

HOLOCAUST COMMITTEE

DOCUMENTATION

Polish American Congress

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Auschwitz No.22213

Dear Dr. Donohue:

As a Polish Catholic who spent 3½ years in Auschwitz as a prisoner of Hitler's SS, I fell compelled to express my objections to the April 17th telecast of Frontline's SHTETL. It is fraud and it is shameful the Public Broadcasting System is party to it.

I have dedicated many years to speaking on the Holocaust and how great a catastrophe it was for the Jews and Christians of Poland. Foremost for me is to recall and relate my experiences with scrupulous accuracy. Nothing is more powerful than truth and honesty when telling this terrible story. Nothing is more reprehensible than the manipulation and embellishment of the historical record to force a specific interpretation.

The film distorts and misrepresents the centuries-long relations between Jews and Poles especially during the Holocaust period. Because Poland had been subjected to so much Nazi and Communist propaganda during World War II, it was easy for me to recognize some of the same tactics SHTETL uses to falsely accuse and condemn the Polish people.

Its purpose is clear: to damage our image in any way possible, not only because we are Poles but also because we

are Catholics.

Like myself and anyone else who suffered through the Holocaust, SHTETL's Jewish producer undoubtedly is unable to restrain his passion when dealing with this subject. But nobody – not even a Jew – has the right to tamper with the truth simply because the truth may not be to his liking.

The techniques are self-evident. One is to focus on what is the rare exception, magnify and exaggerate it and, when useful, misrepresent it. Every interaction between Poles and Jews is closely scrutinized with the hope some sort of inference of anti-Semitism might be extracted from it.

Producer Marian Marzynski deliberately holds his interviews with aged and uneducated Polish farmers rather than with professional individual who would have been able to recognize his devious intentions – to portray the Poles as guilty as the Germans.

His other technique is to capitalize on the fact the average viewer's knowledge about Nazi atrocities is generally limited only to the Jewish experience. SHTETL's resolute silence on anything that could show how Polish Catholics like me went through the same hell the German barbarians prepared for the Jews allows the anti-Polish allegations Marzynski formulates to appear more acceptable.

Marzynski opens SHTETL with a dedication to his father who was killed "only because he was a Jew." I understand his deep emotions when he says it because this is the disaster the Germans inflicted on Poland's Jewish citizens. But "only" is an exclusive word that does not take into account the fact that Poles also were killed "only because they were Poles." This is why so many Polish men, women, children, priests and intellectuals were murdered inside and outside the concentration camps. Through a bizarre stroke of luck, I myself evaded the Auschwitz gas chamber by only a few

minutes.

SHTETL deliberately conceals such essential information. Instead, it wants the viewer to believe we were merely onlookers untouched by German brutality. To show Polish Catholics beaten, shot, hanged or gassed by the Nazis would naturally pull out the underpinnings from the anti-Polish scenario he tries to construct. But it vividly illustrates what the German and Soviet propagandists proved to the world: a half-truth can often do more than a whole lie.

Were there Poles who betrayed Jews? Whatever the number, it was relatively insignificant. But if betrayal is to be a primary focus of SHTETL, Marzynski should not have obscured the fact that Jews betrayed other Jews not only in Bransk but elsewhere in Poland. Moreover, there were some Jews who even betrayed the very Poles who were hiding them and both were murdered as a result.

More people were executed for rescuing Jews in Poland than in any other occupied nation in Europe. More people willingly took this risk despite the fact Poland was the only country in Europe where the Nazis declared death as a penalty for giving a Jew any kind of aid. Marzynski admits 5,000 of the 11,000 trees at Yad Vashem honor Poles. But this number is only a fraction of the total, many of whom were murdered together with the Jews they were hiding. Despite SHTETL's strenuous efforts to smear the Polish people and suppress the story of our suffering it does reveal certain significant facts. The many photos shown of individuals from the pre-war Jewish community disclose the great freedom and opportunity Poland offered Europe's Jews for 800 years. Poland gave them haven when they were expelled by other nations. I am proud the land of my birth welcomed them and permitted the development of a rich and resilient Jewish culture. So much, in fact, that Jewish education, prosperity and well-being often surpassed that of the average Pole.

What I found to be the most disturbing and saddest scene is the one where the students at the school in Israel meet the central Polish figure in SHTETL, Romaniuk. I was shocked at the virulent anti-Polish prejudice and hatred they displayed. I have seen hatred before, mostly during my years in Auschwitz. Now I understand better why my own daughter, when she told her Jewish friends her Catholic father is an Auschwitz survivor, was met with anger and called a liar. "Impossible," they told her because no Christians ever were in Auschwitz. But I can only pity these young people. They also are victims – victims of those like Marzynski who inculcate others with their own prejudice and hatred. For whom integrity is subordinate to a personal agenda. Who tells the Israeli students his father died in a Warsaw ghetto and, in another part of the film, says his father cut a hole in the floor of a train, jumped out to join the partisans and was killed in a battle. I believe PBS is obligated to point out this contradiction if it airs the film.

I can also pity them for their exposure to false witnesses like Marzynski uses to condemn Poles in a situation which suggests a partisan action against Russian communists and their collaborators and not an action directed specifically against Jews.

In conclusion, the film confirmed my long-held suspicion that most of the misrepresentations about Poland and her Jewish citizens evolve from the fact the country is so visibly Catholic. It does not require a trained eye to see SHTETL's preoccupation with pictures of Christ, crosses and crucifixes, priests and the religious ceremonies in which they take part. The silent message resonates loudly. The subtle and the subliminal prompt the viewer to attribute Marzynski's anti-Semitic scenario to the Catholic Church as the ultimate source.

It is astounding that someone like Marzynski, whose life was

saved by Polish Catholics when he was a child, would display such malevolence to the religious beliefs of those to whom he owes his life.

As someone who was part of this terrible tragedy for both Poles and Jews, I must ask why only so many anti-Polish films continue to be made which stress nothing but the negative between Jews and Poles. We have had strong and positive relationships throughout history and they seem to have been totally forgotten. In memory of everyone, Jew and Christian who perished in the war, we must look at what unites us instead of what divides us. We owe it to them.

Sincerely yours,
Michael Preisler
Auschwitz #22213