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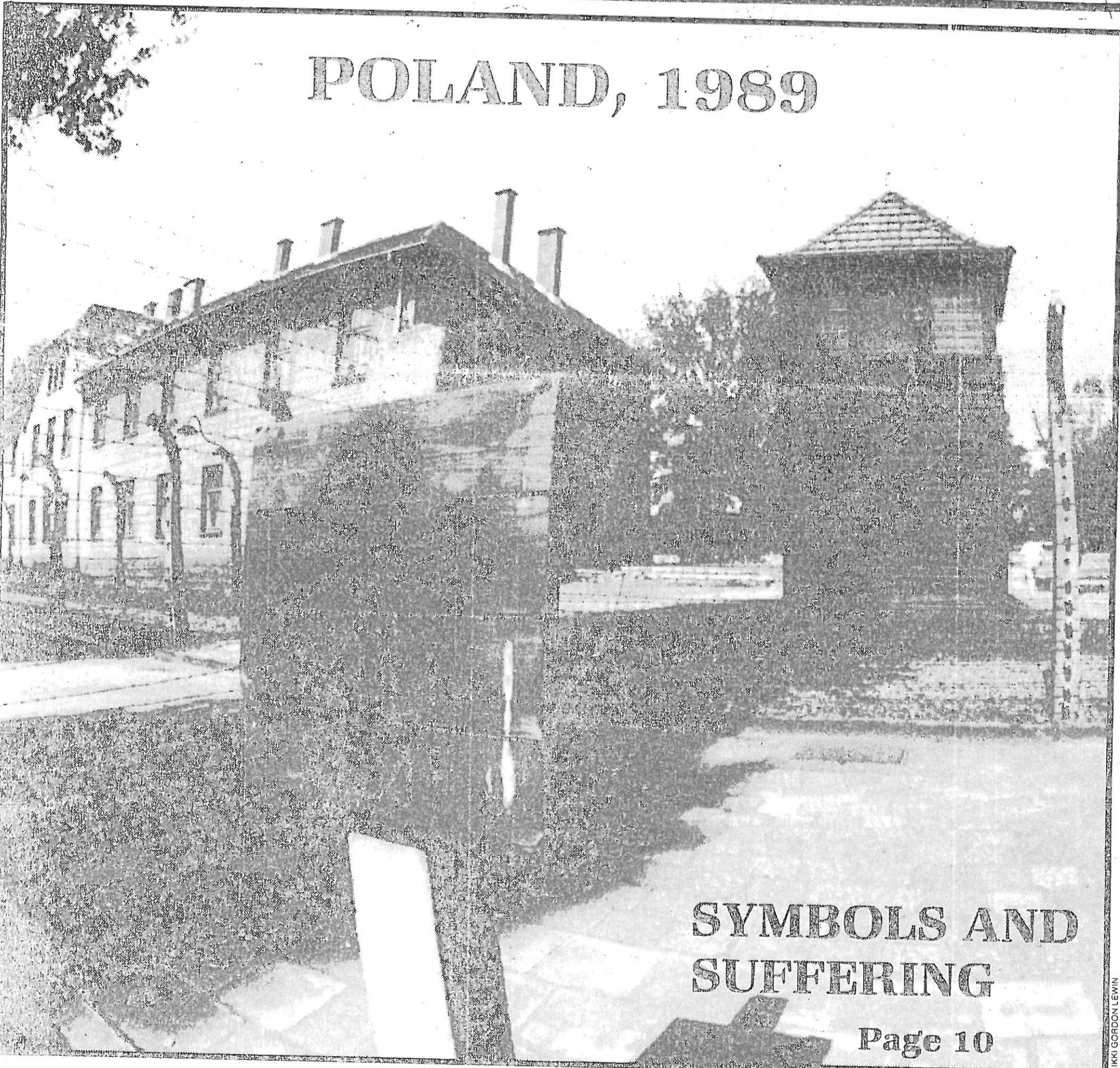
# LONG ISLAND Jewish World

