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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
regarding the intellectual programme

1. The purpose of the symposium

The purpose of this symposium is to bring together Jewish scholars and intellectuals for *in situ* discussions on the formulation of a Jewish approach or approaches to the question of the future of the physical Auschwitz. The Polish Ministry of Culture, which accepted my proposal that they should fund such a meeting, seems to be anxious to obtain serious Jewish input into any future readjustment(s) regarding the site, for which it has the official Polish responsibility. One major step that has been taken thus far is the establishment (in 1990) of an International Auschwitz Council as an advisory body; the Council (which has so far met three times) has a Jewish vice-president and a number of Jewish members. I am a member, and amongst the participants of the symposium will be other members as well.

Given the evident goodwill of the post-communist Polish authorities to consider the implementation of Jewish wishes with regard to Auschwitz, there is a massive and awesome agenda - as will be clear to participants from the visits to the site which will be made on days one and two of the symposium. There are many ways in which the subject of the symposium obviously relates to very much wider historical, scholarly, literary, educational, liturgical, architectural and other modes of Holocaust commemoration; but these latter problems do not constitute the purpose, narrowly defined, in our gathering together. What we are gathering to consider is the question of the actual place itself. Although, it is true, an approach to place cannot and should not be divorced from those wider topics, nevertheless we need to keep this principal purpose in mind.

Hence part of the purpose of the symposium, in fact, is to acquaint participants with something of the nature and sheer size of the problems. Many participants will no doubt have their own views on what might constitute the priorities, but I can suggest here at least three specific areas in which a 'Jewish input' can be of value:

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(a) in relation to a Jewish monument of some kind. At present the situation is that (apart from the Jewish exhibition in Block 27, which is not a monument as such) there is no Jewish monument anywhere in Auschwitz - although there is a general monument (commemorating all those who died in Auschwitz), a monument to a group of French communists, a Gypsy monument, a Soviet monument, a monument to Maksymilian Kolbe, and a number of plaques commemorating various groups of Poles (e.g. health workers, journalists, etc.). Is this situation satisfactory, or should there be a Jewish monument of some kind - and if so, what should it look like, where should it be, and to whom should the task be entrusted of designing (and financing) one?

My own view is that there should be a Jewish monument. One of the buildings in Birkenau (I would suggest the 'sauna') should be made available for the fixing of commemorative plaques, and part of Birkenau (the field of ashes) should be turned into a cemetery space, properly so called. I realise, of course, that this is a very personal opinion.

(b) in relation to the physical Auschwitz, narrowly defined, i.e. the State Museum of Auschwitz-Birkenau. The Museum is contemplating a complete overhaul of its general exhibition, so as to include Holocaust-focused issues; as many of you will be aware, this element is almost totally absent at present. When and how such an overhaul will come about will depend to some extent on the availability of financing, but regardless of that aspect the museological will is there to solicit views on new presentations. What type of Holocaust material would participants think appropriate for exhibiting in Auschwitz? There is a host of possibilities, ranging from presentations of pre-war (and also post-war) Jewish life to more 'universalistic' issues concerning such topics as the fate of women and children, or the bureaucracy of mass murder and the banality of evil. In particular, should the Holocaust be presented somehow as a single 'event' (however this is defined, itself no mean task of course), or should it be unpacked into a variety of perspectives and an indefinitely large number of separate social and moral events?

Of course, there are many related museological issues, over and above the restructuring of exhibitions: for example, the aesthetic setting (e.g. how Birkenau should or should not be conserved, the role and type of physical monuments there, etc.); inscriptions (the International Auschwitz Council has been debating the precise text of the new inscriptions on the main monument at Birkenau); the structuring of mass tourism (especially at Birkenau, which poses many problems in this regard); the future of the national exhibitions at Auschwitz (there are many defects in the Jewish exhibition in Block 27); and so on.

