

STORIES OF POLISH RESISTANCE



Irena
Sendler



Maximilian
Kolbe



Emanuel
Ringelblum



Mordechai
Anielewicz



Witold
Pilecki



Janusz
Korczak



Jan
Karski



Zofia
Kossak-
Szczucka



Father
Marceli
Godlewski



Jan &
Antonina
Zabinski



Józef &
Wiktoria
Ulma

About half of the six million European Jews killed in the Holocaust were Polish. In 1939 a third of the capital city Warsaw, and 10% of the entire country was Jewish. By 1945 97% of Poland's Jews were dead.

These eleven examples of Polish resistance *do not* proprt to give an overview of what happened in Poland during The Holocaust. They have been chosen to reflect the unimaginably difficult choices made by both Jews and non-Jews under German occupation – where every Jew was marked for death and all non-Jews who assisted their Jewish neighbours were subject to the same fate.

These individuals *were not* typical; they were exceptional, reflecting the relatively small proportion of the population who refused to be bystanders. But neither were they super-human. They would recoil from being labelled as heroes. They symbolise the power of the human spirit – their actions show that in even the darkest of times, good can shine through...

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Maximilian Kolbe

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Father Maximilian Kolbe 1894 - 1941



Kolbe with student priests

Raymond Kolbe was born in Zdunska Wola, Poland, to a devout Roman Catholic family. When he was 12 he had a vision of the Virgin Mary which changed his life, when he learned that he was to become a martyr. He entered a seminary at Lvov in 1910 and was ordained as a priest in 1918. He formed a group called “Knights of the Immaculate” which was dedicated to fighting for goodness, encouraging people to have an interest in religion and to perform charitable works. They published a journal which was designed to ‘illuminate the truth and show the way to true happiness.’ In 1930 he travelled to Nagasaki, Japan and published the journal in Japanese. Here, he did not try to impose Christianity, but respected Buddhism and Shintoism looking for ways to engage in dialogue. He returned to Poland in 1936 and three years later, when the Germans invaded, he resumed his pamphleteering work and offered assistance to Polish refugees, both Jewish and non-Jewish.

Father Maximilian Kolbe 1894 - 1941



His work agitated the Nazi regime and he was imprisoned on many occasions, eventually being deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. This was the most notorious concentration camp that the Nazi's built on Polish soil – more than a million of the six million European Jews that were murdered in the Holocaust died there. It was also were approximately 70,000 non-Jewish Poles were murdered. Although it was a terrible place of death, many remarkable stories of heroism have emerged from the testimony of survivors, - one such example is that of prisoner 16770 - Maximilian Kolbe.

Kolbe was incarcerated in a part of the camp where Polish non-Jewish prisoners were kept. Even in these dreadful surroundings his instinct was to reach out to his fellow men. Auschwitz Survivors have reported that he shared his rations of soup or bread with others and, at night-time, moved from bunk to bunk, saying: 'I am a Catholic priest. Can I do anything for you?'



*The prisoner bunks at Auschwitz
(this photo was taken many years after the war)*

Father Maximilian Kolbe 1894 - 1941

When it was reported that another prisoner had escaped from the camp, the Nazis decide to starve 10 others in retaliation. One of the selected men broke down and cried “My wife! My children! I will never see them again!” Hearing this, Maximilian Kolbe stepped forward and asked to die in his place. The Germans granted this request, probably because the young prisoner was more useful to them as a slave labourer than the much older, frailer Kolbe.



After the war the prisoner that Kolbe replaced said 'I could only thank him with my eyes. I was stunned and could hardly grasp what was going on. The immensity of it: I, the condemned, am to live and someone else willingly and voluntarily offers his life for me - a stranger. Was this some dream?'

Father Maximilian Kolbe 1894 - 1941

Father Maximilian Kolbe died on 14 August, 1941 and his body was removed to the crematorium, without dignity or ceremony, like hundreds of thousands who had gone before him, and hundreds of thousands more who would follow.

Another survivor declared that when the news and circumstances of Father Kolbe's death became known it was like 'a shock filled with hope - like a powerful shaft of light in the darkness of the camp.'

The cell in Auschwitz where Father Kolbe died is now a shrine and he was made a saint by Pope John Paul II in 1981. His story continues to inspire many people today.

