

# Auschwitz survivor inspires many, but others find fault

AP



By VANESSA GERA

January 29, 2020

WARSAW, Poland (AP) — An Auschwitz survivor’s warning about indifference to discrimination is reverberating strongly in his native Poland, with some people praising the 93-year-old’s World War II anniversary speech as wise but others criticizing it as overtly political.

Marian Turski was one of the keynote speakers during observances held Monday to mark the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. He addressed an international audience of world leaders and about 200 other survivors of the notorious Nazi German death camp.

During his speech, Turski said the Holocaust did not “fall from the sky” all at once but took hold step by step as society’s acceptance of small acts of discrimination eventually led to ghettos and extermination camps.

Turski, who along with his family was forced into the Lodz ghetto and later deported to Auschwitz, called on people to not remain indifferent when minorities are discriminated against, when history is distorted and when “any authority violates the existing social contract.”

The Warsaw resident never specifically mentioned Poland’s current nationalist government in his remarks. But many understood his words as criticism of Polish politicians and public officials who have used discriminatory language against migrants, LGBT people and religious minorities, and have sought to harness history as a political tool.

While Turski received a standing ovation on Monday, some members of Poland’s conservative governing party, Law and Justice, who were in the audience did not applaud him.

In the two days since, there have also been angry comments, with some suggesting Turski had no moral authority because he belonged to Poland’s communist party before 1989.

Samuel Pereira, the head of Polish state news broadcaster TVP Info’s website, wrote on Twitter that a former Auschwitz prisoner going on to work for the Polish United Workers’ Party showed that “evil can be contagious.”

Far-right presidential candidate Krzysztof Bosak accused Turski of using the anniversary to “attack the government.”

Pawel Jabłoński, a deputy foreign minister, told The Associated Press in a statement Wednesday that the government appreciated Turski’s warnings “as a very important voice to remind us and future generations of the atrocities of World War II” and preserving historical truth.

But he also added in the statement “we strongly disagree with any attempts at abusing or misusing survivors’ statements for today’s political purposes.”

“Such attempts are deeply insulting to the memory of the victims,” the statement said.

Turski began his speech by saying he did not want to talk about what he suffered while imprisoned at Auschwitz, during two forced death marches, or near the end of the war, when he weighed just 32 kilograms (70 pounds).

Instead, Turski — who lost 39 family members in the Holocaust — delivered what he called a final warning to his grandchildren’s generation, saying that because of his age it would likely be his last chance.

Citing the words of another survivor, Roman Kent, he described what should be the Eleventh Commandment of the Bible: “Though shalt not be indifferent.”

“Because if you are indifferent, you will not even notice it when upon your own heads, and upon the heads of your descendants, another Auschwitz falls from the sky,” Turski said.

Michael Schudrich, chief rabbi of Poland, said Turski's message was very important because it reminded people that what allowed the Holocaust to happen was not only the evil of the Nazis, but also the indifference of the rest of the world. He said the stir Turski's words have caused, including negative reactions, meant "he touched people's souls."

"If somebody feels that he is speaking against them, then maybe that person needs to look into himself," Schudrich said. "The fact is, this speech will be quoted for decades and decades, and I hope for centuries. It said what had to be said."

Many others hailed Monday's speech as historic, with some comparing it to the one Pope John Paul II gave during a visit to his homeland in 1979, when Poland still was under communist rule.

Dariusz Stola, the former head of the POLIN Museum of the History of the Polish Jews, called Turski's address a "great speech," because of the way "he translated 'Never again' into a call for action now and against small wrongdoings."

Rafal Pankowski, who heads Never Again, a Warsaw-based association that monitors hate speech and crimes, said amid a rise in xenophobia, the negative reactions to the speech were not surprising "but still shocking."

"I and a lot of other people were really moved by the speech, and it will stay with us for a long time," Pankowski said. "Turski didn't name anyone. It dealt with the universal and global challenges of xenophobia and intolerance. I think anybody could relate to it from any place in the world, and this is what made it so powerful."

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