Pope John Paul II: A Life Lived to the Fullest, Without Fear

By Bob Keeler
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For all his erudition and mysticism, Pope John Paul II was a gloriously human pope, not pale and other-worldly from years in a Vatican bureaucracy, but fully rounded and robust from toiling in the harsh light of the real world.

This pope felt the sting of his parents' deaths at an early age, worked with his hands, heard the rock-hard cacophony of a quarry and the boom of Nazi bombs, enjoyed belting out a good song. **He lived an outsized, epic life -- so full of novelistic, even cinematic, twists of plot** that it might well have been written by Charles Dickens and filmed by Steven Spielberg.

A major element of his uniqueness was his stunning versatility. **In many fields of endeavor, Karol Wojtyła (pronounced voy-TEE-wah) was outrageously adept:** as a poet, an athlete, a linguist, a playwright, an actor, a philosopher, an economic critic, a deft political strategist. His writing output was breathtaking in its volume and variety: from a tender, heartbreaking poem for his dead mother, to encyclicals that thundered against the relativism of the modern world by restating moral certainties and proclaiming "The Splendor of Truth," as he named one encyclical.

Only one pope ever wrote a play about married life, "The Jeweler's Shop," which became a movie starring Burt Lancaster in 1988.

No other pope can claim to have both lionized a man on the stage and then canonized him at the altar. As a seminarian and a young priest, Wojtyla wrote a play, "The Brother of Our God," about one of his Polish heroes, Adam Chmielowski, a 19th-century artist, Polish patriot and founder of the Albertine Brothers and the Albertine Sisters.

"This was my way of repaying a debt of gratitude to him," John Paul wrote in "Gift and Mystery," a 1996 book on the 50th anniversary of his ordination.

As pope, John Paul canonized him and called that "one of my greatest joys."

No other bishop of Rome has ever combined the monastic level of mysticism that attracted John Paul so strongly to the Carmelite order as a young man, with such a powerful, stage-trained ability to connect with large crowds, including adolescents and children six or seven decades his junior.

Nor is any pope, past or future, likely to surpass John Paul's **deep and existential connection to the Holocaust.**
Wojtyla's participation in a secret seminary and an underground theater exposed him daily to the threat of arrest and consignment to a concentration camp, and he saw his Jewish friends disappear into the jaws of the Nazi killing machine. Later, as pope, he translated this profound empathy into the greatest advances ever in Catholic-Jewish relations.

In addition to his bountiful talents, John Paul always enjoyed the patronage of powerful church leaders -- from Cardinal Adam Stefan Sapieha, the archbishop of Krakow, who first noticed Wojtyla as an 18-year-old student, recruited him, ordained him a priest and played a major role in launching his career, to Pope Paul VI, who admired him and prized his advice.

Wojtyla became an auxiliary bishop at age 38, archbishop of Krakow at 43 and a cardinal at 47. He was only 58 -- far younger than the norm -- when he was elected to the papacy in 1978, becoming the first non-Italian pope since Adrian VI in 1522-1523. In choosing Wojtyla, the College of Cardinals opted for a vigorously healthy young man to succeed Pope John Paul I, whose papacy lasted only a month before he died. Wojtyla loved to hike, ski and kayak, and he displayed boundless energy and prodigious capacity for working long hours.

No one who knew him as a young man would have been shocked to learn that his life would unfold well. Though his mother died just before his ninth birthday and his brother and father died before he was 21, his loneliness and tragedy were surrounded by accomplishment. He was always at the top of his class, but he did not fit the stereotype of the delicate, introverted genius. He loved sports and his abundant charm made him a student leader. His emerging theatrical skill brought him positions as an actor and director in Wadowice, the town where he was born on May 18, 1920.

In 1938, Archbishop Sapieha visited his high school, and Wojtyla's welcoming speech impressed him. Sapieha asked a local priest whether Wojtyla was interested in the seminary. But Wojtyla told Sapieha that he planned to attend the Jagiellonian University and study Polish philology -- a natural choice for someone interested in poetry and drama. In his 1995 book, "Pope John Paul: The Biography," Tad Szulc reports that the priest later told Sapieha over dinner that young Wojtyla was smitten with the theater. "Too bad, too bad," Sapieha said. "We could use him."

