

Polish physician-scholar to speak on Jewish contributions to Poland

BY DAVID BAUGHER
SPECIAL TO THE JEWISH LIGHT

A renowned Polish physician, scientist and historian will speak in St. Louis on the Jewish community's history in his native land later this month.

"Many were very talented — artists, writers, journalists," said Dr. Aleksander Skotnicki. "They gave so much to our culture so they deserve our attention."

A recipient of the Jan Karski and Pola Nirenska Award from the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, Skotnicki is head of the Department of Hematology at Jagiellonian University and author of "Oskar Schindler in the Eyes of Cracovian Jews Rescued by Him." His appearance in St. Louis is sponsored by an array of institutions and organizations operating under the umbrella of St. Louis Polonia, a group that promotes the arts, education and culture of eastern Europe and Poland.

"Our hope is to exchange ideas and thoughts and bring different perspectives together," Basia Skudrzyk, a vice-presi-

dent of St. Louis Polonia, said of the event.

Skudrzyk is also business director of the Division of Medical Education at Washington University's School of Medicine, which is involved in a cultural partnership with its counterpart division at Jagiellonian University. Skotnicki is one of four Polish physicians who will be part of an associated internal medicine course being offered after his talk.

Skudrzyk said that Skotnicki is very charismatic and told her during one conversation that he wanted to know more about those to whom he'd be talking.

"He said, 'I don't want to speak at the people. I want to speak with the people. I want to understand who my audience is,'" she recalled.

In a phone interview with the *Jewish Light* from Poland, Skotnicki said he'd be speaking about the thriving Jewish community previous to the German invasion of 1939. He noted that half of pre-war



Dr. Aleksander Skotnicki

physicians in the Polish city of Krakow were Jewish as were a majority of the lawyers.

Active in trade and commerce, they also played an important role in the military.

"They took part in the defense of our country against the Germans," he said. "In 1939, there were more than 100,000 Jewish soldiers and officers."

Though not Jewish himself, Skotnicki does have family ties to the Holocaust. His grandmother perished in a concentration camp for the crime of hiding Jews. She has been honored by Yad Vashem as one of the Righteous Among the Nations.

He said that many, including those whose stories are lost to history, showed great courage in helping their Jewish neighbors even though it entailed great risk for both themselves and their families.

"This is a lesson for the contemporary world not to be neutral, to take part in

Upcoming lecture

WHAT: Dr. Aleksander Skotnicki will discuss 'Building Bridges: Polish-Jewish Perspectives'

WHEN: 6 p.m., April 18

WHERE: Four Seasons Hotel St. Louis, 999 North 2nd St.

HOW MUCH: \$75; with an additional \$25 to attend a 5 p.m. reception with the speaker

MORE INFO: Purchase tickets online at skotnickistpolonia.eventbrite.com or contact Ewa Dyk at 314-374-8811 or evadyk@gmail.com. Questions can also be directed to Skudrzyk at 314-766-2171.

supporting other people," he said. "For us physicians, it is very important that medical students know about that."

Skotnicki said that even institutions of learning participated in Nazi brutality.

"Even medical professors, academic people in medical fields did terrible things," he said. "They treated prisoners much worse than experimental animals."

Skotnicki has himself become active in Holocaust education through authoring his book and collecting the stories of survivors, something which came about after he began treating them as a physician. He learned much about life in the Warsaw Ghetto and in the camps.

Today, he hopes that those experiences can help future generations avoid the mistakes of the past.

"It would be much better if this war and terrible tragedy never happened but it has happened and we can learn from all of it," he said.

The 69-year-old said that he was glad to hear that Americans were interested in Poland's experiences under the Nazis, a topic which continues to be discussed in his native country.

"It is still alive in our thinking," he said.

Skudrzyk said that Skotnicki's message, entitled "Building Bridges: Polish-Jewish Perspectives," is one of tolerance and stresses the value of diversity so people do not fear those from other cultures or religions.

"We're all humans. We're all people," she said. "We need to learn to respect each other's differences and grow from them and learn from each other to be better people together."

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