I have put together a memo with some detailed observations on some of these issues (the Block 27 exhibition, and a review of public inscriptions), and this will be available at the symposium for those participants who are interested in following up these matters. Clearly there is scope for very focused discussion in this area, but on the other hand I think it would be a pity if the symposium got itself bogged down totally in matters of (relative) detail without also considering it its brief to engage itself in wider matters of principle.

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(c) in relation to Auschwitz as a new educational centre. There has been a German centre for a number of years. Technically it is an International Youth Centre, but the details of its management are complex to define; in practice, it serves to host parties of German students and teachers on stays which are usually of a week's duration. In addition, the new site of the Carmelite convent contains provision for a substantial educational centre, and it has already hosted one international symposium on contemporary right-wing movements and antisemitism. I have also come across a proposal to establish in Oświęcim a new centre for minorities, i.e. to provide them with the opportunity for encounter, dialogue, political self-expression, and education. In other words, one of the roles that Auschwitz in effect is beginning to see for itself in the future is to provide the new generations with a setting of unparalleled power for the study and contemplation of persecution, evil, and the negative aspect of race relations broadly understood (or, to put it positively, educating Europeans for a democratic, culturally pluralist future). Clearly the question to be asked is whether Jews will be there to participate in this process, and if so how. My own view is that there must be, and my preference is for a Jewish house of some kind - an Auschwitz Institute for Holocaust Studies, perhaps. Its purpose would be to sponsor seminars, youth encounters, hospitality to Jewish visitors seeking a place for quiet meditation, prayer, study.

As indicated above, these are merely my own suggestions for an intellectual agenda for the symposium.

2. Structure of the symposium

Allow me to explain the structure of the symposium, although I hope you have seen a copy of the provisional programme that was sent out by the organisers at the Jagiellonian University last December.

On the Sunday evening there is to be a concert in a synagogue in the Kazimierz district of Kraków.

The symposium will be formally opened, in the presence of an assortment of local dignitaries, in the magnificent old Collegium Maius building of the University on the Monday morning, whereafter I shall give a short 'briefing session'.

That afternoon we shall proceed to Auschwitz and visit the place as an ordinary package tourist would - that is to say, we shall be taken round by a Museum guide for a standard three-hour tour. The purpose of this is to enable participants to get a feeling of how the site is ordinarily presented to the average visitor.

The following day (Tuesday) we shall revisit Auschwitz, but this time for the whole day and without Museum guides: the morning in Birkenau, and the afternoon in the Auschwitz base-camp. The purpose of this is to enable participants to follow our own interests and meditations, either alone or in small groups. I envisage my own role during this day as one whereby I shall

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accompany (and, as necessary, lead and guide) those participants who would like to have things pointed out to them; there are of course other participants who may also wish to take up such a role. During the course of the day meetings have been arranged to enable visits to the German centre and to the site of the new Centre for Information, Meeting, Dialogue, Education, and Prayer in Auschwitz (this is the name for the Centre that amongst other things will house the newly relocated Carmelite convent). A meeting has also been arranged with senior Museum staff, so that participants can have the opportunity to put their questions.

The next two days (Wednesday and Thursday) will be devoted to discussions, to take place in Jagiellonian University premises in Kraków. On the Thursday afternoon and evening the symposium will be hosting a discussion, reception, and dinner with concerned Polish scholars and intellectuals; the purpose of this is to enable our participants to get to know our 'opposite numbers', both intellectually and socially.

On Friday morning there will be a press conference. At one level this is obviously a very important part of the symposium; indeed, in order to say to the press what we collectively 'think' will need to be carefully considered. I warn you now in advance that I shall be looking for colleagues to work with me as rapporteurs during the symposium to prepare specifically for this encounter.

