

Ludwik Wrodarczyk, O.M.I.

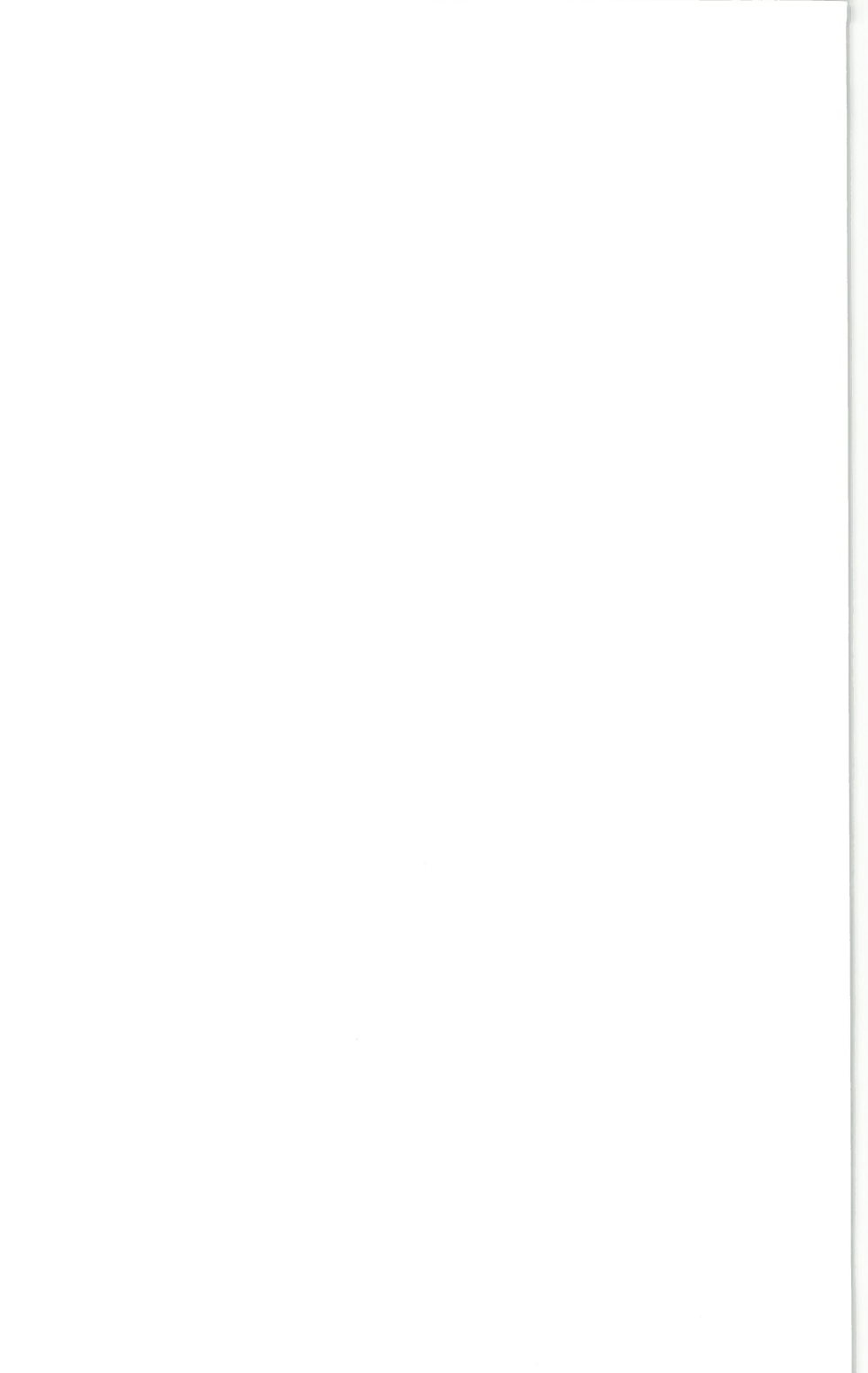
1907 - 1943

AUGUSTYN
MIODEK, O.M.I.



 OBLATE
HERITAGE

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“If Only For an Hour”

Ludwik Wrodarczyk, O.M.I.
1907-1943

Fr. Augustyn Miodek, O.M.I.

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Father Ludwik Wrodarczyk, O.M.I.

1907 - 1943

Ludwik Wrodarczyk was born in Radzionkow in Upper Silesia, the second child of very industrious parents. The people of Silesia are known to this day for their piety. The inhabitants of Radzionkow including the Wrodarczyk family were no exception. This was how Father Jozef Knosala, long-time pastor of Radzionkow and a historian in his own right, appraised his parish where Father Ludwik Wrodarczyk was born on August 25, 1907.

Ludwik's parents Karol and Justyna were married in St. Wojciech church (named after Poland's first bishop and martyr) in Radzionkow on July 13, 1903. Justyna's brother, Fr. Franciszek Wrodarczyk, a missionary priest from the Lazarite order in Cracow presided over the wedding ceremony. After a year's happily married life, Karol and Justyna became the parents in 1904 of a baby girl whom they named Helena. Three years later, on August 25, 1907, a baby boy was born to them at 10:00 p.m., as was noted in the parish baptismal records. Two days later, this child was baptized "Ludwik Jan Wrodarczyk".

