

POLES AND JEWS

Among the historic national enmities in the world, the enmity between Jews and Poles is not the least. But then one test of whether humankind has a future is whether such enmities can be healed.

A former Polish leader, now a Polish-American leader, living in San Francisco, has just joined with Simon Wiesenthal, other Jewish survivors of Nazi Death Camps, and other Poles, to urge that Poles and Jews "lay aside the ghost of mutual antagonism."

George Lerski, Professor emeritus of history at the University of San Francisco, was, during World War II an emissary between the Polish Underground fighting in Poland and the Polish government in exile in London. So were the other Polish signatories to the recent statement. They also carried appeals from the Jews to the outside world during the war.

The joint statement by Poles and Jews does not try to cover up the existence of Polish anti-semitism. But it also points out that at least 621 Poles according to a list that is no doubt incomplete, were executed by the Nazis for hiding Jews. Also, Poles outnumber all other nationalities on the honor rolls of Yad Vashem. And a number of Polish Underground Army soldiers were killed and wounded trying to bring aid to the Jews fighting in the Warsaw Ghetto.

The point in recalling all this is to raise the question as to whether hostility should be maintained in perpetuity against a whole people, rather than against a regime or a period. That is not an easy problem to handle emotionally, especially for those with first-hand experience. As removed as they were, a large part of the American Jewish generations who lived at

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the time of the Nazis still feel some revulsion at things German. The sound of the German language itself continues to trigger a hostile reaction.

It is probably not a rational reaction, but it will not change very much for those generations. However, new Jewish generations are not locked into those rigid reactions, although it is hoped that they will never forget what happened.

So it must be with Jewish hostility towards the Polish people. Anti-semitism is not in the genes of the Poles. It was part of a culture. And not all Poles partook of that part of the culture. The Polish Communist regime has tried to keep that anti-semitic culture alive, but many Poles have explicitly condemned it, including the leadership of Solidarity. This recent joint statement attempts to create a new initiative towards that end. The statement says: "Men of good will - Poles and Jews alike- are trying to create a real dialogue and mutual understanding. Let us use this dialogue to find what *unites* Poles and Jews."

The joint statement calls for Poles to demonstrate their interest in the fate of Israel. It also points out that Poles and Jews are fellow victims of the Soviet Union, and asks for an expression of mutual concern on that score. It has long been demonstrated that the Soviet Jewry Movement itself loses effectiveness to the extent that it broadens its agenda beyond the repatriation of Soviet Jews. But there are ways in which the American Jewish community in general can become more active in supporting Solidarity and opposing Soviet oppression of Poles.

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These were "first thoughts" by Wiesenthal, Lerski and the others. Further attempts will be made to expand this rapprochement, at least in the free world. "We are fully cognizant of the risk of attack by extremists on both sides," says the statement, "but we will not be turned aside from our undertaking." Maybe the world does have a future.