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ONE DOLLAR

## POLAND, 1989



SYMBOLS AND  
SUFFERING

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RIKKI GORDON LEWIN



# Symbols and suffering: Auschwitz after the convent

By YOSSI KLEIN HALEVI

AUSCHWITZ—The tour buses unload in the large parking lot, near the ice cream stand. You enter with the crowds and the tour guides beneath the sign, *Arbeit Macht Frei*, work makes one free. You had imagined vastness, but the dimensions of the camp are easily human: two-story red brick buildings, tree-lined cobblestone paths, patches of grass. You had assumed that Auschwitz would literally stun you, inhibit your power to speak; even breathing would be painful. Auschwitz: you repeat the word, to shock yourself out of the easy accommodation you have made with being here. Planet Auschwitz, the survivor and novelist KaTzetnik once called it, a place apart from all other human experience, apart even from all evil that preceded it. But whatever Auschwitz once was, it is no longer a planet separate from ours.

Auschwitz is packed. There are Polish schoolchildren wearing large wooden crosses around their necks, Israeli high school students carrying parade-size blue and white flags on poles, Germans speaking German without self-consciousness, American Jews with video cameras.

The former prisoners' barracks have been transformed into exhibits, and lines of visitors wait their turn to enter. Each barracks is devoted to a single theme: arrival in Auschwitz, extermination process, daily life. One barracks displays the plunder Germans collected from the deported, and here you glimpse the vastness of the crime and at the same time its effect on individuals. In one room, behind display glass, are piled thousands of adult shoes; in another, children's shoes. There are mounds of eyeglasses, artificial limbs, pots, hair, much of it grey, which the Germans had planned to use for insulating soldiers' uniforms, hundreds of suitcases carefully marked with the names and addresses of their owners, who expected to retrieve them at the end of their journey.

The names on the suitcases are Jewish. But nowhere does the exhibit acknowledge it. When Jews are mentioned here, it seems incidental, almost always together with Gypsies and Poles and Russian POWs.

The de-Judaization of Auschwitz seems to turn malicious in the barracks devoted to individual inmates. Along two walls are dozens of framed photographs of men and women prisoners—nearly all of them Poles, and not one with a recognizably Jewish name. The Jewish visitor feels his rage turning against the non-Jewish faces on the wall—absurdly, because they too were victims. Yet he resents their suffering for displacing his own, and he suspects that these faces are hanging here for only one reason: they are not the faces of Jews.

The Final Solution is almost, but not entirely, absent from Auschwitz. There is a "Jewish Pavilion" here, one of perhaps twenty "national" pavilions devoted to the deportees of various countries—as if the Jews were

only one group among many sharing the same fate. Most groups visiting Auschwitz don't go to the Jewish pavilion, just as they don't visit the Czech or Italian or Austrian pavilions. Unless a Jewish group comes, the Jewish Pavilion is empty, its lights shut.

By the time the Jewish visitor completes his tour of the barracks, he is disoriented, even outraged. The Nazis, he feels, stripped the Jews of their shoes and suitcases and hair and gold teeth; this museum has stripped the victims of their Jewishness. During the war, Auschwitz imposed a Jewish identity on the most assimilated Jews. Today, Auschwitz denies

grate. At least formally, this latest crisis has now been resolved. Soon the convent will be moved outside the camp, belatedly fulfilling the terms of an agreement signed in 1987 in Geneva between Jewish organizations and representatives of the Catholic Church.

Another, lesser-known, but perhaps more significant change will soon occur at Auschwitz. The new Solidarity-led government has appointed a commission, composed of Catholics and Jews, to revise the exhibits in the Auschwitz museum created by Poland's communist regime. Among the changes almost certain to occur will be greater em-

place. Auschwitz One—where the museum and the convent are now located—was the administrative center of a vast Auschwitz complex and a camp for slave labor; Birkenau, part of the Auschwitz complex and two kilometers away from Auschwitz One, was where Jewish transports were directly brought for "selection" and gassing. Auschwitz One was a concentration camp; Birkenau was a death camp.

