

# Is this man fit to lead the Tories in Europe?

It is three months since the Observer first revealed the outrage British Jews felt at Conservative links to a rightwing Pole, Michal Kaminski. Since then the party has tried to deflect charges of antisemitism against the man who heads the group to which Tory MEPs are affiliated. Now new statements by Kaminski about a massacre of Jews during the war raise more questions for David Cameron's party



BY TOBY HELM  
WHITEHALL  
EDITOR

It is a short walk from Jedwabne's town centre to the place where the barn stood – but it is one I will never forget. It was 9 July 2001. We had driven for several hours from Warsaw across the flat plains of north-eastern Poland. It was a hot day and my translator and I were relieved to roll into the small town before nightfall. But as we parked in the central square, part of me began to wish Jedwabne had never existed.

I found myself recreating in my mind's eye the horrors of 60 years before. In 1941, on 10 July, Jedwabne's Jews had been ordered by the town's mayor, Marian Karolak, to assemble in the square. They were told to pull grass from between the cobblestones. They arrived in their hundreds with spoons and scissors. Many were whipped and beaten with clubs and farm tools. Some were ordered to pull down a statue of Lenin which had served as a reminder to Poles of the hated, former Soviet occupiers, with whom they accused their Jewish neighbours of having collaborated. The Jews were ordered to carry the statue up the dusty track to the barn, singing "the war is because of us, the war is for us".

When the procession arrived at the barn, at least 300 Jewish men, women and children were pushed inside. Villagers looked on as others poured in fuel before setting it alight. Screams rang out as they were all burned alive.

The full details of the massacre – hushed up throughout the postwar communist period in Poland – were set out in a book by the Polish-Jewish historian Jan Tomasz Gross in 2000, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland*. Its publication shocked the nation. Gross had overturned the accepted explanation that it was the occupying Nazis who had ordered the Jedwabne pogrom.

Not so, Gross concluded. The Poles themselves had been primarily responsible, albeit with the probable tacit acceptance of Nazi troops. Gross's book triggered an agonised national debate over how Poland should react and confront its antisemitic past. It was a debate that split national opinion.

Many Poles – and much of the population of Jedwabne – were appalled by the reaction of their country's then president, Aleksander Kwasniewski. He believed the only way to atone was to stage a national apology, in Jedwabne, to mark the massacre's sixtieth anniversary (10 July 2001). Kwasniewski would "beg for pardon" from the world. Some Poles approved, others did not. One camp contested Gross's version of events and still blamed the Germans. Another did not see why Jedwabne should bear the shame of an entire nation.

One of those who opposed the president's approach at that time was the young rightwing MP for Jedwabne, Michal Kaminski. It is the same Michal Kaminski who eight years later, in July this year, became the leader of David Cameron's 25 Tory MEPs in the European parliament, in his role as head of the new European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR). If the Tories come to power, Kaminski will be the face of the British Tories in Europe. But to many Jewish people – and plenty of others – he will not be an acceptable one.

Last week's Tory conference, where the sharp-suited Kaminski, 37, made a brief appearance, he was almost as much of a talking point as London mayor Boris Johnson. In the bars and fringe meetings the issue of Kaminski's past divided Conservative Jews and non-Jews alike.



Victims, left, of the massacre of Jewish civilians by fellow Poles in Jedwabne, which previously had been blamed on the Nazis. MEP Michal Kaminski, right, opposed the Polish apology in 2001.

Main photograph by Eddie Mulholland

In a dramatic intervention in the middle of the week that raised the pulse of the conference, the president of the Board of Deputies of British Jews, Vivian Wine-man, wrote to Cameron raising questions about whether the Tories had checked out Kaminski's CV before appointing him to head the ECR – around which the Tories' entire European policy now revolves. Jewish leaders were having doubts.

Wineman, aware that Kaminski stood accused by critics not only of past antisemitism and racism but also homophobia, then dashed to Manchester for an urgently convened meeting with Mark Francois, the party's Europe spokesman. He demanded written evidence from Francois that the party had done "due diligence" on Kaminski, which was not immediately forthcoming.

The Tories now have to produce it

## 'As MP, Kaminski played a key role in urging Jedwabne not to apologise'

Rafal Pankowski, author

to satisfy him. Wineman's intervention sent panic through the Tory party and opened deep rifts in the Jewish hierarchy, a large part of which is desperate for Cameron to win next year's election. One influential Conservative-supporting Jew, Dean Godson, attacked Wineman at a fringe meeting held by the Holocaust Educational Trust.

