

FEATURES Christmas

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A true Polish Christmas story - Katyn Christmas of 1939

• Robert Strybel

The late Msgr. Zdzislaw Peszkowski, a professor at Polonia's Orchard Lake Schools near Detroit, after retiring became the chaplain to Poland's Katyn Families. He shared the following experiences both orally and in his written memoirs. A 21-year-old cavalry officer in 1939, Peszkowski was among the some 22,000 Polish officers captured by the Soviets and one of a handful who survived the ordeal that would later become known as the Katyn Forest Massacre.

The Polish POW confined to an abandoned Orthodox monastery-turned- prison at Kozielsk, Russia took considerable risks to secretly hear the Word of God, receive the sacraments and uphold their ancestral heritage without their Soviet captors' knowledge. In that way they were a lot like the early Christians worshipping in catacombs.

When Christmas 1939 was approaching, the then Captain Peszkowski asked the friendly prison cook Wanka (Russian for Johnny) for some flour for oplatki. Wanka's eyes mysteriously lit up and he asked Peszkowski to step outside into the snow. He looked about to make sure no one was listening and whispered "Ojczy nasz, któryś jest w niebie..." (The Lord's prayer in Polish). He too was a Pole whose family had been Russified, because admitting to being Polish or Catholic back then was strongly frowned on by the Soviets. It could mean spoiling your job or getting deported into the wastelands of Central Asia.

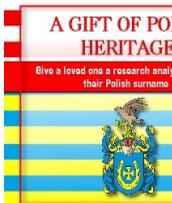
Peszowski got some coarse, rye flour for the oplatki and communion wafers. Amongst those imprisoned at Kozielsk was a priest, whose identity fellow-prisoners had kept a secret and referred to him only by his rank as "the captain." Every so often the word would go around that that "the captain is going for a walk" and prisoners would scurry to join him. Going with him on such a "walk" was the only way they could make their confession.

As Christmas approached, the Soviets twice carried out unannounced searches and roll-calls. Nevertheless, the prisoners managed to clandestinely prepare oplatki which turned out brownish, brittle and similar to Jewish matzoh.

"We sent the youngest man present to see if the evening star was shining, according to our Polish tradition," Peszkowski recounted his Wigilia in Soviet captivity "The oldest man read an extract from the Bible which I had copied from a missal." Someone was always posted on watch outside. Bits of food were placed on a bed sheet pretending to be a tablecloth, and there were even tiny gifts for everyone. But their attempt to quietly sing

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koledy failed. Some of the prisoners shared their experiences of the preceding Christmas, but most wanted to be alone with their thoughts and returned to their bunks.

Midnight Mass was not even attempted. During the long months as a Soviet POW, Peszkowski was able to attend a clandestine Mass only a handful of times. Such Masses were sporadically attended in turn by small groups of prisoners who had to appear to be sitting around and chatting. Soviet guards and politruks (political indoctrination officers) arrived at 10:30 p.m. And only shook their heads in disgust when they saw spruce branches in the middle of the room, the white sheet with our oplatek wafer and a hand-carved wooden Christmas crib.

But nobody was interrogated or punished for engaging in such "illegal propagation of religious superstition," as the Stalinist penal code referred to religion. Did the Soviet POW camp officials already know what fate was in store for the Polish POWs and were under orders not to unduly torment their captives?

Without explanation, a handful of the captured Polish officers, Peszkowski among them, got moved to a "model camp" before the executions began. Apparently the Soviets wanted to have a showplace to show Red Cross officials and visiting diplomats how humanely Stalin treated POWs. Whatever the case, Peszkowski would later be among the Polish survivors who joined the army of General Wladyslaw Anders which led thousands of Polish troops and civilians out of the Soviet Union. After leaving Stalin's "inhuman land," Peszkowski cared for Polish orphans in India for a time and eventually made his way to America, where he became a priest and began teaching Polish and theology at the Polish Seminary in Orchard Lake, Mich. He passed away in Poland in 2007.

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