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# 'The Nazis carried out the Holocaust against our will'

*In an exclusive interview with Haaretz, Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski discusses what he calls the old-new love story between his country and Israel*

By **Adar Primor**

It is often said about Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski that the story of his life could supply the material for a number of films. The first would likely be a melodrama with elements of an action movie. The foreign minister, who largely symbolizes the new Poland, was already active in the Solidarity movement as a high school student. He was hounded by the military regime and forced to emigrate to Britain, where he studied at Oxford University. He later became a war correspondent for several of the most important British newspapers. He traveled to Afghanistan and covered the war of the Mujahideen against the Soviets, in which he lost a good friend.

He met his wife Anne Applebaum – the Jewish American historian and journalist, and winner of the 2004 Pulitzer Prize for her nonfiction work "Gulag: A History" – in 1989, in Berlin. The two celebrated the fall of the Berlin Wall together, building a romance rooted in history for themselves.

The second film of the foreign minister's life is a dark political thriller rife with passion: Upon his return to Poland, Sikorski entered politics, where he rose meteorically. He served as deputy defense minister at just 29 years old; deputy foreign minister in the government headed by Jerzy Buzek (now president of the European Parliament); and defense minister under Prime Minister Jaroslaw Kaczynski.

The Kaczynski twins abhorred the young minister, who was the most popular official in their government. President Lech Kaczynski even accused Sikorski of plotting intrigues with the

former commander of the Polish army's counterspy unit, and claimed Sikorski had intervened on behalf of a Belorussian spy. Sikorski defected from their party for that of current Prime Minister Donald Tusk.

week, when a Polish delegation came here to officially launch the two countries' joint governmental forum. Tusk and Sikorski were accompanied by the Polish ministers of defense, education, culture, health and en-

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The third film is the one whose plot Sikorski is toiling on today. It is based on a love story – the surprising, against-all-odds love affair between Poland and Israel. It is about a country perceived as the cradle of anti-Semitism, a land of persecution and pogroms, that has turned into one of Israel's best friends; a movie in which Poland considers Israel one of its staunchest allies and a strategic asset, and volunteers again and again to defend it in international forums; a film in which the so-called cemetery of the Jewish people gives rise to various groups established to resuscitate the Jewish culture; where an enormous museum of the history of Jews in Poland is being erected opposite the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising; in which the universities of Krakow, Warsaw and Wroclaw offer Jewish Studies programs; and where every year thousands of Poles happily take part in festivals celebrating Jewish culture.

The Poles' great interest in Israel and Judaism was also expressed this past

year, when a Polish delegation came here to officially launch the two countries' joint governmental forum. Tusk and Sikorski were accompanied by the Polish ministers of defense, education, culture, health and environmental protection, and the secretary of state for special services. Until now, Israel has conducted such high-level dialogues only with Germany and Italy, while Poland has only maintained relations at this level with Germany and France.

### Shared history

"Poland and the Jewish people share a thousand-year history, and ever since we regained our independence, the state-to-state relations have also increased in importance," Sikorski said in an interview with Haaretz. "Economic relations drew closer, investments increased and commercial relations are growing. As a former defense minister, I am especially glad about the important procurement program we have developed together. We use the term 'strategic relations' only rarely and only with regard to a handful of countries.

"Both Israel and Poland live in interesting and at times dangerous neighborhoods, and so both take security matters with the utmost seriousness," he continued.

"Both nations have lost their independence in the past, and we know what a painful experience that is. And so we have compatible means: Poland has a presence in Afghanistan and is retooling its armed forces with modern technology. You have some of the technology and we have the resources. Cooperation is no doubt fruitful."

*Poland is one of Israel's most enthusiastic supporters worldwide. You yourself led the opposition to Durban II, the United Nations conference against racism, and the Goldstone report on the Gaza conflict. Does this excep-*



Photos: Michal Fattal

Sikorski. "The number of anti-Semitic incidents in Poland [is] minuscule in comparison to most western European nations and the U.S."

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tional support for Israel stem from moral considerations, a desire to improve Poland's image in the world, to attract investors, to become closer to the United States, or all of these things together?

"In Poland, the term 'solidarity' has great significance. We identify profoundly with your pain, as we too have lived in condition of occupation, of loss of statehood and under the threat of cultural and physical annihilation. So we know how precious it is to have your own state to express your interests.

"We feel solidarity with both peoples of the holy land, who have a right to live in secure borders. But above all else, it was also the fact that the Polish state was too weak in 1939 to stand up to Nazi Germany. It was not able to defend all its citizens. Nazi Germany carried out the Holocaust on our soil – against our will, but in front of our eyes. That also is a spiritual source of our solidarity with Israel."

*What are the limits of that friendship? For example, how would you have voted if the resolution to condemn continued building in West Bank settlements had been brought to a vote in the UN general assembly?*

"This question is pertinent. The limits of friendship are international law. We believe that building in the settlements is bad for Israel, bad for Palestine and bad for the cause of peace. This is a program we do not support. Making peace and a solution to the conflict are in your hands. In the end, Israel and Palestine are the ones who must find a way to live with one another."

*Do you foresee a situation in which the European Union will follow Latin American countries and recognize a unilateral Palestinian declaration of statehood?*

"I doubt it. We would like to upgrade Israel's relations with the EU. Today Israel already has privileged relations with the EU, which includes regular summits and regular high-level contacts, but we would like to see more, and this depends on whether Israel restarts the peace process."

