

OUR VICTORIOUS LADY OF KOZIELSK

Crowned with golden papal crowns by Pope John Paul II (Krakow 08.06.1997)



The creation of the wood relief of Our Victorious Lady of Kozielsk has its origin, among the members of the pre-war Marianum Institute and Religious and Knightly Association which had existed in the city of Wilno in north eastern Poland during the 1930s. The Institute and Association was re-established by Lt. Tadeusz Birecki in one of the internment camps for Polish officers in Lithuania, following the defeat of Poland in September 1939 during the first campaign of the Second World War. Following the occupation of Lithuania by the USSR in July 1940 the interned Polish soldiers were taken eastwards by the Soviets and imprisoned in Kozielsk Camp. Their predecessors who had been imprisoned in the same camp from autumn 1939 to spring 1940 were taken to Katyn Forest near Smolensk and murdered by the Soviet secret police, the NKVD and buried in mass graves.

One of the oldest members of the Marianum Institute was Captain Walerian Charkiewicz PhD. It was he, who by chance discovered a well preserved fresco in the oldest of the Kozielsk complex orthodox churches, representing Our Lady of Żyrowice (near Slonim a town in pre-war north eastern Poland) associated with St. Józefat Kuncewicz (c.1580-1623), one of the founders of the Uniate Order of Basilians, murdered in Vitebsk by opponents of the Uniate Church (which recognised the dogma of the Catholic Church and primacy of the Pope whilst retaining the rites of the Orthodox eastern church).

Amongst the prisoners of war held in Kozielsk the cult of Our Lady of Ostra Brama defender of Wilno against the Russians was very much alive. It was not surprising that an initiative to combine the two icons into one was born. The first sketches for such a painting were made by the journalist and sketch artist

Mikołaj Arciszewski. The painter Lt. Michał Siemiradzki, a nephew of the renowned artist Henryk Siemiradzki (1843-1902), took upon himself to paint the picture. As the base for the painting, he used a plank from a lime tree which apparently had come from a dismantled iconostas. The board was prepared in the camp's carpentry workshop run by Maj-Gen. Waclaw Przeździecki a member of the Religious and Knightly Association of the Marianum Institute. Lt. Mieczysław Gulin prepared the crowns for Our Lady and baby Jesus from a pear tree. Thus, was born the first painting of Our Victorious Lady of Kozielsk.

Among those who were brought to the second Kozielsk Camp were those who had been interned in Latvia, among them reserve Lieut. Tadeusz Zieliński (1907-1993) a young sculptor. At the request of Lt. Birecki and on the basis of Mikołaj Arciszewski's sketches, Zieliński sculpted a wood relief of Our Victorious Lady of Kozielsk. It was sculpted from the second part of the iconostas used for the original painting. In the bottom right-hand corner, he cut out his name and the date 3.5.1941 and on the reverse the words of Poland's greatest poet, Adam Mickiewicz (1798-1855) "And so by a miracle You will return us to the bosom of our Fatherland".

In great secrecy, in the presence of Lt. Birecki and Col. Adam Kosiba both icons were blessed by Father Nikodem Dubrawka on Holy Saturday 1941. When the prisoners were being transferred to Giazowetz Camp the wood relief was smuggled in the false bottom of Col. Kosiba's suitcase. In the new camp, Tadeusz Zieliński managed to add a coloured polychrome using paints earmarked for communist slogans. Meanwhile Siemiradzki's painting under the care of Cadet Officer Siemiński went north to the Kola Peninsula, from where it finally reached the centres where the Polish Army in the USSR was being formed, originally in Tatishchev where the 5th Infantry Division was being formed. Following the evacuation of the Polish Army to the Middle East and then to Palestine the painting was returned to Lt. Birecki, with the aim that after the war it would be placed in the restored Marianum Institute.

