



'Religions and Ideologies,
Polish Perspectives and beyond.'

International Council of Christians and Jews
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Christian-Jewish Dialogue in Poland today
– Coming out of the shadows of WWII and Communist dictatorship

1. / The present Christian-Jewish relations in Poland have their roots in the past – in the pre-modern times of the First Polish Republic – republic of the nobility, which ended with the partitions of Poland in late 18th Century. The numerous populations of Polish Jews occupied ethnic enclaves, excluded from the mainstream society, in which all the wealth, power and privilege were monopolised by the nobility class – 5-10 percent of the Polish population. The majority of the society were peasants, deprived of power, impoverished, and oppressed by serfdom. Towns were small, poor and under-developed, marginalized by the powerful nobility. There was little option for the Jews to assimilate or integrate in the Polish society, especially that it was ideologically dominated by the Roman Catholic Church, particularly since the period of counter-reformation. However, the Polish Jews were able to protect their relative cultural autonomy. They cooperated with the nobility as traders and inn-keepers, but were seen by peasants as dangerous exploiters and cultural aliens – the image constructed largely by the Catholic Church.

2./ Modernity in the Polish ethnic territories was, as everywhere in Europe, characterised by mobility, increased competition and breaking of ethnic boundaries. Some Jews tried to take advantage of social change and integrate in the modern society, coming out of the ghetto. But in Poland modernity was also a period of partitions, the absence of Polish state, Polish citizenship, and the time when the modern Polish nation was constructed according to ethnic principles. The ethnic model of nation is based on shared culture and mythologised common origin, excludes cultural others. In the absence of a sovereign Polish state, categories such as citizenship, the political community, civil society, co-operative work for the sake of the common good, were not bound up with national identity. Till now, or at least till very recently, for Poles the nation has been the historical shaping of a cultural community, divided by cultural (above all linguistic and religious) boundaries from other peoples, regardless of how the political borders run. Nationality and citizenship are separable in the Polish mind. Members of ethnic minorities, especially the Jews, felt the impact of this, and were excluded from the Polish nation as cultural others. Moreover, the 19th century the Polish national identity was informed by the messianic idea of martyrology of the nation, sometimes even referred to as Christ of Nations. To see Poland as a messiah, that would bring salvation to humanity through suffering and death, gave a particular shape to the Polish national identity. Poland suffers and dies, but will be reborn, resurrected, and through suffering will save humankind. Such a conception presumes absolute mortal purity and the superiority of the Polish people. It also precludes any culpability on the part of the Poles against anyone. Admitting that Poland bears any guilt would wreck the whole structure on which the ethnic and romantic version of Polish national identity rests. “Christ” cannot bear any blame; his moral superiority and the uniqueness of his suffering cannot be in doubt.

3. / The interwar period was dominated by the effort to consolidate the Polish nation, in which two options were in conflict: the nationalistic one, represented by the National Democracy party, which argued for the construction of an ethnic nation, excluding all minorities, and the second option a federalist one, represented by Józef Piłsudski, attempting to recreate a multi-ethnic Polish society, but with a real domination of ethnic Poles. Towards the end of the 1930s, especially after the death of Józef Piłsudski, and perhaps under the influence of radical rightist ideology mixed with traditionalist Roman Catholicism, militant nationalism combined with anti-Semitism was increasing, characterised by various attempts to discriminate against Jews.

4. / The WWII was the time when the Holocaust happened, largely on the Polish soil. Many Poles, also those with anti-Semitic prejudices, tried to help Jews in spite of death penalty which was imposed by the Nazis for such deeds. Many Poles were later honoured in Yad Vashem. On the other hand many, perhaps more Poles collaborated with the Nazis against the Jews one way or another. Facts and figures concerning the proportions here still remain subject of scholarly debate. The majority of Poles, especially in big cities, remained indifferent, passive witnesses of the Holocaust, partly because Jews were generally seen in Poland as not belonging to the Polish nation. Here the absence of the concept of civic nation, the domination of the ethnic concept of the nation, had a tragic impact. Jews were seen as aliens, as strangers, as "them" not "us". Those people who tried to help the Jews did this for humanitarian reasons, trying to stop human suffering and prevent genocide. But the Jews were not saved as members of the Polish national community. One needs also to remember that in Poland, unlike in the west of Europe, a very large segment of the Jewish population consisted of very traditional, Hassidic Jews, who were separated from the Polish ethnic society by a particularly strong cultural boundary, strengthened from both sides: by the ritualistic culture of the Jews and by the prejudice and xenophobia of the Poles.

