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Auschwitz disturbs.

The difficult Polish-Jewish-German Relationship from the Perspective of a  
German Theologian

**1. Auschwitz disturbs: The Complexity of a difficult Relationship**

When Poles, Jews and Germans are mentioned together, the point of reference in their togetherness is above all Auschwitz. The German name of the Polish Oświęcim stands permanently for German history's unprecedented crime: the ideologically conceived and industrially realized attempt to exterminate the Jewish people. The name Auschwitz disturbs. Auschwitz as a central site of the Shoah still makes casual togetherness problematic. From the German perspective, the name Auschwitz stands above all between Germans and Jews. From the Polish perspective, it stands as a word of admonition between Poles and Germans. And from the Jewish perspective, it names the rift between the Jewish people and the German people as well as Israel and the Nations facing one another; and in the Jewish perception of the Polish people, the Poles have a place of their own. Jews, Poles, and Germans connect very different memories and feelings with the name Auschwitz.

The complexity of memories and feelings continues to be considerable when Germans and Jews face one another. Nevertheless, this complexity has at the same time a relatively clear profile, which is the face to face of the perpetrator's side and the victim's side. However, when Poles, Germans and Jews begin to speak with one another, the complexity brings with it overlapping and relocations. These preliminary comments show up a difficult relationship. Already, German-Polish relations today are still “associated with thoughts of the past”, even if the majority consider the present and the future to be more important.<sup>2</sup> How much more does this apply to the German-Polish-Jewish relationship! I want to illustrate this by recalling a conversation that was one of the learning experiences in my biography.

## 2. A Memory and an Experience of Dialogue in 1990

It took place at the 13<sup>th</sup> annual meeting of the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee in September 1990 in Prague. At the world level, official Catholic-Jewish dialogue had been interrupted five years earlier. The reason for this was the most serious crisis that had occurred in the still young ecumenical relationship between the Catholic Church and Judaism. This crisis consisted in the weighty controversy around the Carmelite convent then in Auschwitz and its cross.

*At the center of the controversy was a mutual foreignness in the basic understanding of symbols, identity and spirituality.*<sup>3</sup>

Now in 1990, an easing had come about in this ever greater conflict. By starting to build a new convent outside of the Auschwitz memorial site at the beginning of 1990, an atmosphere had returned to Catholic-Jewish relations that again made official dialogue possible. In the context of the meeting in Prague, Bishop Henryk Muszynski, at that time the president of the Polish Bishops Conference's Commission for Dialogue with Judaism, had been asked to make a statement regarding the controversy around the Carmelite convent. He said that for the Polish people the Shoah was not a theoretical problem. Rather, it was a living reality, a wound that was still bleeding. "We Poles have a terrible legacy: all of National Socialism's large concentration camps are on Polish ground. Our Poles have had no contact with Jews for almost 50 years. It is hard for them to learn that Jews are against the cross." On Polish ground, the cross is not only a symbol of Christianity, but also a symbol for freedom and against oppression. Bishop Muszynski ended with the lament: "We Poles and Jews were victims of the repressions and the martyrdom perpetrated by German National Socialists. The suffering that should really bring both of us closer together has split us. We must do everything in order to overcome this split." However, this appeal was followed by a vehement discussion. Rabbis, Jewish historians and other Jewish spokespersons questioned the bishop in a heated critical manner. They not only expressed their impression that the Shoah was being "Christianized", and the problematic nature of the thesis that Jews and Poles shared the reality of being victims. They also hinted at the historically untenable<sup>4</sup> suspicion that the concentration camps were on Polish ground because of Polish Antisemitism.