Baptism made Ludwik a child of the church, whose faith was deeply ingrained in the life of the Wrodarczyk family. His parents, relatives and parish priests would be examples of living faith which would inspire young Ludwik on the road to his service as a priest. His mother Justyna was especially significant in the faith development of her son. She was a very hard-working woman, God-loving and graciously mannered, loved by her neighbours and, to this day, held in high opinion by the entire neighbourhood.

Karol, Ludwik's father, was both a farmer and a hard working and conscientious coal-miner. He loved to spend many

joyful hours playing on the farm with his children. As they grew and attended school, others came into the world. Karol worked long hours wondering how he would manage to feed and care for so many in his young family. He decided he would work in the local coal-mine, at that time called “Johanka”. He grew to love his new profession as much as his farmlands which he had inherited from his predecessors.

Ludwik began his schooling by walking the many miles leading to the Tarnowskich Gor (Tarnow Hills). The school is known to this day as No. 1. There he received his elementary education. Each morning he would leave home at the same hour, visit his parish church of St. Wojciech which for him was the second most highly valued place after his home. He was a quiet-natured boy, even-tempered and conscientious. Joyfully and willingly he would help his classmates who were weak in their studies. In spite of all those time-consuming chores, Ludwik spent a great deal of time praying and yet there was time enough to do all of his chores — at home and at school.

After school hours the other pupils would dash out in all directions, shouting with elation to be finished for the day, each eventually heading for home. On his way home, Ludwik would often visit his parish church spending more and more time in prayer. It would be difficult to count the hours Ludwik spent as

a young lad before the Blessed Sacrament.

His mother Justyna quietly accepted his long periods of prayer after school. Her other children: Helena, Gertruda, Maria (later to become Sister Priscilla, a Sister of Service), Peter, Jadwiga and Klara would sit around the table laden with dinner which their Mother



The Wrodarczyk family home. It remains unchanged today.



The Parish Church of St. Wojciech, Radzionkow

prepared while they were out in the fields, and often Ludwik would be missing from the group. His mother always knew where he could be found; most often it was Jadwiga who would go rushing out to the church to fetch him. At times she would just bring some food for Ludwik who would remain alone in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament.

At the age of 12 Ludwik made his first Holy Communion. Something seemed to change within him. In those days children shared in the Eucharist for the first time at that age. Adolf Szastok, a friend of Ludwik still who is still living explains, at that age “when we were more serious we would go to catechism classes to an old school beside the church”. Whenever the topic of conversation was about Ludwik, Adolf would recall his childhood years: “Ludwik was a good companion. But he differed from the rest of us with regard to manner — so solemn for one of his age. We would observe him and were filled with awe. There was something in him which was lacking in us. At



The Wrodarczyk family, 1910.
Mother, Father, Gertruda, Ludwik, Helena

times it seemed to be resemble pride or conceit. But he was not proud, and he never acted as if he was better than others. He was modest, likable and friendly, but at the same time very mysterious, as if he harboured some far-reaching plans. His outstanding trait was a majestic kind of dignity and a nobleness that had a depth about it. It is difficult to explain his qualities in human words [which are lacking to one such as I] to show his true richness.”

In 1921 the time had come for Ludwik Wrodarczyk to bid farewell to the school which he had attended so regularly and conscientiously and to move on to his seminary studies. Even at this stage of his life he displayed an unusual maturity of mind and heart, together with a deep religious sense. Once, in a flush of sincerity, he confided to an older friend, Francis Baczkowicz: *“You know, Frank, I would so very much want to help build up the Kingdom of God with my life. I would like to die a martyr’s death.”* Baczkowicz, a machine hoister in the coal-mines of

Buchacz, would often repeat Ludwik's words to his own children after Ludwik's death. He would add, "From his earliest youth Ludwik would thrust himself towards God," and would end by saying, "There was a holy man."

The year 1921 presented a difficult choice for Ludwik. He felt an interior calling to the priesthood, but on the other hand, his father depended upon Ludwik to follow in his footsteps either as a coal-miner or a farmer. All the while, Ludwik was aware of the fact that it is more important to obey God than man, and his reply to his father was: *"I'm going to study to become a priest."* Taken aback by his son's choice, the father said, "Ludwik, take that [coal-miner's] lamp and away with you to Johanka." But Ludwik, mature in his decision, replied: *"I will be a priest, even if only for an hour."* And he chose the path which would lead him to the life of a religious in the Congregation of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate.

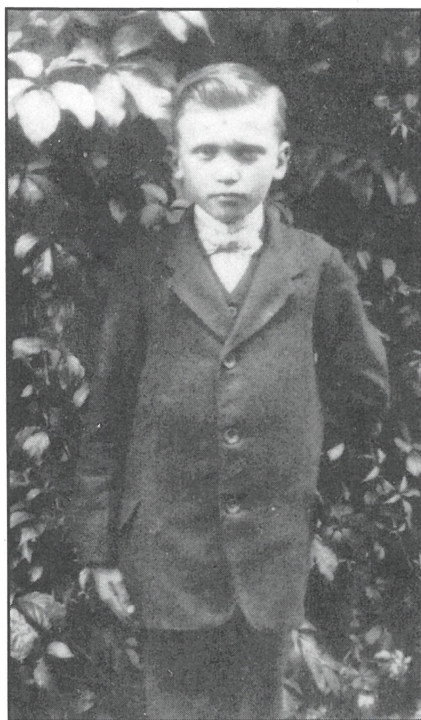
The Oblates were founded in France in 1816 by Blessed Eugene de Mazenod. Some of the missionaries came to Poland at the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1920 they established a house in Silesia and the Wrodarczyk family would have known of this recent addition to the life of the Church in Poland.



