

Kielce and Communism from 5

mass-murder of millions of civilians. Long after the guns have been silenced, the spirit of animosities energized by World War II between peoples, between cultures, and between religious groups stays alive within some people's hearts. World War II and its spirit of hatred will continue to live on until reconciliation between these groups is complete.

Young people born a generation or two after the end of World War II generally have little natural interest in nursing animosities born of earlier eras. These animosities, in order to live on, have to be carefully cultivated in younger people by those who may feel their interests are served by doing so. Surprisingly, there have been systematic attempts by some to keep these animosities alive by devising mythological accounts of what had happened preceding World War II, during the War, and in the aftermath of the War. Even more surprisingly, some of these mythologies have been advanced by people from groups who were victimized in the War, people who should have the strongest vested interest in the truth being propagated.

There are many versions of these mythologies, but one in popular currency in the mid-1990's North America distills roughly to this: an outside force known as the Nazis forcibly gained control of Germany and under totalitarian military rule forced a policy of war and ethnic hatred and extermination on a frightened but generally unwilling German populace. According to this myth, the real story of genuine ethnic hatred can be found among Jewish people and gentiles who lived in Poland, whose alleged long-standing animosity pre-dated the War, and extends beyond the end of the War to this day. The myth-speakers claim that the Polish nation was the true anti-Jewish state, and that atrocities perpetrated on countless Jewish people on Polish soil in German-occupied Poland were carried out with great relish by a willing Polish populace that was tired of dealing with a Jewish sub-culture that had been already relegated to ghettos prior to the War. The existence of the myth of non-support by the German people of the actions of the Nazi regime even motivated the title and thesis of a recent doctoral dissertation turned into a book by Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Knopf, 1996). Goldhagen documents the involvement of ordinary Germans in carrying out what today are referred to as Nazi atrocities.

As Goldhagen was clarifying the role of the Germans, others were perpetuating the myths. In April 1996, propagation of the anti-Polish myth was advanced by the film *Shtetl* shown on Public Television (PBS) in the United States. The film falsely suggests Polish complicity in the Holocaust. Through its own baseless and malicious claims about Polish people, the film is unwittingly a study of the encouragement of ethnic hatred by Jewish people toward Polish gentiles. Israeli students in the film are shown making a series of claims, sometimes gleefully, about alleged Polish involvement in the Holocaust, including attempts to shift the blame

for Nazi crimes from the German people to the Polish people. The students even mocked Polish rescue efforts, seemingly oblivious to the fact that the Germans punished Polish gentiles collectively for providing any form of assistance to Jewish people, or even for not turning them in.

The film *Shtetl* focused negatively on the local Catholic Church and priest several times. In actual well-documented fact, Polish gentiles helped Jewish people in Poland extensively during World War II. This assistance included the hiding of tens of thousands of Jewish people in the homes of Polish gentiles, which put the gentiles' entire families at risk of death. Several thousand Polish Christians, including men, women, and children, were burned alive or otherwise summarily executed for the crime of hiding or assisting Jews. As an example of local Catholic Church involvement, it is ironic that the wartime associate pastor of the very Catholic Church that was featured in the film was murdered because he was assisting Jews. His name was Father Henryk Opiatowski of Brańsk. Yet, Father Opiatowski was never mentioned in the film! Nor were several other Polish residents who were put to death for extending help to the Jews. In no other country during the war were people subjected to death in this way for providing assistance to Jewish people. These students of the Holocaust were certainly taught how anti-Semitism produced six million Jewish deaths in the Holocaust; apparently they did not also learn how anti-Polonism produced three million Polish Christian deaths during the occupation - the Polish aspect of the Holocaust. Since the students in the film *Shtetl* were not eyewitnesses to the horrors of the Holocaust, they may very well be a window into the way the Holocaust is being taught in some Jewish homes and schools. If the purpose of teaching about the Holocaust is to never forget how ethnic hatreds can be nurtured to the point of destroying a people (and it should be), then Holocaust teaching will fail if along the way it teaches young Jewish people to hate Polish people.

There is another example of an obstacle to Jewish-Polish goodwill that is perhaps more significant and potentially longer lasting in promoting ethnic hatred by Jewish people towards Polish people than the film *Shtetl*. It is an exhibit in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., that falsely presents events that occurred in Kielce, Poland, in 1946 as part of the Holocaust. It refers to the clearly Soviet-staged violence in Kielce as a "Polish pogrom." To many visitors of the Holocaust Museum, the exhibit by its very inclusion seems to suggest that after the end of World War II, a liberated Polish populace chose to continue Hitler's work of exterminating Jewish people. The study you are now reading examines these events in Kielce, and shows that the suggestions of a Polish-led extension of the Holocaust are patently false. The Kielce Pogrom had nothing to do with the German-engineered Holocaust. It had everything to do with the Soviet-engineered strangulation of the Polish

nation.

