

Henryk Sławik as a Patron. Reviving the Memory of KL Gusen

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Abstract

The article presents the person of Henryk Sławik, a Polish journalist and political and social activist who following the outbreak of the Second World War, together with tens of thousands of Poles, found refuge in Hungary. He rendered great service in organizing care and assistance for his fellow countrymen, and played a very important role in saving the Jews of Europe. His bearing and actions led to him being hanged at the German extermination camp of Gusen. The text summarizes years of efforts aimed at reinstating the memory of this “Righteous” Silesian, and goes on to describe their results and future plans, which include the establishment of the Henryk Sławik European Center of Education in Gusen.

“God’s messenger” (Cipora Lewawi), “a paragon of honesty, kindness and friendship” (Tamás Salamon-Rácz), “an angel” (Stefania Pielok), “he knew that what he did would cost him his life” (Henryk Zvi Zimmermann) (Łubczyk, 2008, pp. 9–13) – these are the words that Polish refugees (some of them of Jewish descent) who found themselves in Hungary after September 1939 used to describe Henryk Sławik, a Silesian and one of the victims of the German concentration camp of Mauthausen-Gusen. It was there, in picturesque Upper Austria, that approximately 190,000 people from German-occupied Europe were imprisoned and over 120,000 murdered. No other Nazi extermination site consumed the lives of so great a number of Polish intellectuals. And for these reasons alone it is hard to believe that in 2016 some people actually advocated the demolition of the few surviving – and by that time dilapidated – buildings of the former Gusen subcamps; fortunately, these structures continue to stand as proof of German crimes.

Had it not been for the timely protest of former prisoners from many countries, including Poland, we would now have nothing to save from oblivion. Moreover, we owe the fact that material traces of this site of human debasement were not obliterated altogether to the praiseworthy attitude of the local community and the efforts of the Gusen Memorial Committee, set up some thirty years ago. It is therefore a good moment for the Foundation for Polish-German Reconciliation to come forward with a proposal for establishing the Henryk Sławik European Center of Education in Gusen. Today, we have an excellent opportunity to put a stop to the eradication of memory about the camp’s tragic contribution to European heritage – and lest we forget, Gusen was the site of indescribable suffering of 71,000 victims of 27 nationalities. This important message came across very clearly during an international academic conference entitled *Killing Intellectuals. European Intellectual Elites Under German Occupation, 1939–1945*, which was organized in May 2017 at the Polish Institute in Vienna by the Witold Pilecki Center for Totalitarian Studies.

It was in Mauthausen-Gusen that on 23 August 1944, at 3–3.15 p.m., the German murderers hanged among others five members of the war-time émigré Polish leadership in Hungary: Andrzej Pysz, Professor Stefan Filipkiewicz, Józef Fietz-Fietowicz, Kazimierz Gurgul and Henryk Sławik – the President of the Citizens’ Committee for Help to Polish Refugees in Hungary and the main delegate to this country of the Government-in-Exile of the Republic of Poland (Łubczyk & Łubczyk, 2012, pp. 393–402). As a long-standing promoter of his in many ways remarkable person, I believe that Henryk Sławik, a Polish patriot from Silesia who fell victim to Nazi terror, would be a fitting patron for the future European Center of Education in Gusen.

But who was this man and what exactly did he achieve?

From Szeroka to Katowice

Henryk was born in Szeroka (now a district of Jastrzębie-Zdrój) on 16 July 1894 in the poor, large family of Jan Sławik, a small farmer, and his wife Weronika née Sobocik. Because of his parents' poverty, Sławik was able to complete only Prussian elementary school. To earn a living and help out his loved ones, he took up various jobs – some of them far from home, for instance near Hamburg. It was there that, having turned eighteen, Sławik joined the Polish Socialist Party in the Prussian Partition. At the beginning of the First World War, just like other Silesians, he was forced to don a German uniform. While serving on the Eastern Front, he was taken captive by the Russians.

