Reconciliation: Reaching past the pain of history

By YOSSI KLEIN HALEVI

CRACOW—The Catholic Intellectuals Club meets in a high-ceilinged, dimly-lit room, whose walls are lined with gold-framed portraits of the respectable men who have presided here over the last four centuries. A large color photograph of the Pope that sits atop a grand piano seems too bright in this somber room, a modern intrusion.

Tonight, Stephan Wilkanowicz (pronounced, Vilkanovich), editor of the Catholic monthly, *Znak*, will be addressing a meeting of the club. Wilkanowicz is one of Poland's leading advocates of dialogue with the Jews—in Wilkanowicz's words, "an anti-anti-Semite." In 1983, his magazine published a special issue on Jews and Judaism, in effect breaking the long Polish silence on its vanished Jewish past.

Tonight Wilkanowicz will be speaking about what he calls "the problem of Auschwitz." Wilkanowicz has been appointed by the new Solidarity-led government to head its commission on revising the Auschwitz museum. Among the changes in the museum that Wilkanowicz envisions is a greater emphasis on the destruction of the Jews.

Wilkanowicz, a white-haired gentleman in a tweed jacket, has the courtly manner of a Polish nobleman, greeting women by kissing their hands. His face is kindly: what appears at first to be frailty is in fact harmlessness.

About 50 people, most of them middle aged or elderly, sit on folding chairs. Wilkanowicz sits before them at a table with the president of the club, Count Andrjez Potocky (pronounced: Pototsky). Like Wilkanowicz, Potocky is a strong advocate of Catholic-Jewish dialogue. Once, at a meeting in the club, someone publicly blamed Jews for having operated taverns before the war and causing the moral decline of the Polish people. Count Potocky replied, "Jews may have run the taverns, but it was the Count Potockys who owned them."

Potocky introduces Wilkanowicz. "Someone who doesn't want to be kind to Mr. Wilkanowicz," says Potocky, "will call him the Minister of Auschwitz." Wilkanowicz smiles weakly.

Wilkanowicz begins to speak. In his slow, calm voice is an implicit request to his audience to be reasonable about the intensely emotional issue of the Auschwitz convent.

"There were many different nations among the victims in Auschwitz," he says. "But the place the Jews occupied there has not been properly dealt with in the museum. One can leave the museum feeling that Jews were among those who suffered, while in fact they were in the majority. Nothing is said of the specific nature of the Holocaust, of a whole nation sentenced to death."

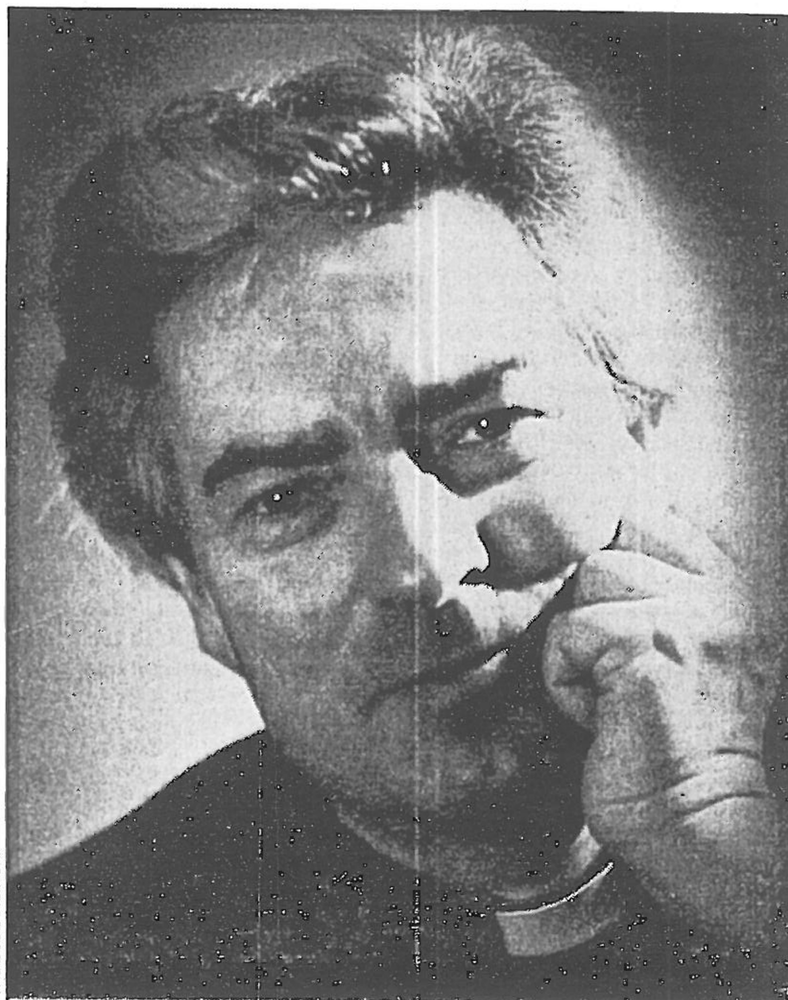
And so, says Wilkanowicz, the Jewish protests against the convent were in large measure an expression of frustration over the nature of the Auschwitz museum. "The museum's false impression of the fate of the Jews, accompanied by the idea that in the middle of Auschwitz the Poles were building a monastery, created the impression that Poland was trying to erase the memory of Jewish martyrdom from history."

