



Day of Judaism in the Churches of Europe

01/05/2009 | Violetta Reder

In 2009, the Catholic Church in Poland celebrated her 12th Day of Judaism, the Ecumenical Council of Churches in Austria organized the 10th Day of Judaism, while the Catholics in the Netherlands exulted in their 2nd Day of Judaism. An overview.

Day of Judaism in the Churches of Europe

Italy

The Roman Catholic Church in Italy was the first to celebrate an annual day of Christian-Jewish reflection, and has done this ever since 1990, ie, seven years before that idea was brought by the interreligious group, Teshuva, from Milan into the 2nd European Ecumenical Assembly (1997) and spread in the Churches of Europe. Since 2001, the Italian Episcopal Conference was joined by the Italian Jewish community in its promotion. In 2005, both sides assumed a ten-year programme of reflection on the Ten Commandments. However, in the months preceding the 2009 celebration the assembly of the Italian rabbis announced their withdrawal from participation as a protest against the wording of the Good Friday prayer for Jews in the Tridentine Missal. Despite this upheaval, Italian bishops continued to plan for the Judaism Day and published a document that summarized the stages in the Christian-Jewish dialogue in the past 50 years, emphasizing the removal of “perfidī ludeorum” from the Good Friday prayer in 1959, and the contribution of Cardinal Ratzinger into the remarkable Vatican document: *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible* (2001).

Austria

For many years the Austrian experience of the Judaism Day had an intra-Christian, ecumenical character - without the involvement of Jews - focusing on the Hebrew roots of Christianity and repentance for Christian faults expressed at a service. This year, two services were held: an ecumenical service of the Ecumenical Council of the Churches in Austria in a Roman Catholic Name of Jesus Church in Vienna on January 17th, and an interreligious prayer meeting with the members of the Reformed Jewish community, Or Hadash, in the Augsburg Evangelical Am Tabor Church in Vienna on January 15th. Also occasional lectures were delivered in Austrian cities: the Catholic expert in dialogue, Hans Hermann Henrix, offered a lecture and a seminar at the Theologische Kurse in Vienna; Prof. Ewald Volgger spoke on “Anty-Judaism in the Roman Catholic liturgy” at the Katholisch Theologischen Privatuniversität in Linz; and, in the Cathedral Bookshop in Salzburg, the Methodist woman pastor - Esther Handschin, the New Testament specialist - Prof. Peter Arzt-Grabner, and Markus Himmelbauer - the President of the Austrian Coordinative Committee for Christian-Jewish Cooperation discussed “St Paulus after 2000 years – is he a bridge or an obstacle in the Christian-Jewish dialogue”?

The Netherlands

Christian interest in Jews and Judaism in the Netherlands after the WW II is a deep-rooted tradition. It is for many decades now that the Protestant Church in the Netherlands has held a Sunday for Israel (Israëlzondag) – preaching on Israel on the first Sunday of October, whereas the Catholic Council for Relations with Jews (Katholieke Raad voor Israël) has promoted dialogue with

Jews since 1951, and even became an official advisory and executive body within the secretariat of the Dutch episcopal conference. In 1994, the Dutch bishops decided to have also their own committee for relations with Jews, and issued their pastoral letters on the subject: “Living from one and the same root” (1995) and “Living with one and the same hope” (1999). They also took a decision on holding Judaism Days together with other Catholic Churches – on January 17th, preceding the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. The programme of those Days is based on the 1999 episcopal letter: in 2009, the Day was devoted to the Bible, next year the focus is to be on liturgy as sanctification of time. The Dutch Judaism Days is meant to be as much local and grassroots as possible, involving not only local bishops and rabbis, but also ordinary Catholics in parishes.

Poland

The 12th Day of Judaism in the Catholic Church in Poland had a motto: “I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth.” (Gen 9:13) and was part of a several years’ programme of reflection, based on God’s covenants. This year, the main celebration took place in Warsaw, offering a full range of events for the whole week 12 – 18th January. Among them there was a joint prayer meeting and agapa for Jews and Christians in the House of Warsaw Archbishops, liturgy of the word of God in All the Saints Church, celebrated by the Archbishop of Warsaw, Kazimierz Nycz, including comments to biblical readings presented by Jews and Christians. Jewish people were very moved when hundreds of Neocatechumenate members sang *Shma Israel*; “I could feel the bond that had become established between us”, said Piotr Kadłcik, the president of the Association of Jewish Communities in Poland. Warsaw residents could also participate in the session titled “Prayer is the way” with Jewish and Christian speakers, an “Open Day” and a Havdala for all in the Nozyks’ Synagogue, and many cultural events. Ms Lucia Faltin from the Cambridge University lectured on the “Current state of research on Jewish-Christian relations”.

An incredible *shulchan aruch* of an eleven days’ Jewish-Christian festival with joint prayer and cultural and intellectual events is always offered in January by the Archdiocese of Poznan, whose Archbishop, Stanislaw Gadecki, was the mastermind of the Days of Judaism in Poland, and the previous head of the Polish Episcopal Commission for Dialogue with Judaism. This initiative is amply supported by the grassroots movement that took shape in the “Coexist” Association.