*Some of your European colleagues are creating a direct link between the revolutions taking place in our region and the failure of talks between Israel and the Palestinians. From Israel's point of view, these events show that the problem is in fact rooted in the absence of democracy in this part of the world. What is your opinion?*

"I don't see a link. The events in Tunisia, Egypt or Libya are not connected to us, the United States or Israel. We are talking about internal challenges by rebellious populations – millions of people seeking the right to be responsible for managing their own lives the way they should in a democracy."

*What is the meaning of the phenomenal renewal of*

*Jewish culture in Poland today? Should we really accept the thesis, heard more and more, that Poland is a philo-Semitic country nowadays?*

"I am surprised at your surprise. The fact that a large portion of the world's Jews lived in Poland before the Holocaust needs to be taken into account. For generations, Poland absorbed Jews while they were expelled from other countries. The Holocaust that took place on our soil was conducted against our will by someone else. So what is happening now is simply that free Poland is returning to its natural self.

"Before coming to Israel, I reviewed statistics about anti-Semitism worldwide, and was proud to discover that the number of anti-Semitic incidents in Poland was minuscule in comparison to most western European nations and the United States. And furthermore, it has been more than half a century since a murder with an anti-Semitic context has taken place in Poland. Poland is today renewing its tradition of tolerance and we are proud of this."

*What is your opinion of the debate taking place now in Poland about what is known as the "third phase of the Holocaust," and books such as Jan Gross' "Golden Harvest" (set for release later this year) about Poles who robbed Jewish property during and after the Holocaust? Does this testify to a new wave of self-examination in your country?*

"I have a principle not to comment on texts that I have not read, but the last time I checked the definition of the Holocaust, it was said to be a phenomenon in which a state uses industrial methods to eradicate an entire ethnic group. Horrendous events took place in Poland; there were periods during the Holocaust when people behaved heroically and others behaved like scum, but the Holocaust was

the creation of the German state. We mustn't be confused about that."

*There is an ongoing debate in Israel about high school students' trips to death camps in Poland, with critics claiming these visits lead to radical nationalism among pupils. In Poland, criticism is directed at the focus on the camps, and the absence of emphasis on modern Poland and a thousand years of shared history. What is your take on these issues?*

"Our two peoples experienced hell in the 20th century and [we] have not yet managed to heal [our] wounds. We visit Katyn in Russia to honor our dead [where more than 20,000 Polish officers and senior government officials were murdered in 1940 at Stalin's orders], and you come to Poland because the Nazis chose our land to commit their grisly crimes.

"One of the reasons we are in Israel is to reshape these visits. We would like them to emphasize the identity of the perpetrators and the victims of the Holocaust, so that the younger generation will not receive mistaken ideas about them. We also want young people to absorb the sense of modern Poland, tolerant and prosperous, in order to deepen understanding of the positive aspects of our relations. We would like to be seen as a place where one can live, not only die.

"In the past I visited an air base in northern Israel, and saw a very well done documentary about a fly-past of Israeli pilots over Auschwitz – a wonderful statement of victory over

evil. But we want to ensure that the next generation of Israeli pilots knows who built Auschwitz and who operated it. Prime Minister [Benjamin] Netanyahu has promised me that such documentary films will correctly emphasize the facts."

### Staunch opponent of Iran

*Poland is among the staunchest opponents of the Iranian regime. Does this stem from a good relationship with Israel, from the Holocaust and historic Jewish-Polish relations, or are you disturbed by the spread of fundamentalist Islam?*

"We do not feel threatened by Iran. We are not high on the ayatollah's list of targets. Our opposition to Iranian policy is based on the conception that theocracy is the last form of ideological dictatorship of the 21st century, after fascism and communism. This is why we also opposed the Durban II conference against racism, at which Iran intended to spread hatred and anti-Semitism. After all, our country does not lack for physical traces of what anti-Semitism can lead to."

*Do the events now taking place in our region remind you of the events in your part of the world in 1989, or are you also concerned about an Iran-style Islamization?*

"I have always enthusiastically supported democratization in the [Middle East] region. I am among those who believe that democracies never go to war against each other. And so when millions of people seek the right to be responsible for managing their own lives the way they should in a democracy, it is reason for hope.

"At the same time, hope is understandably accompanied by concern, as revolutions of this type do not always peacefully lead to the establishment of a democratic regime. It appears that Tunisia is closest to the 1989 model, with a matrix of civil society and trade unions that provide a stabilizing force. In Egypt the sit-

uation is different, but it is still a stable country. Libya is completely disintegrating and is the most worrying in this connection."

*Are you of the belief that this revolutionary wave will spread to countries beyond our region?*

"People forget that only recently, in December, election forgery brought masses of people into the streets in Minsk [the capital of Belarus]. Unfortunately, the opposition to President Alexander Lukashenko is now under house arrest, being tried and sent to labor camps... I believe that the Russian people, too, want to be responsible for their fate and aspire to the right to fair elections and a fair government.

"Believing that the European democracy can serve as a model, Poland plans to present the European Union with an initiative whose main principle is 'cooperation for transformation.' It will be offered to all the EU's neighbors. Despite the fact that the challenge of democracy is now a burning issue for our neighbors to the south, it is no less important for those in the east."

*British Prime Minister David Cameron expressed remorse last week for Britain's earlier support for authoritarian regimes. Was it possible to behave differently? If so, what is the lesson for future behavior?*

"All I can say in this context is I am glad that, as a Pole, I do not have to apologize for our colonial past. Poland does not have to feel sorrow for supporting bloody regimes."

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Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk meeting with his Israeli counterpart, Benjamin Netanyahu, in Jerusalem last Thursday.