Uses and Abuses of Holocaust History in Poland.

An Overview

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Last year, I had to renew my Polish passport. Unexpectedly, this simple administrative task became fraught with moral ambiguity. How to treat a document decorated with the portrait of a vicious antisemite, and an enthusiastic apologist for Adolf Hitler? This, unfortunately, was my dilemma when I flipped through the pages of my mint-new passport. On pages earmarked "visas", I saw watermark images of stern faces of Polish statesmen and leaders. Curiously, not even one woman made the cut. Finally, I found the picture of Roman Dmowski, a round- faced, bland looking man, founder of the nationalist *Endecja* party; a politician driven by his obsessive hatred of the Jews[1].

In 1934 Roman Dmowski wrote: "It is obvious that if we want to secure a bright future for Poland, we must strive to reduce the number of Jews in our country […] our cities are Jew-infested (pol: *zażydzone*. The Polish word "zażydzony", which has been rendered above into English as "Jew-infested", is also sometimes translated as "Jewified". The latter expression is being used in order to explain to the English-reading audience the true meaning of the German word *Verjudung*, not infrequently used, among others, by Martin Heidegger[2]. *Verjudung*, however, does not carry the same emotional load, as its Polish equivalent. While the German term informs us about the prevalence, or the "density" of Jewish presence, real or imagined, *zażydzenie*, so often used by Roman Dmowski to describe the essence of the "Jewish threat", draws upon deeper sources of hatred. The term implies the threat of sickness, disease, and filth. It is closely associated with expressions such as *zakażenie, zagrzybienie* (contamination, fungal infection).

In 1929 Dmowski wrote: "the problem with our current economic system, it that it promotes immoral elements, moral turpitude, and allows the Jews who act with shamelessness so typical of that race, to have great influence on our lives". One year later, he expanded on the same issue: "the Jews hitched their careers to modern capitalism, which they have helped to shape, because it is through this means that they wanted to gain total control over the world".[3] The "Jewish sins" were- according to Dmowski - immutable and could not be washed away with baptism and assimilation. Quite the opposite. According to the "Father of the Polish Independence", "even if the Jews were angels, intellectual geniuses, even if they were a superior species, the mere fact of their presence amongst us, and their participation in our life, is deadly for our society and we have to get rid of them".[4] "As long as Poland will hold this sad title of being the most Jewish country worldwide, there is no possibility of us being able to evolve successfully"[5]. Interestingly, Dmowski rejected the notion of Jewish assimilation as early as the 1890s! The founder of *Endecja*, considered assimilated Jews a secret weapon which could be unleashed at an opportune moment to strike against the Polish *Volksgemeinschaft*[6]. Finally, shortly after Hitler's *Machtübernahme*, Dmowski thus praised the "German solution" of the Jewish problem: "The Nazis understand that if they want to organize Germany on national foundations, they have to destroy the Jewish influence on the German society".

Dmowski was not alone. Similar statements entered the speeches of mainstream European politicians during the 1920s and 1930s. In France, for instance, bigotry, hatred and anti-Jewish prejudice found their way to politicians of the *Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière*, or the SFIO, from which later the French Socialist Party emerged. Marcel Déat, an active member of the *Ligue internationale contre le racisme et l'antisémitisme*, criticised the "subtle bizantinism" and " very oriental passivity" of Leon Blum[7]. Paul Faure, also a socialist, berated Blum, as someone "who would have us all killed for the Jews"[8], Georges Barthelemy believed in the Jewish-communist conspiracy, Yvon Delbos was convinced that Jews "always seek salvation in a world war"[9], and Gaston Berger admitted, in 1938, that "he understands the wave of antisemitism even if he does not approve its means"[10]. The same "understanding for the wave of antisemitism" characterized Polish Prime Minister Felicjan Sławoj-Składkowski who, although no

antisemite himself, declared in June 1936: "Economic boycott [of Jews] yes, by all means! But no violence!". A prime minister calling for a boycott of several millions of his own co-citizens indicates clearly how far the boundaries of racial hatred have moved during the 1930s. Mainstream politicians, some of them strongly opposed to Nazism, understood that playing the Jewish card could translate into visible electoral gains. In Poland, the anti-Jewish obsessions of Dmowski's *Endecja* percolated into the language of centrist and even left-leaning politicians and soon brought about anti-Jewish regulations and laws which, shortly before the war, placed the Jewish minority in increasingly precarious situation[11].

The Legacy of Dmowski.

Since anti-Jewish declarations were so frequent during the pre-war period among the political classes, one might ask why should one care about Roman Dmowski; an obscure politician from a country located on the European periphery? The answer is manifold. First, for Roman Dmowski - unlike so many other politicians of the time - the hatred of the Jews was a central, inalienable, and constitutive part of his *Weltanschauung*, of his entire world view. For him, and for the growing masses of his followers, the vilification of the Jews and their exclusion from the Polish society had become the cornerstone of future social transformation. More importantly, Dmowski's hate poisoned the political atmosphere and paved the way for the acceptance of more radical "racial" measures which were soon to become law in occupied Poland.

Another issue which makes Dmowski (and his legacy) stand apart, is the fact that it was Poland where the Germans chose to execute the "Final Solution of the Jewish Question". It was pre-war Polish territory which has become the grave to close to five out of six million victims of the Holocaust. Dmowski, who passed away in January 1939, did not live to see the triumph of his political vision. Nevertheless, five years after his death, 90% of Polish Jews had been murdered and Poland had effectively been declared *Judenrein* - cleansed of the Jews. Significantly, most of the Polish Jews who lived, survived the war deep inside the Soviet Union, having fled Poland in 1939. From among those, however, who remained under the German rule, less than 2% lived to see the liberation. Dmowski's vision of racially-pure Poland had been fulfilled, although the purification occurred within a political context which *Endecja's* founder could not have foreseen[12].

