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Webster woman prays for uncle martyred by Nazis

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

WEBSTER — When the Nazis imprisoned Father Emilian Kowcz in Majdanek concentration camp in Poland, he spurned all attempts to get him released.

"Don't waste your efforts," he wrote his bishop. "I cannot leave here because I am needed. These unfortunate people — thousands of them — need me. I am their only comfort. It is my duty to remain here, and I am happy."

Only a saint could be happy in a concentration camp, and that's what Father Kowcz may become. On Wednesday, June 27, Father Kowcz will be among the 27 Ukrainian Catholic martyrs beatified by Pope John Paul II in Lviv, Ukraine. Beatification is the last step taken before a person is canonized a saint by the church.

The martyrs died either at the hands of the Nazis, who occupied Ukraine during World War II, or at the hands of the Soviets, who outlawed the Ukrainian Catholic Church after the war and persecuted it until 1991. In August of that year, Ukraine gained its independence and instituted religious freedom for all.

Father Kowcz was arrested in December, 1942, for issuing Catholic baptismal certificates to thousands of Jews in order to protect them from the Nazis. He was sent to the camp in August, 1943, and could have gained release if he had agreed to not continue helping Jews. He refused and died on March 25, 1944, as the result of beatings from camp guards.

When the pope beatifies Father Kowcz, his niece, Christina Kowcz, will be watch-

ing the ceremony on her TV set in her Webster home. A parishioner at St. Josaphat's Ukrainian Catholic Church in Irondequoit, Kowcz — along with her mother, Lubomyra, and her father, Ewstachij, the martyred priest's brother — left Ukraine the same month her uncle was killed. Her cousin, Maria Lozynsky, likewise attends St. Josaphat's, and the two may watch the ceremony together, Christina Kowcz said.

"From what I've read about him, he must have been a marvelous man," Kowcz said as she sat in her kitchen. "He was always putting others before himself."

She pointed out that Father Kowcz used his time in camp to minister to others — celebrating Mass, giving people last rites before they were killed and, in general, comforting everyone in their sorrow.

She added that she didn't know him in Ukraine, but learned about his life by reading the 1994 book on his life *For God's Truth and Human Rights*, penned by the priest's late daughter, Anna Maria Kowcz-Baran. (Eastern Rite Catholic priests are allowed to marry and have children.) Christina Kowcz said she has been praying for her uncle's canonization ever since she learned several months ago that he was to be beatified.

"It's a very deep feeling for an uncle that I never had a chance to meet," she said. "It's quite an honor for the family."

Kowcz's father shared some of his brother's saintly qualities, she added. When the Germans came to occupy Ukraine in 1941, they compelled her father to serve as an agricultural engineer on confiscated farmland. She noted that the Ukrainians at first welcomed the Germans because they saw



Karin von Voigtlander/Photo intern

Christina Kowcz recalls the life of her uncle, Father Emilian Kowcz, who died in a Nazi concentration camp.

them as liberators from the Soviets, whose policies had fostered a famine that killed millions in Ukraine in the 1930s. However, the Ukrainians learned soon enough that the Germans did not intend to give Ukraine its independence, and her father began working against the same Germans he entertained in his home.

"Our cellar was crawling with people hiding," she recalled, adding that Jews would be in the basement while German soldiers were upstairs drinking and laughing with her father.

Ironically, even though he saved Jews from the Nazis, as the Red Army advanced

on Ukraine in 1944, her father knew the Soviets would see him as a collaborator with the enemy.

"In general, I would say we were caught between two evils," she said of the Nazis and the communists. "Nobody had good plans for us."

Her father decided it was best to take his wife and his daughter out of Ukraine and into Austria where they lived in a refugee camp in the U.S.-occupied zone. They stayed there until 1951 when they were able to move to Rochester where some relatives lived. Among her deceased relatives who have lived here was a cousin who was arrested by the Soviets for teaching Catholicism and sent to Siberia for 18 years before she came to the United States.

Kowcz, who translates St. Josaphat's weekly bulletin into Ukrainian, has written an article for her parish about her priest-uncle. The story is a fascinating portrait of a cleric who seemed completely filled with hope in a hopeless situation. In particular, she pointed out the extraordinary words he wrote in the last note to be smuggled out of the camp to his family. In this note, he asked his supporters to pray for those who created the camps, and asked God to "have mercy on them."

"Besides Heaven, this is the only place I would like to be," Father Kowcz wrote of the camp. "We are all equal here. Poles, Jews, Ukrainians, Russians, Lithuanians or Estonians. ... They die in different ways, and I help them to cross the bridge."

"Is this not a blessing?" he continued. "Is this not the greatest crown my Lord could put on my head? It is. I thank God a thousands times a day that he sent me here."

Trip

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pope praised the dynamism of Ukrainian faith and the amazing speed with which the nation's Eastern Catholics were able to rebuild their church after more than four decades of being forced to live their faith underground. The pope sat to the right of the altar near a huge icon of Christ, as Cardinal Lubomyr Husar of Lviv, head of the Eastern-rite Ukrainian Catholic Church, led the liturgical celebration.

Pope John Paul said the liturgy, so dif-

ferent from the Latin-rite Mass he celebrated the day before, is just one sign of the diversity found within the church.

The pope was planning to beatify more than a score of Ukrainian Catholics, most of whom were killed by the Nazis or the Soviets. The beatification was slated to take place during a Mass in Lviv on June 27. Beatification is the final step taken before a person is canonized a saint.

Parishioners at St. Josaphat's Ukrainian Catholic Church in Irondequoit viewed the beatifications with particular interest. Cousins Christina Kowcz and Maria Lozynsky are nieces of Father Emilian Kowcz,

one of the Ukrainians slated for beatification. Father Kowcz was killed in a Nazi concentration camp in Poland (see related story on this page).

Meanwhile, the parish's religious sisters belong to the order Sisters Servants of Mary Immaculate. Sister Tarsyia Olga Mackiv, a member of their order, was shot by a Soviet soldier in 1944 and has been declared a martyr. She is to be beatified alongside the order's cofounder, Sister Josaphata Michaelina Hordashevskya, who died of tuberculosis of the bone in 1919.

In addition to honoring Christians who suffered for their faith under the Nazis and

the communists, Pope John Paul also paid homage to Ukrainian Jews and Muslims who were persecuted, murdered or exiled under the totalitarian regimes.

Speaking of the Nazi shooting of tens of thousands of Jews at Babi Yar, near Kiev, in the early days of World War II, the pope said, "What atrocities is man capable of when he fools himself into thinking that he can do without God." The pope visited Babi Yar June 25; the previous evening he had prayed at Bukovnya, a forest outside Kiev where the bodies of 120,000 victims of Joseph Stalin's 1937-41 purges were dumped.

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