

VALERIA GERTZ

CRASH OR CRIME?

INVESTIGATIONS INTO THE POLISH
PRESIDENTIAL PLANE CRASH OF 2010

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INTRODUCTION

To my friend, Rhonda:

Imagine that the events I have described in this book had occurred in Canada. Imagine that the military Airbus jet, with the Prime Minister on board, crashes to the ground in Russia under unexplained circumstances and is torn into a thousand pieces. The National Security and Intelligence Advisor to the Prime Minister does not only not resign but hands the investigation over to the Russians, who inform all the world that the Prime Minister, along with the Commander and Chief of the Air Force tore into the cockpit and drunkenly took down the entire aircraft and the 95 onboard, including the Chief of the Canadian Forces Intelligence Command and the Head of the National Bank of Canada. Imagine that the Canadian Government simply agrees with this version, while the CBC and the Canadian Press criticize the Governor General's nearsightedness and his love of Canadian Whisky, criticize the pilots' training and lack of experience, and bemoan the moral depravity of the Governor General's family, as well as the alcohol abuse rampant in the Air Force.

Meanwhile, the Minister of National Defense, having avoided the fateful flight, is promoted to Prime Minister, and he later nominates the Chief of Intelligence to position of General. It seems to hold no meaning that the Governor General's body is returned by the Russians with three legs in the coffin, and that another victim is found to have two kidneys, neither one his. It seems to hold less meaning that after exhumation, some bodies have been found desecrated: one with garbage stuffed inside the stomach, another with a surgeon's glove forgotten inside the skull.

It means little that the entire site of the accident was immediately ploughed level and covered with concrete slabs, tracks swept up, trees cut down to the stump, the windows of the aircraft smashed in, the fuselage washed, and to finish it off the Russians refuse to return the wreck. The entire cockpit has disappeared without trace so miraculously that no one has even inquired after it. And while the original transcript from the Flight Data Recorder and the Cockpit Voice Recorder never made it to Canada, a copy of it has. Seven different copies in fact, each one a different length.

The Canadian Government is delighted by all of this; it circulates press releases worldwide about groundbreaking improvements with Russian relations, referring to the catastrophe as a turning point in these relations and a new opening for dialogue with the Russian government. At every opportunity given it confirms officially that the drunk, three-legged Prime Minister along with the Commander of the Air Force, are to blame for the whole tragedy.

Do you still wonder why I am writing this book?

CHAPTER 1

He killed the first person at the Lubyanka in August of 1924. Afterwards, he killed daily for nearly 29 years. Vasily Blokhin, head executioner in the mass murder of Polish prisoners in Katyń, Russia executed 50,000 people himself – I couldn't read it into the microphone straight. My voice started to break halfway through the sentence. I tried again, I said it out loud to myself – he executed 50,000 people himself. The words rang in my ears but I managed to finish the recording. This was only the beginning of the narration to the news piece for tomorrow's commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the Katyń Forest massacre.

I was alone in the studio and the acoustic panels softened the silence of the evening. The camera operator had long hurried home, anticipating a long and demanding day of filming tomorrow. We'll have to send the edited material to Warsaw first thing in the morning, and then cover the footage of the ceremony by the Katyń monument in Toronto live. The ceremony will start with a mass at the church on Roncesvalles. I'll have to bring warm clothing. I made little tired mental notes as I opened the window. The cold spring night swept into the studio and I wondered for a split second whether it was the wind or the archival footage I was editing that raised the hair on my arms.

The winter in Canada had been long and hard that year. Great mounds of snow still lined the beaches of Toronto, pushed down there by heavy bulldozers, but after a few days of sharp and merciless spring sunlight the spring melt had begun to seep into the sewers in long dirty streams. I could hear their monotonous watery trickle singing even now, this late into the night, disrupted only by the occasional car

driving by. I drank in one more breath of fresh air and forced myself to close the window. The microphone would pick up the slightest background noise.

I don't have fancy production gear. I use Final Cut to edit my reports. It's adequate for what I do, short news pieces that don't run over two minutes. I splice voiceover narration in between the speakers' sound bytes, I sync the audio and the video and I put in an intro. When you hit your stride you can produce this kind of piece in half an hour. The most time-consuming step is downloading the footage onto the computer, and of course converting it to PAL, the European encoding system. This can take hours and it's definitely the bottleneck for international correspondents.

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He was the exemplar of a Communist executioner, his *accomplishments* won him promotion to General and the highest awards from his native Soviet Union – I began reading, putting strong emphasis on the suspect word.

The degenerate's wide, angular face looks out emptily from the photograph, which will accompany my narration about the Soviet murderer. This 'comrade', as the Russian's would have called him, specialized in shooting the victim in the back of the head, a method favoured by the communists. He left in his wake piles of shot skulls. Just like in the archival footage. It's truly horrendous. When communism was met with resistance, it was forced into human minds by the only way familiar to murderers, through a hole in the back of the skull.

The black and white pictures shuddered on the screen like film reels in an old theatre, and with them shuddered the skeletons dug up in the Katýn Forest. A doctor, perhaps, since he wears a white frock, tilts the skull back with one swift movement to reveal the bullet hole. He

moves up to another body and does the same. He moves to the next body and does the same. He moves to the next body, and the next, and the next. It's a gruesome crime, and so many years of lies. The frames of archival film flickered along on the screen, and the rich silence of the room was layered with a fluttering reminiscent of old film projectors.

This is how the night of April 9th passed, quietly, slowly turning into April 10th 2010. As always with such important occasions, I was preparing to submit a correspondence piece to Poland, for TV Polonia in Warsaw. On this occasion it would be filmed at the ceremony under the Katyn monument in Toronto. In addition to producing a clip of documental footage, I intended to collect some short interviews from two Polish architects who battled with the Canadian government throughout the eighties for the right to build a monument to commemorate the death of over 20,000 Polish officers at the hands of the NKVD – the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs – in 1940.

For half a century, the USSR had blamed the massacre on the Nazis, and the Polish people were advised that the most 'reasonable' course of action would be to not stir up the silt of history. The source of tensions over erecting the Katyn monument was the proposed inscription; the Polish community was insisting on remembering that the genocide was carried out by the Soviets. However, in the eighties, after the long, tense years of the Cold War, Canadian diplomats were taking care to smooth over relations with the East. The sculpture is a massive block of bronze, split down the middle to symbolize the breaking of the silence around the crime, and the access to the Russian archives wherein Stalin's order to kill all Polish prisoners is documented.

The anniversary of the genocide is commemorated in Toronto each year on the Sunday that falls closest to the 10th of April. After holy mass at St. Casimir Church on Roncesvalles Ave., the Polish community processes through the city in crowds, arriving at the

monument on King St., where the barbarism of the Soviets toward the Polish is remembered through speeches made by members of various Polish organizations. Each year I report on the ceremony and submit my correspondence piece to public broadcasters. This year's commemorations fell on April 11th, and because it was the 70th anniversary, the producer of the Warsaw news program I was reporting for insisted that the intro be filmed live, and that we dig up – literally from the earth, if need be - all the individuals who heroically contributed efforts to the erecting of the first ever Katyn monument in any large city.

In Poland, the international channel TV Polonia was also preparing for an unusual day of broadcasting, because for the first time in 70 years, a national delegation with the President of Poland at its helm, was scheduled to visit the very site of the mass execution. The word among the press was that President Lech Kaczyński had prepared an especially strong speech to deliver at the commemoration. Hearing this I was reminded of the words of yet another, equally charismatic and rebellious Polish leader, Father Jerzy Popiełuszko, who once addressed his congregation of politically oppressed followers with these words, “Do not fear. Do not fear those who kill the body for they can do nothing more.” Father Popiełuszko was tortured and murdered in 1984 by agents of the communist special services, in a crime that is still today shrouded in mystery.

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Somewhere around 11 at night I scrolled habitually through some Polish and Canadian news portals. I checked the TV Polonia site to confirm the time of tomorrow's broadcast and a strange headline caught my eye, “Internal Security Agency warns Central Command in Warsaw of possible terrorist threat to one of the EU Member States' aircrafts.” None of the other websites were touching the news so I let

it slide and continued with my search. Later on, after the news of the catastrophe came to light I would spend much time searching for that headline, as the links that first lead me to this information would disappear.

Polish television websites were inundated with the news that one of Poland's largest financial institutions, PKO Bank, was paralyzed by a telecommunications emergency, which left over 6 million people suddenly unable to access the funds in their accounts.

Later I would also recall the disturbing notice that appeared on governmental sites on April 7th. The Governmental Computer Security Incident Response team warned of the possibility of dangerous cyberattacks being carried out against the public administration institutions in Poland. Emails crafted to look like they had come from the Estonian Ministry of Defense were sent to governmental institutions containing PDF attachments with a destructive computer virus.

Estonia had fallen prey to the largest cyberattack in history just two years prior. On May 9th, 2008, as Russia was celebrating an anniversary of its victory over the fascist Nazi regime, the webpages of the Estonian President, the majority of the country's ministries and even the main bank, were blocked. I knew about this because I remembered the coverage of an Estonian journalist colleague whom I trained with. On the day of the cyberattacks he reported that the Swedish Hansabank, the largest financial institution in Estonia, could not access Internet transactions for half a day.

Only later would I piece together these different incidents preceding the events of April 10th, which should have raised indisputable red flags for any seasoned journalist. However, in the lull of the quiet, abandoned recording studio, half a night away from the day of ceremony on the 10th, with much recording yet left to do, I simply skimmed through these headlines, and waited for the blue loading icon to inch slowly across the screen. In a matter of seconds

the documentary-style introduction to the Katyn commemoration, as well as my interviews with the architects of the monument would be uploaded. The time difference between Poland and Toronto is six hours. I looked at the clock. Two minutes past midnight, in Poland the sun was rising. Another day was starting and the delegation, along with the nation's President, was preparing to fly.

CHAPTER 2

On the morning of April 10th he put on his dress uniform and a white dress shirt. As always, he asked Ewa to tie his tie, not because he couldn't, but because he liked the intimacy of watching her supreme focus applied to such an ordinary task.

She said her farewell to him in front of the children, one day before the tragedy, perhaps sensing intuitively that these were her final moments to share with her beloved. She spoke to him tenderly, cradled in his arms, "My darling Andrew, you know that I love you so much. You know how much our families have suffered. Represent us well in Katyń."

They met when he was finishing up his studies at the Polish Air Force Academy in Dęblin. Like so many young pilots, he practiced his craft at the airport in Biała Podlaska, his hometown. In his fourth and final year he was looking for someone to type his final thesis project. Ewa worked as an administrator in the local veterinary office. Although airplanes were forever cutting through the air high above her head, she didn't know any pilots. When her friend asked if she would consider typing up a report for a pilot she agreed without hesitation, "let him call me, but first I have to check with my supervisor that it would be alright for me to use the typewriter after hours."

She recalls his phone call distinctly. It was August 1985. They agreed to meet and fell in love before the first meeting was up. Andrew dictated his report while she typed because the abbreviations and technical vocabulary made little sense to her. It would not have been easy to translate the work without his help, so he dictated line by line. Somewhere in the fourth chapter he proposed to her. They understood quickly that they were soul mates.

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Andrew Blasik, Commander of the Polish Air Force was traveling to Russia for the first time. Ewa was supposed to accompany him. Perhaps under different circumstances she would have traveled with him as she had countless times before. When she found out that there were more interested passengers than seats in the plane she agreed to stay behind.

She didn't even see him off to the airport. As it happened, most of the families of the presidential delegation did not see off their loved ones that day. This was unusual but it was an early flight. Everything she knows about what happened after Andrew left the house she learned from people who reported to be there. The driver who arrived to take General Blasik to the airport reported that the general was in a fine mood that day. From witnesses she heard that at the airport he was greeted by Colonels serving in the 36th Regiment. A moment later the Chief of the General Staff, General Franciszek Gągor arrived. They shook hands and headed to the VIP lounge in the military section of the Chopin Airport. None of the witnesses reported overhearing any conversation about bad weather conditions that might have foretold of a complicated landing in Smoleńsk later that day. Supposedly nothing out of the ordinary occurred in that lounge. No other members of the crew were there and the place was quiet.

Ewa had accompanied her husband on many ceremonies and was familiar with the ritual of the proceedings among the generals as they prepared for the flight. She could imagine what was said and done in great detail.

Following protocol her husband would have reported himself to both the commander of the regiment and the commander of the base. She learned from the witnesses that both positions were filled by replacement staff that day. He would have surely conferred with the

Chief of the General Staff, General Franciszek Gągor, to decide who would report to the President. They probably divided flight duties amongst each other. She knows from reports that they agreed that Błasik would be the one to give a short report to President Lech Kaczyński. As far as she could remember this was the first time that her husband had the pleasure of flying with the President, who also acts as the Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces.

A few days before the flight to Katyń, while they celebrated Easter holidays, Andrew mentioned that there was talk of a possible terrorist attack being planned. The Internal Security Agency had issued a warning of possible terrorist threat to one of the EU Member States' aircrafts. When Ewa asked for more details Andrew retorted gruffly that he had no idea and hoped that the Military Intelligence Agency knew what they were doing. According to protocol General Gągor would also have been notified. Despite the warning, according to the witnesses relating the occurrences at the Chopin airport that day, they boarded the aircraft. It was parked so close to the terminal that they walked up to the plane.

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When I awoke the night was chasing the morning and I wasn't sure how long I had slept. I took a drink from my cold, day-old coffee, watched the grounds streak along the porcelain, and remembered a sentence read somewhere along the way, "if only coffee could taste as good as it smells."

Where had I left off with the script on the Burdenko report? I had to finish recording that before heading into the city. Contrary to the interviews carried out by the Allied states, the 1944 Burdenko Report falsely stated that the massacre of Polish officers was conducted by the Third Reich. Nikolai Burdenko was the head of the Special Commission "struck to investigate the circumstances of the shootings

of captive Polish Officers by German fascists in the Katyń Forest.”

However, well before the committee arrived at the Katyń Forest to investigate, the NKVD had already spent long months there, along with the Military Counterintelligence *Smiersz* destroying all evidence of their crimes and manufacturing new evidence for the soon arriving committee.

They dug two new graves, which they filled with documents dated so as to exclude the possibility of their involvement. The accounts of the witnesses, the peasants from the nearby village of Gniezdowo, changed dramatically within the year. In 1943 they related to the Germans that it was the Russians who perpetrated the genocide. A year later, under pressure of brutal threats made by NKVD officers, they changed their testimonies in the presence of international journalists. Ivan Kriwozierec was the only one who managed to escape after having revealed the exact location of the graves that the Russians dug into the sandy loam and then filled with the bodies of Polish officers. Kriwozierec dug up the graves with his bare hands. After much lonely wandering he found sanctuary in London, but not for long. His body was found hanging from a tree in a nearby forest in 1947 – my God, I thought, what dark times.

The clock on the screen read 3:05 am. The Katyń broadcast was already rolling on TVP Polonia. Well-known broadcaster, Krzysztof Ziemięc, was hosting a panel discussion with three guests. I recognized Father Isakowicz because he often attended meetings organized by the Polish community in Toronto. I didn't know the other two guests. Occasionally, the footage of the panelists was interrupted by pictures of the location in Katyń where soon a church service would take place to remember the officers shot there. Twice the reporter announced that the President has already arrived in Katyń but the corresponding shots pictured rows upon rows of empty chairs, so clearly he hadn't yet arrived. I was about to turn back to my work when the reporter learned of something that had evidently shocked him. Pulling himself

together he addressed the public: “I just received disturbing news that the President’s airplane, which was expected to land in Smoleńsk, has crashed, but we don’t know anything more, there’s no information about the victims.”

Silence. Some kind of archival footage appeared on the screen. I was left dumbfounded and dread-filled. I started nervously searching through other stations for live coverage. Everywhere I looked I found the same footage, members of Parliament crying at the location prepared for the mass, Katyń families and scouts praying, their hands lifted to God. Back at TVP Polonia a journalist reporting from Katyń was finishing saying, “we are waiting for confirmation, back to you in Warsaw.” In disbelief I read the headline moving across the bottom of the screen: “The Russian Ministry: 87 of 90 people onboard the President’s aircraft dead.” I felt nothing but the numb and speechless shock of dread.

CHAPTER 3

She learned about the tragedy from the headline on the news ticker scrolling across the bottom of the screen. She wasn't going to watch TV at all but her brother, Peter, called asking which airplane Andrew was flying. Peter recalled that the General couldn't decide whether to fly the Yak-40 or the Tupolev. "He flew the President's airplane," she replied. Peter went silent on the other line. When he spoke next his voice shook, "Ewa, turn on the television." He hung up.

News of the catastrophe was already printed on the news ticker. It was a nightmare and a total shock. Something told her that Andrew hadn't survived, couldn't have. She wouldn't be able to cry for a whole week, everything inside her had hardened to numb stone.

She had often considered this possibility. A pilot's wife must contend with being widowed by a plane crash. In their years spent together she lived through many aviation accidents. Somewhere in her subconscious she had prepared herself for the worst. She had seen off so many of her husband's colleagues, she was friends with several widows. When Andrew was nominated as the Commander of the Air Force, she started the Society for the Families of Pilots and gathered in both the widows she knew and those she did not. She wanted to know how they were coping, if they had adequate work, how their children were faring, if they needed anything. She knew they were not well treated by the military. Often their ties to the military were cut at the moment of the funeral.

Everything she learned of the catastrophe on April 10th she learned from the television. "All of Poland is in shock, for several hours now crowds of Warsaw residents have gathered before the President's Palace. This sea of people grieves that twice now the soil of Katyń has

taken from us the brightest members of our nation. It's difficult to find the proper words to describe what we feel right now," the reporters' words were barely reaching her. "People are hanging mourning flags from their home windows. In Polish hearts lives grief."

"There are no words that could do justice to the immense tragedy these peoples' families are now living - husbands, wives, children - words of empathy fall short. This is also a great tragedy for our nation, we have lost the flower of our society: members of our political body, members of our cultural body, families with ties to Katyń. It's hard to summarize all the dimensions of this loss," she hears the words of Kazimierz Nycz, Cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church, as if they were very far away from her, floating through a long, mute tunnel. "The crash of the TU-154 took the lives not only of the head of the nation and the Chief of the General Staff, but also those of senior military officers. The Polish military is without leadership."

Prime Minister Donald Tusk called to offer his condolences. The Minister of National Defense, Bogdan Klich, also called. There were many phone calls in the following days from all over the world. All the callers expressed their deepest sympathies. She received a visit from her husband's successor who assured her that all the Generals were with her. Andrew's reputation was renowned among the Air Force staff and his colleagues were also deeply moved by this loss.

#

Andrew Błasik had been born to fly planes. At the age of fifteen he began to fly with the Aeroclub in Łódź. He joined the military to keep flying. His teachers were world-class pilots, like Ryszard Michalski, who was a winner of the World Precision Flying Championship. Andrew was fascinated by the history of Polish fighter aces who flew during the second World War. He knew everything about the pilots of the No. 303 Polish Fighter Squadron, who flew in the Battle of Britain.

He admired them and took them as role models. He read much about Janusz Żurkowski, the most renowned Polish-Canadian pilot who flew the legendary supersonic jet interceptor Avro Arrow. Flying was to him the most important part of his life. In the air he felt like a fish in water. Without intending it, he was swiftly building a career for himself.

He graduated as a pilot engineer from the Polish Air Force Academy in Dęblin, dubbed the School of the Eaglets. He was promoted to Second Lieutenant in 1985. Between 1993 and 1995 he studied at the National Defense University in Warsaw. Afterwards he served in the Air Force Command, Air Force and Air Defense in Warsaw.

At that time, Poland was preparing to enter NATO. Transitioning from the Warsaw Pact, a communist system, to a radically different western one must have required significant overhaul and ample retraining, not only for the Air Force. The formulation of a strategic and flawless transition for the Polish Air Force from one system to the other, and they were literally worlds apart, fell to General Blasik.

The military unit he commanded received the “Mark of Honour of the Polish Armed Forces” in 2003, for the protection of international maneuvers at the NATO Air Meet 2003 held in Krzesiny. Blasik organized the logistics of scheduling over 120 NATO aircrafts for the day of live tactical air operations practice, which was highly praised by all participating NATO officers. He was invited to study at the Air War College in Montgomery, Alabama, which he did, taking along his wife and children.