Józef Górski, a wealthy landowner from Caranów (an estate a few miles distant from Treblinka), wrote in his memoirs: "*As for me, I looked at the extermination of the Jews from two different points of view, between which there was an abysmal antonymy: as a Christian and as a Pole. As a Christian I could only feel compassion for my fellow human beings. Sometimes I thought about what these unfortunate people felt when they were marched to the gas chambers. As a Pole, I looked at these events differently. Being a follower of Dmowski's ideology, I perceived the Jews as an internal enemy, always hostile to the country the diaspora inhabits. Therefore, I could only feel satisfied that we were getting rid of this occupier, not with our own hands, but with the hands of the other, external enemy*"[13].

The question is thus not whether, but to what extent Dmowski and *Endecja's* hatred of the Jews facilitated the execution of German genocidal policies in Poland and what was the contribution of the Polish politician to the Jewish catastrophe. Jan Karski, the well-known courier of the Polish underground state, delivered (in February 1940) a report to the Polish government-in-exile. One of the points which have later been removed from the sanitized version which has been submitted to the Western Allies read: "The Solution of the Jewish Question" by the Germans - I must state this with a full sense of responsibility for what I am saying - is a serious and quite dangerous tool in the hands of the Germans, leading toward the "moral pacification" of broad sections of Polish society. It would certainly be erroneous to suppose that this issue will be effective in gaining for them the acceptance of the population.

However, although the nation loathes them morally, this question [Jewish question - JG] is creating something akin to a narrow bridge upon which the Germans and a large portion of Polish society are finding agreement"[14]. Furthermore, Karski stressed that while some Poles "were shocked and appalled at the barbarian methods of the Germans, others looked at these methods (and therefore at the Germans too!) with curiosity and often with admiration." He went on to say that any attempt "to create a common [Polish-Jewish] front would encounter very strong opposition on the part of broad segments of Polish society, whose antisemitism has not diminished at all."

The participation of segments of the Polish society in the Holocaust can and, as I would argue, has to be seen within the frame of and in direct relationship with the *Judenhass* which was inspired and fueled over the years by Roman Dmowski and his political followers. The swift dehumanization of the "other" which - already in 1942 - facilitated the massive involvement of ethnic Poles in the brutal liquidations of the ghettos, in the plunder of Jewish property, and in the hunts for the Jewish survivors which followed, would not have been possible without the legacy of exclusion and hatred prepared skillfully by Dmowski in the preceding decades and years. The issue of Polish complicity and its ideological origins has been documented at length by historians of the New Polish School of Holocaust Scholarship and its discussion would extend beyond the frame of this talk. Let me, therefore, turn to third reason why Dmowski and his ideology deserve closer scrutiny in the third decade of the 21st century.

The Lasting Legacy.

This third reason has all to do with the prominent place of Dmowski in today's Polish official, state-sponsored and state-enforced, historical narrative. Dmowski's image printed into millions of passports is just an innocuous sign of the long shadow cast today by this apologist of fascism. School curricula encourage children to appreciate Dmowski, scouts are told to follow his footsteps, central squares in largest Polish cities are named after him, as are railway stations, bridges and major thoroughfares, and a special Dmowski Institute, well-funded by the state, transfers millions of dollars to right-wing extremist militias. It's one thing to acknowledge and to study the fascist ideology and its champions. It's something very different to be proud of them and help this legacy grow.

The American historian John Connelly wrote in a recently published op-ed piece: "*For students of European history, celebrations of this extreme right wing figure suggest unfortunate associations: it is as if authorities in France commemorated Charles Maurras or those in Italy put up a statue for Mussolini, or the government in Berlin had decided to place plaques at Berlin's Hauptbahnhof honoring Adolf Hitler and Joseph Goebbels*"[15].

An astute western observer of the cold war noted shortly after the fall of Berlin Wall: "Now that Eastern Europe is free from the alien ideology of Communism, it can return to its true historical path — fascism."[16] This thought, at first sight no more than a quip, unfortunately has a deeper meaning and undeniable explicative value. Adam Daniel Rotfeld, a former Polish minister of Foreign Affairs, scholar and a child survivor of the Holocaust, elaborated further along the same lines in a 2018 interview: "*Endecja rules over the Polish souls because this is the only unfulfilled, and serious political force in Polish politics. Until this day, it provides Poles with answers they seek. Since 1918, we face a frozen, delayed and unfulfilled demand for Endecja*".[17] This "frozen and unfulfilled demand" came to life after the fall of communism. Not that the communists themselves were averse to taking a page, or two, from the fascist handbook. The vicious antisemitic campaign of 1968 (which forced into exile the last remaining Polish Jews) was quite likely the only communist campaign which found traction among the Polish masses. According to Rotfeld, the popularity of Dmowski and his antisemitic obsessions is linked to the irrationality of *Endecja* mentality. Issues which we fail to

grasp, best function in the realm of myths: "thirty percent of Poles believe today that the Jews murder Christian children in order to use their blood in the kosher Jewish kitchen" - argued Rotfeld.

It is this "unfulfilled demand" which placed Dmowski's ideology at the heart of the contemporary Polish "history policy" - or the state-sponsored and state-enforced official interpretation of the national past. The cornerstone of this policy, taken straight from Dmowski's textbook, is the relentless pursuit of the myth of "national innocence". In the eyes of its proponents, the Polish nation is a unique community of virtuous people which has valiantly resisted the totalitarian oppression of larger and unscrupulous neighbours, while demonstrating extraordinary generosity towards minorities which had the good fortune of being hosted by such a tolerant society. The minorities (and most of all the Jews), for reasons which have never been adequately explained, repaid the hospitality and generosity of the Polish people with hostility, bad will and - argue the proponents of the official narrative - outright treason. Interestingly, one thousand years of residence did seemingly nothing to make the Jews anything more than "guests" tolerated by Polish "hosts".

The state-enforced "history policy" is, however, not inflexible. According to the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) - by far the largest among the institutions tasked by the Polish state to enforce the party line on the fields of history - there were also some bad Poles. Each society, argue the employees of the IPN, has its bad apples. There were, they say, Poles who blackmailed and otherwise harmed the Jews during the war - but through their deeds they removed themselves from the Polish *Volksgemeinschaft* (national community); and they should no longer be considered Poles. On the flip side of this argument, we find another equally false assertion that during the Holocaust, masses of Poles saved the Jews. That rescuing of the Jews, despite the death penalty imposed by the Germans, had become a default position of the Polish society.

