

The Official Address Delivered By The President of the Republic of Poland
Mr. Aleksander Kwasniewski
On July 10, 2001, in Jedwabne, Poland¹

Dear Ambassador of Israel, Dear Rabbi Baker, Dear Representatives of Jewish Milieus, Dear Mr. Mayor, Dear Residents of Jedwabne, Dear Ladies and Gentlemen, Fellow Countrymen!

Sixty years ago, on 10 July 1941, crime was committed against Jews on this land, at that time conquered and occupied by the Nazi Germany. This was a dreadful day. Day of hatred and cruelty.

We know much about this crime, though not yet everything. May be we will never learn the whole truth. But this did not prevent us from being here today. To speak in an open voice. We know enough to stand here in truth - facing pain, cry and suffering of those who were murdered here. Face to face with the victims' families who are here today. Before the judgment of [our] own conscience.

This was a particularly cruel crime. It is justified by nothing. Among the victims, among the burned were women, there were children. Petrifying cry of people closed in the barn and burned alive - continues to haunt the memory of those who witnessed the crime. The victims were helpless and defenseless. The criminals had a sense of being unpunished since German occupants incited them to such acts.

We know with all the certainty that Poles were among the oppressors and assassins.

We cannot have any doubts - here in Jedwabne citizens of the Republic of Poland died from the hands of other citizens of the Republic of Poland. It is people to people, neighbors to neighbors who forged such destiny.

At that time - sixty years ago - Poland was to be wiped out from the map of Europe. There were no Polish authorities in Jedwabne. The Polish state was unable to protect its citizens against the crime committed with the Nazi permission, at Nazi instigation. But the Republic of Poland should persist in the Polish hearts and minds. And the standards of a civilized state, the state with ages-old traditions of tolerance and amicable co-existence of nations and religions should be binding on its citizens. Those who killed, beat, took part in the dead set, set fire - committed crime not only against their Jewish neighbors. They are also guilty towards the Republic of Poland, its history and glorious traditions.

We are standing on a tormented land. The name Jedwabne, by a tragic ordain of fate had become for its today's citizens a byword recalling to human memory the ghosts of fratricide. It is not only in Jedwabne that superstitious prejudice was enkindled into the murderous flame of hatred in the "furnace era". Death, grief and suffering of the Jews from Jedwabne, from Radzilow and other localities, all these painful events which lay a gloomy shadow on Poland's history are the responsibility of the perpetrators and instigators. We cannot speak of collective

¹ Source: <http://www.radzilow.com/jedwabne-ceremony.htm>

responsibility burdening with guilt the citizens of any other locality or the entire nation. Every man is responsible only for his own acts. The sons do not inherit the sins of the fathers. But can we say: that was long ago, they were different?

The nation is a community. Community of individuals, community of generations. And this is why we have to look the truth into the eyes. Any truth. And say: it was, it happened. Our conscience will be clear if the memories of those days will for ever evoke awe and moral indignation.

We are here to make a collective self examination. We are paying tribute to the victims and we are saying - never again.

Let us all be the citizens of Jedwabne today. Let us feel what they feel! Let us remain with them in a common sense of grievance, despair, shame and solidarity. Cain could have killed Abel anywhere. All communities could have been tried in the same way. The trial of evil, but also of good. Of meanness and nobility. Righteous is the one who was able to demonstrate compassion in face of human suffering. How many Poles - also inhabitants of the neighborhood also of Jedwabne deserve to be called righteous!

Let us recall all of them today with greatest gratitude and with highest respect.

Thanks to a great nation-wide debate regarding this crime committed in 1941, much has changed in our lives in 2001, the first year of the new millennium. Today's Poland has courage to look into the eyes of the truth about a nightmare which gloomed one of the chapters in its history.

We have become aware of the responsibility for our attitude towards the dark pages in our history. We have understood that bad service is done to the nation by those who are impelling to renounce that past. Such attitude leads to a moral self-destruction.

We who have gathered here today, with all the people in our country who have clear and sensitive conscience, with the lay and religious moral authorities, consolidating our adherence to basic values, paying homage to the memory of the murdered and most deeply deploring the despicable perpetrators of the crime, give expression to our pain and shame, we manifest our determination to learn the truth, courage to overcome the evil past, firm will of understanding and agreement.

For this crime we should beg the souls of the dead and their families for forgiveness. This is why today, the President of the Republic of Poland, I beg pardon. I beg pardon in my own name and in the name of those Poles whose conscience is shattered by that crime.

In the name of those who believe that one cannot be proud of the glory of Polish history without feeling, at the same time, pain and shame for the evil done by Poles to others.

I wish with all my heart that the name of this village bring the memories of not only the crime but that it become the sign of the great self-examination, that it become the venue of reconciliation. Polish bishops prayed on 27 May "for all those who cherished anxiety and resentment towards the Jewish nation that they accept the grace of a change in their hearts".

These words express only too well the feelings of a great part of the Poles. May, then, this change occur. Let us spare no effort for it!

The tragedy which took place here cannot be annihilated. Evil cannot be wiped out; Suffering cannot be forgotten.

The truth about what happen will not redress what happened. The truth is not so potent. But only truth - even the most aching and painful - will allow to purify the wounds of the memory.

This is the hope that we cherish. This is what we are here for today. We are saying today the words of sorrow and pain, not only because of human decency. And not only because others expect us to. Not because they will be a compensation for the murdered. Not because the world is listening.

We are saying these words because this is what we feel. Because we ourselves need them most of all. We are doing it to be better, stronger with moral strength, free from prejudice, animosities and hatred. To respect and to love men. To turn the wrong into the right.