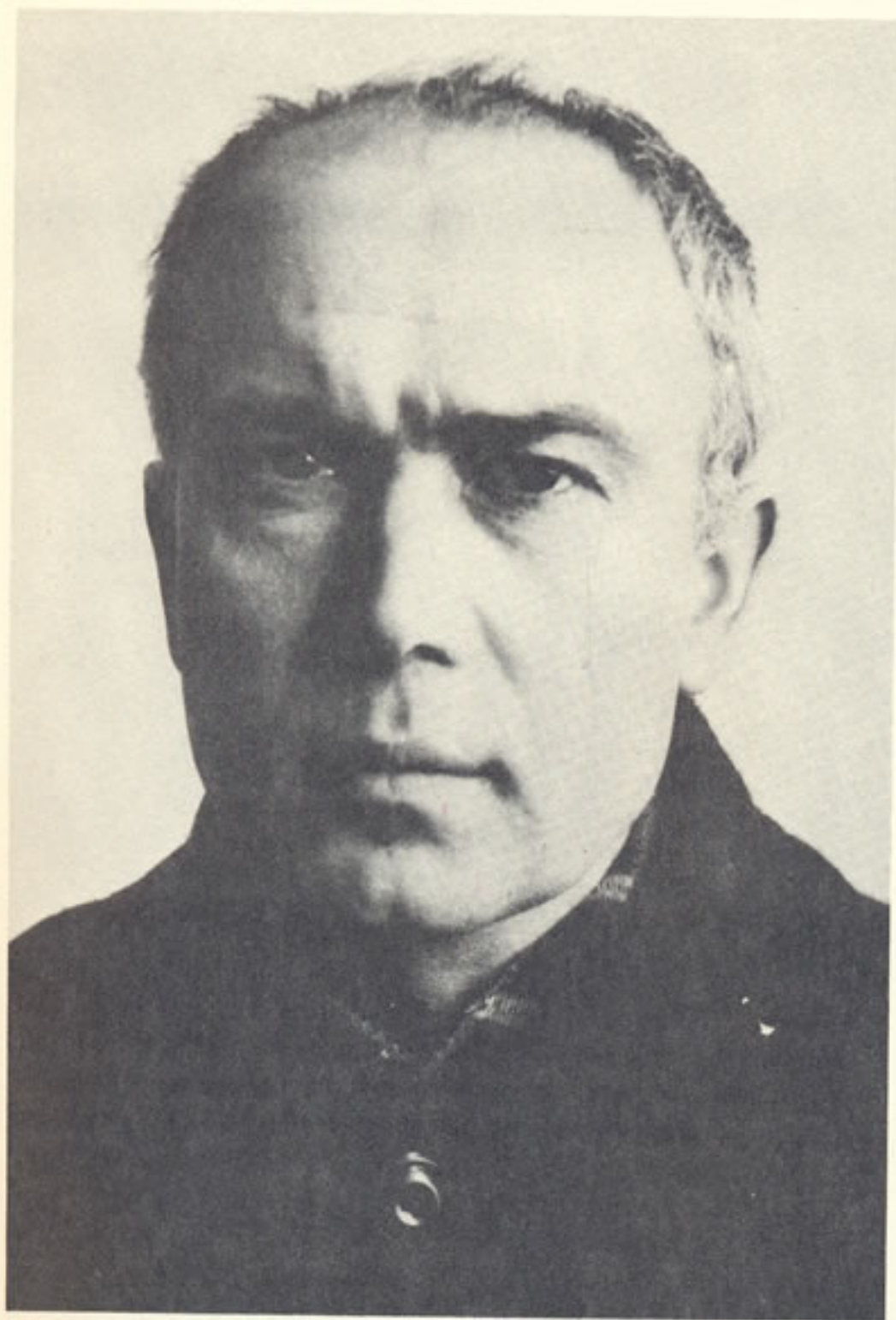


A  
MAN  
FOR  
OTHERS

Maximilian Kolbe  
Saint of Auschwitz

In the Words of  
Those Who Knew Him

Patricia Treece



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1817

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## Prologue

**A**USCHWITZ, 1941. The sergeant, a tough professional soldier, has just been fingered by an SS man for one of the cruelest deaths here. He is to be shut up naked in an empty, subterranean cell and left without food or water until he dies.

Grown men not too numbed by terror wail and weep at such a sentence. This victim is no exception. He is sobbing over his wife and children, and saying he doesn't want to die.

The SS ignore him.

Suddenly another prisoner, breaking ranks, asks to take the condemned man's place. Even the SS are stunned. Having reduced the personal identities of twenty thousand Poles to numbers, for once they want to know more about a victim.

