

Anti-Semitism and its Impact on Jewish Evangelism in Central and Eastern Europe

By Avi Snyder

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Introduction – Be Careful if you Call the Police

In the on-line edition of Haaretz, dated 10 January 2010, Yehuda LaHav quotes an ominous statement from the newsletter of an organization called “the trade union of Hungarian police officers prepared for action.” The spokesperson of the police union declares, “Given our current situation, anti-Semitism is not just our right, but it is the duty of every Hungarian homeland lover, and we must prepare for armed battle against the Jews” (quoted in “Proud Hungarians must prepare for war against the Jews,” Haaretz, Yehuda LaHav, 10 January 2010).

But Hungary shouldn't be singled out among other European nations. Nor should we think of the presence of anti-Semitism in Europe as the resurfacing of an old disease that went into socio-political remission after the Second World War. Jewish survivors of the Holocaust returning to their homes in Poland often found old hatreds intact, as the 1946 pogrom in Kielce sadly points out.

Tragically, anti-Semitism remained and has remained a seam in the fabric of pan-European society. One could possibly even argue that the depth of anti-Semitism in European society is one of the gauges by which we may measure the degree to which Europe was ever really evangelized? Why? Because at the heart of “Christian” anti-Semitism lies the charge of Deicide leveled against us Jews. In other words, “They, the Jews, killed our Savior Jesus.” But foundational to the gospel message is the understanding that each one of us, whether Jewish or Gentile, caused Y'shua's death. Our sins necessitated His death and resurrection, and to call Him, “my Savior” carries with it the acknowledgement that He saved or rescued each one of us from the judgment that our sins deserve. So if *my* sins put Him on the cross, then how can I accuse someone else of putting Him to death? Actually, and sadly, I *can* accuse someone else very easily, so long as I don't understand the gospel and my own complicity in the Messiah's death.

But this paper isn't the place to discuss the theological absurdities of anti-Semitism. Rather, I'd like to offer my thoughts on the effect that anti-Semitism has had and continues to have on the work of Jewish Evangelism in Central and Eastern Europe. Let me begin by reviewing some of the reasons that explain why anti-Semitism in these countries persists.

Anti-Semitism – an ongoing “way of life”

In his 2003 paper, “Anti-Semitic Trends in Post-Communist Eastern European States” (online Jewish Political Studies Review, 15:3-4), Yosef Govrin speaks about six factors that have contributed to the problem. He lists them in this order:

1. The economic crisis that accompanied the collapse of the Soviet Union and the accompanying traumatic transition from a centralized to a liberal economy. The “transition” seemed to leave some Jewish people in prominent positions.
2. Xenophobia, or hatred of the foreigner, shared by both the extreme right and the extreme left in post-communist republics.
3. The “rehabilitation” of national heroes who stood against the soviet regimes. Often, these heroes had championed the fascist cause (e.g, Marshal Ion Antonescu in Romania and Father Tiso in Slovakia, both of whom were condemned to death as war criminals following the war).
4. The perpetuation of “classical Christian anti-Semitism” by parts of the Orthodox Church.
5. Attempts by international Jewish agencies to redeem Jewish property that had been stolen by the Nazis and then nationalized during the communist regimes.
6. The weakness of the new post-communist governments to check the spread of anti-Semitic literature and the rise of anti-Semitic parties.

To Govrin’s list, I would add:

7. The use of current political tensions in the Middle East as a pretext for voicing ages-old arguments against “the Jews.”
8. A refusal on the part of many nationals to accept any responsibility for the Holocaust that occurred in their lands (this is more a result of anti-Semitism than a cause).
9. The “scape-goating” of us Jews as the ones who ushered in and allegedly led the soviet regimes.
10. The charge that Jewish suffering during the Holocaust is constantly put before the public eye, while the suffering of nationals at the hands of the Nazis is minimized or ignored.

I’ll discuss 3, 8, 9 and 10 in greater detail below.

To state the obvious, anti-Semitism in Central and Eastern Europe persists. The question then, is: How has anti-Semitism impacted the cause of Jewish evangelism in this part of the world? Specifically...

- How has anti-Semitism affected the field?
- How has it affected the response among our people to the gospel message?
- How has it affected the task of winning Christians’ hearts to our cause?

How has Anti-Semitism impacted the Field of Jewish Evangelism in Central and Eastern Europe?

The greatest impact is the most obvious. It has led to...

