

**Before and After: 50 Years of the Letter of Polish Bishops to German Bishops
and Polish-German Reconciliation**

Summary of Presentation

7th European Workshop On dealing with the past of Auschwitz burdened by violence

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Introductory remarks

When meeting in Auschwitz, tragic symbol of one of the most terrible evidences of human fall in the history of mankind, one can not forget about the necessity of learning from the past errors and the message of hope for improving ourselves and building the better world for the future generations. From our present perspective Auschwitz is truly not only the symbol of what is the worst but also the symbol of what is good and beautiful about the human being. This is the place of saying sorry for the past and building the now and the soon which are very much in our hands. Let me thank the organizers of this workshop for giving me the possibility of participating in this incredible event during which we can experience ourselves how bridges can be built in spite of different histories, experiences, and perceptions.

This is why I would like to present here the issue which is the evidence of this better though definitely not an easy dimension of being the human namely the ability to say sorry and to forgive in the situation when such attitudes seem even hard to imagine.

While history of Polish-German relations is one of the most difficult and tragic histories of neighbourhood in this part of Europe it is also the example of one of the most effective and most extraordinary processes of reconciliation in the modern history. What is especially important and interesting in Polish-German reconciliation is the input and role of the societies of both countries organized in the form of the different initiatives to “start talking to the enemy” and specifically the role of religious motivations of those who initiated and moved forward the whole process later “picked up” by the politicians and state officials on the both sides.

Historical and political context

After WWII the relations between Poland and Germany were reduced to mutual hatred and longing for revenge. From the perspective of Poland, first victim of the Nazi Germany terribly experienced by the Hitler's plan of extermination of Polish nation, every single German was to be blamed and to be punished for the suffering of the Poles. In this context the new borders of Poland and the displacement, or expulsion, of Germans from so called Recovered Lands was perceived as the sign of historical justice. According to the decisions made not by the Poles but by the Allies during the Yalta and Potsdam conferences in 1945 Poland was losing around 1/3 of its territory in the East and gaining the lands in the West inhabited by many Germans that were to be displaced to Germany. The decision on the huge exchange of people between the Eastern and Western parts of Poland was made causing a great deal of additional postwar suffering and sorrow both on Polish and on German side.

Poles saw all the Germans as the perpetrators and expected them to feel collective guilt for their crimes. Germans perceived themselves differently. They did not feel collective guilt and felt themselves as the victims of the war which made millions of them leave homes in the territories belonging now to Poland as the Recovered Lands.

The new communist government installed in Poland after World War II with the Soviet support gradually developed the narrative of the Soviet Union being the only true defender of the Polish interests against Germany. After the division of Germany and establishing two separate states in 1949 in communist propaganda Western Germany was pictured as the worst enemy and the fear in the society against the Germans was used to convince Poles it was necessary to keep Russian troops in Poland due to the danger from the German side. The argument against West Germany became stronger after 1950 when East Germany confirmed the new Polish borders while West Germany did not. Additionally with the time the Iron Curtain becoming thicker the contacts between Poles and Germans were becoming practically impossible.

Catholic Church finding itself in more and more complicated situation in the new communist Poland was not into the idea of building the bridges between Poles and Germans during the first years after World War II. In August 1945 primate August Hlond established five administrations in the Recovered Lands but they were temporary structures. Due to still binding concordate between the Holy See and Germany pope Pius XII was not able to

recognize the changed borders between Poland and Germany as long as they would not be recognized by West Germany itself. This argument could have been used by the new Polish government to denounce the concordate between Poland and the Holy See in 1945. Relations between the state and the church were deteriorating rapidly and in 1953 primate of Poland Stefan Wyszyński was arrested by the communist government. He was kept in isolation till 1956.