Towards the end of 1918 he returned to Silesia and involved himself in the activities of the local Polish Socialist Party, also joining the Polish Military Organization. During the First Silesian Uprising of 1919, he took part in military action in the Pszczyna district; this marked the beginning of his active campaigning for a Polish Silesia. He also took part in the Second and Third Silesian Uprisings, during which he was charged with readying an insurgent regiment from Rybnik for combat. According to Dr. Tomasz Kurpierz from the Katowice Branch of the Institute of National Remembrance, the District Workers' Committee of the Polish Socialist Party in Katowice recommended that Sławik be appointed a member of the Executive Branch of the Supreme Insurrectionary Authority, where he went on to serve as a press liaison in the theater of operations of the Third Silesian Uprising (Kobiela & Kurpierz, 2014, pp. 13–14).

He was chosen for this position because since 1920 he had been collaborating with the “Gazeta Robotnicza”, a newspaper of the Silesian socialists. His earnest articles on patriotic and social issues drew the attention of the editorial board, and in 1922 he assumed the post of a full-time editor. Sławik must have put a lot of effort into self-education, for only six years later, in 1928, he became the editor-in-chief of “Gazeta Robotnicza”. He remained at the helm of this gazette until the outbreak of the Second World War, often acting as a mouthpiece for the poor – particularly miners, who lived lives of privation.

In addition, Sławik held a number of other positions: from 1928 until September 1939 he was one of the top leaders of the Polish Socialist Party in Upper Silesia, and for many years he co-headed the Syndicate of Polish Journalists in Silesia and the Dąbrowskie Basin; in 1928 he was voted into the Katowice City Council as a representative of the socialists, and during his tenure as councilor and member of the Silesian Voivodeship Council he was engaged in social work and the distribution of aid to the poor. He used his mandate to supervise the establishment of the Association of Workers' Universities and Workers' Sports Clubs, going on to administer the activities. Finally, for several years he served as President of the Silesian Cultural and Educational Association of the Workers' Youth “Siła” [Strength].

When asked for a succinct characterization of Sławik, Professor Mirosław Fazan, an expert on the history of Silesia whose research focuses around the fates of distinguished Silesians, had this to say:

Sławik epitomized all the virtues ascribed to Silesians: responsibility, industriousness, and – what should be particularly emphasized – a quality displayed by practically every representative of the generation born in captivity: ideological devotion. He belonged to the generation about which Professor Wyka wrote so beautifully: “our country’s independence, so recently regained, was for us an immense obligation”. For Sławik, Poland’s sovereignty was actually a personal obligation – one in fulfilment of which he would not hesitate to sacrifice his life (Łubczyk, 2003, p. 191).

As far as Sławik’s pre-war life is concerned, it should be noted that he fell in love with Ms. Jadwiga Purzycka from Warsaw, and that the couple exchanged vows on 21 July 1928 in the Church at Trzech Krzyży Square in Warsaw. Two years later, Sławik’s wife gave birth to their only child – a daughter, Krystyna.

An Indomitable Guardian of War Refugees

The attitude and behavior of Hungarians towards Poles in September 1939 (and indeed throughout the War) were another example of true brotherhood, in this instance going back many centuries. Despite the fact that they were bound by a political alliance with Germany, the Hungarian authorities – headed by the Regent, Admiral Miklós Horthy, and Prime Minister Pál Teleki – first rendered Hitler’s planned attack on Poland from the south impossible, while a short time later, on the day following Soviet Russia’s invasion of Eastern Poland (which took place on 17 September 1939), they decided to open Hungary’s border to Polish citizens. In total, some 120,000–130,000 Polish refugees availed themselves of this opportunity.

Among them was Henryk Sławik, who due to his pro-Polish campaigning in Upper Silesia had found himself on the list of people to be arrested in first order by the Germans. His stay in Hungary proved to be the most spectacular time of his life – a time when he made world history. It so happened that in October 1939 the camp in Miskolc, in which Sławik was located, was visited by József Antall, the Director of the 9th Social Affairs Department of the Hungarian Ministry of the Interior, who was shortly to assume the position of government plenipotentiary for war refugees. The fact that both spoke fluent German definitely made matters easier, and Sławik wasted no time in briefing Antall about the precarious material situation of Polish refugees. Eventually, Antall returned to Budapest in

Sławik's company. Their official acquaintance quickly warmed into one of the most incredible male friendships of the Second World War – one that only death proved capable of tearing apart.

