

The Milewski Polish Studies Lecture



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The Holocaust: Remembrance and Education

IRENE TOMASZEWSKI



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A Polish American Studies Lecture

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In 1990 Dr. Stanisław and Mrs. Anita Milewski endowed the Milewski Polish Studies Lecture at Central Connecticut State University in honor of their parents, Alfred and Sabina Milewski and Maria and Jerzy Dobiecki. The lecture is devoted to key issues in the modern history of Poland.

Dr. Stanisław Milewski's life is a reflection of Poland's modern history. He was born in Bargowo, Poland on June 16, 1930. After World War II began, he was deported on January 10, 1940 to Russia northeast of the city of Archangel. He left Russia with the Army of General Władysław Anders in 1942, and served with the Polish Cadet Corps between 1943 and 1947 in Barbara, which was near Gaza in Palestine. As a result of the war, the Milewski family became part of a new Polish diaspora. The young Milewski attended Medical School at Trinity College at the University of Dublin from 1950 to 1956. He received his training in ophthalmology at the Gill Memorial Hospital in Virginia, and then did his fellowship in surgery and diseases of the retina and vitreous at the Massachusetts Eye-Ear Infirmary at Harvard Medical School in Boston. Dr. Milewski is an Assistant Clinical Professor of Ophthalmology at the University of Connecticut. He is in active practice in the Hartford area, specializing in surgery and disorders of the retina and vitreous. He has lectured in the United States and trained Polish physicians in his specialization.

Dr. Milewski is a prominent member of the Polish community. He served as a president of the Connecticut District of the Polish American Congress and is a member of the Polish Institute of Arts and Sciences in America, the Kościuszko Foundation, and the Józef Piłsudski Institute of America. He is a long-time friend and supporter of the Polish Studies Program at CCSU.

In recent years the Holocaust has been the subject of intense discussion in the United States, and especially among Jews and Poles wherever they find themselves. Irene Tomaszewski has been one of the thoughtful voices in the discussion. A graduate of Concordia University, she is a writer, educator, and lecturer. She has published in the *Montreal Gazette*, *The Globe and Mail*, and in the *Toronto Star*, as well as articles and short fiction in Canadian magazines. She has frequently written on Katyń, the Warsaw Ghetto and the Warsaw Uprising. Together with Tecia Werbowski, she co-authored *Żegota: The Council for Aid to Jews in Occupied Poland 1942-1945*. Ms. Tomaszewski edited and translated *I Am First a Human Being: The Prison Letters of Krystyna Wituska* (1997). She was researcher and associate producer of the 1995 Galafilm/National Film Board documentary on Poland in World War II, "A Web of War," and writer/researcher for the Washington-based Documentaries International's film, *Żegota: The Council for the Aid to Jews in Occupied Poland 1942-1945*, released in May 1998. Ms. Tomaszewski is currently working on *The Generation of '44* (McGill-Queen's University Press, forthcoming), a study of Polish youth during the occupation, specifically the impact of, and response to the total loss of human rights.

Żegota, I Am First a Human Being, and Ms. Tomaszewski's essay on Canadian pluralism and national unity have been included into the urban school curriculums. Ms. Tomaszewski is president of the Canadian Foundation for Polish Studies, director of the Polish Canadian Students' Association, and a board member of (1993-1996) of the Polish-Jewish Heritage Foundation (Montreal).

The Polish Studies Program is pleased to publish Irene Tomaszewski's lecture for the permanent record. Our sincere appreciation is extended to Dr. and Mrs. Stanisław Milewski for making the Milewski Polish Studies Lecture possible. Our hope is that the dissemination of the Milewski Lecture will promote greater awareness of Polish public policy issues and discussions.

Stanislaus A. Blejwas

CSU University Professor of History

Holder of the Endowed Chair in

Polish and Polish American Studies

The Holocaust: Remembrance and Education

The Milewski Polish Studies Lecture

Central Connecticut State University

November 16, 1999

Irene Tomaszewski

Montreal, Canada

On the Occasion of the Sesquicentennial of

Central Connecticut State University

and the 25th Anniversary of

Polish Studies at Central Connecticut State University

I am very grateful to Professor Blejwas for inviting me to present this year's Milewski Polish Studies Lecture. The subject suggested to me was *Remembrance and Education*. It is a subject that has been my principal interest for the past several years, an interest spurred by my own personal connection with Poland and by my distress about the often bitter relations between Polish Christians and Polish Jews as well as between Polish and Jewish Americans.

When we talk about "Remembrance," most people assume that we are talking about the genocide of the Jewish people — the Shoah — and Holocaust education is now a well-established field of study. The German occupation of Poland and the atrocities committed against the Polish Christian population, on the other hand, are neither commemorated nor studied, except in specialized fields of history. Here and there small groups of Polish veterans gather together to mark special occasions — September 1, 1939 or the Warsaw Uprising of 1944 — but these gatherings are ever smaller, and their children are rarely present. Their communities don't participate, and their local newspapers don't cover the events.

This is a situation that distresses many of us, and we must consider how this came to be. As the Reverend John T. Pawlikowski once said, when it comes to remembrance, Polonia has failed to find a way to do this, and as a result, the majority either ignores their history altogether or complains that Jewish commemorations have not included Polish victims.¹ I share Father Pawlikowski's view and will return to this later. It follows that without remembrance, there is little effort in the area of education and without that, the younger generation of Polish Americans and Canadians are bereft of an historical memory. We cannot demand remembrance from our children, let alone from a broader segment of our society, if they do not know what it is they should remember.

