Neighbors? Jews and Catholics in Post-Shoah Poland

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In 1928 Shalom Ash, a Yiddish author born in the Polish town of Kutno who died in 1957 in the USA, wrote: "Fate has united us with the Polish nation for eternity". However, year 1939 brought into this seemingly eternal relationship the tragic experience of extermination, that would recur as a frame of reference in discussions on the mutual Polish-Jewish relations. Despite the shocking number of victims, the legacy of Jewish culture remains invariably present in the present Polish discourse on the earlier stages of cultural co-operation. That presence was aptly recapitulated by the eminent Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert, who observed: "Poland without Jews (and other minorities) is not Poland".[1] It is, therefore, impossible to convey the essence of European culture, including the Polish one, without reference to the cultural dialogue between those neighbors, who shared the hopes and miseries of the Jewish people.

Dialogue from the Lublin perspective

Lublin, where I have been serving as a metropolitan for nine years, was for long centuries a Jewish Oxford. It was here that the first Yeshiva in Poland was built. On the strength of charters granted at the beginning of the 18th century, it enjoyed the status of a state university. It was famous throughout Europe for its studies of the Talmudic and Kabbalist tradition. Its seventeenth century vice-chancellor Salomon Luria, known as Maharshal, was one of the most prominent Talmudists of the era. Lublin was the second center of Jewish press after Cracow. It was here that Chaim Schwarz printed *Machzor* – the second Hebrew book in Poland – in 1536. It was here, again, that Moses Aaron Samuel of Lublin published "Ziz Sadaj" – the first Polish Kabbalist book.

The Talmudic School established in Lublin by Rabbi Meir Shapira was opened in 1930. Among its graduates there were chief rabbis of Jerusalem and New York. After the war, to thousands of Jews returning mostly from the USSR, it was a meeting place known as the House of Peretz. It was here that the exhausted people received information, help, new hope. Here they planned their future life in other countries, including Palestine. About one thousand decided to remain in Lublin. Before the war, the same city was home to almost 40 thousand.

In the old Jewish cemetery in Lublin, the gravestone of Jacob Isaac Hurvitz survived in good condition. The Seer of Lublin died in 1815. He was regarded as one of the most important personalities of his time. In a sense, the whole area between Bełżec and Bełżyce can be considered a huge cemetery that evokes the memory of those murdered in the name of racial hatred inspired by the Übermensch ideology. Before World War II, in many towns of the Lublin district, Jews constituted nearly 50% of population. Such was the case mainly in the area near Lublin and Zamość, Krasnystaw, Biłgoraj, Kazimierz. The town with the greatest percentage of Jewish population - about 95% - was

Izbica. In Lublin itself, Jews constituted about 35% of the population. Today, if we wanted to create a community of prayer, in the city of 400 thousand, we would find approximately 7 practicing Jews. The lost Atlantis of the Polish-Jewish community was consumed by a flood of fire. In the new Polish realities after the Holocaust, "there are synagogues without worshipers, homes without their inhabitants, tombstones without graves, graves without tombstones, and memories that have faded into oblivion". "Gone are the Yiddish poets who argued passionately with God about the way the world is run, and gone are the Hasidic Jews who danced through the night hoping that, in losing themselves in God, they would find God"[2].

Gone are the things that made up the unique charm of small towns, shtetls, from Słonimski's poems or the dialogues of Polish and Jewish neighbors recorded by Isaac Singer in his short stories. However, in the areas destroyed by fire and the Shoah it is still possible to unearth the deepest roots of Jewish culture and identity. Rabbi Byron Sherwin writes on that subject: "When I visit Lublin, I now know that Shalom Shakna and the Maharam of Lublin are not simply abstract figures in the history of Polish Jewry, but part of my personal legacy; that theirs is not simply an intellectual inheritance, but a family bequest for me to preserve and to cherish."[3] Sherwin claims he has established the genealogical tree of his Jewish ancestors in Poland from 1450, when they arrived from Spain through Germany and Bohemia. He is able to go back 22 generations in the dramatic history of his people to show the European roots of his ancestral families[4].

