

Spinning for Poland

Poland may have the ear of the White House and be a loyal American ally, but the country still has an image problem in the United States, writes Robert Kopacz.

All the quotes sound eerily similar, despite the diverse sources. Consider this Sidney Frank obituary, written by Douglas S. Martin, in the January 12, 2006, edition of the *New York Times*: "After he saw *Escape from Sobibor*, a film from 1987 on the revolt in 1943 of Jewish prisoners at a Polish death camp, he tracked down nine survivors and sent them checks of \$11,000 each." Or take a look at the article entitled *Files Uncover Nazis' Trail of Death*, written by Colin Nickerson in the May 7, 2006 edition of the *Boston Globe*: "The famous Schindler's list is part of the archives—consisting of transport orders diverting more than 1,000 Jews from the Polish death camps to jobs at a factory operated by the courageous German businessman Oskar Schindler." Or read this excerpt from *World History—People & Nations* by Mazour (2000), p. 729: "In his book, *Never to Forget*, Milton Meltzer quotes an SS officer sent to a Polish death camp to deliver poison gas. There he witnessed the mass extermination of Polish Jews..."

The list goes on and on. Some items are references to "Polish death camps" like that in a brochure for the 15th New York Jewish Film Festival, describing a film about Auschwitz. There was even a history book used in the school curriculum up Pittsford, NY, suggesting that Poles, not Nazis, herded Jews into ghettos. The Polish language version of Poland's Ministry of Foreign Affairs website has a page listing as many such erroneous references as they have been able to find globally. Although these excerpts are from recent publications, many can recall hearing such references back in the 1980's.

So what is going on? A recent *Economist* survey of Poland described Poles as "prickly" when it comes to foreigners' ignorance of Polish history and culture. But even those Poles who resist the urge to be prickly will have a hard time resisting the notion that all the references to "Polish death camps" across so many different US media sources are more than just a coincidence. Nothing will make a Pole or any person with Polish

roots feel pricklier than hearing a Nazi concentration camp that happened to be located on Polish soil referred to as a "Polish death camp." Blatantly inaccurate, it has the unfortunate effect of fanning the flames of paranoia amongst those Poles who are quick to claim conspiracies to defeat or defame the Polish nation. Ironically, when newspapers refer to Auschwitz correctly, they seem to take pains to use the term "Nazi death camp," and not "German death camp," to avoid hurting German feelings. Yet to refer to it as a "Polish death camp" seems to be considered an innocent mistake. So is all of that a part of a larger plot to defame the Polish nation?

According to the Polish Consulate in New York, the answer is no. "In most of these cases these intentions are innocent and come mostly from lack of familiarity with history and sensitivity. But it is not just the intentions, it is the result," that matters, notes Krzysztof Kasprzyk, Poland's consul general in New York.

Kasprzyk should know. A journalist by profession, he left his native Kraków in the 1980's for the US, working as a chief editor for a weekly publication in Chicago, and in 1988 joining the faculty of the University of Colorado at Boulder as a visiting professor of journalism. He returned to Poland in 1991, and joined the Foreign Service, holding consular posts in Vancouver and Los Angeles before taking the Consul General post in New York in October of last year.

As he suggested, the intentions might be innocent, but the implications are not. The repeated references read by a person who is not fully informed about World War II history—and many Americans are not—can also create an inaccurate subconscious impression of Poles amongst Americans. That can operate to the long-term disadvantage of the collective Polish community, and the Polish government's relations with the United States.

The consulate in New York is hardly sitting on its hands. Kasprzyk, together with the Vice Consul General, Marek Skulimowski, has developed a network of Poles living in the US, Polish Americans

and others who are both knowledgeable about Polish history and friendly to the cause, to watch for references to Poland. The network has been effective in catching even the smallest historical inaccuracies about the conduct of Poles during World War II. Once a reference is identified, letters start going out from Skulimowski's email, as well as from his network of helpers, asking for a correction.

The consulate makes it quite clear: Correcting the record is the order of the day; prickliness is not. The goal, according to Skulimowski, is to properly correct the record and inform.

In fairness to the various media cited, when the Polish consulate in New York calls it to an editor's attention, apologies are forthcoming and corrections are published in most—but not all—cases. Judging from correspondence between the Consulate and the editors of the *New York Times*, the *Times* appears to be responsive.

Up until now, in the battle to create a positive image of Poland in the world, Poles have tended to be on the defensive. Efforts to change Poland's image have been limited to reacting to these occurrences in the media. But responding to inaccuracies in the media is not enough. The recent June 11, 2006, editorial in the *New York Times*, captioned, "Poland's Bigoted Government" shows that more needs to be done. Suffice to say, in a quick and informal survey of the Poles living in the US, their reaction to the editorial, even those who dislike the current government, was that the editorial was unfair and biased.

Fully aware of this, Kasprzyk and Skulimowski are examining a more proactive plan to better inform the American public on Polish history. They are pressing hard to get the *New York Times* to change its stylebook to include proper citation of Auschwitz and expressly avoid the usage of "Polish death camp." Could we be seeing better Public Relations for Poland in the future? ■

Author's Note: Comments from Polish government representatives in the U.S. were made prior to the June 11, 2006, New York Times editorial.



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