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MS-603: Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum Collection, 1945-1992.

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Box 11, Folder 13, Auschwitz - Carmelite controversy, 1987-1988.

CONFLICT OVER THE ESTABLISHMENT of a Carmelite convent at Auschwitz—like the reverberations of John Cardinal O'Connor's recent visit to Israel—illustrates both the depth and the volatility of certain critical questions at issue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Jewish community. That both of these potentially explosive conflicts appear to have been resolved is a demonstration of the progress that has been made in Catholic-Jewish understanding in recent decades and a tribute to interreligious diplomacy among both Jewish and Catholic leaders.

In both situations, the AJC played an active role, since it is in the area of interreligious diplomacy that the AJC staff and leadership have made a major contribution over the years. The flare-up around O'Connor's trip was heated, but quickly resolved.

However rankled Jewish leaders may be by the Vatican's refusal to extend full and formal diplomatic recognition to Israel, they understand that the Cardinal was bound by church policy. However painful his reference to the Holocaust as Judaism's "gift" to the world, Jews believe it was not maliciously intended.

The convent at Auschwitz is another, much thornier issue. The establishment of the Carmelite convent at the site of the camp whose name both symbolizes and summarizes the Holocaust for Jews aroused impassioned feelings among the Jewish communities of Europe—particularly survivor groups—and touched a variety of religious, ethnic and national nerve endings. Embedded in this tangled web are competing and conflicting self-perceptions of Jews, Roman Catholics, Poles and other national groups; vastly different understandings of history; still unreconciled views of how the victims of Nazism should be memorialized.

The Jewish communities of Belgium, France and Italy led the fight against the convent—thus demonstrating a point made by Tullia Zevi,

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The Convent Crisis

The Carmelite convent at Auschwitz aroused impassioned feelings and touched nerve endings.

By Judith H. Banki

president of the Union of Italian Jewish Communities, to a recent AJC annual meeting: the Jews of Western Europe now consider themselves to be a third center of Jewish life, along with Israel and the United States.

Even so, the AJC played a significant role in the developments through its interreligious, international and ethnic contacts in the United States and abroad. AJC staff and leaders transmitted Jewish concerns to members of the church hierarchy in Poland as well as in Western Europe, offered suggestions for programs to deepen Catholic-Jewish understanding, and worked to keep channels of communication open.

The origins of the convent remain unclear. In 1984 the Carmelites of Krakow were given permission by the Polish government to occupy a building on the outer edge of the camp.

Originally intended as a theater, the building was used by the Nazis to store supplies, particularly the Zyklon-B gas used in the gas chambers.

Jews were neither consulted nor informed about this decision, and only learned about the convent the following year, through the circulation, in Belgium, of a fund-raising brochure by an organization called "Aid to the Church in Distress." The brochure called the convent "Catholics' gift to the Pope . . ." claiming "The Carmelites do penance for us who are still alive," referred to "the victorious power of the Cross of Jesus," and predicted the convent would become "a spiritual fortress, a token of the conversion of brothers from various countries who went astray."

These triumphalist formulations drew the objections of Christians and Jews alike. The Christian members of

"What is at stake is the question of how the Holocaust is to be remembered."

the Amitié Judéo-Chrétienne (Jewish-Christian Friendship Society) of France strongly criticized the fund-raising tract.

Similar criticism came from a variety of other Christian sources, ranging from members of the Roman Catholic hierarchy to Catholic and Protestant laypersons. Cardinal Decourtray of Lyons, France, declared: "It is the attempt to totally exterminate the Jews that we call the Shoah, of which Auschwitz is the symbol. Such affliction and suffering has conferred on the Jewish people, through its martyrs, a particular dignity that is quite properly its own. And to construct a convent at Auschwitz would, for me, impinge upon that dignity."

