

70th anniversary of the outbreak of World War II

By: *Robert Strybel*,

Our Warsaw Correspondent

Poland didn't start the war but was first to fight

WARSAW—The pre-war Polish Military Transit Depot at Westerplatte was aptly chosen as the venue of Poland's central observances of the World War II anniversary. It was on September 1st, 1939, at precisely 4:45 a.m. that the battleship Schleswig-Holstein, allegedly paying a courtesy visit to the then largely German-controlled Free City of Gdańsk (Danzig), opened fire on the Polish depot, thereby launching the bloodiest war in human history.

Seventeen days later, the Red army moved in from the east. Implementing a secret agreement between Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia, Hitler and Stalin divided Poland down the middle. Poland was the only Allied country to fight from the first to the last day of the war and then some. A few freedom-fighters managed to survive in the underground in Communist Poland until the early 1960s, and the London-based Polish Government-in-Exile continued their struggle until the Soviet-imposed regime finally collapsed in 1989.

One of the symbols of the anniversary is the well-known "Poland – First to Fight" poster, showing a battle-scarred Polish flag. It has been updated to include the dates 1939 and 1989. Seventy years ago, Poland had been the first country to stand up to Hitler, and half a century later it was the first to throw off the Communist yoke. That triggered a domino effect which led to the collapse of one Soviet satellite after another and eventually to the disintegration of the USSR itself.

But that generally accepted view of the war's outbreak is now being questioned. Russian leader Vladimir Putin was among those invited to the Westerplatte observance, but Moscow has insisted the ceremony must concentrate only on Germany's September 1st attack on Poland. There can be no mention of the Molotov-von Ribbentrop pact in which Germany and Russia agreed to partition Poland between them. The Red Army's encroachment that began on September 17th and led to the Soviet annexation of the eastern half of Poland must also be ignored.

Long-standing Soviet and subsequently Russian propaganda claims that Stalin was forced to sign a non-aggression pact with Hitler after Poland had rejected a Soviet proposal to join forces with Russia against Germany. And the Kremlin calls the annexation of one-half of Poland's pre-war territory as the liberation of Ukrainian and Belarussian "brother-Slavs" from Polish subjugation.

But as the World War II anniversary approached, the Kremlin really outdid itself by concocting some truly outrageous examples of historical fiction. The Web site of the Russian Defense Ministry stated that Poland was actually to blame for the outbreak of the war. That was because Poles refused to accept Germany's "moderate and justifiable demands." After all, all Hitler wanted was to annex Gdańsk and build an extraterritorial highway and rail-line across Poland to connect East Prussia to the rest of the Third Reich.

In addition, the main state-owned Russian TV station broadcast a prime-time report alleging that in 1939 the Polish government had forged a secret alliance with Nazi Germany and Japan to invade the Soviet Union. In a strongly worded protest, the Polish embassy in Moscow called the report "deceitful and unreliable (and) a striking example of the falsification of history."

While it is difficult for today's Germans to deny the atrocities masterminded by Hitler, who had enjoyed the enthusiastic support of most of their parents' and grandparents' generation, there have been attempts to spread the blame, thereby taking some of the heat off Germany.

A case in point was the influential news weekly "Der Spiegel" which not long ago ran a report attempting to show that not only Germans who were responsible for the

Commemorating the Anniversary of World War II

“If There Won't Be Anti-Polishness Then there won't be Anti-Semitism”

Cardinal Joseph Glemp's Homily at Jasna Góra - August 25, 1989

This is the English translation of Cardinal Glemp's homily which the worldwide press labeled as being anti-Semitic.

“Words of peace come to the fore at this time, not just because we are upon the eve of ecumenical prayers asking for God's peace throughout the world to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the beginning of World War II.

What is more important is the necessity to eradicate the injuries to the spirit and the soul, which seem to have been carried on into the post-war generations as a result of the war. I refer to here specifically the feelings Poles have toward Germans and Jews.

Peace, as the Church teaches us, is a gift from God. It should therefore be cherished and carefully preserved. In society peace is a pact between people, which is based primarily on justice and fairness. I would also like to add that it should be based on freedom, truth and love. The road to such a peace is through a patient and wise dialogue, which would allow us to overcome the difficulties on the road to good international relationships.