Wineman was sitting at the back of the meeting last Wednesday evening as Godson let rip. In an outburst that astounded his audience, Godson, a research director at the centre-right Policy Exchange thinktank, launched a tirade against him and others such as Labour peer Greville Janner (who had bitterly criticised the Tories' links with Robert Zile of Latvia's For Fatherland and Freedom party,

whose members attend commemorations of the Waffen-SS). Godson accused them of "a certain form of left McCarthyism" and of deliberately invoking the memory of the Holocaust to harm the Tories.

Beneath all the controversy, it is not difficult to establish basic truths about Kaminski's past. The accounts of Polish journalists, historians and local people leave no doubt he was instrumental in urging Jedwabne residents to oppose the president's apology and boycott the ceremonial event in 2001. He pressed his case at numerous meetings in Jedwabne during the first half of that year.

"As a local MP, Kaminski played a key role in the campaign questioning the Polish responsibility for the Jedwabne massacre. The campaign had strongly antisemitic overtones," said Dr Rafal Pankowski, a member of the Never Again Association and author of *The Populist Radical Right in Poland*.

In an interview with the nationalist *Nasza Polska* newspaper in March 2001, Kaminski argued that, while the Jedwabne massacre should cause every man to "bow his head" in shame, it had always been in favour, he insisted. But when asked if he had, as a supporter of the apology and as the local MP, attended the event in Jedwabne to say sorry, led by his country's president, he was completely thrown. "Actually no, no. I was out of the country at that time," he said at first. So he did not attend an event of international importance in his own constituency town, even though he supported it? "I am sorry I don't remember," he then said. "Maybe I was there for a few minutes... I do not remember. I can't remember where I was at that time."

Kaminski also denied ever having conducted the interview with *Nasza Polska* or telling the paper – which is known for carrying far-right material – that the Poles should not apologise until the Jews apologised to them. "I never said it. It is absolutely not true," he said. To discover if this was correct, we contacted the editor-in-chief of *Nasza Polska*, Piotr Jakucki, who issued a statement confirming that the interview had been

conducted with Kaminski by the paper's Kaja Bogomilska and that the article had been published on 20 March 2001. Jakucki emailed us a hard copy.

Initially – and partly because Kaminski had denied so much – the row over his past was picked up by only a few newspapers and by the *New Statesman*. The latter ran a story quoting the Chief Rabbi of Poland, Michael Schudrich, expressing serious concerns about Kaminski. Schudrich said he was alarmed about Kaminski's membership, as a teenager, of the ultra-right National Revival of Poland party (NOP).

In a clear message to Cameron, Schudrich said: "It is clear that Mr Kaminski was a member of NOP, a group that is openly far right and neo-Nazi. Anyone who would want to align himself with a person who was an active member of NOP and the Committee to Defend the Good Name of Jedwabne [which opposed the apology] needs to understand with what and by whom he is being represented." The Tories who, like Kaminski, often appear in denial about his past, now claim that Schudrich has withdrawn those remarks, but senior figures in the Jewish community insist that this is not the case.

Perhaps because Poland's history is so complex, and claims of antisemitism so toxic, Labour was initially slow to put its name to attacks on Kaminski. It was cautious. But this has never stopped the Tories thoughtlessly attacking anyone who raised questions about Kaminski of being part of a Labour-led "smear" campaign. The Tories have been desperate to close the Kaminski story down by denials and bullying, marshalling no facts along the way.

But they face difficult opponents, including Edward McMillan-Scott, the veteran ex-Conservative MEP. McMillan-Scott sparked the controversy in July when he stood and won

against Kaminski for the position of vice-president of the European parliament, breaking a deal between the Tories and Kaminski's Law and Justice party (PiS).

McMillan-Scott said he took the decision to oppose Kaminski because he was appalled by his "antisemitic, homophobic and racist past".

To mend relations Kaminski was given the leadership of the ECR instead. But the Tories' shadow foreign secretary, William Hague, was furious. He immediately withdrew the whip from McMillan-Scott and later expelled him

on 10 August, Hague was savage. But in his savagery he dug himself permanently and irretrievably in as a defender of Kaminski. "The use of smears for personal political advantage by an elected Conservative politician is something the party cannot treat lightly," he told him. "There is the additional consideration that you have made your allegations against an individual who is a good friend of the Conservative party and against a party (the PiS) allied to the Conservative party in the European parliament."

Hague added: "I do not think it acceptable to make allegations of antisemitism against Kaminski for the position of vice-president of the European parliament, breaking a deal between the Tories and Kaminski's Law and Justice party (PiS). Jakucki emailed us a hard copy.

