



WYDZIAŁ STUDIÓW
MIEDZYNARODOWYCH
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‘Religions and Ideologies,
Polish Perspectives and beyond.’

International Council of Christians and Jews
in cooperation with the
Faculty for International and Political Studies
of the Jagiellonian University Cracow.
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Report and some personal reflections by Ruth Weyl, ICCJ consultant

ICCJ CRACOW CONFERENCE 2011

“There is always something constructive we can do, even if it is just changing our attitude. And it is in our response – and that of others - that we find cause for hope. To hope is our greatest responsibility”.

With this conclusion in her conference opening lecture ICCJ President, Dr Debbie Weissman set the tone for this year’s ICCJ conference on *“Religions and Ideologies - Polish perspectives and beyond”*.

Some 180 participants from 25 ICCJ member countries geographically ranging from Northern, Central and Eastern Europe to Latin America and Australia engaged in listening to and debating issues relating to Jewish-Christian, Jewish-Polish and Jewish-German-Polish painful past experiences and their emotional, rational and religious impacts in our new century. All that in a beautiful city only a little over one hour’s bus ride away from Auschwitz.

There was a magnificent opening reception at the Town Hall on Sunday evening, addressed by leading civic and religious personalities and a beautiful dinner. Right from the outset, the well prepared programme structure moved on Monday from enlightening discourse on Christian-Jewish dialogue in Poland today introduced by Professor Zdzislaw Mach, Director of the Institute for European Studies of the Jagiellonian University.

As a sociologist his insightful assessment of “*Christian-Jewish Dialogue in Poland today coming out of the shadows of WW II and communist dictatorship*” presented a positive view of developments. A view slightly corrected from a Jewish view by Professor Stanislaw Krajewski’s assessment and requirements of present and future developments.

Topic related workshops such as “*Polish and Jewish stereotyping; a common future for Jews, Germans and Poles*” despite a divided past, and important and creative full participation of the ICCJ Young Leadership in the majority of workshops gave participants ample choice.

Plenary sessions were held in the beautiful Aula of the Collegium Novum and workshops in its adjoining old University building. Despite constant rain well led tours to Cracow new and old, in particular also Kazimierz, the Jewish quarter, added substance to a conference dealing honestly with painful history and hope in the future. Though as we discovered in the workshops, spoken or unspoken, there was still a minefield to cross. Some mines now closer to the surface, ready to be sensitively and carefully removed. It is good to see the ICCJ involved in helping to clear various layers so that future generations may be able to walk without fear.

On Tuesday we went to Oswiecim and Auschwitz-Birkenau, learning about the educational work at the Oswiecim Centre for Dialogue and Prayer “at the edge of Auschwitz”, followed by a four stations commemorative walk in Birkenau, led by Father Manfred Deselaers and Rabbi Ehud Bandel. Ehud talked of members of his own family who were murdered. The *Our Father* and the El Malleh Rachamim as well as the *Kaddish* were said by all. Candles were lit and individually, each with their own thoughts, we returned.

Wednesday’s topic was set by two outstanding presentations by the German Lutheran theologian Professor Ursula Rudnick and Rabbi David Rosen on “*Justice, justice shall you pursue*” followed by related workshops and panel discussions. Instructive and bringing new practice, concepts were presented by a YLC led workshop. Excellent was a model ensuring more participatory involvement at major gatherings enabling the voices of those often too shy to speak out in public to be heard. It taught veterans new and enriching approaches. And certainly proved the importance of ongoing integrated involvement by today’s generation, confronted not just with memory of the past but the need to translate this memory into building a new present and future.

Others may give a different overview or impression of this conference. For me, guiding my continuing re-evaluation of our dialogue in the 21st century were the lectures on “*Justice, justice shall you pursue*”, with the challenging understanding of *Zedek* and *Zedaka*, of justice, righteousness, judgment and mercy in the face of our history, contemporary experience and listening to the voices of others. I found an echo of Debbie Weissman’s concluding words in David Rosen’s reference to the ICCJ 1993 theology statement that we share a book and a hope; that we are united in the hope for the establishment of God’s Kingdom of justice and peace.