This is the issue I will address today — the Polish tragedy during World War II and its remembrance. The Jewish Holocaust is part of this story, as it must be. I remember that when Tecia Werbowski and I were working together on our book, *Zegota*², we noted that when we were discussing the German occupation of Poland, we never lost sight of the Holocaust, and when we were discussing the Holocaust, we could not but be constantly aware of the brutal occupation of Poland. Nevertheless, these are two distinct events in history, each with its own significance. Comparisons are unnecessary and indeed never has Samuel Johnson's observation that "comparisons are odious" been truer than when people thoughtlessly compare human suffering on the scale inflicted upon Poles and Jews during World War II. Polish-Jewish

¹Reverend John T. Pawlikowski, "Polish Americans and the Holocaust" in *Perspectives in Polish History*, Stanislaus A. Blejwas ed., Polish Studies Program, Central Connecticut State University 1996.

²Tomaszewski, Irene and Tecia Werbowski, *Zegota: The Council for Aid to Jews in Occupied Poland 1942-1945* (Montreal: Price Patterson Ltd., 1999).

relations are sometimes insensitively described as a competition in victimization, in response to which I will quote one Auschwitz survivor who said to me: "Anyone who uses the word 'competition' does not understand the issues, or the differences. It is demeaning to us all."

These two peoples, whose cruel fate was intertwined during World War II, have very different memories, memories that, despite their historical proximity can not, today, be bridged. It follows that their subsequent education stays within these two divergent paths and time, far from healing, seems to have added to their bitterness. As Władysław Bartoszewski put it: "Each side passed through the terrible experiences of the war separately rather than together, and the attitudes and behavior of particular persons and groups often contributed... to inflicting painful new wounds rather than allowing the old ones to heal."³

Bartoszewski was referring to the years 1944-1956, but these wounds still have not healed, and new ones – emotional wounds – are still being inflicted. Holocaust remembrance is still marked by conflicting memories, with the result that education is also an area of conflict. This is not a situation that will soon be resolved but it is a problem that is being addressed by many intelligent, knowledgeable and dedicated people: religious leaders, educators, and community leaders who participate in the challenging process of dialogue.

As I stated earlier, the Polish tragedy has not been remembered in North America, largely because it has not been taught. And since the responsibility for our history rests with us, then Polonia must look to itself for the reasons, and for the resolution, of this situation. But in fairness, we must understand the situation of Poland and Polonia after World War II to understand this apparent lack of historical memory among many. At the same time, we should not exaggerate, and recognize the dedication and the prodigious volume of work done by many excellent scholars and community leaders, all too often without much support.

We must not forget that Poland was the first country to resist Nazi Germany; continued to fight with the allies on every front; fielded the largest resistance in occupied Europe; and bore the heaviest proportional losses of any occupied country. But although Poland was a steadfast ally throughout the war, at the end of the hostilities Poland was betrayed, subjected to another occupation and another murderous tyranny, and endured still more arrests, deportations, and executions. The Polish veterans and refugees who stayed in the west had to deal with this loss and betrayal, make a new start, learn a new language, cope with prejudice, and adapt to a new environment. It must have been difficult to find their psychological bearings in a world that denied their reality, excluded them from victory parades, and was not eager to find a place for them in their midst. "That dead and detested country," wrote the

³Władysław Bartoszewski, "We Are All Part of the Same Image" *Więź* (Special Issue 1998), 10.

despairing Tadeusz Borowski after the war. Perhaps these words are too bitter but, in fact, few people then cared about the fate of Poland – or the feelings of Poles.⁴

Post-war political reality made remembrance for most Poles in Poland and in the west a private affair, but in Poland, those remarkable people, despite all the risks, the censorship and the repression, did not neglect their history. True, some followed the Party line, but others circumvented the censors, and many wrote *do szuflady*, as they say – that is, secretly, in the best traditions of Polish resistance. Here, Polonia, for the reasons mentioned above, remained largely silent. But today there is an awakening, and while it is true that there is too much negativity, there are also many people who realize that the time has come for Polonia to support Polish studies – new research, new books, translations, films – and to integrate their history into mainstream American consciousness.

We have to consider, however, *how* to bring Polish remembrance into American consciousness. There is no vacant spot there reserved and waiting for Polish history and Polish remembrance to move in. To enter it, we must be prepared to ask ourselves some questions, and seriously consider their answers – before we present them to others. Remembrance of what? By whom? To what purpose? And education – of whom, by whom, how and why? All too often, we do not have the answers.

Before sharing with you some opinions expressed by educators in Canada and the United States, I would like to look at one of the first acts of Polish remembrance and education, which is as impressive today as it was then. This act was the determination on the part of former prisoners of Auschwitz to preserve this camp both as the largest cemetery in Europe and as perpetual evidence of a crime of unparalleled magnitude. Auschwitz remains today a hallowed ground, a memorial to the victims of Nazi Germany, a museum, and a research and educational center. I suggest we can look to it and to its courageous founders for inspiration as we try to articulate our own remembrance and educational needs. I will also look at some words by Zofia Kossak, a co-founder of Żegota, whose words and life have largely been forgotten. Finally I will close with a few observations about issues of remembrance and education today.

