



Catholic Underground

KAROL ENJOYED HIS FIRST YEAR OF STUDY AT JAGIELLONIAN. But before he was able to start his second year, he found his university days brought to a sudden halt. The roar of airplanes over Poland on the morning of September 1, 1939, signaled the change in his life.

Although the German armies were advancing, Karol thought that there was perhaps still time to escape. The air raids had come in from the north, the south and the west, so he and his father joined the tens of thousands of Polish refugees streaming toward the east. The trek required much travel on foot, but sometimes the Wojtylas were able to secure a ride on a truck, a bus or even a horse cart.

The crossing was very wearying for Karol, Sr., and Lolek began to fear that his father wouldn't make it to the end.

Finally, after a more than ninety-mile journey, the Wojtylas turned back. Karol, Sr., was indeed worn out. Additionally, a secret pact made three weeks earlier between Moscow and Berlin allowed the Soviet Union to steamroll into Poland in a surprise invasion from the east, so there was nowhere left to run.¹

POLAND NO MORE

“The Pole has no rights whatsoever. His only obligation is to obey what we tell him.” German Governor-General Hans Frank issued these words to his officers as he set up base in Kraków. He was plain about the Nazis’ ultimate plan: “[Our] major goal... is to finish off as speedily as possible all trouble-making politicians, priests, and leaders... [T]housands of so-called important Poles will have to pay with their lives... [and] the Polish nation is never again... to offer resistance. Every vestige of Polish culture is to be eliminated. The Poles... will work. They will eat little. And in the end they will die out. There will never again be a Poland.”²

To outsiders this evil plan seemed to be working. By October 5 Nazi troops had marched victoriously into Warsaw as Adolf Hitler watched from a platform erected for the occasion. But by some miracle, the members of the Polish government had been able to escape into Romania. Poland never officially surrendered to Germany.

Although Poland would suffer the oppression, torture and great loss of life of its people over the next six years, the country would indeed survive, and without an army. It didn’t need one. For even as the Nazis hung their red, white and black flags at Wawel Cathedral, underneath the flapping

swastikas one could read the inscription over the doorway: "If God is for us, who can be against us?"

God's servants, however, would be major targets of the Nazis, who hoped to destroy Poland by attacking its culture. The Roman Catholic faith was a major aspect of Poland's identity, and no Catholic was safe. A priest could be shot for leading a procession around his own church or for hearing confession in Polish instead of in German.

Before the war was over, 5,000 priests and nuns would be sent to concentration camps, and nearly 3,000 of them would die there. A priest from Kraków, Father Piotr Dańkowski, died in Auschwitz with a log tied to his shoulders on Good Friday of 1942. Shortly afterward a Salesian, Father Józef Kowalski, would also die in Auschwitz, beaten and drowned in feces for refusing to grind his rosary beads under his foot.³

The last Mass Archbishop Sapięha was allowed to celebrate was on October 29, 1939. After that, he and the other priests and staff were officially turned out of the cathedral, with the exception of an elderly priest and Father Figlewicz. These two priests were allowed to celebrate Mass on Wednesday and Sunday mornings, as long as they were under German guard and no additional worshippers attended. Bit by bit the Nazis were trying to dismantle the Catholic Church.

Academia fared no better. In November 1939, when the SS called all professors and university staff members to a lecture at Jagiellonian, 184 academics showed up only to be ambushed by a Nazi squad. The soldiers entered Szujski Hall, arrested everyone and shipped them off to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp, where most of them would die.

By 1942 Jagiellonian University would rise from the ashes and continue to operate as a full university in secret. A faculty of 136 professors defiantly risked death by teaching 800 students in clandestine classes held in private homes.

Such intellectual stimulation was a great support to Lolek and in fact helped him maintain his sanity during that difficult time. He wrote to a friend: "I surround myself with books, I put up fortifications of Art and Learning. I work. . . . I read, write, learn, pray, and fight within myself. Sometimes I feel horrible pressure, sadness, depression, evil. Sometimes I almost glean the dawn. . . ."4

Lolek also busied himself with a new favorite literary pursuit, playwriting. He wrote three plays in the year that followed, and as one can tell by their eponymous titles, they were versions of the biblical stories of David, Job and Jeremiah set during pivotal times in Polish history. *Job* was set in the present Nazi occupation. This modern Job suffered as much as the one in the scriptural version, and the play ended on the same notes of hope, resurrection and renewal.

THE GIFT OF CARMEL

It is said that when the student is ready, the master appears. In Lolek's case it was Jan Leopold Tyranowski who arrived to mentor him. A deeply spiritual layman whom John Paul II would later describe as "really saintly,"5 Tyranowski was trained as an accountant but chose to work as a clerk in his father's tailor shop on Różana Street. This work provided him with quiet and contemplative moments in which he could develop his inner life.

The Salesian Fathers who ran the church in Debniki provided another way for Tyranowski to express his spirituality. The priests had run a few retreats for townspeople who were in their twenties and thirties. In order to build on the success of those gatherings, they hoped to start a prayer circle called “Living Rosary” for young people, and they needed someone to lead it. Tyranowski eagerly volunteered, and the Salesians accepted with gratitude, but there were some who questioned their decision. Tyranowski, it turned out, was not a popular figure in Debniki. In fact, he was generally looked upon as an odd and unpleasant person, being unattractive in appearance, awkward in expression and archaic in his catechism.

But the Living Rosary was given the green light, and Tyranowski vigorously stepped on the gas. His recruiting tactics left much to be desired. In his zeal to find members for the group, he would walk up to people and interrogate them on their spirituality. Surprisingly, this managed to pique the interest of enough people, including a friend of Karol, who then invited Karol to accompany him to a meeting one Saturday night. Accepting that invitation would change his life.

