



# New Eastern Europe

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## 2012-07-04 Re-examining Spielberg's Portrayal of Polish-Jewish Relations



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Nearly two decades after its premiere, Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* is considered to be the most emblematic film about the Holocaust. While this Oscar-winning tale of a Nazi war profiteer turned humanitarian experienced little controversy after its premiere in Poland, *Schindler's List* falls short of providing a historically accurate depiction of Polish-Jewish relations in Nazi-occupied Poland.

All the scenes in the film featuring Gentile Poles portray them as anti-Semitic Nazi collaborators. Also, the film's depiction of the 1939 September campaign in Poland features incorrect information. While Polish-Jewish relations were often painful during Nazi occupation, Spielberg's depiction of interactions between Poles and Jews is one-sided and lacks accurate historical context.

### Unflattering depiction

Starting with the beginning of the film, *Schindler's List* depicts the Poles as not resisting the German occupation and as Nazi accommodators and fanatical anti-Semites. In one of the film's early scenes, an on-screen note informs the viewer that the German army defeated Poland in a mere two weeks. In a scene that takes place in September 1939, SS officers attend a lavish banquet. Their jovial Polish girlfriends accompany them. The women's nationality is obvious because one of them is named Agnieszka, a Polish name (the German equivalent is Agnes). At another Nazi officer party, a Polish orchestra plays for them a popular Polish tango written by Mieczysław Fogg, which leaves no doubts regarding the orchestra's nationality. Ironically, the tango's composer Fogg hid Jews in his Warsaw apartment under Nazi occupation and years later was named one of the "Righteous Among the Nations" by Yad Vashem in Israel.

Later, after the swift September campaign, the Poles are once again shown in an unflattering light. In the scene when the Jews are herded into the ghetto, their Polish neighbours are shown standing unmolested on the sidelines throwing mud at the Jews. In one of *Schindler's List's* more disturbing moments, a small girl screams repeatedly in a high-pitched, angry voice "Goodbye, Jews!" As Andrew Nagorski writes: "[T]he chilling scene of a young girl screaming with hatred, 'Good-bye Jews!' as victims were herded into the ghetto, seem[s] to suggest that the only role Poles played was to applaud Nazi terror."

As the film progresses, the Poles collaborate with the Third Reich in the Final Solution. In the scenes that take place in the Plaszow concentration camp the guards and doctors are Poles. In one scene, when the Jews are forced to run naked, camp guards yell commands in Polish. In another scene, the camp administration selects Jewish women for labor. Doctors examine them and ask them to stand and open their mouths again in Polish. Finally, when Jewish women are sent to the camp showers where in fact they are gassed and killed, women command them in Polish to disrobe, take soap, and shower.

Finally, Spielberg ends his film with a note saying that the Jews Schindler saved and their descendants number 6,000, while Poland's present Jewish population is less than 4,000. This implies much about what Spielberg believes regarding Polish-Jewish relations. Many viewers of the film have interpreted this to signify that the Poles were thoroughly indifferent to the *Shoah*. Even film critic Roger Ebert subscribed to this view. "The obvious lesson would seem to be that Schindler did more than a whole nation to spare its Jews," he writes.

### Historical inaccuracies

After this introduction to the presentation of Polish-Jewish relations in *Schindler's List*, it is worthwhile to evaluate the historical accuracy with which they are presented, and each of these aspects will be analysed point by point. First, Spielberg's claim that the German army defeated Poland in two weeks is untrue. The September campaign lasted until October 5, 1939, more than five weeks. Furthermore, the fierce September campaign was costly for the Germans, and the Polish resistance did not end on October 5. Despite the fact that the Soviet Union invaded Eastern Poland on September 17, 1939 (a fact Spielberg ignores) the September campaign cost Germany 16,000 dead and 32,000 wounded while every other country in mainland Europe fell faster than Poland to the Nazi *blitzkrieg*.

Next, with regards to the scene in which Polish onlookers throw mud at their Jewish neighbours who are herded into the ghetto while a Polish child yells at them, it is likely that similar events occurred in Poland in 1939, and it certainly is accurate, although to an extent. As mentioned previously, in pre-partition Poland Jews were treated better than in other parts of Europe. In Medieval Poland, the kings placed their Jewish subjects under special protection and considered them to be model citizens as, unlike the nobility, they paid taxes and were not given to rebellions. Furthermore, at this time the Catholic Church considered money lending to be an immoral activity, which meant that Poland's mercantile class was heavily Jewish, and the country's Jews played an economically crucial role in the country. Royal courts harshly punished Christians who killed Jews in Poland. It was only until the partition of Poland when Tsarist Russia introduced anti-Semitic legislation.

