

Senior Adviser to Polish Prime Minister Under Fire From Top Jewish Leaders for ‘Antisemitic’ Online Campaign

by Ben Cohen
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Jewish leaders in the US and Europe have risen to the defense of a leading Polish expert on antisemitism, after he recently became the target of an “antisemitic” online campaign led by an official adviser to Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki.

Rafal Pankowski — a Warsaw-based professor who leads the anti-racist “Never Again” Association — was described as a “Polish-speaking Jewish mongrel dog” and threatened with violence by extremists on social media following a speech he delivered to the Global Forum Against Antisemitism in Jerusalem on March 21.

In that presentation, Pankowski highlighted the upsurge of antisemitic rhetoric that has accompanied the recent passage of controversial Holocaust commemoration legislation in Poland. The bill — signed into law by President Andrzej Duda on Feb. 6 — criminalizes public discussion of Polish antisemitism and collusion with the Nazi authorities during the German occupation of 1939-45, with potential violators facing a maximum sentence of three years in prison. (Pankowski, a critic of the legislation, is frequently quoted on this matter and related issues by The Algemeiner and several other international news outlets.)

Among those in the audience for Pankowski’s speech was Polish Ambassador to Israel Jacek Chodorowicz. Attending with the ambassador was Andrzej Pawluszek — a government adviser promoted on March 2 to the official post of secretary to the prime minister — who took exception to the speech’s content. While Pawluszek did not challenge the remarks during the panel, his furious disagreement with Pankowski’s claim that antisemitism was widespread among certain Polish politicians and media outlets was revealed in a subsequent series of tweets, in which he joined with the deputy leader of Poland’s far-right National Movement in denouncing Pankowski’s assessment of Polish antisemitism as a “scandal.”

The tweets were approvingly shared by other well-known figures in Poland — including Sebastian Kaleta, a high-level official at the Ministry of Justice, Krzysztof Ziemięc, the presenter of Polish state TV’s evening news program, and Adam Bielan, a deputy speaker of the Polish Senate — setting off a volley of online abuse in Pankowski’s direction.

One respondent accused Pankowski of having gone to Israel “to earn his Judas shekels,” while another urged Pawluszek to “punch him in the face on our behalf.” Another participant in the exchange declared his desire “to put TNT in the ass of this Pankowski.”

Polish far-right activists — 60,000 of whom turned out for a menacing show of force in Warsaw in November 2017 — carry a long-established reputation for violence at soccer matches and political demonstrations, as well as a reported average of ten assaults each week on immigrants living in the country.

Some of the Jewish leaders who rushed to Pankowski’s defense on Monday expressed dismay that the originator of the social media campaign was a government official who had been present at the annual antisemitism forum in Jerusalem, hosted by Israel’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

An Israeli Foreign Ministry representative clarified that Pawluszek “wasn’t invited by us, and did not play an official role.”

“The conference was open to all,” the Israeli official explained to The Algemeiner on Monday, emphasizing at the same time that “the behavior cited by Rafal Pankowski is disturbing and troubling, and we will look into this.”

Mark Levin — CEO of the Washington, DC-based National Council Supporting Eurasian Jewry (NCSEJ) — was among the speakers who shared the platform with Pankowski in Jerusalem. “Rafal was an important part of the panel, and the information he shared was well received,” Levin said.

“It’s unfortunate that the Polish prime minister’s adviser interpreted the information in a negative way,” Levin told The Algemeiner. “The purpose of the session was to outline the recent, significant increase in antisemitic rhetoric, and some incidents as well.”

Levin continued, “We were trying to create an inclusive atmosphere, and these tweets unfortunately don’t help with that.”

Sharon Nazarian — director of international affairs for the Anti-Defamation League — demanded an immediate end to the outburst of online vitriol against Pankowski.

“The campaign of online antisemitic harassment against our longtime partners at the Never Again Association is deeply disturbing and needs to stop now,” Nazarian told The Algemeiner in an email.

“This incident is another example of how far-right extremists can abuse social media platforms to troll their perceived enemies,” Nazarian — who also spoke at the Jerusalem meeting — commented. “We stand in solidarity with Rafal Pankowski and all those who stand up against hate in Poland.”

Responding to an email query from The Algemeiner, Pawluszek stressed that he had “always been against antisemitism, which I consider to be a serious problem.”

Arguing that antisemitism was more pronounced in Western Europe, the Polish prime minister’s adviser added, “I do not disregard it in Poland, and I regularly ban antisemites on my Twitter profile.”

“Again — I will never accept any antisemitic statements on my profile,” Pawluszek said.

Asked why he had not challenged Pankowski during the panel, Pawluszek answered, “I did not have to confront him, because (Polish Chief Rabbi) Michael Schudrich did this after his speech.”

Rabbi Schudrich had “pointed that also anti-Polish statements are a real problem in the current debate,” Pawluszek said.

However, Pankowski told The Algemeiner on Monday that he had been heartened “by the numerous messages of solidarity and support I received in the last days, not least from the chief rabbi of Poland, Michael Schudrich, and many other friends and allies of the ‘Never Again’ Association.”

“What is surprising and disappointing is that the nasty online campaign was started by the prime minister’s adviser specifically tasked with solving the Polish-Israeli-US crisis,” Pankowski continued. “Such behavior is unworthy of a public official.”

Other Jewish leaders echoed the same concern. “In his talk, Pankowski expressed concern about the recent Polish legislative initiative regarding the Holocaust,” Betty Ehrenberg, executive director of World Jewish Congress North America, told The Algemeiner in an email. “In reaction, Pankowski was vilified and denounced by some Polish officials in a public social media campaign that was shocking in its use of hateful language and imagery.”

Ehrenberg said the WJC had been “deeply saddened by these unfortunate expressions on the part of the officials and calls for an immediate return to respectful and civil discourse.”

Meanwhile, Shimon Samuels — international affairs director for the Simon Wiesenthal Center — called for Pawluszek’s dismissal from his role in Morawiecki’s office.

“For a Polish government official to attend and abuse an Israeli government-organized Forum on Antisemitism, to deliberately launch a hate campaign against Rafal, demands an immediate condemnation from his boss, Prime Minister Morawiecki, and the dismissal of Pawluszek from all government functions,” Samuels said.

“The repercussions of Pawluszek’s libel have already included threats of violence against Rafal — threats in which the prime minister and his adviser are complicit,” Samuels charged.

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