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Neighbors? Jews and Catholics in Post-Shoah Poland

and

The Theological and Pastoral Reception of *Nostra Aetate* in Poland

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## Neighbors? Jews and Catholics in Post-Shoah Poland

In 1928 Shalom Ash, a Yiddish author born in the Polish town of Kutno who died in 1957 in the USA, wrote: “Fate has united us with the Polish nation for eternity.” However, the year 1939 brought into this seemingly eternal relationship the tragic experience of extermination that would recur as a frame of reference in discussions about the future of Polish-Jewish relations. Despite the shocking number of victims, the legacy of Jewish culture remains invariably present in the current Polish discourse on the earlier stages of cultural co-operation. That presence was aptly recapitulated by the eminent Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert, who observed: “Poland without Jews (and other minorities) is not Poland.”<sup>1</sup> It is, therefore, impossible to convey the essence of European culture, including the Polish one, without reference to the cultural dialogue between those neighbors who shared the hopes and miseries of the Jewish people.

### Dialogue from the Lublin perspective

Lublin, where I have been serving as a metropolitan for nine years, was for many centuries a Jewish Oxford. It was here that the first Yeshiva in Poland was built. On the strength of charters granted at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it enjoyed the status of a state university. It was famous throughout Europe for its studies of the Talmudic and Kabbalist tradition. Its seventeenth century vice-chancellor Salomon Luria, known as Maharshal, was one of the most prominent Talmudists of the era. Lublin was the second center of the Jewish press after Cracow. It was here that Chaim Schwarz printed *Machzor*—the second Hebrew book in Poland—in 1536. It was here, again, that Moses Aaron Samuel of Lublin published “Ziz Sadaj”—the first Polish Kabbalist book.

The Talmudic School established in Lublin by Rabbi Meir Shapira was opened in 1930. Among its graduates there were chief rabbis of Jerusalem and New York. After the war, for thousands of Jews returning mostly from the USSR, it was a meeting place known as the House of Peretz. It was here that the exhausted people received information, help, and new hope. Here they planned their future life in other countries, including Palestine. About one thousand decided to remain in Lublin. Before the war, the same city has been home to almost forty thousand.

In the old Jewish cemetery in Lublin, the gravestone of Jacob Isaac Hurvitz has survived in good condition. The Seer of Lublin died in 1815. He was regarded as one of the most important personalities of his time. In a sense, the whole area between Belzec and Belzyce can be considered as a huge cemetery that evokes the memory of those murdered in the name of racial hatred inspired by the *Übermensch* ideology. Before World War II, in many towns of the Lublin district, Jews constituted nearly 50% of the population. Such was the case mainly in the area near Lublin and Zamosc, Krasnystaw, Bilgoraj, and Kazimierz. The town with the greatest percentage of Jewish population—about 95%—was Izbica. In Lublin itself Jews constituted about 35% of the population. Recently, when we wanted to create a community of prayer, in the city of 400 thousand, we found 7 practicing Jews. The lost Atlantis of the Polish-Jewish community was consumed by a flood of fire. In the new Polish realities after the Holocaust, “there are synagogues without worshipers, homes without their inhabitants, tombstones without graves, graves without tombstones, and memories that have faded into oblivion.” Gone are the Yiddish poets who argued passionately with God about the way the world is run, and gone are the Hasidic Jews who danced through the night hoping that, in losing themselves in God, they would find God.<sup>2</sup>

Gone are the things that made up the unique charm of small towns, *shtetls*, from Slonimski’s poems or the dialogues of Polish and Jewish neighbors recorded by Isaac Singer in his short stories. However, in the areas destroyed by fire and the Shoah, it is still possible to unearth the deepest roots of Jewish culture and identity. Rabbi Byron Sherwin writes on that subject: “When I visit Lublin, I now know that Shalom Shakna and the Maharam of Lublin are not simply abstract figures in the history of Polish Jewry, but part of my personal legacy; that theirs is not simply an intellectual inheritance, but a family bequest for me to preserve and to cherish.”<sup>3</sup> Sherwin claims he has established the genealogical tree of his Jewish ancestors in Poland from 1450, when they arrived from Spain through Germany and Bohemia. He is able to go back 22 generations in the dramatic history of his people to show the European roots of his ancestral families.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> S. Krajewski, “The Jewish Problem” as a Polish Problem, 74.

<sup>2</sup> Byron L. Sherwin, *Spark Amidst the Ashes. The Spiritual Legacy of Polish Jewry*, New York: Oxford University Press 1997, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 77.

<sup>4</sup> Dialogue is an Effort at Translating Symbols, Wi□□, 160.

## Neighbors—the community of human fate

No less important is the task of directing that dramatic common history towards the future. It requires us to perceive a community of values whose promotion is a challenge faced by our generation. In that community, we need to discover positive objectives and set them in a frame of reference where the memory of the Shoah remains invariably vivid and lasting. The problem requiring common reflection is still the question of how to unite the past and present, in order to find among ruins and graves the fundamental meaning that both Jews and Christians, as children of the same God, should discover and develop. How should we build a community where, despite the experience of pain and destruction, we will emphasize what unites, and not what hurts?