Let me now digress very briefly to make a brief clarification about my use of the terms, “Poles” and “Jews” or “Polish” and “Jewish.” I use these terms only to denote ethnicity, but when I speak of people in Poland, it goes without saying that they are all Polish by citizenship whether they are Catholic, Jewish, atheist or anything else. I avoid the hyphenated terms such as Polish-Jewish and Polish-Catholic because they are cumbersome as well as a bit limiting.

⁴For some insights into post-war, western attitudes towards refugees from eastern Europe see Modis Eksteins, *Walking Since Daybreak: A Story of Eastern Europe, World War II, and the Heart of Our Century* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999).

Auschwitz is a word everyone knows. Much has been written about it, often by people who are incompetent, opinionated, and biased, with the result that in our media the controversies and the bitterness overshadow the meaning of the place itself. This avalanche of news and commentary started comparatively recently, yet there were many years after Auschwitz was liberated when it existed as a museum and a memorial without attracting too much attention. I didn't give this much thought until 1996, when I attended a lecture by Robert Jan van Pelt, the co-author of *Auschwitz: 1270 to the Present*. I was in the company of one of the consuls from the Polish consulate in Montreal. He spoke to Mr. van Pelt, who signed his book. The dedication read: "To the Polish Consulate, with thanks for the way the Polish people have been stewards of Auschwitz since 1945." Two things struck me immediately. First, that although he was writing to a representative of the Polish government, it was the "Polish people" he cited as being stewards of Auschwitz, not the Polish government. The second thing was the date since the Polish people became stewards of this camp: 1945.

Perhaps Mr. van Pelt wrote "Polish people" so as not to thank the former Communist regime, or perhaps it was just literary elegance. And as for the date, I could not help but be aware of the terrible situation in Poland in 1945 — the hunger, the terror, the grief and trauma, displaced people, missing people, cities and towns in ruins. Why, I wondered, did the preservation of Auschwitz become a priority at such a time?

Robert Jan van Pelt's words made me aware of a human dimension to a place that newspapers had depersonalized into an institution and a hotly contested symbol and I decided I had to know who preserved Auschwitz, and why.

Immediately after liberation, Auschwitz was administered by the Soviet authorities and for two months in 1945 the Soviet Extraordinary Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes operated there. A Polish Red Cross Hospital was set up there from February until October of that year. Soon after the hospital was closed down, the last of the Soviet army units also left. The security of the camp was then entirely in the hands of a local civil militia that was hardly up to the job. A Regional Liquidation Office, established in Cracow, was empowered to look for and inventory camp property. This did not escape the notice of former Auschwitz prisoners who had come back there, many of them demanding that the grounds be secured and memorialized. They acted none too soon. In this short period of time, tens of thousands of documents had been removed from the camp by the Soviet army and taken to Moscow, not to be returned until the 1990s.

It is to these prisoners who came back to Auschwitz after liberation that we owe the existence of the memorial and museum today. The first was Tadeusz Wąsowicz, ex-prisoner number 20035, who came back to Auschwitz directly from Buchenwald. It was primarily his vision and determination that secured the site and he eventually became the first director of the Museum. He was soon joined by others who came back from all over Poland, from

Germany, or wherever else they were when they finally regained their freedom. They came back not just to see it again. Each of them, independently of one another, came to ensure that the camp remain unmolested. They came to stand guard, to protect the documents and other evidence, such as the immense storage of human hair, lest they be stolen or destroyed. They found, preserved and protected the prisoners' art – drawings, sketches and engravings.

There were 80 men and women in that first group, in time joined by relatives – husbands, children, parents. Later, they were helped by people from nearby areas. To them this wasn't work, it was a calling, and they labored without pay until mid-1947 when the government, in response to demands from former prisoners, recognized their work and officially established the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum. These first employees labored under very difficult conditions, and for some years, they operated a small farm to supplement their food supplies. The budget in those years was so limited that food was considered an employee benefit. Perhaps even more difficult was the psychological impact. They lived surrounded by nightmares. At night they heard voices, the sound of wooden clogs echoed in their ears. Some had to leave, and some committed suicide.

There was no precedent for the ex-prisoners' undertaking, but their unerring instinct established the principles that guide the museum to this day. Some intrusion from a totalitarian government was inevitable – and I will touch upon this later – but their guiding principle was always that the historical truth must be preserved. It was not long before pilgrims arrived, and I use their word – pilgrim – for no other word could describe these first visitors. Many were former prisoners but many more were relatives of prisoners who had perished. They came in search of traces of their loved ones and to learn the truth, no matter how painful, about their deaths. To help these pilgrims, those first unpaid employees of Auschwitz added the role of guide to their other work.

They showed the pilgrims the gate with the inscription "*Arbeit macht frei*," the courtyard of Block 11, the punishment bunkers, the Death Wall, Crematorium I. It was a visual encounter with the concentration camp that was initially established to hold Polish prisoners whose number reached a point that there were not enough prisons in Poland to hold them. Auschwitz, one of the principal weapons used by the Germans to crush Polish resistance, held a total of 150,000 Polish prisoners, half of whom perished.

