

Saint Maximilian Maria Kolbe



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IE BIOGRAFIE
WYSTAWY
ELEMENTARNE

“There is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends”



Saint Maximilian Maria Kolbe (born Rajmund Kolbe) went down in history as a martyr who laid down his life for another man in the German Nazi concentration and extermination camp Auschwitz. That event was preceded by the Franciscan’s years of ministry, full of immense faith in Divine Providence. Militia Immaculatae, an organisation that propagated the Marian devotions, became his *opus magnum*. At Niepokalanów he established a Franciscan monastery and a modern publishing centre. He did not limit his evangelisation activity to Poland, as he created a Japanese Niepokalanów – Mugenzai no Sono (The Garden of the Immaculata) – in Nagasaki. He was sanctified as a confessor of the faith and a martyr. Not even repression by the communist authorities in Poland could hinder the continuation of St. Maximilian Kolbe’s work.

↑ In the photo: Fr. Maximilian Kolbe, the interwar period

📍 Historical Museum of the Town of Zduńska Wola



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The Kolbe family

Rajmund Kolbe was born on 8 January 1894 in Zduńska Wola into a family of weavers. His parents were Juliusz Kolbe and Marianna née Dąbrowska. Considering their outstanding piety, humility and diligence, the Kolbes were seen by family and friends as a “holy couple”. Due to their difficult economic situation, the family left Zduńska Wola and moved to Łódź and later, in 1897 to Pabianice. The Kolbes brought up their sons in the patriotic spirit. Rajmund and his brothers followed the example of their parents, who were engaged in the life of two Pabianice parishes: under the invocation of St. Matthew and of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and zealously took part in religious practices. In his childhood, the future saint experienced a revelation in the Church of St. Matthew. Our Lady appeared before him, holding two crowns, a white one and a red one, which symbolised purity and martyrdom.

↓ In the photo: the house of the Kolbe family in Zduńska Wola where Rajmund was born. The photograph was taken in 1982
📷 S. Fuks, Historical Museum of the Town of Zduńska Wola



↑ Most probably, Juliusz Kolbe died as a legionnaire in 1914, near the town of Olkusz. Rajmund’s mother died in 1946. In the photo: Marianna Kolbe, early 20th century
📷 Niepokalanów Archive



↑ The Kolbes had five sons, although two of them died in childhood. In the photo: Rajmund Kolbe (sitting in the second row, first from the left) together with his brothers: the elder, Franciszek (standing in the last row, first from the left), and younger, Józef (sitting in the first row, third from the right), friends and supervisors of the Pabianice orchestra and choir
📷 Niepokalanów Archive



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Following his calling

↓ In 1910, when he began his novitiate, Rajmund adopted the name of Maximilian. In the photo: Maximilian Kolbe (standing in the second row, third from the right) among priests and novices in Lviv

📷 Niepokalanów Archive



Participation in missionary teachings in the Pabianice parish conducted in 1907 by Franciscans from Lviv was to change Rajmund's life. It was then that, together with his brother Franciszek, he decided to begin his education in the Small Theological Seminary of the Franciscan Fathers in Lviv, by getting through from the Russian Sector to the territory of Galicia, which was under Austro-Hungarian rule. They then entered the Order of Minor Conventual Friars. Maximilian Kolbe finished his studies in Rome, where he obtained his doctorate in philosophy at the Pontifical Gregorian University and in theology at the newly established Seraphicum. He took on holy orders in the Eternal City on 28 April 1918.



← Maximilian Kolbe made his perpetual vows in 1914 in Rome, taking the name Maria. In the photo: clerical student Maximilian (standing in the last row, second from the left) in the Pontifical Theological Faculty of Saint Bonaventure in Rome, 1917

📷 Niepokalanów Archive

← In the photo: Maximilian Kolbe as a student

📷 Niepokalanów Archive



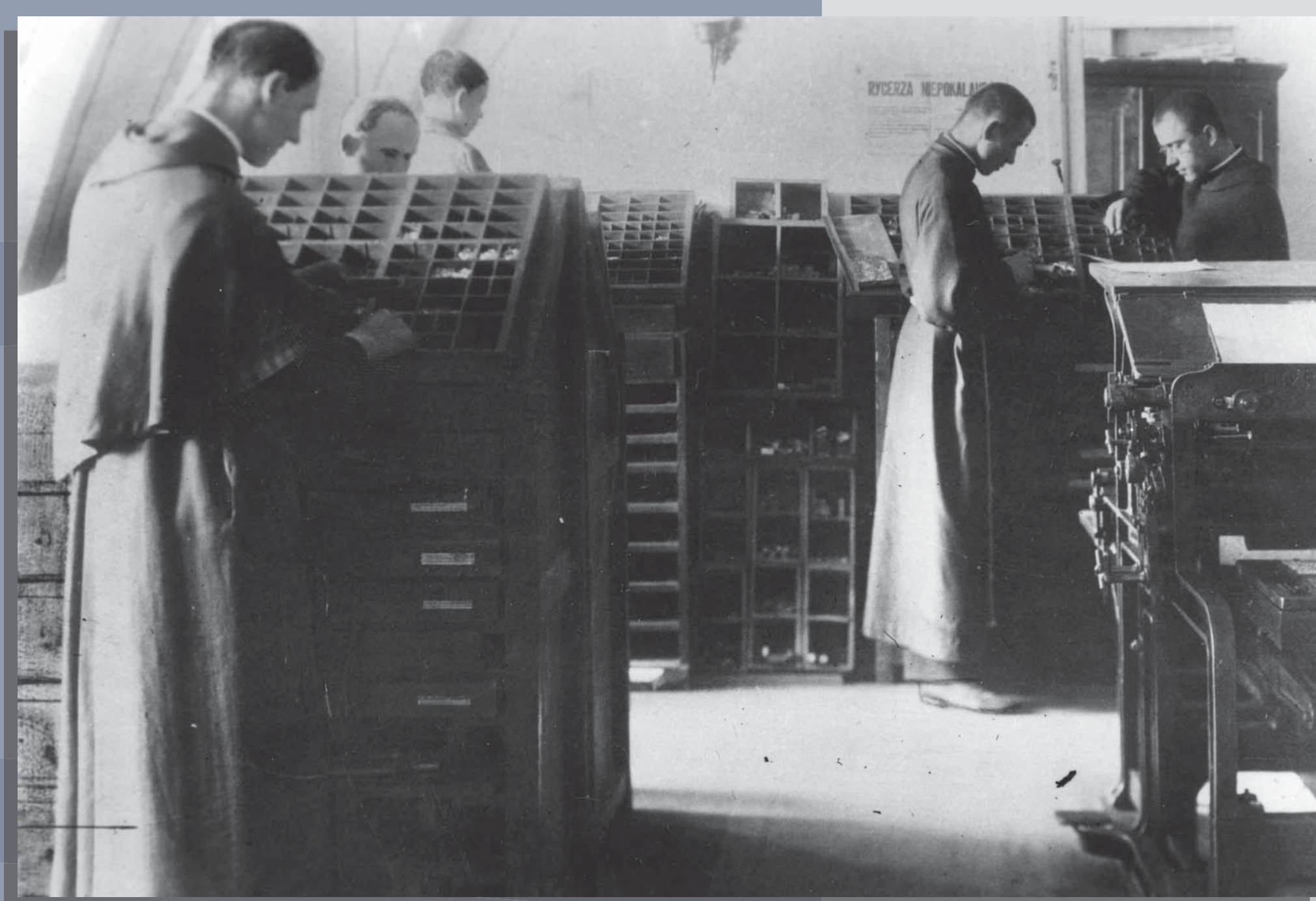
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Militia Immaculatae

