

Polish Clergymen as Victims of KL Gusen

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Abstract

The concentration camp of KL Gusen was one of the main extermination sites for the Polish clergy, and especially that of the Roman Catholic denomination. Out of approximately 34,000 Poles detained in this camp, some 300 were clergymen (according to partial data). Many were imprisoned both as representatives of the Polish national elite – intended for extermination in accordance with the genocidal policy of the German National Socialist regime – and for religious reasons. In the camp, religious practices were forbidden and punishable by death. According to survivors' accounts, the camp personnel subjected priests to especially brutal treatment. The martyrdom of the victims of KL Gusen has been commemorated by means of three special rosaries containing the ashes of the murdered, which were deposited in the Jasna Góra sanctuary in Częstochowa, in St. Anne's Church in Warsaw, and in Wrocław Cathedral. Former prisoners of KL Gusen also made votive offerings during the second visit of Pope John Paul II to Poland in 1983.

For Poles there is only one master, and he is a German; there can be no two masters, both of equal stature, and there shall be no consent to this – hence, all representatives of the Polish intelligentsia are to be killed. This may sound harsh, but such are the laws of life (*Człowiek człowiekowi*, 2009, p. 11).

This statement was made by Martin Bormann, one of Adolf Hitler's closest associates, in October 1940.¹

The Nazi German authorities had already elaborated a special proscription register of so-called enemies of the Reich – *Sonderfahndungsbuch Polen* (Special Prosecution Book – Poland) – well in advance of Bormann's statement. It contained an alphabetical list of more than 61,000 Poles who had rendered greatest service to their country, and were consequently earmarked for arrest (with extermination to follow) in the territories incorporated into the Third Reich under Operation Tannenberg. The register, which included numerous clergymen, had been compiled by the Berlin-based Security Service of the *Reichsführer-ss* – the *Sicherheitsdienst* (SD) – on the orders of Reinhard Heydrich and in cooperation with members of the German minority in the Second Polish Republic. It was printed in book form in July 1939, and thereafter gradually expanded by the occupiers.

Between September 1939 and April 1940, the Germans carried out the *Intelligenzaktion* (the "Intelligentsia" operation). This was an organized act of genocide openly directed against the Polish elite on territories incorporated into the Third Reich, and in its course approximately 50,000 educated Poles were murdered – among them teachers, priests, members of the landed gentry, independent professionals, social and political activists, and retired military men. A further 50,000 representatives of the Polish elites were deported to concentration camps, and only a very small percentage of them survived. Executions were carried out in various regions of Poland, but mainly in the lands absorbed into the Third Reich (Wardzyńska, 2009). For the purposes of the present paper the most important fact is that the victims of the *Intelligenzaktion* included members of the clergy.

An equivalent of the *Intelligenzaktion* was carried out in the General Government between May and July 1940. This was the AB-Aktion (*Außerordentliche Befriedungsaktion* – Extraordinary Operation of Pacification), which claimed the lives of 3,500 members of the Polish political and intellectual elites from Central Poland, among them Catholic priests (Mańkowski, 1992).

1 For a slightly different translation cf. "Zeszyty oświęcimskie", 1958, no. 2, p. 45.

The policy implemented by the German occupier found full confirmation and support in the public statements made by representatives of the Nazi authorities. In accordance with his declarations of 2 March 1940, the Governor-General of the Polish occupied territories, Hans Frank, envisaged the extermination of the Polish intelligentsia, the Polish Church, and all “active centers of Polishness” (Mańkowski, 1992). “The very concept of the Polish intelligentsia relates in first order to the Polish clergy”, declared the NSDAP Office of Racial Policy (*Rassenpolitisches Amt*) on 25 November 1939 (Wetzel & Hecht, 1948, p. 136). Elsewhere in the same document, Polish clergymen were deemed a completely expendable element, for the

celebration of religious services in Polish is to be banned. Catholic and Evangelical church services are to be celebrated in German only, and by those select clergymen who possess a thoroughly German awareness (Wetzel & Hecht, 1948, p. 136).