Almost all of these early pilgrims were Polish and this very fact reveals to us the truth about the other dimension of Auschwitz-Birkenau – that Jews were killed not as individuals but as a nation. Over one million Jews from all over Europe were killed at Auschwitz. Millions more were killed at Treblinka, Belzec and other death camps, with even fewer survivors. There were no families to mourn the victims because whole families were victims. The few Jews who did survive had no one to comfort them in their grief, to accompany them on a pilgrimage to their nation's graveyards. It was only

decades later, when the Jewish survivors had children old enough to bear this burden and support their parents through such a journey, that Jews began returning to Auschwitz.

From the start, Tadeusz Wąsowicz recognized the special significance of Birkenau. He believed that the grounds, with the ruins of the gas chambers and the crematoria, should be left the way they were, and that the proportions in size between the main camp and Birkenau had to be maintained. It was Birkenau that would enable people to understand what the camp really had been and, he said, "the main camp existed only so that behind that façade the things that really went on in the Birkenau camps could go on."⁵ The Polish writer and former prisoner Seweryna Szmaglewska put it this way: "Auschwitz is a book...which the visitor can read without commentary. It is all the more incumbent on us to tend the state of the book, the state of Auschwitz and its secret annex, which the Germans built in Birkenau... Auschwitz still remains a discussion... that is why it cannot be compromised."⁶

Some years later, a commentator in the Polish Catholic weekly, *Tygodnik Powszechny* wrote this about a discussion on how best to memorialize Birkenau: "...we will not think up anything ... more profound than the centuries of human culture which have created cemeteries. The only places where there is no shouting and no display of empty show, where the atmosphere itself protects the memory and the presence of the dead."⁷

The official opening of the camp took place in 1947 in a ceremony in which 50,000 people took part. Now that it was an official state museum, the ceremony was attended by the highest officials, including Prime Minister Józef Cyrankiewicz, who was himself an ex-prisoner. As well, there were representatives from The Supreme Tribunal, from the Main Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes, and from the Central Jewish Historical Commission. An ecumenical service was presided over by Roman Catholic Prelate Skarbek, the Orthodox Archimandrite Szurwiło, and Chief Rabbi Colonel Kahane. After the ceremonies, a huge procession proceeded on foot to Birkenau, to pay their respects, silently, to the dead. It was, in a sense, the first March of the Living.

It is not my intention to present here today a chronological history of the Auschwitz museum, nor could I possibly cover all the important work done there. Rather, what I want to do is look at the lessons from the prisoner-founders whose pioneering work provides insights for us today as we try to figure out what memory we want to preserve.

⁵"Tadeusz Wąsowicz: First Director and Co-Creator of the Auschwitz Museum" by Irena Szymańska in *Pro Memoria* (Information Bulletin Auschwitz State Museum and memorial Foundation for the Victims of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Death Camp in Oświęcim), Volume 7, 50.

⁶Seweryna Szmaglewska, quoted in "Antimonies of Memories", *Pro Memoria*, (Information Bulletin, Auschwitz State Museum and the Memorial Foundation for the Victims of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Death Camp in Oświęcim), Volume 7, 14.

⁷*Ibid*, 16.

From the beginning, Tadeusz Wąsowicz saw the Auschwitz Museum as a work in progress. He knew that as the years went by there would be many opinions to consider, and that he and his colleagues could not think of everything, let alone do everything, that needed to be done.

On the other hand, there were policies that came about not as a result of a sensitive exchange of views, but that were imposed by the state, or more precisely, by the Party. The financial support from the state enabled the museum to enlarge its scope of operations and do much important research. Most of the new employees were dedicated and highly competent people, many of them children of former prisoners. But the Party exerted pressure that could not always be overcome. For example, two of the original ex-prisoners who held important positions were dismissed on political grounds, only one of them to be re-instated and that only in 1956.

The Party did not abide by the principle of historical truth. One exhibition organized by the Party, for example, was titled "Imperialism Unmasked," and included, among other things, an American soldier with blood on his hands. There was little the employees could do except persevere in their work, believing that Auschwitz itself was the truth, no matter what commentary was temporarily affixed to it. Nor would the Party permit identifying the Jewish victims as Jews, insisting rather that they be identified only by their countries of origin.

As the years went by, hundreds of thousands of visitors came to Auschwitz — for the first two decades or so, primarily from Poland. For many years the emptiness of Birkenau was echoed by the absence of Jewish visitors, and for many years Poland was, by and large, cut off from the western world. That, coupled with the Party's policy of identifying victims by their country of origin rather than as Jews, skewed the perception of many people in Poland. We are dealing with the legacy of these years today. But the original dedication to truth, which Tadeusz Wąsowicz considered a "moral obligation," has won out. Auschwitz and Birkenau, so faithfully preserved, are in themselves an unalterable historical memory. Decades later, a Canadian child of Holocaust survivors, filmmaker Harriet Wichin, interviewed Tadeusz Szymanski, another of the ex-prisoners who dedicated the rest of his life to preserving Auschwitz. While Dachau was turned into a memorial park, he explained, Auschwitz remains as a "silent witness," a phrase she used for the title of her documentary. To Wichin, the lessons were clear. She filmed the lighting of candles on All Souls' Day as the families of Polish victims commemorated their dead. There is no one left to light our candles, she said. There is only Auschwitz itself, the silent witness.⁸

As we here in North America consider what we should remember and what we should teach, it may come as a surprise to us that today Polish educators face a similar challenge. Auschwitz has been a part of every Polish student's education but today's students are different from those in the past.

