

## Why the words 'Polish death camps' cut so deep

Obama must remember that Poles were also victims in the Holocaust

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CARLSO OSORIO/AP

President Obama made his gaffe while honoring Jan Karski, who fought against the Nazis in World War II.

My first memory is hearing my father scream at night.

I was very young and it pierced my sleep and sent me racing to my parents' bedroom, where I found my mother holding my dad in her arms.

She told me he had a nightmare and to go back to bed. But I stood rooted there in shock because it was the first time I realized that my father could be afraid of anything.

His name was Konstanty Siemaszko and he survived both the Auschwitz and Sachsenhausen concentration camps. To the day he died, he was plagued by nightmares.

I found myself aching for my father this week after President Obama caused an uproar by mistakenly using the term "Polish death camp" while honoring a World War II hero with the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

You see, my father was Polish. And I am certain that if he was alive today, he too would be disappointed that those three awful words wormed their way into an otherwise wonderful tribute to Jan Karski, a Polish underground fighter who was the first to alert the world that the Holocaust was underway.

In addition to being Polish, my father was also Catholic.

And that fact is also key to understanding why so many Poles and Polish-Americans are angry at Obama's comments.

While everybody should know by now that the Nazi genocide machine was created mainly to destroy the Jews, less known is the fact that more than a million Polish Catholics were also ground up in those gears.

This is entirely understandable. The Jews were Hitler's primary victims. Catholic Poles were next in line, along with homosexuals and Gypsies and others the Nazis deemed "undesirable."

When Polish-Americans hear the words "Polish death camp" uttered by the President of the United States, they don't hear a benign geographical description — as some apologists for the White House have argued Obama's gaffe to be.

They hear blame and responsibility for the slaughter of millions being transferred from the true culprits to victims like my father.

They hear a refusal by a President many of them admire to acknowledge the pain and suffering of people who went to the gas chambers and the ovens with the Jews.

That is wrong. The Poles did not launch the Holocaust or build the concentration camps or the death camps. The Germans did. Anybody who has ever cracked open a history book should know that.

Yes, there were Polish collaborators, and nasty anti-Semitism lingers to this day. There is scum in every society — in fact, there were collaborators in just about every European nation. But they were far outnumbered by other Poles who risked their lives to save thousands of Jews from the Nazis.

Just go to Yad Vashem in Jerusalem and count the Polish names on the list of The Righteous Among the Nations who aided Jews. There are more than 6,000 of them.

But all it takes is three awful words, strung together in a speech, to turn them into villains. And that is why Obama, who I'm certain meant no harm, needs to take an extra step and apologize to the Polish people.

*Siemaszko is a reporter for The Daily News.*

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