

Testimony of Sigmund A. Rolat, Chairman
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Hearing of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe
on
The Museum of the History of Polish Jews
Thursday, March 13, 2008

Honorable Chairman Hastings and Members of the Commission:

In the following pages, I would like to explain why I believe now is the right time for the Museum of the History of Polish Jews and why Warsaw is the perfect place for it. Our Museum there will excel both in its content and context.

What better portal for any visitor wishing to trace the footsteps of Polish Jews, their millennium of accomplishment? Even the terrible holocaust cannot extinguish what the Polish Jews and their descendants achieved.

I disagree with the very direction of the so-called March of the Living which brings hundreds of thousands of American and Israeli youngsters to Poland. Thankfully, it is slowly changing but not enough. Its very name is a misnomer. Mainly it is a tour of the triangle of death – Auschwitz, Treblinka and Majdanek. While it is important to know about the horror perpetrated by the Nazis in Poland, is it not even more important to learn about the millennium of Jewish achievement in Poland? Are not the places of birth and the landscape of the great Polish Jews and their fascinating history more interesting than the German death camps? Especially for the young?

Years ago, before their Bar and Bat mitzvahs, I took my son and my daughters to Poland to see their ancestral land. It was, I suppose, my own, private version of the March of the Living. How enhanced would have been the experience of my children if their tour commenced at our projected Museum?! How profoundly a few hours there would have prepared them for the next few days?! Their itinerary would of course include my native city – a wonderful microcosm of Polish municipalities. I wanted my children to see the site of the Old Synagogue, the beautiful Mirowska which was where our Grand Rabbi officiated. Traditionally, with a Torah in his arm, the Grand Rabbi would greet the Polish President on his visit to Czestochowa. The synagogue boasted ceiling and wall frescoes by the renowned Prof. Peretz Wilenberg which he painted for three years á la Michelangelo.

In that synagogue, like national treasure, was preserved for over a hundred years a battle flag with its white eagle. It was entrusted for safe-keeping by a Polish troop detachment, commanded by Prince Poniatowski retreating with the Napoleonic Army. For all these years it became the inner lining of the plush cover of the Holy Torah ark sanctum.

I was born in Czestochowa and I fondly remember my happy childhood. My grandfather operated a small school at Stary Rynek where all subjects were taught in the Polish language. Ever the schoolmaster, he taught me how to count to 100 in Russian and he gave me a *Kolo Swiata*, an ingenious two part cardboard disk which, when properly aligned, showed you the capitals and other information for all the countries in the world. I must have been the only five year old boy in Czestochowa who could tell you that Bangkok was the capital of Siam and that Siam was a kingdom.

My parents and my older brother Jerzyk were killed during the war. Both my father and Jerzyk died fighting the Nazis. Jerzyk at 18 was the youngest in a group of six partisans. My father was killed in the Treblinka death camp uprising.

Jerzyk and I attended the Hebrew Gymnasium, a most prestigious old school once headed by Daniel Neufeld who first translated the sidur Hebrew prayer book into the Polish language.

Czestochowa, famed for the Black Madonna icon at *Jasna Gora*, is the most Catholic city in Poland. One third of its prewar population was Jewish. A very important and productive third. Not only did Jews build the first textile mill or paper factory but also a concert hall and theater were funded by Jewish philanthropy.

I was a Pole whose religion happened to be Jewish. On high holidays, we attended the handsome New Synagogue but we also celebrated the Constitution Day on May 3rd. When our beloved Marshall Pilsudski died, there was pervasive sadness and mourning among the Jews of Czestochowa.

We who lived in Czestochowa during the war in the ghetto, in hiding, in the Hasag camp where I survived with some 30 children carry with us some harrowing memories.

I was lucky to immigrate to the USA where I proved, as millions before and after me, what America is all about. A young penniless, orphaned boy willing to apply himself, can receive the best education, prosper and secure a solid place in society for his family and himself. Only in America!

