



Holocaust Educational Foundation
of Northwestern University

FOUNDED BY THEODORE ZEV AND ALICE R. WEISS

14 November 2016

President Andrzej Duda
President of the Republic of Poland
Kancelaria Prezydenta Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej
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Dear President Duda,

We, the undersigned, write to express our serious and growing concerns about the continued statements and actions by the Polish government threatening to suppress the objective study of history and freedom of expression. As international Holocaust Studies scholars and educators, we also write to voice our concern about the status of academic freedom in your country.

In March 2016, the Academic Council of the Holocaust Educational Foundation of Northwestern University sent you an open letter, in which it condemned recent actions by the Polish parliament. The Academic Council expressed its deep concern regarding the procedure to strip Dr. Jan T. Gross, Professor of History at Princeton University, of the Knight's Cross of the Order of Merit. We were equally concerned about the planned legislation that would make it punishable by law to present a different vision of the past than that desired by Polish authorities. We asked you to immediately reverse this attack on the freedom of speech. We interpreted the symbolic gesture against Professor Gross and the new law to represent a most unwelcome reversal of Poland's trajectory toward open engagement with its history. The Academic Council also perceived these developments as an attack on academia and an imminent threat to our colleagues in Poland and those in other countries, who research the history of Jewish-Polish relations.

Regretfully, this course of action continues and intensifies. The new law, which has now been adopted by the Polish government and which went through the first reading in parliament, calls for imprisonment of up to three years for any scholar who engages critically with the Polish past. To quote the law verbatim: "Who publicly and against the facts ascribes to the Polish Nation, or the Polish State the responsibility or complicity for the Nazi crimes committed by the III German Reich, or other crimes which constitute crimes against peace, humanity, of war crimes, or (who) otherwise greatly diminishes the responsibility of the real perpetrators of these crimes, will be subject to fine or three years of imprisonment. The sentence shall be made public." Unfortunately, as we now see, it will be the police and non-specialist bureaucrats who will decide what is factual and what is not.

Most recently, the prosecutor investigating the statements made by one of the foremost scholars of the Holocaust, our friend and colleague, Professor Jan T. Gross, decided to close the investigation into his case. The prosecutor's superiors, however, promptly overturned his decision, and thus the investigation continues. Prof. Gross faces a threat of criminal charges. Such a course of action is unacceptable to the international community of scholars of which Prof. Gross is a respected member.

As academics and specialists in Holocaust Studies, we strongly condemn these actions of the Polish authorities, which not only put Poland on a collision course with freedom of speech, but which constitute a threat to the study of the history of the Shoah. Academic freedoms, civil liberties, and freedom of speech have been essential for the development of the Polish state and Polish democracy during the last decades. The current political developments will place Poland among the states which try to inhibit free speech and censor historical debates. Scholars and the broad public must have the ability to discuss new research, even that which casts nations or individuals in an unfavorable light. This principle has been accepted across the spectrum of the world's leading universities and is protected by the world's democratic governments. One need not look any further than the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which is supported by the U.S. government and Poland's partners in the European Union. It would be most troubling to see Poland's government turn away from the possibilities promised by this consensus, and it would isolate Poland in the intellectual, social, and economic global communities.

In this context we need to question Poland's commitment to the underlying principles of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), of which Poland is a member country. The purpose of IHRA is to place political and social leaders' support behind the need for Holocaust education, remembrance, and research nationally and internationally – something which cannot be reconciled with the current situation.

Please act immediately to reverse these attacks against academics, against freedom of expression and, in its broadest sense, against basic human rights. This is a path that can only lead to further hatred and division. Sadly, this is a lesson that those of us who study the Holocaust know all too well.

Sincerely,

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