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DIVINE MERCY COLLEGE.  
A POLISH SECONDARY BOARDING SCHOOL FOR BOYS  
NEAR HENLEY-ON-THAMES IN 1954–1986

Following the Second World War and the occupation of Poland and the whole of East Central Europe by the USSR and the foisting of foreign communist regimes onto those countries, over 100,000 members of the allied Polish Armed Forces remained in exile, along with some of their families who had managed to join choosing life in foreign lands. At the same time, in July 1945, the major Western powers withdrew their recognition of the legal Polish Government, resident temporarily in London since 1940 (prior to that its base after September 1939 was Paris/Angers until the capitulation of France in June 1940). Some smaller states maintained diplomatic relations with the Polish Government in Exile well into the 1950s.

The majority of Polish exiles, i.e., army personnel and families decided to ‘sit it out’ in Britain, believing that sooner or later there would be a return to a free and independent Poland, even if shorn of her eastern territories – territories from which many of the soldiers, especially from the Polish 2nd Corps came from.

This meant that following the end of the war they had nowhere to return, their homes now being within the borders of the USSR. Thus, after the war under the Polish Resettlement Corps scheme the Polish Armed Forces, which had formed part of the United Nations allied force since 1939 were disbanded. Over 100,000 Poles remained in the west, the majority settling for what they believed was temporarily in the United Kingdom.

The Polish Government in Exile, along with the majority of its institutions, also made their temporary base in Britain (in London). For the next

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forty-five years this became the centre of Polish political, social, cultural, educational, and economic life in exile. During the Second World War, throughout the territories where the Polish forces and Polish civilian refugees found a base, Polish primary, secondary, and higher education schools were set up and organised. One of the remarkable features of the Polish state in exile was that wherever Polish children and youth were found, school courses and schools were quickly organised. One of the overriding aims of the exiled Polish Government was to concentrate and promote the education of its children and youth who found themselves far from home. This remains one of the unsung achievements of the Polish exiled state authorities.

Among the Polish exiles, there were thousands of children of school age along with those older youths, now young men, who had fought in the Polish Forces, whose education had been interrupted by the outbreak of war and now had to make up for lost time, so as to be able to go on to higher education. For many, this would have been the normal progression had it not been for the German and Soviet invasions of September 1939.

Under the aegis of the Committee for Polish Education and informally the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Public Education of the London based Polish Government in Exile, dozens of Polish secondary schools were set up in the UK, which in the years 1946–1954 provided secondary education to the exiled children. By the mid-1950s these schools were closed, their pupils either having gone on to further education in the British educational system or having entered employment. And yet, during the time that the Polish secondary schools under the aegis of the Committee for Polish Education were being closed, two new initiatives arose. Those initiatives led to the establishment of two Polish secondary boarding schools, which maintained a British curriculum, whilst at the same time promoting a Polish and Catholic ethos. In the history of exiled secondary education, this was and remains an extraordinary phenomenon.

The two schools in question are the secondary boarding school of the Sisters of Nazareth established at Pitsford near Nottingham for girls in 1953. The other was the Divine Mercy College for boys based at Fawley Court near the Oxfordshire town of Henley-on-Thames.<sup>1</sup> Established as a boarding school (minor public school) in the autumn of 1954 it functioned until spring

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<sup>1</sup> The archives of the Divine Mercy College Secondary School are currently held at the Marian centre in Skorzec, Poland, where they were transferred following the sale and closure of Fawley Court by the Congregation of Marian Fathers. This brief article is based on the existing literature about the school and the reminiscences of the author.

1986, when after thirty-two years it closed its doors as a school. Bearing in mind the history and development of Polish exiled life in Britain this was, to say the least, a largely inevitable, though no less regrettable end to the school.

Yet the fact that there were in Britain two Catholic Polish boarding schools which whilst adhering to the British educational system, at the same time aimed at instilling Catholic and Polish values in its pupils alongside the British curriculum, was a unique episode.

