Accepting the Burden of History

31.10.2013 | Bishops' Conferences of the German Federal Republic, of Austria and of Berlin

Common Declaration on the Fiftieth anniversary of the pogroms against the Jewish Community (1988).

1. HISTORICAL REVIEW

"Those inconceivable sufferings, sorrows and tears are before my eyes and they have impressed themselves deeply on my soul. Indeed, only the one you know, you can love."

It was with these words that Pope John Paul II remembered the events of fifty years ago, during a meeting on June 24th 1988 with the representatives of the Jewish communities in Austria.[1]

At that time, during the night of the 9th-l0th November, 1938, and the following day, everywhere in the Grossdeutschen Reich, of which Austria had become a part since the Anschluss, synagogues were set on fire or destroyed. Jewish cemeteries were desecrated and countless Jewish shops and homes were demolished and looted. Many Jews were murdered in these pogroms, instigated by the N.S. (National Socialist) leadership, and countless Jews were maltreated. Tens of thousands were deported for days or weeks to the concentration camps at Dachau, Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen. Most of them left this place of their humiliation and affliction seriously hurt in body and soul. There was the added insult and mockery that those who were wronged had to pay a "compensation" of one thousand million Reichsmark.

The N.S. press presented these riots as "spontaneous" actions of revenge of an infuriated populace; soon the word K ristallnacht, made to sound inoffensive, was passed round. But everybody knew that in reality the November pogroms had been street tenor of the vilest dimensions, ordered from above, but organized on the spot. That is why there could be found in the population, besides active participation, demonstrative staying away; besides malicious joy, also shame: besides indifference, also inner horror, and besides a timid looking away, also a readiness to help. But nowhere could be found rallies of protest.

Today many complain that at that time even the Christian churches did not speak a public word of condemnation. Sure enough, many priests and lay people were disciplined by the N.S. authorities because of their public criticism of the anti-Jewish outrages. We know of the witness of the Berlin Canon Bernhard Lichtenberg, who later went to his death for his brave actions. However, our predecessors in the episcopate did not raise a common protest from the pulpit.

Their silence also raises questions, because there could be no doubt as to an uncompromising "no" of the Church towards Hitler's race politics. In his encyclical letterM it brennender Sorge,on March 14th 1937, Pope Pius XI declared that whoever exalted race, people or nation to the highest norm, falsified "the divinely created and divinely ordained order of things"[2] A year later, on April 13th 1938, the same Pope appealed to all Catholic universities and Catholic theological faculties to fight antisemitism in word and writing. In September 1938, he said, "Antisemitism is a revolting

movement, of which we Christians cannot be part... Antisemitism cannot be justified. Spiritually we are semites."[3]

The German bishops decided – before November 9th, 1938 – on Guidelines for the clergy concerning N.S. ethnology. In these they declared: "... In the Church there is fundamentally no difference between people and people, race and race." This, certianly, was no direct intervention on behalf of the Jews, but from the point of view of the dictators, it was absolutely clear and therefore provocative. For, through permanently questioning the racist ideology, the Church was shaking the ideological foundations of the regime. In a basic statement of Cologne's Cardinal Schulte, it was pointed out that the main aim of all pastoral care ought to N "to deepen and strengthen the life of faith in as many Catholics as possible to such a degree that they were able to withstand the trials of the time, even if the ultimate witness to their faith was demanded of them." This statement caused the Church to become, in the eyes of the National Socialists, the main opponent to their ideology. Shortly after the November pogroms, an official government opinion poll stated, "It is only those circles influenced by the Church that still stand aloof from the 'Jewish question").[4]

But was this enough: the education of conscience and ideological immunisation, in the face of burning synagogues and thousands of abused Jewish fellow-citizens? These questions we ask ourselves, looking back after fifty years. Would not public protest, a clearly recognizable gesture of humaneness and sympathy, have been the duty demanded from the Church's office as guardian?

These questions depress us all the more, as we, – in contrast to those of that era–ask them, with our knowledge of "Auschwitz". But it is difficult to find a clear, unambiguous answer to these questions. We do not know the reasons of the episcopate; moreover, we lack the sources as to the attitudes and expectations of the laity. But one thing is certain: the bishops' caution can only be understood against the background of the National Socialist fight against the Church, which was a question of life or death for the Church.