In political and quasi-academic narrative one can often hear today that "hundreds of thousands, or millions of Poles saved the Jews". Things went so far, that Poland's Prime Minister in a speech given in 2019 actually went on record that: "Today we build great, bright houses, a great and shining Poland on the foundation of memory of millions of Poles who suffered and who rescued Jews during the cruel night of German occupation"[18].

The Polish "history policy" focuses on several areas of contemporary history such as the legacy of the Warsaw uprising of August 1944, the so-called "Forsaken Soldiers", or the struggle with communism, but it is the issue of Polish-Jewish war-time relations which is, by far, the most important battleground in the current memorial warfare. However, the "Righteous offensive", or the multiplication of the ranks of Polish rescuers, combined with a general assault on our understanding of relationships between Jews and gentiles during the Shoah, is not a new phenomenon. The history of this form of denial - denial of own participation in the Holocaust - has a history which goes back to 1946.

It was in Kielce, on July 4, 1946, that a Polish mob driven to a frenzy by rumours of ritual murder, killed forty Jewish refugees, most of them survivors of the Holocaust. One year after Hitler's death, the citizens of this city in central Poland decided that the time was ripe to bring the process started by the Germans to its logical conclusion, and to solve the Jewish question once and for all. The explosion of hate directed at the Jews, just after the Holocaust, in a place which saw millions of Jews put to death, forced Polish intellectuals to do some soul-searching.[19] According to people aligned with the communist authorities, the pogrom was directly linked to right-wing and nationalist underground. For the catholic intellectuals, the Kielce pogrom was an aberration, an exception, an awful blemish on the otherwise noble image of a proud nation[20]. It was then, in the shadow of the Kielce pogrom, that the myth of the alleged sympathy, of rescue of Jews by the Poles, was born.

In order to deflect the inevitable questions about the spread, the extent and the depth of antisemitism in the Polish society, to reject the criticisms of Polish wartime record, the rhetoric of Righteous Defense developed.

"Each and every Polish Jew who is alive today, owes his life to a Polish catholic family" - wrote Stanisław Grabski in 1946[21]. "Just a small percentage of Jews was able to save themselves from the mass murder on their own, or by accident. They were saved, for the most part, by Christians, Catholics. There are very few people in Poland who did not risk everything. This attitude was widespread; one could not ascribe it to one specific social group" - wrote Stefania Skwarczyńska in the leading Catholic weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny*[22]. One would expect - insisted the catholic writers - that Jewish survivors express their gratitude to the Polish society! After Kielce, *Tygodnik* wrote: "Demonstrations of intolerance and sporadic rioting were an exception in Poland and never involved broader masses of the society. This tradition is still with us. One cannot, therefore, allow any hasty and unfounded generalizations".

The Righteous Defense, or the claim that the Poles en masse, in corpore, rescued the Jews, was hard to sell in the context of the massive historical evidence pointing to the scale of local complicity. The Polish policemen, the voluntary firefighters, the uncounted thousands of "bystanders" readily joining the Germans in the horrible liquidation actions, all those who took part (with or without German presence) in manhunts for the Jewish refugees - this entire scenery of horror conspired to derail the narrative of innocence. Roman Knoll, the chief of the section of Foreign Affairs of the Government Delegation for Poland, summarized the "Jewish problem" in his report written on July 23, 1943: "The return of the Jews" - wrote Knoll- "even in much reduced numbers, to their settlements and workshops is to be absolutely ruled out. Non-Jews have filled Jews' places in towns and townships and this is, in a vast part of Poland, a fundamental change of a final nature. A massive return of Jews would be perceived by the population more in the light of an invasion to be thwarted - even physically - than a restitution"[23]. Knoll wrote these words when a great majority of Polish Jews had already been murdered, right in front of him and millions of other Poles.

The liberation in 1945 brought little change in social attitudes towards the Jews. The desperate flight of survivors from their native villages and towns testified to the general hostility surrounding Jews who tried to return home. They quickly learned that their homes were theirs no more. The murders and the unwelcoming attitude towards survivors were commonplace. According to the latest counts, more than 1,100 Jews were killed in Poland, by Poles, right after the war - and this number of confirmed cases continues to grow[24]. In 2016, in the village of Markowa, Polish authorities opened a museum of Righteous Poles. The museum is interesting mostly through omissions: it fails to mention that the local population was responsible for hunts for the Jews and its core exhibition has nothing to say about the concentration and deportation of the local Jews in 1942 which has been done without any direct German involvement. The museum is equally mum about Polish-Jewish relations after the war. Historical evidence is, however, unequivocal: Jews who survived in hiding, had to flee their village facing death threats from their Polish neighbours- and many have been brutally murdered in villages nearby.[25] In some cases, not only the Jews were murdered but also the Poles who offered shelter. I venture that we call them the "Late Righteous" – people who were persecuted, wounded or murdered for rescuing Jews after the liberation from other Poles.

How to reconcile the tales of the alleged massive rescue, of the universal helping hand phenomenon during the war, with the horrifying scenery of murder and intimidation right after the war had ended? The sad fact was, that Polish Jews died alone, surrounded by a largely hostile Polish society. Antisemitism, which was strong before the war, became even stronger under

the occupation, acquiring its genocidal traits, and continued unabated after the liberation, despite the Holocaust. A good share of the responsibility for this deterioration of the moral condition of society went to Roman Dmowski and his education of the masses in the art of racial hatred.

