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Pride and Peril – America in the Polish Mirror

Anthony Cunningham

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, tcunningham@csbsju.edu

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AVON HILLS SALON

Thoughts from the Avon Hills

Tony Cunningham on Pride and Peril – America in the Polish Mirror

FEBRUARY 14, 2018

Nations understandably wish to think well of themselves, just like individual citizens. Yet the natural emotions of pride and shame are invariably more complicated when it comes to nations because their histories and doings extend beyond any individual's life.

If I fail to live up to my responsibilities as a son, brother, friend, husband, father, or philosophy professor, the flaws and failures are *on me* in a fundamental way. My shame expresses a sense of personal diminishment—I deem myself less than I should be. Of course, circumstances beyond my control can influence my success in all things, so there can be mitigating factors with respect to feeling proud or ashamed. Perhaps the deck was stacked

against me, or then again, maybe it was stacked in my favor. If so, then sheer happenstance may temper my personal responsibility to some degree, for good or ill. If I have done shameful things, perhaps I should be pitied more than reviled in some cases. Without a doubt, the proper grounds for pride and shame can be complex, but when it comes to nations, the details are even more complicated. For instance, if I consider the extermination of native peoples in American history, I can't sensibly say that I bear any personal responsibility, and yet, the idea that I might still feel ashamed *as an American* makes perfect sense to me.

In this light, consider a [bill](#) recently signed by Poland's president, Andrzej Duda. The law imposes prison sentences of up to three years for claiming "publicly and contrary to the facts" that "the Polish Nation or the Republic of Poland is responsible or co-responsible for Nazi crimes committed by the Third Reich" in Poland. The Nazis murdered at least 3 million Jewish Poles during World War II, so there can be no denying that horrific, shameful deeds were perpetrated in Poland. Though death camps like Auschwitz, Treblinka, Belzec, and Sobibor operated on Polish soil, they were undeniably Nazi camps, not "Polish concentration camps."

Given these facts, one way to interpret this law, legislation advanced by the Polish nationalist populist party, Law and Justice, is to see it as an honest attempt to discourage and punish *slander* that paints Poles as complicit perpetrators, rather than victims of Nazi crimes against humanity. Thus, President Duda insists that the law means to protect the "dignity" of Poland against defamation, and if you take him at his word, why shouldn't Poles wish to preserve their good name?

Some critics of the law have just one thing to say in response: *Jedwabne*. On July 10th, 1941, many (maybe *most*) of the Jewish residents in the town of Jedwabne were executed. Historian Jan Gross chronicled the event in his [Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland](#).

The slaughter of Jedwabne Jews lasted an entire day, and it was confined to a space no bigger than a sports stadium. Sleszytowski's barn, where the majority of the pogrom victims were burned in the afternoon, was but a stone's throw from the square in the center of town. The Jewish cemetery, where many of the victims were knifed, clubbed, and stoned to death, is just across the road.

Though the town was occupied by Nazis, the executions were carried out by non-Jewish residents of the town, basically a case of one part of the populace killing the other. Germans were present, but Gross details a situation where these Nazi occupiers were merely observers, not the perpetrators of the pogrom. As he concludes, "And so everybody who was in town on this day and in possession of a sense of sight, smell, or hearing either participated in or witnessed the tormented deaths of the Jews of Jedwabne."

Poland suffered horribly in World War II, and the Poles have innumerable stories of profound humanity, heroism, and incredible endurance under Nazi oppression, stories that should rightly inspire national pride. For instance, [Witold Pilecki](#), a Polish Army officer, *voluntarily* made his way into Auschwitz to gather intelligence and to organize a resistance movement. [Jan Karski](#), a Polish resistance fighter, was smuggled *into* the Warsaw Ghetto in 1942, and after

seeing what was happening, he worked tirelessly to let the Allies know about the evils being visited on Jewish victims.

Yet as Jedwabne poignantly demonstrates, Polish hands were not entirely clean, and quite frankly, no nation could ever likely claim complete innocence in the face of anything like the Nazi occupation. Under such conditions, some degree of complicity, however begrudging, is likely to be the price of survival. For some people, a noble death can be preferable to being any part of evil, but especially for those responsible for vulnerable loved ones, the choice is seldom so simple and unequivocal. Indeed, one has only to heed the poignant words of an Auschwitz survivor like Primo Levi to appreciate the fact that survival in the death camps compelled the moral compromise of dwelling in a “gray zone” where one had to look away and remain silent about the inhumanity foisted on victims. Poland’s story is a fully human one—a story of loss, heroism, humanity, *and* inhumanity.

The Polish legislation championed by the party of Law and Justice isn’t truly about a sensible shield against shameless slander. The law is meant to prop up a mythical image of Polish innocence and glory, where the moral lines between maggots and angels are clear and absolute: Over here are the pure saints, and over there are the abject sinners. Ironically, this illusion tends to have a special power where national pride and shame are concerned. It is one thing to confess my own flaws and misdeeds, and quite another to implicate my people by drawing attention to such things, whether they be things of the past or something right here before my eyes. The powerful yearning to see one’s country as all-good is both childish and completely understandable.

The Polish lie that is this law at heart is a variation on an urge we see all around us in everyday America. We rush to deem all sorts of things and people *sacred* in the sense of admitting of no criticism or dissent. Flags, servicemen, law enforcement officers, clergy, and other souls are revered in ways that mythologize them, effectively denying their humanity in a foolish rush for some version of *inhuman* purity. This is folly and worse because by nature, the human condition is imperfection. At our very best and most beautiful, we have much to be proud about, but we should also keep in mind that Lucifer was undone by pride, the deadliest of the seven deadly sins.

We do ourselves no favors with make-believe tales that lionize us as nothing but heroes, whether we are Poles or Americans.