In using the word “neighbors,” I do not mean to refer only to the painful experiences, such as those described in Jan Gross’s book about Jedwabne. I am referring to a more general community of values that included great and beautiful elements as well as some tragic attitudes. The latter were sometimes provoked by the lack of appropriate action, indifference to evil that was being trivialized as an inevitable constituent of our world. An example of such a tragic and solitary protest against the indifference of broadly understood “neighbors” was the suicide committed in London on May 12, 1943, by Arthur Zygielbaum. His death, at the age of 48, was a reaction to the massacre of the last Jews during the uprising in the Warsaw ghetto. In a note left behind, he wrote: “I cannot be silent—I cannot live—while remnants of the Jewish people of Poland [...] are perishing. [...] By my death, I wish to express my strongest protest against the inactivity with which the world is looking on and permitting the extermination of my people.”<sup>5</sup>

Asking about the reasons for the dramatic loneliness of those who shared Zygielbaum’s feelings in the hour of death, we are bound to notice a frequent lack of basic interpersonal solidarity that should unite the participants of human fate. Sometimes, endeavors to find that solidarity may resemble the search for a single righteous man in the Sodom of the Holocaust. In saving but a single human life, he would have saved the world through the testimony of courage, honor and solidarity. There was no such man among the Polish inhabitants of Jedwabne in 1942. However, I have come across attempts to find such men in various regions of Poland, not only in Jewish circles. In 1990, when I became the bishop of Tarnów, I learned of a beautiful legend in my first diocese. It told of a young Austrian soldier, Otto Schimek, who was supposedly shot for refusing to carry out a death sentence on Poles as a member of a firing squad. During the communist rule, Schimek appeared as an example of a sensitive conscience. His grave in Tymowa was visited by both independence activists and pacifists.

During my stay in Tarnów, however, I received documents of the Austrian court martial from Ludwigsburg. It appeared from them that the sentence on Schimek was carried out in a completely different place and for altogether different reasons, that is, for disciplinary rather than moral ones. I ordered the exhumation of the body buried in the grave where Schimek was supposed to rest. It turned out the grave contained the remains of a young woman. Empirical facts did not confirm the beautiful legend of the solitary young Austrian who, conscripted into the Nazi army, nevertheless managed to preserve his sensitive conscience. However, we should not lose heart or get discouraged. We must constantly invoke positive examples from the past. We should look for neighbors with whom we share not so much the proximity of residence, but rather common historical roots, the community of the Judeo-Christian vision of a human being, the bond of culture built together for many generations.

## Rooted in history

Abraham Heschel stressed that the wealth of a soul manifests itself in faithful memory. The richness of a personality finds expression not in following the fashion, but in preserving a living memory of what was particularly dear to us in the past. In the Lublin region there is a great number of monuments of Jewish culture. In those places, Jews participated in creating the culture of their environment, also demonstrating their openness to events that are important to the Catholic community. A symbolic sign of that openness was the participation of a Jewish delegation in a welcoming ceremony for the bishops who visited particular parishes as part of the so-called canonical inspection. Another important form of the co-existence of Jewish and Polish cultures in the same centers was a creative presence of Jewish communities in the local culture. At the time when the communist authorities put emphasis on the so-called proletarian internationalism, information about the cultural roots of Judaism in Polish history was censored. So much more valuable is therefore the approach developed by John Paul II in his last book, *Memory and Identity*. Writing about the vicissitudes of Poland, the Polish Pope points to the Jagiellonian period as a particularly beautiful time in

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Aviva Ravel, *Faithful unto Death. The Story of Arthur Zygielbaum*, Montreal 1980, 178n.

its history, when various ethnic communities—Polish and Lithuanian, Jewish and German—coexisted in the same state.<sup>6</sup>

The Israeli ambassador in Poland, Shevah Weiss, thus sums up that period of harmonious co-operation: “We lived as Jews together with you, the Poles, more or less normally for almost a thousand years. In comparison with the whole Europe, here in Poland Jews felt comfortable and secure. Tolerably comfortable, for the Jews were never comfortable—since they were a nation without a Homeland.”<sup>7</sup>

Before the war, out of almost 18 million Jews in the world, about 3.5 million lived in Poland. At the peak period, there were 1000 Jewish Kehillahs in Poland; today there are 13. The Germans murdered about 4 million Jews in Poland.<sup>8</sup> German names of towns remained in Poland like islands of suffering—not Oswiecim but Auschwitz, not Brzezinka but Birkenau.

One cannot expect that the social reaction to the anti-Semitic pathologies of one epoch will be their complete disappearance in the following era. Under Gauss’s law of distribution, even the most absurd interpretations will gain some following. However, this should not divert our attention from positive phenomena that testify to important changes in social consciousness. In the present Polish circumstances, signs of a new mentality, formed in the spirit of *Nostra Aetate* and *Dabru Emet* can be observed, especially among young people and religious elite. Those circles have cultivated for years a set of values constitutive for the spiritual solidarity and friendship between the older and younger brothers in faith. That new quality in mutual contacts has been reinforced to a great extent by the pontificate of John Paul II, and notably his visit to the Synagogue of Rome in 1986. The fruits of similar precedents have also lasted after the Pope’s death.

The phenomenon has been emphasized by Kazimierz Wójcicki, who writes: “Jewish culture ... long accompanied Polish culture. The present pluralism of Polish culture means, among other things, the memory of the many sources of and influences on that culture in the past. ... The place left behind when the culture of the Jews of Central and Eastern Europe was swallowed up in the abyss of Auschwitz and Birkenau cannot remain empty. Nor can it be only a field of research for historians with exotic specializations. The place of that part of Jewish culture that developed on our lands must today be a place where Polish culture is at work—for the sake of Polish culture.”<sup>9</sup>

