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## **THE CATHOLIC-JEWISH DIALOGUE IN POLAND IN 1993-94**

By Waldemar Chrostowski (Warsaw)

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Progress in the democratization of social and political life, the restoration of diplomatic relations with Israel after a twenty year break, and the implementation of the Catholic Church's new attitude towards the Jews and Judaism are intensively making up for lost time by establishing contacts and launching initiatives that would have been unthinkable only a few years ago. Among the various aspects of Polish-Jewish and Christian-Jewish relations, the greatest prominence has been achieved by the Catholic-Jewish dialogue. The year 1993 was an extremely successful one in this regard; in fact, it should be considered a turning point.

### **The Convent at Oswiecim - Landscape After Battle**

The controversy over the Carmelite Convent at Oswiecim (Auschwitz) constituted a source of serious Catholic-Jewish tensions for years. At times the conflict intensified to such a point that the complete collapse of the Catholic Church's dialogue with representatives of Jewish communities appeared likely. Things became particularly tense in the late summer of 1989. It was then that advocates of dialogue realized that only stepped-up efforts to achieve understanding could break the impasse.

In the early spring of 1993 a new convent was completed. Towards the end of June, the nuns moved into the new building, located in the immediate vicinity of the Center of Information, Dialogue, Education, Meetings and Prayer. The move was calmly accepted by Polish society, and by Catholics in particular, very calmly. Even that part of public opinion that had not concealed its distaste for the agreement made in Geneva in 1987 did nothing to prevent its implementation. The most, of course, depended on the nuns themselves and the manner in which they adjusted to the decision of the Holy See and the local ordinary bishop. The Carmelites' transfer to a new convent was an event without precedent, and the manner in which this conflict was resolved was a test of the Church's credibility in her dialogue with the Jews and Judaism.

The dramatic conflict had also had its good sides. The way the dispute developed revealed the true state of Catholic-Jewish relations, not only in Poland. At the basis of the tensions lay a fundamental, mutual lack of understanding of the opposite side's views and sensibilities. The widely publicized conflict made it possible to articulate basic elements of historical and religious identity and determine the most controversial and sensitive points which might have otherwise continued to be passed over in silence or ignored.

One of the results of the extensive literature that grew up around the convent dispute was that subtle theological and religious disputes had to be formulated so as to be convincing to those who had little in common with theology or religion. Were it not for the convent dispute, Catholics in Poland, and most likely, in many other European countries as well, would never have learned so much about the Jewish manner of perceiving *Shoah*, Jewish views on the suffering of the innocent, and various aspects of Christian-Jewish relations. The dispute revealed itself and put into sharper focus a matter that had not been fully understood earlier. If Pope John Paul II called the Jews "the elder brothers" of Christians (Rome, 13 April 1986), then Christians must revise their hitherto attitudes and thinking about Jews and Judaism. That is the most effective way to overcome all forms of anti-Semitism wherever that danger exists. The adherents of Judaism, on the other hand, must ask themselves whether they want and are able to treat Christians as "younger brothers." If such bilateral changes took place, potential conflicts and tensions could be more easily resolved without inflaming passions as had been the case in the not-too-distant past.

It was within the context of the Auschwitz convent dispute that an awareness of the need and problems of dialogue with the Jews made its way into all segments of Polish society. This was especially true of Catholics, including the Church hierarchy, bishops, priests, and catechism teachers who are primarily obliged to teach about the Jews and Judaism in a new way. Jewish sensitivities and arguments were extensively presented by the press, television and radio. As a result, there grew an awareness of the need to understand the Jews as they understand themselves.

### **Settling Scores with a Painful Past**

The year 1993 witnessed events constituting a continuation of earlier efforts aimed at overcoming the burden of the past and coming to grips with obsolete stereotypes and prejudices. Jews had been present on Polish territory since the dawn of Polish statehood. One of the frequent misunderstandings has been the tendency to project the atmosphere and strains of the period between the two World Wars onto all of Polish history, as well as a selective interpretation of *Shoah*--the extermination carried out by the Nazis on Polish soil--that is unfavorable to Poland and Poles. On the other hand, the contributions of Jews to Polish culture and spirituality have been played down and depicted in a distorted manner.

Throughout the year, there continued to function the several-year-old institutionalized bodies devoted to Polish-Jewish dialogue: The Polish President's Council on Polish-Jewish Relations, The International Council of the State Museum in Oswiecim, and the Foundation to Commemorate the Victims of the Extermination Camp KL Auschwitz-Birkenau, as well as The Polish-Israeli Friendship Society.

