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NAZISM AND COMMUNISM AND THE REMARKABLE LIFE OF THE POLISH POPE

Memory and identity: personal reflections. Pope John Paul II, 2005. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson; ISBN 0297785075X, 198 pp., £12.99, cloth.

This book provides an extraordinary insight into the mind of one of the twentieth-century's most influential religious leaders. It is not a biography, but in reflecting on one of the most turbulent periods of history – the second half of the twentieth century – and John Paul's own beliefs and experiences, it nonetheless serves to paint a picture of the remarkable life of the Polish Pope.

The book is actually a collection of personal memoirs and reflections prompted by a series of interviews held at Castel Gandolfo in 1993. Josef Tischner and Krzysztof Michalski, two Polish philosophers who had co-founded the 'Institute for Human Sciences' in Vienna, conducted these interviews. They had requested that the Pontiff undertake a critical analysis of the two opposing dictatorships that marked twentieth-century Polish history, Nazism and Communism. The Pope had returned to the transcripts of the interviews almost 20 years later with the intention of broadening and updating the discussion and debate contained within the original text. There is a poignancy and timeliness of the publication of these memoirs coinciding, as they did, with the year in which John Paul died, 2005.

The style of the book is constructed as a conversation in order that the reader will not misconstrue it as an academic treatise but, rather, accept it as an informal dialogue. The obvious intention is that it should be accessible to a greater audience than those who would normally read the writings of the Pope. It must be said, however, that it only partially succeeds in this ambition since the work is sufficiently dense to provide an intellectual challenge beyond that of most informal dialogues and it does come across as a series of intensely philosophical monologues on specific topics. The prose is sometimes difficult to follow and one needs a certain knowledge of church and political history (not to mention Latin) to fully

comprehend its content. This dissonance between intention and outcome reflects in some measure that associated with John Paul as arch communicator: the Polish Pope was a master of modern communications – using the media and Internet to spread his encyclicals, sermons and opinions. He used the jet age to travel as no other Pope had done before. Famously kissing the tarmac wherever he landed, and projecting himself as a genial liberal, he would then go on to preach a staunchly conservative message apparently out of kilter with the modern world or even, indeed, with the modernists within his own church.

Karol Wojtyla was born in 1920 at a time when Poland had recently been restored to the map of Europe for the first time since the eighteenth century. The history and politics of the land of his birth continued to be a major influence on his ministry throughout his life and in this book he explores notions of patriotism, the concept of nation and the history and culture of Poland. He goes on to explore the idea of Europe as a native land in the context of other continents and the importance of the evangelization of central and eastern Europe. In discussing the relationship between church and state, one is left in no doubt as to how his background served to change the face of modern politics. He was always an implacable enemy of the Nazi and Communist totalitarian systems, knowing and suffering both at first hand from his early years as he grew up in Poland. His university education (he studied Polish literature at Jagiellonian in Krakow) was interrupted by the Nazi invasion and he was forced to smash rocks in a stone quarry. Later, he worked as a stoker in an industrial unit and suffered accidents that left him slightly disabled. These experiences had an enduring effect, in that they alerted him to the alienation of the weak and powerless. They also turned his thoughts to a career in the priesthood, although in his youth he had wished to pursue a career in acting and was an accomplished poet and writer. In the chapters on *The Limit Imposed Upon Evil*, the Pope explores the co-existence of good and evil and uses Nazism and Communism to illustrate his points concerning the ideologies of evil and the redemptive nature of God. He offers an insight into his experiences of evil and the outcomes of his personal reflections on it and he affirms his belief that the power of good will ultimately prevail.

Wojtyla was ordained a priest in 1947 and was created Cardinal of Krakow in 1967. He had a reputation for being a rarity, a priest who was a philosopher with a solid understanding, though not approval, of Marxist dialectic. The Communist authorities discovered what a strong opponent he could be through his defiant sermons and lectures and his support for industrial workers in their wish to assert their Polish Catholic identity. In the chapters on *Freedom and Responsibility*, Pope John Paul explores his thoughts on the lessons of recent history including his firm belief that in

the process of resisting both Nazism as a system aimed at the destruction of Poland, and Communism as an oppressive system imposed from the East, the Polish people had pursued highly positive ideals. He asserts that those years of occupation and domination saw the recovery and strengthening of the fundamental values by which the people lived and to which they wished to remain faithful. His support and encouragement of the Solidarity movement in Poland in the early 1980s was crucial, as it came at the beginning of the process by which Communism and the Soviet empire were first undermined and then overthrown. His critique of atheistic materialism contained within 'Centesimus Annus' was an important contribution to the eventual disintegration of the old Marxist and Soviet hegemonies.