The increased tendency towards atheism in European societies that Maximilian Kolbe observed in Rome contributed to his establishment in 1917 of a missionary organisation of international reach, which he called Militia Immaculatae (MI). Its members included both clergymen and laymen who wanted to propagate devotion of the Virgin Mary. After his return to Poland in 1919, he continued spreading the ideas of the MI, at the same time wrestling with progressive tuberculosis and a shortage of resources for establishing a magazine. Finally, he appealed to the generosity of the congregation and in Krakow in 1922 he began to issue a monthly entitled *Knight of the Immaculata*.

→ In the photo:
cover of the first
issue of *Knight of
the Immaculata*,
January 1922
■ Niepokalanów
Archive

↓ Initially, the
circulation of the
*Knight of the
Immaculata* was
5 thousand copies;
five years after its
creation it reached
70 thousand copies.
In 1927, the MI
organisation counted
over 125 thousand
members. In the
photo: the printing
works in Grodno
(Fr. Kolbe standing first
from the right), 1920s
■ Niepokalanów
Archive



↑ In October 1922, the editorial office was moved to Grodno. In the photo: Maximilian Kolbe (sitting in the centre) with his first collaborators in Grodno, 1923
■ Niepokalanów Archive



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↓ The land located in the centre of Poland, 40 km from the capital, in the neighbourhood of a train station, constituted a convenient place to run a publishing house. In the photo: Fr. Maximilian and Fr. Florian Koziura inspecting the land intended for construction of the future new "Headquarters of the Militia Immaculatae", July 1927

📷 Niepokalanów Archive



Due to the increased circulation of the *Knight of the Immaculata*, the surface area of rooms devoted to the publishing activity in Grodno turned out to be insufficient. Therefore, Father Kolbe, fully revealing his organisational talents, brought about the establishment of a new publishing house and Franciscan monastery on a plot of land donated by Duke Jan Drucki-Lubecki on the Teresin estate, situated near Sochaczew. The monks settled in at Niepokalanów in late November 1927, initially living in humble conditions. In subsequent years, the endowment gradually grew to 25 ha. In 1929, the founder of the monastery and also its first guardian established the Small Missionary Seminary together with his younger brother, Józef – Fr. Alfons.



← Even before the beginning of construction and the final arrangements concerning transfer of the donation, a statue of Our Lady was placed in the field in Teresin. It is invariably situated on the premises of the monastery in Niepokalanów and greets arriving guests with its symbolic gesture of extended arms. In the photo: Fr. Maximilian (standing in the first row, third from the left) together with the community of Niepokalanów and Fr. Kornel Czupryk, Franciscan Provincial Superior, right after the consecration of the first chapel in Niepokalanów, early December 1927

📷 Niepokalanów Archive



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In the Oriental world

マクシミリアン・コルベは、神学校で哲学を教える仕事を依頼された。5月には、日本語の「聖母の騎士」の出版を開始した。当初、ラテン語で書かれたテキストは日本の聖職者が翻訳していましたが、彼らが辞任し、日本の教会当局の意向が不明に滞在しているという確信が生まれたため、イタリア語からの翻訳は地元の教授が行

In the years 1930–1936, Father Kolbe conducted missionary work in Asia. In April 1930, he arrived in Shanghai (China) together with four other monks. He believed in the possibility of establishing a missionary centre there. Therefore, he left there two of his collaborators, who were supposed to learn the local language and culture. With the others he went on to Nagasaki (Japan). It was then that he received the offer of becoming a philosophy teacher in a seminary. In May, he began the publication of the Japanese version of *Knight of the Immaculata* – *Seibo no Kishi*. Initially, texts written in Latin were translated by Japanese clergymen; later a local professor translated them from Italian. In 1931, in Nagasaki, Fr. Kolbe bought a plot of land on the slopes of Mt. Hikosan, where the Japanese Niepokalanów – Mugenzai no Sono – was created.

↓ In the photo: Fr. Kolbe (sitting third from the left) as a professor at the Nagasaki Theological Seminary, 1931
📷 Niepokalanów Archive



→ In an article about the Polish Niepokalanów written for the March 1931 issue of *Seibo no Kishi*, Fr. Maximilian wrote, “I believe that many Japanese who know and love Our Lady or who want to get to know Her will readily contribute to the construction of the holy place of the Immaculata”. In the initial period after the erection of the monastery, the monks lived in difficult conditions. In the photo: construction of the monastery in Nagasaki (Fr. Kolbe is standing in the first row, in the centre), 1931
📷 Niepokalanów Archive



→ The first issue of *Seibo no Kishi* was published in the number of 10 thousand copies. Five years later, its circulation reached over 60 thousand copies. Initially, the monthly was distributed together with a Japanese diocesan magazine and handed out in the streets. In the photo: cover of an issue of *Seibo no Kishi*, 1930
📷 Niepokalanów Archive



