Dear guests,

On the twenty seventh of January seventy five years ago, the soldiers of the Red Army arrived to free the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. Those soldiers, used to seeing all kinds of war atrocities, were dumbfounded after they had crossed the gate with the derisive inscription “Arbeit macht frei”. On this day Shoah is commemorated all over the world in all Jewish communities. Poland could not ignore this important anniversary, simply because half of the six millions Polish citizens that were killed in the Second World War, were of Jewish origin. Many of them showed a great deal of heroism in their fight for the freedom of my country, which is visible on various war cemeteries in Poland, Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, France, Belgium and Italy, for example at Monte Cassino, Bologna or Loreto, where the graves of Jewish fighters are marked with the star of David. Polish citizens of many religions and various descent have fought in Polish Army for the freedom of Poland, Europe and the whole world.

Poland was the first country to provide military resistance against totalitarianisms in 1939 and was determined to fight until a complete victory on all fronts of the Second World War. Poland was led by the government-in-exile that was established in France and was then moved to England. Hitler’s gory retaliations against any civilian and military resistance during the occupation of Poland caused a great deal of suffering of all the citizens. However, an important issue that had caused general disbelief of the Western world was the systematic and meticulously planned extermination of whole nations, particularly of the Jewish population. Any attempts of aid, especially hiding citizens of Jewish descent were met with extreme reprisals, most often death penalty. Many individuals that were hiding their Jewish neighbors were sentenced to death. I would like to mention here the particular case of Ulma family from southern Poland, where Józef and Wiktoria Ulma were massacred with their six children along with one unborn child together with eight Jews they were hiding. The traitor that exposed them was a Polish police officer. At the time of war, many such criminals seeking financial gain, had denounced Jews or people that were helping or hiding them, having thus condemned both Jews and the Polish helpers to death. Unfortunately, frequently publications describing those events fail to point out that such persons were considered traitors and were condemned to death by Polish government-in-exile in London and those sentences were carried out by Polish Home Army officers.

It is imperative to remember that many Polish citizens were deeply engaged in helping people of Jewish origin. Polish Home Army created a dedicated unit that specialized in helping Jews, especially during the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Many priests and nuns helped by providing fake baptism certificates for Jewish children. Also Polish diplomats did not remain indifferent. As recently uncovered, a group led by a Polish ambassador in Bern, a consul and other staff of the Polish Embassy in cooperation with two Jewish organizations, were providing fake passports of South American nations to Jews facing persecutions in Europe. Thanks to their efforts over 10 thousands of Jewish lives were saved.

However, there were two persons whose feats I would like to highlight: captain Witold Pilecki and courier Jan Karski.

Cavalry captain Pilecki allowed himself to get arrested as soon as 1940 in order to provide intelligence for the Polish Army. He was imprisoned in Auschwitz and was the author of first reports about the genocide taking place in the concentration camps. The resistance movement was able to pass his reports on first to Sweden and later to other western countries. Pilecki fled Auschwitz in 1943, and was then able to write a detailed report and pass it on to the authorities. In spite of his heroism, captain Pilecki was sentenced to death by the communist government and executed on the fifteenth of March 1948 with a shot in the back of the head.

Jan Karski was a key person in the fight against Nazi regime. He went on a few missions as a courier between France, Great Britain and Poland. He wrote a report that he passed on and spoke personally to the British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden, giving a detailed statement. On the 28th of July 1943 he personally met President Franklin D. Roosevelt in the Oval Office and Rabbi Stephen Wise and presented the situation in Poland, the Holocaust and mostly what he had seen in Bełżec camp and Warsaw Ghetto. On the basis of the Karski Report, the Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs Count Edward Raczyński passed the information on to the Allies about the dramatic situation of the Jews and the Holocaust in Nazi-occupied Poland.

The title of his report was: The mass extermination of Jews in German occupied Poland addressed to the Governments of the United Nations on December 10th 1942.

Please do not hesitate to take a copy of the report that we have printed for you.