

As a young man, Karol Wojtyla had no desire to become a priest. He loved literature (especially the poems of Polish writers) and the theatre.

But five formative years, during his young-adult life in Poland, redirected his path.

As the Germans began their invasion of his country, in September of 1939, Karol Wojtyla (Pope John Paul II's birth name) was assisting a local priest serving Mass in Krakow. After Mass was over, Karol raced home to check on his ailing father.

Quickly leaving the city, the Wojtylas - like other fleeing Poles - witnessed acts of atrocities. Those events, leaving a lifelong impression on the young man, solidified the new direction of his life (and his journey to the Vatican).

Hoping to find protection, behind the lines of the retreating Polish army, Karol and his father realized a terrible truth. It wasn't just the Nazis who were invading their country. So were the Soviets.

Hitler and Stalin, would-be allies at the beginning of World War II, had agreed to carve-up Poland between them. They did not care how their actions would be viewed by the Poles. A famous Polish saying sums it up:

The Germans would destroy our body, but the Russians would destroy our soul.

On the 5th of October, 1939, the German victory over Poland was complete. The swastika now flew over Polish buildings as Karol Wojtyla studied in the city of Krakow.

He could not have imagined then that one day he would become the most recognized individual in the world and would be recommended for beatification by his church within six years of his death.

That beatification occurred on May 1, 2011.

See, also:

[Witness to Evil - Young John Paul II, Part 2](#)

[Witness to Evil - Young John Paul II, Part 3](#)

[Witness to Evil - Young John Paul II, Part 4](#)

[Witness to Evil - Young John Paul II, Part 5](#)

[Witness to Evil - Young John Paul II, Part 6](#)

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The BBC provides background information regarding this docudrama:

Drama-documentary telling the story of five years which transformed the life of Karol Wojtyla and set him on the path to the Vatican.

The man who would become John Paul II was 19 when the Germans invaded Poland in September 1939. He had no intention of joining the church, but the devastating experience of Nazi occupation led him first to join the underground resistance and then to risk his life studying in secret to become a priest.

Interviews with key survivors from the period who knew him well, and the Pope's own writings, are combined in a powerful exploration of the young John Paul II's coming of age, including his brushes with death and the horrors he witnessed that helped to shape his thinking.

"Young John Paul II - Witness to Evil" (2008)

Director

Philip Smith

Producer

Leanne Klein

Writer

Philip Smith

Starring John Sackville

as Karol Wojtyla

Narrator

Richard Lintern

Wall-to-Wall for the BBC. Originally broadcast, BBC One.

See [Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:](http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/Witness-to-Evil-Young-John-Paul-II)

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See [Learning Tasks for this story online at:](http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/Witness-to-Evil-Young-John-Paul-II)

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