

FUROR ON CONVENT NEAR AUSCHWITZ

Jewish Groups Call Nuns' Site Affront to the Memory of the Millions Who Died

By PAUL LEWIS

Special to The New York Times

PARIS, Jan. 27 — The establishment of a Roman Catholic convent near the site of the Auschwitz death camp has caused dismay among some Jewish groups in the United States and Western Europe who call it an affront to the memory of the Jews who were killed there by the Nazis.

A group of Carmelite nuns has been living in an unused theater just outside the Auschwitz site in southern Poland since late 1984. But the presence of the convent, which was set up as a place of prayer for all who died in the camp, was apparently not widely known until a fund-raising appeal was begun last year in Europe by a Catholic group in an effort to renovate the building in which 10 nuns now live.

The group, Aid to the Church in Distress, has also been criticized by some Jewish and Catholic leaders for a statement issued in conjunction with the fund-raising drive, in which it raised \$150,000 in Luxembourg, Belgium and the Netherlands during Pope John Paul II's visit to these countries last May.

'Not Seeking a Confrontation'

As news of the drive spread, many Jewish groups in Europe issued statements demanding that Auschwitz be preserved as a monument to the mass killing of the Jews. The establishment of a convent, they said, insulted the memory of the Jews killed in Auschwitz. About 2 million to 2.25 million Jews and 1.25 million to 1.5 million non-Jews, mostly Polish Catholics, died at the camp, according to a spokesman for the Simon Wiesenthal Center.

"We are not seeking a confrontation with the church," said Israel Singer, secretary general of the World Jewish Congress. "We have no objection to a convent a mile or so from the camp. But we don't want it right there very

close and visible. Auschwitz was mainly a Jewish death camp."

Markus Pardes, the president of the Coordinating Committee of Jewish Organizations in Belgium, which has led the protest in Europe, said: "We want to keep Auschwitz as an eternal memorial to the Holocaust of the Jews. We don't want it being perpetually fought over by rival religions like the holy places in Jerusalem."

In a telephone interview from the group's headquarters in Königstein, West Germany, the founder of Church in Distress, the Rev. Wilfried van Straaten, defended the decision to raise money for the convent.

He noted that the Carmelite nuns founded a convent at the Dachau concentration camp in Germany nearly 40 years ago. "There have never been any objections from Jewish organizations to that convent," he said.

Of the one at Auschwitz, he said, "The sisters are praying for all who died there and doing penance for the act of genocide."

Protest by Bronfman

The theater where the nuns live, which they plan to turn into a permanent convent with the money given them, is situated just outside the camp fence and was used by the Nazis to store poison gas for the extermination chambers. It is clearly visible from inside the camp.

Last month the president of the World Jewish Congress, Edgar M. Bronfman, protested to the Polish Religious Affairs Minister, Adam Lopatka, in Warsaw, according to Mr. Singer. He said Mr. Bronfman was told that the Government would talk to the Catholic Church about the convent and probably try to get it moved farther away from the camp.

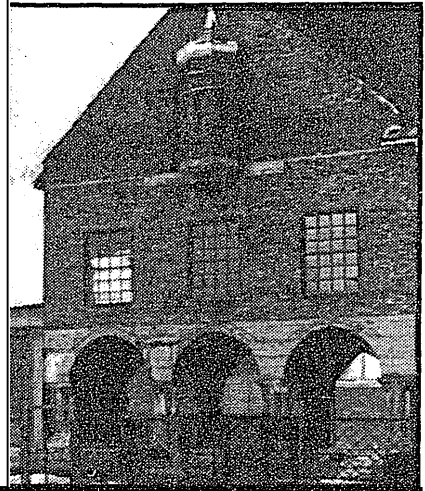
In Warsaw, Government and church officials declined to comment on the Bronfman protest. One Government official said the Polish authorities had agreed to the establishment of the convent and "have no intention to go back on this decision," which, he said, had been made in agreement with the Polish church.

The Jewish groups said they were also upset by what they regarded as the militantly Christian language of the fund-raising appeal. The statement described the convent as "a spiritual fortress and a guarantee of the conversion of strayed brothers from our countries as well as proof of our desire to erase

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A Carmelite nun, left, inside unused theater that now houses a Roman Catholic convent just outside the Auschwitz death camp. Below, the exterior of the building.

The New York Times



outrages so often done to the Vicar of Christ."

Mr. Pardes said he believed that the reference to "the conversion of strayed brothers" was "an oblique appeal for the conversion of Jewry." The mention of outrages against the Vicar of Christ, he contended, alluded to "accusations that Pius XII did not help the Jews as much as he might in the Second World War."

Father van Straaten denied Mr. Pardes's assertion. "We were not thinking of the Jews," he said. "We were thinking of those in Belgium and Holland who opposed the Pope's visit there because they do not agree with his teaching."

Catholic leaders in Europe have generally criticized the language of the fund-raising appeal as contrary to the ecumenical spirit of the Second Vatican Council.

But they are more divided over the merits of establishing a convent at Auschwitz. Many stressed that the Carmelite nuns — who devote their lives to prayer and contemplation and have little contact with the outside world — will be praying for all the victims. They also took note of the convent at Dachau.

'Disconcerting,' Cardinal Says

Last month Albert Cardinal Decourtray of Lyons, France, called the Aid to the Church in Distress project "disconcerting" and said that for world opinion, Auschwitz would always remain "a reminder of the Shoah, that is to say, the attempt to exterminate Jews because they are Jews."

In Brussels, Canon Wilfried Brieven, a spokesman for the Belgian Primate, Godfried Cardinal Danneels, said the Bishops of Belgium and the Nether-

lands were never consulted about the fund-raising appeal and were "not very happy" about the effort begun by the group.

Canon Brieven said he had less objection to the convent, saying, "There is never anything wrong with prayer, and the nuns will be praying that it never happens again." Canon Brieven also recalled that John Paul had canonized the Rev. Maksymilian Kolbe, a Roman Catholic priest starved to death in the Auschwitz punishment block in place of a married prisoner, as a saint.

Father van Straaten said Franciszek Cardinal Macharski of Cracow got permission to turn the Auschwitz theater into a convent from the local authorities "with the encouragement of the Pope."

What the Vatican Says

Asked whether John Paul had approved the project, Joaquin Navarro Valls, the chief Vatican spokesman, said that in principle the Pope would sympathize with the idea. But he added, "It is my impression that he was unaware of the controversy."

"This is a personal initiative of the Church in Distress," Mr. Navarro said. "They apparently had encouragement from Cardinal Macharski and from the Mayor of the city."

"The Pope was probably informed of the move," Mr. Navarro continued, "but he neither encouraged nor discouraged the initiative. The matter doesn't concern the Vatican one way or the other. The personal line of the Pope is that local bishops have responsibility for the local affairs of the church."