

St. MAXIMILIAN KOLBE

By Fr. Teresio Bosco, S.D.B.

White flowers and red flowers

“It was tea-time, and my son had not come home. Father sat sullenly at the table. His two brothers, Francis and Joseph, ate in silence, as always when they felt a storm was brewing. They had almost finished, when the door opened and Raymond entered; dishevelled and dirty, like a little gypsy. Father raised his head and the storm broke.

“Is this the time to come home? Look at him! Filthy good for nothing. A wonderful consolation you are to your mother who works all day to send you out dressed as you should be.”

“Raymond listened to the rest of the storm with bowed head then sneaked into the bedroom. It was taken for granted that he went without tea that night.

“Next day, as I was mending his torn jacket and I saw him standing dejectedly beside me, I sighed and asked: ‘My child, what are we going to do with you?’

“Raymond burst into tears and ran to his room. I caught a glimpse of him a short time later. He was kneeling in front of the little altar of the Madonna. He came out much later lost in thought. For some days he remained like that: long periods of silence, sometimes bursting into tears. This was not normal for him, and finally I took him aside and asked him firmly: ‘What has happened? Are you still sulking because of your father’s outburst?’

“He shook his head.

“‘What then? What has happened? Why such a long face all the time?’

“Raymond hesitated as he answered me: ‘Mummy, when you said, “What are we going to do with you?” I went to Our Lady and I said nearly the same words to her: “What’s going to happen to me?” And the Madonna opened her hands and showed me two garlands: one of white flowers, and one of red flowers. She smiled at me and asked me which one I wanted. I don’t know how, but I understood that the white garland meant purity, and the red one the sacrifice of my life. I did not know which one to take, and then I asked her for both. The Madonna smiled at me again, then I saw her again just as she is seen in the picture. This is all true, mummy, I have not made up one single word.’

“After he had told me, all this, Raymond became happy and calm, as if he had got something off his chest. I have never told these words of my son to anyone, not even to his father. But now that I know how he died, I believe that I should tell you, his friends and confreres.”

The mother of Father Maximilian Kolbe wrote this letter when she heard that her son had been martyred by the Nazi tyrants in the concentration camp at Auschwitz.

He wanted to preach to the birds, but they flew away

Giulio Kolbe and Maria Dobrowska had set up house in the small town of Zdunska-Wola, in the part of Poland then under the Russia of the Tsars. That was way back in 1891 and Giulio and Maria had only one source of income: strong arms and a determination to work.

They began by renting a large room which they divided into two by means of a curtain. One part was for the two looms, which also were on hire, with a small corner to serve as a kitchen; the other half contained their bed, their wardrobe and a small altar on which was placed a picture of the Black Madonna of Czestochowa. That family had a second source of income: a great faith in the Lord and a tender devotion towards the Madonna.

Every month, Giulio went to the market at Lodz and purchased skeins of wool from the Jewish merchants; then they worked energetically at the looms from dawn to dusk. When their first child Francis was born they placed his cradle alongside the looms and his mother sang lullabies to him as her quick hands moved the shuttles back and forth.

Raymond was born in 1894 and he also was to spend the first months listening to the accompaniment of the looms. According to his mother, Raymond was quite a lively boy and quick-witted but a bit spiteful. He was highly imaginative. One day he heard the story of St. Francis, and then ran into the garden outside the house to preach to the birds himself. He

was quite upset when the birds promptly flew away instead of flocking to listen to him. John Bosco was another saint who captured his imagination. His mother read him the story of the time little Johnny Bosco broke the bottle of Oil and then cut a cane with his pen-knife so that his mother could punish him. Some days later, his mother saw him approaching to hand her a stick prepared with his own pen-knife: "I haven't broken a bottle of oil," he said dejectedly, "but a jar of jam. If you want to punish me . . .". It took his mother all her time to refrain from laughing.

Three handkerchief-sized plots

When Joseph arrived, there were three mouths to feed every day. Father decided to leave Zdunska-Wola and settle in Pabianice, where there was a larger market and hence greater opportunities for a weaver to sell his wares.

This time they rented a whole house; it was small but it was all theirs. The father engaged a man to work the looms. Mother was able to open a small shop to sell all their merchandise and with part of the proceeds rent three handkerchief-sized plots of land where she grew onions and salad vegetables.

As their earnings increased, father rented a larger house and mother opened a better shop. By dint of plenty of elbow grease they could do so much. Raymond noted how calm, yet how active, his parents were and from them he learnt a lesson which he was to practise all his life: if you are prepared to work hard and to stick at it, poverty is no great obstacle. You can do great things as well.

Father and Mother were Franciscan tertiaries and they had wonderful faith. Mother had offered Francis, her first son, to the Madonna; if the Madonna would accept him and make a priest of him, she was prepared to undertake any sacrifice to help him follow this vocation. As secondary schooling was not free and as there was not enough money to pay for them all through High School, Raymond and Joseph would have to be weavers like their father (it was to turn out just the opposite: Francis was to be the weaver, Raymond and Joseph became priests. God does not always see things as we do).

