

A LIFE LIVED ON AN EPIC SCALE

Multifaceted pope left a huge legacy

BY BOB KEELER
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For all his erudition and mysticism, Pope John Paul II was a gloriously human pope, not pale and other-worldly from years in a Vatican bureaucracy, but fully rounded and robust from toiling in the harsh light of the real world.

This pope felt the sting of his parents' deaths at an early age, worked with his hands, heard the rock-hard cacophony of a quarry and the boom of Nazi bombs, enjoyed belting out a good song. He lived an out-sized, epic life — so full of novelistic, even cinematic, twists of plot that it might well have been written by Charles Dickens and filmed by Steven Spielberg.

A major element of his uniqueness was his stunning versatility. In many fields of endeavor, Karol Wojtyla (pronounced voy-TEE-wah) was outrageously adept: as a poet, an athlete, a linguist, a playwright, an actor, a philosopher, an economic and social critic, a deft political strategist. His writing output was breathtaking in its volume and variety: from a tender, heartbreaking poem for his dead mother, to encyclicals that thundered against the relativism of the modern world by restating moral certainties and proclaiming "The Splendor of Truth," as he named one encyclical.

Wojtyla's participation in a secret seminary and an underground theater exposed him daily to the threat of arrest and consignment to a concentration camp, and he saw his Jewish friends disappear into the jaws of the Nazi killing machine. Later, as pope, he translated this profound empathy into the greatest advances ever in Catholic-Jewish relations.

In addition to his bountiful talents, John Paul always enjoyed the patronage of key church leaders — from Cardinal Adam Stefan Sapieha, the archbishop of Krakow, who first noticed Wojtyla as an 18-year-old student, recruited him, ordained him a priest and played a major role in launching his career, to Pope Paul VI, who admired him and prized his advice.

Wojtyla became an auxiliary bishop at age 38, archbishop of Krakow at 43 and a cardinal at 47. He was only 58 — clearly younger than the norm — when he was elected to the papacy in 1978, becoming the first non-Italian pope since Adrian VI in 1522-1523. In choosing Wojtyla, the College of Cardinals opted for a vigorously healthy young man to succeed Pope John Paul I, whose papacy lasted only a month before he died. Wojtyla loved to hike, ski and kayak, and he displayed boundless energy and prodigious capacity for working long hours.

No one who knew him as a young man would have been shocked to learn that his life would unfold well. Though his mother died just before his 9th birthday and his brother and father died before he was 21, his loneliness and tragedy were surrounded by accomplishment. He was always at the top of his class, but he did not fit the



Pope John Paul II, shown walking in a field on Dolomite Mountain, often hiked in hills and mountains on his travels.

stereotype of the delicate, introverted genius. He loved sports and his abundant charm made him a student leader. His emerging theatrical skill brought him positions as an actor and director in Wadowice, the town where he was born on May 18, 1920.

In 1938, Archbishop Sapieha visited his high school, and Wojtyla's welcoming speech impressed him. Sapieha asked a local priest whether Wojtyla was interested in the seminary. But Wojtyla told Sapieha that he planned to attend the Jagiellonian University and study Polish philology — a natural choice for someone interested in poetry and drama.

That summer, after his high school graduation, Wojtyla and his friends had to serve in a paramilitary labor battalion, where he peeled potatoes and built roads. Then he and his father moved into a basement apartment in Krakow, near the Jagiellonian. There, as in high school, he became a student leader.

On Sept. 1, 1939, as the Nazis bombed Krakow, Wojtyla and a friend were in the streets, surrounded by the mayhem. The occupation that followed sorely tested not only the national spirit, but Wojtyla's own. Cracking down on intellectuals, the Nazis deported his professors. To avoid deportation, he had to take a job at a quarry. That later inspired a long poem, "The Quarry." Here Wojtyla developed his sense of what it was like to be a working man. But his co-workers saw his intelligence and made it possible for him to study even on the job. "It did not bother them that I brought books to work," he wrote in 1996. "They would say: 'We'll keep watch. You go ahead and read.'"

When Wojtyla decided in 1942 to study for the priesthood, he entered an underground seminary. His life revolved around the seminary, his



President Reagan greeted the pope on his arrival in Miami on Sept. 10, 1987.

daytime job, and an enterprise that could have earned him deportation: the development of the underground theater. In 1944, as he walked home from work, a German army truck hit and nearly killed him. Later that year, after the Warsaw Uprising, the Nazis rounded up young men in Krakow; Wojtyla barely avoided arrest.

