

JOHN PAUL II
The Story of My Life
Collected Memories

“Everything
I want and
must tell you
is written in
my heart.”

Joannes Paulus pp. II

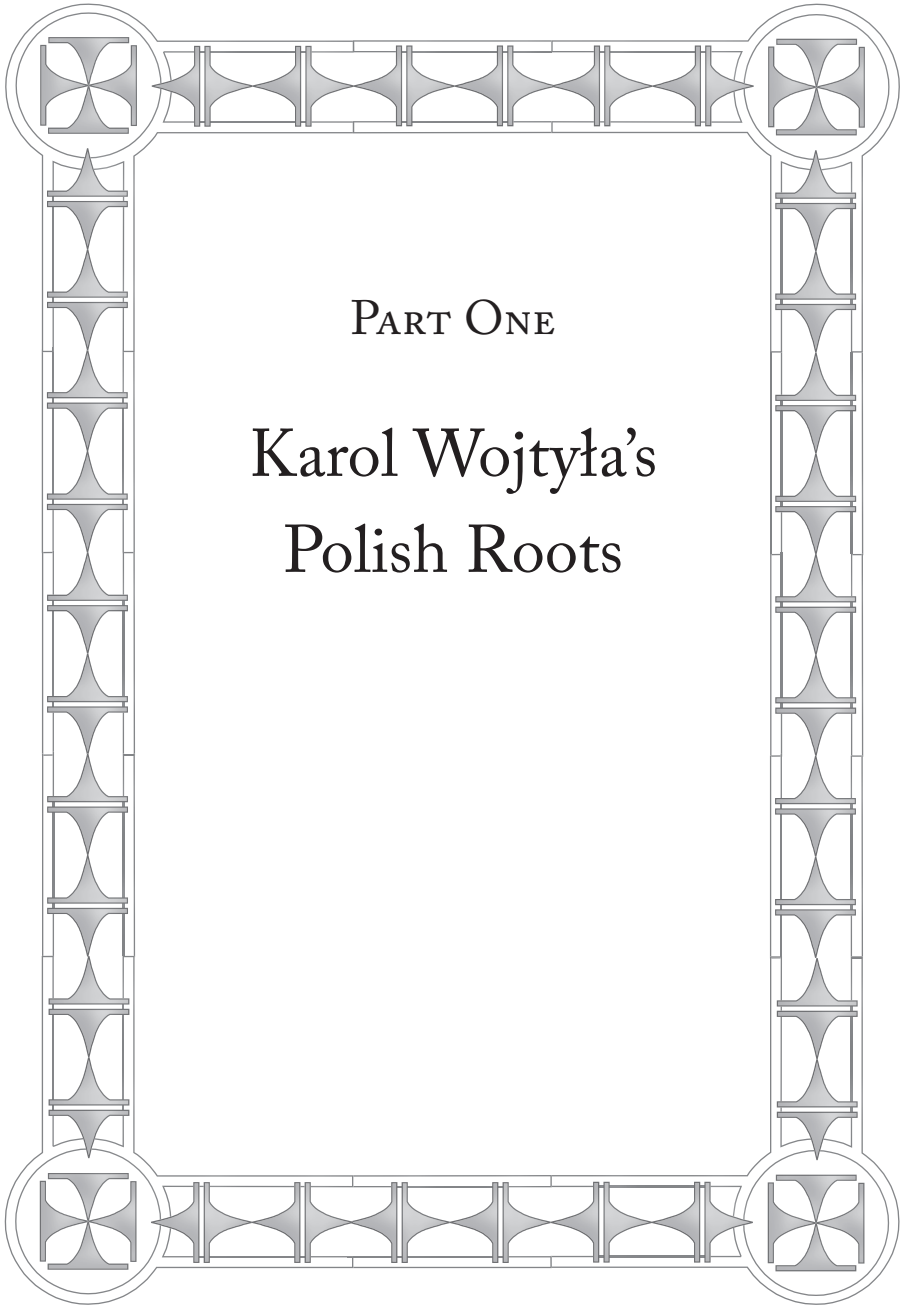
JOHN PAUL II
The Story of My Life
Collected Memories