There was always a lamp burning in front of the altar of the black Madonna. The Kolbe family often gathered in front of it to whisper prayers or to pray in silence. It was there that Raymond in the quiet of the evening learnt from his mother how to be alone with the Madonna for lengthy periods of time.

Providence in the shape of a pharmacist

Francis was in First Year in the only high school in the town. It was then that the hour of Providence struck. Mother sent Raymond to the pharmacy to buy some medicinal herbs. Mr. Kotowski, dressed in his white coat, went up the steps to get the jar and asked: "How are the studies going, Raymond?"

"I am no longer studying, Mr. Kotowski. Francis is the only one going to high school. My parents haven't enough money to pay for both of us to go to school."

The pharmacist got down from his step-ladder and looked Raymond straight in the eye. "And what are you going to do with the fine head God has placed on your shoulders?"

"I am going to help my father."

Mr. Kotowski shook his head. "Listen, Raymond, tell your mother to let you come to me every morning. I still have the books my son used when he studied. If you are willing to apply yourself, I'll teach you enough Latin and Mathematics so that next year you'll be able to join your brother in Second Year."

"That day," Mrs. Kolbe said later, "Raymond rushed straight home". Both father and mother agreed, and every morning the boy went to school in the back room of the pharmacy. Mr. Kotowski was indeed the hand of Providence, and the following year Francis and Raymond were both enrolled in Second Year at High School.

The coarse habit of St Francis

Easter 1907. Father Pellegrino Haczela, a Franciscan, came to preach at Pabianice. He saw so many boys with intelligent eyes who were destined to be farmers. He put forward an idea to their fathers and mothers; the Franciscans have opened a College at Leopoli. They don't intend to make friars of them all but to open their schools to the poor boys

of the area. And if any of the students, drawn by the example of their teachers, wanted to don the habit of St. Francis, they would be delighted.

In October, Giulio Kolbe accompanied fifteen-year-old Francis and thirteen-year-old Raymond to Leopoli. They made the trip in a farm cart and, since Leopoli was in the part of Poland then ruled by Austria, they had to get a visa and have their documents stamped in order to cross the border. It was the first time that the two boys had been away from their family. Life was beginning to demand sacrifices of them.

There followed four years of hard study and their younger brother, Joseph, later joined them at College. Raymond liked school. He was very good at science so much so that his mathematics teacher, a layman by the name of Gruchala, said to him one day: "What a pity that you want to join the Franciscans; you are such a gifted boy . . .". Evidently he had his ideas of what a Franciscan is; Raymond's ideas were quite different.

In October 1911, Raymond and Francis, with the permission of their parents, applied to enter the Franciscan Order. Raymond was 17 years of age. He put on the coarse habit and tied the white cincture around his waist - the same way that Francis of Assisi used to dress from the day that he decided to marry "Lady Poverty".

On the evening of September 4, Raymond took Maximilian as his religious name; he would henceforth be known by this name to the day he died.

In 1912 Fra Maximilian was sent to Rome to continue his studies.

Throughout the world, factories were multiplying on the outskirts of the large cities at a very fast rate. Huge numbers of workers lived in squalor alongside smoky buildings. Their pay was very poor, and they had no insurance against sickness or accident at work. At intervals violent strikes paralyzed the life of the city and there were bloody encounters between workers and police.

It was evident in those troubled, questioning times that an old world was dying and a new one, with as yet uncertain horizons, had already been born.

Cannons boom at the Serbian border

But another danger, equally as serious, was just around the corner and it was about to engulf Europe. France and Germany had more than once been on the brink of war. Both were large, powerful nations. In the summer of 1913 the boundary between the two nations bristled with bayonets and with the barrels of cannons. It only needed one spark to set off a conflagration.

July 28, 1914. Cannons boomed along the Serbian border and the Austrian army fanned out towards the south. Russia mobilized millions of farmers. Germany responded by throwing her divisions into the fray. Poland, then divided into three parts by Russia, Germany and Austria, was overrun by the armies. By August 4, France and England joined in. Belgium was swept by an avalanche of fire. Millions of young people occupied the trenches. The first World War had begun.

The squares of Italy resounded with the talk of war, for all the world as if a great feast were being celebrated.

In that 1914, Francis Kolbe took off his Franciscan habit and shouldered a rifle. A strong movement was growing under the leadership of J. Pilsudski to fight for the reunification and independence of Poland and Francis joined the volunteers to fight for the life of his fatherland.

An "army" is born in silence

In 1915 Fra Maximilian graduated in philosophy. And his mind became absorbed by a project which slowly gained ground. He would found an "Army", not for war, but for the purpose of propagating the Kingdom of God, of justice and of peace. The protectress of this "Army" would be the Immaculate Virgin.

1917. The war had already flooded Europe with blood and corpses. Pope Benedict XV issued an invitation to the nations to put an end to this "useless slaughter". In retort the Masons organized a procession through the streets of Rome holding aloft a banner depicting the Archangel Michael being defeated by Lucifer. When they reached St. Peter's Square

they waved their banners in front of the Pope's windows; on one of them was written: "Satan will reign in the Vatican; the Pope will be his servant". Blasphemies!! Absurdities!!

