

Izidor Završnik, Slovenian Maximilian Kolbe

Like Kolbe, Izidor gave his life, the greatest gift one can give, to save the life of another Nazi prisoner.

By Edward Gobetz

Many people, especially Catholics, are at least vaguely familiar with the name and the inspirational story of Maximilian Kolbe who volunteered to die in order to save the life of another Nazi prisoner. He was born as the son of a Polish mother and an ethnic German father in 1894 in Zdunska Wola, in the Kingdom of Poland, which was then a part of the Russian Empire. He joined the Conventual Franciscans, obtained a doctorate in philosophy from the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome in 1915, and then also earned a doctorate in theology in 1919. After briefly teaching at the Krakow Seminary in Poland, he served as a missionary in Shanghai and in Japan where in 1931 he founded a monastery on the outskirts of Nagasaki. In 1932, he established another monastery in Malabar, India. Because of poor health, he returned to Poland in 1936, where two years later he started a religious radio station. After German occupation of Poland in 1939, he refused to declare himself an ethnic German and ended in the notorious Nazi concentration camp Auschwitz, where he was submitted to brutal beatings and lashings.



Sv. Jurij ob Taboru, a small parish where Izidor Završnik was born

When at the end of July 1941 three prisoners escaped, the deputy camp commander Karl Fritzch ordered ten men to be starved to death in an underground bunker to deter further escape attempts. One of the selected prisoners cried out, "My wife! My children!" and Kolbe, moved by compassion, volunteered to take his place. After two weeks of dehydration and starvation, only Kolbe remained alive. Then he was given a lethal injection in order to empty the bunker for the next group of victims.

On October 10, 1982, Kolbe was canonized a saint by Pope John Paul II. He remains an inspiration to Catholics and to the entire humanity (https://wikipedia.org/wiki/Maximilian_kolbe).

As indicated in the title of this article, Izidor Završnik (pr. Isidor Zavershnick) is our Slovenian Maximilian Kolbe. He, as a young priest in the Nazi prison of Maribor, Slovenia, also sacrificed his own life in order to save an even younger prisoner who, as every tenth person in a line-up was to be shot as a hostage by the Nazis. Izidor, standing next to one of the selected victims, offered to change places with him, thus saving the life of his fellow-prisoner by sacrificing his own.

Who was this remarkable priest, Izidor Završnik?

It was only in 2007 or over sixty years after his martyrdom that I first learned about Izidor from our good friend Frank Urankar, a well-known organizer of Slovenian pilgrimages from Cleveland to Baragaland and to Lemont, Illinois. Frank told me about a new book, authored by his acquaintance Jože Kužnik, chancellor of the Diocese of Celje that was just published by Slomškova založba of Maribor. The book was named *Krvave zvezde "Starega piskra"* (*Bloody Stars of "the Old Pot"*). Stari Pisker (or Old Pot), is remembered as the most notorious Nazi prison in Slovenia. It is located in the ancient city of Celje, known in Roman times as Celea, and under German administration as Cilli. In Stari Pisker, among many others, three Slovenian priests, were horribly tortured, namely Mihael Grešak, who was born in 1914 and, after brutal tortures, shot to death on July 22, 1942; Ferdinand Potokar, born in 1911, who died on November 5, 1942, as a consequence of brutal tortures; while Izidor, after excruciating torture, was transferred to another Nazi



Celje (Celea under Romans and Cilli during Austrian and German administration)

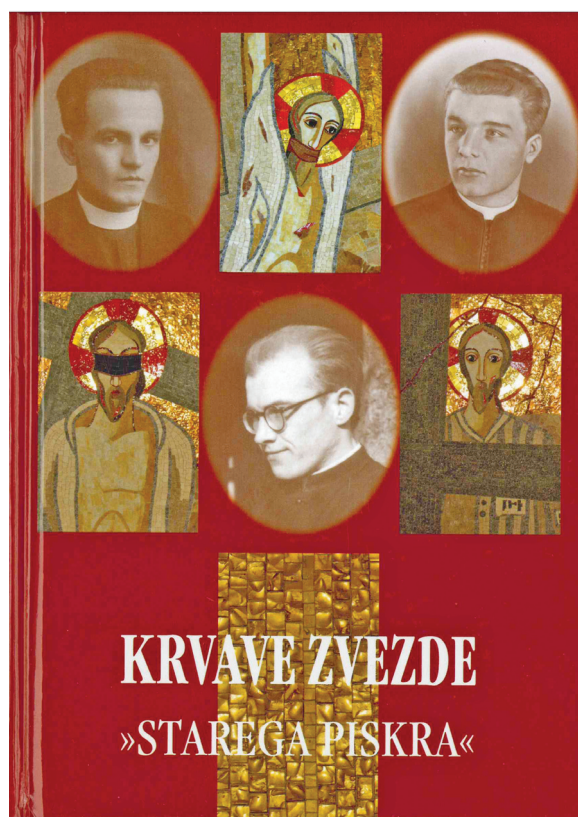
prison in the city of Maribor, in northern Slovenia. There he volunteered to be shot as one of 25 hostages to save the life of another Slovenian prisoner. Just as the City of Celje has three golden stars in its coat of arms, so Kužnik called these martyrs the "three bloody stars of Stari Pisker". His was the first book about Izidor.

