

Chronicle

Summaries of Events and Background Information

Father Jerzy Popiełuszko

Fr Jerzy Popiełuszko, whose murdered body was found by the Polish authorities on 30 November, was born in Białystok in 1947. He entered the Warsaw seminary in 1966 and was ordained in 1972. He later served as curate to parishes in and around Warsaw, and was most recently attached to the Church of St Stanisław Kostka. He also worked as chaplain to the medical community in the area. Ill-health prevented him from having a parish of his own.

In 1980, the Polish Primate, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, appointed him as chaplain to striking workers in a Warsaw steel-plant. He became increasingly involved in the steel-workers' activities and remained a source of moral and spiritual support to them throughout the Solidarity era. He attended a number of political trials connected with action taken by steelworkers during 1981.

In February 1982, he began holding "Masses for the Country" which ultimately made him an international figure. The Mass was celebrated monthly after that and focussed particularly on prayers for the politically oppressed and their families. Fr Popiełuszko's sermons — which were recorded on tape and circulated throughout the country — repeatedly denounced the abuse of human rights and freedom of conscience in communist Poland. He had a vision of national liberation through non-violent resistance to evil and a spirit of unity, which he called a "solidarity of hearts". The Masses were often introduced and concluded by recitations of Polish poetry and national songs. Often more than ten thousand people attended, spilling out of the church into the square, watched over by cordons of armed militiamen.

Fr Popiełuszko had been under surveillance by the security police since September 1982. In December 1982 the parish house in which he stored food and clothing for internees was vandalised (presumably as a timely "warning"). In August 1983 he was detained by police on charges of "abusing religion for political purposes" and obliged to attend interrogations. Four months later he was detained on allegations that a cache of arms and political leaflets had been found in his flat. Fr Popiełuszko denied all knowledge of the compromising material, and following the intervention of Archbishop Bronisław Dąbrowski, the secretary of the Polish Episcopate, was released on bail. He returned to his work undeterred, although he was henceforth accompanied everywhere by a parishioner acting as his personal protector in case of unforeseen harassment. In May 1984, he gave a sermon implicitly supporting the election boycott promoted by Solidarity. In June he was again summoned for interrogation.

Last August, the charges against him were suspended under the general amnesty on condition that he gave the authorities no cause for complaint for a minimum of 2½ years; on 26 August he preached again as usual.

Various methods for removing him from the public eye had apparently been explored by the authorities, including the possibility of transferring him to another, quieter, parish in return for the release of interned Solidarity activists Bogdan Lis and Piotr Mierzejewski. Recently it had been rumoured that an exchange had been proposed, whereby an imprisoned priest would be released if all "Masses for the Country" were cancelled. Suggestions for sending Fr

Popiełuszko abroad for an unspecified period of study leave had also been put to the church hierarchy.

In September, the magazine *Tu i Teraz* (Here and Now) published an article signed by Jan Rem (the pen-name of the official Communist Party spokesman Jerzy Urban), denouncing Fr Popiełuszko as an "organiser of political sessions" whose Masses were symptomatic of his "fanaticism and hatred towards communist Poland". A month before his death he was clearly attracting more attention in high places than was good for him.

Those who knew Fr Popiełuszko reported that he had of late seemed tense,

tired and very overworked. He freely admitted that he had reason to fear for his life; he had received a number of threats indicating that he was saying and doing too much. "We always live with this risk," he observed once, "and if we must die suddenly, it is surely better to meet death defending a worthwhile cause than sitting back and letting injustice win." His persistence cost him his life — as he well knew it might — but this is small consolation to a nation for whom he had become a symbol of non-violent resistance to an alien ideology in the name of personal liberty and conscience.

IRENA KORBA

Renewed Campaign against Hebrew in the Soviet Union

The second half of 1984 saw a systematic clamp-down on Jewish activists, and in particular on those teaching or studying Hebrew, in the USSR. The trial and sentencing (to 13 years) of Josef Begun in autumn 1983 had seemed to mark a fatal blow to the older generation of Hebrew teachers; it was the culmination of a series of repressive measures against Begun himself and other teachers. These included Pavel Abramovich, who after almost ten years of threats, interrogations and house-searches, had been forced by the threats made against his young son to close his Hebrew classes in 1982.

Following the imprisonment of Josef Begun young Hebrew students were beginning to teach others. In reaction the authorities turned their attention to the younger generation of students and teachers, and within three months — August to October 1984 — there were four arrests of Jews in their twenties and thirties, as well as one older Hebrew teacher and activist.

In May, following Purim celebrations, the homes of seven Jews in Odessa were searched and large amounts of religious literature confiscated. One of the seven Jews whose homes were raided was Yakov Levin, 26, who had been studying Hebrew for several years. Two months later, Hebrew literature was confiscated from his flat, and on 12 August, immediately after this house search, Levin was arrested and charged under Art. 187 of the Ukrainian Criminal Code (equivalent to Art. 190-1 of

the RSFSR Code, "circulation of deliberately false fabrications slandering the Soviet state and social system").

Leonid Volvovsky, a 42-year-old leading religious Jew from Gor'ky, was warned in July that he would face "serious consequences" if he continued with the Bible-reading sessions which he had been holding in his flat attended by a few friends. This "warning" from the police followed several interrogations and house-searches which involved the confiscation of Hebrew literature.

A young Hebrew student from Moscow, Alexander Kholmyansky, 34, was arrested in July, originally on charges of petty hooliganism. He was given ten days "administrative detention" but was then not released; instead, following the alleged discovery of a gun and bullets during a search of his flat, which took place in early September, he was charged with "possession of a weapon". (Under very similar circumstances another Jew, Stanislav Zubko, was sentenced to four years labour camp in 1981; see *RCL* Vol. 10 No. 2, pp. 194-95). Also in Moscow, a third young Hebrew student and devout Orthodox Jew, Yuli Edel'shtein, was arrested and detained on a spurious charge of possessing cannabis. His home was searched on 24 August, and the police claimed they had found a matchbox containing a narcotic substance. They also found, and confiscated, Edel'shtein's Hebrew books. Edel'shtein is awaiting trial under Art. 224 of the Criminal Code.