

THE CATHOLIC-JEWISH AND POLISH-JEWISH DIALOGUE IN NEW POLAND

by **Waldemar Chrostowski**

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The post-1989 socio-political changes in Central and Eastern Europe have also had their impact on the attitude towards Jews and Judaism. However, compared to other countries, the Jewish subject matter has in Poland its remarkable significance as for many centuries Jews had been intellectually, religiously, culturally and economically present in this country's life before it was violently interrupted by the Germans in World War II. As the place where the European Jews' extermination was done, Poland takes a special position in Jewish consciousness. Poles and the Church in Poland have to assume their posture not only to the mere fact of extermination but to its remembrance as well. If and to what extent the anti-Semite elements which constituted the subsoil for anti-Jewish attitudes have been present in Christian teachings and life is a major part of this challenge.

In recent years several institutionalized groups for Catholic-Jewish and Polish-Jewish dialogue have started in Poland. Their hard work and results achieved fill with hope. The Polish Bishops' Commission for the Dialogue with Judaism, the leading body of interreligious rapprochement and cooperation, was established by the Church many years before the socio-political transformation occurred. In other recently started Commissions and Councils there are Church representatives and theologians who care for the problems of religious dialogue, and the changes in attitude to Jews and Judaism are given full attention.

Polish Bishops' Commission for the Dialogue with Judaism

The theological dialogue between Catholics and Jews started when at the 213th Plenary Conference of Polish Bishops' (Czestochowa, 1-2 May 1986). A subcommission was appointed, which in autumn 1987 was elevated to the Commission for Dialogue with Judaism, headed by Bishop Henryk Muszynski, ordinary of Wloclawek and from March 1992 the archbishop and ordinary of Gniezno. It is one of the most workable advisory bodies for Polish bishops. Its first considerable achievement was the international theological symposium *Jews and Christians in Dialogue* organized with the Anti-Defamation League B'nai B'rith in Cracow and Tyniec in April 1988. It assembled

several dozen theologians and notable public personalities, and reverberated round Poland and other countries, to finally usher in many meetings and theological discussions.

In summer 1989 the Commission co-organized a Christian-Jewish theological seminar at the Spertus College of Judaica in Chicago. Since then its participants, 22 lecturers of Polish theological academies and seminaries, share the experience of American religious pluralism and the acquired knowledge of Judaism. Three visits to Poland of Rabbi Byron L. Sherwin, the Vice-President of Spertus College, came as a continuation of this event. In May 1990, April 1991 and May 1992 Rabbi Sherwin visited seminaries in Bialystok, Cracow, Lublin and Wloclawek as well as the Academy of Catholic Theology and Christian Theological Academy in Warsaw, where he delivered the lectures on Jewish spirituality, ethics and theology. In Auditorium Maximum of Warsaw University he gave a series of lectures on the spiritual heritage of Polish Jews. He met Cardinal Jozef Glemp, the Primate of Poland, and Cardinal Franciszek Macharski, the Archbishop of Cracow, as well as many other bishops. His visits resulted also in the establishment of the Institute for the Study of Judaism at the Academy of Catholic Theology which cooperates with Cardinal Bernardin Center of Spertus College of Judaica. The Institute's task is to strengthen efforts to bring Christians and Jews closer through theological studies and courses, an exchange of lecturers and students as well as conferences and publications. These activities are complemented by publishing a book series under a common title *The Church, Jews and Judaism*. So far, three volumes containing the Church documents and John Paul II's teachings on Jews and Judaism (1990), papers on the dialogue written by participants of the seminar at Spertus College of Judaica (1991), and the materials of the theological colloquium on *Jews and Christians in Dialogue* (1992) have been issued.

Since 1989 the Polish Bishops' Commission together with Academy of Catholic Theology have been organizing annual symposia *The Church, Jews and Judaism*. In June 1989 and April 1990 the religious dialogue agenda and tasks were discussed, whereas in April 1991 the meeting focused on reality, symbolisms and theology of *Shoah*. The May 1992 symposium focused on Jewish and Christian understanding of Jesus. All of the materials are regularly published in *Collectanea Theologica*, the Polish theologians quarterly, come of the papers have come put in other periodicals too. Christian and Jews from Poland as well as from Belgium, France, the Netherlands, Israel, Germany, the USA and the UK participated in theological deliberations. In the 1991 symposium opening ceremony Zevulun Hammer, the Israeli Minister for Culture and Education, took part.