3. Structure of the discussions

Those of you who were present at the meeting in Yarnton in 1990 will recognise the format: there is no obligation on each participant to present a 'paper' as such. I have suggested above three broad areas which might well turn out as a focus, but I ought to make it quite clear that I am by no means committed to them if there are other suggestions, either by way of replacement or modification or extension. I think the symposium ought to be flexible in such a way as to make room for the reactions of participants to what they see in Auschwitz (especially, of course, for those for whom this will be their first visit) - although at the same time a balance has to be struck between making room for intellectual spontaneity on the one hand, and disordered lack of structural cohesion on the other. I guess this is my job. It may be, for example, that participants will in effect divide themselves up into those who are more interested in certain specific details and those who have an interest in framing more general perspectives. I would therefore greatly appreciate it if participants would communicate directly with me during the whole symposium (including the Auschwitz visits) so that I can be aware of the intellectual trends and make the appropriate administrative decisions.

We shall have two full days for the actual discussions, and, following the Yarnton model, discussion sessions will be of two types: those in which we shall be all together, and those when we shall split into smaller workshop groups (of a maximum of ten persons). I shall be responsible for specifying the membership of these groups and will circulate the lists at the symposium itself.

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The obvious advantage of workshops is that participants will have an opportunity to discuss in depth in small groups - but this will only be of value if each workshop appoints its rapporteur to announce back to the full meetings the views expressed. I do not believe that we shall find it easy to agree on many issues - but that lack of agreement, and the substantive reasons for it, will itself be of value in articulating coherently.

It is proposed that the proceedings of the symposium will be published. It was intended to do this following the Yarnton meeting, but this never came about because of a shortfall in the financing. This time I am more confident about this, and so there will be tape-recorders in the sessions so that after the symposium the discussions can be transcribed and then edited so as to present to the wider public something of the nature of the subject.

I wrote above that there will be no 'papers' as such. Of course, if some participants have a particular subject that they would like to speak on uninterruptedly for (say) five to ten minutes, then such requests will be accommodated according to the time available. Once again, I should appreciate it if those participants wishing to make a presentation of this kind could let me know during the course of the symposium so that the necessary slot can be found for them. And if they would like their short papers to be published in the proceedings, they should equally inform me of this.

Any advance notice that participants can give me of their desire to present a paper would obviously help: please send me a fax to (44-865) 311-791.

I ought to say that the final session of the symposium discussions will be specifically devoted to the formulation of a set of resolutions or declarations; this will greatly help in the handling of the press conference - and, in particular, with dealing with any misunderstandings or misquotings of our views that may arise following this obviously very sensitive event.

4. Preparatory materials

Enclosed with this memo is a copy of a recent lecture of mine which sets out my own views on the subject, together with some ethnographic material about Auschwitz which participants may find useful as background reading before coming to the symposium. Also enclosed is a copy of the Yarnton Declaration.

Some of you may wish to bring to the attention of the meeting some of your own articles. I have thus far not received any such materials for prior circulation, which is why all you are getting now are these two enclosures. If, however, you would like to have your materials circulated, please ask the local organisers at the Jagiellonian University to make arrangements for photocopying, although I am not in a position to say how easy this will be to arrange at short notice in Kraków.

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5. A word about our identity as a group

Since the Yarnton meeting two years ago, the symposium has come to be known as the 'Yarnton Group', a formulation which has the advantage of reinforcing the point that participants are not there in order to represent any institution but rather we are there in our own right. We do not constitute a group except in an ad hoc sense. This symposium does, however, have a continuity with its Yarnton predecessor: partly in terms of the people who are coming, and partly because it was at Yarnton that the Polish Deputy Minister of Culture, who was present at my invitation throughout our deliberations, invited us to come to Poland to continue our work.

Having said that, however, we shall all be aware of the urgency, sensitivity, complexity, and delicacy of the subject. We know who it is in whose memory we shall be gathered together. We are but a small group of individual Jews, facing the immensity of Auschwitz before our eyes. Let us try to find our words, whilst at the same time acknowledging the need for our silences.

Jonathan Webber
5 March 1992

Encls. Jonathan Webber, *The Future of Auschwitz: Some Personal Reflections*
The Yarnton Declaration, May 1990