At the beginning of October, 1938, this battle against the Church in Austria had reached its first climax with the destruction of the Archbishop's Palace in Vienna. In Munich, simultaneously with the November pogroms, under the slogan, "Against world Jewry and its black and red cronies", the residence of Cardinal Faulhaber was stormed.[5] A few weeks prior to this, Bishop Sprott of Rottenburg had been expelled from his diocese after staged riots. Therefore, a great part of the population saw the anti-Jewish outrages as a rehearsal for future attacks on the Catholic (and Protestant) Church. This, too, was the bishops' fear. In their common pastoral letter, of August 19th 1938, they described as the aim of the N.S. Church Politics, "The destruction of the Catholic Church among our people, yes, even the annihilation of Christianity". So, to all appearances, the bishops tried everything not to provoke a further escalation of this fight against the Church. But in the following years they intensified their practical, but non-spectacular charitable efforts in favour of the persecuted. The Raphae1 is Society, the Caritas and the aid organizations of Bishop Preysing (Berlin), Archbishop Groeber (Freiburg) and Cardinal Innitzer (Vienna) were, for many, the last chance of rescue before deportations to the death camps of the East started in 1942.

But apart from all these considerations of expediency, we ask if in November 1938 yet other expressions of brotherly solidarity would not have been possible and expected; forexamp le, a common prayer for the innocently persecuted, or a demonstrative, renewed intensification of the Christian law of love. That this was neglected, saddens us today when we perceive the defence of basic human rights as a duty that goes beyond denominations, classes and races.

One has to consider, though, that many an attitude which we consider self-evident today grew only as a result of a tough confrontation with the N.S. regime. The readiness to champion other people's human rights, beyond the interests of one's own Church, is just as much part of it as the rejection of any special law against individual groups of society. It has long been Catholic tradition

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to examine state laws and state activities in the light of norms of natural rights which are not at the disposal of dictators. The bishops and the faithful had to learn –just like others – painful lessons in the face of N.S. injustice that mocked human dignity and human rights. This was accompanied by enormous tensions which brought the Fulder Bishops' Conference to the brink of breaking apart.

We know that with this historical review and with a presentation of the circumstances of the time not everything can be explained and certainly not excused. Among us Catholics, too, there has been failure and guilt. In August 1945, the Fulder Bishops' Conference declared: "Many Germans, also from our ranks, allowed themselves to be deluded by the false teachings of National Socialism. They remained indifferent in the face of crimes against human freedom and human dignity; many supported these crimes through their attitude; many became criminals themselves. A heavy responsibility weighs on those who, because of their rank, were in a position to know what was happening among us; who could have prevented such crimes by their influence and did not do it; who even made these crimes possible and so placed themselves in solidarity with the criminals."

The bishops in the Federal Republic of Germany took this up, when they said in a statement in 1980, "Integral to the duty of Christian charity towards the Jews is also the continuous prayer for the milllions of Jews murdered in the course of history, and the continuous plea to God for forgiveness of the many failures and omissions of which Christians have been guilty in their attitude towards the Jews. In Germany we have a special reason to ask for forgiveness of God and our Jewish brothers." Thus we repeat the psalmist's cry, "If you, 0 Lord, should mark our guilt, Lord, who would survive? but with you is found forgiveness; for this we revere you." (Ps 130:3f)

2. REFLECTION AND CONVERSION

The memory of November 1938 and the twelve years of N.S. rule is depressing. Therefore, some of us ask whether the remembering of the past ought not, at some time, to come to an end. However, one cannot accept one's own history in a selective fashion and block out those things that incriminate. We have to accept the burden of history. We owe this to the victims, whose sufferings and death may not be forgotten. We owe this to the survivors and relatives because, otherwise, every dialogue with them and each new "being-with-one-anotheC would be impossible. But we also owe this to the Church and to ourselves. For history is not something exterior, it is part of the particular identity of the Church and is able to remind us that the Church, which weproclaim as holy, and which we honour as a mystery, is also a sinful Church and in need of conversion. Therefore our interest must never slacken to re-present this history to ourselves in as comprehensive and as exact a way as possible. for this reason we shall also, in future, advance the research and presentation of our history with all our strength, and do all that is in our power to ensure that the historical truth will be fully told in the teaching of religion, in catechesis and in other fields. For the sake of this truth we shall also oppose all attempts of manipulating history for the sake of present-day differences of opinion in the Church, the state or in society and to misuse it for personal attacks against individuals or whole groups. Respect for the victims demands this as well.

