

## "Was Saint Maximilian Really a Ham?"

Over the years, I have received comments from others around the world about whether or not Saint Max was a "Real" Ham. The Saint Maximilian Kolbe Net has never suggested that Saint Maximilian got on nets, had CW & Phone rag chews, went to Hamfests or participated in any of the activities commonly associated with traditional Ham Radio.

However, it was not uncommon in the 1920s and 1930s around the world for host governments to issue Experimental Amateur Radio Licenses to examine the viability of various aspects of the radio art, including non-commercial religious broadcasting. It is my belief that Saint Max did just that.

Saint Max was a committed evangelist for The Immaculata. From his perspective, anything done to promote her cause in Poland and the rest of the world was fair game. According to Dr. Claude Foster's book, *Mary's Knight*<sup>1</sup>, Kolbe received permission from his superiors and the Polish Postal Department to operate a shortwave radio station on the 7 mHz band. He was licensed on 9 September 1938 as SP3RN. (He even got a vanity Call.)

Upon receiving a radio station construction permit, Maximilian said:

Children, do you realize what this will mean for our outreach? Soon, daily, we'll be able to reach thousands of our countrymen over the airways. As soon as we have permission for the airstrip, the distribution of our publications by airplane to all of Poland will increase our subscriptions and now with radio, we should win even more members to the Millitia Immaculatae.<sup>2</sup>

On 26 October 1938, construction began on the station, which included a borrowed HF transmitter secured from the German Wehrmacht (nice touch, Saint Max) and antennas erected in one of the new buildings at Niepokalanow. Like true Hams, the Friars built and installed their own gear. Photographs show the array and the station. I'm impressed to see that Saint Max even used early vacuum tube condenser microphones - always the best for Mary!

At 8:00 PM on 11 December 1938, Saint Max made his first broadcast.

It is my view that Saint Maximilian Kolbe used his keen interest in physics and technology to advance the cause of Mary, the Immaculate. Ham radio operators over the years have had many different spheres of interest. I believe that SP3RN exemplified both in reality and spirit the true meaning of amateur radio. Incidentally, I am certain that Saint Max and several of the Franciscan Brothers would have been required to have Polish commercial or amateur experimental licenses in order to get

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1 Foster, Claude R. *Mary's Knight: The Mission and martyrdom of Saint Maksymilian Maria Kolbe*, West Chester, PA, West Chester University Press, 2002.

2 Ibid., p. 529.

on the air. This licensing would have required the knowledge and use of Morse code, as that was an international requirement until 1999. Up until the late 1940s, almost every U.S. Commercial AM & Shortwave transmitter site had a telegraph key installed on the premises.

This experimental license practice was common in the United States. The first radio station, KDKA Pittsburgh, was originally licensed as 8ZZ. The first TV station in Philadelphia, WPTZ-TV, had the call W3XE and Armstrong's first FM station in NJ was W2XMN.

There has also been some speculation that SP3RN was used to pass traffic between Niepokalanow and Mugensai no Sono, the Franciscan monastery in Japan. I have found no evidence of this but it certainly would not surprise me if Saint Max exploited this resource as well!

When Maximilian Kolbe was first arrested on 13 September 1939, the Nazis had stopped all publications of the Knights of the Immaculate and of course any further activity by SP3RN. The station never went on the air again.

God Bless & 73,

Lloyd -K3QNT