



THE JACOB RADER MARCUS CENTER OF THE AMERICAN JEWISH ARCHIVES

Preserving American Jewish History

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

Series A: Writings and Addresses. 1947-1991

Box 5, Folder 17, "Carmelite Nuns" - Op-ed in *New York Times*, 5 July 1989.

OP-ED, NYTIMES

Carmelite nuns managed to put at risk all the precarious goodwill built up since the war between the Jewish community and Christians/illustrates both the depth and the volatility of certain critical issues between the RCC and the Jewish community

Problem is not what they are doing - they are praying - but where they are doing it. They have opened a convent in the grounds of Auschwitz concentration camp./Origins of convent remain unclear. In 1984 Carmelites of Cracow were given permission by the Polish Govt. 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 never consulted nor informed about this decision, and only learned about the convent the following year through the circulation in Belgium of a fundraising 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 objections from Christians and Jews alike (Christian members of the Amitié Judeo-Christienne (JXC) Friendship Society of France criticized fundraising pamphlet.)

Dutch, Belgian protests

Cardinal Decourtray of Lyons, France, declared: "It is an 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."

Cardinal Macharsky who visited and was profoundly moved by Yad Vashem, viewed the convent as an act of reconciliation; to Jews it was an act of appropriation.

Ensuing controversy focused attention on the meaning of Auschwitz for Poles as well as for Jews. In article in Polish Catholic weekly TYGODNIK POWSZECHNY, 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? Defying church authorities to close their convent and move out, they have signalled their defiance by erecting a prominent cross above the old theater building they are occupying in the concentration camp compound.

They were supposed to be gone by Feb./ 23, a date agreed after top-level negotiations between JEWS AND CHRISTIANS'.

CHURCH HAS NOW PROMISED THEY WILL LEAVE IN JULY but there are not many Jews who believe it.

AUSCHWITZ, WHERE MILLIONS OF JEWS WERE MURDERED BY THE NAZIS, IS UNIQUELY SPECIAL TO THE JEWISH COMMUNITY; TO CALL IT EMOTIVE WOULD BE A CRASS UNDERSTATEMENT. Auschwitz both symbolizes and summarizes the Holocaust for Jews. Establishment of the convent has aroused impassioned feelings among the Jewish communities of Europe-particularly survivor groups. It has touched religious, ethnic and national nerveendings.

But POLISH CATHOLICS WERE MURDERED TOO AND THE NUNS WISH TO PRAY FOR THEIR SOULS./Bishop Henryk Muszynski of Wloclawek, chairman of the Polish Episcopate's Commission for Dialogue with Judaism, wrote MHT on February 24, 1989, "You have written, "Auschwitz was built by the Nazis for the primary purpose of exterminating European Jews." Now, it is obviously true, but not from the very beginning. According to the Encyclopedia Judaica, vol 8, p871, mass murder of Jews began in March 1942. And the first transport of Poles arrived at Auschwitz the 14 June 1940. From this time on, during a nearly two years, the Auschwitz camp was functioning as an extermination camp primarily for Poles. It is of course quite possible, and even very likely that there were also some Jews among the prisoners defined as "Poles" but they came to Auschwitz not as Jews, but as Poles. The first transports of Jews, defined as such, arrived truly in March 1942 and the first Jewish transport sent to Auschwitz by RSHA arrived the 12th May 1942. Such was the real beginning of the systematic extermination of Jews decreed at the Wannsee conference, the 20th JANUARY 1942. Many thousands of Polish people were dying in Auschwitz already since the summer 1940, and that is why among others as I have many times repeated, Auschwitz has become for the POLES, STILL DURING THE WAR, A HOLY SYMBOL OF MARTYRDOM OF THE POLISH NAATION. Thus understanding the feelings and the sensitivity of the Jews for whom the same Auschwitz has become the symbol of Shoah, I am not able to see how to convince in a plausible way my compatriots that the Carmelite convent should be moved at once to a not yet existing "interim center". DESPITE THEIR PIOUS INTENTIONS THEIR PRESENCE HAS GENERATED ENDLESS MISUNDERSTANDING WHICH IS NOW TURNING TO ILL WILL. Embedded in this tangled web are competing and conflicting self-perceptions of Jews, Roman Catholics, Poles and other national groups; vastly different understanding of history, still unreconciled views of how the victims of Nazism should be memorialized. Jewish communities of Belgium, France and Italy have led the fight against the convent (Jews of Eastern Europe a third center of Jewish life, along with Israel and the U.S.)