The young and the awareness of past tragedies

Another form of shaping the memory of Jews, who so rapidly disappeared from the Lublin region during the Holocaust, were liturgical equivalents of mourning the dead, organized by Catholics in small towns. I’ve been sometimes confronted with the charge made by Jewish circles that during the war, Poles who were themselves in danger of their lives, cared mostly about their own survival and did not mourn their Jewish families and friends. Mourning, as a traditional ceremony, is particularly important to Hasidim, who treat it as a vital expression of solidarity with the departed. I have explained that during the war each Polish family was afflicted with the suffering brought on by the turmoil of war and suggested that we revive the tradition of mourning in certain towns to commemorate the Jews who used to form important cultural centers there. We began with the town of Piaski near Lublin, where Jews were exterminated in the ghetto during a single night. We invited to the mourning ceremony both Jewish Kehillah representatives and members of the families who used to live in Piaski before the war. We began with a Holy Mass; then we went singing to the Jewish cemetery, or rather the place where most Jews were buried. I noticed the strongest response among the young people, who tidied up the cemetery area together with the town authorities, caring both for the aesthetics of the place and the memory of the past. Young people were the most numerous group of participants in the Holy Mass and prayer. The older people participated in smaller proportion; in isolated cases, some regarded the event with skepticism, invoking grudges from 60 years ago. This demonstrates that the new generation is growing up with a totally different mentality, with a sense of common roots and awareness of the dramatic human suffering that took place in our country.

Shaping that living memory—considered so important by Abraham Heschel—takes place for instance during the Congresses of Christian Culture. For all inhabitants of the city, we organize what is sometimes described as a happening, though it might more appropriately be called a mystery. In the Christian Jubilee year 2000, we organized a meditation, attended by the inhabitants of Lublin, on the Jews who contributed to the history of the city and departed. To the first meeting we invited both those who had saved and those who had been saved. The partner city

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<sup>6</sup> See: Jan Paweł II, *Pamięć i tożsamość*, Znak: Kraków 2005, 92.

<sup>7</sup> Shevah Weiss, “Albo bardzo dobrze, albo okropnie, „Więści”, (2005, 4) 16.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p.18

<sup>9</sup> K. Wójcicki, „Jankiel and Reuchlin”, „Więści”, Under One heaven. Poles and Jews, 1998, 44.

of Lublin in Israel is Rishon Le Zion. From there came the city authorities and those survivors whose later course of life had taken them to Israel. There came some wheelchair Poles who had saved Jews. They recalled how very difficult it was and how much courage and effort it required. Finally, a young boy from Rishon Le Zion and a girl from Lublin planted a grapevine together near the former Jewish synagogue. It was a purely symbolic gesture, as the grapevine doesn't generally grow in our climate. That play of symbols was for many people so strong an experience that, out of the three-day session, the participants of the Congress of Christian Culture refer most frequently to that particular moment.

A year later, on the occasion of awarding an honorary doctorate by KUL to Rabbi Elio Toaff, we organized a prayer of five faiths in the former Nazi camp of Majdanek. In the presence of several thousand pupils of Lublin secondary schools, the representatives of the main monotheistic religions, including an American group led by Cardinal Keeler from Baltimore, prayed near the place where the Nazis shot 18 thousand Jews during a single night. Out of all the participants, it was the Jewish delegation and the host of Polish youth who were the most deeply affected by that encounter with the tragic history of the place. On the following day I received a telephone call from a Pole in Würzburg, who was expelled from his Homeland in 1968. He told me: "When I came to Germany I felt nostalgia combined with aggression. I was seething with anger that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the heart of Europe a man can be driven out of his home just because some communist party officials have so decided. At the same time, my heart, memories and sentiments remained in Poland. After 30 years of separation, most of the TV programs I watch today are programs from Poland. By chance, I came across a broadcast from Majdanek and saw young people praying for Jews. What divided and caused pain melted in my soul. I felt among friends again, in the Homeland of my youth."

#### United in culture

The expression "Poland as a Jewish paradise" can be applied to the time of the First Republic, i.e. Poland before the Partitions (between the neighboring powers: Russia, Prussia and Austria) that took place at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>10</sup> For a long time Poland was a center of rabbinical orthodoxy and mystical Hasidism, the Yiddish press, literature and theater, the domain of activity of Hebrew political parties—both socialist and nationalist, with Zionist parties and sport clubs included. Trying to save the memory of Jewish culture in the Polish Diaspora, we undertake activities in two main directions. One of them includes strictly scholarly studies on the contribution of Jews to Polish culture. They have resulted, for instance, in publications by Monika Garbowska from Maria Curie-Sklodowska University in Lublin.<sup>11</sup> Even more striking is the documentation prepared by Tomasz Pietrasiewicz and the center he manages, Grodzka Gate-NN Theatre. It provides a detailed picture of the main forms of Jewish presence in Lublin before the World War II and the interaction of Jewish culture with that of the whole city. The other important form of shaping the memory of the Jewish presence in the history of Poland are cultural events aimed at reminding the young generation of Poles about great and dramatic forms of co-operation between the two nations in the Polish past. During the anniversary celebration of the ghetto liquidation, the present inhabitants of Lublin were invited to read out the list of Jews who used to live in Lublin. In the evening, in the city quarter formerly inhabited by Jews, the light was switched off and the Mourners' Kaddish was said. Secondary school pupils were given the former addresses of the Jewish quarter inhabitants and asked to send their letters there. The postal service ultimately returned the letters, stamped "addressee unknown," to the senders. Nevertheless, these events helped the young generation to better understand the tragedy of people who but a short while ago were their neighbors and now have completely vanished from the landscape of their home town. The reactions of contemporary young Poles were touching; they emphasized that the young inhabitants of the Jewish quarter—just like their Polish peers today—had their dreams and plans for the future, yet had to die so suddenly with a sense of the world's brutality.

