
Interview: Sir Sigmund Sternberg

Dialogue can resolve Auschwitz dispute

by Laurent Murawiec

Sir Sigmund Sternberg is chairman of the International Council of Christians and Jews (ICCJ). On Jan. 25, he had written an article in the International Herald Tribune sharply criticizing the initiative taken by an anonymous group calling itself "For My Brothers, Keep Not Silence Association," to publish in the international edition of the Jerusalem Post in early January a full-page advertisement denouncing the Vatican for alleged "foot-dragging and failure to honor promises" to remove the Carmelite convent from Auschwitz. Sir Sigmund's article sharply rebuked the association, demonstrating with facts and quotes that Cardinal Glemp as well as the Polish Bishops' Conference, and Poland's new Minister of Culture Mrs. Cywinska, were not only honoring their commitments, but that Cardinal Glemp would now concentrate his efforts "on the promotion of Catholic-Jewish understanding, particularly at the popular level, where ignorance of Jews and Judaism is widespread," in the Cardinal's own words as quoted in this article.

A solid hint as to the identity of the none-too-courageous anonymous group that put out the inflammatory advertisement in the Jerusalem Post, came the day after the Herald Tribune article, in the form of a letter to the editor by Isi Leibler, vice president of the World Jewish Congress, who accused Sternberg, of all things, of "insensitivity to Jewish concerns." Leibler is a principal aide to WJC head Edgar Bronfman, the Canadian businessman who received a medal from Erich Honecker, and has spearheaded North American Gorbymania. Bronfman and the WJC had orchestrated a big media campaign directed against Poland, Cardinal Glemp, and Pope John Paul II last year, after a violent incident involving the publicity-seeking adventurist Rabbi Avi Weiss, of New York, on the site of the Carmelite convent.

EIR: Could you sum up the present status of the Auschwitz Carmel affair, and your own efforts?

Sternberg: I visited Cardinal Glemp in Warsaw last November, and I had a longer meeting with him in his residence. He reaffirmed that the decision to rebuild the convent was irreversible. I have seen the architect's plans, and there is a board erected on the site where the convent is going to be built. Regarding my own effort, I was very pleased to have obtained the letter from Cardinal Glemp in September, which

changed the situation when I explained to him the many voices of moderation.

EIR: Are the voices of moderation on both sides winning?

Sternberg: We have to maintain the present situation, because the attitude of the Poles is that they feel they have been pushed around for a long time, and they don't want to be pushed around any more. My answer is that no reasonable person would intend to push anybody around. I understand their feelings, but they must understand our feelings as well.

EIR: Does it seem that they do?

Sternberg: Yes, on the whole they do. It has been explained to them.

EIR: What do you expect, and what do you think may be hoped for in the development of relations and dialogue between Jews and Poles?

Sternberg: Here again, Cardinal Glemp suggested to me that he envisaged to hold a conference in Lublin, he would very much like to mend fences. This is what we have to do, we have to commence a dialogue with them, and of course education is the priority. The grassroots, the parishes, the churches must be made aware of the "Nostra Etate"—the [pontifical] document which defines the relationship between Christians and Jews. It must reach parish levels, which must be translated into Polish.

EIR: I noticed with especial interest the many initiatives taken by Pope John Paul II on the question of Catholic-Jewish relations, not only his visit to the Synagogue in Rome, but also the document in which he affirms very strongly that there could be no question of speaking of the Jews as "deicides."

Sternberg: Yes, that is what we discussed, and it should be translated into Polish and generally distributed.

EIR: From that standpoint, do you think the Pope has taken a quite important and positive role?

Sternberg: Yes, and this should be acknowledged. The whole thing comes down to education, education about the Holocaust. The textbooks in the Socialist bloc countries will have to be re-written.

EIR: Do you think that 70 years of communism have put the issue in a totally wrong light?

Sternberg: Yes, and therefore, we have to look at it again. This is a very important job which only an international organization like the International Council of Christians and Jews can do, because they are unique in their role.

EIR: A main source of organized anti-Semitism in the last decades has been the U.S.S.R. government.

