

OPENING OF THE JOSEPH CARDINAL BERNARDIN CENTER
for the
STUDY OF EASTERN EUROPEAN JEWRY
Spertus College of Judaica
July 22, 1987

INTRODUCTION of Dr. Mira P. Brichto by Howard A. Sulkin, President
of Spertus College of Judaica

You've heard both of us mention with great enthusiasm,
Dr. Mira P. Brichto, and I know after hearing her talk about
her recent visit to Poland, I know you will join her fan club
with Cardinal Bernardin and myself as the two Presidents. She
is a very distinguished educator, a person who has been the
heart, the sole and the spirit of this project. It is now
my pleasure to introduce to you -- Dr. Brichto.

Speech by Dr. Brichto

I don't know what there will be left to say at my eulogy -- but
that's not my problem, is it?

In my haste and exhilaration to bring a report to you, I want
first not to forget to thank Consul General Jan Rabs, friend to
our enterprise for his trust and cooperation in facilitating our
travels to Poland. And also once again, to Mr. and Mrs. Joseph
Radov and their son, whom I met for the first time today, for
the seed money which sustained us during this last year and will,
hopefully, sustain us for the next year as well.

When one wants to report on any country -- it was late spring or
early summer, what have you, when I was there and one of the
first things that struck me was the increase in the number of
young women pushing baby carriages in the street. Surely a
sign of hope and also what a grandmother notices first.

In being early summer in Europe, I remembered what I had so often heard as a child growing up in the United States in a European family -- in the "haym" they use to say. The "haym" was a way of referring to the old country. At home, everything tasted better. Little new potatoes were dug from the ground fresh each day, mushrooms from the woods, strawberries gathered from the fields are sweeter. How much nostalgia and sentiment are stored even in the memory of our tongues.

In a more serious, if not solemn vein, I must tell you that we, by which I mean myself and Victor Brecher of the Poland American Foundation for Jewish Culture, whom you will meet shortly, were met all along the way with warm welcome, encouragement and cooperation.

In meetings here in Chicago during early June between Minister Plenipotentiary Jan Rabs; Poland's Minister of Culture, Kraftchig; Congressman Rostenkowski; Szymon Szurmiej, Chairman of the Cultural Committee and Deputy of the Commission for Foreign Affairs, met to lay the groundwork for cooperation between Spertus College, The Cardinal Center and The Polish Government. It, therefore, remained only for us to travel to Warsaw to meet with officials from various ministries, with museum officials, and members of the Academy of Sciences, both officially and unofficially, to discuss and map out the groundbreaking long-range plans projected for The Center.

Poles like Americans. Especially, when they say, "I come from Chicago."

We have succeeded in setting into position officially, the machinery which will make it possible for us to examine a thousand years of religion, culture and civilization which flourished in Poland. Manuscripts, books and periodicals will be made available for scholarly study. Works of art will be put on view for all eyes to see.

Now the study and examination of a Peoples' past is useful in and for itself. In this case, however, I believe our quest may transcend these motivations. Though we propose not only to examine the history and esthetics of the past, we propose also to examine our own conscience.

No matter what the view of history one holds, be it theological or mechanistic -- agreement is general -- it is natural for heirs to want to know the life of their forebeares. And how much more so in this tragic century. We are, all of us, equally committed to the sense of the richness and importance of our respective traditions. Poland has been in the forefront in every aspect of what we call culture and civilization. In architecture, art, mathematics, astronomy, religious devotion, experimentation with social forms and in all of these undertakings, the Jews of Poland were not exceptions. Participants in the general culture, they also constantly enriched their own.