Inevitably this is a topic deserving a full monograph to do it justice. This short article relies on available publications and the memory of the author who was a pupil at DMC between 1970 and 1975. The archives of the DMC school were sent to the Marian Fathers' house in Skorzec, Poland, following the closure and regrettable sale of Fawley Court by the Marian Fathers. For the purposes of this article the author did not have recourse to consult them if indeed they are available for public research purposes.

So where did the initial spark for the setting up of such a school on British territory arise? That spark came from an extraordinary person, Father Józef Jarzębowski (1897–1964). A priest of the Congregation of Marian Fathers he had already before 1939 been noted for his educational abilities. He had been a stalwart of the Divine Mercy College secondary school run by the Marian Fathers at their base monastery and school in Bielany, north of Warsaw (now a suburb of Warsaw), until the outbreak of the Second World War. The history of Fr Jarzębowski is indeed an extraordinary one – a tale worthy of a film.<sup>2</sup> For above anything else, the establishment of a Catholic Polish boarding school in post-war England, where there were many Polish children, seemed to him to be a prerogative, even more, a mission. For Jarzębowski, a teacher in the Marian secondary school in Warsaw who during the Second World War had cared for the education of Polish children in Japan whom he had brought out via that country from the deprivations of the USSR to Mexico. There he had been instrumental in the running of the Polish refugee centre in Santa Rosa, basically a Polish village in Mexico.

It was he who ten years later, fired with a vision, led to the establishment of a secondary boarding school for boys in the green pastures of the Chiltern Hills. Jarzębowski was a man of undoubted vision and at the same time a man of action. He realised that in the post Second World War period, far

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<sup>2</sup> Z.J. KRASZEWSKI, Z. ORLOWSKA, *Miłosierdzie Boże ratunkiem dla świata. Ks. Józef Jarzębowski Marianin Apostoł Miłosierdzia Bożego* [Mercy of God the saviour for the world. Fr. Józef Jarzębowski Marian Apostle of God's Mercy], Warsaw: (s.n.) 1984.

from home, where so many young Poles were floundering in the new post-war reality in exile, in a country which had little in common to their own pre-war educational experience, if any, needed an educational institution which would combine the realities of British education along with a Polish Catholic ethos. He realized that to keep Polish youth connected to their Polish heritage, culture, and religion, it was necessary to create the right environment where those values could be accordingly nurtured.

Fr Jarzębowski, having himself been a secondary school teacher in the pre-war Marian Fathers' College at Bielany, was a well-respected historian and curator of the Marian Fathers' museum. In fact, the majority of the artefacts had been collected by him. These included royal autographs, mementoes from the November 1831 and January 1863 insurrections, along with memorabilia directly concerning General Józef Haller (1873–1960) and the Poznań 1956 insurrection. All these exhibits and many more, collected by Jarzębowski were on display at the school museum. Today they can be found in the Museum of the Marian Fathers' Centre in Licheń in a specially built museum complex. Moreover, he was a noted historian, specialising in the January 1863 Rising. Amongst others, he was the author of a biography of Romuald Traugutt (1938), the Dictator of the Uprising, and of Jan Jeziorański, one of its leaders (1974). He also edited a volume of documents, letters and notes of Traugutt (1970).

Returning to the school, Fawley Court was purchased in October 1953 by Fr Jarzębowski for the sum of £10,000 from the Mackenzie family who had owned the property since the mid-19th century. Apart from the planned school, Fawley Court also became a new outpost of the Congregation of Marian Fathers with its own father superior.

