

Marian Turski's speech delivered at the state ceremony marking the 80th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising

“Clenching in the fist a stick, a stone,
we beg you, oh God, for a bloody battle.
We implore you for a violent death.
Let our eyes not see, before we expire,
the stretch of the train tracks,
but let the precise aim of our hand, oh Lord,
stain their livid uniforms with blood [...].
This is our Spring! Our Counterattack!”

“Counterattack”—that is how the Polish poet Władysław Szlengel, a Jew imprisoned in the Warsaw ghetto, titled his poem. I quoted a mere few lines from it. The poem was written before the outbreak of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising on 19 April 1943. The poet himself spent the beginning of the Uprising hiding in a bunker not far from here—on Świętojerska Street. Pulled out of the bunker on 8 May, he was murdered by the Germans...

Our civilization has acquired over a dozen—if not more—symbols of resistance and valour. I believe I have the right to say that 80 years ago, the Warsaw Ghetto Fighters transformed the streets that surround us—Gęsia, Miła, Niska, Muranowska—into Jewish Thermopylae, into yet another Jewish Masada, into Jewish Westerplatte.

Distinguished Guests,

We're meeting here today in front of the Monument to the Warsaw Ghetto Heroes designed by Natan Rapoport, a graduate of the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts. I believe there are three reasons why we have gathered here.

The first reason is to show our respect and pay tribute to the residents of the Warsaw ghetto for their heroism, determination, suffering, and martyrdom.

Take a look at the Monument, please. What we see from the front side—what we are all looking at right now—are the silhouettes of the fighters, each holding a knife, a grenade, a rifle.

But do take a moment later to look at the other side of the Monument, the side which shows the last march of the civilians—those who until the very end did not want to part with their nearest and dearest, defenseless elderly people, women.

These are the two ways of demonstrating the same suffering and bravery!

We pay tribute to the individuals who symbolize resistance, such as Mordechai Anielewicz from the Jewish Combat Organisation, or Paweł Frankel from the Jewish Military Union. None of the fighters is with us anymore. However, there are still very few people who were imprisoned in the Warsaw ghetto, those who were children at the time.

Hena Kuczer is here with us today. She was 11 years old at the time. Her two elder brothers had been taken to Umschlagplatz long before the Uprising—two blocks from here, only in the other direction. And yet, before they were deported and murdered in a gas chamber, they had endured several days of torment and humiliation at Umschlagplatz, inflicted by the Germans as well as the

Ukrainians and Lithuanians who collaborated with the Nazis. They had to pay with a watch or hundreds of zlotys for a sip of water.

Towards the end of the Uprising, to flee the sea of fire that surrounded them, 11-year-old Hena accompanied her father and brother in their escape through the sewers. The father and brother died. Fortunately, Hena Kuczer managed to survive. In order to stay alive, she had to hide her identity and take a new name—Krystyna Budnicka. Today, she is an Honorary Citizen of the City of Warsaw.

Dearest Krysia, you have my utmost admiration and respect. I honour you, my companion in suffering and misery.

The second reason why we are standing here today is to pose questions: how did it happen and why?

I am not going to downplay the blame of the Germans—entangled in fascism and supporting Hitler, their culpability towards many countries, nations and social groups. They did bring about something absolutely unimaginable—the near-total extermination of a nation—the Jewish nation.

However, the foundation of such an atrocity had been built over centuries! Antisemitism was the very foundation. And here, I cannot refrain from asking—why?!

Why do people fear someone who has been deemed ‘the Other’? Why prejudices and superstitions towards ‘the Other’ lead to their alienation from society?

Why this alienated human being is later being dehumanized?

Why has antisemitism evolved from distrust towards ‘the Other’, through excluding him from the society, through fanatic hatred to extermination?

Why today do we still have to combat antisemitism?

Honourable guests,

Here comes the third reason.

Every generation interprets facts from the past from their own perspective. They compare what happened in the past with the present-day.

I’ll share with you what comes to my mind today when I reflect upon the events from April-May 1943.

I wasn’t in the Warsaw ghetto. I was imprisoned in another ghetto, in Łódź (Litzmannstadtghetto). I was sent to Auschwitz and I survived two death marches—the last one from Buchenwald to Theresienstadt. There, I was liberated by the Soviet Army, which consisted mainly of Russians. My gratitude towards them, towards those who liberated me from the German camps, will live as long as I live...

And yet... how could I remain indifferent, how could I remain silent when today the Russian Army invades our neighbour and annexes its land? Can I remain silent when Russian missiles demolish Ukrainian infrastructure—residential buildings, hospitals, monuments of culture? All this will result in a drastic rise in mortality rate and will reduce the lifespan of hundreds of thousands of civilians!

How can I be silent when I see what happened in Bucha, knowing how the Germans annihilated Polish Michniów, Belarussian Khatyn, Czech Lidice or French Oradour?

Marek Edelman, one of the commanders of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising— I was privileged to know him personally and I talked to him on numerous occasions—used to repeat these significant words:

“Life is of utmost importance! Once you have life—freedom is of utmost importance! And then, often, you must sacrifice your life again to fight for freedom!”

Honourable Mr Presidents,
Distinguished Guests,
Dear Friends,

125 years ago, in response to the antisemitic Dreyfuss Affair, Emil Zola shouted: “J’accuse!” I accuse!

Zola’s cry sent shockwaves across France and—in some way—across Europe. I do believe, in fact I am deeply convinced that today—in order to pay tribute to the Warsaw Ghetto Fighters—a loud cry should be repeated from here, from Warsaw: J’accuse!

Against antisemitism!

Against violation of human rights!

Against discrimination!

Against aggression on your neighbour’s territory!

Against falsifying history!

Against disrespecting the interests and will of a minority (whatever it may be) by a majority in power (wherever it may be)!

J’accuse, I accuse people indifferent to evil.

People, be alert! It’s easy to gather support by means of hatred. And yet, will this hatred not spell doom—upon myself, upon you, upon your children and grandchildren?

That is why I accuse those who incite hatred. J’accuse!