

President Andrzej Duda's New Year's Meeting with Representatives of the Jewish community in Poland

*Distinguished Mr Minister,
Distinguished Ministers,
Excellency, Mr Ambassador with Spouse,
Most Esteemed Professor,
Distinguished Chairpersons,
Excellency, Esteemed Chief Rabbi of the Republic of Poland,
Esteemed Rabbis,
All Distinguished gathered Guests,
Honourable Ladies and Gentlemen,*

I thank you very much and I am extremely pleased to host you, yet another time, at our annual meeting in the Presidential Palace. This is our traditional Hanukkah meeting, however, for the second time during my term as President, over the time when myself and my wife have been serving at the Presidential Palace, Hanukkah coincided with Christmas. Therefore, we come together a few weeks later. Let me reiterate, once again, the wishes which I extended to your community on the occasion of Hanukkah. The wishes of every success, the best possible development, all the best, may all your dreams and all that every individual desires and aims at come true.

To me, as President of Poland, this is also a very special time. As is happens, recently the world has confronted us with developments which we might not have entirely expected. We are about to commemorate a crucially important anniversary. We are about to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the liberation of prisoners of the German Nazi Concentration and Extermination Camp Auschwitz-Birkenau. This date was also designated by the UN General Assembly in 2005 the International Holocaust Remembrance Day. And indeed, since that moment the 27th January has taken on a global dimension, not merely in the symbolic realm, but also in the official, administrative one. It has become a tradition that those who wished to commemorate the Holocaust victims, those who held such remembrance dear, those who wanted to bow in sorrow over the graves of their loved ones or those they respected, or simply over the ashes of the brutally murdered people, those who wished to pay homage to the survivors and the saved, would meet once a year on the premises of that horrendous factory of annihilation, which the German Nazi camp in Auschwitz was, in order to pay tribute. A number of world leaders would also meet there annually, especially when the anniversaries were round, as we call them in Poland: the 60 anniversary, the 65th, the 70th and the upcoming 75th one.

Frankly, I was hoping, in my capacity as President of the Republic of Poland, that the approaching 75th anniversary would constitute a momentous event, which would bring everyone together at that highly symbolic monument, at that highly symbolic place, at that symbolic time. Usually, as you know, it is very cold there, sometimes bitterly cold. This magnifies the sense of gravity. This stiffening cold makes one truly comprehend the horror of the place. When one imagines that those people stayed there for years, without heating, that the only clothes they had were thin striped uniforms,

that they frequently walked on snow barefoot. Many of them did not even experience those horrors for they were immediately taken to gas chambers and subsequently to crematoria. That was the fate of the great European Jewish community. That was also the fate of 3 million Polish citizens of Jewish nationality who were murdered during the Holocaust, hundreds of thousands of whom were murdered precisely at Auschwitz.

I was hoping that this would be the commemoration ceremony which would bring everyone together. I was hoping that that would be the place which, once again, would send the strong message to the world.

I must say that I was astounded to receive an invitation from Jerusalem extended by the World Holocaust Forum to attend the commemoration, at the Yad Vashem Memorial Museum, of the 75th anniversary of the liberation of the camp and of the International Holocaust Remembrance Day.

To me it is precisely here, in Poland, on our soil of today, occupied back then by Nazi Germans, where those ashes are scattered. This is the place of immense symbolism. This is the place where everyone can pray, the way they wish, in different languages, for the deceased, for those who are no longer with us and who were murdered.

Deep within my soul I believe that this is the appropriate place, the best one. I believe that one must not deprive this place of its remembrance by transferring it somewhere else and by stressing somewhere else what happened more than 75 years ago and what took place over that period – from de facto 1940 until 1945.

Still, I decided to go to Jerusalem to avoid the discussion about my supposed unwillingness to acknowledge the remembrance of the Holocaust victims also at Yad Vashem, where also Polish Righteous Among the Nations are commemorated, where, as one of you has recently posted on the Internet, the trees planted for them whisper truth about the stance of Poles in those black years.

I was however astonished by the information that the President of Russia would be invited to speak, of Russia which in 1939 attacked Poland alongside Nazi Germany, carved up our country and, as a matter of fact, co-facilitated the subsequent carrying out of the Holocaust by Germans; that the President of Germany would be given the opportunity to speak; that presidents of other countries would take the floor, whereas the President of the Republic of Poland would not be scheduled to give a speech.

We resorted to different diplomatic channels to obtain the possibility for the Polish voice to be heard. It became especially important to us the moment when the President of Russia, Mr Vladimir Putin, delivered his speech to representatives, to the presidents of the Commonwealth of Independent States on 20 December in which he used horrible words in reference to Poland and Poles – the words which falsify history, which demonstrate a clearly distorted context of events in 1939, which make sweeping generalizations and slander my country and Poles as a society.

Moreover, they give an false picture of the Second Polish Republic as a whole. They furthermore give a false picture of the atmosphere which prevailed in the then Poland. For if it had not been the

Republic of many nations living alongside each other, the Polish rabbis would not have made an address, on 2 September 1939, calling for defence of German-invaded Poland. They would not have made such an appeal if Poland had been a country hostile to them, a country which had not granted a good treatment to their community – the one who they had cared for spiritually. A country where that community would not have had their Polin – a good place to live.

I could not agree with those words. We took diplomatic steps, we developed a strategy, however one of its important elements was my strong statement saying: "I will not be able to go to Jerusalem, to the commemoration ceremony unless I can present the Polish point of view in the broad sense of the word". In the sense of 6 million Poles murdered during WWII, citizens of the Republic of Poland, including 3 million Jews. Polish citizens accounted for the biggest number of the Holocaust victims.

