

**Speech by HE Mr Zbigniew Gniatkowski, Ambassador of the Republic of Poland
on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the Polish Children arrival
Pahiatua, 1 November 2019**

Szanowni Państwo, Drodzy Rodacy, Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to acknowledge

Her Worship the Mayor Tracey Collis,

Honourable Ron Mark, the Minister of Defence,

the Members of Parliament.

A special welcome to my compatriots, dear Polish Children and your family members and friends.

It is a great honour and privilege to attend this commemoration including a special trip to Pahiatua, along with nearly sixty Polish Children who made their way back to Pahiatua once again 75 years on.

For over two centuries, the history of our homeland has shown how considerably our nation has been marked by struggles to regain independence, by its fight for freedom and by the experience of exiles, deportations and forced resettlement in many parts of the world.

Two months ago, also in Wellington, we commemorated the outbreak of World War Two, which led to the double occupation of Poland – by Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia. The year 1944 will always be special in history lessons – with the battles where Polish and New Zealand soldiers fought as brothers in arms at Monte Cassino, and also in Normandy. At the time when the Warsaw Uprising was fighting against Hitler's brutal occupation, a large group of Polish civilians left Iran. They were victims of Stalin's persecutions. This is the heart-breaking story of hundreds of thousands of Polish families forcibly taken to Siberia and other parts of Soviet Russia in 1940-1941. The gulags and labour camps in the Soviet Union remain as symbols of enslavement and oppressions. Some of those who survived came to New Zealand on the 1st of November 1944 which is a significant date in the Poles' wandering fate.

As we remember, when "General Randall" sailed into Wellington Harbour, carrying the New Zealand soldiers from the distant war fronts to their homeland, on board were also Polish children, together with their caregivers. Among those rescued, mostly orphaned, children were also the "Pahiatua Children" present here today. 75 years ago, as today, they were welcomed with hospitality and warm hearts. Polish orphans could discover their full potential and remain proud of their Polish roots. Despite the distance, their love for Poland, the land of ancestors, remain pure and unbroken. That heartfelt connection with the first Homeland was maintained and possible also thanks to special conditions here in the camp called "Little Poland", with Polish personnel, education programme, including Scouting. And last but not least Catholic faith. Later, when the Polish Children settled in their new home country, coherently they established a Polish House and a Polish School in Wellington – with the aim of being together as the big family and for bringing up next generations in the spirit of patriotism, in the spirit of Polishness.

Having said that, first and foremost, on behalf of the Polish authorities – the President of Poland, the Polish Government and the Parliament, I wish to extend our sincere gratitude to the Government and people of New Zealand, and in particular people of Pahiatua, for your great hearts, and assistance you offered in difficult time.

To conclude, let me recall the historic state visit paid by the Polish President last year. Symbolically, in the year of the Centenary of Poland's Independence, the President of free Poland

was meeting with the Polish Pahiatua Children in Wellington and Auckland. In the capital, he inaugurated the *Polish Children - Polskie Dzieci square* named after the Polish Pahiatua Children. The square in Wellington is a great sign of recognition of the Polish Community's contribution to the New Zealand society and to development of this country. (...)

Pahiatua and people of Pahiatua have special place in our hearts. Two years ago, I was pleased, alongside the Mayor Tracey Collis and the Pahiatua Children, to unveil a memorial plaque just in front of this Town Hall. I am sure you will continue telling the story of Polish Children, the story of friendship and partnership between our nations.