Wrocław, Kraków and Lublin have worked out a constant programme outline of their own, involving their local bishops, higher theological education centres and the local rabbis (Wrocław and Kraków boast having one each). Interestingly, this year, Cardinal Stanislaw Dziwisz, Archbishop of Kraków (former private secretary of pope John Paul II), as the first bishop in the thousand years’ history of this royal capital city and centre of Ashkenazic culture participated in a prayer service in a synagogue together with Jews and Christians. This precedent holds true even if, as the Jews of Kraków remember it, Archbishop Karol Wojtyla, the later pope John Paul II, would visit the (Remuh) synagogue in Kraków on his own: his visits were unofficial. On January 17th, the huge Temple was filled up for a joint Havdala service in Hebrew and Polish, extended with biblical readings – the synagogue was filled up as much as on the days of the famous Jewish Culture Festival in Kraków. The very Havdala ritual and homily fell to the Chief Rabbi of Galicia, Edgar Gluck; the final prayer for peace was read by the Chief Rabbi of Krakow, Boaz Pash, who composed the prayer especially for this occasion and read it together with Fr Dariusz Ras, the Cardinal’s secretary. A Chabad-Lubavitch rabbi, living in Kraków, Eliezer Gurary, was also present. Two days before Rabbi Pash lectured on “The Thirteen Covenants” at the Pontifical Academy of Theology in Kraków, who is the organizer of the Kraków Day of Judaism.

In Kielce, the 12th Day of Judaism took a form of commemoration of the pogrom victims of 1946; French diplomats and men of letters were present, among them the Jewish writer, Marek Halter.

Also smaller cities, like Sieradz (43 000 inhabitants) and Kalisz (one of the eldest in Poland, ca 100 000 inhabitants) organized their Day of Judaism. In Sieradz, it took place in the city theatre, involving the speakers like the Chief Rabbi of Poland, Michael Schudrich, and the Bishop of Włocławek, Wiesław Mering, both of whom later prayed together at the walls of the local synagogue. The pre-War Jewish Sieradz was presented in a medial show, and Golda Tencer, director of “Shalom” Foundation in Warsaw, opened the famous photo exhibition: “And I still see their faces”.

Interestingly, in Kalisz, the Day of Judaism did not have a church or religious character, but it resulted from grassroots involvement of the local philharmonic and the city authorities. The Israeli symphonic orchestra, Ra’anana - the guests of the city - gave a concert of Jewish music and visited the local relics of Jewish life. In the Jewish funeral house, which holds a small Jewish exhibition, they met with Mirosław Przedzik, a fiddler of the Kalisz Philharmonic, who had composed a piece of music in honour of Kalisz Jews titled “Fleida” (commemorating his family’s Jewish neighbour, Frania Kubiak), and had been awarded for it by the President of the city of Kalisz. This time, Mr Przedzik presented the exhibition with the Singer sewing machine that his family kept for Fleida after she was taken to a camp with her family...Her “Singer” is still waiting: Fleida and her family perished in Auschwitz, the musician asks in his musical poem: why...?

In Poland, the Day of Judaism may also take an intra-Catholic character like the celebrations in Płock (John Paul II Institute of Christian Culture) and Olsztyn – the latter with a Mass celebrated by the local bishop and homily by the seminary rector.

In the country which once had 3 million Jewish citizens, who were killed in this very land by the Nazi Germans, where some people still remember their Jewish neighbours, and others trace their own Jewish origin, where anti-Semitism clearly had roots in Christian anti-Judaism – the Day of Judaism has a unique significance. The founding idea of the Day of Judaism in Poland – when the Polish Episcopacy instituted it – was “special prayer and reflection on the mystery of the bonds between Christianity and Judaism” (Abp S. Gadecki, 2003), also assuming that Christians should come to know Jews and Judaism, both by education and encounter. The malcontents from among people devoted to Christian-Jewish dialogue in Poland wish more bishops and parishes were involved, and the character of the Day were more educational than spectacular. Education in Judaism and Christian-Jewish relations at Catholic higher schools is also an urgent need – that is why an Institute for Jewish Studies is being called into existence at the Catholic Lublin University.

Of course, when a half of the bottle is empty, the other half is filled. Someone who researches the latter half may be amazed with the huge number of local Polish initiatives – like commemorating local Jewish citizens and their culture, preserving Jewish heritage, cultivating bonds with their descendants living abroad, educating the youth. Most often these initiatives are based on a charisma, passion and persevering devotion of an individual or a group, sometimes a foundation or an association, who find the local government and sometimes the local parish priest willing to cooperate. Until recently a Jewish culture festival was a renowned Kraków phenomenon (20 editions so far). Then other cities joined organizing their own Jewish culture festivals: Warsaw, Wrocław, Łódź, Sopot/Gdańsk, Zielona Góra, and even former little shtetls like Szczekociny and Chmielnik.

It is good when the Spirit passes through the Church hierarchy, but, very clearly, at the Polish Christian-Jewish stage, “the wind blows wherever it pleases” (*St John* 3:8).

Bibliography:

1. Cisło, Mieczysław Bp, “Spotkanie,” Interview for Tygodnik Powszechny, TP 3(3106), 18.01.2009, <http://tygodnik.onet.pl/32.0.19721.spotkanie.artykul.html> (24.01.2009).

2. Koordinierungsausschusses für Christlich-Jüdische Zusammenarbeit, "17. Jänner 2009 - 10. Tag des Judentums," <http://www.christenundjuden.org/de/?item=567> (27.02.2009).

3. Lange, Tineke de, E-mail correspondence with the author, 5.03.2009.

4. Magistro, Sandro, "Jews and the Catholic Church. The Rabbis of Italy Don't Like This Pope," <http://chiesa.espresso.repubblica.it/articolo/213449?eng=y>.

5. Nosowski, Zbigniew (ed.), *The Bond of Memory*, Laboratorium WIEZI, Warsaw 2008.

6. Weil, Ruth, "Encounter with History – Learning for the Future," <http://www.christenundjuden.org/en/?item=531> (27.02.2009).

Violetta Reder: Interfaculty Institute of Ecumenism and Dialogue, Pontifical Academy of Theology in Kraków, Poland