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The Auschwitz Convent Controversy

by

John A. Drobnicki

Three years ago Catholics and Jews were torn apart over the presence of a Carmelite convent at the Auschwitz concentration camp. During the controversy, many unkind and unfortunate charges were made, and ugly stereotypes were raised by both sides. The present writer can testify to this firsthand: after publishing a letter to the editor in *The New York Times* defending the convent, I received what one could call "hate mail." The recent publication of a book of essays and documents regarding the convent provides an opportune moment to rethink the various positions and issues.

Memory Offended: The Auschwitz Convent Controversy, edited by Carol Rittner and John K. Roth (Praeger Publications, 1991), is a collection of fifteen essays written from (Polish) Catholic, Jewish, and "neutral" perspectives, along with an appendix of relevant documents and official statements regarding the convent. Several essays touch on the long history of Catholic-Jewish relations, and, as with any collection, some articles are better than others.

As we all know, the history of Poland is complex, offering both shining examples of religious tolerance (see, for example, Janusz Tazbir's *A State Without Stakes*) and persecution (an example being the Kielce pogrom). This complexity can be illustrated by the life of St. Maximilian Kolbe, a man who gave his life for that of another in Auschwitz, and also a man who was the editor of a journal accused of being antisemitic.

As several writers in *Memory Offended* point out, the convent provoked such strong reactions from both sides because Auschwitz is a sacred place for more than one group—Emanuel Tanay even uses Jerusalem as an analogy. On that site in Poland is Oświęcim, where a camp was used to detain and kill Poles, and which has become a symbol of Polish martyrdom for the nation. It is also the site of an extermination camp where Nazi Germany killed, according to Yehuda Bauer of Hebrew University, about 1.35 million Jews, and which has become the most preeminent symbol of the Holocaust. As Tanay writes, "The Carmelite convent was established in Oświęcim, a proper place for Polish nuns. The trouble is that Auschwitz, a death camp for Jews, existed at the same location."

Neither side was sufficiently aware of the importance of that place for the other. Jews have, rightfully so, concentrated on the horrors that befell their brethren; Tanay quotes a Jewish friend as responding to his information regarding Polish suffering in the camp at Oświęcim with "This is all news to me." Poles, on the other hand, played down the suffering of the Jews and lumped everybody together as victims of fascism. Readers will be shocked to learn, as several contributors to *Memory Offended* point out, that tour guides at Auschwitz never mention Jews, and that the 1986 official guidebook to the Auschwitz-Birkenau museum does not even have the word "Jew" in it. With such ignorance on both sides, it is easy to see why the convent became so controversial. Hopefully, both sides have become more knowledgeable during the last three years.

What also contributed to the convent controversy was that some people saw in it an attempt by the Catholic Church to de-Judaize the Holocaust, especially since the Church has maintained a presence at several of the former concentration camps. This larger question of whether the term "Holocaust" should be applied to the "other victims" has been raised by several authors in recent years, particularly by Richard Lukas, writing on behalf of the Poles, and Ian Hancock, writing on behalf of the Roma (Gypsies). In his *The Forgotten Holocaust*, Lukas has written in no uncertain terms that Poles and Jews were co-victims of Nazi genocidal policies. In a recent article entitled "The Romani *Pořajmos*: The Nazi Genocide of Europe's Gypsies" in the Fall 1991 issue of *Nationalities Papers*, Henry Huttenbach quotes reputable estimates of the number of Gypsies killed ranging from 250,000 to over one million.

Numbers alone, however, mean nothing if taken out of context. Who knows for sure how many people were killed in the camp gas chambers and in the mobile gas vans, and how many people were shot at the edge of mass graves, and how many people died as a result of military actions. We will never know for sure. In her essay in *Memory Offended*, Mary Jo Leddy distinguishes between evil and radical evil, writing that the Poles were victims of the former and the Jews of the latter: the murder of Jews was "evil done for the sake of evil" with no purpose, while the murder of Poles did serve a Nazi purpose (i.e., to subjugate the nation into slavery). Ronald Modras writes, however, that the "supplies of Zyklon B gas found in storage at the end of the war point to the fact that the Nazis had millions more victims in mind for their program of extermination than the relatively few Jews left in Europe."

We know that people from over twenty different countries were imprisoned in Auschwitz. Although prior to 1942 it at first held Polish prisoners, its primary victims became Jews—1.35 of the 1.6 million killed there, according to Bauer. (An interesting point made by one of the contributors to *Memory Offended* is that, even when Auschwitz was strictly a camp for Poles, the Polish people were powerless to do anything about it, rebutting charges of Polish silence and complicity in the camp's later purpose.)

Many scholars acknowledge that the Gypsies were victims of genocide; and Yehuda Bauer was quoted in *The New York Times* in 1989 as saying that Poles were victims of genocide, but the Holocaust and genocide "are separate frightfulnesses." This is perhaps the most accurate description we can make. All Jews were condemned to a death sentence, while Poles did have a chance of being released from the camps (as evidenced by Władysław Bartoszewski, among others), although life under the Nazi occupiers outside the camps carried constant risks of death, as too did life under the Soviet occupiers.

Stanisław Krajewski makes a very valid point in *Memory Offended* when he notes that "Jews tried to survive by posing as Aryans—there were such cases even in Auschwitz—while there were no attempts in the opposite direction."