

The Holocaust Podcast
Episode 1
'The Origins of Genocide'

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You can't imagine what it meant to be in the Lublin camp; to spend weeks, months, or even years there. Nor will any human tongue or writer ever be able to describe what came to pass on this relatively small patch of ground. You could say that every square inch of land is soaked with blood. Perhaps one day historians will be able to describe in rough terms what happened at Majdanek.
— Former Majdanek prisoner at liberation, July 1944

Two weeks after the start of Operation Overlord — the allied D-Day landings in Normandy, France — the Soviet Union launched Operation Bagration; sending 1.6 million men pouring over the Bylorussian frontlines into German Army Group Centre and inflicting on the Nazis the greatest single defeat in German military history. Fighting shoulder-to-shoulder with the Polish Armia Krajowa and partisans who had been struggling against the German occupation for almost five years, and at the awful cost of almost 200 thousand lives, the Red Army punched a whole into eastern Poland and began the long push back against the occupiers.

By 22-23 July the south-eastern Polish city of Lublin had been surrounded and, after heavy fighting, on Monday 24 the German forces in control of the city capitulated. Polish and Soviet liberators were welcomed into the city by a population utterly traumatised by the sheer barbarism and sadistic cruelty of the German Nazi regime. On entering the Castle jail, the Russian and Polish allies uncovered a scene of horror few could have imagined was but the prelude to the horror that would be discovered within hours. SS-Obergruppenführer Wilhelm Koppe, the SS officer in command of the castle, which the Germans had operated as a prison and torture centre, had ordered the liquidation of the prison; having some 450 prisoners — women and men — rounded up in the yard and shot individually at point-blank range in the head. Their bodies were simply left where they fell as the German forces evacuated the city ahead of the Soviet advance.

Russian reconnaissance planes had identified a complex of guard towers and barracks a little less than 3 kilometres south-east of the centre of Lublin in the direction of Zamość. This was, as the liberators would soon discover to their horror, Konzentrationslager Lublin — known to the local Poles as Majdanek ('little Majdan'), owing to its location next to the Lublin ghetto of Majdan Tatarski, and to its inmates as the 'city of death.' As the Red Army made its rapid advance on Lublin, the Germans set about hastily dismantling the camp in an effort to hide the evidence of their crimes. As a consequence of the rank incompetence of the camp's deputy commandant, SS-Obersturmführer Anton Thernes, however, the crematoria were only partially destroyed before the arrival of Russian and Polish troops — thus giving Majdanek the dark honour of being the best preserved of all the Nazi extermination

centres. Nothing could have prepared the soldiers of the Red Army and the Armia Krajowa for what they were about to uncover.

Constructed on 625 acres — about two and a half square kilometres — of confiscated farmland, surrounded with electrified barbed wire fencing, and watched over by 18 25-foot high guard towers, KZ Lublin, originally built by the Waffen-SS as a prison of war camp, became an extermination centre where, over the course of its 34 month existence, somewhere in the region of 78 to 150 thousand of the two million victims of Operation Reinhard were systematically gassed and incinerated in purpose-built gas chambers and crematoria.

People were brought on trains to Lublin; Jewish men, women, and children — the elderly, mothers carrying their babies, the disabled, the mentally ill, Roma, and others deemed by the Hitlerist regime ‘undesirable,’ ‘life unworthy of life,’ from where they had to walk two miles from the railway station to the death camp — all the while uncertain of their fate. There, the SS, Trawniki guards, and Jewish members of the Sonderkommando reassured them that this was a labour camp — telling them that following selection they would be sent for showers and delousing. Those not selected for forced labour were filed off to a shower block where they were undressed and herded into a gas chamber. Once these unfortunate people were locked inside this sealed room, SS soldiers on the roof would pour cyanide crystals in on top of them which would become a cloud of poisonous gas inside — asphyxiating all the helpless victims within 15 to 20 minutes.

