

Remarks by the Ambassador of Poland Mr Zbigniew Gniatkowski
at the presentation of the Gold Cross of Merit to Mr Rick Sahar
31 August 2020, Wellington

Today's presentation ceremony may be seen in a broader context of Polish-Jewish relations. Certainly, it's been related to history, and to our joint endeavors.

So first, let me say a few words about Polish and Jewish countrymen and their actions taken here in Wellington during the war. You may know, that the first Polish Association in Wellington was established in 1941 by the Polish Jews. They had a genuine feeling of belonging to Poland, hence they observed Polish national days, they were sending parcels to the Polish POWs held in Germany and organised relief to the people forcibly taken by the Soviets from Poland to Siberia. You can find this information in archives, including reports by the Polish Consul-General in Wellington Kazimierz Wodzicki. According to him, the Polish Jews in Wellington were aware that the Polish Government in exile in London and the Polish Underground Army made every possible efforts to support the Polish Jews in their survival during the war.

Wodzicki himself and his wife Maria were helpful in inviting a large group of Polish orphaned children who survived deportation to Siberia. In 1944 the Polish Govt in exile and the NZ Govt of Peter Fraser agreed that 733 Polish Children and their caregivers would be invited to NZ.

For centuries, Poles and Jews lived together in one country. Poland was a welcoming land, hence called *Polin*. Jews were safe and able to benefit from tolerance and freedom to profess their religion, and intensely develop their own culture and spiritual life. That is why in the 16th century Cracow Commune's Rabbi Moses Isserles termed Poland *paradis Judaeorum* (paradise for Jews).

Most unfortunately, the country which for centuries we were shaping together, working for the common good, collapsed in the wake of aggression by Hitler's Third Reich in 1939 and in the wake of the Holocaust, which German Nazis brought to our soil. The occupiers murdered six million Polish citizens, including three million Polish Jews.

This tragedy changed the course of history and the destinies of our nations. After World War II, the Jewish people built their own state, while Poland re-emerged on the map of Europe within its new borders, enslaved by the communist regime, and only after half a century regained sovereignty and true independence.

Today Poles and Jews continue to share many centuries' heritage. I am pleased that our event recalls not only an important aspect of historical experiences shared by Poles and Jews, but also in particular our local cooperation, here in Wellington.

Let me take this opportunity to express my deep satisfaction with very warm relation we enjoy – both Embassies and our Communities, I also mean the members of the Jewish Community of Polish Jewish descent. I would like to emphasise our longstanding cooperation and friendly relationship with the Wellington-based Holocaust Centre of New Zealand. You may know that as the Polish Ambassador I especially value our mutual trust and I was always keen to undertake joint projects, such as film screenings, exhibitions and seminars. One of the most memorable events, in my opinion, was the seminar held in 2018 with participation of the Holocaust and Siberia Women Survivors. In addition, the Embassy has been privileged to join the HCNZ on various occasions, such as the Anne Frank Exhibition.

In organizing many of those events, instrumental was Rick Sahar, along with other members of the Holocaust Centre. Our joint efforts to tell history and to keep memory alive remain one of the most important objectives.

Reminiscent of Stalinist propaganda, recent falsifications of history to discredit Poland do a grave disservice to all the victims of two totalitarianisms. Just a week ago we remembered the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and its secret protocol under which Eastern Europe was divided into German and Soviet spheres of interest. The protocol signed in Moscow on 23 August 1939 violated the independence of Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Finland and Romania. Having Stalin alongside, Hitler could conquer new countries with impunity, lock Jews from all over the continent in ghettos, and prepare the Holocaust – one of the worst crimes in the history of humankind. Tomorrow, we will commemorate the sad 81st anniversary of the outbreak of WW2.

“Together we must preserve the truth – in the name of the memory about the victims and for the good of our common future.”

I am honoured to say that Mr Rick SAHAR has been awarded with the Gold Cross of Merit of the Republic of Poland, for his valuable contribution to positive and vibrant Polish – Jewish relations in New Zealand.