In 1939, a year after he and his father moved to Krakow, the Nazis invaded Poland and World War II began. Many of Karol’s Jewish friends simply disappeared. The theatre and the university closed and Karol had to find a job in a stone quarry. The suffering and difficulties of this time focused his heart, and he decided to enter an underground seminary (the Nazis had closed the regular ones) to study for the priesthood. In 1944, when Nazis broke into the apartment building where he was living, he narrowly escaped arrest – he was lying on the basement floor praying.

After the war he was ordained and began a busy life as a priest. He had a particular interest in young people and organised many camps and gatherings with them and with other Polish writers and thinkers. He continued his studies and became Professor of Ethics at Lubin University. He also kept up his athletic and sporting interests and spent any spare time hiking and skiing. His talent for leadership was noticed and he was made a bishop at the age of 38.

Bishop Wojtyla took part in the discussions at the Second Vatican Council and became a friend of Pope Paul VI. After the 33-day papacy of John Paul I, he was elected Pope on 16 October 1978.

During his 26 years as pope, John Paul II travelled extensively. He was instrumental in the downfall of communism throughout Europe. He demonstrated a commitment to interfaith dialogue and demonstrated a desire for peace among nations. He established the World Youth Day tradition. He left a lasting legacy through his many encyclicals and books. After many years of illness and disability, Pope John Paul II died on the 2 April 2005. At his funeral on 8 April the multitudes chanted _Santo Subito_ (Make him a saint now!).

Pope John Paul II was born in 1920 in a small town in Poland called Wadowice, 35 kms from Krakow in the south of Poland. His parents, Karol and Emilia Wojtyla named their little boy Karol Jozef but he was mostly known by his nickname _Lolek_. He had a brother, Edmund, who was fourteen years older. It was Edmund who introduced his brother to outdoor sports, such as hiking and skiing, which Karol loved all his life.

The Wojtylas were not a rich family. They lived in a small apartment across from the parish church of Our Lady where the family gathered often with other people of the town to pray and celebrate Mass. Karol was a very good pupil at school and very popular with his classmates. he loved playing soccer and swimming in the Skawa River.

One of Karol’s best friends at school was a Jewish boy, Jerzy Kluger, later an important ally when, as Pope, he was trying to make links between the Catholic Church and the state of Israel. Jerzy used to sit in the Wojtyla’s kitchen, warmed by the coal stove, playing chess and cards and listening to Karol’s father tell stories.

Just before Karol’s ninth birthday, his mother, who had not been well for a long time, died. By this time his brother Edmund was a medical resident, so there were only Karol and his father left at home. His father was kind but strict and the motherless little boy turned increasingly to studies and to prayer. Karol found he was good at languages and quickly picked up German and Latin and, at high school, became interested in drama and the theatre. He was often chosen for leading roles and was immensely popular in class. After he finished high school his father wanted him to enter the seminary and become a priest but, instead, he chose to go to university in Krakow to study drama.

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Even as a little boy the future Pope John Paul II, Karol Wojtyla, loved games and outdoor pursuits. He loved soccer in winter and swimming in the nearby Skawa River in summer. When the river iced over in winter he skated and played ice hockey on it with his school friends. Skiing was another favourite pastime and also climbing in the mountains. As a young priest he regularly organised hiking, skiing or kayaking expeditions for the groups of young people and university students with whom he was working. He saw the value of sport and games not only in keeping people fit and healthy but in forming bonds between people and building community. He and the young people he led were always conscious of the presence of God in the wild and beautiful places they visited and prayer, outdoor Masses and discussions were part of the experience. Even as Pope he continued to love to hike and to ski on his holidays and he installed a swimming pool in the grounds of Castel Gandolfo, the papal summer residence.

Quote: While playing sports, Christians also find help in developing the cardinal virtues—fortitude, temperance, prudence and justice.

As a boy, Karol Wojtyla wanted to be an actor. He was involved in school theatre and saw the possibilities for theatre to restore national pride and hope to Poland which had suffered from invasions and occupation by other countries. He enrolled at Cracow’s Jagiellonian University in 1938, and studied drama there until the Nazis occupied Poland and closed classes in 1939. Poles were forbidden by the Nazis to either perform or attend the theatre. He later joined Rhapsodic Theatre, an underground theatre group. As well as acting, he wrote poems and some plays. One has survived called ‘The Jeweller’s Shop’, a play about love which dates not from his early years with the underground Theatre in Nazi-occupied Poland, but from 1960, when he was the Bishop of Krakow. He never lost his interest in the theatre and as Pope enjoyed his public life and the opportunities it gave him to interact with audiences immeasurably larger than those he would have attracted had he remained an actor.

Quote: In your work, always remember the people who are your audience, their rights and their expectations ... Do not let yourselves be influenced by mere financial or ideological interest.

Pope John Paul II grew to adulthood under the shadow of the German Nazi regime which had invaded his native Poland in 1939. Then, after the war, Poland was annexed by Communist Russia. Together these totalitarian regimes were responsible for the deaths of millions of people. The young priest had seen at close quarters the terrible consequences of such political systems but he was intelligent and patient and developed ways of dealing with the communist system. He was not confrontational or openly political preferring to appeal to people's consciences, common humanity, their cultural heritage and hopes for the future. Though Polish communist leaders thought he would pose no problems, his immense influence was a key in helping to peacefully bring down European communism during his time as Pope. On his travels to troubled spots throughout the world he consistently called on leaders and governments to respect the human rights and dignity of their peoples.

