



‘Religions and Ideologies,
Polish Perspectives and beyond.’

International Council of Christians and Jews
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Center for Dialogue and Prayer

‘Listening to the voices of this soil’
Introduction to the visit to Auschwitz: A Jewish voice

I have been asked by Fr Deselaers on behalf of the International Council of Christians and Jews to supply a brief ‘*Jewish voice*’ to this interfaith discussion that is intended to introduce the visit to Auschwitz.

I am very grateful to you for this invitation. But let me say straight away that I was born in England after the war, and I do not have any special qualifications to address you on this subject. Yes, I have been a member of the international board of the Auschwitz museum since it was founded just over twenty years ago; I have written about the Auschwitz museum and also convened several conferences about its future. And I have visited maybe fifty times and in all have probably spent several months here. But all that is irrelevant: none of those things give me any special qualifications. On the contrary, the more often I have been here, and the more I have learnt about this place—what happened here and what it represents—the more difficult and the more challenging I find it to be. All I can offer to you today are some personal reflections about how to make sense of the voices we hear at Auschwitz.

What is this place? First of all, let me say that Auschwitz today is a place of great contradictions. It is an immense cemetery (probably the largest that the world has ever known), and yet it isn't a cemetery. It was never dedicated as a cemetery. In an ordinary cemetery, the people who are to be buried are dead, whereas in Auschwitz people were brought here *in order to die*. In an ordinary cemetery, people are laid *ceremonially* to their rest, whereas in Auschwitz their ashes were simply scattered or dumped *unceremoniously*, for example in one of the ponds in Birkenau. So Auschwitz is a cemetery, but it isn't a cemetery. Today it is a museum, but it's not like any ordinary museum. It is a place of mass tourism (now with 1,400,000 visitors a year), but it's not like any ordinary place of mass tourism. Auschwitz is a place of great contradictions. Auschwitz belongs to all of humanity; Auschwitz belongs to nobody. Auschwitz is about the death of God; Auschwitz is about the need to *believe* in God, and to have faith in the future redemption from tragedy and catastrophe.

People often speak about what Auschwitz symbolises—for example, that it is a symbol of the Holocaust, but it is very, very different from being merely a symbol. It is a real place which people can visit. The mass murders really happened here. Auschwitz is an open wound, and like any open wound it is very hard to deal with. And what is important is precisely the horrifying historical realities and the appalling fate of the terrified victims, the colossal force and scale of the systematic mass murder—a place of extreme suffering and of an unimaginably vast number of dead (round about one million Jews, together with well over 100,000 Christians, including ethnic Poles, Soviet prisoners of war, and Sinti and Roma Gypsies). Auschwitz is not a symbol. To my mind, Auschwitz is completely incomprehensible. For some people, Auschwitz is full of meaning; for other people, Auschwitz is meaningless. To visit it is to contemplate the complete meaninglessness of the mass murder committed here.

We are here in front of the tremendum of the Auschwitz catastrophe, the ultimate nothingness, the vast pit in which the Jews of Europe found themselves during the Holocaust. There is no language to describe this adequately, there is no voice, there is nothing to say, nothing to be said, there can be only silence. What has been left behind here are just silent fragments of the horror and the terror and the evil. The entry gate, the barbed wire, the watchtowers, the surviving barracks, and all the other physical installations (including a very large number of buildings in Birkenau that are in ruins) are certainly important because they help us to connect with the place and ask the questions; but they tell us very little about the worlds that Auschwitz destroyed or about the nothingness it created, let alone the agony of the victims. Too much happened in Auschwitz, to each individual person who suffered and died there, for the relics to provide even a remotely adequate record. But today's realities are all that we have here.

Who were those victims? They were Jewish men and women from virtually every country in German-occupied Europe, from the north of Norway to the south of France and the Greek islands, Ashkenazim and Sephardim of every conceivable social origin and occupation, wealthy Jewish businessmen, Jewish clockmakers, Jewish doctors and lawyers, Jewish musicians, Jewish dancers and opera singers, Jewish tailors, butchers and bakers, poor Jews of the working class, Reform Jews, Orthodox Jews, Yiddish Bundists, assimilated Jews, Christian Jews, Zionist Jews, secular Jews, hasidic rabbis, yeshiva students, and a very great number of Jewish children (probably as many as 200,000 Jewish children).

I believe that our job in coming here is to mourn, to learn what it is to mourn the catastrophe that affected a complete civilization. In so doing we recall the immensity not only of the *number of victims* but also the immensity of that huge range of social and cultural origins of those victims, from so

many different countries of Europe and speaking many different languages. Once they had arrived here, the murderers did not care who they were or what they believed in. They were all taken together, as members of a single people, to be murdered here in the gas chambers.