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↓ Fr. Konstanty Onoszko, who came to Nagasaki in 1932, in a desire to propagate his own vision of running both the monastery and the publishing house, sent letters to the order authorities in Poland and Rome, in which he denigrated the achievements of the founder of the Garden of the Immaculata. In the photo: Fr. Kolbe at work at his desk in the Japanese Niepokalanów, first half of the 1930s

📷 Niepokalanów Archive



Wishing to establish an outpost of the Immaculata in yet another country, Fr. Maximilian travelled to India. Execution of his missionary plans was interrupted by the need to return to Poland in 1933 in order to participate in the convention of the council of order supervisors. He returned to Nagasaki together with the new guardian of the Japanese monastery, Fr. Kornel Czupryk. Despite increasing symptoms of pulmonary disease, he continued to take on activities. His evangelisation led to conversions and new callings to the ministry. In 1934, the missionaries constructed a monastic chapel and two years later they created the Lower Theological Seminary. In 1936, Fr. Kolbe left again for Poland to take part in a chapter, suspecting that he was leaving the island of Kyushu forever. However, he continued supporting the work that he had started in Japan, e.g. financially.



↑ The decision to build a monastery on the slopes of Mt. Hikosan, in a peripheral part of the town, saved it from being destroyed on 9 August 1945, when the American air force dropped the atomic bomb on Nagasaki. In the photo: Fr. Kolbe (sitting third from the left) together with students and teachers of the Lower Theological Seminary in Nagasaki, 1936

📷 Niepokalanów Archive



↑ Fr. Kolbe desired to work intensively even when his illness prevented him from getting out of bed. At that time, he gave lectures to clerical students who gathered around him. In the photo: Fr. Maximilian (sitting in the first row, third from the right) among his fellow brethren in Nagasaki, 1935

📷 Niepokalanów Archive



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“(…)[Fr. Maximilian Kolbe] taught us to respect Japan and he never criticised it. He would always repeat that we had not come here to teach anybody but to learn something ourselves”.

Fragment of the memoirs of Brother Roman Kwiecień, a missionary



↑ In the photo: Fr. Kolbe
(standing at the back) in Japan
📷 Niepokalanów Archive



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Mission in Poland

After his return to Poland, Fr. Maximilian again became the guardian of Niepokalanów, where he attended to the other monks with care. He strove for reorganisation of the monastery in order to make it economically self-sufficient. However, he was aware of the fact that considerable development had already taken place during his absence. In the 1930s, publishing activity was conducted on a broad scale with the use of printing machines. The Franciscans even established a monastic Volunteer Fire Department, while Fr. Kolbe brought about the construction of another power plant in 1937 (the first was put into operation in 1928).

↓ In late 1936, there were over 650 monks living in the monastery in Niepokalanów, while in 1939 – ca. 760. In the photo: the monks welcome Fr. Kolbe (standing in the centre, wearing a hat) in Niepokalanów, 1936

📷 Niepokalanów Archive



→ Fr. Kolbe received many visitors from Poland and abroad, including church dignitaries, diplomats, politicians and journalists.

In the photo: visit from Gen. Józef Haller in Niepokalanów (standing next to the General is Fr. Marian Wójcik, editor-in-chief of *Mały Dziennik*), August 1937

📷 Niepokalanów Archive



↑ In the photo: Fr. Kolbe together with the fire-fighters of Niepokalanów somewhere near Sochaczew, 1938

📷 Niepokalanów Archive



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↓ Among those who knew Fr. Maximilian, he commanded respect and admiration. He was especially valued for his kindness, modesty and managerial skills. In the photo: Fr. Kolbe with Count Adolf Bniński, Duke Jan Drucki-Lubecki and Fr. Florian Koziura, guardian of the monastery in the years 1930–1936, March 1938
 📷 Niepokalanów Archive



Wishing to make use of diverse opportunities for evangelisation, Fr. Kolbe took interest in the first television broadcasts in Berlin and sought approval for the establishment of a radio station, whose seat he established in Niepokalanów. An important press publishing centre was also formed there. In 1935, the publication of the informational and journalistic *Mały Dziennik* [Pol. *Little Journal*] started. Its profile was clearly anti-liberal and anti-leftist. The magazine enjoyed considerable popularity among readers. Apart from *Miles Immaculatae*, *Mały Rycerzyk Niepokalanej* [Pol. *Little Knight of the Immaculata*], *Echo Niepokalanowa* [Pol. *Echo of Niepokalanów*], etc., the *Knight of the Immaculata* was continually published – in 1938 it once reached a circulation of one million copies.



↑ In the photo: the printing works at Niepokalanów, 1930s
 📷 Niepokalanów Archive

← The first page of *Mały Dziennik* (issue 242) of 1 September 1939
 📷 public domain

↑ Despite two trial radio broadcasts, before the outbreak of World War II “SP 3 Radio Niepokalanów” was not cleared for regular activities. In the photo: the first trial broadcast of the radio station in Niepokalanów, 8 December 1938
 📷 Niepokalanów Archive



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↓ In the photo: a visit by the Master of the Franciscan Order Fr. Beda Hess in Niepokalanów-Lasek (Fr. Kolbe sitting on the bench on the right), August 1939
📷 Niepokalanów Archive

“What does the development of Niepokalanów involve? Is it in (...) bringing bigger and better machines? Is it in the Knight, Little Knight and Little Journal increasing their circulation several times? (...) No! The development of Niepokalanów consists in the development of love for God in our souls and in persistently approaching the Immaculata, even if the territory of Niepokalanów were to grow smaller and even if we were scattered all around the world and each of us ran away without his habit”.

**Fragment of a statement by Fr. Kolbe,
quoted by Br. Jarosław Nowakowski**



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The first arrest

The intensive development of Niepokalanów was interrupted by the outbreak of World War II. When on 5 September 1939 the monks received the news that the Germans had crossed the Vistula River and directed their forces towards Warsaw, most brethren left the monastery. Fr. Kolbe, together with the remaining few dozen monks, was arrested on 19 September. They were taken to transit camps, first in Łambinowice, then in Gębice and Ostrzeszów. They returned to Niepokalanów, plundered by the Germans, in December, wishing to restart the publication of *Knight of the Immaculata*. The only issue was published around the end of 1940, containing a text on the subject of truth, which could have contributed to the apprehension of Fr. Kolbe on 17 February 1941.