Everywhere about the feet of the liberators was strewn the goulsh evidence of this beastly crime; human ash and fragments of incinerated bones were lying in the mud across the fields for miles around. The crematoria were not enough to meet the demand for the industrialised murder of so many. Prisoners had been forced, in 1943, to dig large ditches at the south of the compound where, during *Aktion Erntefest* (‘Operation Harvest Festival’) — the largest single massacre of Jews during the Holocaust, some 40 thousand Jews were shot to death in a day-long glut of violence and murder. Polish people living just beyond the camp watched from the roofs of their homes as the unspeakable unfolded before them. Teams of Jewish prisoners, about 600 persons temporarily spared death, were made to burn the bodies of the victims in piles in the open fields around the ditches. Human ash! The ashes of tens of thousands of human beings were used for fertiliser among other things, used to cultivate cabbages in the surrounding farms.

Alive in the camp at liberation were 480 Soviet POWs and 180 political prisoners; emaciated and in a state of bewilderment and disbelief that their salvation had come. They had witnessed the most depraved crime in the history of human civilisation and would, for the rest of what remained of their lives, struggle to find the words to describe what they had seen and suffered.

I saw a shipment of children, 157 of them. They were picked up from the train station in Lublin with a truck and they stopped in front of the gas chamber. Four year olds, five year olds, very small children. Some of them were already dead, they had died in the train during the short trip.

— Testimony of Karl Heinz Stalp, Kapo

Between March and 19 April 1944, as German forces on the eastern front continued to retreat across western Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine, the Nazis — treating the extermination of the Jewish population of Europe as a national priority — evacuated the surviving Jewish prisoners of Majdanek, forcing them to march on long ‘death marches’ west into the Reich; to other camps like Auschwitz-Birkenau and Ravensbrück. Days before liberation, the last train load of Jews from Majdanek left Lublin on 19 July 1944. All across eastern Europe, thousands perished on these marches. Some fell down with exhaustion, never to get back up. Many died of starvation. Those too old, too weak, and too sick to continue were taken from the columns of walking humanity and shot.

On 10 and 12 August, having seen for themselves what the Nazis had done at Majdanek, the novelists Boris Gorbатов and Konstantin Simonov published articles in *Pravda*, telling the world what the Germans were doing. These were widely read and picked up by the media around the world. In England, however, where its Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, had decided to save resources by not bombing the railway lines leading to Auschwitz, the BBC refused to report on Majdanek — believing it to be too fantastical to be true. Yet, it was revealed after the war that in the summer of 1941, during Operation Barbarossa — the German invasion of Russia — British intelligence agents were listening in on classified German radio transmissions describing the systematic mass murder of Jews and Russian POWs. Britain did not publicise the atrocities until it had no option but to report on them.

In the weeks and months that followed, the entire sick network of the Third Reich’s ghettos, labour and transit camps, concentration camps, and extermination camps were uncovered. The Red Army liberated the infamous Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination centre on 27 January 1945 and in the west British forces stumbled upon and liberated Bergen-Belsen on 15 April, and in early May of the same year — after the suicide of Adolf Hitler in Berlin — the Third Reich surrendered. The nightmare had ended and the painful process of survivors searching for loved ones began.

In the 1990s, at Kilmarnock Academy in Scotland, a veteran of the Second World War came and spoke to our History class. He must have been well into his 70s. He had been one of the first allied soldiers to enter Bergen-Belsen. Talking to us about his memories, of stacks of skeletal bodies, of bulldozers tipping naked and partially clothed corpses into massive mass graves, of the stomach-turning stench, he broke down in tears and sobbed. Five decades on, and this poor old man was still haunted by what he had seen there.

Today, when we think of the Holocaust, we have a tendency to see it as an event or a series of single events — as black and white snapshots of something that happened a long time ago. All of this is of course quite wrong. The Holocaust did not happen a long time ago. People who owned telephones, drove motorcars, and who listened to the news on the radio were taken from their homes, murdered in remote forests, and dumped into mass graves. These people went to the cinema and kept photographs of their families and friends. We can still watch colour film shot by people in Nazi era Germany. Ordinary people drove or took the bus or tram into the city centre and used money to buy fashionable clothes. The lives these people led were not unlike our own. This was the modern world. 80 years ago,

but still very much the modern world. And neither was the Holocaust an event or a series of events. Rather, it was a period of time; a culture of attitudes and behaviours produced by a long and complex history — a process of the development of popular prejudices into a whole set of actions across various societies (actions often met with indifference) that led only in the final stages of its development into mechanisms of mass extermination.