In that same year in a quiet part of Portugal, Our Lady appeared to three little shepherds. She gave the three children of Fatima her heart-rending message of love and peace.

Maximilian decided to delay no longer, but rather to start his "army". He spoke about it to his superiors, and received their approval. On the evening of October 16, seven Franciscan seminarians gathered in the room next to that of the Rector. The atmosphere was electric. It seemed as though they were knights of old waiting for their investiture. Fra Maximilian held in his hand the programme which they had framed after many long discussions and after much reflection. He read it out slowly and seriously. Then one by one they signed it, and afterwards exchanged glances, not entirely devoid of some emotion. In those few silent minutes the "Army of Mary Immaculate" was born.

28 April 1918. As Europe entered upon the last terrible months of the Great War, Maximilian Kolbe ascended the Altar to say his First Mass. In October Pope Benedict XV approved and blessed the Army he had founded. Father Kolbe realised that the time was near when he would launch it throughout the world.

In the July of 1919 Father Kolbe gained his degree in theology and prepared to return to his homeland. Poland had again gained its independence, but it did not as yet have peace. It was fighting against Russia in the East. When he left Rome, Father Kolbe had his two degrees, but his health was greatly impaired; he had been spitting blood, and the doctors diagnosed tuberculosis of the lungs; there were sufficient signs to cause worry.

The pendulum of the hospitals

Father Maximilian, however, did not have time to go to hospital. In October 1919 he began teaching Church History in the Franciscan High School at Cracow. A month later, seven young confreres went through the investiture ceremony with him and joined the "Army". With their help he began the first group amongst young men and women at University. He also started the first group of the Army amongst the soldiers with whom he worked as a Chaplain.

The tuberculosis meanwhile was making headway. Spitting of blood became more frequent, and he was exhausted and very pale. His superiors were very concerned, they relieved him of his teaching commitments and, at the insistence of the doctors, they made him go to hospital.

They fixed him up as best they could but in June he had to return and remain in hospital for the next year and a half. This going and coming back from hospital, like the swing of a pendulum, was a kind of Via Crucis which Father Kolbe had to undergo for the remainder of his life. When he was all set to do something they insisted that he take it easy. But even during his long periods of inactivity, the "Army" grew and it involved an ever increasing number of young people and adults.

A mysterious formula

Father Kolbe spent much time in thought, during the periods of silence the doctors imposed on him. He thought of what he was doing, of what he could not do, of the results which come even when one has to be idle. And one day he wrote down a mysterious formula on a sheet of paper: "w=W". It was his great catch-cry which, in the years to come, he was to write so many times on the blackboards of classrooms, before explaining it to the young students. He would say: "w is what we want. W is the will of God. We can worry ourselves to death working, and tire ourselves out every day. But the result will always be very small, and tire ourselves out every day. But the result will always be very small, almost nothing, if God does not bless what we are doing. If on the other hand God helps us, he will add strength to our efforts and then our small amount of work will achieve great, unexpected and sensational results. Our greatest need, however, should be not to do a lot of things and to wear ourselves out with work, but to think, to search, to discover what it is that God wants us to do. Then it will suffice for us to work as hard as we can, be it little or great, and the results will come and they will be sensational. This is the secret of success; to make our little 'w' and God's great 'W' coincide". And he illustrated what he meant with this example: "Our capital (our labour) is only a small amount of money. We can do all the trading we

like, but it will be very difficult for us to earn much with so little capital. But if we invest it in the bank of God, if we write our little capital to his immeasurable capital then the amount of profit we can make will be astronomical”.

Father Kolbe spent a year and a half in the sanatorium at Zakopane, occupied during the long silent hours in prayer. But whenever he could he did not allow his small amount of capital to remain idle. He held talks, group meetings, conferences and discussions with the sick inmates. The authorities at the sanatorium had prohibited every kind of “religious assistance”, and they would not allow a chaplain for the sick. ‘But Father Kolbe’s position was different: he was a sick inmate, and as such no one could prevent him from speaking.

He even succeeded in invading the section for university students who had been stricken with tuberculosis. It was a kind of “fortress of incredulity”. But the young people could not ‘resist Father Maximilian’s charm, his courage in speaking plainly about spiritual things, about the validity of the message of Christ for the construction of a new world, for the need for every man to clarify the mystery of the “beyond”. His brilliant cultural preparation was a good passport. The Army took root even amongst these people. Some of the sick Jews and Protestants became Catholics.

Begging, cap in hand

January 1922. The first number of a review entitled “The Knight of Mary Immaculate” appeared. The idea for this magazine had come to him during his moments of solitude in the sanatorium of Zakopane. He achieved his aim a month after he returned to Cracow.

He was its founder, its editor, its director, its despatch clerk. His superiors did not contribute a cent towards the cost of the magazine; on the contrary they told him quite clearly that, if he could not pay all costs for the first issue, then they would not give him permission to print a second number. And so Father Kolbe, hat in hand, went around the city begging for help. He knocked at countless doors, and came home with about half of what he needed in his pocket. Then he went and knelt in front of Our Lady’s altar and, with the same confidence he had had as a ten-year-old, he asked for her help.

