

# The strategic dimension behind Europe's current 'religious wars'

by Muriel Mirak

At the highpoint of the summer vacation in Europe, marked in Catholic countries by the feast of the Assumption of the Virgin on Aug. 15, what looked like a religious controversy took on an uncanny form and rapidly escalating proportions. An American Jewish rabbi leads a group of followers to penetrate the silent confines of a Carmelite convent located at the site of the Auschwitz concentration camp. A group of Polish construction workers, who happen to be on the scene, do the obvious, and repel the invaders by force. The archbishop launches fiery attacks against "certain Jewish circles" for their lack of respect for the nuns; spokesmen, self-styled as well as official, for the world Jewish community, respond with anger and dark insinuations. Pope John Paul II makes references to the "infidelity of Hebrews" in the Old Testament, and in response, accusations of anti-Semitism are hurled at him.

One would have thought that new wars of religion had broken out in Europe.

Although a number of important theological and philosophical issues worthy of deep consideration (like the concept of martyrdom and the function of prayer, as viewed by the Judaic and Christian traditions) are embedded in the affair, the very unusual form of the mid-summer escalation, viewed within the broader context, would indicate rather that the fundamental religious conflict were of an eminently political nature.

First, the facts.

Since August 1984, a group of 14 Polish nuns has established a Carmelite convent along the walls enclosing the Auschwitz concentration camp. They are revered by the Poles, who view their presence there as bearing constant witness, through prayer, for the victims of Nazism. Opposition to their presence came from parts of the Jewish community who urged that the site remain a museum-camp, a reminder of the *Shoah*, the Holocaust against the Jews. In 1987, an agreement was reached in Geneva between delegations of Jews and of Catholics, that within two years, the convent would be transferred 600 meters away, where an ecumenical center would be constructed, for "information, education, meetings, and prayer." Signators to the agreement included Cardinal Franciszek Marcharski, successor to Karol Wojtyla in Krakow, and Cardinal Decourtray, president of the French Bishops Conference.

Due to delays in readying the new center, the deadline

established for the move—Feb. 22 of this year—was postponed for five months. On July 14, when the Carmelites still had not moved out, Rabbi Avraham Weiss of New York climbed a fence to enter the convent grounds, protesting that the nuns' presence was a desecration of the memory of the Jews killed there. Rabbi Weiss's group, the Coalition of Concern, continued the protest against the alleged "occupation" for days. Rabbi Weiss was accompanied by Glenn Richter, an activist in the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry and a close friend of Mordechai Levy, an American terrorist (see article, page 60).

On July 19, Israel voiced its concern regarding how the protesters were being treated. By July 23, an estimated 100 Jews from Western Europe were reportedly demonstrating, and Israel's Holocaust Remembrance Authority issued a protest.

On the Polish side, the episcopate's Commission for Dialogue with Judaism responded to the protests on July 20, with a statement that "any violation of law cannot contribute to the solution of the conflict." Then, on Aug. 10, Cardinal Marcharski issued a statement announcing that the center would be impossible to realize, due to the "violent campaign of accusations and defamation, and offensive aggression" launched by "some Western Jewish circles," in an evident reference to Rabbi Weiss.

At this point, the press campaign began, fueling the flames of controversy. Milan's daily *Corriere della Sera* asserted that the Pope was behind Cardinal Marcharski's statement, when in fact, as the newspaper of the Italian bishops conference, *Avvenire*, specified, "the cardinal's declaration cannot be attributed to the Holy See." Cardinal Decourtray of Lyons, France, who had led the delegation to Geneva for the accord in 1987, entered the debate calling for comprehension and the maintenance of the Jewish-Christian dialogue at all costs. Emphasizing the "need for mutual respect, in order not to harm the memory of Auschwitz," he called for the original agreement on building the ecumenical center to be respected. Immediately, spokesmen for the Jewish delegation that had been present in Geneva, officially endorsed his stand, calling for "reciprocal respect for the victims of Auschwitz, both Jewish and non-Jewish." (In July, Cardinal Decourtray had apologized for the delays in constructing the center, pointing to real obstacles, of an administrative as well as psychological nature, rendering the transfer of the convent difficult.)

From the United States, Rabbi David Rosen, a Jerusalem-based representative of the Anti-Defamation League, took issue with the Pope's references to the "infidelity of the Hebrews." Prof. Yirmiyahu Yovel of Jerusalem charged the Pope with having launched a "political attack" against the Jews. He further warned of the "danger of racism," insinuating that Poles and Catholics were racists who had endorsed the Holocaust.

