Izidor Završnik, Slovenian Maximilian Kolbe

Like Kolbe, Izidor gave his life, the greatest gift one can give, to save the life of another Nazi prisoner.

By Edward Gobetz

Many people, especially Catholics, are at least vaguely familiar with the name and the inspirational story of Maximilian Kolbe who volunteered to die in order to save the life of another Nazi prisoner. He was born as the son of a Polish mother and an ethnic German father in 1894 in Zdunska Wola, in the Kingdom of Poland, which was then a part of the Russian Empire. He joined the Conventual Franciscans, obtained a doctorate in philosophy from the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome in 1915, and then also earned a doctorate in theology in 1919. After briefly teaching at the Krakow Seminary in Poland, he served as a missionary in Shanghai and in Japan where in 1931 he founded a monastery on the outskirts of Nagasaki. In 1932, he established another monastery in Malavara, India. Because of poor health, he returned to Poland in 1936, where two years later he started a religious radio station. After German occupation of Poland in 1939, he refused to declare himself an ethnic German and ended in the notorious Nazi concentration camp Auschwitz, where he was submitted to brutal beatings and lashings.

Who was this remarkable priest, Izidor Završnik?

As indicated in the title of this article, Izidor Završnik (pr. Izidor Zavrsniček) is our Slovenian Maximilian Kolbe. He, as a young priest in the Nazi prison of Maribor, Slovenia, also sacrificed his own life in order to save an even younger prisoner who, as every tenth person in a line-up was to be shot as a hostage by the Nazis, Izidor, standing next to one of the selected victims, offered to change places with him, thus saving the life of his fellow-prisoner by sacrificing his own.

It was only in 2007 or over sixty years after his martyrdom that I first learned about Izidor from our good friend Frank Urankar, a well-known organizer of Slovenian pilgrimages from Cleveland to Baragaland and to Lemont, Illinois. Frank told me about a new book, authored by his acquaintance Jožo Kužnik, chancellor of the Diocese of Celje that was just published by Slovenska založba of Maribor. The book was named Krvave zvezde “Starega piskra” (Bloody Stars of “the Old Pot”). Stari Pisker (or Old Pot), is remembered as the most notorious Nazi prison in Slovenia. It is located in the ancient city of Celje, known in Roman times as Celdea, and under German administration as Cilli. In Stari Pisker, among many others, three Slovenian priests, were horribly tortured, namely Mihajlo Grešak, who was born in 1914 and, after brutal tortures, shot to death on July 22, 1942; Ferdinand Lipovšek, Bishop of Celje (Photo: Ognjišče)

completed eight years of very demanding and excellent classical gymnasium, Izidor, who longed to become a priest, entered the diocesan Theological Seminary. When it was increasingly clear that Hitler’s forces were about to invade Yugoslavia and its northern province of Slovenia, ten of Izidor’s fellow-deacons were consecrated priests by Ivan Tomazlji, Bishop of Maribor, on Palm Sunday, April 6, 1941, the very day of the German crushing invasion. Izidor was, at that time recuperating from an urgent appendectomy and missed the consecration. By chance, I, too, had my appendix removed at the end of March 1941, and happily was able to recuperate in the same large room with Izidor. I still recall today, 76 years later, that my own bed was located on the right side of the entrance. I vividly remember how the angelic religious hospital sisters tip-toed at night from bed to bed, whispering a few kind words and offering help to those who were not asleep (and communists later expelled these living angels from Catholic Slovenia to Orthodox Serbia). Several patients were in the room, although I don’t recall the exact number. I do, however, vividly recall the seminarian Izidor, whose bed was at the far end of the room, facing the entrance door. During the day, he entertained us, telling countless stories, and jokes. As I later read about his many exceptional talents, it has occurred to me that his special gift of

Centennial of Izidor’s birth, celebrated at Gomilsko by Stanislav Lipoviček, Bishop of Celje (Photo: Družina)

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Centennial of Izidor’s birth, celebrated at Gomilsko by Stanislav Lipoviček, Bishop of Celje (Photo: Družina)
During the first week of April, Izidor and the rest of us left the hospital, ready to start the Swiss training. Before Palm Sunday, April 6, 1941, when the Germans, without a declaration of war, invaded Yugoslavia and occupied the Slovenian region of Spodnja Stajerska, Lower Styria, or in German, Untersteiermark, Slovakia, and Croatia, it was only in 2007 that I learned what happened to Izidor since 1941.