The President's Council concentrated on preparing and organizing commemorative events marking the fiftieth anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. These events took place in April and generated considerable interest. An important aspect of the commemoration was an international scholarly session, From a 50-Year Perspective, which was organized by the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw on March 29-31. It was attended by

prominent Holocaust historians and experts on the recent history of Polish Jews. Much attention was devoted to the historiography of the Warsaw Ghetto, the historical and moral problems of the Holocaust, and the latest research on the problem of ghettos. Also discussed was the influence of current political events and the ideological climate in which Holocaust research is conducted as well as the vocabulary and image of the phenomena under analysis.

An important event was an international conference which raised the question: "Can Indifference Kill?" It was held in Warsaw on July 5-7 under the sponsorship of the Anti-Defamation League and was devoted to those who rescued Jews during the Holocaust. But something more than simply becoming acquainted with history was involved; the organizers turned this into an occasion of common reflection on the painful vicissitudes of fate and an attempt to describe human behavior under extreme conditions.

It would be impossible to list all the dialogue-type events of a social or cultural nature organized in various parts of the country. Many were connected with the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Others focused on other anniversaries of Jewish extermination (e.g., in April at Golub-Dobrzyn, in November at Majdanek). Among the cultural events especially worthy of note was a large-scale presentation of Jewish art, Shalom, which took place in Warsaw on October 10-28 and attracted a large number of spectators and visitors.

The International Council of the State Museum at Oswiecim and the Foundation to Commemorate the Victims of the Extermination Camp Auschwitz-Birkenau are primarily concerned about salvaging the material and spiritual fabric of the former Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp. As far as the material aspect is concerned, this task is becoming increasingly difficult. The death-camp buildings, which had been slapped together for the ad hoc purpose of extermination, have been deteriorating with the merciless passage of time. Their maintenance, therefore, required innovative methods and solutions involving huge costs. Maintenance work goes on constantly, and the museum staff at Oswiecim strives to present an increasingly comprehensive picture of the martyrdom and annihilation of the Jews.

The Foundation to Commemorate the Victims also has considerable achievements to its credit. It has gathered substantial funds, raised mainly through collections in Germany. This has made it possible to finance the restorative overhaul of several barracks or the remnants of barracks at Birkenau, the repair of a waste-treatment facility at the BII stretch in Birkenau, the drawing-up of plans to develop the protective zone of the Auschwitz museum and to provide additional financing for several publishing and scholarly projects and conferences. An important scholarly conference entitled, Between Auschwitz and Kolyma, was held in Oswiecim-Kozubnik on December 9-12. It dealt with the uniqueness of the Holocaust and its incomparability to Bolshevik and Stalinist atrocities, as well as with the place of the Nazi extermination of Jews in the history of genocide. Also raised were questions about ways of counteracting the evil, the attitudes of Polish society towards Nazi and Stalinist terror, as well as rarely discussed philosophical and theological issues.

## The Interreligious Dialogue

In the realm of Christian-Jewish contacts, initiatives and meetings--backed by a good tradition--were continued. On May 18 and 19, 1993, Warsaw's Academy of Catholic Theology played host to the 5th Symposium in the series: The Church, Jews and Judaism. It attracted leading specialists from the Netherlands, Germany, the United States, and Poland, who focused on the New Testament, the normative base of Christianity, and on Judaism. The materials of each symposium are published in the Polish theological quarterly Collectanea Theologica (Przegald Teologiczny) which considerably increases their range of influence.

Also in May, Rabbi Dr. Byron L. Sherwin of Chicago's Spertus Institute of Jewish Studies paid his fourth visit to Poland. For two weeks, he lectured on Judaism in the theological seminaries and schools of Warsaw, Krakow, Poznan, and Gniezno. A book containing his lectures, as well as conferences on the spiritual heritage of Polish Jews, is being prepared. Franz Mussner's well-known book, A Tractate on Jews, has been published in Polish translation as part of the series The Church, Jews and Judaism.

The most significant forum for interreligious dialogue in Poland has been The Roman Catholic Episcopate's Commission for Dialogue with Judaism and the Polish Council of Christians and Jews. The Commission's chairman, Archbishop Henryk Muszynski; its deputy chairman, Bishop Stanislaw Gadecki; and its members frequently took part in Polish-Jewish meetings, enriching them with religious accents. Dr. Jan Grosfeld became the new secretary of the commission in October. In the spring, contacts were established that gave the Christian-Jewish dialogue a new dimension. This had to do with the inclusion in it of German Catholics. On October 10-17, 1993, an official delegation of the working group Juden and Christen (Jews and Christians), attached to the presidium of the Central Committee of German Catholics, visited Poland. The talks produced unexpected results; the visitors confessed they had been unaware that Poles and the Catholic Church in Poland were being held responsible for *Shoah*. Trilateral Polish-German-Jewish contacts should help to prevent such a damaging view.