Birkenau had one major purpose: the destruction of the Jewish people. Estimates of how many people were gassed there range from one and a half to four million. (Historians now tend to accept the lower figure.) Of those, the overwhelming majority were Jews.

Auschwitz One, on the other hand, was never primarily Jewish; its prisoners included Poles, Gypsies, Russian POWs, communists and homosexuals, as well as Jews. Of the roughly 400,000 inmates who passed through Auschwitz One, about 146,000 were Polish Catholics. Of those, more than 86,000 died.

Auschwitz One was in fact established by the Nazis in 1940 as a destruction center for the Polish intelligentsia, who were to be worked to death there. The Nazi post-war vision imagined the Poles as a nation of slaves; by killing their intellectuals, the Nazis would reduce the Poles to cultural numbness, unable spiritually to resist their fate.

And so when Poles speak today of Auschwitz, they likely mean Auschwitz One; when Jews speak of Auschwitz, they likely mean Birkenau. Jews visiting Auschwitz One will find the camp strangely unfamiliar, not at all what they imagined "Auschwitz" to be. Only in Birkenau will their image of "Auschwitz" be confirmed: train tracks leading to a large brick stationhouse, and then a vast emptiness.

Auschwitz One, a slave labor camp rather than an explicit extermination center, is a legitimate symbol of the Nazi attempt to turn the Polish nation into slaves. And Birkenau is the most logical Jewish symbol of the Final Solution. But, as the Polish Church itself acknowledged in a document it released on the convent debate, one cannot revise symbols once they have been formed. For Jews, Auschwitz is a totality—and administratively it was precisely that. The Nazis, in fact, called Birkenau Auschwitz Two. To separate Birkenau from Auschwitz One, therefore, would seem to Jews artificial, a compromise of history. In the entire Auschwitz complex, at least 90 percent of those killed were Jews.

There is, in addition, a pragmatic reason for honoring the Jewish insistence on encompassing Auschwitz One as part of the symbolism of the Final Solution: many non-Jewish groups visiting Auschwitz don't include Birkenau on their itinerary. As a result, what they see in the Auschwitz One museum forms their idea of "Auschwitz." The museum, therefore, has the obligation to

educate its visitors about the entire Auschwitz complex.

Turning Auschwitz One into a symbol of the Final Solution, however, will not be easy for Poles. Auschwitz One has become a symbol of "crucified Poland"—encompassing the nation's history of invasion and national dismemberment and culminating in the trauma of World War II. It is a trauma from which Poland is only now tentatively emerging.

The Poles actually cherish two main places of pilgrimage related to the Second World War: Auschwitz One and Katyn. Together, they represent the 1939 invasion of Poland by Stalinist Russia and Nazi Germany. In the Katyn forest, the Soviets slaughtered perhaps fifteen thousand Polish army officers. Just as the Nazis attempted in Auschwitz One to destroy the Polish intellectual elite, so the Soviets in Katyn tried to destroy the Polish military elite. In both cases, the intent was the same: to murder Poland's leadership and thereby destroy its ability to resist its conquerors.

I admit that the Polish connection to Auschwitz One had been at best a vague notion to me. I knew there had been some Poles in Auschwitz, perhaps even a priest or two. But like most Jews, I took for granted the fact that the Holocaust eclipsed all other tragedies of World War II. That was not simply self-absorption but an accurate understanding of the uniqueness of the Final Solution: evil, without ulterior motive; an entire people condemned, not to slave labor, but to death. On the wall of the Holocaust memorial in Paris are engraved these words from Lamentations, more a taunt than an elegy: "Come and see if there is any pain as great as my pain."

