



‘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.

Presentation by Archbishop Henryk Muszyński

Monday July 4

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

Since 1989, when Poland has become independent, there was much Polish-Jewish, German-Jewish, Polish-German and general Christian-Jewish dialogue. The bilateral dialogue does not touch the complexity of the historical situation during the German-Nazi occupation in Poland. This dialogue, regarding both: Polish-Jewish and German-Jewish relations during and after the world war II, always had a German background. That is why all problems, even regarding bilateral relations, could be solved only in triangular: Polish, Jewish and German perspective.

Such suggestion is based on the following arguments:

1. Majority of the German-Nazi concentration - and death camps, like: Chelmno on the Ner, Belzec, Majdanek, Treblinka, Sobibor and especially Auschwitz-Birkenau, have been located on the Polish occupied territory. Consequently many people, including some scholars mostly from USA but also from Germany, use the expression *polish concentration camps* instead of *German-Nazi concentration camps on the Polish occupied territories*. The first one phrase incorrectly insinuates that the concentration camps have been built by the Poles – that is from their inspiration and will - and the Holocaust (*Shoah*) was committed by the Polish people. I have many times met people convinced, that the Holocaust has been perpetrated by the Poles. In effect, the worst crimes of the war's time, sometimes have been or still are attributed to the Polish nation, which in fact was the first victim of the German-Nazi occupation. This very unjust accusation of the whole nation, can be overcome only by a honest triangular dialogue.

2. As victims of the German-Nazi occupation, we Poles felt much more the community of suffering with the Jews than the community of Christendom with the Nazi-Germans. Pope John Paul II, during the meeting with the Jewish community in Warsaw on June 14, 1987, said: *Your threat was also our threat. This our threat has not realized in such measure as yours, it did not have enough time to realize so much*. Only in Poland, hiding Jews was punished by the death sentence, that's why one cannot see a clear difference between Jews murdered on *Shoah* and the martyrdom of those, who have been killed by the same perpetrators on the base of the same ideology with common responsibility for hiding Jews. On this background raises some kind of competition of suffering, which cannot be well understood by those who did not have such or similar historical experience. The lack of understanding results in accusation and blaming the Poles of arrogant insensibility.

3. Before 1939 Poland had the highest percentage of Jewish population in the world after Palestine. About 3.3 mln that is more than 10 % of the whole Polish population were Jews. After the war, because of genocide of the Jewish population, Poland became in fact a land without Jews (*Judenrein* – empty of Jews as Hitler had intended). There were two main reasons which caused this disaster:

- the great number of the Jewish population on the pre-war Poland
- occupied territory of Poland was the center of the Gross Reich (*great empire*) of Hitler where the German-Nazis tried to mask the terrible crimes. But some scholars link the *Shoah* not with the real historical conditions, but with the Polish anti-Semitism considered as the most terrible kind of anti-Semitism in general. This unjust accusation cannot be resolved by the bilateral Jewish-Polish or Polish-German dialogue, because the moral responsibility for the crimes committed by the German-Nazis and attributed to the Poles, must be acknowledged by the Germans and accepted by Jews.

On this matter one can note a considerable progress in the German Polish dialogue. Professor Hans Herman Henrix calls the suspicion that the concentration camps were on Polish ground because of Polish Antisemitism *a relocation and a confusion of historical roles*¹.

4. Throughout centuries, Poland was a homeland for millions, especially orthodox, Hassidic Jews. They created here their own culture, religious tradition, customs and language. Many present Jews all over the world, have here their roots and historical background. It determines their very special or even unique relation to their historical homeland. *Now, when Jews no longer live in Poland* – writes Rabbi Byron Shervin – *Poland is still alive in Jews. For many of us Israel is the physical Homeland, whereas Poland is a spiritual one.*² This special, exclusive feature of the mutual Polish-Jewish historical background, should be accepted not only in the bilateral Polish-Jewish relations, but also by others, that suggests therefore a trilateral dialogue.

5. Because of the terrible heritage of the *Shoah* perpetrated by the German Nazis on the Polish occupied territories, Poland – by many Jews – is considered today as a great *cemetery of the Jewish people*. The Jewish poetess Rajzel Zychlinski, who has survived the extermination, came back to Poland and then left this country in 1948 because – as she said – *I cannot live on a cemetery*. Similar opinion expressed the great religious philosopher Abraham Josua Heschel, who left Poland few weeks before the German-Nazi occupation. He said: *I could not live any more in Poland or in Germany: every tree remind me the contempt, the hatred, the crimes, killed children, life-burned mothers, murdered by gas human beings*. It is significant that the Polish-born philosopher and Jew, puts at the same level Poland and Germany. Of course it does not mean that such saying always attribute the same responsibility for *Shoah* to Polish as well to German people, but it certainly a stigmatization Poland as the land of Holocaust. This negative approach of many Jews can be overcome only by goodwill and common efforts of all three partners involved in the dialogue.

There is certainly no other country in the world, but Poland, where the remnants of the Holocaust are so visible and touch people living here in such evident way. Elie Wiesel stated correctly: *Holocaust became an essential part of the Polish consciousness*. For the majority of Polish people, Holocaust is not a theoretical or philosophical problem, it is a living reality. Pope John Paul II called it *an unhealed wound which is still bleeding*.

No doubt, that *Shoah* perpetrated on the occupied Poland, is in some way even an affair of the Polish people. Through the presence of the major part of the concentration camps on the Polish occupied territories, we became involved, even against our own will in the terrible affair of extermination of millions of Jews and other people and nations. In its totality, as planned, prepared and executed *Shoah* was diabolical work and result of the racial ideology of the German Nazis. Many Polish people were involved in this diabolical work in against their will. Every form of collaboration should be considered and judged in individual and personal way. I do not want, in any way, minimize our own

¹ Hans H. HENRIX, *Auschwitz disturbs. The difficult Polish-Jewish-German Relationship from a perspective of a German Theologian*, typescript, p. 9.

² B. SHERVIN, *Duchowe dziedzictwo Żydów polskich* (Warszawa 1995) 53.

responsibility, but just make clear, that to learn the full truth of the time of Holocaust and to overcome the painful past. Any bilateral dialogue is not sufficient. Only a sincere and open trilateral dialogue can help to overcome the past and build a new, better and hopeful future.