

On the Proximity of Polish Homes Adjacent to Majdanek & Auschwitz During WWII: **Setting Straight the Historical Narrative**

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Before I introduce tonight's March of the Living speakers, I would just like to take this opportunity to clarify an important part of the history of the Holocaust. I'm sure that all of us here can agree that accurately teaching the history of the Holocaust is critical, especially during this time of Holocaust denial, distortion and relativism. And especially a time when the actual notion of truth is under assault, when so much of what we read online is highly questionable or simply fabricated from whole cloth.

Since my first trip to Poland in the late 1980s, and my almost four decades of involvement with the March of the Living and other trips to Poland, I have encountered a commonly expressed critical point of view regarding the proximity of Polish homes and their inhabitants to the death camps of Majdanek and Auschwitz during WWII.

The impression given by some educators, intentionally or not, or otherwise gleaned during visits to Majdanek and Auschwitz, involves the alleged indifference of the nearby Polish residents during WWII to the plight of these camps' Jewish victims. This criticism then often gets co-mingled with the general criticism aimed at those in the wider world population, who, during World War II, claimed they did not know what was happening to the Jews during the Holocaust. **"How could those Polish residents, whose homes are now so visibly abutting these factories of death, claim not to have known?"**, the accusation goes.

Their indifference and failure to act then becomes part of the overall Holocaust narrative of a cruel and callous or even worse, actively complicit world, in the genocide of European Jewry during World War II.

In the last few years alone, I've read a number of essays and articles written by both students and adults, returning from the March of the Living, echoing this same erroneous impression. Of course, it is not their fault. They are, in large measure, reflecting what they have been taught, or what they have been led to believe. Fortunately, almost everyone I've communicated with has revised their accounts, considering what I have clarified to them.¹

Here is a short summary of some of the relevant facts illustrating how this specific criticism of the alleged indifference of the Polish citizens living near Auschwitz and Majdanek is not founded on historical fact. The information is based on public historical records and information provided by historians at both the Auschwitz- Birkenau and Majdanek state museums.



Majdanek concentration camp, reconnaissance photograph dated June 24, 1944.



March of the Living students participate in memorial ceremony at Majdanek.



March of the Living participants visiting barracks at Majdanek. Modern day Lublin skyline visible in the background.

Key Historical Clarifications

1. The homes that exist today adjacent to Majdanek and Auschwitz did not exist or were not inhabited by Poles over 80 years ago during World War II.
2. Majdanek was 1-2 kilometres from Lublin when it was built. The houses located near its perimeter today were not there in WWII. Similarly, all Polish villagers were evicted from homes in the immediate proximity of Auschwitz- Birkenau. Those homes were either demolished or occupied by families of SS officers and administration.
3. More germane is the fact that many non-Jewish Poles themselves were murdered in places like Auschwitz and Majdanek.
4. Some of the displaced Poles living near Majdanek pre-WWII ended up in Majdanek as prisoners, as was the case with Auschwitz, where they perished.
5. In Auschwitz, some 70,000 non-Jewish Poles were murdered.
6. Majdanek's victims numbered some 78,000 murdered in total. 59,000 (85 %) were Jews, and 19,000 (15%) were people of other ethnic backgrounds, mostly Poles and Byelorussians. ¹
7. In addition to the 3 million Polish Jews murdered in the Holocaust, some 2 million non-Jewish Poles were also murdered by Nazi Germany.
8. Poles were helpless to save many of their own non-Jewish countrymen, including those who were murdered in Auschwitz and Majdanek.
9. Condemning those Poles who collaborated with the murder of Jews during the Holocaust, or were callously indifferent to their plight, is fair and valid criticism. Similarly, it is right to praise those Poles, the Righteous among the Nations, who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust.
10. Suggesting that during WWII there were Polish townspeople living close to the death camps who were fully aware of what was happening to the Jews there, and - presumably, because of their entrenched antisemitism - chose to remain silent in the face of these horrors is simply mistaken. In fact, the Poles themselves were unable to help their own family members who were being murdered in these very same camps.

¹ These statistics are based on the research of Dr. Tomasz Kranz, currently the director of the Majdanek Museum.

11. While non-Jewish Poles were generally helpless to assist those Jews being murdered in the main death camps set up by Nazi Germany in occupied Poland, this was not the case in other contexts and locations in Poland. Sadly, far too few Poles helped Jews in those instances, as was the case with the local populations in almost all European countries occupied by Nazi Germany. Indeed, the entire world, including countries like the United States and Canada, turned a deaf ear to the plight of Jews, trying to escape the Nazi Holocaust.

