

THE MERCHANDISING OF THE HOLOCAUST

Richard C. Lukas, Ph.D.

The Holocaust is a hot topic. State legislatures have voted to have it taught in schools. Holocaust museums mushroom across the country. Publishers indiscriminately print anything relating to the subject to boost their profits. The media regularly commemorate Holocaust anniversaries. Even Steven Spielberg, after making millions of dollars on "Jurassic Park" and "E.T." , entered the field with "Schindler's List."

The negative side of this frenetic preoccupation with the Holocaust is that the historical context of the tragedy is lost. To be sure, the Holocaust was important but it was not the only tragedy or even the only example of genocide during the Second World War. The Gypsies, who have few spokesmen in this country, were also slated for complete annihilation by the Germans. But who even mentions that fact today? And who would deny that the loss of 3 million Polish Catholic lives was the result of a German genocidal policy that considered Poles sub-human? And what about the millions of White Russian and Ukrainian civilians who perished as a result of German racism? As Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel said, "All Jews were victims but not all victims were Jews."

The tragedy of non-Jews during the Second World War—Gypsies, Poles and other Slavs—is usually ignored or distorted. Publishers rarely print anything about these people. Holocaust museums obscure or trivialize their tragedies. Even the U.S. Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. conspicuously omitted Catholic Poles among Hitler's victim's in one of its fund raising letters. Anniversaries of non-Jewish events such as the German invasion of Poland in 1939 and the Warsaw Uprising of 1944, not to be confused with the Jewish Ghetto Uprising in

1943 which was a much smaller event, passed virtually unnoticed in the mainstream media.

By focusing exclusively on what happened to the Jews during World War II, the magnitude of the evil of Nazism is reduced. The Jewish story is important but it is only part of the history of World War II. When the facts concerning the tragedy of non-Jews during World War II are trivialized, obscured, ignored or distorted, the history of the Second World War is historically and morally compromised and degrades the memory of all the victims of the Germans.

The “us” and “them” mentality that often befouls discussions of the Holocaust and the related genocides of non-Jews underscores the desperate need for balance and objectivity about the subject. But there appears to be precious little of it in many Holocaust studies programs. Out of 55 books listed on the combined reading lists in Holocaust courses taught in eight states, only 26 of them specifically deal with Catholic Poles. When I recently spoke on the subject of Jewish and Polish child victims of the Nazi era at Florida State University’s Holocaust Institute, an organization designed to educate high-school teachers on the subject, a sizable portion of the audience was unprepared intellectually for a rigorous and fair analysis of the subject. What many in the audience wanted to hear was hagiography, not history.

This is what happens when history is merchandised. It becomes vulgar, pop history with all of the cheap distortions and falsifications that are part of the phenomenon. It demeans Jew and gentile alike in having the ring of propaganda.

Richard C. Lukas, Ph.D., is the author of seven books, including *Did the Children Cry?: Hitler’s War Against Jewish and Polish Children, 1939-1945*, for which he won the prestigious Janusz Korczak Literary Award. Hippocrene Books recently published the revised edition of Lukas’ *Forgotten Holocaust: The Poles Under German Occupation, 1939-1944*.