⁸"Silent Witness" directed by Harriet Wichin. The National Film Board of Canada, 1994.

Many no longer feel a connection to the war. For them it is ancient history, something alien to their experience. Museum staff complain that students are not adequately prepared and new pedagogical approaches are being looked at.

Now that Poland is free, visitors come from all over the world. There is an exchange of views, co-operation in research, and in education. Holocaust education in America, on the other hand, was developed far from the center of the tragedy with different pedagogical approaches. One of these is the emphasis on personal stories, on putting a human face on history. Anne Frank immediately comes to mind. This approach is gaining increasing acceptance in Poland, as they too try to help young people understand crimes spawned by racism and hatred and to establish some personal identification with the victims. At the same time, much emphasis is now placed on teaching tolerance, pluralism, respect for human dignity, and the dangers of racism, anti-Semitism and xenophobia.

The Auschwitz Museum, through its publications and its educational services, has properly identified the majority of the victims of the Holocaust as Jews, and Polish educators are following suit. They also recognize the need to provide Polish youth with information about their shared history with Polish Jews, and to Jewish contributions to Polish culture. The Polish and Israeli governments have established a joint commission to examine their textbooks and to correct the inaccuracies and omissions in their respective treatment of one another. The history of Polish Jews is also getting belated recognition here in the west, where so long people mourned the dead, without knowing much about them. It is more difficult, however, to establish dialogue and cooperation in education between Poland and the Jewish community in America, or between Polish and Jewish Americans, since state-to-state mechanisms are not applicable.

I have looked, in my work, to the human faces in history, such as those of Tadeusz Wąsowicz and his colleagues, and have come across many others whose words and insights reveal so much about a period increasingly fading from memory. Among the most powerful memoirs of the occupation and its impact on young people is that written by the Polish sociologist, Jan Strzelecki, who was in high school when the occupation began. He attended the underground university and was a member of the Home Army. I'd like to quote some fragments of his memoir describing the thoughts and feelings of Polish youth as their world collapsed and they lived conscious of the fact that at any moment they could be enslaved or lose their lives.

To us, time was like a region where existence might soon end... every second someone fell off, not only into death – a quick death was the easiest of all possible falls – but into torture, into a slow death drawn out into stages of recurring torment.

We lived in the Auschwitz basin – we saw the fragility of Europe with an intense clarity. Our existence bordered on that of the prisoners... their existence was our shadow... The world of

slaves ... remained a constant possibility. It was only by chance that we did not work in the quarries where the mortality rate was higher than in the quarries of the Peloponnesus. That distance which in a teenage imagination was that of centuries ... was reduced to nothing, and this struck us with great wonder... the history of modern times was the opposite of all theories of progress... We had a deep affinity with the fate of the slaughtered races, with peoples taken into bondage, with inhabitants of cities destroyed by flames, and with devastated cultures.

The evil around us... could not be relieved by any historical explanation. That evil was pride derived from the destruction of human life; it was the personification of cruelty experienced as absolute power over the existence of another person. The prime symbol of that evil was the wall that stood in our city. That wall stood for the exclusion from life, for the gradual death of a people who happened to be Jews. Their suffering was the fulfillment of absolute evil... Not a single sign, not a child's cry, a young girl's beauty, a mother's cry, nothing penetrated to the outside world.⁹

Is it possible to teach our youth what Strzelecki elucidates in this short passage? The sudden collapse of civilization, the moral corruption of a people who wield absolute power over the life of another, the identification with the condemned of the world, and the recognition within this of a people singled out and subjected to a greater, absolute evil.

This dual tragedy of occupied Poland articulated by Strzelecki was a significant subject in the writing, and in the life, of one of the most dynamic personalities during the occupation, Zofia Kossak. Kossak was a key member of the Polish Underground, a co-founder of *Żegota*, a writer and editor of underground literature, a mother of two teenage children, and a mentor to many young people.

Kossak was on the Gestapo's most wanted list from the very beginning of the occupation. She changed her identity and her address so often that on one occasion she lost track of who she was supposed to be. When I first read that her two children were fully involved in the underground and in *Żegota*, taking on such dangerous tasks as escorting Jews to their new homes, I assumed they were young adults. It was a shock to discover that Anna and Witold were only teenagers — Anna only 12 years old when she began.

Kossak was a source of inspiration to many young people, among them Władysław Bartoszewski, who joined *Żegota* at her behest. The artist Marek Rudnicki, who came under Kossak's protection after escaping from the ghetto, joined the Home Army inspired by the courage and solidarity of everyone who came within her orbit. Her pseudonym was Weronika, but all the young people called her Ciotka — Aunt.

⁹Jan Strzelecki, *Próby Świadectwa* (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1971). Fragments translated by Irene Tomaszewski.

She was a devout Catholic. Her faith inspired her every decision, her every action. She exhorted the Poles, addressing especially her Catholic constituency, to defy German edicts and help the Jews. It was a moral question, she wrote, and any pre-war political differences were no longer relevant.