The objectives of the Righteous Defense, which became a *plat du jour* immediately after the Kielce pogrom, were two-fold: firstly, it marginalised the event itself, framing it as an exception in an otherwise benign landscape of Polish-Jewish harmony. Secondly, it shifted the focus away from the Jews, and instead moved the spotlight onto the courageous and altruistic Polish gentiles. Today, historians of the period call this rhetorical device *"de-judaisation of the Holocaust"*. Removing the Jews from the Holocaust might seem a difficult proposition, but not an impossible one, as evidenced by more recent memorial and historiographical developments. The Righteous Defense is also defined as Holocaust distortion (not to be confused with the classic Holocaust denial), which rejects any notion of involvement of one's national or ethnic group in the event. The historical fallacy of the Righteous Defense is founded on several omissions and half-truths which are required to protect the myth. For one, the choices of Poles rescuing Jews are being presented as a social norm. For the other, the defenders of the myth of national innocence will be loath to admit that the Polish rescuers were - most of all- terrorized by their own neighbours, sometimes by their own family members. True, the Germans existed on the threatening periphery, and they created the frame of terror within which the Righteous had to act. But the Germans were a distant threat (especially in rural areas), and left to their own devices, the occupiers were clueless as to the whereabouts of the hidden Jews. The neighbours, however, knew well who was involved in hiding the Jews, and it was they who were likely to report the rescuers to the authorities. Hiding the partisans, or other members of the resistance was considered an act of patriotic virtue, deserving of praise and support. Hiding Jews, however, was considered by many tantamount to national treason and a strike against the Polish *Volksgemeinschaft*, itself a posthumous triumph of Dmowski.

However surprising it may sound, the fear of one's neighbours followed the Righteous Poles even after the liberation. Maria Hochberg-Mariańska, herself a Jew, during the war was involved in hiding Jewish children in Krakow and its vicinity. Armed with "good Aryan looks" she moved "on the surface", passing for a Pole, using doctored papers. She knew intimately both her Jewish charges and the gentile rescuers who agreed to take the refugees under their roofs. Shortly after the war she published her account of the wartime drama. Many Polish rescuers begged her, however, to keep their names out of the book. She noted with dismay: "I do not know whether anyone outside of Poland can comprehend that saving a life of a child hunted down by a murderer can cover one with shame and dishonor"[26]. Mariańska made this comment in 1946. Indeed, it is hard to explain to someone outside of Poland the sense of Marianska's comment. In 2008, I visited several villages in south-eastern Poland, the area which was the focus of my upcoming study. In one hamlet I met an old man who, according to court files from 1947, at great risk to himself saved two Jewish children. Asked about his courageous deed, the old man first denied any involvement and later, confronted with decades-old depositions, begged that his name be left out of the account "lest he face the wrath of his neighbours". This was in 2008, sixty three years after the end of the war…

Finally, the defenders of national innocence stress that it concerned only the Poles who had been threatened by the Germans with the death penalty for aiding and abetting the Jews. Furthermore, they argue, the cruel measure has been introduced in response to the impressive scale of rescue attempts undertaken by the Poles. In reality, death penalty for *Judenbegunstigung* had been introduced throughout the *Generalgouvernment*, targeting equally the Poles, Ukrainians and Belorussians, without distinction to their ethnicity, or creed. And the law had been introduced in October 1941, long before

the liquidation of the ghettos, and long before the Jews started looking for shelter among the gentiles. Simply put, the German regulation targeted areas where the vast majority of Jews slated for extermination lived and where the anticipated number of refugees fleeing the approaching genocide was largest[27].

The Stalinist period - which in Poland, in matters of culture and memory started for real in 1948 - put an end to open debates. The Righteous Defense resurfaced again after the political "thaw" in 1956. The issue of Poles rescuing Jews was, however, mostly mentioned in order to settle domestic disputes. The communists argued that their own political formation had spearheadedthese efforts, while more independent writers and scholars stressed the importance of the Catholic church and organizations loyal to the London-based government in exile. The 1963 publication of Władysław Bartoszewski's "Ten jest z ojczyzny mojej"["He, who is of my fatherland"] , gave the Righteous Defense a fresh lease of life. The voluminous study devoted to Poles saving Jews under the occupation was also meant - according to the author - as an antidote against the "slanders against the Polish nation", circulating in the West, spread by "certain" unidentified forces. Jerzy Turowicz, one of the leading Catholic intellectuals, and editor-in-chief of the influential *Tygodnik Powszechny* ("Popular Weekly") was quick to seize the true value of the book: "it proves once again that the number of Poles collaborating with the Germans has been, when compared to similar situations in the Western countries - negligible. The greatest value of the book relates to what it tells us about the Polish nation, about the people among whom we live, whom we constantly encounter in the streets of our cities, in tramways, cafes, offices. Despite the well-known traits and vices, we are a wonderful nation, which - in extraordinary situations - is capable of nearly superhuman deeds" - wrote Turowicz.[28]

The issue of the Polish Righteous has been, from the very beginning, an exercise in "dignity politics" more than a serious attempt to learn about the past. It has been tainted by the overriding concern to prove the nation innocent or, as argued by Bartoszewski - to counter "anti-Polish slanders" circulated abroad. It was precisely this area - the defense of national mythology - which united Poles of very different political stripes. The Righteous Defense, has become one of the very rare areas where Poles come together, united in their desire to challenge the perceived threats to the *Volksgemeinschaft* and to the Polish raison d'état. It is a truly remarkable phenomenon, a scene upon which liberal intelligentsia, Catholics, communists, nationalists and fascists speak with one voice. It is also a long-lasting phenomenon: it was true in 1946, and it is true in 2021. Moreover, the arguments deployed by the proponents of Righteous Defense remained, with little exception, frozen in time, resisting well the voices of reason and changing political climates.

Nineteen Sixty-Eight

In 1968, the communist authorities unleashed an anti-Jewish campaign which was in part inspired by Israel's great triumph in the Six-Day War and events in the Middle East, but which had more to do with an internal power struggle between different factions inside the party apparatus. In 1967-68 the communo-fascists gained the upper hand and started a campaign against "zionists" (a new codename for all Jews) in all walks of Polish life. Purges ensued and some twenty thousand Polish Jews were forced into exile. Antisemitism, which has been hidden under the tarps of communist censorship, came to the surface. The best way to defuse the anticipated international outcry - said the authorities - was to fall back on the Righteous Defense.

