

# Struggle continues against negative Polish stereotypes

By **Thaddeus C. Radzilowski**

Recently an old problem has reappeared to plague Polish-Americans.

There have been repeated references to "Polish death camps" (most recently in *The Boston Globe*) to identify the camps that Nazi Germany built in Poland to carry out its genocidal policies.

It does not take away anything from the terrible fate of the Jews who comprised 90 percent of the victims at Auschwitz to note that the camp is also for Polish Christians the symbol of their national martyrdom at German hands.

Last month the Polish government petitioned UNESCO to officially name the camp the Nazi German Concentration Camp at Auschwitz to end this defamation. This request was seconded by a majority of major Jewish organizations. In their support, many of them underlined that the historical record clearly shows that Poles did not establish, maintain, operate, staff or support the camps. Last week the United Nations agreed to the change of name.

The same period saw the return of derogatory domestic images of Poles in a popular new film, "The Break Up," whose male lead is a crude, boorish, insensitive and clueless young man dressed in "Polish Pride" T-shirts, and in a *Doodles* cartoon that depicted a character named

Justin Kaminski, who receives a graduation award for excellence in "remedial studies." He is the first person to actually major in "remedial studies."

Thus, we have in short period a national airing of negative Polish stereotypes: Poles as genocidal anti-Semites and Poles as a mentally- and culturally-challenged people. The latter stereotype was, sadly, the Nazi propaganda that justified the enslavement and extermination of the Poles.

It is not necessary to list the contributions of Poles and Poland to world civilization. The record of Polish history marks it, as one noted Harvard scholar (a non-Pole and holder of an endowed chair) characterized, as "one of a handful of world-class cultures." A look at Poland's history and heroes over the last 30 years should be proof enough.

When Polish-Americans complain about these stereotypes and epithets they are told they have no sense of humor or are too sensitive, or that all ethnic groups were subjected to such humor. Our detractors usually claim to know better than we what we should feel about these insults. Finally, we are always assured no harm was intended.

Motives are really of no interest here. Put simply, to be falsely accused of mass murder (whose real authors seemed to

have been forgotten) or to be marked as a subhuman by virtue of culture or genes is painful. These stereotypes are not "good ethnic fun." They are as pernicious as those racist and anti-Semitic stereotypes that stigmatize African-Americans or Jews.

A look at our own local history illustrates what makes the "Polack" image so painful. Poles in Detroit were from the outset subjected to intense prejudice and exclusion. Until well after World War II we, along with other ill-favored ethnic groups, were restricted from moving freely into certain suburbs. There was a paucity of Polish-American women in sales positions in major department stores, and a surplus among cleaning ladies. Well into the 1960s there were only a tiny handful of Polish-American students at the University of Michigan, located less than 40 miles from hundreds of thousands of Polish-Americans. Executive Suite studies in cities with large Polish-American populations such as Detroit and Chicago in the 1970s and early 1980s showed that their representation was as low as that of African-Americans among corporate directors and executives.

Such examples could be multiplied many-fold. Let me just summarize the perceptions of contemporaries. In the 1940s the Rev. Charles Hill, a prominent

African-American and civil rights leader, publicly assured Detroit's Polish-American community that African-Americans — unlike white Detroiters — "did not consider Poles uncouth, uncultured and fit only for manual labor." In 1964 in response to a survey, about 60 percent of African-Americans, who knew about prejudice and exclusion in Detroit, identified Polish-Americans as next to themselves the people most likely to be excluded from private clubs, etc. An equal number of middle-class Protestant white Detroiters agreed.

Even if others have forgotten, it is these recent hurtful memories of discrimination and exclusion that surface for many in the Polish community when we hear those stereotypes and "jokes."

We are grateful to our friends in the Jewish community as well as others who have joined us in the struggle against bigotry. If we are to achieve the pluralistic society we seek here in Detroit and across America, the anti-Polish stereotypes must not be excluded from the prejudices we must uproot from our heart and our culture.

**Radzilowski is president of the Piast Institute, a National Institute for Polish and Polish-American Affairs in Hamtramck, and co-chairman of the National Polish American-Jewish American Council in Washington, D.C.**