The history of Polish Jews is almost as old as historic Poland. We hear about Poland from early Jewish medieval chronicles. Earliest mentioning of Poland is on the first coins ever minted there by the Jewish minters. More prolific are later accounts of the great period of the Golden Ages of the Polish Commonwealth. As Spain and Portugal persecuted and expelled Jews, while onerous restrictions were commonplace elsewhere in Europe, Polish kings welcomed them and granted them privileges and special charters.

For hundreds of years more Jews lived in Poland than anywhere else in the world. The Va'ad Arba' Artzot, the (Jewish) Council of the Four Lands (of Poland) was the only Jewish Executive political body that existed between the destruction of the Second Temple and the creation of the Jewish Agency in Palestine.

And so as Polish Jews, we lived for nearly a millennium in the land that once made up the Kingdom and the Commonwealth of Poland. These lands were much bigger than the territory of the present Polish State. At their maximum, they stretched from the Baltic to the Black Sea, from Germany to the borders of Asiatic Russia; they coincided broadly with what we call today Eastern Europe. You found there a very diverse array of people and cultures. While the rulers were Polish, the peasants were always Polish, but at various periods also Lithuanian, Latvian, Byelorussian and Ukrainian. Cities and towns were populated by Poles, Jews and Germans but also by Armenians, Greeks, Kazakhs, Tatars and other groups. In the past two hundred years, these lands were first annexed by the empires of Russia, Austria and Germany and then in the 20th century they were partitioned into nation states.

Our Museum, through its multimedia narrative exhibitions will magnificently portray the centuries of Jewish life and accomplishments in the early settlements and the Middle Ages. In the cities and towns, Jews often made up half or more of the population. In the largely agricultural economy, Jews cultivated commerce and crafts. They helped shape the country - not as tolerated guests but as proud builders. They developed a unique diaspora civilization that thrived amidst the cultural diversity of Polish lands. A strong minority, they managed to maintain an identity rooted in a clearly defined Jewish way of life. Hundreds of magnificent wooden and masonry synagogues became the backdrop for Yiddish, the vernacular language of Polish Jews. Born was Hassidism, the revivalist movement that wished to serve God through song and dance. The countless Talmudic study centers spawned great sages and teachers - Baal Shem Tov and the Vilna Gaon, other gaonim and tsaddikim. The intellectual ferment brought about the Haskalah movement, the precursor of Zionism and Israel.

Elaborating on the writings of the German Jewish philosopher Emil Fackenheim, Boston Rabbi Joseph Polak states flatly in a recent letter to me “... without Poland there would be no Torah today.” Interestingly, a Polish historian Pawel Spiewak in a new interview also cites Emil Fackenheim as the architect of the 614th injunction (in addition to the Ten Commandments, there are 613 injunctions – the body of Jewish Law): “Most important is that (Yiddishkeit) ‘Jewishness’ be preserved – otherwise we allow the Nazis to triumph. For that we owe a debt of gratitude to historic Poland.”

Through the millennium, Yiddishkeit thrived and was preserved in Poland and the world through the descendants of Polish Jews. As Senator Menendez so well put it when introducing the Museum assistance bill, our Museum “will protect a spirit deeply connected to our own, a heritage we cannot afford to let slip away.”

Jews fought in Poland’s wars and uprisings to reclaim Polish independence. They fought and died - from that great cavalry commander Berek Joselewicz to over 800 Polish Jewish officers butchered at Katyn. As US culture is magnificently the product of its melting pot civilization, so too Polish Jews played an integral part in enriching their Polish fatherland. The poetry of Julian Tuwim, the prose of Isaac Bashevis Singer, the art of Bruno Schulz, the music of Artur Rubinstein, the greats of theater and film – all these were proud elements of Polish culture.

