

# HEROES

## OF THE TERRACES

FOOTBALL, ANTI-FASCISM & PROTEST



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# NEVER AGAIN

**The Never Again Association is a unique and brave organisation battling hatred, hooliganism, antisemitism and homophobia in and around Poland's 'beautiful game'.**

**By MICHAEL COLE**

THE NOTORIOUS Krakow derby, known locally as "The Holy War", was rapidly approaching. Wisła Krakow were struggling in the league and in real danger of going down. Their less-decorated city rivals, Cracovia on the other hand, finally had a decent shout of bringing home some silverware after a promising cup run. It was shaping up to be a battle to remember.

Ticket safely secured in advance, I wandered through the streets surrounding Wisła's Henryk Reyman Stadium a few days before the game. The sense of anticipation in the city was clearly building. You could read it on the walls. "Derby Blisko, Tylko Wisła!" ("The Derby is Near: Only Wisła!") sprayed in blue paint beside a hairdressing salon, "Wierność Wiśle" ("Allegiance to Wisła") on the corner by the bakery. But then, there it was, in huge letters by the convenience store for all to see: the words "Anty Jude", accompanied by a Star of David with a line drawn through it.

Polish football has a long and troublesome history of antisemitic incidents, and what I saw on that wall in Krakow was just the tip of the iceberg. The more I read about the topic, and discussed it with colleagues and friends, the more I heard the same old stories.

"One of Cracovia's ultras groups is called the 'Jude Gang', so it's not really about Jewish people, it's just Wisła fans insulting their rivals," was the most common explanation. It wasn't so much the unfiltered hatred from Poland's hardcore fans that surprised me. I'd been warned about their fearsome reputation long before moving to Krakow. Instead, what struck me most was the general acceptance that blatant antisemitism was somehow a normal part of supporting a football club.

I guess it was only a matter of time before my investigation led me to Dr Rafał Pankowski at the Warsaw-based Never Again Association. I'd first encountered Never Again years earlier after seeing the BBC Documentary 'Stadiums of Hate' in the build-up to Poland and Ukraine's co-hosting of Euro 2012. As fears grew that the tournament would be marred by hatred and violence, Never Again played a leading role alongside UEFA and FARE (Football Against Racism in Europe) in the Respect Diversity Campaign, a series of much-needed initiatives aimed at kicking racism and other forms of discrimination out of Polish and Ukrainian football stadiums. I knew that if anyone could shed light on the issue, it would be them.

Anti-racism action organised by FARE's partner organisation Never Again in Poland, at this Ekstraklasa match between Lech Poznan and Korona Kielce. Photo: FARE network



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*Nine years on, as we gear up for the delayed opening of Euro 2020, that summer of 2012 already seems like a lifetime ago.*

”

**NEVER AGAIN**

It's clear that Dr Pankowski is extremely proud of Never Again's achievements during Euro 2012. Other than a few well-documented incidents involving the far right, when it came to equality and tolerance, the tournament was an overwhelming success. The high point was surely the semi-finals in Warsaw and Donetsk, when the captains of Spain, Italy, Portugal and Germany read out anti-discrimination statements co-written by Never Again, UEFA and FARE before kick-off. Seeing the likes of Cristiano Ronaldo and Iker Casillas present the very messages the organisation had worked so hard to promote to the entire world, was undoubtedly a special moment.

Nine years on, as we gear up for the delayed opening of Euro 2020, that summer of 2012 already seems like a lifetime ago. Hopes that the tournament's true legacy would seed an increased sense of societal tolerance and understanding in Poland, have long since given way to an atmosphere of hatred and fear stoked by the ascendancy of nationalism and right-wing populist politics. It seems that now, in this divisive political environment, where homophobic and antisemitic tropes regularly find their way into mainstream debate, Never Again's commitment to stamping out all forms of discrimination is needed more than ever.

In an initiative started by the organisation's founder, the late Marcin Kornak, Never Again continues to meticulously document and publish incidences of hate speech and violence occurring throughout Poland. While many of the examples listed do relate directly to football, what the 'Brown Book' really underlines is that the "Anty-Jude" graffiti I witnessed in Krakow is just a drop in the ocean. In this kind of climate, it's hardly surprising that those holding extreme views feel ever more emboldened to express them in public places.

**RACISM RETURNS**

In July 2020, following months of football played behind closed doors due to COVID-19 restrictions, it was not only supporters that returned to Poland's stadiums, but racism too. While English Premier League viewers were becoming familiar with the sight of players taking the knee before games in support of Black Lives Matter, Lechia Gdansk fans unveiled a banner in support of Janusz Walus, a Polish national currently serving a life sentence in South Africa for the racist murder of anti-apartheid politician Chris Hani.

Walus has become something of a cult figure for Polish ultras in recent years, with banners and scarves bearing his likeness increasingly commonplace in stadiums and for sale online. Faced with indifference from the Polish football authorities, it was left to Never Again activists to draw attention to supporters' growing admiration of Walus, eventually leading to those scarves and banners being removed from online auction platforms.

It's been more than a year since I walked the streets of Krakow ahead of that hotly anticipated local derby, and almost as long since I first got in touch with Dr Rafal Pankowski at the Never Again Association. Since then I've found myself more and more involved with Never Again's activities.



Lviv soccer fans at a game vs. Donetsk. The banner reads "Bandera – our hero" Photo: Pavlo Friend



Resovia Rzeszow fans display an antisemitic banner during a match against local rivals Stala Rzeszow

Still, reading through each fresh example of racist, antisemitic or homophobic ignorance and violence in the 'Brown Book' underlines the enormous challenges faced by Never Again. Not least because a considerable amount of that abuse is directed squarely at the Association itself, simply for having the gall to stand up for tolerance and respect.

Given the circumstances, it occurs to me how easy it would be to consider throwing in the towel and conceding defeat. But when it comes to Never Again, that's the last thing on anyone's mind. Whether it's new initiatives aimed at combatting discrimination in Polish football, or cooperating with Poland's largest advertising platform to remove racist and antisemitic products from online auctions, Never Again continues to do whatever it can to fight back against intolerance and hatred.

"Football can bring people together like no other sport no matter their religious, social or ethnic background," said Cristiano Ronaldo before Portugal faced Spain nine years ago during Euro 2012 on a long summer night in Donetsk. And while a lot has changed in the world since then, it's those words that still epitomise the goal 'Never Again' continues to strive towards to this day, both in football stadiums and beyond.

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