But, says Wilkanowicz, the convent is only a part of the Auschwitz problem. The more serious issue is the nature of the camp's museum, which is "a museum of techniques of murder and torture. We need to have less emphasis on the mechanics of destruction and greater emphasis on the human aspect, to show how the victims tried to overcome their fate."

Wilkanowicz says he would like to end the tour of Auschwitz at an interfaith center for silent prayer and meditation, which would also function as a meeting place for young people from around the world. "The emphasis would be on a respect for different cultures. The young person visiting Auschwitz should come away wanting to be an instrument for reconciliation."

When Wilkanowicz has finished speaking, Count Potocky calls for questions. Though Wilkanowicz has stressed that the convent is only one part of the Auschwitz problem, it is the convent the audience wants to speak about.

An elderly woman says: "The Poles who were killed in Auschwitz are more important than the Jews who were killed there, because the Poles were heroes, members of the resistance, while the Jews were killed for no reason." Several people in the audience shake their heads; one man says, "That's ridiculous."



TADEUSZ BILINSKI

Father Michal Czajkowski: 'After Glemp's [anti-Jewish] speech, we were in despair. We were ashamed, ashamed.' Cardinal Glemp remains head of the church, but the opposition is gaining in strength.

The woman ignores the reaction and continues: "I think the Belzec camp should be given to the Jews, because only Jews were killed there. And Auschwitz can be for Poles."

For Wilkanowicz, this meeting is part of the process of reconciliation; he doesn't want an emotional debate. And so, rather than replying to the woman's comments about the relative worth of Auschwitz's victims, he tries to show the logical flaw in her second statement. He says: "It is impossible to decree changes in symbols. Asuchwitz is already a symbol for Jews as well as for Poles. No one can make an announcement that from a certain date this should change."

Another elderly woman asks: "Is it true that the Germans wanted to sell the Jews to the Americans, but the American Jews didn't want to give money?"

Several heads nod: apparently others here have heard this argument. The implication is clear: what right do American Jews have to speak about a convent in Auschwitz when they refused to spend money to save their brothers who died there?

Yet the charge is a lie, or at best a half-truth. It *is* true that American Jews, intimidated by anti-Semitism in the U.S., didn't challenge President Roosevelt's passivity toward Jewish rescue. But the accusation—with its nasty overtones of cheap, wealthy Jews—that American Jews refused to "buy" European Jews is a lie. In 1944, the Germans did offer to "sell" Hungarian Jewry, but the Allies—not American Jews—rejected the deal.

Wilkanowicz attempts to deflect the criticism away from American Jews with a general criticism of Allied indifference. "It is true," he says, "that couriers came from Poland to warn the Allies about what was happening. But the Allies didn't want to listen."

A middle-aged man says: "There was a signed agreement in Geneva [between Jewish organizations and the Church] to move the convent, and the Church didn't fulfill its agreement. Then the Church kept silent about its intentions. Wasn't this a mistake?"

It is the first admission from anyone in the audience of the com-

Polish group promotes relations with Israel

The Polish-Israel Association, formed last spring to promote better relations between the two countries, has about 700 members, including priests, journalists and members of the Polish Senate. Its chairman is Andrzej Szczypiorski (pronounced: Shtipyorski), a Solidarity senator but better known here as a novelist. His most recent novel is *The Beautiful Mrs. Seidenman*, about a Jewish woman hiding in Warsaw during the Holocaust. Szczypiorski himself was deported to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp at the age of 20, after taking part in the 1944 Polish uprising against the Nazis.

