

Dialogue at the Edge of Auschwitz

From the Introduction

Dialogue at the edge of Auschwitz is not easy, because we touch wounds which are still open. Nevertheless it is possible.

Our experience has taught us that at the edge of Auschwitz it is difficult to start with dialogue. One should start with silence, with the opening of one's heart to the "voice of the soil of Auschwitz".

Auschwitz is not just about the killing of persons. It is also about the destruction of relationship. This is the main wound that still bleeds. The main challenge of Auschwitz is in the questions about our relationships. Healing here is about the healing of relationships. We cannot heal ourselves alone, Jews alone, Germans alone, Poles alone and so on. Healing is possible only by encounter. Healing is about building trust. It is simultaneously the most important and the most difficult of tasks to rebuild trust after Auschwitz, in order to mutually open-up without fear, listen to each other, and give witness. In honest human relationships which opens to the truth of the other, we trust that such encounter, even if it sometimes hurts, leads to more humanity and corresponds to God's will.

In this book we present some fruits of more than 15 years of dialogue at the Centre for Dialogue and Prayer in Oświęcim. In 1997, we started to organize seminars 'At the threshold of Auschwitz'. These are international and interreligious encounters with former prisoners, Christian and Jewish, with students from Poland, Germany, Israel, the United States and other countries, with professors, rabbis, priests. We present now a selection in an English translation. They represent not only deep theological reflection about Auschwitz, but also quite different perspectives and approaches. We put them in sequence as Polish, Jewish and German voices.

To give you a feeling about the character of these articles, we quote from a text written for our first book by Agata Kroh. She found words for what we all felt:

"However, what was most important in the encounters is not to be found in this book, because it cannot be there. It was the meeting place - the Soil of Auschwitz. The fact that we talked (and also kept silence!) about such difficult topics right here was of primary importance. Regardless of who we are, every person who comes here must confront in himself the history of this place, its meaning, and the moral and existential consequences of this past. In a sense, everyone is left alone in this place. There is a difference whether you read these words at

home, or whether with the visit to Auschwitz and Birkenau still in vivid memory, you listen to what is spoken with emotion and sometimes with significant effort.

A great value of the seminar was the encounter with other people. Our joint presence at Auschwitz was a special sign. Even though everyone must stand alone on this ground and confront its memory, we wanted to be there together. Not to convince anyone, but to listen to each other, to learn a different perspective and to broaden one's own heart for the concern of others. Our presence was common also on the religious and national level – participating in the meetings were Christians and Jews from Poland, Israel, Germany, England and the United States. The fact that we visited Auschwitz and Birkenau together became an event of great symbolic importance ...

On the earth of Auschwitz each word has special importance, not only in regards to what it wants to say, but also, and perhaps in this case especially, in regards to where it was spoken. Anyone who reads these lectures should keep that in mind.”

May the reader of this book be inspired by the texts we presented here – fruits of our dialogue. And may he or she also feel invited to come to Oświęcim/Auschwitz, to listen to the commanding voice of this soil, to seek for the response in one's heart, to participate in trustbuilding dialogue and to search for God's presence.

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