To accept history means to allow oneself to be challenged by its bright and dark sides. Under the national socialist rule of terror there has been not only failure and guilt, but refusalto give and sympathy with the victims as well. Occasionally both were closed to each other and concerned one and the same person. Guilt or refusal to give-in are always the consequences of the individual's free, personal decision. Therefore it is difficult to prove them through subsequent analyses and to attribute them to the individual or even to whole groups of society. But even if one cannot and may not condemn a whole people, there still remains the co-responsibility of all for the things that happened in the name of all and for its consequences. This is also true for the Church. The German Bishops' Conference of September I st 1979 stated: 'We know that (here has been guilt in the Church as well. We know ourselves bound in conscience to an on-going effort to draw the consequences from the mistakes and confusion of that terrible time."[6]

Days of remembrance repeatedly remind us of these commitments. The remembrance, too, during these days, of the November pogroms of 1938 should be a warning sign for us. But days of remembrance must not remain isolated events. They have to be embedded in a constant effort to contribute to a positive change of attitudes and actions, through remembering the past. The main challenge lies in this duty that constantly recurs. We have to confront it. Occasional setbacks and misunderstandings may also occur in the process. These we have to face with the inner calmness which one can obviously only achieve, if the focus remains firmly in sight. We have to be ready occasionally to allow ourselves to be overtaxed without-as was. aid on the first German post-war Catholics' Day (Katholiken Tag), 1948 - "forfeiting one's composure or even one's bve".[7] But there are also signs and openings that encourage us. We gratefully call to mind that this process of re-thinking has been co-initiated and sustained by the Jewish side, as well, when prominent representatives °Newry took the dialogue on their own initiative. We have to continue on this path. A special emphasis will have to be given to the efforts of a genuine understanding and presentation of Judaism and Jewish religion in theology and catechesis. Furthermore, nothing ought to be left untried to promote the understanding between Jews and Christians through direct encounter and to draw from the past the necessary consequences for their joint service of God's word.

With these key words those areas are dealt with which are and still are of special importance in the efforts of the past years to create a new togetherness between Jews and Christians. They have been taken up in a great number of basic statements and declarations, which were presented by the Holy See, numerous local churches, lay people and also joint discussion groups of Jews and Christians. Of special importance among these documents is the Declaration Nostra Aetate (article 4), promulgated by Vatican II in 1965, which introduced a new beginning in Christian Jewish relations. Related to this document are the Guidelines for its implementation, as well as recommendations for preaching and teaching, which were issued in 1974 and 1985 by the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews. In various countries these recommendations have been taken up and have been concretized in particular texts for specific occasions. In this way the German Bishops' Conference (1980), the Austrian Bishops' Conference (1982) and the Berlin Bishops' conference (1988) have clearly stated their position.[8] Apart from these, the working paper published in 1979 and the declaration of the discussion panel, "Jews and Christians", at the Central Committeeof the German Catholics of 1988, deserve special attention, because they had been worked out jointly by Jews and Christians.[9] These and other documents, as well as the repeated meetings of Church representatives with representatives of Jewish organizations - the last during the pastoral visit of Pope John Paul II in Austria-are indications of the serious desire of many "that the old prejudices may be overcome and that space may be given for an ever fuller recognition of that 'bond' and of the 'spiritual common heritage' which exist between Jews and Christians" (John Paul II, 13 April 1986). The remembrance of the November pogroms ought to be a renewed incentive to interiorize these documents in their intentions and contents and to continue on this road that has been prepared.