#### Open to the future

On John Paul II's death, Rabbi Prof. Elio Toaff, a holder of an honorary doctorate from the Catholic University of Lublin (awarded in 2000), was invited to join a handful of his closest friends who kept vigil and prayed at the Pope's coffin before the funeral. Even though Toaff himself observed that in the theology of Judaism the dead person's body has an altogether different status than in the Christian one, he came and prayed, expressing—through his presence—that crucial solidarity in the hour of departure. This is a new quality: a Jewish rabbi is invited to pay the last tribute to

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<sup>10</sup> Compare: S. Krajewski, "The Jewish Problem" as a Polish Problem, *Wi□□*, *ibid.* 61.

<sup>11</sup> See e.g.

a Pope among the closest circle of the Pontiff's friends. It is a beautiful evidence of the spiritual bond that John Paul II kept building throughout his mission.

But how does the new climate of dialogical openness translate into the language of daily practice? I do not claim it's an idyll, but in Poland, each year, a day before the Ecumenical Week, we celebrate a day of prayer for Judaism. In Lublin, the central celebration is held in the seminary and attended by many representatives of our city. Some of them had Jews among their ancestors, but in most cases they are, again, elite circles interested in dialogue and convinced of its vital importance. This community is something precious as a model of co-operation, prayer, and brotherly communion between the children of one Father. I realize, however, that the situation in an average parish cannot be assessed with equal optimism. In an average parish, a single intercession for Jews is added to the Prayer of the Faithful, and that is usually the only sign that the Day of Judaism is being celebrated. In this case, we must make consistent efforts to move beyond the routine minimum and search for more perfect forms of spiritual communion with our elder brothers in faith.

According to statistics from 2005, out of the overall number of 20,757 people honored as "Righteous Among the Nations," Poles were the most numerous (5,874), followed by the Dutch (4,639) and the French (2,500). Dr Ludwik Hirszfeld, who during the war was given shelter by many Christian friends, commented: "I find comfort in the thought that such people exist. It's unbelievable that such people and the German murderers belong to the same human species." Many of them paid with their lives for saving Jews.<sup>12</sup> In many cases the experience of that price marked their psyche for the rest of their lives. The Rev. Stanislaw Musial SI, who has rendered great services to the Catholic-Jewish dialogue, relates how, as a child with little understanding of war and its cruelties, he was affected by the death of a Jew who came starving to their home, asking for a meal. Little Stasio's (a diminutive for Stanislaw) mother was preparing a food parcel for the famished man. In the meantime, the Gestapo arrived. After undergoing torture, which was supposed to have an educational effect on the villagers, the Nazis killed the Jew and lined up the Polish family outside their house to be shot. At that point, the four-year-old Stasio threw himself at the Gestapo man's boots, begging for mercy. The German, who had also left a little son at home when he went to the front, was touched and cancelled the execution. That scene kept haunting the Rev. Musial throughout his life as a moving memory of the departure of people denied the status of human beings, who could not hope for mercy or sympathy from the self-styled *Übermenschen*.<sup>13</sup>

Such experiences constitute an important psychological complement to the theological dialogue developed against the backdrop of the Shoah. They reveal the whole truth about man, throwing into relief both the transcendent dimension of our actions and the natural human solidarity in suffering. It is a particular duty of our generation to treasure the testimony of that solidarity. Especially in academic circles, it is our common responsibility to build the community of values that were negated by the communist ideologues of our past who preferred political slogans to critical reflection on the inalienable dignity of the human person.

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<sup>12</sup> Aleksander Klugman, *Encyklopedia polskich Sprawiedliwych*, "Wiśnik", (2005, 4)47-54

<sup>13</sup> Rev. Stanisław Musiał, *Czarne jest czarne*, WL: Kraków 2003, 152n.

## NOTES

1. Stanisław Krajewski, “‘The Jewish Problem’ as a Polish Problem” in “Under One Heaven: Poles and Jews,” ed. Jacek Borkowicz, trans. William Brand, special issue, *Więści* (1998): 74.
2. Byron L. Sherwin, *Sparks Amidst the Ashes: The Spiritual Legacy of Polish Jewry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 3.
3. *Ibid.*, 77.
4. Byron L. Sherwin and Zbigniew Nosowski, “Dialog to wysiłek tłumaczenia symboli,” *Więści* 405 (July 1992): 160.
5. Quoted in Aviva Ravel, *Faithful unto Death: The Story of Arthur Zygielbojm* (Montreal: Arthur Zygielbojm Branch, Workmen’s Circle, 1980), 178n.
6. See Jan Paweł II, *Pamięć i tożsamość* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 2005), 92.
7. Shevah Weiss, Jacek Borkowicz, and Zbigniew Nosowski, “Albo bardzo dobrze, albo okropnie,” *Więści* 558 (April 2005): 16.
8. *Ibid.*, 18.
9. Kazimierz Wóycicki, “Jankiel and Reuchlin” in “Under One Heaven: Poles and Jews,” ed. Jacek Borkowicz, trans. William Brand, special issue, *Więści* (1998): 44.
10. Cf. Stanisław Krajewski, “‘The Jewish Problem’ as a Polish Problem,” in “Under One Heaven: Poles and Jews,” ed. Jacek Borkowicz, trans. William Brand, special issue, *Więści* (1998): 61.
11. See e.g.
12. Aleksander Klugman, “Encyklopedia polskich Sprawiedliwych,” *Więści* 558 (April 2005): 47–54.
13. Stanisław Musiał, *Czarne jest czarne* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2003), 152n.