That summer, after his high school graduation, Wojtyla and his friends had to serve in a paramilitary labor battalion, where he peeled potatoes and built roads. Then he and his father moved into a basement apartment in Krakow, near the Jagiellonian. There, as in high school, he became a student leader.

For all Wojtyla's charm, however, his friends found him to have a strong sense of privacy, a tightly held inner space where his thoughts were his own. It was at the Jagiellonian that he began to express those thoughts in a torrent of poetry and plays. And it was the Nazi invasion in 1939 that made theater for him not just a pleasant avocation but a necessary, almost religious assertion of national pride.
"It was essential to keep these theatrical get-togethers secret; otherwise we risked serious punishment from the occupying forces, even deportation to the concentration camps," John Paul wrote in his book "Gift and Mystery." "I must admit that the whole experience of the theater left a deep impression on me, even though at a certain point I came to realize that this was not my real vocation."

On Sept. 1, 1939, as the Nazis bombed Krakow, Wojtyla and a friend were in the streets, surrounded by the mayhem. The occupation that followed sorely tested not only the national spirit, but Wojtyla's own. Cracking down on intellectuals, the Nazis deported his professors. To avoid deportation, he had to take a job at a quarry. That later inspired a long poem, "The Quarry." Here Wojtyla developed his sense of what it was like to be a working man, an unusual trait in a modern pope. But his co-workers saw his intelligence and made it possible for him to study even on the job. "It did not bother them that I brought books to work," he wrote in 1996. "They would say: `We'll keep watch. You go ahead and read."

When Wojtyla decided in 1942 to study for the priesthood, he entered an underground seminary. His life revolved around the seminary, his daytime job, and an enterprise that could have earned him deportation: the development of the underground theater. In 1944, as he walked home from work, a German army truck hit and nearly killed him. Later that year, after the Warsaw Uprising, the Nazis rounded up young men in Krakow; Wojtyla barely avoided arrest.

After the war, Cardinal Sapieha ordained him in 1946. Soon after that, Wojtyla headed off to Rome -- his first venture outside Poland -- to study theology and the ancient city itself. During this period, he traveled in both France and Belgium, visiting the country church in Ars where St. John Mary Vianney, a 19th-century priest who was the best-known confessor of his time, had spent as many as 18 hours a day hearing confessions and offering spiritual advice.

In 1948, he completed his first of two doctorates, this one in theology. His dissertation focused on the Spanish Carmelite mystic, St. John of the Cross. Then he returned to Poland to begin serving in a parish outside Krakow.

"When I finally reached the territory of Niegowic parish, I knelt down and kissed the ground," he wrote in "Gift and Mystery." "It was a gesture I had learned from St. John Mary Vianney." And it was a gesture that he was to repeat many times as pope, on his first visit to a country.

Less than a year later, he was sent to a parish in Krakow, where he worked extensively with secondary school and college students. In that parish and in his university chaplaincy, he built what he came to call his Srodowisko, his environment.

Young people in that setting found him charmingly open, willing to listen, charismatic and athletic -- on hikes, in kayaks and on skis.
They called him Wujek, "Uncle," to avoid trouble, because Poland's communist regime forbade priests from working with groups of young people.

In 1951, Sapieha's successor as archbishop of Krakow, Eugeniusz Baziak, sent Wojtyla off on a two-year academic sabbatical to work on a second doctorate, this time in philosophy. His study focused on phenomenology, a school of philosophy that tried to take account of the everyday things of life in its examination of the great questions. In 1953, he began lecturing on social ethics at the Jagiellonian University. Later, he taught ethics at the Catholic University of Lublin.

