

**Address by HE Mr Zbigniew Gniatkowski, Ambassador of Poland
on the occasion of the 75th Anniversary of the Warsaw Uprising
National Library of NZ, Wellington, 1 August 2019**

Once a year on the 1st of August, the people of Warsaw pay a special tribute to the fallen heroes that fought for freedom in 1944 during the Warsaw Uprising. If at 5pm you are going by bus, it will stop in the middle of the street for one minute; the same if you are walking somewhere in Warsaw, you will see that Polish people will stop when hearing the alarms honouring the Warsaw Uprising. After this minute, everything in the city comes back to normal life. The Warsaw Uprising is still considered by the Polish people as the greatest and biggest rebellion against the Germans. In the course of World War II the myth of Warsaw known as the “Paris of the north” was replaced by the story of indomitable Warsaw – the city which stood up to totalitarian rule. To fully understand the reasons for the outbreak of Warsaw Uprising and the degree of determination of the Warsaw citizens fighting for their freedom, one has to realise the extent of oppression to which Warsaw had been exposed in the years of the occupation.

So, let me start with introductory remarks about the genesis. On 23 August 1939 the Third Reich and the Soviet Union signed a neutrality pact, known as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. A secret protocol within this agreement included a plan to divide Poland between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. A week later, on 1 September 1939, Germany invaded Poland, what was the beginning of World War II. On 17 September Eastern Poland was assaulted by the Soviets. Adolf Hitler, a few days prior to the invasion, said to his army commanders: “Destruction of Poland is our primary task, (...) show no mercy. Be brutal.”. Poland’s fate was unavoidable. The result of defence was tragic – 77,000 of Polish troops were killed in battle while fighting against Wehrmacht and the Red Army; 670,000 Polish troops became prisoners of war.

Poland was the first country to resist Nazi Germany in 1939. Several countries, including France, Great Britain, and New Zealand, in a spirit of solidarity with Poland, declared war on Germany. In material terms, however, Poland, left alone in its struggle, would suffer more than five years of brutal occupation and terror, with millions of victims of genocide and massive persecutions. Poland was Adolf Hitler’s first victim. The Nazis murdered three million Polish Jews and three million other Polish civilians. They designated the Poles “subhuman Slavs”. In concentration and death camps established and administrated by Germans – Auschwitz-Birkenau, Majdanek or Sobibór – the most numerous victims were Jews, including Polish Jews and Jews from many European countries occupied and controlled by Nazi Germany, but those killed also included hundreds of thousands of Poles, and people of other ethnicities, people with disabilities perceived in an evil doctrine as “subhuman” too. In death camps – Bełżec or Treblinka – prisoners were often killed in less than thirty minutes upon arrival. Under Nazi German occupation in Poland the death penalty was imposed not only for joining the underground movement or hiding Jewish countrymen; even trading was punished with death penalty. Racial segregation, humiliation, food shortages, the fear of being sent to labor camps – that is what people had to deal with every day.

On the other side, in former Eastern Poland incorporated into the Soviet Union, with regular army troops arrived special NKVD units, whose role was to eliminate the Polish state structures and any potential resistance. To this end, mass-scale arrests and executions of intelligentsia were carried out in the Soviet-occupied territories. It is estimated that in 1940-1941, Soviet Russia was responsible for deporting 1.5 million innocent Polish civilians into slavery; they were forcibly taken to labour camps, called gulags in Siberia and other parts of Russia, where many of them perished. In 1940, 22,000 Polish prisoners of war, the majority of Polish Army officers, were taken into captivity by the Soviets and shot to death in Katyń and other sites, in violation of war-time customs and conventions.

When we refer to the fight against German occupiers in Warsaw, and specifically to the Warsaw Uprising 1944, we also refer to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising which broke out in April 1943, in the final phase of the ghetto's liquidation. It was the largest and the most heroic act of armed resistance taken up by the Jews during World War Two and also the first civic uprising in occupied Europe. "The point was not to get slaughtered like sheep when they came for us" – Marek Edelman, one of the leaders of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, said in retrospect.

One year later, the Warsaw Uprising came as an act of defiance against the Nazi ideology and an expression of Poland's devotion to freedom. Warsaw took up arms at 5pm on the 1st of August 1944. The Home Army troops captured control of some quarters of the city and the capital was almost free after five years of cruel occupation. Polish flags appeared in windows and street loudspeakers played patriotic songs instead of German announcements. Warsaw residents reacted with enthusiasm. However few days later the mood changed. The reality was hard – without water and electricity supplies nor communication. Bombardments and fire were turning the city into ruins. During air raids, Warsaw residents hid in cellars, where they cooked, ate and prayed together. "From bombs and airplanes save us Lord", read the lines of a litany written by Miron Białoszewski, a Polish writer. In reaction to the uprising, Hitler gave to SS, Wehrmacht and Police units order to destroy Warsaw. In the first days of August 1944 Germans murdered not only those captured and wounded insurgents, but also civilians – children, women and the elderly. On 5 August, 20,000 civilians were killed in just one day. From bullets, grenades and bayonets, from the flames of fire and collapsing buildings, whole families and communities were dying. The terror of those events is beyond words. Initially intended to last several days, it continued for over two months before being suppressed by the Germans. Although the Soviet Red Army was present on the right bank of the Vistula river, Stalin rejected queries of the Allied forces seeking access to airfields.