The Primary School in Radzionkow

Seminary Years

In the autumn of 1921, fourteen-year-old Ludwik began his first year in the Minor Seminary at Krotoszyn which had been established only one year before to educate young men for missionary work in the Oblate Congregation. The second year of his studies was taken at Lubliniec in Upper Silesia, the new location of the Juniorate, and here Ludwik found himself closer to his native Radzionkow. Ludwik felt good there. *“With the help of God my studies are coming along quite well.”* He was anxious about one thing — whether he would have the courage to persevere. In December 1923 he wrote to his parents: *“Please pray for me, that I will persevere in my vocation to the end. And I will pray for you, that God will be with you, bless you in your cares and difficulties which burdens you bear daily for me.”*



14-year-old Ludwik in 1921, at end of his elementary studies, just before entering the Oblate Minor Seminary in Krotoszyn

After 1924, the Juniorate in Lubliniec became too small for the number of vocations to the Minor Seminary, and Ludwik found himself in the new school year 1924-25 at Krobi (Poznan). That first year and its studies were not the most fruitful, although Ludwik did well in his exams. He was having major difficulties with his eyesight and had to wear thick glasses for the rest of his life.

Ludwik also learned that year, that his father was dismissed from his work in the coal-mines and left without a job. Ludwik



Novitiate 1926-27.

Ludwik, with Krawiec Macies and Antoni Leszczyk

agonized over this news, and over the fact that there were seven brothers and sisters to be looked after as well as the upkeep of the farm. In March 1925 his mother wrote: "We find ourselves now in a critical situation. Your father is without work and must feed ten of us. And so we must pray to God for our daily bread." Ludwik wrote to his Father: "*The news of the loss of your job saddened me deeply, and I am writing to cheer you up in your sadness.... In closing, I kiss your work-worn hands which have laboured so hard for my sake... Your grateful son, Ludwik*".

In spite of his family's critical plight, Ludwik completed the year 1925 at school and on June 30 he arrived home for a summer vacation. The next year he began his final year of studies in Krobi and with his usual seriousness he prepared himself for the final examinations. Trusting in God's help he prayed that each one of his group would pass so that, after summer vacation, they could all enter Novitiate together. On

June 12, 1926, they began their final examinations. In the days following, Ludwik successfully graduated but tragedy struck. On June 10, his father passed away in the hospital in Bytom at the age of 49. His funeral took place in Radzionkow on June 17, 1926. On that day Ludwik, accompanied by his orphaned brothers and sisters, walked behind his Father's casket, and following them were a crowd of friends and neighbours, some visibly broken-hearted, others deep in thought, and still others sharing that sorrow with their neighbour. And in the heart of Ludwik, Christ once again spoke the words: "Come after Me; let the dead bury their dead but you go and preach the Good News of the Kingdom of my Father" (Lk. 9,39). On that day Divine Providence placed the entire burden of caring for the family on the tender shoulders of that quiet, religious and valiant woman, Ludwik's mother Justyna. After his father's death, Ludwik did not turn away from his choice of vocation but became even more determined in his resolve — *"if only for one hour to be a priest"*. At the end of that summer, he entered the Oblate Novitiate.

Markowice

Ludwik arrived at the Oblate Novitiate in Markowice on August. There, along with his classmates, he began his first year of preparation for religious life. For the first week they took part in a retreat preached by Fr. Czakaj the Novice Master. On August 14 at 11:00 a.m. the novices were formally received by the Provincial Superior himself.

Soon after, Ludwik wrote the following letter to his family: *"I am very happy that I have left the world because it is so beautiful to sanctify oneself to God.... If only I can properly avail myself of the graces which our Lord God and best of Fathers offers me here in this place. To make a really good Novitiate means to do my utmost to sanctify myself. To do that I need perseverance and much good will in order that I will not lose heart and not become frightened in the face of dangers. Rather, I must remain steadfast at my post like a good soldier so that the enemy will not approach and claim the victory. Pray that I may*

be worthy to become a priest, a prayerful religious and a zealous missionary so that later I will perform good and fruitful works in the Lord's vineyard, and lead as many souls as possible to God...".

On August 15, 1927, the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Ludwik pronounced his first religious vows. He was now an Oblate of Mary Immaculate, and was eagerly looking forward to moving on to his formal philosophical and theological studies, together with the rest of his class.

Obra

At this important point in his Oblate formation Ludwik had to face a serious delay. He was held back from the seminary because of a serious illness with which he was hospitalised in Poznan. Poor record keeping has left the exact nature of his illness a mystery. It seems that in his eagerness to succeed in his studies he had over-taxed his strength, and ended up with stomach problems. But on October 1, 1927, he left the hospital and went to the seminary in Obra to begin the academic year there with his former classmates. Feeling strengthened, Ludwik was happy to find himself in Obra. However, his joy at feeling stronger was short-lived. He was forced to interrupt his studies; his sickness had advanced to such a degree that he was sent home to his family in Silesia. Many presumed that he would not be able to continue.