As testimony to our striving for this road to peace is the presence here of Cardinal Franz Hengsbach and a group of Catholics from Germany, who have come here to pray with us. Also present is our Premier Mr. Mazowiecki. Not too long ago the Catholics of both nations – issued a declaration on the anniversary of the beginning of World War II, which we greeted with approval and great pleasure. We fervently hope that our relationships with our western neighbors become fuller and friendlier. We are especially grateful for the charitable help received. What remains is the integrated cultivation of mutual respect.

The celebration of the 1,000 anniversary of Russia threw a new light on our eastern neighbors and allowed us to remove prejudices. The road to peace is open and we want to proceed along this road with Christian sensitivity.

However, life does not like established patterns. And relationships between people do not fall into just two categories – friend or enemy. In our country, this holds true especially where the Jewish people are concerned. These people have been not just neighbors but members of our household and their talents have enriched us and at the same time caused some difficulties. For many Jews, Poland was a motherland not only because of their citizenship but also because they truly loved it.

As we read in "Pan Tadeusz" about Jankiel: "The Jew, a good soul, just as a Pole loved his country". Along with the innkeeper who induced the peasant to drink heavily, along with the Jews who were founders of communism, there were those who gave Poland their talents and their lives.

We were not indifferent to each other. Therefore, such occurrences as anti-Semitism and anti-Polishness were possible. To understand the complexity of Polish-Jewish problems, we have to ask ourselves a question: Was there ill will and were there disturbances against Jews in Poland? – Yes! Were there Jewish businessmen who disregarded and despised Poles? – Yes! Were there Jews during the occupation that collaborated with the Nazis, who were not up to the heroic defenders of the ghetto? – Yes! Were there periods of silence about Jewish suffering and were they victimized? – Yes. Were there Poles who died saving Jewish lives? – Yes!

The memory of the 50th anniversary of the beginning of World War II puts us on the same side of the barricade – on the side of devastation and death. The Jews, Gypsies and Poles were peoples who in Hitler's grand "solution" were condemned to extermination but according to a different plan and on a different scale. Among the Poles the intelligentsia was to be destroyed first. The oppressed shared a common fate.

At Polish cemeteries above the graves of Catholics are inscriptions with the Star of David as well as above the graves of Polish soldiers. Among the mass graves of Polish officers murdered in Katyn certainly there are also Jews. The brotherhood of common martyrdom is of extraordinary significance. Anthony Slomiski, who did not hide his identity, had written about the anonymous heroes of Warsaw: "For you my song and my tears. You who were at the same time simple and powerful. Hundreds more of you died in the war but who will mention your names? Porters, cobblers, craftsmen, doctors, tailors and servants, wives, sisters – who for months lived among the ruins in basements – my tears."

Then why are there problems with Oświęcim and the Carmelite Convent? Why suddenly after 48 years since the crematorium fire had been extinguished – why has the problem exploded? These questions trouble many of us, when we speak about peace, which should annul the war.

With deep humility and with a longing for unity, I would like to touch upon this topic. If there are so many unresolved matters then there is need for dialogue and not the presentation of demands. We bear some blame before Jews, but today, one would like to say – my dear Jews do not talk to us from the position of a nation raised above all others. Do not give us conditions that are impossible to fulfill. The Carmelite nuns who live close to the Oświęcim camp had wanted and still want to be the symbol of human solidarity, which embraces the living and the dead.

Don't you, my dear Jews see that your protests against them disturbs the feelings of all Poles and our hard achieved sovereignty? Your power lies in the mass media, in many countries at your disposal. Let this power serve anti-Polishness.

Not long ago a group of seven Jews from New York attacked the convent in Oświęcim. Admittedly the nuns were not killed, nor was the convent destroyed, because they were restrained – but do not call them heroes. Let us maintain a civilized attitude. We can differentiate between simple and complicated matters. Let us differentiate Oświęcim-Auschwitz, where most of the victims were Poles and people from other nations, located a few kilometers away in Brzezinka-Birkenau, where most of the victims were Jews.

Also regarding the new doctrine whether God is present or not present at the place of sacrifice is clear and understandable to all people who believe in God and should not be a political tool especially in the hands of a group of unbelieving people.

We, who worship Mary of Nazareth and who share with you Jews many sacred places want to start a sincere dialogue.

If there won't be anti-Polishness then there won't be anti-Semitism (in Poland).