↓ In the photo: the arrested Franciscans leaving Niepokalanów, 19 September 1939
📷 Niepokalanów Archive



→ In the photo: the editorial office of the Niepokalanów newspapers destroyed and ransacked during German troops' occupation of Niepokalanów, which lasted until the end of the war
📷 Niepokalanów Archive



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→ In the photo: Fr. Maximilian Kolbe with other monks and, among others, Hans Mulzer, commandant of the XXIA Stalag of the camp in Ostrzeszów, December 1939. The photograph was taken under Mulzer's order
 📷 Niepokalanów Archive



→ In the photo: the camp for displaced persons from Pomerania established by the Germans in Niepokalanów. On 20 December 1940, on Hitler's birthday, the Germans ordered the displaced persons to decorate the novices' building with wreaths, a swastika and a banner reading "One nation, one Reich, one Führer"
 📷 Niepokalanów Archive



→ Fr. Kolbe allowed one of the monks to paint a portrait of the Immaculata and send it to the mother of a Wehrmacht officer stationed in Niepokalanów. In the photo: Fr. Maximilian Kolbe, Br. Iwo Ahtelik and the above-mentioned officer - initiator of the photograph, early 1941
 📷 Niepokalanów Archive



“The greatest sacrifice is a sacrifice of one’s own choosing”

On 28 May 1941, Fr. Kolbe was transported from the Gestapo prison in Pawiak to the Auschwitz concentration camp, where he was given the number 16670. In spite of numerous brutal beatings, he did not lose his faith. What is more, he tried to inspire his fellow inmates, including confessors of other religions, with hope for survival. As a result of the escape of a prisoner from block 14, on 29 July 1941, during a penal roll-call, the camp’s deputy commandant Karl Fritsch applied collective responsibility and marked out ten prisoners who were supposed to starve to death. Fr. Maximilian volunteered to replace Franciszek Gajowniczek, a husband, a father and soldier who was not even forty years old. Despite his poor health, Fr. Kolbe lived in his starvation cell for over two weeks. On 14 August 1941, the Germans gave the dying monk a phenol injection, and the next day, his body was cremated.

→ Fr. Maximilian’s older brother, Franciszek, who did not commit his life to the priesthood, also fell victim to the German occupant. Initially, he was taken to Auschwitz, and he died of exhaustion in the Mittelbau camp in January 1945. In the photo: the main gate of Auschwitz with the inscription reading “Arbeit macht frei” (“Work sets you free”)

📄 Archive of the Institute of National Remembrance



↑ Reproduction of a painting by Mieczysław Kościelniak, a prisoner of the Auschwitz concentration camp, showing Fr. Kolbe stepping forward, ready to replace Franciszek Gajowniczek

📄 Archive of the Institute of National Remembrance

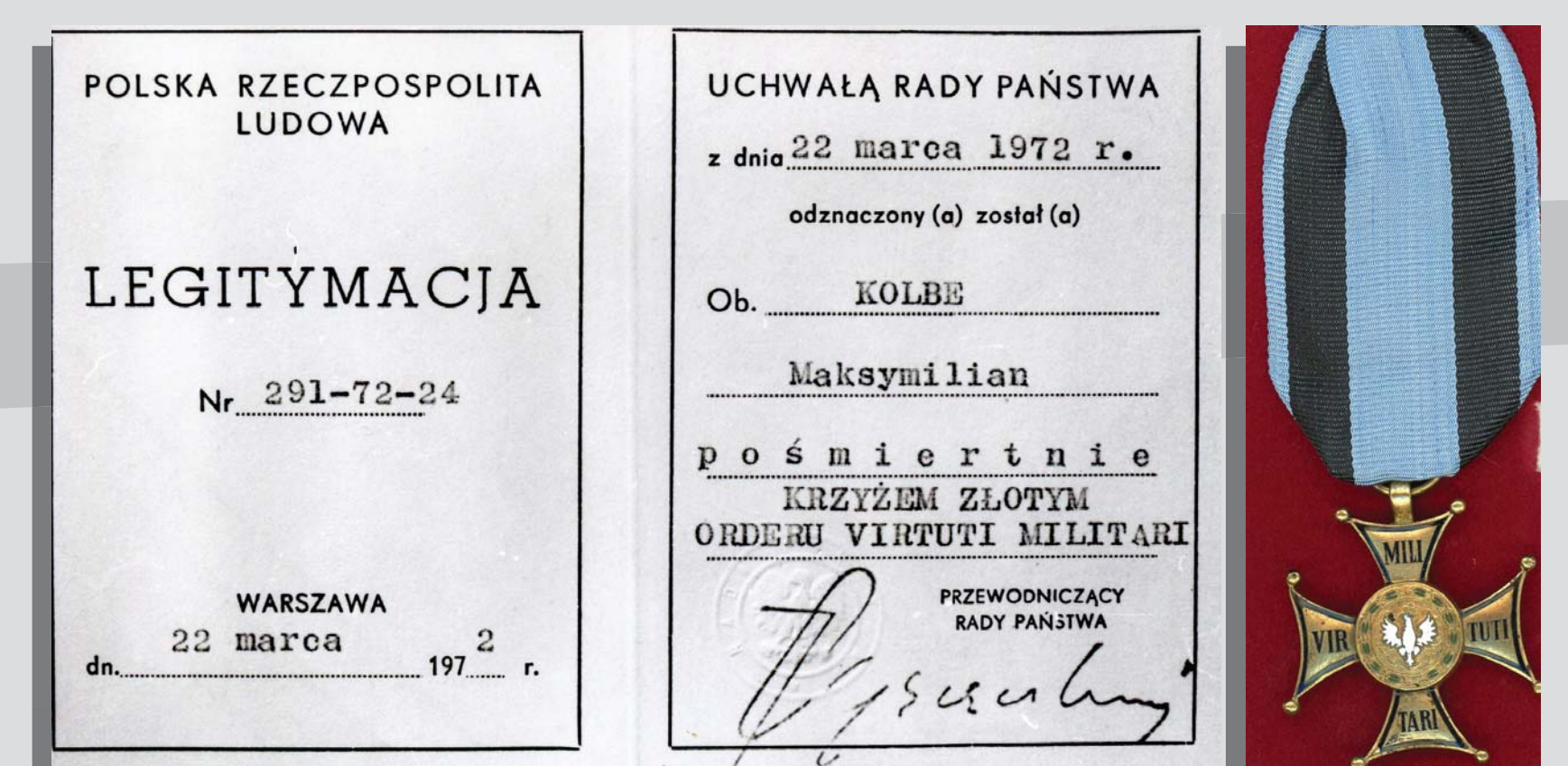


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Beatification and canonisation

The pious life of Fr. Kolbe, his martyr's death and miracle healings became the basis for his sanctification. The beatification was effected on 17 October 1971 by Pope Paul VI. The beatification mass held at St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican was attended by ca. 6 thousand worshippers from Poland. In total, the service was attended by ca. 150 thousand people. Eleven years later – on 10 October 1982, during the difficult times of martial law in Poland, Maximilian Kolbe was canonised by Pope John Paul II.

