January 18, 1948

Dear fellow countrymen and countrywomen, I greet you with the words: Praised be Jesus Christ!

 Today, I have dedicated my talk to one of my confreres, a Polish Franciscan: to the memory of Fr. Maximillian Kolbe, who established Niepokalanów, who, on August 14, 1941, died of starvation in one of the bunkers of the Oświecim Concentration Camp. Please hear what I have to say peacefully and with patience. I use the words of Fr. Melchior, also a Conventual Franciscan, the author of the brochure entitled “In the Shadow of the Crematoria.” “I do not want anyone to get emotional over the fate of the victims, or foamed with rage at German criminals, because nothing can come of it, but rather that he make himself understand the notion and belief that man possessed with a passion, and this darkest crime, directly on his own, could even be perpetrated by the brothers. On the other hand, a religious man in the most difficult situations will find an honorable way out, in death and life he holds on to the truth and the good. And ultimately that such an individual person as well as the whole of the society feels guilty at what exists in the communist states, as well as these acts of the Germans.” And now to our talk under the title:

 “A RELIGIOUS HERO”

 Fr. Maximilliam Kolbe, OFMConv., was born in Zdunskiej Woli in 1894. He was one of five brothers, two of whom died of tuberculosis, which, in Łodz was called the disease of garment workers or weavers. His father was a butcher and owned a store handling baked goods and meats, which he had to close because of health reasons. His mother was a midwife. In 1905 together with his brother, Francis, he went away to a school in Dwow. In 1910 on September 4th Kolbe begins his novitiate. From now on he drops his name, Raymond, and becomes Maximillian. His parents after the entry of their third son into religious life look for a cloistered life. His mother joins the Benedictine nuns in Lwów and his father cloisters himself with the convent in Krakow as a tertiary brother. In 1912, he was a cleric in Rome in the International College. Here he instituted the Militia Immaculate. On the 28th of April he is ordained and ret urns to Poland; he brings with him thousands of projects not only bold but on the fabulously crazy side. He starts to print his “Rycerza” (KNIGHT). He comes across a thousand obstacles. On plots Prince Drucko-Lubeckiego Teresin near Sochaczew assumes Niepokalanowo, to which he brings his printery where he prints thousands of copies of the “Rycerz”. In 1930 he sails to Japan, and organizes the “Kights of the Immaculate” in Japanese. He purchases some space in Nagasaki for a convent, the internet and a printery - a Japanese “Niepokalanów”. In 1936, he returned to Poland for a Chapter and was chosen as Guardian of the Polish Niepokalanow, which blossoms under his direction. Other publications: “Rycerzyk I Mały Rycerzyk,” “Zagroda Niepokalanej,” I “Mały Dziennik,” which counted 320 thousand copies. In the end a radio station was begun. It opened with „Po górach dolinach” and „Polish Station 3, Radio Immaculate.” Kolbe’s media presentations proliferated and moved at a rapid pace. In addition they are building an airport for the dissemination of the “Mały Dziennik” throughout the Province.

 I skip to the historical conference, in which among other things, Fr. Maximillian spoke to over seven hundred brothers: “in these times everyone is talking about the difficulties because of the war. It is an unusual situation. The armies at the front are nearing. We could rejoice in the sense that our prayer life will become more fervent and we will understand better the need to a more fervent prayer and greater sacrifices. Besides the most noble ideal would be to lay down one’s life for the Immaculate.” Things are happening at a rapid pace. The world was thrown into a disastrous war. 1939: a year of lightning events and change. On September 1, the German might is falling upon the Poles. The German Air Force is dropping bombs on Poland’s cities, countryside and roads! Ground fire spits out upon the farmers from their panzers puncturing the flesh of Poland. The German army surrounded the towns of Kutna, Łowicze, Sochaczewa. Above Niepokalanów with terrifying whistling bullets fly from distant artillery, the sound of the engines of bombers and chatter of machine guns, and all around, the flames from burning peasant huts. The greater part of the dwellers of Niepokalanów have moved away. From a total of seven hundred brothers about 50 remained. Others went to their relatives or went to the Red Cross.