We wish you that on the sacred earth of Palestine no one will throw stones at you, that the sounds of guns will stop, that no one will die from bullets – that peace – shalom – will be with you.

In our time, more than in the past, great wisdom is needed, so that the new great things will be more human. We are the witnesses of great changes happening in our motherland, new and important changes. We have to keep pace with the great challenge of history. We cannot look on passively, cynically or with hostility upon the efforts of the people working hard to lead Poland on the way to development and sound economy which is also the way to peace.

There is a need for wisdom that can see all that is possible and what is impossible. In this way we can overcome difficulties. There must be a wisdom that does not shake fists, or stamp its feet, does not stop progress but heartens those who are losing strength.

All matters of our motherland, church and people, we put in the hands of the Queen of Jasna Góra (Queen of the Bright Mount).

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Miracle On The Vistula River (Cud Nad Wisłą)

By: *Kazimierz Cybulski*

An Englishman Lord d'Abernon, once remarked, that the battle of the Vistula was the XVIII deciding battle in the history of the world. Said he: "There are battles great and bloody, but they are of importance only to those nations that are participating in those battles. However, there are battles that are deciding the historical faith of not one but many nations, as well as the historical overall faith of civilization. Such was the battle of Salamina, which saved the ancient Greek civilization and set the destiny of Europe some thousand years forward. Such battles were 16 in the past, and now the battle on the Vistula River in 1920."

On the fourth of July, the Bolshevik general Michail Tuchaczewski initiated the second offensive on Białorus, which allowed him to lead the four armies to Vistula, from Deblin up to the city of Włocławek. The diplomatic corps members were speedily evacuating from the capital city of Warsaw. In the capital remained the representative of the United States, and the Papal Nuncio, who later became Pope Pius XI, Achilles Ratti. The diplomatic –military mission of the High Council and General Maxime Weygand, Chief of Staff of the War Council Entente, suggested or rather advised that the Polish army units withdraw from its southern front, from Lwów (Lviv), Wolyn, and Lubelszczyzny, toward the Vistula and San River and to initiate counter-offensives from Warsaw and Modlin, and simultaneously start the cease-fire talk with the enemy. The Commander-in-Chief rejected those operational suggestions because they would not bring the ultimate military solution to the war.

Meantime during the months of July and August, in the city of Baranowiczka and then in Minsk, the commencement of talks with the Bolsheviks was initiated. The Bolsheviks played the game of delay tactics, but waiting for the news from Tuchaczewski, who was to capture the city of Warsaw.

At the same time the Bolsheviks initiated an anti-Polish campaign in the West. They mobilized the communists and all left leaning organizations to act against Poland. In Great Britain and in France, the loading of the war material for Poland was slowed down. The English diplomats, especially Lloyd George, tried to force Poland to accept the treacherous peace treaty. Very active supporters of the treaty were Czechs and Germans. Earlier, during the summit of the Prime Ministers of the allied countries, then Polish Prime Minister Władysław Grabski asked for help. Lloyd George set the conditions: give up Gdańsk, give to the Czechs Cieszyn, and give to the Bolsheviks all the land beyond the line Grodno, Brześć-Litewski. Grabski accepted those unfavorable for Poland conditions, without gaining any military or other help.

In front of this young, not well yet organized nation, stood a dilemma: TO WIN OR TO PERISH. On August 15, 1920, POLAND WON!!!... The superior plan by the Commander-in-Chief, and General Tadeusz Rozwadowski was as follows: From the Wieprz River on the north, Piłsudski forced the Bolsheviks to be between general Sikorski's army which was successfully fighting on the north of the Kingdom. In the meantime, General Żeligowski's forces stopped the advancement of the great masses of the soviet armies that were going toward the city of Warsaw.

The Battle of Warsaw ended with the Poles defeating four Bolshevik Armies. The Bolshevik losses were: 60,000 prisoners, 25,000 dead and wounded.

General Weygand, to whom the enemies of Piłsudski tried to pass the glory, wrote the following in his memoirs: "In the course of three days that Marshall Piłsudski spent among his men of the Fourth Army, he electrified them, he passed from his own soul into the souls of his fighters the confidence and the will to overcome all obstacles. Nobody but Piłsudski could do this."

The victory in August became known as *Cybulski - Vistula Miracle to page 9*