Reconciliation begins

While the official contacts between Poland and West Germany were practically impossible in the first years after the war they started developing in the second half of 1950s through the initiatives of “ordinary people”, often those motivated by faith and through the church institutions. Stanisław Stomma, representing Polish Catholic intellectuals gathered around Znak Community and described as one of the architects of German-Polish reconciliation, visited West Germany, as the first Pole to Bundesrepublik, in 1957. In 1958 during the Synod of the Protestant Church in Germany Aktion Sühnezeichen was established which was the first Christian initiative declaring as its official goal of activity Polish-German reconciliation. Two years later bishop of Berlin Julius Döpfner presented his famous speech calling to recognize German responsibility for the WWII, to reconcile with Poland and to recognize postwar borders between Poland and Germany. This idea was developed in 1961 in the Tübingen Memorandum in which the group of eight prominent German Protestant intellectuals called for recognition of the new borders. Meanwhile the call for reconciliation between Poland and Germany was also discussed in the German Pax Christi section where from 1960 the visit to Poland was planned. In 1964 the penance pilgrimage to Auschwitz was organized which was the first organized visit of the German Catholic group to Poland after 1939. Next year Aktion Sühnezeichen organized pilgrimages to Auschwitz and Majdanek and in October 1965 the leadership of the German Protestant Church in the Eastern Memorandum called for the recognition of the Oder-Niese border.

“We forgive and ask for forgiveness”

Historical step recognized as the milestone of Polish-German reconciliation undertaken on the Polish side took place on 18 November 1965. Polish Catholic Church was preparing at that

time for the celebrations of the Millennium of Baptism of Poland which were to take place in the middle of 1966. Invitations to different episcopates of the world to take part in these events were prepared and sent out during the last weeks of the Vaticanum II. One of those invitations, the one addressed to German Bishops, was causing the big discussion and many controversies in the Polish Catholic Church. This letter was to lead to historical consequences in the relations between Poland and Germany and to significant changes in social and political dimension.

The author of the letter, bishop Bolesław Kominek, included into the “community” of founding fathers of common Europe, can be perceived as “Polish Schuman”. As the man of the border area, speaking fluent German, but also very empathetic and caring for the small and big problems of the ordinary people, bishop Kominek was the one to understand well both Polish and German point of view on the WWII and especially the problem of victimization experienced not only on the Polish but also on the German side. Approved and signed by the top hierarchy of the Polish Catholic Church including primate Stefan Wyszyński the invitation to German bishops was entitled the *Message of the Polish Bishops to their German Brothers in the Christ Pastoral Office*. The letter included rather detailed description of the long and complicated history of relations between Poland and Germany, with both good and bad moments. But the piece that became the essence being definitely the most difficult and most challenging part of the letter, was the statement “We forgive and ask for forgiveness”.

Rather reserved answer of German bishops addressed a few weeks later was not what was expected by the Polish bishops. Still the discussion that developed after the exchange of letters was a significant element of wider public discourse that continued in both countries in the next years and the gradual change of social and political attitudes between former enemies.

In Poland this discussion was carried out in the context of the biggest propaganda action against the Catholic Church undertaken by the communist government in the postwar period trying to present the Catholic bishops in Poland as the traitors of nation not being entitled to say the words of forgiveness in the name of Polish nation. The winner in this battle over Polish soul and the attitude towards the Germans turned out to be the Church and the Christian message of forgiveness. In May 1966 during the Millennium Mass at Jasna Góra, the spiritual capital of Poland, the primate of Poland cardinal Stefan Waszyński asked the

historical question: “Do we forgive?”. The answer given by the gathered ones was: “Yes, we forgive!”.

From the second half of 1960s the changing attitudes towards Poland were visible in the polls in Germany. In 1967 already 50% of Germans were ready to recognize Polish-German border while three years earlier, in 1964, only 20% respondents said “yes” to such a question. The level of mutual hatred was going down and more and more initiatives, many of them still among church organizations, were developing. They resulted in the changed political attitudes. In 1969 New Eastern Policy was introduced by the new German SPD-FDP government and one year later in the Polish-German Treaty the postwar border was confirmed.

Festive celebration of the 50th anniversary of Letter of Polish Bishops to German Bishops from 1965 that took place in 2015 was a moment of reminding to both nations how far we have gone in our relations and how much has been achieved. While the Letter was not the only but one of many elements in the difficult process of Polish-German reconciliation it meant a lot. President Joachim Gauck talked about the special meaning of the Letter in his speech to president Andrzej Duda in August 2015: “For us, Germans, Christians and non-Christians, Catholics and Protestants, this letter was a great gift. There are many things we will never forget. The Letter is one of them”.