On June 22, 1941, Germany attacked the USSR. In view of the defeat of the Red Army, a decision was made to evacuate the POW camps in the west of the country, including the camp in Kozelsk. When in June 1941 prisoners of war were transferred to the camp in Giazowiec near Wołogda, a painting by Michał Siemiradzki, hidden in the double bottom of a suitcase, went with them. Siemiński. The bas-relief, also hidden in a suitcase, was transported to the camp in Giazowiec by Col. Adam Kosiba.

It is here in Giazowiec that the artist Zieliński managed to cover the bas-relief with polychrome by using paints intended for communist slogans and. On the other hand, the painting of Siemiradzki under the care of Officer Cadet Siemiński went north, to the Kola Peninsula, together with a group of cadets and policemen. Later he was in the 5th Division organized in Tatishchevo on the Volga. After leaving the Soviets, already in Palestine, it was returned to Birecki in the prediction that after the war it would be the image of the Marianum Institute.

In the summer of 1941, due to the German invasion of the USSR, diplomatic relations between Poland and the Soviet Union were restored. This meant the normalization of relations and the building of the Polish army.

On Sunday, August 25, 1941 in Giazowiec, the first public Mass was celebrated in front of the painting of Our Victorious Lady of Kozelsk by Fr. Franciszek Tyczkowski in the presence of General Władysław Anders and Soviet officers. From that moment on, the painting becomes an object of public worship.

The camp in Giazowiec was empty. Soldiers were transferred to army recruitment points. Quickly the commander of the Polish army in the USSR summoned Col. Adam Kosiba. The colonel took the bas-relief of Our Victorious Lady of Kozielsk the Victorious with him to Moscow. Then, after about 10 days, he went with her to the army headquarters in Buzuluk. Here he handed over the bas-relief to the care of the Polish Armed Forces in the USSR, Rev. Włodzimierz Cieński.





On November 21, 1941, the bas-relief was consecrated a second time, this time officially.

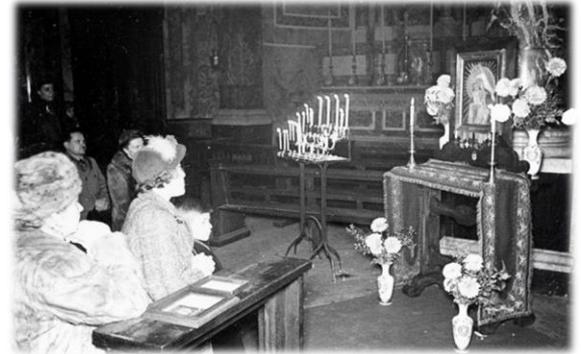
Fr. Włodzimierz Cieński did this. From Buzuluk at the beginning of 1942 the bas-relief was transferred to Jangi-Juli (today's Uzbekistan). Then the OVLK, together with the soldiers, set off on through the Middle and Middle East, North Africa to Italy where to OVLK accompanied the 2nd corps throughout the Italian Campaign.

From November 30 to December 8, 1943 in the church of Assumptionists under the invocation of St. Peter in Gallicantu, on the slopes of Mount Zion in Jerusalem, a daily novena was celebrated to Our Lady of Victory for the victory of the Polish army. In May 1944, the novena was published in Italy as the "Novena to Our Lady of Victory".

While still in the Holy Land, a dispute over the ownership of the bas-relief began. Eventually, it was handed over to Gen. Anders, who appointed Col. Stanisław Rohm as the curator of the bas-relief.

In May 1944 masses were celebrated under her image before going into battle at Monte Cassino.