Overall Losses Suffered by the Catholic Church in Poland under German Occupation

According to the official Polish statistical yearbook of 1939, immediately before the outbreak of the Second World War Poland had 9,731 Roman Catholic diocesan priests (including 5 archbishops and 41 bishops), 6,430 Roman Catholic monks and 16,820 Roman Catholic nuns, as well as 2,308 alumni of higher seminaries. Statistics concerning the Polish Catholic clergy must also take into account the Armenian Catholic clergy – a small group but nonetheless significant for the south-eastern territories of Poland – which comprised 22 diocesan priests (including 1 archbishop), 11 nuns, and 12 alumni of higher seminaries.² According to the statistical yearbook of the Catholic Church (Adamczuk et al., 1991, p. 132), the Second World War claimed the lives of 5 bishops, 1,863 diocesan priests, 580 monks (including 289 priests), 289 nuns, and 63 alumni of higher seminaries. A comparison of the two statistics shows that around 20 percent of the diocesan clergy (including every tenth bishop), 10 percent of monks, nearly 2 percent of nuns, and nearly 3 percent of the alumni of higher seminaries perished during the period of conflict. However, slightly different statistics have been given in historical literature. Czesław Madajczyk claims that in 1939 there were 10,917 Catholic priests in Poland, and that 1,811 of them died, that is 18.1 percent of the group; 1,263 perished in prisons and concentration camps (Madajczyk, 1970, Vol. II, p. 212).

² Data concerning the Armenian Catholic Church comes from 1934 (when, for example, the Armenian Catholic Archbishop Józef Teodorowicz – who died in 1938 – was still alive) (*Mały rocznik statystyczny 1939* [Concise Statistical Yearbook for 1939], Warszawa 1939, p. 353). I mention the Armenian Catholic denomination because one of its clergymen (from the diocese of Lwów) was murdered at Mauthausen-Gusen.

While analyzing these figures we should make distinct mention of the numerous Catholic clergymen who were murdered at *Konzentrationslager* Dachau. According to the yearbook, cited above, as many as 1,393 Polish Catholic clerics were incarcerated at this concentration camp alone; 750 of them were murdered, 52 were released when the camp was still functioning, while 591 were liberated by the American Army (Adamczuk et al., 1991, p. 132). Furthermore, of the Catholic priests who were killed in concentration camps, at least 202 perished at KL Auschwitz, no less than 89 at KL Sachsenhausen, and exactly 94 at the KL Mauthausen-Gusen complex.³

Since I am unable to perform an accurate verification of data concerning the circumstances of death of each single clergyman, I have made no attempt to determine how many of them lost their lives at KL Gusen exactly, instead simply mentioning the camp complex as the place of death.

Clergymen – Victims of the Mauthausen-Gusen Camp Complex

On the basis of topical literature and publicly accessible statistical data I have managed to establish that at least 347 Catholic clergymen of various nationalities were imprisoned at KL Gusen (*Człowiek człowiekowi*, 2009, p. 34). Their deportations to the camp were conducted mainly from May to August 1940. Most of them did not stay there for long, for that camp was not intended as the final place of their persecution. Out of the total number of clergymen mentioned earlier, 152 priests (including 139 Poles) were transferred on 8 December 1940 from Gusen to KL Dachau, which the Germans had selected as the main center of imprisonment of the predominantly Catholic clergy hitherto scattered across different concentration camps. Nevertheless, members of the Christian clergy were imprisoned and killed in Mauthausen-Gusen throughout the entire War. Many of those transported from Gusen to Dachau died of fatigue in December, shortly after their arrival. This means that the living conditions in KL Gusen played an indirect albeit decisive role in their demise, even if they eventually died elsewhere. To give but one example: 5 out of the 12 Verbite seminary students released from Gusen died in short order.

A comparison of partial data (Jacewicz & Woś, 1977–1981)⁴ shows that at least 94 clergymen died in both of these camps, which were located in

³ The publication *Człowiek człowiekowi* (cited earlier) states that according to the Council for the Protection of the Memory of Struggle and Martyrdom, 73 clergymen died in Gusen and 22 in Mauthausen, which gives a total of 95 victims from the clergy. I myself, however, have found credible sources mentioning 94 people identified by name, and this is the number that I prefer to quote.