Thanks to the Commission efforts other important meetings took also place. Among them are the conference *Jews and Poles--the Past and the Present*, (Catholic University in Lublin, 20-21st February 1991) and a symposium *The Meaning of Shoah for Christian and Jewish Theological Thinking* (Cracow, 7-10th April 1991). The acute dispute over the Carmelite Convent in Oswiecim is directly connected with the theological evaluation of *Shoah*. There is a constant advance at the building site of the Center of Information, Meetings, Dialogue, Education and Prayer which is financed by Catholics' contributions. The administrative building, where in February 1992 the first conference on the distressing heritage of twentieth century totalitarianism took place, has been already

completed. The building of new convent will have been finished by the very beginning of 1993. According to the so-called Geneva Agreement, the Carmelite nuns should move there from the "Old Theatre" adjacent to the walls of the former Auschwitz concentration camp. Until now it is not known how it happens and what should happen to the convent they live in and the adjacent grounds which by virtue of a notarial deed of 1984 they have got in their possession.

The Commission elaborated on the *Polish Bishops' Letter* to mark the 25th anniversary of the II Vatican Council's Declaration "*Nostra Aetate*". This scrupulously prepared document was approved of at the 244th Plenary Conference of Polish Bishops on 30th November 1990 and then on 20th January 1991 read out in churches and chapels throughout the country. The *Letter* consists of two parts, concerning ties between the Church and Judaism (theological part) and the Polish-Jewish relations (historical part). The first part remembered the teachings of the Holy See and marked a clear departure from negative stereotypes present in the Christian views of the Jews and Judaism. It also stressed the main directions of the shift the Vatican Council II had recommended. The second, historical, part refers to the long coexistence of Poles and Jews and expresses "a sincere regret at any anti-Semite deeds no matter when and who accomplished them at the territory of Poland." There is a number of proofs that after the document had been announced, Polish Catholics started to reflect on their attitude towards Jews. At the level of each diocese and parish dialogue surely escalated. The decision of bishop Juliusz Paetz, the ordinary of Lomza, who in January/February 1991 organized special lectures on the nature and history of Judaism, as well as ties between Christianity and the Jewish religion for all priests ordained in the last five years, is worth noticing as one of many examples.

The Commission's work is focusing now on elaborating a new project for seminary education and revising the handbooks used in catechesis as to correctness of information on Jews and Judaism. Meetings with representatives of Jewish communities abroad serve this aim well. In February 1992, a group from the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee came to Warsaw and its members showed their interest in how advanced this work was. Five months later the Commission received an American group from the Center of Christian-Jewish Dialogue with Archbishop William Keeler from Baltimore, Professor John Pawlikowski, OSM from Chicago as well as Rabbi Leon Klenicki, the director of Anti-Defamation League, and Rabbi James Rudin from American Jewish Committee. The talks concerned introducing elements of Jewish interpretation on Hebrew Bible into the Catholic theological studies programme and elaborating new educational programmes to help overcome negative stereotypes of Jews and Judaism among Polish Catholics, and of Catholics and Poles among American Jews.

The Presidential Commission on Polish-Jewish Relations

The Commission was appointed in March 1991, i.e. in the first months of Lech Walesa's presidency. At first, it was headed by Minister Arkadiusz Rybicki, and since early 1992 by Minister Andrzej Zakrzewski. Its task is long term counselling and submitting

initiatives to achieve friendly Polish-Jewish relations and passing opinions on materials connected with the past and present of Poles and Jews.

The entire Commission meets twice a year, but its Secretariat meetings are more often. The work consists of three groups of issues: 1) broadly understood problems of Auschwitz and *Shoa*, 2) revision of handbooks' content, and 3) various current, usually difficult, in which consequences of the painful past revive. The Commission assumes its position on various displays of anti-Semitism and anti-Polonism which still embitter mutual relations. It actively took part in preparing President Lech Walesa's visit in Israel in May 1991 and President Ch. Herzog's return visit in Poland in May 1992. To the President's and Commission's address letters asking for help or interference pour in constantly. Minister Rybicki and his successor, Minister Zakrzewski, have had dozens of meetings with representatives of Jewish communities from all over the world who have visited Poland. In November 1991, a special Handbook Commission of the Ministry of Education was appointed; its task was to verify handbooks used by children and youth in Poland. It has its counterpart in Israel. At its last meeting in March 1992, the Presidential Commission dealt with the difficulties facing the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, which preserves the greatest collection of Judaica in Poland, among others the famous Ringelblum Archive. The Commission's current work largely consists of preparations for the celebration of the 50th anniversary of Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.