A decimated field. As all of us know, the Holocaust caused the near obliteration of Jewish life in Central and Eastern Europe. For example, prior to the war, the Jewish population of Poland stood at approximately 3,300,000 people. By the war’s end, between 40,000 – 100,000 Polish Jews remained. In Hungary, some 260,000 out of a pre-war Jewish population of 825,000 survived. 400,000 Romanian Jews perished out of a pre-war population of 800,000. And in

what was then Czechoslovakia, over 303,000 out of nearly 357,000 Jewish people died – the destruction of 85% of our people in that land.

A further diminished field: In the quarter century immediately after the war, residual and revived anti-Semitism provoked many Holocaust survivors to immigrate to the West or to make Aliyah. Today, according to a variety of online sources, the “official” number of Jews living in Poland is ca. 6,000 – 8,000; in Hungary, ca. 80,000 - 100,000; in Romania, ca. 11,000 – 12,000; and in the Czech Republic, ca. 3,000 – 5,000 (I’ll speak more about the reliability of these official statistics below).

Obviously, other factors contributed to Jewish immigration, such as the appeal of Zionism and the dream of building a Jewish state; a desire to escape the soviet regimes (which were, themselves, decidedly anti-Semitic); or the simple hope of living a better life. But ongoing anti-Semitism in Central and Eastern Europe clearly played a dominant, motivating role in the immigration by giving our people little reason to stay. And as Communist control became more and more complete, the Jewish people who did remain became even harder and harder to reach. Of course, we need to remember that while the field diminished in Central and Eastern Europe, it expanded in the west as Jewish people immigrated to other lands.

A disguised field. In some countries, anti-Semitism didn’t just drive many of us Jews out; it also caused many remaining Jews to “disappear” or to “go underground.” Rather than leave, and rather than live openly as members of a despised minority, some Jewish people undoubtedly opted to assimilate and become “gentiles.” Other Jewish people who didn’t take the route of total assimilation nevertheless chose to keep their Jewish identity a private affair.

As a result, we have good reason to believe that the Jewish population throughout Central and Eastern Europe is larger than the official statistics indicate. Three pieces of evidence substantiate the fact that the reported number Jewish people and the *real* number of Jewish people are two very different things. First, the official numbers usually reflect only the number of Jewish people who were and are willing to identify themselves openly as Jews, or who are identified as Jews because of their affiliation with an official Jewish organization

Secondly, the growing trend of “hidden Jews” to come out of hiding, especially in Poland, indicates that the official population statistics are skewed. (See, for example, an article in the online edition of the New York Times, 28 February, 2010, entitled “Changing Face in Poland: Skinhead Puts on Skullcap.” The article talks about a man named Pawel, now Pinchas, who lived a young life as a virulent anti-Semite, then discovered that he’s Jewish, and finally converted with his wife to Orthodox Judaism.”).

Third and finally on this point, we mustn’t forget that many Jewish parents on their way to their own deaths at the hands of Nazis entrusted an unknown number of Jewish children to sympathetic nuns and priests, as well as to the care of compassionate nationals who raised these children as their own.

For the past fifteen or so years, Jewish cultural festivals have occurred in cities like Budapest, Warsaw and Krakow. And even though these events are attended by at least an equal number of

non-Jews as Jews, the festivals themselves suggest a potentially resurgent Jewish community and a revived interest in Jewish life and culture among Jews and non-Jews alike. Add to this mix the presence of groups such as the Lauder Foundation and Chabad, and we have a picture of a Jewish population in Central and Eastern Europe that hopes to bring itself back to life.

What does all of this mean? Simply this. First, the potential field for Jewish evangelism in Central and Eastern Europe isn't necessarily as small as we might think. Second, and less encouraging, the prevalent tendency for a number of Jewish people to remain "hidden" makes it more difficult to bring the gospel to them or to know when we're reaching the group we long to reach. But third, an emerging interest in Jewish culture, and a bolder reaction from our people against on-going anti-Semitism might actually lead to the resurfacing of a Jewish population that will be much easier to identify.

However, identifying our people in the face of anti-Semitism is one thing: approaching them with the gospel is something else. So we need to ask:

How has anti-Semitism in Central and Eastern Europe impacted our people's Responsiveness to the Gospel Message?

We might automatically assume that continuing national and cultural anti-Semitism has driven our people even further away from receiving the Good News. On the surface, this line of reasoning would certainly seem to make sense. The frequent fusion of a national cause with the Christian faith doesn't make the gospel very appealing to us. Instead, national and cultural anti-Semitism by alleged "Christians" simply reinforces the centuries-old false notion that Christianity is hostile to us Jews. "Jesus is for the goyim, not for us Jews:"

In light of all of this, it's natural to assume that a climate of continuing anti-Semitism in Central and Eastern Europe makes a positive Jewish response to the gospel all but impossible. But, by God's grace, that isn't necessarily the case. Jewish believers in Y'shua, messianic congregations, and ministries that are dedicated to proclaiming the gospel to our people can be found throughout the Central and Eastern European republics. I know that at least two messianic congregations exist in Poland; at least three in Hungary; no less than two in Romania; and one or more in the Czech Republic. My information on this point is certainly not definitive, so the numbers may be greater than I've reported. Indigenous ministries such as the Olive Tree in Poland and "Johair" in Hungary, along with "foreign" evangelistic ministries such as AMZI, Chosen People Ministries, Christian Witness to Israel, and Jews for Jesus are functioning in these lands as well.