3. "YOU ARE OUR DEARLY BELOVED"

The need to encounter one another is especially evident in theology. Over centuries, errors, misunderstandings and prejudices concerning faith and religion have heavily burdened the relationship between Jews and Christians on both sides. Here are to be found - besides political, social and economic resentments-the sources of anti-Judaism, which was also propagated among Catholics. These traditional prejudices have weakened the forces of resistance against the new phenomenon of modem antisemitism, which elevated race to the highest principle and which became the central feature of the National Socialist ideology. The extermination of Jews in the "Third Reich" has painfully brought home to us our own deficiencies and failures. "The terrible persecutions which the Jews have suffered in the various epochs of history have finally opened the eyes and roused the hearts." (Pope John Paul II, 6 March 1982) In the process we were able to

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rediscover–both in shame and gratitude – the Jewish people as the people of God's first and never-revoked covenant with man. Following the teaching of the Council (Vatican II), Pope John Paul II said during his visit to the Synagogue of Rome on 13 April 1986, "For us, the Jewish religion is not something 'exterior', but in a certain sense belongs to the innermost part of our religion. Our relationships to it are unlike any of those we have to other religions. You are our dearly beloved brothers and, one could even say, our elder brothers."

This special bond between Christians and Jews is clearly evident if one traces the roots of Christianity and if one considers the spiritual heritage of Israel for the Church. The faith in one creator God is just as common to both as the commandments of the decalogue or the hope for the messiah. We Christians are called upon to reexamine our understanding of Jews and Judaism from this point of view of mutuality and to change where necessary. But there can be no question of denying what truly separates us or to make false compromises. The person of Jesus both unites and separates us; Jesus, who was a Jew and who for us christians is Son of God and redeemer of the world. But illuminating the common roots gives us abetter understanding of Judaism in its true identity and at the same time helps us to uncover dimensions of our faith that have perhaps been buried. This clarification should, wherever possible, be sought by Christians and Jews together. A dialogue can unfold – fruitful for both sides–about the Old Testament or the importance of Jesus. This joint engagement, however, of Jews and Christians is urgently demanded and is of greatest importance if it concerns faith in the one God. In the faceof the temptations coming from new, esoteric myths and promises of salvation, the witness is indispensable of all those who believe in God the creator and redeemer of the whole world.

4. PREACHING AND TEACHING TO SPEAK CORRECTLY ABOUT JEWS AND JUDAISM

With the Declaration Nostra Aetate, Vatican 11 has expressly brought to mind the bond "by which the people of the New Covenant is spiritually united with the seed of Abraham'. In order to bring about a genuine dialogue between Christians and Jews, the Council has emphasized the importance of "mutual knowledge and esteem". The Guidelines of the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews concretize this concern and urge Christians to learn "by what essential traits the Jews define themselves in the light of their own religious experience". In this way not only individual areas of information and instruction are addressed, but "all levels of Christian doctrine and education". The range of information-media thus envisaged extends from catechetical writings and historical representations to the "media of mass-communication (press, radio, film, television)". A few years ago the same Commission took up again the ideas of the Guidelines and presented – with regard to the contents – "Instructions for a correct presentation of Jews and Judaism in the Preaching and Teaching of the Catholic Church".

Corresponding to these documents and efforts on a world-wide level there are numerous initiatives and activities in various local churches which aim at a proper presentation and appreciation of Jews and Judaismwithin preaching. The above-mentioned statements of the three Bishops' Conferences fit within this framework just as much as the proclamations of the discussion group "Jews and Christians" at the Central Committee of the German Catholics. These incentives and aids are already producing their first fruits. This issue assumes a new value in the formation of priests, in religious education and in catechesis, during conferences of Catholic academies and educational institutions, or in Church publications. We should not forget to mention the impressive German Catholics' Day (Katholiken Tage), during which, with a great participation of young people, the Christian Jewish dialogue and the joint prayer have formed a special focal point for quite some time. Moreover, there are the two Vienna conferences entitled "Shalom", because jn Austria these have greatly contributed in helping the representatives of the "Israelite Cult Community" (Kultusgemeinde) to prepare their on-going dialogue. During the Dresden Catholics' Meeting, 1987, as well, the question of the Christian-le w ish dialogue played an essential role. This is no

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reason for complacency. It gives courage, however, to continue and not to slacken in our efforts. Particularly encouraging is the fact that a part of these initiatives is also carried by the Jews. We owe them grateful recognition.