At home he was given the loving and maternal care of his mother who was very sensitive to his sufferings, as well as the attention of a good doctor from Katowice who was instrumental in restoring Ludwik's health, so that on July 19, 1928, he was able to return to Obra. On his way there, he visited Sister Teresa working in the hospital at Poznan. She told him: "Father, for your information, you ought to thank Our Lady of Piekar for your renewed health; you were so ill that you had one foot in the grave. I was very much afraid about your poor condition. To which Ludwik replied, *"I am indeed fortunate to be a member of a religious order, that I am an Oblate of Mary Immaculate. If it were not for Her, I do not know where I might*

be today. She rescued me and I am at a loss to know how I can show my gratitude.” Ludwik was convinced that Our Lady of Piekar, in Her loving concern, was responsible for his almost miraculous healing.

On October 1, 1928, Ludwik resumed his studies at the seminary. He professed his vows on an annual basis. *“I console myself with the knowledge that the next year will bring me to that solemn moment when I shall be able to carry Jesus on my person as part of my religious garb.”* Word from home brought Ludwik the joyful news that one of his sisters, Maria, had made plans to enter the convent. *“Jesus is so good and has blessed us so magnanimously! First he leads me to the Oblate Congregation and now He is calling to Himself my sister! Is that not a tremendous blessing! How God must love us!”*

“On the feast of Christ the King I gave myself and my family to Jesus so that He would be King and Lord of our entire being: our mind, will and heart.” Ludwik lived constantly with the thought of his complete offering: his final vows. On June 18, 1930, the Formation Council members were unanimous in admitting Ludwik to profession of his final vows, to the Tonsure as well as to the diaconate, and on July 4, 1930, the



The Wrodarczyk Family, 1936, with photo of deceased father

Provincial Council approved that decision. The moment that had dreamed of for so long had finally arrived: August 15, 1930, the day of his final vows. *“My joy was so great in anticipating that great day that I could hardly contain myself. On the eve of that great day I could not sleep a wink. At last came the sound of the rising bell, and in a loud voice I called out with exultation: ‘Haec est dies, quam fecit Dominus — this is the day that the Lord has made!’ From my Lord Jesus I received the Oblate Cross as a gift and an order, which I am to wear as long as I shall follow Him. And from my Heavenly Mother, the soutane signifying her garment in which she accepted me and, in her special way, will protect me as an Oblate of Mary Immaculate.”* Later, on October 27, the day of Ludwik’s reception of the Tonsure: *“In a short while I will be accepted into the religious state. Only one step separates me from my first ordination; tomorrow I will already be on the next rung of the ladder leading me to the heights of priesthood. Who can comprehend what the PRIESTHOOD truly is?”* *“We can say that we love God if our acts and duties are performed with love for Him, for His greater honour and glory. It would be far better that all manner of ill-fortune should befall us than that we should offend Him by sinning voluntarily.”*

On August 14, 1932, Ludwik was raised to the subdiaconate by Cardinal Hlond and on October 6 became a deacon, being ordained by Bishop Jozef Gothardt, OMI. As soon as he learned that his Ordination to the Priesthood was to take place in Obra on June 10, 1933, Ludwik wrote to his sister, Sister Priscilla, stationed in Panewnik: *“Just a few days before the moment when I shall stand before the altar and by the power of the sacrament of Ordination, I will be a priest forever. The closer that day comes, the greater is my fear, and yet at the same time the greater the happiness which embraces me. On the one hand, it is a magnificent dignity, but on the other, a huge responsibility for everything will begin. God is good and will give His grace and strength that I may be able to fulfil all that I wish to do for His sake.”*

At last June 10, 1933 arrived and Ludwik attained that which had been his life’s dream and aspiration: to hear the words:

The
Priesthood
of Father
Ludwik
Wrodarczyk,
O.M.I.

“You are a priest forever.” For his ordination memento cards Ludwik had chosen the text of Psalm 86: “I will glorify Your name forever, for great is Your Mercy towards me.” Little did he realize on his ordination day that he would be so soon called upon to give witness to God’s Name and in such an heroic manner.

On June 13, 1933, in his home town of Radzionkow, Fr. Ludwik celebrated his First Mass in St. Wojciech Church, and it was in that parish that he began his priestly and missionary activities. He thanked God for His endless mercy and graces given to himself and to his family. After his first Mass and summer vacation, Fr. Ludwik returned to Obra for the last year of his studies in theology and subsequent final examinations. On Sunday, August 5, 1934, he received his first posting — the parish of Koden-on-Bug. Ludwik wrote these words after settling into his new home: *“I find myself in the care and protection of our powerful Blessed Mother of Koden. My assignments here: assistant pastor, treasurer and teacher of religion in the neighbouring schools, shall keep me well occupied, but our Lord and Our Lady of Koden will help me so that I shall manage all my duties quite well. On my part, I will work to the best of my capabilities, so that all will be for the glory of God and the salvation of souls.”*

