

**CHURCHES COMMISSION ON INTER FAITH RELATIONS
DUBLIN : 31 MAY – 2 JUNE 2005**

Report on POLIN 2004

An Ecumenical Study Visit of British Christians to Jewish Sites in Poland

5-15 July 2004

The group that set out to study the Jewish sites in Poland was made up of 14 Christians from different denominations and one person from the Reform Jewish tradition. It was arranged by CCIFR in partnership with the Centre for Jewish Culture in Cracow and led by Dr Barry Morgan, Archbishop of Wales. Some of the Christians in the group had long experience of Jewish- Christian relations, others had an academic interest and some were new to the whole experience of inter faith. The presence of someone from the Jewish community gave an added dimension to the visit. We were travelling with someone whose family had come from Poland which personalised many of the issues that we studied and did not allow us to forget the pain that many British Jews still carry within them. It was challenging to us to consider the place of the Jewish community in Poland in the presence of someone whose family had come from that community but as our companion was also an ardent Zionist it was also challenging to be asked to consider contemporary manifestations of anti- Jewishness which he thought were often disguised in anti – Israel sentiments.

The aim of the trip was three fold

- to explore the cultural roots of modern Judaism in order to understand the background of many of the Jewish community in Britain and to better understand the situation of the Middle East.
- to remember the Holocaust in a world of suffering and to face the reality of this suffering by a visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau
- to experience and be aware of what it means to live in the absence of Jewish People in a land where the community had once flourished.

The Centre for Jewish Culture is situated in Kazimierz, the Jewish district of Cracow. Kazimierz is a different world from the main centre of Cracow. At its height Kazimierz was the intellectual and economic centre of Polish Jewry and was called the ‘Gallician Jerusalem’. There is a medieval air about it and each day we passed monuments of Jewish life, the mikvah, the ritual slaughter house, synagogues, community centres, all of which evoked the vibrant Jewish community that thrived there for centuries from the Middle Ages to the Second World War until the community was forced into the ghetto on the other side of the city before its liquidation and the transportation of the remaining Jewish population to concentration and death camps where they subsequently died or were murdered.

There were two parts to the programme

- a number of lectures organised by the Centre for Jewish Culture with an opportunity to explore both the Jewish and Polish districts of Cracow

- a field trip to a number of small towns in Galicia where there had been thriving Jewish communities. This included a day visit to Ukraine and a visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

What did we learn?

We learned about

Poland –which in the 16th cy was given the titles of Asylum for Heretics and Rampart of Christianity against the Muslim World is a country trying to come to terms with the murder of so many Jews on its soil but a country which also suffered at the hands of the Germans and Russians. Three times in the last 200 years Poland has been wiped off the map of Europe and as a result is faced with questions of identity and future survival. 95% of the 39 million people are ethnic Poles united by a common religion and a common language for the first time in their history. Today Polish nationalism has become synonymous with Catholicism and the Jews are not recognised as Poles. In such a situation there is no real motivation for dialogue or interest in pluralism.

The Church struggling to define itself in a burgeoning democracy. During the communist era the Roman Catholic Church provided a forum for debate and the discussion of political problems. It was the symbol of freedom and the defender of human dignity but in the new democracy the clergy find themselves alienated from the people. During the communist regime of the 1990s the church withdrew from the public sphere and attendance increased. Now the Bishops often speak out on public affairs but they appear to be more concerned with morals and church image than with real life. Church attendance is falling and society is becoming more secular though the Bishops talk of the re-evangelisation of the nation and of Europe.

Thriving Jewish life which had existed in Poland since the 9th cy. Many of the Jewish community were murdered during the Nazi occupation and those who were not assimilated or emigrated. Today there are estimated to be 8-10,000 Jews in Poland Although Jewish life flourished in many towns in Poland the Jewish community kept to themselves with their own customs, language and dress. Christians and Jews did not live as neighbours. Traditionally the plan of small market towns showed the relationship of the Christians and Jews. The synagogue was usually situated diametrically opposite the Church on the other side of the market square and was usually a modest building which was there with permission. This meant that the Jewish community were often located close to the centre of the town but opposite the Church and living a quite separate spiritual life. This closeness to the centre set them between the manor and the peasants. Jews mediated the exchange between rulers and peasants. Rulers employed them as merchants and saw them as necessary for the economy but not to be trusted as they belonged to lower strata of society. Because they were employed by the rulers they were equally not trusted by the peasants.

The reality of anti-Semitism within Polish society. Research in the 1990s (1992 & 1996) shows that many Poles overestimate the number of Jews living in Poland, underestimate the suffering of the Jews and overestimate the number of the Righteous Gentiles who helped the Jews. Because the Jews are still discussed in the media people believe that they are important and influential and there is a fear that the Jews could become dominant in society. This is particularly so for people who attend church several times a week and seems to be highest among those from the middle years and those who have been to university, perhaps because they are the ones who were exposed to communist anti-Semitic propaganda. However there is also a growing contempt for anti-Semitism within some

levels of Church and society. It is recognised as a sin and an annual Day of Judaism (Jan. 17th) was recently introduced into the Polish Church. Although Pope John Paul II has done much to encourage Christian – Jewish relations his words and example have gone unheeded in a land where he is greatly loved. It was suggested that the Poles use the language of anti-Semitism when they feel insecure and are trying to exert their identity. Therefore there is always the danger that it can re-emerge in a way that is not related to real Jews. People have an ability to separate the Jew in the abstract from the Jews who were neighbours. During pogroms the abstract view of Jews obliterated that of neighbours. Modern anti-Semitism, however, is sociological rather than religious. Traditional anti-Semitism has been transformed into Polish nationalism.

