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III THEOLOGICAL SYMPOSIUM "THE CHURCH, JEWS AND JUDAISM" IN POLAND

By Waldemar Chrostowski

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On 11 and 12 April, 1991, the Theological Faculty of the Academy of Catholic Theology in cooperation with the Commission of the Polish Episcopate for the Dialogue with Judaism organized the third Christian-Jewish symposium entitled "Auschwitz--Reality, Symbolism, Theology." The symposium began on the day observed by the Jews as *Yom ha-Shoah*, Day of Extermination, to commemorate the memory of the six million Jewish victims of Nazi genocide. Three rabbis--Byron L. Sherwin of Chicago, co-organizer of the interreligious seminar in Spertus College of Judaica for Polish professor priests, Awraham Soetendorp of The Hague, who as a child was saved during the occupation by a Catholic family, and Menachem Joskowicz, Chief Rabbi of Poland--led prayer for the murdered whose highlight was the parable of Jewish faithfulness to the Lord and words from Psalm 22.

The guests were greeted by Prof. Roman Bartnicki, dean of the Theological Faculty of Academy of Catholic Theology (hereafter ACT). The introduction was delivered by the rector, Prof. Jan Lach, who stated that ACT had been the first Catholic institution of higher education in Poland to take up an on-going dialogue with the Jews and Judaism and that scholarly reflection of representatives of the two communities was making an important contribution to greater religious understanding. The Israeli Minister of Education and Culture, Zevulum Hammer, participated in the opening ceremonies. "Too often do we say," he stated "that in Auschwitz God suffered a defeat. Meanwhile, we forget about our own responsibility for the fact that we, Christians and Jews, have failed to make the followers of different religions see in every person, regardless of race and religion, the brilliant image of a loving God." The minister emphasized that this common failure makes necessary a dialogue and the building of a new future, in which respect for every person, especially for a "different" person, will dominate. The Ambassador of Israel, Miron Gordon, praised the contracts with ACT, and pointing to the auditorium filled with scholars and young people, he added, "If this is not ecumenism, I do not know what ecumenism is." A speech of

greeting was also delivered by Michas Friedman, chairman of the Coordinating Commission of Jewish Organizations in Poland. He appealed to Poles and Jews to correct historical errors and to show more often the patriotism of Polish Jews and their contribution to Poland's culture. He recalled the heroism of the Jew Michas Landa, who during the manifestations in 1863 took up a cross from the hands of a fallen priest. "We have a common God, we have a common commandment to love. May the Jewish and the Christian Messiah come together into the world", he concluded. Rev. Pier Francesco Fumagalli, Secretary of the Commission of the Apostolic See for Religious Relations with Judaism, participated in the opening and in the entire symposium.

The subject of the first paper, which was read by Prof. Waclaw Dlugoborski (State Museum Oswiecim-Brzezinka), was "KL Auschwitz-Birkenau--Facts, Problems, Polemics." Auschwitz has two histories: the history of the camp in the strict sense, as an element of the Nazi system of terror and extermination and as a symbol of Shoah, the personification of evil. The lecturer focused on the first aspect: for the second one was the subject of other papers. The "real" history of Auschwitz does not end in 1945, for it continues with the postwar lives of the survivors among the prisoners and their role in society on the one hand and with the trials of the SS crew of the camp on the other. The sources on the history of the camp are constantly increasing: new research questions raised by the accounts of former prisoners, the files of the headquarters of the camp made available to the Polish side by the Soviets. Though the establishment of the camp in June 1940 was connected with the deportations of Polish prisoners, chiefly intellectuals, its expansion to monstrous proportions in 1941-43 (high point reached in August 1944 with a prisoner population of about 120 thousand) was the result of the deportations of hundreds of thousands of Jews, only a small number of whom were registered. As the function of the camp expanded they were used as forced labor, and nearly a million died directly in the gas chambers. The many functions of the camp (camp for political prisoners, place of extermination of Jews and Gypsies, reservoir of slave labor) have attracted the interest of historians of many countries, especially Polish, Israeli, and German. In spite of the rather advanced state of research, many matters still arouse discussions and controversies: the total number of victims (from 4 million we have arrived at the number of about 1.2 - 1.4 million), the role of Auschwitz-Birkenau in the *Endlosung*, the organization and operation of genocide - in the camp and in the countries from which the transports came, the interrelations between Jewish and Polish prisoners and the attitude of the latter toward the extermination of the Jews of which they were eye-witnesses.