And the Polish President should not take the floor? I made it clear: that is a distortion of historical truth. How is it possible that the ones who speak are the Presidents of Germany, Russia and France whose government back then sent people, Jews, to concentration camps, whereas the President of Poland is not allowed to speak, of Poland who never collaborated with Germans, whose Underground State was fighting against Germans and tried to support Jews as resolutely as it could.

Of course many will stand up and say: "But there were also anti-Semites. There were those who were mean". Indeed. I am not denying it, and I never have. Yes, there were anti-Semites and the mean ones. They did exist! There was also a majority of those who simply wanted to survive, to save their lives. Hence, they did not help or even refused to help. They did exist for they wanted to live!

And in Poland, on the lands occupied by Germany, any help to Jews was punishable by death. Everybody knows that. That made a big difference in comparison to occupied France and to other occupied countries. Here, helping Jews was punished by death. That was how the Ulma family died, as well as other Polish families who were totally wiped out, together with their children, for helping their neighbours.

I could not understand why the Polish President was not allowed to take the floor. My declaration made yesterday was decisive: I will not go to Jerusalem to participate in the commemoration ceremony since the place of commemoration of the International Holocaust Day is located on the premises of the former German death camp Auschwitz. And it is there that the commemoration will be held, organized by the Auschwitz Museum with the support of the Polish authorities on 27 December, where of course I will be present, in order to pay tribute, along with others, to those murdered.

I am saying this as I can imagine that within your community this decision and this discussion must have aroused different emotions. However, first of all, I wish to extend my deep gratitude to the Union of Jewish Religious Communities in Poland for their explicit support and their unambiguous backing of the Polish side in terms of where the historical truth is, following the speech by the President of the Russian Federation Mr Vladimir Putin.

I thank numerous representatives of your community, including official organizations, which in these days have advocated my decision. I am profoundly grateful for your understanding. Thank you for

being able to understand my great, huge respect, remembrance and homage to the victims of that horrendous extermination, their suffering and the need to take into account my duty as President of the Republic of Poland to remember all Polish citizens who perished, to take into account the remembrance of them. And the need to care for the dignity of my country, Poland, which I must not allow to be tarnished or questioned. I cannot be present in situations where such dignity is being questioned without having the right to speak. I could not have agreed to that.

I am deeply thankful for all your expressions of understanding. I am reiterating this once again very clearly as I would like you to hear it in person at this meeting. Thank you for your presence. There were different options possible. Some persons who did not agree with my decision or who had doubts about it might not have come to today's meeting. But you are here. I can see so many familiar faces which I see every year. Thank you so much for that.

We are a community of people living in Poland. We differ in our views, we confess different religions but we live together in respect and mutual understanding. I am very grateful to you for that. Whenever I look at you, I smile and say: "I am indeed the President of all Poles". It is a fact since all those who come to the Presidential Palace and feel connected with the Republic of Poland, with my country, where I was elected President, are Poles to me. This is the way I see it.

It is not a matter of nationality. It is a matter of what one has in their heart. It is not a matter of blood. Whenever someone asks about blood, I tend to smile and say: "Show me a Pole who can state with one hundred percent certainty that they don't have a drop of Jewish blood in their veins after a thousand-year-long common history. I am not able to clearly say that there is Jewish blood in my family. I am not able to do that since we do not have historical sources to that effect. But am I sure? As you know, Ladies and Gentleman, only the mother knows for sure. Especially in times when technology was still imperfect. That is the great wisdom which was there.

Once again, I ask you to accept my cordial wishes for the New Year which has just began. Once again, I want you to accept my deep gratitude for your position and the huge support which I received from you over the last couple of days. I am convinced that today there is no difficult relationship between Poland and the State of Israel, there is no difficult relationship between Poles and Jews today. There might be a troublesome relationship for a certain group of influential circles who organize this commemorative ceremony. That however is not the State of Israel. We know that the ceremony is organized by a private foundation with big influences. I believe that thanks to an honest, diligent, joint and wise action we will succeed also in surmounting this difficult moment. But first and foremost I believe that in connection with the 75th anniversary of the liberation of this horrific place, of the German Nazi Concentration and Extermination Camp Auschwitz-Birkenau, that the tribute and homage which should be paid to the Holocaust victims, to all those who perished, will be paid in an appropriate way. The way it should be and the way every one of us pictures it in their heart. To me this is the remembrance encompassing all Poles. Both, the Poles who do not find in themselves Jewish roots and those who are sure of having them. And of all those who believe to have only Jewish roots and who construe this land and this place as their own. For this is how I define Polish identity – as a sense of connection with your Homeland. If I did not define it in this way, then how could I possibly knee before a grave of a soldier who fell in 1939 or 1920 in defence of the Republic of Poland, a grave which has the Star of David on its tombstone? For who was he – the man who gave

his life for Poland, in its defence? He was a Pole, he was a Polish soldier, he is a Polish hero who sacrificed his life for his Homeland. He might have had two Homelands in his heart and in his understanding, but this one he had for sure. Otherwise he would not have died for it.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you again for your presence. We are a great community. Looking at that dreadful time and at the difference between a family who considers itself Polish and a family who considers itself Polish Jewish, when we look through the lens of the Second World War, then I am going to say the following: there is no single Polish family after WWII who did not lose anyone in that war. I also lost a close person – the brother of my grandfather, a partisan who was murdered by Germans. The difference however is that a huge number of Polish Jewish families simply ceased to exist after the Second World War. Altogether. And therefore all of us owe a huge tribute to the Holocaust victims. And therefore these are our common victims since we are a community. Once again, thank you for your presence.