## The Theological and Pastoral Reception of *Nostra Aetate* in Poland

### Theology among ruins and ashes

In the Majdanek concentration camp by the symbolic ashes of the camp's victims, there is an inscription: "I see my relatives in each handful of ashes." From the perspective of the community of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob's faith, Catholics and Jews are more than relatives. We are a community of brothers in faith. We share the faith in the same God, who is not a God of the dead, but of the living. We share the common, dramatic history that in Poland comprised both the beautiful pages of harmonious coexistence and the most tragic hour of the Holocaust. While preserving the living memory of what we have in common, we must not let the experience of pain and nostalgia for the bygone world be the final chords of this Polish-Jewish Grand Symphony.

This experience is something natural to those for whom the ghettos established in Poland by the Nazis proved to be a lost Atlantis. Chone Shmeruk, in his impressions after visiting the Warsaw that was rebuilt from its wartime ruins, told his friends: "my Warsaw no longer exists; there's no point going to Krochmalna Street any more—new buildings, new people, new world. All those things, so dear to me, have vanished, passed away, won't come back."<sup>14</sup> He is right if we are talking of a physical departure. In the spiritual sense, however, the presence of the values I have mentioned above depends on us and our faithful memory. That memory is capable of transcending the physical separation with the past to reveal the community of spiritual values.

How, after the Holocaust, should we develop dialogue in the lands where the memory of the Shoah is still very much alive? Our dialogue about this question must combine the universal truth of theology with the testimony of living memory about local tragedies. Stressing the importance of dialogue with the elder brothers in faith, John Paul II writes in his apostolic adhortation *Ecclesia in Europa*: "Consequently, it is necessary to encourage dialogue with Judaism, knowing that it is fundamentally important for the self-knowledge of Christians and for transcending the divisions between the Churches, and to work for the flowering of a new springtime in mutual relations" (*Ecclesia in Europa*, p.56). The document is the result of the last synodal meeting of the Bishops of Europe in the second millennium. The bishops speaking at the synod stressed that "each ecclesial community [should] engage, to the extent that circumstances permit, in dialogue and co-operation with believers of the Jewish religion." That general quantifier—"each ecclesial community [should] engage [...] in dialogue"—is something binding and universal at the same time. For it is sometimes the case that the forms of dialogue undertaken are treated by local communities as an innocuous hobby, practiced by groups of local enthusiasts. Interreligious dialogue, however, is not a hobby, but an important expression of mature faith; dialogue with Judaism is, moreover, an expression of a genuine Christian self-knowledge. To a Christian, this dialogue is a mutual completion of two meetings: the meeting with Christ and with Judaism.

If dialogue with Judaism is an expression of Christian self-knowledge, what are we to think of recent displays of anti-Semitism? Replacing dialogue with aggression against Jews would have to be considered as a form of auto-aggression since we strike at ourselves, destroying the defining elements of our identity, our history, and an important constituent of the theological foundations of our community of faith. The origin of anti-Semitism is usually explained by reference to the hypothesis of the scapegoat, a concept developed by René Girard.<sup>15</sup> I think, in the present cultural realities, the scapegoat is not only Judaism but also Christianity. As a result of auto-aggression, a person engaging in anti-Semitism strikes at his own community, destroys its sense of identity, amputates its history. As an alternative, this person offers an apotheosis of nationalism, a pagan cult of the tribe, or aggression and contempt elevated to the rank of fundamental interpersonal relations. The late Orthodox Rabbi of Warsaw Abraham J. Heschel (d. 1972), who contributed to the creation of *Nostra Aetate*, observed that interreligious dialogue is truly fruitful only when faith meets faith.<sup>16</sup> It is, therefore, necessary to get rid of environmental prejudices, political axioms, and similar practices. In order to develop dialogue between the two faiths, I established the Lublin Archdiocesan Center for Jewish-Christian Dialogue in 1998.<sup>17</sup> This center is a meeting place for students of Catholic theology at the Catholic University of Lublin (KUL) and Jewish rabbis visiting the city of their forefathers, for Polish and Ukrainian candidates to priesthood, and for Jewish students coming to pray for their ancestors who died in Majdanek.

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<sup>14</sup> Chone Shmeruk, *Wiat utracony. O twórczości Isaaca Bashevisa Singera*, Lublin: WUMCS 2003.

<sup>15</sup> See e.g. Michael Kirwan, *Discovering Girard* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2004).

<sup>16</sup> Rev. M. Czajkowski, *Wiara spotyka wiarę*, „Znak”, 55 (2003, 1) 45.

<sup>17</sup> See: Alfred M. Wierzbicki, *The Lublin Diocesan Centre for Christian-Jewish Dialogue*, in: *Jews and Christians in Dialogue*, II ed. Michał Bron Jr., Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell 2001, 160.

In this mutual interaction between theology and pastoral practice, between groups open to interreligious dialogue and charismatic personalities inspired by the example of John Paul II, there develops a kind of chain reaction. A young Dominican, Marek Nowak, confirmed this fact during a Polish-Swedish Colloquium on Jewish-Christian Dialogue. He said: "I feel bound to admit that I have tried to follow the examples of other priests and the teaching of Pope John Paul II; if it were not for them, I might never have entered into this type of dialogue with the Jews."<sup>18</sup>

One of the charismatic personalities who has rendered great service to the Polish-Jewish dialogue is the Rev. Romuald Jakub Weksler-Waszkineł, a lecturer of philosophy at the Catholic University of Lublin. Father Jakub, who was born into a Jewish family, was placed with a Catholic family when his mother was about to be taken to Auschwitz by the Nazis. Just before the arrest, Jakub's mother persuaded her Polish neighbor to take in her little son by drawing upon theological arguments: "Save my son and you'll see that your Jesus will reward you for it." The neighbor agreed to the mother's plea and she was rewarded for her sacrifice.

