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OP-ED COLUMNIST

## The Glory of Poland

By ROGER COHEN

NEW YORK — My first thought, hearing of the Polish tragedy, was that history's gyre can be of an unbearable cruelty, decapitating Poland's elite twice in the same cursed place, Katyn.

My second was to call my old friend Adam Michnik in Warsaw. Michnik, an intellectual imprisoned six times by the former puppet-Soviet Communist rulers, once told me:

"Anyone who has suffered that humiliation, at some level, wants revenge. I know all the lies. I saw people being killed. But I also know that revanchism is never ending. And my obsession has been that we should have a revolution that does not resemble the French or Russian, but rather the American, in the sense that it be for something, not against something. A revolution for a constitution, not a paradise. An anti-utopian revolution. Because utopias lead to the guillotine and the gulag."

Michnik's obsession has yielded fruit. President Lech Kaczynski is dead. Slawomir Skrzypek, the president of the National Bank, is dead. An explosion in the fog of the forest took them and 94 others on the way to Katyn. But Poland's democracy has scarcely skipped a beat. The leader of the lower house of Parliament has become acting president pending an election. The first deputy president of the National Bank has assumed the duties of the late president. Poland, oft dismembered, even wiped from the map, is calm and at peace.

"Katyn is the place of death of the Polish intelligentsia," Michnik, now the soul of Poland's successful *Gazeta Wyborcza* newspaper, said when I reached him by phone. "This is a terrible national tragedy. But in my sadness I am optimistic because Putin's strong and wise declaration has opened a new phase in Polish-Russian relations, and because we Poles are showing we can be responsible and stable."

Michnik was referring to Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's words after he decided last week to join, for the first time, Polish officials commemorating the anniversary of the murder at Katyn of thousands of Polish officers by the Soviet Union at the start of World War II. Putin, while defending the Russian people, denounced the "cynical lies" that had hidden the truth of Katyn, said "there is no justification for these crimes" of a "totalitarian regime" and declared, "We should meet each other halfway, realizing that it is impossible to live only in the past."

The declaration, dismissed by the paleolithic Russian Communist Party, mattered less than Putin's presence, head bowed in that forest of shame. Watching him beside Poland's prime minister, Donald Tusk, I thought of François Mitterrand and Helmut Kohl hand-in-hand at Verdun in 1984: of such solemn moments of reconciliation has the miracle of a Europe whole and free been built. Now that Europe extends eastward toward the Urals.

I thought even of Willy Brandt on his knees in the Warsaw Ghetto in 1970, a turning point on the road to a German-Polish reconciliation more miraculous in its way even than the dawning of the post-war German-French alliance. And now perhaps comes the most wondrous rapprochement, the Polish-Russian.

It is too early to say where Warsaw-Moscow relations are headed but not too early to say that 96 lost souls would be dishonored if Polish and Russian leaders do not make of this tragedy a solemn bond. As Tusk told

Putin, "A word of truth can mobilize two peoples looking for the road to reconciliation. Are we capable of transforming a lie into reconciliation? We must believe we can."

Poland should shame every nation that believes peace and reconciliation are impossible, every state that believes the sacrifice of new generations is needed to avenge the grievances of history. The thing about competitive victimhood, a favorite Middle Eastern pastime, is that it condemns the children of today to join the long list of the dead.

For scarcely any nation has suffered since 1939 as Poland, carved up by the Hitler-Stalin nonaggression pact, transformed by the Nazis into the epicenter of their program to annihilate European Jewry, land of Auschwitz and Majdanek, killing field for millions of Christian Poles and millions of Polish Jews, brave home to the Warsaw Uprising, Soviet pawn, lonely Solidarity-led leader of post-Yalta Europe's fight for freedom, a place where, as one of its great poets, Wislawa Szymborska, wrote, "History counts its skeletons in round numbers" — 20,000 of them at Katyn.

It is this Poland that is now at peace with its neighbors and stable. It is this Poland that has joined Germany in the European Union. It is this Poland that has just seen the very symbols of its tumultuous history (including the Gdansk dock worker Anna Walentynowicz and former president-in-exile Ryszard Kaczorowski) go down in a Soviet-made jet and responded with dignity, according to the rule of law.

So do not tell me that cruel history cannot be overcome. Do not tell me that Israelis and Palestinians can never make peace. Do not tell me that the people in the streets of Bangkok and Bishkek and Tehran dream in vain of freedom and democracy. Do not tell me that lies can stand forever.

Ask the Poles. They know.

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