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Truth rises from Poland's tragedy

Last week's plane crash has brought an ignored nation and a harrowing episode in its history to world attention

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The Russian army band was practising in a forest clearing. Shafts of sunlight streamed through the stands of tall red spruce, playing on patches of unmelted snow and glinting on the brass of cornets and trombones. It was Wednesday morning: later that day the Russian and Polish prime ministers were to join a memorial service marking the cold-blooded execution of 25,000 Polish allied officers, killed in a series of massacres that had started on that very spot 70 years ago.

The musicians were not familiar with the Polish national anthem, Dabrowski's mazurka, and their conductor repeatedly led them through the spritely opening bars. As they concentrated on finding the right rhythm and tempo, their faces betrayed no sign of the extraordinary symbolism of their task. They would not have known the accompanying words: "Poland has not perished yet, so long as we still live."

The personal jet of Vladimir Putin, the Russian prime minister, had landed at the military airport near Smolensk an hour or two earlier. He skipped down the steps alone and walked to the limousine that was to lead the convoy heading for the Katyn forest. Thirty miles of road were closed to normal traffic that day. Policemen manned the checkpoints at every crossing.

Putin was engaged on a ground-breaking mission. Even though Mikhail Gorbachev, the last Soviet general secretary, had bravely told the world in 1990 that the massacres were ordered by his wartime predecessor, Putin would be the first Russian leader to visit the cemetery at Katyn. Moreover, as a former KGB officer, he could not have been unaware that Stalin's order had been carried out by the KGB's forerunner, the NKVD.

For 50 years the Soviet government upheld the false story that the Nazi SS was to blame for the massacres. Successive British and American governments had willingly colluded in the cover-up, presumably intent on protecting the myth of their "good war". Now, after many delays, Putin was throwing his weight behind the truth.

It seems his aim was to introduce the Russian public gently to the realities of Stalin's mass crimes. He had approved the screening of Andrzej Wajda's film *Katyn* on a minor television channel. In the final searing sequence, Russian viewers could see how soldiers of the Soviet security army had murdered thousands of blindfolded prisoners at high speed, carefully firing a German bullet into the base of each man's skull.

The plane carrying Donald Tusk, the Polish prime minister, had landed at Smolensk five minutes before Putin's. With him were a team of people who had worked long and hard for a breakthrough in Russo-Polish relations; among them was Lech Walesa, the former Solidarity leader and former president, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, Poland's first non-communist prime minister in 1989, Adam Daniel Rotfeld, a former foreign minister heading the "commission on difficult matters", and Andrzej Sariusz-Skapski, chairman of

the Katyn Families Association, a quiet determined man who had resisted all attempts to politicise the subject. I was aboard, too, as one of several historians, together with my wife in her capacity as a victim's relative.

Ever since the war, Polish people had talked in private about Katyn but public discussion was forbidden. I only heard about it in detail in the 1970s from Zofia Litewska, my son's elderly Polish teacher in Oxford. On September 1, 1939, she had been the head of a rural school in eastern Poland and had watched as her husband mounted his horse and rode off to join the army. His fate is unknown to this day. She and her four children were arrested by the NKVD shortly after and transported to a camp in Arctic Russia. Escaping by raft, they survived an epic two-year journey across Russia to Uzbekistan, Persia and finally India.

It was Litewska who showed me a copy of the Spis Katynski — the Katyn List — a volume published in London recording thousands of names of missing officers. Possession of that book was a criminal offence in the Soviet bloc.

My wife never knew her cousin's father, Roman Frydrych. We first heard about him 40 years after his death as we sat on cousin Danuta's sofa in Bromley, south London. In 1939 he had been a civil servant, a "counsellor" in Poland's defence ministry and a reserve officer. He said goodbye to his family during their August holiday following a sudden recall to duty. His daughter had no further news until the spring of 1943, when the German occupation authorities in Warsaw screened a film about their excavation of the Katyn graves. She was one of many who boycotted German cinemas, but friends told her they had recognised her father's identity card taken from his wallet.