Szczypiorski: "For me, the most important part of Israeli-Polish relations is the moral aspect. During the war, I saw the death of the Jewish nation. I saw school friends, neighbors being taken away to be gassed. I felt helpless, and this feeling is a very important part of my biography.

"The Holocaust took place mainly in Poland. Here was the greatest Jewish minority in all of Europe, and here is the greatest Jewish cemetery. This debt will have to be paid. It means taking care of Jewish cemeteries and monuments, teaching courses at universities on Jewish history—not only the history of the Holocaust but the entire history of the Jews in Poland.

"This is not just a Polish matter, of course, but a problem for Christian Europe as a whole. The Church and Christianity bear direct responsiblity for what happened to the Jews. The sad truth is that Hitler realized some Christian bad dreams. All of us who are members of the Church have a debt to pay to the Jewish people. Putting the exclusive blame on the German nation is taking the easy way out.

"For the last 20 years, the reconciliation between Jews and Poles was suspended: there were no relations between Poland and Israel. The years of communist rule certainly didn't help stop anti-Semitism here.

"During the convent controversy, there was a complete misunderstanding between our two peoples. Once the problems began, the easiest thing would have simply been to remove the convent, even if some Poles would have felt it was an injustice. But this gesture was not made; it was a sign of our provincialism.

"Despite the convent, there are positive signs. Anti-Zionist propaganda hasn't taken root here. When I speak to young people—not only the educated but also a large number of peasants—I find a strong sympathy for Israel. During the 1967 War, Polish taxi drivers used to say, 'Polish Jews are beating Soviet Arabs.' It's true that a lot has changed in the Middle East since then, but many Poles don't really know about the intifada.

"My own feeling is that the Arab countries kept the Palestinian issue artificially boiling. Those countries could have absorbed the refugees, but didn't. Still, the problem exists, and some solution will have to be found." □

plexity of the convent issue. "Yes," says Wilkanowicz, "it was a mistake."

Another middle-aged man stands up, agitated: "What was wrong with Cardinal Glemp's speech? I read it a few times and everything he said was completely true. Why did the communist press have to defend him against Catholics?"

The man is referring to the recent speech by Cardinal Jozef Glemp, Primate of the Polish Church, accusing Jews of, among other sins, using the "Jewish-dominated" Western media to incite anti-Polish hysteria over the convent.

Wilkanowicz says: "I cannot answer precisely about the speech because I don't have the text here. But there were some words that could be understood in a negative context. Sometimes even words that are not meant to do so can cause harm. You know that sometimes the Primate's words are not so appropriate—not only in this case but in other cases as well."

It is a mild, even reluctant rebuke. To an outsider, it seems almost apologetic. Yet when the meeting is over, Count Potocky says to Wilkanowicz: "History was made here tonight. I am quite certain this is the first time that the head of the Polish Church has been publicly criticized in this building." The two men laugh at their own daring, which perhaps only a Polish Catholic can fully understand.

A New Power

Wilkanowicz and Potocky are part of an influential circle of Catholic humanists who champion dialogue with Jews and Judaism. They hold interfaith conferences, publish translations of Jewish philosophical works in their magazines, contribute funds toward restoring abandoned and vandalized Jewish cemeteries. During the convent debate, they actively tried to diffuse Polish resentment against the Jews by—in Wilkanowicz's words—"explaining and explaining and explaining." So strong is their interest in Jewish dialogue that other Poles have sometimes accused them, absurdly, of attempting to "Judaize" the Church.

The Catholic humanists are gathered primarily around the newspaper, *Tygodnik Powszechny*, and two magazines, Wilkanowicz's *Znak*, based in Cracow, and *Wiez*, founded by Tadeusz Mazowiecki—today Prime Minister of Poland. With the rise of Mazowiecki, Poland's humanistic Catholic tradition is no longer confined to a group of well-meaning but powerless intellectuals.

When Lech Walesa led the Gdansk shipyard workers in Solidarity's first strike in 1980, Mazowiecki (pronounced: Mazovietski) and his colleagues travelled to Gdansk to offer moral support. They discovered that Walesa badly needed advice on how to negotiate with the government; on the spot, they formed a board of advisors. That initial board became the nucleus of the current Solidarity government.

In the past, intellectuals were often disdained by many common Poles. "Intellectuals were considered snobs and Westernizers who were cut off from authentic Polish culture," one liberal Catholic intellectual told me. The communist government's purge of Polish Jews in 1968, for example, was at the same time an attack against pro-democratic intellectuals. The communists paired the two groups deliberately: both Jews and intellectuals were easy targets.