However, in the early twentieth century anti-Semitic tensions began to rise. Poverty caused many Poles to oppose the disproportionate role of Jews in their country's economic elites and intelligentsia. Until his death in 1935, Poland's *de facto* ruler Marshal Jozef Pilsudski vigorously opposed anti-Semitic policies. Nonetheless, post-Pilsudski governments officially discriminated against Jews by, for example, excessively taxing them while many universities introduced quota systems to limit the number of Jewish students admitted and conservative organizations boycotted Jewish businesses, thus pauperizing Poland's Jews.

In other words, while Polish anti-Semitism was prevalent, the "Goodbye, Jews!" scene incompletely tells what happened. Emanuel Ringelblum, a Jewish historian who lived through Nazi occupation in Warsaw until 1944, when Nazis discovered and executed him and his Gentile rescuers, provides an important testimony in his part autobiographical, part historical chronicle, *Polish-Jewish Relations During World War II*. Ringelblum bitterly writes of Polish anti-Semitism. However, he notes remarkable Polish-Jewish solidarity during the German invasion not seen since the 1861 rebellion against Tsarist Russia, when Poles and Jews became brothers in arms against a common enemy. He notes that at this time Warsaw's Jews fought above all for Poland, while anti-Semitic Poles temporarily put aside their prejudices and united themselves with the Jews against Germany. Thus despite Polish anti-Semitism, there were scenes of Polish-Jewish fraternity during Nazi rule.

### No official collaborators

Next, it is worth examining the film's notion that the Poles were passive collaborators of the Nazi regime. As Slavs, the Poles were "inferior" to the German "race" in the Nazi racial ideology and, although they were not singled out for complete annihilation like the Jews or the Roma, Hitler wanted to repopulate conquered Poland with Germans. The German policy towards the Poles living under occupation was one of enslavement and occupation. Under Nazi rule, 50 per cent of Polish doctors were killed, as were 57 per cent of Polish lawyers, 40 per cent of Poland's professors, and 18 per cent of Poland's Roman Catholic clergy. Before the invasion of Poland, Adolf Hitler claimed that a major goal of Germany is to destroy Polish culture.

Perhaps most important is the fact that Poland had no official collaborators. There are cases of Poles collaborating with their occupiers in anti-Semitic pogroms. The most famous example is that of the Jedwabne massacre, where in 1941 the town's Gentile inhabitants murdered hundreds of Jews with Nazi help. However, the Polish underground was the largest and most sophisticated in German-occupied Europe, while no collaborationist governments were formed in Poland.

Finally, this essay will deal with Spielberg's assertion that there are more descendants of Schindler's Jews than there are in Poland today. Spielberg clearly fails to consider the historical, sociological, and demographic context of modern Poland's Jewry.

According to Poland's Chief Rabbi Michael Schudrich, Poland's Jewish population currently numbers approximately 20,000. He mentions that since the collapse of Communism, large numbers of Poles have discovered, usually to great surprise, that they had Jewish ancestry. Yet they had not known this before usually because their family members were silent on this matter, fearing anti-Semitism. Other Jewish Poles had lost their entire families during the Holocaust, with a vague idea of what had happened to their relatives.

Furthermore, Spielberg's assertion fails to consider the history of Polish Jewry between the end of Nazi occupation and the shooting of his film. Schudrich additionally notes that in 1945, 350,000 Jews lived in Poland, which by today's standards would make the Polish Diaspora the third largest in Europe. He notes, however, three waves of emigration from Poland after the war, in 1948, 1956, and 1968, respectively. Most left during the first two waves for a variety of reasons: anti-Semitism, the imposition of Communism on Poles, and the small civil war waged between Home Army veterans and the Communists after the war. Meanwhile, in 1968, much of the Poland's remaining Jews had following Wladyslaw Gomułka's "anti-Zionist" campaign, and those who remained were completely assimilated.