But the continuing Polish preoccupation with "the war" reminds a Jew that there are many kinds of pain, and no one has the right to minimize another's suffering. Perhaps nowhere outside of Jerusalem will one find as many recently published books about World War II as are displayed in the windows of Poland's bookstores. There are personal accounts of the war with titles like *My Deportation*, photo albums of Warsaw entitled *1939-1945*. Documentaries about World War II continue to be shown on Polish TV, as though the war had only recently ended. And Polish schoolchildren are taken to Auschwitz not once but twice: first in grade school, then in high school.

**The meaning of Auschwitz for Jews**  
If Jews haven't appreciated Auschwitz as a national symbol for Poles, neither have Poles understood the camp's meaning for Jews. Most Poles still don't realize that for Jews "Auschwitz" is short-hand for "Final Solution": Jews use the two terms interchangeably.

The Jewish cynic will say: those Poles who don't know what Auschwitz means to Jews, don't want



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that identity to even its most Jewishly committed victims. Murdered as Jews, they go unmourned as Jews.

At the end of the line of barracks, the Jewish visitor comes to a barbed-wire fence. Across the fence is a long three-story red brick building: the Carmelite convent. Everything that is wrong with the Auschwitz museum seems suddenly concretized in that building. All the frustration the Jewish visitor has felt here now has a focus. The convent, with its large cross, becomes the instant symbol for the Polish authorities' attempt to deny the Jewish link with this place. For the Jewish visitor, it is the final lie, an alien marker on his place of desolation.

#### Continuing Feud

The dispute over the Carmelite convent created the worst crisis in Polish-Jewish relations since the communist government's anti-Semitic campaign of 1968, which forced most of Poland's surviving Jews to emi-

phasis on the fate of the Jews.

Still, the bitterness created over the convent between Poles and Jews remains. Both peoples continue to suspect each other of the most unworthy motives in the convent debate. Jews believe the convent was a deliberate Polish Catholic attempt to usurp the Holocaust, similar to the communist regime's distortion in the Auschwitz museum; Poles believe the Jews were fighting an inexplicable war against nuns who only wanted to pray.

Without minimizing the animosity between Jews and Poles, it is fair to say that the intensity of the convent feud was at least partly due to a surprising ignorance on the part of both groups about the meaning that Auschwitz holds for the other.

A basic source of the conflict was a misunderstanding over the geography of Auschwitz. What Poles call Auschwitz and what Jews call Auschwitz is not necessarily the same



to know. To some extent this is true. Many Poles refuse to acknowledge the Jewish attachment to Auschwitz, for fear of compromising the integrity of their history, diminishing their own claim to martyrdom.

It is also true that some Poles have deliberately minimized or even ignored the Holocaust and coopted its victims into Polish martyrdom. The official guide book at Auschwitz, for example, speaks of the "six million Polish citizens" killed in the war.

This is technically correct: perhaps three millions non-Jewish Poles were killed by the Nazis on battlefields, in partisan skirmishes, in prisons and concentration camps; and three million Polish Jews were starved to death in ghettos or gassed in the death camps. But if Poland's pre-war Jews were officially "Polish citizens"—in the deceptive words of the Auschwitz guide book—they were hardly regarded as "Poles" by a majority of their Catholic compatriots. Nearly every one of Poland's pre-war political parties was committed to an anti-Jewish policy, aimed at encouraging Jewish emigration. If Poland was ambivalent about accepting its Jews while they were alive, it can hardly claim them now in death—let alone for the purpose of enhancing its bid for preeminent martyrdom.

Still, the widespread Polish failure to connect Auschwitz with the Holocaust is less a result of maliciousness than ignorance. The Poles know, of course, about the Final Solution, which happened largely on their territory. As one Polish Jew said to me, "There aren't any and there cannot be any historians in Poland who deny that the Holocaust happened." Here, the evidence of the Holocaust is irrefutable. The death camps devoted to the Final Solution—Treblinka, Maidanek, Belzec—were located in Poland. But—as absurd as this may sound to Jews—many Poles, and certainly most young Poles, don't identify Auschwitz with the Final Solution. "Why don't the Jews take Belzec as their symbol for the Holocaust and leave Auschwitz for the Poles?" I heard one woman ask at a meeting in Cracow devoted to the convent controversy.