5. / The most tragic and the darkest moment in the history of Polish-Jewish relations came after the War, when Jewish survivors, few as they were, came back to their homes to regain their property and to start life again. They were often met with hostility by the Poles who in the meantime took over their possessions and had no intention to give them back, hoping that the owners would never return. These facts were described in detail by Jan Tomasz Gross, among them there were some particularly drastic examples of atrocities committed by Poles against Jews during and after the War. The mass murder of Jews by their Polish peasant neighbours in Jedwabne, or the pogrom in Kielce were among the best known, but now historians discover more and more previously hidden or forgotten crimes against the Jews committed by Poles. It seems now that most crimes were committed by peasants who, motivated mainly by greed, betrayed hiding Jews to the Nazis and in various ways profited from Jewish money and property. The moral sense of guilt was largely eliminated by the perception of Jews as aliens and by the ambiguous position of the Roman Catholic clergy, who did not send a clear message condemning those who committed crimes against Jews. Among many excuses found to justified persecution of Jews were various stereotypes presenting Jews as practitioners of outrageous rituals, involving murder of Christians, and

general conception that Jews were not to be trusted. The fact that there were some Jewish individuals joined the power elite and secret police of communist establishment, was seen by many Poles as yet another proof that Jews were not to be trusted, and that they had never been true members of the Polish nation, but strangers capable of anti-Polish sentiments and actions. This image of a Jewish-communist is still quite alive in Polish minds.

6. / Poland under communism was an ethnically homogenous society. The unity of nations, in the ethnic sense, was seen as positive and was supported both by the communist elites and by the opposition, especially the Roman Catholic Church. After the 1968 anti-Semitic hysteria, almost all the remaining Jews were forced to leave Poland. What followed was an almost total silence in the public sphere as far as Jews and their place in the Polish history was concerned. Sites of the Holocaust, especially Auschwitz, were nationalised ideologically, and served as symbols of Polish martyrology and German crimes against the Polish society. The disturbing memory of Polish crimes against the Jews was conveniently forgotten, eliminated from any public communication. Any accusation of Poles by others, especially by Jews, were interpreted as unjustified attack on innocent Polish people, who, according to their own historically shaped collective identity, cannot be responsible for any crime against anyone, being victims themselves. It seems that Poles, not being able to accept their own responsibility for other people's suffering, also find it difficult to accept that others could suffer more. Poles built their national identity on martyrology, on collective suffering, and it is a problem for them to recognize suffering of others as greater. This of course causes problems in relations with Jews who also build their identity on unique suffering. Another problem which influences Polish-Jewish relations is that Poles brought up in the communist-dominated Poland generally have difficulty in dealing with others, not just ethnic and cultural others, but with otherness in any form. This is a legacy of decades of cultural homogenisation and elimination of pluralism for the public sphere.

7. / Openness to the outside world which began in 1989 resulted in a serious identity crisis among Poles, who learn to problematise what in their past used to be taken for granted. In the integrating Europe Poles must take into account other memories and rethink their relations with other nations, especially the significant others: Germans, Russians and Jews. Currently one can talk about two parallel developments in the Polish national identity and historical consciousness. On the one hand ethnic nationalism and xenophobia are still present among many Poles, perhaps as many as 20-30 percent. Here we find the old way of thinking and

interpretations well known from the past: victimisation of Poles, rejection of all suggestion of Polish responsibility of suffering of others, martyrology, xenophobia, mistrust of Germans, Russian, and Jews. People who share such views reject all sense of guilt, and consider accusations as yet another manifestation of attack by enemies. This is not only the matter of opinions, but also behaviour. Although open, aggressive anti-Semitism is no longer acceptable in the main stream society, anti-Semitic acts happen again and again. To call someone a Jew is not a compliment in Polish, and internet fora are full of anti-Semitic statements. The main problem is, however, not the fact that some individuals are capable of anti-Semitic acts, but that these acts seem not to bother the passive and silent majority. Anti-Semitic graffiti remain on walls of public and private buildings, and citizens seem not to be disturbed by them. Anti-Semitism does not seem to offend a Polish Catholic sensitivity, which can be deeply disturbed for example by even a slight public representation of human naked body or by any joke referring to religion. One could wish that the Roman Catholic Church, which is responsible for much of the old anti-Jewish sentiments and stereotypes in the Polish society, sends a clear message condemning anti-Semitism. Of course there were many strong statements of the kind, but the Church in Poland does not speak one voice on the issues of anti-Semitism and ethnic prejudices, as it does on other issues, for example on sexual morality.

On the other hand, there is also another development in the Polish society, which consists in reconstruction of the Polish collective identity in a more open way, within the new, broader, European frame of reference, taking into account other people's views, more ready to engage in dialogue and negotiation. Here there is a feeling that the old interpretation of the Polish history and the traditional identities, especially national-catholic, needs to be reconsidered, reconstructed in a different, more open, more diversified, more pluralistic way. Especially young people feel identity crises, while not all respond to it in the same way. More liberal approach of some of them is counterbalanced by traditionalism and conservatism of others. But one thing is certain. The place of Jews in the Polish culture and society is no longer a taboo, what used to be taken for granted is now being problematised, questions are asked, and the debates continue. In the new Europe past and present relations between Christians and Jews, and the tragic memory of the Holocaust belong to all Europeans, constitute a significant aspect of the European heritage. Therefore Europeans must be able to reach understanding on these issues in order to build their future on a foundation of human rights and rejection of prejudices and xenophobic sentiments.