Compiled by Saverio Gaeta

Foreword by Rocco Palmo

Introduction by Angelo Cardinal Comastri


Pauline
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PART ONE

Karol Wojtyła's
Polish Roots

Childhood at Wadowice

ACCORDING TO WHAT I WAS TOLD, my birth took place between five and six in the evening. Then, at almost exactly the same time, fifty-eight years later, I was elected Pope.¹

I was born May 18, 1920. On a day that is so important for a person, I go back in memory to my parents, who have been dead for many years. I remember with gratitude my father and my mother, who gave me life. As I think of my parents, in a special way I want to give thanks to God, Lord and Font of life, for this first and fundamental gift.²

It was during these months that Poland received back its independence, with the treaties of Versailles (1919) and Riga (1921), which freed them from the dominion, respectively, of Austria and Russia.

I was born in a time of war, but I knew nothing of it. Yet I have always had great admiration for those who won that war.³

His father, also named Karol, was born in 1879 and was forty years old when his son was born. In 1904 he was an administrative official at the army barracks in Wadowice, a city of fifteen thousand.

My father was admirable and almost all the memories of my childhood and adolescence are connected with him.⁴

People often sing to the pope: "Long life! Long life! May you live a hundred years!" It is difficult at those moments not to think of my mother, the woman who gave me birth. If I am alive, it is because she gave me life. Naturally, my father also, but the labor of transmitting life is borne by the mother above all.⁵

His mother, Emilia Kaczorowska, born in 1884, was thirty-six years old when he was born. At the moment of his birth she asked the midwife



“to open the window so that the first sounds that would be heard by her newborn would be songs in honor of Mary, the Mother of God. And so the midwife went from the bed to the window and opened the shutters. At once the little room was flooded with light and the songs of the vespers of the month of May, provided by the church of Our Lady in front of his birth house.”⁶ Only a month after his birth on June 20, he was baptized by the military chaplain Father Franciszek Zak and received the names Karol (Charles) and Jozef (Joseph).

We know how important the first years of life, of childhood, and of youth are for the development of human personality and character. These are the very years that bind me inseparably to Wadowice, to the town and the area around it. When in thought I look back over the long path of my life, I reflect on how the surroundings, the parish, and my family brought me to the baptismal font of the church of Wadowice, where I was given, on June 20, 1920, the grace to become a son of God, together with faith in my Redeemer.⁷

I express today my gratitude for the divine life I received at the baptismal font in the parish church at Wadowice. With the sacrament of rebirth in water and the Holy Spirit, a new life began for me: supernatural life, a gift from God, a gift that transcends the dimensions of natural existence.⁸

I give thanks to the Lord for the first anointing with the sacred chrism that I received in my hometown of Wadowice. It took place during my Baptism. Through sacramental washing we are justified and grafted into Christ. For the first time we also receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This anointing with chrism is a sign of the outpouring of the Spirit, who gives new life in Christ and renders us capable of living in the righteousness of God.⁹

I am convinced that never at any period of my life was my faith a purely “sociological” phenomenon resulting from the habits or customs of my environment, in a word, from the fact that others around me “believed and acted like that.” I have never regarded my faith as “traditional,” although I have conceived a growing admiration for the tradition of the Church and that living share of it that has nourished the life, history, and culture of my country. Nevertheless, when I look

objectively at my own faith I have always observed that it has had nothing to do with any kind of conformism, that it was born in the depths of my own “self,” and that it was also the fruit of my intellectual search for an answer to the mysteries of man and of the world. I have seen more and more clearly that faith is a gift.¹⁰

Name days always draw the attention and the benevolence of those closest to us—members of the family—upon the person who bears a given name. This name reminds us of the love of our parents, who, on giving it, wished to determine somehow the place of their child in that community of love which the family is. They were the first to address him with this name, and together with them, his brothers and sisters, relatives, friends, and companions. And so the name marked out the man's path among men; among the men closest to him and fondest of him. My beloved parents gave me the name Karol (Charles), which was also my father's name. Certainly, they could never have foreseen (they both died young) that this name would open up for their child a way through the great events of the Church of today.¹¹