There are good reasons for popular Polish failure to link Auschwitz with the Final Solution, foremost among them being the Auschwitz museum. For the communist ideologues who ran the Auschwitz museum (and continue to run it—though likely not for long), the Holocaust as a specific assault on the Jewish people had little meaning or use. Instead, Nazism—or "fascism," as the communists

preferred to call it—was portrayed as a class phenomenon, capitalism taken to its mad but logical extreme. The communists could justify minimizing the Final Solution because, after all, they were universalists who revered the martyred victims not because they were Jews but human beings.

This internationalist spirit was of course a lie. For at the same time that Poland's communist authorities were turning the Jewish victims into anonymous "human beings," they declared Auschwitz a place of Polish national martyrdom. In its decree establishing the Auschwitz museum in 1947, the communist regime called it "a Monument of the Martyrdom of the Polish Nation and Other Nations."

The educational results were predictable. A generation of young Poles has been raised to see Auschwitz as its national symbol—and kept largely ignorant of the fact that another people, the Jews, see it as their national symbol too. When I asked a tour guide at the Auschwitz museum whether Polish children visiting the camp were taken to see the Jewish Pavilion, she said, "If they want to go, they can go." In other words: they aren't taken. One young Polish Jew told me that when he went as a child to Auschwitz on his class trip, he came away from the museum not realizing that Jews had any special connection with the camp. One can expect no more from young Polish Catholics.

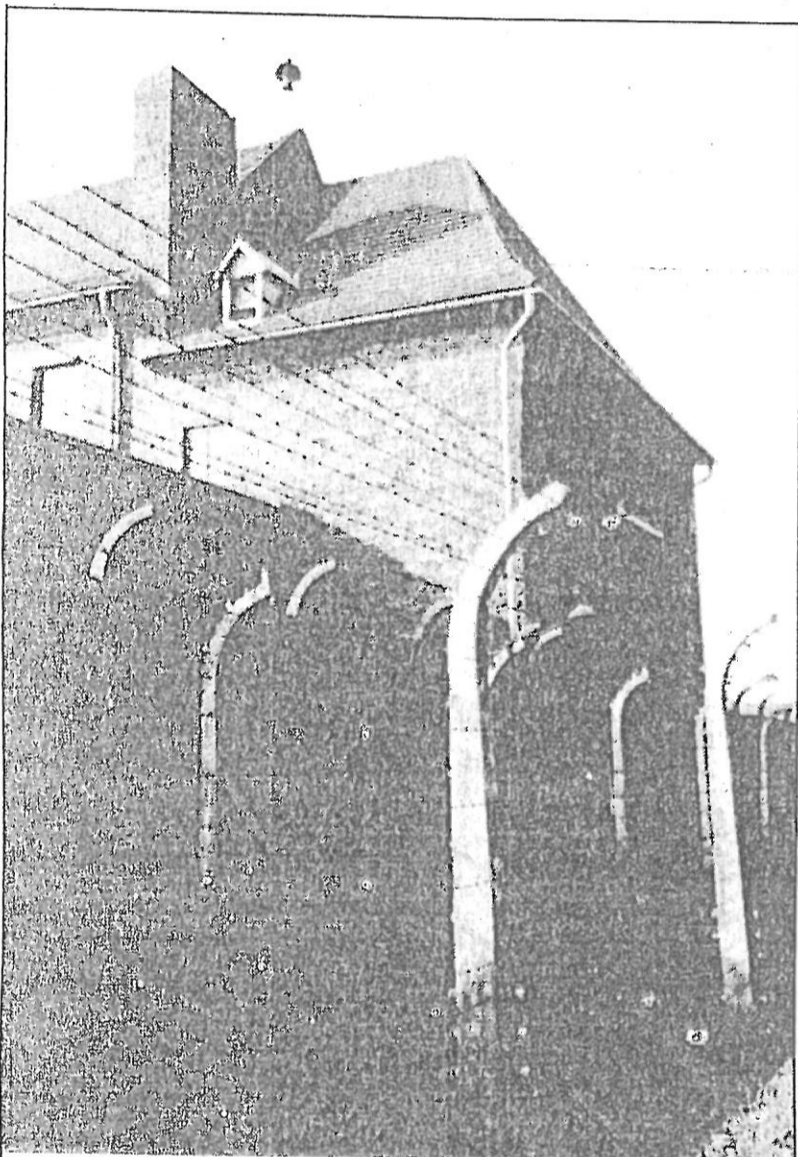
During the recent convent debate, even many Poles without anti-Semitic sympathies were outraged by Jewish protests. Why, they asked, was a convent at Auschwitz any concern of the Jews? Polish Catholics, including priests, were martyred at Auschwitz One; now Polish nuns were praying there. What could be more natural?