WJC RECENTLY CONSIDERED A WORLD JEWISH BOYCOTT OF PJP II WHEREVER HE WENT AND THE WITHDRAWAL OF JEWISH PARTICIPATION IN JOINT FAITH ENTERPRISES ALL OVER THE WORLD. MORE MODERATE COUNSELS PREVAILED.

BUT THERE WAS A STRONG SENSE OF CRISIS MERELY POSTPONED RATHER THAN AVOIDED. ALTERNATIVE TACTIC TO APPLY AS MUCH PRESSURE AS POSSIBLE BEFORE NEW JULY DEADLINE EXPIRES. THIS HAS MADE IT MORE

A GLOBAL ISSUE, A MAKE- OR- BREAK TEST FOR CHRISTIAN-JEWISH RELATIONS FOR IT CHALLENGES THE SINCERITY OF A FAR WIDER GROUP THAN THOSE DIRECTLY CONCERNED WITH THE AUSCHWITZ CARMELITES.

FROM THE JEWISH POINT OF VIEW CHRISTIAN JEWISH RELATIONS ARE ONLY WORTH FOSTERING IF OVER A CRITICAL ISSUE LIKE THIS THEY CAN DELIVER SATISFACTION.

DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN CATHOLICS, ANGLICANS AND PROTESTANTS ARE LOST ON MANY ORDINARY JEWS. THEY SEEM TO SEE THE AUSCHWITZ CONVENT AS A BLATANT PIECE OF AGGRESSION WHICH DEMONSTRATES THE TRUTH OF THE OLD SUSPICION THAT NO CHRISTIANS EXPRESSION OF GOODWILL TOWARDS JEWS, WHATEVER DENOMINATION IT COMES FROM CAN EVER BE REALLY TRUSTED.

THERE IS NO EVIDENCE HOWEVER THAT THE NUNS MOTIVES ARE CONSCIOUSLY ANTISEMITIC; THEY HAVE OFFERED TO PRAY FOR THE JEWISH VICTIMS OF AUSCHWITZ AS WELL.. THAT IN ITSELF IS A PERFECT EXAMPLE OF THE FUNDAMENTAL MISUNDERSTANDING AT THE ROOT OF THIS CRISIS, FOR MANY JEWS GREETED THE OFFER AS COMPOUNDING THE OFFENSE.

IT SEEMS TO BE THE CASE THAT EVEN THOSE IN THE CHURCH WHO HAVE BEEN MOST SYMPATHETIC TO THE JEWISH GRIEVANCE HAVE SCARCELY GRASPED EXACTLY WHY THE ISSUE IS TO THE JEWS SO IMPORTANT. CARDINAL JOHN O'CONNOR'S REFERENCE TO THE HOLOCAUST AS JUDASISM'S 'GIFT TO THE WORLD WAS NOT MALICIOUSLY INTENDED BUT IT WAS PAINFUL NONETHELESS. THE NUNS PROBABLY DO NOT BEGIN TO UNDERSTAND; NO DOUBT THAT IS WHY A MOVE THIS JULY SEEMED A FAIR SUBSTITUTE FOR A MOVE IN FEBRUARY.

AUSCHWITZ STANDS FOR THE UNIQUENESS OF THE HOLOCAUST. TO REGARD IT AS THE SCENE OF ONE MORE DREADFUL MASSACRE, ONLY IN DEGREE WORSE THAN COUNTLESS OTHER INHUMANITIES OF MANKIND, IS TO IGNORE THAT IT WAS THE FOCUS OF AN ATTEMPT TO WIPE OUT THE WHOLE JEWISH RACE.

EVEN TO MENTION THAT HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF CHRISTIANS WERE MURDERED BY THE NAZIS THEIR COUPLING JEWISH AND NON-JEWISH SUFFERING AND DEATH AS SOMEHOW A SHARED EXPERIENCE SEEMS TO JEWS TO THREATEN THE SYMBOLIC MEANING OF AUSCHWITZ AS A PLACE OF SPECIFICALLY JEWISH DESOLATION WITHOUT PARALLEL ON EARTH.