Nazi propaganda was saying that the massacres had been perpetrated by the NKVD. It was one of the occasions when Goebbels had no need to lie. He released the grisly film to divert attention from the suppression of the Warsaw ghetto which had started that same day.

The simple memorial service we attended was held in front of a square, rust-coloured monument erected in 1995. A Polish orthodox bishop recited a prayer, Poland's chief rabbi sang the Hebrew lament for the dead and the service was followed by the laying of wreaths and prime ministers' speeches.

Tusk, who comes from Gdansk, has no personal link with Poland's eastern tragedies but as a historian he is well aware of the implications. His tone was firm but conciliatory.

Putin pulled no punches. Fears that he might mouth platitudes were unfounded. Speaking without a prepared text in a brisk professional style, he watched his audience intently, fixing his piercing eyes on those individuals — including me — who were listening without headphones.

He condemned the "totalitarianism" which had devastated Russians as well as Poles and stated clearly that "the truth can never be revised". He also spoke moving words of sympathy, talking of the murdered men's families, of widows and fatherless children. The two leaders shook hands warmly and helped each other from the stage, which had been erected at the intersection of the Russian and Polish sectors of the site.

The Russian sector contains unopened mass graves that are said to date from Stalin's great terror of 1937-9. The Polish site is covered by a quadrangular structure reminiscent of the Vietnam memorial wall. It carries the name, dates and rank of every known victim, each recorded on a separate tablet. We found the tablet of Second Lieutenant Roman Frydrych and left a red carnation.

After the ceremony, talks between Putin and Tusk overran by nearly two hours. No one present could have doubted that Russo-Polish relations had taken a definite step forward.

President Lech Kaczynski had not been invited to Katyn on April 7. Ever since his appearance in Tbilisi during the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008, he was high on the Kremlin's watchlist of suspect politicians. He had made a speech in Tbilisi which included a vainglorious boast that he had come "to fight". He and his twin brother, Jaroslaw, were forever demanding "strong policies" or inciting Polish fears about Germany, Russia's principal business partner in Europe. So Putin preferred to follow protocol and limit his invitation to his Polish counterpart. President Kaczynski was left to organise a second and separate visit to Katyn scheduled for the Saturday.

The president's chancellery prepared a guest list packed with dignitaries from almost all walks of life for this trip to Smolensk and Katyn. The aircraft, an old three-engined Tupolev Tu-154 (Nato reporting name "Careless"), had recently undergone a total refit at its manufacturers in Moscow. It was in sound mechanical condition, although doubts remained as to whether its automatic landing equipment was compatible with Russian military guidance systems.

When it took off from Warsaw shortly after 7.30am, the presence of thick fog at its destination was already known and planes were being diverted to Minsk or Vitebsk, but the president's forays into international affairs had been marred by several incidents featuring crossed purposes, dubious aircraft and inadequate flight plans. On his way to Georgia, for example, he insisted as commander-in-chief as well as head of state that his pilot should fly to Tbilisi despite the absence of air traffic clearance. The pilot had the temerity to land in Azerbaijan and was dismissed from the air force. By way of compensation the minister of defence awarded him a medal.

As we now know, when the plane arrived at its destination it made three successive approaches and three successive ascents. The Russian controller, who has been interviewed, said he had advised the pilot to divert but without response. When it crashed on its fourth approach, an explosion was followed by a fireball: 96 passengers and crew were killed instantly.

Great catastrophes cause emotional shock and shock leads to disorientation and a loss of judgment. Events preceding the catastrophe are forgotten, reactions to new developments are exaggerated, reporting veers out of control and conspiracy theories abound. In the case of this tragedy, the shock in Poland has been multiplied by its link with the pent-up sorrows of Katyn, which for decades knew no release.

A wave of sympathy has flooded over Poland from Russia. Russo-Polish relations have improved far beyond the modest advance already noted. Wajda's film has moved to a mainline Russian television channel. The presence of a Russian president and prime minister at President Kaczynski's funeral, scheduled for today, will be unprecedented.

