

# Auschwitz uproar endangers Poland at its historic crossroads

by Muriel Mirak

As summer came to a close in Europe this year, a series of commemorations began, of the outbreak of World War II a half a century ago. It is only appropriate that the first such solemn event recall the invasion of Poland by the Nazis, and take place in Warsaw. But, it would seem wholly inappropriate that reflection on such catastrophic historical events be marred by the heated controversy around the issue of the Carmelite convent in Auschwitz.

Yet this issue has inflamed passions on all sides to such a degree that not only are Poles and Catholics being artificially pitted against Jews, but the Catholic Church itself is being threatened with serious rifts. And all this furor is working to the detriment of those forces in Poland who are painstakingly seeking a way out for their beleaguered nation.

The controversy centers around a Carmelite convent located near the Auschwitz concentration camp, now a museum. According to a 1987 agreement between representatives of the Catholic Church and the Jewish community, the nuns were to move to another location within two years' time. When bureaucratic and political obstacles made it impossible to respect this timetable, a group of American Jews associated with the Edgar Bronfman faction of the World Jewish Congress mounted a provocation, breaking into the convent and offending the nuns.

The Polish Cardinals Macharski and Glemp responded indignantly, that under such conditions, the agreements reached could not be respected. Glemp and Macharski were accused of anti-Semitism, and the verbal clash escalated rapidly. Although, after several interventions particularly by the French Catholic Church, Cardinal Macharski reviewed his position and agreed to transfer the nuns, an exasperated Cardinal Glemp stated that the entire agreement should be renegotiated.

When Glemp called into question the competence of those cardinals who had negotiated the 1987 accord, what had been presented as a Christian-Jewish confrontation sparked an internal Catholic dispute. The Polish primate had been quoted by the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica* on Sept. 2, as saying that the agreement had been signed "by Cardinal Macharski and by a group of men who are not competent." He had reportedly called for the accord to be "calmly renegotiated"

and that Macharski, who "represents only the Church of Krakow," not be the only Polish representative involved, as "the problem is far more vast."

Glemp was further quoted as saying that Poland, in the throes of a terrible economic crisis, could not finance the proposed \$2 million ecumenical center slated to house the Carmelites.

Theo Klein, former president of the Representative Council of Jewish Institutions in France (CRIF) and president of the Jewish delegation to the Geneva accords of 1987, was not the only one to take issue with Glemp. The three who (together with Macharski) had constituted the Catholic delegation, Cardinals Albert Decourtray, Godfried Daneels, and Jean-Marie Lustiger, respectively archbishops of Lyon, Malines-Brussels, and Paris, immediately issued a communiqué, answering Glemp point for point, and reiterating that the accord be respected.

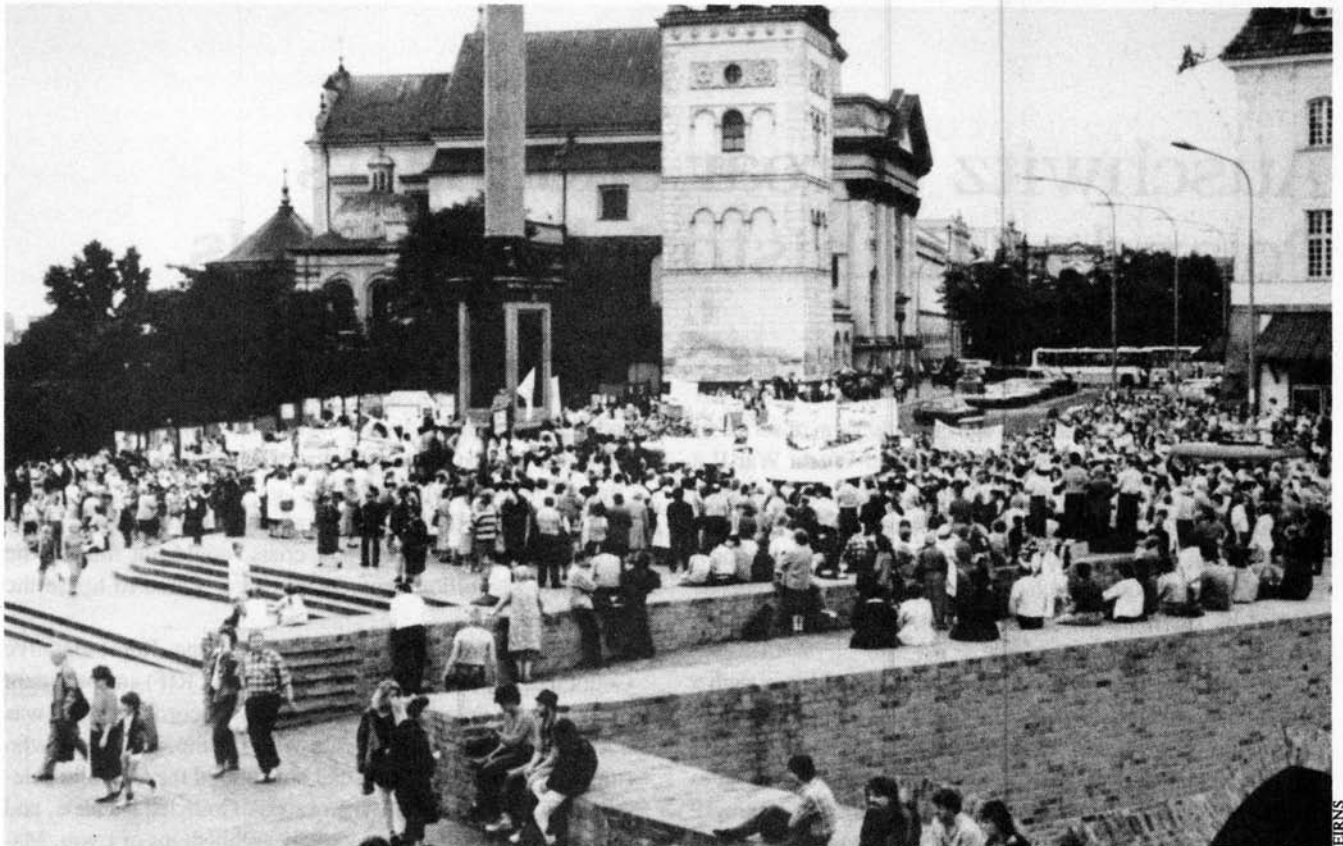
Cardinal Decourtray, whose earlier interventions had contributed to calming things down, declared that he was "shocked" and "hurt" by Glemp's words, and that he could not understand what had prompted them.