For one just newly ordained, very young and rather poor in health, his duties were many and time-consuming. What added to those burdens was the fact that the conditions under which he had to work were difficult. Ludwik conceded that some days were extremely heavy — 16 lessons of religion a week, not all in the same school (some of the schools were 5 kms apart). In summer when the roads were dry and smooth, he rode to his teaching assignments on a bicycle, but when the rains came and turned the roads into pools of mud, he rode by horse-drawn cart — the common means of travel in those days. But on those occasions when neither a bicycle nor a wagon would do, Fr. Ludwik rode on horseback. It was also his job to ride into the

forest to transact the purchase of wood for construction, as well as to examine the fields to determine whether it was time to mow the hay. He understood that part of his duties for he was a descendant of farming parents. As assistant Pastor, a great deal of his time was taken up with various associations in the parish, and with making visits to the Chancery office. About one of such days, Fr. Ludwik writes:

“I arose at 6:30 in the morning, offered Mass, and of necessity made only a short thanksgiving afterward. I was then called to hear Confessions after which I went to the sacristy where a family waited to have their new-born child baptized. I wrote down the formula prayers and soon I could hear children’s voices and I knew that it was time for me to get to school. At 10:00 I returned from school, ate breakfast at 10:30, did a few more chores and at 12:00 I was again off to school for two hours. Upon my return at 2:30 there were people waiting for me in the rectory. While I was transacting their needs, the door opened and a group of young couples entered to register for a marriage preparation course, and I had to take care of their needs. Meantime, my stomach is grinding a steady march, so I must eat some lunch. But, it is already 5:00 p.m., so back to the marriage course group. At 7:00 p.m. there is choir practice in church and it lasts for two hours. At this time I feel as though I have had enough action and that it is time for prayers. There is my breviary to complete, finish up the little chores left undone during the day, and by then it will be midnight. However, let me add that not every day is as busy.”

After two years Ludwik received a new assignment as house bursar to the Oblate Juniorate in Markowice. He was also to help in the local parish with the Catholic youth and serve the seminary as well as the parish with his musical talents as an organist on Sundays and special occasions. To his fellow religious he was the epitome of religious living, a model priest and missionary. They not only looked up to him but learned from him, his ways, his kindly disposition, delicate nature,

simplicity, humility and diligence. “He was a magnificent person, a remarkable priest, a hard worker both as a treasurer and as a missionary,” exclaimed Brother Jozef Jarmuz many years later.

When confronted with difficulties and problems in his priestly life., Fr. Ludwik would meet them with his own brand of resourcefulness, humour and cheerfulness. He was always able to manage when faced with difficulties. He had a peculiar but godly way of approaching life, and was never discouraged by any manner of work. Even work in the fields did not outrage his sensibilities as a religious missionary. He would write his family saying: *“The work of harvesting peas is awaiting us now, and in a week there will be wheat to cut. I spend a great deal of time now in the fields, so do not expect me at home for vacation. This is now my profession, to be a gardener and a farmer. So do not count on me, and if others are at home on vacation, all the better for them,”*

In the spring of 1938 there was need for preachers for retreats, and Ludwik found himself taking on additional work in this area. He was not an outstanding speaker and he realized this fact; was fully aware of it. As a seminarian he once said: *“It is not the sermon that converts people but the grace of God to which we must hold ourselves open to.”* He attributed any success in his work to this grace of God and the power of prayer. To his sister, Sister Priscilla, he wrote: *“I have been giving retreats. I think that you were praying for me during that time.”*

The year 1939 was a year of deep pain, of tragedy and bloody conflict not only for Poland’s families, but for the Oblate Congregation, the Polish nation and the entire world. It was the year of the beginning of that terrible and most tragic war, World War II. It was also a most unusual year in the life of Fr. Ludwik. During the weeks of Lent he was engaged in preaching in the parishes and in opening the hearts of his listeners to the activity of God’s grace. *“Let us rejoice that Jesus arose from the dead for now He is with us. Let us thank Him for His sufferings*

and death which He underwent for our salvation. Jesus lives; may He always live in the souls of the faithful, and may He graft His life in those souls that are indifferent, lukewarm, those who keep themselves aloof from Jesus, that they too might burn with love for Him and taste how sweet is the Lord toward those who love Him."



Ludwik Wrodarczyk, O.M.I.

"Let us first go and give ourselves to the Will of God"

Later, he would still work in the orchards and gardens of the monastery of Markowice, taking care to see that the tree trunks were sufficiently whitewashed, that their foliage was sufficiently sprinkled against the onslaught of worms and other pests, checking whether the peas which had been sown were beginning to appear. His attentive eye missed nothing in his care of growing plants ... “so that all would be good”.

In May, Father Ludwik left for Silesia. On the 23 of that month at 11:00 a.m., he stood for the last time before the altar of St. Wojciech to bless the union in marriage of his younger sister Klara with Francis Kieras. For Father Ludwik this was the last close contact he would have with his family. His joy that day in Radzionkow did not last long. His hasty departure from the wedding feast was so that he could prepare for the following Thursday's feast of Corpus Christ and, following that, more work in the fields and the harvesting of alfalfa.

The year 1939 was truly a year of unrest in the world, when the outbreak of war would cause shifts in the concentration of population. There were severe changes in the lives of the Oblates of the Polish Province, including changes in the life of Fr. Ludwik Wrodarczyk. He began to have a presentiment of some monstrous evil — a restless waiting in deep anxiety. “Each day I expect a letter from Father Provincial which will contain an order authorizing me to go to another parish. When I have some news, I will write to you immediately, either from here in Markowice or from where I will be sent.”