He served as commander-rector of the School of Officers of the Air Force One in Dęblin. In April of 2007, newly elected president of Poland Lech Kaczyński promoted Blasik to Major General and put him in command of the Air Force. He was a master pilot, with a total of 1,592 hours flying time, of which he spent 482 hours flying SU-22s.

Ewa remembered well the time they spent in the United States.

They longed to represent themselves well, though they were significantly poorer than the families of his American colleagues. In the U.S., a General's wife holds a considerable position in military society, quite in contrast to the wife of a General of the Polish Armed Forces. The Warsaw Pact did not respect women. The ties among those in service to the American military were palpable; they seemed to live like a family, deeply united by the service. Ewa was inspired to fight for just treatment of military wives in Poland. When Poland joined NATO its technology was modernized yet the culture of how women and families were treated stayed unchanged. It shouldn't all be about flying the newest design of airplanes, thought Ewa, all the rest of it was equally important and deserved fair treatment.

She had felt cared for by the military right up until the moment that a new head of the Air Force was chosen to replace Andrew. The new leader replaced her husband's men with his own. It was similar to the way the Presidential Palace had been cleaned out. From that moment on she felt abandoned by the institution although she maintained contact with most of the Generals who had worked with Andrew, they spoke on the phone regularly. Both of the Generals who refused to keep contact with her studied in Moscow, were against Andrew's promotion, and did not share his outlook on the military or the world.

"For my husband, the captain of an aircraft was sacred," she would tell reporters. He proved this well while flying to Georgia in 2008. She remembered this flight well. That was the day she buried her mother, the 12th of August. She was upset that there couldn't be peace for her family even on such a difficult day. The pilot had supposedly refused orders to land in Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia, claiming it was too dangerous. She remembered Andrew's words in response to this, "There is a captain on board for that very reason, who oversees the entire situation and assesses the risks and makes the appropriate decision." Aboard that aircraft were the Presidents of Poland, Lithuania, Estonia, and Ukraine, as well as the Prime Minister of

Latvia. They were enroute to grant support to Georgia against mounting pressures from Moscow and Brussels. Very much was riding on that landing, and so the discussion about whether or not the pilot had the right to resist orders, was continued for some time in the press.

On August 15th of that same year General Blasik met with the President, who wanted to know who had been correct. “Mister President, the captain of the crew did everything in his powers to assure the safety of the people onboard,” Andrew explained, and this seemed to satisfy the President. This meeting was to have a very strong impact on Blasik. He would return to it over and over again, and his colleagues will attest to this.

#

At first she wanted to fly to Moscow to identify her husband’s body. She made it to the threshold of the airplane scheduled to fly the families of the victims to Russia. Ewa knew what to expect, what it can look like when a pilot has died in a crash. She had seen it on more than one occasion. Still, when she learned that a flight was being organized to take the victims’ families to Moscow, she drove to the hotel next to the Chopin Airport, where they had been asked to meet before the flight. The families were gathered, they were informed that they would have a place to stay in Moscow. The priest was explaining to the families that they should prepare themselves because what they would find there would be very disturbing. Ewa understood that she didn’t feel strong enough to make this trip, she had traveled right to the threshold of the aircraft, turned around and went home.

She simply couldn’t bear it all, and the process of identification would prove to be far from a simple task. The son of General Kazimierz Gilarski would spend five days in Moscow and not succeed to identify his father’s body. It took eleven days to identify the body of General Blasik. No one from the family was able to travel to the crash

site. Ewa heard that some pilots recognized her husband, she doesn't know who they were.

Eleven long days she waited for the news. She tended some impossibly fragile flame of hope throughout those days that, by some strange miracle, his body wouldn't be found among the wreckage. The flame was extinguished when the phone call came from someone in the Military, she was informed by telephone and she doesn't remember who called. Her exhausted body shook with grief for the first time since the news of April 10th.

The following days were drowned in mourning, funerals, and more funerals. She attended the funerals of almost all the Generals who died in the crash. She participated in the masses that were held in the chapel on base. She prayed that her husband's body might finally be returned, and waited. On the 23rd of April it finally was.

She didn't want to know what his injuries had been. She would learn much later that he had been heavily injured but in that moment that information wasn't even available to her. It was supposed to have been released by the Prosecutor's office but the photographs of the bodies hadn't arrived from Moscow yet. Her attorney asked if she wanted access to the documents from the investigation. She didn't have the strength to bear the horror of it all. She knew she would certainly read the document eventually, when it was time, but right now she had to brace herself to survive her husband's death.

The coffin arrived from Moscow. Andrew himself had prepared her for what she might find inside. He had been one of the first ones present at the site of several crashes, and had described to her in detail what he had seen there when she asked about it. She could imagine what the body inside the coffin might look like. Even if she could have opened the coffin then, she wouldn't have wanted to. She wasn't ready to look inside.

Ewa remembers how deeply Andrew lived the tragic catastrophes that claimed the lives of his friends. He remained calm, calculated and

emotionally restrained in the face of great tragedy, as befitting for a commander, but on the inside he cried like anyone else would.

He lost one of his friends in a fatal crash of an Iskra jet trainer airplane. Andrew was flying himself in those days, and it could have easily been him in that aircraft. He described to her that he saw the corpse still clutching the yoke. You could tell he was trying to lift the plane until the very last moment. “He fought for his life until the end”, Andrew told her.

Why hadn’t he prepared her for his own death then? The risk was so high, and yet they never spoke of it. He never once prepared her for how to act should something like this happen. They simply didn’t like to speak of it, and Andrew knew well that Ewa would know intuitively what to do. He knew her well.

CHAPTER 4

As scheduled, the commemoration took place in Toronto on Sunday; however, no one could foresee that it would become the site of a mass public grieving of the Polish delegation, the President, First Lady, NATO Generals, the highest-ranking dignitaries, the Chief of the National Bank, the Chief of the Institute of National Remembrance, members of the Clergy...

Suddenly news of Poland's tragedy and the massacre at Katyń were being discussed all across the world. The Canadian press was addressing events that had lain hidden and forgotten for 70 years. The ghastly demons of history came to life and were making themselves known in nightmarish ways.

On April 15th, Canada's Prime Minister, Stephen Harper announced a national day of mourning. That same day President Lech Kaczyński was buried in Poland. Television stations from all around the world were calling reporters of Polish descent to contextualize the importance of the 1940 events.

Reporters from Canadian television programs began searching out Polish Canadians who could contextualize the history of the Katyń massacre, comment on camera about the purpose of the Polish delegation to Katyń and give short descriptions of the most important political figures who had perished aboard. Often this fell to younger people who still had strong ties to Poland and a knowledge of current events and spoke both English and Polish fluently. In all the years since I immigrated to Canada I had never seen so much coverage of Poland and its painful history on CTV. It was a shame that it took the President's airplane crashing tragically for the massacre in Katyń to reach the Canadian public and yet that was exactly what we were

watching happen.

The striking contradictions that began to surface concerning the exact time of the crash, the final number of victims, the circumstances of the takeoff, and the hastily decided cause of crash easily disappeared into the swirling international techno-chaos that dominated the media. Only after the first shock subsided did the gross scale of disinformation around what occurred in Smoleńsk begin to show its shape, and as my research suggested, the authors of this disinformation were journalists themselves.

The journalists who were the first ones on the scene admit that they did not witness the crash of the Tupolev. They relied on the accounts of Russian officials for their reports. In fact, the first information released about the catastrophe cannot be traced back to a source.

Fourteen journalists arrived aboard a Yak-40 aircraft at the Severny Airport in Smoleńsk Russia between 7:15am and 7:25am, local time in Poland (Central European Time or CET) approximately one hour before the scheduled landing of the president's aircraft. From everything I have ever seen as a reporter, this group of journalists should have waited in the Severny Airport for the arrival of the Polish president and the first lady, in order to be able to report live that the head of the Polish nation had arrived on Russian ground. This would have been routine protocol for reporting on any official visit. Instead, as Peter Ferenc Chudy, journalist for *Gazeta Polska*, recounted, all Polish journalists were immediately transported to Katyń.

"We're accompanied by a military escort to the Katyń cemetery, and we wait until finally one of the journalists arrives with the news that the presidential aircraft has crashed. Most of us think that that sounds just absurd, but a few journalists pack into a car and drive back towards Smoleńsk. Phones begin to ring. A rumour starts to circulate that the aircraft caught fire but no one is hurt. Next we're told that there may have been casualties. Next the phones begin to ring off the hook and we learn that perhaps the president has died. The

information surfacing is increasingly terrifying. Minister Jack Sasin approaches the microphone and announces the tragic news. The people gathered at the cemetery freeze. Some begin to pray others begin to cry, to kneel. Some grow weak and sit on the ground, others faint. Lament and disbelief surround us. Everything is happening as if through a fog.”

The first report issued by Polish broadcasters about the catastrophe is hard to find but after much searching I manage to track it down. Although the anchor at the POLSAT television studio announces that long-time Russian correspondent Wiktor Bater is reporting from the site of the wreck, we see clearly that he is standing before a metal fence. A few people stand in the background. No one seems especially panicked.

The anchor addresses Bater, “Wiktor, describe to us how the people waiting for the commemoration in Katyn to begin learned of this tragic news?”

“We were at the Katyn cemetery to begin with, and I received a phone call from an official member of the Polish delegation relating the first news of the tragedy at 8:40am CET, practically four minutes after the crash. In the meantime, at the Katyn cemetery, no one had been informed yet. There was a great commotion, everyone was trying to phone members of the official delegation.”

At the time of this broadcast, and for the following two weeks, the officially stated time of the crash was 8:56am CET. By what miracle did the journalist in that broadcast learn about the crash 16 minutes before it occurred? This coverage seems to be a twisted joke when you consider that at 9:00am another Polish broadcaster, CET TVN announced that President Lech Kaczyński would soon pay tribute to the Poles murdered by the NKVD in 1940. By the time that announcement had been made, the broadcasters had known for ten minutes already that there had been a tragic accident. They were in contact with the journalists in Katyn and yet they proceeded with

broadcasting invalid information.

Jarosław Olechowski, correspondent for Polish broadcaster TVP related the following at 12:11pm CET: “The site of the crash is located some two hundred meters beyond that forest, beyond those bushes” – the journalist turns to address the forest behind him, in the field in front of the trees. Next to a pile of what looks like garbage stand two soldiers, they seem to be waiting for something. “That is where the presidential aircraft hit the ground while attempting landing. The final moments of that flight looked like this: the airplane was very close to the ground, leaning left” – here the journalist attempts to demonstrate the angle of the airplane with his hand – “it caught the trees with that wing, and later, it caught the ground. I saw the long trough that the wing ploughed into the earth. Next the airplane hit the ground and burst into flames. The emergency response, the ambulance and firefighters arrived on the scene very quickly. I spoke with one of the rescuers some 20 minutes after the crash, he was just coming back from the crash site and he was saying that no, there was no point in sending ambulances there. The decision was made to not send in ambulances because no one could have survived that crash. However, here in Smoleńsk we’ve received unofficial and unconfirmed notice that three people have managed to survive. Supposedly they are located in one of the local hospitals. As I stood here watching I didn’t once hear an ambulance driving past.”

This report is entirely incoherent. If the journalist has received news of potential survivors, why is he not disturbed to hear that ambulances won’t be sent in because “no one could have survived this crash”?

I remember my first experiences in television journalism, and my first reports for the Polish television station that took me in. It’s customary for seasoned journalists to drag the green newcomer through a kind of baptism of fire into the profession. The editor will send the new reporter out on assignment, often to a live-coverage of a car or train crash. I can’t imagine ever being able to say into a

microphone that someone had died before the arrival of the ambulance, and before receiving confirmation from the paramedic that, indeed, the victim was dead. Journalistic ethics aside, it was simply protocol to wait for confirmation.

The discrepancy of the facts related by the journalists ‘at the site of the crash’ gives the impression that they were each reporting on a different accident. So for example, shortly after Wiktor Bater relates for POLSAT that he is one of the first informed of the catastrophe at 8:40am, the news ticker on the public broadcasting channel displays a headline that warns about a “probable emergency onboard President Lech Kaczyński’s aircraft” at 9:19am. Two minutes later it is followed by another headline, “President’s airplane had trouble landing in Smoleńsk.” At 9:28 the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs announces that, “the presidential airplane has crashed in Smoleńsk.” From these occurrences it appears that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs needed 48 whole minutes to formulate the announcement that a Tupolev aircraft, with the president of a sizeable European nation on-board, had ‘crashed’? Furthermore, Peter Paszkowski, spokesman for the Ministry appeared on TVP at 9:35 saying that, “emergency workers are attempting to rescue passengers from the presidential aircraft,” while earlier Jarosław Olechowski, citing a ‘Russian informant’ was assuring the public that 20 minutes after the crash – so according to the then official crash time he must have spoken with the informant at 9:16 – there was no emergency rescue action, ambulances were not sent out, because there was no one left to save.

At 9:40 the TVN news ticker displayed an equally shocking headline, a quotation from the spokesman of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “The crash occurred in deep fog – the Yak-40 aircraft had trouble landing, the pilots struggled to gain altitude but the aircraft fell.” Why was the Ministry referring to a Yak-40 aircraft when the entire Smoleńsk investigation would center around the Tupolev-154M? Is it possible that at 9:40 an employee of the highest rank did

not know what aircraft the President of Poland and his delegation took to Russia?

At 9:52 there is a relation from the news anchor on TVN24 that, “the airport is engulfed in chaos”, “there is a blockade of information”, “the airplane fell half a kilometer from the airport in Smoleńsk, the Russian Federal Security Service is seizing journalists’ photographs and notes.” Eight minutes later the public is stunned to learn from her that, “the site of the crash has been completely zoned off and there is no further information coming from the Russian Federal Security Service.” Did she mean to communicate to the Polish public that the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) would now serve as a kind of press agency? That from now on the media would be relating news from the site of the crash based not on the reports of the Polish journalists on-location but rather on the reports of the FSB?

When Reuters broadcast at 10:10am CET that “Polish President dies in air crash,” were they relying on this very FSB press agency? It would appear so since we would learn later that at the time of that broadcast the body of Lech Kaczyński had not yet been identified. Jarosław Kaczyński, twin brother to the Polish President, traveled by car from Warsaw to Smoleńsk, and along with officials from the Polish Government Protection Bureau made the official identification at 5:30pm CET that same day.

A similar mess of contradictory information swirls in the testimonies of the witnesses. Perhaps the height of contradictory acrobatics is exemplified in the testimonials of Irina Talalajew and Oksana Kułakowa, two Russian paramedics who claimed that during the emergency response action they managed to count 90 bodies at the site of the crash in half an hour. This achievement is nothing short of miraculous considering contradictory testimony from Aleksandra Ignatienkowa, reportedly the first nurse to arrive at the site of the crash, who described for *Nasz Dziennik*, that the bodies were so badly torn to shreds that “there was nothing left to gather. These were not

corpses but pieces of flesh, blood, entrails. We ran among all this trying to find at least one intact body.”

From its very inception, this media storm was fueled by information that was heard through the grapevine. Journalists were not permitted at the scene of the crash so they repeated what the Russian officials divulged as if in secret. Routinely the Russian officers stunned and distracted the reporters by referring to the crash as a tragedy the likes of which “the world hadn’t seen” and encouraging the reporters to keep away from the site of the wreck. Those reporters who insisted on traveling to the site of the crash were met with what Peter Krasko from TVP explained as a cordon of Russian officers blocking the perimeter 100 meters from the site of the crash so that no one could pass through or even see in. Krasko explains that he “received a text from someone from the daily news program *Wiadomości* that according to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs the emergency rescue workers were attempting to extract passengers from the aircraft.” When journalists attempted to move past the cordon the Russians used brute force to keep them away and confiscated their equipment.

The journalists on-location weren’t the only ones caught in this disinformation campaign. The personnel of the Air Operation Center, which should have been the first in the chain of communication to be notified of the crash was not. Instead it was the very Minister of Foreign Affairs, Radosław Sikorski, who should have learned of the crash from the AOC, who notified the AOC of the crash. Government communications reveal that Sikorski learned of the catastrophe at 8:48am CET and notified the AOC a whole 13 minutes later. With time it would come to light that the Government Protection Bureau had also lost total communication with the presidential aircraft. This break in protocol was not an isolated event that day.

So from the reports we know that there were absolutely no survivors and yet again rumours of three survivors, that the bodies are whole and already counted while another paramedic reports that they

are so shredded to pieces it's impossible to pick through. How can it be that with all these contradictory reports, in such a mess of an aviation catastrophe the emergency search and rescue action is authoritatively called off?

Furthermore, how can the statements of a few Russian officials be held up authoritatively as proof that everyone aboard the aircraft has died? Poland did not send its emergency response team or experts in medical law when that is the protocol procedure for any aviation accident. It was clear that I would not find the answers to these questions in Canada. I decided to travel to Poland.

CHAPTER 5

“I’ll say it again, Ma’am, you cannot fly to Poland – all flights to Europe have been cancelled for April 15th through the 18th.” The travel agent I was calling was impatient with me. I probably wasn’t the first client anxious to fly home to my country that day. “Why is that?” I was upset and scratching for details. “Eyjafjallajökull,” the travel agent gargled the Icelandic word. “Excuse me?” The agent replied coldly, “a series of volcanic eruptions have created clouds of ash that hang over Europe and the airspace over most of the European nations has been closed down.”

Supposedly a PLL LOT plane has been sitting at the Toronto Pearson Airport since Thursday. Normally that plane would have flown back that same day or the next. Supposedly Polish airlines have cancelled flights to Poland from New York and Chicago. On Friday they’re expected to cancel 200 European LOT flights.

Of course the volcano erupts now, I thought to myself. I wanted to be in my country on the 17th for the public visitation of the caskets containing the bodies of Maria and Lech Kaczyński. I wanted to pay my respects to them in the Presidential Palace in Warsaw. I wanted to be there among hundreds of thousands of my countrymen and women. I wanted to cry with them and speak with them. I wanted to learn more about this ill-fated flight. I wanted. I wanted. I began to leaf through the newspaper to settle my disappointment, searching for the burial date. The caskets would be driven from Warsaw to Kraków, where they were to be buried in the crypt under the Wawel Cathedral. I found the date: the 18th, the last day of cancelled flights. How unfortunate. I wondered how dignitaries and leaders of nations invited to the funeral would travel there? I had just heard on the radio that

Prime Minister Stephen Harper invited leaders of the opposition to accompany him onboard the aircraft scheduled to fly to Kraków this Saturday. Bill Burton, Deputy Press Secretary for President Obama was shown on TV aboard the Air Force One. He assured the public that President Obama intended on attending the funeral, although the situation with the volcano might yet complicate plans. So they'll fly despite the warnings not to, I wondered. Perhaps European delegates will travel by car? I surrendered this line of thinking. A memorial service was scheduled here in Mississauga for the Presidential couple, so the Polish community could gather and mourn this unprecedented loss. Prime Minister Harper himself was scheduled to attend. I had to prepare to report on it, I planned to travel with the raw recordings to Warsaw, and edit them before the broadcast in the Warsaw studios. My editor considered this footage very important, as Canada was one of the few nations that announced a national day of mourning in solidarity with Poland over the loss of the head of state. This was seen in Poland as a sign of great respect. Unfortunately, Eyjafjallajökull rendered me a corresponding reporter instead.

What I found outside of St. Maximilian Kolbe Parish in Mississauga on the 15th of April surpassed not only my imagination and expectations, but also those of the Polish-Canadian community. Several thousand people gather in mourning in front of the church. The crowd is solemnly awaiting the arrival of the Prime Minister of Canada. This big of a crowd struggles to keep silent, either a child cries out or people begin to whisper to one another impatiently, and their whispers grow louder. In such a big crowd these sounds swell to a murmur.

Television news crews are parked alongside the curb in a row, CTV prominent among them, preparing to broadcast live from the mass. Just before the entrance to the church stands a group of scouts with the Polish and Canadian flags and a banner that reads "Let us hurry to love people, they depart so quickly." Words from a poem by Father

Jan Twardowski deepen in meaning as they face the death of the Polish President who had many political enemies. The objectives of several dozen cameras on tripods are focused on the driveway into the church from Cawthra Rd., where the black limousine with Prime Minister Stephen Harper inside is expected to arrive.

