

## Maximilian Kolbe - a story from Auschwitz



In order to discourage escapes, Auschwitz had a rule that if a man escaped, ten other men would be killed. In July 1941 a man from Kolbe's bunker escaped. *'The **fugitive** has not been found!'* the commandant Karl Fritsch screamed. *'You will all pay for this. Ten of you will be locked in the **starvation** bunker without food or water until they die.'* The ten were selected, including Franciszek Gajowniczek. He couldn't help a cry of **anguish**. *'My poor wife!' he **sobbed**. 'My poor children! What will they do?'* As he was crying, Maximilian Kolbe stepped silently forward, took off his cap, and stood before the commandant and said, *'I am a Catholic priest. Let me take his place. I am old. He has a wife and children.'* Surprised, the icy-faced Nazi commandant asked, *'What does this Polish pig want?'* Father Kolbe pointed with his hand to the **condemned** Franciszek Gajowniczek and repeated *'I am a Catholic priest from Poland; I would like to take his place, because he has a wife and children.'*

The commandant remained silent for a moment. Amazingly, he accepted the request. Franciszek Gajowniczek was returned to the **ranks**, and the priest took his place. Father Kolbe was thrown down the stairs of Building 13 along with the other victims and simply left there to **starve**. Hunger and thirst soon began to frighten the men. Some drank their own urine, others **licked** moisture on the walls. Maximilian Kolbe encouraged the others with prayers, psalms, and meditations on the Passion of Christ. After two weeks, only four were alive. The **cell** was needed for more victims, and the camp executioner came in and injected a dose of cabolic acid into the left arm of each of the four dying men. Kolbe was the only one still fully **conscious** and with a prayer on his lips, the last prisoner raised his arm for the executioner. His wait was over ...

So it was that Father Maximilian Kolbe was executed on 14 August, 1941 at the age of forty-seven years. His body was removed to the crematorium, and without dignity or ceremony was **disposed of**, like hundreds of thousands who had gone before him. The cell where he died is now an Auschwitz memorial.

But what happened to Gajowniczek - the man Father Kolbe saved? He died on March 13, 1995, at Brzeg in Poland, 95 years old - and 53 years after Kolbe had saved him. After his release from Auschwitz, Gajowniczek made his way back to his hometown, with the dream of seeing his family again. He found his wife but his two sons had been killed during the war. But he was never to forget the ragged monk

Franciszek Gajowniczek said: 'I could only thank him with my eyes. I was stunned and could hardly grasp what was going on. The immensity of it: I, the condemned, am to live and someone else willingly and voluntarily offers his life for me - a stranger. Is this some dream? I was put back into my place without having had time to say anything to Maximilian Kolbe. I was saved. And I owe to him the fact that I could tell you all this. The news quickly spread all round the camp. It was the first and the last time that such an incident happened in the whole history of Auschwitz.'

The dreadful irony of the story is that the escaped prisoner was later found drowned in a camp latrine, so the terrible reprisals had been exercised without cause.

Extracts taken from <http://auschwitz.dk/Kolbe.htm>. Some part have been abridged.