

From The Sunday Times

April 11, 2010

Polish president dies in plane crash after pilot ignored warning not to land



People hold candles and flowers in front of the Presidential Palace in Warsaw

Matthew Campbell and Mark Franchetti in Moscow

Poland suffered its greatest peacetime tragedy yesterday when its president and dozens of other leading figures were killed in a plane crash in Russia after their pilot ignored warnings not to land in thick fog.

President Lech Kaczynski, 60, his wife Maria, an economist, and 95 others died on their way to commemorate the massacre of 22,000 Polish prisoners at Katyn in 1940 by Stalin's secret police.

Instead of diverting, as advised, the pilot of the 20-year-old plane tried and failed to land at least once, before clipping trees and plunging into a forest.

Air traffic controllers watched their screens with growing unease as the Soviet-era Tupolev descended into the fog that hung like a shroud over the military airfield at Smolensk in western Russia.

The controllers had already issued several warnings not to attempt a landing because of the danger posed by visibility close to zero. They wanted the plane to divert to Moscow or Minsk, the Belarus capital.

But the plane carrying a Polish presidential delegation to commemorate the Soviet massacre of Polish officers in the Katyn forest seven decades ago came in to land regardless.

"At a distance of 2.5km [1.5 miles] the head of air traffic control ascertained that the crew had increased the speed of the descent," said Alexander Alyoshin, of the Russian air force.

"The head of the air traffic control group gave a command to the crew to put the aircraft into the horizontal position and when the crew did not implement this order, several times gave orders to divert to an alternative airport.

"Despite this, the crew continued the descent. Unfortunately this ended in tragedy."

Russia Today and other television stations reported that even before the first attempt to land, the pilot had been

dumping fuel — indicating some form of mechanical problem — so by the fourth attempt there was no alternative but to put the aircraft down.

President Lech Kaczynski, 60, who with his identical brother Jaroslaw, had dominated conservative politics in Poland for 20 years since the downfall of communism, was killed with his wife, Maria, 66, an economist, and 95 other people, including some of the country's top military and civilian leaders, as the plane plunged into the forest about 300 yards short of the runway. Television images showed pieces of smouldering wreckage scattered over a wide area among the trees. A tailfin with the Polish red and white colours stuck up from the debris. There were no survivors.

Two "black boxes" — the plane's cockpit flight recorders — were recovered from the wreckage. According to Russian investigators, a preliminary check confirmed that the pilot had defied the control tower. The recorders may hold the answer as to why.

Kaczynski, whose body was also said to have been found, was a former anti-communist campaigner with a penchant for taunting the Kremlin. He had every reason to believe he was not welcome in Russia. Polish observers said he may have interpreted an order to divert to Moscow as an attempt to sabotage his big day in Katyn, where he was due to attend a mass and give a speech.

Russian media reports said he had once become angry with a pilot who refused to land in Tbilisi, the Georgian capital, on the grounds that it was unsafe. The same thing may have happened at Smolensk, aviation experts claimed. They suggested he may have pressed the pilot to make at least two attempts to land.

The crew included Captain Arkadiusz Protasiuk, Major Robert Grzywna, the first officer, Artur Zietek, the navigator lieutenant, and Andrzej Michalak, the engineer. All were said to have been very experienced.

The crash could not have happened at a more sensitive moment in Polish-Russian relations. Vladimir Putin, the Russian prime minister, had attended a ceremony earlier in the week to commemorate the Katyn massacre with Donald Tusk, his Polish counterpart, in what was seen as a conciliatory gesture from Moscow.

The Kremlin had previously distanced itself from such events at Katyn, where 22,000 Poles, mostly military officers, were gunned down by Soviet secret police in the woods.

Yet Poles were disappointed that Putin referred to the massacre merely as a "crime". Furthermore, there was bafflement among families of the Katyn victims at Russia's refusal to hand over documents about the massacre from Soviet-era archives.

Kaczynski was not invited to Putin's event and there was no promise of a warm welcome at the Smolensk airfield yesterday. He was determined to attend the commemoration, though — not, as he put it, "to inflame relations with Russia", but to support 400 relatives of the victims who were expected to be there. "I hope I get a visa," he had joked.

His death plunged Poland into shock. Tusk was said to have cried when he heard the news. Later he described the crash as the worst tragedy in Poland's post-war history.

Among the dead were Franciszek Gagor, the chief of the general staff, Slawomir Skrzypek, the president of the central bank, Jerzy Szmajdzinski, the deputy parliamentary Speaker, Andrzej Kremer, the deputy foreign minister, and 15 MPs.

Much of Poland's military leadership was on the plane, including four army generals and a vice-admiral. Other passengers included high-ranking representatives of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches.