Throughout its entire post-war history, Poland has struggled with the memory of its Jewish past. Having witnessed the most devastating genocide in human history, committed by the Germans

on Polish soil, in front of Polish witnesses would have, all alone, been hard enough to deal with. Human societies do not witness genocides and then carry on as usual. The memory remains, in stories told and untold and in the nightmares. This burden alone would have been hard to bear. The burden was compounded by the fact that while so many wonderful, brave men risked theirs and their families' lives to save their Jewish neighbors, some collaborated with the occupiers. While doubtless most Poles lamented the Jewish tragedy, among some there was shameful glee for finally having been freed of the "Jewish question" – a slogan very current in the Fascist wave of prewar Europe which also found strong echoes in Poland of the late 1930s.

Any meaningful discussion of Polish Jewish history of the war-time years or of the nine hundred years which had preceded them was impossible with the advent of Soviet communism. France, for instance, had faced similar problems of memory as Poland. True, there the Jewish death toll was smaller but there the French state itself and not only individual Frenchmen had participated in the crime. France struggled for half a century to come to terms with the problem. And France had a double advantage over Poland in that respect. Not only had it emerged from the war only wounded and not nearly shattered but, even more importantly – it emerged from the war a free country. Poland had lost 6 million dead (more than half of them Jewish) or over 15 percent of its population to France's 560 thousand or less than 1 ½ percent. And Poland fell victim to Soviet occupation. The war that broke out over Poland's independence ended with the country losing it again.

The Polish communist regime the Soviets had set up was bloody, brutal and hostile to free discussion. The country was far too traumatized to be able to engage in much intellectual introspection anyway but when on occasion it tried, the communist censor would intervene.

Communism not only stifled debate but twisted and perverted it. To be fair, there were some prominent Polish communists of Jewish origin which rendered the quandary even worse – at least until the "anti-Zionist" purge of 1968. By then, the small and shrinking community of Jewish survivors was too weak to provide any counterweight. Apart from a brief mention here and there, the history of Polish Jewry disappeared from textbooks of Polish history and even from guidebooks to formerly significantly or predominantly Jewish towns. The communists reveled in what they considered one of their main successes - the new ethnic unity of Poland. And for once nobody challenged them. Not only the Jewish origins of many communist politicians became unmentionable; the same became true of the biographies of outstanding figures of Polish science, art and letters – including some of the country's most beloved poets. Remaining Jewish monuments gradually decayed. Cemeteries became dumps or construction sites, synagogues were converted into storage facilities, sport clubs, or at best, museums or concert halls.

History of the war was rewritten; its Jewish victims became anonymous "Polish citizens"; the Shoah merely a footnote to the – only too real – "suffering of the Polish nation at the hands of the Hitlerites." The Auschwitz site was officially named "Museum of the Martyrology of the Polish Nation and Other Nations." In that list, Jews were mentioned last as the Polish word for Jews begins with the last letter of the Polish alphabet. (I well remember my heated argument with an Auschwitz guide in 1967 when a 3-hour tour ended without him once mentioning the word Jew). The only remaining visible sign of nearly a millennium of history – Nathan

Rappaport's towering Monument to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising Fighters – stood on the central square of a new housing development which had grown around it out of the ghetto ruins. One almost wondered why it had been built at all.

Much has been done to change this sorry state of affairs since Poland recovered its independence in 1989, became part of Europe and proudly a friend of the USA and Israel. Literally hundreds of books of Jewish interest have been published. The Jewish culture festivals in Krakow and Warsaw have become the European continent's largest. Hundreds of Polish scholars, writers, journalists and community activists have produced an impressive array of works, scientific monographs, journalistic debates, memoirs and local commemorations of neighbors lost. Public debates about the iniquities of the past – honest now and daring – attract widespread attention and passion. Jan Gross' seminal "Neighbors" was read or read about by a stunning 85 percent of Poles. The renascent Jewish community, through its recovered rebuilt synagogues, schools and organizations and events directed to society at large is very much part of this vibrant scene.

In the waning days of communism, Congressman Steven Solarz met with Lech Walesa, the Solidarity leader in Gdansk. Present was also a young State department intern Christopher Hill (later American Ambassador to Poland and now the Under Secretary conducting negotiations with North Korea). My friend Solarz asked me to accompany him as his interpreter. Since those heady days in 1990, I have become a frequent visitor and investor in my native Poland.

