

Bitter Truths

Thought for the Day

Ephraim Borowski (Director, Scottish Council of Jewish Communities)

Broadcast on Radio Scotland, 12 April 2010

The deaths at the weekend of Polish President Lech Kaczynski, and so many other Polish leaders in a plane crash in Russia was not merely a tragedy for their families and for the Polish state. It also had a particularly sad irony.

The Polish delegation was on its way to Russia to mark the 70th anniversary of the massacre of more than 20,000 Polish officers by Soviet soldiers at Katyn during the Second World War. This would have been the first joint commemoration, only two weeks after the Russian leader, Vladimir Putin, had, for the first time, acknowledged Polish anger, and admitted Stalin's responsibility for the massacre, rather than, as before, blaming it on the Nazis.

The irony is compounded for the Jewish community because today is Yom HaShoah, the date in the Jewish calendar that commemorates the six million Jewish victims of the Holocaust. Of course it is also an opportunity to honour the memory of the five million others who were murdered by the Nazis for no reason other than who they were – Gypsies, homosexuals, communists, the disabled, as well as Jews. Many communities also recall other victims of twentieth-century European antisemitism, from pogroms in both Poland and Russia before the First World War, to Stalin's reign of terror after the Second. For many, both Poles and Jews, Stalin's Russia must have seemed like a refuge from Nazi genocide, only to turn into another killing field that was in some ways even more ruthless.

The situation of the few Polish Jews who survived the Holocaust was even worse: some returned home only to be murdered by their Polish neighbours; some who survived that fled into the arms of Stalin. It was only as recently as 2001 that the Polish government acknowledged these massacres, and to this day right wing Poles continue to blame the victims.

If we are to learn from history, we must first acknowledge its bitter truths, so today we honour those, such as the late President Kaczynski, who have had the courage to do so.