Michal Horoszewicz (Warsaw) in his paper "The Symbolism of Auschwitz for Jews and Christians" accented the need to separate "Auschwitz--the place" as a symbol of Shoah-Holocaust for all Jews and a symbol of Polish martyrdom from "Auschwitz--the concept,"

which in the Jewish interpretation is a symbolic counterpart (not a symbol!) of Shoah-Holocaust and a abstract determinant of the incomprehensible meaning of the extermination of six million people. In the opinion of leading Israeli authorities, the sense of the Holocaust as a burnt-offering (used by Pius XII in speeches of 24 December, 1942 and 15 November, 1944--in reference to the Warsaw Uprising) to some extent has been effaced and properly refers to the mass extermination of human beings. People refer to the incomprehensibility of Auschwitz, to the overwhelming feeling of isolation of the Jews that was intensified by the Nazi plan to "dehumanize" them, to implanting in the Jews the vision of an "empty heaven" (which meant rather doubt and a "quarrel with the Creator" but not a rejection of the idea of God), to the general indifference of the world. The heretofore mentioned symbol of the silence of the Churches (Catholic and Protestant) ought to be relativized by their quite often extensive--especially in the case of Pius XII--defensive, supportive, and interventionary actions. The uniqueness of Auschwitz requires us to recall that in the first genocide of the 20th century--the murder of one and a half million Armenians in 1915--it was the Jew Morgenthau who so self-sacrificingly defended these Christians. In a scholarly paper filled with facts M. Horoszewicz noted several of a whole series of "Auschwitz terms" that have become maxims or metaphors; e.g., in the title of his treatise "How Can We Speak of God since the Time of Ayacucho?" the Peruvian theologian G. Gutierrez made a remarkable inculturation by introducing Auschwitz into Latin America under the form of "home of the dead" (the meaning of Ayacucho). In conclusion the lecturer cited four "Auschwitz precepts," starting from "think and act so that Auschwitz will not be repeated" (T. Adorno), next the "commanding voice of Auschwitz" in the form "do not give Hitler posthumous victories" (E. Fackenheim), then expansion of the Decalogue with "we cannot remain silent," and finally the urgent cry of John Paul II "never again."

Theological problems were taken up in the afternoon session, for the theology of Auschwitz is an integral part of all discussions on Shoah. The Protestant theologian Prof. Stefan Schreiner from Humboldt University in Berlin read a paper entitled, "Auschwitz as a Questioning of the Christian Theological Tradition." The matter, so to speak, does not concern a geographical place, that is, a town with the Polish name Oswiecim but a historical place, a place that played a special role in the history of our century, a place of events whose dimensions today are even hard to conceive. Auschwitz is also a place-symbol and even a set of symbols, a symbol of all the Nazi concentration camps, of all places of extermination of this type, but above all a symbol of the horrible extermination of Jews, the symbol of Shoah. There is not one but many Christian theological traditions, in accordance with the number of Churches and differences of theological views and convictions held by the followers of Christ. But these many traditions have one thing in common, namely, the outlook on Jews and Judaism. In this respect, one can speak of one Christian theological

tradition, which was conspicuous for its nearly unchanging negative attitude toward the Jews. We must honestly ask ourselves whether this tradition has any connections with the extermination of the Jews, whose symbol is Auschwitz. The spectrum of previous answers ranges from categorical denial of any connections to the equally categorical statement that such connections exist. Some contend that the hangmen in Auschwitz motivated and justified their crimes with the racist ideology of National Socialism, a form of insane Arian neo-paganism, which had nothing in common with the Christian tradition and was even anti-Christian and anti-theistic; others believe that from the anti-Jewish accents already contained in the New Testament and the anti-Jewish pronouncements repeated in the long tradition of the Church, there is a straight path to the gas chambers in Auschwitz-Birkenau. Prof. S. Schreiner penetratingly discussed these views, pointing out the need for and directions of the reorientation of the Church toward Jews and Judaism. As regards the texts of the New Testament, it is important to investigate not only their verbal sense but also to note how they were interpreted, for here the sharp separation of Christians and the followers of Judaism becomes most evident. Auschwitz calls into question the Christian theological tradition, at least the one which was and at times still is characterized by the "theology of contempt" toward Jews. The task of theologians is to overcome this tradition and to replace it with a new theology with the message of deep "ties" ("*Nostra aetate*") between Christianity and Judaism.