The uprising claimed the lives of 18,000 insurgents and around 180,000 civilians. The remaining 500,000 residents were expelled. After the failure of the Warsaw Uprising, Hitler ordered Poland's capital to be razed to the ground and transformed into a frontline fortress, to be known Festung Warschau. Governor General Hans Frank's diary was clear: "After this insurrection and its suppression, Warsaw will meet a deserved fate – total destruction". Having deported the residents of Warsaw (...), the German troops, with support of various auxiliaries, including criminals, systematically looted the city, they burned and blew up building by building. Warsaw's war losses on the left bank of the Vistula river amounted to 80% of buildings.

In the end of the war, in February 1945, at the conference in Yalta, the leaders of the Soviet Union, the United States and Great Britain decided the shape of post-war Europe. Poland found itself in a zone exclusively controlled by the Soviet Union and its former allies revoked their recognition of the Polish Government-in-Exile in London. Communists took over the country and carried out the Kremlin's orders. The Soviet political Police eliminated the structures of the Polish underground state. The massive persecutions against the freedom fighters of the Home Army began. Also those soldiers who fought in the West, and after the war returned to their homeland, were monitored and seen as a threat to the communist rule. A communist court sentenced to death Witold Pilecki who volunteered to organise resistance in the Auschwitz concentration camp, wrote a report on the Holocaust and fought in the Warsaw Uprising. He was executed in 1948. This was the fate of many Polish heroes who survived the war.

Poland produced great heroes of liberty in the 20th century - during World War II and later. While thinking of war heroes, we must not forget the names of Polish commanders and soldiers fighting on all the fronts of the war – Polish generals Władysław Anders, Stanisław Maczek, and Stanisław Sosabowski. We remember those secret heroes – resistance fighters, couriers, intelligence agents supporting the Allies - Witold Pilecki, Jan Karski, Krystyna Skarbek to name a few. We also recall brave people helping their countrymen - Irena Sendler, Janusz Korczak, the Żabińskis, Ulma family and many others recognised as “Righteous among the Nations” by the Yad Vashem Institute after the war. Also the Polish diplomats in Switzerland or Japan. All those stories have been well documented and told in many books and movies. It is our duty to remember the heroism and martyrdom of the Polish people during World War II. If you visit Warsaw, please spend some time in the Warsaw Uprising Museum. It is a tribute of Warsaw's residents to those who fought and died for independent Poland and its free capital.

Before I conclude, let me recall one of the brightest stars whose light was shut down in the early days of the Warsaw Uprising. Krzysztof Kamil Baczyński is regarded by many, not only by scholars, as one of the greatest Polish poets of the 20th century. Many would rank him alongside Polish Nobel-prize winners - Czesław Miłosz, Zbigniew Herbert, and Wisława Szymborska as one of the Polish writers most deserving of a place in the pantheon of world literature. Yet he is virtually unknown to English-language readers.

“The flight of Icarus, marvellous but extremely short” - this expression perfectly describes the life of Krzysztof Kamil Baczyński. He was born in Warsaw in 1921. Gifted with extraordinary art skills, he planned to study at the Warsaw Academy of Arts and later in France. The outbreak of World War II, and his father's death shattered these plans for ever. During the war he studied Polish literature at the underground university where he met Barbara Drapczyńska, his first love and future wife. They were married in 1942 in the church in Warsaw (Czerniaków). A Polish novelist, Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, attended Baczyński's wedding: “A glorious June day (...). That year the lilacs bloomed more profusely than ever, and I appeared at the ceremony with a huge bouquet of these flowers. After the service was over, I remember remarking to someone that the whole thing seemed more like a First Communion than a wedding. Both Baczyńskis, very young, (...) they really looked like two children kneeling at the altar.”

Basia would agree on all dangers Krzysztof was exposed to when he became involved with the military underground. Until July 1944 Baczyński was a soldier of *Zośka* Home Army battalion. He was participating in sabotage missions like derailing trains. Then he was moved to the *Parasol (Umbrella)* battalion just before the Warsaw Uprising.

Krzysztof Kamil Baczyński did not witness the end of the Uprising. He was killed in action by a German sniper at 4pm on 4 August in the Warsaw Old Town. His family did not know his fate until the end of the war. When, in 1947, he was found in the ruins his mother recognized him thanks to the golden chain on the neck. He came to rest among the ruins of his own native city just as he predicted in his verse:

*For us, one charge
- straight up to heaven
one medal only,
- a cross on our grave.*

Baczyński was buried in the Powązki Military Cemetery, together with his pregnant wife, who was killed on 1 September, not knowing of her Krzysztof's death. His poems depict the brutality of war, but very often they suggest that love is the only force that can effectively defend a human being against it. In many of his poems Baczyński was prophetic. In a poem "A Little Song" (*Pioseneczka*), dedicated to Basia, he wrote:

*And so, leaning over the waters,
we will float away to oblivion
and on earth there will cry for us only
our own shadows which we left behind.*

Baczyński's talent was recognised and his tragic fate was reflected by his generation saying: *We belong to a nation, whose fate is to shoot at the enemy with diamonds.*