"Who are you?" one SS man asks number 16,670.

"A Catholic priest," the prisoner replies. "I have no family," he adds, as though that explains everything. An undercurrent runs through the camp: "It's Father Kolbe." Even those who are not his friends recognize the name—the famous Franciscan, the editor, publisher, and opinion-molder whose publications were so influential in prewar Poland.

What is he thinking of? Even the Bible of his faith says only, "Greater love than this has no man—that he lay down his life for a

friend." The doomed man is not even a friend of Kolbe's.

"Well, you see," one of Kolbe's intimates interjects, "for Father Kolbe everyone is a friend."

"Now there's a Polish hero for you!" someone exclaims.

"A real saint," murmurs another.

"A fool, you mean," mutters a third.

The sergeant, after the initial shock of relief when Kolbe's offer is accepted, will fall into an almost suicidal depression over Kolbe's having died for him. Then, one day, he suddenly sees himself as a man with a mission: To survive so word of the Franciscan's free-will offering of his life for a fellow human being will survive, too, to enrich the human family.

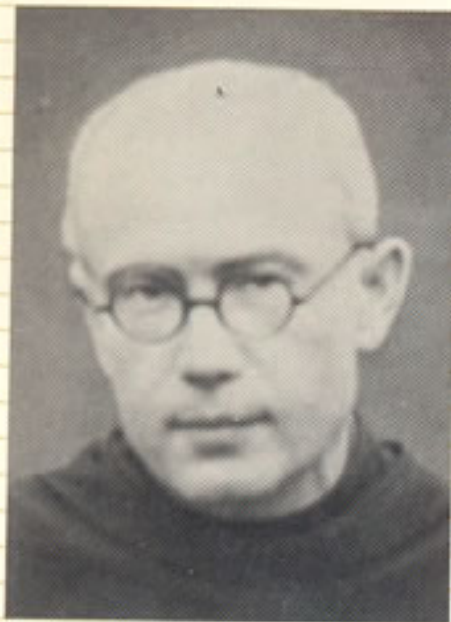
He does not know that others, even before Kolbe's arrest by the Gestapo, thought that the Franciscan was a never-to-be-forgotten person, a credit to the human race because of the way he gave himself freely and completely to others, whatever their class, race, religion or condition.

"Pray that I will love without any limits," he had written his mother when still in his twenties. That prayer, feel those who know him, has been abundantly answered. They point to Kolbe's turning the Franciscan friary he founded into a hospice for displaced Polish Jews, gentiles, and German invaders alike, with a sense of brotherhood that simply did not include the words "enemy" or "unlovable" in its vocabulary.

Students of mysticism also point to Kolbe's remarkable life and sacrificial death. They speak of it as evidence of the highest spirituality, that of an individual completely at one with the eternal Goodness who feels he has received, gratuitously, so much love from God that he has to pass it on at any cost. For them, Kolbe simply overflowed with a love so affirming, accepting, and self-giving that he is a spring of water for a thirsty world.

Can a human being really achieve such completeness? Has a man perhaps been lost in myth? Or, if the superhero is real, can we still consider him a member of our so-fallible race? Those who can say, "I was a friend of Maximilian Kolbe," insist he was not only a hero and "another St. Francis" but so down to earth, so simple, so fully, joyously human in his laughter and jokes, his heartaches and sufferings, his problems and pains, that he was the most approachable of friends.

“There was something about him that drew one to him like a magnet. I can only say I just loved to be with him, no matter what the situation or what we were doing,” his contemporaries say again and again. Let these people, most of whom are still living—his schoolmates, his Franciscan coworkers, his spiritual children, his prison cellmates, jailers, and concentration camp companions—present us with the laughing, loving, suffering, flesh-and-blood man who gave his life totally to God in service to humanity long before he sealed that gift by bearing the burden of another man’s death.



# A MAN FOR OTHERS

Maximilian Kolbe was born in 1894 in southern Poland and declared a saint on October 10, 1982, by Pope John Paul II (for whom he is a spiritual hero). *A Man for Others* chronicles Kolbe's remarkable life, which climaxed in 1941 in Auschwitz, where he volunteered to die in place of a fellow prisoner he hardly knew. Told chiefly in the words of his family, friends, acquaintances, and death-camp survivors—including the man he died for—*A Man for Others* is the story of an innovative, down-to-earth, and immensely likable man whose martyr's death concluded a life devoted to his ideal of "love without limits." Maximilian Kolbe is a real hero for our times and an inspiration for any reader.

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