I look at the hundreds of cars parked tightly, red and white Polish flags fixed to each one, each flag marking mourning with a black ribbon. I wonder if other reporters notice these flags when they look out at this sea of cars. This is tradition among the Polish community here. This is a way to mark a momentous occasion in their homeland. This is how they recognize each other and how they know to honk at each other when they pass each other on the streets.

It's so crowded that even when I stand on my toes I can't see over people's heads. It's only when the thunder of applause breaks out that I know that Stephen Harper has stepped out of the car.

"Is it important to you that Canada's Prime Minister will attend today's mass?" I am interviewing the woman next to me who is crying. "I will never forget this support he is showing for us, I really appreciate it, and that he chose our parish to mourn this tragedy." She dries her tears with a handkerchief.

There are so many Polish people here, they say that the Polish language, after English and Portuguese, is the most used language in Mississauga.

I struggle to push through the crowds to find my spot at the front of the church, where I'll get the best sound. Most of the people stayed outside of the building to pray. There was no way of fitting everyone inside the church, so the mass would be broadcast on screens both outside the church and inside the adjoining John Paul II Cultural Centre.

The cameraman was already waiting for me inside the choir loft, along with the rest of the press. From above we had a beautiful shot of the altar and the seated congregation. We were so many radio and

television broadcasters that it was difficult not to step on toes as you tried to stay out of each other's frames.

The organist played the first mournful notes to begin the mass, and from the sacristy entered one by one: Stephen Harper, Poland's Ambassador to Canada Zenon Kosiniak-Kamysz, the leader of the opposition Michael Ignatieff, NDP leader Jack Layton, as well as representative members of the Polish community in Canada. They all sat down in the first pew. A portrait of Lech and Maria Kaczyński was hung over the podium and draped with a black pall. Next the Missionary Oblates filed in down the center aisle towards the altar, lead by the Archbishop of Toronto, Thomas Collins. They filed and they filed. There were over twenty of them, all dressed in ceremonial blue and white robes.

"Dobry wieczór," Stephen Harper addressed the congregation in Polish and went on to describe Lech Kaczyński as, "a man who stood proudly for Polish freedom," adding that Kaczyński had defended freedom and independence even in very difficult times. On behalf of the Canadian government, Harper expressed his sadness over the tragedy that had befallen the Polish people. He remembered the 70th anniversary of the genocide in Katyń and emphasized that the Polish people have borne incredible suffering.

"When Poland mourns, Canada mourns. That was the case in the times of Katyń, it is the case now," the Prime Minister's voice thundered from the podium, and the congregation responded with applause.

"The Polish community in Canada remembers vividly the visit of the first lady, Maria Kaczyńska, not a full year ago. This happy meeting was meant to be the forerunner of the first ever visit of President Kaczyński," Zenon Kosiniak-Kamysz reminded the crowds.

"The Polish community will not forget this atmosphere of respect and reflection that the Canadian government has shown us at this time." He turned to Prime Minister Harper and other Canadian

politicians and offered his gratitude for their expressions of compassion and comfort.

The cameraman and I stayed for the whole mass, though journalists from several stations began to leave after the official address. Dusk was falling as we left the church.

CHAPTER 6

Ewa couldn't tell the days apart from the nights, dusk from dark. From the moment that the coffin arrived with Andrew's body she was in the company of nightmares that did not allow her to sleep. She struggled into and out of them, waking drenched with sweat. She took sleeping pills and still sleep did not come.

"Maybe I should open the coffin and make certain that I buried my husband, and not someone else's body?"

She had lost courage. She was too afraid to fly to Moscow like the other families had, she turned around at the foot of the airplane. She was furious with herself. The young daughter of Zbigniew Wasserman, Minister of Special Forces, had flown to Russia. Unafraid. Tougher skin. That's probably why the girl was a lawyer. She didn't look tough-skinned; she was slight and fair, with an innocent face. She looked delicate. Ewa had watched Margaret Wasserman on TV as the girl described the horrors of the interrogation she was subjected to at the Federal Center of Forensic Science in Moscow.

She was envious of the girl's courage. She was mourning the death of her father and yet seemed to have so much strength left, Ewa remarked with wonder as she watched the report.

Minister Zbigniew Wasserman's phone was returned to Margaret in Moscow, and she in turn handed it over to the Polish Internal Security Agency for testing. The Minister's phone was not damaged in any way. Like many of the other victims' families, Wasserman did not find any material from her father's last day of life in the phone, but she admits that she did not look through the data recorded before she handed the phone over to the Internal Security Agency. The narration of the program was followed by a short interview with Margaret Wasserman

herself, who began to describe slowly and confidently what she experienced in Moscow:

“When we arrived at this Center of Forensic Science in Moscow, where we were supposed to identify the bodies, it was Tuesday. Embassy workers accompanied us into a big auditorium, where many people were already gathered, we were announced as the next family that had to be processed and they asked who was free. They meant to see which of the prosecutors was free to join our group; a group consisting of a prosecutor, a translator and a psychologist was supposed to accompany us. Finally, such a trio was formed around us and we walked into a series of smaller rooms. What was unusual was that two more people, Russians, were appointed to join our group of three.

The police psychologist, who would return home to Poland on the same flight as me, drew my attention to the fact that our family was treated differently than the others. The size of the team that was assigned to our case was twice as large as those assigned to the other families.

The identification procedure looked like this: first the prosecutor began filling out some forms and asking about specific markings on the body, as he informed us these markings had to be found on the body before we would be allowed to see it.

They asked us about the colour of his eyes, other details, but in the state we were in none of us could remember the colour of our father’s eyes.

I had the impression that the Russians were asking the questions as a formality and didn’t care so much for the specific answers we gave.

What’s interesting is that after many months I found out that one of other family members spent four days in that center in Moscow and saw my father’s documents on a slide. Only upon hearing that did I realize that the whole interrogation, the whole procedure of asking us about specific markings was of no use to anyone. If the body was in

good enough condition that there was no doubt about the identification and it was immediately made, and if the documents were found whole in the clothing that my father was wearing, then I don't really understand what the purpose was of identifying these things. And why did the Russians not admit to having found them?

Another interesting thing was that as soon as the Russian official who was filing out a report with what I was saying found out that it was my sister-in-law who would be identifying the body, he instantly tore up the form and began to fill out a new one, in my sister-in-law's name. He said that was the procedure in Russia. He didn't seem bothered by the fact that he was writing down information that my mother and I had given over the phone.

My family went downstairs to identify my father's body, somewhere in some sort of dungeon. Clearly there were many levels in this building. This all happened very quickly. This woman approached me, blonde, middle aged, and she began to speak with me in absolutely perfect Polish. She asked me if I wouldn't mind taking care of a few formalities with them because it would be faster this way. I said of course I didn't mind. We began to walk down the corridor, this woman walked with us, as did the translator, though a different one than the one originally assigned to our group. We walked and walked, I couldn't tell you today if we walked into another building or if we stayed in the same one, I had the impression that we were moving outside of the building we were first in. Either way, finally we arrived someplace. That's where my interrogation began."

As Ewa Błasik listened to the program the lyrics of Zbigniew Herbert's poem, sung by Przemysław Gintrowski, rang in her thoughts:

When he stands before them in the shadow of suspicion he is still made all of light, the eons of his hair are pulled into a lock of innocence.

“At first I was expected to sign a form that stated that I had identified my father. I said I would not sign that, because I did not identify him, however, I offered that I could sign if I could first contact both my sister-in-law and my brother to confirm that they had indeed identified my father.

To this they said they could not do this for me and I protested, saying absolutely no, that I must speak with my family. So I called my brother, and then my sister-in-law, and they each confirmed they had identified him without a doubt. So I signed that document. Next they began my hearing. At the beginning a representative of the Polish Embassy was present, but I told him to go home. I noticed that he was sleeping sitting up. Outside the room stood several chairs so I told him to sleep there a little. He was stumbling with exhaustion.

I tried to build up my own courage by reminding myself that I had some experience where hearings were concerned, I was a lawyer after all. I did not expect to be put in a difficult position as the victim in the situation. Suddenly everything changed. I was alone with them, with this new crew of interrogators. Inside I curled up with fear. The situation looked like this: it all began with filling out some document. Some data were being noted down onto the form. Their questions caught me off guard. They were very detailed. I was asked to give the telephone number to my work, the name of the company where I earn my living, telephone numbers for my friends and acquaintances. I felt that none of this information should have been of any use to them. However, I told them everything they wanted to know. Next the young prosecutor took over. He had this little computer, which he operated with one finger, and the computer kept shutting down on him. And the whole time they kept repeating to me that this prosecutor is a very important man – distinguished in this region in Moscow and I had to listen to him carefully.

I had this impression that he was so slow at using his computer not for lack of skill or knowledge, but rather that this was strategic. That it

made the whole procedure last and last. Later they instructed me to focus because earlier I had signed something first in black, then in blue ink and we had to redo those forms. Then it turned out that he had entered only one of my names, even though my passport, which clearly listed both my names, was lying right there in front of the prosecutor. So those forms had to be redone too. The whole while I heard over and over again that the Russian procedure wasn't prepared for this.

I remember that at some point the representative of the Embassy said that he had to attend to something back at the hotel, and he left. I agreed to this and was comforted by the fact that somewhere downstairs in this building there are Polish people: Minister Ewa Kopacz and the Chief of Staff of Prime Minister's Office Tomasz Arabski. There were supposed to be Polish families there, Polish officials, so there was no problem. I had nothing to fear. So the hearing started up again. Typing with one finger. Again slowly, again on the computer that often shut down. The next questions came at me, and they seemed to me to be completely unrelated to the situation at hand.

For example, I was asked when my father crossed the border, when I crossed the border. Later, when I analyzed all of this I arrived at the conclusion that they were trying to upset me."

After the first question the face flushes, implement and interrogation drive the blood, by iron cane, by slow flame they define the boundary of his body, a strike to the back solidifies the spine between the puddle and the cloud.

"They achieved what they wanted. Although I didn't show it my aggression was building. I phoned the representative of the Embassy and asked him if I was allowed to tell them what I thought of this whole procedure, or whether, being the family of the victim, I should politely suffer everything that was being done right before my eyes. He told me that no, that I could do whatever I considered appropriate.

All the while I kept telling myself, calm down, after all, this woman

next to you is Polish. Then this “Polish” woman took out Raphacholin tablets. I asked her, you are Polish, is that true? She replied that no, she is Russian. This was bizarre to me; she didn’t have the slightest accent. Absolutely none.

The questions were becoming increasingly more absurd, and they finished off with the most absurd one: “how do I evaluate what happened?” This just spilled the cup of bitterness, I became much less pleasant towards my interrogators. The psychologist kept explaining to me that I was in shock and that was why I didn’t understand the importance of the questions that were being asked of me. She wanted to give me some kind of drug but I resisted. I didn’t want to take any drugs from her. My alertness had been roused. The translator held her hands to her head the entire time, as if she was ashamed of everything that was happening, it looked like she knew that I realized that the whole interrogation was intended to irritate me.

Finally, we finished with that document. Next they told me that they have my father’s belongings, but that another document had to be filled out in order for the belongings to be handed over to me. These belongings included a plane ticket, telephone, rosary, and maybe an itinerary for his trip. When they brought in these things my nerves just went, I took their form and said that I would fill it out myself, because if the Russian prosecutor was to do it, it would take forever. So I did that. I filled in a confirmation that I received the belongings, and he took the form from me and said that he thought there was a watch in there too. He added with stoic calm that the form cannot be left filled out like that, the belongings are differently described than I had described them.

He took the telephone and said that we were going to take it apart into pieces to write down the serial numbers. I lost it. I said, there’s no way. I am taking these things and I am leaving. He agreed to not take apart the phone. Again we were filling in forms, and again it was taking a long time.”

After a few nights the deed is done, the angel's leather throat is filled with the sticky agreement. How beautiful the moment when he falls to his knees, incarnated into fault, sated with human form.

“Two more things were left to do. First I was supposed to give a sample of my blood. Second I was to pick up the clothing. I said I wouldn't give blood. That was the single moment that they lost control. They said: no blood, no father. That was the moment in which I think everyone there realized that it had gone too far. We went upstairs. My finger was cut in such a way that the blood squirted and the cut hurt for several days after.

Then the translator who seemed so ill at ease with this whole situation turned to me and said: “take what you have and go home to your mother, otherwise you'll never get out of here.” I listened to her. I needlessly gave permission to burn the clothing, the suit my father had been wearing. I did this because they were convincing me that the clothing was covered in blood and mud, and I was afraid to bring it home to my mother. I wanted to get out of there as quickly as possible, and I didn't think then that the clothing could have served as evidence in the interrogation. The translator's words were ringing in my mind. And of course, I realized that if we undertake the filling out of yet another document then I would certainly not leave this so-called institute today.

I kept texting the Embassy representative, and he kept texting back that he was trying, that he would be there any moment. My sister-in-law texted me that the other families had completed their tasks and were waiting to be driven back to the hotel. I was the only one missing. She called me every half an hour, every twenty minutes, and I kept repeating to her to make sure that they would not leave me here, but they didn't intend to do that. Not once did Minister Kopacz, who came as governmental support to the families of the victims, or Mr. Arabski

wonder why someone was missing out of the group, even though the identification of Zbigniew Wasserman was completed.

Finally, I told them to go back to the hotel without me. After all they were all so tired, they were swaying in their chairs. So they left. Lucky for me, the embassy worker had just arrived as I was leaving the Expertise Building or the Medical Institute or whatever they called it. When I showed him my father's death certificate he said: I don't believe it, I don't believe it. Clearly they must have informed him that I would never finish in one day."

Ewa Blasik stares blankly into the television. "My God, good thing I didn't go there."

Wax drips from the angel's hair and forms a simple prophecy on the ground, wax drips from the angel's hair...

Ewa finishes mumbling the lyrics to the song and the words send shivers up her spine.

The show host interjects that, "when asked how many of the victims' bodies were in good condition, Margaret Wassermann was unable to reply, but several others replied that all of them, that the bodies were well preserved." The camera turns back to Margaret Wassermann:

"We discovered that our father turned his phone off once in Russia. He logged out in Poland, we even know the exact time he logged out at the airport in Warsaw. We figured it out based on the phone calls he received right after the crash. All those callers received an automated message in Russian.

We submitted a claim to the Agency of Internal Security, to confirm our assessment, but we haven't received any answer. However, we know that my father's phone was working after the crash, as was the phone of President Lech Kaczyński.

Now I realize that – she dropped her gaze here, tucking a strand of

blonde hair behind her ear – I was pressured into agreeing to burn my father’s clothing. They insisted on it saying that it was only a scrap, that it was all bloodied. I was so upset at the time that I didn’t realize that this could not be true. If the body was well preserved, and so were the documents found in the clothing, then the clothing must have also been in a different state than I was being led to believe. I think their intention was that I would become so upset as to stop thinking logically.”

A commercial for some kind of ‘healthy margarine’ popped up on the screen, signifying the end of the program. Ewa stared dumbfounded, struggling to believe what she had just heard.

CHAPTER 7

The Talk Radio AM 640 jingle tears me out of my sleep. It must be 5:30am and therefore time to get up. Waking up to the radio is quite different than to the monotonous ring of an alarm clock. It rouses the mind right away with the weather report and next with the national and international news. The sleeper hasn't yet raised an eyelid and already she knows who, what, where and when. In fact, she has probably already heard commentary on it from early rising listeners who break the monotony of the commute by calling in on their way to work, helping the program to live up to its title of 'talk' radio.

"Stephen Harper will not fly to attend the funeral of President Lech Kaczyński in Kraków as a result of the volcanic ash which has paralyzed European airspace." The radio program went on to announce that President Barrack Obama will also not attend the funeral as even his Air Force One will not be able to cut through the thick, engine-clogging volcanic ash.

To think that under different circumstances I would be lying in my mother's house now, under a goose-down comforter. Actually, right now it is almost noon in Poland. I would more likely already be lined up in front of the Presidential Palace in Kraków, along with the hundreds of thousands of Poles, waiting for my chance to pay my respects at the caskets of the presidential couple. I saw all this on TV. Crowds of people, they stand, they pray, they hold red and white flags. What brought them here? Instinct? Fear? Did they long to be together? The unending line of people, inching along in silence, to kneel at the coffins of the president and the first lady, and to pray even if just for a second, and then to make room for the next person in line. Watching

it I was filled with pride for my identity. The Polish people have shown that they are a united nation, not some interest group, not consumers. The television was broadcasting live as the coffins containing the bodies of the officials of the highest rank in the Chancellery of the President were carried in, shepherded by the Chaplain. The coffins, each one draped in the nation's flag, moved through two alleyways constructed by the grieving colleagues and co-workers of the deceased, who mournfully watched them pass. Each coffin was greeted with the Church hymn: "Grant them eternal rest, lord, and may the eternal light shine for them for ever and ever, Amen."

While over two-dozen R.S.V.P.s were received from leaders of other countries planning to attend the funeral services in Kraków, few actually did. The leaders of neighbouring nations, Angela Merkel, Chancellor of Germany and Nicolas Sarkozy, President of France did not attend. Meanwhile, President of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili, determined to attend, was forced to fly from the United States through Portugal, Italy, Turkey, Bulgaria, to Romania and from there, finally to Kraków. This display of iron will has earned him a hero's welcome among the Polish people. Afterwards, a photo of Saakashvili with the caption: "a true friend will always find a way to support you, even when it is not possible" was circulated widely on social media.

President Saakashvili had not forgotten the support he and his nation received from President Lech Kaczyński in their time of need in 2008. In the first minutes after the crash of the TU-154, while BBC's Breaking News was still erroneously announcing 132 victims, Saakashvili's interview on CNN Live moved both the show host and the watching public to tears:

"We are devastated. President Kaczyński was one of the biggest friends I personally had and you know I've been in politics for some time and it's so rare to have real friends in politics. This man had the capability to be a real friend. His spouse Maria was an amazing, amazing personality. [Many] people lost their friends on this plane, and

I can tell you this is a great loss not only for Poland, but this certainly is a great loss for my nation. He was a hero of Georgia, he was a hero for our fight, for our freedom and I think he was a great voice of freedom and a great voice for Europe worldwide. I mean I am overwhelmed, I just have to tell our Polish friends that, they should know that they are not alone, my nation and many others are mourning with them, and we will never forget what Lech Kaczyński has done for us in the most difficult moments of our history, is still doing for us, what he has done for Europe. I mean this is the man who came to politics with great heart, with great courage, and he kept his heart for all these years, he kept his courage and he never betrayed his principles [...]”

CNN pressed on, “What do you think his legacy is?”

“Look, I’ve met lots of world leaders, I’ve met lots of politicians. I’ve rarely met, if I have ever met, somebody with this level of integrity. In today’s world, when everybody tries to be pragmatic, cynical, this was the man whose main actions were always dictated by his principle and by his great heart. I will never forget when he came, at the moment when we needed help so desperately, or we needed someone to act. I remember when he came to Georgia when we were being bombed. He came and he was told he shouldn’t come, he gathered several European leaders, they told him that they wouldn’t let their plane into our airspace and despite everything, he took personal risks then in 2008, showed amazing courage, came to the place that was supposed to be bombed because that was the menace and stood in front of the people, and basically, together with the other European leaders lead the defense of our independence, of our freedom. [...]”

I have to express my gratitude to the Polish people for having elected such a president. Certainly, I can understand their loss, it is also our loss, our devastation. [...]”

CNN asked again, “How difficult do you think it is to fill the political vacuum that he quite clearly has left?”

“[...] I cannot imagine anyone of his magnitude. In these days this kind of courage, this kind of big heart and principles are so exceptional that I don't think anybody would ever fill his shoes [...] What happened today is tragic, what can I say, there is something incredibly evil about the whole thing [...] ultimately good will always defeat evil even if today what happened, for me it's absolutely an evil and a tragedy what happened today.”

“What do you mean when you say evil?” – asked the reporter.