She refused to accept, on a matter of principle, the separation of Poles and Jews. She insisted that all Polish citizens must share the same risks. Bartoszewski, speaking to a group of students in Montreal in October, 1999, spoke about her influence. He also recalled being dragged off the street once and put in a Jewish work gang. They had taken him for a Jew but he chose not to assert his Polish identity. He would have been ashamed to do so, he said, and he didn't want to go along with the Germans' "divide and conquer" tactics. Both Kossak's children and all other young people under her influence accepted these views. Many years later, one young courier said that it was the only time in her life when there was absolutely no moral ambiguity about the choices she made.

Despite her own strength of character, Kossak was too much of a realist to think that everyone could overcome fear or withstand the demoralizing effects of sadistic brutality that was part of daily life. She wrote about the confusion and loss of judgement of simpler people as the years passed and they witnessed crimes go unpunished. Was it God's will? Were the Jews cursed? Were they themselves cursed? Her friend and colleague in Żegota and in the Home Army, Maria Kann, wrote on similar themes.

In the fall of 1943, Kossak, together with one of her young couriers, was arrested. She was carrying false papers, and was sent to Auschwitz without the Gestapo discovering her true identity. It was not until the following May that somehow her identity was uncovered. She was sent back to Pawiak prison in Warsaw where she was beaten and tortured. In such circumstances, she nevertheless managed to smuggle out a long letter she had written to the Polish President of the Government-in-Exile in London, Władysław Radkiewicz, describing Auschwitz and the fate there of Polish prisoners and of the Jewish people.

Knowing Kossak would most certainly be executed, the underground worked feverishly to get her out. By the end of June, a guard had been bribed to arrange her escape.

She was very ill, and physically almost unrecognizable, yet her spirit was completely unbroken. Because she doubted that she would live long, she was motivated all the more to get to work immediately on her memoir of Auschwitz. Convinced the Germans would try to destroy the evidence of their crimes, she felt it her obligation to testify to this crime, to record the truth, and to teach.

It is our duty to remember, to study, to contemplate, to deepen our knowledge and understanding of Auschwitz and all other atrocities committed against human beings. This we must do in memory of those who suffered and died. This we must do to ensure that civilization will never again sink to this level of barbarism ... and to illuminate the strength and resistance of the human spirit.¹⁰

It was not just physical suffering that was inflicted on their victims; their tormentors were determined to break the prisoner's spirit. Everything was done to deny the prisoners' humanity. They were brought to Auschwitz in cattle cars. They were driven with prods, they were stripped, shaved, and branded like cattle. The numbers tattooed on their arms were from then on their only identity. They were housed in barracks that were worse than stables. They were deprived of privacy and of the most basic essentials for hygiene. They were worked like animals and destroyed when no longer fit for work. No matter what humiliation the prisoners were subjected to, Zofia Kossak continued to see in each condemned woman an individual endowed with an innate human dignity that no amount of savagery could strip away. It was not the prisoners who were de-humanized, it was the killers. Kossak's narrative describes primarily the Polish women's experience, which was what she herself was and what she experienced. But because the women's barracks were in Birkenau, she witnessed the even greater misery of the Jewish victims. She recorded the entire truth, because it was her testament and its purpose was to inform the world.

Truth, memory, and a moral obligation to teach future generations. What are we to do with these lessons today? For specific groups this is self-evident. It is their history. For the Jewish people the Holocaust was an event of such cataclysmic magnitude that it has been seared in their memory. It is also an event that should awaken all of us to the evil that anti-Semitism, or any hatred, can lead to.

Nazi ideology was one of racism carried to an unprecedented extreme. It applied arbitrary values to people, it graded people in order to justify their actions towards them. The Jews were declared to be non-human, to be exterminated as a race. Polish people were graded as sub-human, not necessarily to be totally exterminated but to be disposed of to suit the needs of a master race. Neither of these evils should be forgotten. This is the most tragic period in Polish history and will always be taught in Poland without any questions as to its relevance.

As Polonia struggles to find its own collective memory and its place in American consciousness, we would do well to look to these moral and intellectual leaders in our history. I have spoken of only a few such representatives of Poland's impressive resistance and terrifying ordeal. They elucidate

¹⁰Zofia Kossak, *Z otchłani* (Oświęciem: Państwowe Muzeum w Oświęcimiu. Książka I Wiedza), 261. Fragments translated by Irene Tomaszewski.

with great clarity the attack on our human dignity and the threat to Polish national existence. They also teach us about the fate of other peoples – the Jews and the Roma who were in even greater danger of annihilation, Soviet prisoners who were shown no mercy, and many others.

They explain to us why these times must be remembered, studied and understood. As Strzelecki put it, the evil of those times can not be relieved by any historical explanation. No ideology, no justification in terms of “national interests,” no manipulation of history by any state, whether great or small, can ever erase the truth. No future attempt to commit similar crimes will ever again go unrecognized.

Who should remember? First of all, we should. And we should first of all teach it to our own children. It is our own human dignity that is at stake. Any blurring of distinction between the victim and the victimizer, to borrow a phrase from historian James E. Young¹¹, is a serious assault on the truth and on us. It is an injustice. The first responsibility to guard against this is ours. From my own experience, however, I am inclined to think that most Polonians are not well enough informed either about the events themselves or about the resources available to them. There are very few educational programs within Polish communities themselves, let alone in public schools, general publications or television programming. This is the situation that so often provokes anger and resentment, two negative emotions that do nothing to improve the situation.