Tyranowski was immediately fond of Karol. And despite Tyranowski’s ability to turn people off, Karol found himself drawn to the intensely spiritual man—perhaps because he was both prayerful and ascetic, like Karol’s father. The young man hungrily received all the spirituality Tyranowski could give him. And give Tyranowski did.

Tyranowski met with Living Rosary members individually for counsel, basing his spiritual direction on the teachings of the Carmelite mystics Saint Teresa of Avila and Saint John of the Cross. Thanks to this influence, Carmelite spirituality

would become the backbone of Karol's prayer life and would support him for the rest of his life.

The impact that Saints Teresa and John have had on the Roman Catholic Church is immeasurable. The Vatican recognized this by declaring them both "doctors of the Church." The two Spaniards were contemporaries—although Teresa was a good twenty years older than John—and lived at the time of the Inquisition. They knew each other personally and enjoyed a spiritual camaraderie, recognizing in each other the same call to lead the Carmelite order—and all Catholics, really—to a more intimate relationship with God through contemplative prayer. Indeed, they were the standard-bearers of a prayer renaissance, teaching that quiet recollection in the presence of God was the path all were called to follow, be one a priest, a monk or a layperson. Such prayer, they said, would nurture all aspects of a person's life.

Both saints wrote a number of books, but Karol was particularly inspired by the works of Saint John. This saint, when writing about contemplative prayer, was blessed with the ability to produce either a scholarly treatise or a deeply mystical poem. His most famous poem, "The Dark Night of the Soul," which was based on the love poetry of the Song of Songs, describes finding union with God even in the darkness of desolation.

Exposure to both this Spanish saint and his present-day Polish advocate affected Karol's soul to an immeasurable degree. In fact, Tyranowski's influence was so strong that years later Pope John Paul II admitted, "I don't know whether it is to him that I owe my priesthood calling, but... it was born within his climate."⁶

A ROCK AMONG STONES

By the fall of 1940, all young Polish men were suspect to the Nazis. Those who were strong and healthy—and eventually even those who were not—were deported to Germany and forced to work in labor camps. In order to avoid that scenario, Karol had to find work in an industry that could be considered essential to the German war effort. He also needed to support himself and his father, as the Nazis had stopped payments of the lieutenant's pension. So the young Karol signed up to work at the Solvay chemical company's limestone quarry at Zakrzówek, which was only about a half-hour walk from where he lived in Debniki.

Throughout the bitter winter season, dressed in his "uniform" of oil-splashed and dust-caked denim, a jacket and large clogs, Karol made his daily descent into the pit for the backbreaking work of splitting calcinated rock. This rock was used to make caustic soda, which in turn was used to make explosives. The workday started early, and there was one fifteen-minute break for a breakfast that the workers were expected to provide for themselves. No lunch—neither the food nor the time to eat it—was provided.

Karol, his friend Juliusz Kydryński and the other students who worked with them managed to take turns sneaking off once or twice a day to warm themselves by the stove in the managers' hut. The managers were also Poles, and they recognized that many of their new workers were displaced university students who were not used to the hard physical labor of breaking up stone and shoveling it into small tramcars. Sympathetic to their plight, the managers often went out of their way to make the work easier if they could get away with

it, such as reducing the quotas expected at the end of the workday.

Karol was not assigned the heaviest manual labor, and he was eventually made an assistant to Franciszek Labuś, the rock-blaster. This job carried a challenge all its own: working with dynamite. The danger of the explosive was made especially clear to Karol when he witnessed the death of one of his coworkers in a blast gone wrong. Karol watched as the dead body was laid out on the gravel and the man's wife called. He witnessed her frantic arrival at the quarry as well as the equally heartbreaking arrival of her son, who rushed over straight from school.

This coworker had been angry about the injustice of his situation in life. In fact, anger was ever-present at the quarry, pervading the air like so much dust. But Karol did not judge this emotion. He too was admittedly angry, but he could see beyond it to a deeper meaning. By working through the anger, he believed, a man could grow spiritually. He reflected about this time and again in his poetry of the period:

The stone yields you its strength,
and man matures through work
which inspires him to difficult good.⁷

And

... [I]n man grows the equilibrium
which love learns through anger.⁸

Karol saw everything not just with his physical eyes but also through the mystical lens of contemplative prayer. Contemplative prayer had become his weapon against bitterness;

it was the saving grace that would help him see beyond the obvious and offer him glimpses of the spiritual truths behind it. He would often record his insights in the form of poetry, as mystical understanding is not easily expressed in prose.

Without this prayer and poetry, Karol's deep anger at the unfairness of the war—and of the quarry work in particular—might have gotten the better of him. Instead he came to know, in a deeply personal way, the dignity of manual labor and of the human person made in the image of God. He grew in his appreciation of his coworkers—and of himself.

Karol also understood that the quarry was a training ground of sorts for him. He realized that he was there for a reason and that God could use this experience to make him a better man. Did he know that the Lord himself was mining a rock from that quarry—a rock upon which he would continue to build and fortify his Church? One poem hints at just that:

... [H]is own grandeur he does not know how to name.

No, not just hands drooping with the hammer's weight,
 not the taut torso, muscles shaping their own style,
 but thought informing his work,
 deep, knotted in wrinkles on his brow,
 and over his head, joined in a sharp arc, shoulders and
 veins vaulted.

So for a moment he is a Gothic building
 cut by a vertical thought born in the eyes.
 No, not a profile alone,
 not a mere figure between God and the stone,
 sentenced to grandeur and error.⁹