⁴ Another tool that may prove useful for verifying the partial data is a list of 4,200 Polish clergymen murdered under various circumstances in the years 1914–1989 (*Biała księga*, 2012) edited in 2012 by a group of parishioners from the Parish of Saint

very close proximity to each other. Obviously, this number does not include the group of 308 clergymen (perhaps more) exterminated by the Nazis at Hartheim Castle. Some of the clerics detained there had also been incarcerated at KL Gusen.

The *Martyrologium* provides the following data on the victims of the Mauthausen-Gusen concentration camp complex:

1. Diocesan clergymen incardinated into Roman Catholic dioceses:
 - a) Poznań and Gniezno archdiocese – 35 (including 3 in Mauthausen),
 - b) Katowice diocese – 8,
 - c) Chełmno diocese – 4,
 - d) Łomża diocese – 4,
 - e) Płock diocese – 4,
 - f) Kraków diocese – 1,
 - g) Roman Catholic Lwów diocese – 1,

In total: 57.
2. Roman Catholic monks:
 - a) Verbites – 9,
 - b) Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate – 5 (including 1 in Mauthausen),
 - c) Salesians – 4,
 - d) Missionaries of the Holy Family – 3 (including 1 in Mauthausen),
 - e) Jesuits – 3,
 - f) Christ Fathers – 3,
 - g) Franciscans – 2,
 - h) Orionine Fathers – 1,
 - i) Benedictines – 1,
 - j) Lazarists – 1,

In total: 32.
3. Secular priests of other denominations:

Armenian Catholic Archdiocese of Lwów – 1,

In total: 1.
4. Non-Catholic clergymen:

Evangelical-Augsburg pastors – 4,

In total: 4.

Altogether: 94

Zygmunt in Słomczyn. Although this publication, which I continue to use in an auxiliary capacity, is intended for the general public, it is both broad and comprehensive in scope, while the fact that it is regularly updated allows researchers to verify many of the findings of topical literature from the end of the 1970s. This publication mentions 80 clergymen who perished in Gusen, 5 who lost their lives in Mauthausen, and 9 who died in Mauthausen-Gusen; these numbers also add up to 94.

These figures allow us to elaborate a rough draft of a map presenting the persecution to which the clerics incarcerated at Mauthausen and Gusen fell victim. Since it centers on the Polish lands incorporated into the Third Reich, this chart confirms beyond a doubt that a very clear link existed between the deportations of clergymen to Gusen and the *Intelligenzaktion*. The dioceses of Gniezno and Poznań, as well as that of Katowice – i.e. the regions of Greater Poland and Silesia incorporated into the Reich – suffered the greatest losses. The situation was similar in the dioceses of Płock and Chełmno. Of the 57 diocesan priests murdered in Gusen and Mauthausen, 51 came from territories that had been incorporated into the Third Reich.

While attempting to determine the role of Gusen and Mauthausen in relation to the total losses experienced by these dioceses during the Second World War, we should not forget that as many as 414 clerics from the entire diocese of Gniezno and Poznań perished. About 49 percent of them were from Gniezno and 31 percent from Poznań; at least 231 were killed in Dachau (i.e. nearly 56 percent of all victims from the local clergy). Thus, the victims of Mauthausen-Gusen constituted 8,5 percent of the clergy of these archdioceses who were killed by the Nazi regime, and this makes them possibly the second largest group of such victims after those murdered in KL Dachau. The numbers cited by Czesław Madajczyk are slightly lower but on the whole consistent with those given here: according to Madajczyk, 392 out of 1,050 clergymen from these dioceses perished (Madajczyk, 1970, Vol. II, p. 212).

The two largest groups of monks among the victims – the Verbites and the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate – were also from territories that had been incorporated into the Third Reich. The Verbites had been arrested in Chłudowo near Poznań, where they had their novitiate. In January 1940, 43 monks were arrested there. In May 1940, 25 seminarians were transported to Dachau, and then, on 2 August 1940, to Gusen. 9 seminarians from this group died in Gusen, while 12 were evacuated to Dachau in December 1940. Another 4 were sent to Dachau in 1941. 5 seminarians of the Divine Word Missionaries Order were killed in KL Dachau, 2 were released, and 5 liberated. The Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate killed in Gusen were from Markowice in Kujawy, from a monastery located on the grounds of the archdiocese of Gniezno.

