Fr Jan's Early *Life*

Fr Jan, an elderly Polish Redemptorist, showed Sr Jackie Smith S.P. that great suffering can also reveal great goodness.

"When did you leave Poland?" I asked the gentle, elderly priest with a slight Polish accent. He looked up and replied, "During the war, when I was fourteen, in a goods truck." Thus began a series of conversations at Hawkstone Hall with Fr Jan, now aged eighty-eight, during which he related the story of his early life.

I was born in the small village of Podchybie, about twenty kilometres from Krakow in Southern Poland. My parents, Jan and Hermenegilda, were basket makers. They had their own small business, but as you can imagine, life was hard. I never heard them complain and we were happy and content with the little we had.

"I was the second child of three: my sister, Otolia, was three years older than me. I was born in 1927 and named Jan after my father. My brother, Wladyslaw, was born in 1930.

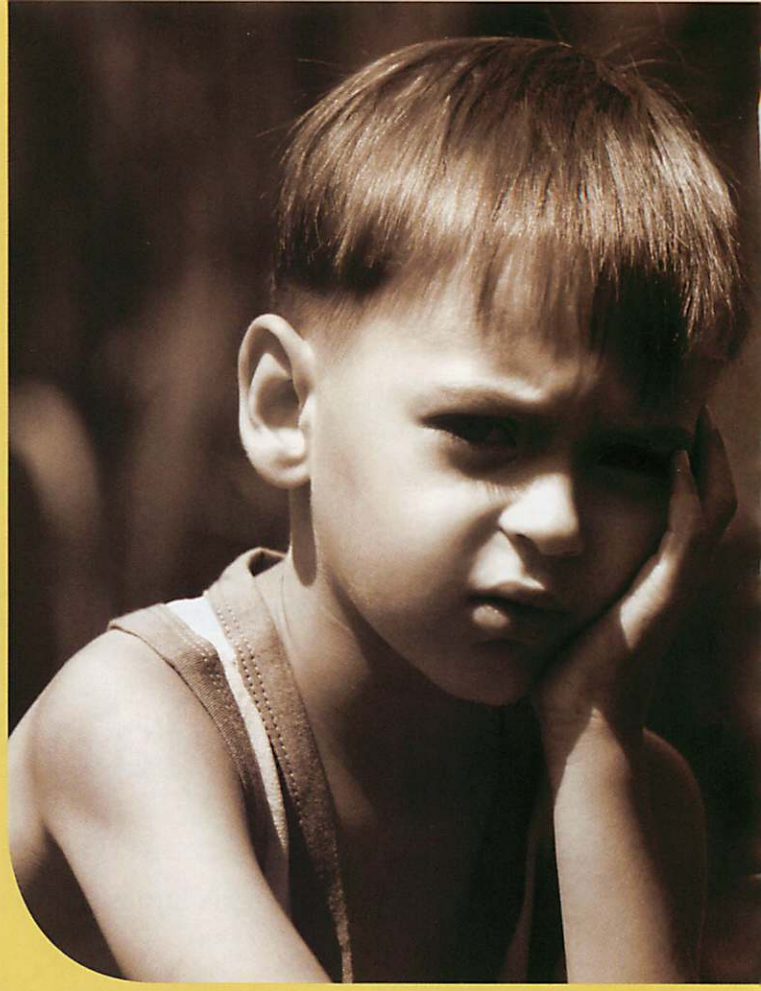
Both my brother and I wanted to be priests from the time we were very young, but our happiness was short-lived. When I was seven years old, my mother took ill. She was taken to hospital and was there for a long time. Our home felt empty. My father found it difficult to cope without her. Then, to our great delight, after about a year, we heard she was coming home for Christmas.

Sadly though, she wasn't better. We didn't realise it at the time but she came home to die. She was with us for about two weeks and died in January 1935. It was such a shock. Two aunts came to live with us, my mother's sisters, but our home was never the same again.