Apparently, Jewish hearts can indeed be warmed to the message of Y'shua. But what about Christian nationals? Can their hearts be won to our cause? Or has anti-Semitism created an unbridgeable gulf?

How has anti-Semitism affected the task of winning Christians' hearts to our cause?

I'd like to start my consideration of this topic by making a comparison between the situation in Germany and the state of affairs in Central and Eastern Europe. Germany's undeniable

complicity in the Holocaust brought about a genuine sense of conviction on the part of many sincere German Christians, and this conviction yielded two results. Many Christians not only “fell in love” with the Jewish people, but became committed to praying and working for our people’s salvation. But sad to say, other German Christians found themselves so burdened with guilt and condemnation that they either jettisoned the belief that our people need to hear the gospel, or they chose to be silent about the gospel – all in an effort to avoid causing further offense or incurring disfavor from Jewish leaders whom they hoped to appease or befriend.

Both results – conviction leading to repentance and proclamation, and guilt leading to silence and theological compromise– are the result of Germany taking ownership of her crimes against our people. Hopefully, more and more German Christians will be persuaded that silence is the enemy of the salvation of our people, and that a biblical love for our people must always include an endorsement of gospel proclamation and a burden to see them saved.

In short, the reality of the Holocaust caused Germany to deal painfully but candidly with her centuries-old history of anti-Semitism. However, I don’t believe that this type of national self-appraisal has taken place in Central and Eastern Europe to any significant degree. Anti-Semitism openly persists, in part because the peoples of the region have not dealt with their past. And this persistent anti-Semitism presents a serious impediment to winning the hearts of Christians to the work of Jewish evangelism.

Earlier in this paper, I listed ten prevailing causes of anti-Semitism in Central and Eastern Europe. I believe that four of them can have an especially negative impact upon enlisting and involving Christians in our cause, so let me elaborate upon them a bit more. They include:

- The absence of acknowledged complicity in the Holocaust;
- The contention that the nationals were equal victims or perhaps even greater victims of the Nazi Holocaust;
- The belief that we Jews actually ushered in communist rule and dominated the soviet leadership;
- The trend to rehabilitate national heroes who were outspoken anti-Semites in their day.

Concerning the absence of acknowledged complicity:

When Jan Gross published the Polish edition of his book, “Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz,” some voices welcomed the book as a distressing but necessary “coming to grips” with an unpleasant truth, while others condemned the book as yet another Jewish attack upon the Polish people. The office of the Polish State Prosecutor even issued a statement to the effect that it might take legal action against Gross for “insulting the nation” (see Haartez online edition, 15 January, 2008, “Historian threatens to reveal Polish atrocities against Jews if tried for slander,” Adi Schwartz).

In Romania, when Dr. Radu Ioanid sought to gather documentation for his book, “The Holocaust in Romania,” he found his efforts frequently blocked by officials who insisted that substantial information did not exist because a Holocaust did not occur – at least not on Romanian soil.

So what impact might this absence of acknowledged complicity or responsibility have upon any efforts to involve Christians in our endeavors? Ironically, the absence of a sense of self-condemning guilt might serve in some marginal way as a hedge against abandoning a belief in our people's need to repent and trust in Y'shua. Christians who feel no national shame for the atrocities that occurred in their lands won't abandon their theology out of guilt; even if they are unfriendly to our people, they can still believe wholeheartedly in the need to bring the gospel to all, including to us Jews.

But a commitment to general evangelism doesn't necessarily engender a particular passion for Jewish evangelism, and the absence of any ownership of the crimes of the Holocaust make it all too easy for Christians to disregard our people's spiritual plight. In fact, anti-Semitism in evangelistically-minded churches will make it easy to "overlook" bringing the gospel to us Jews. What Christians bring God's message of love to a group of people that they despise?

Concerning the contention that the nationals were equal or even greater victims:

Some years ago, I remember being told by a Polish Christian – a genuine believer -- that we Jews are quick and eager to talk about our own suffering at the hands of the Nazis, but we never say anything about the sufferings that the nationals endured. This particular Christian woman is a friend, and I would never characterize her as an anti-Semite. But it was clear that she was hurt by what she thought was an inordinate attention given to the "Jewish" Holocaust versus the "Polish" Holocaust," and I suspect that beneath the hurting lay a resentment toward our people as well.