Before returning to the history of the school it is worth pondering the history of Fawley Court itself – a wonderful place steeped in English history. The original house belonged to Sir Bulstrode Whitelocke (1605–1675), a notable but moderate Parliamentarian during the English Civil War of the mid-17th century, and one time Ambassador to Sweden. The mansion, destroyed during the Civil War, was rebuilt by the renowned architect Christopher Wren in 1684. In 1688, William of Orange, the future King William III, stayed the night before travelling to London to usurp the crown of England from his father-in-law King James II (James VII of Scotland). During the 18th century, the then owners, the Freemans commissioned the landscape gardener Lancelot “Capability” Brown (1715–1783) to design the park (1771), the basic design surviving to the present period. In the mid-19th century, the

estate was purchased by the Mackenzie family in whose hands it remained for the next century.<sup>3</sup> During the Second World War the mansion was requisitioned by the British Defence Ministry and used as a training centre for wireless operators, both for SOE purposes as well as wireless operators based in Britain.<sup>4</sup> For a brief period in 1945, the “Wawer” Radio Station of the Polish Special Bureau of the General Staff (responsible for communications with the Polish Resistance Army) was housed in Fawley Court.

Eight years later the Polish connection returned in full force. Fr Jarzębowski, adamant that a Polish school for boys be created, purchased the very rundown mansion of Fawley Court. Here he set up a secondary boarding school for boys. His idea was that this school would be primarily for Polish school children, sons of soldiers of the Polish Armed Forces who could or did not want to return to a Soviet-occupied Poland with a Soviet-nominated and controlled communist government. Jarzębowski’s idea was to create a school where Polish ideals, language, literature, and history could be imparted to Polish pupils who would inevitably, at least in what was seen as in the short time, be brought into British everyday work life. His idea was to foster in his pupils a feeling of Polish and Catholic values, at the same time providing a solid education which would serve the pupils in their future travails. Thus ‘Bielany’ on the Thames was born.

The school opened in January 1954. It was a modest beginning, with 15 second-year pupils. Fr Jerzy Frankowski was appointed first rector (headmaster). In the June of that year the first Whitsun Festival was held beginning a decades’ long tradition of pilgrimages to Fawley Court, which would outlast the existence of the school. The initial annual fee for boarders was £45 and £18 for day pupils. In 1957, the first “O” level exams were taken by the pupils. At the beginning of the 1959 school year, Fr Andrzej Janicki was appointed rector of the school. A veteran of the Polish underground resistance Home Army, he was to remain rector with a brief interlude until 1984. A natural, a man of great culture and sensitivity, he knew how to approach pupils, and on the whole was both respected and liked by them. Because of his looks he was nicknamed ‘Mousey’, a term of sympathy if nothing else. Nonetheless, when necessary, he could be strict, though this seemed alien to his nature. Fascinated by astrology, he wrote a three-volume science fiction novel, *Porwany w przestrzeń* (*Abducted into Space*), along with a

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<sup>3</sup> *Fawley Court. Historic House and Museum* (by Henryk Lipiński), p. 1–7.

<sup>4</sup> D.J. KELLY, *Buckinghamshire Spies and Subversives*, 2015, p. 124–125.

candid and interesting first volume of memoirs.<sup>5</sup> The second, which was to cover the post-war period and Fawley Court, was never published and whether the manuscript has survived is a moot point. Fr Janicki was indeed the right man in the right place. Whether his superiors always saw it in the same way is open to discussion. However, the fact that he was in situ for so long was either an accolade for him or a line of least resistance by his superiors. He was succeeded by Fr Czesław Pisiak in 1984 and he remained rector until the school's closure two years later. By that time, the number of pupils had dwindled to less than fifty.

The school, as all educational institutions, developed and expanded over the ensuing years. Until September 1960 all the classes were situated in the main mansion. That autumn school classes were transferred to newly built wooden classrooms resembling barracks. That same year the prep class for pre-secondary school pupils was established. In 1967, a new brick building housing dormitories for the prep and first forms was opened along with a physics and chemistry laboratories and handed over to the school's use. These were connected by a corridor with classrooms built earlier. In March 1969, the school was granted a certificate of efficiency. The laboratories were visited by heads of local British schools at the behest of the Ministry of Education and presented as an example of how such laboratories should look. The school was also visited by the Belgian Minister of Education.