In the 1950s, he had to do his teaching, writing and pastoral work in the setting of a regime intent on controlling the church. In 1953, the regime shut down Tygodnik Powszechny, an independent Catholic weekly that had carried Wojtyla's poetry and essays. Wojtyla went to the newspaper, heard sad tales about the financial straits that its journalists now faced, and handed a key editor half of his own monthly salary to give to the editors. The young priest continued turning over a third to a half of his own salary, and other priests began to do the same.

That same year, Wojtyla's teaching appeared in an underground book called "Catholic Social Ethics," which first came to general knowledge in the West in Jonathan Kwitny's 1997 book, "Man of the Century: The Life and Times of Pope John Paul II." In an interview in 1997, a year before his death, Kwitny said: "This book is a very specific economic program which I think would shock many Catholics." The book cautioned against overzealous nationalism, criticized unregulated capitalism and outlined rules for social struggle similar to those later proclaimed by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. It also condemned war in stark terms: "War is evil. It should be avoided even as a last resort to restore justice between countries, because it may result in even greater evil and injustice than it combats."

This book, like his financial support for the unemployed journalists, may have eluded the attention of the state. But he had also demonstrated his grit publicly by forcing local officials to back down from taking over a seminary, and by preaching sermons that carried what can only be called thinly veiled references to government repression.

"There was ample evidence that Wojtyla was going to be a troublemaker," said George Weigel, author of "Witness to Hope: The Biography of Pope John Paul II," the authorized biography published in 1999. If the government had been paying sufficient attention, it should have marked him as a man to be watched carefully and suppressed at all costs.

Inexplicably, however, Zenon Kliszko, the Communist Party's chief ideologue, failed to appreciate how much of a threat Bishop Wojtyla represented to the state. When Archbishop Baziak of Krakow died in 1962, the selection of his successor had to go through a process that the state and the church had agreed upon in 1956. The primate of the Polish church, Cardinal Stefan Wyszynski, would consult with the Vatican about candidates, and then Wyszynski would submit names to the government, which had three
months to veto the appointment. Kliszko vetoed name after name. In private, he made it clear that he was waiting for the Vatican to nominate Wojtyla.

"Why? Because I think he thought Wojtyla was a kind of light-headed intellectual who could be manipulated into a position of opposition to Wyszynski," Weigel said. "One must always always remember that the communist strategy with the church was to try to divide and conquer." If that was the strategy, it was based on a total misreading of Wojtyla and breathtaking obtuseness on Kliszko's part. Finally, 18 months after Baziak's death, Kliszko got his way: The church announced that Wojtyla would be the next archbishop of Krakow. Only three years later, Pope Paul VI, who had a strong relationship with Wojtyla, named him a cardinal. And when Paul VI died in 1978 and his successor died only a month after his election, Wojtyla became Pope John Paul II.

To the surprise of some Vatican insiders, instead of knuckling down immediately to work on internal questions, his earliest work as pope focused heavily on his native land. His triumphal return to Poland in 1979, less than eight months after his election as pope, rattled the nation's communist leaders, emboldened the workers and started a long, inexorable chain of map-changing events.

By 1979, the Polish government had seen Wojtyla as archbishop and cardinal, and officials knew him to be a formidable opponent. Now, he was expressing a desire to return to Poland as pope, and the government resolved to do everything possible to contain the damage.

The first issue was timing. John Paul wanted to visit on May 8, 1979, the 900th anniversary of the martyrdom of St. Stanislaw, his most illustrious predecessor as the shepherd of Krakow's Catholics. The saint's death at the hands of King Boleslaw had made him a great hero for most Poles, including John Paul, who had once played the role of Boleslaw on stage.

Just before his election as pope, Wojtyla had written a poem titled "Stanislaw," and in his speeches, he often cited Stanislaw's heroic example. For Poles, Stanislaw embodied the church's resistance to the state, and the government wanted no part of a papal visit on the anniversary of his martyrdom.

Ultimately, John Paul visited Poland in June, and he did not shrink from mentioning Stanislaw. The regime did everything it could to minimize his impact, such as making sure that TV cameras focused tightly on John Paul and didn't show the huge crowds -- an estimated 12 million Poles saw him in person during that visit. At one event in Warsaw, as many as 1 million people heard him say: "Christ cannot be kept out of the history of man in any part of the globe." The crowd roared back, over and over: "We want God," an unnerving sound for the regime.