The intensity of the Jewish response—which was virtually unanimous—apparently caught Cardinal Macharsky, archbishop of Kraków, in whose diocese Auschwitz-Birkenau falls, off balance. A church leader sincerely interested in Christian-Jewish rapprochement who visited and was profoundly moved by *Yad Vashem*, he viewed the convent as an act of reconciliation; to Jews it was an act of appropriation. The ensuing controversy focused attention on the meaning of Auschwitz for Poles as well as for Jews. In an article in the Polish Catholic weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny*, editor Jerzy Turowicz emphasized that Auschwitz "is also a symbol of the martyrdom of the Polish people during the Nazi occupation," and asked: "Do these two symbols really have to divide our two nations?"

A powerful answer to this question was delivered by Ady Steg, president of the Alliance Israélite Universelle at a "summit meeting" held July 22, 1986 in Geneva between members of the Roman Catholic hierarchy from France, Belgium and Poland and rabbinic and communal leaders of French, Belgian and Italian Jewry. Addressing the assembled church leaders, Professor Steg proclaimed that the Jewish people had acquired, through the martyrdom of its children, "inalienable rights to Auschwitz." He declared that the memory of the tens and

hundreds of thousands of non-Jews who were murdered there "deserves to be preserved in piety." But, he noted, "their murder was perpetrated as an 'extra measure' . . . a matter of subjecting the non-Jews to facilities which were installed for the working out of the Final Solution. In truth, Auschwitz, with its gas chambers and its crematoria, was conceived, constructed and put to use solely for the extermination of the Jews . . . Nor is it possible to forget that the Final Solution succeeded in part: six million Jews slaughtered; the total disappearance of Judaism in Poland."

"Once again, the church was acting as if it could substitute for the Jewish people."

Out of the Geneva meeting came a promise that reconstructive work on the convent would be halted. Jewish leaders interpreted that as the first step in relocating the convent, but when additional nuns were reported to have moved into the building they feared a resolve by the church to keep the convent at its present site.

A joint statement adopted at a second Catholic-Jewish "summit meeting" (Geneva II) held Feb. 22, 1987, appears to have resolved the conflict. The Catholic delegation, including the archbishops of Paris, Lyons, Brussels and Kraków, agreed to establish a center "for information, education, meeting and prayer . . . outside the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp grounds." It is understood by the Jewish delegation, including Grand Rabbi René Samuel Sirat of France, Theo Klein,

president of the European Jewish Congress, Professor Steg and Ms. Zevi, that the new center will be some distance from the camp and that the Carmelite sisters will be moved into it within two years. The agreement represents a significant achievement.

The controversy over who "owns" Auschwitz and how to commemorate the millions who were murdered there may appear unseemly and distasteful. But what is at stake is the ultimate question of how the Holocaust is to be remembered. It is some 45 years since the gates of the death camps were opened. Forty-five years from now, when there are no survivors left, will the Holocaust be recalled as the pinnacle and culmination of centuries of anti-Semitism, or as a tragic aberration? Will the story of the Holocaust be told without Jews? Indeed, it is possible to take a guided tour today through Auschwitz without learning that Jews met a special fate there.

The frequent invocation by church leaders of the names of St. Maximilian Kolbe and Edith Stein compounds the problem. The former, a Roman Catholic priest who offered his life in place of another prisoner at Auschwitz, may have died a martyr's death from a Catholic perspective, but in life he was also editor of an anti-Semitic newspaper and traveled in a highly anti-Semitic Catholic circle. As for Edith Stein, a convert from Judaism who died at Auschwitz a Carmelite nun and who is a candidate for beatification, Catholics find it difficult to grasp why Jews do not consider her an appropriate personification of Jewish martyrdom. Indeed, this very lack of sensitivity testifies to the dimensions of the problem.

If the church views the Holocaust only as something that happened to innocent Christians and Jews—equally victims, equally martyrs—it sidesteps the question of anti-Semitism and its own role in fomenting it across the centuries. It is this failure to acknowledge and confront the poison at the root of Christian-Jewish relations that the convent at Auschwitz signifies to the Jews of Europe. ■

"THE CHAPEL N AUSCHWITZ"



Elie Wiesel



Franklin Littell



Yehuda Bauer



Gerhard Riegner

THE EXTENT of Christianity's responsibility for the Holocaust, argued by Christian clergymen and scholars among each other and with Jewish colleagues, occupied much of a conference held in Oxford last month. The conference, organized by British press tycoon Robert Maxwell, and his wife Elisabeth, an historian, was entitled "Remembering for the Future: The impact of the Holocaust and genocide on Jews and Christians."