For half of his life, Jakub didn't know he was a Jewish child who had been saved from the Shoah. It was only when his Polish mother's health seriously deteriorated and she feared she might soon die that she told him that she was not his biological mother. To the young priest, the discovery of his Jewish roots came as a shock. As a son of two nations, he spoke of it with emotion in an interview for Polish public television: "My Polish mother told me that my Jewish mother was blonde." Today Father Jakub sets the tone for theological dialogue. He evokes John Paul II's teaching and denounces all cases of the tribal apotheosis of the nation by arguing that they contradict Christian universalism.

### United by history and culture

In the past, Lublin was an important center of dialogue, a place open to interactions between many different religions. A gravestone in an Evangelical church provides a telling example of this dialogue. It is engraved with an inscription informing the visitor that here rests Friedrich Marianowitsch Dreimann. The name Friedrich is German, and the church is Evangelical. Marianowitsch is a patronymic; it is derived from the father's name, as is customary in Russian usage. Marian, however, is a Polish name, not Russian. Dreimann, finally, is a family of Lublin Jews. In this medley of cultures where different traditions blend together, one should recognize the beauty of interpersonal bonds based on mutual openness and respect. This task is a particular responsibility of the Christians who live by John Paul II's *Letter to Artists*. As the Pope instructed, we are a generation of God's artists entrusted with the mission of defending beauty in a culture dominated by kitsch. It is our common task. I would venture to say that the young generation of Poles undertakes it with a great deal of courage and passion.

We are inspired to adopt this dialogical attitude by both the theology of *Nostra Aetate* and the principles emphasized in *Dabru Emet*. John Paul II's unambiguous statements leave no place for doubt: "Antisemitism is a sin against God and humanity. One cannot be a Christian while being an anti-Semite" (International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee: *Declaration of the Prague Conference*). Antisemitism, like all other forms of racism, is "a sin against God and humanity and as such must be rejected and condemned" (JP2, *Address to the Representatives of the British Council of Christians and Jews*).

In the message of *Dabru Emet*, point 6 strikes me as particularly important: "The humanly irreconcilable difference between Jews and Christians will not be settled until God redeems the entire world, as promised in Scripture. [...] Neither Jew nor Christian should be pressed into affirming the teaching of the other community."<sup>19</sup> This statement means that God himself wants Jews and Christians to exist as such until the end of time—united by the common Book and common hope; free from the pragmatism that would push them to overcome mutual differences hastily.

For the Jews who died during the Holocaust, the sense of identity was very important. At the time, many assimilated Polish Jews died for being Jewish, even though they felt Polish. Such was the case with Bruno Schulz. His home country was Poland; he never felt that he was a Zionist. The Gestapo murdered him for being Jewish.<sup>20</sup> This emphasis on the symbiosis of Polish and Jewish cultures is also important in understanding the attacks against artists of Jewish origin during high Stalinism. For example, Osip Mandelstam was attacked by Russian national-communists not as a Russian poet but only as "a Jewish author writing in Russian."<sup>21</sup>

For these reasons, our satisfaction is all the greater when we look at the biographies of people whose home country was Poland but who also made great contributions to Jewish culture and politics. One of these personalities

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<sup>18</sup> M. Nowak, *The Holocaust and the Spiritual Contribution of Polish Catholic Priests*, in: *Jews and Christians...*, 158.

<sup>19</sup> *Dabru Emet*, „Znak”, 55 (2003, 1) 63.

<sup>20</sup> S. Weiss, *Albo bardzo dobrze...*, 23.

<sup>21</sup> Jerzy Pomianowski, WUMCS: Lublin 2006, 81.

is Shevah Weiss. According to his biography, Weiss was born in Borysław, Poland. He survived the war thanks to a neighbor who gave shelter to his family. From 1992 to 1999, he was a speaker of the Knesset; between 2001 and 2003, he served as an Israeli ambassador in Poland. In 2000 he became a president of the Yad Vashem Council.

Unfortunately, apart from the testimony of faithful memory, our generation has also been endowed with a capacity for quickly forgetting the tragedies and scandals that shocked the world only yesterday. Deep wounds heal fast. Then, among the patched up scars, one may just as quickly encounter relapses to hurtful practices, as if some people couldn't draw any important conclusions from history. Rabbi Byron Sherwin has told me that after he had finished a lecture on the Warsaw ghetto uprising to his students in Chicago, he asked them to try to describe their notion of life in the ghetto. From those descriptions that reached him later, he learned for instance that in the Warsaw ghetto people could only watch black and white TV, that even the richest inhabitants had no more than two pairs of jeans, and that there were no snacks between the main meals of the day. This is historiography in the minds of Chicago teenagers who have never seen Europe. In the name of integral truth and faithful memory, we must not revise history nor forget what past generations paid for with their blood.

In fact, thanks to the power of our faith and our ability to collaborate in a common culture, we can counter the erosive impact of the passage of time. Together, we must save from oblivion that lost Atlantis as long as the people who preserve its outlines in their memory are still alive. A noteworthy example of how powerful that memory can be is provided by the life of Isaac Singer. The author of *Der kunstmakher fun Lublin*, (Tel Aviv, 1971) lived in America longer than in Poland, that is for over 40 years, and he actively participated in American life. Still, the protagonists of his stories are invariably Jews who arrived from Poland. Jews in Israel were close and dear to him, but he never made them the protagonists of his narratives. His faithful memory and his fascination with beauty remained in the townscape of bygone years: in the Warsaw Krochmalna Street, in Biłgoraj, among the poor Jews of Chełm. It was in Chełm that Jews were convinced that the first snow falling during Hanukah was made of silver, pearls, and diamonds; that is why they didn't let a "Shames," one who went round the houses waking Jews for prayer, tread on it.<sup>22</sup>

To them, Chełm was a universal metaphor. Percec concludes in one of his short stories: "There is something of a Chełm rabbi in each of us." Singer puts the following words in the mouth of a schlemiel who didn't get to Warsaw from Chełm because of redirected shoes: "Those who leave Chełm return to Chełm. Those who stay in Chełm are certainly in Chełm. All roads lead to Chełm."

