

Anti-semitism live

A broadcast invoking extortionate 'Judeans' has brought a powerful Catholic radio station in Poland to worldwide attention, writes Nicholas Watt

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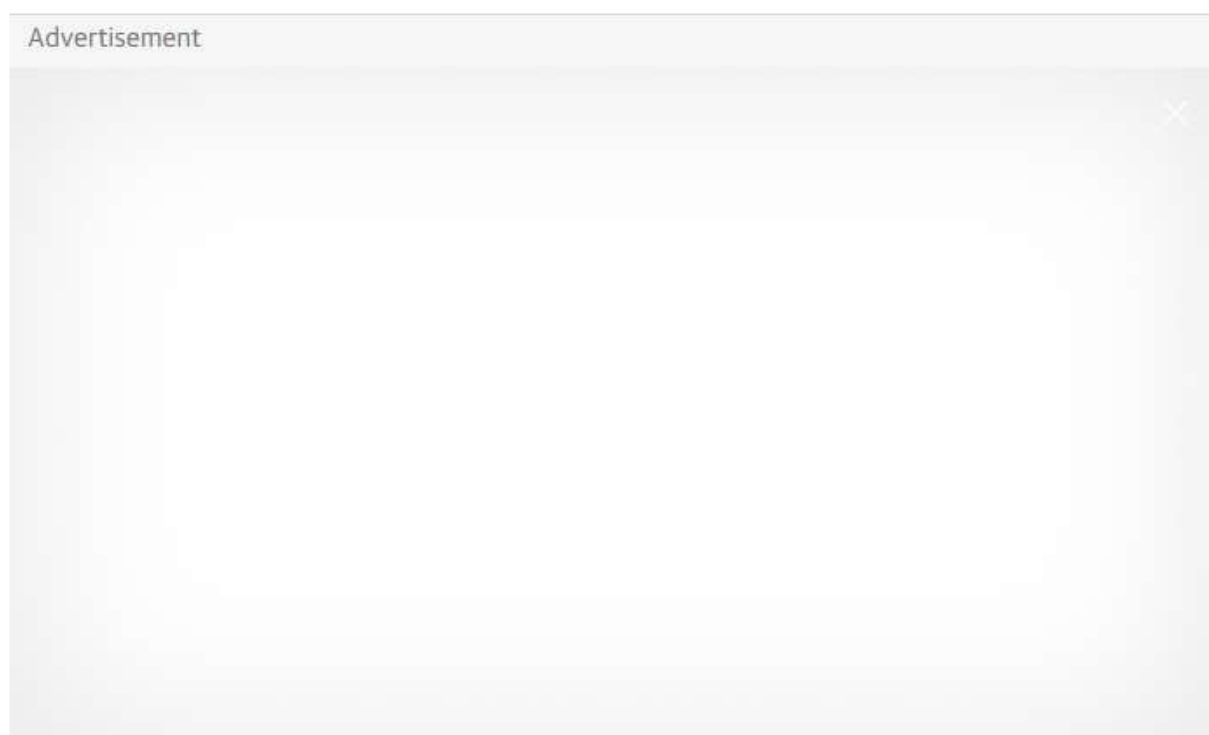
Mon 5 Jun 2006 16.12 BST



On a quiet road in the suburbs of Torun, an historic Polish city on the banks of the Vistula river, tempers are becoming frayed. "We are Catholics, go away," an elderly woman shouts as she slams shut a thick metal gate before scurrying back inside the headquarters of Poland's most popular radio station.

Shooing away outsiders has become an occupational hazard for workers at the staunchly Catholic Radio Maryja, which is attracting worldwide attention after a highly provocative anti-semitic broadcast.

Even the Vatican registered its unease after Stanislaw Michalkiewicz, one of the station's best known commentators, warned that Poland was "being outmanoeuvred by Judeans who are trying to force our government to pay extortion money disguised as compensation".



As Pope Benedict prepared to pay his first visit to Poland last month, the papal representative in Warsaw called on the Polish episcopate to deal with the "nagging issue of Radio Maryja". Weeks later an eight-strong panel was appointed to oversee the station, a move that failed to impress critics because Tadeusz Rydzyk, an outspoken Redemptorist priest who founded the station, will remain on board.

Tomasz Krolak, of the Catholic Information Agency, voiced fears of a "very dangerous alliance between the religious and political spheres" in light of the cosy relationship between the government and the station.

His remarks highlighted widespread concern in Poland about the central role Radio Maryja plays in the country's political life. Jaroslaw Kaczynski, the leader of the governing Law and Justice party and his twin brother, Lech, who is Poland's president, unashamedly court the station whose support was instrumental in their surprise election victory last year.

Poland's answer to America's conservative radio shows has a devoted daily audience of just over 1 million listeners who are attracted by a combination of folksy advice on domestic affairs, strict religious observance and outspoken broadcasts. "A Catholic voice in your home", is the proud boast of the station, which is richly rewarded by its listeners who bankroll Radio Maryja through private donations.