The 2nd Corps of the Polish Armed Forces stayed in Italy until the summer of 1946, when it was transported to Great Britain and joined the Polish Resettlement Corps. The bas-relief found another place to stay in Delamere near Chester on the border of England and Wales. Due to the demobilisation of the army, the bas-relief had to be placed under "civil" protection. Therefore, in the fall of 1949, Fr. Włodzimierz Cieński transported the OVLK to London. In consultation with Fr. Wiktor Judycki, president of the Marianum Institute, decided to place the bas-relief in one of the side chapels of the of St. Philip Neri Oratorian Church in Brompton, Kensington. In December 1949, in the carpentry workshop of General Waclaw Przeździacki, an altar and frames for the bas-relief were prepared. Twelve votive offerings (soldier's decorations) were placed on the lower sides and on the bottom of the frame. After the solemn introduction on December 11th, the OVLK was permanently placed on the side of St. Wilfred. She was under the care of subsequent parish priests. First, Fr. Kirsche, then from 1952 to 1955 Fr. can. Wiktor Judycki and after 1955, Fr. Kazimierz Sołowiej. In 1958, the work was restored.



In 1961, the church committee of the central London parish purchased its own church on Leysfield Street in the Hammersmith area. On the 8th December that year the new Polish church was solemnly consecrated by Fr. inf. Bronisław Michalski dedicated to St. Andrzej Bobola. In 1962, the church was extended by adding a side nave on the north side. The bas-relief was moved to the new church between December 1961 and the summer of 1963. It was placed in a side chapel created especially for her by Eng. A. Klecki. In 1967, a monument dedicated to those murdered by the NKVD at Katyn, also designed by the architect A. Klecki, was placed in the chapel.

Since moving to the "new home", the cult of OVLK has grown steadily. Over the years, it became so great that in November 1978, F. Z. Mensell made a replica of the bas-relief for the Polish church in Manchester.

After moving to Hammersmith, the priest of the Polish parish and at the same time the guardian of the OVLK was still Fr. Kazimierz Sołowiej and then in the years 1979-1992, Fr. Witold Jarecki. In 1992, the new parish priest was Fr. Ryszard Juszcak. He was the first priest to not have had a military trail behind him. He came to Great Britain from Poland. He decided to propagate the cult of OVLK. So far, it has been of a local nature. It was so obvious to the war generation that they did not try to propagate it further. As a person who came from outside, Fr. Juszcak had a slightly different, broader view. So he began efforts to crown the image with papal crowns. Church hierarchs were positive about this idea. After completing all formalities, it was decided that the coronation would take place in Poland during the papal pilgrimage. A special committee was established to take care of the transport of OVLK to Poland, to Wawel. From there, on the 8th of June 1997, along with the relics of Bl. Queen Jadwiga was escorted by the police to Blonie in Krakow, where she was placed on the papal altar. At the end of the Holy Mass, Pope John Paul II crowned the bas-relief with golden crowns, blessed it, and then said:



„This bas-relief made in the camp of prisoners of war, who almost all died in Katyn, reminds us of the tragic events of the war period. May the veneration of Mary in this image not only be a memory of the past, but also strengthen the faith of contemporary Polish emigrants”.

The ceremonial welcome of OVLK in British soil took place on June 14, 1997 in the church of the Oratorians of St. Philip Neri on Kensington. This church was chosen because it could accommodate as many as four thousand faithful. After the solemn service, the bas-relief was taken to the church of St. Andrzej Bobola. Due to the fact that the Church of St. Andrzej Bobola became a Marian sanctuary, there was a need to create a chapel for the OVLK. A competition for its design was announced. The design of Maryla and Marek Jakubowski won. The Chapel's solemn consecration took place on April 5, 1998. The last major peregrination of the replica of OVLK took place between August 2011 and May 2012, in preparation for the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the parish of St. Andrzej Bobola. On the initiative of the parish priest Marek Reczek, a copy of the icon visited twelve parishes in Great Britain.

Photos of the archives of St. Andrew Bobola RC Parish in London. Text by Michał Gackowski based on the new book by Andrew Suchcitz "The history of the miraculous bas-relief of OVLK and her worship". The book's premiere is scheduled for June 2021 – more details will be published on the 8th of June 2021 on <https://bobola.church/en/shrine/history>