What are some facts about Izidor Završnik? He was born on April 4, 1917, in the small Parish of St. Jurij ob Taboru, to father Vinko, a tailor and sacristan, and to mother Lucia, nee Kozmelj. Soon after his birth, the family moved to nearby Gomilsko where his brother Drago and sister Ana were born. In 1928, Izidor entered the Little Seminary in Maribor and completed eight years of classical gymnasium. Jože Kužnik, pages 78-79; and Karel Gržan, *Zmagovita ljubezen* (*Victorious Love*, Ognjišče, 2017, pages 27-43), as well as a few other authors, educators and observers, noted that Izidor, or Darko, as he was called for short, was exceptionally gifted. He learned easily and fast and excelled in prescribed curriculum courses. He was remarkably multi-talented: wrote poetry, became a playwright, having dramatized Ivan Cankar's *Šimen Sirotnik*; engaged in photography, was a budding artist and illustrator of a number of texts by such writers as Josip Jurčič and Fran Saleški Finžgar, and was the very best chess player at the entire school. Yet, he remained modest and always deeply grateful to God and to his benefactors, especially to Father Franc Cukale, a native of Gomilsko who became the Canon at the diocese in Maribor and took a fatherly interest in Izidor as his top benefactor and a remarkably capable and influential mentor (Gržan, pages 9-43).

In 1936, after having



Izidor Završnik, as a dedicated young priest at Gomilsko (Photo: Družina)



Cover of Kužnik's book: top Grešak and Potokar; center Završnik (Photo: Ognjišče)



Centennial of Izidor's birth, celebrated at Gomilsko by Stanislav Lipovšek, Bishop of Celje (Photo: Družina)

completed eight years of very demanding and excellent classical gymnasium, Izidor, who longed to become a priest, entered the diocesan Theological Seminary. When it was increasingly clear that Hitler's forces were about to invade Yugoslavia and its northern province of Slovenia, ten of Izidor's fellow-deacons were consecrated priests by Ivan Tomažič, Bishop of Maribor, on Palm Sunday, April 6, 1941, the very day of the German crushing invasion. Izidor was, at that time recuperating from an urgent appendectomy and missed the consecration. By chance, I, too, had my appendix removed at the end of March 1941, and happened to be recuperating in the same large room with Izidor. I still recall today, 76 years later, that my own bed was located on the right side of the entrance. I vividly remember how the angelic religious hospital sisters tip-toed at night from bed to bed, whispering a few kind words and offering help to those who were not asleep (and communists later expelled these living angels from Catholic Slovenia to Orthodox Serbia!). Several patients were in the room, although I don't recall the exact number. I do, however, vividly recall the seminarian Izidor, whose bed was at the far end of the room, facing the entrance door. During the day, he entertained us, telling countless stories, and jokes. As I later read about his many exceptional talents, it has occurred to me that his special gift of

entertaining as a storyteller should perhaps also be added to the very impressive list.

During the first week of April, Izidor and the rest of us left the hospital, reaching our homes just in time before Palm Sunday, April 6, 1941, when the Germans, without a declaration of war, invaded Yugoslavia and occupied the Slovenian region of Spodnja Štajerska, Lower Styria, or in German, Untersteiermark, by Good Friday, April 11th. It was only in 2007 that I learned what happened to Izidor since 1941.