→ In the photo: devotional print with the image of Fr. Maximilian; on the back there is a prayer for his prompt beatification
📍 Historical Museum of the Town of Zduńska Wola




↑ Fr. Kolbe was the first Polish martyr beatified after World War II. In the photo: Pope Paul VI together with the Primate of Poland Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, Cardinal Karol Wojtyła and Franciscans: Provincial Superior Fr. Mariusz Paczowski and Guardian of Niepokalanów Fr. Błażej Marian Kruszyłowicz, during the ceremonial beatification of Maximilian Kolbe, October 1971
📍 Niepokalanów Archive

↑ On 15 October 1971, local authorities all over the country obtained a cyphertext from the Director of Department IV of the Ministry of the Interior, containing the instruction to observe people's behaviour during preparations for the day of Fr. Kolbe's beatification. In the photo: the Gold Cross of the Virtuti Militari War Order with which the authorities of the Polish People's Republic felt obliged to decorate the blessed Maximilian Kolbe after his beatification
📍 Niepokalanów Archive



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“(...) In this place of horrendous torture, which brought death to four million people of different nations, Fr. Maximilian Kolbe won a spiritual victory similar to the victory of Christ Himself by voluntarily sacrificing himself to death in the starvation bunker in his brother’s stead. (...)”

Words uttered by Pope John Paul II during his sermon on the premises of the German Nazi concentration and extermination camp Auschwitz on 7 June 1979

↑ In the photo: John Paul II in Maximilian Kolbe’s death cell at Auschwitz during his first pilgrimage to Poland, 1979
📷 Niepokalanów Archive



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→ The communist authorities tried to anticipate social initiatives in relation to travel to Rome for the canonisation ceremony, for example by giving funds to the Ars Christiana company for the preparation of devotional articles that were patriotic in nature in order to prevent the creation of items alluding to NSZZ “Solidarność” [the Independent Self-Governing Trade Union “Solidarity”]. In the photo: believers participating in the canonisation mass on St. Peter’s Square in Rome, 10 October 1982

📷 Niepokalanów Archive



↓ In the photo: Pope John Paul II with Franciszek Gajowniczek after the canonisation of St. Maximilian Kolbe in Rome

📷 Niepokalanów Archive



↑ In the photo: commemorative postcard with the canonisation portrait of St. Maximilian Kolbe and photographs from the canonisation ceremony in Niepokalanów

📷 Archive of the Institute of National Remembrance



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Devotion of the saint



← In the photo: Pr. Jerzy Popiełuszko (blessed since 2010) leading a mass dedicated to the Homeland in the Church of St. Stanisław Kostka in Warsaw, 31 October 1982. The nature of the service is revealed by the illustration decorating the altar and reading “PATRON OF THE MARTYRED POLAND”, depicting the figure of St. Maximilian Kolbe against barbed wire. A fragment of his striped uniform in the shape of the map of Poland bears the number that Kolbe was given at Auschwitz

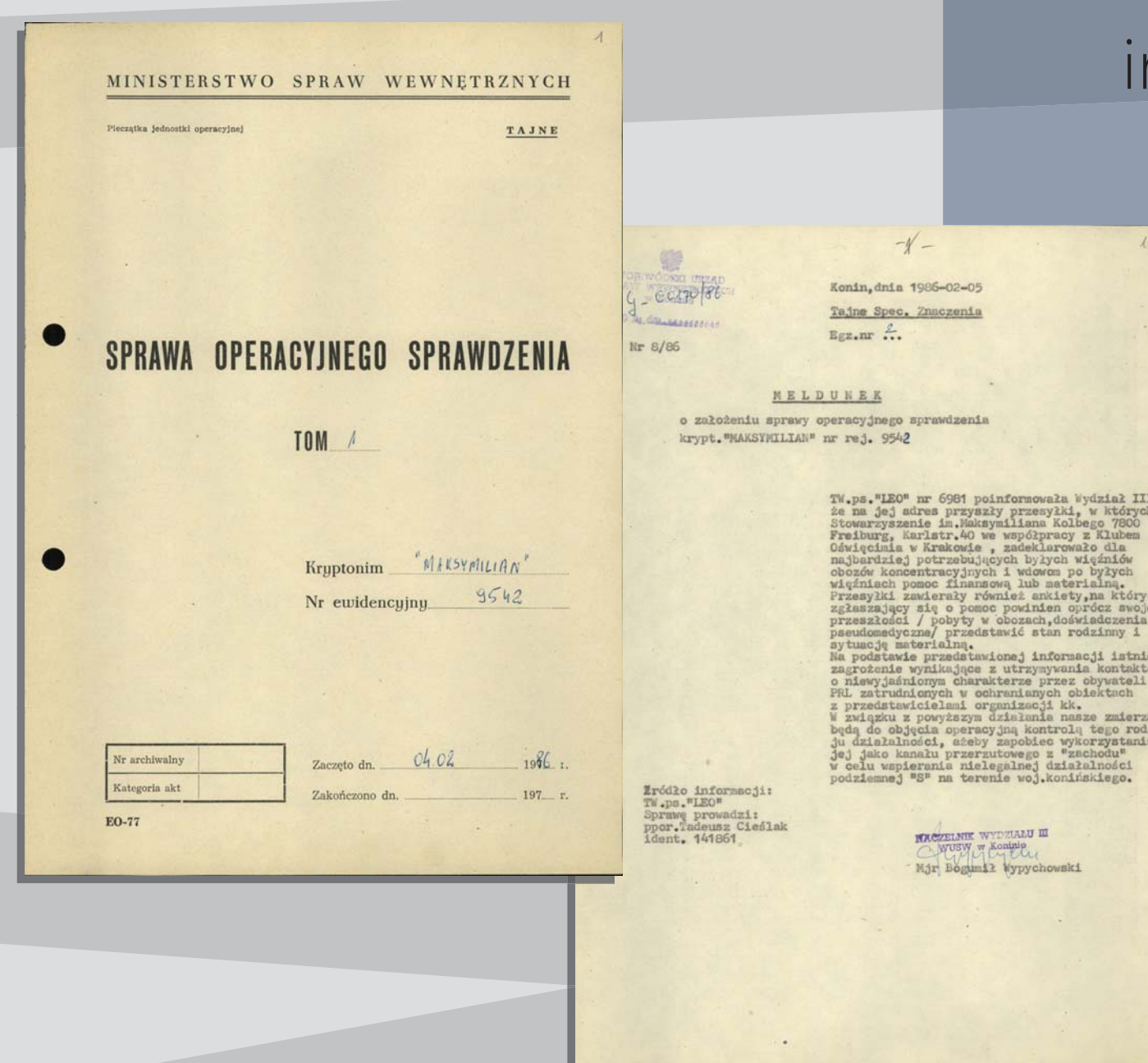
📷 Archive of the Institute of National Remembrance