All too often in discussions about our governments' treatment of immigrants and refugees, about the rise in support for right-wing populist political parties, and the mainstreaming and normalisation of openly racist and xenophobic ideas and opinions, allusions to the Holocaust are shouted down, laughed at, and dismissed on the disingenuous grounds that we have nothing like extermination camps. People are not being murdered by state governments because of their racial, ethnic, or religious identities, so — the argument runs — this is nothing like the Holocaust. But it is. Much of this is very like the Holocaust, because the Holocaust started just like this. Hitler was not elected on a platform of building Auschwitz. Hitler and German National Socialism were the products of developing antisemitic opinions, nationalist ideas, and widespread intolerance. Arguably, it could even be said that the Holocaust had begun — that it was latent in European society — before Adolf Hitler came to power in Germany.

In this podcast series, I would like for us to take a closer look at the Holocaust — as a culture and a process which over the course of decades blossomed into a nightmare. In this first episode, *The Origins of Genocide*, we will go right back to the origins of antisemitism in Germany and in the whole of Europe to see how European attitudes towards Jewish people became the foundations on which genocide could be rationalised and effectively obfuscated in a culture of unsympathetic, sometimes hostile silence — how so many could tolerate the intolerable until the forces driving it became so powerful that no one in society could do anything to stop it — *even if they wanted to*. With far-right political parties gaining ground across Europe and North America, this is an immensely important history and one, lest we want it repeated, we ought to pay close attention to. It won't be fun. I don't want this to be 'entertainment education.' I want us to stick to the facts, avoid emotion as much as possible, and tell a story we really do have to hear.

Before getting into this, I want to be clear that I do not like the word 'Holocaust' being used to describe these events and this whole ugly period of history. Holocaust is the wrong word. I think, also, that it is a disrespectful word to use to describe something so evil. As some may be aware, the word 'holocaust' is a biblical word from the English translation of the Torah that describes a whole sacrifice — a burnt animal sacrifice to HaShem, the God of Israel. This is a voluntary sacrifice made by the people to their God, and so its use in the context of genocide implies almost that i. this was a sacrifice and that ii. it was voluntary. The Holocaust was neither. This was murder, the needless vicious and vindictive destruction of human life on an unimaginable scale and the wanton destruction of societies, cultures, and an ancient and rich European civilisation.

If his offering be a holocaust, and of the herd, he shall offer a male without blemish, at the door of the testimony, to make the Lord favourable to him.

Leviticus 1:3

Shoah — a Hebrew term meaning ‘catastrophe’ — when discussing the murder of the Jews and *Porajmos* or *Samudaripen* — the Roma words for ‘hard time’ and ‘mass killing’ — when discussing the murder of the Romani people are better and more fitting. Sadly, however, given that a podcast like this is aimed at a wider audience, these terms are simply too obscure. Holocaust, for the time being, has won out in the language of the public sphere — and it is for this reason we will use it here. I only wish to make it known here, from the very beginning, that there is a better language to describe these events — one which many of the survivors and their descendants prefer.

As already said, the Holocaust was ‘a period of time; a culture of attitudes and behaviours produced by a long and complex history — a process of the development of popular prejudices into a whole set of actions across various societies that led only in the final stages of its development to mechanisms of mass extermination.’ Before we touch on the prelude of the Holocaust in Weimar Germany in the 1920s and 30s in the next episode, here we want to concern ourselves with the long pre-history that made this *impossibility* possible: the millenia-old history of Christian anti-Judaism in Europe and the evolution of secular antisemitism from the beginning of the modern period, through the rise of nationalism and the nation-state, to its use in forging ideas of patriotism and nationhood in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In 1988, at a meeting of the Council of Christians and Jews — an interfaith council founded in 1942 — marking the fiftieth anniversary of Kristallnacht, Robert Runcie, the then Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury said:

Without centuries of Christian antisemitism, Hitler’s passionate hatred would never have been so passionately echoed ... The travesty of Kristallnacht and all that followed is that so much was perpetrated in Christ’s name. To glorify the Third Reich, the Christian faith was betrayed. We cannot say, ‘We did not know,’ We did — and stood by. And even today there are many Christians who fail to see it as self-evident and why this blindness? Because for centuries Christians have held Jews collectively responsible for the death of Jesus. On Good Friday Jews have, in times past, cowered behind locked doors for fear of a Christian mob seeking ‘revenge’ for deicide. Without the poisoning of Christian minds through the centuries, the Holocaust is unthinkable.