After my mother's death, things became even more financially difficult. There wasn't enough money to buy us shoes all the year round. In summer, we went to school and church barefoot. In winter, we sometimes had boots for outside and we had boots made out of old rugs for inside, and even for outside too.

My father died two years after my mother. He had had asthma for a long time but this year it was very bad. We had no money to call a doctor, no money for medicine. It was pitiful to see him suffer like this. He died at the beginning of winter, so we had another funeral in the cold, cold weather. I was ten.

In 1939, the Germans invaded Poland. It was a very sad time for Poland. There were many atrocities. The Nazis closed all schools. Nobody was allowed to teach Polish children. Some teachers taught in secret but if they were caught, they were sent to concentration camps. Many were arrested and those who were suspected of teaching were sent away. We never saw them again.



My schooling stopped at the age of twelve. My brother was only ten. They took our food and gave thirty percent of it to feed the German army. We were starving. People exchanged their gold for food. Our family had no food: we all had to beg. I didn't like begging so I would look for jobs.

"Thousands of men were forced to go into the German Army. The Germans ordered local councils to supply the required number of people for forced labour in Germany, but people preferred to spend the nights sleeping in the fields and in hiding rather than be taken. My sister and I did this until conditions became so bad that we spent some nights at home."

On 15 July 1942, I was woken by Germans banging on the door at 4 a.m. I was fourteen and my sister was seventeen when the soldiers seized us both, forcing us to move quickly. They gave us just a few minutes to say our hurried goodbyes to our crying aunts. My brother, too young to be taken away, was left with my aunts.

We didn't know where the soldiers would take us. They marched us at gunpoint down the road to a big hall, where we stood for several hours: men and women, adults and teenagers. That afternoon, they marched us to a railway station five kilometres away. One elderly man couldn't walk fast enough so a soldier pulled out a gun and shot him in the head. Dead. His niece, who accompanied him, was inconsolable."

"We were taken to a big military camp in Krakow where thousands of people waited to learn their fate. The soldiers separated the men and women: I didn't see my sister again for sixteen years.

The soldiers marched the men and boys to the station, where we were herded onto cramped and horrible cattle trucks, without water and sanitation, fifty of us to each wagon. The heat was terrible. Our only food for five days was a small loaf of bread and a sausage made of salted horse meat. The salt made us so thirsty. Sometimes, under armed guard, they allowed us out at a station to get water from buckets.

We didn't know how long the journey would be. On the first day, through open slats in the carriage, we saw Russian prisoners in a pitiful condition, working on the railway. We threw them some of our own meagre rations. This gesture spread spontaneously from carriage to carriage. I have never forgotten this beautiful thing in such a horrible situation: the soldiers' brutality failed to suppress the greatness of the human spirit and the strange solidarity that can come in the midst of suffering. It lifted the spirits of the Russian prisoners - and ours too, making us feel momentarily human again.

We crossed the border from Poland into Czechoslovakia. That's when I broke down. It suddenly hit me that I was leaving my country. Would I ever see it again?

After five days we arrived at Lienz in Austria. We were divided up to work as forced labour on farms which supplied food to the German army. Two soldiers took me to a farm where I spent the next three years as a labourer. At first I found the work hard. I was weak and hadn't eaten properly for some years. Gradually, however, I became stronger. We ate well and, eventually, I even enjoyed the work.

The farm's Austrian owners were good to us. They let us eat the same food as they did and provided us with decent clothes. It was forbidden to feed us well and they would have been shot if they had been found out. They took us with them to church. The farmer also allowed us to listen to the news from London on his wireless. He was very brave. He risked his life."

Strangely, during this time, the Nazis allowed us to write letters home. My sister was sent to a farm in Germany where people were cruel. She had a difficult time, but I only learned this twenty years later.

On 1 December 1944, when I was seventeen, the Gestapo arrested me and a few more Poles. We were taken to a prison five kilometres away from the farm, but I don't know why because they didn't tell us. I remember the iron doors and iron bars: everything was iron. About six of us slept in one big room. The hunger started once again.