When he rose from his knees (and only then) he noticed an envelope lying on the altar cloth. Inside there was an anonymous note, “For a good work”, and also the money to cover the debt with the printer and to pay for the second issue of “The Knight”.

Five hectares of swamp

Printing the magazine at a commercial establishment became too costly. Father Kolbe decided to get a printing machine and to transform the silent monastery into a workshop. The friars agreed. They began to alternate prayer with work. The machine poured out the work and was busy day and night. The circulation of “The Knight” grew, to the extent that the machine could no longer cope with the work.

His Superiors assigned Father Kolbe to a new monastery at Grodno.

The intense cold of the northern town of Grodno was too much for his frail body, and at the beginning of 1926 he had to give in once again. The doctors feared for the “ghost” in the Franciscan habit and sent him back forthwith to Zakopane.

He was to be away for fifteen months and his younger brother Joseph was sent to take his place; Joseph had been ordained a priest a few years previously and was known as Father Alphonsus. Harmony reigned in the community and the work continued apace. “The Knight” now had a circulation of 50,000 copies a month, and was rapidly jumping towards the target of 100,000. From the sanatorium Father Kolbe sent some post cards to “his very dear brothers in St. Francis”. On all of them he wrote a short mysterious formula:

“w = W”.

His health improved in the spring of 1927 and Father Maximilian was able to go back to Grodno. He took back with him a new idea which had matured in silence and prayer: Grodno was no longer large enough, it was necessary to work on a bigger scale, to build a large printing press, to flood Poland with magazines, books and newspapers which would bring the message of Christ to every family.

There were five hectares of swampy land 42 kilometres from Warsaw. Father Kolbe took possession of them “in the name of Mary” in the summer of 1927. Franciscan priests and brothers worked with him as labourers, brick layers, carpenters, plumbers. By November the first building was ready - the Chapel where Jesus in the Eucharist would come to sustain them in their work by His very presence.

In search of a pair of sandals

When the first snow of winter began to fall, the framework of the first buildings had already been erected. The friar-workers all slept in the temporary huts, which gave little protection from the winter cold. They took it in turns to fill the basins at the foot of each palliasse: by the morning the water had often turned to ice. They economised where they could, and watched every little expense, because building materials were very dear and soon they would have to buy costly machinery and large quantities of paper. Even their sandals were shared in common; as he went to work, each one put on the first pair he found. And when Father Kolbe had to go to Warsaw, he had to go from one friar to another to borrow a pair that was good enough.

In the space of two years, the city-monastery, called Niepokalanow, that is, City of the Immaculate, became the foremost publishing centre in Poland with the latest machines and great production potential.

A power plant made the small city self-sufficient in electricity. There were shops for blacksmiths and mechanics, for tailors and shoemakers, warehouses for building material, and everything needed for a publishing house: editorial offices, library, linotype, platemaking, typesetting, and a photographic laboratory. There were also a car park, a small railway station connecting into the national network and even a field which could be used as an aerodrome.

The small city was equipped with a bakery, a huge kitchen, a dining room which could seat a thousand people, a fire station, a radio station and a sporting complex. But above all it possessed enthusiastic brothers who were willing to work and who believed in their mission. Francis of Assisi called fire his “brother” and water his “sister”, but they, along with Father Kolbe, called the newspaper their “brother” and the press their “sister”, and they were keen that all went well, along modern lines, to carry the word of Christ their Saviour to their brothers in Poland.

The clinic, the department where most work is done

Father Kolbe was the body and soul of this city. In his eyes there was no difference between the confrere sitting at the editor’s desk and the machine worker covered in grease; they ate the same food, they wore the same patched clothes, they worked for the same God.

The workers at Niepokalanow were not all Franciscans; architects, engineers, labourers flocked to give a voluntary helping hand to Father Kolbe. The city-monastery (citadel) soon had seven hundred inhabitants, all volunteers, all working for the kingdom of God and at lunch time they sat down at the same table; there was no class distinction, no privileges.

There was only one place where any privilege was given: in the little infirmary where the sick were treated. Father Kolbe knew the value of suffering and he considered the clinic “the department where most work was done”.

Whilst the presses thundered on, the Blessed Eucharist was continuously exposed in the Chapel. The workers had no scruples about taking a break so as to kneel down and offer Him a prayer and their work. “I demand that you be holy,” Father Kolbe firmly told his helpers, “Holiness is not a luxury, but a simple right. And it is not difficult”.

The results were almost unbelievable. “The Knight” reached a normal circulation of 750,000 copies; for extra-ordinary editions it touched the million mark. Then a small daily newspaper—the MALY DZIENNIK—saw the light of day; its circulation was 250,000. They also published seven specialised reviews, something really tremendous for the Poland of that time.

One day a gentleman approached Father Kolbe and asked whether he could be shown over the establishment. After he had carefully studied every corner and every activity he turned to Father Kolbe and said: “I am a communist. I must confess that here, for the first time in my life, I have seen my ideas realised.”

Father Kolbe had another gigantic dream. He courageously explained it to his Superiors: "We have created a 'City of Mary Immaculate' where we work for the Kingdom of God. I think that we should do something similar in every country. Modern inventions should serve commerce, industry and sport but, first and foremost, the Kingdom of God".