In May 1973 the newly built St. Anne's Church was consecrated. Funded by Prince Stanisław Radziwiłł in memory of his mother who perished in the depths of the USSR, and designed by another exile, a veteran of the Home Army, who became an architect in London, Władysław Jarosz.

Tragedy struck in June 1973 when the historical Wren building caught fire, damaging the roof and top floor. The water to quench the flames did much damage to the lower floors and ground floor. Almost immediately funds began to be raised for restoration work and to provide new dormitories.

As already mentioned, the school opened with 15 pupils. A new year class was added each year so that ultimately there was a prep class (10–11-year-olds), five classes leading to 'O' levels and from 1969 a lower and then upper sixth form ending with 'A' levels. At its height the school had some 140 pupils. Classes 1 to 5 counted some 20–25 pupils, the preparatory class up to 10 pupils, whilst the two sixth form classes also had about ten pupils together. One of the strong features was that in the initial years the staff was

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<sup>5</sup> A. JANICKI, *Na rozkaz. Wspomnienia 1937–1947* [On orders. Memoirs 1937–1947], Henley-on-Thames 1995.

made up primarily of veteran schoolteachers who had graduated from pre-war Polish universities and had begun their teaching careers in various secondary schools. During the tumultuous years of the Second World War, some of them went on to continue teaching in the various Young Soldiers Schools established for Polish refugee children in the Middle East, India, and the Polish settlements in East Africa. Nearly all had been deported by the NKVD to the depths of the USSR following the German and subsequent Soviet invasions, and occupation of Poland in September 1939. After the war those teachers who had settled in Britain continued to teach in the dozen or so Polish schools established after 1945, so that Polish refugees could complete their education. These Polish language schools operated under the aegis of the Committee for Polish Education established in 1947. By the mid-1950s, Polish children were absorbed into the British educational system and the Polish schools were closed. With the passage of time younger teachers, the product of the British educational system, joined DMC. The last of the pre-war Polish teachers remained at their post until 1978. Among this extraordinary group were Stanisław Kapiszewski (English), Paweł Schulz (history), Edward Gemborek (biology), Adolf Scheybal (mathematics), Fr Stanisław Bełch (Latin and religious studies), Zofia Orłowska (Polish for younger classes). With time a new generation of teachers were employed including Kazimierz Irzykowski (physics) who was also headmaster from the late sixties to 1971, Feliks Puczyłowski (biology), Irena Bielatowicz (Polish history), and next half generation down, Włodzimierz Gorzelak (geography and physical education), Rembowski (physics), Brzezińska (chemistry). In this generation were also teachers from local communities such as Capt. E.F.R. Byng (mathematics for senior classes), Madame E. Knight (French), Mr. J. Hunter (social sciences). As the oldest generation of teachers left, new younger teachers born after the war were taken on. Mention can be made of the Canadian Tom Gaffney (mathematics) and Krystyna Lunaczek (English). Apart from the teaching staff, each year had its own housemaster, the vast majority of whom came from Poland. Mostly they were laymen and in a few cases priests. When I was in the first year the second-class housemaster was Fr Władysław Zasłona known as “lemon peel”, not for the sweetness of his character. Of the other lay housemasters or housemistresses, mentions can be made of Jadwiga Biszewska (prep form) Irena Bielatowicz (year 1), Edward Wojtasik, Leon Jankowski, Bernard Tomczyk, Kazimierz Gintowt-Dziewałtowski. Apart from Irena Bielatowicz, the remainder invariably moved on after a year or two, this being, understandably a stepping-stone to better

employment. Understandably from their point of view, though whether this was beneficial to the pupils remains a matter of contention.