The memory of St. Maximilian Kolbe’s heroism, leading to devotional attitudes, was considered dangerous by the communist authorities. Wishing to bring about a change in society’s perception of the martyr, they alleged antisemitism among members of the editorial office of the Niepokalanów newspapers (e.g. on the pages of *Mały Dziennik* an article had appeared entitled “The harmful impact of the Jews on Polish culture”). Those statements of the founder of Niepokalanów that were of a different nature were ignored, e.g. “*Speaking about the Jews, I would be very careful not to inadvertently arouse or feed our reader’s hatred towards them (...)*”. As a consequence of initiatives undertaken by worshippers of St. Maximilian Kolbe, the Security Service (SB) ran some operations. Not only Niepokalanów, growing because of its founder’s glory, was subjected to close scrutiny and repression. Among the numerous priests under surveillance was Pr. Jerzy Popiełuszko, murdered by the SB in 1984 for his activity in the “Solidarity” movement.



↑ In the photo: John Paul II praying in Fr. Kolbe’s cell in Niepokalanów, together with his assistant and Vicar General Fr. Marian Błażej Kruszyłowicz, the Primate of Poland Cardinal Józef Glemp and the Metropolitan Bishop of Krakow Cardinal Franciszek Macharski, during his second pilgrimage to the Homeland, 18 June 1983

