

Nov 04, 2016 by *Cynthia P. Schneider*

A Class Act of Diplomacy: Leading with Humility ^[1]

The last place that the Polish Ambassador to the United States Ryszard Schnepf might have been expected to appear in his first two weeks in Washington was the opening performance of *Our Class*, the searing play about a dark episode in Poland's history: the 1941 massacre of Jewish citizens by their Catholic neighbors in Jedwabne. But there he was, delivering a moving talk before he took his seat at Theater J.

"We have to face the truth, no matter how bitter", Ambassador Schnepf commented as he went on to emphasize the importance of learning from the past to avoid those same mistakes, and, ultimately, to create a more peaceful world. No one in the audience found this trope to be self-evident as we watched the unfolding of unthinkable acts of cruelty between erstwhile classmates.

Not unlike some patterns of domestic violence, the attacks of Catholic Poles on their Jewish neighbors in *Our Class* seep almost imperceptibly into the fabric of life following the German occupation of Jewabne in June of 1940. Two Catholic young men beat a Jewish classmate until a third Catholic makes them stop, asking, "What are you doing?" The victim and assailants alike stand and look around, bewildered, as if to ask, "What just happened?" The next time they meet, the Catholics will beat their Jewish classmate to death.

Our Class explores events leading to and following the murder of half of the town -- some 1600 Jewish men, women, and children -- by the other half, their Catholic neighbors. Jan Gross's book *Neighbors*, published in 2001, first thrust the true story of Jewabne into the Polish consciousness, shattering illusions that Poles had not participated in the Holocaust.

Our Class brings the gruesome facts of the Jewabne massacre to life as only theater can. Director Derek Goldman's production distills a monstrous crime into relationships between ten people, revealing acts both humane and mundane in an abyss of inhumanity and hypocrisy. In *Our Class*, the audience looks in vain for heroes, and is constantly haunted by the words of one of the characters, "What could I do?" It is encouraging to learn that Tadeusz Slobodzianek's original Polish version of the play drew nightly capacity crowds three years into its Warsaw production.

Ambassador Schnepf's moving appearance at the opening of *Our Class* contrasts with the conspicuous absence of official representation from China at the opening of the first exhibition of the most famous Chinese artist, Ai Wei Wei, at the Hirshorn Museum. Sadly, the artist himself was unable to attend or speak at the opening, as the Chinese authorities have continued to withhold his passport since he was arrested in 2011 on tax evasion charges. Although Ai Wei Wei has been released, the charges are still pending, and he is not allowed to leave the country.

China continues to open Confucius Institutes around the world promoting Chinese culture, while preventing the most famous living practitioner of Chinese culture to attend the Washington, D.C. exhibition of his art – the most significant public display of modern Chinese art ever seen in the U.S. Rather than celebrating the exhibition, the official representatives of the Chinese government avoid it.

Propaganda apparently is alive and well in China, but in this age of 24-hour communication and citizen journalism, the global public, including in China, seems to prefer honesty, especially in humorous and satirical form. Look at the astronomical popularity of the K-pop phenomenon PSY's parody of his genre, "Gangnam Style", which has over 500 million views and counting. An admirer of PSY's hit, Ai Wei Wei released his own version of "Gangnam Style", which he describes as a "grass roots expression of individualism", only to have the Chinese government block it.

Humor, humility, and, of course, honesty, all are qualities that work in public and cultural diplomacy. In attending and speaking at Our Class, Ambassador Schnepf understood that leading with humility can be more effective than the self-promotion that often accompanies public diplomacy. We can all learn from his example.
