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From Poland's Tragedy, Hope

By Zbigniew Brzezinski

For decades the word *Katyn*, for the Poles, has stood for an unspeakable crime as well as tragedy. Henceforth, it will stand also for an additional national disaster — but perhaps also for hope.

In the past, *Katyn* signified mass murder committed in 1940 in a forest just west of the Russian town of Smolensk by troops of the Soviet Union, who killed defenseless Polish prisoners of war. The victims of the atrocity accounted for much of Poland's military as well as intellectual elite. The second *Katyn* tragedy — the April 10 crash on the approach to Smolensk airport of a plane carrying dignitaries to a ceremony commemorating that very 1940 massacre — led to the death of nearly 100 of the top political personalities of a newly independent, and once again democratic, Poland. Those who died on this modern pilgrimage of peace included Poland's President, Lech Kaczynski. ([See pictures of Poland's days of mourning.](#))

And yet it is possible that future historians will see in these combined events — and especially in the consequence of the second one — the beginning of a truly significant turning point in Polish-Russian relations. Should that come to pass, it would represent a geopolitical change in Europe of genuinely historic proportions. ([Read more about the Polish-Russian relations.](#))

A few days before the second tragedy, the Polish Prime Minister, Donald Tusk, and the Russian Prime Minister, Vladimir Putin, met to formalize a protracted process of painful accommodation regarding the *Katyn* crime. What happened in the forest 70 years ago was for many years a forbidden fact of life in Polish society. From the end of World War II to 1989, Poland was politically subservient to the Soviet Union. Even the closest relatives of those who perished at *Katyn* were not allowed to talk about it. People who claimed that their fathers or grandfathers had died on a certain date in 1940 were often viewed with suspicion; it was thought that they might be aware of who the killers really were. It was not until the era of Boris Yeltsin, President of Russia from 1991 to 1999, that a serious process to acknowledge what had happened in the past was initiated.

When Tusk and Putin met on April 7, the goal of the two men was a formal and comprehensive reconciliation of their nations. Putin spoke at that event and spoke well. But he still spoke more as a statesman doing what was needed; somehow, he did not really connect, in a human sense, with the Poles. By contrast, within hours of the fatal plane crash outside Smolensk three days later, Putin himself was on the spot in *Katyn*, reaching out to the Poles in a spontaneously warm and compassionate fashion. That all of a sudden infused human feelings into an issue that had divided the two peoples. ([See TIME's Poland covers.](#))

It is difficult to tell what the long-term reactions in Poland will be to what has so recently transpired. Poland is still mourning its dead; it is possible that conspiracy theories could yet surface. But I feel confident that the gestures of the past few days will unleash a degree of reciprocal human warmth from the Poles and the Russians. There is a chance that together they will initiate a new era in the historically troubled relationship between their two nations.

Should that happen, the map of central Europe would be transformed. A Russian-Polish reconciliation is impossible to imagine without it leading also to greater security for others who live in proximity to Russia, whether they be Estonians or Ukrainians or perhaps even Georgians, who fought a brief war with Russia in 2008. One should not overestimate the consequences of a change in mood, but ultimately human affairs are shaped by human beings. The sensitivity with which Russian leaders have handled the tragedy, coupled with the determination of Poland's leaders to face the future without recrimination, augur well for what is to come. ([See the top 10 news stories of 2009.](#))

If my hopeful perspective comes to pass, the evolving reconciliation between the Poles and the Russians will be another milestone in the process of a larger European accommodation. It is only in recent years that a genuine and socially far-reaching reconciliation between Poland and Germany — bitter enemies in World War II — took place. And it is only a matter of decades since something similar happened between the Germans and the French. A Europe in which old enmities like that between Russia and Poland have been put aside will in turn make the relationship of the U.S. with Russia easier.

In brief, maybe someday there will be a memorial in Katyn to all its victims: the earlier ones, whose death and suffering in 1940 was ignored for so long and even lied about, and the more recent ones, who perished on a mission of peace in 2010. If so, Katyn will have at last earned a more hopeful place in Europe's collective memory.

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