Ryszard Gontarz, writer, director and a communist party activist, one of the most active communo-fascists, set the tone. In 1968 he wrote a script for the movie "The Righteous", intended to "counter the vicious anti-Polish campaign" - as he said at the time in a TV interview[29]. "Our film shows the truth about the help given [to Jews] by the Polish nation. We show that there were millions of Righteous. We show that it was a

period when our nation fought for its survival and that our help for the Jews was a part of that struggle. While rescuing the Jews we had to contend not only with the terror of the occupant but also with this incredible passivity of the Jewish masses. We faced also hostile actions of various Jewish groups, such as the Jewish police, Jewish Councils, or the Jewish Gestapo in Warsaw...so, if we wanted to help, we also had to fight with these centres of Jewish collaboration".

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The assertion that there were millions of Righteous has become an inalienable part of the message. Ryszard Gontarz said so in 1968, and Polish Prime Minister Morawiecki repeated it in 2019. Blaming the victims, the focus on the alleged "Jewish passivity" and on the Jewish collaboration was, at the same time, an option favored by the more radical proponents of the "Righteous" myth. Interestingly, the communist party activists of nationalistic and antisemitic hue gladly incorporated into their rescue narrative émigré politicians and heroes of the wartime Home Army resistance, who until then had been vilified by the party for their "reactionary" stand. The writings of Tadeusz Walichnowski, one of the main villains during the anti-Jewish campaign of 1968, testify to the fact that the "defense of the good name of the nation" trumped political differences of the past[30].

The Righteous Defense implied more, however, than simple praise of Polish virtue; it drew attention to Jewish ingratitude. A typical example of this argumentation can be found in daily Zielony Sztandar ("Green standard") in an article aptly entitled: "This Is What We Get in Return! Poles Helping the Jews": "*It is with disgust and astonishment that I read about the slanders and smear campaigns orchestrated by various foreign Jewish circles, accusing us Poles of helping the Nazis to murder the Jews. It is difficult to imagine something more disgusting, and more untrue about our society. We, former soldiers of the Resistance, are appalled at the slanders raised against us in Israel and elsewhere. So this is the payback for all the help given to the Jews? For all the sacrifice? Where are those whose lives we have saved? Why these Jews, who today live in Israel, the U.S.A., in Germany and elsewhere, why do they remain silent?*"[31] The defense of the memory of Poles saving Jews has become one of the main tasks of the Association of Polish Veterans of WWII (ZBOWiD), an organization deeply involved in "fighting Zionism", and led by Mieczysław Moczar, the main power behind the antisemitic campaign.

It is hard to imagine foes more bitter than hard-line communists in Warsaw and expatriate Polish politicians and soldiers living, since the end of WWII, in exile in the West. Nevertheless, in 1968, their voices joined the same improbable chorus of "Righteous defense". Both sides were equally ready to sacrifice historical truth and common decency at the altar of the variously construed Polish "raison d'etat", and in defense of the myth of the universality of Polish rescue attempts during the Holocaust. Kazimierz Iranek-Osmecki was one of the heroes of the patriotic Polish resistance. A former colonel and chief of the Home Army's Intelligence Division, after the war Iranek-Osmecki emigrated to Great Britain. In 1968, he published a book "He Who Saves One Life", moved by the fact that: "such a study is doubly important now since the press, both in the West and in Israel, has made many accusations about the attitude of the Polish nation. The press contends that the Poles were passive, that they looked with indifference on the extermination of the Jews, and that they even collaborated with the Germans in the crime". [32]

Until the 1980s, however, the "Righteous defense" was mostly an internal Polish obsession, and few foreign observers gave the issue more than a passing glance. Admittedly, until then, the Holocaust was but a distant cloud on the horizon of Western consciousness. This was to change during the 1970s and 1980s, when the Holocaust, for a variety of reasons (which go far beyond the frame of this talk), became a universal,

pan-European benchmark of evil. Association with the event and social attitudes toward the Jewish catastrophe started, henceforth, to be considered a test of the moral condition of one's own society. The process was long and painful, it encountered strong opposition, and there were reversals. Nevertheless, over the years, sweeping change took place and more and more people agreed that the Holocaust was a legacy which all Europeans had to share. The genocidal project and its execution were a German responsibility, no doubt, but the German project found many eager helpers. All across the continent.

This *prise de conscience,* or mental breakthrough, bypassed Poland entirely. The country, engrossed in its own struggle against the militarized communist *junta*, was oblivious to the memorial processes which occurred beyond its borders. Steeped in the ethos of its own struggle, hope, and misery, it was unprepared to face criticism from the most unexpected, western, democratic side. I recall vividly the 1985 screening of Claude Lanzmann's "Shoah" in a Warsaw theater. The film - one of the most ambitious and shattering realizations in the history of the cinema - has been roundly denounced in the communist media as "anti-Polish". The Polish state TV, the radio, and the press, all claimed that Lanzmann's portrayal of Polish society generally, and of Polish peasants in particular, was deeply unfair; that the primitive and antisemitic brutes which one saw on the screen were a fabrication of a sick mind and a slap on the face of the proud Polish nation. That the Polish society passed with flying colors the wartime exam of morality and did all it could to save Polish Jews. Despite the vicious attack, a few selected cinemas were authorized to show Lanzmann's film. I sat, mesmerized, through all nine hours of the movie. Other than I, there were perhaps five or six elderly Jews in the audience. Otherwise, the cinema was empty. The communist propaganda, quite obviously, seems to have been successful in convincing people to stay away from this "anti-Polish" movie.

Kazimierz Kąkol, a member of the Central Committee of the Polish communist party, wrote in 1988: "One talks about the alleged traditional Polish antisemitism [...] stupid opinions are being circulated, according to which the majority of Poles looked at the extermination of Jews with indifference. Definitive opinions are being formulated, like a blind man who talks about the colors. How many among those who saw the 'Shoah' will see through its lies...? The manipulative individuals, who try to share the blame in such a way as to take the burden off the German shoulders, do not see the peculiar Polish circumstances [...]". [33] Comrade Kąkol was a communist apparatchik but - in this particular instance, I dare say - he spoke for the masses, and for the elites. Norman Davies, a British scholar of Polish history, and an ardent defender of Polish innocence, wrote about Lanzmann's work along the same lines: "A significant problem has been created around 'Polish antisemitism'. Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* is but one of the many outrageous (*bulwersujących*) examples of films and books propagating lies about Nazis killing Jews in Poland in response to an expressed request of the local population"[34].

