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Remembrance and teaching history: perspectives and experience.

The Righteous Among the Nations and resistance against totalitarian systems

In my speech I would like to focus on three topics: 1) to present the state of the Polish society's (including the youth's) remembrance of the totalitarian systems; 2) to outline how the theme of totalitarianism and resistance against it is presented by the Polish history handbooks for secondary schools 3) to draw attention to the significance of featuring, when teaching about totalitarian systems, the figures of people defying them (The Righteous).

Ad. 1.

State of the Polish society's remembrance of the totalitarian systems

Unfortunately, the issue of the consciousness of the Polish youth concerning totalitarianism has not been in Poland the subject of an inquiry so far. The theme was being undertaken only selectively, if ever, and confined almost exclusively to the Nazi totalitarianism, and more specifically to one of its most horrible crimes – the Holocaust.

The opinion polls concerning attitudes of the Poles to Holocaust has begun to appear on regular basis since the mid-1990s, particularly in connection with some “round” anniversaries of the liberation of the Auschwitz camp. It should be pointed out, that the findings are encouraging, because they indicate steady growth of the consciousness of the Holocaust in general and of Auschwitz in particular during the last 15 years. It can be attributed – at least partially – to the reform of the system of education that took place in 1999 and to the growing interest of media and politicians in the Holocaust.

The general topic of the Second World War has been the subject of opinion poll only twice in Poland. The first poll, which took place in 2000, was carried out by OBOP and ordered by M. Kucia PhD, from the Jagiellonian University, who conducted research into „The picture of

the World War II in the remembrance of the Poles”; the second, which took place in 2005, was ordered by the (public) Polish Radio and carried out by Institute for Opinion Polls and Market Research PENTOR in connection with the 60th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp.

The findings of both of the polls indicated, that the Poles above all associate the Second World War with two facts: the first day of the German aggression against Poland and the Auschwitz camp. Those associations were to be found in case of every fourth of the respondents. Almost every sixth person associates the World War II above all with the defense of Westerplatte and every eighth with the Warsaw Uprising of 1944. The destructive actions of the Soviet Union against Poland are the symbol of that war for only 10% of the Poles; 6% of the respondents point to the very fact of the Soviet aggression, and 5% to the mass murder in Katyń. This opinion poll (in 2000) as well as the subsequent ones indicated clear differences in the perception of two totalitarian systems – Nazi and Soviet one.

As we can see, the Polish society has a much more negative attitude to the crimes committed by the Nazi Germany than to those committed by the Soviet Union. This situation is for sure caused by the many years of falsifying or concealing the truth about the latest history of Poland. It is commonly known that under the communist regime such themes, as the Soviet aggression against Poland or Katyń, were forbidden. School programs and history handbooks concealed communist crimes and featured the Nazi ones.

Because of the changes in the programs and handbooks that emerged as a result of the reform of the school system of 1999, one can say, that the situation is much better today, but I am afraid, that we are still far from treating both totalitarian systems equally. My concern is substantiated by the latest research by Prof. Marek Kucia (2005), which showed – as did the former ones – substantial disproportions as far as the youth’s attitude to Nazi and Soviet totalitarianism was concerned.

Some years ago Prof. Wojciech Roszkowski drew attention to that problem; in his paper „Historic memory 15 years after the collapse of the communism” he suggested, that the historic memory of the today’s Poles appears to be substantially dimmed. „For some, albeit small, part of them, the past – says Roszkowski – is a part of their own identity: as strugglers for independence

or as supporters of the communist system. The later case is very problematic, because it is hypocritical". Prof. Roszkowski tries to discover the causes of such a situation. They are multiple according to him. The poor knowledge the witnesses of the history of PRL (Polish People's Republic) had about the very nature of the system is one of them. A desire to forget about humiliations of the past and to get compensation today is another one. The new circumstances of living in the transforming Poland are the third one. The fourth cause – which is probably the most important in view of our theme – **lies at school**. It is not the bad handbooks that are a problem - they are abundant – but the teachers. „Unfortunately, a substantial part of the teachers, because of their poor education or laziness, repeat slightly refreshed slogans and maintain that there are many different truths about the past – leftist and rightist. It contributes to relativism, both in the study of history and in the study of living". In effect the Poles are poorly informed about last 50 years of their own history, and that fact impacts badly on the process of establishing of the citizen society.

If the state of the Polish society's consciousness concerning communism is as poor, as Prof. Roszkowski suggests, what could we say about the societies in Western Europe, which do not have such experiences as the Poles, so their knowledge is virtually none.