Nor could Poles possibly realize that the convent would be seen by Jews as part of a world-wide assault on the notion of the Jews as victims. The attempts to minimize or even deny Jewish victimization have ranged from the "revisionist" historians who claim the death camp crematoria were used for baking bread, to the U.N.'s Zionism-Racism resolution, which in effect turned Zionists into Nazis. Jews believe that those assaults have had a single purpose: to transform them again into a people that deserves not sympathy but loathing, thereby making future attempts to destroy them morally acceptable.

Jews—especially Diaspora Jews, who don't have the Israeli army to protect them—are convinced that their physical safety depends in large part on "Holocaust education": shocking humanity into realizing the consequences of anti-Semitism. If Auschwitz, the preeminent Jewish symbol for the Final Solution, became a Christian shrine, then the Holocaust might no longer be seen as a specific event aimed at Jews—thereby weakening humanity's repugnance toward anti-Semitism and Jewish immunity to another possible genocidal assault. This is partly why Jews reacted so strongly to the convent. The debate over "Whose Holocaust," as one American magazine put it, was for Jews not a question of perverse national pride or even exclusively of historical truth: it was potentially a matter of physical



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safety.

The convent dispute came at a particularly sensitive and frustrating time. Since the Palestinian intifada, international criticism of Israel has become so extreme and disproportionate that many Jews wonder whether that too is not another attempt to minimize the victimization of the Jews. Cartoons of Israeli soldiers wearing stormtrooper uniforms were no longer the exclusive domain of *Pravda*, but could now be found on the editorial pages of respectable Western newspapers. If Jews couldn't strike back at an amorphous world opinion, they could vent their frustrations on a single, isolated outrage: the seeming attempt to Christianize the Holocaust.

The convent dispute also came at a particularly sensitive historical moment for Poles. Just as they were trying to free themselves from Soviet domination, Jews began to interfere in what Poles saw as an internal Polish affair. It is of course absurd to compare Jewish protests over the convent with the Soviet occupation of Poland. But—as Jews and Poles both know—symbols can tend to obscure reality. It was, therefore, quite common to hear this complaint from Poles: "First the Russians run our lives, and now these other foreigners are trying to tell us where to pray?" Both for Poles and for Jews, then, the convent became a symbol not only of

past suffering but of current national frustrations.

#### The Religious Dimension of the Conflict

Had the dispute over Auschwitz been confined to competing national emotions, it would have been difficult enough to resolve. But what made the dispute especially bitter was that, for both Jews and Poles, Auschwitz also has deeply religious symbolic meaning. And, once again, neither side made much attempt to understand the religious significance that Auschwitz and its convent held for the other side.

