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PRESERVING THE PAST FOR THE FUTURE

Symposium On The Meaning Of The Holocaust
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The Holocaust and Polish American Identity

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While we seek clarity in understanding the meaning of the word “Holocaust” in the context of Polish and Jewish experience in the Second World War, especially in the pursuit of two of the major goals of NPAJAC to support each other in telling fully the stories of the two communities and the improvement of relations between them in the United States, let us acknowledge our ability to control the meaning of the word “Holocaust” is and will remain exceedingly difficult. Given the voracious ability of our consumer culture to appropriate, swallow up and change the meaning of words and concepts, we will always face the problem of the word being used in all sorts of ways we find inappropriate. (I remind you how “racism” which used to be a strong and specific word has now become weak and diffuse in meaning.) The “Black Holocaust” museum complete with its own state-sanctioned highway signs in Milwaukee is a case which graphically demonstrates this appropriation.

It is important to note at this point that the dispute we are talking about is a distinctively American issue, not a European and certainly not a Polish one. In Polish the word Holocaust means simply the genocide against the Jews. In so far as it is used by Poles it is not seen as referring to their own experience. A major modern Polish dictionary defines it as:

“zagłada, całkowite zniszczenie, zwłaszcza w odniesieniu do masowej zagłady żydów, przeprowadzonej przez nazistów w czasie II wojny światowej”.
Annihilation, total destruction, in particular in relation to the massive annihilation of the Jews perpetrated by the Nazis during World War II.

Recent academic writings in Poland on the Shoah, such as those of Barbara Engelking, confirm this impression. In Poland, ironically enough, the Martyrdom of Poland has been significantly decoupled from the Shoah. Earlier, as Michael Steinlauf has shown us, it was both ignored and subsumed into the Polish story. This tragedy is an unfortunate legacy. It is the opposite of what we seek to do here.

Thus, the debate about the Holocaust that we are addressing is an American dialogue between two American ethnic groups. The issues in Poland are obviously related, but are of a different order. Most certainly the meaning of the word “Holocaust”, or its exclusivity or inclusivity, is not at issue there. The problem we are discussing is specific to the context of Jewish American and Polish American relations and the public presentation in the United States of the Shoah and the experience of World War II in Poland.

We have a publicly established institution, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, which does include a mission to commemorate the wartime destruction of Polish and other Slavic peoples and the Gypsy population of Europe – the Sinta and Roma – as a result of Nazi racial

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ideology. The description of the mission of the Holocaust Memorial Museum is – perhaps because it is a political document – artfully ambiguous on what constitutes the “Holocaust”, but it does seem to include the experience of those other groups in some way in that term:

“The Holocaust refers to a specific event in 20th century history: the state-sponsored, systematic persecution and annihilation of European Jewry by Nazi Germany and its collaborators between 1933 and 1945. Jews were the primary victims - six million were murdered: Gypsies, the handicapped and Poles were also targeted for destruction or decimation for racial, ethnic or national reasons. Millions more, including homosexuals, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Soviet prisoners of war and political dissidents also suffered grievous oppression and death under Nazi tyranny.”

Recent publications of the Holocaust Museum’s researchers, especially Rossini’s [Hitler Strikes Poland](#), have documented more clearly and systematically than ever before the role of racial ideology in Nazi genocidal activities against Christian Poles. This is one of the key criteria in the Holocaust definition of the USHMM.

There is no doubt that the leaders of the Jewish community, who spearheaded the campaign to create the Holocaust Memorial Museum, were sure they intended the Holocaust to refer exclusively to the Jewish experience, as Sigmund Strochlitz, one of the prime movers of the project, said in 1980:

“the term Holocaust can only mean one thing – the systematic, state sponsored murder of six million Jews – men, women and children – and no one else! No other people were singled out for total annihilation except the Jewish people. It is therefore unreasonable and inappropriate to ask survivors to share the term Holocaust with any other mass suffering that occurred in the history of mankind.”

He goes on to say that to agree to share the term would be to “equate our suffering, our lives, our fate during the war with others and take away the distinctiveness, the uniqueness of a tragedy that has no precedent in the history of mankind”. His statement was in response to the 1980 legislation to create the museum as inclusive of the genocidal activities by the Nazis against other groups and President Carter’s State of the Union announcement to that effect. Part of the reason for that inclusivity was the lobbying of those other groups, including of Polish American organizations.

