

INTER-RELIGIOUS: The Ecumenical Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew I presents Dr. Debbie Weissman with book about Greeks in Auschwitz during a visit to the Patriarchate in Istanbul in June



COURTESY TOMAS

To Meet or Not to Meet

Interfaith and peace organizations are tested in times of crisis

Deborah Weissman, Istanbul

“YOU’RE GOING TO Istanbul?” The taxi driver taking me from my home in Jerusalem to the air-

port seemed incredulous. So were many of my relatives and friends.

In mid-June, less than three weeks after the unfortunate flotilla incident, I spent a week in Istanbul, at the annual conference of

the International Council of Christians and Jews (ICCJ), of which I am president. Despite the Israeli government’s warnings against travel to Turkey, despite media reports of anti-Israel demonstrations and

despite the fear that some Israeli tourists felt on the streets of Turkey, I went. If the organization I head is holding its annual conference, I must be there.

I am the first Jewish woman and only the second woman to hold the position of president in the more-than-60-year history of the Council. The ICCJ functions as an umbrella organization of local councils in about 30 countries (including the Inter-religious Coordinating Council in Israel, the ICCI, founded and headed by Rabbi Dr. Ron Kronish) and runs its own projects and forums, including an annual international conference. In 2008, in honor of Israel's 60th anniversary, the conference was held in Jerusalem, focused on the theme of "The Contribution of Jewish-Christian-Muslim Dialogue to Peace-Building in the Holy Land."

The constitution of the ICCJ calls for a rotating presidency between Jews and Christians. In Jerusalem, I was elected to a three-year term of office. My predecessor, who had served for two consecutive terms, was Father John Pawlikowski, a professor of social ethics at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago and a veteran of Catholic-Jewish dialogue. His predecessor was another Israeli, Rabbi David Rosen, well-known in interreligious circles.

Our annual conferences are generally attended by 100 to 200 people from throughout the world. The Christians include Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox; the Jews span the wide spectrum from Orthodox to secular.

At last year's conference, held in Berlin, we had chosen to hold the 2010 conference in a predominantly Muslim country, in order to better explore our theme of bilateral and trilateral interreligious dialogue. The ICCI has no intention of abandoning the crucially important dialogue between Christians and Jews. Yet we do wish to explore ways of involving Muslims on various levels of activity, in recognition of our common spiritual heritage as descendants of Abraham and our common concerns in the contemporary world.

One of these concerns is the hijacking of our respective faiths by violent extremists. More than 90 years ago, poet William Butler Yeats gave us words that are no less relevant today. In "The Second Coming," written in 1919, the bard tells us:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;...

The best lack all conviction, while the worst

Are full of passionate intensity.

As Jews, Christians and Muslims, I believe that we must work to ensure that people like us remain passionate and intense in our convictions and our commitments to nonviolence, open dialogue and mutual respect. We took as the motto for our Istanbul conference the famous quotation from the Koran (Sura 49,13):

The advisory against travel to Turkey was, at best, an unnecessary precaution; at worst, it was a political step in a dangerous process

O humankind!

We created you from a single (pair) of a male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, so that you may know one another...

During the winter, as relations between Israel and Turkey began to deteriorate, our international executive board went to Istanbul to assess the situation. Should we go ahead with our plans to hold the conference there? Would it be safe for the conference participants? Would we in any way be putting local Jews and Christians at risk? Based on our very positive experience there that week and our consultations with the locals, we went ahead with our plans.

But after the tragic events on the *Mavi Marmara* on May 31, we were again faced with a dilemma.

The Israeli media were reporting anti-Israel demonstrations in the streets of Istanbul, in front of the Israeli Consulate. The Israeli Foreign Ministry issued travel advisories. Hundreds of Israelis had canceled their planned vacations in Turkey. Should we still go? What if Israeli passports would no longer be accepted at the Istanbul airport? Would it be safer to go in on a foreign passport? What if there were no flights? Could I fly to another European city and then get to Istanbul?

If we canceled the conference, a lot of fine people would lose a lot of money. And

quite apart from financial considerations, could our organization afford to go a whole year without an international meeting?

One of the local Turkish Jews with whom we consulted told us that there was an "unhealthy electricity in the air" that week, and a Catholic bishop had been brutally murdered in the south of Turkey.

After much deliberation – thank God for the invention of Skype! – we decided to hold the conference as planned. In our letter to the registrants, we wrote: "The words of Hillel in the Ethics of the Fathers are most appropriate: 'If not now, when?' Interfaith and peace organizations are tested in times of crisis. Now more than ever our presence in Istanbul is needed and hopefully we will be able to contribute something (even very small) to defuse tensions."

Perhaps one of the reasons I was less frightened than some is that when I saw the Turkish anti-Israel demonstration on television and heard the report that there were about 10,000 demonstrators, I realized that in a city of 15 to 17 million, like Istanbul, that is not a particularly significant number. I think there may actually have been more anti-Turkish demonstrators in Israel. I must admit that my greatest fear was a fantasy that if Israel cut off ties with Turkey, I could be accused of going to an enemy state and suspected of espionage or treason! But having been on a secret Zionist mission to the Soviet Union in 1971, having served in the IDF (albeit in the Education Corps) and having lived in Jerusalem through two intifadas, it would take more than a government warning to stop me from going.

Of the more than a hundred Jews, Christians and Muslims from five continents who had registered, six were due to come from Israel. Three unfortunately canceled; they and their families were fearful. The other three of us came in, all on Israeli passports. Rabbi Ehud Bandel, the first vice president of the ICCJ, who had just attended the World Zionist Congress, representing the Masorati movement; and Viktoria Kanar, from the Interfaith Encounter Association, were the other two Israeli Jews with me.

This was my fourth time in Turkey, and I felt absolutely no difference from the other three times – not at Ben-Gurion Airport, not at Istanbul's Ataturk Airport and not in Istanbul itself. The Turks tend to be gracious and cordial and they continued to be so. Even on the Turkish Airlines

