

About those death camps in Poland....

By J.D. Mullane | Posted: Thursday, May 31, 2012 3:00 am

The furious demand by Poland's prime minister for an apology from President Obama for saying "Polish death camp," rather than "Nazi death camp in Poland" may seem fussy, but not to Poles. The president's gaffe, as VP Joe Biden might say, is a big deal.

The president's careless remark came Tuesday as he gave posthumous honors and the Medal of Freedom to the late Jan Koziielewski, aka Jan Karski, a Polish army officer and resistance leader, and later a professor at Georgetown University. Koziielewski was the first to alert President Franklin Roosevelt of mass killing of Jews in Nazi-occupied Poland in 1943, to become known as the Holocaust.

Obama, in his Medal of Freedom remarks said: "Before one trip across enemy lines, resistance fighters told (Koziielewski) that Jews were being murdered on a massive scale, and smuggled him into the Warsaw Ghetto and a Polish death camp to see for himself."

In fact, it was not a "Polish death camp." It was a Nazi death camp in occupied Poland. It's a difference with enormous distinction to 38 million Poles. Therefore, the international brush back.

"We can't accept such words in Poland, even if they are spoken by a leader of an allied country," said Prime Minister Donald Tusk.

Poland's Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski Tweeted: "It's a shame that such a momentous ceremony has been overshadowed by ignorance and incompetence."

Why the Polish recoil? In America, we forget things that happened 15 minutes ago. In Europe, something that happened 15 centuries ago is treated as if it happened last week. The Holocaust happened a mere 70 years ago. It's like yesterday.

Nearly 3 million people were exterminated in Poland in six death camps built and operated by German Nazis. Unlike most other Nazi-occupied countries in Europe during World War II, the Poles refused to cooperate with the Third Reich. Many chose to die with their Jewish friends and neighbors rather than cooperate and staff the death camps and some 400 sub-camps in that imprisoned nation.

Poland produced the most Righteous Gentiles – those who risked their lives or died to save Polish Jews. Among them was Irena Sendler, a Catholic social worker, who smuggled 2,500 Jewish children from the Warsaw Ghetto. During the war, she was part of "Zegota," the Polish secret network to disguise, smuggle and hide Jews from the Nazis.

In 1944, an uprising was launched in Warsaw. For this, Hitler reduced the city to ruins and rubble. Miraculously, one of the few buildings to survive intact was a synagogue, which still stands today, and is still active.

In Poland it is this righteous rebellion, not collaboration with evil, that defines the national character.

The American Jewish Committee has tried for years to instruct world leaders not to commit Obama's error. In 2005, on the 60th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz death camp, the AJC was emphatic:

"We would ... remind those who are either unaware of the facts or careless in their choice of words, as has been the case with some media outlets, that Auschwitz-Birkenau and the other death camps, including Belzec, Chelmno, Majdanek, Sobibor and Treblinka, were conceived, built and operated by Nazi Germany and its allies. ... The camps were located in German-occupied Poland, the European country with by far the largest Jewish population, but they were most emphatically not 'Polish camps.' This is not a mere semantic matter. Historical integrity and accuracy hang in the balance."

Poland's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has spent more than 20 years trying to do the same, but "Polish death camps" still appears regularly in the German news weekly Der Spiegel and The New York Times.

If this seems picky, it's probably because you have never been to Poland to see for yourself where the Holocaust was perpetrated.

I did, in 2011. I went to Auschwitz in the Polish hinterlands of Oswiecim. I traveled there with a Holocaust survivor, Danny Goldsmith, from Horsham, who speaks to local school children about his experiences. His father perished at Auschwitz.

Once you see the barracks, the piles of shoes, the piles of human hair, the piles of personal effects — purses, suitcases, a child's hair ribbons — then you go through Block 10 and hear of Dr. Mengele's experiments, and see the ovens, you are never careless describing who was the perpetrator, and who was the victim.