Without question, Dr Runcie was correct in this unfaltering acknowledgement of Christian culpability. I only have one minor quibble. Not in any way to minimise the roots of the Holocaust and antisemitism in western Christian prejudice and ill-opinion, what he was describing here was Christian anti-Judaism and not antisemitism. One is as wrong as the other, and antisemitism owes its existence largely to anti-Judaism, but these are different things. Speaking as a religious Christian, I am persuaded that, of the two, Christian anti-Judaism is the worse — because it came from a culture and a community that was supposed to be nourished by a Gospel of indiscriminate love. Anti-Judaism was always the failure of that command to love. Where antisemitism is a hatred of a people on the basis of their race and ethnicity, anti-Judaism was a hatred of Jews on account of their religious traditions, their refusal to convert to the Christian faith, and for — as it was widely believed — responsibility for the death of Jesus; for deicide — for the murder of God.

Antisemitism, certainly as it developed in Europe through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, was as unthinkable without anti-Judaism as the Holocaust was unthinkable without antisemitism. By the start of the twentieth century, for sure, for many, Christian anti-Judaism and secular antisemitism amounted to the same thing — *Jew hatred*.

If we are to understand the roots of the Holocaust, then, we must travel back in time through European history to the earliest years of the Christian faith. As we can read even in the pages of the New Testament, during the later half of the First Century, Jewish communities were to be found right across the Mediterranean basin. The economic stability and size of the Roman Empire gave people (free people, as opposed to slaves) under Roman rule — not only Jews, who were even then a tiny minority — the opportunity to travel from one side of the empire to the other for purposes of trade and commerce. Young men who joined the Roman Army in Palestine and Syria could be billeted in far-flung corners of the empire like Gaul and Britannia. The freedom of movement created for many Roman subjects was unrivalled in European history until the establishment of the European Union almost twenty centuries later. As with many patterns of migration, in modern times too, the movement of merchants and soldiers often resulted in the movement of their families, and before long Jewish communities had been established from one side of the Mediterranean to the other, from North Africa in the south to Britannia, Germania, and Gaul (modern day England, the Low Countries, and France), and these communities — like many other ethnic communities and their religions — thrived.

At least a decade before the first Christian church was founded in the city of Rome, during the reign of Emperor Claudius, the Jewish community of the city — the imperial capital — constructed the magnificent Synagogue of Ostia, at the seaport of Rome. This is one of the oldest synagogues in the world, the oldest in Europe, and the oldest mainstream synagogue as yet discovered outside Israel. While Saul of Tarsus (that is St Paul to Christians) was setting out on his missionary journeys into Syria, Asia Minor (modern day western Turkey), and Greece, the Jews of Rome were gathering together every Shabbat to hear the Torah read, to sing psalms, and to pray their liturgy.

It was in this milieu that the first seeds of Christian anti-Judaism were planted. Paul, himself a Jew of the Jewish diaspora, had, according to his own account and the Acts of the Apostles, been commissioned by the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem to hunt down and persecute Christian believers — themselves also Jews. As the competition between the Church and the Synagogue intensified he wrote to the Christians in the Greek city of Thessaloniki:

For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you suffered the same things from your own compatriots as they did from the Jews, who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out; they displease God and oppose everyone by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. Thus they have constantly been filling up the measure of their sins; but God's wrath has overtaken them at last.

— 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16

We can — and should — explain this away by explaining that it was produced within the context of a dispute between mainstream Judaism and the emergent Church, which was then very much a Jewish

messianic sect. Jesus of Nazareth was a Jew, believed to be the Jewish messiah by those Jews — like the disciples and the first followers of the Christian ‘Way’ — who believed in him. This was not an ethnic prejudice against ‘the Jews,’ this was a hot dispute between Jews. Yet, as the Church grew in numbers and separated itself more from the Synagogue — and in places where Christians were expelled from the synagogue — and as Christianity began to attract an increasing number of gentiles or non-Jews, the reception history of these texts took on a darker hue. In time, the Church would establish itself in opposition to the Synagogue and, regrettably, to the Jewish faith and, ultimately, to the Jews themselves. Christian history, from the reported resurrection of Christ to 1945 and the discovery of the extermination camps was a sorry history of failure to overcome an ancient animosity — and this coloured and plagued the Christian faith.