His Superiors thought the matter over. It seemed to be a project which was more fanciful than real; at the least it was very ambitious, but they replied: "If you think you can do it, go ahead!"

Four set foot in Japan

May 1930. Father Kolbe has left Niepokalanow in good hands and has arrived in Japan. Mary's statue and the Bishop, Mons. Hayasaka, welcomed him on the steps of the Cathedral in Nagasaki.

Before leaving for the Far East, he visited Rome and Assisi. He knelt beside the graves of two of his former fellow students with whom he had founded the "Army". God had called them first. Then he visited Lourdes to meet Our Lady where she had appeared to a very poor girl of the Pyrenees. He went to Turin and stopped to pray in the very places hallowed by Don Bosco, a giant of charity, who had begun a world-wide work on behalf of youth and who had worn himself out in ceaseless activity. He also went to Lisieux, too—the Silent Convent where a young girl, Therese on fire with the love of God, had been a missionary; she helped her brothers not with words and actions but by living out every day the three difficult words in her programme: love, suffer, smile. These were all people who had advanced the Kingdom of God in different ways and in different circumstances.

When he landed in Japan, Father Kolbe had in his pocket a letter from the Superior General of his Order. It contained both a permission and a prohibition—these were to be the parameters of his work. He had permission to begin a new Citadel wherever he thought fit, possibly wherever there was a nucleus of Christians. He was prohibited from seeking money within the Order. He had to do the best he could with money collected on the spot. Father Kolbe did do his best. That very month of May a rich Catholic gave him a small modern press for printing in Japanese characters. Father Maximilian wrote his articles in Latin, a cleric and a seminary professor translated them into Japanese. On May 25 the first number of "The Knight" appeared; its Japanese name was "Mugenzia No Seibo No Kiski". 10,000 copies were printed.

With the approval of Mgr. Haysaka, Father Kolbe climbed the hills overlooking the city in search of 5 hectares of vacant land. He found them, he bought them and he began building a new Citadel. A year later the essential buildings of the Citadel had been completed. It was inaugurated during the feast of the cherry blossoms; those amazing Japanese cherries which flower splendidly for only one week and produce rare small fruit.

Kimonos and guns

The Japan of those years was a mixture of delicate and rustling kimonos and of threatening guns. The military had a very strong hold on the country and aspired to establish a large Japanese Empire in Asia. They strove to inculcate a proud nationalistic spirit amongst all including the children.

This Japan, which looked upon every foreigner with mistrust, was quite favourable to the work of Father Kolbe and his magazine. In a short time it became the most widely circulated Catholic publication in Japan.

Volunteers began to come to the Citadel which, as at Niepokalanow had a chapel, a printing room, an electricity generator and a large meeting room. They were mainly Christians, but there were also some pagans. They were prepared to undertake labouring tasks, to help with the distribution of the review and also with the translations. Some asked for instruction in the faith, and later for baptism. Some were soon to ask to receive the habit of St. Francis.

Father Kolbe studied Japanese assiduously, and began first to speak the language and then to write it. The friars and his friends distributed the review on trams, in shops, in hospitals, in schools. Even the bonzes read it with interest. The circulation went up and up: twenty, thirty, fifty thousand copies.

But Father Kolbe's health again began to decline in a rather frightening manner. He had to give up all work.

Two or three months to live

A high fever and spitting of blood once more. The old sickness had returned. The Japanese doctors feared for his life. They advised that he return to Europe and undergo long and drastic treatment. Father Kolbe departed.

The doctors at Zakopane shook their heads when they saw him. They told him quite emphatically that he had only three months to live. Father Maximilian went to stay with his mother and in the calm atmosphere of her house he slowly recovered. Three months passed, thirty months. His health returned. "The doctors know everything", smiled Father Kolbe, "but someone up there knows much more".

He recommenced work at Niepokalanow. His native air did him good. They reappointed him director of the Citadel, and he succeeded in raising the circulation of "The Knight" to a million copies. Then he had another grand idea - an apostolate by correspondence. He invited anyone with problems, difficulties or doubts to write to him. Soon he was getting 2,000 letters a day. In the first year there were more than half a million. They all received an answer.

The sad period of Nazism

Meanwhile the Brown Shirts had been on the march for many years in Germany. The sad period of Nazism had begun. A frenzied man spoke into the microphones at German Radio stations: his name was Adolf Hitler. He looked at Poland with the practised eye of a violent thief and proclaimed to the world that this territory was vitally needed for the expansion which destiny had decreed for the "privileged race", the German race.

In Poland they said that he was only bluffing. But on August 23, 1939, Stalin of Russia and Hitler of Germany signed a nonaggression pact. There was a secret clause in that pact: Poland would be divided between Russia and Germany by a line drawn down the middle from north to south.

September 1, 1939. German armoured divisions under the command of General Guderian penetrated deep into the heart of Poland. Two thousand aircraft of the Luftwaffe bombed Warsaw and railway junctions, practically paralysing the life of the nation. France and England, which had both signed a pact of mutual assistance with Poland, declared war within the space of 48 hours. But they could do nothing against Hitler's well-oiled war machine. Poland was brought to its knees in four weeks.

