

**Speech by Hon Ron Mark, the Minister of Defence  
on the occasion of the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Polish Children's arrival in New Zealand  
Pahiatua, Town Hall, 1 November 2019**

(...) I am privileged and honoured to be here today on behalf of the government and to pay our respects and acknowledgement for the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the day that we welcomed our Polish brothers and sisters to Pahiatua.

I'll start with firstly acknowledging HE Zbigniew Gniatkowski and Mrs Agnieszka Kacperska, Her Worship (and my very good friend) Mayor Tracey Collis and the Tararua District Council, two of my Parliamentary colleagues, the MPs for the Wairarapa Alastair Scott and Kieran McNulty. Welcome. Thank you for being here. Krysia Reid from the Polish Reunion Facilitating Committee, Ladies and Gentlemen, Friends and Family, Boys and Girls.

I also want to specially acknowledge my military personnel (...) who came all the way from Linton. (...)

I'll start with that I was born in Masterton and (...) I was raised here in Pahiatua. (...) The one thing I can really recall is my foster parents talking very fondly and positively about the role that Pahiatua played on behalf of all of New Zealand when it became the host, and the carers, and the guardians of the Polish children who came here to make this place their home. And I believe – and it's clearly evident from today - that Pahiatua as a whole, young and old, is still very proud with the role they played in providing the safe place for these children.

The decision by the Fraser-led government of that day to invite these children to come to New Zealand, to what became known to them as home - Pahiatua, (...) was a humanitarian one. After that long voyage from Europe, arriving in Wellington, the Polish children were farewelled from Wellington railway station. And many of us who live in Wellington are very familiar with the memorial that is there in Wellington to remind us all of these children and their parents in Poland and when they arrived here and why they arrived here and what they had left. It was a big welcome here in Pahiatua. (...) From the military side, there were 33 army trucks which transported the children from the Pahiatua train station, just down the road (...) to the newly named Polish Children's Camp.

Ladies from Pahiatua's Polish Children's Hospitality Committee have prepared the beds and put flowers on the tables and tidied up the camp for their arrival. And Pahiatua opened its arms wide.

The camp, as Mayor Tracey has said, was administered by the New Zealand Army. All the Army maintenance staff took orders from the Camp Commandant Major Foxley. And over and above the daily responsibility of running the Camp, the New Zealand Army also helped collect 830 invitations from New Zealand families for the Polish children to spend 2 weeks holidays with them in different parts of New Zealand (...).

I can only imagine how it must have felt being taken out of the war-ravaged Europe and away from everything that is familiar to the other side of the world. And how these young children must have felt the fears, the concerns, given everything that they had seen, witnessed and been put through. As a foster kid myself, I was placed in a number of different homes over the years and I learned that you had to harden up and toughen up. But I simply cannot imagine what these children's lives must have been like before they arrived here. The trauma they would have suffered in the forced labour camps in Russia's Siberia. The deaths of their parents. The separation from their families. Being shipped to Iran and eventually all the way here to New Zealand. Such is quite unimaginable to the average New Zealander. Then, little alone now.

That they survived and dealt with the trauma; that they survived and dealt with the post-traumatic stress, that they went on to build and reconstruct themselves and their lives, to raise families and become constructive citizens of this nation, is simply remarkable.

And I think within that, for some of us today, who might complain about our lives, sometimes it would do well to reflect.

As a soldier, as an officer, as a student of a military history, there are things that I know about Poland that, I guess, that a lot of other New Zealanders may not. The atrocities that were committed on their officers in Katyń wood, the atrocities that were committed on the nation, on the people, not just by Nazi Germany, but by Russia. The bravery with which that nation and its free army fought in battles such as Market Garden, where they parachuted in and where the British airborne took such heavy losses, but the Poles succeeded.

Just recently I had the opportunity to attend the commemorations at Monte Cassino. And for me as a New Zealander and a soldier it hurts to see so many New Zealanders, so many names on those headstones whom I know their families, buried so far from home, beneath that mountain. But that mountain was taken, eventually, by Poland. At a huge price. Where the Americans, the Gurkhas, the Indians, the New Zealanders had failed, Poland prevailed. But they paid a heavy price. 1072 of their soldiers lay buried at the closest cemetery beneath the Abbey and on the rightly given to Poland for their achievement and for their sacrifice. And I visited the grave of General Anders who died in the UK but was actually taken back to lay with his soldiers.

I can only marvel at what Poland has achieved, the price it's paid and how it has risen. And the children who came here are part of that history, that legacy. And I think we here in Pahiatua are very privileged to have been able to play a very small part and assist that nation to recover, and the way we did.