Mazowiecki and his colleagues who today run Poland are legitimized by their close personal ties to both Solidarity and the Church. And so, for the first time, Poland's Western-oriented—and pro-Jewish—intellectuals have the respect and attention of the Polish people.

Among the first acts of the new government were several important gestures aimed at the Jews. The first was Mazowiecki's appointment of Wilkanowicz to head a Catholic-Jewish commission on the Auschwitz museum. The second, and more politically substantive move, was to begin normalizing relations with Israel.

A few weeks ago, the state-run television gave prime-time space to Israeli ambassador Mordechai Paltzur to address the Polish people. It was an extraordinary moment: nothing like it had ever happened in an Eastern-bloc nation. Paltzur spoke not in an interview format but directly to the camera, as though he were the nation's leader addressing the people on a matter of state. Speaking fluent Polish, Paltzur in effect told the Poles that for the last 20 years they had been lied to by the communists about Israel. By giving Paltzur a platform normally not given to ambassadors of foreign countries, the new government was clearly signalling that Poland's reform would include a profound change in relations with the Jews.

continued on page 16

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Poland

continued from page 9

Struggle in the Church

One of the tragic results of Cardinal Glemp's public attack on the Jews was that it reinforced the notion of an unreconstructed anti-Semitic Polish Church. And yet, for the first time, the views of Poland's Catholic humanists are not marginal. There is, for example, a growing appreciation within segments of the Church that Jewish spiritual life didn't end with the coming of Jesus. The most dramatic example of this new attitude happened this past summer, when 21 Polish priests spent six weeks intensively studying rabbinic Judaism at the Spertus College of Judaica in Chicago.

Broadly, one can discern two trends in the Polish Church's attitude toward the Jews. The first may be called "nationalist," the second "humanist." The nationalist trend, whose most prominent exponent is Cardinal Glemp, is heir to the xenophobia of the pre-war Polish Church, which believed that Poland must be a homogeneous Catholic nation. The National Democrats—who led a boycott of Jewish stores and sometimes organized physical attacks on Jews—were the leading advocates of this form of Polish Catholic nationalism. (Glemp has, on occasion, expressed his admiration for the National Democrats.)

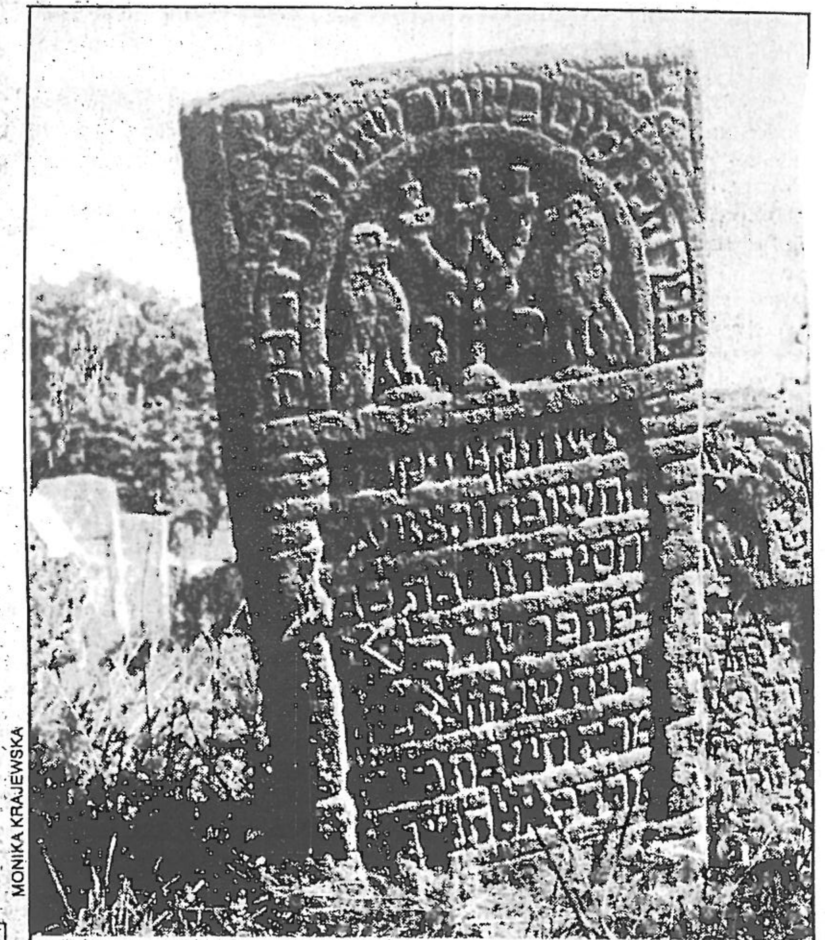
The humanistic trend in Polish Catholicism—whose most prominent adherent is Prime Minister Mazowiecki—owes its spiritual roots in part to a movement called "Personalism," which was founded by a French Catholic named Emmanuel Mounier. Personalism was a direct response to European totalitarianism, both Nazism and communism, which glorified the state or the masses over the individual. Mounier taught that, precisely at this time, the spiritual worth of the individual must be valued above all. Christians would best serve God, he said, by insuring the life and dignity of their fellow man, created in the Divine image.