📷 Archive of the Institute of National Remembrance



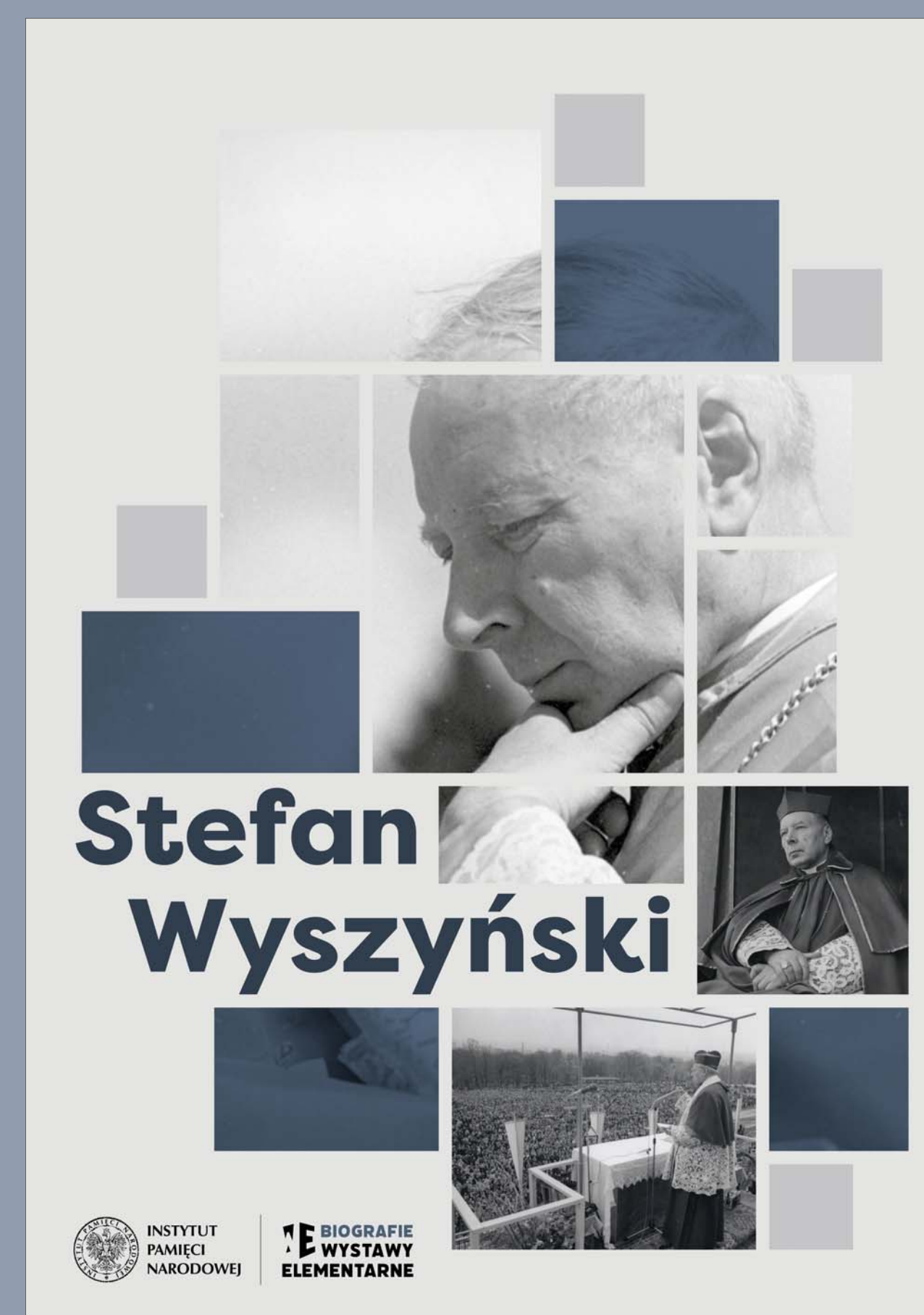
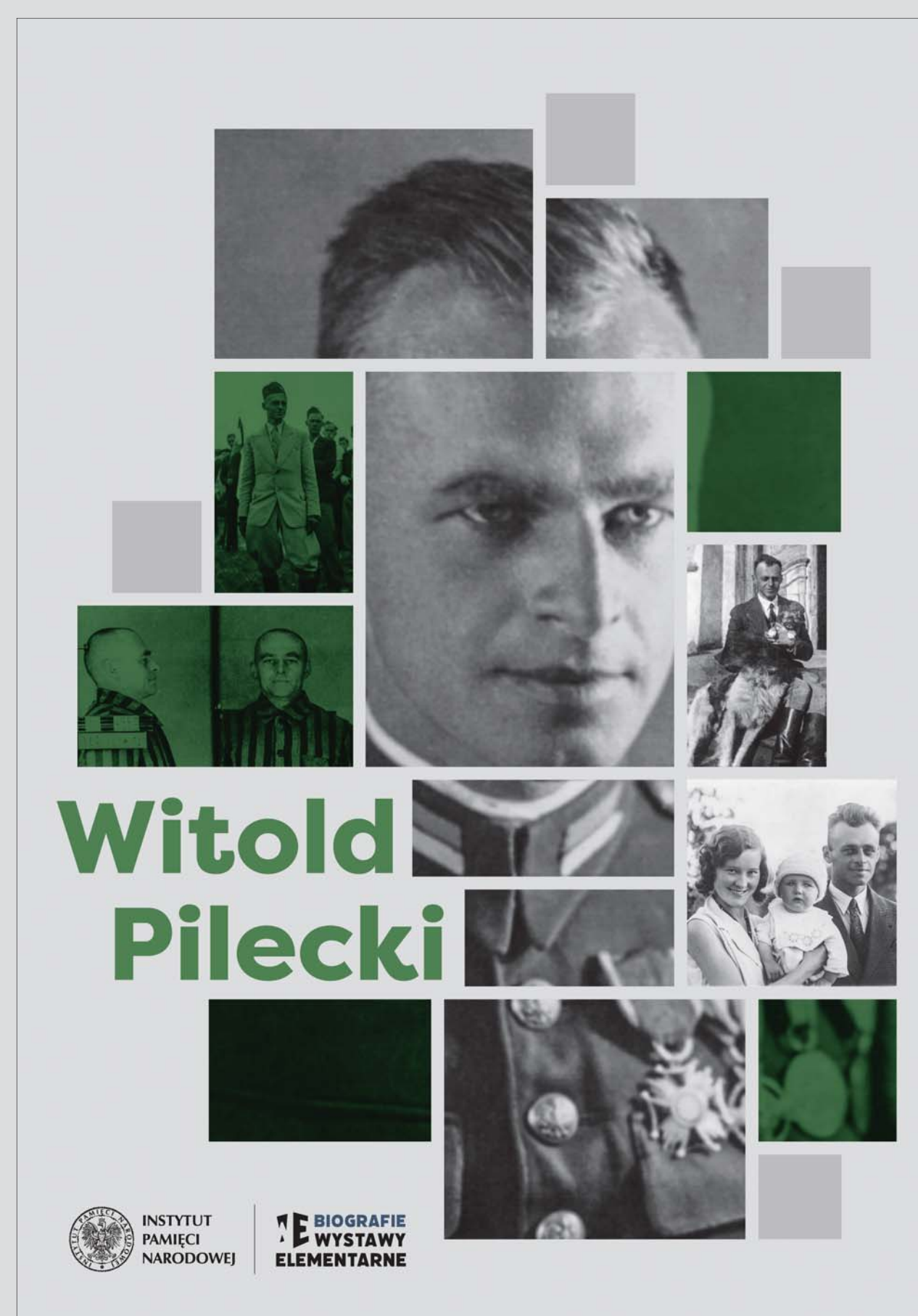
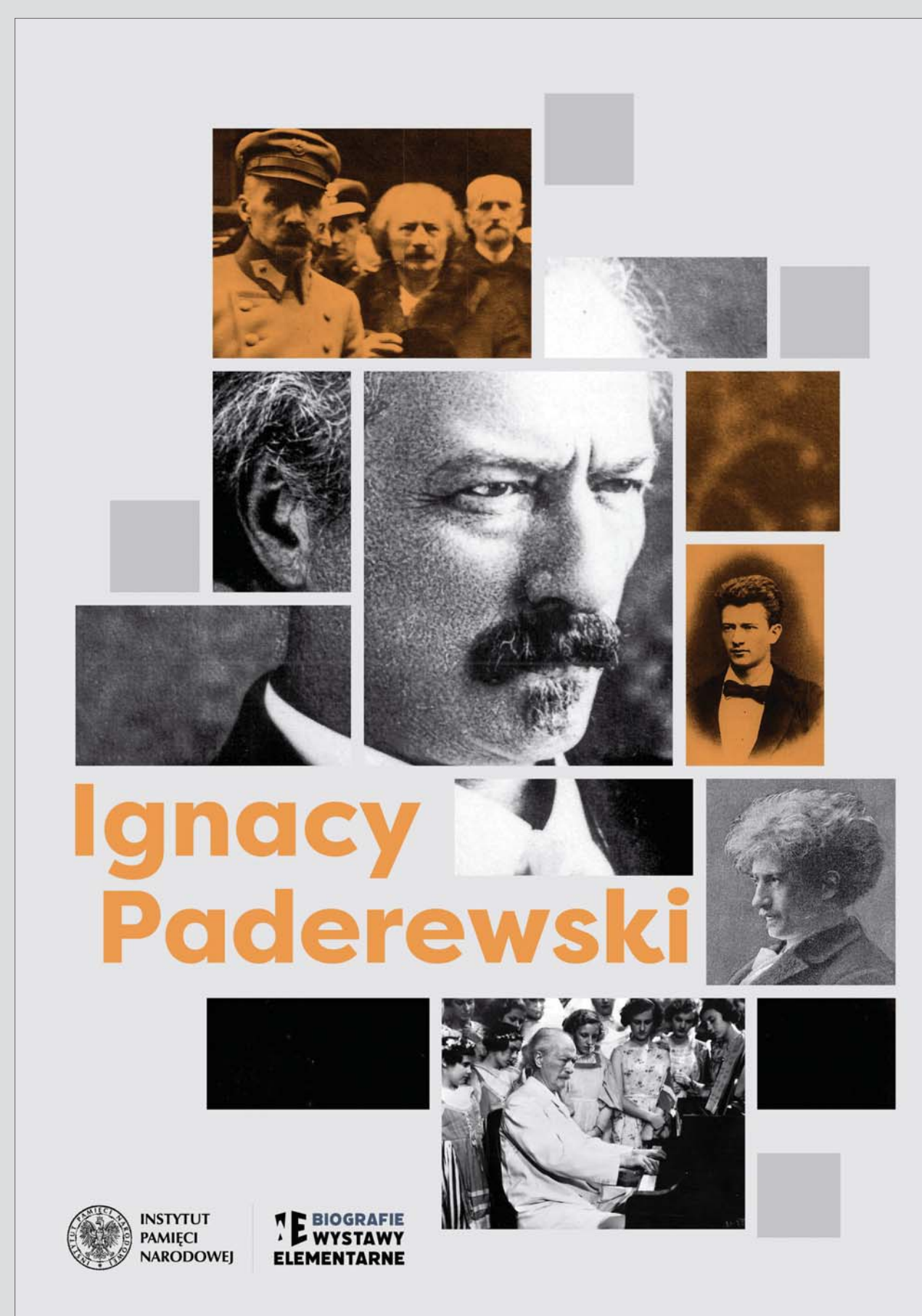
← In the photo: cover of the file and dispatch about the instigation of the operation code-named “Maksymilian”, concerning the M. Kolbe Association, whose statutory purpose was to help ex-prisoners of concentration camps, 1986