But we must remember who they were and what they believed in. We must lament the extraordinary diversity and creativity of the great Jewish civilization that flourished in Europe for centuries and then came to its bitter end here. We should have in our mind's eye village after village and town after town where the synagogues were looted and then set on fire; the holy Torah scrolls they contained, which were ripped out, trampled on, and desecrated; the thousands of Jewish cemeteries whose tombstones spanning many centuries were smashed to pieces or else stolen for reuse to pave local roads or simply sold by the truckload for use as ordinary building materials. Even our dead they did not leave in peace. The remains of the synagogues sometimes lie in ruins, even today, with gaping holes in the roof. Sometimes the remains were demolished, or else the building was converted, usually unrecognisably, into some other use, such as a cinema or a bakery—or even, in one case in northern Poland, into a swimming pool. And the cemeteries lie forlorn and abandoned, desperately overgrown with no one to look after them, or with a few remaining kerbstones, like amputated stumps. The living Jewish world in literally thousands of towns and villages is no longer present—all the way across Europe, and particularly here in Poland. Gone are the schools, the libraries, the social clubs, the old age homes, the yeshivas, the Jewish community centres. If Auschwitz is the symbol of the Holocaust, then these are the things that should be in our mind here. For all these things we weep, and we mourn.

But above all, when we come to this place we should say our prayers for the souls of those who were murdered here. They may have no one else to say prayers in their memory unless we do it ourselves. I said before that in Auschwitz there can be only silence. So this is perhaps yet another contradiction: the need to say prayers for the souls of those who were murdered. Through our prayers and meditations, and through the memory of their achievements in life, and what they would have achieved if they had lived longer, we can do our part to let their souls rest in peace. They may indeed have no one else to pray for their souls if we don't do it. What we Jews say when we go to a cemetery is to bless the Lord God who created those human beings who are buried there, who nourished and sustained them in life, and who forgets no one who ever lived. He knows, in his divine justice, the exact number of the people who are there. We do not know, nobody knows, precisely how many people were murdered in Auschwitz—but the Lord God knows. He is the divine record-keeper, and we must praise him for that.

At a funeral we also praise God in the Kaddish prayer. Not only were the Jews mercilessly murdered at Auschwitz; they also had no funeral ceremony, and no Kaddish was recited for them. The first four words of the Kaddish say (in the Aramaic language) 'May the great name of God be exalted and sanctified'. The person who died is no longer able to continue the good deeds and other achievements that he or she accomplished in their lifetime. They are no longer living, and so they are unable to do anything more to enhance the reputation of the monotheistic ideal, or the great name of the God who created the world. So the meaning of those first four words of the Kaddish is to express the profound hope that although God's great name and sanctity has been diminished by the death of that person, nevertheless the prayer is that it will be restored in the future by the good deeds and achievements of others who will follow in the footsteps of the dead person.

And so in that state of mind we also look for comfort. We are all mourners at Auschwitz, and we should all hope that we will find the strength we need to find that comfort. As it says in the Hebrew

Bible, “As a mother comforts her son, so will I comfort you” (Isaiah 66: 13).

That universal comfort can most probably come from just one source—the faith and the confidence that moral decency and ethical integrity, which constitute the true Jewish message to the world, should be restored to humanity. What the world should learn from the horrors of the wickedness and *inhumanity* of what happened at Auschwitz is an awareness of two things: that our world was shattered, and that there is therefore a fundamental need for the world to protect and repair itself by insisting on the highest moral values for the future. If *that* message could go forth from this place, then that is what would bring peace to the souls of those who were murdered at Auschwitz, as well as enabling us all to find comfort as we rebuild our shattered world. The important thing is precisely to put behind us that descent into evil and so to rebuild civilised values, trust between peoples, a better world, the spiritual and moral potential of all human beings, the power of goodness, and the greatness of the name of God. Perhaps it is yet another of those paradoxes and contradictions, but maybe, in the kingdom of death people can find the meaning of life.¹

So this, at last, is what may give us the clue why Jews need to be in dialogue with the different religions and nations of the world. When I first came here I was puzzled why Jews tended to think of Auschwitz as a place of uniquely Jewish significance, but at the same time wanted all the world to know about it. I used to wonder how Jews could say that Auschwitz represents the Holocaust and only the Holocaust, but at the same time say that Auschwitz has *universal* significance. But the answer, I think, is very clear. There *has* to be dialogue here at Auschwitz—both for the sake of the victims and also for the sake of the whole world itself.

