

The Home Town Remembers Pope

Vatican City (RNS) — A register of births in a Catholic Church in a town called Wadowice, about 170 miles south of Warsaw, the capital of Poland, bears among its entries the inscription: Karolus Josef Wojtyla, born to mother, Emelia Kaczorowska, and father, Karolus, May 18, 1920.

Next to the entry, the parish priest noted in Latin that Karolus Josef was elected Pope John Paul II on Oct. 16, 1978.

The Latin inscription — spare, bloodless, factual — says nothing about the man who is the first Polish pope in history. It does not say, for example, that he is a man who loves jokes, and particularly puns.

"He likes to play on words in Polish," says a Polish bishop who has known him for 20 years, "because they are funny and they don't hurt anyone."

The new pope, who was Archbishop of Cracow until his election, is also a man with a sharp memory. Sister Mary Blaise Surlas of Cracow met the future pope when he was Titular bishop of Ombi, about 20 years ago.

"I was a young, a very bashful schoolgirl," she says. "But our local priest told me I would have to make a welcoming speech for the

bishop. When the time came to speak, I just couldn't. I was so scared. Then, all at once, the bishop hugged me and asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. Then, my fear left me."

It was not until about 10 years later, the sister explains, when she had become a nun, that she next saw then Cardinal Karol Wojtyla. He was calling on the sisters of her institute, the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Felix, in Cracow, she explained, "He recognized me immediately and asked me what I was doing now."

In Wadowice, there still lives a teacher who recalls when Karol Wojtyla was a schoolboy. Father Edward Zacher, his teacher in the Lyceum, or Classical High School, remembers that the pope was an outstanding pupil, who excelled particularly in literature and foreign languages. The pope is fluent in Latin, Polish, English, French, Italian, German.

Father Zacher's young pupil came from a working class home. His father was left alone to raise Karol and his two older brothers after Emilia Wojtyla died when young Karol was eight years old.

Father Zacher does not remember young Karol Wojtyla as a pupil who was

particularly inclined to religion. "I believe that his calling to God, his vocation to the priesthood, must have taken place in the first years of the war in Cracow," he says.

The Polish bishop explains that though Karol Wojtyla did not become a priest until 1946, the story that he had a wife, fiancée, or girl friend during the war is untrue. He explains that working in the day to support himself, Wojtyla studied at night all during the war to become a priest.

Whatever the reason for the future Pope's decision to become a priest, it did not prevent him from pursuing normal, everyday activities.

During the war, he was an actor with an underground theater troupe, the Rhapsodic Theatre. The group was clandestine by nature because the Nazis forbade Polish cultural activities. It would perform before groups of twenty or thirty people gathered in people's homes.

Even after his ordination in 1946, the young priest continued to publish poems, most of them long and not all of them on religious themes. They appeared in two Catholic journals, the "Universal Weekly" and "The Sign," a monthly. The poems were published under the pseudonym, Andrea Jawien, the name of a character from



Pope in Early years

Little Karol Wojtyla, who became Pope John Paul II on Oct. 16, poses with a candle in his hand after receiving First Communion in Cracow, Poland (date not known).

a 1930s Polish novel about a man who loses and then regains his faith.

The future Pope's other past-time was sports. He loves skiing, camping, canoeing (which he has now given up), mountain climbing, swimming and watching soccer.

Participants at a conference in Milan, Italy, on paternal and maternal love recall the

future Pope rushing off to see Poland play Brazil for the World Soccer Cup, last June.

Others recall his asking "how many Italian cardinals ski?" When he received no reply, he answered, "In Poland, fifty per cent of the cardinals ski." (He was talking about himself and Cardinal Stefan Wyzenski, the two Polish resident cardinals.)

As befits an athletic man, the new pontiff has an appetite, particularly for Polish food. Sister Mary Blaise, a cook, recalls that the future pontiff was not above sneaking into the kitchen when she was preparing meals for guests, to sample some tripe, a favorite dish of his, along with potato pancakes. The Pope, it is reported, does not drink vodka, but likes an occasional light beer.

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