

The Holocaust Activist Who's Warning Poland – About Danger Posed By Jews

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In Poland these days, the head of the country's highest-profile Holocaust remembrance group is warning Poles that attacks on their country are coming from the "leftist Jewish media."

He says that the stories of Poles who actually helped Jews during World War II were not told until he arrived, despite decades of work in this field by institutions as significant as Yad VaShem in Jerusalem.

He says that Poland should demand reparations from Germany, citing the reparations Israel got from that country after the Holocaust.

And he seems to be receiving public and even financial support from the right-wing Polish government, which many Polish Jewish leaders accuse of turning a blind eye to growing anti-Semitism in the country.

Jonny Daniels, a British-born Israeli, is a public relations man whose clients include Donald Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. But it's as head of his Warsaw-based Holocaust remembrance charity, From the Depths, that he has been stirring controversy among researchers, scholars and activists devoted to teaching the Shoah's lessons.

Through a string of recent high-profile media appearances in Poland and the United States, Daniels has broadcast a message that echoes themes voiced by Poland's current government under the Law and Justice Party, a hard right nationalist political faction.

Daniels says that he is just correcting distorted perceptions of Poland and righting historical neglect by highlighting Poles who helped Jews during World War II. His critics say that his efforts are serving the government's aim of whitewashing Poland's checkered World War II history, and putting a broadly heroic narrative in its place.

"There are Jews – left[ist] Jews - benefiting from the Holocaust," Daniels darkly warned viewers of TVP, Poland's state television news network, on October 14. Asked why Poland "has such bad press in the world," he explained: "Leftist Jewish media continue to attack Poland and will continue to show Poland as a racist country. They profit by doing so."

Dressed in a sharp suit, a small black kipa neatly on his head, Daniels, explained to an interviewer the motive behind these attacks: "It helps them, to obtain restitution from Poland, which is nonsense. The Jewish community in Poland got a lot of money for Jewish property."

Poland, he told his Polish audience, "must stand up, be honest and say, 'Back off!'"

In an August 8 appearance on Fox News' "Fox & Friends," the U.S. cable channel's top-rated morning news show, Daniels implicitly dismissed the Israeli Holocaust museum Yad Vashem, which carefully verifies and honors non-Jews who rescued Jews during the Shoah. "This should have been done 50 years ago, 40 years ago," he said, citing his own work. "It's just 70 years later that we're able to come and tell these stories."

Yad Vashem's "Righteous Among the Nations" program, which rigorously researches claims of Holocaust rescues, was established 54 years ago, in 1963, to honor those heroes. Daniels did not respond to an email asking how he vets those he honors and how his work marks a precedent.

On Telewizja WPolisce, another Polish TV news channel, Daniels urged Poland on October 17 to follow Israel's example and demand reparations of Germany for having invaded it during World War II.

"It's not much more difficult than creating an invoice and sending it to Mrs. Merkel," he told Polish viewers, referring to Germany's chancellor. "If I was in charge of reparations, that's exactly what I'd do."

He also appeared to say that Jewish and non-Jewish Poles had suffered through the Holocaust together.

"There's a thousand years of shared heritage and history; most of it good, some of it bad [that] obviously ended with the tragic mass murder of so many Jews and Poles by hands of the Nazis... We need to understand this 1,000 years of shared heritage and history in context of also understanding difficult events for the Jewish people, and also for the Polish people, like the Holocaust."

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The role of Poland and its people during the Holocaust, in which some 3 million Polish Jews perished, is a complex one. The suffering of non-Jewish Poles was also substantial: An estimated 1.2 million of them died under the Nazi occupation. At Yad Vashem, Poland can claim more people recognized as Righteous Gentiles — non-Jews who saved Jews — than any other nation; more than 6,700. At the same time, only 11,000 Jews, or one-third of 1% of Poland's prewar Jewish population, were successfully hidden or sheltered by their fellow citizens.

There are also infamous episodes of Poles joining in the slaughter of Jews. In one notorious case at Jedwabne, between 340 and 1,500 Polish Jews were burned alive by non-Jewish Poles; in another episode, uniquely, after World War II, residents of Kielce, a town in Poland's south, killed some 40 Jewish Holocaust refugees returning to their homes in 1946.

In recent years, scholars such as Jan Grabowski of Ottawa University and Jan Gross of Princeton University have published intensely debated books that focus on the role of non-Jewish Poles in betraying Jews to the Nazi occupiers. In his 2013 book, "Hunt for the Jews," Grabowski details the fate of Jews in Dabrowa Tarnowska, a rural southeastern county where, he finds, the majority of the Jews in hiding perished as a result of betrayal by their Polish neighbors.

