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## POLISH LEAGUE AGAINST DEFAMATION

11/8 Chmielna Street, 00-021 Warsaw, Poland  
www.rdi-plad.org

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### In defence of Polish academics

The letter was to draw attention to what Jan Grabowski has been doing with his selective and doubtful research findings in his publishing, part of that research has been challenged by historian Bohdan Piętko in “Zeszyty Oświęcimskie 26/2010” issued by the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum. Grabowski has never responded, so academic freedom couldn’t have a place. But here he is, using his authority as a scholar in such newspapers as *El Pais*, *The Washington Post*, *Haaretz*, and *The Times of Israel*, to support rhetoric which is not only unfavourable to Poland, but also, if not primarily, deeply prejudiced and unfair.

This rhetoric, so heavily emphasised in global media, focuses on portraying Poles as driven by their primitive instincts and burning with hatred towards their Jewish neighbours. And it is only because of this primitive and barbarian nature that they did not commit even greater crimes than the well-organised “Nazis”, who were simply infected with the virus of an insane ideology.

The Polish League Against Defamation has documented a number of examples of such rhetoric in relation to the Holocaust.

Among others:

„One of the significant findings of my research was the surprising degree of own agency among Polish policemen, who killed Jews on their own, without any direct German involvement - and often without the knowledge of the Germans” Grabowski for *Haaretz*.

„Significant findings”, “surprising degree”, “often” - these are other words, which help Jan Grabowski create an illusion of a limitless scale, at the same time avoiding specific, not estimated numbers, what is even better depicted in his thesis published in *El Pais*.

„Cazas de judíos En Caza de judíos, el historiador asentado en Canadá se basa en documentos de diferentes archivos que recogen procesos en los que se juzgaron casos de crímenes antisemitas durante la ocupación, perpetrados por ciudadanos polacos. Narra también lo que se conoció como Juden-jagd, o Cazas de judíos, cometidas casi siempre por polacos, en las que participaron desde bomberos hasta campesinos. Según Grabowski, fueron asesinados así más de 200.000 judíos.”

„More” than 200.000 Jews were killed by Poles, Grabowski makes accusations without any responsibility for his words. Most likely he tries to behave like his idol, Jan Tomasz Gross who stated in his book *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne* “one day, in July 1941, half of the population of a small East European town murdered the other half - some 1,600 men, women and children.” Those revelations met with applause of the global public opinion starting crusade against Poles, but as later investigation has shown, number given in accordance with „the highest standards of academic research” was groundless. Moreover, Alexander B. Rossino, a research historian at the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. wrote: “while *Neighbors* contributed to an ongoing re-examination of the history of the Holocaust in Poland, Gross' failure to examine German documentary sources fundamentally flawed

his depiction of the events. The result was a skewed history that did not investigate SS operations in the region or German interaction with the Polish population."

This myth is reinforced not only by J.T. Gross, whose credibility as a scholar has been questioned by Polish and international historians, but also by Professor Barbara Engelking, who signed the letter defending J. Grabowski, and who expressed her attitude to Poles in the following racist words "*for Poles, death(...) was just a biological matter, something natural, death was just death, but for Jews this was a tragedy, a traumatic experience, something metaphysical, standing face to face with the supreme, or whatever their attitude to death was*".

This rhetoric, which expresses obvious anti-Polonism, is now an unwritten, prevailing, norm, a fashionable thing to say in discussions about the Holocaust. It is difficult for the alternative, boring, known and documented, yet less-spectacular account to show. Examples? The rather poor "*Pokłosie*" (*Aftermath*) is widely known, while "*Azyl*" (*The Zookeeper's Wife*), not an inferior film, with a star-studded cast, not necessarily so. This is because "*Azyl*" was not allowed to be released in France and Germany — its message does not match the portrayal of Poles as barbarians who were only waiting for an opportunity to kill, and take over the property of, their Jewish neighbours.

This approach is further developed to portray contemporary patriots as primitive, xenophobic, anti-Semitic, and waiting to hurt "refugees", just as they used to wait for an opportunity to attack Jews.

Regardless of signatories' field of study, all scholars are required to comply with standards concerning the publication of their research findings and the responsibility for their interpretation. Indeed, this is part of their professional ethics, which is based on the pursuit of truth, whose motivations go beyond the current economic situation, personal considerations, and social sentiments and pressures.

The letter cites some historical facts to which the readers of *El Pais*, *The Washington Post*, *Haaretz* or *The Times of Israel* would be left oblivious. It is safe to assume that we believe that a Polish professor of nuclear physics knows more about Polish history than a broker in Ottawa who reads Grabowski's texts during lunchtime. And, as a representative of the elite, he/she is morally required to respond to any such attack on the community he/she is a member of, and whose intellectual elite he/she represents.

Claims about Poles' own fault and "the not-so-obvious truth" sell well. In the so-called post-truth era, such claims are popular and sought-after. It is easy for those who make such claims in journalism, culture, or even science, to find support in countries which bear the actual (not metaphysical) responsibility for the Holocaust, and that want to lay at least some blame on others, to blur the distinction between the oppressor and the victim, and to distort the past.

Refusal to accept such an approach is by no means an attempt to evade being held accountable for the past, or to deny the blame.

Polish League Against Defamation