Since the word was given its meaning in the United States, in relation to the genocide of World War II in 1959, the word has been used by the American Jewish community, with only few exceptions, to refer exclusively to the [Shoah](#). One of those exceptions was Simon Wiesenthal. In 1980 Professor Yehuda Bauer chided Mr. Wiesenthal for his role in influencing President Carter on this issue. Eli Wiesel was another who widened the definition. However, Jewish scholars such as Alexander Donat, Nora Levin and Lucy Dawidowicz, gave the meaning of the Holocaust as an exclusively Jewish tragedy wide currency in academic literature early on.

On the other hand, since the late 1970’s when they began to use it, Polish Americans concerned with the World War II story have extended the word to include the Polish experience. One notable exception has been its usage in the work [Zegota: The Rescue of Jews in Wartime Poland](#) by Irena Tomaszewska and Tacia Werbowska, the first a Polish Catholic, the second a

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Polish Jew. “When we discussed the Holocaust, we were always aware of the brutal occupation of Poland; when we discussed the occupation, we could never lose sight of the Holocaust.” Although written with Werbowska, it is a view of the meaning of the Holocaust that Tomaszewska, a leading Polish Canadian activist publicly holds. That statement, however, is important because it does give us the reason the Holocaust is a contested word, especially for Polish Americans.

The Polish American use of the word “Holocaust” began in the late 1970’s largely in response to the growing popular literary and media depiction of the Holocaust, most notably the made-for-TV series The Holocaust in 1978. William Styron’s Sophie’s Choice, Arthur Miller’s Playing for Time and the Diary of Anne Frank also appeared at this time. The period also saw an enormous growth in interest in teaching about and depicting the story of the Shoah. Eli Zborowski’s newspaper Martyrdom and Resistance during that era gives us a full record of the astounding energy, commitment and resources the Jewish community devoted to create curricula, exhibits and programs on the Holocaust and the lobbying it did to mandate its inclusion as a topic into school curricula and college courses. The series and the new curricula, however, showed Polish Americans that it was impossible to tell the Jewish story without telling some of the Polish story. Polish Americans felt that the way the segments of the Polish story in these popular accounts were presented were inaccurate, out of context and tendentious. Any telling of the Holocaust story must include, they felt, a fuller account with input from the Polish side and recognition of the breadth and depth of the victimization of Christian Poles, if only to give context to the Jewish story.

One of the leaders of this movement was the late Dr. Stanislaus Blejwas, former co-chair of this council. In 1979 he organized a local television program with appearances by Polish camp survivors. This was followed by a Connecticut Humanities Oral History Project, “Polish Survivors of the Holocaust” and the production of a public radio documentary in 1982 based on the project. The Polish American Congress at this time shifted its anti-defamation efforts away from the “so-called” Polish joke and other similar defamations which had begun to decline, especially in the wake of the election of John Paul II in 1978, to the Holocaust issues.

In 1980, the Novak Report, published by philosopher Michael Novak, a booklet titled The Other Holocaust, the first major use of the term in a title to refer to the sufferings of other groups beside Jews. The work by Ukrainian American scholar Bohdan Wytycky primarily covered the Nazi victimization of Slavs and Gypsies.

Also in 1980 Czesław Miłosz won the Nobel Prize for literature. In his Nobel address he says:

“For the poet of the “other Europe” the events embraced by the name Holocaust are a reality, so close in time he cannot hope to liberate himself from this remembrance unless perhaps by translating the Psalms of David. He feels anxiety, though, when the meaning of the Holocaust undergoes gradual modifications, so the word begins to belong to the history of Jews exclusively, as if among the victims there were not also millions of Poles, Russians, Ukrainians and prisoners of other nationalities. He feels anxiety, for he senses in this a foreboding of a not distant future when history will be reduced to what appears on television while the truth, because it is too complicated, will be buried in the archives, if not totally annihilated.”

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It is important to note that the Polish version of the text includes the words “The Holocaust” italicized and in English. He is clearly writing as a Pole who has lived for decades in the United States (as much as he might not want to be called a Polish American). He also appears, with his reference to television, to be reacting to the recent TV blockbuster The Holocaust. His reaction to the events of the Nazi occupation of Poland, as a witness who was acutely sensitive to the uniqueness and depth of the Jewish tragedy, speaks to the resonance the extension of the word “Holocaust” to the Polish experience had in the Polish American community. In the fall of 1983, Dr. Blejwas wrote an article in Perspectives, a national Polish American educational and cultural bi-monthly, titled “Holocaust Illiteracy” in which he argued explicitly for this particular understanding of the Holocaust while respecting “the special significance it had for Jews”.