The remaining handful, who looks after the crowd were chaired and under the care of - Father Maximillian. He cheered them up, settled them down, called them to prayer; he was as always a great leader of people. In wooden structures are the wounded, who have to be taken care of. His words are powerful, he brings hearts to peace. September 19, 1939. Soldiers appear at the doors of Niepokalanow. Dressed in their military green outfits, they shout out, “Alle raus!” “Everybody out!”. There are two groups facing each other: the soldiers dressed in their military attires and the Franciscans with their cords of vows. One of the soldiers orders the religious to pair up in twos. When they did that, two of them were ordered the stay behind to take care of the hospital and the rest were to go! But go where. No one knows where. The soldier did not feel like answering. One of the brothers, a director, stays in his place. And others utter out loud? Maksymiljan! Ojciec Maksymiljan. Please stay with us, Father.” Maksymilijan shakes his head. He turns to brother Cyril (?) and says: “Stay, my son.” The column of religious leaves Niepokalanow! They go by the highway. In the first series O. Maksymiljan leans on his cane. Trembling voices, swollen anxiety, run along the column: "What will happen? Where do they lead us?". Nothing is known! The German soldiers accompany the column as we go along. They are armed. The boots of the German soldiers beat hard against the pavement. Fr. Maximillian goes along gently and peacefully; you would say smilingly. On the highway they pack the column into trucks. The way of the cross to Częstochowa begins. There, they put them from the trucks into trains. The soldiers beat and curse the people as they push them into the train cars. On September 25th they reach Lamadorf. From there, three days to the camp at Amtitz. They live in tents on the wet and cold ground. The Autumn of 1939 came quickly and with it sleet and rain. In the camp there were a mixture of Poles, Jews, priests, religious, lay people, intellectuals and common people. While some pray other curse their fate. This grouping of a variety of different people create the terrible tragedy of the German concentration camps. While some weather the storm; others steal and some from Niepokalanow feel that it is an occasion for sacrifice. Some are doubtful of their situation, they are frightened and careful. F. Maximillian with patience, tries to buoy them up in spirit, urges them to be prayerul and to see it as an occasion for missionary work in Germany. The travel is free as is the food and they are not adverse to speak about their Niepokalanow. He gives out medals. The German solders wonder about the people who pray and seem to be happy about their sad situation. An unheard of thing! In this country, where the "fear of God" was replaced by "fear of superiors," where there is no crime, they would not be commanded in the name of archpatriotism and racism. In this country, where the kindly contented and friendly smile was changed into a cynical sneer; in this country of Luther, Frederic, Bismark, and Hitler, the figure of Maximilian seems like a playful dream. Hun paganism and German barbarism totally poisoned the brains of the young soldiers in gray colored jackets. Fr. Maximillian is always even tempered, calm, and inflexible. When, on his feast day, he is given greetings, he replies sincerely and seriously: “I was thinking about what I was going to give you on my feast day. I wish one thing for you, the you belong to Our Lady even more and come to her even more. When suffering is far away we are ready for anything. But now, when there is an occasion to suffer, let us come to her, so that we could earn through our suffering even more souls for her.” - In November the religious are taken to Ostrzeszowa and housed in the school’s cellar. They are presented with hard labor, to digging, and crushing rocks in order to repair the roads. Then, exactly on December l8th, on the feast of the Immaculate Conception they were freeing the religious. They leave by train. They forget about their humbling experiences. They laugh and joke with each other. Fr. Maximilian sits gravely preoccupied in his thoughts. Again, his sacrificial suffering has been put aside.. He would have given his life but once again he had been spared by Providence of God. He gathers together a few of the brothers in Niepokalanow. He is permitted by the occupying forces to go about publishing his “Rycerz Niepokalanej” publication. It is published under the date of December-January 1940-1941. In an article he asks all to do penance. In another article under the title, “The Truth,” he writes “One cannot change the truth but one can only seek the truth and find and know it, and live according to it, go the path of truth in all circumstances and especially as far as the ultimate aims of life ” After the publication of his second article, he was banned from printing by the brutal Germans. In January came to Niepokalanow, a commission “Warschauer Zeitung”. They went over all the rooms of the