Gross's research, meanwhile, includes his 2001 book about the Jedwabne massacre and a 2011 book examining how Poles enriched themselves at the expense of Jews murdered in the Holocaust. In 2015 he stated in an article that "Poles killed more Jews than [they did] Germans" during the war. This has earned Gross criticism even from some notable Jews who see his work as one-sided — and support from some non-Jewish Polish scholars.

The current government has signaled its determination to end this debate. At a November 17, 2015, conference called by the Polish president, Andrzej Duda, representatives from Polish museums and other cultural institutions were told to galvanize Polish nationalism and to discard narratives that shamed Poland. And, using a law that criminalizes writings that "defame" Poland, the government has opened up an investigation of Gross.

Daniels, meanwhile, has worked closely with Polish ministries and agencies in his initiatives.

"We want to break with the false claim," Daniels told viewers of TVP, "that the Poles murdered the Jews."

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Daniels' message as head of From the Depths echoes themes voiced by Poland's ruling Law and Justice Party. And in one recent television appearance, Daniels acknowledged publicly for the first time that he is,

in fact, paid by the Polish government. The funding goes to his for-profit public relations firm, JDPR, and comes from LOT, the government owned national airline.

“I help in building LOT’s image abroad,” he acknowledged during his TVP appearance.

That acknowledgement contradicted repeated denials he gave in earlier interviews, including with the Forward for a profile last July.

Daniels won’t say how much his for-profit public relations firm’s contract with Poland’s state air carrier is worth, or disclose its provisions; nor will LOT, without Daniels’s agreement. More than 99% of LOT’s shares are in the hands of the state, and LOT’s chairman and upper management are political appointees of the government.

Meanwhile, it is impossible to learn who contributes to Daniels’s nonprofit charity, or anything about its finances. Daniels raises funds for From the Depths in the United States and the United Kingdom via a fiscal sponsor in each country. These sponsors decline to release any information about Daniels’s charity, as does Daniels.

According to its website, From the Depths’ mission is “to preserve the memory of the Holocaust and to give a name to those who were brutally murdered in the dark days of the Holocaust and to continue the message to the next generations of those who survived.”

But corporate registration papers in Poland for Daniels’s charity, obtained by the Forward, suggest that its work could be influenced by the government’s agenda. As do many charities that seek Poland’s most privileged tax status, From the Depths declares that one of its missions is “undertaking endeavors for the promotion of the Republic of Poland abroad.”

“Taking actions in support of the dissemination of physical culture” is another goal in its mission statement that seems far removed from Holocaust remembrance.

In a phone interview with the Forward, Daniels said, “I understand how it can be perceived,” referring to his contract with LOT. “But I’m telling you I answer to no one in the government. This is through a PR agency I own and run. And it’s a client I’m very proud to have. We’re helping them purely on the basis of their international media relations as an airline.... I personally don’t view it as working for the government at all.”

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To many Jewish and non-Jewish Poles, Daniels’ assurance on this score has not been reassuring. “Some say that he is engaged in the world’s oldest profession,” said Rabbi Michael Schudrich, the American-born chief rabbi of Poland.

“He has become a supporter of the ultra-right wing,” he added. “It’s the politicization of the Holocaust that is the most dangerous aspect of what he’s doing—and the politicization of history.”

A Catholic Pole who is a leading voice in Catholic-Jewish reconciliation efforts in Poland told the Forward, “Daniels right now is working closely with the ruling party.” Among other things, she noted, Daniels supports their “historical politics,” which stresses the heroic role of non-Jewish Poles saving Jews during the Holocaust. Some say that hundreds of thousands of Poles who played this role remain unrecognized. Daniels, she said “is a convenient Jewish voice saying that Jews are unjustly accusing Poles and treating them equally to the Nazis.”

This Catholic Pole, who requested anonymity out of fear that Daniels would attack her group, is aware this topic is highly fraught.

“I’m not saying that the image of Poles and Poland among the Jews across the world is accurate,” she stressed. “The guilt of the Poles is often exaggerated. But this should be a matter of delicate and nuanced dialogue, not politics.”

“By strengthening the narration of the government,” she said, “he makes it more complicated for Polish society to have deep and truthful debate about the past, because we get absolution from a real Israeli Jew.”

Daniels sees it differently. “I believe the message of the Righteous is much stronger than the message of the murderers,” he said, in a message cited on the website Forum of Polish Jews. “These people should be Polish heroes, Jewish heroes, they should be international heroes. These people are real heroes.”

