

FORUM

6501 Lansing Ave.
Cleveland, OH 44105
216-883-2828
e-mail: forumpacc@yahoo.com
www.polishcenterofcleveland.org

September 2012, No. 9/122
Wrzesień 2012, Nr 9/122

POLISH-AMERICAN



John Paul II



CULTURAL CENTER

PUBLICATION OF DECLASSIFIED KATYN DOCUMENTS CAPITOL HILL, SEPTEMBER 10, 2012



On September 10, 2012, the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) published the declassified documents relating to the murder of Polish officers in the Katyn Forest in April of 1940. The documents, which until now remained classified in the archives of various US Government institutions, were formally presented on the Capitol Hill to an audience which included The Honorable Marcy Kaptur, who provided the leadership and was the prime mover in persuading the White House to permit the publication of the documents, Congressman Daniel Lipinski, representatives of a number of interested Polish-American organizations, several Katyn family members, two prominent researchers and authors

of the Katyn tragedy, and a sizeable representation from the Polish Embassy in Washington.

The format of the presentation consisted of three parts. The first included introduction by Hon. Marcy Kaptur, remarks by a representative of the Polish Embassy, and the NARA officials' descriptions of the released documents and the complex procedures of locating them. While dry in itself, the description of the process of finding the documents provided the road map of the task before us if we want, which we undoubtedly do, to pursue the search for all remaining documents in the possession of the US Government relating to the Katyn tragedy.

The question uppermost in our minds was how much did the US Government know about the Katyn atrocity, when did it find out about the murders, and what use did it make of this knowledge. During this second part of the meeting, Allen Paul, a researcher and writer, and Professor Mark Kramer of Harvard University who had been given advanced copies of the released papers, analyzed them and tried to answer the three questions posed above. Both agreed that the US Government officials, including President Roosevelt, knew about the Katyn massacre, knew as early as 1943 who had perpetrated it, but chose to suppress it so as not to antagonize their ally, Stalin. The report, the so called "smoking gun" of Russian complicity in the murder of Polish officers in Katyn, written and secretly transmitted to the US by Lt. Col. John Van Vliet, was not found. Col. Van Vliet, then a US prisoner of war held in Germany, was forcibly taken to the Katyn murder site and given by the German military complete freedom to look anywhere and examine whatever he wished in or around the Katyn grave sites. Van Vliet's report, transmitted secretly to Washington by way of his Swiss contacts, has been described by various US officials as lost, destroyed, or stolen. Even the manner of its disappearance seems to be a mystery.

In the third part of the meeting members of the audience were given an opportunity to sign up for a maximum five minute statements of their own. The most memorable of these statements were personal accounts by two victims of Soviet brutality, Franciszek Herzog and Antoni Chruscielewski. The first described in a quiet but dramatic way the receipt of a postcard, dated April 6, 1940, from his father, then held by the Russians as a prisoner of war near Kozielsk, who was executed in the Katyn forest only a few days later. Antoni Chruscielewski, Sybirak and a prominent member of SAWAP, spoke from the heart about what it took to survive Soviet captivity and about the role patriotism played in winning and preserving Poland's independence, the same patriotism which in today's Poland, he said, is called chauvinism, even fascism. Though physically weakened by age, he vigorously brushed aside the feeble and embarrassed objections of a Polish Embassy official.

My Personal Impressions

The declassification and publication by NARA of the Katyn documents was significant not so much for what these one thousand or so pages reveal as for the fact that this act constitutes a precedent, an opening of the door, to further search for the still undiscovered documents.

The credit for the political push leading to the declassification and the disclosure of these documents was given to the "Polish-American Community." This was like saying that everybody, and therefore nobody in particular, was responsible for attaining this goal. The truth was that there were Katyn Institutes, those in Maryland and New Jersey to mention two, and the Libra Institute, very active in the Katyn investigations, which deserved to be given the credit for the work they had done to have the documents declassified.

The performance of the delegation from the Polish Embassy at this meeting was bland, without character, subdued. The two Polish officers present at the meeting sat passively in the first row and made no effort to express any thoughts, or feelings, concerning the massacre of their colleagues in arms of seventy-two years ago. The contrast between the bravery and self sacrifice of those in 1940 and the blandness and passivity of the two in 2012 at this meeting was sad to observe.

Ms. Izabella Sariusz-Skapska, President of the Federation of Katyn Families, Warsaw, blamed "the totalitarian communist system of the Soviet Union," the "Soviets," and Stalin for the Katyn atrocity. Since Stalin and the communist system are gone, there does not seem to be anyone in particular to blame for the Katyn atrocity. This is a deeply troubling attempt to depersonalize the murderers, transform them into abstractions, without any names, languages they spoke, or nations of which they were members.

Finally, the reports and speeches failed to describe clearly and comprehensively the political context in which the Katyn slaughter occurred. It needs to be known that the Katyn atrocity was not an isolated event, but that it was the central, and the most bestially brutal component of a much larger genocidal plan directed by Russians against Poles. Even before WWII began Russians executed approximately 180,000 Poles living on the Soviet side of the Polish border just because they were Poles. This was the beginning of the ethnic cleansing which assumed monstrous proportions after September 17, 1939.

On April 13, 1940, about 350,00 Polish citizens from the entire eastern part of the country, were deported to Siberia or Kazakhstan. At this very same time, when all of us, the women, the children and the elderly were being exiled to the far and frozen reaches of the Soviet empire, 25,000 of their husbands, fathers, sons and brothers were being brutally murdered, one by one, their hands tied behind them, with a single shot to the back of their heads.

There were three other mass deportations of Polish citizens to Siberia: on February 10, 1940, in June of 1940, and June of 1941, the last one taking place just as the Germans were launching their attack on the USSR.

All total, about 1.5 million Polish civilians were deported to the Soviet Union in 1940 and 1941. According to Keith Sword's study, the mortality rate among the exiles reached up to 30% per year. As Jan T Gross pointed out, the deportees were taken not to teach them a lesson, not even to terrorize them, they were deported to be tortured and to die. The women, children and the elderly had been condemned to slow death; their husbands, fathers, sons, and brothers, the 25,000 of them, were murdered immediately in Katyn. This was the Moscow carefully planned and executed genocide of Poles in its totality, with Katyn at its center.

Witold J. Lukaszewski Sybirak
The Woodlands, Texas
September 12, 2012

**Tekst w języku polskim ukaże się
w następnym numerze Forum**