

Institute of National Remembrance

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Our daily arduous work translates into building historical awareness and local communities of memory - Michał Karnowski's interview with Jarosław Szarek, Ph.D., President of the Institute of National Remembrance

"I remain responsible for this decision. Nevertheless, I cannot agree to the accompanying lies, attempts to stigmatize all of the Institute's employees and the entire institution, which arduously and efficiently works for Poland"



Our readers are familiar with both your personal academic achievements and the books authored by you. We also follow the activities of the Institute of National Remembrance and are fully aware of its continuous fight for the truth about Poland's history. The IPN has nothing to do with any totalitarian ideologies, on the contrary - it lays bare their terrible effects. Following the appointment of Tomasz Greniuch, Ph.D. as the acting director of the IPN's Wrocław Branch, and subsequent media interest, there have appeared accusations of the IPN employing people formerly associated with the National Radical Camp (ONR), and even those whose gestures might suggest fascist sympathies. What would you say went wrong?

The withdrawal from the proposal to nominate Tomasz Greniuch, Ph.D.,

and accepting his resignation, is my way of admitting a mistake had been made. Newly-acquired knowledge of the employee's former conduct led me to the decision to discontinue further cooperation with T. Greniuch, Ph.D. His recently disclosed public activity is contrary to the mission and values of the Institute of National Remembrance.

What was the decisive factor in discontinuing further cooperation with Tomasz Greniuch? Was it media pressure, newly acquired information or rather statements formulated by the most important persons in Poland or finally your reluctance to engage in a dispute which might lead to an image crisis?

Today, I can say that my newly-acquired knowledge constituted the decisive factor. Tomasz Greniuch started working for the IPN's Office of Search and Identification in 2018. The recruitment process at the Institute is ruled by strictly defined criteria. The candidate is assessed on the basis of their qualifications as presented in the provided CV. Before the new facts were revealed, I believed that on the one hand we have photos as presented by the media, and on the other, a specific man with a story of personal transformation. Any discussion in this situation is out of the question. These forces are able to destroy anyone, changing the timeline and making any form of defense impossible. I opted for the human approach.

When you look back, do you have the feeling that you made a mistake? What was the motivation behind Tomasz Greniuch's promotion?

It was his diligent work and remarkably good results. Tomasz Greniuch, Ph.D., started working at the Institute three years ago. A year and a half ago, he became the acting head of the IPN's Opole sub-branch, and in January 2020 its head. Even then, there was a discussion about him, also in the media. Nobody seemed to be hiding anything.

Apparently, Tomasz Greniuch's time in Opole was a test for him. Did anything concerning take place during that time?

No. After all, his election at that time was also accepted by the IPN's Council. During this period, the activities of the sub-branch received great praise on the part of both the media and our partner institutions. He turned the Opole sub-branch into one of the IPN's most outstanding organizational units. The fact that he initiated wide-scale cooperation with various institutions, schools, the local government, scouts and other communities was of particular significance for us as it was part of the IPN's mission. We want to help people to discover and strengthen common elements in the fate of Poles as individuals and as a community. For instance, it was thanks to his efforts and initiative that the memory of the Second Silesian Uprising in the Opole region was revived. It was his cooperation with the local government that convinced the President of Opole to entrust the IPN with the premises for its "History Point" educational center, its vigorous activities being unfortunately restricted by today's epidemic situation.

Why did you decide to transfer Tomasz Greniuch to Wrocław?

I expected Tomasz Greniuch's work to have the same impact on the

functioning of the IPN's Wrocław branch. It turned out, however, that this provoked a heated discussion about Tomasz Greniuch's past. Facts from his recent past which were previously unknown to us, and which I do not accept. For the sake of the good name of the Institute of National Remembrance, I decided to put an end to the situation.

Yes, but on the other hand, we all know how thin this ice is, how sensitive these spheres are.