Circumstances of the Deaths of Clergymen at KL Gusen

The main causes of death among the clergy incarcerated at KL Gusen were the same as for the other prisoners: backbreaking slave labor performed in quarries, constant malnourishment, and dysentery. But there were also others, albeit somewhat less common. For instance, in December 1941 Brother Mieczysław Frała, a seminarian of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate Order, was classified by the camp administration as a “cripple” – and therefore unfit for work – and duly gassed using exhaust fumes. A seminarian from the

diocese of Chełmno – Bernard Jaruszewski, prisoner number 112147 – was killed with a phenol injection in 1945. Seminarian Jan Wojtkowiak – a Verbite, prisoner number 7320 – froze to death after a *kapo* threw him out of his barrack, naked, for an entire night in December 1940. Another Verbite – Norbert Gosiemski, prisoner number 6224 – also froze to death.

As regards the temporal distribution of these deaths, it is certain that 58 clergymen perished in 1940 (57 in Gusen I and 1 in Mauthausen), 15 in 1941, 5 in 1942, 5 in 1943, 4 in 1944, and 5 in 1945. The date of death is uncertain for only one clergyman.

This distribution, marked by the predominance of 1940, clearly illustrates the fact that towards the end of that year Dachau became the main camp for the imprisonment of clerics, and the majority of the clergymen who had hitherto been detained at KL Gusen were soon moved there. One of the inmates of KL Gusen, Henryk Strzałkowski (Madoń-Mitzner, 2011, p. 259), made the following observation in his memoirs: “There were no priests around – all of them had been deported to Dachau”. Topical literature confirms this statement. But a detailed chronological overview of the deaths of the priests presented above shows that some clergymen were imprisoned in the camp throughout its period of existence.

To this number we should add at least 19 clergymen who were released from KL Gusen; they have been enumerated in the *Martyrologium*: 6 were from the diocese of Katowice, 6 from the diocese of Poznań, 4 from the archdiocese of Gniezno, 1 came from Włocławek, 1 from the diocese of Łomża, and 1 was a Missionary Oblate of Mary Immaculate. Obviously, we cannot consider these data as complete, for not all dioceses and orders recorded this kind of information in their materials.

The Conditions of Existence of Clergymen in the Camp

The clerics incarcerated at Gusen were subjected to conditions similar to those in which the other prisoners languished and toiled. It should be noted, however, that their circumstances were especially harsh, and much more difficult than for example in KL Dachau (which themselves were most arduous). To illustrate this point, I will cite the account of one of the priests incarcerated at Dachau. He described his companions in misery, who had arrived from KL Gusen, in the following way:

Our colleagues [from Gusen; author’s note] are so horribly emaciated, ill and weak that they resemble shadows, not people. [...] and yet there are no older men among them! Those have already died. The priests here are twenty seven to forty-odd years of age. [...] How months of labor in quarries have changed these young people, who not that long ago had been in perfect health! (Malak, 1961, p. 30).

One of the harshest psychological and spiritual torments inflicted on Catholic clergymen in concentration camps (including KL Gusen) was the ban on celebrating Mass, or even praying, which constituted a standard element of camp discipline. While witness accounts mention that numerous clergymen were able to organize clandestine prayers, the conditions at KL Gusen certainly did not make it easy for priests to celebrate Mass in secret. The following fragment comes from the account of a survivor:

I celebrated Holy Mass in Gusen only once. Around Christmas time, Christmas wafers were smuggled into the camp in packages from the home country. Some clever woman put a small bottle of altar wine in the package. It was delivered to the addressee because the bottle was labelled as [...] heart medication. So we had wine and bread. A small pocket-sized missal was found among the prisoners' clothes deposited at the *Effektenkammer* [warehouse in which prisoners' clothing was stored; author's note]. An old cream jar served as a chalice. We even had candles. The Mass was celebrated in a concealed chamber, obviously in great secrecy (*Reżimy totalitarne*, 2008, p. 27).⁵

The Reason for Repressions – Polishness or Catholicism?