On one such visit, I met with several officials in Czestochowa. Professor Jerzy Mizgalski asked for my help in presenting an exhibition about the long history of Jews in Czestochowa. Rich, original archival information, artifacts, photographs, multi media would provide the first such showing of a once proud community now reduced to a handful and almost forgotten. In my own meetings with Polish young people, I invariably found almost total ignorance about their not so long ago Jewish neighbors. But without exception, they were very eager to find out. Still, I was fascinated when Prof. Mizgalski related to me his recent Jewish history course for which a 35 seat classroom was assigned and for which over 300 students applied.

And thus commenced what Israeli Ambassador to Poland Shewach Weiss succinctly described as "*Przyklad Czestochowy*", the Example of Czestochowa.

Many encouraging events and programs followed. In an annual contest of the largest newspaper, the Exhibition was adjudged the best cultural event of the year. Perhaps, the most important consequence was a program at a local College of Fine Arts entitled *From the Inspiration of Jewish Culture* which after Czestochowa was shown at the National Library in Warsaw and then incorporated by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage into nationwide curriculum.

Incidentally, the exhibition *The Jews of Czestochowa*, accompanied by examples of the art *From the Inspiration of Jewish Culture* is traveling throughout the USA and a condensed version was shown in 2006 at the Rotunda of the Russell Senate Office Building.

May I mention some reasons for my sponsorship of the exhibition which have more than a little in common with my fervent support for our Museum?

We wanted young Poles to learn the true history of their fellow countrymen for centuries. We wanted once and for all to kill the terrible lie that Jews went to their death like sheep. We wanted the many Jewish visitors to shed their own stereotypes and misconceptions. And we wanted to clean up the Czestochowa Jewish cemetery which has become a jungle in recent years.

We had press and TV coverage of all the ceremonies including the speeches of the diplomatic corps and the religious heavyweights – imagine the Chief Rabbi of Poland and the Archbishop of *Jasna Gora* on the same podium at the Philharmonic Hall which the Archbishop acknowledged as the site of the once beautiful New Synagogue. All that and the academic symposium presentations were valuable and educational.

We persuaded the city authorities to make a good start in the cemetery clean-up. Within weeks prior to the Exhibition opening, they did an incredible job which we all applauded. That set the stage for the rededication of the cemetery not only with a Kaddish and El Maleh Rachamim but also with a stirring Military Roll Call. For the first time, at a Polish Jewish cemetery Jewish resistance fighters were given their due by a Polish Army Honor Company in a ceremony broadcast by nationwide television.

Hundreds of Jews and Christians, young and old from around the world attended the events replete with joy and sadness, drama, emotion and nostalgia. From Mayor Wrona to the police; from members of the philharmonic, museum and theater, from staffs of the hotels (managers to porters and the volunteer students at hospitality desks) from the friendly crowds – there was not even one untoward incident, quite the contrary. And from Up High the verdict seemed favorable as well because the weather was just glorious.

This then is the milieu and the need and the spirit where our Museum will rise. Like the phoenix out of ashes, it will become the deserved paragon of excellence.

When I express my gratitude to Representative Christopher Smith for his authorization of HR 3320 it is not only in my name or in the name of the North American Council for the Museum or even for the three official partners of the Museum – the Polish government, the City of Warsaw and the Association of the Jewish Historical Institute. I thank Congressman Smith on behalf of all the young people, Poles and Americans, Jews and Christians and all people of good will who will now have a very good, a very special reason to visit Warsaw and Poland.

In addition to the all important cutting edge exhibition, our Museum will provide a learning environment and outreach programs. It will make us all glad to have been at the “creation”.

I think that any person who visits our Museum, if he is Jewish he will be proud and if he is not Jewish he will walk out knowing all there is to know about the Jewish history in Poland.