In part, the nuns came to Auschwitz to counteract the communist identification of the camp with the struggle between fascist reaction and socialist progressivism; they hoped to restore to Auschwitz its spiritual meaning as a place of struggle between darkness and light. The nuns also believed—as do many Jews—that Auschwitz was demonic, a phenomenon outside the normal bounds of history. And so the nuns attempted a spiritual "counter-attack": a convent for prayer and fasting.

Jews, however, perceived the convent as a spiritual assault on them, a particularly insulting example of Christian triumphalism. For Jews, a convent in Auschwitz—which Jews call "the greatest Jewish cemetery"

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# Poland

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—was a new version of the Christian attempt to spiritually inherit them: where once the Church declared itself the “new Israel” and tried to usurp the life of the Jewish people, now it was trying to claim its death.

The convent was not a deliberate attempt to “steal” the Holocaust from Jews. The nuns were simply doing what Carmelite nuns do at a place in which there has been suffering: pray and fast. “If a plane-load of Buddhists would crash in the Polish countryside,” one priest told me, “the instinctive Polish reaction would be to set up a shrine on the site of the tragedy.”

Even Polish Catholics who have devoted themselves to Jewish-Polish reconciliation at first welcomed the idea of nuns praying in Auschwitz. “I was very glad there would be prayer there,” one priest, active in Catholic-Jewish dialogue, said to me. “It didn’t occur to me that there would be any opposition. But once I realized

the convent would create conflict instead of reconciliation, I insisted it be moved.”

By all accounts, the nuns expected no controversy. After all, a Carmelite nunnery has been operating in Dachau for the last 20 years, without protest. But in the Jewish consciousness, Dachau, with its many non-Jewish as well as Jewish inmates, was not a symbol of the Final Solution.

Jewish sensitivities over the Auschwitz convent were further provoked by a fundraising brochure published by a Belgian Catholic group. The brochure urged support for the nuns who, it claimed, would convert the souls of “strayed brothers” who died in the camp. The notion that the nuns were trying to convert the souls of Auschwitz’s victims was for the Jews an unbearable affront to the memory of their dead; and it was a central complaint Jews raised when discussing the convent among themselves.

### Theological Absurdity

But—the Belgian brochure notwithstanding—the nuns had no intention of trying to convert Auschwitz’s Jewish victims. The Belgian group’s brochure—issued without the approval of the Polish Church and later

withdrawn—was not only stupid politics but bad theology. One Solidarity journalist, who visited with the nuns and who later wrote articles supporting the Jewish position on the convent, told me: “You can’t convert the dead. It’s a theological absurdity. We’re not dealing with black magic, after all.”

In recent years, there have been several well-publicized rifts between Jews and the Church, most notably over the Pope’s audiences with Yasir Arafat and Kurt Waldheim. But in the convent dispute, Jews for the first time attacked the church on what was essentially an issue of religious symbolism. In so doing, they transformed the convent into a symbol for all their historical grievances against the Church—muted but by no means resolved by the post-Holocaust ecumenical dialogue.

Many Jews remain convinced that the Final Solution was made possible by centuries of Christian “teachings of contempt” against Jews; they believe that the Church—despite some exemplary individual efforts at rescue—remained largely indifferent to their fate. If the Church was silent when it could have saved our people, Jews said, it should have the decency to be silent now.

For Poles, however, there is no more beloved institution than the Catholic Church. Poland is a country in which prayer never stops. Churches are full not only on Sundays but weekdays as well; it is common to see university students drop into a church for a few minutes of prayer before classes. In his remarkable book, *Mysteria*, photographer Adam Bujak documents Poland’s mass pilgrimages: hundreds of thousands of worshippers endure storms and wade through rivers to trek to holy sites around the country.

Moreover, the Polish church has a national significance which surpasses individual piety. Polish Catholics widely believe that if Poland has managed to become the first East European country to oust the communists from government, it is thanks in large measure to the power of prayer.