Sternberg: They certainly contributed to it, and now it is changing, because it suits their political purposes. You know

what happened in Poland, in 1968. You have seen the report of my visit to Prague. Resulting from this I have heard from the Czech ambassador that Mr. Hromadka, the deputy prime minister [in charge of religious affairs] is progressing with the formation of the Council of Christians and Jews in Czechoslovakia. He will be going to Israel on Feb. 6 and immediately on his return he will establish a steering committee.

EIR: From the time of the great Rabbi Loew of Prague, the Jewish community played a very important role in the cultural and social development of Bohemia. The same could be said of the Jewish community in Poland and other countries in that region.

Sternberg: As a matter of fact, I said jokingly to Cardinal Tomasek that the dialogue started with Rabbi Loew, when he discussed history with the King, so we are actually continuing something which was started by Rabbi Loew. Jews had a good time in Czechoslovakia during the time of Masaryk and Benes, and the country flourished. Let's hope we can bring that back. Certainly the time is ripe for it.

EIR: And that would also be a very good part of the Western contribution to the present revolutions of Central Europe.

Sternberg: Yes. That is what we would like to do. I talked yesterday to Dr. Galsky, the president of the Jewish Community, and I would like the International Council of Christians and Jews to hold a colloquium in Prague in August.

EIR: In the U.S.S.R., the Pamyat organization is spearheading a virulent anti-Semitic campaign—

Sternberg: At the moment, the secretary general of the ICCJ has returned from a conference in the Soviet Union, and we are having discussions about starting an informal dialogue group in the Soviet Union with the Christians and the Orthodox church, but all these things take a little longer than we anticipated. This forming of a dialogue group could not have been contemplated a few months ago; now they are quite happy with it. He met Mr. Khristoradnov, and they are very keen to have this inter-faith religious understanding, because they are quite concerned themselves about the role of Pamyat.

EIR: When one reads the manifestos, pronouncements of Vasiliev and the other leaders of Pamyat—these are the people who are quoting the so-called Protocols of the Elders of Zion—they seem to have fully absorbed the ugly tradition of the Black Hundreds.

Sternberg: The formation of a dialogue group must make it clear that if the Soviets want the Jews to stay in the Soviet Union, the only way they would want to stay would be in conditions of peace and tranquility and not anti-Semitism, and provided that the law is observed.

EIR: I cannot remember a period in the Soviet Union when there was not perfect freedom to be an anti-Semite.

Sternberg: Yes, it's right, but now there is even more freedom. I am very hopeful that we are going to form such a dialogue group, and the only thing is that we ought to be careful about how to select the Jewish side of the dialogue. This of course will have to be decided by the Jewish community in the Soviet Union. They will have to be very selective as to who will represent the Jews. There is no Jewish representation in the Soviet Union, unlike America or England, where we have a representative Jewish body.

EIR: Some individuals representing some organizations have been to Moscow making deals behind the back of the refuseniks, which the Russian Jewry was very upset about.

Sternberg: They were, the Russians were confused, there were so many people coming over, and they don't know who is who.

EIR: I do remember how upset the Russian Jews were when Mr. Bronfman was there talking to Gorbachov and a group of people were making deals which no Russian Jew had been consulted about.

Sternberg: Yes, therefore we Jews ourselves should talk with one language, we should be united, not be jockeying for positions.

EIR: It seems to me that a lot of things done in the name of Jews and Jewry really have nothing to do with Jews or Jewry, but with power, with money, etc., where Jews are just being used.

Sternberg: Jewry should be represented by the Israeli government; they are the legacy of Jews, and we should really leave it to them and not tell them what to do. If we want to give them advice, there are ways of doing it in private which would be more effective than upbraiding them.

EIR: The Israeli government and public opinion manifested a great deal of sober moderation when the Carmel affair flared up, at a time when various Americans were making incendiary statements. . . .

Sternberg: American methods are not the same as those understood by people in Europe. It is a European question. I don't want to say anything against the American ADL or Edgar Bronfman, it would not be helpful at all. . . . We should be united and stronger. Inflammatory statements do not help at all.

EIR: Are similar efforts being made to establish a Council of Christians and Jews in Hungary?

Sternberg: There are: I am going at the end of February to Budapest to meet Cardinal Paskai and I hope to establish the Council of Christians and Jews there. Work has been going on for the last few months—I spoke to Mrs. Seiffert, the secretary of the Jewish community—they're happy to have such a group.