"Black and White Righteous." ***Krytyka Polityczna*****, 2.11.2014**

http://www.krytykapolityczna.pl/artykuly/historia/20140211/lehrer-czarno-biali-sprawiedliwi

[English original]

As someone who has written about and undertaken experimental curating around issues of Polish-Jewish memory, I wanted to share my thoughts about the current exhibit on at the Krakow Historical Museum's Oscar Schindler Factory: *The Righteous honoured in Krakow. Motives, attitudes, message.*

The present exhibit, it strikes me, is more a monument than an exhibition worthy of an historical museum. A monument to Polish Righteous is an extremely important initiative – and one is indeed being planned. But history museums should be tools for teaching – and for honing our moral acuity – through a confrontation with life's complexities. This very often requires that they go against, rather than comfortably along the grain, of our inclinations.

The exhibit's English-language introductory text suggests (citing scholar Jacek Leociak's words) that the exhibit is "About a meeting of a human with a human. About looking at each other's eyes. And about the dilemma which meant something else for both parties." Yet few of the actual dilemmas of saving Jews – and none of the divergence in meaning of this experience for the two parties – were elucidated in the gallery space. Instead, the exhibit is governed by an implicitly national, apologetic ambiance.

The wall-sized lists of names – one for the righteous, and one for those Jews saved – employ a classic memorial trope. But here the design choice also suggests equivalence – as if Jewish targets were met by Polish heroes, 1:1. Apropos, the proposed number of 10,000 Krakow Jews who survived the war is nowhere explicated or substantiated – and in this context it is easily misread as the number who were saved. The portraits of righteous individuals hang like proud flags, but the broader social and psychological contexts of their deeds – with all the hellish choices and challenges involved – have been largely cleansed away. (The overall commemorative, rather than interrogative atmosphere is not disrupted by the inclusion, on the single black wall, of a large Nazi poster criminalizing aid to Jews, and a small letter threatening denunciation sent by a Polish neighbor).

Let us imagine a different kind of exhibit, one that productively unsettles cherished mythologies, making us vulnerable to entirely new views. It might trace the story of a single instance of rescue, from the perspective of both rescuers and those rescued. Such an approach would offer diverse visitors multiple points of entry into this history, rather than only through a Polish national framework. This would provide the distance necessary for inquiry into difficult questions regarding: *Motivations* (Why did even some anti-Semites risk their lives to save a Jew?); *Risks* (Why were rescuers afraid of their own neighbors during the war? And even after?); *Logistics* (How was food obtained for those in hiding? Who paid for it? What happened when the money ran out?); *Rewards* (What kinds of relations and sentiments prevailed after the war between saviors and saved? Who petitioned Yad Vashem for "righteous" status after the war? How was that status determined?); *Consequences* (How did saving or being saved influence people's sense of ethnic, national, political, and personal identity?). Knowing the range of answers to these questions makes heroism all the more heroic - and more human.

When I saw a group of high school students standing in the exhibit between the single black (evil) and the mostly white (good) walls, I thought: this is a lost opportunity. Young adults should be presented with life's grey areas, the difficult questions that previous generations had to grapple with, in whose

wake they will be making their own lives and their own choices. We owe it to them to reveal life's ubiquitous grey areas – to give them actual history – rather than simplistic self-assurances affirming that our own imagined communities "passed the exam" (as the title of the museum's recent panel discussion connected to the exhibit framed the issue).

Flipping through the museum's comment book, the consequences of such simplicity are visible in the many visitor platitudes about feeling re-assured by this exhibit that goodness prevails. Indeed, one comment suggested the dangers of a self-celebratory, patriotic approach to a complex history, demanding that rare, individual deeds be repaid with collective obeisance. It reads:

"Where were and are those rescued Jews? Why don't they testify to the world about their fates, why don't they defend the good name of Poles?"

Righteous Among the Nations should be ever honored, and their examples should inspire. But especially in this moment of impressive, important museum growth and experimentation in Poland, let us think about how to create exhibits that highlight the tensions between history and memory, how the former can enrich the latter, and how the latter is an ever-present threat to the former. Let us consider the value of learning from grey.

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