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For a Polish Artist, Tragedy Strikes Twice

By MARC CHAMPION

Wojciech Seweryn, an American immigrant from Poland and skilled amateur sculptor, spent 10 years crafting a monument to one of the great crimes of the 20th century, the massacre of 22,000 Poles by Soviet agents in 1940. The slaughter, known as as the Katyn Forest massacre, happened when Mr. Seweryn was under a year old. The monument he built, though, was personal: Among those executed was his father.

It ate at him his whole life. Russia denied culpability for Katyn until 1990, and has yet to describe the event as a war crime for which Stalin himself was responsible.

Then, this month, a breakthrough: Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin visited Katyn, just ahead of the 70th anniversary of the massacre. And in the crowning moment of Mr. Seweryn's life, he was invited by Polish President Lech Kaczynski to fly with him and other leaders to Katyn for a ceremony last Saturday.

Mr. Seweryn bought new clothes: a navy-blue suit, two white shirts and a blue one, new shoes and so many socks his wife, Maria, laughed at him. He fretted over the suit's material. "It was important that it didn't wrinkle on the plane," she says. "He was so excited."

Mr. Seweryn didn't make it to the ceremony. He, President Kaczynski and 94 others perished when the Tupolev-154 crashed in fog.

Katyn consumed her husband, his widow says. In Chicago, their home since the 1970s, Mr. Seweryn worked in an automobile paint shop. Any spare time he spent trying to bring attention to Katyn, a trauma whose importance to Poles is something outsiders find hard to understand. Mr. Seweryn built a monument to the victims in Niles, Ill.: the Virgin Mary cradling not baby Jesus but a grown man with a bullet hole in his head.

Stalin blamed the Nazis for the executions after the Germans discovered a mass grave at Katyn in 1943. The U.S. and Britain, focused above all on defeating Germany, backed the Soviets' story. After the war, despite mounting research implicating the Soviets, little was done for decades to set the record straight.

Mr. Seweryn "lived his whole life envious of other peoples' fathers. He hated those Russians so much, hated them for taking his father and, on top of it, denying it," says Mrs. Seweryn. She herself came to fear Katyn and was exhausted by her husband's passion for it. She didn't want to go.

This week in Warsaw, tens of thousands of Poles spent up to 14 hours waiting in line to see the coffins of President Kaczynski and his wife, Maria. Many didn't like the president, but they added their votive candles to the thousands in front of the presidential palace, making the ground slick with wax.

Mr. Seweryn's obsession with Katyn was unusually intense but shared to a degree by countless Poles. The killings wiped out much of a generation of Poland's military officers and civilian intelligentsia. The plane

crash of a week ago has offered a grim catharsis for Poland as a nation, historians and analysts say. Katyn, an open wound that stood for a national sense of martyrdom and abandonment, may be starting to close.

"Katyn is in a way the most important event in World War II in Polish minds, more so than the Holocaust," says historian Norman Davies. "People get very angry about this and say it shows Poles are being anti-Semitic. They're not. The difference is that the whole world has been told about the Holocaust."

Poles are expressing surprise and pride at the resilience of their young democracy after the loss of so many of its leaders. Equally surprising to many has been the warmth of the world response to this second Katyn tragedy, especially from Russia.

Russia showed a searing 2007 Polish movie about Katyn on prime-time television. Polish public television has received numerous requests from other countries to air the movie.

"I never imagined" it would be shown on Russian TV, says its director, 84-year-old Andrzej Wajda, whose father died in one of the series of simultaneous executions, many carried out in Soviet prisons instead of the forest but grouped under the rubric of Katyn. "This is the first attempt at de-Stalinization."

Poland, too, has had to come clean on difficult truths since communism fell, disturbing its own national narrative of martyrdom. President Kaczynski last year apologized for Poland's decision to annex part of what was then Czechoslovakia after the 1938 Munich agreement, in which Britain, France and Italy agreed with Hitler to let Germany annex the Sudetenland.

U.S. President Barack Obama, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and other leaders were due to attend Mr. Kaczynski's burial in Krakow Sunday, though those plans were threatened by the Iceland volcano's disruption of air travel.

Pawel Sliwonik, the head of a small Warsaw bathroom-fittings firm, waited 10 hours to pay his respects to Mr. Kaczynski, a politician he hadn't supported. Katyn, Mr. Sliwonik said, should be "one of those recognizable places in Europe that everyone understands in just a name, like Waterloo."

On Sept. 1, 1939, Mieczyslaw Seweryn, a teacher and reserve infantry officer, saw his young son for an hour at a hospital in Tarnow in southeast Poland. It was the first day of World War II and the hospital was hit by a bomb. He found a car for his wife and baby and put a mattress inside for them to lie on as they drove to safety, Maria Seweryn says. The German army had invaded. Mr. Seweryn went to the front. He was among 250,000 soldiers of the defeated Polish army who fled east and were detained without resistance by advancing Soviet troops.

He and other Polish officers were sent to a prison camp, Kozielsk. The last word Officer Seweryn's wife, Janina, had was a letter saying he would be transferred to a camp with better conditions. "He said he was so happy to have a son and eager to come back," she says. He was 36 years old.