The theology of Personalism was brought to Poland by Mazowiecki's magazine, *Wiez*. And it was in Poland— which had been jointly invaded and subjugated by Hitler and Stalin—that Personalism took deepest root.

Still, despite the success of Personalism and the influence of the humanists, the Polish Church is divided over its relations with the Jews. And yet, while Cardinal Glemp remains head of the Church, his ideas no longer go unchallenged. And the opposition is gaining in strength.

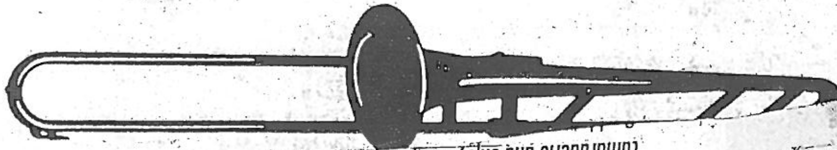
The day after Glemp's anti-Jewish speech, the Bishop's Committee on Dialogue with the Jews convened an emergency meeting, and issued a statement that called for moving the convent—a pointed rebuke to Glemp. "After Glemp's speech we were in despair," says Father Michal Czajkowski, a member of the Bishop's Committee. "We were ashamed, ashamed. But that statement restored our honor."

Czajkowski (pronounced: Chai-


MONIKA KRAJEWSKA

The Jewish cemetary of Lubaczów.

'Here was the greatest Jewish minority in all of Europe, and here is the greatest Jewish



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PART III

kovski) is professor at Warsaw's Academy of Catholic Theology, and among the Church's most passionate advocates of dilaogue with the Jews. He likes to show guests the ecumenical view of Warsaw from his high-rise window: "Over there is an Orthodox church, there is a Catholic church, there is an Evangelical church. And there is the synagogue."

Czajkowski is a powerfully-built, energetic man. In his face there is both strength and compassion, as though he reserved judgment for himself and mercy for others.

Before we begin our interview, I admire the artwork of several Polish icons in Czajkowski's study. He points to an icon of Mary and says, laughing, "This is a picture of a Jewish woman." Then he points to an icon of Jesus and says, "And here is a picture of a Jewish man."

It is, in fact, the Jewishness of Jesus and Mary that first led Czajkowski to his dialogue with the Jews and confrontation with anti-Semitism.

He says: "Some years ago, I preached a mass at a meeting of Polish priests. It was September 8, Mary's birthday. I spoke about the [New Testament] text which tells of the Jewish origin and geneology of Mary and Jesus. I didn't think I was saying anything controversial; it was simply what the Bible itself said. I added some words against anti-Semitism, just a few words really.

"When I finished my sermon, [Cardinal] Glemp asked me, 'Where do you see anti-Semitism in Poland?' I told him, 'You are right.' I simply didn't think we had an anti-Semitic problem here.

"Then a Catholic paper published the text of my sermon. It may sound incredible, but the paper received letters from Poles denying that Mary and Jesus were Jews. Now I understood that we did have an anti-Semitic problem. Thanks to those anti-Semites, I began to study the history of Jewish-Christian relations."

In addition to belonging to the Bishop's Committee on Dialogue with the Jews, Czajkowski is an active member of the newly formed Polish-Israel Association (see sidebar). And this past summer, he was among the Polish priests who studied Judaism in Chicago. Czajkowski is especially enthusiastic about having studied rabbinic commentaries on the Bible. "They are so free," he says, "so full of fantasy, so rich."

Czajkowski's most recent act toward reconciliation took place during a pilgrimage that he led to Katyn, the forest where Soviet troops slaughtered thousands of captured Polish army officers. At Katyn, one of the great symbols of modern Polish nationalism, Czajkowski told the mourners that not only crosses but Stars of David should be placed on the mass graves, to commemorate the Polish Jewish officers buried there.

