

## Netanyahu will not attend Polish ceremony marking start of WWII

A July 15 article by Greer Fay Cashman in the Jerusalem Post reports... Sources within Poland's Ministry of Foreign Affairs are mystified by the fact that Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu will be absent from the 70th anniversary ceremony commemorating the Nazi invasion of Poland.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin have already indicated they plan to attend the event, which is set to take place in Gdańsk on September 1, and chances are very high that French President Nicolas Sarkozy and British Prime Minister Gordon Brown will also be among the dignitaries in the historic Polish port city.

The Jerusalem Post has learned that after the invitation issued three months ago by Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk was initially declined, another attempt was made, but the response remained negative, and no explanation was given.

Polish officials are puzzled by Netanyahu's attitude, given that Menachem Begin, the founder of his party and the country's first right-wing prime minister, was a soldier in the Polish army and that more than 120,000 Jewish soldiers - 30,000 of whom fell in battle - fought with the Polish forces during World War II.

Moreover, Netanyahu's family has roots in Poland, which prior to World War II had the highest concentration of Jews in Europe.

Poland frequently supports Israel in the international arena and was one of the countries that promoted the upgrading of relations between the European Union and Israel. In addition, Poland was among the European countries that boycotted Durban II.

Moreover, the new president of the European Parliament is former Polish prime minister Jerzy Buzek, the first Eastern European politician to hold the post.

Aside from honoring the memories of soldiers and partisans who fought in the war, as well as millions of civilians who were murdered or who died from cold, malnutrition, starvation or one of the diseases that were rampant during wartime, the ceremony in Gdańsk would afford Netanyahu the opportunity to meet with those European leaders who could play pivotal roles in the Middle East peace process and who could influence European attitudes vis-à-vis Iran.

Mark Regev, a spokesman for the prime minister, told the Post that while Netanyahu was honored to have received the invitation and had hoped to attend an event of such great historical significance, his pressing schedule would not allow the trip. □

### Polish Joke commentary from 9

The Polish Joke is a play made up of loosely connected comic skits held together by the presence of Jasiu - a classic simpleton who wanders from one absurd dilemma to another seeking to explain his Polishness by so-called "Polish jokes". (It is clear from the cover of the book of Ives' play that it is intended to be comic and to play off our society's perception of Poles as stupid and incompetent. The title Polish Joke is upside down on a background that mimics the Polish flag.) Jasiu's odyssey ends with his migration to Poland and apparent acceptance of his Polish identity. The play offers no clear reason for the change except that he gets a brief impassioned speech from someone in Warsaw named Olga (wearing red and white which arouses him sexually) who tells him to read Polish poets and listen to Polish composers and accuses him of being ashamed of Poland because it "has been the garbage can of Europe for centuries". She clinches her argument by pointing out that the genocide of three million Christian Poles in World War II has been ignored by the West.

Ives creates an image of Polish and Polish American culture (he fails to distinguish them) as consisting of a special reverence for a 1930's Czech polka, accordion music, peculiar beer drinking habits and the celebration of the feast day of a Russian saint. Poles, he asserts, are utterly fatalistic and see the world as futile and meaningless. Most of his Polish characters are lumpenproletarian in habit and manner. Ladislaw, the Polish immigrant who tunneled to America from Łódź for example, emerges from the earth with a toilet plunger offering to fix toilets. Even education and social mobility don't help. Magda, who becomes a successful Fortune 500 executive, still wears the cheap rhinestone tiara she got for portraying the Virgin Mary.

The play opens with Uncle Roman telling nine-year-old Jasiu: Roman: I'm gonna tell you something now that will guide your entire life. Alla wisdom you ever need to know in just two words.

Jasiu: Okay.

Roman: Are you ready?

Jasiu: I'm ready.

Roman: All Polish jokes are true.

He then proceeds to tell him of a Pole, Stasiu, who built a garage so badly that it collapsed. But, because he had "the luck of the Polish" he survived... "if the stupid bastard had built his garage right, he'd be dead today".

The statement, meant perhaps to sound like a Zen Koan is, of course, either meaningless and silly or racist. The example that follows it and the Polish jokes which constitute a significant part of the remainder of the text give no indication that he doubts it. In fact, some of his characters, such as the doctor or the Polish immigrant, become embodiments of the demeaning jokes he tells the audience. A running joke in the play is the one about the Pole who locked his keys in his car. It took him an hour to get his family out as a consequence. This actually happens to the immigrant who drives his car through the tunnel he dug from Lodz ("Woodge"). He tunneled because he did not know the Berlin Wall had fallen. Having discovered that fact, he returns to Poland by the tunnel so he can fly back to America. It is clear that this character who is superfluous to the main action of the play exists only as a device to gratuitously introduce offensive Polish Jokes. He does not in any way move the play along.

Like his bizarre view of Polish culture, Ives' Polish history is absurd and ignorant. The sudden appearance, apropos of nothing in particular, of a comic Kościuszko to recites a silly narrative about Poland in 1795 is incoherent and painfully embarrassing. (Poland was not attacked by Lithuanians and Swedes in 1795.) He also gives us elsewhere the discredited old canard of Poles charging

German tanks in 1939. He could have at least given us the courtesy of getting a few basic historical facts right.

Perhaps his most serious *faux pas* is to characterize Poles as utterly fatalistic and nihilistic. It is hard to characterize a people who fought so hard generation after generation with risings to win their freedom against impossible odds, a people who fought courageously against Hitler and Stalin, who created Solidarity as without hope. Their Polish American cousins struggled, suffered and died in all of the battles for decent working conditions and living wages for American workers. When descendants of the founders were willing to deny basic human rights, 600,000 Poles came over *en masse* to create the CIO unions. They were the largest single ethnic group in all the key unions.

Ives has confused the deep Polish Catholic sense of the tragedy of human life and history with fatalism. Poles always understood that human action would never bring an earthly millennium (which inoculated them against the totalitarian ideologies of our time) but that one must always act in the pursuit of justice and good even if one fails. They also understood that work and action lay at the heart of human dignity.

Ives' one-dimensional characters all lack the dignity that Polish immigrants strove so hard to attain as they created neighborhoods, parishes, institutions, societies, unions, schools and above all homes and families. In the process they changed dramatically the landscape of urban America and humanized with their church bells, flower gardens and children some of the ugliest industrial neighborhoods in America. Nothing illustrates the sense of dignity and honor they sought to maintain more than a story from a Polish immigrant worker which was collected some years ago in an oral history project. He led a delegation of Polish workers to speak to the boss about a desperately needed raise. He made his point tellingly by stressing that the workers could not even afford to buy proper clothes to go to church in. The boss, unimpressed by the argument replied; "Well then, go to church in your work clothes." Fifty years later the man,

still insulted and bewildered could only think, "What kind of people did he think we were that we would go to church, the house of God, in our work clothes?"

I think it is fair for us to ask David Ives as well as the College: "What kind of people do you think we are that you should choose to tell our story in such a racist and demeaning way?"

It is one of our cultural pieties that art is ennobling and that it can lead us to truth and understanding. But, it is also true that art can be cruel and mean spirited and it can be prejudicial and dishonest.

David Ives, whatever his intentions, has distorted our story beyond recognition. His weak attempt at a positive ending cannot disguise the fact that he has chosen to play in a cheap way off of insidious and damaging prejudices that have had painful and evil effects for countless people in our time.

I am saddened that a university committed to Catholic principles of social justice, human dignity and an equitable civil society should have been so insensitive as to allow this production apparently without any second thoughts.

Thaddeus C. Radzilowski, Ph.D.  
President  
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