

CHILD HOLOCAUST SURVIVOR, RAISED CATHOLIC, REFLECTS ON THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF NOSTRA AETATE

Fifty years ago, in October 1965, an ocean away and a world removed from her childhood in Europe, Lucia Weitzman, 25, attended to the needs of her two-year-old son and infant daughter in suburban Detroit. On the 28th day of that month, the Vatican issued a Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions *Nostra Aetate* (“In Our Time”), a landmark document that rejects the charge that the Jews of Jesus’ time or those alive today are collectively guilty of Jesus’ death.

Lucia recoiled upon learning the news. This was a different message than what she had heard while she sat in the pews of her beloved St. Mikolaj church in Bochnia, Poland. It was much the same during her school years.

She was then known as Alicja Swiatek, an assumed identity. Born to Jewish parents, Michael and Adele Berl, and blessed with the name Rose, she’d been given at age two to a Catholic couple, Genowefa and Franciszek Swiatek, for safekeeping in a desperate attempt to keep her from the Nazis—and certain death. Her parents never returned after the War, perishing in the Holocaust.

Adopted by the Swiateks, Alicja was not a Jewish girl in hiding during the War—she was simply a Catholic child nurtured by doting parents. But the secret of her true identity was revealed in the spring of 1945 when a Jewish relative searched Bochnia for the little girl, intending to send her to a Jewish orphanage. Alicja clung to Genowefa’s leg and the war-weary relative left after a brief protest.

The impact of the relative’s visit was immediate. The Swiateks’ landlord and neighbor, who’d given Alicja candy a day earlier, now threw a brick at her. He threatened her with a butcher’s knife off and on for more than a decade after that. She was taunted in grade school, even though she regularly attended church and had little idea about who Jews were (there were none left in Bochnia) or what Judaism was about.



Lucia Weitzman

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What was the source of this hatred, evident long after the Germans had left Poland?

The Jewish-Christian split early in the first century, and more pointedly the charge of deicide, figured prominently in well over a millennium of persecution directed at Jews. In addition to absolving collective Jewish culpability, the *Nostra Aetate* declared that “Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God.” It decried “hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone.”

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The Declaration was bold. For many in the Jewish community it was a welcome olive branch. For others, it did not go far enough. There was no specific mention of the Holocaust, nor of Israel.

For Lucia (an Anglicization of Alicja), the Declaration was as jarring as it was belated. She'd left Poland only about four years earlier.

The memories were still raw. "In high school, I nearly fainted at church when I sensed the glare of my classmates during a particularly vivid Passion reenactment," she recalled. "At that moment, I didn't know who I really was—Catholic or Jew. I felt enormous guilt. I wondered whether my life had been spared in order to atone and pray for the Jewish people. But after

that incident, I found it hard to pray at all." She also recalled the anguish when her first love, a man in a neighboring town, broke off their relationship after discovering that she was Jewish.

Would Nostra Aetate have altered her life had it been issued thirty years earlier? A deeper question is could it have prevented the Holocaust? It's hard to know, of course. The seeds of hate were planted well before the Holocaust, and stubbornly persisted, as Lucia's experience attests, long after it ended.

A review of events since 1965 perhaps sheds some light, and hope, on the question. The Vatican has issued several guidelines implementing Nostra Aetate, liturgy has been modified, and countless conferences seeking to improve Jewish-Christian relations have been convened. Pope John Paul II was the first to visit a synagogue. There have been several papal visits to the Western Wall in Jerusalem, Judaism's holiest site.

Lucia observed these developments as a practicing Jewish woman. She'd discovered relatives in New York who brought her to America and gave her a crash course in Judaism. She married and raised a family, suppressing the angst and religious confu-

sion of her past in order to acclimate to the Jewish community.

But her carefully managed emotional bubble burst in 1993 when her husband died, leaving her a young widow at age 53. A year later, on a trip to Israel to reconnect with old friends and perhaps meet new ones, she instead traveled to the Western Wall and confronted God. It would be the beginning of a more than two-decade spiritual journey that confronted religious divisiveness and strife more than it did God.

As Lucia looks back on the fiftieth anniversary of Nostra Aetate, there remains a part of her that is as affected as she was in 1965.

"Childhood pain never truly disappears," she says. A proclamation can't erase that hurt." But has Nostra Aetate, prevented religion-based persecution? Is that even possible? Lucia laments the recent return of virulent anti-Semitism in Europe and the overall proliferation of religious extremism and violence around the globe.

In espousing a community of all peoples united in Godly origin, all walking in His light, Nostra Aetate does indeed speak to our contemporary world as much as it does to history. But a Declaration is only as effective as the individual hearts and minds it reaches. The fiftieth anniversary of Nostra Aetate merits our attention, and perhaps its emulation by other religious groups mired in divisiveness and intolerance.

One can imagine its words reaching the far-flung corners of the world where men, women, and children are persecuted or killed in the name of religion. Perhaps those words can even reach back in time to comfort a little Jewish girl praying in the pews of a Polish-Catholic church.

Mitchell Weitzman is the author, with his mother Lucia, of the forthcoming inspirational memoir The Rose Temple: A Child Holocaust Survivor's Vision of Faith, Hope, and Our Collective Future.

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