Polish American academics also began to use the word. In 1986 Dr. Richard Lukas wrote The Forgotten Holocaust: Poles Under Nazi Occupation 1939-1944. (Revised 1997.) He introduced his work with the quotation from Milosz’s Nobel address. In 2002, Dr. Tadeusz Piotrowski published a work titled Poland’s Holocaust in which he discussed all of the genocides that took place in the Polish lands. His novel approach surveyed these through the prism of collaboration. Thus, this usage of the word had found wide currency in Polish American circles.

In many places in the United States, Polish American groups either *ad hoc* committees or those affiliated with formal organizations, in particular with the PAC, sought membership with varying success on local or state curriculum boards that dealt with Holocaust curricula. These curricula, as I noted, were the product of the renewed national interest as well as Jewish community concern with the telling of the Holocaust story. By the 1980’s it was increasingly common for Polish camp survivors like Mrs. Bozena Urbanowicz-Gilbride and Mr. Michael Preisler whose sufferings had only been known within Polonia to now begin to appear as Holocaust speakers in classrooms and community forums to discuss their experiences in Nazi concentration camps. The news stories that reported on many of these presentations were remarkably similar. The most common element in these reports was that audiences expressed surprise and sometimes disbelief that Polish Christians had been victims on a large scale of Nazi genocidal policies. Their Holocaust stories were always seen, however, it must be stressed, in the context of the Shoah. Although these appearances were an avenue for introducing the story of Polish martyrdom in World War II, the history of Polish victimization in them was never exclusive of the Jewish story nor, of course, could it be since the topic was the Holocaust.

Let me digress briefly at this point to put the Polish American reaction in a broader American historical context. The process of the ethnization of immigrants to the United States from the Polish lands in the late 19th and early 20th centuries took place at the same time as the identical process was going on in Poland. In the United States, Polish national identity became an integral and major part of Polish ethnic identity. In fact, many became Polish in America sooner than their relatives in Poland became Polish. There are few American ethnic groups in which national identity and concern for the nation of origin was as strong as for Polish Americans. (Paradoxically, they became patriotic Americans at the same time.) There is perhaps no other ethnic group – Jews in recent decades being the only possible exception – whose major *raison d’etre* has been so intensely the cause of the homeland. In some cases, for long decades given the tragedy of Polish history over the last one hundred fifty years, they saw themselves as Poland’s surrogates and even its legitimate representatives. Chicago, not Warsaw, for many was Poland’s real capital. Another result of the dynamic of this American social process was that almost none of the members of the other groups from the Polish lands became Polish in America – an option that was at least available and taken by some of their members – including Jews in Poland. Jews from all over Eastern Europe combined with their German brethren to create a new Jewish

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American ethnic group in the United States. Peter Yollis is the one prominent exception of a Jewish immigrant who identified as a Pole. He was the editor of Nowy Dziennik in New York.

Despite the more radical separation in the United States between Poles and Jews than in Poland, Jews became the only American ethnic group to materially affect the identity of Polish Americans. Internally, the debate about who was a Pole in America, whether it was a question of membership in Polish organizations, (the issue between the PNA and the PRCU) or the more general question of “true Polishness” as it was being formed in America and reflected in immigrant literature, as Karen Majewski has shown in her excellent new study Traitors and True Poles: Narrating a Polish American Identity, revolved in no small measure around the Jew as Pole. More importantly, in external relations with other groups given the importance of the meaning of Poland for Polish Americans, the debate about Polish independence, the place of the new Poland among the world’s nations and the role of minority populations in it, was joined with Jewish Americans in the American public square. Their own self-esteem and the regard with which they were held in U.S. society was directly tied in their minds (rightly to some degree) to the way Poland was regarded in public opinion, in addition to the practical impact of favorable or unfavorable views of their newly emerging homeland on U.S. policy makers. The strong attacks on Poland by Jewish Americans or their supporters, such as John Dewey, brought sharp responses from Polish Americans in the 1918 – 1922 period. These ranged from official responses and counter-attacks from Polish American organizations, to demonstrations outside of vaudeville theaters against Jewish comedians and performers who publicly denigrated Poland in their acts, to fights between youths in the two groups. All other (and there had been many) attacks on Polish American self-esteem, the propagation of negative images, and discrimination and prejudice in the United States against them came because they were Polish immigrants in America. Only the public contention with Jewish Americans was focused on the issue of Poland, which was so central to their self-identity and their definition of their community.

