

Tuesday, 29th July 2014

Address in Berlin on the anniversary of the Warsaw Uprising

Your Excellency,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear friend, and dear friends of freedom, Polish-German reconciliation, and Polish-German cooperation!

History cannot be changed. Yet one can live with it for better or for worse, build our future for better or for worse.

That is why I would like to say that I find it very difficult to resist my emotions when in the presence of the President of a free and democratic Germany, in the presence of so many so distinguished guests and the people of Berlin, an exhibition in homage to the Warsaw Uprising is being opened. An uprising that was the most bloody battle in the history of Poland, and one of the most heroic armed uprisings in the tragic years of the second world war. The uprising was directed against the German occupation and claimed over 150,000 victims among the soldiers of the Home Army and the civil population of Warsaw. The victims lost their lives not only as a result of warfare but also, or rather primarily, due to a planned campaign of a genocidal nature.

The Warsaw Uprising formed the Solidarity generation. We address our most grateful and respectful thoughts to the participants in the Uprising present here with us. Seventy years ago their heroism and their armed effort ended in catastrophe, ended in the hecatomb of Warsaw, a hecatomb of the Polish nation. The presence of insurgents in this place, where the central institutions of the Nazi state of terror had their main headquarters in the days of the Third Reich, notably the Reich Main Security Office, the Gestapo and the SS, who caused so much suffering and dealt such great destruction and so much pain to the insurgents, the presence of soldiers of the underground here is an example of the capacity we all hold: the capacity for a heroic stand against the past with the future in mind. The presence of insurgents in this place makes us also realise that in the final account, even the most arrogant, self-assured, and ruthless totalitarianism is helpless when faced with dreams of freedom and the reconciliation of free nations.

In 1944, the citizens of Warsaw seized arms eager to win a space of freedom for themselves pressed between two totalitarianisms: a space between the German occupants, already losing the war, and the advancing and victorious Red Army. That army would bring liberation from

the genocidal Nazi occupation, and would yet, at the same time, bring new Communist enslavement and new suffering.

The Warsaw Uprising was an insurrection of free people organised by the Polish underground state. It was not a purely spontaneous movement, it was the organised existence of the nation in the circumstances of the occupation, in circumstances of complete secrecy. Despite the daily terror, the underground structures really did operate throughout the occupation; it was not only the secret civil administration, but also the Home Army, the most powerful underground army in occupied Europe, that was operating.

Social aid units were active, operating to alleviate the life of the starving and the ailing. Well organised clandestine education thrived and books and magazines were published. It is worth remembering the clandestine education in the occupied territories of the Polish state. Polish underground education involved around one million pupils at primary school level. In conditions of secrecy around one hundred thousand people were studying in secondary schools, and nearly ten thousand students studied in secret institutions of higher education.

Another organisation operating at that time was the Żegota Council to Aid Jews trying to bring aid to those threatened with destruction in the ghettos and outside them. That was activity on an unprecedented scale that had no counterpart in any other country of occupied Europe. Nowhere in the occupied states did a specialised organ of the clandestine administration exist that would be set up in secrecy to bring active aid to Jews.

The occupant fought the Polish underground state ruthlessly, yet the underground state had a powerful mandate, that of the will of the nation, as it was the nation, subjugated and oppressed, which established that state. In the insurrectionist action of 1944, the underground state left the underground. A particular republic of free people was set up in Warsaw. Free, despite the artillery shelling, continuous raids, and dramatic fighting. And the members of the republic paid the highest price for that freedom. Krystyna Krahelska, who posed for the sculpture of the Warsaw mermaid, the symbol of the capital of Poland, was already mortally wounded on the first day. Her death is also a symbol, a symbol of Warsaw, a symbol of the heroism of the nation, a symbol of enduring against all the odds.

The Warsaw Uprising ended in a military defeat and near absolute annihilation of the city. The contemporary leaders of Germany ordered the murder of the inhabitants and the razing of the city to the ground. As SS Obergruppenführer von dem Bach-Zelewski testified after the war, the order that came from Berlin on the first day of the uprising went: *“every inhabitant is to be killed, no prisoners taken. Warsaw is to be razed to the ground, and this is how to set a terrifying example to the whole of Europe”*. It is worth remembering that at the time the

powers that be of the Soviet Union, perhaps at the Kremlin, issued a decision to hold back the offensive of the Red Army so that it did not in fact inconvenience the Germans in carrying out their criminal plan. In this way once again, much like in 1939, the two criminal totalitarian regimes actually collaborated to overcome the Polish desire, the Polish striving for freedom.

In 1945 Warsaw was 80% in ruin, demolished during the aggression of 1939, during the Uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto in 1943, and during the Warsaw Uprising of 1944. The loss of human life in Warsaw needs a similar recapitulation: the losses of 1939, of the liquidation of the Warsaw Ghetto in 1943, and the horrible losses of 1944. The numbers are terrifying, these numbers inspire horror in us even today, yet at the same time we remember and know that that effort, and those victims, were nevertheless not in vain because the Warsaw Uprising was a factor that formed the future generation, my generation, the generation of people in Polish Solidarity; it formed a generation that could in no way be robbed of their dreams of freedom. The soldiers of the Warsaw Uprising paid for that relay between the generations, for the passing on of values and dreams to following generations of Poles, a price that was equally great during the occupation and during the post-war persecutions by communist authorities. We look with respect at the fate of those who could indomitably survive that difficult and most difficult of times. It is they, the soldiers of the Warsaw Uprising present here, who were the role models for those who formed the young anti-Communist opposition in the 1970s and 1980s.

