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Remembering is our duty

September holds a special place in the memory and historical consciousness of Poles. It is a time of reflection on the Polish nation's dramatic experiences in the 20th century, as two anniversaries remind us how fragile the foundations of our peaceful, everyday lives often are and how important it is to remain vigilant in the face of the growing imperial ambitions of external enemies. The commemorations are an opportunity to appreciate the value of an independent state and the ability to defend what is most important in our lives – our families, the achievements of generations, life and freedom.

On the morning of 1 September 1939, German planes dropped bombs that obliterated the All Saints' Hospital in Wieluń, followed by a substantial portion of the town – a place with no strategic value, whose demolition marked the initiation of World War II. It also foreshadowed the nature of this war – the complete and utter barbarity of the invaders, their total disregard for the value of human life, and, indeed, the establishment of one of the war's primary strategic aims: the annihilation and condemnation to obscurity and disgrace of those nations that interfered with the German vision of a new, totalitarian world order.

Just over two weeks later, on 17 September 1939, the Republic of Poland, still defending itself against the German onslaught, suffered another blow. Under the terms of the criminal Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, the armies of the Soviet allies of the Third Reich crossed a Polish border and established a different kind of totalitarian order, with mass murders, deportations and gulags that claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of Poles.

Each year, these two dates are an opportunity for us to reflect on the fate of the victims of the German and Soviet occupations: on the six million murdered citizens of the Republic of Poland, the extermination of the Polish elite, broken lives and shattered families; on the magnitude of devastation, with cities in ruins, particularly the capital, Warsaw, and over 10,000 villages impacted by different forms of oppression; on the destroyed and stolen possessions, including priceless Polish cultural artefacts, estimated at over 500,000 items.

In these September days, our thoughts also turn to the intangible cultural values that proved their importance during the dark times of war. These values include courage, patriotism and the ability to make incredible sacrifices in defence of what is most important – human life and dignity.

This year, Poles – and perhaps others around the world – will be invited to reflect on these values through an extraordinary religious ceremony that transcends religious boundaries and speaks to those who demonstrate the highest level of bravery and selflessness by giving up their lives to save others. On 10 September 2023, in Markowa, the Ulma family from Poland will become blessed of the Catholic Church. The Ulmas provided one such example of extreme sacrifice at a time of trial, sheltering two Jewish families despite the threat of the death penalty, for which they paid the ultimate price at the hands of the German occupiers. In 1944, Józef and Wiktoria Ulma were killed along with their seven children: eight-year-old Stanisława, six-year-old Barbara, five-year-old Władysław, four-year-old Franciszek, three-year-old Antoni, one-and-a-half-year-old Maria, and the unborn child of Wiktoria's ninth month of pregnancy.

In 2023, the Polish September time of reflection will gain an additional dimension. This year, Poland will celebrate the first annual National Day of Polish Children of War, a new public holiday set for 10 September by the Sejm of the Republic of Poland. On this day in 1943, dozens of Polish children were arrested in the town of Mosina in the Wielkopolska region, marking the grim culmination of a massive repressive campaign that resulted in the capture of many Polish families suspected of cooperating with the independence underground. German gendarmerie station in Mosina sent a telephonogram that September day to the higher command in Śrem, providing a succinct but powerful record of the tragedy: 'The operation in Mosina continues. Last night, 156 people were arrested. Expecting to detain 60 more children today.' These three short sentences marked the tragedy of entire families whose members were subsequently executed or imprisoned. For the majority of the Mosina children, these words meant incarceration in the *Polen-Jugendverwahrlager Litzmannstadt* – a concentration camp for Polish children in Łódź on Przemysłowa Street, the only such place of execution set up by the Germans in occupied Europe.

The Łódź camp was intended for Polish children and adolescents between the ages of 6 and 16, but in practice, it contained even younger children, some only a few months old. Juvenile prisoners were sent to the camp for transgressions such as trading, riding the tram without a ticket, begging or petty theft. The children of families who refused to sign the *Volkslist* were also placed there, as were the children of people sent to camps or prisons

and youngsters suspected of taking part in the resistance movement. The exact number of children who went through the camp and died there is still unknown. As time passed after World War II, the camp's remnants slowly vanished from public view, and the memory of this unspeakable crime began to fade.

The terrible fate of the children from the Przemysłowa Street camp was but one part of the enormous tragedy suffered by the youngest Polish citizens and their families under the two occupying powers. Another was the German expulsion and pacification campaign in the Zamojszczyzna region, which left about 110,000 Poles, almost a third of the region's population, homeless. Approximately 30,000 – which accounts for almost a third of all displaced individuals – were children. 10,000 of them died as a result of deportation in inhumane conditions, imprisonment in resettlement and concentration camps, planned killings in gas chambers or phenol injection. Another almost 4,500 were abducted to the Reich for Germanisation.

Of the six million Polish citizens murdered during World War II, approximately 40% were children. The new public holiday honours their tragedy and the tragedy of their peers, who were exposed to mass deportation, crippling slave labour or imprisonment. The Polish authorities established this Day in response to the initiatives of the previous generation to commemorate this period of the war. Their response includes also the memorial institutions created and supported by the Polish state: The Ulma Museum in the village of Markowa in the Podkarpacie region – where the Orchard of Remembrance reminds us how Poles saved Jews at the risk of their own lives and those of their loved ones – and The Museum of Polish Children, Victims of Totalitarianism, which commemorates not only the tragedy of the prisoners of Europe's only concentration camp for children but also the martyrdom of all Polish child victims of the Second World War.

Remembering those dramatic experiences of the past is our duty – to the victims and future generations. Every day, we strive to fulfil this honourable obligation passed down to us by our ancestors.

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