The station kicks off harmlessly in the morning with cooking tips and prayer services. In the evening, the tone changes abruptly as commentators take their turn to spew out rightwing broadcasts and take calls from listeners horrified by the direction of their country since the collapse of communism. Stewing at home in rural areas of Poland, the listeners rage at "post-communists", a term of abuse for former apparatchiks who reinvented themselves to lead the country down an immoral and cruel "laissez-faire" path after the fall of communism.

Unlike American talkshow hosts, who know they have to remain within certain bounds, Radio Maryja regularly airs thinly veiled anti-semitic broadcasts. But these reached a new low recently when Stanislaw Michalkiewicz accused American Jewish groups of indulging in the "Holocaust industry" by seeking compensation for property seized during the second world war.

Days after the broadcast, an 87-year-old retired cardiologist picked up the phone in his modest flat to dictate a letter accusing Radio Maryja of "xenophobia, chauvinism and anti-semitism". The intervention electrified Poland because the author, Marek Edelman, is the last surviving commander from the 1943 uprising in Warsaw's Jewish ghetto when the remaining survivors launched a series of audacious attacks on the Nazis.

"It is obvious that Radio Maryja and this broadcast are anti-semitic," Dr Edelman, 87, told the Guardian at his flat in the struggling former industrial city of Lodz 80 miles south-west of Warsaw. "Even if you do not use the word Jew, there are synonyms. People know what you are talking about. Radio Maryja broadcasts propaganda, hate and a misconceived patriotism, saying Poles are superior and Poland for the Poles."

Puffing on his favourite Gauloise cigarettes in his sitting room, which is decorated with images of the Warsaw uprising, Dr Edelman condemns the government for courting such a dangerous outlet. "They lend credence to this radio station. Government figures do not go to Radio Maryja to pray. They go there to make propaganda."

Dr Edelman, who fought on the same side as President Kaczynski in the anti-communist underground resistance movement, believes the governing twins are not anti-semitic, though he warns them to be careful. "There are symptoms of intolerance and anti-semitism in Poland which must be combatted by the government. There are historic examples of the shortness of the path of the word to the deed."

Under attack from Jewish groups and politicians on the Polish centre ground, Radio Maryja has responded with a combination of paranoia and sneering self-satisfaction. Critics are simply "post-communist" troublemakers out of touch with Poland, unlike Radio Maryja which enjoys the support of 10 million people thanks to its sister television station, Trwam. Mr Rydzyk has apologised to anyone who felt offended by the broadcast but insists the station cannot censor its commentators.

Radio Maryja demonstrated its paranoia when the Guardian called on the station, which is housed in a large, modern building amid immaculately tended gardens on the outskirts of Torun, a picturesque Hanseatic city 150 miles north-west of Warsaw.

As elderly visitors to the station's bookshop spoke of how its religious broadcasts gave them comfort, Radio Maryja embarked on some bizarre behaviour. After rebuffing our request for an interview - "we're not interested in talking," a receptionist barked over the intercom - a student from Radio Maryja journalism college tried to film us surreptitiously.

In the shadow of figures of the Virgin Mary and a giant poster of Pope John Paul II that dominates the grounds of Radio Maryja, the student darted around bushes to film us from various angles. When we failed to move on, the student ended the pretence of secret filming and marched out with another journalist from Radio Maryja's sister television station, who gave his name as Witold. Barely able to control his rage, he thrust a microphone at us to demand to know what we were doing in Torun.

"We are attacked by the post-communist media in Poland," he declared as the Guardian tried to explain itself. "We do not trust the media. We have 10 million listeners, so we have a lot of support. The other media, dominated by the post-communists, spread disinformation. You have to report [that] disinformation." At that, Witold and his cameraman turned on their heels and fled back to the safety of Radio Maryja.

The station's feud with the "post-communist" media reached new heights recently when Gazeta Wyborcza, Poland's leading liberal newspaper - dismissed in the controversial broadcast as a "Jewish fifth column" - infiltrated its journalism college. Wojtek Bojanowski, a young journalist who spent six weeks as a student at the school, found that his fellow students were brainwashed into believing that the former Polish elite, who ran the country until last year's election, were ex-members of the secret police. "The college does not see things in black and white - only black," says Bojanowski, who wrote up his notes at night in the loo.

Students are carefully vetted and are only admitted if they can produce a letter from their local priest confirming they are devoted Catholics. Atheists would have a tough time because the working day begins and ends with prayers at 8.00am and 9.00pm. Exams are even interrupted for prayers at midday.

Bojanowski, 21, who received threatening calls when his expose was published, fell foul of the college authorities by questioning a claim by Tadeusz Rydzyk, the station's founder, that he was a friend of the late Pope. "The college was very angry and telephoned my grandmother even though I had given a false name and not given her number. They sensed she would be a supporter and told her there was something wrong with me. She was very distressed."

Seweryn Blumsztajn, a founding editor of Gazeta Wyborcza, was not surprised that Radio Maryja appeared to be copying the tactics of the communists it claims to despise. "Radio Maryja is like a sect. It is anti-democratic and very anti-semitic."