

## Commemorating the Beginning of World War II, September 1, 2019

I was very honored to be asked by our PCA President, **Grazyna Brzostowski**, to represent her at the Official Launch of the Exhibition of *"Fighting and Suffering. Polish Citizens During World War II"*

The invitation was extended to Grazyna by the President of the Polish Community Council of Victoria Inc., **Mr Marian Pawlik**.



Guests attending the launch of the Exhibition

The launch of the Exhibition was held on 29<sup>th</sup> August in Queen's Hall at Parliament House in Melbourne. It was jointly organized with the Gdańsk Museum of the Second World War and the Embassy of the Republic of Poland in Canberra.

The Exhibition was part of the worldwide commemoration of the beginning of World War II, when German forces invaded Poland, 80 years ago, on September 1, 1939.

The event was attended by His Excellency, The Ambassador of the Republic of Poland, **Mr Michał Kołodziejcki**, The **Hon. Colin Brooks**

**MP**, Speaker of the Legislative Assembly; **The Hon. Robin Scott MP**, Minister for Veterans; Members of both Chambers of Parliament, including Co-chairmen of the Victoria Parliamentary Friends of Poland, the **Hon. Nick Wakeling MP** (also representing the Leader of the Opposition), and **Ms. Natalie Suleyman MP**, the **Hon. Bruce Atkinson MLC** and representatives of the various Polish community organisations in Victoria.

After inspecting the exhibits and reading about the suffering the Polish people endured, even during the first few days of the German invasion of Poland, I decided to watch the commemorative services held in Poland on 1st September and transmitted to Australia on



Polish Ambassador, H.E. Michał Kołodziejcki  
& Mr Marian Pawlik



via PolBox from Warsaw, Westerplatte and from the little-known town of Wieluń, 90km east of Wrocław in the south-eastern region of Poland.

The memorial service from the town of Wieluń showed the people of Wieluń and the various dignitaries, including the President of Poland, **Andrzej Duda**, and the President of Germany,

**Frank-Walter Steinmeier**, gathered in the Town Square at 4.40am to commemorate the beginning of World War II.

Why Wieluń? I asked myself. Like me, I'm sure that not many people would have been aware that at 4.40am on 1<sup>st</sup> September 1939, the German Luftwaffe bombed Wieluń while her inhabitants were still asleep. One thousand-two hundred men, women and children were killed. This was the beginning of the invasion of Poland by the Germans.



Wieluń in 1939 and Wieluń today

Five minutes later, at 4.45am, Hitler's ground forces, his Luftwaffe and his Navy began their assault on the Baltic coastal guardhouse of Westerplatte, which, in 1939, was in what was called "the Polish Corridor" - the only access Poles had to the Baltic Sea. Westerplatte is not far from the port city of Gdańsk (in 1939 it was under the jurisdiction of Germany and was known as Danzig). Westerplatte was mercilessly shelled from the Baltic coast by the German Navy artillery; bombed from the air; and attacked by German land forces. Westerplatte terrain resembled a "moonscape" after the attack ended. For days, the Germans continued their assault but failed to break through to the stubborn resistance of the Polish guard. Sadly, after six days of a valiant defense, the Polish heroes of Westerplatte had no option but to surrender.

The might of the Hitler's Luftwaffe continued their assault on Poland, flying onto Warsaw, where they were ordered to destroy the city and to leave nothing that would remind the Polish people of their once-beautiful capital and their rich Polish culture.



Warsaw in 1939 and Warsaw today

Soon after the invasion of Poland, Great Britain declared war on Germany. At the same time, Hitler formed a pact with Stalinist Soviet Union. Poland found itself now being attacked from the west by the German army and from the east by the Soviet armed forces. In order to stop any organized Polish resistance to the Soviet invasion, Stalin ordered the arrest of around 22,000 Polish military officers and intellectuals, who were then transported into the forests of Katyn, in western Russia and there, they were all shot in the head from behind and shoved into mass graves.

The Memorial Service, held in Warsaw on September 1, 2019, was attended by the Presidents of the all the European Union member countries and other representatives from other parts of the world, including the Vice President of the USA, **Michael Pence**. The service was led by the President of the Republic of Poland, **Mr Andrzej Duda**.



The German President, **Frank-Walter Steinmeier** on the podium at the Memorial Service in Wieluń, September 1, 2019

It was very heartening to listen to the message of reconciliation in the speech made by the German President, **Frank-Walter Steinmeier**, at Wieluń, and the heart-felt apology President Steinmeier expressed to the people of Wieluń and to the people of Poland in general:

***“I bow my head before the Polish victims of the German tyranny, and I ask for your forgiveness..... This war was a German Crime”.***

President of Germany, **Frank-Walter Steinmeier**



At the Commemorative Service in the Piłsudski Square, Warsaw

From left,

President **Frank-Walter Steinmeier**  
President **Andrzej Duda**  
Vice-President **Michael Pence**

**Henry Szkuta**  
**Secretary**  
**Polish Community Association in Geelong Inc**