

# Waldemar Chrostowski

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## III theological symposium on "The Church, Jews and Judaism"

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WALDEMAR CHROSTOWSKI, WARSAW

### III THEOLOGICAL SYMPOSIUM „THE CHURCH, JEWS AND JUDAISM”

On 11 and 12 April, 1991 the Theological Faculty of the Academy of Catholic Theology in cooperation with the Commission of the Polish Episcopate for the Dialogue with Judaism organized the third Christian-Jewish symposium entitled *Auschwitz-Reality, Symbolism, Theology*. The symposium began on the day observed by the Jews as *Yom ha-Shoah*. Day of Extermination, to commemorate the memory of the six million Jewish victims of Nazi genocide. Three rabbis — Byron L. Sherwin of Chicago, coorganizer of the interreligious seminar in Spertus College of Judaica, Polish professor priests, Awraham Soetendorp of The Hague, who as a child was saved during the occupation by a Catholic family, and Menachem Joskowicz, Chief Rabbi of Poland — led prayer for the murdered whose highlight was the parable of Jewish faithfulness to the Lord and words from Psalm 22.

The guests were greeted by prof. Roman Bartnicki, Dean of the Theological Faculty of ACT. The introduction was delivered by the Rector prof. Jan Łach, who stated that ACT had been the first Catholic high school in Poland to take up an on-going dialogue with the Jews and Judaism and that scholarly reflection of representatives of the two communities was making an important contribution to greater religious understanding. The Israeli Minister of Education and Culture, Zevulun Hammer, participated in the opening ceremonies. „Too often do we say” — he stated — „that in Auschwitz God suffered a defeat. Meanwhile, we forget about our own responsibility for the fact that we, Christians and Jews, have failed to make the followers of different religions see in every person, regardless of race and religion, the brilliant image of a loving God.” The minister emphasized that this common failure makes necessary a dialogue and the building of a new future, in which respect for every person, especially for a „different” person, will dominate. The Ambassador of Israel, Miron Gordon, praised the contacts with ACT, and pointing to the auditorium filled with scholars and young people he added: „If this is not ecumenism, I do not know what ecumenism is.” A speech of greeting was also delivered by Michal Friedman, chairman of the Coordinating Commission of Jewish Organizations in Poland. He appealed to Poles and Jews to correct historical errors and to show more often the patriotism of Polish Jews and their contribution to Poland’s culture. He recalled the heroism of the Jew Michal Landa, who during the manifestations in 1863 took up a cross from the hands of a fallen priest. „We have a common God, we have a common commandment to love. May the Jewish and the Christian Messiah come together into the world” — he concluded. Rev. Pier Francesco Fumagalli, secretary of the Commission of the Holy See for Religious Relations with Judaism, participated in the opening and in the entire symposium.

The subject of the first paper, which was read by prof. Wacław Długoborski (State Museum Oswiecim-Brzezinka), was *KL Auschwitz-Birkenau 1940—1945 — Facts, Problems, Polemics*. Auschwitz has two histories: the history of the camp in the strict sense, as an element of the Nazi system of terror and extermination, and as a symbol of Shoah, the personification of evil. The lecturer focused on the first aspect, for the second one was the subject of other papers. The „real” history of Auschwitz does not

end in 1945, for it continues with the postwar lives of the survivors among the prisoners and their role in society on the one hand and with the trials of the SS crew of the camp on the other. The sources on the history of the camp are constantly increasing: new research questions raised by the accounts of former prisoners, the files of the headquarters of the camp made available to the Polish side by the Soviets. Though the establishment of the camp in June 1940 was connected with the deportations of Polish prisoners, chiefly intellectuals, its expansion to monstrous proportions in 1941—43 (highpoint reached in August 1944 with a prisoner population of about 120 thousand) was the result of the deportations of hundreds of thousands of Jews, only a small number of whom were registered. As the function of the camp expanded they were used as forced labor, and nearly a million died directly in the gas chambers. The many functions of the camp (camp for political prisoners, place of extermination of Jews and Gypsies, reservoir of slave labor) have attracted the interest of historians of many countries, especially Poland, Israel, and Germany. In spite of the rather advanced state of research, many matters still arouse discussions and controversies: the total number of victims (from 4 million we have arrived at the number of about 1.2—1.4 million), the role of Auschwitz-Birkenau in the *Endlösung*, the organization of genocide — in the camp and in the countries from which the transports came, the interrelations between Jewish and Polish prisoners and the attitude of the latter toward the extermination of the Jews of which they were eye-witnesses.