As regards the clergymen imprisoned at KL Gusen, we should put forward a fundamental question: were they oppressed only because of their ethnicity, or was religion a factor as well? As we have already noted, the decided majority of clerics imprisoned in Gusen were detained there in consequence of the *Intelligenzaktion*. Not all clergymen who died in the camp were Catholic. Some were Protestants, for example the Reverend Professor Edmund Bursche – a theologian and lecturer at the University of Warsaw, half-brother of the famous Juliusz Bursche, the Polish Evangelical-Augsburg bishop murdered by the Germans in Moabit prison in Berlin. Edmund Bursche died of pneumonia in July 1940. The account of one of his fellow prisoners clearly shows the national aspect of the persecution that he suffered:

“I am not a Jew, I am a Pole”, replied the professor in German. [...] “You dirty dog”, shouted an enraged youth in an SS uniform and a cap with the death's head, furiously bashing the calm professor over the head with a riding crop (*Reżimy totalitarne*, 2008, p. 16).⁶

⁵ Father Ludwik Bielerzewski's account. He was detained in Gusen in the years 1940–1944, and later transferred to Dachau.

⁶ The account of Dr. Józef Iwiński.

But nationality was not the only issue of importance for the Nazis. It seems that their hatred of religion happened to coincide with that of Polishness, resulting in a lethal combination. This is clearly evident from some accounts concerning the clerics incarcerated at KL Gusen. The death of the Blessed Włodzimierz Laskowski, who was murdered on 8 August 1940, followed directly from the fact that he admitted to being a Catholic priest. One of his colleagues recalled:

He was ordered to lift a huge stone weighing about a hundred kilos. [...] The “Tiger” [one of the infamously cruel kapos at KL Gusen; author’s note] and his colleague put this stone on the poor prisoner’s back. The stone slid down and Father Laskowski fell over. As the priest was lying on the ground, the perpetrators beat and kicked him. When finally, with great effort, he managed to get back on his feet, they placed the same load on top of him again. He collapsed. After the third time, they finished him off (the account of Father Ludwik Bielerzewski, in: *Reżimy totalitarne*, 2008, p. 27).⁷

Another priest who was killed most likely for religious reasons was Father Edward Kałas, a Missionary of the Holy Family; his murder occurred on 7 June 1943. However, his path to the Mauthausen-Gusen concentration camp complex was somewhat unusual – namely, having worked at the Polish Catholic Mission in France, he was arrested because of his activity in the “Visigoths-Lorraine” organization and deported to the camp together with 987 French prisoners, receiving number 28187. Purportedly, he was murdered after refusing to worship Adolf Hitler as a deity. But although this version of events has been recognized for the purposes of his beatification process, there exists another account, according to which the priest was killed because he had tried to intervene when a guard started tormenting another prisoner – as punishment, the priest was to be stoned to death “like Christ” (Jacewicz & Woś, 1981, Vol. v, pp. 345–346). This, however, is of little consequence to our question, for in both versions the perpetrators had blasphemous intentions and were evidently driven by hatred of religion.

⁷ A slightly different version of events is mentioned by the author of Father Laskowski’s biographical note (Gintrowicz, 1996, pp. 164–166). According to this account, Father Laskowski was beaten to death by kapos – he was kicked until he lost consciousness, and then the men started to jump all over his body. Nevertheless, he regained consciousness, but they beat him up again and left him to die. In any case, this version is consistent with the one which I have cited as regards the fact that Father Laskowski was brutalized because he admitted that he was a priest.

The Catholic clergymen who perished at KL Gusen and KL Mauthausen have been commemorated by the Catholic Church in the most fitting way possible – by their beatification. As a matter of fact, several have already been declared blessed, while the beatification processes of others are still pending. Among the 108 Polish martyrs of the Second World War who were declared blessed by Saint John Paul II in June 1999 was one clergyman murdered in Mauthausen – Józef Cebula (1902–1941) (Lubowicki, 1996, pp. 378–382), a Missionary Oblate of Mary Immaculate.⁸ He was arrested for forbidding the destruction of icons of the Virgin Mary and continuing to minister as a priest despite the fact that this was forbidden for Poles in Warthegau (the German-occupied region of Greater Poland). In KL Gusen he was assigned to perform arduous physical labor, in the course of which he was beaten senseless by a kapo at least a dozen times. Worse still, he was forced to recite Eucharistic prayers while being mocked by the camp personnel. Józef Cebula was shot dead on 28 April 1941. Włodzimierz Laskowski (1886–1940), the priest from the Poznań archdiocese mentioned previously in the article, was also beatified (Gintrowicz, 1996, pp. 164–166).