Like all effective myths, those related to World War II have some elements of truth underlying them. In conjunction with the construction of these myths, though, actual facts and events have been distorted or misrepresented, and certainly the contexts within which they occurred have been falsely stated. Sadly, the distortions, misrepresentations and falsehoods are sometimes purposely and systematically advanced by those who feel a need to humiliate the Polish nation and members of the Polish ethnic group from around the world. Those who today seek to humiliate or destroy people because of their ethnic association are kindred spirits to those who sought to humiliate or destroy people because of their ethnic association in the World War II era. Let me say unequivocally: anti-Semitism in the World War II era or now is wrong and it is evil. On the flip side of the coin bearing the image of anti-Semitism is the image of anti-Polonism. The coin of anti-Semitism cannot be melted down and destroyed without also melting down and destroying anti-Polonism.

I will state up front that I have a vested interest in the truth about World War II and its aftermath being clearly illuminated. I am a veteran of 64 months of imprisonment in Gestapo prisons, concentration camps, and death marches. My own ordeal, and the suffering and death of many of my Polish and Jewish friends and prison-mates, not to mention the sacrifices made by the young men who fought and died as soldiers, will have been rendered meaningless if the hatred of Jewish people by the Nazi leadership and various members of the German nation are simply replaced by hatred of Polish people by Jewish people, or vice versa. Those who even today perpetuate myths and misconceptions about animosities associated with World War II and its aftermath are not merely bearing false witness - they are willing accomplices to the spirit of hatred of World War II, a frightening spirit embodied in its purest evil form by Adolf Hitler.

I have seen, first hand, the disgusting, murderous results of ethnic hatred. I have devoted the latter part of my life to writing about the long-term coexistence of Polish Jews and gentiles within Poland, and am committed to trying to help diffuse animosities stemming from World War II. In this spirit of friendship and respect, I wrote and had published earlier this decade a documentary history entitled *Jews in Poland: The Rise of Jews as a Nation from Congressus Judaicus in Poland to the Knesset in Israel*. If World War II presented any lessons to the people of the world, it showed what can eventually happen if ethnic animosities are allowed to fester and grow.

The study you are now reading is a quest for Polish-Jewish reconciliation. For it to be successful, those who would join this quest must have one thing in common: respect for the truth. As part of this quest, I will address how Jewish-Polish animosities have been cultivated in the aftermath of the War, and in particular how Soviet actions and Soviet-induced events and situations contributed to or drove the process of cultivating the animosities.

In particular, I will take the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Kielce Pogrom to discuss this event in detail and use it as a basis for discussion of the larger geopolitical situation. This study deals primarily with the results of Soviet-institutionalized hatred and the Soviet crime of provoking situations purposely designed to sour Polish-Jewish relations. In general, the public in Western countries knows very little about the specifics of these types of Soviet misdeeds.

For this study, the book *Poland: Communism, Nationalism, Anti-Semitism* by Michael Chęciński (New York: Karz-Cohl Publishing, 1982) is an important source of information for the Cold War period. I will use Chęciński's book as a resource to help illuminate the events and situations in the aftermath of World War II that relate to Polish-Jewish relations. Chęciński's book details the relations between Poles and Jews in the postwar "People's" Republic of Poland and the damage done to these relations under the conditions created by the Soviets. Chęciński was an insider of the Soviet-controlled terror apparatus. As a Jew who survived the Łódź Ghetto, Chęciński (Chęciński) was naturally very sensitive to Soviet policies which fomented and used anti-Semitic excesses in the satellite empire to serve Soviet purposes of the time. Chęciński's book shows Soviet methods used to bring the destruction of law and morality to Poland and other satellite states. I also draw heavily on material from a book by Krystyna Kersten, *Polacy - Żydzi - komunizm: anatomia półprawd 1939-68* [Poles, Jews, Communism: The Anatomy of Half-Truths 1939-68] (Warszawa: Niezależna Oficyna Wydawnicza, 1992) and also from *Pogrom Żydów w Kielcach 4 lipca 1946* [Pogrom of Jews in Kielce, July 4, 1946] by Bożena Szaynok, (Warszawa: Bellona, 1992). Along the way, I will include some necessary background information relating to World War II. Overall, through this study I hope to help unravel some of the root causes and dynamics of Polish-Jewish relations after World War II, and how these are strongly affecting Polish-Jewish relations even today.

To be continued...
July issue - Part 2

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