

November 2000

## Nicholas Konrad, Catholic Priest and Holy Martyr "He's My Grandfather!"

George Isajiw

Richard A. Watson

Follow this and additional works at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq>

---

### Recommended Citation

Isajiw, George and Watson, Richard A. (2000) "Nicholas Konrad, Catholic Priest and Holy Martyr "He's My Grandfather!," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 67: No. 4, Article 6.

Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq/vol67/iss4/6>

# **Nicholas Konrad Catholic Priest and Holy Martyr “He’s My Grandfather!”**

by

**George Isajiw, M.D.**

**As told to:**

**Richard A. Watson, M.D.**

---

Doctor George Isajiw, Past President of our Catholic Medical Association, recently caught me by surprise with the above statement. These words certainly captured my attention, and I expect that they well might capture yours as well. More fascinating still was the explanation that followed. With Dr. Isajiw’s permission, I would like to share with readers of the *Linacre Quarterly* the true life story he has to tell concerning his grandfather, Father Nicholas Konrad, Ukrainian priest and holy martyr.

## **My Grandfather, the Catholic Priest**

Dear Rich and Leonie,

Here is a brief note about my grandfather, Father Nicholas Konrad who was a Catholic priest. (As you may know, priests in the Ukrainian Catholic Rite are allowed to marry. In fact, BOTH of my grandfathers were priests – or, more correctly, ARE priests, i.e., “You are a priest forever” [Hebrews 5:6]). I never had a chance to meet my grandfather, since I was born four years after his death. Father Konrad was a professor in the seminary at Lviv, which is the largest city in Western Ukraine. At the time, that region, called “Galicia,” was under Polish rule, by mandate of the League of Nations after the First World War. My grandfather was a theologian, with multiple advanced degrees (S.T.D. and Ph.D.) gained in

Rome. He was the author of several books in theology, philosophy, and sociology. He and my grandmother, Antonina, had four children; my mother being second oldest.

### **Gathering Storm of Anti-Catholic Persecution in Ukraine**

Father Konrad's first calling was to the academic world within the Church. As a matter of fact, up to 1939 he had never been a pastor, having served as a professor from his earliest priestly days.

Suddenly, everything changed in September 1939, when the Russian communist armies invaded Western Ukraine, as a result of the partition of Poland, under the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, engineered jointly by Stalin and Hitler. (Eastern Ukraine had already been under Russian rule since 1921.) The German/Russian border had been shifted to about 60 miles west of the city of Lviv. Archbishop Sheptytsky, anticipating that persecution of the Church was soon to begin, had already closed the Seminary in order that the seminarians might avoid being betrayed to the Russian KGB. The archbishop secretly issued permission for all those parish priests who had families to flee westward to the German side of the border, in order to avoid the impending difficult times, under Communist oppression.

### **Professor Konrad Takes on a Parish**

My grandparent's children were all already full-grown with families of their own. So, Antonina and Nicholas volunteered to stay behind, and Father Konrad became pastor of the village of Strach, some 20 miles west of Lviv. This parish had recently been vacated by a younger priest. Fully conscious of the risk that he was taking, my grandfather remained in Strach through the summer of 1941, becoming very popular and beloved by the parishioners (some of whom I have had the privilege to interview personally during my recent visit to Ukraine).

By June of 1941, many priests in the city of Lviv had been imprisoned by the KGB, under the charge of collaborating with anti-communist separatists. However, the priests in the outlying villages had not yet been persecuted. On June 22, 1941, the Germans attacked the Russians without warning (blitzkrieg). For the ensuing four days, Russian armies were in full retreat, along the main highway, which passed near the village of Strach. On June 26, however, there was no further military traffic on the highway. Still, the air was bristling with tension, as it was anticipated that the Nazi army would be arriving at any time.

## Martyr's Blood

On that morning, Father Konrad, after Mass, received a sick call from one of his parishioners who lived near the main road. His church cantor pleaded with him not to go, in view of the imminent danger. However, Father Konrad responded, "What if this woman were to die without benefit of the Sacraments?" Insisting on going alone, Father Konrad urged the cantor to hurry home to be with his wife and three children. (Father Konrad was 67 years old, while the cantor was 35). The cantor importuned upon Father Konrad to allow him to accompany him. While they completed the sick call without incident, on the way back they were confronted by two KGB agents on horseback. These communists forced the two churchmen, at gun point, to walk along the road towards the city. The villagers of Stratch, who had witnessed all this, assumed that their priest was being taken to a prison in Lviv. Instead, once the priest and cantor were out of sight of the villagers, they were driven into the woods, where both men were shot in cold blood. (Had they managed to reach Lviv, their fate would have most likely been much the same. On that very day, Ukrainians held in the Russian prisons of Lviv – especially the priests – were being murdered, en masse, by machine guns and hand grenades, as their communist captors fled the city.)