The irony is (at least from a Jewish point of view) that the task is made much easier for Jews just because there were so very many *non-Jewish* victims of the murder machine at Auschwitz. Right now we are here in a Catholic centre, and that very fact enables us Jews to *share* in your own Catholic grief at the colossal disaster that befell Roman Catholics and other Christians here in Auschwitz—well over 100,000 of them, including many Catholic priests, who suffered and were murdered here, alongside us Jews. Your grief must be our grief. Your need to repair the world and rebuild relationships must be *our* need to repair the world and rebuild relationships. Yes of course, we thank you for your hospitality here, in inviting us to meditate and share our grief and our sense of mourning together with you. Your religious, emotional, and intellectual hospitality, and your openness to everyone, are what this Centre was established for, and we wish you well in the extremely important work you do here. But by being here, in the company of a conference of the International Council of Christians and Jews, reminds all of us that the work of repairing the world has to be a *joint* project. Of course it is a Jewish project and also, in its own way, a Christian project. But to take each project separately makes no sense. By definition it is a joint project, a universal project. We preserve our own Jewish traditions of remembrance; but we are enhanced, enriched, and deepened by our contact with you.

Let me put that point another way: I believe that it is essential for Jews to recognise that even if Auschwitz was the greatest catastrophe that has ever befallen the Jews, one of the Jewish responses,

¹ I owe that last remark, about the kingdom of death, to Marek Zajac, secretary of the International Auschwitz Council, as reported by Michael Kimmelman (‘Auschwitz Shifts from Memorializing to Teaching’, *New York Times*, 19 February 2011). ‘I sometimes meet students,’ Zajac said, ‘whom I met here years ago, now grown, who say they were changed by their visit, who became responsible people, dedicated to charity, leading ethical lives.’

and especially in today's world, has to be to work with other faiths to help them commemorate their own victims and, thereby, to be involved in the work of repairing the world. There is, in any case, no other solution that I can see for finding a suitable way for all of us to commemorate all the victims and allow their souls to rest in peace. Peace between nations has to be the best objective that we can institute in their memory.

We are all affected by the Holocaust, each of us in our different ways and perspectives and histories. Remembrance and education are in this sense two necessary elements of the much wider process of cultural healing that must take place through dialogue between all of us. A new culture of dialogue is needed. In the Jewish religious tradition, memory is not just an end in itself; it is supposed also to generate action. Europe in the twenty-first century needs to build a new culture of dialogue, with a universalist concern for all its citizens. Transnational, intercultural, and interfaith understanding can be created only if we learn to listen to each other—and that starts only if we listen to the voices of the ground at Auschwitz and say our prayers for the dead. Only if we remember and educate ourselves about the bitterness and deep trauma left behind in Europe by the Holocaust and all that came with it can we hope to be convincing about our sincerity to take action to build a better world and realise our full potential—to see what it is that unites people, not only what divides them. After all, the challenge of the Auschwitz memory today is surely to find ways of extending a sense of the universe of moral obligation in which the suffering, of all those involved, would find itself represented. The challenge is to transcend one's own personal, ethnic, or religious horizon and to develop an enhanced vision—to be faithful to the history and memory of one's own group but also, at the same time, to see beyond it.

We need continuously to work at widening the circle of those who feel that Auschwitz is relevant to them, responding to their needs, giving credit to those who work at peace and reconciliation, and sending out a message of hope and not just despair. Appealing to young people, and preserving the memory of Auschwitz, means to widen our responsibility, for example to strengthen the educational centre that has already been established at the Auschwitz museum and the interfaith dialogue centres that now exist in this town. Auschwitz has a commanding voice when it comes to teaching the world about the dangers of genocide. Our responsibility is to use that voice wisely and effectively, so that it will continue to be heard. We must constantly ask questions, both of ourselves and of others—but doing so always with a sense of hope. Only then do we meet our responsibilities to those who died at Auschwitz, only then will there be real substance to the slogan, 'Never Again'.

My own view of the contradictions that I have mentioned is that one should look at them positively, as a form of *organic* tension. Think of it the other way round: surely we would object if at Auschwitz we were presented with one official history, one set of memories to take home with us. Far better to have here the entanglement of voices, a series of paradoxes, ambiguities, and contradictions, a sense of a perspective that is unfinished, a feeling that we must continue to remain challenged by what Auschwitz *was*, and what Auschwitz means for us today. We need to internalise a profound sense of unease about genocide and its utter abnormality. We need to be disoriented about the basic fact that Auschwitz ever existed at all. It means that we must be encouraged to ask open-ended questions and not just walk out of the place thinking that we have ticked the box—'been there, done that'—and now know everything there is to know about Auschwitz. We need to feel that visiting Auschwitz is—or at least could be—a life-changing experience, although maybe you will have your own ideas about how the place should be presented as a cemetery. The museum is constantly reappraising its strategy, its exhibitions, its presentation of the site, and its overall policy; and it is likely that there will be many changes in the future, especially in the area of promoting peace and

reconciliation between nations. The work of making sense of Auschwitz will be with us for a long time to come; it will never be finished.