“I mean the way he died, of course there's symbolism in all that. I think that every Pole feels that. [...] [Lech and Maria] were human beings of amazing magnitude above all. [...] If you can speak about the soul of Poland, I think in some way Lech Kaczyński was the soul of Poland but I think the soul of Poland will never die and certainly it will carry on together with his legacy.”

#

Lech Kaczyński played a critical role when Georgia was attacked by Russia in 2008. He led an intervention that is credited with having interrupted the Russian invasion that would have likely resulted in the conquest of Georgia and the establishment of a puppet government. Listening to President Saakashvili reminded me of President Kaczyński's address in 2008, in Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia when he spoke to the gathered crowds:

“We are here to express our unwavering solidarity. We stand here as the representatives of five European Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. We came here to stand up to the [Russian] aggression. For the first time in a while our neighbors from the North - and from the East to us - showed their true face – a face known to us for hundreds of years. These neighbors think that these nations around them should be their subjects. We say no! This country

is Russia. This country believes that the old Soviet Empire that had crumbled some twenty years ago will once rise again, [wishing] that domination would once again be the feature of this region. It will not be so. These times have ended once and for all, not for twenty, thirty, or fifty years. In one time period or another we have all felt the weight of that dominance bearing down on our backs. This calamity that befell this part of Europe was characterized by the breaking of the human spirit, an imposition of a foreign system, an imposition of a foreign language. The difference between the situation of yesterday and that of today is that today we stand united!

Today, the world had to react even if it did so reluctantly. We are here today so that our world reacts more decisively, in particular the European Union and NATO. When I initiated this gathering, some thought that the presidents would be afraid. No one was afraid! They all came here because Central Europe has courageous leaders! I would like to say this, and not only to you; to those from our common European Union: Central Europe, Georgia, and our entire region will have a significant say, because our fate should mean something! We know very well that today it is Georgia, tomorrow Ukraine, the day after it will be the Baltic States, and who's to say my country of Poland won't be next?

We were deeply hopeful that our membership in NATO, and in the European Union would bring an end to Russian appetites. But it was apparently a mistake. However, we can oppose these reigns. We can oppose this but only if the values that are Europe's cornerstones are to have any meaning in practice whatsoever. If these values are to mean anything all of Europe should be here with us. Standing here with me are the leaders of four European nations that are part of NATO, Ukraine, a significant European Nation is here. However, 27 European member states should have been here."

Kaczyński delivered this speech standing alongside the newly appointed leaders of Central and Eastern Europe, Saakashvili and

Yushchenko, and the leaders of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia.

After watching this address it wasn't hard to imagine that such a display of resistance could easily have not only lost the Polish President the sympathy of the Russian leadership, but provoked interest in his removal. When I let myself follow this logic, this conclusion seemed entirely reasonable.

Russia's tactics to eliminate political enemies are far from a bygone relic of the past. In 2004 for example, Viktor Yushchenko, at the time a presidential candidate in the Ukrainian elections, fell prey to these tactics. One day he was invited to supper. He went. Someone intended to poison him. The three people who prepared his meal were present at the meal. In an interview, Yushchenko says that all three of them now live in Russia:

“Along with the Prosecutor General's office we've submitted to the Russian government both formally and unofficially for the release of these people, or for the permission to question them at the Ukrainian Embassy in Russia. This was unfortunately not possible.”

Yushchenko's face bears the marks of his poisoning as he explains about developing ties with Poland, “When Lech Kaczyński was President, Poland occupied a key position in the region. We were looking for a way to strengthen our relations. We wanted to make friends with him, to become partners, because he respected Ukraine's national interest. Not every politician is able to do this. Most do not consider it important to conduct politics in such a way as to respect the interests of the neighbouring nations.”

Kaczyński knew the history of the Russian Empire. It is a story most Polish school children can recite by heart. He knew that Russia's ambitions for expansion were beginning to rouse yet again. He wanted to stand up to Moscow's impunity in the name of his nation. Russia attacked Georgia and annexed two provinces, as the world stood by in silence. In fact, America had announced a new beginning, speaking in terms of a “reset” of relations. They forgave it all; they forgot it all. In

the meantime, the occupation of a neighbouring country is no trifle; this was the way the First World War had started. This was how the Persian Gulf War against Saddam Hussein had started. History shows that this is an adequate reason to start a war. What pressure is persuading the world to remain silent? This sends a clear signal to Moscow that it can continue, that it can do more, that it can apply twice as much pressure to gain twice as much.

By some miracle Saakashvili, thanks to his late arrival to the funeral service for Lech and Maria Kaczyński, was spared a face-to-face meeting with Dmitry Medvedev, President of Russia. Medvedev offered his condolences to the family and greeted the delegates of Central and Middle Europe, the only ones who managed to overcome the difficulty of travel under those circumstances.

The absence of 27 EU delegations at the funeral was painful to me. Certainly the majority of the Polish people felt this pain. How else could we be expected to respond otherwise when we watched serious institutions such as NATO and the EU thwarted by some mythological volcanic ash, unable to transport their politicians a mere 1200 km, while the President of Russia arrived at the service almost theatrically, as if in demonstration that he fears no one.

#

Out of the 1000 deputies of the Duma, the lower legislative house of the Russian Federation, no fewer than 70% come from the KGB (Committee for State Security) and the GRU (Main Intelligence Directorate). In other words, at least 70% of the Duma representatives come from the former KGB and Special Forces. This is an uncommon constitution for the ruling elite, as I heard repeated many times in the lectures of Andrzej Nowak, an historian specializing in Polish-Russian relations at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow.

For 123 years Poland did not exist on maps of Europe. My country

lost its sovereignty in the 18th century, and it was Russia that annexed the largest part of Poland, exactly 82%. Prussia occupied 7% and Austria swallowed up 11%. It should not come as a surprise that it is in the Polish tradition to look with suspicion upon what might come from Russia.

Meanwhile, even before the transcript from the recorders aboard the TU-154 was recovered, we were learning what caused the crash of April 10th and who was at fault from none other than Russian media sources. Polish news agencies were thoughtlessly repeating anything that appeared in Russia. For example, the radio interview with Vladimir Zyrinowski on Kommersant FM, broadcast approximately an hour after the crash, emphasized over and over again that, “the insistence of the Polish President to land may have played a role in the fatal crash.”

That same day we heard from the highest-ranking Russian Officials, such as General Aleksandr Aloszyn, Deputy Chief of Staff of the Russian Air Force, who claimed with certainty that the “President’s flight crew disregarded commands from Flight Control several times” which lead to the tragedy.

The Chief of the Central Federal District claimed that the crash was “likely the cause of crew error.” The Minister of Foreign Affairs in Poland, Radoslaw Sikorski, took a similar position, even before he examined the recordings of the black boxes. Shortly after the crash he phoned Jaroslaw Kaczyński, Lech Kaczyński’s twin brother, to inform him that “everyone died” and also that it was the “pilot’s fault.” How could Sikorski know right away that the death of the president and the other 95 passengers was caused by pilot error? He himself is unsure and explains that it was a “case of formulating a first hypothesis quickly in response to a sudden shocking event.”

Parliamentary journalists reporting in the Parliament (Sejm) would ask Sikorski many times later to explain “why he formulated such a certain cause so soon after the catastrophe?” Finally, two years later, the Polish Press Agency will publish communications between the

Minister of Foreign Affairs and a worker at the Operations Centre, exchanged on April 10th 2010. These communications won't offer justification for the definitive claims made in the wake of the catastrophe, they will, however, uncover an even more shocking revelation about this most tragic event to befall Poland since the Second World War.

I listened to the recording again. At 2 minutes 30 seconds the worker of the Operations Centre is asked by the Minister of Foreign Affairs to send the list of passengers onboard by email, and responds, "except that we have a problem, Sir. Right now the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is undergoing repairs and we don't have access to email, we've been completely cut off...the power has been cut...complications after a weather emergency."

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of a sovereign nation cannot be knocked into a communications lockdown by a weather emergency, that's what back up power generators are for. Furthermore, this is all beside the point since neither the day the communication occurred, nor the day before did Warsaw experience extreme weather.

From the very beginning we were bombarded with instances of strange, displaced information and disinformation about the crash. After some time even the journalists themselves lost track of the chronology of the facts. I was arriving at the conclusion that Russia's influence on Poland was exerted not only by way of agents, but also by way of 'useful' idiots, who, quite often, were also journalists.

CHAPTER 8

She buried him at the Powązki Cemetery in Warsaw. Later the statue for the victims of the Smoleńsk catastrophe would be erected nearby his grave. The funeral service for Andrew Blasik was attended by the Chief of the Canadian Air Force, and by his U.S. counterpart. She remembers that they stood over Andrew's grave with lowered heads for a long time.

It was a beautiful final goodbye: fifty standard-bearers from all over Poland, thousands of people, delegations from over twenty nations. The speeches moved her. They were not artificially motivated like funeral speeches tended to be. They were quite simply true. The ceremony was noble and worthy, appropriate for the burial of a great man of great merit.

She could not know at the time that her husband would soon be made out to bear all the fault for the plane crash. For the time being she was allowed a moment's grace to part with her beloved. She couldn't yet wrap her head around all the shreds of incoherent information circling around this tragedy, and the worst was yet to come.

At first she was able to treat the crash as a tragic accident. There could well have been an emergency aboard; the Russians could have been at fault. She didn't know what the condition of the airport in Smoleńsk was. Andrew was onboard that fateful flight as a representative of the Katyń delegation. Several other institutions were responsible for the flight.

Without consideration Ewa intuitively drew a parallel to the crash of the Belarusian SU-27 in Radom. She had witnessed the proceedings

of the investigation. She spoke with the pilots who were on the investigating committee, and saw with her own two eyes the full cooperation between the Poles and the Belarusians on the case. Each side was invested in arriving at the cause of the catastrophe; there was a trust between them.

When Ewa first learned that Prime Minister Donald Tusk had handed the investigation of the TU-154 crash over to the Russians it felt as if she had been struck. She doesn't remember who told her but she's grateful to the person. Whoever it was, saw to it that the information would not disturb her first deep mourning. Her immediate reaction to the news was one of terror: how could this be? The Russians will be investigating the cause of death of NATO generals? She was well versed in aviation law and knew that this was contrary to the Polish-Russian agreement signed in 1993, which states, among other things, that a joint commission must conduct investigations of aircraft disasters affecting both countries. When she learned that the investigation was going to be carried out by a State Commission with Prime Minister Vladimir Putin appointed as Investigator-in-Charge, an investigative committee of the Prosecutor General of Russia, and the Russian Interstate Aviation Committee (MAK) her tired eyes which had cried themselves dry, cried anew. Anything but this, she whispered under her breath and felt her body freeze painfully.

The Russian Interstate Aviation Committee, abbreviated to MAK in Russian, suggest by its very title an international organization. This is grossly misleading as this institution is in fact a unique last vestige of the Soviet Union. When the Soviet empire collapsed in 1991, the former states of the union formed the Commonwealth of Independent States, and alongside it formed a committee responsible for overseeing the use and management of the airspace in the CIS. The countries originally belonging to the CIS are ones that were formerly governed by the Soviet Union: Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, Georgia,

Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Ukraine. Over time the Commonwealth of Independent States was discarded but the MAK Committee was never dismantled. In fact, it only took on strength at that point.

Not only did the MAK Committee assess causes for aviation accidents, it also issued certificates for aircrafts, plane engines, airports, and investigative agencies. Essentially, without permission from the MAK Committee, planes could not fly and airports could not operate in Russia. Meanwhile the Committee enjoys a unique status: on the one hand it operates as a business, making profits off certification and operating according to law governing business practices. On the other hand, it accepts the privileges that come with diplomatic representation, as if it were operating in another country. Its agents are therefore protected by diplomatic immunity, and the committee itself does not fall under Russian or any other jurisdiction.

At the head of this committee so well established in the post-soviet system is Tatiana Anodina. A woman of great power, she is referred to as the most influential and wealthiest person in Russia. Her father was a fighter pilot. She finished an engineering degree at the Lviv Polytechnic National University and gave birth to her son, Alexander, a few years later. His father is Pyotr Pleshakov, Minister of Soviet aviation. Anodina's son was the president of Transaero airlines. Tatiana Anodina was the director of the State Institute for Civil Aviation and then the director of the technical division of the Soviet Ministry of Civil Aviation, where she had unlimited control over financing research projects. Later, thanks to the support of the First Deputy Chairman of the KGB, Yevgeny Maksimovich Primakov, she became the chair of the Interstate Aviation Committee (MAK), which Primakov helped found.

The history of the MAK Committee is a varied patchwork of scandals and corruptions. For example, in 2006 the Audit Office exposed Anodina's son, Alexander Pleshakov, tangled up in a

\$300,000,000 financial scandal. The whole affair was quickly covered up; the people who reported the fraudulent activity were either arrested or fired, some disappeared without a trace.

Perhaps the most provocative scandals, the ones to cause the greatest stir, have occurred when the MAK Committee, acting as judge in its own right, has pronounced the causes of certain aviation accidents.

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Ewa was suddenly flooded with alertness. The rush of this information that had just earlier lulled her into a stupor now boiled into anger at Prime Minister Donald Tusk. What right did the Polish Prime Minister have to hand an investigation of such national importance over to a bunch of swindlers? Feelings of betrayal and powerlessness were swelling inside her so strongly that all she could do was imagine fighting the Prime Minister with bare hands.

Struck by a memory she ran to the closet where Andrew kept newspaper clippings of aviation articles in one of the lower drawers. She picked through the articles with shaking hands looking for anything pertaining to investigations carried out by the MAK Committee. Already a general by then, Andrew once told her about some Armenian plane crash; there were over 100 people onboard. She recalls that he referenced controversy over the proceedings of the investigation carried out by the MAK Committee. At that time, he was Head of Training 2 Tactical Air Brigade in Poznań. He had kept a couple of files of documents from that time in his desk. She fell into his study carried on the wings of some terrible force. It was the first time she had entered that room since she said goodbye to him the morning of April 10th. The blinds on the windows hadn't been opened since the evening of the 9th. When she pulled them back rays of sunlight illuminated the thick dust that had settled on the mahogany

desk. She pulled a folder from 2006 out of a drawer and threw it onto the desk. The thick dust lifted into the sunlight.

Inside the folder was a photocopy of that article. It was coming back to her now. The Armenian A320 crashed into the ocean while attempting landing. One hundred and thirteen people died. The MAK Committee accused the flight crew of causing the crash. The Armenian media, however, revealed that the MAK Committee investigation concealed witness testimonies about the terrible conditions of the airport, which had been certified by none other than Anodina. The incident caused such a storm that Armenia, under intense media pressure, was expected to withdraw from the Commonwealth of Independent States.

She skimmed the article and her gaze caught a scribble at the top corner of the page. It was Andrew's favourite fountain pen, her gift to him for his 40th birthday. He adored elegant gadgets, and the fountain pen, in its fine leather case, quickly joined the ranks of the cuff links and distinguished ties. Her heart warmed with the thought. As she slowly pulled out of the melancholy reverie the contents of the article she had been staring at began to assemble before her eyes.

"December 1997. Heavy airlift transport aircraft An-124 Ruslan crashes into residential area of Irkutsk. Seventy-two people dead. Multiple engine failure. MAK Committee issued certificates for the engines. MAK Committee verdict: pilot error." The last two words were underlined in fountain pen. She noticed them also underlined on another page, where the article described the MAK investigation of an Il-76 that crashed into the Baku airport. The pilot had survived and was pleading with the Committee to have his name cleared. It turned out that worn engines had been installed into the aircraft, which was then promptly insured for ten million dollars.

Ewa didn't have to watch the news report to know what verdict the almighty Anodina would issue for cause of crash of the presidential plane, and yet not even in her worst nightmares could she ever imagine that this dignified 70-something year old woman would sentence her husband, Andrew Blasik, posthumously.

On the 12th of January 2011 the MAK Committee announced the conclusion of its investigation. It was a slap in the face not only for her. Even the political commentators who had naively trusted Russia to be a neutral judge concluded that this was a strike aimed directly at the very heart of Poland.

The conclusions of the MAK report were announced before the camera as uncontestable truth, with no room for discussion. Ewa watched the cynical presentation from home. The Russians played audio recordings of fragments of conversations from the cockpit; they included the final screams of the crew who knew they were about to die. Ewa had tried so often to imagine what the final moments would feel like, when a person knows that the end is coming but still has these fleeting seconds...to do what, exactly? Was it enough time for him to whisper a prayer? My God, what did he feel in those final moments? She knew that he was thinking of her, the family, the children. He knew he was going to die.

The first tears hadn't finished gathering to roll yet when the verdict struck her hard:

"The plane crash was caused by pilot error. The pilots were under pressure to land from General Blasik. The General was drunk; the autopsy revealed alcohol in his blood."

Anodina, coiffed and styled immaculately, as if she were made of wax, delivered Andrew's sentence in an icy tone. Ewa couldn't understand the words; nothing was getting through to her. Anodina repeated the word 'alcohol' with insistence, several times. That's not true! Ewa cried out at the television, Andrew didn't drink, certainly not before an assignment, certainly not on the way to the Katyn

commemoration. That's impossible!

By that time Polish experts had already recovered fragments of conversation from the cockpit indicating that pilot Arkadiusz Protasiuk announced the decision to discontinue landing, contrary to the claims of Russian investigators. The experts had passed their remarks on to the Russian investigators with no effect. Not a word was uttered in the conclusion of the MAK report to suggest any possibility of fault on the part of the Russians.

In the days following the release of the MAK report Ewa began to search for someone who understood the grave injustice that was being acted out. She was waiting for someone, anyone, to speak up to defend the honour of her husband. She was hoping that the new president, or the Head of the Armed Forces, or the Minister of National Defense or the Head of the Air Force will speak up and say that it was not so, that these words are insulting a Polish General. But no discussion followed the report, no response from the Polish government.

She shook off the shock and swore to herself that she would put up a fight to defend her husband's name. She was the victim of a tragedy; she would set this straight. She had a right to access the documentation in the investigation. I won't allow this to stand, she thought to herself, fighting off tears of helplessness. The Russians are lying right to our faces. They are playing Poland for a fool. They are tarnishing our name before the whole world. Why isn't anyone reacting to this?

The following day Ewa set out to find an attorney but this proved to be difficult. The media had already taken up the slander of General Blasik's name and it was difficult to find a lawyer brave enough to stand up to the prosecution. She spoke with two but neither wanted to take up her case. She knew that she needed help. She couldn't fight these accusations alone. She was deeply exhausted but she traveled to the Parliament to attend the press conference organized in response to the release of the MAK report. She told journalists that a Polish general

is being dishonoured publicly for all the world to see. Out of the crowds of people she found one single advocate, Bartosz Kownacki. She will always be grateful to the man. Kownacki agreed to represent her and put himself to the case of clearing the General's name.

Their first action was to insist that her husband's post-mortem examination be removed from the Internet. It had been published as part of the MAK report, in direct violation of the very Chicago Convention which the Russian investigation was based on. They wrote a letter addressed to General Anodina, which resulted in the partial removal of the examination.

The Russian journal *Izvestia* would quickly mock Ewa in a commentary published February 12th, saying, "the widow of Andrew Blasik, Chief of the Polish Air Force, did not like that everyone learned that alcohol was found in her husband's bloodstream." *Izvestia* would not issue a correcting article explaining that blood tests done by the Institute of Forensic Research in Kraków, as requested by the Polish prosecutor's office, found no traces of alcohol in Andrew Blasik's bloodstream. Ewa's attorney concludes that the single objective of this publication was to humiliate the Polish people, after all, the story of the drunken general was broadcast all over the world. However, what hurt Ewa the most was that not one person from the Polish government offered an apology for having done nothing to protest while she was being insulted.

At first she had no hope for receiving help in her own country, but across the ocean she found outspoken critics decrying the lack of an international investigation of the catastrophe. Dr. Eugene Poteat, a retired CIA executive, was one of them. He expressed his opinion on the proceedings of the investigation in the media forthrightly, citing his experience with the workings of the Soviet Union, and specifically with their intelligence practices. He knew well about the Soviets' murders committed in Katyn as well as other murders the KGB has on its conscience. When he learned that the Polish presidential airplane had

crashed in Russia his first thought was: they're up to something again.

