was 98. Until the end she was alert, ever-curious and active. She had just returned from Oxford, England, where she had been invited to give a talk on her friend and mentor, Fr. Lev Gillet, whose life had been the subject of one of her books.

Fiercely independent, she lived alone in a two-room flat overlooking the Seine in the suburbs of Paris. Her apartment was cluttered with books, reviews, journals and photos of friends long deceased but ever-present for her as well as those of her many descendants. Friends also found a supply of red wine in one of the cupboards. She was no stylite except, she noted, when the elevator in her building broke down.

Elisabeth Behr-Sigel on the day of Mother Marias canonization

She occupies a unique place in Western Orthodoxy. For 70 years she helped guide a church dispersed and uprooted from its cultural heritage towards its adaptation to its new situation, challenging it to overcome its divisions and also to enlarge the role of women. Her background predisposed her to such a mission. She was born in Alsace; her father was Protestant, her mother Jewish. She received a masters degree in theology at the Protestant Faculty of Theology of Strasbourg and became the first woman authorized by the Reformed Church of Alsace-Lorraine to preach and exercise a pastoral ministry.

Her ministry lasted but a year. Already, as a student, she had been captivated by the beauty of the Orthodox liturgy and spirituality. At the age of 24, she officially embraced Orthodoxy. In time she married an exiled Russian engineer, André Behr. They would have three children who would provide an impressive number of descendants. (André died in 1968.)

During the Second World War, the family was living in Nancy where Elisabeth taught in the public school system. She would later refer to this period as her real apprenticeship in ecumenism — when people of different traditions formed a tight-knitted group of spiritual resistance to Nazism. They put together a network to shelter Jews and provide escape routes.

After the war she followed free courses at St. Sergius Theological Institute in Paris which, at that time, did not allow women. She later returned to St. Sergius as a professor. While in her 70s, she obtained a doctorate in history from the University of Nancy. She taught at the Catholic Institute of Paris, the Ecumenical Institute of Tantur near Jerusalem, the Dominican College of Ottawa, and St. Sergius. She was a regular contributor to many reviews and helped to revive the Orthodox theological journal *Contacts*. She was the author of books on Orthodox spirituality, on the role of women in the Orthodox Church, and a biography of Fr. Lev Gillet. She was much in demand for workshops and conferences.

As important as her writings and classes may have been, they reflected only one aspect of her activity. She thought it critical that Orthodoxy open itself to the riches of its sister churches and root itself in the local culture. The various Orthodox jurisdictions in France, for example, should become the Orthodox Church of France. She saw the divisions in Christianity as constituting an authentic scandal. While fiercely defending what is essential, Orthodoxy must present the Gospel to the contemporary world.



After retiring, Elisabeth devoted much time and energy to the promotion of women in the Orthodox Church — respectfully, almost humbly, but with firm conviction and solid theological arguments. She helped create an awareness that women had been relegated to an inferior status that was not according to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and had to change.

Though challenging Orthodoxy on many fronts, she was always a faithful and loving daughter of her church — without stridency or bitterness or animosity and often with a mischievous sense of humor which kept her opponents off guard.

The presence of Elisabeth in all this was discreet, constant and pacifying. She considered herself a very minor and unimportant part of things. She would enjoy speaking at length of the great and imposing personalities who surrounded her but was very reticent about her own role — as if it were the grandeur of others that mattered and her only worth came from having known them.

From the time of the refounding of the Orthodox Peace Fellowship in 1988, she participated in its work both as a member of its advisory board and participant in all the OPF conferences that met in France.

She was far from an imposing physical presence; she appeared fragile, as if a good gust of wind would blow her away. When, after her death, people were arranging her apartment, they found her driver's license which she had renewed at the age of 90 without telling anyone. Friends related that she was pulled over by the police several times because they couldn't see anyone behind the steering wheel — her line of vision was just above the dashboard.

Last year she had the joy of participating in the canonization of Mother Maria Skobtsova, whose writing and work Elisabeth so greatly admired.

Elisabeth's ecumenism was not simply theoretical. She moved with ease among the different Christian traditions, always seeing the positive, always curious and ready to learn. Her 95th birthday was celebrated in the Carmelite convent of St. Elie in Central France with the presence of two Orthodox bishops, a Greek Catholic Bishop, the vicar generals of three Catholic dioceses and several eminent Protestant pastors. This, in itself, was a magnificent testimony of their esteem for this diminutive grandmother whose love embraced them all and brought them together. It was a way of recognizing that, in her, the Christian unity so desired and prayed for had been realized — hopefully, prophetically.