

Address by Aleksander Kwasniewski, President of the Republic of Poland to the Knesset on 29 May 2000

(Translation to English from the official website of the President of the Republic of Poland*)

Mr. Speaker of Knesset! Ladies and Gentlemen! Respect, brotherhood and help to Israel, an elderly brother of ours. Help on the road to its eternal and worldly possessions. Equal rights to all. It is how great Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz wrote 150 years ago in his "Set of Principles," the Constitution of the 19th century emigres. The same Mickiewicz, leader of the Polish Grand Emigration, formed the Jewish Legion in Turkey, the first organized Jewish armed force since the Bar Kochba insurrection, to fight against Russia for the freedom of Poland, the common fatherland.

Poland and Israel are heirs to one of the most unusual chapters of human history - the over eight-hundred-year-old coexistence of the two nations. In 1861, Rabbi Beer Majzels said in a Warsaw synagogue in his new-year sermon: We should love inhabitants of Poland more than residents of other countries because they are true brothers of ours, sons of Esau.

Throughout centuries, Poles and Jews used to live on the same land, reaping the fruits of joint work. They were warmed by the same sun. It would take a long time to list the bright pages of Polish-Jewish history. Written on them are outstanding works of culture, a climate of tolerance unprecedented in that part of Europe, a great spiritual and religious development. Suffice it to say that at some time more than a half of all Jews lived on the Polish soil. For eight hundred years, Poland used to be an important Jewish centre of science, Talmud studies and seminaries, arts, poetry, literature, philosophy and theology.

That used to be so...

Alas, history did not spare us difficult and painful moments. The most tragic of them, the experience of the Holocaust, will never disappear from our memory. That was the gravest crime of the 20th century.

The world is not the same after the Holocaust. This tragic experience obligates the nations of the world to fight for peace and human rights, for freedom and democracy, for human solidarity. One must not allow chauvinism and xenophobia to revive. There can be no consent to anti-Semitism. The world owes that not only to the Jews. It owes it to the generations to come.

The Nazi occupier perpetrated that crime on our common land. It was only Poland where assisting the Jew was punishable with death. It was only Poland, the only state in the Nazi-occupied Europe, where there was no collaborationist government. There was, instead, a Polish underground state, which fought against the Germans, lending assistance to the persecuted Poles and Jews.

The Forest of the World-Righteous at Yad Vashem, where every fourth tree bears a Polish name, testifies to the Polish solidarity. But we must not allow those, who

bringing disgrace upon the Polish people, were helping the criminals, including those who took part in the anti Semitic excesses after the war. We are aware in Poland of the deadweight which our domestic anti Semites have put on the present-day and the future of relationships between Poles and Jews.

And that's why we forcefully emphasize: One must not falsify history! One must not conceal the truth! Every crime and every roguery should be named and castigated, and circumstances examined and revealed.

The changes which have taken place in the consciousness of Poles towards history and other nations are one of the important accomplishments of the past few years. Great merits for these changes are due to our compatriot, Pope John Paul II, a great advocate of peace, understanding and dialogue between people, peoples and religions. His ideas, his trips, take for instance his recent trip to the Holy Land of three great monotheistic religions of the present-day world, are exerting big influence upon the transformations in Poland, including, naturally, the climate of international relations.

I have come from a land which history experienced harshly. We are proud of our history and state, which regained independence twice in the 20th century. We know that similar pride in their state and history is taken by the Israelis. So, let history be a warning and encouragement to us in an equal measure. A warning against evil, but also against one-sidedness. Encouragement to overcome the adverse by-gones and build up good relations between Poland and Israel and Poles and Jews all over the world.

Ladies and Gentlemen! For more than ten years, Polish governments have been taking actions to come half way to meeting Jewish expectations. The restitution of the property of Jewish religious communities is on under the law. Regulated has been the status of Jewish cemeteries and places of martyrdom. I have the honor to patronize the Auschwitz Program, which in a worthy manner protects the memory of people murdered at concentration camps.