## Beyond Corruption

The very next day, the German army arrived. My parents had already moved to the German side of the border in 1939, as my father (who was a history professor and editor of a Catholic newspaper) had found himself in grave danger in Ukraine as an "anticommunist intellectual". One of my uncles, who had remained in Lviv, went to the prisons, trying unsuccessfully to identify Father Konrad's body. It was not until three weeks later, in the heat of mid-summer, that the bodies were found, lying exposed in the forest. The cantor's body was so badly decomposed that he was only identifiable by his wallet. My grandfather's body, however, was perfectly preserved, without even an odor – and the blood in the bullet wound in his chest appeared fresh and bright red! He was buried in a wooden casket without embalming. Eleven months later, when my grandmother finally managed to obtain a metal casket, my father and my uncle (who is a doctor), along with other villagers, exhumed Father Konrad's body in order to transfer it to the metal casket. They documented that there were still no signs of decomposition. All the blood had dried up, but there was no odor. The skin was intact, leather-like and hardened, and

the martyred priest's body was light (i.e., dehydrated), but no evidence of decomposition could be found.

### **Communist Oppression**

In 1944, the Russian communists returned the Western Ukraine and reinstated their systematic persecution of the Catholic Church. Over five hundred priests, who had refused to join the newly formed Orthodox Church (controlled by the KGB), were either executed as "Nazi collaborators" or they were sentenced to hard labor in Siberia, where most eventually died (although some did manage to return). It was not until 1991 that the Catholic Church could come out from the underground – "the catacombs" – to be reestablished in Western Ukraine, where it is now flourishing!

### **Beatification**

In January of 2000, Archbishop Hrynchyshyn (the Ukrainian Rite prelate) submitted to Rome a list of 18 names for canonization, and included among them was that of my grandfather, Father Nicholas Konrad. This decision came as no surprise to the residents of the village of Stratch; they had, on their own, for many years recognized Nicholas Konrad as a Saint. They had already been holding a yearly Mass and a procession to the site where the priest and his cantor had been martyred, and many of the parishioners are convinced that cures have been obtained through father Konrad's intercession.

### **Private Devotion**

Even though his cause was not announced until this past January, members of the Isajiw family have been praying for his intercession on behalf of our daughter Colleen for the past two years – as our personal, private devotion to an acknowledged martyr for the Faith. Colleen is now still alive and well, over two and a half years after her first craniotomy for a highly anaplastic glioblastoma. (This is the worst histologic type – the accepted prognosis in the medical literature is for an 80% mortality within the first eight months, regardless of treatment, and 100% mortality within two years!) It is now seven months after her third craniotomy, and she is without any evidence of tumor residual or recurrence. Even though the tumor had recurred twice in the same site (the left frontal lobe), there has never been any evidence of spread to any other part of the brain nor of

distant metastases, even though metastases are a very common complication of this type of tumor.

### **Canonization to Come**

Now it is permissible to pray publicly for the intercession of Father Nicholas Konrad. I feel confident that some day soon, members of the Isajiw family will be going to Rome to celebrate his canonization. And I am feeling more and more confident that Colleen will be going there with us on that day! It is a hope about which one never dares feel too confident. Nevertheless, I trust it to be God's will. For myself, with my wife and my children at my side, it will truly be a great privilege and source of much grace to be among Saint Nicholas' grandchildren, standing there, at his canonization.

### **The Watsons Attest**

Since learning from Doctor Isajiw of his saintly grandfather and his intercession, the Watson family has placed our concern for the health of our son, Peter Damien Watson, in the hands of Nicholas Konrad. Peter, who was born with Down Syndrome and consequently with serious physical as well as mental disabilities, has recently suffered a mysterious, life-threatening downturn, with mini-seizures, anorexia and a weight loss of over thirty pounds. Multiple tests, including CT Scan, ultrasound, MRI and endoscopy, have all proven fruitless. However, since we have been praying to Servant of God, Nicholas Konrad, Peter's health has been slowly turning around. We are not out of the woods yet, by any means, but things are looking up for the first time in several months.

We invite your prayers for our son, Peter Damien, for the Isajiws' daughter Colleen, and for all those children of CMA members and *Linacre* readers, who are currently facing physical, mental, emotional or spiritual challenges. And we invite you, too, to look forward with us to the day when Nicholas Konrad, along with his companion martyrs of Ukraine, will be formally recognized by our Church, be it the Will of God, through the process of beatification and eventual canonization, as the Saints they truly are; that all Catholics may join in the prayerful petition:

*"Blessed Nicholas Konrad of Ukraine, pray for us."*

---