In Poland, it is very clear who should teach, and who should be taught. In pluralist societies such as ours, the relevance of subjects that do not have a direct bearing on American or Canadian history is not so easily agreed upon. The Holocaust is widely taught, mandated in some, but not all, states and in Canada taught in some, but not all, school districts. There are also many programs in public education on the subject, most notably at the National Holocaust Museum in Washington, where, it must be added, the Polish wartime ordeal is not ignored. Polish resistance and victimization are part of the main, permanent exhibit, publications on this subject are available, and there is ongoing collaboration with scholars from Poland and specialists in Polish history from the United States, Canada and other countries. This past September, the Holocaust Museum sponsored a month-long commemoration of the invasion of Poland featuring films, lectures, concerts and other events.

The importance of Polish studies at universities needs no explanation and their growth in recent years is gratifying to us all. It is incumbent on Polonia to support them, and to make full use of them. Our yearning for recognition and remembrance will only be realized through our own efforts. We must invite our scholars into our communities and into our schools, and we must sponsor public lectures. We are part of the American landscape, our story is part of the American story.

¹¹James E. Young, “The Future of Auschwitz,” *Tikkun* (Nov/Dec 1992), 31.

In his lecture at the Holocaust Museum this past September, University of Toronto's Professor Piotr Wróbel addressed this unpleasant Polish dilemma. While, on the one hand, no six-year period in history has been written about as much as the years 1939-1945, most people in North America, even the well educated, know next to nothing about the history of the Second World War in Poland, despite its central and tragic position in it. Up until recently, Poles were left with the uncomfortable choice of hiding their feelings and remaining silent, or expressing their feelings and being accused of nationalistic bias.¹² It is time to get over this.

One approach to resolving this dilemma is to address the question of education, that is, who should be taught, what and how they should be taught, and why. Let us remember that among those North Americans who know next to nothing about the German – let alone the Soviet – occupations of Poland, is a large segment of Polonia itself. This should be a priority for our community. When something as monumental and agonizing as the Polish wartime experience is denied, dismissed, trivialized or falsely presented, it is an injury to our identity and our human dignity. This often has a negative effect on our self-perception, and most certainly a negative effect on the perception of us by others. It should be obvious that only through education can members of our community, especially the younger generations, be at ease with their own self-image, and also be equipped to deal with errors in educational institutions and in public discourse as the need arises. Professor Wróbel's lecture, the finest concise presentation about the dual attack on Poland by the two most powerful and brutal totalitarian regimes in history I have yet heard, should be required reading for every Polish American, and Polonia should make every effort to integrate such material into mainstream American education.

Integrating the Polish experience into mainstream consciousness is a difficult challenge, but not an insurmountable one. First of all, we should take a much more active role in public education, sponsoring public events outside the confines of the Polish-American community. World War II remains a major field of study. The Polish dimension should not be excised from it. At the public education level, it is possible to integrate some Polish material simply because it is valued in our pluralist society.

Last spring, I was asked to present *Żegota: The Council for Aid to Jews in Occupied Poland*, and *I Am First A Human Being: The Prison Letters of Krystyna Wituska* at a teachers' workshop organized by a public school board in Montreal. These materials had been selected as part of the learning resources for the curriculum on Moral and Religious Education because they embody universal moral values.

Before going further into the pedagogical applications, I will just give a very brief background on these subjects.

Żegota: The Council for Aid to Jews in Occupied Poland is a half-hour

¹²Piotr Wróbel, *The Devil's Playground: Poland in World War II* (Montreal: The Canadian Foundation for Polish Studies, 2000)

documentary about the clandestine organization co-founded by, among others, Zofia Kossak and Władysław Bartoszewski. Through archival footage and interviews with historians and with participants, both rescuers and the rescued, the film discusses the occupation of Poland, the Holocaust and the extraordinary people who were willing to sacrifice their lives for the sake of others.

I Am First A Human Being is a collection of letters written by Krystyna Wituska, a young Polish woman who was arrested by the Gestapo and sent to a prison in Berlin where she was ultimately executed. These letters, smuggled out by a compassionate and courageous prison guard, document the last year of Krystyna's life. They reveal a girl very much like many we know – bright, fun loving, passionate about friendships, somewhat spoiled as a child. They also reveal her strength of character, her part in Polish resistance, and her thoughts about her life as she faced death. She wrote that she considered nationalism a serious limitation, and that she considered herself first a human being and only then a Pole. When she faced death, she found comfort knowing that she will die for freedom and justice for all humanity and not just for her own Poland. In one angry letter to her guard's daughter, she lashed out at the Germans. A few days later she apologized, saying she would never go so far as to hate an entire nation.

The course on moral and religious education in Quebec public schools is designed to teach students about the diversity of religious expression, and to promote tolerance and respect for all religious, racial and ethnic groups. Students are taught to assume personal responsibility for their behavior and for the consequences of their actions.

Żegota and Krystyna Wituska's letters were chosen by the school board precisely because they are excellent materials for teaching these values, and not because of a need for Polish content in Canadian high schools. As a Polish Canadian, it pleases me very much that something from my heritage is so highly regarded and willingly integrated into our general Canadian education.