At plenary sessions of the Commission and its Secretariat problems of religious and theological implication are also taken up. Theologians and then successively priests and religion teachers may play a decisive role in changing the attitude towards Jews and Judaism. It is also important to make Christians more sensitive to neglected and desolate Jewish shrines, such as synagogues and cemeteries, to helping preserve the spiritual and religious heritage of Polish Jews and to mitigating conflicts and tensions which arise from mutual mistrust and ignorance.

The International Council of the State Museum in Oswiecim

The Council has its origin in the Group for the future of the State Museum in Oswiecim, headed by Krystyna Marszalek-Mlynczyk, the Under-Secretary of state in the Ministry of Culture, and called into being in autumn 1989 by Izabella Cywinska, the Minister of Culture. At the first meeting in Oswiecim in early December 1989, the Group reviewed national exhibitions and their structure and got to know the Museum's problems and needs. Many proposals and motions were suggested, among other things, to expand the main exhibition to show the place of Jews in Auschwitz and to clarify how unique *Shoa* was, to prepare informative boards and guide-books enhancing Jewish martyrology, and to change and complete the recording in Brzezinka (Birkenau) so that visitors know it was the place where Jews were exterminated. The Group also discussed to revive the 1968 suspended Oswiecim Council.

The International Council of the State Museum in Oswiecim had its first meeting in June 1990; its members were Polish and other European as well as American and Israeli intellectuals. Professor Wladyslaw Bartoszewski, former Auschwitz prisoner and now

Polish ambassador to Austria, became the Council's chairman, and Professor Israel Gutman, the director of Yad Vashem Remembrance Institute Research Center in Jerusalem, the Council's vice-chairman. Its mission to preserve the historical and symbolic heritage of the Extermination Camp Auschwitz-Birkenau is accomplished by helping the Museum administration and staff to effectuate right educational and instructive work and to sustain the exhibits of Nazi crimes. The Council appointed four commissions: scientific, headed by Professor Waclaw Dlugoborski, informative and educational, with Professor Jonathan Webber from Oxford at its head, preservation, led by Professor Bohdan Rymaszewski, spread and development, chaired by Kalman Sultanik from New York. Among its numerous activities and initiatives, the Council was employed in providing the informative plaques of the main Brzezinka monument with new texts to properly indicate the genocide of Jews. The new inscriptions express a tribute to victims of the Nazi ideology, quote the Book of Job, mention the Polish prisoners being the first ones put in the Camp and the extermination of Jews who constituted the prevailing majority of victims; the extermination of Gypsies was pointed out too. The number of the Camp victims was also discussed. According to latest studies it surpasses a million, but it is lower than two million. There have been changes in many exhibitions so as to present the core of Nazi ideology, the role of Auschwitz as the symbol for the Holocaust (*Shoa*) and to emphasize the spiritual and moral aspects of Camp life.

Some of the Council members are theologians who pay a lot of attention to the philosophical and religious aspects of *Shoa*. In Western Europe and in the USA there is a wide trend in post-Auschwitz theology aimed at elaborating a new Christian theology of Judaism and a new vision of Christian-Jewish relations having in mind Auschwitz as a vital stimulus for meditations. This theology branch arises a growing interest in Poland. The presence of Auschwitz and other German extermination camps requires that this new attitude reaches the Christian consciousness.

The Foundation for the Commemoration of the

Victims of Auschwitz-Birkenau Extermination Camp

The Foundation is the second body, beside the Council of the State Museum in Oswiecim attached to the Museum; this distinguishes them from other similar structures. Started in 1990, it is headed by Krystyna Marszalek-Mlynczyk, and its work supervised by the Minister of Culture and Art. To fulfil its principal task of preserving the former Auschwitz Camp extermination buildings which constitute unique traces of contempt for people and of planned genocide, financial resources necessary to preserve the former extermination camp's documents and archives, to spread the knowledge of crimes committed, to do research studies, to publish its materials and to cooperate with interested circles and institutions in Poland and abroad must be gained and found. Of special importance is to stress the Jewish dimension of Auschwitz-Birkenau and to include it in its informative and publishing work.

Twice a year there are reporting conferences; at the one of 29th September 1992, it was announced its bank account amounts to over Zl 5,100 million (ca. US \$330,000). For 1992, the Ministry of Culture and Art has allocated a Zl 6,000 million (ca US \$400,000) budget to the Museum, the needs being many times higher. It has been decided to spend a considerable share of the money the Foundation gained on most urgent preservation works in the former Auschwitz-Birkenau Extermination Camp and on implementing the publishing programme; the newest Museum publications have been stressing the extend and uniqueness of Jewish martyrology.

