

Servants of God John Świerc and eight Companions Martyrs. Pastors who gave their lives

Extremist ideologies, that is, ideas raised to the rank of absolute truths, always bring suffering and death when they seek to impose themselves at any cost on those who do not accept them. Sometimes it is enough to belong to a nation or social group to suffer the consequences. This is the case of the Polish Salesian martyrs presented in this article.

Nine Polish Salesian priests also belong to the number of victims of Nazism, Servants of God Fr Jan Świerc and his 8 Companions: Fr Ignacy Antonowicz, Fr Karol Gołda, Fr Włodzimierz Szembek, Fr Franciszek Harazim, Fr Ludwik Mroczek, Fr Ignacy Dobiasz, Fr Kazimierz Wojciechowski and Fr Franciszek Miśka, who were killed *in odium fidei* in the Nazi death camps in 1941–1942. As priests, all the Servants of God were engaged in Poland in various pastoral and governmental activities and in teaching. They were completely uninvolved in the political tensions that agitated Poland during the wartime occupation. Nevertheless, they were arrested and martyred *in odium fidei* for the very fact of being Catholic priests.

The strength and serene perseverance preserved by the Servants of God in carrying out their priestly ministry even during their imprisonment represented a real act of defiance for the Nazis: although exhausted by humiliation and torture, in defiance of any prohibition, the Servants of God were guardians to the end of the souls entrusted to them and showed themselves ready, despite human weakness, to accept death with God and for God.

The concentration camp at Auschwitz, known to all as the death camp, and the camp at Dachau for Fr Miśka, thus became places of priestly commitment for these Salesian priests: Fr Jan Świerc and 8 companions responded to the denial of human

dignity and life, by offering the power of grace and the hope of eternity through the sacraments. They welcomed many fellow prisoners, sustained them through the Eucharist and confession and prepared them for a peaceful death. This service was not infrequently rendered in hiding, taking advantage of the darkness of the night and under the constant and pressing threat of severe punishment or more often death.

The Servants of God, as true disciples of Jesus, never uttered words of scorn or hatred towards their persecutors. Arrested, beaten, humiliated in their human and priestly dignity, they offered their suffering to God and remained faithful to the end, certain that whoever places everything before the divine will is not disappointed. Their inner serenity and their demeanour, which they showed even at the hour of death, were so extraordinary that they left their torturers astonished, and in some cases outraged.

Here are their biographical profiles.

Fr Ignacy Antonowicz

Ignacy Antonowicz was born in 1890 in Więśławice, Włocławek County, north-central Poland. In 1901 he entered the Salesian Secondary School in Oświęcim, where he remained until 1905. Between 1905 and 1906 he completed his novitiate in Daszawa. He made his perpetual profession in August 1909 in Italy, in Lanzo Torinese. He was ordained a priest on 22 April 1916 in Rome. Fr Ignacy taught dogmatics at the Theological Studentate in Foglizzo (Turin) between 1916 and 1917. In 1919, during the Russo-Polish War, he was a military chaplain in the Polish army. Between 1919 and 1920 he was in Krakow as a professor in the Theological Studentate. On 1 July 1934 he was appointed councillor of the Polish Province of St Hyacinth in Krakow until the end of 1936. In 1936 he took up the post as Rector of the Salesian Immaculate Conception Theological Studentate in Krakow, which he held until his arrest on 23 May 1941. He

was detained for a month in the Montelupich prison in Cracow, then taken to the concentration camp at Oświęcim. He was killed on 21 July 1941. He was 51 years old, with 34 years of religious profession and 25 years of priesthood.



Fr Karol Golda

Karol Golda was born on 23 December 1914 in Tychy, Upper Silesia. After finishing fourth grade, he moved to the Bolesław Chrobry Secondary School in Pszczyna. He attended sixth grade at the Salesian school in Oświęcim. In June 1931 he went to the House in Czerwińsk to begin his novitiate. On 15 January 1937 he made his perpetual religious profession in Rome. On 18 December 1938 he was ordained a priest in Rome, where he stayed for a further six months to obtain a Licentiate in Theology. In July 1939 he returned to Poland. The Second World War broke out and Fr Karol went to Silesia in October 1939 and then to Oświęcim where he stayed, as the occupying authorities did not allow him to travel to Italy. Fr Karol Golda was entrusted with teaching theology at the Salesian Institute in Oświęcim and was appointed Prefect of Studies there. He was arrested by Gestapo officials on 31 December 1941 and killed on 14 May 1942, after only three and a half years of priesthood.