Neighbors – the community of human fate

No less important is the task of directing that dramatic common history towards the future. It requires us to perceive a community of values, whose promotion is a challenge faced by our generation. In that community, we need to discover positive objectives and set them in a frame of reference where the memory of the Shoah remains invariably vivid and lasting. A problem which still requires common reflection is the question of how to unite the past and present, in order to find among ruins and graves the fundamental meaning that both Jews and Christians, as children of the same God, should discover and develop. How should we build a community where, despite the experience of pain and destruction, we will emphasize what unites, and not what hurts?

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[1] S. Krajewski, "The Jewish Problem" as a Polish Problem, 74.

[2] Byron L. Sherwin, *Spark Amidst the Ashes. The Spiritual Legacy of Polish Jewry,* New York: Oxford University Press 1997, p. 3.

[3] Ibid, p. 77.

[4] Dialogue is an Effort at Translating Symbols, Więź, 160.

In using the word "neighbors", I do not mean to refer only to the painful experiences, such as those described in J. Gross's book about Jedwabne. I am referring to a more general community of values that included great and beautiful elements as well as some tragic attitudes. The latter were sometimes provoked by the lack of appropriate action, indifference to evil that was being trivialized as an inevitable constituent of our world. An example of such a tragic and solitary protest against the indifference of broadly understood "neighbors" was the suicide committed in London on May 12, 1943, by Arthur Zygielbaum. His death, at the age of 48, was a reaction to the massacre of the last Jews during the uprising in the Warsaw ghetto. In a note left behind, he wrote: "I cannot be silent – I cannot live – while remnants of the Jewish people of Poland [...] are perishing. [...] By my death, I wish to express my strongest protest against the inactivity with which the world is looking on and permitting the extermination of my people"[5].

Asking about the reasons for the dramatic loneliness of those who shared Zygielbaum's feelings in the hour of death, we are bound to notice a frequent lack of basic interpersonal solidarity that should unite the participants of human fate. Sometimes, endeavors to find that solidarity may resemble the search for a single righteous man in the Sodom of the Holocaust. In saving but a single human life, he would have saved the world through the testimony of courage, honor and solidarity. There was no such a man among the Polish inhabitants of Jedwabne in 1942. However, I have come across attempts to find such men in various regions of Poland, not only in Jewish circles. In 1990, when I became the bishop of Tarnów, I learnt of a beautiful legend current in my first diocese. It told of a young Austrian soldier, Otto Schimek, who was supposedly shot for refusing to carry out a death sentence on Poles as a member of a firing squad. During the communist rule, Schimek appeared as an example of a sensitive conscience. His grave in Tymowa was visited by both independence activists and pacifists.

During my stay in Tarnów, I received documents of the Austrian court martial from Ludwigsburg. It appeared from them that the sentence on Schimek was carried out in a completely different place and for altogether different reasons, that is for disciplinary rather than moral ones. I ordered the exhumation of the body buried in the grave where Schimek was supposed to rest. It turned out the grave contained the remains of a young woman. Empirical facts did not confirm the beautiful legend of the solitary young Austrian who, conscripted into the Nazi army, nevertheless managed to preserved his sensitive conscience. However, we should not lose heart or get discouraged. We must constantly invoke positive

[5] Quoted in Aviva Ravel, *Faithful unto Death. The Story of Arthur Zygielbaum*, Montreal 1980, 178n.

examples from the past. We should look for neighbors with whom we share not so much the proximity of residence, but rather common historical roots, the community of the Judeo-Christian vision of a human being, the bond of culture built together for many generations.