At the same time, and to the discomfort of Western leaders, he was no less critical of what he described as the 'unbridled capitalism' of the West, which he describes as dangerously decadent and destructive. In the chapters on *Democracy: Possibilities and Risk*, he concurs with the Aristotelian notion of politics as social ethics and quotes Thomas Aquinas as saying 'the law is a rational ordering promulgated for the sake of the common good by him who has the care of the community' (p. 151). But he strongly argues that the law established by man has definite limits, which it should not overstep. He asserts the primacy of God in safeguarding fundamental good and criticizes modern parliaments for their support for what he considers unethical legislation. Legalized abortion is cited as the most obvious example of how governments can exceed what he believes is their proper competence and thus place themselves in open conflict with God's law and the law of nature. This section typifies a Pope capable of great gentleness and sympathy but also of great intolerance and perhaps an ignorance of modern-day pressures.

The Epilogue contains a unique section dealing with the assassination attempt made on Pope John Paul in 1981. There have always been suspicions that the Soviets, enraged by the stance taken by the Papacy on Communism, and acting through the Bulgarian Secret Service, were responsible for the shooting of the Pope in St Peter's Square. It is well known that the Pope had publicly forgiven his attacker, Ali Agca, and even visited him in prison. It is also well known that the Pope believed that because the assassination attempt took place on the feast day of Our Lady of Fatima (13 May) that it might have been the intercession of Our Lady who had saved him on that day. But he had never spoken publicly on this topic and so the book's section on this issue is particularly interesting. In 1991, and significantly whilst giving thanks for the deliverance from Communism, the Pope released the obscure prophecy known as 'The Third Secret of Fatima'. He obviously believed that this prophecy predicted his assassination attempt. He also had Agca's bullet – shot at such

close quarters and which he says was certainly intended to kill, not just wound – placed in the crown of the statue of Our Lady of Fatima. The book recalls the events of the shooting and his subsequent treatment and recovery. Pope John Paul says, ‘It was all a testimony to divine grace . . . Agca knew how to shoot, and he certainly shot to kill. Yet it was as if someone was guiding and deflecting that bullet.’ He writes that Agca, a professional assassin, was perplexed by the fact of his intended victim’s survival and this had led him to want to know what the secret of Fatima was. He was apparently insistent to know what the prophecy had said. The Pope felt that it awakened in him a sense of religion: ‘Ali Agca had probably sensed that over and above his own power, over and above the power of shooting and killing, there was a higher power. He began to look for it.’

In many ways, this episode in the Pope’s life, and his reactions to it, exemplify his stance throughout the text of this book and the text of his life: he experienced and survived evil; rejected its basis and understood its limits; explored redemption as a victory and asserted his belief in a higher power.

The book stimulated me to challenge my own stereotype of the papacy of John Paul II and whilst I strongly disagreed with some of his assertions, I found much in the book to absorb and reflect on. It failed in its attempt to be ‘conversational’ (except in the section on the attempted assassination), but nonetheless was a worthwhile and interesting book.

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DINING WITH SIBERIANS

The other side of Russia: a slice of life in Siberia and the Russian Far East. Sharon Hudgins, 2003. Texas: A & M University Press; ISBN 1585442372. £25.95, cloth.

Tom and Sharon Hudgins are a Texan academic couple who have taught and administered the overseas programmes of the University of Maryland University College in Spain, Germany, Greece, Korea, Japan, Siberia and the newly opened southern littoral of the Russian Far East (*Primorskiy Krai*). Resourceful, adaptable, eager, relaxed and friendly, they cheerfully survived the discomfort and squalor of life in Vladivostok and Irkutsk in 1993 and 1994. Take Christmas, for example. Presented with a naked evergreen tree (in Russia, as elsewhere, a legacy of nineteenth-century German influence), they faced the fact that ‘Russia was not the kind of country where you could just drive down to the local Wal-Mart and buy a tree stand.’ Foraging in the wasteland of mud and filth outside their