



'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.  
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Workshop 3: Divided past, common future? Jewish-German-Polish dialogue

The subject of this conference and our workshop makes me think... about my personal experience with Christianity and Judaism in my life.

I was born during World War II near Russian city of Rostov on the Don River. My parents escaped there from Gdynia in the autumn of 1939.

However... they didn't escape far enough. I was just three months old when the German Nazis invaded this part of Russia and my Father was murdered in a forest along with other Jewish men. After the war my mother and I returned to Poland together with other Poles. The trip on a freight train lasted a few months. We were traveling to the Western territories, so-called Ziemia Odzyskana or Recovered Lands, together with many other Polish Jews who had survived the war by taking refuge in the Soviet Union.

My Mother and I settled in an apartment shared with a German widow and her two children. Before I started speaking Polish, I spoke German while playing with these two nice kids. They suddenly disappeared from my life, when the Germans left our small town of Friedland, (today named Mieroszów.)

// Optional // All my friends at this time were Jewish. Immediately after the war we were able to have our life within a close, small Jewish community. There was a Jewish kindergarten, a Jewish school and a Jewish theater ... My Mother remarried a new Jewish man and a new family life had started. We moved to the city of Wrocław. //

At the first grade I was the only child not attending Catholic religious teachings after classes. Each time I overheard the stories of Jesus told by a Catholic priest I couldn't accept them as a true. These stories seemed to me rather unrealistic, in contrast with my own beliefs learned in my childhood, which were more real to me. I believed in a magic power of a piece of marble I found outdoors. I believed it could make our childish dreams come true.

One day, my Polish neighbor's daughter, Halinka Purtakówna, told me:

"You, Jews, killed Jesus, our son of God. "

I don't remember what my mother's answer to this accusation was but I felt ashamed by this non clear accusation

At the Art College I was probably the only Jewish student in my classroom. My design teacher had an annoying custom; he constantly was mocking my Jewish family name. He never said it correctly: Żelechower. Instead he was calling me: Tartychower, Mamrychower, Jerychower. At the end of such ritual he used to say: "Ok, Werychower is not present".

I would respond: "I'm present; you just didn't call my name."

When he mispronounced my name again and I corrected him, he pretended not to understand me...When students were working silently on projects, my design teacher was asking me all kind of bizarre questions: "Are you really a Jew? Perhaps your parents took you from some Polish family? What do the Jews do with trumpets?"

I felt helpless and ashamed.

At that time I didn't know much about Jewish holiday's traditions. In the beginning of my elementary school education I started asking my stepfather questions about my Jewish identity: who am I? My stepfather tried to convince me I wasn't a Jew, because I didn't know the Jewish religion and traditions, or Hebrew. He himself was a committed Marxist.

Yet, to me I was a Jew, because I belonged to my Jewish family and I heard my parents speaking Yiddish. Even though I didn't understand many of the Jewish traditions, I still identified myself as a Jewish woman through the language.

Being an artist I participated in art sessions (called Plenaries) organized in Poland's countryside. There, in 1974, motivated by an artistic and community needs I restored an old and ruined road chapel at a village. I invited a local Catholic priest to bless it. The villagers came together with the priest.

It was a big event noticed by an art commentator who helped establish an artistic community connected through art work and religious issues. This was the beginning of my involvement with the Catholic community. I arrived to Laski near Warsaw soon after. This center, run by nuns, was always a home for intellectuals.

By the time Martial Law was imposed in Poland in 1981 we had become a group of close friends and opponents of the official political and cultural life of the communist regime. We started organizing meetings in the church on Żytnia Street in Warsaw.

The Laski spiritual atmosphere combined with my mystical inclinations led me to the teachings of Christianity and I became a member of the Catholic Church. I was so involved in church activity that without thinking much about it I became one of the leaders of the Diocesan Fine Arts Council. After Martial Law was imposed in Poland we, the artists, decided to boycott officially organized cultural events. The Catholic Church became our place of political opposition. In churches we organized our independent presentations of current art works, lectures and seminars.

In Wroclaw, the Archbishop was the patron of our conference entitled: "The Road and the Truth" ( Droga i Prawda"), as well as an exhibition of young artists.

Although I was involved in all these activities I did not attend our group's regular meetings with Archbishop. In our leadership group everybody knew he disliked Jews.

After the second conference in 1987 we didn't receive permission to continue our meetings and exhibitions in that church. The Archbishop suggested organizing the next meeting dedicated to Our Lady in another smaller church.

In the meantime I painted a collection titled "*The Mysteries of the Rosary*" for a new church. It represented Jesus wearing a Jewish tallit and praying in the Olive Garden. //

At the same time I received an invitation from my Father's family to visit my relatives in Israel. After many years my Jewish family had found me. I was afraid they might be offended by my Catholic conversion but I decided to travel to Israel and see them.

My father's sisters and brother amazingly enough survived a labor camp in Germany. I couldn't learn much about their fates because every time I began asking questions there were tears and my cousin forbade more curiosity-driven questioning of the elders. They survived and were in Israel. When they found me and invited me there, Poland was still communist. No one thought that would change within our lifetimes.

