

Who's the anti-Semite now?*

A Pole and a Jew write an article about the mishandling of the restituted Jewish property. They are being gagged by their German publisher.

The journalists of the Polish edition of the American monthly "Forbes" pressured by their German publisher apologized to the president of the Union of Jewish Religious Communities in Poland and to the Chief Rabbi of Poland for... writing the truth. To make things even more interesting – the co-author of this article is an Israeli investigative journalist, and the trustworthiness of the gathered materials has been confirmed by American journalists. The article has been reprinted in renowned magazines in the US and in Israel, but the headquarters of Axel Springer in Berlin considered it to be an unacceptable act of anti-Semitism, and the head of the international division of this consortium conducted interrogations with the journalists in Warsaw. This humiliating questioning lasted for three months.

If you're going to intervene, do it in Berlin.

According to the article published in the August issue of "Forbes", in the years 1997-2009 there were numerous cases of mismanagement of the property reclaimed by the Polish Jewish communities. Some of the properties were later sold below their market value (for example the neo-classical hospital in Siedlce or the synagogue in Lubraniec). This was done even with cemeteries!

Wojciech Surmacz assures that the informations he gathered along with Nissan Tzur are reliable and that they have been verified many times. It's possible to find informations regarding the Property Commission, which handles the restitution of the property taken away from the Churches in Poland by the communists, but there are practically no informations available about the restituted Jewish property. Only after a strenuous investigation which took several months the journalists of "Forbes" established that in the restitution process about 500 properties were given back, and that in addition the Polish state has granted to Jewish communities 82 million PLN as compensation for the properties which could not be returned.

The main negative characters of the article – Monika Krawczyk – the CEO of the Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage (FOD), Piotr Kadłak – president of the Union of Jewish Religious Communities in Poland (ZGW) and Michael Schudrich – the Chief Rabbi of Poland – intervened immediately after the article came out. Not in Warsaw, but directly in Berlin, at the headquarters of the Axel Springer consortium, which owns the license for publishing "Forbes" in Poland.

* Legutko Piotr, "I kto tu jest antysemit?", published in the "Gość Niedzielny" weekly on February 9th, 2014, trans.: M. Szymbalska.

This historical mikvah is not a historical monument!

Actually, they formulated just one accusation, but it was the most serious one: of anti-Semitism. The negative characters described in the article written by Surmacz and Tzur told [the management of Axel Springer – M.S.] that they should put an end to the anti-Semitic attacks published in the Polish edition of "Forbes". They brought up the so called second "corporate principle" of the Axel Springer publishing house, which states: "To promote the reconciliation of Jews and Germans and support the vital rights of the State of Israel". Piotr Kadlōik in his letter went even further: – he compared the "Forbes" publication to the attack of the Arab states on Israel during Yom Kippur and to the liquidation of the Warsaw Ghetto by the Nazis.

The German headquarters of the consortium immediately ordered that an investigation should be carried out regarding the preparation process of the *"Kaddish for a million bucks"* article. Despite the fact that the investigation carried out by a renowned law firm confirmed that the informations presented by the journalists are reliable, they were ordered to publish a correction as well as an apology. Since the editor in chief Kazimierz Krupa refused to do that and stood firmly behind his journalists, interrogations which lasted for many hours were conducted. Their aim was to break the journalists' resistance. – I actually supported their demand that we should quickly publish their correction, since in its original version it was humiliating for its authors, not for us – says W. Surmacz. – For example, in my text I wrote that [the Jewish Religious Community in Warsaw – M.S.] rented a historical mikvah in Piaseczno to the son of Piotr Kadlōik. And they wrote in their correction, that this is not true, since... this mikvah is not a historical monument. To make things even funnier, on their own website they claim that this mikvah is in fact a historical monument. Unfortunately, this passage was crossed out from the final version of the correction – the journalist tells "Forbes".

We apologize for the truth

Ralph Büchi, the head of the international division of Axel Springer, assumed from the very beginning that the protagonists of the article are the ones who are right, and he apologized for everything right away. When he wasn't able to force the editorial office of the Polish "Forbes" to do the same, even stronger pressure was exerted on him. An official statement demanding a condemnation of the "Forbes" publication was issued by Ronald Lauder, the president of the World Jewish Congress. Moreover, Abraham Foxmann from the well-known Anti-Defamation League, which tracks down all the acts of hatred and prejudice against Jews, called on Mathias Döpfner, the chairman of the Axel Springer consortium, to defend the good name of Rabbi Michael Schudrich.

No wonder that the American "Forbes" decided to carry out its own investigation regarding this case. They demanded detailed explanations from the Polish editorial office. – We sent them all the materials and they wrote us back that... they congratulate us on a well-

done job – says W. Surmacz. In spite of this the German headquarters forbade the Polish editorial office of "Forbes" from publishing any further texts regarding the restitution of Jewish property, and Ralph Büchi finally achieved his goal – a correction which took up an entire page along with an apology was published (as the author of the '*Kaddish...*' article emphasizes: "I refused to sign it"). They were also prohibited from writing their answer to any of the 16 paragraphs of the correction, although according to Polish press law every editorial office has the right to do that.

Together against evil

The Association of Polish Journalists decided that the authors of the "*Kaddish for a million bucks*" article will receive the "Watergate" award for the best investigative piece of the year 2013. And what about Ralph Büchi? He received the "Hyena of the Year 2013" anti-award for "an unacceptable interference of the publisher into the autonomous actions of the editorial office and of the journalists; his actions led to the creation of self-censorship mechanisms".

– While writing this text I found out that I am the most anti-Semitic Jewish journalist in the world – joked Nissan Tzur when he received this prestigious award. Both journalists didn't hide how content they were, since until now their text has been appreciated only outside of Poland. The whole "*Kaddish...*" article has been reprinted in Hebrew in "Forbes Israel", in the American "Jewish Journal" and in the German "Die Welt". In Poland the only one who wholeheartedly supported the authors was... Severyn Ashkenazy, the president of the Beit Foundation (linked to Progressive Judaism). Ashkenazy has been trying to draw attention to the problem of the selling out of Jewish property for many years. "Although we are not responsible for the souls of other Jews, we should warn each other and try to prevent each other from committing evil; we should oppose the injustice which is being done both to us and to the strangers among us. Therefore we praise 'Forbes', since it's helping us do that" – we can read in the statement issued by the Beit Foundation.

– If my text really had been untrue and anti-Semitic, I would have been condemned by Jews all over the world. But that's not the case. I have friends among them, they helped me work on this text. They tell me how unhappy they are with what is happening with their cemeteries or synagogues. I've gathered an enormous amount of materials regarding the mishandling of the restituted Jewish property. Will a book be written based on those materials? One publisher is already interested in it. In fact, this publisher is from Israel – Wojciech Surmacz finishes his story.