

Ideas

What the US ambassador to Poland left out when he absolved Poland of Holocaust complicity

“Many Poles ... were very happy about what was happening to the Jews,” the author’s mother, a survivor, once wrote.

[Menachem Z. Rosensaft](#) November 21, 2025



Polish Chief Rabbi Michael Schudrich, second from right in blue tie, speaks next to Catholic clergymen at the Jedwabne commemoration ceremony, July 11, 2021. (Krzysztof Bielawski)

Lost in Thursday’s kerfuffle over whether the U.S. Coast Guard would no longer consider the swastika as a symbol of hate was a far more troubling development in antisemitism. The new U.S. ambassador to Poland, Thomas Rose, delivered a speech in which he absolves Poland, and by extension, the Polish people, of any responsibility whatsoever for the Holocaust.

This is a distortion that cannot be allowed to go unchallenged or unrefuted.

Addressing a conference on antisemitism in Warsaw organized by the International Association of Jewish Lawyers and Jurists, Rose declared categorically that Poland “has been burdened with the moral stain that was never its own, the persistent belief that Poland shares guilt for the barbaric crimes committed against it,” adding, for good measure, “It’s a grotesque falsehood and the equivalent of a blood libel against the Polish people and Polish nation.”

The reality is far more complex and far more nuanced than the simplistic and sanitized one-sided image put forward by Rose. While Poles and Poland did not perpetrate the Holocaust, those Poles who assisted the Germans in doing so must not be whitewashed out of history.

I do not write as a disinterested observer. My parents were Polish Jews who were incarcerated in the ghettos of their respective hometowns, Będzin and Sosnowiec, and then deported to Auschwitz, also in Poland, where virtually their entire families were murdered. In her memoir, my mother recalled that there were Poles and ethnic Germans (Volksdeutsche) who behaved altruistically and decently. “Many Poles, however,” she added pointedly, “were very happy about what was happening to the Jews.”

To be sure, as Rose correctly pointed out, “thousands of Poles died saving Jews.” He neglected to mention, however, that thousands of other Poles callously betrayed their Jewish compatriots and neighbors to the Germans or murdered them outright.

A basic history lesson, or at the very least a review of the relevant bidding, is in order.

It is true that the machinery for the implementation of the Nazi “Final Solution of the Jewish Question” was established by Germans – not Poles – in German-occupied Poland at places such as Auschwitz-Birkenau, Treblinka, and Majdanek. It is also true that more than 7,000 non-Jewish Poles — more than from any other Nazi-occupied country – have been recognized by Yad Vashem in Israel as Righteous Among the Nations, that is, men and women who risked or gave their lives to rescue or help Jews.

What Rose seems to overlook, however, is that these heroic and altruistic individuals made up an extremely small minority of the overall Polish population, probably around a quarter of 1%. In addition, the bravery and sacrifice of many other Christian Poles who hid or otherwise tried to save Jews were never formally recognized. Still, as the late historian Yehuda Bauer once

noted caustically, “Even if we assume that the real figure [of righteous Poles] is 200,000, out of 21 million Poles, that’s only 1%. What about the other 99%?”

At the same time, let’s not lose sight — as Rose evidently did — of the many thousands of Poles who voluntarily and often quite viciously assisted the Germans in carrying out the annihilation of Polish Jewry by enthusiastically denouncing hidden Jews or handing them over to the Gestapo. Others blackmailed such hidden Jews, thereby making a horrific situation exponentially worse. Others still profiteered callously from the removal of Jews to ghettos and their deportation to death and concentration camps. And there is nothing “historically false and morally scandalous,” to use Rose’s own words, in recalling that there were in fact Poles who killed tens of thousands of Jews, perhaps as many as hundreds of thousands, during the years of the Holocaust.

According to historians Barbara Engelking and Jan Grabowski in their groundbreaking work, “Night without End: The Fate of Jews in German-Occupied Poland,” two-thirds of the Jews who hid in the nine regions in Poland covered by this particular study did not survive World War II, either because they were killed by Poles, or because Poles handed them over to the Germans who proceeded to kill them. Elsewhere, Grabowski estimated that as many as 200,000 Jews were killed in Poland during the war by Poles, not Germans. Rose made no mention of these statistics.

Rose also seems to ignore — or may be unaware of — the thousands of members of the Polish police, known as the “Blue Police” because of the color of their uniforms, who assisted the Germans in rounding up Jews, often roused Jews out of their hiding places, and stole Jewish property as perks of their job. “In the eyes of the Polish policemen, the Jews, or rather their goods, were a prized catch – not only during the Judenjagt [hunt for Jews] stage of the “Final Solution,” but even before, from the earliest months of the occupation when new German regulations marked Jews as people without rights,” Grabowski wrote in his book “Hunt for the Jews: Betrayal and Murder in German-Occupied Poland.”

And then there were the szmalcowniks, the extortionists and blackmailers who preyed on Jews hiding outside ghetto walls. They added considerably to the terror confronted daily by those Polish Jews who had managed to avoid deportation to the death camps.

A further highlight in the litany of things Rose chose not to mention in his speech was the horrific 1941 slaughter of hundreds of Jews by Poles in the

eastern Polish town of Jedwabne. And then there was the post-war 1946 pogrom in the city of Kielce in which a Polish mob killed 46 Jews who had managed to survive the Holocaust.

I am not suggesting that Poland or the Polish people should be tarred or stigmatized by the Poles who took part in the persecution and murder of Jews during, and even after, the Holocaust. But neither should the nefarious roles of these Poles be glossed over or overlooked altogether: They are every bit as much a critically important part of the historical record as the Polish Righteous Among the Nations.

Ambassador Rose was of course 100% on target when he said that the thousands of Polish Righteous Among the Nations “proved that even in their country’s bleakest night, multitudes of Poles chose conscience over fear and humanity over terror.” What he should not have done, however, and what neither he nor anyone else should do in the future, is distort Holocaust history and Holocaust memory by turning a blind eye to the dark legacy of those thousands of Poles who did the exact opposite.

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