An extremely valuable and important initiative has been the cooperation between the Polish Roman Catholic Episcopate and the American Jewish Committee, involving an exchange of theological school lectures. In October and November, Jewish theologian Prof. Robert Cohn lectured at four Catholic seminaries (Gniezno, Olsztyn, Kielce, and Szczecin) preparing candidates for the priesthood. Earlier, at the turn of September and October, Poland was visited by Prof. Marcel Dubois, OP., a member of the Vatican Commission for the Religious Relations with Judaism, a professor at Hebrew University, and an honorary citizen of Jerusalem. In Warsaw, Lublin, Krakow, and Oswiecim, he gave a series of lectures dealing with various aspects of the Christian-Jewish dialogue.

The Polish Council of Christians and Jews was also active. In May, the annual Man of Reconciliation award was presented to Sir Sigmund Sternberg. In September 1989, when the Auschwitz convent dispute was at its height, it was he who had established ties with Polish Primate Cardinal Jozef Glemp and helped salvage the dialogue. Afterwards, he

continued to work for mutual reconciliation. In October, at the Council's initiative, the Jewish holiday *Simhat Torah* was celebrated in a Catholic church, and in November a delegation of Holland's *Katholieke Raad voor Israel* visited Warsaw and Krakow.

On April 29-29, representatives of the Council took part in a working meeting organized by the International Council of Christians and Jews in Mauloff near Frankfurt on the Main. It was devoted to the way Jewish religion, culture and history were being presented by the new educational systems of the countries of East-Central Europe. The point was to revise existing textbooks and develop new ones regarding what they teach about Jews and Judaism. European education functions at two levels: there is general education, in which children and youths become acquainted with elements of their own culture, that of Europe, and the rest of the world, and there is also Christian education or catechism, which continues to contain negative stereotypes about the Jews and Judaism. The issue of education for dialogue was raised again during the conference of the International Council of Christians and Jews that was held in Haifa on July 11-14. It revolved around the question of coexistence by followers of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in the Holy Land. Polish participants had an opportunity to become acquainted with the difficulties and challenges faced by the inhabitants of the State of Israel, as well as sharing their own experiences in the field of dialogue.

### **The Nearest Future**

Any honest comparison of what has changed in attitudes toward Jews and Judaism in the post-Communist countries would be clearly in Poland's favor. This also holds true for future intentions and plans.

Nearing completion are plans to create an Institute for Christian-Jewish Dialogue. It is to be set up at the Academy of Catholic Theology under the aegis of the Episcopate's Commission for Dialogue with Judaism. It will concern itself with ensuring that the interreligious dialogue in Poland takes account of local realities and conditions, rather than simply transplanting ready issues and patterns from Western Europe and the United States. This is to be an academic institution with all the necessary scholarly and research facilities, as well as an ecclesiastical one implementing the Catholic Church's teachings and practices. Various initiatives will be better coordinated and more widely publicized than previously. The Institute plans to establish and consolidate contacts and provide specialists in and advocates of dialogue wherever they may be needed. It also intends to publish Polish and foreign-language versions of an information bulletin. The Institute will include a workshop devoted to documenting the bibliography of the dialogue. Its tasks will include the compilation of a current and retrospective bibliography (of published and unpublished materials) as well as registering dialogue-related problems raised by scholarly institutions, societies and foundations in Poland and abroad. There are also plans to collect materials for a Bibliographical Dictionary of the Christian-Jewish dialogue and a Lexicon of this dialogue.

An essential feature of dialogue is mutual contacts. In response to the lectures that Rabbi Byron L. Sherwin has been giving in Poland since 1990, Dr. Waldemar Chrostowski

traveled to Chicago to lecture at the Spertus Institute of Jewish Studies. This program lasted two months: from early January to mid-March, 1994. It included such subjects as the balance sheet of Catholic-Jewish relations, the present state and future prospects of religious dialogue, selected theological problems, and the history of Jews in Poland. Sponsored by the Archdiocese of Chicago, this program was addressed to Jewish students and lecturers, as well as to the general Jewish audience. Elements of the Church's teaching were presented in Polish-American communities. Similar intentions and goals are linked with Prof. Chrostowski's visit to the United States in the Spring 1994, in cooperation with the American Jewish Committee; this was a continuation of the exchange begun in Poland by Prof. Robert Cohn.

In mid-July 1994, the International Council of Christians and Jews' annual conference was held in Poland for the first time. Preparations are under way for a trilateral (German-Jewish-Polish) scholarly conference which would lay the groundwork for further undertakings and cooperation. Initiatives and projects launched earlier, such as the continuation of symposia, publishing endeavors and basic level meetings aimed at revising the image of Jews and Judaism in the Polish consciousness, are moving along normally.