

## Holocaust Memorial Day, 27 January 2011

### Maksymilian Maria Kolbe – reading by pupils from Polish Community School

#### in Luton

##### **Piotrek:**

Another famous story is that of the Polish Franciscan priest, Maksymilian Kolbe – a prisoner of Auschwitz.

In late July 1941, after a successful escape from the camp, the camp commandant selected a number of prisoners to be killed by starvation. One of the selected men, Franciszek Gajowniczek, cried out, lamenting his family.

Father Kolbe broke ranks, approached the commandant, and volunteered to take his place.

##### **Natalia:**

It was remarkable that he wasn't beaten to death or shot on the spot, just for this act. He had volunteered to take the place of another man whom he knew had a family. The commandant accepted this exchange.

##### **Piotrek:**

Father Kolbe was taken to starvation cell.

During the time in the cell he led the men in songs and prayer. After three weeks of dehydration and starvation, only Kolbe and three others were still alive. Finally he was murdered by phenol injection.

##### **Kinga:**

The man whose life Father Kolbe had saved, Franciszek Gajowniczek, survived the camp and lived a long life (95). He died in 1995.

##### **Piotrek:**

After the war, the Roman Catholic Church bestowed sainthood on Father Kolbe. In a 1979 pilgrimage to Auschwitz, Pope John Paul II honoured Father Kolbe, and made the point that he was not the only one to overcome evil: "How many here earned similar victories? The victorious were people of various faiths, various ideologies, and surely not only believers."

Maksymilian Kolbe's life, his work and his heroic death are known to most Polish people. The tragic memories conjured up by the events of World War Two in Poland are still fresh in many minds. Father Kolbe was but one of many millions who died in those years. However, it is to the nature of his death that we must look. He made his sacrifice, to save the life of a fellow prisoner, alone, freely and fully comprehending the consequences of his act. By his action he was a living witness to the belief that only good can conquer evil. This was a man, who in such inhuman conditions, brought consolation, love and the hope of survival.