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THE FUTURE OF AUSCHWITZ Symposium of Jewish Scholars and Intellectuals Kraków and Oświęcim, 6-9 April 1992

Memo to all participants from the convenor

1. The Kraków proposals

Here, at long last, is a copy for you of the final version of the proposals which were fleshed out at the last session of the meeting. I must apologise for the long delay in sending this out.

These proposals should be given the widest possible publicity, so if you have any access to a journal or newspaper that would be interested in giving this coverage (whether in whole or in part), please do proceed. It would be helpful if you could send me copies of anything that is published, so that I can as necessary inform the others in our group (or those making fresh enquiries) how things are progressing.

2. News from the International Auschwitz Council

The Council held a two-day meeting (oddly enough, in a village 30 kms from Auschwitz) earlier this month. The new Minister of Culture was present. I gave a full report of our meeting and distributed copies of the Kraków proposals.

The following subjects were the principal items on the agenda

(a) The inscriptions on the international monument at Birkenau. A broad agreement seems to have been reached on this contentious subject, though a great number of details were left unexamined, including a specification of precisely which languages ought to appear on the nineteen plaques and in which order. It also was not clear whether the text that was agreed was not in fact too long to fit on to the plaques. The result is that it is possible that we do not yet have a working plan to solve the problem.

What I would like to ask you is whether you would be interested and willing to offer your advice on the actual texts once all these details have

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been sorted out, notably on matters of linguistic style (NB nineteen languages are involved). If so, please drop me a line (specifying which languages you can tackle), and I shall keep you posted. I say this in the spirit of collaboration with the Museum that was one of the principal features (as it seemed to me) of the consensus at our meeting.

(b) The future of the national exhibitions: it was agreed that a new formula has to be found, and there was a general discussion, but without any concrete proposals.

(c) Tony Frantz (a senior colleague of George Wheeler from the Metropolitan Museum of Art) gave a presentation on conservation issues, and there was a general discussion.

(d) Reports from the various departments of the Museum, in particular its dire financial straits. Salaries in the state sector are so low that for the first time in its history the Museum is losing good people to the private sector [this is of course a general problem in post-communist Eastern Europe]. There was some discussion on whether friends of the Museum should assist in fundraising. [In fact it is an interesting question whether the world Jewish community would assist in such a scheme. Maybe, given the current nature of world Jewish public opinion on matters concerning Poland, it is somewhat premature, but perhaps in time this may be a serious possibility.]

(e) A group of local designers engaged by the Museum presented a detailed proposal for waymarking in Birkenau, including a scheme for a monument at the field of ashes and turning the 'sauna' into a kind of commemorative hall with lists of names. Nothing was decided, but it was clear that the Museum is working on all kinds of interesting long-term plans. Incidentally, the idea of a Jewish monument was broadly acceptable to the Council, although once again no details were agreed upon.

I think it worth making the point that just as the Yarnton Declaration was clearly taken seriously by the Museum (even though it was unable to fulfil thus far all our recommendations), so too the input made by us at Kraków is being taken as representing a useful, thoughtful, and authentically Jewish contribution to the whole discussion.

3. New Jewish plaque

On 26 May 1992 Chaim Herzog, president of the State of Israel, paid a visit to Auschwitz, and he brought with him a piece of Jerusalem stone of approximately one yard cube weighing 700 kilos and bearing an inscription in three languages (Hebrew, Polish and English). The Museum felt it had no choice except to instal it outside Block 27 (the Israelis had wanted it to be erected in Birkenau),

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being afraid that if they refused to instal it at all they would be accused of antisemitism. But it is an appalling development: the inscription says (quoting from Psalms) 'My pain is before me always', and underneath (in larger letters) 'Chaim Herzog, President of the State of Israel, 26.5.1992'. I shall be writing to the Israeli ambassador in Warsaw, suggesting that it might be better if they slice off the inscription and erect it as a tablet inside the 'prayer room' of Block 27, rather than leaving it (quite inappropriately, in my opinion, and that of the senior Museum staff, though the latter can't say so openly) outside the Block. The way is of course left open for other heads of state to do likewise.

4. A Jewish house in Auschwitz

The symposium in Kraków reached no concrete decision on this. But there has been an initiative from the ADL in New York to set up an interfaith centre at the Catholic Centre (indeed, inside the very building). Whilst I think this idea has a lot of merit I'm much more in favour of an independent Jewish house, and so I'm taking the opportunity of this mailing to send you also herewith a copy of a brief paper I have written to the ADL about this.

5. Publication of the symposium proceedings

The Kraków organisers appear to have overspent on the budget and now say they can't pay Priscilla's (quite reasonable) bill if they are to hold back enough money to pay for a publication (transcribing the tapes, editing, typesetting and printing). I haven't yet been able to resolve this (the Oxford Centre for Hebrew Studies may well come to the rescue), so it means that I can't say anything definite about the publication. Frankly I think that there is value in a well-prepared publication that would give some indication of the sort of discussion that took place (at both Yarnton and Kraków); the Yarnton Declaration and the Kraków Proposals are far too formulaic and dogmatic to be of much use in (say) a classroom discussion of the future of Auschwitz.

Once I know for certain that the publication will be going ahead I shall write to you to ask if you want me to include a brief statement (4-5 pages) on a particular aspect of your choice. A few people sent in such statements after the Yarnton meeting, but because of the financial shortfall after that meeting (which incidentally has to this day not been paid off) there was no publication and I was not able to use them.

Would any of you have suggestions as to possible sources of funding for the publication? I would need \$7500 to cover the shortfall, including the deficit on the Yarnton meeting.

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6. Future developments

As we are all aware, there are many ways in which the subject of the symposium in Kraków could have been extended outwards to very much wider philosophical issues, not to mention other detailed historical, literary, educational, liturgical, and architectural approaches. The question is whether we should meet again as a group (augmented no doubt by many others who were unable to join us this time round); whether we should meet as sub-groups, concerned with a specific agenda concerning matters of principle (e.g. for philosophical debate, or for drawing up a set of conservation priorities); whether we should convene meetings of specialists, i.e. abandon the 'Jewish scholars and intellectuals' criterion as hitherto; and so on.

There are two obvious approaches to this: (1) to convene meetings according to motivations from within our group, i.e. on the basis of people's interests, professional or otherwise; or (2) to convene sub-groups or specialist meetings on the basis of responding to circumstances outside the group (for example, if there were once again another major international controversy of the proportions of the Carmelite issue; or if the Museum needed help in organising the details of such things as a monument, a new publication, or a Holocaust exhibition).

In practice, as far as (2) is concerned, the existence of the past two meetings that have taken place will evidently make it much easier to organise something in the future should the need arise; and as far as (say) a new guidebook is concerned, several of you indicated to me in Kraków that you would be interested in collaborating. As for (1), Gillian Rose has drawn to my attention a Foundation that might be interested in sponsoring a meeting that would be devoted to philosophical discussion around the themes of violence, aggression and dominance; and I certainly intend following that up in due course. Others amongst you might have additional, complementary ideas.

Some of my own research interests will continue for some time to be oriented towards future developments in Auschwitz, since I have recently begun participating in a major East-West initiative funded by the Economic and Social Research Council of the UK. The focus of this research will be on ethnicity and ethnic identity in Poland, with which the situation of Auschwitz will obviously have some connection.

Jonathan Webber
23 June 1992