The most obvious factor behind Glemp's words, was the desire of *La Repubblica* newspaper to provoke an explosion. The newspaper which had most consistently fanned the flames of controversy, organized an interview leading the primate to make his comments. The rest of the press then followed suit: Headlines announced that Cardinal Decourtray had "denounced" Glemp, that the French church was splitting from Poland, that the Jewish community was up in arms, that Walesa was distancing himself from Cardinal Glemp, etc.

To grasp what prompted Cardinal Glemp's overreaction, one must view the entire affair—insofar as its political implications are concerned—as a carefully orchestrated provocation, which aims at undermining the Vatican's *Ostpolitik*. This comes at the moment when Rome's first precious fruits are being borne in the form of the new Polish government.

## Glemp clarifies

On Sept. 15, Cardinal Glemp met with the president of the Foundation for the Restoration of Jewish Monuments in Poland, Zygmunt Nissanbaum. They discussed the problem



*A Solidarnosc demonstration in Warsaw in June, before they entered the government. Around the fate of the new Poland pivots the future of Eastern Europe.*

for several hours, and according to the Polish news agency PAP, they reached an agreement, for which no details were released to the press.

In an interview with a weekly magazine in Krakow, Glomp also made it clearer what he had meant in the interview with *La Repubblica*. By saying that the original group who made the accord on the Carmelite convent were “incompetent,” he meant that the delegation on the Catholic side should have been better composed, with more Polish representation. The Jewish component was not matched on the Catholic side, which only had an informal pastoral grouping, he said. Glomp knows that any successful pressure on the Catholic Church in Poland, creates a dangerous precedent.

In the context of the violent upheavals reverberating throughout the Soviet bloc, the fate of the Polish experiment takes on even more awesome dimensions: If it succeeds, it may point the way to similar transformations elsewhere; if it fails, it will signal the dashing of perhaps the only hope for peaceful development on the troubled eastern horizon.

### **Poland needs support**

The conditions for Poland’s succeeding are clear. Lyndon LaRouche identified them in his “Berlin proposal” of 1988, when he launched the idea that Western Europe, particularly

West Germany, should mobilize its economic potential to industrialize Polish agriculture and provide the necessary infrastructure for further rapid economic growth.

Lech Walesa of Solidarnosc echoed this concept when, during a visit to Bonn in early September, he said that the experimental government would stand or fall depending on what economic support it would find especially from West Germany and the United States. Such economic aid would be the concrete form in which the West could manifest its political solidarity with the new government. Conversely, denying such solidarity would be the most effective way of sabotaging the efforts made by the coalition of nationalist forces within Poland.