Michał Horoszewicz (Warsaw) in his paper *The Symbolism of Auschwitz for Jews and Christians* accented the need to separate „Auschwitz — the place” as a symbol of Shoah-Holocaust for all Jews and a symbol of Polish martyrdom, from „Auschwitz — the concept”, which in the Jewish interpretation is a symbolic counterpart (not a symbol!) of Shoah-Holocaust and an abstract determinant of the incomprehensible meaning of the extermination of six million people. In the opinion of leading Israeli authorities, the sense of the Holocaust as a burnt-offering (used by Pius XII in speeches of 24 December, 1942, and 15 November, 1944 — in reference to the Warsaw Uprising) to some extent has been effaced and properly refers to the mass extermination of human beings. People refer to the incomprehensiveness of Auschwitz, to the overwhelming feeling of isolation of the Jews that was intensified by the Nazi plan to „dehumanize” them, to implanting in the Jews the vision of and “empty heaven” (which meant rather doubt and a “quarrel with the Creator” but not a rejection of the idea of God), to the general indifference of the world. The heretofore mentioned symbol of the silence of the Churches (Catholic and Protestant) ought to be relativized by their quite often extensive — especially in the case of Pius XII — defensive, supportive, and interventionary actions. The uniqueness of Auschwitz requires us to recall that in the first genocide of the 20th century — the murder of one and a half million Armenians in 1915 — it was the Jew Morgenthau who so self-sacrificingly defended the Christians. In a scholarly paper filled with facts M. Horoszewicz noted several of a whole series of “Auschwitz terms” that have become maxims or metaphors; e.g., in the title of his treatise “How Can We Speak of God since the Time of Ayacucho?” the Peruvian theologian G. Gutierrez made a remarkable inculturation by introducing Auschwitz into Latin America under the form of „home of the dead” (the meaning of Ayacucho). In conclusion the lecturer cited four “Auschwitz precepts,” starting from „think and act so that Auschwitz will not be repeated” (T. Adorno), next the “commanding voice of Auschwitz” in the form “do not give Hitler posthumous victories” (E. Fackenheim), then expansion of the Decalogue with “we cannot remain silent,” and finally the urgent cry of John Paul II (Miami, 1987) “never again.”

Theological problems were taken up in the afternoon session, for the

theology of Auschwitz is an integral part of all discussions on Shoah. The Protestant theologian prof. Stefan Schreiner from Humboldt University in Berlin read a paper entitled *Auschwitz as a Questioning of the Christian Theological Tradition*. The matter, so to speak, does not concern a geographical place, that is, a town with the Polish name Oswiecim, but a historical place, a place that played a special role in the history of our century, a place of events whose dimensions today are even hard to conceive. Auschwitz is also a place-symbol and even a set of symbols, a symbol of all the Nazi concentration camps, of all places of extermination of this type, but above all a symbol of the horrible extermination of Jews, the symbol of Shoah. There are not one but many Christian theological traditions, in accordance with the number of Churches and differences of theological views and convictions held by the followers of Christ. But these many traditions have one thing in common, namely, the outlook on Jews and Judaism. In this respect one can speak of one Christian theological tradition, which was conspicuous for its nearly unchanging negative attitude toward the Jews. We must honestly ask ourselves whether this tradition has any connections with the extermination of the Jews, whose symbol is Auschwitz. The spectrum of previous answers ranges from categorical denial of any connections to the equally categorical statement that such connections exist. Some contend that the hangmen in Auschwitz motivated and justified their crimes with the racist ideology of National Socialism, a form of insane Arian neo-paganism, which had nothing in common with the Christian tradition and was even anti-Christian and antitheistic; others believe that from the anti-Jewish accents already contained in the New Testament and the anti-Jewish pronouncements repeated in the long tradition of the Church there is a straight path to the gas chambers in Auschwitz-Birkenau. Professor S. Schreiner penetratingly discussed these views, pointing out the need for and directions of the reorientation of the Church toward Jews and Judaism. As regards the texts of the New Testament, it is important to investigate not only their verbal sense, but also to note how they were interpreted, for here the sharp separation of Christians and the followers of Judaism becomes most evident. Auschwitz calls into question the Christian theological tradition, at least the one which was and at times still is characterized by the "theology of contempt" toward Jews. The task of theologians is to overcome this tradition and to replace it with a new theology with the message of deep "ties" (*Nostra aetate*) between Christianity and Judaism.