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Through his networking and connections in Poland, Israel and America, Daniels has come to play a special role for Warsaw’s nationalist government and its supporters. In March, for example, Daniels brokered a meeting between two confidants of Donald Trump — Christian conservative activist Ralph Reed and former Ohio secretary of state Kenneth Blackwell — with one of Poland’s most prominent anti-Semites. Father Tadeusz Rydzyk, head of Radio Maryja, leads an influential media empire whose anti-Semitic broadcasts have been condemned by the U.S. State Department, the Council of Europe, the Vatican and the Polish government’s own National Television and Radio Broadcasting Council. But Rydzyk, with government support, has recently established a chapel to highlight non-Jewish Poles who saved Jews during World War II. Daniels brought Reed and Blackwell, with Polish government officials, to pay it tribute.

In January, he also brought Oren Hazan, a scandal-plagued Likud Knesset member, to Poland to meet with Rydzyk and with government officials. Daniels himself is a frequent guest on Rydzyk’s own radio show.

“Jonny Daniels seems to occupy an increasingly central position as an interface between the Polish, Israeli and US far right,” said Rafal Pankowski, the leader of Never Again, a Polish group devoted to combatting racism. In his partnership with Rydzyk, said Pankowski, Daniels “is clearly crossing some lines which must not be crossed.”

On the other hand, Israel’s ambassador to Poland, Anna Azari, who seeks good relations with the current government, both met with Rydzyk at her embassy and attended a Sabbath dinner with him hosted by Daniels at his home last year.

“The dialogue with Father Rydzyk is important,” Israel’s Foreign Ministry spokesman, Emmanuel Nahshon, told the Forward in an email earlier this year. “It does not imply that we agree with him. He is a public figure, and it is important to make him realize the danger of anti-Semitic positions.”

Daniels, for his part, has told the Forward that Rydzyk is “absolutely not” an anti-Semite. “Truly not,” he said.

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On September 18, at the Warsaw Zoo, Daniels presided over what From the Depths billed as its “second annual Zabinsky awards... honoring non-Jews who saved Jews during the Holocaust.” The zoo, publicity for the event noted, was “the exact site where Antonina and Jan Żabiński saved over 300 Jews during the Second World War.” The couple achieved wider fame this year in March, when Focus Pictures released “The Zookeeper’s Wife,” a dramatic film starring Jessica Chastain that depicted the couple’s rescue of Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto. Attendees included the head of the Law and Justice Party, the deputy prime minister and other party leaders. The event’s sponsors included the state-owned LOT and two other government-controlled companies.

But the Żabińskis’ daughter, Teresa Żabińska-Zawadzki, boycotted the event, complaining of “the excessive politicization of this award.”

“It [goes against] my parents and their attitudes,” she told the Polish news site Wyborcza. “It became a political rally.”

Speakers lauded Poland as a safe country for Jews and hailed Poland’s close ties to Israel, she noted. But she said, “The issue of casual and widespread anti-Semitic sentiments in Poland was not addressed by the politicians and organizers.” Żabińska-Zawadzki cited numerous anti-immigrant protests by extreme right-wing groups. These included one mass rally in Wrocław, where a Jew was burned in effigy in December 2015. A study released earlier this year documented a sharp rise in anti-Semitic attitudes among Poles.

Unlike the Żabińskis, whose heroism has been researched, documented and verified by Yad Vashem, the individuals Daniels honored at his event have not been recognized as Righteous Among the Nations by that institution. There is general agreement that many Poles who risked their lives to help Jews remain unrecognized by Yad Vashem. But an email to Daniels asking what vetting process he used to authenticate the stories of those he honored went unanswered.

Similarly unclear is the verification process he will use for a new project From the Depths launched in October—to record the stories of elderly Poles with recollections of how they or their families helped Jews during the Holocaust.

“Jonny Daniels, he’s the one that’s been doing the principle research,” said Sir Eric Pickles, Britain’s Special Envoy for post-Holocaust issues, whose government has contributed support for recording the recollections.

“Daniels finds his own Righteous and to the best of my knowledge has never publicly identified his methods and criteria,” said Konstanty Gebert, a prominent Polish journalist and traditionally observant Jew, in an email to the Forward.

The real danger, said Michael Berenbaum, a noted Holocaust scholar, is that “this current Polish government is determined to recognize the great contributions of Poles and their victimization under the Nazis — but to downplay or ignore that Poles participated in and sometimes benefitted from the Final Solution.”

Asked specifically about Daniels, he said, “If you only emphasize the righteous without recognizing the enormous role of bystanders and those who turned Jews in, you’re distorting history.”

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