



'Religions and Ideologies, Polish Perspectives and beyond.'

International Council of Christians and Jews
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Report and some personal reflections by Rori Picker Neiss

In July 2011 I had the privilege of joining one hundred and eighty other participants at the annual conference of the International Council of Christians and Jews in Krakow, Poland, exploring the theme of "Religions and Ideologies." The ICCJ conference was preceded by the annual conference of the Young Leadership Council, the youth branch of the ICCJ boasting membership of young Jews, Christians and Muslims from across the globe.

The YLC conference was truly uplifting and inspiring. Twelve young people spent a weekend together discussing the practical implications of interfaith dialogue and modeling listening exercises to be used in communities back home. Participants ranged from those who had worked in interfaith dialogue for a number of years to those for whom the YLC was one of their first interfaith encounters. In sharing about interfaith experiences and exhibiting tools of dialogue, the group also experienced dialogue, creating a safe space and sharing a deep and profound interfaith encounter.

It was in that spirit that we went together to the ICCJ. At the ICCJ conference I met an impressive array of individuals, many of whom had been involved in Jewish-Christian dialogue from its earliest stages. I was enamored by small group discussions that took place during coffee breaks and in-between sessions. However, I was surprised by the very academic approach of many of the presenters. Especially coming from a weekend of such practical approach to dialogue, many of the plenary sessions felt esoteric. And with so many participants bringing decades of dialogue experience with them, I was shocked at the occasional instances of offensive encounters that I witnessed. One particularly poignant and painful story was at Auschwitz-Birkenau, where the group participated in a meditative walk around the death camp. At one stop on the walk a woman from the group tapped me and then nudged me along so that I would be standing next to a Muslim participant wearing a hijab, so she could then take a picture of us. This woman presumably returned home and showed her friends and family how far we have come in peacemaking that a Jewish woman and a Muslim woman can stand together at Auschwitz, and yet the picture was contrived, and we felt stereotyped and marginalized.

As one can imagine, separate from that particular story, Auschwitz was a particularly powerful experience. I had never been to any concentration camp before, and visiting the site with an

interreligious group of friends was quite unique. Before visiting the site we shared with one another the first time we had ever heard of Auschwitz. It was incredible to learn how the Holocaust was taught and discussed across faith and geographic communities. I listened to Christians talk about how they had been made to feel that they needed to continuously apologize to Jews because Auschwitz existed. I listened to Jews share how the Holocaust shaped their Jewish education and experience. I listened to Muslims express profound grief and horror as they attempted to grasp the sheer magnitude of the horrors of the concentration camps. And then, together, we walked through.

I was incredibly disconcerted at Auschwitz I. It felt like a museum, in many ways removed from the place it sought to memorialize. A tour guide showed us pictures of the camp and all I could think was: "Why are we inside looking at pictures of the camp when we could be outside looking at the camp?" I was bothered by buses outside the gates of the camp, the soda machines and snack bars, the story of Auschwitz, the rooms that were reconstructed and felt false, even in their authenticity. I wanted to be alone, separate from my own tour group and separate from the hundreds of other tour groups and to just walk through the grounds. I tried to imagine what it felt like to enter a barracks when it was not a museum installation, but a prison. But I felt like I was seeing it all through layers and layers of glass.

At Birkenau, I found some of that silence. There were no big tours, no loud tour guides. Just barracks and barracks as far as the eyes could see, in all directions. It terrified me. Walking along the train tracks in the center of the camp, imagining all of the people for whom that was their last stop. Walking on soil that had absorbed so many tears and so much blood. Standing together with Jews and Christians chanting prayers from their own traditions.

And as we exited Birkenau I saw a bus stop in front of the camp and a bus pulling up. The sign on the bus read: "Auschwitz. Salt Mines. Schindler's Factory." I was struck once again by the experience of Poland itself-- a country devastated first by the Nazis and then by the Soviet communists; a country that boasts the greatest percentage of those named as "Righteous Among the Nations" and also the greatest percentage of Jews murdered during the war. I felt all of these facts shine through in Poland. Tourist shops selling shot glasses reading "Krakow" and models of the city also sell statues of Jews with their side curls, big noses, and money. Merchants selling antiques on the street have tables with menorahs next to lighters and pocketknives engraved with swastikas. And I believe that none of it is meant maliciously. While Germany was forced to grapple with its anti-Semitic history, Poland, as an occupied country during the war, was never forced to wrestle with the anti-Semitism that had been so prevalent before the war and allowed the Nazis to kill so much of the Jewish population. Instead, Judaism became a fascination and, not surprisingly, a budding tourist industry.

On an even more personal level, I found the conference to be incredibly thought-provoking, as evidenced by much of the above, and incredibly enriching. I was inspired by the dialogues modeled at the YLC to pursue dialogue sessions in my own community, and am currently in discussions with various people to work together using these new tools to create better relationships between the Jewish students and the Muslim students at Hunter College, where I serve as a rabbinic intern. Additionally, I have been invited by the Council of Centers on Jewish-Christian Relations, an American affiliate of the ICCJ, to speak at their annual meeting on a panel for "New Voices" in interfaith dialogue. Most excitingly, at the conclusion of the conference, I was elected to the board of the Young Leadership Council. I look forward to the coming year of working closely with the YLC and the ICCJ to help bring these powerful experiences to even more people.

As an Orthodox Jewish woman who had been educated exclusively in private Jewish day schools, college was the forum for my first genuine encounters with Catholics, Muslims, atheists, and agnostics. Beliefs and concepts that had been self-evident in high school suddenly needed to be verbalized and explained. I engaged my new friends in dialogue, asking them to share their worldviews and experiences with me as I shared my own with them. As I learned more about other

cultures and creeds, I felt my own beliefs enriched. In each conversation I watched the stereotypes I had always accepted as fact splinter and break, and as each one was destroyed, so were the barriers that had existed between others and myself.

As a future leader in the Orthodox community, I believe that it is essential that the Orthodox community join this interfaith conversation, to benefit from the enrichment that comes with dialogue and the insight that comes with the breaking of stereotypes, but also to ensure that the Orthodox voice is heard to break the stereotypes of others and contribute to their growth and learning. I have witnessed tremendous negativity towards the Orthodox community from other Jewish denominations and from other religious communities because of our refusal to engage with others and the demands that we require in our relationships. I strive to introduce non-Jews, non-Orthodox Jews, and Orthodox Jews to an Orthodoxy that is hearty, vibrant, engaging, rich, relevant, and meaningful.