Fr Włodzimierz Szembek

The Servant of God Fr Włodzimierz Szembek, son of Count Zygmunt and Klementyna of the Dzieduszycki family, was born on 22 April 1883 in Poręba Żegoty, near Cracow. In 1907, he graduated from the Jagiellonian University in Krakow with a

degree in agricultural engineering. For about twenty years he was involved in the administration of his mother's estates and in the lay apostolate. When he turned 40, the Servant of God's religious vocation came to maturity. On 4 February 1928 he entered the aspirantate in Oświęcim. At the end of 1928 he began his novitiate in Czerwińsk. He made his religious profession on 10 August 1929. On 3 June 1934 he received priestly ordination in Cracow. On 9 July 1942 he was arrested by the Gestapo and taken to Nowy Targ. The following 19 August he was taken to Auschwitz concentration camp, where he died on 7 September 1942, exhausted by suffering and as a result of the mistreatment he had endured. He was 59 years of age, 13 of profession and 9 of priesthood.



Fr Franciszek Harazim

Franciszek Ludwik Harazim was born on 22 August 1885 in Osiny, Rybnik district in Silesia. He attended primary school first in Baranowicze, then in Osiny. In 1901, he entered the Salesian Institute in Oświęcim to attend secondary school there. He completed his novitiate in Daszawa in 1905/1906. On 24 March 1910 he made his perpetual vows. He was ordained a priest in Ivrea on 29 May 1915. Between 1915 and 1916 he taught at the Oświęcim High School, of which he was appointed headmaster between 1916 and 1918. In the years 1918-1920 he taught philosophy in the Salesian major seminary in Cracow (Łosiówka). From 1922-1927 the Servant of God held the post of headmaster at the Salesian High School in Aleksandrów Kujawski. In 1927 he returned again to the major seminary in Krakow as a councillor, teacher and educator of clerics. In July 1938 Fr Franciszek was appointed professor at the Krakow-Łosiówka house. He was arrested by the Gestapo in Krakow on 23 May 1941. He was first taken to Konfederacka Street and then, together with the other confreres, to Montelupich Prison. A

month later, on 26 June 1941, he was taken to Auschwitz concentration camp. He was killed on 27 June 1941 on the famous Ghiaione. He had not yet turned 56 years of age: of these 34 were of religious profession and 26 of priesthood.



Fr Ludwik Mroczek

Ludwik Mroczek was born in Kęty (Kraków) on 11 August 1905. In 1917, after attending school in Kęty, he was admitted to the Salesian institute in Oświęcim where he completed his secondary school studies. He did his novitiate in Klecza Dolna completing this on 7 August 1922. He made his perpetual vows on 14 July 1928 in Oświęcim. In Przemyśl he received priestly ordination on 25 June 1933. Ordained a priest, he worked in Oświęcim (in 1933), in Lvov (in 1934), in Przemyśl (in 1934 and 1938/39), in Skawa (in 1936/37), in Częstochowa (in 1939). On 22 May 1941, as soon as he had finished celebrating Mass, he was arrested and transferred with other confreres to the concentration camp at Oświęcim. Here he died on 5 January 1942: he was 36 years old, 18 years of religious profession and 8 years of priesthood.



Fr Jan Świerc

Jan Świerc was born in Królewska Huta (today Chorzów, in Upper Silesia) on 29th April 1877. He completed his secondary school studies at Valsalice, Turin. Between 1897 and 1898 he did his novitiate in Ivrea. Here he took his perpetual vows on 3 October 1899. On 6 June 1903 he was ordained a priest in Turin. In 1911 he was appointed Rector of the Krakow House by the then Rector Major Fr Paul Albera. From September 1911 to

April 1918, he was Rector of the Lubomirski Institute in Krakow. In 1924, for a period of seven months, he was engaged as a missionary in the Americas. From November 1925 to October 1934, he was Rector and Parish Priest in Przemyśl. On 15 August 1934 he was appointed Rector of the Lviv House. In July 1938 he took up the post as Rector and Parish Priest of the house at 6 Konfederacka Street in Krakow from 1938-1941. On 23 May 1941 he was arrested by the Gestapo together with other confreres and taken to prison in Montelupich. On 26 June 1941 he was transferred to the Auschwitz concentration camp and, after just one day, he was killed: he was 64 years old, 42 years of religious profession and 38 years of priesthood.



