

**Dear Deputy Prime Minister,
Excellencies,
Dear mayors and aldermen,
Ladies and gentleman,**

In the province of West-Flanders where I live, when it comes to the Second World War, people make often references to the Poles. This reference always happens with a lot of respect.

In some Flemish municipalities, the troops of General Maczek were the first allies whom they saw. And they were very enthusiastically received. Sometimes a romantic spark struck. A number of Flemish girls married a Polish soldier.

But the story of liberation has a heavy shadow side. Despite their prowess, these soldiers could no longer return to their native country. Poland was occupied by the Soviets and the Western Allies were not in a position to get Poland within their own sphere of influence.

The result was that thousands of soldiers were forced to build up a new life away from their homeland. Some did so in Flanders.

Fortunately, there were Flemish people who were concerned about their fate. One of them is present here, Dirk Verbeke. As a young municipal secretary of Tielt, Dirk was seized by the story of those displaced, stateless people just after the war. He got to know a lot of former Polish soldiers. He could also meet the son of General Maczek, who became professor of mathematics in London.

Dirk is the driving force of the society ' 1st Polish Armoured Division', which is an anchor point for the many families of Polish veterans in Flanders. He organized three exhibitions in Tielt about the Polish liberators.

But the expo we are opening today is about his magnum opus. He worked on it for eight months. Fortunately, pensioners have a lot of free time, they say. Thanks also to Mrs Verbeke who gave her husband the opportunity to organize this and saw him leave for Warsaw several times for a meeting.

I am pleased that a number of Flemish mayors are also present here. Their cities and municipalities co-financed the monument of the 1st Polish Armoured Division in this city. Polish liberators have not been forgotten in their municipalities. Some local authorities have a monument or

a Poland square and realized twinning's with Polish municipalities. From there, many partnerships have arisen, such as youth exchanges and the funding of scholarships.

But also Poland hasn't forgot the Polish liberators. It struck me when a few weeks ago a group of female cyclists from Poland made a detour to Tielt. They were there to take part in the classic cycling races Gent-Wevelgem and Straight through Flanders.

And here economics and history reach out to each other. Because the cycling team BCM Nowatex Ziemia Darlowska is sponsored by a real estate group from the Flemish municipality of Pittem.

This company POC Partners is working on a construction project in the Polish seaside resort of Darlowo, the hometown of the cycling team.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It gives me a great pleasure that a number of pieces from Flanders were given a place in this exhibition.

Especially one particular Polish flag from Izegem, the city where I live, is a remarkable piece. Izegem itself was not

liberated by the Polish troops but a local pharmacist crafted this flag and had it signed by a number of Polish officers.

All these artefacts show the richness that resides in our Flemish archives. I mention also the flemish databank of 700 photos about the Polish liberation. I would like to thank the municipalities and the private individuals who provided these objects.

Finally, I would like to thank Dirk Verbeke of course, but also everyone else for the realization of this exhibition done by our two countries.

I mention hereby, by way of example, Ryszard Mozgal and the staff members of the IPN and Yves Wantens, the General Representative of the Flemish government in Warsaw.

The exhibition has a number of months ahead in Warsaw and Gdansk and will be in Flanders next year.

I wish it a good speed.