The conclusions of the Christian participants varied only in the degree of culpability they assigned to the teachings of the Church. But the accent was on the prevention of further genocide.

Harshest on himself and his fellow-Christians was A. Roy Eckardt, emeritus professor of religious studies at LeHigh University, in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, quoting the theologian Johann Baptist Metz:

"There is no Christian truth that I could defend with my back turned towards Auschwitz... The problem... is not merely a revision of Christian theology of Judaism, but a revision of Christian theology altogether." He elaborated that at Auschwitz there was a chapel for the SS. That is to say, when the devil appears, he characteristically comes in the guise of God, as well as of human beings.

Continuing in the same vein, Eckardt found anti-Judaism in the essence of Christian doctrine.

"The resurrection of Jesus remains a primordial and unceasing source of the Christian world's anti-Judaism," he said. "How can the resurrection of Jesus be proclaimed as the special, saving act of God, without the Christian supersessionism [of Judaism] and triumphalism that helped lay the railroad tracks to the murder centres?"

ECKARDT'S STERN judgment was opposed by other Christian theologians. It was notably a fellow American Methodist, Prof. Franklin Littell, of Temple University, who refused to go along with his radical rejection of one of the pillars of Christian belief.

But Eckardt persisted. He quoted from a book by Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits, of Jerusalem: "In its effect upon the life of the Jewish people, Christianity's New Testament has been the most dangerous anti-Semitic tract in history." As Berkovits points out, Eckardt said, the New Testament is the spiritual progenitor of a massive library of international hate literature.

To balance the picture somewhat, however, he also quoted several New Testament verses which can be interpreted as including the Jew in the demand to love one's fellow man. Thus, there is 1 John 4:19-21:

Christian triumphalism, the New Testament as the progenitor of all anti-Semitic literature, and the daring new Catholic view that Jews have their own valid way to salvation — all these ideas were discussed at a recent conference in England on the impact of the Holocaust on Jews and Christians. Ernie Meyer, who covered the conference for The Jerusalem Post, sums up.

We love because God loved us first. But if a man says, I love God, while hating his brother, he is a liar.

He recalled that Roman Catholics had admitted, at the Second Vatican Council of 1965, that Jews have their own valid way to salvation. "But we have to think carefully what remains of Christianity when we admit that there are other ways to salvation."

THE CONSENSUS, even among the more conservative Christian scholars, was that Christianity had to learn to view the Jewish rejection of Jesus in a more positive light, as part of God's providential plan.

This view, it must be remembered, is actually in complete conflict with the established Christian treatment of the subject, which in the past has held Jews up to contempt for this reason.

The more positive view was stressed by Franklin Littell, who is sometimes referred to as "the father of Holocaust studies in America." He earned this title because of his pioneering work in challenging Christians to rethink the meaning of the Holocaust and anti-Semitism.

"The critical frontier of Christian theology today," declared Littell, "is the reworking of the relationship of the Churches to the Jewish people."

He went on to say that the murder of the Jews in the heart of Christendom continues to confront Christianity with the major credibility crisis of its history. Most church leaders in the Third Reich and its allies failed to live up to their ordination vows. The perpetrators were, with few exceptions, baptized Christians, who were never rebuked, let alone excommunicated.

How did a situation develop in which wholesale apostasy could become the sign over Christendom, with only a few martyrs bearing authentic witness of spiritual resistance, he asked.

Littell is noted for having developed what he calls a Genocide Early Warning System. According to him, genocide studies have today reached the stage where it is possible to identify potentially genocidal movements according to 15 criteria.

During the closing public meeting of the conference at London's Central Hall, Westminster, Littell ring-

ingly scored Christianity for its triumphalism. "There is enough guilt to go around. We need a massive reconstruction, and the memory of the Holocaust can lend us."