Rev. dr. Waldemar Chrostowski (ACT) took up a related subject in his paper *The Meaning of Shoah for the Christian Understanding of the Bible*. This understanding takes place on several levels: exegesis, theology, and hermeneutics. Exegesis is not only the carrier of the meanings contained in the text, but it also expresses the determinants, possibilities, and needs of the exegetes, who in their explanations bring out part of their own identity. In spite of the range and diversity of schools and trends, Christian exegesis has many fundamental common features. One of them is that it faithfully reflects the poor state of Christian-Jewish relations. Since the word "Jew" and "Jewish" took on a pejorative sense, every biblical allusion to the Jews gave rise to anti-Jewish associations. The exegete of today cannot ignore the fact that nonreligious factors so readily influenced the understanding and commentary of the Scriptures. When the Nazis began to implement their genocidal ideology, the Christian exegetes were unprepared to meet the challenges of their times. Since in the explanation of the Bible there were expressions of prejudice rooted in the consciousness and sub-consciousness of Christians, it is the first order of business to work out a new image of Jews and Judaism. The postulate of a new exegesis comes not from the wish to make any changes in the holy text but from the new sensitivity of Christians that has come about as a result of Shoah. One must

at the same time investigate whether and to what extent the entire Christian theology reflected and at the same time moulded the poor state of relations with Jews and Judaism. All theological anti-Judaism cultivated after Shoah turns into a serious indictment of theology and introduces a dilemma into it. For countless thousands of Jews the Hebrew Bible was the last comrade on the way to a horrible death. In the eyes of the Christian there is an identity of the fate of millions of Jews and the fate of Jesus, which enables him to fully appreciate the Jewish martyrdom and has nothing in common with the "Christianization" or "appropriation" of Shoah. The tradition of anti-Judaism in Christian theology and practice of life has great hermeneutic value. It is obvious that Hitler's argumentation justifying the extermination of the Jews was racist and anti-Christian. But the Nazis eagerly made use of the anti-Jewish tendencies rooted in the Christian tradition and explanation of the Bible, and Christian theology in the past had lost too much on account of its persistent deprecation of Judaism. In looking for ways to define its own attitude toward Judaism, theology today does this through the power of the internal dynamism of the Gospel and not by treating Shoah as a new theological principle.

The first day of the deliberations ended with a discussion of the participants and Ewa Jozwiak's communique *Shoah in the Teaching of John Paul II*. The pope from Poland has made a great contribution to the development of the Christian-Jewish dialogue and to overcoming the painful past in relations between the Church and the Synagogue. The authoress recalled the papal pronouncements mentioning the extermination of the Jews as a historical fact, analyzing the causes of the extermination (racism and anti-Semitism), expressing solidarity with Jews and pointing out the message and sense of Christian reflection on Shoah. To recall Shoah, according to John Paul II, means "to have hope that it will never be repeated and to do everything possible to prevent it from being repeated."

The deliberations of the second day were lead by Bp. prof. Henryk Muszynski, chairman of the Commission of the Polish Episcopate for the Dialogue with Judaism. The author of the first paper, entitled *Haggada Holocaust: Telling about the Holocaust*, was Rabbi dr. Byron L. Sherwin, vice-chairman of Spertus College of Judaica in Chicago. In their reflections on Auschwitz scholars have supplied us with much information and many theories. Often, when we hear someone speak about the Holocaust, we can find out more about who is speaking than about the figures and events of the story told. When we observe how Jews today, especially American and Israeli Jews, relate the history of the Holocaust, we see how they understand this story and how they understand themselves. The basic feature and necessity of the Jewish existence after the Holocaust became the striving of the Jews to survive coupled with reliance on themselves for their own security and survival. The American Jews perceive themselves as Jews of a new kind, who have left behind Europe and the memory of persecutions, massacres, and oppression. Israeli Jews also perceive themselves as Jews of a new kind, professing that it is better to die fighting than to allow themselves to be pushed into gas chambers and to accept death passively. For one and the other the story of the Holocaust becomes a problem that leads to a logically contradictory but psychologically consistent reaction: on the one hand they accept what happened, though they do not identify with it, but on the other hand they reject what happened by identifying with it. The main Jewish response to the Holocaust is expressed by the motto: "Never again!" Instead of talking about martyrdom, as was done during the time of previous persecutions, Jews today emphasize another side of the story — resistance and heroism. The view that survival can be assured only by relying completely on themselves prompted the Jews to transform the story of the Holocaust into a story of Jews betrayed by non-Jews. It became ne-

