



Br Augustin Zurek, S.J.
(1846-1917. In Zambia 1910-1917)

11 June 1917

Augustin Zurek was born on 11 July 1846 at Lubline/Chestochowa. He entered the Society at Stara Wies in January 1871. He served as sacristan, gardener and general house duties in Stara Wies (1873-1874); in Nowy Sacz (1876-1877); in Tarnopol (1877-1878); in Cracow (1878-1881). He then went to Lancut on house duties from 1883-1884.

Inspired by the early missionaries to the Zambezi, Br Augustin Zurek set out from Poland at the beginning of 1884, together with Br Thomas Kunsztowicz and arrived at Grahamstown in March. He was already 38 years old, a mature man capable of doing different jobs while his real proficiency was as a blacksmith.

He was sent immediately to Dunbrody. A few years before, the first Jesuits had headed into the interior towards the Zambezi (1879) but within four years those still alive regrouped in South Africa to prepare for a second attempt, which would come in 1890 with the Pioneer Column. In the meantime the new Mission Superior, Fr Weld who had directed the first operation from the General's office in Rome, now planned a house of formation (a philosophate) to gather together the young volunteers who were pouring in, inspired by the accounts and letters written by the first group. Br Zurek was among the first to help get the new philosophate of Dunbrody going. Bishop Ricards had invited over 30 Trappists to set up a monastery there, but after 18 months, they vacated the place, claiming that the soil was not suitable for them to survive. They transferred to Natal where they later became the very successful Mariannahill Missionaries.

Br Zurek worked there until 1890 when the philosophate was closed. It was too difficult to maintain in both staff and money but the hard working brothers had developed a farm by pumping water from the Sunday River that ran through the property. The farm thrived there for many more years, paying its way with a herd of ostrich and of goats. Within the six years of its existence the philosophate had seen almost 100 men, students and staff, pass through it and its purpose was achieved. There was quite a body of brothers there, some of whom were being trained by the older ones, like Br Zurek, in a variety of skills needed on the mission.

Br Zurek continued to work at St Aidan's the secondary school from 1890-1894. He wrote in one of his letters 'I feel the lack of tradition of my Polish brothers, but I am in a place where God wants me'. He worked at the remote mission station of Keilands for a while (1895-1896). There is no record of him in the Zambesi Mission catalogue for the years 1897-1900. He may have managed after all these years to get back home but he is next found in the Lower Zambesi Mission in 1901 and so his request to work among missionaries from his home province was finally accepted.

He was sent to the great mission of Boroma under Fr Hiller. His companions were Frs Zutkowski and Hankiewicz and Brs Tomanek and Uhlik - all from his own province. "We live here, like in a family, I feel very happy." His letters home gave good insights into the life a missionary. The work was very rewarding for there was great progress in a short time. In 1909 for instance, there were 80 baptisms, 30 marriages, 40 funerals and 15,500 communions. The buildings were magnificent and today, even after nearly a hundred years of neglect and poor maintenance, they are still remarkable edifices. The early photographs show the workshops and trade school equipped with all kinds of

machinery. The trade school had 200 boys in it and Br Zurek was involved in training the youth and through his skills and his gentleness he made a great impact.

He was then posted to Miruru in 1904 which was on a smaller scale. He was allowed to take his tools with him for which he employed 70 carriers! He found the climate more difficult and the pastoral work less successful. However he could see the hill at Katondwe across the Luangwa River which, although he did not realize it then, would be his final assignment. Again the workshops were the crown of the educational impact of the mission and he even installed an electrical generator.

In 1910 the Edict of Expulsion came from Portugal and they had to leave. Most of the missionaries returned home for re-assignment but a small group decided to cross the river and settle down in what is today Zambia. He even visited the British Administration at Feira with Br Rodenbücher to scout out possibilities for a mission site. In a short time a site was acquired at Kapoche and then the main center at Katondwe was set up. From his room in Katondwe he could see Miruru in the distance over the Luangwa River and he would often think of his good old days there.

The years from 1910-1917 were difficult for Br Zurek not only because beginnings are always hard, but also because of the outbreak of the First World War. He passed away suddenly from a heart attack on 11 June 1917. He was the first in a series of deaths that devastated the young mission, but in his case it was at the end of a long and fruitful missionary life of 33 years of productive labor. In fact quite some time would pass before any of his countrymen could manage to equal his age of 71 years.

11 June

11 August 1846 – 11 June 1917

Br. Agostinho ZUREK

He was born in Lubliniec, Poland, on August 11, 1846, and entered the Society of Jesus on January 24, 1871, in the German Province. He took his final vows on August 15, 1882. He was sent to the Zambezia Mission (Mozambique) in 1901. He was a master locksmith. He left Mozambique in 1913 and went to the mission of Katóndue, Rhodesia, where he died on June 11, 1917.

(Catalogus Defunctorum in renata Societate Iesu ab a. 1814 ad a. 1970)