Resentment is a dangerous thing. It can be fueled into active anti-Semitism as nationals protest what they consider to be the downplaying of their own victimization during the Nazi occupation of their lands.

Now, do I agree that the genocidal destruction of our people has been overplayed or overstated? No, I certainly do not. But my belief in the singular magnitude of the crimes that were committed against our own people should not make me numb to the sufferings that others have endured. If anything, we should be looking for bridges of empathy so that we may engage the hearts of these brothers and sisters in the Lord. Should we forget that thousands of Polish people died, helping and defending us Jews? Should we forget that even though Hungary was allied with the Third Reich, the Hungarian military command refused to surrender Jewish soldiers to Nazi authorities? No, we should not forget.

Denying the Holocaust is not the same as crying out, "We were hurt, too!" Though I doubt that we're likely to change the minds of any Holocaust deniers, I do believe we can engage and win the affections of Christians who, like us, have been the victims of evil.

Concerning the view that we Jews supported the communist regimes:

Those of us who know our history know also that some of our people saw socialism as our "savior," first from the Tzars and then from the Fascists. But we also know that the communist regimes were never friendly to us Jews, and writers like Gross have documented the fact that

communist leadership in the soviet bloc countries hoped to strengthen their own positions by playing upon the historic anti-Semitism of the populations they oppressed.

Even so, a false perception remains among some nationals – including among Christians – that we Jews were responsible for the communist plight that followed the Second World War, and that we Jews were the “prime movers” of the soviet regimes. The degree to which these false notions are held by national Christians is the degree to which we’ll encounter obstacles in moving them to embrace our cause.

This perception that we Jews caused and led the soviet occupation helps us better understand the next point that like to raise; namely...

The trend of rehabilitating past national heroes who were known for their anti-Semitic views:

Just a couple of examples will suffice. In Romania, streets have been named after Antonescu, And in Slovakia, nationalists commemorate the anniversary of Tiso’s execution (see Govrin). In the socio-political sphere, this kind of “rehabilitation” can reinforce the idea that we Jews are hostile foreigners and international conspirators, dedicated to undermining a nation’s well-being. In the religious sphere, this rehabilitation can perpetuate the tendency to view us Jews not as a people beloved by the Lord and in need of His salvation, but as the evil foil of Christianity and as the perpetual opponents of the faith.

The two spheres easily overlap. And because the church often represented the nation in its stand against soviet oppression, the line between Christian faith and national allegiance can easily become blurred. As a result, there is the danger of anti-Semitism from the political realm affecting the view of both the nominal and the believing church.

How does all of this affect our hope of winning national Christians to our cause?

- Christians who are influenced by anti-Semitic thinking will undoubtedly distance themselves from Jewish evangelism. Why should they endorse reaching out with Y’shua’s love to a people whom they despise?
- Christians who recognize the sinfulness of anti-Semitism may nevertheless find it difficult to endorse our cause because of the disfavor they may face from other Christians. It’s sadly ironic: whereas *German* Christians might back away from Jewish evangelism for fear of displeasing Jewish leaders, Christians in Central and Eastern Europe might back away from Jewish evangelism for fear of displeasing their nationalistic brothers and sisters in the faith.

So when all is said and done...

What conclusions can we draw about the affect of anti-Semitism on the cause of Jewish evangelism in Central and Eastern Europe? Here are a few thoughts:

- Regarding the “smaller size” of the Jewish populations -- The size of the field doesn’t determine the importance of the people or the worthiness of the endeavor. Whether we’re talking about a few thousand or hundreds of thousands, the Jewish people in these lands need

to be reached. Isn't that the point of the parable about the shepherd who left the ninety-nine in order to rescue the one?

- Regarding the receptivity of our people – the presence of messianic Jews and the existence of messianic groups affirm the notion that Jewish people will respond in faith to the proclamation of the good news. And even if the evidence didn't exist, we know in principle that our people will respond. For neither the grotesque history of allegedly “Christian” crimes against our people nor the lingering presence of anti-Semitism can undermine or overcome the power of the gospel message (Hebrews 4:12).
- Regarding our efforts to win the hearts of Central and Eastern European Christians to our cause – we should remember that Y'shua Himself instructed us to beseech the Lord of the harvest to send workers into the field. Can we trust Him to give us the people whom He told us to request? Yes, we can.

Therefore, despite the presence of anti-Semitism and its impact upon the cause of Jewish evangelism, let us *“be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord”* (1 Corinthians 15:58)