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The Meaning of This Time and Place: Address to American Catholic Bishops and American Rabbis

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The Meaning of This Time and Place: Address to American Catholic Bishops and American Rabbis

Cover Page Footnote

Rabbi Eugene Korn is Executive Director of the Center for Christian-Jewish Understanding of Sacred Heart University. This address was delivered in Krakow, Poland, on September 2, 2007, as part of the U.S. Bishops and Rabbis Study Tour sponsored by the CCJU.

EUGENE KORN

*The Meaning of This Time and Place:
Address to American Catholic Bishops
and American Rabbis*

This will not be a pleasant or easy trip, but it will prove to be one of enormously spiritual rewards. We have come to a place of great challenge. Because of its history, Poland is at the same time an intensely holy place and the place of ultimate desecration of God's name. Poland was not the brain center of the Nazi extermination program that was a Holocaust for Jews and a spiritual crisis for all who believe in the Creator of life who made a covenant of life with his children. But Poland was the heart of the killing machine.

It is in Poland that all the extermination camps were located. It is in Poland where the greatest destruction of the Jewish people took place. Before the war, Krakow had 60,000 Jews, approximately one-quarter of the city. After the war, only a few were alive and able to return. Before the war, there was a rich Jewish life in Poland. There were 3.3 million Jews, mostly simple people of faith who had no political, financial, or military power, and who posed no threat to Germany or any other country. Three million—90%—were systematically shot or gassed at places like nearby Auschwitz-Birkenau. Some were killed voluntarily by their Polish neighbors, as

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in Jedwabne, where the citizens burnt 400 local Jews alive in their synagogue. Some who survived the war returned to their home towns, only to be killed by their neighbors, as happened in the nearby Jewish quarter of Krakow in August 1945, some seven months after liberation. In all, 6 million Jews were exterminated at the hands of the Nazis—2 out of every 3 Jews in Europe. And more died of starvation and disease soon after the war.

Numbers are numbing—and dehumanizing. Indeed, the first step of Nazi dehumanization in the concentration camps was to brand people with numbers to take away their individuality, their humanity, and the unique character bestowed upon them by God. So we dare not speak only of millions or of mere numbers. Who were these people who went to their death only because they were Jews?

Here is the story of one family, the Grossmans:

— Solomon and Leia Juda Grossman (parents), executed by gunfire in April 1942, near Demblin, Poland, approximately age 62

— Bernard (Berl) Grossman (son), slave labor then exterminated at Auschwitz, May 1942, age 35

— Yidl Grossman, his wife, Sura, and infant son (son, daughter-in-law, and child), exterminated by gunfire near Demblin, Poland at Auschwitz, May 1942

— Nissan Isak Grossman (son), slave labor camp, exterminated at Auschwitz, June 1942, age 29

— Brandl (Berta) Grossman (daughter), exterminated at Auschwitz on Christmas day, 1943, age 18

— Bruchah Berliner (niece), exterminated at Auschwitz, December 1943, teenager

— Chaye Sara (Herminka) Berliner (niece), teenager, exterminated at Auschwitz, 1943

— Shaul Berliner (nephew), teenager, shot to death, time and date unknown

— Dina Grossman Rosenbaum (aunt), husband, and three children (Alexei, Esther, and Nathan), shot to death

In all, the extended Grossman family totaled over 100 people. Only 5 survived.

The Grossmans are all my wife's ancestors from Zhborov, Slovakia. Leia and Solomon were her grandparents. Her mother, Leba, was the only sibling to survive, having come to America only two months before Hitler invaded Czechoslovakia in 1939. My wife is named Leia Brandl (Leah), after her grandmother and an aunt, who she never knew. She grew up without any grandparents, aunts, uncles, or cousins. As she put it many times to me, "My family were ghosts who haunted my childhood." There aren't even any graves to visit where she can pay homage to their memory.

Today there are only 200 Jews left in Krakow, and less than 9,000 in all of Poland. Hitler destroyed lives, a thriving culture, and forever changed both Jewish and Christian spiritual life.

We stand at the scene of the Final Solution that first reduced God's children to objects, robbed of the most elemental dignity, and then exterminated them with meticulous efficiency and brutality. Every day in 1944, 10,000 persons—each one made in God's holy image—were gassed and cremated in Auschwitz. In all, 1.2 million Jews died in that one hellish spot on earth.

As Pope Benedict said when he visited here in May 2006:

To speak in this place of horror, in this place where unprecedented mass crimes were committed against God and man, is almost impossible—and it is particularly difficult for a Christian.

So answers fail us. This is a place of questions, not answers; of reflection, not conclusions. Questions—not to undermine our faith and commitment to ethics, but to honestly confront the challenge that the world and history poses to our faith and our morality. Without such honesty, our faith is hollow and our ethics often merely rhetorical.

Again, Pope Benedict understood this well in 2006 when he said:

How many questions arise in this place! Constantly the question comes up: Where was God in those days? Why was he silent? How could he permit this endless slaughter, this triumph of evil?

So we are left with few answers, but many questions:

Where was God when so many of his children were being murdered?

Where was man?

Where was human morality when men, women, and children were marched to the gas chambers?

What does it mean to speak of a loving God after the horror of Auschwitz?

What role, if any, did our religious traditions play in facilitating the Final Solution?

What can we say about religious institutions and beliefs that were powerless to stop the march of Satan?

What does the biblical covenant mean after Auschwitz, and how can each of us, Jews and Christians alike, best live out our covenantal responsibilities after the horror?

Pope Benedict understood Hitler's separate obsessive war to destroy every trace of the Jewish people on earth:

Deep down, those vicious criminals, by wiping out this people, wanted to kill God who called Abraham, who spoke on Sinai and laid down principles to serve as a guide or mankind. If this people, by its very existence, was a witness to God who spoke to humanity and took us to himself, then that God finally had to die. By destroying Israel, by the *Shoah*, they ultimately wanted to tear up the taproot of the Christian faith and to replace it with a faith of their own invention.

Jews and Christians, then, are both witnesses to the reality of God and his moral law on earth. That is why if Hitler had succeeded in destroying the Jewish people, God forbid, he would have begun destroying the Church next. This is no theoretical speculation, for recent research has uncovered German documents with these plans. Even Hitler knew that there was no way for Nazis and their new ethic which substituted the imperative to "Kill" for the biblical command "Thou shall not Kill" to coexist with either Jews or the Christian faith.

It was the profound tragedy of the *Shoah* that convinced the Church to reevaluate its teachings and relationship with the Jewish people. Out of this horror came the seeds of Jewish-Christian healing and the beginning a new era of fraternity—and we are only at the beginning of this reconciliation. This healing between the Church and the Jewish people is no small measure of meaning in the midst of the unspeakable devastation and desecration. Perhaps it points the way to a new era of faith for all of us and renewed commitment to sanctify life, to heal the world, and to protect God's moral values for all of his children.

We must create a powerful testimony to the triumph of life and life-affirming values that is counter-testimony to Auschwitz and the

Nazi testimony of death. Perhaps this is the key to us fulfilling our biblical obligations to be vessels of blessing to each other and to the world, and to the messianic hope of Isaiah that one day “there will be no violence or strife on earth and that the knowledge of God will fill the earth as the waters cover the sea” (11:9).