On August 17 he received an obedience to move to the newly-opened parish in Okopy located right on the border between Poland and Russia. That parish was composed of three Polish villages: Dolhan, Okopy and Borowe Budki. One of these three villages, Okopy, had its own wooden church built by the (then) pastor of Rokitna, Rev. Dr. Bruno WYROBISZ, a native of Cracow. From that time on, Okopy became a mission of Rokitna which was served from time to time by the pastor of Rokitna. Sometimes the chaplain of the Borderland Army Corps would hold special devotions. At other times the faithful

Pastor
and
Martyr
of
Okopy

would come to the church to pray by themselves, without the benefit of a priest.

On August 21, 1939 Ludwik wrote to his family, *“Most likely I shall be leaving this week for my new ministry. It is a completely new parish by the name of Okopy. The last railway station is Ostko just above the Bolshevik border, and Okopy 2 km from that border. At OKOPY I am to be the pastor of a parish of approximately 500 souls. To help me, I will have one Father and one religious Brother.”*

Some time after the 20 of August in 1939, the 32-year-old Fr. Ludwik Wrodarczyk, in the sixth year of priesthood, and Brother Karol Dziemba, left together for their new assignment. On August 28 they arrived in Rokitno where they were cordially met by the pastor, Rev. Dr. Bruno Wyrobisz, who was pleased at the arrival of two missionaries who, from that day on, were to become his closest neighbours. He immediately notified the Polish Army in nearby Borowy of their arrival. The administrator who took the message in Okopy immediately sent out a wagon to pick up the missionaries. In Okopy the two are welcomed by all the inhabitants including the Orthodox Christians. There was even an orchestra and flowers, all signs of their sincere welcome of the missionaries. The parishioners then led the two religious into the church where Fr. Ludwik thanked everyone for their sincere and hearty welcome, and then encouraged them to be conscientious in their attendance at the retreat devotions. Afterwards, the multitude dispersed, each to his home, and the caretaker of the parish church at Okopy, Hieronim Rudnicki, took the two missionaries to his home. Under the caretaker’s care and hospitality, they remained for two years, by which time the parishioners completed a rectory just beside the church.

“We have already moved into our own little home, although it is not yet completely finished; we are surrounded by a forest, and we have to go a distance of 20 km to the nearest town. Our wooden church is lovely, and

Forming a Parish

we are happy to see so many parishioners attending the various devotions; however, there were times when the temperature was down to -33 degrees C, but when the spring rains came the fields were huge pools of mud. The winter of this year was a very difficult one. To travel the 20 km to town even on a good day took us almost two hours, and when there is all that mud along the way, then even six hours' travelling time were not enough."

With the missionary zeal of a young priest he threw himself into the organization of the parish. He was a priest by his very nature. The church was his life; to those who were the members of his church he was their main source of help in every aspect. He was available to their every need at any hour of the day or night, whether it was to bring medicine to the sick or to anoint them with the sacrament of the sick. "I became sick with dysentery and suffered much pain. I do not know how it would all have ended were it not for the help I received from Fr. Wrodarczyk who treated me and brought me the necessary medicines. His charity knew no bounds. He himself administered the medicines and then taught my parents to do so. He was willing to come with his help at any hour of the day, winter or summer — it made no difference to him." — thus wrote one of the parishioners of Okopy about this new priest. Many people of the parish were to grow to be thankful for his devoted ministry.

"The new pastor drew to himself a huge group of sympathetic individuals from among the parishioners by virtue of the fact that he was very pious, simple and modest at the same time having a highly cultured personality as a priest. Until his rectory was completed, he lived in humble conditions with whichever family was able to accommodate him. He refused his ministering to nobody. Those who came to him for aid were Poles, Ukrainians, Catholics, Orthodox, partisans". "Fr. Wrodarczyk came every day to my three-year-old daughter

A Pastor For All

Maria, and after she died he supported me and comforted me with his words; for me that was most necessary and helpful. He was always serene, self-controlled.... He was a most unusual priest, and when he was not within earshot, we would call him 'the saint'. He never asked to be remunerated for his many acts of kindness. On the contrary, whenever he did receive a token of someone's gratitude, he gave it away to others. Whatever he did was done willingly; he was at his parishioners' beck and call at all times. He wanted nothing for himself even though he himself was very poor."

Father Wrodarczyk was a zealous as well as kindly pastor of that small, badly-neglected village. The inhabitants' homes adjoined the Ukrainian villages of Kisorycz, Karpilow and Borowy. He managed to draw them together and to create strong loyalty to their faith. He was an exemplary model of what a true shepherd of souls ought to be. To this day, the parishioners scattered throughout the village of Okopy still speak of him in glowing terms: "That priest will never fade away from my memory. He was the first person who directed my mind and heart to God. Perhaps it is thanks to him that I am a complete person", said Zygmunt Grabowski-Kobiela.

In November Mr. Benedict Halicz, who had come to Fr. Ludwik begging for refuge from the Nazis, was hired as organist in that small parish. By that charitable act, Fr. Ludwik put his own life on the line while saving that of Benedict Halicz who, by his music at church functions, enlivened the life of Okopy. On that very day, candidates to the choir began to assemble, and some time later, an orchestra was formed of part-time musicians playing brass instruments. That Christmas Eve the church resounded with the music of the choir and instruments in a blend of beautiful carols. The church was filled for devotions not only with his own parishioners from Borowy Budek, Dolhan and Okopy but also from the ten outlying Polish villages some 40 km distant.