THE BISHOP OF Oxford, Dr. Richard Harries, voiced what was probably the most liberal and even daring view on Christian-Jewish relations. He said that Christians had to rediscover Judaism as "a living religion, not destined to be replaced by Christianity."

He called on Anglicans to stop seeing Judaism as a fossil. "Christians are not yet clear on how to relate the New Testament to the Old," he said.

"It is not our prime task to proselytize," concluded Dr. Harries, who was recently appointed consultant on Jewish-Christian relations to the Anglican archbishops. "We share the essentially Jewish hope of seeing the Kingdom of God on earth."

SOCIOLOGY PROFESSOR Hubert G. Locke, of the University of Washington, did not engage in theology, but made practical, more down-to-earth observations. He quoted from the book *The Christian-Jewish Tragedy* by the church historian Conrad Henry Moehlmann, who wrote:

"An apology to Judaism on the part of Christianity is long overdue. The relationship between Christianity and Judaism during the last 19 centuries is an ethical problem which 20th-century Christianity can no longer afford to ignore."

Said Locke, one of the few black scholars at the conference, whose own books include one on the letters from prison of Pastor Martin Niemöller: "There is nothing particularly remarkable in this simple acknowledgment of a truth, which all of us here have come to recognize."

DR. GERHARD RIEGNER, aged 77, could perhaps be described as the elder statesman of the conference. A Berlin lawyer, he was a co-founder of the World Jewish Congress and is one of the leading pioneers in Christian-Jewish dialogue. In Switzerland during the war years as the representative of the WJC, it was his tragic fate to be the first to have authentic news of the

death camps. He passed on the information to the Allied governments, but had to watch impotently as nothing was done.

Speaking in his gentle manner, Riegner praised the progress that had been made in Jewish-Christian relations since the Holocaust. He singled out as a "revolutionary development" the Vatican II declaration *Nostra Aetate* of 1965, which declared that God's covenant with the Jewish people had not been abrogated. He similarly praised the 1983 Lutheran World Council, which had "strongly and unanimously repudiated" the anti-Jewish teachings of Martin Luther.

"But who is aware of these important changes?" he asked. "The knowledge of these achievements is still confined to a small elite in our communities."

Riegner said Church statements during the Holocaust were mostly of a defensive nature; that everything that could be done was being done; that any attitude except one of greatest restraint could only make matters worse. "Does such an evaluation really stand up to our knowledge 40 years later?" he challenged.

The churches' position towards the State of Israel, "lacks warmth and boldness," he continued. "How can one affirm constantly in the theological statements that the destiny of the people of Israel is of deep concern to Christians, and then forget this when it comes to delicate current political problems?"

SAUL FRIEDLANDER, professor of modern history at Tel Aviv University, himself a Holocaust survivor, made some trenchant observations. While not of a strictly theological nature, they were highly relevant as cultural criticism in this generally religious age.

He said that while the Holocaust was widely recognized as important, it did not seem to have any decisive impact on central intellectual or cultural debates within contemporary Western society. "None of the major cultural currents which have developed in the West since the war have been directly influenced by it."

He contrasted this with the impact of World War I on the intellectual and artistic scene.

"We are faced with the paradox that the Holocaust is apparently without a clear impact on present-day debates, while at the same time it is constantly rephrased by the culture industry, and thus reinserted into the general Western context."

In a surprising observation, Friedlander noted that in Germany, "a manifest discourse about the possibility of nuclear holocaust may reveal a latent fear of retribution."

Also speaking in a non-theological vein, Hebrew University history professor Yehuda Bauer lent an air of urgency to the entire proceedings with his impassioned warning: "It can happen again. Hitler was not a madman; he was responsible for his deeds. World War II was an ideological war for the superiority of the Germanic people. It could only be done by fighting the Jews — it was a war against the Jews."

One of the chief architects of the conference, Professor Bauer spoke of the Armenian genocide by the Turks during World War I, and also mentioned "our brothers, the Gypsies," exterminated at Auschwitz.