On March 5, 1940, Lavrenti Beria, head of the Soviet Union's NKVD secret police, wrote to the Politburo proposing to kill thousands of Polish detainees, whom he called "enemies of the Soviet authorities, full of hatred towards the Soviet system." The Politburo, including Stalin, agreed the same day, specifying "capital punishment—shooting."

The prisoners, including lawyers and other Polish professionals in addition to thousands of military reserve officers, were methodically shot at sites in Western Russia, Ukraine and Belarus in April and May of 1940. Historians say they may have been killed in order to eliminate an educated class that might resist Sovietization after the war.

Those killed numbered 21,857, according to a since-released internal 1959 Soviet memorandum.

In 1943, the German Army found a pit in the Katyn forest in Russia, where they exhumed the remains of more than 4,000 Polish officers—a propaganda coup for the Germans.

Soviet officials retorted that the Germans themselves did the killing, when they occupied the area in the summer of 1941. The Nazis brought in international experts to counter that claim. One, a Scottish prisoner of the Germans named Stanley Stuart Gilder, later described in a report to British authorities why the men couldn't have been killed as late as the summer of 1941: Their boots were too new to have been used in prison for long, and they were wearing greatcoats.

By the time of that report, 1944, the Allies had several such reports, says Krystyna Piorkowska, a researcher at Poland's national military museum in Warsaw. But the U.S. and Britain didn't dispute the version given by their allies, the Soviets. Although in 1952 a U.S. congressional committee confirmed that the Soviets were responsible, little was done. And in Poland, Soviet-dominated through the Cold War, the subject was taboo.

The wife of Officer Seweryn kept alive her hopes for him, even though a German newspaper had described a wedding band found on one body with the same inscription as her husband's. She remarried after 12 years, but her new husband left and she was poor and ill, according to her daughter-in-law, Maria Seweryn.

"Sometimes she would come around to our house asking for a slice of cold cuts, or anything." Her son, Wojceich, "tried to support her as best he could," Ms. Seweryn says. He eventually went to the U.S. and later she joined him there.

In America, Mr. Seweryn, who had trained as a sculptor at Krakow's school of fine arts, worked painting cars in a repair shop. But Katyn was never far from his thoughts. He led the Katyn delegation in parades among Chicago's Polish community. For 10 years he struggled to get the money and land to build his monument, driven by a desire to honor his father, and by anger, his widow says.

Mr. Wajda, the film maker, says, "These are feelings we all had. They ruled all of us." His mother spent years hoping her army-captain husband was alive. "My father was the victim of the crime, my mother was the victim of the lie," Mr. Wajda says.

As Poles, after the fall of communism two decades ago, learned more about the massacre and truth behind the Soviet role, the events seemed to some to encapsulate the agonizing history of a country that had been independent just 20 years. "These were men, many in their 30s and early 40s who grew up fighting for an independent Poland and working to develop it," says Ms. Piorkowska, the researcher. "So you take these people who are the hope of the nation, and you liquidate them."

Russia has had difficulty coming to terms with the truth. It wasn't until 1990 that Mikhail Gorbachev, author of Russian glasnost, approved a small item from the state news agency that acknowledged Soviet responsibility. He had been under pressure from Poland's then-still-Communist government. But he declined to open the archives.

Mr. Gorbachev recalled in a newspaper interview this month that as he was preparing to leave the Kremlin after Soviet communism's collapse in December 1991, he gave his successor, Boris Yeltsin, "the Special Folder" on Katyn, which included the 1940 decision by the Politburo.

Mr. Yeltsin gave the file to Poland in 1993. When he went to Warsaw and visited a Katyn monument, he whispered "forgive us" but never said the words in public, says Adam Rotfeld, the Polish co-chairman of a

joint "Polish-Russia Committee on Difficult Matters."

A multiyear Russian investigation of Katyn slowed in the mid-1990s as Russia's worsening economic problems and political conflicts distracted from the quest for historical truth. Of 183 volumes of documents, a Russian court declared 116 volumes secret.

Those secret files include the final report of the Russian investigators, which has a list of those found responsible. The list has never been made public. Lawyers and scholars familiar with the case say it includes about 125 of the actual executioners. "The main goal of keeping all this secret is to portray it as an ordinary criminal act," rather than a war crime or genocide, says Anatoly Yablokov, who led the investigation. "It would have been a unique opportunity to declare [Stalin] a criminal."

Mr. Seweryn gained recognition back in Poland for his statue in Illinois. President Kaczynski visited the monument and presented him with a medal. Later, he was invited to attend the Katyn ceremonies. He and his wife journeyed to Poland, visiting the Seweryn family home, and Mr. Seweryn went on to Warsaw for the flight to Katyn. The president's office arranged a car for him to the airport.

"My husband called me from the hotel" in Warsaw, Mrs. Seweryn says. "He said, "I should have asked for a seat for you. Sometimes I think maybe I should have gone. Now I'm alone. It's the 70th anniversary of Katyn, and he was 70 years old."

—Gregory L. White and Marynia Kruk contributed to this article.

Write to Marc Champion at marc.champion@wsj.com

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