There was hope also in reviewing the complexity of relations between Jews, Germans and Poles. When as Jews we speak of Poland as the graveyard of Jewish life, today’s Poles, and certainly today’s young Poles, remind us that despite a long history of antisemitism in Poland there were no Polish concentration camps, but German Nazi concentration camps established on occupied Polish soil. Three generations after Auschwitz there seems need to review justice and judgment. In the workshop dealing with “*Divided past, common future? Jewish-German-Polish triologue*” it was moving to listen to Manfred Deselaers, the German priest at the Centre for Dialogue and Prayer, speaking of the fact that he originates from the people who were the perpetrators in the 20th century’s immeasurable crime. As it was moving listening to Professor Jonathan Webber to talk of his commitment to transmit in his teaching the suffering also of the Polish people living under Nazi occupation. In the words of Professor Hans-Hermann Henrix: “Auschwitz disturbs – there is complexity in a difficult relationship.” When Jews, Poles and Germans are mentioned together, the point of reference in their togetherness is above all Auschwitz. When Jews and Germans meet, the complexity of memories and feelings continues to be considerable.

German-Polish relations today remain clearly associated with thoughts of the past, even if the majority considers the present and the future to be of greater relevance. In Bishop Muszynski’s words, Poles and Jews were both victims of the suffering perpetrated by the German Nazi regime. From a Jewish point of view this attitude amounted to a “Christianisation” of the Shoah. Reflections on the Shoah and the Nazi crimes have to a large extent taken place bilaterally: Germans and Jews, Poles and Germans, Jews and Poles. Simultaneous trilateral encounter of Poles, Germans and Jews are rare. Could mature encounters for the sake of the future be stimulated by the experience of this ICCJ conference?

A few days before the start of our conference I attended the Jewish Festival in Cracow, a huge event with thousands of visitors and participants, some 80 % of whom non-Jews. The colourful brochure for this amazing festival was laid out in every hotel and huge adverts were posted all over the city. There were wall posters with the history of famous Jews of Polish origin in Israel and elsewhere. I wonder: Is there a process of changing memory into revival?

If the topic of *"Justice, justice you shall pursue"* appeared of outstanding importance to me, then in addition to the aforementioned discussion. Wednesday's topics continue to engage my thinking and I believe also that in addition to the ICCJ's on-going tasks, close attention and study have to be given to some of the Wednesday issues. And this not least as our headquarter is located in the heart of Europe in the former home of Martin Buber. Particularly the exploration of *"Enemies or Allies? – Religion and State after Nazism, the Shoah and Communism"* may apply also to other regions of the ICCJ membership. Superb analyses of this subject were provided by Professor Hans-Hermann Henrix on Germany, Mr Zbigniew Nosowski on Poland and Rabbi David Rosen on Israel. Each gave an over-view of the historical development and the current situation.

Germany: Not quite the positive secularism aimed at by French president Sarkozy, but nowadays a moderate separation between state and religion. Christian communities and Judaism are statutory bodies within public law. The system of moderate separation of state and religion is accepted by the majority of citizens as the system does not presuppose any fundamental hostility between religion and state but is rather viewed as beneficial to society. The rise of Muslim communities though may require effort to maintain this status.

Poland: After the fall of communism in 1989 Poland had to rebuild its own state. A complex matter because for the 200 years prior to 1989 Poland had only enjoyed genuine freedom for 21 years. A fact that meant that for that period Poles, divided into three groups by their neighbours were not allowed the building of any form of democratic state. It was the Catholic Church that united Poles while they were divided. After 1989 there were sharp debates about the role of the Church and the State. Today the majority of Poles define themselves as an ethnic entity and baptised Catholics. Their new constitution expressly speaks about God as the source of deepest respect for all believers of whatever faith. The modern Polish model of religion-state relationship understands that democracy needs values. Democracy and religion need each other. But that religion is still the best institution to teach family and social responsibility.

Israel: David Rosen considered this matter in Israel as at best “problematic”.

To the “p” of that word be added four others: principle, politics, personal and public. Giving a brief overview of past Zionist history and perception he referred to Israel’s Declaration of Independence. Although recognising the whole spectrum of Christian denominations, and the near homogenously Sunni Muslim population there is no recognition of non-Orthodox Jewish communities. The state provides for a pluralism of religions, but not for Jewish pluralism. A situation that will only be rectified by recognising civil marriages, at present permitted only for those who “have no religion”. The prospect of official civil marriage is of concern however to Muslims and in particular Arab Christians in Israel to which they object on religious grounds.

There surely is much we have to understand and learn from and about each other.

The conference concluded on Wednesday night with a gala dinner which allowed for much needed relaxation after three days of listening and debating. As usual, old friendships were renewed and new ones forged. Much gratitude was expressed to the programme planning committee, the Polish partners, the staff of the Martin Buber House, the general secretary, Dick Pruiksma and in particular to Debbie Weissman and her open-minded leadership.

Ruth Weyl

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