At the start of the tragedy, Father Kolbe summoned together the thousand inhabitants of Niepokalanow and told them: "This is the moment of trial. We must disperse. Those who can should return to their families. The others will leave this very day for the monasteries in the east; they will be much safer there".

He remained, with fifty of his brother Franciscans.

"Poland has ceased to exist"

The wave of destruction and death hit the Citadel towards the middle of September; some buildings were destroyed by bombing; others were badly damaged. Then the Flying Squad of the Wehrmacht arrived at the gates, rifles at the level. On September 19 the remaining religious were herded into the yard, bundled into trucks, then into railway cattle-wagons and transported into the unknown.

They were taken to Amlitz in Germany. It was during the time when the "Lord of the War", Adolf Hitler, announced to an astonished world that Poland as a nation had ceased to exist.

In November, the religious were unexpectedly returned to Polish territory. They were held for a time in an abandoned Salesian College at Ostrzeszow. Then in December there came the unforeseen permission for them to return to Niepokalanow.

In the meantime a Red Cross Hospital had been set up in the buildings of the Citadel. Father Kolbe and his companions made themselves available for any need. The wounded, invalids, fugitives and persecuted Jews came to the Citadel seeking assistance.

Some of Father Kolbe's helpers, believing that the worst had passed, returned a few at a time to the Citadel to resume their work.

The Nazi invaders looked upon Niepokalanow with a certain amount of sympathy. They hoped that this rather enterprising "Father" would collaborate with them. During the twelve months of relative calm, Father Maximilian restored some of the machines to working order and asked permission to resume printing "The Knight". They granted him approval for one issue "on trial". Furthermore they offered him the privilege of becoming a German citizen (Kolbe is a German name, and indicates perhaps that his family was originally of German origin). Father Maximilian accepted the permission to go ahead with the printing, but courteously declined the "privilege".

The issue "on trial" was a great disappointment to the invaders; it contained nothing which pleased them. Permission to print a second issue never came.

Two black automobiles at the front door

1941. The lull ceased suddenly. Hitler was about to begin OPERATION BARBAROSSA, the invasion of Russia. For this great military operation, his armies needed to dispose completely of Poland and all its resources. "The Polish race," Hitler stated cynically, "is one of slaves, destined by history to serve the great German race".

The first move, in the reduction of Poland to slavery, was the elimination of the intellectual class, of all leaders and influential people who could persuade the people to offer resistance.

February 17, 1941. There was a cover of snow on the streets and on the dilapidated buildings at Niepokalanow, when two black automobiles braked sharply at the front door of the Citadel. Ivo Achtelick, the Franciscan brother in the porter's office, knew the number plates quite well: it was the Gestapo, the notorious State Police Force to which Hitler had entrusted the elimination of enemies of the Reich. He snatched the telephone and called Father Maximilian: "It's the Gestapo. They're looking for you." "I noted a quiver in his voice", Ivo Achtelick said later, "as he replied: 'What did you say?' But he controlled himself straight away and said as calmly as ever: 'I'll be down immediately, brother'".

Some minutes later, wearing his poor Franciscan habit, Father Kolbe got into one of the two automobiles. Five other Franciscans were taken away with him.

From February to May Father Maximilian was locked up in the prison at Pawiak, in cell 103. Pawiak was a clearing centre; from here prisoners were transferred to the various forced labour camps.

The Bishop protested at his arrest. The Gestapo Commander replied that it was a matter of conspiracy. Twenty Franciscans signed a petition to the German authorities, requesting that they take Father Kolbe's place; it met with a blunt refusal.

The large rosary beads and the Nazi

In cell 103, Father Kolbe had the company of a Jew and another Polish citizen. The cell was small. They took it in turns to exercise in its few square metres. The priest kept passing the large Franciscan rosary beads through his fingers. One day a Nazi officer came for inspection. He saw the habit and the cincture from which hung the Rosary beads and the crucifix. He turned purple with anger. He seized the Crucifix and yelled: "Do you believe in this?".

"Yes", the priest calmly replied.

The officer gave him a violent back-hander. Three times he repeated the question, and receiving the same answer, three times he struck the priest. Then, in typical Nazi fashion, he assaulted the priest with punches and kicks, until Father Maximilian fell to the floor. Only then did the officer go away.

The Jew and the Pole helped the priest who was bleeding profusely and whose face was swollen. He made a gesture that it was nothing and forced a smile. A guard who had witnessed the brutality and who feared other inspections, hurried to get some prison garb and asked him to take off the habit. Father Kolbe hesitated. He did not want to discard the religious dress he had worn for so many years. He then decided that it was better to do so and put on the striped jacket. He was never again to wear the habit of St. Francis.

The cell was very damp. Father Maximilian had delicate lungs and soon began to cough and to shiver with fever. They took him to the infirmary in the gaol. The infirmarians treated him with every care. When he recovered they arranged for

him to be kept in the sick bay, where he was relatively well looked after. But one day the order came for Father Kolbe to be taken back to his cell in preparation for his departure.