Since he was still recuperating from surgery and missed his consecration on April 6th, Bishop Tomažič consecrated him a priest on May 11, 1941. A day later, Izidor modestly and without the usual celebrations sang his New Mass in his parish church at Gomilsko, in Savinjska dolina, or the Savinja (Savinja) Valley, near the ancient city of Celje. By then, the Germans expelled many Slovenian priests from the Diocese of Maribor. According to the noted historian Dr. Tamara Griesser Pečar, while “there were 608 priests in Styria at the beginning of the war, only 121 remained by the end of 1941,” most of them borrowed replacements from non-Slovenian dioceses (see *Razdvojeni narod: Slovenia 1941-1945*, Mladinska knjiga, 2004, page 35). Because of his late ordination, Izidor was not on the German list of priests to be expelled, mostly to Croatia, so he worked with great enthusiasm not only in his own parish of Gomilsko, but also in several neighboring parishes. An optimist, he tried to bring comfort and hope to his landsmen. When the use of the Slovenian language was forbidden in all public places, including churches, schools, administrative offices and even in village grocery stores, Izidor was convinced that eventually Slovenians would be liberated and could again freely practice their religion, study and communicate in Slovenian language, cultivate their culture in Slovenian organizations and enjoy freedom. Have faith, he urged others. Meanwhile, Germans kept expelling and arresting many Slovenians, especially those with leadership qualities. Those in danger tried to escape across the border to the Italian occupation zone, where conditions were initially safer, yet many were shot or caught and severely punished. Izidor felt a moral duty to help those in greatest danger. He knew a good patriotic Slovenian, Tone, who worked in the nearby municipal office of Braslovče where Germans kept permits to cross the border.

Once, he visited Tone and finally persuaded him to give him some of the blank forms. If caught, he assured Tone, he would rather die than betray him or anyone else. The next day, about midnight, he returned and Tone brought him the life-saving blank forms. In the weeks that followed, Izidor, using his artistic skills, prepared many Permits that looked genuine to the guards and many probable victims safely crossed the border (Kučnik, pages 80-81; Gržan, pages 53-57).

Nazis, of course, noticed that somehow many of their plans were thwarted. In a way yet unknown to us, they began to suspect the young and popular priest Izidor. On January 6, 1942, or exactly a year after the invasion, when Izidor returned to the sacristy after the Mass, the Nazi Gestapo Niederberger was waiting for him. While reports differ, the fact is that incriminating evidence of Izidor's involvement in helping Nazi-threatened Slovenians escape across the border was found. He was brought to Stari Pisker, the most notorious German prison in occupied Slovenia. Gestapo, the Nazi secret service police, came to Celje on April 16, 1941, or only ten days after Germany's attack on Slovenia and Yugoslavia, followed on April 19th by SS leader Heinrich Himmler who made sure that Stari Pisker became one of the most feared Nazi prisons. Three notorious, fanatic and sadistic Nazi Gestapo were in charge: Kolman, Wiegele and Niederbeger. They were known to torture some prisoners to death. People walking on the adjacent streets often heard desperate screams of victims, yet once in a while prisoners were also heard singing a patriotic Slovenian song, just before they were shot to death. In either case, residents or visitors had to be careful not to show any compassion, for showing compassion for enemies of Hitler's Germany was a crime for which one could be arrested.

This was the prison to which Izidor was brought after his arrest. The task of the brutal Gestapo was to torture him until he confessed his »crimes« against Germany and, especially, betrayed others who in any way collaborated with him. He was submitted to no end of brutal beatings and lashings, receiving blow after blow to his head and all parts of his body. Bleeding and often lying helpless on the floor, he was viciously kicked all over. All kinds of tortures were tried on him. Pushing splinters in his finger nails, suspending his body from the ceiling, sometimes for the entire night, being beaten and tortured until he lost consciousness and then waking him up by pouring cold water over his body in order to continue with torture and interrogation. We know that Potokar and others died as a result of such torture. Relatives who were allowed to bring washed laundry to prison saw blood all over the laundry that they were taking



Stari Pisker, a notorious Nazi prison during the Second World War (Photo: Muzej novejšje zgodovine Celje)



Execution of Slovenian hostages at Stari Pisker, 1942 (Photo: Muzej novejšje zgodovine Celje)



“Cleaning up” after shootings; Slovenian women, too, were brutally executed (Photo: Muzej novejšje zgodovine Celje)

back home. Often, Izidor had to be carried to his cell, being too weak to walk. Yet, with superhuman strength, rooted in his deep faith in God, he didn't betray anyone.