Poteat had been interested in aviation since childhood. He had always wanted to be a pilot and he paid close attention to aviation accidents. The more he researched the circumstances of the TU-154 crash the more he became convinced that this was no accident. The MAK report put all the fault of the crash upon the pilot. The Russians went so far as to suggest that the pilot had a hard time communicating with the flight controller in Russian. The pilot, however, was fluent in Russian, he had been to Russia many times; this was well known. Meanwhile the flight controller in question disappeared without a trace. The Russians took to cleaning the site of the crash instantly. They claimed that the aircraft had clipped a birch tree, which caused the crash. Two American aviation accident experts carried out a detailed and rigorous analysis of the crash and concluded that this explanation was simply unrealistic. They pointed out that the shreds of the aircraft scattered across the crash site were disproof enough. The parts of the aircraft were very small and scattered across great distances. If the crash had indeed been caused by impact with a tree, large parts of the airplane would have remained intact.

Considering this analysis, Poteat suggested that it was likely that explosives had been rigged onboard the presidential aircraft. He pointed out the behaviour of the Russians directly after the crash: the lightning-fast move to fault the pilot, the meticulous clean-up of the crash site which included leveling the ground, removing the victims' bodies and locking them inside sealed coffins, the confiscation of the recorders. If it truly was pilot error as they claimed, they should have made the Flight Data Recorder and the Cockpit Voice Recorder available, said Poteat. The recordings would have confirmed the theory. Of course the recorders were not made available.

According to Poteat, the behaviour of the Russians after the crash resembled the clean up of a crime scene. He even dared to call this tragedy an unpunished crime. Every crime has a motive, and so the

Russians must have had reason to want to destroy these people. To Poteat the motive was clear: the Russians did not wish for this commemoration in Katyn to take place. For entire decades they had maintained that the Germans were behind the massacre. They did not like that they would be reminded yet again of their actions in 1940. This retired CIA executive had no doubt that without an international investigation supported by NATO justice could not be served.

Meanwhile, Ewa was really praying for an international investigation to clear her husband's name. After all he was well known among NATO generals. He was honoured for his service during his lifetime and also after death. A monument was erected in his memory at the Ramstein Air Base in the United States. The monument is humble in size yet potent with meaning. Engraved within the contours of Poland are the words of Jan Kochanowski, poet of the Renaissance, "If anyone is destined for heaven, it can only be those who serve their homeland." In front of the main residences on base an oak tree was planted to honour his memory.

In addition to the expressions of support she received from abroad she was heartened to receive a letter from professor Jack Trznadel. It was addressed to Prime Minister Donald Tusk and demanded the creation of an international committee to investigate the Smoleńsk tragedy. Over 250,000 people had signed it. In the letter professor Trznadel expresses wonder at Tusk's trust of Putin. He reminds Tusk that Putin was behind the bombing of the apartment building and the Russian occupants inside for the purposes of creating a pretext to start a war with Chechnya. He offers up as examples the investigations of the murders of Anna Politkowska, Galina Starowojtowa, and Aleksander Litvinienko.

Anna Politkowska was a living example of the freedom of the press, which is a very rare occurrence in Russia as journalists fear losing their health and even their lives for criticizing the government. She was 'accidentally' shot on October 7th, 2006 the day President Putin was

celebrating his 54th birthday.

52-year-old Galina Starovoitova, leader of the democratic opposition in the collapsing USSR was shot in a stairway the eve of the elections to the St. Petersburg legislative assembly.

Aleksander Litvinienko was a former KGB official. In 1998 he publicly revealed that he had received illegal orders, including the assassination of oligarch Boris Berezovsky. In 2001 Litvinienko managed to escape Russia. He received asylum and then citizenship in Great Britain. There he published *Lubyanka Criminal Group*, a book wherein he revealed the inner workings of the highest officials in the government administration of Russia. He described them as barbarians capable of murdering hundreds of people and casting the blame on others (Chechens) in order to achieve wealth, power, and unlimited influence. By the time Litvinienko was murdered he was no longer dangerous to Russia; he had said all he was going to say. His killing was an act of revenge. He was poisoned with Polonium-210, a radioactive isotope that British experts claim could only have been produced at a closed nuclear facility in the Russian town of Sarov.

For 23 days the whole world watched in horror as Litvinienko suffered towards his death in a London hospital. It was as if a new Tsar of Russia had declared: this is the punishment awaiting my enemies. Before his death, Litvinienko succeeded to address Putin one last time: "Perhaps you will succeed to silence me, but this silence has a price. You showed yourself to be the absolute barbarian your most hostile critics believe you to be. May God forgive what you have done."

In the presence of all these facts the behaviour of the Polish authorities in the wake of the April 10th tragedy is bewildering. Vladimir Bukovsky, a Russian dissident, was one of the many who expressed outrage at the actions of Donald Tusk, when the Prime Minister handed the investigation over to Putin. Bukovsky commented that either the Polish government did not understand who they were dealing with, else they were being forced in their dealings. The Russian

leaders are only putting up a misleading façade of pleasantries, warned Bukovsky, who over the course of his life became intimately acquainted with Soviet mentality. The sympathy of the Russian people towards the Polish should not be confused with the Kremlin's disposition.

CHAPTER 9

Dr. Kazimierz Zuchowicz [name changed] disappears easily into a crowd. His salt and pepper hair, average height and furrowed brow do not easily betray that he has spent the last 40 years of his life investigating aviation accidents. Mechanical engineer by profession, Dr. Zuchowicz has a calm and jovial demeanor and earns his daily bread by studying macabre situations that would make the average person weak in the knees. Why did Dr. Zuchowicz agree to speak with me about the Smoleńsk catastrophe? What drove him to travel the five-hour route from Ottawa to Toronto to meet with me? For a moment I wondered if perhaps he agreed because he is bored with retirement, which I know from our phone conversation is a recent change in his life. He knows that the tragic event of April 10th has brought me many sleepless nights. I had published several articles about it, nearly each one of them ending with a question that seemed to have no answer.

“I worked for quite a long time with the Ministry of Transportation. I’m a member of the International Society of Air Safety Investigators, and I have worked in aviation for the last 40 years” – Zuchowicz started the conversation.

These last words pulled me out of my reverie. “I know, I researched your career before I agreed to meet. It is nice to meet you,” I said. I lifted my hand to shake his but pulled back as his hands were full, laptop in one, leather briefcase in the other. He set his computer up at one of the little tables in the coffee shop and suddenly we fit right into the crowd of students pouring over their glowing screens. The smells of coffee and chocolate were stirring my mind and I was thankful for

that, as the engineer's first sentences came out sounding like a military report, stern and dry.

"The safety of civil aviation in military zones, and the flights of civilian aircrafts are increasingly endangered by military actions, with tragic results as we are seeing. First example: Airbus cargo plane owned by Air Transport was struck by a Russian missile on November 22, 2003. Thankfully the experienced crew, two Belgians and a Scot, managed to land the plane safely. Take as a second example the Malaysia MH17, shot down over eastern Ukraine by a Russian missile on July 17, 2014. Two-hundred and ninety-eight people died. Example three: on April 10th, 2010 a Polish aircraft crashed fatally over Smoleńsk, Russia. Ninety-six people died."

I began to feel as if I were sitting in a contemporary history lecture, waiting for this man to tell me nothing new, and the numbness of disappointment began to sink in. He must have sensed my agitation because he drew closer to the point with the next slide.

"Look closely at the fragments and only at the fragments of the airplane seats, which were discovered at the site of the crash, and listen to the conclusions drawn in the final official reports. Before I outline the striking falsehoods in these reports I have to draw your attention once more to the sequence of events that day."

He straightened up as if he were relating a report to his official:

"On the 10th of April, Polish Air Force TU-154 crashed near the Russian town of Smoleńsk, killing all 96 people onboard. Among the victims were: Polish President Lech Kaczyński along with his wife Maria, former last President of Poland in exile Ryszard Kaczorowski, as well as the commander and a number of generals of the Polish Armed Forces. Onboard were 88 passengers and eight crewmembers."

He moved to the next slide, an illustration of the flight path of the aircraft: from Warsaw, through Belarus, to Russia.

"Two official accident reports have been published to conclude investigations of this crash, the Russian MAK report and the Polish

Miller Report. Both reports classified the accident as a Controlled Flight into Terrain (CFIT), which is an accident that occurs when an airworthy aircraft, under pilot control, is flown into the ground by an unintentional maneuver. Typically, a CFIT is most often attributed to pilot error.

The basic principle of investigating any accident is that if the final report contains any fundamental flaws or discrepancies, it should be dismissed entirely. I noticed several basic inconsistencies in these reports, which cast doubt on the professionalism and integrity of the official investigation. I'm going to use specific examples to illustrate a general outline of the quality of these reports."

He called up the next slide.

"Let's begin with the documentation of the location of the catastrophe; this is what the wreckage looked like."

He pointed to a photo on the screen.

"Taking inventory of the site of the crash is the basic function of the investigation. Securing the site of the accident against unauthorized personnel assures proper investigation."

He spoke as if this had to be explained to me. Barely one week after the crash we watched on television as just about anyone could pick their way through the wreckage and take whatever they pleased. Even to the most lay spectator this was wrong and shameful.

"Unfortunately, the original layout of the wreckage was altered by random passers-by who made it to the site of the crash. Here's one example of an unsecured accident site: in the photograph here you can see a Russian soldier who is breaking the window to the airplane cabin. The second example, here you can see a man who has erected part of the airplane to stand vertically.

Here we have unprofessional conduct at the crash site, the photo shows two men holding up some part of the airplane and inspecting it from all sides. At this point in the investigation, airplane parts should not be touched with bare hands. The openings left by the pulled out

rivets suggest the effects of strong forces. The mechanism that destroyed this part of the airplane could mean a turning point in the investigation. The airplane part should be documented and its original location in the wreckage should be carefully photographed.

From satellite photos you can see that part of the airplane was moved. The left horizontal stabilizer was moved approximately 20 meters closer to the wreckage, and this new position was documented in the MAK report as the original position in which the stabilizer was found onsite.

So the following are the inconsistencies that were identified: the wreckage was not properly closed off to local unauthorized traffic, parts of the airplane were moved at will without appropriate documentation, and the original location of the fuselage was not explicitly marked.

According to both the MAK and Miller reports, aircraft TU-154M 101 was the aircraft that left the Chopin Airport on April 10th. And here is an example of a certificate, this is a Certificate of Airworthiness, each civilian aircraft must carry one. Now here's the thing. The MAK report claims that two certificates were found at the crash site: one expired certificate for aircraft 101, and one up-to-date certificate for aircraft 102. Mind you that aircraft 101 had undergone a general overhaul while aircraft 102 was being overhauled in Samara at the time of the crash. The question remains: why were the up-to-date certificate for aircraft 102 and the expired certificate for aircraft 101 found at the site of the crash?

This is taken from the original documentation from the MAK report, 'At the site of the aviation accident a Certificate of Airworthiness for aircraft 101 was found with an expiry date of May 20, 2009, another, up-to-date certificate was also found for another aircraft (102), which was being overhauled at the time of the accident.'

The fundamental document that regulates the use of aviation technology in the Polish Armed Forces is the Instruction for

Engineering and Aviation Service of Aviation Forces. In accordance with this document, a Certificate of Airworthiness is not required. The pilot is not under obligation to carry it in the aircraft, neither is it a common practice to do so.”

The conclusions were drawing themselves as Dr. Zuchowicz spoke, I could almost give them voice – the presence of both certificates at the site of the crash suggests that one or both were planted at the site of the wreck. Both of the committees investigating this accident had completely disregarded the possibility that the aircraft documentation was tampered with. In the “Remarks of the Republic of Poland,” which Dr. Zuchowicz found on the Internet, it is clearly stated that, “aircraft TU-154M 101 was not granted a Certificate of Airworthiness” after its overhaul.

“In that case what documentation did the Russians find at the site of the accident?” I almost yelled this sentence, drawing for a moment the attention of the students sitting at the table next to us.

“Well, they claimed to have found two certificates, and the Polish site assures that they did not issue any certificates. And there you have it. And this leads me to conclude that documents were tampered with, and this tampering was not addressed in either of the reports.

Things become even more interesting if we consider the passenger cabin of the aircraft. Both reports list aircraft TU-154M 101, carrying 88 passengers onboard as the aircraft that crashed. There exist, however, serious discrepancies as to the number of passenger seats aboard this aircraft. The Miller Report claims that, four days before the catastrophe, the number of passenger seats in the aircraft was increased from 90 to 100.

The MAK Report shows only 90 passenger seats. Here are the blueprints from the Polish report. Here we have the VIP lounge, which had eight seats originally. Supposedly it was converted to accommodate 18 seats. This is one of the documents from the Miller Report, which is offered as proof of the aircraft’s renovations.”

The photograph on the slide showed a scrap of paper with handwritten doodles.

“Please note that all the notations are made in one colour, blue, and this here note, in black ink, states that, in accordance with the orders of the Chief of the Air Force, the interior was rebuilt to accommodate 18 seats. And this is it. This is all the documentation that was obtained on the topic of the reconstruction of the aircraft. To me it looks as if someone had simply added in this sentence post-fact. In either case this does not look like an official document, even more so when you consider that where the signatures are concerned, it is not clear who signed what.

Under the heading, Details of Construction and Airplane Data under Investigation, the MAK report states that, ‘the aircraft was structurally designed to carry 90 passengers. In accordance with chapter 2.3 in the instruction manual, there should be a minimum of four flight attendants on board during flight.’”

“Let me count for a minute then” - I said - “the MAK report claims that there were 90 seats on board, because there were 88 passengers, two seats would have been left empty. According to the Miller report there were 100 seats, 88 passengers would leave 12 empty.” I drew my conclusions excitedly and my tutor nodded his agreement.

“It is precisely this discrepancy in number of empty seats during the flight, which was never explained. The MAK report does not state how many passenger seats were found at the site of the wreck. It claims, however, that all passengers as well as all seats were counted, and even claims that some number of passengers did not have their seat belts fastened before the crash occurred. It does nothing to mention the 12 empty passenger seats, which are documented in the Miller report.

Now, what is most interesting is that the Supreme Audit Office claims that according to a statement made by a soldier assigned to protect the Chief of the General Staff of the Polish Armed Forces for the duration of the Chief’s flight and stay outside of Poland, the soldier

was turned away by the Chief of the Secretariat of the Minister for ‘lack of room onboard.’”

The personal bodyguard of the Chief of the General Staff was not allowed onboard because there wasn’t enough room. I hadn’t heard about this and it seemed altogether too much. According to the MAK report, 12 spare seats were available. Who was lying here? My tutor watched my growing disease calmly and continued.

“On the one hand we have an assessment by an official governmental agency, the Committee for Investigation of National Aviation Accidents, which is under obligation to present factual information. On the other hand, we have the Supreme Audit Office, another official governmental body, which claims the contrary. These two governmental documents, issued by Polish agencies, contradict one another! The MAK report states that almost everyone, the high-ranking officials, two members of the crew and one flight attendant were in the front of the passengers’ cabin. However, a little further into the report it is also stated that ‘tickets were not issued at the airport, passengers presented boarding passes to board the aircraft and seats were not assigned.’

So we arrive at the following question: how were individual passengers assigned to specific seats if there was no documentation of it? Who sat where? Here we have the fragments of seats found at the site of the crash.”

He shows me a photograph. Small scraps of seat debris are scattered throughout the wreckage. I study the photograph with a growing sense of dread.

“Now I ask you to imagine that the MAK reporters claim they know who sat where. The conclusion to draw is a simple one, an elementary student could arrive at it: the configuration of the passengers’ cabin, the number of seats in the aircraft, and the state of seat belts before landing have not been adequately addressed.”

I watched him take a few sips of coffee and marveled at what he

managed to draw from those dry reports, and at his calmness in describing what sounded like a crime novel to me.

“Nothing lines up in this catastrophe. Even something as obvious as the time of crash is in question. According to BBC news, the Russian Ministry informed Russian News Agency ITAR-TASS that the aircraft crashed at 8:56am CET while attempting landing. This information is released on the 10th of April. A week later, Euronews was circulating that the aircraft crashed at 8:56am CET, so at the same hour.

As it turned out, this official time of the crash circulated a whole two weeks. Recordings from the Flight Data Recorder and the Cockpit Voice Recorder, as well as the recordings from the control tower are used to calculate the time of the crash.

Two weeks after the catastrophe, the time of the crash was changed to 8:41am CET, fifteen minutes earlier than the time originally stated. This change was never explained. Therefore, an incorrect time of crash was circulated widely for a whole two weeks, despite the fact that the data from the recorders had already been read, I have to assume, correctly. On April 10th 2010 the Russians access data from the Flight Data Recorder, at least that is what was documented in the report.”

He held my gaze to let his words sink in.

“And in spite of this, for a whole two weeks the wrong time of the catastrophe was given out, untruthfully, over and over again. Why? And what about the recorders themselves? This is another strange story. As it turns out, there exist at least seven copies of the recording from the cockpit; each recording is a different length. What’s even stranger is that four versions of the recording of the final minutes of the flight have appeared. Each of these copies has been presented as a ‘certified copy of the original recording from the cockpit.’ Now, this is just bizarre. We have a single recording device, and yet we have several copies of recordings, each a different length, with differing content. This is an event of international importance. It remains to be explained how recordings of different length with different content came to be.

The authenticity of the recordings cannot be verified as the Russians refuse to return the recorders.”

I found myself cursing under my breath, after all, there must exist some kind of procedures around assessing aviation accidents. Zuchowicz’s dry emotionless tone was beginning to irritate me, but he ignored my growing rage and continued, speaking as if he were assigning homework to schoolchildren.

“One of the basic functions of taking inventory of the site of the crash is the ability to assess whether any of the parts of the aircraft were found along the flight path before the place of impact.

If parts of the aircraft were found along the way to where the aircraft hit the ground, this means there was technical malfunction, and it’s likely that the pilot could not control the plane. It has already been confirmed that several parts of the airplane were found before the place of impact. Additionally, the MAK report notes a serious emergency of the entire computer system aboard, ‘power supply to the FSM cut at 10:41:05, at an altitude of 15 meters, speed of 145 knots (270 km/h).’ These facts tell us that this aircraft experienced serious technical problems. So we have an airplane, which the Russians claim is fully functional, and next they contradict themselves by documenting in the report that the power supply to the Flight Management System was cut. It is hard to control an aircraft if the thing is falling apart in mid-air.”

He showed the next photograph, a fragment of the airplane preceding the location of the machine itself.

“Because the plane began to fall to pieces in the air, the commission investigating the accident should investigate the possibility of an Uncontrolled Flight into Terrain (UFIT). In this scenario, the pilot has no capacity for a safe landing.”

He sat back, finally satisfied with the words that lay between us, and let me follow his train of thought.

“In that case, claiming pilot error as the cause of the crash, as both

the MAK and the Miller reports did, is baseless and unsupported. In the face of the fact that the aircraft began to fall apart while in mid-air, the investigative committees entirely disregarded the possibility of Uncontrolled Flight into Terrain and prematurely faulted the pilot. Both reports are riddled with serious errors and oversights, which cast doubt on the professionalism and credibility of the committees.”

If a professional who has spent forty years investigating civilian aviation accidents recounts the above, it must mean something. And if he knows, other experts in the field must also know. Why are they silent?

CHAPTER 10

Maybe it is because they fear for their safety, I wondered as I watched Zuchowicz's Honda disappear into traffic after our interview. I wonder if he would have dared to take up the case of Smoleńsk if he and his family lived in Poland? Considering the mysterious consecutive deaths of people tangled up in one way or another in the tragedy of April 10th made it difficult for a person to avoid considering the term 'serial suicides', even if they were trying hard steer clear of hysteria.

'Serial suicide' is an expression that appeared in Polish popular culture after April 10th 2010, in reaction to the unexplained deaths marred by questionable circumstances that began to occur with disturbing frequency. Relating to the repetitious characteristics of a 'serial killer' the paradoxical term is a tongue in cheek recognition of the changing times in the country in the wake of the Smoleńsk tragedy.

