



# To Be a Mensch Prof. Harold Kasimow's Lecture Tour in Poland

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**Violetta Reder of the Institute for Ecumenism and Dialogue, Pontifical Academy of Theology, Kraków, Poland, recounts the story of Jewish scholar Harold Kasimow's return to his homeland after a 60-year absence.**

## To Be a Mensch

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His two visits to Poland after a 60 year absence were a challenging experience to Harold Kasimow, George Drake Professor of Religious Studies at Grinnell College in Iowa, USA, and a specialist in comparative religion and Jewish studies. It was also a great event to those in Kraków who invited Kasimow in May and in November 2004.

Born in a small shtetl near Vilnius (now the capital of Lithuania, but formerly in Poland) just in time to face the Holocaust as a four-year-old boy, Kasimow experienced suffering and violence during his earliest years. A Holocaust survivor, he owes his life to a Polish peasant, who risked his own and his family's lives to hide and sustain the Kasimow family during the Nazi occupation of the region. Since 1949 Kasimow has lived in the USA.

Both his family and the Salanter Yeshiva he attended in the Bronx nourished him with the ideas of the ethical Musar movement, founded in Lithuania in the 19th century by Israel Salanter. Similarly, his encounter with Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel as his teacher at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City contributed to the clear ethical message of his life and work as professor of religion. This was the foundation of his commitment to interreligious dialogue as a way of bringing about world peace.

Both Heschel and Kasimow focus on the transformation of individuals through an encounter with God's presence to bring about this goal. In all religions, Kasimow finds those whom he might call a *Mensch* - a person truly human, combining compassion with a passion for truth, devoted to other people, especially those who suffer. One of the seminars he offered at Grinnell was titled "Abraham Joshua Heschel: A Jewish Saint of the Twentieth Century."

Prof. Kasimow is drawn to Pope John Paul II, whom he sees as a great spiritual leader in the present world and a revolutionary leader in Catholic-Jewish relations following in the footsteps of Pope John XXIII. In his writings, Kasimow's interest in the work of Heschel, Pope John Paul II and Asian religions has led him to try to understand how these three disparate areas of scholarship may be seen to have an affinity with each other. He has been especially interested in the ways in which Asian spirituality can enrich Judaism. In recent years Kasimow, with colleagues, has edited several books related to these topics<sup>1</sup>.

Kasimow's contact with Kraków, Poland, began with an invitation from Prof. Stanisław Obirek SJ, one of most prominent scholars in Poland involved in Jewish-Catholic dialogue. Obirek asked Kasimow to deliver eight lectures at the university schools and centers of culture and dialogue in Kraków in May 2004. The series started at the University School of Philosophy and Education, a Jesuit institution. Kasimow also presented lectures at several departments within Jagellonian University, the oldest and most distinguished university in Poland, including Jewish Studies, the

Institute of Religious Studies, Institute of Sociology, and the Institute of Oriental Philology. He also lectured at the Jewish Cultural Centre and the Centre of Japanese Art and Technique, "Manggha."

During his stay in Kraków Kasimow also met with Franciszek Cardinal Macharski, Archbishop of Kraków, the founder of the Centre of Dialogue and Prayer in Oswiecim (Auschwitz). He states that he will never forget being asked by the Cardinal to pray for him.

At the Pontifical Academy of Theology, Institute of Ecumenism and Dialogue, Kasimow spoke on the "Influence of the Pilgrimage of John Paul II to the Holy Land on Jewish-Christian Relations." Fr. Prof. Z. Kijas OFM, director of that Institute, who first met Kasimow at this talk, then invited him to deliver a paper at the international interreligious conference titled "Sacred Books and the Word of God" at the Academy, November 24-25th, 2004. Kasimow approached this topic from the Jewish perspective. A seed planted at this conference grew into an extension of Kasimow's stay in Poland to enable him to speak to the Polish members of the Polish-Israeli Society for Mental Health to give a lecture and answer questions on "Forgiveness in Judaism."

At the Academy in Kraków, Kasimow also took part in a press conference, presenting a short statement, "Reflections on the Interfaith Movement and the Quest for a Global Ethic." His co-participant was Dr Mohammad Ali Shomali, professor of religious studies in Qum, Iran.

The lecture tour expanded to the university in Lublin, where Kasimow was warmly hosted at the Archdiocesan Theological Seminary by its Vice-Rector, Fr Prof. Alfred Wierzbicki, theologian, ethicist and poet. There Kasimow lectured to about 100 clerics on "Pope John Paul II and Interreligious Dialogue."

A memorable, moving moment came at the end when Prof. Wierzbicki thanked Kasimow and called him a *tsaddik*:

I am deeply impressed by the encounter with Prof. Kasimow. We can see that for religious dialogue to develop, no less than a *tsaddik* is needed. In the person of Professor Kasimow we meet such a *tsaddik*. Let us try to enter the spirit of Prof. Kasimow as a Jew who made so much effort to understand the contribution of the Church to dialogue....

That evening Kasimow met with Prof. Józef Zycinski, Archbishop of Lublin, one of the most active bishops in Poland involved in Christian-Jewish dialogue. A more personal meeting followed between Kasimow and a *landsman*, Rev. Dr Romuald Jakub Waszkinel-Weksler, professor at Catholic Lublin University (KUL). The priest, who at the age of 35, discovered that he had been a rescued Jewish child, born in the same region as Kasimow near present-day Vilnius. Fr. Waszkinel-Weksler is known worldwide from the film titled "Cross Inscribed in the Star of David", which describes his unique life story.

Kasimow concluded his tour with a lecture on "Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel and Pope John Paul II: Their Contributions to Interreligious Dialogue" at the Catholic Lublin University. After the lecture Kasimow was received by the Rector of the Catholic Lublin University - Rev. Prof. Stanisław Wilk - at the senate hall, where Cardinal Wojtyła (before he became Pope John Paul II) took part in the KUL senate meetings. To be in this room was an awe-inspiring moment, Prof. Kasimow stated, for a Jew who genuinely admires John Paul II's achievement in fostering Christian-Jewish dialogue.

And here is what Prof. Kasimow himself has said of his adventure of encountering Poland again after 60 years: "I have devoted quite a bit of time to the study of the very complex relationship between the Jews and Catholics in Poland. During World War II there were many Polish people who were involved with saving my family. At the same time, just after the war ended, we were nearly killed by Polish people. However, during my stay in Poland in 2004, I felt nothing but gratitude to be alive and gratitude to the courageous Polish people who saved my life, and gratitude to the many Catholics in Poland who are continuing to work for a deeper understanding of

my faith."

**From the left: Prof. H. Kasimow, Fr. Prof. Z. Kijas OFM**

#### Notes

1. H. Kasimow, B. L. Sherwin (eds.), *No Religion Is an Island: Abraham Joshua Heschel and Interreligious Dialogue*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991
2. B. L. Sherwin, H. Kasimow (eds.), *John Paul II and Interreligious Dialogue*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999  
(both these books have been published in Poland by WAM, the Jesuit publishing house in Kraków)
3. Harold Kasimow, John. P. Keenan, Linda Klepinger Keenan (eds.), *Beside Still Waters: Jews, Christians, and the Way of the Buddha*, Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2003.

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