cessary to prove that the history of anti-Semitism in Europe inexorably led to the Holocaust and that the betrayal of the Jews by their non-Jewish neighbors in the countries where they resided made possible what the Nazis did. Both the Israeli and the American Jews accepted the same premise, i.e., the lack of possibility for the life of Jews in Europe. Not only the vision of the past changed, but also the program for the present and the future. The lecturer questioned the conviction in the rightness of the survival of the Jews for the sake of survival alone as the dominant ideology and basis for action and policy in the contemporary world. For this inexorably leads to secularization. The "new" Jew is a secularized Jew who is more interested in passing on his ethnic, national, and cultural values than his spiritual and religious ones. Against this background Rabbi Sherwin took stock of the post-Holocaust Jewish theology and made comments on Polish-Jewish relations. He emphasized that the history of the Polish Jewish community is part of the common heritage of Jews of Polish origin and Polish Catholics.

Dr. Stanislaw Krajewski (Warsaw) read a paper *Auschwitz as a Challenge*. In his opinion, the issue of the convent in Oswiecim is not the most important thing in itself, but the controversy revealed deeper problems. The first one is minimizing the Jewish dimension of the camp. Fortunately, much already has been done to show visitors that the vast majority of the victims were Jews. The second, more difficult problem to overcome is the banalization of this place. The third one is the anonymity of the victims, and the fourth one the evil that seems to emanate from it. Catholic attempts to overcome these problems are fully justified, but even without any bad intentions they can threaten Jews. This happens when the only representatives of the victims become Fr. Maximilian Kolbe and Sr. Edith Stein and when the murder in the gas chambers is given a redemptive sense by seeing the murdered as sacrifices made to God. The deepest level of discussion on Auschwitz is theological. There is no escape from theology even in such as matter as the inscription on the monument in Brzezinka; the representative of the organization of former prisoners initially opposed placing an quotation from the Bible there by stating that "God was not there then". Krajewski also suggested a model of relations in occupied Poland among Germans, Jews, and Poles (so-called "Arian" Poles). These are three separate relations: between Germans and Jews (murdering), between Germans and Poles (subjugation and terror), and between Poles and Jews (to be a witness). Any reduction of this triad to two of its elements leads to great falsifications; either to putting Jews and Poles into one sack as the equal victims of the Nazis, or to perceiving the Germans and Poles as equal persecutors of the Jews, or to pairing the Germans and Jews, identified with Bolsheviks, as equal enemies of the Poles.

Next Rev. prof. Michal Czajkowski (ACT) vividly and with involvement discussed *The Meaning of Shoah for the Polish Pastorate*. He started by explaining that the reflection of Polish Christians on Auschwitz reveals not dolorism but a new sensitivity toward the Jews and toward every person. In the context of various manifestations of anti-Semitism the Church is obligated to speak up on this matter, for both ethical and for theological reasons. Everything must be done to root out once and for all elements of contempt found in teaching, catechesis, preaching and even the liturgy. The lecturer noted that a lot still remains to be done and argued that the official representatives of the Church ought to become even more active in joining the interreligious dialogue. He mentioned the positive and the negative voices that appeared after the publication of the *Letter of the Episcopate on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of «Nostra aetate»* and gave some suggestions for the approaching II Plenary Synod.

The papers were followed by interesting discussions that showed that the new attitude had gained considerable support among Polish Catholics.

The participants were informed about the creation of the Polish Council of Christians and Jews affiliated with the International Council of Christians and Jews (ICCJ). Rev. M. Czajkowski renewed the suggestion that had been made during last year's symposium on creating a day of brotherhood of Christians and Jews, suggesting that this could be one of the days just before the Ecumenical Day celebrated in January or the Day of Extermination celebrated by the Jews in April. The symposium was closed with the words of the guest from the Vatican, Rev. P. F. Fumagalli, who stressed the deep commitment of John Paul II to the dialogue and emphasized the need of a new theological outlook on Judaism and setting up mutual relations on a new basis.

The symposium gathered about 200 persons, including many prominent individuals and promoters of dialogue. In addition to the persons mentioned, the participants included more than a dozen individuals who had attended the conference that had ended the day before entitled *The Theology of Auschwitz* organized by the ICCJ, The Commission of the Polish Episcopate for the Dialogue with Judaism, and the Club of the Catholic Intelligentsia in Cracow.

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