We would also like to meet half way the expectations of private persons, who lost their property due to the war and post-war changes. We want to do what lies within the powers of a state which lost half of its territory as a result of the war, which suffered enormous destruction, on the territory of which there were huge migrations of population, where thousands of Polish citizens were deprived of private property in the name of "the higher needs of the state," where most archives were destroyed. Speaking of reprivatization one should have these facts in view. But the complexity and scale of the problem do not exempt us from the obligation to solve it.

At present, the draft of a property-restitution law is in parliament. I do believe the work on it will end in the adoption of solutions, which will not arouse controversy and will close the balance of the Second World War.

We rejoice at the revival of Jewish life in Poland. We see in it the triumph of life over death, of freedom over bondage, a return to the great Polish tradition of a multi-national Republic. With special satisfaction we hail the Jewish youths coming to

Poland from all quarters of the world. The participation of young Jews, alongside Poles, in the annual March of the Living provides an excellent lesson of history.

We would like to expand these meetings of the young, as direct contacts are the best way to familiarize with each other, to overcome the stereotypes and build up respect for the common tradition and discussion.

Ladies and Gentlemen! Today's Poland is a democracy, a state of the law, where respected are civil liberties. Ours is a country of friendly relations with all the neighbors, striving to integrate the entire region of Central, Eastern and Southern Europe. It is also one of the fastest developing states on the continent, in which the average growth of GDP over the past 7 years has exceeded 5 percent per annum.

I do not conceal that the costs of the transformations were and are steep. But effects are also conspicuous. That's why it is possible to usher in consecutive reforms and prepare the country for EU accession. I am under the impression of Israel's political and economic performance. Israel has accomplished so much over the past few years.

Poland, a NATO member, does understand, mindful of its own historical experience, your need for security. With respect we treat your decision to pull out your armed forces from Lebanon. Compromises, albeit sometimes painful, are indispensable to build a lasting peace. I hope that such a way of thinking will be also accepted by your partners.

We also feel our co-responsibility for peace in the Middle East. For years, we have been actively participating in actions taken by the international community to maintain peace in the Middle East. This purpose is served, among other things, by our participation in the peace-keeping mission of UNFIL on the border between Israel and Lebanon, as well as by our involvement in UNDOF peace-keeping mission on the Israeli-Syrian border. Our country will continue it.

Poland, aspiring to EU membership, does understand Israel's efforts to move closer to the group, which are so natural for historical, political, cultural and economic reasons. We also hope that the Jewish state will be able to establish close relations with all of its neighbors.

We support Israel's just aspirations to normally function on the international arena. Israel, the only UNO state, is not admitted to its regional grouping. Consequently, it is deprived of representation at UN bodies and authorities. It should not be so that the Israeli society of the Red Star of David is deprived, as the only one in the world, of full membership of the International Federation of Red Cross and Crescent Societies, only due to its symbol. I rest convinced this must change.

Ladies and gentlemen! We positively assess the development of relations between Poland and Israel. Particularly heartening are the results of the past year, such as the abolishing of visas, growing tourist exchange, doubling of Poland's exports and the fact of Poland becoming Israel's largest importer in our region. There are no conflicting interests between Poland and Israel, but there is tradition of cooperation,

will to resolve common problems and hope for the future, which we can and want jointly build.

There is still a huge potential of untapped possibilities in bilateral cooperation and collaboration on the international arena. We may do still much in the domain of economy, culture and education. We are open to such cooperation. It is our desire to seize each chance to strengthen peace in the Middle East, to tighten Polish-Israeli cooperation.

Ladies and Gentlemen! The 20th century of Christian era, the bloodiest of centuries in the history of humankind, the century which experienced both of our nations so harshly, is drawing to an end. It does not matter at all that we measure time in a different manner, that your calendar shows the sixth millennium and the Muslim calendar - the second one. Time which we count in different ways passes off the same way for all. Let's keep abreast of it.

Not forgetting the past, let's turn to what is borne to us by the future. Let's strive to have the future secure and auspicious for us, for our families and children. Let's stride as friends, who have so much in common, along the road which will lead to a better Man and a better World.

Thank you and Shalom.

* <http://www.prezydent.pl/en/news-archive/news-2000/art,30,visit-in-israel.html>