Today I want to venerate Saint Charles Borromeo, whose name I received at my Baptism. I have made pilgrimage to his tomb in Milan a few times, as well as to places connected with his life, like Arona. His heart rests here in Rome in the church dedicated to him, Saint Charles (San Carlo al Corso). This detail is very eloquent; it testifies that this cardinal and pastor of the Ambrosianⁱⁱ Church of Milan was at the same time a servant of the universal Church.¹²

At home there were also the first child, Edmund, born in 1906, and another baby named Olga, who died, most probably only a few days after birth, in 1914. Due to this last pregnancy, which ended so dramatically, much damage was done to the heart and the kidneys of Mamma Emilia, which led to her death on April 13, 1929.

I was not yet the age for my first Communion when I lost my mother, who did not have the joy of seeing that day she so anticipated:

ⁱⁱ The Ambrosian rite is one of the ancient liturgical traditions within Roman Catholicism. It is proper to the Archdiocese of Milan and originates with (or pre-dates) Saint Ambrose (339–397). The rite is similar to the Roman rite, but has distinctions of rubrics, calendar, breviary, and chant.



she wanted two sons, one a doctor, the other a priest. My brother was a doctor and, in spite of everything, I have become a priest.¹³

Over this your white grave
 the flowers of life in white—
 so many years without you—
 how many have passed out of sight?
 Over this your white grave
 covered for years, there is a stir
 in the air, something uplifting
 and, like death, beyond comprehension.
 Over this your white grave
 oh, mother, can such loving cease?
 for all his filial adoration
 a prayer:
 Give her eternal peace—

—“Over This, Your White Grave” (Kraków, 1939)¹⁴

When he wrote the verses of this poem dedicated to his mother, Karol was nineteen years old and had also lost his adored brother, Edmund, who died in Kraków on December 5, 1932.

My brother Edmund died from scarlet fever in a virulent epidemic at the hospital where he was starting as a doctor. Today antibiotics would have saved him. I was twelve. My mother’s death made a deep impression on my memory, and my brother’s perhaps a still deeper one, because of the dramatic circumstances in which it occurred and because I was more mature. Thus quite soon I became a motherless, only child.¹⁵

Now Karol had only his father, who left the army in 1927 with a modest pension.

For me, it was my father who in a special way made me aware of the activity of the Holy Spirit, precisely when I was your age. If I found myself in some difficulty, he would suggest that I pray to the Holy Spirit; and this teaching of his has shown me the path which I have followed to this day.¹⁶

One day my father gave me a prayer book which contained the *Prayer to the Holy Spirit*. He told me to recite it daily. So, from that day on, I have tried to.¹⁷

The small town of Wadowice always represented for Karol the place of memories and his first affections.

I want to thank Wadowice for those schools from which I received much light—the elementary school and then the magnificent Wadowice High School dedicated to Marcin Wadowita.^{iii 18}

I remember, above all, the Wadowice elementary school, where at least a fourth of the pupils in my class were Jewish. I should mention my friendship at school with one of them, Jerzy Kluger—a friendship that has lasted from my school days to the present. I can vividly remember the Jews who gathered every Saturday at the synagogue behind our school.¹⁹

And the parish of Our Lady of Wadowice would remain for him the cradle of his faith.

Here, in this city, in this ancient parish church, I heard Peter's confession^{iv} (of faith) for the first time. It came from the baptistry, the altar, the pulpit, and the school. It was all wrapped up in the life of this Christian community. This confession formed its life, as it forms the Christian life of the entire world. This confession came to me as a gift of the faith of the Church. It gave my life a direction that began in the Father, and in the Son, opened itself to the Holy Spirit, to the inscrutable mystery of God. My mother's hands taught me this mystery, as she joined my baby hands in prayer, showing me how to make the sign of the cross, the sign of Christ, who is the Son of the Living God.²⁰

As children we all waited for Saint Nicholas on account of the gifts that he brought to us. . . . I remember that as a child I had a personal

ⁱⁱⁱ Marcin Wadowita, also known as Wadovius or Campius (1567–1641), born in Wadowice, was a priest and theologian and, successively, student, professor, chancellor, and benefactor of the Jagiellonian University.