The findings of the opinion poll carried out in Sweden in May 2007, commissioned by the Organization of the Information on Communism, may serve as an example of the situation prevailing in the West. The research revealed a stunning picture. **The Swedish youth know what the Holocaust was, but has no idea at all about the crimes of communism. Two fifths of them think, that communism brought welfare to the world!** In the Swedish schools – probably the same situation is in other West-European countries – during lessons the students learn about the Nazi's crimes against the Jews on regular basis. However the theme of the crimes of Stalinism is virtually nonexistent.

Let us cite some of the findings of that poll, because they are really fearsome. As much as 90% of the 15-20 years old Swedish respondents have not ever heard of the Soviet work camps. It contrasts with relatively good knowledge of the Holocaust, because as much as 95% of the questioned youth knew about the Auschwitz death camp. What is worse, as much as 43% of the young Swedes think, that the number of the victims of the communist repressions is less than a

million, and one fifth of the questioned was convinced, that the number is less than 10 thousands! What is still worse, as much as 40% of the Swedish youth think, that communism has contributed to the increase of the world welfare, and 22% perceives it as a democratic regime. The explanation of such a situation lies – according to the Organization of the Information on Communism – in the history of Sweden and the attitude toward communists of the Swedish social democrat government, which during the period of “cold war” deliberately tempered itself so as not to irritate the Soviet Union. “Excessive” engagement in the dissemination of the information about Soviet Gulag was considered in Sweden an attack on the Soviet Union, upsetting the balance between the parties of the cold war.

According to Maciej Zaremba – Polish historian of ideas and journalist, who emigrated from Poland to Sweden in 1969 – **the most important cause of the poor knowledge of the crimes of communism lies in the Swedish system of education. In the history handbooks there is nothing about the crimes of Stalinism.** As the Swedish example concerning the dissemination of knowledge about Holocaust proves – this situation can be changed. A dozen or so years ago there was an opinion poll concerning the knowledge of the youth about the Holocaust. The findings were similar to those of the present poll concerning communist crimes. Extremely poor state of the consciousness of the Swedish youth concerning the Holocaust elicited an intense political debate. It effected in establishing a state-funded institution (Levande Historia), with an aim of disseminating the knowledge about the Holocaust. This policy had its climax in international Forum on Holocaust carried out in Stockholm in 2000. Declaration signed by the heads of the states drew attention to the need of teaching about the Holocaust not only in Sweden but in whole Europe. There was established then an international organization called International Task Force for Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research. Consecutively the issue of education about the Holocaust became a part of the focus of some other important international organizations, such as the Council of Europe or Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). The effects of their actions can be noticed all over Europe today, an example of which can be the Holocaust Remembrance Day established in most of the member countries of the Council of Europe.

In this context there should be welcomed the recent declaration of the European Parliament on the proclamation of 23 August (the date of the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact) as European Day of Remembrance for Victims of Stalinism and Nazism, “in order to preserve the memory of the victims of mass deportations and exterminations”. Parliament reminds, that „the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 23 August 1939 between the Soviet Union and Germany divided Europe into two spheres of interest”. “The mass deportations, murders and enslavements committed in the context of the acts of aggression by Stalinism and Nazism fall into the category of war crimes and crimes against humanity.” Euro deputies are aware, that “the influence and significance of the Soviet order and occupation on and for citizens of the post-Communist States are little known in Europe”. They point out that “the program 'Europe for Citizens' to promote active European citizenship calls for support for the action 'Active European Remembrance', intended to prevent any repetition of the crimes of Nazism and Stalinism”.

According to Prof. Roszkowski, the Polish historian and euro deputy mentioned above, co-author of the idea of establishing the Day, this resolution will influence favorably the consciousness of the young inhabitants of the European Union. „The history handbooks in the countries of the „old” Union are still abundant with the information about the Nazi regime, but say little about the crimes of Stalin. This declaration – according to Roszkowski – made the whole Europe know that Nazism and Stalinism were equally criminal totalitarian systems, having millions of victims on their conscience”.

The establishing of the Day of Remembrance will require the decisions of the parliaments of particular member countries of EU. If they will make it, its form will depend on schools and teachers. I hope, that as in case of the Holocaust Remembrance Day, the teachers and students will be taking part in its celebration. For sure the commemoration of the victims of Katyń crime will become part of it, because - as Prof. Barbara Fedyszak-Radziejowska, a sociologist from the Polish Academy of Science points out – „Katyń, this is not only remembrance of the crime and the number of victims. It is a significant element of the Polish and European identity and knowledge about the nature of two totalitarian systems of 20th century. In this crime there lies the truth about communism, which European elites do not want to remember”. But the Soviet version

of totalitarianism enjoys today much better opinion than Nazism, because today's Russia and European countries prefer to remember only about their common warfare against Hitler.