As all tortures failed, he was allowed to leave the prison after a few months, conditionally, of course. The Gestapo believed that he would be willing to report on at least some of the rebels in order to avoid re-arrest and repetition of torture. They may have also believed that by observing his every move, they could perhaps discover his contacts and then proceed with greater success. They were wrong. It never even occurred to Izidor to be an informer and he served the religious needs at Gomilsko and several adjacent parishes with renewed enthusiasm. He completely ignored the advice of various friends to move to a less dangerous location since “a shepherd should never leave his flock” (Kučnik, page 83; Gržan, pages 67-71).

As Izidor failed to become an informer, he was again imprisoned at Stari Pisker in the fall of 1942. The Gestapo again used all their torturing skills to break him, yet they failed. Thus, Izidor was transferred early in 1943 to the Prison of Maribor where conditions were somewhat less cruel than in Stari Pisker. He was even allowed to get his father's and sister's visits and began to believe that he would be transferred to a less dangerous prison elsewhere. Could his father bring him a pair of shoes on his next visit?

But a day later, on March 10, 1943, which was Ash Wednesday, all prisoners had to line up in the prison's courtyard. Every tenth prisoner was selected to be shot as a hostage, one of well-known German punitive actions, widely publicized by posters, listing the names of “bandits” who were executed. Izidor happened to stand next to a younger man and as Germans were distracted during some sort of debate, he told him: »You are still a young fellow and the whole future is still ahead of you.« Then he quickly changed places with his neighbor. Now being the tenth one in line, Izidor was one of the 25 hostages shot to death on that fateful Ash Wednesday, 1943. Among the prisoners was also another Slovenian priest, Maks Ledinek, who gave all the hostages a sacramental absolution before their execution (Kučnik, page 92).

It was only much later that more facts were revealed. Franc

Žvan, born in 1923 in Zgornje Hoče, was the original selectee to be shot as a hostage whom Izidor saved by changing places in the line-up. Žvan's father, a farmer, was the one whom Germans had come to arrest. His name, too, was Franc, so his oldest son of the same first name, stepped forward and was brought to the Maribor Prison instead of his ailing father. There, Izidor changed places with Franc and saved his life. It was only shortly after Franc's marriage in 1953 in Ljubljana where he was employed, that the couple visited Maribor and Franc showed his wife Olga the building where he had been imprisoned. Then he told Olga how he was the tenth one in the line-up. “You would never be my wife, if it were not for the man standing next to me who offered to take my place.” Izidor, a 26-year old Catholic priest, was that man, the only priest among the 25 hostages who were shot.

The Slovenian Church that suffered so much during German occupation and was treated as public enemy number one after communist rulers replaced Germans in 1945 was long unable to get involved in the needed research or even in Izidor's beatification process. As stated by Archbishop Anton Stres in *Reporter* (July 19, 2010), “we kept silent.” Among a small number of sources, Izidor was very briefly mentioned in *Palme mučeništva* (*Palms of Martyrdom*, Mohorjeva: Celje, 1995, pages 154-155). He entered Slovenian national consciousness a little more deeply only after the publication of Kučnik's book in 2007.

The crucial breakthrough concerning recognition of Izidor Završnik's martyrdom occurred, however in 2017 for the centennial of Izidor's birth. In that year, a book-length biography, titled *Zmagovita ljubezen* (*Victorious Love*), dedicated to the Slovenian Maximilian Kolbe, authored by the popular writer Karel Gržan and published by Ognjišče, was widely publicized in the Slovenian media. As reported by Slovenia's leading Catholic weekly *Družina* (*The Family*, on March 19, 2017), there was a magnificent gathering at Gomilsko on March 12, 2017. Stanislav Lipovšek, Bishop of Celje, celebrated a solemn Mass, concelebrated by several other priests. He devoted his sermon to martyrs of the diocese, especially to Izidor Završnik, the Slovenian Maximilian Kolbe. Among the concelebrating priests were also diocesan chancellor Jože Kučnik, the first person who had written extensively about Izidor and Dr. Metod Benedik, the scholarly postulator for Izidor's beatification. “No one has greater love than the one who gives his or her life for another!” Slovenia hopes and prays that Izidor's heroic sacrifice, like that of Maximilian Kolbe, will be recognized by the entire Catholic Church and by many people of good will everywhere, especially by those who have suffered so much under Nazism and other totalitarian regimes, such as fascism and communism.