5. EFFORTS FOR RECONCILIATION

During the Third Reich great wrong has been inflicted on numerous peoples and groups in the name of Gemiany.ln 1945 it was rather doubtful whether it would be possible once more to succeed in establishing a relationship with our neighbours which was born out of trust and mutual esteem. And yet, the unbelievable has happened. The victims themselves have decisively contributed to this –as the late Cardinal Heffner commented.[10]

To attain a reconciliation with the Jews all overthe world is a still greater task which is far from being accomplished. The hurts are deep. The Jews have been threatened with the "Final Solution', total annihilation. The sacrifices of the Jews in the "Shoah" are immeasurable. And yet we have constantly trimake every effort to obtain areconciliation. In this effort the common religious and cultural roots of Jews and Christians can form a particular point of contact and can contribute to a mutual openness. Central, however, is personal encounter. In this sense, all initiatives which allow immediate contacts, everything that makes dialogue possible and all Mat widens our horizon across the frontiers of peoples, faiths, and social groupings, deserve ongoing support. Much has been done. Much is still to be done. We place great hopes in the openness andreadiness for mutual understanding of the youth, which, in future, will have to build up the relationship between Jews and Christians. It may succeed, in causing the common memory to bring forth a new togetherness and a mutual responsibility for the shaping of the future. The will to openness and readiness for dialogue is necessary on both sides. But just as we MAY not forget, we must accept that many Jews CANNOT forget. Many of those, who themselves had to suffer under the persecutions, but also many of the suceeding generation cannot yet show this openness. Their hurt is too deep. We have to meet them with respect. Reconciliation can neither be forced nor bought, but only he achieved through a long process of walking towards one another.

6. COMMON TASKS IN THE WORLD

During the visit of Pope John Paul H to the Synagogue of Rome, Chief Rabbi Toaff said, "We cannot... forget the past. However, full of confidence and hope, we want to mark today the beginning of a new era of history which promises to be fruitful through joint action, which eventually, in the spirit of partnership, of equality and of mutual respect, may profit the whole of humanity". This consciousness of mutuality among Christians and Jews, but also among all human beings of good-will grew under national socialist affliction. It broke away from a pattern of thinking and acting which envisaged, above all, the interests of one's own group – whether political party, trade union or church – and which left little space for a mutual sense of responsibility. Yet, at the same time, the conditions fora mutual engagement of Jews and Christians for and with one another are given in a special manner/ both respect the dignity of human beings and acknowledge a task in the human fashioning of the world, because they believe in the creative act of God guaranteed in the Book of Genesis. Therefore both ought determinedly to take their part in ensuring that this consciousness of mutuality is not buried again and that a new "thinking in categories" cannot once more gain a footing in the state and in society.

The areas for mutual engagement of Jews and Christians in the shaping of the world are manifold and also different from one country to another: in the forefront are the efforts in promoting human dignity, the ethical consolidation of the ordering of State and society and the guaranteeing of human rights. In spite of all public protestations and international agreements, human rights are still endangered worldwide–be it for racial, religious, social or political reasons. Especially endangered is the first right of man, the right of life. This is not only true of regions of special

oppression and crisis, but also for ourselves, where every year hundreds of thousands of children are killed in their mothers' wombs. The experiences of history teach us that all barriers are breaking where the life of the individual is no longer respected. "Nobody's life is safe unless it is stated incontestably 'You shall not kill (Fulder Bishops' Conference, 1942).

However, Christians and Jews should also work together if it is a question of fighting against any unjustified disadvantage and discrimination of individuals or of whole groups for ideological, religious or other reasons. Religious freedom and freedom of conscience are precious gifts. Therefore Christians and Jews ought to support a just social order, which is marked by mutual respect and tolerance, which safeguards everybody's inalienable rights and which does not give room to anti-Semitism or any other ideology that holds human beings in contempt. In this way Christians and Jews are called in a special manner to a service of justice and peace.

Furthermore, they are called to a service of peace in the world, the dangers of which are well known to us. The first step towards this is also here to recognize the human being in the other and neither to question his right to life nor his opportunities for development. Just as within a state, so also among nations, the word holds true: "justice creates peace (Is 32: I7)—the word which—referring to the motto of Pope Pius XII — stands above the present efforts of the Christian churches to work for peace, justice and the preservation of creation.

And finally, our engagement for the preservation of creation is demanded. The way our natural surroundings are threatened by technical civilization is a reminder for us of the task to deal responsibly and competently with creation, not to pillage the treasure of the earth irresponsibly and to consider the consequences of our actions for ourselves and the successive generations. We ought to impress upon our minds and that of others that we are all "creatures", not masters of this world.

