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Poland's Jewish Uproar, And With So Few Jews

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WARSAW, Sept. 10 — As Poland nears its first fully free election in a generation, this country virtually without Jews finds itself once again grappling with issues about Jews and anti-Semitism.

The matter has been joined at two levels of society. On the margins of politics, Poland in the last year has seen a resurgence of bigotry in such forms as graffiti scrawled on Jewish monuments to the anonymous but widespread circulation of false claims that Tadeusz Mazowiecki, the popular Prime Minister and devout Roman Catholic, is secretly of Jewish origin, with the implication that this would make him suspect as a Polish leader.

And at the very heart of politics, a debate among the country's leading figures reflects the national preoccupation with the role of Jews in Poland. The debate centers on whether people of Jewish origin in public life should publicize their backgrounds, whether others should make such disclosures and whether such questions are inappropriate.

Both the popular expressions of anti-Semitism and the obsessions of the politicians are a curious phenomenon in Poland, a country of 38 million people that has about 10,000 Jews. Unlike the situation in the Soviet Union, where anti-Jewish groups are agitating against a small but visible minority, presumably to force them out of the country or out of good jobs or to use them as scapegoats for the failure of the system, in Poland Jews are so small a group that it is hard to see any imaginable practical goal in anti-Semitic politics. At best, the impulse seems to be a historic reflex from the days before the Nazis, when the bulk of the world's Jews lived in Poland.

The Automatic Villain

For some Poles — no one can say with certainty how many — the word Jews evokes shadowy villains who can be blamed for economic hard times.

Both of the competing political parties emerging from the dominant Solidarity federation are, to varying degrees, using this Jewish issue as a defining point.

Lech Walesa, the likely presidential candidate of the center-right Solidarity group, has said in news conferences and several interviews this summer that Jews in politics are hiding their origins, a remark that appeared to echo the popular stereotypes about Jewish conspiracy.

Members of the center-left group, whose leading figures include a few men whose parents were Jews, repeatedly argue that as a pluralistic group weaving together many traditions they are the strongest force to avert the rise of nationalism, authoritarianism and anti-Semitism in Poland.

porter whether the center left party that opposes him was dominated by Jews. He replied:

"Jews are great patriots, have done a lot for culture, but when they hide their nationality, they provoke attitudes of anti-Semitism," he said, according to a transcript carried by the Polish press agency. "Why are Jews not proud of the fact that they are Jewish? I am proud of the fact that I am Polish and similarly would have been proud of my origin if I had been Jewish."

In a recent interview in his office in Gdansk, Mr. Walesa said that his remarks were intended to dispel anti-Semitism, not inject it into the campaign. He seemed stung by the reaction his comments provoked and noted several times that he had worked to establish memorials to Jews killed in Poland.

"I wanted people of Jewish origin to be proud of their origin, and they are never satisfied, they never believe me," he said.

The Jews and 'the Masses'

As he explained himself, Mr. Walesa offered some revealing glimpses into how he perceives his role as the politician who transmits the feelings of "the masses" who have worries about the role of Jews.

"I am a practitioner of politics," he said. "The worst possible thing is to hide. The society and the masses react in the worst possible way to hiding. If

Even Walesa is fighting charges that he is insensitive.

it's out in the clear, it's in the open."

"If the masses have such doubts and they reach me even minimally," Mr. Walesa continued, + "I cannot disregard it. And then we have another problem. Should I avoid and reject it? Michnik says I should disregard them. Theoretically he could be right, but practically I cannot."

No responsible figure in Polish politics accuses Mr. Walesa of anti-Semitism, but several, including his supporters, said his comments were unfortunate. This week, after a meeting with an Israeli delegation, Mr. Walesa said, "While I have something to say in Poland, anti-Semitism will not happen."