As a German eye and ear witness, I followed this controversy with held breath. For in part it seemed to signify a relocation and a confusion of the historical roles. In my view of history as well as in my self-understanding as a German citizen and a Catholic, I had interiorized the view:

*(expressed as follows by the common synod of the dioceses of the Federal Republic of Germany in its main resolution "Unsere Hoffnung" ["Our Hope"] of November 22, 1975)*

Germany is "the country whose most recent political history is darkened by the attempt to systematically exterminate the Jewish people. And in spite of the exemplary behavior of individual persons and groups, on the whole we were at the time of National Socialism an ecclesial community that continued to live with its back turned towards the fate of the persecuted Jewish people. The Church's gaze was too fixated on the threat to its own institutions, and it was silent regarding the crimes committed against Jews and Judaism."<sup>5</sup> And now I was experiencing a discussion between Jewish partners in dialogue and a Polish bishop, in which people were speaking in a way that came close to the thesis: "Poland is the land of the Shoah." During that discussion, an almost physically painful voice came up in me that said: What a relocation of the problem! What depth of pain! What a conflict between members of two peoples that were pushed into the abyss of persecution, terror, killing and murder through German deeds.

During the years that followed, the situation during that conversation in Prague<sup>6</sup> was repeated in various constellations. Theo Mechtenberg, a competent expert on German-Polish relations, has repeatedly described its basic structure: an uncomfortable to even embarrassing situation comes up when, in the presence of Germans, Poles are confronted with the Jewish reproach of Polish Antisemitism. "Representatives of the nation that alone bears responsibility for the Holocaust surely

have no right to reproach their Polish neighbors with Antisemitism, the neighbors whose living space they desired and which they chose as the place of death for the Jews. But should these representatives simply keep quiet? Is it not rather their task to do all they can to contribute towards Polish-Jewish understanding?"<sup>7</sup>

### 3. An abiding Task

Indeed, the Polish-ecclesial side has now launched an appeal to the Germans and more precisely to the Catholic Church of Germany to contribute to Polish-Jewish understanding. This request has in part been answered by statements and gestures. One important contribution to this process was, for example, a parallel statement by the German Bishops Conference and the Polish Bishops Conference's Commission for Dialogue with Judaism on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp in January 1995.<sup>8</sup> The tone of the Polish text is reflected in its title: "We bow before the excessive amount of suffering." Auschwitz is clearly characterized as the work of German National Socialists: "The creators of Auschwitz were German Nazis and not Poles. Everything that this extermination camp symbolizes is a result of the National Socialist ideology, which did not come into being on Polish ground." The German bishops' statement begins with the indication that Auschwitz is *the* symbol of the extermination of European Judaism, that at the same time it has a place in the history of Polish suffering, and that it is a burden in the relationship between Poles and Germans.

Such a statement makes clear that reflection on the Shoah and the crimes of German National Socialism is taking place to a large extent at the bilateral level between Germans and Jews or between Poles and Germans or Jews and Poles respectively. Simultaneous meetings of Poles, Germans and Jews are more rare. Such meetings occur for example during visits to the State Museum of Auschwitz-Birkenau or during seminars at the international youth center in Oświęcim.<sup>10</sup> During such visits and meetings, Poles, Germans and Jews can name and share their differing and opposing assessments and feelings as well as their historical theses and social and religious perspectives. They can experience the limits to closeness or agreement as well as the extent to which these do exist.

Pope John Paul II placed a process of "purifying the memory" at the center of the Church's efforts when planning the Jubilee Year 2000. The aim of such a process of purification is to recall the events of history in order to acknowledge them anew and in so doing to perceive the beginnings of healing. When this process is successful, it rejects suppression and excuses, and names atrocities and crimes. It faces what psychoanalysis calls "processing, transformation, grieving". It prevents collective trauma so as not to block a future together. In that case, memory consciously distances itself from the negativity of one's own history and becomes an admonishment to become aware of one's own tendency towards evil.<sup>15</sup> When this occurs, healing and a relative reconciliation begin, even when an explicit request for forgiveness cannot be expressed and forgiveness cannot be granted, because there is no mandate for requesting and for granting forgiveness. Such relative reconciliation would be the expression of an "adult" relationship between Poles, Germans and Jews. And for the sake of the future of their relationship, this remains at one and the same time a task and a promise.