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Dialogue at the Threshold of Auschwitz. Dialog u progu Auschwitz, red. M. Deselaers, Wydawnictwo UNUM, Centrum Dialogu i Modlitwy w Oświęcimiu, Kraków 2003, 279 p.

Father Manfred Deselaers, the editor of the book *Dialogue at the Threshold of Auschwitz*, is a German priest, who has been living in Poland for fifteen years now. Since 1990 he has been acting for the reconciliation between the Poles, the Germans and the Jews. He has also been working for improving relations between

Christianity and Judaism in the Oświęcim Center for Dialogue and Prayer, which was created in 1992. For his activity, in 2000, the Polish Council of Christians and Jews awarded Father Deselaers the title of the “Man of Reconciliation”. In the introduction to the book he writes that everyone who is coming to Auschwitz must face the history of this place, with its message, and with the moral and existential consequences of Auschwitz. The book *Dialogue at the Threshold of Auschwitz*, he continues, does not claim a right to answer questions about Auschwitz. Rather, it seeks to inspire readers to ask these questions of themselves and to show them that the inquiries about Auschwitz concern every man.

The book *Dialogue at the Threshold of Auschwitz* is a collection of sixteen papers delivered for Polish students at the Center for Dialogue and Prayer. In the beginning these lectures were organized only for Polish students but recently they have taken on an international character. That is why the scholars who have been invited to lecture were Christians and Jews from Germany, Israel, Poland and the United States of America.

The papers are collected in two chapters. The first one is entitled “Historical Testimonies” and the second “Symbolical Meaning of Auschwitz”. Although the title of the book and especially the introduction could suggest that the contributors deal only with the death camp of Auschwitz, in the first chapter we find authors which concentrate on other camps and treat Auschwitz only in a marginal way. For example, Leon Lendzion in the paper “The Testimony of a Polish Prisoner of the Concentration Camps” writes mainly about the camp in Stutthof and in Sachsenhausen. Wiesław Jan Wysocki, a member of the Polish Committee for the Dialogue with Non-Christian Religions of the Polish Bishop Conference in the paper “The Testimony of the Religious Life of the Prisoner Concentration Camps” refers particularly to the camps in Stutthof, in Sachsenhausen, and in Dachau. While reading these lectures we begin to understand that the name of “Auschwitz” has a symbolic meaning and in this way we must read and interpret the whole book.

In the last paper of the first chapter Teresa Świebocka, a curator of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, says that in fact, it is impossible for us to fully comprehend Auschwitz, the largest and the most infamous place of the Holocaust, of the genocide and terror. She reminds readers that the Nazis disposed of, by sending to Auschwitz, the death camp, at the very least 1.1 million Jews, about 150 thousand Poles, 23 thousand Gypsies, 15 thousand Russians, and tens of thousands of people of other nationalities.

Auschwitz is a symbolic place for Poles. For them it has become a symbol of the German occupation. That terrible place of death is symbolic for Gypsies as well. For them the 2nd of August is commemorated as the Day of National Remembrance. On that day in 1944, the last group of Gypsy prisoners, about three thousand people, were murdered in gas chambers. Yet first of all we must remember that ninety per cent of the victims of Auschwitz were Jews and that is why that terrible place of death has become a symbol of Holocaust not only for the Jewish people but also for the whole world. In the dialogue between the Christians and the Jews the word “Auschwitz” itself is symbolic. It means the extermination of the Jewish people during the Nazi rules. However it is often replaced by other words such, as: “holocaust”, “annihilation” or “genocide”.

Then we have to ask everybody, including T. Świebocka, who deals with the history of the Second World War and with the responsibility for the annihilation of millions of people, if it is the whole truth to speak only about the deeds of the Nazis.