After the war, Cardinal Sapieha ordained him in 1946. Soon after that, Wojtyla headed off to Rome — his first venture outside Poland — to study theology and the ancient city itself. During this period, he traveled in both France and Belgium, visiting the country church in Ars where St. John Mary Vianney, a 19th-century priest who was the best-known confessor of his time, had spent as many as 18 hours a day hearing confessions and offering spiritual advice.

In 1948, he completed his first of two doctorates, this one in theology. His dissertation fo-

cused on the Spanish Carmelite mystic, St. John of the Cross. Then he returned to Poland to begin serving in a parish outside Krakow.

"When I finally reached the territory of Niegowic parish, I knelt down and kissed the ground," he wrote in "Gift and Mystery." "It was a gesture I had learned from St. John Mary Vianney." And it was a gesture that he was to repeat many times as pope, on his first visit to a country.

Less than a year later, he was sent to a parish in Krakow, where he worked extensively with secondary school and college students. In that parish and in his university chaplaincy, he built what he came to call his Srodowisko, his environment.

In 1951, Sapieha's successor as archbishop of Krakow, Eugeniusz Baziak, sent Wojtyla off on a two-year academic sabbatical to work on a second doctorate, this time in philosophy. His

study focused on phenomenology, a school of philosophy that tried to take account of the everyday things of life in its examination of the great questions.

"There was ample evidence that Wojtyla was going to be a troublemaker," said George Weigel, author of "Witness to Hope: The Biography of Pope John Paul II," the authorized biography published in 1999. If the government had been paying sufficient attention, it should have marked him as a man to be watched carefully and suppressed at all costs.

Once the Solidarity movement began, John Paul nurtured it through its confrontations with the Polish government. In the difficult spring of 1981, as the movement grew, the press in the Soviet Union verbally attacked John Paul. A few weeks later, a Turk named Mehmet Ali Agca physically attacked the pope.

The failed assassination attempt occurred on the anniversary of the first Marian apparition at Fatima, and the pope attributed his survival to Mary's intervention. On the first anniversary of the assassination attempt, he visited the shrine at Fatima and said his survival was no accident, that "in the designs of Providence there are no mere coincidences."

At Agca's trial, the formal verdict held that he had not acted alone but named no co-conspirators. No one has tied the shooting definitively to communist anger over John Paul's role in Poland, but that suspicion lingered. In 1983, the pope visited Agca in prison and forgave him. A few months after the assassination attempt, the new Polish leader, Gen. Wojciech Jaruzelski, declared a "state of war," imposed martial law and ordered mass arrests to crack down on Solidarity. The general had all of the state's military power on his side, and the pope had only the power of moral force, but when John Paul returned to Poland in 1983, in a meeting between the two men, Jaruzelski visibly trembled, and later acknowledged that he had been nervous. Weeks after John Paul's visit, Jaruzelski formally ended the "state of war" in Poland.

The events in Poland were an overture to the collapse of communism in Europe at the end of the 1980s and the start of the 1990s, but in John Paul's behind-the-scenes maneuvering in Europe, some details remain in dispute. One version comes from Carl Bernstein, who covered the Watergate scandal for The Washington Post. In a 1992 Time magazine article, Bernstein wrote about "The Holy Alliance" between President Reagan and John Paul, primarily run by the White House, that kept Solidarity alive. He described meetings between White House and Vatican aides to further this cooperation. Later, he expanded this account in a 1996 book written with Italian reporter Marco Politi, "His Holiness: John Paul II and the Hidden History of Our Time."

But for Jonathan Kwitny, author of "Man of the Century: The Life and Times of Pope John Paul II" in 1997, reports of a Reagan-John Paul alliance were totally unsubstantiated. Kwitny wrote that the Time article was "a work of fiction from beginning to end."

Perhaps the definitive verdict comes from one of the primary players on the opposing side. "Everything that happened in Eastern Europe in these last few years would have been impossible without the presence of this pope and without the important role — including the political role — that he played on the world stage," former Russian President Mikhail Gorbachev wrote in the newspaper La Stampa of Turin, Italy, in 1992.

John Paul stood up to totalitarianism, and at times, he made its knees shake. Describing his time under totalitarianism, John Paul told Weigel: "I participated in the great experience of my contemporaries — humiliation at the hands of evil." But he overcame the humiliation, because his life reflected the simple words of Jesus that he used so often in his papacy: "Be not afraid."

From his election to his death, John Paul remained true to that. He simply did not fear.

