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Our Polonia

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"BROTHER ZENO"

We Polonians have all become very aware of the recently conferred sainthood upon Father Maximilian Kolbe, but not too much has been written about his life and exploits in Japan with a man/priest that has come to be known as Brother Zeno (Zenon Zebrowski).

Parts of the following can be attributed to Franciszek Kwawery who wrote the original text in Polish...

Brother Zeno was born on September 28, 1898. He donned the monk's frock on December 15, 1928. On April 24, 1930, he came to Japan with Father Maksymilian Kolbe and Brother Hilary Lysakowski. On December 17th the following year, Brother Zeno took his monastic vows. He is the only living witness of the entire stay of Father Kolbe in Japan from the moment of their departure from Poland until their final parting in Nagasaki. The difficulties connected with a mission in a foreign country during this particular period of history cannot be expressed by the pen. Brother Zeno was closely tied to Father Kolbe. He not only helped him in all his difficulties but also did not flinch from them himself, working without a word of complaint.

One of the means of main communication in Japan is Nihon Hoso Kyokai (NHK), which is a national radio program. Not long ago NHK decided to present a radio play entitled, "Footsteps of Foreigners in Japan." The scenarist, K. Shindo, worked up the program after a meeting with Brother Zeno in a Tokyo hospital in July 1979. He describes this meeting as follows: "The brother was lying in bed, in blue pajamas and the nurse caring for him was helping him to get up. She announced the visitors, introducing them

to Brother Zeno, who attempted to speak a few words to them. He was a handsome man and looked healthy. He also didn't look his age. Seeing his erect form, one could believe that he was much younger."

The action of the radio play began at the moment of Brother Zeno's arrival in Japan on April 24, 1930, when these three Poles arrived at the port of Nagasaki. They had sailed to Japan from Hong Kong, departing from Warsaw in February, which meant that they already had a three months' voyage behind them. They immediately made their way to the Cathedral in Ours. Bishop Hayasaka, who received them, was in serious difficulties - the newcomers did not know a word of Japanese. But already on the following day they began to study the language intensively.

Brother Zeno often came to the paper warehouse in Nagasaki, requesting an allotment of paper. "Please give me paper," he said, "we want to print. Please give me sheets of paper." After which he sat down and refused to move until he received the paper. At that time the owner of the warehouse was no longer alive and had been succeeded by his son, who regarded Brother Zeno as a truly unyielding and consistent person. The newly arrived priests wished to shock society by publishing the first number *Seibo no Kishi* (The Knight of the Immaculate One) already one month after their arrival in Japan. Paper was the most important, printing could be done much more cheaply. The manuscript, written in Polish, was first translated into French or Italian with the help of foreign missionaries, then this translation was in turn translated into Japanese.

Brother Zeno and Brother Hilary worked without rest, day and night. Their perseverance was admirable. Father Kolbe went to Osaka to purchase a printing machine, while Brother Zeno looked for a building that could serve as a printing office. In the opinion of eyewitnesses, the life of the priests was very difficult, to such an extent that it hardly differed from the life of beggars. A straw mat served for a place to sleep, which they placed near the printing machine. The equipment of their kitchen was limited to a clay stove on charcoal and an enamel pot. They displayed the already printed books in a room on the corner of the street, encouraging passers-by with the words: "Buy books, please!"

It was essential to have a house. They toured the entire country and in the end found a building in the Honogochi valley, located in the upper course of the Nakayima River, which flows through the center of Nagasaki. This vicinity was full of unbursed remains of various animals left by people. The price of a house here, however, was lower than elsewhere. For a contribution received from Poland they bought 2,250 square meters of land, paying 7,000 yen (at present about 33 dollars). The people Brother Zeno led were at first rather distrustful of this undertaking. Father Kolbe dissipated their anxiety, saying: "This will be land where in the future all our brothers will live happily. Here we shall build our temple."

At present, in this place there is a group of buildings filling the entire valley...a church, secondary school, and also a fully equipped printshop. Stone steps lead to the top of the valley. During World War II, Brother Zeno brought stones one by one from a no longer used slaughterhouse in the area. He also busied himself with weaving, printing and shoemaking. He was the first to inform the others about the death of Father Kolbe. He wept. Father Kolbe used to say to him: "There is no greater love than to sacrifice one's life for others."

The war ended, Brother Zeno's work began anew. The explosion of the atom bomb turned Nagasaki into ruins. Japan was full of orphans. Brother Zeno assembled them. He toured Hiroshima, Osaka and Tokyo in order to bring children to the orphanage he had built together with others. He was everywhere, even going to the American occupation authorities to ask for food for orphans. He went everywhere he could in order to obtain help for people stricken by tragedy. He had only a pair of worn-out shoes; besides his habit he had no other clothes. As soon as he received a contribution, he immediately gave it to the needy. This spirit of helping people never left him.

In 1971, Brother Zeno visited Poland after an absence of 41 years. In June 1976, he received a high decoration at the Polish Embassy in Tokyo. In July 1979, he received a gold medal for his services from the Japanese

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