It has often been said that communism was like a freezer of ideas, stifling and muzzling intellectuals and preventing expressions of dissenting voices. There is much truth to it - especially in countries such as the DDR, or the Soviet Union. But Poland (jokingly referred to as the merriest barrack in the socialist camp) followed its distinct path. The country, in terms of intellectual exchange, at least since 1976, has been a vibrant place. The independent (albeit illegal and underground) presses published hundreds of books, revues, and pamphlets dealing with all aspects of Polish history. All, save the critical examination of Polish-Jewish relations during the Holocaust. Here, the silence of opposition intellectuals was as profound as it was within the communist-approved sphere[35]. Émigré presses, including the venerated *Paryska kultura*, the France-based organ of the enlightened, liberal expatriate circles, also preferred to keep safe distance from the offending "Jewish" issue[36].

And in such a way, well before the end of communism, the "Righteous Defense" reached its mature form. Firmly rooted in Dmowski's virulent nationalism, based upon the conviction of the country's own innocence and espoused by Poles of all political hues, it presented a unified front of rejection and denial of abundant and inconvenient historical evidence. The "battle lines" - and military terminology is very appropriate in this case - were clearly drawn: Polish society under the occupation did everything it could do to save the Jews; the assistance was massive and involved all social strata. The rescue attempts were, however, not only individual but also institutional. The underground resistance (known as the Polish Underground State), its military and civil leadership, together with the government-in-exile, offered help to the Jews and tirelessly tried to wake up the consciousness of the Western allies to the ongoing Holocaust. The cases of betrayal and murder of Jews at the hands of the Poles were exceedingly rare and the perpetrators, through their own callous action, removed themselves from the Polish national community. Poles - unlike any other nation in Europe - faced the death penalty for helping their Jewish co-citizens at the time of need. All of this occurred in the context of Jewish collaboration with the Soviet communists in the east during the 1939-1941 period, and the passivity of Jewish masses in the ghettos of the *Generalgouvernment*. Last but not least, the proponents of the "Righteous Defense" explored the issue of Jewish complicity in the Shoah, especially the role of the *Judenräte* and that of the Jewish police. All of these arguments were at stand-by and ready to use, in anticipation of the right moment.

This moment arrived in 2000, with the publication of Jan T. Gross' book "Neighbors".

Into the Twenty-First Century, With Optimism.

The publication of "Neighbors", a slim volume published by a niche editor, had the effect of a bomb exploding in a quiet neighborhood. The story of a small town where the local Poles herded their Jewish neighbors to a barn, and burned them alive, sent shock waves through the nation. Countless meetings, discussions, articles, films, and books have been devoted to the issue. The debates immediately spilled beyond the academic community, and Jedwabne - the site of the communal genocide - became a household name throughout Poland. Initially, Jan T. Gross' findings were either called into doubt, or simply rejected. With time, however, the wealth of historical evidence describing the massacre became irrefutable. No longer able to deny the factuality of the event, the defenders of the good name of the nation turned to the well-tested strategy of Righteous Defense. For one, they argued, Jedwabne was an absolute aberration, which had no explicative value for the understanding of the dynamics of Polish-Jewish relations in the rest of the occupied land. The news that similar pogroms occurred in more than twenty-five locations in the vicinity of Jedwabne did little to defuse this line of argumentation[37]. Second, it was the Germans who were directly or indirectly responsible for the deed - argued the "true patriots".

Third, and by far the most important part of the defensive strategy, was the relentless drive to paint Polish society as a community of rescuers. This form of Holocaust distortion has become, in the years following the publication of "Neighbors", a semi-official policy of the Polish state. Countless institutions became involved in the "Righteous Defense", producing films, exhibitions, studies, books, and articles. Squares, highways, streets, schools, and colleges were named after Polish Righteous. Special coins and commemorative stamps have been issued to honor the Righteous, leaving the less-informed with the impression that rescuing the Jews during the Shoah was one of the major preoccupations of the Polish society. The "memorial warfare" which ensued opposed the resources of a major European state to the fading memory of the millions of dead Polish Jews. One of most vivid examples of this battle is the area surrounding the Museum of the History of Polish Jews, which has been erected in the middle of what used to be the Warsaw ghetto, the site of starvation of ninety thousand of

its inhabitants and a place from which 325,000 other Jews were deported to their deaths at the Treblinka extermination camp. Natan Rapaport's famous 1948 monument commemorating the heroes of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, is located nearby.

Until recently, it used to be a Jewish *lieu de memoire*, one of the few such places remaining in the Polish capital. No longer. Walking toward the museum, one stumbles on the "sanitary cordon" of Polish virtue. Flanking the museum is Irena Sendler's path. Irena Sendler was a courageous Polish woman who saved Jewish children. Nearby, sitting pensively on a bronze bench, is the figure of Jan Karski, the courier who tried in vain to raise the conscience of the world to the ongoing Holocaust. In front of the museum is the Tree of Shared Polish-Jewish Remembrance and next to it a monument commemorating Żegota, an underground organization to aid Jews. On the western side of the Museum a Monument of Jews Grateful to Their Polish Rescuers is being planned, and the closest intersection of Anielewicza and Karmelicka streets is now called "The Roundabout of the Righteous"[38].

The Righteous Defense, the product of nationalistic exclusion, and falsely construed "national pride", has come of age. Unsurprisingly, the successive democratic Polish governments gave a green light to the "memorial offensive". As shown earlier, the "defense of the good name of the nation" has been for decades an area where political differences blurred, allowing deeply divided Poles to come together.