📷 Archive of the Institute of National Remembrance

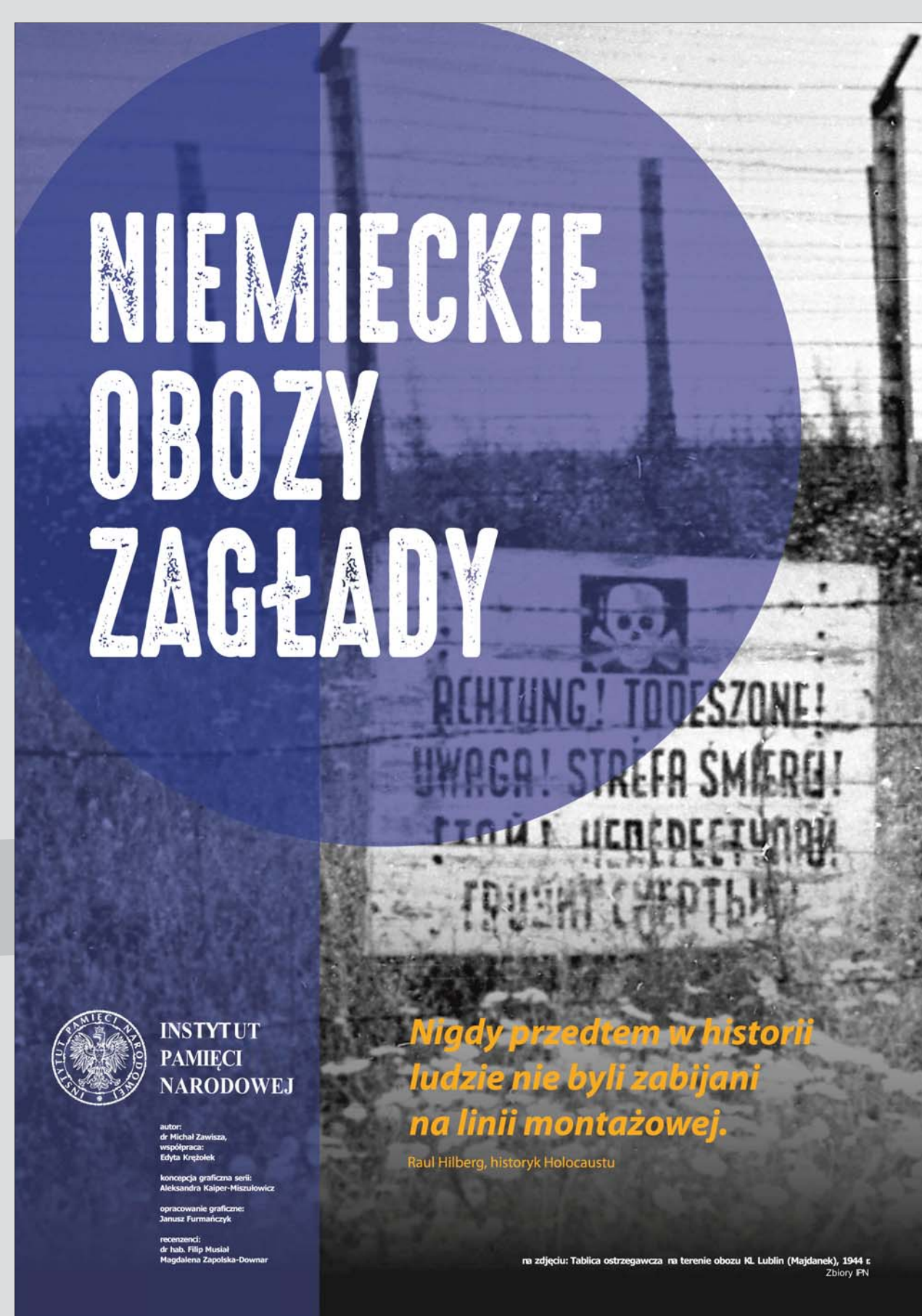


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Graphic design and typesetting: ARSA

The exhibition uses photos, documents and reproductions of paintings from the Archive of the Institute of National Remembrance, Niepokalanów Archive, public domain and the Historical Museum of the Town of Zduńska Wola.

Photographs included in the title panel:

Fr. Kolbe (standing third from the left) together with missionaries in front of a ship of the Lloyd Triestino cruise line Niepokalanów Archive

Fr. Kolbe's portrait photo Niepokalanów Archive

Fr. Kolbe (standing next to a bicycle) together with students of the Small Missionary Seminary Niepokalanów Archive

Reproduction of a painting – Fr. Kolbe with the globe and a rosary in his hands F. S. Szytyk, Historical Museum of the Town of Zduńska Wola

Reproduction of a painting signed "Rydel" in the bottom right corner – Fr. Kolbe in striped camp uniform Historical Museum of the Town of Zduńska Wola



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