Already in November 1939, supported by Antall and his minister, Ferenc Keresztes-Fischer, Sławik established the Citizens' Committee for Help to Polish Refugees in Hungary, which was made up of representatives of the major pre-war Polish political parties and chaired by Sławik himself. At the beginning of 1940, this organization was granted proper authorization by General Władysław Sikorski's government. The Citizens' Committee occupied itself with social and health care issues and the educational and cultural needs of refugees, and it also cooperated in the establishment of the Polish Chaplaincy for Refugees, which was officially set up in the autumn of 1939 by Michał Zembrzuski, a Paulite. Further, Sławik's Committee published a number of press titles, including the leading émigré newspaper, "Więści Polskie". Exactly 661 issues of this title appeared before the Germans occupied Hungary on 19 March 1944. Thanks to the goodwill of the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, this newspaper was delivered through diplomatic channels to several German-occupied countries. Right until the German take over of Hungary, the Citizens' Committee was the principal Polish partner of Antall's office, while after the Legation of the Second Republic was shut down in January 1941 (sic!), the Committee functioned as an unofficial Polish embassy in Hungary.

Both Sławik and Antall took particular care of the youngest refugees, numbering several thousand, who were able to attend a dozen or so elementary and secondary schools, as well as Hungarian universities. The secondary and high school in Balatonboglár became renowned as the best and largest wartime Polish school outside of Poland. As many as 600 young Poles studied there, and over 100 became its graduates.

A Masterstroke of Camouflage

From the beginning of 1940 up until 19 March 1944, when the Germans occupied Hungary, Sławik availed himself of the help of Antall and his office to issue new documents – with typically Polish names and surnames – for a great many Polish Jews. In order for these papers to be handed over to their new holders, appropriate birth certificates were forged by Polish and Hungarian Catholic priests. The Yad Vashem Institute has estimated that about 5,000 Jews were thus saved from the Holocaust, but according to some people who were in the know on this clandestine operation – for instance Henryk Zvi Zimmermann – their number was far higher.

Sławik and Antall's idea to set up an Orphanage for the Children of Polish Officers in Vác on the Danube – which in actual fact housed about 100 Jewish orphans, who had reached Hungary at the beginning of 1943 with the last wave of almost 5,000 Jews from southern Poland – was a masterstroke of camouflage. Among these orphans were children who had been

thrown by their parents from wagons heading to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Polish teachers and a Catholic priest taught the youngsters to cross themselves and say basic prayers so that they would not betray their origin in front of Fascist agents. It is hard to believe that all these children actually survived, but their evacuation was excellently organized and faultlessly implemented – even though by that time Hungary had fallen under German occupation.

In 2004 in Israel, during the filming of the Polish Television documentary entitled *Henryk Sławik. Polski Wallenberg*, one of those miraculously saved – Cipora Lewawi née Cyla Ehrenkranz – was asked who Sławik was for her. After a moment's silence, she said:

I believe that he was a messenger of God. Because of what the Germans did I was left all alone. I am alive today and live in Israel with my own large family – children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, over thirty people in total – only because Sławik saved my life (Łubczyk, 2008, pp. 9–10).

A Friendship for Life and Death

Sławik and Antall were not immediately caught by the Gestapo. Sławik's wife, Jadwiga – whom Countess Erzsébet Szapáry spirited out of Warsaw along with her daughter, Krysia, in December 1943 – was less fortunate. She was arrested and incarcerated at Ravensbrück. Left all alone, 14-year-old Krysia was placed in a school boarding house by Father Béla Varga, the charismatic guardian of Polish students in Balatonboglár. One night, during her last meeting with her father in a hideout at Lake Balaton, Krysia recalled a conversation between her parents which she had overheard soon after she had arrived with her mother from Warsaw. At the time Henryk had reassured Jadwiga – who was filled with apprehension – that he had three visas to Switzerland and that the family would find refuge there in case of imminent danger. Krysia asked, “Daddy, Mother was arrested by the Germans and you are hiding. Why didn't we leave for Switzerland [before this happened]?” Surprised, her father fell silent for a while before responding, “Honey, it is difficult for you to understand, but I couldn't leave the people who had been entrusted to my care and simply go away...” (Łubczyk, 2008, p. 61).

