

**Remembrance Days
Opening Address**

**The Mayor of Częstochowa
Tadeusz Wrona**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Memory is the foundation on which to build our future. It is a collective memory which turns a group of people into a community. It makes for people's commitment to their home locality and adds local patriotism to their life perspective.

Last year, in September, I had an honor to open the World Congress of Former Częstochowa Inhabitants. Many people came whose lasting affection for the town on the Warta had sprung from being born, coming of age, studying, or starting their professional careers here. They all shared just one basic emotional quality: they felt Częstochowers – which has been enough to be one.

The Congress participants included a group of Częstochowa Jews with Mr. Arye Edelist, the leader of the Częstochowa Jews in Israel Association. The timing of the Congress concurred with the important and tragic anniversary of the genocidal liquidation of the large ghetto during WWII. Many inhabitants of Częstochowa, school students, veterans, and Congress participants joined Mr. Arye Edelist and us during ceremonies of laying wreaths at the memorials in homage to the Jewish inhabitants. The recollections of this terrifying crime of murdering over 20,000 Jewish Czestochowers brought tears to our eyes.

It was then, at the Congress, that the idea to organize the Days of Remembrance to bring us together, to show our reverence to all those who had contributed to the development of our city. And also to commemorate the victims of the most hideous and inhuman crime that had been committed here.

It is my honor and pleasure to open our meeting today. I would like to welcome most genially the initiators and contributors to our event, the members of the Honorary Committee: Mr. Zygmunt Rolat, president of the Oxford International Corporation, and Mr. Alan Silberstein, president of the Silco Associates whose funding and organization contributions were crucial to the event, Professor Feliks Tych, director of the Jewish Historical Institute, and Professor Janusz Berdowski, the president of the Pedagogical University, the organizer of the seminar.

Częstochowa has long been regarded as the symbolic town of Catholic Poland, since it is here that the spiritual focus of our country is located with the Jasna Gora monastery. Therefore, I am delighted to welcome His Eminency Archbishop of Częstochowa, Father Stanislaw Nowak, and the Abbot of the Jasna Gora Monastery, Father Superior Marian Lubelski. His presence in the Honorary Committee of the Days of Remembrance is very significant. We have the honor to have John Paul II as a freeman of Częstochowa and our Catholic community recognizing the authority of the Pope has been following closely his example and teachings.

It is also my pleasure to welcome Rabbi Michael Schudrich, the chief Rabbi of Warsaw and Łódź. We are honored to have such a guest.

I welcome the U.S. Ambassador Mr. Christopher Hill and the Ambassador of Israel David Peleg and thank them for having agreed to participate in the Honorary Committee. My special respect and appreciation goes to Mr. Shewach Weiss, the president of the Yad Vashem Institute and a former Israeli ambassador in Poland. I have in mind our meeting in Częstochowa several months ago and his friendly attitude.

I am glad our old friend and partner Mr. Arye Edelist of the Polish Jews in Israel Association is here with us. I also welcome our guests from Americas and Israel: Professor Elizabeth Mundlak Asz of the Caracas University, Steven Solarz, a former U.S.

Congressman, and, Samuel Willenberg, the sculptor from Tel Aviv.

I welcome the custodians of the Częstochowa Jews memorials: Ms. Halina Wasilewicz, who is at the head of the Częstochowa branch of the Social and Cultural Society of Jews in Poland, and Mr. Włodzimierz Kac, chairman of the Jewish community in Katowice.

It is good to have with us the distinguished columnist Konstanty Gebert; I have been reading your texts since the time of the martial law times.

Thank you for your participation in the Honorary Committee of the Remembrance Days. Częstochowa is greatly honored by your presence.

I am happy to welcome all representatives of our city. And these include members of the Parliament, town councilors, central and local administration officials, scholars, educators, and artists. I am so grateful that the cream of the crop have gathered here today to honor the memory of Częstochowa Jews.

Ladies and gentlemen, I have the honor and pleasure to represent Częstochowa self-government. Self-government stands for the community of people living in a neighborhood. But the meaning of community can be more extensive. The community of Częstochowians includes people from all over the world who are emotionally involved with this place. Community means also continuity. Our responsibilities as the town administrators include preserving the heritage of past generations, their traditions and values, to which we should contribute our work and then pass them to the next generation. Protecting this heritage involves also preserving the memory of its creators.

From the late eighteenth century, the Jewish community was contributing to the development of Częstochowa. We do appreciate this contribution. In the nineteenth century, the period of foreign rule in Poland, Jews of Częstochowa often manifested their patriotism and commitment to the traditions of the independent Polish Commonwealth. It was at the synagogue on Mirowska street that a White Eagle banner of the Polish army under Napoleon. It was in Częstochowa that Dawid Neufeld was active for many years, prior to his engagement as the editor of *Jutrzenka*, journal famous for its patriotic involvement on the eve of the 1863 Polish uprising. At the time our Old Town was also a scene of a joint independence manifestation led by a Catholic priest and a Jewish rabbi.

