Reflections on the 60th Anniversary of the Invasion of Poland and the Beginning of World War II by:

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"Forgive, but remember..." The late Cardinal John Krol, Archbishop of Philadelphia for twenty-seven years, repeated this refrain throughout his homily at Ss. Peter and Paul Cathedral in Philadelphia at a Mass commemorating the 50th anniversary of the invasion of Poland and the beginning of World War II. Cardinal Krol eloquently recounted the tragic victimization endured by the people of Poland for a half century, which began with Hitler's German Nazi invasion on September 1, 1939, and continued with a "double holocaust" perpetrated by Communist Russia, both during and after the War.

Nearly three generations have passed since the devastation of World War II, and yet misgivings and misunderstandings still linger between victim populations, particularly between Poles and Jews, whose presence and prosperity in Poland, as in no other country in the world, spanned a period of 600 years. Jews regard "the Holocaust" as an exclusively Jewish tragedy and feel betrayed by Poles and others who did not "do enough" to protect Jews from the Nazis. Poles, on their part, feel betrayed by the lack of recognition of their heroic resistance efforts and their own immense suffering at the hands of both Hitler's German Nazis and Stalin's Soviet Communists.

It simply makes no sense to accuse Poland or any other occupied nation for failure to do more in the face of Nazi terror. Casting judgment upon previous generations serves no purpose except to aggravate the very attitudes and feelings that made Nazi success possible in the first place, namely, prejudice, hatred and refusal to appreciate another's heritage or point of view. We must focus on what we can do today to prevent current and future holocausts. As the words, "Never again," echo in our minds, what can we do to prevent such ethnic conflicts as have occurred between Tutsis and Hutus in Africa and Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo? As we debate the past, the slaughter continues in the present.

Cardinal Krol's words offer a blueprint for finding common ground and reconciliation between perpetrator and victim alike, and between the descendants of both. But the task is not easy. There is an intense struggle of conscience in both advocating and accepting the full terms of forgiveness. The crimes were heinous. Forgiveness requires extraordinary courage and benevolence. Forgiveness will never erase the haunting memories of the terrorization of millions who suffered and died in concentration camps, on battlefields, and in towns and villages in Poland and across Europe. Forgiveness does not remove guilt or responsibility from the perpetrators of barbaric atrocities and genocide. Forgiveness does, however, call for an understanding of the anguish of children and grandchildren who bear the burden of the "sins of their fathers." They, and all of us, must acknowledge and remember the enormity of the crimes against humanity. But, for the sake of future generations, instead of dwelling on the past, we must vigilantly guard against future holocausts.

It is especially important for us as Polish Americans to recognize the torments endured by Poles during the war years. It is a little-known fact that, after Poland's invasion by Hitler's Nazi forces, the Polish people were singled out to be enslaved and killed and their cities and towns were threatened with destruction. Hitler's purpose was to annihilate Poland and its people. Although he did not achieve his ultimate goal, Poland's invasion ushered in a period of foreign oppression that altered the lives and fortunes of Poles for over half-a-century.

"On August 22, 1939, (Hitler) authorized the killing 'without pity or mercy of all men, women, and children of Polish descent or language.' On September 1, 1939 the Poles became the first people to experience the systematic terror of the Holocaust." William A. Donohue, President of the Catholic League for Religious and

During the war, six million Polish citizens were killed. Three million were Polish Christians, three million were Polish Jews. Without question, the Jews were specifically singled out for immediate extermination, but in Hitler's plan to establish additional fertile "living space" (Lebensraum), the Poles were next in line to die after a period of enslavement. No one, neither Jew nor Pole, deserved the immense hardship they were subjected to. We must remember their loss equally, because every life is precious.

"The Poles experienced an enormous tragedy during German occupation of their country. The genocidal policies of the Nazis resulted in the deaths of about as many Polish Gentiles as Polish Jews, thus making them co-victims in a 'Forgotten Holocaust.' This holocaust has been largely ignored because historians who have written on the subject of the Holocaust have chosen to interpret the tragedy in exclusivistic terms - namely, as the most tragic period in the history of the Jewish Diaspora. To them, the Holocaust was unique to the Jews, and they therefore have had little or nothing to say about the nine million Gentiles, including three million Poles, who also perished in the greatest tragedy the world has ever known." Richard C. Lukas, Forgotten Holocaust, "Preface" of 1990 Hippocrene Books edition.

Unfortunately, because of Poland's geographical centrality and large Jewish population, Hitler's Nazi forces established within Poland's borders several concentration camps where millions were brutally gathered to suffer and die. Victims, especially political prisoners were gathered from all over Europe. Majdanek concentration camp revealed records of prisoners from 50 countries. Due to the camps' locations, the Polish people are often implicated in Hitler's murderous purposes, even to the point of being regarded, by some, as collaborators. Regrettably, we hear little about the fact that the law in Nazi-occupied Poland, and nowhere else, required the immediate execution of any Pole who protected or assisted Jews in any way, even by offering a glass of water. This death sentence was extended to entire families and sometimes even villages, whether or not all participated in assisting Jews.

Some claim that Christian Poles should have done more to save the lives of more Jews. To decide between the life of a family member and a neighbor is truly a terrible choice, for which there was and is no simple solution. We must be careful about passing judgment on previous generations, whose individual circumstances we simply cannot know or understand completely. For our part, we must honor the Polish people who fought so valiantly to resist the unscrupulous Nazi oppressors and those who risked their lives by harboring Jewish friends and neighbors secretly in their homes. More Jews were saved in Poland than in any other occupied country.

To make matters even worse, despite extensive Polish underground efforts to stop the Nazi war machine, the Poles were further betrayed, after the War, by being handed over to continued oppression for the next 45 years under Soviet Communist domination. While the rest of the world rejoiced in victory over the Nazi reign of terror, Poland and other Eastern European and Balkan nations were pawned off to appease the Soviet hunger for territory in compensation for Communist collaboration in Hitler's defeat. Except for survivors and their families, few are aware of the Russian Communists' brutal deportation of over a million Poles to Siberian concentration camps during the War. Nevertheless, the indomitable Polish spirit remained unshaken and, through the Solidarity movement, provided the moral and political leadership required to overthrow Communism in Eastern Europe.

My numerous visits to Poland have helped me appreciate the intense suffering of the Polish people both during the war and under Communist domination. It has been extremely gratifying over the past two decades to observe Poland's emergence from oppression, first political and now economic, and to assume its rightful stature among the industrialized nations of Europe. It's a heritage that I'm proud of and encourage my family to be proud of, too.

The world is a wonderful place, offering great happiness and reward to many. Yet evil persists in the midst of good. We can only hope that our good deeds will outnumber the bad. I urge you to forgive yesterday's faults, both our own and those of others who have caused so much turmoil in the world. And most importantly, let's not hold descendants today accountable for the pain and suffering caused by a deranged minority in the past. I urge everyone, each in his or her own way, to work for the betterment of all, today and tomorrow.

"Forgive, but remember..." Sound advice for a better world.

Besides offering a call for reconciliation, this statement has been prepared to present little-known facts about German Nazi and Russian Communist victimization of Poles and other Europeans during and after World War II.