The letters of Krystyna Wituska have been used in human rights education because Wituska exemplifies the essential innocence of *all* victims of oppression and of human rights abuses. She has a timeless quality that enables young people to identify with her. A number of dramatic readings have been presented in schools and currently a play is being prepared that will portray both Wituska and Nelson Mandela in a dialogue about freedom and human dignity.

In a panel at last year's conference of the Polish Institute of Arts and Sciences in New York, the Reverend James Halstead, director of Catholic Studies at DePaul University commented on the pedagogical applications of *Żegota* to contemporary issues. He said that *Żegota* was a great discussion starter for issues in fundamental ethics: What is morality? Personal morality? Social morality? *Żegota* raises questions of moral theory: Can a nation sin? What is a sin of omission – an issue Bartoszewski addressed in his interview. What is moral success? Father Halstead raised an issue of the great moral

dilemma in *Żegota* – what are the proper questions to address when faced with the decision to endanger one's children? And theological questions: What is forgiveness? What is reconciliation? Where was God in all this? What is evil? What is sin? What was the source of moral courage of the people who participated in *Żegota*? And besides being useful to teach history, he added, *Żegota* presents wonderful role models at a time when so much of our mass culture is cynical and tends to show morality as something for "wimps."

As I review the words and actions of people such as Tadeusz Wąsowicz and Zofia Kossak, Bartoszewski and Krystyna Wituska, I can think of no greater homage to them than that it is just such issues that Polish history should raise today. It should be a matter of great satisfaction to us that our story can be integrated into our North American culture not because of any ethnocentric considerations but because this story can help us face the issues of racism, justice and human dignity today and in the future.

I know that I only skimmed the surface of the questions I raised – remembrance and education of whom and by whom, what and why, but I hope that you found these early struggles with remembrance as inspiring as I did. They were guardians of a historical memory of universal significance. There seems to be a stronger feeling here recently that our historical memory, and the education we need to preserve it, need our attention. We have excellent resources to draw upon – our centers of Polish studies in our universities, our public education resources such as the National Holocaust Museum in Washington, and a wealth of resources in Poland. As Tadeusz Wąsowicz put it, it is a work in progress and much work needs to be done.

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Polish Studies

The Polish Studies Program at Central Connecticut State University is a unique endeavor. It contributes to the diversity and strength of Central as a University, and is the only active program of its kind in New England with roots both on the campus and in the community.

The Program, inaugurated in January, 1974, seeks to preserve and to stimulate an awareness of Poland's history and of her contributions to European and world civilizations. The Program's core are courses in history, politics, culture, literature, language, and on the Polish American ethnic community. The Polish Heritage Collection in the University Library, numbering over 16,000 catalogued books and periodicals, supplements the course offerings. The Connecticut Polish American Archives is a research depository to the public and to scholars and students of the Polish community in America. It is supported in part by the Alex M. Rudewicz Endowment.

The Program also sponsors lectures, cultural events, exhibits, recitals and concerts, and literary evenings. Our activities include the Fiedorczyk Lecture in Polish American Studies, the Milewski Lecture in Polish Studies, The Koproski Lecture in Polish Business and Economy, the biennial Godlewski Evening of Polish Culture, and the Alex and Regina Rudewicz Polish Music Series. The Martin & Sophie Grzyb Prize for Excellence in Polish Studies is awarded in recognition of student achievement. There is a scholarship for a student participating in a summer program of Polish language and culture at a recognized Polish university, and a scholarship for a student born in Poland studying at Central that was funded by the Polish Invitational Golf Tournament Committee. Recent endowments by Msgr. John P. Wodarski and Mr. Henry A. Gajda help underwrite publications of the Polish Studies Program. A generous donation from the Polish National Alliance was recently made to the Copernican Polish Heritage Endowment.

The Copernican Polish Heritage Endowment, which is located in the CCSU Foundation, Inc., supports all aspects of Polish Studies at the University. Donors are commemorated on the plaque in the University Library. Individuals, families, businesses, and organizations are listed in the following categories:

Founders.....	\$1,000
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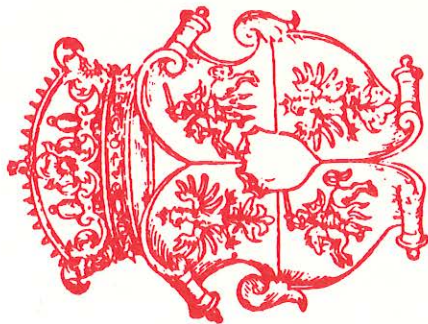
A person, family, business, or organization may wish to endow (\$10,000) a special lecture, a named scholarship, a book and publishing fund, a fund for exchange professors from Poland, a student exchange, or some other activity. These donations are commemorated with individual bronze plaques which are also in the University Library.

Our goal has been the endowment of a permanent chair of Polish and Polish American Studies at CCSU. Connecticut's Polish Americans and their friends have donated more than \$600,000. On May 7, 1997, Gov. John Rowland announced a matching grant of \$600,000 from the State of Connecticut. This grant, made possible by existing state legislation, enabled the establishment of the Chair in Polish and Polish American Studies.

A major donation is being sought to name the Chair. For further information contact Prof. Stanislaus A. Blejwas, the Coordinator of Polish Studies [(860) 832-2814] or Mr. Nick Pettinico, the Vice-President for University Relations [(860) 832-1765], Central Connecticut State University, New Britain, CT 06050-4010.



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