

Address by President Bronislaw Komorowski
29th July 2014

Distinguished President,

Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear Friend,

Dear Friends of the Polish-German reconciliation and of Polish-German cooperation!

One cannot change history. However, one can, better or worse, come to terms with history, one can build the future on history: better or worse.

This is why, admittedly, I cannot help being overcome with emotion as I am opening, in the presence of the President of free and democratic Germany, in the presence of so many distinguished guests and residents of Berlin, an exhibition which is a tribute to the Warsaw Rising. The Rising which was the bloodiest battle in Poland's history and one of the most heroic bids in the tragic years of World War II. The Rising, aimed against the German occupation, took the toll of more than 150 thousand lives from among Home Army soldiers and civilians. Those victims not only lost their lives in the wake of an ongoing fighting, but first and foremost, in the wake of an intended and designed genocide operation.

Our thoughts, imbued with gratefulness and respect, turn to the Rising participants who are present with us today. Their heroism, their fight waged 70 years ago, ended in a disaster, ended in a hecatomb of Warsaw, hecatomb of the Polish nation. The presence of the Warsaw insurgents in this place where back in the days of the 3rd Reich the chief institutions of the Nazi terror state were headquartered: the Reich Main Security Office, Gestapo and SS, the institutions which inflicted so much suffering, losses and pain to the underground soldiers, also the ones present here, speaks volumes about the ability we all have: to heroically face out the past, and to do so thinking about the future. Moreover, the presence of the insurgents in this very place makes us realize that ultimately, even the most arrogant, self-assured and ruthless totalitarianism is helpless when confronted with the power of freedom aspirations and pursuit of reconciliation of free nations.

In 1944, the people of Warsaw stood in arms driven by the desire to gain a space of freedom, wedged in-between two totalitarianisms. In-between the German occupiers who were already starting to lose the war and the advancing victorious Red Army. The latter, while releasing people from genocidal Hitler's occupation brought with it a new, Communist enslavement and new suffering.

The Warsaw Rising was the rising of free people, organized by the Polish underground state. This was not a purely spontaneous move; this was an organized existence of the nation under occupation, fully clandestine existence. In spite of every-day terror, underground structures continued operations almost throughout the whole occupation period: not only structures of civilian and secret administration but also the underground Home Army, the strongest underground army in occupied Europe.

Social welfare agencies continued their operations, trying to come to aid to those sick and starving. Clandestine education functioned, magazines and books were published. Noteworthy is that clandestine primary-level education was made available to almost one million pupils, on occupied territories which were under administration of the Polish underground state. Approximately 100 thousand students attended clandestine secondary schools, whereas secret universities offered clandestine curricula to almost 10 thousand students.

Adress by President Bronislaw Komorowski
29th July 2014

Moreover, the Council for Aid to the Jews Żegota was in operation, trying to come to aid of those threatened with annihilation in ghettos and beyond. This was an effort of unprecedented scale, with no equivalent in any other country in occupied Europe. Nowhere else would a specialised agency of clandestine administration be functioning, founded with the view and working to help Jews under occupation, a fully underground-based agency.

The underground state was ruthlessly persecuted by the occupiers. It derived its strength from the legitimacy it obtained from the nation. Since the nation, albeit tamed and occupied, called that underground state into being. In the insurgent effort of 1944, the underground state came to surface. Warsaw saw a formation of a kind of republic of free people. In spite of artillery fire, constant air raids and dramatic fighting going on. The members of that republic paid the highest price for their freedom: On the first day, Krystyna Krahelska who before the war had been the model for the sculpting of the Warsaw Mermaid, the symbol of Warsaw, was deadly wounded. Her death is also a symbol, the symbol of Warsaw, the symbol of the nation's heroism, the symbol of persevering against all odds.

The Warsaw Rising ended in a military defeat and an almost complete destruction of the city. German leaders of the time ordered that the inhabitants should be slaughtered and the city razed to the ground. According to the testimony of SS obergruppenführer von dem Bach-Zelewski, the order from Berlin issued on the first day of the Rising read as follows: *"Every citizen of Warsaw is to be killed, now POW's taken. Warsaw has to be levelled to the ground in order to set a terrifying example to the rest of Europe"*. It must be remembered that at that time the Soviet Union authorities, probably seated in the Kremlin, issued a decision following which the advance of the Red Army should be stopped so as not to disturb the Germans in the carrying out of their criminal plan. As it had been the case in 1939, once again the two totalitarian regimes engaged in an authentic cooperation to overcome the Polish desire of freedom, Polish pursuit of freedom.

In 1945 Warsaw lay in rubble, levelled during the 1939 attack, during the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in 1943 and in the Warsaw Rising of 1944. The same way, one needs to look at the cumulative loss of lives in Warsaw: including the one of 1939, including liquidation of the Warsaw Ghetto in 1943 and the devastating loss of 1944. These are shocking figures. But at the same time we do remember that the effort and sacrifice were not in vain, in spite of everything. The Warsaw Rising, next to its other credits, formed a new generation, my generation, the generation of Polish Solidarity people, formed a generation which could not be deprived of its freedom aspirations.

The price to be paid by the Rising soldiers in return for this generations relay, for handing over of the values and aspirations to new Polish generations, was equally heavy under occupation and during the post-war persecutions at the hands of the Communist regime. We look with admiration at the destinies of the ones who were capable of indomitable conduct, going through that trying period of time and the most trying one as well. It is them, including the Warsaw Rising soldiers present here who became a role model for young anti-Communist opposition fighters of 1970's and 1980's.