International solidarity means both economic aid and political support. By blowing the Auschwitz controversy out of all proportion, the international press has painted the slanderous picture of an “anti-Semitic” Glomp. The cardinal canceled a trip planned to the United States, precisely because forces related to the Bronfman faction in the American Jewish community, had hatched plans for further provocations against him. American economic aid for Poland is not in the works.

In Europe, Poland’s strongest objective allies are France and West Germany, both countries with a powerful and wealthy Catholic Church. France is also the European coun-

## The Carmelite convent

The site on which the Carmelite convent was built, was originally a "theater," erected in 1914 by a Polish aristocrat for the distraction of Austro-Hungarian troops staying in the vicinity. During World War II, the theater was used by the Nazis to stock Zyklon-B gas. But it was not part of the Auschwitz camp, and even after the war, when the camp was turned into a museum, it was not considered part of it. When, in 1978, the Polish government wrote to UNESCO to have Auschwitz declared a monument in the "patrimony of humanity," the theater was included for the first time, and designated number 18. The Polish government, apparently not recognizing the theater as part of the camp, decided in 1984 to grant it to the Catholic Church. Cardinal Macharski, who succeeded John Paul II as bishop in Krakow, took the initiative to build the convent.

Initially, the reactions from the Jewish community were very warm to the initiative, viewed as a Catholic acknowledgement of the victims of the Holocaust. In 1985, a priest from the Netherlands, Werenfried Van Straaten, launched a drive to support the convent, which was characterized in promotional literature as a "fortress of spirituality," and a place to convert the "lost brothers." It was this promotional brochure which was picked up by associates of the Bronfman faction in the United States, who initiated hostilities against the convent.

Responsible parties on both the Jewish and Catholic sides intervened rapidly to find a rational solution. Cardinal Lustiger and Theo Klein of CRIF met in Geneva July 22, 1986. Klein proposed a declaration stating that all "recognize Auschwitz and Birkenau as the symbolic lo-

cations of the final solution in the name of which the Nazis proceeded to the extermination (Shoah) of six million Jews, including one and a half million children, only because they were Jews." This was accepted by Cardinals Decourtray, Lustiger, Macharski, and Daneels. The French and Belgian cardinals had been brought in on Macharski's request, because they represented countries which had suffered many victims—Jewish and not—in the Holocaust. An agreement was reached on Feb. 22, 1987, that the nuns would move to a center, to be built outside the walls of the camp, within two years.

The agreement was unfeasible from the start, considering the bureaucratic and material problems a country like Poland would have to solve to erect a new center. In addition, the Communist government authorities did everything possible to render the agreement impossible; it has just recently donated the land destined to house the ecumenical center.

The nuns of the Carmelite convent are supervised by Mother Maria Theresa, the prioress. Like all the other nuns there, she had victims of the concentration camp among her family members. She accepted moving the convent out of the "theater," in the interests of the Judeo-Christian dialogue, which she has fought for in Poland. She was shocked by the banners sported by Rabbi Avraham Weiss's group, saying "Carmelites, out of Auschwitz," and saddened by Western press reports which accused her of being an anti-Semite and an accomplice in Nazi crimes.

During World War II, the Carmelite nuns had a very important role in Warsaw. Their convent was located at 27 Wolska Street, in the building which hosted the general headquarters of the Jewish resistance. The clandestine organization "Zegota" was founded by Poles to support that resistance.

try with the largest Jewish population, which enjoys cordial relations with the Catholic Church. Cardinal Lustiger, one of the protagonists of the Auschwitz convent negotiations, is a converted Jew of Polish origins. Thus, the easiest way to sabotage French and German support for Poland, would be to whip up hysteria around such an issue, and drive wedges between the national churches if possible. All this would tend to isolate Poland within Europe; internally, if a wedge could be driven between Solidarnosc and Glemp, then the game would essentially be up.

In the interests of Poland, its courageous people, and the promise it embodies for others in Eastern Europe, it is to be hoped that the Auschwitz controversy will not be allowed to poison international relations. Those institutions and parties aware of the international

seem to be exhibiting caution and prudence.

Wisely, the Vatican has kept a diplomatic distance from events, reiterating the competence of the local church to deal with such matters. And John Paul II continues his policy of dialogue, with world Jewry, and with the Communist East. Just as wisely, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir avoided a trap laid for him by an interviewer for the *Jerusalem Post* who tried to draw him out on the question of tensions between Jews and Catholics. Responding to probes regarding the Auschwitz case, Shamir said the state of Israel had a responsibility to its own citizens, and could not represent world Jewry. He refused to "declare war on all fronts against the Church" and expressed his desire that "warm, close relations" with the Church could be developed, even leading to establishing diplomatic ties with the Vatican.