AT THE CLOSING convocation in London, Nobel Peace Prize laureate Elie Wiesel sounded several theological notes. He said that at one time, he compared "the Event" [the Holocaust] to the revelation at Sinai. "Auschwitz seemed to me an anti-Sinai. Something essential was revealed there, and it will take us centuries to unravel its mysterious message."

Why did it happen? he asked rhetorically. Some ultra-Orthodox Jews say, because of our sins. "This is to me obscene and blasphemous. Any reason offered is the wrong reason. God? I had my quarrels with Him. Just as we cannot comprehend Auschwitz with God, we cannot understand it without God."

Wiesel stressed that the survivors did not turn against society. "They did not become nihilists. All the 400 children who left Buchenwald with me in 1945 turned out to be friends of humankind, working for a better future for their children — for all children."

Wiesel had some scathing words for left-wingers, including those in Israel, who compare Israel with the Nazis, and cast the Palestinians in the role of the Jews under the Nazis. He singled out Prof. Yeshayahu Leibowitz of Jerusalem for his "indecent analogies" in comparing the mentality of Israeli soldiers to that of SS men.

He concluded by describing the Oxford conference as a celebration of memory from which all people may benefit. "The future of the world is totally intertwined with the future of remembering," he said.



JEWS AND VATICAN OFFICIALS TO CONVENE ON ANTI-SEMITISM

By Susan Birnbaum

NEW YORK, Dec. 15 (JTA) -- Jews and Catholics will gather at a conference in February to examine the Christian roots of anti-Semitism, according to Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum, chairman of the International Jewish Committee for Interfaith Consultations.

The conference is expected to initiate work on a Vatican document that would challenge Catholic teachings worldwide.

The conclave, scheduled to take place Feb. 20 through 24 in Zurich, is expected to be the first of several meetings that will discuss the development of Christian thinking from early days to present times, including how it bears on anti-Semitism and its relation to the Holocaust.

The conference is an outgrowth of a meeting held in Miami on Sept. 11, 1987, between Pope John Paul II and 206 Jewish leaders.

Soon after, a joint Jewish-Vatican conference to explore the roots of Christian anti-Semitism was approved by the pope.

The conference is conditional on the removal of a Carmelite convent at Auschwitz to a center away from the Auschwitz grounds.

This was decided Thursday by members of the international committee, the body involved in Vatican-Jewish negotiations. The move must be made before Feb. 20.

Tanenbaum said the upcoming conference would "begin a serious scholarly examination of the history of anti-Semitism in the Western world through the ancient, the medieval and the modern periods, culminating in the Nazi Holocaust."

Talks on the long-awaited document will probably take several years to complete. They will involve careful examination of 11 volumes of Vatican records of the years between 1939 and 1945.

Members of the Jewish group, which meets with Catholics, explained their opposition to a conference centering on the Holocaust.

Rabbi Fabian Schoenfeld, a member of the committee and a past president of the Rabbinical Council of America, explained that the Rabbinical Council position "tends to agree with the Hasidic community," which conducts dialogue with Christians only on social issues and not on theology.

Vatican joins Jewish unit in anti-Semitism review

By SUSAN BIRNBAUM

Representatives of the Catholic church and the world Jewish community will meet in February to launch a probe of the Christian roots of anti-Semitism.

Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum, chairman of the International Jewish Committee for Interfaith Consultations, said the convening of the conference would be conditional on the removal of a convent on the grounds of the Auschwitz concentration camp. Tanenbaum is also international affairs director of the American Jewish Committee.

The conference is expected to initiate work on a Vatican document that would challenge Catholic teachings worldwide. It represents the latest stage in a 19-year working dialogue between the Vatican and the international Jewish committee, which was formed to coordinate the world Jewish community's response to changing church views.

The conclave is scheduled to take place Feb. 20 through 24 in Zurich. It is expected to be the first of several meetings that will discuss the development of Christian thinking from early days to present times, specifically as it bears on anti-

Semitism and the relation this had to the Holocaust.

The conference is an outgrowth of a meeting held in Miami on Sept. 11, 1987, between Pope Paul II and 206 Jewish community figures from this country. Soon after, a joint Jewish-Vatican conference to explore the roots of Christian anti-Semitism was approved by the pope.