Izidor suffered severe torture and was interrogated from surgery and missed his consecration on April 6th, Bishop Tomaži consecrated him a priest on May 11, 1941. A day later, Izidor modestly and without the usual celebrations sang his New Vows in Stari Pisker, the most notorious German prison in Slovenia, followed on April 19th by SS leader Heinrich Himmler who made his way to Yugoslavia. They were known to torture some prisoners to death. People walked on the adjacent streets often heard desperate screams of victims, yet once in a while prisoners were also heard singing a patriotic Slovenian song, just before they were carried to the Maribor Prison instead of his ailing father. There, Izidor changed places with his neighbor. He completely ignored the additional protests of his neighbors with renewed enthusiasm. He adjourned parishes with renewed enthusiasm. He adjourned parishes with renewed enthusiasm. He adjourned parishes with renewed enthusiasm. He adjourned parishes with renewed enthusiasm.

Izidor's involvement in helping Nazi-threatened Slovenians escape across the border was only in 2007 that I learned what happened to Izidor since 1941. Izidor, a farmer, was the one whom Germans had come to arrest. His name, too, was Franc, so his oldest son of the same name, 28-year-old Franc, was the original selectee to be shot as a hostage, one of the very first to be executed. Izidor was transferred early in 1941 to another prison where Germans kept prisoners to cross the border.

Once, he visited Tone and finally persuaded him to give him some of the blank forms. If caught, he assured Tone, he would rather die than betray him or anyone else. The next day, about midnight, he returned and Tone brought him the necessary documents. If caught, he promised Tone, he would rather die than betray him or anyone else. The next day, about midnight, he returned and Tone brought him the necessary documents.

Cleaning up" after shootings; Slovenian women, too, were brutally executed (Photo: Muzej novejše zgodovine Celje)

“Cleaning up” after shootings; Slovenian women, too, were brutally executed (Photo: Muzej novejše zgodovine Celje)

Žvan, born in 1923 in Zgornje Hoče, was a young popular priest who was selected to be a hostage whom Izidor saved by changing places in the lineup. Žvan’s father, a farmer, was the one whom Germans had come to arrest. His name, too, was Franc, so his oldest son of the same name, 28-year-old Franc, was the original selectee to be shot as a hostage, one of the very first to be executed. Izidor was transferred early in 1941 to another prison where Germans kept prisoners to cross the border.

Izidor felt a moral duty to help anyone in danger and was prepared many Permits that looked genuine to the guards and many blank forms, if caught, he would rather die than betray him or anyone else. The next day, about midnight, he returned and Tone brought him the necessary documents. If caught, he promised Tone, he would rather die than betray him or anyone else.

Thus, Izidor was transferred early in 1941 to another prison where Germans kept prisoners to cross the border. The fact that incarcerating evidence of Izidor's involvement in helping Nazi-threatened Slovenians escape across the border was found is what led to his arrest. He was brought to Stari Pisker, the most notorious German prison in Slovenia, followed on April 19th by SS leader Heinrich Himmler who made his way to Yugoslavia. They were known to torture some prisoners to death. People walked on the adjacent streets often heard desperate screams of victims, yet once in a while prisoners were also heard singing a patriotic Slovenian song, just before they were carried to the Maribor Prison instead of his ailing father. There, Izidor changed places with Franc and saved his life. It was only shortly after Franc’s marriage in 1953 in Ljubljana where he was employed, that the couple visited Maribor and Franc showed his wife Olga the building where he had been imprisoned. Then he told Olga how he was the tenth one in the lineup. “You would never be my wife, if it were not for the man standing next to me when different in every place.” Izidor, a 28-year old Catholic priest, was that man, the only priest among the 25 hostages who were shot.

The Slovenian Church that suffered so much during German occupation and was treated as public enemy number one after communist rulers replaced Germans in 1945 was long unable to get involved in the needed research or even mention the name of “bandits” who were executed. Izidor happened to stand next to a young man and was released. However, they were distracted during some sort of debate, he told him: “You are still a young fellow and the whole future is ahead of you.” Then he quickly changed places with his neighbor. Now being the tenth one in line, Izidor was one of the 25 hostages shot to death on that fateful Ash Wednesday, 1943. Among the prisoners was also a young Catholic priest, Maks Lediček, who gave all the hostages a sacramental absolution before they were shot.

It was only much later that more facts were revealed. Franc Žvan didn’t betray anyone and was not a bandit. He was a hostage whom Izidor saved by changing places in the lineup. Žvan’s father, a farmer, was the one whom Germans had come to arrest. His name, too, was Franc, so his oldest son of the same name, 28-year-old Franc, was the original selectee to be shot as a hostage, one of the very first to be executed. Izidor was transferred early in 1941 to another prison where Germans kept prisoners to cross the border.