cloister with a fine tooth comb. They came up with angry directives, sharp reprimands and angry commentaries. The boot of the ruthless regime stomped on the cloister. A reporter of this historic visit graciously and good visitors was place in on the date of February 1, 1941. This is what one of the correspondents wrote, “The religious person leads us into one of the closest homes. On the door we read: KMB 1941 marked by chalk. These letters were initials of the three kings, who on the door of Catholic residences were written on the 7th of January. This marking is supposed to bring good fortune to the home. – the “Mały Dziennik” – that bird, who bought us to the visitation of Niepokalanów…the publishers of the dwellers of Niepokalanow, these black brothers had the main job of printing the “Knight of the Immaculate”. In addition that monthly publication printed a million copies and given out freely. The main publication was no big deal but the small publication – was a thing almost unbelievable. It has angrily attacked the Germans, and always sought the occasion of forcefully stating the brutality of its country to the west. It poisoned the relationship between the invader and Poland. It was harmful to German interests since it was so widely distributed in the region. Its cost was very minimal. The fact remains a fact that the publication was one of the most dangerous dailies undermining the reputation of the invaders and it was Roman Catholic and produced great hatred between Germany and Poland. The Daily stood as a guard of morality and the good traditions of the social structure. The Catholic Church was always a bulwark helping Poland. But we also know that the Church overextended its powers – and Niepoklanow is a prime example of that. – so wrote a “big wig" of the propaganda machine in the rag, "Warschauer Zeitung". Relations between the "black monks” with representatives of “Gubernji General " were poor and miserable. At that time, Fr. Maximilian was urged to declare himself as “volka-deutsch. Fr. Maximillian threw out that idea without thought. He understood only too well that he was a thorn in the German Reich. He stated at one time: “I feel that some kind of black clouds are appearing in our eyes.” The Germans will not leave me in peace. The “Rycerz” was not published at that time. The Germans stole his publishing machinery little by little. O. Maxillian spent hours in prayer and meditation. He thought of a martyr’s death. And here, he thought without peaceful composure that death is coming and will catch up with him at Niepokalanów – on his bed, unceremoniously without knightly dignity and without suffering. We understood in our way, Providence works as it wills. It was the 17 of February. It was the morning. Two black cars marked “Pollizei” stopped at the doors of Niepokalanów. O. Maximillian is summoned by the door keeper. After a while which seemed like an eternity, the religious comes to the door in his habit, his face beaming, in command of the issue which wins over the world. Is it true? Have they come for him? On the left are the one level barracks. In between the barracks, they come – those with the pointed hats. They walk, sure of themselves. The booted ones come. Fr. Maximillian confronted them saying peacefully, “Wait a minute, my children, let them come.” He stands like some unfearful giant among the German soldiers, saying to them: “Praised be Our Lord, Jesus Christ!” The soldiers of the almighty German Reich look at his eyes. After all, they are used to seeing fear in the eyes of their victims. But Fr. Maximillian stands before them with a calmness in his face, smiling. Who knows whether his hand is searching for the miraculous medal of Our Lady to give to the representatives of the German Third Reich. The dark manner of the soldiers looks on without effect at the calmness of the Franciscan: “Sir, your name is Maximillian Kolbe, is that right. He says it in broken language. The Franciscan nods affirming with greater assurance and with greater joy. Now, he understands. Now, he knows. In truth, they came for him. A moment of silence. The Franciscan’s gaze crucifies the look of the anger and hatred of the booted visitors and triumphant victors. They arrest Maximilian and with him: Justyn, Urban, and Pius and Antonin. The arrests were made on February 17, 1941. Those arrested were taken away to the prison at Pawiak where they were held until May 2. Interrogations, beatings, inventing accusations, humbling. "Übermensch" proud German torturers forced confession to everything, beatings with whips, sticks and fists. Diggings, shooting in cells, corridors, cellars. Called to the presidium are the brothers of Fr. Maximilian Kolbe: Cherubin Pawlowicz, Iwo Achtelik, Godfryd Pyrka, Bwido Gnyba, Innocenty Wójcik, Toman Tarłowski, Dionizy Molga, Benwenut Stryjewski, Hieronim Wirzba, Rufin Majdan, Alojzy Iwańczyk, Anatol Musiał, Heladiusz Orzeł, Leander Wojt as, Gerard Polanin, Dariusz Markowski, Arnold Wedrowski, Filemon Kozielczyk, Benedykt Mieczkowski I Nazarius Słota. Pleas were rejected and the would be