

Veteran Holocaust Denier David Irving's Tour of Nazi Extermination Sites May Run Foul of Controversial Polish Legislation

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by Ben Cohen

Poland's widely-criticized new legislation regulating the commemoration of the Nazi Holocaust is facing an unexpected challenge with an impending tour of death camp sites that is being led by a veteran Holocaust denier.

National newspaper Rzeczpospolita reported on Tuesday that British convicted Holocaust denier David Irving intends to lead a tour of World War II landmarks in September 2018 which includes extensive stops at Holocaust sites in Poland.

Irving has conducted these and similar tours for his followers and admirers for nearly a decade — the forthcoming visit, however, would be his first since Poland passed a controversial amendment to its existing Holocaust commemoration legislation on Feb 6. Public discussion of wartime antisemitism and collusion with the Nazis among Poles is now a criminal risk, which carries a maximum prison sentence of three years.

Irving told Rzeczpospolita reporter Wiktor Ferfecki in an email on Monday that he had every intention of conducting the tour this year, which includes visits to the sites of Bełżec, Sobibór and Treblinka — Nazi extermination camps where nearly two million Jews who were trapped in German-occupied Poland were murdered.

Describing Irving as the “guru” of Holocaust deniers, Ferfecki pointed out that his presence in Poland might well further damage the country's image in the eyes of international critics of its Holocaust legislation.

The author of several volumes on Nazi Germany, Irving began espousing Holocaust denial in the late 1980s. His reputation as a historian was destroyed in 2000, when a British court famously dismissed his libel action against the American academic Deborah Lipstadt for categorizing him as a Holocaust denier. He has been barred from entering several countries under legislation to counter Holocaust denial, including Germany, Italy and Canada. In 2007, he was released from an Austrian prison after serving 13 months for a three-year sentence for a speech he made in Vienna alleging that the gas chambers were a “fairytale.”

Irving's activities likely fall foul of Poland's legislation, which empowers the country's official Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) to investigate potential offenders inside and outside the country. The IPN — whose mission is to commemorate the “victims, losses and damages suffered by the Polish Nation” during World War II and the fifty consequent years of Communist Party rule — describes the fate of three million Polish Jews under the Nazis as an “especially tragic” dimension of its overall work.

Billed on his website as “The Real History Tour of the Wolf's Lair,” Irving's September 2018 tour will escort “international guests” around key war sites in Poland and Latvia. Without mentioning any of the Jewish or Roma gypsy victims who died there, Irving describes Bełżec, Sobibór and Treblinka as the “grim sites of the SS ‘Operation Reinhard.’” The tour will also include a wreath-laying ceremony for one of Hitler's aides, Heinrich Berger, whom Irving calls an “innocent stenographer” killed during the failed assassination attempt on the Nazi leader in July 1944.

Encouraging participants to “make up your own mind about the truth,” Irving's tour includes an opportunity to “inspect the much visited Auschwitz I and II in Poland.” No further details of the Auschwitz-Birkenau complex — where one million Jews were murdered alongside thousands of Poles, gypsies and Soviet prisoners of war — are provided.

One leading expert on antisemitism in Poland said that he expected the conservative government to take pre-emptive action against Irving.

“Because of the history law controversy, it would be very strange if the Polish authorities just turn a blind eye to Irving’s use of the death camp sites in Poland for his business and his propaganda of denial,” Prof. Rafal Pankowski of the Collegium Civitas University in Warsaw told The Algemeiner.

Meanwhile, Irving — who turns 80 later this week — remains unrepentantly antisemitic. A correspondent for The Australian newspaper who interviewed Irving in Scotland in 2017 quoted him saying that Jews “have spent the last 50 years trying to destroy me.”

In the same interview, Irving claimed that the number of deaths at the same Auschwitz site he intends to visit with his party in September had been “grossly inflated.”

“They use it now because it has an airport nearby and it’s got hotels everywhere and there’s a McDonald’s and a hot dog stand actually in the parking lot, which makes it very agreeable for tourists and visitors,” Irving remarked. “It’s highly commercialized in the sense that Disneyland is commercialized.”

Testimonials from tour participants published on Irving’s own site leave little doubt that he personally expresses open admiration for Nazi leaders during the tours. “I found your encounter with the war veteran as we exited Hitler’s bunker particularly thoughtful — indeed moving,” one American participant wrote in an appreciative note on a similar tour led by Irving in September 2013.

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