In many of the serial suicide cases the body was discovered on a Friday or Saturday. Because the forensic medicine laboratories in Poland close for the weekend the autopsy would then be scheduled for the following Monday. This is significant because according to pathologists, increasing the time between death and autopsy can significantly interfere with accurate results, as certain drugs and chemicals can decay over the course of a few days leaving no detectable trace in the body. Often the investigators would arrive on the scene, immediately rule out third party involvement and throw that version to the press. None of the serial suicide victims left behind a letter.

Under the rule of Donald Tusk the serial suicide became a way to silence problematic individuals in Poland. In the not so distant past it

was the Soviets who employed similar tactics, choosing a “natural death” so long as they had the agreement of the investigative body to be appropriately dishonest in identifying the perpetrator. In response to these deaths many of the people engaged in untangling the mysteries surrounding the Smoleńsk crash chose to post videos of themselves on-line where they declared for the record that they did not suffer depression, struggle with finances, or with personal problems; that they were of sane mind and that they did not intend to commit suicide.

The first one I heard of was ensign Remigiusz Muś, on the 27th of October 2012. Remigiusz Muś was the leading witness in the Smoleńsk investigation. He was the pilot of the YAK-40, the plane that flew Polish journalists to Smoleńsk that fateful day. He was the only witness to the communications between the control tower and the pilots of the TU-154. He contested the official version of the catastrophe, testifying that the control tower operator at the Smoleńsk airport commanded the pilots of the Tupolev to descend to an altitude of 50 meters, contrary to the official report. According to the official version, he committed suicide in his basement in Piaseczno, near Warsaw.

Andrew Lepper, who had served as Deputy Prime Minister, was found dead in his office in Warsaw on the 5th of August 2011. He was found dead right after he had announced that he had important information about the Smoleńsk catastrophe. Because the death fell on a Friday, just before the weekend, the autopsy was carried out the following Monday. The verdict: death by hanging. Shortly before his death Lepper was trying to reach Jarosław Kaczyński, the brother of the dead president.

General Sławomir Petelicki was the founder and leader of the world-famous Polish Special Forces unit Grom. He criticized the government harshly for the presidential tragedy. He revealed the contents of a text communication sent April 10th 2010, which instructs the envoys of the leading party to fault the pilots with the cause of the crash. He was found dead in a garage. The official cause of death is

suicide.

An unnamed officer of the Polish Military Counterintelligence Agency who had clearance to access classified information died in Wejherowo on the 12th of June 2011. He allegedly hung himself.

And what of Dariusz Szpineta? All those who were interested to learn the true causes of the Smoleńsk tragedy were impatiently awaiting the completion of his analysis, which, he assured, would undermine the governmental report. He was the first to inform the Prosecutor's Office of the corrupt handlings of the Civil Aviation Authority. He questioned the official findings of the Smoleńsk investigation openly and repeatedly. A video of Szpineta proving that the ill-fated flight was a military flight, not a civilian one, circulated widely on the Internet; the Russian investigation was carried out according to the Chicago Convention, which concerns civil aviation. Szpineta was a pilot, a flight instructor, and an aviation expert. He took a trip to India. He was found dead in a resort bathroom December 2nd, 2011. He allegedly hung himself. He showed no signs of depression leading up to his death. His friends recounted that he was in good spirits before traveling.

In addition to these serial suicides, a number of individuals actively engaged in the Smoleńsk investigation died of suspicious causes.

Dr. Eugene Wróbel was an engineer, retired Deputy Minister of Transport, and lecturer at the faculty of Automatic Control, Electronics and Computer Science at the Silesian University of Technology in Gliwice. Wróbel was an expert in aviation and one of the leading specialists in Poland on computer flight controls. He was perhaps the first author to conclude that what occurred in Smoleńsk was a terrorist attack. What's more – and this I found out in secret from friends working as investigative journalists in Poland – he put into question whether the aircraft wrecked at the Severny Airport in Smoleńsk was a TU-154 tail number 101 at all.

He was murdered with the help of a chainsaw, on October 16th,

2010, three days before the MAK Committee was scheduled to announce their conclusion on what caused the crash of the presidential aircraft. According to the investigation, he was murdered by his 'mentally ill' son in their family home. The results of the investigation concluded that Gregory, until that moment a role-model son, threw himself like a beast at his father with a chainsaw in hand, and cut him up into pieces. Then he managed to masterfully clean every last trace of blood, throw the body into a nearby lake, and return home to act as if nothing had happened. Everyone who knew Dr. Wróbel's family received this news with disbelief. Gregory's mother, a trained psychiatrist, somehow failed to notice her son's psychotic tendencies for over 20 years.

Earlier that year Mieczysław Cieslar, an Evangelical bishop reported to the media that he had received a text from a priest aboard the TU-154 after the crash of the aircraft. Shortly after his media declarations, on the night of April 18th, Cieslar died in a head-on collision on a straight road, heading home from the funeral service for the victims of the crash.

Krzysztof Knyż, a camera operator for Fakty TVN was the first member of the press to arrive at the Smoleńsk airport in anticipation of the arrival of the TU-154. He was on-location before Russian Special Forces officers forced all press to leave the premises. According to Russian accounts, he died of sepsis on the 2nd of June 2010, in a Moscow hospital. That's what I found posted on the Internet. This is very curious considering that his friends, who attended the mass celebrated by Father Alexander Jacyniak in honour of the victims of the Smoleńsk tragedy, reported that the priest referred to Knyż's circumstances of death as 'unexplained.' Paul Pluska, reporter for Fakty TVN contests both versions. According to him, Knyż could not have been in Smoleńsk because at that very moment he was bed-ridden in a hospital in Warsaw.

Professor Mark Dulinicz who was preparing to accompany a

volunteer group of archeologists to travel to the Smoleńsk crash site died in a car accident on the 6th of June 2010.

Dr. Włodzimierz Abramowicz was a prominent specialist in the field of mechanics and dynamic construction, inventor of state-of-the-art computer simulations for analyzing collisions of vehicles, ships and aviation accidents. He was presented as the expert who could explain the Smoleńsk crash. On February 12th, 2012 we read his obituary in the papers.

Professor Jerzy Szaniawski criticized the government for Smoleńsk repeatedly; he referred to the tragedy as an assassination. He was an historian and a journalist and lectured at the Higher School of Social and Media Culture in Toruń. He was insisting that Smoleńsk was an assassination. Szaniawski died in September of 2012 in the Tatra Mountains; he fell off the trail into a chasm.

Krzysztof Zalewski, journalist, historian and aviation expert, head-editor of the monthly publication *Lotnictwo* (Aviation) was murdered December 10, 2012. The 48-year old assailant stabbed Zalewski multiple times.

In August 2014 an official of the Polish Government Protection Bureau (BOR), who in 2010 was involved in preparing the presidential flight to Smoleńsk, died mysteriously. 44-year old Mark K. was one of the key officers responsible for the safety of the most important politicians in the country. He was found dead in his home in Ząbki, in the suburbs of Warsaw. His friends reported that he gave no reason to suggest he was suicidal. Mark K. was found covered in blood with a wound to the brow. The pathologist who carried out the autopsy concluded that the cause of death was cardiorespiratory failure.

Finally, the death of Sergei Tretyakov is of note. Though it occurred in 2010 I only learned about it recently. Tretyakov was a former KGB agent who allegedly had traveled to the USA with the intention to talk to CIA agents about the Smoleńsk tragedy. He died on that trip.

It was only when I listed these deaths alongside each other that I

realized that there are two more, which deserved to be grouped in here. Both of them are shrouded in secrecy, and both occurred before April 10th, 2010.

Gregory Michniewicz, Head of the Prime Minister's Chancellery hung himself with a vacuum cleaner cord in his home near Warsaw, just before Christmas in 2009. Earlier that day he had bought Christmas gifts for his wife and children. Michniewicz had access to the country's most secret intelligence information, and the highest security clearance from NATO and the European Union. He hung himself the day the Tupolev aircraft was returned from repairs in Samar, Russia. The autopsy was performed only after the holidays.

Earlier that year cryptographer and ensign Stefan Zielonka was declared missing by his wife, on April 19th. The remains of his body were found a year later on the banks of the Vistula river that runs through Warsaw. This remains one of the most mysterious deaths of the last years. Zielonka worked with the Military Intelligence Services, had access to the country's most secret and classified information and to classified communications with NATO. The circumstances of his death remain unexplained today.

As I finished drafting this horrific summary it struck me that behind the dry statistics of dates and times and garish circumstances is a group of people, distinguished, achieved professionals and scholars who each made great contributions to society in their own ways. These people each had their dreams and ambitions, love and family. Each one lost his or her life dramatically, and the investigations surrounding their deaths, instead of being taken up by the media, were quietly extinguished over time. For a moment I was overwhelmed as these people's lives and all they had lost pressed upon me. I wished I could feel less. I didn't for a minute want to find myself in the skin of those bereaved, mourning one of these 'serial suicide' victims.

CHAPTER 11

Outside the darkness was falling. The cars ahead of me were crawling as if through molasses. The left lane was torn up and I could smell the stink of heated tar. Another hard winter of freezing and snowing and plowing had cracked holes into the asphalt that had to be replaced now. We were moving so slowly that I could watch carefully as the black viscous mass of gravel, tar and bitumen was poured over the earth and then pressed with heavy rollers.

The earth will cover everything and the roller will compress it, smooth it out. Cover, compress, smooth, cover...the words were rolling in my mind and I swallowed hard. The roadside construction was colliding with fragments of information about the mysterious deaths and I suddenly remembered how Józef Mackiewicz described the exhumation and identification of the Polish officers in his book *The Katyń Wood Murders*:

“The local workers climb down into the ditches where the dead lie, they separate individual corpses, often they are forced to rip apart the bodies, which have been layered so thick that they have flattened and stuck to one another. The workers lay the corpses out onto stretchers and carry them to an open field where they are laid out on the earth. Another group of workers under strict supervision from the leadership of the Polish Red Cross collects any items found on the corpse [...] The uniforms are naturally flattened, stuck together, gluey, faded. There is no hope to unbutton buttons. The workers use knives. They cut open pockets and even the tops of the boots, to extract all those things a person carries with them in life. And this is the moment in

which the mute, sullen grave begins to speak.”

This description of the barbaric treatment of the bodies disturbed me. Christianity, the religion I was raised in, teaches that the body should be respected and venerated after death, and burying bodies in mass graves and then dragging them out again was a horrifying contrast to the tradition of ceremonial Christian burial rituals.

This ritual was as familiar to me as the landscape of my childhood. I came to know it when I spent the summers with my grandparents out in the village. The atmosphere that accompanied death and the preparations for a burial was characteristically solemn and mysterious. My grandmother would put on her fine striped cape. I remember her telling me that the body of the person we were going to visit would first be washed and dressed in fine clothing and then laid inside the coffin. Then she would take me by the hand and we would go to hold vigil by the dead one.

The coffin with the body was arranged in the center of the chamber on a makeshift catafalque. The village women were singing, or more like wailing mourning songs. Next came the holy mass, and afterwards the dead one was walked to the cemetery, accompanied by the sound of church bells. The mourning villagers would pray over the grave for the soul of the dead one. The body was buried facing east. After the coffin was placed in the grave handfuls of earth would be cast in along with the words “rest in peace” and “may the earth be light upon you.” The whole ritual had a metaphysical dimension to it.

It is therefore not hard to imagine the anger that grew in the hearts of the Polish people when they learned that over the course of the autopsies of certain victims of the Smoleńsk crash some of the bodies had been desecrated. The Russians had sewn surgical gloves, wood chips, earth and garbage into the stomachs of some. They placed the dirty naked bodies into plastic bags, sealed them in welded coffins and did not allow the families to open them up again. When I learned this it became clear to me that the death of the Polish delegation also had

a metaphysical dimension to it.

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The body of Zbigniew Wassermann, former Minister of Special Forces, was returned to Poland April 15th 2010. The family was informed that the coffin could no longer be opened. Allegedly some law prohibited it. They were also told that all the necessary testing of the body required for the investigation had already been carried out in Moscow. In that moment the family, deep in shock and mourning, accepted the government's words without questioning. They quickly grew to regret this. When the documentation arrived from Russia and Margaret Wassermann, the Minister's daughter, was handed the results of the autopsy she was stunned. The Russian experts had described internal organs that her father had had removed 20 years before the crash. This was no innocent error. Margaret Wassermann testified against this in numerous interviews:

“My father underwent a very serious operation 21 years ago whereby a significant portion of his internal organs were removed. Considering this, based on the medical documentation as well as other evidence, we have shown unequivocally that this document, which is supposed to be my father's autopsy report, cannot be his autopsy report.”

In October of 2010 Margaret Wassermann decided to file a complaint against the autopsy report. She explained her reasoning in an interview on RFM FM:

“I do not believe that the Russians carried out a proper and just autopsy on my father's body. The documents that came from Russia are simply not authentic. If not for Minister Kopacz, who assured us that Polish representation was present at every autopsy we would not have agreed to bury my father's body when it was first returned to Poland. [...] If ever there was an autopsy performed on my father's

body the Polish government does not have access to that report. [...]”

Andrzej Melak was the next to file a complaint against the autopsy report issued for his brother, Stefan Melak. He explains what he found in the report:

“I felt like I was reading a document written about another person. According to them my brother was 20 centimeters taller than he was in truth, and only slightly overweight. Actually, he was 174 cm tall and weighed well over 100 kg. There are more errors than these in the report.”

Perhaps the murkiest chapter of the Smoleńsk tragedy began around the exhumation of Anna Walentynowicz, the legendary labour rights activist and hero of the Solidarity Movement.

As in the case of Margaret Wassermann, the Walentynowicz family filed an exhumation application after they read through the documents issued by the Moscow Institute. Janusz Walentynowicz explained the family’s reasoning during an interview for Gdańsk public radio:

“There were many inaccuracies in the report and finally we were not sure who was buried in the grave meant for Anna Walentynowicz. We also hope that the exhumation will allow us to learn what caused my mother’s death.”

His son Peter added,

“I don’t allow myself the thought that someone other than grandmother Anna is lying in that grave.”

Walentynowicz’s nephew continued,

“None of us have any proof that any autopsy was carried out in Moscow at all. In our case it was my father who identified Grandma in Moscow. That’s where his role ended in the proceedings, the rest was left up to the expert Russian investigators, and to the Polish experts who were supposedly there. There was no trouble with identifying Grandma, my father recognized her outward appearance. Her body was in one piece. It wasn’t massacred in any way. My father recognized her instantly without any problems. When we started to look through

the Russian documents, however, we concluded that they were not referring to our Grandmother at all. In that moment we began to suspect that there had been an error in identifying caskets, in identifying bodies, or perhaps that the documentation was falsified.”

The Walentynowicz family requested to have renowned international expert pathologist, Dr. Michael Baden participate in the autopsy. Their request was dismissed, which puzzled even Dr. Baden. He said that he had never before been forbidden to participate in an exhumation, not even in war-torn countries in Africa.

What would Dr. Michael Baden have to say if he had been observing the autopsy performed on Anna Walentynowicz and witnessed the sleeve of a suit jacket or surgical gloves left in her skull? How dehumanized must a person be to stick cigarette butts, dirty bandages and other trash into the body cavities of a corpse? And yet the prosecutors announced such findings after performing autopsies on other victims of the TU-154 crash. The body of Minister Przemysław Gosiewski also underwent scandalous desecration at the hands of the Russians. Again the autopsy report was inaccurate, stating a weight 20 kg off the actual weight of the body.

There is an act contained within the Polish criminal law code that addresses this type of desecration, transgression of dignity, honour and respect towards the body of the dead, but who can be blamed in these cases, Russian pathologists?

Another dramatic finding occurred when the experts at the Polish forensic medicine lab revealed they were unable to declare the cause of death for Gosiewski because they concluded that the internal organs had not been disturbed. Meanwhile, the Polish government, as represented by Minister Ewa Kopacz, was making assurances in the Polish Parliament that according to the autopsy reports issued by Moscow the members of the delegation had sustained injuries in multiple organs, which indicates that, “they died in a plane crash.” So if the bodies did not sustain injuries in multiple organs, which indicates

death by plane crash, what was the cause of death?

Professor Karol Śliwka, director of the Department of Forensic Medicine at the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Bydgoszcz, a year after the tragedy admitted that the day the Tupolev crashed he organized a group of the leading Polish expert researchers specializing in a variety of fields, including anthropologists and forensic geneticists. Supposedly they sat around with their bags packed, ready to travel to the site of the crash at any moment. However, the Crisis Management Centre decided that their services were not required there. The team of researchers insisted that the experts from the Department of Molecular Genetics could provide indispensable help in running DNA tests using state-of-the-art technology. They received no response.

As it turned out, not even a single Polish doctor presided over the autopsies performed in Moscow. Why then was Minister Ewa Kopacz lying to the Polish public three days after the crash when she described the proceedings in Moscow like this:

“I would like to remind everyone that three days have passed since the tragedy. The results that came in very late yesterday [indicate that] 48 bodies have been identified. Everyone understands well what bodies look like after a catastrophe of this kind. This is why the identification of bodies is an art. This is the result of the hard work on behalf of both the Polish and Russian anatomopathologists.

We are working together like a large family. I must say that this is the first time I am witness to such good, you could say exemplary cooperation, as well as such complementary work. I have also been authorized to speak for those who have already left, the family members of the victims of the crash who wanted to express their gratitude to Tatiana Golikowa for such good work, for such dedication to the work.”

CHAPTER 12

It was a whole five years after the Smoleńsk crash before the officials at the Polish Embassy in Russia finally admitted to what the cooperation between the Polish officials and the officials of the Kremlin truly looked like in the wake of the catastrophe.

In an interview for *Rzeczpospolita*, Piotr Marciniak, a former diplomat who was working at the Polish Embassy in Moscow at the time of the crash described:

“Just after the crash I was expecting a Hercules to land at the Moscow airport, or at least some Polish equivalent. I expected that dozens of experts would disembark from the aircraft: Polish investigators, doctors, officials and an Emergency Response Team. Meanwhile no one of the sort arrived. Instead Minister Ewa Kopacz arrived, who, with all due respect, is no match against Putin and his very influential advisor, Yuri Uszakov. What was needed there was a first class politician who could take on the weight of negotiations with the Russian side, which had formed and strengthened in a matter of days.”

Even if we side with Marciniak and agree that the whole weight of the situation fell upon the shoulders of a single Polish minister, what are we to think of the minister’s naiveté which allowed her to believe that the autopsies of all the victims were completed within 24 hours of the accident? The autopsy performed on Zbigniew Wasserman in Poland, after his body was exhumed, took three days to complete, for example. Furthermore, the fact that the Russians took nearly three weeks to extract the bodies from the wreckage casts further doubt on

their alleged swiftness with carrying out the autopsies. The very experts who participated in the exhumations were surprised that autopsies were not performed directly after the bodies were returned to Poland. Generally, when foreigners are concerned, an autopsy is performed in the country they died in, and repeated again in the country they come from as soon as the body is sent back. Instead, in the case of the April 10th catastrophe no autopsies were performed in Poland until the first exhumation, which took place a year and a half after the crash.

Despite the fact that Minister Kopacz was informed at 11am the day after the crash that the autopsies had been completed, she maintained for months after that she had participated in the autopsies. Why did she lie?

The sudden shift in the political narrative to pro-Russian that occurred in Poland at around the same time might explain some of the strange behaviors of the high-ranking Polish officials. This could be understood as the government's efforts to calm the public. Disinformation and fact forgery created an atmosphere of imposed reconciliation between Poland and Russia that accompanied the Smoleńsk tragedy from the outset.

The publication *Gazeta Wyborcza* printed reconciliatory slogans with zest and fervor, urging for unity with Vladimir Putin's regime. Journalists like Marcin Wojciechowski and Wacław Tadžiwiniowicz "suggested" that faults could be forgiven and that the Polish society has love for the Kremlin. This is evidenced by article titles such as, "We thank our Moscow brothers" and "Russia is Doing Everything it Can to Help the Investigation." It looked as if the Polish government was attempting to place the entire Smoleńsk tragedy as an offering at the altar of reconciliation.