A train to Auschwitz

It was the end of May. All of the prisoners at Pawiak were suddenly taken out of their cells. “Hurry! Hurry!” yelled the warders. A few hundred metres away there was a cattle train. When they had all been loaded into the trucks, a corporal snapped to attention in front of a field-marshal and reported that there were 320 head aboard and that all was ready.

The murderous journey took 24 hours; a searing thirst tortured the 320 Poles locked inside the trucks. Then, on the night of May 28, the gates were noisily thrown wide open. “The darkness”, recorded a survivor, “echoed with strange orders and with that barbarous barking of Germans which, when they issue commands, seems to give vent to centuries’ old anger.”

About ten S.S. men quickly appeared. They directed the group into two parties with a minimum of gestures and words. “They decided whether each of us could do some useful work for the Reich or not”, wrote one who lived to tell the tale. “then suddenly our wives, our parents, our children were moved off. We saw them for a short time in the dim light at the other end of the platform; we did not see them again.”

Those judged “fit to work” had to run the two kilometres separating them from the camp at Auschwitz; the terrified Poles knew the place by the name of Oswiecim. As they ran, fierce dogs, sooled on by the S.S., bit at their heels.

It should be noted that to staff their extermination camps (amongst which Auschwitz, Dachau, Belsen and Mauthausen were unfortunately well-known) the Nazi hierarchy did not choose normal soldiers, but criminals released from prison, men who had been condemned as abnormal sadists and felons. From May 28, 1941, these men were the “Superiors” of Father Kolbe and his unfortunate companions.

On the main gate of the camp was a brightly illuminated inscription: “ARBEIT MACHT FREI—Work makes one free”.

Inside the camp they were stripped and herded into a large hall to be disinfected. They waited for hours, their teeth chattering.

“Suddenly” wrote a survivor, “hot water poured out from the showers. Five minutes of bliss. But shortly afterwards, four guards came in, shouting at us to move into the next room which was icy cold; here other shouting guards threw some clothes at us and gave each of us a pair of shoes with wood soles. Before we knew where we were, we found ourselves outside in the early morning cold and, barefooted and naked, with our whole outfit in our hands, we had to run to another hut, a hundred metres away. Only here we were allowed to get dressed”.

A new man 16,670

Everything was taken away from these men: clothes, shoes, hair. They even took away their names. Henceforth Father Kolbe would be known as 16,670. For the remainder of his life he was to have this number tattooed on his left arm.

At Auschwitz it was work, work with a devilish monotonous rhythm. Very early in the morning before dawn there was the call “Wstawac”—(“Get up”). Pandemonium followed. They had five minutes to get up, dress, and attend to their toilet because then grey pieces of “brot” (bread) were distributed. Anyone who arrived late missed out and suffered the pangs of hunger until midday.

They worked from dawn to dusk. They marched out briskly. Coming home they almost ran. It was a tragic farce to see those long columns of men dressed in prison stripes returning at the double in strict formation whilst an absurd band made up of other men in prison garb played brisk marches in the large square of the camp.

Down below, beyond the barracks, the tall chimney of the crematorium ovens was always smoking. Any one who succumbed to fatigue, who did not fight for his rations, who was slow in running and fell by the wayside knew that he would finish up there. He would be thrown on to a mine-cart, dead or dying it did not matter. The cart would slip down

the rails to the mouth of the oven. Colonel Fritsch, the camp commandant, would tell them, with a smile on his face: “The only way you’ll leave here is through that chimney”.

Father Kolbe was assigned to Block 17, reserved especially for priests whom Fritsch defined as “useless beings and the parasites of society”. Father Maximilian was chained to a cart with other Polish priests to pull very heavy loads of gravel for the construction of the boundary wall of the crematorium. At ten-metre distances along the route of the carts there was a gaoler armed with a stick to beat them; they had to run past to avoid being hit.

During the night a shadow over Block 17

When the boundary wall had been completed, Krott, the blunt, cruel Nazi commander of Block 17 gave the prisoners another job. They had to pull down trees, tear off the branches, bundle them together and transport them, all by hand. Father Kolbe, often bleeding as a result of the blows of the guards, staggered along the uneven path under the weight of an increasingly heavy load. But, despite all this, there was peace in the depth of his soul. He knew that his Citadel had been destroyed, he knew that his Army had been scattered by the tremendous whirlwind of war, that all his work had been burnt in the bombing. But he knew that God is stronger than evil, that after the darkness the light would shine again. He clung strongly to this certainty even although it seemed a forlorn hope. It did not matter if he would no longer be there. The Kingdom of God would reign on earth, in justice and peace. Others would walk before the face of the Lord, to prepare His way; others chosen by Him.

One day when the tree trunk loaded on to his shoulders was far too heavy, Father Kolbe fell to the ground, like Christ under the weight of the Cross. And Nazi Krott, imitating the cruelty of the Roman guards to perfection, punched and kicked him. “I’ll teach you to work, you priest of the devil!” He did not crucify him, but stretched him across the trunk and gave him fifty strokes of the lash. When Christ was scourged He received only 35 strokes from his gaolers, the maximum permitted by the law.