The memory of the Polish Underground State, the memory of the heroic fight of the Home Army, was preserved in many families, including in my family. That memory inspired us in our efforts to support the new and free Poland. It also happened that soldiers of the Home Army, and probably also the Warsaw insurgents, introduced us to the details of how to act in secrecy. Yet what is crucial is the fact that as a result of this shared experience, this tragic experience, the dramatic losses, including among my generation which was burdened with and yet richer thanks to the drama of the experience of our parents and grandparents, my generation of Solidarity consciously refused to resort to violence and armed struggle while fighting for Polish freedom.

For us, the people of Solidarity, people like Professor Władysław Bartoszewski, the late Marek Edelman, one of the leaders of the Uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto and Warsaw insurgent of 1944, and Wiesław Chrzanowski, a soldier of the uprising and Marshal of the democratic Polish Parliament after the transformation, were respected authorities and were also models of behaviour and a source of experience.

Today, standing near the place where decisions about the destruction of Warsaw and its people were made, I would like to express the conviction that in 1944 the Warsaw insurgents fought for more than just the Polish sacred right to liberty, as they were also fighting against a totalitarianism that was dangerous and destructive of freedom, and which jeopardised the entire civilisation of the Western world.

Therefore, I thank the generation of insurgents for their effort to overcome their situation, for the experience of the time of the occupation, and for overcoming the communist system after the war. For their contribution to the victory of the Polish peaceful revolution that took place 25 years ago.

Both in 1944 and later, in truth right until the end, the struggle continued for the same universal values that we today try to stand for in Polish-German relations, as part of the Polish presence in the Western world, as part of Europe becoming integrated.

The opening of an exhibition about the Warsaw Uprising in Berlin, the second after that held in 2004, is an important testimony to our special and tragic links which also exist between the cities of Warsaw and Berlin; it is a testimony also to the fact that, thanks to dialogue and conscious effort, one can overcome the burden of the crimes of the past.

In Poland we do not and shall not forget that it was in Berlin that the decisions to attack Poland in 1939, to bomb Warsaw, to unleash the terror of the occupation, were made; that it was here that the death sentence for an entire city was issued in 1944, a sentence that was to bring the total obliteration of the Polish capital.

At the same time we appreciate the fact that many years later German society is becoming ever more familiar with and understands this fragment of history so painful for Poles. It is not only our Polish history, not only the history of Germany, but also the history of the entire continent of Europe and of the entire world painfully experienced during the second world war. One testimony to it, among others, is the worthy attitude of the current authorities of Westerland, a city on the island of Sylt, who are ready to take a critical look at the past of SS Gruppenführer Reinefarth, its long-term mayor after the war, and for us one of the worst butchers of the civil population during the Warsaw Uprising.

We, Poles and Germans, remember together, and even more than remember, we are recording the successive pages of history together, speaking about those good turns in the history of Poland and Germany after the second world war, after the transformation of the system in 1989. We remember that the stimulus that brought about the unification of Germany came from Poland, from the Gdańsk shipyards. A fact commemorated in a monument built of fragments of the Gdańsk shipyard that has stood beside the Reichstag building for five years.

We remember that Helmut Kohl, Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, learned about the fall of the wall dividing Berlin while talking to Tadeusz Mazowiecki in Warsaw, the first non-communist head of government in this part of Europe. We remember that three days later, on 12th November 1989, the two men of state exchanged a sign of peace during a mass in Krzyżowa – Kreisau, symbolically opening a new stage in the history of Polish-German relations, and Berlin became an important advocate of Polish accession to the institutions of the Western world – NATO and the European Union.

Sometimes dramatically complicated and painful, this history builds a particular link between contemporary Poland and contemporary Germany, and forms a special relationship between the capitals of our states, connected with a lasting partnership, cities symbolising on the one hand an aggressor state and on the other the state that was the first to oppose it. Both cities had such horrible experiences, had such terrible destruction in the second world war. And both knew how to rise from the ashes.

That is why I wish to express this hope, thanking you with all my heart for the opportunity to organise here today, in Berlin, in this special place, a temporary exhibition presenting an exceptional fragment, not only of Poland, but of the history of Europe. Thanking you for this, and with respect to this dramatic history of mutual ties, I would like to express my hope that a lasting trace, a reminder both of the victims of the war and the occupation of Poland and of the heroes of the fight for freedom from totalitarianism, the freedom of Poles, Germans, and the entire continent of Europe, has the opportunity to start here in Berlin, partner city of Warsaw.

Perhaps it may be the case that the tragic period in which European values were trampled upon is commemorated here, in the Topography of Terror Documentation Centre, on the place where the decision to obliterate the capital was prepared and issued 70 years ago, to remember not only the trampling of those values, but also their defence. It is a commemoration of a free republic, a free people operating first clandestinely and then openly, a republic engulfed first by brown and then by red totalitarianism. I believe that, like no other gesture or symbol, this important trace of memory serves the continued reconciliation and cooperation of Poles and Germans. Thanks to our very awareness of our difficult shared past, in the name of our joint good present and our joint good future.