

**A BLESSING
TO ONE ANOTHER**)
POPE JOHN PAUL II &
THE JEWISH PEOPLE

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**Pope John Paul II:
A Legacy of Improved Catholic-Jewish Relations**

The man who would become Pope John Paul II was born Karol Wojtyla on May 18, 1920 in Wadowice, a Polish town of 8,000 Catholics and 2,000 Jews. The pope's early years were spent living among his Jewish neighbors — Karol's father rented an apartment from a Jewish landlord; Karol attended school with Jews; and his closest friend was a Jewish boy named Jerzy Kluger. As he told the Warsaw Jewish Community in 1991, "I belong to the generation for which relationships with Jews was a daily occurrence." (Frontline documentary, John Paul II: The Millennial Pope. Chapter: The Jews by Jane Barnes and Helen Whitney, available on www.pbs.org)

His childhood in Wadowice would lay the groundwork for one of Pope John Paul II's most extraordinary legacies — improved relations between Catholics and Jews. As a young priest in Krakow, as the bishop of that city, and then finally as Pope John Paul II, he has continuously worked to enrich this relationship, bringing two groups of people closer than ever before.

Here are some examples and most significant contributions culled from "A Blessing to One Another: Pope John Paul II and the Jewish People:"

As Pope John Paul II:

- **He officially established diplomatic relations between the Vatican and the State of Israel in 1993.**
- **The pope has spoken of repentance for past treatment of the Jewish people.** In the cover letter he wrote to accompany the document prepared by the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, "We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah," Pope John Paul II noted: "On numerous occasions during my Pontificate I have recalled with a sense of deep sorrow the sufferings of the Jewish people during the Second World War. The crime which has become known as the Shoah remains an indelible stain on the history of the century that is coming to a close." (March 12, 1998) The document declares: "The Catholic Church desires to express her deep sorrow for the failures of her sons and daughters in every age. This is an act of repentance, since, as members of the Church, we are linked to the sins as well as the merits of all her children. The Church approaches with great compassion the experience of extermination, the Shoah."

- **He was the first pope to enter a synagogue in 2000 years.** When he walked into the Synagogue of Rome on the Lungotevere dei Cenci on April 13, 1986, he became the first Bishop of Rome to join Jews in their synagogue since the time of St. Peter. Commenting on the significance of this visit, the Holy Father referred to it as the “one event which transcends the limits of the year . . . marked in centuries and millennia in the history of the Church. I thank Divine Providence that I was able to visit our ‘elder brothers’ in the faith of Abraham in their Roman synagogue” (Homily, December 31, 1986) [ref. *A Light for the World*].

John Paul II also said: “But a truly exceptional experience for me was certainly my visit to the synagogue of Rome. The history of the Jews in Rome is a unique chapter in the history of the Jewish people, a chapter closely linked for that matter to The Acts of the Apostles. During that memorable visit, I spoke of the Jews as our *elder brothers in the faith*. These words were an expression both of the Council’s teaching, and a profound conviction on the part of the Church.” [*Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (1994), pp. 98-99.]

As a Priest in Krakow (1946-1958):

- **Father Wojtyla refused a Catholic couple’s request to baptize the young Jewish boy left in their care at the beginning of the Second World War.** The young boy’s parents left him in the care of Mr. and Mrs. Josef Yachowitz in an attempt to save his life. The boy’s parents were murdered in the Holocaust and when they did not return for him, the Catholic couple asked a local priest to baptize him. That priest refused, telling the couple to honor the wishes of the boy’s late parents and reunite the boy with his Jewish relatives in America. When Cardinal Wojtyla was elected Pope, Mrs. Yachowitz contacted the boy, now an adult living in Washington, D.C., and told him that the new pope was the priest who refused to baptize him.

During His Childhood and Teenage Years:

- Pope John Paul II (born Karol Wojtyla) recalled this about his life in Wadowice, Poland: “I remember, above all, the Wadowice elementary school, where at least a fourth of the pupils in my class were Jewish. . . . I can vividly remember the Jews who gathered every Saturday at the synagogue behind our school. Both religious groups, Catholics and Jews, were united, I presume, by the awareness that they prayed to the same God.” [*Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (1994), p. 96.]
- Karol played on the soccer team. The Christians would regularly play against the Jews, but there was no obvious racial or religious animosity. In fact, Karol often substituted for the goalie of the Jewish team.
- Two of his closest childhood friends were Jerzy Kluger, the son of the president of Wadowice’s Jewish community, and Regina (Ginka) Beer, a Jewish girl who often acted opposite him in theatrical productions. Jerzy Kluger remained a close friend until the pope’s death. John Paul II held his first private audience as pope with him.

Scholars who have studied the pope’s legacy of Catholic-Jewish relations believe these early experiences instilled in him an openness to Jews and a profound respect for their faith.