S T A T E M E N T

by the
International Catholic-Jewish Liason Committee
Representing the
Pontifical Commission on Religious Relations with the Jews

A N D

The International Jewish Committee on Interreligious
Consultations

(Synagogue Council of America, World Jewish Congress,
B'nai Brith International and Israel Interfaith Committee)

Representatives of the International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations and the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews met in Prague from September 3rd through the 6th. This was the 13th meeting of the International Liason Committee of Catholic and Jewish representatives. Before the deliberations began the Catholic and Jewish delegations made a visit of homage to Theresienstad, one of the nazi death camps.

This last meeting of this committee took place in Rome in 1985. Difficulties which arose led to a delay of a further meeting until now. However, during these years the Steering Committee continued to meet on a regular basis of the Pontifical Commission and IJCIC in Rome in 1987, it was forseen that the next meeting would seek to lay the basis for the preparation of a Catholic document on the Shoah, the historical background of anti-Semitism, and its contemporary manifestations. The intention to prepare such a document was confirmed by the Pontifical Commission.

In this connection, the meeting in Prague discussed the religious as well as the secular basis of anti-Semitism over the past 1900 years and its relationship to the Shoah. This Discussion led to the recognition that certain traditions of Catholic thought, teaching, preaching, and practice in the Middle Ages contributed to the creation of anti-Semitism in Western society. In modern times many Catholics were not vigilant enough to react against manifestation of anti-Semitism. The Catholic delegates condemned anti-Semitism as well as all forms of racism as a sin against God and humanity, and affirmed that one cannot be authentically Christian and engage in anti-Semitism.

At the conference, Jewish and Catholics witnesses to the holocaust ^{spoke} of their experiences, they offered testimony that many Christians failed themselves as well as Jews and other victims be to weak a response to Nazi and Fascist ideologies. Witness was also given to the many courageous Christians church leaders and members who acted to save Jews thereby risking their own lives during the nazi terror. Nor was it forgotten that people other than Jews also perished.

The conference acknowledged the monumental role of the Declaration of the Second Vatican Council Nostra Aetate, as well as later efforts by the Popes and Church officials to bring about a substantive improvement in Catholic-Jewish relations.

Nostra Aetate created a new spirit in these relationships. Pope John Paul II. expressed that new spirit in an audience with Jewish leaders in February 15th 1985, when he said, "The relationship between Jews and Christians have radically improved in these years. Where there was ignorance and therefore prejudice and stereotype, there is now growing mutual knowledge, appreciation and respect. There is, above all, love between us: that kind of love I mean, which is for both of us a fundamental injunction of our religious traditions and which the New Testament has received from the Old".

While echoing the Popes recognition that a new spirit is in the making, the delegations called for a deepening of this spirit in Catholic-Jewish relations, a spirit which emphasizes cooperation, mutual understanding and reconciliation good-will and common goals to replace the past spirit of suspicion, resentment and distrust.

This spirit presupposes repentance as expressed by Archbishop Edward Cassidy, president of the Pontifical Commission on Religious Relations with the Jews, when he said in his opening statement: "That anti-Semitism has found a place in Christian thought and practice calls for an act Teshuvah (repentance) and of reconciliation on our part as we gather here in this city which is a witness to our failure to be authentic witnesses to our faith at times in the past."

This new spirit would also manifest itself in the work that the two faith communities could do together to respond to the needs of today's world. This need is for the establishment of human rights, freedom, and dignity where they are lacking or imperiled. A new image and a new attitude in Jewish-Catholic relationships are required to spread universally the trail-blazing work that has been done in a number of communities in various parts of the world. For example, in the United States an ongoing structure engaging in Catholic-Jewish dialogue recently issued a joint document on the teaching of moral values in public education. Furthermore, the Catholic Church there has effectively taught Judaism in its seminaries, school texts and educational materials in a positive and objective manner, scrupulously eliminating anything that would go against the spirit of Vatican Council II.

Likewise, the Jewish community in the United States in a growing atmosphere of confidence and trust has conducted its own self-study of its texts in terms of what Jewish schools teach about Christians and Christianity.

Over and above the study of the history of anti-Semitism, the meeting devoted special attention to recent manifestations of anti-Semitism particularly in Eastern and Central Europe.