A group of 122 martyrs of the Second World War whose beatification processes are still pending includes 12 victims of the Mauthausen and Gusen concentration camp complex:

1. Seminarian Florian Białka – a Verbite from Chludowo, killed in Gusen in November 1940,
2. Seminarian Czesław Golak – a Verbite from Chludowo, killed in Gusen in July 1941,
3. Seminarian Norbert Gosiemski – a Verbite from Chludowo, killed in Gusen in December 1940,
4. Seminarian Jerzy Jakowejczuk (prisoner number 6298) – a Verbite from Chludowo, killed in Gusen in April 1941,
5. Seminarian Bernard Jaruszewski (prisoner number 112147) – the diocese of Chełmno, killed in Gusen with a phenol injection in 1945,
6. Father Edmund Kalwas (prisoner number 28187) – a Missionary of the Holy Family, murdered in Mauthausen in June 1943,
7. Seminarian Stanisław Kolka (prisoner number 6456) – a Verbite from Chludowo, killed in Gusen in December 1940,
8. Seminarian Bronisław Kowalski – a Verbite from Chludowo, killed in Gusen in 1940,
9. Seminarian Kazimierz Kurzański – a Verbite from Chludowo, killed in Gusen in November 1940,

⁸ He was ordained a priest in 1925, and entered the order in 1927, becoming the Provincial of the Polish Oblates in 1936.

10. Seminarian Alfons Mańka (prisoner number 6665) – a Missionary Oblate of Mary Immaculate from Markowice, perished in Gusen in January 1941,
11. Seminarian Jan Wojtkowiak (prisoner number 7320) – a Verbite from Chludowo, killed in Gusen in December 1940,
12. Seminarian Jan Włoch (prisoner number 7303) – a Verbite from Chludowo, killed in Gusen in September 1940.⁹

The prisoners of KL Gusen (both clerics and laymen) were also commemorated by means of three special votive rosaries, which were made by camp prisoners already during the Second World War. The first of these rosaries was made out of small granite cubes from the quarry in Gusen, in mid-1943. The second was sculpted towards the end of 1943 from a piece of wood from the camp gallows, while the third was made in 1944 out of a piece of plastic taken from the window of an American aircraft which had been shot down near the camp. These strings of beads were intended to symbolize the three mysteries of the Rosary – the joyful, the sorrowful and the glorious. The cubes used for the beads of the rosaries are filled with the ashes of prisoners incinerated at the camp crematorium – among others those of seminarian Władysław Woźniak (1915–1945) from the diocese of Łomża, who was murdered on 22 April 1945. This extraordinary religious undertaking was the direct result of a vow made during Candlemas – on 2 February 1942 – by two prisoners of Gusen: Waclaw Milke from Płock and Władysław Głębiak from Olsztyn. According to their accounts, work on the first rosary commenced after a priest who had been praying on a rosary was forced to swallow the beads of the rosary and then beaten to death in front of other prisoners (unfortunately, we do not have any more details about the victim that could help with the verification of this story). We also know that the prisoners practiced the living Rosary, and that its members carried beads which served as urns and were later incorporated into the Gusen rosaries. Two such urns were presented by former prisoners of Gusen to the Stutthof Museum in Sztutowo as a gift (*Kostki urny*, n.d.).¹⁰ The three rosaries of Gusen were deposited as votive offerings: one in St. Anne's Church in Warsaw, in gratitude for the election of Karol Wojtyła as Pope John Paul II; one in the Jasna Góra sanctuary in Częstochowa in August 1960; and one in the Wrocław Cathedral in 1980 (Jagodzińska, n.d.).

⁹ Currently, the diocesan phase of the procedure has been completed, and the Roman phase is pending. Information concerning the process of beatification of Henryk Szuman and 121 others, conducted by the diocese of Pelplin, is available on the Internet (*Męczennicy*, 2004–2007).

¹⁰ Two of the cubes were given as gifts: one by Florian Wichlacz in 1969, and the other by Krystyna Giemza, the daughter of a prisoner of Gusen, Henryk Wrzeszczański, in 2009.

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