For someone raised Catholic like me, and most of the Polish population, it is obvious that admitting to the fault, regret for what sins were committed, apology and asking forgiveness must precede forgiveness. Meanwhile none of this took place. Russia was expected

to repent during Lech Kaczyński's visit to Katyń, which turned tragic instead. Why was it that in the wake of the tragedy the Polish public was forced by moralistic journalists, who took up the crusade of sculpting social consciousness, to ostentatiously demonstrate love for its longtime enemy?

It was not the Polish who occupied Russia for over 120 years. It was not the Polish who attacked Russia with the intention to destroy its sovereignty. Poland did not ally with Hitler as the Russians did. The Polish did not create prison and labour camps, and did not deport thousands of women and children to the so-called inhuman lands of Siberia where they perished slowly. Finally, it was not the Polish who shot thousands of officers in the back of the head. It was not the Polish who oppressed millions with massacres, rapes and expulsion after 1945. The Russian government had never yet sought to repent these heinous crimes. In fact, it had never yet fully admitted to them. Quite the opposite, often it boasts of the bygone days of that imperial era.

Lech Kaczyński expressed this eloquently in the speech prepared for the Katyń commemoration, which was never read publicly:

“Polish officers, clergy, state officials, police officers, border guards, and prison guards were eliminated without sentence or due process. They were victims of an unspoken war. Their murder violated the law and the conventions of the civilized world. Their dignity as soldiers, Poles and people was crushed. The mass graves were expected to forever hide the bodies of the murdered along with the truth about their deaths. The world was never supposed to learn what happened there. The families of the victims were denied the right to mourn publicly, to grieve and properly remember their beloved ones. The earth concealed the traces of the crime and the lie was supposed to wipe them from human memory. The hiding of the truth about Katyń – the effect of the decisions that led to the crime– became one of the fundamentals of the communist politics in post-war Poland, and the foundational lie of the Polish People's Republic.

In those times a steep price was paid for memory, for remembering the truth about Katyń. However, the families of the victims, as well as other courageous people stayed faithful witness to this memory, defended it and passed it on to new generations of Poles. They carried it through the era of communist governance and entrusted it into the hands of generations born in a free, independent Poland. For this we owe them, and especially the families of the Katyń massacre, respect and gratitude. In the name of Poland I offer our deepest gratitude to you, for in your insistent defense of the memory of those closest to you, you managed to salvage the nation, as well as an important dimension of our Polish consciousness and identity.

Katyń became a painful wound in Polish history and it poisoned Polish-Russian relations for long decades. Let us act so that the Katyń wound may fully heal and scar up. We are already on that road. We the Polish nation appreciate the actions of the Russians in recent years. We should continue on this road which brings our two nations closer, we should not idle along it, and we should not retreat.”

CHAPTER 13

In order to understand the full implication of President Kaczyński's speech it is important to consider the geo-political situation before and after the fall of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).

In May of 1945, Warsaw, the capital of Poland, lay in heaps of rubble. Before the war it housed a population of 1,300,000. After the war a mere 1,000 remained. Theoretically Poland was on the winning side. Practically speaking it was quite a different story. In September of 1939 Poland was invaded by the USSR and Germany. The Russians were fulfilling their commitments to allied Germany and Hitler. Only later would the USSR join the Allied states to war against Hitler.

After the Second World War in 1945 the dominant world powers, the USSR, USA and United Kingdom met at the Yalta Conference to chart their spheres of influence upon the map. The result of the Yalta Conference for Poland meant that for the following 45 years the country found itself a part of the Communist Bloc referred to as the so-called People's Democracy, under the hegemonic rule of the USSR.

The breakthrough finally came in the 1990's. The wave of revolutionary movements had been boiling for near a decade by then in the countries belonging to the People's Democracy, among them Poland's Solidarity movement. These combined with the vulnerable ground created when the powers of the USSR weakened against the US in the Cold War. The empire collapsed over the course of 1988 to 1991. The monolith began to fall apart from the inside out. Republics wrought with economic crisis, their institutions paralyzed, separated. Estonia was the first to separate, declaring sovereignty in 1988.

Lithuania and Latvia followed suit.

Economic policy changes under the name perestroika introduced in the 80s by Mikhail Gorbachev were not without influence on Poland. They advanced social and political change and precipitated the Polish Round Table Talks, which saw discussion between the party government and representatives of the less radical opposition groups in Poland. As a direct result of these talks partially-free elections were held in Poland in 1989, in which 35% of the parliamentary representation was assigned to the opposition.

Thanks to the introduction of Pax Americana, Poland and other eastern European nations began to join the military, economic and political alliances of NATO and the European Union. USA the superpower began to break into the post-soviet territory and limit the influence of Russia, the successor of the USSR which had until recently ruled as a mighty hegemony.

However, soon the eyes of the world, and most importantly the United States, would focus on the increasingly important role of Asia and the Pacific Region in global politics and economy. Also, the widely accepted conviction that access to natural resources, especially fossil fuels, means sustained global power has lead to fierce competition between world powers for access to strategic oil-rich regions in the Middle East, fueling wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and northern Africa.

In the meantime, the Americans needed Russia's favours in a number of geo-political interests. Relations with Israel, which is America's ally in the Middle East and holds strong lobby power in the USA, demanded re-establishing relations with Russia in order to gain Russian support in the region. The Russian so-called reset proposed by the Obama administration assumed many advantages, including Russia putting pressure on Iran to suspend its nuclear weapons program, as well as Russian support for new sanctions proposed by the UN Security Council.

The US also had interest in persuading Russia to cancel its contract

to sell Iran the system of S-300 surface-to-air missiles. Additionally, the US was also looking for Russia to back the Northern Distribution Network, which supplies US and NATO military troops in Afghanistan, after relations between the US and Pakistan degraded and the number of Taliban attacks on Pakistani section of the supply routes increased.

The major interest for Russia lay in the US canceling plans to build a missile defense complex in Poland and Czechoslovakia, which was announced September 17, 2009 laying groundwork for further discussion on the shared responsibility for the safety of Russia, Europe and NATO. In practice this translated to NATO and the US both allowing the return of Russia's influence over territory that once belonged to the Eastern Bloc. Furthermore, the US and NATO abandoned the expansion of NATO into the former Soviet states of Georgia and Ukraine, thereby formalizing their agreement to increased Russian control over those areas.

On April 8th, 2010 the US signed a new treaty with Russia, named START II, to decrease the number of nuclear missile launchers. START II was one-sidedly favourable for Russia, giving the nation a moment's reprieve and allowing it to concentrate on modernizing its military potential, for which cooperation with the West, mostly Germany and France, was critical.

All of this was happening in defiance of President Lech Kaczyński's politics, whose blade was directed against the politics of Putin's Russia locked in strategic partnership with Angela Merkel's Germany. President Kaczyński spoke of this emphatically at the demonstrations in Tbilisi, Georgia in 2008. At that time Poland was a resilient opponent of Russian and German politics, both hegemonic powers in Europe. Perhaps all of this inspired the thought to interrupt these politics and remove Poland from its position in international politics.

Reset negotiations took place primarily in 2009, however, in 2008 Democratic representatives and representatives of presidential

candidate Barack Obama were working to assure swift agreement with Russia. The distribution of elements of the US missile defense shield in Poland negotiated by President Kaczyński with President George Bush stood in the way of that. Already in 2008 the oppositional government under the leadership of Donald Tusk joined efforts to reset US-Russian relations by blocking negotiations about the shield with the US. When Barack Obama announced the US decision to abandon building elements of the military defense shield in Poland and Czechoslovakia on September 17, 2009, coincidentally the 70th anniversary of the Russian invasion of Poland, this also served as a symbolic blow to the eastern politics of President Kaczyński, as well as a 'handing over' of Poland into the hands of strategic partners, the Russians and the Germans. In the face of this sudden geo-political change that resulted when Poland lost US backing came intensive consultations between Tusk and Putin and between Tusk and Merkel, resulting in establishment of strong political alliances.

This is the geopolitical context in which the commemorations of the 70th anniversary of the Katyn massacre were split: the commemoration with Prime Minister Donald Tusk took place on April 7th, 2010. The commemoration scheduled to take place on April 10th, 2010 with President Lech Kaczyński resulted in tragedy. Former diplomat Peter Marciniak emphasizes that the splitting up of these visits constituted an important element in the game that was played out against Kaczyński by the Prime Minister of Russia at the time, Dimitri Medvedev and the Prime Minister of Poland, Donald Tusk.

CHAPTER 14

The third anniversary of the Smoleńsk tragedy was upcoming and the Polish community was organizing yet another demonstration on Parliament Hill in Ottawa. I had been in touch with Ewa Blasik and we were planning to meet at the demonstration but at the last moment a serious surgery kept her from flying.

Along with my colleagues, we set out to Ottawa at 5am on a blustery day to make it to the demonstration for 10. Four hours of long and monotonous highway. Four hours of little to look out at other than fields. Occasionally a vinyl siding house tucked in the middle of the field, sometimes proudly flying a Canadian flag. At around the Kingston region Highway 401 cuts through exposed limestone bedrock, but still the road is long and monotonous. We had to choose the shortest route but it would have been something else to go through Algonquin Park instead. I was lost in thought while the road stretched on and our picket signs, which read “Katyń 1940 Smoleńsk 2010” rattled along in the trunk.

Many had gathered despite the foul weather, an eerie and dreamlike composition by Michał Lorenc was playing over the loudspeakers. It was the very same “Farewell to Poland” that had scored the video footage of the caskets of Maria and Lech Kaczyński being returned to Poland.

The commemoration was to be translated into both French and English, and the organizer was explaining to passersby that the purpose of the demonstration was to correct in the public eye of the international community the role of the crew and generals aboard the

fateful presidential flight. They had been unjustly accused of causing the crash.

Although she was unable to attend, Ewa Blasik was named the honorary patron of the commemoration, which imbued the event with potent meaning. As the letter she had addressed to Polish-Canadians was read by Jola Szaniawska, tears flowed:

“Firstly, I want to thank the Polish-Canadian community. You did not let yourself be manipulated by the official version into believing that the Polish pilots, president and general are to blame for this horrible tragedy, which is the greatest one our nation has lived since the times of the Second World War. I thank you on behalf of the wives and families of the military officials who lost their lives on that flight.

In the last weeks Polish prosecutors have released a statement that my husband was only one of the passengers aboard this flight. The prosecution stated that it does not have any evidence to prove that General Andrew Blasik put pressure on the work and decisions made by the flight crew. The truth is slowly beginning to crack the shell of the Smoleńsk lie!

We are continuously learning more about the scandalous unprofessional mishandlings, the political games carried out by the Polish and Russian governments, about the lowering of safety standards during Lech Kaczyński’s scheduled visit to Katyń. This is all thanks to the Parliamentary Committee for the Investigation of the Causes of the Smoleńsk crash, headed by Antoni Macierewicz. Uninhibited media sources such as: Telewizja Trwam, Radio Maryja, Nasz Dziennik, Gazeta Polska, the weekly wSieci, the weekly Do Rzeczy and independent internet stations play an important role in this as well.

This said I am pleading with you, especially the Polish-Canadians, to continue helping us in this fight for TRUTH! I ask this of you specifically because the International Civil Aviation Organization headquarters are located in Montreal. Turn to them, speak with them,

tell them about the findings of the independent experts, uncover the lies spread by the MAK Committee, appeal to them: let the Smoleńsk crash finally be investigated by international professionals.”

I wanted to include Ewa’s letter whole in my story. It was important to me to send the video footage to Warsaw that same day, so I began to scribble the narration down on scrap paper in the middle of the commemoration: more Polish generals died in the Smoleńsk crash than during the Second World War. Many of the banners at the commemoration pointed out the Polish generals’ membership in NATO, the alliance that is also supposed to defend Canada. Canadians of other ethnicities were also present in the crowd. Among them was Andris Kesteris of the Baltic Federation in Canada. Over the course of our interview he told me, “We know what the truth is, now we are looking for justice. The servicemen and women of the Canadian military know why General Blasik was so despised by the Russians. He was the one who used his position as a NATO general to equip Poland with F-16 aircrafts which can take off in Poland and be flying over Moscow in seven minutes.”

Despite the cold rain many families had brought along their children. I needed a few more interviews with the public so I approached a woman with a child in her arms. “What brought you out in such weather?” I asked. “We must be here. We are fighting for a good name of the Polish military. I will pray for a swift resolution to the mysteries surrounding this tragedy. I come here every year and cry,” was her reply.

The weather turned for the worse and the trip back to Toronto stretched out long but we were satisfied with our efforts. The following day’s newspapers would show whether we had reached the public as we hoped. In the meantime, while we were gathered on Parliament Hill in Ottawa, Poland had received chilling news that the Investigative Committee of the Federation of Russia was preparing to launch accusations against Major Arkadiusz Protasiuk, the commander of the

TU-154 crew. General Michail Goriewicz, chief of the committee, stated that the recorders as well as the wreckage of the Tupolev would remain in Russia for the duration of the investigation.

CHAPTER 15

December 5, 2014, Poland

They stretched in a great column through the darkness. Escorted by the Polish police, the four over-size transport trucks, two of them flatbeds, carried the well-sealed remains of the crashed Malaysian Boeing 777 MH17, which had been shot down over Ukraine July 17, 2014.

On Polish ground, according to highway transport regulations, the trucks were permitted to travel exclusively by night. According to a communication released by the Dutch Safety Board (OVV), they were expected to arrive in the Netherlands within the next week, and deposit the wreck remains at an army base for examination. The trucks made slow progress as the night was foggy and the temperature hovered around freezing. When they failed to cross Poland before morning, the convoy was forced to stop over in Jaworzno in Silesia Province. A radio communication from police headquarters announced that the convoy could resume travel again at 10pm, heading in the direction of Germany and then the Netherlands.

The next day, on Saturday December 6th we waited for notice about the next transport carrying the remainder of the MH17 wreck. It was scheduled to enter Poland by the border with Ukraine in Korczowa, in the Podkarpackie Province. This convoy consisted of four standard-sized transport trucks. The drivers, not obligated by regulations pertaining oversized vehicles, could travel both day and night. Consequently this transport was carried out very efficiently. The

convoy received priority processing at the border and crossed within a half hour. OVV press representative, Sara Vernooi, announced that the relatives of the victims of the crash were welcome to witness the arrival of the convoy at the army base.

We followed the progress reports on the transport of the Malaysian airplane with a sense of awe and envy. How we wished that those transport trucks were transporting the wreckage of our TU-154! Meanwhile, after four long years of investigations, it remained securely in the hands of the Russians.

In our helplessness, we sought an analogy in the Dutch investigation to the proceedings of our own, but aside from the fact that Putin was yet again casting blame on other parties and again denying the blood on his hands, we found only differences. Beginning with the fact that none of the premiers of the countries whose citizens had died in the MH17 crash acknowledged Russia as a democratic country, whose proposed account of events held any merit. In the case of the MH17, no civilized nation even so much as considered Putin's fabrications, whereas with Smoleńsk, the Russian issued version of the story became without a doubt the obligatory one for the Polish prosecutor's office, the media, and the whole world.

The Smoleńsk investigation was handed over to the Russians; in the case of the MH17, there was no doubt that it ought to be conducted internationally. Finally, no one was mocking the victims of the MH17 crash. The crew of the TU-154 had been desecrated, both in their country as well as worldwide. On September 13, 2015, not a full two years after the Malaysian passenger carrier was shot down, the Dutch Safety Bureau made available the final report concluding the investigation. The methodologies employed within this report demonstrated to the Polish public what an investigation of such caliber looks like, step by step. With a sense of envy and disbelief we watched T.H.J. Joustra, Chairman of the Dutch Safety Board in a conference, which was broadcast by all mainstream television networks in the

world.

The riveting film presented at the conference begins like a murder mystery, the difference being that the public is first presented with the resolution of the crime, and only then are the details of the investigation revealed.

We learn that early afternoon on July 17th, 2014, a Malaysian Boeing 777-200 departs Amsterdam en route to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. According to regular procedure, the aircraft's technical state is inspected, and when nothing is found out of place the plane is made ready for take off. Onboard are 283 passengers and 15 crew members. The airplane's trajectory is planned through Germany, Poland, Ukraine and then east, a standard and commonly used route to Asia. Flight MH17 enters airspace above Ukraine at 33 thousand feet, on airway L980. The captain and crew reroute north to avoid a storm ahead and enter a conflict zone between Ukraine and armed factions of pro-Russian separatists. At this point the involvement of Russian armed forces in the War in Donbass is a well-known fact.

Civilian aircrafts are banned from lower-lying airspace above this region, but the MH17 is enroute well above the restricted zone. Until this moment the flight has been completely unremarkable, as the aircraft is crossing over eastern Ukraine, the Buk surface-to-air missile system launches a missile with a 9N314M warhead, which travels at three times the speed of sound. It carries explosive materials and two canisters of projectiles in its core. The radar lines the missile up with its target and detonates it. The Buk missile achieves 80 thousand feet; it can reach altitudes well above the MH17. At 1:20 and 3 seconds the missile detonates at the upper-left hand side of the nose of the aircraft. Approximately 800 preformed objects perforate the hull. This impact and the force of the explosion cause the cockpit and the business class section to tear away from the remainder of the aircraft. It falls to the earth, disintegrating as it goes.

How did the investigators manage to arrive at this conclusion, and

effectively to reconstruct the events minute by minute, and towards the end of the flight, even millisecond by millisecond? Here is the preliminary data that was made available to the investigators, and the schedule of events beginning the first day that the Boeing 777-200 fell to the earth, right into a conflict-zone, controlled by armed pro-Russian separatists.

The MH17 aircraft disappeared off the radar at 1320 hours and 3 seconds according to the Flight Data Recorder. The first information on the crash appeared in eastern Ukraine very quickly. The remains of the aircraft were found in six clusters across a surface area measuring approximately 50 kilometers squared. The cockpit and front of the plane was found in the region of Rozsypne and Petropavlivka. The rear of the plane in Hrabove, the middle part of the airplane was destroyed by fire. There were no survivors. The National Bureau of Air Accidents Investigation of Ukraine (NBAAI) began the investigation that same day. On account of a large proportion of the victims being of Dutch nationality, the Ukrainian delegation asked the Dutch Safety Bureau to take over investigations. One hundred and ninety-three Dutch, 28 Malaysians, 27 Australians, 12 Indonesians, 10 British, 4 Belgians, 4 Germans, 3 Filipinos, one Canadian and one New Zealander perished in the crash. The investigation was carried out according to standards set by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), a United Nations specialized agency, which works to regulate the civil aviation sector. The accredited members of 7 nations took part in the investigation: the Netherlands, Ukraine, Malaysia, United States, United Kingdom, Australia and the Russian Federation. They began their work in Kiev, and later continued in the Hague, in the Netherlands. Chairman T.H.J. Joustra explained that the investigation was carried out with the assistance of so many nations in order to ascertain the detailed facts of the event, eliminate all speculation, to increase knowledge about the event, increase safety and to resolve any potential secrets, as this is very important for the families of the

victims. It was thanks to the work of all the involved nations that the investigation was carried out so efficiently.

Access to the site of the crash was complicated as the debris of the plane landed in a region wrecked for months now by armed conflict in Donbass, patrolled by Russian armed forces. Escorted by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Ukrainian and Malaysian investigators were able to access the site briefly in the first days after the crash. They photographed the site extensively. Afterwards, there would be no way to access the site until the late autumn of 2014. Fragments of the cockpit showed damage to the outside hull, caused by objects travelling with great force. The Flight Data Recorder was sent to Farnborough, Great Britain (on July 22-24, 2014) to access the logged contents. Based on these findings the Dutch Safety Board drafts its preliminary report in August 2014. No abnormalities were found regarding the airplane or crew. No malfunction of any system or aural warning was recorded. There were no weather warnings, Air Traffic Control did not receive any distress messages, no other aircraft was in close enough proximity that a mid-air collision could have occurred. Damage to the forward fuselage indicated penetration by high-energy objects from outside the airplane.

The first mission to retrieve the debris of the crash was executed in the autumn of 2014. The preparation of the fragments of the wreck most critical to discovering the cause of the crash began in October. Beginning November 6th, the Dutch Safety Bureau recovered hundreds of fragments of the wreck and transported them to Torez, the nearest train station in the Donetsk Oblast. The following two recovery missions took place in the Spring of 2015 and saw the recovery of further pieces of the wreckage, including fragments recovered by locals. Only on the 21st of July were members of the OSCE and Dutch investigators permitted on the crash site.