Fr Ignacy Dobiasz

Ignacy Dobiasz was born in Ciechowice (Upper Silesia) on 14th January 1880. Having completed primary school, in May 1894 he went to Italy, to Turin Valsalice, to do his secondary school studies there. On 16 August 1898 he entered the Salesian novitiate in Ivrea. He made his perpetual vows at San Benigno Canavese on 21 September 1903. He completed his philosophical and theological studies at San Benigno Canavese and at Foglizzo between 1904 and 1908. On 28 June 1908 he was ordained a priest in Foglizzo. He then returned to Poland: he carried out his pedagogical and pastoral activities in Oświęcim (in 1908, 1910, 1921 and 1923), in Daszawa (in 1909), in Przemyśl (1912-1914) and in Krakow (between 1916 and 1920 and in 1922). In 1931 he was in Warsaw as Vice-Rector. In November 1934 he went to Krakow where he remained as confessor and assistant parish priest. Here he was arrested together with other Salesian confreres on 23 May 1941. After a short detention in the prison in Montelupich, he was deported to the concentration camp in Auschwitz. On 27 June 1941, he died of ill-treatment and inhuman labour. He was 61 years of age, 40

years of profession and 32 years of priesthood.



Fr Kazimierz Wojciechowski

Kazimierz Wojciechowski was born in Jasło (Galicia) on 16 August 1904. Orphaned by his father when he was only five years old, he was taken into the institute of Prince Lubomirski in Cracow. He began secondary school in 1916 at the Salesian Institute in Oświęcim. In 1920 he began his novitiate in Klecza Dolna. He made his perpetual vows on 2nd May 1928 in Oświęcim. Between 1924 and 1925 he taught music and mathematics in Łąd. On 19th May 1935 he was ordained a priest in Cracow. In 1935-1936 he was in Daszawa and in Cracow, where he taught religion and was appointed director of the oratory and of the Catholic Youth Association. The Servant of God was arrested in Krakow on 23 May 1941 with other Salesian confreres. On 26 June 1941 he was deported to Auschwitz concentration camp where, after just one day, he was killed. He was 37 years of age, 19 of profession and 6 of priesthood.



Fr Franciszek Miśka

Franciszek Miśka was born in Swierczyniec (Upper Silesia) on 5 December 1898. He completed his secondary schooling at the Salesian Institute in Oświęcim. He entered the novitiate in Pleszów in 1916. He made his perpetual profession in Oświęcim on 25 July 1923. He completed his theological studies in Turin-Crocetta. He was ordained a priest on 10 July 1927 in Turin. He then returned to Poland. In 1929 he was appointed counsellor and catechist at the orphanage in Przemyśl. In 1931 and for the next five years he was in Jaciążek as the Rector.

In 1936 he was appointed parish priest of the parish of Łąd. In 1941 he became Rector of the house of the Sons of Mary and parish priest of Łąd. On 6 January 1941, the Salesian institute in Łąd was transformed by the Gestapo into a prison for priests of the diocese of Włocławek and Gniezno-Poznań. Fr Franciszek was entrusted by the German authorities with the task of maintaining order and providing for the prisoners. For unspecified reasons he was transferred several times to Inowrocław and brutally tortured there. On 30 October 1941, the Servant of God was transported to Dachau concentration camp (Germany). Here, subjected to forced labour and inhuman living conditions, he died on 30 May 1942, the day of the Most Holy Trinity, in the camp's barracks hospital. He was 43 years old, almost 25 years of religious profession and almost 15 years of priesthood.



The reputation for holiness and martyrdom of the Servants of God Fr Jan Świerc and 8 Companions, although hindered during the communist period, spread as soon as they died and is still alive today. They were considered to be exemplary priests, dedicated to pastoral work and works of charity, warm and friendly, always available, interested in giving glory only to God, for whose sake they were faithful even to the shedding of their blood.

On 28 March 2023, the Historical Consultors of the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints cast affirmative votes on the *Positio super martyrio* of the Servants of God John Świerc and VIII Companions, Professed Priests of the Society of St Francis de Sales, who were killed in *odium fidei* in the Nazi death camps in the years 1941-1942. We pray that they will be raised to the honours of the altars as soon as possible.

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