After several weeks in hiding, and despite the fact that they changed their places of stay frequently, Antall's and Sławik's luck finally run out. The Germans organized a confrontation of the two men. Even though he was tortured, Sławik denied all the charges made against Antall, which included participation in smuggling Polish soldiers to France and – following its fall – to the Middle East, and also saving Polish Jews, though of course these were not the only accusations. When after their interrogation the two men were being transported from Gestapo headquarters back to prison, József

squeezed the cuffed hands of the half-dead Henryk and said, “Thank you, my friend, you saved my life!” Henryk whispered, “This is how Poland repays...” (Łubczyk, 2008, pp. 62–61).

We should mention at this point that it was only in 2012 that the actual date of Sławik’s death and the way in which he was murdered by the Hitlerite thugs were made publicly known: namely, he was executed by hanging on 23 August 1944. This information appeared in the 2nd volume of the Polish-Hungarian album *Pamięć/Emlékezés. Polscy uchodźcy na Węgrzech 1939–1946* [Memory. Polish Refugees in Hungary 1939–1946] authored by Krystyna and Grzegorz Łubczyk. It had been previously believed that Henryk Sławik had been dispatched by firing squad on 25 or 26 August 1944. The truth was discovered in the U.S. National Archives after many years of efforts by the family of Kazimierz Gurgul, another important figure of the Polish underground in Hungary, who was hanged together with Sławik.

Uncovering the Truth

Another long unknown truth about how “the boy from Szeroka” – as his daughter Krystyna used to call Sławik – saved Jews was revealed to me by a Polish Jew from Haifa, Henryk Zvi Zimmermann (Łubczyk, 2008, pp. 70–75). A graduate of the Faculty of Law at the Jagiellonian University, following the outbreak of the War he had been incarcerated at the labor camp in Biezanów, but managed to escape; from September 1943, after he was successfully smuggled by Polish couriers to Hungary, Zimmermann helped Sławik in saving Jews right until March 1944. I had a chance meeting with him in Warsaw in mid-2001, during which Zimmermann said that Sławik was a “Polish Wallenberg”; his remark astounded two other participants of this encounter, Jan Stolarski and Bogumił Dąbrowski, both war refugees from Hungary. Zimmermann’s dramatic story motivated me to ensure – and my efforts are on-going – that Sławik gained a place worthy of his achievements in the global collective memory and in world history.

The moving account of Krystyna Sławik-Kutermak, whom I met with in Katowice and who told me about both the tragic wartime fates of her parents and the painful postwar experiences of her family, provided further incentive to return this incredible man from years of oblivion. It was then, too, that I discovered that in 1946 Zabrska Street in Katowice had been Sławika Street – but only for three days. Councilors of the city for which Sławik had done so much before the War were forced to revoke their decision, effective immediately. The authorities of the Polish People’s Republic considered it inadmissible that a representative of the Government-in-Exile of the Polish Republic and, worse still, a supporter of the independence-oriented fraction of the Polish Socialist Party should have a street in Katowice named after him.

Basing on what I learned at the time – with equally invaluable help from the daughter of the other hero, Edith Antall-Héjj Lászlóné – in 2003

I penned my first book about Sławik: *Polski Wallenberg. Rzecz o Henryku Sławiku* [The Polish Wallenberg. The Story of Henryk Sławik]. This publication served as the basis for a documentary titled *Henryk Sławik. Polski Wallenberg* [Henryk Sławik - The Polish Wallenberg], which was written and directed by Marek Maldis and myself (TVP 2004). During the preview of the film, held in the Presidential Palace, the granddaughter of Henryk Sławik, Jadwiga Kutermak, accepted a posthumous award from President Aleksander Kwaśniewski on behalf of her grandfather - the Commander's Cross with the Star of the Order of Polonia Restituta. A second book about Sławik - *Czerwony ołówek. O Polaku, który uratował tysiące Żydów* [Red Pencil. About a Pole Who Saved Thousands of Jews] - was published by Elżbieta Isakiewicz in 2003.