Israel was a completely different world. For me, the most striking part was the atmosphere of the Land, its touch. I felt as if I had entered into the Book; to which I then still referred to as the Old Testament. The Psalms all but materialized.

I was fortunate to visit Mount Sinai on a place which is believed Moses received whole Torah. It was there that I experienced the closeness of the Centre; the Presence. This encounter became the source of my renewed energy. I felt the call to exist in my Jewishness because I could not remain there, in Israel. Once I returned to Poland, I began the journey of discovering my Jewish heritage. The titles of my collections following that experience speak of my travels.

My first collection was entitled: "Through the Holy Land to the Promised Land." I had the opportunity to display these paintings in Beit Omanim – the Artist's Home – the following year in Israel. During the opening, a woman asked me: "If you're from Poland, how come there is nothing about the Holocaust in your works?" I didn't want to think about it, I didn't want to look behind me, I didn't want to identify myself with that experience; at the time, I didn't think it needed to be addressed. After returning to Poland, this information influenced a completely new consciousness which then opened a new gateway in my mind. I could no longer hold back the series of paintings. They were wiser than my collected imaginings; they led me.

The collection „Let's not wait – let's sit down" (czy tak to było przetłumaczone na ang.???) was created. My point was that Poles and Jews need to stop arguing about who is the greater martyr; they need to look one another in the face and raise a toast: Lechaim! Na zdrowie!

More paintings poured from me like from a waterfall. The next collection was titled "Heritage" and I exhibited it in my hometown – Wrocław. And at the same time I organized a historical seminar at City Hall: "Jewish Contributions to Poland's Heritage." I thought I was done with the subject.

I took this collection to New York where it was shown at the Polish Consulate. My hope was to find Jews who would join Poles at a shared table. But there I found grievances toward Poland and Poles. I now know more about where they came from.

In New York I had my first opportunity to enter a synagogue and to meet Rabbi Chaskiel Besser. I started learning Hebrew. I was jolted by the essays of Levinas, who lost his entire family in Austwitz. Once I returned to Poland, I began lighting Shabbat candles as a way of connecting with the Jewish world, the rhythms of Jewish life and traditions. I went to the Lauder Foundation's Jewish Summer Camp led by Rabbi Schudrich. It was an opportunity to begin my Jewish education. Small steps, but a huge impression. I met a group of young Jewish intellectuals.

In Poland you couldn't get a siddur prayer book – you could only find Xeroxed copies of a prayer book published in the times of Tsar Alexander. There were no books about Jewish traditions. The Christian translation of the Torah was merely the Old Testament – stripped of all the Jewish commentaries and Midrashim. What I discovered in Jewish traditions was so different from the Christian interpretation of the Five Books of Moses – it filled me with excitement. I uncovered a totally different and, for me, convincing way of thinking. While learning, I had to share my discoveries.

This was the source of my paintings and also of the courage to discuss them at exhibitions. The fact is, I met and continue to meet with great curiosity from the audiences.

I've collaborated with the Gardzienice Theatre Association for many years and so was able to plan a gathering – "The Taste of Shabbat" – with the help of our Rabbi. I set the space up in the shape of a synagogue with a huge table nearby. Our cook koshered the kitchen and prepared a meal for over 70 guests.

The following day a display of my paintings titled "The Taste of Shabbat" was arranged at a neighboring house in Gardzienice. One of the paintings was of a long table surrounded by people I know. And so it happened: here in this place, these very people found themselves together. The collection was shown many times in Poland in vast rebuilt synagogues that doubled as museums and I had the opportunity to dialogue with the audiences.

The most recent collection of paintings that was so important to me is "A Calendar of Memories According to Bruno Schultz." Originally, I showed the works as part of the set for a performance by

the Double Edge Theatre near Boston. It was a chance to let American viewers get closer to a Jewish artist and writer who was dramatically murdered in the town of Drohobycz.

Recently I displayed these paintings in our synagogue; concurrently I showed a collection of 54 paintings – painted commentaries on the Torah – at the neighboring Municipal Museum. It's a subject that always arouses lively discussions which makes me glad - because beyond what my art conveys, I have the ability to do something that brings our traditions together and to show that our cultures have a shared source.

Nowadays, I'm filled with intentions to create a series of paintings titled "Holy Day." It will be about the single holiday that has a shared source and even a similar meaning: Pesach (Passover) and Easter. And it is this critical holy day which contains the source of the age-long conflict between the two religions. But I believe that it's possible to shed some light on it and perhaps for those participating, the conflict will fade once shown from the other side. This will be accompanied by a children's workshop for children from Four Temple's Quarter and panel discussions attended by all representatives of all religious groups, intellectuals and artists. It's in an old town part of the city called Mutual Respect District, which has been active in organizing reconciliation events in Wroclaw for many years.

I hope we will be able to bring to some understanding and light to this "Holy Day" – a subject enmeshed in the weight of an age-long and painful conflict between Catholics and Jews,