Despite the convent crisis, Czajkowski says Polish attitudes toward Jews are improving. Now, when he speaks in churches against anti-Semitism, he causes little controversy. "I think the Polish Church will become more and more open and ecumenical," he says. "Under communism, the Church was closed.

continued on next page

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Poland

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When you have to defend yourself, you don't think too much about pluralism. But now, with the new government, it will be better. The liberalization of social life will have its effect on us too."

The Future

At the Warsaw University, I met with a class of future English translators. In over an hour of free discussion, not once was a hostile or even unintentionally offensive remark made by any of the students. Instead there was an intense interest about Jews, Judaism, Israel, the Polish Jewish past. They were, after all, the first Poles in a thousand years to grow up without any contact with Jews. One young woman wanted to know what I thought of *Fiddler on the Roof*: the film was shown on Polish TV three times, and she had seen all three screenings.

Even more than their interest in Jews and Judaism, they wanted to know: What do Jews abroad think of us? Are Israelis less antagonistic toward Poland than American Jews? It was as if, by understanding their place in Jewish consciousness, they would come to know some elusive truth about themselves.

Though they had been raised in an atmosphere of intense anti-Zionism, these students showed a surprisingly positive attitude toward Israel. Living next door to the Soviet Union, they appreciated the difficulties of a hostile geography and understood Israel's obsession with secure borders. A comparable group of university students on a Western campus would have been far more critical of Israel.

In fact, these young Poles reminded me of young Israelis. Both Israeli and Polish youth are preoccupied with the question of whether or not to emigrate: whether their countries will ever escape the curse of history. One young woman in the translators' class, named Kasia, whose father had spent time in prison as a Solidarity activist, said, "I know there's been so much suffering in Poland and I know all about our obligation to the past. But I feel my first obligation is to my own future and happiness." A young Israeli could have easily spoken these same words.

Several students wanted to know what I thought of the Pope's visit to a Rome synagogue in 1983. That visit was repeatedly mentioned by young Poles I met, and seems to have had a lasting impact here. When I asked one young woman what she had been taught by her priest about Jews, she said, "That they are our elder brothers"—the very term used by the

Pope in his talk at the Rome synagogue.

In the Cracow Art Museum's exhibit on Polish Jewry, one wall is devoted to Polish anti-Semitic paintings. At the end of that row of paintings is a large photograph of the Pope seated before the Ark in the Rome synagogue. As if to underline its importance, it is the only photograph in the entire exhibit. Above the photograph is a sign with these words: "And now, reconciliation."

In Cracow, I met with young Dominican monks. The priest who arranged the meeting had warned me in advance not to expect more than a few of the monks to come. "I'll make an announcement, and we'll see."

More than 30 monks came to meet their Jewish visitor. We sat together for two hours—I in my yarmulka, they in their white robes—and discussed Judaism and Christianity, Jews and Poles. The faces around me were earnest and intelligent. Their expressions seemed to say: Whatever tragedies and misunderstandings once separated our two peoples, we are eager to know you now.

They asked me questions about the place of prayer and community and charity in Judaism, about Hasidism and Kabbalah, about the meaning for Jews of Israel and Jerusalem and the prospect of peace with the Palestinians. When I told them that Israel without the West Bank would be eight miles wide at its narrowest point, there were audible expressions of surprise. After that, no one asked why Israel didn't withdraw from the territories.

I asked the young monks what they thought of the speech by Cardinal Glemp. At the mention of Glemp's name there was laughter. One young man said, "I had the feeling that the Primate didn't know what he was saying or who he was speaking to." Another monk said, "You cannot say those words in this country, with its undercurrents of anti-Semitism." Not one person in the room spoke up in defense of the head of the Polish Church.

At the end of our discussion, my hosts asked me to say a prayer in Hebrew. I said the Twenty-third Psalm, "Though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death." The young monks closed their eyes and silently prayed with me.

Later that day, I met an Israeli teacher who was leading a group of his high school students on a pilgrimage to the death camps. I mentioned to him that I had met with a group of young Polish monks. "You heard a lot of anti-Semitism," he said rather than asked. "None at all," I said. "Not any anti-Semitism?" he persisted. "Not even about the convent?" "No," I said, "not a single anti-Semitic remark." "That's incredible," he said, suddenly enthusiastic, "you have to write about it."

I was surprised by how quickly his mistrust had vanished, and wondered how many other Jews would be able to reach out beyond the pain of our history to the new Poland trying to be born. □

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