hostages that were coming were insulted with lowering and brutal nicknames as Polish pigs, dogs, and bandits. They needed to spare Fr. Maximilian for the time being because of his nature as Provincial of the Franciscans. Besides, according to previous plans, all Poles were to be put to death. They were to be all eradicated without exception, without pardon and naturally those who were the Polish Intelligentia, first of all. They had to make room for them after the previous batch had been put to death. The cells were all filled. The interrogations had been speeded up. Executioners were seized with a mania for inhuman abuse that ended in the massacre of the prisoner. As one of the prisoners said: “They tie the hands of the prisoner to the table. The right hand is clamped to the table. Only the fingernails show. The tighten with a screw. Pain travels through the whole body. It becomes hot. Slowly they drive a needle behind the fingernail. I fainted.” - I do not have the ability o describe the methods of pulling the joints of the body with chains. In Fr. Maximilian’s prison, they house him on the fifth floor in room 103. The cell is packed. He urges the other prisoners to prayer to steel themselves to agree with the will of God. The group becomes peaceful and controls their nerves; their faces become calm. Hope seems to be uttered in their speech. After a few days an SS man enters the room. He is surprised at the calm. He continues to gaze at the prisoners as if to find a reason to spill out his venom against them. The simple idea of seeing them in their black habits suffices to release the demon in the SS man and the hatred fills the lines of his face. The habit reminds him of the faith and religion of the Catholic Church. He and his comrades have thrown out religion and God and replaced them with their brutality. Despite their external confidence – inside they are confronted of a consciousness of their souls, their guilt and the fears. They want to step on and wipe out those who remind them of God and religion – this is their desire and their goal. From the throat of the guard comes some kind of wheeze, some inhuman gobbling on his lips, foam appears; on the face are marks of unbelievable anger but the guard was speechless and motionless. He grabs the rosary which the friar was wearing as a Franciscan, pulls it toward himself, spits in the face of Fr. Maximillian and says: “ Ah you dope, you crazy man, you hear me? – Talk! Tell me, do you still believe in Christ. No? Speak!” The witnesses to this scene await the response. And they don’t have to wait too long. After a brief pause when the yelling of the guard stopped, came the response: “Yes, sir, I believe and I always will believe!” He will never change that passionate and serious response. No matter how many times the question is asked by the Germans the response will be the same. Are you a priest ? Do you love your brothers? The same response: “Yes!” The reply was also in the same placid reply! Nothing angry; nothing forceful. Others will not have that forgiving spirit. Fr. Maximilian will be open and hide nothing. He hates the sin but forgives the sinner. The choice of responses for the truth from the jailers was always the same: a kick of the boot, a stick, hard work, hunger, darkness, insult, a slap in the face, another and another given with words of hate. The guard slaps Fr. Maximilian in the face, once, twice, and again. The taste of blood is on the guard. The response: I believe. The SS man response with curses. He hits with both hands in the face from one side and then from the other. Fr. Maximilian face at first blanches white and then a bloody red; blood issues from the mouth. Fr. Maximillian falls to the floor; the torturer: perhaps you still believe, do you? The response of Father Maximillian is subdued from the slapping but a firm response once more in placid words – “I believe!” Now is not screams but rough, disgusting bellowing escapes from the throats of the torturers. The face whitens from anger. He throws himswlf at the fallen religious and beats his with fists, dicking everywhere, shakes him with his belt and the rosary which he pulls on while saying, “and you believe in this? And this and this” Tell me.” The beaten religious quietly responds “ I believe. ”Nothing else.” A couple more kicks and the soldier runs out of the hall, slamming the door. Who knows whether he does not go to another cell to annoy another poor religious and after his breaking, tells him to repeat 10 or 100 times, “there is no God, I don’t believe in God.” And Fr. Maximillian? With effort, he lifts himself from and floor and what? In a natural voice he begins to calm the minds which endured the previous torture. But they foam at the mouth and threaten the torturers. And Father Maximillian? He spits the blood from his mouth and admonishes the torturers, “Leave them alone, let them be in peace. It is not necessary; it is not necessary. Dear God, it is not necessary… We suffer this for the Immaculate.” And he faints. This is not the end. The maltreated are sent to the