The Remembrance Foundation

Any attempt to reconcile the Poles and Jews must take into account the almost thousand years of Jewish presence in Poland and the vast Jewish spiritual heritage created here. The over three million exterminated Polish Jews left behind many shrines; in 1945 most of them were devastated; the post-war period only added to their preservation needs. Unless totally refit and preserved, they face a complete ruin. It is impossible for the Jewish organizations in Poland to bear the burden of preserving the Jewish heritage unaided. Meant are synagogues--counted up to about 300--and an estimated 1,000 cemeteries as well as commemoration places of German crimes committed against the Jews. In 1985 only 65% carried informative boards.

In mid-1992 the Polish government appointed the "Remembrance Foundation" to provide an organizational structure for preservation of Jewish places and monuments and to cooperate in this field with people and organizations throughout the world. In the Foundation bodies the Jewish part is to be largely represented by Jews from Israel as well the Diaspora. Meir Lau, the Rabbi-in-chief of Tel Aviv, and Dr. Icchak Arad, the Director of Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, promised to contribute to the Programme Council work. The gained resources are designed to preserve synagogues, cemeteries and Jewish martyrology places. This should make Poles more aware of Polish Jews extermination as an diminution also for Polish spirituality and culture.

Polish Council of Christians and Jews

There has been an advance in Catholic-Jewish and Polish-Jewish reconciliation not only as far as scientific contacts are concerned, but also in the mutual preservation of intellectual and material heritage of Polish Jews. In summer 1990 the Polish-Israeli Friendship Association founded a separate Religious Dialogue Section being a further step to spread and broaden the dialogue. Its representative was a guest at the annual meeting of International Council of Christians and Jews (IC CJ) in Prague (26-30 August 1990) where the Polish structure was affiliated. Then the Polish Council of Christians and Jews (PCCJ) was established, from September 1991 of full legal status, with Rev. Waldemar Chrostowski and Stanislaw Krajewski at the head.

It aims at starting a forum for informal Polish-Jewish and Christian-Jewish meetings; the second aspect specially prevailed as it is necessary for the members to have a religious and theological dialogue. There are regular meetings between Christians of different

denominations and Jews, during which they pray, read and comment the Hebrew Bible, share their faith experience and discuss current affairs. In early 1992 it founded a yearly prize *A Man of Reconciliation*, which in May 1992 was awarded to Rabbi Byron Sherwin from Chicago, the Vice-President of Spertus College of Judaica, and Professor Stefan Schreiner from Berlin, a Protestant promoter of reconciliation of Germans, Jews and Poles. In spring 1992 representatives of PCCJ went to Israel as guests of the local Jewish-Christian Dialogue Groups; it also received foreign guests in Warsaw. Lately it has been participating in the ICCJ regional project, covering also Czechoslovakia and Hungary, on teaching about Jews and Judaism in religious handbooks for children and youth. This initiative's subject and range is in line with what Polish Bishops' Commission for the Dialogue with Judaism does, and it usefully complements the school handbooks' revision project which the Ministry of Education supervises in cooperation with the Presidential Commission on Polish-Jewish Relations. For all undeniable achievements, there are also objections and disturbances to the Catholic-Jewish and Polish-Jewish dialogue. It seems rather difficult to break and eliminate prejudice as there are circles and groups opposing to any attempt to reconcile and assailing Jewish as well as Catholic promoters of dialogue. As far as religious aspects of the dialogue are concerned, it must not be forgotten that in the totalitarian Communist system theologians were disdained, even laughed-at and fought against; theology was pushed outside the intellectual life. Religious and theological questions found it difficult to appear in journals and magazines, not to mention daily newspapers or such influential mass media as radio or television. Now, also in this respect, it has been changing for the better. In February 1990 full diplomatic relations between Poland and Israel were reestablished; this, as well as the strong commitment of Dr. Mordechai Paluzur, the first Israeli ambassador to Poland, and Miron Gordon, the present ambassador, to promote the dialogue between the two nations are conducive to intensive interreligious meetings.

Usually the condition and climate of the attitude towards Jews and Judaism in Poland is seen against the dialogue achievement in Western Europe and the USA. But it has started there much earlier and develops in circumstances of free thought exchange and freedom. Polish achievements in this respect should rather be compared to other post-Communist countries' situation.