

Poland – A Journey into Memory and into the Future // Rabbi Prof. Yehoyada Amir

When I left for a five-day journey as part of the ICCI delegation to Poland, I was quite aware of the Sisyphean effort made by clergymen and intellectuals in Poland to delve into the memory of the destroyed Jewish communities. I have been exposed in the past to—and even took part in—the effort to rebuild the Jewish communities and allow a rich and meaningful Jewish life for Jews, half-Jews and persons related to Judaism in Poland. I thought I knew what to expect. I was wrong.

My experiences in Lublin, Kielce and Warsaw were meaningful, deep and far more emotional than I could have imagined. The unmediated encounter with the Archbishop of Lublin and his companions was not an interreligious encounter in the usual sense. It was a meeting of men of truth, who seek to carefully and determinedly build together a bridge over a terrible open chasm, to aid in mitigating the pain of a terrible blow that will never stop hurting. To walk with them in Majdanek, to stand with them at the entrance to the gas chambers... this was a unique experience even for someone like me, who already knew the place and visited it with members of different religions and peoples.



For the most part, the horrors were not perpetrated by the Polish themselves, but rather by a cruel conqueror in their land. Kielce is different. In Kielce, the full intensity of Polish anti-Semitism was demonstrated. In this town, a pogrom took place **after** the Holocaust. Kielce is like a capsule holding within it the horrible venom poisoning the Jewish-Polish relationship, forming a barrier against normalization and a joint future.

It is exactly there, in that terrible place, that we had the privilege of spending the Sabbath in the company of Polish Catholics who have dedicated their lives to remembering and making sure others remember, to condemning murder and hatred, to healing the wounds. The small-framed figure of the man who took it upon himself to make a change, Mr. Bogdan Białek (no relation to Chaim Nachman and no Jewish roots that I know of), will stay in my mind for many years. He is a modest man, almost invisible, who has transformed Kielce into a focal point of memory and repentance. And when the hopes he had carried in his heart were realized beyond his wildest dreams, and in the desecrated and ravaged synagogue of Kielce a Jewish prayer once again took place—with many dozens of Jews and Christians forming one sacred community during that Sabbath—he could no longer hold his tears.

Many questions are yet to be asked. I am not entirely sure that it is fitting to renew the activities of the old synagogue in Kielce, where there are currently almost no Jews. Perhaps it would be a better idea to turn it into a center of culture, tolerance,

memory and reconstruction. But even then, as we stood there praying, I felt we could—carefully and silently—say the blessing of "Matziv Gvul Almana", traditionally spoken over rebuilt synagogues.



Lublin marked for us the renewal and deepening of interreligious dialogue; Kielce demonstrated setting memory as a guide for building an upright and worthy future. Warsaw signified something else, a third side of this special triangle. In Warsaw we received the opportunity to assist Christian believers in determining what their own approach could be to Jewish tradition. Would they be able to find a pathway to

the Torah, so it would not be for them merely the first part of an "old testament"? Would they be able to extract something from the Jewish methods of study that would make them better Christians (Catholics and Protestants)? Would listening to the Jewish Voice and absorbing its qualities allow them to contribute something of value towards making this world a better place? One week after our "Simchat Torah" holiday, which is now celebrated again in Poland in the synagogues of the various Jewish groups, these Christians chose to gather in a church and rejoice, in their own way, in the Torah. No, they didn't try to celebrate it in the Jewish way, or to take part in the Jewish celebration itself. They merely wished to ask a question that no Christian had asked in the past generations – whether they too could share in the joy of the Torah. We were called to impart on them some of our Jewish heritage and to allow them to examine what it means for them, to them. It was a special experience, a great privilege, a moment that deepened for us our own joy in the Torah.

The spirit of this journey can be demonstrated in the intimate closeness between the reading and studying methods of the story of Moses and the Burning Bush, which we analyzed together both at Kielce and at Warsaw. Orthodox and Reform rabbis alongside a Catholic priest brought the fruits of their studies to the joint conversation. It was easy to see how the various branches of scholarship intertwine and complement each other, how they all aim towards our obligation ("Mitzvah") as human beings to choose good over evil, to fight for it, to understand that the fire burning in the bush is rallying us towards this goal. Although we came from different places, were equipped with a different set of associations, sources, values and faiths, our words shared a joint spirit.

But the spirit of this journey can also be summed up in a more mundane way. Following the joint study session in Warsaw, the entire crowd of about 150 people, men and women, were invited to a joint meal, sponsored by the Mayor of Warsaw. Although the Jewish participants numbered less than 10 percent of this crowd—after all, it was essentially a Christian gathering—the meal was prepared according to the Jewish dietary laws (Kashrut). Catholic and Protestant priests, Christian community members and Jewish guests with different lifestyles were all invited to dine together and to remove for a moment the borders, barriers and everything that sets them apart. Later, we each returned to our homes, to our ways of life. But at that moment,

we were one group, exchanging Torah words and dining together in the brotherhood of believers.



Rabbi Prof. Yehoyada Amir is an Associate Professor of Jewish Thought at Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem. He received his PhD in Jewish Thought from Hebrew University in 1994 and his rabbinical ordination from Hebrew Union College in 2005. In 2004 he published his book Da'at Ma'amina [Cognition out of Faith, Hebrew], a comprehensive interpretation of Rosenzweig's Star of Redemption. 2009 appeared his theological book "Kol Demama Daka" [A Small Still Voice – Theological Critical Reflections, Hebrew]. Rabbi Amir has been deeply involved in Christian-Jewish interfaith dialogue for many years in Israel and Germany and has lately taken part also in dialogue between Israeli Jews and Muslim Palestinians as well as Japanese Buddhists.