The decision to make the conference conditional on the removal of the convent at Auschwitz was decided in mid-December by members of the international Jewish committee, which is commonly known as IJCIC ("idge-kick"). The group said the Carmelite convent must be removed to a site away from the Auschwitz grounds before Feb. 20.

Tanenbaum said the upcoming conference would "begin a serious scholarly examination of the history of anti-Semitism in the Western world through the ancient, the medieval and the modern periods, culminating in the Nazi Holocaust."

U.S. Catholicism's top expert on Catholic-Jewish relations said he saw the upcoming dialogue as a boon to the church.

"The better we can get a grasp on what anti-Semitism is, the bet-

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Vatican

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ter we can oppose it, looking toward positive contributions to better church teaching," said Eugene Fisher, director of the secretariat for Catholic-Jewish Relations at the National Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Talks on the long-awaited document will probably take several years to complete. It will rely on careful examination of 11 volumes of Vatican records of the years between 1939 and 1945.

Spokesmen for the Orthodox community said the Orthodox rabbinate would be keeping its distance from the new stage of dialogue, at least at the beginning. According to Rabbi Fabian Schonfeld, a member of IJCIC and a past president of the Rabbinical Council of America, the modern Orthodox rabbinate's position on the current talks "tends to agree with the chasidic community," which conducts dialogue with Christians only on social issues and not on theology.

Schonfeld said the procedure would be welcomed "if it will result in a public admission of guilt and a public acknowledgment of the Christian roots of anti-Semitism."

Rabbi Wolfe Kelman, executive vice president of the Rabbinical Assembly, the body of Conservative rabbis, was one of three Jewish leaders who accompanied Tanenbaum to Rome two weeks ago to discuss the possibility of such a conference.

The others were Gerhard Riegner of Geneva, former secretary-general of the WJC Congress and a board member of that group, and Prof. Leon Feldman of Rutgers University, secretary of IJCIC.

Jewish Telegraphic Agency



**VATICAN OFFICIAL A NO-SHOW
ON AUSCHWITZ CONVENT DISCUSSION**
By Susan Birnbaum

NEW YORK, Dec. 22 (JTA) -- Jewish representatives who met this week with Vatican delegates to discuss removal of a convent from Auschwitz now think it highly likely the Catholics are backing out of an agreement signed last year to remove the convent.

As a result, members of the World Jewish Congress reaffirmed Wednesday a resolution not to partake in a conference on anti-Semitism scheduled for February, unless the Vatican ensures that the convent at Auschwitz is removed to a site outside the camp.

Rabbi Wolfe Kelman, chairman of the American Section of the WJC Congress, emphasized Wednesday the failure of Johannes Cardinal Willebrands, Vatican secretary of state for religious relations with the Jews, to appear Tuesday in Paris for a meeting with Jewish officials to discuss the issue.

Not knowing the reason for the prelate's absence, members of the WJC Congress said that it looked "very unlikely" that the convent would be removed by the Feb. 22 deadline.

Professor Leon Feldman, American representative of the International Jewish Committee for Interfaith Consultations, reported from Paris Tuesday that the talks on removing the convent had not materialized.

Vatican delegates signed an agreement Feb. 23, 1987, in Geneva to create a Catholic center "for information, education, meeting and prayer to be established outside the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp grounds."

The signed agreement further stipulated that "there will be no permanent Catholic place of prayer on the site."

Signatories included the cardinals of Brussels -- home of the Carmelite order of nuns now living in the Auschwitz convent -- Lyon, Paris, Krakow and four other high Catholic representatives.

"I take this as a very serious breach," said Kelman.

The conclave between Catholic and Jewish delegates has been scheduled to take place in Zurich Feb. 20 through 24, conditional on the convent's removal. The gathering was to be the beginning of work on a document on the history of anti-Semitism and the Church.

"I told you not to run to the goyim," yelled Rabbi Zvi Zakheim, a member of the WJC Congress attending Wednesday's meeting here.

He was using the admission of probable failure to show the futility of holding dialogues on theology with the Christians, a position taken by many Orthodox Jews.