Rooted in history

Abraham Heschel stressed that the wealth of a soul manifests itself in faithful memory. The richness of a personality finds expression not in following the fashion, but in preserving a living memory of what was particularly dear to us in the past. In the Lublin region there is a great number of monuments of Jewish culture. In those places, Jews participated in creating the culture of their environment, demonstrating their openness also to the events important to the Catholic community. A symbolic sign of that openness was the participation of a Jewish delegation in a welcoming ceremony for the bishops who visited particular parishes as part of the so-called canonical inspection. Another important form of the co-existence of Jewish and Polish cultures in the same centers was a creative presence of Jewish communities in the local culture. At the time when the communist authorities put emphasis on the so-called proletarian internationalism, information about the cultural roots of Judaism in Polish history was censored. So much more valuable is therefore the approach developed by John Paul II in his last book, *Memory and Identity*. Writing about the vicissitudes of Poland, the Polish Pope points to the Jagiellonian period as a particularly beautiful time in its history, when various ethnic communities – Polish and Lithuanian, Jewish and German – coexisted in the same state.[6]

Israeli ambassador in Poland Shevah Weiss thus sums up that period of harmonious co-operation: "We lived as Jews together with you, the Poles, more or less normally for almost a thousand years. In comparison with the whole Europe, here in Poland Jews felt comfortable and secure. Tolerably comfortable, for the Jews were never comfortable – since they were a nation without a Homeland"[7].

Before the war, out of almost 18 million Jews in the world, about 3.5 million lived in Poland. At the peak period, there were 1000 Jewish Kehillahs in Poland; today there are 13. The Germans murdered in Poland about 4 million Jews[8]. German names of towns remained in Poland like islands of suffering – not Oświęcim but Auschwitz, not Brzezinka but Birkenau.

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[6] See: Jan Paweł II, *Pamięć i tożsamość*, Znak: Kraków 2005, 92.
[7] Shevah Weiss, "Albo bardzo dobrze, albo okropnie, „Więź", (2005, 4) 16.
[8] Ibid., p.18

One cannot expect that the social reaction to anti-Semitic pathologies of one epoch will be their complete disappearance in the following era. Under Gauss's law of distribution, even the most absurd interpretations will gain some following. However, this should not divert our attention from positive phenomena that testify to important changes in social consciousness. In the present Polish circumstances, signs of new mentality, formed in the spirit of *Nostra Aetate* and *Dabru Emet* can be observed especially among young people and religious elite. Those circles have cultivated for years a set of values constitutive for the spiritual solidarity and friendship between the older and younger brothers in faith. That new quality in mutual contacts has been reinforced to a great extent by the pontificate of John Paul II, and notably his visit to the Synagogue of Rome in 1986. The fruits of similar precedents last also after the Pope's death.

The phenomenon has been emphasized by Kazimierz Wójcicki, who writes: "Jewish culture ... long accompanied Polish culture. The present pluralism of Polish culture means, among other things, the memory of the many sources of and influences on that culture in the past. ... The place left behind when the culture of the Jews of Central and Eastern Europe was swallowed up in the abyss of Auschwitz and Birkenau cannot remain empty. Nor can it be only a field of research for historians with exotic specializations. The place of that part of Jewish culture that developed on our lands must today be a place where Polish culture is at work – for the sake of Polish culture"[9]

The young and the awareness of past tragedies

Another form of shaping the memory of Jews, who so rapidly disappeared from the Lublin region during the Holocaust, were liturgical equivalents of mourning the dead, organized by Catholics in small towns. I've been sometimes confronted with the charge made by Jewish circles that during the war Poles, who were themselves in danger of their lives, cared mostly about their own survival and did not mourn their Jewish families and friends. Mourning, as a traditional ceremony, is particularly important to Hasidim, who treat it as a vital expression of solidarity with the departed. I explained that during the war each Polish family was afflicted with the suffering brought on by the turmoil of war and suggested that we revive the tradition of mourning in certain towns to commemorate the Jews who used to form important cultural centers there. We began with the town of Piaski near Lublin, where Jews were exterminated in the ghetto during a single night. We invited to

[9] K. Wóycicki, „Jankiel and Reuchlin", „Więź", Under One heaven. Poles and Jews, 1998, 44.

the mourning ceremony both Jewish Kehillah representatives and members of the families who used to live in Piaski before the war. We commenced with a Holy Mass; then we went singing to the Jewish cemetery, or rather the place where most Jews were buried. I noticed the strongest response among the young people, who tidied the cemetery area together with the town authorities, caring both for the aesthetics of the place and the memory of the past. Young people were the most numerous group participating in the Holy Mass and prayer. The older participated in smaller proportion; in isolated cases, some regarded the event with skepticism, invoking grudges from 60 years ago. It demonstrates that the new generation is growing up with a totally different mentality, with a sense of common roots and awareness of the dramatic human suffering that took place in our country.