The other priests passing by saw him lying motionless in a pool of blood and covered him with green branches. They thought he was dead.

But during the night, a shadow staggered and dragged itself into Block 17. It was he! He had managed to drag himself to his own palliase in pitch darkness! Next morning he was swollen with bruises and running a high temperature. They took him to the sick bay, the waiting room of death.

In his delirium this prisoner did not curse, did not cry out in terror; he prayed, he spoke to God. And those who were waiting for death knew thereby that a priest had joined them.

Later his fever abated, but he could not move from his palliase; however, human skeletons dragged themselves towards him seeking a word of hope, of faith. He reconciled to God many of these people without hope.

Doctor Sternler, a survivor who had learnt to hate everything and everybody in Auschwitz, spent a night with his hand in the hands of Father Kolbe, who whispered to him: “Hatred builds nothing. It is love which saves”.

Miraculously the fever left him, and his wounds closed up. Father Maximilian was transferred to Block 12, amongst the invalids. This Block was greatly feared: they were on half-rations and there was no medication; even small cuts turned septic. Father Kolbe found words of comfort also for these unfortunate companions. He made bearable terrible sufferings.

A prisoner has escaped

July 20. Number 16,670 was transferred to Block 14: agricultural work. It was harvest time. The men were taken a long way out to work in the fields. One of the prisoners in an act of desperation tried to escape by hiding in the crop.

That evening at roll-call, one prisoner did not answer. All of those in Block 14 shuddered. One of the rules at Auschwitz, always carried out, was that: “For every escapee, ten prisoners would pay with their lives”.

The prisoners in Block 14 were kept standing rigidly to attention. The sun was setting in a darkened sky. Mess time came round and the orderlies brought in the scanty rations; the soldiers tipped them into the drains bordering the clearing. The prisoners would go hungry.

They remained at attention, immovable, despite their tiredness after a hard day in the fields. It became dark. The night wore on and finally they were permitted to go into their barracks.

When they were called next morning, the escapee had still not returned. All, without exception, were required to stand at attention from dawn until three in the afternoon under a burning July sun. Some fainted. They were taken away.

Rations were brought out at three o'clock. They were allowed half an hour to eat their meal. Then it was standing at attention again until evening.

It was about seven o'clock when Fritsch, the camp commandant, arrived with his usual train of hangers-on. He began to shout in German and his words were heard in deadly silence. "The escapee," he ended angrily, "has not been found. Ten of you will pay for it with your lives".

Deleted from the list of the living

He walked down the line of prisoners. He lifted his arm and pointed with his finger: "This one. That one." An assistant followed him with a list of the prisoners and marked those to be deleted from the living. The tenth was a Polish sergeant Francis Gajowniczek. Overcome with desperation he cried out: "My wife—my children".

At that very moment a man stepped out of the ranks of those who had been spared. It was an act that could cost him his life. The Germans instinctively reached for their revolvers. Fritsch took a step backwards and yelled: "What does this Polish pig want? Who is he?"

"I am a Catholic Priest," answered Father Kolbe in perfect German, "and I ask permission to take the place of that prisoner". He pointed to Sergeant Gajowniczek.

Fritsch hesitated for a split second. Then he turned to Gajowniczek and with a "Get back there" motioned to him to join the ranks of the living. Thunderstruck he scampered back. The assistant checked through the list for the number of Father Kolbe and crossed it off.

There was a sharp command: "Hand in your shoes". One who was to die did not need them; the Germans, instead, wanted them for other prisoners. The next order addressed to the ten condemned men was: "Left turn", and they were marched off to the "hunger bunker". It was underground and those who were condemned to die were imprisoned there in darkness without food or water.

Four injections of phenic acid

A guard pushed them inside and before he closed and locked the heavy door, he said laughingly: "You will wither away like so many tulips".

Bruno Borgowiec was a Polish interpreter who had to go down every day with the German guards to check the state of the dying. He said later: "Previously those condemned men had always been in a "state of despair; this time even the German warders were amazed by what they saw. The condemned men were gathered around Father Kolbe, and at intervals sang Polish hymns to the Madonna. More than once the guards had to tell them to be quiet because condemned people in other cells were joining in".

The voices became weaker day by day. As a man died he was carted away. Father Maximilian comforted them in their last moments, and closed their eyes in death. With an amazing show of will-power, he remained either standing or on his knees. His face remained calm and his blue eyes amazingly serene. One of the warders was quite disturbed one day and yelled at him: "Don't look at me like that, you priest of the devil".

After two weeks Father Kolbe was still alive, along with three other prisoners. The cell was needed for other victims and Fritsch ordered that "they be finished off".

It was August 14, the vigil of the feast of the Assumption of Our Lady. At midday Bock, a German nursing orderly, entered the cell. He went to the four prisoners in turn and into the arm of each he injected deadly phenic acid. Father Kolbe was leaning against the wall praying. As Bock approached he extended his arm.

Maximilian Kolbe's body was thrown into the furnace along with those of his companions. His ashes, mixed with those of countless other victims, were scattered over the countryside near Auschwitz. Every spring it is covered with white flowers and red flowers.