Lech Walesa, the former president, highlighted a grim irony when he said that the "elite of Poland" had been struck down, just as they had been 70 years ago. Aleksander Kwasniewski, another former president, said the crash had "stuck a knife into the very heart of Poland". Several descendants of the Katyn victims were among those killed on the plane.

Black ribbons appeared at windows in Warsaw, where Tusk called an emergency session of his cabinet. In Krakow,

the 13-ton Royal Sigismund Bell at the Wawel Cathedral began to toll at the start of a week of official mourning. The nation will observe two minutes' silence today.

Putin and Tusk were flying to the crash site, where Kaczynski's twin — with whom he was said to have spoken on the telephone 10 times a day — was also expected.

Messages of condolence to the Polish people poured in from all over the world. The Queen expressed her deepest sympathy and it emerged that a Roman Catholic priest at a Polish church in west London had been among those on the plane. Tributes were paid to Bronislaw Gostomski, from St Andrew Bobola Church in Shepherd's Bush.

Angela Merkel, the German chancellor, said she was "deeply dismayed" by the disaster. President Barack Obama said: "Today's loss is devastating to Poland, to the United States, and to the world."

Kaczynski had angered the Kremlin by siding with Georgia in its brief war with Russia in 2008. Tensions between the two countries grew when Poland agreed to host an American missile defence system. Relations have remained frosty despite Obama's decision to opt for a simpler version of the system.

"We still cannot fully understand the scope of this tragedy and what it means for us in the future," said Piotr Paszkowski, Poland's foreign ministry spokesman.

Polish officials said a new president would be elected within two months. Until then, Bronislaw Komorowski, Speaker of the lower house of parliament, would assume the presidency.

Putin took personal charge of a Russian investigation but Krzysztof Kwiatkowski, the Polish justice minister, said he would order his own special inquiry. Polish internet forums were abuzz with conspiracy theories about an assassination by Russia's intelligence services. Some Poles saw a connection between Kaczynski's death and that of Wladyslaw Sikorski, a leader killed in a mysterious plane crash in Gibraltar in 1943 just as he had started delving into events at Katyn.

Kaczynski's plane, which had been in service for at least 20 years, took off in Warsaw, where it was checked by Polish air force ground staff. Although it was old — and the Tu-154 is notoriously unsafe — it had been overhauled in February.

There was anger in Poland that the government had not followed the example of Aeroflot, the Russian carrier, which recently withdrew its Tu-154 fleet from service.

A Russian military aircraft that attempted to land at the Smolensk airfield half an hour before the arrival of the Polish plane aborted because of the fog and was diverted to Moscow.

"No one should have been landing in that fog," said a Russian air traffic control official who had been present during conversations with the pilot.

People gathered outside the presidential palace in Warsaw to lay flowers and light candles for the victims. The crash changed Poland's political landscape at a stroke, bringing to an end the partnership between Kaczynski and the brother with whom he founded the Law and Justice party, and who served for a year as prime minister.

Ideologically, they shared fervent anti-communism and Catholicism as well as deep suspicions of Russia and Germany: notoriously thin-skinned, Kaczynski once cancelled a meeting with Merkel after a German newspaper compared him to a potato.

As students at Gdansk University, the twins, who were natural rebels, became activists in the anti-communist opposition and later members of a committee for the protection of workers known as KOR.

During a crackdown on the trade union Solidarity in the 1980s, Kaczynski was interned for almost a year. He is survived by Marta, a daughter, and two granddaughters.

Additional reporting: Bojan Panchevski and Kamil Tchorek, Warsaw

Wiped out: Poland's political and military elite

The crash devastated the upper echelons of Poland's political and military.

The president's twin brother Jaroslaw Kaczynski might well have been among the victims but he stayed behind because their mother is not well.

Rarely has any nation suffered such a devastating single blow to its national political life. Among the dead were Vice Admiral Andrzej Karweta, the head of the navy, and Lieutenant General Andrzej Blasik, the head of the air force as well as the army. Aleksander Szczyglo, head of the national security bureau, was among the government officials who died, as was Mariusz Handzlik, minister of the president's chancellery and Marius Zuzana of the foreign ministry.

A number of members of parliament were also victims

The Kaczynski twins

June 18, 1949 Twins born in Warsaw, Jaroslaw 45 minutes before Lech

November 12, 1962 They star in Polish film The Two Who Stole the Moon

December 13, 1981 Lech interned for supporting Solidarity trade union

June 18, 1989 Lech elected to senate to represent Solidarity

October 27, 1991 Jaroslaw becomes MP

June 13, 2001 Brothers found the conservative Law and Justice party

November 18, 2002 Lech becomes mayor of Warsaw

December 23, 2005 Lech becomes president

July 14, 2006 Jaroslaw becomes prime minister. Loses office October 21, 2007

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