hospital. After a few weeks of healing by doctors, also Polish, they are sent to work at the prison library. Fr. Maximillian is sent to work in the prison library as well; probably to scrub floors and washing the walls. This library existed in the imagination of the Germans for propaganda. It was a hall for interrogation and torture. It housed very many important Poles, whose word and example encouraged goodness in the face of suffering and death. In May of 1941, the remnant of the prisoners from Pawiak (the Geraman created prison) were sent outside and loaded into trucks and taken to who knows? On May 28, the breathless, puffing locomotive stopsat the Auschwitz-Oświecim railroad station. The journey itself was torture: hunger, awaiting, crowding and the inhumane treatment by the ss., but why should I talk about it, because people would not believe it. Besides, would accuse me of one sidedness and lack of love of neighbor. I only hold on to this, because of what Włodzimierz Ledochowski, the General of the Jesuits told me. I knew him very well and saw him in Rome in the last days of November 1939, after having visited the Rumanian Camps of the displaced people because of the war. When I related to him what I had seen and heard, he told me in a serious gentle way but very forcefully: “Father, It is your obligation to tell and condemn the crime perpetrated by the Germans. Let the world know of what happened – this is what Dobraczyński writes: “Auschwitz! That repeated name, that Germanized, Poisoned Oświecim, will become one of the most popular place on earth. Six hundred thousand people died a death most horrible, most painful – as any death can be. What is the Roman Coliseum soaked in the several hundred martyrs when compared to the Oświecim-ed “Apeli-platzu”, on which thousands, hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions suffered and died?” The difference can be only one. Not every suffering is a martyrdom, not every slaughter ends upon an altar. In the Coliseum people died for their faith, in Oświecim a martyred blood was mixed with the blood of those, who cursed at their torturers with hatred. But being the true "blood of the world "- blood, in which the composition of sanctity borders with mediocrity, and mediocrity - of villainy - bloodshed in Auschwitz is a symbol of the general-human unity of what constitutes life of the world: wheat next to weeds.

 What, in reality, were the concentration camps? This is their composition by a priest who went through four of them: “Materially, at first glance, it is a city of barracks, with a dug out moat around it, circled with barbed wire with an electric current running through it, observation towers which held guards with machine guns. In reality they were concentration camps – a hidden method of killing people with the faking of humanitarian ways. They were a method of killing of people who are not needed or who are a threat to the German Reich. It was a way of life that destroyed people physically or psychologically through the space of 24 hours. The camps were created at first in Germany in 1933. They were packed with German Communists, centrists, and Christian Democrats, alien thieves,, bandits and Jews. The camps were run by so called “Sturm-stafeten”, in short SS troopers. They had prisoners who were German. The eldest was the “Lager-seltester”; in charge of the cells was the “Stuben-seltester etc. To these barracks, at the end of 1939, came crowds of Poles, and from 1941 waves of people of different nationalities were processed. Imagine this: Seven hundred priests and brought in cattle cars.. They secular priests, Jesuits, Capuchins, Oblates, Franciscans, Bernadines, and Carmelites and other congregations. They were still dressed in their habits or cassocks. Guards will night sticks with loud cursing would shove and beat them and hurry them from the wagons, told to get into rows of five and march them into the camp. The captors laugh and joyously spit on the prisoners. Who could write about all of the feelings of these prisoners? Listen to what Bishop Francis Korzyński said to the author of the work “The Hate”: “When they took me in chains and paraded me through the streets of Berlin and the populace looked upon me as a great criminal, they gave me various downgrading titles; perhaps they really wanted to lynch me.” I felt a pain in the soul, because by conscience sent out signals to me. I reminded myself about Jesus, holiness itself and the suffering he underwent and the example He gave us. And here was a sign designating the concentration camp.: “Arbeit macht frei”. Work produces freedom. On the walls of the barracks were written these words: “Es gibt einen weg sur Freicheit; seine Meilenstalne heisen: Ordnung, Fleisigkeit, Auberkeit, Gehorsankeit, Neuchlerniehkeit, Opfercim und Liebe sur Vaterland!” Translated: There is only one way to freedom, and its ways are: order, attention, cleanliness, obedience, sobriety, sacrifice and love of the fatherland.” Next Sunday, you will hear the continuation and end of the tragic story of the hero Franciscan.