The first step towards reinstating the memory of Sławik had been made years earlier, in 1977, when Isaac Brettler, an Israeli lawyer and one of the teachers at the famous orphanage for Jewish children in Vác, petitioned for its founders and teachers to be awarded the honorary title of "Righteous Among the Nations". However, the fact that he gave incomplete data in his petition to the Yad Vashem Institute and that Poland did not have diplomatic relations with Israel at the time resulted in a considerable delay; eventually, it was the previously mentioned Henryk Zvi Zimmermann, by then a former Deputy Speaker of the Knesset, who saw the case through to its successful conclusion on 6 November 1990.

The first Silesian city to truly commemorate Sławik, one of the region's most famous sons, was Jastrzębie-Zdrój, within the borders of which - as it happens - lies the old village of Szeroka, Sławik's birthplace. On 29 September 2004, Secondary School No. 3 in Jastrzębie-Zdrój-Szeroka became the first in Poland to have Henryk Sławik as its patron. Secondary School No. 17 in Katowice and the Secondary Building Engineering School in Rybnik followed suit in 2008 and 2012 respectively, while the Red Cross Blood Donors' Club in Jastrzębie-Zdrój was named after Sławik in 2016. The key role in these initiatives - crowned in 2010 with Henryk Sławik being awarded the Order of the White Eagle by President Lech Kaczyński - was played by the Henryk Sławik - Pamięć i Dzieło [Memory and Work] Association, which was established in 2008 through the efforts of Aleksander Fiszer, Grzegorz Łubczyk, Michał Luty and Zbigniew Kutermak, Sławik's grandson.

Numerous meetings with readers both in Poland and abroad encouraged me to write another book: *Henryk Sławik. Wielki zapomniany Bohater Trzech Narodów* [Henryk Sławik. The Great Forgotten Hero of Three Nations], which was published in 2008; like the first, this volume too was also published in Hungary. Let me just add that Senator Andrzej Misiólek (who provided substantial assistance) and I managed to convince the Polish Postal Service to include Sławik and Antall among the preeminent figures of the 20th century, which led to the issue in 2010 of a postcard with the following inscription in both Polish and Hungarian: "Sprawiedliwi wśród Narodów Świata / A Világ Igaza: Henryk Sławik i József Antall" [Righteous Among the Nations: Henryk Sławik and József Antall].

The Campaign for “the Boy from Szeroka” – Continued

The year 2014 proved to be very successful as regards promoting the accomplishments of “the boy from Szeroka”. Since that year marked the 70th anniversary of Sławik’s death at the German extermination camp of Mauthausen-Gusen, the Silesian Regional Assembly adopted a resolution proclaiming 2014 as the Year of Henryk Sławik in Silesia. The list of initiatives endorsed by the Municipal Offices of Katowice and other Silesian cities, all of which were focused on uncovering, promoting and honoring the life and work of Sławik and his Hungarian friend, József Antall senior, without whom Sławik would never have earned his place in world history, is indeed impressive. Among the projects were exhibitions, school competitions, concerts, religious services, sports events, press publications (including a special supplement to the “Gość Niedzielny”), and popular science discussion panels, such as the one held at the University of Silesia, which was followed by a publication entitled *Henryk Sławik. Śląski bohater trzech narodów* [Henryk Sławik. The Silesian Hero of Three Nations].

It was in 2014, too, that a commemorative plaque was unveiled in front of the local church in Sławik’s beloved Szeroka, and the first permanent exhibition dedicated to the man himself – the Henryk Sławik Room (arranged in accordance with my proposal) – was opened at the Gallery of History of the City of Jastrzębie-Zdrój. I was also fortunate to be able to join in on the celebrations of Sławik’s Year with a suitably timed fictionalized documentary, *Życie na krawędzi. Henryk Sławik–József Antall senior* [Life on the Edge. Henryk Sławik–József Antall Senior], which featured a number of accomplished actors (Krzysztof Globisz as Sławik, Olgierd Łukaszewicz as Antall, and Piotr Fronczewski in the role of the narrator).

