

The Conspiracy of Goodness

Part 2

There are other voices to be heard, other testimonies that must be offered at this time of disillusionment. For if only the witness to evil is presented every brave step of past progress and future hope for reconciliation may be destroyed.

There is sufficient witness to the poisonous anti-Semitism that contaminated Polish-Jewish relationships before and during World War II. With Cardinal Glemp's recent resuscitation of arcane myths about Jews and Judaism, it is painfully evident that the residual toxicity of xenophobia in high places is still active.

The controversies swirling around the Carmelite convent at Auschwitz have gotten way out of hand. Accusations, counter-accusations, products of cumulative rage threaten to set back the conciliatory changes in Jewish-Catholic relationships brought about through the work of Vatican II.

They chill the warming economic and cultural contacts between Poland and the State of Israel.

The ominous shadow cast by the Glemp affair however must not be allowed to eclipse Poland's rising sun. There is important evidence of a part of Poland, even in its darkest days, that promises hope for its future. There is verifiable witness to the behavior of Christian Poles who at the height of the Nazi persecution risked their lives and those of their family to rescue, hide, and protect Jews hunted by the predators.

A small but significant Polish minority acted with admirable altruism and without outside help. Some rescuers relied on the assistance of Zegota, a council for aid to Jews, formed by Catholic intellectuals and moderate and leftist Polish parties. But after October 15, 1941, Germany proclaimed that all Poles hiding Jews or abetting their concealment would be put to death.

On January 29, 1943, the S.S. executed 15 Poles in the village of Wierbicz, all members of those families who saved Jews. One of these 15 souls was a two-year-old Polish child.

--Ninety-six Polish men were murdered by the Germans in the village of Biala for hiding and feeding Jews.

--In Stary Ciepilow, the S.S. pushed 23 Poles, men, women, and children, into a barn which was then burned down with all of them inside it because they violated the edict proscribing the protection of Jews.

--Polish workers hid 17 Jews for 14 months in the rat-infested sewers of Lvov.

--Tens of thousands of Poles were executed or died in Nazi concentration camps for the crime of helping Jews.

In my capacity as founding chairman of the ADL's Jewish Foundation for Christian Rescuers, I have heard the testimony of Jews rescued by Polish farmers, nuns, priests, maids, doctors, businessmen. I have become aware of the evidence of the conspiracy of goodness, the clandestine cooperation of the milkman, the grocer, the postman who kept secret the identity of the hidden and the barns, fields, attics, and holes where they managed to survive.

I have come to know some of these people who made themselves as hiding places from the predators and as shelters from the deadly pursuit. This crucial Polish minority sheltered frightened people in their homes for days, weeks, months, and years knowing that discovery meant imprisonment, torture and death.

These Poles, some raised in anti-Semitic environments transcended the insular circle of hatred to embrace Jewish individuals and families in their lives. These Polish people, within and without the Church, were ordinary people who acted with extraordinary courage.

Compelled by conscience, they secured sleeping pills to keep Jewish infants from crying and thereby revealing the hiding places, foraged for food, sought medical help, buried the Jewish dead without detection, while all around them blackmailing informers lurked ready to be bribed with a bottle of vodka or packs of cigarettes for information leading to the capture of the Jewish prey.

Cardinal Glemp is fortunately not the whole of the Church. I regret the publicity his remarks are being given over other prelates such as the cardinals in the Roman Catholic Church who have openly expressed their repudiation of Glemp's disturbing dicta. Glemp is not Poland.

The Polish community and the world community must discover the thousands of Poles who unlocked their doors, took pregnant women under their wings, protected sick and frightened families, issued fictitious identity papers and false baptismal certifications out of respect for humanity.

The Polish community deserves to know the moral heroism within it. It must know of the small nunnery not far from the Vilna ghetto where seven sisters and a mother superior hid those who escaped the ghetto including several Jewish writers and leaders of the ghetto underground: Abraham Sutzkever, Abba Kovner, Edek Boraka, and Arie Wilner. The Polish nuns roamed the countryside to gather knives, daggers, pistols and grenades to smuggle into the ghetto for the defense of the Jewish fighters.

In November of this year, the Jewish Foundation for Christian Rescuers will be celebrating the altruism of Alex and Mila Roslan, a Polish husband and wife, who hid three Jewish brothers in their small home throughout the Holocaust years. One of the Gilat brothers died, but two of them, now scientists living in the State of Israel, will be flown to the United States for a reunion with their rescuers.

Jacob and David Gilat will recall how, when scarlet fever broke out and hit Yurek Roslan, he was taken to the Warsaw hospital where no Jewish children could safely enter.

Yurek, age 10, divided the powdered medicine given to him by the physicians and handed them to his parents so that the Jewish youngsters sequestered at the Roslan home could be treated. David Gilat cannot forget how the Roslans smuggled him into the hospital and bribed the doctors to perform an operation which saved his life.

There is a double witness that must be heard for the sake of all our futures. One offers testimony of the unspeakable atrocities men can visit upon the other. The other testifies to the goodness in those human beings who would not ally themselves with the betrayers of human conscience. Poland and the world must not forget the evil done but they must remember the good achieved. For its own healing, the post-Holocaust world needs the type of balance that Erik Erikson called “a favorable ratio of basic trust over basic distrust.”

Poland must know and raise to high honor those of its own people who lived out the noblest ideals of Judaism and Christianity. The haters who regarded Polish people as sub-human “untermenschen” and Jews as insects to be exterminated must not be given a posthumous victory.

In the name of remembered goodness and solidarity of these suffering two peoples, the killers of the dream will be vanquished.

Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis

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