Unfortunately also the Polish remembrance of Katyń leaves a great deal to be desired. As the opinion poll carried out on 18-19 April 2007 by TNS OBOP for a newspaper "Rzeczpospolita" and TV show "It is worth talking" indicates, only 40% of the Poles have heard "a lot" about that crime (54% have heard "something") and only 61% know, that it is the Soviet Union, that is responsible for it. Substantial part of the respondents (11%) still attribute it to the Germans, and according to 19% of them, nothing has been settled yet for sure.

The Katyń crime has, according to Prof. Fedyszak-Radziejowska, one „peculiar, totalitarian aspect. It is a symbol of a long-lasting, efficient, skillfully organized political lie, disseminated with the use of various technical means, numerous false documents, witnesses and even crimes, that still are unraveled". This lie lasted for 47 years, till 1992, when president Boris Yeltsin handed over to Poland the copy of the (signed by Stalin) decision of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of Communist Party of the Soviet Union, of shooting Polish prisoners of war. Unfortunately the effects of this lie survived in our collective consciousness longer than the structures of power that had disseminated it.

Summing up this part of my speech I would like to repeat, that for some time the remembrance of the Holocaust is common in Poland and the whole Europe, but the remembrance of the communist crimes pushes its way through only occasionally.

Ad.2. The resistance against totalitarian systems and the theme of the Righteous Among the Nations in Polish history handbooks for secondary schools

This issue has not been so far subject to any reliable research as well. As in the case of research into the collective consciousness, the analyses of the school handbooks focused so far almost exclusively on the theme of the Holocaust. That is why I would like to emphasize, that my remarks are the preliminary ones and should be considered as a mere voice in a debate, because they are based on reading of only a few selected handbooks.

Totalitarian systems and resistance against them

My analysis shows that the issue of totalitarianism – both Nazi and communist – is discussed in relatively comprehensive way. Almost every handbook defines totalitarianism, giving its essential features and indicating differences between totalitarianism and dictatorship. Some of the handbooks emphasize differences between fascist, Nazi and communist totalitarianisms, calling the first one „imperfect totalitarianism”. During lessons devoted to the theme of totalitarianism there often appear such terms as communism, Gulag, indoctrination, personality cult, fascism, Nazism, pogrom.

Usually such countries as Soviet Union (in case of communism) and Germany under Hitler’s regime (in case of Nazism) are given as examples of the countries with a totalitarian regime. As far as the communist ideology is concerned, it is being emphasized, that communism in the post-revolutionary Russia “transformed into an ideology of overtly totalitarian dictatorship of the communist party, which as a vanguard of the proletariat usurped the right to rule in the name of the people”. Stalin is being indicated as the one, who is responsible for establishing totalitarian system. The most of the authors of the handbooks indicate 1956 as an end of the totalitarian system in the Soviet Union (as well as in the whole Eastern Bloc).

In relation to Nazism there is pointed out, that racism was its fundamental and distinctive feature. It is the Jews, who were the main enemy of the Nazis. Evaluating both systems, the authors assert, that Nazism was "along with Stalinism the most felonious totalitarian system in the history of mankind". On the other hand, Italy under the regime of Mussolini is considered as not fully totalitarian country. Italian fascism is called "imperfect totalitarianism". The authors point out the differences between the Italian fascism on the one hand and Nazism and communism on the other. It is pointed out, that the Italian fascism "was not so brutal as Bolshevik's regime and later the Nazi one; it was able to cooperate, better or worse, with the king and church. Fascist party has not managed to predominate over the citizens, life totally, because the army and industry remained outside its total control. Those features distinguishing Italian fascism from other totalitarian dictatorships of those days contributed to its popularity in various parts of Europe.

The handbooks mention also the crimes committed by the communist regime of the Soviet Union, such as collectivization in the sector of agriculture that effected in an immense

famine in Ukraine or relentless exploitation of the workers of heavy and arms industries. There also appears the theme of the resistance against totalitarianism, and ipso facto the issue of struggle against opposition. As the main persecuted groups there are mentioned above all the peasants and the political opponents (mainly belonging to the communist party), of which - according to the authors of the handbooks - only wealthy peasants put up some resistance. It is emphasized, that everyone, who criticized the policy of the state or was recognized as its enemy, was subject to persecutions such as imprisonment or deportation to work camps. It is pointed out, that the collectivization effected in the collapse of the production of food and in the return of famine (especially in Ukraine), which together with the mass repressions took 5-8 millions of human lives (half of which made the victims of collectivization). What is interesting, some of the handbooks point out the fact, that the camps survived longer than the Stalinism itself and functioned till the end of the Soviet Union, albeit the hard conditions of the forced labor were lessened substantially after 1956.