The cultural universe of those Jews is revealed both in the poetry of the prosaic and in the attempts at constructing their own cosmogenesis representing the Chełm version of physics and astronomy. In 13 installments published in the USA, in the *Forverts* daily newspaper, we find the history of Chełm signed with Singer's pseudonym, D. Segal. Its first part is entitled "The Big Bang – the Origins of Chełm," while the chapter on the theory of biological evolution bears the title "A Fish Can Turn into a Goat and a Goat Can Become a Monkey." In the recapitulation of the history of Chełm, we read: "Chełm will always exist, and there will always be sages there." Our generation has been entrusted with the great task of protecting the meaning of life whose destruction was attempted in the name of absurd hatred. We must derive from history all that was inspired by God's wisdom and truth. We must believe that Chełm, where Jews were often treated with paternalistic tolerance, needs new sages with whom the experience of pain does not destroy the profound belief in the meaning of life. All roads lead to Chełm. We are responsible not only for directing future dialogue between Christianity and Judaism, but also for the community of values that we cherish, whose memory must not vanish in the global world.

#### Fidelity to tradition and the dilemmas of cultural pluralism

Stanisław Vincenz recalls that one of the Hasidim told him he was studying Russian and Polish literature. The Russian literature was Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy, whereas the Polish one was primarily religious: The Great Magid, the words of Baal Shem-Tov, Mendel of Vitebsk, Nachman of Bratslav, and others.<sup>23</sup> The memory of that tradition is sometimes continued in the centers where various elements of pluralist culture overlap. Rooms where Polish Catholics gather for prayer on the occasion of the Day of Judaism neighbor bookstalls offering *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. When Mickiewicz, Norwid, Miłosz or Herbert express their high regard for the role of Jews in Polish culture, other authors—much less known, but much more numerous—advise their readers to appreciate above all "true Poles," thus blurring the line between patriotism and nationalism.

One half century ago, Nazi propaganda utilized two bogeymen. On the one hand it frightened people with the image of the rich Jewish merchant, on the other with that of the Jewish pauper from the East. The first of these myths

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<sup>22</sup> The Snow in Chelm, in: *Zlateh the Goat and Other Stories*, New York 1966, pp. 29-34.

<sup>23</sup> Krajewski, „the Jewish Problem”, 74.

is still alive today and people are still being scared with images of Jewish high finance. For symmetry's sake, some Jewish circles frighten people with a simplified version of the Holocaust. When W. Bartoszewski's book *Ten jest z ojczyny mojej*, about Poles saving Jews, was published in English, it was boycotted by some opinion circles in the USA because it clashed with their simplistic ideological picture.

#### The uniqueness of the common patrimony

We need to unite our efforts to bring out with renewed enthusiasm the patrimony shared by Christians and Jews, of which *Nostra Aetate* says: the Church, mindful of the patrimony she shares with the Jews and moved not by political reasons but by the Gospel's spiritual love, decries hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone." The Church reproves, as foreign to the mind of Christ, any discrimination against men or harassment of them because of their race, color, condition of life, or religion.

We should bring out the testimonies of solidarity in the darkness of the Shoah—for example, the testimony of altruism demonstrated by Rev. Michał Piaszczyński from the Łomża diocese, the same diocese where Jedwabne belongs. When the Jews in the Sachsenhausen camp were deprived of their daily ration of bread, Father Piaszczyński shared his portion with a Jewish fellow-prisoner named Kott. In response to his generosity, he heard the following words: "You Catholics believe that in your churches Christ is hidden in the form of bread, and I believe that the living Christ is hidden in this bread, and that he told you to share with me"<sup>24</sup>

Skeptics say that Jews and Poles historically found it hard to coexist in the same land, if one considers the tradition of Polish messianism developed during the Partitions of Poland. One might sarcastically observe that two chosen nations in one land are one too many. It is, however, not a question of the theological concept of chosenness, but rather the psychological conviction of the unique character of one's own nation and its unique role in history. In the past we find many touching testimonies of how we were united in the same land by the same truth of the Book, the same tragedy of suffering, the same hope. I am always moved when rereading Stanisław Baliński's poem in which he tells of his encounter, at the beginning of WWII, with a Jewish fellow traveler on a train to Italy:

In a second-class compartment I sat  
Next to an old and sad Jew of Levant.  
His eyes looked tired,  
Tired—not by the journey, not by the present war,  
But earlier, yes much earlier  
By the never-ending journey that goes back  
To the ruins of Jerusalem  
That old man, fortuitous companion,  
Looked sadly into my eyes. He asked: You're from Poland?  
And guessed everything first...  
He gave me an orange,  
And whispered in French, though homesick in Polish:  
"A new journey of the world is beginning again."<sup>25</sup>

As fellow travelers on the same journey, we feel the common obligation to give witness to the same values. The common odyssey of those years cannot be summed up in simplified clichés. Instead, it has to be diligently reconstructed in the perspective set by *Nostra Aetate* and *Dabru Emet*. Prof. Źwida-Ziemba invokes this specifically Polish experience of common fate, remembering how in communist Poland after World War II her Jewish friends were forced to take part in dances organized on Good Friday. They protested and represented themselves as "Poles of Jewish faith."<sup>26</sup> In her polemic with the myth of "Jewish communists," according to which the number of Jews working with communist authorities was particularly great, Hanna Źwida-Ziemba writes: "To a religious Jew, a communist son was no less of a tragedy than to a pious Catholic." The whole complexity of human tragedies and moral choices cannot be conveyed in the language of statistics or black-and-white generalizations. The essence of dialogue is that it liberates its participants of simplified clichés, allowing them to discover more fully the complex truth about man and tragic dilemmas of human life.