### Complex history

Also, this statistic begs a question. Were the Poles really so unwilling to help their Jewish neighbours? One of the most fascinating things about Polish aid to Jews during Nazi occupation is that many anti-Semites rescued Jews. For example, the writer Zofia Kossak, a writer who co-founded *Zegota*, the only underground council to help Jews in occupied Europe, was famous for her nationalism and anti-Semitism. Yet she believed that as Catholic victims of German oppression, the Poles had a religious and patriotic duty to help Jews. Meanwhile, Rev. Marcei Godlewski, the vicar of the All Saints Church, the only parish within the Warsaw Ghetto, was known for his anti-Semitic sermons. Yet after witnessing Nazi brutality, he hid Jews in his church. He gave escaping Jews the birth certificates of deceased parishioners and smuggled Jewish children out of the ghetto under his cassock.

Of all countries, Poland has the most "Righteous among the Nations" recognized by Yad Vashem. Though estimates vary, one standard measure is that Poles rescued approximately 45,000 Jews, from certain death,

12,000. Because Poland's pre-war Jewry exceeded 3.5 million, this may seem disappointing. However, this must be properly contextualized. The Poles were in a more difficult situation than the people of France, Denmark, and Holland, where locals formed collaborationist governments with the Nazi occupiers and Jews were numerically few well assimilated into Gentile society. More important, however, unlike the Poles the Danes, French, or Dutch did not face immediate execution of themselves and their families and neighbours. Because of the harsh punishment Poles faced for helping Jews, hundreds of thousands of Polish Christians unsuccessfully tried to aid Jews.

In conclusion, from an artistic point of view *Schindler's List* is unquestionably one of the great American films of the 1990s. However, to any student of Polish-Jewish relations Spielberg's depiction of encounters between Poles and Jews in Nazi-occupied Krakow is simplistic. Often when studying wartime Polish-Jewish relations Polish scholars exaggerate the scale of aid given to Jews by Polish Gentiles while Jewish scholars focus on Polish anti-Semitism and appalling events such as the massacre in Jedwabne. However, the legacy of Polish anti-Semitism and indifference to the Holocaust is only part of the story. *Schindler's List* does no justice to this complex historical issue.

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## COMMENTS

### Comments

#### [A movie that deals with \(/comment/222#comment-222\)](#)

[Permalink \(/comment/222#comment-222\)](#) Submitted by ExpatInvader on 2012-07-04

A movie that deals with Polish Jewish relations far better is Roman Polanski's "The Pianist". It remained more faithful to Spilzman's original book and did not invent Polish concentration camp guards and the like.

#### [Time for post-war acceptance as well \(/comment/224#comment-224\)](#)

[Permalink \(/comment/224#comment-224\)](#) Submitted by Neptune on 2012-07-04

Stalin saved the Polish Catholics from being gassed by Nazi Germany. This is obvious. The Einsatzgruppen first murdered Polish Catholics. They would have gassed all the Poles not suitable for slavery had not the Red Army won. Because of Stalin, Poland has its present boundaries, which German PM in the early 1990's wanted set back. Yes, Stalin was nasty, but he did not gas the Poles.

#### [Response to Permalink \(/comment/225#comment-225\)](#)

[Permalink \(/comment/225#comment-225\)](#) Submitted by D.K. on 2012-07-04

Because of Stalin, Poland lost its Kresy..Lwow..etc.. No, he did not gas the Poles..he merely took them into a forrest, put them on their knees..filled their mouths with sawdust and shot them in the back of the head. You ever heard of something called a 'Gulag' ? Arguing that Stalin saved Polish Catholics is about as right as saying Hitler saved Polish Jews.

#### [er... \(/comment/226#comment-226\)](#)

[Permalink \(/comment/226#comment-226\)](#) Submitted by bob on 2012-07-04

While I agree that the portrayal of Poles in the film is unbalanced, I don't agree that it shows what Spielberg thinks of Polish -Jewish relations. Look at Wajda's 'Katyn'. There is not one single Jew in the film, yet of the 20,000 Polish officers killed at the Katyn massacres, over 400 were Jewish. Many would have been saying a word of Hebrew in their final moment, not a Catholic prayer as depicted in the film. But Wajda's total omission of the Jewish aspect of Katyn does not mean that Wajda thinks there were no Jews at Katyn. By the same token, Spielberg's total omission of the Polish Righteous, etc, does not mean that Spielberg thinks only bad of the Polish people. On secondary points, bear in mind that this film was an adaptation of a book by an Australian author who used the memoirs of a Jewish man to create the story. Spielberg is not the sole author of the narrative. Moreover,