Shaping that living memory – considered so important by Abraham Heschel - takes place for instance during the Congresses of Christian Culture. For all inhabitants of the city, we organize what is sometimes described as a happening, though it might more appropriately be called a mystery. In the Christian Jubilee year 2000, we organized a meditation, attended by the inhabitants of Lublin, on the Jews who contributed to the history of the city and departed. To the first meeting we invited both those who had saved and those who had been saved. The partner city of Lublin in Israel is Rishon Le Zion. From there came the city authorities and those survivors whose later course of life had taken them to Israel. There came some wheelchaired Poles who had saved Jews. They recalled how very difficult it was and how much courage and effort it required. Finally, a young boy from Rishon Le Zion and a girl from Lublin planted together a grapevine near the former Jewish synagogue. It was a purely symbolic gesture, as grapevines don't generally grow in our climate. That play of symbols was for many people so strong an experience that, out of the three-day session, the participants of the Congress of Christian Culture refer most frequently to that particular moment.

A year later, on the occasion of awarding an honorary doctorate by KUL to Rabbi Elio Toaff, we organized a prayer of five faiths in the former Nazi camp of Majdanek. In the presence of several thousand pupils of Lublin secondary schools, the representatives of main monotheistic religions, including an American group led by Cardinal Keeler from Baltimore, prayed near the place where the Nazis shot 18 thousand Jews during a single night. Out of all the participants, it was the Jewish delegation and the host of Polish youth who were the most deeply affected by that encounter with the tragic history of the place. On the following day I received a telephone call from a Pole in Würzburg, who was expelled from his Homeland in 1968. He told me: "When I came to Germany I felt nostalgia combined with

aggression. I was seething with anger that in the 20th century in the heart of Europe a man can be driven out of his home just because some communist party officials have so decided. At the same time, my heart, memories and sentiments remained in Poland. After 30 years of separation, most of the TV programs I watch today are programs from Poland. By chance, I came across a broadcast from Majdanek and saw young people praying for Jews. What divided and caused pain melted in my soul. I felt among friends again, in the Homeland of my youth."

United in culture

The expression "Poland as a Jewish paradise" can be applied to the time of the First Republic, i.e. Poland before the Partitions (between the neighboring powers: Russia, Prussia and Austria) that took place at the end of the 18th century[10]. For a long time Poland was a center of rabbinical orthodoxy and mystical Hasidism, the Yiddish press, literature and theatre, the domain of activity of Hebrew political parties – both socialist and nationalist, with Zionist parties and sport clubs included. Trying to save the memory of Jewish culture in the Polish Diaspora, we undertake activities in two main directions. One of them includes strictly scholarly studies on the contribution of Jews to Polish culture. They resulted, for instance, in publications by Monika Garbowska from Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin[11]. Even more striking is the documentation prepared by Tomasz Pietrasiewicz and the center he manages, Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre. It provides a detailed picture of the main forms of Jewish presence in Lublin before World War II and the interaction of Jewish culture with that of the whole city. The other important form of shaping the memory of Jewish presence in the history of Poland are cultural events aimed at reminding the young generation of Poles about great and dramatic forms of co-operation between the two nations in the Polish past. During the anniversary celebration of the ghetto liquidation, the present inhabitants of Lublin were invited to read out the list of Jews who used to live in Lublin. In the evening, in the city quarter formerly inhabited by Jews, the light was switched off and the Mourners' Kaddish was said. Secondary school pupils were given the former addresses of the Jewish quarter inhabitants and asked to send their letters there. The postal service ultimately returned the letters, stamped "addressee unknown", to the senders. Nevertheless, these events helped the young generation to better understand the tragedy of people who but a short while ago were their neighbors and now have completely vanished from the

[10] Compare: S. Krajewski, "The Jewish Problem" as a Polish Problem, Więź, ibid. 61.
[11] See e.g.

landscape of their home town. The reactions of contemporary young Poles were touching; they emphasized that the young inhabitants of the Jewish quarter – just like their Polish peers today - had their dreams and plans for the future, yet had to die so suddenly with a sense of the world's brutality.

