

Institute of National Remembrance

<https://ipn.gov.pl/en/news/1705,The-screening-of-quotPassports-to-Paraguay-at-the-Polish-Embassy-in-Washington.html>

19.04.2024, 21:03

20.03.2019

The screening of "Passports to Paraguay" at the Polish Embassy in Washington







On 19 March 2019, Dr Mateusz Szpytma, Deputy President of the IPN took part in the official screening of the film “Passports to Paraguay”, produced by the Institute of National Remembrance, which took place at the Polish Embassy in Washington. The film, directed by Robert Kaczmarek, presents events concerning the participation of Polish diplomacy in rescuing Jews during World War II. In the years 1942—1943, an informal group of Polish diplomats and activists of Jewish organizations worked together to obtain passports of South American countries for Jewish people imprisoned in ghettos by the Nazi German occupants of Poland and other European countries.

Thanks to these documents, many Jews avoided deportation to German death camps. The holders of such passports were instead sent to internment camps in Germany and to occupied France.

Unfortunately, not many of the people saved thanks to the Polish diplomats survived the war and it is often the case that families of the

survivors only now find out to whom their relatives owed their lives.

After the screening, Deputy President of the Institute of National Remembrance gave a speech devoted to Poles who saved Jews, which is attached below. Dr Szpytma said: "The Polish underground state and government-in-exile made a great effort to support activities aimed at helping Jewish citizens threatened by extermination."

The screening of the film at the Polish Embassy in Washington was preceded by an introductory speech by Ambassador Piotr Wilczek. Sara Bloomfield, the Director of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum also participated in the event.

After the presentation of "Passports to Paraguay" Maciej Lang, the Deputy Minister of foreign affairs said: "These loyal and experienced diplomats rose to the occasion, and acted accordingly." Minister Lang added: "The risk to each was very personal, each actor risked his own life and freedom and that of his family."

After the film, a panel was held with the participation of the Polish ambassador to Washington, Piotr Wilczek, Polish Ambassador to Switzerland Jakub Kumoch, and Marion Lewin a Holocaust survivor.

Your Excellency, Mr. Ambassador - our Host this evening, Minister Lang, Your Excellency Polish Ambassador to the Swiss Confederation, Ms. Sara Bloomfield, Director of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, Ms. Marion Ein Lewin, and all Distinguished Guests,

In my speech I am not going to talk about the IPN's movie itself (the discussion panel being devoted to it), nor am I going to talk about the activities of my institution. Please allow me to outline the most important aspects of the situation in which Poland found itself during the Second World War and the Holocaust, which was the most atrocious crime of this conflict. I will also touch upon matters of a more general nature which were, however, of particular importance at the time, and are also significant for understanding the activities of Polish diplomats and their Jewish co-workers portrayed in the movie.

At the same time, I would like to offer a few words of explanation to those who may think that I am talking about very obvious matters. It has been almost 80 years since the outbreak of the Second World War. With the passage of time we are dealing more and more with the lack of public understanding of the reality which prevailed at the time, leading to frequent distortions of the subject, especially by the media.

1.

The Holocaust was a state-organized endeavour. The state authorities of the German Reich were the initiator and organizer of the mass murder of the Jewish nation. The state used all its resources to completely eradicate the Jewish population. These activities were carried out under the protection of the laws adopted by the Reich, which were also imposed on the citizens of conquered states.

2.

The German military police and various auxiliary formations created by the Reich were the primary tools of the entire criminal system. In occupied territories, the German state tried to prevent aid for the Jewish population by means of criminal laws. At the same time, it favoured the members of conquered nations who were ready to support the Reich's criminal activities against their fellow citizens for their own benefit.

3.

The Republic of Poland was the first country to defend itself against the German Reich. It was the first country in the world to refuse to submit to the demands of Adolf Hitler. It was the first to mount armed resistance in defence of the right of its citizens - including those of Jewish nationality - to freedom and independence.

4.

Poland, under German occupation since September 1939, never surrendered to the Germans, unlike such countries as France; during the whole war it was an Allied state participating in the fight against Germany. The Republic of Poland did not take part in any form of collaboration with the German Reich. In contrast to the countries that cooperated with the Reich, Poland did not at any point take part in the implementation of German crimes.

5.

The Polish underground state and government-in-exile made a great effort to support activities aimed at helping Jewish citizens threatened by extermination. They provided logistical, personal and financial support to the structures created in the underground that provided help to persecuted Jews. Such help often put the lives of the conspirators at risk. The Polish underground state and government-in-exile also undertook activities in which they put their efforts to save Jews above the rules of diplomacy.

6.

The Republic of Poland made a great effort to convince the world about the scale of the crimes committed by Germany by transferring information and witness accounts to the Allied camp. Poland helped inspire the activities of the international community to stop German crimes on the Jewish nation.

7.

The tragedy of the Republic of Poland was its inability to provide security for its citizens subjected to German cruelty and Soviet occupation. Apart from Jews - who were Polish citizens - millions of ethnic Poles became victims of German occupation.

8.

Each individual decision to support the Germans in their activities against the life and health of citizens of the Republic of Poland, of Polish, Jewish and other nationalities, meant treason against the Homeland. The authorities of the Republic of Poland (including the structures of the Polish Underground State) denounced German collaborators. They issued death sentences where possible, and unequivocally announced in public that any form of complicity in the crimes of the German Reich would be punished.

9.

Today, the Republic of Poland, as the legal heir of a state struggling for independence during the war, considers it its duty to preserve the memory of innocent Jewish and Polish citizens murdered during those inhuman times.

Aware of all these facts, the Institute of National Remembrance is trying to examine various aspects of German occupation and the various attitudes of Polish citizens, the noble ones portrayed in the movie as well as the vile ones which also existed. Only the truth is of interest. Thank you for your attention.

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