The international investigation mission working on-site was interrupted a number of times as a result of on-going frictions between

the Ukrainians and pro-Russian Separatists.

The first convoy carrying wreckage of the Malaysian Boeing arrived in the Netherlands on December 9th 2014. Others followed. Each piece of evidence, no matter how small, was marked, sorted, photographed against a green screen, and tested forensically. The fragments of the wreck were laid out in a hangar and made available to investigators. Each piece was tested for proper functioning, potential malfunction and traces of damage caused by external objects that may have hit the airplane. The investigation showed that a surface-to-air missile caused the crash of the MH17. Other potential causes, such as an internal explosion, a fire on-board, or an air-to-air missile were ruled out.

In order to illustrate the results of the investigation, photographs taken of the site of the crash were used to reconstruct a two-dimensional model of the wreck. Next the Dutch Safety Bureau was able to build a three-dimensional frame of the Boeing 777-200 and map the wreckage remains onto it. Within three months the cockpit and the front section of the business class had been reconstructed, and the corresponding fragments recovered from the site of the crash had been mounted to the frame. The reconstruction makes immediately visible the pattern of shrapnel damage to the aircraft, as well as the effects of this impact, and the location where the cockpit tore away from the rest of the plane. The high-energy objects, which perforated the aircraft, were found in the bodies of three crew members who were travelling in the cockpit. They are the shape of bowties and cubes, and investigators have found traces of glass and aluminum on them, which suggests that they entered the aircraft from the outside. The glass in the airplane windows also shows signs of shrapnel damage, as does the body of the aircraft. The left wing also demonstrates shrapnel damage, and contains traces of paint that distinctly match paint samples from missile parts recovered from the site of the crash. The many computer simulations carried out over the course of the investigation concluded

this very scenario, the detonation of a 9N314M warhead. The location of impact and potential damage was calculated. The warhead exploded in the vicinity of one meter squared left of the aircraft and above the cockpit, launching its contents in a characteristic spiral spray pattern. This damage corresponds to the damage found inside the front part of the fuselage. Further proof of an explosion in the front part of the aircraft is found in the final milliseconds of the audio recording recovered from the Cockpit Voice Recorder. The four microphones, one of which was mounted above the heads of the pilots in the cockpit, recorded the audio wave in the final milliseconds before the explosion. By considering the difference in time on the recordings from each of the microphones, investigators were able to deduce the direction the explosion came from. This information allowed investigators to define the area from which the missile was launched as some 320 kilometers squared situated in eastern Ukraine. The further testing required to narrow in on specific location coordinates within this outlined area fell beyond the scope of the commission.

The investigators were able to conclude with even more precision the details of the event, and this is how they were circulated in the media around the world. Namely, the MH17 was flying at a height of 33,000 feet (10,100 km). No abnormalities were found regarding the airplane or crew. The flight proceeded normally, and no malfunction of any system or aural warning were recorded. No distress messages were received by Air Traffic Control. Both of the flight recorders aboard the craft stopped recording suddenly at 13:20:03 hours. From that moment on the crew did not respond to messages from Air Traffic Control. The MH17 disappeared off the radar. The aircraft was perforated by hundreds of high-energy objects shaped like cubes and bow-ties. These were also found inside of the bodies of the crew who were flying in the cockpit. The left side of the cockpit reveals a characteristic damage pattern, traces of explosives were found in the wreckage and on missile fragments. The paint on missile fragments

found inside the aircraft matches the paint on the recovered missile parts. The point of detonation was determined by the spray pattern of the shrapnel, and confirmed by the sound recording retrieved from the cockpit voice recorder. The impact and explosion caused the aircraft to disintegrate in mid-flight. Pieces of the wreckage landed in six different sites consistent with the way the airplane broke up in the air.

Based on this evidence the Dutch Safety Bureau concluded that the airplane was shot down with a 9N314M warhead launched by the Buk surface-to-air missile system. Other possible causes of the crash were considered and ruled out. According to the Dutch investigators no other scenario matches this combination of facts. The findings are final and confirmed with other sources. According to the Chairman of the Dutch Safety Board, investigators were able to assess the cause and the events of the crash early on. The investigation showed that the aircraft was perforated on the left side above the cockpit, everything pointed to this at the top of the investigation and the remains of the aircraft and forensic examinations were necessary to verify the evidence.

Immediately after the crash people began to question how it could be that a civilian airplane was permitted to fly over a conflict zone in the first place. After all the ground-based conflict extended to the airspace above as well. Several airplanes had been shot down in the previous weeks, two of them were destroyed by stronger weapons systems capable of reaching the cruising altitudes of civilian airplanes, still no one considered that the risk extended to civilian aircrafts. On the 6th of June 2014 a directive was issued to close the airspace above Eastern Ukraine up to FL260 in order to protect civilian aviation by forcing it to fly higher. On the 14th of July the restriction was raised to FL320. Airlines assumed that the airspace above the imposed restrictions were safe. The majority of flight traffic occurs in that region. One hundred and sixty commercial aircrafts travelled through this region on July 17th alone, before the airspace was closed. Three other aircrafts were in the vicinity of the MH17 when it disappeared

off the radars. There are conflicts raging the world over and the airspace above these regions is not restricted. Ukraine had enough information leading up to the catastrophe to close the airspace over the conflict-zone. Effectively this tragic event demonstrates a risk insufficiently studied by the aviation authorities.

The international investigation was carried out with transparency. The Dutch Safety Board itself called three international meetings with investigators over the course of the investigation in accordance with ICAO protocol in order to assess progress. The Accredited Representatives approved the report issued by the Dutch Safety Bureau. It concluded that a model 9N314M warhead, launched by a Buk missile system, detonated to the left and above the cockpit of the traveling aircraft, killing 3 crew members in the cockpit and causing structural changes to the front of the airplane, which led to the breaking of the fuselage. All the passengers aboard lost their lives. While Russia confirms that an explosion indeed occurred, it has doubts as to who is responsible for launching the missile at a civilian aircraft.

Several months before Russia made this admission, on the 1st of June 2015, German *Der Spiegel* published an article based on investigative reporting by Bellingcat, an independent collective of researchers and civilian journalists, claiming that Russia falsified satellite images of the crash using Adobe Photoshop CS5. This brings to mind Putin's behaviour after the Smolensk crash: manipulating the data from the Flight Data Recorder, playing cat and mouse with the satellite images. In much the same fashion as Russia insists on the story that a Ukrainian hunter unknowingly shot down the MH17, in the case of the TU-154, it insists on the story of the drunk general and the Polish pilots of 'dubious capabilities'. The Dutch appear to be ignoring Russia, standing firm by the conclusion of the investigation. They considered other possible versions: an internal explosion, an external explosion with fire, they discredited each one, and the chief of the investigation insists that their conclusion is the only scenario which can

marry all the facts.

The investigation report issued in 2015 addresses the course of events that lead to the shooting down of the MH17, however, it does not implicate Putin, even though it has been demonstrated that the missile in question was launched by surface-to-air system Buk. Only in May 2018 did an international investigation group provide evidence that Russia is responsible for the crash of the Malaysian airplane. The experts showed in the report that the Buk missile system, which was used to launch the warhead that hit the MH17, belonged to the Russian forces stationed nearby Kursk.

As a result of this investigation, the governments of the Netherlands and Australia officially accused Russia of shooting down the MH17. Both countries turned to Russia to initiate discussions in order to address and honour the great suffering of the victims and their families, as well as to address the damage caused by the shooting down of the aircraft. Although the Deputy Russian Foreign Minister, Aleksandr Gruszko agreed to such talks diplomatically, it is widely known that Putin insists on blaming the deaths of 298 people on Ukraine. Meanwhile the world knows what it has seen.

Powerless to extract punishment for those guilty of this crime, the families of the victims submitted a complaint against Russia to the European Court of Human Rights in April 2019. Three hundred and eighty people from the Netherlands, Australia, Malaysia and Germany undersigned the action accusing Russia for the deaths of the 289 passengers aboard the MH17 on April 17th 2014.

Meanwhile 10 years have passed since the crash of the Polish Tupolev carrying the Polish President Lech Kaczynski, his wife, the highest-ranking NATO officials of the Polish military, and many high-ranking state officials. This is widely understood as the largest tragedy for Poland since the times of the Second World War. Supposedly the investigation led by the military prosecutor's office continues, while the evidence of the wreckage itself remains in the hands of Russia,

despite repeated diplomatic pressure to release it to Polish investigators. Even though the governments have since changed over and the conservative Law and Justice party was democratically elected into government, the hands of the Polish prosecutors continue to be tied by the memorandum signed in May 2010 by the then Minister of Internal Affairs, Jerzy Miller, which states that the Flight Data Recorders and the remains of the aircraft shall remain available to the Russians for the duration of the court proceedings in Russia. These only began on April 10th, 2015 and continue beyond the publication date of this very book (2020).

One thing is clear: the Polish Parliamentary Committee for the investigation of the TU-154M crash in Smoleńsk disputed the conclusions of the MAK Commission and most of the findings of the Miller Commission. It's important to note that the latter commission was struck by Donald Tusk's liberal pro-Russian government in order to loan credibility to Putin's version, and was led by the very same Jerzy Miller who was complicit in keeping the Flight Data Recorders in the hands of the Russians. Furthermore, the explanations proposing that President Lech Kaczyński and General Andrew Błasik exerted pressure on the crew of the TU-154M, thereby causing the crash, were also rejected. Nevertheless, the narrative of the drunken Polish pilot and his inept flight crew continues to make the rounds. It appears that Putin is mocking Poland. Perhaps the best proof of this is his arrogance on this matter. When the Russian president was asked to comment on the findings of the Parliamentary Committee and on the discovery of trace explosives aboard at an annual press conference in front of 1600 journalists on December 14th 2017, he replied tauntingly that the airplane took off from Warsaw and not Moscow and that therefore the Polish should look for the culprits in their own country. He then asked the journalist if she was insistent on complicating Polish-Russian relations for the sake of correcting her notes.

EPILOGUE

April 10th, 2020. Ten years after the TU-154 tragedy.

Time is of the essence in any investigation, as are the witnesses, evidence and documents. Ten years is a clear sign of catastrophe in an investigation. The evidence is in Russia. The wreck is in Russia. The witnesses are dead. The documents – the Flight Data Recorder transcripts, the aircraft safety certificates, the autopsy reports – have been manipulated, the knowledge come from investigations carried out by foreign nations can be kept hidden, for ages. This was the case with the documentation detailing the circumstances of death of General Sikorski at Gibraltar. They lay hidden for 40 years. To this day a number of theories persist on the catastrophe at Gibraltar, as this was a loss that proved to have profound political consequences. Historians today continue to spin theories on who may have profited enough from the tragic death of the General to warrant being complicit in it.

It is important to consider the circumstances of the ‘accident’. In June of 1943, well into the Second World War, the Gestapo arrested the commander of the Polish Home Army, General Stefan Rowecki-Grot. Soon after, on the 4th of July, the Gibraltar catastrophe claimed the life of the Commander-in-Chief of the Polish Army and Prime Minister of the Polish government-in-exile, leading politician of the government-in-exile and of Poland besides, General Władysław Sikorski.

General Sikorski’s position was pivotal in the politics of the interwar years. He entered the Republic of Poland, which had only

regained its independence in 1918, with strong credentials. He was an educated officer of the Austro-Hungarian army as well as a member of the Riflemen's Association. In other words, this was a man deeply engaged in the work of the Commission of the Confederated Independence Parties and engaged in the Polish Armed Forces in the West. He served in the department of Military Affairs, he oversaw the recruitment of volunteers into the Polish Legions. He wanted to expand the Polish Legions into a prolific army on the Western front. He was a leading figure in the fight for eastern Poland. He took part in crucial moments of the Polish-Soviet War, and proved his skill in leading large tactical associations. After the battle for the borders of the Polish State, and then after the assassination of Gabriel Narutowicz, the first president of the Second Republic of Poland in deeply uncertain times, Sikorski was appointed as Prime Minister and the Minister of Internal Affairs. In 1923, the Conference of Ambassadors acknowledged Poland's eastern frontiers and these boundaries were to remain firm from then on. Sikorski then delved into political work and in the 1930s became one of the faces of the Front Morges, an alliance of centrist factions. At the start of the Second World War, General Władysław Sikorski received an assignment from newly nominated President Władysław Raczkiewicz to form a government-in-exile. Thanks to support from Paris and London, and to his position as Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces he played a key role in exile, first in France, then in England. His primary objective was to build up Polish Armed Forces in the west, in Allied France. Indeed, the efforts were successful until 1940, when as a result of the fall of France the Polish forces were disbanded. Some of the soldiers managed to make it to Britain and regrouped there with Allied forces. Until the very end Sikorski believed France would fight and not capitulate, and he fell under heavy criticism from Polish politicians for not taking every possible measure to evacuate the divisions of the Polish Armed Forces. Furthermore, he took certain

steps without permission to negotiate with the Soviet Union, the nation that attacked Poland along with Germany in 1939. In Allied London Sikorski received unconditional support from the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Winston Churchill. In June 1943 the German invasion of the Soviet Union dramatically changed the international situation. The Sikorski-Majski Agreement was signed. Its most important consequence was to grant amnesty to many Polish citizens in the Soviet Union. Earlier their fate would have been deportation to labour and prison camps, as a result of the agreement they were freed, this allowed for the creation of the Polish Army in the West, which remained active throughout the Second World War. In 1942, General Sikorski relocated from the Soviet Union to the near east, to Persia. Finally came the dramatic moment, spring of 1943, the case of Katyń, namely the murder of over twenty thousand Polish officers by gunshot to the back of the head. The Soviet Union broke off diplomatic relations and communication with the Polish Prime Minister -in-Exile, Władysław Sikorski. A guest in the United Kingdom, along with the Polish Armed Forces under his command, suddenly Sikorski was forced to navigate a diplomatic stance between Britain – his host country’s – favourable relations with Russia under Coalition and the very raw wound the massacre just left on his nation. Consequently, Sikorski was both supported and criticized for his too-soft stance towards the Soviet Union and towards the United Kingdom.

We arrive at July 1943. After inspecting the armed forces deployed in the east, General Władysław Sikorski boarded a British airplane in Gibraltar in the company of close relations, including his daughter. Mere seconds after takeoff, the aircraft fell into the sea at cliff’s edge. A rescue mission recovered the dead bodies of the General and several other passengers; most of the passengers were lost without a trace. The Czech pilot was the only survivor.

Immediately people in Poland and England began to question if this

had truly been an accident, as concluded by the official inquiry, which offered too much cargo weight and jammed elevator controls as possible causes of the crash. However, as this fate befell a military person with a significant political role, the questions multiplied. Some historians emphasize that Soviet agents had a vested interest in the death of the General and may have contributed to it. General Sikorski received strong support in the United Kingdom, which truly made him an authority figure in political affairs. Most strikingly he held a firm position on insisting on accountability for the Katyń massacre. He was counting on the International Red Cross investigation to resolve the matter of who was responsible for the murders and this made him an uncomfortable presence to the Soviets. They consequently broke off negotiations with the General, broke off diplomatic relations with the Polish government-in-exile and already had an alternative in place, the Union of Polish Patriots, under the command of General Berling. Berling was under orders to create the Polish People's Army and join forces with the Red Army to invade Poland from the East.

Another theory proposes that the German secret services were engaged in the death of General Sikorski as he had resolutely stood for resisting the Germans at the front during the Second World War, both in the air and at sea, as well as in the battles in Africa. He was a stalwart supporter of the Polish nation and its Home Army, which functioned throughout the war mostly as an underground army and fought the German forces.

Surely Sikorski was an outstanding statesman and one of the more formidable leaders among the Allies. This is the basis for yet another theory, which posits that the British may have contributed to the General's death, as he was becoming an uncomfortable presence among them. After all, towards the end of the war the British were concerned with striking an alliance with Uncle Joe Stalin, as they called him, and the Soviet Union. The Polish representative insisting that justice be served in the case of the Katyń massacre posed a serious

complication to good relations.

General Sikorski was hastily buried in a military cemetery at Newark, in the United Kingdom. There is no official record of an autopsy and the photographs taken of the body after the crash disappeared. The death of the General was a huge blow for the Polish people. This was a genius military official and politician who embodied the fight for regaining Poland's independence, and who was positioned along with the Polish people from the first days of the Second World War, in a passionate battle to bring exiled lawful Polish officials back to their country. Finally, he had succeeded to recover the sovereignty of the Polish nation from the totalitarian regimes of its neighbouring nations, Germany and Russia.

Is it a uniquely Polish affliction that those who struggle to defend Polish independence and sovereignty die in mysterious accidents? In 1993 the body of General Sikorski was exhumed and buried in Poland, then exhumed again and autopsied. The results of the autopsy showed that he died as a result of injuries to multiple organs, as often seen in air crash victims. The investigation records, however, have never yet been released so it is impossible to rule out sabotage of the aircraft. The secrecy of the report findings added fuel to the fire spurring along several other theories on the cause of the crash, among them that the crash never occurred in the first place. Antoni Chudzyński, high-ranking officer in the United Kingdom's MI5 Security Service and secretary to Tadeusz Romera, the Minister of Foreign Affairs in the Polish government-in-exile, had extensive knowledge on this topic and maintained this latter theory. Although he refused to speak on the subject and cited his obligation to keep state secrets whenever questioned in interviews, Colonel Chudzyński often repeated that this incident was never an ordinary aviation accident, and that the coming generations might yet be allowed to access the files archived in London decades from now, and the whole truth would then see the light of day. The only thing the Colonel was permitted to reveal about the situation

was that the official version, which claimed that all the passengers drowned in the Atlantic, was simply not true. In an interview from 2008 he insists that there was no Gibraltar Crash, and that General Sikorski was never aboard the aircraft that was destroyed in that 'accident'. Other investigators add that General Sikorski was dead for several hours by the time the aircraft took off; he had been murdered in the Governor's palace sometime around 4pm. The question left behind is, who is responsible for this murder?

There is one more explanation of this mysterious death, and it lies with the British counter-intelligence service. In 1942 and 1943, Kim Philby took over as the Chief of the Military Intelligence Section 6. Philby was also a double agent for the Soviet Union, one of the most famous double agents working in the Cold War years until the 50s. As Philby was in charge of an Iberian subsection of the MI6, it is conceivable to imagine that Stalin may have used the agent to murder Sikorski.

All of these above theories are still circling today because the British for years now have behaved strangely, to say the least, with regard to this situation. It is common practice that documents can be classified for 30 years. Immediately following the death of General Władysław Sikorski, the British extended the period to 50 years. When the 50-year period passed, we waited with bated breath for the publication of these documents only to watch the period of classification extended by another 40 years. Is this not the behaviour characteristic of someone who is attempting to hide the evidence of a crime? Will this be the case with the crime committed against the Polish delegation to Katyn on the 10th of April, 2010?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Valeria Gertz is an author pseudonym of a Polish-Canadian journalist. She started her journalism career in Poland, where for years she worked as a reporter, news publisher and director of documentary films. She eventually moved to Canada, where she worked as a Canadian correspondent for Polish networks. Among other things, she covered the events of April 10th, 2010 and much that happened since – and that's when she decided that somebody has to write this book.



The Polish president and an entourage of political and military leadership perished suddenly in a plane crash in 2010. An official Russian report soon declared that the crash was a fault of Polish pilots, the Polish president, and a single birch tree. Meanwhile, the plane wreck was never returned to Poland, families of the victims were bullied, and a series of apparent suicides ensued – all while the Polish political regime changed to a Russian-friendly government. Anybody following the events asked themselves one question: what really happened in Smolensk on this fateful day of April 10th, 2010?

Violetta Kardynal, a Polish-Canadian journalist who covered the Smolensk crash events as they were unfolding, delves deep into that question. *Crash or Crime?* is a brilliant investigative work which puts the Smolensk crash in an entirely new context: political plots, investigative shortcomings, disinformation, mysterious suicides, and geopolitical events that unfolded since. This is an electrifying page-turner which makes one conclude that history never dies, and the turbulent events of the 20th century continue on.