For each one of us and for all of us together a vast scope of tasks presents itself here, where what is uniting carries more weight than what divides. History shows us the necessity of acting creatively in good time. In proportion to this manner of acting will grow — thus, we hope — not only the insight into the mutuality of Jews and Christians, but also into the mutuality of all people of good will.

"Reconciliation comes about through remembering" (Martin Buber). One cannot create this reconciliation with one's own hands; it is basically God's work. As a conclusion to this statement we would like to bring in prayer before the Lord of history those events, which are the cause of our remembrance. Only from there can strength and courage flow towards us on the difficult path to reconciliation.

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[1] L'Osservatore Romano, German edition of July 1T, 1988. The texts related to the Christian-Jewish dialogue are collected in the volume, The Church and Judaism. Documents from 1945 to 1985, Paderborn, Munich 1988, edited by Rolf Rendtorff and Hans Hermann Henrix. Individual references are therefore given only for those texts that are not included in this volume. As to the historic sources, reference is made to the Documents of the German Bishops on the Situation of the Church 19331945, Volumes 1-6, Mainz

1968-1985, published by Bernhard Stasiewski and then by Ludwig Volk Individual references are given here as well only for those sources, which are not printed in this series.

[2] Printed in Dieter Albrecht (revised), Exchange of Diplomatic Notes Between the Holy See and the Government of the German Reich, Volume 1, Mainz 1965, pp. 402-443.

[3] Annotation from Rudolf Lill, Catholicism Alter 1848, in Karl Heinrich Rengstorf, Siegfried von Kortzfleisch (Publ.), Church and Synagogue. A Handbook on the History of Christians and dews. Presentation and Sources, Volume 2, Stuttgart 1970, p.366.

[4] Helmut Witetschek, The Church's Position in Bavaria According to the President's Reports, 1933-1943, Volume 1; Administrative District of upper Bavaria, Mainz 1966, p. 300.

[5] Ludwig Volk (Revised): Documents of Cardinal Michael von Faulhaber 19171945, Volume 2, Mainz 1978, p. 604.

[6] Statement of the German Bishops of August 27th, 1979, on the occasion of the 40th Anniversary of the outbreak of World War II, in Secretariat of the

German Bishops' Conference (ed.), Remembrance and Responsibility, Working Aids 30, (Bonn 1983).

[7] The Christian in the Peril of the Era, Paderborn 1949, p. 216.

[8] The German Bishops' Statement on the Church's Attitude to Judaism, of April 28, 1980, in Rendtorff/Henrix, pp. 260-280. Bishops' Conference of Austria/Pastoral Commission of Austria, The Christians and Judaism, April 1982, in Rendtortf/Henrix, pp. 205-215. Pastoral Letter of the Berlin Bishops' Conference on the 50th Anniversary of the Reich's Night of Pogrom (Kristallnacht), November 1988.

[9] Dialogue group Jews and Christians, at the Central Committee of German Catholics; working paper: Theological Emphases of the Jewish-Christian Dialogue, of May 8th, 1979, in Rendtorff/Henrix, pp. 252-260. After 50 Years - How to Talk of Guilt, Sorrow and Reconciliation?- Statement of the dialogue group Jews and Christians of the Central Committee of German Catholics, 50 years afar the Reich's Night of Pogroms (Kristalinacht) in Reports and Documents 68, pp. 30-46. (see SIDIC XXI:3 1988 p. 26). The Central Committee of German Catholics, is the agency recognized by the German Bishops' Conference, for the co-ordinating of the efforts of the lay-apostolate and for the promotion of apostolic activity of the Church in the Federal Republic of Germany and in West Berlin. Membership consists mainly of representatives of the diocesan council and of the central associations and organizations.

[10] Joseph Cardinal Höffner, Sermon in the Ecumenical Service in Cologne Cathedral, 8 May 1985, in Press and Information Office of the Government al the Federal Republic (Ed.), Remembrance, Grief and Reconcillanon. Addresses and Statements on the Occasion of the 40th Anniversary of the end of the war .

Translated from German; source: Notre Dame de Sion.