It stressed the need to disseminate the achievements of Nostra Aetate and past Catholic-Jewish dialogues in those countries where new political developments have created the possibility for cooperative work.

Recognizing the importance of widening the circulation of the teachings of Nostra Aetate, the meeting noted with satisfaction the establishment of joint Jewish-Christian liaison Committees in Czechoslovakia and Hungary and the diffusion by the Polish Church authority of official documents concerning Catholic-Jewish relations in their own language.

It was stressed that systematic efforts must be made to uproot sources of religious anti-Semitism wherever they appear through the publication of texts, priestly training, liturgy, and the use of Catholic media.

The Liaison Committee hopes that the new Catechism for the Universal Church now in preparation could serve as an effective instrument to this end.

With regard to the special problems of anti-Semitism in Eastern and Central Europe, the Committee recommended the following:

- 1) Translations into the vernacular languages and broad dissemination of all relevant church documents on relations with Judaism (notably the Declaration on the relationship of the Church to non-Christian religions, Nostra Aetate (4), October 26, 1965, The Guidelines and suggestions for implementing the Conciliar Declaration Nostra Aetate (4), December 1, 1974, and the notes on the correct way to present the Jews and Judaism in preaching and catechesis in the Catholic Church, June 24, 1985).
- 2) The inclusion of the teaching of these documents in the curricula of theological seminaries, in order to eliminate all remnants of the "teaching of contempt", and the setting up of special courses on the same subjects in the seminaries for priests who have not yet received such theological instruction.
- 3) The monitor of all trends and events which threaten an upsurge of anti-Semitism with a view to countering promptly such developments.
- 4) Ongoing action aimed at guaranteeing freedom of worship and religious education for all citizens (Christians, Jews and others). It was recommended that a special joint commission be established in each of the countries of Eastern and Central Europe by the competent authorities of the respective communities to facilitate and promote these goals. The Pontifical Commission and IJCIC are ready to assist such efforts.
- 5) Active support of general legislation against discrimination on grounds of race or religion including anti-Semitism, against incitement to religious or racial hatred, promotion of legislative action curtailing freedom of association to racist organisations.
- 6) Support of general educational programmes which would foresee
 - a) inclusion in schools curricula of knowledge of and respect for different civilizations, cultures and religions, in particular of peoples and denominations inhabiting the national territory concerned.

- b) Special attention to be paid in education to the problem of racial, national or religious prejudice and hatred. This should include the teaching of history of the disasters brought about by such prejudice or hatred.
- c) Elimination from text-books of all racially or religiously prejudiced content and of material conducive to creating inter-group strife.

As already envisaged, closer and more rapid cooperation and exchange of information between IJCIC and the Pontifical Commission in order to avoid future misunderstandings and face together trends and concerns within the two communities.

We note with satisfaction the declaration of the Pontifical Commission made by Cardinal Willerbrands in September 1989 the intention to establish a Center of Meeting, Dialogue and Prayer, as foreseen in the Geneva Agreement of February 1987 which would contribute in an important way to the development of good relations between Christians and Jews.

We look to the early completion of the new edifice in which the Carmelite Monastery will find its natural setting.

The Jewish delegation expressed its commitment to the State of Israel and stressed the need for Catholic understanding of the special place Israel has in Jewish consciousness. It manifested its concern with the lack of full diplomatic relations between the Holy See and the State of Israel. Furthermore, the Jewish delegation expressed the hope that Vatican archival material would be made accessible for better understanding of the darkest period in Jewish history.

As Catholics and Jews we have a sacred duty to strive to create after two millennia of estrangement and hostility a genuine culture of mutual esteem and reciprocal caring.

Catholic-Jewish dialogue can become a sign of hope and inspiration to other religions, races, and ethnic groups to turn away from contempt, toward realizing authentic human fraternity.

This new spirit of friendship, and caring for one another may be the most important symbol that we have to offer to our troubled world.