On 27 February 380, Emperor Theodosius promulgated the Edict of Thessalonica, establishing Roman Christianity as the state religion of the Empire, effectively transforming priests and bishops into civil servants and functionaries of the imperial state. State policy became Church policy, and in time Church policy became state policy. Clearly, this had benefits. It finally ended the persecution of Christians and paved the way for an empire directed by more humane religious and spiritual ideas. This alignment with the state — the most powerful empire in the world at the time — injected the Church, which was already a highly motivated proselytising institution, with the resources to send emissaries and missionaries to every corner of the empire and beyond. By the fifth century, Christian missionaries had penetrated Ireland and Scotland, most of central Europe, and Scandinavia. In 966 Christianity became the religion of the new Polish state, and a century before the Church of Constantinople completed its greatest missionary project — the conversion of the Kievan Russ, the territories of modern day Belarus, Ukraine, and cis-Ural Russia.

European Christianity — the faith that would become Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Protestantism across the continent had transcended its Jewish roots, but — as all European history bears witness — never overcame the sibling rivalry. Christianity became the majority faith from Lisbon to Moscow, and the Church the principal formator and shaper of Mediaeval culture. The Jews and their faith, on the other hand, almost vanished into obscurity; preserved almost entirely in the Christian imagination as a living relic from the Church’s myth of origin. Where Jews were to be found in Christendom — the expanse of the Christian world — they were tolerated, but just. Jews were everywhere viewed through the lens of Christian memory; at once as the people of the Promise and a people who rejected the Gospel and killed the Son of God.

Anti-Judaism infected and so informed every part of the Church in Europe. Thomas Aquinas (1225-74), perhaps the greatest Christian theologian and philosophical mind of the Middle Ages, was a thinker remarkably informed by Jewish philosophy and whose work betrayed long and close study of some of the most impenetrable works of Jewish scholarship and whose work was frequently translated by Jewish scholars into Hebrew, never managed to free his mind — and so help to liberate Christian minds for centuries to come — from the profound antipathy of the Church towards Jews. Questioned by the Duchess of Brabant ‘whether at any time, and at what time, it was lawful to exact material

tribute from Jews,' his answer followed the strictest letter of the law of the Church's teaching on the Jews; a statement that hangs over and haunts Christian theology to the present day:

... as their sins deserve, the Jews are or have been given over into perpetual slavery, as the laws state, so that earthly lords may take their property as though it were their own, provided only that the things necessary to sustain life are not withdrawn.

'As their sins deserve!' What the great Doctor of the Church is referencing here is the idea of the 'blood curse.' When, according to the Gospel of Matthew, the Roman Procurator Pontius Pilate appealed to the people of Jerusalem — 'the Jews' — to save the life of Jesus, the people as a whole answered:

To αἷμα αὐτοῦ ἐφ' ἡμᾶς καὶ ἐπὶ τα τέκνα ἡμῶν

His blood be on us and on our children!

— Matthew 27:25

The author or authors of the Matthean Gospel seeking, quite clearly, to ingratiate their work to a Greek and Roman audience, shifted the blame for his execution from the Roman forces of occupation to the very people it was believed God had promised a land, deliverance from slavery and exile, and a redeemer. Now it was possible to take from the Gospel the idea that by its faith the Church had replaced Israel and that the Jews had become enemies both of God and the people of God — the Church. For the crime of the murder of Christ, which the Jews in Jerusalem had apparently put on the heads of their children, the Jews were to be held in perpetual slavery. Jews could never truly be free people in the Christian world.