the cinematographer of this movie was Spielberg's closest colleague and old friend Janusz Kaminski, a Pole who graduated from the Polish National Film School. Mr Kaminski, a Pole, is also one of the authors of this film. Schindler's list did put Poles in a negative light, but it could have been worse - a few Poles actually murdered Jews in the Holocaust, and the film did not show this. Certainly, it is high time for a man like Spielberg to correct the negative stereotypes about the Polish record in WWII, perhaps with a film about one of the several Poles who personally saved many more Jewish lives than Schindler ever did. But don't go jumping to conclusions about hidden motivations of story-tellers.

### **[Have not seen Katyn. However \(/comment/228#comment-228\)](#)**

[Permalink \(/comment/228#comment-228\)](#) Submitted by ExpatInvader on 2012-07-04

Have not seen Katyn. However were there Jews cheering the officer's death? Jews fraternising with the Stalinist killers? If so, then you can compare it to Schindler's list's portrayal of Poles. Historical errors in a movie are understandable. However all of the historical errors with regards to Poles in Schindler's list (length of Nazi campaign, existence of Polish concentration camp guards, non-existence of Polish prisoners working for Schindler) are prettily obviously designed to defame Poles. I have absolutely no doubts about the motivations of the story-tellers in this regard.

### **[Grammatical error \(/comment/231#comment-231\)](#)**

[Permalink \(/comment/231#comment-231\)](#) Submitted by ExpatInvader on 2012-07-04

officer's = Officers'. I believe there was more than one...

### **[er... \(/comment/235#comment-235\)](#)**

[Permalink \(/comment/235#comment-235\)](#) Submitted by bob on 2012-07-06

The Katyn massacre was a closed operation by the NKVD, there is no evidence that 'Jews were cheering it'. Historians agree that at the Katyn massacres the Soviets killed at least 400 Jews who were Polish Army officers (including the Polish Army's Chief Rabbi Baruch Steinberg, the chaplain for minorities also administering to Muslims (Polish officers who were ethnic Tatars) and protestants (mainly Polish officers who were ethnic Germans)). This contradicts the myth that Jews were excluded by the Polish elite, that Jews had no reason to be loyal to Poland, and that the Polish Army was an anti-Semitic institution. The notion that Jews were entirely excluded by the Polish elite and therefore had no loyalty to Poland is a defamatory, anti-Polish stereotype. The idea that Jews would cheer killings of Jews at Katyn is as relevant as the idea that Poles would cheer killings of Poles at Katyn. Like Spielberg, Wajda missed a chance to create a more complex narrative, but that is no evidence of bad faith. There should have been Poles who saved Jews in 'Schindler's List', there should have been a Jewish Polish Army officer in 'Katyn'.

### **["There should have been Poles \(/comment/257#comment-257\)](#)**

[Permalink \(/comment/257#comment-257\)](#) Submitted by Patriota on 2012-07-16

"There should have been Poles who saved Jews in 'Schindler's List', there should have been a Jewish Polish Army officer in 'Katyn'. " Then in that case there should have been Jews shooting the Polish officers in the back of the head in Wajda's film as many of the executions were ethnic Jews. Of the 20,000 missing officers and other members of the intelligentsia just over 4,000 were found in the Katyn mass graves. I don't know if any of the identified victims who were found in Katyn were Jewish but if there weren't any then maybe this would explain Wajda's omission. I also think it wise that he didn't portray Jewish members of the execution squad because it wouldn't be very constructive in terms of building Polish-Jewish relations in the 21st century.

### **[I recommend \(/comment/227#comment-227\)](#)**

[Permalink \(/comment/227#comment-227\)](#) Submitted by Noemi on 2012-07-04

reading Norman Davies' "Rising '44" to anyone who is interested in history and wants to know the truth.

[Your article re Spielberg \(/comment/229#comment-229\)](#)

[Permalink \(/comment/229#comment-229\)](#) Submitted by Agnieszka Gerwel on 2012-07-04  
Thank you for writing such an excellent film review. Best wishes, Agnieszka

[Your article re Spielberg \(/comment/230#comment-230\)](#)

[Permalink \(/comment/230#comment-230\)](#) Submitted by Agnieszka Gerwel on 2012-07-04  
Thank you for writing such an excellent film review. Best wishes, Agnieszka

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