### The broader context

While it is easy to see how an issue so emotionally charged could unleash a violent debate, it is difficult to grasp how John Paul II, the Pope who has developed the dialogue with Judaism to unprecedented heights, could be so accused. Was it not, after all, this pontiff who, entering the Rome synagogue, officially exculpated the Jews from charges of "deicide," and redefined the political nature of the persecution of Christ at the hands of the Romans? Is not he also the Pope who paid homage to the victims of Nazi oppression, by canonizing Father Kolbe and beatifying Edith Stein, both Auschwitz victims?

In the Italian press, precisely these acts have been cited, to allege that "the Jews fear" that the Vatican wants to "Christianize the Holocaust" and thus "let the *Shoah*, with the passing of time, lose meaning" (*Corriere della Sera*, Aug. 11). Such appears to be the view of Rabbi Weiss, who is quoted as having said, while charging the Carmelite monastery, "You don't pray for Jewish martyrs, they weren't Christians." Such is indeed the view of the Edgar Bronfman wing of the World Jewish Congress, whose spokesman Elon Steinberg charged the Pope with trying to "de-Judaize the Holocaust."

But that is not the whole story.

The enemies of John Paul II who are members of the Jewish community are identified with Edgar Bronfman's faction, Henry Kissinger, Rabbi Weiss, and others. Their opposition to the Pope certainly is grounded philosophically on their rejection of his "New Covenant" doctrine, which they have attacked as "prejudicial" and "anti-Semitic." But their animosity also has a distinctly political aspect, relating directly to great strategic concerns. John Paul's enemies dislike him for his policies in the Mideast and, above all, vis-à-vis the East bloc.

In the turbulent Middle East, the Pope has pledged his undying support for the national resistance forces of Lebanon around the Christian community, and against all those projects, promoted by the likes of Kissinger and Bronfman, aimed at dismembering the nation of Lebanon. There are in Israel, as well, certain groupings allied to Bronfman who are engaged in diplomatic efforts with the Soviets, aimed at obtaining the release of hundreds of thousands of Soviet Jews, in exchange for Israel's acquiescence to a newly drawn Middle East map. This, the Vatican seems concerned to prevent; thus, the Pope is standing up to the Soviets' global agreement with the United States.

But there is more. This Pope, as Elon Steinberg and others will readily acknowledge, is challenging the condominium arrangement between Moscow and Washington where it hurts: in the heart of the East bloc. For it is also this Pope who has overseen and encouraged the most ambitious, and successful drive to restore the rights of Catholics behind the Iron Curtain—not only in Czechoslovakia, where he has nominated four archbishops, and Hungary, where restrictions on believers are to be relaxed, but above all in Poland, the nation whose role within the captive nations is absolutely key.

As if by coincidence, on the very day that Rabbi Weiss and his followers were staging a sit-in at the Carmelite convent, Poland and the Vatican officially announced the restoration of diplomatic relations. This step had been prepared carefully over years; in 1987 during his trip to Poland, John Paul II had stressed to the Polish bishops that such a step could occur only when it were credible to the Polish nation, whose rights the Church has defended in its history. The Pope emphasized that diplomatic relations would help lend real sovereignty to Poland, by helping establish sovereign rights for its people. When, in May 1989, the state granted legal status to the Church in Poland, it became clear that the Pope's demands for such steps were being heeded by the government, which was fully aware of the political weight represented by the Polish Catholic Church. With the diplomatic ties reestablished, the Polish Church has consolidated institutional ties with the universal Church, thus gaining certain international guarantees for its freedom of activity which it did not enjoy before.

Such developments are to be welcomed by all those who treasure freedom of religion and share the hopes of not only the people of Poland, but also those of Czechoslovakia, Hungary, the Ukraine, other captive nations. Yet, as the protagonists of the carefully constructed *Ostpolitik* of the Vatican are well aware, such developments are fraught with dangers, for they implicitly challenge the status quo now reigning within the East bloc and between "new Yalta" circles in Washington and Moscow. As a Ukrainian expert of religious and ethnic problems in the Soviet Union recently stated in an interview with the Italian newspaper *Nuova Solidarietà*, "The Russians fear the Ukrainian Catholics for three reasons: 1) they fear a mass conversion to Catholicism of the people in that region; 2) they fear a Ukrainian Catholic Church because it expresses the desires and aspirations of citizens for national independence; 3) they are afraid because a Catholic Ukraine would be closer to the West."

What is true for the Ukraine, is also true for Poland. And it is this policy, being implemented through the pontificate of John Paul II, which constitutes a threat to the "New Yalta" agreements sealed by Gorbachov and Bush—and supported by a clearly defined faction within the Jewish community—according to which the birth of sovereignty for the nations behind the Iron Curtain would only disturb the existing spheres of influence.