Father Wrodarczyk was known for his unusual modesty and tact, but above all for his humility. Brother Dziemba was himself highly edified by him. After World War II when he returned to Markowice as a Religious Brother, he related many accounts of his stay with Fr. Ludwik in Okopy. Fr. Wrodarczyk would point out, in a Christian spirit of brotherliness, the wrong done by Brother, and then he would kneel before the young religious and apologize for offending him.

A Focal Point

The ministry of Father Wrodarczyk was known beyond the boundaries of his parish, reaching into the depths of Russia. *“The further I advance in my work, with the help of my priestly life, the more souls eager for help, the warmer are the hearts which enkindle my soul to a more intensive apostolic work. Dear Brothers, too little do we strive for perfection in our work for God. We ought to pray more, to offer ourselves as a sacrifice, so that we may become true Oblates totally dedicated, strictly according to the will of our Founder”*, he said in one of his sermons. People began to come together to him more and more. For the Midnight Mass at Christmas in 1941 his church was already completely filled with worshippers by 8:00 p.m., with more standing outdoors for lack of space. Many had arrived from Russia, having never been at a Midnight Mass for years.

A Life of Prayer

After Mass, Fr. Wrodarczyk received many invitations from Russian Catholics to their homes to care for their sick and to administer the Sacraments. In July 1942 he wrote: *“I have been at this post for the past two weeks. Thank God that I am well and able to tend the sick and bed-ridden, thanks, surely, to prayer. I strongly believe in prayer.”* His dedication to prayer was noticed even more so at his parish in Okopy. He was often seen in church all alone, completely engrossed in prayer. Often he returned from church late at night, sometimes at 2:00 a.m. *“He would pass through my room to go to his quarters, moving very quietly so as not to wake me, but even so I heard him pass*

Preaching – Reconciling

by, and I said nothing,” related Benedict Halicz many years later. One day, the landlord and his wife asked Fr. Ludwik what he was doing in church so late at night. He told them outright: *“I pray that God will save our church from being burned by the enemy. Even if I were to be liquidated, another priest would be given you, but it would be very difficult to build another church.”* Father Wrodarczyk cared not only for the spiritual life of his parishioners but also for those who came to him in their material difficulties. Like a true apostle and missionary he preached Christ by his very attitude. He was known as the “benefactor of the poor”.

In 1941, in spite of the war and the German occupation of the territory of Okopy, Father Wrodarczyk went to Klesow to preach the Lenten retreat. Father Chomicki, the pastor, who to this day remembers that retreat, has written: “As a preacher he could not be described as being outstanding, but something seemed to speak through him. I used to wonder how he could manage all of the work involved in those retreats. Other priests, when they came to preach, did not hear confessions at all, but he listened to the confessions of practically everyone in that church. He was a good confessor and everyone wanted to go to him to hear their confessions. We could sense in him a holiness, a deep spirituality while he preached. The people could sense in him what I did, could hear the message that came to me”.

Fr. Ludwik was invited also to other parishes where people would be waiting for him long before he arrived. At times his trips to the various missions which were great distances away: Zytomierz and as far east as Kiev, places that were within a radius of some 100 km. Orthodox Christians converted to Catholicism, many were baptized, countless had their sins washed away and reconciled with God. Throughout those two months of missionary travels preaching retreats, he baptized several thousand, anointed over 500 sick and dying and brought back to the Church over 600 fallen away Christians. Small wonder that the people were loath to be parted from such

The Winter of 1943

a missionary. They promised that they would return to Okopy for the feast of St. John, June 24, 1943, as a memento of the mission. They kept their word, for over 3,000 came from Zytomierz alone, not counting those from other parishes and communities.

The second World War gave rise to deep tensions, confusion of loyalties and passions that often blurred the lines between right and wrong. Old wounds which were up to then hidden in the pages of history were resurrected. National aspirations and unrealistic hopes fuelled old animosities. Eastern Poland and Western Ukraine was a region in which these divisions were acute, since their histories had been interwoven for many centuries. Two peoples very closely related by language and culture, but often torn apart by ethnic and religious differences, found themselves at odds. Polish, Ukrainian, Roman, Orthodox — these made up a tangled web which defied even the clearest minds to unravel.

The unsettling conditions of the war gave radical groups with nationalistic ambitions an opportunity to further their aspirations. And so roving bands of guerillas and partisans clashed. The Polish Home Army formed a resistance against the occupying Nazis and the Bolsheviks, whilst the Ukrainians were engaged in what they saw as a struggle for national independence. As is so often the case, the innocent local population suffered most. Fr. Ludwik's parishioners stood in the crossfire.

The Evening of December 6, 1943

It was the first Sunday of December and the temperature was minus 20 degrees with a strong east wind stinging the faces of the faithful hurrying to church. One of those present on that night recalled the scene. "It was cold in church. The peaceful voice of Father Wrodarczyk was drowned in the noise of the stamping of frozen feet and coughing of those suffering with colds. Disregarding the chilly atmosphere in the church, the majority knelt in silent prayer that God would save them from

the ravages of that imminent war. The women knelt, their bodies nearly prostrate before the altar, eyes filled with sorrow, many crying as their worn-out rosaries passed, bead by bead, through their fingers, as others prayed with hands uplifted in supplication before the altar. Their pastor, Fr. Ludwik, would turn from the altar to face the people every so often, observing their anguished, frightened and pleading faces.”

