

**Introductory remarks by HE Mr Zbigniew Gniatkowski, Ambassador of Poland**  
**at the screening of “Katyń” by Andrzej Wajda**  
**Embassy Cinema Theatre, Wellington, 12 August 2020**

*Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,*

Thank you for joining us tonight at this special screening. We wanted to mark the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Katyń Crime in April, but, as many others, due to the Covid19 spread and lockdown, we had to change our plans.

Let me start with a few general words. Reflecting the historical circumstances that brought many Poles to New Zealand, during and after the Second World War, we keep alive and acknowledge the tragic history of Poland as one of the first victims of two totalitarian regimes. Over the past years, we initiated many projects, including commemorations, seminars, film screening, research and publications. You may remember that last December we launched a special publication of excerpts from *“A World Apart: The journal of a Gulag Survivor”* by Gustaw Herling-Grudziński, a Polish writer and journalist. His account remains strong and thought-provoking as it is the movie we are going to see tonight.

For those less familiar with historical context, a brief introduction. Following an agreement between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union (and a secret protocol signed by Ribbentrop and Molotov), on the 17<sup>th</sup> of September 1939 Poland was invaded by Russia. The Soviet Union was responsible for deporting hundreds of thousands of innocent Polish civilians who were forcibly taken to forced labour camps in Siberia and other parts of Russia.

In 1940, 22,000 Polish prisoners of war - military officers and intelligentsia - were shot to death at Katyń and other sites, in violation of war-time conventions. They were murdered at Joseph Stalin's orders. This genocide was a long-kept secret of Soviets' atrocities. However, it was discovered during the war and the memory was preserved, in secret in Soviet-occupied Poland and openly abroad, also here in New Zealand. 43 years ago, the Polish Community founded a memorial Plaque at the church of St Mary of the Angels in Wellington. Another plaque, comprising the sacred soil from Katyń forest, was installed at St Patrick's cathedral in Auckland.

In April we published unique recollections. An Auckland-based author Barbara Scrivens prepared a research which includes photos, documents, and memories of several families living in New Zealand whose relatives fell victims of the Katyń Crime.

*"The murders of at least 21,857 Polish prisoners-of-war were clinical, brutal and carried out day after day in remote Russian locations in April and May 1940. In the Katyń forest, trees muffled the shots of the specialised executioners, Soviet NKVD officers"* - writes Barbara Scrivens in her emotional and personal presentation.

Among the murdered were the elite of pre-war Poland: officers of the Polish Army, policemen and reserve officers: officials, doctors, professors, lawyers, teachers, engineers, clerics, writers, merchants and social activists. At the same time, when the NKVD murdered Polish prisoners, their families became the victims of mass deportation into the Soviet Union. Over 700 Polish orphaned children, those Siberia survivors, arrived in New Zealand, upon NZ Government invitation in 1944.

An important anniversary is related to Katyń. Just this Saturday we will commemorate the centenary of the Battle of Warsaw. This victory halted the Soviet invasion of Poland and Europe in 1920. Many historians say that the killings in Katyń were an act of revenge, since many officers had taken part in the Polish-Soviet war twenty years earlier.

Finally, the Katyń Massacre was classified as a war crime, a crime against humanity and genocide. Sometimes we also say, the memory about Katyń Crime laid foundations for the Independent Poland, reborn after the collapse of Communism (this month we celebrate 40 years of *Solidarność*, the Solidarity movement which played an important role in our fight for freedom). Today's event is a part of many-years-long efforts to preserve the memory.

As the film description says we are going to see a powerful, multi-strand film. An uncompromising exploration of the Russian cover up of the genocide that prevented Polish people from commemorating patriots killed in the first months of the war, in spring 1940.

This cinematic tribute comes from Andrzej Wajda, an outstanding Polish film director. He is considered one of the world's most renowned filmmakers who documented the Polish nation's struggles to maintain dignity under the most trying circumstances.

Thank you once again for being with us tonight.