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It was too cold for snow. Everyone was wrapped up tightly but not thinking of the weather. The rabbi, black hat and coat and graying beard, who had come in from another town, was at the centre of the group and very present, a focus for the camera team. But I sensed that maybe he was, and understandably, the most absent. A guest asked back too late by those who had rejected his predecessors. What might he be feeling, apart from the cold?

People of many faiths, and no doubt some whose doubts were stronger than their faith, stood around the Jewish cenotaph in the city of Kielce, Poland, surrounded by the Holy Cross Mountains. Bogdan Blalek, a publisher and activist in Jewish-Christian relations, a Catholic from Kielce born after the war, had sponsored the Kielce Menorah, placed slopingly in the sidewalk and only half-visible. Was it sinking into the ground or rising from it? It is not for the dead, Bogdan said, but for the living.

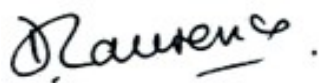
A YouTube video shows him sitting with two old Jewish ladies who were survivors of the holocaust. He has devoted much of his inner life bearing this mystery of iniquity, as his cross, and to repairing its interminable harm. The women describe their experience and, like old women anywhere, remember with wry humour the boys they had loved when they were young. 'Seventeen is not too young to love; he was so beautiful.. but later you have to consider whether it was worth it.' As they recall the herding of the Jews into the ghetto in 1941 - 27,000, of whom a remnant survived the killings both during the process and at Treblinka after - Bogdan covers his face in his hands and weeps. One old woman watches him and says, as if he were not there yet to him : 'he was born after the war but he feels it like we did.' The other says to him, with the pragmatic toughness of those who have undergone the whole spectrum of emotion, 'stop dealing with it, Bogdan. It will finish you off. Get away from it as far as possible.' He replies 'how can I?' She says, 'I know it's impossible.'

In 1939 a third of Kielce was Jewish. Apart from the death camps the Germans exterminated by lethal injection all doctors and patients in the Jewish hospitals. Many Polish Catholics hid and protected individual Jews. Many did not. When the Russians arrived in 1945 there were two Jews left in the town. A terrible legacy to live with; but Kielce was to know worse. About 200 Jews returned or came to Kielce to await emigration to Palestine. In July 1946 a young Christian boy went missing and the rumour spread – as it had in innumerable towns and villages for centuries – that he had been killed by the Jews who used his blood to make matzot. A lynch mob ran the streets and murdered 42 of the surviving Jews. The boy was found later in a nearby village. Kielce 1946 convinced Jews they had no future in Poland.

You would imagine this would make the memory of the holocaust even more difficult to get away from. But, perhaps because it makes it impossible to put all the guilt on the Germans, the greatest of all band-aid solutions, repression and denial, clicked in. My translator, a young educated Pole, had no idea of the 1946 pogrom.

It is left to Bogdan and a few like him to bear the memory without being crushed by it. For the living. The dead don't need to remember; if we pray for them it is more for ourselves than for them. We must remember what is always easier to forget in order to defy the shame of selective memory and the tragedy of amnesia. But the remembering must be purposeful not nostalgic. Lest it might happen again – and the continued desecration of Jewish cemeteries and anti-Semitic graffiti prove this European virus is not over yet – but also so that we can purify religion itself. Religion provided the categories and even the reasons for these inhumanities.

Buddhists, Jews, Muslims, Christians and other faiths prayed together after the menorah ceremony in a warm church hall. The guilt was shared and also the hope of a world where this would not happen again. The next day, putting it behind me as the old lady had advised, I was talking with a Benedictine abbot about the church in Poland: deeply divided, even with hints of anti-semitism in some Catholic quarters. We discussed the contemplative and theological development of the faith in Poland, so necessary since Consumerism replaced Communism. How important as Bogdan had told me to remember in the right way – not just the facts but because the heart, the seat of conscience and new life, has been unforgettably touched.



Laurence Freeman OSB

The World Community for Christian Meditation, of which Laurence Freeman OSB is director, has recently opened a new outreach program – “Meditatio”
(www.wccmmeditatio.org)

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