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<sup>24</sup> Co dalej z dialogiem chrześcijańsko-żydowskim w Polsce? „Więź” (2001, 8) 107.

<sup>25</sup> Stanisław Baliński, *Rzecz sumienia*, Kolin Publishers: London 1942, 11.

<sup>26</sup> Hanna Źwida-Ziemba, *Rozbraja wlasne mity*, „Znak”, 52 (2000, 6) 46.

## New challenges and the future of our dialogue

When we consider the prospects for mutual contacts at the beginning of the third millennium, the following words of John Paul II are appropriate: “Whoever has encountered Jesus Christ has encountered Judaism.” Equally unambiguous are John Paul II’s words to representatives of the Jewish community during his apostolic pilgrimage to Australia, when he stressed that in Christian perspective any form of “acts of discrimination or the persecution of Jews [...] must be regarded as sinful.” This is not to say that all displays of anti-Semitic behavior—the sad heritage of Nazism—are things of the past. Certain Nazi symbols and slogans remain attractive only to young radicals who express their identity by aggression. Simultaneously, however, we observe a new form of anti-Semitism in the world. During international sessions, where radicalism frequently combines with political correctness, I very often encounter a simplistic critique of so-called “Americanism” and an all but obsessive preoccupation with Jewish political clout in the international forum. These obsessive claims that American or Israeli “imperialism” is the main source of evil in the international scale represent a new quality in anti-Semitic aggression. The Nazi model played out its pathological role. Today it cannot attract significant support, and as a result, those who invariably need a scapegoat try to fight American influence or Israeli policies. This is how they create a new quality in contemporary culture, often denominated as “the anti-Semitism of the left.”

Time also brings entirely new challenges and problems that the Jewish Diaspora has to confront. To many Jews living with Polish realities, the problem of today is the question of what they should hand down to their children as the foundation of their identity. This is an important problem in cases where parents consider themselves agnostic and wish to keep a critical distance from internal disputes between the representatives of Orthodox and liberal circles. Their bond with the Jewish culture is emotional rather based upon a deep, rational reflection. In this situation, one might form a “soft national identity”; however, the danger of dissolving into the surrounding world will remain real.<sup>27</sup> I am convinced that in the present circumstances, interreligious dialogue offers the best opportunity for defining one’s own identity and finding appropriate responses to the qualitatively new challenges of the contemporary world.

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. Helena Datner, “The Jewish Community in Poland,” in: *Jews and Christians in Dialogue II*, op. cit., 127-132.

## NOTES

1. Chone Shmeruk, *Wiat utracony: O twórczości Isaaca Bashevisa Singera* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2003).
2. See Michael Kirwan, *Discovering Girard* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2004).
3. Michał Czajkowski, "Wiara spotyka wiarę," *Znak* 572 (January 2003): 45.
4. See Alfred M. Wierzbicki, "The Lublin Diocesan Centre for Christian-Jewish Dialogue" in *Jews and Christians in Dialogue II: Identity – Tolerance – Understanding*, Södertörn Academic Studies 5 (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2000), 160.
5. M. Nowak, "The Holocaust and the Spiritual Contribution of Polish Catholic Priests" in *Jews and Christians in Dialogue II: Identity – Tolerance – Understanding*, Södertörn Academic Studies 5 (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2000), 158.
6. Tykva Frymer-Kensky et al., "Dabru emet: 'Mówcie prawdę,'" trans. Stanisław Krajewski, *Znak* 572 (January 2003): 63.
7. Shevah Weiss, Jacek Borkowicz, and Zbigniew Nosowski, "Albo bardzo dobrze, albo okropnie," *Więź* 558 (April 2005): 23.
8. Jerzy Pomianowski, *Wybór wrażeń*, (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2006), 81.
9. Isaac Bashevis Singer, "The Snow in Chelm" in *Zlateh the Goat and Other Stories* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 29–34.
10. Stanisław Krajewski, "'The Jewish Problem' as a Polish Problem" in "Under One Heaven: Poles and Jews," ed. Jacek Borkowicz, trans. William Brand, special issue, *Więź* (1998): 74.
11. Helena Datner et al., "Co dalej z dialogiem chrześcijańsko-żydowskim w Polsce?" *Więź* 514 (August 2001): 107.
12. Stanisław Baliński, *Rzecz sumienia* (London: Kolin, 1942), 11.
13. Hanna Włowska-Ziemba, "Rozbraja własne mity," *Znak* 541 (June 2000): 46.
14. Cf. Helena Datner, "The Jewish Community in Poland" in *Jews and Christians in Dialogue II: Identity – Tolerance – Understanding*, Södertörn Academic Studies 5 (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2000), 127–32.

## Occasional Papers

1. Language Wars: Language Policies and Globalization, Louis-Jean Calvet, April 2005.
2. Challenges facing American and European Catholic Universities: A View from the Vatican, Archbishop J. Michael Miller, CSB, November 2005.
3. Remarks on the Regensburg Controversy: R. Scott Appleby, Brad S. Gregory, Paul V. Kollman, CSC, A. Rashied Omar, William David Solomon, September 2006.
4. Neighbors? Jews and Catholics in Post-Shoah Poland, and The Theological and Pastoral Reception of *Nostra Aetate* in Poland, Archbishop H. E. Mons. Józef Zycinski, November 2006.