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The death of a friend

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Polish President Lech Kaczyński and other Polish leaders were killed in a plane crash in western Russia on Saturday.

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I was in Warsaw, about to have a leisurely Saturday morning breakfast with a well-known documentary filmmaker, Wanda Koscia, when her husband, the Finance Minister of Poland called to tell her that a plane carrying half the nation's leadership was down. Dismay, disbelief and despair in the face of untimely death left us in shock. What can be said in moments when an entire nation has suffered such a gigantic loss?

A second Wanda – Wanda Urbanska, an American television personality, whose program “Simple Living” appeared for many years on PBS – was with us. She had a meeting to follow at mid-day and wondered should she canceled it. We both urged her to go on, never exchanging a word on the obvious: this is precisely what Poles have always done in the face of all their terrible tragedies.

In the hotel lobby we scanned a list of the dead on the concierge's computer screen. A name flashed, sending a chill down my spine—Andrzej Przewoznik, dear friend and high-ranking official in charge of on-the-ground arrangements at Katyn. Late the day before, we had visited for an hour in office.

“Come with us—you really should,” he had said; and for a moment I thought “Maybe I should.” I never gave the invitation serious consideration but the invitation was appealing. He wanted me to stay for the next day's ceremony but more importantly for the national observance to commemorate the 70th anniversary of Stalin's massacre that liquidated a high percentage of Poland's officer corps early in World War II. Andrzej and I had both gone to Katyn on Wednesday as part of the official delegation that accompanied Prime Minister Donald Tusk to his meeting with Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. The Prime Minister had invited me because my book had twice been a bestseller in Poland. A new edition reached bookstores just this week and I had given more than 20 television and radio interviews in the past three days, many of them on Wednesday just after the Putin-Tusk encounter. I knew if I went back to Smolensk, there would be more interviews and even more attention for my book. Fortunately, I had been gone for a week, was tired and needed to get back home. The U.S. national observance of Katyn, which I proposed last September, is scheduled for May 5th at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC; I am a principal organizer.

Reluctantly I told Andrzej, “No, I'd better get back.”

He threw up his hands and gave a smiling nod of disagreement—an image that will be forever etched in my mind. “Dobrze (okay),” was all he said, but the implication was clear: I'd be missing out on a great opportunity. I felt embarrassed to decline his generous offer, that I had let him down. Then we posed for a photo and exchanged bear-hugs as close friends in Poland so often do. Moments later as I waited for the elevator, Andrzej dashed out of his office and down the corridor; he waved and was gone. It was half past five and he had a plane to catch at dawn. Was he off to yet another meeting? Perhaps, but I hope he was able to go home, that he had a last and memorable evening with his lovely wife Jolanta, and his daughters, Ashia and Kasia. Just before we parted, I asked about his family because I had dined at their home and spoke three years ago to the assembly at Ashia's gymnasium. He beamed with parental pride when he told me Ashia, now 21, is reading Hebrew and even speaking a bit, reflecting a

remarkable phenomena among many young Christian Poles—an awakening of interest in the rich, one thousand-year heritage of the Jews in Poland.

In that sense Ashia is a chip off the block: Her father supervised the establishment of the haunting memorial at Belzec where approximately 435,000 Jews were murdered by the Nazis. Nothing infuriated Andrzej more than the occasional references to “Polish death camps” that still appear in the U.S. and European press. In fact he oversaw the restoration and maintenance of Polish cemeteries all over the Eurasian land mass—from Ukraine to Western Russia, to Siberia and at Monte Cassino where the Poles made the famous assault that cleared the road to Rome in 1944. They suffered more than 4,000 casualties and 1,150 deaths on the slopes below the ancient abbey where Germans troops made their fateful stand. It is noteworthy that the Polish Second Corps volunteered to make that heroic assault after three other attempts had failed.

Katyn, the great symbol of Stalin’s brutality toward the Poles, was a driving passion of Andrzej’s life. Like most Poles he was obsessed with finding the truth and wrote many articles and books on the subject. Near the end of our meeting he handed me his latest, an atlas-sized book full of haunting photos of the Katyn victims and the site where more than 4,400 Polish officers were murdered and buried. They were among almost 22,000 soldiers, police and border guards were murdered in numerous locations by Stalin’s secret police early in the war.

The tragedy of Andrzej’s death and the ninety-six others on the plane is compounded by the fact that it comes fast on the heels of a new turn in Russo-Polish relations. On the return trip back to Warsaw, he mentioned that he was confident that a new path forward with the Russians had been established—that eventually closure on the highly divisive Katyn issue would be achieved. On the trip back I also spoke to two members of Mr. Tusk’s inner circle. Both felt the day had gone well. Their boss had taken a political gamble by going with no prior commitment of concessions from Mr. Putin. When I asked about that risk, one of his aides said Mr. Tusk “did not take a risk; he took responsibility. Now there will be no turning back from what was accomplished today.” Specifically, the two leaders agreed to institutionalize an on-going joint effort to find missing information that the Poles badly want about where more than 3,000 of their men were shot and buried.

In the aftermath of this ghastly crash, accusations and recriminations—bitter and strident ones at that—will surely arise. A hard line faction in Poland wants to cling to old grievances over Stalin’s crimes. God knows all too well they spring from a blood-soaked earth. It is indeed ironic that so many leaders of Poland should perish near the very spot that symbolizes, more than any other, Stalin’s treacherous policy to liquidate the best and brightest of Poland.

President Kaczynski was particularly outspoken in his criticism of the Russians over the Katyn issue. One reason he went there only three days after his rival, Mr. Tusk, was to prevent being upstaged completely with the domestic audience. He was trailing badly in the polls in a presidential election to be held this fall; now, in the aftermath of the crash, it is scheduled for two weeks hence. Mr. Kaczynski wanted to salvage something in the afterglow of the avalanche of favorable coverage Mr. Tusk received from his meeting with Mr. Putin. Poles tend to think the absolute worst of Mr. Putin and some will surely say: “Putin detested Kaczynski ... now he’s done him in.”

Andrzej, the Tusk inner circle and other progressives readily acknowledged that Mr. Putin has a very difficult challenge on his hands – that the typical Russian scratches his head over ceremonies like the one on Wednesday and asks, “Why are the Poles complaining about a mere 22,000? We lost millions!” Mr. Putin has to prepare his people, and as the question suggests, educating the Russians about their tortured history will be a very difficult task.

Were he still alive, Andrzej, my warm and generous friend, would be the first to say: “Do not turn back; the old grievances must not force another long and pointless stalemate, we must embrace the future with confidence and hope.” The words may be mine, but he expressed that very thought in the last hours of his life. If he could he would now call on his countrymen to once again dry their tears and bravely face their ancient conflict with the Russians by putting enmity aside and resolving it at last.

The two Wandas and I will reconvene our meeting to decide how to structure the documentary we plan to make on “The Path to Reconciliation for Russia and Poland.”

Editor’s Note: *Allen Paul’s book “Katyn: Stalin’s Massacre and the Triumph of Truth” has been a bestseller in Poland twice. A new edition has just been released in the U.S. His website is: www.allenpaulbooks.com*