

Jewish childhood friend of late Pope John Paul II dies in Rome

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ROME — Jerzy Kluger, a Polish-born Jew who was a lifetime friend and childhood playmate of the late Pope John Paul II and who lost much of his family to Nazi death camps, has died in a Rome clinic, his widow said Monday. He was 90.

Irene Kluger told The Associated Press that her husband died on Dec. 31 after suffering from Alzheimer's disease for three years and was buried Monday. The couple lived in Rome for decades, but at John Paul's urging, Kluger, a World War II veteran, occasionally returned to visit Wadowice, the southern Polish town where the two spent their boyhoods, his widow said.

Kluger, a year younger than John Paul, who died in 2005, was one of the last living childhood friends of the late pontiff. He was 5 when he met Karol Wojtyla, who would become a priest two decades later in his predominantly Catholic homeland, and eventually Krakow's cardinal, before being elected as history's only Polish-born pontiff in 1978.

The two — Kluger known by his nickname Jurek and the future pope known as Lolek — played soccer, shared school benches and lived in houses across a square in Wadowice. Kluger also recalled daring swims with the young Wojtyla in the Skawa River during the warmer months. In winter, the two also hiked for hours to the top of the local mountain to ski.

Upon John Paul's death, Kluger said the pope always had a passion for social justice.

"Even when he was a young boy, he would already show great concern for social equality, especially for the Jews," Kluger told the AP. "This was very important to him from a very early age."

John Paul's landmark efforts to improve Vatican-Jewish relations, including a historic visit to Rome's main synagogue, were a legacy of his 26-year papacy.

Polish Cardinal Stanislaw Dziwisz, the longtime secretary of John Paul II, remembered Kluger as "a great Polish patriot" and said it caused him deep grief to learn of the death of the pope's friend, whom he also knew.

"It didn't matter the Kluger was a Jew and the pope a Christian," Dziwisz, the archbishop of Krakow, said in a statement carried by the Polish news agency PAP. "Between them there was a deep, human bond and concern about Polish issues in the world."

The pope and Kluger kept in touch across time and distance, and Kluger occasionally visited the Vatican so they could dine together, meetings that apparently helped shape John Paul's thinking on Jewish issues.

George Weigel, a biographer of John Paul, wrote in "Witness to Hope" that Kluger was a "sounding board" for John Paul in his thinking about the history of relations between Jews and Catholics and relations with Israel.

Early in his papacy John Paul asked his friend to start informal discussions with Israeli diplomats in Rome as the Vatican began to consider establishing full diplomatic ties with the Jewish state, according to Weigel.

Kluger's efforts did not lead to an immediate establishment of diplomatic ties, which occurred only in 1993, but may have helped change the thinking of skeptical Israeli officials, Weigel wrote.

Elan Steinberg, vice president of the organization American Gathering of Holocaust Survivors and their Descendants, said Kluger's passing was both a moment of individual sorrow as well as of "symbolic remembrance for the link with Pope John Paul under whom a revolution in the advancement of Catholic-Jewish relations was realized."

"Their childhood friendship was seared by their shared experience of coming under the Nazi yoke in Poland," Steinberg said in an emailed statement. "There can be no question that John Paul's warmth and gestures to the Jewish people were shaped by his personal witness of Nazi horrors."

Irene Kluger said her husband lost his mother, sister and virtually the rest of his entire family, except for his father, a lawyer, when his relatives perished in German death camps in Poland in World War II.

Jerzy Kluger was among the Polish troops led by Poland's celebrated World War II general, Wladyslaw Anders, during the battle against the Nazis at Monte Cassino, south of Rome, in 1944, she said.

Anders' troops fought as the Second Polish Corps of the British Eighth Army. Poles had risen up at home against the German occupiers and also fought alongside the British and other Allies in the struggle to defeat Hitler's regime.

"He never, never thought that the Germans would do what they did in Poland," Irene Kluger said of her husband.

Kluger was there when John Paul's successor, the German-born Benedict XVI, visited Wadowice in 2006, a day before he visited Auschwitz. Said Kluger of Benedict's stop in the death camp: "It's good that the pope will go there. The visit to Auschwitz is a question of responsibility."

Up to 1.5 million people, most of them Jews, were killed by the Nazis at Auschwitz.

Besides his Irish-born wife, Kluger is survived by a daughter.

Vanessa Gera and Monika Scislowska contributed to this report from Warsaw.