The Gestapo thought some Italian prisoners were spies: they had crossed the border to buy salt. There were also Germans who had escaped from the army. They were all shot. The Allies were already bombing the area, trying to hit the nearby station. If a bomb had fallen on the prison we would have been killed.

The Commandant was a nice man, unwillingly caught up in all this and sympathetic towards us. The guards behaved very badly. One day, when the farmer's wife for whom I had worked came to bring me food, they chased her away and told her to take it to the German soldiers.

The conditions became so terrible that, one day, in desperation, I plucked up courage to ask the Commandant for work. We were all so hungry. I wanted to do something so as not to think about hunger. To my surprise, he agreed and I was given a job outside the camp with a lady who had a nearby general store. She knew I was a prisoner. Each evening, she gave me a few loaves of bread which I hid under my coat for myself and my cell-mates.

I remember Christmas 1944 in this Gestapo prison. The Allied bombers were blowing everything up, so I also remember the clanging of iron, the falling bombs, the explosions and the shaking building. I spent that Christmas with my cell-mates, hungry and desperate, the future dark and uncertain. There was no Mass, no singing, no extra food.

Fr Jan suddenly smiled. "Imagine! Christmas! Yet, I have to say, I am glad I had that experience. I have been a prisoner. I understand how it is, being in a prison. You have no control. You don't know how many days, weeks, months or years you will be there. You wonder if the guards will come in one day and shoot you all. We didn't know what would happen, but we did know that the Germans were getting desperate.

I was freed at the beginning of January 1945. I don't know why. I don't know why they arrested us in the first place. Perhaps someone was jealous and informed on us? I will never know. Altogether I was in that prison for just over a month.

I returned to the farm. Those good people were so delighted to see me again. I was there until the war ended six months later. The Allied forces entered Austria and a Scottish regiment liberated us in stages because there were so many of us. Prisoners of war were freed first; then the civilians. They asked us where we wanted to go. This was a choice, the first choice I ever made about my future. I was eighteen years old.

Some opted to return to Poland; others emigrated to the United States or went to relatives in other countries. I felt uneasy that Poland was still not a free country so I decided to join the Polish Army. It was wonderful to see Poland's eagle and to wear a Polish uniform! Those who joined the army were sent to different units. In 1945 I went to Italy to train.

After one year, we were demobilised as the British Government had no more use for a Polish Army. I was asked what I wanted to do - join the British Army, emigrate or return to Poland. I was nineteen with no trade. I had enjoyed army life so I decided to join the British Army. It was 1947. I was sent to Bovington Camp in Dorset, where we received some military training but the priority was to learn English and to pass an examination before final acceptance. I signed on for five years and then for a further seven years as a reservist. From Bovington Camp, with a hundred other young men, I transferred to a transit camp in Egypt from whence we deployed to different units.

Another Pole and I were sent to one of the best regiments, the 17/21st Lancers Regiment. We went to Palestine as a peace-keeping force at the time of the Partition. One of our jobs was to escort Jewish people through Arab territories and to escort Arabs through Jewish territories. Both sides saw us as the enemy. We lost quite a few soldiers to snipers. There were many Zionist attacks on British troops. I was tired of war.

In 1950, our regiment returned to England to take responsibility for training young recruits. We were based in Catterick Camp in Yorkshire for a few years. The so-called 'Cold War' began during this time. In 1951 our regiment was sent on stand-by to Germany. Another war was expected, this time with the Russians. I was there for two years, training new recruits until, thank God, the threat of war abated. I returned to England in 1953 to be demobbed. This was the end of my life in the army!

He continued, "Initially, it felt strange and I missed the camaraderie and the company of fellow soldiers. I found a job in Darlington, in a factory which made aircraft parts, initially staying with a lovely couple but moving to new lodgings when they needed the room for their daughter. A family called Madden, who lived in the house opposite, treated me as if I were their son and brother. They could not have been kinder. Our friendship lasted for over forty-four years until the last member died in 1988. I still miss them.

I began to think again about my deepest childhood desire of becoming a priest. I didn't know if, being Polish and with a limited education, I could be accepted to study for the priesthood.

