



CANADIAN POLISH CONGRESS - TORONTO DISTRICT KONGRES POLONII KANADYJSKIEJ - OKRĘG TORONTO

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PRESS RELEASE

In mid-September 2013, the Canadian Polish Congress, Toronto District (KPK OT), received a complaint from several parents of students attending Toronto's Michael Power/St. Joseph High School concerning Art Spiegelman's comic book *Maus*, which was being used in Grade 11 English literature (not history) classes. The parents believed that this book should not be taught in schools because its content constitutes an affront to the honour of Poland. Above all, it leaves the students with a completely false image of Poles in the context of World War II, an event of which these students have little or no knowledge. *Maus* presents Poles as "pigs" who serve as kapos (overseers) in Nazi German concentration camps and sadistically mistreat the Jewish prisoners. (Jews are presented as "mice" in the comic book.)

In response, the Committee for the Defence of the Good Name of Poland and the Poles (Committee) prepared material debunking the falsehoods portrayed in *Maus*. Committee representatives, along with a group of parents, met with the school's principal and teachers. The Committee was unsuccessful in convincing the principal that *Maus* contains material that defames Poles, that it teaches false history and that, for these reasons, it is unsuitable for study by high school students.

In November 2013, a twelve-person delegation of parents, students and KPK representatives met with representatives of the Toronto Catholic District School Board (TCDSB). The delegation presented a detailed submission which pointed out that *Maus* deliberately sets out to present the Polish people in a false, defamatory and perverse manner. As such, KPK requested that the book be withdrawn from use in TCDSB schools. A revised version of this submission can be found on the KPK website at http://www.kpk-toronto.org/fundusz_obrony.html, under the heading "Viewpoints", titled *The Problems with Spiegelman's Maus*.

The TCDSB's response, dated January 30, 2014, acknowledged that *Maus* "contains material that, if not taught in the appropriate context, conveys a negative depiction of Polish people." However, the TCDSB decided not to withdraw the book from school programs, but rather imposed a moratorium for the current semester at all TCDSB secondary schools. The TCDSB promised to undertake "a comprehensive evaluation of the teaching materials and instructional approaches." They also extended an invitation to KPK and members of the Polish community to work with the Curriculum and Accountability Team "to ensure that the book is presented with the appropriate context."

Since *Maus* is not a textbook, but a supplementary resource, the decision to use the book rests with the school board, and not the Ontario Ministry of Education. Despite the fact that literary critics have acknowledged that *Maus* is a "calculated insult" levelled by Spiegelman against Poles (see the authoritative *Norton Anthology of American Literature*, 7th edition), this comic book is widely regarded as a "masterpiece." *Maus* has for many years been taught in high schools in the United States, and even in some elementary schools. It has recently been introduced in some Ontario high schools as part of the International Baccalaureate (IB) program, where it is part of the prescribed list of literature. This background may explain why the TCDSB is not inclined to withdraw *Maus* from the curriculum.

It is our belief that the *Maus* has not undergone a proper critical assessment by Polish academic circles. For this reason, with the assistance of a small group of Committee volunteers, KPK undertook the task of researching and carrying out the necessary critical analysis of *Maus*. This work must be continued. KPK hopes to be able to eventually succeed in having *Maus* withdrawn from use in Canadian schools. As long as the book is in use, there must be appropriate supplementary materials in place, for both students and teachers, to counter the falsehoods in the book and present the necessary historical and background information.

In order to accomplish these goals, we look to parents and students as well as to teachers of Polish descent in Canadian schools to join in this work.

We are requesting parents of children attending Catholic or public schools who have been required to read *Maus* to contact KPK by email at president@kpk-toronto.org or by telephone at 416-971-9848 (please leave your name and telephone number so we can contact you). We also invite everyone in the Polish community who shares our concern for historical truth and memory to consider donating their time or making a financial contribution to support our effort.

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