## 'There will be incredulity that the party of Churchill chooses allies like this'

COMMENT  
BY DAVID MILIBAND

David Cameron's judgment is now in question regarding some of the biggest issues facing the country: Europe, the economy and the role of the state.

Europe is a vital test of credibility for the Conservative party because the issue wrecked the last Tory government and influence in Europe is going to be critical.

The Observer has been dogged in exposing the Tories' new and fringe allies in the European parliament. They have rejected the conservation of Angela Merkel for that of people who commemorate the Latvian unit of the Waffen SS. Rejected Nicolas Sarkozy's Conservatives for a party of

The latest revelations – the Hague letter about his party's "good friend" Kaminski, the latter's disgraceful calls for apologies "by the Jewish nation" to balance Polish ones and his hair-splitting about how bad it is to burn 300 Jews in cold blood – are devastating. There isn't room for hair-splitting when it comes to the Jedwabne massacre. Nor when it comes to understanding what is at stake in framing our international alliances. There will be incredulity in Washington, Beijing and Delhi, never mind Berlin and Paris, that a party aspiring to government in Britain – the party of Winston Churchill no less – chooses allies like this.

Cameron and William Hague should announce today that they are suspending their membership of the ECR group. They should condemn Kaminski's hawking about the Jedwabne massacre, and the marches commemorat-

Shamefully, the Conservatives have refused to disown people they would not be seen dead with in Britain. And their Europhobia means they cannot answer the simple question: will you live with the Lisbon treaty or fight it? Grown-up leadership would have meant Cameron confronting his party last week with a simple truth: the modern world is defined by international challenges that require more, not less, European co-operation, from energy to foreign policy. Instead he did the opposite, posing as the defender of the national interest against a phantom superstate. For all the rhetorical window dressing, the Tories have used the economic crisis to shift to the right and return to the tired old tunes of the past.

The idea that we need

support of Stephen Pollard, editor of the *Jewish Chronicle*, who leaped to Kaminski's defence, saying there was nothing to suggest the Polish MEP – now a strong supporter of Israel – had had antisemitic leanings. But it all just stoked the Kaminski war. Pollard claimed there was not "a shred of evidence" that Kaminski had demanded a Jewish apology for crimes against Poles as a condition for Polish contrition. The evidence had been in *Nasza Polska* since 2001.

Throughout the conference season, the accusations flew with even more force. David Miliband, the foreign sec-

retary, who has Jewish parentage, electrified Labour's conference, accusing the Conservatives of being led in Europe by someone criticised by a leading rabbi for having "an antisemitic, neo-Nazi past". That mattered because Cameron would have to make alliances in Europe: they had to be respected. Miliband also tore into the Waffen-SS sympathisers in the Latvian party Cameron had also embraced. Hague, ever more desperate but reluctant to cite detailed evidence, demanded an apology from Miliband, describing his "smears" as "disgraceful" and unbecoming of a foreign secretary. "He has failed to check his facts," he said.

As the Tory conference closed last Thursday, news leaked out of another Kaminski bombshell. The *Jewish Chronicle's* political editor, Martin Bright, had conducted an interview with Kaminski in Manchester which appeared to blow much of the previous defence of him by the magazine's own editor, Pollard, out of the water. Kaminski denied to Bright having a neo-Nazi past or holding antisemitic views. But he made clear he had indeed opposed the apology issued by the Polish president in 2001, because it would be a one-sided admission of guilt – something he had denied to this paper that he had ever said.

"If you are asking the Polish nation to apologise for the crime made in Jedwabne, you would require from the whole Jewish nation to apologise for what some Jewish communists did in eastern Poland." And he suggested that the mass burning of Jews in Jedwabne should be considered a lesser crime than atrocities carried out by the Nazi regime. It was, he told Bright, unfair to put the massacre "on the same level as the Nazi policy".

That was certainly not how it felt to me, back in 2001, walking to the patch of land where that barn had stood and talking to Jewish relatives of those who had died inside it. And surely, for all his party's denials, it is not what David Cameron will want to hear from his new best friend in Europe.



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election is threefold. First, we need to defend our record with passion as well as humility. This is not a broken society or a bankrupt country. It's actually not just richer and fairer but clearer about its role in the world than at any time since the Second World War.

Second, we need to continue to fill out our vision of the future. This is important not just to be a credible new government – Gordon Brown's line that if re-elected we would be the first Labour government of the global age, not the fourth government since 1997, is bang on.

It is also that by filling out our agenda we will make it possible to take on our third task with gusto. That is exposing the rapidly, contradictions and plain distortions of the Tory offer.

They are not just wrong in themselves. They are tokens of an unreflexed party, out of touch with the