More important is the impact that news of the crash and its circumstances must be having on Russians' knowledge of themselves. After millions have learnt what Stalin did to their Polish neighbours, Putin's compatriots will demand clarification of what he did to their own parents and grandparents. Calls will rise up to condemn him. The time is passing when the great Stalin can be presented as the victor of 1945 and as nothing else.

The paradox is stark. Kaczynski, a politician whose achievements in life were modest, has been rapidly transformed in death into a national hero, a master of his trade, a figure of global significance. One week ago President Barack Obama or President Dmitry Medvedev would not have found time for him: yet this weekend both were planning to attend his funeral in an intercontinental show of mourning and solidarity.

A dispute has erupted in Poland over the funeral's location. Without consulting anyone, Kaczynski's supporters persuaded the cardinal-archbishop of Krakow to have their man buried in the royal crypt of Wawel cathedral. Wajda and his wife led a brief protest in vain. "Lech Kaczynski was a good and humble man," they said, "but there is no reason why he should be laid to rest among Poland's kings." British people will recognise the attitudes that divided this country after the death of Diana, Princess of Wales. One grief-stricken side wants to sanctify the departed; the other side protests hysterically against the hysteria.

Conspiracy theorists are blaming the Polish government for Kaczynski's death, saying Tusk was at fault for not restricting the president's guest list, if not for actively plotting with Putin. "Mossad", I was told by an earnest professor at Warsaw University, "would have immediately secured the crash site." Yet Tusk's "weak government" did nothing, letting all the victims' laptops and mobile phones be pocketed by Putin's police.

Nonetheless, several good things may come from the disaster. Poland, so often ignored, has found its way onto the lips of the world. The gathering of leaders at today's funeral will do more than 20 years of dogged diplomacy. Its government, relatively unscathed, is functioning normally. And the meaning of Katyn will be pondered by millions who previously had never heard of it.

Katyn is the supreme symbol of honesty in European history. It is far from being the largest of European atrocities. But it is the test of whether people are prepared to face their denial, to bear the pain and to tell the truth. It is the archetype of all the many tragedies of the second world war that never reach the headlines but whose absence distorts our understanding.

'I knew almost everyone on board'

As Poland's foreign minister I knew about the crash within minutes: the Polish ambassador to Russia was 100 yards from the wreckage when I spoke to him by phone. My initial reaction was one of disbelief. I hoped it was a crash landing but not a crash. I could not imagine that everyone on board was dead.

I rang the prime minister, and later had the unenviable duty of telling the president's twin brother what had happened. I phoned him and said I had horrible, horrible news. It was a particular stroke of fate that it fell to me, since he had been leader of the opposition and we had often crossed swords.

He was calm, dignified, but I could feel the enormous emotion. He thanked me for the information. They had talked by satellite phone only half an hour before the crash. The president was anxious, a nervous flyer, and he also liked to talk to his mother before and after takeoff and landing. I knew that, because I had flown with him myself many times.

I knew almost everyone on board. I knew all the chiefs of the armed forces; the chief of staff got the job on my recommendation. I lost my deputy for eastern affairs who was a close friend. I even knew one of the stewardesses who died, a 22-year-old. She had flown with me to Norway the day before. She was asked to stand in for a friend on Saturday morning and she lost her life.

David Miliband was in touch to express his condolences, for which we are very grateful. And I am glad that there is going to be a huge television screen today in London so that Polish people there will be able to follow the state funeral of the president. I was in exile myself in London at one time and was grateful for being granted asylum there in 1981.

I told my children there are moments in history that we need to preserve in our memories. One such moment was 9/11; another was when I took my son — we were living in America then — to the funeral of Ronald Reagan. This is another such moment.

The outpouring of grief has been compared to that following the death of Princess Diana, but I think that it perhaps has more in common with the death of the Queen Mother. The mood is quieter, more dignified.

There was a possibility that I myself might have been on the plane. Several people rang me to see if I answered my phone after the crash. It is diplomatic protocol that a foreign minister often accompanies the head of state on such a journey, but on this occasion my deputy went. Sadly, he too is dead.

Radoslaw Sikorski was talking to Mark Edmonds

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A Polish mourner carries a photo of the late President Lech Kaczynski