Mention must be made of the brothers of the Marian Congregation and (later from 1972) three sisters of the Congregation of Jesus who were an integral part of the functioning of the school. The brothers worked on the farm, in the kitchens, as gardeners (Brother Czesław Banasikowski), as cleaners and handy men, fixing what needed to be fixed (Brother Franciszek Czech). The sisters looked after the kitchens and the school's sick bay.<sup>6</sup>

However, because of the limited funds available the incomes of the young teachers were small in comparison to their colleagues elsewhere. Many of the youngest teachers moved on after a few years of gaining experience. Such a situation could not encourage long term commitment among the teaching staff. Also, with the passage of time, from the late 1970s, *tempus fugit* was doing its work. Pupil numbers dwindled and the maintaining of the school was becoming increasingly unviable. Originally set up to provide not only a solid secondary education but also to maintain and promote Catholicism and Polishness among the young who had been uprooted by the war, and thrown into involuntary exile, one of its aims was not to allow for this generation to be lost to Poland.

The first 'O' level results came in 1957, automatically raising the school's profile as a secondary educational establishment. In September 1967, new dormitories and classrooms for the younger years (1 and 2) were opened, including several science laboratories. These were linked to the old wooden classrooms, ending with the PE building which doubled up as a cinema/theatre, and a general cultural hub which included choir practices. Many annual gatherings took place here. It was not far from here that Brother Franciszek (or to us boys, Brother "Georgie" [as in George Best, the famous Manchester United player] as he liked to play football with us) collapsed whilst mending the pavement around the school paths. For many of us, young lads, this was a first sight of someone dying – a person who a few days earlier had been a lively (at least for us boys) member of the Marian community.

One of the annual features of Divine Mercy College were the annual Whitsunday celebrations that took place in late May/early June. Each year

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<sup>6</sup> Many of the priests, teachers, and brothers from Divine Mercy College, Fawley Court are buried in Fairmile Cemetery, Henley-on-Thames. See K. GRODZISKA and A.SUCHCITZ, *"Zostanie po nich nikły ślad..."*. *Polskie groby na cmentarzach w Laxton Hall, Pitsford Hall, Fawley Court i Henley-on-Thames* ["There will be little trace of them."]. Polish graves in the cemeteries of Laxton Hall, Pitsford Hall, Fawley Court and Henley-on-Thames], Kraków: Secesja 2007, p. 55–106.



thousands of Poles from various corners of the United Kingdom descended on Fawley Court for this special festival. In earlier years, there was an open-air mass with a field altar in front of the grotto of Our Lady of Lourdes; latterly, after the school closed, the masses took place within St. Anne's Church which had been built and consecrated in 1973. For many years Archbishop Szczepan Wesoły officiated at these masses.

Apart from Whitsun there was a second annual event which was a fixture in the school's calendar. This was the religious retreats, when outside *padres* were asked to lead the three day lessons. It is not possible to name all those who were asked to come and try and instil in us an understanding and devotion to Our Lord's Word. From my days in the early 1970's I remember Fr Andrzej Głazewski from Newton Abbot. Apart from being the army chaplain in my father's regiment 10th Mounted Rifles Regiment, 1st Armoured Division during the Second World War, he was renowned for his healing powers. He also, as I remember, had a habit of stopping mass in mid-sentence if there was any noise in the congregation, which was not hard in a boys' school. He would wait until complete silence was restored before carrying on the service. Another memorable priest who held several retreats was, Fr Włodzimierz Okoński.

By the beginning of the 1980s, this first generation of Poles born in exile had grown up, graduated, set up their own families, and in the main – as is wont – became ever increasingly assimilated into British life. They did not see the necessity of sending their children to a boarding school which promoted a specifically Polish and Catholic ethos, albeit fully integrated into the British education system. One might as well send one's children (second generation) to English schools, whether state or public (i.e. private). The number of pupils attending the school began to fall steadily, so that by the mid-1980s there were only several dozen pupils attending the school. Even so, in 1984, in the school magazine the editors were moved to write somewhat optimistically: "Today, twenty years after his [Fr Jarzębowski's] death, Divine Mercy College stands poised at the threshold of many new and exciting developments, providing even greater opportunity for those boys fortunate enough to be able to participate."<sup>7</sup> However, the writing was on the wall and eventually the school was closed after the Easter term of 1986, before the beginning of the summer term, not even ending the school year. A sad but inevitable turn of events.

