

The rise of Nazism has modern parallels

In Poland and the U.S., disturbing patterns are emerging and they are all too familiar

WITOLD LILIENTAL

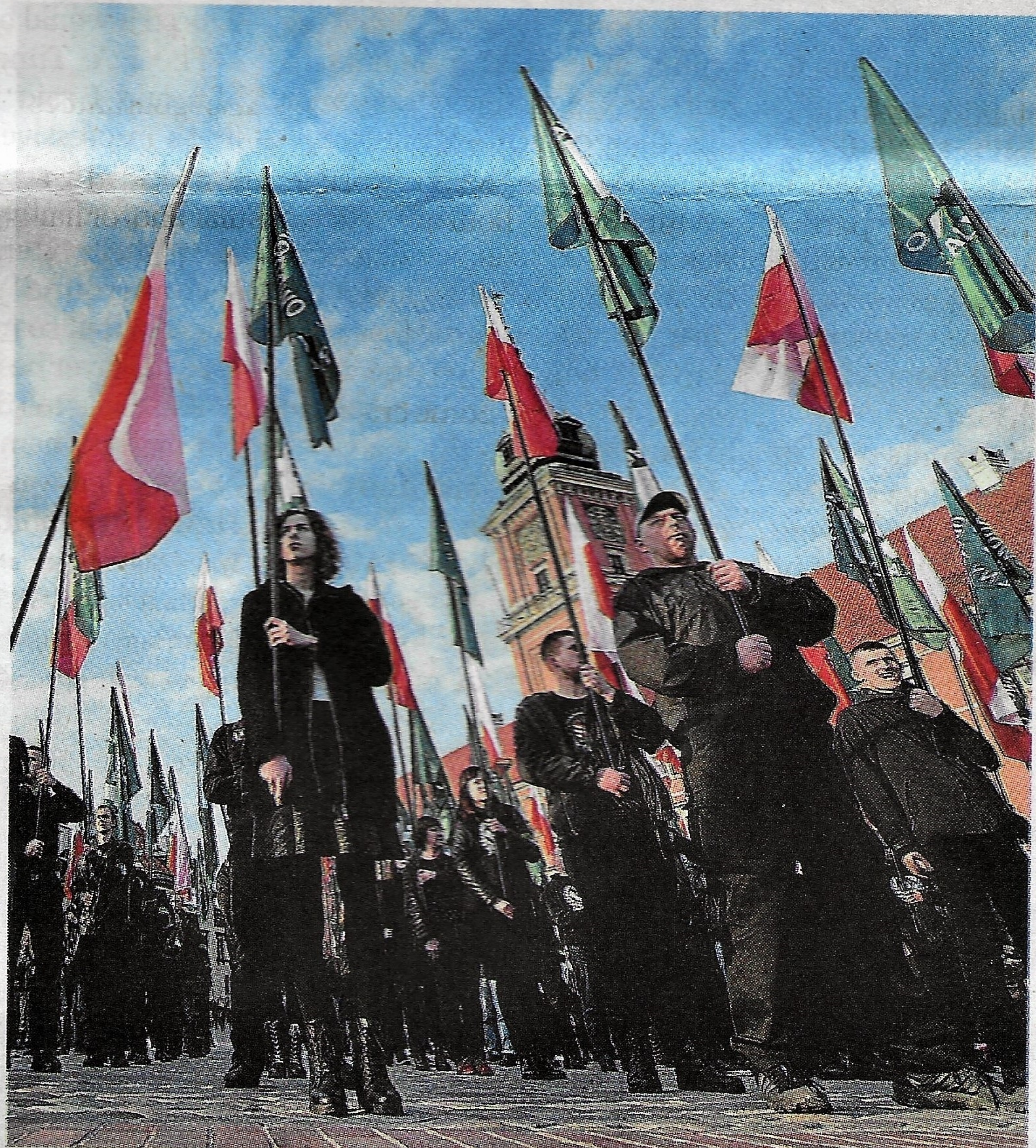
After the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, President Franklin D. Roosevelt said that Dec. 7, 1941, would forever be known as a day of infamy. After an insurrectionist throng of neo-Nazis, and white supremacists, incited by Donald Trump, stormed the Capitol, Chuck Schumer, Senate Majority leader, declared Jan. 6, 2021, also a day of infamy.