Luckily, efforts aimed at raising public awareness of the achievements of this eminent Silesian and perpetuating his memory are being continued with vigor. In 2013, on the initiative of the Council for the Protection of the Memory of Struggle and Martyrdom, the presidents of Poland and Hungary, Bronisław Komorowski and János Ader, unveiled a plaque in Mauthausen-Gusen commemorating the heroic death of Henryk Sławik and his closest associates, while in 2015 in Katowice they unveiled a monument to the Silesian hero and his friend József Antall. Over the past couple of years commemorative events have also taken place in Hungary: plaques were put up at the former seat of the Citizens’ Committee, which had been headed by Sławik, and at the orphanage that he had helped establish for Jewish children in Vác on the Danube; moreover, one of the wharves on the side of Buda was named after him.

In Poland, Sławik’s name was given to streets in Warsaw and Jastrzębie-Zdrój, as well as to a roundabout in Katowice. In mid-2015, together with Dr. Józef Musioł, the President of the Association of Friends of Silesia in Warsaw, I set up a Public Committee for the Erection of Statues to Henryk Sławik and József Antall Senior in the Cities of Warsaw and Budapest.

The body received support from the City of Warsaw, the Office For War Veterans and Victims of Repression, and the Polish History Museum, which provided us with a grant from the Ministry of Culture. A year and a half later, on 8 November 2016 to be precise, a monument dedicated to both heroes – designed and executed by sculptor Władysław Dudek – was unveiled in Dolinka Sz wajcarska in Warsaw. The event was preceded by a mass held at the Warsaw Archcathedral by Cardinal Kazimierz Nycz and Archbishop Wiktor Skworc, the Metropolitan of Katowice, for the two men and for all Hungarian protectors of Poles. The unveiling of the monument was attended by senior state officials, chief among them Marek Kuchciński, the Speaker of the Polish Sejm, and Piotr Gliński, the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Culture, as well as by the heads of the two capitals: Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz, the Mayor of Warsaw, and István Tarlós, the Mayor of Budapest. In accordance with the founding idea of the Public Committee, a monument to Henryk Sławik and József Antall Senior – identical to the one in Warsaw – was officially unveiled on 26 June 2017 at the Goldmann György Square in the XI District of Budapest as a token of remembrance and gratitude to the Hungarian nation for providing help and support to tens of thousands of Polish refugees throughout the War. Guests included the Speaker of the Polish Sejm, Marek Kuchciński, the Speaker of the National Assembly of Hungary, László Kövér, the mayors of Warsaw and Budapest, people who had found refuge in Hungary during the War, and a dozen or so Polish MPs.

Never the Final Word

Summing up, during my presentations devoted to Sławik and his work, which are usually accompanied by film screenings – and I have organized more than 250 such events both in Poland and abroad (Hungary, France, Canada, Austria, Lithuania) – I am often asked a question that is like a pang of conscience: “Why do we learn about such a hero this late?” One of participants in these meetings, Zbigniew Ringer, wrote thus in the New York “Centrum” monthly: “We have diamonds, but we don’t know how to make use of them. This is one of our Polish faults – we have no clue about self-promotion”.

It seems, however, that what we have managed to do so far to promote knowledge about Sławik has contributed to a gradual improvement of the wartime image of Poland, which in some countries is still tarnished and not true to fact. This is why it is so important for the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage to actively engage in the popularization of persons such as Henryk Sławik. It is truly good news, then, that the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs sent an exhibition devoted to Sławik and Antall, available in several languages, to its cultural institutions and embassies; it has already been displayed in

Vilnius (January 2017), Budapest (June 2017), Paris (September 2017) and Bratislava (April 2018).

Henryk Sławik, however, is bigger than the Polish national interest. Let me repeat: this man is the perfect candidate for patron of the European Center of Education in Gusen. The establishment of such a Center – and with such a patron – will undoubtedly help and indeed make it easier to introduce KL Gusen into the collective European memory. It is our moral duty to ensure that lessons are drawn from his tragic legacy, so that history shall not repeat itself.

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