Generally, Polish society (like much of European society), the Polish underground, and the Polish government did not see Jews as part of Poland, or part of their universe. This, along with the fact that Poland itself was being subject to Nazi genocidal actions and that helping Jews was punishable by death, all acted to disincentivize Poles from helping Jews. Still, one must acknowledge the actions of Żegota (the only state-sponsored organization in German-occupied Europe dedicated to rescuing Jews during World War II, and the 7,000+ Polish Righteous Among the Nations honoured at Yad Vashem, who acted with exceptional bravery and altruism in spite of the factors mentioned above.

12. That some Poles and Ukrainians who lived very close to Belzec, and that some Poles who lived very close to Treblinka, Sobibor, and Chelmno, economically profited from their proximity to these camps during and after WWII is also a sad chapter in this history.
13. A more general point that needs to be shared in this discussion is the location of the major Nazi German death/concentration camps in Poland. This unfortunate fact had nothing to do with the feelings of the local Polish population towards its Jewish population. Rather, it was a reflection of the geographical location of the largest centre of Jewish population in Europe, Poland. If you are planning to murder the majority of European Jewry, you're going to locate the camps in Poland, the country with over 3 million Jews, roughly 10% of Poland's population, more Jews than any other country in Europe.

I still recall the Canadian student of Polish (non-Jewish) descent on one of my trips. who, with visible pain, expressed anguish over the fact that Nazi Germany had chosen to commit their most infamous and heinous atrocities on Polish soil, thereby staining the land and reputation of Poland and damaging Polish-Jewish relations.

The history of Polish-Jewish relations before, during, and after World War II is complex; it is full of moments of sadness, exclusion, and betrayal, as well as coexistence, courage, and heroism.

However, drawing negative conclusions about Poland, from the location of Nazi Germany's killing fields, or the current proximity of homes inhabited by Poles near the former death camps of Majdanek and Auschwitz, fits into neither of the categories above.

As educators on the March of the Living, it is incumbent upon all of us to insist that what we teach is based on historical facts and not on commonly held erroneous assumptions.

As the rabbis teach us, the Hebrew word for truth, *emet* (אמת) is made up of the first, middle, and final letters of the Hebrew alphabet, symbolizing that our striving for truth should be at the beginning, middle and end of all of our endeavours.

And as Rabban Shimon Ben Gamliel said, "The world is sustained by three things: by justice, by truth and by peace."

When approaching the teaching of the Holocaust, surely the values of justice, truth and peace should be our north star and be among our most important and sacred guiding principles.



1988 March of the Living

1988 March of the Living PBS Documentary, narrated by Colleen Dewhurst & Jonathan Silverman

[hCps://youtu.be/p7d5qLKuJC8?si=S7XSzH6KbikPBtO1](https://youtu.be/p7d5qLKuJC8?si=S7XSzH6KbikPBtO1)

8:45 to 10:36

Narrator: Although most of the killings were done at Auschwitz, when I think back to the most emotional part of the trip, it was at the camp located right in the center of the Polish city of Lublin: Majdanek.

Stephanie Akerstain (Student): I just go back and think how the people around it could be silent and not say a word about

what was going on, those who knew. And the scene in Majdanek really scared me because the city is, was what, 10 miles away maybe? It was just so visible, you could smell, you could hear.

Narrator: Majdanek was the most difficult of all because this camp remains the same, basically untouched since the Nazis hurriedly retreated in 1944. Everything is there intact, from shoes to ashes.

2025 March of the Living

San Diego Jewish World

S.D.'s Former Police Chief Shelley Zimmerman Marched in Poland, Volunteered with IDF in Israel June 17, 2025

<http://www.sdjewishworld.com/2025/06/17/s-d-s-former-police-chief-shelley-zimmerman-marched-in-polandvolunteered-with-idf-in-israel/>

“At Majdanek, another camp where we bore witness, the crematorium stood just beyond nearby homes. So close that a frisbee thrown from a backyard could have landed in the crematoriums where tens of thousands of Jews were murdered. The townspeople knew. Their silence was unforgivable.”

Although the online article in the San Diego Jewish World was not corrected, the writer agreed to share the information I provided to her, that appears in the article I wrote above, during her future public speaking engagements.

PHOTO CREDITS:

Cover Photo: Majdanek Photo -Dafna Lorber, Witness: Passing the Torch of Holocaust Memory to New Generations 2020

Page 2 – Majdanek Archival Photo - Wikimedia Commons

Majdanek Photos - Yossi Zeliger, Witness: Passing the Torch of Holocaust Memory to New Generations 2020

Page 5 -- Auschwitz Photo - Shutterstock