BUT ANGER SEEMS TO GO DEEPER EVEN THAN THAT.. EUROPEAN JEWRY HAS SPENT ITS WHOLE EXISTENCE IN THE SHADOW OF CHRISTIANITY UNDER A PERPETUAL PRESSURE TO DISAPPEAR, TO CONVERT, TO GIVE UP. JEWS BECAME AWARE OF EVERY CHURCH, CHAPEL, CONVENT OR CROSS AS AN OMINOUS SYMBOLIC REPROACH TO THEM FOR REMAINING AS THEY WERE./

TO THE JEWS OF EUROPE CHRISTIANITY WAS NOT A RELIGION OF THE LOVE OF GOD BUT A RELIGION OF HOSTILITY TOWARDS JEWS. A CHRISTIAN CHAPEL IN AUSCHWITZ, NOW TOPPED BY A CROSS, FEELS TO THEM LIKE AN ATTEMPT TO HOUND THE DEAD EVEN BEYOND THE GRAVE - OR EVEN TO CELEBRATE JEWISH EXTERMINATION AS A KIND OF CHRISTIAN TRIUMPH.

CHURCH OF COURSE WOULD BE QUITE PROPERLY OUTRAGED BY THE VERY SUGGESTION,. BUT VERY FEW JEWS WILL HAVE EVEN AN INKLING OF THE REASON WHY PRESENCE OF A COMMUNITY OF NUNS IN AUSCHWITZ PRAYING FOR PEACE AND FOR THE DEAD MAKES PERFECT CHRISTIAN SENSE. THE JEWISH INSTINCT IN A PLACE LIKE THAT IS TO LEAVE IT AS DESOLATE AS POSSIBLE, PHYSICALLY MORALLY AND PHILOSOPHICALLY.

AUSCHWITZ IS NOT SACRED TO JEWS; IT IS THE VERY OPPOSITE OF SACRED. TO EXTRACT SOLACE OR MEANING FROM SUCH THINGS LET ALONE FIND HOLINESS THERE IS TO TRY TO MITIGATE THE EVIL, TO PRETEND IT WAS SOMEHOW NOT AS BAD AS IT REALLY WAS, AND THUS TO BELITTLE MILLIONS WHO DIED THERE. AT AUSCHWITZ THERE WAS A CHAPEL FOR THE 'CONVENIENCE' OF MEMBERS OF THE SS. THAT IS TO SAY WHEN THE DEVIL APPEARS HE CHARACTERISTICALLY COMES IN THE GUISSE OF GOD AS WELL AS OF HUMAN BEINGS. Elie Wiesel at one time 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. Just as we cannot comprehend Auschwitz with God, we cannot understand it without God.

BUT THE CHRISTIAN INSTINCT IS THE EXACT REVERSE; IT IS TO SANCTIFY SUCH A PLACE. CHRISTIANS CONSECRATE THEIR CEMETERIES, BUILD SHRINES WHERE ACCIDENTS OR EXECUTIONS HAPPENED, CELEBRATE THEIR MARTYRS AND CALL THE PLACE OF MARTYRDOM HOLY. THERE IS ALSO A CONVENT OF NUNS ON THE SITE OF THE GALLIES AT TYBURN PRAYING FOR PEACE AND FOR THE DEAD.

THE TOTAL CONTRADICTION BETWEEN THESE TWO APPROACHES TO AUSCHWITZ HAS HIDDEN THE FACT EACH SIDE IN ITS OWN WAY IS TRYING TO EXPRESS ITS UTMOST SORROW AND GRIEF. BUT AUSCHWITZ IS THE LAST PLACE ON EARTH AT WHICH JEWS CAN BE EXPECTED TO LOOK ON CHRISTIANS SYMBOLISM WITH SYMPATHY. AND IT IS THE CHRISTIANS WHO MUST GIVE WAY-FOR THEY WERE NOT ONLY AMONG THE VICTIMS; THEY WERE AMONG THE MURDERERS.