In 1955, I made enquiries of a Redemptorist priest called Fr John Berry. As he had been a prisoner of war on the German and Polish border during the war, we had many experiences to share. He suggested that I go to the seminary at Osterley for two years to perfect my English, learn Latin, and finish my education. With his help and the help of others, I was accepted. I was in Osterley from 1956 to 1958. In 1958, to my great surprise and delight, my young brother visited me, all the way from Poland. We had last seen each other fifteen years earlier.

The Polish border opened for the first time in the summer of 1957. Later, in 1958, I applied for a visa and visited the land of my birth. What a joy it was to meet my family, relatives and some old friends! They had suffered so much during the war and subsequently with the Russians and Communism. The country was depressed and run down. Everyone was very poor. People were sad because of the oppression they were experiencing.

During the war my sister was sent to work on a farm in East Germany. In 1946 they were 'liberated' by the Russians and she was sent back to Poland. She later married and had five children: four boys and one girl. They were almost destitute – as was everybody. They were so pleased to see me again when I visited her in Czestochowa. The little they had, they shared with me. I slept on the floor: there was no alternative. They had nothing.

My brother was in Poland through the war and after. His schooling had stopped when he was ten, so he was sent to school by the Communists. Every year, for three or four years, he had to cram the learning of two years into one. He could do it because he was clever. He also wanted to become a priest but it was forbidden. Because he had been educated by the State, he was forced to become a teacher. When I visited, he was married and he and his wife were expecting their first baby. They eventually had three children. Financially, they had very little. Teachers were paid nothing! Under Communism, everyone was paid the same whether you were a doctor, teacher, road worker, or gravedigger: barely enough for food. For several years, I did what I could to help them. People in England helped me to send parcels of money, medicine and clothes.

I entered the Redemptorist Noviciate in Perth in 1958 at the age of thirty, older than many of my fellow students and with very different experiences. To my delight, Fr John Berry was the Rector. Having been a prisoner of war he understood what I had been through and was a great support. He and his family became valued friends.

One sunny summer day in Perth the novices had a coach trip to the seaside for a swim. We were all enjoying the water, when we saw Fr John suddenly stop moving. He had died of a heart attack. It was so unexpected. He was only in his fifties. We drove back home in absolute shocked silence.

In 1959, I made my first profession and then went to Hawkstone Hall for seven very happy years to continue my studies for the priesthood. A few months before my ordination, I applied for a visa to Poland. That year, 1966, there was to be a big celebration of one thousand years of Christianity at the famous shrine of Our Lady in Czestochowa. Warsaw refused all visa applications - even that of Pope Paul VI! My brother, however, was busy pleading my cause, approaching different Government Ministers, explaining that I had been taken for forced labour: I wasn't an activist and wouldn't be a spy or a threat. I was Polish and wanted to visit my family.

On 1 July 1966, I was ordained a priest. It was the happiest day of my life. It was here, in Hawkstone Hall. It was a wonderful day, although my family couldn't come because of the cost. Going through the cards and letters that evening, I saw one was from the Polish Embassy. Imagine my surprise and delight! My visa had been granted, thanks to my brother! What a wonderful gift that was on my ordination day!

My first Mass was celebrated in Hawkstone Hall for my friends and confreres. Then I celebrated Mass in Darlington for all my dear friends there. Within a few days I was able to celebrate Mass in Poland with my family and friends!

Most of my priestly life has been spent ministering in parishes," Fr Jan remarked. Although I have been through many things, I know the hand of God has held me and kept me safe. We need God; we also need each other. Our love for God is shown in how we treat each other. If only we could realise how important acts of kindness and care are... That is what Jesus meant when he said, "'Love one another'. I am extremely grateful to God for all he has done for me. Looking back on my whole life, I realise that what got me through was God's goodness and mercy, as well as those loving people who came to my help. It was God and they, who made my life worth living. Deo Gratias!"

Fr Jan is the last surviving member of his generation in his family. His sister died in 2009 and his brother two years later in 2011.