As far as the 1930's are concerned, on the one hand it is pointed out, that the situation of the society got better, and on the other, that the political repressions intensified (several waves of political "cleansing"). It is estimated, that the number of the victims amounted to 7 millions of imprisoned, of which 3 millions were shot or died in the work camps. It is worth mentioning, that when writing about the repressions and victims, the handbooks explain, that the Soviet regime managed to avoid mass protests owing to intense propaganda and concealing the facts.

In case of the Italian fascism, as its victims there are mentioned only its political opponents. The repressions consisted in long-term imprisonment or deportation. That is why, as the authors say, many of those threatened with imprisonment immigrated secretly, mainly to France. The theme of the resistance against fascism appears only in connection with the Pope Pius XI, who in 1937 clearly distanced himself from totalitarian systems of those days. In his encyclical "Mit brennender Sorge (Z wielką troską)" he condemned Nazism as neo-paganism, and in the encyclical "Divini Redemptoris (Odkupiciel Boży)" – he condemned communism. It is emphasized, that the Apostolic See opposed to the Italian imperial policy and particularly to the participation of this country in the warfare during the II world war.

The widest spectrum of the victims appears in connection with the German Nazism. In the most of the handbooks there are mentioned following groups: political opponents (communists, social democrats), the Jews, catholic priests and so called “antisocial elements” (e.g. the Gypsies, mentally handicapped persons, the witnesses of Jehovah and homosexuals). According to the authors of the handbooks boycott and persecutions of the Jews, confiscations, imprisonments and deportation to the concentration camps were the most common forms of persecutions.

The theme of the relations between the authorities and the society is presented in a very similar manner in the discussions of all of the totalitarian systems.

In case of Germany it is pointed out for example, that the support for the Nazis increased as the economic situation was gradually improving. The overtaking of power by Hitler coincided with the ending of the economic crisis. What is more, the masses were impressed by the successes of Germany in the field of international policy. That is why - as the authors emphasize - "it would be a mistake to think, that the program of the Nazi party was introduced only by force and terror. In fact the vast majority of the society supported new regime willingly or even was enthusiastic about it”.

Also in case of Italy the support of society for the Fascists was caused by the economic successes of the government. “The policy of great national economic enterprises and public works (construction of roads, power stations, establishing of new cities) fostered prosperity and lessened unemployment. Tax allowances, help for the families from the state and expanding of the social legislation made society feel secure. Also the awakening of the faith in the imperial power of Italy and official agreement with the Apostolic See in 1929 effected in the increase of support. Lateran Pacts meant the official recognition of the Fascists by the pope and influenced political views of the Catholics, not only in Italy. But the support of the church for Mussolini gradually decreased, what was clearly visible particularly at the end of the 1930's.”.

The notion of the Righteous and the individuals’ resistance against system

All of the handbooks refer the term "Righteous" only to one category of people, namely those, who were saving the Jews. It is then associated exclusively with the Holocaust. It is worth mentioning, that in this context both collective and individual attitudes are being discussed.

Students learn not only names but also short biographies of such people as Irena Sendlerowa, Oskar Schindler, or Raul Waldenberg. Other groups defying the system are called oppositionists or dissidents. In this second case more often there are discussed collective attitudes than individual exemplars. Only some of the handbooks mention such figures as Aleksandr Sołżenicyn or Andriej Sacharow. As far as Poland is concerned, the most commonly appearing names are those of Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, Jacek Kuroń, Adam Michnik or Lech Wałęsa. What is interesting, all of them come from the post-war period. There appear no names of oppositionists in relation to the process of the development of totalitarianism in the inter-war period, except for the pope Pius XI, who publicly condemned totalitarianism. There prevails therefore the tendency to emphasize, that in those times the active opposition was impossible.

The picture of the period of war and occupation is quite different. There appear many figures connected with the resistance movement - both military and civil. This is however limited to the representatives of the societies of the occupied countries.

The photographs of the oppositionists are even rarer than their names - quite contrary to the photographs of dictators and criminals. Those proportions raise substantial doubts. I consider this unconscious promotion of the unfavorable attitudes and anti-heroes. The same can be said of emphasizing helplessness in the face of the totalitarian systems. The educational effects of both are negative. I think, that students should arrive at the conviction that the actions of an individual are of an immense importance, that the resistance against system from the very beginning of its development is possible and necessary. I am afraid, that such a selection of the pictorial materials does not contribute to reaching this goal.