Quote: Peace is not just the absence of war. Like a cathedral, peace must be constructed patiently and with unshakable faith.
**Man of Many Gifts**

**The Man of Prayer**

All his life Pope John Paul II was dedicated to prayer. As well as being devoted to the celebration of the Eucharist he was fond of praying the rosary and was responsible for adding five extra decades, the Luminous Mysteries, focusing on key events in the life and work of Jesus. Prayer was the wellspring of his energy and vision as the following story shows: The Holy Father was in prayer in his private chapel when the Cardinal in charge of International Affairs came wanting to speak to him. His Secretary told the Cardinal that the Holy Father was at prayer. The Cardinal said, “The matter is very urgent and very important and I need to know the comment of the Holy Father immediately and urgently.” So the Secretary went to the Pope and said “The Cardinal is waiting for you. He says he has a very important and urgent message to discuss with you.” Then the Holy Father said, “Tell the Cardinal if the matter is so urgent and so important, I need to pray a bit more.”

*Quote:* Prayer gives us light by which to see and to judge from God's perspective and from eternity. That is why you must not give up on praying!

**The Youth Guru**

Pope John Paul II has been called the Pope of the Youth. The interest in young people that inspired the young priest to gather them for all sorts of activities and discussions when he was a university chaplain in Poland continued throughout his ministry and he was the instigator of World Youth Days at which young people from round the world come together to share and celebrate their faith. Pope John Paul II had extraordinary rapport with these young people and when he was dying it was the youth that came to see him. Most of the crowd gathered in St Peter’s Square keeping vigil with him during his last hours were young people.

The Pope’s last audible words, on hearing tens of thousands of young people singing in St Peter’s Square as he lay in his deathbed, Friday, April 1, 2005: “I sought you out and now you come to me. Thank you.”

*Quote:* Dear young people of every language and culture, a high and exhilarating task awaits you: that of becoming men and women capable of solidarity, peace and love of life, with respect for everyone. Become craftsmen of a new humanity, where brothers and sisters – members all of the same family – are able at last to live in peace.

**The Pilgrim Pope**

Pope John Paul II was known as ‘the Pilgrim Pope’ because he made over 100 journeys to countries around the world – more than all previous popes combined. In total he logged more than 1,167,000 kms visiting almost 130 countries during his 26 years as Pope. He consistently attracted large crowds on his travels, some amongst the largest ever assembled in human history. He met not only world leaders but tried to visit ordinary people, the elderly, the young and those who were sick or disabled. Until he was quite an elderly man, his first gesture on arriving in a new country was to kneel and kiss the ground as a sign of his affection and regard for the people of that country. His heavy travel schedule was motivated by his conviction that personal contact and relationships were vital to break down fear, suspicion and hostility between peoples. He wanted the whole world to relate to each other as members of a family.

*Quote:* I have always believed that religious leaders have a vital role to play in nurturing that hope of justice and peace without which there will be no future worthy of humanity.
The Indigenous people of Australia have a unique connection to the land and to all of creation. This connection helps to nurture and nourish their spirit. It is a part of their culture; a richness of their traditions. Pope John Paul II visited the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of Australia when he came to Alice Springs in 1986.

This was to become a historic event for the Australian Church. It was with encouragement, hope and respect that Pope John Paul II delivered a strong message of reconciliation. The Pope's speech—addressed to his 'Brothers and Sisters', the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people—challenged all Australians to uphold the Indigenous culture so that Australia could grow to be an inclusive and multicultural country. The Pope affirmed the Aboriginal culture and spoke of its enduring value, proclaiming,

‘Your culture, which shows the lasting genius and dignity of your race, must not be allowed to disappear… Your songs, your stories, your paintings, your dances, your languages, must never be lost.’

The Pope affirmed those gathered that their own culture and traditions could lead them to a deeper relationship with the Divine.

Australia has a marred history in its treatment of our Indigenous brothers and sisters. We have made dire mistakes. Pope John Paul II acknowledged our blemished history but implored us all to look forward and stay united. He affirmed that in standing together the Aboriginal People will find strength. In the words of John Paul II,

‘If you stay closely united, you are like a tree standing in the middle of a bushfire sweeping through the timber. The leaves are scorched and the tough bark is scarred and burned; but inside the tree the sap is still flowing, and under the ground the roots are still strong. Like that tree you have endured the flames, and you still have the power to be reborn. The time for this rebirth is now!’

Pope John Paul II continued to encourage the Indigenous People throughout his speech. He encouraged the Aboriginal People to be open to forgiveness and healing, drawing new life from the strength of the Gospel, penetrating their culture and traditions with a new Spirit. The enduring words of this speech however placed a great responsibility on the Church of Australia.

‘You are part of Australia and Australia is part of you. And the Church herself in Australia will not be fully the Church that Jesus wants her to be until you have made your contribution to her life and until that contribution has been joyfully received by others.’

Although this address was given nearly 25 years ago many of the issues raised by Pope John Paul II continue to be a challenge for our country today. We need to surrender our fear and welcome the wisdom of the Aboriginal ancestors so that, as a Church, we can grow and become fully the Church as we were intended to be.

Quotations taken from the Address of John Paul II to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in Blatherskite Park—Alice Springs (Australia), 29 November 1986.