

“No one has greater love than this...” – St. Maximilian Kolbe

In July 1941, three prisoners appeared to have escaped from the camp; as a result, the Deputy Commander of Auschwitz ordered 10 men to be chosen to be starved to death in an underground bunker.

When one of the selected men Franciszek Gajowniczek heard he was selected, he cried out “My wife! My children!” At this point, Kolbe volunteered to take his place.

The Nazi commander replied, “What does this Polish pig want?”

Father Kolbe pointed with his hand to the condemned Franciszek Gajowniczek and repeated: “I am a Catholic priest from Poland; I would like to take his place because he has a wife and children.”

Rather surprised, the commander accepted Kolbe in place of Gajowniczek. Gajowniczek later 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. Is this some dream?”

I was put back into my place without having had time to say anything to Maximilian Kolbe. I was saved. And I owe to him the fact that I could tell you all this. The news quickly spread all round the camp. It was the first and the last time that such an incident happened in the whole history of Auschwitz.”

Franciszek Gajowniczek would miraculously survive Auschwitz, and would later be present at Kolbe’s canonisation in 1971.

The men were led away to the underground bunker where they were to be starved to death. It is said that in the bunker, Kolbe would lead the men in prayer and singing hymns to Mary. When the guards checked the cell, Kolbe could be seen praying in the middle. Bruno Borgowiec, a Polish prisoner who was charged with serving the prisoner later gave a report of what he saw:

“The ten condemned to death went through terrible days. From the underground cell in which they were shut up there continually arose the echo of prayers and canticles. The man in charge of emptying the buckets of urine found them always empty. Thirst drove the prisoners to drink the contents. Since they had grown very weak, prayers were now only whispered. At every

inspection, when almost all the others were now lying on the floor, Father Kolbe was seen kneeling or standing in the centre as he looked cheerfully in the face of the SS men.

Father Kolbe never asked for anything and did not complain, rather he encouraged the others, saying that the fugitive might be found and then they would all be freed. One of the SS guards remarked: this priest is really a great man. We have never seen anyone like him..."

After two weeks, nearly all the prisoners, except Kolbe had died due to dehydration and starvation. Because the guards wanted the cell emptied, the remaining prisoners and Kolbe were executed with a lethal injection. Those present say he calmly accepted death, lifting up his arm. His remains were unceremoniously cremated on 15 August.

The deed and courage of Maximilian Kolbe spread around the Auschwitz prisoners, offering a rare glimpse of light and human dignity in the face of extreme cruelty. After the war, his reputation grew and he became symbolic of courageous dignity.

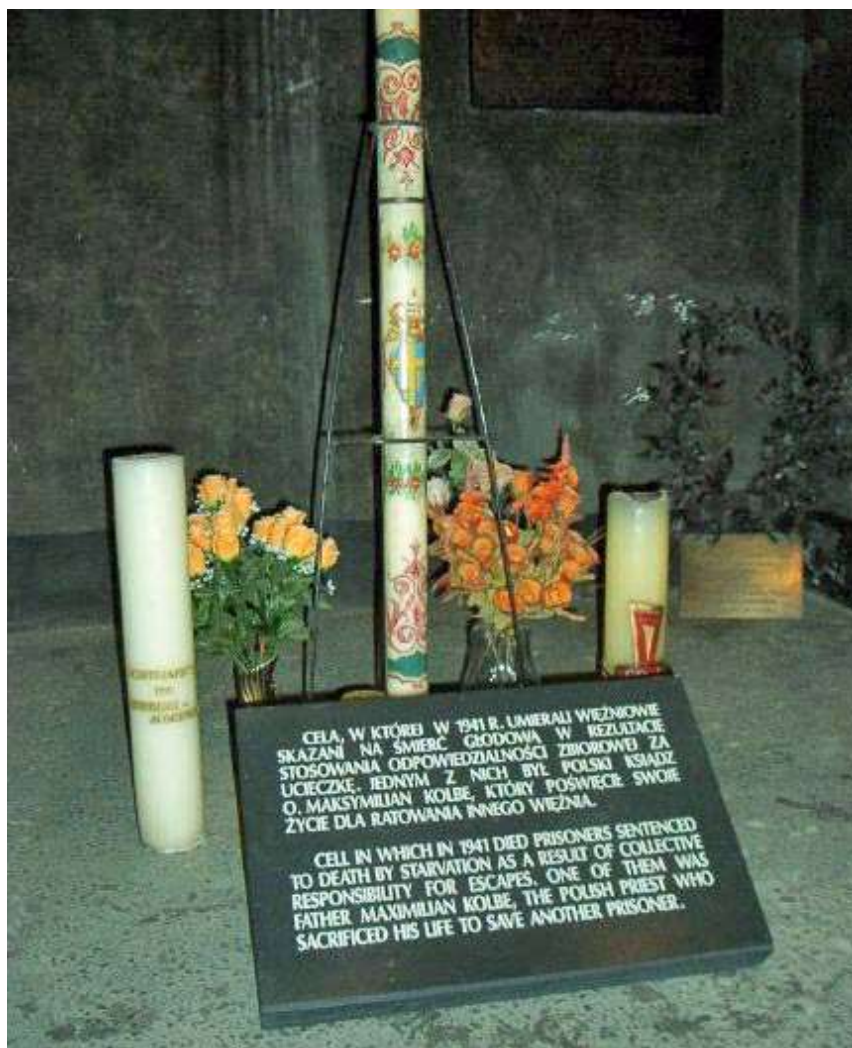


Photo of cell where Kolbe was executed

Kolbe was beatified as Confessor of the Faith in 1971. He was canonised as a martyr by [Pope John Paul II](#) (who himself lived through the German occupation of Poland) in 1981.

Pope John Paul II decided that Kolbe should be recognised as a martyr because the systematic hatred of the Nazi regime was inherently an act of hatred against religious faith, meaning Kolbe's death equated to martyrdom.

At his canonisation, in 1982 Pope John Paul II said:

“Maximilian did not die but gave his life ... for his brother.”

What happened to **Franciszek Gajowniczek**?

After World War II

Gajowniczek was a guest of Pope Paul VI in the Vatican, when Maximilian Kolbe was beatified for his martyrdom on 17 October 1971. In 1972, *Time* magazine reported that over 150,000 people made a pilgrimage to Auschwitz to honor the anniversary of Maximilian's beatification. One of the first to speak was Gajowniczek, who declared "I want to express my thanks, for the gift of life."^[3] His wife, Helena, died in 1977.^[3] Gajowniczek was in the Vatican again as a guest of Pope John Paul II when Maximilian Kolbe was canonized by him on 10 October 1982.^{[2][3]}

In 1994, Gajowniczek visited the St. Maximilian Kolbe Catholic Church of Houston, where he told his translator Chaplain Thaddeus Horbowy that "so long as he ... has breath in his lungs, he would consider it his duty to tell people about the heroic act of love by Maximilian Kolbe." Gajowniczek died in the city of Brzeg on 13 March 1995 at the age of 93.^[2] He was buried at a convent cemetery in Niepokalanów,^[2] 53 years after having his life saved by Kolbe. He was survived by his second wife, Janina.^[3]