



Statement on Religious Symbols at Birkenau

16.12.1997

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Statement by National Polish American-Jewish American Council on Religious Symbols at Birkenau Death Camp (December 17, 1997)

The recent decision to move religious symbols from the Birkenau death camp in Poland to appropriate religious institutions represents an important and promising breakthrough in Polish-Jewish relations. The National Polish American-Jewish American Council applauds the move and the leadership of so many who helped bring the problem of the religious symbols to this successful resolution.

It would be easy to dismiss this development as "merely" symbolic. But we must not ignore the fact that symbols play a large role in interpreting what happened to Jews and Poles at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Nor should we overlook the complex history of Polish-Jewish relations and the fact that often both Poles and Jews regard the camps in different ways.

At issue was the presence of religious symbols - 11 crosses and eight stars of David - on the sites of Birkenau's "fields of ashes." These fields are the final resting places of more than a million Jews who were murdered in the camp's notorious machine of death, rendering Birkenau the largest Jewish cemetery in the world. The symbols had been planted there in the 1980s by Polish boy scouts whose intention was to honor, if not sanctify, those who perished there.

In recent years, Jewish leaders raised concerns that, notwithstanding the admirable intentions behind the placement of the religious symbols, Christian crosses disserved the memory of the victims and could confuse future generations as they struggle to comprehend the history of the place.

But removing crosses from such a site in a society where Christianity and national identity are so tightly entwined cannot be, and was not, considered lightly. Nor can the reality that approximately 75,000 Christian Poles were killed at Auschwitz -- Birkenau's companion camp. Many Poles lament that this fact of Polish victimization there has been overshadowed by the enormity of the loss European Jewry suffered at the hands of the Nazis. Some have said the removal of the symbols "secularizes" a place that cries out for spirituality and religious commemoration.

The crosses have been moved to a church in Oświęcim, the town surrounding Auschwitz-Birkenau. The stars of David have been transferred to the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw.

Those who negotiated the removal of the religious symbols, which was part of a larger master

plan to guide future development and preservation on and around the Auschwitz-Birkenau camps, well understood these burdens. In good faith, they worked toward an outcome that would bridge the contrasting perspectives and sensibilities surrounding the issue. The efforts of these leaders - Polish government and church authorities, a U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum-led international consortium of seven Jewish organizations and independent parties who helped bring about a resolution -- should be emulated as other delicate issues of Polish-Jewish relations arise.

Only now, after the half-century freeze communism imposed on Poland, Poles are beginning to thaw aspects of their history that were previously taboo. This includes, notably, the history of Jews in Poland and their relationship with the Christian majority, a history many non-Jewish Poles hungrily try to recover in order to fill in their incomplete understanding of their country's past. The re-opening of Poland is, in turn, allowing Jews to revisit Poland, figuratively and literally, and to rediscover something that has been denied them by geography, politics, memory, emotion and the expanse of time,

Inevitably, this precious new opportunity has brought about competing claims to memory. It has ignited controversy about questions such as the restitution of Jewish property, the history and legacy of anti-Semitism in Poland and the role of the Holocaust in the dynamics of Polish-Jewish relations.

But the accelerated exploration of the Jewish place in Poland's history can be a gateway to increased "normalization" of Polish-Jewish relations. News of the successful resolution of the religious symbols issue at Birkenau is one of the best examples of this trend. So, too, is the recent announcement by the Polish Church that parishes throughout the country will hold "days of Judaism" in January 1998, efforts to educate large numbers of Poles about the Judaism.

In recent months, an ugly, anti-Semitic backlash from one of Poland's most visible Catholic priests followed the appointment of a prominent Polish political leader who is Jewish to one of the most important positions in the government. The priest's comments were, in turn, rebuked from the highest levels of Poland's political leadership, the Church hierarchy and, most notably, by Fr. Stanislaw Musial, a well-regarded Jesuit priest from Cracow.

It is too soon to say whether these developments will ease the longstanding tensions that have characterized Polish-Jewish relations. But as each threshold is crossed, trust, understanding and familiarity are bred, enabling, we hope, an ever-increasing cadre of Poles and Jews to cross the next threshold together.

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The National Polish American-Jewish American Council, convened by the American Jewish Committee and the Polish American community, is committed to improving relations and establishing a framework for cooperation between the two communities.