The inhabitants of all three villages, after their prayerful vigil in church went home for the night, somewhat calmed. The night was cloudless and very cold. Somewhere from far away came the snarling and barking of dogs. Most of the villagers’ houses were dark as if in silent preparation for that dreadful day soon to come. That evening the local administrator was to pay a visit to the rectory as had been arranged with the Brother who was in charge of the care of the rectory as well as the surrounding territory of Okopy. The administrator later decided that, due to the danger that threatened their neighbourhood that night, he would not make his visit to the rectory. Other men came to the rectory to persuade Father Wrodarczyk to go with them to the forest to avoid any danger of attack on his person. Father was prepared for everything. One day he said to his organist Mr. Halicz: *“Would you consider accepting, together with me, of your own free will, the death of a martyr?”* Mr. Halicz, taken aback by surprise, made no answer. He merely stood there stunned. From that time on, they never again discussed the topic of freely accepting a martyr’s death. Brother Dziemba on that last night tried to get Father Wrodarczyk to go with the people into the forest, but he received the following reply: *“Brother, you must run away; I will go into the church. I cannot leave the Blessed Sacrament alone for those bandits to desecrate. But let us first go and give ourselves to the will of God; maybe it will not be so bad.”* He then went into the church to continue with preparations for the feast of the Immaculate Conception, including writing special music for that great Oblate feast.

About 10:00 p.m., a rocket suddenly burst into the sky. The Ukrainians had already begun their advance towards Borowy Budki. In the rectory, Father Wrodarczyk suddenly left off the writing of music, probably sensing that on the 8 of December his choir would not be singing to the Blessed Virgin in their church. He came up to Brother Dziemba, gave him his hand, embraced him, kissing both cheeks and said: *“Go with God, Brother. Love the Blessed Mother”* and went into the church. There they said their good-byes and separated — forever. In the snow two sets of footprints led from the rectory. One from beneath the windows of the rectory out of which Brother Dziemba jumped onto the snow led to the forest where other villagers of Okopy were hiding. The other set of footprints were those of Father Wrodarczyk — footprints that led to the church and the Blessed Sacrament. That brief path, from the rectory to the church where he spent the evening of December 6, 1943, was his last free journey. He went all alone, of his own free will for the last time in his mortal life. In the church he knelt for the last time and prayed.

The Suffering Begins

In the meantime, many of the villagers — women and children as well as those men who were incapable of finding refuge in time — were put to death. It was a premeditated form of ravage, piling the villagers’ possessions and livestock onto wagons before leaving, burning every building after sacking it. They smashed into the church and fell upon Ludwik kneeling on the steps before the Blessed Sacrament. Two women came to his defence, begging the marauders to spare Fr. Ludwik’s life. They were 18-year-old Veronica Kosinska, the other, 90-year-old Lucja Skurzynska. For their efforts they were seized and brutally tortured. Their bodies were found next morning in the aisle of the church.

According to the testimony of Tekla Wlosiewicz, a young 16 year old girl, the bandits, after flogging the young priest, dragged his bleeding semi-conscious body from the church

towards the village of Karpilow, bringing him to their camp in the forest. There they offered to spare his life if he would agree to be their physician. During the next few days they ordered Father to tend their wounded. But he refused to be held prisoner whilst the people of his parish were being murdered in the forest. He would rather lose his life than abandon his sheep.

His captors were filled with anger and hatred. "They tortured him in the most brutal manner imaginable", said a number of Orthodox Ukrainians from Karpilow as well as some of the Poles of Okopy who witnessed the torture from hiding-places in the forest. After stripping him of his clothing, they flogged him, tying him to a tree as if crucified, stuck his naked flesh with spikes and then proceeded to burn his feet with hot irons. These horrendous tortures continued for almost a whole week.

“To
Accept
the
Death
of a
Martyr”

After these many days of almost unbelievable suffering he was still alive. He was then dragged to Pauki and their his assassins finished the martyrdom. They tied him to a wooden log, placing him on a wood-cutting stand. Just then, Father Ludwik begged his torturers to give him time to pray. As best he could, he knelt down. When he arose he said, *“I am ready.”* Then a group of twelve of the women proceeded to cut him in two using a long-hand saw. Some of the men fired bullets into him at the same time. And so Ludwik Wrodarczyk, degraded, humiliated and crushed, gave up his spirit to the God he so loved.

The
Aftermath

In January of 1944, the Russian army returned to that territory along with the Execution Battalion (Batalionem Egzekucyjnym). The army officers along with some Polish partisans from Okopy, Zygmunt and Boleslaw Lech testified that Father Wrodarczyk was murdered and buried. His bodily remains were later discovered in the forrest surrounding Okopy. The Russian army, after extracting testimony from the

bandits, executed and buried them in the same forest that had become Fr. Wrodarczyk's place of rest.

Time has covered over any traces of the evil that was perpetrated in and around Okopy. But in that town the memory of Fr. Ludwik Wrodarczyk is still alive — the memory of a young Oblate who had wished to be a priest “*if only for an hour*”. And what a glorious hour that had been.

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