America's shining light of democracy has been tarnished over the last four years. But this coup attempt incited by Trump, the most controversial president in modern history, has opened the eyes of many honest Republicans, to how dangerous he is.

Joe Biden, champion of democracy and rule of law, understands the threat of global warming and the importance of European allies, including my native Poland whose current government contests some values espoused by the European Union. If Polish authorities can refuse to adhere to certain union guidelines, they will surely have to reckon with the new American leadership.

January 20, the day Biden was inaugurated, recalls a tragic date 79 years earlier, on Jan. 20, 1942, when the world descended into infamy as top Nazi officials convened in the Berlin suburb of Wannsee to decide on what they termed "Final Solution to the Jewish Problem." A decision was made to systematically exterminate an entire nation scattered throughout Europe without a home of their own. A significant part of this logistically complicated program of mass murder was to take place in Nazi-occupied Poland. It did not drop from the sky. It all began with almost unnoticed harassment. Jews were forbidden to sit on park benches. Later, they were banned from using swimming pools. Then they lost jobs, their homes were seized, while propaganda circulated lies about them spreading disease. Next came Kristallnacht, finally the Holocaust. Step by step, they were deprived of dignity, humanity and finally of the right to live.

Selecting scapegoats had been used by autocrats since centuries. Jews fitted this image well. For centuries they had been condemned as "killers of Jesus." Deceptive horror stories were circulated about Jews poisoning wells and murdering Christian children to mix their blood with matzos. However idiotic these stories were, many believed them. Hitler's propagandists por-



CZAREK SOKOLOWSKI THE ASSOCIATED PRESS FILE PHOTO

Members of the far-right group the National-Radical Camp in Warsaw, Poland. Witold Liliental sees disturbing parallels between what is happening in America, in Poland and in European history.

trayed Jews as industrial and financial bloodsuckers, responsible for initiating wars and causing mass poverty in Germany after the Great War. Such a narrative found fertile ground among many citizens of the pauperized Reich.

In the years preceding Hitler's rise to power, German cities witnessed marches of young, often poorly educated fascist fanatics, shouting racist slogans. After the Second World War many thought that the world was taught a lesson and fascism and extremism would never reappear. How wrong! Today, neo-fascists hold marches in Poland, America and elsewhere, sowing seeds of white supremacy, anti-Semitism and hatred against Muslims and the LGBT community. In the U.S. some people were led to believe that racist views were OK. Thus, democracy was being dismantled or, at least, severely damaged.

In my native Poland, where right-wing populists won the election, neo-Nazi groups freely shout anti-Semitic and racist slogans. Syrian refugees were called terrorists and spreaders of disease and not admitted into the country. Other groups were victimized: LGBT communities became a target of

the church and the government. Women's rights were curtailed causing major protests. The government often turns a blind eye to the rhetoric of neo-fascist groups. All this is documented by the "NEVER AGAIN" Association, a non-government organization, reacting to all cases of racism and discrimination and fighting it daily.

Reunification of a divided society will be long and difficult in both countries but must succeed in the end. We know that there are madmen ready for violence. Evil forces lurk all around. Those responsible for the safety of Biden and American democracy should be made aware that on Dec. 16, 1922, Gabriel Narutowicz, the first president of reborn Poland was assassinated a week after taking office by an extremist murderer blinded by anti-Semitic hatred.

Witold Liliental was born in Warsaw, several months before the outbreak of the Second World War. He has contributed articles in a Polish language Canadian newspaper from Toronto, in the leading Polish daily "Gazeta Wyborcza" in Poland, "Newsweek" Polish Edition, the "Angora" Polish weekly and the magazine "Everyone's War" in the United Kingdom. He also works with the Polish BIS Radio, broadcasting from Hamilton.