

Wanda Póltawska (1921-2023), a Pro-Life Leader

***"I saw Nazis tossing newborn babies into crematoriums: for all my life I've had these harrowing images before my eyes...I promised myself, if I survived, to study medicine and to defend life."***



**Wanda Póltawska, one of the leading pro-life figures of the 20th century and a close collaborator of John Paul II, died in Krakow at the age of 102 on October 25, 2023.**

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Wanda Póltawska (Wojtasik) was born in Lublin on 2 November 1921. She received her education at the Ursuline Sisters' school and was active in scout movements. After the outbreak of World War II, she continued her education in clandestine courses. At the same time, she became involved in underground resistance activity as a liaison officer.



After being arrested by Nazis in 1941, she went through a brutal, months-long interrogation and was repeatedly tortured. From the prison in the Lublin Castle, in September 1941, she was sent to the Ravensbrück concentration camp. There she stopped being a person, someone with a first and last name. Instead, she became known by her prisoner number: 7709.

She became a "Kaninchen", a prisoner ordered to participate in medical 'experiments' at the nearby SS clinic directed by Dr. Karl Gebhard. In short, she was turned into a human guinea pig. The "medical experiments"

caused her tremendous pain, and she almost lost her mind. Close to death, Wanda barely survived, and was saved by her friend Kryisia, who pulled her out of a heap of corpses.



[Fig. 1. M.K., one of the victims of the Ravensbrück "operations." She has extensive scars on her right leg, with damage to the soft tissue and paralysis of the peroneal nerve (palsy, Zenker's paralysis).]



Fortunately, the German concentration camp was liberated on April 30, 1945, and Póltawska moved to Kraków. Affected by her experiences in the concentration camp, she decided to become a physician and completed her medical studies at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków. Determined to live the remainder of her life as a healer, Wanda became a doctor of psychiatry and ministered to camp survivors, especially children who had been abused. During that time, as she sought her own healing, Wanda and her husband became close friends with a young bishop of Kraków, Karol Wojtyła—the future Pope Saint John Paul II.

Their friendship culminated in a miraculous story of healing and involved another friendship, between Bishop Wojtyła and Saint Padre Pio, when Wanda, now a mother to four young children, was diagnosed with cancer in 1962. The doctors told her that though her prognosis was terminal, they would try their best to remove the cancer. Heartbroken and struggling to persevere, Wanda told her dear friend Karol about her disease. *"Resignation is contrary to God's will,"* replied Karol. Immediately upon hearing the news, Bishop Karol wrote to a priest who had touched his own life, Padre Pio of Pietrelcina.

*"Venerable Father,"* wrote Karol, *"I ask for your prayers for a certain mother of four young girls, who lives in Kraków, Poland (during the last war she spent five years in a German concentration camp), and now her health and even her life are in great danger due to cancer. Pray that God, through the intercession of the Most Blessed Virgin, has mercy on her and her family. Most obligated in Christ, Karol Wojtyła."*

*"To this one it is not possible to say no!"* Padre Pio responded.

The Holy priest began to pray. The answer to his intercession was discovered as the surgeons went to remove the cancer from Wanda: nothing was there. The cancer was gone, miraculously.

Five years later, Wanda travelled to San Giovanni Rotondo and attended Padre Pio's Mass. After Mass she, along with other pilgrims, went into the sacristy to meet the man who had interceded for her. She had never met him before. He walked up to her, looked deeply into her eyes, and said, "Now are you all, right?" Thus, Wanda became one of the miracles that led to Saint Padre Pio's canonization.



The Półtawskas' friendship with Bishop Wojtyła deepened and they would be a source of inspiration for many of his teachings, especially those on marriage and love, including Theology of the Body. Wanda was among the founders of the Institute of Theology of the Family at the Pontifical Academy of Theology in Krakow (Pontifical University of John Paul II).

Doctor Półtawska was also a consultant to the Pontifical Council for the Family and honorary member of the Pontifical Academy of Life, as well as author of about four hundred publications on psychiatry, protection of the unborn, sick, and elderly, protection of marriage and family. An author of heart-breaking memories: 'I boję się snów' (And I'm Afraid of Dreams), 'Stare rachunki' (Old Scores), 'Z prądem i pod prąd' (Downstream and Upstream) which confirm the steadfastness of her principles, heroism of service, and ability to forgive.





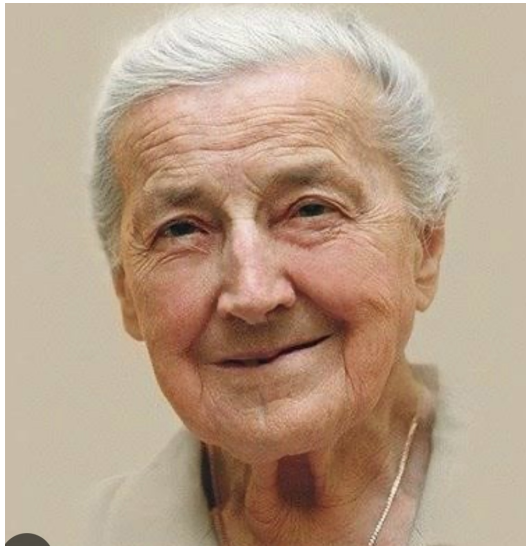
In 1981, she was awarded the medal "Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice". Her honours included also the Order of the White Eagle, Poland's highest state award.



On May 15, 2020, for the 100th anniversary of the birth of John Paul II she launched an appeal:

*"If we really want to honour the centenary an appeal [for John Paul II's] birth and his legacy, I see only one way to do so: to convert people so that they understand that every child and every person has the right to life. The only Lord of life is our Creator who loves His creation. I am a 'gift' of humanity for this great man."*

At the end of her life Póttawska could see protesters gathered in the city's huge square bearing signs saying, "Abortion is OK." Later she learned that in Poznan and Warsaw John Paul II monuments had been desecrated. Moreover, it surely didn't please this medical doctor and victim of Nazi Germany to watch German Parliament (Bundestag) Vice President, Claudia Roth, holding up the same symbol of the Polish protest, a lightning bolt alongside the words: "This is war." The Germans already waged war once in Poland and at the price of 6 million deaths. It was the Germans who had introduced abortion into Poland. Seeing a high-ranking German politician threatening Poles with "This is war", should provoke a shudder of fright.



In his eulogy at the state funeral, President Andrzej Duda described the departed woman as "an unwavering advocate for life, morality, and a believer in other people."

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**Translated by:** MZ

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**Resources** Author: Wanda Półtawska. Experimental operations at Ravensbruck concentration camp. Medycyna praktyczna. <https://www.mp.pl>

Wanda Półtawska, 101, who forged a friendship with a future Pope, dies. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com>

Ravensbruck to papal advisor, the life of Wanda Półtawska. Aeon. <https://www.aeon.co>

Pogrzeb prof. Wandy Póltawskiej. Polskie Radio 24.<https://polskie-radio24.pl>.>artykuł

Wanda Póltawska. O więcej niż życie. Biografia w zarysie. Wydawnictwo Edycja Świętego Pawła.