Open to the future

On John Paul II's death, Rabbi Prof. Elio Toaff, holder of an honorary doctorate from the Catholic University of Lublin (awarded in 2000), was invited to join a handful of closest friends, who kept vigil and prayed at the Pope's coffin before the funeral. Even though Toaff himself observed that in the theology of Judaism the dead person's body has an altogether different status than in the Christian one, he came and prayed, expressing - through his presence - that crucial solidarity in the hour of departure. This is a new quality: a Jewish rabbi is invited to pay the last tribute to a Pope among the closest circle of the Pontiff's friends. It is a beautiful evidence of the spiritual bond that John Paul II kept building throughout his mission.

But how does the new climate of dialogical openness translate into the language of daily practice? I do not claim it's an idyll, but in Poland, each year, a day before the Ecumenical Week, we celebrate a day of prayer for Judaism. In Lublin, the central celebration is held in the seminary and attended by many representatives of our city. Some of them had Jews among their ancestors, but in most cases they are, again, elite circles interested in dialogue and convinced of its vital importance. This community is something precious as a model of co-operation, prayer and brotherly communion between the children of one Father. I realize, however, that the situation in an average parish cannot be assessed with equal optimism. In an average parish, a single intercession for Jews is added to the Prayer of the Faithful, and that is usually the only sign that the Day of Judaism is being celebrated. In this case, we must make consistent efforts to move beyond the routine minimum and search for more perfect forms of spiritual communion with our elder brothers in faith.

According to the statistics from 2005, out of the overall number of 20 757 people honored as "Righteous Among the Nations", Poles were the most numerous (5 874), followed by the Dutch (4 639) and the French (2 500). Dr Ludwik Hirszfeld, who during the war was given shelter by many Christian friends, commented: "I find comfort in the thought that such people exist. It's unbelievable that such people and the German murderers belong to the

same human species". Many of them paid with their lives for saving Jews.[12] In many cases the experience of that price marked their psyche for the rest of their lives. The Rev. Stanisław Musiał SI, who has rendered great services to the Catholic-Jewish dialogue, relates how, as a child with little understanding of war and its cruelties, he was affected by the death of a Jew who came starving to their home, asking for a meal. Little Stasio's (a diminutive for Stanisław) mother was preparing a food parcel for the famished man. In the meantime, the Gestapo arrived. After tortures, that were supposed to have an educational effect on the villagers, the Nazis killed the Jew and lined up the Polish family outside their house to be shot. At that point, the four-year-old Stasio threw himself at the Gestapo man's boots, begging for mercy. The German, who had also left a little son at home, when he went to the front, was touched and gave up the execution. That scene kept haunting the Rev. Musiał throughout his life as a moving memory of the departure of people denied the status of human beings, who could not hope for mercy or sympathy from the self-styled Übermenschen[13].

Such experiences constitute an important psychological complement of the theological dialogue developed against the backdrop of the Shoah. They reveal the whole truth about man, throwing into relief both the transcendent dimension of our actions and the natural human solidarity in suffering. It is a particular duty of our generation to treasure the testimony of that solidarity. Especially in academic circles, it is our common responsibility to build the community of values that were negated by the ideologues who preferred political slogans to critical reflection on the inalienable dignity of the human person.

[12] Aleksander Klugman, *Encyklopedia polskich Sprawiedliwych*,"Więź", (2005, 4)47-54
[13] Rev. Stanisław Musiał, *Czarne jest czarne,* WL: Kraków 2003, 152n.