



‘Religions and Ideologies,
Polish Perspectives and beyond.’

International Council of Christians and Jews
in cooperation with the
Faculty for International and Political Studies
of the Jagiellonian University Cracow.
2011 Conference, July 3-6.

Opening speech Dr. Deborah Weissman
Sunday July 3, Qubus Hotel, Cracow

Those of you who have been coming to our conferences recently know that my father was born in Istanbul, and lived in Vienna, Berlin and Paris, before coming to the US, where he met my mother. Well, now it's time to focus the spotlight on my mother's family. She was born in New York, to parents who came from... Poland. My grandparents did not come from Cracow; my grandmother came from Wloclawek, in the north, and my grandfather came from near Lodz, more centrally located. But this is now my 4th visit to the beautiful southern Polish city of Cracow, at one time capital of Poland for more than 500 years. I am very pleased to open our annual conference here, on the theme of "Religions and Ideologies - Polish perspectives and beyond." I wish to thank all those who worked hard for this conference to take place—our dedicated committee, under the chairmanship of Manfred Deselaers; our conference coordinator, Maya Brand; our partners from the Jagellonian University; our staff in Heppenheim, especially Dick Pruiksmas and Ute Knorr. We are delighted to welcome the participants in the YLC, whose conference overlaps with ours.

For several years, one of our projects has been opening up dialogue in the emerging democracies of Central and Eastern Europe—societies that had suffered in the 20th century—first, under the domination of the Nazis and their collaborators, and then under the Soviet Communist Empire. But for the past 20 years or so, these states have developed as democratic nations, with important and interesting implications for the multi-religious, multi-cultural, multi-ethnic societies that comprise them. We have chosen to focus our attention on Poland as a case study. Perhaps we can say that here in Poland, Christianity in general and the Catholic Church, in particular, survived; while the Jewish community has been revived. Those of us who arrived a

few days early had the opportunity to participate in what has become legendary in its own time—the Jewish Culture Festival, now completing its 21st year.

Within the framework of an organization devoted to Christian-Jewish dialogue, we should mention that Cracow was for many years the home of an individual who did a great deal to advance our cause—Pope John Paul II, of blessed memory. In the 16th century, this was the home of one of the most important Jewish legal experts, Rabbi Moshe Isserles, the “Rama.” In one of his commentaries on the Jewish legal code, the *Shulhan Aruch*, Isserles acknowledged that Christians are not idolaters and wrote that their “intentions are toward the One who has created the heaven and the earth.” That may not sound like much, but for medieval Jews, and even some modern ones, that’s a big step forward. Cracow’s Jewish prominence continued into the 20th century. I want to mention a woman, about whom I did research in graduate school, Sarah Schenirer (1883-1935.) She was the founder of the Bet Ya’akov schools, an educational movement for Orthodox Jewish girls and women that began here in Cracow in 1917 and spread throughout the Jewish world.

She was truly a pioneer in the field of Jewish women’s education. I have even written an article in which I suggested that she might be seen as an early model for contemporary Jewish feminists.

Of course, we can not come to Cracow without also visiting Auschwitz-Birkenau. The story of this city is also the story of the liquidation of its ghetto in 1942 and 1943, including the murder of Mordecai Gebirtig, who was one of the most influential and popular writers of Yiddish songs and poems. There were Polish collaborators with the Nazis and there were horrific pogroms carried out after the War, when Polish Jews tried to return to their homes. And yet, we also remember that Oskar Schindler’s factory here in Cracow saved 1, 200 Jews. Actually, [Polish](#) citizens have the world's highest count of individuals awarded medals of [Righteous among the Nations](#), given by the [State of Israel](#) to non-Jews who saved [Jews](#) from extermination during the Shoah. There are over 6,000 Polish men and women recognized as "Righteous" to this day, amounting to over 25 per cent of the total number of honorary titles awarded already. Many of the rescue initiatives were carried out by individuals, but there also existed organized networks of [Polish resistance](#) dedicated to aiding Jews—most notably, the [Żegota](#) organization. Over 700 Polish "Righteous among the Nations" received their medals of honor posthumously, having been murdered by the Nazis for aiding or sheltering their Jewish neighbors.

The stories of the rescuers fill me with both wonder and hope. As author Alice Walker put it, “I have experienced many difficulties and hardships in my life and yet despair is a state in which I rarely remain for long. This is largely because despair cannot share the same place as wonder. . .”¹

¹ Alice Walker, *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For: Inner Light in a Time of Darkness*, The New Press: New York, 2006, p. 36

I hope that the overall theme of this conference will indeed be hope. As Rabbi David Hartman has suggested, our God is a “God of surprises.” Just a few months ago, Jews, in celebrating the Exodus from Egypt, and Christians, in celebrating the Resurrection, demonstrated our belief in renewal, in the possibility of radical, surprising change. I will conclude with what I think is a beautiful theological statement, surprisingly to be found on a Web site devoted to corporate sustainability.

Without hope, we lose our faith in life. And without a belief that we can make things better, we become disempowered, rendered ineffective in the world. Without hope, we die, if not physically, then mentally and emotionally. Hope is an attitude of effectiveness and a source of energy...

There is always something constructive we can do, even if it is just by changing our attitude. And it is in our response - and that of others - that we find cause for hope. **To hope is our greatest responsibility.**²

Let’s hope for a successful and stimulating conference.



² Wayne Visser—Corporate Sustainability & Responsibility; Csrinternational.blogspot.com/2008/10/faith-hope-and-responsibility.html--Accessed March 18, 2009. (Emphasis is mine-D.W.)