Therefore, I remain responsible for this decision. Nevertheless, I cannot agree to the accompanying lies, attempts to stigmatize all of the Institute's employees and the entire institution. We work every day, we have not limited our activity for a moment. An example from the last days is the commemoration of the forgotten strike of Łódź women working in the textile industry in 1971, the registration of the Independent Students' Association, restoring the significance of the Rzeszów-Ustrzyki Agreements of 1981, which constituted an important step in the process of establishing "Solidarity" of Individual Farmers. These are not merely commemorations. The IPN's activities always include publications, educational materials, conferences and other signs of memory. These are dozens, hundreds of initiatives that we tend not to hear about in the media but which do strengthen local communities. We feel that these are often the last moments to describe, research, document and popularize important historical events in the lives of those communities.

.The methods, however, have to be completely different than in the past. Has the epidemic affected the Institute of National

Remembrance?

Unfortunately, we had to transfer a significant part of our activity to the Internet. It is a pity, because direct meetings of witnesses of history with younger generations, and seeing specific historical sites with one's own eyes are priceless. Building the community without direct contacts via the Internet is very difficult.

I would also like to remind you that we have liquidated the so-called classified collection within the IPN's archives. This seemed impossible for a long time.

We have improved access to the archive for researchers. Foreign cooperation is also flourishing, although unfortunately certain inevitable conflicts come to the fore. As with Ukraine, where the search for burial sites on Ukrainian territory is still blocked for Poles due to political reasons, and yet we are able to obtain copies of documents which are invaluable for us. We have received about 700,000 scans on the fate of Poles in the former Soviet Union in the 1930s.

On top of this, we have got a huge amount of work aimed at commemorating and describing the Polish pro-independence underground after 1944.

Some went on from criticizing you personally to postulating the liquidation of the Institute of National Remembrance. This is, after all, part of the programme of the main opposition party in Poland. Where does this reluctance come from?

The National Day of Remembrance of the Accursed Soldiers is ahead of us. Regretfully, hardly anyone remembers the great contribution of the late President Lech Kaczyński and the late Janusz Kurtyka to the establishment of this day. How many heroes have entered the national Pantheon? On this occasion, for three years now, we have been unveiling new areas such as the accursed youth and over a thousand anti-communist youth organizations, a division of teenagers from the turn of the 1940s and 1950s. We commemorate them by placing plaques in their former schools. This is accompanied by the exhibition "Forgotten Link". This campaign has been very well received by their contemporary peers and teachers. Sometimes our actions are met with distrust, and then, however, follows a fascination with a hitherto unknown episode in Polish history. How much did this change the way Poles think about communist Poland, the communist party and the whole system? Also young Poles. Are you surprised that so many people regard it as a problem?

Are any of these events surrounding the IPN politically motivated?

I think so. In July my term of office as the President of the IPN expires, which may be the reason for various attacks.

Do you plan to apply for another term?

Everything will have been known by 19 March, when the application deadline expires.

And as far as politics is concerned, let me give you the latest example,

on Facebook people interested in seizing power at the IPN are exchanging ideas on how to dismiss me before the end of my term.

What were the suggestions?

Instructions on how to do it, because Szarek "deserves to leave his post in disgrace."

So looking for dirt on you and provocations?

And calling me a "fascist". Such behaviour has a long tradition in Poland.

This was what the communists used to call anyone who opposed them.

Exactly. But I will say this: I can leave my post in disgrace. I did not take this post for fame, and unfortunately the media have the power of defaming people. I may not work for the Institute, but in no way will this undermine the achievements of my presidency.

For example, the revolutionary changes in the IPN's archival inventory, the database of the victims of the Volhynian massacre, the "Archive Full of Remembrance" project, which has resulted in obtaining nearly 2,000 priceless collections, or the creation of the largest historical publishing house in Poland specializing in books on the 20th century, hundreds of projects on the centenary of events from the period 1918-1921, intensifying research on the security services, including the publication of the first volume of the "Security Services Lexicon". In

a few weeks, the readers will receive the next updated issue of the "Apparatus of repression ...".