It would be difficult to overestimate the contribution of Jewish entrepreneurs' to the development of industry in Częstochowa in the nineteenth century. The builder of Częstochowa steelworks, Bernard Hantke, was Jewish. To Jewish producers, Weinberg and Landau, did Częstochowa owe its nickname of "Polish Nuremberg" – indicating a major center of toy and accessories manufacture. Textile industry also profited enormously from Jewish entrepreneurs.

I would like to mention the grand figure of Henryk Markusfeld here. As an entrepreneur he was a pioneer of industrial development of Częstochowa, and also a visionary, establishing a huge jute mill and investing his money to provide Częstochowa with electric lighting and telephones. A patriot and a philanthropist. As the chairman of the Jewish community he succeeded in the new synagogue being built on Wilsona street, but he also funded institutions serving the entire Częstochowa population to this very day, such as the hospital at Zawodzie and the crafts vocational school on Targowa street. He contributed to the cultural activities of his own community, but also funded a building to house the town Lutnia choir, which was not strictly Jewish. He was a man of unprecedented public authority and repute, even with people known for their animosity towards Jews.

Jews contributed **greatly** to the development of Częstochowa in the interwar period, manifesting on numerous occasions their local and general Polish patriotism. The number of Jewish inhabitants amounted to 20 per cent of the entire population. They had their representatives in the Town Council. Everyday life of Częstochowa owed much to their efforts, which call for further study and appreciation.

Let us not pass over Polish-Jewish conflicts. We need to speak openly of brutal, deplorable excesses of 1937, when a pogrom took place with many Jews beaten and their

property destroyed, and of local politicians using anti-Semitic rhetorics... **It was a time of the great economic depression; impoverishment made people sometimes resort to unacceptable means in their fight for survival.**

This is for us to remember it too. We must take responsibility for the good and the bad in our history. My generation did also experience anti-Semitism. The humiliating 1968 is a painful and shameful memory for Częstochowa. Then the ruling socialist regime acted as a national socialist regime and the vapors of gruesome official propaganda poisoned public life. The poison has not evaporated yet.

Tragic death befell Jewish Czestochowers during WWII. The frenzied and hatred-based ideology of Nazi Germany passed a death sentence to any human being considered to be Jewish. 20,000 people were murdered upon the liquidation of the large ghetto alone, neither did the next several thousand survive the war.

But beside atrocities and loss of human solidarity, the history of those times contains tales of dignity preserved against all the odds. I would like to recall Dr. Adam Wolberg, who, in his uniform of Polish army officer and an armband with the Star of David, was organizing help for the children faced with destruction. One cannot forget the Polish inhabitants of Częstochowa, who tried to rescue their Jewish neighbors. Their number includes Father Boleslaw Wroblewski, the diocesan parish priest, Father Teodor Popczyk of St. Barbara Church, who was murdered for this by the Germans, and the Sowas, who were also killed for giving shelter to some refugees from the ghetto.

We keep in mind and denounce the cases of scoundrelism., blackmailing, and collaboration with the Nazis. They were severely punished by the underground Polish structures. But let us not forget the heroism of ordinary, sometimes uneducated people, who paid with their life for their attempts to save their Jewish neighbors.

Memory can take people apart or bring them together. Our Days of Remembrance include the scholarly seminar meant to arrive at the objective truth about the past. This truth may seem painful to some of you, but it is the truth that brings people together. Because truth always brings people together, it is the lie which takes them apart.

Ladies and gentlemen. In 1990 I was first elected to be the mayor of our city. I am pleased to say that the first step aimed at saving the memory was done then. In close cooperation with Mr. Arye Edelist we commemorated the victims of the Holocaust buried on Kawia street, and put memorial plates on the walls of the former synagogue, of the hospital, at Bohaterow Getta Square. It was also then that at the initiative of the late Dr. Zbigniew Jakubowski, the Pedagogical University in Częstochowa have undertaken research on the history of Częstochowa Jews. **The research has been continued by the originator of the present seminar, vice-president of the Pedagogical University, Dr. Jerzy Mizgalski.** We have entered together upon this track and has followed it since.

I am Catholic and I have the image of Częstochowa Virgin Mary in my heart. And that is why I respect other religions, nationalities, and beliefs. Częstochowa, the spiritual capital of Poland, should deserve to be renowned for its openness and regard for innate dignity of any human being. It is a duty of the Mayor of Częstochowa to remember and pay homage to all those, who contributed to the development of our city. Let this event be such a homage.

Thank you all for coming.