



Holocaust Educational Foundation
of Northwestern University

FOUNDED BY THEODORE ZEV AND ALICE R. WEISS

7 March 2016

President Andrzej Duda
President of the Republic of Poland
Kancelaria Prezydenta Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej
ul. Wiejska 10
00-902 Warszawa
listy@prezydent.pl

Dear President Duda,

We write as members of the Academic Council of the Holocaust Educational Foundation of Northwestern University to voice our commitment to academic freedom and our serious concern about recent statements and actions by the Polish government that threaten to suppress the objective study of history and freedom of expression overall.

A new law is pending in the Polish parliament that would impose five-year jail sentences on people who "blame the Polish nation for Nazi or Stalinist crimes." In a related development, your Chancellery has initiated a procedure to strip Dr. Jan T. Gross, professor of history at Princeton University and one of the leading scholars of modern Polish history and the Holocaust, of the Knight's Cross of the Order of Merit, awarded to Professor Gross in 1996 for his public opposition to the communist regime in Poland. Such measures represent the intention of the Polish government under the Law and Justice party to promote "patriotic" education as part of its new "historical policy" that seeks to "reinforce national pride." The symbolic gesture against Professor Gross and, more significantly, the impending legislation constitute a government-initiated attack on intellectual inquiry and on the right to speak uncomfortable truths about the past. They represent a potentially staggering reversal of Poland's trajectory of open engagement with its history. It is also an attack on all of us as academics and a deep threat to our colleagues in Poland and other countries in the region.

As both academics and specialists in Holocaust Studies, we strongly condemn these actions and ask you to immediately reverse this course against freedom of speech. Academic freedom along with other civil liberties have been essential for the developments of the Polish state and Polish citizens in the last 3 decades and more. In particular, scholars must have the ability to debate and promote popular and unpopular ideas and interpretations if we are going to achieve our goals of a better understanding of our histories, our current conditions and our possibilities for growth and development into the future. This principle has been accepted across the spectrum of the world's leading universities and protected by the world's democratic governments, for example in 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 a tragedy to see Poland's government turn away from the possibilities promised by this consensus, and it would isolate Poland's intellectual, social and economic contribution to the global community.

We take up this issue because the Holocaust Educational Foundation (HEF) has served since its founding in 1976 as a beacon for promoting tolerance and scholarship on the Holocaust. The HEF's founder, Theodore Zev Weiss, himself a survivor of the Holocaust and a trained educator, saw early on the importance of the most advanced intellectual work on the Holocaust as well as its transmission to our students and a broader public. This mission must be kept alive for all of our sakes, especially if we hope to learn from the past to make a better present. Professor Gross has been a leading participant in this scholarly community, and he deserves our highest respect for broadening our historical understanding of the past.

Please act immediately to reverse this attack against Professor Gross, 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,

HEF Academic Council:

Dr. Natalia Aleksion (Touro College, USA)
Dr. Sandra Alferts (Western Washington University, USA)
Dr. Alan Berger (Florida Atlantic University, USA)
Dr. Alexandra Garbarini (Williams College, USA)
Dr. Jan Grabowski (University of Ottawa, Canada)
Dr. Sara R. Horowitz (York University, Canada)
Dr. Paul B. Jaskot (DePaul University, USA)
Dr. Francis R. Nicosia (University of Vermont, USA)
Dr. Kevin Spicer (Stonehill College, USA)
Dr. Barry Trachtenberg (University of Albany, USA)

HEF Director:

Dr. Benjamin Frommer (Northwestern University, USA)

Cc: President Barack Obama
Secretary of State John Kerry
New York Times
Washington Post