After seven years, new volumes of the "Encyclopedia of Solidarity" and "Poland-Ukraine in the 30-40s of the Twentieth Century" have been published. We have also edited eight volumes of the "Dictionary of Resistance ..." . Moreover, "They stayed in the East. Dictionary of the Polish Intelligentsia in the USSR 1945–1991 " is about to be launched.

The publication "Pro Memoria" devoted to Primate Stefan Wyszyński, subsequent volumes of the new series "Literature and Memory", nearly 70 brochures within the "Heroes of Independent Poland" series regularly appear.

The initiated research on difficult Polish-Jewish relations materialized, inter alia, in publishing a new "Polish-Jewish Studies" periodical, thus hindering the monopoly of certain academic circles.

...which is edited under the supervision of Mateusz Szpytma, Ph.D. We have published an interview with him on the subject on the wPolityce.pl portal. As he put it "even for the experts in the field the scale of aid offered by Polish diplomatic missions during World War II is astonishing".

I am very hopeful as to the success of this periodical. There is also a need for a broad debate, because some works on this subject were burdened with substantial errors, sometimes even falsifications of source materials and quotations from documents.

The 3rd issue of the "Institute of National Remembrance Review" is about to be published. Intensive research on the terror of occupation is constantly being carried out.

The educational division has also got impressive achievements, one of them being the establishment of the 8 Strzelecka Street Educational Center located in the former NKVD detention center in Warsaw's Praga district. A series of educational materials for teachers and students, several dozen elementary exhibitions on the most important events in Polish history, the establishment of the History Point educational centers from Daugavpils, Zhytomyr, to Chicago and New York, and "The Passports to Paraguay" film production are also worth mentioning.

The latter film, directed by Robert Kaczmarek, describing the activities of Polish diplomats aimed at saving Jews, is screened in various parts of the world and received enthusiastically.

That's true. And we keep receiving further requests for screenings.

An important field of our activity is the search for our heroes in dozens of places in Poland and abroad. The number of commemorations is also impressive. Continuous restoration of the memory of people or events for example "The Pomeranian Crime" or "Polish Operation 1937-1938" constitutes yet another important part of our work. We have managed to obtain over 700,000 documents relating to this genocide from our partners in Ukraine.

Our presence on the Internet is marked by new portals, the Internet "History Point", and social media accounts also in English.

Last but not least, we have established the “Semper Fidelis” Prize. And the list could go on.

Our daily arduous work translates into building historical awareness and local communities of memory. We have been planning ahead activities not only for next year, but for the next several years. There is a lot of work ahead of us, because the scale of lies about Polish history is still substantial, especially in relation to the years 1939-1945.

What is the reason behind this? Does it entail reinterpreting the course of World War II?

Yes, but not only that. After all, our historical research, facts, and truth are received with reluctance, also when they concern the Polish-Bolshevik war, the great victory of 1920, and the role of St. John Paul II. It is worth mentioning here that in the spring of this year we intend to publish a pioneering book on the activities of the KGB against St. John Paul II, and the heritage of "Solidarity" in 1980. In fact, this story is seen through the eyes of the cultural war which is taking place in the modern world. The problem lies in the values that Poland has always defended. Our history, the truth about our fate are being attacked, but these values are the real target. They allowed Poles to survive the most difficult moments during the partitions of Poland, and then the atrocities of World War II, and later the communist period. They constitute our strength. But does everyone want us to be strong? No. Does everyone want these values to be borne by the next generations? No. If the historical lie wins, will Poland be stronger or weaker? Should our country be built by free and independent people aware of their

heritage or by hedonists? And this is how these attacks should be interpreted.

In addition, old communism meets new.

Exactly. Here we also touch upon the issue of new elites. Communism murdered and eliminated them, forming new elites in their place. This is the legacy we face today. Again, we, and the whole world, are offered various mutations of Marxism. But we in Poland do know how totalitarianisms are born. Beautiful slogans about a brave new world are in the end turned into some “re-educational camps”. Not only does the IPN defend historical truth, but it also passes it on to young people who will become independent elites. This is why the Institute is under such an intense attack.

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