Specifically, people here recount the 1979 Polish pilgrimage of Pope John Paul II, history’s first Polish pope. For the first time since Poland had become communist, millions of people spontaneously appeared in the streets. One Catholic intellectual told me: “In Cracow, a million and a half people gathered to pray with the Pope. I can still hear his words to the assembly: ‘Let the Holy Spirit come to this soil. This soil.’ At that moment I felt the Holy Spirit descend on the crowd; I felt it on me.” As this man spoke, there were tears in his eyes.

Many Polish Catholics believe that the prayers of the Pope and millions of Poles during his pilgrimage created a kind of spiritual counter-attack on communism, opening the way for Solidarity to be formed a year later. That belief may partly explain the vehemence of Polish reactions to Jewish protests over the convent. The Jews were opposing nuns at prayer—the power that had helped save Poland from communism.

### No Historic Precedent

From the Jewish perspective, moving the convent will simply right a wrong: the nuns should not have been there in the first place. But there is a widespread feeling among Polish Catholics that Jews don’t sufficiently appreciate the psychological and, indeed, spiritual difficulties they had to overcome in agreeing to move the convent. A document issued by the Polish Church, aimed at explaining to parishioners why the convent should be moved, notes that there is no historic precedent for the Church abandoning a place of prayer to

honor the sensitivities of another religious group. As one priest—who only reluctantly agreed with the church decision to withdraw the convent—said to me, “Moving the convent is an act of charity, not justice. We have every right to pray in Auschwitz.”

Polish outrage against Jewish opposition to the convent intensified after seven American Jews scaled the convent’s fence to protest the presence of the nuns. Cracow’s Cardinal Macharski, who had previously signed an agreement with Jewish organizations to relocate the convent, declared that the demonstration had so upset him that he was now reconsidering moving the nuns. Jewish organizations denounced Macharski’s reversal as a pretext: surely one doesn’t renege on a signed agreement because of seven irresponsible demonstrators.

But Western Jews underestimated the depth of Polish outrage over the demonstration. “You can’t imagine what it meant to Poles,” one woman active in Polish-Jewish dialogue told me. “A convent is protected ground. Even hoodlums, murderers, wouldn’t think of invading a convent.”

Yet the seven American Jewish demonstrators could not possibly have known how Poles would react to their protest. Demonstrations—even inside churches and synagogues—have become an unremarkable part of American life. In the early ’70s, for example, a New York synagogue located across the street from the Soviet U.N. Mission was repeatedly occupied—against the wishes of the synagogue’s leadership—by militant young Jews, who used the synagogue’s balcony to electronically broadcast anti-Soviet messages. The aim of the American Jews who protested inside the convent walls was media publicity—a deliberate manipulation of a religious site, but nonetheless a common American occurrence. Like the nuns at Auschwitz, they inadvertently trespassed on another people’s deepest emotions.

### Enemies?

One morning I went to the Auschwitz museum with a group of American Jews. When we finished a tour of the barracks, members of the group lingered at the barbed wire fence facing the convent, taking pictures of the building as though it were another exhibit of horror. Polish high school students watched from a distance. Some pointed toward the Jews and laughed. It was as though, confronting each other, Jews and Poles had suddenly found the real villains of the place.

I sat on the steps of one of the barracks. A Polish high school boy stood nearby. He looked at me, a Jew wearing a yarmulke, with what seemed to be neutral curiosity. I wanted to tell him that if Jews and Poles would not accommodate each other’s history in this place, we would continue to sully our precious symbol with humiliating squabbles. But I couldn’t say that to him because I knew only a few words of Polish.

When I got up to leave I offered him my hand. “Zbogiem,” I said to him in Polish, God bless you. He smiled, as if just now realizing that I meant him no harm. □

This article is the first of a series of three.

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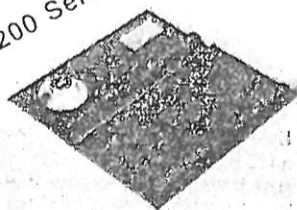
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