For those who wonder that our Center should be called The Joseph Cardinal Bernardin Center for the Study of Eastern European Jewry, it is important to know, it is not only because of the importance of Poland to the Church, but also because of the rich, cultural symbiosis which existed between Polish Catholics and Jews for many centuries. In this ecumenical century, we do well to recall other more parochial centuries, times when attitudes of churchmen were adversarial, un-Christian -- and, as Jews we too are becoming better able to understand that by definition, ecumenicism cannot be one-sided. We are coming to realize and appreciate that the whole Christian tradition is a triumph, an affirmation of our biblical tradition. If we have an enemy, it is the common enemy of fascism, which would deny the validity of man's spiritual quest. I dare say, and I mean dare, that there are still some Jews, even here in Chicago, who question why a great Jewish institution such as Spertus College would see fit to name its ambitious project after a Prince of the Church. Would that they could know this man, his commitment to the central core of what we call the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Among the first details which would have been in my report to the Cardinal, if I had seen him this morning instead of this afternoon, would have been not the important meetings with government, museum and scientific officials from the Academy, although we are not unaware of the pragmatic importance of those meetings, there are other things I would have told him first.

First, I would have told him of a young man, a Curator from The National Museum in the Department of Old Polish Drawings. He knew we were meeting in the Museum Director's office. Modestly he waited at the foot of a very grand stairway. When we descended he came towards us to volunteer his services. It seems that in the course of his curatorial studies of Polish drawings, he discovered a consistent pattern in the depiction of the Jew. Not the propagandistic Nazi stereotypical, but rather, the Jew living alongside the Pole in dignity. Pictures, as he told us, not always stuffy, but sometimes quite humorous. If you will permit me, he told of a quite wonderful one, a simple drawing of a Jew and a Pole embracing each other very tightly. The drawing is a cartoon and there is a legend underneath it. The Pole said to the Jew, "Zid, Zid, I love you, I love you very, very much, but you stink of garlic." The Jew speaks to the Pole and he says, "I too, love you very, very much, but you stink of vodka." It's very important for us to be able to laugh. Self respect in place, we feel free to laugh at ourselves. Mutual respect assured, we may laugh at each other as well.

In passing, the young man told us that his mother, a Jew, had been saved from deportation and certain death by a Polish family.

Also, I would have told the Cardinal, a story told to me by Szymon Szurmiej. On a June evening under a full moon, when The National Yiddish Theatre was playing in Zamosh, the ancient shtetl Lubin, which was the birthplace and beloved village of Yitzhak Leib Perez, Szymon Szurmiej who was Director of the theatre, described how they played in an outdoor theatre to an

entranced audience, a theatre piece based upon Perez' Yiddish writings. Only a few kilometers from Zamosh he discovered a town so small its not on any map -- "a dorfl," he said, "not a shtetl at all. It's called Cohszno. A place where only a small handful of people now live." The dorfl of 160 men, women and children had been wiped out by the Nazis because they kept two Jews in hiding among them. In 1964 the Polish government erected a M'zevah to those 162 soles. As Szymon Szurmiej described the artistically sculpted monument, I thought what a fitting logo it would make for our Center.

As you know, we live in a political system which scrupulously honors the constitutional principle of the separation of Church and State. Yet, Spertus, a Judaic College announces here today, grants from the National Endowment of the Arts and National Endowment for the Humanities. Permit me to share some background on this.

Knowing that the Cardinal travels frequently to Washington, we had the temerity to ask that he accompany us to a meeting at the office of John Agresto, the Acting Director for the National Endowment of the Humanities. With perfect grace, he arranged his schedule to accommodate our request. Mr. Agresto had assembled his top people for a meeting, during which it was Cardinal Bernardin who presented the case for Spertus College's Eastern European Studies project.

The grants awarded by the National Endowment confirmed the underlying humanistic goal of our enterprise. It affirms that diverse religious groups, as well as differing sovereign states may come together to work in mutual trust. It is so very characteristically American.

Finally, again in a personal vein, I keep asking myself, as many of you must as well, "what is the true meaning, the real reason for this passion to evoke the past?" Is it not perhaps something closer to home than the reasons already suggested here? Perhaps reasons more psychological than historical or moral. Intuitively, we understand that to know what we are is to know what went into the making of us. To know what we are is to know what obstacles had to be overcome so that we could become what we are. When we evoke the images of beloved grandparents, whether Bola-gula, pedler, melamud, farmer, tailor, scholar or factory worker, it is their fortitude and courage, their gentleness and piety we would remember. For ultimately, our attempt to recreate as much of their lives as possible, is the way we deepen our sense of what we like most in ourselves and what we hope to hand down to our children and grandchildren.