

## The evil and the good done at Kielce

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On July 4, 1946, Kielce was gripped by the ancient blood libel. That myth charging Jews with the ritual murder of Christian children had shadowed Jewish communities throughout Europe for centuries.

In Kielce that day, the rumors focused on Jews who themselves had only recently returned from Nazi death camps. These survivors were attempting to reclaim their lives, but as the rumors spread they were set upon by their neighbors.

As the mob attacked, hundreds of onlookers and bystanders did nothing. Some Polish soldiers and police joined in the attack. Forty-two innocent people were murdered at one site, and many others were killed or seriously wounded throughout the city that day.

While the pogrom became notorious internationally, in Poland it was largely pushed from public memory. Even after communist rule ended in Poland, many Poles were not interested in being reminded of their responsibility for the pogrom.

In 1996, Elie Wiesel went to Kielce and spoke truthfully about the pogrom. He was excoriated by the Polish press.

Ten years later, the Polish people were more forthcoming. The city of Kielce agreed to construct a sculpture called "White/Wash II." It was designed not only to memorialize the victims, but to also mark the subsequent attempted cover-up of the pogrom.

The sculpture stands near the heart of town so people passing through the city center cannot ignore it. It is deliberately painted in a whitewash finish that requires annual repainting - a certain mechanism for memory of the pogrom to be refreshed.

AS CHAIRMAN of the US Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad, I was proud to work with the city of Kielce and fund the memorial. However, the work the commission accomplished, together with the Poles in Kielce, is just one step in a much longer process. In Poland as well as in many other countries across Europe, many sites of infamy - death camps, ravines and forests where Jews were murdered en masse, centuries-old cemeteries - are ignored or in varying degrees of disrepair.

Visitors to Treblinka, for example, are greeted by an evocative monument, but no way to learn the story of Treblinka: that in less than nine months more than 800,000 Jews were killed there. The Nazis destroyed much of the camp, and in the six decades since, the site has been barely tended to. There are no proper facilities or shelter from the elements for visitors.

Across Europe memorials are needed at many sites, but have not been built or funded due to official disinterest. This cannot be allowed to continue.

And it is not enough to have these sites as permanent memorials; they must be maintained and preserved as memorials must be. They must be given thought-provoking education and visitor centers. They must be paired with school curriculums to prepare young visitors to understand what they are about to see. And they must be built with international support.

For survivors now in their twilight years, these were places where they last saw their brothers, sisters,

parents and children. For the rest of us, these sites are reminders of the enormous capacity for evil that exists throughout the world.

SOME THINK this a fool's errand. They say that Europe, the birthplace of anti-Semitism and the Holocaust, cannot be counted upon to protect sites important to Jews long gone.

But in Kielce, such doubters were proven wrong. If a memorial can be built in Kielce, a site of national shame, with the support of the local population, anything is possible.

After all, not long ago the citizens of Kielce tried to whitewash from history the events that earned the city its international distinction. But a new generation of Poles chose to face the truth, and remember.

It was an honor to be present as the people of Kielce dedicated a memorial in the center of their town telling of a terrible day when the innocent could not be protected. It would be good to see other European towns and cities follow that lead, confronting the truth and honoring the past. It is our duty to help make sure this happens.

*The writer is chairman of the US Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad. The US government agency works with governments in Eastern and Central Europe and the former Soviet Union to preserve endangered sites of cultural and historical ignificance.*

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