



On the 50th anniversary of the liberation of the extermination camp at Auschwitz

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Statement

of the German Catholic Bishops

on the 50th anniversary of the liberation of the

extermination camp of Auschwitz

27 January 1945

I

On January 7, 1945 the concentration camps of Auschwitz I and Auschwitz-Birkenau were liberated. Numerous people were murdered there in a terrible manner: Poles, Russians, Roma and Sinti people as well as members of other nations. The overwhelming majority of prisoners and victims in this camp consisted of Jews. Therefore Auschwitz has become the symbol of the extermination of European Jewry which is called Holocaust, or — using the Hebrew term — Shoah..

The crime against the Jews was planned and put into action by the National Socialist rulers in Germany. The "unprecedented crime" which was the Shoah (Pope John Paul II on June 9, 1991) still raises many questions which we must not evade. The commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz gives German Catholics the opportunity to re-examine their relationship with the Jews. At the same time this day recalls the fact that Auschwitz is also part of the Polish history of suffering and burdens the relationship between Poles and Germans.

II

Already during earlier centuries, Jews were exposed to persecution, oppression, expulsion and even to mortal danger. Many looked for and found refuge in Poland. However, there were also places and regions in Germany where Jews could live relatively untroubled. Since the 18th

century, there was a new chance of a peaceful coexistence in Germany. Jews decisively contributed towards the development of German science and culture. Nevertheless, an anti-Jewish attitude remained also within the Church. This was one of the reasons why during the years of the Third Reich Christians did not offer due resistance to racial antisemitism. Many times there was failure and guilt among Catholics. Not few of them got involved in the ideology of National Socialism and remained unmoved in the face of the crimes committed against Jewish-owned property and the life of Jews. Others paved the way for crimes or even became criminals themselves. It is unknown how many people were horrified at the disappearance of their Jewish neighbours and yet were not strong enough to raise their voices in protest. Those who rendered aid to others, thereby risking their own lives, frequently did not receive support. Today the fact is weighing heavy on our minds that there were but individual initiatives to help persecuted Jews, and that even the pogroms of November 1938 were not followed by public and express protest, i.e., when hundreds of synagogues were set on fire and vandalised, cemeteries were desecrated, thousands of Jewish-owned shops were demolished, innumerable dwellings of Jewish families were damaged and looted, people were ridiculed, ill-treated and even killed. The retrospect on the events of November 1938 and on the terror regime of the National Socialists during 12 years visualises the heavy burden of history. It recalls "that the Church, which we proclaim as holy and which we honour as a mystery, is also a sinful Church and in need of conversion" (statement by the German and Austrian bishops" conferences on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the pogroms of November 1938).

Failure and guilt of that time have also a church dimension. We remind ourselves of that fact by quoting the witness given by the Joint Synod of Dioceses in the Federal Republic of Germany:

"We are that country whose recent political history was darkened by the attempt to systematically exterminate the Jewish people. And in this period of National Socialism —despite of the exemplary behaviour of some individuals and groups — we were nevertheless as a whole a church community who kept on living its life too often in turning its back to the fate of the persecuted Jewish people, who looked too fixedly at the threat to its own institutions and who remained silent about the crimes committed against the Jews and Judaism." The practical sincerity of our will to renewal is also linked to the confession of this guilt and the willingness to painfully learn from this history of guilt of our country and of our Church as well." (Resolution "Our Hope" November 2, 1975).

We ask the Jewish people to hear this word of conversion and will of renewal.

III

Auschwitz confronts us Christians with the question about the relationship we have with the Jews and whether this relationship corresponds to the spirit of Jesus Christ. antisemitism is "a sin against God and humanity," as Pope John Paul II has said many times. In the Church there must not be any room for and consent to hostility towards Jews. Christians must not harbour aversion, dislike, and even less, feelings of hatred against Jews and Judaism. Wherever such an attitude comes to light they have the duty to offer public and outspoken resistance.

The Church respects the autonomy of Judaism. Simultaneously she has to learn anew that she is descended from Israel and remains linked to its patrimony concerning faith, ethos and liturgy. Wherever it is possible, Christian and Jewish communities should cultivate mutual contacts. We have to do everything in our power to enable Jews and Christians in our country to live together as good neighbours. In this way they will make their own distinctive contribution to a Europe whose past was darkened by the Shoah and which, in the future, is to become a continent of solidarity.

Würzburg, January 23, 1995