



Catholic Bishops of Poland: The Victims of Nazi Ideology

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Statement by the Catholic Bishops in Poland, 1995

Half a century has passed since the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp on January 27, 1945. Once again our attention is drawn to the painful reality and symbolism of this camp, where more than 1 million Jews, Poles (70,000-75,000), Gypsies (21,000), Russians (15,000), and other nationalities (10,000-15,000) found an atrocious death.

Only a few months into the war, in the spring of 1940, the Nazi Germans created the Auschwitz concentration camp on occupied Polish territory annexed to the Third Reich. At the beginning of its existence, the first prisoners and victims were thousands of Poles, mainly intelligentsia, members of the resistance movement as well as clergy and people representing almost all walks of life. There probably isn't a Polish family that hasn't lost someone close at Auschwitz or at another camp. With great respect we bow our heads before the infinite suffering which was often accepted in a deep Christian spirit. An eloquent example is the heroic figure of Fr. Maximilian Kolbe, who sacrificed his life for a fellow prisoner in August 1941. He was beatified by Pope Paul VI and canonized by Pope John Paul II. His victory, motivated by the Gospel of Jesus Christ, bears witness to the power of love and goodness in a world of outrage and violence.

Almost from the beginning, Polish Jews were sent to this camp, as part of Polish society, to be destroyed. Since 1942, the Auschwitz-Birkenau complex, as well as other camps in occupied Poland, as a result of the Wannsee Conference became extermination camps to realize the criminal ideology of the "final solution," in other words, the plan to murder all European Jews. The Nazis transported to the death camps Jews from all European countries occupied by Hitler. Not only Auschwitz, but also Majdanek, Treblinka, Belzec, Chelmno, and others were located in occupied Poland by the Germans as places to exterminate Jews, because this was where the majority of European Jews lived and, therefore, such a Nazi crime could be better hidden from world public opinion in a country totally occupied and even partly annexed to the Third Reich.

It is estimated today that more than 1 million Jews died at Auschwitz-Birkenau alone. Consequently, even though members of other nations also perished at this camp, nevertheless, Jews consider this camp a symbol of the total extermination of their nation. "The very people who received from God the commandment 'Thou shalt not kill,' itself experienced in a particular way what is meant by killing" (John Paul II, homily at Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp, June 7, 1979).

Extermination, called Shoah, has weighed painfully not only in relations between Germans and Jews, but also to a great extent in relations between Jews and Poles, who together,

though not to the same degree, were the victims of Nazi ideology. Because they lived in close proximity, they became involuntary witnesses to the extermination of Jews. Regretfully, it has to be stated that for many years Auschwitz-Birkenau was treated by the communist regime almost entirely in terms of an anti-fascist struggle that did not help to convey the extent of the extermination of Jews.

It must be underlined that Poles and Jews have lived in this country for centuries, and although now and again conflicts did arise, they considered it their homeland. Driven out of western Europe, Jews found refuge in Poland. Consequently, Poland often had the reputation of being paradisus Judaerorum ("a Jewish paradise"), because here they could live according to their customs, religion, and culture. Contrary to many European countries, until the time of World War II, Jews were never driven out of Poland. About 80 percent of Jews living in the world today can trace their descent through their parents and/or grandparents to roots in Poland.

The loss of Polish independence and Poland's partition by Russia, Austria, and Prussia—which lasted more than 120 years—brought about, in the midst of other dramatic consequences, a deterioration in Polish-Jewish relations. In the period of time between World War I and World War II, when Poland, after regaining her independence in 1918, sought to find forms of her own identity, new conflicts arose. Their underlying factors were of psychological, economic, political and religious nature but never racist*. Despite the antisemitism of some circles, shortly before the outbreak of World War II, when Hitler's repressions intensified, it was Poland that accepted thousands of Jews from Germany.

Seeing the Nazi extermination of Jews, many Poles reacted with heroic courage and sacrifice, risking their lives and that of their families. The virtues of the Gospel and solidarity with the suffering and the persecuted motivated almost every convent in the general government to give Jewish children refuge. Many Poles lost their lives, in defiance of threats of the death penalty with regard to themselves and their family members, because they dared to shelter Jews. It should be mentioned that, as a consequence of giving refuge to Jews, the rule of common responsibility was applied to Poles. Often whole families, from children to grandparents, were killed for harboring Jews. In acknowledgment of this, thousands were awarded with medals "righteous among the nations of the world." Nameless others also brought help.

Unfortunately, there were also those who were capable of actions unworthy of being called Christian. There were those who not only blackmailed, but also gave away Jews in hiding into German hands. Nothing can justify such an attitude, though the inhumane time of war and the cruelty of the Nazis led to Jews, themselves tormented by the occupier, being forced to hand over their brothers into the hands of the Germans. Once again, we recall the words of the Polish bishops' pastoral letter that was read at all Catholic churches and chapels on January 20, 1991, which stated: "In spite of numerous heroic examples of Polish Christians, there were those who remained indifferent to that inconceivable tragedy. In particular, we mourn the fact that there were also those among Catholics who in some way had contributed to the death of Jews. They will forever remain a source of remorse in the social dimension."

The creators of Auschwitz were the Nazi Germans, not Poles. Everything that symbolizes this death camp is a result of a National Socialist ideology that was not born in Poland. Another totalitarian system, similar to the Nazi, which was communism, gathered many millions in a harvest of death. Nazism also meant trampling on the dignity of the human being as an image of God. There existed a dramatic community of fate between Poles and Jews in constraint and ruthless extermination. However, it was the Jews who became the victims of the Nazi plan of systematic and total liquidation. "An insane ideology decided on this plan in the name of a wretched form of racism and carried it out mercilessly" (John Paul II, beatification of Edith

Stein, Cologne, Germany, May 1, 1987).

The world in which the cruelties of Auschwitz were carried out was also a world redeemed and at the same time a world of challenge, even after the Shoah, from where arises the message to all Christians that they should reveal God in their actions and not contribute to the questioning of his presence. God was and continues to be everywhere. What is satanic and represents hatred never originates from God but from man, who submits himself to the influence of the Evil One and doesn't respect the dignity of the human being or God's commandments.

The half century that has passed since the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau obliges us to express a clear objection to all signs of disregard for human dignity such as racism, antisemitism, xenophobia, and anti-Polish attitudes. Living in a country marked with the burden of a horrible event called Shoah, with Edith Stein, who died at Auschwitz because she was a Jew, with faith and total confidence in God, the Father of all humanity, we emphatically repeat: Hatred will never have the last word in this world (John Paul II's message prior to visiting the Federal Republic of Germany, April 25, 1987).

The only guarantee of this is to educate future generations in the spirit of mutual respect, tolerance, and love according to the recommendations contained in the Holy See's [Notes on the Correct Way to Present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Catholic Church](#) (June 24, 1985).