Under the Authoritarian Regime

The 2015 elections brought to power hard-line nationalists for whom the "national dignity file" is no longer a part-time pursuit. The pride in national history, or rather in a lose collection of national myths, finds itself at the core of their Weltanschauung and forms an essential part of their electoral strategy. Consequently, the Righteous Defense, which under the democratic regime could be compared to a mild obsession, now evolved into full-blown paranoia. There are posters, films, exhibitions, articles, books, coins, and paintings celebrating the Polish Righteous. The Museum of WWII in Gdańsk saw its main exhibition transformed in order to reflect better the Polish rescue efforts. Polin museum now boasts a virtual exhibition devoted to the Polish Righteous, the Markowa Museum of Poles Rescuing the Jews has visibly expanded its activities on a national scale, and the nationalist authorities provided funding for a new Museum of Warsaw ghetto which, to quote the minister of culture, is to become a "museum of Polish-Jewish love"[39].

The nationalists did not invent anything new; they simply shifted priorities and placed many more resources in the hands of people and institutions delegated to the "front of memorial struggle". In early 2018, with the support of the opposition, they rammed through parliament a bill, known as the Polish Holocaust Law, which called for three years of imprisonment for people who argued that the Polish nation was in any way complicit in Nazi crimes.

The IPN, weaponized by the authorities with a colossal budget, and employing hundreds of historians, has become by far the most important institution of "memory control" in today's Poland. Its current leadership, appointed by the nationalists, is in the process of re-shaping, in a radical way, the Polish national-historical consciousness. It is a sign of an evolving institutional culture that last February an ex-neo-Nazi was appointed to one of the top directorial positions in the IPN. One of the fundamental parts of Institute's mandate is to distort the history of the Holocaust in order to make it more palatable and agreeable to the myths of national innocence espoused by the nationalist authorities. The Righteous Defense is at the core of IPN's message. The relentless drive to celebrate the Polish Righteous among the nations has become one of the most pernicious aspects of the "history policy" promoted by the IPN. The Righteous are used instrumentally today to cover up the less laudatory actions of large segments of Polish society

which, in a variety of ways, took part in the German genocidal project.

In 2020, the IPN issued a public statement ("Statement on the crimes committed by the German Reich in occupied Poland and on the false information appearing in public") which in a way summarizes the fallacies of the Polish "history policy" and which repeats lies, half-truths, and omissions, deployed by defenders of the good name of the nation since WWII[40]. The statement was issued in an attempt to discredit the estimates according to which Poles were involved (directly, or indirectly) in the murders of 200,000 Jews. The statement, however, goes further and shifts some of the blame for the Holocaust to the victims, places the Jewish police on the same footing as the Polish auxiliary collaborationist police, mentions the Jewish agents of the Gestapo, claims that the Polish Underground State engaged fully in prosecution of anti-Jewish elements, and stresses the universality of the rescue phenomenon. The tone of the statement brings to mind the communist "rescue" narrative of 1968 discussed earlier.

The IPN is not alone on the memorial battlefield. The Pilecki Institute, IPN's younger cousin, also fully and generously funded by the Polish state, set out to cover the countryside with visible markers of Polish Holocaust-related suffering. It's flagship initiative, "Called by Name", strives to commemorate Poles who lost their lives rescuing or helping Jews. In the area of commemoration, Pilecki employees place characteristic stones, decorated with a bronze plaque and information - in Polish and in English - about the person who gave her or his life to save the Jews. Pilecki's stone markers are not only to "restore the pride" of the local community, but also to honor people who have never been recognized as Righteous by Jerusalem's Yad Vashem Institute. The drive to create a "more inclusive", vastly longer list of Righteous has been, for a long time, a goal of Polish nationalists. For obvious reasons, the state-sponsored memorial initiatives follow a "racial", or ethnic interpretation of the term "nation". Consequently, in Markowa museum, the focus is on ethnic Poles - Ukrainian rescuers of Jews who have been left out of the narrative. Significantly, there was no attempt to honor Polish Jews who died helping to save other Jews. Not infrequently they died defending their families from their Polish neighbors. Thousands of unmarked places of burial, or rather places of abandonment, of corpses are strewn across the Polish countryside. Referred to by Claude Lanzmann as "non-places of memory" [*non-lieux de mémoire*], they can be found - even today - etched in the memory of the locals who know well where the bodies have been hidden, and who are unable to purge this memory[41]. Unsurprisingly, the "Called by Name" program does not call out the names of Jews whose unmarked places of non-burial are a painful reminder that the Holocaust is still an unfinished story.

Local celebrations go hand in hand with nationwide commemorative initiatives. In 2018 the Polish parliament declared March 24 of each year a "National Day of Remembrance of Poles Saving Jews Under the German Occupation". In 2019, on this National Day of Celebration of the country's own virtue, the Polish prime minister Mateusz Morawiecki decided to pay tribute to Poles who rescued Jews on the territory of Węgrow county, an area situated northeast of Warsaw. The event was hosted by Pilecki Institute. To be exact Mr. Morawiecki visited the village of Sadowne, where he stated that: "The inhabitants of Węgrow county passed with flying colors the exam of compassion. Contrary to various slanders which are being published" - the prime minister continued - "numerous sources testify to the great and positive role of the Poles during World War II".

The slanders to which Polish PM Morawiecki alluded in his speech might have something to do with the book "Night Without End", a study which described, among other things, the tragic fates of Jews from this particular county. The mood of self-congratulation, so evident in Morawiecki's speech, would have evaporated had the Polish PM read a few pages of the testimony of Adam Starkopf, a Jewish survivor, who had

spent two years in the very village that the PM chose to praise in his speech[42]. Starkopf wrote about regular hunts organized by the Polish villagers of Sadowne for the desperate Jews who escaped death trains to the nearby Treblinka extermination camp. According to the Jewish survivor, the Jews were a prized catch and, once they have been robbed, the inhabitants of Sadowne delivered them, in exchange for modest prize, to the Germans, for execution. This testimony might have brought some balance to the Polish prime minister's statement but, obviously, it is neither balance nor historical truth that are sought here. Without Starkopf's testimony, however, the celebrations turn into a sad farce.