Pre-conceptions of Jews - The traditional understanding of Jews as Christ – killers. still persists. Jews are seen as the mob that rejected Jesus and are therefore cursed. At the same time they are close to the passion of Jesus and as such are not total strangers. Other preconceptions influence relations with the Jewish community. For example when religious leaders visited the synagogues they saw what they expected – interviewees claimed to have seen the golden calf. There was also evidence that people still believed in the ritual murder of Christian children. Certain traditions identify the Jews with the powers of darkness. For example in rural areas nativity plays include characters that are not in the biblical story such as the devil and a Jew among others. There is also a tradition of a puppet of Judas which is either burnt or thrown down from a tower on Good Friday as a symbol of expelling darkness. Sometimes real Jews were beaten during this ritual.

The horrors of the Holocaust and of the death camps which exposed the reality of the evil that must lurk in the hearts of all human beings. The systematic degradation and humiliation of the Jewish community and the absolute squalor of what life must have been like in Birkenau seemed to be beyond evil. While the murder of the Jewish community was perpetrated by the Nazis many Poles were indifferent to it and in one place, Jedwabne were responsible for the slaughter of 1600 Jews. Some Poles betrayed their neighbours while others hid and helped them. Many Poles are included within the ranks of Righteous Gentiles. While recognising that many Poles, Roma and others also died in Auschwitz attempts at christianising the site must be and have been avoided but not without protest e.g. The Carmelite Convent and crosses.

Coping with the absence of Jews. In some places Judaism was recognised as part of Poland's national heritage by commercially developing Jewish areas and turning Synagogues into museums. In many places the memory of the community was safeguarded by Jews and Gentiles who restored cemeteries and prayer houses, guarded artefacts and welcomed visitors to significant sites. However there were also areas where the memory of the Jewish community was ignored and excluded as in Zolynia where a very large war memorial does not include mention of the Jews who fell fighting for the fatherland or were murdered during the war. In other instances the memory has been destroyed and obliterated such as in Przeworsk's bus station which had been built on a Jewish cemetery

The growing anti-Semitism in the Ukraine as a result of Judaeophobic literature coming from Russia and interpreted by Ukrainian writers as well as Israel's attitude to Palestine.

Challenges

The visit faced the group with many questions and challenges. Some of them put to us by the people we met. Others raised by our visits and experiences. Some of the more interesting for me were:

The clash of interpretations – what is positive to one side is negative to another. It is important for all to accept the good and bad in history. How are we to do this with regard to biblical history, Jewish/Christian relations, the Holocaust and the Israeli/Palestinian conflict? In concentration camps when all were victims people began to listen to one another's stories – shared experience is important in working for reconciliation.

The role of religion in nation building processes. What is the role of religion in general and the Churches in particular in a modern secular society? How can the Churches be true to themselves but also seem relevant to a modern age? Is it important that the Churches relate to real life? What are Churches hoping for when they speak of evangelising or re-Christianising Britain, Europe, Scotland? How do we allow people to be different, to look different and yet respect our common civic identity and work together for the common good?

The question of identity -ethnicity is an invention and consequence of education and conditioning –it is difficult for some people to say who they are; ethnicity is based on imagined common ancestor – the way we perceive our origins. If see it as a belief, perception have a good basis for cooperation. If see it as a consequence of genetic codes have basis for racist ideology. Can this also be said for religion?

The use of language in shaping attitudes and pre-conceptions. How are the Churches to cope with the anti- Jewish language of the scriptures? How cope with the question of supercessionism.

The Shoah. How does humanity and Christianity cope with the reality of the Holocaust? What do we do with the recognition of a history of anti-Semitism within the Christian church and the fact that Christianity was the context and seedbed in which Nazi anti-Semitism flourished? What of the violence which is at the roots of Christianity and Judaism (Passover and Crucifixion). How do we keep alive the memory of the Holocaust while healing memories and moving on?

The recognition of anti-Jewish sentiment and language – World Day of Prayer from Poland but no mention of suffering or death camps, not allowed to recognise it during communist era.

A Way Forward?

- Readiness to talk of xenophobia, racism and anti-Semitism as well as Islamophobia as sins
- Overt acknowledgement of the close relationship between Judaism and Christianity – speaking of them as our elder brothers
- Not allowing sympathy with the Palestinian cause to lead to a demonising of the State of Israel. It is Eretz Israel which leads to the normalisation of Jewishness

- Talking about the Hebrew Scriptures, rather than the Old Testament, being careful not to suggest one is about law and the other about spirit, one about a vengeful God and the other about a loving God
- Explaining references to the Jews in the Christian scriptures and remembering Jesus and his followers are all Jews
- Encourage relations with Jews, inter faith relations, see social cohesion as a sign of the kingdom
- Church reflecting on its place in a modern society and getting real
- Use Holocaust Memorial Days, send cards at festivals, make friends with the local synagogue

Future Developments

- A collection of reflections on our experience
- Further visits to Polin from a wider constituency - lay and clerical Christians, more Jewish members
- Longer courses 6 weeks if possible
- Continuing contact with the Centre for Jewish Culture