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<sup>7</sup> *A new chapter in the history of Divine Mercy college*, "30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Divine Mercy College", Fawley Court: Ks. Marianie 1984, p. 27

During its 32-year-old history, over one thousand pupils passed through its gates, gaining thousands of “O” levels and proportionally ‘A’ levels.<sup>8</sup> Many went on to higher education, graduating in every perceivable subject: musicians, medical doctors, teachers, academics, soldiers, lawyers, bankers, businessmen, IT experts, historians, archivists, economists, translators, administrators, journalists, to name but a few professions. Many found employment overseas and made their homes there. One could mention countless names of DMC pupils who went on to achieve many heights in a myriad of professions. To name but a few, Waldemar Januszczak who became a well-known and respected art critic writing for the leading British newspapers as well as making and presenting television films on art, something which he continues to do so to this day. Another is Colonel Richard (Ryszard) Ciągliński, who became a professional soldier in the British Army (Royal Educational Corps) and eventually Britain’s first Defence Attaché in post-1990 independent Poland, a son of a Polish soldier of the Second World War. Later he became an advisor in the Balkan conflict of the mid-1990s.

Michael Charidemou went on to become a professional musician who composes, performs and produces. Yet another, Richard Brzeziński, went on to become an historian specialising in Polish 16th and 17th-century military history, publishing several books in the Osprey series. Such examples can be multiplied tenfold. The end results of the achievements of ex DMC pupils, have indicated that the standards of teaching were high or at least steady. Or maybe, individual pupils did indeed take advantage of what the school had to offer and used this sound basis to go on to achieve all the things which they did. As one pupil put it, “any averagely intelligent boy, willing to work, will be successful in his G.C.E. results, nowadays so essential as the starting point for any worthwhile career.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> A. JANICKI, “Dwudziestolecie”, [in:] *20 lat Kolegium Miłosierdzia Bożego Fawley Court 1954-1974*, p. 4. Fr Janicki cited the figure of over 789 pupils who had passed through the school by 1974.

<sup>9</sup> B. LISTER, *DMC*, [in:] *20 lat Kolegium Miłosierdzia Bożego Fawley Court 1954-1974*, p. 19.

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#### DIVINE MERCY COLLEGE. A POLISH SECONDARY BOARDING SCHOOL FOR BOYS NEAR HENLEY-ON-THAMES 1954–1986

This article presents the history of Divine Mercy College at Fawley Court, England, a secondary boarding school for boys founded in 1953 on the initiative of Rev. Józef Jarzębowski, which continued the tradition of schools established by Polish refugees and World War II veterans. The main idea of this establishment was to promote a sense of Polishness and Catholic values, while providing students with a solid education. Over its 32-year history, the school has educated more than a thousand pupils, and can boast distinguished alumni for the UK.

**Keywords:** Divine Mercy College; Poles in the UK; Fawley Court; education of Polish diaspora.

#### DIVINE MERCY COLLEGE. A POLISH SECONDARY BOARDING SCHOOL FOR BOYS NEAR HENLEY-ON-THAMES 1954–1986

Artykuł przedstawia historię Divine Mercy College w angielskim Fawley Court, męskiej szkoły średniej założonej w 1953 roku z inicjatywy ks. Józefa Jarzębowskiego kontynuującej tradycje szkół zakładanych przez polskich uchodźców i weteranów II wojny światowej. Główną ideą tej placówki było promowanie poczucia polskości i wartości katolickich, przy równoczesnym zapewnieniu uczniom solidnej edukacji. W ciągu 32-letniej historii, szkoła wykształciła ponad tysiąc uczniów i może poszczycić się zasłużonymi dla Wielkiej Brytanii absolwentami.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Divine Mercy College; Polacy w Wielkiej Brytanii; Fawley Court; szkolnictwo polonijne.