Describing the depressing scenery of the Polish memorial Holocaust battlefield, one should not forget the GONGOS (Government Organized Non-Governmental Organizations), or the institutional proxies funded by the state and acting on its behalf. The Redoubt of Defense of the Good Name of the Polish Nation or Institute to Fight Antipolonism, despite their ridiculous names, are well-funded by the Polish state and have become threats to independent historians and educators of the Holocaust. The Institute to Fight Antipolonism, for instance, reports historians and journalists to the State Attorney's Office, triggering criminal investigations based on article 133 of the criminal code, which calls for prison terms of up to three years for people "slandering the good name of the Polish nation". The "Redoubt" prefers to file civil lawsuits against offending historians and journalists. Quite recently, I wrote that extermination camps were established by the Germans for Jews, not for Poles. This uncomplicated and, one would think, uncontroversial statement generated a lot of angry reactions and a request made by the Institute to Combat Antipolonism to the judicial authorities to open an article 133 criminal investigation against me. Here, we leave the familiar territory of the "Righteous Defense", and move toward the closely associated but distinct area known as Holocaust envy, which wants to place a country's own national suffering on a par with the Jewish catastrophe. Unlike the "Righteous defense", Holocaust envy is not specifically Polish, and its various demonstrations can be seen in Ukraine, or in the Baltics. An example of Holocaust envy can be found, for instance, in a press release of the Polish National Foundation (established by the nationalists in 2016 in order "to fight the slanderous stereotypes which hurt the image of Poland abroad"), in which the Foundation insists that "Poles and Jews died together in the Holocaust"[43].

The "Righteous defense", as described above, has become a permanent feature of state-sponsored and state-enforced Polish history policy – a strategy based on historical fallacy driven by prejudice, ignorance, and bad will.

Conclusion

Never was I more aware of immutability and resilient persistence of denial than when reading a yellowed carbon-copy of a letter written by my father, a Holocaust survivor, in September 1973. The letter was addressed to Kazimierz Koźniewski, a well-known and influential Polish writer, and - during the war - a courageous soldier in the Polish armed resistance. Visibly upset with an article published some time before by Koźniewski, my father wrote (let me quote short excerpts):

"*Before the war, our society was filled with intolerance and antisemitism, which flowed from pages of the press, preached from the pulpits in the churches, and eagerly sucked up by the younger generation like mother's milk. There were very few people in the pre-war [Polish]society who consciously opposed this intolerance and its most glaring representation - antisemitism. War and occupation were a horrible shock therapy for the whole nation but even they were unable to make people shake off the accumulated resentments, to leave behind the old mental patterns and to cure the indifference of bad conscience [...] Nowadays, nearly everyone, you included, celebrates national remembrance. Polish society was united and firm*

against the Germans. Germans were a common enemy. People supported and warned each other. The signs of collaboration - even a moral one - were being eliminated. There was, however, no universal condemnation of the German treatment of the Jews; there was no common attitude of Polish public opinion toward the Jewish tragedy [...] Entire social strata enriched themselves on the wealth of Jews driven into the ghettos, and later murdered. When this source [of income] dried up, they started blackmailing and delivering into the hands of the Germans the remaining few who were hiding on the Aryan side. I was one of them [....] There was no atmosphere [conducive to helping Jews]. Those who decided to engage in this noble risk did it on their own. They had to hide against their own people. In the case of a hidden partisan, Polish society was united - not so in the case of a hidden Jew! You surely remember these so popular and so horrible words: "After all, we should build a golden monument to Hitler - he does our dirty work for us!" Many of those who knocked in fear (and you may not know how we felt being hunted down like wild animals) found the door slammed in our faces, oftentimes we were met with mockery [and] insults. People set dogs on us. There was this characteristic sign, an evil glitter in one's eyes which for me was a warning: 'run - this man will betray you!' This conspiracy of silence concerns practically everything considered shameful in the eyes of the nation. The hyenas did not die, they have not fled, they live peacefully among us as respected citizens, not unlike their more blood-thirsty equivalents in Germany..."[44].

My father's letter, written in 1973, could be published today, in 2021, without any editing, as a comment on the current discussions surrounding Polish-Jewish relations. The immutability and the resilience of the myth is truly impressive.

In normal circumstances, commemoration and celebration of virtue and courage during the Holocaust should carry no moral ambivalence. Unfortunately, in the Polish context, the sacrifice of the Righteous has been - over many decades - cynically used, abused, and manipulated in order to falsify and distort the history of the Shoah. No longer a tribute paid to the brave people who, against the odds, and with risk to their life, decided to help Jews, it has become a cynical exercise in domesticating the history of the Holocaust for the needs of Polish nationalism. It has also been one of the few (if not only) areas where the Poles come together, regardless of their political stripes. In the past, under communism, the celebration of the country's own national virtue united liberal intellectuals and Catholic writers with hard-line communo-fascists. During the democratic interlude, it united left-wing and right-wing parties. Today, under the authoritarian regime, it forms a narrow bridge upon which members of the democratic opposition vote together with the ruling nationalists, religious Catholic fundamentalists and find support among the neo-fascist militias and other right-wing extremists. In the atmosphere of unfounded, misinformed, and misplaced appreciation of the country's alleged own national virtue, the defenders of the myth of national innocence lose sight of the Jewish victims of the Shoah and join the ranks of Holocaust deniers.

Is there a way in which one could render homage to the Polish Righteous, avoiding at the same time the pitfalls of Holocaust distortion? Of course. More than two years ago, I wrote in the main opposition daily Gazeta Wyborcza: "If it's impossible to slow down the state-sponsored commemoration of own heroism, one could at least try to enrich the narrative. Each and every time a new commemorative plaque is unveiled, each time a new monument is erected to honor Poles rescuing the Jews, let's celebrate Jews who - in the same location, in the same street - were denounced or killed by the Poles. I guarantee that finding the relevant information should not be a problem. Need be, I will be glad to offer assistance and provide references". [45]

I am not holding my breath. Thank you.

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Watch: Holocaust Scholarship on Trial: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jqYs8S2w_kY

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