In spite of *Sicut Judaeis*, a series of papal bulls from Pope Calixtus II in 1120 to Nicholas V in 1447 affirming and reaffirming a significant degree of toleration of Jews and insisting on their protection from abuse and violence, the Church's attitude towards was never consistent. At the Fourth Lateran Council, by way of an example, Jews were forbidden to charge 'extortionate and excessive interest,' compelled to wear particular clothes to distinguish them from Christians so that no Christian shall come to marry them, and disqualified from holding public office. Jews were seen as a dangerous other, a necessary outsider-insider, who could function within Christian society with certain restrictions. The Church banned money lending or usury, something not forbidden by their own laws and customs to Jews. The Jewish money-lender, then, became a staple of the Christian perception of the Jew as a necessary evil. So powerful was this distorted image, that the words of Shakespeare's Shylock ring to this day in the Christian mind:

Signior Antonio, many a time and oft

In the Rialto you have rated me

About my moneys and my usances.

Still have I borne it with a patient shrug

(For suffrance is the badge of all our tribe).

You call me misbeliever, cutthroat dog,

*And spet upon my Jewish gaberdine,
And all for use of that which is mine own.*

— William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice* (Act 1, Scene 3)

‘Set fire to their synagogues and schools,’ blasted the Protestant Reformer Martin Luther in his work *On the Jews and Their Lies*. The homes of the Jews should ‘be razed and destroyed,’ and Jewish ‘prayer books and Talmudic writings, in which such idolatry, lies, cursing, and blasphemy are taught, should be taken from them.’ And more, ‘their rabbis should be forbidden to teach on pain of loss of life and limb.’ From its earliest beginnings, the Protestant Reformation — which sought so dearly to renew a Church that it believed had sunk into corruption and sinfulness — was not going to reconsider prevailing Christian attitudes towards the Jews. As far as the Jews were concerned, this was to be a continuation of the same dark and painful history.

Admittedly, Luther’s thinking on the Jews oscillated over the course of his tumultuous career, from an early attempt to love-bomb them into the reformed church to a violent and vitriolic besmurching of all things Jewish when they refused to give up their faith. This was not the Jews of Europe’s first rodeo. And yet, Luther and the Protestant reformations — plural — from Luther to Henry VIII and his Archbishop Thomas Cranmer were the foreshadowing of something much worse to come. In its formation of national churches, broken away from a universal *Catholic* Church, the Reformation period ploughed the soil of Europe for the birth of national consciousness and the terrifying ideology of nationalism with its ideas of national insiders and outsiders. Where in the past the king or emperor was understood in some regnal and mystical fashion as the father of all his people, now the monarch — as the head of the national church — was the defender of the faith; the Christian faith, and the nation itself defined in law and in the person of the king as a Christian nation. Jews in the past might never be citizens of Christendom *qua* sons and daughters of the Church, but remained subjects of the king and entitled to his protection. Now, as forms of nationalism began to ferment, the Jew — as the archetypical non-Christian — could never be a part of the nation.

In the next episode we will talk more about the development of European nationalism and its ramifications for the Jews of Europe, but right now we want to keep our focus on the Christian religious, social, and cultural underpinnings of what would feed nationalist and secular European antisemitism — the necessary prerequisite of the Holocaust.

By the early modern period, the centre of European Jewish civilisation was in the east; in the massive expanse of territory that was the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (modern Poland, much of the Baltic, Belarus, parts of western Russia, and most of Ukraine). Where they came from is something of an enduring mystery. We know that from the first century small migrations of Jewish communities moved north from the Byzantine lands towards Kiev. Others we know came from the east through the Khazarian Empire — where there is a fascinating history of the conversion of the nobility (a history that has become something of a favourite of modern anti-Semites, sadly). That the predominant language of these Jews was Yiddish — a descendent of High German — tends to inform us that most of these Jews came from the west; from France and Germany. Trade opportunities and no doubt a desire to escape the reach of the Church in the west would have made this fringe of Europe particularly

attractive. It is entirely fascinating to find that, as minters to the kings, Jews were milling coins for the states of this borderland in the eleventh and twelfth centuries which bore Hebrew inscriptions.