Summing up, I would like to say, that the Polish handbooks give an opportunity for the students to learn a lot about raising, functioning and evolution of totalitarian systems, but on the other hand they cannot learn much about the exemplars of favorable attitudes.

Ad 3.

Significance of featuring, when teaching about totalitarian systems, the figures of people defying them (The Righteous)

During the discussions that take place during lessons devoted to the themes of war and occupation, totalitarian systems and the Holocaust, the youth more and more often raise moral questions. Young people ask for instance: Why people sacrifice their lives to save other people? Are some of us “natural born heroes”? What kinds of internal factors and social mechanisms influence human behavior?

The answer for those question demands something more then simple historical explanation. The arguments from the field of social psychology must be referred to as well. Psychologists say, the everyone has an element of good and evil, which can manifest themselves depending on circumstances. Therefore it may be assumed, that heroes as well as criminals are being created by the particular situation, social and political system in which he or she happens to live.

What is, in this context, the task of the teacher, school and education? It is for sure to show the students some exemplars and to give some guidelines, how to resist unwelcome social influences, how to secure oneself from the charm of the specialists of propaganda, how to fight against various techniques of mind control, used to subdue our freedom to choose and to think.

One has to teach young people how to oppose to evil - how to think reflectively, how to be a nonconformist. One has to inculcate in them the belief that they can act in a reasonable and critical way, that they can direct their actions in a conscious and purposeful way. Because apart from the "architects of the evil" there also exist "architects of the good", who can be exemplars of how efficiently defy criminal systems and power. That is why the featuring of the figures of the Righteous (people saving the Jews) and people that oppose to the totalitarian systems in the teaching of history as exemplars for the youth is of so great educational value.

This problem is profoundly analyzed in the latest work of leading American social psychologist, Prof. Philip Zimbardo, “The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil”. He points out, that the thesis, that we are directed toward good or evil by the internal determinants, is false. We underestimate the external factors determining our thoughts, emotions and actions. Evil should be thought of in terms of culmination, as something we are all capable of, depending on the situation. We can learn to be good or bad regardless of our genetic heritage, personality or genealogy. Following his line of thought, in teaching about totalitarianism (including the Holocaust) we should substitute the question "Who?" with "How?": What

circumstances might influence people's behavior during the Holocaust? What factors lead to particular situations? How was the situation perceived by the different parties (victims, witnesses, perpetrators)?

Unfortunately we do not know a lot yet about the psychological processes in the minds of the people that perform heroic deeds. Most of them are "ordinary" people. Therefore we can assume that heroes, as well as criminals, are created by the circumstances. Taking this into account, Zimbardo made a thesis of "banality of heroism". In his book cited above he says that „everyone is a potential hero, waiting for a proper time and place, to make a decision of helping other people, regardless of personal risk and sacrifice involved". He differentiates between two types of heroism - "impulsive" and "reflective". The first one consists in immediate reaction and help to other person and the second in the acting after some consideration and recognizing the need to help. Such a person is not swayed by the pressure of any group or authority, is able to empathize with the situation of the person needing help, to go beyond his or her own egoism. Such an attitude often involves substantial risk, so it requires courage necessary to resist the pressure of the group or system. Zimbardo is convinced, that this can be taught and learned, because apart from the "architects of evil" there also exist "architects of good", who can give exemplars how efficiently resist against criminal systems and power.

What is, in this context, the task of the teacher, school, and education? It is for sure to show the students some exemplars and to give some guidelines, how to resist unwelcome social influences, how to secure oneself from the charm of the specialists of propaganda, how to fight against various techniques of mind control, used to subdue our freedom to choose and to think, to subject it to the tyranny of conformism, obedience, mimicry and fears caused by the lack of self-confidence. One has to inculcate in them the belief that they can act in a reasonable and critical way, that they can direct their actions in a conscious and purposeful way. How to do it? The answer is given also by social psychology. Zimbardo has formulated a 10-point program indicating how to resist unwelcome social influences. It can be found on the web site (www.lucifereffect.com), and every one interested can find the information about the type of resistance proper in case of particular influence. I think that teachers should know this program and be able to use it as part of their educational activities.

To sum up I would like to say, that the time has come to take into account, when teaching about totalitarianism, the output of psychology necessary for understanding the processes leading to homicide. Revealing the mechanisms that function in our minds, we will be able to understand better the complexity of the attitudes of perpetrators, victims, witnesses and The Righteous, and then maybe we will be better prepared to detect and to stop such processes.