



**'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 Wendy Fidler
Wednesday July 6, Collegium Novum, Cracow
Concluding session

If I may begin by paraphrasing the well known part of the Pesach Haggadah, the Passover Service, by using the beginning of the four questions, and asking 'Why is this conference different from all other conferences'? And if I was allowed only one answer instead of the four in the Haggadah, the answer would be, 'because it has taken place near the site which has witnessed one of humanity's greatest act of genocide.'

This conference has had a profound effect on me, and I shall be going home a different person. I have attended ICCJ conferences in Berlin and Istanbul, but I believe it will be this conference in Poland, that I will never forget – emotions which have taken me by complete surprise.

There have been three equally important but different aspects to this conference, which I shall call 'the three P's'.

The first is the People side of things; the second, the Presentations and the third Poland.

First the People and renewing friendships made over previous years. I do, however, want to engage in that dangerous game of singling out one person. That person is Sister Mary from the Centre of Dialogue and Prayer, who, following a close friendship forged last year in Istanbul made me, a Jew, an honorary 'Sister' – I jest – and who greeted me with open arms and an open heart when we arrived late on Sunday evening. And of course there are all those new links made; the discovery of all the people engaged in the many inspiring initiatives and activities which are going on in every corner of the world. To talk to these people helps enormously in those darker moments back home when I feel I cannot move mountains as quickly as I would wish.

The second 'P', the presentations and papers, which this year I believe have been consistently of a very high standard. For me this 'P' represents the heart of the conference. Having attended a conference – any conference – I aim to go home with more key issues to think about, and with a broader understanding of 'old' issues as well as new issues to consider. What I have found so refreshing during these three days have been the voices of moderation and sense, not only in religious tolerance, and the extended handshakes of friendship between our faiths, but also, as Rabbi David Rosen so eloquently put it this morning, the need to search for political compromise in order to achieve peace in the Middle East, through the overbearing need to feel the pain of the other's hurt.

My wish is that these voices I hear at this conference can continue to be heard loudly and strongly when, once back home and we return to pick up the pressures of our lives, and our visit to Crakow begins to fade.

Can my aims be fulfilled? I trust above all that next year I will be able to answer 'yes'.

I leave the most difficult 'P', Poland, to the last. If papers and presentations were the heart of the conference, then Poland has been the soul. No meeting such as this, taking place in Crakow, would be complete without our time spent in Auschwitz and Birkenhau. We all returned deep in our own thoughts and emotions from this harrowing experience. I defy anyone to be emotionally unaffected by this experience.

Professor Jonathan Webber prefaced our visit when he spoke at the Centre for Dialogue and Prayer near the gates of Auschwitz, in a measured but extremely powerful manner, based on the contradictions of the Shoah. Our visit to the site itself began with yet another paradox – that of masses of people queuing in an area where we were surrounded by fast food and souvenir outlets. This introduction was an awful long way from my preconceived expectation. But the paradox I had to ask myself was how I would have felt if very few felt the need or the desire to come? Needless to say I would have questioned why more people were NOT coming to bear witness.

Like many people, I found our time in Birkenhau something very special and emotionally unique, and our walk to the four stations extremely moving. This time the paradox was that we were walking along a path of green, green grass under a warm summer sun, but adjacent to this path was the railway line which brought its human cargo to destruction.

Father Manfred's words – the way he addressed such a difficult issue, were for me, a true lesson in humility. Rabbi Ehud Bandel's haunting recital of El Maley Rachamim and the Kaddish, to include members of his own family who had perished, was just haunting. And the fact that Jews and Christians could say The Lord's Prayer and Kaddish together, in that place, completed the experience.

The memory of this visit will remain forever. This morning in a workshop I attended, Rabbi Boaz Pash asked us if we thought humanity had done better in the last thousand years than the previous thousand. His fellow presenter, Father Jamal Khader's sensitive reply was that he would have answered differently on Monday, before his visit to Auschwitz than today, after the visit.

But of course Poland is much much more than the sites of the Shoah. It has emerged from the Communist era so that Crakow has become a vibrant modern city. Coming from Britain, I feel I have to apologise for leaving you without your plumbers, but I want to say how much we appreciate their superior skills and work ethic.

And now it's almost the end of our 2011 conference. Yes, as ever, it has been amazing and our thanks must go to the tirelessness of the organisers and to the ICCJ committee.

As for the weather – well all I can say is that it is in preparation for the 2012 conference, when I look forward to seeing you all again.

Until then may we all go from strength to strength.