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## Commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the liberation of German Nazi concentration camps

Victory in Europe – May 8<sup>th</sup>, 1945 – was the official end of the Second World War following Nazi Germany's unconditional surrender. This war, the biggest tragedy in the history of humankind, started on September 1<sup>st</sup>, 1939 when Germany attacked Poland, and ultimately took the lives of dozens of millions of victims, soldiers fallen in countless battles, civilians killed during warfare, prisoners murdered in POW camps and civilian prisoners slaughtered in concentration camps.

In stark contrast to the joyful cheers of the population when allied troops liberated the first two western European capitals, Rome in June 1944, and Paris in August 1944, when the allied troops moved further east, they encountered the dark reality of the concentration camps. Although they knew about their existence, nothing had prepared them for the atrocities they witnessed there.

The first major camp to be liberated, in July 1944, was Majdanek, just outside Lublin (now Poland) where Soviet forces found just 500 survivors. The German guards had fled, taking the rest of the prisoners west with them earlier in the spring. It was a great irony of this war that one totalitarian was defeated by another, a former partner in the original attack in September 1939.

As the Red Army continued their advance west, on January 27<sup>th</sup>, 1945 they entered the largest death camp of all, Auschwitz-Birkenau. Here, too, they found this vast complex of industrial-scale murder almost empty; the SS guards had taken their prisoners on a death march to the west while those too weak to march were shot, leaving behind only 7,000 emaciated prisoners, some of them children. Primo Levi, in his memoir *Survival in Auschwitz*, mentions that the last German had left the camp by January 18<sup>th</sup>.

In his speech during the ceremony commemorating the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau on January 27<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the President of the Republic of Poland Andrzej Duda said:

"The genocide perpetrated here by the functionaries of the Nazi Third Reich, claimed more than one million three hundred thousand human lives. Among them were Poles, Roma, Soviet prisoners of war – but first and foremost Jews, of whom over one million one hundred thousand were slain here.

We are speaking about numbers, but these numbers represent concrete people, their histories and their suffering. We are speaking about numbers though we will surely never get to know the exact figure. We are speaking about numbers for we are in the factory of death. For the numbers make us realize the industrial nature of the crime committed here".

President Andrzej Duda stressed in his speech the importance of memory and the truth about what happened in Auschwitz. "We, in Poland, know well the truth about what was happening here since it was recounted to us by our compatriots who had camp numbers tattooed on their bodies by Germans. Distorting the history of WWII, denying the crimes of genocide and the Holocaust as well as an instrumental use of Auschwitz to attain any given goal is tantamount to desecration of the memory of the victims whose ashes are scattered here. The truth about the Holocaust must not die."

In the early months of 1945 victory was almost achieved, but at the same time the Allies were seeing the magnitude of German Nazi crimes as they liberated more and more camps: Gross-Rosen, Buchenwald, Dora-Mittelbau, Westerbork, Bergen-Belsen, Sachsenhausen, Flossenbürg, Ravensbrück, Dachau, Mauthausen-Gusen as well as hundreds of subcamps.

Among the last to be liberated, this one by the American army, was Mauthausen-Gusen. This camp is of special significance to

Poland since it was established especially for the educated elite of Polish society; indeed, the German name for it stressed that it was for the extermination of the Polish intelligentsia - *Vernichtungslager für die polnische Intelligenz*.

Victory in Europe, when it is commemorated on May 8<sup>th</sup>, will be one of honour for the victorious Allies, but it will also recall the suffering of the countless victims. When President Duda stressed in his speech the importance of memory and the truth about what happened in Auschwitz, he conveyed a universal message about a common effort of all mankind to prevent more tragedy of war.

Please find enclosed the speech by President Andrzej Duda during the commemorative ceremony of the 75th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau German Nazi Concentration and Extermination Camp.