The ostensible reason for his visit was to promote his first encyclical, "Redemptor Hominis" (Redeemer of Man), emphasizing the dignity of the human person, which became a theme of his papacy. On his visit to the concentration camp Auschwitz, John
Paul asked a group of bishops: "Can anyone on this Earth be surprised that a pope who came from the archdiocese which contains this camp started his first encyclical with the words `Redemptor Hominis,' and that he devoted it in full to the cause of man, the dignity of man, the threats facing man, the rights of man?" In one section of the document, he used the word "solidarity" prominently. It may never be entirely certain that the Solidarity labor movement took its name from that word in the encyclical, but Weigel feels confident of the relationship. "I think the parallelism between his constant use of that word and the adoption of that by the movement is just so self-evident," Weigel said.

Once the Solidarity movement began, John Paul nurtured it through its confrontations with the Polish government. In the difficult spring of 1981, as the movement grew, the press in the Soviet Union verbally attacked John Paul. A few weeks later, a Turk named Mehmet Ali Agca physically attacked the pope.

Agca had previously assassinated the editor of an Istanbul newspaper and had threatened to assassinate the pope during his 1979 visit to Turkey. During a regular Wednesday afternoon papal audience in St. Peter's Square, Agca fired two shots at John Paul as he rode through the crowd.

The bullet had narrowly missed a main artery. The failed assassination had occurred on the anniversary of the first Marian apparition at Fatima, and the pope attributed his survival to Mary's intervention. On the first anniversary of the assassination attempt, he visited the shrine at Fatima and said his survival was no accident, that "in the designs of Providence there are no mere coincidences."

At Agca's trial, the formal verdict held that he had not acted alone but named no co-conspirators. No one has tied the shooting definitively to communist anger over John Paul's role in Poland, but that suspicion lingered. In 1983, the pope visited Agca in prison and forgave him. A few months after the assassination attempt, the new Polish leader, Gen. Wojciech Jaruzelski, declared a "state of war," imposed martial law and ordered mass arrests to crack down on Solidarity. The general had all of the state's military power on his side, and the pope had only the power of moral force, but when John Paul returned to Poland in 1983, in a meeting between the two men, Jaruzelski visibly trembled, and later acknowledged that he had been nervous. Weeks after John Paul's visit, Jaruzelski formally ended the "state of war" in Poland.

The events in Poland were an overture to the collapse of communism in Europe at the end of the 1980s and the start of the 1990s, but in John Paul's behind-the-scenes maneuvering in Europe, some details remain in dispute. One version comes from Carl Bernstein, who covered the Watergate scandal for The Washington Post. In a 1992 Time magazine article, Bernstein wrote about "The Holy Alliance" between President Reagan and John Paul, primarily run by the White House, that kept Solidarity alive. He described meetings between White House and Vatican aides to further this cooperation. Later, he expanded this account in a 1996 book written with Italian reporter Marco Politi, "His Holiness: John Paul II and the Hidden History of Our Time."
For Kwitny, reports of a Reagan-John Paul alliance were totally unsubstantiated. Kwitny wrote that the Time article was "a work of fiction from beginning to end."

Perhaps the definitive verdict comes from one of the primary players on the opposing side. "Everything that happened in Eastern Europe in these last few years would have been impossible without the presence of this Pope and without the important role -- including the political role -- that he played on the world stage," former Russian President Mikhail Gorbachev wrote in the newspaper La Stampa of Turin, Italy, in 1992.

John Paul stood up to totalitarianism, and at times, he made its knees shake. Describing his time under totalitarianism, John Paul told Weigel: "I participated in the great experience of my contemporaries -- humiliation at the hands of evil." But he overcame the humiliation, because his life reflected the simple words of Jesus that he used so often in his papacy: "Be not afraid." From his election to his death, John Paul remained true to that. He simply did not fear.

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