When the issue of the Holocaust captured the attention of the American public in the 1970’s, the echo of the earlier, and subsequent less vehement, disputes was still there. However, more importantly, the issue arose at a time the Polish American community was feeling especially vulnerable. It has been singled out, for reasons not fully explicable, for unusual and virulent public ridicule and denigration in the media and popular literature and culture. At the same time Polish Americans, as the most visible group then in the American white working class and as usually the last group to leave the urban space for which they competed with African Americans, were stigmatized as the major source of racial problems, support for radical right political candidates and an unpopular war. (None of which were tenable conclusions as subsequent studies showed.) I wrote on the impact on Polish Americans of being publicly perceived as the major opponents of African Americans and Jewish Americans in U.S. society more than twenty-five years ago in 1979.

Thus, the issues that arose in the popular presentations of the Holocaust in that period which Polish Americans felt reflected negatively on them had a more powerful impact than otherwise might be the case. It evoked a determined effort to correct the record as they saw it and to present the true story of Polish martyrdom and courage. It is interesting to note that, as a result, the martyrdom and victimization of Poland began to receive a perceptively greater emphasis than that nation’s heroic struggle in the accounts of the war. Although the Polish story had never lacked legitimacy within the community, the new Holocaust interest in society at large offered Polish Americans the opportunity of telling it beyond the community. The popular interpretations of the story of the Holocaust, as I noted above, further made the Polish community anxious to tell it to correct and amplify what was becoming the public record. The only way to enter the

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discourse was through the rubric of the Holocaust. Aside from this practical aspect, it also offered them an interpretative framework to organize the story of Polish victimization for racial and ethnic reasons and one that the general American audience was primed to understand and appreciate. It also caught the imagination of the community itself, especially after Milosz used it in his Nobel address, as I tried to show briefly above.

The Polish American community is not as wedded to the notion of seeing its experience in World War II in terms of the Holocaust as is the Jewish American community. There are other narrative strategies that it can and does use. However, Polonia is as committed as is the Jewish community to having its experience become part of the general knowledge about history that its fellow citizens have of Poland and, by extension, of itself. It is key to its more than century-long role as the guardian and spokesman for Poland and an integral part of its self-identity in America. The “Holocaust” narrative, for better or worse, has been for more than two decades one of the main venues in America to accomplish that. In addition, the Holocaust has been internalized as the most compelling way that many of the survivors in the Polish American community have come to understand their own painful experience and to tell it.

The most important issue, however, for the Polish community is the one articulated in the dialogue between Irena Tomaszewska and Tecia Werbowska: “When we discussed the Holocaust, we were always aware of the brutal occupation of Poland, when we discussed the occupation we could never lose sight of the Holocaust.” Although they are not the same story, they are interrelated so that neither is fully comprehensible without the other. This terrible period can only be understood as a whole if we truly and fully comprehend the magnitude of the evil that was visited on the world by totalitarianism and racism and the ability of evil to corrupt and divide its victims. The most unspeakable of its chapters, The Shoah and the story of the terrible martyrdom of Poland, each illuminate the other and in complementary ways give us the full dimension of this evil. This is what I believe Milosz was calling for when he spoke of understanding the story in all its complexity. What he sought, and the Polish community, I believe, seeks is the fullness of understanding of the period and a genuine inclusion of its Polish aspect. The intent was not and is not to equate the experiences. We all recognize in the words of Gutman and Krakowski that Poles and Jews were “unequal victims”. But, both stories are necessary, important and compelling and irrevocably tied together.

More than twenty-five years ago the story of the Holocaust and its meaning became one of the significant narratives in the American public square and the discourse about it became a major feature of our culture. If it had ever been a private story it now lost that quality. Given the dramatic changes in access to information via new technologies and the even wider compass of our media since that time, it is now more than ever impossible to hope to keep it in any way a private story. In fact, the whole purpose of the popular presentations, the school curricula and the establishment by Act of Congress of the Holocaust Memorial Museum itself was to put it at the heart of American public consciousness.

The story is out there and it affects all of us. For the Polish American community the issue is not so much what its experience is called, but that the public narratives and school curricula include the Polish story. Polish Americans, in turn, have the responsibility to see that any narratives we produce include the Shoah because it is an integral part of the Polish story. Polish Americans and Jewish Americans may never agree on a common story. Nevertheless, we both have a compelling interest to assist each other in seeing the story told fully and fairly and the differences explored honestly.