

5 QUESTIONS:

A Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies Interview With Suzanne Brown-Fleming on her Recent Publication, *The Holocaust and Catholic Conscience: Cardinal Aloisius Muench and the Guilt Question in Germany*

Suzanne Brown-Fleming is a Senior Program Officer in the University Programs Division and a former Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies Fellow (2000). She received her B.A. in History and English from Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech), her M.A. in American Diplomatic History from the University of Richmond, and her Ph.D. in Modern German History from the University of Maryland-College Park. She is author of *The Holocaust and Catholic Conscience: Cardinal Aloisius Muench and the Guilt Question in Germany* (University of Notre Dame Press in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2006), written in part during her fellowship at the USHMM. Her articles and essays have appeared in *Lessons and Legacies VI: New Currents in Holocaust Research* (Northwestern University Press, 2004); *The United States and Germany in the Era of the Cold War, 1945–1990: A Handbook* (Cambridge University Press, 2004); and *Encyclopedia of German-American Relations* (ABC-CLIO, 2005); and in the scholarly journals *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* and *Contemporary Church History Semi-Annual Journal for History and Theology*. Dr. Brown-Fleming's research focuses on the relationship of Roman Catholicism and Nazism before, during, and after World War II.

Who was Cardinal Muench?

Born in Milwaukee of German-immigrant parents, Cardinal Aloisius Muench (1889–1962) was a key, and heretofore ignored, figure in internal German Catholic discussion about the Holocaust, Jews, and Judaism between 1946 and 1959. He was the most powerful American Catholic figure and influential Vatican representative in occupied Germany and in postwar West Germany during this period. While bishop of the diocese of Fargo, North Dakota (1935–59), Cardinal Muench also held five key positions in Germany. He was the Catholic liaison representative between the U.S. Office of Military Government and the German Catholic Church in the American zone of occupied Germany (1946–49); Pope Pius XII's apostolic visitor to Germany (1946–47); Vatican relief officer in Kronberg, near Frankfurt-am-Main (1947–49); Vatican regent in Kronberg (1949–51); and Vatican nuncio to Germany from the new seat in Bad Godesberg, outside Bonn (1951–59).

What aspects of or issues raised by his story drew you to researching his life, thought, and work?

As a (still practicing) Roman Catholic raised and schooled in the post-*Nostra Aetate*, post-Vatican II Church, I was immediately attracted to Cardinal Muench's story, and, frankly, very surprised at the antisemitism that animated him and many other Catholics (German and American) at times during his stay in Germany. In my own experience attending Catholic schools from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, and in worship, I was taught very little about Jesus of Nazareth as a *Jewish* rabbi, rooted in specifically Jewish traditions. On the other hand, I was not taught, nor did I hear, anti-Jewish commentary of any kind. What is striking to me now is this absence of commentary, positive or negative, about this history, about the Jewish roots of Catholicism, about Jews and Judaism. Also, as someone with a German Catholic mother whose family has a very specific link to Holocaust and World War II history, it is a personal topic and history for me as well.

What archival sources did you draw upon in your research?

The Aloisius Muench papers, housed at the Catholic University of America here in Washington, constitute the bulk of the primary source material for this book. This collection is quite sizable—it occupies 81 linear feet of shelf space and numbers over 150,000 items. During his stay in Germany between 1946 and 1959, Cardinal Muench received tens of thousands of letters from German Catholics. For me as a scholar, these letters are a valuable source for studying discussions about World War II and the Holocaust in postwar Germany. His papers include letters from German Catholics, numbering in the thousands, describing what they consider their own "victimization," be it via expulsion, bombing, the denazification process, material need, losing sons and fathers to the front or to imprisonment, or becoming a people shamed in the eyes of the post-Holocaust world.

Of special value are those letters to Muench commenting directly and unambiguously on crimes against Jews or describing the few surviving Jews in their communities. Roughly 300 German Catholics wrote letters to Muench remark directly on the Holocaust. They included lay Catholics; convicted Catholic war criminals involved in Holocaust-related crimes, their families, or their champions; members of the German Catholic clerical upper hierarchy; priests and nuns; Catholic politicians; ethnic German expellees; German prisoners of war; and German Jews. Muench's German correspondence numbered 15,000 letters in 1956; and he received many more by 1959. That only 300 of these letters addressed the Holocaust indicates just how unusual direct commentary by Germans about the persecution of European Jewry was in the immediate postwar decade.

Why do you consider Muench a key figure in German and German-American Catholic responses to the Holocaust, Jews, and Judaism?

Cardinal Muench stood, to my mind, in the eye of the hurricane with regard to German Catholic consideration—and ultimate rejection—of guilt and responsibility for Catholicism's relationship to Nazism in general and to the persecution of European Jewry specifically in the first decade and a half following World War II. Cardinal Muench's story is also one of lingering antisemitism, in Germany and in the United States, in the postwar years. Cardinal Muench was an important player in the candid and uncensored dialogue about the Nazi period among a large and often prominent circle of contemporary Germans and Americans. Within this self-selected and yet broad and powerful circle, Muench's philo-German, anti-Jewish notions mirrored and at times influenced postwar actions toward and views of Jews, and postwar German understanding of culpability for the Holocaust.

What were your findings regarding the role Muench played in post-1945 German and Catholic consideration of guilt and responsibility for Nazism in general, and for the persecution of the European Jews in particular?

Cardinal Muench's pastoral letter, entitled "One World in Charity," appeared in religious and secular publications alongside statements denying Germans' complicity in Nazi crimes. Typically, a pastoral letter is a document issued by a bishop to address matters of concern in a diocese. Letters to Muench commenting on "One World" confirmed that German Catholics (and some non-Catholics) considered him a figure of German descent, one who especially understood German "suffering." For this reason, they wrote to Muench on Holocaust-related topics in unusually frank and telling ways, and their words allow the historian to carefully reconstruct a lively dialogue about who should be assigned guilt or responsibility for the murder of approximately six million European Jews during World War II, and in what manifestations anti-Jewish notions still lingered postwar. Primary source documentation by Germans about their real views is very hard to come

by. We have postwar surveys conducted by OMGUS, but Germans were not likely to be very honest in that setting (nor in more contemporary interviews). So, these letters, in real time to someone they trusted and saw as "one of them," mean we get perhaps the most intimate insight into what these Germans thought.

This dialogue linked not only Muench and German Catholics but also Muench and American Catholics and clergy, Vatican prelates, and American occupation officials. In addition to 300 letters from German Catholics, Muench received over 100 letters from U.S. Catholics and military government personnel commenting frankly on the taboo issues of anti-Semitism, surviving Jews, and the Holocaust. What emerges is a disturbing picture of anti-Jewish prejudices that influenced not only German Catholics but also the highest offices of American Catholicism and American military personnel.