Across northern Germany, at the time for the First Crusade in 1096, Jews were subjected to a series of popular massacres that were very much beyond the control of the state authorities, and the mania that swept much of western Europe during the Crusades put a great deal of pressure on Jews to migrate — and they did. Over two centuries later, following waves of Jewish migrations to the east, Kazimierz the Great officially welcomed the Jews to Poland; a near mythical event in Jewish memory that cemented Kazimierz in eastern European Jewish folk memory as something of a messiah — leading many rabbinic scholars of the time to formulate a Hebrew etymology of the name Poland: *Po Lin* — ‘here we shall find rest.’ Poland, Lithuania, western Russia, and Ukraine become a refuge for Jews; a territory no doubt many of them began to see as a type of a promised land. This four to five hundred year period was a golden age for Jewish civilisation in Europe, a golden age that would quite actually go up in smoke and flames in the twentieth century.

Western Europe became a place of poison for the Jews from the start of the Crusades. Through the twelfth century the idea of the blood libel really began to take root in the popular western Christian mind — a conspiracy theory which accused Jews of stealing Christian children, sacrificing them, and using their blood in Passover bread and other rituals. This blood libel, in one form or another, has refused to go away, and we still see it in modern anti-Semitic conspiracies. PizzaGate, for example, the Qanon-pushed internet rumour that Democrat supporting ‘wealthy elites’ and ‘globalists’ — subtle codes for ‘the Jews’ — were keeping kidnapped children for demonic blood sacrifices in the basement of a Washington DC pizza parlour, is just a modern iteration of the blood libel slur. From taverns in mediaeval Germany to *Twitter* and *Facebook* today, these horrid ideas have endured and continue to have a deeply negative impact on Jewish people.

Edward I expelled the entire Jewish population of England in 1290, a century after the Jews of York were locked up inside the tower of York castle and burned alive. In Spain, in 1492, the Jews of Spain who lived for centuries under Islamic toleration, were offered the choice — to convert to Christianity or leave. Everywhere where this happened, we find the same religiously motivated hatreds and prejudices. Jews became the victims of Christian failures and insecurities, a means by which western Christian society could exorcise the worst of its own demons — by projecting it onto the other, the idea outsider-inside, and by casting them out.

Can anything be said in defence of this Christian treatment of the Jews? Certainly not. This will forever be a shameful blot on European Christian history. There is no denying that this Christian religious hostility to the Jews in time brought about the necessary conditions for the development of modern secular antisemitism. But — and this is important (while not being an absolution) — it must be stressed that Christian anti-Judaism was never a hatred of the Jews as a racial or ethnic group. The Church never denied the humanity of Jewish people — and, sure, this is little consolation to the Jews who suffered at the hands of Christians — and conversion was always open to those who would accept Christ and Christian baptism. Absolutely, this was deplorable and unjustifiable in any age. But as toxic

and poisonous as it often was, the Church's treatment of Jews in western Europe was something quite different from antisemitism — a hatred of the Jews as a race.

Robert Runcie was correct. 'Without the poisoning of Christian minds through the centuries, the Holocaust is unthinkable.' A direct line can be traced from Christian readings of the Gospels and the Letters of Paul to what the Red Army discovered at Majdanek in 1944. As a religious Christian, this is an uncomfortable truth for me. It is an uncomfortable truth for Christians everywhere. Somehow, over a protracted period of preaching and teaching, some of the ugliest ideas of Christianity made the horrors of mass murder and the Holocaust possible. Ideas have incredibly long lives and have the ability, over time and space, to mutate in ways that could never have been imagined at the time of their birth. This is what happened with Christian anti-Judaism. Christian attitudes towards Judaism and the Jewish people informed the society and culture of Europe in such a way that it travelled and bled into other developing ideas over two millennia. In the saddest of all twists of fate, St Augustine's City of God took the train to Lublin and became the city of death.

Next time we look at how the negative attitudes of mainstream Christians across the whole of Europe made antisemitism an inevitable by-product of nationalism by the mid-nineteenth century, and how in the national embarrassment of Germany after World War I and the Great Depression this force was mobilised by the Nazis to unify the state by making outcasts and victims of other — millions of others. Weimar Germany was not, as we shall see, an isolated moment in the past of one country. Weimar and its descent into barbarism is a pattern we can see time and again when economies fail in western industrial societies infected with the disease of antisemitism. The Holocaust is not so much a history lesson as it is a warning for the future — a warning to us. 'Never Again,' lasts only so long as people remember what must never be forgotten.

Thank you for listening, and I hope you will tune in again to *The Holocaust Podcast*.