Very informative writings on that subject are: the book of Daniel Jonah Goldhagen *Hitler's Willing Executioners. Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, which was published in 1996, and Christopher R. Browning's *Ordinary Men. Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, edited 1992. A large number of specialists maintain that the Nazi anti-Semitism had its distinct features, but those who murdered the Jews were not always Nazis. Very often they were simply implementing the policy of German authorities in the spirit of obedience or conformity while in fact the Nazi ideology was frequently strange to them. Various people, even not only Europeans were responsible for the Holocaust, for example the "Einsatzgruppen", killing squads trained to kill the Jewish people especially in the Soviet Union and the Baltic States, collaborated with some Romanians, Ukrainians, Latvians and Lithuanians.

Świebocka, as many other researchers who describe the genocide of the Jewish people, uses two terms: "holocaust" and "shoah". Both of them are used by scholars and writers, but modern theologians prefer the word "shoah". They stress that the designation "shoah" allows to emphasize the uniqueness of the genocide of the Jewish people during the Nazi era. Świebocka's lecture could be understood as the bridge between the first and the second chapter of the book "Dialogue at the Threshold of Auschwitz".

Reflections on the subject of the symbolic meaning of Auschwitz and a future of theology after the Shoah, considered from the point of view of Christian and Jewish scholars, are taken up in the second chapter of the book *Dialogue at the Threshold of Auschwitz*. Readers of that chapter can be pleasantly surprised because it contains a collection of uncompromising and interesting papers. Moving and impressive are the reflections of Łukasz Kamykowski, a professor of the Papal Theological Academy of Cracow. Recollecting the beginning of his priesthood and the mass said by John Paul II at Auschwitz on June 7, 1979, during the Pope's first pilgrimage to Poland, Kamykowski writes that at that time he thought about "the humility and the quiet of God (...), who strengthens the weak in the hope, and who stands out against the proud-hearted, against murderers and the mighty of the world". For Ł. Kamykowski, and for many other people, the meetings with Auschwitz are events still alive, the history, which is always open.

It is very difficult for Christians to study and develop the theology of Auschwitz after the extermination of the Jews. While semi-scientific racial theories and specific historical, ideological, economic, and social realities within Germany must be taken into account in order to explain Nazism, we must remember that the anti-Judaism of Christians, which was rooted in their theologies of supercession, liturgies, hymns, prayers, services, sermons, did lay the groundwork for modern racial anti-Semitism by stigmatizing not only Judaism but Jews themselves, which caused their opprobrium and contempt, as modern Christian theologians and historians contend basing on the research of newly published Church documents. The new positive approach of the Churches to the Jewish people was born in the ruins of European Jewry when the Christians realized that anti-Semitism had had its source in anti-Judaism. Furthermore, the Christian theologians who resolved to fathom the problem of the Shoah have been sometimes accused of "Christianization" of the Jewish victims, that is of taking advantage of them for their own theological purposes. In spite of that Michel de Goedt, Benedictine from Jerusalem, takes up the reflections on the subject of Christian theology of Auschwitz. He emphasizes that the Nazi murderers of the Jews were violently opposed to the Name of God

and to the people who gave witness to the Lord in the world. The same idea, writes the Benedictine, can be found in the forth Gospel where the Passion of Christ is described as rejection of Jesus and of the Name of God revealed by Him.

The significance of the Shoah from the Jewish point of view is described by an orthodox rabbi Sacha Pecaric from Cracow, the Director for Religion in the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation. Even after the Shoah, Pecaric states, one should not ask God why the Holocaust had happened. The only possible attitude for him is still trust “that the world is not meaningless, that the history is composed of many elements and that one cannot understand everything all at once”.