The memory of the Polish Underground State, the memory of the heroic fight waged by the Home Army was preserved in many families, including my own. Those memories were our inspiration as we struggled to launch a new effort to free Poland. Also, on a number of occasions, Home Army soldiers, and among them possibly the Warsaw Rising participants, were initiating us into the mysteries of clandestine operations. What is significant is that the sharing of experience, tragic experience, including that of dramatic losses sustained, strained

Address by President Bronisław Komorowski
29th July 2014

my generation but also enriched it, we were enriched by the dramatic experiences of our fathers and grandfathers, and my generation of Solidarity consciously abandoned use of force and refrained from standing in arms in the struggle for Polish independence.

People such as Professor Władysław Bartoszewski, the late Marek Edelman, one of the leaders of the Warsaw ghetto uprising and a Warsaw insurgent of 1944, or Wiesław Chrzanowski, the soldier of the Rising, the Marshal of the Polish democratic Sejm after the break-through, they used to be for us, the Solidarity people, our recognized authorities, and also role models from whom we acquired experience.

Today, as I stand close to the location when decision on the annihilation of Warsaw and its populations was made, I wish to share with you my conviction that the 1944 Warsaw insurgents not only stood for our right to freedom, a sanctity for us Poles, but also stood against totalitarianism: dangerous, curtailing freedom, perilous to the entire Western world.

Therefore I wish to thank the Rising generation for their effort to overcome the war-time experience and the communist system after the war. I wish to thank them for their contribution in the victory of Poland's peaceful revolution which was attained 25 years ago.

Equally in 1944 and thereafter, the struggle continued for the same universal values which we are now striving to realize in our Polish-German relations, in Poland's presence in the Western World and in the integrating Europe.

The opening in Berlin of the exhibition about the Warsaw Rising, the second one following the 2004 one, is an important testimony of particular and tragic relations, of Warsaw and Berlin, also seen as cities. It testifies to the fact that through dialogue and a conscious effort one can overcome the burden of past-time crimes.

In Poland we do not forget and we will not forget that it was in Berlin that decision about the assault on Poland in 1939 was made, the decision on the bombardment of Warsaw, on the launch of occupation terror. It was here that in 1944 a sentence was passed against the whole city, with the intention to achieve a complete destruction of the Polish capital.

At the same time, we do appreciate the fact that years after, the German society is better acquainted and shows greater understanding for this chapter of history, so painful for the Polish people. Not only a chapter in our Polish history, not only in the history of Germany, but also in the history of the whole Europe, so painfully afflicted in World War II, and the history of the whole world. This is corroborated by the notable stance of the present-day authorities of Westerland on the Sylt Island who are prepared to critically view the past of SS gruppenführer Reinefarth, the long-time mayor of the town after war, who was from our perspective one of the worst butchers of civilian population in the days of the Rising.

We, the Poles and the Germans together, we remember and even more so, we jointly write the new chapters of history which reflect the good fortunes of Poland and Germany after World War II: after the political breakthrough of 1989. We remember that the impulse which ultimately led to unification of Germany had been sent from the Gdansk Shipyard. The fact was duly commemorated by the monument representing a part of the Gdansk Shipyard, which for five years now has been located not far from the Reichstag building.

We do remember that German Chancellor Helmut Kohl was informed about the fall of the Berlin Wall when he was talking to Tadeusz Mazowiecki, the first non-Communist chief of

Adress by President Bronislaw Komorowski
29th July 2014

government in that part of Europe. We remember that three days after, on November 12, 1989, both statesmen offered to each other the sign of peace during the Holy Mass in Krzyżowa, the gesture which symbolically paved the way for the new opening in Polish-German relations, and that Berlin emerged as a powerful advocate of Poland's accession to the institutions of the West: NATO and the European Union.

This history, with its occasional dramatic perplexities and painful experiences, creates a particular bond between the contemporary Poland and the contemporary Germany. It develops a special relationship between the capitals of our two states, connected by a lasting partnership, the cities which on the one hand symbolize the aggressor state and the state which put up resistance as the first one. Both cities were so severely afflicted and suffered such heavy destructions in World War II. Both managed to rise from the ashes.

This is why, thankful for the opportunity to host today in this particular place in Berlin a temporary exhibition featuring this incredible chapter in the history of Europe, not only Poland, I remain hopeful. As I am offering my thanks, I remain hopeful that here, in Berlin, a partner's city of Warsaw, bearing in mind the dramatic history of our interrelations, a permanent trace can be created commemorating the victims of war and occupation in Poland and the heroes of the fight for freedom from totalitarianism: for freedom of the Poles, the Germans and the whole Europe.

Perhaps it will be possible to commemorate here, in the Museum of Topography of Terror, in the location where 70 years ago the decision on annihilation of the Polish capital was prepared and issued, not only the tragic days of trampling on European values but also to commemorate their defence. To commemorate the free republic, free people operating at first underground and then openly. The Republic surrounded by the brown and red totalitarianisms. In my view, this important thread of memory, more than any symbol or gesture, serves the cause of reconciliation and cooperation of between the Poles and the Germans. It is precisely the awareness of our shared troubled past that makes it possible, in the name of a bright present-day and of a bright future to be shared.