

Holocaust and Polish American Identity

On April 20, 2004 Dr. Thaddeus Radzilowski (pictured) gave a paper titled "the Holocaust and Polish American Identity" at a symposium sponsored by the National Polish-American-Jewish-American Council in Washington DC. The symposium was organized to explore the different ways in which the concept of the Holocaust is framed and used in the two communities. Dr. Radzilowski argued that although the Polish American community does recognize and respect the uniqueness of the Shoa, there are Polish Catholic survivors in the United States for whom the concept of the Holocaust forms the interpretative framework of their experiences. More importantly the idea of the Holocaust has entered that American public discourse as the way to talk about the Nazi era and the genocidal destruction it unleashed on Europe. As such it has generated movies, television programs, popular literature, college courses, mandated school curricula, exhibits and the Holocaust Museum itself created by an Act of Congress. Thus there are few other public venues for the Polish community to tell the important story of the martyrdom of Poland to its fellow Americans or to have students in elementary, secondary or college classes get some awareness of it. Dr. Radzilowski indicates that this was not the best prism



through which to see and teach the Polish experience, as it over-emphasized victimization and slighted the tale of struggle and resistance. The concept works much better as a way of understanding the Jewish story for which it originated. However, given the realities of the current public discourse it is the only avenue available.

Dr. Radzilowski stressed that this was primarily an American concern and involved and ongoing dialogue between

two American ethnic groups - Jewish American and Polish American. It is not an issue in Poland. There the issues are different and Poles do not understand their experience in World War II as subsumed under the concept of the Holocaust. Modern Polish dictionaries define the word "Holocaust" as referring to the annihilation of the Jews.

During the discussion the issue of the lack of materials specifically designed for American classroom on the Polish story was raised by a number of members of the audience. Many felt that the quality of earlier curricular projects on the topic were poorly designed and never updated. Everyone agreed that the responsibility for the production of new materials for current use falls on the Polish American community. Dr. Radzilowski indicated that the Piast Institute would explore the possibility of finding funding for such a project. It already has the expertise through its network of fellows and cooperating scholars, as well as its own staff to do a professional job on the project.

The other speakers included Dr. Alex Langrebe, Lecturer in History and Assistant Professor Natalia Aleksiu, both of the Jagiellonian University and professor Joshua Zimmerman of Yeshiva University. The moderator was Fr. John Pawlikowski of the Catholic Theological Union of Chicago.