A broader spectrum of Jewish response to the Holocaust is presented in the paper contributed by Michael Signer, a representative of the Reform Judaism and a professor of American University of Notre Dame. He begins with writing about the Jews who try to understand the Shoah in the context of the continuity of the Jewish history. At that point the lecture of M. Signer is linked with the earlier speech given by S. Pecaric. Rabbi Ignaz Maybaum, as Signer reminds the readers, had even maintained that God used Adolf Hitler and the Nazis for purification of the sinful world. I. Maybaum compared the Shoah with the Passion. According to him “Jesus was an innocent sacrifice, chosen by God himself to redeem the human-kind”. M. Signer speaks also about the Jewish theologians, who are of the opinion that the Shoah was an unprecedented experience in the Jewish history, a kind of rupture. In other words, it is impossible to interpret the Holocaust in the large plan of the continuity of the Jewish history. Rabbi Richard Rubenstein was sure that after the extermination the Jews cannot explain the history of Israel and their covenant with God or its irreversibility in the traditional way. R. Rubenstein claimed that the affirmation of the God’s people and the election of Israel are senseless. Emil Fackenheim, a rabbi and a philosopher, who was died in 2003, also tried to understand the Shoah. As M. Signer describes he emphasized that after that unique catastrophe the Jews had to obey also the 614th commandment in order to be actively Jewish, thus denying Hitler a posthumous victory. According to the Orthodox Judaism, the number of commandments, which God gave to the Jewish people numbered 613. It is necessary to add that E. Fackenheim spoke in plain terms that the Jewish people had to survive as Jews, that they had to “remember in their guts and bones the martyrs of the Holocaust”. The Jews, the philosopher asserted, are forbidden to despair of God or to deny His existence. They are forbidden, too, “to despair of the world as a place which is to become the Kingdom of God lest they help make it a meaningless place in which God is dead or irrelevant and everything is permitted”.

The front cover of the book *Dialogue at the Threshold of Auschwitz* is illustrated with a symbolic presentation of the gate of the Auschwitz camp. Looking at the picture we feel that we are at the threshold of the terrible camp. After reading the book Christians can find themselves behind the gate of Auschwitz. There, Christians have to accept and reconcile themselves to the truth that for centuries their theologies, their teaching and practices have been anti-Jewish. Michael de Goedt writes that Christian traditions had influenced “in the manner which is difficult to describe precisely”, the conditions that made the Shoah possible. It is necessary to add that the pseudo-traditions, as now the theologians refer to those anti-Jewish tendencies, attitudes and teachings, are still present in the ordinary life of Christians, although the official documents of the Churches are very positive and open to the dialogue with the Jews. After the extermination of the Jewish people

there are still some groups of the believers who emphasize that the old Israel has been replaced by the new Israel, which is now the Church. To cross the threshold of Auschwitz it is important to leave forever the anti-Jewish theologies and the daily prejudices. The Christians have to bury all the theologies of substitution. Ł. Kamykowski writes that there are some possibilities to present a mysterious relation between the Church and the Jewish people after the coming of Jesus Christ, however, Christian scholars have many problems with the explanation of those questions. Meanwhile Christian theologians stress that after the coming of Jesus of Nazareth the Israel continues to be a creative and fruitful community, bearing – very often in a heroic way – the real witness to the living God, who is worshiped by the Churches in their daily and solemn liturgies and Psalms, the common prayers of the Jews and the Christians. The long-lasting separation of the Church and the Israel, according to Ł. Kamykowski and many other thinkers, cannot be overcome only by human efforts.

All through the book *Dialogue at the threshold of Auschwitz* is full of hope. A well-known writer, Halina Birenbaum, a prisoner of the camps at Majdanek, Auschwitz, Ravensbrück and Neustadt-Glewe, confirms that she comes to Auschwitz as a pilgrim to a holy place. In the street of Oświęcim – the town where the Auschwitz camp was built – she experiences the joy of victory and the meaningfulness of her life. For her, Oświęcim is a symbolic town, a lesson which should be learnt by mankind in order that the story of Auschwitz never happens again. Marian Kołodziej a prisoner of the camps at Auschwitz and Ebensee, and a designer of over a hundred scenery projects, writes: “I am today, from the perspective of my past life, completely certain that if I am what I am, it is through the experience of the camps, through the experience of that hell. I have been learning and learning to be myself ever since”.

Grzegorz Ignatowski