^{iv} This reference is to Peter's response when Jesus asked what people thought about his identity: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Mt 16:16, NRSV).



connection with him. Naturally, like every other child, I waited for the gifts that he would bring to me on December 6, but this expectation had a religious dimension, too. Like all the children of my age, I nourished a veneration for this saint who unselfishly bestowed gifts to the people, and so manifested his loving concern.²¹

It has always been clear to me that the Church is the place where the sacraments are dispensed and received. From my first years at primary school, preparation for first Confession and first Communion taught me that a sacrament “is a visible sign of invisible grace, instituted by Jesus Christ for our salvation.” That is how the catechism put it.²²

The years of my childhood and adolescence passed in an atmosphere of faith, of faith handed down and freely continued. I was very conscious, sometimes agonizingly so, of the “last days” especially of the “judgment of God.” In the catechism in use at my primary school, the “last days” figured in the chapter on Christian hope, which discussed successively death, judgment—personal and final—heaven, hell, and purgatory. At the center of this catechetical eschatology lay—or at any rate that was my impression—the judgment of God.²³

The liturgy is also a kind of *mystery* play, acted out on stage. I remember the deep emotion I felt when, as a fifteen-year-old boy, I was invited by Father [Kazimierz] Figlewicz to the Sacred Triduum at Wawel Cathedral, and I was present for the Tenebrae^v services, anticipated that Wednesday afternoon of Holy Week. It was a profound spiritual experience for me, and to this day I find the Triduum very moving.²⁴

Here in Italy there has been much development of the oratories since the time of Saint Philip Neri. In Poland there were other organizations, and I went often to them. From my childhood I was a good altar boy.²⁵

In the parish in Wadowice where I was born, our very zealous pastor would often read passages to us from the encyclicals of Pope

^v Prior to the liturgical reform of Vatican II, Tenebrae (Latin for darkness) was the celebration of Matins and Lauds (late evening or early morning) of Thursday, Friday, and Saturday of Holy Week. The series of psalms and readings were accompanied by the gradual extinguishing of a number of candles representing the loss of Christ to death. One candle remained, or was restored, as witness to the resurrection.

Pius XI. However, what interested me more than his encyclicals was the fact that he was a mountain climbing pope (*Papa alpinista*). [. . .] I wanted to own up to this in order to mention the tie between a great Italian pope who called himself a Polish bishop^{vi} and this Polish bishop who is to be called an Italian pope.²⁶

The Saint Vincent de Paul Society Councils have spread beyond France to all the countries of Europe and to the world. Before the Second World War, while a student, I myself was part of one of them.²⁷

The pride of his Polish origins was not only a purely nostalgic sentiment, but it also represented the awareness of belonging to a fearless people.

I am the son of a nation which has lived great experiences of history, which has been condemned to death several times by its neighbors, but which has survived and remained itself. It has kept its identity, and it has kept, in spite of partitions and foreign occupations, its national sovereignty, not by relying on the resources of physical power, but solely by relying on its culture. This culture revealed itself in the circumstances to be a power greater than all other forces.²⁸

The painful experience of the history of my own country, Poland, has shown me how important national sovereignty is when it is served by a state worthy of the name and free in its decisions; how important it is for the protection not only of a people's legitimate material interests, but also of its culture and its soul.²⁹

The faith traditions of his homeland also accompanied him throughout his life.

Many years ago I was a child like you. I, too, used to experience the peaceful feelings of Christmas, and when the star of Bethlehem shone, I would hurry to the crib together with the other boys and girls to relive what happened two thousand years ago in Palestine. We children expressed our joy mostly in song.³⁰

^{vi} Pope Pius XI (1857–1939) was born Ambrogio Damiano Achille Ratti. He was appointed apostolic visitor and then nuncio to Poland, Lithuania, and Silesia. He was consecrated bishop of Lepanto in the Warsaw Cathedral in 1919, but transferred to Adana, Italy, in 1921. Though a studious man, he was an ardent mountain climber as well, ascending the Matterhorn and Mont Blanc, among others.